

Ancient Concepts about Divine Anger and Appeasement: Mesopotamia and the Hebrew Bible | BY JEAN SHELDON

*The king's wrath is a messenger of death,
and whoever is wise will appease it.*

Proverbs 16:14, NRSV

In Mesopotamian, like most polytheistic religions, we can hardly uncover a consistent, coherent theology; however, certain features stand out that form a portrayal of the deities making up the pantheons of ancient Babylonia and Assyria. Perhaps the most foundational principle of ancient Mesopotamian religions, that tied their various elements together, was that of divine anger and appeasement. Why did the Babylonians and Assyrians find it so important to bring food offerings to the temples of the gods? Because human beings were created to be slaves of the gods, saddled with taking care of their needs much the same way slaves in the royal court took care of the king's needs. While fed from the same repast as the deity, the priests and other caretakers did not eat with the god, who enjoyed his meal aloof and silent.¹ And though the worshipers who brought the offerings, and the priests and temple personnel who prepared them into food, may have fed the deity primarily as their duty, they no doubt had in mind the need to keep the god happy. After all, like any slave master, a full, contented deity remained less likely to get angry, while a neglected god, like his counterpart, the king, would angrily retaliate with appropriate punishment of his slaves.

Why did kings engage in temple building and restoration as an act of duty toward the gods? A god whose temple lay in disrepair might huff off in anger, if the right deity (such as Erra) came along and taunted him about his dirty tiara (crown), leaving the helpless Babylonians to the tyrannical power of the one who incited his displeasure in order to gain the control and power he wanted so that the people would fear him.² Why did the priests burn incense and offer incanta-

tions? They intended to soothe the gods so that they would be inclined to answer their petitions and show them favor. Why were kings, sometimes royal officers, and even free citizens so obsessed with reading the omens? Because the Mesopotamians believed that the gods communicated with human beings by inscribing omens (as legal verdicts of reward or punishment) on the entrails (most specifically, the liver) of domestic animals such as sheep, or signs in the heavens. Such verdicts were not absolutely fixed, but one could attempt to negotiate with the gods if the omen reading portended a negative outcome.³ If enemy forces seized the idol of the god out of the temple, they in effect seized the god himself, who had, in anger, allowed the enemy to take him to better treatment elsewhere.⁴ As in the case of the three friends of Job, the Mesopotamians generally believed that all illness, loss of reputation, injustice, and misfortunes equaled punishments by the gods whom they had angered.

Though the Babylonians and Assyrians believed in justice, and kings, such as Hammurabi, hoped to gain divine favor by portraying their many acts of justice toward their citizens,⁵ the gods did not concern themselves with human justice quite as much as with rituals and temple services. One Babylonian sufferer complained that the gods treated him as though he had not brought the proper offerings to the temple, ignored the days of the gods, and generally neglected them.⁶ Another Babylonian sufferer contended that it did no good to make offerings to the gods.⁷ At the heart of these complaints lies the assumption that if one suffers it is because the gods are angry over some ritual neglect on the part of the sufferer. While moral concerns also figure into this punishment, ritual concerns seem paramount.

Similar to the royal domain, in the arena of divine anger, the issue at stake was not to seek a morally

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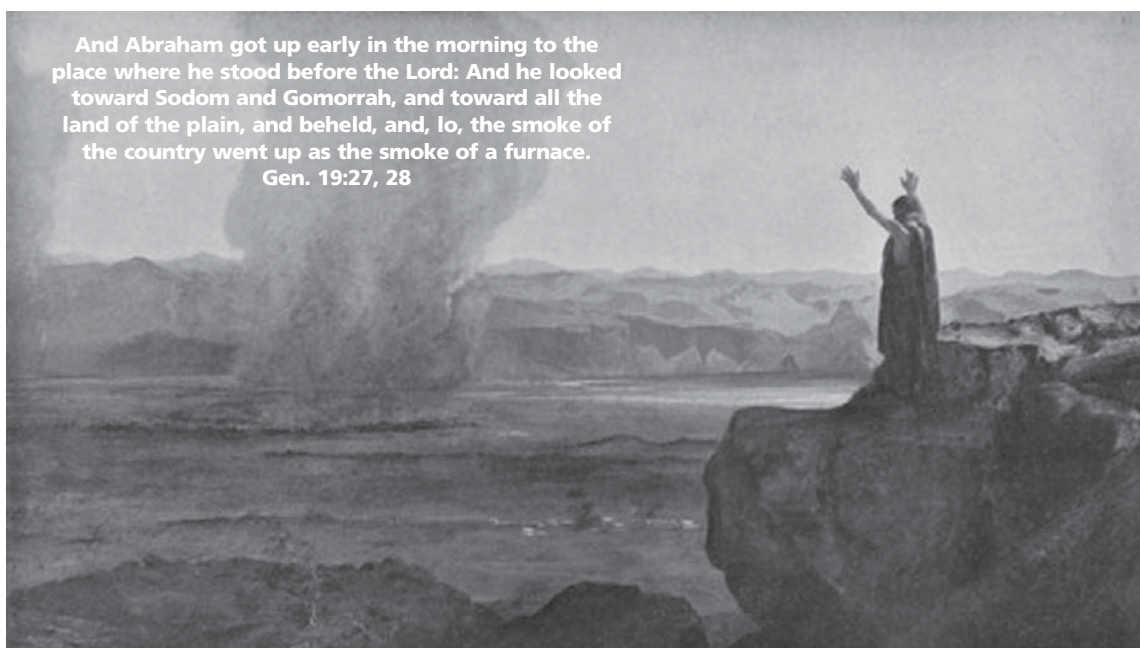
upright character that would reflect the deity's own persona, but rather to manipulate either the deity directly, or circumstances and influences involving the deity, so as to assuage his or her wrath. Such manipulations did not involve Israelite notions such as admitting one's hurtful practices, repentance of wrongdoing or reconciliation with a neighbor whom one has offended, or ceasing to practice injustice. Rather, the powerful nature and potential anger of the god seems to have served as the sole controlling factor in the relationship, requiring worshipers to do whatever they deemed necessary to obtain favor from the deity and either prevent or appease his or her anger. Though Babylonians could attempt to negotiate on some ritual level with their angry gods, a relationship of confiding trust, with the latitude to question the deity's decisions (as Abraham does over Sodom and Gomorrah), remains absent in the many prayers prayed that archaeologists have uncovered.

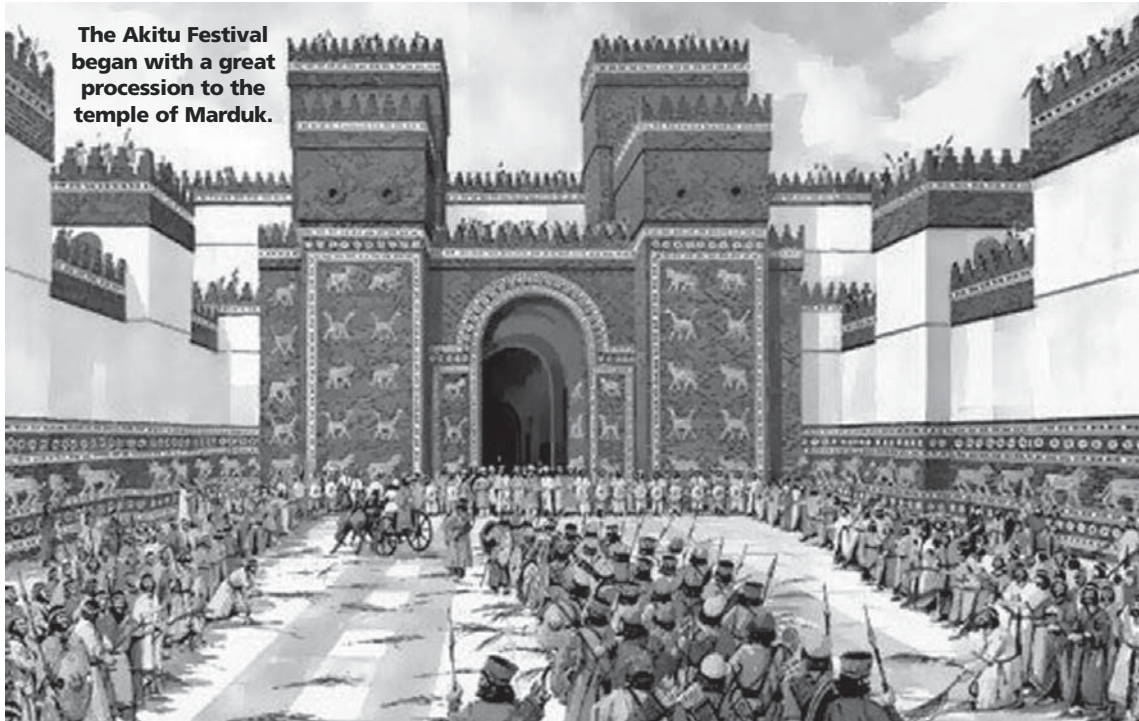
To be sure, those sovereign masters [the gods] had only rather good-natured dispositions with regard to humans, provided that everyone did his duty as a good 'servant'; and people even believed they could count on the gods' help if they had not been good servants and were expecting to be punished. But any

*true communication with the gods was inconceivable, so powerful and beyond reach were they believed to be: the only imaginable relationships were those of humble domestics vis-à-vis lofty and distant masters, without any other pleasure than that of accomplished duty, which has never truly delighted anyone.*⁸

This statement by Jean Bottéro sums up the relationships the Mesopotamians had with their gods. After suggesting further that for the "elite," "devout preoccupation" probably played "only a subsidiary role and did not have a powerful daily impact on the common consciousness," he states: "There was no hint of an emotional attachment, of tender searching, of authentic love, but only an attitude of reverence, of respect, of prostration, of fear, rooted in the profound conviction of a condition of servitude both zealous and modest with regard to the gods."⁹ On a psychological level, however, potentially angry deities serve both to hold in check a worshiper's internal desires to completely neglect them, yet create distance between worshipers and their gods that allows them to ignore their deities for most of the time. Nevertheless, the prayers, pleading for divine appeasement, especially those, perhaps, to the patron god of Babylon, Marduk, suggest that for some, the ability to

And Abraham got up early in the morning to the place where he stood before the Lord: And he looked toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the plain, and beheld, and, lo, the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace.
Gen. 19:27, 28





The Akitu Festival began with a great procession to the temple of Marduk.

appease an angry deity allowed the only real assurance of divine favor. For example, during the Akitu festival, the High Priest prays to Bel (Marduk), repeatedly, pleading “My Lord! My Lord, be calmed!”¹⁰ Such a prayer was especially significant because of the humbling of the king that took place before Marduk.

The High Priest strikes the king’s cheek, presumably to instill within the king the feeling of penitence, and drags him by his ear before Marduk. The king, forced to kneel like a servant, swears to Marduk that he has not sinned against Babylon, that he has fulfilled his obligations. Thereafter the High Priest strikes the king’s cheek once more and, according to the ritual, if tears flow, then Marduk has accepted him. If tears do not flow, however, Marduk will have the king overthrown.¹¹

Prayers for appeasement seem necessary in this situation.

Another feature was utilized on behalf of kings whose lives were threatened by unfavorable omens that indicated that the gods were angry and wished to depose the king and have him slain. Both the Assyrians and the Babylonians created a ritual to offset such omens, in

which they installed a substitute king (*šar puhi*) for a specified number of days; upon the conclusion, when the king was reinstated on his throne in a ceremonial banquet, the substitute king and his wife suffered the fate of execution. This slaying of “the king” made legal satisfaction to the gods by fulfilling their wishes.

The perception of angry and potentially-angry gods achieved a political status during the first millennium when bureaucracy increased under the very powerful Neo-Assyrian kings such as Sennacherib, Esarhaddon, and Assurbanipal, and the earliest kings of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. The Akkadian language¹² contains about the same number of words for “wrath” or “anger” as does the Hebrew Bible. By studying these terms in the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary, an interesting feature emerges. In those time periods, when a greater number of references exist depicting gods as angry, a fairly proportionate quantity of references portrays kings as angry.¹³ This correlation suggests powerful kings came to use divine anger as a weapon to exercise control over their subjects, but more particularly, over the nations they conquered, punishing any unfaithfulness to their treaties as acts

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offending their gods. One such king, Assurbanipal, earned for himself the designation of “a tyrant, motivated more by thirst for personal revenge than by sound political considerations.”¹⁴ Yet, this

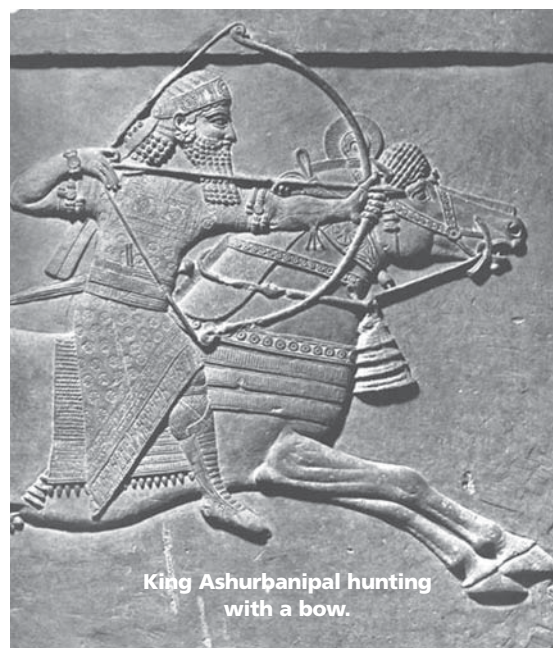
despot could show kindness to his officers. In separate land grants, he exempts two officers from taxes, mandating protection for them throughout their lives and indefinitely in the afterlife. “Whoever disturbs [him],” Assurbanipal wrote, “and removes him from the grave where he is lying, may the king his lord be angry with him and show him no mercy, may he forbid [him] to walk in temple and palace, and by the wrath of god and king, may a bloodstained weapon await him.”¹⁵ Such language underscores the use of divine and royal anger combined to control any who dared to breach a dictum of the king.

Divine Anger in the Hebrew Bible

I find both parallels and major differences regarding divine anger between Assyro-Babylonian texts and the Hebrew canon. In my canonical critical reading of the Hebrew Bible, I attempt to read it as primarily story and only secondarily as law.¹⁶ In my criteria, God’s preferred will is stated first in a narrative sequence (or is tied to creation,) while all references to God’s will that seem to contradict this divine preference serve as God’s will acquiesced or adapted to the insisted will of the people.¹⁷ Applying this method to divine anger, God is never explicitly referred to as angry once in the entire book of Genesis, the book of beginnings. Indeed, the only hint of divine anger occurs when Abraham pleads with God not to be angry with him in prayer, something with which God complies.¹⁸ In the first canonical instance of anger, Cain becomes angry over God’s preference for Abel’s offering, and his anger leads him to fratricide. This immediate

connection between anger and violence prepares the reader for the story that follows, in which Lamech kills someone for wounding him and declares his right to be avenged. In going beyond talionic law (“type for type”), Lamech’s words, in turn, ominously portend the violence that culminates in the flood.¹⁹ The only divine expression of emotion in this case is grief. Thus, in the prototypical representation of God in Genesis, God does not become angry, and human anger finds censorship. The first canonical reference to divine anger occurs in Exodus 4, when Moses finally begs God, “Please send someone else!”²⁰ The divine response of anger means a shift from the divine preference to acquiescing to Moses’ requests. God will send someone else: Moses’ brother Aaron. So divine anger in the preferred voice is letting someone have their choice. This finds an echo in Paul’s description of God’s wrath as “giving people up” to the results of their choice.²¹

Unlike the Babylonians, who would never seek to reason with their potentially angry deities, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Job, and the authors of the Hebrew Psalter were not afraid to wrestle with Yahweh in prayer. Likewise, the Hebrew Bible shows at least a slight reluctance to posit human beings as slaves of



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God,²² thus permitting the “true communication with the gods” found lacking between the Babylonians and their deities. On the other hand, while Babylonians sought negotiations with their gods through forms of appeasement, what “turned aside” Yahweh’s wrath were not rituals but sincere prayers of repentance. The sacrifices offered did not appease his anger but acted to expiate for sin and guilt, with a focus on reparation of those who committed the sin, rather than on God’s anger.²³ The Hebrew verb, often translated, “to make atonement,” lacks the construction required for the meaning “appeasement.” Said another way, the ritual texts nowhere use the verb “to make atonement” with God or his anger as its object.²⁴ Canonically speaking, the very first mention of blood retaliation occurs when Abel’s blood cries out to God from the ground for vengeance. Yet this voice does not belong to God; it is Abel’s blood that cries out. When Cain is forced to wander, he is not cursed by God but by the ground.²⁵ And while the prophets speak vigorously of Yahweh’s wrath, they abhor the thought of “paying God off” with blood sacrifices without any heart change. Indeed, for the prophetic voice, obedience and the exercise of justice trumps sacrifices.²⁶

Nonetheless, the reader of the Hebrew Bible faces an incredibly large number of references to divine anger.²⁷ Only between seven and nine books do not contain an explicit reference to God’s wrath. Yet in some of the narratives involving divine judgment, God, surprisingly, does not expressly get angry: the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, and Nadab and Abihu. Added to this confusing mixture, many prophets trumpet divine anger as signifying severe retribution, yet the prophet Joel, filled with dark images for the “day of the Lord,” speaks nowhere of Yahweh’s anger. The many references deserve further analysis, but one thing seems consistent, especially with the evidence from Babylonia; divine anger is expressed most often in the prophets who

naturally prophesied during the monarchy and often directly to the king. The correlation between royal and divine anger once again seems underscored, though in the case of the prophets, the anger they express on behalf of Yahweh seems directed against the powerful, thus perhaps speaking their own language. Not surprisingly, the prophets who represent God as the most wrathful are Nahum (*below*), who prophesies against Nineveh, and Ezekiel, who prophesied in Babylonia. Of the former, Nahum speaks against Nineveh, a city that became the capital of Assyria under Sennacherib, who, with his son Esarhaddon, and grandson Assurbanipal, formed the first of the most powerful kings of ancient Assyria.²⁸

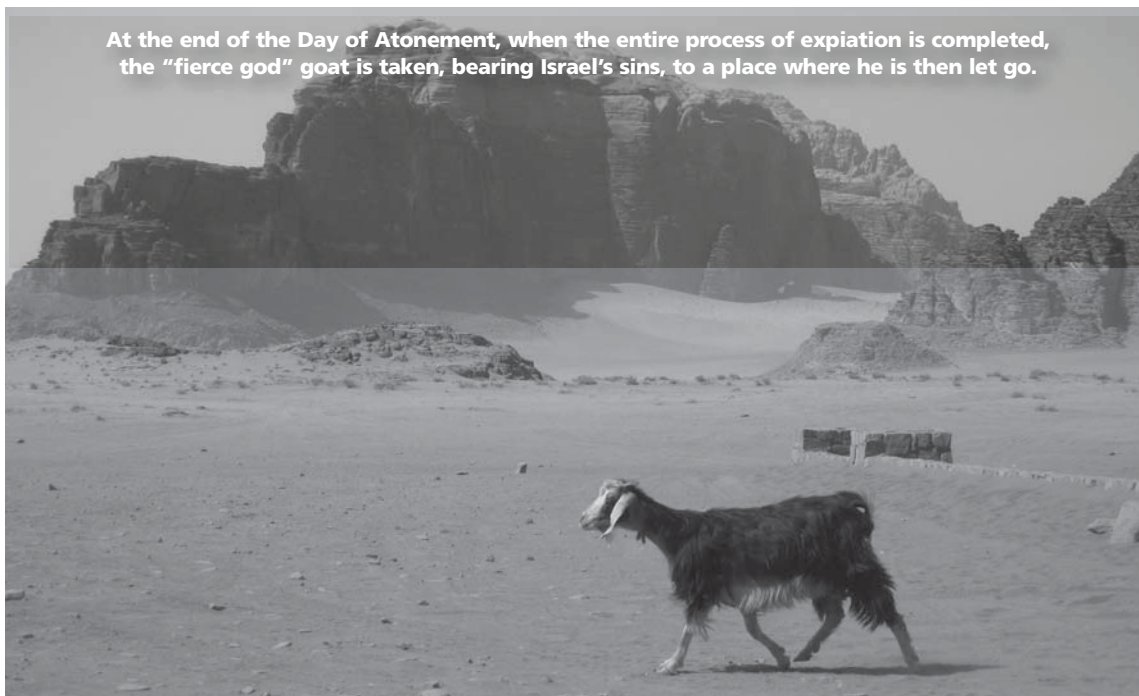


Once again, a prophet portrays the wrath of God against the oppressor who himself is angry and who has lent support to portrayals of angry gods. Of the latter, Ezekiel speaks to the Babylonian exiles, who have refused to let register the terrible crimes done by those in power in Jerusalem, a city “full of violence,”²⁹ that they too have participated in filling Jerusalem with blood. Therefore, unlike the great kings of Assyria and Babylon, prophets take the images of divine anger against those who employ them in order to control their subjects and their vassals. It thus belongs to speech that reflects God’s will adapted to the will of the people.

One question remains: is Yahweh’s anger an integral aspect of his character? The answer should be cast in the setting of Assyro-Babylonian vocabulary for anger. Two of the Akkadian terms—*agāgu* and *ezēzu*—occur the most frequently. Though often used as synonyms, the former refers to “a passing emotion” whereas the latter implies “an inherent quality.”³⁰ Since both of these terms are used in reference to gods as well as kings, we

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may assume that the verb *ezēzu*, when applied to a deity, represents an aspect of his persona, if not his nature. Does a counterpart to this occur in the Hebrew Bible? Nahum spoke of Yahweh as "Lord [*baal*] of anger,"³¹ one of the closest instances in which anger is ascribed to Yahweh's character. Since the term *baal* can mean "master" or "owner," it remains indeterminate whether Nahum intends to refer to an aspect of Yahweh's character or to state that Yahweh controls anger, in which case, the terms for "anger" would not apply to Yahweh but represent disaster, as they often do in the later periods of Israel.³² On the other hand, in Yahweh's self-disclosure to Moses, he does not include anger as an attribute.³³

This can be balanced with two features in the Day of Atonement, the Hebrew counterpart of the Babylonian Akitu Festival. In contrast to the latter, the former involved no prayers for Yahweh's appeasement. (Except for the pleas that Yahweh "turn away" his anger, the Psalter also contains no prayers for divine appeasement.) Yet the Day of Atonement does speak to the perception of divine anger, and in a most unexpected way. According to H. Tawil, following the traditions of medieval rabbinic commentators,

who viewed the goat for Azazel as a desert demon, the term Azazel represents a metathesized form of the Hebrew 'zz and 'ēl to mean "fierce god." Yet the Hebrew cognate, 'zz, is never applied to God in the Hebrew Bible. Even more significantly, the word "fierce" ('zz) is directly related to the Akkadian verb *ezēzu* that refers to fierceness as a characteristic. A Hebrew adjectival form of this word is applied to a deity in just one place: Leviticus 16. At the end of the Day of Atonement, when the entire process of expiation is completed, the "fierce god" goat is taken, bearing Israel's sins, to a place where he is then let go. The message seems clear, in light of the fact that the Day of Atonement seems to answer questions evoked by the deaths of Nadab and Abihu,³⁵ that the real "angry god" is a demonic figure.

Apocalyptic Synthesis

The Apocalypse contains a marked contrast between Babylonian wrath and biblical divine anger; Revelation 14:8 states that Babylon "causes all nations to drink the wine of the wrath of her fornication." Since, according to 18:3, Babylon's fornication is with kings, and since it represents the opposite of the New

Jerusalem, we may conclude that Babylon's wrath resulted from religion and government coming together to produce the ancient power of political control: royal and divine anger. Historically, the evidence suggests that angry kings ideologically reinforced the perception of angry gods. Kings then furthered their cause by appealing to divine anger for greater power.

In contrast to Babylon's anger, God's wrath is poured out (as in "give up") in 14:9–12 without mixture (i.e., without that ideological merging with "kingly power") into the cup of his indignation, a reference to the cup that Jesus drank from Gethsemane to the cross. Nowhere in the passage is God described as

angry in character. Rather, the torment of those who worship the beast of power is to live in the presence of the Lamb and his angels. Just as the Day of Atonement separates God's presence from divine anger, so does the third angel. What this passage suggests is that the power-hungry, who rest upon an Assyro-Babylonian view of divine anger to enforce their decrees, are literally tortured by the presence God revealed on Sinai to Moses—of which patience is an attribute. Only this can explain how the saints can be patient. If God is an angry god, why do they need patience? They only need it if God is One whose patience only ends when anger wins the hearts of those

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Babylon is Fallen
by Gustav Doré

who reject him; then he unleashes his wrath—his pouring out of his grief in having to let them have what they have chosen. ■

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15. K 211 (ADD 647); NARGD 9, lines 27–31; K 2729 (ADD 646); NARGD 10; 25 and 26 respectively in L Kataja and R. Whiting, *Grants, Decrees and Gifts of the Neo-Assyrian Period*, State Archives of Assyria 12 (Helsinki: Helsinki University, 1995), 26, 28.

16. For an overview of how I employ canonical criticism, see Jean Sheldon, "Images of Power and a Kingdom of Priests," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 52 (2014): 162, 163.

17. A clear case of this is 1 Samuel 8, where the prophetic voice is against kingship and supports the general opposition to hierarchy in Genesis, while God acquiesces to the people's determined will.

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23. Though modern dictionaries treat the terms "expiation" and "propitiation" almost as synonymous terms, biblical scholars make distinctions between them. See Yitzhaq Feder, *Blood Expiation in Hittite and Biblical Ritual: Origins, Context, and Meaning*, *Writings from the Ancient World Supplements* 2 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 173.

24. See Feder, *Blood Expiation*, 172–176, 182–186, 252–260 266–271.

25. Gen. 4:10, 11.

26. 1 Sam. 10:22; Isa. 1:11–13; Jer. 7:21–26; Hosea 6:6; Amos 5:21–24; Micah 6:1–8.

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