# Human and Divine כעס and Jealousy in the Hebrew Bible

Divine anger is considered a fundamental phenomenon in biblical theology and many studies have analyzed, whether in parts or in all of the Bible.[[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, among them **חרה, אף, קצף,** and others, and many studies about human or divine anger in the Bible have tried to classify these terms. Despite the considerable research effort invested in divine anger, however, the basic lexical assumption—that these are basically synonymous expressions for anger—has not been tested. Even studies shed light on some nuances differentiating among the “terms of anger” almost always treat them in practice as synonyms and regard any differences found among them as inconsequential in the interpretive and conceptual analysis of anger in the Bible.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In this article, I seek to show that this conventional and unproven assumption about the insignificance of the differences between the biblical terms for anger impairs our ability to properly analyze the phenomenon of divine anger, as well as the possible gaps between biblical theory and more recent theological or psychological perceptions, and the differences in the ways the deity’s emotions and actions are given form in the various works of Scripture. Rather than attempting to justify divine anger or to give it a comprehensive, biblically inclusive explanation, I suggest considering the internal logic that guides the deity’s behavior in diverse theological and literary contexts. Semantic analysis is absolutlely essention for such an examination, because it may show that, in contrast to most scholars’ conventional wisdom, the biblical authors themselves unambiguously distinguished among different phenomena when describing crises in man–deity relations.

This article, part of a project remapping the so-called terms of anger in the Bible, focuses on the root **כע"ס**. In modern Hebrew, this root is used as the common and conventional 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 later provenance of this book of prophecy compared to to the Pentateuchal stratum. Regardless 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. It is possible, however, that the phenomenon that Horowitz indentifies in the conditional literature is documented in some texts in the later biblical literature. Even if so, this does not suffice to exempt us from conducting a synchronic semantic analysis that can clarify the differences in meaning between כעס and קצף and other “terms of anger.”

The word **כעס** is attributed to YHWH in a range of biblical works—Shirat Ha’azinu being the oldest—especially 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. Accepting the axiomatic assumption that **כעס** is anger, Deena Grant declared that: “In Deuteronomy and in the Historical Books, Israel’s past is interpreted through the lens of divine anger.” However, her analysis of divine anger in these strata makes no distinction whatsoever among the various terms expressing the idea.[[4]](#footnote-4) Catherine Joe conducted detailed research on 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 compared to the others that are thought to denote anger and appear widely in this literature, foremost among them being **חרה אף**.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In contrast to these approaches, I offer a new semantic analysis of **כעס** in biblical Hebrew which leads to three main claims. The first and most dramatic of these is that **כעס** does not denote anger at all; instead, it is lexically proximate to sorrow, vexation, or insult. Second, **כעס** expresses 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 overcome the basic perception of **כעס** as simply denoting anger. The third claim is that this new understanding of the root of **כעס** —**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, or 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 does not inflict **כעס** on another, but one who is himself or herself in a state of **כעס.** In addition, the nominative **כַּעַס** (or **כַּעַשׂ**) occurs twenty-five times in passages from various periods.

It is acceptable in research to include **כעס** among the terms that express the notion of anger, despite researchers, commentators, and translators having noted that the meaning of “anger” is not always consistent with **כעס.** This has led to incoherence in defining the word. In the Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (HALOT), for example, the nominative **כַּעַס** is defined as grief in some of its references pertaining to people, and as vexation 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, which, while grammatically possible, is most certainly 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, rather than on theological ones, will lead to the conclusion that, with a few exceptions found in the latter biblical literature, **כעס** does not denote anger when attributed to either humans or the divinity. To explore this position, let us first consider various occurrences of **כעס** in human 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’ actions. In fact, the phrase **כעס על**, “angry at,” already common in Talmudic Hebrew and used in modern Hebrew to express an active response, is completely 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 the feeling 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 the Scriptures, 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, the expressions “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 described as as “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 examination, however, shows that it actually expresses a particular kind of sorrow that arises only in certain situations and not in others, with respect to divine **כעס** and human **כעס** alike. To substantiate this, we need to demonstrate how **כעס** relates 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 can be neither multiplied nor divided; for this reason, a perceived challenge to such loyalty triggers**קנאה** in the party demanding it. This kind of **קנאה** is typical of a husband who suspects his wife of betraying 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,** a “jealous” god (e.g., Exod. 20:4, 34:14, Deut. 4:24, 5:9, 7:14).[[20]](#footnote-20)

Indeed, many biblical passages, in contexts between man and man and those between man and deity point to a special relationship between the roots **כע"ס** and **קנ"א**, jealousy. The most significant examples are found 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., they make Him jealous of another deity—who, in some sense, is undeserving of the appellation “god”—by worshipping the no-god instead of God. Therefore, YHWH promises exact vengeance, measure for measure, by incensing them with a “no-people,” i.e., making them jealous of another nation, which, in some sense, is undeserving of the appellation “people.” By clear implication, YHWH’s jealousy is aroused when faced with other gods. Admittedly, in the same breath mentioning YHWH’s jealousy of other gods, the text stresses these deities’ worthlessness compared to YHWH, calling them “vanity” and “no-god.” The Israelites’ preference of powerless gods as objects of worship intensifies 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) The unique nexus between the two terms can also be found in other bibilical texts:

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’s prolonged infertility, in stark contrast to the fertility of Jacob’s second wife, prompts her 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 by something possessed by the other. This is also evident in the following passage:

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 can be found between **כעס**, vexation, and **קנאה**, jealousy, manifested particularly in passages in which there is 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' —to provoke YWYH**.**

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; in nearly all 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 constructing an idol, which may provoke his jealousy (להכעיסו). In light of the affinitity between the terms, it becomes clear 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, unlike other so-called terms of anger, כעס is always triggered by actions of Israel and never by those of other peoples.

This distinction is important due to the dominance of הכעיס in the Deuteronomistic literature, which has 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 subject of “divine anger” too broadly, making it impossible to discern the unique meaning of כעס and its centrality in the Deuteronomic and, above all, the Deuteronomistic literature.

1. הכעיס in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic Literature

Indeed, a study of the occurrences of כעס in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic redaction in the Former Prophets shows a strict and systematic distinction between כעס and its ostensible synonyms, i.e., other expressions that are considered to be terms of anger.[[30]](#footnote-30) Deut. 9:1–10, 11, for example, details the sins of Israel in the desert and emphasizes YHWH’s displeasure with their actions.[[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.” The text goes on to give specifics of their actions,followed by an account of the sin of the golden calf (9:8–21), the misdeeds at Taberah, Massah, and Kibroth-hattaavah (v. 22) and the sin of the spies (vv. 32, 25–29). In recounting the latter, a general statement is again made: “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). The reason for this can now be clearly understood. The sin of the calf transcended mere disobedience or disbelief; it involved constructing an idol—an act that “caus[ed] the Lord your God displeasure and vexation [**לְהַכְעִיסוֹ**]” (Deut. 4:25). Consequently, it appears adjacent to the description of YHWH as an “impassioned god” [**אֵל קַנָּא**] (v. 24).[[32]](#footnote-32)

Thus, it appears that the expression “caused [...] God [...] vexation” is not a general category that signifies inciting divine displeasure by any means. Rather, it has a specific meaning of provokingYHWH’s jealousy by means of idol worship in the two senses of this term found in Deuteronomy and in the Deuteronomistic literature: worship of other gods or worship of YHWH in an illegitimate way.

This distinction is also valid when examing the books of The Early Prophets. Nathan’s reproachful sermon to David (II Sam. 12:7–12) strongly resembles Abijah’s reprimand of Jeroboam (I Kings 14:7–11) in structure and style. In both passages, the prophet describes YHWH’s selecting the king and assisting him against his enemies, and contrasts this with the ingratitude of the king, who “did what was displeasing to the Lord,” and warns of the “evil” that YHWH will bring upon him in retribution. Given this similarity, it is salient 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 **להכעיס** YHWH is possible only through idol worship, of which David is not accused.

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

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| --- | --- |
| 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). Similarly, in the left-hand passage in the above example, 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 “term of anger,” is conspicuous. The two expressions are differentiated in their meaning and in the contexts of their occurrence. First, as we have seen, like other so-called terms of anger, —**חרה אף** may occur in diverse contexts, unlike **כעס**, which appears only in the context of idol worship. Of Achan’s appropriation of property 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 narrative, it is stated that “Then the anger of the Lord subsided” (v. 26)—without כעס in either mention. 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).

However, it is specifically when the phrases הכעיס את ה' and חרק אף ה' appear in close proximity that the syntactic and semantic distinction 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 imprudent conclusion that כעס is one of the terms of anger. For example, a passage describing the cyclical nature of 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). As a result of these deeds, YHWH is incensed at them, surrending them over to the hands of their enemies against whom the Israelites cannot defend themselves (v. 14). It bears emphasizing that the matter transcends mere stylistic diversity; the author of the text had no option to change the terms used. 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 essence, Israel has insulted YHWH and made him jealous by worshipping other gods, and, according to the biblical text, provoking him. In response, YHWH punishes Israel and injures it by allowing its enemies to defeat it; namely, he is incensed at Israel.

This relationship 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, with the two terms separated by the preposition על, against.

Similarly, כעס may to appear adjacent 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, it serves 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 affront or outrage involving jealousy. Following 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? In the context of jealousy between spouses, 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 marital exclusivity. However, it is possible to imagine a different kind of relationship between one of the spouses and another—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 something of no consequence in another.

In light of this analogy, we may suggest 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 written 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 in 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).

However, the Deuteronomistic literature expands the limits of “vexation” beyond idol worship and worshipping a sculpted image that illegitimately represents YHWH 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. In place 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” is used. The substance of the allegation, however—that not only idolatry but also worship of YHWH in cult places “displeases” YHWH is consistent with 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 is not a general expression of strong negative emotions. This particular combination of terms has a distinct meaning of causing sorrow or affront involving 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 tolerant response to Israel’s actions, and driven by 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 first extension of the divine vexation is the claim that making a sculpted image displeases YHWH, even if those who produce the image intend it to represent YHWH. In the last stage, the boundary of vexation expands even farther to include worship of YHWH in the wrong place.

Recognizing the singular semantic force 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 appears that the biblical authors’ choice of whether and when to use different “terms of anger” is neither arbitrary nor purely a matter of style. As this article has shown, 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.

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