

We Who Wrestle with God, a Review

by [Rebecca Bynum](#) (December 2024)



Jacob Wrestling with the Angel by Alexander Louis Leloir ca. 1865

[*We Who Wrestle with God: Perceptions of the Divine*](#)

Jordan Peterson

Portfolio, Nov. 19, 2024

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Before Jordan Peterson became the Jordan Peterson phenomenon, he was a truth-seeker trying to fathom the complexity of the human condition through psychology. It was as a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto that he became a *truth-upholder* when he refused to obey the newly instituted speech codes which would have compelled the professor to essentially lie by bowing to student whims concerning self-identity. This action by the university was not only absurd, it was part of a pernicious new strain of thought that human beings need not conform themselves to reality, but rather reality must be made to conform to human thought, or whim as the case may be. Though Peterson's courageous stand for truth in the face of officially sanctioned falsehood cost him his position at the university, it also opened the door to new adventure, a new calling, that of truth-revealer and upholder.

A devotee of Carl Jung and the idea of a collective unconscious, Peterson soon realized that perception itself is active and involves the sorting and evaluating of reality on a level that is not entirely conscious, but is not unconscious either, coming from a place not lower, but higher than consciousness, a place involving values.

Neither is the human self merely the sum of the successive states of consciousness. Without the effective functioning of a consciousness sorter and associater there would not exist sufficient unity to warrant the designation of a selfhood. Such an ununified mind could hardly attain conscious levels of human status. If the associations of consciousness were just an accident, the minds of all men would then exhibit the uncontrolled and random associations of certain phases of mental madness. (*The Urantia Book*, 133:7.9 (1480.1))

In other words, psychology alone was not enough to explain the human condition. There is something living within the human mind – the spirit of God, the highest value and that which gives order, not only to the perception of reality, but to reality itself. Therefore, it is fitting that Peterson opens his new book, [We Who Wrestle with God: Perceptions of the Divine](#), with a discussion of Elijah:

In 1 and 2 Kings the revelatory groundwork is laid for a much more psychological and relational definition of the Supreme Deity, detaching God from the pagan theater of the natural world (awe-inspiring as nature might indeed be) and placing Him, wonderfully and terribly, inside us all.

Peterson then moves to a methodical discussion of the opening books of the Bible in the tradition of Jung and Joseph Campbell by treating these stories as the founding myths of our civilization, each pregnant with meaning for the diligent searcher. In a [recent discussion with Richard Dawkins](#), Peterson claimed that it does not matter whether these stories are pure myth or actual fragments of ancient history. They have survived for millennia and in the process of being passed from generation to generation have been shaped by the collective unconscious and retain ancient wisdom to be rediscovered by each new generation.

Of course, both things can be true. Dawkins is correct in asserting that the vengeful and jealous Yahweh of the Old Testament is a conceptualization of the divine totally out of step with modern sensibilities, but this conception reflects the standards and mores of the times in which they were written. What Peterson and Dawkins both miss is the reality of evolutionary religion which coupled with revelatory religion has produced the religions of the modern world. Thus, the

practice of human sacrifice and cannibalism, is first upstepped by the revelation to Abraham of the substitution of animal sacrifice (revelation) and is further upstepped by the bloodless sacrifice of the Christian sacrament (revelation again). We might think of it as the [punctuated equilibrium](#) of the evolution of religion.

Nevertheless, it is profitable to mine these ancient stories for meaning in the modern world as Peterson ably demonstrates in his discussion of the story of Adam and Eve.

“And the Lord God commanded him, You may eat freely from every tree of the garden, but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; for in the day that you eat of it, you will surely die” (Genesis 2:16–17). The “knowledge” indicated refers to the complete mastery that would allow for what is good and evil to be fashioned, altered, and defined by human design.

(...)

This is the taking to self not merely the ability to revalue all values, in the sense meant and recommended by Nietzsche, but the ability to create values—to serve as the veritable source of value itself: the capability of God Himself.

This means, by necessity, that any man or woman who steps outside the domain of the eternal human values has essentially ceased to be human and has therefore not so much transcended the human as destroyed it. What such stepping outside almost inevitably means in practice, as well, is not the grand and heroic transvaluation upward envisioned by Nietzsche. It is instead the degeneration and fragmentation of a uniting morality into hedonistic whim or the false incorporation or suppression of all such slavish impulse under the rubric of power. This is the elevation of

narrow self-will to the highest conceivable place, in the guise of ultimate freedom. ("I can abide by whatever values I choose"—something that almost immediately deteriorates into "I can do whatever I want" or, more accurately, "Whatever impulse grips me rules.") This is simultaneously the presumption of subjective omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence. ("I have the capacity to determine the very definition of right and wrong, valuable and contemptible, good and evil.")

This is certainly a sound analysis and indeed, without the concept of God, the concept of human morality is actually inconceivable. Morality may give rise societal mores, but they are not equivalent. Dawkins' erroneously limits God to the most ancient human idea of him and then goes on to judge that conception from a place of modern moral superiority. This is also where Peterson runs into some trouble. Why would God order the slaughter of the Midianite prisoners, for example?

In delving into the story of Cain and Abel, Peterson elaborates on the idea of the "proper sacrifice" and elevates the idea of sacrifice to abstract levels in order for it to be relevant in the modern age. To Peterson sacrifice is something more along the lines of delayed gratification, which is a sign of maturity. We sacrifice time and effort in the present for the rewards of the future. While this is certainly true, when Peterson tries to explain why Abel's sacrifices of animals are more pleasing to God than the fruits of the field of Cain, things get a bit torturous—wrestling with God.

The story of Cain and Abel is an attempt by the collective human imagination to distill, transmit, and remember the essentials of good and bad into a single narrative. How did we come to undertake this effort? One answer would be

“divine inspiration,” and that is a good answer, at a very high-order level of analysis. Another (in truth, a variant of the first answer) is that people have been telling each other stories forever—acting them out, perhaps, even before that—and that some of the stories were more pointed, interesting, and memorable than others.

(...)

The greatest stories, told by the best storytellers, gripped people’s attention in an unforgettable manner and burned themselves into imagination and concept, collective and personal. This might be regarded as a collaboration between the image and word (the Logos) that gripped attention and the image and word (the Logos) that compelled memory. This collaboration continued for tens and perhaps hundreds of thousands of years. Stories thus told and remembered became better and better and, simultaneously, deeper and deeper. And no one wrote them or invented them, precisely; or, more accurately, perhaps, everyone did: and that is the action, so to speak, of Jung’s collective unconscious.

One might also posit these stories are fragments of history which have been distorted and repeatedly edited.

In his early teachings, Moses very wisely did not attempt to go back of Adam’s time, and since Moses was the supreme teacher of the Hebrews, the stories of Adam became intimately associated with those of creation. That the earlier traditions recognized pre-Adamic civilization is clearly shown by the fact that later editors, intending to eradicate all reference to human affairs before Adam’s time, neglected to remove the telltale reference to Cain’s emigration to the “land of Nod,” where he took himself a

wife. (*The Urantia Book*, 74:8.8 (837.7))

Like many before him, Peterson gets around that problem by skipping the matter-of-fact statement that Cain found a wife in the land of Nod at a time when there were supposedly no other human beings on earth; however, he teases out an important concept—that of the personality of God.

Personality, to put it another way, is our chosen mode of adaptation, of being in the world, our essence, our spirit. We face the world as personalities. We have evolved, even speaking scientifically, as personalities. Personalities cannot exist, except in relationship.

(...)

Cain does worse than abandon God. He establishes a relationship of enmity with him. Implicit in the story of the original hostile brothers is the insistence that a relationship with the divine is inevitable; the only question is its nature. This is at least in part because the human being is a personality, and personalities by their nature exist in relationship—contract, agreement, negotiation, or covenant—to what they encounter.

It is certainly true that however much more God may be, he can certainly be no less than personal as he is the very creator of personality – that essence of the self which integrates all character development and yet remains changeless. Writes Peterson:

Why would we presume that the spirit giving rise to being

and becoming itself is something dead, unconscious, pointless, and lacking identity when adaptation to that reality has required consciousness, teleology and purpose, and personality? Is it merely chance, or even the arbitrary requirements of human society, that has organized the world, such that some patterns of moral striving further life, individual and communal, and others do not; or is that instead not and inevitably a reflection of the deepest of underlying realities? If the concept of God as Personality works, so to speak, in the time-tested manner—in the pragmatic manner—why is that model not aptly regarded as most accurate?

One minor sticking point for me was Peterson's insistence on conscience as being synonymous with the "still small voice" of God's spirit within. Conscience results from the self-reflection of the human mind—often the consciousness of having transgressed the mores of society, which may or may not reflect the divine will. The leading of the spirit and the voice of the spirit is much more than mere conscience, as anyone who has heard that still small voice will attest.

There is no doubt, however, that Peterson is feeding the flock in ways traditional churches have failed to do in recent years. He describes life as the hero's journey full of suffering and sacrifice and he exhorts his followers to the attitude of "bring it on!" —embrace the adventure with courage, as when he discusses Abraham:

Each of those new ventures, however, requires a sacrifice: of previous comfort, of previous commitment or aim, of previous identity. This is the pattern of individual development. Each opportunity requires a corresponding increment in maturity—a sacrifice of something that is now

insufficient to the challenge at hand. Each sacrifice, in its turn, makes way for a new and ever-improved identity. This is a process of succession that is identical to the ongoing maturation and expansion of competence, psyche, and community. Each of those new and expanded identities must reaffirm their commitment to the spirit that is properly put in the highest place.

And is this not the journey that Peterson himself has undertaken? Is he not leading by example, rather than simply providing biblical exegesis? Is he not giving young people hope for the future and the courage to face it, whatever comes, as part of the grand adventure of potentially endless spiritual progression? In retelling the stories of the ancient prophets, is he not also becoming something of a prophet himself? Certainly, Peterson has shown himself to be a man absolutely dedicated to truth and the God of Truth. He is true to his calling.

Whatever he is, Peterson is a force to be reckoned with, as slowly but surely, the tide is turning on materialistic reductionism, as exemplified by Richard Dawkins and the other new atheists. They represent the arguments of the last century, arguments which no longer satisfactorily explain the reality being discovered today by our increasingly powerful microscopes and telescopes. The questions remain, however: Where are we? What are we? And where are we going? Peterson provides more answers than most.

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Rebecca Bynum is the publisher of *New English Review*, and author of *Allah is Dead* and *The Real Nature of Religion*.



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