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Does God “Repent” or Change His Mind?

Walter A. Maier III

A question that has frequently arisen in the minds of those studying the Bible, both laity and clergy, is: Does God repent, or change his mind? Such an inquiry is the result of the translation of passages in Scripture that describe God’s thinking with the words “repented,” “regretted,” or “changed his mind.”

This question is part of the general subject of God’s foreknowledge. That subject has been the focus of much discussion the past several years by the members of a (relatively) conservative theological organization, the Evangelical Theological Society.¹ The discussion was prompted by the fact that some members of the society had adopted the position known as “Open Theism,” which in essence asserts that God does not know everything that will take place in the future.²

Specifically with regard to the question mentioned above, if God “repents” or “regrets,” that seems to imply that God at an earlier point in time engaged in an activity with one result in mind. However, another result, which God did not anticipate and does not like, is the reality, and thus God is sorry that he carried out that earlier activity. If God “changes his mind,” the average Bible reader could understand this to mean that God’s final decision on an issue was unknown even to God himself; that God initially had one plan in mind, but then adopted another. Both the translations “repent” or “regret,” and “change the mind,” can lead to the

¹The basis for membership in the Evangelical Theological Society is agreeing with and subscribing to these statements: “The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written, and therefore inerrant in the autographs. God is Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each an uncreated person, one in essence, equal in power and glory.”

²During its November, 2001 Annual Meeting the society voted, by a large majority, to reject “Open Theism.” In November, 2002, challenges were brought to the membership credentials of certain society members who had written as advocates of Open Theism. Those challenges are being reviewed by the society’s Executive Committee, which reported, and referred the case for action, to the society at the November, 2003, Annual Meeting. Discussion, debate, and reading of prepared statements followed. The final result was that neither of the men whose membership credentials were challenged were removed from membership, a two-thirds vote being required for dismissal. For more information, see James A. Borland, “Reports Relating to the Fifty-Fifth Annual Meeting of the Society,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47 (2004): 170-173.

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same conclusion: God does not know everything that will take place in the future. That is exactly the conclusion reached by open theists.

This article will give a brief overview of Open Theism, followed by a short summary of the orthodox position, and then present considerations concerning translation and interpretation of biblical passages. In particular, two key passages will be examined in greater depth: Genesis 6:6 and Exodus 32:14.

I. Open Theism

Gregory A. Boyd has given an articulate presentation of this theological position in his book *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*.³ In the introduction he mentions questions that led him eventually to embrace this view.

The most serious questions about the classical view of [God's] foreknowledge ... relate to the Bible. If the future is indeed exhaustively settled in God's mind, as the classical view holds, why does the Bible repeatedly describe God changing his mind? Why does the Bible say that God frequently alters his plans, cancels prophecies in the light of changing circumstances, and speaks about the future as a "maybe," a "perhaps," or a "possibility"? Why does it describe God as expressing uncertainty about the future, being disappointed in the way things turn out, and even occasionally regretting the outcome of his own decisions? If the Bible is always true—and I, for one, assume that it is—how can we reconcile this way of talking about God ... with the notion that the future is exhaustively settled in his mind?⁴

As a result, Boyd writes: "I came to believe that the future was, indeed, partly determined [or "settled"] and foreknown by God, but also partly open and known by God as such. In short, I embraced what has come to be labeled the 'open view' of God."⁵

Boyd goes on to explain further the "open view of God," or to use the phrase he prefers, the "open view of the future." To some extent, he

³Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000). Also see, for example, Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), and John Sanders, *The God Who Risks* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998).

⁴Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 11.

⁵Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 11. In all Boyd references, emphasis is in the original.

believes God know the future as "*definitely* this way and *definitely* not that way." On the other hand, to some extent God knows the future as "*possibly* this way and *possibly* not that way." Boyd moreover writes that this open view

... does not hold that the future is wide open. Much of it, open theists concede, is settled ahead of time, either by God's predestining will or by existing earthly causes, but it is not *exhaustively* settled ahead of time. To whatever degree the future is yet open to be decided by free agents, it is unsettled. To this extent, God knows it as a realm of possibilities, not certainties.⁶

Boyd vigorously protests the accusation that he, and other open theists, are denying God's omniscience. However, in attempting to refute this charge, Boyd engages in semantic shifts and a subtle reworking of the definition of "omniscience." Notice how he moves from the idea of total knowledge to "perfect" knowledge: "Open theists affirm God's omniscience as emphatically as anybody does. The issue is not whether God's knowledge is perfect. It is. The issue is about the nature of the reality that God perfectly knows." With their understanding of reality, Boyd and other open theists hold that God's "perfect" knowledge means that he knows "the future as consisting of both unsettled possibilities and settled certainties."⁷

Boyd does move back to the concept of God's *complete* foreknowledge, but against the background, again, of a new definition of omniscience. He writes: "If God does not foreknow future free actions, it is not because his knowledge of the future is in any sense incomplete. It's because there is, in this view, *nothing definite there for God to know!*" According to Boyd, "free actions do not exist to be known until free agents create them."⁸

Despite what Boyd and other open theists claim, in the final analysis they indeed believe that God's knowledge of the future is incomplete. In their view, God does not know everything that will take place, or

⁶Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 15.

⁷Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 16.

⁸Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 16, 17. Thus Boyd can conclude that the "debate between the open and classical understandings of divine foreknowledge is completely a debate over the nature of the future: Is it exhaustively settled from all eternity, or is it partly open?" (17). This article is not so much concerned with the nature of the future, as with God's foreknowledge, and, precisely speaking, whether or not it can be said that God "repents" or "changes his mind."

everything that will be done or said by people. By implication, God does not even know everything that he will do or say in the future.

II. The Orthodox Position

With regard to the knowledge of God, Scripture teaches that God does know *all things*, whether in the past, present, or future. A few representative passages are: 1 John 3:20: "For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything" (NIV); 1 Samuel 15:29: "He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind" (NIV); and Isaiah 46:9-10, "I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come" (NIV). In Isaiah 41:22-23, Yahweh, by revealing what idols *cannot* do, indicates what he *can* do: "Let them bring forth and declare to us what is going to take place; as for the former events, declare what they were, that we may consider them, and know their outcome; or announce to us what is coming. Declare the things that are going to come afterward, that we may know that you are gods.... Behold, you are of no account, and your work amounts to nothing...." (NASB). Another passage would be Ephesians 2:10: "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (NASB).

Scripture presents to us God's complete knowledge, including God's total foreknowledge. However, in revealing himself in Scripture, God at the same time is condescending to our human weakness, since our finite human reason cannot fully comprehend the infinite, majestic Deity. Because God employs our human language, with its limitations, he has also adopted our way of thinking and accommodated himself to the laws and ways of human thought processes.⁹

For example, Scripture speaks of God in a twofold manner: 1) in his majesty as being above time and space (e.g. Psalm 90:4: "A thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday"); and 2) in accordance with our human views, as being in time and space. God is conforming to our mode of thinking in terms of time and space, cause and effect. Only in this manner is God comprehensible to us. In fact, when God ascribes foreknowledge to himself, as he does in Isaiah 46:10, he who is outside of time is adapting to

⁹Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 3 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950-1953), 1:428-429.

the mode of thinking of his time-bound creatures. The Deity enters into time and space without becoming temporal or local in his essence.¹⁰

Likewise, God in his being is immutable. Yet we must so think of God, and Scripture portrays him, as varying from being angry to being merciful according to changes or variations in the object of his affection. That is how our minds and Scripture handle a God who in his essence remains immutable, but who is dealing with people who are mutable.¹¹ Luther comments:

God in his essence is altogether unknowable; nor is it possible to define or put into words what he is, though we burst in the effort. It is for this reason that God lowers himself to the level of our weak comprehension and presents himself to us in images, in coverings, as it were, in simplicity adapted to a child, that in some measure it may be possible for him to be known by us....¹²

Luther continues:

That Scripture thus assigns to God the form, voice, actions, emotions, etc., of a human being not only serves to show consideration for the uneducated and the weak; but we great and learned men, who are versed in the Scriptures, are also obliged to adopt these simple images, because God has presented them to us and has revealed himself to us through them.¹³

A discussion of God's accommodations in his word, then, in part involves Scripture's anthropomorphisms (ascribing human form or attributes to the Deity) and anthropopathisms (ascribing human feelings, emotions, or passions to God). The ascription of human actions to God can be included under both terms. Referring to both by the general use of the one term "anthropopathism," Tayler Lewis points out, "Why talk of anthropopathism as if there were some special absurdity covered by this sounding term, when any revelation conceivable must be anthropopathic?... There is no escape from it. Whatever comes in this way

¹⁰Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:440, 451.

¹¹Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:440-441.

¹²Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 6-14," vol. 2 of *Luther's Works*, trans. George Schick (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1960), 45. John Calvin (*Commentaries on The First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, vol. 1, trans. John King [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996], 249) states: "... since we cannot comprehend him [God] as he is, it is necessary that, for our sake, he should, in a certain sense, transform himself."

¹³Luther, "Lectures on Genesis," 2:46.

to man must take the measure of man...."¹⁴ John Lange, after noting the necessity of anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms, focuses on the latter, observing that if we do not accept them we will "have in the mind a total blank in respect to all those conceptions of God that most concern us as moral beings."¹⁵ As he explains:

Talk as we will of impassibility, we *must think* of God as having *πάθη*, *affections*, something connecting him with the human.... We must either have in our thoughts [with regard to God] a blank intellectuality making only an intellectual difference between good and evil (if that can be called any difference at all), or we are compelled to bring in something emotional, and that, too, with a measure of intensity corresponding to other differences by which the divine exceeds the human.¹⁶

Lange concludes: "Without this, the highest form of scientific or philosophic theism has no more of religion than the blankest atheism. We could as well worship a system of mathematics as such a theistic indifference."¹⁷ In other words, anthropopathisms, and anthropomorphisms, besides being the vehicles for communicating to us truths about the Deity, give life to the text. They are particularly appropriate in the Old Testament, where, Milton Terry writes, they are "the vivid concepts which impressed the emotional Hebrew mind, and are in perfect keeping with the spirit of the language."¹⁸

III. Considerations Concerning Translation and Interpretation

Recognizing the accommodations in Scripture, specifically anthropomorphisms and -pathisms, one could argue that the translations that God "repented," "regretted," or "changed his mind" are legitimate. In those verses and contexts, one could hold, this is what God seemed to do, from the human standpoint. Yet, at the very least, the translation that God "repented" must be understood in the sense of the other renderings, namely, that God "had regret" or "a change of mind." God never does

¹⁴Taylor Lewis, quoted by Milton Terry in *Biblical Hermeneutics* (1885; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1964), 103, n.1.

¹⁵John Lange, *Genesis, or, The First Book of Moses*, trans. Taylor Lewis and A. Gosman, 5th ed. rev. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902), 288.

¹⁶Lange, *Genesis*, 288. Italics in original.

¹⁷Lange, *Genesis*, 288.

¹⁸Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 103.

wrong; all his thoughts and ways are thoroughly just, righteous, and holy; there is never any sin or error on the part of God. Also, God's "being sorry," or "having regret" about something, or his "changing his mind," must be understood within the framework of God's total knowledge, including his complete foreknowledge, and the related truth of his immutability.

Nevertheless, the position of this article is that other translations, based on the original language and context, are to be preferred. They are preferable because they will not mislead or confuse the modern reader of Scripture. For when the reader comes across the renderings that God "repented," or "regretted," or "was sorry," or "changed his mind," he could arrive at wrong notions concerning the Deity, as already discussed (and as exemplified by the open theists).

Two sample passages will be examined, which have been translated by some in just this manner, and which have figured into studies of God's knowledge, as well as his immutability. Both passages are from the Old Testament, and both involve the same Hebrew verb used of God: נחם, *nacham*, in the *niphal* stem. The first is Genesis 6:6: "Yahweh *nachamed* that/because he had made man on the earth and he was pained to/in his heart." The second is Exodus 32:14, which occurs in the text after God threatened to devour the Israelites because of the golden calf incident, and after Moses' subsequent intercession on behalf of the Israelites. The verse reads, "And Yahweh *nachamed* concerning the harm/injury/disaster that he threatened to do/spoke of doing to his people."

The verb *nacham* occurs 108 times in the Old Testament, forty-eight times in the *niphal* stem, fifty-one times in the *piel* stem, twice in the *pual* stem, and seven times in the *hithpael* stem.¹⁹ It has a range of meanings, especially in the *niphal* and *hithpael*. Heinz-Josef Simian-Yofre summarizes as follows:

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; by influencing a decision, when the focus is on the future; and by accepting the consequences of an act or helping another

¹⁹Heinz-Josef Simian-Yofre, "נחם," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 9, trans. David Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 342.

accept them or contrariwise dissociating oneself emotionally from them, when the focus is on the past.²⁰

Simian-Yofre observes that the twin factors of decision and emotion are the rule in *nacham*: "they are indissolubly interwoven, even when in individual cases there may be greater emphasis on one element or the other."²¹ Years earlier Lange had arrived at a similar conclusion, specifically for *nacham* in the *niphal*, when he noted that the verb relates the dual aspects of feeling and purpose.²²

For the most part the Septuagint (LXX) uses παρακαλεω, *parakaleo*, "to summon, call upon, invite, urge, request, comfort," and possibly "try to console" or "conciliate," to translate the *niphal*, *piel*, *pual*, and *hithpael* of *nacham*. It uses μετανοεω, *metanoeo*, "to change one's mind," "repent," only for the *niphal*, several times in connection with Yahweh, sometimes with regard to Israel. The LXX uses ελεεω, *eleeo*, "to have mercy" or "pity," "be merciful," four times for the *piel* and once for the *niphal*. It uses παυω, *paio*, "to stop, cause to stop, relieve" five times for the *niphal*.²³

Interestingly, the LXX uses none of these Greek verbs for *nacham*, *niphal*, in Genesis 6:6 and Exodus 32:14. In Genesis 6:6 the LXX renders *nacham* with the verbal root ενθυμεομαι, *enthumeomai*, "to reflect (on), consider, think." In Exodus 32:14 appears the Greek verbal root ιλασκομαι, *hilaskomai*, "to propitiate, conciliate," passive "be propitiated, be merciful" or "gracious." Further, in the LXX Genesis 6:6,7 are the only verses where *enthumeomai* is used for *nacham*, and Exodus 32:14 the only place where *hilaskomai* appears for *nacham*. What this data from the LXX means is uncertain. Perhaps the translators wanted to avoid the impression in both passages that God regretted, was sorry, or changed his mind.

²⁰Simian-Yofre, "נָחַם" 342. He states that "most experts no longer accept an original semantic identification of Heb. *nhm* with Arab. *nhm*, 'breathe heavily,' both because of critical objections to deriving the meaning of a word from its etymology and because the concrete semantic field associated with *nhm* in the OT clearly differs from that associated with Arab. *Nhm*" (341).

²¹Simian-Yofre, "נָחַם" 342.

²²Lange, *Genesis*, 288.

²³Simian-Yofre, "נָחַם" 355.

Genesis 6:6

Based on the translation of Gen. 6:6a, that Yahweh "was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth,"²⁴ Boyd offers the following interpretation.

Now, if everything about world history were exhaustively settled and known by God as such before he created the world, God would have known with absolute certainty that humans would come to this wicked state, at just this time, before he created them. But how, then, could he authentically regret having made humankind? Doesn't the fact that God regretted the way things turned out—to the point of starting over—suggest that it *wasn't* a foregone conclusion at the time God created human beings that they would fall into this state of wickedness?²⁵

The orthodox exegete can respond by saying that in Genesis 6:6 *nacham* is an anthropopathic term describing God's reaction to the horrible wickedness and pervasive corruption of the human race. The rest of the verse is intensely anthropopathic and anthropomorphic: "He [God] was pained to his heart." *Nacham* communicates to the reader that the Deity is not remote, distant, and uninterested in mankind. Rather, he has a keen interest in, watches closely, and gets involved with, humanity. *Nacham* gives the reader the correct impression that God is not static, plastic, both indifferent to and unaffected by, the thoughts, words, and actions of his creatures. Rather, he is a dynamic, living Being, who has a personality, and who, to use more anthropopathic/-morphic language, is concerned with, affected by, and reacting to, how people live their lives.

Because of the preceding context, Genesis 6:1-5, and as a parallel to the second half of v. 6—"He was pained to his heart"—the suggestion is made here that *nacham* be translated as "He was grieved," or "He suffered grief." Such a rendering fits the context and avoids the pitfalls associated with the phrases "He repented," or "He regretted," or "He was sorry that." Other verses where *nacham* in the niphal, used with reference to God, *can* mean "He was grieved," or "He suffered grief," are 1 Samuel 15:11, where Yahweh says, "I am grieved that I made Saul king"; 1 Samuel 15:35, which reads essentially the same way; 2 Samuel 24:16, which relates how Yahweh was grieved concerning a pestilence he had sent upon Israel; 1 Chronicles 21:15, similar to the preceding verse; Jeremiah 42:10, where Yahweh suffers

²⁴Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 55.

²⁵Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 55. Italics in original.

grief/is grieved concerning the disaster/harm that he has done; and Genesis 6:7, a partial parallel to verse 6. A related New Testament verse is Ephesians 4:30: "And do not grieve [λυπεω, *lupeo*, pres. act. impv., "to cause sorrow, to grieve"] the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption" (NIV).²⁶

Intertwined in *nacham* in Genesis 6:6 are the dual aspects of feeling/emotion and purpose/decision. When God created the world, everything was very good. The first human beings were holy, perfectly in the image of God. They were made personally by *Yahweh* (God's personal, covenant name appears in Genesis 2), to be in fellowship with him, and to love and serve him, and so it was. But then came the fall into sin, and eventually the spread of unbelief in the human race, which culminates with the scene portrayed in Genesis 6:5: "The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time" (NIV). This is the reality in Noah's day, compared to what could have been! Because he had made man, then, *Yahweh*, who had once been in intimate fellowship with man, suffers grief. His creatures, who had mutated in such a terrible way, cause him to feel not joy, but sadness.

Also due to the present reality, the holy God *decides* to wipe out the human race with a flood. He, who in his essence is immutable, is portrayed as altering in his feelings, due to the change in humanity, and thus changing in his actions.²⁷ That decision, in turn, brings him grief. He has to destroy the work of his hands, the people whom he loves, and with whom he longs to have fellowship.

Genesis 6:6 (and v. 7) is not to be interpreted, again, as saying that *Yahweh* "regretted" or "was sorry" that he had made people on the earth, in the sense that he did not foresee how awful the human race would become, and now wishes that he had never made man. There is no hint of *Yahweh* wanting to retract his previous act of creation, since he now regards it as a mistake. In addition to the matter of the foreknowledge of God, there are other relevant considerations. How can he regard the

²⁶A possible translation of *nacham*, niph'al, in Judges 21:6 and 15 is that the Israelites "were grieved" or "suffered grief" in regard to, or concerning, the tribe of Benjamin. Cf. H. Van Dyke Parunak, "A Semantic Survey of *NHM*," *Biblica* 56 (1975): 519, 526-527.

²⁷Herbert Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1942), 261; John Davis, *Paradise to Prison: Studies in Genesis* (Salem, Wisc.: Sheffield, 1975), 116; Lange, *Genesis*, 287.

making of man a mistake, when he has, from eternity, before the foundation of the earth, predestined people for salvation, for everlasting life with him (e.g., Eph. 1:4, 1 Cor. 2:7-9)? He does not think of the existence of the human race as a regretful error on his part, because he has already (Genesis 3:15) promised to send the Savior to rescue fallen humanity. God loves people so much that he thinks they are worth saving, at the cost of the life of his own Son, who himself would become a man. There had been many godly people before the flood who lived to God's glory, as his true servants. In Genesis 6 Noah stands forth, with the believing members of his family, as a righteous man. He walked in close fellowship with his Creator, as had his ancestor Enoch, whom God took alive to heaven (Genesis 5:21-24). God, therefore, does not regret having made man.

Exodus 32:14

In the section of his book entitled "Reversed Divine Intentions," Boyd presents a number of passages that he believes declare "the truth that God changes his mind when circumstances call for it." Here he lists Exodus 32:14, for the relevant part of which he uses the translation "the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people."²⁸ At the end of this section Boyd comments:

Clearly, the motif that God changes his mind is not an incidental one in Scripture. It runs throughout the biblical narrative and is even exalted as one of his praiseworthy attributes. It is very difficult to see how passages such as these can be fairly interpreted if we assume that the future is exhaustively settled and known by God as such.... God is not only the God of future certainties; he's the God of future possibilities.²⁹

For Exodus 32:14 this article suggests the translation "And God *relented* concerning the disaster which he spoke of doing to his people."³⁰ God "backed off," withdrew, from his threat to consume the Israelites and leave

²⁸Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 81, 83.

²⁹Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 85. He further comments: "Classical theology cannot accept this conclusion because of philosophical preconceptions of what God must be like: He must be in every respect unchanging, so his knowledge of the future must be unchanging" (86).

³⁰John Durham (*Exodus*, WBC 3 [Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1987], 424), translates "Thus was Yahweh moved to pity concerning the injury that he had spoken of doing to his people." Similarly, Jonathan Master ("Exodus 32 as an Argument for Traditional Theism," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45 [December, 2002]: 595) prefers the translation "Yahweh had compassion."

only Moses, out of whom he would make a great nation. He did not wipe them out; however, God did chasten them, by means of a plague, as reported at the end of chapter 32 (v. 35).

The “relent/“back off” translation well fits the context in Exodus 32. Further, this rendering of *nacham* in the niphal is either the preferred, or a possible, translation in numerous other Old Testament passages.³¹ “Relent,” this article proposes, is a better choice than “God changed his mind,” or “God repented over/was sorry about.” The latter two translations, as already explained, can mislead the reader into thinking that God really does not know what he is going to do, that he initially decides on one course of action, but in the end takes another course. Worse yet, the reader might in addition believe that God in the heat of his anger can say some things that he is sorry about later on, realizing that his words were a mistake. The fundamental concept throughout all this type of thinking is that God does not have complete foreknowledge, even with regard to his own activity.

That concept and type of thinking are not in accord with a proper interpretation of Scripture. God is not limited in his knowledge, as well as capricious, and subject to uncontrollable fits of anger that lead him into errors. Besides being omniscient, God is fully in control of himself (to speak anthropomorphically) and all situations. He is consistently holy, just, and righteous in his thoughts, words, and actions.

In Exodus 32:14 *nacham* is an anthropopathic term imparting, anthropopathically, spiritual truths to us mere sinful mortals. God in his Word comes down to our level, communicating with us in the best, most effective manner, to the limit of our understanding.

What are we to see, then, in the use of *nacham* in Exodus 32:14? This verb conveys, as discussed above, the dual aspects of decision and emotion. God, who is immutable and outside of time, is portrayed as making a decision in time, due to a change in his emotions. Righteously angry with the Israelites, and speaking of consuming them, God turns from his fierce wrath (as Moses requested), and spares them. God knew from eternity what he would do and how the situation would turn out; but from Moses’,

³¹E.g., Exodus 32:12; 2 Samuel 24:16 (1 Chronicles 21:15); Isaiah 57:6; Jeremiah 4:28; 15:6; 18:8, 10; 20:16; 26:3, 13, 19; 42:10; Ezekiel 24:14; Joel 2:13, 14; Amos 7:3, 6; Jonah 3:9, 10; Zechariah 8:14; Psalm 106:45.

and the reader's, point of view, God holds out one course of action, and then goes with another.

It should be noted that God did not necessarily say to Moses, "I will" destroy the Israelites. Rather, the Hebrew text can be translated as God saying, "Now therefore, let me alone [imperative], that my wrath *may* [jussive] burn hot against them and I *may* [cohortative] consume them" (v. 10; NKJV).³² With this translation God's words carry a hint of conditionality. They imply that someone can stand in the way of God's fierce anger, preventing him from consuming the people, namely, Moses. As is well known, in Scripture many of God's threats (and his promises, too) are conditional.³³

God turns aside from his fierce wrath and refrains from carrying out his threat not because of a change in the Israelites. The decisive factor in Exodus 32 is Moses, acting as intercessor.³⁴ *Nacham* in verse 14 presents what is taught elsewhere in Scripture, that the prayers of believers truly have an effect upon God. James writes: "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much" (5:16; NKJV). On the one hand, God knows in advance how he will act, long before his people pray to him. God announces in Isaiah: "It shall come to pass that before they call, I will answer...." (65:24; NKJV). On the other hand, Psalm 106:23 reports, concerning the scene in Exodus 32: "He [God] spoke of destroying them, except that [לִלְוִי] Moses his chosen one stood in the breach before him to turn back his rage from destroying." Moses' intercession had an impact; it was effective with God. According to our limited human reason and way of speaking we might say that God allows himself to be moved by the

³²This is also the translation of, e.g., the ESV, KJV, NAS, NIV, and the NRSV.

³³Cf., e.g., Jeremiah 18:7-10; Ezekiel 33: 13-16. Robert Chisholm, in his article "Does God 'Change His Mind'?" (*Biblia Sacra* 152 [1995]), distinguishes two types of divine statements of intention: decrees and announcements (389-391). The former are unconditional promises. The latter, often following a specific grammatical pattern, are conditional, and implicitly open to change. Concerning Exodus 32:10 he writes (396): "The form of the statement (imperative + jussive + cohortative + cohortative [the remainder of the verse]) indicates that it is not a decree but an expression of God's frustration with his people." He concludes: "... God had only threatened judgment, not decreed it" (396). Master, agreeing with Chisholm, notes that "Moses recognized the opening in God's statements and appealed to previous divine decrees which were, by their very nature, unbreakable" (596).

³⁴J. Philip Hyatt (*Exodus*, New Century Bible [London: Oliphants, 1971], 307) notes that there are three grounds seen in the Old Testament for Yahweh's relenting: intercession, repentance of the people, and Yahweh's compassionate nature.

prayers of believers, and he also knows in advance he will be impacted by these petitions.

As observed, God in verse 10, with the implicit conditionality of his words, is subtly inviting Moses to plead with him. In addition, at the beginning of the verse God speaks one way – “let Me alone” – to bring about an effect that is the opposite of what his words seem to mean on the surface. Far from leaving him alone, Moses proceeds to engage in intimate, straightforward conversation with God.

In fact, God throughout is speaking with great intentionality to Moses. The scene in Exodus 32 is not one of God being overcome by a fit of anger, and spewing forth rash words, for which he is later sorry, or about which he changes his mind. Rather, God is talking in a deliberate manner with a certain purpose, and corresponding goal, in mind. God’s purpose is to put Moses to the test.³⁵

In Exodus 32 God chooses his words carefully, to lead Moses into exactly the kind of test he intended for his servant. Scripture teaches that God prepares people in advance for the testing process, and that he puts someone to the test for that person’s good, and for the glory of God. Moreover, there are a number of Scriptural examples in which God, while testing a person, seems to take one stance, but actually has something else in mind, as the outcome shows.

In Genesis 22 God puts Abraham to the test by commanding him to sacrifice Isaac. God knows in advance what Abraham will do, and that God’s purpose will be accomplished. God did not actually want the

³⁵This is the position of various commentators. E.g., Calvin, in his Exodus commentary, in *Commentaries on The Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, vol. 3, trans. Charles Bingham (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 339; John Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt: Studies in Exodus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971), 296; Terence Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 284; and Walter Kaiser Jr., “Exodus,” in vol. 2 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 479. A reasonable argument is that, in reality, God could not have wiped out the Israelites, leaving only Moses. As recorded in Genesis 49, God has already, through Jacob, foretold that the coming Savior would be from the tribe of Judah (49:8-10). Moses was of the tribe of Levi. The promises concerning the Messiah in the Old Testament were unconditional. God would not have gone back on his word spoken centuries before by Jacob. One might counter by saying that, theoretically, God was able to raise the Judahites from the dead, but this seems forced. Cf. Genesis 22, and Hebrews 11:17-19. The command to sacrifice is one thing; “I will devour” gives a much different impression.

patriarch to slay his son; other scriptural references proclaim clearly that God abhors child sacrifice. The Angel of the Lord prevents Abraham from killing Isaac, not because God has had a change of mind, but because Abraham has successfully met the test, by God's grace and power. As a result of this crisis Abraham's faith reaches its highpoint; he holds steadfastly to the word of God, as the author of Hebrews indicates.

In Genesis 32, the Angel of the Lord wrestles with Jacob. At first this seems to be a stance of hostility on the part of God; in the end, however, God blesses Jacob. Through this test God causes Jacob to grasp him and his word, so to speak, with bulldog tenacity.

When the Canaanite woman begged Jesus to heal her daughter, Christ apparently ignored her, not answering her a word. When she persisted, Christ gave her a somewhat insulting, and far from encouraging, response. In the end, of course, Christ went on to heal her daughter. Christ knew all along what he would do. He acted and spoke as he did to test the woman, to exercise her faith, so that she could display herself as spiritually bold and persistent.

Partial analogies to these examples are found in Genesis 18 and Luke 24. In the former passage, God appears determined to exterminate totally the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. By the last part of the chapter God agrees to take a different position, in response to the petitioning of Abraham. Because of the way God dealt with him, Abraham shows himself to be a great intercessor. God knew in advance, however, what he would do to the cities, and how he would spare Lot and his family. In Luke 24, the resurrected Christ seems to take a position of ignorance in responding to the question of the two men, whether or not he knew about what had transpired in Jerusalem. Jesus simply replies, "What things?" He knew everything, but replies as he does to have the men articulate their disappointments and concerns, as the background for Christ then ministering to them from Scripture.

In Exodus 32 God speaks one way initially, because he is putting Moses to the test, but later, when the test is over, *nacham*, "backs off" from his threat, from what he suggested as a course of action.³⁶ As God intended,

³⁶Calvin, in his Exodus commentary has this pertinent comment (340-341): "Nor is there any reason why slanderous tongues should here impugn God, as if he pretended before men what he had not decreed in himself; for it is no proof that he is variable or deceitful if, when speaking of men's sins, and pointing out what they deserve, he does not lay open his incomprehensible counsel."

Moses benefits mightily from this test, which God uses to shape and prepare him for the coming years, and for God's glory. The following paragraphs are illustrative.

Moses rejects ungodly pride, which would have prompted him to jump at the chance to become a new patriarch. Humility remained a characteristic of his life and work.

Through this test Moses emerges as the great intercessor for his people, and takes on in a decisive manner his role as their true shepherd, under God. All that he relates to God concerning the Israelites has meaning also for Moses. Because of this test he sees in clearer fashion the importance of his people, and learns to identify in a closer manner with them. As Maxie Dunnam explains, we see on the part of Moses "a commitment that had moved almost unbelievably from long argument against God's call to standing toe to toe with God for the sake of what God had called him to do in the first place...."³⁷ Moses will have to endure these Israelites, in a wilderness setting no less, for some thirty-eight-plus years.

God, through this experience in Exodus 32, leads Moses to stand in an even firmer manner on God's Word, with its promises. Moses recalls what God had said to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: "I will multiply your descendants." He reasons, "How, God, can You wipe out the Israelites and make of me a great nation? These future people would be called the descendants of Moses, and not of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

Because of his being tested, Moses' *agape* love is drawn out and brightly shines.³⁸ He has this love, certainly, for his fellow Israelites. He perhaps displays this love for the Egyptians, too, since he says to God: "Why should the Egyptians speak, and say, 'He brought them out to harm them, to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth?'" (v. 12; NKJV). Moses possibly is thinking that, whatever positive effect God's mighty miracles in Egypt and at the sea might have had on the Egyptians, would be undone with God's annihilating the Israelites. Ronald Clements emphasizes this point. He writes: "...the foremost reason why God should not destroy Israel is that the Egyptians (and so all gentile

³⁷Maxie Dunnam, *Exodus, The Communicator's Commentary*, vol. 2 (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1987), 352-353.

³⁸Concerning Exodus 32:14, R. Alan Cole (*Exodus, TOTC*, vol. 2 [Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity, 1973], 217) writes: "We are not to think of Moses as altering God's purpose towards Israel by this prayer, but as carrying it out: Moses was never more like God than in such moments, for he shared God's mind and loving purpose."

peoples) would not recognize the LORD as the true God if he did so. In this way God’s name would be profaned, as Ezekiel describes in a similar situation (Ezek. 36:20).”

Therefore, in Exodus 32 God is fully in control of the situation. He is acting and speaking according to a preconceived purpose and goal, and having his will accomplished, as was foreordained.

IV. Conclusion

Genesis 6:6 and Exodus 32:14 remind us that Scripture reveals God to us via accommodations, including the use of anthropomorphic and anthropopathic terminology. What we see *is* the truth, yet this must always be viewed within the framework of God’s omniscience, immutability, and timelessness, which, however, we do not fully grasp.³⁹ “For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become his counselor?” (Rom. 11:34; NKJV). Now “we know in part ... we see in a mirror, dimly” (1 Cor. 13:9, 12; NKJV). God has chosen the best way of communicating to us, taking our feeble minds to the extent of their capability. While our knowledge of God is only partial, we *do know* the one, true, Triune God—including his incarnate Son—with corresponding love and affection. We can be absolutely sure that, through this knowledge, or faith, we have salvation.

³⁹Simply speaking, there are “tensions” (but *not* contradictions) in the Christian faith: spiritual realities which our limited human reason cannot completely figure out or comprehend.