

# Scripture

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## VENGEANCE IS MINE

MODERN unbelief can sometimes present a very persuasive defence of its positions when these positions are considered in isolation. One position which it finds easy to defend is its rejection of the biblical and primitive Christian concept of an angry and avenging God. Anger, they say, is unworthy of a civilised man, and much less worthy of any alleged supreme being. The desire for revenge and the explosion of anger are signs of immaturity and barbarism at best, and can be cruel and bestial at worst. Christianity itself, they tell us, has implicitly rejected the earlier phases of biblical belief in its precept of bearing and forgiving injuries; and the Christian God should at least measure up to the idea which is imposed upon the Christian man.

This type of rationalisation is as old as Greek philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Euripides said that it was not fitting that the gods, like men, should be angry (*Bacchae*, 1348). Sextus Empiricus, followed by Cicero, said that it was a dogma of philosophers that the gods are impassible. Epicurus, followed by Plutarch, affirmed that the divine and the immortal experienced neither joy nor anger. Other philosophers affirmed the same truth, and the speculative theological system created by the schools of the Middle Ages denied the reality of any emotion in God. Many modern Christians have found the persuasions of unbelievers effective to the extent that these Christians are inclined to say that God is angry and vengeful only in the Old Testament; the law of love revealed in the New Testament has replaced the law of fear and wrath. It is a very simple and consoling way of believing; those who accept it are not worried at the incipient Marcionism which they nourish, because they have never heard of Marcion. Apparently they are not worried because the anger of God is found in the New Testament too; perhaps they do not remember reading these passages. Our philosophical conception of God does not permit us to attribute to Him the reality of anger; but our philosophical conception of God is not a comprehension of God as He is. The biblical anger of God is not a philosophical conception; but it must involve some

<sup>1</sup> The following quotations are taken from Kleinknecht, *ThWBNT* V, pp. 385 f.

reality, or the Bible is worthless as a source of the knowledge of God. What reality does it express ?

Probably no-one will question whether the anger of God is found in the Old Testament ; but a brief review of some texts will help us to see more clearly just what is meant by the anger of God in the Old Testament. It is anger, hot blazing anger ; it manifests itself in a sudden and consuming flame (Jer. 17:4 ; Is. 65:5 ; 30:27 ; Ez. 21:36) which leaves the land a lifeless waste (Jer. 4:23-6). It is a raging storm which sweeps all before it (Jer. 30:23 ; Is. 30:27, 30). It is a bitter intoxicating drink which makes men reel and stagger (Is. 51:17, 22 ; Jer. 25:15f.). When Yahweh is angry He brandishes His strong arm, and there is no help for those upon whom His blow falls (Is. 63:5 ; 9:11). His anger is armed with a devouring sword which is sharpened for slaughter and whirls in every direction until it is sated with blood (Ez. 21). When Yahweh treads the wine press His garments are sprinkled with blood, for a day of revenge is in His heart (Is. 63:3-6).

Upon whom does Yahweh's anger fall ? It falls in the first place upon Israel. The 'middle books' of the Pentateuch are a series of crises in which Israel provokes the anger of Yahweh by its unbelief, its lack of confidence in Him, and its rebellion against the leadership of Moses (Ex. 32 ; Num. 13:25-14:35 ; 18:5 ; 25). Even the chosen leader Moses excites Yahweh's anger by his hesitation (Ex. 4:14 ; Deut. 1:37). Aaron incurred anger for his part in the episode of the golden calf (Deut. 9:20) and for his questioning the authority of Moses ; in the latter episode the anger of Yahweh smote Miriam with leprosy (Num. 12:1-10). The theme of Yahweh's anger recurs in the later historical books ; either the whole people (1 Kg. 14:15 ; 2 Kg. 22:17) or such kings as Ahab (1 Kg. 16:33) and Manasseh (2 Kg. 23-6) arouse Yahweh's anger by the worship of Canaanite gods. It is this vice which provoked Yahweh to His greatest deed of anger : the destruction first of the kingdom of Israel (2 Kg. 17:17) and finally also of the kingdom of Judah. His anger was so great that He did not spare even the people whom He had chosen as His own.

Since Yahweh did not restrain His anger against Israel from its satisfaction, it is not surprising that He does not restrain His anger against other nations. He is not angry with them for worshipping their own gods, because they know no better. What infuriates Him is their pride and arrogance. This pride and arrogance is particularly offensive when they attack Israel and claim their success as their own. For they overcome Israel only because they are the rod of His anger (Is. 10:5ff.), and He is roused to fury by this implicit denial of His power to deliver His own people. In the early traditions of Genesis

the catastrophic anger of Yahweh strikes all humanity in the deluge (Gen. 6-8); and the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, while not universal in scope, is scarcely less fearful for being localised (Gen. 19). These cities were a monument of the fiery anger of Yahweh and are recalled several times in the Old Testament.

What angers Yahweh? Most frequently it is the worship of false gods. In addition to the passages from the historical books cited above this can be seen often in the prophets, of whom Jeremiah and Ezekiel are more than the others the prophets of the divine anger.<sup>1</sup> It may be noticed that Osee, the prophet of divine love and mercy, is also a prophet of divine anger. The anger of Yahweh is also provoked by human pride (Is. 9:11), by practical unbelief (Is. 9:16), by inhumanity (Is. 9:18, 20) and by assorted crimes and violations of His law (Ez. 5:13; 7:3, 8). The anger of Yahweh in such passages is not capricious nor unmotivated; it is excited by men's refusal to do exactly that which He insists they must do.

But this easy answer seems invalid for other passages in which the anger of Yahweh seems unmotivated, even capricious; some writers speak of an 'irrational' element in His anger. The term is admissible as long as we explain it within the categories of Israelite thought; and it is necessary to recall here that this thought is not logical discourse. Anger is one of the human terms in which Israel conceived God; but they knew that He is not human, that the ways of man are not His ways and that His actions cannot be explained by human motives. The motives of His anger, then, may lie too deep for human perception. The Israelites were affected by the common mode of conception of the ancient world which attributed all misfortune and disaster to divine anger. If men suffer it is because the gods are offended; but men do not always know in what they have offended. Israel in general conceived the anger of Yahweh as motivated by His moral will; but they were sufficiently aware of the mystery of divinity to realise that the depths of the moral will were not perceptible to man. They called the mystery of divinity 'holiness,' and they conceived that the anger of Yahweh could be an outburst of His holiness. Hence Yahweh could attack Jacob at Penuel (Gen. 32:23ff.) and Moses on His return to Egypt (Ex. 4:24ff.). One who approached too near to the 'holy,' the sphere of Yahweh Himself, or who saw His countenance, would die (Ex. 33:20; Jg. 13:22; Is. 6:5; Ex. 19:9-25; 20:18-21; Num. 1:52). He could strike men for what appeared to be an involuntary or at least not a serious lack of reverence (1 Sam. 6:19; 2 Sam. 6:7). The sudden death of poor Uzza as he tried

<sup>1</sup> Os. 5:10; 8:5; 13:11; Jer. 4:4, 8, 26; 7:20; 17:4; 32:31; 36:7; Ez. 6:12; 8:18; 14:19; 16:38; 20:8

to steady the ark on its wagon has always been a classic example of what one might call a certain irritability in Yahweh. Apart from the literary character of this piece of popular tradition, the concept of anger which it contains is a part of the problem; let anyone take comfort who can from the probability that this episode is not historical. He will scarcely be able to take the same comfort from the story of David's census and the ensuing plague, which is initiated by the anger of Yahweh against Israel (2 Sam. 24:1ff.). Yet this is precisely the Hebrew reasoning implicit in both stories; sudden disaster can have no cause except the anger of Yahweh. The Chronicler found this unsophisticated reasoning not entirely suitable and made Satan instead of Yahweh the one who moved David to take the census. Were it not for this simple assumption that Yahweh's anger is exhibited in misfortune and disaster, there would have been nothing for Job and his friends to debate. Let anyone who thinks that the problem of Job or Uzza is solved by a metaphysical analysis which denies the reality of the divine anger take comfort from that too; if he could analyse Job's pains out of existence with equal success he would solve the problem. The Hebrews had their way of putting it, and we have ours.

The Hebrews found the notion of divine anger intelligible because they believed the moral will of Yahweh was a serious will. Men, and especially men in the Orient, where emotion is displayed with a lack of restraint distressing to the Occidental, are angered when their serious will is flouted. To the Israelites an absence of anger would show that Yahweh was not serious. But anger is not the only emotion which they represented in Yahweh, and it is the background of His character as a whole that puts His anger in its proper proportion. His anger can be averted by petition and intercession such as the intercession of Moses for Israel<sup>1</sup> and of Amos for Israel (Am. 7:2, 5) and of Jeremiah for Judah (Jer. 14:7ff.; 18:20). Yahweh's anger, which annihilates unless it is restrained, is restrained by His patience; for He is slow to wrath and quick to forgive.<sup>2</sup> His anger is an outpouring of His justice, the instrument by which He accomplishes justice; for if evil were treated by Him in the same way as good, there would certainly be no justice. By a paradox which is most clearly revealed in Osee the anger of Yahweh is also an outpouring of His election and love of Israel; for He is a jealous God who treasures that which He loves and resents anything which takes it away from Him. From one who has received such love, disobedience and infidelity are not legal offences but personal insults.

<sup>1</sup> Ex. 32:11 ff., 31 ff.; Num. 11:1 ff.; 14:11 ff.; Deut. 9:19

<sup>2</sup> Ex. 34:6; Num. 14:18; Nah. 1:3; Jon. 4:2; Ps. 103:8; Os. 11:9

At the risk of humanising the deity the OT represents Him in human terms: feeling and expressing love, mercy, compassion, patience—and anger. The reality of His anger is no more and no less than that of His love and mercy; and the reality of each consists properly in what man experiences from Him. Man can destroy the reality of the divine anger by surrendering entirely to the divine love and mercy.

Does the divine anger disappear in the New Testament? It does not disappear in Jesus, who was angry once.<sup>1</sup> This is a rare event, it is true; but the words which He used on more than one occasion are words which in anyone else would certainly be taken as expressions of anger. Such are His words to the Pharisees<sup>2</sup> and to the unbelieving crowd (Mt. 17:17). The words which He puts in His own mouth when He describes His function as a judge are likewise words of anger.<sup>3</sup> The common misconception of the New Testament may seem to have some support in the absence of any mention of the anger of God in the Gospels. But anger is attributed to the master or king in the parables, particularly at obstinate unbelief or inhumanity.<sup>4</sup> Nor should one forget that fire, which in the Old Testament is an outburst of divine anger, appears as an instrument of punishment in the New Testament<sup>5</sup>; those who heard the words of Jesus would not miss this allusion.

But if the anger of God is not mentioned in the Gospels, it is certainly mentioned frequently in the writings of Paul. We miss here the figures of fire and storm of the Old Testament; Paul could presume that these were known. But we read what we do not read in the Old Testament, that all men are objects of God's anger, 'children of wrath by nature' (Eph. 2:3). God's anger falls on those who suppress the truth (Rom. 1:18), on the Jews who impede the preaching of the Gospel (1 Thess. 2:16), on false teachers (Eph. 5:6), upon the impenitent (Rom. 2:4f.). Furthermore, Paul introduces a note suggested in the words of John the Baptist, 'the wrath to come' (Mt. 3:7; Lk. 3:7); this is the idea of the eschatological wrath, the wrath which is stored up by the impenitent against the 'day of wrath' (Rom. 2:4f.). 'The day of wrath' was already announced by Sophonias (Soph. 1:15, 18), but it is not eschatological in the New Testament sense. God 'brings wrath' when He judges the world, and without anger He could not judge the world justly (Rom. 3:5). Because God has stored up anger the Christian should not attempt to avenge himself but should 'give place to the wrath' which will execute all the

Mk. 3:5, and in Mk. 1:41 in the text of D

<sup>3</sup> Mt. 21:12 ff.; 24:51; Lk. 13:27; 12:46

<sup>5</sup> Mt. 3:12; 18:6 ff.; 25:41; Mk. 9:43-8

<sup>2</sup> Mt. 12:34; 23:33; 15:7

<sup>4</sup> Mt. 18:34; 22:7; Lk. 14:31; 19:27

vengeance that is necessary (Rom. 12:19). The Apocalypse resumes all the Old Testament images of God's anger—fire, sword, vials and cups of wrath—in its picture of His judgments.<sup>1</sup> The particular force of this anger is that it is eschatological, final; it is the anger which is never appeased, which never gives way to forgiveness. It is as enduring as the human malice which provokes it.

Even more frightening perhaps is the 'vessel of wrath,' which in Pauline theology is made 'that He might show His glory and His power' (Rom. 9:22). Indeed these vessels are prepared for destruction (*ibid.*). We need not here explore the mystery of predestination, which has excited so much theological discussion involving this verse, except to say that Paul himself would probably recognise no theological theory of predestination as expressing his own belief. What this phrase meant to him may be seen in the fact that he introduces this paragraph with an affirmation of God's justice (v. 14). One may say that the subsequent verses are an implicit affirmation that Paul does not understand God's justice, and I think he did not; one would like to meet the man who does understand it. A vessel of wrath gets what it deserves, and God's glory is seen in His treatment of the vessels of wrath. His power is also seen, the power which is great enough to prevent the wicked from destroying goodness.

The anger of God then is not absent from the New Testament; like the anger of God in the Old Testament, it must be considered against a larger background. Those who believe that the New Testament 'law of love' excludes the Old Testament anger of God should be ready to admit that the themes of love and mercy are present in the New Testament; what they have difficulty in admitting is that the themes of love and mercy must make room for the theme of anger. If Jesus and St Paul could grasp this, they wish that we should grasp it too. God's love of righteousness is balanced by His hatred of iniquity; this hatred is not a philosophical rejection, but a personal response of hostility which must be called by a name strong enough to make its reality apparent; the name they chose is anger.

The New Testament ultimately does not escape from the anger of God by denying its reality. It escapes in the affirmation, important enough to be repeated three times in the New Testament, that it is Jesus who delivers man from the divine anger (Jn. 3:36; Rom. 5:9; 1 Thess. 1:10). He is the incarnation of the love and mercy of God, a pledge superior to all promises that God is slow to anger but quick to forgive, patient and long suffering beyond comprehension. He is

<sup>1</sup> 6:16; 11:18; 14:19; 16:1, 19; 19:15

the supreme revelation of the love of God for man. Let us not forget that this is the love which saves us from the anger of God. We believe that the deliverance which Jesus wrought is a real deliverance which no man can accomplish for himself. The reality of the redemption is as great, no more and no less, as the reality of God's anger. For if there were no anger, there would be nothing from which we would need to be delivered.

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THE QUENCHING OF THIRST:  
REFLECTIONS ON THE UTTERANCE  
IN THE TEMPLE, JOHN 7:37-9

THE invitation of Christ to come and drink, as recorded in John 7:37-9, is of the most direct appeal possible, and yet to judge by the numerous and often contradictory comments made on it, beset by difficulties: must we put a full-stop after 'let him come to me and drink'? from whom do the rivers of living water flow? what exactly is the 'scripture-text' referred to?—and others. All these questions must be answered as far as it is possible to answer them, but perhaps in trying to do so we neglect to see the text in a larger field of vision. The object of these brief reflections is to attempt to show one or two ways of doing just that—in particular by concentrating not on these individual problems but on the literary form of the passage and the motif which it contains.

Even a superficial reading of St John's Gospel would suffice to bring to our notice the recurrence of some short phrases which were evidently meant to serve as notes explanatory of more difficult or obscure points in the gospel, or to emphasise sayings or actions which were seen to be of special significance. Some are merely topographical, mentioning the place where certain words were spoken or some miracle performed. Thus, at the end of John the Baptist's witness to Christ, we are told: 'These things took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan where John was baptising' (1:28), and so for the miracle at Cana, the eucharistic discourse in the synagogue at Capharnaum, and elsewhere. Others have as their object to clear up obscurities for such as were not familiar with the Palestinian scene or to introduce some new *dramatis persona* and establish his or her identity, as with the sister of Martha who was the same as the woman in the incident in the house of Simon the Leper (11:2). Others again, and the greatest