

Reading the Bible in the
Pre-Modern World:
Interpretation, Performance and Image

edited by

Chanita Goodblatt and Howard Kreisel



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The Motif of God's Wrath from the Bible to the Zohar: Dividuation and Individuation of a Literary Character

Piero Capelli

The Problem

Almighty in heaven and earth, avenger, merciless, a raiser of conflict and strife, agitated and restless as if always on the lookout and always on the move in search of prevaricators, in order to ruthlessly punish them for the evil they do (Pettazzoni 1965: 77).

One would expect such words to refer to the God of ancient Israel, the protagonist of the Torah (Pentateuch), of part of the Former Prophets, and of some Psalms. Yet this is not the case. This list of psychological features is attributed to Tezcatlipoca, one of the main deities of the Aztec pantheon, as described by Raffaele Pettazzoni, the founder of the Rome school of religious history, in his essay of 1957 on omniscience as an attribute of the godhead. Tezcatlipoca punishes men for their sins (such as sexual misbehavior, or transgression of vows, or of fasts) by striking them with disease or by lightning. Yet this description by Pettazzoni surely recalls the God of biblical Israel. Pettazzoni himself was aware of this, as can be seen from his conclusion that “[Tezcatlipoca] shared some features (albeit loaded with negative overtones) with the character of Yhwh” (Pettazzoni 1965: 77).

Further on, Pettazzoni restrains himself from such mitigated expressions when describing the ancient Israelitic conception of God: that God who was still in the process of becoming the only God; a “quick-tempered, jealous, vengeful, and relentless” God;

the God that the biblical Prophets would later try to “sublimate” (as Pettazzoni puts it, 1965: 109-10) into a God of justice without ever fully achieving their aim; an all-knowing God with demonic traits, residing on mountaintops, and showing Himself to mankind via catastrophic meteoric externalizations (lightning, thunder, flood). As such, He can easily be grouped along with deities such as Zeus-Jupiter, Wotan, Varuna, Tezcatlipoca, and the like.

It is evident, and acknowledged by a long-standing critical tradition (e.g., Russell 1977; Bloom and Rosenberg 1990), that God’s character in the Hebrew Bible is loaded with contradictions and often unresolved inner tensions. God’s ambiguity is already conspicuous in the Torah. God is portrayed as capable of tricking Adam and Eve into believing that if they eat the forbidden fruit they will die (Genesis 2:17), whereas they would actually become like Him (Genesis 3:22). He becomes homicidally hostile towards his own favorites, such as Jacob (whom he attacks at night at the ford of the Yabbok river, Genesis 32:23-33), and Moses (whom he tries to kill on his way back from Midian to Egypt, once again at night, Exodus 4:24-26). Jacob realizes that he is still alive, notwithstanding the fact that he has seen what man cannot usually see, that is, God’s very face (Genesis 32:31). Both the fight with Jacob and the fight with Moses occur at the beginning of God’s relationship with mankind, and with Israel in particular. At this point in the history of this relationship, God is still young. In youth it is more difficult to control one’s impulse to destruction and to master the inner shadow symbolized by the darkness on whose background both episodes are set. As Oscar Wilde would put it in his *Ballad of the Reading Gaol*, everyone kills the thing he loves. Thus, not even God, in this juvenile stage of His inner life as a literary character, is yet capable of mastering His own death drive towards his own favorites.

The most evident, yet least easily solvable, inner tension within God’s personality, is the one between his attribute of

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Wrath and his attribute of Mercy: a tension that the writers of the Bible ascribed to God's character in a truly divine measure – that is to say, in the highest degree.

Biblical Sources

Let us go through some of the relevant passages. The prophet Nahum, at the very beginning of his prophecy, directly qualifies God as “passionate and avenging” (*qanno we-noqem*):¹

The Lord is a passionate, avenging God; the Lord is vengeful and fierce in wrath. The Lord takes vengeance on His enemies, he rages against his foes. The Lord is slow to anger and of great forbearance, but the Lord does not remit all punishment. He travels in whirlwind and storm, and clouds are the dust on His feet. [...] Who can stand before His wrath? Who can resist His fury? His anger pours out like fire, and rocks are shattered because of Him. The Lord is good, a haven on a day of distress; He is mindful of those who seek refuge in Him. But with a sweeping flood he makes an end of those who oppose Him,² and chases His enemies into darkness (Nahum 1:2-3, 6-8)

The mitigated expressions of verses 2b-3a, where God is qualified as vengeful but only against his adversaries, are commonly acknowledged by critics as later pious interpolations (See: Powis Smith, Hayes Ward and Bewer 1912: 289; Watts 1975: 103; Roberts 1991: 50; Spronk 1997: 37).

Another ancient, terrified description of God's wrath is found in Psalm 90:7-11:

So we are consumed by Your anger, terror-struck by Your fury. You have set our iniquities before You, our hidden sins

*in the light of Your face. All our days pass away in Your wrath, we spend our years like a sigh. [...] Who can know Your furious anger? Your wrath matches the fear of You.*³

Last, when God appears on Mount Sinai during the exodus from Egypt, He is praised for His virtues of mercy and forbearance, hand in hand, though, with the virtue of justice:

The Lord! the Lord! a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet He does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generation (Exodus 34:6-7).

This passage is peculiarly meaningful for our topic, and for our understanding of ancient Israelite piety at large, since it depicts God introducing Himself to Moses on Sinai on the occasion of the stipulation of the Covenant with his people. This is a most solemn self-definition at a key turning point of his biography.

Even this circumscribed and partial anthology of sources shows a variegated, yet precise biblical imagery of God's wrath. Historians of religion have explained it in various, but not incompatible ways. A feasible explanation is that these ancient texts preserve the primal idea of superhuman power that anthropologists call *mana*: a personalized, yet unsystematic and amoral force, capable of creating both good and evil (van der Leeuw 1960: 9). Another possible explanation is that such a representation of God still corresponded to that of the storm god typical of nomadic pastoral cultures such as the early Israelites, but also of proto-agricultural polytheistic cultures such as the Canaanites.

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These historicist explanations are only valid for the postmodern, secularized, and disenchanting Western mind. For the Jewish tradition, as for any religious tradition based on the Bible and on the religious history of the Jews, God's inner tension between the attributes of wrath and mercy is an always-open theological issue – which Rabbinic Judaism classically formulated in terms of an alternative between the *middat ha-din*, God's attribute of severe Judgment, and *middat ha-rahimim*, God's attribute of encompassing Mercy. According to Rashi's commentary to Genesis 6:6 (11th cent. C.E.), what happened when God stated he had repented from creating mankind and decided to destroy it in the Flood, was that the Omnipresent's thought shifted from the attribute of Mercy to the attribute of Judgment.

Such oscillation from one inclination to its opposite is part of the wider literary and theological problem of the anthropomorphic representation of God, which is a typical feature of biblical genres and styles, and had already constituted a problem in the earliest Jewish interpretive translations of Scripture, such as the Septuagint (3rd-2nd cent. B.C.E.) and the Targumim (first centuries C.E.).⁴ Hence the widespread saying, “Dieu a fait l’homme à son image mais l’homme le lui a bien rendu” (“God made man in his own image, but man returned tit-for-tat”), ascribed to Voltaire by Guy de Maupassant in a famous fantastic short story of his (*Le Horla*, Maupassant 1887: 28) – most likely an apocryphal quotation. Yet the origin of this motif in Western literature dates back to the 5th cent. Greek philosopher Xenophanes and his criticism of anthropomorphic representation of deities in archaic Hellenic poetry (Homer and Hesiod):

But mortals believe the gods to have been generated and to have their same clothing, voice, and likeness (Xenophanes DK 21 B 14).

Ethiopians state that their gods are pug-nosed and black; Thracians, that theirs are blue-eyed and red-haired (DK 21 B 16).⁵

The earliest corrections to the all-too-human biblical image of an angry God are found in the most recent parts of the Hebrew Bible itself. I have already mentioned the Masoretic editorial interventions in the text of Nahum 1:2-3. In the post-exilic age, the author of Third Isaiah highly extolled God's terrible wrath against Israel's enemies:

Of the peoples no man was with Me. I trod them down in My anger, trampled them in My rage; their life-blood bespattered My garments, and all My clothing was stained. For I had planned a day of vengeance, and My year of redemption arrived. Then I looked, but there was none to help; I stared, but there was none to aid – so My own arm wrought the triumph, and My own rage was My aid. I trampled peoples in My anger, I made them drunk with My rage, and I hurled their glory to the ground (Isaiah 63:3-6).

Somewhat earlier, the author of Second Isaiah had somewhat differently thought that God's attitude towards Israel oscillated between scorching wrath and cheerful, affectionate mercy, with mercy eventually prevailing:

In slight anger, for a moment, I hid My face from you; but with kindness everlasting I will take you back in love – said the Lord your redeemer (Isaiah 54:8).

Some of God's eulogies from the post-exilic age completely shun God's wrath, favoring instead his *hesed* (forbearance). Thus, for example, Nehemiah 9:17: the Israelites

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stiffened their necks [...] but You, being a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, long-suffering and abounding in faithfulness, did not abandon them.

And again, in Psalm 103: 8-10:

The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love. He will not contend forever, or nurse His anger for all time. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor has He requited us according to our iniquities.

How did Judaism, in its different declensions, manage the ambiguity of the character named God in its own sacred literature? How did it try to resolve the open tension between his wrath and his forbearance? How did it confer meaning to a traditional feature, made so hard to manipulate and renegotiate by the very fact of having itself become a part of the tradition? From now on, I will look for the answers to this question in Rabbinic aggadic literature from late antiquity onwards, especially in the Targumim and in Midrash; then I will briefly fathom the Jewish mystical tradition of the Middle Ages.

The Homiletical Tradition

The Sages of the Talmud dealt extensively with all the biblical passages that are most relevant to our purpose. The texts that generated the greatest amount of interpretations are the narratives on the destruction of Sodom and on the worship of the Golden Calf. In the narrative on Sodom (Genesis 18:16-19:29) the verb “be angry” (*harah le-*) appears as such only when Abraham pleads God and succeeds in delaying the explosion of his wrath against the sinful city (*What if there should be fifty innocent within the*

city...? ... *Let not my Lord be angry if I go on...*; Genesis 18:24-30). The noun *hemlah*, “mercy”, is used in Genesis 19:16 to describe God’s feelings towards Lot. In Genesis 18:21 God states that He wants to come down in order to check the degree of corruption of the inhabitants of Sodom; to His words, *Targum Onqelos* adds the following: “I will exterminate them completely if they do not repent, but if they do, I will not punish them.”

Midrash Genesis Rabbah 49.6 also stresses that God had granted Sodom many possibilities:

R. Yirmeyah b. El’azar said: “The real prosperity of Sodom lasted fifty-two years only, and for twenty-five of these the Holy One, blessed be He, made the mountains to tremble and brought terrors upon them in order that they might reform, yet they did not. Hence it is written, *Who removes the mountains, and they do not know when He overturns them in His anger* (Job 9:5).

Similarly, right before the sinful city is destroyed by the “rain of sulfurous fire,” the *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* to Genesis 19:25 adds the following observation:

The Word of God let healthy rain fall on Sodom and Gomorrah, so that they could repent and make atonement. But they did nothing, as they told each other: “Evil deeds are unknown to God’s eyes.”

The inhabitants are thus made guilty not only of sexual misbehavior, but also of denying a tenet of rabbinic orthodoxy such as God’s omniscience. Furthermore, in *Genesis Rabbah* 50.5, Lot, before fleeing with his daughters, prays all night for the salvation of Sodom’s inhabitants:⁶

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But immediately they demanded: *Bring them out to us, that we may know them* (Genesis 19:5) [...]. They said to him: *Do you have anyone else here [poh]?* (Genesis 19:12) Until now you had the right to use your mouth [peh] to plead in their defense, but from now you have no right to plead for them.

The goal of the text is to show that both Lot and God strove until the very end to grant the Sodomites a moral way out, and that it was almost against His own will that God ultimately had to bestow upon them such a terrible punishment for their deeds.

The other key biblical text on God's wrath is the narrative about Moses temporarily soothing God's anger against the worshipers of the Golden Calf (Exodus 32:9-14), much like Abraham interceding for the Sodomites. These intercessions triggered the attention of Erich Fromm, who traced the development of God's role as a godly monarch in the Hebrew Bible from that of an absolute monarch (what He had been with Adam and Eve, with Cain, and with the generations of the Flood and of Babel) to the role of a "constitutional" monarch, by progressively stipulating covenants with human counterparts: first with Noah, then with Abraham, and lastly with Moses. Through this ever more detailed and ever more binding form of social contract, God obliges Himself to master His own destructive instinct towards his partners – that is, first mankind, and later Israel (Fromm 1966).

Let us return, however, to the episode of the Golden Calf and to its interpretation in rabbinic homiletical literature. In Exodus 32:12 Moses begs God: "Turn from Your blazing anger, and repent from the plan to punish Your people." Here, *Targum Neophyti* and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* translate *we-hinnahem*, "repent!" with "Let there be repentance by you" (*w-ihewe tohu qodamakh*). In order to downplay the anthropathism of the original, that is, attributing human feelings to God, the Targumist

hypostatizes repentance (*teshuvah*) into a metaphysical entity that is autonomous from God – much like a man’s defending lawyer as opposed to a prosecutor like Satan in the Book of Job (Drazin 1990: 295 n. 20).

Similarly, in another instance when the Israelites fall back into idolatry (Deuteronomy 29:22), the text goes: *Just like the upheaval of Sodom and Gomorrah ... which the Lord overthrew in His fierce anger*. In *Targum Neophyti*, the Lord becomes “the Word of God,” yet another hypostasis (if an extremely frequent one in targumic literature) working as a substitute for God precisely in the moment when the biblical text ascribes him a once again all-too-human change of feeling (compare Genesis 19:25 above; see also Hayward 1981). In their preaching to the masses, the Sages could not concede that God had actually changed His mind. Such an anthropomorphic representation of the Godhead had to be downplayed and harmonized, since it contradicted the more simplistic and absolutist statement found in Numbers 23:19: *God is not man to be capricious, or mortal to change His mind*. All this notwithstanding, the fact is that the Bible itself clearly states that God lied to Adam and Eve and that He experienced repentance about having created mankind and the animals, thus deciding to annihilate them with the Flood (Genesis 6:6-7).

The aggadic interpretation of the narratives about Sodom and the Golden Calf shows a clear intention to sweeten God’s angry image. In each instance, the coexistence of conflicting traits within God’s character is solved in favor of one trait only: most often the positive one, but sometimes also His severity – thereby making it possible to preach God’s attributes to the Jewish community in a linear, univocal way, without contradicting the statement that God does not lie nor repent as found in the Torah (Numbers 23:19). This is the most widespread attitude towards the problem of God’s wrath in rabbinic homiletical literature.

The Mystical Tradition

In the same literary corpus there are, however, examples of a deeper, more articulate awareness of the ambiguities in the divine character. The most significant text of this kind is a Talmudic tradition attributed to Rav (first half of the 3rd cent.) through his student Zuṭra bar Ṭuyva:

The Holy One, blessed be He, prays. What does He pray? [...] “May it be My will that My mercy will overcome My anger, and may My mercy prevail over My other attributes, and may I conduct myself toward My children with the attribute of mercy, and may I stop short of the limit of strict judgment” (*BT Berakhot 7a*).

Immediately after this passage we find an autobiographical account ascribed to R. Yishma'el ben Elisha (early 2nd cent.):

Once I entered the innermost sanctum to offer incense, and I saw Akatri'el Yah, the Lord of Hosts, seated upon a high and exalted throne (Isaiah 6). And He said to me: “Yishma'el, My son, bless Me”. I said to Him: “May it be Your will that Your mercy overcome Your anger, and may Your mercy prevail over Your attributes, and may You act toward Your children with the attribute of mercy, and may You stop short of the limit of strict judgment”. He nodded His head, which teaches us that you should not take the blessing of an ordinary person lightly (*BT Berakhot 7a*).

As in many other passages in the Talmud, several explicitly mystical components have merged. First, the rabbi-narrator also appears in other Talmudic contexts of theosophical or magical content (e.g., *Berakhot 51a*). Secondly, the divine qualification with the theophoric suffix – *el* (here *Akatri'el*, from *keter*,

“crown”), is a recurrent stylistic feature of the oldest mystical Jewish texts (sometimes consisting in actual psycanodias). And thirdly, God’s image as a king on his throne in the Temple is an intertextual echo of the vision in chapter 6 of Isaiah, a *locus classicus* of early Jewish mysticism.

Certain elements of this text suggest that the entire passage might have been edited much later, and that the mention of Yishma’el ben Elisha might therefore be pseudepigraphical. We are told in the sources that this rabbi actually came from a priestly family, and could thus be entitled to access to the Temple precincts. Still, he lived after the Temple’s destruction, so maybe the Temple mentioned here is not the earthly one, but rather its immutable heavenly archetype, that the rabbi would access in a vision or in a supernatural journey. What matters here, however, is that this mystical narrative deals with the issue of God’s temper independently from its basis in Scripture. Mystical texts do often resort to Scripture as a mere repertoire of symbols or prooftexts, supporting documents extrapolated from their contexts to serve for arguments that do not really depend on biblical models. It is also worth observing that, in this cluster of juxtaposed traditions, God prays in order to be merciful, and also asks, or rather commands, a man to pray for Him with the same aim (“Bless me!” is tantamount to “Pray for me!”), since blessings – *berakhot* – constitute the most important part of Jewish prayer).

Let us look for other answers to our problem in medieval Qabbalah. The *Zohar* (attributed to Moses de León, 13th cent.) is undoubtedly the most influential document of Jewish mysticism. It encompasses an articulate theory of divine wrath. Gershom Scholem dealt with this topic in a lecture he delivered to the Eranos group in Ascona (Scholem 1991). He stated that in classic Qabbalah God’s wrath

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is a holy quality within the divine totality. So long as it operates within the union of all the *Sefiroth*, it is not evil, although it is the source of evil [...]. However, in its exuberance this fire bursts outward, becoming independent in a surge of strength; in this new modality, severity is no longer mitigated or balanced by the other forces within the divine dynamic, but operates as the power of evil in Creation (1991: 72)

In the *Zohar's* fictive Aramaic, the outburst of God's severity as fire from within the Godhead itself is called *tuqefa de-dina*, "the Power of Judgment." This symbolism reveals the conception of the Godhead as an organism that is typical of the *Zohar*: the fire of divine Severity refines the divine attribute of Judgment, yet, this process produces a dross (the so-called *qelippot*). The primal sacred is lost within this dross, or stays within it in the form of a hidden spark. This is the system that the *Zohar* calls *Sitra Aħra*, "the Other Side." It tries to capture Good and to reduce it to itself: in Scholem's words, "externalized and made independent [...] it becomes an entire hierarchical system, a counterworld ruled by Satan" (1991: 73). Such a conception could easily lead to a dualistic outcome. Still, in the *Zohar* this threat against monotheism is mediated and downplayed through the idea that the *sitra aħra* also serves precise positive functions within the organism that is the Godhead. It is God's *sitra aħra* that punishes sinners, tests man so as to purify and improve him, and surrounds the essence of the Godhead like a walnut is surrounded by its shell (compare Tishby 1989: 511-12).

Thus, the divine attributes of Mercy and Judgment of Rabbinic homilies (*middat ha-rah̄amim* and *middat ha-din*) were rethought and re-nominated in Qabbalah as the main face of the Godhead in opposition to its *Sitra Aħra*. Rather than dualism or a split between two incompatible aspects within the divine

character, what we see at work here is a functional opposition, or even better, a polarity – an exchange between two interdependent extremes, producing energy and meaning. In their turn, such energy and such meaning fall on the world and have a positive effect on it.

Elsewhere, the *Zohar* (III 215a) ascribes to Rabbi Yose (2nd cent.) another elegant explanation of intradivine anger and even suggests a therapy for it. This tradition is once again based on a biblical narrative: that of God setting the rainbow in the clouds as the sign of his covenant with Noah and of his promise not to destroy mankind ever again (Genesis 9:13-17). Based on the similarity between the words *qeshet*, “rainbow,” and *qashat*, “to adorn, to embellish,” the author of the *Zohar* imagines that the Shekhinah (that is, God’s immanence personified as a female divine hypostasis) utilizes the rainbow as a bridal ornament in order to prepare herself to meet her groom the Lord. The Lord, like a king who is momentarily angry against his own son (an example taken from midrashic tradition), is cheered by the sight of his partner the Shekhinah, quits His anger against Israel and the world, and prepares for joy. So, exactly like the rainbow that followed the Flood, the seduction generated by the Shekhinah and the colors of the rainbow are the signs of God’s promise of salvation and redemption for mankind (Busi 1999: 279; Tishby 1989: 667-68).

Subconscious and Consciousness

The mystical tradition of Judaism answers the issue of God’s oscillation between wrath and mercy with a much greater awareness (as compared to the aggadic answer in Midrash) that the issue is part of the wider issue of the alternative between Good and Evil. Classic Qabbalah appears to have been the field of Jewish knowledge best equipped for dealing with these two

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aspects of the divine temperament; and it seems to have considered them as a polarity or a dialectic between different energies rather than a schizoid split in God's personality.

In order to achieve a better definition of such polarity, I will now borrow two categories from analytical psychology. The first category is *syzygy*, that is, complementarity within a pair of opposites (as in the alchemical *coniunctio* studied by Jung, or as in the Zoharic union of God with the Shekhinah as his own feminine element – a union that leads precisely to overcoming anger). The other category is *integration*, that is, establishing a relationship between two elements that remain distinct from each other in their essence yet interact with each other (Pieri 1998: 350-63). Integration, after differentiation, is a necessary stage in the building of a non-split individuality – what in Jungian terms we would define as the Self. Once again, Qabalah is the dimension of knowledge and experience, within which Jewish postbiblical tradition represents its God without downplaying or denying His inner tensions, nor clumsily projecting on Him a rather simplistic anthropomorphic image. Quite on the contrary, Qabbalistic Judaism granted its God an ultimately integrated, *individuated* personality, an organic structure within which even the trait of wrath found a reason and a usefulness of its own.

In rabbinic *aggadah*, both God's wrath, and God's repentance and restraint from wrath, are seen as anthropopathisms that must be eliminated in order to enforce and preach the pattern of an awe-inspiring, eternal, immutable, Olympically superhuman Godhead. On the other hand, the mystical tradition strove to confer on divine temper a place and a meaning within God's personality, notwithstanding the difficulties inherent in such an image of the Godhead: complex, ambiguous, all-too-human yet extremely remote – almost useless for preaching.

Postmodern biblical criticism came close to the qabbalistic solution to our problem with Jack Miles's Pulitzer Prize-winning

book: *God: A Biography* (1995). Miles's working hypothesis was that one should read the Hebrew Bible synchronically (in its canonical order) as a single book – the coming-of-age novel of its protagonist, whose name is God. According to this interpretive hypothesis, the outbursts of God's wrath that are especially frequent in the Torah can be read as the youthful sins of a character who towards the end of the canon demonstrates one last controlled fit of verbal anger, the one against Job's friends, and later appears only as the Ancient of Days in the book of Daniel – an extremely old man apparently no longer capable of uttering any word. Fromm depicts the evolution of God's institutional role as heavenly king in the Hebrew Bible from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy; Miles traces God's psychological development as a literary character, from being a quick-tempered young man to turning into a silent and passive old man. I have followed Miles' perspective in previously defining God's homicidal hostility towards his favorites, Jacob and Moses, as "juvenile."⁷ Throughout the Bible – throughout God's biography, following Miles – the character named God comes to funnel his own severity, and even his wrath, into a more fatherly and mature attitude. Only Abraham and Lot are forewarned of the doom impending on Sodom, whereas God sends Jonah to warn the Ninevites of their impending doom and urge them to atone for their sins and thus shun divine punishment.

Abraham's desire to prevent doom from his fellowmen is nonetheless much stronger than Jonah's. When bargaining with God for Sodom's temporary salvation (Genesis 18), Abraham acts like Rabbi Yishma'el in the Talmudic passage we have discussed: both Abraham and Yishma'el are apparently aware that God needs a human interlocutor in order to overcome (if only temporarily) His own severity, or even His own rage as in the case of Sodom. In this respect, Abraham seems to know God even better than God knows Himself, whereas in his dialogue with

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Yishma'el God asks for the cooperation of His human counterpart. This inner development in God's character seems not to be fulfilled before His dialogue with Jonah, in which He defends the idolatrous Ninevites from the consequences of His own wrath, and explains the reasons of His own behavior to Jonah, who is not at all willing to comply.

Once again resorting to Jungian categories, I propose that this manifestation of the two sides of God's personality can be read as the opposition between pulsional subconscious (severity and anger), and emotional and rational consciousness (mercy). In the dialogue with Rabbi Yishma'el the opposition of these *Entgegensätze* is shown as the antithesis of two opposites: white vs black. But biblical tradition (as interpreted by Miles) is sufficiently well equipped to interpret it as an opposition of a correlative kind: half vs whole, or part vs entirety. If God's wrath represents His subconscious and His mercy represents his consciousness, we can read this antinomy through Jung's words:

Conscious and unconscious do not make a whole when one of them is suppressed and injured by the other. [...] Both are aspects of life. Consciousness should defend its reason and protect itself, and the chaotic life of the unconscious should be given the chance of having its way too – as much as one can stand. This means open conflict and open collaboration at once. That, evidently, is the way human life should be. It is the old game of hammer and anvil: between them the patient iron is forged into an indestructible whole, an “individual.” This, roughly, is what I mean by the individuation process. [...] Out of this union emerge new situations and new conscious attitudes (1968: 288-9).

We can thus read the relationship between God's wrath and his mercy (and also between his silence and his speaking) not as a

radical opposition, but rather as a polarity – one of a developmental rather than a dialectic kind. In this polarity, one *Entgegensatz* tends towards the other and develops until it integrates within the other. In the end, the other *Entgegensatz* will prevail but will also be transformed by this process of growth and individuation. It is a tension in flux, presented in the Hebrew Bible as a developmental factor inherent to God's personality. As Jung puts it:

There is no energy unless there is a tension of opposites [...].⁸ Seen from the one-sided point of view of the conscious attitude, the shadow is an inferior component of the personality and is consequently repressed through intensive resistance. But the repressed content must be made conscious so as to produce a tension of opposites, without which no forward movement is possible. [...] All consciousness, perhaps without being aware of it, seeks its unconscious opposite, lacking which it is doomed to stagnation, congestion, and ossification. Life is born only of the spark of opposites (Jung 1966: 85).

If the tension between wrath and mercy towards Israel is a constitutive factor of God's personality, it is then true that God is walking along with Israel, inasmuch as his own personality is developing within his relationship to/with his people.

Masculine and Feminine

In a passage of his book *Which God? A Question from History*, the late Italian theologian Paolo De Benedetti hinted at one further tension between the two conflicting aspects of God's personality, once again starting from the opposition between Severity and Mercy:

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God might not like this world anymore, but he will no longer be able to destroy it, for three reasons: first, because, after he began creating it only through his attribute of severity (expressed by his name Elohim in Genesis 1), he decided to add to it his attribute of mercy (expressed by his name Yhwh in Genesis 2) – as stated by Rashi on Genesis 1:1; second, because in his covenant with Noah he promised not to send a Flood anymore (Genesis 9:11); and third, because he is not only a Father-God but also a Mother-God (cf. Isaiah 46:3; 49:15; 66:13; Hosea 11:1-4) (1997: 29).

As severity is a masculine, fatherly attribute, so is mercy a feminine, motherly attribute, as is well known from the etymological correspondence between the words *rahimim*, “mercy,” and *rehem*, “womb.” Thus, when mercy and severity do not reconcile within God, God's masculine and feminine halves also split. In classical Qabbalah, especially in the *Zohar*, the root of Evil is repeatedly identified with the dividuation of God's feminine element from its corresponding, masculine *Entgegensatz*. Such a dividuation occurred at a precise moment in Israelite history, always understood as the history of Israel's relationship with its God. When the Temple was destroyed for the second time, the Shekhinah started mourning and followed Israel into exile. This split turned into a cosmic mourning and made it possible for the “Other Side” to establish its power over the world, and over the Land of Israel in particular:

Come and see: When the Temple was destroyed and sins proved decisive and Israel were exiled from the land, the blessed Holy One withdrew above, above – not looking upon the destruction of His Temple or upon His people who had been exiled. Then the Shekhinah went into exile with them. Then He descended. He looked upon His house – it was

burnt. He gazed at His people – they had gone into exile. He inquired concerning *Maṭronita* – She had been driven away. Then, *Yhwh God of Hosts summoned on that day to weeping and mourning, to tonsuring and girding with sackcloth* (Isaiah 22:12). And of Her too, what is written? *Girded with sackcloth for the husband of her youth* (Joel 1:8), as is said: *for he is no more* (Jeremiah 31:15), because He had withdrawn from Her and there was separation. Even all of heaven and earth mourned, as is written: *I clothe the heavens in blackness, and make sackcloth their covering* (Isaiah 50:3). The supernal angels all mourned for Her, as is written: *Behold, the Erelim cried outside; angels of peace weep bitterly* (Isaiah 33:7). Sun and moon mourned and their lights darkened, as is written: *The sun will darken as it rises and the moon will not shed its light* (Isaiah 13:10). All above and below wept over Her and mourned. Why? Because the Other Side dominated Her, obtaining dominion over the Holy Land (*Zohar* I 210ab).

The split between God and his Shekhinah will be recomposed only at the end of times. Evil will then be eradicated from Israel and the world, and Israel, who is the *son* of the Shekhinah, will finally return from his exile:

[The Shekhinah] replied before Him, “My children are in exile and the Temple is burnt, so what is left for Me here?” [...] And we have established that the blessed Holy One said to Her, *Restrain your voice from weeping, your eyes from tears; for there is reward for your labor, declares the Lord: they will return from the land of the enemy* (Jeremiah 31:16). Come and see: Ever since the day that the Temple was destroyed, there has never been a day without curses. For when the Temple existed, Israel would perform rituals,

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bringing offerings and sacrifices, and the Shekhinah hovered over them in the Temple like a mother over her children. All faces were radiant, so that blessings appeared above and below; there was never a day without blessings and joys. Israel dwelled securely in the land, and the whole world was nourished because of them. Now that the Temple is destroyed and the Shekhinah is with them in exile, no day passes without curses; the world is cursed, and joy cannot be found above or below. But one day the blessed Holy One intends to raise the Assembly of Israel from the dust, as has been said, and to delight the world utterly, as is said: *I will bring them to My holy mountain and give them joy in My house of prayer* (Isaiah 56:7). (*Zohar* I 203a)

The essence of evil in Zoharic Qabbalah is the split, the *dividuation*, of what was originally one – into one that was meant to stay and one that is meant to finally return. God and His creation were kept in perfect balance as a system by the original integration of divine *Entgegensätze* within God's personality. By the same token, there should be no separation whatsoever between God and His ten “crowns,” the *sefirot*, that is the emanations through which He grants form and function to His creation: He and they should be “like a flame bound to a burning coal” (*Zohar* III 70a). The split between God's attributes is not due to reasons inherent to the Godhead; rather, it is caused by man and his sins:

[In God's sacred name] *yod* is linked with *he*; *he* with *waw*; *waw* with *he*; *he* with the whole – and the whole is one linkage, one entity, never separating from one another. Whoever causes division, as it were, destroys the world (...). Of the time to come – when the blessed Holy One will one day restore the Shekhinah to Her place [in the Temple] so that all will be

unified – it is written: *On that day Yhwh will be one and His name one* (Zechariah 14:9). You might say, “And now is He not one?” No, for the wicked of the world cause Him not to be one, since the *Maṭronita* is far removed from the King and they are not united (*Zohar* III 77b).

If man can be held responsible for the split between God’s halves, he then also has a role and a duty in the process that can translate the split into a vital tension between opposite poles of energy, ultimately restoring them to their primal unity. Not that such a *coniunctio oppositorum* is destitute of potential risks for Israel. Indeed, the *Zohar* explains how the prayers and the blessings of the Israelites also help to restrain the Shekhinah from heading upwards, towards its conjugal union with God, unless Israel itself can be a part of such union. Otherwise, after God’s reunion with the Shekhinah and the Godhead finally becoming undivided, it might lose any memory of its people who would then remain left alone in exile:

It is written: *And You, Yhwh, be not far. My strength, to my aid hasten!* (Psalms 22:20) [...]. *And You* – mystery of unity without separation. *Be not far* – once She ascends to be adorned by Her Husband, all in the upper world, from there He seeks to rise to *En Sof*, so that all may be joined above, above. Therefore, *Be not far* – departing from us, abandoning us. Consequently, during the arrangement of praise, Israel must seek to be included there and to cleave to them from below; for if this glory seeks to depart, Israel below grasp it, holding tight, not letting it move away from them. Therefore, prayer in a whisper, like someone speaking secretly with the king: as long as he is secretly with him, [the king] does not move away at all. (*Zohar* II 138b)

Individuating the Split

At the end of Chapter Two of his book *Which God?* Paolo De Benedetti writes:

Not only Jewish mysticism, but Jewish tradition at large suggest [...] that there is a dark side to God too, [...] a conflict between Good and Evil – a conflict in need of redemption. This is not just the classic conflict between his attribute of Judgment and that of Mercy. It is rather a deeper conflict between his goodness and its absence, his being acceptable and his being not. It is, as it were, a divine unhappiness, already expressed in God's prayer to himself and in his own crying mentioned in the Talmud: "cooing like a dove" (*BT Berakhot* 3a) (1997: 49).

I have called the conflicting aspects of God's personality with different names: Mercy *vs* Severity, as in Rabbinic tradition; Unconsciousness *vs* Consciousness, as in Jungian interpretation; Masculine *vs* Feminine, as in classic Qabbalah. In the Hebrew Bible the character named God shows Himself to His people and to individuals through two main modalities, which De Benedetti defines as the "thunderous modality" (as in the theophany on Sinai in *Exodus* 19) and the "silent modality" (like the "soft murmuring sound" heard by Elijah on Mount Horeb, 1 Kings 19:12). De Benedetti concludes that:

Maybe all we can say is that God's image is fraught with fickleness and ambiguity. The Bible undoubtedly likes such an unstable image of God, as it countered pagan religions, where the image of the Godhead was contrariwise stable. Yet, such an instability ultimately becomes a full-fledged ambiguity. [...] A dual modality of experiencing God's manifestations is widespread in Christianity and its history

as well. I would say that institutionalized forms of religion always had a more frequent experience of the thunderous modality, whereas mystical or doubtful forms of religion have rather experienced the other one – the theophany to Elijah, the “soft murmuring sound” (1997: 56-7).

A further contraposition within God, expressed with the most bodily and anthropomorphic of all symbolisms, is that between God’s Face and his Back, also referred to at the beginning of the narrative of the theophany on Sinai. In announcing to Moses that He will soon show himself to Him, God gives Moses a warning against the consequences of visual contact with the *sacrum tremendum* of the Godhead: *But [...] you cannot see My face, for man may not see Me and live. [...] You will see My back; but My face must not be seen* (Exodus 33:20, 23). These words of God, and His terrifying image deriving from them (a frequent image, especially in Psalms, for example 89:8), are matched by De Benedetti (1997: 11 n.1) with their commentary by the Hasidic Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk (the Kotzker Rebbe, 1787-1859): “Everything puzzling and confused people see, is called God’s back. But no man can see His face, where everything is in harmony” (Buber 1948. Volume 2: 275-6).

The Kotzker Rebbe was evidently recalling classical Jewish mysticism, in particular the *Zohar*’s definition of evil as God’s “Other Side.” We read that, according to the *Zohar*, man is bound not to cause any division between the *sefirot*. As we have seen above, according to the Talmud, God Himself begged a rabbi to bless Him, and the Rabbi solemnly formulated the wish that God’s Mercy may prevail on His Severity. In other rabbinic texts from the first centuries C.E., various rabbis were convinced that, by practicing good deeds and observing the Law, a man could hasten the coming of the messiah and thus the end of times, when the original unity of the Godhead would be restored. By the

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invention of these myths, a relevant part of Jewish tradition – not only the mystical part – acknowledged that God's personality was even more (and worse) than just “fraught with fickleness and ambiguity” (as in De Benedetti's expression), but often contradictory, maybe unaccomplished, and not happy with that. At a certain moment in His history as a literary character – once again, a history also made of the history of his relationship with his people – God seems to be a truly split personality, individuated into the antinomic opposites of which it is compounded. When we read in the Talmud about God begging the Rabbi to bless him so that He can master His own wrath, we might be reminded of the title of a long-forgotten yet beautiful movie by the French filmmaker Jean Delannoy: *Dieu a besoin des hommes* (*God Needs Man*, 1950). In this movie, God does not seem to be convinced, maybe not even capable, of finding the balance between the two sides of His character. In order to finally individuate His own split and create His personality as a literary character, God seems in need of man's participation and empathy – or even of man's lead. In the Hebrew Bible, God shows two appearances: His Face vs His Back; or His Forgiveness vs His Wrath. What we are thus left to wonder in each narrative context of the Bible is, which of God's two appearances is His actual face, and whether one of the two is just to be considered as a mask.

Endnotes

- 1 Quotations from the Hebrew Bible are taken from the *New Jewish Publication Society of America Tanakh* translation (JPS 1985), quotations from the *Zohar* are from Daniel Matt's translation in the Pritzker Edition (Matt 2004-2017), and quotations from the Babylonian Talmud are from Adin Steinsaltz's translation as found in the *William Davidson Talmud* (WDT 2017), all with minor emendations on my part. Unless otherwise specified in the bibliography, all other quotations from the sources, both ancient and modern, are my own.
- 2 Here I emend *meqomah* ("her place") of the Masoretic text with *be-qamaw* (following the ancient Greek version and Elliger 1970, 55 *ad loc.*). The text of the first half of the verse is difficult and in all likelihood corrupt. For a *status quaestionis*, a discussion, and a desperate attempt at defending the Masoretic reading, see: Maier 1959: 181-83; Tsumura 1983.
- 3 The second half of verse 11 is difficult. The Masoretic text reads *u-ke-yir'atekha*, "and according to the fear of You is your wrath," which can also be interpreted as "Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you" (thus the *New Revised Standard Version*). The Codex Alexandrinus of the Septuagint reads *apo tou phobou sou ton thymon sou*, "who will know [...] Your wrath from the fear of You?" (which seems to come from a Hebrew *u-me-yir'atekha*), whereas the Codex Vaticanus and the Codex Sinaiticus read *apo tou phobou tou thymou sou*, "from the fear of Your wrath". Dahood 1968: 326 suggested to emend the text with *ki yir'atekha*, "who will understand [...] that [even those who nourish] the fear of you are [the object of] Your wrath?" For a discussion see Tate 1990: 435.
- 4 On the rendering of Biblical anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms in Targumic literature see Wittstruck 1976; Orlinsky 1981; Klein 1982.
- 5 Compare p. also fr. DK 21 B 15: "But if oxen, horses, and lions had hands, and if with their hands they could draw and make objects like men do, horses would draw images of gods in the likeness of horses, and oxen in the likeness of oxen; and they would make bodies precisely alike to the shape of each of theirs."

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- 6 Compare, however, *Targum Neophyti* and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* to *Genesis* 19:18, where Lot seems to ask for God's mercy only for the sake of his own family.
- 7 Compare the severity that marks God's relationship with Adam, with all mankind until the Flood, and with Israel and its transgressions throughout the Exodus.
- 8 Compare Jung's other statement: "In the end we have to acknowledge that the self is a *complexio oppositorum* precisely because there can be no reality without polarity" (1959: 267).

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