

Problematic Portrayals of God

A cruel streak exists in the biblical depiction of God. The overwhelming evidence permits no other conclusion.

—JAMES L. CRENSHAW¹

Many characters in the Bible—including God—sometimes act in ways that seem to transgress the moral code the Bible espouses. This conflict with the Bible . . . creates a dilemma. If God is good, how can he . . . seem bad sometimes?

—RONALD HENDEL²

The well-known Trappist monk Thomas Merton once wrote: “It is of the very nature of the Bible to affront, perplex and astonish the human mind. Hence the reader who opens the Bible must be prepared for disorientation, confusion, incomprehension, perhaps outrage.”³ For many people, this “disorientation” is felt most keenly when entering the strange and unfamiliar world of the Old Testament, especially when confronted by its deeply disturbing stories of violence, deception, and sexual immorality.

Take, for example, the story of the Levite’s concubine in Judges 19. An unnamed Levite, traveling toward his home, makes the fateful decision to lodge in the city of Gibeah for the night. While he is there, some of the men of Gibeah come to the house where he is staying and demand that he be sent out so they can have sex with

him. The Levite's host refuses but offers an alternative. The men can have his virgin daughter and the Levite's concubine instead. Only the Levite's concubine is sent out, and she experiences extreme violence at the hands of the men of Gibeah who sexually abuse her throughout the night. The next morning, the Levite finds his dead (?) concubine on the doorstep. He puts her on his donkey and heads for home. When he arrives, he cuts her body into twelve pieces and sends various parts of her dismembered body "throughout all the territory of Israel" (v. 29). It is a gruesome tale, and readers are rightly repulsed by it.

To cite another example more briefly, consider what Amnon, David's oldest son, does to his half-sister Tamar. Amnon is smitten by his stunningly beautiful sister and desperately wants to go to bed with her. So, on the advice of his friend Jonadab, Amnon feigns illness as a pretext to be alone with Tamar. Then he rapes her. His behavior is outrageous and morally repugnant.

As troubling as these—and similar—Old Testament stories are, they do not raise insurmountable theological problems for one simple reason: they are stories about *human* wrongdoing.⁴ They describe human beings behaving badly, as human beings regularly do. Therefore, the presence of such stories in the Old Testament is neither surprising nor remarkable.

What is surprising to many readers, however, is the inclusion of stories portraying God behaving in ways that appear ungodly and "ungodlike." For example, God is sometimes said to act unfairly, deceptively, and even abusively in the pages of the Old Testament. The Old Testament also describes God routinely participating in various acts of violence. As Raymund Schwager observes:

The theme of God's bloody vengeance occurs in the Old Testament even more frequently than the problem of human violence. Approximately *one thousand passages* speak of Yahweh's blazing anger, of his punishments by death and destruction, and how like a consuming fire he passes judgment, takes revenge, and threatens annihilation. . . . No other topic is as often mentioned as God's bloody works.⁵

These descriptions of God bother many readers of Scripture and raise important questions. How can we explain God's behavior in these instances, and what do these portrayals suggest about God's character? But before tackling questions like these, we first need to discuss some of the passages in which these portrayals appear. This will help us better appreciate just how prevalent and problematic these portrayals really are. It will also enable us to be more specific about what makes God's behavior in these episodes particularly troubling.

In what follows, I discuss several different categories of disturbing divine behavior.⁶ While these categories draw general distinctions among various kinds of such behavior in the Old Testament, there is some overlap among them. Throughout this chapter, I raise various questions about God's behavior in the passages under

consideration to demonstrate the kinds of questions that might occur to thoughtful readers of Scripture and to illustrate some of the potentially problematic dimensions of these portrayals of God. We will begin our exploration of disturbing divine behavior by briefly noting some examples in Old Testament law before turning our attention more extensively to numerous examples in Old Testament narratives.⁷

Disturbing Divine Behavior

God as Deadly Lawgiver

The books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy contain 613 laws that God reportedly gave to the Israelites, most often through Moses.⁸ These laws cover a broad range of issues, including agriculture, slavery, sexual behavior, war, and worship, to name but a few. Many of these laws simply state what people should or should not do without specifying what happens to lawbreakers. Certain laws, however, do indicate what should be done when infractions occur. While some of these consequences are quite reasonable—such as requiring a thief to make restitution for stolen goods—others seem disproportionate and morally questionable. Those laws stipulating that an offender is to die for his or her misdeeds are particularly disturbing. Consider the following sampling:

Whoever strikes father or mother shall be put to death. (Exod. 21:15)

Whoever kidnaps a person, whether that person has been sold or is still held in possession, shall be put to death. (Exod. 21:16)

Whoever curses father or mother shall be put to death. (Exod. 21:17)

Whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall be put to death. (Exod. 31:15b)

If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death. (Lev. 20:10)

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death. (Lev. 20:13a)

If a man has sexual relations with an animal, he shall be put to death; and you shall kill the animal. If a woman approaches any animal and has sexual relations with it, you shall kill the woman and the animal; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them. (Lev. 20:15-16)

A man or a woman who is a medium or a wizard shall be put to death; they shall be stoned to death, their blood is upon them. (Lev. 20:27)

One who blasphemes the name of the Lord shall be put to death; the whole congregation shall stone the blasphemer. Aliens as well as citizens, when they blaspheme the Name, shall be put to death. (Lev. 24:16)

Anyone who kills a human being shall be put to death. (Lev. 24:17)

Regardless of one's position on the controversial question of the propriety of the death penalty, many of the offenses listed above certainly do not seem to warrant such extreme and irreversible measures. As unacceptable as kidnapping, adultery, and bestiality are to many of us today, who would seriously advocate executing those who engage in such behaviors? What legislator would rally behind legislation demanding death for children who strike or curse their parents? And what church body would advocate rounding up and routinely executing Sabbath breakers? Yet, as the Old Testament portrays it, for all of these offenses—and others—God stipulates demands that the wrongdoer be put to death! Such severe and inflexible legal requirements make God appear harsh and unmerciful. Where is grace? Where is the opportunity for the wrongdoer to repent and amend his or her ways? If God actually instituted this deadly series of divine decrees, how does that square with the Christian notion of God as forgiving and kind? The portrait of God as deadly lawgiver presented in these verses is difficult to reconcile with other portraits of God found elsewhere in the Bible.

God as Instant Executioner

In the prologue, we briefly discussed the tragic fate of a man who gathered sticks on the sabbath (Num. 15:32-36). In this incident, the unfortunate Sabbath breaker is executed by his fellow Israelites, who reportedly act on divine authority.⁹ In several other Old Testament stories, the offender is killed directly by God without the use of human intermediaries. We will consider three such passages. In each instance, God's use of lethal force seems excessive—some might even say unwarranted—given the nature of the offense. The net result is a rather unsightly portrait of God as unusually cruel and pitiless.

JUDAH'S SONS

In Genesis 38, we learn that Judah, Jacob's fourth son, has three sons of his own: Er, Onan, and Shelah (Gen. 38:1-6). In typical patriarchal fashion, Judah arranges the marriage of his firstborn son, Er, to a woman named Tamar. The next thing we are told is that Er "was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death" (Gen. 38:7). Since no explanation is given, we can only speculate about the nature of Er's wickedness. Judah then instructs Onan, his second-oldest son, to take the recently widowed Tamar to be his wife. Though such an arrangement seems odd to us, it was in keeping with an ancient custom known as Levirate marriage.¹⁰ This law

was intended to ensure the preservation of the deceased brother's name (in this case Er), since the first child of this union would be regarded as the deceased brother's son. Judah follows this custom and gives his second-oldest son, Onan, to Tamar. Since Onan knows the child produced by this marriage will not be regarded as his own, he refuses to impregnate her, practicing coitus interruptus instead (Gen. 38:9). Since Onan's actions were "displeasing in the sight of the Lord, "he [the Lord] put him to death also" (Gen. 38:10). One can hardly blame Judah for being more than a little reluctant to give Shelah, his last remaining son, to Tamar. Marriage to Tamar seemed like a death sentence, and Judah "feared that he [Shelah] would die like his brothers" (Gen. 38:11).

The image of God in this passage is unsettling to say the least. Is God really in the business of assassinating those who are "wicked" and "displeasing" in God's sight? If so, how does this fit with the ugly realities of the modern world? If God instantly executed these kind of individuals, then why were people like Adolf Hitler, Saddam Hussein, and Slobodan Milosevic allowed to live so long and do so much evil?

NADAB AND ABIHU'S UNHOLY FIRE

Another portrayal of God as instant executioner appears in a most unlikely place, the book of Leviticus. If you are familiar with the book of Leviticus, you know it is almost wholly devoid of stories. One notable exception is the story of two priests named Nadab and Abihu. Their very brief story of disobedience and death follows:

Now Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, each took his censer, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered unholy fire before the Lord, such as he had not commanded them. And fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. (Lev. 10:1-2)

There is no indication of what motivated these newly ordained priests to offer "unholy fire." Whatever the reason, this act of ritual disobedience costs them their lives. God quite literally incinerates them. But what does this say about God? What kind of deity burns someone alive for committing a single ritual offense? Why doesn't God extend grace and offer these men a chance to repent? As the text stands, God appears rigid, harsh, and unmerciful. It is not a pretty picture.

UZZAH AND THE ARK OF THE COVENANT

A third portrait of God as instant executioner appears in 2 Sam. 6:1-8 (see also 1 Chron. 13:1-11). In a politically savvy move, King David decides to bring the ark of the covenant, Israel's most sacred symbol of God's presence, to Jerusalem. This move is designed to centralize David's political and religious interests. As the ark is being transported on a cart, the oxen shake it and an otherwise unknown man named Uzzah reaches out his hand to steady the ark (2 Sam. 6:6). For this act he is rewarded with death.

The anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah; and God struck him there because he reached out his hand to the ark; and he died there beside the ark of God. (2 Sam. 6:7)

David is furious at this outbreak of divine anger, and many readers are similarly perplexed, if not perturbed, by God's behavior (v. 8). What has Uzzah done that is so terribly wrong that he deserved to die? The ark is about to tip over and he steadies it. It seems a most natural and reasonable response. You might even expect Uzzah to be praised for his quick thinking and decisive action, which presumably prevented the ark from sliding off the cart and crashing to the ground. Instead, he is struck dead by God.

Some have argued that Uzzah's actions were sinful because he overstepped his bounds and profaned something sacred when he touched the ark. We will consider that possibility later. But even granting that explanation, what makes this story so disturbing is the swiftness and severity of God's punishment. This is especially true when God's response here is compared to God's response in other stories. Sometimes, when people have committed far more egregious sins, they get off the hook more easily. Just a few short chapters after the story of Uzzah and the ark, David commits adultery with Bathsheba, attempts an elaborate cover-up, and orchestrates the murder of Uriah in a foolhardy military operation that eliminates Uriah but also results in the death of eighteen Israelite soldiers (2 Sam. 11:24).¹¹ If anyone should have been killed instantly by the standards of the law, it was David! Yet the prophet Nathan comes to him and says, "The Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die" (2 Sam. 12:13). In fact, David lives well on into old age (see 1 Kgs. 1:1-4).¹² Why does God so easily forgive David for a series of unambiguous, premeditated, and deadly sins but instantly execute Uzzah for a split-second decision spontaneously made for the benefit of the ark? How can one account for such colossal inconsistencies that smack of divine favoritism?

In each of these three accounts, the offenders are given no opportunity to repent and no second chances. Instead, they are instantly executed by God for their actions. Such rapid retribution seems to run counter to the Old Testament's claim that God is "slow to anger."¹³ It creates the impression that God is excessively demanding and utterly unmerciful. Is God really like this? If not, what are we to do with these passages?¹⁴

God as Mass Murderer

In addition to killing isolated individuals, the Old Testament also describes God as a mass murderer. This begins as early as Gen. 6:13 when God makes a startling announcement to Noah: "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along

with the earth.” Understandably, most modern depictions of the story focus primarily on the survivors: Noah’s family and the fortunate animals on the ark. Yet, despite cute songs, child-friendly play sets, and colorful artistic renderings of the story, “Noah’s Ark” is not a happy tale of giraffes and panda bears clambering aboard a floating zoo. It is a story of catastrophic death and destruction that, incidentally, results from a divine decree. Nearly the entire human population perishes because God drowns them. It is a disaster of such epic proportions that Hollywood’s most extreme doomsday scenarios pale in comparison.

A similar story of mass murder is recorded in the book of Numbers. Once again, we witness divine destruction on a grand scale. In the short span of forty years, more than half a million people perish as punishment for their unwillingness to enter Canaan after hearing the unencouraging report that ten spies brought back to them (Num. 14:26-35). But unlike the flood narrative, this time the entire group does not perish in one great cataclysmic event. Instead, they die throughout the (approximately) forty-year period. During that time, there are several specific episodes in which God reportedly kills sizable numbers of Israelites.

And the men whom Moses sent to spy out the land, who returned and made all the congregation complain against him by bringing a bad report about the land—the men who brought an unfavorable report about the land died by a plague before the Lord. (Num. 14:36-37)

Moses said to Aaron, “Take your censer, put fire on it from the altar and lay incense on it, and carry it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them. For wrath has gone out from the Lord; the plague has begun.” . . . Those who died by the plague were fourteen thousand seven hundred, besides those who died in the affair of Korah. (Num. 16:46, 49)

Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. (Num. 21:6)

Whether individually or in groups, at the end of forty years, hundreds of thousands of Israelites were killed “for the Lord had said of them, ‘They shall die in the wilderness’” (Num. 26:65). This story and the flood narrative both portray God murdering on a massive scale.

These two stories are by no means the only ones that depict God behaving in this way. Many other Old Testament stories similarly portray God as a mass murderer. Consider the following sampling:

Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the Lord out of heaven; and he overthrew those cities, and all the Plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. (Gen. 19:24-25)

At midnight the Lord struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the prisoner who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock. (Exod. 12:29)¹⁵

The descendants of Jeconiah did not rejoice with the people of Beth-shemesh when they greeted the ark of the Lord; and he killed seventy men of them. The people mourned because the Lord had made a great slaughter among the people. (1 Sam. 6:19)¹⁶

So the Lord sent a pestilence on Israel from that morning until the appointed time; and seventy thousand of the people died, from Dan to Beer-sheba. (2 Sam. 24:15)

That very night the angel of the Lord set out and struck down one hundred eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; when morning dawned, they were all dead bodies. (2 Kgs. 19:35)

In these and many other stories, God is depicted as killing large numbers of people in one fell swoop. But does God really behave this way? Does God slay sizable groups of people in single acts of terror? If so, what does that suggest about the nature and character of God? These are not easy questions to answer.

God as Divine Warrior

One especially common way the Old Testament portrays God killing large groups of people is through his role as divine warrior.¹⁷ This image of God is one of the most pervasive and unsettling in the Old Testament. One of the most striking examples of God's warring is recorded in the first half of the book of Exodus, as God decimates Egypt through a series of ten plagues before drowning the Egyptian army in the Red Sea. As the Israelites are trapped between the Egyptian army and the Red Sea, God fights on their behalf. The dramatic account is worth quoting at length:

At the morning watch the Lord in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt." Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers." So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into

the sea; not one of them remained. But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord: “I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him. *The Lord is a warrior*; the Lord is his name. “Pharaoh’s chariots and his army he cast into the sea; his picked officers were sunk in the Red Sea. The floods covered them; they went down into the depths like a stone. (Exod. 14:24—15:5, emphasis mine)

In various ways, this passage highlights God’s very *active* involvement in warfare. God is not portrayed as sitting up in the heavens sending down divine directives while the Israelites slog it out on the field of battle. Rather, God is the one who reportedly “threw the Egyptian army into panic . . . clogged their chariot wheels . . . [and] tossed the Egyptians into the sea.” According to this text, God is directly responsible for exterminating the Egyptians. It is God who obliterates the Egyptian army by drowning countless Egyptian soldiers. And as their lifeless bodies wash up on shore, Israel takes no credit for the victory but praises *God* for being “a warrior.”

God’s military prowess is also on display throughout the conquest narrative in the book of Joshua. As Israel enters Canaan and takes possession of the land, God is repeatedly described as fighting for Israel. In Joshua 10, for example, the Israelites are able to rout a coalition of kings whose armies are in retreat because “the Lord threw them into a panic” (Josh. 10:10). The following verse then provides a vivid description of the Lord’s military tactics on this occasion:

As they fled before Israel, while they were going down the slope of Beth-horon, the Lord threw down huge stones from heaven on them as far as Azekah, and they died; there were more who died because of the hailstones than the Israelites killed with the sword. (Josh. 10:11)

Other Old Testament passages indicate God’s involvement in war by referring to God “driving out” Israel’s enemies and “fighting on behalf of” the people of Israel. For example, consider the words Joshua is said to have spoken to the Israelites just prior to his death:

For the Lord has driven out before you great and strong nations; and as for you, no one has been able to withstand you to this day. One of you puts to flight

a thousand, since it is the Lord your God who fights for you, as he promised you. (Josh. 23:9-10)

Other texts indicate God's involvement in war by claiming that God "handed over" Israel's enemies.

And the Lord handed them [a coalition of northern kings] over to Israel, who attacked them and chased them as far as Great Sidon and Misrephoth-maim, and eastward as far as the valley of Mizpeh. They struck them down, until they had left no one remaining. (Josh. 11:8)

Each of these verses affirms God's role as divine warrior. While many more examples could be given, these should be sufficient to demonstrate that the Old Testament describes God as one who not only condones war in certain situations but actively participates in it.

Yet this is precisely what many readers find so troubling. As Walter Kaiser observes: "It is Yahweh's involvement with war in the Old Testament that poses the key problem for modern readers."¹⁸ Similarly, Albert Winn believes "the main problem is not that the *people* of God were warriors, but that the Old Testament affirms that *God* is a warrior."¹⁹ This portrayal of God as a divine warrior, as one who actively participates in so much bloodshed and killing, is problematic for many readers. It is little wonder it has been referred to as the "*skandalon* of the Old Testament."²⁰

God as Genocidal General

On more than one occasion, the Old Testament portrays God ordering Israel to utterly annihilate a particular ethnic group, leaving no survivors. This represents what is arguably the most problematic way God operates as a divine warrior, namely, in the role of a genocidal general.²¹ The most comprehensive command of this nature is related to the "conquest" of Canaan mentioned previously. As Israel prepares to occupy the land that God is said to have promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Moses gives the people these stark instructions:

When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you—the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you—and when the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then *you must utterly destroy them*. Make no covenant with them and *show them no mercy*. (Deut. 7:1-2, emphasis mine)

But as for the towns of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, *you must not let anything that breathes remain alive*. You shall

annihilate them—the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites—just as the Lord your God has commanded, so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the Lord your God. (Deut. 20:16-18, emphasis mine)

In these passages, the Israelites are not just instructed to displace the Canaanites; they are commanded to destroy them. There is no room for compromise, and the Canaanites are to be slaughtered without mercy. Israel's total annihilation of the inhabitants of Canaan is regarded as the will of God. As we read in Josh. 10:40 (emphasis mine):

So Joshua defeated the whole land, the hill country and the Negeb and the lowland and the slopes, and all their kings; he left no one remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, *as the Lord God of Israel commanded.*

The ruthless program of violence and killing described here is explicitly said to be divinely sanctioned. In short, God is portrayed as a genocidal general who instructs Israel to act with utter disregard toward the countless Canaanite men, women, and children already living in the land.

This divine directive to utterly annihilate every last Canaanite makes God appear brutal and unmerciful. What kind of deity desires the absolute eradication of an entire group of people? Does the rationale for their destruction given in Deut. 20:18—"so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods"—justify such extreme measures, and could toddlers and infants ever pose such a threat? If not, what does this genocidal decree suggest about the character of God?

On another occasion, God is said to have commanded the extermination of all Amalekites. Consider the chilling command the prophet Samuel relays to King Saul:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, "I will punish the Amalekites for what they did in opposing the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey." (1 Sam. 15:2-3)

As the text portrays it, Saul is divinely commissioned to commit genocide by completely annihilating the Amalekites. Apparently, this is regarded as punishment for Amalek's attack on the Israelites hundreds of years prior, just after they had departed from Egypt (see Exod. 17:8-16).

Yet such a comprehensive command raises serious questions about the nature of God. If this text reflects "what really happened," as many Christians believe, what

does it suggest about God's character? What kind of God commissions genocide? Such questions are particularly unsettling in light of the many atrocities committed in the twentieth century during the Holocaust and, more recently, in places like Rwanda, Kosova, and Darfur. Moreover, narratives depicting God as genocidal become increasingly challenging to understand when viewed in light of other biblical stories in which God appears ready and eager to forgive those who repent of their wicked ways. Consider how the Ninevites escape destruction after responding favorably to the preaching of Jonah (Jonah 3). Why don't the Amalekites enjoy the same opportunity of divine grace? Such inequities further complicate this already problematic portrayal of a God who commissions indiscriminate killing by making God appear unfair and ungracious.

God as Dangerous Abuser

The portrayal of God acting abusively toward particular individuals reveals a somewhat different aspect of disturbing divine behavior from what we have already discussed.²²To illustrate, we will look briefly at the stories of Hagar, Abraham and Isaac, and Saul.

HAGAR

When Abram's wife, Sarai, is unable to bear children, she encourages her husband to have sexual relations with Hagar, her Egyptian slave girl, as a means of having children by proxy, so to speak (Gen. 16:2). Abram complies, and Hagar conceives. But things quickly sour. Once Hagar has conceived, we are told she "looked with contempt" on Sarai (Gen. 16:4). Sarai responds by treating Hagar harshly and, understandably, Hagar runs away. While on the run, the angel of the Lord finds Hagar in the wilderness and asks where she has come from and where she is going.²³ After Hagar tells this divine messenger she is running from Sarai, her abusive master, she receives the following instructions: "Return to your mistress, and submit to her" (Gen. 16:9). That is like telling a battered wife to leave the women's shelter and return home to her abusive husband. Commenting on this troubling text, Phyllis Trible writes: "Without doubt, these two imperatives, return and submit to suffering, bring a divine word of terror to an abused, yet courageous woman. . . . God . . . here identifies with the oppressor and orders a servant to return not only to bondage but also to affliction."²⁴

ABRAHAM AND ISAAC

A few chapters later, in Genesis 22, we encounter the story of the near sacrifice of Isaac. The narrative begins with these horrifying words:

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you

love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.” (Gen. 22:1-2)

Abraham unquestioningly follows the Lord’s command and, after arriving at the designated spot, arranges the wood and binds his son, Isaac, to the altar. Then, with knife in hand, he is ready to make the required sacrifice when the angel of the Lord appears and stops him just in the nick of time (Gen. 22:11).

It is not uncommon for commentators to use this passage as an example of Abraham’s amazing faithfulness and devotion to God, and at one level it certainly can be read that way. God had promised to make Abraham’s name great by providing innumerable descendants through Isaac. God’s promise would be worthless if Isaac were dead. By demonstrating a willingness to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham demonstrated his loyalty to God above all else, even that which had been promised to him.

While this reading of the text is constructive and compelling—and one that finds support in New Testament passages like Matt. 6:33 and Matt. 19:16-26—it does not diminish the troubling portrayal of God contained within this narrative. What kind of God asks a faithful follower to kill his own child? As Danna Nolan Fewell and David Gunn observe:

We are not told what God wanted or expected to find in Abraham’s performance. Most readings assume that what Abraham did met with God’s approval. Abraham, on account of his radical obedience, becomes an exemplary character. Such a reading, on the other hand, leaves the character of God in a rather sticky situation. At the very best one might assert that God is simply unfathomable; at the worst, God is deranged and sadistic.²⁵

James Crenshaw regards this as “a monstrous test” and believes “one labors in vain . . . to find the slightest hint of divine compassion in the dreadful story recorded in Gen 22:1-19.”²⁶ Thus, while this text can be regarded as one that encourages total devotion to God, it has a shadow side. God is portrayed as acting in an emotionally abusive way toward both Abraham and Isaac—toward Abraham for having to contemplate and almost carry out this diabolical deed and toward Isaac for having to experience the trauma of being tied to an altar while his dad prepares to kill him.

SAUL

The story of Saul, Israel’s first king, begins with his royal anointing in 1 Samuel 9 and ends with his ignominious death on Mt. Gilboa in 1 Samuel 31. Signs of Saul’s unsuitable leadership first emerge in 1 Samuel 13, and just two chapters later the Lord rejects Saul “from being king” (1 Sam. 15:23, 26) and gives the kingdom to his “neighbor” David (1 Sam. 15:28). Samuel then anoints David as king, and we are told that “the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David” (1 Sam. 16:13). What is

especially troubling is what happens next. According to 1 Sam. 16:14, “the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him.”. As the text describes it, this evil spirit from God came and went.

And Saul’s servants said to him, “See now, an evil spirit from God is tormenting you. Let our lord now command the servants who attend you to look for someone who is skillful in playing the lyre; and when the evil spirit from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will feel better.” . . . And whenever the evil spirit from God came upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand, and Saul would be relieved and feel better, and the evil spirit would depart from him. (1 Sam. 16:15-16, 23)²⁷

This passage clearly claims that *God* was the one who sent an evil spirit to torment Saul. But is this the way God works in the world today? Is God in the business of sending evil spirits to afflict and torment people? If so, how can such behavior be reconciled with convictions about God’s goodness? Portrayals of God acting abusively seriously complicate our efforts to think rightly about God.

God as Unfair Afflictor

There are several stories in the Old Testament in which God seems to punish the wrong person or persons. Our sense of justice is violated as we read these stories and observe God making decisions that seem unfair and that result in considerable suffering.

PHARAOH’S DIVINELY HARDENED HEART

In the book of Exodus, as God is doling out plagues designed to deliver Israel from Egyptian bondage and to display God’s greatness, God repeatedly hardens Pharaoh’s heart.²⁸ For example, after the sixth of ten plagues, we read, “But the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he would not listen to them [Moses and Aaron], just as the Lord had spoken to Moses” (Exod. 9:12). This divine hardening of heart strengthens Pharaoh’s resolve to keep the Israelites under his control as he refuses to let them go despite the increasing severity of the plagues on his land.

The image of God hardening Pharaoh’s heart has troubled readers of the Bible for centuries. While many people would readily agree that God regularly *softens* hearts by making people receptive to divine initiatives, hardening hearts seems counterproductive and uncharacteristic of how God typically behaves. Why would God want to make someone more rather than less resistant to the divine will? Moreover, if God is at least partly responsible for Pharaoh’s obstinacy, as the text clearly indicates, how can Pharaoh be held responsible for his refusal to let Israel go?²⁹ It just does not seem right. Pharaoh appears to have no other alternative. But why should God punish Pharaoh for resisting God’s will when God was at least partly

to blame for Pharaoh's ability to resist? These passages make God seem unjust and malicious.

DAVID'S "SINFUL" CENSUS

According to 2 Sam. 24:15, a verse previously cited in our discussion of God as mass murderer, seventy thousand Israelites die from a divinely initiated plague. Such an enormous death toll inevitably causes one to wonder what terrible evil these people had done to incur such monstrous divine wrath. Was it idolatry, sexual promiscuity, or social injustice? Not according to 2 Samuel 24. Instead, this lethal plague resulted from a census taken by David. But why? What is wrong with taking a census, especially given the fact that this particular census was authorized by God?

Again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go, count the people of Israel and Judah." (2 Sam. 24:1)

David does exactly what he is told but then is punished for it. This seems like entrapment, a deliberate setup designed to ensnare David and to provide a pretext for divine judgment.³⁰

Upon completing this census, David is guilt stricken over what he has done, and he cries out to God (2 Sam. 24:10). God's reply to David comes through the prophet Gad, who instructs David to choose one of three options as his punishment. David can experience famine for three years, run from his enemies for three months, or experience a plague on the land for three days (2 Sam. 24:13). David chooses the latter, and by the end of "the appointed time," seventy thousand people are dead (2 Sam. 24:15).

This episode has many troubling dimensions. First, it portrays God as inciting, or prompting, David to sin. How can that be? Most people envision God as one who forgives sin—not one who causes it. Such behavior seems out of character for God (compare to Jam. 1:13). Second, the *Israelites* are punished for something *David* does wrong. Is it fair for God to punish the Israelites for something their king does wrong? Third, by any standard of measure, the punishment seems totally disproportionate to the offense. Regardless of how "wrong" taking this census may have been, killing seventy thousand people seems grossly excessive. The whole ordeal seems terribly unjust and unnecessarily lethal. It makes God seem heartless and cruel.

SAMARIA'S DEADLY LIONS

One of the most unusual stories portraying God unfairly afflicting people is found in 2 Kings 17. This chapter describes the fall of Samaria, Israel's capital, to the Assyrians in 727 BCE.³¹ When the Assyrians conquered people, they would take them from their homes and relocate them in various places around the Mediterranean world. Such a policy of deportation made it more difficult for a vanquished people to regroup since they were so widely dispersed. After the fall of Samaria,

some Israelites were deported while foreigners were brought in to live on the land. According to 2 Kings 17, these new arrivals were in for quite a surprise.

The king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria in place of the people of Israel; they took possession of Samaria, and settled in its cities. When they first settled there, they did not worship the Lord; therefore the Lord sent lions among them, which killed some of them. So the king of Assyria was told, “The nations that you have carried away and placed in the cities of Samaria do not know the law of the god of the land; therefore he has sent lions among them; they are killing them, because they do not know the law of the god of the land.” Then the king of Assyria commanded, “Send there one of the priests whom you carried away from there; let him go and live there, and teach them the law of the god of the land.” So one of the priests whom they had carried away from Samaria came and lived in Bethel; he taught them how they should worship the Lord. (2 Kgs. 17:24-28)

The text makes it unmistakably clear that the Lord is the one responsible for sending these deadly lions. Yet the deaths of these non-Israelite newcomers seem terribly unfair. These people came from distant places. Obviously, they were not going to know how to follow Yahweh. Still, they experience divine judgment for their ignorance all the same. Thankfully, the king of Assyria has the good sense to send a priest to teach these new arrivals “the law of the god of the land.” Presumably, this stops the killing.

The portrayal of God in this passage is not attractive. God kills people for failing to follow “divine laws” that they had no way of knowing, a situation that God does nothing to remedy. It is up to a “pagan” king to solve this dilemma and to preserve the lives of these newcomers, people who have already suffered the humiliation of conquest, capture, and forced relocation. In this story, the king of Assyria appears more concerned than God is about these vulnerable people. Is God really that cold and uncaring?

JOB

One of the most memorable portrayals of God afflicting an individual is found in the opening chapters of the book of Job. As the story begins, Job is described as being “blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil” (Job 1:1b). After a few verses detailing Job’s enormous wealth—which, for ancient readers, would reinforce the impression that Job was a very righteous man—the scene shifts to the heavenly realm. There we see “heavenly beings” appearing before the Lord. One of these beings is referred to as *hasatan*, literally, the adversary.³² After asking the adversary whether he has considered Job, the Lord proceeds to boast about Job’s exemplary character. God’s speech echoes the words of the narrator in

verse 1: “There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil” (v. 8).

The adversary is not impressed. He asserts that the only reason Job worships God is because of the way God has blessed him. The adversary believes Job’s devotion to God is only skin deep and would quickly disappear if Job fell on hard times. The adversary then issues a frightening challenge: “But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face” (v. 11). Incredibly, God accepts the challenge and allows the adversary to wreak havoc on Job. In rapid succession, Job loses everything: his wealth, his property, his servants, and all of his children (Job 1:13-19). It is a tragedy of epic proportions.

Why would God do this to his blameless and upright servant? We find the answer in the following chapter. Once again, we are invited to peer into the heavenly realm as heavenly beings present themselves before God. And once again, God boasts about Job to the adversary, saying, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil.” But this time God does not stop there. He continues by saying, “He [Job] still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason” (Job 2:3). One could hardly imagine a more self-incriminating statement. What kind of God is willing to destroy someone—especially someone as devout as Job—“for no reason”?

But Job is not the only one who suffers at God’s hands in this story; many others are affected as well. As the text portrays it, God permits—one might even say causes—the death of dozens of people “for no reason,” or at the very best, to win a divine wager.³³ All of Job’s children and nearly all of his servants are killed as a result of God’s conversation with the adversary (Job 1:3, 15, 18-19). This kind of behavior casts a shadow over God’s character, making God seem reckless and unjust. This again causes us to ask: Is God really like that? Does God treat people in ways that result in physical and emotional harm? If not, how should we interpret this image of God?

God as Divine Deceiver

The final problematic portrayal of God we will consider in this chapter is that of God as divine deceiver. As recorded in 1 Kings 22, King Ahab of Israel and King Jehoshaphat of Judah are seeking divine guidance to determine whether or not they should go to Ramoth-gilead and attempt to take it from the Arameans. Ahab rounds up four hundred prophets who advise the king to proceed as planned. They encourage him by saying, “Go up; for the Lord will give it into the hand of the king” (1 Kgs. 22:6). Jehoshaphat needs further assurance before he is ready to sign on and asks if there is another prophet of the Lord by whom they might inquire (v. 7). When Micaiah son of Imlah is brought forward, he initially mimics the words of these false prophets but eventually delivers his true message, saying:

Therefore hear the word of the Lord: I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, with all the host of heaven standing beside him to the right and to the left of him. And the Lord said, “Who will entice Ahab, so that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?” Then one said one thing, and another said another, until a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord, saying, “I will entice him.” “How?” the Lord asked him. He replied, “I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.” Then the Lord said, “You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do it.” So you see, the Lord has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; the Lord has decreed disaster for you. (1 Kgs. 22:19-23)

According to Micaiah’s report, God uses deception to persuade King Ahab to go on a military expedition that would result in his death—and that is precisely what happens. Believing the deceptive words God put into the mouths of the false prophets, Ahab goes into battle, is wounded by an arrow, and dies (1 Kgs. 22:29-40). The image of God as a divine deceiver is not one we are accustomed to seeing in the pages of Scripture. Is this what God is really like? Does God sometimes use deception?³⁴ If so, how can we trust God? Once again, it seems we are left with a portrait of God that stands at odds with some of our most basic beliefs about the nature of God.

The Problematic Nature of These Passages

Before concluding, I want to summarize briefly some of the key difficulties we have identified with the portrayals of God discussed in this chapter. What is it that makes these images of God so troubling? First, these portrayals of God are problematic because God commonly appears to treat people inconsistently, especially when punishment is concerned. Uzzah is killed for trying to steady the ark (2 Samuel 6), while David is forgiven for committing adultery and murder, abusing the power of his office, and attempting to cover up his outrageous sin (2 Samuel 11). God’s wildly different—and seemingly inequitable—responses to human behavior in this example and many others disturb our sense of divine fairness.³⁵

Second, in numerous examples, God is portrayed behaving in ways that might be regarded as unethical or immoral. Perhaps the most egregious example of this is the portrayal of God as genocidal general. Images of God sanctioning—and, at times, actively participating in—genocide are deeply disturbing since this kind of behavior is exceedingly difficult to justify.³⁶

Third, many of the passages we have considered are problematic because God is portrayed as one who kills indiscriminately. This is especially the case when God is portrayed as a mass murderer in such stories as the flood narrative, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the Canaanite and Amalekite genocide. These stories

speak of the wholesale slaughter of everyone: infants and toddlers, the aged and infirm, the mentally challenged. Today we routinely condemn such behavior in the strongest terms. For example, there is never a justifiable reason for killing an infant or a toddler. People who commit such atrocious acts are condemned and marginalized by society. Yet God is portrayed as engaging in such behavior repeatedly in the pages of the Old Testament. This constitutes a serious problem for sensitive readers of Scripture.

Fourth, when engaging in acts of judgment and deliverance, God often appears to use excessive force. Take the Exodus narrative, for example. Was it really necessary to totally devastate the land of Egypt and kill every firstborn child in order to free the Hebrews? Wasn't there a less violent, less destructive way to liberate these people? Yet ironically, as the narrative describes it, God actually prolongs the devastation by strengthening Pharaoh's resolve to resist. One might reasonably expect the God of the universe to find more creative and less destructive ways to judge Egypt and deliver Israel.

Fifth, some of these portrayals are problematic because they depict God as one who provides no opportunity for offenders to repent. For example, when God is portrayed as an instant executioner, the affected individuals have no second chance. There is no opportunity to ask for forgiveness or to make amends. Their punishment is final and total. God's zero tolerance policy in these kinds of situations makes God appear harsh, exacting, and uncompassionate.

Sixth, God's behavior in Old Testament narratives is troublesome because God sometimes appears to act in self-contradictory ways. Many problematic portrayals of God are difficult to square with other images of God in the Old Testament. For example, though God is reportedly "merciful and gracious" (Exod. 33:6), such qualities seem utterly lacking when it comes to the divine directive to kill Canaanites and to "show them no mercy" (Deut. 7:2). Moreover, I suspect that those who were instantly annihilated by God—Er, Onan, Nadab and Abihu, and Uzzah—would beg to differ with the description of God as one who is "slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love" (Exod. 33:6). These apparent discrepancies create difficulties for those wishing to use the Bible to speak coherently about the character of God.

Seventh, Christian readers of the Old Testament are often bothered by these portrayals of God because they seem so unlike the God Jesus reveals. Many of these Old Testament images of God appear to be totally out of sync with the God Jesus reveals in the New Testament: a God who calls us to love enemies and pray for persecutors (Matt. 5:44), a God whom Jesus describes as being "kind to the ungrateful and the wicked" (Luke 6:35), and a God who suffers violence rather than inflicts it on others. Trying to reconcile some of the Old Testament's most troubling images of God with the God revealed in Jesus is no easy task. Some would even say it is impossible.³⁷

This chapter has demonstrated both the broad range of problematic portrayals of God found in Old Testament narrative and the reasons why such portrayals can be so unsettling. The lengthy discussion of the portrayals was intended to familiarize readers with these images and to help them recognize some of the images' more troubling aspects. Even devout readers of the Bible do not always recognize the magnitude of the problem of disturbing divine behavior. Yet, regardless of whether one realizes it, the Old Testament contains a vast array of troubling images of God, which should be concern all who regard these texts as normative for faith and practice. Regardless of how one tries to resolve the tension, it is hard to deny that the Old Testament presents God in ways that appear ethically questionable, if not downright immoral. God is portrayed as one who sanctions violence, participates in war, executes individuals for seemingly minor offenses, and annihilates large groups of people in dramatic acts of divine destruction. If we are honest, many of us will admit that these images of God do not match up very well with some of our beliefs about God. Understandably, this creates a dilemma for those of us who affirm Scripture's authority yet remain at a loss for what to do with these problematic portrayals.

Obviously, not every Old Testament narrative portrays God behaving in disturbing ways. It would surely be an exaggeration to suggest that the Old Testament contains nothing but troublesome texts from Genesis to Malachi. Anyone who reads through the Old Testament will discover many wonderfully *unproblematic* images of God to be savored and enjoyed. God's love, mercy, and grace are often displayed in grand fashion. Since this is not regularly recognized—and given many people's suspicion about the value of reading the Old Testament in the first place—perhaps I should have written a book about “inspiring” divine behavior rather than “disturbing” divine behavior. Yet, despite the obvious value of such a book, it would inevitably leave the problem of disturbing divine behavior unresolved and would provide no guidance for making sense of some of the most troubling images of God in the Old Testament. Thus, it is necessary to confront this issue head-on, with intentionality and care.

While this chapter has considered *how* various images of God are problematic, it has not considered *for whom* these images are problematic. The subtitle of this book—“Troubling Old Testament Images of God”—begs the question, Troubling for whom? Who specifically is bothered by the kinds of passages we have explored in this chapter, and why do they find these images of God so terribly troubling? The following chapter will address these questions by identifying various kinds of people who take issue with the way God is portrayed in certain Old Testament passages. By listening to what they have to say, we can better appreciate why these images are so disturbing for them. The seriousness of the problem we have raised in this chapter will come into even greater focus as we hear their stories.