

**Tough**  
**Questions**  
about **God**  
and **His**  
**Actions** in  
the **Old**  
**Testament**



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Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.

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*Tough Questions about God and His Actions in the Old Testament*

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Dedicated to  
Mrs. Susie Rowan,  
Executive Director of  
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## Introduction

**Question:** *How shall we answer tough questions about God and His actions in the Old Testament?*

**M**uch of the current antipathy to the Old Testament seems to have begun as early as the middle of the second Christian century with a ship-owner named Marcion who died around 154 A.D. He was the son of a Christian bishop but, for the first time in the Faith's early history, dissociated the two testaments of the Bible, preferring the New Testament over against the Old Testament. Even though the Church ultimately rejected Marcion's bold (but futile) attempt to demean the Old Testament, if not to get rid of it and to replace it with most of the New Testament, there still lingers in Christian thought today the haunting suspicion that there may indeed be a difference between the two testaments. It is to this suspicion that this book is addressed.

The first use of the expression "Old Testament," as applied to the first thirty-nine books of the Bible, didn't appear until much later in the fourth century A.D. in the writings of Eusebius of Caesarea. Clearly, Eusebius started this divisive reference with the distinct intention to show the superiority of the New Testament over the Old Testament—even though the New Testament proclaims that "all Scripture is inspired by God" (2 Tim. 3:16).

Centuries later, G. L. Bauer (1755–1806) wrote the first book to use the title *Old Testament Theology* (1796), wherein he tried to show that the Old and New Testaments belonged to two different inspirations and that the Old Testament was foreign to the Christian faith. The outcry for the removal of the Old Testament from the canon of Scripture grew louder by the time of Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930). Harnack denounced the practice of retaining the Old Testament as part of the Christian canon as "an ecclesiastical and religious

paralysis.” Friedrich Delitzsch (1850–1922)<sup>1</sup> wrote *Die Grosse Tauschung* (*The Great Deception*) in 1920, in which he argued that the Old Testament was not a Christian book and the New Testament superseded it. Even more recently, Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) adopted explicit Marcionite views as he advocated that the Old Testament was a witness to a miscarriage of history as Israel failed to obey the law, which therefore necessitated the need for grace to replace it. The Old Testament was not a document for Christian faith according to Bultmann. Even Karl Barth (1886–1968), who did not agree with Bultmann, still usually stayed away from the Old Testament as he unadvisedly opposed the New Testament God of grace to the Old Testament God of law.

Marcion is also credited with beginning what became a Christian overemphasis on salvation over against creation. Marcion made the God of the Old Testament the exclusive Demiurge, the Creator, who was different from the Savior of the world. Thus, as some have correctly pointed out, Christians tended to fix their attention almost exclusively on God’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt, rather than joining this theme with the theme of creation. As a result, all too often, nature and the physical world had no interest for the Christian community. Christians all too frequently tended to think only of themselves and their own salvation in a much too narrow way. Accordingly, the physical world and the human body were replaced mainly by a spiritual view of deliverance in Christ alone. The realm of the spirit tended to swallow up all attention to the physical or material world.

Therefore, as negative statements concerning the first testament grew within the scholarly community, a large number of questions were raised about the first thirty-nine books of the Bible. Unfortunately, they were all too often left unanswered, which seemed to be reason enough to downgrade the significance and importance of the first testament.

This is why we feel that it is time that issues regarding the Old Testament were faced as straightforwardly as possible. This challenge is especially relevant for those in their upper teens and in college or graduate school—the 20 and 30 somethings! They comprise the largest segment of a new group of “Nons”—the non-attenders at Church and the non-religious. Discussion questions are included in each chapter that will hopefully engage readers in a deeper consideration of these issues. This is not to leave middle-aged or senior folks out of the picture, for often times their questions are just as challenging as any that

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1. Not to be confused with his godly father, Franz Delitzsch (1813–1890).

younger generations are asking. So this book might often be best read in small study groups in homes where the focus is on one chapter or portion of Scriptures at a time. But neither would it be unthinkable for a pastor to choose to do a series of messages on these chapters that would bring new health to the body of Christ and then to follow those sermons up with a discussion time. It would be a time of great growth for the body of Christ.

The need to understand the proper role of the Old Testament in Christian thinking and experience and for understanding the ways that God as depicted in the Old Testament has recently assumed a much larger role in our society with the rise of the New Atheism and, as we have already alluded to another group, the increasing number of dropouts from the Church in the twenty and thirty year-old range. A great number of questions have arisen that could be called “tough questions about God and his actions in the Old Testament,” especially as they relate to today’s world. It seems as if all too often God is depicted by readers of the Old Testament as someone whose character appears to be less loving and gracious than the way the New Testament seems to present his character.

Could this be an accurate portrayal of the same God who was revealed in our Lord Jesus Christ? Why is it that the teaching ministries of the Church and Bible study groups appear to focus mainly on the second person of the Trinity by urging that all sermons and teachings in our day ought to be “Christocentric” and “Redemptive-Historical”? Is this a deliberate attempt to avoid these issues as if they have no solution? Jesus indeed is central to the message of the Bible, but we must never indulge in a *Christo-exclusivism* that downplays the rest of the teaching of the Bible.

There is only one way to decide on how to answer this critique of the Old Testament and the questions that most do not seem to want to talk about: we must take up the most challenging issues that seem to cast the longest shadow on God’s character and his actions in the past in order to see if such depictions are accurate and truly represent who God is and what he has done! Therefore, this book proposes to openly and honestly face these charges and to answer them with valid responses from the same biblical texts that are the basis for these challenges.

Some readers of Scripture approach the Old Testament with a sympathetic attitude, recognizing that while there are indeed a host of issues in this portion of Scripture, it is nonetheless God’s Word. Other readers, however, focus on a list of problems that form a series of great stumbling blocks to their appreciation of parts or even the entirety of the Old Testament. For example, here are just two

of the offsetting issues directly from Old Testament materials that are puzzling to say the least:

Uzzah reached out instinctively to save the Ark of the Covenant when stumbling oxen endangered the ark of God, but who was nevertheless struck dead for doing so (2 Sam. 6:6–9).

Forty-two children were mauled by two bears for mocking the prophet Elisha (2 Kings 2:23–25).<sup>2</sup>

These, and more, are often given as evidence that the God of the Old Testament is rather heavy-handed, swift to judgment, and beyond our ability to understand at times. At least he does not seem to possess the same type of love and grace that Jesus exudes in the New Testament. In that testament, God is presented as the person from whom all goodness, kindness, and grace flows. In the Old Testament, however (it is claimed), God is presented as possessing a mixture of anger and love, judgment and grace. How are we to explain this combination? Is God shown altogether differently in the New Testament presentation?

This distorted picture presents such a contrast that it is certainly a different picture from the one actually found in the Old Testament context itself. Some of the reasons for such an unbalanced view can be attributed to the fact that many who read the Bible read the New Testament much more frequently than they do the Old Testament. Therefore, their understanding of the Old Testament context is often marginal and episodic compared to their understanding of the New. Others complain about the antiquity of the Old Testament. They say that its culture is too far removed from ours for us to sense its relevance. Others point to the fact that many of its books are too long for readers to capture the overall thrust and central meaning of individual books and how each contributes to the total meaning of the Old Testament.

Regardless of which explanation above best explains why many have bypassed the Old Testament or found it to be beyond their understanding, the reality is that the Old Testament contains over three-fourths of the revelation God has communicated to us. To avoid reading it is to miss the *majority* of what

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2. Since every difficult passage of the Old Testament cannot be discussed in the present book, please see the explanation given to the two citations listed above in *Hard Sayings of the Bible* by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. et al. (Downers Grove, IL.: IVP, 1996), pp. 219–221 and 232–34.

God has given us for our edification and insight. Can Christians dare refuse to listen to this disclosure of the mind of God and of his preparation for the person and work of his Son? To the extent that we selectively read and study the Bible, especially the Old Testament, we develop a type of biblical illiteracy and therefore remained unformed and untaught in portions of Christian truth.

There is another group of Old Testament users who do interact with the Old Testament, but they do so in such a way that they allow the New Testament to get in the way of actually understanding what the Old Testament has to say. These readers take a later rendering of an Old Testament passage in the New Testament in such a contorted way that the reader incorrectly re-interprets the Old Testament from the New Testament perspective, which the reader then accepts as the authoritative and exclusive meaning on that Old Testament text. To go *first* to the New Testament interpretation as the source for the original and final meaning of an Old Testament text, reading that alleged New Testament meaning back into the Old Testament, is methodologically flawed and wrong-headed. In effect, it makes the Old Testament meaning dispensable and reduces it to mean the same thing as the most recent application of that text in the New Testament. This levels out the whole of the Bible to always say what it said in its latest and most recent communication of the divine meaning, which at the very least is reductionistic and, at its worst, destructive of meaning in Scripture.

This is not to deny that the New Testament writers have a legitimate freedom in interpreting the Old Testament according to the author's intentions and then applying that biblical text to related areas. Such a procedure, however, should never be used as a shortcut for interpreters to understanding the point of view and claims of the Old Testament author or as the first order of business in trying to understand an Old Testament text.

One of the most important principles of interpretation is that we should allow the biblical writer to say first of all what he wanted to say before we apply that truth or even ask how, in the progress of revelation, that truth was supplemented and advanced in the whole canon by New Testament comments on that same text.

We can also add to this list of issues, the outcries of the New Atheists who are not hesitant to pile up a long list of charges against the Old Testament. Some of these will be listed in our first chapter. Are the charges that have been raised from Marcion to the interpreters and critics of the present day unfairly leveled? Would our Lord really dispose of three-fourths of the revelation he has given to us? It is this author's conviction that the Old Testament can once again be up-

held as the distinctive revelation of God. Moreover, God's character, actions, and teachings during that same time period carried with them His own time-limits, authority, and principles for later application within its body of truth. God's name, character, reputation, works, and purposes were beautiful, righteous, just, fair and upright. It is with this purpose, then, that we propose to tackle these tough questions.

# 1

## The God of Mercy or the God of Wrath?

**Question:** *Is the God of the Old Testament a God of love and mercy or a God of wrath and judgment?*

The contemporary neo-atheist Richard Dawkins, in his best-selling book *The God Delusion*, wrote these stinging words about the God of the Old Testament:

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.<sup>1</sup>

What is amazing is not only the bitterness that runs like acid through the course of his words, but the fact that his book has become an international best-seller. Does this huge number of sales in the Western world indicate that from a global perspective those who live in what used to be regarded as the Christian West have concluded that the God of the Old Testament is different from the Jesus of the New Testament?

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1. Richard Dawkins. *The God Delusion* (New York, NY: Mariner, 2008), p. 51.

Previously, in 2007, another neo-atheist, Christopher Hitchens, published a similar best-seller entitled *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*.<sup>2</sup> Hitchens (recently deceased) had the same anti-God sentiments, which he set forth just as provocatively as did Dawkins. It seemed as if the negative view of God, especially as he was depicted in the Old Testament, was becoming the flavor of the new decade that introduced the twenty-first century. Did this also mean that a new majority of persons now agreed with these neo-atheists, despite the extremely acerbic nature of such bitter characterizations of the Living God?

Dawkins's attacks, in particular, were focused on the Old Testament God for he also wrote another article entitled "Atheists for Jesus"<sup>3</sup> (an apparent take-off on the name "Jews for Jesus"). In that piece, he even allowed that "Jesus is a huge improvement over the cruel ogre of the Old Testament."<sup>4</sup> But this was a small consolation, given how vitriolic his attacks on God in the older testament were.

The basis for such charges against God are usually anchored in poor readings and interpretations of various difficult passages in the Old Testament. If there was a way to dramatize or misread what the Bible taught in the Old Testament, then that meaning was immediately adopted and exalted as another mark against the respectable character of God.

A second fault that could be detected in these negative views of God and his character was that they absolutely detested any statement about God's judgment, wrath, or anger against evil, wrong, sin, or unrighteousness. Instead, they focused on the quality of God's love, which was often exalted in some of these writers, to a point where God became a being simply and totally characterized by an all-consuming love with no evidence of his disapproval of evil or his dislike or hatred of sin, injustice or any evil.

## The Anger and Wrath of God

It was a heretic named Marcion, who (despite the fact that his father was a pastor) brought the issue of God's anger to a head as early as A.D. 140. But the Hebrew word for "anger" (*אַף*, meaning "nose," because anger is seen first in the face) goes back pretty far in time, especially to the story of the Exodus. There "anger" is used ten times of God and Moses (Exod. 4:14; 11:8; 15:8; 22:24;

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2. Christopher Hitchens. *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York, NY: Hachette Book Group, 2007).

3. Richard Dawkins, "Atheists for Jesus," *Free Inquiry* 25 (2005): 9–10.

4. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 283.



32:10, 11, 12, 19, 22; 34:6). These texts need now to be sampled to test the challenges brought against them by the New Atheists.

Moses was called by God to lead Israel out of Egypt, but Moses objected four times. Each time God countered Moses objections with divine assurance of assistance. Moses finally objected a fifth time, without any kind of good or clear reason, but with a simple refusal that he would not accept God's call to lead his people Israel out of Egypt. This excited the anger of God! Later, Moses himself also got angry with an intransigent and unrelenting Pharaoh (11:8), but it is the anger of God that dominated this narrative of the Exodus, and that is what attracted the ire of some, such as the noted neo-atheists in our day.

It is also important to note right from the get-go that this same text that emphasizes the wrath of God is the same text where God is also said to be "slow to anger" (literally, "long-nosed"). This description of God occurs frequently throughout the Old Testament, including Exodus 34:6, Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalms 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; and Nahum 1:3. In fact, this was so much a part of Yahweh's nature, that he dramatically announced this feature as part of his name in Exodus 34:6–7. There God passed-by in front of Moses, proclaiming, "Yahweh, Yahweh, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin" (my translation).

Thus God pointed out the essence of his compassion, his slowness to anger and his love and grace. This grace of God and his slowness to anger was announced at the very same time that Yahweh had become furious with his people for setting up and worshiping the golden calf (Exod. 32:10). Nevertheless, God still abounded in forgiveness and love, despite all of these acts of disloyalty; he was full of "love and kindness" (Hebrew, "full of *hesed* and *emet*, "full of grace and truth") to sinning Israel. That is the topic that must be explored more fully if we are to understand who this God actually is.

## The Loving Kindness/Grace of God in the Old Testament

There is a special term for one of God's most celebrated characteristics taken from Exodus 34:6–7. It is the Hebrew word *hesed*, which occurs about 250 times in the Old Testament, yet it is by far the most difficult word for which to find a precise equivalent English word(s) to translate it since no one, two, or more English equivalents fully capture all that is intended in this Hebrew word. It is

variously rendered as “loving-kindness,” “covenantal love,” “mercy,” or perhaps it is best rendered simply by our word: “grace.”

This word is used most frequently in the Psalms (123 times), but even there it is used most often of all to describe Yahweh’s character. His “loving kindness” or “grace” is enormously bountiful, yet it is simultaneously steadfast and dependable. It is the overwhelming love and grace from God to those who least deserved it, but, in God’s tenderness, he has reached out to his sinful people and showed them his grace. Yes, the Lord does get angry, but he never flies off the handle abruptly nor does he lose his temper as mortals do. Instead, God is slow and deliberate in the practice of his anger, always more than willing to extend his grace and love. God has no desire whatsoever to even the score or to remain implacable. He has no potential rivals with whom he sees himself in competition with or wanting to get level with them on their plane.

It is only when anger and wrath, as practiced among humans more often than not, are left unchecked and uncontrolled in mortals that such anger becomes an evil that must be faced and dealt with. But God’s anger is never explosive, unreasonable, irrational, or one that is out of control. Rather it is an anger that is controlled in God, which he uses as an instrument of his will, without at the same time shutting off his mercy, grace, and compassion to the same sinners (Ps. 77:9). Moreover, his anger marks the end of any perceived indifference on his part to evil, for it is impossible for him to remain neutral or impartial in the presence of evil (Isa. 26:20; 54:7–8; 57:16–19). Yahweh’s love remains despite Israel’s disobedience and even in spite of our own rebellion (Jer. 31:3; Hos. 2:19), which is almost inconceivable.

Along with this important word for “grace” in the Old Testament is the Hebrew verb “to love” (Hebrew, *’ahab*), which occurs in the Old Testament thirty-two times, twenty-three of which describe God’s love for Israel or for particular individuals. In addition to this, the noun form of this word for “love” appears another four times, making a total of twenty-seven times that God’s love for humans is affirmed in the Old Testament.

In an attempt to define the love of God, C. S. Lewis gave us four possible analogies for this love of God, but it was his fourth analogy, the love that exists between a husband and his wife, that helps us to best approximate the love of God. In one of Lewis’ finest statements, he concluded, this love between a husband and his wife is a love wherein each is willing “to forgive the most” (because love is willing to look beyond and live with any perceived faults) while at the same time “it condones the least” (because that love, while continuing to love,

nevertheless does not cease coaxing, urging, and hoping for the best in the other partner). In the same way, God continues to forgive graciously, while he simultaneously maintains his high and holy standard for all that is good, right, and just, in each person. It is precisely this very same tension between forgiving the most, yet condoning the least, that can begin to help explain God's love for us.

However, this still leaves the question not faced as yet as to how we can reconcile the anger of God with the love of God. In the history of the Church, this became the question of divine passibility (i.e., whether God was capable of having feelings or emotions of any sort) over against divine impassibility (i.e., whether God was without a capacity to feel, suffer, or be angry at anything). Gnosticism took a strong lead in this discussion and denied that God could indeed experience anger, suffering, or any other feelings. Marcion, the second-century heretic, as already mentioned, also declared that God was free of all such affections or feelings and therefore was impassible.

It was the Church Father Lactantius, who in the later part of the third-century A.D., put the question in a more biblical perspective. He argued: "He who loves the good also hates the evil, and he who does not hate the evil does not love the good because, on the one hand, to love the good comes from hatred of evil and to hate evil rises *from the love of the good*."<sup>5</sup>

Our modern difficulty in accepting that anger can be a part of the character of God is related to our improper and incorrect association of anger with "the desire for retaliation" or "the desire to get-even," as Aristotle<sup>6</sup> and others taught. But anger, properly defined, is the legitimate emotion of a person rising to resist evil, not an attempt to get even or to right what we felt was a wrong in a way that put us, as the objectors, on a higher plane than those we accused. Therefore, anger does not need to be explosive, unchecked, or something out of control. In fact, God's anger, the Scriptures teach, passes quickly (Isa. 26:20; 54:7–8; 57:16–19), lasting but for a moment while God's love endures forever (Jer. 31:31; Hos. 2:19).

If it is true that God has both a soft side and a hard side in the exercise of his love and his anger, how does God himself relate these two sides, especially in the Old Testament? One of the classic passages in the Old Testament where Yahweh expresses his own tension between his anger and his compassion is found in Ho-

5. Lactantius, *The Minor Works: De ira Dei [The Wrath of God]*. Trans. Sister Mary Francis McDonald (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of American Press, 1965), 154:69.

6. Aristotle, *De Anima*, 1:1. See the excellent discussion on this whole topic by Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1962), 2:1–86, especially 60n4.

sea 11:8–9. Certainly Israel needed to be reprov'd for she had gone off on her own way and sinned grievously, yet she was addressed as Yahweh's "son" (Hos. 11:1), and the thought of "overthrowing" or "hand[ing her] over" to judgment (Hos. 11:8) so aroused God's "compassion" that it made him almost like someone who was about to vomit or throw-up. The passage says:

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboyim? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I devastate Ephraim again. For I am God, and not man—the Holy One among you.

The reason why God cannot carry out what ordinarily he might do in a case like this is because he is God and not a mortal being like other men (Hos. 11:9). God is the Holy One, therefore his actions must show him to be separate and different from those responses that might come from mere mortals. Admah and Zeboyim were two of the five cities of the plain that were destroyed when Lot was told to leave Sodom and Gomorrah before God's judgment struck. It is texts such as these that make it difficult to argue that the God of the Old Testament is some sort of harsh and unfeeling despot. The reality that God needed to punish his people is seen as emotionally wrenching. Despite what Israel deserved, God's compassion would not allow it to take place. He showed enormous reticence to execute anger so that love and grace were in the forefront.

For some, however, the most notorious example of Yahweh's alleged hatefulness, some argue, is found in the line, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" (Mal. 1:2–3; Rom. 9:13). But how could a deity claim to still love a person, but hate what he did? This is exactly what Isaiah 1:14 and Amos 5:21 affirmed in connection with Israel's hypocritical worship as well. So, just as God loved Israel but could not stand what they did, so both Jacob and Esau were still loved as the rest of the context in Malachi 1:4–5 demonstrates: God had a future plan for Esau as well.

But just as the sinless Jesus was filled with indignation and anger in the days of the New Testament (Mark 3:5; 10:14; John 2:17; 11:33, 38), so in the Old Testament "hate" was the proper emotion for disavowing all evil and wrong that stood opposed to God and to all that was good. When a person truly and passionately stands for what was right, then their dislike and hatred of all that was wrong, evil, and wicked had to be opposed with all their being.

The antonyms, “to love” (Hebrew, *‘ahabah*) and “to hate” (Hebrew, *sin’ah*) are both used in Deuteronomy 21:15–17 to distinguish between the one loved and the one loved less. That same pair is found in the New Testament in Matthew 6:24 and Luke 16:13, where the Greek terms mean “to prefer” one over the other, or “to love” one more than the other are found. Therefore, in the case of Jacob and Esau, Jacob was called to a ministry of service, whereas Esau was not.

Nevertheless, Esau was not, therefore, an object of contempt, for he too would realize that God’s promises in the present (Gen. 36:7), and his descendants in the future would also receive the deliverance of God (Obad. 19–21; Amos 9:12).

## The Anger of God in the Prophets

It is a real shame that some have depicted the wrath of God as something that bordered on what is capricious, demonic, or as some sort of evidence for a type of a divine green-monster jealousy. The Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel explained how such embarrassment over the emotional aspects of biblical revelation caused the negative historical-critical school to adopt an evolutionary scheme for explaining the character of God. In their revised view of things, the God of the Old Testament exhibited demonic and primitive characteristics. To all of this Heschel commented:

This view, which is neither true to fact nor in line with the fundamental biblical outlook, arises from a failure to understand the meaning of the God of pathos and particularly the meaning of anger as a mode of pathos. “Pathos,” like its Latin equivalent *passio* from *pati* (“to suffer”), means a state of a condition in which something happens to man [sic], something of which it is a passive victim . . . emotions of pain or pleasure. We must not forget that the God of Israel is sublime rather than sentimental, nor should we associate the kind with the apathetic, the intense with the sinister, the dynamic with the demonic.<sup>7</sup>

“The Old Testament prophets,” Heschel observed, “never thought of God’s anger as something that cannot be accounted for, unpredictable, irrational.”<sup>8</sup> For

7. Heschel, *The Prophets*, 2:27–28, 84.

8. Heschel, *The Prophets*, 2:62.

these prophets the anger of God was not blind, explosive, or without reference to the behavior of mortals. His anger was not to be treated in isolation from the surrounding circumstances and issues; instead, it was one of the ways in which God directly responded to men and women. It was conditioned mainly by God's will; it was aroused by the sin of humans. It was a secondary not a ruling passion in the character and nature of God. It would be more like what we sometimes regard all too lightly in ourselves and label it as "righteous indignation." Thus, to be impartial to people, God could not be indifferent to evil for the divine being was pained and distressed when evil, sin, or injustice was done anywhere.

God's anger arises out of his care for humans. Moreover, in his use of his anger he never pitted his anger and mercy opposite one another; instead, anger and mercy were correlatives. As the prophet Habakkuk prayed, "In wrath remember mercy" (Hab. 3:2). It just could not be God, if his love should ever cease, as the Psalmist taught in Psalm 77:9: "Has God forgotten to be merciful? Has he in anger withheld his compassion?" Hardly! An example of this combination of anger and mercy could be found in Hosea 6:1–2: "Come, let us return to the LORD. He has torn us to pieces, but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us that we may live in his presence."

There is an evil that infects many humans, but it does not afflict God. It is the evil of indifference when we are in the presence of evil or wrong-doing. This evil often exists under a silent justification that is used to keep us from taking any kind of action against evil. The more we find rationalizations to avoid standing up to evil, the more likely it is that our toleration of evil is treated as the accepted thing to do. When God sees evil, however, there is an end to indifference to evil! God cannot treat wrong in an indifferent way, for to do so would mean that he would need to abdicate his rule and reign as God.

In order to understand the meaning of divine anger, it is necessary to reflect on the meaning of divine patience and divine forbearance. We have already mentioned that God is slow to anger, long-suffering and patient, as witnessed in some ten Old Testament passages (Exod. 34:6; Num. 14:18; Jer. 15:15; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nah. 1:3; Neh. 9:17; Ps. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8). But the divine patience must never be confused with some type of apathy or an attitude that can be swayed by the caprice of human beings, or even one that could be confused with over-indulgence. Divine forgiveness must not be confused with unconditional forgiveness either for that would additionally lead to all sorts of evil. This is why the prophets repeatedly called for people to "amend [their] ways and

[their] doings, obey the LORD . . . and repent of [their] evil” (Jer. 7:3; 26:13) as the grounds for receiving God’s forgiveness.

To put it more directly, the anger of God is conditioned and subject to his will. Whenever the people whom the prophets addressed repented of the evil they had done, the mighty Lord of the universe changed in his threatened action towards these same individuals or nations. The declaration of the anger of God was not an announcement that judgment would immediately ensue; rather, it was a call to mortals to cancel the coming divine anger by obeying the injunctions given by the same prophets and to repent immediately.

Thus, there always was an aspect of contingency to God’s anger. But this never represented a change in the nature and character of God; to the contrary, it affirmed just the reverse. Just as mortals can and do change when others who have occasioned our grief ask us to forgive them and to change our attitude towards them (thereby showing a continuity in our nature and character), just so God often demonstrates the same type of change in action, but not in his very nature. Nowhere is this pointed out more clearly than in Jeremiah 9:24—“I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight, declares the LORD.” Or again in Jeremiah 32:41, the prophet announced that the Lord commented: “I will delight in doing them good and will assuredly plant them in this land with all my heart and soul.” This is the only time in Scripture where God assures us that what he has said is said “with all [God’s] heart and soul.”

Some have taken particular umbrage at those times when God’s anger breaks out like a fire or a storm, as for example in Jeremiah 23:19–20: “See, the storm of the LORD will burst out in wrath, a whirlwind swirling down on the heads of the wicked. The anger of the LORD will not turn back until he fully accomplishes the purposes of his heart. In the days to come you will understand it clearly.”

Some scholars have complained that on the bases of texts such as this one that God’s anger is like a hidden force of nature, incalculable and arbitrary, as if it had no limits or mercy bound up with that anger. But such a conclusion is a distortion of the prophet’s teaching, for God is never seen or represented as acting in an unaccountable way or in ways that cannot be explained. God’s sense of outrage came over the people’s mistreatment of the fatherless, the widow, and the poor. More fundamental to the attributes of God are his love and his mercy, but his anger is consistently represented as being transient and reactive to how the people are responding to his grace and his call to obey. Again, we need to be reminded that God’s love or his kindness (*hesed*) go on forever (Jer. 33:11; Ps.

100:5; 106:1; 107:1; 118:1–4; 136:1–26), but we are never told that his anger likewise lasts forever! Instead, we are told that his anger lasts but for a moment (Ps. 30:5; Isa. 26:20; 57:7–8, 16–19). In fact, Israel had asked this very question: “Will you always be angry? Will your wrath continue forever?” (Jer. 3:5). To this straightforward inquiry God replied: “‘Return, faithless Israel,’ declares the LORD, ‘I will frown on you no longer, for I am merciful,’ declares the LORD, ‘I will not be angry forever’” (Jer. 3:12). But Israel did not return to the Lord.

Heschel concludes his section on God’s anger by declaring that “the secret of anger is God’s care.”<sup>9</sup> This is brought out clearly in Isaiah 12:1: “In that day you will say: ‘I will praise you, O LORD. Although you were angry with me, your anger has turned away and you have comforted me.’”

The greatest comforting fact about God is that he really does care. Had it not been for God’s caring, there would have been no story about Israel, no line of David from which the Messiah would come, and perhaps very little to speak of regarding the future. But God’s caring made the difference. Therefore, Scripture teaches us to regard his anger and wrath not as irrational, emotional outbursts of the divine nature, but as part of his continual care. God’s heart and being are not made out of stone, but his feelings are as real and tender as any we could ever imagine.

Moreover, the necessity of God’s wrath and anger is actually distasteful to him; he would rather not be obligated to use it. This can be demonstrated from a number of passages, but especially from one we have already looked at—Hosea 11:9: “I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim, For I am God and not man—the Holy One among you.”

God must punish, but he cannot destroy his promises; indeed, he is in control and master of his anger and of his emotions. After all, He is God and not man!

## Conclusion

There is no way anger can by any means be regarded as a distinguishing attribute of God, as if he had anger as one of his basic dispositions or as a quality that was inherent in his very nature that it existed separate from the rest of his attributes. Instead, his anger represents a mood, a state of mind and soul that is active towards sin and evil. It is never an uncontrolled spontaneous outburst, but it is always conditioned and under complete control by our Lord.

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9. Heschel, *The Prophets*, 2:72.



But God's anger is never to be seen as that which is the most lasting aspect of his responses to human beings for his mercy, grace, and kindness far outstrip anything we could attribute to his anger. The fact that wrong-doing excites his anger is a demonstration of his care for us for if he were indifferent, casual, and nonchalant about his wrath and his anger, then there would also be no assurance that when injustice, wrong, or evil were done to us that he would come to our rescue.

God's anger is preceded, as well as it is followed, by his love, grace, and mercy. It is for these reasons that we refuse to make a difference between the way God is represented in the Old Testament and the way he is represented in the New Testament. He is God, the Holy One, and not a man!

### *Discussion Questions*

1. How do verses, such as Isaiah 12:1, show that the secret to God's anger is that he still cares?
2. Which gives more delight to God: his anger or his kindness? What role do Jeremiah 9:24 and 32:41 play in answering this question?
3. Sometimes God's slowness to anger, his patience, and his long-suffering with sin and evil gets redefined as a form of divine apathy and caprice. How do you understand Exodus 34:6, Jonah 4:2, and Psalm 103:8 in light of this objection?
4. Has God ever once forgotten to be merciful (cf. Ps. 77:9; Hab. 3:2)?
5. How did Aristotle define anger versus the way this concept is used of God's anger?
6. Is God possible or impossible in his emotions?