

“Not a Tame Lion”¹: An Exposition of the Wrath of God as Exemplified in Deuteronomy 28:63

Eric Ellison
Andrews University Theological Seminary

וְהָיָה
כְּאֲשֶׁר-שָׂשׂ יְהוָה עֲלֵיכֶם לְהִיטִיב אֹתְכֶם וּלְהַרְבּוֹת אֹתְכֶם
כֵּן יִשִׂישׂ יְהוָה עֲלֵיכֶם לְהַאֲבִיד אֹתְכֶם וּלְהַשְׁמִיד אֹתְכֶם

**And it will come to pass:
Just as the Lord rejoiced over you to prosper you and to make you great;
So will the Lord rejoice over you to destroy you and to bring you to ruin.**
Deuteronomy 28:63a

Such a passage is seldom read for church services, devotional thoughts, or bedtime stories, largely because it seems to be completely incompatible with the loving God most Christians have come to know and love. Words like this call to mind the ancient gods of mythology, selfish and spoiled, yet endowed with superhuman powers. Causing mischief, playing favorites, and making life miserable for humans were some of the ways that the Greek, Scandinavian, and Mesopotamian gods passed their time. A statement like the one in this passage would be no surprise at all from one of these gods, as it would only reflect the kind of casual, destructive whim that was almost a daily occurrence. Words like this are another matter when they are found in the Bible, spoken by the Creator, the Lord of Hosts, the almighty and loving God.

The fact is, however, that it is almost impossible to avoid such expressions of divine wrath, and the judgments resulting from it, when one reads the Bible

¹ A reference to the unpredictability of God in C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: Harper Trophy, 1994), e.g. 19, 25, 31, 36.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

(Gen 6:13; 7:23; 19:14, 24–25; Exod 4:14; 32:10; Deut 11:17; 2 Sam 6:7; Ps 78:58–62; 85:5; 88:16; 89:46; 90:9; Ezek 7:3, Rom 1:18, etc.). Such references to God's anger can be "embarrassing for those who regard the Old Testament texts as holy and decisive for their own concept of God."² Those who believe in a God who is consistently tender and predictably loving may even find them offensive.

It is not only modern readers who have had difficulty reconciling their conception of God with his wrath. Early Rabbinic Jews saw possible dangers in such anthropomorphic concepts of God and tried to avoid them by speaking about angels of wrath. The Talmud, commenting on Psalm 5:5, says, "Only angels of peace stand in the presence of God, but angels of wrath are far away from him."³ This not only removes anger from God and gives it instead to angels, but it even removes the angels of wrath from His presence. Pamela Jean Owens has argued that even the author of Lamentations, in extreme grief over Jerusalem's destruction, found it difficult to integrate the opposing feelings of God as comforter and persecutor, treating them almost like two separate personalities.⁴

Historical Solutions

Because it is so difficult to assimilate the concept of an angry and omnipotent God into a sophisticated theology of a loving God, it should come as no surprise that people have tried different tactics over the ages to circumvent this dilemma.

1. Ignore the Problem. If theologians refuse to discuss the problem and preachers omit the topic, then few will ever be troubled by it. Ferdinand Weber has shown that the Greek fathers, those of the western-Augustinian theology, and the older dogmatics avoided discussions of the wrath of God, fearing that it would result in a God unworthy of their worship.⁵

One might suspect that this evasion is something theologians would attempt to foist upon the public only before the advent of the printing press, when most people were illiterate and Bibles were scarce, but this course of action continues well after illiteracy has been nearly eliminated. Schleiermacher taught that "we have no cause or directive for setting up this idea of the wrath of God as something grounded in Christianity, as something essential to faith, or even as a

² Seth Erlandsson, "The Wrath of YHWH," *Tyndale Bulletin* 23 (1972): 111.

³ My own translation of: "Vor Gott stehen nur Engel des Friedens, aber Engel des zorns אַלְמַלְאֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם sind fern von ihm." Hermann L. Strack & Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, vol. 3 (München: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1926), 30.

⁴ Pamela Jean Owens, "Personification and Suffering in Lamentations 3," *Austin Seminary Bulletin* 105 (Spring 1990): 75–90.

⁵ Ferdinand Weber, *Vom Zorne Gottes* (Erlangen: Diechert, 1862), 7.

ELLISON: "NOT A TAME LION"

proper doctrine.”⁶ Such policies in the face of the copious texts referring to God’s wrath are reminiscent of children who think themselves invisible to all others when they cover their own eyes.

2. Deny Its Possibility. Thomas Aquinas dealt with the issue by saying: “Anger and the like are attributed to God on account of the likeness in effect. Thus, because to punish is properly the act of an angry man, God’s punishment is metaphorically spoken of as his anger.”⁷ Knowing Aquinas’ propensity for quoting Aristotle more than the Bible, one may well ask whether this mindset is what Christians should draw from when approaching the Scriptures. The idea that God is not capable of getting angry “seems to have come into Christianity from the Greek philosophic view,”⁸ which is a culture well known for believing in unpredictable gods who frequently needed appeasement. This leaves one to ponder whether such a view is more of a philosophical reaction to pagan views of God than an objective, biblically based view of the nature of God.

3. Reinterpret Wrath. There is evidence to support the fact that the wrath of God as it is referred to in the Bible is not always an emotion, but rather an anthropomorphic expression for natural laws as well as cause and effect. “Men have generally attributed to God such characteristics as anger, wrath, tempting, evil, sending fire, and hardening of hearts of men, when in reality, such semantics are used to establish God as the first cause, thus, the sovereign of the earth.”⁹ One wonders, since God has occasionally chosen to reveal Himself as a wrathful individual, how wise it is for humans to speak of the reality being quite different. Notwithstanding, while this might explain away many of the judgment passages in the Bible, it cannot be applied to all places where God’s wrath is found. Deuteronomy 28:63, as a case in point, speaks of God rejoicing in the activity of destruction, which goes far beyond the mere action of cause and effect. The verb used here for rejoice is *וַיִּשְׂמַח*, a word overflowing with emotion, used elsewhere to describe the feelings of a groom when he is married (Isa 62:5) or someone who stumbles upon great spoil (Ps 119:162). This is much more than figurative language representing God’s unemotional arbitration of justice, and it deserves careful attention.

⁶ Friedrich Schleiermacher, “The Wrath of God,” *Servant of the World: Selected Sermons of Friedrich Schleiermacher*, trans. Dawn DeVries (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 153.

⁷ Thomas Aquinas, “Treatise on God,” *Summa Theologica*, Question 3, Article 2, Reply Objection 2 (English Dominican Translation).

⁸ Edwin Bevan, *Symbolism and Belief* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1938), 210, quoted in Leon Morris, “The Wrath of God,” *Expository Times* 63 (1952): 144.

⁹ Morris D. Lewis, “An Interpretation of the Wrath of God,” *The Stature of Christ* (Festschrift, Loma Linda University, 1970), 212. For an excellent treatise on this theory, see the rest of Lewis’ article.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

The Value in Curses

Deuteronomy 28 is one of the most important chapters in the Bible for understanding how God relates to those who are true to His covenant and those who are not. It gives the reader a peek behind the scenes of political, religious, social, and economic interplay, showing how God affects and is affected by them.

The significance of this chapter, in which our text is set, was understood by George Washington, who took the very first American presidential oath of office on April 30, 1789, with his hand on a Bible open to Deuteronomy 28. In his inaugural address, he said:

No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the Invisible Hand which conducts the affairs of men more than the people of the United States. Every step by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency . . . We ought to be no less persuaded that the propitious smiles of Heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right which heaven itself has ordained.¹⁰

Strangely, such an important chapter seems to have been all but passed over completely by biblical scholars and commentators. At best, it is referred to as background material for more recent texts, or a few general comments are made in passing, but almost no original research at all has been focused on this chapter. Perhaps most find the 55 consecutive verses outlining one curse after another uninteresting or the wrathful God pictured here not one with whom they are comfortable.

Abraham Heschel has noted that people in our time are increasingly “moved by a soft religiosity, and would like to think that God is lovely, tender, and familiar, as if faith were a source of comfort, but not readiness for martyrdom.”¹¹ All humans have habits, surroundings, and beliefs with which they are comfortable, and it is a risk to move outside of these familiar boundaries. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, by C. S. Lewis, Susan and Lucy first find out that Aslan (representing God) is a lion and ask if he is safe. The reply comes, “Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”¹² One is left to consider what kind of a God we really want: a safe and predictable one, or one who is good, even if that puts us at odds with Him.

There is very little that could move me out of my comfort zone more than to envision God as one who actually rejoices in destroying people and bringing them to ruin. The temptation is strong to turn the page and leave such a picture

¹⁰ Paul M. Angle, ed., *By These Words* (New York: Rand McNally & Company, 1954), 128–131.

¹¹ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, vol. 2 (Peabody: Prince, 2001), 76.

¹² C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: Harper Trophy, 1994), 86.

ELLISON: "NOT A TAME LION"

buried where few ever go and move back to the familiar, tender God who always weeps when pronouncing judgments (cf. Luke 19:41–44). Since it is the same God pictured in both cases, perhaps one should not so much judge divine wrath on its presence, however, as by the nature of the God that exhibits it and its impact on His relationship with humans.

Wrath for a Good Reason

Although others may question God's nature because of the verses portraying His wrath, the Bible writers certainly do not. The prophet Nahum asks, "Who can stand before the wrath of the Lord," and in the same breath asserts that "the Lord is good" (Nah 1:6–7). The Psalmist can declare that "God is a righteous judge, and a God who has indignation every day" (Ps 7:11), without contradicting himself. It is one thing when one sits down thousands of years after the fact and determines that just judgments cannot be carried out in wrath and quite "another thing if the Old Testament texts also find such a combination impossible."¹³ On the whole, it seems that the Bible writers meant to communicate that these were compatible with one another, even complementary. In fact, there are times when the Bible writers feel that God would be more loving to His people if He were not so slow to anger (Ps 69:24; 79:6).

The main danger with human anger is that irrationality easily comes right along with it and leads people to do and say things from which their higher reason would normally restrain them. Human wrath is always centered upon self: the damage done to self, justifying self by blaming others, revenge, etc. In our modern world, especially, the justifiableness of anger has been clouded in the morass of media violence, which "has driven out of the culture any general understanding of what makes violence necessary, not gratuitous, in a story."¹⁴ In the case of humans, even in the most altruistic of circumstances, one cannot easily discern if action taken in anger is done merely because of justice and necessity, or because it satisfies a less rational desire for vengeance. On the other hand, one must guard against throwing the baby out with the bath water merely because it is so often misused. The value and even necessity of wrath was recognized many centuries before Deuteronomy was ever written. Back in the Middle Kingdom, Egyptians believed that "the inability to summon up indignation at wrongdoing is clearly a characteristic of weak rulers, whether the creator himself or the king."¹⁵ In portions of the ancient world, at least, wrath was essential in just administration. Perhaps we should learn a lesson from the ancients and be less concerned with whether God is angry and more concerned with whether this contributes to the just administration of the world.

¹³ Erlandsson, 115.

¹⁴ Catherine Madsen, "Notes on God's Violence," *Cross Currents* 51/2 (Summer 2001): 230.

¹⁵ Jan Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt*, trans. Andrew Jenkins (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002), 144.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

When we consider God's wrath, we see that it "is not an implacable blind rage. However emotional it may be, it is an entirely reasonable and willed response."¹⁶ The divine wrath is completely separated from self-interestedness, not focused upon what has offended God, but upon the need of the individual against whom it is directed. When we see it manifested, its purpose is to clarify that "God takes human sin with utmost seriousness, sympathizes with the victims of human cruelty, and is moved to work for the liberation of those suffering from all types of human oppression."¹⁷

Returning to Deuteronomy 28, perhaps it is easier now to understand this initially offensive statement. When God speaks of rejoicing over the destruction that He causes, one may rest assured that it has an altruistic purpose, and love is its motivation. One can hardly fault a ruler for delighting in activities that establish justice and uphold true order in the world.

Provoked Wrath

In every case in the Bible where God is spoken of as being angry, there is a definite cause. God does not wake up on the wrong side of the bed, as humans sometimes seem to; something has to be done to earn His ire, which is "not a fundamental attribute, but a transient and reactive condition. It is a means of achieving the intents of His mind."¹⁸ In this way, God's wrath is fundamentally different from His love. God initiates every relationship in the Bible with love and care. Unlike His wrath, nothing needs to be done to cause God to love His creation because a relationship of love is God's default.

Some have noted that the immediate context of our verse, Deut 28:58–68, is a description of how God will systematically undo all of the good things that He has done for His people.¹⁹ This itself reminds us that God's covenant relationship with Israel began with blessings (e.g., freeing them, making them into a nation, etc.). He even promises to continue to bless them endlessly if they will only be true to their covenant (Deut 28:1–14). The covenant includes responsibilities on both sides. If Israel does not fulfill its responsibilities, God is entitled to remove the blessings He has taken the responsibility to give. Instead of portraying the wrath of God as the wrath of an enemy, the Bible pictures it like a

¹⁶ Donald A. Carson, "God's Love and God's Wrath," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156 (October–December 1999): 389.

¹⁷ George M. Landes, "Some Biblical Theological Reflections on the Wrath of God," *Living Pulpit* 2/4 (October–December 1993): 11.

¹⁸ Heschel, 69.

¹⁹ See Peter M. Head, "The Curse of Covenant Reversal: Deuteronomy 28:58–68 and Israel's Exile," *Churchman* 111/3 (1997): 218–226; John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton: Victor, 1983); D. A. Carson, D. Guthrie, J. A. Motyer, *New Bible Commentary*, 4th ed. (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1970).

ELLISON: "NOT A TAME LION"

rejected bridegroom taking back his engagement ring and other things he has already given his bride to be.²⁰

Reexamining our passage with this in mind, we see that God's condition of rejoicing over Israel's destruction is not natural or inevitable; rather, it is provoked and out-of-character (Deut 28:15), hence it tells us not so much about the basic nature of God as about the extremities to which He is willing to go in an emergency.

The Necessity of Wrath

Wrath is God's righteous reaction to the presence of sin in the world. The fact that we are sinful is what makes our interaction with God an unsafe proposition. If God were to be a completely wrathless, unemotional being (as Aquinas and Schleiermacher, etc. would have us believe), the entire biblical picture would implode upon itself. If we excise or ignore the biblical references to God's anger, soon we will lose the meaning of rich theological concepts such as sin, judgment, and the cross. "Without the one, the others lose their meaning. Wrath measures sin, produces judgment, and necessitates the cross. Once we have abandoned wrath, the whole Bible becomes unintelligible."²¹ As there is definitely sin in the world, we must consider that if God were not at all wrought up over it, sin could not be so very bad after all.

The fact remains that the Bible is full of God's wrath precisely because sin is atrocious in His eyes. The gospel that the apostles proclaimed across the world is what has the power to save people from death in their sins. If God was never angry about it in the first place, we have been deprived of the good news that it has been turned away.²² If God did not have any wrath to be turned away, then all the horrors we see on the news and the appalling things that happen every day are the summation of all that we can ever expect, and the Christian hope is useless.

The gospel would also be robbed of its power if we were saved from death, but our lives were not at all changed. The very word reconciliation implies a progression closer to one another. An inseparable part of this activity "is the revelation of his hostility to sin so that his children know with unmistakable clarity what his attitude is to sin so that he may teach them to be hostile to it."²³ As we grow to become more like God, it is hard to envision a greater day than

²⁰ Already in the Pentateuch there is clear evidence that the jealousy of God is linked to a view of the covenant relationship between God and Israel as a marriage relationship. See Aron Balorda, "The Covenant of Phinehas as a Reward for the Jealousy of Numinal Marriage," M.A. Thesis, Andrews University, 2002.

²¹ William D. Eisenhower, "Sleepers in the Hands of an Angry God," *Christianity Today* 31/5 (March 20, 1987): 26.

²² Fleming Rutledge, "Cover-ups," *Christian Century* 116 (November 17-24, 1999): 117.

²³ J. Benjamin Bedenbaugh, "Paul's Use of 'Wrath of God,'" *Lutheran Quarterly* 6 (May 1954): 156.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

when Christ comes and we shall be like Him (1 John 3:2) or any greater joy than the fact that sin will be destroyed forever. Thus, at least part of the reason why God would rejoice so much over destroying wicked people is understandable.

Wrath Consists of Love

Most refer to Justice and Mercy, Law and Grace, or Wrath and Love as separate entities or qualities that balance and complement one another. To compare them this way is like dissecting a brain: you may learn more about the different functional aspects of the cerebrum and cerebellum, but you kill the organism as a whole when you cut it apart. Wrath and Love are not so much complementary organisms as they are two aspects of the same organism.

1. Love Leads to Wrath. One cannot, in reality, function without the other. Charles Cranfield illustrates it this way: “A man who knows, for example, about the injustice and cruelty of apartheid and is not angry at such wickedness cannot be a thoroughly good man; for his lack of wrath means a failure to care for his fellow man, a failure to love.”²⁴ If you want to eliminate the possibility of any wrath, you must eliminate all love for anything or anyone. One must be totally indifferent if one is to be free from wrath.²⁵ However, indifference to evil is a worse option than involvement: “it is more universal, more contagious, more dangerous. A silent justification, it makes possible an evil erupting as an exception becoming the rule and being in turn accepted.”²⁶

There is a masquerade some people call love—though it is really cowardice—whereby people cannot muster the courage to do what is best for others because it might damage their relationship. If we did not have such references to the wrath of God, He “would cease to be fully righteous and His love would degenerate into sentimentality.”²⁷ I once attended a wedding where the minister turned to the friends of the couple, charging them to do everything in their power to strengthen this marriage, even to the point of jeopardizing their own individual friendships with the couple. Heschel has noted: “For love to function, the suppression of sympathy may be necessary. A surgeon would be a failure if he indulged his natural sympathy at the sight of a bleeding wound. He must suppress his emotion to save a life, he must hurt in order to heal.”²⁸ Were God unwilling to display his anger for the good of the sinner, at the risk of people disliking Him when they read about it, His love would merely be a sentimental charade.

²⁴ Charles Cranfield, “Romans 1:18” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 21 (September 1968): 333.

²⁵ Such is the aim of eastern religion—to free oneself of all that might cause pain or disturb—which is the exact opposite of the Christian God, who opens Himself up to being disturbed. Cf. Kosuke Koyama, “God is Disturbed,” *Frontier* 7 (Summer 1964): 107–110.

²⁶ Heschel, 64.

²⁷ Erlandsson, 116.

²⁸ Heschel, 76–77.

ELLISON: "NOT A TAME LION"

2. Wrath Leads to Mercy. There is one other consideration that should be brought to bear upon the discussion of God's *true* love as the Bible depicts it. The nature of happiness is that those who pursue it for themselves never find it, but those who pursue it for others receive it in abundance. The former shoulders the impossible burden of guaranteeing only pleasurable events for self and banishing all negative things. The latter, however, is free to take pleasure in the much more manageable task of bringing some joy to the lives of others. When one considers the overarching principle behind the stipulations of the covenant outlined in Deuteronomy, keeping or breaking it places a person in one or the other of these two categories. One who has chosen as a pattern for life the selfishness inherent in not following this covenant will never be truly happy. Given time (say, eternity?), life would degenerate into torture. The wrath of God manifested on that individual would be an act of mercy and love for the person concerned. In Mary Shelly's treatise on creator versus creation, she speaks of a creature abandoned by his creator to a life of crime, devoid of love, in which his own misery spreads to all around him. Because of these repeated sins, his life spirals downward into continual remorse and self-loathing, and at the end, he cries to his creator, "If thou . . . yet cherished a desire of revenge against me, it would be better satiated in my life than in my destruction."²⁹

A similar conclusion can be drawn from a perspective building on logic and philosophy instead of heaven and eternity: "So the unjust man, like the man who possesses bad things, is pitiable in every way, and it is permissible to pity such a man when his illness is curable . . . but against the purely evil, perverted man who cannot be corrected, one must let one's anger have free rein. This is why we declare that it is fitting for the good man to be of the spirited type and also gentle, as each occasion arises."³⁰

Thus, it seems that a valid reason for which God would rejoice to destroy a sinner would be that true love calls for it, and it may be the only merciful thing to do under the circumstances.

The Evanescence of Wrath and a Changing God

One of the most remarkable things about God, as He reveals Himself to us throughout the Bible, is that He is willing to change. He specifically states that He can and will change His plans for destruction (Mal 3:6). One would expect that every decision would be final from an all-seeing, all-wise, all-knowing God. There is no better example of change than we find here.

The word *שׂוּח*, used here to describe God rejoicing, appears in only two verses of the Pentateuch. Almost the exact same sentence, with one major change, appears only 44 verses after this verse: "And you shall again obey the Lord and observe all His commandments, which I command you today. Then

²⁹ Mary Shelly, *Frankenstein* (New York: Dover, 1994), 166.

³⁰ Plato, *Laws*, 731d.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

the Lord your God will prosper you abundantly in all the work of your hand, in the offspring of your body and in the offspring of your cattle and in the produce of your ground, for the Lord will again rejoice over you for good, just as He rejoiced over your fathers” (Deut 30:9 NASB). Here we see almost the same formula, but now God no longer rejoices to destroy them, but again rejoices over them for good. As soon as Israel is true to God again, all is well, and there is no hint of lingering anger or resentment. This not only tells us that the wrath of God is manifested objectively and rationally, as we saw before, but also that God has wrath for the specific purpose of bringing about repentance. When certain conditions (i.e., disobedience) exist, God’s wrath is fully active; however, when those conditions are no longer met (i.e., a return to obedience), God’s anger evaporates. As Jason Locke puts it, “He is not like humans who resort to fury out of hatred. He does not desert his people when they are disobedient and rebellious. He tries to bring them back into the proper relationship with him.”³¹ Could this be another part of the joy that God gets out of his wrath, namely, He knows that even though the process is painful for both parties involved, in many cases, the result will be a restored relationship?

Knowing that God’s wrath is not necessarily a permanent institution, things that seem ridiculous elements of God’s interaction with humans can become a reality. From a sophisticated, western mindset, stories like the one found in Exodus 32:7–14, where Moses talks God out of being angry, are seen as unbelievable and even quite silly.³² An infinite God allowing Himself to be out-debated by a finite creature is unthinkable, unless there is a deeper motivation and consistency behind the anger than we normally see demonstrated by humans.

God’s wrath, despite its intensity, “may be averted by prayer. There is no divine anger for anger’s sake. Its meaning is instrumental: to bring about repentance; its purpose and consummation is its own disappearance.”³³ Moses had the opportunity to cause God’s wrath against an entire nation of people to dissolve.

It is such an amazing story, and yet there is an opportunity in it for everyone. In Ezek 22:30–31a, we are told what happened when there was not a person like Moses to stand up for God’s people: “I searched for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand in the gap before me for the land, so that I would not destroy it; but I found no one. Thus I have poured out My indignation on them; I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath.” Here is pictured the intercessory, human part in the wrath of God. Like Moses, others can stand before God and speak on behalf of those whom God would destroy. God’s anger never reaches the point where discussion is useless. In fact, “it is rather directed

³¹ Jason W. Locke, “The Wrath of God in the Book of Isaiah,” *Restoration Quarterly* 35/4 (1993): 227.

³² Edward P. Ross, “That God Might Remember the Good Times . . .” *Witness* 67/8 (August 1984); Richard C. Brand, “The Reputation of God,” *Expository Times* 105 (1994).

³³ Abraham J. Heschel, “The Wrath of God,” *Witness* 76 (March 1993): 21.

ELLISON: "NOT A TAME LION"

against those who refuse to step into the breach, against those who neglect justice, who try to protect their lives instead of risking them for others."³⁴

Thus, the passages about the wrath of God that so many throughout history have found offensive or unrealistic are less the story of an angry God and more of an invitation to talk with God about the sins of His children. Deuteronomy 28:63 of all places demonstrates this as it juxtaposes the two possibilities, begging listeners to give God a reason to rejoice over them for good again, as He has done in the past.

God Rejoices to Destroy the Destroyers of Happiness

The very out-of-character response a naturally loving God has against sin testifies to its horrendous nature. Although it is inherently self-destructive, "evil can't be counted on to destroy itself, it must be fought every step of the way."³⁵ Luckily, we have infinite power on our side. In Rom 8:31, the apostle Paul asks the rhetorical question: "If God be for us, who can be against us?" The sad truth is that there is one group that does try to oppose God and those on His side. That is the group God will rejoice to destroy.

In our passage, it says that God rejoiced over and will rejoice over the people of Israel, both for good and bad. If God takes joy in destroying Israel and bringing her to ruin, it would be helpful to know what other things God takes joy in throughout the Bible. Eight times in the Bible, *שׂוּעָה* is used with God as the subject, each time the object is His people (Deut 28:63 (2x); 30:9 (2x); Isa 62:5; 65:19; Jer 32:41; Zeph 3:17). Deuteronomy 28:63 is unique in this list in that it is the only place where God rejoices over a negative activity with regard to his people, which affirms the above principle that God's natural state is love and wrath only arises when there is a problem. Ezekiel 33:11 relates a similar idea: in the words of God, "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked." Furthermore, in Jeremiah 9:24, the Lord declares: "I am the Lord who exercises loving-kindness, justice, and righteousness on earth, for I delight in these things." This establishes a significant pattern. Something drastic must have happened to make God do an about face from looking upon them as objects of joy to objects of wrath.

All the curses of chapter 28 are predicated upon one assumption: the people have chosen to neither obey the Lord their God, nor observe to do all His commandments and His statutes with which Moses charged them (v.15). Back in chapter 4:6–8, we are told that a result of keeping the covenant would be that the people are drawn *noticeably* closer to God. Conversely, one who does not keep the covenant instructions in Deuteronomy is, therefore, moving visibly away from God. If the differences between the two groups are so readily apparent,

³⁴ Christoph Schroeder, "'Standing in the Breach': Turning Away the Wrath of God," *Interpretation* 52/1 (January 1998): 20.

³⁵ Miroslav Volf, "Washing Away, Washing Up," *Christian Century* 116 (Aug 25–Sep 1, 1999): 820.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

perhaps their comparison, based on the covenant stipulations in Deuteronomy just prior to this curse, will shed some light on why God would rejoice to annihilate them. What does a person God rejoices to destroy (i.e., a covenant breaker) look like?

If a new neighbor moved in next door and you soon got a notice in the mail that this person was a convicted murderer (5:17; 19:11–13), rapist (22:23–26), and you observed him holding spiritualistic (18:10–11) midnight bonfire meetings in the back yard, would you still feel safe? What if the only babysitter in town was a convicted kidnapper (24:7), prostitute (23:17–18), and murderer of her own children (12:31)—would you still have a night on the town? The list could go on, but the point is that God loves creating a world that is wonderful in every way for His created beings to live in. His greatest desire is their happiness; therefore, “because He loves us, He’s angry at people who seek to hurt us: our blessedness is his glory and our joy. God’s loving anger on our behalf nourishes and encourages our faith. God’s beloved children hope and trust that at the return of Christ, His anger will make things right.”³⁶

God takes no greater joy from anything than making the world perfect for His children again, even if that means getting rid of some of the people that would ruin it. The message of Deuteronomy 28:63 is a solemn one: Follow the Lord and live within His covenant relationship, lest you become a roadblock to someone else’s happiness.

Conclusion

Many factors (especially examples from humans) lead our contemporary culture to view anger as an emotion entirely incompatible with a God of love; however, the Bible portrays the two aspects of God as complementary and necessary for one another’s existence, and even asserts that God rejoices in the destructive nature of His wrath. While strategies for avoiding the issue are plentiful, several important lessons can be gained by a straightforward examination of the information. First of all, God’s indignation does not preclude His rationality, but grows out of it, motivated by His ultimate goodness. Second, it characterizes the tension humanity lives in with the presence of sin in the world, without which salvation and hope for a better future could not exist. Third, under certain circumstances, a lack of anger reveals a lack of love, for the two are inextricably intertwined. Were some to receive their wish of a wrathless God, they would be left with an entirely loveless, merciless God as well. Fourth, it is fueled by a desire to accomplish a purpose by it: namely, the repentance of His people, and the willingness of an omniscient God to change His plans for the future is an astounding illustration of this. Finally, God is able to rejoice in the pouring out

³⁶ David Powlson, “Anger Part 1: Understanding Anger,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 14/1 (Fall 1995): 42.

ELLISON: "NOT A TAME LION"

of His anger not because He takes joy in destruction, but because it results in greater joy and security for those who love and follow Him.

Eric Ellison has recently completed an M.Div. at Andrews University and is currently pastoring in Tennessee. ellison@andrews.edu