

A GOD LIKE No OTHER

Depaganizing the God of the Hebrew Bible

An abstract painting featuring several vertical, blurred figures in various colors (blue, green, yellow, red, purple) against a light, textured background. The figures appear to be standing in a row, possibly representing a group of people or a divine assembly.

Chapter 10 excerpts
The God Who
Plans to Bless

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Both God's creation of human beings and his election of Israel as his people presuppose some type of plan or objective that the God of Israel seeks to accomplish. A careful reading of the biblical texts reveals that, rather than pursuing some type of self-interest revolving around his own needs or desires, the God of whom those texts speak is dedicated to seeking the well-being of Israel and all the nations of the world as an end in itself.

THE GOD WHO PLANS TO BLESS

Although the Hebrew Scriptures never speak explicitly of God having a plan for the world and the human beings that he created, they clearly presuppose such an idea. As we noted in Chapter 2 of this study, those Scriptures not only present God as the creator of all that exists but also consistently stress his sovereignty over all the people and things that he has created. Because there are no powers or beings that are superior to him, he was not subject to any type of force or compulsion when he created the world and the human beings he placed over his creation but was free to order and fashion all that exists in any way that pleased him. If such was the case, then he must have had some type of objective or purpose in mind and therefore some type of plan as well. Without such a plan, he would have had no basis for creating the world and human beings in the way that he had.

The same observation must be made with regard to God's election of Israel as his special people or "treasured possession" (Exod 19:5). That election presupposes a plan of some kind, that is, some purpose or objective that God intended to carry out from the time he decided to choose Israel as a people, even before they existed as such. While in the previous chapters we have already examined in detail many aspects of that plan as it is presented in the biblical texts, what we have seen up to this point will make it possible to contemplate and spell out that plan even more clearly in the present chapter.

THE INTENTIONS OF THE GODS IN ANCIENT PAGAN THOUGHT

Because the gods of most of the nations in antiquity were believed to have emerged from nature and had not been brought into existence for any purpose, they were not thought to be attempting to direct history toward any type of goal or objective. If they were thought to have any objective themselves, it was the same as that which most human beings have: simply to spend their existence in as much comfort and pleasure as possible without suffering any type of need or hardship. To the extent that the gods cared about human beings, they merely wanted human beings to do whatever contributed to their comfort and pleasure by serving and honoring them, doing their will, and offering them the gifts and sacrifices they desired for their own sake. Since the gods regarded human beings as a means to their own ends rather than seeing their well-being as an end in itself, they were not thought to be pursuing some

objective in relation to human beings themselves, other than ensuring that they might continue to serve them perpetually.

Because virtually all of the gods of antiquity were associated with a particular people or nation, they were not thought to be concerned for all human beings equally. Instead, they cared for the people and nations that gave them what they wanted by offering them their worship and sacrifices. They were especially concerned for the rulers and the elites among these people and nations, since the wealthy and powerful leaders ensured that the people under them would continue to serve the gods loyally and faithfully. For the same reasons, the gods also sought to protect and care for the people and nations who were dedicated to their worship and service. This too, however, responded to their own self-interest, since if those people and nations suffered some type of misfortune or disaster they would no longer be able to give the gods what they needed and desired. It was also in the gods' best interest to associate with great and powerful nations rather than those that were small, weak, and insignificant, since nations that were inferior would inevitably be forced to serve other nations that were superior to them and to adopt the gods of those nations as their own.

Among many peoples, the worship of their gods was not voluntary but obligatory. Those gods would bless the people and nations under them only if they received the offerings and worship that were regarded as their due. If they did not, it was thought that those gods would punish not only the individuals or groups that refused to serve them but the entire nation or people. For that reason, it was necessary for all of the people and their leaders to pressure or oblige those individuals or groups that were not serving the gods faithfully to do so in order to avoid provoking the wrath of the gods and bringing down their punishment on the people as a whole.

Because what concerned the gods was simply receiving the worship and offerings they desired for their own sake, as long as the rulers and people who were dedicated to serving them satisfied their desires, the gods were for the most part content with them. It was extremely important, however, for those who worshiped them to remain loyal to them and submit to them fully. In exchange for that loyalty and submission, the gods would themselves remain loyal to their worshipers even when they acted in ways that were morally reprehensible. The gods especially continued to defend and side with those who were most dear to them, no matter what they did. Thus, for example, as we have noted in Chapter 1, even though the manner in which Polyphemus treated Odysseus and his men in the *Odyssey* was cruel, reprehensible, and unjust, the god Poseidon sided fully with Polyphemus against Odysseus because Polyphemus was his son. That type of loyalty and faithfulness to one's own kin or people was thought to be more important than a concern for the practice of what was good, just, and right and thus to override such a concern.

Because most gods in antiquity were said to be immortal, it was generally claimed that the position they occupied in relation to human beings was

intended to last indefinitely or forever. This enabled the people associated with those gods to regard themselves in the same way. In the *Enuma Elish* and the Code of Hammurabi, for example, it is not only Marduk and the other great gods of Babylon who are expected to remain in power forever but also the Babylonian people, as well as the city of Babylon that those gods had established as their dwelling place. Such a view justified subjugating other peoples not only to the Babylonian gods but to the Babylonian people and their rulers as well. To affront or attack the Babylonian people or their rulers, therefore, was also to affront or attack their gods. Gods such as Marduk would not tolerate any such opposition and would act through the Babylonian people and their rulers to quash any type of rebellion or resistance to their dominion.

For the same reasons, it was not generally thought that the gods had any intention to bring about a reality that was different in any significant way from that which existed in the present. On the contrary, as is evident from the Prologue and Epilogue to the Code of Hammurabi considered in Chapter 4, the people and rulers who claimed to have been chosen by the gods to subject other peoples to themselves tended to maintain that the prosperity and well-being of all depended on their submitting unquestioningly and unreservedly to them as the representatives of those gods. To criticize the existing order and express hopes regarding an alternative order that might replace it was seen as unacceptable and subversive, since it involved an implicit rejection of the rulers in place as well as the gods who had chosen those rulers as their representatives.

THE BLESSING OF ISRAEL IN GOD'S PLAN

As we have seen in Chapter 2 of this study, the opening chapters of Genesis stress several points that are key for understanding the Hebrew Scriptures as a whole. First, they affirm that God desired only the good for the human beings and the world he created. From the beginning, he pronounced his blessing on human beings collectively and not merely on one of the nations or peoples in particular that would come into existence. Second, the Genesis account makes it clear that human beings can attain the blessing and the good that God desires for them only if they live in accordance with God's will by doing what is good, right, just, and loving. When they instead practice injustice, violence, and oppression, they destroy their own well-being and fill the earth with pain and suffering. And third, the story of the flood in Noah's day assumes that God cannot force human beings to abandon their destructive behavior so as to live instead in ways that allow them to enjoy the well-being he desires for them. If God could bring human beings to alter their behavior unilaterally, he would have done so after they had become violent and corrupt instead of destroying them through the flood.

The narrative in the opening chapters of Genesis also assumes another important point, namely, that God holds out hope that eventually he can bring human beings to change their ways and commit themselves to living in

accordance with his will so that they may attain the happiness and well-being he intended for them. Such a hope, of course, is possible only if God remains committed to doing everything in his power to bring them to abandon their violent and destructive behavior. If God no longer held out such a hope or were no longer committed to doing everything possible to see that hope fulfilled, it would make no sense for him to allow human beings to continue to live and multiply across the earth. Instead, he would simply destroy them or abandon them definitively so as to let them destroy themselves.

Only when we bring together all that we have seen in the preceding chapters of this study is it possible to grasp more fully the manner in which the biblical texts conceive of God acting to accomplish his objective of bringing human beings to live in ways that will enable them to enjoy the well-being he desired for them from the start. Despite the diversity of perspectives and emphases that we encounter in those texts, they share a common vision regarding the manner in which the God who created all that exists intends to accomplish his purposes in the world he has fashioned, just as they reflect a common vision regarding that God himself.

The Challenge of Bringing Blessing

By affirming that God had chosen to create all things as good and that he had blessed all that he had created, the opening chapters of the Genesis account presuppose that the reason and purpose for which God had created the world and human beings was a loving one. The biblical account of creation, however, also presupposes another idea. According to that account, God had not created separate groups of people or nations when he had made human beings, nor had he divided them into distinct groups or nations. Of course, once human beings began to multiply, it was inevitable that they eventually form different families, peoples, and nations. Even when that took place, however, there was no reason why they might not all continue to live as a single family, people, or nation in some sense. If instead the families and peoples of the earth had come to be divided among themselves and at enmity with one another, it had been due to the sin, evil, jealousy, and lust for power and dominance that are described in passages such as the account of Abel's murder by Cain in Genesis 4 and the story of the tower of Babel in the opening verses of Genesis 11.

Therefore, if God had created human beings as a unified whole and if the divisions that had come to exist among them were not his work but that of human beings themselves, then from the start God must have desired the well-being of *all* human beings without exception and not just certain groups or peoples among them. Because all descended from the same man and woman, all were equally to be considered the work of his hands and in some sense were also to be regarded as sisters and brothers and as fellow children of the one God who had made them.

As we have seen in previous chapters of this study, however, beginning in Genesis 12 with the account of God's calling of Abram or Abraham, God is

presented as choosing for himself a particular individual together with the people that will descend from him. From its very outset, the narrative regarding Abraham makes it clear that God's intention is not merely to bless him and his offspring but to bless all of the peoples and nations of the world: "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (v. 3). The idea that God wishes for all of the families to be blessed is not only repeated elsewhere in key passages from the book of Genesis but also appears both explicitly and implicitly in other passages from the Hebrew Scriptures, especially in the Psalms and the prophetic writings, as we shall see below. At the same time, however, the blessing of other peoples is tied to the blessing of Abraham and the people descended from him. In biblical thought, therefore, these two blessings are inseparable from one another.

When considering these ideas, it is important to stress once more a point that we have seen repeatedly throughout this study, namely, that by definition *those who are not committed to living in accordance with God's will for justice and righteousness cannot be blessed*. Their failure or refusal to live in ways that will allow them to enjoy the well-being that God desires for all makes it impossible for them to be blessed, since rather than using whatever they receive from God's hands for good, they will use it in ways that do them harm and promote injustice and oppression. As we have seen in Chapter 3 of this study, according to the logic of the Genesis narrative, what made it possible for God to bless Abraham was Abraham's faith and trust in God and his commitment to practicing righteousness and obeying God in all that God commanded him.

The biblical account, therefore, presupposes that if the people descended from Abraham as well as the other families of the earth are to be blessed through Abraham and together with him, *they must be brought to live in accordance with justice and righteousness in the same way that Abraham did*. For that reason, God's promise to Abraham must be understood in terms of a commitment not merely to pour out blessings on the descendants of Abraham and the other families of the earth but also to bring them to practice the justice and righteousness that will enable them to attain the well-being associated with those blessings. In that case, what concerns and interests God is not the election of a particular people for its own sake but rather the existence of a people who will practice justice and righteousness and bring others to do the same. In other words, God's concern for the well-being of the people descended from Abraham and the other families of the earth who will be blessed through them is inseparable from his intention and insistence that all of these nations and peoples come to obey him as Abraham did by practicing justice and righteousness. If they fail or refuse to do so, God simply will not be able to bless them, no matter how much he may wish to do so.

Further on in the biblical narrative that begins in Genesis, of course, it becomes clear that the "great nation" to which God is referring in Gen 12:1-3 is the people descended from Abraham through Isaac and Jacob, that is, the people of Israel. God's intention to bless Israel is, of course, stressed

repeatedly elsewhere throughout the biblical texts. At the same time, however, those texts consistently maintain that if Israel does not obey God and live as his people by practicing the justice and righteousness he demands of them, God will remove them from the land he promised to Abraham, deliver them into the hands of their enemies, and even destroy a large part of the people so as to leave behind only a remnant. Numerous passages add that ultimately this remnant will come to live obediently in the way God demands for their own good so as to attain the blessings he intended for them from the moment he chose them as his own through Abraham.

While in a sense God's promise to bless the people descended from Abraham is unconditional, therefore, since God intends to do whatever is necessary to make that blessing a reality for them, in another sense that promise is conditional upon the people's living in faith, obedience, and righteousness in the same way that Abraham did. The biblical account makes it clear that many of those descended from Abraham will *not* be blessed and will even be subjected to hardships, punishments, and destruction due to their refusal to follow in Abraham's footsteps. Although God will do everything in his power to enable them to attain the blessing he desires for them by providing them with instruction and guidance, pouring out his Spirit on them, calling them to turn back to him when they stray, and seeking to correct them through chastisements when necessary, many of Abraham's descendants will *not* attain that blessing because their conduct will prevent them from doing so.

These ideas must be kept in mind when interpreting God's promise to bless those who bless Abraham and curse those who curse him or make light of him in Gen 12:3. The logic behind this promise is not that God has chosen to bless Abraham simply because for no good or apparent reason he determined to show preference for one individual over all others, as if some type of arbitrary favoritism were involved on God's part. If Abraham has been blessed by God and should be blessed by others, it is because of his commitment to doing God's will. To refuse to bless him or to curse him and speak ill of him would be to belittle or make light of his commitment to doing God's will and serving as God's instrument to bless others. In contrast, to bless Abraham would involve valuing his commitment and obedience to God and attempting to live in the same commitment and obedience.

Blessing a People to Be a Blessing for All

Because the people descended from Abraham through Isaac and Jacob will not always practice justice and righteousness but will frequently fall into sinful behavior that is willful and persistent, to bless them must not be understood in terms of offering unconditional support for everything they do or speaking with approval of them when they act in ways that are contrary to God's will. While all people are to desire that Abraham's offspring be blessed rather than cursed, when the people descended from him fall into destructive behavior that does them and others harm, this desire for them to be blessed

will take the form of expressing disapproval for that behavior and exhorting them to change their ways. The reason why God wants Abraham's offspring to be blessed is that like Abraham they are his chosen instrument for blessing others as well. For the same reason, God promises to curse any who show contempt for Abraham's offspring, since in order for them to be a blessing to others they must themselves be blessed rather than cursed and rejected. Behind God's promise to bless those who bless Abraham and curse those who curse him or make light of him, therefore, is not the kind of arbitrary favoritism that was characteristic of the pagan gods of antiquity but rather a concern to see both Israel and the other nations of the world blessed by practicing the same type of justice and righteousness seen in Abraham. That would happen only as his people Israel were blessed, yet for Israel to be blessed the people needed to be committed to living in accordance with God's will.

Such a vision regarding the blessing of Israel stands in stark contrast to interpretations of the passage that imply that God loves Israel more than he loves other nations and desires a blessing for Israel that is greater than the blessing he desires for others on a permanent basis. According to such an understanding of God's election of Israel, what really matters to God is that Israel be blessed as the people whom he prefers and cares about over all others. Any blessing that the other nations may receive from God is secondary and should in some way contribute either directly or indirectly to the blessing of Israel, which is of much greater importance to God than the blessing of any other nation. In that case, God has assigned to the nations an auxiliary role in relation to Israel. Their primary purpose is to serve Israel so that Israel may be the most blessed of all peoples on the earth.

If God's intention for the nations is reduced to that of fulfilling such a role, then the needs and desires of Israel are to be given priority over the needs and desires of all the other nations of the world. Undoubtedly, in order for Israel to be blessed, the needs and desires of the nations must also be met, yet this is not an end in itself but only a means to the end of ensuring that Israel's needs and desires are satisfied. In that case, the people of Israel are to be concerned primarily for themselves and only secondarily for others, while the nations are expected to put the needs and desires of Israel above their own. Such a relationship would make of God's chosen people an instrument of oppression for other nations. They would be justified in treating those nations as their slaves in order to be served by them and would even have God's approval for relating to them in that way. In the eyes of those nations, the God of Israel would be an oppressive God rather than a liberating one, since he would demand that all people dedicate themselves to serving Israel rather than concerning themselves primarily with their own needs. At the same time, that God would make of Israel a selfish and egotistical people who subjected other nations to themselves for their own sake. He would also show himself to be the same type of God, namely, a selfish and egotistical God who imposed his will on the nations by force in the same way that his people Israel were to do. While

his love for Israel would be unconditional, his love for the nations would be conditional upon their loving Israel more than they loved themselves.

Were the God of Israel to behave in that way, he would be acting in the same manner that the pagan gods of antiquity were thought to do. As we have seen above, one of the primary characteristics of those gods was that they sought to be served purely for their own sake and were ultimately concerned only for themselves. Their only interest in attending to the needs and desires of the people who worshiped them consisted in bringing those people to satisfy their own needs and desires as gods. If such gods served human beings, it was only to be served by them. Furthermore, rather than caring about human beings in general, they cared only for those who were dedicated to providing them with the things they needed and desired for their own sake.

The people who worshiped such gods inevitably came to relate to people of other nations in the same way. With the support and approval of their gods, they sought to subjugate and dominate those people and compel them to live as their servants or slaves. If the people of Israel viewed the God whom they worshiped in the same way, therefore, they too would seek to impose their will on the other nations of the world with his help and bring them into submission so that those nations might be dedicated to their service.

If this was what God intended for Israel, however, then rather than seeking his people's well-being he was doing them tremendous harm. The reason for this is that any who relate to others by seeking to impose their will on them and subjugate them by force can never truly enjoy well-being and wholeness. In order for people to be happy and whole, they must live in solidarity with one another. Because all depend on others for what they need in order to enjoy well-being and no person or group of people can attain that well-being on their own without the assistance and support of others, those who seek to enjoy well-being for themselves must seek the well-being of others at the same time. If they do not, they will be undermining their own well-being and acting in ways that are contrary to it. Furthermore, this concern for others must be *genuine* and *sincere*, since it must involve regarding the well-being of others as an end in itself rather than solely as a means to one's own well-being. If that concern is not genuine or sincere, it will inevitably end up being selfish and self-serving and others will perceive it as such, since they will realize that they are merely being used and manipulated. In that case, there will not truly be solidarity, that is, a sincere commitment on the part of all to seeking the well-being of others together with their own. Where there is not a true and sincere commitment to solidarity, by definition there cannot be wholeness, well-being, and justice for all.

A further reason why those who live in ways that are selfish and self-serving cannot enjoy true well-being and wholeness is that the manner in which they will relate to others will generate tensions, conflict, enmity, and violence. When they show disregard and indifference for the well-being of others and either trample upon them or oppress and mistreat them by seeking

to use them for their own ends, they will generate anger, hatred, and enmity among those whom they treat in that manner. As a result, those others will seek to do them harm and they will be forced to be constantly on the defensive, concerned for their own safety. They will inevitably live in fear of the aggressions and attacks of others and will have to dedicate much of their time, energy, and resources to implementing measures aimed at protecting themselves from others as well as keeping them in subjection and under control. As a result, they will never be able to enjoy peace and security. Their lives will instead be full of unrest, anxiety, fear, and hostility. Those who live under such conditions cannot experience well-being and wholeness.

For these reasons, if God truly seeks to bless Israel, he cannot give preference to the well-being of Israel over that of the nations or allow Israel to do so, since that would involve promoting the type of injustice and oppression that makes it impossible for people to enjoy the well-being he desires for all. The only way in which God can bless Israel is by seeking the blessing of the other nations at the same time and demanding that Israel do likewise. If God ascribes greater importance to the well-being of Israel than he does to that of the nations and commands that the nations give greater priority to the needs and desires of Israel than they give to their own needs and desires, then he not only makes of himself an oppressor in relation to those nations but he makes of Israel an instrument of oppression in the world as well.

If Israel is to enjoy well-being, wholeness, and justice in accordance with God's will, therefore, neither Israel's God nor the people themselves can be concerned primarily or exclusively for the welfare of Israel. Instead, both for the sake of others *and for their own sake*, the people must be genuinely concerned for the welfare of other nations, and both God and the people themselves must be just as committed to seeking the well-being of others as they are to seeking that of Israel. In essence, this involves striving to live *in solidarity* with other peoples and nations so that all together are equally committed to doing whatever is necessary to promote the well-being of all people without exception. Ultimately, this must be the goal or objective pursued not only by God but by Israel: a world in which all seek the well-being of one another by genuinely caring for one another, looking out especially for the weak and suffering, and seeking to ensure that the needs of all are met. Only when such a world exists will all within it be able to enjoy true well-being, peace, and prosperity. In contrast, if any particular people or group of people lives selfishly and seeks to serve only its own needs by disregarding, manipulating, dominating, or subjugating others, that people will undermine and destroy not only the well-being and happiness of others but its own well-being and happiness as well.

The problem, of course, is that for such a world to exist, not only Israel but the other nations and peoples must be committed to that type of solidarity. This means that if God and Israel are to seek such a world, they must be dedicated to doing what is necessary for those nations and peoples to be

brought to care for one another and do everything possible to combat injustice and oppression in the world. From the perspective of the biblical writings, however, as long as human beings continue to serve gods of their own making rather than the one true God, it is impossible for a world characterized by such solidarity and mutual concern to exist. As long as people continue to worship and submit to gods who promote violence and injustice out of selfishness and self-regard, they will never be able to live in ways that truly promote their well-being and for that reason will never be able to attain that well-being. The world will continue to be filled with suffering, hatred, injustice, violence, strife, and discord as long as those who inhabit it do not come to know and serve the one true God who created them so as to live in the way that he commands, not for *his* sake but for *theirs*.

In biblical thought, this is the challenge that God faces. The only way in which he can bless the nations along with Israel is by bringing them to know and serve him for their own good. However, because those nations have no desire to know and serve him but are instead committed to serving their own gods, whose worship leads them to live in ways that make it impossible for them to enjoy well-being, there appears to be no way for God to bless them. His only hope is first to establish through Israel a people that will acknowledge and serve him alone as their God so as to live in justice and righteousness. Only when the other nations see how such a way of life leads to blessing will they choose to abandon their own gods to serve the God of Israel alone alongside Israel.

In light of these considerations, the idea that God has chosen Israel as his special people and desires to bless them above all other nations cannot be viewed in isolation from God's intention to bring all of the families of the earth to attain the same blessing that he desires for Israel. In biblical thought, while God's blessing of Israel is undoubtedly an end in itself, it is also a means toward the end of eventually bringing people of all nations to live as his people together with Israel. In other words, God first intends to bless Israel, yet once that has happened he will then seek to use the blessing of Israel to bring other nations to be blessed in the same way.

If the passages in which God speaks of his intention to bless all of the families of the earth through Abraham and his offspring are understood in this way, then the plan that God intends to carry out becomes clear. First, God must bless his people Israel not only by multiplying them, giving them the land he promised them, and making them prosper, but also by guiding and instructing them through the Torah so that they live in a way that promotes their well-being. He must also take whatever measures are necessary to discipline and correct his people when they depart from the good path he has laid out for them. Then, when the people are blessed as a result of their righteous conduct and God's response to that conduct, those from among the nations who observe how richly Israel is blessed will be attracted to Israel's God and will also want to live as his people in order to obtain the same blessings. In this way, they too will be brought to live in accordance

For these reasons, if God seeks to bless the nations with wholeness and well-being, he must attempt to draw them to himself in some way so that they submit to his loving will voluntarily and with gladness. According to many passages from the Hebrew Scriptures, Israel is his chosen servant to accomplish that objective as a light and a witness to the nations. When his people fulfill that role faithfully by living in accordance with his will, God is able to pour out his blessings on them, since they use those blessings for good rather than for harm. As a result, the nations who desire the same blessings for themselves are attracted to Israel's God, who brings about in them the way of life necessary for them to enjoy those blessings by guiding and instructing them as well.

In biblical thought, then, the obedience of Israel is fundamental to God's plan. The nations will be drawn to him only if his people live in a way that allows them to be blessed. For that reason, when Israel fails to obey God, that failure harms not only Israel but the other nations as well, since they cannot be drawn to Israel's God unless Israel is able to attain the blessings that will enable the other nations to seek the same blessings. When God chastises his people Israel and responds to their persistent disobedience in wrath and judgment, he does so not only for their sake but also for that of the nations. Only by purifying his people from their sin can he hope to see other nations purified from their sin as well, since if Israel persists in sin and disobedience the nations will not be drawn to him.

For that reason, throughout the Hebrew Scriptures the passages that hold out hope that the nations will be drawn to Israel's God to attain the blessings of salvation that come from worshiping and serving him alone are generally found in the context of other passages that speak of Israel itself attaining God's blessings through obedience. The blessing and obedience of Israel are a precondition to the blessing and obedience of other nations. Furthermore, just as God promises by pure grace to do everything possible to bring his people Israel to live in accordance with his will for their own good, so also by pure grace does he promise to do everything in his power to bring other nations to do the same so that they may be blessed together with Israel by living under him as his people alongside Israel.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that the passages that speak of God judging and destroying the other nations rather than saving them are much more common throughout the Hebrew Scriptures than those that refer to the nations attaining God's blessing. The reason for this, however, is that the nations of the world persistently refuse to abandon the practice of evil, injustice, and oppression, as well as the worship of false gods that leads to these things. This constitutes a cause of consternation for God and for the prophets whom he sends to speak to the nations on his behalf and to censure and rebuke the people of those nations for their own good. For the most part, the biblical texts hold out little if any hope that the nations will actually turn away from their oppressive gods unless something radically new and drastic

takes place. On the contrary, both the biblical narratives and passages from the Psalms and the prophetic books present the nations as being irremediably and hopelessly immersed in the worship of false gods and in the harmful, destructive, and oppressive conduct that is associated with that worship. History had seemed to show that this situation was not going to change on its own. Only some type of dramatic intervention on God's part would bring the nations to abandon their false gods and to love and serve him alone for their own good. It is for this reason that most of the passages that speak of the nations turning to Israel's God regard this turning as something that will take place only at some decisive moment in the future, an end time when the renewal and restoration of Israel and the creation as a whole will come to pass. Only then will the nations be convinced that the gods they worship are no gods at all and that life and salvation are to be found in the God of Israel alone as the creator and Lord of all.

If the nations are to be blessed, then, they must become convinced of the same basic truths of which Israel must be convinced, namely, that the God of Israel is the sovereign creator and Lord of all and that he loves all people unconditionally in the sense of seeking their well-being as an end in itself. God must also make his will known to the nations in the same way that he has made it known to Israel. Only by doing so can he hope to bring the nations to live in ways that truly promote their well-being. The nations must also be brought to realize that the God of Israel is fundamentally distinct from their own gods, precisely because he is fully committed to their well-being above all else and is not using them for his own selfish ends in an attempt to satisfy needs or desires of his own. It is this conviction that will lead them to submit gladly and willingly to whatever he commands, since like Israel they will know that all that he commands is only for their good and is truly in their best interest. In this way, they will be brought to serve and obey him, not for *his* sake, but *for theirs*.

At the same time, it is important to stress that to affirm that the blessing of Israel is to serve as a means by which the other peoples of the earth will be blessed is by no means to question or deny that the blessing of Israel is an end in itself. On the contrary, in biblical thought God wishes to bless his people Israel *for their own sake* out of love for them and not merely for the sake of the nations who will be brought to know him through Israel. In fact, only by truly loving Israel and treating the people's well-being as an end in itself could God hope to attract others to himself, since if he were to treat Israel only as a means to some greater end it would soon become apparent to all that he was merely using them for some ulterior motive. In that case, he would bless them and seek to bring them to obey him not primarily out of love for them but because he was attempting to accomplish through them some objective that he regarded as more important than their own well-being and happiness. There would be no reason for other peoples to be attracted to Israel's God if he simply used human beings for his own ends,

since that is the manner in which the pagan gods of antiquity were thought to behave. Only if God was truly committed to Israel's well-being as an end in itself would Israel be able to attain that well-being and be able to serve as a means for other peoples to attain it as well.

Conversely, to affirm that God has a special and unique love for Israel as his chosen people and relates to them in a way that is distinct from the way in which he relates to all other nations is by no means equivalent to saying that he loves the people of other nations less and is less concerned with their well-being than he is with that of Israel. In biblical thought, ideally God would like to enjoy the same type of relationship with *all* the nations of the world, who are just as much his creation as Israel and therefore should be understood as being just as dear to his heart. However, because those nations do not know him and are not interested in knowing him, it is impossible for him to enjoy such a relationship with them at present. They have no interest in living as his people or identifying with him in any way. Instead, they wish to subjugate, dominate, and control other peoples and look to their own gods for everything they need in order to accomplish that objective, since those gods seek the same things for themselves. What those people and their gods desire is to establish their rule over other peoples in the way that imperial powers such as Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon are said to do in the biblical texts. This is not what the God of Israel seeks for his people, however. His objective is not to dominate the nations of the world and subjugate them to himself or to his people Israel but to establish peace, wholeness, and justice throughout the earth for the good of all. Such peace, wholeness, and justice will become a reality only when all submit willingly and obediently to his own rule as a God who is committed to the well-being of all people without exception.

This background makes it possible to understand why many passages from the Hebrew Scriptures portray God as loving Israel more than other nations and seeking to bless them above all others. For all of the reasons mentioned above, if God is to accomplish his purposes in the world, at present he must show a special concern for Israel as his chosen people and relate to them differently than he does to the other nations of the world. This involves giving priority to their well-being over that of all others and establishing a close and intimate relationship with them as their God and Lord. He must make himself known to them as fully as possible and allow them to experience his love and commitment to their well-being so that they are brought to love him in the same way. Only if they truly love him will they obey him so as to live in ways that make it possible for them to experience the well-being he desires for them.

Finally, it is important to stress once more that because of the intrinsic relation between human well-being and a way of life that makes that well-being possible, God's desire to bless Israel as his chosen people cannot be divorced or viewed in isolation from his commitment to bringing about in them that way of life. As noted above, behind God's election of Abraham

and the people descended from him through Isaac and Jacob is not merely a concern or love for *a particular people* but rather a concern for *the practice of a way of life that will enable that people to enjoy the well-being that God desires for all*. In fact, because all of God's blessings depend on the people living in a way that promotes their well-being, that way of life must itself be regarded as his greatest blessing.

A COVENANT DESIGNED FOR BLESSING

According to the biblical narrative, in order to carry out his plan of blessing not only for Israel but for all of the families of the earth as well, God establishes a covenant with Abraham and his descendants. The first allusion to this covenant appears in Gen 15:18, where in the context of a covenant ritual with Abraham God promises to give to Abraham's descendants the land to which he had led him. Two chapters later, God is presented as elaborating further on the promises he has made to Abraham by means of the covenant he establishes with him. He tells Abraham that a multitude of nations will come forth from him and that he will be God to Abraham and his offspring for all of their generations (Gen 17:1-8). In addition to describing this covenant as everlasting, God tells Abraham that he is giving to him and to his offspring the land he had promised to them as a "perpetual holding" (vv. 7-8). As a sign of this everlasting covenant, God orders Abraham to have all the males of his household circumcised together with himself and ordains that in the future all of Abraham's male descendants be circumcised from infancy as well (17:9-14).

After the people descended from Abraham through Isaac and Jacob fall into slavery in Egypt, God is said to remember his covenant with them. On that basis, he determines to fulfill the promises he had made by freeing them and taking them to the land he had vowed to give them (Exod 2:24; 6:2-8). Once he has delivered the Israelites from the hand of the Pharaoh, he directs them to Sinai, where he has Moses tell them: "If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (19:5-6). After Moses receives the commandments that God initially gives him and reads them to the people, they respond: "All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do" (24:3). Moses then writes down those commandments on a scroll that is referred to as the book of the covenant and carries out a rite in which he sprinkles sacrificial blood both on the book and on the people before telling them: "This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words" (24:8).

Although the covenant God establishes here with Israel can be seen as essentially the same covenant that he had made previously with Abraham, in some ways it is also distinct, primarily because it involves a detailed list of stipulations that lay out the manner in which God and Israel will relate to one another from that point on. No matter how the covenant God makes with Israel at Sinai is understood as relating to the covenant he had made

previously with Abraham, the ideas that are central to it remain the same: God promises to bless the people by giving them the land he had promised to Abraham and making them his own so as to be their God forever. Of course, this can happen only if the people descended from Abraham consent to live under that covenant and under the God who has established that covenant with them. As God's words in Exod 19:5-6 indicate, this covenant will set Israel apart from all of the other peoples of the earth as God's special possession. Nevertheless, when God immediately adds: "indeed, the whole earth is mine," he makes it clear that all of the other nations of the world are his possession as well, thus reminding the Israelites that they are not unique in that regard. While in certain ways his relation with Israel will be special and unique, God's words to Moses leave no doubt that he intends to continue to relate to all of the other peoples of the earth as his own possession as well, since they too are his creation.

Although the centrality of God's covenant with Israel in the biblical narrative is recognized by virtually all interpreters of the Hebrew Scriptures, the precise nature and purpose of that covenant have been understood in many different ways. What is common to many of these understandings of the covenant, however, is the idea that it was based on the principle of *do ut des*. According to this idea, the reason that God established the covenant with Israel was so that he might receive from Israel what he desired or needed for his own sake. This understanding of God's covenant with Israel is especially reflected in the comparisons that are often made between it and other pacts and treaties from antiquity known to us.

For over half a century, scholars of the Hebrew Bible have compared the covenant between God and Israel as it is presented in the biblical texts with ancient treaties between great kings known as suzerains and the vassal kings who ruled under them. In these treaties, the suzerain committed himself to conferring certain benefits on the vassal king in exchange for the vassal's loyalty and obedience. Many of these treaties use the language of love to speak of the suzerain loving his vassals by caring for their needs, while at the same time placing the vassals under the obligation to love the suzerain in return by doing everything that he commanded of them and remaining faithful and loyal to him at all times and under all circumstances. This love of the vassals for the suzerain was to be exclusive of any type of similar relationship with other sovereigns or rulers. These treaties generally concluded with a list of witnesses together with promises of blessing for the vassals if they fulfilled the conditions established in the treaty as well as threats of curses and punishments if they did not. As Jon Levenson has noted, the curses and punishments mentioned in these treaties included things such as "annihilation, epidemic, sterility, drought, famine, dethronement, and exile."³

3. Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1985), 30. On the ideas associated with the suzerainty treaties and the history of the comparison between these treaties and the covenant between God and Israel as it is presented in the Hebrew

The fact that Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 present a list of blessings for obedience to the commandments given to Israel by God and curses for disobedience to those commandments has led many biblical scholars to interpret these passages on the basis of the ideas associated with the suzerainty treaties of antiquity. Supposedly, what God sought by means of his covenant with Israel was that the people submit obediently to him and that they be faithful and loyal to him alone. If they did so, God promised to bless them, yet if they failed or refused to be faithful, loyal, and obedient to him, God would bring down on them the curses that were associated with disobedience.

According to such an understanding of God's covenant with Israel, that covenant was in essence a treaty by means of which God promised to grant his people Israel the blessings they wanted for themselves for their own sake in exchange for receiving from them the obedience and devotion that he desired for *his* own sake. In Levenson's words, the relationship between God and Israel was to be one of "mutual service" and "mutual benefit."⁴ Like the great rulers of antiquity, what God sought were devoted vassals, servants, or even slaves who would submit to everything he commanded them so that he might obtain from them the things he sought for himself. His objective was to have a people who would be committed to him under any and every circumstance, not because he sought their well-being as an end in itself but because this brought him satisfaction and pleasure. This satisfaction and pleasure might derive simply from being loved, served, and obeyed by the people. In that case, this was the "benefit" he obtained. Many biblical interpreters presuppose that what interested God was receiving the people's adoration and worship. He wished to have a people who would be dedicated to singing his praises and ascribing to him the honor and glory that he regarded as his due. By means of the covenant, God imposed his will on the people as their superior or sovereign and promised to treat them well if they gave him what he desired, yet at the same time he threatened to punish them severely if they failed to submit obediently to his will and were unfaithful and disloyal to him.

The comparisons that the Hebrew Bible repeatedly makes between God's relationship to Israel and the relationship between a husband and a wife have often been interpreted as reflecting a similar understanding of God's covenant with Israel. According to these interpretations, God's love for Israel was thought to be like that of a man who takes a wife because he wishes to be loved and served by her. While he undoubtedly can be said to love and serve her as well, at the same time he is jealous and possessive in the sense that he demands that her love for him be exclusive and that she remain faithful, loyal, and obedient to him at all times and in all things. While God appears to be

Bible, see 26-30. Levenson offers a more detailed analysis of these ideas and comparisons in his more recent work *The Love of God: Divine Gift, Human Gratitude, and Mutual Faithfulness in Judaism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); see especially 6-15, 36-38, and 48-51. On the scholarly critique of these comparisons, see especially Bruce C. Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 146-48.

4. Levenson, *Love of God*, 6

kind and caring toward Israel when the people live in this type of relationship with him, as soon as they are unfaithful to him and disobey him he becomes angry, violent, and abusive. As a result, the people must live in constant fear of God and be careful to avoid doing anything that might upset him. Such an understanding of the covenant relationship between God and his people Israel once again makes that relationship an extremely oppressive one. Rather than truly caring for Israel, God establishes the covenant because he wishes to use and manipulate Israel for his own ends and obtain some benefit that he desires for his own sake.

While there are no doubt many significant parallels between the covenants, pacts, and treaties that ancient peoples made with their gods and rulers in antiquity and the covenant that God is said to make with Israel in the Hebrew Bible, these parallels must not be allowed to obscure the fact that the biblical understanding of God's covenant with Israel is fundamentally at odds with the ideas just considered. As we have seen repeatedly throughout this study, in biblical thought there is one thing alone that interests and concerns the God of Israel: the well-being of the human beings and creatures that he has made, including especially the people to whom he has chosen to make himself known.

This distinguishes the God of Israel radically from any type of suzerain or king of old. What he sought were not faithful and submissive vassals who would do his bidding for his own sake but a people who would be as fully committed to their own well-being and that of others as he was. Rather than seeking to control his people and impose his will on them, he sought to guide and instruct them in the way that they were to go for their own good. What God desired and demanded of the people was the same thing that they were to desire and demand for themselves, namely, a life characterized by justice, righteousness, compassion, and solidarity that would enable them to enjoy the well-being that God desired for all.

None of the other nations in antiquity understood themselves to be living in any type of covenant or pact with a God like the God of Israel. The gods whom they worshiped and served were not believed to have created all that existed, nor did any of them claim to be the one and only true God. Just as importantly, however, those other nations did not believe in gods who loved them unconditionally and were concerned for their well-being as an end in itself in the way that Israel's God is said to be in the biblical texts. For that reason, the demand of their gods for loyalty and obedience was a selfish and self-serving one rather than an expression of love and concern for them. Like the suzerains and rulers of old, those gods merely wished to have vassals and slaves who would do their bidding dutifully and submissively without questioning them or rebelling against them. According to many biblical interpreters, however, rather than conceiving of the God of Israel in terms that were radically different, the biblical texts present him as acting in the same ways and for the same reasons as the gods of the other nations of antiquity.

This pagan conception of the God of the Hebrew Bible and his covenant with Israel is reflected in many of the translations of the biblical texts. In the NRSVue translation of Lev 26:40-41, for example, after speaking of the diverse chastisements to which God will subject the people if they fail to obey his commandments, God is presented as referring to “their treachery against me and also their continued hostility to me” and as treating them with hostility as well. In English, treachery is generally understood in terms of an act of subversion or betrayal against a ruling authority to whom one is obliged to be loyal. In biblical thought, however, the possibility that his people might betray him or commit treason against him is not a concern of God, since he does not seek to be served and obeyed for his own sake but for theirs. If his people disobey him, they do no harm to him but only to themselves. What the God of Israel desires from his people is not loyalty but that they be faithful to him in the sense of pursuing the same objective he seeks, namely, their own well-being and that of others as well through obedience to his will.

For similar reasons, the use of the language of hostility to describe the relation between God and the people in Lev 26:40-41 must be regarded as reflecting ideas that are not present in the Hebrew text. In English, hostility generally implies enmity, that is, a desire to do harm to another person. A vassal who is hostile to a king or at enmity with him seeks to subvert his reign and overthrow him. In the case of the God of Israel, however, human beings can never threaten his reign or do him any type of harm. The Hebrew original in these verses speaks of God and the people walking contrary to one another or in opposition to one another rather than being hostile to one another. In biblical thought, the problem is not that God’s people regard him as their enemy and wish to do him harm but that they insist on walking in a path of their own that runs contrary to the path that God has laid out for them for their own good. When God sets himself in opposition to them in order to prevent them from walking down the path they have chosen for themselves and attempts to bring them to walk instead in the path that he has graciously laid out for them in the Torah, strictly speaking he is not being hostile to them or behaving as their enemy. Much less is he attempting to do them harm or being jealous and possessive. Rather, he is merely seeking to stop the people from continuing to walk in a way that is not good for them and seeking their well-being by insisting that they walk instead in accordance with his commandments for their own good.

God’s covenant with Israel as well as the mutual love that is to characterize that covenant should be understood on the basis of these same ideas. In biblical thought, God establishes the covenant because in his love he wishes to bring the people to live in a way that will make it possible for them to enjoy the well-being he desires for them. For the same reason, he commands that they love him by obeying him for their own good. By loving him, they will also be loving themselves in the sense of doing what is best for them. This understanding of God’s covenant love is therefore at odds with affirmations such as

that of Levenson: “Positively, the covenantal love of God means heeding the LORD’s commandments and walking in his ways. Negatively, it means scrupulously avoiding actions that signal disloyalty. . . .”⁵ According to Levenson, what God sought was the same thing that suzerains sought from their vassals, namely, “the complete fidelity of the vassal and his wholehearted reliability as an ally.”⁶ In biblical thought, however, what God’s covenantal love seeks is not loyalty or “reliability as an ally” but the well-being of his people. If there is a sense in which Israel is to be his ally, it is that the people are to ally themselves with God in committing themselves to seeking their own well-being along with that of the other peoples and nations that he loves by living in the way that he has commanded for the good of all.

For all of these reasons, the claim that the relationship that God sought with Israel by means of the covenant was essentially the same as the relationship that rulers in antiquity sought with their vassals by means of the suzerainty treaties known to us must be firmly rejected. While many of those treaties use the terminology of love to describe that relationship, any such love is fundamentally distinct from the love that God had for his people Israel and the love that he expected and demanded of them as well. Unlike the suzerains and rulers of old, God was genuinely concerned with the well-being of his people as an end in itself and out of love for them demanded that they love both him and themselves by being just as firmly committed to their own well-being as he was. If God were to relate to his people in the ways that the gods and rulers of antiquity did, treating them as a means to his own self-centered ends rather than viewing their well-being as an end in itself and seeking to satisfy his own needs and desires by using his superior power to impose his will on them, he could never hope to be truly loved by them. On the contrary, they would relate to him in the same way that he related to them, acting purely out of self-interest and attempting to get from him what they wanted for *their* own sake. Rather than consisting of a relationship based on mutual love, God’s covenant with Israel would be reduced to a relationship of mutual manipulation in which both God and his people would use one another for their own ends and seek to derive some personal benefit from the other by means of the principle of *do ut des*.

God’s covenant with Israel, therefore, must be viewed in the context of his plan to bring about the well-being of Israel together with the nations that he hopes to bless through Israel as well. That covenant is an expression of unconditional love rather than any type of self-interest. What God seeks are not loyal and faithful vassals who submit to him for his own sake but a people committed to loving themselves and others in the same way that he does.

Just as it is contrary to biblical thought to conceive of God’s relationship to Israel as analogous to that of a suzerain or ruler who seeks to impose his will on his vassals for his own sake, so also is it problematic to conceive of

5. Levenson, *Love of God*, 13.

6. Levenson, *Love of God*, 13.

that relationship in terms of a jealous and possessive husband who takes a wife simply because he wishes to derive pleasure from her and be loved, served, and obeyed by her. A husband who acts in that manner does not truly love his wife but instead wishes to exploit and dominate her. His jealousy and demand for loyalty and faithfulness are not motivated by any genuine concern for her well-being as an end in itself but are self-serving and aimed at controlling her for his own ends.

Rather than focusing primarily or exclusively on God's desire to receive from his people something that he desires for his own sake when considering the manner in which the biblical texts conceive of the covenant between God and Israel, many interpreters see that covenant as having the purpose of ensuring that the demands of God's justice, righteousness, or holiness might be satisfied. As we have seen in previous chapters of this work, according to this conception of the covenant, while God loves Israel and wants only to bless his people, the demands of his just and holy nature make it necessary for him to lay down certain conditions that the people must fulfill if he is to be able to dwell in their midst and bless them as he desires. In this case, the commandments that he gives have the purpose of communicating to them what they must do to remain on good terms with him and avoid actions and behaviors that his justice, righteousness, and holiness will not allow him to tolerate. Some of those commandments also indicate what the people must do to be restored to his good graces if they fall into any of the actions and behaviors that his nature finds intolerable. By means of the covenant, God makes his people aware of the conditions that they must fulfill in order for him to bless them and the people commit themselves to fulfilling those conditions. On that basis, God assures the people that if they do in fact fulfill the conditions he has laid down, he will indeed bless them. However, he also warns them that if they do not fulfill those conditions, he will subject them to his punishments and may even eventually reject or destroy them, at least in part.

All of these ways of conceiving of the covenant between God and Israel ground that covenant in God's own desires or the needs of his nature. The covenant is then viewed either in terms of some type of pact or deal in which both parties promise to "keep their end of the bargain" in order to obtain from the other what each party wants for its own sake or else in terms of a series of conditions that God imposes on Israel in order to satisfy the demands of his holy and righteous nature. In both cases, lying at the heart of the covenant is the idea that Israel can obtain certain rewards in exchange for giving God the obedience he desires for his own sake but will be subjected to God's punishments if they fail to obey him as they should. What God demands from Israel is faithfulness, loyalty, and submission to himself, and if the people give him what he demands, he promises that he will bless them and be loyal and faithful to them as well.

Just as the idea that God entered into a covenant with Abraham and his descendants for his own sake in order to receive from them something he desired only for himself must be considered foreign to biblical thought, the

same must be said of the notion that he established his covenant with Israel for the purpose of ensuring that the demands of his holy, just, and righteous nature might be satisfied. Although by means of the covenant prescriptions God undoubtedly lays down conditions for the people to obtain the blessings he desires for them, those conditions are rooted not in God's nature but rather in the need for the people to live in ways that promote their well-being and avoid behaviors that undermine and destroy that well-being. God commands that the people live and behave in certain ways not *for his sake* or for the sake of his nature but *for theirs*, since only by living and behaving in those ways can they enjoy the well-being he desires for them.

The Covenant as Faithfulness and Commitment

While God committed himself to blessing Israel by means of the covenant he established with the people, the fact that it was necessary for the people to obey his commandments for their own good in order to obtain that blessing meant that God's commitment to the people would not always take the form of giving them abundance and prosperity in the land he had promised to them. As Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 make clear, God certainly intended to pour out his blessings on his people if they lived in accordance with his commandments, yet if they insisted on disobeying those commandments, his love for them and his commitment to their well-being would take the form of doing whatever was necessary to bring them back to himself in obedience for their own good. As we have seen previously, at times this meant imposing sufferings and chastisements on them in order to discipline and correct them. If the people repeatedly failed to respond to those chastisements in the way God desired, God might inflict even greater sufferings on them and if necessary even send the people into exile or destroy them in part until a righteous and obedient remnant was brought into existence.

God's commitment to the people's well-being, therefore, took the form of refusing to abandon them or give up on them until he might accomplish in them his loving purpose of bringing them to live in ways that would allow them to enjoy the blessings he wished to pour out on them. While he might abandon the people for a time so as to let them experience the negative consequences that followed intrinsically from disobeying his good commandments, he promised never to abandon them definitively but to keep attempting to do whatever was necessary to bring them into conformity with his loving will until that objective was accomplished.

At the same time, however, because the people could obey God and live in conformity with justice and righteousness only if they were genuinely and sincerely committed to doing what he commanded for their own good, God could not achieve that objective by imposing his will on them by force. According to the biblical narrative, at no point does God ever compel or oblige the Israelites to submit to him as their God so as to obey him and live in his covenant. Instead, through Moses he merely makes clear to them the

manner in which it will be necessary for them to live if they wish to be his people and asks them whether they will commit themselves to living in that manner under him as their God.

This understanding of God's covenant with Israel is especially evident in the words that God speaks to the people through Moses in Exod 19:5-6, which we have already cited above. After reminding them of the manner in which he had delivered them from the Egyptians and bore them on eagles' wings in order to bring them to himself, God tells them: "Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples" (v. 5). By means of the imagery of the mother eagle, God points to the love and care that he has shown to the people by pure grace and mercy. At the same time, the allusion to their deliverance from their slavery in Egypt serves to remind them of his sovereign power. He also expresses to them his desire that they live as his own and become a kingdom of priests and holy nation in his service (v. 6). He makes it very clear to them, however, that these things can happen only if they obey his voice and keep his covenant. According to the narrative, when the people respond by promising: "Everything that the LORD has spoken we will do" (v. 8), God had not yet even given them any commandments. In essence, the people had merely told God that they were willing to do whatever he commanded, even though the contents of God's commandments had not yet been revealed to them.

While both God and the people of Israel were making a commitment to one another by means of the covenant, therefore, both the commitment that God made to the people and that which the people made to God were aimed at the well-being of the people themselves and not at anything God needed or desired purely for his own sake. By means of the covenant, God manifested his commitment to blessing the people in the sense of doing whatever was necessary to bring about their well-being. He did this first and foremost by means of commandments that instructed and guided them in a way of life that would promote their well-being for intrinsic reasons. Obviously, however, those commandments could only contribute to the people's well-being if they observed them faithfully and carefully. For that reason, the covenant also stipulated that the people were to commit themselves to learning, studying, and implementing to the best of their ability everything contained in those commandments.

Because the people were sinful and imperfect in the same way that all human beings are, it was recognized that their obedience to the commandments given to them by God would be deficient in many ways. For that reason, as we have seen in the previous three chapters of this work, from the very beginning the covenant also included commandments that were aimed at bringing the people to acknowledge their wrongdoing when they fell into sin and to take steps to correct it. Those commandments thus anticipated the people's disobedience and included provisions through which they might manifest their commitment to turning away from their wrongdoing and seek

God's forgiveness on that basis. While these provisions included sacrificial rites, the condition for the people to obtain God's forgiveness was not simply the performance of those rites but a renewed commitment to living in accordance with his will. What God demanded from the people was not perfect obedience, therefore, but a sincere commitment to observing the commandments he was giving them for their own good. As long as the people remained firm in that commitment, God would accept and forgive them even when they stumbled and fell into sin. Of course, this commitment to obeying God's commandments was also by definition a commitment to seeking their own well-being, since that well-being constituted the purpose for which God had given those commandments.

It is especially important to stress, however, that from the start God tells the people that when they fall into disobedient and destructive behavior he will chastise them in different ways in an attempt to bring them back to himself in obedience for their own good. In passages such as Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, he also makes it clear that if those chastisements do not accomplish their objective, he will not give up on them but will instead chastise them even further and in ways that will become even more painful for them. The alternative would be simply to abandon the people to their own fate by letting them follow whatever path they desire. To treat them in that manner would not be loving on God's part, however, since it would involve handing them over to their own self-destruction. Any path other than the good one that God had laid out for them would eventually lead to their ruin and perdition.

According to biblical thought, therefore, when God chastises the people in order to purify and correct them, he is being faithful to the covenant he made with them and keeping that covenant, even though in a sense this involves doing them harm and evil. That harm and evil must actually be considered something good, however, precisely because when the people are persistently rebellious his painful chastisements are the only means by which God can hope to bring them to return to a way of life that will allow them to enjoy the well-being he seeks for them. Were he not to chastise them in an attempt to purify and correct them, it would be necessary to affirm that he was *not* fulfilling the covenant he had made with them or observing it faithfully.

In a sense, it may similarly be said that God shows the people compassion, kindness, and favor even when he treats them in ways that are *not* compassionate or kind and withholds his favor from them. Such an affirmation does not represent a contradiction in terms. His compassion, kindness, and favor consist of seeking nothing but what is truly best for his people, yet at times what is best for them is that he refuse to show them compassion, kindness, and favor in the sense of subjecting them to suffering and hardships. Only in that way can he bring them to abandon their destructive behavior and obey him for their own good.

Likewise, it can be said that when the people persist in their stubbornness and rebelliousness, God blesses them by withholding his blessings from them

and subjecting them instead to the scourges or curses mentioned in the covenant. Those scourges have the sole objective of molding them into a people who will be fully committed to practicing justice, righteousness, compassion, and love for their own good and for the good of others as well, even though at times they involve hardships and afflictions that can only be described as horrific and harrowing. While God is a “devouring fire” and “a jealous God” (Deut 4:24), his ultimate purpose is not to do harm to the people but to purify them from the behaviors that destroy their life and well-being. This is clear from the words that Moses speaks only a few verses after he has described God in those terms and has alluded to the scourges, afflictions, and utter destruction that God will bring upon them when they disobey him: “In your distress, when all these things have happened to you in the time to come, you will turn back to the LORD your God and listen to him. Because the LORD your God is a compassionate God, he will not abandon you or destroy you, nor will he forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them” (4:30-31). When it is said that God does not forget that covenant, this should be understood not only in the sense that he remains committed to blessing and saving his people but also in the sense that he remains committed to chastising and punishing them when their behavior does not allow him to bless and save them. In other words, he blesses and saves them not only by granting them good things but at times also by subjecting them to the scourges, afflictions, and hardships that most English translations of the book of Deuteronomy refer to as curses.

It is also important to stress that when the people assented to living in accordance with God’s covenant and the commandments it contained, they also gave their assent to the punishments or scourges that God promised to bring upon them if they refused to live within that covenant and submit obediently to its commandments. They did not only pledge to obey everything that God commanded them through Moses, as they are said to have done in passages such as Exod 19:8, Exod 24:3-8, and Deut 5:27, but they also subjected themselves to whatever measures God might regard as necessary in order to bring them to live faithfully under his covenant by obeying his commandments for their own good. Through Moses, God had told the people ahead of time that if they promised to obey his commandments but did not fulfill that promise as they should, the chastisements he would inflict on them would be extremely painful and difficult to bear. According to the book of Deuteronomy, he had told the new generation of Israelites again of those chastisements as they prepared to cross the Jordan River into the land he had promised them. For that reason, when God subsequently subjected his people to those chastisements following their entrance into the land, they had no right to complain that they were excessive or overly harsh. From the start, God had made it clear to them just how dire the consequences for disobedience would be. By agreeing to live in the covenant not only at Sinai but also a short time before taking possession of the land God was giving them, they

agreed at the same time to the chastisements that God said he would inflict on them if they disobeyed him.

While God's faithfulness to the covenant and to the people's well-being would take the form of imposing sufferings on them when he considered that they needed to be corrected, therefore, the people's faithfulness to the covenant and to their own well-being had to take the form of submitting willingly to any disciplinary measures God might take in order to accomplish his purposes in them. Even when the people acknowledged their wrongdoing and sought God's forgiveness, their faith and trust in God and their faithfulness to the covenant were to be manifested by accepting whatever chastisements God might deem to be necessary in order to correct them without complaining or rebelling against him. Those chastisements were not an imposition on his part, nor were they something that in principle ran contrary to the will of those who had agreed to live under the covenant. On the contrary, even though God's chastisements were painful and were therefore to be feared, the people were to regard those chastisements as an expression of God's love for them and his faithfulness to his covenant commitment of bringing them to live in the way that was in their own best interest. Because he was seeking only their well-being when he chastised them, the people were even to be grateful for those chastisements, since for God to fail to seek to correct them would involve handing them over to behavior that would lead to their ruin and destruction rather than doing them good.

At the same time, because the covenant was an expression of God's love for the people and his desire for their well-being rather than something that he imposed on them against their will for his own sake, at no point does God threaten to punish the people if they choose not to live in that covenant. If they rejected the covenant, however, they would forfeit the blessings promised to them in it, including especially the blessing of a land that they would be able to call their own. In essence, by electing not to live in the covenant, they would reduce themselves to the same condition in which all the other nations of the earth found themselves. Just as God was not thought to punish those nations for serving other gods but for the most part merely let them live in whatever way they desired, so also would he allow the people of Israel to go their own way should they so choose. Because they were a small, weak, and insignificant people who would have no land of their own, however, and also because following in their own ways would do them harm rather than good, for God simply to abandon them to their own fate would almost certainly involve handing them over to hardships such as those that they had experienced in Egypt, and perhaps to their own destruction at some point as well. Nevertheless, according to the logic of the biblical account, if that is what the people desired, God would respect their decision.

For that reason, after the people initially indicate their willingness to live in the covenant that God sought to establish with them in Exodus 19, in chapters 20–23 of the book God defines more precisely for them what it will mean

plague involving the death of the firstborn, other peoples are said to have made the decision to accompany them: “The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, in addition to the little ones. A mixed multitude also went up with them and livestock in large numbers, both flocks and herds” (Exod 12:37-38). While the precise meaning of the phrase “mixed multitude” in Hebrew is not entirely clear, there seems to be a solid basis for affirming that “the group here mentioned is distinct from the people Israel.”⁸ As we have noted above, other passages from the biblical texts also speak of non-Israelites joining themselves to Israel. These include individuals such as Rahab and Ruth, from whom King David was said to descend (Ruth 4:13-17; Matt 1:5), as well as larger groups of people. As we have noted above, the prophet Isaiah alludes explicitly to “the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants” (Isa 56:6). In principle, there was no reason why any persons or groups of non-Israelite origin might not join themselves to God’s people Israel by submitting to the covenant and the commandments associated with it.

While people of other nations might join themselves to Israel and its God, however, it is important to stress once more that the commandments or prescriptions that form part of the covenant are viewed as having been given to Israel alone. Those commandments are not presented as universal divine laws imposed on human beings of all times and places, nor are they given to any nation or people other than Israel. Undoubtedly, the biblical texts present God as desiring that all people everywhere live in accordance with what is good, right, just, and loving and often speak of him punishing those of other nations who practice injustice, violence, and oppression. Some passages from those texts may also be read as expressing the hope that one day people of other nations may come to live as God’s people simply by practicing justice and righteousness, yet without submitting fully to all of the commandments found in the Torah. Nevertheless, those texts consistently speak of Israel alone as the people with whom God has chosen to enter into the covenant he established through Moses. For that reason, the commandments contained in that covenant apply only to those who have agreed to live under that covenant as members of God’s people Israel.

Israel as God’s Treasured Possession

The idea that God does not impose the covenant and its commandments on Israel against the people’s will must also be kept in mind when considering God’s election of Israel to be his “treasured possession out of all the peoples” (Exod 19:5). This passage and many others in the Hebrew Bible present Israel as a people who belong to God as his own. This idea is affirmed explicitly

8. Joel N. Lohr, *Chosen and Unchosen: Conceptions of Election in the Pentateuch and Jewish-Christian Interpretation*, SLTHS 2 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 88; see 86-89 for Lohr’s full discussion of the phrase.

whenever God refers to Israel as “my people.” While in a sense all people belong to God, as this verse from Exodus 19 makes clear (“indeed, the whole earth is mine”), there is also a sense in which Israel alone is God’s people. The main reason for this is that Israel alone has *agreed* to live as God’s people by accepting the covenant that God has chosen to establish with them. Because of this, there is also a sense in which the people are to regard themselves as belonging to God rather than as belonging to themselves: *they are not their own but God’s*. The same is true of their lives and everything they have and are. Throughout the biblical texts, in fact, the Hebrew term *‘ebed* is used repeatedly to refer to the people of Israel as God’s servants or slaves.⁹ Slaves are people who do not belong to themselves but to someone else as their owner. They are therefore obliged to do what their owner wills rather than simply acting in accordance with their own will.

As we have noted briefly in Chapter 5 of this study, at first glance the idea that the people are God’s possession and are to live as his servants or slaves might seem highly oppressive. Such an idea might be understood as placing the people of Israel in a relation to God that is the same as that described in the *Enuma Elish*, where the gods create human beings so that they may be dedicated to their service as their slaves. It might also seem to conflict with the notion that by delivering the people from their bondage in Egypt and giving them a land of their own, God has given them their freedom. If God took them out of Egypt merely to make them his own slaves for his sake, then rather than freeing them from slavery he has simply taken the Pharaoh’s place as the new taskmaster and overlord whom they are now under obligation to serve.

For a couple of reasons, however, such a conception of God’s relationship with Israel must be regarded as foreign to the biblical texts. The first of these reasons is that which we have just considered above: after God has freed the people from their bondage in Egypt and taken them to Sinai, he does not *oblige* them to enter into the covenant with him but lets them decide for themselves whether they wish to live in that covenant. His words indicate to them that they will be his special people and his treasured possession only if they choose to live as his own by serving him and doing what he asks: “*if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, then you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples*” (Exod 19:5). In contrast to the *Enuma Elish*, where human beings have no choice but to serve the gods as their slaves, here the people are free to determine for themselves whether they wish to live as God’s own and obey his commands.

It is therefore not simply *God* who makes the people his treasured possession but *the people themselves* by presenting themselves, their lives, and their souls and bodies to God as his own. Undoubtedly, it is God who has chosen them from out of all the peoples to be his treasured possession, as Moses affirms in Exod 19:4, Deut 7:6, and Deut 14:2, but that election in

9. See, for example, Lev 25:55; Deut 32:36; Ps 90:13; 102:14; 135:14; 136:22; Isa 41:8-9; 43:10; 44:21; Jer 30:10; 46:27; Ezek 37:25.

itself does not make the people his own. If they refuse to *live* as God's own people and do not accept him as their God, they will not *be* his own people. This is clear from Moses' words to the people in Deut 26:17-18: "Today you have declared that the LORD will be your God and that you will walk in his ways, keep his statutes, commandments, and ordinances, and listen to his voice. And today the LORD has declared that you will be his treasured people, as he promised you, by keeping all his commandments." According to this passage, what makes Israel God's special people and treasured possession is not only God's election of them as his people but also their declaration that they will *live* as his special people and treasured possession by observing his commandments. Of course, they will do so only in response to the grace, love, and mercy he has shown them in electing them to be his own, delivering them from their bondage in Egypt, giving them his good commandments, and blessing them in other ways. Thus, while in one sense it is God's election of Israel that makes them his people, in another sense it is their favorable response to that election that will make them his people. Were they not to respond favorably to God's election, they would *not* be God's special people or treasured possession, no matter how much God wished to regard them as such or desired for them to live as such.

The second reason why it is liberating rather than oppressive for the people to live as God's possession and serve him is that *he is dedicated entirely and exclusively to their happiness and well-being rather than selfishly seeking something from them for his own sake*. His purpose is in no way to control or manipulate them for his own ends. Nor does he wish for them to live as his exclusive possession and serve him purely out of self-interest. Rather, he wishes for them to submit fully to him and obey him in all things *for their own sake* out of love for them. In this regard, it must be stressed once again that affirmations such as that made by the Dutch Reformed theologian Hermann Bavinck must be regarded as entirely contrary to biblical thought: "Obedience in love or subjection by force is the final destiny of all creatures."¹⁰ While pagan gods such as those of which the *Enuma Elish* speaks may wish to subject human beings to themselves by force in that manner and even demand that those human beings love them as they serve them—an idea which is actually a contradiction in terms, since true love can never be coerced or compelled by the use of force—the God of Israel does not treat human beings in that way, and much less his people Israel. On the contrary, he makes it clear to them that he desires nothing but their happiness and well-being and reminds them that, as their creator, he alone truly knows what is in their best interest and will contribute to that happiness and well-being. Then, on that basis, he asks them to submit to him and obey him for their own good. For the people of Israel to live as God's possession and as his servants thus involves being *dedicated entirely and exclusively to their own happiness and well-being in the same way*

10. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2: *God and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 434.

that God is. To submit to him and obey him is to seek only what contributes to their wholeness and well-being and avoid anything that undermines or destroys that wholeness and well-being, since this is what God commands of them as their lord and master.

It is these convictions that are to lead Israel to accept the covenant that God determines to establish with them and to submit to the commandments contained in that covenant. God does not *oblige* the people to become his treasured possession or live as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Nor does he force them to serve him as his own possession so as to do *his* will rather than their own. Instead, on the basis of their belief in his sovereignty and his unconditional love for them, the people decide to enter into the covenant relationship with him voluntarily. They become God's treasured possession not merely because all people are already his by nature as their creator but because they choose freely to live as his own, since they are convinced that only in that way will they attain the happiness and well-being that God in his love desires for them. For the same reason, they also choose to obey him in all things so as to do his will rather than their own. In reality, however, they make his will their own so that when they do *his* will they are doing *their own* will as well. What *they* will is the same thing that *God* wills, namely, that they enjoy wholeness or shalom in its fullness. They are to be confident that everything that God commands and demands of them is for their own good and is motivated solely by his desire for their happiness and well-being. What will compel them to submit fully to God is not the use of force on God's part but their convictions regarding his love for them and his sovereign wisdom as the creator of all that exists. When God is presented as describing the people as his own treasured possession and commands them to serve him alone, therefore, he does so out of a desire not to *control* them or *enslave* them but to *bless* them.

Even though the people must respond favorably to God's election in order to be his treasured possession, however, ultimately it is not their response that makes them God's people but God's unconditional love for them. If God treasures them, it is not because they do his bidding faithfully and serve him loyally. In fact, for the most part, they do neither of these things, since they are a rebellious and stiff-necked people who constantly disobey him. Instead, God treasures them simply because he loves them unconditionally. At the same time, even though it no doubt sounds extremely odd, it is precisely that unconditional love for his people that leads God to demand that they serve him as his slaves. The service that he demands and commands of them is not like that imposed by the Pharaoh or other rulers in antiquity, who wished to be obeyed for their own sake. Instead, what God demands and commands of his people is that in everything they do they seek their own well-being with all their heart, soul, and might in the same way that he does. The love that he seeks from them *for himself* is a sincere and genuine love *for themselves*, that is, a commitment to their own happiness and wholeness together with that

of others. Because the Torah is the means by which he has indicated to them what such a commitment is to consist of and the things that it is to involve, out of love for his people he commands and demands that they submit fully to that Torah and obey everything in it *for their own sake*. This involves striving to practice justice, kindness, and compassion in all of their dealings with others and avoiding any type of behavior that might be harmful and destructive for them or anyone else.

In other words, for the people to live as God's servants or slaves involves loving themselves and others unconditionally in the same way that God loves them and all people. If the only thing that interests and concerns God is that all people enjoy well-being and wholeness, then what he must be said to desire and demand is that his people dedicate themselves to seeking their own well-being and that of others with the same passion, dedication, and commitment that he does. It is this and this alone that God desires and demands of them out of love for them as their sovereign king, lord, and master. According to this understanding of God's relationship to his people, they serve God as his faithful slaves and loyal subjects when they obey him by caring for themselves and one another in the same way that he cares for them. These ideas are reflected in the only passages in the Pentateuch that portray God as Israel's king and speak of the people as God's servants or slaves. When Lev 25:55 and Num 23:20-22 refer to the Israelites as God's servants or slaves and present God as Israel's king, the only thing that they mention in connection with these ideas is God's commitment to blessing the people and their deliverance from their bondage in Egypt by his hand. Similarly, when Moses describes God as Israel's king in Deut 33:3-5, he states that God "loves his people," that all those consecrated to him are in his hand, and that he gives them instruction in order to guide and direct them. In the only passage from the same book in which he uses the Hebrew term *'ebed* to refer to the people as God's servants or slaves, Moses affirms that "the LORD will deliver his people and have compassion on his servants when he sees that their power is gone and neither bond nor free remain" (Deut 32:36).

According to these passages and others in the biblical texts, therefore, neither the kingship of God nor the submission of his people to him as his servants or slaves is oppressive for them. On the contrary, as their king God seeks nothing but their happiness and well-being and demands nothing of them as his servants or slaves but that they seek the same thing for themselves. In this regard, he is nothing at all like the kings and suzerains of antiquity, nor does he treat the people who belong to him as his vassals or slaves in the way that those rulers did. Rather than attempting to control, manipulate, or use them for his own ends or for his own pleasure, he loves them unconditionally and seeks only what is best for them, even when they disobey him, are unfaithful to him, and rebel against him. The faithfulness that he demands of them is not faithfulness to himself but faithfulness to the practice of what is good, just, right, and merciful for their own sake. When they live in this manner, it might

even be said that they are being faithful to him by being faithful to themselves in the same way that he is faithful to them. Similarly, the loyalty he expects of them is not merely loyalty to himself but rather the same loyalty to their own well-being that is his as well. When the people are unfaithful and disloyal to him by being unfaithful and disloyal to themselves and as a result he is moved to anger, he becomes angry only because he is grieved, saddened, and frustrated that they insist on undermining and destroying their own well-being rather than living in a manner that promotes that well-being. While he demands and commands that his people obey him, he does not want or expect them to do so out of *fear* but out of *love*, since the obedience he seeks from them is for *their benefit* rather than his own.

Paradoxically, then, only as the people live as God's servants or slaves and submit fully to everything that he commands will they be free. Only as they cease to regard themselves and all that they have as their own possession and instead understand their lives and their possessions as belonging to God will they be able to enjoy the well-being that he desires for them and that they desire for themselves. While true freedom involves choice, it also exists and is to be desired solely for the purpose of doing what truly contributes to one's own happiness and well-being. In that sense, those who live and act in ways that do them harm are not free but are slaves to their own ignorance and selfish desires. They believe themselves to be acting in accordance with their best interest but in reality are deceived. In biblical thought, only those who willingly seek to conform to the way of life commanded by God out of love for all are truly free. Only those who act in accordance with what is good, right, and just and refrain from practicing injustice, violence, oppression, and other forms of selfish and destructive behavior will enjoy a freedom that truly grants them well-being.

For the same reason, the worship of any god other than the God of Israel leads to death and destruction rather than life. Because the gods of the nations do not seek the well-being of human beings but merely seek to control and manipulate them for their own selfish ends, they reduce human beings to their slaves and seek to impose their will on them by force. Any who conform their lives to the way of being that is characteristic of such gods make themselves their slaves and destroy their own well-being rather than contributing to it. Likewise, any who relate to those gods on the principle of *do ut des* in an attempt to obtain something from them in exchange for giving them what they desire for themselves are not truly acting in their own best interest but contrary to it.

These observations also provide the basis necessary for understanding why God demands that his people Israel set themselves apart from other peoples as a "holy nation" and remain distinct from them (Exod 19:6). What God desired by means of the covenant was that his people relate to him and to one another in the same way that he related to them, that is, with a love that was to be genuine, sincere, heartfelt, and unconditional. The people were to regard

their own well-being and that of others as an end in itself rather than treating others merely as means to their own ends in order to pursue self-interests that were not actually in their best interest. That could happen only as they lived in the covenant that God was establishing with them, loving and serving him alone. From the moment they broke with that covenant and began to serve other gods, they would inevitably begin to relate to others in harmful, selfish, and destructive ways in the same manner that those gods and their worshipers did. The worship of those gods and the adoption of the ways of thinking and behaving that characterized the peoples who worshiped them would thus destroy the people's well-being.

For that reason, God demanded that if the people chose to live in the covenant he was establishing with them, they not only worship and serve him alone as their God but also separate themselves from other peoples. He tells them not to imitate those peoples, make pacts with them, or follow their practices, since any of these things would do them great harm for the reasons just considered.¹¹ He also imposes extremely harsh punishments for those who violate his commands in this regard and especially for those of his people who worship other gods or lead others to do so. From God's perspective, such things are not to be taken lightly but instead are to be dealt with severely. God's command that his people be holy or set apart is therefore not grounded in any kind of concern for himself or his own nature but is given solely *out of a concern for them and their well-being*. As we have seen in the previous chapters, rather than being an attempt to maintain at a distance some type of pollution or contamination for his own sake or safeguard himself from something that might do him harm, God's command for Israel to be holy is rooted in his insistence that those who were to live as his people do whatever was necessary to avoid falling under the influence of those who would lead them to live in ways that would make it impossible for them to enjoy the well-being he desired for them. God's command for the people to be holy and to remain separate from others was designed not to protect *him* from what was dangerous but to protect *them* from behaviors that would do them and others harm. At the same time that he separates his people from other nations, however, God also places them in the midst of those nations so that they may be a means to drawing those nations to himself: "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isa 49:6).

For the same reasons, what God sought from his people was not that they be loyal or faithful to him personally but to the covenant he was establishing with them for their own good. In a sense, as just noted above, by being loyal and faithful to that covenant they would be loyal and faithful to their own well-being and thus to themselves as well. They would be acting in accordance with their own self-interest, yet this would be healthy and good for them rather than selfish and harmful. What was truly in their self-interest was their own well-being. This well-being would result from their faithfulness to the

11. See especially Lev 18:24-30; Deut 7:1-6; 12:29-32; 14:1-2; 18:9-14.

covenant, both because of the positive consequences that would follow intrinsically from their obedience to the commandments contained in that covenant and because their obedience would make it possible for God's actions on their behalf to contribute to their happiness and well-being.

Conversely, if God is said to have promised to be loyal and faithful to Israel as his people, this should be understood in the sense that no matter what Israel did or failed to do, he would not back down from his efforts to bring them to live in ways that enabled them to experience the well-being he desired for them in his love. For that reason, God's loyalty and faithfulness to his people did not take the form of simply approving of anything they did and defending their actions even when they fell into wrongdoing. He did not behave in the way that the god Poseidon is said to have done in relation to his son Polyphemus in the *Odyssey*, standing by him even when he behaved with great cruelty and lashing out at any who opposed him even when they had good reason to do so. On the contrary, God's loyalty and faithfulness to his people took the form of demanding that they act in accordance with his will for what was good, right, just, and loving and attempting to bring them back to such a way of life when they departed from it, even if this meant punishing and chastising them with sufferings that were extremely painful for them.

For this reason as well, it is foreign to biblical thought to view God's relation to Israel as reflecting the kind of favoritism that was characteristic of the pagan gods of antiquity and many of the rulers and powerful figures that worshiped those gods. In reality, rather than showing them favoritism, the demands he made on his people Israel were much greater than those he made on the other peoples of the earth. The biblical texts often repeat that God shows no favoritism or partiality to anyone, including Israel as well as its rulers and leaders, and demands that his people refrain from showing favoritism or partiality to others as well.¹² God also makes it very clear to the people that if they behave in the same way as the peoples that previously inhabited the land he is giving to them, he will expel them from the land just as he expelled those peoples from it before them.¹³ Out of love for his people and for their own good, his insistence that they live in accordance with what is good, right, just, and compassionate is just as firm and unbending as it is for human beings as a whole.

In fact, in biblical thought the reason why God is so uncompromising in his demand that his people obey his commandments and practice justice and righteousness is that he is concerned not only for their own well-being but for that of others who are affected by their behavior as well. These include not only certain groups that form part of his people Israel, such as the poor, the weak, and those in greatest need, but also those who do not form part of his people. In addition to seeking to protect and defend the foreigners in their midst, he desires that other peoples come to know him so as to live in

12. See, for example, Deut 10:17; 16:19; cf. 2 Chr 19:7; Mal 2:9.

13. See especially Lev 18:24-28; 20:22-23; Deut 4:25-26.

accordance with his will for justice, love, and righteousness and thereby obtain his blessings as well. Therefore, if his people fail to obey him and instead practice injustice, violence, and oppression, they not only deprive themselves of the well-being God desires for them but also prevent other peoples from being drawn to him as their God so that they too may attain that well-being. Those peoples will hardly be drawn to him if the people who are said to be his own live and act in ways that do tremendous harm to themselves and others rather than promoting the good of all.

Strictly speaking, therefore, God's commitment is not to Israel *per se* but to the existence of a people who will live in the way necessary for them to enjoy the well-being he desires for all and be able to serve as his instrument to bring others to live in the same way. While he certainly wants to bless Israel and will do everything in his power to make that blessing a reality, his concern is not for Israel alone but for all the peoples of the earth. The other nations will attain the blessing he desires for all only if Israel attains that blessing first, since those other nations will be attracted to Israel's God only if they become convinced that there is no greater blessing or happiness than living under that God and serving him by obeying what he commands for the good of all. If God's people Israel fail to live in that way themselves, however, they will undermine and destroy not only their own well-being but that of the other nations of the earth as well, since they will no longer be able to serve as a means to draw those other nations to serve and obey the God of Israel.

While there is a sense in which God's blessing of Israel is conditional upon the people's living in accordance with his commandments, there is also a sense in which God is committed to blessing Israel no matter what the people do. As we have noted above, because he cannot bless them with well-being and prosperity if they do not obey his commandments, when necessary his blessing will take the form of chastisements aimed at correcting them for their own good. What he promises his people, therefore, is that he will do everything in his power to accomplish his goal of bringing them to live in conformity with his commandments, even if he must take the drastic step of destroying a part of the people and sending another part into exile in foreign lands. Given that Israel is his chosen instrument to draw the other peoples of the earth to himself so that they may live under him and be blessed by him as well, to give up on his efforts to bring his people Israel to live in the way he has commanded for their own good would be to give up on the rest of the nations of the earth as well. Due to his love for all, he refuses to put an end to those efforts.

In biblical thought, therefore, God's election of Israel as his special people is not an expression of favoritism toward one people above all others but rather is a means by which he wishes to bless both Israel and all of the other peoples of the world. While it involves treating Israel differently from the other nations and showing them special consideration, God does these things not only for Israel's sake but for the sake of the other nations as well. In other

words, in biblical thought what led God to choose Israel as his people and establish his covenant with them was his love not only for Israel but for all of the families of the earth as well.

Until the day comes when other nations can be drawn to him by means of Israel, of course, God must bless Israel more than the other nations, even though at times this blessing must take the form of chastisements. Although in Deut 7:14 God promises to make Israel “the most blessed of all peoples” if they obey his commandments, this promise should not be understood as describing a permanent situation. The reason that Israel will be blessed more than all other nations is that their reception and acceptance of the instruction and guidance God gives them through the Torah will lead them to live in ways that will allow them to enjoy blessings that the other nations who have not received and accepted the same instruction and guidance will not be able to attain. In addition to the well-being that the people will attain as a result of the intrinsic consequences of obedience to the commandments of the Torah, they will be blessed by God with things such as long life, prosperity, abundance, health, and deliverance from their enemies in response to their obedience, precisely because that obedience will allow them to use the blessings that God will give them for good rather than in destructive ways. Yet while their obedience to God’s commandments will enable them to become the most blessed of all peoples, God’s intention is that other peoples eventually be brought to live in the same manner so that they may obtain the same type of blessings that he promises to give to his people Israel if they obey him.

A GOD CONCERNED FOR HIS NAME

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, one of the things that is said to concern most YHWH the God of Israel is his name and reputation. The importance of this idea for biblical thought is evident from the fact that it appears in the opening section of the Decalogue: “You shall not use the name of YHWH your God lightly, for YHWH will not regard as innocent anyone who misuses his name” (Exod 20:7; Deut 5:11). The prohibition against profaning God’s name appears repeatedly in Leviticus as well.¹⁴ The most emphatic of these prohibitions is found in Lev 24:16: “One who blasphemes the name of YHWH shall be put to death; the whole congregation shall stone the blasphemer. Aliens as well as the native-born, when they blaspheme the Name, shall be put to death.” Among the other writings of the Hebrew Bible, none stresses the idea that God is concerned for his name more than the book of the prophet Ezekiel.

As we have seen in Chapter 1 of this work, scholars such as Walter Brueggemann interpret the passages that speak of God’s command for his name to be honored and respected as being rooted in a concern for God himself. According to Brueggemann, God’s concern for his name is in essence a

14. See Lev 18:21; 19:12; 20:3; 21:6; 22:2, 32.