

FROM FRATRICIDE TO FORGIVENESS

THE ETHICS OF ANGER IN GENESIS¹

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In the first book of the Bible, every patriarch and many of the matriarchs have significant encounters with anger. However, scholarship has largely ignored how Genesis treats this emotion, particularly how Genesis functions as Torah by providing ethical instruction about handling this emotion's perplexities. This dissertation aims to fill this gap in scholarship, showing both how anger functions as a literary motif in Genesis and how this book offers moral guidance for engaging this emotion.

After an introductory chapter outlining the goals, methods, and limitations of this study (ch. 1), this dissertation draws on works in translation theory, anthropology, and cross-cultural psychology to lay a theoretical framework for analysing emotion described in another language by another culture (ch. 2). It shows that scholars need to exercise particular care when translating and interpreting terminology for biblical emotion—resisting the temptation to impose modern Western conceptions of emotion onto the biblical text. In particular, interpreters need to resist the Western assumption that emotions are irrational—an assumption that is foreign to the Hebrew text and that has been called into question by many recent philosophers, neuroscientists, and psychologists.

The third chapter appropriates the findings of cognitive linguistics to analyse the terminology, conceptions, and associations of anger in the Hebrew Bible. It shows that while the methodologies of cognitive linguistics provide useful gateways into the biblical text, previous interpreters working with biblical emotion have made problematic moves in their appropriations from cognitive linguistics. This chapter corrects previous errors, allowing readers to arrive at a better understanding of the language and conception of anger in the Hebrew

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Bible. It provides a model of linguistic examination that can be utilised with other biblical emotions.

The fourth chapter evaluates the advances that have taken place in the field of Old Testament ethics in recent decades, supplementing them with insights from philosophical, literary, and critical theorists to formulate an understanding of ethics and narrative that aligns with the contours of Genesis. It argues that previous attempts at articulating the ethics of the Old Testament have failed to break free from the strictures of modernity, thus imposing foreign models of ethics onto the text that lead to significant incongruities. This chapter articulates an alternative way of approaching ethics that is much more congruent with the nature of Genesis' narratives.

The fifth chapter employs a rhetorical-literary approach to examine how texts in Genesis provide a conversation with one another about anger and its moral perplexities. Closely reading Genesis 4:1-16, this chapter first shows how Genesis presents anger as the gravest of moral dangers, something capable of bringing death into the world and causing the first recorded sin. The narrative creates in readers a desire for alternatives to Cain; they embark on a quest for a 'brother's keeper'—one who gives protection and provisions to family amid a world of limitations. Attention then shifts to anger among the shepherds of Abram and Lot (Gen. 13–14), the shepherds of Isaac and Gerar (Gen. 26), Jacob and Laban (Gen. 31), Sarai/h and Hagar (Gen. 16, 21), Rachel and Leah (Gen. 30), Potiphar and Joseph (Gen. 39), Pharaoh and his servants (Gen. 40), Dinah's brothers and Shechem (Gen. 34), and Jacob and Esau (Gen. 27, 32–33). Finally, the chapter examines the anger between Joseph and his brothers (Gen. 37–50, esp. chs. 37, 42–46, 50). It ends by showing how in Genesis' final chapter, Joseph and his brothers achieve forgiveness and lasting reconciliation after a long history of deception, anger, and abuse that has left no one guiltless. Genesis presents Joseph as a 'brother's keeper', an anti-Cain who has all the power and all the reasons to harm his brothers but instead turns away from anger and, despite the inherent difficulties, offers forgiveness.

Various themes from this study are then collected and summarised in the final chapter. This dissertation concludes that understanding Genesis' message about anger requires laying aside traditional Western assumptions about both emotion and ethics. Genesis does not, for example, provide a set of ideal principles for engaging anger. Rather,

readers who experience Genesis' narratives view anger from a variety of perspectives and in different lights, gaining wisdom for diverse encounters with anger they may face. They acquire a deep sensitivity to human frailty, an acute awareness of anger's power, and a realistic range of possibilities for engaging this emotion. They develop the ability to face one of life's most morally problematic emotions amid countless constraints and limitations.