

Perfection and Speech about God's Character in the Old Testament

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In his landmark book *Paul and the Gift*, John Barclay discusses the idea of “perfection”—a concept he borrows from Kenneth Burke. “Perfection” describes a tendency “to draw out a concept to its endpoint or extreme, whether for definitional clarity or for rhetorical or ideological advantage.”¹ Take, for instance, the Christian who claims to live by faith.² They eschew doctors, never ask for money, and never make any plans, to allow for God’s leading. To do any such things might reflect a lack of faith, according to this “perfected” logic. In these examples, living by faith is taken to its extreme. By taking “faith” to such extremes, faith becomes perfected away from its biblical sense, and is distorted in the process. A perfected idea can become siloed off from other ideas in the name of “clarity” and often to make a certain ideological point.³

In Scripture, faith sits embedded within a network of other counterbalancing concepts that “inhibit [its] extreme expression.”⁴ The point here is not that faith is just a matter of balance, or that it is not radical or demanding. Instead, faith gains its meaning in relation to other concepts—some of which are equally radical.⁵ In addition to its counterbalancing concepts, faith gains its sense through the various biblical stories that give it life. Faith looks like *this*. For example, faith looks like Abraham and Sarah leaving their home for who knows where, or like Rahab providing cover for Israelite spies at great risk to her own life (Hebrews 11; James 2).

Barclay’s study focuses on how Christians through the ages “perfected” grace (Gk. *charis*), or “gift,” in ways that sometimes distorted its sense in the New Testament. In Luther, for instance, the grace of Christ comes to the believer “for no reward or calculation of return: it is not an interested or instrumental love.”⁶ Concepts like “sheer grace” and “pure gift” emerged in force during the sixteenth century to reflect the idea that God gives grace *without* any expectation of return favour. Barclay points out that these perceptions of divine grace run contrary to ideas about “gifts” operative since at least the first century. In Jewish, Greek, and Roman antiquity, a gift served to establish or reinforce social bonds.⁷ Thus, giving was “enmeshed in the expectation of reciprocity,” including reciprocity toward God. The notion of a “pure gift” without expectation of reciprocity stands at odds with the biblical picture, where grace expects a response of obedience (2 Cor. 5:14–15; 6:1, 14–23) because believers are “debtors” to Christ (Rom. 8:12).⁸ God expects a response of gratitude and obedience/loyalty in response to his unmerited gift. In other words, grace in the New Testament sits embedded within a matrix of concepts like “justice, mutuality, and responsibility.”⁹ Grace as “pure gift” is a perfected distortion.

Because God is, according to Christian theology, *the* perfect being, it proves hard to resist the urge to push divine qualities to their “nth” degree.¹⁰ But when we do this, we pull those concepts out of their web of related divine qualities and narratives that



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give them meaning in the first place. In my work on violence in the Old Testament, I have noticed a similar manifestation of perfectionist language, especially when speaking about God’s potential involvement in acts of violence. This article examines several instances of this tendency in ancient and recent discussions about divine judgment and violence and emphasizes the need for an *embedded* view of God’s character.

Judgement, Wrath, and the Perfection of God’s Goodness

Marcion (85–160 CE), the early church heretic who rejected the Old Testament, “perfected” the concept of divine goodness

and benevolence. In Barclay’s rendering, he “not only *emphasizes* Paul’s association of the Christ-event with the grace and mercy of God but *perfects* this association in the direction of *singularity* . . . distancing the God who is purely and entirely good from any hint of the exercise of judgment.”¹¹ The perfection of singularity insists that the gift-giver’s “*sole and exclusive* mode of operation is benevolence and goodness.”¹² So far, so good. However, Barclay notes the problematic quality of such singularity in Jewish and Christian traditions. For

example, it renders difficult the maintenance of God’s justice insofar as he reserves the right to punish evil.¹³

Marcion offers an example of how the rhetoric and ideology of perfection works: “a single notion (here the benevolence of God) is radicalized, purified, and made internally consistent, forming a polar opposite to its negative foil,” which in his case, was the Old Testament (and parts of the New Testament) and its texts portraying a God who judges.¹⁴ Marcion radicalizes the concept of goodness, influenced by Greek philosophical ideas of what actions are “befitting” a god, to an

extreme point, such that any non-conforming biblical texts were to be excised.

Marcion’s critics recognized the perfectionist tendencies in his work. The church father Tertullian (150–220 CE) mocked his simplistically good portrait of God: “A better god has been discovered, who never takes offense, is never angry, never inflicts punishment, who has prepared no fire in hell, no gnashing of teeth in the outer darkness! He is purely and simply good.”¹⁵ For Tertullian, there are always hidden costs to pictures of God that eliminate challenging tensions that emerge when considering God’s character. In this instance, Tertullian claims that Marcion eliminates God’s ability to act as judge: “You allow indeed that God is a judge, but at the same time destroy those operations and dispositions by which He discharges His judicial functions.”¹⁶ Here he refers to Marcion’s critique of divine wrath. For Tertullian, wrath is the divine quality that animates God’s active concern for justice. Criticizing his wrath was like criticizing the instruments of a doctor. Wrath, in Tertullian’s formulation—and arguably in the Bible itself—is tied intimately to God’s exercise of justice and is thus an aspect of divine goodness.¹⁷

Tertullian is highlighting the inseparability—or at least the complex interaction—of wrath and justice in God, both encapsulated in God’s goodness. In Marcion’s perfectionism, goodness required an *apathetic* God for the operation of justice. Yet the biblical witness refuses to oppose divine pathos and the enactment of justice. In Exodus 22:21–24, for instance, God warns Israel that if his people cause the orphan or widow to cry out, “My anger shall blaze forth.”¹⁸ He would come in judgment upon those who cause such an outcry just as he came against Egypt in response to Israel’s outcry (Exod. 2:23–25). The point of these verses is not to be precise about the exact penalty for oppressing the weak, but to express the *pathos* of God in the face of injustice. For Israel, divine wrath included the idea that God was the protective father of the vulnerable—be it individuals or his people Israel.

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Wrath—like jealousy—reflected *concern for* the weak against any who would put them at risk or threaten God's legitimate claim to parentage. In this sense, God's wrath toward the nations (e.g., for their mistreatment of Israel) was a deep expression of his goodness and love toward his people.¹⁹

For many Christians, wrath with love sounds like an odd or troubling mix. Indeed, several texts also concede the *perceptual* tension that the coexistence of these qualities presents, especially in terms of whether God will display wrath or mercy toward his people (Isa. 54:8; Hos. 11:9; Ps. 6:1). I do not want to minimize the experience of disjunction that Israel experienced. Wrath and mercy are not simply two sides of the same coin, especially in Israel's, or our, experience.

We could extend our analysis of the character constellation that comprises divine goodness further. For instance, several biblical texts insist that divine wrath and *grief* operate in tandem (Jer. 8:19; 9:10–11; 9:17–20). Again, a strange mix. As Terence Fretheim observes, Jeremiah's dependence on the marriage metaphor to depict God's relationship with Israel lends itself to expressions of grief, even in instances where we also witness God's wrath.²⁰ The same co-operation of wrath and grief occurs in Jesus's response to Lazarus's death (John 11:33–36).

In addition to recognizing character constellations like love and judgement or wrath and grief, Scripture invites us to consider concepts like divine mercy, wrath, and judgement in a particular *sequence*. Perfecting divine goodness erases the common narrative patterns of representation by which biblical writers understood God's character. It becomes clear from various stories in Scripture that God's wrath carries a penultimate and temporary quality. It remains liable to revocation. If Israel submits to the divine word of judgement, God is often inclined to withhold judgement or wrath. God announces judgment but then opens himself up to the possibility of averting that judgment by letting his anger build *slowly* (Exod. 34:6). In the merciful space

created by this slow build, God invites humanity to turn from evil. Such turning occurs between Jonah's pronouncement of judgement and the day when Nineveh was supposed to be destroyed. The forty-day interim was very intentional. Jonah 3:8 states that the Ninevites "turn[ed] from their evil ways and from the violence that [was] in their hands."²¹ In response, God extended mercy. In Exodus, God had told Moses, "Let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them" (Exod. 32:10). The assumption here, as in the prophets, is that God reveals his plans before they come to fruition, leaving a gap for God to be persuaded to do otherwise. God's wrath builds slowly. Rabbi Jochanan explains this divine propensity with a story, inspired by Exodus 34:6:

Were it not written in the text, it would be impossible for us to say such a thing; this verse teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, drew his robe round Him like the reader of a congregation and showed Moses the order of prayer. He said to him: Whenever Israel sins, let them carry out this service before Me, and I will forgive them. (Tractate *Rosh HaShanah* 17b)²²

The Old Testament calls us to ponder the complex interrelationship between divine goodness, wrath, and judgement. It does not outline one specific way that these qualities interact, though several distinctive patterns emerge: (1) Scripture recognizes the tension between divine mercy and judgement/wrath, but insists that the two cannot be divorced. (2) Scripture brings God's wrath and judgement into association with divine love and grief, prompting reflection. (3) The tension between mercy and judgement is not that of equals. God's mercy vastly outweighs his judgement, though the latter needs to be maintained (Exod. 34:6–7). I discuss this point further below. (4) God's judgement/wrath is penultimate, and liable to revocation when implored by petitioners (Exod. 32:9–14; Ps.

30:5; Isa. 48:9; Jer. 5:1). I list these as examples of how Scripture invites us to consider troubling divine qualities as embedded, and not perfected, phenomena.

Violence and the Perfections of the Cross

The draw toward perfectionist thinking is evident in discussions about divine violence. This is especially so as one gives serious attention to the central symbol of the Christian faith—the cross.

For some interpreters like Greg Boyd (in his influential *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God*), Jesus’s crucifixion is not just the central lens through which we view God’s relationship to violence. It is the *only* lens. The cross epitomizes divine non-violence as the full and exclusive response of God to human injustice and sin. The cross as symbol of non-violence can then in turn become extended into a totalizing “hermeneutic” that reinterprets the very texts that lend the cross meaning and sense. Boyd’s logic runs something like this. Because

- 1) the cross is the full and complete revelation of God, and
- 2) on the cross Jesus responds non-violently toward his enemies, and
- 3) non-violence does not align with portraits of God in the Old Testament, *then*
- 4) the Old Testament portrait of God needs to be rethought and reinterpreted. Indeed, it should even accommodate the idea that some texts simply misrepresent him.

My primary concern with this variety of perfected crucicentrism is not that it prioritizes the cross, emphasizes non-violence, or interprets the Old Testament toward the cross event. My concern, instead, is that it loses the broader Scriptural context within which the cross makes sense. In numerous texts, New Testament authors reached for the rich palette of Old Testament texts to paint their portrait of the cross and its meaning. Philippians 2:8–10, part of the great Christ Hymn, makes sense of the

cross with the suffering servant image from Isaiah 52:13 and 53:12 as well as the idol polemic in Isaiah 45:23. Ephesians 2:14–17, though speaking about the abolishment of the law (as dividing wall), draws its breath from Isaiah 57:19, which speaks of God’s healing work through Israel. Each example highlights the problem of taking the cross as a self-interpreting symbol with which to re-read the rest of Scripture. That lack of two-way traffic between the Old and New Testaments leads to a kind of hermeneutical tyranny,²³ where the perfection of non-violence in the cross becomes the measure for determining whether we can “accept” the plain sense of a text in the Old Testament. In the process, the story of Israel, with all its rich (and often troubling) symbols, is fragmented into its acceptable parts.

There are several by-products of crucicentric perfectionism. First is hyper-discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments. Boyd’s perfected crucicentrism leads him to the conclusion that the God of the Old Testament does not regularly look like the God revealed on the cross. Rather than explaining away the differences, Boyd maximizes the contrast between the portrait of God in the Old Testament and the revelation of the non-violent cross in the New Testament. For instance, Boyd insists that Jesus and Paul “repudiate” the *lex talionis* (eye for an eye) principle in Matthew 5:39–45 and Romans 12:14–21.²⁴ However, Jesus is clearly not repudiating *lex talionis* (the Israelite concept of equivalent punishment), but challenging a misreading of the law that would position “eye for an eye” as an ethical ideal (which it never was).²⁵ Moreover, the foundations for Jesus’s ideal of love for enemies and non-retaliation lie within the Old Testament itself (e.g., Exod. 23:4–5; Prov. 25:21; 2 Kings 6:1–22; cf. Rom. 12:20).²⁶ Because Boyd divorces the Old Testament from the New on the question of violence, he then needs to overstate the degree to which God’s non-violent response to human violence is unique.

For Boyd, if anything in the Old Testament does not meet the criterion of

enemy-love, it requires reinterpretation or even repudiation.²⁷ If parts of the Old Testament exhibit enemy love, then they can be left alone. As a result, the Old Testament ends up dismembered, with one pile of remains that can be read according to its surface meaning, and another pile that is read against itself. This is part of the collateral damage of solving one problem. Boyd loses the tension, complexity, and difference between different acts of God in history. We must ask what, in Boyd's analysis, gives the cross its meaning. Boyd is choosing a particular interpretive framework for making sense of the crucifixion.

Second, crucicentric perfectionism leads to a static representation of the cross. For Boyd, the cross shows us that God *only* and *always* deals with his enemies non-violently (hence the strong re-reading of other texts). But would this singularity obtain for other dimensions of the cross? For instance, does God *only* and *always* wield power through suffering?²⁸ Does God *only* and *always* remain (mostly) silent in the face of enemy aggression (cf. Ps. 94:1–4)? I do not think Boyd would say yes, but on what basis? Scripture itself calls us to recognize different acts of God in history. The New Testament itself assumes a difference (or narrative development) between the cross and other divine acts. For instance, in Peter's sermon in Acts 3, Peter distinguishes between the way Jesus treated those who crucified him in ignorance, and the way he would judge those who *knew* Jesus as exalted Lord and yet rejected him (v. 23; cf. 13:40–41; Heb. 2:2–3). Paul also recognizes that God treated him differently when he was, unwittingly, a blasphemer: "I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a violent man; yet because I had acted in ignorance and unbelief, I was shown mercy" (1 Tim. 1:13). Or take Jesus's own imprecation against Judas in John 13:18 (cf. Ps. 41:8–10), who knew him and yet betrayed, or the disciples' treatment of the same (Acts 1:16–20; cf. Ps. 69:25; 109:8). My point here is not to overplay the contrast between crucifixion and other acts

of God, but to observe that God's response to enemies is not exactly and always the same. This raises questions about our ability to use the cross as an exclusive lens for interpreting Old Testament representations of God's judgement or violence.

Third, crucicentric perfectionism leads to selective reinterpretation of the Old Testament. Boyd argues that while the God in the Old Testament "wears the mask" of a typical ancient Near Eastern deity (his version of divine accommodation), the mask sometimes slips. What he means is that God allows himself to be misrepresented along the lines of other ancient deities. In rare moments, however, the mask slips and the Spirit "breaks through." Here is Boyd on Amos 9:7: "While God stooped to wearing the mask of an ANE deity who favors and fights for one nation as opposed to others, we can nevertheless discern *the Spirit breaking through* in a number of passages to reveal that the true God is the impartial, universally concerned, loving Father."²⁹ Elsewhere, Boyd writes, "Though God had for a long while accommodated his people's unfaithful reliance on the sword, thereby leaving their 'twisted' view of him as a warrior deity in place, in this passage we see *the Spirit breaking through* to reveal the true peace-loving character of the heavenly missionary."³⁰ Boyd's perfected crucicentrism leads him to select as Spirit-charged only those passages that conform perfectly to the ideal form he sees in the cross, and to relegate the rest to cultural conditioning and divine accommodation. This is perfectionist thinking at work. Texts are extracted from their network of narratives, themes, and "other balancing and limiting concepts, which inhibit their extreme expression" and enable them to speak with their own voice.³¹ The cross thus acts as a colonizer of meaning.

My criticism of crucicentric perfectionism is not meant to suggest that we moderate our talk about the cross or consider it less radical than previously thought. Instead, the cross needs to be understood as an embedded symbol. For biblical writ-

ers, the cross stood within a wider network of narrative symbols and christological considerations that enable the message of Christ, and him crucified, to emerge in all its varied colors. It cannot function as a naked hermeneutic, as though its meaning is self-evident.

The writers of the New Testament are at pains to show that Jesus's crucifixion was *consistent with*, as well as the fulfilment of, Scripture's testimony about Yahweh. That is why Jesus chides his disciples for not seeing beforehand that the Messiah needed to suffer before his enthronement. They *should have*

known that based on the Old Testament (Luke 24:26; cf. 16:29–31). This is why Peter, Paul, and the other apostles could argue from a rich network of related Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah (Acts 17:3). In short, their thinking about the cross was deeply embedded in the stories, symbols, and language of the Old Testament. At least four lament psalms, for instance, shape Mark's passion narrative (Psalms 22, 41, 42, 69).³² Matthew's passion narrative, including the very stories the narrator chooses to tell, are clearly influenced by the events of Psalm 22. The Passover shapes John's understanding of the cross. This is

not to mention the way that, for both Paul and the author of the book of Hebrews, the sacrificial system shaped their understanding of the cross. How, then, can the cross function as a lens for re-interpreting the texts that give it meaning? To that end, I submit that the radical story of the cross was, according to the New Testament, the surprising yet consistent fulfilment of Israel's Scriptures. Those Scriptures provided the interpretive grid for understanding the cross, and more broadly, Jesus's birth, life, death, resurrection, and enthronement. An embedded, rather than a perfected, understanding of the cross enabled

New Testament authors to recognize a Jesus who was high priest, sacrificial lamb, purifying sacrifice, Davidic king, Isaiah's Immanuel and suffering servant, Daniel's Son of Man, the fulfilment of the law, the temple itself, and indeed, Israel's God.³³

How Should We Think about God's Character?

I have highlighted extreme forms of perfectionism in ancient (Marcion) and contemporary (Boyd) interpreters in order to highlight a temptation that accompanies any endeavour to understand ethically troubling qualities of God (wrath, judgement, violence). I have suggested by contrast that Scripture invites us to think about the *embedded* nature of divine qualities. Divine qualities do not exist in a vacuum, but in relation to counterbalancing concepts and in relation to certain patterns (or sequences) of representation. I want to develop this point here in relation to Christian efforts to wrestle with troubling divine qualities.

First, Scripture frequently brings dissonant experiences of, and oppositional claims about, God into proximity for deliberate consideration. The dilemma of paradoxes or tensions regarding God's character is not just a biproduct of the diverse traditions that make up the Bible. The dilemma itself reflects a deliberate rhetorical strategy that biblical writers employ to force readers to come to learn the ways of God. I offer a few examples.³⁴

Early in the story of Genesis we encounter the problem of apparent divine favouritism. God looked with favour on Abel's offering, but not on Cain's (Gen. 4:3–5). The text never explains why—for the readers or for Cain.³⁵ Cain had to confront the problem of apparent favouritism without the benefit of an explanation. Genesis will continue to confront us with the problem of apparent divine favouritism in relation to the theme of chosenness.

Samuel juxtaposes claims that God is not like humans, who regret or change their minds with claims that he did just this, in the space of several verses:

[The cross] cannot function as a naked hermeneutic, as though its meaning is self-evident.

"I regret [Heb. *nkhm*] that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me, and has not carried out my commands." Samuel was angry; and he cried out to the Lord all night. (1 Sam. 15:11)

Moreover, the Glory of Israel will not recant or change his mind [Heb. *nkhm*]; for he is not a mortal, that he should change his mind [Heb. *nkhm*]. (1 Sam. 15:29)

And the Lord was sorry [Heb. *nkhm*] that he had made Saul king over Israel. (1 Sam 15:35b)³⁶

The book of Psalms juxtaposes claims about God's enduring promises with claims that God broke those promises. For instance, Psalm 89 gives voice to the strongest assertions of God's commitment to the Davidic covenant in Scripture before claiming that God broke that covenant:

Forever I will keep my steadfast
love for him,
and my covenant with him
will stand firm.

I will establish his line forever,
and his throne as long as the
heavens endure. . . .

His line shall continue forever,
and his throne endure before
me like the sun.

It shall be established forever like
the moon,
an enduring witness in the
skies. *Selah*

But now you have spurned and
rejected him;
you are full of wrath against
your anointed.

You have renounced the covenant
with your servant;
you have defiled his crown in
the dust.
(Ps. 89:28–29, 36–39)

Each text, in its own way, invites readers to become people who hold together claims about God's character and actions that might otherwise devolve into competing claims.

Second, there are *core* and *peripheral* claims about God, and the Old Testament recognizes this. Not all claims about God are on an equal footing. Yet, the Old Testament makes its core claims about God's character in terms of a complex unity that resists perfectionist thinking. This is expressed best in Exodus 34:6–7, a passage representing the closest to a "character creed" that the Old Testament offers:

And he [Yahweh] passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation." (NIV)

This text's "core" quality derives first from its narrative location—immediately after Israel broke the first and second commands (Exod. 32–34). The revelation of God's character comes in response to Moses's request to know God's *ways* and for his *presence* to remain with Israel (33:12–16, 18) despite their sin. God tells Moses that his goodness would pass before Moses (corresponding to his *ways* above) and that he would reveal his glory (33:17, 19–23) to confirm his *presence* with Israel. God's ways find expression in the adjectives of verse 6 (compassionate, gracious, etc.) and the verbs of verse 7 (maintaining love, forgiving, etc.). Divine *hesed*, or merciful love, appears in the adjectival and verbal portions of 34:6–7, unifying this portrait of Yahweh.

The prominence of this character creed also derives from its repetition throughout Scripture. It is quoted at least fourteen times in the Old Testament,³⁷ and fragments of these verses reverberate hundreds of times through both testaments.³⁸ Israel continued to think with this text as it reflected on God's character. What I want to emphasize

here is the way the passage brings God's compassionate mercy into connection with his judgement. The two sit in uneasy tension (forgiving . . . punishing), but they do sit together. In other words, the core confession of Yahweh's character asks us to stand in awe and wonder before the glorious God who shows boundless mercy and who also judges the guilty. We cannot divorce these qualities from each other. Instead, we are invited to consider how they might relate. I submit that much of the Old Testament is taken up with that very pursuit.

Third, the Old Testament's own reflections on Exodus 34:6–7 allowed for the *accentuation*, but not the *perfection*, of God's character qualities. Other biblical texts did not just quote Exodus 34:6–7 verbatim.³⁹ Instead, they worked within the framework of the Exodus 34:6–7 revelation but foregrounded or downplayed aspects of the character constellation as a given situation warranted it. Here are several examples:

- Joel 2:13–14 highlights the adjectives noted in Exodus 34:6, but then emphasizes how God “relents from punishment.” In other words, Joel evokes Exodus 34:7 but contends that God might retract his declared judgement in response to Israel's submission.
- In Jonah 4:1–3, Jonah expresses rage at God's mercy (not his judgement) toward Israel's enemy Nineveh. Jonah draws from the character qualities of Exodus 34:6 and laments God's “failure” to enact the judgement of 34:7 on Nineveh. This text highlights the “problem” of divine mercy: How can a just God keep extending mercy, especially toward non-Israelites?⁴⁰
- In Hosea 2:19–20, Yahweh pledges his loyalty to Israel, highlighting three terms from Exodus 34:6 (merciful love, compassion, and faithfulness). The list also includes two adjectives not found in Exodus 34:6 (righteousness

and justice),⁴¹ though the latter is clearly implied in Exodus 34:7. The passage suggests that we view Yahweh's remarriage to Israel as an act of justice and mercy.

- Nahum 1:3 insists that while Yahweh is slow to anger (see Exod. 34:6) he is “great in power” and “will not leave the guilty unpunished” (NIV; see Exod. 34:7). This passage, uniquely, focuses on the judgement of Yahweh upon Assyria. It serves as a counterpoint to Jonah's message.

- Psalm 103:6–18 highlights the mercy, grace, and forgiveness of Yahweh (Exod. 34:6–7a), and insists that in fact, Yahweh has *not* enacted the punishments of Exod. 34:7b.

The list of five adjectives and four verbs in Exodus 34:6–7 allows for a flexible-yet-ordered “core” to the Old Testament portrait of God. The claims are underdetermined enough that different contexts can activate potential understandings of Yahweh's character or downplay others. However, each citation retains (or explores) some tension evident within the constellation of core divine qualities outlined in Exodus. Indeed, it is in part the tensions and antinomies of Exodus 34:6–7 that give the character sketch its foundational quality.

If Exodus 34:6–7 sits at the heart of the Old Testament's understanding of God—a point on which there is widespread agreement—then we do well to attend not only to its content, but also to the mode of theological reasoning it advocates.⁴² This mode involves more than just holding tensions. It also involves avoiding the perfection of divine character qualities in ways that negate others. *God is so compassionate that he never punishes wrong. Or, God is so holy that he must judge sin.* The “ways” of God displayed in Exodus 34:6–7 involve the coordination of forgiveness and punishment, of mercy and anger, and of loyalty to thousands and judgment to several generations.

A caveat is in order. By emphasizing embedded thinking about God's character, I do not suggest that we temper our thinking about God (as in, *He is not really as merciful as you thought*). Exodus 34:6–7 forces us instead to think about the “incomprehensible excess of God's goodness.”⁴³ While Scripture invites us to avoid perfecting the notion of mercy away from punishment, it also invites us to recognize the categorically unique quality of divine mercy. This is a mercy like no other. The thousands of generations vastly outnumber the three or four judged generations. In strictly mathematical terms, God's mercy outweighs his judgement by a ratio of at least 500:1 (taking the minimum of 2000 generations vs. the maximum of 4). While such mathematical precision is not the point here, embedded reasoning about God's character does not require that we see mercy and judgement in equal terms.

On Not Saying Everything

Avoiding perfectionism might sound like adding footnotes to every claim about God. He is “holy,”⁴⁴ “loving,”⁴⁵ and “just,”⁴⁶ and none of those terms mean what you think they mean! Surely there is a time where a Christian can say without qualification: “If you want to know God's character, look at the cross.” Or, “God is merciful. Full stop.” Indeed, there is!

In some scholarship, there is a tendency to overplay the role of tensions and antinomies when considering Old Testament theology. Even tensions can be “perfected.” Walter Brueggemann, for instance, suggests that there is a tension that borders on incoherence within Yahweh. The tensions evident in Exodus 34:6–7 are so discordant for Brueggemann that they exhibit a “disjunction . . . in the center of Yahweh's character.”⁴⁷ God is often caught, in Brueggemann's assessment, between acting in his own interests and in the interests of Israel. Any attempt to resolve the tension between mercy and justice is reductionistic. The Old Testament “resists resolution.”⁴⁸ The second part of Exodus 34:7 “bears witness to something potentially wild, unruly,

and dangerous in Yahweh's life.” Israel holds on for the wild ride, according to Brueggemann, for they “cannot know how this unresolved tension will be enacted in any particular circumstance.”⁴⁹ In this respect, Brueggemann avoids perfecting any one aspect away from the other counterbalancing qualities of Yahweh, but he runs the risk of avoiding integration altogether.⁵⁰

In a perceptive review of Brueggemann's *Theology of the Old Testament*, Dennis Olson points out several problems with insisting always and only on holding tensions.⁵¹ First, as Olson notes, Brueggemann seems unaware of his own reductionism. For Brueggemann, the Old Testament is fundamentally a story of God's liberative justice, well-being, and peace.⁵² This reading requires the prioritizing of certain character divine qualities. Second, Olson insists on the necessity of some reductionism in our speech about Scripture: “A certain measure of self-acknowledged reductionism is simply required by finite humans in a local context to render a large, ancient and diverse body of literature into anything rhetorically meaningful, albeit provisional and proximate.”⁵³ Moreover, every expression of biblical theology is inevitably “caught up in a dialogic encounter with a complex constellation of voices that we bring to the text from the outside.”⁵⁴

His point is not that the consistency of divine character is foreign to Scripture. Instead, appropriating Scripture to make claims about God is necessarily contextual and provisional. It requires that we determine which biblical voices are most appropriate in each context and situation, and how to express them in ways most faithful to the overall shape of Scripture. Yet we do so with recognition that there is always more that can be said.

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provisional.*

Conclusions

Several points follow from our discussion of God's character and perfected speech. First, perfectionist tendencies abound when speech about God's character is involved. Yet the impulse toward viewing God as the preeminent expression of any characteristic should not overshadow the way that divine character qualities interact, counterbalance, and define one another. Second, Scripture invites us into a process of knowing God's character as a complex constellation. Scripture even intensifies the tensions between some of God's challenging character qualities (wrath, judgement) and actions (violence) and his mercy, love, and forgiveness. Yet it does so with the goal of prompting theological reflection and faith. Reflection insists on understanding how those characteristics interact, and faith insists on holding and maintaining those tensions. Third, Scripture also invites us to recognize that God's character is not so complex that we cannot know or make summary claims about him. Fourth, the tension evident in the "character creed" of Exodus 34:6–7 provides a good model for our thinking about God's character that avoids perfectionist tendencies, but also resists a constant juggling act. There are grounds for "provisional monologization," or for accentuating aspects of God's character as a situation might demand. Knowing how and when requires great wisdom. ✕

Notes

* Aspects of this article appeared as part of a four-part engagement with Gregory A. Boyd's *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2017); Matt Lynch, "The Warrior God," Reveils, *Theological Miscellany* (blog), WTC Theology, fall 2017, <https://wtctheology.org.uk/theomisc/crucifixion-warrior-god-gregory-boyd-review-part-1/>.

1 John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 67.

2 Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 68.

3 Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 68. This need not necessarily follow, but will often occur when a particular concept is isolated from other concepts.

4 Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 67.

5 Indeed, as Matthew Bates argues in his book *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), faith (Gk. *pistis*) must be

understood in relation to Jesus's kingship and the allegiance that kingship demands.

6 Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 57.

7 Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 44.

8 David A. deSilva, "We are Debtors: Grace and Obligation in Paul and Seneca," in *Paul and Seneca in Dialogue*, *Ancient Philosophy and Religion* 2, ed. Joey Dodson and David Briones (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 150–78.

9 Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 75.

10 Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 68.

11 Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 83. Emphasis original. Singularity is one of six perfections that Barclay discusses. These include superabundance (the "size, significance, and permanence of the gift"), singularity (discussed above), priority (the idea that the gift is "always prior to the initiative of the recipient"), incongruity (a gift given "without regard to the worth of the recipient"), efficacy (the gift "fully achieves what it was designed to do"), and non-circularity (the gift is given without any expectation of a return) (pp. 70–75). One perfection does not imply all the rest, but Barclay does note the presence of common clusters of perfection.

12 Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 71, emphasis original.

13 Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 71.

14 Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 83.

15 Tertullian, "Against Marcion" 1.27, in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Peter Holmes, ANF 3 (1885; repr. Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2000).

16 Tertullian, "Against Marcion" 2.16.

17 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 4–5, distinguishes between divine "pathos" and divine "passion." Whereas passion denotes an irrational emotional response that dominates a person or deity, pathos denotes an emotional response driven by care and justice. Heschel also points out that divine pathos is contingent, provisional, and not intrinsic to God's character. It results from God's relationality.

18 NJPS, formerly known as the NJV.

19 Mark S. Smith, *How Human Is God? Seven Questions about God and Humanity in the Bible* (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical, 2014), 46.

20 Terence E. Fretheim, *What Kind of God? Collected Essays of Terence E. Fretheim*, Siphut 14, ed. Michael J. Chan and Brent A. Strawn (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 145.

21 All Scripture quotations are taken from the NRSV, unless otherwise noted.

22 Quoted in J. Richard Middleton, "God's Loyal Opposition: Psalmic and Prophetic Protest as a Paradigm for Faithfulness in the Hebrew Bible," *Canadian-American Theological Review* 5, no. 1 (2016): 59. On the necessity of prophetic opposition, see Yochanan Muffs, "Who Will Stand in the Breach? A Study of Prophetic Intercession," in *Love and Joy: Law, Language, and Religion in Ancient Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 9–48.

23 A phrase I have borrowed from Lucy Peppiatt.

24 Boyd, *Crucifixion*, 725.

25 Matt Lynch, "Old Testament 'Vengeance,'" *Theological Miscellany* (blog), WTC Theology, October 28, 2015, <https://wtctheology.org.uk/theo-misc/jesus-and-old-testament-vengeance/>

26 For Boyd's hyper-discontinuity regarding sacrifice, see *Crucifixion*, 711.

27 Boyd, *Crucifixion*, 475.

28 My thanks to Matt Bates for raising this question.

29 Boyd, *Crucifixion*, 728, emphasis mine.

30 Boyd, *Crucifixion*, 737, emphasis mine.

31 Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 67.

32 Stephen Ahearne-Kroll, *The Psalms of Lament in Mark's Passion: Jesus' Davidic Suffering*, SNTS 142 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

33 Thanks to Steve Watts for some of the wording in this last paragraph.

34 I benefit here from Walter Moberly's insightful chapter called "Faith and Perplexity" in his book *Old Testament Theology: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 211–42.

35 While some contend that the reasons for the different treatment are due to the kind of offerings they bring ("firstlings" vs. "some" produce), even later biblical law allowed for various kinds of produce offerings that were not "firstfruits." Also, God avoids giving Cain a rationale for the difference in treatment.

36 God's tendency to "relent" (*nkhm*) from bringing evil features prominently in Jon. 4:1–4 and Joel 2:13–14.

37 Num. 14:18; Ps. 86:5, 15; 103:8; 111:4; 112:4; 116:5; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jon. 4:2; Nah. 1:3; Neh. 9:17, 31; 2 Chron. 30:9; cf. Deut. 4:31; Ps. 78:38.

38 For a review of significant echoes of Exod. 34:6–7 in the Old Testament, see Austin Surls, *Making Sense of the Divine Name in the Book of Exodus: From Etymology to Literary Onomastics*, BBRSup 17 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2017), 162–81.

39 We will leave aside the question of whether Exod. 34:6–7 preceded, redactionally, most other biblical iterations of those verses.

40 This text depends on an ironic reversal of the theme of prophetic opposition to the divine proclamation. Whereas prophets typically plead for God to enact mercy, here the prophet opposes divine mercy. See

Amy Erickson, *Jonah: Introduction and Commentary*, Illuminations (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 383.

41 Ps. 103:6–18, which also draws explicitly from Exod. 34:6–7, also begins with an emphasis on Yahweh's justice and righteousness. Biblical writers clearly picked up on the fact that divine *צדק* (justice and righteousness) were central to God's character.

42 Mark J. Boda, *The Heartbeat of Old Testament Theology: Three Creedal Expressions*, ASBT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

43 Claus Westermann, *Elements of Old Testament Theology*, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 139.

44 But note that in his holiness he forgives, shows mercy, and extends grace.

45 But his love requires loyalty and does not preclude his judgement or punishment.

46 But his justice is not always perceptible in terms that accord with human standards of justice.

47 Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2005), 271. Brueggemann considers Exod. 34:7b "an abrupt about face" (p. 270).

48 Brueggemann, *Theology*, 400.

49 Brueggemann, *Theology*, 270–73.

50 For Brueggemann, Israel "pushed the tension [between divine love and retribution] theologically and rhetorically, until it pushed it into the very life, character, and person of Yahweh, [so] Israel assigned to Yahweh, or found within the person of Yahweh, this profound tension, whereby Yahweh's future life in the world and with Israel is characteristically ominous" (*Theology*, 272).

51 Dennis T. Olson, "Biblical Theology as Provisional Monologization: A Dialogue with Childs, Brueggemann and Bakhtin," *Biblical Interpretation* 6, no. 2 (1998): 162–80. Cf. Carol A. Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth," *The Journal of Religion* 76, no. 2 (1996): 290–306.

52 Olson, "Biblical Theology," 166.

53 Olson, "Biblical Theology," 169.

54 Olson, "Biblical Theology," 178, following the insights of Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 7.

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