

# God's "Wrath" as Anthropomorphism Discussed in the Church Fathers

## St John Cassian *Institutes*

### Chapter 3.

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#### **Of those things which are spoken of God anthropomorphically.**

For if when these things are said of God they are to be understood literally in a material gross signification, then also He *sleeps*, as it is said, Arise, wherefore do you sleep, O Lord? though it is elsewhere said of Him: Behold he that keeps [Israel](#) shall neither slumber nor sleep. And He *stands* and *sits*, since He says, [Heaven](#) is my seat, and earth the footstool for my feet: [Isaiah 66:1](#) though He measure out the heaven with his hand, and holds the earth in his fist. [Isaiah 40:12](#) And He is drunken with wine as it is said, The Lord awoke like a sleeper, a mighty man, drunken with wine; He who only has [immortality](#) and dwells in the light which no man can approach unto: [1 Timothy 6:16](#) not to say anything of the [ignorance](#) and forgetfulness, of which we often find mention in [Holy Scripture](#): nor lastly of the outline of His limbs, which are spoken of as arranged and ordered like a man's; e.g., the hair, head, nostrils, eyes, face, hands, arms, fingers, belly, and feet: if we are willing to take all of which according to the bare literal sense, we must think of God as in fashion with the outline of limbs, and a bodily form; which indeed is shocking even to speak of, and must be far from our thoughts.

### Chapter 4.

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#### **In what sense we should understand the passions and human arts which are ascribed to the unchanging and incorporeal God.**

And so as without horrible profanity these things cannot be understood literally of Him who is declared by the authority of [Holy Scripture](#) to be invisible, ineffable, incomprehensible, inestimable, simple, and uncompounded, so neither can the passion of [anger](#) and [wrath](#) be attributed to that unchangeable nature without fearful [blasphemy](#). For we ought to see that the limbs signify the divine powers and boundless operations of [God](#), which can only be represented to us by the familiar expression of limbs: by the mouth we should understand that His utterances are meant, which are of His mercy continually poured into the secret senses of the [soul](#), or which He spoke among our fathers and the [prophets](#): by the eyes we can understand the boundless character of His sight with which He sees and looks through all things, and so nothing is hidden from Him of what is done or can be done by us, or even thought. By the expression hands, we understand His [providence](#) and work, by which He is the creator and author of all things; the arms are the emblems of His might and government, with which He upholds, rules and controls all things. And not to speak of other things, what else

does the hoary hair of His head signify but the **eternity** and perpetuity of Deity, through which He is without any beginning, and before all times, and excels all creatures? So then also when we read of the **anger** or fury of the Lord, we should take it not ἀνθρωποπαθῶς ; i.e., according to an unworthy meaning of **human** passion, but in a sense worthy of **God**, who is free from all passion; so that by this we should understand that He is the judge and avenger of all the **unjust** things which are done in this world; and by reason of these terms and their meaning we should dread Him as the terrible rewarder of our **deeds**, and **fear** to do anything against His **will**.

For **human nature** is wont to **fear** those whom it **knows** to be indignant, and is afraid of offending: as in the case of some most just judges, avenging **wrath** is usually feared by those who are tormented by some accusation of their **conscience**; not indeed that this passion exists in the minds of those who are going to judge with perfect equity, but that, while they so **fear**, the disposition of the judge towards them is that which is the precursor of a **just** and impartial execution of the law. And this, with whatever kindness and gentleness it may be conducted, is deemed by those who are **justly** to be punished to be the most savage **wrath** and vehement **anger**. It would be tedious and outside the scope of the present work were we to explain all the things which are spoken metaphorically of **God** in **Holy Scripture**, with **human** figures. Let it be enough for our present purpose, which is aimed against the **sin** of **wrath**, to have said this that no one may through **ignorance** draw down upon himself a **cause** of this **evil** and of **eternal** death, out of those Scriptures in which he should seek for saintliness and **immortality** as the remedies to bring life and **salvation**.

## **St Ambrose**

### **From the Book upon Noah's Ark by St Ambrose, bishop *Chap, iv.***

We read that the Lord was angry. It is in the thoughts, that is to say, in the knowledge of God, that man being put on earth and weighted with the body cannot be without sin, for earth is the home of temptations, and the flesh is a bait for corruption. Yet man had a reasonable soul, and his soul had power to control his body; and, being so made, he made no struggle to keep himself from falling into that from whence he would not return. God's thoughts are not as man's thoughts; in Him there is no such thing as change of mind, no such thing as to be angry and then cool down again. These things are written that we may know the bitterness of our sins, whereby we have earned the Divine wrath. To such a degree had iniquity grown that God, Who by His nature cannot be moved by anger, or hatred, or any passion whatsoever, is represented as provoked to anger.

## **St John of Damascus**

### ***Exact Exposition of Orthodox Doctrine***

## BOOK I CHAPTER II

Concerning things utterable and things unutterable, and things knowable and things unknowable.

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It is necessary, therefore, that one who wishes to speak or to hear of God should understand clearly that alike in the doctrine of Deity and in that of the Incarnation(1), neither are all things unutterable nor all utterable; neither all unknowable nor all knowable(2). But the knowable belongs to one order, and the utterable to another; just as it is one thing to speak and another thing to know. Many of the things relating to God, therefore, that are dimly understood cannot be put into fitting terms, but on things above us we cannot do else than express ourselves according to our limited capacity; as, for instance, when we speak of God we use the terms sleep, and wrath, and regardlessness, hands, too, and feet, and such like expressions.

### St Anthony the Great *Philokalia*

God is good, and passionless and immutable. If a man accepts it as right and true that God does not change, yet is puzzled how (being such) He rejoices at the good, turns away from the wicked, is angered with sinners and shows them mercy when they repent, the answer to this is that God does not rejoice and is not angered, for joy and anger are passions.

It is absurd to think that the Deity could be helped or harmed by human deeds. God is good and does only good; He harms no one and remains always the same. As to ourselves, when we are good we enter into communion with God through our likeness to Him, and when we become evil, we cut ourselves off from God, through our unlikeness to Him. When we live virtuously we are God's own, and when we become wicked, we fall away from Him. This does not mean that He is angry with us, but that our sins do not let God shine in us, and that they link us with the tormentors-the demons. If later, through prayers and good deeds, we obtain absolution of our sins, it does not mean that we have propitiated God and changed Him, but that through such actions and our turning to God we have cured the evil in ourselves and have again become able to partake of God's goodness. Thus, to say that God turns away from the wicked is the same as to say that the sun hides itself from those who lose their sight. ([Texts on Saintly Life](#) 150)

### Isaac of Nineveh *The Spiritual World of St Isaac the Syrian*

To say that the love of God diminishes or vanishes because of a created being's fall means 'to reduce the glorious Nature of the Creator to weakness and change'. For we know that 'there is no change or any earlier or later intentions, with the Creator: there is no hatred or resentment in His nature, no greater or lesser place in His love, no before or after in His knowledge. For if it

is believed by everyone that the creation came into existence as a result of the Creator's goodness and love, then we know that this original cause does not ever diminish or change in the Creator's nature as a result of the disordered course of creation'. Nothing that happens in creation may affect the nature of the Creator, Who is 'exalted, lofty and glorious, perfect and complete in His knowledge, and complete in His love'.

This is why God loves equally the righteous and sinners, making no distinction between them. God knew man's future sinful life before the latter's creation, yet He created him. God knew all people before their becoming righteous or sinners, and in His love He did not change because of the fact that they underwent change. Even many blameworthy deeds are accepted by God with mercy, 'and are forgiven their authors, without any blame, by the omniscient God to whom all things are revealed before they happen, and who was aware of the constraints of our nature before He created us. For God, who is good and compassionate, is not in the habit of judging the infirmities of human nature or actions brought about by necessity, even though they may be reprehensible'.

Even when God chastises one, He does this out of love and for the sake of one's salvation rather than for the sake of retribution. God respects human free will and does not want to do anything against it: 'God chastises with love, not for the sake of revenge – far be it! – but seeking to make whole His image. And He does not harbour wrath until a time when correction is no longer possible, for He does not seek vengeance for Himself. This is the aim of love. Love's chastisement is for correction, but it does not aim at retribution... The man who chooses to consider God as avenger, presuming that in this manner he bears witness to His justice, the same accuses Him as being bereft of goodness. Far be it, that vengeance could ever be found in that Fountain of love and Ocean brimming with goodness!'

Thus the image of God as Judge is completely overshadowed in Isaac by the image of God as Love (*hubba*) and Mercy (*rahme*). According to him, mercifulness (*mrahmanuta*) is incompatible with justice (*k'inuta*): 'Mercy is opposed to justice. Justice is equality of the even scale, for it gives to each as he deserves... Mercy, on the other hand, is a sorrow and pity stirred up by goodness, and it compassionately inclines a man in the direction of all; it does not requite a man who is deserving of evil, and to him who is deserving of good it gives a double portion. If, therefore, it is evident that mercy belongs to the portion of righteousness, then justice belongs to the portion of wickedness. As grass and fire cannot coexist in one place, so justice and mercy cannot abide in one soul'. Thus one cannot speak at all of God's justice, but rather of mercy that surpasses all justice: 'As a grain of sand cannot counterbalance a great quantity of gold, so in comparison God's use of justice cannot counterbalance His mercy. As a handful of sand thrown into the great sea, so are the sins of the flesh in comparison with the mind of God. And just as a strongly flowing spring is not obscured by a handful of dust, so the mercy of the Creator is not stemmed by the vices of His creatures'.

Rejecting with such decisiveness the idea of requital, Isaac shows that the Old Testament understanding of God as a chastiser of sinners, 'visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation',<sup>24</sup> does not correspond with the revelation that

we have received through Christ in the New Testament. Though David in the Psalms called God 'righteous and upright in His judgments',<sup>25</sup> He is in fact good and merciful. Christ himself confirmed God's 'injustice' in His parables, in particular in the Parables of the Workers in the Vineyard and of the Prodigal Son, but even more so by His incarnation for the sake of sinners: 'Where, then, is God's justice, for while we are sinners Christ died for us?'

Thus, Isaac claims, one should not interpret literally those Old Testament texts where the terms wrath, anger, hatred and others are used of the Creator. If such anthropomorphic terms occur in Scripture, they are used in a figurative sense, for God never does anything out of wrath, anger or hatred: everything of that sort is far removed from His Nature. We should not read everything literally as it is written, but rather see within the bodily exterior of the Old Testament narratives the hidden providence and eternal knowledge of God.<sup>28</sup> 'Fear God out of love for Him, and not for the reputation of austerity that has been attributed to Him'.

With God, there is no hatred towards anyone, but all-embracing love, which does not distinguish between righteous and sinner, between a friend of truth and an enemy of truth, between angel and demon. Every created being is precious in God's eyes, He cares for every creature, and everyone finds in Him a loving Father. If we turn away from God, He does not turn away from us: 'If we believe not, yet He abideth faithful, for He cannot deny Himself'.<sup>30</sup> Whatever may happen to humankind and to the whole of creation, however far it may be removed from God, He remains faithful to it in His love, which He cannot and will not deny.

<http://www.syriacstudies.com/2013/12/04/st-isaac-the-syrian-a-theologian-of-love-and-mercy-bishop-hilarion-alfeyev/>