

# 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 3 excerpts*  
A God of Loving  
Demands and  
Demanding Love

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The commandments of the law or Torah that God is said to give his people Israel through Moses can be understood in two different ways: as a means for him to obtain from the people the obedience and worship he desires for *his own* sake or as a means to bringing them to follow a path that will allow them to experience the good and the well-being he seeks for them for *their* sake. This chapter argues that it is this second understanding of God's purpose for giving those commandments that we encounter in the biblical texts.

## A GOD OF LOVING DEMANDS AND DEMANDING LOVE

Although the narrative that runs throughout the first eleven chapters of Genesis is clearly designed to convey certain core convictions regarding God and his intentions for human beings and the world in general, it also lays out the problem that God must resolve if those intentions are to be fulfilled. The creation account leaves no doubt that God wants only what is good for his creation and for the human beings whom he has placed over it. Those human beings, however, can attain that good only if they live and behave in ways that allow them to experience and enjoy the well-being that God in his love desires for them. They must care for one another and God's good creation, continually seeking the well-being of all others at the same time that they seek their own. Yet this is precisely what they fail to do. Rather than seeking the good for themselves and one another, they live and behave in ways that undermine and destroy their well-being. They persistently choose the bad instead of the good and are consumed by hatred, jealousy, rivalry, ambition, and selfish lusts and passions. All of these things fill their lives with pain and suffering and make it impossible for the good that God intended for them to be theirs.

According to the Genesis narrative, then, the problem that God must resolve is how to bring human beings to abandon their destructive behavior and instead live in ways that will allow them to attain the well-being and wholeness he desired for them from the start. In the language of Genesis, the reality that he must address is that from the time of their youth, "every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts" is "only evil continually," and as a result the earth has come to be filled with evil, violence, and corruption (Gen 6:5, 11-13; 8:21). The manner in which God will attempt to overcome that problem and accomplish his objective for human beings and the world is spelled out at the beginning of chapter 12 of the Genesis account: by means of the righteous Abraham and the nation that God will bring into existence through him, God will act to bless not only that nation itself but all of the families of the earth together with it. However, because human beings can experience and enjoy God's blessings of well-being and wholeness only if they live in ways that promote these things, God can accomplish his purposes for human beings only if he succeeds in bringing them to live in those ways. In order to bless them, therefore, God must provide them with the guidance and instruction they need to live in a manner that will allow them to enjoy the

well-being he desires for them and must also bring about in them the desire and commitment to live in accordance with that guidance and instruction for their own good.

While such a reading of the Genesis narrative may seem relatively straightforward, uncontroversial, and self-evident, the reality is that it is strongly at odds with the interpretations of the biblical text that have held sway in the West for centuries, especially among Christians. The reason for this is that biblical interpreters have ascribed to the God of Israel the same type of motives and concerns that were believed to be characteristic of the pagan gods of antiquity. Supposedly, rather than dedicating himself fully to seeking the well-being of human beings and the created order in general as an end in itself, he was preoccupied with satisfying his own desires and the needs that are grounded in his nature. According to this manner of reading the biblical texts, while God certainly sought to bless human beings, those desires and needs made certain demands on him that had to be met if he was to accomplish his objective of blessing Israel and the nations with life, well-being, and wholeness.

### GOD'S PLAN THROUGH ABRAHAM

Following the account of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11 and a list of the descendants of Noah's son Shem, the figure of Abram appears in the biblical narrative, together with his wife Sarai or Sarah. At the beginning of Genesis 12, God says to Abram: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you but will curse any who disdain you; and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Gen 12:3).<sup>1</sup> This passage, which in many ways lays the basis for everything else that will follow in the biblical narrative regarding Israel, makes it clear that in spite of the sinful and destructive behavior of human beings, God remains firm in his commitment to bless them. In other words, rather than going back on his original intention for human beings or giving up on that intention, he continues to

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1. The translation of the latter part of Gen 12:3 is problematic for a couple of reasons. First, while many English translations speak of God cursing those who curse Abraham, in reality the Hebrew text does not use the verb for "curse" in the second part of the phrase but instead uses a different verb that means "to make light of" or "disdain." On the translation used here, see Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, WBC 1 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 276-77. Second, in principle the Hebrew phrase that appears at the very end of v. 3 may be translated in three different ways: "in you all the families of the earth will be blessed," "in you all the families of the earth will find blessing," and "by you all the families of the earth will bless themselves." Although many translators prefer the last of these options, the basic idea underlying all three of these translations must be considered essentially the same. As Wenham notes, "even if a reflexive 'bless themselves' is preferred here, it would also carry the implications of a middle or passive. For if those who bless Abram are blessed, and all families of the earth bless Abram, then it follows that 'all families will be blessed/find blessing in him' (278). It should also be noted that the earliest interpretation of this verse that we possess, namely, that of the Septuagint in the third century BCE, uses the passive voice "be blessed" in Greek rather than the middle voice "bless themselves."

desire that “all the families of the earth” attain the good he intended for them when he created the first man and woman and will seek to do whatever is necessary for that objective to be accomplished. Clearly, this can be due only to his unconditional love for all of the nations and peoples that are descended from that man and woman. This desire and intention to see all the families or nations of the earth blessed through Abram, who is subsequently renamed Abraham, is expressed repeatedly in the following chapters of Genesis.<sup>2</sup> There can be no doubt, therefore, that this idea is central to the narrative.

The narrative will eventually make it clear that the “great nation” of which God speaks in Gen 12:3 is the nation descended from Abraham through Sarah and their son Isaac as well as Isaac’s son Jacob, who is renamed Israel after he wrestles with the angel of God in Gen 32:22-32. By linking the blessing of all the families of the earth to the blessing of Israel, the Genesis account conveys the idea that the blessing of Israel is not merely an end in itself but also constitutes a means by which God intends to bring blessing upon people of other nations.

Initially, no reason is given as to why God chose Abraham in order to carry out his purposes through him. As the narrative continues, however, that reason gradually becomes evident. When God tells Abraham to leave his homeland and family in order to go where God tells him, namely, the land of Canaan, Abraham immediately obeys (Gen 12:4-6). Given the perils and uncertainties of leaving the security of one’s home and family in order to go to a place where one will be a foreigner and have no one to rely on except God himself, Abraham’s obedience to God’s command must be seen as an expression of profound faith in God. In the following chapters, the narrative consistently presents Abraham as a person who loves God and is committed to practicing what is good, right and just. The first thing that Abraham does after arriving in the land of Canaan is to erect an altar there and invoke God’s name (12:7-8). In Gen 13:8-12, Abraham shows kindness and generosity by giving his nephew Lot the choice between two plots of land on which to dwell and put his herds out to pasture, thereby seeking to avoid any type of strife with Lot and his household. He also risks everything he has to rescue Lot and his family and possessions when they are taken captive (14:1-14). When Abraham offers tithes to God by presenting them to Melchizedek, the king of Salem and priest of the most high God, Melchizedek pronounces God’s blessing on Abraham (14:18-20). Immediately thereafter, the king of Sodom offers to give him great wealth, yet Abraham refuses to receive it because he does not wish to enrich himself in that way (14:22-24). In Genesis 17, Abraham continues to manifest his faith in God and his promises by obeying God’s command to be circumcised along with all the males of his household. The hospitality that Abraham shows when God appears to him in the form of three visitors in Gen 18:1-15 also underscores Abraham’s righteousness and his concern for the well-being of others. Subsequently, when God shares

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2. See Gen 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14.

with Abraham his intention to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham intercedes repeatedly on behalf of their inhabitants in spite of their sinfulness and depravity, asking God to spare the wicked for the sake of the righteous (18:16-33).

All of these stories convey the idea that Abraham is a good and righteous man who cares for others and responds to God's blessings with gratitude and devotion.<sup>3</sup> According to the narrative, however, the reason why he behaves in this way and obeys God in all that God commands him is that he trusts in God and in God's goodness. While this idea is implicit throughout the narrative regarding Abraham, it is made explicit in two passages in particular. The first of these is Gen 15:6. There, after God has reiterated to Abraham his intention to give him a son through his wife Sarah even though she is far too old to bear children, it is said that "Abraham believed the LORD, and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness." Here Abraham is deemed righteous because he trusts and believes God's promise, in spite of the fact that Sarah's age seems to make it impossible for God to bring that promise to pass. It is important to stress that the logic underlying the passage is that God accepts Abraham as righteous not merely because he believes what God tells him but also because Abraham's faith and trust in God will lead him to continue to do all that God commands him. In other words, it is not merely Abraham's faith itself that leads God to view him as righteous but the type of life that will *result* from that faith.

The most outstanding expression of Abraham's faith and his willingness to obey God in all things, however, is the account of the binding of Isaac in Gen 22:1-19. There God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac to him. In principle, Abraham might have refused to obey God, not only due to the cruelty and inhumanity of such an act but also because Abraham could hardly expect to have another son with the aged Sarah. To put Isaac to death would therefore appear to make it impossible for the promises that God had made to Abraham to be fulfilled through Isaac. Rather than objecting to God's command, questioning God, or wavering in his trust in God's goodness and promises, Abraham does not hesitate to do as God commands. Just as Abraham is about to plunge the knife into Isaac in order to slay him, God calls out to Abraham and tells him: "Do not stretch out your hand against the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me" (vv. 10-12). The story concludes with God telling Abraham: "Because you have done this and have

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3. Although for the most part the Hebrew Bible does not explicitly describe Abraham as an extremely righteous individual, this idea seems to be assumed there, especially in the Genesis narrative. A variety of Jewish writings of the Second Temple period, however, make explicit mention of Abraham's surpassing righteousness and virtue; see, for example, Sir 44:19-20; 1 Macc 2:52; Pr Man 1:8; Jub. 17:17-18; 18:16; 23:10; Philo, *Abraham* 225-44; Josephus, *Ant.* 1.256. The allusions to Abraham as God's friend in 2 Chr 20:7 and Isa 41:8, as well as the description of Abraham as a prophet in Tob 4:12, can also be seen as implying that Abraham was an extremely righteous individual.

not withheld your son, your only son, I will certainly bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the grains of sand that are on the seashore. And your offspring will possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring will all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice" (vv. 16-18).

At first glance, it might seem that God's words to Abraham in this latter passage present a stark contrast with the words that God is said to have spoken to Abraham in Gen 12:1-3. Whereas initially God simply promises to bless Abraham, his descendants, and all the families of the earth in him without giving any reason as to why he has chosen Abraham for that blessing or laying down any conditions that must be fulfilled in order for Abraham and his descendants to attain it, in Gen 22:16-18 God affirms that the reason that he will bless Abraham and his descendants is that Abraham has obeyed him by being willing to offer up his son Isaac. In reality, however, this latter passage is merely making explicit what is presupposed in Gen 12:1-3. Just as God had chosen Noah to make a new start because he was a just and righteous man, so also had he chosen Abraham to create a new people through him because he anticipated that Abraham would trust in him and obey him by doing what is good and right. Of course, the narrative seems to assume that God did not know for certain from the start whether Abraham would in fact obey him in all things, yet Abraham's behavior confirms this to be true. While Abraham behaves obediently and righteously prior to receiving the command to offer up Isaac in sacrifice to God, his willingness to obey God by offering up Isaac demonstrates beyond a shadow of a doubt that Abraham will obey God in all things and trust him no matter what God asks of him. It is this that God wants, *not for his own sake*, but because Abraham's faith and obedience provide a basis for hoping that through him God can bring into existence a people who will live in the same type of faith and obedience so as to attain the well-being that God desires for all by practicing the justice and righteousness necessary for that well-being to exist. And once that people has been brought into existence, it will be possible to bring other peoples and nations to live in the same faith, obedience, justice, and righteousness by means of that people.

The idea that Abraham's commitment to justice and righteousness constituted the basis upon which God made to him the promises that he did is also present in Gen 26:3-5. There, following Abraham's death, God tells Isaac: "I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and I will give to your offspring all these lands; and all the nations of the earth will be blessed through your offspring, because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws" (vv. 4-5). These words imply that Abraham's obedience to God's will is the basis for the promises he makes not only with regard to the multiplication of Isaac's offspring but also with regard to the blessing of the nations. In other words, the nations will be blessed or bless themselves as a result of Abraham's obedience to God. The idea is that Abraham's obedience and righteous conduct will bring not

only his descendants through Isaac but also people of other nations to live in the same obedience and righteousness so that they may attain the blessings of wholeness and well-being that result from such a way of life.

The hope that Abraham's own obedience and righteousness will make it possible to form from him a people who will be characterized by the same kind of obedience and righteousness is expressed explicitly in Gen 18:17-19. There, as God contemplates his intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah due to the wickedness of their inhabitants, he is presented as asking himself: "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham will become a great and mighty nation and that all the nations of the earth will be blessed in him? No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." Here it is not merely Abraham's own obedience, justice, and righteousness that will enable God's promises of blessing to Abraham's descendants and the nations of the earth to be fulfilled, but the hope and expectation that those who will descend from him will live in the same type of obedience, justice, and righteousness seen in Abraham.

In Genesis 17, Abraham's faith, obedience, and righteousness are presented as the basis upon which God establishes his covenant with Abraham. The chapter begins with God telling Abraham: "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous" (vv. 1-2). While these verses do not affirm explicitly that the condition upon which God makes his covenant with Abraham is that he walk before him blamelessly, they certainly express that expectation and see it as related in some way to the establishment of that covenant. Of course, Abraham will not be blameless in the sense of being perfectly sinless throughout his life. As the Hebrew Scriptures make clear elsewhere, to live blamelessly is not to be entirely free of sin but rather to be fully committed to living in accordance with God's will. Many readers of the Genesis account, for example, would have considered that Abraham's conduct in concealing his relationship to Sarah in Gen 12:10-20 and 20:1-13 as well as his treatment of Hagar and Ishmael in Gen 21:8-14 was not fully in accordance with the practice of what is good and right.

After God indicates his intention to establish his covenant with Abraham in the opening verse of Genesis 17, he defines the content of that covenant in terms of making Abraham the father of many nations, giving the land of Canaan to his offspring, and being God to them and to Abraham himself (vv. 4-8). God then commands Abraham and his descendants to keep his covenant and to be circumcised as a sign of that covenant (vv. 9-14). As other passages from the Hebrew Scriptures will emphasize further on, this circumcision is to serve as a reminder not only of God's covenant with Abraham but also of the life of faith, obedience, justice, and righteousness that characterized Abraham and is to characterize all of his descendants as well.



The narrative regarding Abraham in chapters 12–26 of Genesis, therefore, makes it very clear what God wants to see happen. Just as he initially blessed the first human beings when he created them, God continues to desire to bless all the families of the earth and intends to do so by means of Abraham and the descendants he will give him through Isaac and Jacob, who will be blessed in a special way. Yet because the happiness, wholeness, and well-being that God desires for all depends on their living in justice and righteousness in accordance with God's will and avoiding the type of violence and destructive behavior described in the previous chapters of Genesis, in order for all of these people to attain and enjoy the blessings God desires for them, they must be brought to live as God desires and commands for the good of all. If they do not, no matter how much God may wish to bless them, he will not be able to do so, since rather than benefiting from his blessings they will use them to harm and destroy themselves and one another.

Even though the Genesis narrative conveys the idea that the faith, obedience, and righteousness of Abraham constitute the basis for his election as the one through whom God will fulfill his promises, it is important to stress that Abraham is not regarded as having earned God's favor and blessings by his obedience and righteousness, as if that favor and those blessings were due to him on account of his obedient and righteous conduct. If Abraham's obedience and righteousness are a condition for attaining God's blessing, this is not because God wants such obedience and righteousness for *his own* sake and therefore promises to bless Abraham in exchange for receiving what he desires, but rather due to the intrinsic relationship between obedient and righteous conduct and the well-being that such conduct makes possible. God's intention to bless Abraham and his descendants and all the families of the earth through them is an act of pure grace on the part of God rather than something merited or deserved by Abraham, yet that grace can accomplish God's purposes only if human beings such as Abraham respond to God's goodness by living in the way necessary for them to enjoy the happiness and blessings that God desires for all. As the story of Abraham illustrates, when people believe and trust in God as one who is both sovereign and good, they do what God commands for their own good out of love for them.

### THE LAW THAT GIVES LIFE

To some extent, everything that appears in the narrative that follows in the remainder of the book of Genesis, as well as in the Pentateuch and the Hebrew Scriptures as a whole, can be regarded as aiming toward the fulfillment of the promises God makes to Abraham and his descendants in Gen 12:1-3 and elsewhere in the account of Abraham's life. Nevertheless, for the reasons we have just seen, those promises can be fulfilled only if the people descended from Abraham are brought to practice justice, righteousness, mercy, and love in relation to one another and refrain from oppressing one

another and doing one another harm. Only if they come to live in such a manner can they be blessed with well-being.

Although throughout the biblical narrative God is presented as acting in a variety of different ways to bring about such a way of life in his people Israel, the primary means by which he seeks to accomplish that objective is the law or Torah that he gives them through Moses at Mount Sinai following their liberation from slavery in Egypt. While that law is generally understood as consisting of a series of commandments, in reality the Hebrew term *torah* refers to guidance, direction, and instruction. The use of this term conveys the idea that, by means of the commandments he gives, God graciously lays out for his people the way of life that will enable them to enjoy the well-being he desires for them.

This is not to say, however, that it is improper to translate *torah* into English as “law.” The use of this English term is suggested by the Septuagint’s translation of *torah* as *nomos*, which also tends to be rendered into English as “law” in most versions of the Christian Bible. It should be noted, however, that in ancient contexts *nomos* generally referred to a norm, custom, order, tradition, or convention and not merely a law in the sense in which this word is commonly understood in English.<sup>4</sup> It is likely, therefore, that those who produced and read the Septuagint viewed the collection of prescriptions that the Hebrew calls the Torah as a set of customs or conventions rather than a legal code as we understand it today. In that case, the translation of *torah* as *nomos* should be seen as reflecting the idea that the Torah lays out a particular way of life and a series of norms that serve as a basis for ordering life among God’s people Israel. Like the Hebrew term *torah*, the *nomos* or law given by God would be seen as promoting the people’s well-being by ordering their life in ways that will benefit them.

This concept of the law or Torah as a gracious gift is comprehensible only if the God who is said to have given it is seen as having done so out of love for his people rather than for his own sake. Such a view of the God of Israel distinguishes him sharply from the pagan gods of antiquity. Because those gods were concerned primarily for their own needs and desires, any laws or commandments they gave human beings were not an expression of love for them or an attempt to promote their well-being as an end in itself but rather an imposition aimed at enabling the gods to obtain what they needed or wanted for themselves, whether directly or indirectly. As such, those laws or commandments constituted a burden for human beings, who had no choice but to fulfill the desires and commands of the gods in order to remain in good favor with them and avoid provoking them to wrath. Undoubtedly, knowledge regarding the will of the gods enabled human beings to obtain blessings from them, since the gods responded favorably to those who obeyed them

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4. See H. Kleinknecht and W. Gutbrod, “*nómos*,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 4, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrichs, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 1022-90 (1023-24).

by rewarding their obedience, yet both the gods who gave commands and the human beings who obeyed them were acting out of self-interest, seeking primarily something for themselves rather than pursuing the well-being of others as an end in itself.

The notion that the commandments given to the people of Israel by God through Moses constitute a gracious gift or blessing runs contrary to the manner in which those commandments have been portrayed in much Jewish and Christian thought over the centuries. The reason for this is precisely that the God of the Hebrew Bible has been viewed as acting in the same ways and for the same reasons as the pagan gods of antiquity. According to much traditional thought, God chose Israel as his people and gave them the commandments *for his own sake*, since his purpose was to obtain for himself a people who would satisfy his desire to be worshiped, served, and obeyed. The logic underlying such a conception of God and the commandments is that of *do ut des*: God gave his laws to the people in order that they might give him what he wanted for his own sake, while at the same time those laws enabled the people to obtain from God what they needed and wanted for their own sake by obeying what God had commanded. Rather than being an expression of God's love and his concern for the well-being of his people, God's commandments were a means by which God sought something for himself.

It has also been common to view God's law as an expression of God's just and holy nature. Supposedly, God's justice, righteousness, and holiness do not allow God to tolerate any kind of behavior that is incompatible with his nature. While God wishes to bless and save human beings out of love for them, his righteous and holy nature makes certain demands on him and requires that those demands be met in order for him to be in the presence of human beings, show them his acceptance, or grant them his blessings. By means of the commandments, therefore, God makes known to his people the conditions that they must fulfill if he is to be able to accept, forgive, and bless them. The people are brought to know which actions and behaviors are incompatible with God's nature and thus intolerable for him so that they may avoid those actions and behaviors and thereby obtain from him the good things that he wishes to give them by giving him the obedience he seeks. Those commandments also inform them of the punishments that God's holy and righteous nature will make it necessary for him to impose on them if they disobey him.

According to such an understanding of God and his law, both God and human beings are subject to the dictates of God's nature, which places limits on God and defines what he can and cannot do. It is said that it is impossible for God to act in ways that run contrary to his holy and righteous nature and therefore that God has no choice but to act in conformity with his nature. God's nature compels him to act in certain ways and imposes on him certain conditions and requirements that he must satisfy if he is to exist and to relate to human beings in the way he desires. This manner of understanding God's relation to the world and nature is essentially the same as that which

is found in the belief systems of other peoples in antiquity. As we saw in the first chapter of this study, in those systems of thought the gods were viewed as being subject to certain forces or laws of nature that existed prior to them and set limits on them, defining what they could and could not do. They had no choice but to submit to these forces and laws and obey them. To claim that the God of the Hebrew Bible has no choice but to act in conformity with his own holy and righteous nature, therefore, involves subjecting him to certain forces or laws that are inherent to his being and dictate to him what he can and cannot do.

When the commandments given by God are understood on the basis of this concept of God, their purpose is seen in terms of responding to some need on God's part to safeguard his holiness or ensure that his strict justice is satisfied as he relates to human beings. In that case, God gives the commandments *for his own sake*, that is, for the sake of his holiness, justice, and righteousness, which cannot be compromised but must be upheld or safeguarded. While in a sense God's commandments benefit human beings in that their observance makes it possible for God to relate favorably to them in the way he desires, their purpose is not to benefit human beings in and of themselves but to satisfy some requirement found in God's nature that stands in the way of God's desire to bless and save sinful human beings freely. For the same reason, those commandments are not expressions of God's love but rather of God's justice and holiness, which are *in conflict* with God's love in that they place limits and conditions on God and prevent him from manifesting his love for sinful human beings in the ways he desires unless the demands that they make on him are met.

According to this understanding of God's law, while God gives his commandments in order to bring about in his people a life of justice and righteousness, his demand that they lead such a life is ultimately rooted not in a concern for their well-being but rather in his own inability or unwillingness to tolerate unrighteousness on account of his perfectly holy and righteous nature. In other words, what matters to God is not the effect that the behavior of human beings has *on them* but rather the effect that it has *on him*. The reason that people must keep God's commandments is not that the failure to obey them does them harm and prevents them from enjoying the well-being that results intrinsically from their observance but rather that his holy and righteous nature will not let him tolerate or accept them if they behave in ways that are incompatible with that nature. According to this logic, while there is a sense in which it can be said that God wishes for his people to obey his commandments *for their own sake*, the obstacle that must be overcome in order for them to attain wholeness and well-being is found not *in them* but *in God*. They need to live in justice and righteousness, not because the failure to do so harms them directly, but rather because God's nature prevents him from accepting them and granting them his blessings unless their behavior is in conformity with the demands of his nature.

### *The Torah and Shalom*

If there is one Hebrew word that can summarize the blessing that God desires for Israel and all the other nations of the world, it is *shalom*. Although this term is generally translated into English as “peace,” in reality it refers to well-being in a much broader sense. The Hebrew noun is derived from the adjective *shalam*, which literally means “complete” or “whole.” For that reason, it can be seen as referring to all aspects of life, including physical and emotional health, the satisfaction of basic needs, the absence of any kind of hardship or suffering, and healthy relations with family members, friends, and others within the community. Applied to a society as a whole, *shalom* can be said to exist when there is equity, prosperity, harmony, security, justice, happiness, fullness of life, and well-being for all in both body and soul. In contrast, when any of these things are lacking for any within the society or community, that society or community cannot rightly be said to be whole or to enjoy *shalom* in the way that it should.

Because God can bless his people with that kind of well-being only if they live in ways that promote it and make it possible rather than undermining or destroying it, however, God’s first task must be that of bringing them to live in those ways. It is this that he seeks to do by means of the commandments of the Torah.

At the same time, of course, if the people are to attain that well-being, they must not only receive the instruction and guidance that God provides them by means of his commandments but must also submit willingly and obediently to those commandments. This involves being fully committed to their own well-being in the same way that God is. Obviously, the people cannot enjoy *shalom* if they are not committed to living in ways that make that *shalom* possible. Yet because the well-being or *shalom* of each individual is inseparable from the well-being of everyone else in the community and society of which all form part, the only way in which each individual can truly seek his or her own well-being is by being fully committed to the well-being of everyone else within the community or society at the same time. By definition, however, to be committed to the well-being of others as an end in itself is to *love* them. For that reason, one can love oneself and seek one’s own well-being and happiness only if one is committed to loving others by seeking their well-being and happiness at the same time. If God wishes to bless people with well-being and *shalom*, therefore, he must bring them to love one another in that way, which is the same way in which God himself loves them. In biblical thought, the Torah is the means by which he seeks to accomplish that objective.

In order for the people whom God loves to be brought to live in accordance with the Torah of their own accord, they must be convinced of two truths. First, they must believe that God knows what is best for them and in fact knows better than they do how they must live in order to attain the well-being that he desires for them and that they desire for themselves. This belief depends on

another, namely, that God is the sovereign creator of all that exists and therefore possesses an understanding of the world and the creatures he has made that far exceeds their own. That understanding enables him to guide them in the way that they should go for their own good. Second, they must believe that God loves them unconditionally and seeks their well-being as an end in itself. Only if they are convinced of these two things will they believe that the things that God asks and demands of them are truly in their own best interest. If they do not believe that God knows what is best for them, they will not want to obey him but will instead seek to define on their own independently of God the way of life that they believe will truly promote their well-being. Alternatively, if they believe that God is pursuing some end other than their well-being by means of the things that he asks and demands of them, they will not want to do what he commands but will instead choose to follow their own will in an attempt to attain the well-being they desire for themselves.

In principle, of course, even those who are not convinced that God knows what is best for them and that in love he seeks their well-being as an end in itself may still feel compelled to obey what he commands in order to try to keep him content and avoid provoking him to anger. They can hardly enjoy or pursue well-being if their conduct is leading God to inflict suffering and punishments on them because it is contrary to his will. Similarly, because the well-being of a people depends on their receiving from God things that are in large part under his control rather than their own, such as abundant harvests, freedom from sickness and disease, and deliverance from enemies who are more powerful than they, they must strive to obtain and retain his favor by doing whatever he demands of them, even if they believe that his demands are not in themselves aimed at their well-being but instead respond to his own needs, desires, or self-interests.

In that case, however, those who receive God's commandments will constantly be in conflict with them and wish to rebel against them. If from their perspective God's will for them and their own will for themselves are at odds with one another rather than being one and the same, they will continually be forced to choose between doing God's will and their own. They will want to obey what God commands in order to remain under his favor and avoid his wrath, yet at the same time they will want to *disobey* God in order to follow their own desires and pursue what they regard as being in their own best interest. As a result, when they believe that they can escape God's notice or his punishment, they will disregard and disobey God's will in order to do their own will instead. When they find themselves in a situation in which they believe themselves to be under God's scrutiny and feel threatened by God, however, they will submit to his will in order to avoid arousing his wrath and being punished by him. When they obey him, therefore, they will do so reluctantly, motivated primarily by fear of God's punishments.

By definition, any who live and act in that manner cannot be happy or enjoy well-being or shalom. Their fear of punishment will fill them with

constant anxiety and prevent them from being at peace. The conflict that they will experience in their interior will be ongoing, since they will continually be forced to choose between behaving in ways that they find burdensome and disagreeable in order to please God and running the risk of provoking God to wrath by disobeying him so as to follow their own desires and impulses instead. Rather than feeling free to act in accordance with their own will as they see fit, they will feel obliged to submit to God's will as if they were his slaves and had no choice but to seek to please him rather than pleasing themselves. In other words, because their own will and the will of God will constantly be in conflict with one another, whether they choose God's will over their own or instead choose their own will over God's, they will suffer.

For these reasons, if God is to bring his people to follow the instruction and guidance he gives them through the Torah gladly and willingly—which is the only way that the Torah can actually be obeyed, since half-hearted and reluctant obedience will not truly be obedience—, he must demonstrate to them that he sincerely loves them and seeks nothing but their well-being. At the same time, he must also convince them that he knows what is best for them. Only in that way will they come to be united in a single will with God, wanting the same things that he wants and making his own will their own voluntarily so as to do whatever he commands with gladness. Rather than considering God's will a burden or imposition, they will see it as something that benefits them and will regard it as the greatest good, since they will be convinced that there is no path that they could follow that would bring them greater happiness and well-being than the one God has laid out for them in his infinite love and wisdom.

According to the book of Exodus, the actions that God takes in relation to his people Israel after they have fallen into slavery in Egypt demonstrate to them precisely the two things just mentioned, namely, that God loves them and that he is sovereign over all people and things. God manifests his love for the people by delivering them from their bondage and oppression at the hand of the Pharaoh in order to take them to the good land he had promised to them, where they will be able to enjoy the bounteous blessings he wishes to pour out on them. At the same time, the Pharaoh's persistent refusal to let the Israelites go provides God with the opportunity to demonstrate to the Israelites his sovereign power. This he does by means of the ten plagues as well as the parting of the sea and the destruction of the Pharaoh's army. By demonstrating to the people both his love for them and his sovereignty, God hopes to gain their trust so that they will believe that whatever he asks and commands of them is in their own best interest and is motivated solely by a concern for their happiness and well-being.

Only when the Israelites have witnessed and experienced both God's sovereignty and his love for them does God take them to Mount Sinai in order to explain to them through Moses his intentions for them. Upon their arrival there, he tells them: "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I

bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you will be my treasured possession out of all the peoples" (Exod 19:3-5). However, because God can bless the people with the well-being he desires for them only if they live in a way that promotes that well-being rather than destroying it, he must also provide them with the instruction necessary to bring about such a way of life among them. This he does by means of the commandments or precepts that he gives them through Moses.

It is important to stress, however, that the precepts that God lays down for the people do not constitute conditions that they must fulfill in order for God to love them. On the contrary, his love for them is a given, since that love is *unconditional*. Rather than being conditions for obtaining God's love, those precepts are conditions for attaining the well-being that God desires for them in his love. The people cannot enjoy that well-being, for example, if they practice murder, adultery, theft, and falsehood or covet what is not their own rather than seeking to assist and care for one another and to build one another up in love. For that reason, God makes it clear to the people that if they are to live as his own and enjoy his blessings in the land he wishes to give to them, they must commit themselves to acting in ways that will benefit them and avoid behaviors that will do them and others harm. In other words, as Exod 19:3-5 makes clear, the people will be God's treasured possession only if they obey his voice and keep his covenant, not because God will cease to love them if they disobey him, but because only if they trust fully in him will they obey him so as to live as his own.

### *The Commandments as a Means to Promoting Well-Being for All*

For readers of the biblical texts in antiquity, the purpose of most of the commandments that appear in the Torah would have been self-evident. By means of those commandments, God sought to promote justice, peace, equity, and well-being among his people. These things would be seen as resulting both directly and indirectly from the observance of his commandments.

In many cases, the manner in which particular commandments contributed to human well-being was quite obvious. A number of the commandments, for example, clearly had the purpose of promoting and preserving within homes and families relationships that might be healthy and strong. Such was the case with the command to honor one's parents and the prohibition of adultery in the Decalogue or Ten Commandments, as well as the commandments that sons and daughters show respect for their parents and not curse or strike them.<sup>5</sup> The prohibition of incest and other forms of sexual immorality as well as the command that nakedness not be uncovered within the family served the same purpose.<sup>6</sup> Many of these commandments also

5. See Exod 20:12, 14; 21:15, 17; Lev 19:3; 20:9; Deut 21:18-21; 27:16.

6. See Lev 18:6-20; 20:10-21; Deut 22:13-30; 27:22-23.



blessings he gave them, including especially the gift of life, and also underscored the belief that they belonged to God together with all that he had given them. In that sense, nothing that they possessed was truly theirs. For that reason, they were to dedicate themselves and all that they had to his service by making use of all that they had received from him in the way he had prescribed for the good of all. The offerings of well-being or peace offerings provided an opportunity for the people to come together in God's presence to rejoice and to enjoy the good things God gave them, yet the fact that part of those offerings was presented to God also reminded them that they owed all they had to him and that he was to be present in all aspects of their life. The sacrifices for sin were to serve as a means by which the people acknowledged their wrongdoings and renewed their commitment to serving God. As they did so, they also sought and experienced God's forgiveness and acceptance.

Both directly and indirectly, then, the commandments of the Torah that had to do with purity, sacrifice, festivals, and holy days were thought to promote shalom, justice, righteousness, equity, and a way of life that was in the people's best interest. Because of this, God would have been thought to have given those commandments for the same reason that he had given the commandments that regulated relations within the home, the community, and society in general, namely, that he loved his people and sought their well-being as an end in itself. By strengthening their identity as a people set apart for him to practice justice, love, and righteousness, such commandments reinforced among them the type of life that would allow them to enjoy the blessings that God wished to pour out on them out of love for them.

## REJECTING THE GODS WHO BRING DEATH

Throughout the books of the Torah, one of the commandments that appears most frequently is the prohibition against worshiping and serving gods other than the God of Israel. In fact, this prohibition stands at the very beginning of the Decalogue: "You shall have no other gods before me," that is, "in my presence" (Exod 20:3; Deut 5:7). The worship of other gods and idols is considered so grave a sin that it is to be punished by death.<sup>25</sup> A number of passages from the Torah also describe the God of Israel as a jealous God who demands that his people worship and serve him alone.<sup>26</sup>

Biblical interpreters have traditionally understood God's prohibition against serving other gods and the affirmation that he is a jealous God as reflecting a concern for his own glory, worship, and honor above all else. Supposedly, he refused to tolerate the worship of other gods because his righteous and holy nature led him to command that the praise, acclaim, and adoration of his

25. On the prohibitions regarding idolatry and idolatrous practices, see Exod 20:3-5, 23; 22:20; 23:13, 24, 32-33; 34:13-17; Lev 18:1-5, 21, 24-30; 19:4, 26-29; 21:10; 26:1; Deut 5:6-8; 6:14; 7:5, 25-28; 11:26-28; 12:1-4, 29-32; 13:1-17; 14:1; 16:21-22; 17:1-7; 18:9-14; 27:15; 29:18-19.

26. See Exod 20:4-6; 34:13-14; Deut 4:23-24; 5:8-10; 6:13-15; 13:4; 32:16-21.

people be reserved exclusively for himself. As we have seen in Chapter 1, in fact, it is commonly claimed that the purpose for which he had chosen Israel as a people was precisely so that he might receive from them the worship and praise he desired for himself. Such an understanding of the God of Israel once more involves attributing to him the type of motivation that was characteristic of the pagan gods of antiquity, who were thought to demand that people worship them and offer them lavish sacrifices and exuberant praise for their own sake.

In reality, however, a careful reading of the biblical texts and other Second Temple Jewish writings makes it clear that the prohibition of the worship of gods other than the God of Israel is grounded in a concern that is very different: such worship inevitably leads to injustice, cruelty, violence, and oppression. Unlike the God of Israel, pagan gods such as those mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures, the *Enuma Elish*, and Homer's epic poems were not concerned for the well-being of their worshipers as an end in itself. Rather, they saw human beings as a means to the satisfaction of their own needs, desires, and passions and thus sought to use and manipulate them for their own selfish ends. The worship of such gods, therefore, is viewed as leading people to live and behave in the same ways.

While the biblical texts and other Jewish writings of antiquity condemn the worship of gods such as Baal, Asherah, Astarte, Chemosh, and Milcom, their strongest condemnation is reserved for the god Molech, who demanded that the lives and blood of human children be offered to him.<sup>27</sup> The worship of Molech is associated not only with human sacrifice but also with the shedding of innocent blood in general.<sup>28</sup> Obviously, gods who demand that innocent children be put to death in order to satisfy their lust for blood or put away their wrath will not prohibit human beings from shedding the blood of other innocent human beings as well. On the contrary, the worship of such gods will encourage people to practice violence and bloodshed among themselves and treat one another with the same cruelty and inhumanity, motivated by the same type of selfish lusts, passions, and desires that were thought to characterize gods such as Molech.

Although most of the deities worshiped by Israel's neighbors in antiquity did not demand human sacrifice in the way that Molech did, they too were seen as promoting the practice of injustice, oppression, violence, and destructive behavior among those who worshiped them. The most powerful gods such as Assur, Marduk, and Baal valued their own worship above all else and were generally unconcerned about the manner in which the offerings presented to them had been obtained. As we have noted in Chapter 1, in many cases such gods were even thought to sanction violence, oppression, and

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27. See Lev 18:21; 20:2-5; 2 Kgs 21:6-9; 23:10; 2 Chr 33:4-6; Isa 57:9; Jer 32:35; cf. 2 Kgs 17:17; Ezek 20:31; 23:37-39; Philo, *Spec. Laws* 1.312-13.

28. See Ps 106:36-38; Jer 19:4-5; Ezek 22:3-12; 33:25-26; Wis 12:3-6; 14:23-25; Jub. 1:8-11; 11:4-6.

exploitation on the part of those who were dedicated to their worship and to lend their support to those who robbed, pillaged, and enslaved others in order to provide them with the sacrificial offerings they desired. The empires that conquered other peoples in the name of such gods did so not because they sought the happiness and well-being of those peoples but because they wished to subjugate, exploit, and enslave them for their own ends. Because such gods were commonly thought to be driven by things such as selfishness, jealousy, hatred, a lust for power, and a desire for revenge, their worship led to the same type of attitudes and behaviors among those who dedicated themselves to their service. The gods of the nations were not committed to justice, righteousness, compassion, and care for the poor and needy in the way that the God of Israel was. On the contrary, unless such things contributed in some way to the promotion of their own self-interests, they had little interest in them and were therefore for the most part unconcerned for the practice of those things among their worshipers.

The difference between the God of Israel and the gods of the other nations mentioned in the biblical writings is particularly evident in the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18. When the prophets of Baal cry out to him to set fire to the wood arranged around the animal victim they have prepared for sacrifice and Baal fails to do so, they begin to cut themselves and draw out their own blood in order to get him to respond (v. 28). According to the logic of such a practice, the only reason why Baal would become attentive to those who did these things rather than continuing to ignore their pleas is that the sight of blood and the cutting open of people's flesh would arouse his interest and capture his attention, evidently because such things fascinated him or brought him some kind of morbid pleasure. If that type of bloodshed was attractive and pleasing to him, then the same would be said regarding the shedding of human blood under other circumstances. In contrast, the God of Israel would never be thought to be pleased if people intentionally cut and wounded themselves or others in order to capture his attention or obtain his favor. On the contrary, such actions would provoke him to intense anger due to his love for his people and his desire for their well-being.

### *The Many Evils of Idolatry*

While the Pentateuch and historical books repeatedly reject and prohibit the worship of other gods among God's people Israel, for the most part they do not state explicitly the reasons for this rejection and prohibition. Numerous passages from these books characterize the worship of idols as abominable or abhorrent and associate it with evil practices and the abandonment of God's law. Although these passages can be understood in the sense that the worship of other gods is itself sinful and abhorrent, many of them also seem clearly to condemn such worship because of the other sins to which it leads. Those who worship idols not only shed innocent blood but also deceive and steal from

others, despise and abandon God's good commandments in general, and fall into other forms of wickedness and injustice.<sup>29</sup>

Elsewhere in the biblical texts, however, the relation between the worship of other gods and the practice of injustice, violence, and oppression is made explicit. In Hosea 4, for example, after using extremely harsh and graphic language to condemn the people for sins such as unfaithfulness, swearing, lying, murder, stealing, adultery, and bloodshed and stressing the depravity, greed, lustfulness, and shamelessness with which they have acted, the prophet continues: "My people consult a piece of wood, and their divining rod gives them oracles. . . . They sacrifice on the tops of the mountains and make offerings upon the hills, under oak, poplar, and terebinth" (vv. 12-13). In this same context, Hosea claims that the people have lost all understanding and accuses them of practicing adultery, prostitution, and harlotry in both a literal and a figurative sense: "Therefore your daughters play the harlot, and your daughters-in-law commit adultery. . . . For the men themselves go aside with harlots and sacrifice with temple prostitutes; thus a people without understanding comes to ruin. . . . Ephraim is joined to idols—let him alone. When their drinking is ended, they indulge in sexual orgies; they love lewdness more than their glory" (vv. 13-14, 17-18). At the same time, all of this leads the people to abandon the one true God: "For a spirit of harlotry has led them astray, and they have prostituted themselves, forsaking their God" (v. 12).

In a similar manner, immediately after affirming that "the righteous perish, and no one takes it to heart," and that "the devout are taken away, while no one understands," the prophet Isaiah accuses the people of being "children of transgression" and "the offspring of deceit" by burning with lust among the trees, slaughtering their children in the valleys, and prostituting themselves with offerings to gods such as Molech (Isa 57:1-10). In Isa 65:2-3, Isaiah presents the people as continuously provoking God to his face by "sacrificing in gardens and offering incense on bricks," while at the same time portraying them as "a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices." The idea that the worship of other gods leads the people to go after worthless things that are not good and do them harm rather than profiting or benefiting them also appears in Isa 44:9-20, where Isaiah criticizes the people for calling out to the idols they have fashioned with their own hands from iron and wood: "Save me, for you are my god!"

These same themes are stressed in Jeremiah as well. There the prophet claims that by exchanging the God of Israel for other gods such as Baal the people have "changed their glory for something that does not profit" and dug out for themselves cisterns that hold no water. For that reason, their worship of other gods in itself punishes them and fills their lives with evil and bitterness (Jer 2:5-20). According to Jeremiah, the people swear by gods who are no gods, committing adultery, practicing prostitution, and neighing for

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29. See, for example, Deut 20:18; 32:15-18; 1 Kgs 11:33; 18:18; 21:25-26; 2 Kgs 17:9-17, 29-40; 21:6-9; 2 Chr 33:4-6, 9.

their neighbor's wife like "well-fed lusty stallions" (5:7-9). At the same time, Jeremiah associates some of the same evils mentioned by Hosea with the worship of other gods and insists that such evils are entirely incompatible with the worship of Israel's God: "Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are safe!'—only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of thieves in your sight?" (7:9-11).

The intimate relationship between idolatry and injustice is made especially explicit in Ezekiel. Those who lift up their eyes to the idols in the high places are said to fill the land with violence and bloodshed, defile their neighbor's wife, commit robbery, and oppress the poor and needy by charging them interest and failing to feed and clothe them and restore to them the garments that they have given in pledge (Ezek 8:16-18; 18:10-18). As a result of their worship of idols, the people are said not only to commit adultery but also to have blood on their hands, including that of their own children, whom they offer up to those idols for food on the same day that they go to the Jerusalem temple to worship the God of Israel (23:37-39). The evils and injustices associated with the worship of idols are especially stressed in a passage from Ezekiel 22, where God instructs the prophet:

You shall say, Thus says the Lord GOD: A city that fills itself with bloodshed! Its time has come! It pollutes itself by making idols. You have become guilty by the blood that you have shed, and polluted by the idols that you have made. . . .

Look, all of the princes of Israel in your midst have used their power to shed blood. The fathers and mothers among you are treated with contempt. The alien residing within you suffers extortion; the orphan and the widow in your midst are oppressed. You have despised my holy things and profaned my Sabbaths. Dwelling in your midst are men who slander in order to shed blood, eat at the mountain shrines, and commit lewdness. There they uncover their fathers' nakedness and violate women who are unclean because they are in their menstrual periods. One man commits abomination with his neighbor's wife; another lewdly defiles his daughter-in-law; another among you defiles his sister, his father's daughter. Those dwelling in your midst take bribes to shed blood. You take interest and practice usury, and make profits from your neighbors by extortion; and you have forgotten me, says the Lord GOD. See, I strike my hands together at the dishonest gain you have made and at the blood that has been shed in your midst. . . .

Its princes within it are like a roaring lion tearing its prey; they have devoured human lives, taken treasure and precious things, and made many widows within it. Its priests have done violence to my law and have profaned my holy things. They have made no distinction between the holy and the common, and they have not taught the difference between the unclean and the clean; they have disregarded my Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them. Its officials within it are like wolves tearing their prey, shedding blood and destroying lives to get dishonest gain. Its prophets have whitewashed their deeds on their behalf, seeing false visions and divining lies for them, saying, "Thus says the Lord God,"

when the Lord has not spoken. The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery; they have oppressed the poor and needy and have extorted from the alien without redress (vv. 3-4, 6-13, 25-29).

Other Jewish writings from the Second Temple period draw the same connection between idolatry and the practice of violence, injustice, cruelty, and oppression. Philo of Alexandria, writing in the middle part of the first century CE, associates a variety of evils with the worship of idols, which not only serves as a means of deception but also draws people away from the true God as the sole source of goodness and blessings (*Decal.* 5-9, 53-54, 72-81). Josephus chides the worshipers of idols not only for their folly and vanity but also for imitating the lewd and lascivious conduct of the gods they serve. According to Josephus, “they determine that some of the gods are to be regarded as givers of blessings but others are to be called averters of evil. They then rid themselves of the influence of the latter by means of favors and gifts, as they would the worst scoundrels of humanity, expecting that some type of mischief will befall them if they fail to pay them their price” (*Ag. Ap.* 2.249). Here the logic of *do ut des* is clearly present: the gods sell their favors and forgiveness for a price.

The most explicit statement regarding the evils that follow from the worship of idols is found in the book known as the *Wisdom of Solomon*, written in the first or second century BCE:

And this became a hidden trap for humankind, because people, whether victimized by misfortune or by tyranny, bestowed on objects of stone or wood the name that ought not to belong to any other. Then, as if it were not enough for them to be in error concerning the knowledge of God, when they live in great strife due to their ignorance, they call such evils peace. For whether they kill children in their initiations, celebrate secret mysteries, or hold frenzied revels with strange customs, they no longer keep either their lives or their marriages pure. Instead, they either treacherously kill one another or grieve one another by adultery, and all is a raging riot of blood and murder, theft and deceit, corruption, faithlessness, turmoil, perjury, confusion over what is good, neglect of gratitude, defiling of souls, sexual perversion, disorder in marriages, adultery, and debauchery. For the worship of idols not to be named is the beginning and cause and end of every evil. For their worshipers either rave in exultation, or prophesy lies, or live unrighteously, or readily commit perjury; because they trust in lifeless idols they swear wicked oaths and expect to suffer no harm. But just penalties will overtake them on two counts: because they thought wrongly about God in devoting themselves to idols, and because in deceit they swore unrighteously through contempt for holiness. For it is not the power of the things by which people swear, but the just penalty for those who sin, that always pursues the transgression of the unrighteous (*Wis* 14:21-31; cf. 12:5-6; 14:1-20).

All of these passages describe clearly and graphically what happens when God’s people dedicate themselves to serving other gods. First, they abandon his commandments. They no longer feel obliged to refrain from stealing,

murdering, lying, swearing falsely, committing adultery, taking bribes, shedding blood, devouring lives, and practicing violence. Rather than caring for the weak and needy, they exploit, abuse, and scorn them. Unlike the God of Israel, the gods of the other nations not only overlook such behaviors and practices but in many cases even promote, encourage, and endorse them. What does it matter to those gods if aliens, orphans, and widows are made victims of greed, extortion, and robbery, as long as those gods receive the offerings and worship that they regard as being due to them? What do they care if the poor are charged interest at exorbitant rates? Why should they be bothered or upset if the destitute stand cold and naked because their desperate condition has left them no choice but to give their garments in pledge for loans and those garments have not been returned to them when they stand in dire need of them? These things may matter deeply to Israel's God, but they are of no concern to the type of gods worshiped by the other nations, including especially the powerful nations that seek to make smaller and weaker nations like Israel their slaves with the approval and assistance of the gods they serve.

Second, by abandoning God's good commandments that promote justice, equity, and wholeness for all, those who worship idols destroy their own lives by pursuing things that are worthless and have no value or benefit.<sup>30</sup> They spend the time and money that they should be using to care for their own needs and those of others who depend on them to do things such as venture into the mountains to present costly offerings to other gods there. Rather than seeking to satisfy their needs honestly through hard work, they idly prostrate themselves before pieces of wood and stone in order to implore from them the favors, blessings, and good fortune they selfishly desire for themselves and seek their help in taking from others what they covet in their greed. They weave ornate clothes to dress up their idols and pour out libations of expensive oil and wine to the queen of heaven while their children and neighbors go naked, hungry, and thirsty (2 Kgs 23:7; Jer 44:15-23). The worship of such gods thus devours their resources and deprives them of things that God has graciously provided for them in order to promote their well-being. Instead of looking to God's good commandments to direct their lives and guide their decisions, they consult sorcerers and soothsayers who not only devour their money and goods but also deceive, mislead, and manipulate them into doing things that do them great harm. As a result of practices such as these, the people are not only preyed on by those who seek only to take advantage of them but also fail to receive the instruction and orientation they need in order to live in ways that truly promote their well-being. Naturally, all of this angers God, who wishes to guide, instruct, and help his people out of love for them rather than seeing them follow down paths that lead to their ruin. For that reason, he is said not only to be provoked to anger but also to be shocked,

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30. On this point and what follows, see especially Ps 97:7; 115:3-8; 135:15-18; Isa 44:9-20; 45:20; 46:1-2; 57:1-13; Jer 2:5-19, 26-28; 10:1-15; 11:12; 16:19-20; 51:7-18; Hos 13:1-3; Hab 2:18-19; Wis 13:10-19; 15:7-17; Ep Jer 7-72.

appalled, and dismayed when his people abandon the way of life that he has laid out for them for their own good and instead go after things that are not only worthless but also fill their lives with evil, bitterness, and vanity.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, the people's worship of other gods leads to a set of values and practices as well as a social system that destroy their well-being and that of others as well. What kind of values will people have who not only dedicate themselves to gods that demand the sacrifice of children such as Molech but even express to such gods their love and devotion by placing before them precious ornaments and perfumes, pouring out drink offerings at their feet, and singing hymns of praise and adoration in their honor? Will such people love and care for their own children and other children in their midst and reach out with kindness and compassion to assist the weak and disabled? Will they treat their spouses and loved ones with respect, affection, and tenderness rather than abusing and beating them with the same type of brutality and savagery that pleases the gods to whom they have pledged their heart and devotion? Will they speak out against those who steal, lie, and shed blood so as to decry and denounce such things or instead not only turn a blind eye to them but actually encourage and take delight in them? When they become angry and upset at others, will they seek to understand them and engage in dialogue with them in an attempt to promote peace, harmony, and tolerance or instead lash out at them in a spirit of spite and vengeance to hurt them in any way they are able?

If the gods themselves lust after wealth, power, and even blood, should not their worshipers feel compelled not only to give them what they want but also to join them in lusting after the same things? If the gods simply seek to relax and enjoy themselves in luxury and opulence while those who are subject to them break their backs waiting on them hand and foot, why should human beings not seek positions of power and prestige over others in order to act in the same ways, enjoy the same things, and treat others in the same way? If the gods love to feast on delicious meals, become drunk with fine wine, recline on beds and couches made from gold and ivory, and engage in all sorts of carnal and sexual pleasures, who is to tell the rich and powerful elites who have the ability to do the same things that they should refrain from them due to the injustices and oppression to which the common people must be subjected in order for them to take pleasure from such things? If the gods are envious, spiteful, vindictive, violent, selfish, cruel, possessive, and manipulative, why should human beings not behave in the same ways?

### *Prohibitions Designed to Protect*

To serve and worship the pagan gods of antiquity, therefore, meant adopting the values and attitudes associated with those gods, imitating their behavior, and conforming one's life to the same ways of thinking and acting that were theirs. It also meant subjecting oneself faithfully and dutifully to whatever those gods willed and handing over control of one's life to those gods as one's



lords and masters. As we have seen previously, in ancient texts such as the *Enuma Elish* it is even affirmed explicitly that the sole purpose for which human beings had been created was that they might dedicate their lives to satisfying the needs and desires of such gods.

Here it is important to stress that in antiquity to worship a deity did not simply involve spending a short time every week participating in some type of religious service, periodically lighting a candle placed in front of a statue or image, or occasionally dropping a coin in an offering box or plate. Instead, the lives of individuals, groups, and entire peoples revolved around the deities they worshiped and served. They constantly looked to their gods for the everyday decisions they made, often with regard to even trivial matters, and believed that the gods were in some way behind virtually every good or bad thing that happened to them. Those who worshiped other gods were expected to devote themselves and their possessions to them and regard them as sovereign in their life. They symbolized this devotion by doing things such as shaving their heads and the edges of their beards, dressing themselves in certain garb, making gashes in their flesh, and marking themselves with tattoos (Lev 19:26-28; 21:5; Deut 14:1). Those who worshiped pagan gods always had to be concerned whether they were acting in ways that pleased those gods and kept them content or were instead offending or upsetting them in some way, whether wittingly or unwittingly. If they wished to prosper in life and avoid tragedy, hardship, and suffering they had to devote themselves wholeheartedly to their gods, manifest their dedication to those gods through gifts and offerings that were as lavish and costly as they could afford, and invoke their favor and blessings repeatedly throughout the day.

As many of the biblical texts that condemn idolatry indicate, the worship of foreign deities was also associated with things such as divination, augury, sorcery, and the casting of spells.<sup>31</sup> Far from promoting a concern for justice, compassion, and the well-being of others, such practices led to abuse, deception, theft, and other evils that did tremendous damage to people's lives. In most cases, such practices were means by which some took advantage of others to obtain monetary gain for themselves and at times took control over certain aspects of their lives in order to manipulate them for their own ends. In addition, in order to make important decisions in life, God's people were to look to the Torah and the principles underlying it, including especially the concern for justice, compassion, and the good of all, rather than following the dictates of those who practiced divination and augury or claimed to have access to spiritual beings, including not only divinities and demons but also the deceased. Similarly, those who cast spells on others were generally trying to do them harm. Even if they sought to bring about some type of positive outcome or benefit for themselves or others by means of sorcery, they were doing so by using means that were not based on the practice of what was good, right, and just. The use of magic to obtain what one desired also involved attempting

31. See, for example, Lev 19:26, 31; 20:6, 27; Deut 18:9-14.

In any case, the point that must be stressed is that despite the highly problematic nature of many of the biblical commandments, the biblical texts provide no clear basis for claiming that what was thought to have motivated God to give those commandments was a concern for himself or for his own glory, holiness, or justice or a need to satisfy the demands of his nature. While it is of course possible to read back into many of the commandments such a concern or need on the part of God, this involves interpreting them on the basis of presuppositions that are neither stated nor implied in the biblical texts. On the contrary, the distinct conception of the God of Israel in the biblical texts must be seen as excluding such interpretations, which reflect suppositions grounded in pagan modes of thought rather than the modes of thought associated with Israel's God throughout the Hebrew Bible.

### THE INHERENT GOODNESS OF THE TORAH AND ITS OBSERVANCE

Once it is clear that in biblical thought the purpose for which God had given the law or Torah was to promote the well-being of his people rather than to satisfy some need, desire, or whim of his own and that even commandments that from a modern perspective do not seem to serve such a purpose would have been viewed as doing so in biblical times, the idea that the law is exceedingly good and constitutes God's greatest blessing to his people Israel can be viewed in a new light. Precisely because the law brings life, wholeness, and happiness for God's people when they observe it, it is a means by which God fills their lives with good things.

#### *The Torah as an Instrument of Blessing*

The idea that the law is a gracious gift of God is particularly emphasized in two of the Psalms. Psalm 19 extols the Torah as a source of tremendous joy:

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making the simple wise. The precepts of the LORD are right, making the heart rejoice; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. They are to be desired more than gold, even much fine gold; they are also sweeter than honey and the drippings of a honeycomb (vv. 7-10).

These same ideas are echoed in Psalm 119, which is by far the lengthiest Psalm in the Psalter:

I delight in the way of your decrees as much as in all riches. . . . My soul is consumed with longing for your ordinances at every moment. . . . Your decrees are my delight; they are my counselors. . . . Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it. . . . I find my delight in your commandments because I love them. . . . Your statutes have been my songs wherever I make my home. . . . At midnight I rise to praise you on account of your righteous

ordinances. . . . The earth, O LORD, is full of your steadfast love; teach me your statutes. . . . You are good and do good; teach me your statutes. . . . The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of pieces of gold and silver. . . . If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my misery. I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have given me life. . . . Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all day long. . . . How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through your precepts I gain understanding; therefore I hate every false way. . . . Truly I love your commandments more than gold, even fine gold. . . . Your decrees are wonderful; for that reason my soul keeps them. . . . Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous ordinances. Those who love your law have great peace (*shalom*); nothing can make them stumble (vv. 14, 20, 24, 35, 54, 64, 68, 72, 92-93, 97, 103-4, 127, 129, 164-65).

The idea that the law is a good and gracious blessing given by God to Israel appears in other passages from the Hebrew Bible as well and often seems to be simply assumed.<sup>39</sup> The same conception of the law is found in other Jewish writings from the Second Temple period. In the books of the Maccabees, many Jews express their willingness to die for the law and in some cases even endure horrendous forms of torture rather than violate its commandments.<sup>40</sup> Philo repeatedly stresses the excellence of Moses' laws and insists that no other law in the world is comparable to it.<sup>41</sup> For Philo, this is evident from the fact that people of other nations marvel at its beauty and in many cases have themselves adopted some of the commandments contained in it. Because the commandments of the law are in perfect harmony with nature, they promote harmony in the world as well as kindness, humanity, and compassion not only toward other human beings but toward animals as well. Josephus also speaks of the law of Moses as producing admiration among other peoples and regards that law as the most excellent gift ever given by God.<sup>42</sup>

Behind all of these affirmations regarding the goodness of the law is clearly the idea that the law promotes human well-being by guiding and instructing people to live in ways that make that well-being possible. In other words, in and of itself, its observance allows people to enjoy the *shalom* or wholeness that God has always desired for all people from even before the time that he created them. While in that sense it is said to give life, the Torah also gives life and enables people to enjoy well-being and salvation because God responds to its observance by blessing that observance. Yet the reason why God blesses its observance is not that he desires that people obey his commandments for his own sake but rather that the people's commitment to a way of life that is conducive to their well-being will lead them to make use of the blessings he wishes to pour out on them in ways that will truly benefit them, since they will use what he gives them for good rather than misusing it to do harm to themselves and one another.

39. See Deut 4:5-8; Ps 37:31; 40:8; 94:12; Prov 28:7; 29:18.

40. See 1 Macc 1:15-38; 13:1-6; 2 Macc 6:18-7:2; 3 Macc 1:23; 4 Macc 4:21-26; 5:14-6:30.

41. On this and the points that follow, see especially Philo, *Moses* 2.12, 20-21, 25-27, 52, 79, 104; *Virtues* 113, 125, 141-42.

42. See Josephus, *Ant.* 3.223; 4.318-19; 12.110; 16.44; *Ag. Ap.* 2.175-76, 184-86, 277-80, 286.

It is precisely this idea that God gave his people Israel the commandments of the Torah for their sake rather than his own that distinguishes biblical thought regarding the law from later Western Christian interpretations of the law and God's commandments. If God is thought to have given those commandments for the purpose of obtaining from human beings what he desires for his own sake or in order to ensure that the demands of his holy and righteous nature are satisfied, the law can be good only in the sense that it enables people to know what they must do to keep God content by doing what he commands and avoiding what he prohibits. In that case, just as God gave the law and demands that his people obey it for his own sake in order to receive from them what he desires for himself or to ensure that the demands of his nature are met, so also the people will be motivated to obey it not because they truly *want* to obey it but because they *must* do so in order to enjoy God's favor and avoid his wrath.

Although this understanding of God's commandments can be reconciled with the idea that those commandments are aimed at providing the people with guidance and instruction, this guidance and instruction are no longer viewed primarily in terms of indicating to human beings the positive or negative consequences that will result naturally and intrinsically from certain actions and behaviors. Instead, those commandments guide and instruct human beings in the sense that they indicate to them the actions that are incompatible with the desires or demands of God's nature so that they can avoid bringing down on themselves his wrath and punishment, while at the same time letting them know which actions and behaviors will keep them in good graces with God and thus enable them to attain the blessings that he grants to those who obey him as a reward for their obedience.

Such an understanding of the law leads people to observe it motivated solely by the same type of self-interest that is regarded as characterizing God himself. When they obey God's commandments, they do so not because they are truly convinced that those commandments promote their well-being in and of themselves but because they have no choice but to obey what God commands if they wish to remain on his good side. What interests them is obtaining the rewards that God promises to those who obey him and being spared the punishments that God imposes on those who disobey him. If they serve others and show kindness and compassion to those in need only because God has commanded this of them, then they do so not because they truly love others or care about them but rather because they wish to obtain God's favor and avoid provoking him to anger. In fact, they may even use the needy to their own advantage by providing them with assistance in order to be able to make a claim on God or attempt to compel him to grant them what they want for their own sake. According to that logic, if they have given God what he wants, then he is obliged to give them what they want in return.

When God's commandments are viewed in this way, therefore, they become means by which people can earn his favor and blessings. Supposedly,

because God has promised to reward those who observe his commandments by blessing them and showing them his favor, he is now under obligation to keep his word. Therefore, any who obey what he has commanded can not only *ask* God to keep his promise by granting them his blessings and favor as a reward for their obedience but can even *demand* that he do so. Their obedience is then seen as leaving God no choice but to fulfill his promises by granting them what they seek for themselves, since he cannot go against his word if he is to be true to it. A God who would fail to live up to his promises would be neither good nor just.

This understanding of obedience focuses exclusively on outward actions in the same way that the worship of pagan gods did in antiquity. Those gods were not able to look inside people's hearts to see the motives behind their actions, nor did they care what those motives were as long as they received from their worshipers what they wanted for their own sake. If the God of Israel acted in the same way, promising to reward people simply for observing his commandments outwardly, then he would be unconcerned about the motives behind their observance. If instead he was truly concerned that people obey him out of love, motivated by a sincere and heartfelt desire to do his will, however, then outward obedience would not be enough to obtain his favors and blessings. Those who obeyed him outwardly would have no basis for demanding that he reward their obedience with his favor and blessings, since their outward conformity to his commands would not be sufficient to obtain his rewards and favor unless it were accompanied by a sincere desire to serve him and others out of love for them. Yet because God alone could look into human hearts to determine whether this desire was truly present, people could never be sure whether their motivations had been sufficiently pure in God's sight to gain his favor. In fact, if their outward obedience had been motivated by a desire to obtain something from God in exchange for that obedience, God would regard such a motivation as self-serving and would not be pleased by it. The only behavior that would gain his favor would be behavior that was *not* motivated by a selfish desire to obtain something from him.

Furthermore, if God sought to bring people to obey him out of sincere and selfless love rather than self-interest, it would be impossible for him to attain that objective simply by rewarding them when they obeyed him, since to do so would only reinforce the self-centered behavior he wished to eradicate. He could hardly offer people rewards in order to bring them to obey him in the way he desired if his objective was that their obedience not be rooted in a desire for rewards. In biblical thought, at times God even chooses *not* to reward obedience to his will with blessings, precisely because he wants people to learn to obey him in a disinterested manner rather than out of self-interest. To demand a reward from God or claim that he was under obligation to grant some type of favor in exchange for one's obedience would involve seeking to impose one's will on God rather than submitting obediently to him, trusting in his gracious providence and goodness by accepting whatever came from his

hand. If God's own behavior were based on the principle of *do ut des*, he would himself be acting out of self-interest. In that case, how could it be claimed that he did not want people to act out of self-interest when they did what he commanded? How could he demand that human beings not be self-centered in their behavior if his own behavior was self-centered?

In fact, the idea that the God of Israel might relate to his people on the basis of the principle of *do ut des* is rejected explicitly in Deut 10:17-18. There God is described as one "who does not show partiality nor take any bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the foreigners, providing them with food and clothing." If God acts purely out of love for those in greatest need and does not show partiality or sell his favors, he clearly does not act out of a concern for himself or seek to obtain something from those whom he helps in exchange for that help. He can hardly be thought to come to the aid of orphans, widows, and foreigners out of self-interest, motivated by a desire to receive from them some type of recompense or reward for the assistance he provides for them. For the same reason, if people try to obtain his blessings and favors by offering him something in return for those blessings and favors, in effect attempting to bribe him, they provoke him to anger rather than obtaining his approval. According to the logic reflected in this passage, therefore, God does not act out of self-interest when he blesses people or commands them to do his will. In that case, the basis upon which he blesses people or withholds his blessing is not the effect that their behavior has *on him* but rather the manner in which their behavior affects *them* as well as other human beings, that is, the *intrinsic consequences* of their behavior.

In addition to leading human beings to act out of self-interest and portraying God as one who does the same, the idea that the commandments of the Torah are means by which God's people can earn his favor, keep him content, and avoid arousing his wrath in exchange for giving him what he desires or needs for his own sake turns those commandments into an oppressive burden. People end up having no choice but to obey God, because if they fail or refuse to do so, they will be subjected to his punishments. As already mentioned above, because by nature they would prefer *not* to have to obey God and would rather follow desires and interests of their own that are contrary to God's will, they constantly find themselves in a dilemma. If they choose to do their own will over that of God they will arouse his wrath, yet if they choose to do God's will rather than their own they will feel frustrated and unhappy because they are not fulfilling their own desires and wishes.

In other words, according to the traditional schemes of thought, the problem that most human beings must continually face is that God disapproves of and punishes many of the activities and behaviors that bring them pleasure and enjoyment, while at the same time commanding things that they find cumbersome, onerous, and disagreeable. If their likes and dislikes coincided with those of God, this problem would not arise, since all would want the same things that God does and thus take delight in his

commandments. Unfortunately, however, human beings like many of the things that God dislikes and dislike many of the things that God likes. For that reason, they not only find it difficult to obey God's commandments but even despise those commandments. Rather than being free to pursue their own desires and interests, they feel compelled to comply with whatever God wills. They wish that they could live selfishly and behave in whatever ways they pleased without any interference or pressure from God. At the same time, they believe that if God would only allow them to live and behave in those ways, they could be truly happy. Rather than seeing God's law as something that *promotes* their happiness and is *good*, therefore, they regard it as something that *prevents* them from being happy by obliging them to do things that they would prefer to avoid and prohibiting them from doing many of the things that bring them pleasure.

In much traditional Christian thought, what makes God's law even more of a burden is that no matter how hard people may try to obey it, they can never attain a level of obedience that is acceptable to God. Supposedly, due to God's perfectly holy and righteous nature, God has no choice but to demand perfect obedience to his commandments. For mortal human beings, however, such perfection is impossible. For that reason, rather than promoting their well-being or saving them in some sense, God's law merely serves to make their sin evident to them and indicate to them that they are under his wrath and condemnation. In Lutheran theology, for example, it is said that "the law always accuses" (*lex semper accusat*). It terrifies sinners and drives them to despair by constantly threatening them with punishments. Due to their imperfection and their fallen sinful nature, they cannot deliver themselves from those punishments, since no matter how hard they may try they can never obey God's commandments perfectly. For that reason, in fact, in order for God to bless and save them, he must use some means other than the law and must even do away with the law so that it no longer condemns and accuses them. Rather than being saved from condemnation and destruction *by* God's law, they must be saved *from* it, precisely because it is the instrument by which they are condemned to destruction due to their inability to observe it perfectly.

Such an understanding of God's law, of course, only makes sense if all human beings are said to be subject to it. In biblical thought, however, the commandments of the Torah are given only to the people of Israel in the context of a covenant that God has made with them alone among all the nations of the earth. While this point is overlooked in many Christian traditions, in others it is maintained that even though the law of Moses was given to Israel alone, some of the commandments it contains are binding on all people universally. In some of those traditions, many of those commandments are said to be expressions of a natural law that God has made known to all human beings and has written on their heart or conscience. These include commandments such as those that prohibit murder, adultery, theft, false witness, and other

actions that are condemned in virtually all cultures and societies, as well as those that prescribe the practice of what is just, good, and right in general terms. In other Christian traditions, the commandments that appear in the Mosaic law are divided into three different categories—civil, ceremonial, and moral—, in order to claim that only those that belong to the last of these three categories are binding on human beings as a whole. Such a division, of course, is nowhere to be found in the biblical texts or in Second Temple Jewish thought. In the centuries following the composition of the books of the Hebrew Bible, however, it became common among many Jews to claim that there are certain divine commandments that are binding on all human beings and to associate these with the commands that God is said to have given to Noah in Genesis 9 following the great flood.<sup>43</sup>

One other reason why the Torah or law of Moses is considered *not* to be good in much traditional Christian thought is that it is supposedly concerned only with external ceremonies and rites that in the eyes of many interpreters seem to lack any real meaning or purpose. According to this view of the Torah, it consists of many petty, inconsequential, and insignificant precepts and regulations regarding things such as purity and the sacrificial cult. This negative view of many of the commandments of the Torah not only leads to the claim that the abolishment of those commandments is fully justified but also reinforces the notion that the law given through Moses was an onerous burden rather than something good that was intended to promote life and happiness among God's people.

Lying at the heart and root of all of the negative conceptions of the Torah or law just considered is the idea that we have seen repeatedly throughout the present chapter, namely, that God gave it for his own sake. The common assumption is that God's purpose was to obtain from human beings something he desired for himself, such as the honor, glory, and worship he craved as an end in itself, or to ensure that the demands of his holy and righteous nature might not be compromised as he acted to associate with sinful human beings in order to bless and save them. When the law is understood in this fashion, it will inevitably be regarded as something oppressive and burdensome rather than a blessing that leads to life, well-being, and happiness for all who allow it to guide and instruct them. In the biblical texts and Second Temple Jewish thought in general, however, the law or Torah is good not because its observance enables one to earn God's favor or avoid his wrath and punishment but because it imparts the wisdom, knowledge, and guidance necessary to live in ways that in and of themselves lead to human well-being and wholeness. It opens people's eyes to what is good and illumines the path that leads to true life, not in a future world but in the present one. For that reason, it is to be loved as a source of delight, wonder, joy, and gladness.

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43. See especially John Day, *From Creation to Abraham: Further Studies in Genesis 1–11* (London: T & T Clark, 2022), 155–62; Matthew P. Van Zile, "The Sons of Noah and the Sons of Abraham: The Origins of Noahide Law," *JSJ* 48 (2017): 386–417 (386–93).



This is not to deny, of course, that the Torah was also seen as good due to the promises of divine blessing that it contains for those who obey its commandments. Obedience to its commandments affords life and blessing not only due to the intrinsic and natural consequence of that obedience but also because God responds to those who obey it by pouring out on them even greater blessings. It is important to stress, however, that in biblical thought the reason that God blesses obedience to his commandments is that they are good in that in and of themselves they promote human well-being. This understanding of the commandments stands in sharp contrast to much traditional thought, which sees obedience to the commandments as good merely because God blesses that obedience. In other words, *the biblical idea is not that obedience to the law is good because God blesses it but rather that God blesses obedience to the law because it is good*. Both that obedience and the law itself are good in and of themselves and not simply because God rewards obedience to the law with blessings.

The notion that obedience to the law earns God's favor must also be considered contrary to biblical thought. In the Hebrew Bible, God's favor is always a free gift, as is his love for human beings. Because God is unconditionally committed to the well-being of all people, everything he does in relation to them has the objective of promoting that well-being and making it possible. In biblical thought, the Torah or law is itself an expression of God's favor because it is a means by which he seeks to bring his people to live in ways that will allow them to enjoy the well-being he desires for them. His demand and insistence that they obey the commandments of the Torah is also an expression of his love and favor because only by obeying those commandments can they attain that well-being. Disobedience to his commandments leads to pain, suffering, ruin, and destruction in and of itself. Those who obey those commandments, therefore, do not earn God's love or favor but merely respond to the unconditional love and favor God shows them in the way he desires for their own good.

When human beings see God's commandments as oppressive and burdensome because they oblige them to do things that they find difficult and displeasing while at the same time prohibiting them from doing things that bring them pleasure, in biblical thought the problem is not God, the law, or God's just and holy nature but the sinful nature of human beings themselves. Because they are by nature selfish and self-centered, they behave in ways that do harm not only to others but also to themselves. Many of the things that bring them pleasure in reality undermine and destroy their well-being, while many of the things that they find difficult and burdensome are actually good for them and promote their wholeness and happiness. The way in which they are made whole and find happiness, therefore, is not by following their own selfish desires and passions but by caring for one another and doing what is good, just, right, and loving in relation to one another and themselves.

### *The Law and the Love of God*

In biblical thought, because God's law promotes the well-being of his people, it cannot be regarded as oppressive. There is a sense, however, in which it can rightly be considered a burden. For sinful and selfish human beings, at times it is indeed burdensome to live in ways that are wholesome and healthy and to avoid things that may seem good but actually are not. To use a modern analogy, for most people it is difficult and cumbersome to exercise regularly and follow a healthy diet rather than spending all of their time resting in leisure and consuming foods, beverages, and other products that they find appetizing but actually do harm to their organism over time. Nevertheless, if they wish to enjoy a long and healthy life, they must make an effort to exercise, eat well, and avoid things that are harmful to them. In the same way, due to the selfish desires and passions that tend to drive and consume them, it is difficult for most human beings to live in accordance with commandments that promote their well-being by demanding of them things that they may find difficult or unpleasant and also prohibit them from doing things that they may find gratifying and enjoyable but actually do them harm. If they truly seek to enjoy wholeness and well-being, however, they must discipline themselves to follow those commandments even when it is not easy for them to do so. In biblical thought, those who do obey those commandments will indeed find life, blessing, and happiness as a result of that obedience, despite the costs and sacrifices that it often involves.

For the same reason, what will motivate those who understand God's law in this way to obey his commandments is not primarily their desire to be rewarded by God for their obedience but their recognition that obedience to God's commandments is good in and of itself due to the intrinsic consequences of that obedience. Because they are convinced that what God has commanded promotes their well-being and happiness, out of love for both themselves and others they will submit to those commandments gladly and willingly rather than feeling forced or compelled to do so by God. Just as God is fully committed to their well-being together with that of all other human beings as well, so also will they commit themselves to living in ways that promote their well-being and that of others by obediently conforming their lives to God's law. This involves loving themselves and others in the same way that God loves them and others, since by definition to love someone is to seek that person's well-being. It is this love that will motivate them to obey God's commandments rather than a selfish desire to obtain some reward from God or the fear that God will punish them if they disobey him. They will also see the well-being that results intrinsically from their obedience to God's commandments as a reward in itself rather than seeking some other type of reward from God for their obedience. Their trust in God's goodness and sovereignty will also lead them to see anything that God does in response to their obedience as a blessing and reward. Rather than defining for themselves and for God the content and nature of the reward they

seek, they will leave it up to God to define what type of response to their obedience on his part is truly in their own best interest, even if at times this may mean having to endure things that in themselves are painful or unpleasant rather than enjoyable.

While those who are motivated to obey God's commandments by genuine love for themselves and others are not acting purely out of self-interest, at the same time there is an element of self-interest involved in their obedience. Nevertheless, this self-interest is healthy rather than harmful. By living in ways that promote their well-being and happiness in accordance with God's law, they are doing what is truly in their own best interest. Yet this obedience to God's law is not only in their own best interest but that of others as well, since all benefit from it. In biblical thought, therefore, what is harmful is not to act out of self-interest per se but to place one's own interests over the interests of others and to fail to recognize that what is truly in one's best interest is to seek the interests of others together with one's own. Because they know that their own well-being is inseparable from that of others, those who obey God's commandments will be just as committed to the well-being of others as they are to their own well-being.

In addition to loving others together with themselves by committing themselves to seeking the well-being of others at the same time that they seek their own well-being, those who obey God by living in such a manner will also be acting out of love for God. The reason for this is that God himself seeks nothing but the well-being of all. Therefore, if human beings seek the same thing that God does by loving others at the same time that they love themselves, they are loving God by doing what pleases him. This means that to love God is to love oneself along with others by seeking one's own well-being and the well-being of all others in the same way that God does. It is precisely this that God's law prescribes and mandates out of love for all.

These ideas must be kept in mind when interpreting God's command for his people to love him. This command appears for the first time in Deut 6:5. There, after exhorting the Israelites to observe God's commandments and decrees so that all may go well with them in the land God is giving them, Moses continues: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart" (Deut 6:4-6). The same type of exhortation appears in Deut 10:12-13: "So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD and his decrees that I am commanding you today for your own well-being." The affirmation that the people are to love God with all their heart and soul is repeated elsewhere in Deuteronomy as well, where it appears alongside injunctions to obey the commandments he

has given the people.<sup>44</sup> In other passages, Moses exhorts the people to turn to God, seek him out, and obey him with all of their heart and soul.<sup>45</sup>

The idea that what God desires from his people is not merely literal or blind obedience but love, as well as an obedience that is an expression of love, can be discerned as well from the passages in Deuteronomy that speak of God's love for his people. Throughout the book, God is portrayed as a loving father or parent who carries Israel as his child, corrects and guides his people, supports them as a rock, and cares for them in the same way that a mother eagle cares for her young.<sup>46</sup> In the one passage from the book that speaks of God ruling as king over Israel, rather than presenting him as a self-serving ruler who demands obedience for his own sake, it is said that "he loved his people," that "all those consecrated to him were in his hand," and that he gave them instruction in order to guide and direct them (Deut 33:3-5). The most emphatic expressions of his love for the people, however, are found in the passages in which God exhorts them through Moses to obey his commandments so that all may go well with them. In Deut 4:40, for example, Moses tells the people: "Keep his statutes and his commandments, which I am giving you today for your own well-being and that of your descendants after you, so that you may live long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for all time." In the following chapter, after Moses recalls the manner in which the people had promised to obey him at Sinai, he affirms that God had responded with pleasure to that promise by saying to him: "I have heard the words of this people, which they have spoken to you; all that they have spoken is good. Oh that they had such a heart in them to fear me and to keep all my commandments always, so that it might go well with them and with their children forever!" (5:28-29). Here God's deep desire to see the people blessed with well-being always is inseparably tied to his desire that they obey his good commandments, since these two things are inseparable from one another.

The same desires are expressed elsewhere in Deuteronomy. When God commands the people to honor their parents, he tells them to do so in order that their days may be long and they may prosper in the land he is giving them (Deut 5:16). In the opening verses of Deuteronomy 6, after exhorting the people once more to keep all of the commandments God has given them so that they may enjoy a long life, Moses adds: "Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that all may go well for you and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has promised you" (6:3). In other passages in the book, Moses reiterates repeatedly God's desire that the people may prosper and thrive for all time in the land that he is giving them.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, however, he not only insists that these things can happen only if the people

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44. See Deut 11:13; 13:3; 30:6; cf. 11:1.

45. See Deut 4:29; 26:16; 30:2, 10.

46. See Deut 1:31; 8:5; 32:4-6, 10-14.

47. See Deut 6:17-19; 8:1; 11:8-9; 12:28; 19:13; 22:7; 30:16-20; 32:45-47.

obey the commandments God has given them but also stresses that God has given them those commandments *for their good*: “Then the LORD commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our lasting good, so that he might continue to give us life, as he does now” (6:24). As just noted above, in Deut 10:12-13 Moses also tells the people that he is giving them the commandments and exhorting them to obey those commandments for their own well-being. In this way, Deuteronomy not only expresses repeatedly God’s desire for the people to enjoy perpetually the well-being that he seeks to give them due to his profound love for them but also emphasizes that the commandments that he has given them are rooted in that same love, as is his command that they diligently and carefully obey those commandments. Only as they do so will they be able to attain that well-being.

If God loves the people in this way and longs for them to enjoy well-being in all of its fullness, then in order to obey him in the way he desires, they must love themselves in the same way and be just as fully committed to their own well-being as he is. It is this that he seeks above all else when he gives them his commandments and demands that they obey those commandments. At the same time, of course, because he loves each and every one of his people with the same love, they can only love and obey God if they love all of those whom God loves, namely, themselves and others. God therefore commands that they love one another in the same way that they love themselves, seeking the well-being of all together with their own well-being. For that reason, God’s command for people to love *him* with all their heart, soul, and might is at the same time a command for people to love *themselves* with all their heart, soul, and might, as well as a command for them to love one another in the same way (Deut 6:5). By loving themselves and one another, they express their love for God. However, when they fail to love themselves by seeking what is truly in their own best interest in obedience to God’s command, they fail to love God as well. When God commands and demands that people love him with all their heart, soul, and might, therefore, he does so *for their sake* and not merely for his own.

Due to the sinful and selfish nature that they share with all other human beings, however, in reality it is impossible for God’s people to love him with all their heart, soul, and might. Try as they may, they can never love God fully and perfectly, nor can they love themselves and others in that way. For that reason, God cannot expect them to fulfill that commandment perfectly. Certainly, he would like to see them attain an obedience that is perfect. In fact, those who truly love God would like to attain a perfect obedience to his commandments just as much as God himself would like such a thing, not for *his* sake but for *theirs*. The violent and destructive behavior into which they fall is just as odious to them as it is to God, since it makes it impossible for them to enjoy the well-being and happiness that God desires for them and that they desire for themselves. When they act in ways that do them and others harm, they arouse their own wrath at their behavior just as much as they arouse that of God.

Because it is impossible for God's people to love and obey him perfectly in the way that both he and they would like, in biblical thought God does not demand or expect perfect obedience from them. What he does demand, however, are two things. First, he insists that they be committed to loving themselves and others in the way that he has commanded in his law for their own good. Neither this commitment nor the obedience that will follow from it will ever be perfect, yet it is an indispensable condition for them to be able to attain as much as possible the well-being that God desires for them. Second, when they disobey him and his commandments so as to act in ways that do themselves and others harm, God demands that they acknowledge their wrongdoing and commit themselves to turning away from it, while at the same time asking him for the strength and ability they need to return to a life of obedience to his will. God cannot expect or demand that his people obey him perfectly, yet he can and does expect and demand that his people constantly look to him for the help and guidance they need to follow his commandments as best as possible for their own well-being and happiness.

While the law or Torah itself provides them with this help and guidance, at the same time it also points out to his people their sinfulness and wrongdoing. As they view their behavior in light of God's commandments, they realize that they are far from obeying those commandments in the way that they should. As just noted above, their failure to obey those commandments in the way God intends arouses their own anger and displeasure just as much as it arouses the anger and displeasure of God. The reason for this is that they want to live and behave in ways that promote their well-being just as much as God wants this for them. When their consideration of God's commandments leads them to the realization that they have failed to live and behave in those ways, their commitment to that objective as well as their inability to achieve it fully on their own leaves them with only one alternative, namely, to seek from God the strength, knowledge, and assistance they need to conform more fully to his commandments for their own good. Thus, while the God of Israel does not demand perfect obedience to his commandments from his people, he does insist that they constantly evaluate their conduct in light of those commandments and continually look to him for the help they need to conform their lives more fully to them. For the reasons we have seen, it is his love and his desire for their well-being that leads him to demand these things of them rather than any concern for himself, his own desires, or his own holiness, justice, and righteousness. As we have already noted repeatedly, what concerns God is not the effect that the behavior of his people has *on him* but rather the effect that it has *on them* and on others who are also the object of his love.

At the same time, the people's commitment to their own well-being and that of others will lead them not only to submit to God's commandments but also to interpret those commandments in a way that truly promotes that well-being. If the people were simply to submit to what God had commanded in a literal sense without being motivated by a sincere commitment to their

own well-being and that of others, they would not be doing what God desired and commanded, nor would they truly be pursuing their own well-being. For example, if they avoided any type of work on the Sabbath yet did not do so out of a sincere concern for their own well-being and that of others, they might still do all sorts of things on the Sabbath that in reality undermined and destroyed that well-being. As they sat alongside their family members and friends in their homes on the Sabbath, they might engage in verbal violence toward one other, degrading and humiliating certain persons in their midst and mistreating them in ways that left them with deep psychological and emotional scars. They might use the time they spent together as they rested to make plans to do harm to others, deceive and extort them, or devise acts of hatred and revenge to carry out once the Sabbath had come to an end, as some of the people are in fact said to do in Amos 8:4-6. In that case, rather than promoting their well-being, the time they spent together resting on the Sabbath would actually end up doing the exact opposite of what God intended when he gave the Sabbath commandment. The time of rest would serve, not to refresh them and allow them to enjoy life, but to carry out and promote activities that filled their own lives and those of others with strife, hatred, pain, injustice, and oppression.

The same observations might be made with regard to all of the other commandments God had given them. Merchants might obey the command to have scales and balances that were just rather than weighted in their favor, yet at the same time collude among one another to drive up prices in order to generate profits that others would regard as excessive. Those who supervised the economic activity carried out at the temple related to the sacrificial worship of Israel's God might follow everything that the law commanded literally yet at the same time take advantage of their position to practice corruption and injustice, perhaps even by twisting and interpreting the laws in ways that promoted their own interests and oppressed those who came to the temple to offer sacrifice. Even a literal observance of the commandments to help the poor and needy might not actually benefit them if those commandments were not interpreted on the basis of a sincere concern for their well-being. If the poor and needy were given assistance in ways that were paternalistic or had the purpose of manipulating and controlling them, that assistance might be in accordance with what the law commanded literally yet actually do them more harm than good. As all of these examples demonstrate, the only way in which the people could truly obey God's commandments and enable their purpose to be fulfilled among them was to live in love for one another and let that love guide their interpretation and observance of those commandments.

In addition to interpreting God's commandments in a way that promoted the well-being of all, it was necessary to avoid interpretations that might do people harm rather than good. Like any law, the law given by God might at times be misused to oppress people and promote injustice. Under certain circumstances, in fact, it might be necessary to violate a commandment in

order to observe the spirit of love and care for others on which it was based. When someone's life was in danger on a Sabbath day, for example, to remain at rest and do nothing to assist that person would be contrary to the concern for human well-being of which the commandment to observe the Sabbath was an expression. The same type of consideration might make it necessary at times to disobey other commandments as well in order to fulfill the good purposes for which those commandments had been given. Only by studying the law carefully so as to grasp more clearly not only what it commands but also the principles underlying its commandments would the people be able to interpret and apply the law in ways that truly promoted their own well-being and that of others. For that reason, God commanded the people and their leaders not only to *observe* the law carefully but also to *study and interpret it* with the same care.

When all of these considerations are taken into account, it becomes clear that what God ultimately wanted from his people for their own good was not simply obedience to his commandments but *love*, that is, a sincere and genuine commitment to their own well-being and that of all others as well. While they were also to love God himself with all their heart, soul, and might, by definition that love could only take the form of loving themselves and one another in the same way, which was the way that God loved them as well. God's command for his people to love him in that way, therefore, was not an expression of selfishness or a concern for himself but rather was grounded in his unconditional love for human beings. Only by truly loving him would they love themselves and one another, and only by loving themselves and one another would they truly be loving him. For that reason, even though in Deuteronomy and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible the commandment to love God and others seems to stand alongside other commandments as one among many, in reality it must be understood as constituting the basis of all of the commandments.

At the same time, it must be recognized that the type of love that God desired to see in his people for their own good was not something that could be brought about by means of commandments alone. People cannot be brought to love God, themselves, and one another in ways that are genuine, heartfelt, and sincere merely by being commanded to do so. Much less can that type of love be brought about by means of rewards, threats, and punishments. Only genuine love itself can evoke the same type of love in others. The only way that God can bring people to love themselves and others with a love that is unconditional is by loving them with a love that is also unconditional. For that reason, it was vital for the people not only to know and become convinced of the depths of God's love for them and see that love as unconditional, but also to regard the commandments he gave them and the demands he made upon them as expressions of that love. Only in that way would they be able to love themselves and one another in the same way that God did and share fully his commitment to their own well-being and that of those around them. It is



therefore no coincidence that in passages such as those from Deuteronomy just considered above, the exhortations for the people to love, obey, and serve God consistently appear in the context of allusions to the love, grace, kindness, and mercy that God has first shown for them, in spite of their unworthiness and their persistent stubbornness and disobedience to his will.

In conclusion, if both the biblical texts and the writings of the Second Temple period speak of the Torah or law as something that is not only good but a source of delight, wonder, joy, and gladness, the reason can only be that all of these writings regard the Torah as a means by which God seeks to bring his people to live and behave in ways that promote their well-being and happiness out of love for them. Because the God of Israel desired nothing but the well-being of the people he had created and chosen as his own, he had given Israel the commandments of the Torah not for *his* sake but for *theirs*, as well as for the sake of other peoples and nations whom he intended to bless through Israel. Likewise, because he had no needs that had to be satisfied by human beings and was not subject to a nature that dictated to him what he had to do or prevented him from relating to human beings in any way he chose, he was free to do whatever he considered good, right, and pleasing without any type of constraint or limitation. It was this freedom and love that had led him not only to create a world that was good in every way but also to give his people good commandments that had no other purpose than to promote the well-being of all.

The reason why people such as the Psalmists rejoiced over those commandments, therefore, was not because they responded to some need or desire on the part of God but because they enabled them and others to attain the well-being and wholeness that God desired for all people due to the intrinsic consequences that followed upon their observance. While some of the commandments were thought to contribute to the people's well-being *indirectly* rather than directly by reinforcing their identity as God's beloved people and reminding them of certain truths, such as God's unconditional love for them, ultimately all of the commandments were thought to have the purpose of enabling the people to be happy and enjoy all of the good that God desired for them. The only desire that God sought to satisfy by means of his commandments was the desire that the human beings he had created attain the happiness and well-being that he had intended for them from the start. While the people's obedience to those commandments was thought to please God greatly and make him happy, this was because he had linked his own happiness to theirs by regarding their happiness as an end in itself. For that reason, from the perspective of the biblical texts, the good commandments that God had given were not only a source of delight, wonder, and joy in themselves but also revealed a good God who was himself the source of these same things.