Lytta Basset. *Holy Anger: Jacob, Job, Jesus.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.

Lytta Basset, pastor, missions consultant, and Lutheran Professor of Biblical Studies at Neuchatel, Switzerland, has written a remarkable biographical, exegetical, theological, and psychological study of the anger of four major biblical characters (Cain is not mentioned in the title but receives significant attention) and of the anger in us all.

"God knows what it is to be angry," Basset says in opening this provocative book, winner of the Prix Siloe in 2003. The rich, multi-layered volume carries on simultaneous conversations with the Hebrew text, the Jewish *targums*, the unfolding history of interpretation, and the wide community of Jewish and Christian commentators. It honors the narratives, stops to do Hebrew and Greek word studies, leaps to explore relational and psychological dynamics, stoops to delve into the soul with careful and critical use of psychoanalytic tools, and then returns to the narrative to rediscover its constant vitality as a mirror of human experience.

Basset finds striking parallels between the Cain-Abel tragedy, the Jacob-Esau rivalry, the Job-God/Satan dilemma, and the Jesus-human evil confrontation. She delves deeply into the biblical sources, then reflects on their psychological depths in an analysis of holy and unholy rage. The positive movement toward a holy anger is seen as an option offered to Cain and rejected, an alternative discovered by Jacob through heroic wrestling, a transcendent possibility for Job reached through anguished suffering, and as a lived reality for Jesus.

Anger that is censored and silenced is Basset's continuing concern. The responsibility to own, explore, and express the anger within by sharing it in relationship is demonstrated in Jacob, sharply defined in Job, and transformed into holy passion for truth in relationship in Jesus. The author presses her argument for open, authentic, congruent emotional life to the very end.

Fascinating as this is to read, it follows the classic psychoanalytic paradigm demanding the expression and ventilation of anger as requisite to mental health. Most research shows this is valuable for a clinical population – certainly Cain and Jacob could have used some treatment – but not for

everyone. Owning anger can more profitably lead to canceling its demands when not just or appropriate, or to negotiation when fitting, so there is a time for silencing and censuring one's volatility.

The volume is divided into three sections. The first, "Fear of Confrontation," takes the story of Cain as the bass line with Jacob and Job as counter melodies. Cain censures his anger then explodes; Jacob hides, deceives, and at last is confronted; Job gestates, clarifies, then explodes with holy rage. All three offer alternative models for anger management: malignant internalizing, devious manipulating, and clarified confronting.

The second section, "The Human Meets His Match," is devoted to Jacob; the third, "For the Sword to Pass," encounters Jesus. Here Basset focuses more on texts speaking of Jesus' work in bringing separation and division than on those describing his reconciling work or his radical teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.

Basset does more careful reading of the Hebrew than the Greek texts. There are breathtaking moments of discovery, such as her identification of Isaac as the first survivor of holocaust (sacrifice) in Jewish history, or her observation that "as Abraham sacrificed Ishmael, so Isaac sacrificed Esau." She puzzles over how Jacob swore by "the trembling of Isaac" in his oaths at his sacrifice on the mountain. Is this a lifelong palsy from the mountain-top trauma at his father's hands, or the trembling when he discovered that Jacob had outwitted him in stealing the blessing? (38)

Interwoven with the exegetical and narrative analysis are conversations with classic psychoanalysis and with the alternative interpretation of religion and violence offered by René Girard and his theory of the scapegoat as the primal mechanism shaping religion from its earliest origins. Basset brings continental thinkers to bear on this study, and they offer fresh ways of perceiving our worlds of rage and our surrounding environment so tormented by violence and war.

I find Basset's work on the patriarchs illuminating, but her approach to Jesus less clear, less balanced, and less integrative of the whole Jesus narrative. In attempting to persuade us that a gentle-Jesus-meek-and-mild Christology is insufficient, she does not fully catch the divine strength and patience of the nonviolent love that passionately confronts and absorbs the most terrifying evil. Basset speaks prophetically of the power of enemy love

and the presence of God in the enemy, but she stops short of fully revealing Jesus as the innocent one beyond all victimhood who surrenders himself to a goal beyond human anger and rage.

Called "a spiritual master" by *Le Monde*, Basset writes with passionate commitment to the right of each person to own, express, and fully embody anger. She hints that this deep urgency springs from the reality of personal suffering. Her previous books indicate a highly sensitive social conscience, and a wide concern for the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized, including those struggling with AIDS.

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John F. Haught. *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2008.

Since the second half of the twentieth century, the debate between atheists and religious believers has been carried on, most often, at academic conferences. That has just very recently changed. The New Atheists (Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens) have with their books, radio interviews, and presentations at colleges and universities successfully brought the debate back into the awareness of the general public. What is new about the New Atheists is not the claim that there are natural explanations for religion – these are as old as the Sophists – but the claim that applying a cost-benefit analysis to religion demonstrates it is bad for humankind. Religion preaches love, but practices manipulative and violent hatred, and consequently we should rid ourselves of it altogether. Moreover, because it provides a space for faith, it is a breeding ground for anti-intellectual fanaticism.

Instead of religion, the New Atheists offer a thoroughgoing Darwinism in which we learn to fold in and make normative ways of being that are conducive to human survival and flourishing. Darwinism explains the rise of