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Ethics, Estrangement, and Emotion: Engaging Anger in Genesis

Traditionally, human emotions have not been on the forefront of biblical research. Although prominent scholars have examined divine emotion, many interpreters have avoided the study of human emotion.[1] However, there are key indications that times are changing. Outside of biblical studies, a number of works have underscored the importance of emotions in a variety of human endeavors, including moral decision making. These works include studies by Damasio and LeDoux in the field of neuroscience, studies by Oatley in the field of psychology, studies by Solomon and Nussbaum in the field of philosophy, and work by Lutz and many others in the field of anthropology.[2]

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[1] For a survey of works dealing with the emotion of anger in the Old Testament, see Zacharias Kotzé, "Research on the Emotion of Anger in the Old Testament: Recent Trends," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 60 (2004): 843-63.

[2] Antonio Damasio, an internationally recognized neurologist, has played a key role in demonstrating that feelings are actually integral to rationality. Over the course of two decades, Damasio has studied several neurological patients who led normal lives until an accident, surgery, or tumor caused brain damage, typically lesions on the prefrontal cortex (PFC). In clinical tests, these patients score high on intelligence exams, but they have difficulty reasoning with everyday decisions, frequently displaying morally problematic behavior and an inability to maintain employment. Damasio finds that such patients also lack the ability to experience emotion. With the inability to experience emotion comes the inability for these patients to make key decisions, even though they remain extremely intelligent. See Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1994), esp. 3-79, 245-252. Cf. Richard J. Davidson, Klaus R. Scherer, and H. Hill Goldsmith, eds., *Handbook of Affective Sciences*, Series in Affective Science (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 5-7, 66-92.

Another important study from the field of neuroscience is Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1996). Although conventional Western assumptions dichotomize feeling and thought, LeDoux demonstrates that emotions play important roles and share key points of continuity with cognition. Both emotions and cognition: (1) operate on unconscious levels, (2) interact with each other, and (3) are processed by the same mechanisms that make us consciously aware of them (ibid., e.g., 19, 68-69).

Studies in the field of psychology have collaborated the findings of those like Damasio and LeDoux. Keith Oatley, the former President of the International Society for Research on Emotions, has written an important essay entitled, "Do Emotional States Produce Irrational Thinking?" Oatley argues that emotions play valuable roles and should not be categorized as innately irrational. While individuals who are emotional can display signs of irrationality, so can those who are not emotional. He concludes, "The

In religious studies, scholars have begun to take note of this broader trend in the humanities. In an article published this year by the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Robert Fuller argues that emotions are integral elements of religious experience that merit careful study. As he puts it, "There is no such thing as emotion-free religiosity."[3] In New Testament studies, Matthew Elliot published a work last year called *Faithful Feelings: Rethinking Emotion in the New Testament*.[4] It includes a chapter surveying major themes on emotion in the Old Testament. Meanwhile, in a collection of essays published this year on character ethics and the Bible, Jacqueline Lapsley writes on emotions and ethics in Ezekiel 24, where God commands the prophet and the people not to mourn.[5] Also this year, Ellen van Wolde and Zacharias Kotzé have had a lively debate on the *SBL Forum* concerning emotional language in the Hebrew Bible.[6] While more

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appropriate way to see emotions is not as irrational elements in our lives, but as a clever biological solution to problems with which we are often confronted." See Keith Oatley, "Do Emotional States Produce Irrational Thinking?" in *Lines of Thinking: Reflections on the Psychology of Thought*, ed. K. J. Gilhooly, et al. (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1990), 130-31.

Similar conclusions have also been reached in the field of philosophy. Nussbaum takes a neo-Stoic position that argues emotions are *eudaimonic*, consisting of evaluative judgments that are concerned with a person's flourishing. See Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). In an earlier work, Solomon argues that emotions are essential to a life worth living. See Robert Solomon, *The Passions* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1976).

The best anthropological research reflects the findings of those like Damasio, LeDoux, Oatley, and others, recognizing that the opposition between thought and emotion is a Western construct that one should not presuppose is at work in non-Western cultures. One of the most prominent sources to do so is Catherine A. Lutz, *Unnatural Emotions: Everyday Sentiments on a Micronesian Atoll & Their Challenge to Western Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998). An excellent review article describing this work and others in anthropology is Niko Besnier, "Language and Affect," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19 (1990): esp. 420.

[3] Robert C. Fuller, "Spirituality in the Flesh: The Role of Discrete Emotions in Religious Life," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75, no. 1 (2007): esp. 45.

[4] Matthew A. Elliott, *Faithful Feelings: Rethinking Emotion in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel, 2006).

[5] Jacqueline E. Lapsley, "A Feeling for God: Emotions and Moral Formation in Ezekiel 24:15-27," in *Character Ethics and the Old Testament: Moral Dimensions of Scripture*, ed. M. Daniel Carroll R. and Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 93-102.

[6] Ellen van Wolde, "Language of Sentiment," *SBL Forum* 5 (2007), http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=660. Cf. Ellen van Wolde, "Sentiments as Culturally Constructed Emotions: *Anger* and *Love* in the Hebrew Bible," *Biblical Interpretation* 16, no. 1 (2008): forthcoming. See also Zacharias Kotzé, "In Response to Van Wolde," *SBL Forum* (2007), http://www.sbl-

examples could be given,[7] these very recent publications suggest that the subject of human emotion is both an emerging and a fruitful area of study for biblical interpreters.

An excellent place to continue the study of biblical emotion is analyzing human anger in the book of Genesis, a topic I have chosen for my dissertation (written under the direction of Jim Crenshaw). This emotion is foundational to many narratives, driving plots throughout the book. Every patriarch and many of the matriarchs have significant encounters with this emotion. Consider the following episodes, which feature anger on either explicit or implicit levels: [8]

1. In Gen 4:5-8, Cain's anger leads to the Bible's first recorded murder and the first explicit mention of sin.
2. In Gen 13:5-12, the anger between the herders of Abram and Lot leads to their separation, on which several subsequent events depend.
3. In Gen 16 and 21, Sarah's anger, albeit somewhat implicit, leads to the expulsion of Hagar from the household.
4. In Gen 26:12-22, one of the few narratives featuring Isaac, the anger on the part of the herders of Gerar leads to the forced migrations of this patriarch.
5. In Gen 27, Jacob deceives his father and steals his brother's birthright, which enrages Esau and causes Jacob's flight and subsequent residence with Laban (esp. 27:41-45).

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site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=671. Cf. Zacharias Kotzé, "Humoral Theory as Motivation for Anger Metaphors in the Hebrew Bible," *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 23, no. 2 (2005): 205-09.

[7] For example, Paul Krüger has also written on emotions: Paul A. Krüger, "A Cognitive Interpretation of the Emotion of Anger in the Hebrew Bible," *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 26, no. 1 (2000): 181-93. Paul A. Krüger, "A Cognitive Interpretation of the Emotion of Fear in the Hebrew Bible," *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 27, no. 2 (2001): 77-89. Paul A. Krüger, "On Emotions and the Expression of Emotions," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 48, no. 2 (2004): 213-28. Earlier work on emotion in the Hebrew Bible can be found in these sources: H. W. Robinson, "Hebrew Psychology," in *The People and the Book*, ed. A. S. Peake (Oxford: Claredon, 1925), 353-82. A. R. Johnson, *The Vitality of the Individual in the Thought of Ancient Israel* (Cardiff: 1949). E. Dhorme, *L'emploi Métaphorique Des Noms De Parties Du Corps En Hébreu Et En Akkadien* (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste, 1963). Mayer I. Gruber, *Aspects of Nonverbal Communication in the Ancient near East*, 2 vols., Studia Pohl 12 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1980). Mark S. Smith, "The Heart and Innards in Israelite Emotional Expressions: Notes from Anthropology and Psychobiology," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117 (1998): 427-36.

[8] A number of these episodes involve jealousy. As I explain in greater depth in my dissertation, there are many reasons to understand jealousy as a subset of anger. For example, 33% of the occurrences of words from the root *qn'* occur in conjunction with another term for anger, typically standing parallel to it. Verses like Ps 79:5 are not uncommon: "YHWH, how long? Will you be angry (תֶּאֱנַף) forever? Will your jealousy (קִנְאָתֶךָ) burn like fire?" Anger in the Hebrew Bible prototypically results from a perceived wrongdoing, and jealousy refers to a specific type of wrongdoing, namely the perception of someone receiving more or less of something than they should.

6. In Gen 30:1-4, Leah and Rachel appear to be at least implicitly angry with each other, and the text says specifically that Jacob becomes angry with Leah after she demands children.
7. In Gen 31:35-32:1 (31:35-55, Eng.), an enraged Jacob and Laban contend fiercely with one another, eventually agreeing to a legal separation.
8. In Gen 33, a tense interchange transpires between Jacob and Esau where anger is not far in the background.
9. In Gen 34, Dinah's brothers become enraged with Shechem and consequently slaughter both him and the inhabitants of his city (esp. 34:7). See also 49:6-7.
10. In Gen 37, Joseph's brothers, upset and jealous with him, plot to kill him before deciding to sell him into slavery instead.
11. In Gen 39:17-20, an angry Potiphar imprisons Joseph after he hears his wife's allegations.
12. In Gen 40:2, 41:10, Pharaoh's anger leads to the imprisonment of two of his servants.
13. In Gen 44, 45, and 50, various interactions occur between Joseph and his brothers where anger plays an important role (esp. 44:18, 45:5, 50:15).

As the evidence above illustrates, anger is fundamental to much of Genesis. Without this emotion, the book's plots would be radically altered. For centuries, scholarship has recognized the importance of motifs like blessing, promise, covenant, land, generations, and family in Genesis. The prominence of anger in this book suggests that it is an equally important motif.[9]

The writings of John Barton, Gordon Wenham, Martha Nussbaum, and Wayne Booth are particularly helpful for understanding these various episodes involving anger in Genesis.[10] While much could be said about these four authors, I will focus on one of their key insights. In different ways, they argue that the moral life can be quite complex.

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[9] Words for anger, for example, appear more frequently than the word תּוֹלֵדוֹת ("generations"). (Thirteen references are made to תּוֹלֵדוֹת, while 22 references are made to חָרָה, אַף, קָצַף, עֶבְרָה, and שָׂטַם where these words designate anger.) Similarly, Genesis has more episodes involving anger than episodes where God enters into covenant with humanity. Furthermore, the narratives of this book deal with anger more often than they portray God promising land to the patriarchs. This emotion has a persistent presence throughout the book.

[10] John Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), esp. 55-64. Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2000), esp. 11-15. Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 1986), esp. ch. 10. Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), esp. ch. 6. While one should not conflate the thinking of these four authors, there are obvious spheres of similarity.

Those making moral decisions do not do so in a vacuum, but amid the harsh realities of life, which can entail various sorts of limitations, difficulties, and things outside their control. Narratives, these authors argue, are particularly suited for addressing the type of moral decision making that takes place amid such realities. As Barton puts it, "Literature is important for ethics because literature is as complicated as life itself and cannot be decoded or boiled down."[11] He here is building on Nussbaum, who maintains that complex narratives offer ethical guidance not by presenting readers with abstract, general, first principles (so Plato), but rather with the means to acquire practical wisdom so that they can make right judgments amid the concrete particularities of life (so Aristotle). Through narratives, readers gain what I would like to call "imaginative experience." They learn something of how the world works, of human nature, and of the fragility of goodness. They gain insights for upright living in a fallen world.

When examining the narratives of Genesis, one sees that from its third chapter on, this book is not concerned with an ideal world, but rather a world where characters face limitations of various sorts, an array of complexities, and circumstances beyond their control. Within the highly complex world evoked by its narrators, this book presents readers with various characters who become angry in different ways and for different reasons. Through repeat exposure to these episodes involving anger, readers gain a level of practical wisdom about the dangers of this emotion and the perplexities it brings to the moral life.

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[11] Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, esp. 63. These authors suggest that narratives provide readers with resources for facing the challenges of life. The characters and episodes readers encounter in fiction are not altogether removed from the people and situations they face along life's journey. Characters and implied authors can even become imaginative companions in readers' minds.

The narratives of Genesis have two bookends, which expose readers to the opposite extremes of what can happen with anger. In Genesis 4:1-10, readers receive their first glimpse of life outside Eden. There, they encounter the two sons of Eve, and they learn that the elder becomes angry when divine favor falls on the younger but not himself.[12] God intervenes and speaks to Cain about his anger, which is quite remarkable given that the divine word in Genesis is reserved for the most significant of developments, including the creation of the world and the establishment of various covenants.[13] But in sharp contrast to divine words elsewhere, God's word in chapter 4 falls flat. Cain refuses to heed God's warning. He kills his brother after Abel has done nothing wrong. Fratricide represents one extreme of what can happen with anger.

In the final chapter of the book, readers encounter the opposite extreme, forgiveness. There, Joseph and his brothers are reconciled after a long history of jealousy, anger, deception, and abuse. Jacob is at death's door, and Joseph's brothers fear that Joseph has harbored anger against them and may be plotting to kill them after their father's death, much as Esau planned to do with Jacob (27:41; 50:15). So Joseph's brothers claim in a message, perhaps deceptively, that their father has ordered Joseph to forgive them (50:16-17). When Joseph hears their words, he weeps. The brothers offer themselves as Joseph's servants (50:18; cf. 32:18, 20), but Joseph instead speaks graciously with them and reassures them that he will provide both for them and for their

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[12] It is no coincidence that Cain's Hebrew name, *qayin*, has such close phonetic similarities with the Hebrew word for jealousy, *qana'*: he is obviously jealous of his brother's blessing.

As early as Chrysostom, the connection between Cain and jealousy has been noted (cf. Andrew Louth, ed., *Genesis 1-11* [ACCS; Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001], 105). See also Angela Y. Kim, "Cain and Abel in the Light of Envy: A Study in the History of the Interpretation of Envy in Genesis 4.1-16," *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 12 (2001): 65-84, esp. 71.

[13] While the role of divine speech in creation is obviously present in Gen 1-2, there are many passages speaking of God's promises and covenants: Gen 6:8; 9:8-17; 12:1-3; 13:14-16; 15:5; 17:4-21; 18:17-21; 22:16-18; 26:2-5, 24; 28:13-15; 35:11-2. Cf. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (OTL; trans. John H. Marks; rev. ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 160.

children. It is a moment of reconciliation offered just before the book closes, letting readers see Joseph as an anti-Cain—a brother who has all the power and all the reasons to harm his brothers but instead turns away from anger and, despite the inherent difficulties, offers forgiveness.

While Genesis frames its post-Edenic narratives with two contrasting outcomes of anger—fratricide and forgiveness—it avoids simplistic moral reasoning that demands from its readers that they respond to being angry with someone by forgiving that person. Rather, between these two bookends, it offers many other episodes that give readers imaginative experience for dealing with this emotion.

A number of these episodes show just how complex anger can be. Consider, for example, the case of Esau's anger toward Jacob. Echoing the narrative of Cain and Abel, Esau's anger causes him to plan fratricide (Gen 27:41-45). In this sense, Esau's anger is obviously negative, a great moral problem. And yet, both Esau and his dying father have been deceived and robbed of what is most precious to them. Only someone who is morally numb would fail to feel some level of anger toward Jacob and Rebecca for their actions.[14] In this sense, anger results from a sense of right and wrong, which obviously is a good thing to have. Both here in chapter 27 and elsewhere in Genesis, anger is portrayed as an extension of characters' moral sensitivities and, paradoxically, a hindrance to characters' ability to do what is right.[15] The perplexities of anger merit

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[14] Cf. Michael James Williams, *Deception in Genesis: An Investigation into the Morality of a Unique Biblical Phenomenon*, ed. Hemchand Gossai, Studies in Biblical Literature (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 18-19.

[15] In my dissertation, I explain that anger prototypically results from a perceived wrongdoing, frequently an interpersonal wrong or instance of insubordination, although there are also cases of intertribal wrongs, religious wrongs, and some others. I also explain that one of the prototypical outcomes of anger is violence, although verbal confrontations and separation also are common.

careful ethical reflection, and it is not surprising that the first book of the תּוֹרָה (*instruction*) devotes considerable time to it.[16]

To understand what Genesis says about anger, interpreters need to lay aside Western assumptions about emotions and not assume that Western models of anger somehow got it right, or are universal, or are better than competing models. This has not always been easy for biblical interpreters. For example, several have characterized biblical anger with the Western category of *irrationality*. Bruce Baloian, in his doctoral dissertation on anger in the Old Testament, consistently refers to human anger in the Bible as irrational. A chief example he points to is Genesis 34, where he criticizes Dinah's brothers because they do not "cool down, so that the heat (חֵמָה) of passion can cool and rational thinking can take hold."[17] Ellen van Wolde has joined him in describing human anger in the Hebrew Bible as irrational and uncontrollable. She also points to Genesis 34, saying that the brothers "lose all rational control and aim for but one thing: immediate revenge."[18]

Such comments are not only doubtful, but also they distract readers from the complexities of what the text is trying to teach about the ethical dimensions of anger.

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[16] Genesis makes clear that the human desire to punish the guilty and to free our homes from immorality may in fact have the opposite effects when anger is involved. Thus, in chapter 39, Potiphar receives news that his servant Joseph has attempted to seduce his wife. He naturally becomes angry, and he acts in a way that from his perspective seems just and reasonable. He takes care of the matter not by physically harming his slave, but by imprisoning him. However, the readers of this narrative know something Potiphar does not: Joseph is innocent; the allegations are false. Here, readers learn that even when characters act carefully on their anger in order to bring about justice, injustice can instead occur.

[17] Bruce Edward Baloian, *Anger in the Old Testament*, American University Studies 7, Theology and Religion 99 (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 39-40.

[18] Van Wolde, "Sentiments as Culturally Constructed Emotions." The brothers' revenge certainly is not immediate, contra Wolde's assertion. Rather, it is carefully calculated. Initially, they deceive the Shechemites. They demand that they become circumcised, meaning that Shechem experiences pain on the same bodily organ with which he raped Dinah. After a period of time, Simeon and Levi take the city when the men are still in pain and unable to defend themselves. The revenge is not immediate, but designed to inflict the maximum damage on the maximum number of people. Cf. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 466-67.

Obviously, the reason for the brothers' anger is not irrational. Though interpretations of this chapter differ greatly,[19] there is a clear logic to why the brothers become angry. Their sister has been severely mistreated, and the entire clan has been disgraced. Even the narrator explicitly condemns Shechem's treatment of Dinah in Gen 34:7, which is remarkable, given the rarity with which the narrator of Genesis offers explicit evaluation of events.[20] The brothers are angry because Shechem has committed an outrage. They are not angry for irrational reasons.

But what about their actions? Is it fair to say that the behavior stemming from their anger is irrational? While many have joined Baloian and van Wolde in answering affirmatively,[21] there are several reasons to be cautious about seeing the brothers' actions as fundamentally irrational. First, Naomi Segal has questioned whether in fact one

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[19] There is considerable debate over how to translate the verb *ʿinnâ* in v. 2. See Mark G. Brett, *Genesis: Procreation and the Politics of Identity* (London: Routledge, 2000), 101-03. On the one hand, it could mean simply "to disgrace." This interpretation suggests that Shechem, perhaps by virtue of being uncircumcised (cf. v. 14), has brought dishonor upon Dinah and her family by sleeping with her. On the other hand, *ʿinnâ* could refer to rape. Even among those who understand this chapter to be about rape, there is considerable variance in interpretation. Compare Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, esp. 445-475, with Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, "Tipping the Balance: Sternberg's Reader and the Rape of Dinah," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110, no. 2 (1991): 193-211.

[20] Gen 34:7bcd reads, "They were exceedingly angry, for he committed an outrage in Israel by lying with Jacob's daughter [so NRSV]. This should not happen" (וַיִּחַר לָהֶם מְאֹד כִּי־נְבָלָה עָשָׂה בְיִשְׂרָאֵל לִשְׁכַּב אֶת־בַּת־יַעֲקֹב וְכֵן לֹא יֵעָשֶׂה׃). The language of "outrage" and the concluding clause "This should not happen" are clear and explicit condemnations on the narrator's part. Frequently, evaluations from the narrator are more indirect, for example, spoken by characters within the story. Other times, they are missing altogether. Thus, Sternberg refers to the "scarcity of evaluation on the narrator's part" (Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, esp. 54). Similarly, Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), esp. 184, draws the following conclusion:

> The Bible's highly laconic mode of narration may often give the impression of presenting the events virtually without mediation: so much, after all, is conveyed through dialogue, with only the minimal 'he said' to remind us of a narrator's presence; and even outside of dialogue, what is often reported is absolutely essential action, without obtrusive elaboration or any obvious intervention by the narrator. Against this norm, we should direct special attention to those moments when the illusion of unmediated action is manifestly shattered.

The narrator's statements that Shechem "committed an outrage" and "This should not happen" shatter the narrator's typical silence. They forcefully demonstrate the narrator's judgment, lest there be any ambiguity.

[21] E.g., Fewell and Gunn describe the actions of Simeon and Levi as a "grossly disproportionate response" (Fewell and Gunn, "Tipping the Balance," esp. 205). As 4 Macc 2:19 illustrates, there is an ancient precedent for calling Levi and Simeon's actions irrational.

should "'automatically' judge rape as a much lesser crime than massacre." Such judgment, she asserts, reflects patriarchal assumptions that fail to do full justice to the degree of trauma involved in the act of rape, ignoring the abuse of autonomy, body, and will that this act entails for its sufferers.[22] Second, throughout the Hebrew Bible, many individuals, including God, maintain on a wide range of occasions that punishment must come not only against the evildoer but also against the entire community, presumably for its complacency in allowing the evildoing to occur.[23] Levi and Simeon appear to display the same type of logic. Third, it is obvious from Gen 34:30 that if Simeon and Levi punished only the Shechemites' chief prince, the inhabitants of the city would soon seek vengeance.[24] The brothers develop a scheme that protects themselves from this counter-attack. Finally, the last verse of the chapter clearly suggests that from Simeon and Levi's perspective, their actions are defensible. When Jacob scolds his sons and points to the life-threatening consequences, the two brothers remain steadfast, asking, "Should he make a whore out of our sister?" The narrator allows this episode to end with this question unanswered and unchallenged, suggesting there is some degree of logic in what the brothers assert.[25] It is thus doubtful that the brothers have "lost all rational control," as van Wolde maintains.

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[22] Naomi Segal, "Review of Meir Sternberg, *the Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*," *Vetus Testamentum* 38, no. 2 (1988): 243-49, esp. 245, 247.

[23] Thus, in Gen 18:16-33, God is portrayed as having few qualms about destroying all of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham barters with the deity, eventually getting the divine being to agree not to destroy the cities if ten innocent people are therein. Even then, the text implies (or at least leaves open the possibility) that nine innocent people could be killed with the guilty.

[24] If there is any truth in Jacob's comment that the Canaanites and Perizzites may assemble against him in reaction to the slaughter, then certainly the Hivites, if they were not wiped out, would pose an even more likely threat.

[25] Granted, these words eventually are challenged in Gen 49:6-7, where Jacob condemns the anger of Simeon and Levi. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that Gen 34 concludes with the brothers' question unanswered for much of the remainder of the book. Furthermore, Gen 49:6-7 may not reflect the narrator's judgment on the actions of Levi and Simeon. One suspects it has more to do with the portrayal of the Levites as violently angry in passages like Exod 32 (Jake Stromberg, personal conversation, 19 Oct. 2007).

The point of the preceding discussion is *not* that the just punishment for rape is the slaughter of an entire city. Nor is it that anger is always a good thing. Rather, the point is that characterizing the brothers' anger as irrational distracts readers from the text itself. The chapter as a whole raises a series of challenging questions for readers that become obscured when the brothers' response is viewed through a Western lens and quickly dismissed as irrational. At its heart, the text asks its readers, What is the proper response to sexual violence? What should one do when a family member has been disgraced and there are no good options for punishing the wrongdoer? How does one exact justice in the absence of possibilities commensurate with the offence? What should one do with the fierce anger that arises in such situations? If one sides with Jacob and does little or nothing, then how does one reply to the brothers' unanswered question? This chapter is more concerned with deep reflection on these types of questions than with tidy solutions. When readers dismiss the brothers' action as driven by irrational anger, however, these enormously weighty and complex questions quickly lose their evocative power. Then, the story merely tells Western readers what they already know: emotions are irrational.

Understanding what Genesis says about anger involves laying aside both Western characterizations of emotion and even traditional assumptions about what ethical discourse looks like. Genesis does not present readers with anything like the types of morals found at the conclusion of Aesop's fables. Some have reduced the narratives of Jacob and Esau, as well as Joseph and his brothers, to the simple notion that readers ought to forgive those who wrong them.[26] But when one carefully reads these narratives,

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[26] Wenham describes how the Jacob cycle (25:19-35:29) and the Joseph novella (37:2-50:26) both focus on family reconciliation in cases marked by persistent hatred, which suggests to readers "that they too

it quickly becomes apparent that the text is not about simple solutions to complex moral dilemmas. It is about deep reflection on the perplexities of the moral life.

Like many of the episodes involving anger in Genesis, Esau's anger at his brother leads to estrangement, in this case, twenty years of separation between the brothers.[27] When Jacob is forced back home, Esau initially appears ready to kill him with his 400 men, but Jacob does all he can to make amends, and Esau ends up embracing Jacob instead (33:4). At the cost of many possessions, intense fear, and great risk to himself and his family, Jacob walks away with a sense that he has received favor in the eyes of

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should forgive even their long-term enemies, if they show sincere contrition" (Wenham, *Story as Torah*, 38). Such an analysis comes close to reducing biblical narratives to a sort of Aesop's fables wherein the moral at the end offers all one really needs to know.

Nor is this instance an isolated example. Wenham assembles a catalogue of virtues upheld by the implied author of Genesis:

> [The righteous person] is pious, that is prayerful and dependent on God. Strong and courageous, but not aggressive or mean. He or she is generous, truthful and loyal, particularly to other family members. The righteous person is not afraid to express emotions of joy, grief or anger, but the last should not spill over into excessive revenge, rather he should be ready to forgive. Finally righteousness does not require asceticism. (Wenham, *Story as Torah*, 100. See also ibid., 87-102, esp. 88-89)

Although Wenham does draw attention to emotions, these findings are somewhat disappointing. One senses a qualitative difference between the ethical possibilities that Wenham believes narrative texts offer and what he actually finds when examining Genesis. While he talks about the richness and depth of narrative texts, this summary seems rather flat and one-dimensional.

There are many more complexities in these texts, to which Wenham's book fails to give adequate attention. The biblical texts speak about the persistent power of anger and how anger makes forgiveness extremely difficult both in terms of the great temptations to resist forgiveness and the problems that persist even after forgiveness has been attempted.

[27] Genesis 33 shows readers that the estrangement resulting from anger need not be permanent, but it is also painfully realistic about how difficult and demanding such reunions can be. Filled with fear, Jacob does all he can to show his brother he is no longer a threat, showering Esau with gifts, bowing before him, and speaking with humility.

Jacob even positions his family so that Esau encounters them before encountering himself (33:1-2). If Esau chooses to kill Jacob, he will do so cognizant of the large family that will be orphaned and widowed, for which he will need to take responsibility (cf. 38:8-10). As a result of Jacob's measures, Esau, who initially appeared ready to kill Jacob with his 400 men, instead embraces his brother and offers both hospitality and protection (33:4, 12, 15). Jacob, however, refuses Esau's offers of spending time together and goes his own way, possibly out of fear that Esau may still attack or perhaps out of a sense of shame and guilt for past wrongs (33:12-17).

Cf. Petersen, "Genesis and Family Values," 20-22. While Petersen on the whole does very important work here, his emphasis on Esau's continually trying to kill his brother does not match well with Gen 33:4, where he embraces Jacob. There are also two more minor mistakes on these pages. First, Petersen mistakenly claims that Jacob offers Esau 542 animals when in fact he offers 550. Second, Petersen's subject heading speaks of Genesis 32, when in fact he spends considerable time on Genesis 33 as well.

his brother. But the reconciliation is short-lived at best. The brothers soon go their separate ways. Although there is a moment of forgiveness here, the narrative is painfully realistic about the difficulty, demands, and dangers of attempting to assuage anger. Genesis does not minimizes the force of anger or the prolonged impact it can have on human lives.

In the Joseph narrative as well, the text explains that anger can subside, but only after great difficulties. The narrative makes clear that Joseph has been grievously wronged by his brothers and that he has the power to inflict great retributive harm upon them.[28] At times, Joseph appears at least to be toying with the idea of paying them back evil for evil. He imprisons them, accusing them falsely (42:9-17).[29] He appears primarily interested in a long-term reunion with only Benjamin (44:10, 17), not his abusive half-brothers.

But in a climactic moment, Judah approaches Joseph, urging Joseph not to be angry (44:18). Judah then recounts his father's deep concern for Benjamin—whom he thinks is Rachel's only surviving son (44:19-31). Next, Judah offers himself in Benjamin's place (44:32-34). In so doing, Joseph learns that Judah is not the same person he was many years ago. The brother who once sold him into slavery (37:26) is willing to become a slave himself to prevent a recurrence of past evils. In this poignant moment, Joseph reveals his identity and urges his brothers not to be angry with themselves on account of their wrongdoing (45:5). He embraces and weeps over them

[28] Samuel J. Mann ("Joseph and His Brothers: A Biblical Paradigm for the Optimal Handling of Traumatic Stress," *Journal of Religion and Health* 40 [2001]: 335-342) explains how the narrative gives several indications that Joseph has been traumatized by his brothers' treatment of him.

[29] This same action happened to Joseph at the hands of Potiphar.

the same way he saw Esau weep over his father.[30] But unlike the reunion between Esau and Jacob, this one has a more permanent quality, as Joseph arranges to provide both lodging and sustenance for his brothers (46:31-47:12). As mentioned above, the brothers live in fear for a time, wondering if Joseph is harboring anger that will bring them harm after their father's death. But by the book's conclusion, fear and anger have subsided. The twelve brothers driven apart by anger and jealousy are united and at peace with one another.

While much more could be said about anger in the book of Genesis, I would like to conclude by taking a step back and observing that Genesis is not alone in reflecting on the ethical significance of anger. Although modern individuals often relegate this subject to the offices of psychologists, this emotion has puzzled and intrigued some of the most influential thinkers of antiquity.[31] I would like to give two brief examples and inquire about a third. First, Seneca's *Moral Essays* contain a lengthy discussion of anger. At certain junctures, Seneca's writings provide interesting points of conversation with Genesis. For example, Seneca writes, "Anger … has this great fault—it refuses to be ruled."[32] Genesis presents a slightly different message. Although Cain was unable to rule (משל) his anger,[33] there are some ways—difficult though they may be—to rule this

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[30] The linguistic connections between 45:14-15 and 33:4 are striking (cf. 46:29). As 33:2 notes, Joseph among all his brothers was in the best location to witness the reunion.

When Joseph tells his brothers not to be angry with themselves, he uses not only the word *ḥrh* but also *ʿṣb*, which also appear in tandem in 34:8. Cf. also 6:6.

[31] William V. Harris, *Restraining Rage: The Ideology of Anger Control in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), esp. 3-24.

[32] Seneca, "De Ira," in *Seneca: Moral Essays*, ed. John W. Basore, *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1928), esp. 156-157, § 1.19.1.

[33] Gen 4:7 has provided considerable trouble for translators, and lengthy explanations and conjectures have been offered. For discussion, see E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (3rd ed.; AB; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1984, 1964), 33; cf. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Continental Commentary* (trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984), 299-300. It seems wise, however, to understand the antecedent of the third masculine singular pronouns as referring to אַף (anger), the implicit subject of the verb in the previous verse. Thus, one can render

emotion, or at least to prevent its worst outcomes. Not all need to take the path of Cain. Some will even prove themselves to be like Joseph, Cain's polar opposite.

The second example is Aristotle. He suggests that anger could be praised, albeit under limited circumstances. He writes, "Any[one] can become angry—that is easy… but to [do this] to the right person, and to the right amount, and at the right time, and for the right purpose, and in the right way—this is not within every[one]'s power and is not easy; so that to do these things properly is rare, praiseworthy, and noble."[34] Aristotle, much like the narrators of Genesis, describes the complexities and challenges that anger presents for moral living.

Finally, I would like to draw attention to a third source that treats the ethics of anger: the New Testament. Here, I have a few questions for my respondent and the audience as a whole:

1. On a general level, what points of continuity and discontinuity exist between the New Testament's teachings about anger and the teachings of Genesis?
2. What is the New Testament's message about anger? On the one hand, many NT passages talk of anger being a vice (2Cor 12:20; Gal 5.20; Eph 4:31; Col 3.8; cf. Matt 5:21-22; James 1:19-20). On the other hand, Mark 3:5 says that Jesus became angry, and there are other passages that portray him as acting or speaking in anger (e.g., Matt

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לֹא תֵיטִיב לַפֶּתַח חַטָּאת רֹבֵץ וְאֵלֶיךָ תְּשׁוּקָתוֹ וְאַתָּה תִּמְשָׁל־בּוֹ
As, "If you do not do what is right, *anger* is crouching at the door of sin. Its desire is for you. You must rule over it."

Many interpreters have claimed that the word here rendered "crouching" refers to a demon mentioned in Akkadian literature with the word *rābiṣu*. Such an interpretation would make sense of the syntax of the verse (especially the masculine participle *rōbēṣ*) and why reference is made to "the doorway." However, of the 34 instances in the Hebrew Bible where the root *rbṣ* appears, none refers unambiguously to a demon. It is questionable, therefore, whether one can assume that ancient readers of Gen 4:7 would somehow know to associate *rōbēṣ* with a demon. This problem of association is compounded when one considers that within Akkadian literature, the word *rābiṣu* could refer not only to a harmful demon, but also a peaceful one—and even to government officials and deities (M. L. Barré, "Rabiṣu רבץ," *DDD*, 682-683). There is insufficient evidence to conclude that the ancient readers of Genesis had knowledge of a *rābiṣu* demon, and that they would have correctly connected it with *rōbēṣ* in this verse.

[34] Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1934), esp. 110-111, § 2.9.2.

21:12-13, 23:13-29; Luke 6:24-26, 11:42-52). What do these two sets of passages suggest about the negative and positive roles of anger in Christian ethics?

3. Ephesians 4:26 reads, “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.” Two questions: First, what does sinless anger concretely look like? Second, what concrete steps should individuals take to dispose of their anger before “the sun goes down”?