CHAPTER 15

From Theodicy to Anti-theodicy: Midrashic Accusations of God’s Disobedience to Biblical Law

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1 Introduction

Alan Segal’s many contributions to our knowledge of ancient Judaism and Christianity are distinguished by great creativity and insight. Both from his writings and from his guidance in my own scholarly development, I have learned to question commonplace beliefs about Judaism, Christianity, and—most importantly—the study of Judaism and Christianity. Alan refused to be bound by traditional assumptions or methodologies, and he did not simply repeat oft-heard and largely unchallenged ideas. For example, his work inverts the widespread and questionable scholarly practice of drawing on comparatively late rabbinic sources to illuminate the New Testament by convincingly arguing for the usefulness of Paul’s writings for the study of Judaism in the first and second centuries. He broke with earlier Jewish scholars’ unwillingness to move beyond traditional antipathies and fruitfully considers the relevance of Christian sources to Jewish history.1 He brought nuance to popular and scholarly terminology, and skillfully demonstrates the inadequacy of descriptions of ‘universalistic’ Christianity and ‘particularistic’ Judaism, for example.2 He critiqued such simplistic divisions and distinctions, and likewise crossed academic boundaries to draw from other fields. In his research on both the afterlife and conversion, he did not limit himself to an analysis of theological beliefs but delved into contemporary sociological data and methods.3 These

1 Alan F. Segal, Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), xv–xvi.
examples, and many more, illustrate why it is appropriate to honor him with a work subtitled “Crossing Boundaries in Early Judaism and Christianity.”

As a tribute to my mentor and friend, I present here a study of rabbinic theology that in a sense crosses both modern and ancient boundaries. I will consider anti-theodicy—challenges to the traditional belief in divine justice and benevolence which blames the Jews’ suffering on their own sins—in the Midrash on Lamentations. While not dominant, such challenges in this text have largely been overlooked by modern scholars, and yet deserve serious attention. Whether this can be explained by traditional piety (i.e., a reluctance to consider sometimes shocking rabbinic ideas) or unexamined assumptions about rabbinic theology, there has been surprisingly little interest in investigating rabbinic anti-theodicy, especially the most extreme or harsh statements. Whatever the reasons, I propose to move beyond the prominent scholarly focus on the many midrashim that support a traditional theodicy and consider evidence for an anti-theodic trend. This parallels what I will demonstrate was a more remarkable breach of religious boundaries in the Midrash itself. Despite the dominance of traditional theodicy in biblical and rabbinic thought,