Divine Violence in the Prophets—
"I was only a little angry": Divine Violence in the Prophets

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A biblical understanding of God's relationship with Israel and the world helps us interpret passages in the prophetic literature that link God and violence. With tears, lament, and regret, God takes into the divine self the violent effects of sinful human activities and thereby makes possible a non-violent future for God's people.
I was only a little angry; they made the disaster worse." This seemingly minor quotation from Zech 1:15, which witnesses to the excessive actions of divine agents, may provide a helpful angle on the interpretation of violence in the prophets. After some introductory comments, I consider these basic claims: God's relationship with Israel is genuine; God acts in Israel and in the world in and through agents; God's agents of judgment commonly exceed their mandate; God's response to the consequent disasters includes tears, lament, and regret.

Prophetic literature is filled with violent speech and action, both human and divine. But let it be said immediately: if there were no human violence, there would be no divine violence.[1i] Genesis 6:11-13 announces a pattern regarding divine and human violence that will persist throughout the canon: "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them." A more specific form of human violence, namely war-including its anticipation, execution, and aftermath-provides the context within which most of the prophetic literature was written. Another particular form of violence-the oppression of the poor and needy-will often be associated by the prophets with the outbreak of war (e.g., Isa 10:1-5; Mic 2:1-3; Ezek 22:29-31). Violence brings violence in its wake. Inasmuch as the prophets are not deists, the God of whom they speak will be involved in the violence associated with oppression and war. Trying to sort out the nature of that divine involvement is our most basic task.

Divine violence has often been troubling to biblical commentators-and for good reason. One need only note the devastating effect of God's judgment on children, women, and the environment (e.g., Lam 2:19-21; 4:4, 10; 5:11). Such texts have led to various attempts to "shelve" the topic of divine violence: spiritualizing it ("put on the whole armor of God"), reducing it to the mysterious ways of God (though the texts have a remarkably "plain sense"), "projections" of human behaviors, or even cutting these texts out of the Bible, whether practically (as in lectionaries) or actually.

This concern about divine violence in the Old Testament has intensified in recent years.[2ii] Reasons for this development include the following: the cumulative violence over the course of the 20th century with increasingly lethal weapons, more recent experiences (9/11, terrorist activities), and the spread of interreligious conflict-all of it available in the media on a daily basis.[3iii] Also to be noted is the increasing realization that the Bible's violence has played a part in the spread of the world's violence. Altogether too often the actions of the God of the Bible have been claimed as justification for the violence, from the crusades to slavery to the denigration of women.[4iv] One may claim that the Bible has not been properly used when this occurs, but at the least readers must admit that the Bible has not provided safeguards for preventing such interpretations and should also consider whether some of its violence is "out of bounds."[5v]

Some interpreters may think that voicing such probing questions about the violence of God is inappropriate. Such questioning, however, has long been integral to the Judeo-Christian tradition, and has roots deep within the biblical texts. One need only note questions raised by Abraham (Gen 18:25) and Moses (Exod 32:1-14) regarding divine violence. Habakkuk is a prophetic example. In Hab 1:2-4, the prophet complains to God about the violence Israel has had to endure, to which God responds with an oracle of judgment (vv. 5-11). God is "rousing" the Babylonians, who will "come for violence." Habakkuk's second complaint (w. 12-17) "attacks God's announced solution to injustice as being more unjust than the original problem."[6vi] Given Babylon's violent ways and means, how can God use such a people as divine agents to overcome the wicked? God is too pure and holy to use such agents for divine purposes! We return to this issue below.

Let it be clearly said that the prophets and their God often promote non-violence. The eschatological reflections of the prophets are marked by visions of peace and non-violence, extending even to the animal world (e.g., Isa 2:2-4; 65:17-25); such texts demonstrate that Israel considered violence to be an intruder in God's world. Moreover, some texts witness that God makes every effort to stop the violence, but is not successful in doing so; people can make choices that successfully resist the will of God. For example, in the face of the post-597 B.C.E. Babylonian threat, God calls Jeremiah to bring a word that is intended to reduce the violence: Israel is to submit to Babylon's hegemony (Jer 38:17-18). Demonstrating a political realism, God announces that if Israel would not rebel, its future would take a less violent course. Israel's own use of violence would lead to its experience of even greater violence. God, too, has a stake in Israel's decision: a positive response would lessen God's association with violence.

VIOLENCE AND RELATIONSHIP

A key factor that must inform considerations of biblical violence is the centrality of relationship for Israelite theological reflection.[7vii] For the Old Testament, relationships are constitutive of life itself; through relationships all things are woven together like a spider web. Interrelatedness is a basic characteristic not only of the God-Israel (and God-world) relationship but also of the very nature of the created order. Human sin ripples out and affects the entire creation (see the linkage between human violence and the nonhuman in Hos 4:1-3). To live in a relational world inevitably means that every creature will be affected by every other; each individual is involved in the plight of all. Violence perpetrated anywhere reverberates everywhere through this relational structure of life, leading to even further violence. Because Israel understood that God is related to, and indeed deeply engaged in the affairs of this world, even the Creator will be affected by and caught up in every act of violence. Though there may be non-violent breakthroughs, an avoidance of interrelational violence is simply not possible for either Israel or God.[8viii] The Bible tells it like it is.

This understanding of relationship places a key question on the table: What does it mean for God to be a faithful member of this relationship with Israel (and the world) in the midst of all its violence? I make a claim at this point and return to it below. God so enters into these relationships that God is not the only one with something important to do and the power with which to do it. Creatures in relationship with this kind of God have been given genuine power (e.g., Gen 1:28), and God so honors this relationship-indeed is unchangeably faithful to it-that God will be self-limiting in the exercise of divine power within such relationships.[9ix] This divine self-limitation, necessary for the genuine freedom of creatures within the relationship, is a key factor in understanding violence. Israel's (and the world's) long story of successful resistance to God's will for non-violence has had deep effects on every aspect of life and the resultant violent reality complicates God's working possibilities in the world. Because of God's committed relationship to the world, no resolution will be simple, no "quick fix" available, even for God. The enemies of God cannot be overcome with a flick of the wrist. One might wish that God would force compliance and stop the violence, but, because of the genuine relationship, God's efforts to that end will entail constraint and restraint in the use of power. And so, with continued resistance to the will of God for non-violence, laments will continue and suffering will go on for both the world and God.

GOD'S USE OF AGENTS

God works through various human and nonhuman agents to get things done in the world. God acts directly, but always through means. The variety of means that God uses is impressive. God works through already existing creatures to bring about new creations (Gen 1:11), through human language to call the prophets (Isa 6:8-13), through nonhuman agents at the Red Sea (the nonhuman is the savior of the human!), through sacrificial rituals to mediate forgiveness of sin, through non-Israelite kings and armies to effect both judgment and salvation, and through the created moral order. The latter two are interrelated and particularly pertinent for this discussion.

1. God's Use of Human Agents. God's use of human agents is amply demonstrated in texts such as Jer 50:25 ("the weapons of his wrath"), Isa 10:5 ("Assyria, the rod of my anger"), and Isa 45:1 (God's "anointed," Cyrus of Persia). God's word regarding the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon in Jer 27:8 puts the matter in a nutshell, "I have completed its destruction by his hand." Remarkably, God refers to Nebuchadrezzar as "my servant" in

Jeremiah (25:9; 27:6; 43:10). Others whom God designates "my servant" in Jeremiah are David, the prophets, and Israel![10x] As with these other agents, in some sense God has chosen to be dependent on Nebuchadrezzar and his armies in carrying out that judgment.[11xi] The latter will certainly act as armies in that world are known to act, and God knows of potential problems from experience with conquerors such as these. This portrayal of God constitutes a kind of extreme realism regarding what may happen to the people. Once these armies begin their onslaught, the people will no doubt experience their pillaging, burning, and raping. Exilic readers of these texts will recall that they were real agents indeed.[12xii]

The frequency with which words of violence have both God and Babylon/Nebuchadrezzar as their subjects is remarkable, especially in Jeremiah. And so, God in judgment will not "pity, spare, or have compassion" (Jer 13:14), because that is what the Babylonians, the agents of divine judgment, will not do (Jer 21:7). God will dash in pieces, destroy, scatter, and strike down (Jer 13:14, 24; 21:6), precisely because that is what Babylon, the chosen divine agent, will do (Jer 48:12; 36:29; 52:8; 21:7).[13xiii] Such harsh words are used with God as subject because they depict the actions of those in and through whom God mediates judgment. The portrayal of God's violent action is conformed to the means that God uses.

For these reasons, interpreters must not diminish the distinction between God and God's agents or discount the power of these human armies.[14xiv] Both God and human beings are effective agents; God's activity is not all-determining. God neither 'lets go' of the creation nor retains all power. God makes free choices, but those choices are constrained by relationships God has established. One might fault God's choice of agents, but God uses the means available in that time and place to accomplish the divine purposes and, true to the nature of the relationship, does not perfect them before involving them. Hence, God's actions through them will always have mixed results, and God will not necessarily confer a positive value on the violent means in and through which God works (see below). This decision to work through such means is a risky move for God because God thereby becomes associated with the agent's activity. God thereby implicitly accepts any "guilt by association" that may accrue to the divine reputation.

This issue is made more complex by still another reality. One characteristic of communal judgment is that no clean distinction can be made between the righteous and the wicked (hence Abraham's questions in Gen 18:25). Because life is so interrelated, the righteous and the innocent (e.g., children) are often caught up in the judgmental effects of other people's sins. In other words, they will undergo the experience of judgment in ways that are often devastating to their life and health.[15xv]

In sum, consideration of God's work through human agents must steer between two ditches. God neither remains ensconced in heaven watching the world go by nor micro-manages the world to control its moves so that creaturely agency counts for nothing. Readers may find more than one place to stand between these two ditches, for the biblical texts do not always provide clear direction, but neither ditch will do. To all external observation, God is not involved in these military and political activities, but the texts confess that God's will is somehow at work even in and through violence on behalf of God's salvific purposes.

2. God Acts in and through the Moral Order. While interpreters cannot fully account for how God acts in the world, some aspects of the "how" may be evident in terms of the created moral order-a complex, loose causal weave of act and consequence. The basic purpose of the moral order is that sin/evil not go unchecked and that God's good order of creation (=righteousness) can be (re)established.[16xvi]And so, with respect to our topic: that sins have consequences, including the sins of violence, is a working out of the moral order, and can be named the judgment of God.[17xvii] God is to some degree subject to this just order (so Abraham's question in Gen 18:25 assumes, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?"); God has built this self-limitation into the very structures of creation for the sake of a genuine relationship with it. At the same time, the looseness of the causal weave allows God to be at work in the "system" without violating or (temporarily) suspending it. One possible example of such divine work is Jer 51:11: God "stirred up the spirit of the kings of the Medes."[18xviii]

Just how God relates to the movement from sin to consequence is not easy to sort out.[19xix] But, generally speaking, the relationship between sin and consequence is conceived in intrinsic rather than forensic terms; that is, consequences grow out of the deed itself.[20xx] At the same time, Israel insists that God mediates the

consequences of sin.[21xxi] The point is illustrated by Ezek 22:31, wherein God declares: "I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath." What that entails is immediately stated: "I have returned (natan) their conduct upon their heads"[22xxii]

This moral order, however, does not function in any mechanistic, precise, or inevitable way; it is not a tight causal weave. And so it may be that the wicked will prosper (Jer 12:1), at least for a time, and those who are innocent will get caught up in the effects of the sins of others. Ecclesiastes 9:11 ("time and chance happen to them all") introduces an element of randomness in relating human deeds to their effects.

Several matters of translation and interpretation come together in thinking through this issue. Sometimes the Hebrew word ra'â refers to the evil/wickedness of the people, sometimes to the effects of their wickedness, commonly translated "disaster."[23xxiii] In other words, the people's ra'â will issue in their ra'â.[24xxiv] This verbal linkage makes it clear that the judgment experienced by the Israelites flows out of their own wickedness, rather than from some divinely imposed retribution. While this understanding could be expressed in language such as "you reap what you sow" (cf. Obad 15-16), God usually remains explicitly linked to the connection between sin and consequence.

In sum, Israel's sin generates effects in a snowballing, act-consequence pattern. At the same time, God is active in the interplay of sinful actions and their effects and "third parties" are used by God as agents for that judgment. Both divine and creaturely factors are interwoven to produce the judgmental result. In modern terms, our own sin and the sins of our forebears press in upon us, but no less the hand of God. For history is our judgment and God enables history, carrying the world along, not in mechanistic ways, but with a personal attentiveness in view of the relationship. God's salvific will remains intact in everything, and God's gracious concern is always for the best; but in a given situation the best that God may be able to offer is burning the chaff to fertilize the field for a new crop.

3. Violence in judgment and salvation. The use of violence in the prophets is never an end in itself; it has a twofold purpose: judgment and salvation. So, for example, God uses the violence of the Persians under King Cyrus as judgment against the enslaving Babylonians as a means to bring salvation to the exiles (e.g., Isa 45:1-8; 47:1-15). In other words, God uses violence both to save Israel from the effects of other people's sins (cf. Israel in Egypt; Exod 15:1-3) and to save God's people from the effects of their own sins.[25xxv]

These two ways of speaking of God's use of violence may be reduced to one. That is, God's use of violence, inevitable in a violent world, is intended to subvert human violence in order to bring the creation along to a point where violence is no more. Walter Brueggemann says it well: "It is likely that the violence assigned to Yahweh is to be understood as counterviolence, which functions primarily as a critical principle in order to undermine and destabilize other violence." And so God's violence is "not blind or unbridled violence," but purposeful in the service of a non-violent end.[26xxvi]

EXCEEDING THE DIVINE MANDATE

A remarkable number of prophetic texts speak of divine judgment on those nations that have been agents of God (Jer 25:12-14; 27:6-7; 50-51; Isa 10:12-19; 47:1-15; Zech 1:15). In effect, Babylon and other agents exceeded their mandate, going beyond their proper judgmental activities in vaunting their own strength at the expense of Israel and in making the land an "everlasting waste" (Jer 25:14).[27xxvii] Such texts (cf. the oracles against the nations) assume that moral standards are known by the nations, to which they are held accountable. The exercise of divine wrath against their excessiveness shows that the nations were not puppets in the hand of God. They retained the power to make decisions and execute policies that flew in the face of the will of God; the God active in these events is not "irresistible."[28xxviii] God risks what the nations will do with the mandate they have been given. One element of that risk is that God's name will become associated with their excessive violence.[29xxix]

I take a closer look at one of these texts, namely, Zech 1:7-17. The angel of the Lord presses a lament before God: "O Lord of hosts, how long will you withhold mercy from Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, with which you have been angry these seventy years?" (v. 12). The duration of the suffering and the seeming absence of

mercy are a dual focus. God's "gracious and comforting" reply is striking: "And I am extremely angry with the nations that are at ease; for while I was only a little angry, they made the disaster worse." This text stands in the tradition of other texts that speak of nations overreaching-an "improper exercise of power toward the object of God's anger, Israel."[30xxx]

Petersen speaks of the angel's "displeasure with the one in control, Yahweh,"[31xxxi] but the point of the text is that God is not in control of these nations. They exceeded the divine mandate in their violence! God was not that angry! And so, the angel's lament (v. 12), "how long will you [God] withhold mercy," has not taken into account a key element: the exercise of power by the nations went beyond God's will for Israel and that misuse of human power complicated God's merciful activity on behalf of Israel. In other words, the "how long?" is not simply up to God, as if God were the only agent at work and could at any time push a button and "fix" matters. The nations have made God's possibilities more complex and hence God's way into the future is not reduced to a simple divine decision to act. Because of God's committed relationship to the world, no resolution will be simple, even for God.

This perspective is testimony to a fundamentally relational understanding of the ways in which God acts in the world. There is an ordered freedom in the creation wherein God leaves room for genuine human decisions as they exercise their God-given power. Even more, God gives them responsibilities in such a way that commits God to a certain kind of relationship with them. God does not micro-manage their activity, intervening to make sure every little thing is done correctly. They overdid it! These texts are testimony to a divine sovereignty that gives power over to the created for the sake of a relationship of integrity. At the same time, this way of relating to people reveals a divine vulnerability, for God opens the divine self up to hurt should things go wrong. And things do go violently wrong, despite God's best efforts.

DIVINE ANGER, GRIEF, AND REGRET

What is God's response to this devastating violence visited upon Israel by the overreaching divine agents? Divine anger is kindled toward these agents certainly, but God's response is also one of grief and regret regarding what Israel has had to undergo. Anger, grief, and regret go together for Israel's God and cannot be properly understood apart from each other. I consider each in turn.
God's anger is usually associated with God's judgment.[32xxxii] The category of relatedness is basic to the discussion. God is deeply engaged in this relationship and is passionate about what happens to it.[33xxxiii] God's anger is a sign that the relationship to Israel is being taken seriously, since apathy is not productive of anger. That God's anger is "provoked" (e.g., Jer 7:18; 8:19) reveals that God is moved by what people do and shows that anger is a divine response and not a divine attribute. God's anger is contingent; if there were no sin, there would be no divine anger.

The wrath of God is often imaged in impersonal terms: it goes forth, whirls like a tempest, and bursts upon the head of the wicked (e.g., Jer 23:19). This characterization of wrath is true to the understanding of moral order; human wickedness triggers negative effects in the interrelated social and cosmic orders, which are then linked to God and named as wrath. At the same time, this wrath is named in personal terms: "the anger of the Lord" (Jer 23:20). God's personal anger is a "seeing to" the movement from act to consequence that is the moral order. Abraham Heschel helps capture some of what is at stake in the prophetic witness to the divine anger:
"The wrath of God is a lamentation.... [God] is personally affected by what [people do to people]. [God] is a God of pathos. This is one of the meanings of the anger of God: the end of indifference! ... [Our] sense of injustice is a poor analogy to God's sense of injustice ... Is it a sign of cruelty that God's anger is aroused when the rights of the poor are violated, when widows and orphans are oppressed?"[34xxxiv]

Heschel links divine wrath with divine lament, reflecting a deeply relational understanding of God. To speak of tears and anger together is not contradictory (see Jer 8:19c in context; 9:10 with 9:11; 9:17-19 with 9:22). Rather, these emotions are held together in God, as they commonly are in people who have suffered the brokenness of intimate relationships. The internal side of God's external word and deed of wrath is profound grief. And the prophets put both on public display. God's mediation of judgment is viewed basically in terms of a breakdown in a personal relationship with its associated effects-anger, pain, and suffering-on both parties to

the relationship. God's judgment is not proclaimed joyously, but reluctantly and with great anguish, not satisfaction. In effect, readers are invited to look back and see that they have been visited not with the strict and icy indifference of a judge, but with the pain and anger of one whose intimacy has been spurned.[35xxxv] This interweaving of divine anger and divine sorrow continues into the post-judgment time and Israel's experience of violence (e.g., Jer 4:19-26; 8:18-9:1; 9:10-11, 17-19). Not only are the tears of the people voiced (e.g., Jer 14:19-22), so also are the tears of the prophet and the tears of God. Readers can thereby see that God does not remain unaffected by the violence Israel has lived through.[36xxxvi]

That divine anger and divine tears go together has considerable theological import. Without the intermittent references to divine tears, God would be much more distant and unmoved. Anger accompanied by weeping, while still anger, is different-in motivation and in the understanding of the relationship at stake. God's harsh words of judgment are not matched by an inner harshness. The prophet's strategy is to portray the kind of God with whom Israel has to do, namely, a God for whom anger/judgment is neither the first word nor the last. A word about such a God can be productive of hope. While God may give the people up to the effects of their sinfulness, God does not finally give up on them. In other terms, the circumstantial will of God in judgment is always in the service of the ultimate will of God to save.[37xxxvii] To that end, God can use judgmental effects for a variety of positive purposes (refining, cleansing, insight, discipline).

The ethical implications of this understanding are considerable: if there were no divine anger at sin/evil, then human anger toward that which is oppressive and abusive would not carry the same weight. At the same time, if there were no sorrow associated with divine anger, then human anger would be given a freer range regarding harshness.

Finally, I look at regret. God's response to Israel's suffering at the hands of overreaching agents is remarkably stated in Jer 42:10, "I am sorry for the disaster that I have brought upon you." For God to say, "I am sorry," regarding God's own actions is a striking admission.[38xxxviii] How are we to understand this divine lament? The divine response is not prompted by anything that the people have done; this move is made entirely at the divine initiative. The text certainly does not mean that God regrets that the judgment occurred at all; all prophets witness to the appropriateness of God's judgment against Israel. The text could mean that the past stance of God toward Israel has now changed in view of events; God is now open to a future for this people other than judgment.[39xxxix] Yet, God has always had a salvific future in mind for this people. The point could be softer, namely, that God is sorry about all the pain that this community has had to experience. This is certainly the case, but the issue seems more complex.

It seems to me that this statement of God carries with it the sense of genuine regret, in the sense that the judgment and its painful effects proved to be more severe than God had intended, or even thought they would be.[40xl] This direction for interpretation seems especially apt in view of the excessiveness of Babylon noted above. Yet, God does not remove the divine self from responsibility for the choice of means that resulted in an imperfect execution of the mandate. God, who does not foreknow absolutely just what and how the means chosen will speak and act, accepts some responsibility for what has happened.[41xli] This text reveals something of the inner life of the God who uses agents who cannot be divinely controlled and is deeply pained at the results. God, however, is not bereft of resources to act in the midst of suffering. Indeed, suffering becomes a vehicle for divine action. God does not relate to suffering as a mechanic does to a car, seeking to "fix it" from the outside. God enters deeply into the suffering human situation and works the necessary healing from within.[42xlii] For God to so enter into the situation means that mourning will not be the last word (see Jer 31:13-17).

That God would become involved in such human cruelties as war is finally not a matter of despair, but of hope. God does not simply give people up to violence. God chooses to become involved in violence in order to bring about good purposes; thereby God may prevent an even greater evil. The tears of the people are fully recognized; their desperate situation is named for what it is. But because of the anguish of God, their tears will one day no longer flow. By so participating in their messy stories, God's own self thereby takes the road of suffering and death. Through such involvement, God takes into the divine self the violent effects of sinful human activities and thereby makes possible a non-violent future for God's people.

[i] 1 For a survey of the issue of violence in the Old Testament, see T. E. Fretheim, "God and Violence in the Old Testament," VVW 24 (2004) 18-28.
[ii] 2 Among more recent scholarly efforts that raise serious questions regarding the Bible's violence and God's common association with it, see J. J. Collins, "The Zeal of Phinehas: the Bible and the Legitimation of Violence," JBL 122 (2003) 3-21, and the literature cited therein. Others have been particularly pointed in their critique of those texts wherein God's violence is associated with female imagery. see, e.g., R. J. Weems, Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); among many articles one might cite, that of Diane Jacobson offers a well-balanced approach ("Hosea 2: A case Study on Biblical Authority," CTM 23 [1996] 165-172). I have worked with this issue in several publications, especially "Is the Biblical Portrayal of God Always Trustworthy?" in T. Fretheim and K. Froehlich, The Bible as Word of God in a Postmodern Age (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 97-111 (reprinted: Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002).
[iii] 3 For a review of seven recent books on the topic, see S. J. Stein, "The Web of Religion and Violence," RSR 28 (2002)103-108.
[iv] 4 E. Zenger, A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath, trans. L. Maloney (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1996) 84: "[T] he history of the impact and reception of an individual text in the annals of Judaism and Christianity must also be taken into consideration when we reflect on its revelatory character... [some texts] can have been received in such a destructive way that the very knowledge of this negative history of reception becomes a constitutive part of the revelatory dimension of these texts."
[v] 5 See Fretheim, "God and Violence," for efforts to make some distinctions regarding the appropriateness of the Bible's ascription of violence to God.
[vi] 6 J. J. M. Roberts, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991) 81.
[vii] 7 For a sophisticated effort to speak of relationship as key to understanding violence and its effects, see M. Suchocki, Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology (New York: Continuum, 1994). For a fuller explication of the category of relationship, see T. E. Fretheim, "Divine Dependence on the Human: An Old Testament Perspective," ExAud 13 (1997) 1-13; "Old Testament Foundations for an Environmental Theology," in Currents in Biblical and Theological Dialogue, ed. J. K. Stafford (Winnipeg: St. John's College, 2002) 58-68.
[viii] 8 The violent events of Sept. 11 are a superb demonstration of this reality; every human being has been deeply affected by the violence of a few, not least through intensified forms of anxiety. No matter how personally we may be in control of our own violent tendencies, we are personally often invaded by a horrendous amount of violence, and that will have deep effects individually and communally.
[ix] 9 See, e.g., T. E. Fretheim, The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 71-78, for a more extensive treatment.
[x] 10 The New Testament also will speak of civil authorities as executors of the divine wrath (Rom 13:4; 1 Pet 2:13-14). In a modern context, one might consider the allied armies as an instrument of divine wrath in the defeat of Hitler; recall also the excessive military activity (e.g., the saturation bombing of Dresden) and the devastating effect of the war on children and other non-combatants.
[xi] 11 Exodus 3:8-10, where both God and Moses (often called "my servant") bring Israel out of Egypt, could function as a paradigm for such considerations. On issues of divine dependence, see Fretheim, "Divine Dependence"; idem, "Creator, Creature, and Co-creation in Genesis 1-2," in All Things New: Essays in Honor of Roy A. Harrisville, ed. by A. Hultgren, et al. WW Supplement I (1992) 11-20.
[xii] 12 Jeremiah also makes this witness when he describes the actual destruction of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 39; 52) in terms that hardly mention God.
[xiii] 13 For a listing of these correspondences, see Fretheim, Jeremiah (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2002) 36. see also p. 40 for a listing of the use of parallels in the violent speech of God and Jeremiah. For detail on this problematic language, see T. E. Fretheim, "The Character of God in Jeremiah," in Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community, and Biblical Interpretation, ed. W. P. Brown (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 211-230.
[xiv] 14 A surprisingly common scholarly claim is that God acts in an unmediated way. For example, W. Brueggemann (A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998]) often makes such claims: "The army may be Babylonian, but the real agent is Yahweh" (54, 70, 176, etc.).
[xv] 15 It remains a lively question whether it is helpful to continue to speak of "judgment" when its effects are so all encompassing, but the biblical texts do so.
[xvi] 16 See H. H. Schmid, "Creation, Righteousness, and Salvation: 'Creation Theology' as the Broad Horizon of Biblical Theology," in Creation in the Old Testament, ed. B. W. Anderson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 102-117.
[xvii] 17 Though the language of judgment is commonly associated with the court of law, juristic categories do not fully comprehend the workings of divine judgment.
[xviii] 18 see also Isa 13:17; 41:25; 45:13; Ezek 23:22; Joel 4:7.
[xix] 19 For a recent effort, see G. Tucker, "Sin and 'Judgment' in the Prophets," in Problems in Biblical Theology: Essays in Honor of Rolf Knierim, ed. H. Sun, et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 373-388.
[xx] 20 G. von Rad (Old Testament Theology, vol. I, Irans. D.M.G. Stalker [New York: Harper & Row, 1962]) speaks of a "synthetic view of life" (265) in which the consequence "is not a new action which comes upon the person concerned from somewhere else; it is rather the last ripple of the act itself which attaches to its agent almost as something material. Hebrew in fact does not even have a word for punishment" (385). The common translation of paqad, "visit," as "punish" is problematic. Notably, God's actions in history are here grounded in an understanding of God as Creator.
[xxi] 21 Interpreters have used different formulations: God midwifes, facilitates, sees to, puts in force, or completes the connection between sin and consequence. Sometimes God as subject stands in a prominent position (Jer 19:7-9); elsewhere, God's stance is more passive (Hos 4:1-3), even withdrawn (Isa 64:6-7).
[xxii] 22 There are over fifty such texts in the Old Testament that link wrath with such formulations (e.g., Ps 7:12-16; Isa 59:17-18; 64:5-9; Jer 6:11, 19; 7:18-20; 21:12-14; 44:7-8; 50:24-25; Lam 3:64-66).
[xxiii] 23 The word 'awdn, "iniquity," is also used in both senses in the Old Testament.
[xxiv] 24 This understanding of ra'a issuing in ma may be observed in several formulations. For example, God brings disaster (ra'â), which is "the fruit of their schemes" (6:19; see Hos 8:7; 10:13). Or, "I will pour out their wickedness upon them" (14:16).
[xxv] 25 Salvation is thus more comprehensive than commonly conceived. For detail, see T. Fretheim, "Salvation in the Bible vs. Salvation in the Church," WW13 (1993) 363-72.
[xxvi] 26 W. Brueggemann, Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 244.
[xxvii] 27 The relationship of God to Babylon changes in view of Babylon's own conduct as the agent of judgment. When Babylon engages in excessively destructive behaviors, it opens itself up to reaping what it has sown (Jer 50:29; 51:24). God turns against God's own agent on the basis of issues of justice, a divine pattern also evident with respect to Israel (see Exod 22:21-24). If God were not to change in view of changing circumstances, God would be unfaithful to God's own commitments.
[xxviii] 28 Contrary to Brueggemann, Jeremiah, 222.

[xxix] 29 See J. Sanders, The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998).
[xxx] 30 D. L. Petersen, Haggai and Zechariah 1-8 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 154. While Babylon is no longer the issue at this juncture, it may well continue to be among the nations indicted because of the long-term effects of its policies, leading to "the continued degradation of the Israelite community" (155).
[xxxi] 31 Ibid., 155.
[xxxii] 32 For details, see T. Fretheim, "Theological Reflections on the Wrath of God in the Old Testament," HBT 24 (2002) 1-26.
[xxxiii] 33 For an excellent treatment of divine anger, see A. Heschel, The Prophets (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1962) 279-306.
[xxxiv] 34 Ibid., 284-85.
[xxxv] 35 see T. Fretheim, The Suffering of God, 107-126.
[xxxvi] 36 On the role of emotions in Old Testament God-talk, see J. E. Lapsley, "Feeling our Way: Love for God in Deuteronomy," CBQ 65 (2003) 350-369.
[xxxvii] 37 See T. Fretheim, "Will of God in the OT," ABD, VI, 914-920.
[xxxviii] 38 The translation of niham is difficult (NRSV, "be sorry"; NAB, "regret"; NIV/NAB, "grieve"). Each of these translations carry the sense of a pained divine response to God's own past actions.
[xxxix] 39 W. McKane, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark: 1986) 1033.
[xl] 40 For the idea that God thought something would occur, but did not, see Jer 3:7, 19-20.
[xli] 41 On the issue of less than absolute divine foreknowledge, see T. Fretheim, The Suffering of God, 45-69.
[xlii] 42 See the paradigmatic Exod 3:7, "I know their sufferings," in this connection.