

Divine Repentance or Pedagogy? On the Rhetoric of Divine Repentance in 1 Samuel, Exodus, and Genesis*

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Commitment both to the philosophical understanding of God as transcendent and immutable (as implied by reason as well as passages of Scripture) and to the inerrancy of Scripture can be a challenging position to hold. Since Scripture refers to God as repenting of things he intended to do, said he intended to do, or even did, Scripture sometimes portrays God as incommensurate with both itself and what seems philosophically necessary. One might opt for holding to biblical literalism in happy defiance of the philosophers—what has Athens to do with Jerusalem?!—but Tertullian himself would reject positing a mutable God: one who grows, changes his mind, or is even surprised. Alternatively, one might hold to the deity’s transcendence and explain Scripture’s discussions of God’s repentance as mere poetic anthropomorphism.

Neither approach adequately engages Scripture, but each contains some correct instinct and some shortcoming. For the latter perspective, dismissing Scripture’s anthropomorphism as mere poetic flourish for unsophisticated minds fails to recognize Scripture’s sophisticated rhetoric. To put the same thing positively, Scripture itself points us to the transcendent deity who, nevertheless, is not bound by his transcendence but reveals himself, however

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philosophically shocking that ontological bridging may be, let alone its means. For the former perspective, this fideistic approach to Scripture is a failure to understand it and is therefore devoted to an unsophisticated (if sometimes edifying) misunderstanding of a sophisticated text.

In this article, I will treat three challenging episodes where God is represented as changing his mind regarding nothing less than the economy of salvation: God's regretting making Saul king (1 Sam 15), God's decision to destroy Israel on account of the idolatry of the golden calf (Exod 32–33), and God's decision to destroy humanity in the flood (Gen 6). In each of these passages, the omniscient narrator refers to God's repenting (נחם) from his plan of action (Gen 6:6; Exod 32:14; 1 Sam 15:35), and in 1 Sam 15:11, God himself tells Samuel, "I regret that I have made Saul King." I will treat these passages in reverse order, as 1 Samuel gives us the clearest cues in how to understand the pedagogical purposes in divine repentance in Scripture, and as the implications for how we understand these stories become increasingly profound as we read backward in Scripture. But first, I will frame my approach in contrast with another treatment of this conundrum.

It should come as no surprise that this issue has already been treated by a theologically interested Old Testament scholar. In his *Ecclesial Exegesis: A Synthesis of Ancient and Modern Approaches to Scripture*, Gregory Vall addresses these texts with St. Augustine's and St. Thomas's concerns at the forefront.¹ Vall develops a three-step approach, going from the Fathers of the patristic era (method A), to critical evaluation of the text (method B), and finally to a synthesis (method C). This method C is not exactly a "method" for Vall, and the sequence is more logical than sequential, as Vall more elegantly integrates the second and third in his discussion and ultimately seeks a more organic approach than the Hegelian synthesis seemingly implied by the discussion of method C. Still, Vall points to Augustine and Aquinas to begin with the premise of divine impassibility to establish that the language of change in God's will is metaphorical, and to Augustine and Chrysostom to explain this metaphorical rhetoric in terms of the condescension of divine pedagogy.²

I agree with Vall (and Augustine, Chrysostom, and *Dei Verbum*) that the

¹ Gregory Vall, *Ecclesial Exegesis: A Synthesis of Ancient and Modern Approaches to Scripture* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2022), 43–71. Vall observes several other passages that discuss God's repentance (2 Sam 24:16; 1 Chr 21:15; Jer 18:8, 10; 26:3, 19; 42:10; Joel 2:13–14; Amos 7:3–6; Jonah 3:9–10; Pss 90:13; 106:45), but the three passages treated by Vall, and here, present a far greater challenge, as the others can be "solved" through one relatively simple consideration (see further note 4).

² Vall, *Ecclesial Exegesis*, 43–51.

language of divine repentance must be understood in terms of the divine pedagogy. But I understand some of the key pedagogical strategies and points differently from Vall. Generally speaking, I further wonder whether the A-B-C framework might guide us to allow the tradition's philosophical concerns—which are certainly not alien to the text—to focus the inquiry in advance such that we then neglect the texts' priorities and the richness of the condescension of this pedagogy. We should not approach the rhetoric of divine repentance as a problem to be solved, so much as a cue that draws us more deeply into the text's pedagogy.³ Although I am devoted to the same historical, theological tradition and will come to conclusions consistent with Vall and the tradition, the approach here will be primarily historical-critical, though without any allergy to theological reflection.

Like Vall, I will make extensive use of narrative criticism, but I will also rely somewhat more on source and form criticism, to focus on *Scripture as rhetoric*. While divine pedagogy is certainly a motif arising from Scripture's individual narratives and contributing to the coherence of Scripture's meta-narrative, limiting ourselves to narrative criticism does not reflect enough on the divine pedagogy implied in the texts' non-narrative features, let alone on their significance in the historical development of Israel's theological reflection: the divine pedagogy in real time.

Before turning to the texts, it will be useful to sketch out Aquinas's treatment of the question of divine immutability and Scripture's rhetoric of divine repentance, so that we can refer to these categories after treating each text. In *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 19 a. 7, sc, Aquinas cites Balaam (whose speech is equivalent to Samuel's) as the authoritative statement that God neither lies nor repents (Num 23:19; cf. 1 Sam 15:29). In his *respondeo*, Thomas explains that God's will does not change, but God wills different things according to the circumstances in reference to his eternal will. In

³ By this, I do not mean to "give divine mutability its fair hearing!" so much as to say that, if our sole focus is on vindicating orthodox theology (in basic, philosophically necessary matters such as divine mutability or in classical interpretations of a text), then we might fail to attend to what the text focuses on. Happily, I think we can have our cake and eat it too, as I think these texts do not contradict divine immutability. But our primary stance before Scripture should not be to solve our problems with it, so much as to learn from it. Of course, seeking to learn what Scripture teaches cannot be done without sensitivity to the problems it raises, so I do not mean to posit a strict dichotomy; in fact, Scripture often teaches by confronting us with problems, and the rhetoric of divine repentance clearly raises the philosophical question. But the philosophical question itself serves the larger pedagogical purposes of the passages, as I hope to show here.

explaining Scripture's rhetoric, Thomas judges that Scripture speaks of God's repentance metaphorically.

Thomas's replies to the first two objections provide two different ways of reconciling God's rhetoric and divine immutability. In ad 2, Thomas points to Jer 18:7–8, where God refers to his repenting from destroying a nation if it repents of its evil. As Thomas explains, this can be reconciled with divine omniscience, omnipotence, and immutability, insofar as God foreknows and wills the intermediate causes (repentance or obstinance) that result in his foreknown and divinely willed consequence (forgiveness or destruction). God's reference to his repentance can therefore be explained as metaphor, especially since God lays out the logic prior to the events. Most passages that refer to God's repentance can be so explained.⁴

The first objection is more complicated, however: "It seems that the Will of God is changeable. For the Lord says (Gen 6:7): *It repenteth Me that I have made man*. But whoever repents of what he has done, has a changeable will. Therefore God has a changeable will."⁵ God repents, not of his justly deserved punishment based on a new turn of events, but of his own unprovoked decision to make humanity in the first place. In his reply, Thomas compares this with a loose way of speaking, in which a person might create something with the intention of destroying it later. The moment at which the artisan had intended from the beginning to destroy it can be metaphorically described as his repenting of having made it in the beginning—even as the created thing comes to its predetermined *telos*. When I treat the pedagogy of divine repentance in the flood, I will suggest that the flood narrative is better related to the ad 2 than to ad 1, as one of the rhetorical purposes of the flood

⁴ Many of these are prophetic and relate precisely to Jeremiah's dynamics: Jer 18:8, 10; 26:3, 19; 42:10; Joel 2:13–14; Jonah 3:9–10. Others are still explicable in terms of God's willing the intermediate causes, but those causes are not necessarily repentance so much as prophetic intercession (Amos 7:3–6), liturgical propitiation (Ps 90:13), or God's apparently arbitrary decision to have mercy in reference to his devotion to Israel (2 Sam 24:16; 1 Chr 21:15; Ps 106:45). As regards these examples, then, I largely agree with Walter Moberly, *Old Testament Theology: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 116, when he argues that "the axiomatic nature" of Jer 18:1–2 makes it "the passage whereby all the other depictions of divine repentance are to be understood." Indeed, he follows Aquinas in selecting this passage as particularly convenient for demonstrating the dynamic. However, the three passages treated here are substantially more complicated than Jer 18, requiring us to seek a different solution for them. Thankfully, Samuel provides an alternative "axiomatic" statement which will guide us for these other three.

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 19, a. 7, obj. 1, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1948).

narrative is to teach about the nature of things, about intermediate causes, and especially about the divine character. But, as I will buttress my reading of Genesis with observations made in 1 Sam 15 and Exod 32–34, and as 1 Sam 15 makes clearest the relationship between the text's philosophical and rhetorical features, I begin with 1 Samuel.

1 Samuel 15: The Prophet's Exposition of God's Rhetoric

The most philosophically precise statement in our text is Samuel's categorical statement on the divine nature: "The Eternal Splendor of Israel neither lies nor repents, for he is not a man that he should repent" (1 Sam 15:29).⁶ The key term is נִצָּח, translated here as "eternal splendor." As Vall notes, נִצָּח is often translated as "glory" here (e.g., ESV, RSV, NABR), but its primary sense is of "lastingness," so he prefers "the Everlasting One."⁷ Still, it seems the term had a doxological connotation compared, for example, with עוֹלָם for the following reasons: its place in 1 Chr 29:11, where it is in parallel with a term meaning "splendor"; evidence from cognates; its clear usages in later Hebrew and Aramaic to mean "gleam," "conquer," "distinguish oneself," and "supervise"; and its treatment in the LXX and Vulgate translations, where it is associated with victory.⁸ This in itself is a relatively minor point: Vall helpfully points to the term's significance as denoting "lastingness" and its relevance to the question of divine repentance in 1 Sam 15. However, by using a term with doxological connotations, Samuel's statement on divine repentance is related to the larger motif in 1 Samuel: God's glory.

The motif of God's glory (כְּבוֹד) of course goes back to Exodus, but in 1 Samuel, Hannah introduces it in her proto-Magnificat. Hannah praises God, whose generosity and vindication is manifested in the raising of the lowly and the humiliation of the proud. God's generous and punitive reversals reflect Hannah's new fertility and Peninnah's implied frustration, and Hannah's praise foreshadows the major plot developments from this point

⁶ Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

⁷ Vall, *Ecclesial Exegesis*, 69.

⁸ The LXX does not translate the term here whatsoever, while the Vulgate provides *Triumphator*. First Chronicles 29:11 puts נִצָּח in parallel with תְּאֵרָת, "splendor," and 1 Chr 29:10 refers to God as the Father of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting (מֵעוֹלָם וְעַד עוֹלָם). Of course, עוֹלָם itself is a divine privilege, and so suggestive of God's transcendent glory. But it seems that the 1 Chr 29:11 use supports a stronger connotation of splendor, particularly since it follows another pair of terms, "greatness and might" (הַגְּבוּרָה וְהַתְּפָאֶרֶת), in parallel and close in sense. See further, George W. Anderson, "נִצָּח," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament [TDOT]*, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 529–33.

to David's accession to the throne: the judgment on Eli and his house, the honor Samuel enjoys, the rise and fall of Saul, and the accession of David.⁹ It is closely associated with Eli's house's judgment, as Hannah rejoices that the lowly "will inherit the seat of honor" (וְכִסֵּא כְבוֹד יִנְחָלֶם; 2:8): Eli sits before God's presence (1:9) when he rebukes her (1:14), Eli's failure to "honor" God condemns him (2:29–30), and Samuel will inherit Eli's position of honor (see 9:6).

There are important developments in the theme in the prophetic judgment against Eli. After the discussion of Eli's reprobate sons, who consume the fat (חֵלֶב; 2:15) and sleep with women at the tabernacle, the prophet condemns Eli for his feeble attempts to rein in his sons, and he accuses Eli of "honoring" his sons more than God while he and they fatten themselves in the process (תַּכְבֵּד אֶת בְּנֵיךְ מִמֶּנִּי לְהַבְרִיאֲכֶם; 2:29); there is in fact a pun, as כָּבֵד's primary sense of "heavy" allows it to signify either "heaviness" or "fatness." Their condemnation is based on the principle that God honors those who honor or glorify him, and those who despise him will be made small, light, or insignificant (כִּי מִכְבְּדֵי אֲכַבֵּד בְּזֵי יִקְלוּ; 2:30).

The theme resumes in the judgment on Eli's house in 1 Sam 4, to ironic, humorous, and theological effect. When Eli falls to his death, the narrator explains his death in terms of his being old and fat (4:18). Eli's weight recalls the fact that he and his sons fattened themselves on God's sacrifices in 2:29, but the term used to describe Eli's weight in 4:18 is the term used for glory in 2:29–30 (כָּבֵד). God has judged Eli's and his sons' presumption against him per their privilege as priests; he has ended their self-glorying and fattening.

Indeed, the presumption against God and the failure to ascribe him his glory explains additional features of 1 Sam 4. The decision to carry the ark into battle is based on the idea that God's presence, his glory, dwells at the ark (cf. Exod 25:21–22; 40:34; Num 10:35–36; Josh 3; 6; Ps 68). The Israelites hope to guarantee God's presence and thereby their victory, implying their misunderstanding that God's gift of the ark allows them to manipulate him.¹⁰ After the ark has been captured and the priests have been killed, Phinehas's wife bears a son, naming him Ichabod, meaning, "where is the glory?" The narrator attributes this name to her mourning the loss of the ark and the deaths of Eli and her husband. But the name also punctuates the motif developed in 1 Sam 2–4: Israel has failed to recognize or honor God's

⁹ See David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 42; A. Graeme Auld, *I and II Samuel, a Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 69.

¹⁰ Similarly, see Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel, A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 51.

transcendent glory, instead presuming on their privileges as priests and as possessing the ark. The question operates at the meta-narrative level, as Israel has failed to realize where their glory is truly. This presumption has alienated God from them.¹¹ But, beyond their mutual relationship to Hannah's song, what does this theme, developed ten chapters before, have to do with Saul?

There are a few direct connections. As Eli and his sons disobeyed, presuming on their office, and as the Israelites presumed that they could win the battle by virtue of carrying God's presence to battle, so Saul disobeyed presuming on his office as king and that he could secure God's favor in battle through sacrifice in 1 Sam 13.¹² The passing of the high priesthood from Eli's house to a faithful priest who will honor (כבד) him (2:30, 35) corresponds to the passing of the kingship from Saul to someone better: Samuel's career is in fact practically bracketed by delivering these mirror messages (3:10–18; 15:27–29). Finally, Saul's confession of wrong-doing hardly merits to be called repentance. Not only does Samuel have to coach him through his excuses and deflections, but when Saul finally acknowledges his sin, his focus remains on his standing before the people, as he asks Samuel to "honor" (כבד) him before them (חטאתי עתה כבדני נא נגד זקני עמי; 15:30).¹³ God had

¹¹ The presumption regarding the ark is continued in both 1 Sam 6, as the Philistines and the men of Beth-Shemesh possess or look upon the ark, and in 2 Sam 6:3–7, as the Israelites transport the ark on a cart drawn by oxen. The Philistine priests, in fact, warn the Philistines against hardening their hearts; of Exodus's three idioms for Pharaoh's hardening of heart, the Philistines use the one that uses the root כבד for glory (למה תכבדו את לבבכם; 1 Sam 6:6). While the Philistines loaded the ark on a cart and God's providence directed the cart (1 Sam 6:10–12), this practice does not seem to be acceptable for Israel. According to Exodus, the ark was designed to be carried by hand (25:10–16); Numbers entrusts the moving of the ark specifically to the Kohathites (3:27–31); Deuteronomy seems to imply that the Levites manually carry the ark (10:8, 31:9, 25–26); and so it is described when Israel crosses the Jordan (Josh 3). After David decides again to bring the ark up, the ark is carried (2 Sam 6:13–17; while the agents are not specified, the cart and oxen are now absent and there is no mention of humans driving something else to bear the brunt of the labor). The Chronicler's explanation in David's voice, that the Levites alone could carry the ark and that Uzzah's death was due to this failure (1 Chr 15:2, 12–15), is canonically thoroughly grounded, however these texts relate chronologically. Moreover, the importance of the ark being carried by humans seems to be understood within 2 Sam 6.

¹² It may seem strange to describe Saul's activities as presuming on his office as king, when he often seems to be so insecure in that position. But, as the rejection accounts (1 Sam 13, 15) respectively indicate, Saul fears men and seeks to be honored by them enough to resort to his own devices and to disobey God.

¹³ This qualification on Saul's confession is passed over by commentators who argue that God does not hold David to the same standard as Saul or who claim that Saul is a model penitent in this chapter and God's refusal to accept his repentance is an assertion

told Eli he would honor those who honor him, but Saul has dishonored God in seeking honor before men. And he continues to do so. While Saul confessed his sin, he remained focused on his disordered attachment to the approval of men.

Given this motif, reading an English translation's "Glory" in 1 Sam 15:29, one would be surprised to find out that the word choice differs, making that translation somewhat misleading. However, given the motif, it also remains important to maintain the doxological connotation of "splendor" (בִּצְחָה) as a synonym for glory (כְּבוֹד), as Saul has failed to honor the transcendent Splendor of Israel.¹⁴ From Eli to Ichabod, from Israel's asking for a king to Saul their first king, no one other than Hannah and Samuel have succeeded in honoring God appropriately. None, that is, until David.¹⁵

Comparison with David is inevitable if we want to know the pedagogical purpose of Saul's kingship. There are many contrasts to be drawn, but the story of David's anointing in the next chapter guides us to a specific one. Indeed, Samuel himself must learn the lesson. When Samuel looks on Eliab, he is so impressed that he infers that Eliab is the anointed. God, however, explains to Samuel that God sees not as man sees. Samuel had earlier realized that God does not repent; now God explains that he looks not on appearances or on height, but on the heart (16:7). The episode distills the pedagogical purpose of Saul's reign.

Eliab effectively stands in for Saul. Saul is first described as handsome and a head "taller" than the rest of the people (גִּבָּה מִכָּל הָעָם; 9:2). God directs Samuel precisely against looking on Eliab's appearance and "tall" stature (גִּבָּה קוֹמָתוֹ; 16:7).¹⁶ As God had rejected (מָאַס) Saul for his disobedience

of divine and arbitrary sovereignty; respectively, see Walter Brueggeman, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1997), 367–71, and Robert Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist: 1 Samuel* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), 141–47.

¹⁴ Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*, 129, also recognizes that the term is "another way of speaking of 'glory.'"

¹⁵ This requires a massive caveat, as David's later career is problematic. David, like Eli, despises (בִּזָּה) the LORD (2 Sam 12:10, cf. 1 Sam 2:30), and David despises the Word of the LORD (הַדְּבַר יְהוָה; 2 Sam 12:9) as Saul had rejected it (מָאַשַׁת אֶת דְּבַר יְהוָה; 1 Sam 15:23). Perhaps the critical character difference between David and Saul is that Saul makes excuses (1 Sam 15:13–15, 19–21) and he continues to seek to be honored before the people, the apparent occasion of his sin (1 Sam 15:21, 24, 30), whereas David confesses without excuse (2 Sam 10:13). See further, Claire Matthews McGinnis, "Swimming with the Divine Tide: An Ignatian Reading of 1 Samuel," in *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Breward S. Childs*, ed. Christopher Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 259–68.

¹⁶ As noted by Paul Dhorme, *Les Livres de Samuel* (Paris: Gabalda, 1910), 141.

enacted openly before Israel and the reader (15:23), so God has rejected (סרס) Eliab because of what exists potentially in Eliab's heart (16:7).

This comparison suggests that the failure of Saul's reign was always known to God, and in that sense willed by God. The dual lessons of God's transcendence and omniscience—his unchanging ways and his seeing the heart—are corollaries to each other.¹⁷ God saw Saul's heart and willed that he should be king despite knowing the dynasty's foregone conclusion. We might ask, therefore: Why go through the trouble of Saul's reign if the same lesson could and would be taught in David's anointing?

The answer may be understood in terms of Samuel's earlier exchange with Israel as they first sought a king, rejecting God as their king and forfeiting their privilege of having the Glory of Israel as their king (1 Sam 8). When they ask to have a king like the other nations so that they can be a nation like the other nations, God gives them such a king: one rich, tall, and handsome (9:2). But God does so with the intention of demonstrating to them that this is not the sort of king they need. God's explanation to Samuel of his rejecting Eliab expositis the lesson of Saul's failed rule, but Saul's dynasty's fate provides a public exposition.

With this in mind, we can apply Thomas's distinctions appropriately. Vall aptly observes that Samuel's use of the imperfect in 15:29 takes us outside the temporal view of isolated events to comment on the divine nature itself, whereas the perfects spoken by God (15:11) and the narrator (15:35) correspond to what appear to be changes in the divine plan viewed from the perspective of human history.¹⁸ With Thomas, we can agree that God willed Saul to be king at one point but not permanently (*ST* I, q. 19, a. 7, resp.), in accordance with the intermediate causes of his anointing and disobedience (ad 2), and God willed the whole from the beginning (ad 1). God's and the narrator's rhetorics must therefore be metaphorical. But these philosophical observations do not account for the pedagogical purposes of the rhetoric of divine repentance.

Given Saul's failures as king—as the rich, tall, and handsome leader—

¹⁷ The correlation between God's seeing and not repenting invalidates scholars' arguments that Samuel's statement that God does not repent *must* be an interpolation, due to its abstract nature and its flagrant contradiction to 1 Sam 15:11, 35. Dhorme, *Les Livres*, 136, for example, asserts quite baldly that the contradiction evidences an interpolation and that "the abstract term, 'the glory' shows that the gloss is late." This is simply a prejudice against the sophistication both of the text and of the early authors. Still less helpful is the suggestion that the narrator has simply lost control by David Jobling, *1 Samuel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 85.

¹⁸ Vall, *Ecclesial Exegesis*, 69.

God's repentance at making him king confirms the book's larger critique of Israel's requesting a human king and of failing to glory in God alone. David's early career acts as a foil, showing that Saul could never fulfill the office. David's later failures and the failure of the Davidic line confirm that neither could David or his merely human offspring. God's repentance at creating the institution corresponds to his earlier warning that the institution was a rejection of his own kingship. God's making Saul and David into kings, therefore, reflects divine accommodation and pedagogy. God accommodated Israel's problematic request to teach them quickly through Saul (and much more protractedly through David's line) that a political institution could not fulfill Israel's fundamental need to glory in God and to submit to his reign. That fundamental need would be fulfilled in a different sort of Son of David. But God's accommodation to Israel's sinful request is the beginning of the divine pedagogy pointing toward that different fulfillment, and God's repentance underscores the proximate political institutions' inadequacy and provisionality. As Eliab's anointing contains *in nuce* the explanation of Saul's failure, Saul's dynasty's failure reflects in brief the ending of the Davidic dynasty (as a political institution). In Aquinas's terms, then, God willed Israel's political dynasties, Saulide and Davidic, intending to end them as part of his eternally willed pedagogy (*ST I*, q. 19, a. 7, resp., ad 1 and ad 2).

Finally, there are important observations to make regarding the interpretation of the dynamics of divine pedagogy, which will be especially useful for our next texts. First, God's speech is here indirectly ordered. God does not always speak directly to his purposes, but God speaks in such a way as to reveal, by some twists and turns, his will and perspective in a more subtle, gradual, and pedagogically effective way. There is some comparison with God's command to sacrifice Isaac in Gen 22:2, which itself corresponds to 1 Kgs 3:35, Solomon's command to divide the child. Neither command reflects the speaker's will or perspective, but both are wise speech: ordered toward revealing truth and establishing justice. Similarly, God's claim to have repented reflects neither his immutable essence nor his purpose in having selected Saul in the first place as though Saul had been a viable option. But, in the larger context and given Samuel's more philosophically precise statement, God's claim to have repented forces the reader to come to grips with God's pedagogical purpose in installing Saul as king.

Secondly, while divine immutability is explicitly affirmed in the passage and is a key cue in understanding the story's significance, it is not quite the story's point: the story is ordered to our repentance. Although Thomas's reasoning is sound and God's rhetoric is metaphorical, the observation is insufficient. It is not merely a matter of God speaking in human idioms so

that we can understand him; in fact, the idiom is confusing. Rather, the rhetoric indirectly teaches that God desires a king after his own heart. That is, God rejects our perspective and leads *us to repent* of our preoccupation with stature, beauty, and wealth: to glory in God alone and to seek the grace of glorification in communion with him and in absolute submission to him, rather than to imitate the other nations. David's contrast with Saul underscores this, but David himself and his dynasty will fail to glorify God. In this way, both Saul's dynasty and David's complement God's repentance in the divine pedagogy, pointing to the only human king who perfectly glorifies the Father (John 12:23–28), himself being the visible manifestation of God's glory (1:14).

Thirdly, God saves some of his best lines for his servants. On the one hand, Samuel does not understand Saul's inadequacy enough, such that he immediately fixates on Eliab and God must reveal both Eliab's inadequacy and, thereby, the lesson from Saul's failure (1 Sm 16:7). On the other hand, whereas God and the narrator are usually the two most authoritative voices in Scripture, it is only Samuel who accurately states God's unchanging nature (1 Sam 15:29).¹⁹ As Vall observes, Samuel's insight paradoxically comes from his attempt to sway God's will by pleading that God "repent of his repentance" (15:11)!²⁰ But Samuel's insight implies the recognition that Saul's dynasty was preordained to fail and God's rhetoric is metaphorical. That is, Samuel makes the most philosophically accurate statement regarding the divine nature, and this statement, along with God's explicit pedagogy in 16:7, is the key which allows us to understand the designs of God's speech.

Fourthly, this gives Samuel a profound dignity, which we will also see in Moses's role in Exodus. Samuel and Moses both participate in God's self-revelation, as their wrestling with God's speech reveals God's nature and will more fully or directly than God's own speech. Indeed, God's rhetoric is ordered toward their dignity, as he honors those who honor him and as he entrusts Samuel and Moses with providing the hermeneutical cues necessary for discerning his rhetoric's pedagogical purpose.

¹⁹ Contrast with Yairah Amit, "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, who argues that God and the narrator are always reliable and Samuel can be readily dismissed. But the argument presumes against the philosophical sophistication of the ancient authors and their texts. The Exodus account, moreover, disallows this simple solution.

²⁰ Vall, *Ecclesial Exegesis*, 68.

Exodus 32–34: The Mediator's Demonstration of God's Character

Our Exodus passage concerns the making of the golden calf, God's response to that apostasy, and Moses's securing Israel's survival and God's forgiveness. The chapters are bracketed by the instructions for the tabernacle (chs. 25–31) and its construction (35–40). Of course, the entire episode occurs at Sinai and follows God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt in fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, along with the judgment on Egypt, Egypt's gods, and especially Pharaoh's pride or hardness of heart.

As Vall and others have pointed out, God's rhetoric in Exod 32:7–10 and throughout his conversation with Moses in Exod 32–33 has more subtle designs than God's explicit claims: God's real purpose is to invite Moses to intercede for the people.²¹ The episode shows God testing Moses, so to speak. But it seems that God's testing of Moses cannot be the chief point either. Moses has shown himself obedient and faithful (compared, for example, to Abraham, whose problematic decisions sowed strife and correspond to his being tested in Gn 22). Instead, the passage dignifies Moses as intercessor and even more so in culminating his role as mediator, especially as mediator of divine revelation. The episode in turn culminates Exodus's reflections on what it means to see God. The conversations read a little roughly, but the seeming non sequiturs can mostly be explained narratively: they take on greater significance when we consider them thematically without limiting ourselves to the immediate narrative's analysis.

We need not follow the dynamic of God's rhetoric subtly eliciting Moses's intercession throughout the entire episode,²² for the first exchange between God and Moses suffices to demonstrate it. God claims that the people are Moses's, and that Moses is responsible for bringing Israel up from Egypt (32:7). God also quotes the people who—though idolatrously referring to the golden calf—almost accurately state that their God(s) brought them out of Egypt (32:7–8). The Israelites' idolatrous claim and bacchanalian festival (32:4–6) is a distortion of the directive to celebrate the Passover memorial (13:3–16). To be sure, the idea of Moses bringing Israel out of Egypt as anything other than God's representative is ridiculous. Moses insists that the

²¹ E.g., Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 567–68; Mark O'Brien, "The Dynamics of the Golden Calf Story," in *Australian Biblical Review* 60 (2012): 21–22; Michael Widmer, *Moses, God, and the Dynamics of Intercessory Prayer* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 108–18; Andrea Saner, *Too Much to Grasp: Exodus 3:13–15* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 155–63.

²² See O'Brien, "Dynamics," 21–30; Childs, *Exodus*, 562–72, 586–97, 610–13.

people are God's own people rather than Moses's, using the same noun and second singular suffixes as God (עַמֶּךָ), and he reminds God that God himself brought Israel out of Egypt with a strong hand (בְּיָד חֲזָקָה; 32:11), recalling the language for remembering God's salvation on the Passover (בְּחֻזֶּק יָד הוֹצִיאָנוּ; 13:14). Between God's language and the language of the Passover, Moses redirects God's rejection of Israel to a reminder of God's association with Israel; both locutions come from God.

Moses also reminds God of the longer context. God's greatest "temptation" to Moses is in the final line as he offers Moses to become the patriarch of a great nation. As Vall notes, this is a temptation to become a second Abraham, and Vall sees this temptation as so crass that Moses "treats it as unworthy of a response."²³ But there is something of a response here. Moses's intercession is predicated on this allusion to the Abrahamic promise. Although God's promise to Abraham could have been fulfilled through making a great nation of Moses—even as this nation came through Jacob rather than through both of Isaac's sons, let alone Abraham's nine—the clear allusion to the Abrahamic promise directs Moses to the second grounds on which he bases his intercession: faithfulness to the patriarchs, God's servants and the recipients of God's promises. Moses refuses to become another patriarch; he is an Israelite and a mediator for the Israelites. Both grounds of intercession—God's promises to the patriarchs and God's bringing Israel up from Egypt—are based on God's larger purpose to bless the world through Abraham's offspring, this newly created priestly people (Gen 12:2–4; 22:15–18; Exod 19:4–6), and both are indicated in God's request that Moses would let God destroy his people.

And this request is the clearest cue for Moses's intercession. At least God's saying, "let me alone [לִי הִנִּיחָה; cf. Noah, נָח] so that my wrath might burn against them and I might consume them" (32:10), suggests that Moses has the opportunity *not* to "leave God alone" so that God *may not* destroy his people.²⁴ If God did not mean to suggest this, God could have destroyed the people without syntactically subordinating his actions to Moses's.

When God repents (וַיִּנָּחֵם) of the evil he had spoken of, then, it is not from something he intended to do, and it is according to Moses's intercessions cued by God's own speech. But, by speaking of the disaster he "wanted" to bring upon the people, God teaches the severity of Israel's sin and the just consequences of such sin. In yielding to Moses's intercession, he also teaches

²³ Vall, *Ecclesial Exegesis*, 62.

²⁴ Taking the *weyiqtol* forms as indirect volitives, following the direct volitive in God's imperative to Moses. See Paul Jouon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, trans. T. Muraoka (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2005), §116.

that his ultimate purpose cannot be limited to that logic. In Aquinas's terms, therefore, God is teaching about the nature of intermediate causes: God punishes sin, and sin truly merits death; but God's purposes—from Abraham's election to the Exodus to subordinating his actions to Moses's—include willing other intermediate causes which deliver humans from death. In accordance with the created order and particularly the nature of sin, God wills punishment; in accordance with God's higher, salvific purpose, God wills atonement for sin and the intermediate cause for that atonement, in this case Moses's intercession. This question of the challenge of intermediate causation is inflected in Exod 32–34 in terms of the divine presence, which theme underlies the narrative's progressions.

The people's repentance clearly focuses on God's presence, as can be seen in Exod 33:3–6. Whereas the first evil or disaster God had spoken was of the people's total destruction (32:14), in 34:4–6 the people mourn over "the evil word" of the loss of God's presence. They have avoided destruction and regained God's promise to inherit the land of Canaan (33:1–3), as Abrahamic promise and term of the Mosaic covenant (Gen 12:1–4, Exod 19:4–6). But these benefits are negligible compared to God's presence, through which he will bless the earth and make Israel a holy nation and a kingdom of priests.

Accordingly, Moses's intercession culminates in securing God's presence accompanying Israel (Exod 33:17), best reflected in Moses's final intercession (34:8–9) and God's re-entering into covenant with Israel (34:10–28). In modern English, Moses's concern that God might not go up with him and the Israelites seems like a non sequitur, given that God has just offered to go with "you" (33:14–15). But God concedes his accompaniment to "you" in the singular (ךָ), and Moses insists on God's accompanying himself *and Israel*, as Moses's act of solidarity with Israel. This exchange is bracketed by what seem two even stranger non sequiturs: (1) Moses's claim that he has found favor in God's sight with his desire that God should reveal his ways to Moses so that he can find favor in God's sight (33:12–13; cf. Gen 6:8) and (2) Moses's demand that God would show him God's glory after God has confirmed that Moses has found favor in God's sight (Exod 33:17–18). The keys to these curious elements of the dialogue are to be found in the theophany which is the climax of Exod 32–34 and in Moses's final intercession.

In response to Moses's request to see God's glory, God agrees to have his glory pass by Moses while proclaiming his name; he will reveal his backside to Moses but not his face, since that part of God is deadly (Exod 33:19–23). The language is clearly metaphorical. This final theophany in Exodus (excepting the tabernacle for the moment) culminates Exodus's

theme of “seeing” the God who truly is (3:14) with narratively contradictory episodes (cf. 24:10–11, 33:7–11, and 33:20). What Moses “sees” here is no visual phenomenon, but God’s self-proclamation of his name in 34:5–7. This proclamation is an expansion on God’s self-description in 20:5, God’s commandment against idolatrous worship of idols. The passages are worth viewing side by side:

Exodus 20:5–6 (ESV)	Exodus 34:5–7 (ESV)
⁵You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments	⁵The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. ⁶The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”

Proclaiming the “name” of the LORD turns out to be an expansion on God’s character and being, and seeing God’s “glory” and “ways” corresponds to Moses’s deeper insight per this expansion. The expansion is not contradictory, but it reveals more than God’s self-description in 20:5–6.²⁵ As Vall observes, God does not simply pardon sin or grant amnesty, but God himself

²⁵ O’Brien sees Exod 20:5–6, 32:33, 33:19, and 34:6–7 as a series of codes of divine conduct, and the latter codes are not new information, but elaborate on the template of 20:5–6 (“Dynamics,” 28–29). However, 32:33 does not speak of mercy whatsoever, and the omission corresponds to Israel’s plight, and 33:19 is primarily an anticipation of 34:7–8. While 34:7–8 might not technically introduce a new idea about God, since God was already understood as merciful, the multiplication of merciful descriptions emphasizes God’s mercy to such a degree that the idea has changed. Hence, the

must bear it away.²⁶ The mercy God reveals is not Marcionite. Israel's apostasy stands for all human sin, and God's response to Israel's sin reveals that, according to the nature of things and of holy God's presence, sin must be atoned for rather than merely pardoned. This clarifies the nature of God's mercy, as God must take substantial measures to address human sin, and the passage's expansive language on the mercy of God affirms that his character is such that he will remain committed to atoning for human sin. This is the revelation of divine "glory," the "ways" of God that Moses sought to "see" so that he could better understand and find God's favor, and this revelation leads to Moses's climactic intercession.

Moses's final intercession in Exod 34:9 is based on God's self-revelation in 34:5–8, and it makes even clearer the nature of God's mercy. Given his insight into God's ways and glory, Moses insists that God's character is such that the lower order of things in relationship to God results in a different priority from God's previous declarations. Namely, God had associated his holy presence with the destruction of Israel per their stiff-neckedness; Moses now insists on God's presence with Israel precisely because Israel is a stiff-necked people.

In 32:9–32:10, God has seen that Israel is stiff-necked and comes to the just plan to destroy them. God reiterates the logic in 33:3–5. After "forgiving" Israel—in the sense that he is not going to obliterate them or even withhold the promised land from them—God insists that he is not going with them. The decision is not arbitrary. Rather, God reveals to them that his presence is inherently deadly for the stiff-necked. He will not go with them precisely because they are a stiff-necked people and his presence is such that he would inevitably destroy them (כִּי עַם קָשָׁה עָרַף אֹתָהּ פֶּן אֲכַלְךָ בְּדֶרֶךְ; 33:3); God says in 33:5 that "even a moment" would be catastrophic, emphasizing the inevitable danger of his presence for them as stiff-necked people.

But in 33:9, Moses rejects the inevitability of this logic and flips it on its head. Using God's words against God's ostensible rhetorical purposes, Moses requests that God would go amid the people, precisely "because it is a stiff-necked people." The latter clause quotes God verbatim (כִּי עַם קָשָׁה עָרַף; cf. 33:9 and 34:9).²⁷ But—having seen more of God's glory precisely because

expansion on 20:5–6 in 34:7–8 carries additional significance, founding Moses's new theological insight in 34:9.

²⁶ Vall, *Ecclesial Exegesis*, 65–66.

²⁷ The particle כִּי, translated here as "because," often simply means "that," as a marker of indirect speech, etc. But God's rhetoric clearly uses its common sense as "for," indicating the causal relationship between the clauses (God would destroy them because they are a stiff-necked people). Rarely, כִּי can have a concessive sense, so one could justify

of Israel's apostasy and his own commitment to Israel's election, per God's ultimate purpose—Moses now insists that the ultimate result of God's presence amongst this stiff-necked people will not be their destruction, but their redemption. The import of the previous statements remains largely true: God is holy, and therefore an existential danger to sinners. But this logic is not decisive. Rather, given God's gracious character, given God's higher purpose in calling Abraham out of Ur and Israel out of Egypt, *and given Moses's meritorious intercession*, God will forgive Israel and take them as his people in covenant.

The significance of Israel's stiff-neckedness can be further understood in reference to Pharaoh's heart-hardening. The main two verbs used to describe Pharaoh's hardening of his heart are כבד, which we have seen in 1 Samuel means "heavy" (and glory or fat by extension), and חזק, which means to strengthen. Pharaoh strengthens and glorifies himself, but in so doing makes his heart insensate: heavy and fat. These two come together in Exod 14:4, where God tells Moses he will "strengthen" Pharaoh's heart in order that he, God, will "get glory" over Pharaoh, revealing himself to Egypt. This rhetorical payoff likely explains the author's decision to alternate between the two terms. Less readily explicable is the third term used for Pharaoh's hardening. Twice God refers to Pharaoh's "hardening" using the root קשה (7:3; 13:15). These uses bracket the marvels or plagues in an *inclusio*: the first precedes Moses's staff turning into a serpent and acts as a programmatic description of what follows, and the latter is part of Israel's recollection of the Exodus and acts as the definitive formulation of Pharaoh's hardening. Thus, the Exodus's significance has been structurally, programmatically, and liturgically encapsulated by this specific term. Since we have just seen that this same term (in adjectival form) plays a thematic and structural role in Exod 32–34, we must recognize that Israel is being compared to Pharaoh: they also deserve annihilation, as stiff-necked idolaters who failed to render God his due glory.

Moses's intercession succeeds, therefore, not because Israel is cut from that different a cloth from Pharaoh. But it succeeds because God wills to overcome their stiff-neckedness in covenant, in accordance with his ultimate purpose promised to Abraham.²⁸ The whole episode turns then, not

translating it as "even though" here ("come with us *even though* it is a stiff-necked people"). But Moses's direct quotation of God and his deeper "seeing" of God and God's ever-greater self-disclosure make this decision less than desirable.

²⁸ This reading is made explicit in Deut 9:6–10:11. In fact, the precise phrase "stiff of neck" (קשה-עֵרֶךְ) occurs only six times in the Hebrew Bible, all in reference to Israel's apostasy with the golden calf as told in Exodus (32:9; 33:3, 5; 34:9) and recounted

only on the intermediate causes of Moses's intercession and God's promise to Abraham, but more fundamentally on Israel's election per God's salvific plan and eternal will. Moses's successful intercession is willed and prompted by God because Israel has been elected, and the whole episode underscores that Israel existed in the first place, let alone *continues* to exist, only due to this election. As the Exodus complements the patriarchal stories as a national origin story, Israel's origin story has its own original sin, and Israel's continued existence presupposes God's commitment to extirpating that sin. Indeed, as a priestly people through whom God will bless the world, God intends to extirpate sin in and through Israel.

Thus, the structure and themes of Exod 32–34 correspond neatly to the priestly author's placement of the tabernacle account in 25–31 and 35–40 squarely around it. The premise of Israel's continued existence is also the premise of the enactment of Israel's cult: in Israel's constructing the tabernacle, in Moses's erecting it, in the sacrificial system initiated in Leviticus, and in God's condescension to dwell within Israel in covenant at the tabernacle (Ex 33:14–17; 34:9–10; 40:34–38).²⁹

Given this pedagogical purpose, we are better positioned to understand the significance of Moses's attempt to put himself in solidarity with Israel even to the point of death (32:31–33). This is the only one of Moses's intercessions that does not seem to be productive, that does not elicit some concession from God or advance the conversation in a meaningful way. God's response seems to be a flat rejection of the very idea of vicarious death. But Exodus's editorial shaping may be understood analogously to 1 Chr 3:1 naming the temple mount Moriah. (This detail, lacking in 1 Kgs 6, makes the metaphysical rather than locative claim that Israel's temple cult was founded on the merits of Abraham's obedience to God in being willing to sacrifice Isaac.) In Exodus, Moses's willingness to die occurs near the center of the golden-calf crisis and intercessions (32:1–34:9). Although God disallows Moses's self-sacrifice, it is the ultimate expression of Moses's solidarity with Israel, and therefore the strongest intermediate cause securing God's continued merciful accompaniment with Israel.

With this literary analysis in place, we can now take a step back to reflect on the dynamics of the pedagogy of divine rhetoric. First, as Vall observes,

in Deuteronomy (9:6, 13). See further, M. Zipor, "פְּשָׁלָה," *TDOT*, vol. 13, 189–95. As Childs notes, Exod 32:7–14 is saturated with Deuteronomistic language, suggesting a close relationship (*Exodus*, 559). See further, Bernard Renaud, "La formation de Ex 19–40: quelques points de repère," in *Le Pentateuch: Débats et Recherches*, ed. Pierre Haudebert (Paris: Lectio Divina, 1992), 101–33, at 111–30.

²⁹ See further, Childs, *Exodus*, 542–43, 557–61; Renaud, "La Formation," 126–33.

God's indirect rhetoric gives Moses a profound dignity. God leads Moses to contradict and complementarily improve on God's previous statements regarding the implications of his presence for a stiff-necked people. God's profound holiness cannot abide sin, but the idea of a holy god not tolerating sin is not that profound. More profound is Moses's insight—itsself deriving from God's leading rhetoric and self-proclamation—that the LORD's holiness is better understood and more perfectly manifests in God's atoning for sin. But God allows Moses to articulate this insight, again saving one of the best lines for his servant, just as Samuel articulated God's unchanging nature.³⁰

This profound dignity is the culmination of Moses's career as mediator. Moses has grown since his reluctance at his call (Exod 3–4), to become the emissary who destroys an empire, the liaison between God and Israel, the one who ratifies the covenant, and finally the one who refuses to leave God alone, but offers his own life on behalf of the people and succeeds in changing God's mind. The repentance is metaphorical, and God wills Moses's actions as the intermediate cause of Israel's survival. But the drama remains in the story, and Moses's glory as mediator is not diminished by God's eternally willing it.

Moses is also a mediator of revelation, and this corresponds to the theme of seeing God in Exodus. Throughout Exodus, the idea of seeing God is raised through complementary and even mutually exclusive passages. God is present in the visible phenomenon of a (non)burning bush where he first reveals his name (3:2–6, 14), in clouds that evoke storm gods and signify the presence of the God that cannot be seen (13:21; 19:9, 16–20), on a sapphire throne as a suzerain (24:9–11), and face to face in the tent of meeting (33:7–11). But the dramatic climax of the book is Moses's seeing God's glory, where God reveals that man cannot see God face to face (pace 24:9–11 and 33:7–11), but that he reveals his name in expanded form as the LORD who atones for sin (34:6–7; cf. 3:14; 20:5). *This* is the God whose glory cloud takes up residence in the tabernacle (40:34). While this motif challenges the narrative's coherence, the theme's development throughout Exodus leads us in a sophisticated reflection on what it is to see God. Occasioned by Israel's sin and by God's indirect rhetoric, God leads Moses to understand that none of the previous theophanies can adequately capture the divine essence. In thus "seeing" the glory of God, Moses reveals the God who cannot be seen more fully than ever.

These dynamics enrich our understanding of Moses as a type of Christ, which seems to be a major point in the divine pedagogy. He is the faithful

³⁰ O'Brien, similarly notes that God requires Moses to play his role in order to teach us that salvation is dynamic, requiring our participation ("Dynamics," 22, 26).

mediator who ensures God's tabernacling amongst humanity (40:34; cf. Jon 1:14), offering his life to God in order to reconcile God and humanity. But more so, he is also the one who participates in God's self-revelation. Through his solidarity, he reveals and actuates the second, atoning operative logic relating the presence of holy God to stiff-necked humanity. God's refusal of Moses's self-offering reserves the fulfillment of that task for Christ, who alone can offer himself in a way that secures God's atoning presence amongst humanity.

This story buttresses our reading of 1 Samuel. The rhetoric of divine repentance is an indirect, pedagogically ordered mode of speaking. While God's speech remains true insofar as it metaphorically teaches about the nature of things (especially sin) and the natural causes willed by God (rejecting Saul *because of* disobedience; destroying Israel *because of* idolatry; not destroying Israel because of intercession), it is also ordered toward the characters within the stories learning specific lessons and modeling those lessons to the readers. These lessons lead us to grow beyond the perspective implied by a simplistic reading of God's speech—as God's speech is literally designed to do. In other words, what looks like God's growth in the stories is articulated for our growth, cued by the dignified interventions of God's servants.

God's servants' interventions use both God's proximate language and doxological or liturgical language against God's self-representation. Samuel's doxological praise for divine transcendence characterizes God's nature and activity in terms of repentance, which term God had introduced. Moses uses both God's language and allusions to reframe the implications for God's action, and both parties recall the celebration of the Passover. Both episodes punctuate salvation history, as David's anointing is prefaced by the pedagogy of Saul's failure and Moses's intercession clarifies Israel's nature and role. The doxological and liturgical language reveals God's essence and purpose, clarifying the biblical history's meta-narrative and serving as the hermeneutical framework for God's rhetoric—as God's rhetoric confirms. That is, Scripture portrays Samuel's philosophical insight and Moses's liturgical recollection—Israel's religious tradition—as the keys to understand God's speech within Scripture.

There is also a crucial observation to make about the rhetoric, both within the narrative and at the level of narration. God's description of his purposes in terms of repentance, along with Samuel's attempt to sway God and his longer familiarity with God, leads Samuel to lead us to recognize that God's rhetoric is metaphorical and should be understood as a rhetorical device. Samuel's insight, like Moses's, is rooted in God's speech and in his general knowledge of who God is. But note that this remains a direct contradiction

both to God's self-description *as a speaker within the narrative* (1 Sam 15:11; Exod 32:9–10) and to God's self-description *as the speaker of inspired Scripture on the level of narration* (1 Sam 15:34; Ex 32:14).

This will be crucially important for reading the flood narrative. In the flood narrative, Noah does not speak; he simply accepts the seemingly inevitable consequence of God's "repentance." We do not have a character who challenges God's rhetoric and reveals its pedagogical purposes. Instead, we as readers are left without a model such as Samuel or Moses, and we are forced to wrestle directly with the narrative's portrayal of a God who repents of his own past action of creation and who forsakes his creature. In Exodus, God "sees" Israel's wickedness and proposes to destroy Israel until Moses intervenes and reveals that this course of action does not correspond to God's character. In Genesis, no one intervenes. God "sees" the wickedness of humanity, repents of creating them, resolves to destroy them (Gen 6:5–7), and then follows through. The flood takes us, as it were, to ground zero in its portrayal of God's repentance, as God repents of his creative project and annihilates it.

Genesis 5–9: The Problem

While the flood story is rhetorically simpler than the other passages, its challenge is far greater. In Genesis, it is not merely a matter of anthropomorphic language (though there is plenty of that). The narration of God's actions is disturbing, both thematically and philosophically. Thematically, God's destruction of the human population excepting Noah is difficult enough to accept, though the story's portrayal of a desperately corrupt humanity suggests that humanity was irredeemable other than Noah and his offspring. Still, the thing from which God has repented was his original creative purpose, as opposed to the provisionally willed kingship of Saul or his proposal to destroy Israel at Sinai.

Philosophically, more problematic is the portrayal of God as growing. Whereas in Exodus God's rhetoric was designed to bring Moses to a superior articulation of the relationship between holy God's presence and the stiff-necked people, in Genesis God himself seems to grow from one perspective to the other. The flood was premised on the fact that "the LORD saw that [וירא יהוה כי] the evil of humanity was great upon the earth and every inclination of the thoughts of his heart were only evil every day" (Gen 6:5). After the flood and Noah's sacrifice, however, "the LORD says in his heart, "I will not again curse the earth on account of humanity, since [כי] the inclination of the heart of man is evil from his youth" (8:21). In both Gen 6:5

and 8:21, as in Exod 33:3 and 34:9, the particle *כי* relates the evil inclination within humans' hearts to God's opposite courses of actions: to destroy utterly through the weaponized return of the primordial cosmic waters, or to refrain absolutely from such cosmic destruction, however much deserved.

The distinction between the premises is subtle, and it may help us understand the shift in God's perspective. In Gen 6:5, God refers to the wicked impulses within humans' hearts every day (*וכל יצר מחשבת לבו רק רע כל היום*), and in 8:21, he refers to the wicked impulses from their youth (*כי יצר לב האדם רע מנעויו*). The ubiquity of human sin begins in our youth, suggesting that it is always within us, so that we cannot be expected to perform a seminal act recommitting ourselves to original justice. Such freedom is not available to humanity after Gen 3, and God decides to accommodate our plight. But this observation only helps us describe the shift: the distinction does not solve the problematic fact of God's apparent growth in perspective.

Translations that treat the particle *כי* as a concessive (e.g., NIV) distort the story: translating *כי* as "even though" implies that God is not going to destroy humanity, "even though" we really do deserve it.³¹ The facts are in basic agreement, and the emphasis remains on mercy, but the translation implies that the point in Gen 8:21 is to underscore how badly we deserve destruction, and therefore how magnanimous God is. However, translating *כי* as a causative ("since," "because," "for," etc.) indicates that God recognizes that—from our very youth—the human heart spontaneously inclines toward evil. The spontaneity of our evil inclination indicates how corrupt the human creature had become, but the emphasis is not therefore on how much we deserve to be destroyed: Genesis emphasizes God's recognition that humans cannot be expected to avoid evil altogether, since our earliest and most fundamental impulses are corrupted.

God wills, then, at the end of the story, to accommodate himself to such corrupted creatures, *since* that corruption has reached so deeply that we are unable to extirpate it ourselves. God's accommodation is then reflected in the promise never to destroy humanity or the earth again (8:21–22), in God's creating a covenant with Noah (9:9–17), in God's reiteration of creation's original blessings and reaffirmation of humanity's dignity (9:1, 6–7), and in God's gift of the law in the Noachic covenant (9:4–7). The gift of the law is the first major pedagogical step in the Bible's meta-narrative, as God seeks to instruct and redeem humanity little by little. God's covenantal promise commits him to this long project refusing to resort again to God's previous course of action in destroying creation and beginning anew, and the rest of

³¹ See note 27.

the covenants presuppose the paradigmatic Noachic covenant as they continue that redemptive, re-creative project. But this covenantal portrayal of God comes only at the end of the story. As Vall observes, the chiastic symmetry of Gen 6:5–8 and 8:20–21 structurally encodes that something seems to have changed within the heart of God.³² This presentation of a mutable God is therefore far more challenging than the narratives of 1 Samuel or Exodus.

Vall's insightful approach to the flood merits a close engagement here. First, as Vall observes, the flood uniquely describes God's repentance in terms that emphasize God's emotion. God not only regrets making humanity, but he is grieved to his heart (6:6). It is not merely a matter of using a convenient term whereby we can consider God's ultimate purpose and willing of intermediate causes. Rather, the story's anthropopathic language teaches us to think of sin, not as an infraction against an abstract legal code, but as the personal offense against a loving father, for God is personal and cares deeply about his relationship with his creatures.³³

Second, Vall observes a series of paradoxes in the story. God saves through destruction. God punishes sin "more or less definitively even while his saving mercy transcends his judgment in and through the very act of judgment!" And, even as God "repents" of making man, he affirms his commitment to man in saving Noah.³⁴ Most critically, "God's will seems to be running two different directions simultaneously."³⁵

But in what sense are the first two really paradoxes? Is saving through destruction itself paradoxical? Saving Noah while destroying everyone else is no more of a logical paradox than is saving and creating anew the people of Israel through the destruction of the Egyptians in the Red Sea or, for that matter, any deliverance through a decisively won battle. I like the paradox—particularly as it prefigures being united to the Cross through baptism—but the narrative operates easily enough without resorting to this paradox. "More or less definitively" is an abstract way to present what is simple in the narrative: despite what evokes the categorical destruction of creation or even the reversal of the creative process, the flood waters are temporary and Noah's survival is morally and narratively appropriate per his distinctive character and treatment. Calling these paradoxes seems to presuppose an implicit judgment of how the flood narrative works as a myth: Noah, *qua* representative of all of humankind, paradoxically demonstrates God's commitment to humankind even while destroying all of humankind; the

³² Vall, *Ecclesial Exegesis*, 54.

³³ Vall, *Ecclesial Exegesis*, 51–52.

³⁴ Vall, *Ecclesial Exegesis*, 55.

³⁵ Vall, *Ecclesial Exegesis*, 53.

flood, *qua* dissolution of creation, paradoxically shows that a new creation can come about through an uncreation.

The third paradox better supports resorting to paradox, but it seems that the narrative ultimately guides us to reject the claim of divine repentance. According to Gen 6:6–7, God does not “regret” that humans have become superlatively evil and therefore decide to destroy all but the least evil human family. Rather, God “repents” of making humans whatsoever. Noah’s salvation, then, shows that God’s rhetoric of “regret” is not just hyperbole or a metaphorical way of expressing how evil humans have become and God’s “feelings” about the matter. Rather, Noah’s salvation, coupled with the covenant’s affirmations of God’s creative blessing, forces us to recognize that God *does not in fact repent* of making humankind. In the very context where one might expect the God of Israel to abandon his creative project (ubiquitous and superlative human evil), and in the very literary trope where one might be familiar with the deity’s attempt to destroy humankind completely, God does not attempt to.

The fourth paradox is the crux of the matter. Does God’s will run in two directions simultaneously? Not exactly. God’s will does not run in two directions simultaneously, but *sequentially*. God goes from a God who destroys his sinful creature because of its corruption “every day” (6:5) to a God who destroys *not* his sinful creature because of its corruption “from its youth” (8:21). This sequence of logical consequences corresponds to the sequence in logics revealed in Moses’s formulation of the nature of God’s presence amongst stiff-necked people (Exod 34:9) compared to God’s own (32:10; 33:3, 5). In both passages, the previous logic of judgment remains valid (idolaters and depraved humanity deserve destruction), but in both passages the logic of just annihilation gives way to the deeper and decisive logic of God’s mercy. But, whereas Exodus’s rhetorical cues help us see God’s teaching through Moses, Genesis does not elaborate on the lesson to be derived from God’s apparent repentance.

Indeed, the differences between the stories are massive. In Exodus, God does not act according to justice’s logical conclusion or abandon his redemptive project; in Genesis God *does* act according to justice’s logical conclusion and seemingly abandons most of his creatures. In Exodus, Moses refuses to become a new Abraham or “let God alone” so he can start over; in Genesis, Noah becomes a new Adam by letting God start over. In Exodus, God repents of the evil he proposed to do; in Genesis, God repents of the good that he did. In Exodus, God’s rhetoric is designed to make Moses grow to reveal God’s deeper compassionate character; in Genesis, God himself seems to grow to have deeper compassion on humanity.

Inevitably, then, we come to the limitations of a narrative analysis of Genesis's flood account. But we have in place from 1 Samuel and Exodus hermeneutical cues which might help us past this impasse. Moses and Samuel both model wrestling with God's leading rhetoric *within the narrative* to participate in God's greater self-disclosure and divine pedagogy; both come to see God as he is or to see as God sees. Moses and Samuel thereby guide the reader's wrestling with God's rhetoric both within and at *the level of narration*. While Noah does not wrestle with God's rhetoric within the narrative, by reading these episodes backwards we are reasonably well equipped to wrestle with the God's rhetoric on both levels. One possible way past this impasse, then, might be to put ourselves as readers in the position of Moses and Samuel, wrestling with God's rhetoric of repentance.

Genesis 5–9: The Reader in the Prophetic Mediator's Breach

But now Thomas is no longer our most helpful guide. While his observations about the metaphorical use of such language remain useful, Thomas's question presumes that the flood narrative itself is to be taken as a historical account and God's rhetoric to be understood as metaphorically describing God's will enacted in history. But this can hardly avoid the problem of God's apparent growth. More helpful is the theme of divine pedagogy as discussed in Augustine, Chrysostom, and most especially the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* [DV].

As Vall reminds us, Augustine and Chrysostom recognized that revelation itself was a divine condescension—the eternal Word addressing us in words—and that this results in using language which is strictly inadequate. Of course, all human language about the deity operates by analogy and is technically inadequate to its object, but some language is especially so, describing God as human in form and emotion. That God uses such language in Scripture reveals the depth of divine condescension, as God willed that we should speak of him in even especially inadequate language so that we could more readily perceive God's loving character.

Citing Augustine and Chrysostom, DV §12 applies this logic to the level of genre or forms. Scripture has a great deal of generic variety: works historical (according to Hebrew and Greek historiographical conventions), poetic, legal, sapiential, and even mythological. As God inspired the historical authors of Scripture, he did so in idioms that they and their readers could understand, even especially inadequate idioms. The process of using inadequate mythological tropes and then pedagogically undermining and redirecting them is demonstrable within Israel's religious history, most

clearly in the uses of the storm-god myth, as Scripture both uses the trope and disabuses its readers of it.³⁶ The flood, similarly, may be understood as engaging an inadequate mythological trope with the intention of pedagogically leading its readers out of that paradigm's way of conceptualizing God. Thus, a form-critical approach may help us to wrestle with the pedagogical intention of the rhetoric of divine repentance in Genesis.

The pedagogical purpose of the flood account can be most readily understood by comparison with the ancient Near Eastern (ANE) flood account *Atrahasis* (*Atr*). But it will be illuminating to consider this rhetorical engagement by comparison with the relationship between Gen 1 and the mythology represented by *Enuma Elish* (*EE*). While the historical relationship between these specific texts cannot be demonstrated and his work has received some criticism, Hermann Gunkel did demonstrate that the basic contours of the myth were known to Israel and indeed present in Israel's own religious traditions as attested in Hebrew Scripture; also, Israel demonstrably wrestled with this trope during its Babylonian experience.³⁷ With this caveat, therefore, the intertextual comparison remains both insightful and warranted.

The texts, Gen 1 and *EE*, readily provide striking comparisons. They are, of course, both cosmogonic accounts in which creation is understood as the imposition of the creator deity's order upon preexisting, chaotic waters,

³⁶ Consider the myth's echoes, for example, in Pss 74 and 89 and Isa 51:9–11, and its explicit rejection, ranging from materials such as the Elijah cycle, Deuteronomy, and Isa 51:1–53:12. The theme would be redirected in the Gospels and especially in the Apocalypse.

³⁷ While not all the details of Gunkel's reconstruction of Israel's religious history are securely grounded, his overview of biblical materials containing echoes, allusions, or outright citations of the *Chaoskampf* myth remains a useful overview of the themes—*Creation and Chaos in the Primeval History and the Eschaton: A Religio-Historical Study of Genesis 1 and Revelation 12*, trans. K. William Whitney (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006). See also Jon Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994). For a critique of Gunkel (which is often semantic more than substantive), see Karen Sonik, "From Hesiod's Abyss to Ovid's *rudis indigestaque moles*: Chaos and Cosmos in the Babylonian 'Epic of Creation,'" in *Creation and Chaos: A Reconsideration of Hermann Gunkel's Chaoskampf Hypothesis*, ed. JoAnn Scurlock and Richard H. Beal (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 1–25. While the textual relationship between *EE* and Genesis cannot be demonstrated, we can be sure of Babylonian influence in Israel's theological development regarding many of the same themes such a contrast evokes. Psalms 74 and 89 cite the myth in Judah's reconciling the Babylonian captivity with God's promises, and Isaiah seeks to guide its readers away from this mythological understanding, again in reference to Babylonian idolatry, mythology, and empire. See Isa 46–47 and 51–53 and J. Gerald Janzen, "On the Moral Nature of God's Power: Yahweh and the Sea in Job and Deuter-Isaiah," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 56 (1994): 458–78.

Genesis's *tāhôm* and *EE*'s *Tiamat*. But their portrayals of deity and creation are worlds apart. Whereas Marduk is a sixth-generation deity who comes to rule the pantheon, there is no theogony in Genesis, and Gen 1 portrays only one God. Whereas *Tiamat* is the primordial deity who attempts to slay the younger gods and whose brutal death and butchery are the preconditions of the life-sustaining cosmic order, Genesis's *tāhôm* has no agency or life force, and there is no resistance to God's creation. Marduk is immanent, cannot but kill *Tiamat* (lest he die), and requires the created order and humans to satisfy the needs of the deities; the God of Genesis is transcendent, creating from a position of total freedom and generosity, and creates so that others can participate in his self-sufficient rest.

Creation by word is key in Genesis. Marduk's word is compared to fire and becomes authoritative when he gains the sovereignty due to the words of the other deities yielding that sovereignty to him. But, in Genesis, God's word is inherently effective: neither depending on a covenant with assenting deities nor having its power portrayed with a destructive metaphor. Because God exists outside the creative order, his word—his will—directly affects the created order. Marduk, on the other hand, being one god among many, must fight the elder deity, *Tiamat*; since her corpse is the material of creation, Marduk himself exists on the same level of creation. Therefore Marduk must create through violence and physical manipulation, whereas God in Genesis—per his transcendent omnipotence—can create gently by word.

This seems to be crucial for understanding the pedagogy of Gen 1. Obviously, its profundity is not dependent on the comparative method. But comparison with *EE* underscores Genesis's portrayal of a God whose transcendent omnipotence allows him to engage his creation gently rather than with brutal coercion.³⁸ In *EE*, Marduk sponsors Babylon, making it his throne city and a mirror of heaven, suggesting that the Babylonian imperial project imitates, participates in, and effects Marduk's order on earth. Genesis 1, being a priestly text, portrays God as gently imposing distinctions upon his creation, and inviting us to imitate God, participating in that creative project through gardening and liturgy, cultivating the other's and our own good, because it is in liturgy that God cultivates our good, gently persuading

³⁸ This pedagogical lesson can be understood as being reiterated throughout Scripture: in God's decision that a king of peace rather than a man of blood must build God's temple (1 Chr 22:6–10), in Isaiah's redirection of the *Chaoskampf* motif to seeing the suffering servant as the one who reveals the arm of the LORD (Isa 51–53), and finally in Christ's pedagogy about the nature of the messiah, as one who came to serve, suffer, and save from demonic oppressors rather than to dominate political entities (see esp. Mark 8:22–9:37).

us to conform ourselves to his creative intention. By the very nature of God's creative intention to make images of himself freely imitating him in love, he will not resort to brutal coercion—as even some of Israel's own religious texts seem to hope! Genesis 1, then, makes use of a widespread mythological trope present even within Israel's religious tradition (creation by imposition of order upon chaos) while removing the problematic elements also present to their own tradition (creation through battle; conceiving of divine power as politically coercive; cf. Pss 74, 89). The flood seems to be operating similarly, though the issues are again more complex.

As in Gen 1 and *EE*, Gen 5–9 and *Atr* readily compare with an abundance of low-hanging fruit at the narrative level. Genesis portrays one God compared to the pantheon in *Atr*. In *Atr*, the flood and survival of the titular survivor, Atrahasis, occur according to the competing wills within the divine assembly: Enlil seeks to destroy humanity so he can sleep, and Ea-Enki saves Atrahasis who worships him. In Genesis, the destruction is the result of human evil, and both destruction and salvation are attributed to the justice and grace of the one God.³⁹ But, in this narrative comparison, God shows less well than in Gen 1. In *Atr*, the gods respond to the post-diluvian sacrifice, and Enlil agrees to stop trying to annihilate humanity after the flood, his third attempt. In Genesis, God is pleased by Noah's sacrifice and promises never again to destroy humanity in a flood (8:20–22). Thus, a narrative analysis complemented by the comparison with *Atr* is enriching but remains inadequate.

This dynamic is worth pondering: the reader who takes the flood story as a basically historical account to be taken on its own terms can still read it fruitfully. The single deity is in complete control. Sin is an intrusion of chaos into God's creative order, so the flood is the cosmo-logical result of that sin. But this is too abstract: sin is also an alienation from our loving creator, such that God is “personally grieved” by sin. The transcendent deity need not sleep or eat, but he accepts Noah's sacrifice as an accommodation, since it is an instantiation of Noah's piety, with which God is truly pleased. In God's (mature) mercy, God refuses to let the cosmos return to its watery chaos; God will intervene lest sin run its cosmo-logical course. In the immense condescension of the divine pedagogy, then, even simple readings inoculated ancient readers against the grosser ANE ideologies, and they remain edifying for modern readers. In Gregory the Great's expression, Scripture is shallow enough for a lamb to wade through. But this simple reading cannot

³⁹ See further, Leon R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 162–67.

get around the fact that God, like Enlil, did something that he now confirms is inappropriate: that God has grown and changed his perspective. As in the other half of Gregory's maxim, Scripture remains deep enough to float an elephant.

Thankfully, we can navigate these waters, given the story's literary cues, if we do not limit ourselves to the narrative logic and instead allow our previous findings to guide our approach. As Samuel states explicitly, God does not repent (1 Sam 15:29), so we must take Gen 6:6–7 with a grain of salt and wrestle with its pedagogical intent as opposed to its ostensible claim. As Moses reveals, God does not abandon his creative or redemptive projects, despite his rhetorical claim to do so (Exod 32:9–10), and this rhetoric is ordered toward Moses's dignified wrestling with God. Through this wrestling, Moses sees and reveals the deeper character of God: whereas Moses seems to guide God to a superior way of relating the divine presence to Israel as stiff-necked people, from annihilation to redemption (32:9; 33:3–5; 34:9), it has in fact been God's purpose to reveal this logical relation and the eternally merciful character of God. What appeared to be God's growth was Moses's insight and God's pedagogical rhetoric toward Israel.

So, it seems Genesis must teach us that God does not repent of his creative plan, despite the flood narrative's claim that God did just that thing. If we take the flood account itself as God's rhetorical address rather than as a precisely accurate account, then we are the ones being taught, rather than God learning a lesson in the story. We are the ones being invited to grow to see God not merely as a holy, transcendent being who justly punishes sin rather than lashing out because he needs his sleep—though that elementary lesson remains true—but as a merciful God who accommodates humanity. God commits himself to the gentle and persuasive redemption of his creature through covenant, rather than resorting to the brutality and coercion of Enlil or Marduk.

Thus, the flood (while problematic in a way that Gen 1 is not) complements Gen 1, as both challenge the brutal depictions of God in ANE mythology. Whereas Gen 1 simply omits any conception of a violent God in creation, the flood uses the mythological trope to affirm that God punishes injustice and will remove all evil from his creation, while simultaneously undermining the trope itself as inadequate.⁴⁰ Instead, God understands

⁴⁰ The dynamic is worth further comparison to *Dei Verbum*, in which §15 indicates that the Old Testament contains some things that are incomplete and temporary but were nonetheless pedagogical, in accordance with humanity's historical position. This is of course true, but we should also recognize that the rhetoric of the Hebrew Bible operates at multiple levels (within its literal sense!), simultaneously teaching things

and accommodates the nature of the human condition, inviting the human creatures to participate in realizing the image of God within them, as God seeks to remove sin from the human heart. To put the matter in the terms of the story's definitive symbol: the rainbow itself is not a secondary provision signifying God's growth or plan C, but, as part of the created order, it signifies God's eternal and unchanging commitment to that created order.

Finally, we may consider the rhetoric of repentance thematically as it puns on Noah's name. Noah's name (נֹחַ) sounds most like the verb נוּחַ, "to settle down" or "to rest," as the ark will do in Gen 8:4. Also, God seems to respond to Noah's sacrifice, specifically to the "pleasing aroma" (אֶת רִיחַ הַנִּיחִחַ) (8:21)—again, not unlike the gods in *Atr*. Noah's name, then, directly corresponds to God's being "soothed" by Noah's sacrifice, which precipitates God's new-found perspective and resolve never to destroy humanity (8:22).

However, this is not the etymology provided by Noah's father Lamech when giving his name. Rather, Lamech says: "This one will console us [יְנַחֲמֵנוּ; Gen 5:29] from the work of the toil of our hands from the earth which the LORD has cursed." The term "will console us" is the piel of נָחַם, compared to the niphal of נִחַם (to regret, be sorry, be comforted), which describes God's repentance in 6:6–7.

The rest of the etymology perspicuously alludes to Gen 3:17, as nearly every other term appears there.⁴¹ Genesis 3 also includes subtle mercy in the context of God's punishment: despite God's claim, Adam and Eve in fact do not die the day they eat of the tree. God's pedagogical rhetoric reveals both their deserts and eventual fate. But had they died on that very day, the human creature would have become extinct, and God's creative purpose would be cut off. Analogously, Noah's naming suggests that God might not follow through on the just, logical conclusion to human sin, but rather might "relent" (נָחַם; cf. Exod 32:14) and grant "consolation" (נָחַם; Gen 5:29) and "rest" (נוּחַ; cf. Exod 33:14), thereby maintaining his commitment to his creation. The flood account, then, like the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, shows God speaking (within the narrative in Eden, at the level of narration in the flood) what is justly deserved, but revealing that his mercy will not allow those intermediate causes to result in their logical conclusion.

Surprisingly, then, Lamech gets one of the best lines in the flood story: his

more incomplete for the elementary and things more perfect for the mature who have learned to wrestle with Scripture according to its genres. While Gregory's swimming elephant corresponds to the allegorical interpretation of the Book of Job, the principle also applies to the literal sense.

⁴¹ See Gen 3:17: אֲרֹרָה הָאֲדָמָה בְּעֹבֹרְךָ בְּעֵצָבוֹן תֹּאכְלֶנָּה כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ. See also Gen 5:29: זֶה יְנַחֲמֵנוּ מִמְּעֹשֵׁנוּ וּמִעֲצָבוֹן יָדֵינוּ.

gloss on Noah's name challenges the idea that God would repent of creating humanity or allow the curse to come to its logical conclusion (Gen 5:29). The narrative suggests that Noah is an exception and that God grows into Lamech's perspective, deciding never again to curse the earth (8:21); he will never again "repent" (נחם) of his creative project, but he has instead "been soothed" (נוח) regarding his creatures' corruption, and therefore he "relents" (נחם) from the curse, and "grants consolation" (נחם) to humanity.⁴² On the other hand, reading the flood account as a divine address condescending to use the form of a flood story allows us to wrestle with God's pedagogical rhetoric ordered to our growth. The same God who created gently by speaking in Gen 1–2, rather than brutally as in *EE*, will see his creative project through, gently redeeming them through speaking persuasively in covenant (Gen 9), rather than brutally managing their population for his amoral preferences (*Atr*). And this is not the result of his growth, but of his unchanging character.

Therefore, we might read the Noachic covenant in this way. God's patient redemption through accommodating pedagogy in the theological covenants is grounded in God's transcendent and immutable character as omnipotent and loving creator. Genesis 5–9 is an act of rhetoric addressing a culture which took for granted that God had wiped out the vast majority of the human population with a flood and, critically, who understood that flood as signifying God's definitive judgment. St. Thomas also took the flood's historicity for granted, and therefore awkwardly explained the language of divine repentance as a loose manner of speaking (*ST I*, q. 19, a. 7, ad 1). But we might instead understand God's repentance in Gen 6:6–7 as God's pedagogical rhetoric that metaphorically teaches about the order of things according to the narrative logic's portrayal of the severity of sin (ad 2), but also, more importantly, undermines altogether the trope's portrayal of God's definitive destruction of his creature—whether as fickle in *Atr* or as justly

⁴² The Hebrew issues here are subtle. The root נחם in the piel means to comfort by communicating one's sympathy to the consolation of the other; the niph'al, meanwhile, is rather elastic, encompassing repenting, regretting, being sorry, and consoling oneself. Lamech uses the *piel* in Gen 5:29, and the narrator and God use the *niph'al* in 6:6–7. As a first-*nun* root, the words are indistinct by their consonants. However, the *piel's* taking a direct object suffix makes it clearly a transitive *piel* in 5:29, and the *niph'al's* in 6:6–7 clearly express regret about God's former action, as the ו clause corresponds precisely to the structure seen in 1 Sam 15:11, 35. To put my argument and the story's theme in grammatical terms, then, Lamech's *piel* may be understood as shading the sense in which we ultimately understand God's *niph'al*—from regretful destruction to merciful consolation—despite the grammatical constructions of 6:6–7 that correspond to the flood's portrayal of God's repentant destruction.

deserved as in Genesis—according to God’s definitively merciful character. As Samuel and Moses wrestled with God’s rhetoric, and thereby came to see and reveal his character more perfectly, God’s seeming narrative growth is itself divine rhetoric, ordered toward Israel’s dignity and our own. In Israel’s wrestling with God’s challenging rhetoric, God gradually revealed his character through the development of Israel’s historical theology; we continue that wrestling, following Israel in coming to see and reveal more deeply the loving character of God.

This is one potential solution to the story of the flood, but it has some weaknesses. Comparison to Gen 1 is well and good, but insisting that Gen 5–8 conform to Gen 1 overlooks the minor detail of the fall into sin. God is transcendent and creates gently, but Gen 1 presumes no sinful resistance to God’s will; it therefore directly refutes *EE*’s myth of creation through battle and butchery. But the biblical flood account tweaks and undermines rather than refutes the more typical flood story. The general idea that God seeks to re-create sinful creatures gently is supported in Scripture, and it is critical for understanding Christ and the Gospel. But much of the Bible—Old and New Testaments alike—portrays God as resorting to severe punishment, even for those whose salvation is presumed. In fact, the preceding section’s inquiry risks falling into the Marcionite hubris of dictating to God that his mercy precludes all punishment: whether final or pedagogically redemptive. To put it in the terms of the Exodus narrative, it risks excising God’s justice from his fuller self-revelation in Exod 34:7, thereby trivializing sin, reducing mercy to indulgence, and potentially abandoning us to sin. But the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation and nowhere more than the Cross, disallows this trivializing. In fact, the mystery of Christ crucified points us a different way, though the insights from this previous solution will be retained.

The Flood Seen through the Cross: Christ as Prophetic Mediator and Noah’s Antitype

Recall that I introduced the flood as thematically and philosophically disturbing. The previous line of reasoning leveraged the philosophical problem of divine repentance to question the validity of the theme of unqualified divine punishment and of the flood trope itself. However, there is another way to understand the philosophical problem’s implications for the theme. As Genesis grants the basic facts of *Atr*’s flood account (a deity regretted humanity’s existence, most humans were destroyed by the flood, and a deity saved a handful of them) but challenges the myth’s signification (one God versus many, who punishes sin rather than destroys noisy slaves, etc.), so we

might consider that Genesis's re-signifying of the flood is incomplete. Read on its own terms, Genesis's flood account still signifies God's repentance, decision to destroy creation, and growth. Therefore, this system of signification rather than a hypothetical flood is both what Genesis sought to correct and what remains the problem.

But rather than seek to fill the prophetic-mediatorial role of Moses and Samuel ourselves, and thereby risk falling into a Marcionite rejection of divine justice, we may consider how Christ, Noah's antitype, has filled the void and re-signified Genesis in his own paschal mystery. Indeed, it may be that Gen 5–7 *cannot* be safely read without recourse to an exterior reference whereby it can be further re-coded. Christ re-signifies Genesis in a way both less and more radical than that proposed above: less insofar as it preserves more room for divine destruction, and more insofar as it refers to salvation what previously signified final destruction. Through the Cross, Genesis's literal events can be understood as signifying not God's repenting of making humans, but God's most profound commitment to humans.

While the enigmatic passage is contested, I take 1 Pet 3:1 and 4:6 as including the humans killed in the flood.⁴³ The author seems to understand the destruction of Noah's contemporaries not as their definitive destruction according to the story's obvious sense, but as mysteriously ordered towards their salvation: a mystery only to be discerned in Christ. They were destroyed in the flesh (3:19) and according to human judgment (4:6)—we might

⁴³ Sometimes the spirits of 1 Pet 3:19 are related directly and exclusively to the "sons of God," who impregnate the daughters of men in Gen 6:2–4 and their offspring, by analogy with 1 Enoch, where those spirits' punishment is paradigmatic for judgment on the world. After all, Christ's proclamation of the kerygma (ἐκήρυξεν; 1 Pet 3:19) is not necessarily a call for repentance or opportunity for salvation: if demonic beings decisively rebelled before the flood, Christ's proclamation of his reign may be nothing more than the definitive statement of his authority. See, e.g., Bo Reicke, *The Epistles of James, Peter, and John* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 107–11, 119–20. However, there is no reason to exclude the spirits of humans from this destruction or proclamation of the kerygma. Genesis 6:5 refers, after all, to the wickedness of humanity, not of the sons of God, the Nephilim, the watchers, or any other demonic or hybrid beings. (Genesis 6 reads quite well without the account of the Nephilim in vv. 2–4.) Furthermore, 1 Pet 4:6 refers to a proclamation not of the kerygma, but of the Gospel (εὐηγγελίσθη) to the dead. It seems, too, that we should take 4:6 as resuming the thought of 3:19–20, as it resumes the juxtaposition of flesh and spirit from 3:18. It is unfortunate that Reicke should stake everything on ἐκήρυξεν as opposed to εὐηγγελίσθη in 3:19 in his argument against the proclamation of the Gospel to human spirits, but then pass over 4:6 without considering how the proclamation of the Gospel to the dead might qualify his assertions against the Apostles' Creed and the evangelistic interpretation of 3:19.

say, according to the ostensible sense of Gen 6–7 and God’s “repenting.” But, since they too hear the Gospel that they may live in the spirit, God’s commitment to accommodate for sinful humanity’s evil inclinations (Gen 8:21) is paradoxically accomplished in those whose flesh God destroyed in the flood for those same evil inclinations (Gen 6:6–7).

But it is Christ’s sufferings in the flesh that so adapt the flood’s signification, that both render the flood truly paradoxical and resolve the paradox; Christ’s sufferings are the prophetic and mediatorial solidarity that decodes the pedagogy of the rhetoric of divine repentance in Gen 6:6–7. The Cross reveals the depth of God’s commitment to humans: that he would take on death in his own assumed flesh to redeem humans, that he would make himself man rather than repent of making man. After all, the Eternal Splendor of Israel is not a man that he should repent (1 Sam 15:29), but God is eternal love that has no hatred for what he has made (Wis 11:24–26), and who, in that love, became man. More, Christ’s baptism as ordered to the Cross reveals that two of the most striking signifiers of God’s judgment and curse—being hanged on a tree (Deut 21:22–23; Gal 3:13) and entering a place of watery judgment on sin (Gen 8:21; Matt 3)—are themselves turned into signs of God’s commitment to redeem rather than to destroy humanity. Death remains in both, but now death is ordered to life.

Thus, the Cross provides a new paradigm, a new system for decoding the signification of wood and water. While the flood story’s ark makes wood the instrument of surviving the flood waters of death, in the Gospel the wood and water are both implements of death to the flesh ordered toward life in the spirit. Noah survives according to the flesh, but his subsequent drunkenness and cursing Hamm reveal that the flood did not effect God’s recreation. Whereas Lamech had hoped that Noah would be the man through whom God would give relief from the curses, it is the New Noah who gives relief from the curse by bearing the curse of death himself; he does not use wood to avoid the waters of death, but he enters the flood of baptism to consign himself to death on the wood of the Cross. For it is the New Noah who exercises the prophetic and mediatorial role left void by Noah and who, as God himself, can resolve the evil that Noah simply escapes temporarily.

In fact, recall that we treated the Old Testament passages in the reverse order, since the latter passages provided greater clarity, preparing us to wrestle with the flood narrative. As useful as that was, we should now consider it in its proper order. Scripture’s pedagogy of the rhetoric of divine repentance in its canonical order is ordered to an ever-increasing clarification of what is perhaps the most troubling passage in Scripture. But that ongoing

pedagogical clarification remains incomplete in the Old Testament (*DV* §15) and is finally fulfilled in Christ.

In this New Noah's passing through the flood of baptism by his Cross, those killed in the flood are not excluded from God's re-creation. Reading the Old Testament typologically cuts both ways, in understanding Christ in the light of the Old Testament and in re-understanding the Old Testament in the light of Christ, and the latter is particularly pronounced in 1 Peter's use of the flood story. The author of 1 Peter has transformed his understanding of the flood narrative through the Cross and Easter mystery; the flood story has itself been baptized. But this baptism was already foreshadowed by the rhetoric of divine repentance in Gen 6:6–7, giving a cue centuries before Christ that the story required further re-signification.

The Word Made Flesh: God's Rhetoric and the Culmination of Divine Pedagogy

Given that all these passages are key inflection points in salvation history, that each pedagogical lesson has evidently provided rich typological material, and that the discussion necessarily found its term in Christ, it would be regrettable not to make some observations about Christ as divine rhetoric. Of course, Christ *is* the ultimate act of divine rhetoric, the Word addressed to humanity in human form, in its clearest though initially most opaque form. Christ *is* the culmination of divine pedagogy to which each of these episodes points, both from its place within the historical development of Israel's theology and as typology: sketches of the problem of the human condition to be solved in a reverse sketch, the still surprising solution of the mystery of Christ. And within the Gospels, Christ addresses humanity in challenging and sometimes even offensive ways.

On a simple level, God's rhetoric in these Old Testament passages corresponds well to Christ's rhetoric in addressing the Syrophoenician woman (Matt 15:21–28; Mark 7:24–30). Readers may regret seeing Jesus contemptuously compare the woman to a dog and express resistance to helping her. But Jesus makes observations about secondary and indecisive causes, as God did in Exod 32:9–10, or rather he evokes a paradigm that his contemporaries hold, as in Genesis, and the woman uses Christ's words against him, as Moses did in Exod 32:11–13. Jesus initially humiliates her, as a *Canaanite* (Matt 15:22) might expect from a Jew. He was sent to Israel, as the Mosaic covenant had excluded local Canaanites. But Jesus thereby allows her to model the complete humility of faith, as a gentile calling on her Lord, the Son of David, in hope rather than fear. Jesus does not uphold the Old Testament's

ban on Canaanites or seek to dominate them under a Davidic empire; instead the Son of David casts demons out of even the gentiles. But there are deeper thematic connections to make.

As the Son of David and Son of God, Christ is the king who glorifies the Father and mediates God's reign. As Son of David, Christ is man, and therefore can be obedient where Israel's human kings had failed. More, Christ is a man after God's own heart (1 Sam 13:14), because his very taking on the human nature results from and rhetorically expresses the eternal love of God; it follows that his career continues to express that eternal Word of love. As Son of God, Christ mediates God's very presence and the kingdom of heaven. Where Saul had sought to be glorified before men and David and his sons had also failed to glorify God, Christ's crucifixion is the revelation of the glory of God. It is the glory Moses sought, and it reveals the mercy of God that atones for sin and satisfies the justice of God (Exod 33:18–34:10), the glory that brings all humanity, including the gentiles, into communion with the Father (John 1:14, 12:20–32). But this is the glory of the Cross, not of empire, as Saul, David, and the Babylonians sought and as several of the Davidic, messianic Psalms imply (Pss 2, 74, 89, and 110). For God's power is effected gently and persuasively, as P understood, in the rhetorical movement of the Incarnation and in our response in liturgy; not at the end of a sword, whether Roman, Babylonian, or Israelite. Hence, the temple had to be built by David's son, the king of peace and man of rest (מנוחה), rather than by David, who had shed much blood (1 Chr 22:8–10).

Indeed, Christ, as Son of God and Son of David, reveals the character of God and the nature of divine power as the culmination of the Old Testament's pedagogy. In the Synoptic Gospels, his revelation as Messiah is matched both with the revelation of the Cross, where Christ overcomes demons rather than Romans, and with his invitation to Peter and all his disciples to stop thinking as the world does, but instead to follow him in the way of the Cross (Matt 16:13–24:18; Mark 8:27–9:37; Luke 9:18–62). For, God's power is gentle and seeks to persuade through the spoken word of the prophetic proclamation of the kerygma and the Gospel: rather than resort to violence or coercion, the omnipotent Word of God restrains and resigns itself to the violence of the Cross in order to persuade and convert us. While God's *suffering* per the hypostatic union could not have been foreseen, Christ's career corresponds to the portrayal of creation in Gen 1, to the portrayal of God's more mature position at the end of the flood, and to the revelation of the Arm of the LORD in Isa 52:10–53:12, as God refuses to meet evil with evil, but applies himself to the amelioration of the human heart by revealing his own.

As in Genesis and Exodus, justice and peace kiss (Ps 85:10) in the Incarnation. Both the flood and Moses's intercession at Sinai teach that God takes sin deadly seriously and that he will in fact punish the wicked. But whereas they portray God's growth, they are designed to teach us that God will not leave us to suffer the logical consequences of sin, but he instead will ensure that mercy has the definitive word even while satisfying justice. In the Cross, Jesus's death makes true atonement for sin, bearing the curse of sin and bearing sin itself away (Gal 3:13; John 1:29; cf. Exod 34:9). Baptism, as an antitype to the flood (1 Pet 3:21), unites the baptized to Christ in his death and new life (Rom 6:3–6), making them a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). The Cross, then, both reveals and establishes the justice and mercy of God, and it allows mercy to triumph over judgment (Jas 2:13) without compromising God's justice. Neither the Old Testament nor the Gospel are Marcionite; God does not grow from vengeful to merciful, but he teaches us the absolute character of both even while bringing us to his harbor of mercy.

Notably, each of the Old Testament passages treated here marks a major inflection point in salvation history, as three of the major theological covenants turn on God's rhetoric of repentance.⁴⁴ The flood, as the first covenant and perspicuous re-creation, establishes the paradigm for understanding God's theological covenants as his redeeming renewal of creation. Each episode typologically anticipates Christ's mediation of the new covenant: as ideal human king who obeys and glorifies God, as ushering in the new creation through baptismal death, and especially as the mediator of a new covenant after humanity has transgressed and merits destruction. Christ establishes the new covenant in his Cross as he dies for us as Moses had offered (Exod 32:32). We enter this new covenant through the sacraments of initiation: baptism corresponding to the flood, confirmation corresponding to David's anointing, and the Eucharist corresponding to the Passover.

The Incarnation, then, both historically culminates and typologically recapitulates these episodes, as the definitive act of God's eternally willing

⁴⁴ Consider Abraham's career in light of this reading. His final testing in Gen 22 involves God's rhetoric indirectly achieving God's purposes; killing Isaac would suggest that God has repented of his selection of Abraham; Abraham's testing can be seen as a sort of punishment for his previous failures, particularly the moral problem of sending Hagar and Ishmael away to die with little provision; Abraham's own speech (22:5, 8) may be understood as already challenging God's rhetoric and trusting God's promises and unchanging purposes; in which case God's servant again gets one of the best lines; as in Exodus, God's rhetoric is ordered toward Abraham's superlative merit, whereby he secures God's oath as an intermediate cause advancing God's salvific plan; and we thereby get one of the most profound types of Christ's sacrifice in the binding of Isaac on Mt. Moriah.

our good. Rather than repent of his creative plan, God gently redeems it, as suggested by the creation account and by the turn from the flood myth to covenant. But he does not do so from a position of privileged transcendence absent from the created order as in Gen 1; he enters creation as in Gen 2. God addresses and wrestles with a particular people through their history to reveal himself gradually. But even more so, the God who is grieved to his heart (analogically speaking) by the sin of the human heart (Gen 6:5–6) takes on a human heart in time, such that he can literally grieve in, for, and with us, teaching us to grieve with a grief analogous to God's eternal rejection of sin and unchanging compassion for us, and so to repent ourselves, to receive God's consolation and freedom from the curse of sin (Gen 5:29). This grief is imaged for us by the image of God himself (Col 1:15), so that we can imitate him and be remade in that image (Gen 1:27; Col 3:10). But even Christ's career was often a confusing rhetorical act, to be finally understood only through the Passion, resurrection, and breaking of bread: that is where God most definitively addresses us, as the ultimate rhetorical and historical expression of God's eternal and immutable love for us (John 3:16). N.V.