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# The God at the End of the Story

In many ways, the hybrid field that is often called theology of the Hebrew Scriptures, and its particular expression called Old Testament theology, may be moving closer to consensus in describing its purpose.[1] If I might put that purpose into my own words, it is to describe the character called God in the Hebrew Scriptures and to observe how that character relates to the other characters in the text and to the world in which these other characters live.[2] At the same time, there is an increasing number of ways to go about this purpose, so our approaches are diverging at the same time that our purpose may be converging. One of the most serious problems interpreters face in the contemporary era is that they have developed a keen awareness of the multiplicity of portraits of the divine character within these shared sacred texts. The first concern in this opening chapter is to examine two different ways of attending to this multiplicity and the extent to which these approaches are useful to the enterprise of Old Testament theology.

One approach to this multiplicity proceeds by laying out the many differing portraits of the divine character and allowing them to converse with one another. The result is a canonical debate about the nature of God's character. This approach has been very fruitful, and I will describe some examples more extensively in this chapter. The primary problem with approaches that fall within this category, however, is that, although they would appear to put all biblical texts into play on an even field, some texts inevitably get to speak first and set the agenda. It will become apparent throughout this study, however, that the problems of this practice are often compounded by letting these texts speak last.

The other general type of approach to examining the divine character in the Bible involves putting texts in some order and looking for a sense of development in the divine character. The obvious initial difficulty with such approaches is the choosing of such an order, which establishes a trajectory for the development of the divine character. The discussion in this chapter will

identify and analyze examples of some of the potential choices. One significant implication of observing the development of God as a narrative character is that it necessitates more emphasis on the end of such a developmental process and the texts that portray that end. This emphasis contradicts much of the history of biblical theology, which has always given more attention to the divine character in the early parts of the biblical story, where the divine character is more active and more interesting. In the discussion of these two types of approaches, I will illustrate how they bring us to an impasse between a tension-filled but static divine character and a dynamic but receding one. Old Testament theology has paid far less attention to the parts of the Old Testament where God recedes into the background and becomes a subtle influence in various ways, rather than participating in the story as an active character.

## Examining Past Trajectories in Old Testament Theology

There is probably no subdiscipline of biblical studies that loves to wallow in its past as much as Old Testament theology. The great difficulty of this tendency is that once one packs up all of the necessary luggage, the weight of it makes forward movement very difficult, and the packing has taken so long that any new path, once visible, may have become obscured. Still, I venture briefly into an aspect of the past with the hope that it will reveal more than it obscures.

The overlapping fields of theology of the Hebrew Scriptures and Old Testament theology have passed through a period of significant disruption and uncertainty during the past few decades. At the core of most, if not all, of the work in these fields has been a desire to develop a synthetic presentation of these related bodies of literature. In the recent past, the framework for such a presentation was often entangled with reconstructions of the history of Israelite religion. Many have become increasingly suspicious of the hypothetical nature of such reconstructions and have understood it as an unmanageable liability of such an approach. This framework relied heavily not just on the observations of the standard historical-critical approaches to using texts but also on their most tenuous conclusions about sources, dates, and the original settings of small literary units. In recent decades, these difficulties have led to an increased focus on the final form of the text and the worlds that it creates, but this move has heightened our awareness of the diversity of the text. It resists synthetic treatment. This resistance can be clearly illustrated in the work of the two giants of the mid-twentieth century, Walther Eichrodt and Gerhard von Rad. Walter Brueggemann has aptly described the similarities and differences in the work of these two figures and the impasse to which they brought the field half a century ago. Eichrodt's goal was to establish the central theme of covenant strongly

enough to hold all of the diversity of the Old Testament literature within its gravitational pull. The result was an intense focus upon what Brueggemann called "a constant basic tendency and character to Old Testament Theology."[3] Von Rad, on the other hand, placed his emphasis on the dynamic quality of Israel's faith, particularly as expressed in its recitals of the work of God on Israel's behalf. Brueggemann described succinctly the stalemate created by these two movements: "Eichrodt's accent on constancy makes it difficult, even as he seeks to do so, to allow for historical dynamic in Israel's faith; thus Eichrodt is easily indicted for reductionism. Conversely, von Rad's emphasis on historical dynamic means that in the end, one finds in his work many theologies but no single theological formulation. Indeed, von Rad concludes that such a statement is impossible. The variegated material precludes such a statement without an unbearable cost in terms of reductionism."[4] This situation is analogous to the idea in physics known as the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, which states that an observer cannot measure or describe both the position and velocity of an electron at the same time. Dynamism and constancy are incompatible. Velocity must be measured over time, using change in position. The only theoretical exception to this would be a particle with no velocity. As yet, no such particle has ever been observed, and it seems just as unlikely that the God of a wandering people might stay still long enough to be described fully.

### *Approaches Based on Biblical Debate about God's Character*

I have rehearsed some of the well-known past of the field Old Testament theology in order to consider the possibility that it has reached a similar impasse after nearly a half century of movement away from using a historical framework toward using a primarily literary one. I take it for granted that it is too late for any valid attempt to present the God of the Bible as a simplistic, consistent character and to present the Bible itself as a univocal source on this subject. Once again, constancy and dynamism may function as two helpful categories. If the explication of the literary development of the divine character within the canon is the primary task, then approaches that fit into the "constancy" category are those which present the divine character as one in a state of tension. The primary advantage of these kinds of approaches is that there is no need to place biblical texts along any kind of trajectory. The primary choice is which texts get to speak first, thus establishing a norm. A clear example can be seen in the work of Brueggemann, in his *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Advocacy, Dispute*, where texts in which God is creating, promising, delivering, commanding, and leading get to speak first and constitute the "core testimony." The aspects of God's character that do not fit this core portrait,

such as ambiguity, negativity, and hiddenness, receive significant attention in this work. Providing the texts that participate in this development their own legitimate voice is perhaps the greatest strength of Brueggemann's work, but they are framed as "counter-testimony" and thus given a secondary role.[5] Although the result is a creative tension that gives due attention to the many facets of the divine character, the weight of the "core testimony" seems to anchor the divine character to a position that restricts the potential for dynamic character development. Despite this difficulty, Brueggemann's work has been essential in confirming the principle that Old Testament theology must be grounded in the actions God performs as a character presented in the biblical text.[6]

A more recent attempt that moves along similar lines is Karl Allen Kuhn's *Having Words with God: The Bible as Conversation*. Kuhn has argued effectively for a dialogical understanding of Scripture, one that allows for multiple voices to express differing views about the character of God. To support his contention that "Scripture itself embodies and invites dynamic conversation between God and humanity and conversation among believers about God,"[7] Kuhn points to texts such as the discussion between God and Moses at Mount Sinai, in the wake of the golden-calf episode;[8] Abraham's negotiation with God concerning the fate of Sodom;[9] and the lament tradition, which fills so much of the book of Psalms.[10] The usefulness of Kuhn's work on the subject of the theology of the Hebrew Scriptures is limited by his frequent movement into the New Testament, but his dialogical model serves as a useful example of the kind of constant approach I wish to demonstrate here. By adopting a more general conversational model, Kuhn avoids the need within Brueggemann's courtroom model to classify "core testimony" and "counter-testimony." Nevertheless, despite Kuhn's attention to the diverse voices present within Scripture and his acknowledgment that the "story quality" of Scripture is central, he still insists on what he calls a "coherence" that seems to be in control of the story. He does not attempt to place the varying portraits of God along the narrative plotline of the Bible in order to look for linear development of the divine character, so he must look for something other than a narrative coherence. This insistence on a coherence that includes "abiding features of God's character" places a limit on the dynamic development of the divine character.[11] In the work of Brueggemann and Kuhn, the attempted placement of all texts on a level surface in order to allow a creative dispute keeps all of these aspects in a constant tension with each other, but, in the end, texts seem to be assigned different values based upon predetermined theological norms or because they are better or less well suited to this kind of dialogical context.[12] The texts given a more

visible position are those which conform to the "core testimony" or the "abiding features."

Another aspect of dialogical approaches is the long tradition of talking about a "dark side" of God. The use of such a term raises some immediate problems but is too common in the discussion of God's character to ignore.[13] This subject was treated extensively at the end of the twentieth century in a two-volume work by Walter Dietrich and Christian Link called *Die dunklen Seiten Gottes*. More recently this work and its subject have been engaged by John Barton in an essay called "The Dark Side of God in the Old Testament." For Dietrich and Link, an unavoidable dark side of God comes with the presentation of a divine character with emotions. Further, because in most of the Old Testament God is understood as the sole cause of everything that happens, a dark side is inevitable.[14] For Barton, these moves by Dietrich and Link are too "apologetic." The dark side of God is portrayed as a necessary by-product of God's positive side. Rejection, for example, is the by-product of election, and vengeance of justice. Such moves are typical of much Christian theology. In many ways, this identifies the "core testimony" as God's primary intent and the "counter-testimony" as the accidental or incidental consequences. Barton prefers to conclude that God is "inscrutable."[15] This is somewhat more satisfying but still appears to place the blame for the problem on the limits of human reason. The implication is that there is some sense of coherence behind God's behavior and if only we had the secret codes, we would be able to perceive that sense. In terms of observing God as a narrative character, this discussion disrupts a sense of continuity by dividing this character's behavior into categories, a move that ultimately leads to a division of the character. Finally, the most telling failure of this theological move is revealed by the tendency not to name the other side, what would logically seem to be the "light side." The implication is that the "dark side" is an anomaly or aberration that must be named, whereas every other part of God's character is the normal or default mode and need not be specifically identified. So, what is being juxtaposed in this language is not God's "light side" and "dark side" but "God" and God's "dark side."

### *Approaches Based on the Development of God as a Narrative Character*

A much different result appears when texts are placed along a trajectory and the divine character is allowed to develop throughout the resulting plot. The simplest way to do this is within a single book, which is limited in size and fixed in order. The most direct and ambitious attempt to do this to date is

W. Lee Humphreys's 2001 work, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis*. Humphreys made use of models for evaluating the process of characterization in the Bible that had been developed by Robert Alter and Adele Berlin two decades earlier, but Alter and Berlin had applied this model only to the human characters in the Bible.[16] Humphrey's conclusions about the development of God's character in Genesis were quite profound and have significant theological implications. According to his own summary statement, "The movement is from type to full-fledged character to agent, as we move from God the sovereign designer in Genesis 1 to the complex, multi-faceted and changing figure in the bulk of Genesis 2–36, to God as an agent silently shaping the stories other characters tell of him in the latter segments of Genesis."[17] This conclusion begs an important question: Which God does Genesis want its reader to believe in or serve, some hybrid version of all three stages, or the one that the divine character has become at the end of the story? Humphreys's own position on this question is not clear. Perhaps the closest he comes is in passing the question off to the rest of the Bible. In his words, "We also sense that [God] is not complete or full or whole at the end of Genesis. . . . But then Genesis is not an end in itself. It is the Book of Beginnings."[18] It is difficult to imagine, however, that the religious experience of Joseph is not closer to the religious experience of the intended audience of Genesis than is the religious experience of Abraham or Jacob.

One more example of this approach on the scale of a single biblical book may be found in Phyllis Trible's treatment of the development of the divine character in the book of Jonah. Although such a small book of the Bible offers less opportunity for diverse portrayals, the changes in the divine character that Trible observed are profound. Two examples are most noteworthy, and the first has to do with God's actions toward Jonah. A recalcitrant prophet is presented in the scenes narrated in chapter 1, when Jonah flees on the boat, and chapter 4, when Jonah goes out into the desert. The deity who responds in chapter 1 with a violent storm, trying to drown Jonah into submission, becomes one who attempts by argument to persuade the sulking Jonah in the desert in chapter 4. Second, in relation to the Ninevites, the divine character of chapter 3 responds in kind to the Ninevites when they repent by deciding not to destroy them, whereas the God of chapter 4 argues for saving them out of a sense of pity. In Trible's words, God has moved from a "theology of reciprocity" to a "theology of pity." She took this argument one more step and asserted that the book of Jonah seeks to persuade the reader to accept a theology of pity, just as the divine character in the story is attempting to persuade Jonah to do so.[19] This argument comes much closer to a claim that it is the God at the end of its story that the

book is promoting, and that the development of the divine character takes part in that process of persuasion.

Moving to a larger collection of literature such as the entire Tanak, rather than just a single book, requires choosing a trajectory upon which to place texts. There would seem to be three basic choices here. The most problematic trajectory would be one based upon the dates of composition of texts. Not only are such dates hypothetical and disputed, but this process would require difficult decisions about how to divide texts into units. Should a supposed original date for a small individual unit be used; or the date of a larger complex into which this unit has been woven; or the date of the final form of the book in which it is found, the composition of which may have involved some reshaping of that individual text? Another possibility is to use a narrative trajectory following the plot of the story the Bible tells. This makes the placement of some texts, such as those in the Pentateuch and the Former Prophets, easy and certain, but what does one do with the parallel narratives in the books of Chronicles, or texts like those in the Psalms and Wisdom literature, which do not fit into the narrative sequence? Most of the problems of these other two types of trajectories are resolved by the use of the canon as a trajectory. Of course, we have more than one canonical tradition, so the interpreter still must make a difficult choice.

It may help to refer briefly to three works that do not quite fit the criteria of a treatment of the narrative development of the divine character throughout the entire canon but that moved the possibility of such a treatment forward considerably. The title of Samuel Terrien's 1978 work, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology*, indicates his acknowledgment of the need for a dialectical approach. An elusive figure is one that must be pursued, and pursuit is a dynamic activity. Terrien followed a roughly canonical path for much of the book, but at least two major factors limit the usefulness of his work here. First, his approach is still shaped too significantly by the history of Israelite religion, rather than the narrative development of divine character in the literature of the Old Testament. Second, the whole of his work seems to me to be infused with his desire to get to the New Testament as a resolution of the problem of the *Deus absconditus*. Indeed, Terrien qualifies this problem with his phrase *Deus absconditus atque praesens* in order to create a greater sense of continuity between the two testaments of the Christian Bible. Nevertheless, his assertion that, at some point, "God no longer overwhelmed the senses of perception and concealed himself behind the adversity of historical existence" points toward a consideration of a more thorough and precise narrative approach to God's character.[20]

The understanding of God as a narrative character was also moved forward significantly by the 1983 work of Dale Patrick called *The Rendering of God in the Old Testament*. Patrick effectively developed the notion of God as a "dramatis persona," rendered in language.[21] Further, he recognized this character as "dynamic, surprising, [and] occasionally paradoxical," a combination of qualities "requiring of the reader a dialectical process of recognition."[22] Patrick's method required this notion of recognition so strongly that his focus more often became God's consistency of character, which overshadowed a sense of linear character development, but the idea of God as a dramatic character emerged powerfully enough to add substantially to the growing idea of a dynamic narrative character.

Finally, in a work called *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, Eric A. Seibert has raised important theological questions generated by the observation of God's behavior as it is presented in the Hebrew Scriptures. This book has purposes that often take the discussion outside of the realm of narrative to examine historical issues, but it also pays close attention to the possible functions of the portrayal of a character.[23] As the title indicates, Seibert's work also pays attention to the effect a character's behavior has on the observer of that behavior, in this case, the reader.

A more fully developed example of the kind of narrative approach I am describing, one in which the sustained focus is the development of God as a narrative character through all or a large part of the Hebrew Scriptures, is the work of Richard Elliott Friedman. In *The Disappearance of God: A Divine Mystery*, Friedman called attention to a phenomenon in the Bible that has received very little attention in the history of interpretation: a progressive movement of God's character toward hiddenness as the biblical plot progresses.[24] The receding of God's presence is accompanied by a shift in the "divine-human balance." These were not entirely new observations, though. Friedman did not interact overtly with von Rad in *Disappearance*. It may have been most helpful for Friedman to note the observation in von Rad's article that was placed as a postscript on the end of his two-volume *Old Testament Theology*.[25] The full significance of this essay for understanding the direction of von Rad's theology at the end of his career was highlighted by Magne Saebo in his 2000 article "Yahweh as *Deus absconditus*: Some Remarks on a Dictum by Gerhard von Rad."[26] Saebo noted the importance of differing English translations of the key sentence in von Rad's essay, "Ist es Nicht ein Jahwe, der siche von Mal zu Mal in seinen Selbstoffenbarungen vor seinen Volk tiefer und tiefer verbirgt." Saebo's own rendering, "Is he not a Yahweh who from time to time in his self-revelation is hiding himself more and more

deeply from his people,"[27] may lean slightly more toward the notion that this hiddenness progresses over time than does the better-known translation of D. M. G. Stalker, "Does he not, in the course of his self-revelation, conceal himself more and more deeply from his people?"[28] Given von Rad's overall framework, if he did observe a progression, it seems more likely that it was historical in nature, rather than canonical or literary, but this sense of dynamism carries over into literary treatment of God as a narrative character.

The work of Friedman is still an apt beginning point, because only he makes any overt attempt to compare the results of a historical trajectory with a narrative one. He does this by delineating specifically eight stages in the disappearance of God and summarizes them as follows:

1. Moses sees God at Sinai.
2. Moses, the one man who has seen God, wears a veil.
3. God tells Moses, "I shall hide my face from the Israelites."
4. The last time God is said to be revealed to a human: the prophet Samuel
5. The last time God is said to have appeared to a human: King Solomon
6. The last public miracle: divine fire for Elijah at Mount Carmel; followed by God's refusal to appear to Elijah at Horeb/Sinai
7. The last personal miracle: The shadow reverses before Isaiah and Hezekiah
8. God is not mentioned in Esther.[29]

The texts to which Friedman connects these stages follow the narrative order of the plot presented in the Bible and are very close to falling in canonical order, with allowance for the problem of parallel passages in the Deuteronomistic History and Chronicles. Friedman's hypothetical attempt to place the texts in the order in which they were written, however, produces rather different results. The revelation to Moses and the story of Esther are still first and last respectively, but God's statement of intent to hide, which is third in the list above, comes from Deut. 31:17–18, a text that he places considerably later than the story of Elijah on Mount Carmel, which is sixth in the list above.[30] The problem this would seem to solve, that stage number 3 in the list above is out of place, may have a relatively simple narrative resolution, though. The speeches of Moses in Deuteronomy frequently project into the distant future, so such a statement need not fit into the "narrative time" in which it is made.

Friedman also goes to greater lengths than any other writer of which I am aware to propose a literary process that could have produced these results. This is a significant challenge, considering that his view of the Bible's composition is far too complex to allow for any kind of deliberate collusion among writers or editors, and he does not seem to hold to the kind of understanding of divine inspiration that would provide magical guidance toward such an end. Instead, this fairly consistent movement in the character of God is the result of a shared experience of the writers and the common assumptions that arise from that experience. In Friedman's words, "Given that miracles and other signs of divine presence were not in fact occurring in any apparent way to them, their perception would naturally be that God's visible interventions in human affairs belonged to a bygone age. Whenever a biblical author lived, no matter how long after the events he or she was narrating, his or her perception would be that God's visible acts had diminished. That is, the placement of God in history, inevitably, meant departure."[31]

At about the same time that Friedman was producing *The Disappearance of God*, Jack Miles was writing his monumental work, *God: A Biography*. Though less deliberately focused on a single theme, like hiddenness, Miles still constructed a similar portrait. Following the basic trajectory of the Hebrew canon, Miles attempted to set aside all general presuppositions about God and to pursue rigorously the divine character presented to us in the pages of this story. Thus, Miles's task was relentlessly narrative in nature. He gave significant attention to nearly every book in the Hebrew canon, and he found a pattern not unlike that which Friedman uncovered. The divine character whom Miles describes early in the canon as creator, destroyer, friend, conqueror, and father is, by the end, described as sleeper, bystander, recluse, and absence. Perhaps two of Miles's conclusions are most significant. First, in describing Ezra-Nehemiah as a resumption of the narrative of God and the chosen people, left off at the end of the book of 2 Kings, Miles notes that "the roles of the two are nearly reversed. In the days of Abraham, Moses, Joshua, and David, the Lord took mighty action on behalf of Israel. In the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, Israel takes energetic action on behalf of the Lord."[32] When, in the eighth chapter of the book of Nehemiah, Ezra reads to the people from the scroll of the law and the people respond by bowing down, the scroll itself has essentially replaced God, just as its public reader has become God's voice.[33] The Bible has managed to replace God with itself, a point to which I shall return later.

Miles's second pertinent conclusion lies in the question that forms the subtitle of his final chapter, "Does God Lose Interest?" In this chapter, he makes one last attempt to resolve the multiplicity of personalities found in

the divine character by producing a "polytheistic retelling of the Tanakh," only to discover that this process removes the "diffuse anxiety [that is] the more characteristic mood of the Tanakh."[34] The key to understanding this anxiety is the observation that "the course of the Lord God's life runs not just from omnipotence to relative impotence, but also from ignorance to relative omniscience."[35] God's knowing diminishes God's power, because, in Miles's words, "once God understands what motivated him at the start, his motivation to continue is undercut."[36] Miles's brilliant narrative analysis seems hindered by one presupposition of which he cannot let go, namely, that God is the protagonist of the Bible. This assumption seems at odds with many of his observations, especially those which are so similar to Friedman's. If the divine character is receding, progressively disappearing from the story, then can this description be fitting? Is it not Israel, the character that grows larger and more active as the story progresses, which is best understood as the protagonist? Does this leave God necessarily as the antagonist, and do not those qualities which, in the end of the story, are so ill fitting of a protagonist make for an ideal antagonist? To adopt two of the terms from Brueggemann's countertestimony list, God's character moves toward hiddenness and ambiguity as the story progresses.[37] The work of Friedman and Miles has received little attention from the field of Old Testament theology, a problem that I will attempt to remedy throughout this book.

A decade later, something of a sense of narrative development of the character called God was inherent in the work of Harold Bloom, in *Jesus and Yahweh: The Names Divine*, which appeared in 2005, though it is not developed along clear lines of the Bible's full narrative. Bloom understands the choice of creating as an act of "self-exile."[38] God can make room for creation and humanity only by receding, so creation involves a divine decision to recede. Bloom's reading is idiosyncratic for at least two reasons. First, he is still reading what he understands as the J source, rather than full the text of the Hebrew Scriptures, and he still seems to hold many of the assumptions from his odd work *The Book of J*, from two decades earlier, most significantly a very early date for the J source.[39] Second, as a Shakespearean scholar, he openly reveals that he is reading J's God through the lens of *King Lear*,[40] a move that I personally find powerfully productive but that will cause some to question whether he is doing legitimate biblical interpretation. For Bloom, the development of God's character, God's withdrawal, is inextricably linked to God's initial decision to create: "Yahweh permanently wounded himself very badly in the act of creation. A self-degraded Supreme God, so human—all-too-human, forever will be ambivalent toward everything and anyone, his Chosen

People in particular."[41] At times, it is difficult to determine whether Bloom understands this self-exile as an instantaneous act fully congruent with the initial act of creation, or as a narrative progression that continues throughout the story of the Bible, but his constant insistence on reading God as a literary character, illuminated by Lear, makes the notion of character development impossible to escape.

Most recently, the collection of narrative approaches to divine character development has been updated by the appearance of Jerome Segal's *Joseph's Bones: Understanding the Struggle between God and Mankind in the Bible*. Segal is reading the books of Genesis through Joshua, rather than the entire Tanak, so it is easier for him to follow a coherent narrative without having to make any choices of trajectory, and he insists, among other things, that the story of God and humanity in the Hexateuch is a coherent story.[42] Perhaps the key to understanding Segal's work is his discussion of the interplay between God and Moses. This may not contradict the title of the book as much as it seems, given that for the majority of the Hexateuch the bones of Joseph are in the possession of Moses and are under his control. Most important for Segal is determining why God has to kill Moses. It is God's own growth or "evolution" as a character that makes this act necessary. In Segal's words, "God . . . is undergoing an evolution and is finding other tools—indeed the Torah itself is one—that will allow him to interact successfully with the Israelites. He is becoming less in need of Moses, less in need of a human intermediary who will protect the Israelites from himself. What happens is that just as Moses is becoming more problematic for God, he is becoming more dispensable. As these two processes converge, they bring his death."[43] Like Miles, Segal recognized that the Bible ultimately replaces God's more direct presence and becomes God's voice. The competition for this voice is the oral prophet, and none is greater than Moses.

## The Place of Divine Character Development in Old Testament Theology

The major attempts to articulate a linear, narrative development of the character of God that I have identified here lie, at best, on the edges of biblical theology. There are, perhaps, a number of reasons for this. The field of biblical theology has typically been more confessional than other areas of biblical studies, and this is to be expected. Though there may be no way to measure such things objectively, works like those of Friedman, Miles, and Segal look and sound less confessional than those of Eichrodt, von Rad, Terrien, Brueggemann, and Kuhn. Those writers who utilize a more strictly narrative approach, whether

they have confessional commitments or not, likely view themselves more as literary critics than as biblical theologians, so their work is not overtly oriented in the direction of biblical theology. James Barr's massive 1999 work, *The Concept of Biblical Theology,* formed something of a catalog of the field at the end of the twentieth century; and, although it contains a twenty-two-page chapter on Brueggemann, focused almost entirely on his Old Testament theology, which had appeared just two years earlier, there is no mention of Miles or Friedman, whose books came out in 1995. Perhaps this neglect is best explained by Barr's claim that story itself is not theology but merely the "raw material for theology," because story is "theologically unclear or ambiguous."[44] This claim, of course, betrays an expectation about theology—that it must be clear and unambiguous—a claim that would require serious reconsideration before a focus on character development could qualify as theology. Modern readers are so conditioned to look for and ask for the "moral of the story" that the idea of carefully reading or hearing a story and letting it work on us, trusting a story to do what it will, is an act of patience often beyond our capability.

It is these and other similar observations that continue to drive my question about the compatibility of biblical theology and narrative enterprises that focus on the development of God's character. At least three questions reflect components of this problem and must be addressed:

1. What trajectory of texts do we follow in order to examine this development?
2. What theological significance do we give to the earlier stages of the divine character's development?
3. How do we give appropriate attention to the texts that present the fully developed character, the God at the end of the story?

In response to the first question, the preceding discussion moved toward the necessity of a narrative trajectory, which, for the Tanak, would approximate a canonical trajectory. For the Christian Old Testament, the distance between this trajectory and a canonical one would remain a point of difficulty, but the shape of the Christian canon does provide a possibility. The Old Testament begins by telling the story of God and Israel from creation to the exile, in the books of Genesis through 2 Kings. It then immediately tells us the same story, in a much different fashion, in 1 and 2 Chronicles. This story is continued into the restoration/Persian period in Ezra-Nehemiah. The Protestant Old Testament finds its narrative end there, whereas the Catholic and Orthodox canons continue into the Hellenistic period in the books of Maccabees. Most of the remainder of the Old Testament writings can be connected to this central narrative in some way.

The second question has to do with the relative values we might assign to the various stages of the life of a character who develops through the plot of a narrative. How can a theology of the Hebrew Scriptures cope with a portrayal of a playful, impetuous God who makes a person like a child playing with mud pies,[45] tosses the clay figure over the fence when it will not play as God wishes, destroys the whole earth in a flash of angry regret, and then almost immediately regrets the destructive act; especially when compared to a seasoned, detached, observer God who leaves the humans created so long ago to find their own way in the world, speaking to them only through the indirect majesty of literature? The God at the end of the story is clearly more mature, but the God at the beginning of the story is easily more interesting. In Brueggemann's *Theology,* references to Genesis alone outnumber references to all of Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah together by a ratio of 3 to 1, and the Scripture index of James Barr's *Concept of Biblical Theology* contains not a single reference to Chronicles, Ezra, or Nehemiah. Esther finds no place in either book. The field of theology of the Hebrew Scriptures has always expressed more interest in the earlier part of the narrative about God than in its conclusion. This intense interest in the early part of the divine character's development cannot, and need not, be diminished, but the results of the reading of these passages need to be put in a different place in such a character analysis.

Here, it may help to pause to ask more generally how we understand and describe a narrative character who changes and develops through the course of a plot. What should readers do with the earlier encounters with that character once those have been superseded by later encounters? What relative values do readers assign to the various stages of their encounters with a character? The way one answers these questions will undoubtedly be affected by religious convictions, of course. For many readers, God is not simply a narrative character but one to whom they are related in some way outside of the reading of the text; and even if they follow guides like Miles and Brueggemann in a fairly successful attempt to keep these other experiences away from their reading,[46] these readers cannot keep such experiences from influencing what they do with the results of the reading of the text. So, comparisons to how we value the various stages of our awareness of actual characters that we know, not just literary ones, are apt here. When we know other human beings over a long period of time, we do not let go of our memory of early encounters with them. In some way, we see those early encounters as inextricably bound up in the person's later identity, even if the behavioral traits exhibited early on are no longer expressed. With human characters, we not only accept but even expect a process of change and development. The earlier stages of the development

of a person we love are not valued less when we see him or her change and develop. We no longer relate to the earlier version of the person, but we can, along with that person, remember and cherish the experience of those earlier encounters. The difficult question this raises is not just whether we can look at God as a character that changes, with earlier traits and habits receding and becoming subsumed within a more developed version, but whether looking at and describing God in this manner can be a way of doing Old Testament theology.

The third question, the one about the significance of the divine character's final destination, will require another difficult reorientation in the discipline of Old Testament theology: an increased emphasis on the theology of the later literature that forms the end of the story. Surely the firmest ground is found in identifying Ezra-Nehemiah as the target for greater attention. Meir Sternberg's description of the change in mode of narration in Ezra-Nehemiah may illustrate one of the more important ways the divine character has changed by this point. The omniscient narrator of most of the rest of the Hebrew Bible is essentially telling the story from God's point of view. Put more bluntly, God is telling us God's own story in Genesis through 2 Kings, and this is still mostly true in Chronicles,[47] but this is not the case in Ezra-Nehemiah, a point made most apparent by the first-person "memoir" materials.[48] This is another aspect of the disappearance or distancing of the divine character: not only has this character become less interventionist, but one must also now take the word of another voice describing this character. When Nehemiah goes to Judah, he reports that "the hand of my God was upon me" (Neh. 2:8). Whereas Ezekiel uses this phrase to describe the onset of his ecstatic visions, to Nehemiah this is merely an interpretation of his practical success. It explains why "the king granted me what I asked for" (2:8). In 2:12, Nehemiah interprets his desire to rebuild the wall as "What God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem." Throughout the book, Nehemiah interprets his own planning as God's intent and the successful result as God's blessing. Only in the book's recollections of the distant past did God command (1:8), perform signs and wonders (9:7), and lead the Israelites by pillars of cloud and fire (9:19).

This approach might initially generate the problem so famously produced by von Rad's dynamic approach in the middle of the twentieth century, that is, where to put the parts of the Bible that do not easily fit within its narrative framework. The Wisdom literature is the most obvious point of difficulty here, but a means of including this material in a divine narrative has been sketched by Marvin A. Sweeney in his important work *Reading the Hebrew Bible after the Shoah: Engaging Holocaust Theology*. Sweeney included in this book a chapter

called "Divine Hiddenness and Human Initiative in the Wisdom Literature." He seems correct in assigning the Wisdom literature in its canonical form to the end stage of the development of the divine character, regardless of whether some of the material within the Wisdom books might be assigned an earlier date.[49] This is a subject that will be treated more extensively in chapter 6.

Additional difficulties remain, of course. For Christian readers, the divine character is reinvigorated in the moving of the Prophetic literature to the end of the Old Testament canon; and, of course, the extension of the divine character in the figure of Jesus in the New Testament is difficult to keep separate from the reading of the divine character in the Old Testament. For Jewish interpreters of the Tanak, the centrality and ongoing commemoration of the exodus and Passover traditions make the sequestering of the divine action in those events within the distant past difficult.[50] These tensions return us to a question posed near the beginning of this chapter about a possible impasse between the constant and the dynamic. On the one hand, given the diversity of materials in the Hebrew Scriptures, a claim of divine constancy seems incoherent. On the other hand, the dynamic God may be moving to a place that makes doing theology unsatisfying. This is the risk of the readjustment for which this book will contend.

This introduction to the theological examination of God as a narrative character in the Old Testament requires some initial attention to a difficult and often-neglected topic that will arise from time to time throughout this book: God's physicality. Beginning to think about God as a narrative character in a story in which all of the other characters have physical bodies makes this issue unavoidable. The body of God appears sporadically in the Old Testament, but these appearances are far more frequent than many interpreters, especially biblical theologians, tend to acknowledge.[51] This avoidance, or even denial, has been carefully demonstrated by Benjamin D. Sommer in the opening chapter of his 2009 book, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*.[52] The acknowledgment of this tradition, broader and deeper than most readers of the Old Testament recognize, is particularly important in a discussion of the development of the divine character, because embodiedness is an essential component of the way human readers perceive any character. Sommer argued effectively for what he called a "fluidity model," which includes two aspects. The first is the fluidity of divine selfhood, which means that "a deity can produce many small-scale manifestations that enjoy some degree of independence without becoming separate deities."[53] The second aspect of the fluidity model is the "multiplicity of divine embodiment," the idea that God could be present in various ways in multiple places at the same time.[54]

Ultimately, as Sommer went on to demonstrate, strong streams of tradition in the Old Testament, those he labels as "Deuteronomic" and "Priestly," rejected the fluidity model, but they did not succeed in removing it entirely from Israel's sacred texts, nor from the ongoing practices of some Jewish communities.[55]

Through the use of source criticism, these opposing views of God's embodiedness can be set up as an intrabiblical debate, which Sommer did.[56] Such conclusions work well within the dialogical model of Old Testament theology, but a narrative approach will have to ask a different question: When and where in the story does God show up with a body of some kind, and what is the narrative function of that body? We can also observe the characteristics of particular embodiments and how they help to determine the nature of the divine character who possesses them.

## On the Act of Reading Biblical Narrative

When biblical scholarship turned its attention to the study of narrative during the last quarter of the twentieth century, it inherited a massive amount of work that had been done on this subject within the fields of philosophical hermeneutics and literary theory. Two of the most influential figures in these areas have been Erich Auerbach and Paul Ricoeur. In 1953, Auerbach published his monumental work, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, in which he began his discussion of narrative theory with a comparison of biblical narrative to other narratives from the ancient world. His primary examples were the story of Odysseus's return home in book 19 of *The Odyssey* and the Akedah ("binding" of Isaac) story in Genesis 22.[57] Though Auerbach was not a biblical scholar, his use of the latter text ensured that his work would receive significant attention within biblical scholarship.

A prominent early figure in the process of incorporating narrative theory into biblical studies was Hans Frei, who moved in a particular direction using some of Auerbach's ideas and brought the problematic phrase "realistic narrative" to the center of the discussion of biblical narrative. Frei defined this kind of writing as "that kind in which subject and social setting belong together, and characters and external circumstances fitly render each other."[58] His next step was to describe such "realistic narrative" as "history-like," in an effort to emphasize what he saw as a connection between biblical story and the "real world," while avoiding a heavy literalism.[59]

The difficulties inherent in Frei's work are best demonstrated by comparing it to the contemporaneous work of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur.[60] Perhaps the most significant difference between the work of these

two is their understanding of the role of the reader. Frei's emphasis on a realistic and "self-referential" text, on the one hand, inevitably led to an exaggerated understanding of the text's autonomy and left little, if any, room for the reader to play a role in the construction of meaning.[61] Ricoeur, on the other hand, argued that texts do not function autonomously but are dependent on the reader to determine the meaning of the language of which they consist.[62] Ricoeur's most overt biblical work was his collaborative volume with André Lacocque called *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, in which Ricoeur argued for a sense of correspondence between the world of the text and the world of the reader.[63] Although the text must be both the starting point and ending point of Old Testament theology, particularly when operating with a narrative approach, the simplistic idea of a reading experience determined entirely by the text, independent of the experience and identity of the reader, is untenable. Much of Ricoeur's work has focused on the significance of metaphor and symbol, elements that draw deliberately on the active participation of the reader.[64] All of the readings in this book involve choices that I have made, and these choices cannot be entirely separated from my identity and experience. A keen awareness of how the act of reading works will allow us to keep our observations about the divine character presented in the Old Testament as closely connected to the text as possible.[65] Perhaps the best sense of balance on this point is provided by Walter Brueggemann, who at once insists that the "utterance" within the text is the only object of study for Old Testament theology and that the text engages and demands the full imagination of the reader.[66]

A recent study by Greger Andersonn, *Untamable Texts: Literary Studies and Narrative Theory in the Books of Samuel*, raised serious questions about the ways in which biblical scholars have conducted what they have called literary study of biblical narratives. Andersonn seemed particularly bothered by literary interpretations that arrive at conclusions very different from what he called "more conventional readings" of "common readers." He labeled such interpretations as "disquieting" and claimed to find inadequate explanations in the work of biblical literary critics as to why their readings are so different from "common" readings. Andersonn argued that "many critics suggest that . . . common readers misread these texts, whether because they do not have a general ability to understand literary narratives or . . . [because they] have not applied this ability when reading these particular texts."[67] He expressed dislike for the frequently proposed reasons for this misreading: "their unfamiliarity with the specific poetics of the Bible, their misapprehension of the genre of these texts, or . . . [their being] misled by their religious beliefs."[68] It has been

my experience, however, from a quarter century of interacting in the classroom with these "more conventional readings," that it is precisely the last of these three causes that is the culprit. Readers come to the Bible with so firm a sense of the character traits of God, given to them by their religious traditions, that they fail to see and acknowledge what is plain on the pages of the Bible. The virtue of any particular poetics is not in its rightness but in its ability to help the reader see what is on the page. Where I find more sympathy with Andersonn is in his identification of some readers' literary interpretations that go another step to replace the preconceptions of common readings with the readers' own, thus "taming" the texts in a different way, by finding hidden meanings.[69]

My own intent is to use a narrative approach not to expose hidden meanings but to help the reader focus on what is on the page. In doing so, I also wish to avoid the common practice of finding a "moral" or "lesson" in a story. Such an approach too often assumes that stories are mere vehicles or packages that contain propositions that can be extracted from them. My own conviction, which I acknowledge can require greater patience and may be less immediately satisfying, is that stories work on their hearers/readers, and the goal of interpretation is to bring more careful attention to narratives while resisting the temptation to explain them or reduce them to pithy maxims.

A study like this one must seek to walk very carefully along a narrow ridge, because there is a constant danger of drifting off in two problematic directions. The first area of potential error involves implying that the God of Judaism or Christianity, a being outside of the biblical text, has been going through some process of maturation. Such an implication is outside the purview of this study and is thoroughly untestable. It is moderately challenging to keep one's thinking about this subject limited to the deity presented as a literary character inside the text, and it is exceedingly difficult to keep one's language inside these boundaries. The second kind of error is to presume a kind of historical development in religious thought that led from a "primitive" understanding of God to a more sophisticated one, and that ancient Israel's course along this path can be charted by tracing the ways of presenting the deity in the literature of the Old Testament along a historical trajectory.

This study will seek to avoid these kinds of missteps and will operate within one basic approach with one assumption. It will proceed by looking at the divine character presented in the pages of the Old Testament and asking how that character behaves in different parts of the story. I am assuming that both the writers of the books that form the narrative end of the Bible and the final shapers of the biblical literature lived in the Persian period, in the late sixth through fourth centuries bce. This means that the divine behavior described in

Ezra-Nehemiah most closely reflects their own religious experience, and that the divine behavior in the earlier parts of the story reflects the way they thought about the religious experience of their ancestors. I am convinced that it can be clearly demonstrated that the divine character in the literature they preserved about their ancestors behaved very differently from the divine character in the literature that illustrates their own experience. This means that it is possible to talk about this latter portrayal of God as "mature," as long as such a description is used carefully. Most significantly, the God portrayed in these latter texts is the product of a long tradition of theological reflection, which had passed through a long and difficult story of building a society, watching that society be destroyed, being dispersed, and struggling to rebuild or find a permanent way of life in a foreign world. The writers and editors asked hard questions about how their God was involved in that process, and some of their seasoned answers lie in the texts they produced, which were shaped to tell a continuous story and which can be read theologically from beginning to end.

## Conclusion

If I might borrow language to which we have become accustomed, at least by way of analogy, have we reached a point of conflict between a diachronic approach to narrative and a synchronic approach to narrative? Do we look at the story of God in the Hebrew Scriptures all at once, seeking language that speaks of that whole story at the same time, or do we follow that character through narrative time, arriving at an articulation of the nature of God's character that has left some aspects behind and arrived at a particular identity? In his sequel to *God: A Biography*, a work primarily about the Christian New Testament called *Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God*, Jack Miles attached an epilogue called "On Writing the Lives of God." In this reflection on his two-volume project, Miles asserted two rules that he followed throughout the process. His second rule was "that conflict in the divine character, rather than being described or analyzed systematically, as in theology, should emerge in the course of the narrative."[70] The accusation about the systematic tendencies of theology, which Miles articulated in this rule, was largely correct up to the time of his writing and remains more or less intact today, even for the field of Old Testament theology, as I have demonstrated in the preceding discussion. Is this way of operating still appropriate, however, or is it time for biblical theology to move away from it at a more determined pace? If biblical theology is to move in a more deliberate narrative direction, it will need to find a way to tend to this impasse, which may involve letting go of the divine character from which the

Bible is trying to lead us away. The dialogical approach has done great service in identifying the multiplicity of voices in the text, but the voice from the earlier portions of the story is still too loud. The voice at the end of the story must eventually be allowed to speak alone, or it will not be adequately heard.

The subsequent chapters of this book will examine stages in the development of the divine character and analyze the ways that Old Testament theology has tended to the stages.

Chapter 2 will open with an examination of the divine character found at the beginning of the book of Genesis and will move from there to look at divine characterization in other creation texts, particularly in Psalms. This being is characterized by power and creativity but also by uncertainty and even naïveté. Biblical theologians have naturally been drawn to this characterization and the parts of the Bible that contain it because of this captivating energy. This is where the Bible begins, and it is a focal point for both Jewish and Christian liturgy and confession. After an examination of what Old Testament theology looks like when these texts and the God they portray are the primary focus, the chapter will end with the question of what we do with these portrayals now that such activity is in the distant past.

Chapter 3 will chart the movement of the biblical story into the ancestral, exodus, and wilderness materials, which present a somewhat different portrayal of the divine being. A more certain voice emerges as God speaks to the ancestors and to Moses, but an inconsistency of behavior emerges ever more clearly. God makes promises to the ancestors but then seems to forget them for long periods of time. The relationship with Israel in the wilderness is complex and hyperemotional. The narrative power of these portrayals has earned them a prominent place in many works of Old Testament theology, but this is not a divine character who fits easily into the later developments of Jewish and Christian religion. Again, an important question at the end of the chapter will concern what we can do with these portraits of God that ceased to be part of the religious experience of writers and readers of the Bible, including ourselves.

Chapter 4 will examine the divine character who builds the nation of Israel. Although this divine project does not have a clear beginning point in the Old Testament, it comes to the forefront in Joshua and the books that follow it. This part of the story presents an active, energetic God, but at the same time this character is busy authorizing and developing institutions that will mediate the divine presence. Because palace/king and temple/priest are included in these institutions, this part of the story still lends itself to a theology of the Old Testament focused upon an active sense of God's presence and work in the world. These characters represent and act for God in a way that

is visibly commanding. Nevertheless, the end of the monarchy is a tremendous theological challenge within the Old Testament itself and presents an even greater disconnect between the divine character in the text and later readers of that text.

The part of God's story that turns to a focus on punishment and destruction, which is the subject of chapter 5, is found in much of the books of Kings and Chronicles and is also the primary subject of the Prophetic literature. In what has often been labeled the Deuteronomic view, Israel's failure is blamed on Israel's sin and disloyalty to God. Casting the misfortunes of Israel as YHWH's punishment allows the divine character to remain an active figure in the text, even as the work that this being has accomplished in the earlier parts of the story is being completely dismantled. The work of God becomes, in Jeremiah's words, "tearing down, overthrowing, uprooting, and destroying." Thus, a great deal of attention to this character still fits into treatments of Old Testament theology that presented God as a "mighty actor." The theology of retribution assumed in such treatments, however, begins to become suspect even in the Bible, and it is not a view with which many later readers are comfortable, because of both its harshness and its oversimplifications.

Chapter 6 will examine the narrative conclusion of the Hebrew Bible found in the book of Ezra-Nehemiah, where the portrayal of God is quite different from that in earlier books of the canon. This God moves in the shadows, indirectly influencing events, and does not perform "mighty acts." Such a divine character did not fit well into the Biblical Theology movement of the twentieth century, and, even though that approach has been left behind, some of its habits and tendencies remain. Among them is a relative neglect of biblical literature that does not present an active, energetic, and exciting divine character. Some portions of the Wisdom literature, along with books such as Esther and Daniel, also participate in this kind of portrayal. This chapter will examine these portraits and attempt to move them toward the center of a theology of the Old Testament by allowing them their own voice and their own place to speak that is not drowned out by the claims of mighty acts.

## Notes

1. There are two primary reasons that terminology is difficult here. The first is that there is significant overlap between the Tanak of Judaism and the Old Testament canons of various Christian traditions. In some contexts, the hybrid term "Hebrew Bible" partially resolves this problem, but within each of these religious traditions this term misses the mark in various ways. The second problem is that in Christian scholarship Old Testament theology participates in the separate subdiscipline of biblical theology. I will use the term "Old Testament theology," because I

live and write in the context of the Christian tradition and because I think that an entirely separate, self-contained formulation concerning this part of the canon is necessary before entering into the formulation of a biblical theology. Such an approach was espoused, perhaps surprisingly, by Brevard S. Childs, though he may have had difficulty practicing it consistently. See Childs's *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 6–10, and *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 95–102.

2. This general sense of direction is exemplified by a work like Terence E. Fretheim's *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005).

3. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 39.

4. Ibid., 39–40.

5. Ibid., 117–44. This development was present in nascent form in Brueggemann's earlier work, which appeared in a pair of brilliant journal articles. These were "A Shape for Old Testament Theology I: Structure Legitimation," *CBQ* 47 (1985): 28–46, and "A Shape for Old Testament Theology II: Embrace of Pain," *CBQ* 47 (1985): 395–415. Again, although both aspects are given a significant voice and a powerful sense of tension between the two is developed, this approach seems to require allowing the "structure legitimation" (core-testimony) aspect to go first and establish the parameters of the discussion.

6. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 122.

7. Karl Allen Kuhn, *Having Words with God: The Bible as Conversation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 11.

8. Ibid., 22–28.

9. Ibid., 29–30.

10. Ibid., 33–44.

11. Ibid, 142.

12. Benjamin D. Sommer has recently published a substantial and important article called "Dialectical Biblical Theology: A Jewish Approach to Reading Scripture Theologically." This article is the first chapter in *Biblical Theology: Introducing the Conversation,* ed. Leo G. Perdue, Robert Morgan, and Benjamin D. Sommer (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009). This attempt to articulate a biblical theology compatible with Jewish faith and scholarship is nascent, and where it might situate itself within the landscape of biblical theology is hard to say.

13. Not least among these problems are the potential racial undertones involved in using the language of light and dark as a metaphorical expression of good and bad.

14. Walter Dietrich and Christian Link, *Die dunklen Seiten Gottes: Willkür und Gewalt* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner, 2000), 148–68. This work frequently moves into the New Testament and even the larger discussion of Christian dogmatics, but it does a more than adequate job of isolating the Old Testament presentation of such issues and treating this presentation on its own terms first.

15. John Barton, "The Dark Side of God in the Old Testament," in *Ethical and Unethical in the Old Testament: God and Humans in Dialogue*, ed. Katharine Dell (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 130–34.

16. See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981), 114–30; and Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 23–42. Of course, Alter had borrowed significantly from a large body of work on characterization in the general field of literary criticism. Humphreys himself points to the classic work of E. M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel* (London: Edward Arnold, 1927), 65–75.

17. W. Lee Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis: A Narrative Appraisal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 241.

18. Ibid., 21.

19. Phyllis Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 216–23.

20. Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 470–71.

21. Dale Patrick, *The Rendering of God in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 25–27.

22. Ibid., 59–60.

23. Eric A. Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010). Among the important functions of narrative that Seibert presents are "to encourage certain behaviors and beliefs" (138) and "to inspire hope and confidence in the face of powerful threats" (142). The idea that the needs of writers and readers change and grow is not in conflict with the growth of a character. Indeed, they may even grow together.

24. Richard Elliott Friedman, *The Disappearance of God: A Divine Mystery* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995), 78–89. Friedman does give some attention to the 1983 work of Samuel Balentine, *The Hidden God: The Hiding of the Face of God in the Old Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). Although this book does give careful attention to the phrase "hide the face" and the uses of the motif it generates, Balentine did not look for the development of this character trait through a suggested plot of the biblical story.

25. This essay was originally published as "Offene Fragen im Umk einer Theologi des Alten Testaments," *TLZ* 88 (1963): 401–16.

26. Magne Saebo, "Yahweh as *Deus absconditus*: Some Remarks on a Dictum by Gerhard von Rad," in *Shall Not the Judge of All the Earth Do What Is Right? Studies on the Nature of God in Tribute to James L. Crenshaw*, ed. David Penchansky and Paul L. Redditt (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 44.

27. Ibid.

28. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 2:415.

29. Friedman, *Disappearance of God*, 82–84.

30. Ibid., 85.

31. Ibid., 88–89.

32. Jack Miles, *God: A Biography* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 372.

33. Ibid., 389.

34. Ibid., 398–401.

35. Ibid., 402.

36. Ibid., 403.

37. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 318–19.

38. Harold Bloom, *Jesus and Yahweh: The Names Divine* (New York: Riverhead, 2005), 200–205. Bloom is very much dependent upon the kabbalistic notion of *zimzum*, or self-emptying, here.

39. Ibid., 116–17.

40. Ibid., 129–31.

41. Ibid., 214.

42. Jerome Segal, *Joseph's Bones: Understanding the Struggle between God and Mankind in the Bible* (New York: Riverhead, 2007), ix–xi.

43. Ibid., 208. The appearance of the word *evolution* in this quotation directs attention to the fascinating work of Robert Wright in *The Evolution of God* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009). Attention to this work does not fit within the primary discussion of this book, because its concern is with the history of Middle Eastern religions, not with the development of a divine character within the narrative of the biblical canon. Still, Wright arrives at some conclusions that are remarkable parallels to this discussion. Particularly, he notes that the deity of Israelite religion ends up as "a remote, even transcendent God, whose presence is felt subtly, but is portrayed earlier in Israel's history as "a hands-on deity" (103). Wright's conclusions are based upon a historically reconstructed text and a great deal of archaeological information.

44. James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 354–56.

45. On this aspect of playfulness, see Bloom, *Jesus and Yahweh*, 201–2.

46. Miles explains this as his goal in *God*, 8–10. Brueggemann states this goal in no uncertain terms: "A student of Old Testament theology must pay close attention to the shape character, and details of the utterance, for it is in, with, and under the utterance that we have the God of Israel, and nowhere else. See *Theology of the Old Testament*, 122.

47. Chronicles is much more problematic in this regard. It is universally understood to be later than the Pentateuch and the Deuteronomistic History, but it tells the same story, beginning and ending at the same place. It also sits in two very different places in the two primary canonical traditions. Isaac Kalimi has demonstrated in great detail how the writer(s) of Chronicles develop(s) characters, adapting the material found in the Deuteronomistic History to "render" characters "more significant" or "less significant." See *The Reshaping of Ancient Israelite History in Chronicles* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 166–79. Kalimi does not deal specifically with the rendering of the divine character. I would also include here the Prophetic literature, which clearly fits into this part of the story, specifically Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. The problem of Chronicles and its relation to Samuel and Kings will be addressed more extensively in chapter 4 of this book.

48. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 86–88. Sternberg refers to these two "models of narration" as "inspirational" and "empirical."

49. Marvin A. Sweeney, *Reading the Hebrew Bible after the Shoah: Engaging Holocaust Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 188–207.

50. In addition, Michael Fishbane has demonstrated the lengths to which early rabbinic interpretation also went to recover a divine personality, particularly using the display of divine emotion. The activities and emotions he identifies—"memory and mourning; sympathy and sorrow; desolation and despair"—seem to be a response to the distinctive lack of pathos demonstrated by the divine character in the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures. See *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 160–62.

51. It may well be that Christian theologians have a built-in resistance to this idea, based on a desire to save the embodiment of God for the incarnation presented in the New Testament.

52. Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1–12.

53. Ibid., 38. Examples of this phenomenon are abundant in the Old Testament, as Sommer demonstrates, and include the attachment of YHWH to specific locations and the appearance of God as various kinds of beings, such as the "angel of the LORD" (38–44).

54. Ibid., 44–54.

55. Ibid., 58–79.

56. Ibid., 124–26.

57. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 7–23.

58. Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 13. Here Frei acknowledged the influence of the work of Erich Auerbach on his own understanding of narrative. Most significant was Auerbach's discussion of the Akedah story of Genesis 22 in *Mimesis.*

59. Ibid, 3. Frei's work was influential in what eventually developed into the "Yale school" of hermeneutics. See further discussion of this in Mark McEntire, *Dangerous Worlds: Living and Dying in Biblical Texts* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2004), 3–4.

60. See the very careful analysis of the conflict between Frei and Ricoeur by Gary Comstock in "Truth or Meaning: Ricoeur versus Frei on Biblical Narrative," *JR* 66 (1986): 117–40, and "Two Types of Narrative Theology," *JAAR* 55 (1987): 687–717. Comstock is careful

to give much credit to Frei for the influence of his work on the study of biblical narrative but takes his own position much closer to Ricoeur.

61. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), xiii–xvii.

62. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1:77–82.

63. André Lacocque and Paul Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 50–54. On this point, the position of Ricoeur has much in common with the influential work of Hans Georg Gadamer, who used the image of "horizons" to talk about the world of the text and the world of the reader and argued that meaning is formed at the point where those horizons meet, or "fuse." See Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1975), 269–78. Dan R. Stiver has provided an excellent illustration of the advantages of Gadamer's "fusion" model over Frei's concept of "absorption" in *Theology after Ricoeur: New Directions in Hermeneutical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 50–55.

64. For more on this element of Ricoeur's work and its implications for the reading of the Bible, see Lewis Mudge, "Paul Ricoeur on Biblical Interpretation," in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 4.

65. On the importance of "self-disclosure" in the practice of Old Testament theology, see Leo G. Perdue, *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology: After the Collapse of History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 346–48.

66. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 57–58, 122.

67. Greger Andersonn, *Untamable Texts: Literary Studies and Narrative Theory in the Books of Samuel* (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 253.

68. Ibid.

69. Ibid., 264–65.

70. Jack Miles, *Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God* (New York: Knopf, 2001), 248.