

THE OPENNESS OF GOD: DOES PRAYER CHANGE GOD?

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A proper understanding of two OT prayers, one by Hezekiah and one by Moses, helps in determining whether prayer is the means by which God gets His will done on earth or the means by which the believer's will is accomplished in heaven. A chronological arrangement of the three records of Hezekiah 's prayer in 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, and Isaiah reveals the arrogance of Hezekiah in his plea for God to heal him. Because Hezekiah missed the opportunity to repent of his self-centered attitude, God revealed that his descendants would become slaves in Babylon, but Hezekiah 's arrogance kept him from being concerned about his children and grandchildren. His pride further showed itself in his inability to trust God for defense against the Assyrians. God healed Hezekiah, not so much because of his prayer, but because of the promises that God had made to Hezekiah 's ancestors about sustaining the Davidic line of kings. Hezekiah 's prayer changed Hezekiah, not God. Moses' prayer in Exodus 32 sought a change from God's expressed intention of putting an end to Israel and starting over again with just Moses. This suggestion was not something that the Lord ever intended to occur; such a course would have voided His expressed purpose for the twelve tribes of Israel (Genesis 49). God did not change His mind regarding His plan for the twelve tribes; He rather altered His timing in order to keep His promises to them. What He did in response to Moses' prayer cannot be taken as normative action. His "change of mind" was a tool to elicit a change of response in Moses. Moses' 'prayer changed Moses, not God.

Introduction

Two very different views of prayer pervade the church today. The first view teaches that prayer is one of the means by which God gets His will done on earth: "Effective prayer is, as John said, asking in God's will (John 15:7). Prayer is not a means by which we get our will done in heaven. Rather, it is a means by which

God gets his will done on earth.”¹

The second view proclaims that prayer is one of the instruments by which the believer's will is accomplished in heaven. This view holds that prayer can change God:

Prayer affects God more powerfully than His own purposes. God's will, words and purposes are all subject to review when the mighty potencies of prayer come in. How mighty prayer is with God may be seen as he readily sets aside His own fixed and declared purposes in answer to prayer.²

This view sees prayer as changing God's mind or helping Him decide what to do, since He does not know everything.³ In his book *The God Who Risks*, John Sanders writes, "Only if God does not yet know the outcome of my journey can a prayer for a safe traveling be coherent within the model of S[imple] F[ore-knowledge]."⁴ In other words, an individual has reason to pray about a journey only if God does not know where that person is going or what will happen to him. If God already knows where someone is going and what is going to happen, open theism believes there is no need for prayer regarding the journey. The prayers of Hezekiah and Moses are among the passages whose interpretation is contested by these two views.

Hezekiah's Prayer (2 Kgs 20:1-11; Isa 38:1-8; 2 Chr 32:24)

Open theists present the prayer of Hezekiah as an example of prayer changing God's mind.⁵ Error in open theists' approach to this prayer is partially due to their failure to examine all three records of Hezekiah's prayer (2 Kgs 20:1-11; 2 Chr 32:24; Isa 38:1-8) in their respective contexts.

Hezekiah's Arrogance

King Hezekiah repeatedly manifested an arrogant mindset. What was admirable about Hezekiah was that, in spite of that arrogance and egotism, he was

¹ Norman L. Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man?* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997) 86.

² E. M. Bounds, *The Reality of Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 41.

³ Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 58: "God sometimes expresses uncertainty about it" (the future)—based on passages like Gen 22:12. ". . . [S]ometimes God tells us that things turn out differently than he expected" (59)--based on passages like Isa 5:2-4. "Scripture teaches us that God literally finds out how people will choose when they choose" (65)--based on passages like I Sam 15:11. "God is also perfectly certain about a good deal of what is actually going to take place in the future" (150). Clark H. Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994) 122: "In saying 'perhaps,' God also indicates that he does not possess complete knowledge of the future"--based on passages like Jer 26:3.

⁴ John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998) 205.

⁵ See Boyd, *God of the Possible* 82; Sanders, *The God Who Risks* 70-71, 271.

yet sensitive to the leading of God through the words of the prophet Isaiah. The king allowed himself to be rebuked, would demonstrate a sincere change of mind, and turn to God in faith. Close scrutiny of the order of events in Hezekiah's fourteenth year reveal the king's arrogance as well as his moments of faithfulness. Old Testament scholars recognize that the biblical records of Hezekiah's reign are not in chronological order.⁶ Prior to his illness, Hezekiah had already been on the throne for 14 years of his 29-year reign (2 Kgs 18:2, 13).⁷ At the time God granted him healing and an extended life, He also promised to deliver both Hezekiah and Jerusalem from the Assyrians (2 Kgs 20:5-6; Isa 38:6). Clearly, therefore, that deliverance had not occurred prior to Hezekiah's healing. When Merodach-baladan, king of Babylon, sent envoys with a letter and a gift for the restored Hezekiah (Isa 39:1), the proud king showed them his stored treasures (39:2-4). Thus, the stripping of Jerusalem to pay tribute to Sennacherib had to have taken place subsequent to that event. Careful reconstruction of the events of Hezekiah's fourteenth year as king reveals that it was a very busy year:

1. Sennacherib invaded Judah (2 Kgs 18:13; 2 Chr 32:1; Isa 36:1).
2. Hezekiah became mortally ill (2 Kgs 20:1; 2 Chr 32:24; Isa 38:1-3).
3. Hezekiah was healed and granted an additional 15 years of life (2 Kgs 20:5-6; Isa 38:4-22).
4. Merodach-baladan's envoys bring Hezekiah a letter and gift because Babylon had heard of the Judean king's illness (2 Kgs 20:12; Isa 39:1).
5. Hezekiah showed off his wealth to the Babylonian envoys (2 Kgs 20:13-15; Isa 39:2).
6. Isaiah informed the king that one day his own descendants would serve in the palace of Babylon's king (2 Kgs 20:16-19; Isa 39:3-8).
7. Hezekiah constructed the Siloam water tunnel, strengthened the walls of Jerusalem, and prepared weapons to defend the city (2 Chr 32:2-8).
8. Weakening in his faith,⁸ Hezekiah stripped both the Temple and his own treasuries to pay tribute to Sennacherib at Lachish (2 Kgs 18:14-16). This wealth was what God had given to Hezekiah (cf. 2 Chr 32:27-30).
9. Sennacherib, sensing Hezekiah's fear and weakness, sent his officers to demand the unconditional surrender of Jerusalem (2 Kgs 18:17-19:7; 2 Chr 32:9-19; Isa 36:2-37:7).
10. The Assyrian officers left Jerusalem and rejoined Sennacherib at Lachish (2 Kgs 19:8; Isa 37:8).
11. Rumor of the Ethiopian king's intent to attack Sennacherib resulted in renewed pressure upon Hezekiah to surrender (2 Kgs 19:9-13; Isa 37:9-13).
12. In what the writer of 2 Kings and Isaiah both present as a significant act of

⁶ John C. Whitcomb, Jr., *Solomon to the Exile: Studies in Kings and Chronicles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971) 125.

⁷ Cf. T. R. Hobbs, *2 Kings*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 13 (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1985) 288-89.

⁸ Whether this was just a weakening of his resolve to resist Sennacherib or a ploy to buy time or further strengthening of Jerusalem's fortifications, it is evidence that Hezekiah was depending upon his own actions rather than upon the living God's protection.

faith, Hezekiah took the letter demanding surrender into the Temple and prayed for deliverance (2 Kgs 19:14-34; 2 Chr 32:20; Isa 37:14-20).

13. Isaiah prophesied about the Assyrian king's removal from Jerusalem (2 Kgs 19:20-34; Isa 37:21-35).
14. Assyrian troops surrounded Jerusalem; 185,000 were slain by divine intervention; and Sennacherib returned to Nineveh (2 Kgs 19:35-36; 2 Chr 32:21-22; Isa 37:36-37).
15. The people bestowed such an abundance of gifts on Hezekiah that even the nations around Israel began to exalt him (2 Chr 32:23).

Why is the order of the record in 2 Kings and Isaiah so confused? It appears that with chapters 36 and 37, Isaiah intended to wrap up the prophecies he had begun in chapter 7 concerning the Assyrian era. Starting at chapter 38 and continuing through at least chapter 48, he is dealing with the Babylonian era. The writer of 2 Kings was probably well aware of Isaiah's order and chose to follow it himself. A summary of each king's life was a characteristic part of the formula employed by the writer of Kings. In 2 Kgs 18:3 the summary declared that Hezekiah "did right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father David had done."⁹ After describing the revival under Hezekiah's rule (v. 4) and his piety (vv. 5-6), his political achievements are listed (vv. 7-8). The most prominent of these was the repelling of the Assyrians. Therefore, the writer proceeds to describe it in detail (vv. 9-37). Then he reveals another side of Hezekiah that God did not choose to hide from His people. Hezekiah was not a perfect saint.

Hezekiah's illness probably was due to divine chastening for his arrogance. Fourteen years prior to becoming mortally ill he had repaired the Temple doors, ordered the cleansing of the Temple, and arranged for its reconsecration (2 Chr 29:3-36). He also had reinstated the observance of the Passover (30:1-27) and a revival broke out in the nation (31:1). Then he led the people in the provision of tithes and offerings for the Temple service (31:2-7). So much was given that room had to be prepared for storing them in the Temple (31:8-19). The first words of 32:1 sound ominous: "After these acts of faithfulness...."

One indication of the king's arrogance appears in the self-centered character of his plea for God to heal him. A comparison of Isa 38:3 with 37:16-20 reveals that Hezekiah's emphasis in the former was upon his own deeds ("I have walked before Thee in truth and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in Thy sight"). By contrast, the latter prayer focused upon God Himself ("Thou art the God, Thou alone, . . . Thou hast made . . . Incline Thine ear . . . open Thine eyes . . . that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that Thou alone, LORD, art God").¹⁰ Further evidence of the king's arrogance is obvious in that even after his healing, Hezekiah was chastised for arrogance: "But Hezekiah gave no return for the benefit

⁹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references are taken from the *New American Standard Bible* (1977).

¹⁰ Cf. Hobbs, *2 Kings* 290.

he received, because his heart was proud; therefore wrath came on him and on Judah and Jerusalem" (2 Chr 32:25).

God gave Hezekiah the opportunity to show that his mortal illness and divine healing had changed his attitude (2 Chr 32:31). Finding no such change, God sent Isaiah to prophesy that Hezekiah's descendants would become slaves in Babylon. But all that the king could think about was that he would be spared such an indignity. He showed no concern for his children or grandchildren (2 Kgs 20:19; Isa 39:8).

Hezekiah was one of the most truly human of the kings, and his portrait here accords with what is recorded elsewhere. He was a man whose heart was genuinely moved towards the Lord but whose will was fickle under the pressures and temptations of life. Like the David who was his ancestor, and unlike the greater David who was his descendant, his first thoughts were for himself. On hearing of his imminent death his only cry amounted to 'I do not want to die' (38:2-3), and on hearing of a dark future for his sons his private thought was 'There will be peace ... in my lifetime' (39:8).¹¹

Perhaps Hezekiah's first words ("The word of the LORD which you have spoken is good," Isa 39:8a) were merely a public show of yielding to God's will. However, the Lord knew the king's true thoughts in the matter (v. 8b). "The clay feet of Hezekiah are now apparent."¹² Assuming that Hezekiah did not hide such feelings from Manasseh, it is no wonder the son turned out to be so antagonistic to spiritual things. Hezekiah lacked the capacity to trust God totally for his and the nation's deliverance from the Assyrians. The fact that he sent tribute to Sennacherib seems to indicate as much. Isaiah had exposed Ahaz's dependence upon Syria in the face of the Assyrian threat (Isa 8:6-8). Hezekiah may have followed in his father's footsteps and merited the prophetic accusation that he made plans and alliances apart from the Lord (30:1-5, 15-17; 31:1). There was truth to the accusations made by Rabshakeh that Hezekiah had sought help from Egypt (36:5-9). As Motyer so eloquently stated, "Sennacherib arrived! But the Lord looks on the heart. Sennacherib would not have come had Hezekiah kept himself free from the worldly expedient of arms, alliances and rebellion."¹³

Therefore, with Whitcomb, the conclusion must be "that if II Kings 20:1 were expanded, it would read: 'In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death because Jehovah chastened him for the pride that was rising within his heart after so many years of prosperity and blessing.'"¹⁴ In addition to the prosperity, there was also the matter of Hezekiah trusting more in his own ingenuity at preparing the defenses of

¹¹ J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1993) 290.

¹² Hobbs, *2 Kings* 295.

¹³ Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* 291.

¹⁴ Whitcomb, *Solomon to the Exile* 126.

Jerusalem, amassing armaments, and seeking advantageous political alliances.

Hezekiah's Ancestry

Why did God heal Hezekiah? One possible reason would be that Manasseh, who began his reign at the age of 12 when his father died (2 Kgs 20:21-21:1), might not have been born yet. However, that has been disputed. The Israelite system of coregencies makes it possible that

Manasseh ... was probably a co-regent with his father-perhaps for 10 years-since his 55-year reign is difficult to fit into the history without such a coregency. Hezekiah appears to have failed to provide Manasseh with sufficient reason to be a godly kin. However, he may have played a part in Manasseh's later repentance (2 Chr 33:12-13).¹⁵

Oswalt takes a line in Hezekiah's psalm (Isa 38:19, "It is the living who give thanks to Thee, as I do today; a father tells his sons about Thy faithfulness") as an indication that he was still heirless at the time of his healing.

As Young notes, if it is correct that Hezekiah had no heir at this time (see on 38:3), then the opportunity to declare God's faithfulness to his children through the added years of life would have been a special blessing. Given Manasseh's apostasy, one can only wonder whether Hezekiah then missed the opportunity when it was given him.¹⁶

Whether or not Manasseh had not yet been born, there was a greater reason why God prolonged Hezekiah's life. Divine action was founded upon the Lord's covenant with David. That motivation is clearly declared in regard to God's promise to rid Jerusalem of Sennacherib ("I will defend this city to save it for My own sake and for My servant David's sake," 2 Kgs 19:34). "It also makes clear that, in spite of his piety and his prayers, Hezekiah played a minor role in the deliverance. Yahweh acted because of his promise to David."¹⁷ The Davidic factor is "emphasized by the use of the self-designation of Yahweh as אֱלֹהֵי

דָּוִד אֲבִיךָ (*lhy dwd*)

¹⁵ Ibid., 127.

¹⁶ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 689. Herbert Lockyer concurs: "His prayer was heard and his tears seen. God added fifteen years to Hezekiah's life, during which time a son was born to him, Manasseh, who became an abomination unto the Lord. It might have been better for Hezekiah had he died when the divine announcement reached him. There are occasions when God grants our request, but with it comes leanness of soul" (*All the Prayers of the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959] 80). Cf., however, "Nor did God punish Hezekiah by giving him the full measure of his 'wrongful prayer' as some have suggested. Indeed selfish, misdirected prayer (James 4:3) and petitions that are contrary to God's will are not granted (cf. Deut 3:23-26; 2 Cor 12:8 with 2 Chr 7:14; John 15:7)" (Richard D. Patterson and Hermann J. Austel, "1, 2 Kings," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank E. Gaebelin [Grand Rapids: Regency/Zondervan, 1988] 4:274).

¹⁷ Hobbs, *2 Kings* 282.

'byk, "the God of David your father").¹⁸ Hobbs proposes that the reference to David as Hezekiah's "father" is followed by the promise to add to Hezekiah's days (2 Kgs 20:6) because the "only commandment with a promise attached grants length of days for honoring parents."¹⁹

In other words, the answer to Hezekiah's prayer had more to do with the welfare of the nation and with sustaining the Davidic line than with the prayer of Hezekiah. "It is a sobering thought that when God answers one's prayer, He can also be considering others in the larger picture, not just him."²⁰ Oswalt seconds this concept: "Hezekiah's recovery is not merely because God has changed his mind but because of his willingness to keep faith with those to whom he has committed himself in the past (Deut. 4:37, 38)."²¹

Did Hezekiah's Prayer Change God's Mind?

God did not change His mind because of Hezekiah's prayer. Nowhere in the text of 2 Kings 20, 2 Chronicles 32, or Isaiah 38 is the claim made that God changed His mind. Absence of such a statement in Scripture does not, however, prevent open theists from making that claim. Their claim flies in the face of all that the Scripture has to say regarding God's relationship to the Davidic line.

1 Sam 15:29 affirms that Yahweh's choice of David and his dynasty is irrevocable, unlike his choice of Saul. Nathan's statement to David in 2 Sam 7:15 concurs. 1 Sam 24:21; 2 Sam 3:9-10; 7:12, 16; Pss 89:4-5, 36-37; 132:11 all connect Yahweh's irrevocable oath to his promise to David and his descendants. Thus, 1 Sam 15:11, 29, and 35 all come from the same Davidic circle, which advocated that whereas Yahweh repented over his choice of Saul, he would never repent of his choice of David and his dynasty.²²

"It seems clear," as Bruce Ware points out, "that the divine repentance, in such cases, functions as part of a tool for eliciting a dynamic relationship with people, a means of drawing our responses which God uses, then, to accomplish his ultimate purposes."²³ The change was not in God. The change was in Hezekiah. How can the reader of Scripture ascertain whether the change was first in Hezekiah rather than in God? Within this context the reader is repeatedly reminded that the

¹⁸ Ibid., 287.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ James E. Rosscup, unpublished manuscript on prayer, 36.

²¹ Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah* 677.

²² John T. Willis, "The 'Repentance' of God in the Books of Samuel, Jeremiah, and Jonah," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 16/2 (December 1994):173, referring to the reasoning of Joachim Jeremias, *Die Reue Gottes: Aspekte alttestamentlicher Gottesvorstellung*, *Biblische Studien* 65 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1975) 34-36.

²³ Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2000) 97.

focus is not really Hezekiah. "I will defend this city to save it for My own sake and for My servant David's sake" (Isa 37:35) does not include "for your sake."²⁴

God will never contradict what He has said or promised elsewhere. He knew what He had promised in the Davidic covenant and would not violate it. Divine provision and care for the nation and for the Davidic dynasty superseded any immediate death sentence on Hezekiah, no matter how much it might have been justified. The illness was designed, not to kill Hezekiah, but to humble him. Its purpose was to teach the arrogant king that he was insignificant in God's overall plan. Likewise, there was no change in anything that the Lord had planned with regard to the length of Hezekiah's life (cf. Ps 139:16²⁵). As far as Hezekiah's limited grasp of reality was concerned, God had added the 15 years at the time of his prayer. The Lord spoke of them from Hezekiah's standpoint.²⁶

A reprieve had been granted to Hezekiah. However, that reprieve was primarily for Jerusalem's benefit, not his. As a matter of fact, the reprieve was "only a temporary one. And it is conditional. The life of a man or of a city is solely in the hand of God."²⁷

Interestingly, God's specific declaration that Hezekiah's life would be extended 15 years is, in itself, inconsistent with Open Theism.

God granted to Hezekiah fifteen years of extended life--not two, not twenty, and certainly not "we'll both see how long you live," but fifteen years exactly. Does it not seem a bit odd that this favorite text of open theists, which purportedly demonstrates that God does not know the future and so changes his mind when Hezekiah prays, also shows that God knows precisely and exactly how much longer Hezekiah will live? On openness grounds, how could God know this? Over a fifteen-year time span, the contingencies are staggering!²⁸

Moses' Prayer (Exod 32:1-35)

Exodus 32 is another passage contested by the two views of prayer introduced at the beginning of this essay. Open theists parade it as evidence that prayer changes God's mind.²⁹ The chapter describes the role of Moses' prayer in

²⁴ Isa 38:6's parallel in 2 Kgs 20:6 adds a nearly identical statement: "I will defend this city for My own sake and for My servant David's sake."

²⁵ Boyd tortures the text in order to gain support for his opinion that the length of one's life may be altered (*God of the Possible* 40-42).

²⁶ Rosscup, Manuscript on prayer, 36.

²⁷ Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah* 673. Oswalt introduced this declaration with an astute observation regarding the theme of Isa 38: "the major thrust of the chapter, including the psalm (vv. 9-20), is upon the mortality of the flesh."

²⁸ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory* 95.

²⁹ Richard Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective," in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994) 27-29.

God's dealing with Israel's rebellious and idolatrous worship of the golden calf at Sinai.

That idolatry aroused God's anger. As a result, He spoke of putting an end to the nation and starting over again with just Moses (Exod 32:10). Did the Lord make a legitimate offer to Moses? Is it possible that God had only made an announcement, not a decree, therefore He was free to change His mind about its implementation?³⁰ Could the Lord nullify the prophecies concerning the individual tribes of Israel (cf. Genesis 49) or the prior promises to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3) in order to produce a new nation from Moses? Did Moses' prayer permanently remove the sentence of death from the nation?

Unlike the biblical accounts concerning Hezekiah's prayer, Exodus 32 specifies that "the LORD changed His mind" (v. 14). What is involved in God changing His mind or relenting? Is it the retraction of declared punishment in an act of forgiveness? Parunak³¹ offers parallelism, idiom, and context as indicators for determining the meaning of נָחַם (*nhm*, "He changed His mind"). Are these sufficient for determining the meaning in this text? Since a postponement of inevitable judgment would allow time for the rise of a new generation of Israelites to replace the one to be destroyed, was the change of mind a matter of expediency?

Who was changed? God or Moses? How does prayer relate to the petitioner's will and God's will? Is prayer a means of training leadership and/or testing leadership? Is prayer the means of human participation in God's program? If so, what kind of participation? Does anthropomorphic interpretation apply well to the concept of God changing His mind or regretting His actions?³² In such matters, is there anything to Graham Cole's comment that "it may not be so much a matter of God being anthropathic (human like) but of our being theopathic (God like) as bearers of the divine image"?³³

In this examination of Exodus 32 the text itself is enlisted as the primary witness. Therefore, the study will be organized according to the order of the text. Donald Gowan makes the important observation that the Book of Exodus "reaches its theological conclusion with chapters 32-34, for they explain how it can be that

³⁰ Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., "Does God 'Change His Mind'?", *BSac* 152/608 (October 1995):396.

³¹ H. Van Dyke Parunak, "A Semantic Survey of NHM," *Biblica* 56/4 (1975):512-32. 32 "The Scriptures, however, which come to us as a revelation from God, often bear an anthropomorphic character. All our speaking of God must, in fact, be anthropomorphic. We need not, on that account, devalue Scripture's ascription of longsuffering to God. To do so consistently would be to rob Scripture of much of its own vocabulary" (G. C. Berkouwer, *The Providence of God*, Studies in Dogmatics [reprint of 1983 ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983] 73-74). Berkouwer is discussing the forbearance of God in the days of Noah when God patiently held back judgment for a time while the call to repentance was given. This same discussion of anthropomorphism could be equally applied to concepts of God "regretting" or "repenting" of his actions.

³³ Graham A. Cole, "The Living God: Anthropomorphic or Anthropathic?" *The Reformed Theological Review* 59/1 (April 2000):24.

the covenant relationship continues in spite of perennial sinfulness."³⁴ Thus the context itself emphasizes the Lord's faithfulness in spite of Israel's unfaithfulness.

Israel's Disobedience and Idolatry (32:1-6)

While Moses was on Mt. Sinai, the Israelites and Aaron made a golden calf idol for themselves and attributed to it their deliverance out of Egypt. The people had deliberately committed the sin of idolatry; therefore they deserved to die (cf. Deut 7:4; 8:19; 29:17-20; 32:15-25). By his later actions, Moses demonstrated that he recognized the justice of the death sentence for his people because of their wickedness (Exod 32:27-29).³⁵ When he had seen for himself what the Lord had already seen, Moses' actions mirrored those of God: anger, determination to remove the idolatry, and ordering the execution of the idolaters.

The Divine Declaration of Judgment (32:7-10)

"Go down at once, for your people ... have corrupted themselves" (32:7). When the Lord revealed the crisis to Moses, He changed the possessive pronoun to indicate "that he was disowning Israel (contrast 'my people' of 3:10 et al.)."³⁶ Then He proceeded to offer Moses the opportunity to start over with a different people who might not be so stubbornly disobedient. Gowan claims that the offer to Moses reveals the "vulnerability" of God.³⁷ He quickly adds,

Having said that, I must immediately emphasize that in this passage God's vulnerability is set alongside strong statements concerning his sovereignty.... Yet this sovereign God, who is fully in charge, . . . is also represented as a God who will change his plans as a result of human intervention, and more than that; he indicates that he has subjected himself to some extent to the will of Moses.³⁸

The implications of "Now then let Me alone" (32:10) have been variously construed by the commentators and theologians. Kaiser viewed it as God's way to test Moses.³⁹ Some ignore the divine statement altogether, some make it an example of divine accommodation to human inability to understand the mind of God fully,

³⁴ Donald E. Gowan, *Theology in Exodus: Biblical Theology in the Form of a Commentary* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1994) 218.

³⁵ Identifying the idol and dealing with questions of polytheism and syncretism will not be handled in this study.

³⁶ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Exodus," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Regency/Zondervan, 1990) 2:478.

³⁷ Gowan, *Theology in Exodus* 222.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Kaiser, "Exodus," in *Expositor's Bible Commentary* 2:479.

and others claim that "it is actually God's invitation to Moses to intercede."⁴⁰ To claim that God is "unwilling to act without Moses' 'permission',⁴¹ seems to be making too little of God in the situation. Fretheim argues that

For such a word to make sense, one must assume that, while God has decided to execute wrath (see v. 14), the decision has not reached an irretrievable point; the will of God is not set on the matter. Moses could conceivably contribute something to the divine deliberation that might occasion a future for Israel other than wrath. In fact, God seems to anticipate that Moses would resist what is being said.... God thereby does leave the door of Israel's future open.⁴²

Moberly agrees with Fretheim's observation⁴³ and proceeds to take it one more step by declaring that the "importance of Moses' role in these chapters and elsewhere has frequently been underestimated through a slightly exaggerated emphasis on divine sovereignty."⁴⁴ But even Fretheim admits that it is possible "that God was testing Moses in some way, seen not least in God's reference to Moses' future."⁴⁵

That leads to God's offer to produce a new nation from Moses. Was His offer to Moses a sincere offer? Gowan believes that Moses' appeal to God's solemn oath to Abraham (32:13) is, "in a way, . . . a very weak argument, for God has offered to start over with Moses, who is a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and who could keep the line intact."⁴⁶ However, the matter is not that simple. Even if God kept the Abrahamic line intact, it would still result in the repudiation of prior divine revelation regarding the twelve tribes of Israel (cf. Genesis 49). Moses was a member of the tribe of Levi. Therefore, if God were to begin again with Moses alone, only the Levites would survive to fulfill the prophecies concerning them (Gen 49:5-7). God's suggestion to Moses could not have been something the Lord ever intended to occur. If He did intend for it to happen, it would indicate either that He forgot what He had previously declared about the tribes, or that His previous prophecies were false and untrustworthy, or that Genesis 49 is an illegitimate

⁴⁰ Gowan, *Theology in Exodus* 223. Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974) 567: "The effect is that God himself leaves the door open for intercession. He allows himself to be persuaded. That is what a mediator is for! As B. Jacob correctly observes, God could have shut the door--indeed slammed it--as he did in Deut. 3.26 when Moses requested permission to enter the promised land. Moreover, the personal promise to Moses to make him into a great nation picked up the identical words of the prior promise to Abraham (Gen. 12.2), giving Moses his strongest argument by which to counter the threat."

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus, Interpretation* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox, 1991) 283-84.

⁴³ R. W. L. Moberly, *At the Mountain of God: Story and Theology in Exodus 32-34*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 22 (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1983) 50.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 51.

⁴⁵ Fretheim, *Exodus* 284.

⁴⁶ Gowan, *Theology in Exodus* 224-25.

intrusion in the Scriptures. It is, more logical and consistent to understand the divine offer as a test intended to prepare Moses for the remaining 39 years of leading Israel in the wilderness.

The position taken by Robert Chisholm is that God had only made an announcement, not a decree, therefore He was free to change His mind about its implementation.⁴⁷ His position, however, has several problems. First, grammatically the distinction between decree and announcement is not sufficiently diverse. Imperative + jussive + cohortative is not exegetically distinct from waw + imperative + waw + cohortative.⁴⁸ Second, contextually it does not take into account the direct ties to the Abrahamic Covenant (Exod 32:10 [cf. Gen 12:2] and Exod 32:13) and the final declaration of unretracted judgment (32:34, 35). Exodus 32 shares elements in common with Elijah's judgment speech against Ahab in 1 Kings 21:20-24--it would still come to pass because "it was a divine decree that could not be altered."⁴⁹

Third, theologically it does not make sense that Moses could "persuade Him to change His mind."⁵⁰ Chisholm's ultimate conclusion is not consistent with the contents of the passage as a whole: "In every case where such a change is envisioned or reported, *God had not yet decreed a course of action or an outcome*. Instead He chose to wait patiently, hoping His warnings might bring people to their senses and make judgment unnecessary."⁵¹ The Lord had decreed what He would do in the first half (up to the *athnach* in the Hebrew) of 32:10. The last half of the verse is obviously inconsistent with what He had decreed concerning the twelve tribes of Israel in Genesis 49. Perhaps it would be best to keep in mind Chisholm's final word (his last sentence): "At the same time such passages should not be overextended. God can and often does decree a course of action."⁵²

Was there anything conditional about God's declaration? No new condition was given, but God had repeatedly declared His principles of justice and compassion (cf. Gen 18:19, 25; Exod 33:19; 34:6-7).

Moses' Prayer and Its Answer (32:11-14)

The petition of Moses was heard by God and He "changed His mind" (32:14). What does that phrase mean? It is the Hebrew verb **נָחַם** (*nham*). Unfortunately, the entry on *nham* in NIDOTTE⁵³ is woefully inadequate and overly brief in

⁴⁷ Chisholm, "Does God `Change His Mind?," *BSac* 396.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 390, 396.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 391.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 396.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 399 [emphasis added].

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Mike Butterworth, "נָחַם," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, 5 vols., ed. by Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 3:81-83.

its discussion, offering virtually no help at all for someone struggling with its utilization in passages like Exodus 32:14. The entry in TLOT⁵⁴ is a little more extensive in its discussion and of more help. Note especially Stoebe's observation that *nhm* in the Niphal "is never sorrowful resignation but always has concrete consequences. Consequently, 'and he regrets the evil' can elaborate 'he is gracious and merciful' (Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; ...)." ⁵⁵ Fortunately, the entry in TDOT⁵⁶ is substantial.⁵⁷ Simian-Yofre concludes, "The *nhm* of Yahweh is thus presented as a response to Moses' appeasement. Yahweh's repentance is a change of purpose incidental to the circumstances, not a modification of the circumstances."⁵⁸ Although he did not directly apply it to Exodus 32, one of Simian-Yofre's observations is pertinent to our current discussion: "The only element common to all meanings of *nhm* appears to be the attempt to influence a situation: by changing the course of events, rejecting an obligation, or refraining from an action, when the focus is on the present."⁵⁹ In Exodus 32 God is obviously refraining from an action--indeed, He is temporarily postponing the inevitable judgment. That postponement is not a change in His purpose it was a planned postponement in order to allow time for the rise of a new generation of Israelites to replace the generation He will destroy in the wilderness. God's action was a temporary delay of punishment in order to allow for a replacement generation to arise.

The reprieve is only temporary, because the people are still in open rebellion and obviously Yahweh will not tolerate apostasy and idolatry.... Unless there is a radical change on the part of the people, the grace period will elapse and the judgment will be reinstated.... Intercession can only produce a temporary reversal; the basic situation must be rectified.⁶⁰

If Manasseh had not yet been born when Hezekiah was ill, the same observation would apply. God postponed Hezekiah's death until the next Davidite was ready to take the throne.

⁵⁴ H. J. Stoebe, "נחם," in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 3 vols., ed. by Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, trans. by Mark E. Biddle (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1997) 2:734-39.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 2:738.

⁵⁶ H. Simian-Yofre and H.-J. Fabry, "נחם," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. by G. Johannes Botterweck, Heimer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, trans. by David E. Green (Grand Rapids/Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 1998) 9:340-55.

⁵⁷ However, the contribution to the study of Exodus 32 is marred by Simian-Yofre's adherence to the documentarian views of Martin Noth: "Ex. 32:9-14 is an addition in Deuteronomistic style that inappropriately anticipates the question of Israel's punishment" (*ibid.*, 9:345 [emphasis added]).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 9:342.

⁶⁰ Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Amos: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible (New York, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1989) 648. Cf. also "Excursus: When God Repents" (638-79).

Furthermore, God did not change His mind regarding His plan for the twelve tribes of Israel. He merely altered His timing in order to keep His promises to the tribes in Genesis 49 as well as His promise of judgment on the entire nation. In the light of this conclusion, it is significant that six of the thirty times the Old Testament speaks of God repenting or changing His mind emphasize that He does not repent or change His mind (Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29; Jer 4:28; 20:16; Ezek 24:14; Zech 8:14).⁶¹ God will never do that which would contradict His previously revealed declarations.

At no time did Moses attempt to justify the idolatry of the Israelites. "He realizes that they committed a great sin, and that strict justice requires them to be severely punished, but he appeals to the Divine attribute of mercy, and relies on the Lord's paternal love for his people."⁶² To explain how Moses' prayer could actually change God's mind, adherents of open theism appeal to "the fellowship model" in which "God is genuinely responsive to us.... God changed his mind to accommodate Moses' desires."⁶³ A milder, but nonetheless equally anthropocentric approach explains that

God is always ready to be entreated. He is unchanging in his intention to bless his creatures and is willing to change his word if people turn to him in intensity of faith (Jon. 4:2). This does not mean that matters will always turn out as we wish. But it does mean that prayer can change the course of events, and that failure to pray is not necessarily a sign of submission to God's intractable will. Rather, it may be a sign of apathy and unwillingness to wrestle with God (note Jacob's refusal to let go of the man with whom he wrestled, Gen. 32:26).⁶⁴

This concept that God is unchanging in His intention to bless is often carried over to His "unwavering intention to save."⁶⁵

Those who would be more theocentric in their interpretation of passages referring to God's change of mind, would propose that "divine repentance, in such cases, functions as part of a tool for eliciting a dynamic relationship with people, a means of drawing our responses which God uses, then, to accomplish his ultimate purposes."⁶⁶ Indeed, a more theocentric approach is open to the thought that the Lord considers more than the petitioner when answering prayer. That was also observed in the examination of Hezekiah's prayer. Israel's temporary reprieve from divine judgment was not because God had changed his mind, but because the Lord

⁶¹ Gowan, *Theology in Exodus* 225-26.

⁶² U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, trans. by Israel Abrahams (reprint of 1967 English ed.; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1997) 415.

⁶³ Sanders, *The God Who Risks* 271.

⁶⁴ Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah* 675.

⁶⁵ Gowan, *Theology in Exodus* 226.

⁶⁶ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory* 97.

would keep faith with those to whom he had committed himself in the past (cf. Deut 4:37, 38). As John Sailhamer declares, "When the Lord did act mercifully with them as a result of Moses' intercession (v. 14), the basis of his actions was not any merit of Aaron or the people, but rather his own oath sworn to the patriarchs (vv. 12-13)."⁶⁷

Fretheim's conclusions are a classic example of the explanation offered by open theists:

The God of Israel is revealed as one who is open to change. God will move from decisions made, from courses charted, in view of the ongoing interaction with those affected. God treats the relationship with the people with an integrity that is responsive to what they do and say. Hence human prayer (in this case, intercession) is honored by God as a contribution to a conversation that has the capacity to change future directions for God, people, and world. God may well adjust modes and directions (though not ultimate goals) in view of such human responsiveness. This means that there is genuine openness to the future on God's part, fundamentally in order that God's salvific will for all might be realized as fully as possible. It is this openness to change that reveals what it is about God that is unchangeable: God's steadfastness has to do with God's love; God's faithfulness has to do with God's promises; God's will is for the salvation of all. God will always act, even make changes, in order to be true to these unchangeable ways and to accomplish these unchangeable goals.⁶⁸

Some commentators have sought to distinguish a divine change of mind from a human change of mind as the explanation. Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman emphasize that God does not change His mind the way human beings change their minds. We often change our minds "frivolously, capriciously, or arbitrarily, whereas Yahweh does so only for cause.... Yahweh's repentance is limited to situations of a certain number and kind and occurs only under certain conditions."⁶⁹ At the same time, Andersen and Freedman admit that the whole issue involves the employment of a metaphor to seek to represent a difficult concept for humans to understand about God.⁷⁰

The situation involved a very unusual occurrence that places the event outside that which should ever be considered normative for our practice of prayer. In Scripture, only Moses ever used the imperative of *nhm* with God (Exod 32:12; Ps 90:13). "To instruct God to repent (using this verb with its connotations and overtones) is a privilege claimed by Moses and restricted to him."⁷¹ Parunak's suggestion that *nhm* should be given the meaning of "forgive"

⁶⁷ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 311.

⁶⁸ Fretheim, *Exodus*, 287.

⁶⁹ Andersen and Freedman, *Amos* 644.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 645.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 649.

is based upon three observations. First, parallelism with **נָחַם** (*sub*) (another expression meaning forgiveness) in Exod 32:12 might support such a conclusion. Second, the Hebrew phraseology (the use of *nhm* in association with **עַל**) [*l*] followed by a term referring to the proposed judgment--note Exod 32:12, 14) is capable of bearing such a meaning. Third, context can be an indicator for this meaning of *nhm* in cases where there is "a contextual reference to punishment, and usually to its withdrawal on condition of a change in the sinner."⁷² However, these factors together do not trump the overall force of the passage and its context as a whole.⁷³

Moses' Actions and Their Results (32:15-29)

Although Moses prayed for mercy while he was still on the mountain, when he descended and beheld what had occurred, his actions were swift and bloody (32:27-29). It was as though he changed his mind and began to agree with the Lord's assessment of the seriousness of Israel's sinful rebellion. In a parallel passage (Deut 9:7-21) Moses gave a few additional details about the incident that occurred at Sinai. His reference to the events was to support his sermonic declaration that the Israelites were not chosen by the Lord because of any righteousness they possessed (Deut 9:4-6). He had not only led the slaying of about three thousand (Exod 32:28), he had also spent another forty days and nights in prayer (Deut 9:18).

Moses' Intercession and God's Response (32:30-35)

God revealed that even Moses' prayer could not remove the irrevocable sentence of death that the people had incurred (Exod 32:34-35). Had God really determined to destroy the Israelites? Was His statement to Moses an unalterable decree or a mere threat? It was obviously a decree (cf. Ps 95:8-11). The punishment was inevitable, even if it were temporarily delayed (Exod 32:34-35). It was delayed, not because of Moses' prayer nor because of any righteous action or confession by the Israelites, but because of the sworn promise the Lord had made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Deut 9:5).

Moses' action bought time only, time to remedy the situation, because a holy God cannot dwell in the midst of an idolatrous people, and unless the idolatry and the apostasy are eliminated the great experiment will end at its birth. . . . Moses achieved a more permanent rescission of the judgment. The temporary suspension of judgment was confirmed, and with some reservations Yahweh agreed to keep his people and lead them

⁷² Parunak, "A Semantic Survey of NHM," *Biblica* 524.

⁷³ Cf. Childs, *The Book of Exodus* 568: "The writer brings this scene to a close by an explicit reference to its effect on God. Yahweh changes his mind regarding his intention to destroy Israel. If this sentence is read by itself, it makes the God of Israel as arbitrary as Zeus. If it is read in its full context, it epitomizes the essential paradox of the Hebrew faith: God is 'merciful and gracious ... but will not clear the guilty' (34.7)."

to the holy land.⁷⁴

Punishment for the nation's sin would be postponed to some undefined time in the future. In Num 14:36-38 a similarly undefined future plague was to kill the unbelieving spies. That judgment is referred to in a way that interrupts the narrative in much the same way as Exod 32:35 interrupts its surrounding narrative.⁷⁵

Verse 35 is the ultimate fulfillment of the initial execution carried out by Moses in verse 20.⁷⁶

Only in the last verse of the chapter do we see God himself acting in that judgment. The reason for this focus on Moses' role in judgment rather than God's is apparently the writer's desire to stress God's gracious response to Israel's sin. The central theme of the subsequent narrative (Ex 33) is God's great mercy and compassion (33:19). God's dealings with Israel henceforth emphasize his goodness and compassion. What the present narrative shows, however, is that God's gracious dealings with his people are not accomplished in the absence of a clear acknowledgment of his wrath.⁷⁷

Compassion or deferred execution do not nullify the federal consequences of sin. Nor does the necessity of judgment nullify God's prior promises (cf. Heb 6:18).

Concluding Thoughts

Since God was not changed and His plan unaltered, and since Israel did not repent and remained in their sinful and rebellious condition, Moses must have been the only one who was changed by this incident at Sinai. Is it possible that prayer could change him? John Yoder's response is instructive for both Hezekiah and Moses:

Why prayer? Because it lifts man from being an observer in God's arena to being a participant. He does not idly watch God's will being done in history; he earnestly seeks it. He asks for each need and praises for each victory. In prayer we see God near His humblest point: He allows men to do what He could do so easily. In prayer we see men at their highest pinnacle: bringing fire from heaven, raising the dead, feeding the hungry, winning lost souls, and learning to fellowship with their Maker. In God's goal of discipling men, nothing is more effective than prayer.

Our argument for prayer is that prayer changes me. How so? (1). It leads us to earnestly desire what He desires; my will becomes merged with His. (2). We become

⁷⁴ Andersen and Freedman, *Amos* 674.

⁷⁵ Cassuto, *Commentary on the Book of Exodus* 424. Cassuto has an unusual interpretation that adds another divine reservation stating that God would not dwell in the midst of the Israelites in the Tabernacle because of their disobedience in the golden calf incident (425-26).

⁷⁶ George W. Coats, *Rebellion in the Wilderness: The Murmuring Motif in the Wilderness Traditions of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968) 188.

⁷⁷ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* 312.

more grateful for everything He does. (3). Not only is God's will done, but we learn to fellowship with Him. (4). We begin to see that God is behind all events. (5). We become participants in God's program, not spectators.⁷⁸

Norm Geisler agrees: 'There was a change in Moses. As leader and mediator for his people, there was a change in Moses' heart, which allowed God's unchanging mercy to flow to Israel through Moses as their mediator.'⁷⁹ Indeed, if man is capable of changing the mind of God, then it might be argued that man knows more about governing this world than God.⁸⁰ However, God does know what He is doing. The appearance of change is merely the fact that God had already planned to "change" when His people have finally come to behave in the way He had anticipated they would in response to His words and actions.⁸¹

It is significant that God would utilize this incident to motivate Moses to be the kind of mediator he needed to be. Moses was to be the revelation of God, not on tablets of stone, but on a tablet of a heart and life of flesh (cf. 2 Cor 3:1-3). May these examples of Hezekiah and Moses produce in us a godly humility and commitment to the Word of God that will fit us for service for the Sovereign Lord.

⁷⁸ John W. Yoder, *Your Will Be Done: A Comprehensive Study of Prayer*, 2 vols. (n.p.: n.d.) 2:483.

⁷⁹ Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man?* 86. Charles Swindoll recounts how Donald Barnhouse "came to the pulpit and made a statement that stunned his congregation: 'Prayer changes nothing!' You could have heard a pin drop in that packed Sunday worship service in Philadelphia. His comment, of course, was designed to make Christians realize that God is sovereignly in charge of everything. Our times are literally in His hands. No puny human being by uttering a few words in prayer takes charge of events and changes them. God does the shaping, the changing; it is He who is in control. Barnhouse was correct, except in one minor detail. Prayer changes me. When you and I pray, we change, and that is one of the major reasons prayer is such a therapy that counteracts anxiety" (Charles R. Swindoll, *The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart And 1,501 Other Stories* [Nashville: Word, 1998] 451).

⁸⁰ Yoder, *Your Will Be Done* 2:478, 479.

⁸¹ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory* 92-93. Cf. William Lane Craig, *Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom: The Coherence of Theism: Omniscience, Brill's Studies in Intellectual History*, vol. 19 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991) 12: "God's foreknowledge encompasses the most contingent of events, even the very thoughts that a person will think (Ps. 139.1-6). It is true that there are instances in which God is said to 'repent' of some action He has taken or to relent on something He had said would take place, which would seem to undermine the doctrine of foreknowledge. But a careful study of the relevant texts reveals that God's 'repenting' does not mean His changing His mind, but simply 'to suffer emotional pain', and that His relenting on prophesied judgements is due to a change in human behavior which renders the judgement no longer appropriate. In such a case the prophecy of judgement was not a manifestation of foreknowledge but was rather a forecast or forewarning of what would, *ceteris paribus*, happen, that is, unless the persons involved repented."

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