

WRATH, DESTRUCTION

In the NT the Greek words for wrath, *orge* and *thymos*, are basically interchangeable. In the Pauline corpus, however, *thymos* is primarily related to human anger and is used in lists of negative human actions (2 Cor.12:20; Gal.5:20; Eph.4:31 and Col.3:8), with the exception of Romans 2:8, where it refers to divine anger and judgment. In the case of *orge* most of the uses can be read as the “wrath of God,” even if the designation “of God” is not present. When we turn to the idea of destruction, it quickly becomes evident that there is a rich variety of Greek words in Paul which carry the meaning of destroying, such as *apollymi* and *apoleia* (basically implying “hopelessness” and “ultimate loss”), *olethros* (“corruption,” “ruin,” and “death”; cf. *olothreutes*, “destroyer”, 1 Cor.10:10), *katalyo* and *kathairesis* (“tear down” or “take apart”), *katargeo* (“put an end to,” “invalidate”), *phtheiro* (“ruin,” “destroy”) and *portheo* (“lay waste”). In the use of these words only the context will determine whether the destroying is speaking of human activity, Satanic work, or the judgment of God.

1. God’s Wrath.

In Paul the treatment of the wrath of God is most fully explicated in Romans where God’s wrath is said to be directed against human wickedness (Rom 1:18; 2:5–8). The prevailing thought is that the wrath of God which will be fully and finally revealed on the eschatological “day of wrath” (Rom 2:5; cf. 1 Thess 1:10; 5:9) is, like the saving righteousness of God in the gospel, already being revealed from heaven (Rom 1:18). In interpreting Paul, the eschatological nature of the wrath of God, with its roots in the OT and Judaism, must be recognized.¹

“In the OT the wrath of God is not viewed as an essential attribute of God, but as an expression of his will as he deals with sinful and rebellious humankind in the context of history. Yahweh’s wrath, as an expression of his holiness, his omnipotence and his sovereign, kingly rule, is executed against the nations who have rebelled against his sovereignty (e.g., Ex 15:7; Ps 2:1–6; Amos 1:2–2:5; see Herion). Yahweh’s wrath is also aimed at Israel for failing to live by the covenant which Yahweh established with the chosen nation (e.g. Ex.32:10; Num.11:1, 33; Amos 2:6), a work that Isaiah calls Yahweh’s “strange deed” (Is.28:21). A day will come when Yahweh will finally establish his sovereignty in history and defeat his enemies. That will be a “day of wrath” (e.g., Zeph.1:15, 18; 2:2 – 3). The question of how Israel will finally be delivered from the wrath of God was a lingering question in Paul’s day. Some Jews apparently maintained that Israel still remained under the curse of exile and thus was not yet delivered from the wrath of God (*see* Restoration of Israel).

This background should inform the debate of whether Paul understands the wrath of God as emotional in nature (affective), or the necessary consequence of a holy God

¹Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 991 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

encountering sin (effective). Any solution to the problem must account for both the judgment and the love of God in his dealings with Israel and humankind in general, and must exclude any notion of malicious or capricious anger on the part of God. C.H. Dodd, noting that “Paul never uses the verb, ‘to be angry,’ with God as subject” and that *wrath* when used of God is “curiously impersonal,” propounded the view that wrath is “not a certain feeling or attitude God has toward us, but some process of effect in the objective realm of facts” (Dodd, 21 – 22). In other words, wrath is the inevitable result, or consequence, of human sin in a moral universe – a calculable effect of certain behaviors or attitudes – and not the activity of God against sinners (Dodd, 23 – 24; cf. Hanson). But Paul seems to maintain that wrath is not simply something that can be attributed to the way the world is, but that it originates in God and is an activity of God (Dunn, 55). Already the wrath of God is being revealed “from heaven” in the wayward degeneration of humankind, whether Gentile or Jew (Rom.1:18 – 3:20).

Paul’s argument is that no one remains untouched by sin (Rom.3:23) and therefore whether it is a matter of Jew or Greek, none is righteous (3:9 – 10) and thus all are liable to the wrath of God. Indeed, in Ephesians the readers in their pre-Christian state were “disobedient” and “by nature children of wrath,” a Hebraic way of indicating a class of people doomed to suffer God’s wrath because of their sinful disobedience (Eph.2:3; 5:6). According to Paul, all people are justified by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and will be saved from God’s wrath (Rom.5:8 – 9). Neither Law nor circumcision serves as a refuge from wrath because law codes and physical signs such as circumcision are not the means of acceptance by God (Rom.2:25 – 28). Abraham’s life witnessed for Paul that acceptance preceded both circumcision and Mosaic Law. Indeed, without faith the Law produces, or brings God’s wrath into effect (*katergazetai*, Rom.4:15), in that it heaps up transgressions (Rom.5:20).

Paul views wrath as both a present reality and a future expectation. It is at this point that judgment and destruction intersect with wrath (cf. *orge* and *dikaiokrisia*, “righteous judgment,” in Rom.2:5). The present wrath is indicated by its present revelation from heaven (Rom.1:18) and in the threefold “handing over” (*paradidomi*) by God of Gentiles to their abysmal lifestyles in which heart, passions and mind are all given over to wickedness (Rom.1:24, 26, 28) and an absence of covenantal relationship with God. Likewise, although the Jews have the commands of God (Rom.3:2), they are judged no better in actuality because of their disobedience (Rom.3:20). Thus, all – Jew and Gentile – stand under judgment. But the wrath of God at this point in the process is not final (Rom.5:9 and 1 Thess.1:10; cf. Col.3:6) but awaits a future manifestation, just as salvation is not yet complete, and will not be fully experienced (Rom.5:21; 6:22) until the last day.

The means by which believers escape the eschatological wrath is through God’s action in Christ Jesus (Rom.5:8 – 9; cf. 1 Thess.1:10). Specifically, this involves the death of Christ, a subject Paul has already developed with reference to the *hilasterion* of Romans 3:25. The question has been widely debated whether Paul uses the term *hilasterion* to refer to an expiatory sacrifice, which focuses on the obliteration of sin, or a propitiatory offering, which in some way satisfies the divine wrath directed against sin. Some

interpreters suggest that the term refers to Christ as the mercy seat where the blood of atonement was applied in the OT cultus. If propitiation is in mind, the idea is that Christ, having taken sin upon himself, substitutes or stands in for Israel and humanity in general, thus satisfying the holy wrath of God against sin. God in Christ bears, in love and mercy, the judgment of divine wrath upon himself (*see* Expiation, Propitiation, Mercy Seat).