

THE LIMITS OF OMNISCIENCE

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In their discussion of the phrase *וּמַגִּיד לְאָדָם מִה־שָׁחוּ* in Amos 4:13, F. I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman explain that the verse means not that God can tell what a human being is thinking¹ but that God sometimes tells his own innermost thoughts to certain individuals.² Thus, the verse is not meant to indicate that God can “read” one’s mind. After all, say Andersen and Freedman, that is obvious in any case.

But is it? What I wish to suggest here is that, as in so many other instances, on this question the Hebrew Bible is of two minds. It includes texts which presuppose the notion that God has direct access to what human beings are thinking and other texts which presuppose that God does not know directly what goes on in the human mind.³ As Andersen and Freedman’s comment demonstrates, the notion that the biblical God can read minds is one with which most scholars today would automatically agree.⁴ Let me begin, then, by discussing

¹ So, e.g., Richard S. Cripps, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Amos* (London: SPCK, 1929) 177. This interpretation is out of favor today; the most extensive discussion of it I have been able to find is in Meir Weiss, *The Book of Amos* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1992) 2.223 n. 77. (Weiss too rejects this understanding of the phrase.)

² Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Amos* (AB 24A; New York: Doubleday, 1989) 456. On the versional variants, see Shalom M. Paul, *Amos* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 154–55.

³ Paradoxically, both notions may ultimately derive from the experience of prayer. One thinks of Hannah “speaking to her heart; only her lips were moving, but her voice could not be heard” (1 Sam 1:13). This kind of prayer essentially depends on the understanding that God is aware of the thoughts being verbally formulated in the mind; but “why pray when God knows already the secrets of our hearts?” (Margaret Falls-Corbitt and F. Michael McLain, “God and Privacy,” *Faith and Philosophy* 9 [1992] 369–86 at 383). Falls-Corbitt and McLain are the rare contemporary writers who, albeit for theological reasons, think God does not read minds: “though God’s knowledge of what is true could include every innermost thought and feeling of each of us, God chooses instead to grant humans the choice of self-disclosure” (p. 369; and see pp. 381–83).

⁴ The one scholar I have found who denies that the biblical God was omniscient is James

the less intuitive notion. To do that, we must look first at the biblical locus of thought, not the brain—a word that never occurs in the Bible—but לב, the heart.⁵

The verb used most frequently to describe God's activity with regard to the human heart is בָּחַן, "try" (in the sense of "test"). Of some two dozen *qal* occurrences of the verb, seven involve God testing the human heart and/or kidneys (the poetic pair-word for "heart" as an organ of mentality) and two more are parallel to such expressions.⁶ A tenth example asks God to "examine me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts [שְׂרַעְפֵּי]" (Ps 139:23).⁸ Though בָּחַן is primarily a verb of general application, so far as it has any material image associated with it, this appears to come from testing metal for purity, as in "I will test them as one tests gold" (Zech 13:9); "Try me, I will come out like gold" (Job 23:10). Thus, it is no surprise to see that the specific צָרַף, "refine," clearly a metalworking term, is also used with heart and kidneys in Ps 26:2 and parallel to לְבִי בַחֲנָה in Ps 17:3. The image of God as תִּכְן לְבוֹת (Prov 21:2; 24:12) or תִּכְן רוּחָהּ (Prov 16:2) similarly uses a technical metaphor, that of weighing, to describe how God understands the human mind.⁹

Crenshaw, who remarks, "For modern readers there is something shocking about depicting God as having to search diligently to discover Job's wrongdoing, but the biblical YHWH cared about good and evil, and lacking omniscience, searched the human heart ("Qoheleth's Understanding of Intellectual Inquiry," in *Qoheleth in the Context of Wisdom* [ed. A. Schoors; BETL 136; Leuven: Peeters/Leuven University Press, 1998] 221).

⁵ Robert North describes "what must have been the common man's impression of *lēb*: a vaguely-known or even confused jumble of organs, somewhere in the area of the heart or stomach, and very important for what we today call the brain and nervous system" ("Brain and Nerve in the Biblical Outlook," *Bib* 74 [1993] 577–97 at 596–97). It is true that לב in the Bible never specifically denotes the organ a cardiologist would call "the heart" (see North, "Brain," 592–93). By contrast, כְּלִיּוֹת can refer to the anatomical kidneys (e.g., in Lev 3:10). The head is found as the locus of mental activity only in the Aramaic phrase רִאשׁוֹת רֵאשׁוֹת, "visions of the head" (Dan 2:28; 4:2, 7, 10; 7:1, 15).

⁶ Jeremiah 11:20 (heart and kidneys), 12:3 (heart), and 17:10 (kidneys || חֲקַר לֵב); Ps 7:10 (heart and kidneys) and 17:3 (heart); Prov 17:3 (heart) and 1 Chr 29:17 (heart). See also Jer 20:12 (בָּחַן צָדִיק) and Ps 26:2 (כְּלִיּוֹת וּלְבִי) [*qērē*]. D. Kellermann suggests that heart and kidneys together are meant to encompass the total interior life by a merism representing both the upper and lower parts of the trunk and (respectively) the rational and emotional faculties (*TDOT*, 7.181, s.v. כְּלִיּוֹת). Note that the metaphoric usage of "kidney" is not found in Akkadian or Egyptian (*ibid.*, 178); the pairing of kidneys and heart is found in Ugaritic, but in a text of uncertain meaning (*ibid.*, 176). The liver, כֶּבֶד, which does have a metaphoric role in Akkadian, lacks it in Biblical Hebrew except for Lam 2:11, "My liver is spilled out onto the ground over the shattering of my people." See Edouard Dhorme, *L'emploi métaphorique des noms de parties du corps en Hébreu et en Akkadien* (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1963) 128–30. But the LXX understood "liver" for "glory" in כֶּבֶד of Gen 49:6 as well.

⁷ The word is found also only in Ps 94:19; the dictionaries consider it to be derived from the root שָׁעַף (Job 4:13; 20:2) by insertion of בָּ.

⁸ On this psalm, see further below.

⁹ See Nili Shupak, "Egyptian Terms and Features in the Biblical Wisdom" (in Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 54 (1984–85) 475–83, esp. 475–78 (Eng. abstract, I).

The unspoken assumption that implicitly underlies this repeated focus on God's testing the heart is that when God wants to know what is in a particular human being's mind, God cannot sense it, but must deduce it. Moreover, the details of an individual's secret thoughts are not at question in these passages but the nature or moral character of the person. Except for one occasion, Jer 20:12 (to which we shall return), God is never described as seeing or hearing (and certainly not "reading") what is in the heart. Rather, the standard biblical imagery describing God's awareness of human thought depicts God as examining it from the outside, not comprehending it directly. Like a technician with a lump of ore, God puts it to the fire to discover what it is made of and to remove its dross. The purposes of the writer decide whether the testing aspect of this process (תכין/בחן) or the purification aspect (צרף) is emphasized. Either choice implies that God's access to human thoughts is indirect only.

This process of testing is familiar to us in the Bible also with the verb נסה, "test, try," which has no technological application. The name Massah, from this root, for a site on the Israelites' desert itinerary, immortalizes their testing of God's powers. As Ps 78:18–19 describes it, "They tested God in their hearts [וינסוֹ אֱל בלבבם], asking for food to satisfy their appetites. They challenged God, wondering [אמרו], Can God set a table in the wilderness?"¹⁰ That the desert experience was a test of the Israelites by God emerges from Deut 33:8 ("Your loyal one [Levi], whom you tested at Massah") and Ps 81:8 ("I was testing you at the waters of Meribah").¹¹

The most familiar example of this process of probing the mind by creating an external context that demands a choice of actions is God's testing of Abraham in the story of the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22. Later readings of this story, under the assumption that God's omniscience extends both to the mind and to the future, have had to make the test a more complicated one than it is presented to be in Genesis.¹² If the biblical story is taken at face value, however, God does not probe Abraham's beliefs and feelings by direct apprehension, but sets up an external situation whose outcome reveals them. Genesis 22:12 confirms this interpretation: "Do not raise your hand against the boy, do nothing to him! For now I know [כִּי עַתָּה יָדַעְתִּי] that you are a fearer of God—you have not

¹⁰ Similarly Exod 17:7; Deut 6:16; Ps 95:9; and 106:14. On the testing motif, see Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974) 306–7, and literature noted by him on 305; also William Henry Propp, *Water in the Wilderness: A Biblical Motif and Its Mythological Background* (HSM 40; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987) 51–93.

¹¹ This latter occurrence is often emended to תבחני, in favor of the more common motif (e.g., Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60–150* [trans. Hilton C. Oswald; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993] 146; BHS ad loc.), but no textual or versional evidence supports the emendation. See the argument of Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms 51–100* (AB 17; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965) 265–66, who reports the word to make it a niphal with "dative suffix of agency."

¹² See recently Jerome I. Gellman, *The Fear, the Trembling and the Fire: Kierkegaard and the Hasidic Masters on the Binding of Isaac* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994).

withheld your only son from me.” God understands Abraham’s internal attitude, fear of God, through observation of the external actions that demonstrate his willingness to sacrifice his son. Only “now,” after Abraham has lifted his hand to slay his son, does God attain this knowledge.

In a less familiar passage, God’s testing someone is explicitly described as intended to reveal the contents of the heart: “God abandoned [Hezekiah] in order to test him [לנסותו], to know all that was in his heart [לדעת כל־בלבבו]” (2 Chr 32:31).¹³ In Deut 8:2 is found the similar expression לנסתך לדעת את־אשר בלבבך, “to test you, to know what is in your heart.”¹⁴ Here the test was the forty years of wandering through the wilderness, and the method of evaluating “what is in your heart” is explicitly defined: “Would you keep his commandments¹⁵ or not?” Again, what is “in” the Israelites’ hearts is not accessible directly to God but must be ascertained through the external actions to which it gives rise. The wilderness essentially provided a laboratory environment where, in biologically and culturally sterile conditions, God could experiment on the Israelites—for example, as in Deuteronomy 8, by making their survival dependent on manna (cf. Deut 8:16) and setting up strict rules on how this was to be collected and consumed.¹⁶ Jacob Licht sums up: “Testing [in the Bible] is an investigation whose results are not known in advance. . . . According to the Bible, God only tests human beings in order to find out how they will behave.”¹⁷

Let us turn now to the few apparent exceptions to this view. There is a verse which says explicitly that God’s omniscience extends to the thoughts within the human mind:

If we forgot the name of our God and spread out our hands [in prayer] to a strange god,
Would not God search this out? For he knows what is concealed in the heart
[כִּי־הוּא ידַע תְּעִלְמוֹת לֵב]. (Ps 44:21–22)¹⁸

¹³ This laconic remark apparently refers to the incident recounted in 2 Kgs 20:12–19. Exactly how this constituted a test is unclear. Sara Japhet suggests that the Chronicler may have regarded Hezekiah’s acceptance of Isaiah’s prophecy as passing a test set for him by God (*I and II Chronicles* [OTL; London: SCM, 1993] 995–96). H. G. M. Williamson suggests that the purpose of the test was to determine whether Hezekiah’s submission to God in 2 Chr 32:26 was genuine (*I and II Chronicles* [NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982] 387).

¹⁴ Japhet regards 2 Chr 32:31 as a citation of this expression (*I and II Chronicles*, 996).

¹⁵ Following the *qērēʿ*?

¹⁶ Deuteronomy 8:17 presents the direct quotation of a rebellious thought which might potentially enter the Israelites’ minds: “My own strength, and the power of my own hand provided me with all this bounty.” Obsession is perhaps not too strong a word for the Deuteronomic fear of the unfettered and intrinsically private nature of the mind (cf. Deut 29:17–20). See “Deuteronomy and the Control of the Mind,” in Michael Carasik, “Theologies of the Mind in Biblical Israel” (Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 1996) 214–65.

¹⁷ Jacob Licht, *Testing in the Hebrew Scriptures and in Post-Biblical Judaism* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1973) 17 (emphasis original; my translation).

¹⁸ Loren D. Crow compares the “Prayer of Arnuwandas and Asmu-Nikkal Concerning the

Yet even this seems to deny that God's knowledge is direct. If it were, why would God have to "search out [יחקר]" such forgetfulness? Indeed, what God discovers is an overt action, raising the hands in prayer to some other god, suggesting that here too God "knows" what is concealed in the heart through deduction, not direct sensing. If we turn to the verses cited by Andersen and Freedman to show that God's ability to know what human beings are thinking is "obvious," even there we find that this is questionable.¹⁹ The first is Ps 94:11, *ה' ידע מחשבות אדם כִּי־הִמָּה הִבִּיל*. Taken out of context, the first few words of this verse seem to say that "the LORD knoweth the thoughts of man" (KJV), but this is misleading; they merely mean that he knows such thoughts are illusory. Ibn Ezra makes clear that this is the proper grammatical understanding of the verse,²⁰ and emphasizes: *אין כוח לו להוציא לאור העלומה*, "[God] does not have the power to bring a hidden thought to light." It is exactly this inability that requires Deuteronomy to provide a solemn warning to one who assures himself (והתברך בלבבו): "I will be fine, though I stubbornly follow my own heart [בשררות לבי אך]" (29:18).²¹ Such a one is assured in turn that all the curses "of the covenant written in this book of Torah" (v. 19) will indeed fall upon him. But the curses are not activated by the secret resolve at the time of the covenant; not to be bound by it. They are the punishment for the violations of the covenant that he will commit—the external actions that were prompted by, and in turn reveal, the thought that would otherwise have remained private.

The other proof text cited by Andersen and Freedman is Jer 11:20, "The LORD of Hosts judges righteousness, tests [בַּחֵן] the kidneys and the heart,"

Ravages Inflicted on Hittite Cult-Centers" (*ANET*, 399 lines 6ff.) ("The Rhetoric of Psalm 44," *ZAW* 104 [1992] 398 n. 15). Here too what the gods know by "divine insight" is observable cultic behavior.

¹⁹ The same two verses are cited by Hans Walter Wolff, *Joel and Amos* (trans. Waldemar Janzen et al.; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 223–24.

²⁰ Grammatically the structure is the same as that of, for example, Gen 6:2, "the sons of the gods saw the daughters of man, that they were attractive" = "saw that they were attractive." The syntax is discussed in GKC 117h, where, however, neither Ps 94:11 nor the comparable Deut 8:18 is cited.

²¹ S. R. Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy* (3d ed.; ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1902) 325: "mentally congratulate himself." For more on *התברך*, see J. Scharbert, *TDOT*, 2.296 (s.v. *ברך*), on Isa 65:16. On the meaning of *שררות*, see Aida Besancon Spencer, "שררות as Self-Reliance," *JBL* 100 (1981) 247–48; cf. Aaron Skaisit, "The Background of the Talmudic Formula וקים שריר וקיים," in *Studies in Hebrew and Semitic Languages* (ed. Gad B. Sarfatti et al.; Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1980) xlv and n. 18, xl–liv; and Marguerite Harl, "Le péché irrémissible de l'idolâtre arrogant: Dt 29,19–20 dans la Septante et chez d'autres témoins," in *Tradition of the Text* (ed. Gerard J. Norton and Stephen Pisano; OBO 109; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1991) 66. The arguments of Elisha Qimron that the equivalence to *מחשבה* in 1QS 1:6 || CD 2:16 demonstrates that *שרירות* merely means "thought" are not convincing, since *מחשבה*, too, is not simple "thought" but something more like "scheme" ("Biblical Philology and the Dead Sea Scrolls" [in Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 58 [1988–89] 313). In any case, the context, in Qimron's own words, is one of "the will of the human heart (as opposed to God's will)" (my translation).

again a verse which merely says that God tests the mind, not that God can penetrate it. In this case, they would have done better to cite the verse's parallel in Jer 20:12, which does call God, in so many words, רִאֵה כְּלִיּוֹת וְלֵב, one who "sees the kidneys and the heart." Without entering too deeply into the inconclusive discussion of the relationship between these two parallel verses, I would suggest that the use of the word רִאֵה in Jer 20:12 was influenced by the immediately following phrase, אֲרִאֶה נִקְמַתְךָ מֵהֶם, "Let me see your vengeance upon them." The automatic assumption that God can read minds has prevented scholars from remarking on it, but in fact this phrase רִאֵה כְּלִיּוֹת וְלֵב is a unique occurrence in the Hebrew Bible, which makes it a slender reed on which to support the assumption.²²

With the possible exception of Jer 20:12, then, all of the biblical evidence we have seen so far suggests that there is a limit to God's omniscience. God's power of understanding may be extraordinary, but God's power of observation is limited to externals. The "words" of thought that are spoken silently within the mind²³ are not accessible to God; when God wishes to search these out he must devise a test to create an external result that will reveal them.

There are, to be sure, some stronger expressions suggesting that the bibli-

²² Moshe Garsiel, in a different investigative context, has noticed both the uniqueness and the probable source of the expression ("Parallels Between the Book of Jeremiah and the Book of Psalms" [Ph.D. diss., Tel Aviv University, 1973] 1.171). The general, but not unanimous, consensus is that Jer 20:12 is secondary to its context; see A. R. Diamond, *The Confessions of Jeremiah in Context: Scenes of Prophetic Drama* (JSOTSup 45; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987) 252 n. 17; and William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986) 1.468–69, 480. Diamond (*Confessions*, 27) cites Ferdinand Ahuis, *Der klagende Gerichtsprophet: Studien zur Klage in der Überlieferung von den alttestamentlichen Gerichtspropheten* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1982) and Ulrike Eichler, "Der klagende Jeremia: Eine Untersuchung zu den Klagen Jeremias und ihrer Bedeutung zum Verstehen seines Leidens" (Ph.D. diss., University of Heidelberg, 1978), both of which were unavailable to me, as asserting that it was incorporated into Jeremiah 11 from Jeremiah 20 (though Diamond's remark on p. 105 appears to contradict this). Jonathan Magonet also casts some doubt on the doubters, attributing to Jer 20:12 the same role in its context that Jer 11:20 plays in its context ("Jeremiah's Last Confession: Structure, Image and Ambiguity," *HAR* 11 [1987] 303–17; see esp. 304–6).

²³ For the Israelites—as, indeed, for us—thought was most easily represented as speech. Meir Sternberg comments on "the ambiguity of the biblical 'said' between thought and speech" (*The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* [Indiana Literary Biblical Series; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985] 97); see also Cynthia L. Miller, *The Representation of Speech in Biblical Hebrew Narrative: A Linguistic Analysis* (HSM 55; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996) 290–97. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg observe that Homer's use of interior monologue "exemplifies the ancient tendency to think of thought simply as speech minus the sound. This concept of thought as a sort of internal dialogue, taking the same linguistic form as oral speech, remained the prevailing assumption about the nature of thought in literature, because if thought is simply unspoken speech, it can be represented exactly as speech would be represented" (*The Nature of Narrative* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1966] 180). For more on the common human notion that thought comes in words, see Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (New York: William Morrow, 1994) 56–57.

cal God does know or at least can know what is going on in the mind. Psalm 139 seems to hint at such complete knowledge of the psalmist. Yet even here we find that this knowledge is the result of examination (חִקְרָתִי, v. 1). Verse 2, “you understand [בְּנִחָה] my thoughts from afar,” need not imply that God’s knowledge of those thoughts is direct, especially since the psalmist speaks of God’s thoughts in v. 17; no one would suggest that he or she has immediate access to them. Ezekiel 11:5 explicitly says, “Such are your thoughts [כֵּן אִמַּרְתֶּם], O House of Israel; I know what comes into your mind [מֵעֵתִידָהּ אֲנִי יֹדְעֶתִיהֶן]” (NJPSV). But again context suggests that this knowledge is based on what the being accused have said—not internally but to each other—and the streets of Jerusalem, which God can see are filled with corpses. There are many similar cases in the prophetic books where the unmarked verb אָמַר describes what people think, most likely based again on what they have said and done; the addition in Ezekiel of the assertion that God “knows” what is on their minds does not imply direct knowledge. Only “Sheol and Abaddon are before the LORD; how much more so the hearts of humanity?” (Prov 15:11) seems to support the standard notion of God as mind reader; the lack of any context for the verse precludes a deeper understanding of what it implies for our question.

It is different, however, with some depictions of God in narrative literature. It is clear that one’s innermost thoughts cannot be concealed from this God; God knows them directly, without testing. Thus Sarah, overhearing that she is to have a son (though she has gone through menopause), laughs “within her [בְּקִרְבָּהּ]” (Gen 18:12).²⁴ Yet God asks Abraham at once (v. 13) why she laughed. Confirming that she was laughing to herself but not outwardly, Sarah lies and denies that she laughed; to which God responds, “No, you laughed, all right” (v. 15). Note that God’s question to Abraham includes Sarah’s words, introduced by the quotation marker לְאִמֶּר, indicating that God’s knowledge of Sarah’s thoughts was indeed gained by what we would call “reading” her mind.²⁵

Abraham, of course, had had a similar reaction when first told the news: “Abraham fell on his face and laughed, thinking [וַיֹּאמֶר בְּלִבּוֹ], Can a hundred-

²⁴ קִרְבֵּי, generically one’s inner part without reference to a specific organ, can sometimes (as here) be used comparably to לֵב. See BDB, s.v. קִרְבֵּי II, 2 (899a).

²⁵ The fact that the words cited are not precisely the same as those of v. 12 is not an indication that God’s knowledge of Sarah’s thoughts was imperfect but simply a reflection of the absence, in biblical writing, of our contemporary insistence on the exactness of direct quotation. See George W. Savran, *Telling and Retelling: Quotation in Biblical Narrative* (Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) 49–51. The Midrash, evaluating inexact quotation for its own purposes as deliberate, suggests that God deliberately accused Sarah of saying that she was too old (not Abraham, as she had actually “said within herself”) in order not to start a quarrel between them. See William T. Miller, *Mysterious Encounters at Mamre and Jabbok* (BJS 50; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984) 35 and 174 nn. 201–5, citing, e.g., *b. B. Meṣ.* 87a; *b. Yeb.* 65b; and *Gen. Rab.* 48:8.

year-old man father a child? Will Sarah, who is ninety, give birth?" (Gen 17:17). Here the implication that God "read" Abraham's mind is not made explicit, but it is nonetheless clear. God responds first to what Abraham said "in his heart"—"Sarah will, indeed, bear you a son" (v. 19)—and only then to the audible request (on Ishmael's behalf) that Abraham made after stifling his amusement—"As to Ishmael, I heed you" (v. 20). Again, Abraham's falling on his face shows the element of attempted concealment,²⁶ which God's awareness of his real thoughts frustrates.²⁷

Here, then, we have two cases where characters conceal their true thoughts, amusement, and doubt, behind a facade of acceptance. Yet what is carefully kept internal (בקרבו/בלבו) is immediately evident to God, without testing or "refining." Narrative texts, then, as opposed to those texts which address God's knowledge of the heart directly, permit the assumption that God can indeed "read" minds. To pursue this line of inquiry, let us look at the various biblical occurrences of words formulated only "in the heart."

We begin with the first person: לבי, "my heart." The phrase אמרתי בלבי is found in the Bible exclusively in Ecclesiastes (2:1, 15; 3:17, 18; also דברתי בלבי in 2:15). Here saying something in the heart implies no attempt at concealment. Qoheleth is letting the reader in on his internal thought processes. There is no contrast here between thought and outward expression that varies from it; Qoheleth really was thinking through a problem.²⁸ Note that the introduction אמרתי אני בלבי of 2:1 is taken up again in v. 2 simply as אמרתי and then again in v. 3 as דברתי בלבי.²⁹ The fact that this discussion is going on internally, בלבי, is significant for Qoheleth not specifically because it is not external, but because the internal—the mind—is part of what he is trying to explore.

This is very different from the way the expression אמר בלבו, in the third person, is used. We have already seen Abraham saying one thing בלבו and presenting a different face to God (Gen 17:17), just as Sarah laughed בקרבה (Gen 18:12) and denied to God that she had done so. In both cases the specification

²⁶ The concealment here is twofold. By falling on his face, Abraham both hides his smile and feigns obeisance to God and acceptance of his promise. Here, to be sure, Abraham's falling to the ground constitutes an action by which God might have divined what was in his mind; but the explicit answer to Abraham's unspoken question implies that the narrative is presenting God as having unmediated access to the very words in which Abraham framed his thoughts.

²⁷ It is interesting that both the P (ch. 17) and J (ch. 18) versions of the announcement of Isaac's birth, despite their differences, share not merely the laughter that explains his name but also the failed attempt to conceal the laughter from God.

²⁸ For a discussion of Qoheleth's awareness and explicit discussion of his own thought processes, see Peter Machinist, "Fate, *miqreh*, and Reason: Some Reflections on Qoheleth and Biblical Thought," in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots* (ed. Ziony Zevit et al.; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995) 159–75.

²⁹ "For I had explored the matter with my mind" (Robert Gordis, *Koheleth: The Man and His World: A Study of Ecclesiastes* [3d ed.; New York: Schocken, 1968] 148). Here Qoheleth is using his mind as a tool, not following after his own impulses to the exclusion of God's commands as in וליאחזרו אחרי לבבם of Num 15:39.

that the utterance was internal seems to be intended to emphasize that the thought was a negative one which the thinker was hoping to conceal. We see the same effect several more times in narrative texts. In Gen 27:41, Esau says “in his heart [בלבני],” after Jacob has cheated him of Isaac’s blessing, “The days of mourning for my father [i.e., his death] are soon to come; then I will kill my brother Jacob.” Here what Esau is concealing in his heart is premeditation of murder. Again, in 1 Kgs 12:26–27, Jeroboam says to himself (ויאמר ירבעם בלבו), “Now the kingdom may revert to the House of David—if this people goes up to perform sacrifices at the Temple of the LORD in Jerusalem, this people will return to their lord Rehoboam, king of Judah. They will kill me and return to Rehoboam, king of Judah!” The narrator has Jeroboam secretly acknowledging that Rehoboam is the legitimate king (אדנייהם) and reasoning that the ritual connection to Jerusalem will make his own partial usurpation of the Davidic kingship untenable. His subsequent establishment of the golden calves in Dan and Bethel is not grounded in religious intentions, as he pretends. The internal thoughts exposed by the narrator reveal that his motives are grounded not in faith but in realpolitik. Finally, in Esth 6:6–9, Haman’s apparently disinterested suggestions for glorifying one whom the king wishes to honor are revealed by what he says “in his heart [ויאמר המן בלבני]”—“Whom could the king wish to honor more than me?” (v. 6)—as the most egregious self-aggrandizement, to the point of a symbolic usurpation of the king’s royal prerogatives for himself.

As with Abraham and Sarah, we find that the narrator is not content with revealing the reprehensible innermost thoughts of the character. In each of the cases, the narrative goes on to give the character his comeuppance. Haman’s bubble is burst immediately in Esth 6:10 when Ahasuerus tells him, “Quick, take the raiment and the horse, just as you said, and do so for Mordecai the Jew.” We know that Jeroboam’s alternative shrines in Dan and Bethel long survived him,³⁰ but narratively 1 Kgs 13:1–6 immediately destroys the shrine in Bethel, confronting Jeroboam in public with the illegitimacy that he had acknowledged in his private thoughts. Esau’s case is the most remarkable. Immediately after we are told that he resolved “in his heart” to kill Jacob, we read, “The words of Rebekah’s elder son Esau were told [ויגיד] to her [!], and she called her younger son Jacob and said to him, ‘You know, your brother Esau is planning on³¹ killing you’” (Gen 27:42). How could Esau’s private thought be

³⁰ For Dan, “Jonathan son of Gershom son of ‘Manasseh’ and his descendants were priests to the Danite tribe until the day the land went into exile” (Judg 18:30); for Bethel, “Moreover, the altar in Bethel and the shrine that Jeroboam son of Nebat had made . . . [Josiah] tore down that altar and that shrine” (2 Kgs 23:15).

³¹ Following Saadia, who interprets תנחומיך of Ps 94:19 and תנחומות of Job 15:11 similarly. The example in Gen 6:7 (כי עשיתם כי נחמתי כי נחמתי) perhaps indicates that the verb originally meant any change of mind, not just one from grief to consolation. But Isa 1:24 hints at a link with revenge, if only because of the likeness to נקם (E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* [AB 1; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964] 210).

told to Rebekah? Perhaps the narrative intends us to understand that God was aware of Esau's thoughts (as he seems to have been with Abraham and Sarah) and could warn Rebekah that Jacob's life was in danger.³² The alternative possibility is perhaps even more interesting. If no supernatural access to Esau's thoughts is implied, but he was simply overheard muttering to himself, then the function of the idiom *וַיֵּאמֶר בְּלִבּוֹ* here could not be to indicate deliberate concealment by means of silent thought, as we would naturally understand the phrase. Instead, *וַיֵּאמֶר בְּלִבּוֹ* would have to be a semantic marker indicating nothing but the very fact of evil intention. In either case, it is almost as if doing something *in* the heart constitutes a direct challenge to God.³³ In narrative texts, such challenges are uniformly followed by the immediate frustration of the concealed thought.³⁴

There are other instances in narrative literature that present God interacting directly with the "heart"—that is, the mind; but their implications are not as clear as one might wish. Thus, in Exodus, God prevents Pharaoh from carrying out the logical policy of letting the Israelites go and thus putting an end to the plagues by "hardening" his heart, that is, interfering with his reason.³⁵ (In the

³² Most modern commentators ignore the unusual combination of *וַיֵּאמֶר בְּלִבּוֹ* and *וַיִּגְדַּל לְרֵבֶקָה*. The Midrash agreed that Rebekah's knowledge was prophetic (*Gen. Rab.* 67:9). Nahmanides, by contrast, explains that deliberation (*אֲשֶׁר יִמְלֹךְ אָדָם עִם לִבּוֹ*) is called "speaking with the heart" (*אִמְרָה עִם הַלֵּב*) whether or not it is accompanied by audible speech, for "heart" simply means "the will" (*הַרְצוֹן*). Sternberg similarly makes "[t]he naturalistic inference that the plan leaked out because Esau could not keep his own counsel . . ." (*Poetics*, 251). Robert Alter carries the inference to another level, calling v. 42 "a shrewd play of oblique characterization," forcing the reader to infer "that Esau was unable to restrain himself and keep counsel with his own heart but instead blurted out his murderous intention to people in the household" (*Genesis* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1996] 144).

³³ *Genesis Rabbah* 67:8 observes that speaking "to" the heart indicates control over it and that speaking "in" the heart indicates yielding to its control. The observation that speaking "in" the heart is reprehensible and "to" the heart is innocent does generally hold true for the Bible. Dietz Otto Edzard notes a distinction in Akkadian between speaking *ana* (= *אֵל/עַל*) *libbi*, "soliloquy," and *ina* (= *ב-*) *libbi*, "reflection" or "deliberation" ("Selbstgespräch und Monolog in der Akkadischen Literatur," in *Lingering over Words* [ed. Tzvi Abusch et al.; HSS 37; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990] 157). Thus the Biblical Hebrew distinction may have developed from a prior distinction in Semitic usage generally that implied no value judgment.

³⁴ The immediate obviation of Haman's mental usurpation of the king's position, which is otherwise reserved for thoughts directed against God, is to be regarded as another example of the motif of God being at work behind the scenes in the book of Esther.

³⁵ God is responsible for the hardening in E and P, not in J. See Robert R. Wilson, "The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart," *CBQ* 41 (1979) 18–36. Note the same motif outside the exodus story in Deut 2:30 (*הִקְשָׁה אֲדָרְדָּרוֹ וַאֲמַץ אֲדָלְבָבוֹ*), Josh 11:20 (*לְחֹזֶק אֲדָלְבָבָם*), and Isa 63:17 (*תִּקְשִׁיחוּ לִבֵּנוֹ*); see Wilson, "Hardening," 33–34. On both "hardness of heart" and the Ezekielian "heart of stone" as positively viewed in Egyptian thought, see Nili Shupak, "Some Idioms Connected with the Concept of 'Heart' in Egypt and the Bible," in *Pharaonic Egypt: The Bible and Christianity* (ed. Sarah Israelit-Groll; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1985) 206–7.

biblical idiom, a heart that is “hard” is not cruel, as in English—merely ineffective.) Again, it is God who keeps Absalom and his supporters (2 Sam 17:14) from realizing, as they otherwise would have, that Ahitophel’s advice is better than Hushai’s. Similarly, but on a grander scale, the purpose of “fattening” the Israelites’ hearts in Isaiah 6 is to make their minds so sluggish as to prevent them from figuring out how to save themselves from the punishment God has ordained for them. By contrast, God gives Solomon a wise heart (1 Kgs 3:12) and puts wisdom and the ability to instruct into the hearts of Bezalel and Oholiab (Exod 35:34–35).³⁶ In 1 Sam 10:26, God “touches” the hearts of החזיל (NJPSV “upstanding men,” by contrast with בליעל in v. 27), so that they follow Saul.

In all of these cases, God affects the functions of the mind in some apparently supernatural or at least paranormal way. God’s more usual way of affecting the workings of the heart is indirect, however. At its baldest, God’s gift of wisdom means that a heart of unchanged ability works better because it has better information with which to work. The opposite is of course also true. God can simply lie and thus permit a false perspective of reality to interfere with the workings of a mind whose intrinsic capacity God has not disturbed. Thus, falsehoods innocently proclaimed by prophets speaking at God’s instigation were to lead Ahab to his death at Ramoth-Gilead (1 Kgs 22:20–23), and laws that were not good were given to Israel in the desert, in the guise of a way of life designed for their benefit, in order to lead them into ultimate disaster (Ezek 20:25). On this level, no psychic powers are necessary. But in the cases where we are simply told that God has affected the workings of the mind but are not told the details of this process, our assumption must again be that God somehow has direct access, if not to the contents of the mind, at least to its workings.

The “writing” of God’s teaching upon the heart in Jer 31:31–34, despite its superficial resemblance to our “reading” the mind, is really an opposite process. The writing does not provide the script of one’s thoughts (as “reading” the mind would provide a transcript of them) but instead serves as the instruction-set that determines how one *can* think—“firmware” in computer jargon. Even in Jeremiah’s vision of the future, God could be assured that our thoughts would never leave the proper channels, but God would not necessarily know exactly what they were.

What is the origin of the narrative impulse to extend God’s omniscience to the realm of human thought? For the beginning of an answer to this question, let us turn to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, and specifically to God’s soliloquy in Gen 18:21, “Let me go down and see whether they have really acted as in the outcry which has come to me, and if not, I want to know about it.” We know

³⁶ It is no coincidence that all three men were given this wisdom to permit them to construct the tabernacle and the Temple (1 Kgs 5:26 makes it clear that Solomon’s wisdom was meant for this purpose as well).

that according to Psalm 139 God could see the psalmist in formation in the womb. How can a God who is able to see the unformed limbs of the embryo in the womb be unable to see what is going on in Sodom and Gomorrah without descending to earth for an inspection?

This sort of contradiction between two biblical texts is often resolved by the appeal to multiple authorship. Without rejecting that notion, I would like to suggest that in this case the difference results from something more than the differing views of two different biblical writers. After all, earlier in Genesis 18 God had no problem reading Sarah's mind. I think God had to go to Sodom and Gomorrah to see what was happening there in order to give Abraham the opportunity to bargain. That is, God's omniscience was limited by the author of this story for narrative reasons. Similarly, though most of the Bible represents God as unable to read minds, the biblical narrators sometimes give God this power for the purposes of the story they are telling. We learn something similar from the revelation of Esau's murderous thoughts to Rebekah. We have seen that this text, as it stands, appears to involve a contradiction; M. Niehoff has cogently suggested that the narrator of the story is trying "to reconcile two mutually exclusive narrative demands."³⁷

Robert Alter remarks:

The narrators of the biblical stories are of course "omniscient," and that theological term transferred to narrative technique has special justification in their case, for the biblical narrator is presumed to know, quite literally, what God knows, as on occasion he may remind us by reporting God's assessments and intentions, or even what He says to Himself.³⁸

I would argue the opposite: that omniscience is something that the narrator lends for imaginative purposes to God, rather than the reverse. It is not the narrator who knows what God knows, but God who knows what the narrator wants God to know.

To sum up: Can the God of the Hebrew Bible read minds? Contrary to popular belief, most biblical texts suggest that God cannot, but several narrative texts insist that God can. This observation prompts a second and broader question: To what extent are the theologies that appear to be operative in various biblical texts actually shaped by literary imperatives?³⁹

³⁷ M. Niehoff, "Do Biblical Characters Talk to Themselves? Narrative Modes of Representing Speech in Early Biblical Fiction," *JBL* 111 (1992) 580.

³⁸ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981) 157.

³⁹ An anonymous reviewer suggests that the appeal to "test me" might also stem from "features of poetry (e.g., hyperbole)," rather than being based on the assumption that the contents of the mind are hidden. Such a possible contradiction, however, is more likely based on the psychological "paradox of prayer" (see n. 3) than on deliberate aesthetic or creative choice. The extent to which psychological forces (or, for that matter, philosophical argumentation) determine a writer's view of God goes beyond the study of the biblical text to that of religion in general.