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A God of Mercy, Grace and Wrath

The Essential Nature of God in the Old Testament

By John and Tim Willis

Anyone who professes to follow the New Testament (NT) as authoritative must espouse the view of the Old Testament (OT) taught in the NT. The NT describes the OT as “Scripture [that is] God-breathed” (2 Tim 3:16). Jesus describes himself as one who has come to “fulfill” the Law and the Prophets (i.e., the OT), not to “abolish” them (Matt 5:17). Paul describes Jesus as “the end of the Law” (Rom 10:4), meaning that Christ is the “goal” or “intention” of OT Law to impute righteousness to everyone who trusts in God. Thus, the NT is viewed by its writers as confirmation and continuation of the OT; the NT does not replace the OT wholesale. Their messages are one, not two.

A primary example of the fact that we should talk about a single message of the Bible (rather than an OT message vs. a NT message) is in the Bible’s teaching concerning the character and nature of God. “The revelation of God in the NT is wholly consonant with his revelation in the OT. . . . No attempt whatever is made to revise or to correct the OT presentation. Nor, in the strict sense, is any attempt made to amplify it.”¹ There are numerous examples of how the portrayal of God and his character are uniform between Old and New Testaments. In both, he is the all-powerful and all wise creator (Genesis 1-2; Col 1:16), the sustainer of the universe (Ps 104:10-15; Col 1:17), the king of the universe (Psalm 47; 1 Tim 6:15-16), savior, redeemer, deliverer, etc. etc.

But in this article, we want to emphasize a series

of passages from the OT (with echoes in the NT) which highlight some of the most basic characteristics of God — his compassion and grace, in conjunction with his wrath. These passages have been chosen for two primary reasons: (1) they are said to describe the very essence of God — his “name”; and (2) they are so similar in order, wording and teaching that they seem to belong to a stereotyped, creedal, liturgical formula which was often repeated in Israelite and Jewish worship and teaching. If an Israelite were to be asked to describe what God is like, it is likely he/she would have responded with statements such as are found in Exodus 34:6-7.

Exodus 34:6-7

Exodus 34:6-7 is the earliest and most complete rendition of these same statements about God. The passage is part of the sequel to the story of the Golden Calf (Exodus 32). In this sequel, God threatens to separate himself from his people as they travel to the Promised Land (Exod 33:1-6). Moses then appeals to God’s love for him as a motivation to forgive the entire people and to continue to accompany them on their journey, and God agrees (Exod 33:12-17). But then Moses presses God a step further, asking God to show him his “glory,” his actual face; but God says this is not possible (Exod 33:18, 20). Instead, God promises to “proclaim his name, ‘the Lord,’” to Moses (Exod 33:19).

It appears that Moses is asking for reassurance, even visible proof, of God's presence. God's answer suggests that his "name" — which is given in Exodus 34:6-7 — is something of a substitute for an actual viewing of God himself. How God's name actually serves as such a substitute will be demonstrated shortly. But first, we should look at what that "name" is, and what it means.

God "passes by" Moses on Mt. Sinai and "proclaims his name" to him. The following translation of Exodus 34:6-7 attempts to reflect the Hebrew syntax of this proclamation of his "name" as closely as possible.

"Yahweh, Yahweh, a God compassionate
and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in love and
faithfulness,
Maintaining love to thousands [of
generations],
and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and
sin.
Yet he does not leave [the guilty]
unpunished,
punishing the children and their
children
to the third and fourth [generation]."

This "name" obviously falls into two parts, reflecting a "positive" side to God's nature as well as a "negative" side. Syntactically, the fact that God is "compassionate and gracious. . ." is mirrored by the fact that he "does not leave the guilty unpunished;" the fact that he is "maintaining love. . . and forgiving. . ." is mirrored by the fact that he is "punishing. . ." But these mirror images do not reflect an equation. God's compassion and grace are not counterbalanced by his punishment of the guilty; rather, the former outweigh the latter. There are four "positive" qualities in contrast to one "negative" quality; there are two "positive" actions in contrast to only one "negative" action. Moreover, the effects of those "positive" actions last far longer than the effects of the "negative" action.

But even to describe these characteristics in terms of contrasts is misleading. The biblical portrayal of these divine characteristics reveals that they are not two opposites in competition within the will of God, but rather that God's anger (the "negative" characteristics) is really subsumed within God's love (the "positive" characteristics). Both Old and New Testaments bear witness to the fact that God disciplines (shows his wrath toward) those who do wrong, because he loves them as a father loves his children (Prov 3:11-12 [cp. Deut 8:5]; Heb 12:4-11).

Similarly, God's anger is always restrained by his love (Ps 78:38; Hos 11:8-9).

Some of the characteristics of God listed in Exodus 34:6-7 are attributed to many different people, as well as to God, and in a wide range of settings in the OT. However, the most significant application seems to be in reference to the keeping of promises (a covenant relationship). For example, the combination of "love and faithfulness" summarizes Laban's intent to keep the promise which he makes to Abraham (Gen 24:49), Joseph's integrity to carry out the promise which he made to his father (Gen 47:29) and Joshua's reliability in the promise to Rahab and her family (Josh 2:14). God "shows love" (cp. "maintaining love" in Exod 34:6) to Abraham (Gen 24:12, 14) and Jacob (Gen 32:10) and David (2 Sam 22:51), as fulfillment of his promises to them; Jonathan is asked to "show love" to David in order to uphold his covenant with David (1 Sam 20:8); likewise, Nahash demonstrates his covenant loyalty to David by "showing love" to David (2 Sam 10:2). These observations suggest that God's characteristics (as described in Exod 34:6-7) are particularly obvious in the ways that He fulfills covenant promises.

This finding explains how Exodus 34:6-7 (the proclamation of God's "name") functions in the sequel to the Golden Calf incident. Moses has asked for visible proof of God's presence (Exod 33:18), which God has denied. In its place, God says that Moses (and all his people) will know that God is present when he displays both mercy and anger — with the latter subsumed by the former — particularly in his fulfillment of covenant promises.

Significant OT References to Exodus 34:6-7

The first reference back to this characterization of God in Exodus 34:6-7 demonstrates how God's mercy superseding his anger is realized in a historical event. Numbers 13-14 recounts the story of the twelve spies, sent by Moses to scout out the land of Israel. When ten of the twelve return with a discouraging report, the people enter into one of their many complaints against God and Moses. God first threatens to destroy the nation, but he holds off once Moses brings to mind God's name, as revealed in Exodus 34 (Num 14:17-18). The two sides of his "name" are evident in his final response: he will forgive his people, allowing the next generation of Israelites to inherit the promised land, but the present generation of complainers will die in the wilderness (with the exceptions of Joshua and Caleb; Num 14:19-35). God's wrath is shown to be severe, but temporary and light in comparison to the mercy. One generation suffers, but many future generations en-

To have grace without wrath, or to have wrath as the more dominant characteristic, would be “un-God-like”

joy God’s great blessings.²

When we move to the other end of Israel’s history, we find Ezra looking retrospectively over the history and noting the same qualities of God in explaining how God has dealt with his people over the centuries (Nehemiah 9). Ezra recounts a history which begins with God acting on behalf of his people, and then continues with story after story where Israel responds to God’s love with disobedience, and God responds to their disobedience with wrath administered with “great mercy.” Ezra uses Exodus 34:6 (to explain God’s merciful actions) at two strategic points in this recitation; in connection with God’s responses to the first and last displays of disobedience by the people (Neh 9:17, 31). This shows that, from first to last, God’s covenant relationship with his people has been maintained by God and his “compassion and grace,” rather than by the people’s faithfulness to the law. God has been faithful, not his people.³

The time of Babylonian exile provides a particularly vivid example of how God’s character consists of wrath controlled by and as a part of love. The notion that God’s punishment on his covenant people is short-lived — especially in contrast to the way he deals with other peoples — is brought out at that time by Jeremiah. On two occasions (Jer 30:10-11; 46:25-28), Jeremiah uses language reminiscent of Exodus 34:7 (“I will not leave you unpunished”) to say that God will certainly punish Israel for her sins. But Jeremiah prefaces these statements with the promise that he will not “bring [Israel] to an end.” This reveals the entire plan of God, a plan that involves short-term punishment but long-term blessing for his people (see also Joel 2:10-13). In this, we see that God does not show only anger toward some people and only love toward others, but a mixture of both with love as the dominant characteristic — to the

same people/person. To have grace without wrath, or to have wrath as the more dominant characteristic, would be “un-God-like” (cp. Ps 86:8, 15; Isa 55:6-9; Mic 7:18-20).

The final reference to Exodus 34:6-7 demonstrates perhaps more clearly than any other how basic these characteristics are to God’s nature. This reference is in Jonah 4. Jonah has finally arrived in Nineveh after a most amazing sea voyage. He has preached to the Assyrian people living there, and they have received his warning from God, repenting of their sins and asking for God’s mercy. God grants it, but — being a “good” Israelite — Jonah is upset. The Assyrians are Israel’s enemies; they oppress the Israelites. Jonah would like to see God show his wrath against the Assyrians; so, he expresses frustration when God forgives them. But he also reveals that he is not that surprised by God’s forgiveness. After all, he knows God and what he is like. He knows that God is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing” (Jonah 4:2). Jonah knows that, if that really is God’s nature, if he really wants to “live up to his name,” then he will treat all people — even the Assyrians of Nineveh — in a way which demonstrates both love and wrath, with the former as the dominant characteristic.

Other Examples of God’s Character in the OT

The same “name” of God is demonstrated over and over again in the history of God’s people, even in cases where no explicit reference to Exodus 34:6-7 is made. God’s covenant with David is one good example. God promises to be with David’s family always. This might mean punishing them for sin at times, but God says he will “never take away his steadfast love” from David’s family (2 Sam 7:14-15). In David’s own life, God brings hardship and suffering upon David’s family as a result of his sins against Bathsheba and Uriah, but he still does not disown David. Similarly, when Solomon turns to idolatry, God responds by taking most of the tribes away from the family’s control; but, he leaves one tribe under them “for the sake of his servant David” (1 Kgs 11:11-13).

The same portrayal of God is given by Israel’s prophets, especially Hosea. He delivers a message to Israel of God’s impending judgment for the people’s sins. It will even be the equivalent of a divorce (Hos 1:9). Yet, God’s love compels him to do the unexpected (Hos 11:8-9). The divorce will not be final. Rather, God will use it as part of a strategy to win Israel back to him, as he again showers his love upon her (Hosea 2-3).

The OT Portrayal of God in the NT

The NT reveals the continuation and wider recognition of these characteristics of God toward all people, but particularly his covenant people. We have already mentioned the reference in Hebrews 12:5-6 to God disciplining his children whom he loves. But there is much more.

First, the fact that wrath is still a part of God's character in the NT needs to be kept in mind. God strikes down Ananias and Sapphira for "lying to the Holy Spirit" (Acts 5:1-11). Paul discusses at length how God's wrath has been shown against all humankind, both Jew and Gentile (Romans 1-3). "The wages of sin is death." (Rom 6:23) "God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient." (Eph 5:6)

For Paul, "the righteousness of God" is revealed to the Christian in the fact that God's mercy supersedes his wrath, but not that mercy displaces wrath entirely. God rightfully punishes those who are wicked, Paul says, but he also has been displaying "the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience" in allowing people — Jew and Gentile alike — the opportunity to repent (Rom 2:1-4). God's righteousness is revealed "through the law and the prophets" first in its revelation of God's requirements, but secondly in the fact that everyone — in spite of their failure to satisfy God's requirements — can be justified "through faith in Jesus Christ . . . by God's grace as a gift" (Rom 3:21-26). The God of the NT is one who gets angry and "desires to show his wrath," but who restrains that anger "in order to make known the riches of his glory for the objects of mercy" (Rom 9:22-24). He is a God of "kindness and severity," who separates himself from the disobedient, but also who is eager to be reunited with them once they repent (Rom 11:17-24, 30-32). Paul says that "we were by nature children of wrath," meaning we all deserved to receive God's wrath against us. But

solely because of God's mercy, love and grace we have been saved from that wrath (Eph 2:3-10). Paul even uses himself as the primary example of how God's mercy predominates. He speaks of himself as "the foremost of sinners," yet one to whom God showed patience (he did not destroy Paul) and mercy and grace (1 Tim 1:12-16).

In conclusion, we see that the entire Bible, Old and New Testaments alike, portray God in the same way. He is a God who justifiably displays anger with people for their sins. But this anger is only part of who God is, and not the predominant characteristic which he possesses. That is his love, his mercy, his grace. In showing his love and grace, he is justified as well. But he does not do so because it is required of him, but simply because that is who he is and what he is like; it is his "name." Furthermore, his anger is actually seen as part of his love. They are not two separate qualities over which God wrestles. Instead, out of his love, God displays his anger. That anger is always restrained by that love. The anger is always temporary, the love permanent; the anger is confined, the love unlimited. God's anger, when it is displayed, is displayed in love, for the purpose of prompting human repentance, either in the person against whom it is displayed or in someone who is observing. He does this because "He desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4). It is the way God was in the OT, it is the way he was in the NT, and it is the way he always will be.

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