

# A GOD LIKE No OTHER

Depaganizing the God of the Hebrew Bible

An abstract painting featuring several vertical, elongated figures in shades of blue, green, and yellow, set against a background of light, textured brushstrokes. The figures are rendered in a way that suggests movement and depth, with some appearing more solid than others.

*Full  
Summary*

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Depaganizing the God of the Hebrew Bible

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## Introduction

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, we consistently encounter two portrayals of God that seem to be in conflict with one another. While many passages celebrate the steadfast love and goodness of the God of Israel, others present him as a wrathful, vindictive, and violent God who threatens all those who disobey him with his condemnation and punishments. In this regard, he seems to be no different from the pagan gods of antiquity known to us, who looked with favor and acceptance upon those who served them faithfully but lashed out angrily against any who denied them the worship, honor, and offerings they demanded as their due.

Rather than seeking to reconcile these two apparently conflicting views of God with one another in the way that many biblical scholars do or attributing them to the manner in which material from many different sources was brought together to form the Hebrew Scriptures as we now know them, if we wish to grasp properly the conception of God that runs throughout those Scriptures we must call into question some of the most basic assumptions commonly made by interpreters. These include especially the idea that the God of whom the biblical texts speak was thought to be motivated by the same type of concerns that were characteristic of the pagan gods of antiquity and the claim that due to the variety of sources incorporated into those texts we cannot expect to find in them a conception of God that is uniform and consistent with itself. The approach adopted here involves attempting to understand the texts on their own terms and seeking to discern the ideas and logic that are assumed and implicit in them.

## Chapter 1: The Repaganizing of a Depaganized God

To what extent have both Jewish and Christian interpreters of the Hebrew Bible been influenced by conceptions of the divinity that are rooted in the pagan worldviews of antiquity rather than the biblical texts themselves? In order to answer this question, which lies at the heart of the present work, it is necessary to consider the characteristics commonly attributed to the gods in the belief systems of ancient peoples other than Israel.

Because the primordial gods of antiquity were thought to have emerged naturally or spontaneously out of some type of primeval substance, matter, or reality, they were not thought to exist for some purpose or end. What the gods sought was merely to satisfy their own needs and desires and pass their time enjoying a blissful existence in the places in which they were thought to dwell, surrounded by luxury and splendor. Human beings were viewed as having the task and obligation of serving the gods by presenting them with sacrificial offerings and giving them the worship, honor, and obedience that they desired for their own sake. Their relationship with the gods was defined by the principle of *do ut des*: if human beings wished to receive what they sought from the gods so as to prosper in life and avoid suffering and hardships as much as possible, they needed to give the gods what they wanted in order to keep them happy and avoid arousing their wrath. This manner of conceiving of the gods is readily apparent in numerous passages from ancient works such as the *Enuma Elish* and Homer's epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

There can be no question that in many ways the God whom we encounter in the Hebrew Bible is different from the other gods of antiquity. As creator of all that exists, he is said to be sovereign over all people and things in a way that no other gods were thought to be and is also regarded as all-knowing and all-powerful. His uncompromising commitment to justice and his concern for the weak and needy distinguish him from other gods of antiquity as well.

Nevertheless, it has been common for biblical interpreters to assume that the God of whom the Hebrew Scriptures speak created all that exists for his own sake in order to receive from human beings the worship, reverence, and obedience he desires. This conception of God as one who is primarily concerned for himself and his own glory and honor is especially evident in the work of Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, who finds in the biblical texts a God who is motivated primarily by his self-regard in all that he does and reacts with “savage propensity” against any who offend, disobey, and affront him. While he undoubtedly cares for his people Israel and demands that they practice justice, righteousness, and mercy, ultimately he cares most about himself. In this regard, he is essentially no different than the pagan gods of antiquity.

While the Hebrew Scriptures speak of a God who was “depaganized” in the sense that he was conceived of in ways that set him apart from the gods of other nations, for centuries biblical interpreters have “repaganized” that God by ascribing to him the same type of motives and concerns that were typical of those gods. It is this paganized conception of God that must be called into question if we are

to understand the biblical texts on their own terms.

## **Chapter 2:**

### **The God Who Began with an End**

The account of creation that appears in the opening chapters of Genesis stresses both God’s sovereignty over all that exists as well as the intrinsic goodness of all that he has made. If everything that he created was “exceedingly good,” it follows that he must want only what is good for all of his creatures, including especially the human beings he fashioned from the earth. In contrast to the gods of antiquity who were said to have made human beings for the purpose of serving them as gods and providing for their needs, the God of the Hebrew Bible gives human beings dominion over all that he has made and seeks only to bless them. For them to attain the good that God intends for them, however, it is necessary for human beings to live in ways that promote their well-being and wholeness. In other words, they are to love themselves as God does by being as firmly committed to their own well-being as he is. The idea that God loves his creatures unconditionally and seeks only what is good for them is especially reflected in numerous passages from the Psalms, where God’s love and goodness are said to evoke spontaneously expressions of worship, praise, and thanksgiving throughout his creation.

The story of the disobedience of the first man and woman to God’s command and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden can be read in two different ways. According to the first of these, God sought the obedience of the man and woman for his own sake and acted out of a concern for his own interests and sovereignty when he commanded them not to eat of the tree of knowledge and subsequently



punished them for disobeying him. A careful consideration of the biblical account suggests that such an interpretation must be rejected. Throughout the narrative, God's concern is not for himself but for the well-being and happiness of the human beings he has created. When he commanded that they obey him and subsequently imposed certain measures on them in response to their disobedience, he did so not for his own sake but for theirs due to the effect that their disobedience had, not *on him*, but *on them*. The narrative thus stresses that only by trusting fully in God's goodness, love, and sovereignty can human beings attain the well-being and wholeness that God intended for them when he made them.

The narratives in Genesis regarding Cain and Abel, the great flood, the tower of Babel, and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah serve to illustrate the problem that God must resolve if he is to accomplish his objective of enabling human beings to enjoy the blessings he desires for them. If they are to attain those blessings, God must bring human beings to put away the unjust, oppressive, and violent behavior that destroys their life and well-being and to live in ways that promote what is good, just, and right among them. According to the biblical narrative, therefore, the problem that God must address is not one of forgiveness, since the obstacle to human well-being and salvation is not found in God but in human beings themselves. Rather than simply overlooking and forgiving their sinful and destructive behavior, which would do them harm rather than good, God must bring them to put away that behavior and instead live in ways that will allow them to be well and whole.

While the opening chapters of the book of Genesis raise many theological difficulties,

they also make it clear that the God of whom they speak remains committed to bringing about among human beings the way of life that will allow them to attain the blessings he desired for them from the start. According to the logic underlying the biblical narratives, therefore, rather than needing to be saved from God or his wrath, human beings need to be saved from themselves and their own destructive behavior.

### **Chapter 3: A God of Loving Demands and Demanding Love**

Because people can be blessed with well-being only if they follow a way of life that promotes that well-being, God's promise to bless Abraham and his offspring together with all of the families of the earth through him in the Genesis narrative presupposes that God will be active to bring about such a way of life in human beings as a whole. According to the logic of that narrative, this is the objective that he seeks to accomplish through Abraham and his offspring. Abraham's commitment to obeying God and the practice of righteousness that results from that commitment constitute the basis for his election by God, since they provide hope that those who look to him as their father will live in the same way.

After manifesting to Abraham's descendants Israel both his sovereignty and his love for them by liberating them from their slavery in Egypt, God has Moses take them to Mount Sinai, where he gives them the commandments of the Torah. A careful examination of those commandments makes it clear that, both directly and indirectly, they have the purpose of promoting among God's people the way of life that will allow them to be blessed by guiding and instructing them in the path they should follow for their own good. In biblical thought, therefore, God gives

the commandments of the Torah, not for *his* sake, but for *theirs*, since those commandments are designed not to benefit *him* but to benefit *them* as a result of the intrinsic consequences that follow upon their observance.

Because the purpose of the Torah or law is to promote shalom or wholeness among God's people, throughout the Hebrew Scriptures it is repeatedly seen as an instrument of blessing rather than a means by which God seeks to satisfy some need or desire on his part. Such an understanding of the law contrasts sharply with traditional Christian interpretations of the law, which ground the need for its promulgation and observance in God's inability to tolerate sin on account of his holy and righteous nature.

The strict prohibitions against serving other gods that appear in the Torah are rooted in God's same concern for the people's well-being. Because the worship of other gods leads people to abandon the good and life-giving commandments of the Torah and instead practice the same type of selfish, unjust, violent, and oppressive behavior associated with the pagan gods of antiquity, out of love for his people God demands that they serve and obey no god other than him for their own good. What distinguishes him from those gods is that he alone is fully committed to their well-being as an end in itself.

While from a modern perspective many of the commandments of the Torah do not appear to promote human well-being and in some cases even seem to be unjust and oppressive, it must be remembered that those commandments originated in contexts that are very different from our own. Once it is recognized that God was thought to have given the commandments not for his own

sake but for the good of the people themselves, it becomes clear that the observance of those commandments was not viewed as having the purpose of earning or obtaining God's favor. Rather than reflecting the idea that obedience to God's law is good because God blesses it, the biblical texts presuppose that God blesses obedience to the law because it is good, since it is a means by which God seeks to fill the lives of his people with wholeness and well-being. For the same reason, in biblical thought any interpretation of the commandments of the Torah that does not promote wholeness and well-being must be considered contrary to the Torah or law.

#### **Chapter 4: Delivering Justice from the Hand of the Oppressor**

Throughout the biblical texts, justice and righteousness are said to exist when all have what they need to enjoy the well-being God desires for all. To judge people involves pursuing that objective by delivering those who are suffering from whatever is oppressing them. In biblical thought, therefore, judgment is an act of love, since it involves saving the weak, needy, and oppressed from their plight. In order to make that salvation a reality, at times it is necessary to take action against those who are causing others to suffer by oppressing them and practicing violence and injustice. The objective is not to inflict suffering on the oppressors for its own sake, however, but to prevent them from continuing to do harm to others.

Such an understanding of judgment, justice, and righteousness contrasts sharply with the manner in which these terms have traditionally been understood in English. Rather than being grounded in love and a concern for others, judgment and justice are defined in terms of upholding the order that

supposedly has been established for the good of all. To judge people or do justice is generally not understood in terms of helping or delivering the weak and needy from their condition and liberating them from their oppressors but inflicting sufferings and punishments on those whose conduct is considered a threat to that order. The punishment of evildoers in itself is said to establish or restore justice, whereas in biblical thought justice is restored only when those who are suffering are delivered from their hardships and oppression so as to be able to enjoy well-being and wholeness once again.

According to the worldviews associated with the worship of pagan gods in antiquity, justice can exist only when those whom nature has gifted with greater intelligence, strength, and resources are established in positions of authority and dominance over those who are less gifted and capable. Their superior knowledge and capabilities give them the right to rule over others and to define the order in any way they see fit. As a result, justice is associated with the preservation of a hierarchical system that places some over others and demands that the common people submit obediently to those above them without questioning them or rebelling against them. The people are also expected to show love and gratitude for their superiors, whom they are to regard as their benefactors.

Although it is maintained that the established order exists for the good of all, in reality it benefits those in power and keeps others in a position of disadvantage. Nevertheless, this is not considered unjust because those in positions of authority are said to be deserving of their superior position within the order. They are also in charge of promulgating and enforcing the laws that

keep the established order in place by administering justice as they see fit. They justify their positions of power and privilege within the order not only by claiming that their presence in those positions is necessary to avoid chaos and disaster but also by maintaining that the gods have chosen them to rule over others and that they alone are able to keep the gods content by providing them with the worship and offerings they need and desire. All of these ideas can be discerned in the Prologue and Epilogue of the Code of Hammurabi, where it is said that the gods of Babylon have chosen Hammurabi to rule as king because he provides amply for their needs and promotes the well-being of all of his subjects, including especially the weak and needy, by defending what is good, just, and right. In reality, however, such claims must be regarded as imperial propaganda designed to keep Hammurabi in power and justify all that he does.

According to biblical thought, the criterion for determining whether a particular order or system is just, good, and right is the extent to which it promotes well-being for all without exception. It is this objective that all within the order established by God are to seek collectively out of love for God and one another in accordance with the commandments of the Torah. The emphasis is on distributive rather than retributive justice. The purpose of judgment is not primarily to determine guilt and impose punishments on the guilty but to ensure that all are cared for, including especially the poor, weak, and disadvantaged.

### **Chapter 5: The Healing Chastisements of an Unrelenting God**

In the pagan worldviews of antiquity, what the gods sought by offering rewards to those who did their will and imposing punishments on those who disobeyed them was to attain from human beings what they needed or desired for their own sake. Any “love” that they manifested for human beings was simply a form of self-interest and might quickly change to wrath and violence the moment that human beings ceased to give them what they sought.

In contrast, the God we encounter in the Hebrew Bible is presented as seeking the well-being of his people as an end in itself. For that reason, he is said to bless and reward behavior that promotes that well-being as a result of its intrinsic consequences, but to take action aimed at correcting and disciplining the people when they instead practice behavior that does harm to them and others. Because his objective was to lead them to put away behaviors that undermined and destroyed their well-being and bring them to live in a manner that would enable him to bless them, in the biblical texts God’s chastisements are viewed as acts of kindness, grace, favor, and love, despite the fact that at times they may be extremely painful and difficult to endure. The God of Israel was fully committed to doing whatever was necessary for his people to be brought to obey his good and life-giving commandments so that they might attain the wholeness he desired for all. Instead of demanding that they obey his commandments for his own sake and promising to bless them in order to obtain that obedience, as the pagan gods of antiquity did, God desired and commanded that his people obey him for their sake.

In the biblical texts, therefore, God’s calls for his people to turn back to him in repentance when they fall into destructive behavior are an expression of unconditional love, since they are grounded solely in his concern for their well-being. When they refuse to return to him and instead live in ways that do them and others harm, his love for them will not allow him simply to ignore or overlook such behavior but instead takes the form of chastisements aimed at bringing them to abandon that behavior for their own good. By making it too painful for the people to continue down a path that leads to their ruin and destruction, God seeks to compel them to abandon that path and follow instead the one he has laid out for them in his love, a path that leads to justice, wholeness, and well-being for them and for others as well.

In many passages from the Hebrew Bible, the sufferings and chastisements that God is said to inflict on his people when they disobey him are so harsh and harrowing that it is extremely difficult to see them as an expression of love for them. These passages, however, should be read in light of the tremendous suffering that the people had actually endured or had seen others endure in the past. In the face of such suffering, those who remained firm in their faith in God’s goodness, love, and power refused to believe that he had rejected or abandoned them. Instead, they interpreted what they had suffered as a means by which God sought to correct them and bring them back into conformity with his good commandments, even though such an interpretation was extremely problematic in that at times it involved ascribing to God acts of enormous cruelty and great violence.



The immense suffering that the people endured might also be interpreted as demonstrating that God adamantly refused to give up on his efforts to bring the people back to himself for their own good when they stubbornly persisted in their rebelliousness. Rather than simply abandoning them to their own fate by putting an end to the chastisements designed to correct them, he elected to make those chastisements even more intense until they became so painful and unbearable that the people would conclude that if they wished to survive they had no choice but to return to the type of life prescribed by God out of love for all.

Because God's objective was to bring his people to be just as fully committed to their well-being as he was, what he ultimately sought was not to control or manipulate them by instilling fear into them but to kindle in them the same love for themselves that was his own. The idea that it was God's concern for the well-being and wholeness of his people rather than any concern for his own glory, holiness, or justice that led him to inflict suffering on his people when they persistently refused to turn back to him in obedience for their own good appears repeatedly not only in the biblical narratives but throughout the prophetic books and other writings of the Hebrew Bible as well.

### **Chapter 6: The Wrath of a God Burning to Save**

Although the Hebrew Scriptures often speak of the God of Israel becoming angry and acting in wrath in the way that other gods of antiquity were said to do, that anger and wrath are consistently seen as being grounded in his commitment to the well-being of all rather than arising out of the same type of concern that motivated other deities. For that

reason, when people such as the Psalmists call upon God to assist and deliver them when they are suffering and oppressed, rather than offering to give him something he desires for his own sake in exchange for his help, they appeal to his compassion and his solidarity with the victims of injustice and violence. Conversely, when God is said to become angry with his people, it is not because they have failed to offer him their worship and sacrifices but because they persist in behaviors that undermine and destroy their own well-being and that of others.

Throughout the biblical texts, when God is said to take action against evildoers, his purpose is not viewed in terms of inflicting suffering on them for its own sake but rather is that of preventing them to continue to do harm to others whom they are hurting through their behavior. The biblical allusions to God's vengeance and retribution should be understood on the basis of this same understanding of God's purposes. What God seeks is not revenge or vengeance in the sense that these terms are commonly understood in English but to bring an end to injustice and oppression by taking action against those who insist on filling the lives of others with suffering and violence. When God is said to hate or visit sinners or their sins, the idea is once more that out of love for human beings God refuses to tolerate behavior that does them harm and acts to put an end to that behavior either by bringing those who practice it to change their ways or else by intervening to prevent them from continuing to hurt others and destroy their lives.

Precisely because at times God must bring down suffering and evil on human beings in order to bring an end to the violence, oppression, and injustice that they practice in

relation to one another, many passages in the Hebrew Bible speak of God doing evil. Paradoxically, however, even when he does evil he is thought to be seeking only what is good for human beings at the same time, since his ultimate purpose is to save them from the tremendous evils they inflict on themselves and one another so that they may instead be brought to live in ways that truly promote their well-being.

### **Chapter 7: Giving Life by Taking It**

Although at first glance the sacrificial worship offered to God in the Hebrew Bible seems to be essentially the same as that which was offered to other deities in antiquity, in reality the logic underlying that worship is very different. Whereas other gods were thought to demand the worship and sacrifices of human beings for their own sake, the God of Israel is presented as commanding that his people serve him and present him with offerings for *their* sake rather than his own. By means of the sacrificial worship he prescribed in the Torah, he sought to strengthen their commitment to living in accordance with his will for their own good out of love for them. As they offered up to God their gifts and dedicated to him their lives and all that he had given them, they were brought to grow in their love for him and for one another.

All of the different aspects of the sacrificial worship prescribed in the Torah were thought to contribute to that end either directly or indirectly. By participating in that worship and the many rites and symbols that it involved, the people were constantly reminded of the manner in which God had chosen them to be his own and had acted to fill their lives with his many blessings. Those rites and symbols also served to reinforce among them certain beliefs and truths that

would lead them to continue to look to God and obey him as their sovereign creator who provided for all of their needs. When they fell into behavior that did them harm, the sacrificial offerings prescribed in the Torah served as a means by which God sought to bring them to acknowledge their wrongdoing and correct it for their own good.

In biblical thought, therefore, the sacrificial worship of Israel's God was a means by which the people offered up to him their prayers and expressed in a concrete and palpable manner their dedication and commitment to serving him in the way he had commanded for their own good. Rather than having the purpose of obtaining his favor, appeasing his wrath, or satisfying some type of desire or need grounded in God's nature, that worship was aimed at transforming them collectively into a people who would give generously of themselves to God and to one another so that they might attain the well-being that God desired for all.

### **Chapter 8: Purging a Paganized God from the Sins of His Interpreters**

For historical reasons, biblical scholars have generally paid greater attention to the sacrificial rites and offerings prescribed for sin and purification in the biblical texts than to the prescriptions regarding other forms of sacrifice. According to many traditional interpretations of those rites and offerings, they had been prescribed by God so that those who had sinned might satisfy the demands of his justice and righteousness by subjecting an animal victim to the punishment their sins deserved so that God might forgive them and accept them once more. Due to the work of Jacob Milgrom, however, in recent decades it has become common to maintain that the offerings for sin or purification prescribed in

the Torah were designed to serve as a means by which the sanctuary might be cleansed from the impurities generated by the people's sins, thereby making it possible for God to continue to dwell in their midst in order to bless them.

When examined carefully, it becomes evident that both of these interpretations of the offerings for sin or purification are highly problematic due not only to the understanding of God associated with them but also the assumption that those offerings were thought to "work" in some way to bring about some desired "effect," such as the removal of sins from God's sight or presence. Supposedly, in order to satisfy the demands of his holy and righteous nature, God was believed to have no choice but to demand that his people offer him up one sacrifice after another if he was to dwell among them. Such an idea makes his just and holy nature oppressive both for him and for human beings, since it poses an obstacle to his desire to forgive and bless them. Furthermore, rather than dissuading human beings from sinning, such an understanding of the offerings for sin or purification leads to the conclusion that their primary purpose was to make it possible for God to tolerate the people's sinful behavior rather than leading them to put away that behavior so as to live in the way that he had commanded for their own good. The notion that sins were thought to be transformed into some type of pernicious malefic substance or force that could be removed or eliminated by means of sacrificial rites with blood is also problematic and cannot rightly be said to have any basis in the biblical texts.

Many biblical interpreters have claimed that holiness and purity were similarly

understood as consisting of an actual substance or force that might be transmitted by contact or proximity and have even argued that God's holiness made it dangerous for human beings to draw near to him in his sanctuary due to the effect which that substance or force might have on them. A careful reading of the biblical texts, however, reveals that those texts offer no basis for such an idea. Behind many of the passages that have been viewed as supporting that idea is instead a concern that the signs and symbols of God's presence among his people be shown the respect necessary for them to fulfill their purpose, since the lack of respect for those signs and symbols would lead to a lack of respect not only for God himself but also for the good commandments he had given his people out of love for them.

### **Chapter 9: Consecrating a People Set Apart for Solidarity**

Because in biblical thought the problem that God must address is not his inability to tolerate human sin without compromising the demands of his holy and righteous nature but the destructive behavior that makes it impossible for human beings to be blessed with well-being, the offerings for sin or purification prescribed in the Torah should be seen as having this latter objective as their aim. It was not the sacrificial offerings themselves that led God to accept once more those who had become impure or unacceptable because of their sin but rather the renewed commitment to doing his will of which those offerings were to be an expression. The language of expiation, propitiation, atonement, and bearing sin as well as the blood rites associated with *Yom Kippur* and the sacrificial offerings for sin and

purification should be interpreted as reflecting this understanding of sacrifice.

Contrary to traditional interpretations of Isaiah 53, the sufferings of the servant of whom the passage speaks are not presented as being expiatory or healing in themselves but are viewed as the consequence of the servant's faithfulness to the task of bringing the speakers in the passage to put away their violent and destructive behavior. By remaining obedient to that task all the way to his death despite the tremendous suffering he endured as a result of that obedience, the servant brought many of the people to return to a life of righteousness and in that way enabled them to be healed and restored to wholeness. In this passage and others in the Hebrew Bible, to bear sins involves bearing the consequences of sinful behavior as well as interceding to God on behalf of those who have fallen into that behavior at the same time that one seeks to bring them to put an end to such behavior.

Throughout the biblical texts, God's holiness is understood in terms of a resolute and uncompromising commitment to the well-being of all. Although this commitment is undoubtedly a cause for celebrating, it may also be a motive for fear due to God's insistence that all people be just as uncompromising as he is in seeking the well-being of all. While it is impossible for sinful human beings to attain that same level of commitment, God is willing to accept and forgive those who make that commitment as long as they continue to acknowledge their sinfulness and look to him for the help and guidance they need to fulfill it. His command for his people to be holy is therefore an expression of pure grace, since he desires to

see that commitment in them not for *his* sake but for *theirs*.

Many of the commandments of the Torah had the purpose of sanctifying the people of Israel in the sense of setting them apart from people of other nations. What was to distinguish them from others, however, was not merely their observance of laws regarding things such as circumcision, purity, and the Sabbath rest but the practice of justice, righteousness, and compassion.

### Chapter 10: The God Who Plans to Bless

According to the logic underlying the biblical texts, from the very beginning it was God's plan and intention to bless all of the people of the earth. In order for this to happen, however, it was necessary for human beings to live in ways that allowed them to experience the well-being God desired for them. When their failure and refusal to do so made it impossible for God to bless them in the way he intended, God chose the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to carry out through them his plan of bringing them together with all of the other families of the earth to practice the justice and righteousness that would enable them to attain the well-being and wholeness he sought for them. While the blessing of Israel was an end in itself, it was also a means by which God hoped to draw other nations to himself so that they might be blessed as well.

Although it is common for biblical interpreters to compare the covenant God establishes with Israel to the pacts that powerful rulers and nations made in antiquity with peoples who were subject to them as their vassals, such comparisons suggest that God sought to satisfy some desire or need on his part by means of that covenant. This idea

must be considered foreign to biblical thought. According to the logic underlying the biblical texts, rather than being designed to benefit God in some way, his covenant with Israel had the purpose of guiding the people in the path that they were to follow for their own good. What God expected and demanded of his people was not that they be loyal or faithful to him personally but rather that they remain committed to living and acting in ways that promoted their well-being rather than undermining it. While God promised to remain faithful to his covenant with Israel, when the people fell into behavior that did them harm and departed from the good path that God had laid out for them in the Torah, God's faithfulness took the form of chastising them through suffering in order to bring them back to that path so that he might bless them once again.

Although at first glance the idea that Israel was to belong to God as his possession and serve him exclusively might seem to be oppressive, as if God were imposing his will on the people by force or subjecting them to a form of slavery by means of the covenant, in reality such an idea was profoundly liberating. The reason for this is that what God demanded of the people by means of the covenant was that they be as fully committed to their well-being as he was by living in a manner that would make that well-being possible. For the people to serve God as a people of his own was therefore to seek the good that he sought for them by obeying the commandments that he had given them for *their* sake rather than his own. His prohibitions against serving other gods and misusing or profaning his name also responded to a concern for the well-being of his people rather than being grounded in

some type of self-interest on his part. Only by respecting him and his name would they also respect the commandments he had given them for their own good and eventually be able to bring other peoples to do the same.

Numerous passages from the Hebrew Scriptures look forward to a day in which the people will put away for good the idolatrous, unjust, and destructive behavior that is attributed to them throughout most of the biblical narratives in order to attain the blessings God sought for them by practicing justice and righteousness in accordance with his will. Many of these passages envision a new age in which the people will enjoy peace, prosperity, and salvation from their enemies under the rule of David's descendants. Their obedience to his commandments would make it possible for them finally to experience the wholeness or shalom that God intended for them from the time he chose them to be his people and gave them his covenant out of love for them.

### **Chapter 11: A Stubborn Love for a Stubborn People**

According to the narrative that runs throughout the Pentateuch, when the peoples of the earth persisted in the same corrupt and violent behavior that had characterized them prior to the flood in Noah's day, God remained determined to accomplish his purpose of blessing them in accordance with his original intention for them. To that end he chose the righteous Abraham and the people descended from him through Isaac and Jacob, that is, Israel.

By allowing the descendants of Jacob to fall into slavery in Egypt and then demonstrating his great power and love for them by liberating them from their bondage

with many signs and wonders and introducing them into a land of their own, God hoped to fashion Israel into a people who would live in accordance with justice and righteousness by trusting in him and obeying all that he commanded them for their own good. In this way, God would not only be able to fill the lives of his people Israel with his blessings but would also draw other peoples and nations to himself so that they might come to experience the same blessings by practicing the justice and righteousness that make human well-being possible.

Almost immediately after he delivers the people from their slavery under the Pharaoh and takes them to Sinai to give them his commandments through Moses, however, the people lose faith in God and begin to rebel against him. The narratives regarding the people's worship of the golden calf, their years in the Sinai wilderness, and their turning away from God in order to serve the Midianite god Baal of Peor when they were finally poised to enter the land God had promised them stress the same themes: the people's persistent failure to trust in God despite the care and concern he shows for them and the many signs and wonders he performs on their behalf, their insistence on serving gods other than their own, and God's intense frustration and anger at their stubbornness and hardness of heart.

When the people refuse time and again to respond to the harsh punishments God imposes on them in an attempt to bring them to obey him by following the path he has laid out for them for their own good, it appears that it will be impossible for God to succeed in his efforts to fashion them into a people who will live in a manner that will allow them to be blessed and be a blessing for others.

Nevertheless, as the book of Deuteronomy stresses in its final chapters, rather than giving up on his people and the plan he seeks to accomplish through them, God chooses to persist in those efforts, even though this means continuing to subject his beloved Israel to even harsher chastisements until they respond to his love in the way he desires for their own good.

### **Chapter 12: Bringing a Stiff-Necked People to Their Knees**

The passages from the Pentateuch and the book of Joshua that describe the conquest and destruction of the peoples who were inhabiting the land God had promised to give to his people are undoubtedly some of the most problematic and troubling in the Hebrew Bible. While it is important not to downplay or minimize the disturbing image of God reflected in those passages, the biblical narrative makes it clear that the reason why God is said to command the Israelites to conquer and destroy the inhabitants of the land is that only by removing them from that land and giving it in its entirety to Israel can he accomplish his purpose of bringing blessing upon Israel and eventually upon the other families of the earth as well. As is the case elsewhere throughout the Hebrew Bible, the logic underlying the narrative is that the evil and destructive behavior of human beings at times leaves God no choice but to do things that are also evil and destructive if he is to have any hope of bringing both Israel and eventually other nations as well to abandon that behavior and live in conformity with what is good, right, and just.

In the book of Judges, once the Israelites have been established in the land God had promised them, it is not long before they begin to worship the gods and idols of the



surrounding peoples and fall into the unjust and destructive behavior associated with that worship. In Judges and throughout the remainder of the biblical narrative, while at times the people heed the calls of the prophets God sends them so as to turn back to him in obedience, this obedience is short-lived and soon gives way to the same type of apostasy and rebellion that has characterized the people's behavior since the time they left Egypt. Although the people appear to be greatly blessed under the reigns of David and his son Solomon, for the most part the kings of Israel and Judah who succeed them persist in promoting idolatry and the worship of other gods throughout the land. As a result, God subjects both kingdoms to destruction and sends many of his people into exile in foreign lands. His purpose is to bring into existence a righteous remnant who will finally practice the justice and obedience necessary for them to enjoy his blessings.

When the biblical narrative comes to an end following the people's return to their homeland and the rebuilding of the temple, the question of whether the Jews who remain in that land and those who are scattered elsewhere throughout the world will finally come to live faithfully in accordance with his commandments and serve him alone as their God is not yet resolved. The hope that appears in the narrative is that when this objective is finally accomplished, God will be able to fill the lives of his people with the blessings he intended for them from the start.

### **Chapter 13: Proclaiming a Passion That Refuses to Die**

Throughout the writings of Israel's prophets, passages in which God is presented as expressing his love for his people in

extremely tender and moving ways stand alongside others in which he threatens to punish them with great cruelty and tremendous violence when they sin and disobey him. These passages can be read in two different ways. The first of these involves viewing the God of Israel as a volatile, erratic, and temperamental deity such as Marduk or Zeus, that is, a God who shows kindness and affection to those who submit obediently to his will but responds with rage and fury toward those who dare to oppose him or rebel against him. According to a second way of reading those passages, when his people persistently refuse to live in ways that will allow them to enjoy the wholeness he desires for them despite his calls for them to turn back from their destructive behavior, his unconditional and unbending love will not allow him to give up on them or relent in his efforts to bring them to abandon that behavior and return to the way of life that is in their own best interest. For that reason, at times the only way in which he can hope to bring the people back to that way of life is by threatening them with sufferings that are so horrific and unbearable that the people are left with no choice but to return to the path that God has laid out for them out of love for them if they wish to survive.

A careful reading of the prophetic writings reveals that the portrayals of God that appear in them only make sense if this second manner of reading and interpreting them is adopted. Although the prophets often present God as acting in ways that appear to be anything but loving and even speak of him doing evil and tremendous harm to his people, the logic underlying the passages that represent God in those terms is that the people have become so stubborn and hard-hearted

that the only way that God can hope to change them is by leaving them so ravaged, broken, devastated, and disconsolate that if they wish to have any future their only hope is to submit obediently to God's will.

At the same time, the prophets consistently hold out hope that at some point the tremendous sufferings that God inflicts on his people will finally bring them to live in ways that will make it possible for him to bless them with the well-being and wholeness he desires for them. Once he has purified a remnant that will practice justice, righteousness, and compassion by obeying the commandments he has given them out of love for them, the people will be able to enjoy his blessings of life, abundance, and prosperity and live in perpetual peace and freedom, unmolested by any who might seek to do them harm.

### **Conclusion**

Lying at the heart of the present work is the claim that throughout the Hebrew Scriptures the God of whom those Scriptures speak is consistently presented as acting out of a concern for the well-being of his people Israel and the other families of the earth as an end in itself rather than seeking merely to satisfy his own needs or desires. In other words, in all that he is said to do and command, his objective is not to obtain something for his own sake but to make it possible for the human beings he loves to attain the blessings he desires for them by living in ways that promote wholeness and well-being for all.

It is this understanding of God that sets the God of the Hebrew Bible apart from all of the other gods of antiquity known to us. Because those gods had no choice but to be

concerned primarily for their own needs and were invariably seen as placing their own desires and interests over those of human beings, they were thought to regard human well-being only as a means to their own ends rather than as an end in itself. If they showed favor to those who obeyed them and threatened to do great harm to those who did not, it was only because they sought to compel human beings to give them what they sought for their own sake.

For nearly two thousand years, the Hebrew Bible has been interpreted as if it spoke of a God who relates to human beings in the same way that the pagan gods of antiquity were thought to do. He demands that his people do all that he has commanded, not because he seeks their well-being as an end in itself, but because he wishes to receive from them the glory, reverence, and obedience he desires for his own sake or else because the demands that his holy and righteous nature makes upon him must be satisfied before he can accept them and grant them his favors and blessings.

On the basis of the reading of the Hebrew Bible that has been offered in the present work, such an understanding of the God of Israel must be rejected as contrary to biblical thought. Only as we return to the biblical conception of a God who seeks nothing but the well-being of all as an end in itself can we grasp properly the faith and testimony of those who composed, edited, and preserved the biblical texts and claim to confess and proclaim today the same God of whom they speak.