

KEY QUESTIONS ABOUT CHRISTIAN FAITH

Old Testament Answers

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1

WHO IS GOD?

If we stand back and consider the impression the Bible as a whole gives of the character of God, what emerges?¹

1. Personal God

The Christian Bible is dominated by a story or by a series of stories that belong to one overarching story extending ultimately from creation via Israel to Christ, and on via the church to the new Jerusalem. The story has a huge cast of major and minor figures, but its key participant is one who is not always present in the action at the front of the stage, yet who is involved from beginning to end, at least in the background to the drama, one who hovers there not only as the dramatist who dares not leave the play to the competence of the company but also as the central character and not merely the author of the story. The story concerns the achievement of the dramatist's purpose in the world.

The fact that the Bible is dominated by God's story points us to God's fundamental characteristic as a personal being. In the story, God establishes long-term objectives and immediate plans, makes decisions and implements them, enjoys successes and experiences frustration when other participants in the drama resist the dramatist's vision of how it should proceed, has changes of mind and formulates revised plans for reaching ultimate goals. All the way along God acts and lives in relation to other actors who sometimes fulfill roles manifestly written especially for them but who sometimes seem dangerously independent. The biblical God is not so much a moral force or an ethereal spirit as a person involved with people. When the story speaks of God out for a stroll in the cool of the evening or enjoying the whiff of food cooking, no doubt there were Israelites who understood this talk literalistically. The advantage of such anthropomorphism is its vivid testimony to the personal nature of the God of Israel, who can be described in our image in the conviction that we were made in God's image, so that God is sufficiently like us for us to take mutual understanding to be an exquisite possibility.

¹A paper written for a meeting of the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England; much of its material appears in revised form in the commission's report *We Believe in God* (London: Church House / Wilton, Conn.: Morehouse-Barlow, 1987).

Speech is of the essence of personhood. Like other actors in the play, the biblical God often speaks, usually not directly to the audience but to other participants in the drama, though in such a way as we can overhear. While God's speaking is thus of importance in the biblical story, it comes into its own in the teaching of Torah and Prophets. "These are the words of Yahweh," say the prophets, using the personal name of Israel's God. They speak in the manner of the human messenger who declares, "These are the words of King so-and-so." They are uttered by the agent, but they come from the sovereign. Sometimes, it seems, the prophets believed that they heard with their own ears words God personally made audible. Sometimes they saw themselves as putting into their own words convictions felt within, which they knew came from God. Either way, they knew that God the actor in Israel's story was also God the communicator of personal feelings, desires, opinions, and intentions.

The content of Yahweh's speech also reflects a personal nature. Although capable of being likened to an animal such as a lion or an ox, or to an inanimate object such as a rock, most characteristically Yahweh is a king, a shepherd, a warrior, a guardian, a teacher, a judge, a potter, a builder, a farmer, a husband, a father (or a wife, or a mother). Yahweh has the feelings of a person: love, joy, satisfaction, sympathy, longing, frustration, regret, hurt, jealousy, anger. Yahweh is the dynamic, living God. The point is made concretely by the Torah's consistent prohibition on making an image of God as an aid to worship. The lively, energetic, moving, acting, speaking God of Israel could never be captured by an image; an image could not be an aid to worship of this God.

Being personal involves being in relationship with people, not only speaking but also being spoken to. Thus in the First Testament story, and in the address of Torah, Prophets, and Wisdom, speaking involves God in conversation. This being spoken to becomes a focus in the Psalms. "Spoken to," indeed, is too mild a term for the uninhibited expression of love, gratitude, honor, trust, and commitment, and of disappointment, grief, rage, hurt, and doubt that characterizes the Psalms. No doubt such self-expression would do the psalmist good whether or not God were a person able to hear, but the Psalms' presupposition is that the God of Israel is real enough and personal enough to appreciate the sharing of enthusiasm and wonder. God has not only ears to hear but also feelings to be aroused and energy to be activated. We have come full circle. The God of the First Testament is one who thinks and feels, who gives expression to thoughts and feelings in words and deeds, and who invites human beings into the shared speech of conversation and thus into a shared involvement in the world.

Developments in Judaism by Jesus' day have sometimes been thought to have rendered God a somewhat distant figure. Perhaps people could know God's presence and respond to God by keeping the Torah, but perhaps the Torah itself distanced God from them. Perhaps refraining from uttering the name Yahweh reminded them of God's reality, but perhaps removing that name from people's lips removed God as a living person. Perhaps the reports by visionaries of what they have seen and heard mediated God's reality to others, but perhaps they underlie God's apparent absence from the experience of ordinary people.

There are no such ambiguities about the relationship with God as a person which Jesus enjoys and which he shares with those who listen to him. It is summed up in the word “Father.” At his baptism he hears God say, “You are my son, my beloved, I delight in you” (Mark 1:11). His baptism is a visionary experience like those other religious figures might have, yet it opens the door to an ongoing closeness of relationship with the one of whom he can henceforth say, “God is my father, God loves me, God chooses to fulfill a purpose through me.” In reflecting on the strangely varying fruitfulness of his ministry, he recalls the Father’s act of revelation, the Father’s gracious will, the Father’s giving of everything to him, the Father’s knowledge of him and knowledge by him (Matt 11:25–27). At his transfiguration he finds the Father’s words from his baptism being repeated (Mark 9:7). His anguished prayer in Gethsemane is “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Take this cup from me, yet not what I want but what you want” (Mark 14:36). These words, too, take up the themes of his baptismal commission. God is the Father who loves him, and therefore Jesus can bring to God his longings and his desire for relief. God is also the Father who has expectations of him, and therefore Jesus accepts that ultimately God’s will is what counts. Fatherhood combines love and authority, and sonship thus combines trust and submission, and an attitude that is free to query the will of God even though (or because) it is committed finally to accepting it.

It is a fair inference that the “Abba, Father” with which the Gethsemane prayer begins also characterizes the frequent resorting to prayer that the Gospels note (e.g., Mark 1:35). In his prayer life Jesus speaks back as a son to a father. Admittedly his distraught prayer from the cross is, “My God, my God, why have you left me?” There is no “Abba Father” here (Mark 15:34; though see Luke 23:34, 46). Yet the exception proves the rule. As in Psalm 22, which Jesus here takes up, the fact that he prays at all, and the fact that he prays to “my God,” indicates that the moment of abandonment is, paradoxically, one in which the personal relationship still holds.

While God was known and addressed as “Father” in Judaism, the image was not a prevalent one, and as far as we know the Aramaic expression “Abba” was not used in prayer in contemporary Judaism. It was the family word with which children addressed their “Daddy,” but it should not be romanticized. It was also the word grown-up children used to address their father, and it suggests an attitude of humility, obedience, and reverence, as well as one of dependence, security, and confidence. To have God as Father, then, means to be able to take for granted not only the fact of God’s personhood but also many aspects of God’s nature. It implies that God is the kind of person who loves, cares, gives, listens, welcomes, seeks, accepts, guides, forgives, provides, who manifests interest, concern, and self-sacrifice, and the kind of person who has expectations and hopes, who exercises authority and power, who embodies discernment and wisdom, who has the right to criticize, to judge, and to determine.

Whatever the sense in which Jesus saw his own sonship as unique and God’s fatherhood in relation to him as different from God’s fatherhood in relation to others, he emphasized that God behaves like a father to all humanity and that all are invited to relate to God as children. Thus he encourages his disciples to pray “Father . . .” just as he does; Luke explicitly makes a connection between Jesus’

praying and his teaching his disciples to pray like that (Luke 11:1–2). The Lord’s Prayer, which Luke introduces at this point, parallels the Gethsemane prayer as it works out the implications of God’s being Father in terms of authority and caring. For Jesus’ disciples, as for him, praying to the Father involves a longing for God’s name to be hallowed and God’s reign to come, before it can imply expecting God to be concerned with our basic needs (hunger, guilt, the pressure of evil). God is, as Matthew emphasizes, a heavenly Father, a Father in heaven, one who commands all heaven’s resources and power for the fulfilling of people’s needs, but also one who must be revered as the Lord of heaven.

It is thus both a solemn and an encouraging fact that disciples live before God as their Father. It is solemn and comforting that nothing happens without the Father knowing (Luke 16:15; Matt 6:4, 6, 8, 18). Having God as Father provides no immediate explanation of the unpleasant and unpredictable aspects to human experience, but it does provide a way of coping with them in a confident, trusting submission to the Father’s will.

In Matthew, the Lord’s Prayer appears in the context of portraying the broader implications of God’s fatherhood (Matt 6). Jesus notes that certain prayer habits implied the assumption that other people are the only ones who hear us praying, or that we have to win God’s attention to our prayer, or that we can forget about other people when we pray. Such habits raise the question whether prayer is talking to yourself, whether God is really interested in us, or whether in prayer we can turn our backs on how we get on with others. Jesus affirms that praying to a Father implies praying to one who really listens, one who is aware of and concerned for our needs, and one who loves forgiving people and cares about my brother and sister as well as me. To this, Jesus later adds the “beggar’s wisdom”² (or child’s wisdom) of ask, seek, and knock, based on the logic that if a human father responds to children who ask for things they need, how much more will a heavenly one do so (Matt 7:7–11; cf. Luke 11:5–13). And Paul adds that in the Spirit through Christ believers in general join Jesus in calling on God as “Abba, Father” (Rom 8:15; cf. Gal 4:6).

2. Involved God

The God of the First Testament is involved in the world. God is independent of the world and far too significant a figure to be in any way confined to it or captured in it. Yet for reasons the First Testament hardly goes into (does the play ask the playwright, “Why did you write me?”), God did create the world and does direct its story. Our terms “creation” and “history” may suggest two separate enterprises; in the First Testament, however, creation is the opening of that ongoing drama that stretches from beginning to end. God is involved in it throughout, though in varying ways, sometimes intervening with sovereign initiatives, sometimes applying

²Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (reissued ed.; New York: Scribner’s, 1963), 159; he refers to K. H. Rengstorf, “Geben ist seliger denn Nehmen,” in *Die Leibhaftigkeit des Wortes* (ed. Michel Otto; A. Köberle Festschrift; Hamburg: Furcht, 1958), 29.

a mid-course adjustment to a trajectory that seems to have gone severely wrong, sometimes apparently leaving the story to develop on its own because it is doing all right or because it has to be allowed to get worse before it can be helped to get better, sometimes arranging behind the scenes for the right person to appear or the right event to take place at the right moment.

Partly because God's involvement is so varied in its dynamic, that involvement is often difficult to identify. Belief in it removes little of history's ambiguity, at least as people live through history, unless God offers some interpretation of events before they take place, or in their midst, or after them. The First Testament pictures the ambiguity of history being substantially reduced over several centuries through the activity of prophets who could interpret the meaning of current events as well as the present significance of events of the past and of events still to come. The prophets' concern was not merely to announce or explain these events but to bring home the demand and the promise bound up in them. They declare that God is involved now in the destiny of Israel and of the nations, and that this involvement looks for a response.

God's involvement in the world is not confined to the macro-history of national and international affairs set in the context of ultimate beginning and final end. Nor is the world that God invented a machine with an inbuilt energy source to keep it working on its own until God's purpose for it is finished. The God who gave stability and life to the world at the beginning continues to be the source of its stability and life. It is God's life breath that animals breathe; plants drink the water God makes rain down. God is involved in the affairs of individual human beings as lifegiver, provider, liberator, healer, companion, counselor. The conversation between humanity and God that the Psalms transcribe presupposes the awareness of that involvement in Israel's life over the centuries, the experience of it in ongoing provision and crisis intervention on the part of each generation and within the life of individuals, and the prospect of that involvement in God's once again turning back and acting on behalf of the needy when they seem to have been abandoned. It is this same involvement that is presupposed by Proverbs, missed by Ecclesiastes, and agonized over by Job.

The messianic expectations of Judaism presupposed that God's activity was not evident in the present in Israel's history. The reign of God is something Israel awaits rather than experiences. When Jesus begins to preach, he asserts that the moment has now come when the King is asserting kingship (Mark 1:14, 15). This new assertion of God's royal authority is the best news the needy could hear. It means blessing for the poor, the grieving, the meek, the just, the merciful, the pure, the peaceable, the persecuted. They are to be given recompense, recognition, revelation, mercy, justice, property, comfort, and the "reign of heaven" (Matt 5:3–12).

The fact that God reigns is not a mere theological theory, statement of faith, or hope for some future day but a living awareness both based in and creative of the experience of witnessing God's involvement as King in the world. God the King is at hand. God's time is now; God's reign dawns. Jesus' ministry means people can witness the blind receiving renewed sight, the disabled walking, people with diseases that cut them off from the rest of society being cleansed, the deaf enabled

to hear, the poor having good news preached to them (11:4–5). A new age dawns in joy, a reign of God where Jesus and his people will drink a cup of wine anew instead of a cup of suffering and join with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in a heavenly banquet (8:11; 26:29).

The implementation of God's reign turns upside down the expectations encouraged by human experience and rubber-stamped by religious tradition. The blessings of God's reign are given, not earned, so that they come to all no matter how long they have worked for them. Indeed, God's mercy naturally finds a home more readily with those who clearly need it than with those who have found ways of living independently of it. The prodigal son finds an unexpected welcome from a prodigally loving father, the child is the model for the receptivity that embraces God's reign, and God's heart fills with joy when one sinner repents (Matt 20:1–16; Mark 10:15; Luke 15; 18:9–14).

God's activity in the world as King is a reassertion of an ongoing involvement in the world that underlies it. God is the original creator as well as the Lord of the End (Mark 13:19). God made humanity male and female and joins together each couple in marriage (10:6–9). In the generosity of power God blesses all, just and unjust, with rain and sun (Matt 5:45–48). It is God that Jesus thanks for bread and fish (Mark 6:41; 8:6–7). God feeds the wild birds and clothes the wild flowers and sees that food and clothing are provided for those who seek God's just reign (Matt 6:25–33). God decides when to take back the life that God originally gave, and thus it can safely be entrusted to God on one's deathbed, or one's cross (Luke 12:20; 23; 46). It is also God's power that renews life on resurrection day; God is not Lord of the dead but of the living (Mark 12:24–27). The notions of God as Creator, Father, and King intersect in connections such as these. When Jesus handles topics we might see as belonging to God's activity in creation and providence, he himself commonly speaks in terms of God's fatherly provision for those who acknowledge God's kingship.

Paul works out the implications of the way involvement in the world cost God an acceptance of a share in humanity's suffering. It was not only Abraham who was willing not to spare his own son; God did so, being willing to give him up for us all (Rom 8:32). He also works out the way God continues the involvement that came to a climax in incarnation, by God's Spirit's dwelling among God's people (1 Cor 3:16–17; cf. Rom 8:11, 16).

3. Holy God

The First Testament God is involved in our world as a being with personal characteristics like ours. Yet God is not one of us; God is not a human person writ large. The First Testament's fundamental way of referring to God's distinctiveness is by speaking of God as the holy one. "Holiness" denotes the mysterious Godness of God, distinctive, set apart, belonging to the heavenly realm, and therefore deserving the awed worship of those who belong to the created order. It points to the supercharged power, the self-assertive freedom, and the jealous wrath of the

sometimes inexplicable God of Israel's story. God is not a person to be trifled with. Holiness denotes the majesty and glory of the one whom prophets were sometimes confronted by, a majesty and glory that are acknowledged for more everyday purposes by religious institutions such as the temple with its rituals.

In itself, holiness is not an ethical term. From where, then, do its ethical connotations come? Holiness means divinity, and it derives its further content from the nature of the God to whom holiness is ascribed. The God of the First Testament is righteous and just, and loving and merciful. It is by acting in righteousness and love that God reveals the essential content of holiness or divinity.

Isaiah, whose vision of Yahweh as the holy one expresses something of the notion of holiness summarized above (see Isa 6), also sums up in a convenient phrase the connection between holiness and justice: "the Lord of Hosts is exalted in justice, and the holy God shows himself holy in righteousness" (Isa 5:16). "Justice" denotes acting decisively in the cause of what is right ("judgment" in the older translations brings out more of the word's concrete, active meaning, and its connection with the judges of the book of Judges). "Righteousness" or "rightness" indicates the moral and relational quality of this activity: it suggests doing right by the people with whom one is in relationship. In Isaiah's context, the holiness of God issues in just judgment on those who ignore the God-ness of God and the rights of other people.

The link between holiness and love or faithfulness or mercy is captured in a phrase from Isaiah's northern contemporary, Hosea. Hosea's understanding of God's personal involvement with Israel is expressed in terms of the mixed feelings of a parent for the child who does not respond to a parent's loving care. Yahweh is tempted, as it were, to cast off Israel, as such a parent might be tempted to cast off an unresponsive child. But parents cannot really do that, and neither can Yahweh. Motherly love triumphs over hurt anger: "for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst" (Hos 11:9). The holiness of God that expresses itself in just judgment also expresses itself in mercy and grace.

A key First Testament expression for this aspect of God's character is the word *khesed*, often translated "steadfast love." It suggests the loyalty and faithfulness that always keeps a commitment that has been made to someone. Thus when Israel is unjustly oppressed, it can appeal to Yahweh to act "for the sake of your steadfast love"—that is, in order to be faithful to undertakings you have given. Yet Israel can also appeal to this steadfast love when it is quite justly oppressed, for the love it denotes is also one that goes beyond mutually binding commitments into the realm of grace, mercy, and forgiveness. Even when acting in mercy and forgiveness, Yahweh retains the sovereign freedom of God, choosing when to show grace and mercy; but even at the moment of wrath, one can plead with God to remember mercy (Exod 33:11; Hab 3:2).

There is a close relationship between the love and justice that give expression to God's holiness, though there is also a tension between them. When God acts in justice on people's behalf, God is acting in love for them. In this sense, love and justice are two ways of speaking of the same reality. The tension arises from the difference between having God act in love or justice for you or against you. Hosea's prophecies express that tension particularly sharply, but it runs through the First

Testament story from Gen 3–11 onwards. Whether one is reading of the experience of humanity as a whole, or of that of Israel in particular, one is reading of God's attempt to relate to people as the loving giver, and of God's willingness, in light of the response they make, to relate to them as the righteous judge. Key symbols of God's relationship with Israel such as King, Father, and Judge can express both aspects of that relationship.

In the New Testament, the close relationship between God's love and God's justice, in the sense of God's doing right by a relationship of commitment to people, is illustrated by the way the former is the great emphasis in one of the classic theological expositions of the gospel (John 3:16) and the latter in another (Rom 3).

The first three Gospels follow Jesus' baptism with his ordeal in the isolation of the Judean desert. The challenge Jesus faces here is whether he will let the holy one be the holy one, let God be God, acknowledged as sovereign over his living and dying, trusted for protection without first being proved, worshiped and served to the exclusion of other claims (see Matt 4:1–10).

Humble submission before this God includes turning one's back on sin. Jesus had accepted John's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, even though it is he to whom John's ministry points. Jesus' preaching of good news then includes the demand for this turning from sin that John had also made. The assertion of God's rule in the world that Jesus heralds and embodies means good news for the needy but danger for the sinner, and it often transpires that the needy are those who have been designated sinners, and the sinners are those who did the designating. Jesus talks much about judgment and about God as judge, and he continues to do so to those who have become disciples, who remain in danger of God's judgment if in their relationships with others they prefer a judging or a begrudging attitude to the forgiving attitude the judge has shown to them (Matt 7:1–5; 18:21–35).

The coming of God thus puts an urgent challenge before people. Jesus announces an imminent confrontation with God in all the holiness, purity, goodness, mercy, and love of God's being. God cannot be placated by pointing to one's religious status or religious observance, for God's demands extend far beyond the outward righteousness for which these commonly stand. God manifests little sympathy with people committed to political action in order to bring about a reversal of political order, because this loses significance in light of the imminent utter collapse of the kingdoms of this age. Indeed, he comes to earn the enmity of both the politico-religious establishment and the politico-religious revolutionaries. They cooperate in order to ensure his death, a death in which, as later theology came to reflect, God was involved and which was the means of God's rule being established at the expense of all other kingdoms.

It is on the basis of his own "But I say to you . . ." that Jesus urges forgiveness and reconciliation, marital faithfulness in thought and act, straightness in speech, submission and generosity, love and acceptance toward enemies as well as friends. God is rarely directly associated with such teaching, though God's fatherhood underlies the stance that is to be taken. It is to reflect God's style and bring glory to God (Matt 5:16, 45, 48).

Jesus himself has to let God be God over the fruits of his ministry. The rule of God is a mystery he comes to unveil, but there is a continuing mystery over whose eyes God opens to perceive what is unveiled and about the process whereby God gives more to those who have and takes away from those who have nothing (Mark 4:10, 12, 24–25; 11:25–26). There is an awesome authority about the God of Jesus, one who requires the death of people for speaking evil of their parents, who roots up what others have planted, who expects Jesus to pick up his cross and walk to execution, who threatens a fiery hell for someone who leads others into sin, who can be likened to a vineyard owner who puts to death his son's murderers (Matt 15:5, 13; 16:21–23; 18:1–9; 21:33–43). Only God knows the day or hour when the Son of Man will come (Mark 13:32). But it is precisely the Father of whom Jesus says this. As with the fact that nothing happens without God knowing about it, the awesome God-ness of God can be lived with because God is a Father who can be trusted.

4. One God

It has often been tempting for Christians to assume that the God of justice and the God of love are two different gods or to infer from the complexity of human experience (which embraces both blessings and trouble, both encouragement and temptation) that good and evil powers exercise approximately similar degrees of influence in the world. The First Testament emerged from contexts that did acknowledge many gods, or gods and demons, or balanced powers of light and darkness, yet it affirmed “Yahweh our God Yahweh one” (Deut 6:4). This central confession of Jewish faith is as difficult to interpret as it looks. It makes clear enough that God is one, but it is not simply a statement about monotheism. It is an affirmation that Yahweh has the exclusive allegiance of First Testament faith; there can be no worshiping of Yahweh and some other power. It also suggests a contrast between the oneness of Yahweh and the multiplicity of the supernatural powers acknowledged by the Canaanites, the Babylonians, the Persians and other powers Israel lived among.

It was once customary to portray the history of First Testament faith as a development from animism (the worship of spirits of nature) via polytheism (the worship of many gods) and henotheism (the worship of one god among many) to monotheism (the recognition that there is only one God). The whole scheme has to be read into the First Testament; it is not there. From the beginning of its story, Israel was laid hold of by one whose evident authority and might knew no rivals. Not that Israel therefore assumed that only one being dwelt in heaven. The diversity of earthly reality is at least matched by a diversity of heavenly reality. But none of the “sons of God” or “angels” has inherent divine power. One will rule in heaven.

Such a statement is made only by faith. Other peoples did assume that the complexity of human experience suggested that the decision-making processes of heaven were as fraught and haphazard as those of earth. And in the context of modernity, there has been no more pressing philosophical question for the person

who wishes to believe in God than that posed by the way suffering is distributed in the world, which makes it difficult to maintain that God is both powerful and fair.

Invited to qualify either their commitment to God's power or to God's love, Christians generally prefer to yield the former, thinking that humanity itself and supernatural powers other than God have significant responsibility for evil in the world. The First Testament is hesitant about this move. It does refer three times to a heavenly adversary (a "satan") concerned to trouble humanity, but it generally seeks to emphasize the conviction that one will ultimately rule on earth and in heaven. It prefers to believe in a God who is in control, but who thus has to be held responsible for some very mysterious events, than in a God whose heart is in the right place but who is not very efficient. The prophet who declares most unequivocally that Yahweh alone is God is also the one who has God affirming the status of creator of both light and darkness, blessing and trouble (Isa 45:7).

If reality knows only one supreme locus of power and authority, and that is Yahweh, this raises questions about Yahweh's relationship with the rest of the world outside Israel. It is not surprising that in the way Israel tells its story, it expresses the conviction that God has been involved with Israel itself. It is more surprising that it sets its own story in the context of the world's story, acknowledging that God's involvement with it is secondary to God's involvement with the world as a whole. It is a means of reversing the curse that seemed to come on world history and of replacing this curse by the blessing God intended from the beginning.

In the bulk of the First Testament, the conviction that God's concern for the world lies behind an involvement with Israel is expressed only intermittently. That is nevertheless the context in which the opening chapters set Israel's story, and it remains part of Israel's background awareness that finds expression from time to time in the Torah, the Prophets, wisdom, and psalmody. Israel recognizes that though the religion of Canaan is deeply perverse and the religion of Babylon dangerously beguiling, foreign peoples are within the control of Yahweh and are not without some true apprehension of God. The God Most High of Melchizedek and Nebuchadnezzar (Gen 14; Dan 3) is not wholly other than the God Most High of Abraham and Daniel, whose ultimate purpose is to bring all the nations to know God fully.

Israel also acknowledges that largely because of its own recalcitrance its own story has not led to the degree of blessing suggested by the way the story opened. When it paints its most explicit future scenarios, it does so out of a feeling of being in exile, cut off from the place of blessing, still looking for that decisive intervention of God that will set world history right. It is this unfinishedness of the First Testament story that leaves it open to having the story of Jesus linked onto it.

Jesus will have believed that the awesome Father whose reign he came to proclaim and implement was the one God who is Lord of the nations as well as of Israel (cf. Mark 12:29). Yet this perspective has little prominence in his life and teaching, at least before his resurrection. Similarly he does not picture the God of Israel involved in world history. By implication, fatherhood is God's attitude to all peoples; by implication, the benevolent reign of God will extend over all peoples. But these themes are not very explicit. Jesus comes to Israel; it will be only on the basis of its

renewal that the nations will be won. Jesus focuses on the former task and resists being drawn into meeting the needs of people outside Israel (cf. Mark 7:24–30).

Ultimately, however, he is destined to rule the whole world. The story of his initial testing presupposes this (Matt 4:8). It also indicates that at the beginning of his ministry the confession of one Lord is made in the context of the pressure to bow down to another. A disciple, too, has to choose between God and Mammon (Matt 6:24).

Like the creative figures of First Testament faith, Jesus ministers in a context whose thinking might be described as demon-ridden, and he distances himself somewhat from it. Whereas the First Testament normally distances itself by declining to speak of such forces of evil, Jesus does so by seeing such forces centered in one entity, Satan, the enemy who exercises hostile power in the name of an alternative kingship. Apparently from the beginning Jesus experienced evil as focused in this form. He lived in real conflict with it but experienced clear victory: Satan is no threat to him or to his disciples (Luke 10:18–19).

Like his contemporaries, Jesus takes for granted aspects of their First Testament inheritance that qualify an affirmation of the oneness of God by speaking of God's wisdom or God's spirit as nascently distinguishable from God's person or by picturing God's will being executed and God's care being exercised by means of God's supernatural aides. The significant development of such insight into plurality within the one Godhead, however, takes place after Easter. The disciples come to affirm that Jesus is Lord, thereby describing Jesus by a term with the resonances of the actual name for God in the First Testament. The implications of this are present in a passage such as Rom 10:9–13, where the statement that confessing Jesus as Lord is key to salvation is buttressed by a quotation that originally referred to the Lord Yahweh. These implications become more explicit as Jesus is seen as the unique embodiment of the divine wisdom (Col 1) and the divine word (John 1). The person who has seen Jesus has seen the Father (John 14:9). Further, in light of the church's experience of the personal activity of God's Spirit in its own midst, it sees that spirit as simultaneously personal and distinguishable from the Father and Jesus (John 14–16). Affirmation of the oneness of God, never too important a concern (see 1 Cor 8:5–6), is well on the way to the qualifying that belongs to the postscriptural period.

HOW DO GOD'S LOVE AND GOD'S WRATH RELATE TO EACH OTHER?

The Bible portrays God as having both a soft side and a tough side. The soft, positive, generous, creative, life-giving, merciful, faithful side of God expresses itself in creating the world, having mercy on it despite humanity's rebelliousness, and acting to restore it to what it was designed to be. The tough, angry, negative side expresses itself in killing people for falsifying their pledges, pouring bowls of wrath over them, and sending them to hell.¹

How do we relate these two sides to God—or rather, how does God relate them? Christians commonly think that the God of wrath is the First Testament God while the God of love is the New Testament God, and this has been supported by scholarly emphasis on Yahweh's inexplicably rough and tough acts.² But apart from making one wonder why the New Testament thinks the First Testament is inspired scripture, as an analysis this answer does not work: in that first paragraph I have illustrated God's soft side from the First Testament and God's tough side from the New. One could take that point further. In general, the First Testament does not describe the world as under God's wrath, though God does from time to time get angry at particular peoples and more often gets angry with the people of God in particular. Only in the New Testament does the whole world sit under God's wrath (e.g., Eph 2:3).³ In the First Testament, God's temper stays under control for long periods, boils over for a moment, and then subsides again (e.g., Isa 54:7–8). In the New, God is not explosive but is coolly negative and resentful, at the same time as loving. It is not self-evident that this is preferable to an occasional explosiveness.

¹Not previously published.

²See, e.g., David Penchansky, *What Rough Beast* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999); David Penchansky and Paul L. Redditt, eds., *Shall Not the Judge of All the Earth Do What Is Right?* (J. L. Crenshaw Festschrift; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2000).

³Admittedly, Genesis's talk about a curse on the world does parallel some New Testament talk of God's anger. When Paul speaks of God's anger being revealed against wickedness, and of this issuing in God's giving people up to the consequences of their deeds (Rom 1:18–32), it is his way of describing the same reality that is described in terms of curse in Genesis. In the First Testament, God's curse, like God's blessing, is more rational and longer lasting than God's anger, and it more characteristically works via ordinary processes of cause and effect, and thus works like God's wrath in Paul. See further chapter 6 below.

I was brought up to see the soft and the tough sides as equally balanced within God. One could apparently support that by texts such as ones that describe God as “a just God and a Savior” (Isa 45:21). There was a tension within God that the cross then resolved, because it both expressed God's love and satisfied God's justice. The First Testament's way of seeing the matter is rather different, as I think is the New's. Tough and soft are not equal within God, and God was not first tough in the First Testament then merciful in the New. The soft is God's dominant side and was so in the First Testament, but God also has a tough side in both Testaments and can give expression to it from time to time. It is important not to ignore the tough side, not least the sometimes inexplicable toughness, but neither to be overwhelmed by it.

1. Exodus 34

At Sinai, Yahweh offers a self-description outlining the First Testament's systematic theology or doctrine of God. That we might so regard it is suggested by its being Yahweh's self-description at Sinai and by the way the First Testament often refers to this classic statement (e.g., Num 14:18). It has already been partially anticipated in the Decalogue, in the prohibition on making images (Exod 20:5–6), which referred to God's short-lived punishment and long-lived love. In Exod 34:6–7 it follows on Yahweh's threat to abandon Israel because of its rebellion. Yahweh then claims to be “a God compassionate and gracious, long-tempered and big in commitment and steadfastness, extending commitment to thousands [of generations], carrying wrongdoing, rebellion, and failure, certainly not acquitting, attending to the wrongdoing of parents on children and grandchildren, on those of the third and fourth [generation].”

The positive and tough sides to Yahweh come into clear focus here, as does the dominance of the former. The positive side comes first; but then, something has to come first. Beyond this, it is more fulsomely expressed, with an accumulation of adjectives and nouns with encouraging resonances. And it declares that whereas Yahweh's commitment extends for thousands of generations, Yahweh's punishing extends only to three or four, the number that live together. Yahweh works through the way the senior members of a household influence the family as a whole, and this has an effect both for good and for ill, but Yahweh's positive commitment goes far beyond this in its effects.

The expression “carrying wrongdoing” is especially significant. It is usually translated “forgiving wrongdoing,” but this obscures its point. The only Hebrew term for “to forgive” is *salakh*,⁴ the word Moses uses soon afterwards in an appeal to Yahweh (Exod 34:9). But in this self-description Yahweh uses *nasa'*, the much more common verb meaning lift and thus carry.⁵ Yahweh is taking up the word Moses

⁴J. J. Stamm, in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1997), 798.

⁵See H.-J. Fabry et al., in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry; 15 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 10:24–40.

used previously in appealing to Yahweh to carry the people's sin (Exod 32:32; cf. earlier Gen 50:17; Exod 10:17; and later, e.g., Ps 32:1, 5). Ordinarily, people have to carry their own wrongdoing in the sense of accepting responsibility for it, accepting the burden of it, and accepting the consequences of it (e.g., Gen 4:13; Lev 5:1, 17; 24:15; Num 14:33–34). Yahweh's self-description goes on to affirm that people who persist in their wrongdoing indeed do not have their guilt cleared but pay for it (cf. Josh 24:19–20). But first comes the emphatic statement of intent, that paradoxically Yahweh is the one who intends to carry people's wrongdoing.

Exodus does not explain the relationship between these two statements. It does not, for instance, say that people must first repent and then Yahweh will carry their sin, and Exod 32–34 includes no account of the people's repenting. Indeed, at Sinai Yahweh's undertaking to carry the people's sin does not exclude also punishing them. But Israel's ongoing story will presuppose that carrying the people's wrongdoing is not conditional on their first having repented. If anything, the logic works the other way round: "I am carrying your wrongdoing: Now are you prepared to turn back to me?" This is explicit when Yahweh declares, "I am wiping away your acts of rebellion like thick cloud, your failings like thunder cloud. Now turn to me, because I am delivering you" (Isa 44:22).⁶ Forgiveness is the basis for repentance, not the other way round. Admittedly one cannot universalize that principle. When Nineveh gains Yahweh's forgiveness in what Jonah knows is a fulfillment of this Sinai revelation, it is the city's repentance that opens the way to this forgiveness. A relationship with Yahweh is a personal one, like that of parents and children or husbands and wives, not a contractual one. Yahweh's self-description is not a legal statement that provides a basis for calculating how to make it work to one's advantage or discovering what one can get away with. Both Yahweh's carrying people's responsibility and people's carrying their responsibility feature in the relationship, but there are varying ways in which that may work out.

We might say that in carrying the people's wrongdoing, Yahweh takes the wrongdoing away, though the nature of this taking away needs clarifying. The Greek verb for forgiveness, *aphiemi*, means to send away, and the First Testament can talk in terms of Yahweh sending away sin (e.g., Mic 7:19). But *nasa'* does not mean take away in this sense. It denotes taking something away with you, not disposing of something (see, e.g., 1 Sam 17:34; 1 Kgs 15:22). Yahweh does take away sin but does so by taking it and keeping it. Yahweh takes up and carries Israel's wrongdoing—carries responsibility for it and carries the burden of it.

Such acceptance of responsibility does not imply declaring that one was responsible for what happened. It implies taking responsibility for the consequences of what happened, not for its causes. Normally, when we wrong someone, this imperils our relationship with that person. Yahweh declines to be bound by this inevitability. Israel's wrongdoing will not be allowed to destroy its relationship with Yahweh.

⁶I understand the qatal verbs as instantaneous, though they might be understood (e.g.) as aorist (and referring to God's longstanding forgiveness), or as perfect (referring to an act God has just undertaken), or as performative ("I hereby wipe away..."). Whichever understanding is right, the act of forgiveness precedes the challenge to repentance.

If Yahweh had not explicitly declared that intention, we might have been compelled to infer it from the history of Israel. Like the history of the church, the history of Israel was as much a history of faithlessness as one of faithfulness. How then did it continue for so many centuries, and how has the church's history so continued? The question is already raised by Israel's faithlessness at Sinai, which presages how the history of Israel and of the church will be. Yahweh's self-description as one who carries the people's wrongdoing explains in advance how it can possibly continue.

At Sinai, Israel has not accepted responsibility for its wrongdoing. The only person who has repented at Sinai is Yahweh (Exod 32:14). Although Yahweh punished some of the people for their rebellion, this punishment fell far short of the dimensions of the rebellion. Yahweh has already started carrying the people's sin. Israel will not change its mind or relent or repent, so Yahweh has to do so. Over subsequent millennia, it will be the exception rather than the rule for Israel or the church to repent and accept responsibility for its faithlessness. Yahweh is better at keeping the promise to carry the people's wrongdoing than at keeping the threat not to clear the guilty.

The God who became incarnate in Jesus and died for us is the God who had been carrying Israel's sin through First Testament times. The incarnation and the cross are the logical climax to the story that has run through the First Testament. The fact that people such as pastors and theologians in Jesus' day could not see it that way illustrates the point.

We customarily think of the cross in sacrificial terms, in judicial terms, or in military terms, or we combine these (Christ's self-offering constitutes his paying the penalty for sin and thus he wins the victory over the devil). But thinking in terms of sacrifice requires Western people to learn another metaphorical language, the judicial metaphor gives the impression of a legal rather than a personal relationship between God and us, and talking in terms of Christ winning the victory over evil undergirds the impression that violence is at the heart of reality. We would do better for ourselves and for the preaching of the gospel to go behind the sacrificial, legal, and military language to the relational dynamics implicit in Yahweh's speech about carrying wrongdoing. On the cross God went to the omega point of letting humanity do its worst. There is nothing worse you can do to someone than kill him, especially God, or no further that you can go in submitting to people than to let them kill you. If that does not also destroy the relationship, nothing can. On resurrection day God once again stands with arms open, showing that God has even carried murder.

2. Genesis

Not surprisingly, Yahweh's self-description at Sinai coheres with the picture of Yahweh conveyed by Genesis in several ways.

At the beginning, God blessed the sea creatures, the human beings, and the seventh day of the week. The implication of the first two is that these creatures will

be fruitful, and perhaps this is also the implication of the last.⁷ Following on Adam and Eve's act of disobedience, Yahweh God declares that the snake is cursed, and so is the land itself. Henceforth blessing and curse will struggle for dominance in the story.

Blessing and curse are thus correlative, but they are not expressed as exact antonyms. God actively blesses creation but does not actively curse the snake and the ground; Yahweh only declares that they are cursed.

At one level the distinction is a purely syntactical one. If we ask, "Who does the cursing?" presumably the answer must be God. God is the subject of the verb that spells out the implications of the curse on the snake, "I will put enmity. . . ." And Noah's father, at least, sees the subsequent curse on the ground as God's act (Gen 5:29). Further, saying something "is cursed" is not merely a statement of fact but a statement of intent and commitment (cf. Gen 9:25; 49:7; Deut 27:15–26).⁸ Presumably the intent and commitment are God's. Yet not having God say "I curse you" is significant. Noah's father assumes like a structural linguist that a passive verb can be turned into an active one without changing the meaning. The logic parallels that of theologians who infer that if God predestines to salvation, God must also predestine to damnation, even if scripture does not say so. Scripture's implications are more subtle and less rationalist. To describe God as blessing but not directly cursing suggests that blessing is Yahweh's natural activity, while cursing is less so.

Next, there is the interesting fact that the only emotion attributed to Yahweh in Genesis is pain. Pain was to characterize a woman's relationship with her children and a man's relationship with his work (Gen 3:16–17)—a woman's relationship with her work and a man's with his children, no doubt, too. It now emerges that pain (*ʿasab hitpael*) characterizes God's experience, too (Gen 6:6). The curse also lands on God. Whereas God had originally looked at the earth and enjoyed the sight, now God is grieved at the frustrating of the creation aim of achieving something good. It will not be the last time God experiences such pain. The forming of Israel as a people, too, will soon bring pain to Yahweh's holy spirit, because that forming is followed by rebellion (Isa 63:10). The story will repeat itself. So God regrets making humanity (Gen 6:6, 7). Like the English word "regret," *nakham* (piel) denotes sorrow at something and a change of mind that issues in a change of plan. These two are related, and the word thus commonly denotes both, though it can focus more on the one or the other. Both ideas belong here. The further reference to emotion adds more explicit testimony to Yahweh's nature. Possessing emotions is one of the respects in which God and humanity are fundamentally alike. God is not without passions, as Christian doctrine has sometimes thought. As the First Testament will go on to show, God has all the emotions human beings have, and has them in spades. Indeed, the fact that human beings are passionate creatures (does that distinguish us from animals?), creatures characterized by compassion and anger, reflects our being made in God's image. The reference to pain and regret

⁷So Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11* (Minneapolis: Augsburg / London: SPCK, 1984), 172.

⁸Num 22:6 uses a passive form of the finite verb to make the statement of fact.

before there is any reference to anger again suggests that such soft emotions are more intrinsic to God's nature than hard emotions such as anger. Presumably the same is true of the beings made in God's image.

Admittedly Yahweh's reaction is then to decide to destroy the world, but Noah found favor in Yahweh's eyes (Gen 6:8). Yahweh acts in linear sequence. Excepting someone from the destruction was not part of the intention formulated in Gen 6:5–7, the emotional response of a grieved spirit. God made a decision and then modified it in the direction of mercy. That fits a pattern that will recur in the story of Sodom, of Israel at Sinai, and elsewhere, often because an intercessor prevails on Yahweh to modify a tough decision. Here there is no intercessor, but having punishment as second rather than first nature makes Yahweh capable of modifying tough decisions without necessarily requiring pressure from outside. The fact that Yahweh responds to such pressure constitutes an encouragement to intercession, but the fact that Yahweh can generate such modifications without being urged to do so constitutes an encouragement not to feel constrained by possible limitations within Yahweh's own character, as if Yahweh might be hard to persuade.

Genesis 12 also implies that blessing is Yahweh's natural activity, while cursing is less so. We might translate Yahweh's opening words to Abram, "Go from your land . . . to the land which I will show you, that I may make you a great nation, and bless you, and make your name great that you may effect blessing, and that I may bless the ones blessing you—and should there be one who regards you with contempt I will curse him. So, then, all the families of the earth can gain a blessing in you."⁹ The last of the first-person verbs, "I will curse him," takes a different form from the four preceding ones. Those all state the purpose of the commission to "go."¹⁰ The last first-person verb, "I will curse," is simply a declaration of intent, not a declaration of purpose.¹¹ Yahweh commands Abraham to go out to receive blessing and convey blessing, not to bring a curse, though Yahweh grants that the latter may happen in the process. The declaration about the curse is not part of Yahweh's direct intention but part of the undertaking to Abraham that promises him protection from people who oppose Yahweh's purpose to bless. Indeed, paradoxically, the curse is thus uttered for the sake of the world's blessing, to ensure that Yahweh's purpose to bless the world is not derailed.

The same point emerges from several aspects of Abraham's intercession for Sodom. First, that intercession is an outworking of Yahweh's commitment to bless the world, which leads Yahweh to determine to tell Abraham about the imminent fate of Sodom (Gen 18:18). Abraham does not take long to work out several implications of this revelation. As Yahweh waits with him (waiting for him to speak?), Abraham immediately begins to talk to Yahweh about Sodom and to challenge Yahweh about the propriety of destroying the city in a way that brings death to the

⁹In this paragraph I follow Patrick D. Miller, *Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology* (JSOTSup 267; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), esp. 495.

¹⁰They are imperfect or cohortative, all preceded by simple *waw* indicating purpose. This construction is resumed in the subsequent clause that closes the quotation.

¹¹The word order is varied so that the linking *waw* ("and") does not attach to the verb, as happens in a purpose clause.

faithless as well as the faithful. Yahweh agrees not to do that. Abraham's conversation with Yahweh anticipates Moses' conversation with Yahweh in Exod 32 (though Abraham is more deferential) and anticipates some other acts of intercession in the First Testament.¹² One of their recurrent features is that intercession is commonly designed to get Yahweh not to implement an intention to bring punishment and death. Their presupposition is the one explicitly and delightfully disparaged by Jonah when he fails to fulfill a prophet's vocation to pray for Yahweh not to implement the intention to punish. Jonah had said to himself back in Israel that Yahweh could not be relied on to carry out a threat to punish Nineveh, and this had been his reason for attempting to get out of being the means of providing Yahweh with the excuse for failing to do so. "I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, long-tempered and big in commitment, and relenting about calamity" (Jonah 4:2, with a reference to Exod 34).

Prayers for Yahweh to abandon the idea of bringing calamity may not always work, but being tough is not Yahweh's first nature, and therefore Yahweh is often a pushover when urged not to act in punishment. So Abraham can imagine the possibility that Yahweh might get angry with him (Gen 18:30, 32), and he knows Yahweh can curse, but he also knows that this is not Yahweh's first nature. In Yahweh's nature blessing has priority over cursing, love over anger, mercy over retribution.

3. The Intention to Punish in Hosea and Isaiah

Hosea 11 is the classic passage in the Prophets where Yahweh gives testimony to a tension between anger and compassion and to the victory of the latter. Yahweh speaks as a mother or father who has lovingly cared and provided for a child but found the child declining to acknowledge its parent. Yahweh therefore determines to thrash Israel. It will end up like other cities such as Admah and Zeboiim that Yahweh "overturned in his hot anger" (Deut 29:22).

But "how can I give you up, Ephraim? How surrender you, Israel? My heart has overturned upon me" (Hos 11:8). "Overturn" (*hapak*, here niphal) now describes something of which Yahweh is victim rather than subject. Yahweh's heart will not allow the implementing of the inclination to destroy. Yahweh had indeed acted on those other cities in "angry blazing" (cf. Deut 29:23), but here Yahweh says, "I will not act on my angry blazing" toward Ephraim (Hos 11:9). The reason is that "all my sorrow has heated up" (Hos 11:8). On the other occasions when something heats up, it is compassion (*rakhamim*; Gen 43:30; 1 Kgs 3:26), and compassion has had some prominence earlier in this book (Hos 1:6, 7, 8; 2:1, 4, 21, 23 [3, 6, 23, 25]; also 14:3 [4]). One might thus have expected compassion to feature in Hos 11, especially as *rakhamim* is a motherly virtue and this testimony may reflect a mother's experience. Talk instead of sorrow (*nikhumim*), a word similar in sound and overlapping in meaning, introduces a suggestive ambiguity. This word occurs only twice elsewhere (Isa 57:13; Zech 1:13), where it suggests pity or comfort

¹²See further chapter 14 below.

and thus has similar implications to compassion. But we have noted that the verb *nakhham* can also suggest sorrow at having done something (e.g., 1 Sam 15:35) or second thoughts at the idea of doing something (e.g., Amos 7:3, 6). Either or both implications would be appropriate here (NRSV has “compassion,” NEB “remorse”). Yahweh could be pulled back from overturning Ephraim either by pity at the idea of it or by a capacity for relenting in connection with a proposed act of punishment. Either way, Hos 11 acknowledges that within Yahweh two fires burn, the fire of anger and the fire of sorrow, but these are not fires of equal strength. The fire of sorrow is stronger than the fire of anger.

That is so because Yahweh is God and not a man (Hos 11:9). Again, Yahweh perhaps makes the most of the ambiguity in a word. From NRSV’s “mortal” or TNIV’s “human being” we might have inferred that the word for man is *adam*, but it is *ish*, which commonly suggests a man over against a woman (*ishshah*). It can refer to an individual person without drawing attention to gender, like traditional English “a man,” but it would be an odd word to use thus in this context, especially when Hosea has made much use of *ish* to denote a male, and specifically a husband (Hos 2:2, 7, 10, 16 [4, 9, 12, 18]; 3:3).¹³ Hosea’s statement is that Yahweh is not a man but someone in Ephraim’s midst as holy one (Hos 11:9). There is a sense in which Yahweh wants Israel to look at Yahweh as her *ish*, as opposed to her *ba’al* (Hos 2:16 [18]). Yahweh wants to be her man, not her lord and master. Patriarchal marriage is not Yahweh’s ideal. But any form of marriage might be a frightening prospect when we have seen in Hos 1–3 how Hosea and Yahweh treat their women. Hosea 11 implies that the abusive husbands of Hos 1–3 are not the book’s sole model for the way Yahweh wants to relate to Ephraim. Yahweh there threatened to behave like a man but here withdraws the threat. Yahweh has threatened to withdraw from Ephraim (Hos 5:6, 15) but has not done so, like a woman who said she was going to abandon her children but in the end could not let herself do so. Yahweh is not a man but is the holy one, still in the people’s midst.¹⁴ Yahweh’s testimony has indicated that the essence of Yahweh’s holiness lies in being vulnerable to the overcoming of fierce anger by sorrow, pity, and the inclination to relent about punishing people.

The closing sections of the book show that we cannot read the move from the story in Hos 1–3 to the testimony in Hos 11 as a once-for-all linear sequence; there are more threats to come. Indeed, Yahweh will declare that “sorrow hides from my eyes” (Hos 13:14).¹⁵ And the broader context of Hosea in the prophets also suggests that the tension between anger and compassion abides.

Isaiah 28:21 implies the same tension and comes to the opposite conclusion to Hos 11. Yahweh is to bring death on Judah. “As at Mount Perizim Yahweh will arise, as at the Valley of Gibeon will thunder, to do his deed (strange his deed) and to work his work (alien his work).” Isaiah looks back to battles when Yahweh spectacularly

¹³ See further John Goldingay and Gillian Cooper, “Hosea and Gomer Visit the Marriage Counselor,” in *First Person: Essays in Biblical Autobiography* (ed. Philip R. Davies; London / New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 119–36 (see 135–36).

¹⁴ Cf. Graham I. Davies, *Hosea* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 264.

¹⁵ “Sorrow” is *nokham*, a variant for *nikhumim* occurring only here.

defeated the Philistines before David (see 1 Sam 5; 1 Chr 14) and declares that Yahweh is again to arise and thunder thus.¹⁶ But this time the deed that emerges from that arising and thundering will be strange and alien.

The statement that Yahweh will act in a strange way is allusive. It surely means more than that this is a strange experience for Judah.¹⁷ Perhaps the prophet speaks elliptically and describes bringing calamity to Judah as the act of a stranger, the kind of thing one might expect of another god or another people. It is strange and alien to Yahweh's relationship with Judah. The natural way for Yahweh to exercise the capacity to bring death is to do that to the people's enemies. For Yahweh to act thus toward Judah is to turn things upside down. Indeed, Yahweh is thus acting in a way that is strange and alien to who Yahweh is. It is not natural to Yahweh to bring calamity, but Yahweh is going to be resolute about acting thus, alien though it is.

In practice in Isaiah's day, Yahweh's resolution fails at the last minute. Yahweh can bring foes to the gates of Jerusalem but is not steadfast enough to let the city fall (e.g., Isa 29:1–8). In the end, the implication is similar to that of the testimony in Hos 11.

4. After Punishing: Lamentations, Jeremiah, Isaiah 40–55

But Yahweh does become tired of sorrow (Jer 15:6), raises the resolve to punish, overcomes the instincts of the heart, and lets blazing anger express itself on Ephraim and later on Judah.

After that, Lamentations nevertheless restates the point about the relationship between anger and Yahweh's heart with particular succinctness. At the center of Lamentations comes the affirmation, "The Lord does not reject forever, but hurts and [then] has compassion, in accordance with the magnitude of his acts of commitment, because he does not afflict and hurt human beings from his heart" (Lam 3:32–33). It is the phrase "not . . . from his heart" that is especially striking. English translations paraphrase the expression by speaking of Yahweh not "willingly" afflicting people. This translation makes the point in a vivid way, in offering the picture of Yahweh acting unwillingly. And the expression "from my heart" can indeed imply "of my own will": Moses and Balaam use it to refer to something that does not come from their own will but from Yahweh's (Num 16:28; 24:13). But if Yahweh's act emerged from some other will, whose will was that? And if Yahweh's act emerged from some other will, how would that support the idea that Yahweh does not reject forever?

More likely the heart here suggests not the will but the deepest springs of the person. Action undertaken from the heart is action that corresponds to the inner being and is thus undertaken with enthusiasm. It expresses who the person truly

¹⁶ RSV translates *ragaz* "be wroth," and it would suit my argument to give the verb this meaning, but it is doubtful if it ever has that precise connotation; it refers to a physical stirring of oneself, in other contexts often caused by fear.

¹⁷ Cf. L. A. Snijders, "The Meaning of *zār* in the First Testament," *OtSt* 10 (1954): 1–154 (see 38). He later sees the word as suggesting something harmful and hostile (see 55).

is (e.g., Isa 59:13). Lamentations is then implying that the reason Yahweh's punishment does not last forever is that, as we might put it, Yahweh's heart is not in it.

After the fall of Jerusalem and the assassination of the Babylonian governor, during the period when the traditional critical view assumes Lamentations was being written and used, Judeans somewhat belatedly ask Jeremiah what they should do now. The answer is consistent with Jeremiah's previous words and actions. If they submit to the Babylonian yoke and stay in Judah, Yahweh says, "then I will build you and not demolish, plant you and not uproot, because I regret the disaster I caused to you. Do not be afraid of the king of Babylon . . . because I am with you to deliver you and rescue you from his power. I will grant you compassion, and he will have compassion on you and restore you to your land" (Jer 42:10–12).

Yahweh here uses the verb "feel sorry/regret" (*nakhmam* niphal) related to the word "sorrow" in Hos 11, with the two possible meanings we have noted. There are contexts where Yahweh's regret implies that a knowledge of how things would turn out would have made Yahweh act differently. The implication is that while having the capacity to foresee how things will turn out, Yahweh often refrains from doing so and lives through events in linear sequence with people.¹⁸ It could then be that seeing how things are going from bad to worse makes Yahweh here express regret at letting Jerusalem fall to Babylon. Or, regret can also mean being sorry that one has to act in a certain way but accepting that one has to do so. It then does not mean one would act differently next time. The context suggests that here Yahweh is indeed thus regretting the necessity to take the action that had to be taken. Yahweh is prepared to do the tough thing, if necessary, and will do it again. But Yahweh does it with regret.

Against the background of the exile, Yahweh elsewhere declares, "Shaper of light and creator of dark, maker of well-being and creator of adversity, I am Yahweh, maker of all these" (Isa 45:7). As is often the case, dark is an image for disaster and light for deliverance and blessing in the midst of disaster (e.g., Isa 8:22 [9:1]; Pss 27:1; 36:9 [10]). The same significance attaches to the introduction of light in Gen 1, the creation story that suggests the context of exile. When God says, "There is to be light," Gen 1 doubtless does refer to physical light illumining literal darkness. But following on the talk of formless void, darkness over the deep, and mighty wind, "light" also carries those other resonances, suggesting safety where otherwise there would be threat, meaning where otherwise there would be a void, order where otherwise uncontrollable tumult could develop. God can act as creator of darkness as well as shaper of light, but at the beginning it was not so. Genesis does not tell us "God said, 'There shall be darkness and light,' and there were darkness and light, and God saw that both darkness and light were good." It presupposes darkness and has God introducing light.¹⁹ At the beginning it was the background for God's insisting that these realities should be succeeded by light. That indicates God's purpose for Israel.

Declaring that disaster as well as blessing comes from Yahweh reassures readers that there is no other power than Yahweh's at work in the world. The disaster

¹⁸ See further chapter 3, which follows.

¹⁹ Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (reissued ed.; Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), xxiv.

that has come on the community is within Yahweh's sovereignty. But such disasters are no more God's first word than God's last. All that God did at the beginning looked good. The world was founded as something good. When it went bad, it went against its nature. Further, the founding of the world involved the streaming of light into darkness. While darkness and light are equally within God's sovereignty, they are not equally God's purpose or aim (Gen 1:3–4). God's drive is toward light, not darkness, and in founding the world God asserted that priority.

A further feature of Isa 40–55 is significant here. These chapters promise that Yahweh will restore the Judean community in exile in Babylon. Yahweh will do that as an expression of *sedeq* (e.g., Isa 45:13; 51:1, 5, 7) or of *sedaqah* (e.g., Isa 46:12, 13; 51:6, 8). They will be the acts of one who is *saddiq* (e.g., Isa 45:21). Elsewhere these words are routinely translated by English words such as “justice” or “righteousness,” and we have noted the familiar idea that God is “a just God and a savior.” But in a number of the above passages this does not work, and NRSV, for instance, thus renders the nouns “deliverance.” Yahweh's act of restoration is an act of *sedeq*. But it would be weird to describe it as an act of justice, as if the Judeans deserved to be delivered. The prophet rather implies that it is an act of grace. It is indeed an act of *sedeq* in the sense that it means Yahweh is doing the right thing by the community. But Yahweh is doing the right thing by them in the sense that this is the act that emerges from Yahweh's character and from Yahweh's commitment to this people. It is not an act of justice, but it is an act of *sedeq*. The notion of justice presupposes that people are treated in a fair way and that everyone is treated in the same way. There are contexts in which the First Testament believes in such justice, but it is not the essence of the idea of *sedeq*. That is a relational word that denotes acting in a way that is proper to one's relationship with people. Thus *saddiq* often means something like “faithful.”

After people have been freed to return to Judah and some have done so, Ezra prays a prayer of confession in which he declares, “Yahweh, God of Israel, you are *saddiq*, because we have survived as a remnant” (Ezra 9:15). His argument is not merely that Yahweh was in the right in reducing them to a remnant. It is that Yahweh's true nature as *saddiq* has also been reflected in not letting them cease to exist altogether. The Levites later comment that in giving the land of Canaan to their ancestors, “You kept your word, because you are *saddiq*” (Neh 9:8). In our terms, giving the land to the Israelites may seem an act of injustice to the Canaanites. This prayer sees it as an act of *sedaqah* toward Israel. Such an understanding of Yahweh's being in the right corresponds to the meaning of the idea in Isa 40–55. What Isa 45:21 declares is that “Yahweh is a faithful God and a deliverer.” The people continue in being because Yahweh continues to treat them as a special people who have rights emerging from Yahweh's having made a commitment to them.

5. Yahweh's Asymmetry

It is a commonplace of human experience that people have dominant aspects to their personality and secondary aspects. They may, for instance, be more inclined

to action or reflection, to idealism or realism, to planning or the serendipity, to firmness or flexibility, to orientation on the present or on the future. Both elements in each pair are good. We might be inclined to think that it would be ideal to have each of these in balance within the individual, though people are rarely like that. Perhaps God prefers to achieve that balance by having within the human body and within the body of Christ people who are more inclined to one or the other, because this encourages us to live together rather than being self-sufficient.

Whatever are our dominant characteristics as individuals, however, we have some capacity to summon up the correlative characteristics when we require these. Our dominant side is complemented by a secondary side.

The First Testament picture implies that in this regard God is like a human being; once again, it links with our being made in God's image. It may be that God has some personality aspects in balance. God holds together idealism and realism, which often startles Bible readers who expect God to be wholly visionary and are surprised at the condescension to practicalities and waywardness expressed in Moses' Teaching. God holds together firmness and flexibility, so that Moses' Teaching lays down the law in detail, yet does so in ways that reflect changes in the way God guided people over the centuries and sometimes explicitly testifies to the way God can be flexible (e.g., Num 27; cf. 2 Chr 30:18–20).

At other points there are dominant aspects to God's character and secondary aspects. For instance, while Gen 1 and Gen 2 indicate that God combines a capacity for planning and for the serendipity, the biblical story as a whole suggests that God is more inclined to serendipity. Again, this surprises Bible readers who have inferred from references to God's planning and to God's sovereignty that God had a detailed plan for world history from the beginning, and for their own lives, but find that the Bible does not suggest that.

The First Testament also makes clear that toughness and softness or justice and mercy do not have an equal place in Yahweh's moral character. Yahweh can summon up the capacity to act tough from time to time, but this does not issue from the heart. Yahweh's dominant side is to be loving and merciful.

First Testament study has difficulty in accepting that there is both a compassionate and a tough side to Yahweh. For the most part, First Testament study emphasizes the positive side to Yahweh, leaving it to a minority from time to time to draw attention to the acts of Yahweh the rough beast. We do not see how to bring these two together. In this we resemble ourselves as children in our attitude to our parents, and in our attitude to ourselves. As small children our instinct is to see our parents either as all good or as all bad; either they do what we want, and they are all good, or they fail to do what we want and act in ways that seem inexplicable, and they are all bad. Good and bad are thus not moral categories but relational ones that point to what seems good or bad from the perspective of our desires and perceptions. Growing toward maturity involves coming to see that our parents are neither all good nor all bad, in that sense and in other senses. They are people in their own right with their own agendas and concerns, which include matters that are priorities to us but which extend beyond those in ways we may not be able to understand. They are not all good or all bad in the way they approach our agenda, but a mixture.

Growing toward maturity involves coming to a related realization about ourselves, though here good and bad have more moral connotations. To see oneself as wholly good or wholly bad is a sign of immaturity or delusion. We, too, are not all bad or all good, but a mixture. Maturity involves coming to own that ambivalence in ourselves.

Christians often expect God to be all good. In a moral sense that is presumably true, but our perspective on God's goodness is often that of children in relation to their parents' goodness. A major theme in Yahweh's confrontation of Job is that Yahweh's agenda and concern for the world are much broader than involving merely what is good for Job or even for humanity as a whole. As far as we are concerned, God does good and bad things, and often we cannot see how the things that feel bad and look bad (the acts of the rough beast) can be the acts of one who is good. Living by trust in God involves coming to believe that they may be so. As with our parents (if we are lucky), the evidence is the fact that many of God's acts do look good. We then trust God for the others. The First Testament shows us that this need by no means exclude protesting about them or owning them by telling stories about them that do not at all pretend to explain them. If we have been able to come to recognize our parents as people who combine good and bad in the first sense, and ourselves as people who combine good and bad in the second sense, we may have an easier time accepting that God combines good and bad in the first sense. And we may have an easier time accepting that the appearance of bad in the second sense may indeed be only an appearance, even though we cannot see how that is so.

There are acts of grace and roughness that are inexplicable as there are acts of blessing and toughness that are explicable, though many, many more of the former than of the latter. Whether acting explicable or inexplicable, Yahweh's dominant side is to be loving and merciful.