

**Judgment, Anger, Benevolence, and Jonah:  
Exploring Human Responses to Divine Benevolence  
via the Framework of the Judeo-Christian Worldview**

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**Abstract**

*After working through general aspects of a theology of benevolence, the current work attempts to articulate one influential element inherent to a theology of benevolence from a Judeo-Christian framework via an exploration of the book of Jonah. Simply, it is suggested that judgment of divine benevolence distorts the application and understanding of benevolence within a Judeo-Christian framework. It is further suggested that anger towards divine benevolence is often the byproduct of judgment. And it is the conclusion of this article, that the book of Jonah provides a comprehensive understanding of divine benevolence within the understanding of God's character and nature; and it is this understanding, that essentially thwarts and challenges misappropriations of anger or judgment in response to God's benevolence.*

From the Judeo-Christian worldview, presuppositions concerning the nature and character of divinity are manifested—and vary—in a multitude of ways. However, such presuppositions or theologies conceptualize the benevolence of God by means of a multitude of understandings. These presuppositions wrestle with the ways in which God is understood to bless humanity through divine love, mercy, compassion, and specific and general favor or, as it is succinctly referred to in systematic theology, theologies of benevolence. Scholars generally identify God's benevolence as inherently intertwined in his character and nature<sup>1</sup>; and yet, despite such widespread identifications, in some cases, demonstrating the ability to articulate a theology of benevolence, human beings do not always seem to react favorably when confronted with God's choices and acts of blessing.

In analyzing such reactions, this paper contends that an element inherent to a theology of benevolence emerges and that this emergence is informative concerning the ways in which benevolence is understood and practiced by human beings operating within the framework of a Judeo-Christian worldview. Therefore, the current work refrains from articulating an overarching theology of benevolence, but rather will briefly address characteristics of generalized theologies of benevolence, while specifically interacting and engaging with judgment and the subsequent consequence(s) of judgment, anger, in response to divine

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

benevolence. From these observations it is argued that a keystone understanding concerning both divine and human benevolence resides—partially, at least—in the ways in which human beings judge or refrain from judgment. The biblical account of the prophet Jonah exemplifies this assertion. But before exploring the book of Jonah, first the current work attends to general characteristics normative within theologies of benevolence from a Judeo-Christian framework.

### I. Theologies of Benevolence

The Judeo-Christian tradition, in all its divergent expressions, has generally understood, as previously identified, God to be inherently benevolent. Thomas Oden summarizes this well in the following assertions:

Divine goodness profoundly qualifies all other divine attributes, for there is no divine power apart from its being benevolent. There is no divine justice that could ignore what is good. There is no truth of God that is not good for creatures.<sup>2</sup>

Further, “divine goodness is that attribute through which God wills the happiness of creatures and desires to impart to creatures all the goodness they are capable of receiving.”<sup>3</sup> First and foremost, life itself is given and creatures are afforded the opportunity to share in life with their creator. Second, God provides creatures “prolific capacities for enjoying creation.”<sup>4</sup> Third, “there is no bound to the goodness of God, which without ceasing to be good is at the same time eternally just, holy, and lacking in nothing.”<sup>5</sup> All of this is interwoven intricately with God’s love. Further, as David Garland observes, mercy and compassion are integral aspects of benevolence and are often used synonymously in reference to God’s benevolence.<sup>6</sup>

Concerning the former, the OT presupposes mercy as a basic characteristic of God.<sup>7</sup> God’s mercy can, therefore, never fail, even if its human recipient is unworthy. Mercy is “the foundation of mankind’s salvation,” “God’s unmerited response to human need,” and “is not simply an emotion [as] it is always manifested historically in personal actions.”<sup>8</sup> Jesus likewise demonstrated mercy to those who appealed to him for help. Considering the latter, there is, according to Walker, “nothing . . . more prominent in the OT than the ascription of compassion, pity, mercy, etc., to God.”<sup>9</sup> Throughout the totality of the biblical account God’s compassion is understood to extend to the entire human race. Even more, because God is

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 117.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 116.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>David E. Garland, “Mercy; Merciful,” in G. W. Bromiley, ed., *ISBE* 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986): 322–23; also Oden, *Living God*.

<sup>7</sup>E.g. Garland, “Mercy; Merciful.”

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 323.

<sup>9</sup>W. L. Walker, “Compassion,” in G. W. Bromiley, ed., *ISBE* 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans., 1979), 755.

merciful and compassionate, he expects his people to “cultivate compassion and show mercy.”<sup>10</sup> And yet, despite all this, there are two more characteristics that appear difficult for God’s people to balance in their cultivation of compassion and demonstration of mercy (the totality of which is benevolence), which stems, almost entirely, from God’s sovereignty.

Exploring this theme requires highlighting, perhaps, the most essential element of God’s benevolence, “God’s goodness is wholly voluntary—not imposed upon God by something else.”<sup>11</sup> God freely and autonomously crafts his benevolence and, it is believed that this goodness is enacted perfectly for the well being for all within creation. The divine sovereignty to utilize benevolence as deemed fit by God identifies a further tension, the tension between divine judgment and benevolence. One such example is witnessed in God’s patience by withholding the judgment and punishment his creatures deserve when they knowingly or unknowingly rebel.<sup>12</sup> God identifies this benevolent act— withholding judgment—as one that humanity must replicate. Jesus tells the parable of the unmerciful servant. In this parable, the character of the ruthless servant was punished because he failed to show to others the mercy shown to him (Matt. 18:21–35). Or, said another way, “judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy” (James 2:13). Further, as Garland discusses, the religious leaders of Jesus’ day certainly missed the essential element of demonstrating God’s character through their own acts of mercy, which perhaps explains Jesus consistent exhortations to these leaders to be merciful to others.<sup>13</sup> Such examples demonstrate an interesting variable into conversations about benevolence, viz. that humans wrongly respond to divine benevolence with judgment.

## II. Judgment and Benevolence

Judgment and benevolence, from the Judeo-Christian perspective, are intricately related. Consider the following instruction by Jesus,

Do not judge, and you will not be judged and do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; pardon, and you will be pardoned. Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure—pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return.” (Luke 6:37–38)

Of particular importance is the fact that judgment is immediately followed by a description of benevolence and this description, accordingly to commentators such as Craig Keener, points to and highlights a relationship between mercy in judging other creatures with blessing from God and not simply blessing, but overflowing, abundant blessing from the divine.<sup>14</sup> This

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Oden, *Living God*, 117.

<sup>12</sup>Thomas B. Dozeman, “Inner-Biblical Interpretation of Yahweh’s Gracious and Compassionate Character,” *JBL* 108, no. 2 (1989): 207–23.

<sup>13</sup>Garland, “Mercy; Merciful.”

<sup>14</sup>Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014), 196.

aspect of benevolence is *the* element that emerges, inherent to a theology and application of benevolence, which becomes especially poignant in combining the aforementioned texts from the NT with the book of Jonah from the OT.

### III. Jonah's Anger: Judging Divine Benevolence

The book of Jonah is fundamentally different from the other prophetic books included in the canon; viz., the book of Jonah is a biography of the prophet whereas the other prophetic books are a collection of Yahweh's messages that the prophet communicated to the nation of Israel.<sup>15</sup> LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush suggest "the book of Jonah is unique in that it is an account of what happened to a prophet . . . [so that] we may conclude that the story of Jonah's experiences and reactions is the message."<sup>16</sup> Smith affirms such assertions and adds that the book of Jonah's "main concern was the prophet's own struggle with traditional beliefs about God's compassion," which, as Smith identifies, is ironic considering that "Jonah helped two foreign groups (the sailors and Ninevites) change their thinking about God and the world around them, but he was unwilling to internalize a new view of God's compassion."<sup>17</sup> This irony is further highlighted by the book's structure.<sup>18</sup>

David Dorsey concurs and suggests "an analysis of the literary structure of Jonah elucidates several aspects of the book's message . . . [and] may also help identify the author's purpose in writing the book."<sup>19</sup> Dorsey identifies a parallel structure within the book, in which

The first three episodes (Jonah's first commission, his first experience with pagans, and his first prayer) are matched by the second three episodes (his second commission, his second experience with pagans, and his second prayer) in an a-b-c || a'-b'-c' configuration.<sup>20</sup>

After these six episodes, the book concludes with Yahweh's lesson for Jonah (4:5–11). These parallels and repetitions serve to emphasize the main themes within the book, such as: "Yahweh's determination to reach the Ninevites with his message of warning"<sup>21</sup> or the borderline astounding responses by the pagans to Yahweh. Of particular interest, however, are the two prayers, given by Jonah, of which the structure of the book of Jonah highlights the substantial differences between Jonah's prayers in chapters two and four.

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<sup>15</sup>E.g., Gary V. Smith, *The Prophets as Preachers* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994); William S. LaSor, David A. Hubbard, and Frederic W. Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); Robert B. Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

<sup>16</sup>LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, 381.

<sup>17</sup>Smith, *Prophets as Preachers*, 91.

<sup>18</sup>LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, *Old Testament Survey*.

<sup>19</sup>David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 290.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

The first, Jonah's prayer of thanksgiving to Yahweh for sparing him, is beautiful, almost serene. It is steeped in piety and rich theology. In contrast, the second prayer, in which Jonah reacts angrily to Yahweh's sparing pagan Nineveh, is the opposite: it is not beautiful, serene, pious, or theologically rich. Rather, it is an indignant outburst, petty, small, mean-spirited. In the first prayer Jonah celebrates Yahweh's "kindness" (*hesed*), which pagans forfeit (2:8[2:9]); in the second Jonah complains that Yahweh's *hesed* has been extended to the pagans—as Jonah feared it would (4:2). In the first prayer Jonah is grateful that his "life" and "soul" have been saved (2:5–[2:6–8]); in the second he angrily entreats Yahweh to take his life and soul. In the first prayer, Jonah praises Yahweh for sparing him—one person—from the punishment he deserved; whereas in the second prayer, Jonah is angry that Yahweh has spared many thousands of innocent children, as well as people who have sincerely repented.<sup>22</sup>

Dorsey concludes that the writer of Jonah wrote with two overarching purposes in mind: "(1) to encourage sinners under Yahweh's threatened judgment to repent and (2) to warn against hypocritically resenting the mercy Yahweh shows to sinner's outside one's own group."<sup>23</sup> The second of which is especially intriguing to the current discussion.

In some commentators' minds, the story of Jonah underscores this phenomenon of resentment towards others outside of one's own group.<sup>24</sup> LaSor *et al.* suggest this to be one of two main doctrinal points they observe from the book of Jonah. The other main point "identifies Yahweh as the creator of the world, and several incidents in the book underline his power over creation."<sup>25</sup> These are essential and fundamental to a theology of benevolence. Further, such realities are demonstrated by Jonah's anger in response to God's benevolent acts towards the Ninevites. In addition to the potential anger at God's benevolence towards others outside of one's own group, Jonah's anger is, by some accounts, also struggling with the total inability of humanity to earn or deserve God's benevolence based upon any act of repentance.<sup>26</sup> These areas of anger point to several poignant realities for a theology and the application of benevolence by human beings attempting to live from a Judeo-Christian framework.

#### IV. Judgment, Anger, and Benevolence

Anger is the fruit of judging God's acts of benevolence. This judgment is generally two-fold in its identification: (1) assessing the absolute inadequacy of any and all human responses that justify or warrant God's benevolence and/or (2) disapproving God's act of benevolence towards a people that is either unworthy and/or different from one's own group. This anger and the judgment that precedes it are, as so clearly demonstrated by the book of Jonah,

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 291.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 295.

<sup>24</sup>Dozeman, "Inner-Biblical Interpretation."

<sup>25</sup>LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, 388.

<sup>26</sup>John H. Walton, "The Object Lesson of Jonah 4:5–7 and the Purpose of the Book of Jonah," *BBR*, 2 (1992): 47–57; John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2000).

misplaced. They are misplaced simply due to an inaccurate and incomplete understanding of God's character and nature. God, in his character and nature, is benevolent and not only is God the all-powerful Creator with sovereignty to act as he chooses to act, but his acts of benevolence are likewise overflowing with grace, compassion and without exception unbounded to any outside authority. As Walton so clearly identifies in his reflection of the book of Jonah, "God's right to bestow grace, Jonah is being taught, cannot be limited in any way."<sup>27</sup> In addition, God's choices of benevolence are just; meaning, God perfectly acts in both his merciful, abounding compassion and his righteous, correct judgment. Dozeman thinks that "the very structure of the narrative suggests that the divine ability to avert justified destruction and to prolong life is inextricably related to the gracious character of Yahweh."<sup>28</sup> It is these realities, these facets of God's character and nature that speak against and condemn any within the Judeo-Christian framework who react to God's benevolence with judgment or whose judgment of divine benevolence leads to anger. Further, it is these realities that speak to and should inform the framework and actions of human beings with a Judeo-Christian framework as it pertains to their ideas and acts of benevolence.

Hoag, Bales and Sider each contribute a Christian response to the question of whether Christians should always give money to people on the street who ask for it.<sup>29</sup> An intriguing exercise as each of the three authors writes a very brief response, but of the three authors, only Hoag identifies judgment as a stumbling block to human acts of benevolence. Whether Hoag is correct or not is, in many ways, immaterial for the current discussion. What is essential is that the ways in which people from a Judeo-Christian framework judge others outside of their own group and/or how these individuals respond to God's acts of benevolence, particularly as it pertains to individuals they feel have not properly demonstrated worthiness of God's benevolence, significantly discolor and distort an understanding of benevolence as demonstrated by the Creator God. This discoloration and distortion should be, therefore, considered to further disfigure the application of benevolence from a Judeo-Christian framework.

### Conclusion

The very act of benevolence begins and is seen in fullness through the example of the God of creation. Divine benevolence is completely voluntary. In demonstrating this, Walton suggests,

The primary emphasis of the narrator [of the book of Jonah] is on the character of God. God's compassion leads him to perform gracious acts, and he will not be restricted in that exercise by anyone's narrow theological strictures. This is what the object lesson taught Jonah. Nineveh was not spared because of her repentance, but because of the freely offered gift of God's grace.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Walton, "Object Lesson of Jonah 4:5-7," 49.

<sup>28</sup>Dozeman, "Inner-Biblical Interpretation," 221.

<sup>29</sup>Gary G. Hoag, Andy Bales, and Ronald J. Sider, "Should Christians Always Give Money to Street People Who Ask for It? Everyday Benevolence," *Christianity Today* 55, no. 1 (2011): 60-61.

<sup>30</sup>Walton, "Object Lesson of Jonah 4:5-7," 55.

Divine benevolence is freely given simply because it is the abundance of mercy and compassion that overflows from the character and nature of the Almighty God of Creation. This highlights that God's benevolence is not simply an emotion, but rather "always manifested historically in personal actions."<sup>31</sup> Therefore, a Judeo-Christian framework towards a theology of benevolence and the application of human benevolence must wrestle with and identify the ways in which judgment in general and judgment of divine benevolence specifically distorts and discolors the character and nature of benevolence; and therefore, the applicability and action of human benevolence within a Judeo-Christian framework.

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<sup>31</sup>Garland, "Mercy; Merciful," 323.