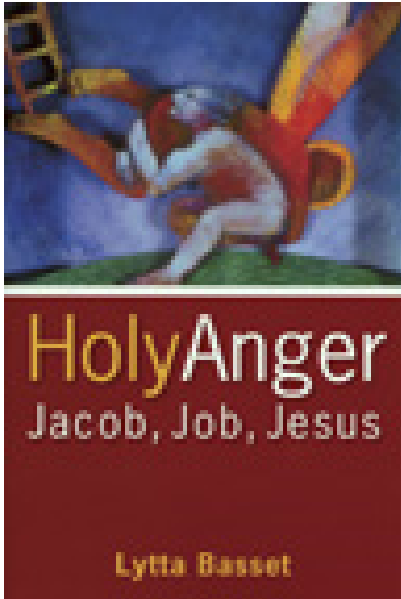


RBL 04/2009



Basset, Lytta

Holy Anger: Jacob, Job, Jesus

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007. Pp. 295. Paper. \$28.00.
ISBN 0802862373.

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Lytta Basset, a Swiss pastor and professor of theology, has written a book on a theme that might not be very appealing at the outset. The words “Holy Anger” in the title can have negative connotations: they sound fanatic, fundamentalist, marginal, too strong. In order to avoid any misunderstandings about what the book is about, it would have been helpful to have the definition of “holy anger” at the beginning rather than toward the end: on page 210 Basset states, among other things, that “holy anger is above all not that appropriation of God’s anger that makes us believe in a divine mission against others.”

Even though the title might not promise to be a bestseller, Basset believes in the importance of her task: anger is an ever-present phenomenon that can be destructive or constructive. Our reactions to anger and its causes are one of the most important human challenges in life. “Any reflection on holiness can only be renewed by considering the theme of anger” (257). Holy anger brings humans in touch with their life-giving energy, something that is related to God but lies deep within us. Anger as a divine characteristic is “the unceasing work of differentiation by which God locates and holds back the living being from what kills the living being” (259–60). “Someone who is angry is someone who has not given up on justice” (73). But in order to have this anger work in us, one has to

confront the “Other”—confrontation and encounter are the themes of the book inasmuch as anger.

The book has three parts. In the first, “Fear of Confrontation,” anger is analyzed both in the present-day (psychological) reality and in several biblical stories. The stories of Cain, Jacob, and Job are in focus (and thus Cain would actually deserve a place in the title). Cain repressed his anger, with deathly results. Jacob always did what was expected of him but slowly grew to meet his anger. Job was a master of complaining, but his censored anger became attributed to God and God was seen as the source of all evil. In the end, Job could own his anger, not being crushed by it and seeing again God as benevolent.

The Hebrew term for *anger* is used frequently of God and much less often of humans. In anthropomorphic terms, God loses his temper for a moment, hiding his face, but then again returns to a constant relationship with humans. Basset’s approach is in many ways psychological: thus, anger is a state that needs to be identified, named, and expressed rather than repressed, as Cain did. But she makes theological and practical conclusions of these psychological claims. For example, believers who are ashamed of their anger and feelings of disappointments should turn to Job and see how he complained. The oft-quoted brief statement in Job 1:21b, “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord,” should not be taken as representative of Job’s attitude. This statement was not sufficient to satisfy Job after all; in fact, Job fell ill after “repressing his complaint.”

In the second part, “The Human Meets His Match,” the story of Jacob is analyzed in more detail. Jacob’s wrestling at the ford of the Jabbok is interpreted as a message dream or vision. The key of interpretation is seen in the part that is often considered an etiology in historical-critical research: the touching of the thigh and the information about the nerve. Basset sees in this a deeper meaning: touching—and healing—of Jacob’s inner wound, that is, his lie and his past, especially with his parents; after all, Jacob got into all his troubles by following his mother’s instructions.

The third part, “For the Sword to Pass,” is about us becoming authentic beings by being in connection with our own desires instead of imitating others. Jesus proclaimed that the truth must become known, even if it hurts or provokes conflicts. The division within family that Jesus came to bring (Luke 12:51–53) is interpreted as God’s work: differentiation between family members brings them closer to their authentic nature. “Agreeing to be separated, differentiated, *split off* from others will allow us to reach the share that belongs to us” (191). Holy anger is explained as anger that does not disconnect us from God or from other human beings for good; if we break a relationship with someone, this restricts our view of the “Father of every creature.” Holy anger restores our

health in its deepest sense. Furthermore, holy anger demands that we encounter the question of our own violence.

This is a book that cannot be read all at once. Probably a person who struggles with something is more receptive to its wisdom than a person who merely wants to learn more about the Bible. Yet reading this book is sometimes demanding. The sentences are not always clear, even with the second or third reading, and thoughts jump from one to another without clear structure. Perhaps a meditative attitude is called for? The three parts of the book are also not clearly distinct. No introductions are given to guide the reader of what is to be expected in each part or each chapter.

The effort of the book is, nevertheless, to be congratulated. Bringing these Hebrew Bible characters alive, close to us, makes them speak to our situations. Scholarly insights are employed but to a limited extent. Instead, many interpreters of these stories in history, including rabbis and church fathers, receive a voice in the book. It seems to me that, although Basset makes many claims and interpretations of her own, the book is not about the correct interpretations. It is about hearing the stories and lines in between—and pondering on the theme of anger for at least a moment.