

# Practicing Midrash

Reading the Bible's Arguments as  
an Invitation to Conversation

F. Timothy Moore

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PRACTICING MIDRASH

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## Introduction

“IN THE DAY THE LORD God made the earth and the heavens” (Gen 2:4b) could have been the first words of the Bible. As a child makes sandcastles at the beach, the God of creation knelt down on hands and knees and fashioned the first human being from the dirt of the earth. Then, the LORD cradled the human like a loving mother and breathed into the human’s nostrils and it became a living being. As the story continues the LORD also molds animals from dirt and breathes life into them. The LORD places all the living creatures in a place called enjoyment, where plants and trees provide every food they need. Finally, this God creates a second human, so that the two will be partners for each other. The Bible once began with an intimate portrait of how the LORD loved the world into existence.<sup>1</sup>

“In the day the LORD God made the earth and the heavens” are not the first words of the Bible, today. A different story became the beginning. An editor thought there was a better story. Another writer told an alternative creation story in which God spoke words from an unknown location. “Let there be light” (1:3), God says, and there was light. God speaks the universe into existence. There is not one day of creation, but six days. At the end of six days of work, God rests on the Sabbath. With Sabbath rest creation is complete. This story is nothing like the other story. This God did not act like the God in the other story.

Thus, the Bible begins with an argument—two competing creation stories with Gods that have different names and who bring the world into existence in contradictory ways. Ancient Israel kept both stories. Instead of selecting one story and erasing the other from the history of time, it decided both stories were sacred and passed them down through the generations. Despite their contradictions, despite their arguments about creation and

1. Bloom and Rosenberg, *Book of J*, 17–48; Friedman, *Hidden Book*, 3–32. Each claim that the earliest collection of biblical writings came from an author called the Yahwist by scholars, who compiled an early theological history of Israel. This was standard scholarship through the twentieth century, though current scholarship questions this theory.

God, they were placed back-to-back on the scroll of Genesis. “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth . . .” (1:1) became the first words of the Bible when the Priests decided to place their creation story before the other one.

This argument between two competing creation stories is not an anomaly in the Bible. What happens in the beginning happens throughout. Time and again ancient writers of what became biblical texts changed and rewrote earlier passages. They paired competing stories next to each other, or kept scrolls that argued against other scrolls.

Someone rewrote the Ten Commandments and reversed the most important statement about God’s character in the Bible. Multiple and contradictory tales about Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph were written and kept side-by-side. A scribe took an earlier scroll about King David’s life and Israel’s history and wrote a second version of the story, removing any questionable acts from David’s life. In every crisis of ancient Israel’s history, they kept the prophecies of at least two prophets who approached the crisis from different theological perspectives. Hosea and Amos, Isaiah and Micah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, each pair had different messages for the people. Israel kept them all.

In the New Testament, Matthew and Luke changed many of Jesus’ teachings and events in his life from how the Gospel of Mark first reported them. John’s gospel deviates from the other three and sees Jesus’ ministry in a totally new light. Paul’s letters to several Christian churches were some of the first written parts of the New Testament. Later, Luke retold Paul’s story in the book of Acts, sometimes in ways that Paul would not recognize himself. Subsequent letters to churches by other authors challenged Paul’s theology and questioned how people read Paul because his letters were “hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction” (2 Pet 3:16).

Almost every section of the Bible is written by multiple authors who encountered God’s Spirit in diverse and sundry ways. They disagreed about how God created the world, and made promises to Abraham, Moses, and David. Prophets spoke divergent messages to the people at times of crisis. Jesus’ teachings were remembered in contrary ways. Is it, for instance, the poor who are blessed, or will the poor in spirit be the recipients of the kingdom of God? The Bible begins with an argument about how God created the world and the arguments continue throughout.

When the Christian church started to standardize orthodox beliefs it was rarely comfortable with these contradictions and for most of its centuries minimized the differences and synthesized the contradictions. In the case of the two creations stories, it stopped talking about them as two

separate stories and taught the second story—the Adam and Eve story—as a complementary ending to the first. Though to do so, the church had to ignore many details in both stories.

The inherent arguments and contradictions in Scripture did not seem to bother the Jewish faith. A practice called *midrash* developed in Judaism sometime before the days of Jesus. The word derived from *darash*, which meant to investigate, to seek.<sup>2</sup> Rabbis and scholars sparred over opposing passages, developed theological arguments, and filled gaps in biblical stories with their own understandings. The way Jesus taught could have been understood as midrash by the rabbis of the day. Matthew's recording of the Sermon on the Mount was structurally arranged as midrash. Jesus recalled a teaching from the Scriptures, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times" (Matt 5:21), and then offered a commentary for his contemporary times, "but I say unto you" (5:22). In simple terms that was midrash.<sup>3</sup> While midrash was a Jewish practice of studying the Scriptures, it was brought into early Christianity. Matthew and Luke's version of Jesus' temptations may have been a Christian midrash of the brief mention of his wilderness temptations in Mark 1:12–13. It was a longer story that filled in the gaps of what was first said.<sup>4</sup>

The practice of midrash developed a few written texts. Rabbis wrote the *Mishnah* during the second century at the same time Christians were beginning to determine their New Testament. This collection of midrashim, or oral teachings, of the rabbis created a Jewish *new testament* to the Hebrew Scriptures, though it only occasionally quoted the Bible. The *Mishnah* provided a new guide for living an ancient faith under new challenges. In the fifth and sixth centuries two versions of the *Talmud* were written, one in Palestine and the other in Persia. The *Talmud* was a commentary on the *Mishnah*, in which the Bible was regularly quoted to ground the oral teachings of the rabbis in the written word of the Torah. The Persian version, called the *Bavli*, organized the practice of midrash. It provided written commentary—interpretations, arguments, suggestions on what the original authors should have said, which structured a debate across the centuries. It also provided

2. Armstrong, *Bible*, 81.

3. Hays warns scholars about being too loose with the term midrash. "The term *midrash* can serve as a convenient cover for a multitude of exegetical sins" (*Echoes of Scripture in Paul*, 13). His warning noted, he does think it is worth exploring Paul's letters through the rabbis' work. "Rabbinic midrash and the letters of Paul are natural analogies because both are paradigmatic instances of intertextual discourse, both wrestling with the same great precursor" (*Echoes of Scripture in Paul*, 14).

4. Gerhardsson, *Testing of God's Son*, offers an analysis of the temptation narrative as an example of early Christian midrash.

space for the new student to enter the conversation by recording his own understandings. Karen Armstrong in her history on the Bible explained it this way: “The Bavli gave no definitive answers. If an argument ended in impasse, the students had to sort it out to their own satisfaction with their teachers. . . . When studying the Bible through the Bavli, the student learned that nobody had the last word, that truth was constantly changing, and . . . was aware that both he and his opponent were in some way participating in a conversation that stretched back to Moses and would continue into the future.”<sup>5</sup> Debating the Scriptures kept Judaism alive, kept the stories alive. Biblical texts that could not be reinterpreted would become obsolete and die of old age. “Turn it and turn it again,” the *Talmud* said of the Scriptures, “for everything is contained therein.”<sup>6</sup> If one interpretation did not satisfy, the practice of midrash kept turning the text, circulating the discussion until a meaning became clear. Midrash is an enemy of fundamentalism, which believes there is one correct, orthodox interpretation of Scripture.<sup>7</sup> It never assumes that there is “a single authoritative reading of scripture,” explains Armstrong. “As events unfolded on earth, even God had to keep studying his own Torah in order to discover its full significance.”<sup>8</sup> Midrash rejuvenated the faith from one generation to the next as new societal challenges sought wisdom from an old religion. Midrash did not end with the writing of the *Mishnah* and the *Talmud*. Students of the Torah used them as tools to examine, debate, and comprehend the meaning of Scripture. Jewish synagogues still use the term midrash as a way of studying the Scriptures.

This book will not be a historical study of Jewish midrash. Instead, it allows Scripture passages to midrash each other. This study brings contrasting biblical texts together and gives them a voice to speak to one another. Overhearing the dialogue invites the reader to join the conversation. This book recognizes that there are arguments, contradictions, and gaps in both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament. Instead of being a problem that needs to be fixed, divergent texts in the Bible serve a purpose that midrash reveals. They invite every generation to reenter divine conversations and decide how the revelation of the Bible will guide them to face new challenges for their day. In this way the Bible remains a living word.

In recent years there has been a lot of publicity about translations of gospels that did not make it into the New Testament. The gospels of Thomas

5. Armstrong, *Bible*, 99–101.

6. Rabbi Ben Bag Bag, *Talmud, Pirkei Avot*; as quoted in Kunst, *Burning Word*, 4.

7. Hammer explains, “Its very method is itself a message of importance. . . . Midrash is the very enemy of fundamentalism. Simplistic, literalistic interpretation and reading of a text can be its death knell. That is where the letter kills” (*Classic Midrash*, 42).

8. Armstrong, *Bible*, 81.

and Mary Magdelene, among others, hit the religious section in bookstores, in part, because of the best-selling success of Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code*.<sup>9</sup> Elaine Pagels wrote an informative book on many of these writings thirty years ago in *The Gnostic Gospels*, but it did not garner the popular success that Brown's novel did. Pagels said that the noncanonical gospels found and translated in the last two generations revealed "a more diverse and complicated world than any of us could have imagined."<sup>10</sup> Maybe we should have had better imaginations.

The diversity that many seek in the books that did not make it into the New Testament is already in the Bible. This book will examine examples of divergent texts in the Bible following the example of Jewish midrash. Its aim will not declare an orthodox winner. Rather, its purpose will allow each of the contrasting passages to speak for themselves, reveal their disagreements, and thereby invite the reader to join divine conversations.

### Practicing Midrash

In the sixteenth century, St. John of the Cross developed a threefold habit of praying that may help us to listen to the various voices of God in the Scriptures.<sup>11</sup> John called this layered way of praying *via purgativa*, *via illuminativa*, and *via unitiva*. The way of purgation (*via purgativa*) is a practice of letting go, of purging things that hinder your soul. Brian McLaren likened this to cleaning the windows of your soul so God's light can shine through.<sup>12</sup> The way of enlightenment (*via illuminativa*) is a practice of opening your soul to the light of God. The way of union with God (*via unitiva*) is a practice of becoming one with the Spirit of God. The second half of each chapter will use this contemplative prayer as a modified way to practice midrash.

9. Brown's wildly popular novel (and movie) claimed that the Roman Catholic Church excluded several reliable gospels from the New Testament for political reasons. While it made for good fiction, none of the noncanonical gospels could in any serious way be considered on par with the canonical gospels. With the possible exception of Thomas, all the noncanonical gospels were written more than a century after Jesus' death. The interest in the Gospels—canonical and noncanonical—caused by Brown's novel was generated by misinformation.

10. Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 34.

11. St. John of the Cross wrote, "God produces striking effects in the soul, for by purging and illuminating it, He prepares it for the union of love with God" (*Dark Night*, 100). Though these ideas about prayer preceded him in the sixth-century writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, St. John of the Cross developed them in *Dark Night of the Soul*.

12. McLaren, *Finding Our Way*, 151.

### (1) Free the Stories to Speak for Themselves

The theological belief that all Bible stories and passages must harmonize and complement one another places a layer of doctrine on top of the narrative. It alters how we read the Bible and shuts down our curiosity. Modeling the practice of *via purgativa* we let go of this need to fix Scripture and hide its contradictions. We are free to explore rather than follow another's lead. We are free to curiously question rather than memorize another's teaching.

Freed from the dogma of forcing biblical texts to synchronize with other passages, we may read them as they are. We do not care if they offer contradictory information about God, or the faith that sustains us. Where there are differences we are not compelled to smooth them out, or create elaborate theories to explain them away. Without the pressure of trying to make the stories conform to theological presuppositions, we are free to note the differences and similarities of the stories, and to look at them with wonder. When comparing the contrasts and lining up the parallels in the stories we are free to ask questions that lead to further understanding of the passages. Where perplexed, we do not feel compelled to create a solution. We remain open to the mystery and resist packaging it into a neat little answer. Understanding that there may be two opposing tales requires the reader to accept that some contradictions will remain unresolved. This practice of midrash allows opposing voices to speak for themselves and invites the reader to be open to what each has to say.

### (2) Listen to the Stories as Contrasting Voices within God

When reading two or more contradictory expressions of a biblical event or a theological concept, hear them as contrasting voices in the word of God. Resist the temptation to assimilate them into one narrative. Let them independently speak their truths about God, the world, faith and you. Imagine that the wisdom of God is working through dialogue, debate, or civil argument. Rather than try to declare what *the* truth is, hear the truths that each story speaks. Let the light (*via illuminativa*) shine forth from each story.

Some of the divergent stories in the Bible were written independently of one another. There is no way to know, for instance, if the Priests of Judah knew the creation story in Genesis 2. We cannot know if the Priests purposely wrote their version of creation to correct, or to compete with the other story, or vice versa. Nevertheless, an editor thought it was divine wisdom to bring them together and put them side-by-side. This created a

debate, a conversation of differing points of view, even if one did not exist when the passages were written.

Sometimes, however, one text was written with another text precisely in mind. In cases where a biblical writer used previously written material and changed the earlier version, it is important for the reader to listen to both voices. One tendency is to give greater weight to the later writing. Rather than uncritically accept Luke or Matthew's changes to Mark's gospel, it is important to read Mark's version of Jesus' ministry as an equal debater opposing Luke or Matthew's version of events. Imagine Mark talking back to either Matthew or Luke, "No, I wrote it like this for a reason." Another tendency is that when one writer removes a passage from an earlier text the silent testimony is ignored. Chronicles removed the story of David raping Bathsheba and murdering her husband from 2 Samuel. Both testimonies have something of value for the reader. Unless the writer of Chronicles thought the scrolls of Samuel and Kings would be destroyed, he knew the tale of how David took Bathsheba and killed Uriah would continue to be known. What does it mean to tell this tragic tale about Israel's great king, and what does it mean to not tell it? What theological ideas may be at work in both the telling and in the silence? There is a reason stories were removed from earlier texts. Listen to the silent testimony as well.

The divergent stories in the Bible are competing against each other to inform the faith of its readers and hearers. Our task as readers is to first listen to these competing voices. Can we describe their point of view, and name their theological concepts? Can we hear the divine conversation, and be enlightened by the debate?

### (3) Find Where You Want to Join the Divine Conversation

St. John of the Cross believed that the purpose of deep prayer was to unite the believer in the Spirit of God (*via unitiva*). John desired to be one with God. Our purposes are a bit more modest. Modifying John's third level of prayer, we seek to join the divine conversation. Part of the divine wisdom for the pluralism of Scripture is to make it a living word. Reading Scripture as a threefold midrash leads us to the point where we enter divine conversations. Here, it is time to start asking where the stories speak more deeply to our hearts.

The divergent stories of the Bible will always be in tension, unrelenting, and unresolved. This is an ongoing conversation, a conversation that includes you, your house of worship, and your community. You may resolve the tension. You may choose to give greater weight to one story over the

other, or find yourself at home somewhere in between. Just as Paul disregarded the Priestly accounts in Genesis, you may choose to disregard them as well. Or following James, you may choose to debate Paul's use of Genesis. The importance is finding where you fit in the divine conversation, so that your voice becomes part of the whole. There, your voice will influence your church and community.

With each chapter in this book we will encounter an argument in the Bible and enter a divine conversation. The foolishness of God, which offers contradictory stories in the Bible, is a wisdom that provides the dialogue to face new generational challenges.

### Excurses

Near the beginning of each chapter an excursus will supply a brief excursion into the biblical scholarship that provides a foundation for understanding the passages that will be compared. This study will rely on the scholarship that in the past two centuries created a *historical-critical* approach to the Bible. Pastors and devoted Bible readers may be familiar with the terms and concepts used in this study, but others may not. Think of the excurses not as something necessary, but like a historical roadside marker that gives you more information about the place you are traveling. When possible they will provide information on the time period, authors/editors, and key components of their context.

Finally, I come to this task from the perspective of a pastor who has a great love for the Bible and a desire that more people would treasure its revelation. This work is approached from the assumption that the Bible is the word of God. All the fingerprints left from the hands that have shaped it are examples of Christianity's incarnational faith. I assume the contradictory stories of the Bible have a divine purpose. My hope is that you, the reader, on your own or in a group study, will reengage the Bible and enter an ongoing conversation among the faithful, whereby each generation decides anew how the biblical faith of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the gospel of Jesus Christ will address the challenges we all face.

## CHAPTER 1

# Which God Created the World?

*The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.<sup>1</sup>*

—F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

THE BIBLE BEGINS WITH an argument, a disagreement between friends, who agree to disagree. You do not have to be a biblical scholar to see this. All you have to do is pretend you have never read the beginning of the Bible, remove any preconceived notions about the first two stories and read them plainly as would a child.

A plain reading of the stories reveals a break at Genesis 2:4. The creation process starts over again. It is apparent that there are two stories, and that they have few things in common. In the first story God creates the world in six days, seven, if you include the Sabbath rest. In the second story, God pulls an all-nighter and finishes the work in a single day. In the first story God ends by creating human beings. In the second story God begins with a human being. In the first story God creates with methodical precision. In the second God creates by trial and error. The two stories read as polar opposites.

This is a curious beginning to the Bible, which should lead one to wonder. Why does the Bible begin with two *contrasting* creation stories? This question is worth pondering throughout this chapter, indeed, throughout this whole book. The first two pages of the Bible are the first impressions of God's written word. If you believe that God is the inspiration of the Scriptures, then what purpose would God have in beginning the Bible with contradictory tales? If this were an anomaly, it would be easy to toss it aside as an inconsequential mystery. Rather than being an exception, what happens on the first two pages of the Bible continues throughout, where dueling

1. Fitzgerald, "Crack Up," 41.

stories give conflicting accounts of Abraham's blessing, the Ten Commandments, King David's life and Jesus' ministry.

Given the regularity with which Bible stories are told through multiple versions, it is rather surprising that the church has not taught the faithful how to read comparative stories in order to form their faith. The task of this book will be to highlight the differences in contrasting stories of the Bible and to encourage readers to work out their own faithful understanding of dueling texts. We will begin with the beginning.

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## EXCURSUS 1.1

### *Two Creation Stories*

The first two chapters of the Bible tell competing stories on the creation of the world. The first story was part of the Priestly writings in Genesis. The second story was written by the Yahwist, a storyteller of a number of tales in Genesis, Exodus and possibly elsewhere. This examination of the two creation stories will assume an editor put these two contrasting stories together sometime after the Babylonian exile—sixth to fifth century BC.

There is nothing in either story that suggests one was dependent on the other. It is possible neither author knew of the other's work. An editor brought them together to be read side-by-side. He did not mind the disagreement, since he could have easily changed the first words of the second story to remove some of the contradictions. Rather than keep, "In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens," he could have written, "In the day that the LORD God made human beings," then removed vv. 5–6, and it would have been less obvious that these were originally two different stories.

The Torah (the first five books of the Bible) is a collection of numerous stories that were passed down and compiled by the Priests of the Second Temple period (sixth to fifth century BC).<sup>2</sup> The Priests (P) wrote major portions of the Torah in addition to

2. De Pury, "Jacob Story," 70. De Pury dates the writing of the Priestly document to the late sixth century BC, specifically between 535 and 530 BC. He does not think the Priestly work is possible before the Babylonian exile. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 74. He states that more recent scholarship points to a postexilic, late sixth century BC, date for a completion of the Torah.

gathering other texts. Their tradition claimed a heritage to the Zadokite priests of Solomon's temple.

Another author, whom scholars have called the *Yahwist* for the past one hundred fifty years because he always referred to God as Yahweh, compiled a collection of stories about Israel's early history and prehistory. A generation ago scholars typically dated the Yahwist as early as the tenth century BC, possibly writing as a scribe for King Solomon.<sup>3</sup> Yahwist theory has been substantially questioned in more recent scholarship; some reasoning that there never was a Yahwist. John Van Seters thinks a Yahwist did write an Israelite history. However, he shows that it was dependent on Deuteronomy and was an exilic text (sixth century BC).<sup>4</sup> If Van Seters is correct, then the Yahwist's stories of God's steadfast love would have been a challenge to Deuteronomy's emphasis on God's justice and offered Jewish exiles a different understanding of their loss. In this book the Yahwist will be regularly identified as the Storyteller.

This examination of the two creation stories will be read from the perspective that an editor put these opposing tales together—one by the Priests of Judah and the other by a Storyteller—some time after the Babylonian exile.

### In the Beginning or In the Day

The creation stories on the first pages of the Bible begin with similar first sentences. "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth" is how the first story begins. "In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens" is almost an echo of the first. There is one main difference between the initial sentences. They use different names for God. This is the case throughout both stories. In the first creation story the name for God is *Elohim*, which was a common name for God in the ancient world and used by Israelites and other peoples.<sup>5</sup> The second creation story calls God

3. Friedman, *Hidden Book*, and Bloom, *Book of J*, propose that the Yahwist's work goes back to Solomon's temple. Whereas Dozeman and Schmid's book, *Farewell to the Yahwist*, contains several articles questioning Yahwist theory.

4. Van Seters, "Report of the Yahwist's Demise," 153–54. See also Van Seters, *Prologue to History*, 332.

5. Anderson notes that the word *Elohim* is in plural form, and is closely related to a generic term for God, *El*. The word, however, is used in a singular sense. "This use is often called the 'plural of majesty.' . . . Elohim includes all gods; the fullness of deity is comprehended in him. Thus the word is equivalent to 'deity' or 'Godhead'" ("Names of

by the specific name *Yahweh*, which is translated LORD in the Bible using all uppercase letters to signify that this is a translation of the divine name. Throughout the second creation story the divine references are always LORD God (*Yahweh Elohim*), a practice that is dropped by the Storyteller in the fourth chapter of Genesis where the name *Yahweh* stands alone.<sup>6</sup> The two names for God used in these creation stories suggest that there are two different authors with two different theologies about God operating in these stories. They are both speaking of the God of Israel. In using different names for God they offer a clue that invites us to explore the ways in which they uniquely experienced God.

With the first words in Genesis 1:1 God created order out of chaos: “The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep. . . . Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.” This God creates by a methodical, detached manner, bringing ever-increasing levels of order into being. As the light so created by God’s word drives out the darkness, so the order of God’s creation drives out the chaos of pre-creation. In successive order God creates light, sky, dry land, vegetation, sun, moon, stars, the animal kingdom, and finally, human beings. God creates by words. God speaks a thing and it comes into being. At the end of each day God looks upon what has been created and saw that it was good. Before moving onto the next step, God evaluated what had been created and declared divine satisfaction.

You may find it helpful to read the first chapter of Genesis. If you have the option, read it from a traditional translation (NRSV, RSV, NIV or KJV) instead of a paraphrase. The text has a rhythmic stiffness to it, which gives it dramatic authority. Power is embodied in these words. This is a powerful God, a God who speaks a word from a distance and instantaneously things come into being. This God is precise. This God does not make mistakes. Everything has been placed where it should be. God looked upon all that was made and saw that it was good.

This powerful God is also distant, which may be a good thing. How close do you want to be to a God that causes mountains to be built and sets the sun in the sky with just a word? It is not surprising that this God creates the heavens *and then* the earth. This is a holy God, a God that is other, not

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God,” 2:413).

6. Friedman explains, “In Genesis 2 and 3 the word ‘God’ appears each time after the name YHWH. But this double identification, ‘YHWH God,’ occurs only in these introductory chapters and nowhere else in the Pentateuch. It therefore appears to be an effort by the Redactor (R) to soften the transition from the P creation, which uses only ‘God’ (thirty-five times), to the coming J stories, which will use only the name YHWH” (*The Bible*, 35).

like us. And yet, we have been created in this God's image. We are not like this God, but we are a reflection of this God.

The Priests of Judah wrote the first creation story. You can see elements of their theology in this story. They emphasized God's holiness. In the Priestly writings of the Torah, the word *holy* is used at least one hundred twenty times. In contrast Deuteronomy uses it only ten times. The first creation story is a depiction of a holy God. Holy means not-like-others. It is set apart. The opposite of holy is common, or ordinary. God is not like us. God is wholly other.

The holiness theology of the priests loved order. Things remained holy by remaining in their place. This is clear in the book of Leviticus where diet, gender roles, and worship rituals had a particular order. Mixing up God's order is prohibited. In creation everything is good because God placed it where it is supposed to be. To be holy is to keep things—and people—in their place. God created order out of chaos and the Priestly tradition of holiness continued the practice of creating order and expelling chaos.

The second creation story (Gen 2–3) is far from orderly. Take a few minutes to read at least the first half of this story, beginning with Genesis 2:4b through the end of the chapter. Notice how differently the narrative flows. The methodical rhythm is gone. It feels like a folktale as many of the Storyteller's tales do. The LORD got down on hands and knees and molded the first earth creature out of the ground. The Hebrew word *human* means *earthling*, or *earth creature*. In English, we might say that God created humans from the humus.<sup>7</sup> Like a kid making sandcastles at the seashore, God gets down in the dirt to create a human being. Having molded a human, the LORD “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being” (2:7).<sup>8</sup> This God has human qualities and wants to be near humans. Like a mother the LORD cradles her newborn baby. This is not a holy depiction of God.

7. Tribble, *Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 76.

8. Tribble translates *nepesh* as “the totality of the ‘self’” (*Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 140n5).

## EXCURSUS 1.2

*Differences in the Two Creation Stories of Genesis 1 and 2*

	First Story—Genesis 1	Second Story—Genesis 2–3
Name for God	<i>Elohim</i>	<i>Yahweh Elohim</i>
Period of creation	Six days, plus Sabbath.	One day.
Order of creation	Light, sky, dry land, vegetation, sun, moon, animals, and humans.	Earth, a human, vegetation, animals, and a second human.
Mode of creation	God spoke things into existence with words.	God planted vegetation and formed a human and animals.
Process of creation	Methodically planned.	Trial and error.
Humans	Made in God's image.	Became living souls with God's breath.
	Given dominion over the earth.	Made caretakers of the garden.
	Given every plant upon the earth.	Given the fruit of every tree, except one.
Evaluation	It was very good.	Some things were not good.
Conclusion	God rested on Sabbath.	Paradise was lost.

In contrast to the first story this God made the earth *and then* the heavens (2:4b). Earth is where this God resides. Aside from the initial sentence, the heavens are never mentioned in this creation story. Instead of creating from far away with words that echo throughout the universe, the LORD gets hands dirty being playful and intimate. Instead of looking at things from afar and declaring it all good, this God notices that something is not-so-good. The earth creature is alone. The LORD decided to correct the problem by creating a suitable partner. Once again digging with hands, God began forming animals and bringing them to the earth creature. God invited the human to name them, one by one, and then listened to the human to see if one would make a suitable partner. If Gary Larson, the *Far Side* cartoonist, would draw this picture, he might draw a chubby, child-like

God molding animals, lining them up—giraffe, lobster, donkey, polar bear, snake, dog—to meet the human, but the human just keeps shaking his head for no suitable partner is found. According to the Storyteller, the animal kingdom was created by mistake, a series of failed attempts to find a partner for the earth creature.

Finally, the LORD gave up on this method and tried a different procedure. Soon, male and female were created from the one earth creature. Still, all was not good. God created male and female naked, or vulnerable, in a world where God also created sly serpents.<sup>9</sup> This God, the LORD, does not act like the God in chapter 1.

The second creation story is clearly not written with a theology of holiness in mind. This God is intimate and immanent. The author describes the LORD with human characteristics: planting vegetation like a farmer, forming things with hands like a potter, and even walking in the cool of the evening with human companionship. This God partners with humans in creation, giving the first earth creature the privilege of naming the animals and determining if one would be a suitable partner. It is hard to imagine the God of the first creation story asking for human input on creation. Yet, human interaction seems to be important to this God from the beginning of the creation of the world. This God puts choices before humans. They are prohibited from eating the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden. “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (2:16–17). Eve and Adam soon tested that warning and disobeyed God. However, they did not die *that* day—as the text said—or the story would have been over. Instead, beginning that day, their days are numbered. Soon God outfits the couple, which at first was naked and unashamed, in fur coats after banishing them from paradise.

This creation story describes the world as a complex and wondrous place. Everything needed is here, but some things are prohibited. Friendship alleviates loneliness, but betrayal divides. God’s loving presence is near, but at a key moment absent. Companionship covers nakedness, or vulnerability, but that may still be exposed. There are consequences, both good and bad, to human actions. While it is difficult to summarize the theology behind this story, it is clearly not the holiness theology of the Priests. It could be read as an anti-holiness creation story. The mistakes that this God makes reveal what this Storyteller believes. It is more important that God be close and caring, than perfect and powerful. Even when the

9. Tribble, *Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 108. Tribble points out that there is a Hebrew pun on nakedness and the slyness of the serpent.

humans must be removed from the garden of Eden, God makes fur coats for them, covering their nakedness and their vulnerability for the challenge ahead. Like a parent frustrated by the bad choices of her children, this God still offers a bit of grace in a compromised moment. Phyllis Tribble called the second creation story “A Love Story Gone Awry.”<sup>10</sup> It is in a literary sense a tragedy. With all the imperfections of creation, when Eve and Adam stand together at the close of act 1 naked and not ashamed, the reader knows this paradise will not last.

In disobeying God, however, Eve and Adam realize their nakedness. While the humans reached for the immortality of the Tree of Life, “they must settle for the collective immortality of generational succession—the human family tree.”<sup>11</sup> Something good comes out of something bad. There is life even in the midst of death. Adam and Eve do not die that day, despite God’s warning, but their days are numbered. Yet, in their numbered days they bring life into the world.

The Priestly theology of holiness points to the ideals of the way things should be. The Storyteller’s theology finds grace even in the tragic way things are.

### Practicing Midrash

Most people are taught to read the two creation stories of the Bible as complementary parts of a single creation story. By plainly reading the two stories, however, we have seen that they are two independent stories of how God created the world. They are irreconcilable stories. They cannot be blended into one long story without changing the details of one or the other. To read these contradictory stories let us walk through a threefold practice of midrash.

#### (1) Free the Stories to Speak for Themselves

We begin by allowing the stories to speak for themselves. We do not care if they offer contradictory information in their depiction of God, or make conflicting reports on how God created the universe. If we find their differences to be disconcerting we will resist trying to fix them. Understanding that there are two opposing tales means to accept that some contradictions will remain unresolved.

10. Tribble, *Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 72–143.

11. Meeks, *HarperCollins Study Bible*, 10, footnote at Gen 3:22.

While the differences in the stories raise a number of questions, their similarities provide a base upon which the conversation may begin. Both stories speak of God as the one who initiates all creative activity. No other being is at work in creating the universe. There is no dualism here. Both stories describe a connection between God and human beings. In the first story, humans are created in God's image. In the second story, God intimately forms them and breathes the breath of life in them. Both stories place humans in relation to their world. In the first they are given authority over it. In the second they are to be caretakers of it. Both stories speak of the equality of male and female. In the first, they are both created in God's image. In the second, gender is created at the time of the second human's creation. She is to be an equal partner with him, and when they cling to each other they are one flesh. Both stories share these values, which were developed from independent viewpoints.

Combining the two stories compromises the second one. When we let it stand alone and speak for itself a number of interesting points stand out. When compared to the first story, this God intimately engages the creation process—planting, forming, breathing life, and fixing problems—all of which give the LORD very human characteristics. Furthermore, the LORD relates closely with humans. God molds them out of the ground and breathes the breath of life into them. God speaks to them, instructs them, and enjoys their company on walks through the garden.

Second, this God makes mistakes. Or at least this God does not create with the same precision as the God of the first story. The LORD uses a trial and error method to create a suitable partner for the human. Finally, after numerous failures, God decides to try another method and a second human is created. This is not usually how we picture God. Why did it take the LORD so long to try another method? Apparently God creates the whole animal kingdom before giving up on the first method. Was God stubborn? Lacking innovative thinking? Most importantly, what does it mean that the LORD fails to be successful in the first place?

Other things are not as they should be. Only after the human is created from the earth does the LORD realize that it is not good for the human to be alone. Why did God not know this beforehand? Even after God creates a partner and makes human gender, here again, problems remain. The humans are naked and vulnerable, though not ashamed. Unfortunately, the LORD creates a sly and crafty animal while unsuccessfully trying to create a human partner—just the kind of creature that would prey on naked and vulnerable humans.<sup>12</sup> Finally, God places them in a garden that provides

12. Tribble, *Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 108.

every thing they need, as well as something that they are prohibited from having. They may eat from every tree in the garden, except for the tree that is in the middle of the garden. If they eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, in that day they will die. God places it in the middle of the garden, where the humans would regularly pass by it. Why does God create a tree whose fruit will kill the humans? Furthermore, why is it placed in-the-way, instead of out-of-the-way? Everyday they face temptation to have the one thing they are restricted from having. Everyday they live they face the consequence of death. Furthermore, when the humans eat the forbidden fruit, they do not die that day as warned. Instead, they become like God, knowing good and evil. Did God lie to them? By the end of the story, God banishes them from the garden and their days are numbered. It was an inevitable tragic ending.

These details in the story raise a number of questions for individual readers to ponder and church communities to discuss. What kind of God creates the world in this manner? What attributes does this God display? What would a God like this want in a relationship with human beings? Do God's imperfections in the process of creation foreshadow the imperfections of the humans' ability to obey God?

The first story is better known as a creation story, so allowing it to stand alone may not immediately bring new thoughts to mind. Comparing it to the second story, however, makes things taken for granted stand out. This portrays a powerful God in complete control. This God speaks a word and it comes into being. God says, "Let there be light," and there was light, and so goes the rest of creation. Creation is a methodical process where God repeats a rubric of speaking (which executes the command), observing, and evaluating. It is hard to imagine anything standing in this God's way. The sovereignty of God over all creation is apparent in the first story. This God does not stumble trying to make two humans, male and female, and the animals certainly are not mistakes. God executes everything commanded. "For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood forth" (Ps 33:9).

The implementation of God's spoken words separated one thing from another. Light is separated from darkness, day from night, and dry land from the water covering earth's surface. Even humans are separated as male and female. Finally, God separates one day of creation from the other six days, blessed and made sacred as a day of rest. While these separations describe what we experience in nature, this description is different from the second story where God creates the first human and the animals out of the ground. The humans, while created one out of the other, were also to be one flesh. The first creation story sees difference by separation, whereas the second sees difference through connection.

At each phase of creation, God looked back on all that God made and declared it good. On the final working day of creation, God declared that it was very good. This is not a dualistic world where good and evil are balanced in some shape or form. The material world as created is good. Everything has been put in its place. "All creatures function perfectly in a marvelous whole that is without fault or blemish," says Bernhard Anderson. "The essential goodness of God's creation is a recurring theme in Israel's praises."<sup>13</sup> Whereas creation in the second story has inherent problems, this story described creation as a perfect process.

Human beings were given a mandate to create generationally as well as have dominion over all life on earth. God commanded them to "fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:28). God gave every plant and tree to humans and dominion over the animals. There is a hierarchy in creation. One part of creation serves another part. Among created beings, humans are given authority over all. In the second creation story, the earth creature was put in "the garden of Eden to till it and keep it" (2:15).

Finally, God rests on the Sabbath at the end of creation. Sabbath is therefore declared an essential part of creation. The Exodus 20 version of the Ten Commandments confesses this, "For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it" (Exod 20:11). Sabbath rest is woven into the natural world. Without it things would be out of place.

The details of this story take us in different directions from the earlier questions. What kind of God creates the world in this manner? What attributes would you give the God of the first creation story? What would a God like this want in a relationship with human beings? And specifically, does God's dominion over the universe mirror the dominion given humans over the animals?

Reading these stories comparatively reveals similarities and differences. They create a dialogue in Scripture about the God who created the universe. The reader is an observer to this dialogue, comparable to a person sitting in the audience of a theatrical play. The unique details of each story form distinct voices within the word of God. These are not simply stories with contradictory details. They are voices with different viewpoints.

The second movement of prayer according to St. John of the Cross is enlightenment, a way to receive light from God. Using this model for reading the comparative stories of the Bible, let us listen to them as contrasting voices.

13. Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation*, 31.

## (2) Listen to the Stories as Contrasting Voices of God

We have already highlighted differences and similarities in the two creation stories at the beginning of the Bible. Their distinctions raise theological questions. The differences are not simply factual disagreements, random mistakes, or minor variances. They form a consistent narrative framework and theological perspective. They represent different voices of God within the Bible. So, what are they uniquely trying to say about God?

The first creation story speaks of a transcendent God. This God creates the world from outside the universe. This God operates beyond our material capacities, a holy God, completely different from humanity and the material world. The interchange between God and the world is therefore limited. God speaks creation into existence. God does not appear in any form; God engages only through non-corporeal words. God, who is separate from creation, creates by separating things from one another. This separation comes without judgment.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, it establishes difference. Light is not dark. Land is not water. Sun is not moon. Male is not female, and vice versa. While God declares all of creation good, difference is created. The Priests of Judah will make judgments about difference. For people whose religious life focused on boundaries of holy and unholy, clean and unclean, righteous and unrighteous, the separations of the first creation story corresponded to those holiness boundaries. The first story portrays a holy and transcendent God.

God's transcendence cannot be limited by the physical world, making God's power beyond human imagination. God builds mountains and oceans with just a word. Transcendence gives God unlimited power. When calling upon this kind of God for aid against one's enemies, this is greatly desired. However, when realizing that you have disobeyed this God, such a trait is greatly to be feared.

The second creation story speaks of an immanent God. This God dwells in the created universe with human capabilities. Creation is literally a hands-on experience. God plants vegetation like a farmer, forms the first human and the animals from soil of the earth, and breathes life into them. While this God is certainly powerful, having the ability to make creation, God's power is not unlimited. In making a second human, for instance, God must use a different method because the old one failed to provide a

14. Neville, "Differentiation in Genesis 1," 226. Neville concludes that the differences in kinds mentioned in the first creation story emphasize the comprehensiveness of God's creative work. He does not believe it anticipates Priestly distinctions between clean and unclean.

satisfactory result. Accordingly, the animal kingdom was a futile effort to create a suitable partner for the human.

The imperfections do not ruin this creation story, because the writer is not trying to describe an all-powerful, transcendent God. That God creates a sly serpent that preys on naked, vulnerable humans does not diminish the story, but in fact adds to its complexity. What matters is that God enjoys the company of humans for walks in the cool of the evening. The Storyteller is comfortable with an imperfect world, even with an imperfect relationship with God (After all, where was God when the serpent was tempting Eve and Adam to eat the forbidden fruit?), because she imagines that God cares deeply for humans, even when they disobey God. This story believes God's love is more important than God's power. While it ends with Adam and Eve's banishment from the garden, this does not end their relationship with God. Disobedience has consequences, but the relationship does not end. Rather than portray God creating an ideal world with everything in place, this story describes a flawed world, in which God's love and grace is nonetheless present. The theology in this brief tale is consistent with the steadfast love of the LORD described in Exodus 34.

Immanence and transcendence are two exclusive terms. You are either one or the other. Yet, Christian theology has tried to keep both descriptive terms for God, because we have experienced God as transcendent and as immanent. With two creation stories, the believer does not have to choose. The reader can hold onto God's transcendence in one hand through the first story and God's immanence in the other hand through the second story. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity achieves the same purpose. It does not matter that this is a logical paradox. Without trying to solve this mystery, or being forced to choose one or the other (though this may be a personal option), the reader is free to explore the possible meaning of both God's transcendence and immanence through these stories. This is an old Jewish and Christian tradition. Daniel Migliore in summarizing the attributes of God wrote that Christianity "has tried to synthesize the confession that God is compassionate, suffering, victorious love revealed decisively in Jesus Christ with a number of speculative ideas about what constitutes true divinity, such as immutability, impassibility, and apathy."<sup>15</sup> People like Augustine, Anselm, and Calvin clung so tightly to transcendent descriptions of God that they could only get to the compassionate and suffering part of God through the divinity of Jesus Christ.<sup>16</sup> Maybe they should have spent more time reading the second creation story. These contrasting stories about God

15. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 72.

16. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 72-73.

hold onto two seemingly contradictory ideals about God—transcendence and immanence. They hold in tension God’s holiness and God’s love.

Hearing their truths separately leaves the hearer with choices. Do you decide to try and synthesize both ideals, reject one outright, or favor one while still listening to the other?

### (3) Find Where You Want to Join the Divine Conversation

The conversation between these stories continues in Scripture. The ideas of God as transcendent or as immanent interact with Israel’s lived history. The Priests of Judah see God’s creative work as a model for the work of Moses and the priests. Moses creates Israel’s sanctuary in the book of Exodus similarly to the way God created the world. Compare the Priests’ creation story ending, “Thus the heavens and the earth were finished. . . . God finished his work which he had done” (Gen 2:1–2), with “Thus all the work of the tabernacle of the tent of meeting was finished . . . so Moses finished the work” (Exod 39:32; 40:33). Just as all the elements of the universe did as God commanded at creation, so Moses “did everything just as the LORD had commanded him” (40:16) in the creation of the tabernacle sanctuary. Just as God saw what was made and blessed each phase of creation, so “when Moses saw that they had done all the work just as the LORD had commanded, he blessed them” (39:43). When creation was completed, God rested on the Sabbath. When the sanctuary was completed, God found a place to rest. “Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle” (40:34).<sup>17</sup> This distant, transcendent God, who has no form, but whose presence is made known by a murky cloud, is present among mortals in the tabernacle’s sanctuary. The Priests make this powerful, transcendent God known through the rituals of the temple, becoming the mediators of God’s presence. In comparing the first creation story with the other Priestly writings in the Torah, Albert de Pury wrote, “In the world of humans the sons of Israel are not meant to be just another nation but that they will have a mission of their own within the community of nations. Israel’s fundamental and perhaps only mission is to build and keep the sanctuary (25:8a, 9) that will allow YHWH to reside among the sons of Israel and through them, among humankind.”<sup>18</sup> The Priests believed God’s perfectly ordered world could still be known in God’s perfectly ordered

17. Boorer, “Envisioning of the Land,” 106–11. She compares the Priestly creation story, the Priestly stories of the tabernacle, and the receiving of the promised land. See also De Pury, “Jacob Story,” 67–72.

18. De Pury, “Jacob Story,” 67–68.

sanctuary. From God's point of view the ideal of the world always exists, from a human point of view the holy space of the temple opens a portal to commune with a holy God.<sup>19</sup> In the Priestly world God acts in systematic, knowable ways. Though distant, people can know God through predictable, reliable rituals. There is right and wrong, good and evil, common and holy—and never the two should meet.

The first creation story tells more than how God created the world. It creates a foundation for how to worship and relate to this holy God of creation. Given that the consensus among biblical scholars is that the first creation story was written during the Babylonian exile or just following it, the story tells exiled Jews, robbed of everything they had, that they still had a unique and treasured place in God's world. The first creation story gave the Priests hope in a time of ruin. Despite their circumstances, they still worshiped a powerful God who created the world, and who had a purpose for them. If they practiced the rituals of the faith, they again would find their place in God's creation, a sanctuary from the rest of the world.

The second creation story never acknowledges the ideal world portrayed by the Priests. It describes a world that has problems right from the start. This does not seem to be a concern for the Storyteller. She does not seek a perfect place to commune with God. From her perspective God is somehow present, even though absent as well. The ending of the second creation story foreshadows exile. Adam and Eve, having failed to keep God's single command, must leave the garden of Eden and go out into the world, "to till the ground from which he was taken" (Gen 3:23). The next tale continues this theme with Cain banished to be a fugitive and wanderer as punishment for murdering Abel. Later, Jacob must flee his homeland after stealing his brother Esau's birthright and blessing. Years after he returns his son Joseph is sold into slavery and lands in Egypt. Each of these stories, written by the same Storyteller, carries this exilic theme. For Jews exiled in Babylon, they were not simply stories that explained how God created the world, or how the nation of Israel began. These narratives revealed how to live through exile and how to have faith in the LORD even when God's absence obscures God's presence.<sup>20</sup> In the Adam and Eve ending, as well as in Cain's story, God provides some means of protection, before they have to go out and live with the consequences of their actions. In Jacob and Joseph's

19. Lohfink clarifies, "After all, the readers of the priestly document did not live within the glorious and peaceful order that had been planned by God and that could be theirs. . . . The ideal shape of the world is known, it has already existed before. From the point of view of God it is always present, and all that is necessary is to return to it" (*Theology of the Pentateuch*, 172).

20. See Edenburg, "From Eden to Babylon," 155–67.

stories, these faith heroes, who had lost everything, overcame their exiled losses. Jacob returns to his homeland, a rich and prosperous man with a large family and household. Joseph remains in his exiled land, but rises to prominence in his foreign home. The exiles of Babylon could see images of hope in each of these stories. These exiles accepted a world where an immanent God cares deeply for them, but who did not (or could not?) create a perfect world, and who would not be perfectly present—the sly serpent seems to always approach when God is not around. While these stories each point to the consequences of failed actions, God never severs the relationship. Both the Priestly and Deuteronomy traditions assign the blame of the Jewish exile upon the people’s sin against God. The Storyteller’s exilic theme from Adam and Eve to Joseph is more complex.<sup>21</sup> Adam and Eve’s nakedness makes them sitting prey for the sly serpent. Cain’s anger comes from God’s arbitrary rejection of Cain’s offering. Jacob may have taken what did not belong to him, but his mother, like the sly serpent, set him up. Finally, slavery and exile is an extreme and unfair punishment for Joseph’s arrogant boasting. Each exile character has a different level of culpability.

The second creation story begins a series of exile tales where mitigating factors refract the blame from solely resting upon the fallen heroes as well as portray God with a more nuanced perspective. God cares for humans, but has arbitrary rules with stiff consequences. God creates, but not without flaws. God rescues, but takes a long time. God protects, but in the midst of exile, not from it. The conversation of the two creation stories turns out to be much more than what you believe about creation. They both carry on a conversation about what kind of faith in God you will live into during exile and trouble and heartache. Which creation story, in other words, gives you hope?

The third movement in St. John of the Cross’s way of prayer is to unite (*via unitiva*) with the presence of God. When reading comparative stories in the Bible begin with a simple question: Which portrait of God speaks more deeply to your heart? Give yourself permission to be formed by *that* story. Ignore the other, if you wish.

Our goal is not simply to find out which story we believe in most, or if we believe in both, or neither. Our aim is to somehow unite with God in the process of exploring these stories. To ask, which portrait of God speaks

21. Van Seters convincingly shows that the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Jacob and Joseph all carry exilic themes. “These literary, historiographic, and theological characteristics of the Yahwist are not unique to the paradise narrative. What I hope to show in what follows is that they are typical of his writing about the primeval history as a whole” (*Prologue to History*, 129).

most deeply to your heart, is to ask a question beyond belief. It is to invite you to explore through contrasting images what you already experience.

Whether in your own spiritual discernment, or in conversations with a small group, take time to review these divergent voices in God's word with regards to the creation of the world.

First Creation Story	Second Creation Story
A transcendent God.	An immanent God.
God is a non-corporeal being.	God has human characteristics.
God creates with distant words.	God creates with intimate formation.
God creates methodically.	God creates by trial and error.
God's power seems unlimited.	God's power has limits.
God perfectly carries out intentions.	God makes mistakes.
God's creation is very good.	Not everything is good in God's creation.
God is holy.	God is loving.
God is distant.	God is present, but not continuously.
Humans are made in God's image.	Humans come alive with God's breath.
In times of trouble the faithful find hope in a powerful God who carries out intentions.	In times of trouble the faithful find hope in God's grace which imparts good into the struggles of life.

There is purpose in the Bible's habit of providing contrasting stories. In providing a conversation between two theological concepts, the Bible invites us into a deeper experience with God than indoctrination. Looking back over these two creation stories, their differences and similarities, we see the description of a transcendent God commanding creation into a specific order in the first story, and in the second the description of an immanent God that draws near creation even though it has flaws from the beginning. Both stories brought hope in different ways to the Jewish people living in exile.

The question as to which God created the universe is unanswerable in the past tense. The two stories will always remain side-by-side debating that issue. It is an ongoing conversation, a conversation that includes you, and your house of worship, and your community.

- Does one of the stories connect more deeply with you? In what way?

- Does one caricature of God strike you as strong or caring, productive or collaborative, or any other positive way? How so?
- Does one caricature of God strike you as cold or weak, heartless or impotent, or any other negative way? How so?
- How might each story provide hope and perseverance in times of struggle or fear?
- In what way, if any, do you see God still creating in one or both of these ways?
- Which story guides you most on how the church should impact the world?
- In what ways does one story or both strengthen your faith?

## CHAPTER 2

# How Deep and Wide Is the Love of God?

*Perhaps the most important finding that came out of our research on the spoiled syndrome was that kids recognize that their parents are often too soft on them—that we let them get away with more than they should.<sup>1</sup>*

—DAN KINDLON

ONE SHELF IN MY library is devoted to parenting. As the parents of triplets, my wife and I do not have the luxury of a learning curve. If we make one mistake, we multiply it by three. So we have sought the wisdom of friends, family, and lots of books as they have grown. Nearly every parenting book we have—from toddlers to teens—stresses the importance for parents to unconditionally love their children while also providing discipline to guide behavior. The definition of what is age appropriate varies. The techniques of time-out, grounding, contracts, removal of privileges, or even old-fashioned paddling will be explained, debated, championed, and rejected by experts as to their success, or lack thereof, for guiding childhood behavior. Through all the debating one thing will be clear—the parent who does not provide boundaries, as well as love, is robbing her child of the self-discipline and self-confidence needed for a healthy and successful life.

In trying to understand God's relationship to humans, biblical writers sometimes portrayed God in a parenting role. Like the parenting books on my shelf, they talked about love and discipline. Deuteronomy thought God's discipline was the most important attribute of God's character and imagined this from a parent's perspective, "Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child so the LORD your God disciplines you" (Deut 8:5). The prophet Hosea preferred to imagine God through parental love, "When Israel was a child, I loved him. . . . The more I called them, the more they went from me. . . . How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over O

1. Kindlon, *Too Much of a Good Thing*, 176.

Israel?” (Hos 11:1–2, 8). These two images from Deuteronomy and Hosea identify a debate within the Bible about God’s character. What is God’s most important parenting characteristic—love or discipline? This question was at the heart of Israel’s early understanding of God, and its debate influenced the rest of the Bible.

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## EXCURSUS 2.1

### *Three Versions of the Ten Commandments*

There are three versions of the Ten Commandments in the Torah. Two are familiar. The Levites from the northern kingdom of Israel wrote the set in Deuteronomy 5. The Priests of Judah wrote an almost identical set in Exodus 20. The only change is found in the fourth commandment—keeping Sabbath. Here, the purpose of Sabbath is tied to the rest God took after creating for six days. The Priests’ version ties the Ten Commandments to their creation story. In the Levites version, Sabbath rest is a matter of justice built on the remembrance of how God liberated them from slavery.<sup>2</sup> This single discrepancy highlights a key difference between the holiness theology of the Priests and the justice theology of the Deuteronomists.

The third set of Ten Commandments is unfamiliar to most people. Found in Exodus 34:14–26, it is a different set of commandments, but the only set identified in Exodus as the Ten Commandments (34:28). This version shares only three commands with the familiar ten. They are all cultic related.<sup>3</sup> They are about worship, sacrifice and devotion to the LORD. Walter Harrelson proposed that they were the ritual Ten Commandments. They regulated “sacred time and sacred rites of a sort we might suppose was characteristic of Israel early in her life in the land

2. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 187–88. Brueggemann mentions that the two versions of the Sabbath commandment exemplify the twin trajectories of social justice and purity from the Deuteronomistic and Priestly traditions.

3. Rowley writes, “Within these verses we find twelve, or perhaps thirteen, commandments, however, instead of ten, and scholars differ in their views as to which were the original ten and which were the additions. . . . For this Decalogue, however we delimit its ten terms, appears to be a much more primitive document than the other Decalogue which we are considering. . . . There is the insistence that Yahweh alone shall be served, and that idols must not be tolerated. . . . But here we find none of the ethical commandments which are characteristic of the other Decalogue. . . . Instead we find purely ritual commands” (*Moses and the Decalogue*, 89–92).

of Canaan.”<sup>4</sup> Van Seters considers it to be from the Storyteller.<sup>5</sup> In our study, we will focus on the preamble to these commandments, where the LORD makes a self-description of God. The familiar sets of the Ten Commandments reversed this description and embedded it in the second commandment. All three versions write a self-description of God.

This chapter will compare two passages in which the second rewrote the first version. It does not matter for our study which self-description of God was first. What matters is that contrasting versions were created and that editors kept all versions in the Torah.

Additionally, we will also look at David’s covenant in 2 Samuel 7. The Deuteronomistic Historian (hereafter called the Historian) picked it up and made changes to it later on in the narrative.<sup>6</sup> He wrote in concert with those who edited Deuteronomy in the period preceding the Babylonian invasion—600 BC. He/they edited a history of Israel that covered Samuel and Kings and possibly Joshua and Judges. A couple of centuries later the Chronicler rewrote the Historian’s work and changed the 2 Samuel covenant in other ways.

### Are There Limits to God’s Love?

The debate over God’s love and discipline can be found in one of the Bible’s core documents: the Ten Commandments. Israel collected the stories of how God gave the Ten Commandments and the Mosaic law over a long period of time. The number of duplications and the disorganized way that the commands are compiled provide the evidence for this. There are three sets of Ten Commandments. Many commands in Exodus 21–23 were rewritten in Deuteronomy 12–26. Had Moses brought all these commands

4. Harrelson, *Ten Commandments and Human Rights*, 34.

5. Van Seters, *Life of Moses*, 345–60.

6. While Fretheim notes, “It has been suggested that certain passages, particularly 1 Kgs 2:4; 8:25; and 9:4–5, make the unconditional promise to David into a conditional one,” and he does concede that the promise becomes more limited in scope, nonetheless he believes the Historian still thought the promise depended on God’s faithfulness (*Deuteronomistic History*, 112). See also Geoghegan, “Redaction of Kings and Priestly Authority,” 118. Geoghegan concludes that the Historian is a “mediator of competing ideologies.” While he acknowledges David’s covenant, he promotes the “northern priestly/prophetic” criticism of monarchy’s abuse of power.

down from the mountain at one time, the Mosaic law would have been more orderly. Furthermore, the stories cannot agree about the name of the mountain on which Moses received the commandments. In Deuteronomy the mountain is either called Mount Horeb or the mountain of God. The Storyteller and the Priestly writings—Leviticus and parts of Exodus and Numbers—always call it Mount Sinai.

The preamble to the Exodus 34 version of the Ten Commandments contains the most explicit description of God's nature written in the Bible. Portions of it are repeated in the other two versions of the Decalogue as well as in the books of Numbers, Jeremiah, Jonah, Nahum, Joel, Nehemiah, and in several Psalms. This list of the Ten Commandments, however, is not familiar. It was not the version Judge Roy Moore encased on a stone slab outside an Alabama courthouse in defiance of the Supreme Court. It has never been hung in American schools, nor been the subject of lawsuits during the culture wars of the past generation. Yet, it is the only Decalogue to be called the Ten Commandments in Exodus (Exod 34:27–28). As Moses climbs Mount Sinai a cloud descends around him. The LORD passes before him and speaks:

The LORD, the LORD,

a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger,

and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,

keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,

forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,

yet by no means clearing the guilty,

but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children

and the children's children,

to the third and the fourth generation. (34:6–7)

This defining statement about God sounds like a creed.<sup>7</sup> Biblical writers reference it more than any other passage in the Bible.

The term translated as steadfast love comes from the Hebrew word *hesed*. This word has also been translated as grace, loving kindness, compassion and mercy. Paul Hanson described *hesed* as “utterly trustworthy”

7. Brueggemann explains, “Scholars believe this is an exceedingly important, stylized, quite self-conscious characterization of Yahweh, a formulation so studied that it may be reckoned to be something of a classic, normative statement to which Israel regularly returned, meriting the label ‘credo’” (*Theology of the Old Testament*, 216).

and it became a model for all relationships.<sup>8</sup> The term assures us of God's loyalty in keeping a promise. The LORD sticks by human beings who constantly break God's heart. Walter Brueggemann suggested that *hesed* may be the notion that holds all the other characteristics of God together. Each characteristic in Exodus 34:6–7 does not matter as much as “the cumulative effect of all of these terms together, which bespeak Yahweh's intense solidarity with and commitment to those to whom Yahweh is bound. . . . Yahweh abides for Israel in complete fidelity, even among those who enact ‘iniquity, transgression, and sin.’”<sup>9</sup>

A few stories reveal the LORD's own struggle to be faithful to people who would not be faithful. In Exodus 32 the LORD decides to consume the Israelites for creating and worshipping a golden calf. Moses responds by reminding God of the divine covenant with Abraham. In Numbers 14 the LORD was frustrated by Israel's disbelief and decides to abandon them. Shocked, Moses reminds the LORD of the divine promise of steadfast love, quoting Exodus 34:6–7. In both stories God repents and chooses to remain faithful in steadfast love.

The theology behind the credo of Exodus 34 does not look like the justice theology of Deuteronomy, or the holiness theology of the Priests. This theology emphasizes God's steadfast love. This Mount Sinai story declared that God keeps promises: “I hereby make a covenant. Before all your people I will perform marvels, such as have not been performed in all the earth . . . for this is an awesome thing that I will do with you. Observe what I command you today. See, I will drive out before you the [inhabitants of the land]” (Exod 34:10–11). Notice that God initiates and makes the covenant. God will perform marvels and do an awesome thing for Israel. God will drive out the inhabitants of the land for Israel. Rather than warn the people of dire consequences if they do not obey the commandments, this theology is based on God's grace. The LORD is going to do an awesome thing for Israel, something that will send them running to God in appreciation. Therefore, the people must observe God's command in thanksgiving for God's graciousness. This set of commands instructs Israel to worship the LORD alone.

The two familiar versions of the Decalogue reverse the statement about God's steadfast love and God's discipline (Exod 20; Deut 5). Embedded in the second commandment of each are these words:

8. Hanson, *People Called*, 27.

9. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 217.

For I the LORD your God am a jealous God,  
 punishing children for the iniquity of parents,  
 to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me,  
 but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation  
 of those who love me and keep my commandments.  
 (Exod 20:5–6; Deut 5:9–10)

This description restates the preamble of Exodus 34. Here, the two sides of God are more obviously in tension with one another—what Tribble calls “God the lover” and the “God the punisher.”<sup>10</sup> The writer introduces the LORD as jealous, one who punishes people who reject him. Not only will this rejected God punish the guilty, but will also punish their children and grandchildren to the third and fourth generation. To reject this God is to condemn your descendants for a century.

The statement secondarily claims that this is a loving God. Those who keep God’s commandments receive God’s steadfast love for a thousand generations. Additionally, the shadow side of love, jealousy—which is a desire to possess what you love and sparks anger when what you love cannot or will not be possessed—is attached to God’s love. While God’s love and jealousy are held in tension by the statement, the Deuteronomist chooses to begin with jealousy. If the Israelites would reject God, then the LORD would severely punish them out of jealousy. God reserves steadfast love only for those that keep the commandments. This love is conditional. It is contingent upon obedience. The Deuteronomist does not entice the hearer by potential reward, as the Storyteller did when discussing how God formed a covenant with Israel. No, he begins his description of God’s nature with a warning. This is a jealous God, so beware.

Justice is one focus in the book of Deuteronomy. The book requires God’s justice to be practiced on a horizontal human plane—where the poor are not oppressed and the widow protected—and also on a vertical divine plane—where humans and God each have promises to keep. There are rewards for keeping covenant with God. There are retributions for breaking covenant with God. Justice on the horizontal plane is tethered to justice on the vertical plane. In justice-based theology you cannot speak of one without the other. Deuteronomy 5 shapes the creedal statement about God in a way consistent with everything else the book of Deuteronomy says about God’s relationship with the people Israel.

We have two ideas about the character of God’s love. One is a love that never ends and forgives even when betrayed. The other is a love that is

10. Tribble, *Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 1.

bound by a covenant of justice; while God will be faithful, Israel's faithfulness determines the relationship.

### Practicing Midrash

The preamble to the Ten Commandments in Exodus 34, and the statement on God in the second commandment in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 share many of the same words, even ordering the words in the same sequence in places. Let us allow these two texts—so closely related—to practice midrash with the other. First, we want to let their differences speak and resist the temptation to smooth out their disagreements.

#### (1) Free the Stories to Speak for Themselves

Someone has switched the two main parts of God's self-description. The Deuteronomistic version begins with God's jealousy and ends with God's love. The Storyteller's account starts by speaking of God's steadfast love, clarifying that God is merciful, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love—words that are not in the other description—and then ends by speaking of God's judgment. Jealousy does not come up until the First Commandment.

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## EXCURSUS 2.2

### *The LORD's Self-Descriptions in the Ten Commandments*

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#### Deuteronomy 5:9–10 and Exodus 20:5–6

#### Exodus 34:6–7

<sup>9/5</sup> I the LORD am a jealous God,

*punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me.*

<sup>10/6</sup> But showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

<sup>6</sup> The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,

<sup>7</sup> Keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,

Yet by no means clearing the guilty, but *visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children to the third and fourth generation.*

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The Storyteller described God by several adjectives—merciful, gracious, slow to anger, steadfast love, and faithfulness. The Deuteronomist removed all those qualities and instead stated the LORD is a jealous God. God's jealousy was not unknown to the Storyteller (Exod 34:14), but it was not the first thing you should know about the LORD. Notice the breadth of God's love. Despite iniquity, transgression, and sin, God forgives. The guilty will not be cleared—and punishment transfers to their children—but the guilty are undefined. We do not know who they are. Thus, the credo leaves it to the interpreter of God's mercy or God's judgment to make the charge.

The Deuteronomist begins with God's jealousy. The breadth of God's steadfast love is narrow, restricted to only those who keep God's commandments. As Phyllis Tribble notes, "Reversing the order of emphasis, the Deuteronomic decalogue appropriated the text to distinguish between those who hate and those who love the deity."<sup>11</sup> The guilty are now named. They are the ones who reject the LORD, the ones who do not keep the commandments.

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One of these statements grew out of the other, and for our purposes it really does not matter which one was first. Either the Exodus 34 passage was shortened and rearranged to minimize the breadth of God's steadfast love while emphasizing God's command of obedience as a requirement to receive God's love, or the Deuteronomistic version was expanded to minimize God's judgment while showering descriptive praise for God's enduring steadfast love. Both possibilities reveal a theological debate in ancient Israel, a debate that continued through the biblical period.

Phyllis Tribble showed in a brief study how phrases from these statements are used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible to emphasize either God's steadfast love, or God's judgment.<sup>12</sup> The prophet Nahum removed any references to God's mercy in order to describe the LORD as a God of judgment and destruction (Nah 1:2–3). He reversed the meaning of "slow to anger" from an element of divine mercy to portray the LORD's wrath as slow and sure—like a slow boil. The prophet Joel did the exact opposite, removing any references to God's wrath in order to encourage his people to return to the LORD, because God's mercy could be trusted (Joel 2:13). The prophet Jonah quoted the merciful parts of the credo almost the exact same way as Joel did, but he did it in anger. He wished for the destruction

11. Tribble, *Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 2.

12. Tribble, *Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 1–5.

of Nineveh. God's mercy for those who did not deserve it made him furious (Jonah 4:2). When Nehemiah went to God in a confessional prayer on behalf of his people, he chose the Exodus 20 version of the creed, praying, "O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments" (Neh 1:5). The prayer speaks of God's conditional love as an enticement to encourage repentance and obedience.

Trible believes that the interpretative use of these statements illustrates the way Scripture is used by other people in biblical times. "These passages illustrate the hermeneutics at work within the Bible. . . . A single text appears in different versions with different functions in different contexts. Through application, it confesses, challenges, comforts, and condemns. What it says on one occasion, it denies on another. Thus, Scripture in itself yields multiple interpretations of itself."<sup>13</sup> In her study, Tribble failed to find any set of interpretive principles in the way the credo from Exodus is referenced and reinterpreted throughout the Hebrew Bible. Thus, it is somewhat unpredictable how future generations and contexts may reinterpret a text. Though future generations will predictably continue to debate the ways to interpret these statements about God.

There is a clear contrast between these descriptive statements of God and the contrast is verified in the way the passages are quoted elsewhere in the Bible. Is the LORD first and foremost a God of steadfast love, who forgives sin and iniquity even to the thousandth generation, and secondarily a God whose slow anger judges the guilty? Alternatively, is the LORD first and foremost a God of justice who punishes those who reject the LORD and secondarily a God of love *for only those* who keep the commandments? These contrasting questions are not simply rearranged semantics. They describe two very different portraits of God. They influenced other biblical authors for hundreds of years. They affect the way people understand, worship, and follow God still today.

The preamble in Exodus 34 explains that God's love overcomes the unfaithfulness of God's people with forgiveness for sin, transgression and iniquity. God remains faithful even when the people are unfaithful. In this way, God's love may be described as unconditional. This Storyteller's perspective would be in line with the understanding that the LORD's covenants with Israel were unconditional promises, everlasting and without end.

The statements embedded in the second commandment declare that God's justice must be satisfied before God's love is shared. If the people break God's commands and reject God, then God is not obligated to remain

13. Tribble, *Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 4.

faithful. The LORD, in fact, will punish those who reject God. This Deuteronomistic perspective made God's covenants conditional, contingent upon the Israelites upholding the commandments of the Mosaic law.

## (2) Listen to the Stories as Contrasting Voices of God

According to the stories of Israel's history the LORD made three great promises, or covenants, with Israel: (1) a covenant with Abraham, which promised a land for him and his descendants; (2) a covenant with Moses, which gave a law to guide the people to live in the land; and (3) a covenant with David, which promised that his descendants would rule the land from the throne in Jerusalem. God promised land, law and leadership to Israel, and furthermore promised God's presence. There are multiple stories about each of these covenants. In each case, some stories depict each covenant as an unconditional, everlasting promise, while other stories claim the opposite, that God's covenant is conditional only as good as Israel's commitment to keeping God's commandments.<sup>14</sup> The covenant stories—with their duplications—reveal that the two versions of God's self-description in the Decalogue affect the way Israel remembers God's promises.

The Storyteller's version of the Ten Commandments gives no hint that God placed any conditions upon Israel in validating a covenant with them. This God kept steadfast love for a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity, transgressions and sin. When Moses warned God that Israel was a stiff-necked people, the LORD showed no hesitation, "I hereby make a covenant. Before all your people I will perform marvels, such as have not been performed in all the earth or in any nation; and all the people among whom you live shall see the work of the LORD; for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you" (Exod 34:10). God's generosity is astonishing. Forewarned about Israel's stubbornness, God nevertheless moves forward, makes a covenant with Israel, and promises to do amazing things to win the people over to the LORD. There are commandments to follow and God warns that to break them will "become a snare among you" (34:12), but there are no threats.

When God makes a covenant with David a similar theme develops. David had begun making plans to build a house for God, in which to place the ark of the covenant. The LORD will have none of it. God provides for Israel, not the other way around. "The LORD declares to you that the LORD

14. This chapter will not examine Abraham's covenant. The Storyteller's version is found in Genesis 12 and partially in 15. The Priestly version is in Genesis 17 and tethers the covenant to circumcision. Another version is found at the end of the story of sacrificing Isaac in Genesis 22. Two stories are unconditional; two have conditions.

will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (2 Sam 7:11b–13).<sup>15</sup> God anticipates that David’s descendants will not be perfect. Like a father correcting a son, God will punish them, but will not take away God’s steadfast love. “Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever” (7:16). David responds in prayer, “Is there another nation on earth whose God went to redeem it as a people, and to make a name for himself, doing great and awesome things for them” (7:23). Brueggemann declares that this “sweeping assurance” overrides the conditional *if* found in the Priestly and Deuteronomistic writings.<sup>16</sup>

This idea that God had made unconditional, everlasting promises to Israel was deeply entrenched in the minds of some of Israel’s people and leaders. There is plenty of evidence in the Bible to confirm that people did believe God made such outlandish covenants. A number of psalms speak of the everlasting covenant God made with David and how God’s steadfast love endures forever (2 Sam 23; Ps 77; 89; 105; 136). Psalm 89 is particularly interesting. The first half speaks confidently of God’s steadfast love and everlasting covenant with David. Originally, the psalm likely ended with v. 37 with the moon serving as a memorable metaphor for God’s covenant. Later another poet added a new ending to the old psalm, after the terrible destruction of Jerusalem and the subsequent exile to Babylon. This poet questioned God in a very Job-like manner.

But now you have spurned and rejected [David];

you are full of wrath against your anointed.

You have renounced the covenant with your servant;

15. See Friedman, *Hidden Book*, 248–49. There is considerable debate about this passage, because it shows a mix of writers, nevertheless the general sentiment follows a theology based on God’s steadfast love. The Historian did not override this Yahwistic notion of an unconditional covenant until 1 Kings. Friedman includes vv. 9–12, but not 13–16, as original. Brueggemann points out that “there is no doubt that this passage has had redactional work done on it and that some parts are later than other parts. The specific distinctions are very difficult to make, but none of that detracts from its main claims” (*David’s Truth*, 74). See also von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:310. He thought the oldest verses in this section were 11b and 16—that God would establish David’s house forever. What was originally promised to David, von Rad believes, was later transferred to David’s descendants and then to the whole people of Israel.

16. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 605.

you have defiled his crown in the dust.  
 You have broken through all his walls;  
 you have laid his strongholds in ruins. . . .  
 How long, O LORD? Will you hide yourself forever?  
 How long will your wrath burn like fire? . . .  
 LORD, where is your steadfast love of old,  
 which by your faithfulness you swore to David? (89:38–49)

The psalm testifies about how God broke the everlasting covenant. The fault lies with God, not Israel. The poet is shattered. He does not understand why this has happened because he formerly believed in God's everlasting, unconditional covenants.<sup>17</sup>

When Isaiah prophesied in Jerusalem while the Assyrian army besieged the holy city in 701 BC, he counted on God's unconditional promises. "The LORD of hosts will protect Jerusalem; he will protect and deliver it, he will spare and rescue it. . . . Then the Assyrian shall fall by a sword, not of mortals; and a sword, not of humans, shall devour him" (Isa 31:5, 8). One dawn the sunlight revealed dead bodies scattered among the Assyrian siege lines while the rest of the army had vanished. In the people's minds this miraculous event confirmed that God truly protected Jerusalem without fail. When Jeremiah preached on the temple steps a little over a century later, he mocked the people for believing that God's temple and the holy city were like home base in a game of tag—if you are there, you are always safe! If people did not believe that God unconditionally protected Jerusalem, Jeremiah's temple sermon would have been meaningless (Jer 7:1–15).

Jeremiah, among others, did not think God made unconditional promises. His temple sermon rebuked those who did. He was a prophet molded by the Levites who wrote Deuteronomy, and they believed that God's promises, like God's love, were conditionally shared with Israel. They believed that the gift of the land was tied to keeping the law. The focus of their theology can be captured in a single, two-letter word: *if*. The Levites understood God's promises in the context of exile. The idea of being conquered and exiled from the land was in direct contradiction with the idea that God unconditionally gave the land forever. Deuteronomy had a solution to that dilemma with that short word. "If you obey the commandments

17. Fretheim notes, "Did not history, through the Exile, contradict this promise (of God) to David? Psalm 89 may well be a lament focusing on this question in that context" (*Deuteronomistic History*, 121).

of the LORD your God . . . then you shall live and become numerous . . . in the land. . . . But if your heart turns away . . . I declare . . . that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land” (Deut 30:16–18).

*If* the people keep God’s covenant, *then* the promises of God’s protection will be sustained. Deuteronomy had no tolerance for those who believed God’s promises were unconditional and everlasting. What people did mattered. If the people were conquered and exiled, it would be because of their disobedience, not because of God’s lack of protection. God waits for a faithful response—or disobedience—before acting. Deuteronomy emphasized that the covenant with Moses was a two-way street between God and the Israelites. This was made clear by the way the covenant was presented at Mount Horeb (5–6), reaffirmed in the Transjordan (26–28), amended and reaffirmed in Moab (29–31), and then finally renewed by Joshua at Shechem (Josh 8 and 24)—at least four and maybe five separate events!<sup>18</sup> The Israelites were told that if they did not keep their promise to God, there would be dreadful consequences. In each case, they promised to keep the covenant through the Mosaic law.

See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse; the blessing, *if* you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today; and the curse, *if* you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn from the way that I am commanding you today, to follow other gods that you have not known. (Deut 11:26–28)

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. *If* you obey the commandments of the LORD your God . . . the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But *if* your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish. . . . I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live. (30:15–19; cf. 4:26; Josh 24:19–21)

The Deuteronomistic writers sent an unmistakable and threatening message. If the hearer became worried and afraid that was not a bad effect. They wanted to change people’s behavior with dire warnings. To covenant with the LORD and then to break it was to place your life in peril. Now, to be fair, Deuteronomy spoke of great blessings for those who kept the

18. See Mendenhall, “Covenant,” 1:721; and Rast, “Joshua,” 243. Some scholars speculate that the multiple covenant renewals are actually separate traditions that have been brought together by Deuteronomy.

commandments. Time and again the Israelites were made aware of the benefits of this covenant—liberation from slavery and presentation of a new land along with promises of prosperity (Deut 7:12–15). Later the Israelites were told that even rain from the heavens would be showered on them as long as they heeded the LORD’s commandments (11:13–17). Blessings and curses of the LORD were contingent upon Israel’s commitment to keeping God’s covenant. God was beholden to Israel only as long as Israel kept the covenant. If Israel broke the covenant, not only would God remove the promised blessings, but in addition would actively curse Israel.

To make their case the Deuteronomistic writers reworked the Davidic covenant as well. At the end of his life David offered a last word to Solomon encouraging him to follow the LORD’s ways and commandments and then stating that *if* he followed them, the royal line would always rule the throne. “Be strong, be courageous, and keep the charge of the LORD your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his commandments . . . as is written in the law of Moses. . . . Then the LORD will establish his word that he spoke concerning me: ‘If your heirs . . . walk before me in faithfulness with all their heart and with all their soul, there shall not fail you a successor on the throne of Isreal’” (1 Kgs 2:2–4).

Compare that version of David’s covenant with the original one written in 2 Samuel 7. “I will raise up your offspring after you . . . and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him . . . but I will not take my steadfast love from him. . . . Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever” (2 Sam 7:12–16). With that one simple two-letter word—if—the Historian changed the Davidic covenant from an unconditional promise to a conditional one. In the 2 Samuel passage, God establishes David’s kingdom without condition. Even if his heirs commit iniquity God will not take away steadfast love, or the throne, from them. David’s throne shall be established forever. Conversely, the 1 Kings passage says that God will only establish the promise *if* his heirs walk before God in faithfulness with all their heart and soul. Notice that in the 2 Samuel passage God is the subject who makes the promise and speaks to unbreakable qualities, whereas in the 1 Kings passage the focus is on Solomon and his heirs, upon whom the promise rests by their behavior.

In the chapters that followed, the Historian further explained that God promised to dwell in the temple only if Solomon walked in the way of God’s commandments (1 Kgs 6:12–13) and to protect Israel in the land only if he walked after the LORD as did his father, David (9:4–9). Solomon is warned that if he strays from the LORD’s commandments that David’s dynasty will

become a heap of ruins. Readers can see the connection with Deuteronomy, because 1 Kings 9:8–9 and Deuteronomy 29:24–27 are nearly identical.

The argument about the character of God's steadfast love determined how Israel understood the promises God made with them. The Storyteller's description of the LORD as a God abounding in steadfast love (Exod 34) encouraged many in Israel to believe that when God made promises they were unconditional and everlasting. Nothing Israel could do would change God's faithfulness.

Conversely, the Levites who wrote the Deuteronomy tradition (as well as the Priests who wrote the Priestly tradition) explained that the steadfast love of the LORD had limits. All of God's gifts and promises to Israel were contingent upon the kings and the people keeping the commandments of the Mosaic law. The covenantal theology could be summed up in a single verse, "If you seek him, he will be found by you; but if you forsake him, he will abandon you forever" (1 Chr 28:9).

### (3) Find Where You Want to Join the Divine Conversation

How do you hold onto the idea that the LORD is a "God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin" (Exod 34:6–7), and also ascribe to the idea that "if you seek [God], he will be found by you; but if you forsake him, he will abandon you forever" (1 Chr 28:9)?

In this chapter, we have looked at two opposing ideas concerning God's love. On one side is the idea that God's steadfast love is amazingly wide and generous, forgiving sins for a thousand generations. This view supported a theology that believed God's covenants with Abraham (land), Moses (law), and David (leadership) were unconditional, everlasting gifts from God. Should Israel stray from God's covenant, the LORD would do amazing things to keep drawing the Israelites near. God would not take away steadfast love even if they committed sin and iniquity.

On the other side is the idea that God's justice tempers God's love. Those who reject God's gifts will not continue to receive God's love and protection. God's justice will not allow God's love to be abused by those who would take advantage of it—which is the reason Jonah angrily protested when God forgave the people of Ninevah (Jonah 4:1–3). All of God's covenants are based on faithfulness of keeping the commandments of the Mosaic law. God is faithful to Israel. The question is whether the people will be faithful to God.

This debate about God's love continues throughout the Bible. As noted above, Phyllis Tribble found a dozen instances in which the Exodus 34 passage was quoted and/or reinterpreted as a statement about God's love or God's wrath. Jesus' willingness to meet with sinners carried the discussion about the wideness of God's love into the New Testament—under the same continuum. The nature of God's love affects theological beliefs about sin, repentance, salvation, the church, ordination, and even eschatology (end times). The reversal of the statements about God's love and judgment in the three versions of the Ten Commandments represents a conversation that will scatter into numerous arguments in the Bible and today in the church.

I cannot help but wonder if it would be the case that what a person believes about God's love shows up in his or her parenting style. Or, how a person supervises workers on her or his staff? Or, maybe where a person falls on the continuum of law and order issues? The beliefs about God's love and judgment may be less likely theologically articulated and more often lived out in how we embody that love and judgment in our relationships and experiences. It may be fair to question which comes first: our conscious beliefs about God's love and judgment, or our practice of love and judgment in relationships (as modeled to us). These questions about God's steadfast love are as much about human capacity as they are about God's nature. Is it possible, in other words, for human beings to become self-disciplined in an environment with no boundaries? Or, does such an environment lead to permissiveness and instability? Or, could it be that the biblical debate over God's love and judgment operate under the same mystery as fraternal twins who grow up in the same household of parental love and discipline (whatever those are), yet one becomes a model citizen and the other a moral reprobate?

It should be no surprise that the great, defining statements about God in Exodus 34, and in Deuteronomy 5 and Exodus 20, were reversed, reworked, repeated, reinterpreted numerous times, nor that all three of God's covenants with Israel—land, law, and leadership—were repeated multiple times with different versions because they dealt with matters more personal than just what people believed about God. These beliefs touched on how people experience love and life at home with family and out in the world.

- So, what do you want to believe about God's love and judgment? The Bible, as you have now seen, gives you a wide berth. Consider, how do you want to love your children, work with people on the job or in the community? How do you think law and order should operate in our nation, or between nations of the world? How does all of that translate into what God's love looks like?

- When you name the strengths of a faith based on a God who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and sins for a thousand generations, what comes to mind? What might be some weaknesses to such a faith?
- When you name the strengths of a faith based on a God who jealously guards covenant—showering steadfast love for a thousand generations upon those who love God and keep God’s commandments, but punishing those who reject God—what comes to mind? What might be some weaknesses to such a faith?
- Could you imagine a faith based on a God whose love and judgment are in perfect balance? If so, what does that look like to you?
- Maybe the most important question is: How deep and wide do you want the love of God to be for you . . . and for your enemies?