

A GOD LIKE No OTHER

Depaganizing the God of the Hebrew Bible

An abstract painting featuring several vertical, blurred figures in shades of blue, green, and yellow, set against a light, textured background. The figures appear to be standing in a row, with some overlapping. The overall style is impressionistic and somewhat ethereal.

Chapter 1

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This first chapter of *A God Like No Other* lays the basis for the comparisons between the pagan gods of antiquity and the God of Israel as he is presented in the Hebrew Bible that constitute the main subject of the book. In order to speak of a paganized, depaganized, or repaganized God, it is necessary first to consider the manner in which most peoples in antiquity conceived of the gods they worshiped.

THE REPAGANIZING OF A DEPAGANIZED GOD

In many ways, the God of Israel as we encounter him in the Hebrew Scriptures was no different than the gods of other nations in antiquity. Like those gods, he had a name, which in Hebrew was written with four consonants, YHWH. He was associated with a particular people and a particular land as other gods were, yet like most of them he was also thought to transcend space and time by dwelling and moving in the air or sky and enduring throughout countless generations without aging or dying in the way that human beings do. While for the most part he could not be seen and heard, like other gods he was able to observe what took place in the world and to hear the prayers of those who invoked him. Those who worshiped the God of Israel presented him their sacrificial offerings and sought his blessings in the same way that other peoples of antiquity implored the favor of their gods by worshiping them and offering them gifts and sacrifices. Just like other gods in antiquity, the God of Israel was thought to become angry with those who refused to submit obediently to his will and at times to punish them by subjecting them to various types of sufferings and afflictions.

At the same time, however, the writings that we now know as the Hebrew Bible portray the God of Israel as a god who in important ways is fundamentally distinct from the gods of other nations. As the creator of all that exists, he possesses powers and knowledge that far exceed those of any other being, human or divine. In some sense, in fact, he alone is God in a way that merits distinguishing him from other gods by using the capitalized form of the term “god” in English to refer to him. While some of the people known as *Yehudhi* or Jews who lived in the period following the construction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in approximately 515 BCE may have believed that other divine or semi-divine beings existed in some sense, they would not have understood those beings to be comparable to YHWH the God of Israel.¹ If such beings did in fact exist, they derived their existence from Israel’s God as their creator and were subject to him as their Lord and sovereign.

In the centuries that have passed since the period in which the writings of the Hebrew Bible were composed and brought together as parts of a single collection, those who regard those writings as sacred scripture have

1. On Jewish beliefs in heavenly and divine beings other than God in the Second Temple period, see Larry W. Hurtado, *Ancient Jewish Monotheism and Early Christian Jesus-Devotion: The Context and Character of Christological Faith* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 163-76; Paula Fredriksen, “Philo, Herod, Paul, and the Many Gods of Ancient Jewish ‘Monotheism,’” *HTR* 115 (2022): 23-45.

continued to conceive and speak of the God whom they portray in ways that distinguish him from the gods of other peoples and nations. By the late fourth century of the Common Era, both the Jews who worshiped the God of Israel and the Christians who adopted the Jewish Scriptures as their own were using the term “pagan” to refer not only to those who worshiped other gods but also to those gods themselves. While in one sense it would be improper and anachronistic to use this same term to refer to peoples of previous centuries and the types of gods they worshiped from time immemorial, in another sense such a usage is entirely appropriate, given that virtually all of those gods were seen as possessing certain traits that made them similar to one another and distinct from the God of whom the Hebrew Scriptures spoke. In many ways, in fact, the gods worshiped by the peoples of ancient Europe, Asia, and Africa who eventually came to embrace Christianity were no different than the gods worshiped by peoples such as the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans in biblical times, as well as those of the peoples who inhabited the regions of Mesopotamia and the ancient Near East for several millennia prior to the composition of the biblical texts. For that reason, many historians and biblical scholars consider it appropriate to use the adjective “pagan” to refer to the gods of these peoples as well, as I will do throughout the present work.

Yet while the preservation and ongoing use of the writings of the Hebrew Bible among Jews and Christians in the centuries following their composition and formation into a single collection led members of both groups to continue to conceive of God in ways that made him different from the gods of other nations and peoples, it would be a mistake to suppose that their conception of God remained entirely uniform and unchanged over that period of time. For at least three or four centuries prior to the beginning of the Common Era, in fact, the vast majority of Jews who adhered to the Hebrew Scriptures as their own had no longer been able to read or understand those Scriptures in the language in which they had been written and preserved. The main reason for this was that by that time the number of Jews throughout the world who continued to speak and communicate in Hebrew had dwindled to a relatively small minority. In addition, however, the primary means of access that most Jews of the Second Temple period had to their Scriptures consisted of the oral traditions that had been passed down to them by their ancestors and the translations made of those Scriptures into other languages, including especially Aramaic and Greek. It can hardly be doubted that both the new social, political, and religious contexts in which the Jewish people came to find themselves and the loss of Hebrew as the everyday spoken language of most Jews had at least some impact on the manner in which they conceived and spoke of the God of Israel, not only because they were inevitably immersed in the worldviews of the peoples among whom they inhabited but also because they had to define and live out their faith in languages and contexts that in many ways were different from those of their ancestors.

The destruction of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 CE, the increase in the number of Jews living outside of Judea following the Jewish revolts against Rome in the first and second centuries, and the rise of Christianity also led to changes in the manner in which those who read the biblical texts understood the God of whom they spoke. No matter how fervently and faithfully they sought to remain grounded in those texts, both the Jews and the Christians who regarded them as sacred scripture were constantly forced to define and redefine their understanding of the God in whom they believed in dialogue with other peoples and worldviews. In most places, those Jews who preserved their faith and identity lived as small minorities among other peoples and thus had no choice but to interact extensively with persons whose ways of thinking and speaking were distinct from their own. Whether they realized it or not, over time many aspects of those ways of thinking and speaking became their own. Among Christians, the influence of pagan conceptions of the gods on their own view of God was much stronger, primarily because the overwhelming majority of those who embraced Christianity came from pagan backgrounds themselves. Even when they renounced their previous beliefs in order to embrace the God of whom the Bible spoke, they could not entirely avoid conceiving of that God in many of the ways in which they had conceived of the pagan gods whom they had worshiped previously. Beginning in the late fourth century, in fact, most of those who were baptized as Christians became so to some extent only in name, both because many did not do so out of sincere conviction and because even those who did generally found it impossible to leave behind completely the beliefs and worldviews that had been ingrained into them and their ancestors for centuries prior to their conversion.

Of course, among both Jews and Christians there were many different groups who read and interpreted the biblical texts in ways that distinguished them from other groups that claimed to confess the same God and the same faith. From the very beginning, the claim that in Jesus the God of Israel had sent his Son into the world and had constituted him as the Messiah or Christ of whom the Jewish Scriptures spoke led those Jews who came to be followers of Christ to conceive of that God in ways that distinguished them from those Jews who did not accept that claim. Eventually those Jews and the large number of non-Jews who became Christians came to view and designate the Jewish Scriptures as the Old Testament and set those Scriptures alongside a collection of writings that were unique to them, which they labeled the New Testament. While Christians thus read the Jewish Scriptures or Old Testament through the lens of the New, most Jews came to read their Scriptures through the lens of the rabbinic writings that began to circulate and rise to prominence in the second century CE.

Although in most ways the manner in which both Jews and Christians understood the Hebrew Scriptures and the God of whom they spoke remained constant over the following centuries and into the modern period, in many

Jewish and Christian circles the rise of biblical scholarship in the nineteenth century led to significant changes in the way in which those Scriptures were read and interpreted. Biblical scholars and historians dedicated themselves to the task of reconstructing not only the texts themselves but also the contexts in which they had been composed and collected. On the basis of these reconstructions, they came to view differently not only the biblical texts themselves but also the beliefs reflected in those texts. It became clear that beliefs regarding the God of Israel had evolved a great deal in the centuries preceding the Common Era and that a variety of views regarding God and his relation to Israel and humanity in general could be discerned in the biblical texts. It also became evident that the beliefs of other peoples in antiquity had influenced in important ways the beliefs regarding God that developed among those who identified as Jews and as members of Israel. For these reasons, many biblical scholars and historians would now reject the notion that there is a single, uniform, and fully consistent conception of God running throughout the biblical texts.

While to some extent those scholars and historians can be considered justified in rejecting such a notion, it must also be recognized that there is a sense in which it would be correct to claim that throughout the biblical texts we encounter a manner of conceiving of the God of Israel that is in fact uniform and consistent. Those texts, for example, consistently use masculine pronouns when referring to God. Nowhere do they speak of Israel's God having a female consort or engaging in activities such as eating, drinking, sleeping, or having sexual intercourse. On the contrary, they consistently present him as not being subject to needs of the type that human beings experience. They also repeatedly describe him in terms that convey the idea that, as the creator of all that exists, he sees and knows all things, including the thoughts and intentions that arise in human hearts and minds. The biblical texts agree in ascribing to the God of Israel other characteristics that distinguish him from the gods of other nations as well and in claiming that he had been active in certain moments and events in the history of Israel and the world in order to carry out his sovereign will.

Precisely when, where, and how this manner of understanding the God of Israel arose is of course a subject of ongoing scholarly debate and will undoubtedly remain so for many years to come. Intimately related to that debate are similar questions concerning the manner in which the biblical texts as we now have them came to be composed, edited, transmitted, and brought together as parts of a single collection that we now call the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. In the present work, however, I will not address such questions or engage in those debates. For that reason, for the most part I will not be referencing the scholarly literature that examines the biblical texts on the basis of those questions and debates.

What I propose here is something distinct from what most scholarly works on the Hebrew Bible attempt. Rather than seeking to reconstruct the original meanings of the biblical texts on the basis of historical considerations,

I simply wish to engage those texts as they now stand in order to examine basic elements of the conception of Israel's God that runs throughout them and the manner in which that conception of God is reflected in the traits and activities that those texts ascribe to him. This involves taking what is known as a synchronic approach to the texts rather than a diachronic approach.² Whereas a diachronic approach attempts to examine the various stages in the formation of a text, a synchronic approach analyzes a text in the final form in which it now stands. Even those scholars who analyze the biblical texts from a synchronic perspective, however, generally address questions regarding the historical contexts in which those texts are thought to have reached their present form. For the most part, I will not be addressing such questions here.

My reason for approaching the biblical texts in this manner is grounded in the argument that I will be developing in the present work. What I will argue is not merely that there are certain traits that the writings of the Hebrew Bible consistently ascribe to the God of Israel but also that for centuries interpreters of the Hebrew Bible have failed to understand properly those traits because they have instead read back into the biblical texts beliefs and ideas that are grounded in pagan conceptions of the deity and are therefore foreign to those texts. As a result, it may be said that the God of whom those interpreters speak is no longer the God of the Hebrew Bible but a God who has been paganized.

The claim that for centuries the God of the Hebrew Bible has been paganized presupposes that there are certain ways of conceiving of the divinity that can be labeled pagan. Such a presupposition can lead one to overlook the fact that many different conceptions of the gods existed in antiquity. Nevertheless, there are certain characteristics that were commonly ascribed to most of the gods known to us. It is these that interest us here.

THE PAGAN GODS OF ANTIQUITY

Despite the differences among them, most of the accounts of the origins of the gods and the world known to us from antiquity share a number of common traits. In virtually all of these accounts, known as theogonies and cosmogonies, the gods and the world are simply said to exist from the beginning, usually in some type of unordered or chaotic form. Strictly speaking, neither the plurality of gods nor the cosmos are said to have been created and are not seen as having arisen out of nothingness as the result of a conscious and deliberate decision on the part of some personal deity or sovereign power to bring them into existence. Most of the gods are said to have their origin in other primordial gods who procreate or generate them in some way. These primordial gods are often associated with some foundational reality, substance, or matter that is either identified with them or else constitutes the

2. On this distinction and its history in the area of biblical studies, see especially Paul R. Noble, "Synchronic and Diachronic Approaches to Biblical Interpretation," *JLT* 7 (1993): 130-48; Koog P. Hong, "Synchrony and Diachrony in Contemporary Biblical Interpretation," *CBQ* 75 (2013): 521-39.

source from which they emerge. The existence of this primordial matter and the primordial gods associated with it is simply assumed from the outset and is not thought to be preceded by a time in which nothing existed at all.

In the Babylonian account of the origins of the gods and the world known as the *Enuma Elish*, for example, the two primordial gods Apsu and Tiamat are said to have existed in the form of water from the very beginning. After they have engendered other gods from within themselves, they are separated into salt water and fresh water. Subsequently the heavens and earth as well as animals and human beings are fashioned from the bodies of the gods themselves or from the same primordial reality.³ The ancient Egyptian theogonies and cosmogonies known to us also speak of water as the source from which everything else emerged, including the first gods.⁴ In his *Theogony*, the Greek writer Hesiod speaks of four primordial gods, Chaos (the chasm), Gaia (the earth), Tartarus (the underworld), and Eros (desire), yet he does not offer any explanation regarding their origin. The rest of the gods are said to have descended from these gods.⁵ According to all of these conceptions of the origins of what now exists, the gods are composed of the same basic substance, matter, or reality as the world itself.

This manner of understanding the origin of the gods and their relation to the world is significant for a couple of reasons. First, neither the gods nor the world are viewed as existing for some reason or purpose. They are not brought into being in order to accomplish some objective. Instead, they simply exist for their own sake. And second, even though the gods possess a great deal of power that enables them to exert control over the forces of nature, at the same time to some extent they are themselves subject to many forces of nature. In some cases, in fact, the gods are identified with the forces of nature or natural realities such as the sun, the stars and planets, or the sea. This means that they are generally regarded as being subject to certain laws that limit them and define what they can or must do. Even when they are seen as personal beings who exist independently of the natural order, they generally must still do things such as sleep, rest, and eat. They also tend to be driven by passions and desires that are similar to those that human beings experience. These include not only sexual passions but also the desire to receive praise, honor, and recognition from others.

3. See the first six tablets of the *Enuma Elish*, also known as the Babylonian Epic of Creation or Babylonian Creation Myth, especially I.1-32, IV.93-140, VI.1-34.

4. On the different types of ancient Egyptian theogonies and cosmogonies that posit water as the source of the primordial gods, see Gordon H. Johnston, "Genesis 1 and Ancient Egyptian Creation Myths," *BSac* 165 (2008): 178-94 (180-81). Johnston notes there that the four major Egyptian cosmological texts in which this idea is found are the Pyramid Texts, the Coffin Texts, the Book of the Dead from the New Kingdom period, and the so-called Shabaka Stone. See also George Hart, *Egyptian Myths, The Legendary Past* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990), 9-28.

5. On the origin of the gods and the world in ancient Hellenistic thought and mythology, see Richard Caldwell, *The Origin of the Gods: A Psychoanalytic Study of Greek Theogonic Myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 126-45; Carolina López-Ruiz, *When the Gods Were Born: Greek Cosmogonies and the Near East* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 84-129.

These same needs, passions, and desires define what the gods are said to want and seek from human beings. If the gods did not need or desire anything from human beings, they would simply ignore them. They would have no reason to respond to prayers or petitions that human beings present to them or concern themselves in any way in human affairs. In principle, human beings might offer the gods gifts or favors in an attempt to obtain something from them, yet because the gods would neither need nor desire what human beings offer them, they would simply remain uninterested in those offerings and indifferent to them. Conversely, human beings would have no reason to present petitions or offerings to the gods, since they would never receive any type of benefit or response from the gods by doing so. As a result, the gods and human beings would simply live in their own separate realms, unconcerned with what happened in the realm of the other.

Of course, this is not the reality we encounter in the belief systems of the peoples of antiquity who worshiped pagan gods. In all of those systems, the gods take at least some interest in the activities and petitions of human beings. They receive gifts and offerings from human beings and respond to those gifts and offerings by bestowing favors on them. When those human beings fail to present to the gods the gifts and offerings they desire or need, the gods become angry and respond by inflicting various types of suffering on human beings as punishment.

While the gods are consistently presented as desiring gifts and offerings from human beings in these belief systems, the question of precisely *why* they desire these things is rarely raised or addressed in the ancient texts known to us. In some cases, it is maintained that the gods actually consume the food and drink presented to them as offerings, if not physically at least in some spiritual or ethereal sense. In other cases, it is the aroma of what is offered that pleases them. When the offerings are burnt on an altar so as to rise up to the heavens in smoke, they are generally thought to be converted into a form in which they can actually ascend to the gods in order to be received by them.

In those belief systems in which the gods are not thought to consume what is offered to them, they are seen as desiring gifts and offerings for some other reason. In virtually every case, this reason is that they wish to be revered, worshiped, and held in high regard by human beings. They long for recognition, acclaim, and adulation. Because they regard such things as ends in themselves, they are viewed as being motivated by vanity and are generally regarded as egotistical or egocentric. Many of the offerings said to be presented by human beings to the gods are not food items but things such as precious metals and stones, jewelry, or other items of great value. If the gods are pleased by such offerings, it cannot be because they need them or wish to consume them, but simply because they desire from human beings the type of veneration and worship that those offerings are intended to express and convey.

It is important to stress that the gods are invariably thought to desire these things *for their own sake*. When they demand sacrificial offerings, they are not

seeking the well-being of human beings or wishing to benefit them in some way. The relationship between the gods and those who worship them is one of *do ut des*, which is Latin for “I give (to you) so that you may give (to me)”: the gods give human beings what they want in exchange for receiving from those human beings what they want for themselves. What motivates the gods is not love for human beings or any kind of genuine concern for their well-being or happiness. Rather, those human beings serve as a means by which the gods obtain what they desire for themselves. If the gods want human beings to enjoy peace and well-being, it is only so that those human beings can dedicate themselves to serving the gods without being impeded by any type of hardship, conflict, or obstacle.

Of course, because human beings are especially dependent on the gods and their favor, they are thought to be under obligation to present offerings to the gods and express their gratitude and allegiance to the gods by means of those offerings. The gods are therefore entitled to receive gifts and offerings, which are said to be due to them. If human beings do not fulfill their obligations in this regard, the gods have a right to demand from them the offerings owed to them and to punish those human beings until they receive those offerings. They may also require that those human beings who have angered and offended them by failing to give them what is theirs by right atone for their offenses by presenting offerings aimed at appeasing them and by carrying out other actions that demonstrate contrition for having failed to fulfill their obligations to the gods.

It is also important to stress what such gods do *not* demand or expect. As long as they receive the offerings due to them, it does not matter to them whether or not those offerings are given out of a spirit of sincere love, devotion, and gratitude. What the gods want is not merely verbal or sentimental expressions of love or affection but concrete gifts and offerings as ends in themselves. In fact, because the relationship between the gods and human beings is based on the principle of *do ut des*, it is generally recognized that those who present the gods offerings do so, not to express heartfelt love and thankfulness, but because they wish to receive something from the gods in exchange for their gifts. Those who offer the gods gifts therefore do so out of self-interest, motivated by the same type of egocentrism and concern for themselves that characterizes the gods.

For the most part, the gods are also unconcerned about the ethical behavior of those who present them the offerings due to them. It matters little to them if the offerers practice justice and kindness in their daily life, care for the needy, or oppress the weak. Nor does it generally matter to the gods if the gifts presented to them have been stolen or plundered from other human beings through acts of violence or injustice. In fact, the gods themselves may send and empower those who worship them to ravage and pillage other peoples in order to receive more gifts for themselves, and when their worshipers are successful in such endeavors, it is expected that they will express their gratitude

to the gods for having enabled them to obtain what they have plundered by offering a considerable portion of it to them.

For this reason, while human beings may be said to offend or anger the gods or transgress against them, it would not be entirely accurate to speak of human beings *sinning* against the gods. In English, to sin generally involves violating some ethical norm or committing some type of wrongdoing. What moves the gods to demand gifts and offerings and to become angry if they do not receive them, however, is not any kind of concern for ethical conduct or the practice of what is good and right, but simply their desire to receive such gifts and offerings for their own sake.

In fact, for the most part the gods themselves are uninterested in practicing what is good and right or engaging in ethical behavior, except as such behavior promotes their own ends. In many cases, they actually do the opposite, acting with cruelty and violence out of spite and hatred or seeking to satisfy their lusts and passions through sexual encounters that many human beings would even consider illicit. They may overlook injustice or even promote it and be pleased by it. At times, of course, they may be moved to pity when they observe human beings in pain, distress, and afflictions, yet even in those cases they tend to be motivated not by love but simply by an aversion to seeing pain and suffering, especially when those who are enduring such things are thereby prevented from giving them the offerings and worship they desire. At the same time, the gods tend to be capricious and moody, acting amicably one moment while becoming consumed with rage the next, often for no apparent reason.

Ultimately, what interests the gods is to be able to dwell in peace and tranquility, unmolested by any kind of trouble or conflict so that they may enjoy the pleasures of their blissful existence. The gifts and offerings they receive from human beings help make this possible. The praise and adulation that human beings offer up to them also contribute to their enjoyment and bliss. Human beings are often seen as fulfilling the role of entertaining the gods. They do this not only by dancing, singing, and playing music for the gods but also by means of other activities that arouse their interest, including competitions and games as well as warfare and bloodshed.

Naturally, those human beings who please the gods the most by satisfying their needs and desires and entertaining them in ways that they find especially pleasing are objects of their special favor. The most important gods show preference for those human beings who are wealthy and powerful, primarily because such human beings are able to present them with gifts that are more lavish and abundant. They also favor those who are physically strong, gifted, and attractive because such individuals are more entertaining and pleasant to gaze upon. These gods are especially interested in the affairs of kings and rulers due to the power and influence that they have over other human beings and also have special regard for the priests who are dedicated to presenting them the offerings they wish to receive. In contrast, such gods tend to show

little concern for the common people, the weak, and the needy, since such people have little to offer them and thus are scarcely considered worthy of their time and attention.

While human beings generally look to the gods for salvation in the sense that they seek the gods' assistance in order to accomplish their objectives and overcome any hardships or difficulties they encounter, including especially opposition from their enemies, in many cases the gods represent the *problem* for human beings rather than the *solution* to their problems or plight. Because they must do whatever is necessary not only to obtain the gods' favor but also to avoid arousing their wrath, in a sense it can be said that human beings must be saved not only *by* the gods but *from* them as well. They must constantly be concerned to keep the gods satisfied and content by offering them whatever they desire and serving their interests in other ways. To some degree, therefore, human beings live in slavery and bondage to the gods, since they have no choice but to do the gods' bidding in order to survive in the world and have success accomplishing any ends of their own.

The superiority of the gods over human beings also results in relationships that are defined in terms of dominance and submission. All seek to gain power over others in order to obtain from them what they want by imposing their will on them. These relationships are therefore characterized by constant conflict and violence. The gods engage in conflicts with one another until the most powerful are able to establish themselves in a position of supremacy over the rest. The same is true among human beings, who also tend to be constantly engaged in struggles for dominance over one another. Because relationships are defined in terms of superiority and inferiority, they are invariably hierarchical. The only way in which conflict can give way to peace is for all to accept their place in the hierarchical order. This peace is understood in terms of a lack of conflict, yet it does not involve equity or a well-being that all are to enjoy equally. Instead, this peace favors and benefits those who are in positions of power and supremacy, since those who are inferior to them are forced to dedicate themselves to serving their needs and satisfying their desires over their own.

Although many myths and stories regarding the gods from antiquity might be cited to illustrate all of the characteristics just considered, for our purposes here that objective can be accomplished merely by examining three of the writings that were most widely known among people in the Mediterranean basin and the area of Mesopotamia in the Second Temple period, namely, the *Enuma Elish* from Babylon and the two epic poems of Homer known as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Scholars generally agree that the *Enuma Elish* in the form in which we know it today was composed some time before the first millenium BCE, while Homer's poems are usually dated to the late eighth or early seventh century BCE.⁶ While some knowledge of these writings on the

6. On the dating of the *Enuma Elish*, see James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), 60: "There is as yet no general agreement as regards the date of composition. None of the extant texts antedates the

part of readers would be helpful for understanding the discussion that follows, it is not essential in order to grasp the points I wish to stress. Nor is it necessary to enter into a detailed consideration of these accounts.

The Gods of the Enuma Elish

As noted briefly above, at the outset of the *Enuma Elish*, two primordial gods are said to exist in the form of water prior to the formation of the heavens and the earth, namely, the male god Apsu and the female goddess Tiamat. These two gods engender another group of gods who in turn engender even more gods. The account seems to assume that these gods are brought into being as a result of sexual relations that are similar to those in which human beings engage, motivated by a bodily desire or urge rather than a deliberate desire to procreate offspring. Nowhere are the gods presented as making a conscious choice to engender children in order that they may love them, care for them, or show them affection once they have been born. In fact, it is not long before Apsu seeks to destroy the lesser gods that he has engendered with Tiamat.

What leads Apsu to become angry at the gods that he and Tiamat have brought into being is that their constant dancing and merrymaking will not let him sleep at night or rest during the day. For that reason, he determines to have them destroyed (I.22-40). Apsu tells Tiamat: “Their behavior has become displeasing to me, and I cannot rest in the day-time or sleep at night. I will destroy and break up their way of life, that silence may reign and we may sleep” (I.37-40).⁷

Initially, Tiamat stands opposed to the destruction of these gods, even though she too is bothered by their raucous and rowdy behavior. When one of the gods named Ea learns of Apsu’s intentions, however, he recites an incantation to put Apsu to sleep and then kills him. He even makes a dwelling for himself out of Apsu’s corpse (I.41-78). Subsequently, Ea’s wife Damkina gives birth to Marduk, whose strength, beauty, and wisdom are said to surpass by far those of any of the other gods (I.81-100). Angered by the slaying of Apsu, Tiamat makes plans with her new consort Qingu and some of the other gods to destroy Ea and those gods who have sided with him. The account portrays Tiamat as a hideous monster who brings into existence other monstrous beings to assist her. When all of the gods whom Tiamat seeks to destroy are intimidated by her, Marduk rises up as their champion and vows to defeat her if the gods who have taken his side establish him as king over them (I.109–III.138).

first millennium B.C. On the internal evidence, however, of the context and the linguistic criteria, the majority of the scholars would assign the epic to the Old Babylonian period, i.e. the early part of the second millennium B.C.”

7. Quotations from the *Enuma Elish* are taken from W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, MC 16 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 45-134. References in parentheses throughout this section are to the tablet and the line numbers of the text of the *Enuma Elish*.

Once these gods submit to his rule, Marduk proceeds to fulfill his vow. He pierces Tiamat with an arrow, tears open her entrails, binds her up, throws her corpse to the ground, and smashes her skull with a mace. He then severs her arteries and cuts her body in two in order to fashion the heavens and the earth from her corpse. Marduk forms the heavens by stretching one half of Tiamat's body over the other and uses various parts of her body to form rivers, mountains, springs, and the landscape in general (IV.101-4, 127-40; V.47-64). He treats the gods who had allied themselves with Tiamat with the same type of cruelty. Marduk then orders the world he has fashioned in the way that pleases him, assigns to each of the remaining gods a place in that order, and tells them that they must submit to him as lord if they wish to enjoy prosperity and abundance (V.1-114). Those gods gladly acknowledge Marduk as their lord out of self-interest and even kiss his feet (V.86). In addition, Marduk commands that a luxurious dwelling place be built for him in Babylon so that he may reign from there forever. After decreeing that Babylon is to be home for the other gods as well, he prescribes the celebration of festivals and the offering of sacrifices to them and to himself at the temples that are to be built in their honor there (V.117-38).

Marduk then decides to fashion human beings from the blood of Qingu. He has Qingu slain in his presence before having his arteries cut in order to drain the blood from his body (VI.1-34). The purpose for which Marduk brings human beings into existence is that they may perpetually serve him and the other gods. This is stated explicitly in several passages. He tells the god Ea: "I will create Lullû—man, on whom the toil of the gods will be laid that they may rest" (VI.5-8). At Marduk's command, Ea is said to have "created [hu]mankind, on whom he imposed the service of the gods, and set the gods free" (VI.32-37). Elsewhere it is affirmed that Marduk created humankind to spare the gods from having to do any kind of work (VII.25-29). What Marduk desires and demands of human beings, therefore, is that they serve him and the other gods obediently so that those gods may live in luxury together with him, relaxing and enjoying themselves. In essence, human beings are to submit to the gods as their slaves.

Once Babylon with its temples and shrines has been built and the gods have taken up the places assigned to them by Marduk, they all gather to drink and feast there (VI.39-76). The newly-formed human beings are commanded to submit to Marduk as their king by presenting him and the other gods with lavish offerings and even kissing Marduk's feet. They are also told that Marduk will reward them with life, abundance, assistance, and prosperity if they serve him and the other gods faithfully and obediently, but that he and the other gods will punish and destroy any who rebel against them and refuse to fulfill their duties to them (VI.95-146). From that point on, if human beings wish to be shown mercy by Marduk rather than being forced to endure his fierce rage and fury, they must submit fully to his rule and constantly learn and remember his words as the one who possesses the truth and is the

source of all wisdom (VII.25-56, 140-60). For their part, the lesser gods are happy to submit to Marduk because he makes it possible for them to enjoy a life of luxury and pleasure. Like Marduk, they want human beings to hold celebrations and festivals in their honor and offer up to them lavish sacrifices. They are therefore pleased that Marduk has fashioned human beings and has placed them under the gods as their servants or slaves.

From this summary of the *Enuma Elish*, it is clear that the relation between the gods is one of animosity, conflict, and violence from the start. Moved solely by a concern for his own comfort and interests, Apsu wishes to destroy the gods who will not let him rest undisturbed, and from that point on all of the gods fight to subjugate and destroy one another in order to establish their dominance over those who survive. Ultimately, because nature has endowed him with a power and a wisdom that are superior to those of the other gods, Marduk is able to establish himself as king and lord over all in order to rule over them as he wishes and order the world in the way that pleases him most. The gods who submit to him celebrate his victory and sing his praises out of the same type of self-interest that is reflected in him due to the benefits that they derive from his reign. What they all desire is the same thing that Marduk desires, namely, to live in luxury and splendor, feasting, relaxing, and enjoying themselves as they are served and honored by the human beings that Marduk has created as their slaves. While the gods also serve one another's interests, they cannot truly be said to love one another in the sense of selflessly desiring the well-being of all. Much less do they love human beings as their inferiors.

In his role as lord and king, Marduk is presented as the one who provides abundantly and generously for the needs of all, including not only the other gods but human beings as well. He is portrayed as a shepherd who "supplies pasturage and watering, making the stables flourish," as well as "the god of the pleasant breeze, lord of success and obedience, who produces bounty and wealth, who establishes abundance, [and] who turns everything scant that we have into profusion. . . ." (VI.124; VII.20-22). The reason that Marduk does these things, however, is not that he truly loves others and cares for them but because it is in his own best interest to do so. As long as he keeps the other gods content and at ease, they will continue to submit to his reign, which he intends to last for all eternity. At the same time, he must also keep human beings as happy and healthy as possible, because if their living conditions become too dire and difficult, they will not only be unable to serve the gods but will also be moved to rebel against them and the order that Marduk has established. Great emphasis is therefore laid on the idea that Marduk is the benefactor of human beings as well, even though he created them for the sole purpose of serving the gods with their gifts and offerings, since human beings will not wish to serve the gods unless they too are convinced that doing so is in their own best interest.

In a sense, of course, human beings know that they have no choice but to submit to Marduk and the other gods if they wish to survive and prosper

within the limits laid out for them. If they refuse to serve the gods faithfully, Marduk promises to inflict tremendous sufferings and hardships on them and even destroy them. The poem repeatedly stresses not only Marduk's tremendous power but also his intense anger and rage at those who disobey him, as well as the extreme cruelty and great violence with which he treats all who oppose him. Its purpose is clearly to warn any human beings who might dare to disobey and oppose him of the terrible consequences that they will endure if they do so.

While the *Enuma Elish* does not refer explicitly to the establishment among human beings of the same type of hierarchical relationships that exist among the gods, it clearly presupposes such relationships. If human beings are to dedicate themselves to producing food and other goods to give to the gods as offerings, some of them must be dedicated to organizing and overseeing the production of these things and their presentation to the gods as offerings. Those who read the *Enuma Elish* in antiquity would also have been aware that the priests and the elites in Babylon retained the goods that were offered to the gods and thus were able to exert control not only over those goods themselves but over the population that depended on those goods as well. It was also generally maintained that gods such as Marduk had assigned to certain individuals and groups the place that they occupied in the social order they had established. In particular, the kings and rulers had been designated by the gods to reign over others as their subjects. Of course, all who rose to positions of power and privilege by imposing their will over others would claim that they had done so as a result of the gods' favor and approval and that the gods had chosen them personally to occupy those positions. Thus the relations between human beings would constantly be characterized by the same type of conflict, violence, and cruelty that the *Enuma Elish* ascribes to the gods, since human beings would similarly strive to establish their dominance over others in order to subjugate them and be served and obeyed by them.

Even though human beings are condemned to serve perpetually the gods and those whom the gods establish to rule on earth if they wish to avoid becoming the objects of their wrath, they are also commanded to praise and honor the gods, and especially Marduk. The final section of the *Enuma Elish* is dedicated almost completely to extolling the great power and accomplishments of Marduk in order to exhort all to acclaim and worship him as lord over all (VI.95–VII.162). Marduk is called by fifty names or titles, each of which points to some outstanding quality that he possesses or some benefit that he confers on others, and on that basis all are called to serve and glorify him: "Let men command that his praises be constantly uttered, let them offer worship to him" (VII.24). If human beings fulfill this command, however, they do so not out of genuine love and affection but out of self-interest and fear. They know that they can obtain what they want from him and enjoy his favor only if they render obeisance to him in the way he desires, and that if they fail to honor him with their sacrifices and offerings they will be subjected to his wrath and fury.

Although Marduk is presented as being cruel and ruthless by nature, he is also described as good, merciful, and forgiving. In part, these attributes are ascribed to him because those who must be convinced to serve him and submit to him cannot be motivated solely by fear if they are to do so willingly and enthusiastically. They must also be drawn to be faithful and loyal to him by his favors and kindness. Nevertheless, they know very well that if Marduk does show them kindness and mercy, it is not because he truly cares for them and is concerned for their well-being as an end in itself, but only because it is in his own best interest to treat them in that manner. For this reason, the poem states: "On the peoples that he created, the living beings, he imposed the service of the gods and they took rest. Creation and annihilation, forgiveness and exacting the penalty occur at his command, so let them fix their eyes on him" (VI.129-32). The idea here is that Marduk will do whatever suits his purposes best in order to be served by human beings. At times, this involves showing them kindness and forgiveness, yet at other times it involves punishing them and even annihilating some of them so that those who remain will submit slavishly to his will out of fear.

While human beings must praise and serve Marduk to remain in his favor and avoid his wrath, when those of lower rank wish to receive some type of favor from the gods, they will generally invoke the lesser gods rather than Marduk himself. The reason for this is that, because they have little to offer Marduk personally, they are generally not worthy of his time and attention. Such human beings will therefore have a greater chance of obtaining whatever they seek if they approach the lesser gods with their petitions and offerings. Within the hierarchical order of the deities as Marduk has established it, the rank of the gods whom the different groups of human beings invoke should therefore correspond roughly to their own rank within the hierarchical order that exists among human beings themselves.

Several passages from the *Enuma Elish* speak of Marduk as one who upholds what is right and true and preserves order by punishing those who do wrong. He is called "the destroyer of crooked enemies" who actively searches out sin and transgression, extirpates the wicked, and does not let evildoers escape (VI.154; VII.34-36, 156; cf. VII.48-52). "He made truth to prosper, he uprooted perverse speech, he separated falsehood from truth" (VII.39-40). Marduk is even referred to as "the pure god, who cleanses our character" (VI.156). It must be recognized, however, that all of these qualities are defined in relation to the hierarchical order or system established by Marduk. While to some degree any understanding of what is true and right must be grounded in the nature of reality, ultimately it is Marduk and the gods who determine what is to be accepted as true, right, fair, and just. They also determine what rewards and punishments human beings are to receive in response to their behavior. Whatever poses a threat to the established order must be regarded as a sin or transgression and must be labeled false, perverse, and evil. Any who oppose that order are wicked and must be treated with violence as its enemies.

What actually concerns the gods, however, is not the well-being of all but upholding the order that Marduk has established, an order that benefits the gods as well as those human beings who enjoy positions of power and privilege. Naturally, it is claimed that this order or system must be preserved perpetually for the good of all, since otherwise chaos would ensue, yet in reality that order or system is not designed to promote the well-being of all equally. Even though those in power claim that the only alternative to the established order is chaos, the reality is that other forms of organizing the relations between human beings might also avoid chaos and promote greater equity and justice. Because public discourse is controlled by those in positions of power and authority, however, this possibility is not acknowledged openly.

What concerns Marduk and the gods, therefore, is not that human beings practice what is good, right, or just for their own sake but that they maintain the order that benefits the powerful and privileged and keeps them in a position of supremacy. Furthermore, whatever rights and duties exist are defined by Marduk and the gods and exist in relation to them rather than in relation to their subjects, who have no choice but to accept whatever the powerful determine to be good and right and submit to whatever obligations and duties are imposed on them. While the gods and those in positions of authority generally acknowledge that they have some obligation or duty to protect and defend those who are under them, they are also free to suspend any such obligations or duties as they see fit and can always claim to do so in the name of the common good that they are supposedly in charge of defining, promoting, and preserving.

The Gods of Homer's Iliad and Odyssey

Many of the same traits associated with the deities of whom the *Enuma Elish* speaks are displayed by the gods and goddesses that appear in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Like the gods of Babylon, the Greek gods wish to spend their time feasting, drinking, relaxing, and enjoying other luxuries and pleasures, including sexual relations. They are surrounded in splendor and virtually everything they possess and use is made of gold and other precious materials. They engage in laughter and gaiety and listen to heavenly music at their banquets until they are filled and satisfied and then, after the sun goes down, they go to their mansions and doze off to sleep (*Iliad* 1.597-611). Olympus is described as a place where there is no rain, snow, or strong wind: "there the blessed gods dwell in endless sunshine, illumined forever by a peaceful and radiant light" (*Odyssey* 6.41-46).⁸ It is said that they constantly take great delight in their festivities and prosperity (*Od.* 11.603). The gods are also happy to travel to other places such as Ethiopia in order to attend the feasts and sacrifices that the inhabitants of those places offer in their

8. Translations from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are my own and are based on the text of volumes 104, 105, 170, and 171 of the Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1911-).

honor (*Il.* 1.423-24; *Od.* 1.22-24; cf. *Od.* 5.99-102). They especially enjoy the music and entertainment that their worshipers provide for them as well as the games and competitions held on their behalf. However, because such an idyllic and blissful existence can at times become tedious and monotonous, the gods also get involved in human affairs. In fact, they often become so interested and engrossed in those affairs that some of them engage personally in the conflicts and fighting among different peoples and on occasion even end up getting struck and wounded themselves.

When the Olympian gods do get absorbed in human affairs, they show interest only in those human beings who are worthy of their attention. These include especially powerful kings and mighty warriors such as Odysseus, Agamemnon, Hector, and Achilles, as well as important peoples such as the Trojans and the Achaeans or Greeks. Rarely do the gods ever concern themselves with the individual lives of common people. Such persons must turn to deities of lesser rank and inferior power for assistance in obtaining what they seek, since they are not worthy of the attention of the mighty Olympian gods.⁹ The gods also show little concern for people of nations other than those who serve them, except of course as those nations relate to those whom they watch over and protect.

Precisely why the gods favor some individuals and peoples and not others is not always clear. Generally, the gods and goddesses show favor to those who are their children or descendants, independently of whether they are immortal or human, although occasionally the gods may repudiate and even loathe their offspring. Of course, they show special regard for those who build them temples and regularly offer them sacrifices. They also want those offerings to be as lavish and abundant as possible.¹⁰ Naturally, only the rich and powerful are able to provide such sacrifices and build great temples for the gods. The gods are also attracted to those human beings who are particularly intelligent and clever or who display qualities such as beauty and charm. In the *Odyssey*, for example, while the goddess Athena does not give any explicit reason for being so concerned about the well-being and safe return of Odysseus, she is presented as admiring his wisdom and intelligence (*Od.* 1.48, 65-66). She also tells him that she cannot leave him because he is “soft of speech, keen of wit, and prudent” (*Od.* 13.331-32). Above all, however, the gods tend to be enamored of those who are powerful in battle and perform heroic feats that they find admirable and awe-inspiring. It is generally that admiration that leads them to come to the aid of the great figures around whom the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* revolve.

In many cases, the gods are presented as being capricious, favoring some human beings over others for no clear or apparent reason. This is particularly true of Zeus, the greatest and most powerful of the gods who stands at the top of the hierarchical order as a result of his superior might and wisdom. In the

9. See, for example, *Il.* 2.398-401.

10. See, for example, *Il.* 1.436-74; 10.291-98; *Od.* 3.379-84, 418-63.

Odyssey it is said that Zeus “gives good and evil as he chooses, for he can do all things” (*Od.* 4.236-37). Elsewhere the poem affirms that “it is Zeus himself, the Olympian, who gives prosperity to all people, whether good or bad, in whatever way he sees fit” (*Od.* 6.188-89). This passage implies that Zeus does not take into account whether human beings do good or evil when he chooses whether or not to grant them good fortune. The same idea is expressed more clearly toward the end of the *Iliad* in a passage that also underscores the gods’ blissful existence on Olympus: “The immortal gods know no care, yet the life that they spin for miserable mortals is full of sorrows. On the floor of Zeus’s palace there stand two urns, one filled with evils and the other with good things. If Zeus, the hurler of thunderbolts, mixes these together, a person meets with both good and bad fortune. But if Zeus decides to take only from the urn full of evils, he makes a person an object of scorn, and the cruel hunger of famine forces that person to wander all over the face of the earth, dishonored by gods as well as mortals” (*Il.* 24.525-33).

In a sense, it may at times be said that the gods love certain human beings. They may even be enamored of particular individuals or care for entire cities or peoples. Once again, however, this is generally because they are related to those persons or people or find in them the qualities that please them. Chief among these qualities is the obedience of human beings to their will. They love those who do what they want yet despise and punish those who refuse to do so. According to the *Iliad*, “the gods gladly give ear to the prayers of those who obey them” (*Il.* 1.218). Their “love” for certain people therefore tends to respond to their own self-interest or self-centeredness. It is also conditional upon the faithful and loyal submission of human beings to their desires and commands.

What the gods especially desire, of course, is sacrifice. Toward the end of the *Iliad*, for example, Zeus tells his wife Hera: “Among all the mortals in Ilios, Hector was most loved by the gods and also the dearest to me, for he never failed to offer me gifts to my liking. My altar has never yet gone without the sacrifices that we claim by right, the drink offerings and the fragrant smell of burnt offerings” (*Il.* 24.66-70; cf. *Il.* 22.168-72). Here Hector is the “most loved” of Zeus because of the generosity and regularity of his sacrificial offerings. Likewise, in the *Odyssey*, Zeus is presented as showing favor to Odysseus because he has faithfully offered sacrifices to Zeus and “beyond all others has given sacrifice to the immortal gods” (*Od.* 1.60-62, 65-68). In fact, throughout both of Homer’s poems, whenever human beings want something from the gods, they invariably point to their faithfulness in presenting the gods the offerings due to them or else promise to honor them by offering them sacrifices and building them temples in the future.

Conversely, when human beings arouse the wrath of the gods, the way in which they attempt to appease them is by presenting them sacrificial offerings. Numerous passages from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* affirm explicitly that the gods are appeased by sacrifice when they become angry.¹¹ Perhaps the clearest

11. See, for example, *Il.* 1.142-47, 442-44; 6.379-80; *Od.* 1.60-62; 3.144-45; 4.581-83.

affirmation of this idea is found in Book 9 of the *Iliad*, where the horseman Phoenix tells Achilles: “Even the immortal gods can be appeased; their might and honor and majesty are greater than ours, yet with incense and reverent vows and drink offerings and the sweet smell of sacrifice human beings can turn them from their wrath with supplications whenever they have sinned and transgressed” (*Il.* 9.499-501). The frequent allusions to these ideas makes it clear that the basis upon which human beings are ultimately accepted or rejected by the gods is not their practice of what is good, right, and kind or their moral qualities and behavior, but their sacrificial worship of the gods.

Neither the *Iliad* nor the *Odyssey* portray the gods actually consuming the sacrificial offerings presented to them, though they are said to take pleasure at the odor of the smoke from the burnt offerings that rises up to them. What pleases them, therefore, is not simply the sacrifices themselves but the honor, devotion, and reverence of which they are an expression. Numerous passages stress that the gods are especially concerned for their own honor, fame, and renown. In a couple of passages from the *Iliad*, such an idea is stated explicitly. In the context of allusions to the feasts, drink offerings, and burnt offerings offered to them at their altars, Zeus’s wife Hera and subsequently Zeus himself refer to “the worship that is owed to us” (*Il.* 4.48-49; 24.68-70). Here it is said not only that the gods *desire* to receive worship or honor but that it is *due* to them as their *right*.

When human beings are suffering hardships or tribulations, they generally suspect that they have angered the gods, especially by not giving them the offerings they desire and demand. The reason for this is that they know that the gods are vengeful and do not tolerate any type of disobedience or failure to give them what is owed to them. At the outset of the *Iliad*, when Apollo rains down arrows on the Achaeans in wrath, they seek a seer who can tell them “for what reason Phoebus Apollo has become so angry, if it is because he blames us for some unfulfilled vow or hecatomb that we have failed to offer, and whether he can be convinced by the fragrant smoke of lambs and the sacrifice of unblemished goats to lift the plague from us” (*Il.* 1.64-67). Elsewhere in the *Iliad*, Aeneas suspects that some god is angry with the Trojans about their sacrifices and for that reason is setting himself against them (*Il.* 5.176-78). Later on, the goddess Artemis is said to have become upset with the Aetolians and to have “sent a plague upon them in anger because Oeneus had not offered her the first fruits of the harvest of his bountiful orchard; the rest of the gods had been given the sacrifices due to them for them to feast upon, but he had failed to offer anything to this daughter of great Zeus.” She takes out her wrath on Oeneus by sending a wild boar to destroy his orchard lands (*Il.* 9.533-42).

The gods become angry not only when they do not receive the sacrificial offerings to which they are entitled but also when human beings seek to deprive them of what is theirs by right. These may be material possessions, including especially animals from their flocks and herds. The reason why

Odysseus must suffer throughout the *Odyssey* in order to arrive back to his home in Ithaca is that Zeus and the other gods became angry after Odysseus's men ate the cattle of the sun-god Hyperion when they were stranded on the island of Thrinacia.¹² Although they had been warned through Odysseus that they would be destroyed if they ate the cattle, when the men were starving and had nothing left to eat, they preferred to take their chances eating the cattle and hoped to appease the gods by vowing to build a great temple to Hyperion when they returned home and promising to fill it with lavish gifts and offerings (*Od.* 12.345-57). Nevertheless, led by Zeus, the gods destroyed all of Odysseus's men and left Odysseus adrift at sea. It did not matter to them that Odysseus's men had been desperate and at the point of starvation, nor were they concerned to show mercy to Odysseus and his men by providing them with something else to eat or assisting them in some other way. The only thing that they cared about was that human beings not take from the gods that which was theirs—in this case, Hyperion's cattle.

The plight of Odysseus and his men is said to have begun after they had committed a similar offense against Polyphemus, a monstrous, one-eyed Cyclops who is said to be the son of Poseidon and to reign over the other Cyclopes as their king on the island they inhabit. When Odysseus and his men wander into Polyphemus's cave and eat some of the cheese he elaborates there, Polyphemus discovers them and seals off the entrance to the cave with a great boulder so that they cannot escape. He then begins to devour Odysseus's men two at a time with great savagery whenever he becomes hungry. Finally, desperate to escape with their lives, Odysseus and the men who remain drive a sharp pole into the eye of Polyphemus when he is asleep in order to blind him. In this way, they are able to sneak out of the cave unseen by Polyphemus (*Od.* 9.307-445). Once Odysseus and his men are back on their ship out of the reach of Polyphemus, Odysseus climbs up a mast and shouts back at Polyphemus in order to gloat over him and to boast that he had been able to make his own will prevail over that of the gods by escaping from him (*Od.* 9.502-5). This angers Polyphemus even more, and as a result he cries out to his father Poseidon to avenge what Odysseus has done (*Od.* 9.528-35). Poseidon then takes out his wrath on Odysseus by destroying his ship and doing everything in his power to prevent Odysseus from returning home to Ithaca. Because Odysseus enjoys the favor of Zeus and especially Athena, however, Zeus does not allow Poseidon to kill Odysseus as he would like.

This story illustrates several other points that are important to understand the nature and character of Homer's gods. First, even though Odysseus had been forced to blind Polyphemus in order not to be devoured by him, from the perspective of the gods, he deserved to be punished for having done harm to one of their lot. While Odysseus had no doubt transgressed against Polyphemus by entering into his cave and eating some of his cheese, Polyphemus had also treated Odysseus and his men with much greater cruelty than they deserved

12. See *Od.* 1.6-9; 12.260-453; 19.273-77; 23.329-32.

by eating some of them alive. In the narrative, in fact, it is suggested that according to the accepted norms of conduct, Polyphemus should have shown hospitality to Odysseus and his men and that Zeus himself took vengeance on Polyphemus for his monstrous and unjust behavior by allowing Odysseus to blind him (*Od.* 9.265-71, 477-79). In spite of Polyphemus's behavior, however, Odysseus had no right to do him harm because mortal human beings are never justified in acting against the gods, whom they are always to treat as their superiors.

A second point of importance is that the god Poseidon is angered and outraged by Odysseus's blinding of Polyphemus not only because Odysseus is a mere mortal but also because Polyphemus is his son. No matter how inexcusable Polyphemus's behavior may have been, as his father Poseidon is obliged to defend him and seek to destroy any who do him harm. According to this logic, loyalty to one's own family and people takes precedence over a commitment to what is good, right, and just. Even when a member of one's family or people has done something that is wrong and unacceptable, the other members of the family or people must take sides with him or her. For that reason, Poseidon is fully justified in seeking to destroy Odysseus and attempting to make his return home as torturous and miserable as possible after Zeus has prohibited him from taking Odysseus's life. At the same time, because Zeus also owes loyalty to his fellow gods, even though he favors Odysseus, he feels obliged to allow Poseidon to harass and oppress Odysseus for what he has done to Polyphemus, despite his prohibition against Poseidon killing him.

A third point illustrated by this story is that mortal human beings deserve to be punished for depriving the gods not only of their sacrifices and property but also of the honor and respect that is due to them. For that reason, from the perspective of the gods, Odysseus's boast that he can make his will prevail over that of the gods is intolerable. The gods are extremely jealous for their honor and will not stand by idly when human beings have the audacity to compare themselves favorably to the gods or claim to be superior in some way. Those human beings must be put in their place in order to preserve the order established by the gods and to keep human beings in subjection under the gods' power and authority.

This principle is emphasized elsewhere in the *Iliad* as well. When the Achaeans arouse the admiration and awe of the gods by building a great wall and a trench with tremendous speed, for example, Poseidon becomes upset that the size and scope of their wall has outdone and overshadowed a large wall that he had built together with the god Apollo. On that basis, moved by envy and jealousy, he asks Zeus to allow him to tear down the Achaeans' wall (*Il.* 7.451-53). Poseidon is also upset that the Achaeans did not sacrifice to the gods or seek their approval before constructing the wall and trench, since he fears that human beings might conclude that in the future they can carry out their projects without consulting the gods or offering them sacrifices (*Il.* 7.446-50). Further on, when the inhabitants of Phaeacia act contrary to

Poseidon's will by assisting Odysseus and taking him home, Poseidon seeks Zeus's permission to wreck their ship and destroy their city, claiming that he will lose the respect of both gods and human beings if the Phaeacians are left unpunished. When Zeus grants him his petition, Poseidon takes out his wrath in full on the Phaeacians, despite the fact that both they and Odysseus offer him sacrifices in an attempt to appease him (*Il.* 13.98-193; 23.274-81).

The logic behind all of these examples is that, in order to preserve their position of power and privilege, the gods cannot allow human beings to do anything that might call into question their superiority, rival them, or undermine their authority. For that reason, any human beings who fail to submit humbly and obediently to the gods and show them the deference, respect, and honor due to them must be severely punished. While they undoubtedly desire sacrifice, the gods will not be appeased by the sacrifices of those who dare to oppose their will and challenge their supremacy. The idea that the gods reject the sacrifices of those human beings who disobey them is reflected in other passages as well. Before Odysseus's men eat the cattle that belong to the sun-god Hyperion, for example, they offer up sacrifices (*Od.* 12.339-48). They do the same before eating Polyphemus's cheese (*Od.* 9.231-32). Such sacrifices are unacceptable, however, because those who present them are not respecting the property and honor of the gods and are not asking the gods for permission ahead of time for the things they intend to do.

These narratives and others found throughout Homer's epic poems also serve to illustrate another important point, namely, that what angers and offends the gods is not the injustice and cruelty that human beings show to one another but simply their failure or refusal to submit to the gods as they should. In other words, what concerns the gods is not the manner in which the behavior of human beings affects human beings themselves but the manner in which it affects them as gods, whether directly or indirectly. If the gods prohibit certain actions or behaviors, they do so not because those actions or behaviors undermine or destroy the well-being of human beings themselves but because they deprive the gods of what they desire and claim as their own by right.

This principle is evident as well from the fact that in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the gods are said to respond favorably to those who ask for their assistance in taking vengeance on their enemies.¹³ Just as the gods are ruthless in exacting revenge on any who dare to disrespect or injure them, even if those who do so are acting in accordance with justice or merely seeking to survive, under certain conditions they are also willing to give support to those human beings who wish to inflict pain and suffering on others motivated purely by spite and a desire for revenge. Similarly, just as the gods themselves constantly lust for greater wealth, power, and glory, they may lend their assistance to human beings who lust for the same things. They often respond favorably to the petitions of those who seek their approval and help in attacking the cities of other peoples in order to plunder and destroy them and take many of their

13. See, for example, *Il.* 1.35-43; 2.411-18; 3.351-54; *Od.* 17.49-60.

inhabitants captive as their slaves, especially if those human beings promise to offer to the gods a portion of what they pillage and steal.

If the gods are willing to assist human beings who carry out acts of violence motivated by greed, thirst for power, and a spirit of revenge, it is obvious that the condition upon which they accept favorably the prayers and sacrifices offered to them is not the practice of what is just, kind, good, and right. Nowhere in the two poems of Homer are the gods said to refuse sacrificial offerings and worship on that basis. Instead, the principle that serves as the basis for their relationship to human beings is that of *do ut des*. The gods are generally willing to grant human beings what they ask and desire, whether it be good or evil, as long as those human beings will give them what they demand and desire, namely, the gifts, offerings, and worship that please and honor them. It is also important to note that the gods do not care whether or not the human beings who give them the gifts, offerings, and worship they desire do so with a spirit of sincere affection, gratitude, and dedication. Because the gods demand the offering of sacrifices and worship for their own sake and regard these things as ends in themselves, as long as human beings fulfill that demand, it does not matter to the gods if they do so willingly or reluctantly, out of love or out of fear. Nor do they care whether the human beings who give them what they desire and demand treat their fellow human beings with kindness or cruelty or whether they obtain the things they offer fairly or unjustly through acts of violence or deception.

For the most part, the Greek gods do not make any moral demands on human beings. In fact, the gods themselves practice deceit, commit adultery and fornication, take the lives of human beings for no good reason other than that they derive satisfaction from doing so, and are driven by things such as envy, revenge, lust, and other selfish passions. They also incite human beings to wage war and engage in violent conflicts against other peoples, not because these peoples have done anything unjust or oppressive, but simply because for whatever reason the gods do not like them. In many cases, when human beings are engaged in conflict, the gods actually take different sides. This demonstrates that their preference for some persons and groups over others has nothing to do with favoring those who practice what is good, just, and right over those who do not. They either act arbitrarily in giving preferential treatment to some over others or take the side of those who will offer them the worship and sacrifices they desire and demand.

Among the adjectives that Homer uses to describe the Olympian gods are cruel, hateful, deceitful, malicious, and envious.¹⁴ Zeus is said to take delight at watching the gods quarrel among themselves and at seeing human beings be made to suffer (*Il.* 19.270; 21.389-90), while the goddess Aphrodite enjoys beguiling feeble women (*Il.* 5.348-49). At the same time, the gods incite the same types of behavior among human beings, stirring up strife among them and putting evil in their hearts.¹⁵

14. See, for example, *Il.* 2.348-49; 8.360-61; 9.17-22, 158-59; 15.14; *Od.* 5.118-19; 22.201-2.
15. See, for example, *Il.* 3.414-17; 9.636-38; *Od.* 3.136-37.

Undoubtedly, the gods of Homer generally expect human beings to respect certain norms of behavior and observe certain rules, such as offering hospitality to strangers and keeping their word when they make vows and treaties. In order to preserve peace and order in the world, they must enforce justice and demand that human beings treat one another with honesty and a certain degree of respect. In fact, the gods themselves are expected to adhere to basic moral principles in their dealings with one another and with human beings. As sovereign arbiters of what is good, right, and fair, however, the gods are often free to bend the rules and even suspend them as they see fit.

At the same time, however, there are certain natural forces that even the Olympian gods must respect. In Homer's poems, these forces are often personified as gods, as if they had a will of their own. Sleep, Death, Morning, and Night are presented in this way, for example, as are Strife, Tumult, and Fate.¹⁶ While at times the Olympian gods can exert control over these forces, to some extent they must also be subject to them. Sleep, for example, can overcome Zeus, yet Zeus may also punish Sleep if he wishes (*Il.* 14.247-62). These personified natural forces generally play the role of preserving order and equilibrium in the cosmos. Therefore, even if those who violate the unwritten ethical code can avoid arousing the wrath of the gods, sooner or later these natural forces will act to restore order and justice and to set right whatever is wrong. Because of these forces, actions that are good or evil can be said to have consequences that are natural, intrinsic, and ultimately unavoidable as well, even when those actions are not rewarded and punished by the gods personally.

This distinction between the desires of the Olympian gods and the forces of nature affects the manner in which sin and transgression are understood in Homer's poems. While the gods regularly punish human beings for failing to give them the honor, respect, and worship that they regard as their due, they rarely inflict punishments on human beings for their violations of moral or ethical norms. Because what ultimately interests the gods is not the practice of what is good and right among human beings but the offerings and reverence that they demand from them, those who do not fulfill that demand do not sin in the sense of acting immorally, doing evil, or committing wrongdoing. Their failure to obey the gods may therefore be labeled an offense or transgression, yet strictly speaking it is not a sin in the sense in which that word is generally understood today. Human beings can also transgress the laws of nature in various ways, yet in these cases it is not gods such as the Olympians who punish them but the forces of nature themselves. Despite the fact that these forces are often personified as gods, when they punish those who disobey the laws of nature they do not act out of anger or because they have been offended. They simply bring upon human beings the intrinsic consequences of their actions.

When human beings violate the laws of nature, there is usually nothing that they can do to avoid suffering the consequences of their actions. As noted above, however, when they offend and anger the gods, they are generally able

16. See, for example, *Il.* 8.1; 11.4; 14.231, 261; 16.829; 19.1, 136.

to appease or propitiate the gods by offering sacrifices and pledging to avoid in the future the behavior that has displeased the gods.¹⁷ Although by means of their offerings and vows they express implicitly their remorse for having offended the gods, strictly speaking this remorse is not the same as heartfelt repentance, since the only reason they may regret what they have done is that it provoked the wrath of the gods and resulted in suffering and punishment at their hands. For the most part, the gods do not care if those who have angered them and seek to be restored to their favor are sincerely sorry for what they have done, since they are concerned only with what human beings actually do and not what is in their heart.

Ideally, what human beings would like is to be able to act in any way they please without having to fear any type of punishment or consequences at the hands of the gods. If they can escape notice by the gods, who are not all-seeing or omniscient, human beings can often get away with disobeying them. For the most part, however, if they wish to be blessed by the gods and avoid falling under their wrath, they have no choice but to treat the gods in the way they demand and seek their permission and approval in all that they do.

Ultimately, then, the gods of Homer's poems respond favorably to the prayers and offerings presented to them only when they consider it in their own self-interest to do so. If the gods want there to be peace, justice, and well-being among human beings, it is not for the sake of human beings themselves but only because in that way human beings can dedicate themselves to giving the gods what they desire and not disturb them as they devote themselves to enjoying their idyllic existence. For their part, human beings must strive to keep the gods content and satisfied because only in that way can they obtain from them what they desire for themselves and also keep them at a distance so as not to be threatened or bothered by them. As noted above, therefore, while at times human beings must be saved and delivered *by* the gods, they must continually be saved and delivered *from* them as well.

THE GOD OF ISRAEL AND THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, we encounter a God who in many ways is radically and fundamentally different from the type of gods just considered. While he is undoubtedly viewed as possessing certain traits that were characteristic of other gods in antiquity, there are two attributes in particular that set him apart from them, namely, his sovereignty as creator and Lord of all that exists and his unconditional love for all of the human beings and creatures that he has made.

As we have seen in the opening section of the present chapter, precisely how and when this conception of God developed among the people of Israel in the centuries leading up to the final redaction and compilation of the books

17. See, for example, *Il.* 1.99-100, 146-47, 442-44; 6.379-80; *Od.* 3.143-45, 418-20; 4.581-84; cf. *Od.* 1.60-62; 8.508-10.

of the Hebrew Bible as we know them today is by no means clear. That process was no doubt a long and complex one and involved the transmission of stories, ideas, and texts in both oral and written form from one generation and group of people to another. Over time those stories, ideas, and texts underwent changes and were gradually shaped, edited, and reformulated in various ways before they came to take the form in which they now exist. At some point during the period of the Second Temple, however, that process came to an end and the biblical texts became fixed in their present form, even though minor variations in those texts continued to exist in different times and places and among the different communities that looked to them as authoritative. Although there were no doubt a number of criteria that were employed in the process of editing and revising those texts in order to bring them into harmony with one another and shape them into a whole that was greater than the parts, one of the most important of these criteria was the conception of God reflected in them. The persons and communities that were responsible for fixing the texts in the form in which they exist today clearly did their best to ensure that the conception of God that appears throughout their pages was uniform and consistent.

Biblical scholars and careful readers of the biblical texts can, of course, still discern traces of earlier conceptions of the God of whom those texts speak. Thus, for example, Psalm 82 begins by affirming that God takes his place in the council or assembly of the gods that are gathered together (v. 1). In this verse, while the god that is identified with the God of Israel stands supreme, other lesser gods exist alongside of him. The idea of an assembly of divine or semi-divine beings may also be reflected in other passages from the Hebrew Bible, such as those that present God consulting and speaking with other beings in the opening chapters of Genesis when he creates human beings and decides to exclude them from the garden after they disobey him (Gen 1:26; 3:22). Traces of earlier conceptions of God may be evident elsewhere in the biblical texts as well.¹⁸

Earlier conceptions of God may also be reflected in the fact that the term used in Hebrew for God is generally *'elohim*, which is a plural noun. The biblical texts also provide evidence that at some point in the history of the people that became known as Israel the ancient god El came to be associated and identified with the god YHWH. Scholars continue to debate the origins of the belief in the god YHWH, yet it is hardly to be doubted that beliefs in this god evolved over time, as did beliefs regarding the god El. Archaeologists have also found evidence that at least in some places and times the god YHWH, like the god El, was said to have a female consort. It would be a mistake,

18. On the passages from the Hebrew Bible that suggest a belief in the existence of other divine or semi-divine beings alongside YHWH the God of Israel, see especially Michael S. Heiser, "Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism? Toward an Assessment of Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible," *BBR* 18 (2008): 1-30. On this subject as well as the points that follow below, see Thomas Römer, *The Invention of God*, trans. Raymond Geuss (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

however, to assume that beliefs regarding YHWH and El were uniform among all the people in the region at any given time. There can be little doubt that at different stages of the history of those who believed in and worshiped YHWH and El there were many different conceptions of these gods as well as the god into which both came to be fused, just as there was a great deal of diversity and evolution throughout the history of the people who eventually came to be known as Israel. In large part, this was because for a long period of time there was no central authority that had the power to establish throughout the peoples in the land the uniformity of beliefs regarding YHWH and El that is reflected in the biblical texts as they now stand.

At some place and time unknown to us, however, the full and definitive fusion of YHWH and El or Elohim that we find in the biblical texts took place among at least some of the people known as Israel, as did the final redaction and collection of those texts as they have been preserved for us. Throughout the present work, it is the final and definitive conception of the God of Israel that runs throughout the biblical texts that will interest us. For that reason, the approach taken here will be exclusively synchronic and questions regarding the manner in which the biblical texts and the beliefs that appear in them evolved over time will not be addressed.

The Character of Israel's God

The biblical texts are remarkably consistent in ascribing certain characteristics and attributes to the God of Israel. While those texts as we have them today generally write his name as YHWH, at times they use the abbreviation YH. Other forms of his name may have existed in antiquity as well. There is evidence that the letters YHWH were pronounced as Yahweh, yet there may have been some variation in the pronunciation of this name from one time and place to another. By the third century BCE, many Jews had stopped pronouncing God's name due to the biblical prohibition against misusing it (Exod 20:7; Deut 5:11). Among many it became customary to substitute the title "lord" for the name YHWH when referring to God (Hebrew: *'adon* or *'adonay*, "my lord"; Greek: *kyrios*). English versions of the Bible that use this title when translating the Hebrew YHWH generally use three small uppercase letters at the end of the word to indicate that this title is being substituted for God's name, thus writing it as LORD, as I will do in the present work. As just mentioned above, the biblical texts also use the term *'elohim* to refer to God, and Jews in antiquity continued to use that designation as well. For our purposes here, however, for the most part it will be sufficient to refer to God (with an uppercase G) or the God of Israel when referring to him.

What distinguishes the God of Israel from the gods of the other nations of antiquity, however, is much more than his name. In some sense, he alone can truly be called God. If some Jews of the Second Temple period believed that other divine or semi-divine beings existed in addition to the God of Israel, the vast majority would have regarded these beings as subservient to

the one true God YHWH. This is in fact the view taken with regard to other spiritual or heavenly beings mentioned in the biblical texts, such as angels, cherubim, seraphim, Satan, and the demons or evil spirits. What made the God of Israel supreme and placed him over all other beings was that he is the sole creator of all, including whatever spiritual or heavenly beings were thought to exist. According to this conception, any deities other than YHWH who might be called gods were not truly God in the same sense that YHWH was and would have been thought to have had their source and origin in him.

This did not mean, however, that the other gods and living beings in the world were actually thought to share in God's own being, essence, or substance. They had not been born of him or generated from him in the same way that gods such as Tiamat and Apsu were formed of water and engendered other gods. Instead, all of the beings and realities that existed in the world were thought to be of a different nature, essence, or substance than the God who had created them. Given that the biblical texts never refer explicitly to anything such as the nature, essence, or substance of God, it might even be thought that it was inappropriate to employ that type of terminology when speaking of God. Furthermore, just as the one true God had created all of the other beings that existed, he could destroy them or will them out of existence at any time if he so desired. In this regard, then, the God of Israel was fundamentally distinct from any of the other gods of antiquity known to us.

Other characteristics also made Israel's God unique. The biblical texts consistently portray him as one for whom nothing is impossible. This claim is closely tied to the belief that he is the creator of all things. Because he brought all things into existence, he is sovereign over all in a way that no other gods in antiquity were thought to be. Unlike other gods, he was not in any way subject to nature or its forces. He did not need to eat or sleep, nor was he subject to passions and desires in the same way that they were. He controlled whatever type of destiny was thought to exist rather than being determined by it. He was also present throughout his creation and was not confined to any location. While he might make himself present in a special way at his sanctuary or at a particular place such as Bethel or Mount Sinai, even then he continued to be able to see all things in the world and remained present everywhere. For that same reason, he knew all things, including the thoughts of human beings and the desires of their hearts and minds. All of these things set him apart from the other gods of antiquity, who were not believed to be all-powerful and all-knowing in the way that the God of Israel was.

The commitment of the God of Israel to what was good, right, just, and merciful also distinguished him from other gods in antiquity. He practiced justice and righteousness and demanded that human beings do so as well. Injustice and oppression were never acceptable to him. This concern for justice and equity also led him to care especially for the needy, the poor, the weak, and the disadvantaged. He did not show favoritism to the rich and powerful but instead demanded that they too act justly and mercifully toward others

and assist those who were in need, such as orphans, widows, and foreigners. While there were undoubtedly other gods in antiquity who were concerned for justice and mercy, none of the ones known to us were thought to be as insistent and uncompromising in their demand for these things as the God of Israel. As we shall see further on, he was even said to reject sacrificial offerings if those who presented those offerings were not fully committed to justice, righteousness, and mercy in the way that he was.

The God of Israel was also said to reject many of the customs and practices that were associated with other peoples. These included things such as adultery, fornication, drunkenness, and other behaviors that are regarded as immoral in the biblical texts. Among other peoples, these behaviors and others such as prostitution, the celebration of games and competitions, and even child sacrifice were associated with the worship of their gods. Such things were strictly prohibited by the God of Israel, however.

The Desires and Objectives of Israel's God

As noted at the outset of this chapter, while there were important differences between the manner in which the pagan gods of antiquity and the God of Israel were conceived of and viewed, there were also many similarities. The biblical texts present him as wishing to be obeyed and being moved to anger by disobedience to his will. He is also said to bless and prosper those who do what he commands but to punish and even curse those who refuse to do so. These punishments include things such as plagues, famines, natural disasters, defeat in battle, and oppression at the hands of enemies. Like the other gods of antiquity, he desires to reign over others as their lord and king and demands that people submit to his rule and authority. He shows mercy and kindness to those who serve him faithfully but is said to take action against those who oppose him and rebel against him. Even though at times he is said to show no favoritism, he chooses Israel as a people of his own and his “treasured possession,” while promising to make them the most blessed of all peoples (Exod 19:5; Deut 7:14). He orders his people to build him a sanctuary in which he may be said to dwell and commands that they offer him there their sacrifices and gifts.

The question that must be asked when considering the passages that portray the God of Israel in these terms, however, is whether he seeks such things and behaves in those ways *for his own sake* or rather *for the sake of the human beings he has created* and the world in general. In principle, for example, he might pour out blessings on people, not in order to obtain something from them, but simply because he wishes for them to be happy and enjoy what he gives them. He might also give them commandments and punish those who disobey those commandments, not out of a concern for himself, but solely out of a concern for their well-being. Similarly, he might wish to reign over human beings, demand that they submit to him, and wish to receive their worship, not in order to obtain something that he desires for himself, but

because their submission and obedience to his will and their acknowledgment of him as God will promote among them a way of living that will allow them to experience well-being, wholeness, and happiness.

In principle, of course, the idea that God seeks the well-being and happiness of human beings and the idea that God seeks something for himself in his dealings with human beings are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, it might even be argued that God's own well-being and happiness depend in some way on the well-being and happiness of the human beings he has created and therefore that God cannot seek his own well-being and happiness without seeking theirs as well. When God is understood to be the sovereign creator and originator of all that exists, however, priority is generally given to God's own desires and interests. According to such an understanding of God, he created the world and human beings *for his own sake* rather than *for theirs*. In fact, to claim that God created human beings for their own sake can be seen as implying that God himself exists for the sake of human beings and therefore in a sense subjects himself to them in order to dedicate himself to serving *their* desires and interests over and above *his own*. This would make God subservient to the world and the beings he has created.

Such a conception of God and his relation to the world and to human beings seems to run contrary not only to logic but also the biblical texts. For that reason, biblical interpreters over the centuries have commonly supposed that God created the world and human beings *for his own sake* rather than theirs. In reality, however, this involves claiming that the God of the Bible behaves in the same way as the pagan gods of antiquity were thought to do and is motivated by the same concerns. What he seeks is to satisfy some need or desire to which he is subject.

Because in biblical thought there is nothing above God or superior to him, the needs and desires to which he is said to be subject are generally associated with God's own being or nature. While God is not said to have been driven to create the world because he stood in need of it or because he depends on the world and human beings in some way in order to exist or be whole, the fact that he freely chose to create the world and also wills that it continue to exist makes it clear that its existence responds to some desire on his part. In that case, while he does not need the world or human beings in themselves, he can be said to need or want something from them in order to satisfy the desire that led him to create them and moves him to continue to will that they exist.

According to this manner of interpreting the biblical texts, if the creation and ongoing existence of the world serve to satisfy some desire on God's part and this desire revolves around God himself, then even though in many respects he is different from the pagan gods of antiquity, ultimately he is motivated by the same type of concern for himself that was thought to be characteristic of those gods. Because this desire cannot be rooted in any type of physical or material need, it has commonly been understood to consist of a desire to be worshiped, honored, served, and glorified. Like the gods of other

nations in antiquity, the God of Israel would have created human beings in order to receive from them the praise, honor, and obedience he desired for himself for his own sake.

While such an idea is commonly assumed among biblical scholars and theologians, rarely is it stated explicitly. There is one tradition, however, in which that idea is expressly regarded as a central tenet of the biblical faith. That is the Reformed tradition. At the outset of the first catechism that he wrote for the Church of Geneva in 1538, John Calvin affirms that “all human beings have been born for religion” and explains this idea thus: “all of us have been created in order to acknowledge our Creator’s majesty and to receive it and esteem it, once acknowledged, with all fear, love, and reverence.”¹⁹ Several years later, in the Latin version of the *Catechism of the Church of Geneva 1545*, Calvin begins by affirming that the chief end of human life is “to know God by whom human beings were created” and then continues: “he created us for this, and placed us in the world, that he might be glorified in us. And it is certainly proper that our life, of which he is the beginning, be directed to his glory.”²⁰ Calvin also spoke of the purpose of the creation and life of human beings in terms of rendering God the honor due to him and frequently understood sinfulness in terms of desecrating, diminishing, and violating God’s honor or robbing God of the honor to which he is entitled.²¹

Other Reformed writings stress the same ideas. In his commentary on the *Heidelberg Catechism*, of which he was the chief author, the sixteenth-century Reformed theologian Zacharias Ursinus wrote: “The glory of God is, therefore, the chief and ultimate end for which man was created. It was for this purpose that God created rational and intelligent beings, such as angels and men, that knowing him, they might praise him forever. Hence, man was created principally for the glory of God. . . .”²² The affirmations of the renowned Dutch Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck reflect the same ideas:

Christian theology almost unanimously teaches that the glory of God is the final goal of all God’s works. Although in its early years theologians especially featured the goodness of God as the motive for creation, still the honor of God as the final end of all things is not lacking. . . . [T]he Reformed tradition made the honor of God the fundamental principle of all doctrine and conduct, of dogmatics and morality, of the family, society, and the state, of science and art. . . . God can rest in nothing other than himself and cannot be satisfied in anything less than himself. He has no alternative but to seek his own honor. . . . Inasmuch as he is the supreme and only good, perfect itself, it is the highest kind of justice that in all creatures he seek his own honor. . . . Voluntarily or

19. I. John Hesselink, *Calvin’s First Catechism: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster, 1997), 7.

20. John Calvin, *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, trans. J. K. S. Reid, LCC 22 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 91.

21. See Marijn de Kroon, *The Honour of God and Human Salvation: A Contribution to an Understanding of Calvin’s Theology according to His Institutes* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), 26–39.

22. Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Williard (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 28. Ursinus (1534–1583) was the principal author and interpreter of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, which dates to 1563.

involuntarily, every creature will someday bow his knee before him. Obedience in love or subjection by force is the final destiny of all creatures.²³

In Reformed thought, to affirm that the purpose for which human beings were created is that they might glorify and honor God and acknowledge his majesty is by no means to deny that God also desires the well-being and happiness of human beings. The seventeenth-century *Westminster Larger Catechism*, for example, begins by affirming both of these ideas: “1. Q. What is the chief and highest end of man? A. Man’s chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever.”²⁴ Nevertheless, as is evident here, while the enjoyment of God is spoken of as one of the ends for which human beings were created, it is clearly subordinated to the glorification of God.²⁵ If human beings are to enjoy God, they have no choice but to glorify him.

There can be no doubt that the God of Israel as he is presented in the biblical texts is concerned for the happiness and well-being of the human beings he has created and thus seeks to establish justice in the world out of love for all. In this regard, he is fundamentally distinct from the pagan gods of antiquity. Nevertheless, the idea that the primary and ultimate purpose for which God created human beings was that they might praise, serve, obey, and glorify him seems to portray the God of Israel as similar to a pagan deity in the sense that he is concerned primarily for himself and his own honor, glory, and worship. These things take precedence over human happiness and well-being. In fact, if God responds in wrath against those who fail to offer him the praise to which he is entitled and punishes them for robbing or depriving him of the honor and glory that is rightfully his alone, it would seem difficult to maintain that he is acting out of love for them and a concern for their well-being. Instead, it would appear that he cares more for his own glory, majesty, and honor than he does for human beings. While he may love them, this love seems to be conditional upon their giving him what he wants for his own sake. Likewise, although it can be argued that human beings can find happiness and well-being only by serving, honoring, and worshiping God as the one for whom they exist, God’s punishment of those who refuse to do these things can hardly have their happiness and well-being as its goal if it is aimed at compelling them to do these things against their will or simply involves sentencing those who do not give him what he needs or desires to eternal torments and condemnation.

The biblical affirmations regarding the holiness, purity, and justice of God have also commonly been understood as reflecting the idea that God’s primary concern is for himself rather than for human beings. Supposedly, God’s holiness, purity, and justice make it impossible for him to tolerate human sin.

23. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2: *God and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 433–34. Bavinck (1854–1921) continues to be revered as one of the most important theologians of the Reformed tradition.

24. See Johannes G. Vos, *The Westminster Larger Catechism: A Commentary*, ed. G. I. Williamson (Phillipsburg, NJ: R & R Publishing, 2002), 3.

25. On this point, see Ursinus, *Commentary*, 29; Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:431–45.

For that reason, he must keep sin and impurity at a distance from himself or else cover these things up from his view. Similarly, God's justice is understood as preventing him from overlooking or forgiving human sin without punishing it. Because this inability to tolerate sin and impurity is considered to be inherent to his holy and righteous nature, if God wishes to have any type of communion with sinners or accept them into his presence, he has no choice but to deal first with their sinfulness and impurity by eliminating it, punishing it, or removing it from his sight.

The God of Israel according to Walter Brueggemann

The idea that the primary concern of the God of the Hebrew Bible is for himself, his own desires, and the demands of his holy and righteous nature is especially evident in the work of Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, who is clearly influenced by the Reformed tradition to which he belongs. In his monumental work *Theology of the Old Testament*, Brueggemann argues that the Hebrew Scriptures portray Yahweh the God of Israel as one who is driven primarily by what he calls "self-regard," that is, a concern for his own sovereignty.²⁶ According to Brueggemann, this self-regard on the part of Yahweh is particularly evident in the passages from the Hebrew Scriptures that speak of Yahweh's concern for his own glory and his holiness as well as those that present him as jealous. As sovereign, what Yahweh ultimately wants is to be glorified and honored as sovereign and for all to submit to him. In this regard, he is essentially no different than the pagan gods of antiquity:

Yahweh, the God of the First Commandment, is a God who intends to be fully sovereign, who will brook no rival, who practices intense self-regard, and who will not tolerate those who detract from this self-regard. In this aspect of Yahweh's life, Yahweh does indeed practice "common theology"—that is, the way of "being god" that was everywhere available in the ancient Near East. In that propensity, Yahweh imposes an order (moral, political, or otherwise), guarantees the order's system of benefits, and deals with rigorous sanctions toward those who violate the order. To some extent, Yahweh conducts Yahweh's life like any god known in this way (283).

For Brueggemann, this self-regard and concern for his sovereignty is manifested first and foremost in Yahweh's demand that all respect his right to be acclaimed and acknowledged as God over all. Yahweh is a "God who takes with savage seriousness Yahweh's right to be worshiped, honored, and obeyed" (272). While Yahweh undoubtedly is concerned for the needs of human beings, including especially those of his people Israel, this concern takes a back seat to his concern for his own reputation as sovereign. Brueggemann thus speaks of

26. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testament, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005). Due to the large number of references to this book in the section that follows, I will refer to the pages cited and referenced by enclosing the page numbers in parentheses rather than using footnotes. I will also be using pronouns of masculine gender to refer to God, even though Brueggemann avoids this practice throughout his work.

“the extreme measures to which Yahweh will go for the sake of Yahweh’s own reputation, without reference to Israel’s need” (202). In other words, Yahweh values his sovereignty and honor more than he values his people Israel. Therefore, if he is forced to choose between preserving his reputation and satisfying his people’s needs, he will opt for the first of these two alternatives.

Intimately related to Yahweh’s concern for his sovereignty is his desire to be glorified by human beings. As their sovereign creator, he has the right to demand this from human beings. In passages such as Isaiah 42:8 and 48:11, where Yahweh insists that he will give his glory to no other in the context of allusions to Israel’s return from its exile in Babylon, Brueggemann claims to find the idea that Yahweh “is a God who is supremely self-confident, who is entitled to all the glory, and who is eager to be recognized as such” (284). For Brueggemann, Yahweh’s concern for his glory is particularly evident in the narratives regarding his struggle with the Pharaoh on behalf of Israel’s liberation. There his desire to manifest his power and glory even takes precedence over his desire to free the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt: “Israel’s cause is subordinated to Yahweh’s self-agenda” (284). This self-agenda involves demonstrating his power so that he may be given the praise and glory he longs for: “Yahweh emerges as more powerful than Egypt, and so is entitled to be honored, worshiped, and obeyed as the true sovereign of the realm” (284).

For Brueggemann, these passages and others demonstrate clearly the priority of God’s concern for his own glory. As a result of the power he manifests when delivering the Israelites from the hand of Pharaoh and bringing them out of their exile in Babylon, “Yahweh is known to be the real sovereign power in the earth to whom other powers must submit. From these two narrative recitals, Israel generalizes to assert that Yahweh everywhere and always is the true possessor of glory” (284). Brueggemann identifies the same concern in passages from the Psalms in which other gods and peoples from among the nations attribute glory to God: “all the other gods recognize in (or assign to) Yahweh the rightful claim of glory and all the authority, power, honor, and dignity that go with it” (285). Those passages thus “make visible and compelling the rightful claim of Yahweh to glory,” as well as “the right to wield authority over all rivals” that is his alone (285).

Brueggemann insists that the same concern for Yahweh’s self-regard is behind the repeated allusions to his holiness in the biblical texts, as well as his repeated insistence that human beings regard him as holy. Due to his intolerance of any type of contamination or pollution that might result from human sin, he will withdraw his presence from human beings when they threaten to create disorder through their impurity: “those zones of life that are inhabited by Yahweh in an intense way must be kept pure and uncontaminated” (192). Behind this demand for purity and his commands that his people be holy is ultimately a concern not for them but for himself: “The holiness commands evidence the claims that God’s preoccupation is with God’s

own life, which must remain protected from all profanation. . . . God is also jealously *for God's own self* and takes with dreadful seriousness every threat of profanation to God's own life (cf. Ezek 36:22-23)" (193). According to Brueggemann, this concern for Yahweh's own self and holiness is greater than his concern for Israel and the nations: "In the end, the notion of Yahweh's holiness suggests that Yahweh cares most about Yahweh's own name, reputation, and character—even more than Yahweh cares for Israel. Yahweh does indeed penultimately care about Israel, and so the Holy One comes to save Israel. Some texts—the more decisive texts, I believe, related to this notion of holiness—make clear that finally Yahweh cares most about Yahweh's own self" (290). This concern for his name, identity and reputation derives from "Yahweh's special uncompromising character," which will not allow his name to be debased, profaned, or diminished (290).

Brueggemann sees the repeated allusions in the Hebrew Scriptures to Yahweh's jealousy as reflecting the same concerns. Because his claim to honor is uncompromising, he responds to any challenge to that claim with fury, rage, and destruction:

Yahweh is a jealous (*qn'*) God. We add the claim of jealousy to those of glory and holiness in our study of Yahweh's profound self-regard. While the terms *jealous* and *jealousy* may be carefully nuanced, their meaning is the one we commonly connect to the English term *jealous*, for they refer to Yahweh's strong emotional response to any affront against Yahweh's prerogative, privilege, ascendancy, or sovereignty. Thus the terms assume Yahweh's singular preoccupation with self, and the expectation that Yahweh will be fully honored and readily obeyed in every circumstance (293).

According to Brueggemann, this concern to be honored and obeyed as sovereign is the driving force behind much of the behavior ascribed to Yahweh in the Hebrew Scriptures. While he seeks the praise and worship of human beings by demonstrating to them his power and glory in different ways, Yahweh also threatens with his "destructive fury" those who would fail to ascribe to him the glory to which he is entitled (294). His self-regard and jealousy lead him to act in "savage propensity" against any who offend, disobey, or affront him:

Indeed Yahweh's name is Jealous (Exod 34:14)—that is who Yahweh is. In the indignation and emotion that guard Yahweh's peculiar claim to honor, Yahweh is uncompromising. Yahweh acts in fury and rage, sometimes destructively. . . . This aspect of the character of Yahweh admits of no taming or minimalization. It witnesses to Yahweh at the extremes of love and anger. The extremity of Yahweh's passion will be turned against any who affront Yahweh, and Yahweh will act without restraint or discipline. That passion may be turned against Yahweh's own people, if Yahweh's self-regard is sufficiently affronted or Yahweh's claim for sovereignty is excessively disregarded (293-94).

Brueggemann notes that numerous passages from the Hebrew Bible also speak of God being jealous for Israel as his people. He insists, however, that

even this jealousy “is in the service of Yahweh’s self-regard” (294). The reason that Yahweh is jealous for his people Israel is that they are the people who are known by his name. By protecting and defending them, therefore, he is ultimately protecting and defending his name. Nevertheless, because he values his name and sovereignty above all else, including his people themselves, he will not hesitate to act destructively toward them if it is necessary to do so in order to defend his holy name. On the basis of several texts from the prophetic writings, Brueggemann argues that if Yahweh is forced “to choose between self-regard and engagement on behalf of Israel,” he will consistently opt for the former: “Yahweh will characteristically choose self-regard, even if to do so requires destructiveness toward Israel” (295).

Brueggemann concludes his analysis of the biblical allusions to Yahweh’s glory, holiness, and jealousy by stressing how all of these concepts revolve around Yahweh’s concern that, as sovereign God, he be given the worship, honor, and obedience that are due to him. While Yahweh is committed to Israel, this is because Israel is the means by which he manifests his sovereignty to the world. Therefore his commitment to Israel is in reality a commitment to his own sovereignty, which is what matters to him most:

The collage of texts concerning the glory, holiness, and jealousy of Yahweh leave one astonished at the largeness and roughness of the claim made for Yahweh, and the power and intensity with which that claim is made. This is a God who will be taken seriously, who will be honored and obeyed, and who will not be mocked. The nations are warned; and Israel is also on notice. Yahweh must be taken in full capacity as sovereign; there is no alternative (295).

Because even the most minimal disregard for Yahweh’s honor and glory can provoke him to intense anger, Brueggemann notes the “hovering danger” that at any moment Yahweh may act as a “loose cannon” and vent his rage in destructive ways (280, 296). Even though his people may be confident of his love for them, this unpredictability on the part of Yahweh makes the people’s relationship with him a source of constant anxiety for them, since they never know when his rage will erupt (282). On this basis, Brueggemann argues that in the Hebrew Bible Yahweh’s concern for his own self and his sovereignty is often seen as standing in opposition to his love and compassion for human beings, that is, his pathos: “This self-regard may emerge as unsurprising moral claim, or it may emerge as a kind of wild capriciousness, as sovereignty without principled loyalty. It is this propensity in Yahweh, Yahweh’s determination to be taken seriously on Yahweh’s own terms, that precludes any final equation of sovereignty with covenantal love or with pathos” (303). While Yahweh undoubtedly loves Israel, therefore, that love often stands in conflict with his love for his own self. For Brueggemann, “Yahweh’s self-regard and Yahweh’s regard for Israel and the world are in tension with each other” (307).

In fact, Brueggemann even claims to find in several biblical texts the idea that God’s steadfast love for Israel is actually not truly a love for Israel but a

love for himself and his sovereignty, that is, his self-regard.²⁷ In these passages, Yahweh's compassion for Israel is "only an inescapable by-product of Yahweh's self-regard," since the reason he saves Israel is ultimately not because he loves Israel but because he wishes to uphold his name and sovereignty, which are linked to Israel: "Yahweh acts, not in the interest of Israel, but in Yahweh's self-regard. . . . The ground for Yahweh's saving activity is completely Yahweh's self-regard" (307). In Brueggemann's words:

In these texts it is clear that viewed per se, Yahweh has no positive regard for Israel and is not moved by its plight. Nor, for that matter, does Yahweh mind saving Israel, for it is no special inconvenience for Yahweh. Yahweh in effect has no interest in Israel, but Israel is a convenient, ready-at-hand vehicle for the assertion and enactment of Yahweh's self-regard. This is no bad thing for Israel—but it is not the same as "steadfast love," and it ought not to be construed as such. Yahweh has long since been linked to Israel and must continue to act on that basis. But the action of Yahweh is fully, without reservation, for the enhancement of Yahweh (308).

According to Brueggemann's reading of the biblical texts, it was this same concern for himself and his own glory that led Yahweh to choose Israel as his people and enter into a covenant relationship with them. What he sought above all else was a people who would be dedicated to serving and honoring him in the way he desired: "The covenant generated for Yahweh a people who would endlessly seek to obey Yahweh's commands and sing Yahweh's praises, and thus enhance Yahweh's sovereignty" (297). At the same time, however, Brueggemann points to passages that from his perspective affirm that God may choose to terminate the covenant relationship with his people if they do not fulfill faithfully the role he has assigned to them: "Indeed it is the relentless thought of the prophets of Israel that Yahweh may indeed terminate Israel in an exercise of sovereign self-regard. . . . This act of abandonment of the partner by Yahweh is rooted in Yahweh's uncompromising self-regard. . . . Yahweh's self-regard permits—perhaps requires—such termination as a defense of Yahweh's glory, holiness, and jealousy" (297-98). In the end, however, Brueggemann notes that the biblical texts never present Yahweh taking such a step.

Despite the priority he assigns to Yahweh's concern for his own sovereignty in his interpretation of the biblical texts and his claim that this concern often stands in tension with Yahweh's love for human beings, Brueggemann by no means overlooks the stress on Yahweh's concern for social justice, righteousness, and equity that also runs throughout those texts. On the contrary, he regards this concern as lying at the core of Yahweh's being. Brueggemann rightly notes that the biblical texts consistently speak of Yahweh as one who cares deeply for all of his people, but especially those who suffer greatest need: "The justice that is proposed and for which concrete implementation is provided, moreover, is a social practice in which the maintenance, dignity, security, and well-being of every member of the community are guarded in concrete

27. These texts are Exod 34:6-7, Num 14:11-12, 19-21, and Ezek 20:41-44; 36:22-32; 39:25-29.

ways” (189). According to Brueggemann, however, rather than standing in opposition to Yahweh’s self-regard, this concern for justice, righteousness, and well-being among human beings is grounded in Yahweh’s concern for himself and is an expression of that concern:

The substance of that righteousness is the well-being of the world, so that when Yahweh’s righteousness (Yahweh’s governance) is fully established in the world, the results are fruitfulness, prosperity, freedom, justice, peace, security, and well-being (*shalôm*). Because Yahweh in righteousness wills good for creation, there is a complete convergence of Yahweh’s self-regard and Yahweh’s commitment to Israel and to creation (303).

While for Brueggemann Yahweh’s concern for himself and his concern for social justice and human well-being converge, this does not mean that they are equally important or constitute one and the same thing. Ultimately, Brueggemann insists that Yahweh’s concern for justice and well-being among his people is subordinate to his concern that the people ascribe to him the glory and honor that are due to him and fulfill properly their role of enhancing his sovereignty. Pointing to Isa 45:21-25, where God invites people of all nations to turn to him to be saved before adding: “To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear,” Brueggemann writes:

Yahweh’s righteousness is engaged in the work of well-being. Israel has benefited from this gift of Yahweh’s righteousness, and the nations are invited to participate in the same. But neither Israel nor the nations can receive such transformative activity unless they are among those who bend the knee and swear with the tongue to the sovereignty of Yahweh (306).

Although Brueggemann’s claim that Yahweh’s concern for justice, righteousness, and well-being in the world is secondary in relation to his concern for his own reputation, sovereignty, and glory may seem to set these two concerns at odds with one another, in reality such is not the case. The reason for this is that, in Brueggemann’s thought, even though Yahweh wants there to be justice, righteousness, and well-being in the world, ultimately he wants these things *for his own sake*. According to this logic, the well-being of human beings is not an end in itself but a means toward another end, namely, allowing Yahweh to be content, satisfied, and at rest as he contemplates the good creation he has made for himself and receives the praise, honor, and obedience of those who inhabit it. Any disturbance in that order upsets and displeases him because it deprives him of the peace, worship, and glory that he desires above all else. Similar to the manner in which the primordial god Apsu in the *Enuma Elish* is angered when the lesser gods will not let him rest and be at peace, apparently Yahweh becomes upset when the practice of injustice and oppression provokes discord and disorder in the world he has created and thereby undermines his sovereignty. While Brueggemann never goes so far as to claim that the reason that Yahweh cares for the poor and oppressed is that their suffering and cries of pain are bothersome to him and prevent him from enjoying the worship and praises being offered to him by

others without being disturbed, one might argue that such a conclusion is by no means incompatible with his portrayal of the God of Israel and may even be regarded as following logically from it.

From Brueggemann's perspective, therefore, even though Yahweh cares deeply about human beings, what he cares about even more is the honor, praise, and obedience that they owe to him. In fact, it was for the purpose of receiving these things from human beings that he created them and subsequently chose Israel as his people. Because he cares for himself above all else, what concerns him is not the effect that human behavior has upon human beings themselves, but rather the effect that their behavior has *on him*. For that reason, if human beings fail to practice justice and righteousness and instead oppress one another, what upsets God the most is not the harm that such behavior does to human beings themselves but rather the fact that it deprives him of the glory, praise, and honor that he desires above all else.

All of these assertions of Brueggemann, therefore, provide the basis for his claim that as the God of Israel Yahweh practices "the way of 'being god' that was everywhere available in the ancient Near East" by imposing on human beings the order he desires and conducting his life in the same way as the other gods known to us from antiquity (283). While there are certain traits and characteristics that distinguish the God of Israel from the gods of other nations, in essence he behaves in the same way that they do and for the same reasons, namely, that he is concerned for himself, his self-regard, and his own honor, holiness, and glory. Like those gods, his relation with human beings is based on the principle of *do ut des*: he will grant human beings his blessings and give them what they want and need, but only on the condition that they serve and obey him, acknowledge his lordship over their lives, and give him the reverence, respect, and praise that he desires as an end in itself.

Many scholars of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, of course, would take issue with numerous aspects of Brueggemann's reading of the biblical texts. For the most part, however, the same assumptions made by Brueggemann can be found in the work of biblical scholars and theologians in general. Brueggemann merely makes explicit a concept of God that other biblical scholars and interpreters take for granted. In the minds of these scholars and interpreters, the God of the Hebrew Bible was never fully depaganized but instead was thought to retain many of the same fundamental traits that were believed to be characteristic of the gods of the other nations of antiquity. What we shall see throughout the remainder of the present work, however, is that the God of whom biblical scholars and interpreters speak today is no longer the depaganized God of the Hebrew Scriptures but a repaganized God who has been read back into those Scriptures for centuries.