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How and Why Does God Wrestle With the Shortcomings of His People?: An Old Testament Perspective

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Introduction

The notion of God wrestling with the shortcomings of his people is a dominant and recurring theme in Scripture and in Christian theological thought. It is indeed a *leitmotiv* of the Hebrew Scriptures. In the initial chapters of the first book of the Old Testament, right after the fall of man in the Garden of Eden and after hiding himself “from YHWH God among the trees of the Garden” (Gen 3:8b), we see God rousing himself to seek after the fallen man; “but YHWH God called to the man, ‘Where are you?’” (Gen 3: 9).¹ Likewise, the last book of the Old Testament recapitulates the motif of God

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are based on the *New International Version* of the English Bible, copyright 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. However, the Hebrew word יהוה is here translated as “YHWH,” the Tetragrammaton or special name for God that Israel applies in their monotheistic reference to the God of Israel, instead of the common practice of rendering it as “LORD” in most English translations of the Hebrew Bible.

wrestling with the shortcomings of his people thus: “They will be mine, ‘says YHWH Almighty,’ in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him” (Mal 3:17). The Old Testament, in effect, appears to construct an *inclusio* of the theme of God wrestling with the shortcomings of his people.²

The concept of God wrestling with the shortcomings of his people is a soteriological category in biblical theology, or the doctrine of God’s redemptive grace that is usually visualized in terms of regeneration and conversion by the Spirit of God. Regeneration, in the Wesleyan tradition, is defined as a work of prevenient grace in which a change of the human heart is effected by an infusion of the Spirit of God and hence marks the onset of new life in Jesus Christ. Conversion, which is viewed as a concomitant of regeneration, is a divinely-enabled faith response of the human will to God’s salvific call and entails the turning away from a rebellious human will to a life submitted to God in Jesus Christ. The argument for prevenient grace posits that, since the human heart is totally depraved and without any capacity to respond to God’s salvific call, salvation is impossible without a prior act of God, or divine *preparatio evangelica*, on behalf of the sinner. As Thomas Oden observes, “the divine will always ‘goes before’ or ‘prevenes’ (leads the way) for the human will, so that the human will may choose freely in accord with the divine will.”³ Thus regeneration and conversion are viewed as inseparable and mutually related aspects of the same happening.⁴ The imperative for regeneration and conversion is generally understood to be

² An *inclusio*, as a literary structuring device common in biblical texts in which a theme is inserted at the beginning and at the end of a narrative unit or text in order to bracket off the unit or text with the theme, suggests a symbolic significance of the theme. Thus the theme of God wrestling with the shortcomings of his people, which brackets the entire Old Testament linking the beginning and the end with the theme, appears to signify that the theme is integral to the overall message of the Old Testament. See also David Ulansey, “The Heavenly Veil Torn: Mark’s Cosmic *Inclusio*,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110 (1991): 123- 125.

³ Thomas Oden, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2: *The Word of Life* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2001), 189. See also Adam Dodds, “Regeneration and Resistable Grace: A Synergistic Proposal,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 83 (2011): 29- 48 (29).

⁴ This observation is eloquently expressed in the works of Emil Brunner. See, for example, Idem, *Dogmatics 3: The Christian Doctrine of the Church: Faith and the Consummation* (trans. O. Wyon; London: Lutterworth, 1952), 275- 281.

necessitated by the universal fall of humanity from God's grace, or the original sin, in the Garden of Eden.⁵

Various theological arguments have been postulated concerning the soteriological-juridical aspects of regeneration and conversion. Whereas some theological arguments posit that God does not regenerate a person without their conversion, or divinely-enabled volitional response of their will, other arguments posit that God's salvific grace is irresistible such that the divine salvific grace is not necessarily predicated on the volitional response of the human will. Adam Dodd portrays these variant arguments in terms of monergistic regeneration and synergistic regeneration. He observes that, in monergistic regeneration, "all aspects of soteriology are exhaustively governed by the absolute divine decrees so that divine willing determines human willing," while, in synergistic regeneration, "the active participation of both God and man are indispensable" for salvation to be efficacious.⁶

The purpose of the present paper is, however, not to delve into the juridical aspects of soteriology. Rather, the concern here is to call attention to the assurance of God's irrevocable redemptive grace toward his covenant people, from an Old Testament perspective, in spite of their persistent shortcomings in terms of their rebellion and unfaithfulness to God. The goal of the paper is therefore to present a biblically-faithful and theologically responsible exposé of God's irrevocable salvific grace, and hence the assurance of salvation, as portrayed in the Old Testament. Methodologically, the use of scriptural references in the exposé is neither a critical-textual or exegetical analysis, nor is it a proof-texting exercise; rather, scriptural references are mainly utilized to illustrate the adduced arguments.

A. Israel as a Redeemed People of YHWH

The children of Israel are depicted in the Old Testament as a people whom YHWH, the God of Israel, redeemed from Egyptian bondage in order to make them his covenant community. The primary soteriological terms in the Hebrew scriptures, תְּשׁוּעָה, יְשׁוּעָה, יִשְׁע,

⁵ For a critical discourse on the notion of the 'universal fall of humanity' or 'original sin,' see, for instance, J. William Johnston, "Which 'All' Sinned?: Romans 3:23- 24 Reconsidered," *Novum Testamentum* 53(2011): 153- 164.

⁶ A. Dodd, "Regeneration Resistable Grace," 29- 36.

(salvation, deliverance, redemption, e.g. Job 5:11; Ps 20:7; 119:155; Jonah 2:10), denote God's deliverance of those in situations of need, distress, or bondage, and their restoration to a state of well-being in relationship with God.⁷ However, the paradigmatic model of redemption in the Old Testament is the deliverance of the children of Israel from their Egyptian bondage. As Middleton and Gorman observe, "beneath the Old Testament use of explicit salvation language lies a coherent worldview in which the exodus from Egyptian bondage followed by entry into the Promised Land, forms the most important paradigm or model."⁸

Although the idea of salvation that is portrayed in the paradigmatic deliverance of the children of Israel from the Egyptian bondage is apparently physical and material, there is, nonetheless, an implicit pneumatological dimension. The motif of Israel's redemption, or 'regeneration,' in order to be YHWH's covenant community is enacted in the Mosaic symbolic sprinkling, on the Israelites, of the "blood of the covenant that YHWH had made" with them (Exod 24:8) and YHWH's pronouncement that "I will take you as my own people and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am YHWH your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians" (Exod 6:7-8). The crossing of the Red Sea from Egypt is also portrayed, in the New Testament pneumatological-hermeneutical rendition of the Exodus account, as a regenerative experience of divine grace in which an infusion of the Holy Spirit is inferred (1 Cor 10:1-4). Indeed the Deuteronomist, who develops the Israelite redemption theology more fully, portrays Israel's deliverance from the Egyptian physical oppression as incidental to YHWH's grand redemptive election of Israel to be his covenant people (Deut 4:32-40; 7:7-9). The Deuteronomist uses the Hebrew word בחר , "choose, elect" (Deut 7: 6; 14: 2), to depict YHWH's redemption of Israel as a divinely-predestinated act that is not contingently occasioned by the existential oppressive circumstances of Israel. Other biblical authors use such imageries as father-son relationship (e.g. Exod 4:22; Isa 63:16), or marital relationship (e.g. Isa 50:1; Jer

⁷ As Richard Middleton and Michael Gorman note, in the Hebrew Bible, "both the deliverance of the needy and their restoration to well-being in relationship with God" are critical salvific parameters. Idem, "Salvation," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 5 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009): 45- 61(45).

⁸ J.R. Middleton and M.J. Gorman, "Salvation," 45.

3:14; Hosea 1-14), to depict a close and loving relationship between YHWH and Israel. Thus the theological import of the exodus from the Egyptian bondage, which also serves as the hermeneutical lens through which Israel's history is interpreted, is YHWH's redemptive election of Israel to be his covenant people.

B. How Does God Wrestle With Israel's Shortcomings?

Notwithstanding YHWH's redemptive love and Israel's status as a redeemed people, the Israelites were persistently rebellious and unfaithful in their covenant relationship with YHWH. Time and time again the Israelites grieved the heart of God. For example, right after God led the Israelites through the Red Sea by his miraculous act of parting the sea- a miraculous act which inspired the Israelites to exclaim in adoration: "Who among the gods is like you, O YHWH? Who is like you- majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?" (Exod 15: 11) – the Israelites soon reneged on their covenant faithfulness to YHWH and began to lament thus: "If only we had died by YHWH's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death" (Exod 16:3). Nonetheless, YHWH, in his covenant faithfulness, rained Manna from heaven and fed the Israelites with abundance (Exod 16:11-35).

Soon thereafter, the Israelites were again caught up in another act of unfaithfulness to YHWH; they engaged in the worship of an idolatrous golden calf at Horeb (Exod 32: 1- 6). YHWH's sad commentary on the Israelites was that "They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of Egypt'"(Exod 32:8). This sad divine commentary followed by YHWH's remark that "I have seen these people ... and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them" (Exod 32:9), would naturally imply that Israel's redemptive election as God's covenant people was in danger of being revoked by YHWH. However, the subsequent divine refrainment from destroying Israel, in response to Moses' intercessory plea (Exod 32:11-14), remarkably reveals God's resilient love for Israel and his inner struggle with the shortcomings of his people.

The name 'Israel' is perhaps a fitting designation of the wrestling nature of God's relationship with his people. 'Israel' is the name given to Jacob after an all-night struggle with a divine being (Gen 32: 22-30). The exact meaning of the Hebrew word ישראל 'Israel,' which occurs over 2,500 times in the Bible, is uncertain. It has a possibly wide semantic range which includes 'struggling with God,' or 'God struggles,' since the biblical narrative in which the name first appears etymologically associates the designation ישראל with שרה 'struggle' and אלהים 'God or divine being' (Gen 32:28). The name is also used in the Bible as a religious symbol of the people of God. For example, the Church, like Israel, is referred to as the "chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" (1 Pet 2: 9; Exod 19:6) and "the Israel of God" (Gal 6: 16).⁹ It is therefore plausible that the name 'Israel' could as well be a fitting reference to God's struggling relationship with the shortcomings of his redeemed people in their covenant transgressions.

Israel's rebellion against God's will, and hence God's struggle with their shortcomings, continued throughout their wilderness sojourn and also throughout their settlement in the land of Canaan. For instance, while on the verge of entering Canaan land at Paran, Israel rebelled against God's command to march into the land and possess it. Instead "they said to each other, 'we should choose a leader and go back to Egypt'" (Num 14: 4). In response, YHWH lamented thus: "How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me ... I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them" (Num 14:11-12). However, Moses' intercessory plea that "YHWH is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion ... In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of this people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now" (Num 14:18-19), invoked YHWH's mercy, which triumphed over his wrath, thus: "I have forgiven them" (Num 14: 20)!

⁹ Reinhard G. Kratz also notes that the name 'Israel' is, on the one hand, the name of a nation or an ethnic group and, on the other hand, a "symbol of the people of God." Idem, "Israel in the Book of Isaiah," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 31 (2006): 103- 128 (104). See also J. Blake Couley, "Israel, Name and Associations of," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 3 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), 131- 132.

God's continued struggle with the shortcomings of his people is best exemplified in the Hosea metaphorical narrative in which Hosea's struggle with the unfaithful character of his wife, Gomer, is generally understood to be a symbolic representation of God's struggle in his relationship with unfaithful Israel.¹⁰ In his wrathful exasperation with Israel's trans-generational propensity to covenant unfaithfulness, YHWH avows that "I will not show my love to her children ... Their mother has been unfaithful and has conceived them in disgrace" (Hosea 2: 4- 5). Nonetheless, in his resiliently long-suffering love for Israel, YHWH affirms that "I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge YHWH" (Hosea 2:19- 20). Then YHWH turns to Hosea and says to him, "Go show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as YHWH loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods" (Hosea 3:1).

Further on in the Hosea narrative, God reveals the inner struggle, in his heart, of wounded and yet unrelenting love for unfaithful Israel with the following apparently poetic soliloquy:

How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, Israel?
How can I treat you like Adamah?
How can I make you like Zeboiim?
My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused.
I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I turn and
devastate Ephraim.
For I am God, and not man- the Holy One among you.
I will not come in wrath (Hosea 11:8-9).¹¹

¹⁰ See, for example, Ehud Ben Zvi, "Observations on the Marital Metaphor of YHWH and Israel in its Ancient Israelite Context: General Considerations and Particular Images in Hosea 1. 2," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 28 (2004): 363- 384.

¹¹ Adamah and Zeboim were some of the Canaanite cities that were overthrown when Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed (Gen 19:24-25; Deut 29:23).

As Karl Plank observes, in this soliloquy, YHWH “reveals his inner struggle and turmoil over his inability to move Israel to faithfulness.”¹²

The Hosea metaphorical narrative, which portrays Israel as an unfaithful wife, happens just before the captivity of the Northern Israelite Kingdom, or Ephraim, in 722 BCE and, indeed, contains warnings that YHWH would allow Israel to suffer the consequences of her unfaithfulness (Hos 8-9). A similar metaphorical narrative is also spoken by the prophet Jeremiah just before the devastation and captivity of the Southern Kingdom of Judah in 597/6 BCE (Jer 2-4). In the Jeremiah narrative, YHWH remembers Israel’s love for him in her earlier days; “I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me” (Jer 2:2). However, Israel had become unfaithful to her husband, and YHWH agonizes over Israel’s faithlessness; “Does a maiden forget her jewelry, a bride her wedding ornaments? Yet my people have forgotten me, days without number” (Jer 2:32). Just as Hosea’s metaphorical narrative contains warnings that YHWH would allow faithless Israel to suffer the consequences of her unfaithfulness, likewise, Jeremiah’s overtures of YHWH love for Israel contains warnings that that Israel would suffer the consequences of her unfaithfulness. Israel would be plundered by her enemies (Jer 6) and taken into captivity (Jer 25). Nonetheless, Israel’s captivity would not imply that YHWH had rejected or annulled the election of Israel as his covenant people. The captivity is likened to a moment in which YHWH had given “faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of her adulteries” (Jer 3:8). However, his resilient covenant love for his redeemed people and his longing for the return of his estranged wife, Israel, are such that they override the long-established Israelite tradition which stated that an estranged wife who marries another man cannot be restored to her former husband (Deut 24:1-4). Thus YHWH wrestles with the tradition and asks, “If a man divorces his wife and she leaves him and

¹² Karl A. Plank, “The Scarred Countenance: Inconstancy in the Book of Hosea,” *Judaism* 32 (1983): 343- 354 (350). However, the idea of God’s “inability to move Israel to faithfulness” cannot be understood in terms of God’s lack of omnipotence; rather, it should be viewed in terms of the freewill covenant relationship which God wills for his people so that they can obey him out of their divinely-enabled freewill love for him. See also H.H. Rowley, *The Biblical Doctrine of Election* (London: Lutterworth, 1950), 90- 108.

marries another man, should he return to her again? ... But you have lived as a prostitute with many lovers- would you now return to me” (Jer 3:1). Nonetheless, YHWH’s resilient love for Israel is able to overcome the bounds of tradition; just as YHWH had commanded Hosea to “go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress”(Hos 3:1), he now yearningly beckons to his adulterous wife, Israel: “Return, faithless Israel, declares YHWH, I will frown on you no longer, for I am merciful, declares YHWH, I will not be angry forever ... Return faithless people, declares YHWH, for I am your husband”(Jer 3:12-14).

Not only does Jeremiah’s pronouncement of judgment contain promises of restoration (Jer 33), but the prophet Ezekiel also, while in captivity, enacts the unfaithful wife metaphor with restorative motifs as follows:

This is what the sovereign YHWH says: I will deal with you as you deserve, because you have despised my oath by breaking the covenant. Yet I will remember the covenant I made with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you. Then you will remember your ways and be ashamed ... So I will establish my covenant with you, and you will know that I am YHWH (Ezek 16:59-62).

Israel’s captivity was therefore not a sign of being rejected or disowned by YHWH; their status as the redeemed covenant people of YHWH was not at stake. Rather, it was a case of YHWH disciplining “those he loves, as a father the son he delights in” (Prov 3:12). It will be recalled that Moses, in his intercessory plea for rebellious Israel in the wilderness, recounts not only YHWH’s divine character of love in which he is “slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion”(Num14:18a), but also YHWH’s divine wrath in which “he does not leave the guilty unpunished”(Num 14:18b). Also, in the plains of Moab, Moses reminds Israel to reckon that “as a man disciplines his son, so YHWH your God disciplines you” (Deut 8:5).

The wrath of YHWH is not inimical to his love; rather, divine wrath is an aspect of divine love. As A. G. Herbert aptly observes, “the opposite of love is not wrath but indifference.”¹³ True love must abominate that which is not love; otherwise it will not be sincere love. As the writer of Proverbs observes, love without disciplining wrath is

¹³ A. G. Herbert, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (London: Faber and Faber, 1947), 251.

tantamount to hate; “He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him” (Prov 13:24). “The wrath of YHWH,” an expression which occurs about 375 times in the Old Testament and which appears to be connected with divine covenant relationship, can thus be viewed as YHWH’s “personal quality, without which YHWH would cease to be fully righteous and his love would degenerate into sentimentality.”¹⁴ Hence Tony Lane’s fitting analogy that “a husband who did not respond to his wife’s infidelity with a jealous anger would thereby demonstrate his lack of care for her.”¹⁵ “The wrath of YHWH” should, therefore, neither be viewed as a problematic aspect of God’s nature nor a revocation of the eternal election of his covenant people. Rather, it is an expression of God’s righteous indignation against that which is unrighteous. The prophet Nahum, for example, juxtaposes the questions, “Who can withstand his indignation? Who can endure his fierce anger?” (Nahum 1:6), with the affirmation that “YHWH is good, a refuge in times of trouble” (Nahum 1:7).¹⁶

The captivity and the subsequent restoration of Israel, events which accentuate the dialectical tension between Israel’s shortcomings and God’s resilient covenant faithfulness, serve as paradigmatic demonstrations of how God wrestles, justly and yet mercifully and graciously, with the shortcomings of his people. God’s covenant faithfulness entails God’s restorative wrath; “for he wounds, but he also binds up; he injures, but his hands also heal” (Job 5:18; cf. Isa 57:15- 19). Thus Israel’s eternal election by YHWH is secured in spite of God’s contingent wrath against her shortcomings; it is the triumph of divine grace in terms of YHWH’s faithfulness to his covenant promises over the faithlessness of his redeemed people.¹⁷

¹⁴ Seth Erlandsson, “The Wrath of YHWH,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 23 (1973): 111-116 (116).

¹⁵ Tony Lane, “The Wrath of God as an Aspect of the Love of God,” in *Nothing Better, Nothing Greater* (ed. K. J. Vanhoozer; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001): 138-166 (160).

¹⁶ Seth Erlandsson equally argues that “instead of being something problematic and negative in God’s nature, the divine wrath is usually represented as a natural expression of his holiness and righteousness.” Idem, “The Wrath of YHWH,” 116.

¹⁷ See also Paul A. Barker, *The Triumph of Grace in Deuteronomy: Faithless Israel, Faithful Yahweh in Deuteronomy* (Milton Keynes, U.K.: Paternoster, 2004), 25- 30.

C. Why Does God Wrestle with Israel's Shortcomings?

At the outset it is pertinent to point out that God's dealings with Israel as his covenant community in the Old Testament is instructive for the Church in her reflection on how God deals with his covenant people, for "These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come" (1 Cor 10:11). The question of why God wrestles with Israel's shortcomings is therefore germane to Christian spirituality. As Paul Gallagher observes, "reflection on the mystery of God's election of Israel, which runs much deeper than the moral obligations attached to that election, will allow us to articulate more completely our conviction as Christians."¹⁸

God's persistent desire to remain in covenant relationship with his redeemed community, in spite of their shortcomings, is perhaps best understood in the light of the nature of God's redemptive love for Israel. First, Gallagher's observation, as noted above, that God's election of Israel is a mystery that runs deeper than simply the rescue of an oppressed people and an attendant reciprocal moral obligation of allegiance to the deliverer, implies that the deliverance of Israel from the Egyptian bondage, and their ability to reciprocate the divine act of deliverance, are incidental to the grandeur of divine fulfillment of God's covenantal promise of love to Israel's progenitor, Abraham (Gen 12:1-2; 15:13-21), a covenantal promise which is later confirmed to Abraham's descendants after their deliverance from Egypt (Exod 19:5-6; 24:1-8).¹⁹

The Deuteronomist, in his review of the covenantal love motif implicit in the redemption of Israel, notes that "YHWH did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples. But it was because YHWH loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers ... YHWH your God will keep his covenant of love with you, as he swore to your forefathers"(Deut 7:7-12). This reinforces the argument adduced above that Israel's

¹⁸ Paul Gallagher, "Salvation from the Jews?: Israel in Liberation Theology," *Asia Journal of Theology* 23 (2009): 281-296 (291).

¹⁹ See also Svetlana Knobnya who equally observes that, rather than the deliverance of Israel from Egypt being simply the rescue of an oppressed people, it was, in reality, a divine act of covenantal love by which Israel is adopted as God's children. Idem, "God the Father in the Old Testament," *European Journal of Theology* 20 (2011): 139-148(140).

covenant relationship with YHWH is not predicated on their ability to sustain covenant faithfulness or their moral uprightness, although these are enjoined as reciprocal obligations in the covenant stipulations (Exod 19:5; Deut 7:11-15). Rather, the election is primarily and ultimately predicated on YHWH's covenant love for Israel and his faithfulness to the covenant promise. The assurance of Israel's salvation is therefore secured by God's eternal love for his redeemed people and his covenant faithfulness, rather than by Israel's fickle ability to sustain covenant faithfulness.

Second, God's covenantal love for Israel embraces the complete humanity of Israel. Michael Wyschogrod aptly decries the theological attempts to visualize God's love for his covenant people as simply ἀγάπη, or divine love that is directed to the abstract good of humanity without embracing the full sensuality, including the fallibility, of human nature.²⁰ On the contrary, Wyschogrod argues that divine love is both ἀγάπη and ἔρωσ; it thus includes a dimension of sensuous love, such as that which subsists in marriage relationships and which embraces the sensuous dimension of human nature.²¹ Although the Greek term, ἔρωσ, does not appear in the Bible as such, ἔρωσ love is, nonetheless, portrayed in the Old Testament *Song of Songs* which, on the basis of ancient Near Eastern texts, has generally been viewed as a sacred marriage text allegorically depicting God's love for Israel or the Church.²² The ἔρωσ love is also portrayed in Hosea's metaphorical narrative in which Hosea's relation with his wife, Gomer, is a symbolic representation of God's relation with Israel. Thus, Hosea's love for his wife has a ἔρωσ dimension; it embraces the totality of Gomer, notwithstanding her inability to sustain faithfulness to her husband. It is also instructive that Hosea utilizes the same Hebrew word, אהב (love), to describe both his love for his wife and YHWH's love for Israel: "Go show your אהב (love) to your wife again ... as YHWH אהבת (loves) the Israelites (Hosea 3:1).

²⁰ See Colin Grant, "For the Love of God: Agape," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24 (2001): 3-21.

²¹ Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: God in the People of Israel* (2d. ed., Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1996), 58-68, 176-181.

²² See, for example, Kenton L. Sparks, "The Song of Songs: Wisdom for Young Jewish Women," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 70 (2008): 277-299 (277-78), and Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or the Song of Songs* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, M.N.: Fortress, 1990), 41-57.

Both the *Song of Songs* and the Hosea metaphorical narrative imply that, YHWH, as the lover, not only embraces the whole of the humanity of his beloved, Israel, but is also exposed to grief because of the possibility of being spurned by the fallible nature of the beloved.²³ The possibility of YHWH's love being spurned by Israel's fallible nature plausibly explains the inner anguish that YHWH displays as he wrestles with the shortcomings of Israel. The literary climax of the *Song of Songs*, or the *Canticles*, reinforces this plausibility by portraying the allegorized divine love as jealous and yet resiliently unyielding; "for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away" (Cant 8:6-7). The *Song of Songs* therefore portrays YHWH's love for Israel as a heartfelt divine bond of affection which touches the core of Israel's human nature and which unyieldingly endures many setbacks in the course of its consummation.

Third, God's love for his covenant people is fully cognizant of the human frailties implicit in the nature of divine redemption. God's love for humanity is therefore not blind love; it is the love of a lover who chooses to invest his total love in his beloved even though fully aware of imperfections in the existential being of the beloved. The Psalmist's portrayal of YHWH's loving forbearance with the shortcomings of Israel is perhaps the most succinct depiction, in the entire Old Testament, of how and why God wrestles with the shortcomings of his covenant people:

YHWH is compassionate and gracious; slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve, or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as East is from the West, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so YHWH has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed; he remembers that we are dust (Ps 103:8-14).

Thus the dialectic of a redeemed Israel, whose transgressions have been removed from them, and who are yet as fleeting and fickle as

²³ So also M. Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, 178- 181.

dust in their covenant faithfulness to YHWH, is explained by the nature of the divine redemption.

When God redeemed Israel to be his covenant community, he set them apart, or sanctified them, to be “a holy nation” (Exod 19:5), a “people holy to YHWH” (Deut 14:2). However, it is generally accepted in theological scholarship that the redemption act is both definitive and progressive such that the redeemed people remain in a realized-and-not-yet eschatological state until the full realization of their ultimate eschatological consummation in God. The fifteenth-century Reformation theologian, John Calvin, for instance, understood redemption to be a double grace; “By partaking in him, we principally receive a double grace, namely, that being reconciled to God through Christ’s blamelessness, we may have in heaven, instead of judge, a gracious Father; and secondly, that sanctified by Christ’s Spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life.”²⁴ Elsewhere, Calvin recounts that “although spiritual death makes continual headway within us (progressive sanctification), yet we are properly said to die once when Christ reconciles us by his blood to the Father and regenerates us (definitive sanctification) also at the same time by the power of the Holy Spirit.”²⁵

Different theological metaphors are usually employed to denote the definitive and progressive aspects of redemption. The definitive aspect is sometimes referred to as justification (or definitive sanctification), while the progressive aspect is often described as sanctification (or progressive sanctification). Thus, utilizing the metaphors of ‘justification’ and ‘sanctification,’ it can be affirmed that “our justification is a one-time act of God never to be repeated; by contrast, sanctification is the ongoing process that removes the pollution of sin and gradually conforms the sinner to the image of Christ.”²⁶ It is thus the justification aspect, or definitive sanctification, that secures, for the people of God, the assurance of redemption. As Fesko goes on to observe, “If the believer’s standing before God were

²⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, LCC Vols. 20-21 (trans. F.L. Battles; ed. J.T. McNeill; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3.11.1.

²⁵ John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians* (trans. R. Mackenzie; ed. D.W. Torrance and T.F. Torrance; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 127.

²⁶ J. V. Fesko, “Sanctification and Union with Christ: A Reformed Perspective,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 82 (2000): 197- 214 (200).

to hinge upon her sanctification, her status would always be in question because of its imperfect nature.”²⁷

From the above understandings of the nature of redemption, it is arguable that God’s struggle with the shortcomings of his redeemed people reflects the dialectical tension between the definitive sanctification and the progressive sanctification. As J. V. Fesko observes further, the dialectical tension is ultimately neither an ontological struggle between “the material and evil body warring against the immaterial pure spirit,”²⁸ nor is it simply a psychological struggle between “good and evil desires.”²⁹ Rather, it is the dialectical tension implicit in the realized-and-not-yet eschatological state of redemption.

God’s perseverance in his struggle with the shortcomings of his redeemed people in their anxious realized-and-not-yet eschatological state of redemption is informed by his eschatological design for the covenant community; “for I know the plans I have for you, declares YHWH, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future”(Jer 29:11). Indeed the entire Old Testament is eschatologically oriented towards the fulfillment of YHWH’s futuristic promises for Israel.³⁰ The Old Testament eschatological motif is more evident in the Israelite exilic/post-exilic eschatological prophecies and apocalyptic literature which not only portray YHWH’s struggle with the shortcomings of his covenant people vis-à-vis his eschatological redemptive promise (e.g. Ezek 37:1-14; 39:28-29; Joel 2:28-32), but also Israel’s “refusal to lose hope in God in the face of his judgments and, instead, a projection of that hope out to the ultimate bounds of existence.”³¹ God’s commitment to persevere in his struggle with the shortcomings of his people until the ultimate eschatological redemptive promise is ultimately fulfilled, and hence an assurance of Israel’s irrevocable redemption, is then affirmed by YHWH’s vow that “Only if the heavens above can be

²⁷ J. V. Fesko, “Sanctification and Union with Christ,” 200.

²⁸ J. V. Fesko, “Sanctification and Union with Christ,” 204.

²⁹ J. V. Fesko, “Sanctification and Union with Christ,” 205.

³⁰ For a similar argument see Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (trans. J. W. Leitch; New York: Harper, 1965), 124- 126.

³¹ John N. Oswalt, “Recent Studies in Old Testament Eschatology and Apocalyptic,” *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 24 (1981): 289- 301(291). See also J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 132.

measured and the foundations of the earth below be searched out will I reject all the descendants of Israel because of all that they have done, declares YHWH” (Jer 31:37).

Conclusion

This essay has attempted to demonstrate how, and to explain why, God wrestles with the shortcomings of his covenant people, from an Old Testament perspective. The argument of the essay is that God’s redemption of Israel to be his covenant people is irrevocable and that God’s perseverance in his covenant relationship with Israel, notwithstanding their shortcomings, is informed by the divine nature of God’s covenant love and covenant faithfulness. It is also informed by the realized-and-not-yet redeemed state of God’s covenant people, for whom the ultimate eschatological redemptive promise is, nonetheless, irrevocably secured by God’s faithfulness to his covenant promises. The goal of the essay has been to develop a grace-oriented approach to our understanding of the nature of our salvation in God, and draw attention to the truth that the redemption of God’s covenant people is assured because it is neither predicated on the abilities of human covenant faithfulness nor on human fickle moral uprightness (although these are enjoined in the covenant stipulations and their transgression attracts the redemptive wrath of God). Rather, the eternal security of the redemption of God’s covenant people is predicated on God’s grace alone.



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