

DOES GOD “CHANGE HIS MIND”?

Robert B. Chisholm Jr.

Most Christian theologians have affirmed that God is immutable. In support of this doctrine they often have cited several Old Testament passages, including Numbers 23:19 (“God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent”), 1 Samuel 15:29 (“And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind”), and Psalm 110:4 (“The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind”). In all these cases “repent” or “change His mind” translates a Niphal or Hithpael form of the verbal root **נָחַם**. However, many other Old Testament passages, using a Niphal form of this same verb with the same semantic sense, assert that God typically does change His mind (Jer. 18:5-10; Joel 2:13; Jon. 4:2), describe Him doing so (Exod. 32:14; Amos 7:3, 6; Jon. 3:10), or at least assume that He might (Jer. 26:3; Joel 2:14; Jon. 3:9). How can one resolve this tension and apparent contradiction? Some dismiss these texts as “anthropomorphic,”¹ but this is an arbitrary and drastic solution that cuts rather than unties the theological knot. A more satisfying solution exists, if the biblical evidence is allowed to speak for itself.

The thesis of this article is that the question, “Does God change His mind?” must be answered, “It all depends.” This study begins with a lexical survey of the Niphal and Hithpael stems of **נָחַם**. The article then defines and illustrates the four kinds of forward-looking divine statements in the Old Testament: (a) marked or formal decrees, (b) unmarked or informal decrees, (c) marked or explicitly conditional statements of inten-

Robert B. Chisholm Jr. is Professor of Old Testament Studies, Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, Texas.

¹ See, for example, Stephen Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, 2 vols. (reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 1:340-41. For a survey of the history of interpretation on this subject, see Lester J. Kuyper, “The Suffering and the Repentance of God,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 22 (1969): 262-68.

tion, (d) unmarked or implicitly conditional statements of intention. The article then argues that if God has issued a decree, He will not change His mind or deviate from it. However, the majority of God's statements of intention are not decrees. And God can and often does deviate from such announcements. In these cases He "changes His mind" in the sense that He decides, at least for the time being, not to do what He had planned or announced as His intention.

A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF נָחַם²

In the Niphal and Hithpael stems נָחַם carries one of four semantic senses.³ (1) In at least nine passages the verb means "to experience emotional pain or weakness" (Gen. 6:6-7; Exod. 13:17; Judg. 21:6, 15; 1 Sam. 15:11, 35; Job 42:6; Jer. 31:19).⁴ In five of these nine instances, וְנָחַם introduces the cause of the sorrow (cf. Gen. 6:6-7; Judg. 21:15; 1 Sam. 15:11, 35). (2) In 13 verses the verb carries the sense "to be comforted" or "to comfort oneself" (sometimes by taking vengeance) (Gen. 24:67; 27:42; 37:35; 38:12; 2 Sam. 13:39; Pss. 77:3; 119:52; Isa. 1:24; Jer. 31:15; Ezek. 5:13; 14:22; 31:16; 32:31).⁵ (3) In perhaps as many as 10 passages the word refers to God's "relenting" from or "repudiating" a course of action that is already underway (cf. Deut. 32:36 = Ps. 135:14; Judg. 2:18; 2 Sam. 24:16 = 1 Chron. 21:15; Pss. 90:13; 106:45; Jer. 8:6 [man as subject]; 20:16; 42:10).⁶ (4) The remainder of the occurrences fall into a fourth semantic category meaning "to retract" a statement or "to relent or change one's mind concerning, to deviate from" a stated course of action (Exod. 32:12, 14; Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; Ps. 110:4; Isa. 57:6; Jer. 4:28; 15:6; 18:8, 10; 26:3, 13, 19; Ezek. 24:14; Joel 2:13-14; Amos 7:3, 6; Jon. 3:9-10; 4:2; Zech. 8:14).⁷ In this semantic category God is the subject of the

² The following survey is indebted to the work of H. Van Dyke Parunak, "A Semantic Survey of *NHM*," *Biblica* 56 (1975): 512-32; and idem, "The Repentance of God in the Old Testament" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1973). Parunak's six categories proposed in *Biblica* have been condensed here to four.

³ The Hithpael is used only seven times in the Old Testament. There are no clear examples of a Hithpael use that falls into category one. Four examples fall into category two (Gen. 27:42; 37:35; Ps. 119:52; Ezek. 5:13), two into category three (Deut. 32:36 = Ps. 135:14) and one into category four (Num. 23:19).

⁴ See Parunak, "A Semantic Survey of *NHM*," 519, for semantic indicators of this sense in the respective passages.

⁵ Parunak points out semantic indicators of this sense in the respective passages (ibid., 520). He also observes that this use reflects a polarization of category one (ibid., 526).

⁶ Some of these verses might fit under category one.

⁷ Categories three and four derive metonymically from category one.

verb. Some texts (Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; Ps. 110:4; Jer. 4:28; Ezek. 24:14; Zech. 8:14; cf. also Isa. 57:6) indicate that God did/does/will not retract a statement or deviate from a stated course of action, while others assert that He does/will/might change His mind. This fourth category is the focus of this study. Under what conditions does God retract a statement or deviate from a course of action? Under what conditions does He refuse to do so?

TOWARD A SOLUTION: DECREES AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

In the Old Testament not all statements of intention are the same. Some are decrees or oaths that are unconditional and bind the speaker to a stated course of action. Others, which may be labeled announcements, retain a conditional element and do not necessarily bind the speaker to a stated course of action.

Two passages in Genesis illustrate this distinction at a secular (nontheological) level. In Genesis 25:32-33 conniving Jacob, desirous of Esau’s birthright and very much aware of his exhausted brother’s vulnerability, made Esau swear an oath, rather than relying on his brother’s rhetorical question. The rhetorical question is equivalent to an announcement. It indicates Esau’s intention to trade his birthright for some stew, but it might be retracted later if he or someone else argued that the deal was made under duress. Jacob wanted the transferral to be unconditional and binding, so he made Esau swear an oath. In Genesis 47:28-30 Jacob, on his deathbed in Egypt, expressed concern that his body be buried in Canaan. Though Joseph indicated his intention to carry out his father’s wishes (“I will do as you have said,” v. 30), Jacob forced him to swear an oath, formally ratifying and guaranteeing the fulfillment of the promise (v. 31; cf. 50:5-6).

One can discern this distinction between a decree and an announcement at the divine (theological) level. A divine decree (or oath) is an unconditional declaration. Because it is certain to come to pass, the response of the recipient cannot alter it, though, as will be seen, the exact timing of its fulfillment can be conditional. An announcement is a conditional statement of divine intention which may or may not be realized, depending on the response of the recipient or someone else whose interests it affects.

Divine decrees are usually clearly marked as such. Something in the statement itself or in the immediate context indicates its unconditional status. For example in Genesis 22:16-18 God swore by His own being that He would bless Abraham. Later references to this promise call it an “oath” and regard it as an un-

conditional gift (Gen. 26:3; Ps. 105:9-10). In Genesis 15:18-21 God guaranteed Abram and his descendants future possession of the land of Canaan. This declaration is formalized by an accompanying ritual (vv. 9-17), in which the use of the *qatal* form ׳ִתְּנֶנָּה (v. 18) rather than the *yiqtol* ׳ִתְּנֶנָּה (12:7; cf. 13:15, 17) further indicates that the deed to the land was actually being transferred to Abram.⁸ God's promise to David is also called an oath and is characterized as eternal and unalterable (Ps. 89:3-4, 33-37).

Conditional statements of divine intention are often clearly marked as well. For example in Jeremiah 26:4-6 the Lord announced, "If [אִם] you will not listen to Me ... then I will make this house like Shiloh, and this city I will make a curse to all nations of the earth." Sometimes an announcement completes an indirect volitive sequence, implying that it will be fulfilled if the accompanying command is observed.⁹ For example Genesis 12:1-2 should be translated as follows: "Go [imperative] from your land ... in order that I might make you [waw + cohortative] a great nation, bless you [waw + cohortative], and make your name great [waw + cohortative], and so that you in turn might be [waw + imperative] a blessing." The blessing is clearly contingent on Abram's leaving his native land. Similarly Genesis 17:1-2 should be translated: "Walk [imperative] before Me and be [waw + imperative] blameless in order that I might ratify [waw + cohortative] My covenant between Me and you and greatly multiply [waw + cohortative] your numbers." Again the blessing is contingent on Abram's obedience to the divine imperatives.¹⁰

Most divine statements of intention are unmarked. In these cases one cannot be sure from the form of the statement whether it is conditional or unconditional. For this reason the recipient of such a message sometimes does what is appropriate, declaring, "Who knows? The Lord may be gracious/turn/relent" (cf. 2 Sam. 12:22; Joel 2:14; Jon. 3:9).

These ambiguous statements of divine intention sometimes prove to be decrees. For example, when Nathan declared that the son conceived from David's adulterous encounter with Bathsheba

⁸ For a fuller discussion of Genesis 15, see Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "Evidence from Genesis," in *A Case for Premillennialism: A New Consensus*, ed. Donald K. Campbell and Jeffrey L. Townsend (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 40-41.

⁹ Following an imperative the cohortative expresses purpose or result. See E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, eds., *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), 320, para. 108d; and Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 577-78, para. 34.6.

¹⁰ For an attempt to harmonize the conditional and unconditional promises of Genesis 12-22, see Chisholm, "Evidence from Genesis," 35-54.

would die (2 Sam. 12:14), David was unsure if the statement was unconditional. He prayed and fasted until the child died, hoping that God might take pity on him and spare the child’s life (v. 22). God’s refusal to respond to David’s acts of repentance shows that Nathan’s declaration was unconditional. Elijah’s judgment speech against Ahab’s dynasty is also ambiguous (1 Kings 21:20-24). In response to the proclamation, Ahab repented, prompting God to postpone the fall of the dynasty until after Ahab’s death (vv. 27-29). However, the prophecy still came to pass, for it was a divine decree that could not be altered (2 Kings 9-10). The prophecy was unconditional, but the exact timing of its fulfillment remained negotiable from God’s perspective.

Many other ambiguous statements of divine intention prove to be conditional.¹¹ Micah announced that Jerusalem would become a heap of rubble (Mic. 3:12), but one discovers from Jeremiah 26:17-19 that this judgment was averted by repentant Hezekiah, thus proving the announcement’s conditionality. Jonah’s seemingly uncompromising declaration (“Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown,” Jon. 3:4) remained unfulfilled when the people of that pagan city repented. The divine promise delivered in Joel 2:26-27 (“My people will never be put to shame”) proved to be conditional. After Joel’s generation (to whom the prophecy was clearly directed, 2:19-25) passed off the scene, God’s people were put to shame on many occasions because of their failure to remain true to the covenant.

To summarize, divine statements of intention can be grouped into two categories: decrees and announcements. Decrees can be formal (marked as such) or informal (unmarked). Announcements can be explicitly or implicitly conditional. On the one hand those verses that declare that God does or will not change His mind pertain to decrees. In fact the declaration formally marks the divine statement of intention as a decree or oath. On the other hand those passages indicating that God does/will/might change His mind pertain to announcements.

PASSAGES IN WHICH DECREES ARE IN VIEW

NUMBERS 23:19

Much to the Moabite king Balak’s chagrin, God would not allow Balaam to curse Israel, but instead prompted this hireling prophet to bless His covenant people. Balaam prefaced the second

¹¹ William Lane Craig speaks of such prophecies as containing an implicit “all things remaining the same” (*The Only Wise God* [Grand Rapids, Baker, 1987], 41).

of his oracles with these words: "God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent; has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good? Behold, I have received a command to bless; when He has blessed, then I cannot revoke it" (Num. 23:19-20). The oracle as such speaks of God's presence with His people (v. 21) and their invincibility through His power (vv. 22-24). Several factors point to the unconditional nature of this oracle. The oracle is designated a divine blessing and cannot be altered.¹² Balaam recognized the blessing's unalterable character and acknowledged his inability to thwart it through sorcery or divination. This blessing, a prediction of Israel's success, is an extension of the Lord's unconditional promise to give Abraham's descendants the land of Canaan (cf. Gen. 15:16; 17:8; 22:17), and thus it shares the binding quality of that promise. (God's oath to Abraham is called a "blessing" in Gen. 28:4.) The introduction, in which Balaam affirmed that God would not change His mind or lie, formally marks the blessing as a decree. Both נִחַם and the parallel verb כָּזַב "to lie," here mean "to retract" (an unconditional promise). The verb כָּזַב has this same sense in Psalm 89:35, where God decreed, "Once I have sworn by My holiness; I will not lie to David." While the verbs refer to how God typically acts when He has made a decree, the principle here applies to the specific blessing to follow.¹³

1 SAMUEL 15:29

When Saul failed to destroy the Amalekites, Samuel rebuked him for his rebellion and declared that the Lord had rejected him as king (1 Sam. 15:23). Saul pled for forgiveness, but Samuel repeated the Lord's decision (vv. 24-26). Samuel then added these words: "The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today, and has given it to your neighbor who is better than you. And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind" (vv. 28-29).

This was not the first time Saul had heard a rebuke from the prophet Samuel at Gilgal. Earlier, impatient Saul had refused to wait for Samuel's arrival and had offered up a sacrifice. When

¹² See Genesis 27:33, 37. Francis I. Andersen and David N. Freedman argue along similar lines, pointing out that כָּזַב, in Numbers 23:19 refers to an oath. See their excursus "When God Repents," in *Amos*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 669-70.

¹³ For discussion of this point see John T. Willis, "The 'Repentance' of God in the Books of Samuel, Jeremiah, and Jonah," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 16 (1994): 168,

Samuel finally arrived on the scene, he accused Saul of foolish disobedience and told him he had forfeited a golden opportunity. Samuel declared, “You have acted foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the Lord your God, which He commanded you, for now the Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. But now your kingdom shall not endure. The Lord has sought out for Himself a man after His own heart, and the Lord has appointed him as ruler over His people, because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you” (1 Sam. 13:13-14).

This rebuke sounds quite final and unconditional, but, as already suggested, the tone of a statement can sometimes be misleading. Perhaps Samuel’s rebuke was designed as a warning to bring Saul to his senses and motivate him to obedience. After all, God had not yet revealed who the new appointee was, let alone formally anointed him. As Samuel departed from Gilgal (v. 15), it is not certain if his words constituted a decree or an implicitly conditional announcement. Was the fate of Saul (or his dynasty) sealed, or was there still a chance God might relent?

No matter how one initially answers that question, Saul’s subsequent behavior, as recorded in 1 Samuel 14-15, makes it clear that he was on thin ice. He did nothing that would motivate Yahweh to change His mind about the earlier prophecy; in fact his folly and disobedience cause one to anticipate the worst. When Samuel went to confront him at Gilgal a second time, any earlier ambiguity was removed. Samuel’s rejection of Saul’s plea for forgiveness shows that this second rebuke is in fact a decree, as does the temporal marker הַיּוֹם, “today” (1 Sam. 15:28). The concluding words, emphasizing that the Lord will not lie or change His mind (v. 29),¹⁴ formally mark Samuel’s declaration as unconditional. Both נֶחַם and the parallel verb שָׁקַר, “to lie,” here mean “to retract.”¹⁵ The Lord had decreed Saul’s demise and nothing could alter His decision.¹⁶

¹⁴ Perhaps the verse should be translated as follows: “He who is the Glory of Israel will not (in this particular situation) lie or change His mind; for He is not a man, that He should change His mind.” In this case the two *yiqtol* verb forms have a specific future, not habitual, nuance.

¹⁵ שָׁקַר is used in a similar way in Psalm 89:33, where God declared to David that He will not “betray” His faithfulness by violating His decree.

¹⁶ See Robert P. Gordon, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 146. Terence E. Fretheim sees the concluding words in verse 29 as referring specifically to God’s election of David, not to His rejection of Saul (“Divine Foreknowledge, Divine Constancy, and the Rejection of Saul’s Kingship,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47 [1985]: 597-98). The election of David is certainly in view here, as Abner’s words in 2 Samuel 3:9-10 make clear: “May God do so to Abner, and more also, if as the Lord has sworn to David, I do not accomplish this for him, to transfer the kingdom from the house of Saul, and to establish the throne of David

What is the relationship between the pronouncement recorded in 1 Samuel 13:13-14 and the decree in 15:29? Two options seem possible. First, perhaps the prophecy in chapter 13 concerns only Saul's dynasty (the twofold reference to Saul's "kingdom" might mean his dynasty; cf. the use of the term in 2 Sam. 7:16), while chapter 15 refers specifically to Saul's personal reign over Israel ("He has rejected you as king" in vv. 23 and 26).¹⁷ In this case the earlier prophecy does not necessarily become unconditional here. The "neighbor" mentioned in verse 28 could be one of Saul's sons (cf. the use of the term אָבִי, in 2 Sam. 12:11, where it refers to David's son Absalom), but developments in 1 Samuel 16 quickly eliminate this prospect.

Second, it is possible that both 1 Samuel 13:13-14 and 15:29 pertain to Saul personally. In this case the first speech could be an informal decree with the second speech simply clarifying the earlier ambiguity. However, if both speeches refer to Saul, it is more likely that the first declaration was an implicitly conditional announcement and that Saul's doom was not sealed until the second speech.¹⁸ Several factors support this. (1) As noted earlier, David, Saul's replacement, was not actually revealed and anointed until after the second speech (cf. 1 Sam. 16). (2) Also the Lord's declaration in 1 Samuel 15:11 ("I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me, and has not carried out My commands") and Samuel's response to it suggest that the earlier warning to Saul had not been final.¹⁹ If Saul's

over Israel and over Judah." However, Fretheim's distinction is overly fine, for Saul's rejection and David's election are two sides of the same coin.

¹⁷ See Bruce C. Birch, *The Rise of the Israelite Monarchy: The Growth and Development of I Samuel 7-15* (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1976), 82-83, 102-3.

¹⁸ See Diana V. Edelman, *King Saul in the Historiography of Judah* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1991), 103-4.

¹⁹ The statement in verse 11 (also v. 35), does not contradict verse 29, for the verb אָנַח is used in different semantic senses with different referents in this chapter. In verses 11, 35 it means "to experience emotional pain" and refers to God's response to Saul's disobedience which in turn moved Him to decree Saul's fate. In verse 29 the word is negated and used in the sense of "to retract." Here it refers to God's decree that Saul will be replaced by another. In the one case it pertains to a past action (God's making Saul king); in the other it concerns a future course of action (the rejection of Saul as king). For a similar line of argument see V. Philips Long, *The Reign and Rejection of King Saul* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1989), 163. Recognizing this semantic variation makes redactional critical suggestions like that of Kyle McCarter unnecessary (*I Samuel*, Anchor Bible [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980], 268). Yairah Amit's creative literary proposal, which argues that verse 29 reflects Samuel's erroneous perspective (in contrast to the narrator's/God's viewpoint expressed in vv. 11 and 35), also fails to take adequate account of the polysemantic character of the word in this chapter ("The Glory of Israel Does Not Deceive or Change His Mind': On the Reliability of Narrator and Speakers in Biblical Narrative, *Prooftexts* 12 [1992]: 201-12).

doom had already been decreed, why would the prophet experience such grief and spend the whole night crying out to God? (3) The presence of הַיּוֹם, “today,” in Samuel’s second speech indicates that God’s decision was finalized at that point, not earlier. (4) The switch from לֹא שָׁמַרְתָּ (“you have not kept,” 13:13) to מָאַסְתָּ (“you have rejected,” 15:23, 26) suggests that Saul’s latest act of rebellion was the basis for the judgment pronounced in chapter 15, or at least the “straw that broke the camel’s back.”

PSALM 110:4

In this passage Yahweh swore an oath that the Davidic king would occupy a special royal-priestly status, much like that of Melchizedek, the ancient king of Salem. The declaration that God will not change His mind, or retract His statement, clearly pertains to the specific pronouncement that follows and, together with the reference to an oath, marks the statement as a decree.

JEREMIAH 4:28; EZEKIEL 24:14; ZECHARIAH 8:14

Jeremiah and Ezekiel attach to a judgment speech a statement about God’s refusal to change, thus marking the prophecy as an unalterable decree. In Jeremiah 4:28 the words וְלֹא־אֶשׁוּב מִמֶּנָּה, “nor will I turn from it,” accompany וְלֹא־נִחַמְתִּי, “and I will not change My mind” (regarding what I have spoken). The former statement is used of God’s oath to David in Psalm 132:11: “The Lord has sworn to David, a truth from which He will not turn back.”²⁰ In Ezekiel 24:14 the Lord declared that He was no longer open for negotiation; the announced judgment would then come to pass (וְעָשִׂיתָּהּ בְּצֵאתָהּ). Zechariah 8:14, which recalls that God judged the preexilic generation just as He had planned without retracting His decision (וְלֹא־נִחַמְתִּי) alludes back to the divine decision recorded in Jeremiah 4:28 and Ezekiel 24:14.

SUMMARY

In each case God's refusal to retract a statement refers directly or applies indirectly to a specific decree identified in the context--His blessing of Israel in accord with the Abrahamic Covenant (Num. 23:19), His rejection of disobedient Saul (1 Sam. 15:29), His oath to make the Davidic king a royal-priest (Ps. 110:4), and His decision to judge Judah (Jer. 4:28; Ezek. 24:14; cf. Zech. 8:14). Each passage has clear contextual indicators that the declaration is unconditional. The statement that God will not

²⁰ Also see Judges 11:35, where Jephthah lamented that he was not able to turn back (וְלֹא־אֶכְלֵ לְשׁוּב) from the vow he had made.

change His mind, made in tandem with a synonymous expression, formally marks the divine proclamation as a decree.

PASSAGES IN WHICH ANNOUNCEMENTS ARE IN VIEW

EXODUS 32:12, 14; AMOS 7:3, 6

When God saw the Israelites worshiping the golden calf, He angrily announced to Moses His intention to destroy the people and raise up a new nation through Moses. "Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them, and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation" (Exod. 32:10). 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. The implication is that Moses, if he did not leave God alone, might be able to persuade Him to change His mind.²¹ In fact this is exactly what happened (vv. 11-14). Moses appealed to God's reputation ("What will the Egyptians think?"), asked Him to relent (יִחַן) from His stated course of action (v. 12), and reminded Him of His unconditional decree to the patriarchs (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.²²

Amos 7 records a similar case of prophetic intercession. The Lord showed Amos two visions of judgment He was planning for Israel (vv. 1-6). After seeing the visions, Amos begged the Lord to be merciful. In both cases the Lord relented from the planned course of action and announced that judgment would not fall. He had simply shown Amos two visions, but had not yet decreed a course of action. However, God's patience can run out. He showed Amos yet a third vision, which, instead of picturing the nation's destruction and rousing Amos's emotions, invited the prophet to reflect on Israel's moral condition from God's perspective. Having convinced His prophet of the necessity of judgment, God declared that He would "no longer" spare Israel (v. 8). Understanding God's words as a decree, Amos offered no objection this time.

JEREMIAH 15:6; 18:8, 10; 26:3,13,19

As already noted, God came to the point where He decreed through Jeremiah that judgment would fall on Judah (Jer. 4:28). However, He issued this decree only after many warnings.

²¹ See the helpful discussion in Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 648-49.

²² For a similar treatment of Exodus 32:9-14, see Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 50-51.

Early in Jehoiakim’s reign God told Jeremiah to proclaim His word in the temple courtyard in hopes that the people would repent. He declared, “Perhaps they will listen and everyone will turn from his evil way, that I may repent of the calamity which I am planning to do” (Jer. 26:3). When the people threatened to kill Jeremiah, the prophet again urged them to repent and once more promised them that God would retract His announcement of judgment (v. 13). Some of the elders stepped forward and reminded the people that God had retracted such an announcement in the days of Hezekiah, who had heard Micah’s words (cf. Mic. 3:12) and repented (Jer. 26:17-19).

The principle underlying Jeremiah’s message and the elders’ advice is that God will change His mind concerning a stated course of action depending on the response He receives. This principle is articulated clearly in Jeremiah 18:7-10. Here the Lord explained that a nation may avert His threatened judgment if it repents when confronted with its sin. In such cases He will “relent” and not inflict the announced disaster (v. 8). On the other hand, if a nation to whom God intended to show His favor sins, He may “reconsider” (נִחַמְתִּי, v. 10) and withhold His blessing.

Since Judah did not respond to Jeremiah’s call for repentance (cf. 18:12),²³ the Lord decided to judge His people, declaring that prophetic intercession, even by such advocates as Moses and Samuel, would not alter His course (15:1-5). He was weary of relenting (וְלֹא יִתֵּי הַנָּחֵם, v. 6) and would no longer postpone judgment. The decree of judgment in 4:28, formalized by the statement “I will not relent,” must have postdated this decision.

JOEL 2:13-14

The locust plague experienced by Joel’s generation was a harbinger of an even more devastating judgment. The Lord Himself was leading an awesome locustlike army toward Judah, but perhaps judgment could still be averted. After all, the Lord Himself was calling His people to repentance (Joel 2:12) and, as Joel reminded his audience, He characteristically relented from sending announced judgments on His covenant people throughout their history (v. 13). Though one could never be certain if the Lord had not been explicit, Joel urged the people to respond appropriately and encouraged them with these words: “Who knows? He

²³ On the relationship of Jeremiah 18:12 to the preceding verses, see Terence E. Fretheim, “The Repentance of God: A Study of Jeremiah 18:7-10,” *Hebrew Annual Review* 11(1987): 87.

may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing." The people apparently took heed to Joel's advice, for subsequent verses state that the Lord did indeed take pity on His people (v. 18) and promised to restore what the locusts had devoured (vv. 19-26). This important passage again illustrates that God is able and willing to retract announcements of judgment.

Furthermore verse 13 indicates in creedal style that God characteristically relents from sending announced judgment.²⁴ This willingness to change His mind is linked with other divine attributes, such as His grace, compassion, patience, and love. The creed has its roots in Exodus 34:6-7, where, following God's merciful treatment of Israel after the golden calf incident, the Lord described Himself as follows: "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin." God's willingness to change His mind concerning judgment is not mentioned in these verses, but the inclusion of this theme in later verses is certainly justifiable in light of Exodus 32:14, for God's decision to relent stands in the background of the creedal statement recorded in Exodus 34.

JONAH 3:9-10; 4:2

Though Jonah's announcement of judgment on Nineveh sounded unconditional, it was accompanied by no formal indication that it was a decree (3:4). For this reason the king of Nineveh responded appropriately in hopes that judgment might be averted (v. 9). Like Joel he said, "Who knows, God may turn and relent, and withdraw His burning anger so that we shall not perish?" When God saw the Ninevites' sincerity, He did indeed change His mind concerning the announced calamity (v. 10), much to Jonah's dismay. In fact Jonah had anticipated this development, and that is why he ran away in the first place. With words almost identical to those of Joel 2:13, he observed that God is "a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness; and one who relents concerning calamity" (4:2).²⁵

²⁴ On the implications of the creedal form of this text (and Jon. 4:2) see Kuyper, "The Suffering and the Repentance of God," 277; Terence E. Fretheim, "The Repentance of God: A Key to Evaluating Old Testament God-Talk," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 10 (1988): 58-59; and Richard Rice's remarks in Clark Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 31.

²⁵ As Rice argues, this passage makes it clear that many warnings of judgment, rather than being unalterable decrees, are actually designed to motivate repentance and in turn, enable God to retract the announced punishment (Richard Rice, *God's Foreknowledge and Man's Free Will* [Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985], 79-80).

SUMMARY

The texts analyzed in this section clearly show that God can and often does retract announcements. Two of the passages even regard this willingness to change His mind as one of His most fundamental attributes. 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.

CONCLUSION

Does God change His mind? It all depends. If He has decreed a certain course of action or outcome, then He will not retract a statement or relent from a declared course of action. Verses stating or illustrating this truth must not be overextended, however. Statements about God not changing His mind serve to mark specific declarations as decrees. They should not be used as proof texts of God’s immutability, nor should they be applied generally to every divine forward-looking statement. If God has not decreed a course of action, then He may very well retract an announcement of blessing or judgment. In these cases the human response to His announcement determines what He will do. Passages declaring that God typically changes His mind as an expression of His love and mercy demonstrate that statements describing God as relenting should not be dismissed as anthropomorphic. At the same time such passages should not be overextended. God can and often does decree a course of action.²⁶

²⁶ Some scholars have recently suggested a solution to this problem much like the one proposed in this paper. In following their lead, this writer has tried to bring to the debate greater exegetical clarity and place this proposed solution on a firmer exegetical foundation. See, for example, Rice’s discussion in *The Openness of God*, 32-33, especially the statement: “In general, then, God’s repentance is a genuine possibility, but one that is foreclosed when God pledges himself unconditionally to a particular course of action.” Andersen and Freedman recognize the importance of an oath in some passages (such as Ps. 110:4 and Num. 23:19) but fail to extend the implications of this observation to all the passages in question (*Amos*, 638-79).

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Dallas Theological Seminary
3909 Swiss Ave.
Dallas, TX 75204
www.dts.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu
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