

Week Two: *Who Is Like Yahweh?*

The Historical Perspective

[The] primary elements in the Israelite knowledge of God could not have been derived from a polytheistic environment.-- G.E. Wright, *The Old Testament Against Its Environment*

Ancient Near East Polytheism

gods are a personification of nature:

The forces and powers of the universe had been distinguished and the category of personality applied to them. 16,17

pantheon of competing deities:

The authoritarian head of the pantheon was El, but the chief executive, the king, was the personified Storm, Hadad, the Baal or Lord of the gods and men. Complementary powers were paired as male and female... 18

Man's creation was conceived and executed not as an end in itself or as a natural sequel to the formation of the rest of the universe but rather as an expedient to satisfy a group of discontented gods. Man was made to be the servant of the gods, to be a kind of breadwinner of his divine masters and to be the builder and caretaker of their sanctuaries. -- Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 120

myth

His religious literature was his witness to his experience with divine personalities... Mythopoeetry was not a mere form of entertainment, nor was it a mere explanation of matters which troubled the intellect; it was the narration in story form of the universal facts of life to which man must adjust himself. 19

problem of existence: harmony with nature

Old Testament Monotheism

God transcends nature:

[Yahweh] was Lord both of the natural and historical event, "the God of heaven and the God of the earth" (Gen. 24:3) He therefore transcended nature, as he transcended history. 23

one infinite God, sovereign over created spiritual beings who are subject to Yahweh

The actual existence of other gods is assumed. The point is that they are without independent existence... 37 (see Ezekiel 28:11ff; Ps. 95:3)

history

The God of Israel has no mythology. 26... He transcended nature—and transcended, likewise, the realm of mythopoetic thought... No abstract words were needed to describe God's being: it was sufficient to identify him with a simple historical statement: he was the God who brought Israel out of the land of Egypt (Ex. 20:2). 20,21

problem of existence: subordination to the will of

[i]ntegration with the forces of nature... 23

God

adjustment to the will of God. 23 (see Gen. 2:15-17, cf. 1 Kings 3:9)

gods described in terms of nature

God described in relational terms

[The polytheist] did not distinguish between reality and the force in or behind it. In the storm meets the God Storm. Nature is alive, and its powers are distinguished as personal because man has directly experienced them. There is no such thing as the inanimate. 17

The Israelite language in depicting the divine is almost solely drawn from the categories of personality and society; indeed this is the basic language of the Bible and of the Jewish and Christian religion. 26 (see Deut. 10:14,15)

fickle gods control life and history:

God's plan to overcome evil

The polytheist saw the problem of his life over against the powers of nature which he could not control but on which he was utterly dependent. 17.

The basis of the literature was history, not nature, because the God of Israel was first of all the Lord of history who used nature to accomplish his purposes in history. 28. (see Isaiah 46:11)

Religious life was thus characterized by fear and desperate acts to placate the gods.

“You are standing on holy ground”

Exodus 3:1-6 Moses' first encounter with God

Concept of “holy”

- singularly unique, other, separate (Ex. 15:11; Is. 40:25, 44:7,8; Micah 7:18)
 - perfect (*tamim*)—his works (Deut 32:4), his way (2 Sam. 22:31), his word (Ps. 19:7)
 - unchanging, constant (Malachi 3:6-*promises*; Micah 7:18,20-*love*)
 - reveals what we are not—producing *fear* and *awe*—associated with fire

Majesty (hadar)

- Greatness (Ps. 48:1; 77:13; 86:10-13; 92:5; 95:3)
 - exalted ruler & possessor (Isaiah 40; Psalms 93:1,2; 145:5; Hebrews 1:3)
 - sovereign “King of kings, Lord of lords” (Deut. 10:17)
 - limitless (Ps 139...; Is. 40:28)—in wisdom and power

Reflection on God's majesty

In our democratic, individualistic, self-reliant age, it is difficult to conceive of God being the exalted sovereign, worthy of all and owner of all. But God's majesty also offers a challenge in a different

direction. Packer writes,

He never abandons anyone on whom he has set his love; nor does Christ, the good shepherd, ever lose track of his sheep. It is as false as it is irreverent to accuse God of forgetting, or overlooking, or losing interest in, the state and needs of his own people. If you have been resigning yourself to the thought that God has left you high and dry, seek grace to be ashamed of yourself. Such unbelieving pessimism deeply dishonors our great God and savior. J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 88,89

1. How might a diminished view of God's greatness be in the way of knowing Him more deeply?
2. How might a robust view of God's greatness have transforming impact on my life?

"Show me your glory"

Exodus 33:18-23; 34:6-8 the glory of the Lord revealed

- God's glory (*kabod*, honor) is his goodness (33:19)
 - God's *character* is the foundation of goodness and his *will* is directed by it.
- *Justice* and *righteousness* emerge out of God's goodness
 - All polytheisms tend to be religions of the *status quo*, and none of them has ever produced a thoroughgoing social revolution based upon the high concept of social justice... The prophetic protest against social injustice is without close parallel in the ancient world, and it was a protest grounded in a known law which the powerful were able to subvert by means of legal techniques. The justice and righteousness of God, therefore, were seen to be especially solicitous of the weak. --G.E. Wright, *The Old Testament Against Its Environment*, 45,60
 - Humans as God's image-bearers and the uniqueness of the Law
 - See Isaiah 57:15; Psalm 107:1-16
 - How is God's goodness manifested?
 - What is the appropriate response to God's goodness?
- *Exodus 34:6,7—Central biblical text on the essential nature of God*
 - **"Yahweh, Yahweh Elohim, Compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in loving-kindness and truth; who keeps loving-kindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; Yet he will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations."**
 - The essential nature of God is *relational*
 - The bricks we collect in order to construct the biblical image of God are, as a rule, conceptual notions, such as goodness, justice, wisdom, unity. In terms of frequency of usage in biblical language, they are surpassed by statements referring to God's *pathos*, which, however, for a variety of reasons, has never

been accorded proper recognition in the history of biblical theology... *Pathos* denotes, not an idea of goodness, by a living care, a dynamic relation between God and man... --Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*, 286, 289

- Key contrasts: mercy and judgment (see Romans 11:22)
- Key modifiers:
 - “slow”—how does God move in judgment?
 - "abounding"—extent of God’s love, kindness, mercy, compassion
- *Hesed*, the Old Testament’s version of “God is love”
 - 170 times, translated “lovingkindness”
 - God is revealed in his *hesed* (350x)—Exodus 34:6,7 (cf. Ps. 86:15; 145:8; Jonah 4:2; Nahum 1:3; Deut. 5:10; Num. 14:18,19; Neh. 9:17; Ps. 86:15; 103:8; Joel 2:13).
 - Translated as and synonymous with:
 - merciful Ps. 86:15; 103:4
 - faithful Deut. 32:4; Ps. 33:4,5
 - kind Josh. 2:12
 - loyal Hos. 6:6
 - compassionate 2 Chron. 36:15; Isaiah 54:7,8
 - favor Psalm 85:1
 - love Isaiah 49:15,16; Jer. 31:3
 - Connected to core aspects of God’s character
 - *hesed* and ‘*emet*: faithful and true or merciful and true (32x).
 - *mishpat* (just) and *tsadaq* (righteous) and *hesed* (faithful or merciful)
 - See Ps. 33:4,5; 143:1,2; Jer. 9:24; Isaiah 30: 1,2,18; Hos. 6:6; Matt. 23:23.
 - *hesed* is everlasting. Psalm 136:1-26 (50x)
- *Mercy & compassion: because of God’s hesed, his righteousness is our salvation* (Is. 56:1).
 - The Old Testament is the story of God pursuing alienated and rebellious humanity
 - History is the victory of God’s *hesed* in his plan to redeem all humanity (Isaiah 43:1-4a; 19:19ff).
 - “The prophets never taught that God and history are one, or that whatever happens below reflects the will of God above. Their vision is of man defying God, and God seeking man to reconcile with him... Had the prophets relied on human resources for justice and righteousness, on man’s ability to fulfill all of God’s demands, on man’s power to achieve redemption, they would not have insisted upon the promise of messianic redemption, for messianism implies that any course of living, even the supreme efforts of man by himself, must fail in

redeeming the world. In other words, human history is not sufficient in itself.”
--Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* 2:214, 235

- Man’s predicament is a predicament for God (Psalm 49:7-9;15).
 - “God is concerned about the world, and shares in its fate. Indeed, this is the essence of God’s moral nature: His willingness to be intimately involved in the history of man. Abraham Heschel *The Prophets*, 2:291
- So, willing to be intimately involved in man’s predicament, God is willing also to suffer with and for man.
 - “[Man is relevant to God]. To the biblical mind the denial of man’s relevance to God is as inconceivable as the denial of God’s relevance to man. This principle leads to the basic affirmation of God’s participation in human history, to the certainty that the events in the world concern Him and arouse His reaction. It finds its deepest expression in the fact that God can actually suffer.” Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*, 2:333,334
- The “adultery” theme in the prophets is directed toward the broken heart of God in the face of human idolatry—forsaking the Lord: Hosea 1:2; 2:5-8
- “Abounding in hesed”
 - God’s amazing generosity: Generosity means a disposition to give to others in a way which has no mercenary motive and is not limited by what the recipients deserve but consistently goes beyond it... Generosity is, so to speak, the focal point of God’s moral perfection; it is the quality which determines how all God’s other excellences are to be displayed... God overflows with generosity. --J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 162
 - Is God holding back his blessings from you?
 - Do you think that God desires to give you all good things *for no other reason* than that you are his child and he delights in you?
 - You are precious in My sight, You are honored and I love you. --Isaiah 43:4

Hesed of God and the prophetic voice

- To speak for God, it is crucial to experience the world *as he does*.
 - “Our conviction as to [the prophets’] existence is based on directly experienced fellowship with God. To the prophet, knowledge of God was fellowship with him, not attained by syllogism, analysis, or induction, but by living together... The prophets witness the misery that man endures as well as man’s wickedness that God endures. But God is wrestling with man” (and so is his prophet). Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* 287,288,243
 - Knowing God means sharing in the heart of God (see Jer. 20:9; Hos. 1:2; 1 Kgs. 17:21-24; Matt. 9:35-38; 2 Cor. 5:11). Like Jonah (4:2) it is possible to have true knowledge of

God (*de dicto*), without actually having your heart shaped by personal knowledge of him (*de se*).

- God's heart and Christian leadership:
 - Sharing God's *hesed* is the basis for Christian community (note carefully Col. 3:12,13)
 - Stirred by the real of danger lost people (Acts 20:18-21)
 - People carved into the heart of a servant (2 Cor. 3:1-3; cf Isaiah 49:16)
 - Controlled by the faithful love of God (2 Cor. 5:14)
 - Fond affection (1 Thess. 1:8)
 - Wrestling in prayer and with the word to influence people (Col. 1:9-12; 1 Tim. 4:14-16)

Assignment:

Read John Wenham, "The Abominations of the Heathen" (from *The Goodness of God*). This will provide some context for discussing God's judgment in week #3

Read J.I. Packer, "The Wrath of God" (from *Knowing God*)

Respond to the objection, "I simply can not believe that God is all loving and merciful since he is also full of wrath!" What would you say about a God *without* wrath? How is wrath reconciled with mercy and love? (keep your response to within a page—or 3-4 minute response)