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EXODUS 32 AS AN ARGUMENT FOR TRADITIONAL THEISM

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I. RECENT FORMULATIONS DENYING IMMUTABILITY

Of the modern theological approaches, process theism must be considered as one of the most far-reaching. It bases its theology in large measure upon man as the ontological starting point.[1] The existence and attributes of God are said to be corollary to those of man himself. God, too, is subject to time. He, too, is ever-changing.

More recently, some of these conclusions have been endorsed by branches of evangelicalism. The seminal bridge for this acceptance was built by Terrence Fretheim, most notably in his commentaries on Exodus and Jonah and his more comprehensive biblical theology, *The Suffering of God*.[2] Although Fretheim's work, in particular, deserves attention, as do the many variants of openness exegesis, openness theologians are consistent in asserting that traditional theism ignores the biblical texts, among them Exodus 32.[3]

II. THE NEED FOR AN EVANGELICAL ASSESSMENT OF EXODUS 32

This persistent charge against traditional theists—a lack of honesty and fidelity to the biblical text—is one which evangelicals must take seriously.[4] In fact, it could reasonably be stated that the popularity of open theism within evangelical circles is directly traceable to its appeal to biblical theology.[5] Chief among the texts addressed is Exodus 32.[6] Although open theists

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[1] Cf. John B. Cobb and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) 42. See also Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960); John Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology Based on the Thought of Alfred North Whitehead* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965); and *Process Theology* (ed. Ronald Nash; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).

[2] Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

[3] Throughout the paper, the term traditional theism is used to denote what some open theists refer to as classical theism. In implying no significant debt to Greek thought, it is probably a more balanced and preferable term.

[4] John Sanders, "Historical Considerations," in *The Openness of God* (ed. Clark Pinnock *et al.*; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994).

[5] Clark Pinnock writes, "It is hard to avoid the impression that, whereas open theists are comfortable with biblical terms . . . traditional theists prefer abstract philosophical terms . . ." (Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001] 26).

[6] Gregory Boyd, *God at War* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997) 130.

assert that Exodus 32 unequivocally bolsters their case, a thorough look at the argument of Exodus, coupled with a close study of chapter 32 itself, shows just the opposite. Exodus 32 is consistent in presenting a picture of God which is best described using the traditional terminology of immutability and omniscience.

III. AN EXPLANATION OF THE ARGUMENT OF EXODUS

The message and argument of Exodus plays a significant role in an understanding of Exodus 32 and, more specifically, in the narrative purpose of Moses' dialogue with God. If properly understood, the argument of Exodus points toward a decidedly traditional understanding of God's immutability. By the time the reader reaches Exodus 32, certain exegetical patterns have emerged. These patterns serve to highlight the theology of the author. Exodus lays a foundational understanding of God—one which would be built upon later in Israel's history.

1. *Exodus 1: Introduction and transition.* Exodus 1 introduces the situation of Israel's bondage. In essence, it acts as the transition from Genesis and the stories of the patriarchs to Moses' particular focus on the nation Israel. God's goodness to his people in slavery is repeated several times, as is the fact that they multiplied greatly during these years. This terminology of multiplication builds upon God's command to Adam and Eve in the garden; although the Egyptian Pharaoh was attempting to thwart the creation mandate in the lives of the Israelites, they nevertheless were able to carry it out—even in slavery. Fretheim, in commenting correctly on chapter 1 writes, "The focus is on *continuity with both creation and promise themes within Genesis*."[7] In fact, the chapter begins with a focus on the final chapters of Genesis, with a list of Jacob's sons (Exod 1:1–6). When Pharaoh appears in verse 8, he is placed in opposition both to Joseph, and to the creation blessing of Israel.[8] This opposition lies behind his command to kill all male Israelite babies. As Joseph stated repeatedly, God was working within the situation to preserve and bless his people (Gen 45:7–8). Pharaoh's goal is exactly the opposite. If anything, this chapter serves to reinforce the notion that God's plans will not be thwarted. The evil work of Pharaoh does not frustrate the good plan of God. In fact, the irony of the situation highlights Pharaoh's inability to do so: his means of destruction (the Nile) becomes a vehicle for Moses' deliverance; Moses' mother gets paid to take care of him; Moses' name reflects his mission as Israel's deliverer.[9]

[7] Fretheim, *Exodus* 24 [italics in original].

[8] Although it is difficult to know how far to push the point, this creation theme serves to highlight from the outset the transcendent nature of God. If anything, the doctrine of God as Creator should discourage the reader from reading into the human characters too large a place in the plan. As in creation, it is God who does the work of redemption, irrespective of man's attempts at intervention or his ongoing failure to obey.

[9] Fretheim, *Exodus* 37.

2. *Exodus 2–15: Dialogue and deliverance.* Exodus 2–7a introduces the human deliverer of Israel: Moses. As the chapters progress, the reader sees Moses' own imperfection as he resists the Lord's call and fails to circumcise even his own son. Moses as the human mediator between God and the people is not portrayed as an individual without fear or faults. Yet, even so, he is the one chosen by God. A God looking for a willing and able deliverer would have rejected Moses immediately. A God prone to frequently change his mind would soon have seen Moses' inadequacy. Instead, from the outset, Exodus presents a God who is *not* thwarted by man and who is unswerving in his commitment, first to bless and redeem Israel, and then to use Moses as the mediator of that redemption and blessing. Moses' role as mediator, especially as it relates to the argument of the book, will take on increasing significance as the story progresses. For now, it is enough to note two things: that God is Creator and not thwarted in his plans, and that Moses is his chosen mediator.[10] These two facts, so clearly in evidence within this section, provide the backdrop for Exodus 32. In fact, they provide the basis for Moses' own theology. As he later dialogues with a God, he knows him to be the Creator and is convinced that his plans for redemption are unassailable.

Also striking in these chapters is the place of dialogue in Moses' relationship to God. As Fretheim himself rightly notes, "Characteristic of the entire section is an *ongoing dialogue between God and Moses*, interrupted by a visit to Pharaoh during which God is silent."[11] Although Fretheim ascribes different significance to these various conversations, it could well be stated that these dialogues become a paradigmatic way for God to reveal himself and his nature to Moses. It is in the context of Moses' questions, for instance, that God assures his presence (Exod 3:12), his name (Exod 3:14–22), and the signs Moses will perform (Exod 4:2–9).

It is also worth noting that, within this setting of dialogue, Moses asks God why he was sent, since to that point Pharaoh had only become more cruel and hardened (Exod 5:22–23).[12] God reveals his ultimate plan in the Exodus—to bring them into the Promised Land (Exod 6:8). In fact, God goes so far as to connect his name to the fulfillment of that land promise (וְנָתַתִּי אֹתָהּ לָכֶם מוֹרָשָׁה אֲנִי יְהוָה׃). This was not lost on Moses, who repeats this theme several times throughout the book, most notably in Exodus 32. From this point onward, Moses' theology is built on the dual notions of the promise of the land and the holiness of God's name.

[10] It is interesting to note that God is said to "remember" at the close of chap. 2 (וַיִּזְכֹּר). Fretheim quite significantly interprets this in a traditional and self-evidently correct way. He writes, "This does not refer to a jogging of the divine memory, as if God had forgotten promises made . . . God's remembering always means action that will affect the future" (*Exodus* 48).

[11] Fretheim, *Exodus* 51–52 [italics in original].

[12] It should be noted just how serious Moses' question is. He accuses God of doing evil הֵרַעְתָּה לָעָם and, in so doing, paralleling Pharaoh's actions, הֵרַע לָעָם. It is striking to note that God reveals to Moses his future plans, which effectively undermine the accusation of evil. Moses, like open theists, saw real evil. He attributed it to God and, in so doing, evidenced the same reaction, but not the same theological suppositions as open theists. He did not understand God's perfect knowledge of and comprehensive plans for the future.

Finally, perhaps the most significant evidence for the argument of traditional theism is this: within these dialogues God reveals that Pharaoh will not listen, because God will harden his heart (Exod 7:1–5). Two things must be noted from this introductory dialogue pattern. First, it is within the context of dialogue (with its apparent give-and-take) that God reveals himself and his nature. Understanding the function of dialogue within Exodus in this way is critical. Second, there is no implication that Pharaoh can disappoint or thwart the plans of God. In fact, even Pharaoh's rejection of both Moses and Aaron is in keeping with God's plan. Pharaoh's rejection cannot even be said to be an evidence of his free will; it is God who hardens him, and God who prophetically speaks of Pharaoh's future action. Although Moses is introduced as the conduit of God's redemption and the messenger of his promised release, it is God himself who is the main character of the story. His work in redemption cannot be thwarted. Even the resistance to his plans was both foreknown and under his control. Hence the reader can see both a pattern of revelation (dialogue), which comes at key points in the story, and a theological foundation, which affirms God as unassailable Redeemer.

The curses of Exod 7:8–11:10 serve various literary purposes. First, many have noted their connection to Egyptian gods, gods which Yahweh is explicitly showing to be impotent.[13] Perhaps more fundamentally, though, these chapters show creation run amok, hearkening back once again to the truth of God as Creator and as the one who alone brings blessing. This is especially significant in light of the later blessing and cursing section. That God, as Creator, alone could bring blessing and curse becomes a foundational theological truth upon which the Law is based. Further, the plagues underscore the powerlessness of humans in the work of redemption. Apart from any other significance, the plagues certainly prove God's power to redeem and his truthfulness in prophecy. Just as God had said when they were yet future, so the plagues went. Nowhere is God pictured as subject to the changes of free creatures, and in no sense were his assertions about the future unreliable or inexact.

Chapters 12–13 are structured as a single unit, with the focus once again on Yahweh, his uniqueness, and his work in redeeming Israel. Here the outworking of God's plan to deliver the nation takes another step. The tenth plague, and the passing over which the nation experienced, both illustrate once again the themes introduced earlier: God alone is the Redeemer, and his plans cannot be thwarted.[14]

Chapter 14, too, appears to be carefully structured, focusing on God's deliverance and redemption. Two pieces of the narrative deserve special attention. First, Moses again dialogues with God. Here, as before, the dialogue functions to reveal more about God's character and purposes. This is the pattern of the book. From a literary perspective, when Moses dialogues

[13] For an example of this theme see George F. Knight, *Theology as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 61–66.

[14] Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1974) 149.

with God, God reveals more about himself, his plans, and his character. In this case, God reveals his power over the minds of the Egyptians. Also, God again reveals the future in verses 3–4 and 15–18. His foreknowledge is remarkably complete, encompassing even the reaction and response of Pharaoh and his army. These two important insights, the function of Moses' dialogue within the narrative and God's foreknowledge and exhaustive control over the minds of his enemies, have significant bearing on the theology of the book.

Chapter 15 functions as a transition.[15] Here is an explicit theological statement about God's provision in the past and a brief narrative passage which establishes God's ability and willingness to provide for his redeemed people even in the wilderness. It is also transitional in terms of Moses' relationship with God. Here it is Moses who is declaring the power of the Lord. Especially in verses 6 and 17, Moses echoes the words of God. Now, instead of God declaring his power, might, and purpose for Israel, it is Moses. Having experienced God's redemption, he can confidently assert the surety of the nation's inheritance in the promised land.[16] This becomes an integral part of Moses' theology.

3. *Beyond chapter 15.* From the end of chapter 15 through chapter 18, the scene of the wilderness is set. This marks a fundamental turning point in the book; it is here that the reader is introduced for the first time to the narrative of a *redeemed* people, whom God had rescued out of slavery in Egypt in order to bring them into the Promised Land. Throughout their wandering in the wilderness, God provides for his children. Although much theological import can be drawn from the complaints of Israel in the wilderness, and while indeed much greater detail is given elsewhere in Numbers, the wilderness narrative in Exodus serves primarily to establish God's continued presence and to set the stage for the giving of the Law, which was to affect the nation's relationship with God from that time onward.

In chapter 19 another element is introduced—the Law. The giving of the Law at Sinai, within the Exodus narrative, radically alters the situation of God's redeemed people. The Law is outlined in brief in chapters 19–23; in chapter 24 the people themselves affirm it. Chapters 25–31 expand on the Law, specifically discussing the worship of God in the tabernacle, the priesthood, and the altars. Chapter 31 ends with a discussion of the Sabbath—both the goal of the Law and the goal of creation. In order to understand this important section, one must first understand the context in which the Law was given.

First, the Law must be seen as having been given to a redeemed nation. Israel at this time had been rescued from slavery in Egypt. Further, her redemption was for a specific purpose—inheritance of the Promised Land. God

[15] Ibid. 173.

[16] This is duly noted and explained by Brevard Childs who writes, "The later section then recounts in poetic form the conquest and possession of the land which culminate in the establishment of the divine sanctuary" (*The Book of Exodus* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974] 244).

had been shown as Redeemer first, and, secondarily, as Provider. All of this was shown in the context of his overall work in creation and in his great power over even the mightiest of his creatures.[17]

After chapter 31, then, the reader has been introduced to God as Creator/Redeemer, and Sustainer/Provider. God is working with a redeemed nation in the wilderness. Having been introduced to the wilderness, the reader is introduced to the Law. The narrative in chapters 32–34 explains how the setting of the wilderness and the gift of the Law work together. In effect, the question becomes, how does a redeemed people in the wilderness respond to the good Sinai Law? Further, by the time the reader reaches chapter 32, there are undeniable literary expectations regarding the use of dialogue. One expects dialogue to be a form of revelation. In it, God will more fully reveal his character and purpose. Also, having read Moses' song in chapter 15, one understands that Moses has finally grasped the truths about God revealed in earlier dialogues. Moses recognized that he was leading a redeemed people, with the fixed purpose of bringing them into the land. He also knew, and expressed quite vividly, God's power over all things, his ability to explain future events, and the connection between God's fulfillment of promises and the integrity of his name. That each of these is reflected in Moses' dialogue in chapter 32 comes as no surprise.

In brief summary, chapters 32–34, like Numbers 14 and Leviticus 10, show that the response is failure. The gift of the Law—even to a redeemed nation—results only in sin. As with the other sections, the first of which introduces bondage, and the next of which introduces wilderness, this, too, gives greater insight into the character of God. God is not only the one who causes blessing, the one who sustains, and the one who is unique and holy; he is also the God who forgives and remembers. This is critical. Unless the argument and structure of Exodus are understood correctly, the reader cannot understand the function of Moses' dialogue with God. Unless that dialogue is seen as a vehicle for God's revelation of himself in this new situation, and as an opportunity for Moses once again to manifest what he so clearly explained in chapter 15, it will seem that God is either quick-tempered or easily swayed. In reality, the dialogue instead reveals that the God of Sinai *forgives*, but that he also *remembers*. His forgiveness is an expression of mercy, and his remembrance guarantees judgment for the disobedient and yet, ultimately, surety for all of God's promises. As one commentator has cogently stated,

[17] Here one refers not only to Pharaoh, who is undoubtedly portrayed as a powerful opposition figure, but also to the sea itself. An exhaustive search of the references to the sea and the deep, even limited to the Pentateuch, yields an impressive array of imagery. Primarily the images center around evil and chaos. God's command over the Red Sea ought to be seen in such a context. Once again, rather than portraying God as somehow limited, this victory over the sea underscores his work in creation and his ongoing power over all created forces. Many have argued cogently that his work in redemption always builds on his work in creation. The images seem to bear this out. Cf. W. J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2000) and Leland Ryken, James Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998) 181–82.

> Any consideration of the literary form of the narrative [Exodus 32] . . . must take into consideration the relation of this brief but crucial narrative to the larger literary complex of which it is a part, Exod 32–34. And that linkage necessarily raises the question of the larger Sinai narrative . . . which leads in turn to some review of the entire composite that is Exodus.[18]

The neglect of openness exegetes to examine this passage in light of its context within the book is one of their great failures.

IV. EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF EXODUS 32

Having been introduced to the formative themes of the book—God as Creator and Redeemer, the transcendence of the Lord, and the mediatoral role of Moses—the reader is prepared for the dialogue of chapter 32. Certain specific exegetical details reenforce what was set forth earlier in Exodus; all operate within the same basic revelatory framework.

1. *The message of Exodus 32.* The theme of failure in the wilderness (in response to the Law) is established in the chapters leading up to chapter 32. Further established is the sovereignty of God over the entire process of redemption; just as in the exodus from Egypt, so in the wilderness, God must be Israel's guide. When the reader reaches Exodus 32, the preceding material is presupposed.[19]

In Exodus 32, the sin of Israel is set up in a way typical of the Pentateuch as a whole. Israel is, first and foremost, guilty of making the most basic mistake: deciding based on what they *see* rather than on what they *have heard* from God.[20] This is typical, not just of individual failure within the Pentateuch, but especially of Israel's response to the Law. Their failure to keep the first two commandments signals, from a narrative standpoint, the failure that they will undoubtedly experience in their attempts to keep the remaining ones.[21] This theme is foundational to properly understanding Exodus 32. When Exodus 32 is viewed as a paradigmatic passage, one which comments on the basic pattern of the nation in response to the Law, it becomes clear that God's response must also be paradigmatic.

Exactly what Aaron and the Israelites were attempting to fashion is a matter of some debate.[22] Though the calf imagery reflects a possible pagan

[18] John I. Durham, *Exodus* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1987) 416.

[19] See R. W. I. Moberly, *At the Mountain of God* (Sheffield, UK: JSOT, 1983) 44–45.

[20] Though an in-depth analysis of this theme is not possible, it is worth noting that, in every instance within the Pentateuch in which a character or a nation acts on the basis of what they see, they make the wrong decision. This paradigm is established first in the garden, where Eve looked at the food and saw and ate. The chapter begins in typical fashion, "When the people *saw* that Moses delayed . . ." The reader is instantly alerted to the failure which is about to be described.

[21] David Noel Freedman has cogently argued for the purposeful ordering of Israel's failures. Each failure reveals their disobedience in keeping one of the first nine commands. Exodus 32 represents the first of these failures, corresponding to the first two commandments. Cf. David Noel Freedman, *The Nine Commandments: Uncovering a Hidden Pattern of Crime and Punishment in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 2000).

[22] Durham writes, "The widespread presence of bull images in ANE worship has been thoroughly confirmed by Eissfeldt . . . and attempts have been made to connect the golden calf with the lunar

connection, the internal evidence seems to suggest that Aaron was attempting to fashion an idol with the characteristics, or at least the fame and power, of the LORD.[23]

Aaron's words in verse 4 have long been discussed by commentators. Oddly enough, although verse 5 explicitly links worship of the golden calf with worship of Yahweh, here he speaks of "gods" in the plural.[24] Often this has been associated with the idolatrous calves of Jeroboam's day.[25] Whether syncretism or polytheism, this significant failure signifies the failure of the nation to keep even the most basic principles of the decalogue. At this point, it may be worthwhile to step back in order to better see the overall significance of the passage. The LORD has given his good Law to a redeemed people in the wilderness. The Law is revealed to Moses and, even as it is being revealed, the people are engaged in breaking it in the most basic and fundamental way. Childs remarks tellingly on this incident when he writes, "From the perspective of the Exodus writer, the people now confirm their idolatrous intent."[26] Exodus 32 is, first, a commentary on the sinfulness of man and on the failure of the Law. The tension exhibited in Moses' pleading is between the just punishment for this inherent sinfulness, the knowledge of sin which the Law provides, and the promises of God. The question becomes clear: what is the mechanism by which a holy and just God can *still* carry out his promises amidst the disobedience of his redeemed people? God cannot break his promises, a fact upon which Moses depends, and he cannot give up his holiness, which the LORD himself asserts emphatically.

2. *Moses' appeal.* A thorough examination of Moses' words gives evidence of his reliance on God's promise and of his dependence upon everything revealed about God thus far in Exodus. Verse 11 is a significant allusion to Exodus 15.[27] His appeal to the LORD's name also relies heavily on earlier material. When God sent Moses to face the Egyptians, he first

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cult of the god Sîn, brought by the patriarchal fathers from Haran and possibly even reflected in the name 'Sinai,' . . . and also with the Egyptian representation of Amon-Re as a bull . . . one scholar has even made the imaginative though implausible suggestion that the golden calf is to be understood as the 'continued, reassuring presence' of the absent Moses" (J. Durham, *Exodus* 420–21).

[23] Exod 32:5 especially lends itself to this interpretation. Aaron proclaims a feast for the LORD. Perhaps this was not simply usurping the LORD, but rather trying to represent him in a way other than he himself had revealed. Also striking is the fact that the people desire a replacement for Moses. It was he with whom they were especially impatient. At any rate, whether attempting to usurp God as he had revealed himself, or Moses, through whom God was being revealed, the Israelites were still undermining, and specifically refashioning, the Law.

[24] This is the case even though some translations do not reflect Aaron's words, likely because of the following verses, in which he clearly seems to connect worship of the calf with worship of the LORD. Still, the Hebrew is striking: אֵלֶּה אֱלֹהֶיךָ.

[25] See especially Childs, *Book of Exodus* 566.

[26] Ibid.

[27] V. 11b reads, אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּכֹחַ גָּדוֹל וּבְיָד חֲזָקָה. Compare with Exod 15:6, יְמִינְךָ יְהוָה נֶאְדָּרִי בַּכֹּחַ. In both, Moses extols the power of God's hand. The allusion in chap. 32 seems both intentional and apparent.

gave his name, the sign of his authority and power. To state, as Moses boldly does, that God's name would be ridiculed by the very people to whom it had been shown as holy would have been a powerful argument, and one which was thoroughly rooted in the LORD's own statements about himself. God's name was that which was to be vindicated in the redemption from Egypt; his hand was to be the means of vindicating that name. In short, Moses reminds God of his previous statements and acts. It is important to remember the foundational nature of this narrative. The reader would expect to be reminded about the most basic of the LORD's attributes and actions. From a narrative perspective, then, this review of God's actions and attributes fits. What seems implausible is the notion that Moses was reminding God of something he did not know already. So, from the perspective of the story of Exodus, Moses' review serves a significant purpose; as a revelatory statement directed at the LORD, it seems unnecessary. As even John Sanders admits when commenting on this passage, "It is unlikely that Moses presents God with any new information."[28]

Further, it would appear that God left the door open for such an appeal. Childs, following the earliest Jewish interpreters, argues that God, while promising severe punishment, nevertheless allows for the mediation of Moses. The LORD's words, in Exod 32:10, signal several things about the judgment. First, the LORD asks Moses to leave, so that he can freely destroy the people. Implied in this is the assumption that, were Moses to stay and intercede, God's judgments might not be as severe.[29] This would fit with the understanding of Moses' role already established in the book. Moses alone was the mediator between God and the people; he alone was the revelatory vehicle through which the LORD communicated his Law. But the opening is signaled by much more than this. The LORD repeats to Moses a promise nearly identical to that which he gave to Abraham in Genesis 12.[30] It was as if God was reemphasizing to Moses both his role as mediator along with the basis for his mediation: the history and promises of God to Israel.[31] This must be clearly in view. Moses is not appealing to his own merit, nor to the LORD's affection for him, but to the promises that God himself had made to his chosen nation.[32]

3. *The basis for the LORD's mercy.* The other option, which open theists prefer, is that God cared enough about Moses' opinion and friendship to change his previous condemnation and promise of judgment.[33] This seems unlikely for several reasons. First, it is an argument from silence. There is

[28] John Sanders, *The God Who Risks* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998) 64.

[29] Childs, *Book of Exodus* 567.

[30] Gen 12:2 reads, וְאֶעֶשְׂךָ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל; Exod 32:10, וְאֶעֱשֶׂה אוֹתְךָ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל.

[31] Childs, *Book of Exodus* 567.

[32] It is also worth noting that Moses argues on this basis in other cases as well. In Deuteronomy 9, after recounting the event of the golden calf, he follows with a description of the rebellion at Kadesh Barnea. In both he argues based on God's past redemption, his name, and his reputation (Deut 9:28).

[33] Sanders, *God Who Risks* 64.

no evidence that the LORD changed his mind based on his affection for Moses. In fact, there are only two statements—both somewhat vague—that give any indication of the reasons for the LORD's decision. The first obvious reason (if such a term can be used) is Moses' argument. Although all would admit that Moses gave God no new information, it does appear that God's response in Exod 32:14 is based in some way on Moses' words.[34]

The second apparent reason for God's mercy was the repentance of the people. In verse 29 Moses demands that the people "dedicate themselves to the LORD."[35] Just as their dedication and repentance was daily, so God's blessing might be with them for that day.[36] Although God himself does not affirm the efficacy of this repentance, it seems likely that Moses spoke authoritatively in demanding it.

Finally, the third apparent reason for the LORD's forgiveness comes in verses 33–35. Here the LORD punishes those who had disobeyed his command. Whatever the scope of this punishment and judgment, it must not have been total. Aaron at least is spared, though he was surely involved in the disobedience. The punishment was representative or substitutionary. It is worth noting that Moses understood that the LORD forgave on the basis of substitution; in verse 32 he offers himself on behalf of the people.

Far from supporting the assumptions of open theism, which maintain that God's response was based upon his affection and respect for Moses, it would seem that the LORD acted in accordance with principles which Moses understood: forgiveness for repentance, and substitutionary punishment. In fact, the suggestion that Moses makes about his own punishment in verse 32 is unacceptable to the LORD. Far from paying special attention to Moses' suggestions, the LORD instead acts according to principles of judgment with which Moses was either familiar or which he expected. So, in summary, there is no warrant for the assumption that God showed mercy *based upon* his relationship with Moses and his respect for Moses' opinion. Rather, if any reasons can be discerned, they relate to repentance and substitutionary punishment, principles with which, at least in part, Moses seemed familiar. If Moses was familiar with these characteristics of God's mercy, and, as discussed, if Moses simply asserts already-revealed facts about God's nature and work, then, inasmuch as a reason can correctly be deduced, God's forgiveness is based entirely upon immutable truths related to his own person and work.

4. *Examination of* נחם. Although the contextual evidence seems to argue strongly against the openness interpretation of Exodus 32, significant questions still remain. While it seems that God does not show mercy on the basis of his affection and respect for Moses, and while the entire argument of the

[34] Perhaps it is unbiblical even to discern the "reasons" behind God's decisions. The issue is whether, from the perspective of Exodus 32, Moses' friendship and feelings can rightly be cited as the reason behind God's decision. God shows mercy for His own reasons, some of which are unknown. Also, Moses' argument refers not to the persuasiveness of Moses, but to the basis for his assertions, namely, the long-standing, irrefutable promises of the LORD.

[35] Literally Moses demands that they, "fill their hand" (מֹשֶׁה מִלְאוּ יֶדְכֶם הַיּוֹם) before the LORD.

[36] Compare the command of Moses with his expectation, וְלָתֵת עֲלֵיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה.

book emphasizes God's transcendence, and even though Exodus 32 itself is a paradigmatic passage, communicating a particular theological perspective, the overwhelming question still lingers: what does the text mean when it states that the LORD repents?

In order to understand this phrase, one must first examine carefully the meaning of נחם. This verb does not occur in the *Qal* form within the OT. Primarily it is found in the *Niphal* and *Piel*.[37] The primary meaning for the *Niphal* form (which is found in Exodus 32) is "to be sorry, moved to pity, have compassion."[38] In the LXX, Exod 32:14 is translated with ἱλάσθη (taken from ἱλάσκομαι, to show kindness, mercy or compassion; to propitiate).[39] This choice indicates that—in the minds of the LXX translators at least—what God was doing could best be characterized by mercy rather than human change of mind. This fits well with the context of the passage. God's mercy, coupled with the repentance of the people and the destruction of a representative few, is evident. Moreover, the perfection of mercy seems to fit better the paradigmatic nature of the passage. Exodus repeatedly emphasizes significant and foundational qualities of God's person and work. Exodus 32 explains what the fundamental attributes of the LORD were in light of the total failure of his redeemed people to obey the Law. This signals a turning point in the narrative.

Although נחם is used in 102 verses throughout the OT, making its meaning fairly certain, it is still worthwhile to examine its lexical roots.[40] Likely, נָחַם is related to the Ugaritic word *nhm*. This word generally means "to console."[41] This is within the range of the Hebrew as well.[42]

It would seem, then, that the meaning could certainly extend to the changing of one's mind, but sorrow, compassion, or mercy are also well within the range of meaning. In fact, in Exod 32:12, נחם is used in the *Niphal* imperative form. The only other time this form of נחם is employed is in Ps 90:13. There it is translated "be sorry" or "have compassion." No other translation fits the parallelism. Though change of mind is one way to describe God's response, given the range of נחם itself, as well as the message of the passage, and the meaning of Moses' own request, it seems best to translate in a way more in keeping with the message of the text. It is not simply for theological purposes, then, that one prefers "had compassion." The linguistic range and message of the passage both point to such a translation.

Though the semantic range could possibly include several nuances, the thing "changed" from may provide the distinguishing clue. Robert Chisholm's article on the semantic range of נחם isolates two types of divine statements of intention: decrees and announcements.[43] Divine decrees are those

[37] *TWOT* 570. Edwin Hatch, and Henry A. Redpath, *A Concordance to the Septuagint* (2 vols.; Graz, Austria: Akademische Druck, 1975).

[38] *BDB* 636–37.

[39] Cf. ibid. 637. Also, *HALOT* 2.668.

[40] For a more thorough philological study of *nhm* see H. Van Dyke Parunak, "A Semantic Survey of *NHM*," *Bib* 56 (1975) 512–32.

[41] Cyrus Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* (Rome: Pontificum Institutum Biblicum, 1965) 443.

[42] *BDB* 637.

[43] Robert Chisholm, "Does God 'Change His Mind,'" *BSac* 152 (1995) 397.

statements by God which are unequivocal promises. Announcements, following a specific grammatical pattern, indicate a type of divine pronouncement which is implicitly open to change.[44] Chisholm comments specifically on Exodus 32. He puts his summary well, "The form of the statement (imperative + jussive + cohortative + cohortative) indicates that it is not a decree but an expression of God's frustration with his people."[45] A further look at the broader context and interpretive history of Exodus 32 bears out this notion.[46] Moses recognized the opening in God's statements and appealed to previous divine decrees which were, by their very nature, unbreakable. Again, Chisholm summarizes this well: "Moses appealed to God's reputation . . . asked Him to relent from His stated course of action (v. 12), and reminded Him of His unconditional decree to the patriarch (v. 13). Verse 14 states that God did indeed change His mind. Moses was able to succeed because God had only threatened judgment, not decreed it."[47]

God's pronouncement was, in effect, an invitation for repentance. Although it is difficult to preserve in English both the words themselves and the nuance of these words, God's statements to Moses were intended to provoke a response. In light of this, perhaps even Chisholm's suggested translation "change of mind" is misleading. Far from an unyielding pronouncement of judgment, God's words are already open; his perfections need not be. Many commentators have noticed the repentance which God's words necessarily invite.[48] This is seen especially in Deuteronomy 9, and in a carefully formulated biblical theology of Moses' dialogue.

5. *Deuteronomy 9.* This biblical/theological picture is clarified by the commentary on it in Deuteronomy 9. There the reader learns that, as anticipated, the golden calf event was paradigmatic for the history of Israel. One also sees that, while Moses' appeal was solidly grounded and efficacious, it also was accompanied by deep and difficult pleading. In addition to what Moses emphasizes in Deuteronomy 9, there are also striking omissions. In this later reflection upon the history of Israel, Moses does not mention divine repentance. Rather, he emphasizes the forgiveness of God, a forgiveness coupled with strict consequences for Israel's sin.

The very presence of this story in the Moses' sermon in Deuteronomy highlights its significance. Moses appeals to the events of Exodus 32 as a reminder to the people that it was not as a result of their righteousness that they were going to enter the blessings of the land (Deut 9:5). For evidence of their unrighteousness, the people needed to look no further than the golden calf apostasy. That Moses himself, by choosing this story to illustrate their failure, recognized it as a model for the kind of failure which characterized the nation, highlights the importance of the narrative within Exo-

[44] Ibid. 391.
[45] Ibid. 396.
[46] Childs, *Book of Exodus* 567.
[47] Chisholm, "Change His Mind" 397.
[48] See again Childs, *Book of Exodus* 567.

dus. Again, this should come as no surprise. Moses' use of the story in his sermon fits exactly with its placement in Exodus. As a paradigm for the failure of the Law, it stands unchallenged.[49]

Second, it should be noted that Moses, in his sermon in Deuteronomy, makes a case against a kind of automatic expectation of forgiveness. Indeed, his emphasis on the forty days and nights during which he pled before the LORD for the people shows both his own recognition of the seriousness of sin and his equally clear understanding that mercy and forgiveness—by their very nature—are undeserved (Deut 9:18). If in fact God's mercy were based on a formulaic rehearsal by Moses or on Moses' relationship with God alone, then Israel and all readers of the OT might fail to appreciate the seriousness of transgression. The forgiveness of Israel was predicated by Moses' admission, both in his words and in his action, that the sin committed by Israel had been great and severe. In fact, so great was the sin that Moses acted in a symbolic way, grinding the calf to dust (Deut 9:20). Moreover, Moses asks for the repentant action, after having already interceded with God for at least a measure of mercy and forgiveness in Exod 32:14.[50] In one of the great paradoxes of both Exodus 32 and Deuteronomy 9, Moses' extensive pleading, as well as God's own pronouncements of judgment, were necessary to communicate the seriousness of the sin. This in spite of the fact that Moses' argument, and God's decision, seems based in large measure on existing and unbreakable promises.

V. CONCLUSION

Open theists, far from providing the more balanced, careful reading of this text, have instead oversimplified in at least three ways. First, they have failed to consider the message and argument of Exodus as a whole. They have neglected the foundational background which precedes Exodus 32. The argument of Exodus as a whole reenforces God's transcendence and establishes the purpose of Moses' dialogues with God. When Moses speaks with God, his conversations are used to assert *certain truths*. These truths are stated explicitly at the end of the dialogue, when God acts on the substance of his revelation.

Second, they have misunderstood the nature of God's statements, from which he is supposed to "repent." Not only is the term "repentance" an imprecise translation, but, rather than unequivocal decrees, God's assertions are instead to be seen as expressions of righteous divine anger, and, as Moses understood (as reflected both in his actions and later reflection), as invitations for human repentance and for remembering once again God's unchanging promises and nature.

[49] Although the paradigmatic nature of the passage does not conclusively argue against open theism, it does serve to illustrate the over-simplicity with which open theists have approached it. As a model text, it would be expected to provide a new theological lens through which one could understand later texts. Mercy and forgiveness provide such a lens in ways which change and response (and one must assert that God changed *twice* in this case) simply do not.

[50] Childs, *Book of Exodus* 571.

Finally, a biblical theology of Moses' dialogue with God establishes what the context of Exodus and the language of Exodus 32 have already made plain: God's words to Moses were not to be viewed as unchanging promises, but rather as expressions of divine displeasure and righteous anger. Moses was invited to dialogue; he was expected to remember the revelation of God in the past; he was responsible to remember God's promises to the nation.

Therefore, although Exodus 32 does raise difficult questions about the nature of forgiveness and the expression of divine grace, it does not promote a theology which sees God as responding to the whims of man, being won over by a good argument, or surprised by something which had not yet entered his mind. Rather, the picture is of a God who is justifiably angry. It is of a God who forgives, remembering his unwavering promises and responding in accord with his unchanging perfection.