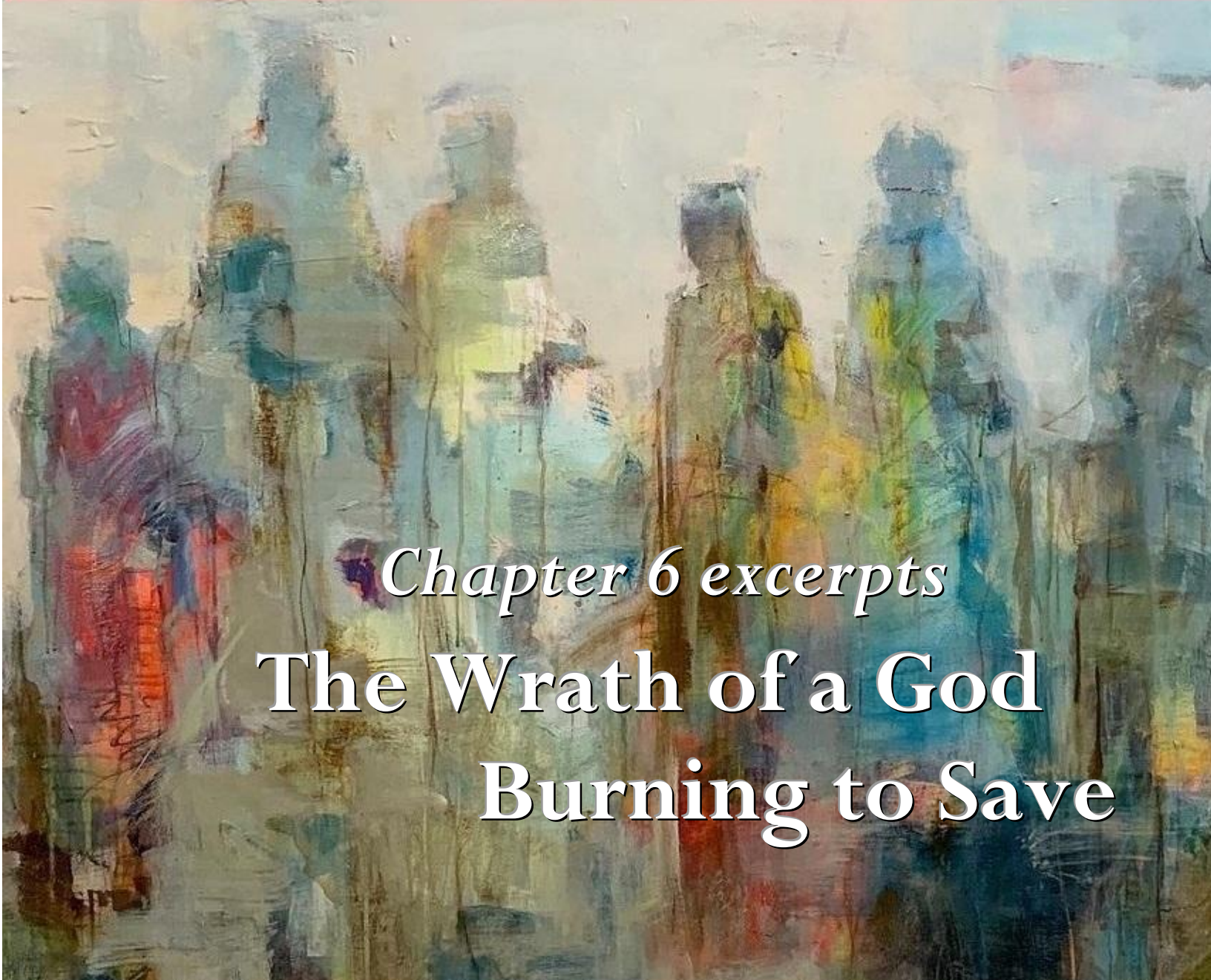


A GOD LIKE No OTHER

Depaganizing the God of the Hebrew Bible

An abstract painting featuring several vertical, blurred figures in shades of blue, green, and yellow, set against a light, textured background. The figures appear to be standing in a row, possibly representing a group of people or a divine assembly.

Chapter 6 excerpts
**The Wrath of a God
Burning to Save**

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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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Throughout the Hebrew Bible, God's anger is presented as being rooted not in a concern for himself or his own desires and interests but in his commitment to the well-being of his people. This chapter explores the use of language such as wrath, punishment, curse, vengeance, and retribution in the biblical texts in order to argue that the logic underlying such language is very different from that which we find in the pagan thought systems of antiquity.

THE WRATH OF A GOD BURNING TO SAVE

For most peoples in antiquity, the greatest obstacle to human well-being was the wrath of the gods. When they became angry at human beings, the gods made their lives unbearable by subjecting them to things such as plagues, famines, natural disasters, oppression by enemies, and other forms of death and destruction. What made the relation with the gods even more difficult was that they tended to be volatile and capricious. At any moment, often for no good or apparent reason, they might become enraged and take out their wrath on those who had done something to provoke it. If people wanted to live in peace, avoid suffering as much as possible, and either enjoy life or at least make it tolerable, keeping the gods happy and satisfied had to be their top priority.

Although at times the gods might inflict punishments on those who angered and offended them in order to compel them to alter the behavior that displeased them and make it clear to them and others that they would not tolerate such behavior, in many cases what moved them to lash out at human beings was not any particular purpose or objective that they wished to accomplish but simply their instincts and passions. When provoked to wrath, what the gods often sought was simply to vent that wrath by taking it out on human beings and exacting revenge on any who had dared to oppose them. They might even take pleasure at seeing the pain and suffering of those who had disobeyed or disrespected them and seek to make that suffering as intense and prolonged as possible. In these cases, they were simply acting out of spite, hatred, and vengeance. In fact, they might inflict suffering on people not because those people had done anything to offend or anger them but simply because for some reason they disliked and rejected those people.

For the most part, the way in which people sought to keep the gods content, avoid their wrath, and placate that wrath when it had been aroused was by presenting them with sacrificial offerings and the expressions of worship, reverence, and submission that were to accompany those offerings. As we have noted previously in this study, gods such as those described by Homer in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were thought to desire these offerings and the honor and praise that went along with them for their own sake. In fact, what often provoked their wrath the most was not any type of sin or wrongdoing but simply the failure to present to them the offerings that they regarded as their due. Of course, since the gods were often capricious and behaved in ways that were unpredictable, one could never know if they would receive favorably the offerings and worship presented to them so as to afford the offerers

their protection and blessings and grant them their petitions. The best that the offerers could do was to make their offerings as lavish and abundant as possible and if necessary find other means to attract the attention of the gods and obtain their favor.

According to many interpretations of the Hebrew Bible, the God of Israel was thought to behave in most of these same ways and to desire many of the same things. He too lashed out at those who dared to disobey and oppose him and inflicted punishments on them not only to compel them to submit to him but also at times simply to satisfy his rage and vent his wrath. He might even take delight at inflicting pain and suffering on those who had offended him and exacting vengeance on them. If people wished to enjoy his favor, avoid his wrath, and placate that wrath when it had been aroused, they needed to do whatever he commanded and make atonement for any sins they committed by means of sacrificial offerings, including especially those that involved the shedding of blood. While it was generally God's strict justice rather than simply passion or spite that was thought to lead God to demand that human sin be punished in the way it deserved, the satisfaction of that justice through punishment was just as essential to Israel's God as the satisfaction of the desires for vengeance and retribution was to the gods of the nations.

Some biblical interpreters, in fact, have no qualms about ascribing to the God of the Hebrew Scriptures the same type of passions and uncontrollable rage that was believed to characterize the pagan gods of antiquity. As we have seen in Chapter 1 of this study, for example, Walter Brueggemann finds in the biblical texts a God "who takes with savage seriousness Yahweh's right to be worshiped, honored, and obeyed."¹ For Brueggemann, the biblical texts speak of a God who stands over human beings as a "hovering danger" and may choose to vent his rage and fury with "savage propensity" at any moment.² What characterizes the God of Israel is his "strong emotional response to any affront against Yahweh's prerogative, privilege, ascendancy, or sovereignty."³ In a passage we have seen previously, Brueggemann paints a picture of Yahweh that could just as easily apply to gods such as Marduk or Zeus:

In the indignation and emotion that guard Yahweh's peculiar claim to honor, Yahweh is uncompromising. Yahweh acts in fury and rage, sometimes destructively. . . . This aspect of the character of Yahweh admits of no taming or minimalization. It witnesses to Yahweh at the extremes of love and anger. The extremity of Yahweh's passion will be turned against any who affront Yahweh, and Yahweh will act without restraint or discipline.⁴

Although there can be no doubt that the God of the Hebrew Bible is at times portrayed as an angry, jealous, and vindictive God, the question that must

1. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testament, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 272.

2. Brueggemann, *Theology*, 280, 293, 296.

3. Brueggemann, *Theology*, 293.

4. Brueggemann, *Theology*, 293-94.

be addressed is whether such a portrayal is grounded in an understanding of God that was essentially the same as that which was characteristic of the pagan belief systems of antiquity. To answer that question, it is necessary to address another, namely, the motives that are said to arouse his wrath and indignation.

THE GOD WHO SEEKS NOTHING BUT JUSTICE

If the God of the Hebrew Scriptures was believed to act in the same ways and desire the same things that the gods of the other nations of antiquity did, then we should expect those Scriptures to speak of him being pleased or provoked to anger by the same things that pleased and angered other gods. When we take a close look at those Scriptures, however, what we find is a God who is very different from those gods in that regard. Not only do the biblical texts present Israel's God as being pleased or alternatively provoked to anger by things that most of the gods of antiquity cared little about, but they also portray the God of Israel ascribing virtually no importance to the things that were said to please other gods or provoke them to anger.

As we have seen in the previous three chapters, throughout the biblical texts the condition that is consistently laid down for obtaining God's blessings and avoiding his anger is the practice of justice and righteousness, that is, the commitment to seeking the well-being of others together with one's own. Those who share that commitment and act in accordance with it are presented as pleasing God, whereas those who do not are said to arouse his displeasure.

At the same time, however, the biblical texts present God commanding that his people offer sacrifices to him and usually being pleased when they do so. In this regard, he may seem to be no different than the pagan gods of antiquity. If such were the case, then those who sought to obtain blessings, favors, and assistance from him would do what virtually all people in antiquity did when they sought those things from their own gods. They would offer him sacrifices that were as lavish and abundant as possible with the hope that, by doing so, they would attract his attention and win his approval. Yet this is precisely what those who seek blessings, help, and support from Israel's God in the biblical texts do *not* do. In fact, rather than obtaining his favor, those who seek to influence or manipulate him by offering him sacrifices and gifts are thought to provoke him to wrath. In effect, they are attempting to bribe him or purchase his favor. As we have seen previously, such a *do ut des* mentality must be considered foreign to the understanding of the God of Israel that runs throughout the biblical texts.

Deserving Help That Is Undeserved

Of all the books in the Hebrew Bible, none presents human beings invoking God's protection, help, and deliverance more than the book of Psalms. If we wish to discern the basis upon which those who approached the God of Israel petitioned him to grant them such things, therefore, there is no better place in

the Hebrew Bible to look. One will search in vain there for passages in which those who ask God for assistance or deliverance offer to present him with lavish sacrifices in exchange for his help or point to their faithfulness in having offered up such sacrifices in the past in the way that figures such as those in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are said to do. The fact that the Psalmists are not presented as approaching God in that manner demonstrates not only that the God of Israel was not thought to respond to petitions for help and deliverance that were made on that basis but also that those who worshiped him *knew perfectly well* that one did not obtain his blessings, support, and assistance by offering him gifts and sacrifices in exchange for those things. This point is particularly significant in light of the widespread use of the Psalms among Jews in the Second Temple period. Like the Psalmists themselves, those Jews were fully aware that one could not obtain what one wanted from Israel's God simply by presenting him with sacrifices or offering to do so. Instead, it was plain to all that the condition upon which God came to one's aid was one's commitment to justice and righteousness, that is, the same commitment that was God's own out of love for all.

Well over a third of the 150 Psalms in the Hebrew Bible contain pleas on the part of the Psalmist for God's help in the context of a situation in which the Psalmist is experiencing some type of suffering or hardship. Many of these Psalms and others also describe the manner in which God has graciously and mercifully acted to save and deliver those in need of such help in the past. While the Psalmists often promise to praise and thank God and offer him sacrifices *in response* to the favor he has shown them, at no point do they promise to give God something that he seeks or desires for himself *in exchange* for his assistance or claim to have obtained help from God on the basis of such an exchange. Instead, the basis upon which God is consistently presented as coming to the aid of those in need is his grace and mercy as well as his justice, that is, his commitment to seeking the well-being of all of his people. In most cases, in fact, that commitment is the *only* basis upon which the Psalmists ask God to intervene on their behalf. Because they know him to be a God who is loving, caring, and compassionate and who defends what is good, right, and just, they appeal to these qualities when imploring his assistance, especially when their sufferings are the result of injustices that others are committing against them. If those who seek God's help do not offer him anything in exchange for that help, it is because they know and are fully confident that *God's primary concern is not anything that he seeks for himself but simply their own happiness, wholeness, and well-being*. For that reason, it would be not only futile but also senseless for them to offer God something in exchange for his assistance. If God values their well-being above all else as an end in itself, what need is there to attempt to sway him to be concerned for something that already *is* his primary concern?

At the same time, it is significant that the Psalmists do not seek from the God of Israel many of the things that those who worshiped gods such as

Marduk and Zeus in antiquity sought from those gods. When the Psalmists pray to God, they do not ask for things such as wealth, power, fame, glory, and dominion over others. Such things are expressions of selfishness rather than a commitment to the well-being of all. Therefore, to seek them from a God who despises selfishness would not only be senseless but also provoke his anger. Because he sees into human hearts, he knows when those who approach him for help do so with selfish motives, and when they do so he will reject them and the petitions they make.

While in principle it would not be selfish for the Psalmists to seek from God blessings such as good health, long life, many descendants, and other forms of prosperity, not only for themselves but for others as well, it is noteworthy that only rarely do they ask God to grant them such blessings. There are two reasons for this. First, in the Torah and by means of his prophets, God has already made known to his people his desire and commitment to do whatever is necessary on his part for such blessings to be theirs. There is no point in asking God for things that he is already fully committed to giving them out of love for them. And second, in the Torah God has made it abundantly clear to his people what they need to do in order to be able to enjoy those blessings, namely, live in accordance with his good and life-giving commandments. Those commandments promote the people's well-being and prosperity because these things follow naturally from the observance of those commandments as their intrinsic consequence. Precisely because their well-being is dependent on their living in accordance with those commandments, the people know that God can and will bless them only when they obey what he has commanded for their own good. For these reasons, the Psalmists generally feel no need to ask God to grant them his blessings, since they know that due to his unconditional love for them he is already fully committed to enabling them to attain those blessings and has indicated to them what they must do in order for those blessings to be theirs.

When the Psalmists invoke God, therefore, they generally do not seek some type of material blessing for themselves but instead ask him to deliver them from a situation in which they are suffering and in need of help. In most cases, the Psalmists have not done anything to deserve the difficulties or plight in which they find themselves. Often they are suffering and in need of help only because evildoers seek to do them harm and oppress them. On occasion, it is God who is allowing or causing them to suffer, yet when this is the case, it is because God is seeking to correct and discipline them for their own good or attempting to accomplish some other loving purpose in relation to them, such as teaching them to trust more fully in him when they experience difficulties in their life. In any case, when they find themselves in such situations, all that the Psalmists can do is to entrust themselves to God and ask him to do whatever he determines to be best for them.

Even when the Psalmists are not aware of having done anything to deserve the sufferings or hardships they are enduring, they never insist that God is

under some type of obligation to come to their aid. While they may point to their own justice and righteousness as evidence of their conformity with God's will, they do not claim that their practice of justice and righteousness gives them the right to demand that God help them or provides them with a basis for maintaining that if God does not give them the assistance they need he has done them an injustice. Nor do they insist that God has bound himself to some type of covenant or agreement that places him under obligation to respond to their obedience to his commandments by granting them his help. In part, the reason for this is that their obedience to God's commandments and conformity to his will are always imperfect, since no human being is capable of living without sin or conforming fully to God's will. However, the Psalmists also know that whatever help and assistance they receive from God is always an expression of his love, grace, and mercy rather than something they deserve or merit. In addition, they know that God's love, grace, and mercy at times take the form of subjecting them to correction and discipline rather than delivering them from their suffering. Therefore, if in his love and his sovereignty God has decided not to put an end to their sufferings or save them from their plight, they can only trust that he is acting for their good and accept whatever comes from his hand.

Because they believe that God is good, kind, and merciful and comes to the aid of those who are suffering not because they deserve his help but only because he cares for them, when the Psalmists seek his help they generally appeal only to his grace, love, and compassion toward those in need. Due to his reputation as a God who is concerned especially for the poor, downtrodden, weak, and oppressed, they know that he comes to the aid of those who have nothing to offer him rather than those who are able to give him something in exchange for his help. For that reason, the basis upon which they present to him their petitions for help is often not anything they have done or any quality or virtue of their own but simply his loving concern for those who suffer and are in need:

Rise up, O LORD! O God, lift up your hand! Do not forget the oppressed. Why do the wicked revile God and say in their hearts, "You will not call us to account"? But you do see! Indeed, you take note of trouble and grief, that you may take it into your hands. The helpless commit themselves to you; you are the helper of orphans. Break the arm of the wicked and evildoers; seek out their wickedness until you find none. The LORD is king forever and ever; the nations will perish from his land. O LORD, you will hear the desire of the meek; you will strengthen their heart. You will incline your ear to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed, so that those of the earth may no longer strike terror (Ps 10:12-18).

Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O LORD? Awake, do not cast us off forever! Why do you hide your face and forget our affliction and oppression? For our souls have sunk down into the dust; our bodies cling to the ground. Rise up, come to our help! Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love! (Ps 44:23-26)

Give ear to my prayer, O God; do not hide yourself from my supplication. Attend to me and answer me; I am restless in my complaint. I am distraught by the voice of the enemy, because of the oppression of the wicked. For they bring down trouble upon me, and in anger they assail me (Ps 55:1-3).

But as for me, my prayer is to you, O LORD. At an acceptable time, O God, in the abundance of your steadfast love, answer me in your saving faithfulness. Rescue me from sinking in the mire; let me be delivered from those who hate me and from the deep waters. Do not let the floodwaters sweep me away, or the depths swallow me up, or the Pit close its mouth over me. Answer me, LORD, for your steadfast love is good; according to the greatness of your compassion, turn to me! Do not hide your face from your servant, for I am in distress; answer me quickly! Draw near to my soul and redeem it; rescue me because of my enemies! (Ps 69:13-18)

O God, the insolent rise up against me. A band of ruthless people seeks my life, and they do not set you before them. But you, O LORD, are a God of compassion and grace, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. Turn to me and be gracious to me. Give your strength to your servant, and save the son of your maidservant. Show me a sign of your favor, so that those who hate me may see it and be put to shame, because you, LORD, have helped me and comforted me (Ps 86:14-17).

But you, O LORD my Lord, act on my behalf for your name's sake; because your steadfast love is good, deliver me. For I am poor and needy, and my heart is wounded within me. I am fading like a shadow at evening; I am shaken off like a locust. My knees are weak from fasting; my body has become gaunt. I am an object of derision for my accusers; when they see me, they wag their heads. Help me, O LORD my God! Save me according to your steadfast love. . . . With my mouth I will give great thanks to the LORD; I will praise him in the midst of the multitude. For he stands at the right hand of the needy, to save them from those who would condemn them to death (Ps 109:21-26, 30-31).

To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens! As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maidservant look to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the LORD our God, until he has mercy upon us. Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us, for we have endured no end of contempt. Our soul has had more than its fill of the scorn of those who are at ease, of the contempt of the arrogant (Ps 123:1-4; cf. Ps 71:1-13; 142:1-7).

In Psalms such as these, the only reason that those who need help are said to hope for and expect such help from God is that they are suffering and in great need. On that basis alone, they appeal to God's grace, compassion, kindness, and steadfast love, since they know him to be a God who cares deeply for those who suffer.

There are, however, other Psalms in which those who ask God for help point out to him that they have been committed to living in conformity with his will by practicing justice, righteousness, and kindness toward others and by avoiding any type of sin or wrongdoing. At times, they also mention that they have sided with those in need in the same way that he does:

Hear a just cause, O LORD. Attend to my cry; give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit. Let my deliverance come from you; let your eyes discern what is right. If you try my heart, if you visit me by night, if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me; my mouth does not transgress. As for the works of others, by the instruction of your lips I have avoided the ways of the violent. My steps have kept to your paths; my feet have not slipped. I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God. Incline your ear to me; hear my words (Ps 17:1-6).

He reached down from on high; he took hold of me. He drew me out of mighty waters. He delivered me from my powerful enemy, and from those who hated me, for they were too mighty for me. They came up against me in the day of my calamity, but the LORD was my support. He brought me out into a safe place; he delivered me because he was pleased with me. The LORD rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he recompensed me. For I have followed the ways of the LORD and have not wickedly departed from my God. For all his precepts were before me, and I did not put his statutes away from me. I was blameless before him, and I kept myself from wrongdoing. Therefore the LORD has recompensed me according to my righteousness, according to the cleanness of my hands in his sight. With the merciful you show yourself to be merciful; with the blameless you show yourself to be blameless; with the pure you show yourself to be pure; but with the crooked you show yourself to be astute. For you deliver those who are humble, but the haughty eyes you bring down (Ps 18:16-27).

Mark those who are blameless and look upon those who are upright, for there is a future for those who are peaceable. But wrongdoers will be completely destroyed; the posterity of the wicked will be cut off. The salvation of the righteous is from the LORD; he is their stronghold in the time of trouble. The LORD helps them and rescues them; he delivers them from the wicked and saves them because they take refuge in him (Ps 37:37-40).

Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell you what he has done for me. I cried out to him, and he was extolled with my tongue. If I had contemplated iniquity in my heart, the LORD would not have listened. But truly God has listened; he has heard the words of my prayer. Blessed be God, who has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me (Ps 66:16-20).

Save me, O LORD, from my enemies; I have fled to you for refuge. Teach me to do your will, for you are my God. Let your good spirit lead me on a level path. For your name's sake, O LORD, preserve my life. In your righteousness bring me out of trouble. In your steadfast love cut off my enemies, and destroy all my adversaries, for I am your servant (Ps 143:9-12).⁵

Among many interpreters, it is common to understand these Psalms in the sense that the Psalmists are claiming that their behavior has earned them the right to be saved by God, as if God were under obligation to help them because they had obeyed him by practicing the justice and righteousness that he asks for and demands. In that case, the basis for their petition for God's

5. The idea that God comes to the aid of those who refrain from wrongdoing and are committed to serving God by practicing justice and righteousness is found throughout other Psalms as well. See, for example, Ps 4:3; 7:1-11; 16:1-4; 34:15-17.

assistance would not be that he is gracious, kind, and compassionate to those who are in need but that they have given him the obedience he demands for his own sake and therefore should be rewarded for that obedience by receiving from him in exchange what they seek for their own sake. In other words, the logic would be that of *do ut des*: those who give God what he wants are entitled to receive from him what they want, since they have fulfilled their obligation to him and thus he must now fulfill his obligation to them as well. Such an interpretation of these passages would place God on the same level as the gods of the nations, who granted their favors to those who did what they desired and avoided actions that displeased them. The only difference would be that the demands made by the God of Israel in the biblical texts have to do with practicing justice and righteousness rather than simply satisfying the type of selfish desire that was thought to characterize the pagan gods of antiquity. Yet what would lead the God of Israel to seek and demand the practice of justice and righteousness would be a need or desire to satisfy the demands of his own nature rather than a concern for human well-being as an end in itself.

If this were the logic behind the Psalmists' allusions to their own righteousness when they implore God's help, then it would follow that the reason that they had been dedicated to obeying what God commanded was to be able to obtain his favor and have a basis for asking him to grant what they requested from him, or even for demanding that he do so. In that case, their practice of justice and righteousness would be motivated, not by a genuine concern for the well-being of others, but by a desire to obtain for themselves what they wanted from God. They would therefore have been acting primarily out of self-interest when they obeyed God and their behavior would be self-serving, even when they helped others, since such help would not be grounded in a genuine concern for others but rather in a desire to have a basis for making some demand upon God or convincing him to grant the petitions they presented to him.

The only way in which such behavior would be pleasing to God is if God himself were also self-serving and concerned only for his own self-interests. He would grant the requests of those who approached him with petitions in exchange for receiving from them what he sought for himself, such as their praise and recognition. The problem with such an interpretation of these passages from the Psalms would be that God would be demanding that people practice justice and righteousness for the sole reason that such conduct is pleasing to him. If he were genuinely concerned for those in need, however, he would want human beings such as the Psalmists also to be genuinely concerned for those in need rather than simply showing concern for them in order to obtain from him his blessings and favor for themselves. If they were not genuinely concerned for others, then once they had received the help they requested from God they might no longer see any reason to continue to show concern for those in need. Their practice of justice and righteousness might also be half-hearted or less committed due to the fact that it was not entirely

genuine and might tend to be opportunistic as well. A God who was genuinely concerned for those in need would also want human beings to share that concern genuinely rather than simply assisting others motivated by self-interest.

Furthermore, if what interested God was receiving praise, honor, and worship from human beings and having his name extolled by them for his own sake rather than the practice of justice and righteousness, then instead of pointing to their justice and righteousness when seeking God's help and favor, the Psalmists would point to the praise and honor they had rendered to him. This is not what we find in the Psalms, however. Just as the Psalmists do not offer to present sacrifices to God in exchange for his favors and blessings or ask God to grant their petitions on the basis of the sacrifices they have offered, neither do they ever point to the praise, honor, and worship they have offered him as a basis for imploring him to grant what they asked of him. As noted briefly above, while the Psalmists frequently offer God these things *in response* to his blessings and salvation, they do not view them as *a condition* that he has laid down in order to bless and save people.

For these reasons, when the Psalmists who seek God's help and deliverance appeal to their own justice or righteousness, the logic underlying that appeal should be understood differently. Rather than attempting to manipulate God or claim that their conduct places him under obligation to respond favorably to their petitions, their purpose is to make it clear to God that they are fully committed to the same thing that he is, namely, seeking wholeheartedly the well-being of others, including especially those in need. That is what it means to practice justice and righteousness. The idea is that if God truly cares about these things and is deeply committed to them, he should come to the aid of human beings who care about them as well and share his same commitment. By helping those who are dedicated to practicing justice and promoting equity by serving those in need, God will not only show compassion to them but will also make it possible for them to continue to be involved in serving those in need. Thus his salvation of those who are dedicated to seeking the wholeness and well-being of others will serve as a means to that same end.

Confessing Sin to Seek Salvation

As we have seen in Chapter 4 of this study, in a number of passages from the Psalms, the Psalmists ask God to judge them. Many translations such as the RSV, the NRSVue, the NIV, the NASB, and the ESV use the language of vindication rather than judgment in order to present the Psalmists asking God to vindicate them. While the Psalmists' petition that God judge them undoubtedly involves asking God to vindicate them or save them from the hands of those who wrongly seek to do them harm, it also conveys the idea that God should look into their heart and evaluate their conduct to see whether they are truly committed to practicing justice and righteousness in accordance with his will:

willing to endure great hardships in order to accomplish that end and perhaps even accept sufferings imposed on them by the gods in order to test them, yet even in those cases they are motivated by a concern for themselves rather than for others. The same is true when they wound or lacerate themselves in order to gain the attention of the gods or manifest their earnest devotion to them. In those cases, their purpose is not to show that they are committed to practicing what is good and right but simply to demonstrate that they are willing to go to any extreme necessary to obtain what they seek from the gods.

The Gratitude Born out of Goodness

In many of the Psalms, the Psalmists affirm that they will give God thanks, sing his praises, proclaim his goodness to others, and offer him sacrifices when he comes to their aid. As we have already noted above, however, they do not promise these things *in exchange* for his help, as if they were operating according to the principle of *do ut des*. Rather, they merely affirm that they will do these things *as a result* of the help that he has given them when they were in need:

The LORD is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. And those who know your name put their trust in you, O LORD, for you have not forsaken those who seek you. Sing praises to the LORD, who dwells in Zion! Declare his deeds among the peoples! For he who takes action against those who shed blood is mindful of them; he does not forget the cry of the afflicted. Be gracious to me, O LORD. See what I suffer at the hands of those who hate me. You are the one who lifts me up from the gates of death, so that I may recount all your praises and rejoice in your deliverance in the gates of daughter Zion (Ps 9:9-14).

In God, whose word I praise, in the LORD, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I am not afraid. What can a mere mortal do to me? I have made vows to you, O God; I will render thank offerings to you. For you have delivered my soul from death and my feet from stumbling, so that I may walk before God in the light of life (Ps 56:10-13).

They set a net for my feet; my soul was bowed down. They dug a pit in my path, but they have fallen into it themselves. My heart is steadfast, O God; my heart is steadfast. I will sing and make melody. Awake, my soul! Awake, O harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn. I will give thanks to you, O LORD, among the peoples; I will sing praises to you among the nations. For your steadfast love is as high as the heavens; your faithfulness extends to the clouds (Ps 57:6-10).

Bless our God, O peoples! Let the sound of his praise be heard, who has kept us among the living and has not allowed our feet to slip! For you, O God, have tested us; you have refined us as silver is refined. You brought us to be trapped in the net; you laid an oppressive burden on our backs. You let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water, yet you have brought us out to a place of safety. I will come into your house with burnt offerings. I will fulfill my vows to you, those that my lips uttered and my mouth promised when I was in trouble. I will offer to you burnt offerings of fatted calves, with the smoke of the sacrifice of rams; I will make an offering of bulls and goats (Ps 66:8-15).

I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify him with thanksgiving. This will please the LORD more than an ox or a bull with horns and hoofs. Let the oppressed see it and be glad; you who seek God, let your hearts revive. For the LORD hears the needy and does not despise his own who are in bondage (Ps 69:30-33).

My mouth will tell of your righteous acts, of your deeds of salvation all day long, though their number is beyond my knowledge. I will come praising the mighty deeds of the Lord GOD; I will extol your righteousness, which is yours alone. O God, you have taught me from my youth, and I continue to proclaim your wondrous deeds. And even when I am old and gray, O God, do not forsake me, until I declare your might to all the generations to come. Your power and your righteousness, O God, reach up to the high heavens. You who have done great things, O God, who is like you? You who have made me see many troubles and calamities will revive me again. You will bring me back to life again, up from the depths of the earth. You will increase my honor and surround me in comfort. I will also praise you with the harp for your faithfulness, O my God; I will sing praises to you with the lyre, O Holy One of Israel. My lips will shout for joy when I sing praises to you; my soul also, which you have rescued. All day long my tongue will speak of your righteous help, for those who tried to do me harm have been put to shame and disgraced (Ps 71:15-24).

Gracious is the LORD and righteous; our God is merciful. The LORD protects the simple. When I was brought low, he saved me. Return to your rest, O my soul, for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you. For you have rescued my soul from death, my eyes from tears, and my feet from stumbling. I will walk before the LORD in the land of the living. I kept my faith, even when I said, "I am greatly afflicted"; I said in my consternation, "Everyone is a liar." What shall I give back to the LORD for all his benefits toward me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD; I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people. Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his faithful ones. O LORD, I am your servant; I am your servant, the child of your handmaid. You have loosed my bonds. I will offer to you a sacrifice of thanksgiving and call on the name of the LORD. I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people, in the courts of the house of the LORD, in your midst, O Jerusalem. Praise the LORD! (Ps 116:5-19)

In Psalms such as these, those who vow to sing God's praises and subsequently fulfill those vows are responding to the kindnesses he has shown them with gratitude. There is no hint of the idea that they are offering God their praise and worship in exchange for his help, nor is God presented as helping them because they will offer him praises and sacrifices in return. In fact, those who are said to receive his help are those in need who have little if anything to offer God. Because of this, even if they do offer him sacrifices after receiving his help, in most cases those sacrifices will not be very lavish or abundant. Yet this does not matter to God, since his concern is not to receive sacrifices but to deliver those who require his assistance.

Furthermore, the reason why the Psalmists offer God their praise, thanksgiving, and sacrifices is that they wish to let others know that he is a good and faithful God who cares for those who are suffering and in need. By proclaiming

the manner in which God has helped them, they encourage those who are in a situation in which they are being oppressed or are in need to call out to God and receive from him the help they require, not because they deserve such help but simply because God cares for the weak, lowly, and downtrodden. In other words, the Psalmists wish to make it known to other people, including those of other nations, that the God of Israel acts with justice, kindness, faithfulness, and steadfast love so that they too may draw near to him and experience his goodness and salvation. This pleases God greatly, not because he seeks worship, praise, and offerings for his own sake, but because he wants people everywhere to be brought to know him and live in accordance with his will so that in that way they may attain the well-being he desires for all out of love for them.

Those who sing God's praises and express their heartfelt gratitude toward him also grow in their love for him as they do so, while at the same time drawing others to live in that same love and be strengthened in it. The greater their love for God and their commitment to living in accordance with his will, the more they will be dedicated to serving him by seeking the well-being of others together with their own. In biblical thought, therefore, if God is content to receive expressions of praise, love, and dedication from those who have received his help, it is not because he desires these things for his own sake but because they are means by which people are brought to submit more fully to the way of life that he wants to see in all for their own good. Once more, the idea reflected in these Psalms is that God wants people to obey him, not for *his* sake, but for *theirs*.

A GOD WHO SEEKS SACRIFICE WHILE SPURNING IT

Just as the only thing that can truly please the God of the Hebrew Bible is the practice of justice, righteousness, love, and compassion, so also the only thing that arouses his wrath and displeasure is the persistent refusal of human beings to practice these things. In this regard as well, he is fundamentally different from other gods in antiquity, who were generally thought to become angry at human beings not for refusing to care for one another and do what is right and good but for failing to present them with the offerings and worship they desired for their own sake.

Desiring Sacrifice from Those Who Refuse to Give It

One will search the Hebrew Scriptures in vain for passages in which the God of Israel is presented as becoming angry at human beings for the sole reason that they have failed to offer him gifts and sacrifices. Only a few passages from those Scriptures, in fact, even seem to suggest such an idea. A close look at them, however, reveals a logic that is distinct.

In Isa 43:18-25, God is presented as telling his people:

Do not bring to mind the former things, or consider the things of old. Behold, I am about to do something new; now it springs forth, do you not perceive

interest in rebuilding the temple per se but the lack of commitment to God's will that is reflected in their failure to rebuild the temple. What God wants from them is their full commitment to living in accordance with his will. This commitment should take the form of rebuilding the temple so that they may offer him their worship there. That worship will lead them to place him and his will at the center of their lives once more for their own good, since only by acknowledging his sovereignty over them as his people will they be brought to live in ways that truly promote their well-being and happiness.

In spite of the apparent similarity between these passages from the books of the Hebrew prophets and the passages from the poems of Homer in which the gods are said to become angry when they do not receive the gifts and sacrifices that they regard as their due, therefore, the idea behind them is very different. What those gods desire, demand, and command is that people offer them their sacrifices for their own sake. In the passages from the biblical prophets just considered, however, what is said to displease God is that his people are not committed to living in accordance with his will for their own good. The lack of that commitment is evident in the fact that they have no interest in presenting him with sacrificial offerings that are truly an expression of love for him and a desire to do his will with gladness. In other words, in these passages the failure of the people to offer God their sacrifices and praise is seen not as the *cause* of God's displeasure in itself but rather as a *symptom* of a deeper problem, namely, the people's failure and refusal to love and obey God by living in ways that promote their well-being and that of others as well. When God complains that his people are not offering him their sacrifices as they should, therefore, what bothers him is not the lack of sacrificial offerings per se but rather the lack of commitment to his will of which the failure to offer sacrifices is an expression or consequence.

Reclaiming Sacrifice by Rejecting It

While there are only a few passages in the Hebrew Bible that portray God as becoming displeased or angry when his people do not offer him sacrifices, numerous passages speak of God *not wanting* sacrifices if his people are not committed to practicing justice, righteousness, and mercy. In these passages, what is said to displease or anger God is not the failure of his people to offer him sacrifices but things such as injustice, violence, oppression, and disregard for those in need. These passages therefore once again present a God whose ultimate concern is *not for himself or for the worship, praises, and offerings of human beings but rather for the well-being of his people*. In fact, if his people are not committed to living in justice, righteousness, and mercy in accordance with his loving will, rather than pleasing him, their sacrifices and offerings provoke him to wrath.

These ideas are especially stressed in a number of passages from the books of Israel's prophets. In the context of allusions to the wrongdoings, bloodshed, robbery, murder, and crimes committed by the people, Hosea presents God as

affirming: “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hos 6:6). Similarly, in Isa 58:6-7, God tells his people who wish to obtain his favor by offering up to him their fasting:

You fast only to quarrel and fight and to strike with a wicked fist. The type of fasting that you are doing today will not make your voice to be heard on high. Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Perhaps the clearest statement of the idea that what ultimately interests God is the practice of justice rather than the offering of sacrifices is found in Mic 6:6-8:

With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself down before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Other passages from the prophetic books stress not only God’s desire for justice rather than sacrifice but also his rejection of the sacrificial worship offered to him by those who practice injustice and oppression. After insisting that God will dwell among his people at the temple only if they refrain from shedding innocent blood, worshiping other gods, and oppressing the needy, the prophet Jeremiah presents God as telling them: “Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and follow after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, ‘We are safe!’—only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of thieves in your eyes?” (Jer 7:9-11). Several chapters later, the prophet adds: “Even though they fast, I will not hear their cry; and even though they offer burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; but I will consume them by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence” (Jer 14:12; cf. 11:15).

In a similar manner, after claiming that the altars that the people have built in order to *expiate* sin have instead become places for *committing* sin, the prophet Hosea adds: “Though they offer choice sacrifices and eat the flesh, the LORD does not accept them” (Hos 8:11-13). In Amos 5:21-25, God tells the people: “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer up to me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; nor will I look with favor on the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals. Spare me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters,

and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” The words attributed to God in Isa 1:11-17 are just as harsh, if not more so:

Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?, says the LORD. I have had my fill of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moon feasts and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are covered with blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean. Remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good. Seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

While some interpreters have claimed to find in passages such as these the idea that the God of Israel does not want sacrifice, the affirmation that God desires the practice of justice, righteousness, and mercy instead of sacrifices should probably be understood instead as a Hebraism. In that case, the idea is that God does not want sacrificial offerings unless they are accompanied by a commitment to justice, righteousness, and mercy and are an expression of that commitment. As we shall see in Chapter 7, in fact, in biblical thought the purpose of offering sacrifice is precisely that of strengthening the commitment to these things among God’s people.

Passages from other books of the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Jewish literature reflect the same ideas found in the prophetic writings. What interests God is not sacrifice per se but the practice of justice, righteousness, love, and compassion:

Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear to hear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. Then I said, “Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me: ‘I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart’” (Ps 40:6-8).

“Hear, O my people, and I will speak; O Israel, I will testify against you. I am God, your God. I do not reprove you for your sacrifices; your burnt offerings are continually before me. I will not accept a bull from your house, or goats from your folds. For every wild animal of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the air, and every creature in the fields is mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and all that is in it is mine. Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats? Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and fulfill your vows to the Most High. Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will glorify me.”

But to the wicked God says: “What right have you to recite my statutes, or take my covenant on your lips? For you hate correction, and you cast my words behind you. When you see a thief, you join in with him, and you keep company with adulterers. You give your mouth over to evil, and yoke your tongue

to deceit. You sit and speak against your kin; you slander your own mother's child. These things you have done and I have remained silent; you thought that I was just like you. But now I rebuke you, and lay the charge before you. Mark this, then, you who forget God, or I will tear you apart, and there will be no one to save you. Those who bring thanksgiving as their sacrifice honor me; to those who go the right way I will show the salvation of God" (Ps 50:7-23).

For you have no delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifice that pleases God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise (Ps 51:16-17).

To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice. . . . The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination; how much more when brought with evil intent (Prov 21:3, 27).

If one sacrifices ill-gotten goods, the offering is blemished; the gifts of wrongdoers are not acceptable. The Most High is not pleased with the offerings of the ungodly, nor for their many sacrifices does he forgive their sins. Like one who kills a son before his father's eyes is the person who offers a sacrifice taken from the property of the poor (Sir 34:23-24).

When one contrasts passages such as these with what we find in the *Enuma Elish* and the poems of Homer, the difference is striking. One can hardly imagine gods such as Marduk, Zeus, or Poseidon resolutely insisting that they demand the practice of steadfast love and mercy rather than sacrifice. Much less would such gods reject the sacrifices of their worshipers because they had failed to care for the poor, the weak, and the downtrodden or because those worshipers had obtained what they were offering up by means of robbery, pillage, violence, and bloodshed. The last thing that concerned many of those gods was that those who worshiped them be dedicated to liberating the oppressed and assisting those in need. On the contrary, their primary concern was that they be given the praise, honor, worship, and offerings that they regarded as their due. If it was necessary to trample on the poor, weak, and needy in order for that to happen, then such gods would not only forgive and overlook such oppressive behavior on the part of their worshipers but at times even expect and demand it of them.

THE CAUSES OF GOD'S WRATH

As many of the passages just considered clearly demonstrate, throughout the Hebrew Bible what is repeatedly seen as provoking God to wrath is not the failure of people to offer him their worship and sacrifices but rather their persistence in living and acting in ways that undermine and destroy their own well-being and that of others. While the biblical texts often speak of God becoming angry in response to the practice of sin, injustice, violence, and oppression among his people, however, they seem to allude even more frequently to his anger at the people's insistence on worshiping other gods. Because biblical interpreters have commonly failed to recognize the relation between idolatry and injustice in biblical thought, they have tended to see

these two motives of God's wrath as separate and distinct from one another. In addition, just as they have generally seen God's prohibition of sin and injustice as something that responds to a concern for himself due to the effects that these things have *on him*, they also tend to ascribe his anger at his people's worship of other gods to a desire and demand that they worship him alone *for his own sake*. For that reason, God's wrath at injustice and idolatry is consistently regarded as being rooted in motives that are self-centered and have little if anything to do with his love for human beings and his desire that they enjoy well-being. As we have noted previously, among many biblical interpreters even God's demand that his people practice justice and righteousness tends to be seen as responding to a necessity grounded in his own nature rather than a concern for the manner in which human beings themselves are affected by the practice of sin, injustice, violence, and oppression.

Before looking more closely at passages from the biblical texts that allude to God's wrath and its causes, however, it is important to note a point that has been mentioned only briefly in the preceding chapters. As we observed in Chapter 2 when analyzing the Genesis narratives regarding God's reaction to the disobedience of the first man and woman, the murder of Abel by Cain, and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, many of the passages in the Hebrew Bible that speak of God imposing punishments or inflicting suffering on those who have behaved in ways contrary to his will make no allusion to any wrath or anger on his part. In fact, as we have noted in the previous chapter, God is often presented as lamenting the need to punish people or even reacting to their sinful behavior with sadness and grief rather than anger, as he does in the introduction to the flood narrative in Gen 6:5-6. The same observation applies to his calls for people to repent and turn back in obedience to him throughout the biblical texts. In many cases, these can be seen as pleas and exhortations rather than threats in that they are grounded in a deep yearning that his people recommit themselves to a way of life that promotes their well-being rather than continuing down a path that will lead only to their ruin and perdition.

It is significant, therefore, that many of the biblical passages that speak of God punishing or chastising people for their sinfulness do not make any explicit allusion to his wrath or even portray God as angry. The reason for this is that those who inflict discipline on others in order to correct their behavior are not always angry at them for that behavior, especially if they are doing so out of love for them. In fact, just as it is often painful for a parent to have to inflict punishment on a child in order to correct and discipline the child, so also in the biblical texts God is at times presented as experiencing pain when he subjects his people to his chastisements in order to bring them to change their ways.

A number of passages from the Hebrew Scriptures, including some of those we have seen in the previous chapter, also present God's wrath as something that gradually increases in the face of his repeated calls for his people to

put away their sinful and destructive behavior. That wrath therefore does not constitute his initial response to sin. Only when his people not only ignore his repeated calls to repentance but willfully persist in their disobedience and injustice does he become angry at them. As this situation continues and grows even worse, God's anger and frustration increase as well and eventually take the form of rage and fury. Even in those cases, however, it is necessary to stress that what leads God to react with such passion and vehemence is his intense love for his people, which will not allow him simply to sit by passively when he sees them doing such great harm to themselves and others.

In fact, one of the phrases most commonly used in the Hebrew Bible to describe God affirms that he is "slow to anger." This affirmation appears in the context of the Sinai and wilderness narratives, in the book of Nehemiah, in several of the Psalms, and in the books of the prophets Joel, Jonah, and Nahum.⁷ In many of these passages, the phrase "slow to anger" is followed by the words "and abounding in steadfast love." The contexts in which this phrase appears allude not only to the punishments or chastisements that God imposes on his people for their sins but also to his compassion and his willingness to forgive. In addition to portraying God's anger and the chastisements he inflicts on his people when they disobey him as expressions of his love, this phrase stresses that when the people fall into sin, God does not immediately become angry at them or punish them. Instead, like a loving parent, he first calls them to put away the behavior that is doing harm to themselves and others. Only when they persistently refuse to respond to this call and willfully continue in that behavior does his anger gradually become kindled.

A second phrase that stresses God's love for his people when describing the manner in which he responds to their sin is found repeatedly throughout the book of Jeremiah. There the Hebrew text speaks of God sending his servants the prophets to his sinful people "daily" and describes them as "rising up early" or at an early hour.⁸ The affirmation that God sent his prophets daily underscores God's persistence in never ceasing to call the people to turn back to him when they have fallen into sin. While the allusion to God doing so at an early hour may also stress God's unwavering persistence and untiring efforts to bring the people to repent, it probably stresses as well the idea that from the very moment or hour that the people first fall into sin, God is already reaching out to them in an attempt to make them aware of their sin and calling them to turn back to him in obedience. He does not wait for the sin and disobedience to get worse, but takes action immediately. As we saw in Chapter 5, this same idea is stated explicitly in 2 Macc 6:12-16, where the author of 2 Maccabees affirms that God shows his kindness to his people by chastising them for their sins as soon as they fall into those sins rather than waiting until they have sunk more deeply into their sinful ways in order to attempt to correct them.

7. See Exod 34:6; Num 14:18; Neh 9:17; Ps 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nah 1:3.
8. See Jer 7:13, 25-26; 11:7-8; 25:3-7; 26:4-6; 29:19; 32:33; 35:14-15; 44:4.

When the biblical texts and other Jewish writings of antiquity refer to God's wrath, therefore, what they often have in mind is not simply his anger but rather his frustration and exasperation at his people's stubborn refusal to respond to his calls to put away their destructive behavior and return to the way of life that he has laid out for them in the Torah for their own good. As several of the passages considered in the previous section demonstrate, however, what is especially said to move God to wrath is not merely his people's failure to repent and their persistence in their destructive behavior but the cruel and violent manner in which some of them oppress others. Of course, that cruelty and violence also take the passive form of failing to show kindness and compassion to those who are suffering by seeking to deliver them from their plight. In these instances, God's anger or wrath is understood as *indignation* and *outrage* at the manner in which some abuse others and trample on them or mistreat them by cold-heartedly ignoring and neglecting them when they find themselves desperately in need.

Giving Vent to God's Rage

Expressions of this indignation and outrage appear repeatedly throughout the writings of Israel's prophets. Even though in many cases the prophets do not allude explicitly to God's anger when denouncing the injustices being committed by some against others, that anger is clearly reflected in the content and tone of their words:

Your rulers are rebels and companions of thieves. They all love a bribe and run after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow's cause does not come before them (Isa 1:23).

The LORD enters into judgment with the elders and rulers of his people: "It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor into the dirt?" says the Lord GOD of hosts (Isa 3:14-15).

Woe to those of you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land! The LORD of hosts has sworn in my ears: "Surely many houses will become desolate, large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant. For ten acres of vineyard will yield but one bath, and a homer of seed will yield a mere bushel." Woe to those who rise early in the morning to pursue strong drink, who continue to be inflamed by wine into the evening! Their feasts consist of lyre and harp, tambourine and flute and wine, but they do not regard the deeds of the LORD, or consider the work of his hands! Therefore my people go into exile for lack of knowledge; their nobles are dying of hunger, and their multitude is parched with thirst. . . .

Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness, who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and shrewd in their own sight! Woe to those who are heroes in drinking wine and valiant at mixing drink, who acquit the guilty for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of their rights! (Isa 5:8-13, 20-23)

Woe to those who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to deprive the needy of justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that they may make widows their spoil, and orphans their prey! What will you do on the day of punishment, in the desolation that will come from far away? To whom will you flee for help, and where will you leave your wealth, so as not to crouch among the prisoners or fall among the slain? For all this his anger has not turned away; his hand is stretched out still (Isa 10:1-4).

For your hands are contaminated with blood, and your fingers with iniquity! Your lips have spoken lies; your tongue mutters perversity! No one brings suit justly; no one is judged with truth. They rely on empty pleas, speak falsehoods, conceive mischief, and beget iniquity. They hatch vipers' eggs, and weave spiders' webs. Whoever eats of their eggs dies, and from the crushed egg a viper is hatched. Their webs cannot serve as clothing; they cannot cover themselves with what they make. Their works are works of iniquity, and acts of violence are in their hands. Their feet run to evil, and they rush to shed innocent blood. Their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; devastation and destruction are in their highways. They do not know the way of peace, and there is no justice in their paths. They have made their paths crooked; no one who walks in them knows peace (Isa 59:3-8).

For scoundrels are found among my people; they lurk like bird-catchers lying in wait, yet the trap they set is to catch human beings. Like a cage full of birds, their houses are filled with fraud; in that way they have become great and rich. They have grown fat and sleek. They know no limits in deeds of wickedness. They do not judge with justice the cause of the orphan, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy. Shall I not punish them for these things?, says the LORD, and shall I not bring retribution on a nation such as this? (Jer 5:26-29)

They bend their tongue like a bow to speak lies; they are renowned in the land, but not for truth. For they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me, says the LORD. Let all be on guard against their neighbors, and put no trust in any of their kin; for all your kin are usurpers, and every neighbor goes around like a slanderer. They all deceive their neighbors, and no one speaks the truth; they have trained their tongues to speak lies, and grow weary by committing iniquities. Oppression follows upon oppression, deceit upon deceit! They refuse to know me, says the LORD (Jer 9:3-6).

O house of David! Thus says the LORD: Execute justice in the morning, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed, or else my wrath will go forth like fire and burn, with no one to quench it, because of your evil doings (Jer 21:12).

Make a chain! For the land is full of bloody crimes, and the city is full of violence (Ezek 7:23).

Ah, you who turn justice to wormwood, and cast righteousness to the ground! . . . They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth. Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you will not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you will not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions, and how

great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate (Amos 5:7, 10-12).

Ah, you who put far away the evil day, and bring near a reign of violence! Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat tender lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and improvise on instruments of music like David; who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph! (Amos 6:4-6)

Hear this, you who trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, "When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the Sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the bushel small and the shekel great, and deal deceitfully with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat" (Amos 8:4-6).

And I said: Listen, you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel! Is it not for you to know justice?—you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones, who eat the flesh of my people, flay their skin off them, break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a cauldron. . . . Hear this, you heads of the house of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and make crooked what is straight, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with perversity! Its rulers give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money. Yet they rest in the LORD and say, "Surely the LORD is with us! No harm will come upon us" (Mic 3:1-3, 9-11).

The voice of the LORD cries to the city (it is sound wisdom to fear your name): Hear, O tribe and assembly of the city! Am I to forget the treasures of wickedness in the house of the wicked, and the false measure that is despicable? Am I to tolerate wicked scales and a bag of dishonest weights? The wealthy among you are full of violence; your inhabitants speak lies, with tongues of deceit in their mouths (Mic 6:9-12).

The faithful have disappeared from the land, and there is no one left who is upright. They all lie in wait for blood, and they hunt each other with nets. Their hands are skilled at doing evil. The official and the judge ask for a bribe, and the powerful dictate what they desire; thus they conspire together. The best of them is like a brier, the most upright of them a thorn hedge. The day that they post their sentinels, their punishment will come; their confusion is now at hand. Put no trust in a friend, have no confidence in a loved one; guard the doors of your mouth from the woman who lies in your embrace. For the son treats the father with contempt, the daughter rises up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; your enemies are members of your own household (Mic 7:2-6).

Throughout these passages, the anger and indignation of God are more than evident, as are the motives for that anger and indignation. What fills him with anger and even rage is not merely the lying, deceit, robbery, injustice, violence, and oppression that the prophets describe in graphic terms but also the disdain and contempt for the weak, the needy, and those who are suffering.

The problem is not only that some are crushing, devouring, and trampling on others but also that they are pushing aside those who are helpless and depriving them of their rights. The guilty are acquitted through the payment of bribes while the innocent are condemned. The passage from Isaiah 10 even presents the people replacing the laws and statutes that God has given them with others of their own making in order to justify and legalize their thievery and their predatory behavior toward the needy. In addition, when the righteous raise their voice to protest, speak the truth, and denounce the lies and corruption, they too are afflicted, persecuted, and even murdered. All of these things are precisely what the commandments of the Torah prohibit and are intended to prevent. For that reason, ultimately it is the failure and refusal of the people to observe those commandments that is regarded as filling the land with suffering, violence, and bloodshed.

Rather than being *opposed* to God's love, therefore, these passages make it clear that God's wrath is the *expression* of his love for his people. That love will not let him ignore or take lightly the pain and suffering that some inflict on others. While his commitment to justice certainly does not allow him to tolerate the people's sinful behavior, at the root of that commitment to justice is his deep desire that his people possess only the good and be delivered from all forms of evil, injustice, and oppression. It is his profound love for his people, including especially the weak and needy among them, that leads him to become filled with wrath and indignation when he sees the cruel and terrible things that some do to others and the heartless and inhumane manner in which they treat those whom they are to love and care for in accordance with his command. In fact, were God *not* filled with wrath and indignation upon seeing such things, he could not be considered a God of love. Instead, he would be siding with the oppressors and evildoers either by actively continuing to pour out his blessings on them when they behave in such ways or by simply looking the other way when they grind others into the dirt. For God to respond to their crimes in either of these ways would even make him complicit in those crimes.

It must also be stressed once more that the biblical texts consistently associate all of these violent and oppressive behaviors with the worship of gods other than the God of Israel. Because those gods are themselves selfish, greedy, cruel, and unjust, they not only disregard the same type of behavior among their worshipers but actually foment and promote such behavior. For that reason, the prophets frequently portray God as becoming indignant and enraged at his people when they persistently refuse to put away their idols and false gods in order to serve him alone. Once again, what moves him to react so angrily to their worship of other gods is not a concern *for himself* but a concern *for them*, and especially for the victims of the cruel and oppressive behavior that follows upon their idolatry as its inevitable consequence.

These passages from the prophetic books also reflect a number of other ideas that we considered at the outset of the present chapter and in the previous

one. What makes the sin of the people so grievous is not only that they have refused to listen to the prophets whom God has sent to them in an attempt to bring them to put a stop to their oppressive and destructive behavior, but also that they have violently persecuted those prophets in order to silence them. Rather than representing a lack of love for his people, God's refusal to hear their prayers and petitions when they insist on practicing injustice and violence is the only response that his concern and passion for their well-being can take in the face of such behavior. In several of the passages just cited, God stresses that his love for the people has led to his repeated and persistent efforts to bring them to put away their wrongdoing, yet despite his persistence, those efforts have proven fruitless. For that reason, the only form that his love can now take is that of chastising them even more harshly by sending them into exile and even destroying many of them, since nothing else has worked. Once again, rather than standing *in opposition* to God's love, his intense wrath and the punishments or chastisements he imposes on the people are *grounded* in his love for all and are the *fruit* of that love. As God himself is presented as asking in Jer 5:26-29, how could he truly be said to love his people if he simply allowed such oppressive behavior to continue unabated without attempting to bring an end to it through punishments and chastisements? In fact, for God simply to *forgive* or *overlook* such behavior and leave it unpunished would be not only to accept and condone it but to prolong it and allow it to proliferate even more. Under such circumstances, to forgive the unrepentant evildoers for their sins would be an act of cruelty rather than love, since it would involve giving them free license to continue in the same behavior.

All of the passages just considered, therefore, make it clear that in biblical thought God's wrath and anger are rooted *not in a concern for himself but rather in his concern for the well-being of the human beings whom he loves*. Undoubtedly, because the biblical texts at times present God as experiencing pain and grief when he observes the manner in which some inflict suffering on others and do them harm, in a sense it can be said that God seeks to alleviate his own suffering when he acts in wrath to punish those who are causing others to suffer. Yet this is only because he has linked his own happiness to that of the human beings he has created, as we saw in Chapter 2. What leads the God of Israel to seek to put an end to the type of oppressive and destructive behavior described in these passages is not simply a concern for his own happiness but rather his concern for the happiness and well-being of those whose lives are being destroyed by that behavior. What angers and pains God is not the effect that such behavior has *on him or his divine nature* but rather the effect that it has on the human beings he loves. It is his passionate commitment to the well-being of all that leads him not only to *ask* but to *demand* and *command* that his people obey him by living in ways that promote and cultivate their well-being and that of others rather than undermining and destroying that well-being through their behavior. In other words, his love leads him to demand that his people be just as passionately committed to their own

well-being and that of other human beings as he is. For that same reason, he also demands that they be filled with the same indignation and outrage that he experiences when they see some people cruelly oppressing others and neglecting those in need rather than rushing to their aid in order to defend them from those who are doing them harm. That same love and passionate commitment to the well-being of all also leads God to channel his anger in ways that must ultimately be regarded as *constructive* rather than *destructive*. What he seeks is not to do harm to those who have aroused his anger but to liberate people from behaviors that fill the world with pain and suffering.

These observations should also be kept in mind when considering passages in which God is said to vent or satisfy his wrath or fury.⁹ Because God's wrath is consistently seen as being grounded in his commitment to the well-being of his people and his opposition to everything that undermines and destroys that well-being, when he acts in wrath he is not seeking to let his emotions out for his own sake or to pour out his rage simply in order to give vent to it. In that case, any actions he took in response to his anger and indignation would not accomplish any kind of constructive or salvific purpose in relation to human beings. Rather than seeking to establish justice and equity, he would merely be attempting to satisfy his own need or desire to relieve himself of pent-up rage. While the pagan gods of antiquity were thought to behave in such a manner, the biblical texts consistently present God as seeking to accomplish a clear objective when he pours out his wrath, namely, that of putting an end to injustice and oppression. When those texts speak of God venting his anger or satisfying his wrath, therefore, they should be understood in the sense that he refuses to put away his anger or wrath until his loving objectives have been accomplished as fully as possible. His anger and wrath at injustice and oppression are satisfied only when that injustice and oppression are brought to an end, either by repentance or by punishment.

The Anger and Hatred of God's Love

While the sufferings and afflictions that the God of Israel is said to impose on his people are often seen as having the purpose of bringing them to turn back in obedience to him and his commandments for their own good, this is not their only purpose. When some are oppressing others and refuse to heed God's call to put away their oppressive behavior, God may punish them not because he is attempting to bring about some change in them but only because he wishes to make it impossible for them to continue to do harm to others by means of that behavior. In that case, rather than punishing them for their own sake, God takes action against them for the sake of those who are suffering at their hands. In addition to saving the oppressed from their oppressors, God's destruction of those who insist on oppressing others also serves as a deterrent, since it is a means by which he gives notice to any who

9. See, for example, Ps 78:62; Lam 4:11; Ezek 5:13; 16:42; 21:17; 24:13.

would fall into such behavior that he will not tolerate it but will punish it with firmness and severity due to his commitment to the well-being of all.

According to the logic that runs throughout the biblical texts, God's destruction of those who insist on oppressing others and filling their lives with suffering is just as much an expression of his love as his persistent attempts to discipline and correct those who practice such behavior. In both cases, what he seeks is to bring sin, injustice, and oppression to an end for the good of all. Undoubtedly, when God acts to destroy those who are oppressing others, their destruction can hardly be seen as an expression of love for them. Contrary to appearances, however, it would also be a mistake to see their destruction as reflecting a lack of love for them on the part of God. In most instances, prior to destroying those who oppress others, God repeatedly exhorts and warns them to put away their oppressive behavior and instead treat others with justice, kindness, and compassion. He also warns them ahead of time of his intentions to punish and destroy them and may chastise them in various ways in an attempt to correct them before taking more drastic action.

When God has done everything possible to bring those who oppress others to change their ways, he may conclude that he has no other option but to punish them with great severity or even destroy them. This is not because he no longer loves them, however. On the contrary, he continues to desire the well-being of all people without exception, no matter what they do or fail to do. Yet when they persistently refuse to live in a way that allows God to bless them and instead fill the lives of others with pain and suffering, they cannot attain the well-being God desires for them, no matter how much God would like that well-being to be theirs. If he proceeds against the oppressors, therefore, it is not because he does not love them but because his love for them cannot accomplish its purposes in them. In that case, he must take action against the oppressors for the sake of those whom they are oppressing, who are also the objects of God's love and concern. If he cannot attain the well-being of all, he must settle for seeking the well-being of those whose way of life will allow them to enjoy that well-being. He does this by delivering them from their oppressors.

It is also important to stress that in biblical thought unjust and oppressive behavior does great harm not only to those who are regarded as the victims of that behavior but also to those who insist on practicing it. While they generally believe that they are benefited by that behavior in that it allows them to obtain the things they desire, such as wealth, power, and control over the lives of others, in reality such behavior does them harm for many different reasons. Rather than enjoying constructive and fulfilling relationships with others that are characterized by sincere love and mutual affection, their lives are filled with things such as hatred, jealousy, rivalries, greed, and selfishness. Whatever material benefits they may obtain come at a tremendous cost, since in order to attain those benefits they generate among others enmity, hostility, anger, and resentment toward themselves. They also end up living in

constant fear due to the fact that others who practice the same type of behavior inevitably seek to do them harm and take away from them whatever they have obtained and accumulated. In fact, even when they appear to be loved and revered by others, it soon becomes clear to them that such love and reverence are almost always simply forms of self-interest rather than consisting of a genuine concern for their well-being. While both those who are closest to them as well as others over whom they have power may offer them praise and adulation and express their adoration and admiration for them, they do so not because they truly care for them but because they wish to obtain from them something for themselves. Rather than attaining true well-being for themselves, those who practice injustice and oppression undermine their own happiness and fill their lives and those of others with strife, rancor, and constant conflict. If God insists that they stop oppressing others, therefore, he does so not only for the sake of those whom they are oppressing but also for their own good, since their oppressive behavior does great harm not only to others but also to themselves.

At first glance, the idea that God loves and cares not only for the oppressed but for their oppressors as well may seem to run contrary to what is affirmed in many passages of the biblical texts. In particular, there are numerous passages that affirm explicitly that God hates or despises evildoers and suggest that he is pleased when the righteous hate sinners and evildoers as well.¹⁰ These passages seem to present him taking action against evildoers and calling on others to do the same not simply for the purpose of delivering their victims from the suffering they inflict on them but also because he takes pleasure in doing evildoers harm and making them suffer.

When considering such passages, however, it is once again important to stress the difference between the biblical conception of the God of Israel and the manner in which other nations in antiquity conceived of their gods. In belief systems such as those that we encounter in the *Enuma Elish* and the poems of Homer, what leads the gods to hate certain human beings and seek to do them harm is a concern for their own desires and interests. Because the gods seek to be in positions of power and control over human beings in order to impose their will on them, they strike out in anger and hatred at any who oppose them or stand in their way. When they act in this manner, of course, they are not acting out of love for people or seeking their well-being. At times, in fact, the gods are presented as hating particular human beings for no good reason. Since they are capricious, they simply are attracted to some human beings and repulsed by others, whom they find displeasing or odious for whatever cause.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, however, those who are said to be hated by God are evildoers and those who practice injustice and oppression. The author of Psalm 5, for example, tells God: "The arrogant will not stand before your eyes;

10. See, for example, Lev 20:23; Deut 18:12; 25:16; Ps 31:6; 95:10; 119:13; 139:21-22; Prov 3:31-34; Hos 9:15-17; Wis 14:9; Sir 12:6; 16:8.

A GOD OF VENGEANCE?

In order for God to accomplish his objective of bringing about among his people the type of just, righteous, and loving behavior that will enable them to attain the well-being he desires for them, he must constantly determine what type of activity on his part is called for in order to promote such behavior and put a stop to behavior that undermines and destroys that well-being. This involves judging human beings in order to evaluate whether they are in fact committed to living in the way he has commanded for their own good. These judgments then serve as a basis for the decisions he makes regarding what he must do in order to accomplish his objective of bringing them to live in the way necessary for them to enjoy the wholeness he seeks for them.

Throughout the biblical texts, the God of Israel is presented as examining and judging both the *actions* of human beings as well as the *thoughts of their heart*. If God were to judge actions alone, it would not be clear to him whether those who act in accordance with his commands are doing so out of a true and sincere commitment to the well-being of others or are instead motivated by other concerns, such as a desire to gain his favor or manipulate him merely to satisfy some type of selfish desire or self-interest on their part. In that case, rewarding their behavior would not lead them to live in genuine love for others and might even result in their becoming more selfish and manipulating, since they would conclude that they can obtain what they want from God merely by doing outwardly what he commands. Conversely, if God looked only into the hearts of people when judging them, it would not be clear whether the good intentions of those he judged and their commitment to living in accordance with his will were leading them to behave in ways that actually contributed to the well-being of others. In spite of their good intentions, they might be acting in ways that do harm to others out of ignorance or a lack of understanding. In that case, they would still stand in need of correction. In addition, a commitment to doing what is good, just, and loving is insufficient if it does not actually lead to behavior that is also good, just, and loving. God must therefore determine not only whether that commitment is present in the hearts of those whom he judges but also whether it is actually leading to actions that contribute to the well-being of all.

Once God makes such a determination, he can then decide what type of response is called for on his part in order to accomplish his purposes. If he does not see the type of behavior and commitment to righteousness that he desires in those whom he judges, his love will take the form of punishments that are aimed either at correcting them or putting a stop to their destructive behavior and its consequences. In contrast, if he does see the type of behavior and commitment to righteousness that he desires in those whom he judges, he will generally respond with blessing. However, because even those who are committed and dedicated to doing his will are never perfect and always need to grow further in that commitment and dedication, at times God may subject them to suffering even when they have been obedient in order to bring them

to an even greater commitment and dedication to living in the way he commands for the good of all. In that case, the suffering to which he allows them to be subjected leads them to continue to examine and evaluate their conduct to discern the changes that they still need to make. It also leads them to seek out God actively in order to ask him to continue strengthening them in their faith, obedience, and understanding.

Rediscovering the Love of Vengeance

In English, the terminology commonly used to refer to the manner in which God responds to human behavior in accordance with his judgments regarding that behavior is that of *retribution*. As we have seen in Chapters 4 and 5 of this study, when God responds to behavior that is in conformity with his will by blessing those who practice such behavior, he is generally said to *reward* that behavior. When God responds to behavior that is contrary to his will by inflicting some type of suffering on those involved in such behavior, he is said to *punish* it. Whether he rewards or punishes people, God's reaction to their behavior is based on what that behavior *deserves* or *merits*. While in principle retribution can involve rewarding people for their behavior, usually the language of retribution is used in a negative sense to refer to the punishment inflicted on those whose behavior deserves to be punished. The purpose of retribution is generally to make someone suffer or pay for having committed some type of wrong or offense. In that case, it can often be understood as a synonym for vengeance or revenge. At times the language of recompense is used to speak of rewarding people for good behavior, though recompense can also be understood in terms of restitution or requital for some type of damage or injury.

For reasons that we have also considered previously, however, terms such as these tend to convey ideas that are not fully in accordance with biblical thought and at times must even be regarded as running contrary to it. This is especially true in the case of the language of retribution. Due to the differences between the Hebrew and English understandings of justice considered in Chapter 4, in English retribution is generally not seen as being motivated out of love or a concern for others. In fact, it is often considered an end in itself. It is said that justice requires that those who have done wrong be made to pay for their conduct by being punished and made to suffer. Such retribution or punishment is not motivated by love or a desire for their well-being but rather by a concern to uphold a system or order that is said to be just. This idea of retribution is also based on the idea that justice is satisfied merely by inflicting suffering on those who are guilty of an offense.

Even more problematic, however, is the use of the terminology of vengeance in order to speak of God's response to wrongdoing in the biblical texts. In English, vengeance or revenge is not an expression of love in any sense but is instead an act of spite and even hatred. It involves seeking to inflict pain and suffering on those who have done one harm or made one suffer. The

objective is merely to “get even” with such persons or make them “pay” for the harm they have done or the offense they have committed. In most cases, in fact, those who seek revenge or vengeance would like the suffering of the persons who have harmed or offended them to be as intense and severe as possible. Their suffering is even seen as a motive for rejoicing and satisfaction by those who have taken vengeance on them. It should also be noted that the opposite of vengeance or revenge is usually said to be forgiveness. To forgive is generally understood in terms of refraining from seeking retribution or taking vengeance on those who have done one harm, even though one may have a right to do so. In contrast to retribution and vengeance, therefore, forgiveness is seen as an expression of kindness, mercy, and compassion.

English translations of the Hebrew Bible regularly use the language of retribution and vengeance to refer to God’s activity of inflicting suffering and punishment on those who anger him by acting contrary to his will. Most English translations of Psalm 94, for example, begin that Psalm by referring to God in this way: “O LORD, you God of vengeance, you God of vengeance, shine forth!” (v. 1).¹⁴ The language of vengeance is also used at the beginning of the book of Nahum: “A jealous and avenging God is the LORD, the LORD is avenging and wrathful. The LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries and rages against his enemies” (Nah 1:2). The same language appears in the first chapter of Isaiah: “Therefore says the Sovereign, the LORD of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel: Surely I will pour out my wrath on my enemies and avenge myself on my foes!” (Isa 1:24). In Jer 46:10, the allusion to God’s vengeance is especially violent: “That day is the day of the Lord GOD of hosts, a day of vengeance, to avenge himself on his foes. The sword will devour and be sated, and drink its fill of their blood.” In these instances and others, English versions of the Bible regularly use the language of vengeance and retribution to translate Hebrew terms derived from the word *naqam*, which may appear either as a verb or a noun.

When one reads these passages in English, the imagery that comes across is that of a violent and vindictive God who merely seeks to inflict suffering on those whom he regards as his enemies or adversaries. What appears to motivate him is not any type of love, grace, or mercy but only spite and hatred for those who have the audacity to oppose him. A close look at the contexts in which these affirmations appear, however, reveals a very different picture. After invoking God as a “God of vengeance” in its opening verse, for example, Psalm 94 goes on to speak of God judging the arrogant evildoers who crush and afflict his people, including especially those in greatest need: “O LORD, how long will the wicked, how long will the wicked exult? They pour out their arrogant words; all the evildoers boast. They crush your people, O LORD, and afflict your heritage. They kill the widow and the stranger, and murder the orphan, and they say, ‘The LORD does not see; the God of Jacob takes no

14. Among the translations that use the language of vengeance in this passage and the ones that immediately follow are the RSV, the NRSVue, the NASB, the NIV, and the ESV.

notice” (vv. 3-7). The author of Psalm 94 then rejoices at the manner in which God chastises human beings out of love for them in order to save them by bringing them to practice justice and righteousness, while at the same time mercifully delivering the oppressed from their oppressors:

He who disciplines the nations, he who teaches knowledge to humankind, does he not chastise? The LORD knows the thoughts of all, that they are but a breath. Happy are those whom you discipline, O LORD, and whom you teach out of your law, to give them respite from days of trouble, until a pit is dug for the wicked. For the LORD will not forsake his people; he will not abandon his heritage. For justice will return to the righteous, and all the upright in heart will follow it. Who rises up for me against the wicked? Who stands up for me against evildoers? If the LORD had not been my help, my soul would soon have lived in the land of silence. When I thought, “My foot is slipping,” your steadfast love, O LORD, held me up. When the cares of my heart multiply within me, your consolations cheer my soul. Can wicked rulers be allied with you, those who contrive mischief by decree? They conspire together against the life of the righteous, and condemn the innocent to death. But the LORD has become my stronghold, and my God the rock of my refuge. He will repay them for their iniquity and wipe them out for their wickedness; the LORD our God will wipe them out (vv. 10-22).

In a similar manner, immediately after describing God as avenging and wrathful, the opening verses of the book of Nahum portray God as one who acts with kindness to deliver those who are being oppressed from their oppressors: “The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he protects those who take refuge in him, even in a rushing flood. He will make a full end of his adversaries, and will pursue his enemies into darkness” (Nah 1:7-8). After alluding further to God’s destruction of those who do evil and oppress others, the same chapter ends with an expression of joy and celebration: “Thus says the LORD, Though they are at full strength and are many, they will be cut off and pass away. Even though I have afflicted you, I will afflict you no more. And now I will break off his yoke from you and tear apart the bonds that bind you. . . . Look! On the mountains the feet of one who brings good tidings, who proclaims peace! Celebrate your festivals, O Judah, fulfill your vows, for never again will the wicked invade you; they are utterly cut off!” (1:12, 14-15).

In the passage from the first chapter of Isaiah, immediately before speaking of God as one who avenges himself and pours out his wrath on his enemies, the prophet points to the corruption, injustice, violence, and thievery of the inhabitants of Jerusalem who have provoked God to anger: “How the faithful city has become a harlot! She was once full of justice, righteousness lodged in her—but now murderers! Your silver has become dross, your wine is diluted with water. Your rulers are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow’s cause does not come before them” (Isa 1:21-23). The verses that follow go on to describe God purifying the people in the same way that metals are purified through smelting in order to bring the people to practice justice and

righteousness again and deliver them from those who rise up against God: “And I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you will be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city. Zion will be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness. But rebels and sinners will be destroyed together, and those who forsake the LORD will be consumed” (1:25-28).

The allusions to God’s retribution and vindication in Jeremiah 46 appear in the context of God’s promise to send the Babylonians against Egypt to deliver Israel and other nations from the oppression they have endured at the hands of the Egyptians (vv. 1-26). On that basis, the passage concludes with words of encouragement for the people, who are told not to fear, since even though God chastises them, he will ultimately save them and enable them to dwell in peace:

But as for you, my servant Jacob, have no fear, and do not be dismayed, O Israel. For I am going to save you from far away, and your offspring from the land of their captivity. Jacob will return and have peace and security, and no one will make him afraid. As for you, my servant Jacob, have no fear, says the LORD, for I am with you. I will make an end of all the nations among which I have banished you, but I will not make an end of you! I will chastise you in just measure, and I will by no means leave you unpunished (vv. 27-28).

Rather than referring to vengeance, revenge, or retribution as these terms are commonly understood in English, all four of these passages speak of God taking action against those who practice evil and oppression in order to deliver those who are suffering at their hands. In each case, the purpose of God’s intervention is not to *inflict suffering*, as if that were desirable as an end in itself, but to *put an end to the injustices being committed by acting against those who are responsible for those injustices*. Undoubtedly, in order to accomplish that objective, God must inflict suffering and destruction on those who refuse to put away their unjust and oppressive behavior, and in that sense God can be said to punish them. This punishment, however, is *a means to an end which is good and loving*, namely, that of putting an end to a situation of injustice, violence, and oppression. Furthermore, it is *not the punishment itself* that restores justice, as if merely making evildoers suffer or bringing about their destruction were sufficient to set everything right, but rather *the deliverance from injustice and oppression that results from that punishment*. What satisfies God and God’s justice is not that evildoers suffer for what they have done but that they no longer be able to crush and trample on others and destroy their well-being. If such punishment is a motive of rejoicing, the motive for that rejoicing is *not that of seeing evildoers suffer but that of seeing those who were suffering at their hands delivered from their plight so as to be able to enjoy peace and well-being once more*.

These ideas are expressed even more clearly in other texts in which English translations have generally used the language of vengeance to translate the Hebrew. In Isaiah 35, for example, the prophet looks forward to a day in which God will come to make the wilderness flourish, strengthen the weak,

heal those with infirmities, and bring sorrow and sighing to an end by filling the earth with rejoicing and gladness. In that context, the passage affirms: “Say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you’” (Is 35:4, NRSVue). Here vengeance and recompense are a means to salvation and to some extent are even synonymous with it. While the passage does not refer explicitly to any evildoers, the idea is that God will take action to put a stop to the evil and violence being committed against those who are in need of salvation and deliverance. As in the other passages just considered, God’s act of taking vengeance is viewed as *an act of love* in that its purpose is to save those who are enduring oppression by restoring them to a situation in which they may once again enjoy peace, justice, and well-being.

In many passages, the language of retribution or recompense appears alongside that of vengeance or is used in its place. Nevertheless, the ideas behind that language are essentially the same. Several passages from the last chapters of Isaiah illustrate this point well. In Isaiah 59, after mentioning God’s displeasure at the lack of justice among his people and the violence, corruption, and bloodshed that he sees in their midst, the prophet affirms that God “put on righteousness like a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in fury as in a mantle. According to their deeds, so will he repay wrath to his adversaries, requital to his enemies; to the coastlands he will render requital. . . . And he will come to Zion as Redeemer, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression, says the LORD” (vv. 17-18, 20, NRSVue). Here the purpose for which God inflicts suffering and destruction on those who oppose him by trampling on the weak and vulnerable is to establish justice and righteousness by putting an end to their unjust and violent behavior so that those who are suffering at their hands may be saved. Moved by indignation at the crimes and injustices being committed by some against others, God comes as a Redeemer to restore shalom, truth, and well-being for his oppressed people. Of course, because only those who turn from their transgressions can truly enjoy the salvation he will bring and that salvation can only come to pass if those oppressing others are punished and destroyed, any who wish to be saved must repent by turning back from their destructive behavior in order to live as God has commanded out of love for all.

The language of vengeance appears particularly out of place in English translations of the opening verses of Isaiah 61, which allude to a savior figure who has been chosen by God to bring deliverance, healing, and justice to his people. In translations such as the NRSVue, this figure is presented as affirming:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor and *the day of vengeance of our God*, to comfort all who mourn, to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give

them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory (vv. 1-3).

Here the prophet presents God sending his servant, not to *inflict* suffering but to *put an end to it* by delivering the oppressed, healing the brokenhearted, liberating the captives, comforting the mourning, and establishing justice and righteousness. In this context, the passage speaks explicitly of God's vengeance as an expression of his *favor*. Obviously, the reason for this is that the manner in which God intends to accomplish all of the things mentioned is by taking action against those who are responsible for the oppression, pain, captivity, and injustice that those he intends to save are enduring at their hands. A few verses later, the passage speaks of God's retribution as an expression of his commitment to what is just and right and his opposition to evil: "For I the LORD love justice; I hate robbery and wrongdoing. I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them" (Isa 61:8). The same understanding of God's recompense and retribution appears in the following chapter: "The LORD has proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say to daughter Zion, 'Look, your salvation comes; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him'" (62:11). While most English translations of this verse refer to a "reward," the context indicates that the salvation and redemption that the people are to experience is not something they have earned or merited by their own activity but a gracious gift bestowed on the oppressed simply because they are suffering and in need.

At the beginning of chapter 63, Isaiah describes a figure who comes from Edom with his robes stained in blood. The figure identifies himself by affirming: "It is I, announcing vindication, mighty to save" (v. 1, NRSVue). The Hebrew phrase translated here as "announcing vindication" is actually "speaking in justice" (*tsedaqah*). Several verses later, the figure continues to speak: "For the day of vengeance was in my heart, and the year for my redeeming work had come. I looked, but there was no helper; I was abandoned, and there was no one to sustain me, so my own arm brought me victory, and my wrath sustained me. I trampled down peoples in my anger; I crushed them in my wrath, and I poured out their lifeblood on the earth" (vv. 4-6). Here vengeance (*naqam*) is presented as being synonymous with the figure's redeeming work or activity, which is aimed at providing assistance to those in need of help by destroying their oppressors.

Other passages from the Hebrew Scriptures use the language of vengeance and retribution in the same manner. In 2 Sam 22:47-49 (= Ps 18:47-49), David joyfully refers to God as "the rock of my salvation, the God who gave me vengeance and brought down peoples under me, who brought me out from my enemies. You exalted me above my adversaries; you delivered me from the violent" (NRSVue). In Micah 5, after describing how God will send Judah a savior and shepherd to feed his flock and deliver a remnant of the people from their adversaries, God is presented as affirming: "And in

anger and wrath I will execute vengeance on the nations that did not obey” (v. 15, NRSVue). The context thus indicates that the focus is once again on the deliverance of the suffering and oppressed from the people and practices that are responsible for that suffering and oppression. The “vengeance” that God brings involves acting against those who disobey God by unjustly inflicting suffering and violence on others so that those who suffer at their hands can be delivered from their plight.

Similar ideas appear in two passages from Jeremiah. In Jer 11:18-20, the prophet proclaims:

It was the LORD who made it known to me, and I knew it; then you showed me their evil deeds. But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter. And I did not know it was against me that they devised schemes, saying, “Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, let us cut him off from the land of the living, so that his name will be remembered no more!” But you, O LORD of hosts, who judge righteously, who try the heart and the mind, let me see your retribution upon them, for to you I have committed my cause.

Further on in the book, Jeremiah uses the same language of retribution or vengeance (*naqamah*) to express his hope that God will deliver him from the persecution he is enduring on account of his prophetic activity:

For I hear many whispering: “Terror is all around! Denounce him! Let us denounce him!” All my close friends are watching for me to stumble. “Perhaps he can be enticed, and we can prevail against him, and take our revenge on him.” But the LORD is with me like a mighty warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble, and they will not prevail. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their everlasting disgrace will never be forgotten. O LORD of hosts, you test the righteous, you see the heart and the mind; let me see your retribution upon them, for to you I have committed my cause (Jer 20:10-12).

Undoubtedly, many of the passages that speak of the vengeance and retribution executed by God employ imagery that is extremely graphic and violent. In some cases, those passages also speak of those who have been delivered from injustice and oppression rejoicing at the punishments and destruction inflicted by God. While these passages may seem to reflect views of vengeance and retribution that are in accordance with the common understanding of these terms in English, when they are viewed in context it becomes clear that they can and should be interpreted instead on the basis of the idea that God’s objective in punishing the oppressors and evildoers is to bring about the deliverance of those who suffer at their hands. Because in Hebrew the objective of retribution or vengeance is not to *inflict suffering* but to *deliver the oppressed from their oppressors*, whatever joy or rejoicing people are said to express when God takes retribution or vengeance is motivated not by seeing others suffer but rather seeing the oppressed delivered from their suffering.

In Deuteronomy 32, for example, language that is extremely graphic and violent is used to speak of God taking vengeance on those who oppose him. There the allusions to God’s vengeance and punishment appear in the context

violence, and oppression by punishing or destroying those who are responsible for perpetrating these things. Undoubtedly, the action God takes against evildoers and those who oppress others is often presented in terms that are extremely aggressive and violent, yet such language should be seen as expressing God's profound passion for the well-being of human beings, his intense hatred of anything that does them harm, and his uncompromising commitment to doing whatever is necessary to deliver them from behavior that fills their life with pain and suffering rather than the good he desires for them. While many passages from the Hebrew Bible present God as acting out of anger, fury, and rage and as being eager to pour out his wrath on those who do evil, it must always be stressed that such passions are rooted solely in his uncompromising love for human beings, a love that will stop at nothing in its efforts to save them from themselves.

VISITING SINNERS AND THEIR SINS

In most contemporary English versions, the language of punishment is commonly used to translate the Hebrew verb *paqad* and its cognates. Translations that are more literal, however, use the language of visiting. While this is the normal meaning of the Hebrew term, which can merely refer to the process of going to see a person or a place for a short time, in many contexts it is said that God visits those who have sinned or visits their sin itself. In these cases, the idea is clearly that of punishment.

This usage appears repeatedly, for example, in passages such as the following from the King James Version of the Bible (KJV) and the RSV, both of which employ the terminology of visiting when translating the verbal root *paqad*.

I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments (Exod 20:5; Deut 5:9-10, RSV).

In the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them (Exod 32:34, RSV).

Thou therefore, O LORD God of hosts, the God of Israel, awake to visit all the heathen: be not merciful to any wicked transgressors (Ps 59:5, KJV).

Then will I visit their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes (Ps 89:32, KJV).

They are vanity, and the work of errors: in the time of their visitation they shall perish (Jer 10:15, KJV).

Behold, I am against thee, O thou most proud, saith the Lord GOD of hosts: for thy day is come, the time that I will visit thee (Jer 50:31, KJV).

While these passages undoubtedly speak of punishment, they also convey the idea that God has been absent or distant when the sins and transgressions mentioned were being committed, but now makes himself present or “visits” in order to bring those sins and transgressions to an end. He does this, of

course, by taking action against the evildoers and oppressors responsible for those sins and transgressions. Although in contemporary English it is not common to use the language of visitation in this manner, the idea behind the Hebrew usage of that language is by no means difficult to comprehend.

Of course, God may also make himself present when those who are suffering or in need wish for him to help them in some way. In those instances, to visit is not to *punish* but to *save* or *deliver* people from their plight. Once again, a number of passages from the KJV and the RSV may be cited as examples of this usage:

Then [Ruth] started with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food (Ruth 1:6, RSV).

And the LORD visited Hannah, and she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters (1 Sam 2:21, RSV).

Thou hast granted me life and favour, and thy visitation hath preserved my spirit (Job 10:12, KJV).

What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him? (Ps 8:4, KJV)

Remember me, O LORD, with the favour that thou bearest unto thy people: O visit me with thy salvation (Ps 106:4, KJV).

O LORD, thou knowest; remember me and visit me, and take vengeance for me on my persecutors. In thy forbearance take me not away; know that for thy sake I bear reproach (Jer 15:15, RSV).

They shall be carried to Babylon, and there shall they be until the day that I visit them, saith the LORD; then will I bring them up, and restore them to this place (Jer 27:22, KJV).

For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place (Jer 29:10, RSV).

The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds, and he will not be consoled until it reaches the Lord; he will not desist until the Most High visits him, and does justice for the righteous, and executes judgment (Sir 35:17, RSV).¹⁵

Many of these passages clearly reflect ideas that we have already seen above. At times God's visitation simply involves coming to the aid of those who are suffering or in need of his assistance. When situations of injustice and oppression arise, however, God makes himself present in order to deliver those who are suffering by acting against those who are responsible for that injustice and oppression. In these cases, there are two complementary aspects to God's visitation: saving the oppressed and either destroying the oppressors or rendering them impotent so that they may no longer do harm to others.

15. For other examples of this usage, see Gen 21:1; 50:24; Exod 3:16; 4:31; Ps 80:14; Zeph 2:7; Zech 10:3; Jdt 13:20; Wis 3:7; Sir 18:20; Lk 1:68, 78; 7:16; 19:44; Acts 15:14.

It must be stressed, however, that God does the latter for the sake of the former: he takes action against oppressors in order to deliver from their hand the people whom they are oppressing. While in some contexts the language of punishment is appropriate to describe the action that God takes against oppressors, the objective that God seeks is not that of inflicting suffering on the oppressors but that of preventing them from continuing to oppress others. In most cases, God is not trying to correct or discipline the oppressors but simply acts to put a stop to their oppressive behavior. For that reason, the language of punishment may often be misleading and inaccurate to describe God's activity when he "visits" contexts in which injustice and oppression exist, since his objective is not to punish anyone but rather to bring the injustice and oppression to an end.

In other contexts, however, the language of punishment is both accurate and appropriate to convey the meaning of the Hebrew text. This is especially the case in passages that speak of God visiting sin, iniquity, or transgressions. Once again, however, God's purpose is not to inflict suffering or punishment as an end in itself but either to bring those who have fallen into sin to put away their sinful behavior or else to prevent them from continuing in that behavior so that they and others may no longer be harmed by it.

It is important to keep these ideas in mind when considering passages such as Exod 20:5-6 (= Deut 5:9-10), Exod 34:6-7, and Num 14:18, all of which refer to God "visiting the iniquity" of the parents upon the children to the third and fourth generation. When this phrase is understood simply in terms of punishment as an end in itself, it appears to present God as spiteful, vindictive, and even cruel, especially because in a couple of these passages God is also described as jealous and is said to visit the iniquity of those who hate him. At the same time, however, in each instance the affirmation that God visits the iniquity of the parents upon the children is made in the context of allusions to God's love, grace, mercy, and even forgiveness:

I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments (Exod 20:5-6; Deut 5:9-10).

The LORD, the LORD, a God 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 clearing the guilty, 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).

The LORD is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children to the third and the fourth generation (Num 14:18).

When these passages are read against the background of the idea that God seeks to correct his people when they fall into sin, it becomes evident

that the allusions to God's "visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children" are fully consistent and harmonious with the allusions to God's grace, mercy, steadfast love, and faithfulness that are also mentioned in these passages. Because God's objective is not to inflict suffering or punishment but to bring those who have fallen into sin back to himself in obedience and to strengthen them in that obedience for their own good, when he "visits" the sin of the parents upon their children, he is not acting *contrary* to love but *in accordance* with it. His purpose is to effect a thorough and profound cleansing of the people from their sin so that they may come to live in ways that make it possible for them to enjoy the well-being he desires for them.

Most of those Jews in the Second Temple period who read or heard the allusions to God visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children to the third and fourth generation would probably have understood the passage to be referring especially to the Babylonian exile. Following the prophet Jeremiah, it was common to fix the duration of Israel's time in exile at seventy years.¹⁶ Given that a generation was equivalent to about twenty years, a period of seventy years would be three or four generations, just as these passages affirm. It is therefore no coincidence that they speak of "the third and fourth generation" rather than specifying either the third or the fourth generation in particular, since in some of the families that went into exile the seventy years would cover three generations while in others it would cover four. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the exile in Babylon is consistently presented as having the purpose of purifying the people from their sins in order to bring about a righteous remnant that might finally leave behind the idolatry that characterized both Israel and Judah prior to the exile and come to live in accordance with the commandments of God's law.

Therefore, rather than presenting the God of Israel as spiteful and vindictive and as one who maliciously makes innocent children suffer for the sins of their parents, the affirmation that he visits the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children down to the third and fourth generation is intended to convey an idea that is very different: God does not merely forgive or overlook the people's sin and disobedience, which would represent a lack of love and concern for their well-being due to the harmful effects which that sin and disobedience have on them and others, but acts to correct these things. He does so by effecting a thorough cleansing that stretches across several generations in order to bring the people to put away their sinfulness and disobedience in a decisive and definitive manner. This will enable God to manifest his steadfast love for them in the way he desires by blessing them to the thousandth generation.

It is also likely that the readers of these passages would have understood them as referring to God's decision to have the Israelites spend forty years in the wilderness before entering into the land he had promised them, given

16. See Jer 25:11-12; 29:10; cf. Dan 9:2, 24; Zech 7:5.

the narrative context in which they appear. While this period of time would probably not cover three or four generations, God's purpose in subjecting the Israelites to those years in the wilderness was precisely to raise up a new generation of people who might trust in him, in contrast to their parents, who had doubted and rejected him when they made the golden calf and questioned his ability to introduce them into the land he had promised them due to the size of the peoples inhabiting that land (Exodus 32; Numbers 14).

While most English translations of Exod 34:6-7 and Num 14:18 speak of God as "by no means clearing the guilty," as the NRSVue does, in the Hebrew original no explicit allusion to "the guilty" appears. Nevertheless, the idea is clearly that God does not simply overlook or leave unpunished the sins of those who commit them. The reason for this is the one just mentioned: simply to overlook sinful and destructive behavior without acting to correct it would involve abandoning people to their own ways and therefore leaving them to go unhindered down a path that will lead to their ruin and perdition. For that reason, as a number of passages considered previously in this chapter affirm, when his people fall into such behavior, in his love God does not simply ignore that behavior or let it continue unchecked but immediately takes steps to bring his people back to the way of life he has laid out for them in his commandments for their own good. These verses underscore once more the fact that in biblical thought forgiveness and punishment are not mutually exclusive and that God is often said to punish those whom he forgives in order to chastise and correct them.

The descriptions of God found in these passages, therefore, are not intended to set his justice in opposition to his mercy or to present him as a God who alternates between loving and hating his people, depending on their behavior. Nor are those descriptions intended as threats, as if God were telling his people: "If you do what I have commanded you, I will show you kindness, but if you do not, I will avenge myself by pouring out my wrath and fury not only upon you but upon your children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren as well!" Rather, these passages are intended to stress the depth of God's loving commitment to the well-being of his people in the face of their sin. For that reason, they speak of God not only forgiving in the sense of not abandoning his people or rejecting them definitively when they sin but also taking whatever measures are necessary to bring them back to the way of life that is necessary for them to enjoy the well-being he desires for them when they have fallen into sin. Even if those measures involve inflicting punishments on his people that are extremely painful not only for them but for him as well, God's love for them will not hesitate to take those measures if it is the only way in which he can bring them back to himself in obedience so that his loving purposes may be accomplished among them. It was precisely for this reason that he was thought to have sent many of them into exile under the Babylonians.

THE TERRIBLE EVILS OF GOD'S LOVE AND GOODNESS

Before concluding the present chapter, it is important to return to a point raised in Chapter 2 of this study. There, after considering the Genesis account of creation, it was observed that because everything that God had created was said to be good, it seemed to follow logically that everything that God would continue to do in human history from that point on would be good as well. As we have seen in this chapter and the previous one, in a sense many of the things that God is said to do in the biblical texts can hardly be considered good. On the contrary, when God "visits" the people's sins by pouring out his wrath on them, subjecting them to the most cruel forms of suffering imaginable, and ultimately even destroying many of them, it is necessary to speak of him doing not only what is *bad* but also what is *evil*, as numerous passages from the Hebrew Bible do.¹⁷

On the basis of what we have seen in these two chapters, however, it must be recognized that there is also a sense in which all that God does in the world must be considered good, including those things that are rightly regarded as evil at the same time. As appalling and even obscene as it may sound, because the God of the Hebrew Bible is uncompromising and unrelenting in his commitment to doing everything within his power to enable the human beings he has created to enjoy the well-being he sought and intended for all from the very beginning, even the most intense and horrific forms of suffering and destruction that he inflicts on people or allows them to suffer must be regarded as good in the sense that they are grounded in that commitment and are an expression of it.

While such a claim is no doubt highly problematic and can even rightly be considered offensive, outrageous, and ludicrous, from the perspective of the biblical texts it must be sustained. Those texts portray a God who is fully, resolutely, and irrevocably committed *only to what is good for human beings and his creation as a whole*, and therefore must be said as well *to seek only good in all that he does*, just as he is said to have sought only good when he created the world. In biblical thought, these things continue to be true of the God of Israel and have never changed. The problem and challenge he faces, however, is the presence of what is not only bad but also evil, wicked, and perverse in human beings and the world. The biblical texts do not offer any explanation as to why such great suffering, evil, and perversity exist in the world, other than insisting that God did not create or desire anything bad or evil and that suffering and evil thus exist contrary to his will and are the result of behavior that is also contrary to his will. Those texts also make it clear that God is fully committed to doing everything in his power to eradicate suffering and evil in the world and to bring human beings to join him actively in that commitment. Nevertheless, that suffering and evil are so widespread and deep-rooted that at times as he pursues that objective he must do things that

17. See, for example, Deut 32:23; 1 Kgs 9:9; 2 Kgs 22:20; 2 Chr 34:24; Neh 13:18; Isa 45:7; Jer 6:19; 19:3; Lam 3:38; Amos 3:6.

appear to be not only cruel and heartless but even barbaric, atrocious, and monstrous. Such things are certainly evil, therefore, yet from the perspective of the Hebrew Bible and the God of whom it speaks, they must also be seen as an expression of his unconditional love for all that exists and his passionate and burning desire that suffering and evil be brought to an end for good. In certain contexts, only by responding to the tremendous and unspeakable evils perpetrated by human beings with even greater evils can God hope to put an end to those evils in a decisive and definitive manner.