



## *Texts in Context*

# The Dark Side of God: Considerations for Preaching and Teaching

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“**G**OD IS LIGHT AND IN HIM IS NO DARKNESS AT ALL” (1 JOHN 1:5 RSV). WE have become accustomed to use a passage such as this to drown out serious consideration of a much more ominous characterization of God’s engagement of the human community—“the dark side of God.” I do not use this phrase to contradict 1 John. I use it because it snaps us to attention. The phrase is shocking in a religious culture that has reduced God to either a useful notion or a dispenser of enhancements to our lives.

This culture has produced a cheap, trivial gospel that is increasingly regarded as either boring or irrelevant. This essay begins with a brief introduction of a perennially shocking metaphor for the dark side of God, namely, the depiction of God as a “warrior.” That will be followed by a brief review of the ways we evade the theme of the dark side of God. I will then examine Isaiah 63-64, Hosea 11, and Psalm 90 to explore the biblical witness to the dark side of God and to seek ways to engage rather than avoid the theme (or, perhaps more accurately, the reality of the dark side of God itself).

### I. GOD THE WARRIOR: MEETING THE DARK SIDE OF GOD

God engages in military destruction. That is the assertion of the opening two chapters of Amos. The assertion is direct, for God, in the first person, is the subject of the verbs of destruction. The text does not assert that God merely allows the Assyrians to carry out the announced destruction. The Assyrians, whom we can

surmise from the rest of the book will be the human agents of destruction, are not even mentioned. *I will send fire upon the house of Hazael, upon the walls of Gaza and Tyre and Rabbah, upon Teman, Moab, and Judah.* In each case, the fiery activity is extended in some manner: *I will cut off the inhabitants from the valley of Aven and from Ashdod. I will slay princes. I will turn my hand against Ekron.* The results are clear: strongholds are devoured, shouts of battle fill the streets, various groups are taken into exile, and remnants of battle perish. Military destruction is the concrete shape of God's word that roars from Zion (1:2). The addressee is Israel, the northern segment of what once was David's kingdom. The Israelites, most interpreters assume, would normally be delighted with this kind of activity on God's part because it would bring the destruction of their perennial enemies. A great day of the Lord! Jericho revisited! Amos, however, reverses the expectations. The day of the Lord's roaring is not for Israel, but against Israel. Regarding Israel, the text asserts,

I will press you down in your place, just as a cart presses down when it is full of sheaves. Flight shall perish from the swift, and the strong shall not retain their strength, nor shall the mighty save their lives; those who handle the bow shall not stand, and those who are swift of foot shall not save themselves, nor shall those who ride horses save their lives; and those who are stout of heart among the mighty shall flee away naked in that day. (Amos 2:13-16 NRSV)

The opening sentence uses a gruesome image of destruction with God as the perpetrator. Subsequent sentences spell out in concrete terms what the opening image means. The overwhelming military defeat and resulting chaos is attributed to God. The text provides no wiggle room; God engages in military destruction.

Military destruction is only one set of language to denote what I have been calling the "dark side of God." The dark side of God includes all the acts and words of judgment that are not and cannot be labeled merely "disciplinary."

Jeremiah at one point terms the shape of God's word of judgment as "war, famine, and pestilence" (28:8). War, famine, and pestilence don't just discipline; they kill. The dark side of God is not the language of a summons to repentance. It is, as one of Amos's visions says, the "end" (8:2). It is the second half of the words directed to exilic Judah: "I form light and create *darkness*, I make weal and create *woe*, I the Lord do all these things" (Isa 45:7, emphasis added). The Psalms often speak of the dark side of God with the language of "hiding" or "forgetting": "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" (Ps 13:1). God's wrath and anger provide yet another set of language to express this dark side of God. Thus, "the dark side of God," as used in this essay, is an umbrella term, not a singular metaphor.

## II. EVASIONS

How are we to preach and teach this dark side of God? How might we preach and teach, for example, the opening two chapters of Amos? The answer is not clear, but the evasions of the question are many. At the outset we should recognize that every attempt to wield the words of Amos against a contemporary audience

borders on presumption, a presumption similar to ancient Israel's assumption that the day of destruction was directed against others. The dark side of God is never our weapon to wield. To assume that the dark side of God is not directed against us is perhaps our chief attempt at evasion. Ministers, however, should always assume that the word of God conveyed *through* them is first a word *to* them. No prophet in the Old Testament ever claims personal exemption from the judgment of God that they so frequently announce. While the Psalms speak repeatedly of God as a refuge from the ill will of others, the book of Psalms as a whole speaks with equal frequency of the dark side of God. Lament psalms far outnumber any other type.

Clearly, the dark side of God is neither a theme nor a reality that concerns only those other than ourselves. This seems self-evident, but it is easily overlooked. First-year seminary students, when asked how Genesis 6-9 is true, commonly speak of the comforting truth of the text: God cares for us in the perils of life like God cared for Noah. God is "there" for me. Besides the problem of the truth being defined self-referentially, there lurks the question of why students assume they are, so to speak, in the boat with Noah. Few students wonder aloud about all the dead and what kind of God destroys so extensively. Why should we so cavalierly assume we are not frantically and hopelessly treading water? The question, once asked, turns the text into one of judgment, not comfort. Some retreat to the language of "allowance," pointing to the indefinite construction of Gen 7:11: "the windows of the heavens were opened"—the agent is not expressed. This softening attempt is, however, removed by the earlier words of the text that assert God's direct action: "I will send rain on the earth...and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground" (7:4). The appeal to diverse sources (the former, the priestly writer; the latter, the Yahwist) may be historically accurate, but it does not in any way silence the haunting theological question.

Equally evasive is the attempt to reduce the narratives depicting God's dark side to instructional material. With this move contemporary readers assume the narrative has something to say to them, not just to others; but despite this improvement, several problems arise. The characters in the Bible are reduced to stock figures in a morality play. The flood narrative becomes a bland reminder that we should avoid wicked things and focus our thoughts on good or godly things. Caricaturing slightly, the lesson is that we should be righteous and blameless like Noah, and things like this will not happen. Good conduct is assumed to be enough to keep the dark side of God at bay. Secondly, the history of Israel is taken too lightly. The many who died in the destruction of Samaria and Jerusalem, announced by various prophets as the deed of God, are not props in a children's sermon. They are not characters in one of Jesus' parables. These were flesh and blood human beings. It is a breach of our common humanity to regard another person's suffering as a didactic illustration, and yet, unthinking, that is what we do far too often, especially with the Old Testament. We are quick to become Job's "friends," enforcing a retributive moral code and desperately seeking an end to justify the means, a rationalization of some sort to mute the terror we experience

when confronted by the dark side of God in the biblical narrative—or, we might suspect, in our own experience.

Our deeply secular worldviews form yet another evasion. I don't mean that we are secular in an atheistic sense, but at a pragmatic level we are profoundly secular. Our basic cultural optimism is a prominent aspect of our secularity. We think of God as an enhancement of a basically good life. We talk about what belief in God will add to our lives. Without God we will lose out on certain benefits, but we rarely talk about the bleakness, even terror, of life without God, much less of life under the curse of God. Shaken as our optimism may be by the wars and holocausts of this century or by some personal devastation, we remain pragmatic optimists. Our religious communities mimic the self-help evangelism of authors hawking their wares on the talk-show circuit. Spiritual techniques multiply, all seeking the key to an enhancement that will endure in real life. We "make peace" with our shadow sides, get our Meyers-Briggs indicators clearly in focus, discover our true enneagram identity, and, when any or all of those do not stave off the darkness, we ask why bad things happen to good people. When our optimism finally breaks and we admit that something bad has happened, we quickly assure each other that God did not do this bad thing to us: God cares, God identifies with us, God does not leave us alone, God journeys with us. All of this may be an improvement over acting like Job's friends, but notice how restrictive the language is. God's doing is restricted to the emotional arena. God does not alter our concrete situation; God only alters our attitudes. Empowerment language frequently follows, and soon we are back to our basic optimism. God eases our journey over the speed-bumps of life but does not fundamentally alter the road. We handle everything, albeit with a little boost from God.

This message has nearly become orthodoxy among us. If you think that is an exaggeration, try challenging the above slogans. You will quickly be called a curmudgeon at best; more likely you will be asked to defend Pat Robertson's claim to have deflected a hurricane through prayer or some other supposed outrage of the religious right. Pointing out the splinter in the eye of the religious right, accurate as the accusation may be, is one more attempt to avoid facing the dark side of God.

The evasions are numerous, more than can be itemized or responded to here. I also create my own evasions, both known and unknown to me. There is no reason to assume that this critic is immune from that which he criticizes. Suffice it to say that the dark side of God is a part of the biblical narrative and that we, as interpreters and readers of scripture, must enter that narrative rather than build walls to insulate ourselves from the theme. We must begin to ask openly and candidly whether the social chaos, individual tragedies, communal violence, lack of purpose—the list of disruptions in our lives is long—whether all these could be the physical, outward manifestation of what life is like when we are no longer called by God's name, that is, when God has rejected us and no longer claims us as God's own people. Are the disruptions of life the expression of the wrath of God or, to use the metaphor of this essay, the dark side of God? Biblical texts repeatedly

force us to answer in the affirmative. The remainder of this essay will consider several such texts in order to address how we might preach and teach the dark side of God, or better, to experience those texts preaching and teaching us to face the dark side of God.

### III. ISAIAH 63-64

Isaiah 63:7-64:12 is as good a beginning point as any. It has been used in the lectionary for the First Sunday in Advent (Series B), although in a rather fragmentary manner (63:16b-17; 64:1-8). That the community is under duress is apparent on even a superficial level: "Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation" (Isa 64:10). Note that Isaiah 63-64 does not simply say that the troubles are caused by Israel's failure to call upon the name of the Lord. That failure is readily admitted (64:7a), but it is not a sufficient explanation for the contemporary suffering. The problem runs much deeper. God may no longer be claiming the community—or claiming us. The result of God not claiming the community or us is sheer disaster in the view of Isaiah 63-64. In the midst of the admission of sin and iniquity, the possibility is raised that we have been condemned to sin and iniquity by God. Our guilty action is our sentence: "Why, O Lord, do you make us stray from your ways and harden our heart, so that we do not fear you?...You were angry and we sinned....There is no one who calls on your name...for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered [Heb *melted*] us into the hand of our iniquity" (63:17; 64:5, 7). The speaker of this text places the community (the speaker included) and us in the same place as Pharaoh. God is accused of hardening (true, the Hebrew verb is different, but that hardly softens the text) the hearts of God's very own people. Or, are they God's people? That seems to be the key question raised by their devastated situation.

The lectionary editing stifles the question by opening and closing with the words, "You, O Lord, are our Father" (63:16b and 64:8). The image of God as potter and us as clay, the work of God's hand, has all the ambiguity stripped from it when the reading stops with 64:8. The sharp imperatives directed to God in the next verse are thereby blunted: "Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people" (64:9). Rather than simply trying to assure ourselves and our memories that we are God's people, the text asks God to remember. What is the potter making? asks the clay in the verses that follow that image in v. 8. The answer may be a pile of ashes and ruins (64:11). Will God leave things in ruin? The text directs that question to God and does not presume to answer it: "Will you restrain yourself, O Lord? Will you keep silent, and punish us so severely?" (64:12). The combination of verbs is noteworthy. "Restrain" and "keep silent" fit our language of "allowance" when speaking of bad things happening to us. God's sovereignty is limited or self-limited, we say; God respects our freedom so much that God will allow us to do ourselves in. We so desperately want assurance that God is not against us that we will chisel away at God's sovereignty to make God benign. The last verb of the verse, however, removes whatever comfort we presume to have achieved with our language of

“allowance” or “limitation”: “Will you punish us so severely?” The linkage of verbs (restrain, keep silent, punish) is telling. Instead of providing some measure of comfort, God’s withdrawal may be God’s most aggressive act. No wedge can be driven between God’s restraint and God’s affliction; they are two sides of the same coin.

Isaiah 63-64 does not fit our contemporary optimism. It does not lend itself to an instructional agenda; and it does not let us use the text against others. Repentance would be in order (human sinfulness is assumed), but that is not the point of the text. There is no room for our ubiquitous talk about empowerment or the employment of abstractions like hope and love. None of these interpretative postures meets the text that we have. If there is a place to enter into a performance of this text in our world, the entry point is the same as it was for the initial readers, namely, in the form of petition. The petition is bold, direct and sharp. God is addressed with strong imperatives and critical questions. The human community is not cast as weak and beggarly, even though it is living in absolute misery and is guilty of sin; rather, it is emboldened to pray. The dark side of God is not explained away; rather, it is prayed against with questions that God must address and with imperatives that God must carry out. The potter’s conduct must change; God’s “darkness” must be answered by God’s “light.” The petitioner is dependent on a change in the one petitioned; in fact, the petitioner demands a change. Isaiah 63-64 leaves the next move up to God; it does not presume to announce a change in God.

Other texts do announce such a change (most of Isaiah 40-55, for example), but it is an audacious move, a move that always threatens to become presumptuous when we appropriate it outside of the posture of petition. False prophets often spoke the exact same words as the canonical prophets, but the context of their speech was different. False prophets announced a hopeful future that claimed exemption from the dark side of God (see Hananiah’s words in Jeremiah 28). The hope of which the canonical prophets spoke was grounded in the reality of human sin and consequent exile and judgment (see, for example, Jeremiah 31). It was a word that needed to be authorized by God because only God could bring it about.

The canonical prophets know that to claim that God’s wrath—the dark side of God—has been absorbed by God’s grace is to risk blasphemy. Only God can make the gospel true because only God can change God. The canonical prophets were able to let the hard questions linger in the air until God answered. “Will you keep silent, and punish us so severely?” Quickly shutting down that question is likely to provide little more than cheap grace. To answer that question with an assertion like “Fear not, you are mine, says the Lord” is an audacious move. Preachers who make such an assertion are out on a limb, for they have made a claim that they cannot bring into being. God will have to make the assertion true. If preachers do not tremble a bit when they speak the gospel, they are in danger of preaching cheap and trivial grace. The chief thing that the grace of God must do is cancel the wrath of God. Preaching the gospel is serious business; reflection on the biblical witness to the dark side of God underscores the seriousness.

#### IV. HOSEA 11

Hosea 11 provides another vantage point for examining the dark side of God. It differs from Isaiah 63-64 by apparently moving beyond the dark side of God to announce God's compassion. Portions of the chapter are frequently cited to support themes like the vulnerability of God, a theme that would seem to do away with any talk of the dark side of God. Like Isaiah 63-64, Hosea 11 recognizes the disastrous effects of human sin. It blames humanity for the disaster that will hit: "They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me" (v. 5 NRSV; the NIV recasts the verse as a threatening question). The refusal to return was not a one-time occurrence, for the preceding four verses expansively develop the image of God as parent of Israel, busy parenting in one way or another since Israel's exodus from Egypt. Israel in contrast is busy sacrificing to idols and is ignorant of God's healing. The result is a sword that will bring about destruction and a devastating end (vv. 6-7). The announced future is, to use the term of this essay, the experience of the dark side of God. Notice that there is no summons to repentance and that no human repents. Israel does not change.

In the next verse, however, the tone shifts as we hear the inner speech of God: "How can I give you up, Ephraim! How can I hand you over, O Israel! How can I make you like Admah! How can I treat you like Zeboiim!...I will not execute my fierce anger...for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One of Israel in your midst, and I will not come in wrath" (vv. 8-9). All the change comes from God. The dark side of God is absorbed within God. This shift in God is not a formula that can be worked by humanity, not a doctrine to quote at the right point in a game of theological chess. In this regard, consider the bland notation to these verses in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible (NRSV)*: "In this striking soliloquy *compassion* restrains the divine anger; such is the nature of superhuman love." Why are abstractions like "compassion" and "superhuman love" used instead of the word "God"? The comment turns the text into an illustration of desired notions and principles but avoids making any claim about the deed of God. But the latter is precisely what the text itself does.

What if God's thinking went something like this: "How can I hand you over? Yes, it will be hard for me to do, but I must." Both rules and reason point in the direction of destructive punishment. But God is God and not mortal, and consequently a different future can be created. The rules and reason that govern life as we mortals know it do not restrain God from exercising another option. Grace is a possibility because God is not limited by the limits of mortals. Because God is not limited, God can create an alternate future. It is equally true, however, that because God is not limited God *could* "do" another Admah and Zeboiim (i.e., Sodom and Gomorrah). Which future will occur at this critical juncture is resolved within God. Mortals have no leverage in this text.

The text portrays God as sickened by God's own announcement of punishment, and consequently the punishment is withdrawn. Withdrawn? Can we be so

sure? When were vv. 8-9 spoken by God or composed by Hosea? Before the destruction was to take place? In that case God only thought about changing course but did not finally withdraw the threatened destruction, for Assyrian destruction and exile (vv. 5-6) did occur for Ephraim (the northern kingdom). All the pathos of v. 8 is no comfort, for God's pledge not to execute God's fierce anger (9a) is not kept. The anger was executed on the northern kingdom.

Or, did vv. 8-9 arise after the defeat of the north? If so, God's resolution of the situation is not to leave matters as they are. God refuses to let the destruction of the north and its subsequent exile become a permanent state of affairs. In this case we would have to understand the pledge at the beginning of v. 9 to be a matter of continuance: God will not carry the destruction to the point of finality. God will bring back those who survive in exile; the exiles will hear God's voice and return trembling from exile. God will restore them to their homes (10-11). There is hope here, but the hope arises in the midst of destruction. The dark side of God has been experienced in the shape of exile for some and as war by all. For some, the talk of return from exile is no comfort at all; they are already dead.

"How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?...My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender." These words are often cited as an example of grace in the Old Testament. They are that, but not at the expense of candor about the dark side of God. The editing of this chapter for use in the lectionary (Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Series A) is telling in this regard. Verses 1-4 and 8-9 are read. This drops out the announcement of destruction (vv. 5-7) and the mention of exile (vv. 10-11)—the dark side of God is not acknowledged in the reading. The words of "grace" in vv. 8-9 become confusing at best. What is God fussing about if all the hearers know is what they learn from vv. 1-4? God becomes an overindulgent parent and Israel is a spoiled brat. The result is inevitably cheap grace.

One additional consideration of Hosea 11 is in order. Assuming a hopeful reading of the chapter (the latter of the two options considered above), we can, perhaps even must, ask when this return from exile is to occur. Over a century later, Jeremiah is still speaking of a hoped-for or promised return of the northern segment of the people of God (see, for example, Jeremiah 30-31). We have no record of such a return. What are we to say? Was the glimmer of hope perceived in the recoiling heart of God futile? Does the recorded speech of God prove false? There is no expression like "in that day," which in many prophetic books prepares us for a long wait, even an eschatological wait of an unknown number of millennia. The most hopeful reading of the chapter places the reader or addressee in exile, after surviving the destruction of the homeland. Return from exile is a future matter from the perspective of the reader or addressee. How long shall the exile last? How long before the recoiled, warm, and tender heart of God takes on the shape of communal restoration? The reader or addressee to whom a hopeful promise is given is currently experiencing the dark side of God. The dark side of God has been met in the specifics of (Assyrian) destruction and exile. When will the "light" side of God be met in the specifics of return from exile and rebuilding?

How long? This question lingers in the reader's mind as the centuries roll on and, if the question is fully ingested, we return to the petitionary posture of Isaiah 63-64.

#### V. PSALM 90

In lectionary usage, Hosea 11 has been coupled with Ps 90:12-17. The editing is again peculiar. It opens, "So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart." These familiar words are a desperate prayer, not a proverbial expression to encourage wise use of the time we have in this life. "Teach" is an imperative verb form, and the imperative force is maintained for the rest of the Psalm. The community addresses God in very forceful language: "Turn....Have compassion....Satisfy us....Make us glad....Let your work be manifest...Let [your] favor be upon us...prosper for us the work of our hands—O prosper the work of our hands!" The question "how long?" (v. 13) hangs over all these demands, but its force is nearly lost without vv. 1-11. Requests for satisfaction, favor, and prosperity could easily fall into the enhancement theme that dovetails so well with our cultural optimism. Verse 15 points in a different direction: "Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us, and as many years as we have seen evil." Verses 1-11 sharply intensify this direction. The affliction of life, that is, the experience of the dark, wrathful side of God, is not limited to punishment for sin. Finitude is also a problem. God is confessed as the Creator, an everlasting God, but that confession only highlights our own "non-everlastingness." We live 70 or 80 years at best, and that is as ephemeral as morning grass; God's longevity dwarfs our temporal categories. Our brief moment in time is spent in toil and trouble; all of our few days are passed under God's wrath. Dust to dust and ashes to ashes, indeed! And then add the punishment for our sins. Verse 8 asserts that God has even set our secret sins in the light of God's countenance. The metaphor used provides an ironic flip to the one used in this essay. The light side of God exposes our darkest corners! The Aaronic blessing says, "The Lord make his face to shine upon you...The Lord lift up his countenance upon you." The Bible, however, recognizes some ambiguity in that metaphor, for God's gaze that protects is also a gaze that exposes.

There is no place to hide. Recognizing the community's sin deepens the problem of finitude. Consequently, God's wrath and anger reverberate throughout the psalm. Verse 11 asks, "Who considers the power of your anger?" Whoever considers the dark, wrathful side of God can only begin to petition, as do the remaining verses of the psalm—six verses with unrelenting imperative force. Petitioning, in the sense of Psalm 90, is not begging. Petitioning is bold prayer, with imperative after imperative hurled at God. Petitioning is forceful because it takes the dark side of God seriously, so seriously that it recognizes that God's conduct must change for there to be any change in the human condition. *God* must teach, turn, have compassion, satisfy us, make us glad, show us his work, favor us, prosper our work.

The dark side of God is a biblical theme that is not restricted to Isaiah 63-64,

Hosea 11, and Psalm 90. Similarly, petition in the face of the dark side of God is not limited to these three units. The theme is pervasive, and our avoidance of the theme is a major source of the cheap, trivial grace so frequently proffered in our midst. How shall we preach and teach the dark side of God? Candidly and honestly—with regard to both the biblical texts and our own lives—is the first answer. In addition, the biblical texts we have examined suggest that we preach and teach in a petitionary posture, forcefully addressing God with our questions about the dark side and demanding God to show another face. ⊕