

The complaining God

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According to the scholarship of the mid-20th century, Micah 6:1-8 is—like similar passages in Isaiah, Jeremiah and Amos—a “covenant lawsuit.” The name of the literary genre is taken from the Hebrew word *rib* (pronounced, “reev”), frequently translated “debate” or “controversy” or, in most of these passages, “complaint” or “case.” Such language conjures up the image of God as plaintiff and Israel as defendant, gathered before some court that would (imagine this) have authority over both. Personally, I think such a literal reading of the “lawsuit” form stretches the theology farther than it will go, but my point for the moment is that a *rib* is the sound of God complaining.

The very idea of God complaining fascinates me. I cut my theological teeth on the great Reformed insistence on the absolute sovereignty of God. It is difficult to accept the idea that if God is not happy about us, God would not simply do something about it. Why waste the divine breath and energy on complaining?

The answer, of course, is that God grants to us both the freedom and the responsibility to amend our own behavior, in light of God’s covenantal expectations. The complaint serves as a reminder that previously negotiated conditions are not being met, in the same way that a parent reminds a teenager of his failure to clean his room as previously agreed (perhaps with similar results?).

What I find fascinating is that a God who complains rather than corrects is a God who has imposed some degree of self-limitation. God elects to complain about God’s people—in Micah 6, to the mountains and hills—rather than simply to obliterate them and start over. God grieves over the wounds inflicted by the people God

created as objects of love.

There is a concept in the Lurianic Kabbalah called *tzimtzum*, which means, roughly, “constriction,” “contraction” or even “withdrawal.” The notion is that the infinite and all-inclusive God constricts or contracts in creation, so as to allow an empty space within which can exist all that is not God—including God’s people.

There is deep irony here. The loving God, who creates from an overabundance of love, withdraws in the very act of creating so that the beloved may exist as the object of God’s love. *Tzimtzum*, as applied to the moral universe, implies the existence of freedom of the will. In order for God’s people to choose to live out God’s intent, God must create the possibility that God’s people may choose *not* to live out that intent.

There is, of course, a tension built into this notion. On the one hand, unless God withdraws, nothing that is not God can exist. On the other, without the continued sustaining presence of God, nothing that does exist can continue. God is thus eternally both withdrawn and present, transcendent and immanent. All life, and all relationship to the God of life, takes place within this tension. Applied to the sphere of human behavior and faithfulness, *tzimtzum* suggests that the God before whom no sin can long persist chooses to make room for the persistence of sin.

In the end, perhaps that is the most important truth of God’s complaint: that we are in relationship with God, who is simultaneously sovereign and self limiting, who is forever making room for our failures without relinquishing control of the moral cosmos in which those failures take place. This is a God whom it is possible to wound—even to kill—but for whom no wound or death is the final word.