

Wrath as a Divine Characteristic

3. In Akkadian, two major verbs for wrath exist: *agāgu and ezēzu*. Though often used synonymously, the former is used of a “passing emotion,” while the latter refers to “an inherent quality.” Both are extensively used with the gods as their subject. By contrast, Yahweh’s character does not include wrath or terms for power. See Exodus 34:6, 7. The closest one gets to it is the term “jealousy” which refers to Yahweh’s marital rights to his people and his desire for loyalty. Of course, v. 7 states, “who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the parents upon their children unto the third and fourth generation of those who hate me.” This can be taken as God punishing people for their sins (as do some versions such as the NIV), or it can be understood as referring to the inherent action of that hatred of God and its consequences from generation to generation. In the counterpart in Exodus 20, the comment is made, “but showing mercy to thousands who love me and keep my commandments,” a clear inference that anyone can receive mercy if they respond to divine love. There is no place in the entire OT that infers that “wrath” or “anger” is part of God’s character in the same way as forgiveness, mercy, compassion, and goodness. The closest to it is the term “slow to anger” in Exodus 34:6, 7.

Statements of God’s Character

“And the Lord passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing *the guilty*, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children to the third and fourth generation.’” Exodus 34:6, 7, NKJV.

Read Psalm 103

Read Lamentations 3

“But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry. So he prayed to the Lord, and said, ‘Ah, Lord, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You *are* a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm. Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for *it is* better for me to die than to live!’” Jonah 4:1-3, NKJV.

“Who *is* a God like You, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights *in* mercy. He will again have compassion on us, and will subdue our iniquities. He will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will give truth to Jacob *and* mercy to Abraham, which You have sworn to our fathers from days of old.” Micah 7:18-20, NKJV.

This is not a delineation of God’s character, but a plea for justice by King David: “O Lord my God, in You I put my trust; save me from all those who persecute me; and deliver me, lest they tear me like a lion, rending *me* in pieces while *there is* none to deliver. O Lord my God, if I have

done this: if there is iniquity in my hands. If I have repaid evil to him who was at peace with me, or have plundered my enemy without cause, let the enemy pursue me and overtake *me*; yes, let him trample my life to the earth, and lay my honor in the dust. Arise, O Lord, in Your anger; lift Yourself up because of the rage of my enemies; rise up for me *to* the judgment You have commanded! So the congregation of the peoples shall surround You; for their sakes, therefore, return on high. The Lord shall judge the peoples; judge me, O Lord, according to my righteousness, and according to my integrity within me. Oh, let the wickedness of the wicked come to an end, but establish the just; for the righteous God tests the hearts and minds. My defense *is* of God, who saves the upright in heart. God is a just judge, and God is angry *with the wicked* every day. If he does not turn back, He will sharpen His sword; He bends His bow and makes it ready. He also prepares for Himself instruments of death; He makes His arrows into fiery shafts. Behold, *the wicked* brings forth iniquity; yes, he conceives trouble and brings forth falsehood. He made a pit and dug it out, and has fallen into the ditch *which* he made. His trouble shall return upon his own head, and his violent dealing shall come down on his own crown. I will praise the Lord according to His righteousness, and will sing praise to the name of the Lord Most High.” Psalm 7:1-17, NKJV. **Questions:** Why does David believe God is angry every day? As king of Israel, was David angry often with a subject in his realm? Does power lead us more readily to love and compassion or to anger? David *wants* God to punish his enemies, yet even he recognizes that they will suffer in their own sins. Does David’s portrayal of God here reflect something of his own heart? Are prayers in the Psalms meant to be ideal representations of God or are they honest conversations of the heart with God?

Babylonian Portrayals of Deity

Marduk – I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom (*Ludlul bēl nēmeqi*) (2nd half of the 2nd millennium)

Tablet I

- 1 I will praise the lord of wisdom, a god judicious,
- 2 angry at nighttime, loosening up in daytime.
- 3 Marduk, lord of wisdom, a god judicious,
- 4 angry at nighttime, loosening up in daytime;
- 5 Who is like a storm, a violent storm; his fury is desolate;
- 6 And, like the breeze of the morning, his blowing is good.
- 7 His fury is unfaceable; the deluge is his boiling fury.
- 8 His mind is merciful; his heart is relenting—
- 9 The main force of whose hand the heavens cannot bear,
- 10 Whose hand of greatness helps the dead.
- 11 Marduk, whose powerful hands the heavens cannot bear.
- 12 The greatness of whose hand helps the dead.
- 13 In his wrath, he opens graves
- 14 When in slaughter, he causes the fallen to rise.
- 15 He looks angrily; the *lamassu* and shades depart.
- 16 He sets his eye, and the personal god turns back to the one he pushed away,
- 17 For an instant, his heavy punishment is terrible.

- 18 But suddenly he has pity; he turns into his mother.
- 19 He hastens to treat his beloved kindly.
- 20 Like a cow (with its) calf, my cow rotates (with me).
- 21 His beatings are thorns; he pierces the body.
- 22 Soothing are his bandages; he heals the victims of Namtar (the dying).
- 23 When he speaks, he imposes crimes on one.
- 24 On the day of his judgment, debts and sins are absolved
- 25 It is he who oppresses; he makes people sick.
- 26 By his incantation, shivers and chills are expelled.

Marduk Characterized in *Enuma Elish*

VI:136-138

“(4) MERSHAKUSHU, angry but deliberative, furious but relenting,
 “Deep is his heart, all encompassing his feelings.” B. Foster, *Before the Muses*, 389.

VII:151-156

“His word is truth, what he says is not changed,
 Not one god has annulled his utterance.
 If he frowns, he will not relent,
 If he is angry, no god can face his rage.
 His heart is deep, his feelings all encompassing,
 He before whom crime and sin must appear for judgment.” *Ibid.*, 400-401.

Note: Nowhere in the “Fifty Names of Marduk” do character traits of “compassion” and “mercy” appear.

Excerpts from the “Great Prayer to Ishtar”:

“You are the great one, the exalted one.
 All the black-headed folk, living creatures, mankind, praise your valor.
 You are the one who renders verdicts for subject peoples in truth and justice,
 You look upon the oppressed and abused and always set them right.
 Have mercy, mistress of heaven and earth, shepherdess of the human race! . . .

O splendid lioness of the Igigi-gods, who renders furious gods submissive,
 Most capable of all sovereigns, who grasps the leadrope of kings,
 Who opens the veils of all young women,
 You rise up, bring yourself down, great is your valor, O valiant Ishtar,
 Shining torch of heaven and earth, brilliance of all inhabited lands.
 Furious in irresistible onslaught, hero to the fight,
 Fiery glow that blazes against the enemy, who wreaks destruction on the fierce,
 Dancing one, Ishtar, who masses the multitude,
 Goddess of men, Ishtar of women, whose intentions no one can learn,
 Wherever you look the dead come to life, the sick arise,
 The unjustly treated prosper at the sight of you.
 I myself call upon you, your exhausted, desperate, most stricken servant,

Look upon me, mistress, accept my entreaty! . . .
Have mercy on my wretched person, which is full of confusion and perturbation!
Have mercy on my most stricken heart, which is full of tears and sighing! . . .
Irrinitum, raging lion, may your heart be calmed.
Furious wild bull, may your feelings be eased.
May your benevolent eyes rest upon me,
Look upon me with your beaming features!" B. Foster, *Before the Muses*, 511-512

A Literary Prayer to Marduk

"O furious lord, let [your heart] be c[almed],
Be eased in your feelings for [].
O furious Marduk, let [your heart] be calmed,
Be eased in your feelings for []!
Your look is a serpent, the crushing power [of a flood],
The onslaught of a conflagration, where is your equ[al]?
O Marduk, whose look is a serpent, the crushing power of a fl[ood],
The onslaught of a conflagration, where is your equal?
[] in your fury, you can h[elp],
[Gentle your pity], like a father's] your mercy,
[O Marduk, in your fury, you] can help. . . .
You know how to pardon the flagrant crime,
To waive the punishment in even grievous cases.
Your heart is merciful, your feelings [],
[You can?] show [favor?] in guilt and wrong-doing,
O Marduk, [your] heart is merciful, your feelings []. . . ." B. Foster, *Before the Muses*, 520

Great Hymn to Nabu

This is basically a prayer of appeasement to Nabu who is perceived to be angry. Here are some fragmentary lines:

"[O Nabu, who . . . the anxio]us like a [],
[] he has turned [].
[] your [an]ger, your raging yoke,
[You . . . ab]undance, you release the yield.
[O lord, . . .] in your [], fire in your pitilessness,
[] of the gods, you inspect Anshar,
[O Nabu, . . .] in your [], fire in your pitilessness,
[] of the gods, you inspect Anshar. . . .
O excellent [lord], be calm at once!
May your [feat]ures (?) relax, have pity!
O excellent [Na]bu, be calm at once!
May your [features?] relax, have pity! . . .
Wise one, master of the literate arts,
O furious lord, you are angry with your servant,
Want and misery have beset him,

O furious Nabu, you are angry with your servant,
 Want and misery have beset him! . . .
 Omnipotent lord, (let) iniquity (be) era[sed],
 O Swift-to-forgive, (let) foul crime (be) for[given],
 Omni[potent Nabu, (let) ini]quity (be) era[sed],
 O Swift-[to-forgive, (let fo]ul [crime] (be) forgi[ven]. . . .
 [Without] your consent, O Nabu, there can be no [forgiveness],
 [Un]less by you, my iniquity and crime [will not be absolved].
 Your servant [has done wron]g, and you continue to turn away from him in anger,
 In your [] you cast down [].
 [] . . ., the burrowing beetle, a hostile deity []”
 The prayer continues with a depiction of various plagues the petitioner suffers from.

“You discipline your servant, (now) give him a vent to breathe through,
 Incline your face to him, turn your head towards him,
 O Nabu, you discipline your servant, (now) give him a vent to breathe through,
 Incline your face to him, turn your head towards him!
 Produce a substitute [Foster’s note: “someone to die in his stead”], and let him [find] self-
 preservation.” (B. Foster, *Before the Muses*, 530-535)

Marduk (2nd half of 2nd millennium)

“Lo[r]d En[lil [that is Marduk as supreme god], prince surpassing of perception,
 Battle formation and warfare are in the hand of the sage of the gods, Marduk,
 He at whose warfare the heavens quake,
 At whose cry the depths are roiled.
 At whose blade edge the gods retreat.
 There was none [who] came forth against his furious onslaught.
 Awe-inspiring lord,
 none like whom has arisen among the gods,
 Stately is his progress through the shining firmament,
 Heavy his responsibilities in Ekur, the cherished dwelling.
 To the ill wind his weapons are flashing,
 Tortuous mountains are destroyed by his flame,
 The surging (?) ocean tosses up its waves.” Adapted slightly from Jean Bottéro, *Religion in
 Ancient Mesopotamia*, 32.

The Shamash Hymn (excerpts)

“You shepherd all living creatures together,
 You are their herdsman, above and below.
 You cross regularly through the heavens,
 Every day you traverse the vast earth.
 High seas, mountains, earth, and sky,
 You traverse them regularly, every day, like a . . .
 In the lower regions you take charge of the netherworld gods,

The demons, the (netherworld) Anunna-gods,
In the upper regions you administer al the inhabited world.
Shepherd of the lower regions, herdsman of the upper regions,
You, Shamash, are regulator of the light for all.
You cross time and again the vast expanse of the seas,
[Whose] depths not even the Igigi-gods know. . . .
You have persevered, O Shamash,
 what you went by day you returned by night.
Among all the Igigi-gods there is none who does such
 wearisome toil but you,
Nor among the sum total of the gods one
 who does so much as you!
At your rising the gods of the land assembled,
Your fierce glare covered the land.
Of all the lands of different tongues,
[You] know their intentions, you see their footprints.
All humankind kneels before you,
[O Shamash, everyone longs for your light,
[From] the diviner's bowl to the knots of cedar,
[You are] the most reflective of dream interpreters,
 Explicators of night visions.
[The parties to] contracts kneel before you,
[Be]fore you both wicked and just kneel down.
[No one] goes down to the depths without you.
You clear up the case of the wicked and criminal, . . .
You send back (to court?) the rogue surrounded
 by [false witnesses],
You rescue from the brink of hell
 the [innocent] one tied up in a lawsuit,
What you pronounced in just verdict, O Shamash, [],
Your utterances are manifest, they cannot be changed,
 [you show] no favoritism. . . .
You show the exile roads he did not know.
[You set free] the one in hid[den dungeon],
You save the displaced cast in prison. . . .
You show the roguish judge the [inside of] a jail,
He who takes the fee but does not carry through,
 you make him bear the punishment.
The one who receives no fee but takes up the case of the weak,
Is pleasing to Shamash, he will make long his life. . . .
You heed, O Shamash, prayer, supplication, and blessing,
Obeisance, kneeling, whispered prayer, and prostration.
The feeble one calls you as much as his speech allows him,
The meek, the weak, the oppressed, the submissive,

Daily, ever, and always come before you. . . .

[The hymn then lists various kinds of people—shepherd, herdsman, caravan, fisherman, travelling merchant, hunter, archer, fowler, thief, bandit, dead spirits—who come before Shamash.]

O Shamash, you have listened to them all.

You did not hold back(?) those who came before you,
you heeded them.

For my sake, O Shamash, do not despise them!

You grant wisdom, O Shamash, to humankind,

You grant those seeking you your raging, fierce light. . . .” B. Foster, *Before the Muses*, 536-544

Adad

“O most great and perfect one, heir of divine Duran[ki].

Storm unabating, who keeps up str[ife and combat],

O Adad, great and perfect one, [heir of divine Duranki],

Storm unabating, who keeps up str[ife and] combat,

Founder of the clouds, master of the deluge,

Who strikes with his lightning bolts,

[who blitzes] Anzu with his lightning bolts!

O overwhelming, perfect one, furious and fierce,

Unrelenting and a wh[irlwind],

O Adad, overwhelming, perfect one, furious and fierce,

Unrelenting and a whir[lwind],

Who overturns raging (enemies), lord of strength,

Fetter that restrains the haughty,

[Fur]ious, stately, awe-inspiring sovereign of the heavens,

Heir of Esharra, who is perfect one among his brothers, hero,

The one who makes lightning flash,

who carries [torches?] and flame,

Who destroys mountains, peaks, and boulders! , , ,” B. Foster, 545-546

Anu

O most great lord, whose lu[strations are pure in heaven],

O Anu, greatest lord, [whose purifications [are pure in heaven],

God of heaven, lord [of heaven],

Anu, god of heaven, [lord of heaven],

Who releases the day [crowned] lord, lord of signs,

Anu, who releases the day, c[rowned] lord, lord of signs,

Dispeller of evil, wicked, and terrifying dreams,

Evil signs and portents,

May my wickedness, [sin, and grave mis]deed

Be absolved with your [life-giving] incantation

And all that I have committed or neglected

against my (personal) god

[and my (personal) goddess] be absolved.
May the angry hearts of my (personal) god and
[my (personal) goddess] be re[conciled to me],
May your furious heart be calmed],
And [your] feelings be eased, have mercy! . . ." B. Foster, *Before the Muses*, 549

Anu (2nd millennium)

" . . . It is You who possess royal insignia,
Prince of the gods!
Your word holds authority
In the council of the greatest gods!
O Lord of the brilliant Tiara,
Endowed with marvelous brilliance,
You straddle the great Cyclones,
Standing like a prince on the noble royal Dais!
The celestial gods listen
To your sovereign words,
And all the infernal gods
Approach You trembling!
At your voice all gods bow down
Like reeds in a storm!
If Your word carries away everything, like the Wind,
It also causes pastureland and watering holes to flourish!
At Your voice all gods bow down
Like reeds in a storm!
If your word carries away everything like the Wind,
It also causes pastureland and watering holes to flourish!
At your voice, even in anger,
The gods return to their homes¹
May all the gods approach you
From heaven and Earth,
With their gifts, their offerings!
May all kings bring you their heavy tributes!
May all people,
Standing every day, before You,
Offer You their oblations,
Their adoration, their prayers! . . ." Adapted slightly from Jean Bottéro, *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 30.

Enlil (end of 3rd millennium)

"Enlil! His authority is far-reaching;
his word is sublime and holy.
His decisions are unalterable;
he decides fates forever!

His eyes scrutinize the entire world!
When the honorable Enlil sits down in majesty
on his sacred and sublime throne,
when he exercises with perfection
his power as lord and king,
spontaneously the gods prostrate [themselves]
before him
and obey his orders without protest!
He is the great and powerful ruler
who dominates heaven and earth.
who knows all and understands all!" Adapted slightly from Jean Bottéro, *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 30, 31.

Jean Bottéro (*Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 37-40) writes:

"More than one passage might be included among those 'numinous hymns' that R. Otto has brought to light: in them the supernatural is not the object of a coldly reasoned glorification, but in truth we see extreme reverence, profound devotion, the unarguable emotion that the supernatural evoked in the hearts of those ancient believers. . . .

". . . The divine, in its multiple, personalized presentations, was above all considered to be something grandiose, inaccessible, dominating, and to be feared. Before it even 'the gods' were believed 'to bend like reeds in a storm.' . . .

"The divinity was never the object of an anxious, enthusiastic pursuit: 'to seek out (*šê'û*) a god,' as was sometimes said, was out of a need for his protection, his assistance. It was not inspired by a desire to be close to him, to be in his presence, to have the peace or happiness of finding oneself in his company. Hymns professing a bottomless desire for a god's presence indicate admiration . . . and not an impatience to get closer to him. The divine did not attract in the manner of a desirable thing, of a presence apt to enchant the heart—as in a true form of love.

". . . It's [Mesopotamia's] gods were considered to be very high 'authorities' (we will return to this fundamental metaphor of power), upon whom one depended in complete humility, obligated to serve them; they were distant and haughty 'bosses,' masters and rulers, and above all not friends! One submitted to them, one feared them, one bowed down and trembled before them: one did not 'love' or 'like' them. The verb 'to like/to love' (*râmu/ág*) appeared only sporadically with the name of a divinity as its object; and in those rare cases it never conveyed the sense of an impetuous and tender pursuit, even less of a need, a passionate desire, but only the inclination that a modest and self-effacing servant might feel toward an omnipotent and sublime 'lord and master' (*bêlu*). 'Honor your god! Connect yourself to Him!' (literally, 'love Him'). . . . The gods were too highly placed, vertiginous, transcendent, to evoke the thirsts, the flames of captivation: their powers, like their nature, were much too far beyond the human grasp, much too crushing and formidable to unleash in human hearts anything other than a fearful reverence, an admiring respect, a humble adoration." Bottéro goes on to suggest

that the gods emanated terror and a luminosity and power that kept human beings at a distance.

Compare this with Exodus 33 and 34 and note that Moses wants God's presence to go with His people because it is His presence going with them that distinguishes them from every other people on the earth (Exodus 33:16). The people grieve when God threatens to abandon them. When God makes His glory (luminosity) go before Moses, He has to conceal him for his protection; but He describes that glory that Moses cannot see by pronouncing His name and then delineating His character. It is interesting that, while all of the attributes He lists make up His love, He does not use the word, "love" to describe Himself here. Elsewhere, when Israel is commanded to love the Lord their God in the Shema, the verb seems to denote action such as obedience. It would seem, then, that until Jesus, God could not describe Himself as "love" to His people because they would have understood the word to mean "honor" or some other respectful term that kept them at a distance from Him.

Bottéro goes on: "Of course, . . . we often encounter terms that express an easier attitude toward the divine. In them the divine appears to hold an authentic potential for goodness, for gracious condescension, for indulgence toward humans. For it was inevitable that since nothing inherently forced humans to suspect the gods of being particularly mean and cruel, humans found it natural to expect help, good deeds, and favors from the gods (until the contrary was proved!), just as one might naturally expect the same from the politically powerful of this world. The hymns and prayers cited above mention a certain number of traits that manifested not only the authority, loftiness, and power of the gods but also their good-natured and helpful side: Sîn was a 'merciful and forgiving father,' and Šamaš took 'care for all the peoples of the lands,' whereas one could implore Ištar, 'lady of ladies, goddess of goddesses,' and expect a favorable response to entreaties and prayers."

Despite the prevalence, from the Old Babylonian period on, and particularly during the first millennium, of divine anger, Bottéro ignores this active trait entirely. Yet, the anger of deity increases with the anger of kings and with their power of conquest.