

1 The Two Faces of God: The Hebrew Bible

This study is about the two conflicting divine personae of the God of the Jews. I trace here how this duality fared in the thought of select Jewish thinkers and movements over history. My selection includes only those who thought of themselves as within the Jewish tradition or were wanting to revise that tradition sufficiently to be loyal to it. This includes a wide swath of thinkers and theologies. However, this leaves out some illustrious thinkers who were Jewish, such as Baruch Spinoza and Martin Buber. As well, other important thinkers will be left out because their thought is less relevant to this Element, and, alas, because this is a short Element.

1.1 The God of Exacting Punishment

The source of the two personae of the God of the Jews is in the Hebrew Bible. On the one hand, we find there a God who will get furiously angry, is slow to forgive; a God who serves out and delivers threats and horrific punishments for disobedience. In short, the proverbial “God of the Old Testament.”

Here, see this God:

I will bring upon you sudden terror, wasting diseases and fever that will destroy your sight and drain away your life . . . You will eat the flesh of your sons and the flesh of your daughters. I will . . . pile your dead bodies on the lifeless forms of your idols. I myself will lay waste the land, so that your enemies who live there will be appalled. I will scatter you among the nations and will draw out my sword and pursue you. Your land will be laid waste, and your cities will lie in ruins. (Leviticus 26:16–33)

And here:

However, if you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come on you and overtake you . . . The Lord will send on you curses, confusion and rebuke in everything you put your hand to, until you are destroyed and come to sudden ruin because of the evil you have done in forsaking him. The Lord will plague you with diseases until he has destroyed you from the land you are entering to possess. The Lord will strike you with wasting disease, with fever and inflammation, with scorching heat and drought, with blight and mildew, which will plague you until you perish. (Deuteronomy 28:15, 20–21)

This God is quick to punish, without warning:

And the people complained in the hearing of the LORD about their misfortunes; and when the LORD heard it, his anger was kindled, and the fire of the LORD burned among them, and consumed some outlying parts of the

camp. Then the people cried to Moses; and Moses prayed to the LORD, and the fire abated. (Numbers 11:1–2)

And once again in Numbers 16:42–49:

When the assembly gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron and turned toward the tent of meeting, suddenly the cloud covered it and the glory of the LORD appeared. Then Moses and Aaron went to the front of the tent of meeting, and the LORD said to Moses, “Get away from this assembly so I can put an end to them at once.”

A plague begins without warning to the people. Then Aaron stops the plague by carrying incense through the Israelite camp. And so, “[Aaron] stood between the living and the dead, and the plague stopped. And 14,700 people died from the plague.”

So, 14,700 people died from the plague, without warning or a chance to repent.

Think, as well, of when King David takes a census of all the tribes. The prophet Gad tells David of God’s displeasure at the taking the census. And then: “The Lord sent a pestilence on Israel from that morning until the appointed time; and seventy thousands of the people died” (2 Samuel 24:15).

And famously, in Deuteronomy 20:16–18, Moses tells the Israelites:

As for the towns of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them – the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites – just as the Lord your God has commanded.

Finally, from Lamentations 2:2–4, a punishment God visits on the people with “heated anger”:

God eradicated without compassion all of Jacob’s pastures. He destroyed in his fury Daughter Judah’s fortresses. He brought to the ground and profaned a kingdom and its princes. He cut down in fierce anger every horn of Israel. He held back his right arm in the face of the enemy. And He burned in Jacob like a fiery flame, consuming all around. He drew his bow like an enemy, His right hand steadied like a foe; And He slew every delight of the eye. Onto the tent of Daughter Zion He poured His venom like fire.

This is one divine persona, found throughout the Hebrew Bible.

1.2 The Compassionate God

The same God of the Jews of the Hebrew Bible is equally a thoroughly compassionate, loving God, slow to anger, and withholding of retribution. Take a look at another, contrasting, side of the God of the Jews: “Our ancestors became arrogant

and stiff-necked, and they did not obey your commands . . . But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore, you did not desert them” (Nehemiah 9:16–18) and, “For the Lord your God is a merciful God. He will not fail you, destroy you, or forget the covenant with your ancestors which he swore to them” (Deuteronomy 4:31). “And He [God] passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6).

“And in Isaiah 54:10: “Though the mountains be shaken, and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed,” says the Lord, who has compassion on you.”

And in Psalms 103:1–8

Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion . . . The LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed . . . The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.

And, again, in Psalms 145:8–9 and 17: “The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in kindness. The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made . . . The LORD is righteous in all he does, merciful in all his acts.”

And in Joel 2:13: “Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.” Here, God is slow to anger, always compassionate and merciful, and forgiving of sins.

So, we have two configurations of the God of the Jews, portraying two severely opposed divine personae: the one slow to anger, always merciful and easily forgiving; the other virtually unforgiving, who rages in anger; the one wholly compassionate, and the one who punishes furiously at times without warning. These two personae cannot easily, if at all, be reconciled. The story of this Element tells of ways Jewish thinkers and movements have faced these strongly clashing dual personae of God.

2 The Rabbinic Literature I

I turn now to the rabbinic literature. Within this literature, the two divine personae find homes in two different divine names. Rabbinic literature spans a period roughly from the beginning of the Common Era to about 600 CE, from rabbis in Palestine and Babylon. It includes legal and non-legal teachings and comprises the Mishnah (completed in the third century), the Jerusalem Talmud (completed in the fifth century) and Babylonian Talmud (completed in the sixth century), and ancillary texts including the Toseftah and most of Midrash.

These contrasting features of the God of the Jews get named in the rabbinic literature as: *midat ha'raḥamim*, the attribute of Compassion/Mercy, and *midat ha'din*, the attribute of severe Judgment. Now, the most common names of God in the Hebrew Bible are “YHWH” and “ELOHIM.” (I set aside for our purposes biblical-critical understandings of these two names of God. That is because I am interested here in the historical reception of the names and the dual personae when dealing with the tradition. Critical views go in very different directions.) There is no uniform Rabbinic view on the import of these names, yet the most influential view in Jewish history was to identify “YHWH” with mercy and “ELOHIM” with judgment.

An early influential rabbinic text marks this correlation explicitly: “Wherever ‘YHWH’ occurs it designates the attribute of mercy, *midat ha'raḥamim* . . . wherever ‘ELOHIM’ occurs it designates the attribute of judgment, *midat ha'din*” (Sifre, Deuteronomy section 26).

And in a later text, by Rabbi Samuel (third–fourth century): Says Rabbi Samuel son of Naḥman, “Wherever it says, ‘YHWH’ – it is the characteristic of mercy, *midat ha-raḥamim* Wherever it says, ‘ELOHIM’ – it is *midat ha'din*, the characteristic of judgment” (Genesis Rabbah 33:8).

It is very difficult to make out those contrasting connotations for the two names in the Hebrew Bible. There seem to be quite a number of counterexamples. Despite the difficulties in making that correlation between the names and the attributes of God, this matchup became quite standard with traditional biblical commentators and Jewish thinkers, at least until modern times.

I note that there are yet two important differences – although not systematic – between the names in the Torah that might have led the rabbis to want to make this distinction between YHWH and ELOHIM. The first is that YHWH *tends* to be more anthropomorphic than ELOHIM, although ELOHIM does not escape such description. (For a study of the name YHWH see: Ben-Sasson and Halbertal, 2012, 53–69 and Ben-Sasson, 2018.) ELOHIM appears in Genesis 1 as the transcendent creator of the world. “YHWH” is added to “ELOHIM” starting in Genesis 2, when God is hands-on inside the world and when God creates Adam from the soil and places him in the Garden of Eden.

A “powerful hand” and “outstretched arm” that save and protect the Israelites, are typically of YHWH. It is YHWH who commands to make a place for him on earth, to be close to the Israelites in the desert Sanctuary: “And YHWH spoke to Moses saying, . . . They shall make for me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them” (Exodus 25:1,8). And subsequently it is YHWH who commands the details of the holy sanctuary. It is YHWH who smells the good fragrance of the sacrifices in the Sanctuary (Leviticus 1:9). These are indications of YHWH’s closeness to

the people to which the rabbis might have paid special attention in seeing YHWH as *midat ha-rahamim*, the attribute of mercy.

A typical way for ELOHIM to communicate is through dreams, which are considered a message from *beyond*. For example, the command to Abraham to sacrifice his son is said in a dream by ELOHIM. Then Abraham arises the next morning to carry out the deed (Genesis 22:3). This places ELOHIM further away from us than is YHWH, who typically communicates directly or through an angel of YHWH present here on earth. And it is an angel of YHWH who stays Abraham's hand when he is about to kill his son Isaac.

There is a second difference between the names "ELOHIM" and "YHWH" that would have made the matching between the names and the attributes seem natural. "ELOHIM" is not a proper name of God, but a common noun. It is the plural of "eloha," meaning simply "a god," small "g." "YHWH" is the proper name of the God of the Jews, like "John" and "Jane." Appropriately, as we have seen, ELOHIM in the Torah *tends* to be more abstract, transcendent, less anthropomorphic than YHWH. "ELOHIM" when used of God is really more of a title, like "the Prime Minister," than a name of God.

"ELOHIM" also connotes judges. The word "ELOHIM" refers to human judges, as in Exodus 22:8, according to Jewish tradition and in standard English translations: "But if the thief is not found, the owner of the house must appear before the ELOHIM [Judges], and they must determine whether the owner of the house has laid hands on the other person's property."

On the other hand, "YHWH" is a personal, proper name of God. Appropriately, it conveys the way the Israelites experience their God. It is their name for their God. A name others might not recognize. So, in Exodus 5:2, we find: "And Pharaoh said, 'who is YHWH that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I know not YHWH, neither will I let Israel go.'" This God *tends* to be more anthropomorphic than ELOHIM, hence more personal than ELOHIM, and appears more readily, and *tends* to be more comforting.

It is YHWH who says to the Israelites, "Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5–6). And it is YHWH who says to them, "You are the children of YHWH your God . . . Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, YHWH has chosen you to be his treasured possession." So, it would have been natural to slide from such verses to identify YHWH with the attribute of Mercy, and ELOHIM otherwise. However, as I have already said, the difference between YHWH and ELOHIM across the board is difficult to make out with any consistency.

It will be convenient to have two names handy for the two divine personae, *irrespective of how they may be named in the Hebrew Bible*. In a gesture to what became a dominant view, that "ELOHIM" connotes severe

judgment and “YHWH” compassion, the two names will be “PERSONA-Y” and “PERSONA-E,” for “Divine Persona-YHWH” and “Divine Persona-ELOHIM.” (Again, this choice reflects no agreement to the systematic occurrence of the names “ELOHIM” and “YHWH” in the Hebrew Bible. These are no more than convenient names.)

The names “PERSONA-Y” and “PERSONA-E,” respectively, are to denote different *clusters* of semantic fields, the Y-cluster and the E-cluster. The *ruling idea* of the Y-cluster will be that PERSONA-Y is the divine persona *close* to us, both in presence and in intimacy. *Accordingly*, Cluster-Y will include the following (and related ideas) under its ruling idea – that PERSONA-Y is accessible, present, and intimate to a significant degree; that PERSONA-Y is benevolent, merciful, loving, and forgiving; that PERSONA-Y is best understood in anthropomorphic terms; above all, PERSONA-Y is deserving of our love. This is the God of the Israelites/Jews more than of the non-Jews.

The *ruling idea* of the E-cluster will be that this divine persona is *distant* from us. *Accordingly*, Cluster-E will include the following (and related ideas) under its ruling idea – that PERSONA-E tends to be abstract and transcendent (less-anthropomorphic) to a significant degree; that PERSONA-E is the majestic creator and ruler of the universe; that PERSONA-E is the source of natural, moral, and religious law; that PERSONA-E is the demanding, supreme judge; that PERSONA-E is “slow to forgive”; that PERSONA-E is deserving of fear and awe, and is given at times to severe anger and punishment. This is the God of absolute power, the God outside the world as creator, the judge sitting high in the court of justice, the judge who sentences in accordance with impersonal law.

In what follows, when this book says of a movement or thinker that they “favor” or “tend” to one divine persona over another, please keep in mind that:

- (1) They need not endorse the entire related cluster of divine features of PERSONA-E or PERSONA-Y but need endorse only *enough* of the one cluster so that their God be closer to one persona rather than another.
- (2) There may be elements of the other cluster in their thinking, but these will be few and/or play a secondary role.
- (3) They need not have thought in terms of the two divine personae at all. Rather, this can be what will emerge for us, from their thought, as we assess the relevance to our topic.

3 The Rabbinic Literature II

In rabbinic literature we find one, influential, strand that raises up the God of love and compassion. Rabbinic literature is composed mostly of conversations