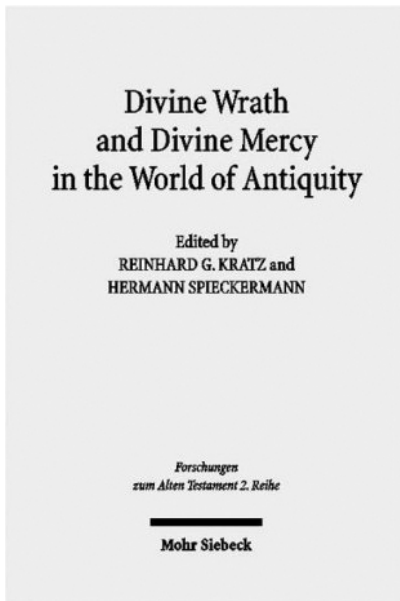


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Divine Wrath and Divine Mercy in the World of Antiquity

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Michael S. Moore
Arizona State University
Tempe, Arizona

Originally read to a Göttingen symposium in 2006, the lectures in this published anthology attempt to engage a rather broad topic: “Concepts of the Divine/Concepts of the World: Polytheism and Monotheism in the World of Antiquity.” As set forth in the introduction, the goal of this book is to investigate “the specific conceptualizations of divine wrath and mercy in the realm of polytheistic and monotheistic religions” because the behavior of these deities is widely perceived in so many circles to be “emotional and arbitrary ... unreliable and obscure” (3).

Section 1 (“Ancient Near East”) thus begins this study with six erudite essays from as many learned specialists in as many languages from the ancient Near East. Egyptologist Louise Gestermann (Bonn) starts things off with a survey entitled “Zorn und Gnade ägyptischer Götter” (19–43), in which she concludes that “Egyptian gods are not wrathful per se” but that “wrath,” nevertheless, is but “one side of the divine double-nature” (43). While it can be debated whether the oldest Egyptian texts portray Pharaoh serving a consciously mediatorial role between deities and humans, the emphasis in these texts is less on the king’s mediatorial role than the dynamic relationship between deeds and behavior in the heart of every human subject who comes to him—and the deities he represents—for justification.

Assyriologist Manfred Krebernik (Jena) next contributes an essay entitled “‘Wo einer in Wut ist, kann kein anderer ihm raten’: Zum göttlichen Zorn in Alten Orient” (44–66), which, after reviewing the phenomenon of divine anger in several Akkadian myths, focuses the bulk of its attention on the Erra Epic (55–66). Observing the presence of several intertextual parallels between Erra and the Anzu myth (see, conveniently, S. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000], 205–26 [Anzu], 282–312 [Erra]), Krebernik shows not only how each of these myths features a raging deity eventually subdued by a vizier-hero but how a similar dynamic animates the prophetic scroll of Ezekiel (Erra = Yhwh; Išum = Ezekiel). While several implications can be drawn from these parallels, the present essay concludes by emphasizing how clearly poet Kabti-ilāni-marduk’s summary statement on Tablet V—“when one is enraged, no other can advise him” (Erra V 12)—allegorically comments on the difficulty of placating *human* (as well as *divine*) anger (66).

Billie Jean Collins (Atlanta) next contributes an essay entitled “Divine Wrath and Mercy in the Religions of the Hittites and Hurrians” (67–77) in which she attempts to show (*contra* J. Assmann, “Monotheism and Polytheism,” in *Religions of the Ancient World: A Guide* [ed. S. Johnston; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004], 21) that the Judeo-Christian tradition is hardly alone in its presumption of a divine plan undergirding human history. The polytheistic Hittite and Hurrian traditions operate on the same presumption, in Collins’s opinion, especially in Šaušga’s (Ištar) attempt to care for the welfare of the Hittite king Hattušili (*KUB* 1.1 i 5–6, The Apology of Hattušili).

P. Kyle McCarter (Baltimore) next contributes a pithy article entitled “When the Gods Lose Their Temper: Divine Rage in Ugaritic Myth and the Hypostasis of Anger in Iron Age Religion” (78–91), in which he argues that, because so many Ugaritic myths go out of their way to equate divine anger with divine “sickness,” Yahweh’s anger should also be interpreted as “a hypostatic or quasi-independent entity” that, in spite of his “beneficent regard for people, can be provoked into destructive activity by certain forbidden human activities, especially ... cultic violations” (87–88).

Reinhard Kratz (Göttingen) contributes an essay entitled “Chemosh’s Wrath and Yahweh’s No: Ideas of Divine Wrath in Moab and Israel” (92–121), in which he, like McCarter, intertextually compares several Hebrew texts alongside several inscriptional texts animating the sociohistorical context (the Mesha and Deir ‘Allā inscriptions), the goal being to produce a more satisfying interpretation of an (in)famous textual crux in 2 Kgs 3:27, וַיְהִי קֶצֶף גָּדוֹל עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל, “and great wrath came upon Israel.” Presuming the Hebrew and Moabite texts to be synoptic versions of the same event, Kratz asks why Kings, unlike the Mesha Inscription, contains such an unconditional announcement of doom. Many argue this to be a unique feature of Israelite prophecy, but Kratz suggests

that it has more to do with the work of later redactors, operating *vaticinium ex eventu*, when they transform earlier promised, but unrealized, victories into unconditional doom announcements directly from Yahweh.

The essay of Karl William Weyde (Oslo), “‘Has God Forgotten His Mercy, in Anger Withheld His Compassion?’ Names and Concepts of God in the Elohist Psalter” (122–39), argues that, “if it is correct that the Asaph Psalms have a northern origin, (then) one can offer a good explanation of the proper name Yhwh and the Name theology: both intend to emphasize that Yhwh is identical with אלהים/אל (the God of the north), and that only Yhwh can be relied upon” (136). Without rejecting this explanation, Weyde nevertheless suggests another possibility, that the Elohist Psalms (Pss 42–83) are thoroughly edited via methods very similar to those used by the Chronicler in order to make it easier for them to be adapted into a new literary-historical context.

Section 2 (“Antiquity”) contains four essays broadly focused on classical, septuagintal, and koine Greek texts, starting with Michael Bordt’s (Munich) “Platon über Gottes Zorn und seine Barmherzigkeit” (143–52). Immediately questioning whether “wrath” and “mercy” can be classified as divine “character traits” (*Charaktereigenschaft*), Bordt argues that, while *mercy* can be a character trait, *wrath* cannot (because the latter is simply an “emotion”). This distinction is important, because even though Plato can on occasion refer to the “wrath of the gods” (*Leg.* 880e8–881a1; *Phdr.* 244d6), this in no way implies that he considers wrath to be a divine character trait. In fact, both attributes should probably be treated as primitive analogues for what “can more clearly and better be expressed through philosophical or perhaps even *naturwissenschaftlicher* terminology” (152).

Peter Schenk (Cologne) next contributes “Darstellung und Funktion des Zorns der Götter in antiker Epik” (153–75), in which he concludes, from a survey of the *Iliad*, that “the motif of wrath, above all of divine wrath ... stems from the value system of an archaic culture of nobility” later “philosophically deconstructed” by Vergil to communicate a more developed “understanding of history and *Welterklärung*” (174). Later, in the work of Valerius Flaccus, Schenk sees a “conscious turning away” from Vergil, after which Ovid’s transformation of the wrath motif into something characterized by “metapoetic significance” looks “playful and frivolous” (174–75).

Markus Witte’s (Frankfurt) essay, entitled “‘Barmherzigkeit und Zorn Gottes’ im Alten Testament am Beispiel des Buchs Jesus Sirach” (176–202), proposes not only that Sirach is a recognizable compendium of biblical theology but that the “wrath-and-mercy” statements in Sir 5:16 and 16:11 “can only be spoken of dialectically” (201). This dialectic portrayal of the divine persona, moreover, is quite different from the portrayals

propagated by pagan “theologians and philosophers,” especially when they represent divine wrath as something merely “emotional, irrational, and uncontrollable.” It also explains why Christian theologians such as Chrysostom gravitate to Sirach in their attempts to explain texts such as John 3:17 from perspectives informed by “monotheistic, personal, and relational” perspectives (201).

Jörg Frey (Munich) concludes this section with an essay entitled “‘God is Love’: On the Textual Tradition and Semantics of a Core Expression of the Christian Notion of God” (203–27), in which he argues (1) that neither **אהבה** nor *ἀγαπάω* are limited to “divine” love; (2) “that the Christian virtue of love is always and can only be grounded in the prevenient love of God or Christ, its scale and model” (226); and (3) that this love, while portrayed as eschatologically “new” (*καινός*, John 13:34), “stands in a longer history” where “God’s love is not featured on the same level or as beside his wrath” but “is in fact its transcendence” (227).

The final section of the book focuses on selected texts from “Late Antiquity,” the first essay coming from Aharon Shemesh (Jerusalem), entitled “An Offer God Can’t Refuse: The Punishment of Flagellation in Rabbinic Theology” (231–38). In this study Shemesh argues (1) that Torah makes a distinction between unintentional and intentional sin (Num 15:30–31); (2) that intentional sinners cannot “enjoy God’s forgiveness and atonement through the sacrificial ritual” (**חטאת**, 235); (3) that final erasure (**כרת הכרת**, Num 15:30) is unacceptable to most Tannaim; and (4) that this leads them to a radical new interpretation of flagellation in Deut 25:2–3 that posits that “it’s the forty lashes that actually atone” for the sins of penitent violators (237).

Gunnar af Hällström (Helsinki) contributes “The Wrath of God and His Followers: Early Christian Considerations” (239–47), which concludes that “the overwhelming majority of Early Christian texts reject the concept of an acceptable Christian anger.... ‘Holy wrath’ is thus nothing to be pursued among humans. With God, things are different, though. His wrath, if there is such a thing, cannot be compared with ours. Painful though it may be for humans, it is regarded as something rational and/or benevolent in the end. Thus it was generally accepted though understood in different ways. Wrath is, however, secondary in comparison with love” (247).

Todd Lawson (Toronto) concludes this anthology with a fascinating essay entitled “Divine Wrath and Divine Mercy in Islam: Their Reflection in the Qur’ān and Quranic Images of Water” (248–67), in which he argues that, since the Qur’ān teaches that the natural world is guided by the same kind of divine inspiration through which the messengers of Allah receive revelation, it might be informative to investigate how the Qur’ān uses the motif of “water,” not least because alongside its use as a symbol for divine

mercy stands its use as a symbol for divine wrath. Thus, “the Qur’ān’s distinctive character may be understood by observing how these otherwise somewhat abstract, theoretical or even theological ideas are rendered powerfully intelligible to the reader/listener/believer” (266).

Some of the essays in this volume focus much more intentionally on the overall theme set out in the introduction than others do, but this is to be expected in any academic anthology. Nevertheless, one would be hard-pressed to find another book on this subject that so diligently, so competently, and so thoroughly engages the wrath-mercy polarity animating the literature of the ancient world.