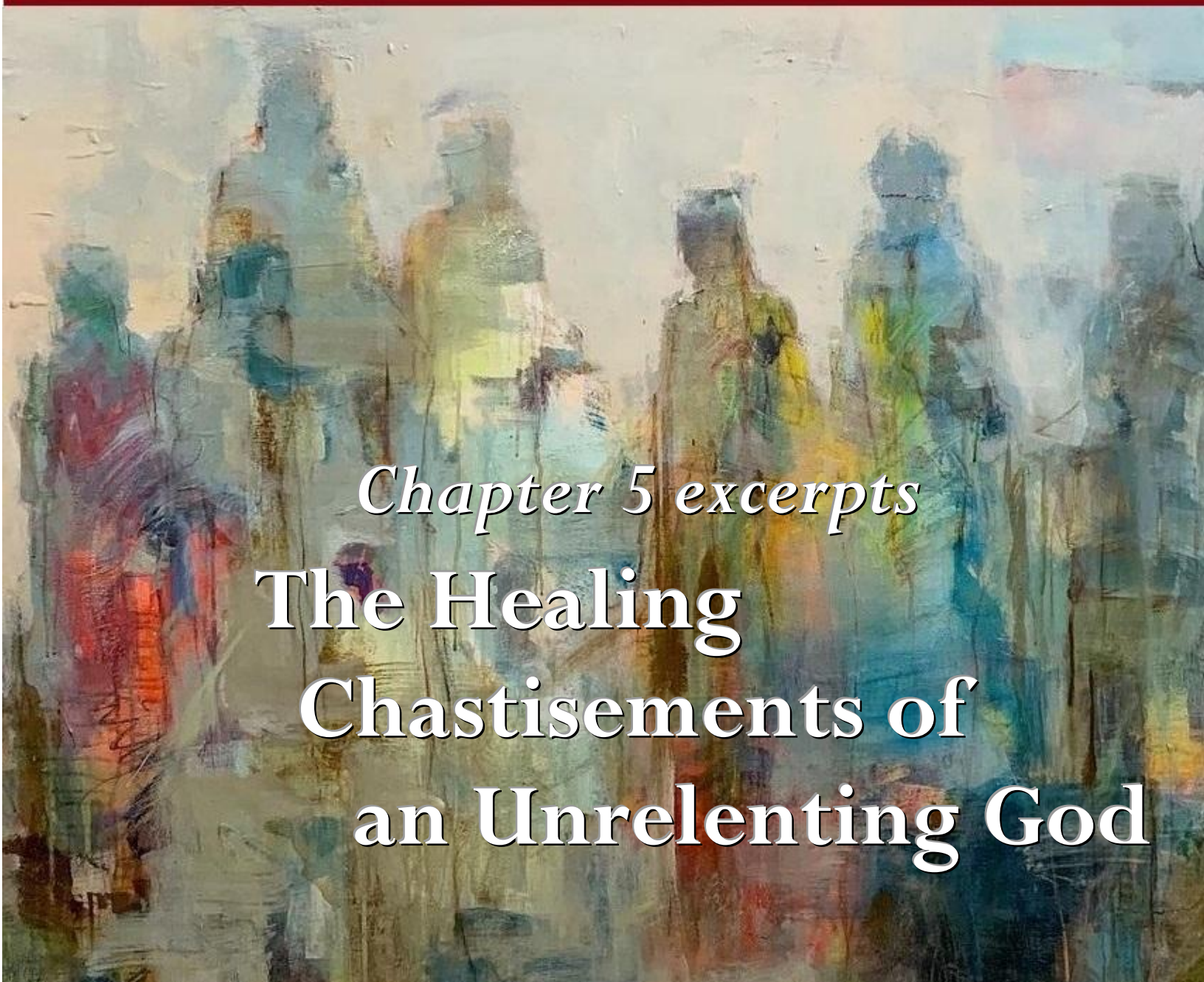


A GOD LIKE No OTHER

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 structures. The color palette is dominated by cool tones like blues, greens, and greys, with some warmer accents of red and orange. The overall effect is one of depth and complexity, with various brushstrokes and overlapping colors creating a sense of movement and history.

Chapter 5 excerpts

The Healing
Chastisements of
an Unrelenting God

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Depaganizing the God of the Hebrew Bible

David A. Brondos



Comunidad Teológica de México Theological Community of Mexico
Ciudad de México Mexico City

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If God is to accomplish his loving purposes among his people, when they persistently behave in ways that make it impossible for them to enjoy the well-being he desires for them, he must seek to bring them back to the good and life-giving path he has laid out for them in the Torah. This chapter explores the logic underlying the language of chastisement and punishment that runs throughout the biblical texts.

THE HEALING CHASTISEMENTS OF AN UNRELENTING GOD

In the pagan belief systems of antiquity, the way in which the gods obtained what they desired from human beings was by means of rewards and punishments. When human beings gave the gods what they wanted and acted in ways that pleased them, the gods rewarded them by blessing them in some way. These blessings might include positions of honor and privilege, wealth, victory over enemies, good health, and other forms of prosperity and good fortune. When human beings refused or failed to give the gods what they desired and instead acted in ways that displeased them, however, the gods generally became angry and responded with punishments such as defeat at the hands of enemies, disease, famine, poverty, natural disasters, and above all death and destruction.

In large part, these rewards and punishments served as means by which the gods attempted to influence human beings so that they would do their will and avoid doing whatever displeased or angered them. By rewarding those who obeyed them, the gods not only encouraged continued obedience among those who received those rewards but also communicated to human beings in general that they too could obtain the same type of rewards by submitting obediently to the gods. Conversely, when the gods punished those who disobeyed and angered them, they served notice to all other human beings that if they disobeyed the gods they would be subjected to the same type of punishments. In this way, those rewards and punishments served to promote among human beings greater submission to the gods.

According to this understanding of the relationship between human beings and the gods, it was necessary for human beings to win the approval of the gods and *merit* or *earn* the gods' favor through their deeds. If they could be said to love human beings, this love was conditional on the obedience of human beings to their will and quickly turned into rancor and hostility if that obedience came to an end. What moved the gods to respond in these ways to human behavior was a concern for their own needs and desires rather than any concern for the needs and desires of human beings themselves. If the gods wanted people to be well and to prosper, it was so that they could dedicate themselves more fully to their service and provide them with what they needed or wanted.

As we have seen in the previous chapters, biblical interpreters have often claimed that the Hebrew Bible presents the God of Israel relating to human

beings in these same ways. According to these interpretations, while God wanted there to be justice and well-being among his people, ultimately he sought these things for his own sake in order that the desires or demands of his nature might be satisfied. If such was the case, then he rewarded or punished the actions of human beings for the same reasons that the gods of the other nations did. When human beings did what he wanted for his own sake, he would reward them in order to encourage both those human beings and others to continue to obey him. In that case, what would ultimately bring people to do his will was not their love for God or others but their desire to obtain for themselves the rewards he offered, that is, their own self-interest. At the same time, God's desire to attain from human beings what he needed or wanted for his own sake would lead him to punish human beings when they failed or refused to obey him. Like the pagan gods just described, he would inflict punishments for the purpose of compelling human beings to obey him by making it clear that he would fill their lives with suffering if they did not. Either way, what would motivate people to obey him was their fear of his wrath and punishments as well as their desire for the blessings he offered them in exchange for their obedience.

According to the logic of this understanding of God's rewards and punishments, if the desires and needs that are rooted in God's nature can be satisfied, there is no other impediment or obstacle that must be overcome in order for God to save and bless human beings. All that sinful human beings require in order to be saved and blessed by God is for God to forgive them their sinful behavior rather than punishing them for that behavior. What prevents them from receiving God's blessings and salvation is not their sinful behavior itself but God's inability to overlook that behavior and leave it unpunished. In that case, if they are to obtain God's blessings and salvation, what is necessary is not that they stop sinning but that God be enabled to tolerate and overlook their sinful behavior rather than punishing it.

At the same time, what motivates God to bless and save those who obey him and to punish those who do not is not his love for them but his own self-interest. If God is said to love those who obey him, this love is not unconditional but is instead rooted in a concern for his own desires and the needs imposed on him by his nature. As soon as human beings cease to give him what he wants or what his nature demands, his love for them turns into wrath and punishment. Just as his rewards are not an expression of genuine love for those who obey him, so also his punishments are motivated by a concern for himself rather than a concern for the well-being of those who disobey him. Instead of desiring the well-being of those who willfully and persistently disobey him or seeking to bless them, he wishes to make them suffer for having offended and angered him. While the punishments he inflicts on those who disobey him may serve a corrective purpose by bringing them and others to put away their disobedience to his will and instead conform to what he commands, in many cases his purpose in punishing them is

simply to satisfy the demands of his just and holy nature and to give vent to his righteous wrath until it is exhausted.

When we look closely at the biblical texts that speak of God reacting favorably to behavior that is in accordance with his will but imposing suffering and hardships on those who act contrary to it, however, it becomes evident that the logic behind those texts is very different from that which we find in the pagan belief systems of antiquity. While those texts undoubtedly use the language of reward and punishment, they present a God whose response to human behavior is oriented entirely to bringing the people he loves to live in ways that will make it possible for them to enjoy the well-being he desires for all.

DEMANDING AN OBEDIENCE THAT BRINGS BLESSING

As we have observed in Chapter 2 of this study, from the very beginning of the biblical narrative, the idea that God desires to bless human beings is mentioned repeatedly. In Genesis, the blessings that God pronounces on the man and woman he has created as well as on Noah and his children immediately after the flood seem to be intended not only for those figures themselves but also for those who will descend from them (Gen 1:28; 5:2; 9:1). Subsequently, as we saw in Chapter 3, when God speaks to Abram or Abraham, from the very beginning he not only blesses him personally but repeatedly states his intention to bless his descendants and all of the families of the earth through him as well.¹ The idea that God wishes to bless Israel in a special manner yet also desires for the nations to attain his blessings runs throughout the biblical texts as a whole as well as the Jewish writings of the Second Temple period.

At the same time, however, these texts presuppose that God cannot truly bless people if they live in ways that undermine and destroy their well-being. While he may freely pour out on them blessings such as health, wealth, and prosperity and give them land, numerous descendants, and long lives, these things will not benefit them if they do not use all that he has given them for their own good. If they instead are abusive toward one another, practice injustice, oppression, and violence, and act out of greed, envy, and selfishness, they will fill their lives and those of others with pain and suffering. In that case, if God decides to withhold his blessings, it is not because he does not want to share those blessings with the human beings he created but because their behavior will not allow them to enjoy those blessings in the way they should. Rather than using the things that they receive from him for good, they will use those things for evil and do themselves and others harm.

In biblical thought, therefore, what leads God to respond favorably or unfavorably to the behavior of human beings is *the intrinsic consequences of that behavior*. When human beings behave in ways that promote their well-being for intrinsic reasons, God responds favorably to that behavior because it allows them to enjoy his blessings in the way he desires. When they act in ways that

1. See Gen 12:1-3; 17:16, 20; 18:18; 22:17-18; 26:3-4; 28:3-4, 14.

undermine and destroy their well-being for intrinsic reasons, however, God responds by withholding his blessings from them and imposing various types of hardships and sufferings on them in an attempt to bring them to put away that behavior and instead live in ways that are truly in their own best interest.

As we saw at the end of Chapter 2, these ideas can be clearly discerned in the Genesis narrative. When Cain kills his brother Abel and the earth subsequently becomes filled with wicked and violent behavior such as that which is described at the outset of the story of the flood and in the account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, it becomes evident that God cannot simply continue to pour out blessings such as health, long life, abundance, and prosperity on human beings if he wishes for them to attain all the good that he intended for them from the time he created them. To do so would only make things worse, since those engaged in such behavior will not only use what God has given them to do harm rather than good but will sink even more deeply into such behavior. By continuing to give them good things instead of acting to check such behavior and attempting to bring it to an end, God would be fomenting it even further and causing it to become even more widespread.

For that reason, God cannot truly bless people if he does not also lay down conditions for them to receive his blessings. These conditions, however, have nothing to do with anything that God needs or desires for his own sake. What defines those conditions is not God's nature per se but the intrinsic relationship between human behavior and the consequences of that behavior. If God is truly to bless human beings, he must at the same time demand that they live in ways that make it possible for them to enjoy those blessings and obtain the well-being he intends for them. They must do what is good and right, treating one another with love and consideration and caring for one another's needs. At the same time, God must prohibit them from acting in ways that do them harm. In addition to laying down such conditions, however, God must respond favorably when people fulfill those conditions and seek to correct them through hardships and sufferings when they do not.

Although the idea that God's blessing of well-being is conditional upon behavior that makes it possible for human beings to enjoy that well-being is evident throughout the biblical texts, it is especially prominent in a number of passages in Deuteronomy where God exhorts his people through Moses to obey all that he has commanded so that he may bless them. In the lengthy discourse of Moses that appears at the outset of the book, he tells the people: "Keep his statutes and his commandments, which I am commanding 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" (Deut 4:40). Further on, God expresses to Moses his wish that the people may obey his commandments for their own good: "If only they had such a heart in them that they would fear me and keep all my commandments always, so that it might go well with them and with their children forever!" (5:29). Moses then reiterates the same idea to the people: "You must walk in

all the way which the LORD your God has commanded you, that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you are to possess" (5:33). Then, after exhorting them once more to keep God's decrees and commandments, Moses adds: "Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with 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. . . . Do what is right and good in the sight of the LORD, so that it may go well with you" (6:3, 18). The same ideas are repeated further on in Deuteronomy.²

In principle, these passages can be understood in two different ways. If interpreted on the basis of the logic found in the pagan belief systems of antiquity, what God wants is obedience to his commandments *for his own sake*. In that case, he is offering to bless the people in exchange for that obedience so that in that way he can get from them what he needs or desires for himself. In essence, he is telling them: "If you give me what I want for my sake, I will give you what you want for your sake. I will reward you with blessings in exchange for your obedience to my commandments." The logic would once more be that of *do ut des*: by granting the people the life of abundance and prosperity that they desired for themselves, God would obtain from the people the praise, worship, and obedient submission he desires for himself.

If these passages are instead interpreted on the basis of the idea that God seeks the well-being of his people as an end in itself, however, they must be understood very differently. By means of the Torah, God has provided his people with the guidance, knowledge, and instruction they need to live in ways that will allow them to enjoy all of the good he desires for them. To a large extent, that good results from the observance of those commandments *in and of itself* due to the natural and intrinsic consequences of that observance. Out of love for his people, therefore, God demands that they observe those commandments, not because of any benefits he derives from their observance himself, but because of the benefits that the people themselves will obtain by observing them.

At the same time, God tells the people that only if they observe those commandments faithfully will he be able to bless them in the way he desires. In other words, the blessings that will result *intrinsically* from the observance of those commandments will be complemented by the blessings that God will pour out on the people *extrinsically* because the people's way of life will make it possible for the blessings that God will grant them to contribute to their happiness and well-being rather than undermining or destroying it. Instead of having to withhold his blessings because the people will misuse what he gives them to do harm to themselves and one another, their obedience to his good commandments will allow God to pour out on them his gifts and blessings in the way he desires out of love for them, since that obedience will allow everything that God gives them to be used for good rather than for harm and evil.

2. See Deut 7:12-16; 11:8-21; 12:28; 30:15-20.

The contrast between these two different ways of interpreting texts like those just cited can be understood by turning once more to the distinction between ends and means. According to an interpretation that is based on pagan categories of thought, the end that God is pursuing is obedience to his commandments, while the means by which he seeks to attain that end is by promising to reward the people with blessings if they obey those commandments. According to biblical thought, however, the end that God seeks is the well-being of his people, while the people's obedience to those commandments is the means to attaining that end. In other words, *rather than offering to bless the people so that they will obey him, God commands the people to obey him so that he may bless them*. Instead of desiring their obedience for *his own* sake and promising to bless them in order to obtain that obedience, God desires their well-being for *their* sake as an end in itself and demands that they obey him because only in that way will they be able to attain and enjoy that well-being.

This, in fact, is what the passages just cited from Deuteronomy affirm explicitly. A purpose clause is used to state clearly what the objective is: Moses repeatedly tells the people to obey God's commandments "so that it may go well with you" and "so that you may live." These phrases communicate the goal or purpose of the people's obedience, namely, that things go well with them and that they be able to live in the sense of enjoying the well-being that God desires for them. The means to that end is their obedience to his commandments, the observance of which promotes that well-being in and of itself. The same idea is reflected in Josh 1:8, where Joshua tells the people: "This book of the law (*torah*) is not to depart from your mouth, but you are to meditate on it day and night so that you may be careful to act in accordance with everything that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will thrive." This prosperity and thriving are therefore not something that God offers them in exchange for their obedience but rather something that will result from the observance of God's commandments for intrinsic reasons: that observance will lead to positive consequences in and of itself.

All of these passages, therefore, presuppose both an *intrinsic* and an *extrinsic* relationship between the people's obedience and the well-being that will follow upon that obedience. Although in and of itself their obedience will promote their well-being due to its natural consequences, that well-being will also result from God's *favorable response* to that obedience: he will fill their lives with blessings, confident that they will use those blessings for their good rather than for evil or injustice. In this way, their well-being will result both *intrinsically* from their obedience to God's commandments due to the natural consequences of that obedience and also *extrinsically* due to God's favorable response to that obedience, which will take the form of providing them with blessings such as long life and prosperity in the land that God has chosen to give to them.

This understanding of the relation between obedience to God's commandments and the well-being and wholeness that God is able to bring

all, he must not only show kindness to all but demand that all do the same in relation to one another. This means that God's gifts are inseparable from his demands, since both his gifts and his demands have the purpose of promoting the well-being of all. In a sense, in fact, his demands must themselves be viewed as a gracious gift given to all, together with the ability to fulfill those demands, because unless human beings receive and fulfill those demands, they cannot obtain well-being and wholeness.

HEALING DISOBEDIENCE THROUGH CHASTISEMENTS

According to the biblical narrative, while at times God's people Israel respond favorably to the blessings he pours out on them by living in a way that makes it possible for them to enjoy those blessings, at other times they do not. In fact, in both the biblical narratives and the prophetic writings, the people are presented as disobeying God and refusing to live in accordance with his will most of the time. When this happens, the question arises as to what God is to do. In principle, he might simply continue to pour out his blessings on them in an attempt to convince them of his love for them, yet if this does not lead them to trust and obey him it can even be counterproductive. As noted above, rather than bringing them to change their ways, their reception of those blessings will simply lead them to become even more entrenched in their destructive behavior and to do harm to themselves and others with the gifts God gives them by using them for evil rather than for good.

For that reason, it might appear that the best option open to God when his people persistently disobey him is simply to withhold his blessings from them and abandon them to the harmful and destructive way of life they have chosen for themselves until they come to realize that such a way of life is not in their own best interest. While at times this may work, the problem with such an approach is that when the people fall into destructive behavior, those who generally suffer the most are those who are weak and in greatest need. In contrast, the rich and powerful who are most responsible for the injustices, violence, and oppression that generate suffering among the people seem to prosper. If God simply abandons the people to their own ways and does nothing, therefore, in essence he is condemning the needy and marginalized to an inordinate and disproportional amount of suffering that will also last for an indefinite period of time. Such an approach tends to make the problem of injustice worse rather than resolving it. Instead of bringing the people to abandon their sinful behavior, it might even involve condemning them to go unimpeded down a path that will eventually lead to their destruction and ruin.

In principle, it might be thought that God could bring people to change their ways by producing some type of mysterious change in them, perhaps by pouring out his Spirit into their hearts. While numerous passages in the Hebrew Bible speak of God transforming the hearts of his people and sending his Spirit on them, nothing in those passages or the Hebrew Bible as a whole suggests that God can simply produce automatically in people the way

of life necessary for them to enjoy the well-being and wholeness he seeks for all. While he is certainly presented as being able to influence people in many ways in order to change their hearts and bring them to live differently, the biblical texts do not speak of him accomplishing these things unilaterally, in effect acting in some hidden and mysterious way to transform those who are rebellious and disobedient into righteous and obedient people. Nor do the biblical texts present God as being able to turn those who have chosen the path of disobedience and injustice into people who gladly and willingly practice what is good, just, and right simply by pouring out his Spirit on them. In fact, those texts presuppose that the problem of human sin and disobedience cannot be resolved in this way, because if it were possible, God's love for human beings and his desire for their well-being would have led him to do so from the moment they are first said to have disobeyed him in the Genesis account. He would hardly have destroyed countless human beings in the flood in Noah's day if he had instead had the ability to transform them into people who would do what is good and right by infusing them with some mysterious power that would accomplish that objective in and of itself. Throughout the biblical texts, it is consistently assumed that in order for people to live in righteousness, obedience, and love they must desire to do so willingly and of their own accord. They may certainly receive God's help in order to be able to live in that manner and ask God to give them the strength, wisdom, and resolve necessary to do so by pouring out his Spirit upon them, yet when God responds positively to such petitions he is not bringing people to act contrary to their own will but rather enabling and empowering those who seek and desire to live in conformity with his will to do so.

If those who are disobedient must be brought to change their ways willingly, then the best option would be for God to attempt to convince them that it is in their own best interest to leave behind their destructive behavior and live in the way he has prescribed for their own good. In biblical thought, the means by which God does this is by sending the people prophets to speak to them on his behalf. These prophets may employ a variety of approaches and arguments in an attempt to convince their hearers to turn back to the way of life that will allow them to experience the wholeness and well-being that God intends for them. They may remind the people of God's love and mercies and his desire to bless them as he has in the past. They may seek to demonstrate to the people that their behavior is destroying their own well-being rather than contributing to it. The prophets may also attempt to stir up compassion in their hearers for those who are suffering due to the hearers' failure to practice justice, point out to their hearers the advantages of doing what is good and right and the disadvantages of doing harm to others, or appeal to their conscience or emotions in some way. If none of these approaches produce the desired effect, the prophets may have no choice but to proclaim to the people that God will inflict suffering and hardships on them if they persist in their disobedience and refuse to change their ways.

Such, in fact, appears to be the only option left open to God when every other course of action has failed. If God cannot bring those who persistently refuse to live in ways that will allow them to enjoy the well-being he desires for all by continuing to pour out his blessings on them, abandoning them to their own ways, or producing some type of mysterious change in them automatically and unilaterally, and if those people will not listen to the prophets he sends them, then he seems to have no choice but to inflict suffering on them. He does so in the hope that those sufferings will allow him to accomplish his loving purpose of leading them to put aside their destructive behavior and submit obediently to his will for their own good. By making it too painful for the people to continue down the same path they have been following, God seeks to compel them to abandon that path and follow instead the one he has laid out for them in his love, a path that leads to justice, wholeness, and well-being for them and for others as well.

Punishment as Chastisement, Discipline, and Correction

In English, it is common to use the language of punishment when speaking of the manner in which God inflicts sufferings and hardships on those who disobey his commandments. While that language is undoubtedly appropriate to describe God's response to disobedience to his will in the biblical texts, it can be problematic in that it tends to focus primarily on the pain and suffering inflicted by God and overlook the purpose for which he inflicts that pain and suffering or allows it to take place. As a result, the same understanding of the nature and purpose of punishment that we have noted above with regard to the pagan belief systems of antiquity tends to be read back into the biblical texts. Like the gods of those belief systems, God is thought to punish those who disobey him simply because he demands to be obeyed for his own sake or because he is compelled to uphold the system or order that he has established in order to satisfy the demands of his holiness, justice, and righteousness. Because his punishments are rooted in a concern for his own desires or for needs that are rooted in his nature, such as the need to uphold his own justice and his inability to tolerate sinful behavior, those punishments are not thought to be loving or to be aimed at promoting well-being among human beings.

In the Hebrew Bible, however, the language of punishment is not particularly common. Most of the occurrences of that language appear in the writings of the prophets, yet even there the two Hebrew terms that are usually translated as punishment in English versions are *paqad*, which literally means "to visit," and the noun *avon*, which generally refers to wrongdoing and guilt itself rather than its punishment. Both of these terms will be examined more closely in later chapters. It is also common for English versions of the Bible to use the language of punishment when translating Hebrew verbs and nouns that refer to judging or condemning people or afflicting them with sufferings, even though that language is not used explicitly in the Hebrew text of the passages involved.

The other Hebrew term that is often translated as “punishment” is the noun *musar*, which is derived from the verb *yasar*. In reality, however, it would be more appropriate to use the language of *chastisement* to translate these two Hebrew terms. While in English chastisement is often understood as being synonymous with punishment, it focuses more specifically on the idea of correction and discipline. To chastise is not merely to inflict suffering and punishments or to reprimand, censure, or rebuke those who do wrong but to do these things for the purpose of bringing them to alter their behavior for the better.

While at times the verb *yasar* is used in the Hebrew Bible to speak of inflicting punishment on someone, its primary meaning revolves around the idea of disciplining, correcting, or even instructing.⁴ In Isa 28:26, this verb appears in parallelism with the verb *yarab*, which means “to teach,” to speak of God instructing his people: “For they are well instructed; their God teaches them.” In Hos 7:15, *yasar* is used in the sense of training someone: “It was I who trained and strengthened their arms.” The idea that chastisement has a loving purpose and is designed to guide and teach, even though it may involve inflicting suffering, is evident in passages such as Ps 94:10-12, where *yasar* appears twice in the sense of applying discipline aimed at correction and instruction: “He who disciplines the nations, he who teaches knowledge to humankind, does he not chastise? . . . Happy are those whom you discipline, O LORD, and whom you teach out of your law.”

The Hebrew noun *musar* conveys the same meaning of discipline and correction.⁵ In Prov 1:8, this noun is even used in parallel with the word *torah* as its virtual synonym: “Hear, my child, your father’s instruction (*musar*), and do not reject your mother’s teaching (*torah*).” In the Septuagint, the Greek terms regularly used to translate *yasar* and *musar* are *paideuein* and *paideia*, which also refer to instruction or correction. These terms were originally used to refer to the training and education of a child (*pais/paidion*), which was done either by the child’s parents or a pedagogue (*paidagōgos*), that is, a person whose task it was to guide, instruct, protect, and care for a child. The fact that such correction was understood as an expression of God’s love is evident in many of the passages that use these terms, but perhaps is stated nowhere as forcefully as in a passage from the book of 2 Maccabees. There, after describing the horrendous sufferings that the Jews were enduring at the hands of the Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes, the author writes:

Therefore I exhort those who read this book not to be disheartened by these afflictions, but to consider that these punishments were aimed not at the destruction of our people but at their correction (*paideia*). For it is a sign of great kindness to punish the impious immediately rather than leaving them alone for long. For the Lord has determined not to treat us like the other nations. In their case he waits patiently for them to reach the full measure of

4. See, for example, Deut 4:36; 21:18; Ps 6:1; 16:7; 39:11; Prov 19:18; 29:17; 31:1; Jer 10:24; 31:18.

5. See, for example, Job 36:10; Prov 1:2-3, 7; 4:13; 6:23; 13:1, 24; 15:32-33; Jer 2:30; 5:3; 7:28; 17:23; 32:33.

their sins before punishing them, but in our case he does not wait until our sins have reached their height before inflicting punishment on us. Therefore he never withdraws his mercy from us. He does not abandon his people, but chastises (*paideuōn*) us with afflictions (2 Macc 6:12-16).

In the Hebrew Scriptures and other Second Temple Jewish writings, the manner in which God imposes suffering on his people to correct them is at times likened to that of a father who chastises or disciplines his children in order to educate and correct them. In Deut 8:5, Moses tells the people: “Know in your heart, then, that as a parent disciplines a child, so the LORD your God disciplines you.” The book of Proverbs speaks of God in the same way: “My child, do not despise the LORD’s discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the LORD reproves the one he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights” (Prov 3:11-12). The Psalms of Solomon, which date from the first or second century BCE, use the language of *paideia* to affirm that God “corrects the righteous as a beloved son, and his chastisement is as that of a firstborn. For the Lord spares his pious ones and blots out their errors by his chastisements” (Pss. Sol. 13:9-10). The same comparison appears further on in the same work: “Your discipline for us is as for a firstborn son, an only child, to divert the perceptive person from unintentional sins” (Pss. Sol. 18:4). Josephus similarly presents Moses warning the Israelites that when they sinned God “would exact punishment, not indeed in keeping with their misdeeds, but such as parents inflict upon their children as an admonition” (*Ant.* 3.311).

Numerous other passages from these texts convey the same ideas. For God to discipline people through suffering is seen as a blessing and an expression of God’s love and favor, since it leads them to live in ways that enable them to enjoy the well-being God desires for all by guiding and teaching them. While they are painful, God’s chastisements serve to heal and purify people from their destructive behavior and are therefore a motive for rejoicing:

How happy is the one whom God corrects; therefore do not despise the discipline of the Almighty. For he wounds, but he binds up; he strikes, but his hands heal (Job 5:17-18).

Whoever seeks God will accept his discipline, and those who rise early to seek him will find his good pleasure (Sir 32:14).

Therefore you correct little by little those who trespass, and you remind and warn them of the things through which they sin, so that they may be freed from wickedness and put their trust in you, O Lord (Wis 12:2).

At the heart of this understanding of the loving purpose of God’s punishments or chastisements is the same idea considered above according to which there is a natural and intrinsic relationship between human behavior and the consequences that result from that behavior. Just as the practice of what is good, just, right, and loving contributes to human well-being and wholeness for intrinsic reasons, so also behavior that is self-serving, unjust, uncaring, violent, and harmful undermines and destroys such well-being and wholeness

in and of itself. This is precisely the type of behavior that God prohibits in his Torah. The reason that God punishes such behavior, therefore, is that he wishes to bring his people to live in ways that promote their well-being and to avoid behavior that destroys that well-being. In other words, the *intrinsic* relationship between harmful and destructive behavior and the pain, suffering, injustice, and oppression that result naturally from it constitutes the basis for the *extrinsic* relationship between that behavior and God's response to it, namely, his chastisements or punishments. In biblical thought, when people fall into wrongdoing, what pains God is not the effect that such wrongdoing has *on him* but rather the effect that it has on human beings themselves, including especially the poor, weak, and needy.

This understanding of the reason why God prohibits and punishes disobedience to his will has made the use of the language of sin problematic and misleading when it is used to represent biblical thought. As we have seen previously, due to the influence of the modes of thought that are characteristic of the pagan worldviews of antiquity, where certain actions are deemed sinful due to the effect they have on the gods who have prohibited those actions for their own sake, biblical interpreters have generally understood sin to consist of actions and behaviors that God prohibits and punishes due to the manner in which those actions and behaviors affect *him* rather than the manner in which they affect human beings themselves. Certain actions are categorized as sinful and prohibited simply because they are thought to run contrary to God's will and to displease him on account of his holy and righteous nature, which does not allow him to tolerate those actions without punishing them. Neither those prohibitions nor the punishments he imposes on those who violate them are rooted in a concern for human well-being. Instead, they respond only to a desire or need on the part of God himself. Sin is therefore defined in terms of actions and behaviors that God prohibits *for his own sake* and for the sake of his divine nature rather than for the sake of human beings or their well-being, which is destroyed or undermined by those actions and behaviors due to the harmful consequences that follow from them intrinsically. For that reason, in contrast to biblical thought, neither God's prohibition of sin nor the punishments he imposes on sinners in response to their sins are considered to be loving. In fact, the question of *why* God prohibits and punishes sin is rarely raised or discussed among biblical scholars and theologians.

When sin is understood and defined in this way, it is regarded primarily as an *offense against God*. In English, to offend someone is to affront, irritate, or upset them, usually by doing something that dishonors and disrespects them or causes them some type of injury. On this basis, God is said to be offended by human sin for the same reasons, namely, that it diminishes his honor and glory, deprives him of something that is rightfully his, or affronts him in some other way. This is true even when the sins committed do harm to human beings due to the intrinsic consequences of those sins. Thus, for example, when people lie, cheat, practice violence, or mistreat and oppress others, such

actions and behaviors are regarded as sins and offenses committed *against God*, as if what concerned God was the effect that such actions and behaviors have *on him*. It is significant that, while the Hebrew Bible often speaks of God being angered at human actions and behaviors, it is virtually impossible to find passages in which God is explicitly said to be *offended* by what human beings do, as if he were the one harmed or affronted by their wrongdoing.

As we noted briefly in Chapter 4, the same type of observations can be made with regard to the terminology of righteousness. Generally righteousness is defined in negative terms as the absence of sin. The righteous are those who do not sin or offend God. While righteousness may involve doing what is good and right, among many biblical interpreters it is understood primarily in terms of avoiding those actions and behaviors that displease God and provoke him to wrath. As a result, the righteous are defined in terms of what they do *not* do, as if what interested God is merely that people refrain from behavior that upsets and irritates him. Righteousness is thus understood to be synonymous with terms such as innocence and blamelessness. Supposedly, this is what God requires in order to accept and justify people—not that they be committed to seeking the well-being of others, including especially those in greatest need, but that they keep themselves pure and uncontaminated by sin as he is.

For the same reasons, even to speak of what is good, right, and just when considering biblical thought can be problematic. Instead of defining these terms on the basis of the intrinsic relationship between human actions and their consequences, biblical interpreters generally understand them on the basis of certain views regarding what God desires or demands for his own sake. A particular action or behavior is considered to be good, right, or just not because it promotes human well-being but simply because it pleases God and conforms to his will. Qualities such as goodness, righteousness, and justice are seen as inherent to God's nature, which compels God to demand them of human beings if he is to accept them and have fellowship with them rather than condemning them or destroying them. He therefore requires that human beings behave in ways that are good, right, and just not because he loves and cares for them but because his holy and righteous nature cannot tolerate them unless they live and act in harmony with it. If it is said to be in their best interest for them to behave in these ways, it is not because that behavior promotes their well-being for intrinsic reasons but because only by practicing that behavior can they hope to enjoy God's favor and avoid his wrath, both of which are conditional upon their conformity to his will.

Because this manner of understanding sin and righteousness is so deeply ingrained in the thought of biblical interpreters and Western culture in general, it is often preferable to substitute other words and phrases for these terms when discussing the concepts associated with them in the biblical text. When readers hear or read the word "sin" in English, they inevitably tend to think in terms of actions or conduct that God prohibits and punishes for his own sake rather than destructive and harmful behaviors that God prohibits and

chastises out of love for human beings due to the manner in which those behaviors affect *them*. The same type of problem arises when people hear the word “righteousness” or read affirmations to the effect that God demands righteousness of human beings. The notion that righteousness merely involves the avoidance of behavior that God has prohibited for his own sake and therefore is virtually synonymous with guiltlessness or innocence is so deeply rooted in biblical interpretation and Western thought that readers today do not readily associate ideas such as love, compassion, and a firm commitment to seeking the well-being of others with that term.

For these reasons, throughout the present study, rather than simply using the terminology of sin when characterizing biblical thought on that subject, I have frequently preferred to speak of something such as destructive, harmful, violent, or oppressive behavior. Similarly, rather than using the terminology of righteousness, I have generally chosen to refer to behavior that promotes well-being and wholeness as well as the status that results from the loving concern for others that is behind that behavior. This type of language stresses the intrinsic relationship between human behavior and its consequences that is at the heart of the biblical understanding of those two terms. As we have seen in the previous chapter, in biblical thought righteousness is understood as being essentially *synonymous* with love in that it involves a commitment to seeking the well-being of others. Such tends not to be the case in English, however.

To affirm that in biblical thought sin and righteousness are conceived of in ways that focus on the effect that human actions and behavior have on human beings themselves is by no means to downplay or deny the idea that those actions and behaviors also affect God. On the contrary, the biblical texts speak repeatedly of God being pleased by certain behaviors and displeased by others. What must be stressed, however, is that the reason that God is pleased by certain behaviors and displeased by others is precisely his loving desire that human beings behave in ways that promote their well-being and avoid doing harm to themselves and others. Strictly speaking, what affects God is not human behavior itself but the effect that human behavior has on human beings themselves. He is pleased when they behave in ways that promote their well-being and happiness but is displeased and angered when they undermine and destroy their own well-being and happiness. In other words, while God is certainly said to be affected by the behavior of human beings, what affects him is the manner in which that behavior affects human beings themselves by benefiting them or doing them harm rather than any benefit or harm that he derives from that behavior himself.

The Return of Repentance

In the biblical texts, when the people are presented as falling into sinful and destructive behavior, the first thing that God does is to send them prophets to point out to the people their sin and call them back to the way of life he has laid out for them in his commandments. In English, the language of repentance is

generally used to refer to this change of behavior. Although that language can be understood in ways that reflect faithfully biblical thought, it also tends to convey certain ideas that are not fully in accordance with the terminology used in Hebrew, where the verb *shub* is generally used to speak of repenting.

Among English speakers, repentance is commonly understood as being synonymous with contrition, remorse, or regret. These terms tend to be associated with emotions or feelings of pain and sorrow at what one has done in the past. In contrast, the Hebrew verb *shub* refers to a turning, that is, a change of direction in one's life or behavior in which one ceases to do what is contrary to God's will in order to live in accordance with it. It therefore focuses primarily on the future rather than the past and also stresses behavior rather than emotions or feelings. In essence, it involves putting away behavior that is harmful and destructive and at the same time renewing one's commitment to living in the way that God desires and commands for the good of all.

Due to the influence that pagan conceptions of the deity have had on biblical interpreters, it has been common to understand the prophets' calls to repentance primarily in terms of threats of punishment and even doom and destruction. God is typically portrayed as an ominous, menacing figure who has been moved to wrath by human sin and is anxious to vent that wrath by inflicting suffering and destruction on those who have disobeyed and offended him. Once again, the emphasis is on the manner in which God himself is affected by human behavior that is contrary to his will. In biblical thought, however, the call for people to repent and return to God is an expression of love precisely because of the intrinsic relationship between disobedience to God and the harmful consequences that follow upon that disobedience. If God calls on people to turn away from a path that is leading to their downfall and destruction and return to a path that leads to well-being and wholeness, namely, the path that he has graciously laid out for them by means of his commandments, it is because in his love he wants only what is best for them.

At the same time, the task of God's prophets goes beyond merely calling his people to repentance and warning them of the consequences they will be made to endure if they fail to turn back to him in obedience. When God acts in the life and history of his people, it is necessary for the prophets to interpret the events that take place in order to make it clear how God is at work in those events and what he is seeking to accomplish among his people through those events. If God were simply to impose sufferings and hardships on the people without letting them know his purpose for doing so, they might not understand that his intention is to bring them back to the way of life that will allow them to enjoy the blessings he desires for them. Because those events are painful for them, they might even interpret the sufferings to which they are subjected as an indication that God has rejected and abandoned them and no longer cares for them. For that reason, even when God's prophets warn the people of the punishments or chastisements that he intends to impose on them when they persist in their disobedience to his good commandments, they must

also constantly remind the people of God's love for them, that is, his commitment to doing whatever is necessary for them to be brought to live in a way that truly promotes their well-being and happiness. It is that commitment that leads him to insist that they turn back to him for their own good.

Grace That Punishes as It Forgives

Among biblical scholars it is common to contrast God's wrath and punishments with his love, grace, mercy, and favor, as if these things were opposed to one another. According to this manner of thinking, when the people fall into sin and fail to repent and turn away from that sin, they also fall from God's grace and favor and he no longer treats them with love and mercy. In reality, such ideas are grounded in the pagan worldviews of antiquity and must be considered contrary to biblical thought, where God's love, grace, mercy, and favor are consistently presented as *unconditional*. There is nothing that God's people could ever do that would lead him to stop loving and caring for them and seeking to bring about in them the way of life necessary for them to enjoy the well-being and wholeness he intends for them. As the Psalmists frequently repeat, his mercy or steadfast love endures forever and knows no limits or bounds.⁶

For the same reason, as already noted above, in biblical thought God's people cannot earn, merit, or deserve his love, grace, and favor through their behavior because these things are already theirs no matter what they do or how they behave. Instead, what they merit through their behavior is *a particular form* that God's love, grace, mercy, and favor will take in response to their behavior. When they live in accordance with God's will for their own good, God's love and favor can take the form of pouring out blessings on them and granting them whatever they need to enjoy well-being and be whole. When they live in ways that are destructive and harmful to them, however, God's love, grace, and favor will take the form of chastising them in order to bring them back to the way of life that he commands and demands of them for their own good. Whether he blesses them or punishes them, therefore, in either case he is acting out of love for them and continuing to show them his grace, mercy, and favor, even when he subjects them to suffering. When viewed from this perspective, in fact, even God's punishments must be regarded as blessings, since they are manifestations of his love for his people. Were God to stop seeking to bring his people back to him in obedience through chastisements when they fall into sin, he would no longer be acting in love for them. Of course, at times he may abandon them temporarily in order to let them experience the painful consequences of their sin and disobedience, hoping that this will bring them to realize that when they live in ways that are contrary to his will and commandments, they only do themselves harm. Even when he abandons them for a time, however, sooner

6. See, for example, Ps 36:5; 57:10; 89:2; 100:5; 103:11; 106:1; 107:1; 108:4; 118:2-4; 136:1-26.

or later he always becomes active among them once more in order to accomplish his loving purposes for them and others.

While biblical interpreters and theologians have often recognized that in biblical thought it is not possible for people to earn or merit God's favor and grace, it has been common for them to do so on the basis of reasoning that runs contrary to that thought. According to that reasoning, what prevents human beings from earning or meriting God's love, grace, and favor is their inability to be perfectly holy and righteous as God is. Supposedly, if they could live entirely free of sin and never transgress even once any of God's commandments, they could thereby earn God's grace and favor and be deserving of his acceptance. Of course, this is regarded as possible only in theory, since mortal human beings are unable to attain that level of perfection.

Such an interpretation of the biblical texts, however, must be rejected as contrary to the logic underlying them. The reason why God's love, grace, and favor cannot be earned or merited is not that human beings can never attain perfection in God's sight but that his love, grace, and favor are already theirs as a gift given by him freely and unconditionally. One cannot earn or merit something that one already possesses as a gift.

Furthermore, even when human beings do become obedient to God's will and live in conformity with his commandments, it is only because of the love and grace that God has shown them. That obedience is not something that they produce in themselves independently of God but something that God himself brings about by instructing them as to how they should live for their own good, providing them with the knowledge and strength necessary to live in that manner, and acting to correct and discipline them when they abandon that way of life so that they may turn back to it for their own good. The life of justice, righteousness, and obedience that they attain is therefore the *consequence* of God's love and favor rather than something that *earns* or *obtains* that love and favor. The gift that God freely gives them is not merely his acceptance but also the way of life that allows them to be healed and made whole.

God's grace, mercy, and favor are often associated as well with the forgiveness of his people's sins. While such an idea is no doubt biblical, it too is often misunderstood and misinterpreted as a result of the influence of the modes of thought that were characteristic of those who worshiped pagan gods in antiquity. According to those modes of thought, forgiveness and punishment are mutually exclusive. When the gods forgive those who have offended them, they no longer inflict punishments on them. Conversely, if they inflict punishments on them, it is because they have not forgiven them.

In biblical thought, however, because the punishments that God inflicts on his people are expressions of his concern for their well-being, they stand alongside forgiveness as two of the forms that his love for his people may take. It is important to note that forgiveness can be understood in two different ways. It may involve not bearing resentment or ill will toward those who have committed some wrong or done some type of harm but instead

continuing to seek their well-being and happiness. In this sense of the word, God always forgives, since nothing that his people do or fail to do can ever lead him to stop seeking their well-being and happiness. However, forgiveness can also be understood in the sense of not inflicting punishments or suffering on those who have committed wrongdoing. In this sense, God often does *not* forgive. This is not because he ceases to love those who do wrong but rather because simply leaving them unpunished may be contrary to their well-being rather than promoting it. If people are living and behaving in ways that do them harm and destroy their well-being, simply to allow them to continue unabated in such behavior without attempting to correct them would be unloving. It would involve abandoning them to the destructive consequences of that behavior rather than seeking to deliver them from those consequences by bringing them to leave that behavior behind and live in a way that instead promotes their well-being. In other words, when people live and behave in ways that do them and others harm, to ignore or overlook that behavior only reinforces it and causes it to spread and proliferate even further, thus doing them even greater harm.

Perhaps the best example of this understanding of forgiveness and punishment in the biblical texts is found in Exodus 32, which contains the account of the people's sin in making for themselves a golden calf to worship while Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving God's commandments. After Moses comes down from the mountain and sees what the people have done, he intercedes on their behalf to God, acknowledging the gravity of their sin while at the same time asking God to forgive them rather than blotting them out of his book or destroying them (vv. 31-32). Although God responds favorably to Moses' petition, he adds: "Nevertheless, when the day comes for punishment, I will punish them for their sin" (vv. 33-34). For interpreters accustomed to setting forgiveness and punishment in opposition to one another, the affirmation that God will punish the people for their sin seems to contradict the notion that he forgives them their sin. According to the logic of the narrative, however, God's forgiveness takes the form of not destroying the people or casting them off for what they have done, while his love nevertheless insists that at some point they be punished or chastised for what they have done. Simply to allow them to continue in that type of behavior without taking measures aimed at correcting it would not be loving on God's part. For their own good, the people needed to be chastised so that they might be brought to abandon their sinful behavior and instead learn to submit obediently to God's gracious will for their own good. Thus, while God forgives them in the sense of not casting them away but instead continuing to seek their well-being, he also punishes or chastises them for the same purpose of promoting their well-being by attempting to bring them to live in ways that will make that well-being possible.

This same understanding of grace and punishment is reflected in other passages as well. Two chapters later in Exodus, God describes himself as "merciful

and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means leaving them unpunished, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation" (Exod 34:6-7). Here the forgiveness of sins is explicitly distinguished from leaving sins unpunished, clearly conveying the idea that these are two different things: God is said to *forgive* iniquity, transgression, and sin, yet by no means to leave them *unpunished*. A form of this same saying appears in Numbers 14. After the Israelites doubt God's ability to deliver the land of Canaan into their hands, God threatens to disinherit them and make a great nation of Moses to take their place. When Moses rejects God's proposal and instead asks God to forgive them by reminding him of what he had promised in the saying just cited, God responds by telling Moses: "I do forgive, just as you have asked." At the same time, however, he adds: "None of the people who have seen my glory and the signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness and yet have tested me these ten times and have not obeyed my voice shall see the land that I swore to give to their ancestors; none of those who despised me shall see it" (Num 14:17-23).

The idea in both of these passages is that God forgives the people in the sense of not disinheriting or abandoning them on account of their sin but continuing to seek their well-being out of love for them. Yet because this well-being depends on their trusting in him and obeying what he commands for their own good, in his love he will also impose sufferings and hardships on them and their descendants in order to fashion and mold them into a people who will live as he has commanded so that they may enjoy his blessings. It is for this purpose that he will have them spend forty years in the wilderness rather than introducing them immediately into the land he had promised them. What he seeks is not to exact revenge on them for having disobeyed or offended him but to discipline and correct them.

This idea, in fact, is made explicit in Deut 8:2-5, the last verse of which we have already cited above. There Moses is presented as telling the people:

Remember all the way in which the LORD your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years in order to humble you and test you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He humbled you and let you endure hunger, and then fed you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of the LORD. The clothes on your back did not wear out, nor did your feet become swollen these forty years. Know in your heart, then, that as a parent disciplines a child, so the LORD your God disciplines you.

This passage makes it clear that the purpose for which God subjected the Israelites to forty years in the desert was to discipline them in the sense of teaching and instructing them, forming in them the type of humble character he wanted to see in them for their own good, and bringing about in them the

obedience necessary for them to enjoy the well-being he sought for them by means of his commandments. Rather than simply seeking to make them suffer for having disobeyed him, he continued to seek their well-being, yet that well-being depended on their learning to trust in him and obey him.

The idea that God *saves* his people by *chastising* them is stated explicitly in Jer 30:11. There God tells those whom he has sent into exile: “For I am with you, says the LORD, in order to save you; I will make an end of all the nations among which I scattered you, but of you I will not make an end. I will chastise you in just measure, and I will by no means leave you unpunished” (cf. Jer 46:28). Here the chastisement inflicted by God is clearly intended to save the people from the sinful behavior that does harm both to themselves and others. For that reason, God expresses his love for the people both by saving them *and* by chastising them. To leave the people unpunished would represent a lack of love on God’s part, since it would involve abandoning them to their destructive behavior rather than seeking to correct that behavior for their own good. Were God to fail to seek to correct them, it would not be possible for him to save and heal them, since their destructive behavior would prevent them from attaining salvation, well-being, and wholeness.

THE HARROWING AND HEALING CHASTISEMENTS OF LEVITICUS 26 AND DEUTERONOMY 28

Even though the language of punishment and chastisement is relatively uncommon in the narrative regarding Israel that runs throughout the historical books of the Hebrew Bible, the idea that God inflicts suffering on his people in order to bring them back to himself and his commandments must be regarded as lying at the very heart of that narrative. The two passages that speak at greatest length of the sufferings to which God subjects his people when they disobey him are the same passages that begin by describing in detail the blessings that he promises to pour out on them when they obey his commandments, namely, Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. In both of these passages, in fact, the description of the hardships and afflictions that God will impose on the people if they disobey him is much more extensive than the description of the blessings they will obtain if they keep those commandments (Lev 26:14-39; Deut 28:15-68).

A close look at the verses from Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 that describe the sufferings that God intends to impose on the people if they do not observe his commandments may initially seem to render entirely untenable the claim that God subjects his people to those sufferings for their own good out of love for them. Despite the fact that Leviticus 26 uses the language of chastisement, the sufferings and hardships described there seem excessively harsh and cruel. They include defeat and pillage at the hands of their enemies, famine and starvation, plagues, death, desolation, exile, terror, consumption, and fever, and perhaps most gruesome of all, the eating of the flesh of their children (Lev 26:14-39).

The language in Deuteronomy 28 is even more harrowing. In addition to all of the sufferings just mentioned, the passage speaks of disaster, panic, frustration, pestilence, boils, tumors, skin diseases, blindness, confusion, hunger, thirst, nakedness, and subjection to the cruelties and abuse of enemies who will enslave them and take from them not only their crops and animals but their sons and daughters as well. In response to their disobedience, God promises to make them an object of horror in the eyes of the other nations, to scatter their corpses for birds and animals to devour, to cause them to be driven mad, and to put an iron yoke around their neck until they are destroyed. The description of the manner in which they will be forced to eat the flesh of their children is much more graphic than in Leviticus 26, as are the allusions to all of the other things they will suffer (vv. 20-57). The passage especially uses the language of curse to speak of them being afflicted in all that they do. The people are told that everything they have or produce will be cursed, including not only their harvests and livestock but their children as well, and that they will be cursed both in the city and the field whether they come in or go out (vv. 15-19). At the end of the passage, Moses tells them:

If you do not diligently observe all the words of this law that are written in this book, fearing this glorious and awesome name, the LORD your God, then the LORD will overwhelm both you and your offspring with severe and lasting afflictions and grievous and lasting maladies. He will bring upon you once again all the diseases of Egypt, of which you were in dread, and they will cling to you. Every other sickness and affliction, even though not recorded in the book of this law, the LORD will inflict on you until you are destroyed. Although you were once as numerous as the stars in heaven, you will be left few in number because you did not obey the LORD your God. And just as the LORD took delight in making you prosperous and numerous, so the LORD will take delight in bringing you to ruin and destruction; you will be torn from the land that you are entering to possess. The LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other, and there you will serve other gods of wood and stone that neither you nor your ancestors had known. Among those nations you will find no respite, no resting place for the sole of your foot. There the LORD will give you a trembling heart, failing eyes, and a spirit of despair. Your life will hang in doubt before you; you will be in dread night and day, with no assurance of your life. In the morning you will say, "If only it were evening!," and at evening you will say, "If only it were morning!," because of the dread that your heart will feel and the sights that your eyes will see. The LORD will take you back in ships to Egypt, by a route that I promised you would never see again, and there you will offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but there will be no buyer (vv. 58-68).

Despite the severity of the sufferings described here, a careful analysis of both Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 unquestionably points to the idea that God's intention is not simply to vent his wrath on the people or to subject them to unspeakable sufferings as an end in itself but rather to chastise and purify them through the things they will suffer. This is stated explicitly, in fact, in Leviticus 26. In addition to using the terms *yasar* and *musar* to speak

of chastisement, the passage makes it clear that the sufferings that God will impose on the people will increase in intensity if the people do not respond to his chastisements by returning to him in obedience. In this way, the passage leaves no doubt that the sufferings God will impose on the people when they disobey him are designed not to consume or destroy them but to refine and purify them and their land so that they will finally come to live in the way that God has commanded for their own good:

But if you do not listen to me and observe all these commandments. . . I will set my face against you, and you will be struck down by your enemies. . . . And if *in spite of this* you will not listen to me, I will chastise you seven times more for your sins. . . . If you *continue* to walk in opposition to me, and will not listen to me, I will *continue* to plague you seven times more for your sins. . . . If *in spite of* these chastisements you are not corrected, but *continue* to walk in opposition to me, then I too will *continue* to walk in opposition to you: I myself will strike you seven times more for your sins. . . . But if, *despite this*, you do not listen to me, and *continue* to walk in opposition to me, I will *continue* to walk in opposition to you in fury; I in turn will chastise you myself seven times more for your sins. . . . Then the land shall enjoy its Sabbath years as long as it lies desolate, while you are in the land of your enemies; then the land shall rest, and enjoy its Sabbath years. As long as it lies desolate, it shall have the rest that it did not have on your Sabbaths when you were living on it (Lev 26:14, 17-18, 21, 23, 27-28, 34-35).

Here the suffering and afflictions to which God promises to subject the people when they persist in their disobedience clearly have a *corrective* purpose. In each case, the outcome that God desires is that the suffering he inflicts on them will lead them to put away their disobedience and walk in the path he has laid out for them by means of his commandments. The passage assumes that if they do so, God will put an end to the chastisements he is imposing on them, at least temporarily. If they stubbornly persist in their disobedience, however, God will increase the intensity of the sufferings he inflicts on them until eventually he acts to destroy a part of the people and to send the rest to languish in exile in a foreign land. Even this measure is said to have a constructive purpose, however, in that it will enable the land to rest and recover so that one day the people may return to it from their exile and enjoy the blessings it provides for them. This indicates that God's purpose in chastising the people is ultimately a loving one.

The idea that the objective that God pursues by means of the sufferings he inflicts on the people in response to their disobedience is that of correcting them and bringing them back to himself in obedience for their own good is also stressed in the concluding section of Leviticus 26. There God is presented as telling the people:

But if they confess their wrongdoing and the wrongdoing of their ancestors, in the unfaithfulness that they practiced toward me, and in their walking in opposition to me, which led me also to walk in opposition to them by bringing them into the land of their enemies; if then their uncircumcised heart is

humbled and they accept the chastisement for their wrongdoing, then I will remember my covenant with Jacob. I will remember also my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land. For the land will be deserted by them, and enjoy its Sabbath years by lying desolate without them, while they accept the chastisement for their wrongdoing, because they spurned my ordinances and despised my statutes. Yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away nor despise them so as to destroy them entirely and break my covenant with them. For I am the LORD their God; but for their sake I will remember the covenant with their ancestors whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, to be their God. I am the LORD (vv. 40-45).

While certain parts of Leviticus 26 clearly convey the idea that Israel's blessing and well-being are conditional upon the people's obedience, these verses at the end of the chapter present God's favor as something that is *unconditional*. God tells the people that, no matter what they do, he will not spurn them definitively or forget the covenant he made with their ancestors. Even if the people do not respond to God's chastisements by turning away from their sin, God promises not to reject them, despise them, or destroy them entirely. Although it may be necessary for God to continue to chastise them repeatedly and with increasingly harsher measures, he will not give up on his objective of bringing them to live in obedience to his good commandments so that they may attain the good things that follow both intrinsically and extrinsically from obedience to those commandments.

According to this passage, therefore, nothing can bring God to put an end to his commitment to doing whatever is necessary to bring his people to live in a way that will allow them to attain the well-being he seeks for them. One way or another, he intends to accomplish that objective and promises to do whatever is necessary until it is attained, no matter how painful it may be for them or for him. If he is fully committed to their well-being, in fact, he has no choice but to act in that way, because their well-being does not depend merely *on him* but also *on them*. They cannot enjoy well-being if they do not live in a way that is conducive to that well-being.

A God Who Curses?

In contrast to Leviticus 26, the parallel passage in Deuteronomy 28 does not stress explicitly the corrective purpose of the terrible sufferings and afflictions that God promises to inflict on the people when they disobey his commandments. Nevertheless, Deuteronomy 28 must be read in conjunction with the two chapters that follow.

In Deuteronomy 29, Moses gathers the people together prior to their entrance into the land God had promised to them in order to remind them of the wonders that God performed on their behalf when he delivered them from their bondage in Egypt and led them through the wilderness for forty years. On that basis, Moses exhorts the people to live under the covenant

that God is establishing with them by obeying his commandments and warns them once more of the punishments God will impose on them if they insist on going in their own stubborn way rather than obeying him. Then, at the beginning of Deuteronomy 30, we find what can be considered the continuation of Deuteronomy 28:

When all these things have happened to you, the blessings and the curses that I have set before you, if you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has scattered you and turn back to the LORD your God, and you and your children listen to him with all your heart and with all your soul, just as I am commanding you today, then the LORD your God will put an end to your captivity and have compassion on you, gathering you again from all the peoples among whom the LORD your God has scattered you. Even if you are exiled to the ends of the world, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there he will bring you back. The LORD your God will bring you into the land that your ancestors possessed, and you will possess it; he will do good to you and make you more numerous than your ancestors.

Moreover, the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you may love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live. The LORD your God will put all these curses on your enemies and on those who hated you and sought you harm. Then you will turn back and listen to the voice of the LORD, observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today, and the LORD your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For the LORD will again take delight in you in order to do good to you, just as he took delight in your ancestors, if you listen to the LORD your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, if you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul (Deut 30:1-10).

In accordance with most English versions of the Hebrew Bible, this translation makes use of the language of curse in the opening verse of the chapter, where the Hebrew noun *qalalah* appears. In this passage and others in Deuteronomy, this noun is contrasted with the Hebrew noun for blessing. The language of curse is also commonly used to translate the passive participle of the Hebrew verb *'arar* that appears repeatedly in Deuteronomy in relation to people who are said to be cursed. The problem with employing the language of curse to translate the Hebrew terms that appear in these passages is that in English that language conveys certain ideas that must be considered foreign to biblical thought. Among English speakers, a curse is generally understood as some type of mysterious, invisible force that is unleashed on someone and acts on its own to harm them in some way. For the most part, curses are uttered solely out of spite and hatred and are motivated by a desire to hurt or injure someone for no purpose other than seeing them suffer. Curses also tend to be seen as definitive, permanent, or irreversible, at least until the harm and suffering they are intended to cause is brought to pass or until some type of magical formula or spell can reverse or neutralize them. To be cursed is to be

beyond hope, subject to an overwhelming maleficent power or to some type of inevitable doom from which one cannot escape. Those who pronounce a curse on others do so not in order to correct them or bring about in them some change in behavior for their own good, but simply because they wish to see them subjected to some type of evil, motivated by a desire to see them suffer to make them pay for something they have done.

Ideas such as these must be considered foreign to the logic of Deuteronomy. When the passages that use the Hebrew term *qalalah* are viewed in the context of the book as a whole, it becomes clear that the afflictions or punishments of which they speak are not curses unleashed on the people by an angry and vengeful God who wishes to see them endure horrific sufferings for having dared to disobey and offend him. Those afflictions or punishments are not permanent and irreversible, nor are they expressions of hatred or spite designed for no other purpose than to do the people harm. On the contrary, the objective that God is seeking when he afflicts the people in the ways described is to bring them to put away their destructive behavior and turn back to him so as to obey his commandments. Because his intention is ultimately to bring them to live in a manner that will make it possible for him to bless them, the punishments he imposes on them are rooted in his love for them. To use the language of curse to refer to these punishments is therefore to communicate ideas that run contrary to biblical thought, since in English curses are never pronounced on others out of love for them or due to a concern for their well-being.

The idea behind the words attributed to God in Deuteronomy 28–30 and in other passages from that book and the Hebrew Bible that speak in similar terms is that the various forms of suffering, affliction, and hardships that God promises to inflict on the people if they refuse to keep his commandments are intended to bring them back to himself in obedience for their own good. Rather than using the language of curse, it would be more faithful to the Hebrew to use terms such as scourge, blight, affliction, devastation, or calamity to describe the sufferings or punishments to which the people will be subjected if they persistently disobey what God has commanded. According to Deuteronomy 28–29, these scourges include things such as those already mentioned above, namely, pestilence, plague, famine, mental and physical illnesses, defeat and oppression at the hands of enemies, untimely death, and exile in foreign lands. Undoubtedly, such measures are extremely painful and at first glance even seem excessively harsh and cruel. However, Deuteronomy 30 leaves no doubt as to their purpose: what God seeks is not to destroy his people or do them irreversible harm but to bring them and their children back to himself so that they may obey him with their whole heart and soul for their own good. The passage refers to this transformation in terms of a circumcision of the people's heart to be brought about by God himself. Once they return to God in obedience, God will restore their fortunes with compassion and bring them back from exile so that they may enjoy his blessings once more (Deut 30:2-4). When that day comes, the people will finally love God with

all their being. The passage also makes it clear that abundance and prosperity will follow upon the people's obedience as its consequence, thereby suggesting both an intrinsic and extrinsic relationship between their observance of God's commandments and their well-being: God will make them prosper not only by pouring out his blessings on them but also by acting to bring about in them the way of life that will make it possible for them to enjoy those blessings. Yet while the blessings God promises to bestow on the people are conditional upon their obedience to his commandments, God's commitment to doing everything possible to bring them to live in that obedience is *unconditional*.

The reason for which God will bring such scourges or calamities on them, therefore, is not because their disobedience to his sovereign will offends and aggrieves him, diminishes his honor and glory, or injures his pride or ego. When he allows such scourges to come upon them or even brings those scourges on them himself, he is not acting out of spite, hatred, or a spirit of revenge in the way that pagan gods were thought to do. Nor is he unleashing some type of mysterious, maleficent power upon them in order to doom them definitively and irreversibly to a future of misery and destruction. His desire is not to impose his will on them by force in order to subjugate and dominate them and oblige them to serve him against their will. On the contrary, his desire is to bring them to live in the manner necessary for them to enjoy the blessings of life, well-being, and wholeness that he intends for them. That can only happen, however, if they are brought to live in a way that promotes these things rather than preventing them from becoming a reality.

When the language of curse is avoided in the English translation of the passages from Deuteronomy that describe the afflictions to which the people will be subjected if they refuse to obey God's commandments, those passages come across very differently. This is especially evident when considering Deut 28:15-19, which in the NRSVue reads:

But if you will not obey the LORD your God by diligently observing all his commandments and decrees that I am commanding you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you: Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field. Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock. Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out.

This translation appears to convey the idea of a God who intends to inflict pain and hardships on the people if they disobey him merely for the purpose of seeing them suffer, as if he were acting out of spite and ill will. While it is of course possible to avoid the language of curse when translating these verses into English, perhaps the greatest difficulty in doing so is that there is no single word in English that can be used to translate the two Hebrew terms used in the passage. In order to capture more fully the meaning of the text, therefore, it is necessary to use a variety of words and phrases when translating these terms. To do so would result in a translation or paraphrase such as the following:

But if you will not obey the LORD your God by diligently observing all his commandments and decrees that I am commanding you today, then all these scourges and afflictions shall come upon you and overtake you: Your life shall be filled with constant suffering and unbearable pain whether you are in the city or in the field. Your basket and your kneading bowl shall remain bare and empty. The fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, the increase of your cattle, and the issue of your flock shall wither, decay, and die. You will experience nothing but misery, anguish, and despair both as you come in and as you go out.

Such a translation or paraphrase makes it possible to describe the enormity and intensity of the afflictions to which the people will be subjected if they refuse to obey God's commandments without implying that those afflictions are imposed by God out of spite, vengeance, or a desire simply to see the people suffer. In addition, however, it allows for the possibility that many of the hardships that the people will endure will follow upon their refusal to obey God's commandments as the intrinsic and natural consequence of that refusal. The reason that their sufferings will be so great is not only that God will inflict punishments on them but also that their unjust, violent, and destructive behavior will have devastating and disastrous consequences in and of itself. In that case, God's words to the people are not only a threat but a warning as well.

Similar observations must be made with regard to God's affirmations in Deuteronomy 28 that he will destroy the people in response to their disobedience. On multiple occasions, the passage affirms that when the people persistently refuse to obey his commandments God will afflict them with various forms of suffering until they are destroyed (vv. 20, 22, 24, 45, 48, 51, 61). While these affirmations may appear to convey the idea that God will annihilate the people entirely, the context indicates that such is not the case. This is especially evident from v. 62 of the passage. There, immediately after Moses tells the people: "Every other sickness and affliction, even though not recorded in the book of this law, the LORD will inflict on you until you are destroyed" (v. 61), he continues: "Although you were once as numerous as the stars in heaven, you will be left few in number because you did not obey the LORD your God" (v. 62). Here it is clear that the destruction of which God speaks does not involve the total annihilation of the people but rather the death of many or most of them until they become few in number. The same understanding of destruction is found earlier in the book of Deuteronomy as well. In Deut 4:26, Moses tells the people that if they serve idols and do what is evil they will "utterly perish from the land" and will be "utterly destroyed." In the very next verse, however, he continues: "only a few of you will be left among the nations where the LORD will lead you" (v. 27; cf. v. 31).

Just as the curses or scourges of which Deuteronomy 28 speaks are not regarded as permanent or irreversible, therefore, so also the destruction of the people mentioned there and elsewhere in the book should not be understood as involving their total annihilation. What God intends is not to threaten

the people with some type of doom or extinction from which they will never recover if they disobey him, but to indicate to them the intensity and severity of the chastisements he will inflict on them in order to bring them to leave behind their destructive behavior and return to him in obedience for their own good. While these chastisements will undoubtedly involve the death and destruction of many of the members of his people, this death and destruction do not constitute an end in themselves but have a healing and corrective purpose in relation to those who will survive God's chastisements, as do the curses or scourges mentioned in the same context.

Finding Love and Purpose in the Depths of Despair

While both Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28–30 undoubtedly present the sufferings and punishments that God promises to inflict on the people if they refuse to obey his commandments as having a corrective purpose, what makes it extremely difficult to interpret these passages in that way is the enormity, intensity, and severity of the sufferings that these passages describe. To use an analogy, when the father of a large family seeks to discipline and correct his children for their own good out of love for them, he does not willfully smite them with blindness or infect them with disease, subject them to starvation and bloodshed, or put some of them to death in the hope that the few who survive will turn back to him in obedience. Much less would he seek to drive them mad, make them an object of horror in the eyes of others, scatter their corpses for birds and animals to devour, or force them to bear an iron yoke around their neck until they fall over dead. Such measures would be considered not only cruel but barbaric, and under no circumstances would they be viewed as expressions of love. In the same way, to affirm that God is acting out of love and concern for his people and seeking their well-being when he forces them to endure the kinds of horrific sufferings described in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 would seem not only ludicrous but revolting to most readers of the biblical texts. Starving people to death until they have no choice but to eat the flesh of their own children is no way to bring them to put away their sinful behavior and instead practice justice, righteousness, and love.

In order to grasp the logic behind passages such as these, however, it is necessary to see them in their historical context. Many biblical scholars would agree that these passages reached their present form in the period following the destruction of Jerusalem in the early sixth century BCE, either after the deportation of many of the people to Babylon or in the years following the return to the land of many of the children and grandchildren of the deportees. Both those who composed and edited these passages and those who read them were well-acquainted with the tremendous suffering that the people had endured, especially because for many that suffering had not yet come to an end. When read from that perspective, these passages would be understood as describing experiences that either the readers themselves or their parents, grandparents, and ancestors had actually been forced to endure rather than

mere theoretical possibilities that had been contemplated by God or Moses centuries earlier, prior to the people's entrance into the land that God had promised to give them.

Even if parts of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 date from a time previous to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, it is likely that the sections that describe in graphic detail the sufferings that the people would come to endure are later embellishments. Either the Assyrians or the Babylonians seem to be in mind in the verses that allude to a particular nation whom the Israelites do not know and whose language they do not speak, which will swoop down on the people from afar like an eagle (Deut 28:32-33, 36, 49). Similarly, even though the siege in which the people will have to devour their own children to survive and endure other horrors seems to be that which took place under the Babylonians prior to the fall of Jerusalem, the passage may have in mind other sieges as well, such as those that occurred at the time of the Assyrian invasion of Israel and Judah (Deut 28:52-57). The scattering of the Israelites among other peoples from one end of the earth to the other and the return of many to Egypt mentioned in Deut 28:64-68 also appear to be descriptions of events from Israel's history either prior to the sixth century BCE or during that century. Most of the horrendous afflictions described in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 should therefore be understood as allusions to concrete experiences that the inhabitants of Israel and Judah had endured prior to the composition of those passages, though the allusions may also be to experiences that other peoples and nations of antiquity were known to have gone through. In fact, a number of these afflictions are mentioned explicitly in the biblical narratives and some of the prophetic books.⁷

The question that would inevitably arise among those who had undergone such horrific experiences or heard them described in graphic detail by people of previous generations was why an all-powerful God who supposedly loved them had allowed such things to take place. In principle, several answers to that question were possible. It might be concluded that the God of Israel was not in fact all-powerful and that he had been unable to save and protect his people from the tremendous sufferings to which they had been subjected. If that were the case, however, then there was no sense in looking to that God for help and deliverance in times of hardships and need, since it was

7. Walter Brueggemann, for example, notes that Deuteronomy 28 is clearly connected to the situation described in 2 Kings 24-25, and that vv. 47-57 of this chapter "surely have reference to the Babylonian devastation of Jerusalem at the beginning of the sixth century. . . ." (*Deuteronomy*, AOTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 2001, 257). Similarly, Duane L. Christensen sees in Deuteronomy 28 repeated allusions to particular events that are described in the biblical narratives and the books of Israel's prophets (*Deuteronomy 21:10-34:12*, WBC 6B; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002, 684-87). Like many other commentators, in his analysis of Deuteronomy 26:15-68 Jack R. Lundbom notes the parallels not only with sufferings described elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible but also with those mentioned in the texts of other ancient peoples, including especially those that contained similar lists of blessings and curses (*Deuteronomy: A Commentary*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013, 766-97). On that basis, it might be concluded that both Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 are alluding not only to sufferings that the people of Israel had endured in the past but also to sufferings that other peoples of antiquity had experienced and interpreted as punishments inflicted by their gods.

impossible to depend on him due to his lack of power. To view God in such a manner would also involve rejecting the belief that as the creator of all that existed he was truly sovereign over all people and things. For these reasons, to conclude that the God of Israel had not been able to save and protect his people from the great hardships and afflictions they had endured was hardly an option. In essence, that would involve affirming that the all-powerful God in whom they had believed previously did not actually exist.

A second possible answer to the question of why God had not come to the aid of his people in the midst of the terrible sufferings that they had endured was that he had ceased to love them. In that case, he had abandoned them and rejected them as his people, perhaps because he could no longer tolerate their sinfulness. If God no longer loved them and had repudiated them definitively, however, they could have no hope for the future and it was pointless to look to him for help or deliverance in times of need. Even if they continued to believe in God and attempted to return to him in obedience, it would do them no good because he no longer cared what happened to them or had any intention of receiving and blessing them again. Such a conclusion was hardly acceptable, however, since it would make no sense for people to believe in or serve a God who had cast them off forever.

A third option was to maintain that God's love for Israel was conditional. When the people obeyed him, he responded in love, but when they refused to obey him, he responded by lashing out at them to hurt them in order to compel them to submit once again to his will. Such an idea would make sense, however, only if God was thought to be pursuing some interest or need of his own by means of Israel. This possibility was ruled out by the belief that as sovereign creator he needed nothing from his creation and did not depend on Israel to satisfy any type of personal need. While in principle it might be thought that what he sought was to be worshiped, served, and obeyed for his own sake simply because he derived pleasure from these things in the same way that the gods of the other nations did, if that were the case then he was not a good God who sought his people's well-being as an end in itself. Instead, like the other gods of antiquity, he merely wished to manipulate and control people for his own selfish ends and subject them to himself as his slaves. Because true love is unconditional in the sense that it is committed to the well-being of others independently of what they may do or fail to do, a God who offered people his favors in exchange for their submission and obedience could not truly be said to love them.

While in principle it was possible for the people to arrive at such a conclusion, the biblical texts consistently reject such an interpretation of Israel's sufferings as well as the concept of God upon which that type of interpretation is based. Instead, they posit a fourth alternative by looking to the ideas we have seen throughout the present chapter so as to conclude that the God of Israel had allowed his people to suffer the horrifying things described in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 because he was seeking to correct them and bring

them to put away their destructive behavior out of love for them. Given the intensity and brutality of the sufferings that the people had endured, this conclusion was no doubt an extremely problematic one. Nevertheless, from the perspective of those who continued to believe in the God of Israel, it was much less problematic than any of the other possible responses just considered to the question of why God had allowed his people to be subjected to such intense and unbearable sufferings. Despite the horrific nature of those sufferings, at least some of the people refused to believe that God had abandoned them definitively or that he did not love them unconditionally. The only alternative, therefore, was to maintain that he had allowed them to experience such tremendous sufferings for a purpose. If so, that purpose could only be that he sought to bring them back to himself and to the way of life that he had commanded them to follow for their own good.

This is in fact the conclusion that is stated explicitly in both Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28–30. As we have seen above, in the closing verses of Leviticus 26, God is presented as affirming that he would never spurn or hate his people or destroy them utterly but would act to deliver them from the sufferings he had imposed on them and return them to the land after it had enjoyed its Sabbath rest. Similarly, in Deuteronomy 28–30, God promises that after his people have endured all of the terrible things described he will restore their fortunes, show compassion to them, and gather them back into the land he had given them in order to bless them and make them prosper there. While both of these passages mention the need for the people to turn back to God in order for these things to happen, they view both the people's recognition of their sin as well as their renewed love and obedience as something that God himself will bring about in them as a result of those experiences. In that sense, it is God himself who will circumcise their previously uncircumcised heart in order to bring them to love him with all their heart and soul (Lev 26:41; Deut 30:6). It is possible that these passages use the imagery of circumcision precisely because it involves a process that is extremely painful, as well as a definitive removal of flesh that leaves a permanent mark. According to the logic underlying both of these passages, therefore, while God may have appeared to abandon his people on account of their refusal to obey him, in reality he had been subjecting them to suffering so that they might be brought to turn away from the harmful and destructive path that they had been following and instead return to the good and life-giving path that he had laid out for them by means of the Torah, hopefully on a permanent basis.

When the horrendous sufferings and experiences described in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 are viewed from the perspective of those who had actually endured such things and sought to find meaning and purpose in what had happened to them, therefore, it is not difficult to understand how their faith in the God of Israel left them no alternative but to interpret those sufferings and experiences as means by which God had sought to bring them to return to the way of life he had commanded for their own good. Such a

conclusion was possible, however, only if they were fully convinced that God did indeed love them unconditionally and had never stopped loving them even when he had allowed them to go through such great afflictions and hardships. This conclusion is stated explicitly not only at the end of Leviticus 26, where God promises never to abandon, spurn, abhor, or utterly destroy his people (v. 44), but in Deuteronomy as well, where the same type of promise appears in the context of allusions to the utter destruction he will bring upon the people: "Because the LORD your God is a merciful God, he will not abandon you or destroy you, nor will he forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them" (Deut 4:31).

The people could arrive at the same conclusion by viewing the horrific sufferings and experiences described in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 from the perspective of God himself. If God was truly committed to the well-being of his people and that well-being could be attained only if the people lived in a manner that made it possible, then he had to be fully committed as well to doing whatever was necessary to bring them to live in that manner. When they persistently failed to do so and refused to respond favorably to the prophets he sent them, then his commitment to their well-being left him no choice but to attempt to bring about the changes necessary in their behavior by means of chastisements.

As we have noted above when considering Leviticus 26, however, at times none of the chastisements he inflicted on them would succeed in bringing them to abandon their destructive behavior and return to a life that truly promoted their well-being. In that case, if he remained committed to that objective, he had no choice but to inflict even greater sufferings on them until those sufferings became so intense and unbearable that the people would be left with no alternative but to conclude that the only way that they could survive was to heed God's call to turn back to the way of life he had laid out for them in the Torah.

In the biblical narrative, however, at times the people are presented as being so stubborn, stiff-necked, and hard-hearted that no matter how intensely they are made to suffer, they continue to refuse to mend their ways. When that happens, God sends them prophets to threaten them with sufferings and chastisements that are even more severe. The graphic descriptions of the terrible afflictions that the people will be made to endure are intended to bring them to repentance by generating shock, terror, and dismay in their hearts. When the people still refuse to listen and instead mock and persecute the prophets God sends them, the only course of action open to God is to carry out the threats he has made. If that does not work, then he may be led to destroy a portion of the people in the hope that those who remain will finally turn back to him. Even then, the survivors may still refuse to respond in the way that God desires and inexplicably may even choose to suffer destruction rather than to submit to God's will. Because God's commitment to bringing the people to abandon the path that is leading to their ruin will not allow

him to relent, he must then destroy even more of the people and make that destruction even more devastating and painful. To do anything else would involve simply giving up on his loving objectives for them. For obvious reasons, however, he cannot destroy his people in their entirety, since that would put an end to any hope of bringing into existence a people who will live in ways that will enable them to enjoy the well-being he desires for them and serve as his instrument for bringing other peoples to live in those same ways.

All of this results in a tremendous paradox that can make it extremely difficult to understand the biblical texts. According to this paradox, in order for God to accomplish his loving objective of bringing the people to live in a way that will allow them to enjoy the well-being, prosperity, happiness, and wholeness that he desires for all, he must at times act in ways that seem to be anything but loving. On the contrary, in order to accomplish those objectives, he has no alternative but to do things that seem cruel and inhumane. When the sufferings he imposes on his people in an attempt to bring them back to himself repeatedly fail to accomplish that objective, eventually he must make those sufferings so unbearable that at least part of the people finally conclude that they have no choice but to return to him if they are to survive. Of course, out of love for his people, before inflicting such intense sufferings on them, he sends his prophets to announce to them what he is about to do. Yet if he is to have any hope of penetrating the hardened and unresponsive hearts of his people, he must use language that becomes increasingly violent, threatening, and ominous to describe the sufferings he intends to inflict on them. As a result, he ends up being portrayed as a God who appears to be anything but loving, since both the threats he makes and the punishments he imposes must become so harrowing as to appear barbaric if he hopes to elicit in his people any response to his pleas for them to change their ways. Yet what lies behind those horrific threats and punishments is his adamant refusal to give up on his people and hand them over to the ruin and destruction that will inevitably result from the path they have chosen for themselves. Simply stated, his love for them will not allow him to relent or capitulate but compels him to keep on trying to provoke in them the reaction he wishes to see for their own good, even though this requires that he treat them in ways that seem not only heartless but at times even monstrous.

In essence, then, there are basically two ways in which the threats and warnings of punishment for disobedience found in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 can be read. According to the first of these, those threats and warnings are an expression of God's refusal or inability to tolerate the people's disobedience for his own sake. Either his desire to be revered, honored, glorified, and served is so powerful and overwhelming that he threatens to inflict the people with the most horrific sufferings imaginable unless they fulfill that desire in the way he demands or else his need to satisfy and safeguard his holiness and righteousness is so inflexible that he has no choice but to smite the people with unspeakable sufferings if they fail to obey him. In either case, what lies

behind those threats and warnings of punishment is a concern for himself and the desires and demands of his own nature rather than a concern for the people themselves. It is this concern for his own glory, honor, holiness, and righteousness that compels him to act with such intense anger, hatred, and vehemence when the people refuse to obey him.

For the reasons we have seen here and elsewhere, however, such an interpretation of passages such as Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 must be rejected. Instead, the reason why God is presented as threatening to inflict such tremendous sufferings on the people if they persistently refuse to obey him is that he is fully and intractably committed to bringing them to turn back from behavior that makes it impossible for them to enjoy the well-being he desires for them and to live in accordance with his commandments for their own good. Precisely because his unconditional love for them will never allow him to abandon them definitively to their destructive ways or back down from his efforts to bring about in them the way of life necessary for them to attain the good he seeks for them, he will do whatever it takes to accomplish these objectives among them, even if this means inflicting suffering on them that is so severe as to become unbearable and destroying a large part of them so as to leave a small remnant that will finally have no choice but to turn back to his commandments for their own good if they wish to survive. It is as if God and his people have locked horns with one another and refuse to give in or back down until they finally break the will of the other and pin the other to the ground. In that clash of wills, in his love for his people God vows that it is not he who will finally relent and back down but his stubborn and rebellious people, no matter how long it takes or how much pain and suffering he must inflict on them. Eventually, he will prevail.

LOVING AND SERVING A GOD WHOM ONE FEARS

According to Deut 30:6, one of the main objectives that God seeks to accomplish by subjecting his people to chastisements when they have persistently failed to obey him is that they come to love him with all their heart and soul so that they may live. These words echo the ones found at the beginning of Deuteronomy 6, where God tells the people through Moses: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (v. 5). God's desire that the people love him and serve him with all of their heart and soul is repeated in other passages of Deuteronomy as well.⁸

At first glance, the notion that God might lead his people to love and serve him gladly and willingly by inflicting punishments on them might seem highly problematic, especially when those punishments are as severe and horrific as those described in Deuteronomy 28. Rather than leading the people to love God and serve him with joy, it seems much more likely that such punishments would produce anger, hatred, and resentment toward God in

8. See Deut 10:12; 11:1, 13; 13:3; 28:47; 30:2, 10.