

TOWARD A LITERARY UNDERSTANDING OF MOSES AND THE LORD "FACE TO FACE" (פְּנִים אֶל-פְּנִים) IN EXODUS 33:7-11

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I. Background

Throughout the narratives of the Hebrew Bible, perhaps no other biblical character is portrayed as being more intimate with God than Moses, the unequaled leader of the ancient Israelites. Not only is Moses well known for the mighty deeds he did on behalf of the Lord, he is also renowned for the profound nature of his relationship with the Lord of Israel. Within the framework of their personal relationship, the brief story of Exod 33:7-11 explicitly claims that the Lord spoke פְּנִים אֶל-פְּנִים¹ with Moses, as a man speaks with his friend. It is the theological, literary and historical nature of this unique face-to-face communication that is explored in this brief essay.

2. Text, Genre and Form

Within the book of Exodus, defining the textual limits of this particular passage does not pose a significant problem, given the distinctive nature of the material itself. For example, John Durham writes that "verses [7-11] are. . . strikingly different in both content and style from the dramatically arranged narrative composite that precedes and follows them."² Umberto Cassuto separates these verses from the rest of chapter 33 due to the use of the imperfect rather than the perfect verb form found in the surrounding text. Finally, the MT indicates that verse 7 is the start of an "open" paragraph and that verse 12 is the start of a "closed" paragraph (indicated by a ס).

¹ Within the OT, פְּנִים אֶל-פְּנִים occurs five times: Gen 32:31; Exod 33:11; Deut 34: 10; Judg 6:22; Ezek 20:35. The passage in Genesis has previously been explored in Mark D. Wessner, "Toward a Literary Understanding of 'Face to Face' (פְּנִים אֶל-פְּנִים) in Genesis 32:23-32," *ResQ* (2000/42:3): 169-77.

² John Durham, *Exodus* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1987), 440.

Although verses 7-11 function primarily as a theophany, the passage appears to have no particular cultic and/or religious significance in the life of ancient Israel. For example, the tent of meeting, as presented in Exod 33:7-11, "had no connections with the Ark or with any other palpable symbol of Yahweh's Presence, or with any rituals of sacrifice or blessing. It was exclusively and solely a place where Yahweh's Presence could be met. . . a kind of post-Sinai point of theophany."³ However, it is not only 33:7-11 that is seen as a theophany; Frank Polak indicates that, in fact, "the theophany theme dominates the entire book of Exodus . . . [and] stands at the center of the book as a whole, and permeates all traditions, sources and redaction layers."⁴ Verses 7-11, however, do more than just present a one-time theophanic event between the Lord and his servant Moses. The pericope's use of the imperfect verb forms causes Fretheim to conclude that verses 7-11 function as "a retrospective: this is how things have been in the recent past."⁶ Walter Moberly concurs that "there is a sense in which the tradition of Exodus 32-34 as a Sinai tradition, functions aetiologically."⁷ It seems therefore, that Exod 33:7-11 has a twofold form and purpose within the literature of ancient Israel: it functions as a theophany (due to the appearance of the LORD) and also as an etiology (due to the habitual nature of the events).

3. Literary Context

In contrast to the relatively easy task of identifying the textual limits of 33:7-11, the literary placement of the passage within its larger context is more challenging. Cassuto, Durham, Fretheim, Noth, and Sarna⁸ each hold that 33:7-11 properly fits within the larger section of the story of the Israelites' disobedience and the golden calf (Exod 32:1-34:35). Moberly concludes, "this unit lies at the mid-point of 32-34 and marks the turning point in the story. It continues and concludes the theme of Israel as under God's judgment and prepares for the revelation of God's grace as the theme of what follows."⁹

³ Durham, *Exodus*, 440. Nahum Sarna is in agreement with the non-cultic nature of the text when he states that in this passage "there is no priesthood, cult, or ritual of any sort (Nahum Sarna, *Exodus*; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 211.

⁴ Frank Polak, "Theophany and Mediator" *Studies in the Book of Exodus* (Leuven: Leuven Univ. Press, 1996), 113.

⁵ Cf. Durham, *Exodus*, p. 439, Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 590, and Cassuto, *Exodus*, 429.

⁶ Fretheim, *Exodus*, 295.

⁷ R. W. L. Moberly, *At the Mountain of God* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983), 150.

⁸ Cassuto, *Exodus*, 407; Durham, *Exodus*, 415; Fretheim, *Exodus*, 279; Noth, *Exodus*, 241; Sarna, "Book of Exodus" *ABD* 2.693.

⁹ Moberly, *At the Mountain of God*, 63.

The simple fact that 33:7-11 is within the larger literary section of chapters 32-34 does not answer the question of why it is there. In his commentary, Durham writes that "there remains the need to consider the text of each pericope of the biblical text as a whole and in the light of the theological purpose binding the pericopae into larger sequences, entire books, and even whole sections of the Bible,"¹⁰ and "these three chapters constitute a marvelous literary unity."¹¹ However, he later acknowledges the difficulty of understanding why 33:7-11 is where it is and concludes "the five verses of Exod 33:7-11, therefore, as important as they are, are nonetheless completely out of place in the taut narrative of Exod 32:1-34:9."¹²

Perhaps the best way to make sense of the placement of Exod 33:7-11 is to understand that it is central, not peripheral, to the larger unit of chapters 32-34. Clearly, Moberly's notion that this pericope is the turning point of the unit must be correct. It is the reality of the presence of God with his people¹³ that ties the larger literary unit together, in which the אֱלֹהִים-פְּנִים encounter of 33:7-11 plays a crucial role.

An analysis of the Hebrew text reveals that the small pericope of 33:7-11 contains a chiasmic structure that suggests the central focus of the narrative itself:

¹⁰ Durham, *Exodus*, 417.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 418.

¹² *Ibid.*, 443.

¹³ The repetitive structure of Exod 33:1-23 indicates that 7-11 are semantically distinct from their surroundings. Throughout the larger section of 1-23, the continuing presence of יהוה (the LORD), דבר (speaking), משה (Moses), and עם (people) occur repeatedly and serve to hold the chapter together as a unit. However, 33:7-11 is clearly marked by the exclusive use of אהל (tent), מחנה (camp) and, פתח (door), Hebrew roots that occur neither before nor after the pericope. Only the face/presence motif (פְּנִים) carries on after vv. 7-11. The unique element that is being presented in this pericope is Moses' Tent of Meeting and it is within this context that אֱלֹהִים-פְּנִים must be considered. (A review of chapters 32-34 reveals that after each private encounter with the LORD (32:1-18, 34:1-28), the LORD proceeds to speak to Moses in view of the Israelites (33:7-11, 34:29-35).)

A Moses pitched the tent outside the *camp* (7a)

הַמִּחֲנֶה

B those who sought the *Lord* (7b)

יְהוָה

C *all the people/every man arose and stood at the entrance of his tent* (8)

יָקוּמוּ כָּל־הָעָם וְנָאֲבוּ אִישׁ פֶּתַח אֹהֶלוֹ

D' *pillar of cloud at the entrance of the tent* (9a)

עֲמֹד הָעֲנַן וְעִמַּד פֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל

E *and he spoke with Moses* (9b)

וַדַּבֵּר עִם־מֹשֶׁה

D' *pillar of cloud at the entrance of the tent* (10a)

עֲמֹד הָעֲנַן עִמַּד פֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל

C' *all the people/every man arose and worshipped at the entrance of his tent* (10b)

וְקָם כָּל־הָעָם וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ אִישׁ פֶּתַח אֹהֶלוֹ

B' the *Lord* spoke¹⁴ to Moses (11a)

יְהוָה

A' Moses returned to the *camp* (11b)

הַמִּחֲנֶה

A clear structure such as this likely indicates that the passage is primarily concerned with the Lord's speaking to Moses--the central point of the chiasm. The other elements (outside the camp, the pillar of cloud, etc.) serve to highlight both the subtle nuances and the overall significance of the entire pericope. This also helps to explain how verse 11, "the Lord spoke to Moses פְּנִים אֶל־פְּנִים" relates to the corresponding chiastic point of "those who בִּקְשׁוּ (sought) the LORD." Either the Lord spoke to those who truly sought Him, or because Moses sought the Lord, the Lord in turn spoke to him face to face.

Finally, the narrative setting of the entire book indicates that the forty-year wandering of the Israelites took place immediately after the exodus from the pagan land of Egypt. In Egypt, the Lord had presented himself in dramatic, powerful and national ways (i.e., the ten plagues, the parting of the sea), and now in the latter part of Exodus, he presents himself in a personal way, sometimes to individuals and sometimes for the benefit of the people as a whole. It is within

¹⁴ The verb-form of 'spoke' is *piel*, from דַּבֵּר, meaning "to speak" with the primary subject (the Lord) being active, and the under-subject (Moses) being passive. The significance of the verb forms is fully explained in Bruce Waltke and Michael O'Connor, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 358.

VOICE OF UNDERSUBJECT

VOICE OF	Active	n/a	Passive	Active
PRIMARY	Middle/Passive	Qal	Piel	Hiphil
SUBJECT	Reflexive	Niphal	Pual	Hophal
			Niphal Hithpael	Int. Hiphil

this larger context of the Lord's *personal presentation of himself* (to both individuals and to the people) that 33:7-11 takes place.

4. Historical Context

If the events of Exod 33:7-11 are to be understood as both theophany and etiology, then it would be expected that the narrative itself serves a cultic function for the people. However, the tent of meeting in 7-11 "is not the Tabernacle --which has not yet been constructed--but a private tent where he [Moses] might commune with God."¹⁵ With regard to this pericope, Durham says "about the significance of the Tent of Appointed Meeting however there can be little question. ..this Tent was a primary symbol of Yahweh's Presence, and especially of the accessibility of the Presence to those in need of guidance, represented primarily by Moses."¹⁶

5. Biblical Context

Within the canon of OT literature, the unique phrase "pillar of cloud" is used only thirteen times,¹⁷ with all but two of the occurrences appearing in the Torah. Rather than for the guidance and protection of Israel, it seems to be used primarily in connection with either the Lord's leading of his people (Exod 13:21, 22, 14:19; Num 14:14; Neh 9:12, 19) or the Lord's speaking with his people (Exod 33:9, 10; Num 12:5; Deut 31: 15; Ps 99:7). The pillar of cloud is reserved for God himself as he makes his presence known among his people, often as a means of divinely legitimizing the recipient, or "seer" of the cloud.¹⁸ That is, one of the primary functions of the pillar of cloud is to portray the presence of the Lord visually.

Also of significance is the term "tent of meeting," with ninety-nine occurrences in the Torah and only nine occurring elsewhere in the entire OT. When the use of this phrase is further restricted to referring exclusively to the tent

¹⁵ Sarna, *Exodus*, 211.

¹⁶ Durham, *Exodus*, 441. The primary evidence that the tent of 33:7-11 is not the formal Israelite Tabernacle is the fact that the Lord visits this tent only occasionally; he does not "dwell" there, as he does in the Tabernacle. Also, there is no Ark, and the tent is outside of the camp (in contrast to the Tabernacle), which is an area of impurity (cf. Lev 9:11, 10:4-5, 13:46, 16:27; Num 5:2-4).

¹⁷ Exod 13:22, 14:19, 33:9, 10; Deut 31 :15, Neh 9:19 (עַמֹּד הַעָנָן), Exod 13:21, Num 12:5, Deut 31: 15, Ps 99:7, Neh 9: 12 (בְּעַמֹּד עָנָן) and Num 14:14 (בְּעַמֹּד עָנָן). In the New Testament, a cloud is often mentioned with regard to both the presence of God (cf. Matt 17:5, Mark 9:7; Luke 9:34) and the coming or going of Christ to the heavens (cf. Matt 24:30, 26:64; Mark 13:26, 14:62; Luke 21:27; Acts 1:9; I Thess 4:17; Rev 1:7). The cloud motif, as representative of the presence of the Lord, is presented throughout the entire Bible.

¹⁸ Thomas W. Mann, *Divine Presence and Guidance in Israelite Traditions*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1977), 138.

described in Exod 33:11 (i.e., not the "official" tent of meeting), it occurs in just three other passages: Num 11:16-17, 12:4-10, and Deut 31:14-15.¹⁹ All three instances portray the Lord's initiation of communication with his servant Moses; and interestingly, in all three cases, the Lord desired to communicate with someone other than Moses,²⁰ but insisted on having Moses there in his presence instead. Within the context of the exodus and the wandering, Moses was the only person with whom the Lord spoke in private.

Perhaps there is no other passage in the OT that is more apt to cause difficulty in understanding how the Lord spoke to Moses אֶל־פְּנִים than Exod 33:17-23:

<20>And he said, "You are not able to see my face, אַתְּ־פָנַי (qal)

For no one can see me and live" כִּי לֹא־יִרְאֵנִי הָאָדָם וְחַי

<23>"Then I will take away my hand " וְהִסַּרְתִּי אֶת־כַּפִּי

and you will see my back " וְרָאִיתָ אֶת־אֲחֻרָי (qal)

but my face will not been seen by you" (niphal) וְפָנַי לֹא יִרְאוּ

The difficulty, however, quickly becomes the solution if Waltke's linguistic lens (see n. 15) is used to view the text. When one considers the verb forms, it becomes apparent that Moses could be the active agent (qal) in seeing the Lord's back, but he could not be the active agent (qal) in seeing the Lord's face. The Lord would not let His face be the passive object of someone else's seeing. As the concepts of the Lord's *actively* speaking (דבר) to Moses face to face and the Lord's face being passively seen (ראה) deal with different issues, they are not in contradiction; rather, they expand and clarify the nature of the Lord's revealing of himself, both verbally and physically. As a result of this verbal nuance, verses 17-23 help the reader attain a more complete understanding of verses 7-11. As in the other OT uses of אֶל־פְּנִים, humankind does not actively initiate face-to-face interaction (ראה, דבר, etc.) with the Lord.²¹ Instead, the Lord is active initiator, and the people are the passive receptors of his intimate presentation of himself.²²

¹⁹ See Durham, *Exodus*, 440, and Israel Knohl, "Two Aspects of the Tent of Meeting," *Tehillah le-Moshe* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 74.

²⁰ The seventy elders (Num 11: 16-17), Miriam and Aaron (Num 12:4-10), and Joshua (Deut 31: 14-15).

²¹ See Wessner, *Face to Face: Panim 'el-Panim in Old Testament Literature* (Theological Research Exchange Network, #048-0211, 1998), 103-4.

²² Num 12:8 ("with him I speak mouth to mouth") is possibly a reference to the events of Exod 33: 11, although this passage uses אֶל־פִּה as the description of the Lord's communication with Moses. דבר (to speak) occurs in the Piel form, in which the subject (the Lord) is active and the undersubject (Moses) is passive.

6. Other Ancient Literature

Due to the anthropomorphic nature of Exod 33:7-11, the transcendentalization of God might be expected in the Samaritan text of this passage in order to "adjust" the theology.²³ It is significant to note that the only difference between the MT and the Samaritan Pentateuch is in verse 11, where the MT has *יְהוָה*, while the Samaritan Pentateuch instead has *יְהוֹשֻׁעַ*, likely a scribal variance. The Samaritans did not transcendentalize this passage, as they may have understood that the Lord was in the pillar of cloud and therefore not personally present, although it is more likely that, in fact, the Lord's *אֵל־פְּנֵים* encounter with Moses was not theologically upsetting.

As is often the case, the textual witness of the Septuagint is an aid in determining the ancient Jewish understanding of Exod 33:11. With regard to our immediate concerns, the only significant textual feature of this passage is its use of *ἐνώπιον ἐνωπίω* rather than *πρόσωπον πρὸς/κατὰ πρόσωπον*, which is used in each of the four other OT uses of "face to face." This Greek phrase is used nowhere else in the Septuagint and seems to present a more abstract (therefore, less physical) notion than *πρόσωπον πρὸς πρόσωπον*.

Targum Onqelos is also helpful in seeking to uncover the way this passage may have been understood by the ancient readers due to its combination of both translation and interpretive commentary:

<7> Now Moses took the tent and pitched it outside the camp far from the camp and called it the *Tent of the Place of Instruction*. Now anyone *seeking instruction from before the Lord* would go out to the *Tent of the Place of Instruction* which is outside the camp. <11> Now the Lord would speak with Moses *literally* just as one would speak with his fellow man, and he would return to the camp, while his attendant, Joshua son of Nun, the youth, would not depart from the tent.

In the same manner as both the Samaritan Pentateuch and the Septuagint, Targum Onqelos leaves the MT essentially unmodified in verse 11, except to add the word "literally" in order to remove any doubt as to the "real" nature (i.e., it was not a vision, dream) of the face-to-face communication between the Lord and Moses, again initiated by the Lord and received by Moses. Targum Neofiti also varies from the traditional Hebrew in verse 11 by using "speech to speech" the nature of the communication.

7. Conclusion

There is essentially no uncertainty that the text says that the Lord spoke to Moses "face to face" due to the witness of the MT, the Septuagint, and even the Samaritan Pentateuch. In addition, the chiastic structure of the text, the recurring theophany motif throughout the book of Exodus, as well as the numerous OT

²³ See Bruce Waltke, "Textual Criticism of the Old Testament and Its Relation to Exegesis and Theology" *NIDOTE* 1.59.

and NT allusions to the passage, indicate that it was indeed the Lord who descended within the supernatural pillar of cloud. However, the fact that the event itself is presented and understood as fact does not answer our questions about the theological/spiritual nature of God's communication with Moses.

As indicated in the text of Exod 33:7-11 (and also Num 12:8), the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend--clearly and not in riddles. In fact, the Lord considered Moses to be such a friend that not only did he speak to him **פָּנִים אֶל-פָּנִים** but he also required Moses to be present in the tent when he wished to speak to others. Clearly, face-to-face communication with the Lord was not possible for every one of his people, at least not at the same level of *intimacy* that Moses personally and privately experienced throughout his time as leader of God's people.²⁴

In addition, it is the Hebrew morphology that brings to light a secondary component of the unique nature of face-to-face communication with the Lord--the Lord is the active and initiating participant in interacting **פָּנִים אֶל-פָּנִים** while his partner is passive. The face-to-face communication in Exod 33:7-11, as presented in the biblical text (Exodus, Numbers) and further confirmed by the earliest readers (Septuagint, Samaritan Pentateuch, and Targums), is a picture of immediate and profound intimacy that reflects both God's initiative²⁵ and Moses' fulfilled desire to seek his Lord within an ongoing relationship. As in the other biblical **פָּנִים אֶל-פָּנִים** encounters, verses 7-11 reflect the four common characteristics of divine initiation, profound intimacy, intentional solitude, and supernatural verification.

²⁴ In fact, there were occasions when the people were saved from divine destruction due solely to the close relationship between Moses and God (e.g. Exodus 32, Numbers 14).

²⁵ Interestingly, in Genesis 32 Jacob thought he had actively encountered God face to face, and he expected to lose his life as a result. Moses however, was the recipient of the Lord's active encounter, and he went back again and again and never seemed to become tired or fearful of spending time with his God.

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