

4-11-2019

How Moses' Intercession Changed the Trajectory of Israel (Exodus 33:12-23)

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Recommended Citation

Kent, Hannah, "How Moses' Intercession Changed the Trajectory of Israel (Exodus 33:12-23)" (2019). *Belmont Undergraduate Research Symposium (BURS)*. 4.
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EXODUS 33:12-23

Hannah Kerr

Dr. McEntire

Presentation on Exodus as a Whole (~4 mins)

Read Exodus 33:12-23

READ PAPER:

Introduction

As the Israelites commit idolatry with the golden calf, YHWH's anger is kindled against them, leaving Moses to try and persuade God to continue being present with them. Before the golden calf incident, YHWH dwelled in a "tent of meeting" outside of the Israelites' camp. However, after this sin God initially refuses to be with the people and threatens to destroy them. The encounter between Moses and YHWH in Exodus 33 sets up the agreement of God to dwell in the tabernacle, which will be constructed later. Therefore, this incident is a crucial turning point that sets up the continuation of the Pentateuch and the ending of Exodus.

Exodus 33:12-23

The dialogue and experience between Moses and YHWH in Exodus 33:12-23 brings up many important theological issues and ideas present throughout the book of Exodus. In this passage, the dialogue between Moses and God reveals elements of their complex relationship, God's glory, and the regulation of God's ever-changing dangerous presence. When broken down and studied, this passage is the crucial response to the golden calf incident as well as the section that propels the Israelites into their further-developing relationship with God. This section of Exodus also crucially precedes the descent of God's glory on the tabernacle.

Source Information

There are elements of this section that seem to contradict with other information in the Pentateuch, so a discussion about the sources that contributed to this story is necessary. For example, Exodus 33:11 says, "Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend." This verse is attributed to the E source, which has no problem placing God and Moses in direct contact with one another. However, in 33:20 God says, "you cannot see my face, for man

shall not see me and live.” This contribution to the narrative is likely from the J source, which explains the conflict. Therefore, verses 11-23 seem to be a combined work of the E and J sources. According to William Johnstone, the narratives around this passage lend themselves to the work of the Priestly source.¹ The instructions for the tabernacle and building of the tabernacle that occurs after this passage are all attributed to the P source. However, the only probable P source in 33:12-23 is the contribution of the word “glory” in Moses’ request, since this word is only used previously in Exodus by the P source.² The proposed Priestly source’s editing of Exodus 33 and the interjections of the E and J source help to shed light on some of the discrepancies within the passage.

Context of Passage

It is imperative to view Exodus 33:12-23 within the context of the narrative of Exodus as a whole, as this story is wedged between the golden calf incident and the renewal of God’s covenant with Israel. Moses’ intercession is the turning point between Israel’s sin and God’s promise to be present with Israel. Carey Walsh puts this passage in perspective and states, “the trajectory of Exodus has been to free the people from service to the wrong god and redirect it to the correct God.”³ From the beginning of Exodus, God is freeing the people from slavery to the Egyptian god to then worship Him. This theme is continued as the Israelites again serve another god, the golden calf, that God must also free them from. The difference here is that the people of Israel have chosen this act of worship in spite of God’s saving work in the past. Moses’ dialogue with YHWH highlights the grace of God as He renews His covenant with Israel once again.

Exodus 33:12-23 must also be viewed in context with the end of Exodus and the instructions for constructing the tabernacle. First, as Moses pleads with God to go with the people

¹ William Johnstone, *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary: Exodus 20-40* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2014), 389.

² Johnstone, *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary: Exodus 20-40*, 390.

³ Carey Walsh, “Where Did God Go? Theophanic Shift in Exodus,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 43, no. 3 (August 2013): 121. doi: 10.1177/0146107913493560.

of Israel, he begs for God's presence. This request will be fulfilled in the building of the tabernacle later on. The same connection can be made as Moses asks to see God's glory on Mount Sinai. Just as Moses receives a glimpse of the glory of YHWH, that same glory will also be present and realized in the new tabernacle.⁴ When these connections to the tabernacle and the golden calf passage are viewed in context with one another, there is a clear theme of creation, fall, and restoration. The Priestly source's story of the golden calf, Moses' intercession, and the renewal of the covenant reflect this pattern that is present in many other stories in the Pentateuch.⁵

God's Changing Presence

A major theme of the whole book of Exodus is the way that God's presence changes in relation to the Israelites, and even Moses. In Genesis, God is directly present to His people in many forms, including speaking face-to-face with some characters. The direct contact with God starts to fade as Exodus progresses. The potency of the divine decreases until the manifestation of God is seen only in a pillar of cloud and fire in the wilderness.⁶ There are many possibilities for why this distancing occurs, but the result is that God begins to manifest Himself in ways that the people of Israel must control. God's presence which was previously not seen as dangerous has now become something to be regulated in various ways. Throughout the book of Exodus, mediating institutions between God and Israel are continually developing.

Some scholars believe that this further distancing of God is caused directly by Israel's sin with the golden calf. J. Gerald Janzen supports this position by referencing all of the previous times where Moses was in the direct presence of God and was unharmed.⁷ Janzen also says, "A person, a

⁴ James Watts, "Aaron and the Golden Calf in the Rhetoric of the Pentateuch," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130, no. 3 (2011): 426. *ATLA Religion Database*.

⁵ Watts, "Aaron and the Golden Calf in the Rhetoric of the Pentateuch," 424.

⁶ Walsh, "Where Did God Go? Theophanic Shift in Exodus," 116.

⁷ J. Gerald Janzen, *Exodus* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997), 247.

community, that stands in the aftermath of such covenant betrayal cannot see God's face and live."⁸ If that is true, it would explain why God asserts that Moses cannot see him face-to-face as one speaks to a friend any longer. When God refuses to go with the Israelites directly in Exodus 33:3, perhaps He is punishing them for their sin and distancing Himself from the "stiff-necked people" who betrayed Him. His anger has caused Him to remove His presence from the people.

On the other hand, perhaps God distances Himself to protect the Israelites out of concern for their safety. In Exodus 33:3, God says He is refusing to go with the Israelites because His presence would destroy them. Jeffrey J. Niehaus points out that just as God reveals Himself in the Pentateuch, He also often chooses to conceal Himself. He says, "[YHWH] reveals himself to those who are being saved. He conceals himself from those who are perishing."⁹ The Israelites deserved to perish after their sin, so initially YHWH had to conceal Himself from the people who directly violated the Decalogue through their idolatry. Carey Walsh tracks this distancing and says, "divine power becomes primarily implied rather than witnessed."¹⁰ God still allows His presence to be implied among the Israelites, but His manifestations become more impersonal, maybe for the safety of the people to whom He has committed Himself.

Dialogue Between YHWH and Moses

The regulation of God's presence is the primary issue facing God and Moses as they enter into their strange and fragmented dialogue in Exodus 33:12-23. The order of the dialogue is: Moses' frustrated address to God on behalf of the Israelites, a short speech by YHWH directed to only Moses, another speech by Moses to appeal to YHWH's ownership of the people, another short response by YHWH, a short request from Moses to see God's glory, and then three speeches of

⁸ Janzen, *Exodus*, 247.

⁹ Jeffrey J. Niehaus, "Theology and Theophany," in *God at Sinai: Covenant and Theophany in the Bible and Ancient Near East*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 17.

¹⁰ Walsh, "Where Did God Go? Theophanic Shift in Exodus," 117.

YHWH. The whole dialogue feels slightly disconnected, but it does give a glimpse into the concerns of both parties and their relationship with one another.

The conversation between Moses and God is not smooth, and Moses is clearly frustrated by God's lack of response to his overall concerns. Moses attempts to regulate the conversation and pull answers out of God by using God's own words to make his points. Moses is concerned about who will go with Israel because Israel's identity rests on the fact that YHWH goes with them; they are His people and He is their God. According to Walter Brueggemann, "Israel's only claim to uniqueness is Yahweh's accompaniment."¹¹ By previously refusing to go with them, God is threatening to take away Israel's identity, and Moses is clearly upset and concerned. However, God mostly disregards Moses' appeals on behalf of the people and states that His Presence will go with Moses. God assures Moses of His presence but, for now, leaves out the people of Israel.

Although He does not refer to the Israelites as a whole, God's dialogue throughout this exchange reveals aspects of His relationship to Moses and His character. In light of the fact that God does not immediately answer all of Moses' questions, it seems clear that YHWH is in control of the conversation but will allow Moses to speak anyway. He hears Moses' requests, and he chooses which requests to answer in His own timing. Irwin states, "YHWH willingly plays along but leaves no doubt who is really in charge."¹² One could regard this as an assertion of power, but perhaps also as evidence that God is willing to respond to His people even when He is disappointed. Donald E. Gowan observes this in the conversation and explains that God is not removing Himself from humanity or making decisions without giving humanity any space to weigh in. YHWH allows Moses to voice his concern, and Moses' allegiance to his people does seem to impact God's decision.¹³

¹¹ Walter Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections" in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck et al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 939.

¹² William H. Irwin, "The Course of the Dialogue between Moses and YHWH in Exodus 33:12-17," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (1997): 633. *ATLA Religion Database*.

¹³ Donald E. Gowan, *Theology in Exodus: Biblical Commentary in the Form of a Commentary*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 23.

This observation could bring up a theological issue about God changing His mind based on the will of humans, but that does not seem to be the case in this exchange; YHWH seems to be motivated to act because of His love for Moses. Gowan says that he does not see this exchange as Moses persuading a reluctant God to do what is right, but rather a portrait of how God chooses to work with human beings.¹⁴ God does not yield completely to Moses' will, but does give enough to assure Moses that He will be with him. This can be seen clearly in God's four statements throughout the dialogue. YHWH assures Moses that he will make his goodness pass before him, he will proclaim his name, he will be gracious, and he will show mercy.¹⁵ These statements remind Moses of YHWH's sovereignty and His character. J. Gerald Janzen agrees with this and says, "in spite of the deep hurt and blazing anger that such a betrayal stirs in the heart of God, God does not seek the death of the betrayers but their life...in Hebrew, the word 'goodness' is the most all-encompassing positive word in the language."¹⁶

By allowing His goodness to pass before Moses, God reminds Moses that He desires his well-being and will take care of him in spite of the sins of Israel. Even if Moses did not directly ask for this answer, God gave it to him because it is the answer he needed to hear. In this conversation, Moses was first concerned that God's favor toward him would be continued, and YHWH ends the conversation with this delayed response to Moses' first concern.¹⁷ In this way, God gives Moses the assurance he seeks even if He does not give any specific answers.

Divine Friendship

¹⁴Gowan, *Theology in Exodus: Biblical Commentary in the Form of a Commentary*, 232.

¹⁵ Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections" 940.

¹⁶ Janzen, *Exodus*, 247.

¹⁷ Janzen, *Exodus*, 246.

By observing the dialogue between Moses and YHWH, it becomes clear that Moses and God have engaged in a unique kind of divine and covenantal friendship. The statement in verse 11 about their face-to-face conversations alludes to the fact that Moses is familiar with intimacy with God that so few people in the Bible experience. His previous interactions with God certainly resemble a close and unique friendship.¹⁸ Although this passage implies that God can no longer speak to Moses face-to-face because of his humanity, their friendship is still present and apparent in other ways. In addition to their friendship, Exodus also reconciles this conversation and unique relationship by implying that Moses, as the center of God's communication with His people, can no longer be described as a normal human. In this real friendship, both parties respond to one another and give of themselves. This act is precisely what God is doing in response to Moses' request to see His glory. God does not have to give all of Himself, but He does allow Moses to see a glimpse of Him through His goodness and the declaration of His name. God's softening toward Moses as the conversation progresses shows that YHWH is still engaged in their covenantal friendship despite the Israelites' mistakes.

Moses' statements and requests are also evidence of the friendship he has with YHWH. While many people would likely shirk away from questioning God's words or plans, Moses dives in and strongly conveys his thoughts to YHWH. Donald Gowan says, "this passage is one of the striking examples of how faithfulness sometimes must be expressed by challenging God, rather than meekly obeying."¹⁹ Moses is faithful to his friendship with YHWH and the Israelites through his willingness to fight for God's loving nature which he has counted on and witnessed previously. Perhaps in this way, Moses is demonstrating what faithfulness should look like for all believers. When believers get to know the heart of God, they can appeal to God's loving and saving nature

¹⁸ Jacqueline E. Lapsley, "Friends with God?: Moses and the Possibility of Covenantal Friendship," *Interpretation* 58, no. 2 (2004): 120. *ATLA Religion Database*.

¹⁹ Gowan, *Theology in Exodus: Biblical Commentary in the Form of a Commentary*, 223.

rather than always responding with distant obedience.²⁰ Maybe the fate of the Israelites would have been different if Moses had not appealed to his promised friendship with God.

YHWH's Face, Back, and Glory

Although Moses and YHWH have had a divine-human friendship, it appears that Moses is not allowed to see all of God's glory and instead sees God's back as He passes by. Moses does not directly ask to see God's face but rather His "glory." Moses was possibly viewing his request to see God's glory as a lesser request in comparison to seeing God's face. According to Walter Brueggemann, "both 'glory' and 'face' concern presence and access to Yahweh. 'Glory' however, is less direct, seeming to honor Yahweh's majestic hiddenness."²¹ This would make sense, as glory in many Exodus stories refers to God's presence that guides the people by sight, such as the cloud that descends on Mt. Sinai and the pillar that leads them through the wilderness. However, it does seem as though YHWH interprets Moses' request to see His glory as a request to be drawn more intimately and dangerously into the core of God's self by seeing His face. To clarify this request, William Johnstone explains, "'face' in these contexts expresses the immediacy of presence and communication; it is not a literal expression of physical visibility."²² This clarification could mean that neither God nor Moses are truly talking about seeing glory or God's face, but rather discussing their degree of intimacy. Many interpreters believe that this story shows Moses asking for too much intimacy and God rejecting his request.²³

On the other hand, Gowan asserts that what YHWH gives Moses, a view of his "back," is actually more than Moses asked for, not less. Moses may not be able to see all of God, but God makes his goodness pass by, and Moses experiences that goodness. This is greater than anything

²⁰ Lapsley, "Friends with God?: Moses and the Possibility of Covenantal Friendship," 119.

²¹ Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," 940.

²² Johnstone, *Smyth & Helms Bible Commentary: Exodus 20-40*, 390.

²³ Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," 940.

Moses is able to see.²⁴ The image of Moses seeing God's "back" has raised questions for interpreters, but it could easily tie together with YHWH's previous statements. J. Gerald Janzen proposes a helpful hypothesis by wondering if God's "back" refers to His "gracious and merciful willingness not to look on us accusingly in our shame and guilt."²⁵ In this interpretation, God's goodness is His back. Moses can no longer see God's face because of the now-dangerous presence of YHWH. But he can experience a close substitute as YHWH makes His goodness pass and proclaims His name before Moses.²⁶

Conclusion

God's willingness to reveal Himself to flawed humans is the true beauty of this passage from Exodus 33. Although the Israelites repeatedly complain and sin against YHWH, He still chooses to renew His covenant with them as He leads them to the Promised Land. The sinfulness of Israel did have consequences, as it distanced them from the glory of God, but the goodness of God still passed by. As the sin drove a wedge between the people and God, Moses proved himself as a model for insistent and faithful prayer.²⁷ The wedge between the people and God was also caused by God's dangerous presence which must be mediated; Moses here acts as the mediator who maintains the connection between Israel and YHWH. Perhaps Christians today could learn something from the model of someone who has enough trust in God to ask Him for impossible experiences. Believers can find comfort in knowing that God is sovereign and free to be whoever He wants to be, yet He chooses to remain faithful to His promises.²⁸ Although Moses intercedes for his people and daringly pleads with YHWH, Walter Brueggemann correctly states, "life goes on for Israel only because

²⁴ Gowan, *Theology in Exodus: Biblical Commentary in the Form of a Commentary*, 234.

²⁵ Janzen, *Exodus*, 249.

²⁶ Johnstone, *Smyth & Helms Bible Commentary: Exodus 20-40*, 388.

²⁷ Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," 942.

²⁸ Janzen, *Exodus*, 248.

Yahweh is free, gracious, and merciful.”²⁹ Even though the fate of Israel seems unclear at the conclusion of Exodus 33, reading to the end of Exodus 40 reveals that YHWH does allow His glory to go with His people and fill the tabernacle. YHWH’s anger was kindled against Israel, but His mercy was greater.

²⁹ Brueggemann, “The Book of Exodus: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” 940.

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