

JOHN GOLDINGAY



OLD TESTAMENT ETHICS

*A Guided Tour*



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InterVarsity Press

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All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are the author's translation.

A full translation of the Old Testament is available in John Goldingay, *The First Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018).

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# CONTENTS

<i>Preface and Acknowledgments</i>	vii
------------------------------------	-----

<i>Introduction</i>	1
---------------------	---

<b>PART ONE: QUALITIES</b>	<b>7</b>
----------------------------	----------

1 Godlikeness	9
2 Compassion	15
3 Honor	21
4 Anger	26
5 Trust	31
6 Truthfulness	38
7 Forthrightness	44
8 Contentment	49

<b>PART TWO: ASPECTS OF LIFE</b>	<b>57</b>
----------------------------------	-----------

9 Mind and Heart	59
10 Wealth	64
11 Violence	69
12 Shalom	77
13 Justice	83
14 Reparation	88
15 Sabbath	95
16 Animals	101
17 Work	107

<b>PART THREE: RELATIONSHIPS</b>	<b>111</b>
----------------------------------	------------

18 Friends	113
19 Neighbors	118
20 Women	123
21 Good Husbands, Good Wives	128
22 Who You Can't Have Sex With	134
23 People Who Can't Undertake a Regular Marriage	141

24 Parents and Children	145
25 Nations	152
26 Migrants	159
27 Cities	165
28 Leaders	173
<b>PART FOUR: TEXTS</b>	<b>179</b>
29 Genesis 1: In the Beginning	181
30 Genesis 2: To Put It Another Way	185
31 Leviticus 25: Sabbaths for the Land and the Jubilee	189
32 Deuteronomy 15: When a Family's Life Falls Apart	195
33 Deuteronomy 20: How (Not) to Make War	200
34 Ruth: Commitment	205
35 Psalm 72: The Exercise of Authority with Faithfulness	211
36 The Song of Songs: Sex	216
<b>PART FIVE: PEOPLE</b>	<b>223</b>
37 Abraham	225
38 Sarah and Hagar	232
39 Joseph	237
40 Shiphrah and Puah, Yokebed and Miryam	245
41 David	249
42 Nehemiah	254
43 Vashti, Esther, and Mordecai	260
<i>Conclusion</i>	265
<i>Postscript: But What About the Canaanites?</i>	267
<i>Subject List</i>	273
<i>Scripture Index</i>	274
<i>Praise for Old Testament Ethics</i>	280
<i>About the Author</i>	282
<i>More Titles from InterVarsity Press</i>	283

## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is a spin-off from a series of short commentaries called “The Old Testament for Everyone” published by SPCK and Westminster John Knox. When I was coming to the end of writing these commentaries, Philip Law (whose brainchild they had been) suggested the possibility of one or two companion volumes covering topics within the Old Testament. Ethics is a hot topic; hence this book. Like those commentaries, it comprises a collection of short chapters and incorporates my translation of part of the biblical text. Each chapter is self-contained and you can read the chapters in any order; there’s not much logic about the order, and there’s no cumulative argument. Often the comment part starts from some experience of mine or some contemporary reflection, and the chapters end with some discussion questions that a group could use. If at any point you get confused about whether I live in the United States or in the United Kingdom, that’s because I’m completing it as we prepare to move back from California to England. I’m grateful to my colleague Erin Dufault-Hunter and (as always) to Kathleen Scott Goldingay for commenting on a draft of the book.

The Old Testament translations are based on drafts of the versions in *The Bible for Everyone* (SPCK, 2018) and *The First Testament: A New Translation* (IVP Academic, 2018). Translations from the New Testament are also my own. Chapters 27 and 37 adapt material first published as “The Bible in the City,” *Theology* 92 (1989): 5-15. There are one or two overlaps with my comments on Old Testament ethics in *Reading Jesus’s Bible* (Eerdmans, 2017).

If you want to know more about Old Testament ethics from the angle that I take in this book, you could look at

John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology Volume 3: Israel’s Life* (IVP Academic)

Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (IVP Academic).



If you think this book looks a bit conservative, you could look at

John Barton, *Ethics in Ancient Israel* (Oxford University Press)

Cyril S. Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land* (T&T Clark).

If you think it looks a bit liberal, you could look at

Roy E. Gane, *Old Testament Law for Christians* (Baker Academic)

Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Zondervan).

If you want to think more about principles of interpretation in connection with Old Testament ethics, you could look at

John Barton, *Ethics and the Old Testament* (SCM Press)

John Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics* (Westminster John Knox).

I'm putting the final touches to this book on New Year's Day, as the Rose Parade passes our house in Pasadena. It will be the last time I see the parade, given that we're expecting to move back to the United Kingdom. In our morning prayers today my wife and I prayed as we do each day that the God who has brought us safely to a new day (except that today we said "new year") may direct us to the fulfilling of his purpose. It's a monumental prayer, to whose achievement the Old Testament is important. Now I'll go and watch the parade for a bit.



# INTRODUCTION

What is ethics? Ethics asks

- what sort of people we are (e.g., faithful, honest, compassionate, forth-right, loyal, confrontational);
- how we think (e.g., about the world, about other people, about life and death, about wealth);
- what sort of thing we do (e.g., show hospitality, exercise generosity, enable people to keep Sabbath); and
- what sort of thing we don't do (e.g., murder someone, have sex with someone's spouse, steal someone's property).

It's easy to assume that the main focus of ethics is how we should approach certain tricky issues (e.g., what to do when a girl gets raped and made pregnant or whether to use nuclear weapons or whether torture is legitimate or what to do when someone is in such pain that they want to commit suicide). But one reason for the importance of the four broader sorts of question I just listed is that they have a big effect on how we approach the more specific tricky issues. They also have more impact on how we live our day-to-day lives. So I treat Old Testament ethics, in particular, as about the Old Testament's take on those four broad topics, though it may sometimes help us directly with the tricky questions.

We will look at Old Testament ethics from various angles:

- In the Old Testament, what are the qualities of a community and a person who live an ethical life? We will consider qualities such as faithfulness, compassion, pride, anger, and contentment.
- What does the Old Testament say about key aspects or areas of life? We will consider topics such as work, the environment, animals, wealth, violence, the Sabbath, and the administration of justice.

- How does the Old Testament look at relationships? We will consider friends, neighbors, parents, husbands and wives, nations, and other relationships.
- We will look at some key chapters that focus on ethical matters or are particularly significant for thinking about ethics: Genesis 1 and 2, Leviticus 19 and 25, Deuteronomy 15 and 20, Ruth, Psalm 72, and the Song of Songs.
- We will look at the lives of some people that open up ethical questions: Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, Joseph. Shiphrah and Puah, Samson, David, Nehemiah, and Vashti, Esther, and Mordecai.
- And in a postscript we will look at the question, “What about the Canaanites?”

In thinking about the Old Testament and ethics, two questions may be uppermost in our minds. One is the way the Old Testament may support us in connection with issues that are important to us—questions such as justice or the conservation of creation or same-sex marriage or caring for migrants. The other is the way the Old Testament raises problems for us—questions such as polygamy or the annihilation of the Canaanites. With the first sort of question, we have set the agenda and we are seeking to let the Old Testament say something about what is important to us. With the second sort of question we think we know what is right and we are seeking to let the Old Testament off the hook when it doesn't fit with our understanding. In this book I will pay some attention to both those interests of ours, but I want my readers to get more interested in a different sort of question. I focus more on what is the Old Testament's own agenda and how it raises questions that we have to respond to.

A friend of mine has suggested to me that Christian ethics has become primarily about principles (“We stand with Jesus on the side of love, justice, and liberation”). It's assumed to be obvious what love, justice, and liberation imply. But the risk is that the outworking of those principles comes mainly in accepting and encouraging the commitments of other progressive people. And the danger is that our thinking and lives are thus substantially shaped by the culture we live in, by our social context. We are inclined to assume that our way of thinking must be broadly right. But we need to have our way of thinking confronted. Jesus implies that what we call the Old Testament is an important resource in this connection.

Some Pharisees once asked Jesus what he thought about divorce. “What does it say in the Torah?” Jesus replied. On another occasion he declared, “I came to fulfil the Torah and the Prophets.” Paul said something similar: “the proper requirement of the Torah is fulfilled in us as we live according to the Spirit.” On yet another occasion Jesus told some people, “You need to work out what the Prophets mean when they say ‘God wants mercy not sacrifice.’” (Those are paraphrases of sayings in Mk 10:3; Mt 5:17; 9:13; Rom 8:4.) Jesus and Paul imply: if you want to know what’s right and if you want then to walk according to the Spirit, you need to know what the Torah and the Prophets say. Or if you want to test whether you are actually walking according to the Spirit, you need to use the Torah and the Prophets to check the way you walk.

One consideration that makes it tricky to discern the implications of the Torah and the Prophets as a whole is that the Old Testament wasn’t all written in one go. It issued from the work of many different people over the best part of a thousand years, two or three thousand years ago. It comes from cultures different from those in which modern Westerners live. It can thus seem remote. It can seem to accept things that we wouldn’t expect God to accept. The situations the Torah and the Prophets were addressing were different, and God needed them to say different things in different contexts. In giving us guidance about what’s right, the Old Testament isn’t systematic, and it isn’t organized by topics. Part of the challenge and the richness of the Old Testament is its colorful variety. Yet in due course these writings became one book. So how can it become a resource to us?

In observations such as the ones I have already noted, Jesus himself offers several suggestions. One arises out of that comment at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, that he didn’t come to annul the Torah and the Prophets but to fulfill them (Mt 5:17). In other words, he came to fill them out. How did he do so? When he goes on to say, “You’ve heard it said . . . but I say to you,” he gives a number of examples. For instance, he implies it’s possible to latch onto the commandment that prohibits murder and ignore the warnings the Old Testament gives about anger. He fulfills the Torah and the Prophets by pointing out things the Old Testament says and also things it implies that people might be inclined to avoid. To give another example, the Torah says, “Love your neighbor,” and the context in Leviticus makes clear that it has in mind the neighbor who you don’t get on with, but maybe Jesus knew of people who thought that as long as you loved

your nice neighbor you could hate your enemy. Jesus fulfills the Torah by bringing out its implications.

A further guideline arises from another question he was once asked. What's the most important of all the commands in the Torah? It was a question that Jewish theologians liked to debate, though there was really little doubt about the answer. It's the command to love God with heart and soul and mind and strength (Deut 6:5). Like some other Jewish teachers, Jesus wanted to augment it with another command from the Torah: loving one's neighbor deserves to be set alongside loving God (Lev 19:18). Jesus then adds that the entirety of the Torah and the Prophets depends on these two commands. It's a significant comment in connection with thinking about Old Testament ethics. When you wonder about the point of an individual rule in the Torah, for instance, or when you're thinking that a particular command by God seems an odd thing for God to require, it's always worth asking, How is this command a working out of either love for God or love for neighbor?

A third insight emerges from that discussion of divorce (Mk 10:1-12). The Pharisees noted that the Torah allows divorce. Ah, says Jesus, the Torah allows divorce because you're hard-hearted. If you look back to the way things were at creation when God made the first man and woman and they got together, you can't imagine that divorce was intended to be part of the picture. But (he implies) God recognizes that some men do throw out their wives, so he provides a rule that regulates the way this grim event happens, and he offers the wife some protection. So paradoxically, there is another way in which the Torah expresses love for one's neighbor. It both lays out God's creation ideal and vision, and it makes allowance for the fact that we don't live up to it.

These three guidelines from Jesus will be important as we look at Old Testament ethics: ask how the implications of the Old Testament's teaching need to be spelled out, ask how its teaching expresses love for God or love for neighbor, and ask how far it is laying down creation ideals and how far it is making allowance for our hard-heartedness.

There's another piece of Old Testament background to these three guidelines. The Old Testament contains lots of "thou shalts" and "thou shalt nots," especially in the first five books. The title "the Law" for these five books is a misleading translation of the word *Torah*, which means "instruction" or "teaching." And it's generally misleading to think of its individual sections of

teaching as “laws,” as if they were like Western state law or canon law. A concrete indication of that fact within the Old Testament itself is that one can find little match between the prescriptions the Torah lays down and the way Israel actually handles offenses such as murder, idolatry, and adultery. It seems that it’s not the case that Israel knows it’s supposed (say) to execute murderers, idolaters, and adulterers, and fails to do so. Even faithful, Torah-keeping leaders don’t treat the Torah as a statute book. They know they are not supposed to be literalistic in interpreting these “laws.”

This phenomenon would be more puzzling were it not for the fact it features among other Middle Eastern peoples. When a king lays down a set of statutes, it doesn’t mean they become the basis of legal practice. They are rather a collection of indications of the kind of moral and social norms that the king claims to be committed to. The Old Testament operates on a parallel basis. “Laws” that prescribe execution for murder, adultery, idolatry, and a long list of other acts are markers of the kind of religious, moral, and social commitments that God expects his people to accept. They are indications of how serious these offenses are. They comprise teaching on theological ethics in the form of laws. Understood this way, the Torah becomes more obviously useful for an understanding of Old Testament ethics. It turns out that asking about the ethical significance of the rules in the Torah is a form of study that corresponds to the Torah’s own nature.





## PART ONE

# QUALITIES

We have noted that ethics asks about what sort of people we are, and the Old Testament's rules and sayings and stories are often concerned to give concrete expression to what sort of people we are and what sort of people we might long to be. In part one of this book we will look at some of the personal qualities the Old Testament wants to inculcate: godlikeness (especially in the combination of love and toughness), compassion, honor, anger (expressing the good kind and renouncing the bad kind), trust in God (a key to ethical behavior, the Old Testament implies), truthfulness, forthrightness, and contentment.





# GODLIKENESS



“Be holy as I am holy” (Lev 19:2). So what is God like? A little earlier in the story of Israel at Sinai, he makes a proclamation about his own nature:

Yahweh, God compassionate and gracious, long-tempered, big in commitment and truthfulness, preserving commitment toward the thousands, carrying waywardness, rebellion, and wrongdoing; he certainly doesn’t treat people as free of guilt, attending to parents’ waywardness in connection with children and with grandchildren, with thirds and with fourths. (Ex 34:6-7)

While this proclamation is designed to shape our thinking about the God we serve, the terms God uses are also ones that recur explicitly or implicitly when the Old Testament discusses the qualities that ideally describe human beings. So this proclamation also makes us think further about the God we are to resemble. He is

- *Compassionate.* The word is the plural of the Hebrew word for a woman’s womb. It’s a feeling you have that’s like the feelings of a mother (see chap. 2 on compassion).
- *Gracious.* It’s the attitude you show to someone when you treat them with favor even if they have done nothing to deserve it.
- *Long-tempered.* It’s the attitude you take when you have good reason to get angry and to act accordingly, but you don’t.
- *Big in commitment.* It’s the generous loyalty you show to someone when you are under no obligation to them, or that you keep showing when they have let you down.

- *Big in truthfulness.* It's the reliability and steadfastness you show when you are consistently faithful to people.
- *Preserving commitment toward the thousands.* It's the generous loyalty that you keep manifesting year in year out, decade in decade out.
- *Carrying waywardness, rebellion, and wrongdoing.* It's the forgiveness you offer when you live with the consequences of people's actions rather than making them carry the consequences.
- *Not treating people as free of guilt.* It's the firmness you manifest when you refuse to let mercy triumph over justice in a way that treats right and wrong as things that don't matter.
- *Attending to waywardness in connection with children and grandchildren, thirds and fourths.* It's the toughness you show even though it's costly through the fact that we live in one web of life.

One feature of God's self-description that may seem strange is that the word *love* doesn't come in it (though it does in some translations of Exodus, as a rendering of the word *hesed*, which I translate as "commitment": see chap. 34). For that matter, the ordinary word for "love" comes only twice in the entire first half of Genesis (for instance). Both times when it does come, Isaac is involved. The nice one is when Isaac's father, Abraham, sends his chief of staff to find Isaac a wife, and he brings back Rebekah. Isaac loves her, and incidentally recovers from his loss of his mother two or three years previously (Gen 24:67).

But earlier, God has referred to the fact that Isaac's father, Abraham, loves Isaac (Gen 22:2), yet that affirmation is preliminary to God's telling Abraham to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice. Subsequent references to love in Genesis are also quirky. Isaac loves one of the twin sons whom Rebekah bears, and Rebekah loves the other (Gen 25:28), which causes problems. Jacob loves Rachel more than Leah (Gen 29:18-32), which also causes problems (Deut 21:10-17 seeks to deal with some of them). Shechem loves Dinah and rapes or seduces her, which is not the last problem in that story (Gen 34). Jacob loves Joseph more than his other sons, which issues in complications of one kind or another (Gen 37). Whereas love can seem so simple and straightforward, in reality it isn't.

Love is (among other things) an emotion, and like any emotion it can be fruitful, but it can also be problematic. Maybe it's no wonder that Genesis doesn't explicitly talk about it much, even though one could properly say that creation was an act of love and that God's promises to Abraham were an act

of love. And maybe it's no wonder that Exodus 34:6-7 doesn't use the word *love* even though love is what it's talking about.

When we do think of creation or of God's summons of Abraham as acts of love, we are presupposing that love isn't just an emotion. Indeed, it may not be an emotion at all. Only in Deuteronomy 4:37 does it become explicit that God loved Israel and its ancestors, and there the expression of love was that God chose Israel and got Israel out of Egypt. Love was an action. It fits that this declaration about love soon leads into a famous command about love: "Listen, Israel: Yahweh our God Yahweh one. You're to love Yahweh your God with your entire mind, with your entire being, with your entire might" (Deut 6:4-5).

Why does the word *love* suddenly appear in Deuteronomy, and what does it mean? In the background of this innovation is the fact that *love* was a political word in the Middle East. A superpower expected its subordinate powers to "love" it. The superpower didn't care much whether it was loved in the emotional sense. It did care whether its underling peoples were loyal to it. Deuteronomy picks up that way of speaking about love to urge Israel to give Yahweh its exclusive loyalty. Israel is to give nothing away to other gods. It's to place no reliance on them. It's never to ask them for anything. Israel's entire mind, being, might is to belong to Yahweh. So in this passage, one could translate the Hebrew word for "love" as "be loyal to."

That other great commandment, as Jesus calls it (Mt 22:35-40), requires love for one's neighbor (Lev 19:18; see chap. 19). While exclusiveness is not the point here, love as action and as loyalty is again the point.

If we look back over the Old Testament story from that point where God says "Be holy as I am holy" (Lev 19:2), what do we discover God is like, and therefore what we should perhaps be like?

- At the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (Gen 1:1).  
So be creative.
- There is to be light! (Gen 1:3).  
So bring light.
- God blessed (Gen 1:28).  
So bless.
- It pained his heart (Gen 6:6).  
So be open to pain.
- The inclination of the human mind is bad from its youth (Gen 8:21).  
So be realistic.

- I myself am going to implement my pact with you (Gen 9:9).  
So don't give up.
- All the kin-groups on the earth will bless themselves by you (Gen 12:3).  
So give people hope.
- To your offspring I shall give this country (Gen 12:7).  
So give people land.
- God tested Abraham (Gen 22:1).  
So test people.
- Their cry for help because of their servitude went up to God (Ex 2:23).  
So hear people's cry for help.
- I will be with you (Ex 3:12).  
So be there.
- The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has appeared to me (Ex 3:16).  
So be open, self-revealing.
- Send my people Israel off so they may hold a festival for me in the wilderness (Ex 5:1).  
So confront the imposition of servitude.
- You will not . . . (Ex 20:4, 7, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17).  
So be categorical.
- When people get into an argument . . . (Ex 21:18).  
So be concrete and practical.
- If you could carry their wrongdoing . . . (Ex 32:32).  
So be more merciful than judgmental.
- Congregate the entire assembly at the entrance of the appointment tent (Lev 8:3).  
So be available.
- In the people who draw near me I will show myself sacred (Lev 10:3).  
So be formidable.

That last reference takes us back to another feature of God's self-description in Exodus 34:6-7, which may seem strange. If there is one thing that people think they know about the God of the Old Testament, it is that he is full of

wrath, especially when compared with Jesus. So why does he play down that aspect of his nature in Exodus 34:6-7? Maybe part of the answer is that the moment when he is here speaking to the Israelites is when they have just been on the receiving end of his wrath (as is the case in Lev 10:3, that last reference in the list above). And maybe this link is significant for Christian readers who think he is a God of wrath—he is saying to us, “Don’t get this wrath motif out of hand.”

On one occasion when God threatens to act in judgment on Judah, Isaiah says he will indeed do so:

To do his deed—strange is his deed,  
to perform his service—foreign is his service. (Is 28:21)

Isaiah is saying that there is something alien to God about acting in judgment. He can do it, but it doesn’t come naturally. Those words in Isaiah have further implications. One is that his bark is commonly worse than his bite. There are occasions in the Old Testament when he does act in wrath, but there are actually not so many of them. Your chances of living in a place and time when he did so are very small. You can read page after page in the Old Testament story and never read about it happening. He is always drawing lines in the sand and then doing nothing when people cross them.

The chapter in Isaiah describing the alien thing that God is about to do would make one think that he is about to surrender Jerusalem to the Assyrians. But he didn’t do it. He arranged for the city to be relieved at the last minute. The wrath of God in the Old Testament is much more often something he threatens than something he acts out. He does sometimes act it out; he did eventually surrender Jerusalem to the Babylonians. But we miss what is going on if we take his warnings as descriptions of things that actually happened. The point applies just as forcefully to the prophets’ declarations about wrath falling on other peoples. There is usually no record of its doing so, though the great empires such as Assyria and Babylon are the exception; they do fall, and Yahweh claims the credit, which is pretty worrying for those of us who belong to great empires.

Jesus follows his Father’s example. He talks in chapter after chapter about weeping and gnashing of teeth and about hell and about judgment on his own people and about the destruction of Jerusalem, and he talks in chapter after chapter in Revelation about the fall of the great empire, but none of that prospect becomes reality in history within his lifetime or for decades afterward.

Oddly, therefore, being Godlike means speaking in fiery terms about judgment in order to seek to draw people back to God, in the manner of Jonah, and not worrying about God failing to implement the judgment he threatens. Because it's foreign to him, even though from time to time he will screw himself up to do it.

#### FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What aspects of the character of God seem most important in connection with ethics?
2. What aspect of God is easiest to imitate?
3. What aspect of God is hardest to imitate?
4. In what way is it hard to love God?
5. In what way is it hard to love one's neighbor?



## COMPASSION



A friend of mine who is divorced and has two children likes to comment that the image of God as husband and the image of his people as wife doesn't work very well for her because the marriage relationship is one that either side can terminate (and in this case did). The image of God as father or mother and of his people as God's children works better because she knows that her relationship as mother to her children is one that she could never terminate, and in a sense neither can they. They will always be her son and daughter, whether they like it or not. No matter what they do, they will still be her children. She gave birth to them. She nursed them.

We noted in chapter one that the Hebrew word for compassion (*rahamim*) is the plural of its word for the womb (*rehem*), which suggests that compassion is an aspect of that feeling a mother has for her children. And the Old Testament talks a lot about Yahweh's compassion, which can help us see what compassion means.

So, can a mother put her baby out of mind? The desperate circumstances of the siege of Jerusalem drove some women into cannibalism with their babies after they had died:

The hands of compassionate women  
 cooked their children.  
 They became food for them  
 through the breaking of my dear people. (Lam 4:10)

If a mother could put her baby out of mind so as not to have compassion on it, Yahweh will not do so with Jerusalem.

Can a woman put her baby out of mind,  
     so as not to have compassion on the child of her womb?  
 Yes, these may put out of mind,  
     but I—I cannot put you out of mind. (Is 49:15)

Not that the Old Testament is sexist about the matter: it also affirms that God's compassion for his people is like a father's compassion.

In accordance with a father's compassion for his children,  
     Yahweh has had compassion for people who hold him in awe.  
 (Ps 103:13)

Before making it the first quality he claims when he gives that systematic self-description in Exodus 34:6, Yahweh had already declared that his compassion was promiscuous: he has compassion on anyone he cares to, without having to provide a rationale or setting limits:

I grace whomever I grace and have compassion on whomever I have compassion. (Ex 33:19)

Indeed, he has compassion for everything he created:

Yahweh is good to all;  
     his compassion is over all the things he made. (Ps 145:9)

It's just as well, because Israel tests those limits to breaking point. But when Yahweh speaks against his "son" Ephraim (that is, the northern Israelite nation) and determines to throw him out of the house, he can't quite do it, because Ephraim is the son he loves. He can't help having compassion for him.

Ephraim is a dear son to me,  
     or a child in whom I took pleasure, isn't he.  
 Because every time I speak against him,  
     I'm so mindful of him again.  
 That's why my insides moan for him,  
     I have deep compassion for him. (Jer 31:20)

Actually Yahweh does from time say, "That's it!" and throw his people out for a while. But he can't finally let go of them or forget the commitment he made to them:

All these things will befall you in a later time but you will turn back to Yahweh your God and listen to his voice. Because Yahweh your God is a compassionate

God. He won't let go of you. He won't devastate you. He won't put out of mind the pact with your ancestors, which he swore to them. (Deut 4:30-31)

When he puts them down, his heart isn't in it, because his heart is compassion:

Because the Lord

doesn't reject permanently.

Rather he brings suffering, but he has compassion,

in the greatness of his acts of commitment.

Because it's not from his heart that he humbles

and brings suffering to human beings. (Lam 3:31-33)

David knows that falling into Yahweh's hands is therefore safer than falling into human hands (2 Sam 24:14). But a theme running through the Old Testament suggests a side comment on David's observation. The Old Testament refers more often to the compassion of people outside Israel than to compassion within Israel. I don't think it's implying that Gentiles are more compassionate than Jews. It's implying that compassion is intrinsic to our created human nature. In this sense, we don't have to feel totally hopeless about falling into human hands. God can inspire compassion in Gentiles. Jacob prays for God to act in that way, Solomon prays that way, Nehemiah prays that way:

May God Shadday himself give you compassion before the man so he may release your other brother to you, and Benjamin. (Gen 43:14)

May you listen in the heavens, in the established place where you live, to their plea, their prayer for grace, and decide for them, and pardon your people who've done wrong in relation to you, for all their acts of rebellion that they have committed against you, and give them compassion before their captors so they may have compassion on them. (1 Kings 8:49-50)

Lord, please may your ear become heeding to your servant's plea and to the plea of your servants who want to live in awe of your name. Please enable your servant to succeed today and give him compassion before this man. (Neh 1:11)

And Yahweh promises it in respect of Judah's captors:

Don't be afraid of the king of Babel, of whom you are afraid; don't be afraid of him (Yahweh's declaration) because I am with you to deliver you and to rescue

you from his hand. I shall give you compassion, and he will have compassion toward you and take you back to your land. (Jer 42:11-12)

When you turn back to Yahweh, your brothers and your children will find compassion before their captors and they will come back to this country, because Yahweh your God is gracious and compassionate, and he will not turn aside his face from you if you turn back to him. (2 Chron 30:9)

Yahweh keeps the promise. Admittedly, like other aspects of the way we were created in God's image, we can resist our natural gifts and lose them. It can even be the death of brotherly relations:

For three rebellions by Edom,  
for four I shall not turn it back,  
Because he pursued his brother with a sword,  
destroyed his compassion. (Amos 1:11)

The Old Testament especially characterizes the superpowers that way. Realistically speaking, maybe you don't get to be a superpower if compassion is one of your main characteristics. And God can make use of a superpower's lack of compassion. He can use Babylon to put Judah down:

There, a people is going to come from a northern country,  
a big nation will arise from earth's remotest parts.  
They take firm hold of bow and javelin;  
it's violent—they don't have compassion. (Jer 6:22-23)

I shall give Zedekiah king of Judah and his servants and the people, those who remain in this town from epidemic, sword, and famine, into the hand of Nebuchadrezzar, king of Babylon, and into the hand of their enemies, into the hand of the people seeking their life. He'll strike them down with the mouth of the sword. He won't have pity for them. He won't have mercy. He won't have compassion. (Jer 21:7)

And then, in turn, he can use Media to put Babylon down:

Here am I, stirring up the Medes against them,  
who don't think about silver.  
Gold—they don't want it,  
but their bows will smash the young.  
They won't have compassion on the fruit of the womb,  
their eye won't spare children. (Is 13:17-18)

It doesn't mean the empires get a pass from the guilt that attaches to lack of compassion, especially the lack of compassion that doesn't care about people like the aged:

I was angry with my people, I treated my domain as ordinary,  
I gave them into your hand.  
You didn't show compassion to them;  
upon the aged you made your yoke very heavy. (Is 47:6)

The prophet is talking here to Ms. Babylon, the empire personified as a woman, and his indictment is that she lacks this basic womanly trait.

While compassion is to be expected of humanity in general, it is expected especially of people who live in awe of Yahweh. They are supposed to be like God in their character: in them compassion lives in the company of graciousness and faithfulness (a neat trinity). It means they act as light for the upright when things are dark for them—that is, they stand by people who are in the dark, protect them and bring them relief:

The blessings of the person who lives in awe of Yahweh,  
who delights much in his orders. . . .  
He rises in the darkness as light for the upright,  
gracious, compassionate, and faithful. (Ps 112:1, 4)

Compassion is friends with truthfulness and commitment; it opposes the oppression of people such as widows, orphans, aliens, and the lowly:

Exercise truthful authority, exercise commitment and compassion each person  
with his brother. Don't oppress widow and orphan, alien and humble.  
(Zech 7:9-10)

It even implies an attitude to animals:

A faithful person knows his animal's appetite,  
but the compassion of the faithless is cruel. (Prov 12:10)

So compassion is a natural feeling that we can encourage or discourage, one that we can urge on other people and on communities, cities, and nations as part of what they really know is involved in being human. It is quite indiscriminate in who it applies to. It may chastise, but it comes back to heal and restore. It implies that we treat other people and nations as brothers and sisters. It recognizes an obligation to the old as well as the young, and to other vulnerable people.

**FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION**

1. Where is more compassion needed in your church?
2. Where is compassion needed in your local community (your village, suburb, city)?
3. Where is compassion needed in your country?
4. Where do you wish you experienced more compassion?
5. Where could you go and show compassion?