

A Perfect Anger

A Brief Survey of Divine Wrath in the Tanakh

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Introduction

The wrath of God: it is rarely comfortable, often misunderstood, and sure to stop any conversation dead in its tracks. The idea of God, who is renowned for his love and compassion, being angry and acting on that wrath, has proved understandably problematic for many. Uncomfortable with divine anger, some insist that interpreters of Scripture have misunderstood the biblical testimony and have suggested that fury has erroneously been ascribed directly to God. Instead, they argue that when the biblical writers wrote of divine wrath, they were merely employing anthropomorphic language to denote “an impersonal process...by which sin is inevitably followed by unpleasant consequences.”¹ Surely, this makes the task of reconciling the tension of divine anger and wrath less difficult. However, is it faithful to the biblical testimony?

The intention of this paper is to demonstrate that it does not represent the teachings of the OT Scriptures. Rather, the Tanakh depicts divine anger as God’s *personal* and *perfect* response to sin. That is to say, God *himself* is opposed to those who reject him and at times *personally* acts in his wrath. Moreover, far from a vindictive and out of control tirade, his wrath is impeccable, *perfectly* governed by his attributes of love, justice, holiness, etc. The importance of thinking well on this topic cannot be overstated. Hanging in the balance is a true understanding of God. While it is easier to neglect any mention of wrath in Scripture, forcing ourselves to investigate the biblical teaching on it helps us develop a fuller and more accurate picture of God’s nature, his works, and his relation to sin.

Vocabulary of Divine Wrath

In order to understand what the Tanakh teaches concerning the wrath of God, we must acquaint ourselves with the terminology used by the biblical writers. Several words, accounting for hundreds

¹ Leon L. Morris “Wrath of God” (*New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair Ferguson, David F. Wright & J. I. Packer, Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988), 732.

of references, are employed to denote God's anger, notably אַף, חַמָּה, and חֲמָה.² Though Scripture often utilizes these terms to communicate both *divine* and *human* anger, as Fretheim notes, "the references to divine anger outnumber references to human anger by almost three to one."³

In describing God's wrath, the most frequently used word is אַף (140 times).⁴ When used literally, it refers to "a nose" or "nostrils." This has led many to suggest that, at one time, אַף meant "snorting,"⁵ Others, point out that the nose often reflects intense emotional state, i.e. snorting or flaring the nostrils.⁶ Either way, in the biblical literature, it is often used metaphorically to communicate the idea of "anger." Though this connection may appear odd, several texts indicate that the nose was "for ancient Hebrew psychology the seat of anger" (Cf. Ezek. 38:18).⁷ Not surprisingly, the correlating verb, אָפַף, in the *hithpa'el* means 'to be angry' (Deut. 1:37) and always refers to *divine* anger.⁸

In addition to אַף, the biblical writers employed the verb חָרַח and its related noun, חֲרוֹן, to speak of the wrath of God. The verbal form, "to burn" or "to ignite," is often used in connection with fire and heat language and is primarily used to denote the kindling of God's fury.⁹ Furthermore, the noun exclusively describes *divine* wrath and is regularly rendered "rage" or "anger."¹⁰ Since the

² Terence E. Fretheim, "Theological Reflections on the Wrath of God" (*Horizons in Biblical Theology*, Vol. 24, Nu. 2, 2002, pgs 1-26), 4; Cf. Henry W. Hollman, "Wrath of God" (*Kregel Dictionary of the Bible and Theology*, Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2005), 599.

³ More specifically, 375 references to God to 80 references to man. Fretheim, "Theological Reflections on the Wrath of God," 4; Cf. S. Erlandsson, "The Wrath of YHWH," (*Tyndale Bulletin*, Vol 23, 1972, pgs. 111-116), 111; G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, trans. John T. Willis, "אַף," (*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 356.

⁴ Gale B Struthers, "אַף," (*New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis: Vol 1* (ed. Willem A. VanGemeren, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 462; Cf., Gary A. Herion, "Wrath of God (OT)," (*Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman: Vol 6, New York: Doubleday, 1992), 990.

⁵ Herion, "Wrath of God (OT)," 990; Cf. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, trans. John T. Willis, "אַף," 351.

⁶ William Mounce, "Anger" (*Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old & New Testament Words*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 21; Cf. Struthers, "אַף," 463.

⁷ Botterweck, Ringgren, & Willis, "אַף," 351; Cf. Herion, "Wrath of God (OT)," 990.

⁸ Herion, "Wrath of God (OT)," 990.

⁹ Jerome F. D. Creach, "חָרַח," (*New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis: Vol 2*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 266.

¹⁰ Herion, "Wrath of God (OT)," 990.

object of *חַרָּה*, in the majority of its uses, is Israel (except Hab. 3:8 and Ps. 18:8), some have argued that this word group has the nuance of the “legitimate rage of a *suzerain against a disobedient vassal*.”¹¹

Also commonly denoting divine anger is the noun *חַמָּה*. Derived from the verb *חָמַם*, “to be hot,” and likely related to the root *חָמַם*, “to warm,” *חַמָּה* has a variety meanings. It can refer to “poison” or “venom,” as in Deut. 32:24. Moreover, it denotes “heat,” e.g. sun’s heat (Ps. 19:6) or fiery wine (Isa. 27:4). However, while both of these usages are attested, the vast majority of uses of *חַמָּה* depict the idea of “anger,” “wrath,” “displeasure,” or “indignation.”¹² Similar to the aforementioned terms, *חַמָּה* primarily denotes *divine* wrath, particularly depicting the “hot inward excitement accompanying [his] anger.”¹³

Used less frequently, yet nevertheless contributing to the biblical understanding of God’s wrath, are a number of other Hebrew words. The noun *עֲבָרָה*, “fury” “overflowing rage” (Hos. 5:10; 13:11, Hab. 3:8) speaks of the intense anger of God. Its related verbal form, *עָבַר*, in the *bithpa’el*, depicts the LORD “becoming furious” or “venting his wrath” (Deut. 3:26; Ps. 78:21, 59, 62, 89:39). Furthermore, the biblical writers employed the nouns *קִצְוֹף*¹⁴ “ire” (Num. 17:11; Deut. 29:27; Jer. 10:10), *זַעַם*¹⁵ “indignation” (Isa. 10:5; 66:14-15) and *כְּעָם*¹⁶ “aggravation” (1 Kgs. 15:30; 21:22).¹⁷

Though there are certainly subtle differences to these discussed Hebrew words, e.g. *חַרָּה/חַרְוֹן/חַרְוֵה* highlighting a suzerain-vassal relationship, *חַמָּה* denoting the inner heat of anger, etc.,

¹¹ Creach, “*חַרָּה*,” 266; Cf. Herion, “Wrath of God (OT),” 990.

¹² 6, 4, and 110 times, respectively. Hollman, “Wrath of God,” 599; Cf. K. - D. Schunck, “Chēmāh” (*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament: Vol IV*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck & Helmer Ringgren (trans. David E. Green), Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 462.

¹³ K. D. Schunck, “Chēmāh,” 463; Cf. Hollman, “Wrath of God,” 599.

¹⁴ Verb *קָצַף* in *qal* or *hiphil* “become irate” (Deut. 9:7, 8, 19, 22, Isa. 57:16-17)

¹⁵ Verb *זָעַם* “becoming indignant” (Isa. 66:14, Zech. 1:12)

¹⁶ Verb *כָּעַם* in the *hiphil* “to be aggravated” (Deut. 4:25; 2 Kgs. 17:17)

¹⁷ Herion, “Wrath of God (OT),” 990.

Fretheim rightly observes that the various nuances do not seem to “make any appreciable theological difference”¹⁸ Especially, since many of these terms are used in clusters or parallelism.¹⁹

Take for example the common combination of **קָרַח** and **אַף**. In Ex. 32:12, Moses refers to God’s “burning [**קָרַח**] anger [**אַף**]” against his people, Israel.²⁰ A similar case is found in Ps. 78:49, which makes use of **קָרַח**, **אַף**, **עֲבָרָה**, and **זַעַם** to depict God’s wrath against Egypt.²¹ The psalmist writes, “He let loose on them his burning [**קָרַח**] anger [**אַף**], wrath [**עֲבָרָה**], indignation [**זַעַם**] and distress, a company of destroying angels.”

Expressions of Divine Wrath

Employing these words, the biblical writers depicted God's wrath using a wide array of figurative imagery, including fire, water, storms, clouds, etc.²² Of these, the most frequently utilized images are *fire* and *water*. Therefore, the Tanakh often describes the outworking of divine fury in language such as *burning* (Isa. 30:27), *consuming* (Ex.15:7), *pouring* (Hos. 5:10), *coming down* (Jer. 7:20), *drinking* (Jer. 10:25), etc., the most common being *burning*, *pouring* and *drinking*.²³

As is attested by such terms as **קָרַח** and **קָרַח**, the intensity of God's anger is often likened to the heat and consuming power of fire. For example, in Jeremiah 15:14, God speaks to Israel and reveals that his wrath “will kindle a fire that will burn against you.” (Cf. Jer. 17:4). David uses similar imagery in Ps. 18:8. He writes, “Smoke rose from his nostrils; consuming fire came from his mouth, burning coals blazed out of it.”

The Tanakh speaks of God *pouring* out his fury on the disobedient as one pouring out water or wine. For example, in Hos. 5:10, God boldly proclaims that he will “pour out [his] wrath like a

¹⁸ Fretheim, “Theological Reflections on the Wrath of God,” 4.

¹⁹ Ibid., 4.

²⁰ Similarly, Mounce notes “about 80x in the OT and always in connection with God, *ʿap* is used with the verb “burn” (*harâ*) in the expression (lit.), ‘his nose became hot,’ which in context means ‘his anger was kindled,’” “Anger,” 21.

²¹ Herion, “Wrath of God (OT),” 990.

²² Fretheim, “Theological Reflections on the Wrath of God,” 5; Cf. Botterweck, Ringgren, & Willis, “אַנְף,” 358.

²³ S. Erlandsson, “The Wrath of YHWH,” 113; Cf. K. D. Schunck, “Chēmāh,” 464; Fretheim, “Theological Reflections on the Wrath of God,” 5.

flood water." Other passages take the imagery in a slightly different direction, depicting divine anger as a cup filled with wrath, which the disobedient are giving to drink. This is the idea in Job 24:20, when he cries out "let [the wicked] drink of the wrath of God." (Isa. 51:17, 22; Jer. 25:15-16). In Ps. 75:8, the psalmist marries the imagery of *pouring* and *drinking*, writing, "in the hand of the LORD is a cup, full of foaming wine mixed with spices; he pours it out and all the wicked of the earth drink it down to its very dregs."²⁴

Though metaphorical imagery often *describes* the expression of God's wrath, its recipients *experience* it in tangible ways. That is to say, when God unleashes his anger, the disobedient feel it in time and space.²⁵ Scripture records countless specific expressions of his fury. However, among the most frequently mentioned are *destruction, exile, and even death*.²⁶

In the wake of God's wrath is devastating destruction.²⁷ The Prophets spoke of this terrifying outcome, warning disobedient Israel that if she did not repent, God and the "weapons of his indignation" would "destroy the whole land," (Isa. 13:5). It was to become nothing more than "a ruin and a waste" (Jer. 25:11). Ezekiel adds that the "cities shall be waste" (6:14).

In addition to bringing the land and cities of the disobedient to physical ruin, God's anger led to Israel's exile.²⁸ Repeatedly, God warned that if his people remained in their disobedience, he would remove them from their beloved land, scattering to them to "all the winds" (Ezek 5:10) and "countries" (6:8). Concisely stated in 1 Ki. 14:15, "he will root up Israel out of the good land that he

²⁴ K. D. Schunck, "Chēmāh," 464; Cf. Fretheim, "Theological Reflections on the Wrath of God," 5; S. Erlandsson, "The Wrath of YHWH," 113.

²⁵ While divine wrath *is* expressed in observable actions in time and space, it is not synonymous with action. Some have argued that it is inconceivable for God to experience emotion and not to act on it. In other words, they question how God could burn with anger over sin and not take action. Yet, God's fury can be turned aside, thus, showing that he can become enraged with sin and not act. Therefore, as Fretheim suggests, it is best to understand divine wrath on a timeline, where action represents only a part, "Theological Reflections on the Wrath of God," 14.

²⁶ W. C. Robinson, "Wrath of God," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology: Second Edition*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 1304; Cf. Martin H Manser, Alister E. McGrath, J. I. Packer, & Donald J. Wiseman, *Zondervan Dictionary of Bible Themes* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 19, 333.

²⁷ Botterweck, Ringgren, & Willis, "רָגַז," 359.

²⁸ Manser, McGrath, Packer, & Wiseman, *Zondervan Dictionary of Bible Themes*, 19.

gave to their fathers” and “scatter them beyond the Euphrates.” Furthermore, God declares, “I will make you serve your enemies in a land you do not know” (Jer. 15:13-14).

The most serious of these expressions of divine wrath is death. God often speaks of *destroying* or *consuming* the disobedient. For example, having been spurned by the Israelites idolatry, God instructs Moses to abandon the people in order that his divine anger could “burn against them” and “consume them” (Ex. 32:10-11). Concerning the same event, Moses later recalls how “the LORD was so angry with [Israel] that he was ready to *destroy* [them]” (Dt. 9:8).

It is necessary to make a few additional remarks concerning these expressions of God’s fury. First, there is a strong link between God’s anger and divine rejection. The connection is seen in Isa. 54:7-8. Speaking to Israel, the LORD declares, “I deserted you” and “in overflowing anger for a moment I hid my face from you.” In the book of Jeremiah, this abandonment is described using such terms as “rejected and forsaken” (Jer. 7:29). Thus, the prophet records God’s words, “I have forsaken my house; I have abandoned my heritage; I have given the beloved of my soul into the hands of her enemies.” (12:7). Thus, these passages demonstrate that the removal of God’s protection and providence allow the devastating effects of his wrath to unfold.

Second, throughout the Tanakh, divine anger is carried out through primarily *physical* instruments, including foreign occupation and natural disaster.²⁹ A number of passages demonstrate the wrath of God exercised by means of the sword. For example, in 2 Chr. 12:7, the LORD threatens, “my wrath shall be poured out on Jerusalem by the hand of Shishak.” Here, if Israel continues in her rebellion, the military conquest of Shishak, the king of Egypt, and his Egyptian army will serve as the expression of divine anger. In this example, it is clear that *God* is the one

²⁹ René A. Lopez, “Do Believers Experience the Wrath of God?” (*The Journal of Grace Evangelical Society*, Autumn 2002, pgs. 45-66), 47.

orchestrating military oppression and defeat of Israel.³⁰ This instrument of wrath is implemented on other nations as well. Note how Ezekiel declares that, because of divine judgment, Edom “will fall by the sword” (12:13). Likewise, natural disasters, such as famine and plague, were the outworking of God’s fury.³¹ For example, in Ezek. 6:12-16, the prophet warns of the coming “deadly arrows of famine” and “pestilence.”

Third, while the biblical writers often described the expression of God’s wrath in their present day (or near future), at other times, they spoke of a distant *future* outpouring of God’s fury. The Prophets foresaw this in connection with the “Day of the LORD” (Isa. 13:9), also referred to as “the day of the wrath of the LORD” (Ez. 7:19) and the “day of wrath” (Zeph. 1:14). Isaiah notes that this *Day* will come “with wrath and fierce anger” (13:9). Moreover, while the *Day* will include calamity like that already mentioned (i.e. destruction, death, etc.), this time will also be marked with cataclysmic disaster. During the *Day of the LORD*, “the sun will be dark at its rising” and “the stars of the heavens” as well as “the moon will not shed [their] light” (Isa. 13:10). It will also serve as a time of final and universal judgment.³² Thus, Daniel speaks of “the *latter end* of the indignation” (8:19). Furthermore, the prophet Zephaniah notes that during these last days, God “will bring distress on *mankind*” (1:17). Likewise, he writes a verse later, “all the earth will be consumed” and “a full and sudden end [the LORD] will make of all the inhabitants of the earth” (vs. 18).

Occasion of Divine Wrath

The biblical witness is clear: God’s wrath is *always* a reaction to the sinful and unbelieving conduct of humankind.³³ At times, this means his anger falls on individuals, at other times, on corporate groups.

³⁰ Scott A. Ashmon “The Wrath of God: A Biblical Overview” (*Concordia Journal*, Vol. 34, Numb. 2, Oct. 2005, pgs 348-358), 354; Cf. D. A. Carson, “Wrath of God,” *Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 39.

³¹ Carson, “Wrath of God,” 39.

³² T. C. Smith, “The Wrath of God,” (*Review & Expositor*, Vol. 45, Number 2, April 1948, pgs 193-208), 197.

³³ Robinson, “Wrath of God,” 1303; Cf. K. D. Schunck, “Chēmāh,” 464; Hollman, “Wrath of God,” 598; Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (Peabody: Prince Press, 2000), 69, 71, 77; Botterweck, Ringgren, & Willis note Gen. 32:23-33 and Ex. 4:24 as possible exceptions, “חַיִּים,” 357.

In either case, God considers sin a direct affront to his role as Creator and King. Interestingly, during the *pre-exilic* period, the Tanakh primarily records examples of God's fury in relation to the corporate sins of the nation of Israel for their breach of the covenant God had made with her.³⁴ While during the *exilic* and *post-exilic* years, the mistreatment of Israel by foreign nations provoked the anger of God.³⁵

The individual and corporate sin of Israel, fall nicely into four broad categories: *unbelief*, *disobedience*, *disloyalty*, and *injustice*. Concerning Israel's *unbelief*, notice the words of the psalmist in Ps. 78:21-22. He reveals that because "they did not believe God," the LORD became furious, ("his fire broke out against Jacob" and "his wrath rose against Israel"). Similarly, Moses' unbelief kindled God's anger. In Ex. 4, after God had instructed Moses concerning what he was to do when he confronts Pharaoh, Moses pleads, "Oh, my Lord, please send someone else" (vs. 14). Moses' response betrays his unbelief that God would empower him to accomplish his divinely appointed task. Not surprisingly, the next verse reveals "the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses" (vs. 15).

Israel's *disobedience*, often expressed by their disregard for God's Word, also provoked God to anger.³⁶ This was the case in 2 Kings 22:13, where having found the Book of the Law, Josiah laments, "Great is the LORD's anger that burns against us because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book" (Cf. 2 Chr. 13:10). Likewise, the prophet Isaiah reveals that God's wrath was kindled against the present generation when they "rejected the law of the LORD Almighty" and "spurned the word of the Holy One of Israel" (5:24-25). Furthermore, God saw the opposition of his prophets, the bearers of his commands, as disobedience and just cause for righteous fury. In Zech. 7:12, the prophet writes that God's people "would not listen to the law or the words that the

³⁴ K. D. Schunck, "Chēmāh," 464; Cf. Lopez, "Do Believers Experience the Wrath of God?" 47.

³⁵ Botterweck, Ringgren, & Willis, "כִּנְיָהּ," 357-358; Cf. K. D. Schunck, "Chēmāh," 464.

³⁶ Hollman, "Wrath of God," 598; Carson, "Wrath of God," 38; Botterweck, Ringgren, & Willis, "כִּנְיָהּ," 357.

LORD Almighty has sent be this Spirit through the earlier prophets.” Because of this rejection, “the LORD Almighty was very angry” (7:13).

In addition to unbelief and disobedience, Israel’s *disloyalty* brought upon them the wrath of God. Particularly grievous was the nation’s betrayal expressed through apostasy and idolatry, a poignant example being the infamous “golden calf” incident.³⁷ Despite having been freed from the bonds of slavery, the nation spurned their Deliverer, insisting on creating and worshipping a golden image (Ex. 32:1-6). The LORD’s response reveals the severity of the transgression. He instructs Moses, “Leave me alone so that my anger may burn and that I may destroy them. (32:8). Unfortunately, Israel’s history is rife with examples of failure in this area (Cf. Dt. 4:15; 8:19; 9:8; Josh. 22:18; 23:16; Jdg. 2:10-14, 19-20; 10:6-7; 1 Ki. 14: 9, 15; 16:32-33; 22:53; 2 Ki. 22:17; 23:19; 2 Chr. 28:25; 34:25; Ezra 9:14; Jer. 7:17-18; 8:19; 32:29; 44:3).

Furthermore, Scripture cites *injustice* as moving God to anger.³⁸ This is particularly evident in the testimony of the Prophets. The prophet Zechariah addresses this in 7:9-12. The passage begins by the LORD outlying his demands for social justice. He commanded his people to “render true judgments,” “show kindness and mercy to one another,” avoid oppressing “the widow, the fatherless, [and] the sojourner.” (vs. 9-10). Unfortunately, Israel “refused to pay attention,” instead they “turned a stubborn shoulder,” “stopped their ears,” and “made their hearts diamond-hard” (vs. 11-12). Thus, their refusal to show kindness to their neighbor and compassion to the oppressed kindled the wrath of a just God. Zechariah writes, “a great anger came from the LORD of host.” In his fury he “scattered them with a whirlwind among the nations,” and “the pleasant land was made desolate.”

³⁷ Smith, “The Wrath of God,” 198; Cf. Hollman “Wrath of God,” 598; Botterweck, Ringgren, & Willis, “אֵתָהּ,” 357; Carson, “Wrath of God,” 38; Ashmon, “The Wrath of God: A Biblical Overview,” 351.

³⁸ Botterweck, Ringgren, & Willis, “אֵתָהּ,” 357.

In an interesting twist, divine anger burns for those who treat Israel unjustly.³⁹ The *rejection* and *mistreatment* of his people by the nations, did not escape God's jealous eye. For example, in Ezek. 36:7, Israel, personified by the landscape of promise land, is vindicated "because [she had] suffered the reproach of the nations." Therefore, the LORD continues, "I swear that with the nations that are all around you shall themselves suffer reproach."

Propitiation of Divine Wrath

Remarkably, certain circumstances may avert divine wrath.⁴⁰ The Scriptures notes three specifically: *sacrifice*, *repentance* and *intercession*. Concerning the first, God graciously established among his people a means of appeasing his anger in the OT sacrificial system.⁴¹ Under this provision, the people were able to temporarily atone for their sins by offering prescribed sacrifices (Lev. 16:11, 32-36). In this way, God vicariously spent his fury on an innocent animal, turning his wrath away from humanity.⁴²

Moreover, individual (or corporate) repentance, i.e. turning from their sinful and returning to the LORD, could avert the wrath of God.⁴³ Regarding this matter, the prophet Zephaniah exhorts Judah to "seek righteousness" and "humility" in order that "perhaps [they] may be hidden on the day of the anger of the LORD" (2:3). Moreover, the book of Jonah records such repentance as it played out in lives of the wicked people of Nineveh. In chapter 3, because of Jonah's prophesying, the entire population of Nineveh realized their great guilt, demonstrated their repentance by fasting and donning sackcloth (vs. 5), as well as turning from their evil deeds (vs. 8, 10). Seeing their genuine humility and repentance, God "turned from his fierce anger" (vs. 9) and "relented of the disaster that he has said he would do to them" (vs. 10). As the Ninevites demonstrated, humility and genuine repentance are necessary to turn back the wrath of God.

³⁹ K. D. Schunck, "Chēmāh," 464.

⁴⁰ Fretheim, "Theological Reflections on the Wrath of God," 13, 18; Cf. Heschel, *The Prophets*, 65-67.

⁴¹ Robinson, "Wrath of God," 1304; Cf. Hollman, "Wrath of God," 598.

⁴² Ashmon "The Wrath of God: A Biblical Overview," 353.

⁴³ Manser, McGrath, Packer, & Wiseman, *Zondervan Dictionary of Bible Themes*, 19; 333; Cf. Robinson, "Wrath of God," 1304; Hollman, "Wrath of God," 598.

Scripture also reveals that the intercession of the godly on behalf of the guilty often moved God to withdraw his anger.⁴⁴ In Ex. 32, infuriated by the waywardness of Israel, God commands Moses to abandon the people so that “[his] wrath may burn against them and [he] may consume them” (vs. 10). However, Moses, filled with compassion for the stubborn nation, pleaded with God for mercy, appealing the LORD’s history of redemptive work and his promises to the patriarchs (vs. 11-13). As a result, “the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people” (vs. 14).

It is clear that the prayer of Moses, in some mysterious way, moved God to change his mind. A similar scenario, found in Num. 14, articulates this connection more explicitly. There, Israel had again sinned, kindling the wrath of God. Once again, Moses interceded (vs. 13-19) and the LORD relented (vs. 20). However, this time the LORD reveals in vs. 20, “I have pardoned, *according to your word.*” God explicitly attributes his change to Moses’ prayer. Far from unique to Moses, similar events unfold because of the intercession of godly men, including Jeremiah (Jer. 18:20), Daniel (Dan. 9:16) and Amos (Amos 7:1-6).

Lastly, in discussing the means by which man may quell the wrath of God, it is important to note that while human participation is necessary, *human* means alone do not divert divine anger.⁴⁵ Rather, it is ultimately a work of God, deeply rooted in his compassion.⁴⁶ Thus, the psalmist can write though they were neither “steadfast toward him” nor “faithful to his covenant,” God, “being compassionate, atoned for their iniquity and did not destroy them” (7:37-38a). Moreover, “he restrained his anger often and did not stir up all his wrath” (vs. 38b). Out of the overflow of his grace, he provides the *time* and the *means* to repent and enter into right relationship with him. Only

⁴⁴; Fretheim, “Theological Reflections on the Wrath of God,” 13; Cf. Robinson, “Wrath of God,” 1304.

⁴⁵ Robinson, “Wrath of God,” 1304; Cf. Manser, McGrath, Packer, & Wiseman, *Zondervan Dictionary of Bible Themes*, 333.

⁴⁶ K. D. Schunck, “Chēmāh,” 465; Cf. Hollman, “Wrath of God,” 599; Manser, McGrath, Packer, & Wiseman, *Zondervan Dictionary of Bible Themes*, 333.

those who accept his mercy escape his fury.⁴⁷ Furthermore, human efforts are only a temporary solution. Sacrifice, repentance and intercession can never *fully* satisfy the wrath of God. In this way, the Tanakh anticipates the final and effective sacrifice of Christ.

Nature of Divine Wrath

Personal

Having discussed the terminology, expression and occasion of divine anger, let us now focus our attention to the nature of this wrath. When we study the Tanakh, we quickly find that his anger is *personal*. That is to say, God *himself* is the unmistakable source of his fury.⁴⁸ Again, many have resisted this view, arguing instead that the wrath of God simply describes a “harvest of what is sown.”⁴⁹ According to this view, then, human sin is inevitably followed by unpleasant consequences.⁵⁰ Unfortunately, while this avoids the uncomfortable assertion that God is angry with sinners, the biblical data simply does not support it. On the contrary, the “exhaustive studies” on this subject in both the OT and NT “do not sustain the thesis that wrath is an impersonal retribution, and automatic, causal working out of an abstract law.”⁵¹

Rather, Scripture clearly teaches that God’s wrath is personal, active, and flows from his “subjective freewill.”⁵² In numerous places, divine anger is directly ascribed to God, implementing possessive language such as “*God’s* wrath,” “*his* wrath,” “*your* wrath” and “*my* wrath.” Furthermore, in other places it is clear that *God* is the one acting. In Lev. 26:14-46, God sternly warns Israel of the devastating consequences that would befall them if they failed to keep their covenantal responsibilities. After a series of “if-then” statements, the LORD reveals in that if they continue in their disobedience he will unleash his wrath upon them. Verse 28 reveals that the LORD will

⁴⁷ Hollman, “Wrath of God,” 599.

⁴⁸ Ashmon, “The Wrath of God: A Biblical Overview,” 358; Cf. Carson, “Wrath of God,” 42; Lopez, “Do Believers Experience the Wrath of God?” 47.

⁴⁹ Carson, “Wrath of God,” 47.

⁵⁰ Morris, “Wrath of God,” 732.

⁵¹ More specifically, Robinson notes the studies of Fichtner (OT) and of Staehlin (NT), “Wrath of God,” 1303.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 1303.

personally execute his wrath. Note the first-person personal pronouns: “I will walk contrary to you in fury, and I *myself* will discipline you sevenfold for your sins.” Similarly, in Ez. 7:8-9, God foretells of the future outpouring of his anger using *personal* language. He warns, “I will soon pour out my wrath upon you...and I will punish you for your abominations.” Thus, the biblical writers and prophets do not disassociate God from the personal execution of his fury.

In addition to the lack of biblical support, there are several other reasons to reject an *impersonal* view. First, logically speaking, an impersonal process in a genuinely theistic universe does not make sense. Throughout Scripture, the biblical writers describe God’s intimate connection to his creation. He is personally and actively involved in all of its workings. Moreover, Scripture depicts sin as a *personal* affront against God, not rebellion against principles.⁵³ Thus, such an impersonal view is too deistic and does not account for the biblical witness.

Second, such a view significantly diminishes the need for salvation. Morris insightfully comments, “If there is no wrath, there is no need for salvation.”⁵⁴ By this he means that if God takes no action against sinners (i.e. his anger), then they are in no danger and are in no need of deliverance. Therefore, the logical conclusion of an impersonal view maintains a frightfully skewed view of sin and a dangerously diminished view of redemption.

Third, many have rightfully argued that the *impersonal* position is an “intrusion from the Greek world of thought.”⁵⁵ Greek thinkers (e.g. Aristeas and Philo) insisted that an *impassible* god should be preferred. In other words, they rejected the idea of God’s wrath on the basis that it would require God to be emotional and thus in some way changeable. However, this is simply not the witness of the Tanakh on this matter, which describes God as having emotions, but acting on them

⁵³ Carson, “Wrath of God,” 52.

⁵⁴ Morris, “Wrath of God,” 732.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 732.

as well.⁵⁶ In light of these arguments, it is best to conclude that God's wrath "is *actively* and strongly opposed to evil."⁵⁷

Terrible and Overwhelming

As can be expected of an infinite God, his wrath is both infinitely *terrible* and *intense*.⁵⁸ The terror of God's fury is well attested. For example, returning to Lev. 26, the LORD reveals in his anger that he will visit disobedient Israel with "wasting disease" and "fever that consume the eyes" (vs. 17). He will "loose wild beasts" on them (vs. 22) and deliver them into the hands of their enemies (vs. 25). Moreover, these calamities bring unnamed atrocities such as cannibalism (vs. 29) and unrivaled public shame (vs. 32).

Furthermore, when moved to the point of action, none can resist or endure his divine fury.⁵⁹ The prophet Jeremiah boldly warns that "at [God's] wrath the earth quakes" (10:10a). His fury moves the foundations of creation itself. Lest his audience think that they could escape from such power, the prophet quickly added, "and the nations cannot endure his indignation." (10:10b). In a similar way, the prophet Nahum asks, "Who can stand before his indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger?" (1:6). Of course, the intended response echoes the words of prophet: *no one can!* The emphatic language of the biblical authors further demonstrates this point. In Num. 25:11, when God turned back his wrath, he chose not to "*consume* the people of Israel in his jealousy." Elsewhere, it is described as an anger that "will not be quenched" (2 King 22:13, 17). Yet, how can such terrible fury be reconciled with overwhelming love and compassion of God?

⁵⁶ Carson insightfully points out that while God does experience passion, his passion never overrides his other perfections or spin out of control. Therefore, we must avoid two extremes:(1) The temptation to assume all references to God's emotion are anthropomorphic or that (2) God's passions are analogous to ours, "Wrath of God,"48.

⁵⁷ Morris, "Wrath of God," 732.

⁵⁸ Manser, McGrath, Packer, & Wiseman, *Zondervan Dictionary of Bible Themes*, 19; Cf. Hollman "Wrath of God," 598.

⁵⁹ Morris, "Wrath of God," 732.

Consistent with His Attributes

Some maintain that it is impossible to reconcile divine anger with divine love. They argue that a loving God could not exercise such fury on creation without violating his divine compassion and patience. However, the Tanakh does not support this assertion. On the contrary, not only do several passages teach that wrath *is* consistent with his other attributes, but they also demonstrate that that it is *because* of his attributes that he acts in anger. Let us further explore the relationship among God's wrath and his holiness, justice, love, sovereignty and perfection.

God's wrath is rooted in his *holiness*. Take for example Josh. 24:19-20. Here Joshua is challenging the Israelites to remain faithful to the LORD and resist the temptation of idolatry. He warns, "If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and do you harm and consume you." Interestingly, in the previous verse, Joshua reveals that because God is *holy*, he will act against their sin. Thus, it is *because* of God's moral holiness and jealousy that he must exercise his wrath against sinful humanity. He simply cannot ignore sin, which stands in opposition to his *holy* character.

Moreover, his *justice* intrinsically relates to his wrath. In Ps. 7:11, David writes, *The LORD is a righteous judge, and a God who feels indignation every day*. In the first line, he declares that God is just in his office as Judge, which he follows with an interesting parallel line, one that clearly links God's justice in the first line with his anger in the second. It is *because* he is just that he is diametrically opposed to the wickedness of humankind. Again, God cannot ignore sin; doing so would violate justice. Interestingly, this same justice also *tempers* his anger.⁶⁰ In other words, his wrath is never excessive or hidden, but rather well defined and perfectly tailored to fit the transgression. As Jeremiah writes, God gives "according to the fruit of [man's] deeds" (17:10).

⁶⁰ Charles F. Pfeiffer, Howard F. Vos & John Rea, "Wrath" (*Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), 1826.

Surprisingly, God's wrath directly relates to his *love*.⁶¹ Admittedly, there exists tension between the two. Yet, it is a *biblical* tension. God is both wrathful against sin and loving toward his creation. Returning yet again to Lev. 26, we clearly see this dichotomy. Verses 1-13 outline the types of blessings that obedient Israel can expect to receive. In vs. 12, accordingly, God reassuringly reveals, "I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people." His love for Israel is unmistakable. Yet, in the very same chapter (vs. 14-33) God describes the vicious wrath that will consume them if they choice to walk away from him.

In order to help bring clarity to the relationship between divine wrath and love, several comments must be made. First, on one level, love *drives* God to anger. Though God is concerned with all of his creation, he has a special love for his people (cf. Deut. 7...). Therefore, when Israel rejected him as their God, their sin was deeply and *personally* offensive. Their rejection of him provoked him to jealousy. In 1 Kings 14:22, the author notes that when "Judah did evil in the sight of the LORD," they "provoked him to jealousy." Thus, jealousy provides a link between love and wrath of God. Notice the prophet Nahum uses these concepts in tandem. He declares, "The LORD is a *jealous* and avenging God; the LORD is avenging and wrathful." D. A. Carson, in his contribution to *Engaging the Doctrine of God*, likely goes too far in saying that God's anger burns "out of *wounded* love."⁶² Nevertheless, it is clear that God unleashes his wrath on his people in the hopes that they will respond positively to the divine chastisement by returning to him.

Second, God's jealous love for Israel leads him to unleash his fury upon those who mistreat his people. Take for example Ps. 79. In vs. 5, the psalmist expresses his frustration with God's lack of action by posing the brazen question: "How long, O LORD? Will you be angry forever?" It is a plea for God act, to "pour out [his] anger on the nations" (vs. 6). In the next verse, the psalmist

⁶¹ Lopez, "Do Believers Experience the Wrath of God?" 47.

⁶² Carson "Wrath of God," 38.

reveals the reason for wrath. It is because the nations have “devoured Jacob, and laid waste his habitation.”

Third, God’s love, as seen in his compassion and patience, delays his wrath.⁶³ While God’s holiness and justice do not allow him to overlook sin, his love generously provides sinners time to come to repentance. Several passages speak of this. For example, Ex. 34:6 depicts God as “slow to anger.” He is patient with disobedient humanity. Elsewhere, it is noted that his compassion leads him to “[restrain] his anger and...not stir up all his wrath” (Ps. 78:38). Only after the allotted time, as prescribe by God, does he unleash his fury. In Ps. 103:8-9, David praises God for his loving attributes, including his patience. However, David is quick to add that this period of grace will not last forever. The LORD “will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever” (vs. 8).

Fourth, God’s love *limits* his wrath. Scripture reveals that God’s anger is *temporary*, while his love is permanent.⁶⁴ God’s self-disclosing statement in Ex. 34:6-7 demonstrates this poignantly. Concerning himself, the LORD declares that he is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love to *thousands* [of generations]...but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the *third* and the *fourth* generation.” Without digressing to address the apparent difficulty of punishing children for the sins of their fathers, notice the contrast in time. While God’s wrath is limited to three or four generations, God pours his favor on thousands. Thus, though “his anger is but for a moment,” amazingly, “his favor is for a lifetime” (Ps. 30:5).

In addition to holiness, justice, and love, the wrath of God is a natural outworking of his *sovereignty*. There is seemingly no end to the biblical support for God’s complete and final control of all things. Furthermore, Scripture is clear that nothing can thwart the will of God. In Job 42:2,

⁶³ Fretheim, “Theological Reflections on the Wrath of God,” 16.

⁶⁴ Manser, McGrath, Packer, & Wiseman, *Zondervan Dictionary of Bible Themes*, 19; Cf. Fretheim, “Theological Reflections on the Wrath of God,” 13; Lopez, “Do Believers Experience the Wrath of God?” 47.

having received a lengthy review of great works of God, Job admits, “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.” Therefore, God says, “My counsel will stand, and I will accomplish all my purposes” (Isa. 46:10).

In light of this, it should come as no surprise that God would strike out against those who oppose his purposes. For example, since God is the creator of the heavens and earth, he is deserving of acknowledgement and worship of all people. However, those who reject him are rejecting his divine right and plan. Thus, the prophet Nahum notes that God “takes vengeance on his enemies and keeps wrath for his enemies” (Nahum 1:2). Likewise, the psalmist is justified in petitioning the LORD to pour out his anger on the nations and kingdoms that “do not call on [his] name” (Ps. 79:6).

Moreover, God’s wrath and judgment *fulfill* his purposes.⁶⁵ This is emphasized by the prophet Jeremiah when he wrote that God will not turn back his fury “until he has executed and accomplished the intents of his heart” (Jer. 23:20). In other words, his anger against sinners is part of the means by which he is bringing his divine plan to completion. In his article “The Wrath of God: A Biblical Overview,” Scott Asmon insightfully outlines several ways the LORD utilizes his wrath to accomplish his divine plan. In certain cases, he employs it to harden the hearts of the disobedient, “thereby solidifying unrepentant unbelievers in their path to God’s final wrath” (Ex. 14:4; Isa. 63:7). He may also deploy his fury on the wicked in order to preserve the faithful (Gen. 6:6-8; Isa. 36:15-22). At other times, divine anger serves as the just punishment for sin (Deut. 7:9; Nah. 1:2-3). Finally, God, who desires reconciliation, often uses his wrath to persuade sinners to return to him (Num. 21:4-9; Ezek. 33:10-11).⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Fretheim, “Theological Reflections on the Wrath of God,” 25-26; Cf. Manser, McGrath, Packer, & Wiseman, *Zondervan Dictionary of Bible Themes*, 19.

⁶⁶ Botterweck, Ringgren, & Willis, “אָנָה,” 357-358.

Lastly, like all of his attributes and actions, his wrath is marked by *perfection*. Unlike human anger, which often lacks control, God's anger is perfectly controlled. Notice in Deut. 9:19 that despite his feelings of "anger and hot displeasure" and his readiness to destroy Israel, he did not. He restrains his fury. It never flares out of his control. Likewise, his anger is always rational.⁶⁷ It is settled in the mind of God and is often communicated to the disobedient in advance. Some, such as Rudolph Otto have likened his fury to "stored-up electricity..., 'incalculable' and 'arbitrary.'"⁶⁸ Yet, throughout the Pentateuch, notably Lev. 26:14-46 and Deut 28:15-68, God outlines the curses he will bring in his wrath if Israel chooses the path of disobedience. Thus, though certainly emotional, the anger of God is far from arbitrary or irrational. It is a perfect melding of emotion *and* reason.⁶⁹

It is also significant to note that the biblical writers' view of God's anger demonstrates the perfection of divine wrath. Even his wrath is viewed positively! Though a few isolated verses criticize divine anger, the vast majority of OT texts view God's wrath in a positive light.⁷⁰ The prophets expected that God would oppose those who oppose him. For them it was the natural outworking of his sovereignty. We see this especially in the passages where the God's people explicitly request the display of God's anger against his enemies. For example, in Ps. 59:12-13, David boldly prays that God would "consume [the enemies of God] in wrath" and that he would do so "till they [were] no more." From this, we may confidently conclude that the Tanakh affirms the fury of God as a good and just response to sin.

Lessons from Divine Wrath

Thus, even the briefest of surveys reveals that the Tanakh has much to say concerning the wrath of God, employing a large and colorful repertoire of terms and imagery. Yet despite this diversity, there remains a simple underlying reality: The anger of God is a *personal* reaction to the sin of humankind.

⁶⁷ Ashmon, "The Wrath of God: A Biblical Overview," 351.

⁶⁸ Quoted by Smith, "The Wrath of God," 194.

⁶⁹ Fretheim, "Theological Reflections on the Wrath of God," 17

⁷⁰ K. D. Schunck, "Chēmāh," 464; Cf. Botterweck, Ringgren, & Willis, "אָנִי," 360.

The biblical writers are not shy about affirming that God *himself* spends divine fury. Moreover, we find that despite its horror, divine wrath is *perfect*, faultlessly meted and entirely consistent with his attributes.

Some well-meaning believers have unfortunately pitted the OT against the NT, wrongly characterizing the former as a period of *wrath*, while the latter one of *grace*. This is a faulty evaluation for a number of reasons, the foremost being that it sees divine anger as merely an OT concept. Wrath is a *timeless* reaction of a holy and just God to the rebellion of man. The apostle Paul, for example, spoke of the outpouring of the wrath of God on the disobedient in the NT age, when he declared, “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (Rom. 1:18). Elsewhere, John described the “wrath of the Lamb,” the future wrath that is to be unleashed in the eschaton (Rev. 6:16, 14:10, etc.). These are merely a sampling of the NT teachings on divine anger. Thus, we must not relegate the wrath of God to the OT.

However, one must also be careful not to over stress the continuity between the OT and NT concerning God’s fury, at the expense of forgetting the vastly superior benefits of the new covenant. NT believers may escape God’s wrath because of the effective propitiation of Christ, which unlike the temporary OT solutions, fully satisfied the anger of God. Paul teaches that while we were once “children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3), the condemning fury of God has been turned aside. Thus, we can rejoice with Paul when he confidently proclaims, “There is...now *no condemnation* for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1)! Therefore, we must strike a balance between relishing in our new covenant position and remembering that there *is* much to learn from the Tanakh and apply to our new covenant lives.

Looking for insights from the *entire* Bible deepens our knowledge of God himself. OT and NT reveal that in response to sin, God acts in wrath. As difficult as this truth may be, there is a great danger in failing to study these most difficult elements of Scripture. Many have found it easier to

focus on the positive fundamentals, such as love, patience, and mercy, at the expense of neglecting his anger. However, this approach overlooks the *entire* Person of God. Moreover, it fails to fully explore and appreciate his holiness and justice. When we develop our theology of divine wrath, we begin to know him more fully.

In addition, having a better understanding of divine wrath can help us gain insight into ourselves. That is, a robust understanding of God's righteous anger enables us to explain and better comprehend righteous *human* anger. God has created all humanity in his image. As image-bearers, he has remarkably endowed us with a taste of some of his attributes. God is love. Thus, God has given us the ability to love. Similarly, he has instilled in us the ability to burn with righteous anger. Take the example of Phineas who burned with righteous anger over the flagrant sexual sin of a fellow Israelite and God rewarded him (Num. 25:10-13). Understanding what provokes God to righteous anger should inform our anger over injustice. Fretheim rightfully warns, "Human anger at injustice will carry less weight and seriousness if divine anger at injustice in the service of life is not given its proper place." Furthermore, he concludes, "If our God is not angry, why should we be?"⁷¹

Only as we learn more about the wrath of God can we better understand of the gravity of our sin and the extent of God's grace. Sin is not free from consequences. In fact, it carries an incomparable price: God's terrible and overwhelming fury. All who continue in their rejection of God *will* fall under its dizzying horror. Moreover, when we understand that God's character (i.e. holiness, justice, etc.) necessitates the expression of his wrath, we quickly realize our need for propitiation. We are in desperate need of a means of turning back the anger of God. Praise God that he provided us, as New Covenant believers, with the atoning sacrifice in Jesus! Thus, as we grow in our understanding of the grave consequences of our sinful actions, our appreciation of God's lavished grace will grow as well.

⁷¹ Fretheim, "Theological Reflections on the Wrath of God," 3.

Finally, the wrath of God should influence our evangelism. For us, the redeemed, truly comprehending the severity of the divine anger that God will ultimately pour out on unrepentant humanity, ought to move us to compassion. As our hearts break at the thought of those close to us – family, friends, neighbors, etc. – falling under the torrent of wrath, we have the responsibility to reach out with the message of salvation through Christ. D. A. Carson aptly concludes his treatment of the anger of God with this powerful statement, “So we teach the wrath of God, for faithfulness to the Scriptures demand it; and we follow Jesus and learn to weep over the city.”⁷²

⁷² Carson, “Wrath of God,” 63.

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