

Character of God:

Slow to Anger

STUDY NOTES

When God reveals who he is to Moses in Exodus 34:6-7, one of the ways he describes himself is being slow to anger, or in Hebrew, *'erek 'apayim*.

“Yahweh, Yahweh, compassionate and gracious, **slow to anger**, overflowing with loyal love and faithfulness.”

This verse is the most quoted and reused verse in the Hebrew Bible. It's clear that this description of God is core to the biblical understanding of who he is, so we wanted to spend some time focusing on this fascinating passage. In our Character of God series, we're looking at each of these descriptors and digging into their significance in the biblical story and the implications they have for us today. These study notes will help you dig deeper into the Hebrew phrase *'erek 'apayim* (slow to anger) and see the ideas presented in our video Character of God: Slow to Anger.

Contents

God is Slow to Anger	4
The Vocabulary of Divine anger	5
“Heat of Nose” = Hot Anger	5
Vocabulary Summary	6
Other Hebrew Anger Words and Synonyms	6
The “Problem” of God’s Wrath	8
Two Important Caveats	8
God’s Anger in the Bible	10
Portraits of Divine Judgment in Genesis 1-11	12
Biblical Cosmology and God’s “Judgment”	12
Example 1: Adam and Eve in Genesis 3	13
Example 2: Cain in Genesis 4	14
Example 3: The Flood in Genesis 6-8	14
The Flood as Cosmic Collapse of the The Waters Above and Below	15
Examples 4 and 5: Sodom and Egypt	16
Conclusions About God’s Judgment in Genesis and Exodus	18
The Introduction of Divine Anger in the Story of the Bible	19
Moses’ Resistance to God in Exodus 3	19
Moses and the Golden Calf in Exodus 32-34	19

Divine Anger in the Wilderness Narrative	20
God's Anger in Moses' Final Warning in Deuteronomy	21
Conclusions from the Portrait of God's Anger and Judgment in the Torah	21
Divine Anger and Judgment in the Prophets	22
Former Prophets: Joshua-Kings	22
The Latter Prophets: Isaiah-Malachi	23
The Exile and God's Future Turn From his Anger	25
Jesus, God's Kingdom and Judgment, and Divine Anger	26
John the Baptist's Message About "Wrath to Come"	26
Jesus' Announcement of Good News	27
Jesus' Warnings of Coming Judgment	28
Jesus, Passover, and God's Judgment on Jerusalem	30
God's Anger in the Apostle's Writings	31

God is Slow to Anger

What does it mean for God to be slow to anger? This phrase has been translated into multiple variations, and “anger” carries specific connotations that may cause us to miss the true meaning of this phrase and its implications. A reading of the literal Hebrew translation and looking at other instances of God’s anger in the Bible will bring this key divine attribute into clearer focus.

<p>“Yahweh, Yahweh,</p> <p>a God compassionate and gracious,</p> <p>slow to anger,</p> <p>and abundant of loyal love and faithfulness;</p> <p>keeper of loyal love for thousands,</p> <p>forgiver of iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet he will surely not clear the guilty</p> <p>visitor of the iniquity of father upon sons and upon the sons of sons, upon the third and the fourth</p>	<p>Exodus 34:6</p> <p>Exodus 34:7</p>
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The Hebrew phrase for “slow to anger” is *’erek ’apayim* (אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם), and it has been translated in various ways throughout the history of English translations.

NASB, ESV, NIV, NRSV	“Slow to anger”
KJV (1611)	“Longsuffering”
Tyndale (1520s)	“Not lightly angry”

But the literal translation of this phrase is actually “long of nose,” or “long of nostrils.” What does this mean? First we need to take a closer look at the vocabulary of divine anger in the Bible.

Slow to anger = long of nose	Nose = anger
<i>’Erek ’appayim</i> (אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם)	<i>’Aph</i> (אֵף)

The Vocabulary of Divine anger

The Hebrew phrase “slow to anger” consists of two words that form a figure of speech, *‘erek* and *‘apayim*.

<i>‘Erek</i>	<i>‘Apayim</i>
<p>“Long” - used of the physical length of an object or its duration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> An eagle is “long of wing” (‘erek <i>ha‘eber</i>) [Ezekiel 17:3] A “long war” (<i>milkhamah</i> ‘arukah) [2 Samuel 3:1] A fixed phrase, “long of days” (‘orek <i>yamim</i>) [Deuteronomy 30:20; Psalm 21:5; 23:6...] 	<p>“Nostrils” - the Hebrew dual form of <i>‘ap</i> (nose)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ‘Ap (singular) is the Hebrew word for “nose” Nose-ring (<i>nizmey-‘ap</i>) [Isaiah 5:21] ‘Apayim means “two noses,” i.e. “nostrils” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Breath of life in the nostrils” [Genesis 7:22]

So we can see the root of this phrase, but the big question remains: why is “long of nostrils” a figure of speech associated with anger?

A common Hebrew phrase that means “to become angry” is “and his nose became hot” (*yikhar ‘ap* / יחר אף). This phrase appears 56 times in the Hebrew Bible! Let’s take a look.

“Heat of Nose” = Hot Anger

Now Eliab his oldest brother heard when he spoke to the men; and Eliab’s **anger burned [lit. his nose was hot]** against David and he said, “Why have you come down? And with whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness?”

1 SAMUEL 17:28

Then **the anger [lit. nose] of Yahweh burned** against Moses, and he said, “Is there not your brother Aaron the Levite? I know that he speaks fluently. And moreover, behold, he is coming out to meet you; when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart.”

EXODUS 4:14

Now when Joseph’s master [Potiphar] heard the words of his wife, which she spoke to him, saying, “This is what your slave did to me,” his **anger burned [lit. his nose burned]**.

GENESIS 39:19

But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his **fierce anger [lit. heat of nose]** so that we will not perish.

JONAH 3:8-9

The words “heat” and “nose” can also be used separately because both are figures of speech for “hot anger.”

The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him,
but his great **anger [lit. nose]** is against all who forsake him.

EZRA 8:22

The one enthroned in heaven laughs;
the Lord scoffs at them.
He rebukes them in his **anger [lit. nose]**
And terrifies them in his **wrath [lit. heat, kharon]**, saying,
“I have installed my king on Zion,
My holy mountain.”

From my youth I have suffered and been close to death;
I have borne your terrors and am in despair.
Your **wrath [lit. heat, kharon]** has swept over me;
Your terrors have destroyed me.
All day long they surround me like a flood;
They have completely engulfed me.

PSALM 2:4-6

PSALM 88:15-17 (NIV)

Vocabulary Summary

Literal →	Metaphor →	Figures of Speech
'Ap / nose	Nose = anger	“A burning hot nose” = anger
Kharon / heat	Heat = anger	“Long of nostrils” = slow to anger

Other Hebrew Anger Words and Synonyms

There are multiple Hebrew words for heat or hot that can be combined with 'ap/nose or can stand on their own as words for “hot-anger.”

Noun: Khemah = heat/anger	<p>I went away in the heat of my spirit</p> <p>EZEKIEL 3:24</p> <p>Stay away for a few days, while the heat of your brother turns aside.</p> <p>GENESIS 27:44</p>
Verb: Khamam = to be hot	<p>My heart became hot</p> <p>PSALM 39:2</p> <p>When the sun grew hot</p> <p>EXODUS 16:21</p>
Verb: Bi'er = to burn, consume	<p>Who handed Jacob over to become loot, and Israel to the plunderers? Was it not the Lord, against whom we have sinned? For they would not follow his ways; they did not obey his law. So he poured out on them his burning anger [lit. the heat of his nose], the violence of war. It enveloped them in flames, yet they did not understand; it burned [bi'er] them, but they did not take it to heart.</p> <p>ISAIAH 42:24-25</p>

There are also Hebrew words for anger that don't have the metaphor of "heat" as part of their meaning.

<p>Noun: Qetseph = "anger"</p>	<p><i>They went off and worshiped other gods and bowed down to them, gods they did not know, gods he had not given them. Therefore the Lord's anger burned [lit. his nose burned hot] against this land, so that he brought on it all the curses written in this book. In anger [‘ap, nose] wrath [khemah, heat] and in great anger [qetseph], the Lord uprooted them from their land and thrust them into another land, as it is now.</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">DEUTERONOMY 29:26-28 (NIV)</p>
<p>Noun: Qatsaph = "to be angry"</p>	<p><i>And are you now turning away from the Lord? If you rebel against the Lord today, tomorrow he will be angry [qatsaph] with the whole community of Israel.</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">JOSHUA 22:18</p> <p><i>But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. Then the king became very angry [qatsaph] and his wrath burned [lit. his heat burned, khemah] within him.</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">ESTHER 1:12</p>
<p>Verb: Za'am = Noun: Za'am = "indignation, anger"</p>	<p><i>Behold, the name of the Lord comes from a remote place; Burning [bi'er] is his anger [‘ap] and dense is his smoke; His lips are filled with indignation [za'am] And his tongue is like a consuming fire; His breath is like an overflowing torrent, Which reaches to the neck...</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">ISAIAH 30:27-28 (NASB95)</p>
<p>Noun: ‘ebrah = "outburst, lit. crossing over"</p>	<p><i>We have heard of Moab's pride—how great is her arrogance!—of her conceit, her pride, and her insolence [‘ebrah]; but her boasts are empty.</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">ISAIAH 16:6 (NIV)</p> <p><i>Where is your king, that he may save you? Where are your rulers in all your towns, of whom you said, "Give me a king and princes?" So in my anger I gave you a king, and in my wrath [‘ebrah] I took him away.</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">HOSEA 13:10-11 (NIV)</p>

The “Problem” of God’s Wrath

God’s hot anger and wrath in the Bible are a major reason why many people struggle to read the Bible. These words are fairly common in the Hebrew Bible, and they depict God in ways that make many people uncomfortable.

Now the people complained about their hardships in the hearing of the Lord, and when he heard them, his anger burned hot. Then fire from the Lord burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp.

NUMBERS 11:1

Therefore the Lord’s anger burns against his people; his hand is raised, and he strikes them down. The mountains shake, and the dead bodies are like refuse in the streets. Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised.

ISAIAH 5:25

Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you; for the Lord your God, who is among you, is a jealous God and his anger will burn against you, and he will destroy you from the face of the land.

DEUTERONOMY 6:14-15

When these types of statements are taken out of the immediate context and read independently of the larger biblical storyline, they can be used to create a portrait of God that is imbalanced and distorted. If you were to simply list all of these statements about God’s wrath and read them aloud, the words of Exodus 34:6 can sound hollow.

We need to learn to appreciate these metaphorical descriptions of divine anger and understand the reality to which they point: the intense emotion God experiences when his people betray him and embrace their own self-destruction.

Two Important Caveats

Even if we are able to understand God’s anger as an appropriate response to the betrayal of his covenant people, there are still two key caveats to consider when thinking about divine anger.

Caveat #1: The Meaning of Anger in our Cultural Setting

There are two important ideas associated with the emotion of anger in our cultural context—one positive, one negative.

- Anger as protection: Anger is a physical response our bodies generate when something we value is threatened, compromised, or lost. There is almost always a deeper feeling or value at stake that generates an angry response.
- Anger as abuse: Anger is a sign of losing self-control, and when it’s expressed by someone in a position of power, it can be used to bully, threaten, and intimidate subordinates into compliance and submission.

These are primarily psychological (anger as protection) and sociological (anger as abuse) perspectives on anger. They have deeply influenced not only the way we talk about anger but also the way we conceive of anger and how we evaluate it.

When we come to the Bible, how we react to God's anger will depend on our life experience, our disposition to the Christian faith in general (open-minded, faith-friendly, skeptic, or hostile), and our core beliefs about God's character.

For example, if I already think of God as a distant, all-powerful sovereign, then his anger will seem more like a dangerous and volatile expression of a deeply angry being. But if I already think of God as a generous, creative father, then his anger will seem measured, fair, and a reasonable expression of his justice and fairness.

So what we need to do is clear the deck and trace the development of God's anger through the storyline of the Bible.

Caveat #2: God's Anger, Anthropomorphism, and the Pathos of God

The biblical vocabulary of "heat" and "nose/anger" are clearly analogies. These words evoke the physical response humans feel when they're angry, and the Bible attributes these emotions to God (hot of nose).

This raises the larger and more complex issue of biblical language that uses anthropomorphic (human-like) imagery to describe God. The classic discussion of this issue from the 20th century is by Abraham Heschel.

"In the prophets, God does not reveal himself in abstract absoluteness, but in a personal and intimate relation to the world... He is moved and affected by what happens in the world, and reacts accordingly. Events and human actions arouse in him joy or sorrow, pleasure or wrath. He is not conceived as judging the world in detachment. He reacts in an intimate manner, being moved, affected, grieved or gladdened by what people do. This notion, basically defines the [biblical] consciousness of God.. This is because the prophets had no theory or 'idea' of God. What they had was an understanding, not the result of theoretical inquiry about God. Rather, to them God was overwhelmingly real and shatteringly present." — ABRAHAM HESCHEL, THE PROPHETS, VOL. 2, PP. 285-86.

"The greatest challenge [for the biblical authors] was how to reconcile in words the awareness of God's transcendence with his overwhelming livingness and presence... Had the poet of Psalm 23 recoiled from anthropomorphism, he would have never written, "The Lord is my Shepherd." But to assume that the poet thought that God was actually a heavenly shepherd is to misunderstand the meaning of the passage. It is precisely the challenge involved in using inadequate words that drives the mind beyond all words..." — ABRAHAM HESCHEL, THE PROPHETS, VOL. 2, PP. 354-56.

“Few [divine] passions have been denounced so vehemently by teachers of morality as the passion of anger. It is pictured as sinister, malignant passion, an evil force, which must under all circumstances be suppressed. The truth, however, is that these features...are not the essence of anger... Like fire, it may be a blessing as well as fatal--reprehensible when associated with malice, but morally necessary as resistance to malice.” — ABRAHAM HESCHEL, THE PROPHETS, VOL. 2, P. 360.

“The prophets never [portray] God’s anger as something that cannot be accounted for, unpredictable, irrational. It is never a spontaneous outburst, but a reaction occasioned by the conduct of humans...and motivated by concern for right and wrong. [362] [T]he word ‘anger’ is charged with connotations of spite and recklessness. The biblical terms, however, denote what we can righteous indignation...it is impatience with evil. [363] ... Indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself, more contagious, and more dangerous... And the entire message of the prophets is one great exclamation: God is not indifferent to evil! ... This is one of the meanings of the anger of God: the end of indifference! [365] — ABRAHAM HESCHEL, THE PROPHETS, VOL. 2, PP. 362-365.

“The pathos of anger is by no means regarded as an attribute or basic disposition or quality inherent in the nature of God. Rather it is portrayed by the prophets as a reaction...occasioned by humans. [In the Bible] the most original divine pathos is love...”
— ABRAHAM HESCHEL, THE PROPHETS, VOL. 2, P. 381.

God’s Anger in the Bible

Who is the first person God gets angry with in the Bible? And in what biblical story does God’s anger first appear? The answer may surprise you. It’s not found in the stories of Adam and Eve, or the flood, or even Sodom and Gomorrah! It’s not until we are 54 chapters into the biblical story that we first see Yahweh get angry.

*Moses said to the Lord, “Please, my Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.” The Lord said to him, “Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.” But Moses said, “Please, my Lord. Please, send someone else.” Then **the Lord’s anger burned against Moses** and he said, “What about your brother, Aaron the Levite? I know he can speak well. He is already on his way to meet you, and he will be glad to see you. You shall speak to him and put words in his mouth; I will help both of you speak and will teach you what to do.”*

EXODUS 4:10-15

Notice a few things about this first appearance of God's anger in the Bible.

- This is Moses' fifth objection to God's commission to send Moses to confront Pharaoh.
- God's anger does not lead to punishment or violence. Instead, God makes a concession to Moses' stubbornness and fear.

The next time we see mention of God's anger is in the poem recounting the parting of the Red Sea.

*Pharaoh's chariots and his army he has cast into the sea;
And the choicest of his officers are drowned in the Red Sea.
The deeps cover them;
They went down into the depths like a stone.
Your right hand, O Lord, is majestic in power,
Your right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy.
And in the greatness of your excellence, you overthrow those who rise up against you;
You send forth your heat-anger [kharon] and it consumes them as chaff.
At the wind/spirit of your nostrils ['ap] the waters were piled up,
The flowing waters stood up like a heap;
The deeps were congealed in the heart of the sea.*

EXODUS 15:4-8 (NASB95)

The last time God's "hot anger" appears in Exodus is in the story of the golden calf at Mount Sinai.

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, 'These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.'" "I have seen these people," the Lord said to Moses, "and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation." But Moses sought the favor of the Lord his God. "Lord," he said, "why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth?' Turn from your hot anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.'" Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had spoken.

EXODUS 32:7-14

This is the first story in the Bible where God's anger is associated with killing and punishment. But this is not the first time that God has brought judgment or even death as a result of human evil. So what makes this story so important?

To answer that question, we have to go back and trace the theme of God's judgment as a response to human evil, so we can appreciate the full force of this new connection between God's anger and his judgment.

Portraits of Divine Judgment in Genesis 1-11

In Genesis 1:1-2:3, God establishes boundaries and order through three acts of separation that create cosmic realms.

Genesis 1:1-2:3

Day 1: Light and dark / day and night	The heavenly order
Day 2: Waters above / waters below	The heaven and earth order
Day 3: Dry land / the surrounding waters	The land order
Result: Humans belong on the dry land, ruling as God's partners over the plants and animals.	

Genesis 2:4-25

Genesis 2:4	Genesis 2:5-9	Genesis 2:10-25
No plants No farming No rain No humans	Water from the ground Plants and a garden Humans to farm the garden	The garden is a sacred center of order and divine life Outside the garden is "dust and death"

Biblical Cosmology and God's "Judgment"

Creation does not refer to a generative act in the past that kick-starts the "machine." Rather, creation is God's ongoing act of sustaining the cosmic order. The darkness and the waters are not eliminated; they are "tamed" through creation. But this understanding also means that disorder can always surface in God's good creation.

*God is our refuge and strength,
A very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, even if the land should totter
Even if the mountains slip into the heart of the sea;
Though its waters roar and foam,
Though the mountains quake at its swelling pride. Selah.
There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
The holy dwelling places of the Most High.
God is in the midst of her, she will not be moved;
God will help her when morning dawns.
The nations roar, the kingdoms tottered;
He raised his voice, the earth melted.
The Lord of hosts is with us;
The God of Jacob is our stronghold. Selah.*

PSALM 46:17 (NASB95)

*Yet God is my king from of old,
Who works deeds of deliverance in the midst of the earth.
You divided the sea by your strength;
You broke the heads of the sea monsters in the waters.
You crushed the heads of Leviathan;
You gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.
You broke open springs and torrents;
You dried up ever-flowing streams.
Yours is the day, Yours also is the night;
You have prepared the light and the sun.
You have established all the boundaries of the land;
You have made summer and winter.*

PSALM 74:12-17 (NASB95)

“In [Psalms that describe creation and watery disorder], the confinement of chaos rather than its elimination is the essence of creation... [T]he survival of ordered reality hangs only upon God’s vigilance in ensuring that those cosmic dikes do not fail, that the bars of the Sea’s jail cell do not give way... [These images] testify both to the precariousness of life, its absolute dependence upon God, and the sureness and firmness of life under the protection of the faithful master. The world is not inherently safe, but inherently unsafe. Only the magisterial intervention of God and his eternal vigilance prevent the cataclysm.” — ADAPTED FROM JON LEVENSON, CREATION AND THE PERSISTENCE OF EVIL, P. 17.

Creation is a cosmic order that is continually maintained and granted to humans by God’s generosity and power. And because humans are called to rule over the dry land and partner with God in extending the realm of divine order, they can also royally mess it up.

Stories about God’s judgment depict God either withdrawing his order-creating power from their lives or exiling people from the realm of order and life into the realm of disorder and death. In these stories, God is simply giving people what they want, but he also often spares them in some way from an even more destructive end. God’s judgment is itself a kind of mercy.

Example 1: Adam and Eve in Genesis 3

The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them. Then the Lord God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil, and now, he might stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever.” Therefore the Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden, to cultivate the ground from which he was taken. So he drove the man out, and at the east of the garden of Eden, he stationed the cherubim and the flaming sword which turned every direction to guard the way to the tree of life.

GENESIS 3:21-24

God’s decision to put the humans back where they started, outside the garden in the realm of dirt and mortality, is actually a severe mercy (“so that they don’t stretch out their hand and take...”). It’s an act that both protects the humans from themselves while also assigning them to the consequences of their actions.

Notice that God’s judgment is not accompanied here by anger; rather, it comes along with God’s tender care to provide clothing for the humans.

Example 2: Cain in Genesis 4

Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" And he said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" He said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. Now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you cultivate the ground, it will no longer yield its strength to you; you will be a vagrant and a wanderer on the earth." Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is too great to bear! Behold, You have driven me this day from the face of the ground; and from your face I will be hidden, and I will be a vagrant and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me." So the Lord said to him, "Therefore whoever kills Cain, vengeance will be taken on him sevenfold." And the Lord appointed a sign for Cain, so that no one finding him would slay him. Then Cain went out from the presence of the Lord, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

GENESIS 4:9-16 (NASB95)

Murder was a capital crime for the biblical authors, yet here is God dealing mercifully with the first murderer, forgiving and protecting instead of executing him. God sends Cain out into the realm of exile and mortality, assigning him to the consequences of his decision.

Example 3: The Flood in Genesis 6-8

The first emotion God feels in the Bible is grief and sorrow—not anger.

Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. The Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and he was grieved in his heart.

GENESIS 6:5-6 (NASB95)

As noted in Genesis 6:5-7, God's decision to bring the flood was not made out of anger; it was motivated by grief. This portrait is filled out in 6:11-13, which transitions from the narrative of creation's corruption to God's response to Noah.

Narrator's Report of the Land's Corruption	God's Words to Noah Recall the Narrative Report
<i>And the land was ruined before Elohim, and the land was filled with violence, and Elohim saw the land: and behold, it was ruined, for all flesh had caused the ruin of its way upon the land.</i>	<i>And Elohim said to Noah, "The end of all flesh has come before me because the land is filled with violence because of them. And behold, I am going to cause their ruin with the land."</i>

Note the parallelism between "all flesh has caused the ruin of its way on the land" and "I am going to cause their ruin with the land."

This shows that God's decision to bring the flood is interconnected with the disaster that humans are themselves choosing and perpetuating in the land. God's decision is not one that is imposed from the outside; rather, his decision is prompted by and works through humanity's self-enacted ruin in the land.

The wording of Genesis 6:13 is crucial and has (unfortunately) been obscured in many modern English translations: “the end of all flesh has come up right in front of me.”

So God said to Noah, “I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth.

GENESIS 6:13 (NIV)

And Elohim said to Noah, “The end of all flesh has come before me because the land is filled with violence because of them. And behold, I am going to cause their ruin with the land.

GENESIS 6:13

And God said to Noah, “I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them with the earth.

GENESIS 6:13 (ESV)

God “is not the subject of the clause [“the end has come”]...Rather, the notion is that the demise of all flesh has passed before [God] and so made itself evident. The Hebrew construction distances the deity from the decision making process, almost as if this outcome was inevitable.” — BARRY BANDSTRA, GENESIS 1-11: BAYLOR HANDBOOK ON THE HEBREW TEXT, P. 358.

“The [verse in Gen 6:13] suggests that God has seen where the ruination of creation is headed and has decided to accelerate the process to its completion...the plain sense of the Hebrew text conveys something very different from most English translations, which are perhaps influenced by the view of an angry, punitive deity... The flood was an ancient symbol of destruction and disorder, and so is a fitting medium for the dissolution of creation as it overwhelms every boundary and returns creation to the primordial undifferentiated ‘deep’ that existed before Yahweh spoke boundaries into being.... We are left with the sense that God is not so much sending the flood to punish the world as much as facilitating, through the flood, the inevitable descent into chaos caused by human destructiveness and violence. God ruins and already ruined creation, and in so doing creates conditions for a reordering and a renewal to take place.” — DANIEL HAWK, THE VIOLENCE OF THE BIBLICAL GOD, PP. 32-33.

The Flood as Cosmic Collapse of the The Waters Above and Below

The flood is the reversal of creation in Genesis 1. The description of the flood is marked by its cosmic imagery that corresponds to Genesis 1, making clear that it is a de-creation story that undoes the order established in Genesis 1.

a they were split apart (ובקעו)
b all the fountains of the great deep,
b' and the windows of the skies
a' they were opened (ופתחו)

GENESIS 7:11

The two waters from Genesis 7 correspond exactly to the “waters below” and the “waters above” in Genesis 1.

Now, the land was wild and waste (תהו ובהו *tohu va-vohu*) and darkness was over the face of the deep abyss (תהום *tehom*), but the breath of Elohim was hovering over the face of the waters (המים *hamayim*)

GENESIS 1:2

Then God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” God made the dome, and separated the waters which were below the dome from the waters which were above the dome; and it was so. God called the dome heavens/skies. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day.

GENESIS 1:6-8

“In...Genesis 1, the reader is introduced to a world in which watery chaos rules supreme until God’s intervention brings order... The flood account in Gen 6-8 tells the story of how, when the world was corrupted, God withdrew the restraints placed on the waters at the time of creation, and they flooded the world once more from the ‘great deep’ (*tehom rabbah*) and the ‘windows of the heavens’ (*arubot hashamayim*)... Thus, the chaos waters by their very nature are symbolic of the absence of order and creation. In the flood narrative, they denote the reversal of creation.”

— D. RUDMAN, “MITTEILUNGEN: THE USE OF WATER IMAGERY IN DESCRIPTIONS OF SHEOL,” ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR DIE ALTTESTAMENTLICHE WISSENSCHAFT VOLUME 113: ISSUE 2, P. 243-244.

Psalms 104 and 148 are poetic explorations of the cosmology of Genesis 1, showing that the waters above still exist for the biblical authors.

Bless the Lord, O my soul!
O Lord my God, you are very great;
You are clothed with splendor and majesty,
Covering yourself with light as with a cloak,
Stretching out heaven like a tent curtain.
He lays the beams of his upper chambers in the waters;
He makes the clouds his chariot;
He walks upon the wings of the wind;

PSALM 104:1-3

Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens;
Praise him in the heights!
Praise him, all his angels;
Praise him, all his hosts!
Praise him, sun and moon;
Praise him, all stars of light!
Praise him, highest heavens,
And the waters that are above the heavens!
Let them praise the name of the Lord,
For he commanded and they were created.
He has also established them forever and ever;
He has made a decree which will not pass away.

PSALM 148:1-6

Examples 4 and 5: Sodom and Egypt

The two other paradigm-setting acts of divine judgment in the Torah also do not involve divine anger; rather, they develop the creation/flood design pattern. Let’s look at the judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah and the ten plagues on Egypt.

Parallels Between Genesis 19 and Genesis 6-8

Genesis 19: Sodom and Gomorroah	Genesis 6-8: The Flood
<i>The humans of Sodom want to have sex with the angels</i> 19:1, 5	<i>The sons of God (angels) have sex with human women</i> 6:1-4
<i>The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave.</i> 18:20	<i>"The end of all flesh has come up before my face."</i> 6:13
<i>Lot faces destruction at the door (פתח) of his house, which the angels close (סגרו) behind him.</i> 19:6, 10	<i>Yahweh closes (סגר) the door (פתח) of the ark behind Noah.</i> 7:16, 6:16
<i>Angels announce that we are about to cause the ruin (משחיתים) in this place...Yahweh sent us to cause its ruin (לשחתה)</i> 19:13	<i>Yahweh announces to Noah that "I am about to cause the ruin of (משחיתם) them with the land."</i> 6:13 <i>"I am about to bring the flood waters upon the land to cause the ruin (לשחת) all flesh."</i> 6:17
<i>"Your son in law, your sons, and your daughters, all that is yours in the city take out (יציא) from this place."</i> 19:12	<i>"You will enter (בוא) into the ark, you and your sons and your wife and your sons wives."</i> 6:18
<i>"And they took him out and they set/rested him (וינחהו, נוח) outside the city."</i> 19:16	<i>"And Noah (נוח) found favor (חן) in the eyes of Yahweh."</i> 6:8 <i>"And Yahweh set/rested him (וינחהו) in the garden of Eden."</i> 2:15
<i>"And Yahweh caused it to rain (המטיר) fire and sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah."</i> 19:24	<i>"For in yet seven days I am going to cause rain (ממטיר) upon the land."</i> 7:4
<i>Escape to the mountains (ההר)</i> 19:17 <i>"And Lot went up...and dwelt in the mountain (ההר)."</i> 19:30	<i>"And the ark rested (נוח)... upon the mountains (הרי) of Ararat."</i> 8:4
<i>"And God remembered Abraham and sent out Lot from the midst of the overthrow."</i> 19:29	<i>"And God remembered Noah and all the living creatures with him in the ark."</i> 8:1
<i>"Come, let's get our father drunk with wine (שקיה + יין) and lay with him so that we may keep alive a seed (חיייה + זרע)."</i> 19:32	<i>"Take for yourself seven of each animal...to keep alive seed (חיייה + זרע)."</i> 7:2-3 <i>Noah got drunk from the wine and became exposed in his tent and Ham (the father of Canaan) looked at the nakedness of his father.</i> 9:21

Parallels Between Genesis 1 and 6-8 and Exodus 1-15

Genesis 1 and 6-8	Exodus 1-15
Noah is to make an "ark" (tebah) GENESIS 6:14	Moses is rescued from the Nile waters in an "ark" (tebah) EXODUS 2:3-6
God undoes the boundaries of Genesis 1, collapsing the waters above and below. GENESIS 6:13-17	God undoes the boundaries of Genesis 1, turning light into darkness. EXODUS 10:21
"And darkness (חשך) was over the surface of the deep... And God said, "let there be light (יהי אור)" and there was light (ויהי אור)." GENESIS 1:2-3	"Let there be darkness (ויהי חשך) over the land of Egypt...but for all the sons of Israel, there was light (היה אור) in their dwellings." EXODUS 10:21, 23
"Let the waters swarm (שרץ) with every swarming (שרץ) creature..." GENESIS 1:20	"The Nile will swarm (ושרץ) with frogs." EXODUS 7:28

"By effecting the deliverances of Israel through a series of natural disorders and disasters, God elevates his victory over Pharaoh into an event of cosmic importance, especially at the Red Sea where the enemy sinks to a watery grave in a miniature reenactment of the flood. Throughout the land of Egypt, the order of creation is disrupted as forces of nature and living things break out of their properly circumscribed boundaries. Water and blood intermingle, light and darkness are no longer separated, everything is spilling and swarming out of its proper category and number. The ten plagues symbolize a return to primeval chaos...the precreation darkness has descended upon Egypt." — BERNARD OCH, "CREATION AND REDEMPTION: TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF CREATION," P. 236.

Conclusions About God's Judgment in Genesis and Exodus

None of the above passages mention divine anger. Rather, the foundational act of cosmic judgment begins with God's sorrow and grief. This is not to say that in later acts of divine justice God isn't angry (he is). But as the story of the Bible unfolds, divine judgment is first introduced and developed without reference to divine anger. God's judgment and anger will be combined later in the story, but they are not intertwined when they are first introduced.

God's justice entails handing creation back over to disorder. The fact that the judgment narratives are cosmic is connected to the fact that humans are appointed as co-rulers of the cosmos with God. If their rule maintains and spreads order, then the flip side of this idea is that their rebellion will cause the ruin of the cosmic order.

The Introduction of Divine Anger in the Story of the Bible

As noted earlier, it is not until Exodus 4 that God is described as angry. It's important to understand the explicit mentions of God's anger to see how divine anger contributes to the biblical story.

Moses' Resistance to God in Exodus 4

*But Moses said, "Please, my Lord. Please, send someone else." Then **the Lord's anger burned against Moses** and he said, "What about your brother, Aaron the Levite? I know he can speak well. He is already on his way to meet you, and he will be glad to see you. You shall speak to him and put words in his mouth; I will help both of you speak and will teach you what to do."*

EXODUS 4:13-15

This first appearance of God's anger in the Bible tells us something very important. Notice that God does not harm Moses. Rather, we're told that God is angry, and then God proceeds to give Moses what he wants. Moses' choice leads to the elevation of Aaron as the high priest and Moses' own eventual diminishment as a leader over Israel.

Moses and the Golden Calf in Exodus 32-34

Divine anger is first developed in the Bible in a story about God's people betraying him just moments after they make their covenant with God.

*Now when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people assembled about Aaron and said to him, "Come, **make us an elohim who will go before us**; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." Aaron said to them, "Tear off the gold rings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." Then all the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. He took this from their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool and made it into a molten calf; and they said, "**This is your elohim, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.**" Now when Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be **a feast to Yahweh.**"*

EXODUS 32:1-5

When God rescues people and brings them close to himself, it heightens God's own investment, but it also makes the humans involved more accountable and thus deserving of God's anger.

Also notice that the first narrative about God's anger (Exodus 3, the commissioning of Moses) leads to his role in the second narrative about God's anger (Exodus 32-34, the golden calf), where he diverts God's anger in a number of ways: intercession, appeal to the covenant, and self-sacrifice.

This passage is Israel's foundational "fail narrative," which shows exactly why God's anger gets "hot." God is angered by betrayal and covenant violation. God being "slow to anger" means that he won't become angry for just any reason. His anger is aroused by specific acts of betrayal from his covenant people.

Divine Anger in the Wilderness Narrative

The wilderness wanderings in Numbers 11-21 contain seven stories of Israel's rebellion against God, many of which mention God's anger.

Now the people became like those who complained of adversity in the hearing of the Lord; and when the Lord heard it, his anger burned hot...

NUMBERS 11:1 (NASB95)

The rabble who were among them had greedy desires; and also the sons of Israel wept again and said, "Who will give us meat to eat? We remember the fish which we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic, but now our appetite is gone. There is nothing at all to look at except this manna." Now Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, each man at the doorway of his tent. And the anger of the Lord was burned hot, very much, and Moses was displeased.

NUMBERS 11:4-6 (NASB95)

The rebellion story at the center of the seven narratives, found in Numbers 13-14, develops the portrait of God's anger yet again. It's a replay of the golden calf story.

Then all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night. All the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron; and the whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the Lord bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become plunder; would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?" So they said to one another, "Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt."

NUMBERS 14:1-4 (NASB95)

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "How long will this wicked community grumble against me? I have heard the complaints of these grumbling Israelites. So tell them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Lord, I will do to you the very thing I heard you say. In this wilderness your bodies will fall—every one of you twenty years old or more who was counted in the census and who has grumbled against me. Not one of you will enter the land I swore with uplifted hand to make your home, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun. As for your children that you said would be taken as plunder, I will bring them in to enjoy the land you have rejected. But as for you, your bodies will fall in this wilderness...For forty years—one year for each of the forty days you explored the land—you will suffer for your sins and know what it is like to have me against you.'"

NUMBERS 14:26-34 (NIV)

Now may the Lord's strength be displayed, just as you have declared, "The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he visits the iniquity of the parents on their children to the third and fourth generation. In accordance with your great loyal love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now. The Lord replied, "I have forgiven them, as you asked."

NUMBERS 14:17-23 (NIV)

In these passages, God’s judgment looks like giving the people what they want—to not enter into the promised land. Instead, their kids will get to enter, and they will die in the wilderness, just as they said would happen.

God’s Anger in Moses’ Final Warning in Deuteronomy

*Then the Lord appeared at the tent in a pillar of cloud, and the cloud stood over the entrance to the tent. And the Lord said to Moses, “You are going to rest with your ancestors, and these people will soon prostitute themselves to the foreign gods of the land they are entering. They will forsake me and break the covenant I made with them. And in that day **my anger will burn hot** with them and forsake them; **I will hide my face from them**, and they will be destroyed. Many disasters and calamities will come on them, and in that day they will ask, ‘Have not these disasters come on us because our God is not with us?’ And **I will certainly hide my face** in that day because of all their wickedness in turning to other gods.”*

DEUTERONOMY 31:15-18 (NIV)

Notice how God’s anger is expressed through a withdrawal of divine presence and power—“I will hide my face.” This withdrawal will expose Israel to the forces of disorder and death, just as the flood and the ten plagues on Egypt were a kind of hiding of God’s face where creation sank back into darkness and disorder.

Conclusions from the Portrait of God’s Anger and Judgment in the Torah

- God’s anger is his just and measured response to the covenant betrayal of his own people. It is not a volatile or unpredictable explosion of abusive violence.
- The most consistent response of God’s anger is to give people what they have chosen, even if it leads to self-destruction. This anger is expressed either as exile from God’s presence or in the hiding of God’s face and the removal of his protective and order-creating power.
- God is slow to anger, which means:
 - God will put up with people’s betrayal for much longer than is reasonable.
 - God will always accept people who turn to him with soft hearts and genuine humility, no matter what they’ve done.

Divine Anger and Judgment in the Prophets

God's anger and judgment are developed throughout the Old Testament, and we continually see God's anger and judgment as a response to the betrayal of his covenant people.

Former Prophets: Joshua-Kings

In the narrative books of the former prophets, God's anger results in "giving his people into the hands" of destructive powers.

After [Joshua's] whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals. They forsook the Lord, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the Lord because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. And the Lord's anger burned hot against Israel and the Lord gave them into the hands of raiders who plundered them. He sold them into the hands of their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist.

JUDGES 2:10-14

The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord; they forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs. The anger of the Lord burned against Israel so that he sold them into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram Naharaim, to whom the Israelites were subject for eight years.

JUDGES 3:7-8

Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord. They served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines. And because the Israelites forsook the Lord and no longer served him, his anger burned hot against them, and he sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites...

JUDGES 10:6-7

[King Jehoahaz] did evil in the eyes of the Lord by following the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit, and he did not turn away from them. So the Lord's anger burned against Israel, and for a long time he gave them into the hand of Hazael king of Aram and Ben-Hadad his son.

2 KINGS 13:2-3 (NIV)

The ultimate expression of God's anger, to which the entire story from Genesis-Kings (Torah and the Prophets) is pointing, is the exile to Babylon.

The Latter Prophets: Isaiah-Malachi

The “cup of God’s anger” is a key image in the book of Jeremiah, specifically chapter 25.

The word came to Jeremiah concerning all the people of Judah in the fourth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, which was the first year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. So Jeremiah the prophet said to all the people of Judah and to all those living in Jerusalem: For twenty-three years—from the thirteenth year of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah until this very day—the word of the Lord has come to me and I have spoken to you again and again, but you have not listened.

JEREMIAH 25:1-3

Therefore the Lord Almighty says this: “Because you have not listened to my words, I will summon all the peoples of the north and my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon,” declares the Lord, “and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations...I will banish from them the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, the sound of millstones and the light of the lamp. This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years.

JEREMIAH 25:8-11 (NIV)

This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, said to me: “Take from my hand this cup filled with the wine of my wrath [“heat” / khemah] and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. When they drink it, they will stagger and go mad because of the sword I will send among them.” So I took the cup from the Lord’s hand and made all the nations to whom he sent me drink it... [list of nations]

JEREMIAH 25:15-17 (NIV)

“Then tell them, ‘This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Drink, get drunk and vomit, and fall to rise no more because of the sword I will send among you.’”

JEREMIAH 25:27 (NIV)

After centuries of covenant betrayal and violation, God is handing Israel over to Babylon, who is described as the “cup of Yahweh’s anger.” This is key: being handed over to Babylonian captivity is the result of God’s just anger.

Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel tell stories of how this happened. Jerusalem’s last king, Zedekiah, was a puppet under Nebuchadnezzar, and he secretly formed an alliance with Egypt and broke his treaty with Babylon (Jeremiah 37 and Ezekiel 17). This angered Babylon, and they came to attack Jerusalem.

Ezekiel has the most recurring and repeated vocabulary of divine anger anywhere in the Prophets.

- Anger (‘ap): used 15x
- Hot anger (*khemah*): used 33x
- Burning anger (*kharon*): used 2x
- Explosive anger (‘*brah*): used 5x

Ezekiel uses elaborate metaphorical imagery that depicts God's anger in very intense and graphic terms.

Therefore as surely as I live, declares the sovereign Lord, because you have defiled my sanctuary with all your vile images and detestable practices, I myself will shave you; I will not look on you with pity or spare you. A third of your people will die of the plague or perish by famine inside you; a third will fall by the sword outside your walls; and a third I will scatter to the winds and pursue with a drawn sword. Then my anger will cease and my wrath against them will subside, and I will be avenged. And when I have spent my wrath on them, they will know that I the Lord have spoken in my zeal.

EZEKIEL 5:11-13 (NIV)

As silver, copper, iron, lead and tin are gathered into a furnace to be melted with a fiery blast, so will I gather you in my anger and my wrath and put you inside the city and melt you. I will gather you and I will blow on you with my fiery wrath, and you will be melted inside her.

EZEKIEL 22:20-21 (NIV)

Therefore this is what the sovereign Lord says: In my wrath I will unleash a violent wind, and in my anger hailstones and torrents of rain will fall with destructive fury.

EZEKIEL 13:13 (NIV)

In Isaiah 51, we read about the aftermath of Israel drinking the cup of God's anger.

*Awake, awake! Rise up, Jerusalem,
You who have drunk from the hand of the Lord the cup of his wrath,
You who have drained to its dregs the bowl-cup that makes people stagger...
These double calamities have come upon you—who can comfort you?
Ruin and destruction, famine and sword—who can console you?
Your children have fainted; they lie at every street corner, like antelope caught in a net.
They are filled with the hot-anger of the Lord, with the rebuke of your God.
Therefore hear this, you afflicted one,
One made drunk, but not with wine.
This is what your sovereign Lord says,
your God, who defends his people:
“See, I have taken out of your hand the cup that made you stagger;
From that cup, the bowl-cup of my wrath, you will never drink again.
I will put it into the hands of your tormentors,
Who said to you, ‘Fall prostrate that we may walk on you.’
And you made your back like the ground, like a street to be walked on.”*

ISAIAH 51:17-23

The “bowl-cup” is an image drawn from Jeremiah, but it is also developing the ritual imagery of the temple ceremonies, where the priests carried bowls of the ashes of sacrifices (Numbers 4:14) or smaller incense bowls (sometimes called “censers”). The sacrificial bowls were made of gold (1 Chron 28:17; 2 Chron 4:8, 21).

The Exile and God's Future Turn From his Anger

The prophets anticipate a time after the Babylonian exile when God's anger will have fulfilled its purpose (justice on covenant betrayal). The following are powerful passages that speak of God's anger being finished and opening the way for restoration.

In that day you will say:

"I will praise you, Lord.

Although you were angry with me,

Your anger has turned away

And you have comforted me.

Surely God is my salvation;

I will trust and not be afraid.

The Lord, the Lord himself is my strength and my defense;

He has become my salvation."

ISAIAH 12:1-2 (NIV)

O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you healed me.

O Lord, you have brought up my soul from Sheol;

*You have kept me alive, that I would not go down
to the pit.*

Sing praise to the Lord, you his godly ones,

And give thanks to his holy name.

For his anger is but for a moment, his favor is for a lifetime;

Weeping may last for the night,

But a shout of joy comes in the morning.

PSALM 30:2-5 (NASB95)

"For a brief moment I forsook you,

But with great compassion I will gather you.

*In a flood of anger [qetseph] I hid my face from you for a
moment,*

But with eternal loyal love I will have compassion on you,"

Says the Lord your Redeemer.

"For this is like the days of Noah to me,

When I swore that the waters of Noah

Would not flood the earth again;

*So I have sworn that I will not be angry [qetseph] with you
Nor will I rebuke you.*

For the mountains may be removed and the hills may shake,

But my loyal love will not be removed from you,

And my covenant of peace will not be shaken,"

Says the Lord who has compassion on you.

ISAIAH 54:7-10 (NASB95)

Jesus, God’s Kingdom and Judgment, and Divine Anger

When Jesus came onto the scene announcing the arrival of God’s Kingdom, part of his announcement was warning about the coming destruction of Jerusalem. Much like the Old Testament prophets, Jesus warned of God’s coming judgement if Israel did not accept his offer of the Kingdom.

John the Baptist’s Message About “Wrath to Come”

John the Baptist was remembered for his prophetic message about the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the ruin that lay ahead for Israel.

Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, “Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.” For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet when he said,

*“The voice of one crying in the wilderness,
‘Make ready the way of the Lord,
Make his paths straight!’”*

*Now John himself had a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then **Jerusalem was going out to him**, and all Judea and all the districts around the Jordan, and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins. But **when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming** for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from **the wrath to come**? Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance, and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father.’ For I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. **The axe is already laid at the root of the trees**; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than me, and I am not fit to remove his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. **His winnowing fork is in his hand**, and he will thoroughly clear his threshing floor, and he will gather his wheat into the barn, but **he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.**”*

MATTHEW 3:1-12 (NASB95)

When John sees the leaders of Jerusalem approach him, he begins talking about a coming act of divine judgment. This connection is crucial. He is not talking about the afterlife here; rather, he is standing in the tradition of Israel’s prophets calling the leaders of Israel (here, represented by Jerusalem) to account. He is warning them that the destruction of the city is near unless they respond to “the one who is to come after me.”

All of John’s imagery of divine judgment is drawn from the Hebrew Bible.

- Brood of vipers: Seed of the snake (Genesis 3:15)
- Wrath to come: Isaiah 13:9, Zephaniah 1:15, 2:2
- Ax at the root of the tree: Isaiah 10:33-34, Jeremiah 46:22-23
- Tree cut down and thrown into the fire: Jeremiah 11:16, Isaiah 10:15-19, Malachi 4:1

- Holy spirit immersion: Seen through the presence of wind, water, and fire
 - Wind and fire: Isaiah 4:4; Jeremiah 4:11-12
 - Wind and water (i.e. a storm): Jeremiah 23:2
 - Water and fire: The combination of intense waters, winds, and fire happens often in the prophets as symbols of judgment (Isaiah 30:27-28; 43:2; 65:15-16)
 - Wind, water, and fire: Isaiah 4:4, 30:27-28
- Winnowing fork/threshing floor: Jeremiah 15:7, Micah 4:12-13
- Chaff blown and burned: Psalm 1:4, Malachi 4:1, Psalm 35:5, Isaiah 29:5, 41:15-16, Daniel 2:35

Jesus' Announcement of Good News

Notice that Jesus' good news did not emphasize God's anger. Rather, when Jesus spoke about the Kingdom and the coming destruction of Jerusalem, his emphasis was on God's comfort for the poor. See here Jesus' reference to Isaiah's words in the Gospel of Luke.

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because he has anointed me
To bring good news to the poor;
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to captives
And recovery of sight for the blind
To proclaim the year of favor for Yahweh,
And the day of vengeance of our God*

ISAIAH 61:1-2

*The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has
anointed me to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release for the
prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed to proclaim the year
of the Lord's favor...*

LUKE 4:18-19

Jesus' focus was more on the generosity of Israel's God and his inclusive regathering of the poor and lost sheep of Israel. This was good news, but we should not see this positive aspect of Jesus' announcement as being in tension with his announcements of judgment on Jerusalem. They are both part of the message about God's Kingdom.

Jesus' Warnings of Coming Judgment

Multiple times throughout the Gospel accounts Jesus warns Israel of what is coming if they do not accept his upside-down Kingdom.

Jesus warns that neglecting his Kingdom ethic would lead to ruin.

*Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. **The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell—and great was its fall.***

MATTHEW 7:24-27 (NASB95)

Jesus sent his disciples out with good news and warnings of judgment.

*And as you go, preach, saying, "The Kingdom of heaven is at hand." Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. Freely you received, freely give. Do not acquire gold, or silver, or copper for your money belts, or a bag for your journey, or even two coats, or sandals, or a staff; for the worker is worthy of his support. And whatever city or village you enter, inquire who is worthy in it, and stay at his house until you leave that city. As you enter the house, give it your greeting. If the house is worthy, give it your blessing of peace. But if it is not worthy, take back your blessing of peace. Whoever does not receive you, nor heed your words, as you go out of that house or that city, shake the dust off your feet. Truly I say to you, **it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city.***

MATTHEW 10:7-15 (NASB95)

Jesus announces prophetic warnings over cities just like Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

*Then he began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles were done because they did not repent. **Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida!** For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. Nevertheless I say to you, **it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you.** And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day. Nevertheless I say to you that **it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you.**"*

MATTHEW 11:20-24 (NASB95)

Jesus warns that Rome would become “God’s servant” in carrying out divine judgment on Jerusalem, just like Babylon was in Jeremiah 25.

Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. And Jesus said to them, “Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this fate? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all perish in the same way.

LUKE 13:1-3 (NASB95)

When he approached Jerusalem, he saw the city and wept over it, saying, “If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you when your enemies will throw up a barricade against you, and surround you and hem you in on every side, and they will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation.”

LUKE 19:41-44 (NASB95)

But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then recognize that her desolation is near. Then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those who are in the midst of the city must leave, and those who are in the country must not enter the city. Because these are days of vengeance, so that all things which are written will be fulfilled. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days; for there will be great distress upon the land and wrath to this people. And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and will be led captive into all the nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled under foot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

LUKE 21:20-24 (NASB95)

Jesus came out from the temple and was going away when his disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to him. And he said to them, “Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down.”

MATTHEW 24:1-2 (NASB95)

“These warnings [from Jesus]... are of the classic prophetic type. They threaten... not the end of the world as such, but rather the end of the present nation of Israel, if they do not turn and follow him. In the sad, noble, and utterly Jewish tradition of Elijah, Jeremiah and John the Baptist, Jesus announced the coming judgment of Israel’s covenant god on his people. It would be a judgment consisting of a great national, social and cultural disaster that would be comprehensible only in terms of Israel’s covenant relationship with their god. [And] at the heart of the disaster would be the ruin of the Temple... Actually, it hardly took a prophet to foresee a major disaster if Israel kept up her present attitude to Rome. Jesus, it seems, was warning against false prophets who, like those that Jeremiah opposed, were telling the people to trust in the Temple; or who, like those opposed by Micaiah ben Imlach, were telling the people to fight, to resist, because they would win. Jesus, like Micaiah, saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, like sheep without a shepherd, and interpreted this coming judgment not as a coincidental and unfortunate political happening, but as the coming of YHWH’s wrath on his people. Jesus comes as the last in the prophetic line, expecting no better than his predecessors, and indeed, worse. Jesus’ anticipation of his own death falls... well within the prophetic mould.” — N.T. WRIGHT, JESUS AND THE VICTORY OF GOD, PP. 185-186.

Throughout his public career, Jesus told a story... in which the judgment usually associated with YHWH's action against the pagan nations would fall upon those Jews who were refusing to follow in the way he was holding out to them... They are typically prophetic oracles, issuing, in the name of Israel's god, warnings to his rebellious people. And the judgment which was to come was conceived in classic scriptural terms: invasion and destruction by foreign armies, allowed to do what they are doing because YHWH, having warned his people beyond patience and beyond hope, has deliberately abandoned them to their fate. Assyria and Babylon had been the instruments of YHWH's wrath before; now it would be the turn of Rome." — N.T. WRIGHT, JESUS AND THE VICTORY OF GOD, KINDLE LOCATIONS 6860-6864.

Jesus, Passover, and God's Judgment on Jerusalem

Jesus went to Jerusalem for Passover and provoked the Jerusalem authorities (Jewish and Roman), so that he could drink the cup of God's wrath on behalf of Israel. But to understand this part of Jesus' story, it is crucially important to know what God's wrath refers to. As we've seen throughout the Hebrew Bible, God's wrath means handing Israel over to their Gentile oppressors because of covenant violation.

Jesus puts himself in the cross-hairs of the Roman oppressor and the compromised temple authorities in the place of rebel-Israel (this is why the Barabbas story is so important!).

*And he said to her, "What do you wish?" She said to him, "Command that in your Kingdom these two sons of mine may sit one on your right and one on your left." But Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. **Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?**" They said to him, "We are able." He said to them, "**my cup you shall drink**, but to sit on my right and on my left, this is not mine to give. But it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father."*

MATTHEW 20:21-23 (NASB95)

*Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, **may this cup be taken from me.** Yet not as I will, but as you will."*

MATTHEW 26:36-39 (NIV)

Jesus is sent to his death as an insurgent king, while Jesus Barabbas (*bar-abbas* = "son of the father"), who is an actual insurgent against Rome, is allowed to go free.

*Now it was the governor's custom at the festival to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. At that time they had a well-known prisoner whose name was **Jesus Barabbas**. So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, "Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" For he knew it was out of self-interest that they had handed Jesus over to him. Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged and handed him over to be crucified.*

MATTHEW 27:15-18, 26

*But the whole crowd shouted, "Away with this man! Release **Barabbas** to us!" (**Barabbas had been thrown into prison for an insurrection in the city, and for murder.**) Wanting to release Jesus, Pilate appealed to them again. But they kept shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" For the third time he spoke to them: "Why? What crime has this man committed? I have found in him no grounds for the death penalty. Therefore I will have him punished and then release him." But with loud shouts they insistently demanded that he be crucified, and their shouts prevailed. So Pilate decided to grant their demand. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will.*

LUKE 23:18-25

However, it's clear that Jesus did not see "the cup" as the end of the story. He repeatedly described his vindication from unjust persecution and death in the language from Daniel 7, where he speaks of the promised Son of Man.

They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise."

MARK 9:30-31 (NIV)

They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. "We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise."

MARK 10:32-34 (NIV)

Returning the third time, he said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners."

MARK 14:41-43 (NIV)

But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer. Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" "I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

MARK 14:61-62 (NIV)

God's Anger in the Apostle's Writings

In Romans, Paul has taken the story of God's anger at Israel's covenant betrayal at Mount Sinai and followed its design pattern through the Scriptures. He shows how God's anger at Israel's idolatry is an image of his anger at all humanity's idolatry.

For I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "But the righteous man shall live by faith." For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of people who suppress the truth in unrighteousness because that which is known about God is evident within them. For God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world, his invisible attributes, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and they exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible humans and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them...For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions... And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a senseless mind, to do those things which are not right, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful. And although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.

ROMANS 1:16-32

Notice that in 1:23, Paul describes the nations' idolatry leading to moral corruption by quoting from Psalm 106:20, a passage that describes the story of the golden calf.

They made a calf in Horeb

And worshiped a molten image.

Thus they exchanged their glory for the image of an ox that eats grass.

They forgot God their Savior,

Who had done great things in Egypt...

PSALM 106:19-21 (NASB95)

Here, Paul is planting the seed for his later argument in Romans 2-3. Even God's own covenant people have proven to be just as idolatrous as the pagan nations, and Israel's idolatry provides the paradigm for all humanity.

"The great evils of the twentieth century have reminded us that unless God remains implacably opposed to the evil that distorts and defaces creation, not least humanity, god is not good. Paul's whole theology is grounded in the robust, scripturally rooted view that the Creator is neither a tyrant nor an absentee landlord, but rather the Creator and Lover of the world... The result is God's 'wrath'- not just an attitude of hostility toward idolatry and immorality, but also actions that follow from that attitude. The content of God's wrath involves the process of God's "giving people over" to the result of their own folly, but also more. Those consequences are also an anticipation of a final judgment, the 'death' spoken of in Romans 1:32... The two are organically connected: moral degradation in the present anticipates the ultimate degrading of humanness itself, in death." — N.T. WRIGHT, ROMANS (NEW INTERPRETER'S BIBLE COMMENTARY), P. 431.

"It is of course possible to misuse the notion of divine wrath and end up with a distorted image of God as some type of 'rage-aholic.' Let us consider that wrath is not a permanent part of God's nature; rather, it is something provoked or aroused by human misconduct, not intrinsic to his person. God's justice is indeed a permanent fixture of his character, and that justice can be expressed as divine anger when circumstances render it appropriate. But God is not in a perpetual state of anger... Whereas love and holiness are part of God's essential nature, his wrath is contingent and temporary." — MICHAEL BIRD, ROMANS (STORY OF GOD BIBLE COMMENTARY), P. 65.

There is one passage in Paul's letters where God's anger is brought into close connection with the death of Jesus.

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

ROMANS 5:6-11 (NIV)

Paul is referring back to his argument from Romans 1:18-3:26. God had handed the nations and Israel over to death because of idolatry leading to sinful degradation of their humanity (God's wrath). However, Israel's Messiah demonstrated God's love by going into death on our behalf, in order to deliver us from the degradation of our humanity that leads to death.

In Paul's mind, it is God's own love that answers to God's wrath, through the life, death, and resurrection of Israel's Messiah. We distort Paul's message when we say that "Jesus bore the wrath of God." Rather, as Paul states it, God saved us from his own wrath through Jesus, rescuing us from being handed over to death.