


# A GOD LIKE No OTHER

Depaganizing the God of the Hebrew Bible

An abstract painting with a textured, layered appearance. It features several vertical, elongated shapes that suggest human figures or forms, rendered in a palette of muted blues, greens, yellows, and earthy tones. The background is a mix of light and dark washes, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall style is expressive and somewhat somber.

*Chapter 2 excerpts*  
The God Who  
Began with an End

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From the very beginning, the biblical narrative stresses both the sovereignty of the God who created all that exists as well as his love and goodness. When the human beings he has created fail to respond to that love and goodness in the way he desires for their own good, however, the problem that God must resolve is how to save them, not from him or his justice and righteousness, but from themselves and their own violent and destructive behavior.

## THE GOD WHO BEGAN WITH AN END

The question of what God wanted when he created the world is never addressed explicitly in the Hebrew Bible. The biblical texts clearly presuppose, however, that he wanted *something*. The reason for this is that they present the creation of the world as an act of God's free and sovereign will. Because God is not seen as depending on the created order in any way and is never said to have been compelled or forced by anything or anyone to create what he did, it is clear that he was not thought to have done so in order to satisfy some type of personal need. If he had freely chosen to create the world and all that is in it and had not done so out of any type of necessity or compulsion that was either external or internal to him, therefore, he must have done so for a reason. Even though the biblical texts never state precisely what that reason was, by asking the right questions and examining carefully certain ideas that are implied and presupposed in those texts, we can discern in broad terms how those who composed and read them would have answered the question of what God wanted when he created the world.

### CREATION AND GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

The creation account in Genesis 1 opens with the simple affirmation that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and that the earth was without form and void or empty, covered by darkness (Gen 1:1-2). Many contemporary translations of the Hebrew text add the word "when" after the initial phrase "in the beginning" so as to reflect more clearly the idea present in the Hebrew, namely, that the earth existed in that condition "in the beginning, *when* God created the heavens and the earth." On the basis of this idea, biblical scholars often claim that the opening verses of Genesis do not speak of God creating the world out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*), contrary to many traditional interpretations of these verses.<sup>1</sup>

It must be recognized, however, that the Hebrew phrasing in this first verse of Genesis is ambiguous. While it can be understood in the sense that the earth *already* existed in that condition when God began to create or fashion it together with the heavens, the Hebrew text can also be understood as implying that when God began to create the earth together with the heavens, he originally made the earth to be formless, void, and covered with darkness.

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1. On this discussion, see especially John Day, *From Creation to Abraham: Further Studies in Genesis 1–11* (London: T & T Clark, 2022), 1–4.

This is, in fact, the way in which the earliest interpretation of these verses known to us understands them, namely, the interpretation of the translators of the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures that was begun in the third century BCE. There the opening verse of the passage reads: "In the beginning God made the heaven and the earth." In the Greek text, this affirmation is also a separate sentence from the sentence that immediately follows: "But the earth was invisible and unformed, and darkness was over the face of the abyss" (Gen 1:2 LXX).

Whether or not those who heard and read the opening words of the Genesis account in the Second Temple period would have understood them as implying that God created the world out of nothing, there is nothing in the text that would have suggested to them that God had not been free to create or fashion the world in whatever way he desired. Even if they did read the text as implying that God had fashioned the heavens and the earth out of some preexistent matter or substance, they would probably have seen this preexistent matter or substance as having had its source in God himself as its originator rather than having existed independently of him for as long as he had himself existed. The reason for this is that both in the Genesis account and elsewhere throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, God is consistently portrayed as having full control over the heavens and the earth and all that exists. Just as he can create, so also can he destroy. As we noted in Chapter 1, the God of the Hebrew Bible is not viewed as being subject to the created order or as depending on it in any way. He is never said to emerge from some type of pre-existent matter or substance in the way that the gods of Babylon, Greece, and other nations were believed to have done, nor is he ever understood to have his source or origin in anything that existed prior to him. In biblical thought, therefore, it was God who had defined the world rather than being defined by it in some way. For the same reason, the created order was not believed to have been defined by any power or force independent of God or to have defined itself on its own. Rather, God alone was thought to have defined everything in the created order in the way he thought best.

Undoubtedly, certain passages from the Genesis account and other writings in the Hebrew Bible and in Second Temple Jewish literature seem to convey the idea that there were other beings already in existence alongside God when he created the heavens and the earth.<sup>2</sup> While some of these beings are called gods, others are described as existing in the form of angels or as evil spirits opposed to God. These other beings, however, would almost certainly have been thought to have been created by God either before he created the heavens and the earth or at the same time that he created everything else. In any case, these beings are consistently presented as being inferior to God and subject to him. At no time is it ever said or suggested that any of them have some power or authority over God or that his will is subject to theirs in any way. If any of these beings were believed to have participated in the creation

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2. See especially Gen 1:26; 3:22; Ps 82:1; 86:8; 95:3.

of the world and human beings, as Gen 1:26 may imply (“Let us make man in our image, after our likeness”), they would have been thought to have done so in an auxiliary role to God at his command and initiative.

Although the biblical texts never state explicitly that God created the world in accordance with some type of design or plan that he had conceived ahead of time, they clearly presuppose such an idea. God would hardly have been thought to have created and fashioned the world as he did without having first contemplated what he wanted that world to look like. This design or plan would also have been understood to be God's own rather than having its source in someone or something else.

Because in biblical thought the world as it exists was both designed and created by God, it must also be seen as existing separately from him. God may be present throughout his creation, yet that creation is not thought to form part of God's being and is not an extension of God. The same is true of the people and things that are found in the world. None of them can be identified or equated with God in any sense.

The biblical texts never discuss the question of the origin of God. They do, however, seem to assume that he has no beginning. In Ps 93:2, for example, the Psalmist tells God: “Your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting.” A number of passages use the phrase “from everlasting to everlasting” (*me'olam*, *ad-'olam* or some variant) in connection with God, thereby implying that he not only exists from time immemorial but will also continue to exist forever into the future: “Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God” (Ps 90:2).<sup>3</sup> Other passages from the Hebrew Scriptures speak in similar terms.<sup>4</sup>

All of these ideas reflect the conviction that the God who created all that exists is fully sovereign over everything he created. This sovereignty includes several aspects. Chief among these is God's omnipotence. The biblical texts and Second Temple Jewish writings in general suppose that God is able to do all things and that nothing is impossible for him.<sup>5</sup> While the terminology of omnipotence does not appear explicitly in the Hebrew Bible in relation to God, it is significant that the Septuagint repeatedly refers to God as *pantokratōr*, that is, the “almighty one” or the one “powerful to do all things.” If God created all that exists simply with his word, it follows that he possesses the ability to alter that creation and intervene in it in any way he sees fit. Furthermore, if he existed prior to that creation and independently of it, he can exist without it and therefore does not depend on it or have need of it in any way.

The God of the Hebrew Scriptures is sovereign not only in the sense that he has full power over the created order and does not need anything that he

3. See also Ps 41:13; 103:17; 106:48; 1 Chr 16:36; Neh 9:5.

4. See, for example, Gen 21:33; Isa 40:28.

5. In the Hebrew Bible, see, for example, Gen 18:14; Job 42:2; Ps 115:3; 135:6; Jer 32:17, 27; Dan 4:35.

has created in order to exist, but also in the sense that everything that he has created belongs to him. What he has created is *his*. This includes not only the world as a whole but all of the things and living beings that are *in* the world as well. In fact, because all people and things are understood as belonging to God as their sovereign creator, there was nothing that anyone might give to him that was not already his own. Furthermore, because everything God has created is his own, he can do whatever he wants with his creation. Just as he fashioned it in the way he desired from the beginning, he can continue to fashion and shape it as he desires in the present and future.

Strictly speaking, however, it would not be accurate or correct to affirm that, as the creator of the world and all that it contains, the God of the Hebrew Bible has the *right* to do whatever he wishes with his creation.<sup>6</sup> Such a claim must be seen as reflecting an idea that is foreign to the biblical texts. This is because it presupposes that there is some principle of what is just and right that is superior to God and grants him certain rights, such as the right to rule over creation or the right to be worshiped and obeyed by those whom he has created. In biblical thought, God is not subject to any type of laws or rules that govern what he can or must do or that prohibit him from carrying out whatever he desires and intends. He does not need to justify his actions to anyone or anything that stands above him. For that reason, he cannot be said to have rights, and much less to be within his rights or alternatively to exceed his rights when he does certain things or acts in certain ways.

For the same reason, God does not need to justify his actions to human beings, who might look to some law or principle that is above God in order to judge whether he is acting in conformity with that law or principle and on that basis determine whether he is acting properly or justly. Undoubtedly, in biblical thought there are certain laws and norms that God himself has established and chooses to respect, just as he expects those whom he has created to respect them. Human beings may therefore make certain appeals to God on the basis of those laws and norms and even question whether God himself is actually respecting them as well, yet their basis for doing so is not that God is subject to such laws and principles by nature but that he is the one who has established them.

All of these ideas clearly distinguish the God of Israel's Scriptures from the type of pagan gods described in the belief systems of other peoples from antiquity known to us. None of those gods was conceived of as having the type of sovereignty over the world that is attributed to the God of Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures.

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6. Jack Cottrell, for example, claims to find such an idea in the biblical texts: "God's authority, his legitimate and deserved right to absolute Lordship, is his by virtue of creation. God has the right to do with his creation whatever he wishes because he owns it; and he owns it because he created it. . . . [T]he Creator—and the Creator alone—has both the power and the right to rule in whatever way he desires" (*What the Bible Says about God the Ruler*, vol. 2 of *The Doctrine of God*, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000, 270).

## CREATION AND GOD'S GOODNESS

In the creation account that appears in Gen 1:1–2:4, no point is stressed as strongly as the idea that everything that God made was good. At the end of each of the six days of creation, God is presented as looking upon all that he has made and concluding that it is good. On the final day, after he has created human beings, he even observes that all that he has created is “exceedingly good” (Gen 1:31). Both that passage and the one that follows in Gen 2:5–25 describe a paradisiacal world full of beautiful things that bring great pleasure to human beings. God places the human beings he has created in a garden, where they will be able to find delight in the trees that are “pleasant to the sight and good for food,” and also pronounces a blessing upon them (1:22, 28; 2:9). At the same time, nothing that is considered *not* to be good is said to exist, other than the initial solitude of the man whom God had created (2:18). God quickly resolves that problem, however, by forming from one of his ribs the first woman as his partner (2:21–23). All of these things convey the idea that God intended for the human beings he had created to be happy and find companionship, friendship, affection, and intimacy as well.

The repeated insistence that everything that God created was good would have been understood as implying a number of related ideas. Above all, it would have led to the same conclusion about God himself, namely, that God is good in every way and that there is nothing bad or evil about God. If all that God had made was good, it also followed that God had desired nothing but what is good for his good creation from the very beginning. Before he had created the world, he must have envisioned that creation as something that would be “exceedingly good” and thus would be thought to have designed it in the best way possible. If throughout the first chapter of Genesis God is presented as being pleased that all the things that he has created are good, this can only be because he is himself good and desires only what is good for his creation.

It is also important to stress that the repeated affirmation that everything that God created was good communicates the idea that it was good *in itself*. According to this idea, that goodness does not exist solely in relation to some greater end or objective. Neither the world nor human beings are viewed as having been created to serve some function or end related to God or anything else beyond or above them, such as God's own enjoyment or praise. Contrary to what we find in the *Enuma Elish*, for example, neither in the Genesis account nor elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures are human beings ever said to have been created for the purpose of serving God or satisfying some need or desire on his part concerning himself and his own well-being or happiness. The only commands that God gives the first human beings in Genesis 1–2 are to be fruitful and multiply, to fill and subdue the earth and exercise dominion over it, and to refrain from eating certain things (Gen 1:28–30; 2:16–17). In Gen 2:15, it is also said that God put the man he had created in the garden “to till it and keep it,” yet this seems to be an activity that the man is to enjoy rather than something that causes him pain and suffering,

as it will later on (3:17-19). Nowhere does God demand that the human beings he has created present him with gifts and sacrifices, or even that they praise and worship him, and nothing in the Genesis account suggests that they initially did such things or were expected to do them. This same vision of the creation appears in Psalm 8, in which the Psalmist admires the glory and majesty of all that God has created, including human beings themselves, and repeats the idea that God has placed the human beings he created over everything he has made.

By presenting God in these terms, in fact, the Genesis account conveys the idea that what God has created is *for human beings and their enjoyment* rather than constituting something that responds to some personal end or need found in God himself. As already noted above, in biblical thought God does not need anything that he has created or depend on it in any way. If he subjects all the things he has created to human beings, he must have created those things *for their sake* rather than his own. And because all of those things are good, he must have wanted only good things for those human beings from the start.

At the same time, given that all the things that God has created are good, God's command to human beings to subdue all of those things and exercise dominion over them carries implicitly within it the idea that they are to do these things *for good* and *in a good way*. In this context, the idea of bringing other things and beings into subjection and exercising dominion over them cannot be understood in terms of abusing or misusing them, doing harm to them, or relating to them in ways that are *not* good either for those things and beings themselves or for the human beings that have dominion over them. In other words, as they relate to the things and beings that God has placed under them, human beings are to see and treat them as good and thus care for them in the way that God intended so that they *continue* to be good. Human beings are also to see themselves and one another as good and therefore are to treat themselves and one another as good as well, in the same way that God does.

The Genesis account thus implies that, even though human beings are created as good alongside many other things and beings, unlike those other things and beings, God does not regard human beings as a means to a greater end but *as an end in themselves*. By placing all things under them and also surrounding them with good and pleasant things in the way that the Genesis account describes, God is simply seeking their happiness and well-being as an end in itself. He does not ask anything of them for himself but only asks of them what is for their own well-being and happiness. In fact, according to Gen 1:28, the first thing that God does after he creates the man and woman is not to give them commands but to *bless* them (cf. 5:2). This can be seen as God's primary will or desire for them: that they be blessed. If God treats human beings as ends in themselves, therefore, by definition he is seeking something good *for them* rather than attempting to obtain or receive something from them solely for himself.



Although the Genesis narrative does not affirm explicitly that God was pleased or content with all that he created, the repeated affirmation that when he observed the things that he had created he considered them good clearly implies such an idea. If that is the case, then God would be said to derive enjoyment from his creation. Given that in biblical thought God does not experience any type of need in the way that the beings he created do, it would seem inappropriate to speak of God enjoying well-being or wholeness in the way that human beings may do. By nature, God is always well and whole, and nothing can change or affect this. The biblical texts, however, do imply that God experiences emotions, including happiness and contentment when things are well in his creation and those whom he has created enjoy well-being.

The affirmation that God considered all that he had made to be good thus implies not only that he desired that everything that he had created experience and enjoy that goodness but also that when that happens he is pleased and content. In that case, when human beings enjoyed happiness and well-being, together with all of the other living beings he had created, God would also be happy and rejoice. The idea that God enjoyed his creation and also wished to enjoy spending time in the presence of human beings seems to be suggested in Gen 3:8-9, which describes "the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze" and then presents him calling out to the man to ask where he was. These verses appear to present God not only deriving pleasure from the garden and the calm evening breeze but also seeking out the company of the human beings he had created in order to spend time with them in the garden, although this is not stated explicitly. Other verses in the first three chapters, of course, also speak of God talking with the man and woman, giving the impression that there was some type of ongoing or regular conversation between God and the man and woman.

As noted briefly above, the only passage in the first two chapters of Genesis in which God is presented as observing something that does *not* please him appears in Gen 2:18, where God observes that "it is not good that man should be alone." Here God notices that the man he has created is not yet whole or complete in the way he desires. He thus realizes that he must do something else to give the man the wholeness that he desires for him. Just as God can be pleased with the goodness of what he has created, he can also be displeased when he sees that something good is lacking in that creation. This verse portrays God as experiencing displeasure or discontent because the man has no one else like him to share his life with or enjoy as a partner. The fact that God is said to have created a woman for the man clearly conveys the idea that God did not want the man to feel lonely or suffer solitude.

The affirmation in Gen 2:18 that God made the woman to be the man's helper has often been seen as implying some type of subordinate role for the woman in relation to the man, as if she were merely to serve him. Such an interpretation is problematic for several reasons. First, it takes the verse out of context. What God is seeking when he creates the woman from the man's

rib is not that the man have someone to serve his needs but merely that he not be alone or lonely. His intention is to provide the man with someone who can keep him company. The passage nowhere speaks of the woman serving the man in any way. Furthermore, if God's purpose is that the man not be alone, then he would be concerned not only that the man have someone to enjoy his company but also that the woman enjoy the company of the man. The man would hardly derive joy from the company of the woman if she did not also enjoy his company and did not desire to spend time with him. Second, as many interpreters have noted, the idea that God forms the woman from the man's rib suggests some type of unity and equality with him. She is to be by his side rather than being subject to him or over him. Third, to refer to someone as another person's helper is not necessarily to place that person in a subordinate role. The same Hebrew noun is repeatedly used throughout the Hebrew Bible to refer to God as the helper of human beings, and in no way does he do so from a position of inferiority.<sup>7</sup> On the contrary, the person who assumes the role of helper is able to do something for another person which that person is incapable of doing for himself or herself. And finally, the verses that speak of the woman as helper would have been read against the background of Gen 1:26-27, where God is said to have made both the man and the woman in his own image.

In any case, what is important in these verses is that *God does not want the human being he has created to be alone or suffer solitude*, and that when he observes that happening, he acts to remedy the situation. This action expresses unequivocally a concern for the happiness of the human beings God has created as an end in itself, as well as a desire that those human beings not suffer any type of need. At the same time, these verses imply that God is unhappy when he sees human beings lacking something they need to enjoy life and well-being and that he is committed to providing for them whatever they lack. The passage clearly conveys the idea that God does these things *for their sake* and not merely for his own.

While the Genesis creation account clearly presents God as desiring the happiness and well-being of human beings as an end in itself, however, it also implies that God derives enjoyment and satisfaction when human beings are content and have everything they need to enjoy the good things he has placed under their dominion. In that case, God's happiness is linked to that of the living beings he has created, including especially human beings. When they are happy and are able to rejoice in the good things he has given them, God himself will be happy and rejoice. Yet because as sovereign creator God has made all things in accordance with his will and design, if God's happiness is linked to that of human beings, it can only be because *God himself has determined that it should be so*. In other words, God himself has chosen to link his own happiness to that of the human beings he has created.

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7. See, for example, Exod 18:4; Deut 33:7, 26, 29; Ps 33:20; 70:5; 115:9-11; 121:1-2; 124:8; 146:5.

To make such an assertion is not, however, to regard the happiness and well-being of human beings solely as a means to God's own happiness and not as an end in itself. Once the happiness of human beings and that of God are inseparably linked to one another, one cannot take place without the other. God cannot seek and desire his own happiness without seeking and desiring the happiness of human beings. God's happiness and human happiness are not two separate ends that might be sought independently of one another but constitute one and the same end. In addition, this end is *an end in itself* rather than a means toward another end.

For the same reason, even if God is said to have created all that he did not only for the enjoyment of human beings but also for his own enjoyment, this cannot be regarded as a selfish or self-centered act on God's part. Because he has linked his own happiness to that of human beings, God cannot be concerned with his own self without also being concerned for them. Even though God certainly desires his own happiness, his happiness has become inseparable from that of the human beings he has created. This means that, by definition, once God has linked his own happiness to that of human beings, it is impossible for God to act selfishly or concern himself only with his own desires. God cannot enjoy the good world he has created if the creatures in that world are not happy and content as well, enjoying the good things he has shared with them. On the contrary, he will be displeased at their unhappiness, just as he was displeased when he saw that the man he had created was alone and lacked companionship. God cannot pursue his own happiness and contentment by doing anything that does not at the same time promote the happiness and contentment of his creatures. He cannot abuse or mistreat them or use them selfishly for his own ends because that would undermine or destroy their happiness as well as his own, which is inseparably linked to theirs.

For that reason, even though the God of the Hebrew Bible can be said to have created the world for his own enjoyment, in no way does the biblical narrative view such an action as egotistical or self-serving on his part. He was not seeking to be entertained or amused by what he had created, precisely because he had linked his own happiness to that of his creatures so as to make their happiness inseparable from his own. In contrast, those who seek to be entertained or amused by others are generally understood to be seeking something for themselves rather than for others. What concerns them is their own amusement rather than the well-being of those who entertain and amuse them as an end in itself. For that reason, those who merely wish to be amused and entertained by others may even take pleasure at seeing them suffer or experience pain and difficulties. Such is by no means the case with the God of the Hebrew Bible. What he seeks from the world and from human beings is not to be entertained or amused, as if he wished to bring into existence something such as a zoo or circus. Rather, he seeks the well-being of all so that all may rejoice and be content and so that he may rejoice and be content with them, because their happiness and his own are one and the same.

It is important to add, however, that by linking the happiness of the human beings he has created to his own, God has also linked the happiness of each human being to that of every other human being. If some human beings act in ways that make others unhappy, God will not be happy, nor will those human beings be able to be happy in the way God desires. The reason for this is not simply that God will be displeased with them and treat them with displeasure, but that the well-being of each individual depends on the well-being of others. If everything that God has created is good, as the Genesis creation account stresses, then if something in that creation ceases to be good, the creation itself as a whole loses part of its goodness and is no longer entirely good. If there is something that is not good, it can no longer be said that *everything* is good. And if the beings that God has created are to enjoy all of the good he desires for them, then it is necessary for all of those beings to experience the well-being God desires for all. If any of them do not experience that well-being, the rest will be affected negatively in some way. For that reason, in biblical thought human beings must seek the well-being of others together with their own if they are truly to attain that well-being in its fullness as God desires. Once they isolate their own well-being and happiness from the well-being and happiness of others, they undermine not only the well-being and happiness of others but their own as well.

To some readers, it may seem that many of the ideas just stated go far beyond what we find in the Genesis account. I would argue, however, that all of these ideas are implicit in that account and follow logically from it. To affirm that everything that God made was good is to claim that nothing that he made was bad. It also involves making numerous assumptions. To draw out those logical conclusions and assumptions and make them explicit, therefore, is not to read ideas *into* the biblical text but to read them *out* of the text.

A number of the ideas just considered, in fact, are stated explicitly elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Numerous passages, for example, affirm that everything in the world as well as the world itself belong to God as his own because he is the one who created all that exists. “The earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers” (Ps 24:1-2). “The heavens are yours, the earth also is yours; the world and all that is in it—you have founded them” (Ps 89:11). “In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land, which his hands have formed” (Ps 95:4-5; cf. 1 Chr 29:11-14; Ps 115:6). The idea that what God has made brings him happiness and joy is affirmed explicitly in Ps 104:31, which speaks of God rejoicing in his works. That idea is suggested as well in Prov 8:22-31, in which God’s wisdom is personified and said to have been present with God before he created the heavens and the earth, acting alongside him “like a master worker” to guide him as he set everything in order. This passage describes wisdom as God’s delight, “rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race”

(vv. 30-31). The author of Psalm 8 not only recalls that God has given human beings dominion over all that he has created but also marvels that God is mindful of human beings and cares for them in the way that he does (vv. 3-8). These and other passages from the Hebrew Bible, therefore, draw out from the Genesis creation account ideas that are implicit in the narrative.

There is, however, one other important idea that seems to be implied by the biblical affirmation that everything that God created was good. If all that God did and made was good at the time of creation, when everything still depended solely on what God had chosen to do and not what anyone else would do, it would seem to follow logically that everything that God would *continue* to do and make would *also* be good. If from the beginning, when all was fully under his control alone, God's desire was *only for good* and his intention was that *everything be good*, there is no reason to think that God's desire and intention would ever come to change. It would seem illogical for a God who desired only what was good suddenly to *cease* to desire only what was good. Furthermore, to affirm that after he has created a world in which everything is good and nothing is bad God will *continue* to do and seek only what is good and not what is bad would seem to lead to the conclusion that everything that God will do in the future after creating the world must also be considered good.

Given the many terrible things that God is said to do and command in other parts of the Hebrew Bible, at first glance such an affirmation may seem to be entirely implausible and even contrary to biblical thought. Unlike the other assumptions and logical conclusions considered in this section, the idea that all that God has done and will continue to do is good does not necessarily follow implicitly from the biblical text itself, since it is possible that a God who initially desired and made only what is good later came to desire and make what is *not* good of his own free will. Most interpreters would maintain that much of what God is said to do elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible is *not* good, and certainly there is a sense in which that is true. It can nevertheless be asked, however, if there is also a sense in which it *is* true that the biblical texts continue to see everything that God does after creating the world as good in some way. That question can only be addressed after we have looked at the biblical texts as a whole and therefore must be considered further on in this study.

## CREATION AND GOD'S LOVE

While God's desire for good is evident throughout the creation account in Genesis, nowhere in that account is God explicitly said to love the world he has created or the human beings under whose dominion he places his creation. Nevertheless, when combined with the idea that all that God created was good, the belief that God was in need of nothing and had created all people and things simply because he had freely chosen to do so would have inevitably led readers of that account to conclude that God's creation of the world and human beings was an act of love. In order to speak of God's love, however, it is important to define the manner in which that term is to be understood.

Among most English speakers, love is associated particularly with a sentiment and is understood to involve the expression of affection. To love is to experience a certain feeling or emotion in relation to someone else and to treat that person with kindness, warmth, and affection. It often involves physical contact, such as embraces and caresses. The Genesis account of creation does not explicitly speak of God loving human beings in these ways. It never mentions any feelings or sentiments experienced by God, although as just noted above, that account does imply that God was pleased when he contemplated the goodness of his creation. Similarly, because the God of the Hebrew Bible is a spiritual being, he does not manifest his love and affection through physical contact in the way that human beings do.

Several things in the Genesis creation narrative, however, do suggest a desire on God's part for some type of communion, fellowship, or friendship with the human beings he creates. His concern that the man not be alone but have a partner implies that God values companionship as something good, important, and desirable. The female companion he makes for the man can also be seen as an expression of God's love for him. The fact that God converses with the man, places him in a garden filled with delightful things, and gives him the task of assigning a name to each of the animals alongside which he will live in the world also suggests the image of a God who wishes to share good things with others and desires fellowship and friendship with human beings. As noted above, this same image is reflected in Gen 3:8-9, where God is presented as walking in the garden in the evening breeze and seeking out the man and woman he had created, presumably to enjoy their company. One can hardly imagine gods such as Marduk, Zeus, or Poseidon wishing to go for a pleasant evening stroll with human beings in a luscious garden, enjoying their companionship as they walk amicably alongside one another.

These implicit allusions to the idea of companionship and fellowship are perhaps the closest that the Genesis account comes to suggesting some type of purpose or reason for God's creation of the world and human beings. The notion that God does not want the human beings he has created to live in isolation or solitude can be seen as implying that they are designed to live in communion not only with one another but with God as well. If all of the beings and things that God has created are good in themselves, they must also have been designed and intended to be good in relation to one another. They are to complement one another in the way that the woman and the man are to do. In a sense, however, they also complement God. The fact that God is presented as continuing to relate closely to all of the people and things that he has created after he fashions them indicates that he is a God who seeks to be involved in the lives of the beings that form part of his good creation.

While in some places the Genesis narrative suggests that God loves human beings in the sense of feeling warmth and affection for them and seeking some type of fellowship with them, that narrative leaves no doubt that

God loves the human beings he created in the sense of being committed to filling their lives with good things. He provides for their needs, giving them food and companionship and placing under their dominion all of the good things he has made. Rather than consisting merely of sentiments or expressions of affection, therefore, God's love takes the form of doing everything in his power to make it possible for the human beings he has created to enjoy true happiness and well-being.

When referring to God's love for human beings, English versions of the Bible generally use the word "love" to translate two different Hebrew nouns, *hesed* and *'ahabah*, the second of which is derived from the verb *'ahab*. While for the most part both of these terms convey the same basic meaning as the word "love" in English, they tend to focus on concrete actions rather than sentiments alone. Thus, for example, when the verb *'ahab* is used to command the people of Israel to love God with all their heart, soul, and strength in Deut 6:4, the idea is not merely that they are to experience some favorable sentiment toward God but that they are to dedicate themselves actively to doing all that he desires and commands. In most English versions of the Bible, the noun *hesed* is translated as lovingkindness or steadfast love. When used in relation to God, *hesed* particularly stresses the unconditional nature of God's love, that is, his faithfulness to those whom he loves and the enduring character of that love. It is a love that is constant, reliable, and unending.

Although the Genesis account of creation does not use the vocabulary of love to describe the way in which God relates to the world and the living beings he has created, numerous other passages in the Hebrew Bible do speak explicitly of God's love for his creation. Most of these passages are found in the book of Psalms. The idea that God's *hesed* or steadfast love extends throughout all of his creation is repeated a number of times. "The earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD" (Ps 33:5; cf. 119:64). "For your steadfast love is as high as the heavens; your faithfulness extends to the clouds" (Ps 57:10). In Ps 136:4-9, the Psalmist recounts one by one God's wondrous works in creation and after mentioning each of them adds: "for his steadfast love endures forever." A portion of Psalm 36 especially extols God's *hesed* and equates it with his justice and righteousness, that is, his saving activity:

Your steadfast love, O LORD, reaches up to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. Your righteousness is like the mountains of God, your judgments are like the great deep; you save humans and animals alike, O LORD. How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For the fountain of life is with you; in your light we see light. O continue to grant your steadfast love to those who know you, and your salvation to the upright of heart! (vv. 5-10).

While all that God has created is said to manifest God's love, that love is also associated with everything that God continues to do in relation to his creatures. God is said to inspire awe and wonder at the way he loves

and cares for his creation and fills it with abundance and joy.<sup>8</sup> The author of Psalm 107 sees God's steadfast love manifested in "his wonderful works to humankind; for he satisfies those who are thirsty and fills those who are hungry with good things" (vv. 8-9). According to Psalm 139, God continues to be involved in the formation of each human being from the moment of conception: "For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (vv. 13-14). Psalm 104 dedicates over thirty verses to describing how God remains active in various ways throughout creation: he cares for everything he has made, provides animals and human beings with food, and enables their hearts to be filled with gladness. Perhaps the most explicit affirmation of God's constant love for all peoples of the earth is found in a passage from the Wisdom of Solomon, which probably dates to the first century BCE:

But you are merciful to all, for you are able to do all things, and you overlook people's sins to bring them to repentance. For you love all the things that exist and detest none of the things that you have made, for you would not have made anything if you had hated it. How could anything have endured if you had not willed it? Or how could anything not called forth by you have been preserved? You spare all things because they are yours, O Lord, you who love the living (Wis 11:23-26).

Many of the Psalms speak not only of the immensity of God's love for his creation but also of the tremendous and unbridled joy which that love inspires in all who experience it. The goodness and steadfast love that God manifests for his creation are described as evoking expressions of admiration, wonder, and praise, not only in human beings but also in God's works themselves. Often these works are personified so as to be presented as singing God's praises and admiring his glory and power as if they were living beings. "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims the work of his hands. . . . Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words reach to the end of the world" (Ps 19:1, 4). "The heavens proclaim his righteousness, and all the peoples look upon his glory" (Ps 97:6). Of course, human beings are also said to respond in the same way to God's marvelous works throughout creation, including not only all the nations but their kings as well: "There is none like you among the gods, O LORD, and there are no works like yours. All the nations you have made will come and bow down before you, O LORD, and will glorify your name. For you are great and do wondrous things; you alone are God" (Ps 86:8-10). "All the kings of the earth will praise you, O LORD, when they have heard the words of your mouth. They will sing of the ways of the LORD, for great is the glory of the LORD" (Ps 138:4-5). "They will celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness, and will sing aloud of your righteousness. The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to

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8. See Ps 65:5-13; 111:2-7; 146:5-7; 147:7-9.



anger and abounding in steadfast love. The LORD is good to all, and extends his compassion over all that he has made" (Ps 145:7-9).

In passages such as these, the response of praise and admiration that God's works throughout creation are said to evoke is presented as something that occurs spontaneously and of its own accord. In other passages, however, God's creatures exhort one another to join together with them in order to sing God's praises and glorify him. While Psalm 96 in its entirety exemplifies this idea, several verses in particular stand out: "O sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth! Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day! Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all the peoples! . . . Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice! Let the sea roar, and all that fills it! Let the field be jubilant, and everything in it! Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the LORD" (vv. 1-3, 11-13; cf. Ps 89:5-16). "Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth! Sing the glory of his name; give to him glorious praise! Say to God, 'How awesome are your deeds! Because of the greatness of your power, your enemies cringe before you. All the earth worships you; they sing praises to you, sing praises to your name'" (Ps 66:1-4). "Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth! Break forth into joyous song and sing praises! . . . Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy" (Ps 98:4, 8). In each verse of the lengthy canticle attributed to the three young men in the blazing furnace that appears in the deuterocanonical version of Daniel, the many different works of God throughout his creation are told to bless the Lord and "sing praise to him and highly exalt him forever" (Pr Azar 28-65).

In many of the other Psalms, it is human beings who exhort one another to praise God for his steadfast love and kindness. "Praise the LORD, all you nations! Extol him, all you peoples! For great is his steadfast love toward us, and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever. Praise the LORD!" (Ps 117:1-2). In the context of allusions to the manner in which God comes to the aid of all who are in need and look to him for help, Psalm 107 repeatedly exhorts human beings to "give thanks to the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind" (vv. 8, 15, 21, 31). After exhorting all the earth to make a joyful noise to God and worship him with gladness and singing, the author of Psalm 100 recalls that "it is he who made us, and we are his," before concluding: "For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness stretches to all generations" (vv. 1-3, 5). The idea that God reigns over all the earth and judges it also serves as a basis for exhorting all peoples throughout the earth and the earth itself to rejoice and sing God's praises.<sup>9</sup> In Psalms 103 and 148, not only are human beings and the works of God's hands throughout the earth called to praise God, but the angels and heavenly host as well (Ps 103:19-22; 148:1-14; cf. Ps 29:1-2).

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9. See Ps 47:5-9; 95:1-5; 97:1-2; 113:1-9; 145:1-13; cf. Ps 93:1-2; 99:1-5.

### *God's Love as Unconditional*

When considering all of the passages from the Hebrew Bible that speak of God's steadfast love for his creation and the response of love, joy, and praise that his love evokes in his creatures, it is important to note that these passages never speak of any conditions that must be fulfilled in order for human beings and creation as a whole to be loved by God. Nowhere in these passages is God said to love the living beings he has created only if and when they behave in certain ways or give him certain things that he desires for his own sake. Nor is he presented as making any kind of demands upon the living beings he has created and telling them that if they do not fulfill those demands he will withhold his love from them. On the contrary, these passages and others describe a love that is completely *unconditional* on God's part. He seeks the happiness and well-being of all that exists as an end in itself and not because he hopes to receive something in exchange for his love and blessings. In fact, the tone of these passages suggests that there could never be anything that might lead God to *stop* loving all the peoples and creatures he has made. This is how the affirmation that "his steadfast love endures forever" should be understood: his love never ceases or wavers but remains constant and persistent for all time, independently of anything that human beings might do or fail to do. That love is resolute, unfailing, and unshakable.

The type of love attributed to God in these passages is fundamentally different from the type of love that was thought to characterize the pagan gods of antiquity. Those gods were not thought to love human beings unconditionally in the sense of seeking their well-being as an end in itself. Rather, they granted their favors and blessings in exchange for the things they desired to receive from human beings, such as their worship and praise. The idea that such gods might love and care for the natural order and all that it contained, such as the plants and animals and the seas and mountains, was also foreign to most of the ancient worldviews known to us.

For the same reason, in the non-Jewish and extra-biblical texts from antiquity known to us, it is rare for human beings or other living beings and realities in the natural world to be portrayed as breaking out in spontaneous praise and worship for such gods in the way that they do in the passages just considered and as expressing the kind of profound love and sincere affection for them that those beings and realities are said to manifest for God in the biblical texts. While those who worshiped the pagan gods of antiquity often expressed their praise, adulation, affection, and reverence for those gods in an energetic and effusive manner, they generally did so in exchange for the favors and blessings that they hoped to receive from those gods. The logic was that of *do ut des*: they gave the gods the praise and honor they desired in order to receive from them the things they desired for their own sake.

The biblical idea that God's love for human beings is unconditional rules out the possibility that human beings might obtain some type of favor or blessings from God in exchange for their expressions of love, praise, and

worship, since God is already fully committed to blessing them and showing them his love and favor independently of anything they may do. If God already loves the human beings he has created and wants only good things for them, what more could they hope to obtain from him by means of their praises? Because they can seek or ask for nothing greater than the infinite and unconditional love that is already theirs as a gracious gift from God, by definition they cannot be acting out of self-interest or attempting to obtain something more from God when they praise and worship him. They cannot get God to love them more by praising and glorifying him, nor will he love them any less if they fail to do so. Of course, that love will not always take the form of giving them everything they desire and ask of him, since in his love and sovereignty God may determine that what is best for them is something other than what they desire and ask for. In fact, as we shall see further on, in biblical thought God's love often takes the form of chastisements that are aimed at correcting people and bringing them to live in ways that promote their well-being instead of undermining and destroying it.

In principle, of course, it might still be argued that God bestows his blessings and favors on human beings and his creation in order to obtain the worship, honor, and reverence that he desires for his own sake, even though such an idea is never affirmed explicitly in the biblical texts or even implied there. In that case, however, the God of the Hebrew Bible would be essentially no different from the pagan gods of antiquity or the God described by Walter Brueggemann in the previous chapter. His primary concern would be that human beings acknowledge his sovereignty, sing his praises, and ascribe to him glory and honor. While he would no doubt care for human beings and want there to be peace and justice among them, these things would be less important to him than his self-regard and would interest him only to the extent that they contributed to the fulfillment of his own self-interests. Although he might be said to love human beings, this love would be conditional upon receiving from them the worship, honor, and praise he desires and demands for his own sake and would quickly turn into wrath and punishment if they withheld these things from him. His relationship to human beings would be defined on the principle of *do ut des*: he would be willing to bless and prosper human beings in the way they wanted, but only in exchange for the worship, submission, and obedience that he wanted from them for himself. In that case, expressions of praise, love, and affection for God such as those found in the Psalms and the other biblical texts just considered would constitute the objective that God sought in all his works, while the blessings he bestowed on his creation and the living beings within it would constitute the means by which he sought to attain that objective.

If such were the case, however, God could not truly be said to love all the people and things he has created in the sense of seeking their happiness and well-being as an end in itself. Instead, he would be using them to obtain what he wanted for his own sake. For the same reason, neither the natural order

nor the living beings within it could truly be said to love God in a genuine and disinterested sense. Whatever praise and affection they expressed for him would be an expression of self-interest, aimed at receiving from him what they wanted for their own sake and attempting to stay on his good side so as to avoid his wrath and punishments. In the same way that God would seek to manipulate them for his own ends, they too would seek to manipulate God for their own ends. Rather than brimming with spontaneous joy and enthusiasm in response to God's love and goodness, they would in essence behave as sycophants, pretending outwardly to celebrate his kindness and compassion and rejoice at the manner in which he cares for them while inwardly cowering in fear over the manner in which he might react should they fail to manifest the exuberance he desires and demands to see in them.

While such an interpretation of biblical passages such as those just considered must be considered problematic in light of the apparent spontaneity and sincerity of the expressions of love and adoration for God reflected in them, that interpretation becomes even more problematic when it is remembered that in biblical thought God is able to look inside of human hearts and minds to see what is in them.<sup>10</sup> In this regard, the God of Israel was distinct from the other gods of antiquity. Because God could examine people's hearts and minds and view the thoughts and sentiments present there, he could determine whether or not the worship, praise, and adoration that they expressed for him was sincere or feigned. If they were simply seeking to manipulate him by outward expressions of love and adulation that were not genuine or heartfelt, he would perceive this immediately.

For that reason, if the God of the Hebrew Bible is viewed as desiring the worship and praise of the living beings he created for his own sake and as an end in itself, he cannot be thought to desire the sincere and heartfelt love of those beings at the same time. On the contrary, it would be necessary to claim that it does not matter to God if those who ascribe to him the power, glory, and honor he craves for his own sake do so purely out of self-interest in an insincere manner. Such a God would simply be unconcerned about what people really thought about him and whether they truly cared for him or not, as long as they *told* him that they cared for him and honored him for his greatness and majesty. When they gave him thanks, it would not matter to him whether they were genuinely thankful or appreciated his kindness, as long as they *said* that they did. He would be indifferent to what he actually saw in their hearts and minds as they expressed outward joy and enthusiasm at his goodness and sang exuberantly of his wonders and magnificence. Hypocrisy and mere lip service would be ignored by him as long as those who expressed their love and appreciation for him *appeared* to be sincere as they worshiped and bowed down before him. In fact, if this were all he wanted, God could obtain it by threatening human beings with suffering

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10. On this idea in the Hebrew Bible, see especially 1 Sam 16:7; 1 Kgs 8:39; 1 Chr 28:9; Ps 7:9; 19:14; 26:2; 44:21; 139:1-4, 23-24; Prov 17:3; 21:2; Jer 11:20; 17:10; 20:12; Ezek 11:5.

and violence if they refused to give him the worship he desires and inflicting punishments on them until they felt that they were left with no option but to praise him. In that case, it would even be pointless or superfluous for God to bless people in order to receive their worship and praise, since those threats of punishment would be sufficient for him to obtain these things from them by force and compulsion.

If, however, God *does* want those who praise, worship, and glorify him to do so with genuine love and sincerity, then he cannot bring them to do this merely by bestowing his blessings on them and granting them favors. Any favorable reaction he would receive in response to those blessings and favors would simply be an expression of self-interest on the part of the recipients rather than sincere love. They would praise and thank him only as long as they continued to obtain from him what they wanted, motivated solely by a desire to receive more. Their praise and gratitude might be sincere to some extent, yet as soon as he stopped pouring out his blessings and favors they would no longer have any reason to praise and thank him. They might even become angry at him and feel as if he had merely been manipulating them to receive from them the praise and thanksgiving he wanted for his own sake.

For similar reasons, God cannot *compel* human beings to praise and worship him with genuine love and sincerity, since these things must be voluntary. Genuine love for another is not something that can be imposed on anyone by force. It is not brought about by coercion or compulsion, nor is it something that can be bought through gifts or bribes. The only way in which people can be brought to love others with a love that is sincere, genuine, and heartfelt is by experiencing such love themselves in their own life.

In biblical thought, therefore, if human beings are to offer God expressions of thankfulness and praise that are sincere, genuine, and heartfelt, they must first be convinced that he truly and genuinely loves them. They must believe in their heart that he sincerely cares for their well-being *as an end in itself* rather than regarding them and their well-being merely as a means to obtaining from them what he wants for himself, motivated solely by his own self-interest. In other words, they must be fully convinced that he seeks their well-being and happiness *for their sake rather than for his own*, that is, *that he truly loves them unconditionally and unreservedly and will always continue to do so, no matter what may happen in the future*. Anything less than that is not truly love. To affirm that God lays down conditions for loving human beings in the sense of seeking their well-being is in reality to deny his love for them, since in that case he will seek their well-being only as long as they continue to fulfill those conditions. Love that is not unconditional is not truly love.

In fact, the idea that God wishes to receive from human beings the same type of sincere and genuine love that he has for them must be seen as excluding the possibility that he created human beings in order to be glorified by them and receive from them their worship and praise. If God truly desires to be loved in the same way that he loves human beings, he

cannot obtain that love by offering them rewards and threatening them with punishments, since any favorable response he receives from them in return will be an expression of self-interest on their part rather than sincere love. Those who do certain things that please him only in order to obtain rewards for themselves are acting purely out of self-interest, as are those who refrain from doing certain things only in order to avoid punishments. One cannot obtain the love of others through rewards and punishments alone. By definition, therefore, a God who seeks to obtain the praise and worship of human beings through rewards and punishments cannot be seeking to be truly loved by them.

Once this is understood, it becomes clear that *the only way that God can truly be loved by human beings is by loving them sincerely and genuinely in the sense of being fully and unconditionally committed to their well-being and happiness*. Only genuine love can produce and evoke genuine love in others. At the same time, if God genuinely loves human beings, what will interest him is *not receiving their praise and worship but receiving their love*. Any praise and worship that is not an expression of sincere love will not interest him and may even provoke him to anger if it is an attempt to manipulate him or purchase his favor.

It must also be stressed, however, that if the God of the Hebrew Bible wishes to be loved in a sincere and genuine manner, *it is not merely for his own sake but for the sake of the human beings whom he loves*. Because as sovereign creator of all that exists God stands in need of nothing, he has no need to receive the love of the human beings he has made and does not depend on them in any way to provide anything on which his existence might depend. If his only desire is to see those human beings happy, whole, and fulfilled due to his love for them and his longing to see their lives filled with good things, then he will want nothing else than for them to desire and seek the very same things for themselves. This will happen as they love him and dedicate themselves and their lives to him and his service, since what he asks, seeks, and demands of those who love him is that they love themselves and one another unconditionally in the same way that he does. If they love him with a genuine and sincere heart and live for him by presenting their lives to him, they will love themselves as those whom he loves and live for themselves and one another by sharing their lives with all of the other beings and creatures he has made. Due to his love for them and all of his creation, this will fill God with joy and contentment, since this is what he longs to see above all else. If God wishes to be loved, therefore, and not merely praised and worshiped, he does so because the love of his creatures for him will lead them to love all of his creation in the same way that he does. Similarly, if he wishes to be praised and worshiped for his love, it is so that all people everywhere may come to know that love and rejoice in it as they experience the good things he wishes to give to all.

### *The Objectives of God's Love*

Of course, God's unconditional love for human beings does not guarantee that those human beings who experience that love will respond to him with the same love. They may even reject his love. However, while God's unconditional love for them does not guarantee that they will love him with the same type of love in return, what is certain is that if God does *not* love them unconditionally, they will never be brought to love him in that way. Instead, they will merely pursue their own self-interests in relation to him in the same way that they believe that he is pursuing his own self-interests in relation to them.

While the love of God for human beings will take the form of caring for them and seeking their well-being, their love for him cannot take the same form, since God has no needs and his existence does not depend on anything human beings might give to him or do for him. In fact, because everything belongs to God, including human beings themselves, there is nothing that they can actually give him that is not already his. One of the forms that the love of human beings will take, of course, is the type of worship, praise, and adoration that the biblical texts regard as an expression of that love. However, if what God ultimately desires is the well-being and happiness of his creatures, then the manner in which they will fulfill that desire is by being committed to seeking their own well-being and happiness in the same way that he is. What will make God happy is that human beings dedicate themselves to doing what is necessary for them to enjoy the well-being that he desires for all without exception, and also that they care for his creation as a whole and all of the creatures that form part of it.

At first glance, it may seem somewhat surprising to affirm that the manner in which human beings will manifest their love for God is by loving themselves unconditionally in the same way that God loves them. Although it may seem selfish for them to do so, in reality such is not the case. The reason for this is that, as we have seen above, in biblical thought God has not only linked himself in love to human beings but also has linked them to one another together with himself. Therefore, as long as they continue to link themselves to one another in love for one another, all those who seek their own well-being will at the same time be seeking the well-being of others, which is inseparable from their own. Because they are dedicated not only to themselves but to all of their fellow human beings as well, by caring for themselves they will also be caring for others. Conversely, by doing what is necessary for others to experience the well-being God desires for all, by definition they will also be doing what is necessary for them to experience that same well-being themselves, since the well-being of each individual is inseparably tied to the well-being of all other individuals as well as God's creation as a whole.

The idea that human beings must be convinced that God loves them unconditionally in order for them to love him and one another in the same way and thereby attain the well-being and happiness he desires for all naturally raises the question of what is necessary for them to become convinced of

that truth. In some way, it must be communicated to them. According to the biblical texts, God does this especially through his prophets, as we shall see further on. However, passages such as those just considered above regard this task as something that God also accomplishes through the works that he has created. Their beauty, splendor, and glory serve as the most magnificent and convincing expressions of God's tremendous love for all. The logic of these passages is that only a God who truly cares for all of the beings he has created and is fully committed to their well-being and happiness would have created a world that is full of such wonderful and delightful things.

Once this is understood, it becomes clear why the biblical texts seem to present God as being pleased when human beings and his creation sing his praises and marvel at his power and glory. In biblical thought, God does not desire these things *for his own sake*. God already knows how marvelous and magnificent the things and beings that he has created are. He therefore does not need to be told of that truth or constantly reminded of it by means of the praise of human beings. Much less does he wish to be extolled because he seeks adulation for his own sake and is pleased when his creatures flatter him and gratify his ego. Rather, what he wants is for his creatures to know of the immensity of his love for them so that they may be brought to love themselves and one another in the same way. He wants them to acknowledge his power and glory, not *for his sake*, but *for theirs*. Only in that way will they continue to draw near to him and seek him out so that he may continue to care for them, provide amply for their needs, and help them when they require his assistance and support. Likewise, if he wishes to be loved by them, even that wish must be grounded in a concern *for them* rather than for himself alone. It is they who will benefit from loving him and others since that love will transform them and fill them with the joy and satisfaction that come from giving of themselves to and for others. It is this that God ultimately desires.

In biblical thought, it is for that reason that God is pleased when human beings and the works he has created sing his praises and glory and tell of his wondrous works. He wishes human beings themselves to be reminded constantly of his love for them and the power he possesses in order to help them and provide for their every need. When they sing of his glory and might and call on others to do the same, they grow not only in their own love for him but also in their love for one another, since the manner in which they manifest their love for him is by loving and caring for one another and his creation as a whole. While he might tell them of his love for them directly, when his creatures tell one another of that love and his glory and might, they serve as witnesses to these things. In that way, it is they who convince one another of God's love for all rather than God himself who must convince them of his love on his own.

For these same reasons, the idea that those who fail to acknowledge God or sing his praises rob or deprive him of the glory and honor due to him must be considered foreign to the biblical texts. As we shall see further on, nowhere



do those texts ever speak in such terms, nor do they present God becoming angry or upset that human beings have not offered him the praise and worship that is supposedly his due. The notion that God is entitled to receive worship from human beings and that such worship constitutes his right as something that is due to him must also be regarded as foreign to biblical thought. The reason that God's creatures are said to worship him is not that they have a duty or obligation to do so, as if they were under compulsion, but that the goodness and kindness he shows them evokes spontaneously their joyous response of praise and blessing.

Conversely, when those who have experienced his love respond by praising and blessing him, what will please God will not be that praise or worship per se but the sincere and genuine love of which it is an expression. In order to understand this difference, we may return to Walter Brueggemann's interpretation of the words attributed to God in Isa 45:20-25, a portion of which we have already considered in the previous chapter:

Assemble yourselves and come together, draw near, you survivors of the nations! They have no knowledge—those who carry about their wooden idols, and keep on praying to a god that cannot save. Declare and present your case; let them take counsel together! Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old? Was it not I, the LORD? And there is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none besides me. Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return: "To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear." Only in the LORD, it shall be said of me, are righteousness and strength; to him shall come and be ashamed all who were incensed against him. In the LORD all the offspring of Israel shall triumph and glory.

According to Brueggemann's reading of this passage, which we considered in Chapter 1, what God seeks when he offers to save people is that they acknowledge his sovereignty and worship him by bowing their knee to him: "Israel has benefited from this gift of Yahweh's righteousness, and the nations are invited to participate in the same. But neither Israel nor the nations can receive such transformative activity unless they are among those who bend the knee and swear with the tongue to the sovereignty of Yahweh."<sup>11</sup> God's saving activity is therefore a means by which he attempts to obtain something for himself. What ultimately concerns him is not the well-being or salvation of human beings but the worship and praise he desires to receive from them. For that reason, if they do not give him what he desires, he will either refuse to save them or else will punish them in some other way in an attempt to compel them to do so. In one way or another, however, he will bring them to bend the knee before him so as to obtain from them the worship for which he longs. In the words of Herman Bavinck, also cited in the

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11. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testament, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 306.

previous chapter: “Voluntarily or involuntarily, every creature will someday bow his knee before him. Obedience in love or subjection by force is the final destiny of all creatures.”<sup>12</sup>

Such ideas must be considered entirely foreign to the thought reflected in this passage, however. If God’s love for people throughout the earth is understood as his commitment to seeking their well-being and happiness and in that sense saving them, then it is that love that motivates him to call out to all the nations inviting and exhorting them to turn to him so that he might save them. What he seeks is not to manipulate them into being subject to him by saving them in order to place them in debt to himself or obligate them to acknowledge his sovereignty. Rather, God’s hope is that, in the same way that the works of creation are said in the Psalms to break forth spontaneously in joyful song to him when they experience his goodness, people throughout the world may one day fall down before him in praise and worship out of genuine and heartfelt love for him as a result of having come to experience the salvation he brings.

This understanding of God’s intentions in the passage is evident from several of the ideas that appear there. First, when God expresses his desire for all to turn to him, he states his purpose not in terms of wanting to be praised and honored but in terms of *wanting all the ends of the earth to be saved*. The imperatives that appear in the passage are not: “Bow every knee to me and make every tongue swear,” but: “Turn to me and be saved.” What God is said to seek is not the worship of human beings but their salvation. That worship will only follow his salvation as its natural consequence. Second, the reason for which God insists that there is no god but he and calls on the people to cease to worship other gods is precisely that *those gods cannot save*. Therefore, those who serve and worship such gods cannot attain the salvation that Israel’s God desires for all, not for *his* sake, but for *theirs*. Third, the same desire for the salvation of all is behind the desire he expresses that all bow down to him and proclaim his justice, righteousness, and strength, since only if they are convinced of that justice, righteousness, and strength will they draw near to him to attain the blessings and life he desires for them. And fourth, the idea that those who were incensed against God will be ashamed and come to him expresses a desire not to impose his will on all by force and take vengeance on those who have not served him but rather his willingness to forgive those who rejected him and bring them to find salvation in him as well. Even though they were incensed with him, he is not angry at them but still desires their salvation. His hope is that they will feel ashamed when they realize that the one against whom they were incensed loves them and desires their well-being and that their feelings of shame will bring them to approach him with a humble and contrite spirit so that he may receive and save them.

According to this passage, therefore, if God wants every knee to bow and every tongue to swear before him, it is not *for his sake* but for the sake of those

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12. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2: *God and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 433-34.

whom he wishes to bless and save. As they experience his goodness and love, people will acknowledge him as God and commit themselves to serving him voluntarily and gladly out of love for him and also seek to make that goodness and love known to others so that they may experience these things as well. And the way in which they will serve and love him is not by giving him anything, since he needs nothing, but by serving and loving those whom he loves, namely, themselves and others.

The hope expressed in these verses, therefore, is that all will come to God so as to be saved by him. When that happens, out of sheer joy and thanksgiving they will be brought to bend the knee and express with their tongue their love for God, not because they will feel *obliged*, *forced*, or *compelled* by him to do so, but because the kindness and goodness that they have experienced from God will fill their hearts with the desire to do so spontaneously. If anything can be said to compel them to respond in the way that the passage describes, it is the inexhaustible love and compassion that they will have been shown by God, which will overwhelm them and move them so deeply that they will not be able to restrain themselves from rejoicing in him and singing his praises with all their heart. It is this that will please God and make him rejoice as well.

For all of these reasons, the expressions of love, praise, worship, and adoration for God that are attributed to human beings and God's works in creation throughout the Psalms and in other passages of the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Jewish literature should be understood as spontaneous and sincere expressions of love and thanksgiving to God for his immense goodness and kindness. The unconditional love that God manifests for his people and his creation as a whole generates in them the same type of love toward him. Nothing else could move them to love him in that way and devote themselves to him gladly and joyously with their whole heart, mind, and strength in the same way that he is devoted to them. To understand those passages in any other way is to misunderstand them entirely, given that the God of the Hebrew Bible would hardly be honored and pleased to receive praise and worship from those who offer him these things unwillingly, insincerely, or hypocritically, purely out of fear of punishment and self-interest.

In light of these observations, it becomes clear that Bavinck's affirmation that creatures will either have to obey God in love or else be subjected to God by force is entirely untenable. If God seeks to compel people to obey him by means of the promise of rewards and threats of punishment, they will not obey him out of love but only out of fear, selfishness, or self-interest. Conversely, if God intends to use force to subject human beings to himself and compel them to bend the knee before him against their will, then God is not interested in being loved by those human beings but merely receiving from them a servile obedience and worship that will also be an expression of fear, selfishness, and self-interest rather than love. Rather than being a good and loving God, a God who relates to human beings in that way will ultimately be just like the pagan gods of antiquity, pursuing his own desires and

interests purely out of a concern for himself and selfishly using the human beings he has created as a means to gratifying those desires and satisfying those interests. Such a God is not the God of the Hebrew Bible.

### SUFFERING, SIN, AND EVIL IN GOD'S CREATION

Almost immediately after describing the manner in which God created the world and the human beings that inhabit it and characterizing that creation as “exceedingly good,” the Genesis account recounts the disobedience of the man and woman created by God to his command not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil at the instigation of the serpent, as well as the consequences of that disobedience (Gen 3:1-24). Readers of this account in antiquity would have found many elements of the narrative just as enigmatic and problematic as they are for readers today. Precisely because of its enigmatic nature, this passage lends itself to having many different ideas read back into it. For that reason, when considering how it would have been read in antiquity, it is important to be aware of the many assumptions and inherited interpretations that have influenced the manner in which this passage has been read over the centuries in order to question to what extent those assumptions and interpretations are actually faithful to the text. Thus, for example, nowhere in Genesis 3 do words such as “sin,” “punishment,” or “fall” appear, nor is the serpent identified with a being such as Satan or the devil, even though traditional readings of the text associate all of these ideas with the narrative.

The allusion to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in vv. 9 and 17 of Genesis 2 brings us to the first of many problems with the common English translations of the biblical texts that we shall see throughout the present work. The Hebrew word in this phrase that is generally translated as “evil” is *ra'*, which is an adjective rather than a noun. Generally, this adjective simply refers to something that is bad or not good. It can be translated in many different ways. One widely-respected Hebrew lexicon, for example, lists the following definitions ahead of the definition “evil”: “of bad quality, inferior”; “disagreeable, unwholesome”; “bad, of no value, contemptible.”<sup>13</sup> The same lexicon also includes definitions such as “displeasing,” “undesirable,” “annoying,” “objectionable,” “harmful,” and “adverse.” In Jeremiah 24, for example, this adjective is used to refer to figs that are not good in the sense that they are of such poor quality as to be inedible and perhaps spoiled or rotten as well.

The problem with translating *ra'* as “evil” in the verses that refer to the tree whose fruit God forbids to the man and woman is that in English this word conveys certain ideas that may not be present in the text, especially due to its extensive use in theological contexts. Evil is often understood as an active force that is opposed both to God and to what is good. In many cases, to call something evil is to consider it not only profoundly immoral or wicked but

13. “*ra'*,” *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. William L. Holladay, (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 341-42.

### *Sin and Evil Elsewhere in the Opening Chapters of Genesis*

The problem of how a good, loving, and all-powerful God is to respond to the disobedience, evil, and destructive behavior of human beings lies at the heart of several of the narratives that appear in the following chapters of Genesis. In Gen 4:1-16, both Cain and Abel offer sacrifice to God. According to the narrative, they do so entirely at their own initiative and not because God has asked them to do so or has even suggested that such a thing would please him. When God accepts Abel's sacrifice but not that of Cain, Cain becomes very angry. Although the text does not affirm explicitly why God found Abel's sacrifice acceptable but had no regard for that of Cain, God's words to Cain in v. 7 suggest that the reason had to do with Cain's behavior or motives: "If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it." Because these words make it clear that the condition for being accepted is to do what is good and avoid what is bad, it can be concluded that the reason that God had no regard for Cain's offering was that in some way he was not doing what was good.

In his anger, Cain then murders his brother Abel. When God hears Abel's blood crying out to him, he tells Cain: "What have you done? Listen! The voice of your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth" (Gen 4:10-12). Depending on how the Hebrew word *avon* is translated, Cain responds to God by telling him either that his punishment is too great to bear or that his crime is too great to be forgiven.<sup>16</sup> In order to protect Cain, God decrees that "anyone who kills Cain will be punished sevenfold" and then decides to place a mark on Cain "so that no one who came upon him would kill him" (4:15).

This narrative clearly reflects God's ongoing concern for the well-being of the human beings he has created. His initial words to Cain indicate that he wants them to do what is good and that the refusal to do so is unacceptable to him. By stressing this point to Cain, God not only explains to Cain why he is not pleased with Cain's conduct and offering but also implicitly encourages him to think and act differently. Obviously, God's concern is for Cain rather than for himself. In this regard, the God of whom the narrative speaks is very different from most of the pagan gods of antiquity. What interested those gods was not that human beings do what is right and good but that they present them with the sacrificial offerings they desired for their own sake. The sentiments with which those human beings presented those offerings was of no importance to them, nor did the spirit or attitude with which

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16. Although translations such as the NRSVue present Cain referring to his "punishment" at God's hands in Gen 4:13, in reality the Hebrew text speaks of Cain referring to his iniquity or guilt (*avon*). The Septuagint translation of this verse reads: "My crime is too great for me to be forgiven."

those offerings were made matter to them. One can hardly imagine such gods rejecting the sacrifice of Cain, unless of course they thought it was of poor quality and should have been more lavish and abundant than it was. In contrast, the God of whom the narrative speaks is interested not in the offerings themselves but in the conduct and the heart of those who present them. His concern is not for himself but *for them*.

It is this concern that leads God to react in the way that he does to Cain's murder of Abel. If God continues to care for the human beings he has created, he cannot merely overlook or ignore what Cain has done, since that would involve not only tolerating destructive behavior but also encouraging it by remaining indifferent to it. At the same time, if God simply allows human beings to kill one another, such violent behavior will gradually spiral out of control (see Gen 4:23-24). Of course, God might simply put to death those who murder others and practice other forms of violence. If God chooses either of these last two alternatives, however, it will not be long before the entire race of human beings is extinguished from the earth.

In the face of Cain's deed, therefore, the form that God's love takes is that of punishing Cain while nevertheless protecting him from becoming the object of further violence himself. While in a sense God subjects Cain to a curse, strictly speaking it is the ground that is said to curse Cain as a result of the blood of Abel that has been poured out on it (Gen 4:11). This suggests that God has designed the world in a way in which the created order itself will not tolerate passively the practice of hatred, violence, and evil. In any case, the curse to which Cain becomes subject serves a purpose in relation not only to Cain himself but also to the rest of humanity. Those human beings who observe the manner in which Cain has been cursed will be led to refrain from killing others, since they will conclude that they may become subject to the same type of curse if they do what Cain did. The afflictions to which Cain is subjected will also constantly remind both Cain himself and the rest of humanity of the consequences of the type of destructive behavior into which Cain had fallen and hopefully lead them not only to refrain from such behavior but also to live in constructive ways that will benefit all instead of doing people harm.

It is important to stress, however, that underlying the measures that God takes against Cain is a concern for the well-being of Cain and that of other human beings as well. Nothing in the account indicates that God is punishing Cain because God's justice will not allow him to tolerate sin and evil, as if God's concern were to satisfy a need internal to himself to exact retribution for violations of his just and holy will, such as that committed by Cain. On the contrary, the measures that God takes should be understood as being rooted in his desire and insistence that human beings act in ways that contribute to their own well-being and avoid behaviors that destroy that well-being. God's ongoing concern for Cain and his desire for Cain's well-being are evident from the manner in which he acts to protect Cain by placing a mark upon

him and threatening any who might kill him with even greater punishments. In addition, by making Cain a fugitive and wanderer, God not only punishes Cain but also keeps him at a distance from other human beings, both for their protection from Cain as well as for the protection of Cain from them. It is also worth noting that God is not said to become angry at Cain when imposing these measures on him, even though the narrative suggests that God is outraged and horrified at what Cain has done. While God's response to Cain's deed can undoubtedly be understood as an expression of anger, any anger on God's part would be motivated by his desire that human beings live in ways that promote their own well-being rather than a concern for the inviolability of his own justice, holiness, or righteousness.

The murderous deed of Cain sets the stage for the account of the flood in Genesis 6–9. At the beginning of that account, God is said to regret having made human beings due to their sinfulness: “The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, ‘I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them’” (Gen 6:5–7). Several verses later, the same idea is repeated: “Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. And God said to Noah, ‘I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth’” (6:11–13). At the same time, however, rather than making an end of humanity as a whole, God preserves Noah and his family due to Noah's righteousness and blamelessness (6:8–9). God tells Noah: “I have seen that you alone are righteous before me in this generation” (7:1).

While the adjective *ra'* and the noun derived from it are used here to characterize both human beings as a whole and the inclination of their hearts as bad, the allusion to corruption and violence clearly conveys what is involved. The Hebrew communicates the idea that the violence of human beings has ruined the earth as well as human beings themselves. In this case, the language of evil and wickedness certainly seems appropriate.

The love of God for human beings is reflected in the affirmation that God was grieved in his heart at seeing the persistent wickedness and violence that had filled the world and for that reason regretted having made human beings. Once again, it is important to note that God is not said to become angry. Instead, he is saddened or grieved. This indicates a sense of pain on God's part. It is important to stress, however, that the cause of this pain and sadness is not anything that human beings do or fail to do in relation *to God* but what they do *to one another*. For that reason, what moves God to sadness is not any concern for himself but rather his love for human beings and his desire that

they enjoy well-being and happiness. Their behavior does not harm God but rather harms human beings themselves by preventing them from attaining the good that God desires for them in his love.

This account presupposes an idea that runs throughout the biblical texts and is vital to understanding them, namely, that God cannot bring human beings to leave behind their destructive and violent behavior by force or by an act of divine omnipotence. He cannot simply produce some type of mysterious transformation in them that will make them choose to do good rather than evil. Were that possible, then God could make the problem described in the narrative go away merely by changing the inclination of the hearts of all so that they would love one another rather than destroying one another. In that case, in fact, God could have avoided that problem from the very beginning. If he had the ability to make human beings live in love and do what is good of his own accord, one can assume that he would have done so from the moment in which he created the first man and woman. Had he done so, they would never have disobeyed him in the first place. The biblical texts consistently assume, however, that God cannot force human beings to live in ways that will enable them to enjoy the well-being he desires for all or unilaterally bring about in them such a life of their own free will. If he could, he would have done so.

The biblical text also reflects a second presupposition that is equally important and vital for understanding the narrative here and throughout the Hebrew Bible. Because the well-being and happiness of human beings depends on their living in ways that promote that well-being among them, God cannot bring about that well-being on his own simply by filling their lives with good things. If they refuse to live in love and instead practice evil and violence, they will take the good things God has given them and use them to do one another harm. Their failure to do what is good and right will make it impossible for them to attain the good that God desires for them. No matter how badly God wishes them to experience well-being in its fullness and how zealously he pursues that objective, their destructive and self-destructive behavior will not allow God's good purposes to be accomplished in them. Those purposes can be achieved only if they obey God and submit to his loving will for them. If God wants them to obey him, therefore, it is for *their* sake rather than this own.

By describing the situation as one in which "every inclination" of the hearts of human beings collectively was "only evil continually," the biblical narrative implicitly raises the question of how God is to respond to the persistent evil or bad behavior of the human beings whose good he seeks. Because the situation is so dire, God cannot simply ignore or overlook what is happening. If he did, the violence, wickedness, and destructive behavior of human beings would only intensify and spread even further as they continued to populate the earth. His love will not allow him to remain idle or simply abandon human beings to such a fate. At the same time, if human beings can



attain the well-being and happiness God desires for them only by living in accordance with God's will, but they adamantly refuse to do so and cannot be brought to do so unilaterally by God, it is by no means clear what form God's love for human beings is to take. There is no option or alternative left open to God that can be considered good. For that reason, if God hopes to change the situation, he must do something that is in some ways bad. If he does so, it will be reluctantly and with the same type of pain and sadness attributed to him in the narrative. In the face of the situation described, however, his love leaves him no choice but to take some type of action to put an end to it in the hope of bringing about a new situation in which his loving will for human beings may ultimately be accomplished.

In principle, God might attempt to bring the human beings who have fallen into such persistently destructive behavior to abandon that behavior by inflicting some type of punishment on them. He might demand that they change their ways and threaten them with severe hardships and afflictions if they do not. In that case, however, even if they did alter their behavior, they would do so out of fear of punishment rather than out of a sincere conviction that it is in their own best interest to live and behave differently. As soon as the punishments and afflictions came to an end, they would simply go back to their destructive behavior. While there seem to be other approaches to the problem that God might take in addition to inflicting punishment, in the biblical narrative he chooses to take a much more drastic measure. He decides to destroy humanity and cleanse the earth by means of a flood in order to make a fresh start with the righteous Noah and his family. The logic appears to be that, because Noah is righteous and blameless, those who descend from him will hopefully follow in the same path, living in ways that allow them to experience the well-being God desires for all rather than destroying that well-being. The obedience that Noah demonstrates by doing everything that God asks of him seems to offer a basis for hoping that what God intends can indeed be accomplished through him.

It is important to stress, however, that the destruction of humanity by means of the flood is not a form of *punishment* but rather a *purification*. Punishments have the purpose of bringing about some type of change of behavior either in those who are punished or in others who observe the punishment and are thereby deterred from engaging in the conduct that led to the punishment. In this case, however, by destroying all human beings with the exception of Noah and his family, God is not seeking to alter their behavior. Nor is he seeking to make those human beings suffer or sentencing them to death in order to satisfy his justice, lay down an example, or exact retribution or vengeance. Rather, he is simply seeking to cleanse the earth from evil and violence by washing away the mass of humanity that has fallen into these things in order to start over with Noah and his family, hoping that this time things will turn out differently. This is how the flood narrative is interpreted by Philo of Alexandria, for example, who speaks of

the flood in Noah's days not as a punishment but as a purification (*katharsis*) of the earth from evil (*Moses 2.64*).

The last part of the flood narrative conveys the idea of a fresh start by presenting God as giving some of the same commands to Noah and his children that he had originally given to the first man and woman immediately after creating them. He tells Noah and his children to be fruitful and multiply and to fill the earth, as well as prescribing for them what they are to eat (Gen 9:1-7). For the first time he gives human beings permission to eat meat, as long as they do not consume the animal's blood with it. At the same time, perhaps due to the pain and sorrow that the destruction of the human beings he loves caused him, God promises never again to destroy human beings or cleanse the earth in that manner (9:11-17). The pleasing odor of the sacrifice that Noah offers him and God's realization that from the time of their youth the inclination of the heart of human beings is bad or evil are also said to lead God to make such a promise (8:21-22). It is not clear whether God arrives at the decision never to destroy humanity in that way again because he discovered that it was not the best way to accomplish his purposes, because he realized that such a measure was futile or overly painful for him, or for some other reason. The fact that he is presented as being pleased by the odor of Noah's sacrifice indicates that he sees that there are still good things in the world and that not all is bad. In any case, it is clear that God wishes for human beings and the world to continue to exist, despite the fact that things have not turned out in the way he had originally hoped and intended when he created the world.

After God brings the flood to an end, it is not long before human beings return to the same type of behavior that had characterized them previously. Noah becomes drunk and curses the descendants of his son Ham when Ham sees his nakedness as he lies uncovered in his tent (Gen 9:21-27). Once human beings have multiplied into many different nations, they join together to build a tower that will reach up to the heavens in order to make a name for themselves, yet God responds by confusing their language so that they no longer understand one another (11:1-9). The concern that is attributed to God in this passage is that if those constructing the tower are allowed to finish it, nothing will be able to stop them from doing even greater things and accomplishing everything they propose (v. 6). This affirmation need not be understood in the sense that God is concerned and fearful for his sovereignty for his own sake, however. Rather, what may be seen as concerning God is the type of oppressive behavior associated with the mindset that led to the construction of the tower. If that behavior and mindset remain unchecked and are allowed to propagate further, they will lead to great oppression for the majority of human beings who are not in positions of power over others. The name of Babel given to the tower and the description of the preparation of bricks to build it seem to anticipate the oppression that many peoples and nations will suffer at the hands of great empires such as those of the Babylonians and the Egyptians.

Several chapters later in the Genesis narrative, the wickedness of human beings reaches new heights. God is presented as hearing the outcry of many against Sodom and Gomorrah for their great sin and descending to observe for himself what is happening there (Gen 18:16-22; cf. 13:13). When the two angels that he has sent into Sodom enter into Lot's house, they are surrounded by the men of the city who seek to force themselves on them sexually. However, the angels prevent them from doing so by rescuing Lot from their midst and striking the men with blindness (19:1-11). The next day, God rains down sulfur and fire to destroy the city, saving only Lot and his wife and daughters, although Lot's wife is turned into a pillar of salt (19:18-29).

This story illustrates the same basic points as the story of the flood and raises the same question regarding the form that God's love is to take in the face of extreme wickedness such as that which is attributed to the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. For God to have done nothing would have involved ignoring the outcry of those who were suffering at the hands of the cities' inhabitants, which is said to be very great due to the gravity of the sin of those inhabitants (Gen 18:20; 19:13). Once again, therefore, he must take action to put an end to the violence and oppression. He does so by destroying the two cities and their inhabitants.

It is important to note, however, that the narrative does not suggest in any way that this action on God's part is simply an act of vengeance against the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. Nor does the narrative suggest that what moved God to destroy these two cities was the manner in which their behavior was affecting him personally. On the contrary, because God's purpose in destroying those inhabitants is to deliver others from the type of violence and oppression attributed to them in the narrative, ultimately that purpose must be seen as grounded in a loving desire on God's part to save the oppressed from their oppressors. Once again, while the Genesis narrative appears to present God as being outraged and horrified by the behavior of the human beings he ends up destroying, God is not said to become angry or to act out of wrath. Although that idea does appear in Deut 29:23, which speaks of "the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, which the LORD destroyed in his fierce anger," God's objective in the account is clearly to deliver those who are suffering at the hand of those who have fallen into such wicked and violent behavior. By destroying the wicked, he will also prevent such behavior from continuing and spreading further and communicate to human beings elsewhere that he will not tolerate such wickedness and violence in the future. By destroying Sodom and Gomorrah, then, he is not acting *in opposition* to the well-being of human beings but *in favor* of that well-being, even though his actions result in the destruction of many human lives. In addition, it is important to stress that the narrative does not speak of the violent behavior of the inhabitants of the two cities affecting God in any way but refers only to the effect that such behavior has on those being oppressed by them, as well as the threats they present to Lot and those

dwelling in his house. God is therefore seen as acting, not for *his own* sake or for the sake of his own justice, but for the sake of those who need to be delivered and protected from such acts of violence and oppression.

While the measure that God takes in response to the behavior of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah is no doubt drastic and extreme, the narrative justifies it not only by stressing the outcry of those being affected by the violence perpetrated by the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah and the gravity of their sin but also by the account of Abraham's intercession on behalf of the two cities (Gen 18:23-33). When Abraham tells God that it would not be good or right to destroy the righteous with the wicked, God agrees with him. The fact that God destroys the cities after having promised Abraham that he would not do so if he found ten righteous persons in them thus indicates that the two cities in their entirety had become corrupt, wicked, and violent. Among those righteous persons would have been Lot, his wife, and his two daughters. Had there been at least a handful of righteous persons in the two cities, there might have been some hope that the way of life that God desires to see in all for their own good might still prevail among at least some of the inhabitants. On their account, God might have been willing to spare the two cities. According to the logic of the narrative, however, if any hope of righteousness among the inhabitants had disappeared, then nothing could be gained by sparing the two cities, since the wickedness that had overtaken them would only grow worse and expand further if God did not act to extinguish it for good.

### SEEKING GOOD IN EVIL

The Genesis account of the origins of human beings and their subjection to sin and death raises a number of theological questions and problems that are nowhere discussed or even acknowledged in the text. Precisely how those who composed, collected, and preserved the biblical texts would have attempted to resolve these questions and problems is not clear.

One of the main points that the Genesis narrative seems intended to convey is that God did not intend for there to be anything bad or evil in his creation. Yet because things such as pain, suffering, violence, and death seem to be an integral and inevitable part of the world as we know it, for readers in antiquity it would have been as difficult to conceive of a world without such things as it is for us today. While the biblical texts regard these things as existing contrary to God's original will, they leave unaddressed questions such as how the world could have existed without such things and how they came into existence. In both the Jewish and Christian traditions of interpretation it has been common to regard the figures of Adam and Eve as responsible for the entrance of sin and death into the world. The narrative never explains, however, why God planted the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden and prohibited the man and woman from eating of its fruit. Nor does it say why the serpent chose to tempt the woman to eat of its fruit, apparently