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Abstract: If God still exercises wrath today, is it possible to identify instances of this? If so, then what sorts of criteria might one use to assess whether a particular event is a case of divine wrath? In addressing these questions, I distinguish between *direct* and *indirect* divine wrath as well as between *special* and *natural* divine wrath. I propose three potential corroborating factors for inferring the occurrence of special divine wrath: (1) the occurrence of a miracle in conjunction with the event in question, (2) extraordinary coincidences associated with the event, and (3) the event occurrence constituting the fulfillment of a bold prediction. Along the way, I use numerous biblical cases of divine wrath to guide the discussion and provide standards for elucidating the distinctions and corroborating criteria I propose.

Key Words: Divine wrath, miracle, redemption, revelation, skepticism

Divine wrath—God's extreme or vengeful anger—is a recurrent theme in the pages of Scripture, and the topic has been consistently propounded in the history of Christian theology.[1] Yet it is a subject that has conspicuously evaded serious analysis by Christian philosophers.[2] Why is this? Perhaps they consider the subject to be obsolete, antiquated, or passé. If so, this is odd because the closely related doctrine of

1. The emphasis on the wrath of God seems to reach its zenith in the Calvinist tradition. John Calvin heavily emphasized the theme in his sermons, commentaries and his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (see especially Book 2, chapter 16). And Jonathan Edwards devoted several sermons and treatises to the topic, including "The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners" (1734), "Wrath Upon the Wicked to the Uttermost" (1735), and, most famously, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (1741).

2. While serious philosophical analyses of divine wrath have been lacking, there have been a few recent theological treatments of the subject though these have mostly been limited to biblical theology and historical theology. See Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?: Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995); Reinhard G. Kratz and Hermann Spiekermann, eds., *Divine Wrath and Divine Mercy in the World of Antiquity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008); and Stephen Butler Murray, *Reclaiming Divine Wrath: A History of a Christian Doctrine and its Interpretation* (New York: Peter Lang Press, 2011). The only recent systematic theological study of divine wrath I am aware of is H. G. L. Peels' The *Vengeance of God: The Meaning of the Root Nqm and the Function of the Nqm-Texts in the Context of Divine Revelation in the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 1995).

hell has generated much philosophical reflection during the last generation, and, of course, the problem of evil is a perennial fascination among Christian philosophers. Perhaps the lack of attention to divine wrath is due to a general assumption that when it comes to the concept of divine wrath there just is not much there to think *about*. If so, then that perception is sorely mistaken. Some very interesting and challenging questions include these: What exactly *is* divine wrath? Does God still exercise wrath today? If so, is it possible to identify instances of this? And if it is, then what sorts of criteria might one use to assess whether a particular event is a case of divine wrath? In what follows I reflect on these questions. And I offer a few distinctions and clarifications that might assist us as we do so.

Biblical Cases of Divine Wrath

Scripture tells us that the Lord is a God of wrath.[3] Through the prophet Micah, the Lord declares, "I will take vengeance in anger and wrath on the nations that have not obeyed me" (Micah 5:15).[4] Nahum tells us that "the Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. The Lord takes vengeance on his foes and vents his wrath against his enemies" (Nahum 1:2). And in many places we find lengthy discourses regarding God's plans or warnings of wrath, such as in Deuteronomy 28:15-68, Isaiah 13, Jeremiah 16, throughout the minor prophets, in

3. To be sure, some have taken issue with this claim, at least when wrath is understood in terms comparable to the human emotion of anger. Notably, Julian of Norwich denied that there is any true wrath in God: "Now this was a great marvel to the soul, continually shown in everything and considered with great attentiveness: that in regard to himself our Lord God cannot forgive, for he cannot be angry—it would be an impossibility. For this is what was shown: that our life is all grounded and rooted in love, and without love we cannot live; and therefore to the soul which through God's special grace sees so much of his great and marvelous goodness, and sees that we are joined to him in love for ever, it is the greatest impossibility conceivable that God should be angry, for anger and friendship are two contraries" (from Roberta C. Bondi, ed. *Julian of Norwich: Selections from Revelations of Divine Love Annotated & Explained* [Skylight Paths, 2013], p. 112). And C. H. Dodd challenged the notion that there is any genuine anger in God, suggesting that what Scripture portrays, especially in the writings of Paul, are not divine emotions or attitudes so much as "an inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe." Dodd adds that, "we cannot think with full consistency of God in terms of the highest human ideals of personality and yet attribute to Him the irrational passion of anger" (from C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, 2nd ed. [London and Glasgow: Collins, 1959], p. 50). Such challenges to the common conception of divine wrath as an expression of genuine anger in God raise the question of divine emotion and lead to the debate over divine im/passibility. This is certainly relevant to the broader discussion of divine wrath, but my analysis of divine wrath in this paper does not hinge on a particular view in this debate.

4. All scriptural quotations are taken from the New International Version of the Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973).

some of Jesus's discourses (Mt. 3:5-12; Mt. 23:29-39; Mt. 24:15-22), throughout the book of Revelation, and in many other places as well.

Particular instances of divine wrath are to be found in both Old Testament and New Testament narratives. Here are some select cases of divine wrath which I take to be paradigmatic.

The Worldwide Flood

The opening chapters of the book of Genesis are turbulent with rebellion and strife, and by the sixth chapter we find this divine lament:

> The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. So the Lord said, "I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created—and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground—for I regret that I have made them" (Gen. 6:5-7).

As we know, God did exactly this, destroying all of human civilization except for Noah and seven other members of his family. Although this passage does not explicitly assert that the worldwide flood was an instance of divine wrath, we can infer this from the context of the narrative as well as several New Testament passages, such as Luke 17:26-30; Hebrews 11:7; and 2 Peter 2:4-5.

Sodom and Gomorrah

Merely a dozen chapters later in Genesis, not only have humans populated numerous cities but some of these cities are again displaying extreme wickedness, so much so that God has planned the annihilation of two of them. He sends two angels in human form to warn Lot and his family of the coming doom:

> The two men said to Lot, "Do you have anyone else here—sons-in-law, sons or daughters, or anyone else in the city who belongs to you? Get them out of here, because we are going to destroy this place. The outcry to the Lord against its people is so great that he has sent us to destroy it. So Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who were pledged to marry his daughters. He said, "Hurry and get out of this place, because the Lord is about to destroy the city!" But his sons-in-law thought he was joking….

> By the time Lot reached Zoar, the sun had risen over the land. Then the Lord rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah—from the Lord out of the heavens. Thus he overthrew those cities and the entire plain, destroying all those living in the cities—and also the vegetation in the land (Gen. 19:12-14, 23-25).

While there is some debate as to exactly what sins of these two cities prompted such divine vengeance, the writer of Jude clarifies this for us, saying that "Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion" and thus "serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire" (Jude 7).

The Egyptian Plagues

A succession of cases of divine wrath are to be found in the account of God's liberation of the Israelites from Egypt. As a prodding to Pharaoh, the Lord strikes Egypt with numerous plagues, including frogs, gnats, flies, locusts, hail, and darkness. After each, the Egyptian leader only "hardened his heart," becoming more resolute in his refusal to set the Israelites free. The final, most devastating plague is effective however:

> At midnight the Lord struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh, who sat on the throne, to the firstborn of the prisoner, who was in the dungeon, and the firstborn of all the livestock as well. Pharaoh and all his officials and all the Egyptians got up during the night, and there was loud wailing in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead (Exod. 12:29-30).

This was not the final act of wrath against Egypt, however. Though Pharaoh set the Israelites free, he relented and his soldiers pursued the Israelites to the Red Sea. There God famously parted the waters to allow Moses and his people to walk across, but when the Egyptian soldiers followed, God closed the waters and they were drowned en masse.

The Golden Calf

After Israel's liberation, they wandered in the desert for decades, waiting for the fulfillment of God's promise to give them possession of Canaan, the land "flowing with milk and honey." During this period there were pockets of rebellion within Israel's ranks that God thwarted in severe ways. For example, as Moses conversed with the Lord on Mount Sinai, the Israelites fashioned a golden calf idol to which they bowed down and made sacrifices. In response, the Lord directed the killing of about 300 Levites (Exod. 32:27-28), then he punished the entire whole assembly with a plague (vs. 33-35).

The Korah Rebellion

Later, Korah, Dathan and Abiram and 250 others rose up to oppose Moses and Aaron, complaining about their leadership: "Why do you set yourselves above the Lord's assembly?" (Num. 16:3). In response, Moses declares,

> "This is how you will know that the Lord has sent me to do all these things and that it was not my idea: If these men die a natural death and experience only what usually happens to men, then the Lord has not sent me. But if the Lord brings about something totally new, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them, with everything that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the grave, then you will know that these men have treated the Lord with contempt."
>
> As soon as he finished saying all this, the ground under them split apart, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them, with their households and all Korah's mean and all their possessions. They went down alive into the grave, with everything they owned; the earth closed over them, and they perished and were gone from the community. At their cries, all the Israelites around them fled, shouting, "The earth is going to swallow us too!" And fire came out from the Lord and consumed the [other] 250 men (Numbers 16:28-35).

After this, the Israelite community were angry with Moses and Aaron, saying, "You have killed the Lord's people." Because of their grumbling, the Lord struck them with a plague that killed 14,700 more of them.

Other Old Testament Cases of Wrath

Many other cases of divine wrath are to be found in the Old Testament, including the Lord's striking the Israelites with venomous snakes in response to their grumbling and complaining during their desert wanderings (Numbers 21:4-9), God's vengeance on the Midianites via the Israelite army (Numbers 31), God's subjecting the Israelites to a defeat by the Amorites because of Israel's refusal to obey the Lord (Deut. 1), divine punishment of Israel for the sin of Achan (Joshua 7), and the case of Elisha and the bears (2 Kings 2:23-25).

Ananias and Sapphira

In the New Testament, there are only a few narrative accounts of divine wrath, but they are dramatic. One of these is recounted by Luke in Acts 5:

> Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet. Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied

> to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God." When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him. About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?" "Yes," she said, "that is the price." Peter said to her, "How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also." At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events (Acts 5:1-11).

Although it is clear from this passage that Peter condemns Ananias, and presumably also Sapphira, for lying to God, commentators speculate as to whether their sin also included covetousness, vain ambition, or breaking vows to the Lord. In any case, the hypocrisy of this couple clearly provoked a severe divine response.

Herod's Demise

Later in the book of Acts we learn of the fate of Herod Agrippa, the great persecutor of the early church:

> Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there. He had been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon; they now joined together and sought an audience with him. After securing the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king, they asked for peace, because they depended on the king's country for their food supply. On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died (Acts 12:19-23).

The Jewish historian Josephus provides a detailed account of these events, noting that those present were declaring Herod to be a God. And yet, "upon this the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery."[5] It appears, then, that Herod's silence was tantamount to consent and therefore blasphemy.

5. Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 19.8.2, William Whiston, trans. (1737 edition): http://sacred-texts.com/jud/josephus/ant-19.htm.

Redemptive Dimensions of Wrath

There are many other biblical events that may be regarded as instances of divine wrath, but these are particularly clear cases, as they all involve the termination of human lives. I select these cases in part for just this reason, as one might object that narratives where God causes suffering or discomfort without killing anyone (e.g., Paul's "thorn in the flesh" described in 2 Cor. 12:7-10) are too mild to properly be described as wrathful.

Still, despite the consistent theme of death, there is variety among the narrative accounts reviewed above. Some involve the killing of thousands of people, while others involve a more surgical strike on a few people. Some are preceded by warnings, while others are sudden and unanticipated. Yet what they all have in common is *a severe divine response to human sin*. Such responses appear to serve a number of functions, including vengeance, rebuke, warning, discipline, and purification. And it is here where things begin to get interesting regarding divine wrath and our usual way of viewing it. For at least three of these functions may be construed as potentially redemptive. That is, God's wrath may be seen as serving a positive or constructive aim. In this regard divine wrath apparently mirrors the principal functional roles of human punishment—retribution, correction, and deterrence. As in civil, familial, or contexts of human punishment, particular cases of divine wrath could fulfill one or more of these aims. For example, the plague on Israel in Exodus 32 and the snakes in Numbers 21 appear to serve corrective and deterrent functions, as do many of the Egyptian plagues, which seem to be repeated attempts at correcting, enlightening, and otherwise improving people.[6] But the worldwide flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the killing of Ananias and Sapphira seem to be primarily instances of retributive wrath with a secondary deterrent effect on survivors who witnessed or otherwise learned of these events.

Some biblical reinforcement of this idea of a redemptive function of divine wrath can be found in this passage from the book of Jeremiah:

> The word of the Lord came to me. He said, "Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does?" declares the Lord. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, Israel. If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it. Now therefore say to the

6. The book of Jonah warrants mention here as an example of the deterrent function of divine wrath. For it was the threat of destruction which prompted the Ninevites to repent and thus avoid this fate. So here is a vivid illustration of how divine wrath *in prospect* can serve a redemptive function *in reality.*

> people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, 'This is what the Lord says: Look! I am preparing a disaster for you and devising a plan against you. So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions'" (Jeremiah 18:5-11).

Here God's aim in threatening "disaster" is to prompt Israel's repentance from the evil in which they are currently indulging. In cases where God actually exercises his wrath rather than merely threatening it, the effect can be even greater. Jude tells us that God's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah served "as a warning of the eternal fire of God's judgment" (Jude 7). Regarding the case of Ananias and Sapphira, Luke tells us that "great fear seized the whole church" when they heard of the sudden death of these two dishonest people (Acts 5:11), which we may assume resulted in an increase of moral seriousness among the early Christians.

So as severe and disturbing as these events must have been to the communities who witnessed them, they do seem to have served the end of prompting repentance and motivating more virtuous living among the people of God. And, of course, this is redemptive. So it seems that if the reticence of the contemporary church regarding the doctrine of divine wrath is due to the perception that the subject is entirely negative (as I suspect is a prevailing perception), this is a mistake. While certainly divine retribution is an uncomfortable idea—as any instance of severe punishment is—we should be encouraged by the notion that God (1) does not tolerate human wickedness indefinitely and (2) he is committed enough to our moral improvement to go to extremes to warn, chide, rebuke, and prod us to greater obedience and virtue. And this certainly seems consistent with genuine love.[7]

Some Distinctions

Now there are some distinctions to be made that are potentially helpful in analyzing and categorizing particular instances of divine wrath. For example, we may distinguish between *direct* and *indirect* wrath. By "direct" divine wrath I mean those cases where God immediately causes death or suffering, whereas in cases of "indirect" wrath God uses some other agency, whether human, animal, or angelic. Biblical examples of each of these categories are plentiful. Beginning with instances of indirect wrath, we find plenty of wrathful deployments of human beings, such as God's use of the Israelite army to bring "vengeance" on the Midianites in Numbers 31. Similar instances are to be found throughout the Old Testament, and God explicitly declares as much in such passages as Isaiah 10:5 ("Woe to the Assyrian, the rod of my anger, in whose hand is the club of my wrath!") and Ezekiel 25:14 ("'I will take vengeance on Edom by the hand of my people Israel, and they will deal with Edom

7. This observation is made, for example, by Thomas Aquinas who regarded divine wrath as a manifestation of the justice of God but insisted that all divine justice has divine mercy as its foundation (see *Summa Theologica*, I., Q. 21, Art. 4).

in accordance with my anger and my wrath; they will know my vengeance,' declares the Sovereign Lord").

As for divine use of animals to execute wrath, here is a particularly memorable example:

> Elisha went up to Bethel. As he was walking along the road, some youths came out of the town and jeered at him. "Get out of here, baldy!" they said. "Go on up, you baldhead!" He turned around, looked at them and called down a curse on them in the name of the Lord. Then two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the youths. And he went on to Mount Carmel and from there returned to Samaria (2 Kings 2:23-25).[8]

Other examples include the Lord striking the Israelites with venomous snakes in Numbers 21 and the use of frogs, locusts, gnats and flies to plague the Egyptians in Exodus 8-10.

As for the third category of indirect wrath, where God uses angelic beings to bring vengeance, biblical instances include the case of Herod noted above (Acts 12:19-23), Exodus 33:2, where God promises to "send an angel before you and drive out the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites," and 2 Sam. 24:15-17, where the angel of the Lord strikes the Israelites. Possibly the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is an instance of divine deputizing of angels, as regarding the city of Sodom the angels declare to Lot, "*we* are going to destroy this place" (Gen. 19:13). There are also references to God's use of a "destroying angel" to execute judgment in such passages as 1 Chron. 21:15, Ps. 78:49, and 1 Cor. 10:10.

As for cases of direct divine wrath, apparent examples include the worldwide flood (Gen. 6-9), the Egyptian plagues of hail, darkness, and boils (Exod. 7-12), the plague on Israel because of their golden calf idol (Exod. 32:35), and the case of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11). I say guardedly that these are "apparent" cases of direct divine wrath because it is possible that God deployed some deputy agency as well to bring these punishments, though the texts do not inform us of this. This possibility seems evident in the fact that many of the aforementioned cases of indirect wrath are referred to elsewhere in Scripture (and among extra-biblical writers) simply as cases of divine punishment without any mention of the secondary

8. The narrator offers no further commentary regarding this strange event. At first blush, this certainly seems to be excessive divine punishment, especially since the targets are young. But biblical commentators note that the ages of the "youths" is not clear; it is possible they were adolescents. Furthermore, we do not know whether any of them actually died as a result of the attacks. Also, the significance of their mockery should be understood in light of where Elisha was going and the prophetic work he seemed intent to do there. At this time Bethel was a major center of idolatry in the Northern Kingdom, and Elisha was God's select messenger to address this evil. So in mocking Elisha, the youths were effectively mocking the very work of God intended to protect them and the rest of their people.

finite agencies involved. If it makes sense to refer to these cases in such terms, then it is conceivable that *all* divine wrath is similarly executed through secondary causes.

Another distinction regarding forms of divine wrath is that between what may be called *special* and *natural* wrath. By "special" divine wrath I mean any case where the wrathful event is somehow extraordinary, unique, or out of step with the usual course of nature or human events, though not necessarily a violation of the laws of nature. Thus, the cases of the worldwide flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, the Egyptian plagues, Elisha and the bears, and the sudden deaths of Ananias and Sapphira would all qualify as special divine wrath. These are all strikingly special events in that there was nothing routine or predictable about them. Each occurred, as it were, "out of the blue" and, thus, was more easily identified as divinely orchestrated.

In contrast, what I am calling "natural" wrath does concern events that are in some way ordinary, routine, and predictable, because their natural causes are—at least at this point in scientific history—easily traced and analyzed. However, they may have just as much of a corrective and deterrent effect on those involved as cases of special wrath. They are the sorts of cases to which the biblical proverb applies which says, "there is a way that appears to be right but in the end it leads to death" (Pr. 14:12 and Pr. 16:25) and to which the apostle Paul refers when he declares, "a man reaps what he sows" (Gal. 6:7; see also 2 Cor. 9:6-7). The basic idea is that if you engage in particular kinds of bad behaviors then certain negative consequences will follow. In addition to these general biblical statements we find specific illustrations in Scripture, such as where the deadly effects of adultery are guaranteed in this passage: "For a prostitute can be had for a loaf of bread, but another man's wife preys on your very life. Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned? Can a man walk on hot coals without his feet being scorched?" (Pr. 6:26-28).

This is what we might think of as a divinely ordained moral law of reciprocity, in the sense that certain forms of conduct bring very unpleasant consequences. Some extra-biblical examples might include the negative effects—physical, psychological, and relational—of alcohol abuse and the tendency of sexual promiscuity to result in STDs as well as emotional and relational distress. This distinction between natural and special wrath is potentially controversial, however, because, depending upon one's view of divine providence, one will be more or less inclined to accept the natural moral law of reciprocity as featuring enough specific divine intent for the pain and suffering that follows from bad behaviors to properly qualify as divine wrath. Those who hold a "high" view of providence which affirms God's meticulous governance of all things will no doubt be more amenable to this distinction.

The Contemporary Viability of Inferring Special Divine Wrath

Now with these distinctions in hand, I would like to raise a few questions regarding the contemporary applicability of the concept of divine wrath. My overarching query

is this: When, if ever, may we justifiably believe a current event to be a case of special divine wrath? That is, are there contemporary phenomena that we might reasonably conclude are instances of God's punishment of a person or people group? I am concerned with special wrath in particular because claims that fall into this category are the most common and controversial. Throughout history Christians have made bold declarations that various disasters and atrocities were instances of God's vengeance, from the destruction of the ancient city of Pompeii by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius[9] to the Black Plague of the 13th century[10] to Hurricane Katrina in 2005.[11] Might some such judgments have merit? If not, why not? One natural response would be to say that all such claims are problematic simply because they do not enjoy any biblical sanction. Unlike the accounts of the world-wide flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, and so on, we have no special revelation to *confirm* that these later, extra-biblical events constituted divine punishment. Thus, one might take the view that all assertions of divine wrath since biblical times are speculative at best and perhaps even irresponsible. They may be regarded as speculative because of the lack of direct biblical corroboration of divine intent to punish with these phenomena, and they may be judged irresponsible because such declarations could erroneously ascribe motives and purposes to God, therefore potentially slandering the deity. Let's call this approach to contemporary ascriptions of divine wrath the *skeptical thesis*. Note that the reasons I've given to motivate this perspective are *epistemological* and *moral* in nature. We will look at both of these in turn.

The Epistemological Argument for the Skeptical Thesis

The concern here has to do with identification criteria when it comes to possible cases of divine wrath. The assumption is that without explicit biblical sanction for describing an event as a case of divine wrath, application of the term to a given phenomenon is illegitimate. But what warrant have we to accept this criterion? Why maintain that explicit sanction by a divinely inspired text is needed to infer that an event is a case of divine wrath? While such corroboration is certainly a *sufficient* condition to be confident of this, it does not follow that this is a *necessary* condition for

9. See, for example, Scott Ashley, "The Day the World Ended: Lessons from Pompeii," *Beyond Today* (Dec. 2, 2005): http://www.ucg.org/the-good-news/the-day-the-world-ended-lessons-from-pompeii. Accessed Dec. 27, 2018.

10. At the time of the Black Plague Christians commonly assumed that the pestilence, or "Great Mortality" as it was called, was an act of divine punishment.

11. In reference to Hurricane Katrina and the damage it caused, New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin is said to have declared, "Surely God is mad at America" (Douglas Brinkley, *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast* [2006], 618). And Nation of Islam minister Louis Farrakhan claimed that the hurricane was "God's way of punishing America for its warmongering and racism" (Michael Eric Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster* [Basic Civitas Books, 2006], 178–202).

such confidence. For all we know, there might be some other reasonable identification criteria the satisfaction of which could also be sufficient to provide strong warrant for making the divine wrath inference.

So what are some possible candidates of corroborating factors that might provide sufficient conditions for inferring that a current event is an instance of divine wrath? One possibility is the *occurrence of a miracle* associated with the event in question. Miracles certainly provided grounds for an inference to divine wrath in many of the Old Testament miracles, from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah to the parting of the Red Sea. Another possibility is *extraordinary coincidence*. This, too, applies to many biblical instances of divine wrath, including Elisha and the bears, the timely earthquake in the case of the Korah rebellion, and the sudden deaths of Ananias and Sapphira. A third possibility is if the phenomenon comes as a *fulfilled bold prediction* by someone connected to the event somehow. Such a criterion is fulfilled in the cases of the world-wide flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, and Korah's rebellion, and the death of Sapphira, all of which were foretold, or at least strongly intimated, by key players in the narratives. Finally, we might also consider the occurrence of *highly beneficial consequences* for righteous people involved. While this would not provide as strong a corroboration as the previous three conditions, and thus would not rise to the status of sufficient grounds for confident belief, it might nonetheless provide some confirmation that a given event is an instance of divine wrath. After all, in every biblical case of divine wrath we find that significant benefits follow, pertaining to such things as repentance, enhanced faith, and the purification of the faith community.

In short, then, when inferring divine wrath about a given event, some other corroborating factors besides explicit biblical sanction might be possible. Scripture itself suggests as much in the above mentioned cases where *at the time of the events* it was reasonable to conclude that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the drowning of the Egyptian soldiers, the engulfing of Korah and the other rebels, and the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira were instances of divine wrath. There were strong indicators or markers of divine intent to punish in each case, *even prior to and independent of later biblical writers' divinely inspired statements to this effect*. So it seems that explicit sanction in scripture is not a necessary condition for properly inferring divine wrath. Other factors may be sufficient to supply corroborating grounds for confidence in such a claim. And this shows that the epistemological argument for the skeptical thesis, at least as I've represented it here, fails. For all we know, there are other criteria besides direct biblical sanction which, if satisfied, can provide warrant for identifying a given phenomenon as a case of divine wrath.[12]

12. Another confirmation of this might be found in 1 Corinthians 11, where the Apostle Paul addresses the problem of abuse of communion among the church at Corinth. Paul appears to infer divine wrath when he notes that "For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. That is why many

One might point out, though, that however compelling the extra-biblical sanctions for inferring divine wrath, be they miracles, extraordinary coincidence, or fulfilled bold predictions, there remains an epistemological disparity between cases where we have special revelation guiding us and cases where we do not, such as regards any current event. Confidence that a given text is divinely inspired in turn lends the same confidence to any particular claims that text makes, whether concerning morals, metaphysics, or historical events. So the alternative corroborating factors just discussed ought not be construed as being as reliable as explicit biblical sanction when it comes to making inferences to divine wrath. Just because one or more of them might be sufficient to instill confidence in this regard, it does not follow that they provide the *same degree* of confidence as is gained from an explicit biblical declaration of divine wrath.

But consider this complicating scenario. Suppose someone experiences or somehow receives an explicit *personal* divine revelation that corroborates a particular divine wrath inference. I have in mind here such things as visions, dreams, or other special divine communications, which could effectively serve the same epistemic function in a person's life as divine sanction through an inspired biblical text. If someone were to have such an experience and it strongly inclined her to believe that certain events in her or someone else's life constituted divine punishment, then such might also constitute strong corroborating grounds for believing those events were indeed God's wrath. The questions to raise in such a case, of course, would be the standard ones when it comes to religious experience in a Christian belief context, e.g., questions about whether the experience coheres with Scripture, orthodox Christian belief, church tradition, etc. Unlike the additional corroborating factors I posed above, personal religious experiences have an irreducibly subjective dimension which properly invites public scrutiny. Passing such scrutiny, it seems reasonable to suppose that such experiences might provide similarly corroborating grounds for inferring divine wrath in a given case. But, alas, establishing the veridicality of such extraordinary personal religious experiences is a very difficult thing to do. So grounding a claim of special divine wrath in this way only pushes a significant justificatory burden back one step.

The Moral Argument for the Skeptical Thesis

Now let us turn to the moral argument for the skeptical thesis—the claim that somehow ascriptions of divine wrath are irresponsible because they risk imputing motives to God that he does not have. In considering this worry, notice that if there turn out to be reasonable epistemic grounds for concluding that a given phenomenon

among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment" (1 Cor. 11:29-31).

is a case of divine wrath, then this would by itself considerably reduce the risk of divine slander. Depending on the corroborating factors regarding the case in question, we might even imagine that the risk is eliminated altogether. Consider again the Sodom and Gomorrah case. Even prior to any explicit biblical sanction it would seem reasonable for someone to confidently assert that God had destroyed those cities as an act punishment. The facts that the sulfur raining down from heaven was a miracle and that the destruction had just been foretold by Lot's two visitors strongly corroborate this belief and thus provide sufficient grounds for inferring it was a case of divine wrath. And it is possible that the warrant for this conclusion is so strong as to preclude any worries about misrepresenting or slandering God by making assertions to this effect. The same goes for the death of Sapphira. This event, too, was foretold by Peter and, though not evidently miraculous, it was extraordinarily coincidental that she would drop dead immediately upon hearing Peter's declaration about her impending demise. These factors, too, might so strongly corroborate the divine wrath interpretation that it could eliminate all moral reservations when declaring it to be a case of divine wrath. The fact that, as Luke tells us, "great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events" (Acts 5:11) suggests that the inference to divine wrath in the case of Ananias and Sapphira was indeed popular in the early church community. Of course, this does not prove that their approach was sound, since, after all, the early church could have been mistaken in drawing this conclusion. But to the extent that we trust the wisdom and prevailing judgments of the early church community, their practice in this matter will provide a model for us today as we think about the issue of inferring divine wrath.

My point, then, is that the moral concerns regarding inferences to divine wrath might stand or fall on the epistemic questions regarding such inferences. The stronger the epistemic grounds for such an inference, the less one need worry about slandering God. And, conversely, the weaker the epistemic grounds, the stronger the moral concerns become. But given the significance of the moral wrong that is slandering God with an errant claim about his acts or intentions, it is probably prudent to maintain an especially stringent standard for making such assertions. After all, it is always possible to err in one's interpretations regarding each of the potential corroborating factors discussed above. What *seemed* to be a miracle might not have been miraculous after all. What *seemed* to be an extraordinary coincidence might have been, in fact, fairly ordinary. And what *seemed* to have been the fulfillment of a bold prediction might have been otherwise. Given human fallibility, one must always consider that it is possible that one's inference to divine wrath is invalid. And to the degree that this is possible, one risks slandering the Lord in making a public proclamation regarding one's inference.

> This consideration suggests a final distinction, this one practical in nature. It is one thing to *privately* draw a conclusion about divine purpose behind an event, and it is quite another to make a *public* declaration regarding one's

conclusion. We may personally believe that X was a case of divine wrath, even where we would never proclaim this to others. This is simply to recognize that there are different standards for private and public intellectual practice. Perhaps all of us hold views about various issues that we would never share with anyone, except perhaps our closest confidants. Usually this is because those views are vague hunches, seemings,[13] or simple intuitions that we know we are unable to support with objective data or strong arguments. Or perhaps because, though well-reasoned and evidentially justified, they are highly unpopular or potentially incendiary positions, socially speaking. In any case, since we recognize that our rational grounds for these beliefs are not likely to be publicly compelling, we do not share them with most people. Nevertheless, we do affirm them. Such might be the case regarding one's belief that X was a case of divine wrath. It might be altogether appropriate to believe this, and perhaps even to air this judgment with one's spouse or close friend, but it might also be most prudent to otherwise keep this view to onesself. In this case, doxastic discretion might be the better part of intellectual valor.

Conclusion

Is it possible to identify instances of special divine wrath in contemporary times? Here I have taken some steps toward an answer to this question. As I have noted, in making such claims, one incurs serious moral and epistemic risks. Because of this, a generally skeptical posture regarding all such claims seems to be warranted. This skepticism might be surmounted, however, if certain corroborating conditions exist, such as (1) the occurrence of a miracle in conjunction with the event in question, (2) extraordinary coincidences associated with the event, or (3) the association of the event with a fulfilled a bold prediction. Although such factors may mitigate skepticism regarding a given claim regarding special divine wrath, they do not justify the same degree of confidence that Scripture provides when it identifies a particular phenomenon as such. We also considered the possibility of a personal extra-biblical divine revelation, such as a dream or vision, which corroborates a claim of special divine wrath.

While such an experience could provide strong corroborating grounds for inferring divine wrath in a given case, this introduces justificatory problems of its own, especially as regards demonstrating veridicality in a public way. I conclude,

13. For some critical discussions of assorted epistemic issues related to so-called "seemings" (how things just seem to us), see Chris Tucker, ed., *Seemings and Justification: New Essays on Dogmatism and Phenomenal Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

therefore, that while it may be reasonable to hold private beliefs about a phenomenon being a case of special divine wrath, it is quite another to make such claims publicly.[14]

14. I would like to thank two anonymous referees for many helpful suggestions which considerably strengthened this paper.