# Human and Divine כעס and Jealousyin the Hebrew Bible

Divine anger is considered a fundamental phenomenon in biblical theology and many studies have analyzed it in the Bible at large or in parts of it.[[1]](#footnote-1) The conventional wisdom is that biblical Hebrew offers a range of expressions that express the concept of anger generally and divine anger particularly, including **חרה, אף, קצף,** and others, and many studies about human or divine anger in the Bible sort them. Despite the strenuous research effort invested in divine anger, however, this basic lexical assumption has not been put to the test. Even studies that illuminate differentiating nuances among the “terms of anger” almost always treat them, practically, as synonyms and regard the differences among them—where present at all—as inconsequential in the interpretive and conceptual analysis of anger in the Bible.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In this article, I wish to show that this timeworn and unproven assumption impairs our ability to property analyze the phenomenon of divine anger, the possible distance between its biblical descriptions and more recent theological or psychological perceptions, and differences in the ways the deity’s emotions and actions are shaped in the various works of Scripture. Instead of attempting to justify divine anger or explain it in a way that would span the entire Bible, I propose a contemplation of the internal logic that guides the deity’s behavior in diverse theological and literary fields. Semantic analysis is a *sine qua non* for such a contemplation because it may show, in contrast to the conventional wisdom in research, that the biblical authors themselves distinguished deftly among different phenomena when they described crises in man–deity relations.

This article is part of a project that remaps the so-called terms of anger in Scripture and focuses on the root **כע"ס**. This root is used in modern Hebrew as the common and ordinary way of denoting anger. Avi Horowitz noted that in Tannaic midrash, the Sages use the verb **כָּעַס** toparaphrase a verse in which the verb **קָצַף** appears. This phenomenon, he claims, was already manifested in the Book of Ezekiel, in which **כעס** is preferred over **קצף**, the common term in the Priestly literature. For Horowitz, this demonstrates the belated provenance of this book of prophecy relative to the Pentateuchal stratum. Irrespective of the debate over Ezekiel and the Priestly literature, however, Horowitz’ specific argument is hard to accept given that **קצף** occurs many times in Ezekiel and **כעס** is documented in other late biblical writings. Still, this does not suffice to absolve us of the need for a synchronic semantic analysis that will illuminate the differences in meaning between כעס and קצף and the other “terms of anger.”

**כעס** is attributed to YHWH in a range of biblical works—of which Shirat Ha’azinuis the oldest—foremost in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic redaction of the Former Prophets and Jeremiah.[[3]](#footnote-3) The Deuteronomistic redactors even believed that YHWH’s **כעס** was the reason for the destruction of Israel and Judah. Acting on the axiomatic assumption that **כעס** is anger, Deena Grant determined that “In Deuteronomy and in the Historical Books, Israel’s past is interpreted through the lens of divine anger.” Her analysis of divine anger in these strata makes no distinction whatsoever among the various terms.[[4]](#footnote-4) Catherine Joe invested detailed research in the uses of the root **כעס** in various strata of the Deuteronomistic redaction in the Former Prophets and Jeremiah, and analyzed the perception of retribution and the historiosophy that these works evoke. She, too, however, assumed that **כעס** means anger and did not pause to investigate the semantic singularity of this term as against others that are thought to denote anger and appear widely in this literature, foremost **חרה אף**.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In this article, I counter these stances with a new semantic analysis of **כעס** in biblical Hebrew. This analysis will culminate in three main claims. First, **כעס** does not denote anger at all; it is lexically proximate to sorrow, vexation, or insult. Second, **כעס** denotes not a general, undifferentiated insult but a special kind of offense specifically associated with jealousy, in view of the special semantic proximity of **כעס** and **קנא**. As I note below, neither of these claims is totally novel in research; however, they have not managed to surmount the basic perception of **כעס** as simply denoting anger. The third claim is that this new understanding of the root **כע"ס** leads to a sharp distinction between it and the other so-called terms of anger in Scripture, facilitating a new, deeper, and more precise understanding of divine **כעס** in the Bible generally and in its Deuteronomistic works particularly.

1. Does כעס Mean Anger?

The root **כע"ס** appears in the Bible mainly in transitive verbs, those in need of a direct object. That is, they indicate the causing of **כעס** to another: forty-six instances in *binyan hif’il* and two in *binyan pi’el*. Only in six places, all in the later writings, does the root **כע"ס** occur in *binyan qal,* i.e., where the subject of the sentence is not the inflicter of **כעס** on another but one who himself or herself is in a state of **כעס.** In addition, the nominative **כַּעַס** (or **כַּעַשׂ**) occurs twenty-five times in passages from various periods.

It is conventional in research to include **כעס** among the terms that express the notion of anger, even though researchers, commentators, and translators noticed that the meaning of “anger” does not always square with **כעס**, creating incoherence in defining the word. In the HALOT dictionary, for example, the nominative **כַּעַס** is defined as grief in some of its occurrences that pertain to people and as vexation in other occurrences and universally when the reference is to the deity. In almost all occurrences of the verb **הכעיס**, however—and in all occurrences that have the deity as their object—it is interpreted in HALOT as “to provoke to anger,” and in only the few occurrences of **כיעס** or **הכעיס** that have human objects is it construed as “to grieve.”

Thus, according to HALOT*,* the causative verb and its outcome do not match, a state of affairs that, while grammatically possible, is definitely unreasonable. Grant, in her study on divine anger, supports the distinction between human **כעס**, grief, and divine **כעס**, anger, because the latter often appears next to other words that are considered terms of anger. Translations such as NRSV and NJPS also treat the root **כע"ס** inconsistently.[[6]](#footnote-6)

My argument, however, is that research based on semantic, syntactic, and morphological considerations, and not on theological ones, will lead to the conclusion that, with few exceptions in the latter biblical literature, **כעס** does not denote anger in either human or divine attribution. For this purpose, let us first consider various occurrences of **כעס** in anthropomorphic contexts only and then turn the discussion to divine **כעס.**

The root **כע"ס** appears several times in the story of Hannah (I Sam. 1:5–18)[[7]](#footnote-7):

but to Hannah he would give one portion only—though[[8]](#footnote-8) Hannah was his favorite—for Yhwh had closed her womb.[[9]](#footnote-9) Moreover, her rival, to cause her miserable,[[10]](#footnote-10) would really??? cause her **כעס** (**וְכִעֲסַתָּה צָרָתָהּ גַּם \*כַּעֵס**)[[11]](#footnote-11) that/because??? Yhwh had closed her womb.[[12]](#footnote-12) This happened year after year: Every time she went up to the House of Yhwh, the other would cause her **כעס**, so that she wept and would not eat. […] In her wretchedness, she prayed to Yhwh, weeping all the while […] And Hannah replied, “Oh no, my lord! I am a very unhappy woman. I have drunk no wine or other strong drink, but I have been pouring out my heart to Yhwh. Do not take your maidservant for a worthless woman; I have only been speaking all this time out of my great anguish and **כעס**.” “Then go in peace,” said Eli, “and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of Him.” She answered, “You are most kind to your handmaid.” So the woman left, and she ate, and was no longer downcast.

One of the characteristics of anger is that it has an object or an addressee; anger is always *aimed* atsomeone (or at least at something).[[13]](#footnote-13) Hannah, however, feels no **כעס** toward Penina or anyone else. Furthermore, the **כעס** applied to her is not something that she does to another; it is her emotional response to others’ doings. In fact, the phrase **כעס על**, “angry at,” already common in Talmudic Hebrew and used in modern Hebrew to express an active response, is altogether absent in the Bible.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Evidently, then the **כעס** in the account of Hannah is not anger but an expression of distress manifested in weeping, refusing to eat, and being “a very unhappy woman” in “great anguish.” When it passes, we read that Hannah is “no longer downcast.” The phrase שיחי וכעסי, “[my] great anguish and **כעס**,” also expresses the association of **כעס** with distress because this is one of the contexts ofשיח —“I cry aloud **[אֶשְׁפֹּךְ שִׂיחִי]** to the Lord; I appeal to the Lord loudly for mercy” (Ps. 142:2); “I am disgusted with life; I will give rein to my complaint **[אֶעֶזְבָה עָלַי שִׂיחִי]**, speak in the bitterness of my soul” (Job 10:1).[[15]](#footnote-15)

Elsewhere in Scripture, too, **כעס** is accompanied by weeping and tears:

I am weary with groaning; every night I drench my bed, I melt my couch in tears. My eyes are wasted by vexation [**ִכַּעַס**], worn out because of all my foes. Away from me, all you evildoers, for the Lord heeds the sound of my weeping (Ps. 6:7–9);

Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eyes are wasted by vexation [**ִכַּעַס**], my substance and body, too. My life is spent in sorrow, my years in groaning; my strength fails because of my iniquity, my limbs waste away (Ps. 31:10–11).

In both passages, “eyes” and “vexation” clearly belong to the semantic field of tears, weeping, sorrow, and groaning.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The nexus of “vexation” and sorrow recurs in the following: “Vexation is better than revelry; for though the face be sad, the heart may be glad. Wise men are drawn to a house of mourning, and fools to a house of merrymaking” (Eccl. 7:3–4). “Vexation” is contrasted with “merrymaking” and resembles “face be sad.” This also explains why Hannah is said to be “was no longer downcast” (I Sam. 1:18)—her face is no longer sad.[[17]](#footnote-17) The proximity of the contrast of “vexation–revelry” to the contrast of “mourning–merrymaking” reinforces the possibility that vexation is associated with sorrow and not with what we call anger. In certain occurrences, “vexation” parallels “heartache” (Eccl. 1:18, 2:23) and once it appears next to “extreme vexation” **[חרה לי]**, which also verges on sadness (Neh. 3:33).[[18]](#footnote-18)

Thus, **כעס** is associated with sorrow, insult, or vexation inflicted by one person on another. Further observation, however, shows that it expresses a special kind of sorrow that arises in certain situations and not in others and that this is so in respect of divine **כעס** and human **כעס** alike. To substantiate this, we need to demonstrate the relation of **כעס** with **קנאה.**

B. כעס and קנא

Hebrew does not distinguish between envy and jealousy; both fall within the semantic field of **קנא** although jealousy seems to be more common, especially in contexts relating to the deity.[[19]](#footnote-19) **קנאה** is an attempt by an individual—or by the deity—to cope with a situation in which something he or she desires is in someone else’s possession: economic success, family fertility, or, as sometimes occurs, loyalty. Absolute and exclusive loyalty cannot be dualized or divided; for this reason, a perceived challenge to it triggers**קנאה** in the party that demands it. This kind of **קנאה** is typical of a husband who suspects his wife of cheating on him, of the law of the Sotah, and, similarly, of YHWH’s insistence that Israel worship him exclusively. It is typical of YHWH, the God of Israel, to demand Israel’s unadulterated loyalty and to threaten to respond to any disloyalty on Israel’s part with massive and destructive force. For this reason, YHWH is repeatedly called **אל קנא,** an “jealous” god (e.g., Exod. 20:4, 34:14, Deut. 4:24, 5:9, 7:14).[[20]](#footnote-20)

Indeed, many biblical passages, in both interpersonal contexts and those between man and deity, point to a special relationship between the roots **כע"ס** and **קנ"א**, jealousy. The most epitomic examples occur in Shirat Ha’azinu:

They incensed Him with alien things, vexed Him with abominations. They sacrificed to demons, no-gods, Gods they had never known, new ones, who came but lately, Who stirred not your fathers’ fears. You neglected the Rock that begot you, forgot the God who brought you forth. The Lord saw and was vexed and spurned His sons and His daughters. He said: I will hide My countenance from them, and see how they fare in the end. For they are a treacherous breed, Children with no loyalty in them. They incensed Me with no-gods, vexed Me with their futilities; I’ll incense them with a no-folk, vex them with a nation of fools (Deut. 32:16–21).

The Israelites incense YHWH with “no-gods,” i.e., make Him jealous of another deity—who in some sense is undeserving of the appellation “god”—by worshipping him instead of God. Therefore, YHWH promises to avenge Himself of them, tit for tat, by incensing them with a “no-folk,” i.e., making them jealous of another nation, which in some sense is undeserving of the appellation “folk.” By clear implication, YHWH’s jealousy is aroused vis-à-vis other gods. Admittedly, in the same breath with the mention of YHWH’s jealousy of other gods, the author stresses these deities’ worthlessness as against YHWH and calls them “vanity” and “no-god.” The Israelites’ preference of powerless gods as objects of worship amplifies YHWH’s displeasure with their treachery toward him, much as Jeremiah says: “Has any nation changed its gods even though they are no-gods? But My people has exchanged its glory for what can do no good” (Jer. 2:11).[[21]](#footnote-21) Three times in this passage, the verb הקניא or קִנֵּא, “incense,” appears in parallel to הכעיס, causing vexation, possibly signaling a semantic proximity between them.[[22]](#footnote-22) Additional parallels in Scripture bring the unique nexus of the two terms into focus:

They vexed Him [**יַּכְעִיסוּהוּ**] with their high places; they incensed Him [**יַקְנִיאוּהוּ**] with their idols (Ps. 78:58).

A stone has weight, sand is heavy, but a fool's vexation [**כַעַס**] outweighs them both. There is the cruelty of fury, the overflowing of anger, but who can withstand jealousy [[**קִנְאָה**? (Prov. 27:3–4).[[23]](#footnote-23)

Vexation [**כָּעַשׂ**] kills the fool; passion [**קִנְאָה**] slays the simpleton (Job 5:2).

Given these significant parallels, it seems justified to interpret **כעס** as connected with jealousy even in passages where the root **קנא** does not appear.[[24]](#footnote-24) For example, Rachel is prompted by her prolonged infertility, in contrast to the fertility of Jacob’s second wife, to **לקנא** (Gen. 30:1) and the same condition stirs Hannah’s **כעס** (I Kings 1:5–7). Hence, **כעס** is a special kind of sorrow or insult, resembling **קנאה** in the sense that it surfaces in response to the success of the other or something possessed by the other. The following passage also indicates as much:

My eyes are wasted by vexation [**כַּעַס**], worn out because of all my foes. Away from me, all you evildoers, for the Lord heeds the sound of my weeping (Ps. 6:8–9).

The evildoers’ success evokes the narrator’s **כעס**, which he manifests in weeping and in wishing his enemies to be “frustrated and stricken with terror” (Ps. 6:11).[[25]](#footnote-25) In another psalm, it is stated that the evildoer will experience vexation (**כעס**) when he observes the success of the righteous: “The wicked man shall see it and be vexed; he shall gnash his teeth; his courage shall fail” (Ps. 112:10). And Nehemiah describes Sanballat’s vexation in view of the Jews’ construction of the wall: “When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, it angered him, and he was extremely vexed **[וַיִּכְעַס הַרְבֵּה].** He mocked the Jews” (Neh. 3:33).[[26]](#footnote-26)

Thus, a special relationship is found between כעס, vexation, and קנאה, jealousy, manifested particularly in passages that create an explicit parallel between the verbs. This conclusion intersects with the realization that כעס is often associated with sorrow or insult and not necessarily with anger. It is on the basis of these findings that we now reexamine the meaning of הכעיס את ה'.”

C. Provoke YHWH to כעס —Make Him Jealous

The verb **הכעיס,** to vex, of which the direct object is YHWH, is characteristic of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic literature.[[27]](#footnote-27) In addition to its three occurrences in Shirat Ha’azinu, it appears three times in Deuteronomy[[28]](#footnote-28); eighteen times in the Former Prophets, nearly all in the Deuteronomistic redaction; eleven times in Jeremiah, mainly in the prose sermons; and ten times in the rest of the Bible.

The connection between כעס, vexation, and קנא, jealousy, explains why YHWH’s כעס in the Bible is always the outcome of idol-worship. Deuteronomy 4:23–25, for example, links YHWH’s being a “jealous god” to the injunction against manufacturing an idol, which may provoke his jealousy (להכעיסו). Given the link between the terms, it transpires that the verb להכעיסו does not mean “to cause anger” but to cause the deity a form of sorrow or insult that verges on what we would call jealousy. For this reason, כעס, unlike other so-called terms of anger, is always triggered by actions of Israel and never by those of other peoples.

This differentiation matters due to the dominance of הכעיס in the Deuteronomistic literature, which led researchers to conclusions such as “In Deuteronomy and in the Historical Books, Israel’s past is interpreted through the lens of divine anger.”[[29]](#footnote-29) This conclusion is problematic because it defines the category of “divine anger” too broadly, ruling out the specific denotation of כעס and its centrality in the Deuteronomic and, above all, the Deuteronomistic literature.

1. הכעיס in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic Literature

Indeed, study of the occurrences of כעס in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic redaction in the Former Prophets yields a strict and systematic distinction between כעס and its ostensible synonyms, the various expressions that research also considers terms of anger.[[30]](#footnote-30) In Deut. 9:1–10, 11, for example, Israel’s sins in the desert are enumerated and YHWH’s displeasure with their actions is emphasized.[[31]](#footnote-31) In the opening verse of this passage, Israel’s conduct in the desert is described in a general way by means of two verbs that position Israel as the subject and YHWH as the object: “At Horeb you so provoked the Lord that the Lord was angry enough with you to have destroyed you.” Afterwards, the specifics of the generality are given, followed by an account of the sin of the golden calf (9:8–21), Taberah, Massah, and Kibroth-hattaavah (v. 22) and the sin of the spies (vv. 32, 25–29). In the middle of the last-mentioned account, a general statement is made again: “As long as I have known you, you have been defiant toward the Lord” (v. 24).

Many so-called terms of anger appear in this passage. The root **קצ"ף** occurs four times (vv. 7, 8, 19, 22); **אַף/הִתְאַנַּף** three times (vv. 8, 19, 20); **חֵמָה** once (v. 19). Among all the misdeeds listed in the passage—the calf, the spies, Taberah, Massah, and Kibroth-hattaavah—only in regard to the calf is it said that Israel had “displeased the Lord and vex[ed] Him [**לְהַכְעִיסוֹ**]” (v. 18). Now, the reason for this is clear: The sin of the calf transcended mere disobedience or disbelief; it involved manufacturing an idol—an act that “caus[ed] the Lord your God displeasure and vexation [**לְהַכְעִיסוֹ**]” (Deut. 4:25)— due to which it appears adjacent to the description of YHWH as an “impassioned god” [**אֵל קַנָּא**] (v. 24).[[32]](#footnote-32)

Thus, the expression “caused [...] God [...] vexation” is not a general category that denotes the undifferentiated causation of divine displeasure. It has a specific meaning: triggering YHWH’s jealousy by means of idol-worship in the two senses of this term in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic literature: worship of other gods or worship of YHWH in an illegitimate way.

This distinction is also valid when we consider the Former Prophets. Nathan’s reproachful sermon to David (II Sam. 12:7–12) strongly resembles, in structure and style, Abijah’s reprimand of Jeroboam (I Kings 14:7–11). In both passages, the prophet describes YHWH’s selection of and assistance to the king against his enemies and contrasts this with the ingratitude of the king, who “did what was displeasing to the Lord,” and the “displeasure” that YHWH will bring upon him in retribution. Given this similarity, it is a salient fact that the verb הכעיס appears only in the sermon to Jeroboam. This is not because Jeroboam’s actions are worse than those of David, who holds YHWH and his word in contempt, but because David has not **הכעיס** YHWH—since to be **להכעיס** YHWH is possible only via idol-worship, of which David is not accused.

I now present an example of the semantic singularity of **כעס** relative to the other so-called terms of anger from a different direction. By comparing two similar Deuteronomistic passages, one may see that the phrase “made YHWH jealous” (**קִנֵּא אֶת ה')** serves as a quintessential alternative to the widely used expression “vexed YHWH” (**הכעיס את ה').** [[33]](#footnote-33):

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| I Kings 14:22–23 | II Kings 17:10–11 |
| Judah did what was displeasing to the Lord, and angered Him more than their fathers had done by the sins that they committed. They too built for themselves shrines, pillars, and sacred posts on every high hill and under every leafy tree. | They set up pillars and sacred posts for themselves on every lofty hill and under even' leafy tree; and they offered sacrifices there, at all the shrines, like the nations whom the Lord had driven into exile before them. They committed wicked acts to vex the Lord. |

We have seen that in Shirat Ha’azinu, the verb קנא in *binyan pi’el* may express the denotation of the same root in *binyan hif’il:* “They incensed Me [**קִנְאוּנִי**] with no-gods, vexed Me with their futilities; I’ll incense them [**אַקְנִיאֵם**] with a no-folk, vex them with a nation of fools” (Deut. 32:21). Similar to this and to the foregoing, in the left-hand passage the expression “angered Him” (לקנא את ה') means להקניא, to make YHWH jealous (in contrast to the phrase **לקנא לה**'). The statement “Judah did what was displeasing to the Lord, and angered Him” resembles in wording and content the passage in the right-hand column: “They committed wicked acts to vex the Lord.” The connection recurs in the actions by which the Judahns made YHWH jealous or vexed in each case.

2. כעס and “Terms of Anger”

In contrast to the similarity and relationship of **כעס** and **קנא**, the difference between כעס and חרה אף, the latter considered the most common among the “terms of anger,” stands out. The two expressions are differentiated in their meaning and in the contexts of their occurrence. First, like other so-called terms of anger—as we have seen—**חרה אף** may occur in diverse contexts, unlike **כעס**, which appears only in the context of idol-worship. Of Achan’s appropriation of loot from Jericho, it is stated that “Achan [...] took of that which was proscribed, and the Lord was incensed with the Israelites” (Joshua 7:1). At the end of the story, it is stated that “Then the anger of the Lord subsided” (v. 26)—without כעס in both places. Although the phrase “was incensed,” חרה אף, may also occur in the context of worshipping other gods (Joshua 23:16) the expression “vexed YHWH” (הכעיס את ה') appears only in connection with idolatry, as with the allusion to YHWH as “a jealous God” (אל קנוא, v. 24:19).

It is specifically when the phrases הכעיס את ה' and חרק אף ה' appear in close proximity, however, that the syntactic and semantic difference between them stands out. It is important to differentiate between the expressions because the occasional appearance of כעס in proximity to חרה אף and other “terms of anger” has led researchers to the rash conclusion that כעס is one of the terms of anger. This is done, for example, in a passage that describes the circles of כעס in the era of the Judges:

And the Israelites did what was offensive to the Lord. They worshiped the Baalim and forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They followed other gods, from among the gods of the peoples around them, and bowed down to them; they provoked the Lord [**וַיַּכְעִסוּ אֶת־ה'**]. They forsook the Lord and worshiped Baal and the Ashtaroth. Then the Lord was incensed at Israel [**וַיִּחַר־אַף ה' בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל**], and He handed them over to those who plundered them. He surrendered them to their enemies on all sides, and they could no longer hold their own against their enemies (Judges 2:11–14).

Forsaking YHWH and worshipping the Baalim and the Ashtaroth (vv. 11–12) is tantamount to doing what is offensive to YHWH (v. 11) and provoking him (v. 12). Consequent to these actions, YHWH is incensed at them: He surrenders them to plunderers against whom the Israelites cannot hold their own (v. 14). It bears emphasis that the matter transcends mere stylistic diversification; the author had no option of switching terms. Surrendering Israel to its enemies is the way YHWH shows his כעס at Israel; it is his response to Israel’s idol-worship, the conduct that kindles YHWH’s displeasure. In other words, Israel has insulted YHWH and made him jealous by worshipping other gods—and, as the biblical text says, provoking him. In response, YHWH punishes Israel and injures it by allowing its enemies to defeat it; namely, he is incensed at Israel.

This relation between being provoked and being incensed also surfaces powerfully in the following verse: “However, the Lord did not turn away from His awesome wrath [**ֵחֲרוֹן אַפּוֹ הַגָּדוֹל]** which had blazed up against Judah because of all the things Manasseh did to vex Him **[אֲשֶׁר הִכְעִיסוֹ]**” (II Kings 23:26). Thus, despite Josiah’s good deeds (v. 25), YHWH does not relent from his intent to destroy Judah but rather fulfills it.[[34]](#footnote-34) As in the foregoing quotation from Judges 2, here “wrath” is YHWH’s response to being vexed: The two terms are separated by the preposition על, against.

Similarly, כעס may seem proximate to another so-called term of anger—**חֵמָה:**

Thus said the Lord, the God of Israel: Say to the man who sent you to me: Thus said the Lord: I am going to bring disaster upon this place and its inhabitants, in accordance with all the words of the scroll which the king of Judah has read. Because they have forsaken Me and have made offerings to other gods and vexed Me with all their deeds, My wrath [**חֲמָתִי**] is kindled against this place and it shall not be quenched (II Kings 22:16–17).

These words of the Prophetess Hulda establish a clear causal relationship between vexing YHWH and his response, described in this case as the kindling of wrath (חימה ניצתת). Since Israel commits idolatry and thus vexes YHWH, his wrath is kindled unquenchably. Just as there is no causal relationship between wrath and the act, so is there none between “My wrath is kindled against this place” and “I am going to bring disaster upon this place,” given that both describe one matter. Thus, while כעס is the outcome of Israel’s doings, as such it does not describe YHWH’s reaction, instead serving as a reason for the reaction.

3. Exactly What “Vexes” YHWH?

The answer to this question carries far-reaching implications for Deuteronomistic theology. The conventional response in this literature, that the destruction of Israel and Judah was caused by divine anger, is inaccurate. The main precipitant of that event was “vexing” YHWH, i.e., worshipping other gods, which evokes in YHWH a sense of insult wrapped in jealousy. Consequent to this “vexation” comes YHWH’s “awesome wrath” (II Kings 23:26), manifested in an especially aggressive and destructive act.

Our realization that divine כעס is associated with jealousy and, accordingly, is mentioned only in contexts of idol-worship, elicits another question: What, exactly, is it that provokes YHWH’s כעס? If we think about jealousy between spouses, for example, we realize that its threshold may vary among couples and in diverse cultural contexts. In most societies, sexual relations with another partner would be considered a breach of the exclusivity of couplehood. One may, however, imagine a different kind of relationship between one of the spouses and someone else—physical contact, shared leisure activity, or intimate conversation—that would be considered a jealousy-inducing breach of trust in one society or one person and as nothing of consequence in another.

With this analogy in mind, we may say that offering sacrifices to other gods is definitely the prime trigger of jealousy in YHWH, a jealous god who demands exclusivity in Israel’s ritual conduct. Indeed, various biblical writings, including some believed to be of early provenance, relate to worship of other gods as “vexing” to YHWH (Deut. 32:15–17; Hosea 12:15–13:1). In Deuteronomy, however, the incidence of **כעס** is expanded beyond outright idol-worship. Here it is stated that making a “sculptured image in any likeness,” even one that is meant to represent YHWH, elicits his wrath and jealousy:

Take care, then, not to forget the covenant that the Lord your God concluded with you, and not to make for yourselves a sculptured image in any likeness, against which the Lord your God has enjoined you. For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, an impassioned God. When you have begotten children and children's children and are long established in the land, should you act wickedly and make for yourselves a sculptured image in any likeness, causing the Lord your God displeasure and vexation ... (Deut. 4:23–25).

I saw how you had sinned against the Lord your God: you had made yourselves a molten calf; you had been quick to stray from the path that the Lord had enjoined upon you. Thereupon I gripped the two tablets and flung them away with both my hands, smashing them before your eyes. I threw myself down before the Lord—eating no bread and drinking no water forty days and forty nights, as before—because of the great wrong you had committed, doing what displeased the Lord and vexing Him (Deut. 9:16–18).

In accordance with this perception of vexing YHWH by representing him via a sculpted image, the Deuteronomistic authors place a divine reprimand to Jeroboam in the Prophet Abijah’s mouth: “You have acted worse than all those who preceded you; you have gone and made for yourself other gods and molten images to vex Me; and Me you have cast behind your back” (I Kings 14:9; see also vv. 15:29–30). Worshipping idols and worshipping YHWH by means of “molten images” are equally forbidden here. Other kings are accused of having “followed all the ways of Jeroboam son of Nebat and the sins which he committed and caused Israel to commit, vexing the Lord, the God of Israel” (I Kings 16:26; see also vv. 16:2, 7; 21:21; 22:53–54).

Beyond idol-worship and worshipping a sculpted image that represents YHWH illegitimately, however, the Deuteronomistic literature expands the limits of “vexation” even more by including worship of YHWH at “cult places” and not in the chosen place:

Josiah also abolished all the cult places in the towns of Samaria, which the kings of Israel had built, vexing [the Lord]. He dealt with them just as he had done to Bethel (II Kings 23:19).[[35]](#footnote-35)

The assertion that even “cult places” vex YHWH recurs in Ezekiel:

When I brought them to the land that I had sworn to give them, and they saw any high hill or any leafy tree, they slaughtered their sacrifices there and presented their offensive offerings there; there they produced their pleasing odors and poured out their libations (Ezek. 20:28).

The wording of the passage in Ezekiel is not Deuteronomistic. Instead of the common Deuteronomistic expression “on every high hill and under every leafy tree” (I Kings 14:23),[[36]](#footnote-36) the phrase “any high hill or any leafy tree” appears,[[37]](#footnote-37) and instead of “displeased YHWH,” the expression “presented their offensive offerings” occurs. The substance of the allegation, however—that not only idolatry but also worship of YHWH in cult places “displeases” YHWH—fits the Deuteronomistic worldview and reflects the final expansion of the concept of divine כעס in the Bible.[[38]](#footnote-38)

If so, the theological circles of כעס and, with them, the acts that may be construed as idol-worship expand steadily. The most obviously and blatantly illegitimate rite is worship of other gods, which is considered vexatious to YHWH even in writings not influenced by Deuteronomy, such as Shirat Ha’azinu and Hosea’s prophecy. In Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic redaction pursuant to it, and in one of Ezekiel’s prophecies, even worship of YHWH that does not necessarily include sculpted images vexes YHWH if performed outside the central ritual location. Thus perceived, even one who worships YHWH through the medium of a sculpted image, or not at the chosen place, ostensibly worships another deity and, accordingly, vexes YHWH as would one who practices outright idolatry.

D. Conclusions: כעס and “Divine Anger”

The phrase **הכעיס את ה'** does not denote enraging or irritating the deity and does not relate to strong negative emotions at large. It has a distinct meaning: causing sorrow or insult packaged in jealousy and, in this case, sorrow brought about by YHWH’s fear of losing Israel’s exclusive loyalty to him. Indeed, study of the various manifestations of divine כעס shows that all occur in the context of idol-worship. A causal relationship does exist between כעס and a violent act by YHWH—described in terms such as חימה or חרה אף. Here,כעס , vexation, is YHWH’s passive response to Israel’s actions, and pursuant to it YHWH is liable to respond by force—an aggressive reaction often described by use of the terms חמה and חרה אף.

In the Deuteronomy source and the literature pursuant to it, the view of YHWH’s **כעס** as something triggered not only by worship of other gods but also by worship of him in an illegitimate way becomes evident. The divine vexation is first expanded in the claim that making a sculpted image displeases YHWH even though those who produce the image intend it to represent YHWH. In the last stage, the boundary of vexation expands even farther to include worshipping YHWH in the wrong place.

Acknowledging the singular semantic freight of **כעס** has far-reaching implications for research into biblical theology. It may liberate scholarship from the overly broad concept of “divine anger,” an interpretive category in post-biblical theology that is often imposed on biblical texts and that integrates a broad range of widely divergent phenomena. Thus liberated, scholarship may begin to map these different phenomena and analyze each on its own merits. It is found that the biblical authors’ choice of whether and when to use different “terms of anger” is neither arbitrary nor purely a matter of style. The terminology of divine emotions and actions has an internal logic that can be traced both synchronically—distinguishing among different expressions used together—and diachronically, differentiating among ways in which different biblical works use one term or another to describe the divine personality in its interaction with human beings.

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)