

But What About God's Wrath *The Compelling Love Story of Divine Anger*

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Kevin Kinghorn (DPhil, University of Oxford) is a professor of philosophy and religion at Asbury Theological Seminary. He is the author of *The Decision of Faith* and *A Framework for the Good*.

Stephen Travis (PhD, University of Cambridge) served for more than thirty years as lecturer of New Testament and for more than fifteen years as vice principal at St. John's College in Nottingham. He is the author of several books, including *Christian Hope and the Future*, *The Jesus Hope*, and *Christ and the Judgement of God*.

Wrath, God, and the Emotion of Anger

There's a sticking point that arises again and again in my conversations with many Christians over the years. We'll be talking about the character of God, the significance of the cross, and the nature of faith, salvation, and so on. We'll be talking about God's great love for us, his desire that we live abundantly, and his efforts to draw people to himself. It's great theological conversation among fellow believers. But then the sticking point arises.

I am in the broad Wesleyan tradition, and many of these conversations have been with fellow Christians who come from a more Reformed theological background. They join me in affirming God's great love for us. But at a certain point, when drawing out what I think are the implications from this starting point that God is love, they caution me as follows. "So far we've only been speaking about God's love. But what about God's wrath?"

There's a lot in Scripture about God's love for us. But there's quite a lot about God's wrath as well. Is God's love only "one side" of God's character? Is wrath really another complementary side we must consider? Saint Paul tells us in Romans 11:22 to consider the "kindness and sternness of God" (NIV). In another translation it's the "goodness and severity of God" (KJV). Would it therefore be a weak, tepid, overly "feel-good" theology that considers only God's love, but neglects to consider God's wrath?

Most, if not all, theological disagreements stem ultimately from differing ways of understanding God's nature and character. As small children we all wanted to embrace the idea that God is love—super simple theology. But a more mature theology recognizes that God's revelation about his character is more complex. It involves themes of his justice, his judgment, at times his wrath. We must go deeper in our theology than a five-year-old's simplistic picture of God. Yet, what if a deeper biblical and philosophical analysis of God's character actually leads us back once again to that simple—though this time not simplistic—understanding that God is love?

In the age before tablets and cell phones, families would often pass the time on long car trips by playing the game twenty questions. That game always begins with the initial question: Is it an animal, vegetable, or mineral? Similarly, any analysis of God's wrath needs to start by clarifying what "wrath" refers to. Is it an emotion? A disposition? An action? Something else?

An answer here is not immediately obvious. And this is because the term "wrath" can be used to denote a variety of occurrences in Scripture. One kind of repeated reference to wrath seems pretty plainly to refer to an *emotion*. Consider, for instance, Proverbs 15:1: "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." The context here seems to be how a gentle answer soothes an emotion of wrath. 1 Kings 14:22 indicates that God's wrath can indeed be "stirred up." Similarly, Jeremiah 32:32 tells how the people's actions have "provoked" the Lord. Yet again, we read in Deuteronomy 9:8 that "At Horeb you aroused the LORD's wrath so that he was angry enough to destroy you." This is language one naturally associates with the rising and falling of an emotion. *Wrath* in these contexts might be thought of as a synonym for *feeling angry*.

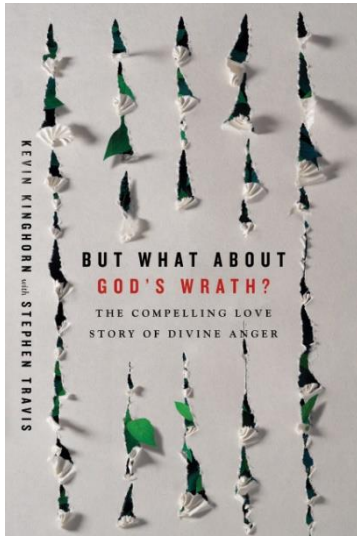


Alisse Wissman, print publicity
800.843.4587 ext. 4059 or awissman@ivpress.com

Krista Clayton, broadcast and online publicity
800.846.4587 ext. 4013 or kclayton@ivpress.com

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We could substitute other English words here besides *anger*. In English we have a variety of words that point to similar kinds of emotional states: displeasure, annoyance, resentment, rage, fury, and so forth. In Hebrew too there are a variety of words for this general kind of emotional reaction, which the Old Testament uses in describing both humans and God. Although it would be possible in English and in Hebrew to trace all the subtle differences among these related terms, for our purposes there is no need to do so. The point remains that God is frequently described in Scripture as having emotions associated with anger or wrath.

The term *wrath* seems often to be the preferred choice of people today when talking about this “angry side” of God we see in Scripture. Otherwise, though, in everyday speech it is rarely used. It is a bit like the English word *ire*. You may know what the term means; but when was the last time you used *ire* in a conversation? So it is with discussions about God's wrath. There is nothing unique about that term. I will use it in this book to refer generally to God's anger or expressed displeasure as depicted in Scripture.

It is actually a great irony that the term *wrath* has become something of a special theological term for God's anger or displeasure. The irony is that the biblical use of the term is specifically *not* intended for the context of abstract academic discussions. References to God's wrath are meant to convey the intensity of God's reaction to real life situations. They convey God's rage, his fury, as he relates to humans in our world made messy by injustice and oppression and human suffering.

Some people are surprised to find the Bible using such words as *fury* or *wrath* to describe God. They think of such language as crude or primitive, not suitable for a mature and enlightened conversation about the character of God. But the biblical language—particularly the Old Testament Hebrew—is direct, vivid, earthy. Centuries later, Christian writers in the early church would draw from the more abstract and sophisticated language of Greek and Roman thought. And they would make subtle theological distinctions using such terms as *Trinity*, *substance*, and *essence*. But the Hebrew language in particular speaks with a much greater vibrancy. Using this language, biblical writers emphasize God's aliveness, his character as a person who loves, cares, acts, feels joy and regret and anguish as we do.

I do not, of course, mean that God is just like us. God is infinitely greater than we are. But the Bible's vivid language of human emotion is the best way for us to see that God cares about us and that we can relate to him. (After all, we are dealing with a personal God.) Wrath is part of this emotional language. Just as we, at our best, react strongly and purposefully when someone we care about is mistreated or when justice is undermined, so does the God of the Bible. God is not like a judge in a courthouse, suspending his personal feelings in order to act objectively. He is more like a parent who feels affronted when her daughter is bullied in school and who takes steps to confront the offender.

—Adapted from the introduction and chapter one, “Wrath as a Pattern of Action”



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