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<p>본 저자는 창세기 1-11장에 나온 하나님의 이미지를 연구하여 교차-문화적 대화를 열어보고자 한다. 특별히 창조와 홍수 이야기 속에 나오는 신적 자기 제한 문제에 대한 본문 증거를 끌어내어 보고자 한다. 하나님이 인간 그리고 비인간적 창조물들과 진정한 관계를 맺고자 하는 것이 드러난 본문들을 중요하게 다룬다. 하나님이 그의 대리인을 사용하는 것, 하나님이 폭력과 관련하는 것, 그리고 홍수 이후 에도 오히려 지속 증가된 폭력에 대한 의미들을 다루었다.</p>	
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Does the God of Genesis 1-11 Cross Cultures?¹⁾

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In the history of biblical interpretation, at least from Marcion on, the Bible's presentation of God has created problems, not least the association of that God with a remarkable range of problematic words and actions (e.g., violence). Indeed, Marcion emerged with a truncated New Testament in order to rid it of any remnants of problematic (to him) Old Testament God talk. Through the centuries Marcion has had many heirs (at times unwittingly so!). These ongoing concerns about the God of the Bible have been raised to new intensities in recent decades, not least because of changing cultural sensitivities, an increasingly diverse readership (e.g., female readers and non-Western readers), and a more varied range of personal experience.

The question underlying this paper: There certainly must be cross-cultural

1) I am honored to present this paper at the 50th anniversary meeting of the Korean Society of Old Testament Studies (2010).

issues that affect the interpretation of those biblical texts that speak of God. How best might we enable those differences to surface and to interact with one another? One way to do this: lay out ones own interpretation of the God of those texts as clearly as possible and be open to dialogue with those who bring differing cultural sensitivities. That is what I try to do in this paper, focusing on the God of Genesis 1-11.

One effect of these developments is that both church and academy have begun to give more intense attention to difficult images for God.²⁾ At the same time, such renewed attention to the problem of God in the Bible has not always been welcomed. It is sometimes suggested that any special consideration of these issues is, finally, in the interests of a theodicy that seeks to defend God in the face of the realities of sin and evil that ravage our world and God needs no defense. Perhaps this is true of some studies. At the same time, not all responses to these kinds of God questions fall into the category of defense. Indeed, some such responses including my own catch God up in significant levels of responsibility for this kind a world.³⁾ Many such responses to evil and suffering can be profitably related to struggles with these issues within the Old Testament itself (e.g., Job; the lament psalms; Jeremiah 11-20).

In addition, it is important to recognize that at least some negative responses to the issue of theodicy are prompted by an often vigorous defense of another kind (perhaps unstated), namely, a defense of traditional understandings of God.⁴⁾ Indeed, readers might ask if at least some of the difficulties with the God of the Bible are related, not to the textual images as such, but to the impact of such traditional understandings of God on interpretation.⁵⁾ These

2) For example, Eric Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009). For my own work, see Terence E. Fretheim, God and Violence in the Old Testament, *Word & World* 24 (2004) 18-28; I Was Only a Little Angry: Divine Violence in the Prophets, *Interpretation* 58 (2004) 365-375.

3) See Terence E. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed: The Bible, God, and Natural Disasters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010).

4) These understandings could be considered Western in origin, but they have often become a part of non-Western interpretations of God through the global impact of Western thought.

5) See Robert A. Oden, *The Bible Without Theology: The Theological Tradition and Alternatives to*

include such claimed divine characteristics (often unqualified and insufficiently nuanced) as: omnipotent, omniscient, immutable, impassible, and atemporal. Though the Bible uses none of these words, their associated ideas have had an immense influence, consciously or unconsciously, on the way in which many readers interpret the word God whenever they encounter it in the text. The result is that many of the actual biblical images for God are neglected or have been harmonized to fit with these post-biblically formed divine attributes.⁶⁾ However much that might or might not be the case and studies of such possible effects on biblical interpretation are needed the textual images for God need closer attention.

From another angle, we should not forget the power of personal experience. It is now generally recognized that Bible interpreters are not blank slates when they read or interpret the Bible. Something of who we are as interpreters will inevitably be a part of any meaning we claim to see in a text. We are deeply affected by what we have been taught and the broad range of our life experiences, including communal and familial experience. We should also not underestimate the power of the churchly tradition within which we have been reared; whether recognized or not, such traditions will have commonly become deeply set within us over time.

Moreover, cultural differences among us will inevitably shape our personal convictions regarding God and in ways that need to be more fully explored. At the same time, in my teaching experiences in several non-Western cultures, I have been surprised at the extent to which a traditionally Western

it (Cambridge: Harper & Row, 1987). While I don't agree with Oden's basic direction of reflection, some of his comments are helpful. For example: The theological tradition carries with it clear limitations that have threatened and still threaten to restrict the range of questions considered appropriate to raise of texts and themes in the Bible and, when confronted with a voice contrary to the prevailing theology, often resorts to explanation by reference to the inexplicable (pp. vii-viii).

6) A prominent exception in Old Testament theological work is Walter Brueggemann. See especially his *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997). At the same time, one should ask whether his presentation of God in the Old Testament is overstated on the problematic side. See Terence E. Fretheim, Some Reflections on Brueggemann's God, in *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann* (eds. T. Linfeldt & T. Beal; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 24-37.

understanding of God, at least with regard to basic formulations, has found a home in such contexts. Sorting out the whys and wherefores of this reality remains an important agenda.

To that end, I would like to begin to explore these God issues through a study of the images of God present in Genesis 1-11, especially the creation story (Genesis 1-2) which I develop elsewhere and only summarize here and the story of the flood (Genesis 6-9).⁷ For this essay I am particularly interested in the image of divine *self*-limitation. The language of self limitation does have some inadequacies; it could suggest to some readers a diminishment of the divine self. That is certainly not necessarily the case, of course; such language may actually magnify the Lord. I use this language to make it clear that it is *God*, not human beings, who chooses to limit the divine self in relating to the world. This divine act is a profoundly gracious move on Gods part.⁸

Foundational to such an understanding of the God of the Old Testament is this: God has entered into a *genuine relationship* with the world.⁹ It would be commonly agreed that, by definition, genuine relationship entails self-limitationmaking room for the other in relation to oneself.¹⁰ In creating that which is not God, God makes room in Gods new world (it is a new world for God, too!) for that which is genuinely other, to which God, at the same time, chooses to be related. The texts with which I work in what

7) See fn. 3.

8) I purposely avoid using the language *kenosis* so as not to be caught up in the interpretation of New Testament texts such as Philippians 2 and related theological claims. I believe that divine self-limitation is an Old Testament theme and needs to be developed on that textual turf as far as is possible. At the same time, I invite others to develop whatever link there may be across the testaments. See fn. 24.

9) Both italicized words are important, not least because relationships can often be construed and practiced in such a way as to be dangerous to human life and health. For detail, see Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005) 13-22.

10) If the language of self-limitation proves too difficult for readers, an option could be: a necessary manifestation (or demonstration) of a genuinely relational self. It might also be noted that the God who makes such moves is a holy God; holiness does not necessarily stand over against self-limitation (see the language of holiness for creatures that are *not* God, e.g., Lev 19:2; Exod 19:6).

follows will help ground this claim. Other texts beyond Genesis 1-11 could be called upon to further this conversation.

More generally, this relational perspective is evident at three levels of consideration: within God (see Gen 1: 26), between God and world (e.g., covenant), and among all creatures.¹¹⁾ To live in such an interrelated world means that all creatures are bound up with one another in such a way that each of us is involved in the plight of all of us. God has chosen to be caught up in this spider web of relationships in a self-limiting way. God will move with these interrelating creatures into a future which is to some extent unsettled, dependent in part on what the creatures do with the powers they have been given *by God*.

I now seek to work out this understanding of divine self-limitation in relation to key texts in Genesis 1-11. I will also suggest that the place of Genesis 1-11 at the beginning of the Bible invites readers to study all the biblical texts that follow through the theological lens these chapters provide.

1. Divine Self-Limitation in Genesis 1-2

How we think about the God of the Bible will be sharply affected by how we portray the God of the creation accounts. It is common to say that God created the world alone, with overwhelming power and absolute control, working independently and unilaterally. But, if this understanding of God in creation is correct, then those created in God's image could *properly* understand their role regarding the rest of creation in terms of power over, absolute control, and independence. What if the God of the creation accounts is imaged more as one who, in creating, chooses to share power in relationship, with a consequent self-limitation in the use of divine power and freedom? Then the way in which the human as image of God exercises dominion is to be shaped by that model. The practical implications of such an understanding, not least with respect to environmental matters, are enormous.

11) For further analysis of these dimensions of relationality, see Fretheim, *God and World*, pp. 13-22.

I see five types of textual evidence in both creation accounts that can assist us in reflecting on this angle of vision.¹²⁾ These points are stated in a very general way here.

1. In some cases,¹³⁾ God creates in and through the use of existing matter. Male and female, for example, are not created "out of nothing," but out of already existent creatures, both human and nonhuman (Gen 2: 7, 22). The Creator gets down in the dirt and creates in direct contact with the stuff that is used to create. The nature of the matter with which God chooses to work in the creative process has an effect on what is being created. This is an act of self-limitation.

2. In still other cases, God speaks *with* already existing creatures and involves them in creative activity. Let the earth bring forth and the *earth* brought forth (Gen 1: 11-13); Let us [the divine council] make humankind (Gen 1: 26). By inviting the participation of that which is not God in the creative process, God thereby *necessarily* limits the divine role in creation. God thereby gives power to the creature and does not retain all power for the divine self. Gods creating is shown to be accomplished in and through the genuine involvement of creaturely agents.¹⁴⁾ God chooses not to be the sole actor in creation. This is an act of self-limitation.

3. The divine let us in Gen 1: 26 signals the nature of the relationship between God and those created in the image of God. That is, as God shares power in the divine realm (in and through the divine council) so also God

12) These matters are more fully developed in the book noted in fn. 3. I assume literary and historical reflections on these texts. For a basic and thorough discussion, see Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984). I work with the two creation accounts together; the present edition of the biblical text invites readers to do so (and the author of the first account may very well be the one responsible for the juxtaposition of these texts).

13) For a full listing of the modes of creation, see Fretheim, *God and World*, pp. 34-35.

14) Gods use of agents in creation is paralleled by Gods use of agents in history (see below).

shares power with those created in the image of God. Hence, Gods *first* words to the human being in Gen 1: 28 constitute such a power-sharing move, a sure sign of an interdependent divine way with the world. Human beings are invited, indeed commanded by God to play an important role in the becoming of their world in and through the exercise of power: be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, subdue it, and have dominion. God here chooses not to retain all power, but to share it with human beings: I am giving you specific tasks to accomplish and, by definition, the power with which to carry out those responsibilities. God thereby chooses not to do everything in the world all by himself.

Then, in Gen 2: 19-21, God lets the *human being* determine whether the animals are adequate to move the evaluation of the creation from "not good" to "good." Genuine power is here given to the human creature. The human naming of the animals that follows is directly parallel to Gods naming in Genesis 1; God gives over the task of naming in the creative process to the human. One could also cite Eve's testimony to *both* human and divine involvement in the production¹⁵⁾ of the first human being (Gen 4: 1). God has freely chosen to act in and through creatures in matters of creational development. God and human beings do not play the same role, but the co-participation of the human is real. These are acts of divine self-limitation.

And so God gives to human and nonhuman creatures responsibilities in such a way that *commits* God to a certain kind of relationship with them. In other words, God exercises a sovereignty that gives genuine power over to the creatures for the sake of a relationship of integrity. God does not manage their activity, intervening to make sure every little thing goes right. At the same time, this way of relating to creatures, not least Gods use of them as agents of the divine will (see below), reveals a divine vulnerability, for God opens the divine self up to resistance and hurt should things not go according to the divine plan. The agents in and through which God chooses

15) The Hebrew verb *qanah* is used in Gen 14:19, 22 for the divine creation of heaven and earth.

to work often do go astray, often violently so, for Gods will can be successfully resisted, at least in the near term.

In sum, God takes the ongoing creational process into account in shaping new directions for the world, one dimension of which is using and engaging creatures in creative acts. Divine decisions interact with creaturely activity in the becoming of the world. Creation is process as well as punctiliar act; creation is creaturely as well as divine. Gods approach to creation is thus communal and relational.¹⁶⁾ That is an act of self-limitation.

4. God as evaluator. In evaluating the creatures each in turn, over the course of the times specified in Genesis 1, God *experiences* what has been created and is *affected* by that experience. In other terms, God *reacts* to what has been created and lets that reaction shape the next divine move (the divine naming of creatures is also a move based on experience). God thereby recognizes the creatures as a genuine other, evident not least in that Gods evaluation does not always issue in a good result (Gen 2: 18). The creature thereby has an effect on Gods continuing creative actions, even if only indirectly, thereby making its own contribution to the developing creation. Gods creative activity is thus shown not only to be active, but also reactive. For God to react, and not simply to act, is in itself an act of self-limitation.

5. God rests.¹⁷⁾ In the language of the text, God keeps the Sabbath day (Gen 2: 1-3).¹⁸⁾ It is important to emphasize that this Sabbath is a day on which *God* rests (not human beings).¹⁹⁾ This is testimony to a period of time in

16) While the biblical testimony, finally, witnesses to creation out of nothing (Rom 4:17; Heb 11:3), there is strong consensus that such an idea only exists on the edges of Genesis 1-2 (and, in any case, would apply to several creational details rather than creation as a whole, for example, 1:6-7, 14-19). It should be noted that the only event that would be needed to sustain a *creatio ex nihilo* perspective is a Big Bang (or its predecessors).

17) For detail, see the exposition of Gen 2:1-3 in Fretheim, *God and World*, pp. 61-64.

18) For God to rest on a specific day, for a specific time, raises issues of divine temporality, that is, past, present, and future are real to God. God therein genuinely enters into time and makes it Gods own, hallowing it thereby.

19) Later texts will call upon human beings to rest as God rested (Exod 20:8-11; 31:17).

which God suspends the divine activity and allows the creatures, each in its own way, to be what they were created to be. In resting for a specific time, God lets the world develop itself; all creatures are on their own, if you will. God thereby gives to all creatures a certain independence and freedom.

2. That God rests is an *explicit* reference to self-limitation.

God chooses to stand back, without managing the creaturely activity, both with respect to the human and the nonhuman. With regard to human beings, God leaves room for genuine decisions on their part. With regard to nonhuman creatures, God releases them from tight divine control and permits them to be the creatures they are. The latter includes the becoming of creation, from the movement of tectonic plates to volcanic activity to the spread of viruses to the procreation of animals. This is a divine commitment that we might wish God had not made, especially when suffering and death are in view. But God will remain true to Gods commitments come what may. God rests so that the creatures may thrive. As a result, the actions of creatures make a difference with respect to the future of the creation, indeed Gods future with creation. That is, Gods actions in the future will be shaped at least in part by what creatures do. The future is thus to some extent unsettled.

These several texts from Genesis 1-2 that we have considered are an extensive witness to divine self-limitation. How might other texts in Genesis 1-11 be drawn into this testimony?

3. Divine Self-Limitation in the Story of the Flood²⁰⁾

20) I assume basic historical and literary perspectives regarding this text and move immediately to theological considerations. Some literary observations: The flood story contains little direct speech and no dialogue; Noah never speaks a word. Also, there is minimal description of the disaster itself and no reaction from any individual. There is virtually no textual attention to the plight of the victims or to their fearful response or to scenes of death and destruction in contrast to the many horrific artistic renditions of the flood through the centuries and media portrayals of more recent natural disasters. Why is the text so reticent regarding the suffering of the victims, not least in view of the fact that the text claims it is their own guilt that has occasioned the disaster?

A basic (overlapping) list of Gods actions in the flood story is remarkable in its range: God expresses sorrow and regret (but not anger); God judges, but does not want to; God goes beyond justice and decides to save some creatures; God pulls back from an initial decision to blot out the world going beyond justice and deciding to deliver both human beings and animals; God changes, but people do not (6: 5; 8: 21); God is receptive to doing things in new ways in view of new divine experience with the world; and God commits to the future of a less than perfect world. Gods promising never to act in such a destructive way again, twice stated and, finally, formalized in covenantal terms (8: 21-22; 9: 8-17), entails an eternal divine self-limitation in the exercise of power in response to evil in the world.²¹⁾ For God will keep promises.

From the perspective of many a Bible reader, including many theologians, these are problematic images for God and commentators often move past them quickly. Moreover, that the flood story takes up so much textual space longer than the creation stories has long bedeviled scholars. Might the very length of the story suggest the theological importance it was believed to have in the biblical witness about God? I here gather some of the ways in which the story witnesses to divine self-limitation.

Genesis 6: 6-7 is a remarkable witness to God:

And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.

The repeated reference to Gods response of tears and regret to human sinfulness (6: 6-7) is accompanied by strong references to God as the Creator.

21) The reference to seed time and harvest in 8:22 suggests that the divine promise is more extensive than a simple reference to no more floods. For an initial effort regarding divine promise and other divine actions as entailing self-limitation, see Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 72.

The God who weeps and regrets is the Creator of heaven and earth! Such a portrayal of divine vulnerability assumes that human beings have successfully resisted the Creators will for the creation. As such, this text is a witness to a God who makes the divine self vulnerable to the twists and turns of creational life, including human resistance. To say that the will of God is resistible becomes a key for understanding many texts that follow, not least the many passages that speak of divine anger.²²⁾ While the external and more objective picture in this story is one of disastrous judgment, the internal, subjective image is that of divine grief.²³⁾

Notably, human beings are said to be just as sinful after the flood as before it:

Gen 6: 5. The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.

Gen 8: 21. for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth.

One of the most profound effects of this *continuing* human reality that prevails through the worst of natural disasters is that suffering will be an *ongoing* reality for God. That is, the flood did not end the reason for the flood in the first place or the reason for the divine suffering (6: 6-7). The flood may have been designed initially to do just that, but Gods decision not to blot out all living creatures (6: 7) had long-term suffering effects for God. Indeed, the everlasting, unconditional promise to Noah and all flesh that follows *necessitates* divine suffering; a pain-free future is now *not possible* for God. In other terms, the future of the creation that now becomes possible in view of Gods promise is rooted in this divine determination to take the sin

22) The 500+ references to potential and actual divine anger in the Bible (both Old Testament and New Testament) is testimony to the successful resistance of the will of God. Otherwise, why would God be angry? For details, see Terence E. Fretheim, Theological Reflections on the Wrath of God in the Old Testament, *HBT* 24 (2002) 1-26.

23) The juxtaposition of divine wrath and divine grief is common in the prophets, especially Jeremiah (e.g., Jeremiah 8-9).

and its negative effects into God's own self and bear it there for the sake of the future of the world. The world's future becomes dependent upon this ongoing divine suffering. This is an act of divine self-limitation; it will lead in time to the salvation of the world.²⁴⁾

I look more closely at Genesis 8: 21. I suggest that this verse addresses two related matters. The first has reference to *a change in the functioning of the moral order* to which God now stands committed. That is, God will never again curse the ground [or, better, regard the ground as cursed] because of humankind.²⁵⁾ This divine change in the way that the created order functions is necessary if the second divine commitment is able to be fulfilled: God's promise regarding the future of creation, nor will I ever again destroy every living creature, a promise formalized with a covenant in 9: 8-17.

The first matter, which introduces the statement about human sin (for; *kā*), has reference to the created moral order; God both places limits on the move from sin to consequence within the natural order *and* limits God's possible actions related thereto. The limitation regarding the curse seems to signal a fundamental shift in the way in which the created order functions or what might be called the causal weave. In effect, God puts into place a new boundary for the functioning of the causal weave. God provides for a constant natural order within which life can develop without any concern about human sin triggering another disaster of the magnitude of the flood. In effect, a divine move to blot out the world (6: 7) in the wake of the human condition announced by God in 6: 5 *will no longer be available to God* in view of God's

24) A trajectory of divine self-limitation extends from the Old Testament to the New Testament (incarnation, cross, etc.). See Terence E. Fretheim, *Christology and the Old Testament in Who Do You Say That I Am? Essays on Christology* (eds. Mark A. Powell; David Bauer; Louisville: Westminster, 2000) 201-215.

25) This phrase has been thought to refer to (a) no more floods; (b) no additional curses on the ground (see 3:17); (c) the abandonment of the existing curse; or (d) more generally, the end of the reign of the curse. It seems best to regard the phrase as some combination thereof; that is, God's newly stated word provides for a constant natural order within which life can develop without any concern about human sin triggering another disaster of the magnitude of the flood. That is, God places an eternal limit on the functioning of the moral order. See discussion in Terence Fretheim, *The Book of Genesis*, in *New Interpreters Bible* (vol. 1) (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) 393; Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 454-456.

own edict about the natural order.

The second matter has still further reference to the effect of that new boundary *for God*; it is first stated negatively (no destruction of every living creature) and then positively (seed time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease, 8: 22).

This multi-faceted divine promise means that the route of world annihilation has been set aside by God as a (divine) possibility.²⁶⁾ Divine judgment there will be (e.g., Gen 18-19, Sodom and Gomorrah), but it will be limited in scope. Sin and evil, and their now limited effects, will be allowed to have their day and God will work from *within* such a world to redeem it, but will not overpower it from without. God remains committed to the existence and the freedom of the creatures and the newly established causal order; even though the effects may be horrendous, they will never again be flood-like.

Again, what do such promises mean *for God*? For God to promise not to do something ever again entails an eternal divine self-limitation regarding the exercise of *both* freedom and power with respect to any related matters. That is, God thereby limits the divine options in dealing with evil in the life of the world. And, given the fact that God will be faithful and keep promises, does that not mean that divine self-limitation yields real limitation for God? That is, God may be said to be *capable* of doing anything²⁷⁾ but the certainty of Gods faithfulness means that God *cannot* break a divine promise. Consider, say, the marital relationship (an oft-used metaphor for the God-Israel relationship): the individuals involved *are capable of* being unfaithful, but they *cannot* do so and still be faithful. God is able, but God cannot.²⁸⁾

26) For a comparable understanding of Gods promise to David, see 2 Kgs 8:19: Yet the LORD would not destroy Judah, for the sake of his servant David, since he had promised to give a lamp to him and to his descendants forever (see also 1 Kgs 11:36-39; 15:4).

27) And hence it would still be appropriate to speak of divine omnipotence. At the same time, because of the common understanding of that word, it would not uncommonly be misunderstood.

28) If one insists on the language of omnipotence, one might say that Gods promises limit the divine options regarding the exercise of omnipotence.

4. Gathered Comments and Implications

How is this divine self-limitation regarding the flood and its aftermath related to the divine self-limitation evident in the creation accounts? Generally speaking, in the wake of the flood God addresses a situation in the ongoing life of *the created order* that calls for a new divine response. That situation is depicted in Gen 8: 21 and speaks of a continuing human reality that is deeply problematic: The Lord said in his heart the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth (still!) What God does in the face of a *continuing* human situation of wickedness is of special import. That is, inasmuch as the wicked situation described in Gen 6: 5 led to the flood, and that same situation of human wickedness prevails in a post-flood world (described in Gen 8: 21), that would mean the threat of another such disaster *if the basic cause and effect structures of the creation were to continue unchanged.*

And so, a significant shift in the way in which these structures of the creation function is necessary if the world is to be spared another such event. We have seen that God's way with the world has been shaped from the beginning in terms of divine self-limitation. When faced with another flood in the world's experience because of continuing human sin (8: 21), God does not pull back from that creational self-limiting way of relating to the world (evident in Genesis 1-2). Instead, God intensifies that divine way with the world, entering even more deeply into self-limiting ways.

In other terms, God determines that, in view of humanity's unchanging wickedness, the divine self-limitation that has been in place since the creation needs to be made even more precise. A change needs to be introduced in the moral order itself and in the way in which it continues to function. More is at stake here than, say, God's patience with human beings in their sinfulness or God's decision not to act in one or another situation.²⁹⁾ God gives to the

29) For examples of interpretive options, Claus Westermann correctly notes (contrary to several scholars) that Gen 8:21 is not a note regarding a transition from curse to blessing; the effects of the curse continue in significant ways. At the same time, Westermann does not go far enough when he claims that the *never again* only means that God decides to put up with this state of evil. He can simply let things be, putting up patiently with people just as they are with their inclination to evil (*Genesis*, 456). At the least, his comments do not take

creation itself new boundaries within which it now functions in ways that will not allow for another flood. Such a change in the created order is deemed necessary so that the divine promise could be kept.

What God does in the flood story *recharacterizes* the divine relation to the world, indeed even more, it recharacterizes the world. God qualifies the workings of the world, placing constraints on the effects of sin and God's own actions relating thereto, and proceeds to promise an orderly cosmos for the continuation of life. Human beings have *not* been changed by the flood, but, in view of God's experience with such a violent world, God charts new directions for that world. In canonical perspective, it is this *kind* of God (and this *kind* of world) that provides a basic lens through which readers are invited to interpret the God who is presented in all the biblical texts that follow.

If such a change in God's relationship with the creation and in the very nature of the world itself can be so characterized, might this help readers come to terms with later biblical texts that speak of violence, indeed divine violence (recall Gen 6: 11-13)? What difference might it make in the interpretation of such texts of violence if they are read in and through the images provided by the flood story, wherein *God places a limit on what God is able to do about violence*? Indeed, is it not the case that such a recharacterized divine way with the world may issue in even more violence? That is to say, by changing the structures of the moral order and promising never again to bring a violent world to an end, does not God thereby open up that world to unending violence, even if never again catastrophic? From another angle, by loosening the divine control of the world (which the divine never again entails), God becomes even more closely associated with its potential for violence and its actual violence, and one might speak of guilt by association. That is, if God had maintained tighter control of the structures of the causal order, there would not have been so much violence!

into account the continuing divine suffering that we have noted. He is closer to the mark when he speaks of the world's stabilization (*Genesis*, 457). But more seems to be at stake.

One related direction for reflection resides in the divine decision to use human and nonhuman agents in carrying out acts of judgment. It may be said that much, if not all of the violence associated with God in the Bible is due to Gods decision to use agents that are capable of violence, though now not of the world-ending sort. Several summary statements regarding the divine use of agents may further the conversation.

1. God chooses to work in and through human beings and other creaturely agents (including the moral order) to achieve Gods purposes for Israel and the world.

2. God does not perfect human beings (or other creatures), with all their foibles and flaws, before deciding to work in and through them. God works with what is available, including the institutions of society; among such institutions in that ancient context were certain ways of waging war and other trappings of government. More generally, violence will be associated with God's work in the world because, to a greater or lesser degree, violence is characteristic of the persons and institutions in and through which that work of God is done. Thus such work by the agents will always have mixed results, and will be less positive than what would have happened had God chosen to act alone.

3. God does not (micro) manage the work of the agents, but exercises constraint and restraint in relating to them. Gods agents may exceed the divine mandate, going beyond anything that God intended (e.g., Zech 1: 15, where God says: I was only a little angry; they made the disaster worse). They are not puppets in the hand of God! God often passes judgment on these agents and their excessiveness (e.g., Jer 25: 12-14; 27: 6-7; 50-51). Notably, God will assume a share of the responsibility associated with that violence and will take on a certain blame for using such agents (Jer 42: 10, I am sorry for the disaster).³⁰⁾ So, God does not necessarily confer a positive value on

the effects of the work of the divine agents.

4. Human beings, then or now, do not have a perfect perception of how they are to serve as God's agents in the world. They are finite creatures. While it is difficult to evaluate Israel's perception, it is important to note that the role of divine agents is often expressed in terms of the direct speech of God. Inasmuch as this is a phenomenon rare in the New Testament (and perhaps for other reasons), should we understand such direct divine speech in the Old Testament in less than literal terms? Israel may have put into direct divine speech understandings they had gained through study and reflection rather than an actual hearing of God's words. And might we say that Israel did not always fully understand? Israelites did understand themselves to be the agents of divine judgment against, say, Canaanite wickedness (Deut 9: 4-5) and understood themselves to have received a word from God to that end. Did they fully understand?

5. That God would stoop to become involved in such human cruelties as war and other forms of violence is finally not a matter for despair, but of hope. God does not simply give people up to experience violence. Again and again, God takes the side of those entrapped in violence and its effects and does so in such a way that God himself, entering deeply into the life of the world, bears the violence in order to bring about good purposes. The tears of the people are fully recognized by God; their desperate situation is named for what it is. By so choosing to participate in their messy stories, God's own self takes the road of suffering. Because God suffers the effects of violence, God thereby makes possible a non-violent future for the world.³¹⁾

Most fundamentally, however, God engages in a new way with the world in and through the articulation of a self-limiting covenant, the first formally

30) For details on these texts, see Fretheim, *I Was Only a Little Angry*.

31) See earlier language regarding this matter in Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, including in order to achieve God's purposes, God will in effect get his hands dirty (p. 76). For a discussion of details regarding divine judgment, see Fretheim, *God and World*, 157-165.

stated promise in the Bible (Gen 9: 8-17). In the language of Claus Westermann, God promises that he will never again allow humanity to be destroyed: There is no power that can shake this promise.³²⁾ I would add: not even divine power.

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32) Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 456. Compare the statement of William P. Brown, *The Ethos of the Cosmos: The Genesis of Moral Imagination in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999): Gods unconditional commitment to remain true to creations formfulness and integrity without destructive intervention (p. 57). The idea is on target except that the problematic word intervention narrows too much the range of the limits that God places on Gods own actions.

1984).

Key word

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power of God
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