

Ten Questions that are Transforming Christian Faith



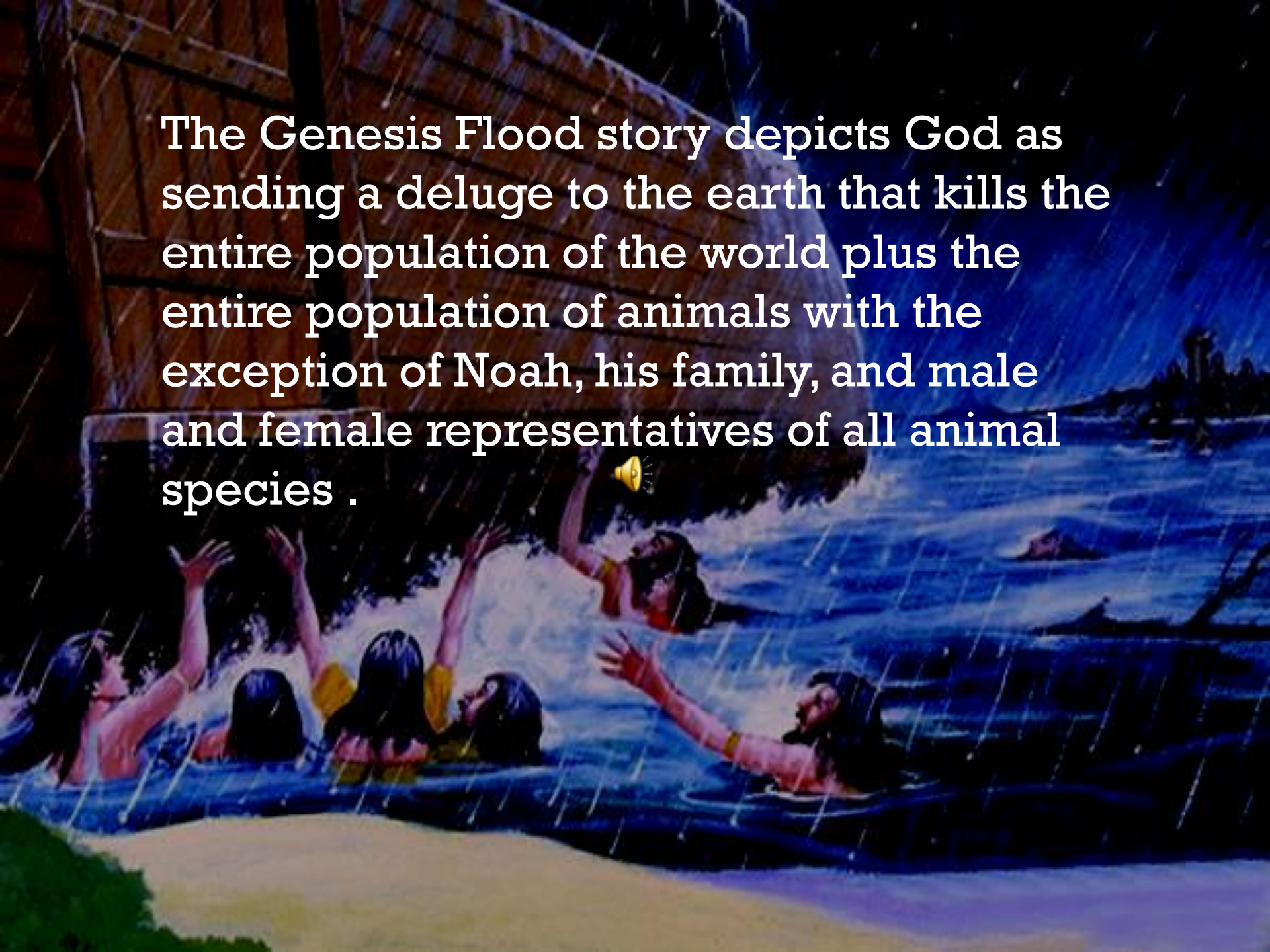
Is God Violent?

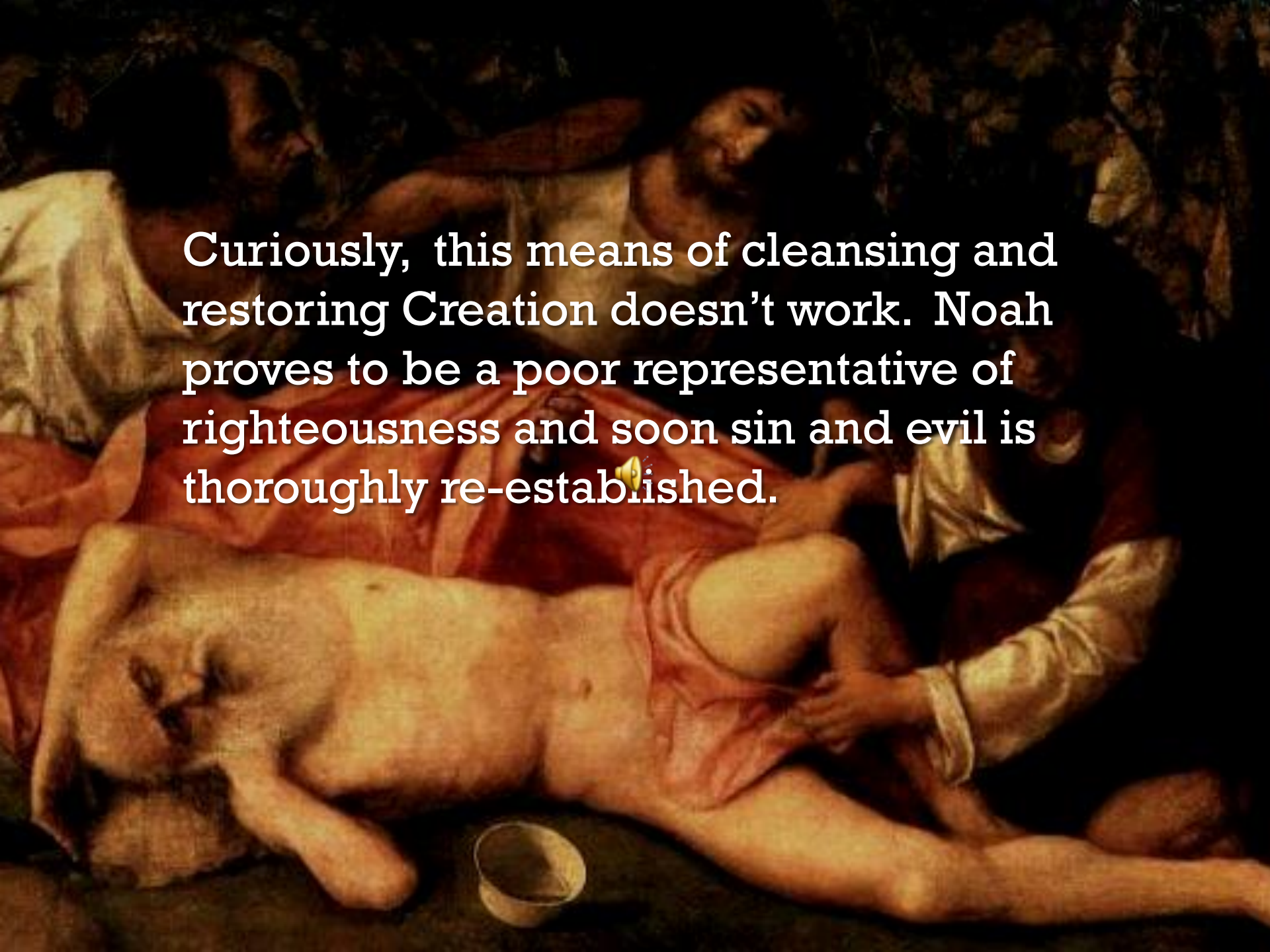


Perhaps the most significant barrier that keeps many Christians hesitant and doubtful about the stories in the Bible is the image of God as violent.



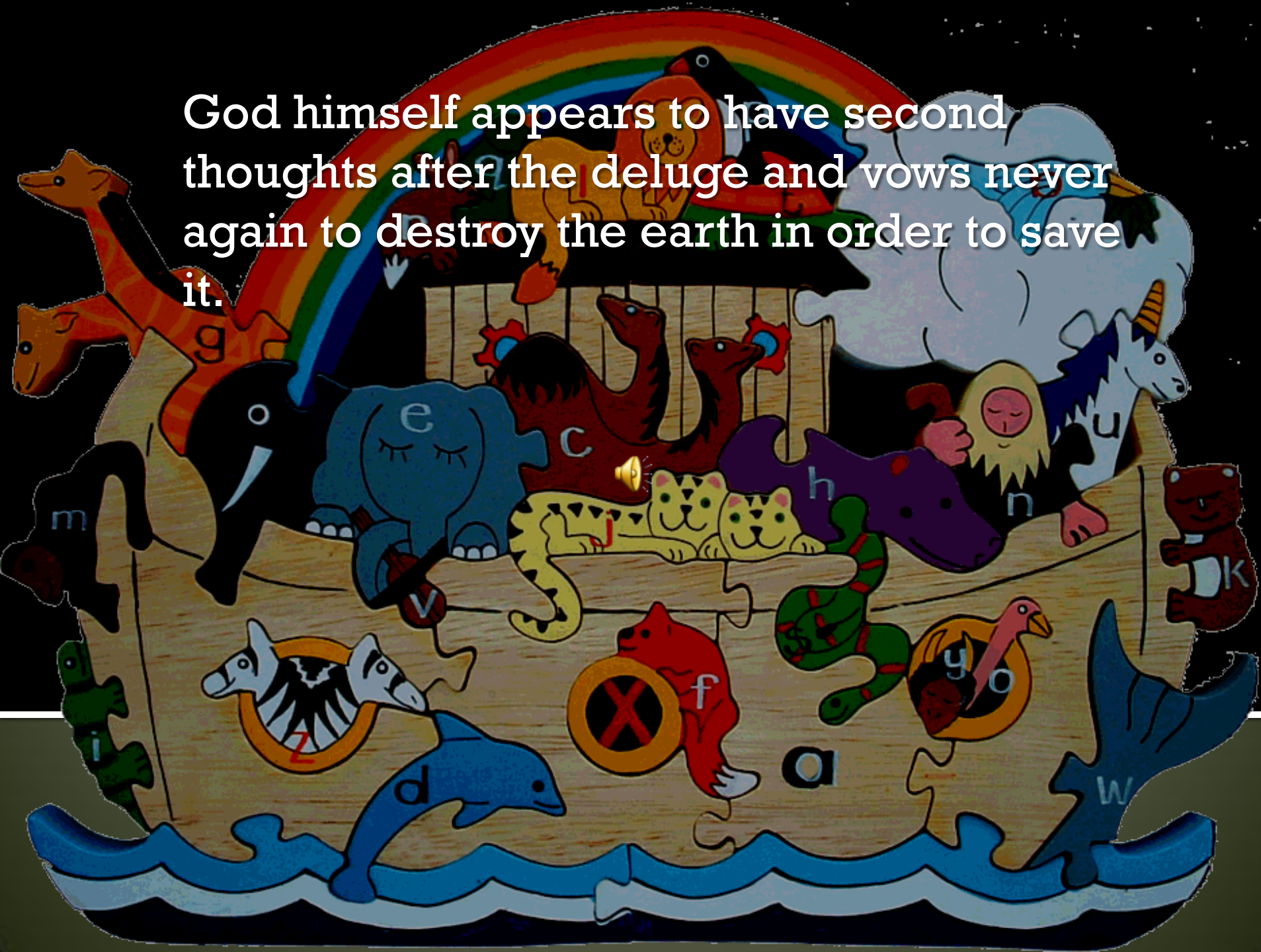
The Genesis Flood story depicts God as sending a deluge to the earth that kills the entire population of the world plus the entire population of animals with the exception of Noah, his family, and male and female representatives of all animal species .





Curiously, this means of cleansing and restoring Creation doesn't work. Noah proves to be a poor representative of righteousness and soon sin and evil is thoroughly re-established.

God himself appears to have second thoughts after the deluge and vows never again to destroy the earth in order to save it.



Violent images of God are mixed with tender, loving, graceful images. In Exodus, the same God whose holiness zaps hapless Hebrews who accidentally touch the ark is seen negotiating with a reluctant Moses who whines about the demands entailed in his calling as liberator.

The entire Bible is sprinkled with violent events, often initiated by God. Joshua is filled with annihilating conquest of the native peoples of Canaan; both Israel and Judah are comprehensively destroyed by Babylonians, God's emissaries according to the prophets; and Jesus himself suffers unspeakable torment seemingly as a necessary step in advancing God's redemption.

How can we deal with these reports of God's sponsorship of violence?



One helpful way is to recognize that people's understanding of God appears to evolve across biblical history. This evolution is not an absolute straight line, but a meandering course from a rudimentary understanding to a more sophisticated one. It's important to note—this is not to say that God has changed. It is to say that what people are able to understand about God has developed.

1. God's Uniqueness:

Some early biblical passages envision God as one superior god among several alternative gods. This gives way to a view that only one God was real and alive.



2. God's ethics:

Early in the Bible God is concerned with religious and ceremonial fidelity, notably in rituals, sacrifices, and the like. Later, especially in the prophets and in the New Testament, God is presented as interested in social ethics and the fate of outcast people.

3. God's Universality:

In the early Old Testament, God is seen as the private deity of Israel. Moving into the New Testament, God becomes the Lord of the church, drawn from all peoples, and lord of the entire creation. It becomes more and more clear that God chooses one particular group—the elect—not for the exclusion, but for the benefit of all others.

4. God's Mode of Action:

In some passages God intervenes in human affairs magically (parting the Red Sea); elsewhere God seems somewhat remote, controlling events by the workings of providence (the rise of David).



5. God's Character:

In some passages, God appears violent, retaliatory, and given to favoritism. Elsewhere, God appears gentle and compassionate. There is a general move towards grace.

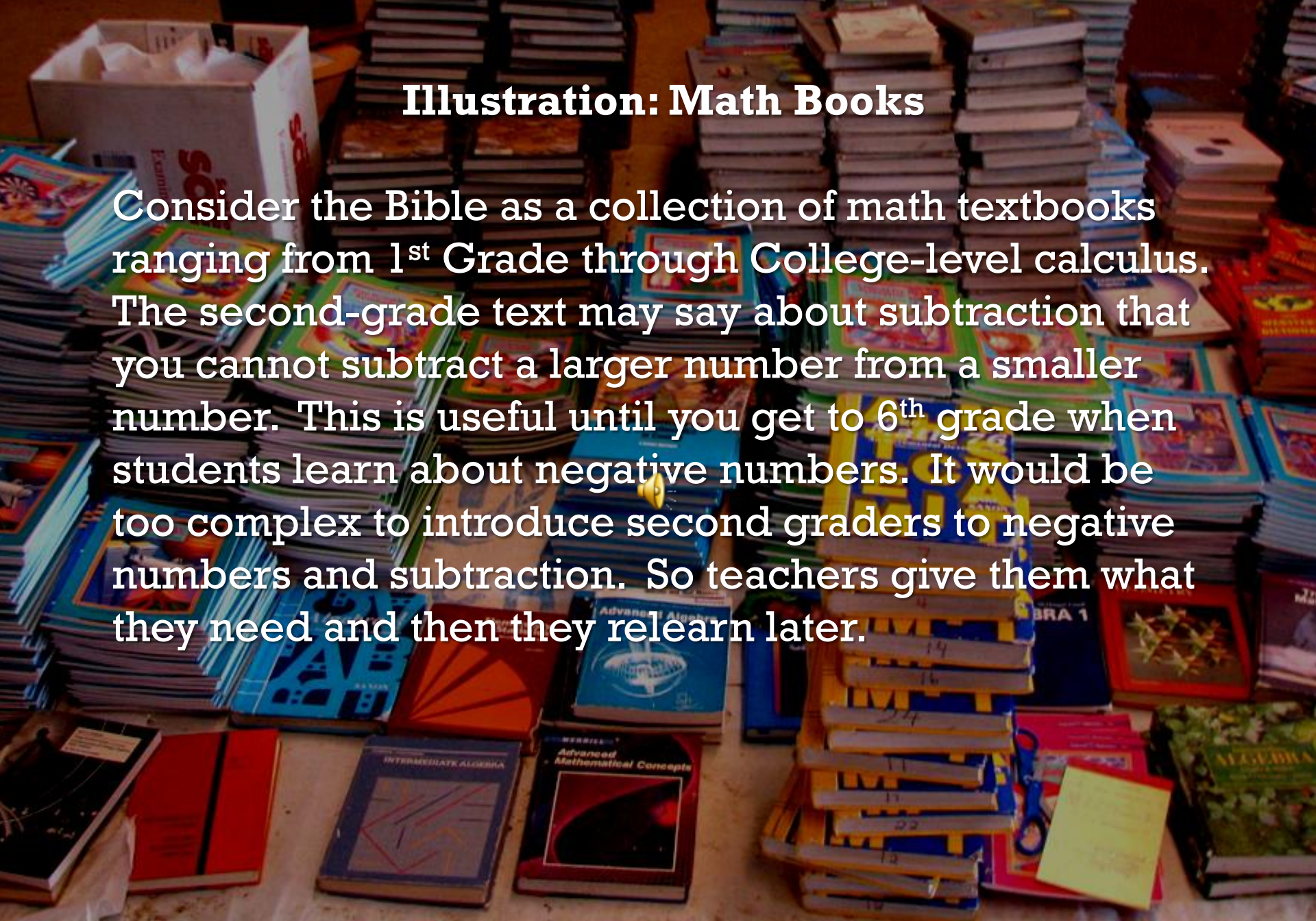


Caution:

The above does not say that there is a process evolution **within God's actual character**, as if God used to be rather immature but has taken a turn for the better and is growing up. What we're working to establish is that human beings do the best they can within the confines of their own development to communicate God's nature **as they best understand it.**

Illustration: Math Books

Consider the Bible as a collection of math textbooks ranging from 1st Grade through College-level calculus. The second-grade text may say about subtraction that you cannot subtract a larger number from a smaller number. This is useful until you get to 6th grade when students learn about negative numbers. It would be too complex to introduce second graders to negative numbers and subtraction. So teachers give them what they need and then they relearn later.



Believers must similarly pass through stages in which our understanding is imbalanced and incomplete. Before being able truly to understand God as committed to justice and goodness, believers must understand God's passion for justice being expressed in a militant defeat of injustice. We see such militancy in the 10 plagues of Egypt that created the conditions for the escape of the Hebrew slaves under Moses.



Two nuances to bear in mind:

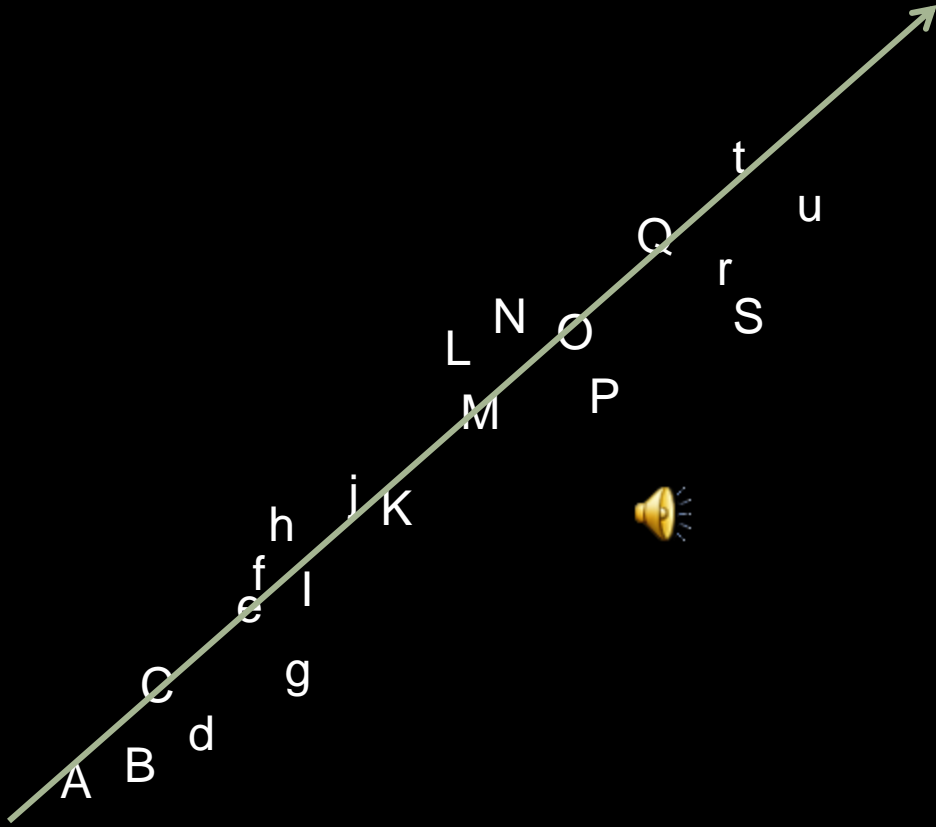
1. Development is continuing. We haven't arrived and there's plenty more for us to learn.
2. God's nature, being divine, is often a mixture of multiple elements. If we explore God's wrath, we find that it is a mixture of God's love and God's righteousness. It is simplistic to see God as only loving, in the sense of indulgent or only righteousness, in the sense of unyielding. God's attributes are often embodiments of apparent opposites.

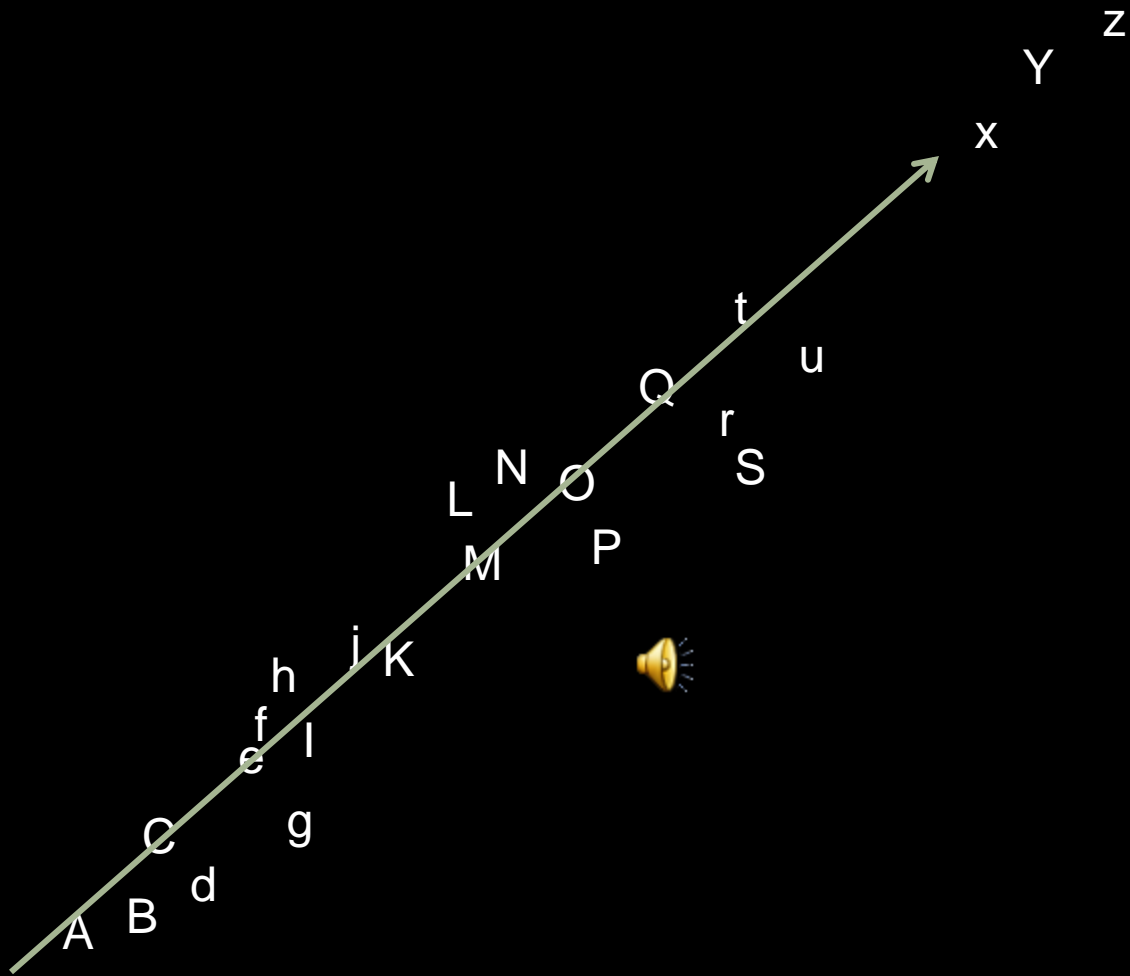
Jesus Christ is the zenith of the Bible's
understanding of God's nature



A B C d
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Elton Trueblood:

“The historic Christian doctrine of Christ’s divinity does not simply mean that Jesus is like God. It is far more radical than that. It means that God is like Jesus.”




The doctrines of the incarnation and deity of Christ are meant to tell us that we cannot start with a predetermined, set-in-stone idea of God derived from the rest of the Bible and then extend that to Jesus. Jesus is not intended merely to fit into predetermined categories. He is intended instead to explode them, transform them, and bring us to a new evolutionary level in our understanding of God.

Fundamentalism

A usually religious movement or point of view characterized by a return to fundamental principles, by rigid adherence to those principles, and often by intolerance of other views and opposition to secularism.

- An organized, militant Evangelical movement originating in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th century in opposition to Protestant Liberalism and secularism, insisting on the inerrancy of Scripture.*
- Adherence to the theology of this movement.*

What would you tell a friend who has some acquaintance with the Bible and who thinks that the God of the Old Testament is so rigid and militant (violent) that she just can't imagine  being a Christian or belonging to a church?

