

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_sbct-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_sbct-01.php)

# GOD'S CHARACTER AND THE WHOLENESS OF SCRIPTURE

P. R. HOUSE, BEESON DIVINITY SCHOOL, ALABAMA

Great unified narratives include the consistent portrayal of characters, and one of the chief evidences for the wholeness of Scripture is its writers' consistent witness to the wholeness of the Bible's main character, the one God, the living Lord. Any biblical-theological discussion of that character ought to be grounded in a biblical text or texts that span the canon. Thus, this article focuses on the character of Yahweh in Old Testament theology based on Exodus 34:6-7 and some of the many subsequent texts that cite or reflect the themes found in that text. This choice of a passage is hardly astounding, given the fact that interpreters as diverse as Phyllis Trible, Brevard Childs, Walter Brueggemann, Walter Kaiser, and Scott Hafemann consider the text pivotal for biblical theology as it relates to the nature of God as depicted in the Scriptures. The fact that this passage relates aspects of God's nature that may seem contradictory at first also makes the passage a foundational text, as does the fact that it is referenced in the Prophets, Writings and New Testament.

## A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF EXODUS 34:6-7

Exodus 34:6-7 occurs within the context of the giving and receiving of the Sinai covenant. More specifically, it falls within Exodus 32-34, a narrative passage that relates Israel's disobedience in the molten calf incident. Moses meets with Yahweh for a lengthy period of time. The people make and worship an image in the meantime. Thus, Yahweh tells Moses that he will destroy the nation and begin anew with Moses. Moses, Yahweh's friend, intercedes and Yahweh relents. The people have vacated the covenant, so Moses smashes the covenant stones that symbolize that covenant. God punishes the people and threatens to withhold his presence, and Moses seeks to renew the covenant. To this end he prays that the Lord will forgive the nation and once again be in Israel's midst and lead them towards their new land. Thus, the context includes a covenantal relationship, disobedience by one covenant partner, intercessory prayer, and a sorrowful, penitent people.

In 34:1-5 Yahweh accedes to this intercessory request. He will forgive the people. He will not destroy them and start over with Moses. But why does he do so? On what basis does he forgive, punish or seemingly do nothing? The answers to these questions are crucial, since they indicate the bases upon which the Israel-Yahweh relationship, which is likely to be marred by sin in the future, may be restored. It also gets to the heart of how Israel may understand how Yahweh acts. Is he unstable? Is he capricious? Or are there some bedrock qualities to his character? In other words, Moses wants to understand why Yahweh put some of the people to death, listened favourably to Moses' intercession, and forgave the nation as a whole in the end.

Yahweh responds in two basic parts. He states that he is 'merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and sin...'. At the same time, he 'will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation' (34:6-7). It is on the basis of this self-characterization that Yahweh re-establishes the covenant with the people (34:8-28).

Scott Hafemann summarises this two-fold characterization by writing, 'As his dealings with Israel after the golden calf illustrate, God is both compassionate and patient with his people, yet he will not compromise his own righteousness by disregarding their sin. Moreover, the renewal of the covenant demonstrates that it is YHWH's mercy which prevails over judgment when it encounters those who have "found favor in his sight" (cf. again 34:9).'<sup>1</sup> What of the severity of the punishment? Hafemann adds, 'Indeed, YHWH's mercy cannot be compared to his judgment in terms of its scope and impact, as the comparison between the "thousands" and the "third and fourth generation" in 34:7 illustrates.'<sup>2</sup> It is natural to consider the justice of one generation suffering because of the sins of their predecessors, as I will discuss later, but this concern must be tempered by the awareness of God's even greater compassion.

The adjectives in Exodus 34:6-7 are significant. According to Mike Butterworth, the terms 'compassionate and merciful' appear together eleven times in the Bible. Thus, together they form a liturgical formula based on

---

<sup>1</sup> Scott J. Hafemann, *Paul, Moses, and the History of Israel: The Letter/Spirit Contrast and the Argument from Scripture in 2 Corinthians 3* (WUNT 81; Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck] 1995), p. 217.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

common understandings of the two words.<sup>3</sup> ‘Compassion’ comes from a root used for ‘womb’ and in usage includes motherly compassion (see 1 Kgs 3:26). It is a term used to describe emotions, such as God’s unwillingness to give Israel up (Hos. 11:8). John Mackay summarizes the term by writing, “‘Compassionate’ recalls a mother’s love for her child, with a deep understanding of its weakness and need, keeping looking after it whatever its behavior or thanklessness. This is not a response to human merit, but a display of divine sympathy which shows favor when punishment might well have been expected.”<sup>4</sup>

The instances of ‘merciful’ in the Old Testament likewise indicate a context of grace. H. J. Stoebe asserts that the word originated in courtly language, and originally indicated unexpected or unearned favour shown to a servant by a kind king. As time passed, the word became more static, and then came to mean kindness of any type.<sup>5</sup> Robert Dentan observes that Proverbs 14:21, 31; 19:17; and 28:8 use the term to describe someone’s kindness to the poor.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the term denotes how a person helps another out of decency and kindness.

Further, the Lord is ‘slow to anger’. Yahweh is longsuffering with sinners, as his patience with Israel to this point in Exodus signifies. Next, the passage states that Yahweh is ‘full of steadfast, covenant-type love and faithfulness’. Though the word *hesed* appears in several covenantal texts, it does not always do so. In fact, Dentan again notes the term’s presence in Proverbs 3:3; 14:22; 16:6; and 20:28, none of which are in a specifically covenantal context.<sup>7</sup> Still, the covenant context is part of the word’s usage, so it is likely that non-covenantal texts have something like ‘covenant-type love’ in mind. The term is flexible enough to cover any situation in which solid loyalty is necessary. Similarly, ‘faithfulness’ indicates the durability of God’s loyalty. It highlights God’s unshakable commitment to his promises.<sup>8</sup> God is every bit as loyal and faithful as he is kind and

---

<sup>3</sup> Mike Butterworth, ‘*rhm*,’ in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis: Volume 3*, ed. Willem VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), p. 1094.

<sup>4</sup> John L. Mackay, *Exodus* (Mentor Commentary Series; Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2001), p. 563.

<sup>5</sup> H. J. Stoebe, ‘*hnn*, to be gracious,’ in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament: Volume 1*, ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, trans. Mark Biddle (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), pp. 442-3.

<sup>6</sup> Robert C. Dentan, ‘The Literary Affinities of Exodus 34:6f.’ *VT* 13 (1963), p. 42.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>8</sup> Mackay, *Exodus*, p. 563.

helpful. As Nahum Sarna explains, the term 'encompasses reliability, durability, and faithfulness. The combination of terms expresses God's absolute and eternal dependability in dispensing his benefactions.'<sup>9</sup> The word also denotes truthfulness and trustworthiness.<sup>10</sup> So the term describes a person whose truthfulness and trustworthiness endure dependably.

The next phrase highlights the scope of God's kindness, grace, and faithfulness. God guards his loyalty for thousands. If Deuteronomy 7:9-10 may be read as explanatory of this verse, then thousands of generations, not persons are meant.<sup>11</sup> The contrastive nature of the second part of the verse also points in this direction. Again, whatever one decides about the nature of the third and fourth generations of the punished, one has to note the greater scope of the kindness.

Finally, the text claims that God forgives, or 'carries', sins of all varieties. Mackay comments, 'The whole range of human disregard of the Lord may be met with forgiveness.'<sup>12</sup> God bears the sins of sinners. He also reveals ways that sins may be covered. For instance, Victor Hamilton observes that the scapegoat in Leviticus 16 and the suffering servant of Isaiah 53:12 also bear sins.<sup>13</sup> God's willingness to forgive is as thorough as his other traits.

God's righteousness is just as dependable as his kindness. He will by no means clear the guilty. He does not treat as innocent those who are not innocent. Of course, at times it seems that he does just that, as texts that discuss theodicy issues attest. Indeed God's slowness of anger might cause some persons to call his righteousness into question, so this phrase offers a good corrective.

Now one of the more controversial portions of the text unfolds. The passage states that God visits, or judges, the sins of the fathers on the third and fourth generations. As is well known, Ezekiel 18:17-20 claims that God only punishes people for their own sins. Or does it? The passage states that the exiles cannot blame their parents for their situation, for they

---

<sup>9</sup> Nahum Sarna, *Exodus* (JPS Torah Commentary; New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), p. 216.

<sup>10</sup> Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament: Volume 1*, trans. M. E. J. Richardson, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 68-9.

<sup>11</sup> See Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 343.

<sup>12</sup> Mackay, *Exodus*, p. 564.

<sup>13</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, 'ns', *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis: Volume 3* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), p. 163.

have sinned as well. Thus, Ezekiel does not state that people never suffer for the sins of others. Such a claim would contradict Ezekiel's own experience as a faithful person taken into exile. The same may be said of Jeremiah's kidnapping to Egypt. Rather, it tells a rebellious generation to stop blaming others, for they have themselves sinned against God. Further, parallel texts that use the phrase 'sins of the fathers', such as Leviticus 26:39-40, Isaiah 14:21, Nehemiah 9:2, etc., all use the term in the context of when both fathers and sons have sinned. Finally, Exodus 20:5 uses the phrase found here with the important inclusion of the infinitive construct 'of those who hate me'. As Walter Kaiser asserts, it is important to note this qualifier, since it is likely that it is to be understood in Exodus 34.<sup>14</sup>

Such is the character of God. These are the reasons why he both judges the instigators of the golden calf incident who will not repent and yet carries the sins of the nation as a whole. This God is at heart merciful, gracious, kind, and steady. These are his primary traits. Yet he is also strong in his unwillingness to leave sin unchecked or unpunished. He explains these complementary characteristics at a crucial juncture in Israelite history. Such self-revelation is not the act of an unstable person. It is the act of an honest, consistent character. Yet as the Bible unfolds it is also increasingly the act of a complex character.

#### SOME USES OF EXODUS 34:6-7 IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Several significant passages reflect application of Exodus 34:6-7. This reflection begins as soon as Numbers 14:18-19, when Moses uses phrases from Exodus 34:6-7 to intercede for sinful Israel. It is impossible to discuss all of these in detail, so some selected ones that relate to forgiveness and judgment in particular will be highlighted. Texts that quote extensively are particularly important, since they are more likely related to the passage than texts that may just allude to it. Though other passages could be selected, this section of the paper highlights Joel 2:12-13, Jonah 4:2, Nahum 1:3 and Lamentations 3:19-38. As Brevard Childs indicates, taken together these and other texts like them provide 'an eloquent testimony to the centrality of this understanding of God's person'.<sup>15</sup>

Joel is notoriously hard to date with anything approaching scholarly consensus. Nonetheless, the book's message is fairly clear, particularly in

---

<sup>14</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr, "Exodus," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Volume 2* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), p. 486.

<sup>15</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), p. 612.

the opening stages. Yahweh declares the need for Israel to fast, pray, and return to him. A terrible locust plague has occurred or will occur, and the prophet compares this plague to a great army swarming over the land. For Israel to 'return' to Yahweh means changing the path they are currently treading. Because sin is probably the thing they must turn from, the concept is normally translated 'repent'.

Joel bases his exhortation on the nature of God. He repeats the Exodus 34:6-7 statement as a statement of faith. The people may and should return to the Lord, for God is merciful and compassionate (the two terms trade places here from the Exodus formula), slow to anger, and filled with covenant loyalty and graciousness. If these things were not so, Joel seems to argue, the Lord would not have sent a prophet or a plague to warn them. If these things were not so, then the Lord would have punished their sins already. God's patience and compassion mean that time for change has been offered, yet because the Lord does not clear the guilty, which seems to be understood here given the preaching of judgment and repentance, the people must indeed turn from their sin and return to their God. They cannot presume upon Yahweh's patience.

The passage continues by adding a logical entailment of what has been professed thus far. Joel asserts that Yahweh 'relents from [sending] disaster'. God, who will not clear the guilty, has some means in mind of punishing the guilty. He has some established ways of judging right and wrong and levying punishment. The existence of the Mosaic covenant makes this point clear, as does the history of God's dealings with Egypt at the time of the exodus. God knows how to punish sin, as sinners since Adam and Eve have discovered. At the same time, his compassion means that this knowledge and willingness does not mean that he takes joy in this process of punishing. Rather, the Bible speaks of God's grief and sorrow over such things (Gen. 6:5-9). The prophet concludes with the observation that 'who knows, he may turn and relent and leave a blessing behind him'. As has been stated, for the people to return to God they must turn from the path of sin. For blessing to occur the Lord must turn from his path of punishment. The prophet indicates that the people's turning from their unjustified paths/acts of sin may well (it is up to God) result in the Lord's turning from his justifiable plans to send punishment. God may relent 'from doing harm' in the sense of not sending disaster, as John Barton accurately translates and interprets the phrase.<sup>16</sup> Two turnings are needed,

---

<sup>16</sup> John Barton, *Joel and Obadiah* (Old Testament Library; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), pp. 76, 81.

then, but only one of them requires turning from sin, and that is the turning *the people* must do.

If this reading is accurate, then what of the traditional English translation of *niham*, which is 'repent'? First, it is important to note that this is not the typical word translated 'repent'. That word is *shuv*, and it means 'turn, return', as has already been noted. Further on this point, 'repent' is a theological summary word for what 'turn' means when one turns from sin, which is not the meaning of the word in question. The moral force of the term must be determined from the context. In other words, one only knows if *shuv* means 'turn' or 'repent' based on context.

Second, the normal meaning of *niham* in the Piel stem is 'take comfort, take encouragement from'.<sup>17</sup> H. W. Wolff adds that it basically means 'an emotional act of spiritual relief'.<sup>18</sup> In other stems it can mean regret or sorrow, or it can mean the changing of one's mind, depending on the context. In the present context, a more literal meaning of the verse might be that when repentance occurs the Lord 'takes comfort (in the sense of "spiritual relief") concerning the disaster' he had thought to send. In other words, the Lord comforts himself with the fact that judgment is not needed. The opposite of such comfort appears in Jeremiah 31:15, where Rachel refuses to be comforted because of her children's terrible situation.

Third, this verb has always presented a problem in English translations because it is basically an internal emotion. So if one translates it as 'regret' one has to decide if 'regret' implies a mistake or outright wrongdoing. Even from the beginning of English translations the verb has been treated as an anthropomorphism, in other words as a term of sorrow that communicates with human readers, but which may not literally apply to God. William Tyndale offers the following marginal note on the verb when it appears in 1 Samuel 15: 'The repentance of God is...attributed to God after the manner of speech...for men cannot otherwise speak of God.'<sup>19</sup> Also, as long as 'repent' had its fluid sixteenth-century meaning that included all sorts of sorrow, instead of the sole meaning of moral

---

<sup>17</sup> Koehler, Baumgartner, et al., *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament: Volume 1*, pp. 688-9.

<sup>18</sup> H. W. Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), p. 154.

<sup>19</sup> William Tyndale, *Tyndale's Old Testament: Being the Pentateuch of 1530, Joshua to 2 Chronicles of 1537, and Jonah*, ed. David Daniell (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 400. For a discussion of Tyndale's work on Old Testament narratives see David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 333-57.

culpability that it has today, this rendering was more meaningful, though perhaps better translations could have been made even then.

Fourth, as is true of *shuv*, context must decide the nature of the taking comfort. Thus, it is simply incorrect to treat this text as teaching that 'God repents' as if the normal word or a suitable synonym appears in the passage. God's taking comfort in this case represents a justifiable relenting from a justifiable action, as in Jeremiah 42:11, though in that case the relenting is from judgment already begun.

What of the word usually translated 'evil'? This word (*ra*) is used hundreds of times in the Old Testament to designate everything from bad food to moral evil. Its numerous uses in numerous contexts make it necessary to determine how to translate it in each individual context. Here the term most likely means 'disaster' in the sense of the plagues God had threatened to send, as Barton and Baldwin argue. In context the 'bad' equals what God was going to send. Since the people were sinning and in need of turning, it is hardly wrong for the God who does not clear the guilty to plan a plague. Joel interprets what it meant for the Lord to turn from punishing Israel after Exodus' golden calf incident, and this same type of interpretation/application is apparent in later texts. What was coming was a disaster, and that was certainly 'bad' from the people's standpoint. It was not a moral wrong on God's part according to the Torah, nor was it a moral wrong to relent from sending the disaster based on being comforted by real repentance.

Joel 2:12-14 indicates that Yahweh is still willing to forgive people when they turn, as some of the Israelites did in Exodus 32-34. God's character remains consistent. The Exodus 34 passage is paradigmatic, not a one-time offering of kindness. It provides insight into how later writers can and should portray Yahweh. Israel can count on the permanent nature of these traits centuries after they were first declared.

The next quotation and application of Exodus 34:6-7 moves beyond Israel to include the Gentiles, in this case the Ninevites. Jonah has long been considered a fascinating narrative with many interpretative possibilities. The book's quotation of Exodus 34 is one of those intriguing aspects. Once Jonah finally preaches to Nineveh the people respond with the sort of fast called for in Joel 1-2. Upon entering into the fast the king of Nineveh says, 'Who knows? The God may turn and take comfort/relent. He may turn from his burning anger we may not perish' (3:9). The narrator adds, 'God saw their deeds – that they turned from their bad/disastrous paths, and he was comforted concerning the bad/disaster that he spoke (through Jonah) to do to them, and he did not do it' (3:10).

The king's statement mirrors Joel 2:12-14, while the narrator's statement about the Lord mirrors the result Joel had promised the people. Once again, the Lord turned from a justifiable path, while the people turned from an unjustifiable path. They turned, and God took comfort that the warning had its desired effect: they turned, which in this context means they repented. God was committed to eradicating sin from them, and he could either do so through judgment or through their turning. God's purposes were thereby fulfilled in this case without punishment. But he was comforted that such was not needed. He can revoke the threat out of compassion without clearing the guilty.<sup>20</sup>

Jonah 4:2 also cites and applies Exodus 34 concepts.<sup>21</sup> Jonah complains that the Lord has forgiven Nineveh, though the text does not state why the prophet is angry. He declares that the reason he did not want to go to the city in the first place was that he knew Yahweh is 'merciful and compassionate [the Joel order of the words], slow to anger and full of covenant-type loyalty, and takes comfort/relents concerning disaster/bad'. In other words he knows that what Joel 2:12-14 asserts is true, and he did not want these traits to be applied to Nineveh. But God does apply his character to Nineveh. He has pity for them because of their sin (4:10-11).

The book of Jonah indicates that God's characteristics do not just apply to his covenant people Israel. They apply to a Gentile nation as well. Thus, they are truly consistent traits. The Lord vastly prefers that sin be removed through turning to him by obeying the word he sends through his messengers. This grace is open to all that hear and respond appropriately.

Perhaps Jonah's problem is that he doubts that Yahweh truly refuses to clear the guilty. After all, he may reason, if Nineveh is not guilty, regardless of the era in question, then who is? As Tyndale translates 4:2, Jonah tells God he resents the fact that 'thou...repentest when thou art come to take punishment' (p. 643). As Joyce Baldwin writes, 'The people of Nineveh have been quick to acknowledge their guilt and to stake their hope on God's mercy. But in Jonah's eyes they deserve all that is coming to them. As soon as they have been spared will they not be as bad as ever?'<sup>22</sup> Of course, this is not Jonah's business. He is God's messenger, not God's judge. Still, God takes time to explain his mercy to Jonah in

---

<sup>20</sup> Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, p. 154.

<sup>21</sup> See James Limburg, *Hosea-Micah* (Interpretation; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), p. 154.

<sup>22</sup> Joyce Baldwin, 'Jonah' in *The Minor Prophets, An Exegetical and Expository Commentary: Volume 2*, ed. Thomas E. McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), p. 584.

4:10-11. By now the prophet should understand that the God who went to such lengths to send him to Nineveh is serious about mercy-induced turning from sin that leads to the elimination of the need for judgment.

In Nahum 1:2-8, however, the Lord proves that Jonah's concern that Yahweh is unwilling to clear the guilty is unfounded. Over a century after Jonah's ministry the Lord's prophet Nahum delivers a different application of Exodus 34:6-7.<sup>23</sup> In 1:3 he states that the Lord is 'slow to anger', the same term that appears earlier. But now the phrase 'but he will absolutely not clear the guilty' reappears. Slowness to anger does not mean an unwillingness to judge, even if such seems the case. God does send devastating punishment on this later generation of Ninevites. Neither Israel (see Joel) nor Assyria (see Jonah) maintained their repentance and renewal, so both the covenant people and the great conquering Gentile nation faced the Lord's wrath. Yet this wrath was indeed slow, for it did not emerge until decades, even centuries had passed. Still, it did emerge, so God's longsuffering kindness cannot be presumed upon forever. Nahum's application of Exodus 34:6-7 thereby emphasizes Yahweh's faithfulness to his word, to his people, and (in an ironic fashion) to the nations.<sup>24</sup>

The Writings segment of the Hebrew canon likewise testifies to the importance of Exodus 34:6-7 principles. Psalms 86:15; 103:8; and 145:8 cite the terminology in order to pray for preservation, thank the Lord for all his benefits, and express God's greatness respectively. Thus, in worship the concepts are used in new and appropriate settings. Nehemiah 9:17 cites the passage as evidence of God's kindness to rebellious Israel. Any or all of these texts would reward careful analysis and explication. But this part of the paper will focus on Lamentations 3:19-24, where the concepts are used to help bring comfort in the most devastating of circumstances.

Lamentations 1-2 declares that God has punished Israel. In fact, they have been recipients of the day of the Lord, the day of Yahweh's punishment. Thus, the people suffer greatly, admit their sin, and pray for

---

<sup>23</sup> Some scholars consider the quotation from Exodus 34 a gloss to soften the harsh rhetoric, but Tremper Longman III correctly argues that the presence of other Exodus imagery probably indicates that the quotation is original. See Tremper Longman III, 'Nahum' in *The Minor Prophets, An Exegetical and Expository Commentary: Volume 2*, ed. Thomas E. McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), pp. 788-9. For an older work that considers the quotation a gloss, consult J. M. P. Smith, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Micah, Zephaniah, and Nahum* (ICC; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911), pp. 288-9.

<sup>24</sup> See Marvin Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets: Volume 2* (Berit Olam; Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000), p. 428.

release. God has certainly proven able to refuse to clear the guilty. God has definitely been through in the visitation of iniquity. But what has become of God's mercy, compassion, and willingness to turn from the path of punishment now? A person identified only as 'the man' (3:1) steps forward to instruct the people. He details his own horrible pain and loss of hope in 3:1-18.

Having stated that he has seen 'affliction' in 3:1 and has been fed 'wormwood' in 3:15, the speaker asks God to 'remember' these facts (3:19). God's ability to remember his relationship with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob results in national deliverance through the exodus in Exodus 2:23-25. Apparently the speaker desires this sort of salvation again, and the circumstances certainly call for something extraordinary on God's part. Next, the speaker professes confidence that the Lord 'will indeed remember' this sorrowful situation, with the result that God will 'meditate' on what to do to help (3:20). How can he be so sure? Has not the Lord only recently treated him harshly? Has not the speaker just stated God's meanness, if not outright cruelty, in 3:1-18? Does such a statement simply indicate that his 'mental state is anything but stable'?<sup>25</sup> Is this statement the last gasp of an injured soul?

Rather than focus further on the situation itself, the speaker digs deep to the bedrock of his faith. He attempts to make contact with that which must be true if anything is true. Thus, he causes something to return to his heart/mind. This something is what brings him hope, the very hope he admits having lost in 3:18. He believes God will deliver in response to his prayer.

God's character provides the basis for this hope. God's character is what the speaker calls to mind. God's 'covenant-type mercies', the acts of kindness he does because Israel is his beloved nation, 'never cease' (3:22a). What is more, his acts of compassion 'never end' (3:22b). The words for 'covenant mercies' and 'compassion' also occur in Exodus 34:6-7, where the Lord forgives Israel and restores his covenant with them after the golden calf incident and Moses' resulting intercession on their behalf.<sup>26</sup> The earlier passage also states that God is 'slow to anger' and that he forgives 'iniquity and transgression and sin', yet does not fail to punish the guilty. If Exodus 34:6-7 is the background for the speaker's confession, then the speaker has come to realize that God's immense capacity for

---

<sup>25</sup> K. M. O'Connor, 'Lamentations' in *New Interpreter's Bible: Volume 6* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), p. 1049.

<sup>26</sup> See D. R. Hillers, *Lamentations* (Anchor Bible 7A; New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 128.

kindness, compassion and forgiveness may indicate that Israel's sin left the Lord little choice but to exercise judgment. After all, God is willing to punish if the need arises.

Exodus 34:6-7 also depicts God's judgment as nearly as thorough, or perhaps every bit as thorough as his kindness. The inevitable conclusion that the speaker must draw from this passage and from his own experience is that God's lack of kindness or covenant memory is not the problem. The problem must lie elsewhere, and in the context of the whole of the book of Lamentations it must reside in the sins of the covenant people.

Indeed, God's covenant mercy and compassion are 'new every morning' (3:23). They cannot be exhausted, though sinners must not take them for granted. Again, as the whole of Lamentations and Exodus 34:6-7 indicate, the Lord punishes those who prove themselves unfaithful.

Given the fact that God answers prayer (3:19-20), exhibits covenant mercy and constant compassion, and renews these traits each morning, the speaker is able to make a further twofold confession. First, he claims that the Lord is his 'portion' (3:24a). This same word appears in Numbers 18:20 to assert that the Lord is the Levites' 'portion' of Israel's inheritance. It also occurs in Psalm 73:26, where the poet professes that the strength he has for living in difficult days stems from the fact that the Lord is his 'portion'. Such confessions mean that those who make them have nothing in the world but the Lord, and that this one possession is enough to sustain them, even in the most trying and horrible of times. Second, the speaker asserts that he will 'hope in him' (3:24b). Therefore, the hope reported lost in 3:18 has now been restored.

The speaker makes one more profound statement. Having discussed what it is 'good' to do in such circumstances, he asserts that Yahweh 'does not afflict from his heart' (3:33). God's first instinct is to bless and forgive, not to 'grieve the sons of men' (3:33). God's heart is not in such activity, though he is well able to judge as needed, as Lamentations proves. If Yahweh prefers not to punish, then the hope is that he will return to compassion, which 3:22 and 3:32 strongly imply is the substance of his heart. Afflicting and grieving surely must come to an end if repentance is present. Norman Gottwald considers 3:33 the high point of Lamentations' theology. He writes, 'The angry side of his [Yahweh's] nature, turned so unflinchingly against Jerusalem, is not the determinative factor in the divine purposes. Begrudgingly, regretfully, if there is no other way toward his higher purposes, he may unleash the forces of evil, but

“his heart” is not in it.’<sup>27</sup> The same thing could be said of all the passages influenced by Exodus 34:6-7.

Lamentations 3 claims that whatever hope there is in such a situation resides in the high level of the Lord’s character. At the core of his being Yahweh nourishes unflinching kindness and willingness to forgive. If such were not the case there would be no future for the speaker or any other recipient of the day of the Lord, the day of wrath described so fully in Lamentations 1-2. As it stands, however, there are grounds for hoping anew. These hopes begin and end with the God who has the qualities the speaker highlights.

### CONCLUSION

Can these traits exist harmoniously in the Lord, or are these contradictory qualities? Walter Brueggemann believes they are contradictory and therefore writes, ‘While some interpretative maneuverability is possible in relating the two statements to each other, in the end I suggest that these two characterizations of Yahweh are in profound tension with each other, and they finally contradict one another. Moreover, if we take these statements as serious theological disclosures, then the tension or contradiction here voiced is present in the very life and character of Yahweh.’<sup>28</sup> He thinks the tension lies in the fact that Yahweh cannot be for himself, or true to himself, yet be for Israel, in the sense that he can always forgive them. So he concludes, ‘There is no one like Yahweh, who while endlessly faithful, hosts in Yahweh’s own life a profound contradiction that leaves open a harshness toward the beloved partner community.’<sup>29</sup>

Of course, what Brueggemann calls harshness the text calls ‘not clearing the guilty’. All judgment texts are hard to accept, in part because one grows so used to God’s patient mercy. Nonetheless, God declared his full character at the start of Israel’s history. Old Testament writers who use this text to call for repentance, repent, worship, confess, and ask for help in extreme circumstances, testify that these are not contradictions but the known and tested qualities of a deity whose person is constantly intact through evident integrity. They are the qualities of a character ready for the full range of human actions. They are the qualities of a character ready to offer grace yet not to clear those who remain in their sin. Those who trust

---

<sup>27</sup> Norman K. Gottwald, *Studies in the Book of Lamentations*, rev. edition (SBT 1/14; London: SCM Press, 1962), p. 99.

<sup>28</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 227.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.

## GOD'S CHARACTER

in God and confess these aspects of God's character may do so knowing that God does not judge from his heart. His first impulse is patience. This impulse means that the gospel is at the heart of God, for at its heart the gospel provides redemption for persons bound for a judgment wrenched from the hand of God, who desires repentance instead.