

**THE MERCIFUL AND COMPASSIONATE GOD:  
BIBLICAL THEOLOGY IN AN ISLAMIC CONTEXT**

**By**

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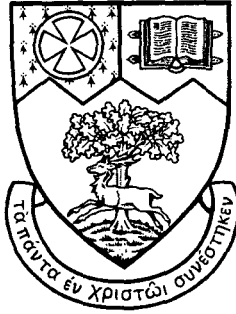
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## ABSTRACT

“The Merciful and Compassionate God: Biblical Theology in Islamic Context”

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The primary purpose of this study is to write a biblical theology in the form of commentary in an Islamic context. This study argues that since the Old Testament is Christian authoritative Scripture, its theological message must be a fundamental resource for writing a biblical theology in an Islamic context. This study uses the narrative of Exod 32–34 as an example of the rich contribution the theological message of narratives makes to biblical theology. The theological message of this narrative reveals powerfully the character of the biblical God in dealing with the crisis of worshiping the golden calf in an Islamic context. This study calls for a move from an apologetic defensive theology that merely requires answering explicit challenges that Islam has posed to Christianity through the centuries to a biblical theology that addresses the hermeneutical questions that arise from the rhetorical Islamic context.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

As a Middle Eastern Christian raised in an Islamic culture, my interest in the Old Testament (OT) began when I started to ask myself what the difference is between the God of the OT and the Allah of Islam? Both, for example, are merciful and just, but, at the same time, give orders to kill other nations! Questions like this one started my academic journey focusing on the OT. This is not the only question that prompted my interest in the OT. As a Christian reading the Scripture in a predominately Muslim cultural context, I began to wonder how the OT can contribute to the writing of a biblical theology in an Islamic context? How can the OT be used to help Muslims understand God and his work through Jesus Christ? How can God be known to Muslims through the OT? Would the OT assist Muslims in their journey of searching for God?

In addition to my personal interest, however, there are some other legitimate biblical convictions (presuppositions) that led this study to focus on the OT's contribution to writing a biblical theology in an Islamic context. First, there are many reasons for Muslims not to accept God's redemptive work in the person of Jesus Christ. The main reason, in my judgment, is their lack of understanding and acceptance of the OT view of God. Systematic theologies, missional workers, and apologetics focus mostly on the New Testament (NT), but a careful analysis of Muslim-Christian dialogue shows, among many other things, the lack of explaining the roots of our faith and how God is described in the OT. This is due to the unbiblical minimization of God's redemptive work and revelation throughout history by only focusing on the person of Jesus Christ, as if redemption and revelation were fully

accomplished in a single moment in history, particularly when the writer of Hebrews tells us that “God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (Heb 1:1–2).

What the writer of Hebrews demonstrates is that “there was a progressive accomplishment of redemption and a progressive unfolding of revelation in history.”<sup>1</sup>

To understand and more fully appreciate God’s redemptive work in the person of Jesus Christ, one needs to study God’s redemptive work from the beginning of creation. To grasp better God’s self-revelation through the Living Word, Jesus Christ, one should first understand God’s self-revelation through the prophets at many times and in various ways in Israel’s history, which is contained in the OT.

To write biblical theology in an Islamic context focused only on the NT and just on the person of Jesus Christ is similar to inviting someone to watch the last scene of a movie and then wondering why he or she does not understand it. In writing this biblical theology in an Islamic context, we must remember that God himself spoke at many times and in various ways to reveal himself to humanity before his ultimate revelation in Jesus Christ, and in the same way we must communicate the full revelation of God through history as God himself did. What this highlights is the need to write biblical theology in an Islamic context that takes into consideration the progressive nature of God’s revelation in Scripture as it will be discussed below so that the character of God and his ways will be known through the complete biblical revelation throughout both testaments.

Second, it is the presupposition of this study that the OT is an authoritative text of the divine revelation for Christian. The NT affirms the authoritative in-scripturated character of this divine revelation. Boda explains:

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<sup>1</sup> Boda, “Biblical Theology and Old Testament Interpretation,” 134.



Even 2 Peter 1:20–21, which focuses on how men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke orally within their generation, identifies such proclamations as “prophecy *of Scripture*,” that is, prioritizing its inscripturated form (cf. Rom. 16:26). It is this inscripturated form that, according to 2 Timothy 3:15–16, is “God-breathed” and “holy” and, according to Romans 15:4, is authoritative to instruct.<sup>2</sup>

This authoritative inscripturated character prompts the biblical theologian to revive the theological message of the OT and confirm its fundamental contribution to biblical theology. It also prompts the biblical theologian to authoritatively communicate its message, revealing God in his involvement in human history.

As Christian authoritative Scripture, thirdly, the OT bears witness to the roots of our faith. As Christians, we are very familiar with NT concepts and we take them for granted. This is due to our familiarity with the background of these concepts in the OT. The writer of Hebrews, for example, tells us that “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Heb 9:22). We do not question why blood is needed for forgiveness because of our background knowledge of OT sacrifice. But for someone who is just hearing these words for the first time, the first question that comes to mind is why forgiveness comes with the blood. Here we must go back to the OT to explain the principle behind this claim, which can be found in Lev 17:11. To understand, moreover, what the Gospel of John means by proclaiming that “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (1:14), one must first understand that God dwelt among his people in the tabernacle in the past (Exod 25:8) and once again in history he dwells among his people through the Word Jesus Christ. The OT, and more specifically the Pentateuch, must be a fundamental source for writing biblical theology in an Islamic context since it helps Christians to explain fundamental principles of their faith.

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<sup>2</sup> Boda, “Biblical Theology and Old Testament Interpretation,” 131.

Fourth, there are many common prophetic figures in the OT and the Qur'an (e.g. Abraham, Moses, Noah). There are as well many common narratives (e.g. Abraham's sacrifice of his son). Despite the variation in narrational details and the differences in figures' names between both texts, there is a common ground to establish the conversation. The common figures and narratives between the OT and the Qur'an suggest that the OT can speak powerfully to these narratives and figures, revealing who the biblical God is and his ways in dealing with humanity.

Fifth, since Muslims are described as "story tellers," the narrative character of the OT provides a very powerful tool to communicate the truth about God. In the OT, God is known through his acts in human history, which is reflected in narrative form. Unlike the Qur'an, the OT is full of narratives that reveal the truth about God, and Exod 32–34 is a good example of that. This narrative character of the OT is helpful in two ways. First, narrative by its nature is a powerful communication tool that makes a vital impact on the reader.<sup>3</sup> Second, this narrative character shows a God who is active in humanity, and his character is revealed not just by a list of attributes but also by his involvement in human life.

Now, one can question the neglect of the Qur'an by OT scholars, as well as to writing biblical theologies of the OT in Islamic context. Glaser questions this neglect of the Qur'an, which she holds as a commentary on the Old Testament. Glaser suggests two reasons for this neglect: "firstly, perhaps, because Old Testament scholars have not seen the Qur'an as a commentary on the Bible, and, secondly, because of the nature of such Islamic comment as there is."<sup>4</sup> One more reason could be added: the Western/academic context within which biblical scholars attempt to work. If the purpose of academic and scholarly studies is to equip the church, it is

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<sup>3</sup> To recognize Exod 32–34 as a narrative means that the meaning is found in the text as a whole rather than in isolated segments.

<sup>4</sup> Glaser, "Qur'anic Challenges for Genesis," 3.

significant for biblical scholars to consciously recognize that the church is facing new realities as massive Muslim populations emigrate to the West.

The thesis of this study, therefore, is that since the OT is Christian authoritative Scripture for Christians, the theological message of the OT must be a fundamental resource for writing biblical theology in an Islamic context. This study will use the narrative of Exod 32–34 to show the rich contribution of the theological message of this narrative to biblical theology and how this theological message reveals powerfully the character of the biblical God in an Islamic context.

While writing biblical theology in an Islamic context must consider both testaments, the focus of this study will be only on the OT. This is not only due to the limit of space and time, but also to the significant rich contribution of the OT to biblical theology in an Islamic context, which this study attempts to stress.

#### I. The Importance and the Contribution of this Study

This study is not meant to be a dialogue between religions. The role of a dialogue between religions, for instance Islam and Christianity, is to talk with one another about *key* issues and varying perspectives on faith as the participants aim for better understanding of the other in order to maintain harmony and build peace. The major concern for this study is to present *canonically* the teaching of the Bible, not just key issues, addressing Islamic rhetorical questions as long as they intersect with a biblical text.

This study is meant, moreover, to be different from systematic theology. While systematic theology “attempts to organize, or systematize, theological reflection,” biblical theology attempts to avoid imposing “a structure not transparently

given in Scripture.”<sup>5</sup> This study, moreover, asserts that the starting point of writing Christian theology must be the biblical text, grounded on solid exegesis. This will prevent using the biblical texts as proof texts. Carson explains, “But because the ordering vision is not dictated by inductive study of the text within the categories of the text, corpus by corpus, the danger of simplistic proof texting becomes proportionately greater.”<sup>6</sup> This study, thus, attempts to avoid imposing categories on the biblical texts in order to communicate the biblical texts in an Islamic context, with reference to such themes as God, sin, forgiveness.

The sort of Christian theological discourse that has developed over the years in Islamic contexts, moreover, has tended to be mainly apologetic and defensive in nature rather than constructive and assertive.<sup>7</sup> Accad, however, describes other trends in writing theology in Islamic contexts:

Instead of defensive and reactionary discourse about God developed in the early stages, an important segment in the church seems to have opted for escapism. Some have adopted a Western-style theological discourse, others have escaped into an esoteric and traditionalist discourse, and yet others have embraced a self-help agenda that follows the latest popular trends of the Western church. These are safer routes than the reactionary discourse, but they are out of touch with the realities on the ground.<sup>8</sup>

This study calls, as Accad suggests, for a shift from a reactionary to a constructive theology that moves beyond merely answering explicit challenges that Islam has posed to Christianity through the centuries. There is a major need for “developing a constructive and creative theology that addresses these questions at a

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<sup>5</sup> Carson, “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” 101.

<sup>6</sup> Carson, “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” 101.

<sup>7</sup> From the standpoint of Christian history the word ‘apologetic’ is derived from the Greek *ἀπολογία* which comes to mean an oral or written defense or reply to a specific attack made against one's position. This was the way the early Christians, such as Justin Martyr, used the word as reflected in his first and second “Apologies.” For more details about apologetic theology see Imasogie, “Christian Apologetic in a West African Context,” 129–44.

<sup>8</sup> Accad, “Middle Eastern Theology in Evangelical Perspective,” 156. For more details about the history of the nature of Middle Eastern Theology, specifically in relation to Muslims, see Accad, “Middle Eastern Theology in Evangelical Perspective,” 155.

more subconscious level... the hermeneutical questions of the rhetorical Islamic context.”<sup>9</sup> This study will put Accad’s suggestion into practice by developing a constructive and creative theology that addresses the hermeneutical questions of the rhetorical Islamic context.

This study, thus, calls for a *biblical* theology in an Islamic context, rather than a dogmatic or apologetic theology. Biblical theology, as defined by this study, is a theological discipline that “seeks to identify and understand the Bible’s theological message and themes, that is, what the Bible says about God and God’s relation to all creation, especially to humankind.”<sup>10</sup> Biblical theology is more concerned about what the biblical text communicates about God since the biblical texts themselves have a theological interest, telling the story of God with his own people. The very descriptor ‘biblical’ demonstrates that the nature of this theology is based on and begins with the biblical texts, rather than on church confession as dogmatic theology or points of contrast as with apologetics. What this means is that what sets biblical theology apart from other approaches is its sustained focus on the biblical text and its interpretation.

To begin with the biblical text is to avoid using the biblical text as a “reference point” and allowing Islamic theology preeminence over the process of biblical interpretation.<sup>11</sup> This study, therefore, suggests that exegesis, that is the interpretation of the biblical text, and theological reflection entail two separate steps. In terms of exegesis, we attempt to interpret the biblical text, defining its concepts and expressing them in a language that is understood in an Islamic context. In considering theology,

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<sup>9</sup> Accad, “Middle Eastern Theology in Evangelical Perspective,” 157.

<sup>10</sup> Mead, *Biblical Theology*, 1.

<sup>11</sup> To avoid confusion, it is important to note that since this study is written in a Western context, I chose to begin this study with defining the Islamic context that this study will address. This takes place to help the Western reader to be aware of this context. In practice, however, the exegetical work of Exod 32–34 took place before.

our goal is to reflect theologically on the themes and motifs of the biblical text addressing the Islamic theological rhetorical questions.

It is important, however, to pay attention to the three horizons that are involved in the process of communicating the biblical text. These three horizons are best described by Carson:

[One]... must attempt to fuse his own horizon of understanding with the horizon of understanding of the text; and having done that, he must attempt to bridge the gap between his own horizon of understanding, as it has been informed and instructed by the text, and the horizon of understanding of the person or people to whom he ministers. Strictly speaking, of course, this third horizon comes into play every time a person attempts to pass on to another person what he has learned from an original source: it is not necessary to envisage a cross-cultural target. But the problem is particularly acute when the second horizon must cross linguistic and cultural barriers to the third.<sup>12</sup>

This process, on the one hand, will reinforce avoiding using the text as a “reference point,” since it will assist the interpreter to understand the biblical text on its own terms, attempting to first discover “what it meant” before one attempts to think of “what it means” in the Islamic context. On the other hand, this process will emphasize the role of the interpreter, which will take place in the process of fusing one’s own horizon with the horizon of understanding the biblical text. Though, in practice, it is impossible to sharply separate all three horizons, the attempt must still take place.

In addition, while the church is held responsible under divine obligation to present its faith to the world and since the roots of its faith lie in the OT, biblical theologians are invited to engage in the valuable task of equipping the church for such a mission. Moreover, since Islam is the second largest world religion, this study will provide the church with a new model for presenting its faith in Islamic contexts, which will release the OT for a more powerful role in the life of the Church.

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<sup>12</sup> Carson, *Biblical Interpretation and the Church*, 17.

This study aims to bridge the gap between biblical theologians and missiologists by providing a biblical theology that takes into consideration the concerns that the world has in approaching the Bible. In this case, communicating the Christian faith is not just left to missional workers and missiologists but is demanded of biblical theologians.

In practice, finally, this study serves those Muslims who will follow the Qur'anic demand to read the Qur'an in light of the biblical literature (16:43). There are many ways to interpret the Qur'an. One of them is to interpret the Qur'an through the lenses of Muhammad's life.<sup>13</sup> The other is to interpret the Qur'an in light of biblical literature.<sup>14</sup> The biblical materials, according to the later method of interpretation, play a significant role in Islamic interpretation of the Qur'an that is at once significant and limited. It is significant in the sense that it sheds light on some Qur'anic texts. The biblical materials, however, are limited when these texts theologically act against the Qur'anic text. Thus, this study is intended to serve as a resource for Muslim readers interested in understanding the biblical texts and their theological interpretation. The ultimate goal is to help promote the knowledge of God through the biblical texts. This study, moreover, is a theological source for those engaged in ministry to Muslims to help them in their journey with Muslims to discover who God is in relationship to humanity.

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<sup>13</sup> Reynolds argues that the detailed information of the life of Muhammad one might assume should allow scholars to explain at least the literal meaning of the text but it does not. This is due to, Reynolds suggests, the intricate nature of these detailed sources. (*The Qur'an and its Biblical Subtext*, 1-3).

<sup>14</sup> Here Reynolds challenges in his book, *The Qur'an and its Biblical Subtext*, the traditional method of interpreting the Qur'an in light of the life of the Prophet. He instead argues that "the Qur'an should be appreciated in light of its conversation with earlier literature, in particular Biblical literature," and that "the exegetes had to turn to the Jews and Christians in order to make sense of their own scripture" (*The Qur'an and its Biblical Subtext*, 2).

## II. Methodology: Hermeneutical Agenda of Biblical Theology in an Islamic Context

It is noteworthy here to briefly mention the debate concerning the relationship between biblical theology and hermeneutics.<sup>15</sup> One of the issues in this debate is whether hermeneutics without presuppositions is possible. With this issue, scholars deal with not only the question of method but also the role of the reader in the process of interpretation, preferring to talk about the “fusion of two horizons” with the horizons being the text and the reader. It is believed that one’s own hermeneutic is already affected by one’s own beliefs. For example, it is one thing to approach the biblical text as a history of religion, and it is totally the opposite to approach it as the authoritative Word of God. Since the task of biblical theology is to describe the theological message of the biblical text, the relationship between the discipline and hermeneutics is inseparable. Hermeneutics is the matrix for biblical theology and the latter is the crown of the former. In this sense, biblical theology, Watson states, “is a theological, hermeneutical, and exegetical discipline, and its hermeneutical and exegetical dimensions are placed at the disposal of its overriding theological concern.”<sup>16</sup> The question now is what the hermeneutical agenda for writing biblical theology in an Islamic context.

### A. The Theological Nature of Biblical Texts

First, our hermeneutic must take into consideration the theological nature of the biblical texts. Throughout the Bible, God speaks in various times and in various ways (Heb 1:1–3). Biblical texts are “God-breathed” and authoritative to correct, reprove, and instruct (2 Tim 3:16). Thus, reading biblical texts means, in this case,

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<sup>15</sup> For more detail see Vanhoozer, “Exegesis and Hermeneutics,” 52–64.

<sup>16</sup> Watson, *Text and Truth*, vii.



that one must come to hear God's voice throughout their pages, rather than to study a history of religion.<sup>17</sup> It is this theological nature of biblical texts that makes possible a hermeneutic that is theological in nature.

The call for a theological interpretation of the biblical texts is issued due to the theological nature of the Bible, "striving to connect the Bible to theology once again."<sup>18</sup> Biblical texts are more than sources for reconstructing human history and religion. Rather, they are texts that testify to God's revelation of himself in history and his relationship with his own people and the world. To read the Bible as a historical human text is to search for better understanding of religion in history. To read the Bible as Scripture, the Word of God, is to search for the self-revelation of God in history. Vanhoozer accurately states:

Readings that remain on the historical, literary, or sociological levels cannot ultimately do justice of what the texts are actually about.... We believe that the principal interest of the Bible's authors, of the text itself, and of the original community of readers was theological: reading the Scripture therefore meant coming to hear God's word and to know God better. Our aim is...to recover the Bible's original governing interest.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, this study will proceed on the assumption that any method of interpretation of a biblical text should serve to discover its theological message.

## B. Historical-Cultural Context

Second, our hermeneutic must take into consideration the historical-cultural context. Striving for theology "should not blind the reader to the historical context of

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<sup>17</sup> Sweeney affirms that, "In contrast to the prior emphasis on the historical context of the canon, biblical interpretation must take place in relation to the context of the Christian canon, including both the Old and the New Testaments, as the normative scriptures of Christianity by which God addresses the world ("Canonical Criticism," 46).

<sup>18</sup> Trimm, "Evangelicals, Theology, and Biblical Interpretation," 312.

<sup>19</sup> Vanhoozer, *Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament*, 21–2.

the text.”<sup>20</sup> Recognizing the fact that biblical texts were directly delivered from God and theologically driven, one must be reminded that these biblical texts come to secondhand through human personalities embedded within particular times and cultures. Thus, the biblical texts, on the one hand, are divine in origin and theologically driven and on the other hand they are “particularized to unique historical situation in language and forms understandable to that audience.”<sup>21</sup> The interpretation of the biblical text then requires understanding as much as possible its historical-cultural background.

It is noteworthy to mention the tension in the discipline of biblical theology between the two hermeneutical principles discussed above. Boda explains this tension “between whether the discipline is concerned with reflection on the shape of the theology of the Old Testament or delineation of the history of religion depicted in the Old Testament text itself.”<sup>22</sup> The emphasis on one category over the other stands against the biblical characteristics of revelation revealed by itself. The NT makes it explicit that the biblical revelation is communicated through a combination of divine origin and human agency (2 Pet 1:10; Heb 1:1–3; 2 Tim 3:14–17), and the two must be juxtaposed.

### C. Literary Aspect of Texts

Third, our hermeneutic must take into consideration the literary aspects of the text. The Bible contains a variety and diversity of literary forms. Prose and poetry are the two main styles of literature. Vanhoozer writes, “Every text is a kind of something, a particular kind of communicative act, and the genre of the text is often

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<sup>20</sup> Trimm, “Evangelicals, theology, and Biblical Interpretation,” 319.

<sup>21</sup> Boda, “Biblical Theology and Old Testament Interpretation,” 129.

<sup>22</sup> Boda, “Biblical Theology and Old Testament Interpretation,” 130.

the best indication of the kind of point the author is making.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore, recognizing the type of literary form of a particular text helps the interpreter to use the right tool examining it.

One of the Bible’s literary forms is prose, more specifically narrative. As Longman explains, “Narrative prose tells a story...its events are related to one another by an explicit or implicit cause-and-effect structure.”<sup>24</sup> In this sense, Exod 32–34 can be seen as a narrative since its events are related to one another to demonstrate the crisis of worshipping the golden calf and God and Moses’ effort to deal with this crisis.<sup>25</sup>

#### D. Canonical Form<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Vanhoozer, “Exegesis and Hermeneutics,” 59.

<sup>24</sup> Longman, “Biblical Narrative,” 70.

<sup>25</sup> For Von Rad, Exod 32–33 is indeed secondary materials that are more closely blended with the settlement tradition than is the account of the theophany and the covenant, “which offered much greater resistance to such interpolation and redaction because of its own massive importance and the gravity of its particular interest” (*The Problem of the Hexateuch*, 18). This conclusion is based on verses that speak of the exodus from Egypt (32:7), the miracles associated with the exodus (32:11b), and the command of Yahweh to leave Mount Sinai and go to the land that he promised to give to the patriarchs (33:1). Having said that, Von Rad, in his massive *Old Testament Theology*, states that Exod.32–33 is a combination of “several smaller units of tradition which, while certainly belonging to Sinai, have only a loose connexion with the actual revelation itself” (*Old Testament Theology*, 189). Nevertheless, he sees the golden calf story as a great narrative that has in itself a complete whole that is *skillfully* linked to the following section in which “sin has further consequences” (*The Problem of the Hexateuch*, 17). Nevertheless, the tradition must at one time have been independent and have a long history of its own before it was put into its present context. As a story, it has organic wholeness and purpose of its own but “it has nothing in common with what precedes and follows it except that these events, too, take a place at Sinai” (*The Problem of the Hexateuch*, 17). It is worth noting that the majority of scholars see only one original source in ch. 32, that includes vv. 1–6, 15–20, and 35. Verses 4–17, 21–24, 25–29, and 30–34 are later interpolations which have been joined to this earlier source.

<sup>26</sup> The two principal practitioners of this approach are Childs Brevard and James A. Sanders. Even though both are practitioners of the same approach, they practice it differently. James A. Sanders’ canonical criticism is similar to Childs’ in that it emphasizes the interpretation of the biblical text in relation to the canon. However, it differs from Childs by emphasizing a broader understanding of canon. While Childs emphasizes the Masoretic text as the basis to understand the Old Testament, Sanders notices “the plurality of canon, including not only the Jewish Tanakh represented by the MT, but the various forms in Protestant Christianity, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and others, as well” (Sweeney, “Canonical Criticism,” 47). Contrary to Sanders, Childs does not seek to determine the hermeneutic employed in the canonical process. Rather, the stance developed by Childs focuses on the shape and function of the final canonical text (Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, 38). Cranford notes that “Childs advocates the canon as final product as adopted by the early Christian community of faith, whereas Sanders insists on the canon as process as his canonical context” (Cranford, “Modern New Testament Interpretation,” 148). Though Childs and Sanders agree that their “common concern with canon cannot be reduced to another technique” (Sanders, *Canon and*

Fourth, our hermeneutic must take into consideration the biblical texts in their final forms. The primary context for the interpretation of a biblical text is not the pre-canonical form or collection of the text. Rather, it is the biblical text in its present shape. What this means is that the reading of such text is driven by canonical form.<sup>27</sup> This is a key presupposition for biblical theological study of the OT, that is, “the form of the text in view as well as the context for reading this text is one identified as canonical within a community of faith.”<sup>28</sup>

This way of reading seeks to understand an individual text in light of its current literary context. The first step in a serious biblical hermeneutic is to take into consideration the larger context within which the passage is found. It is important to note that there are many levels of contexts. The context of a sentence is a paragraph. The context of a passage has a logical relationship with materials that come immediately before and after it. The context of a chapter is the surrounding chapters and “ultimately, the whole book in which a passage appears is its controlling context.”<sup>29</sup> The second step is to read the text within the broader canonical witness of that text. This step “seeks to discern the ways in which an individual text or biblical

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*Community*, 18) Childs is unhappy with the term ‘canonical criticism’, which he appends to Sanders. Childs states that, “I am unhappy with this term because it implies that the canonical approach is considered another historical critical technique which can take its place alongside of source criticism, form criticism, rhetorical criticism, and similar methods. I do not envision the approach to canon in this light. Rather, the issue at stake in relation to the canon turns on establishing a stance from the Bible can be read as sacred scripture. (Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 82). It is worth noting two observations of our brief discussion. First, one of the major challenges to this approach is the disagreement between canonical critics on their understanding of the canon. As mentioned above, while Childs defines the canon as the MT, Sanders takes a broader understanding of the canon. Second, while Childs and Sanders have a common concern not to reduce the canonical approach to another technique and challenge historical methods to some degree both make significant use of the historical-critical method.

<sup>27</sup> By using the term “canonical,” this study means that our approach to the text moves beyond the final redaction of a text to the point when the text was accepted as canonical by the church. Canonical critics are more concerned with the text in its final form than the developmental process of that text. Moreover, meaning does not lie behind the text or in the redactional work of the authors or editors. Rather, “[t]he locus meaning is the canonical text which was produced within and taken up into the life of the believing communities” (Tate, *Biblical Interpretation*, 83). Moreover, this study up to this point follows Childs’s approach as “less to invention of a new methodology and more to the discovery of a new perspective on Scripture” (Sheppard, “Childs Brevard,” 302).

<sup>28</sup> Boda, “Biblical Theology,” 131.

<sup>29</sup> Eckleberger, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 156.

book contributes to and participate within the broader theological witness of the Bible.”<sup>30</sup>

#### E. The Context of a Muslim Reader

Fifth, our hermeneutic must take into consideration the context of the reader, the Muslim. Since the Bible shows itself “to be culturally located and deeply relevant to all cultures, it is our task to take into consideration the context of those who will read it.”<sup>31</sup> This consideration is what Vanhoozer calls “the turn to context.” He explains:

Biblical interpretation involves text and context, and the issues not only in commentaries but in particular shapes of community life. Thanks to their new appreciation for context, theologians now see their task in terms of not only theoretical deliberation but also practical liberation. What I will call the “turn to context” has resulted in a more vital and practical interpretation of Scripture in which understanding is a matter of loving as well knowing God with all one’s heart, mind, and strength.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, if the message of the Bible is unchanging, “then local cultural forms are merely vehicles for conveying the essential, permanent deposit of truth.”<sup>33</sup> Therefore, the “turn to context,” hermeneutically speaking, requires interpreting biblical texts with attention given to Islamic theology and culture. For instance, as Accad notes, Arab graduate theological students in the Middle East, due to the fact that most graduate programs and even some undergraduate programs are taught in English, have adopted a limited theological vocabulary in the Arabic language, and these limitations are transferred to the Church. This limits the ability of the Middle Eastern Church “to engage their Arab Muslim culture sensitively and fluently.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Boda, “Biblical Theology,” 132.

<sup>31</sup> Brown, *Scriptures as Communication*, 30.

<sup>32</sup> Vanhoozer, “One Rule to Rule Them All,” 93.

<sup>33</sup> Vanhoozer, “One Rule to Rule Them All,” 100.

<sup>34</sup> Accad, “Middle Eastern Theology in Evangelical Perspective,” 156.

However, this is not just the case in Middle Eastern/Islamic contexts. Rather, the Western Church today faces the same challenge, though on a different level, especially after massive immigration from the Islamic world to North America. Western churches are experiencing a new reality, which academics must take into consideration and help the church to express its faith. For instance, the use of the term 'Trinity' by the Western Church to describe the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit needs to be evaluated once again, particularly in relation to communicating the biblical text in an Islamic context. The use of this term may give the impression that the Western church, as well as the church around the world, believes in three gods! But our concern here must move beyond the linguistic expression to the theological meaning of this term. Even when we use terms that are linguistically recognizable, the theological meaning of these terms must be defined, taking into consideration the meaning of the same term in Islamic theological thinking. For example, both Muslims and Christians believe in a merciful God, nevertheless, they have their own definitions of how God's mercy works.

Writing a biblical theology in context, generally speaking, requires an understanding of the world of this particular context in order to offer the incarnation of biblical truth in an accessible form. This requires biblical theologians to possess insightful knowledge of Islamic theological thinking and culture. It is not, nevertheless, an easy task to define Islamic theology.

There is a debate among Muslim scholars regarding the definition of Islamic theology. Some Muslim scholars examine and treat Islamic theology as a sub-field of Islamic legal studies due to the link between Islamic law and theology, while others distinguish between the two disciplines by studying theological themes and legal

topics separately. In both cases, A. E. Souaiaia argues, Islamic theology could only be understood in a context “radically different from its counterpart in Christianity.”<sup>35</sup>

While the term *theology* in general denotes a systematic study and teaching about the nature of God, Muslims have not given the term *theology* the same definition.<sup>36</sup> Muslim theologians have been more concerned about religious practice and jurisprudence (*Fiqh*). *Fiqh* is a term for Islamic law implemented by legal experts from among the *Ulama* (professors of knowledge). *Fiqh* involves Muslims’ commitment to understanding Allah’s law and making it relevant to daily living, and “it extends its reach from matters of worship to detailed aspects of everyday conduct.”<sup>37</sup>

*Kalam* (speech), on the other hand, is the term used for Islamic theology to reflect somehow its Western counterpart.<sup>38</sup> This Islamic theology is more dialectic in nature, “because the writings in this area of Islamic learning were originally composed as a set of pro and con arguments concerning disputed matters of doctrine.”<sup>39</sup> It is based mainly on the Qur’an and the Hadith. Some think that this form of theology, or *Kalam*, was influenced by Greek philosophy and Christian theology. Others believe that the origin of this discipline began with Muslim communities and then developed as a result of the interaction with Greek philosophy and Christian theology.<sup>40</sup>

Unlike theologians, Muslim philosophers did not limit themselves to the Qur’an and the Hadith in making their arguments. Rather they maintained that

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<sup>35</sup> For a detailed discussion on this matter see Souaiaia, “Reasoned and Inspired Beliefs: A Study of Islamic Theology,” 331–394.

<sup>36</sup> For a detailed study on the development of dogma and dialectical theology in Islam see Rahman, *Islam*, 85–99. On the emergence of Islamic theological identity see also Rippin, *Muslims*, 73–87.

<sup>37</sup> Campo, “Fiqh [Jurisprudence],” 238.

<sup>38</sup> For the development of *Ilm Al-Kalam* (Science of Speech) see Gardet, “*Ilm Al-Kalam*” (Science of Speech), 1141–50.

<sup>39</sup> Campo, “Theology,” 668.

<sup>40</sup> For more details on Islamic theology see Campo, “Theology,” 667–70.

“knowledge could also be acquired from non-Islamic sources, particularly ‘the ancient’—meaning Greeks such as Plato, Aristotle, and their heirs, the Neoplatonists.”<sup>41</sup> However, those Muslim philosophers seek theological principles through dialogue.

Islamic theology is dependent on the interpretation of the Qur’an since the Qur’an is the most reliable source for doctrine according to Muslims. The interpretation of the Qur’an can be seen as the first manifestation of Islamic thought. Souaiaia explains:

While attempting to determine the function or purpose of theology in Islam, it should be noted that the death of the Prophet Muhammad and the need to justify and validate the acts and activities of the individual and the community all contributed to the emerging of what can be characterized as theological themes at the early stage of the life of the Muslim community (*ummah*). In other words, they needed answers to questions regarding the status of Muslims who fight each other, validation of and meaning for their personal beliefs, a conceptualization of Allah, an explanation of the doctrine of accountability that was introduced by the concepts of reward and punishment (“*jaza*” and “*adhab*”), and an articulation of the nature and extent of the Hereafter. However, since the Qur’an provides guidance on most of the above topics, early theological discussions focused on the proper understanding of its verses.<sup>42</sup>

Some of the Qur’an is written as apologetic theology as a result of a dialogue with Jews and Christians in Arabia during the life of Mohammad. There is, therefore, little need to write another “systematic theology” to explain the faith. For instance, the narrative of the golden calf in ch. 7 ends with the statement that Allah will bestow his mercy on those who will believe in reasoning and miracles. According to Al Sh’arawi, when Jews heard that, they said, “We also fear Allah.” Allah then responded by asking, “Do you fear Allah according to what Moses tells you?” If so, you should believe in Mohammed since Moses taught you to believe in the messenger

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<sup>41</sup> Campo, “Theology,” 668.

<sup>42</sup> Souaiaia, “Reasoned and Inspired Beliefs,” 334.



Mohammed! Therefore, Allah revealed that verse that follows as it says: “Those who will follow the prophet Mohamed...” (7:157).<sup>43</sup>

Indeed, Islamic theology is radically different from its counterpart in Christianity. While Christian theologians are more concerned with writing about God in his relationship with human beings, Muslims theologians are more concerned with religious practices and jurisprudence. Since Allah is somehow unknown in Islam, Muslims are more committed to understanding not the nature of God but rather His law. Since God reveals himself in many different ways in the Bible, as we will demonstrate in the next chapters, Christian theologians are more committed to discovering the revelatory biblical God. Thus, the nature of Islamic religion as a legalistic religion and the nature of unknown Allah in Islam are the main reasons why this difference exists.

Souaiaia, however, argues that the decline of Mu'tazilite theology contributes to the issue. He explains:

The decline of Mu'tazilite theology and the emergence of Ash'arite doctrinal thinking have reduced Muslims' understanding of God [Allah] to a quasi-negative theology. It is negative in the sense that it emphasizes what God [Allah] is not rather than affirms what He is. It is true that for Muslims God [Allah] is not exactly known by what He is not. However, He remains an unknown who is recognized only through attributes; this distinction makes the end result of the theological endeavors undertaken by Muslim scholarship fundamentally different from that in Christian traditions.<sup>44</sup>

Since there is no separation between the religion and the state in Islam, and since Islam controls every aspect of life, understanding Islamic thought requires both *Kalam* and *Fiqh*. This is due to the link between Islamic law and theology and the fact that Islamic law is based on the Qur'an and reflects the Islamic understanding of Allah in relation to creation. This study, thus, will use the term “Islamic theology” to

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<sup>43</sup> Al Sh'arawi, *Khwater [Thoughts]*, 7:156.

<sup>44</sup> Souaiaia, “Reasoned and Inspired Beliefs,” 233.

refer to Islamic theological thinking, which is based on both *Kalam* and *Fiqh*. It will depend heavily on interpretations of the Qur'an in order to understand Islamic thought. In addition, it will bring into the discussion the most influential Islamic theologians, philosophers, and jurists such as Abu Hamid Al Ghazali.

It becomes clear that we are invited to enter into the Islamic texts, the Qur'an, and the Hadith, by writing a biblical theology of the Old Testament in an Islamic context. In their approach to the Qur'an, Christians and Jews, however, have been concerned with its origin. The question asked of the Qur'anic passages parallel to biblical stories have been, as Glaser explains, more to do with historical development than with the theological relationship between the texts. They question where Muhammad found this version of the story rather than how the Qur'an comments on the Bible. Glaser write, "The answer has usually been found in similarities between the Qur'anic stories and Talmudic sources."<sup>45</sup>

The Qur'anic materials, moreover, have been studied against the biblical materials or in comparison with them. It is accurate for Glaser to conclude that Qur'anic stories are often read with little reference to the Islamic commentary on them. Glaser, therefore, suggests that

We move toward seeing the Qur'anic versions, as they are read and discussed by Muslims, as theological discourse within the framework of the stories that can function as comment on the Biblical text and Judeo-Christian interpretation of it. That is, we can treat them as an Islamic midrash, but with an important difference. Where midrash is but human discussion of the authoritative text, the Qur'an claims absolute authority in itself.<sup>46</sup>

This study therefore suggests that an attempt to write biblical theology in an Islamic context must take into consideration the Islamic interpretation of the Qur'an,

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<sup>45</sup> Glaser, "Qur'anic Challenges for Genesis," 4.

<sup>46</sup> Glaser, "Qur'anic Challenges for Genesis," 4.

attempting to understand and listen to Islamic theological thinking which “can provoke questions that produce new insights.”<sup>47</sup>

This study, thus, proceeds on the assumption that “although the stories are recognizably about the same people and the same events, they are used so differently that they tell very different views of Allah and humanity.”<sup>48</sup> This study, therefore, will be more concerned with the theological relationship between the texts addressing the Qur’anic concerns to the Bible rather than the historical development of the texts or comparative studies of biblical and Qur’anic stories that explain similarities and differences between the two texts. We need to read, indeed, the other’s story and understand the Islamic view of Allah and humanity. Glaser is accurate in stating, “It is only *after* this that we will be able to tell our own story in a way that really communicates.”<sup>49</sup>

Though there are many resources for understanding Islamic theological thinking, the Qur’an and the Hadith remain the fundamental sources for theological thinking, and they are fundamental for legal matters as well. As a textual study, examining Islamic theological thinking will take place by looking at the Islamic scriptures, the Qur’an and the Hadith.

To this end, this study will use various Islamic resources for the interpretation of the Qur’an. First, this study will use classical Islamic interpretations of the Qur’an such as: Al Tabari, Ibn Kathir, Al Zamakhshari, and Al Razi. Second, this study will use Shiites’ interpretations such as: Al Tabarsi and Al Tusi. Third, this study will use contemporary interpretations such as Al Alusi, Al Shara’awi, and Tantawi. Fourth,

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<sup>47</sup> Glaser, “Qur’anic Challenges for Genesis,” 7.

<sup>48</sup> Glaser, “Qur’anic Challenges for Genesis,” 4.

<sup>49</sup> Glaser, “Qur’anic Challenges for Genesis,” 16.

this study will consider the Islamic philosophers and thinkers such as Abu Hamid Al Ghazali.<sup>50</sup>

It is significant to recognize the fact that there are various theological schools in Islam. The main theological schools are the Sunni schools (Ash'arite representing mainstream Islam), the Mu'tazilite schools (characterized by rationalism), and the Kharijite school (known for its radicalism and fundamentalism). Among all these theological schools the schools of Mu'tazilite and the Ash'arite are the most elaborate and distinctive.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, this study will limit its scope to the theological schools of Mu'tazilite and the Ash'arite. The differences between the two schools will be mentioned throughout this section when it is needed.

### III. Structure of This Study

This study will be divided into three major chapters. The first chapter will address the hermeneutical questions of the rhetorical Islamic context by examining Islamic theological thinking particularly in relation to the golden calf narrative (Exod 32–34). This chapter will set forth the Islamic context that will be addressed by the biblical text of Exod 32–34. The second chapter, “Exegetical Analysis of Exodus 32–34,” will focus on the theological interpretation of Exod 32–34 in its covenant-tabernacle context, showing how the narrative of the golden calf richly contributes and authoritatively speaks in Islamic context. The third chapter, “Biblical Theology of Exod 32–34 in Islamic Context,” will provide a biblical theology of the narrative, addressing the hermeneutical questions of the Islamic theological thinking using a

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<sup>50</sup> Abu Hamid Al Ghazali (1058–1111) is one of the most famous Muslim intellectuals in Islamic history. His significant work on Islamic theology, philosophy, and mysticism had a lasting effect on medieval Muslim thought. For more details on his life and work see Campo, “Ghazali, Abu Hamid Al,” 261–262.

<sup>51</sup> For a detailed description of these schools see Moucarry, *The Search for Forgiveness*, 18–19.

thematic approach that follows, to some extent, the literary-canonical shape of the text.

#### IV. Definition of Terms

It is essential before we turn to the first chapter to define our terms.

1. *Theology* is the term used by this study to refer to the study of the nature of God in his relationship to humanity as revealed by the biblical text. It will be also used by this study to refer to the Islamic understanding of the nature of God, though the nature of this theology is totally different in Islam from its encounter partner in Christianity as it will be discussed below.
2. *Exegesis* is the process by which one comes to interpret the biblical text in order to discover the theological message of that text regarding God in his relationship to humanity.
3. *Hermeneutics* is understood by this study as the science, theories and methods used to interpret the various types of biblical texts found in the Bible.
4. The *Qur'an*, according to Muslims, is the Islamic divine, sacred, written revelation that was dictated to the prophet Mohammad by Allah through the angel Gabriel.
5. *Hadith* is the collections of sayings of the prophet Mohammad and it is the basis of jurisprudence for Islamic law.
6. *Allah* is simply the Arabic word for the divine being and it is actually "predates Islam."<sup>52</sup> Both Christians and Muslims use this term in their worship referring to God. For the purpose of this study, the name *Allah* will be used to

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<sup>52</sup> Moucarry, *The Search for Forgiveness*, 16.

refer to the Divine being described in Islam, while God will be used to refer to the Divine being described in the Bible.

## Chapter 2: Islamic Context

This chapter will serve as an introduction to Islamic theological thinking, particularly addressing the questions of the rhetorical Islamic context by examining Islamic theological thinking in relation to the golden calf narrative (Exod 32–34).

As it is understood by this study, the narrative in Exod 32–34 is mainly concerned with sin and its remedy in a covenant-tabernacle framework. Since sin is understood in a covenant-tabernacle framework, it is best described as an act of disobedience through the violation of the commandments as well as a disloyalty to the covenant. The remedy for sin includes the intercession of the passionate mediator, just punishment, and the very nature of a gracious God who is merciful and compassionate. Thus, this chapter's examination of Islamic theological thinking will be exclusively related to sin, its punishment and remedy; intercession; covenant; and the character of Allah.

This chapter will be divided into three sections. Since Allah's character is understood in light of his attributes and names in Islam, which is explained in Allah's revelation in the Qur'an and the teaching of the prophet in the Hadith, the first section will briefly discuss Allah's character through his names, the Merciful and Most Merciful, the Forgiver and All Forgiving, the Just, the Acceptor of Repentance, and the Patient. The second section will highlight themes in Islamic theological thinking in relation to the golden calf narrative, mainly intercession and *shirk* (idolatry). The third section will survey the interpretations of the two major narratives in the form of the story of the golden calf in the Qur'an, in chapters 7 and 22. To the first section we now turn.

## I. Allah's Character: Attributes and Names<sup>1</sup>

### A. Allah is *Al Rahman* and *Al Rahim*: The Merciful the Most Merciful

One of the most well-known Islamic phrases, in which Allah manifests himself as the Most Merciful is in the *Basmala*: “in the name of Allah, the ever-Merciful, the all Merciful.” These words are found at the beginning of every chapter in the Qur'an except the ninth. Many Muslims recite the *Basmala* before any activity. The *Basmala* obtains its significance according to Sunni Muslims from the fact that it summarizes the whole Islamic faith, “because in it Allah gives both his essence and attributes.”<sup>2</sup>

Chawkat Moucarray investigates the meaning of the word *rahma* (mercy) in Arabic by examining its root. He states that “the word comes from the same root as *Rahim* (womb) which suggests that the relationship between a mother and her child in some way parallel that between Allah and humankind.”<sup>3</sup>

Allah's mercy in the Qur'an is understood in terms of provision and benefactive acts. Allah, the Creator, is merciful in that he “fulfills the needs of his creatures who depend on his guidance and help.”<sup>4</sup> Ghazali emphasizes this fact as he explains:

Perfect mercy is pouring out benefaction to those in need, and directing it to them, for their care; and inclusive mercy is when it embraces deserving and undeserving alike. The mercy of Allah —great and glorious—is both perfect and inclusive: perfect inasmuch as it wants to

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<sup>1</sup> For a valid study on the nature of Allah and the relationship between his essence and attributes see Gardet, “Allah,” 406–17. Gardet provides an excellent summary of the Qur'anic teaching about God. He explains that the Qur'anic teaching about God is “entirely centered on its affirmation of Oneness, Unity, of transcendence and subsistence, of absolute perfection. The forbidding inaccessibility of the divine nature is resolutely maintained; God, omniscient and 'near' can be known only by His Word, by the Names, the attributes and acts of His paramount (p. 409).”

<sup>2</sup> Campo, “Basmala,” 94.

<sup>3</sup> Moucarray, *The Search for Forgiveness*, 25. This may sound similar to the Hebrew word *rahum*, but the challenge with Moucarray's suggestion is that though the language supports this notion, the concept is far away from Islamic theological thinking. See also Gimaret, “Rahma”, 398–9.

<sup>4</sup> Moucarray, *The Search for Forgiveness*, 26.



fulfill the needs of those in need and does meet them; and inclusive inasmuch as it embraces both deserving and undeserving, encompassing this world and the next, and includes bare necessities and needs, and special gifts over and above them. So He is utterly and truly merciful.<sup>5</sup>

In this sense, Allah's mercy is not limited in its scope; it is available to everyone and all of creation.

Allah's mercy in the Qur'an is also understood as the source of forgiveness; the latter "flows from Allah's mercy like a river from a mountain."<sup>6</sup> In addition, on the Day of Judgment the reward for every good deed will be doubled due to Allah's mercy. It says that "Allah is never unjust in the least degree: if there is any good [done], He doubles it, and gives from His own presence a great reward" (4:40). The Hadith asserts that good works are weightier than bad ones: "when someone excels in their religion, then their good deeds will be awarded ten times to seven hundred times for each good deed whereas a bad deed will be recorded as it is."<sup>7</sup>

Allah's gracious mercy rewards the good deeds; he nevertheless is just with respect to evil deeds. Allah's mercy is much greater than his anger. Muslims are called to love Allah by following the Prophet so that Allah will love them in return and forgive them since "Allah is the all merciful and the all forgiving" (3:31).

However, Moucarray argues that in Islam Allah is full of mercy but not compassionate because, "unlike human creatures, he is not subject to emotion."<sup>8</sup> Moucarray cites Ghazali's point of view on this issue, which, in my opinion, shows how Muslim theologians, generally speaking, struggle in their understanding of this issue. Ghazali states, "Mercy is not without a painful empathy which affects the merciful, and moves him to satisfy the needs of the one receiving mercy. Yet the

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<sup>5</sup> Ghazali, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, 53.

<sup>6</sup> Moucarray, *The Search for Forgiveness*, 28. See (Qur'an 3:157; 7:23, 155; 23:109; 39:53).

<sup>7</sup> Moucarray, *The Search for Forgiveness*, 29.

<sup>8</sup> Moucarray, *The Search for Forgiveness*, 29.

Lord—praise be to Him Most High—transcends that, so you may think that this diminishes the meaning of mercy.”<sup>9</sup>

Ghazali argues that Allah’s mercy in Islam is perfect. He presents a threefold argument:

1. Although God’s mercy is not based on compassion, it perfectly achieves its aims; that is, it meets our needs: ‘the perfection of mercy depends on the perfection of its fruits.’
2. God is powerful; hence he does not suffer: ‘the suffering of the merciful only stems from a weakness and defects in himself.’
3. God’s mercy is pure mercy, it is only concerned with the sufferer: ‘[the] one who is merciful out of empathy and suffering comes close to intending to alleviate his own suffering and sensitivity by his actions, thereby looking after himself and seeking his own goals.’<sup>10</sup>

#### B. Allah is *Al Ghafour*: The Forgiver

In the Qur’an, forgiveness of sins is ascribed only to Allah; it is “a divine prerogative” (3:135).<sup>11</sup> In the context of the golden calf story in the Qur’an, Allah is always being the “best of those who forgive” (7:155).

The prophets and the angels intercede on behalf of others, pleading to Allah to forgive the sins of the people. Examples include Noah (71:28), Abraham (9:114; 14:41), Jacob (12:98), Jesus (5:118), and the angels (40:7; 42:5). Mohammad too interceded for his people: “Know, therefore, that there is no Allah but Allah, and ask forgiveness for your fault, and for the men and women who believe: for Allah knows how you move about and how you dwell in your homes” (47:19; cf. 4:64). Al Razi comments: when Mohammad seeks Allah’s forgiveness for himself this means that he asks Allah to help him not to commit a sin. When Mohammad pleads for the people it is for their sin.<sup>12</sup> For Al Sh’arawi, what Allah says to Mohammad is in case he

<sup>9</sup> Ghazali, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, 53.

<sup>10</sup> Ghazali, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, 53–4.

<sup>11</sup> Moucarray, *The Search for Forgiveness*, 38.

<sup>12</sup> Al Razi, *Al Tafsir Al Kabir [The Vast Interpretation]*, on 47:19.

commits a sin in the future and this does not mean Mohammad is seeking Allah's pardon for something wrong he has done.<sup>13</sup>

Allah always invites people to repent (3:133), and He always forgives their sins if they seek His forgiveness. The promises of Allah to forgive all the time are to prove that He is obligated to forgive in order to be Allah. Moucarry explains:

[Allah] ought to forgive in order to be God. To forgive is an essential characteristic of being divine... Thus the relationship between the Creator and his creatures ought to be that of forgiver –forgiven: if you were not to commit sin, God would sweep you out of existence and He would replace you by those people who would commit sin and seek forgiveness from God, and He would have pardoned them.<sup>14</sup>

### C. Allah the Just<sup>15</sup>

Although Allah is the Most Merciful and Forgiving, his justice requires that we should be punished. Allah is more gracious with good deeds, since he has in store ten like it and even more. However, Allah is very strict with wrongdoing, since he calls people to account for it. This dilemma, according to Moucarry divides Muslims into two groups:

The Sunnites emphasize that God [Allah] is sovereign, and thus he does whatever he chooses. He has the absolute right to forgive or to punish. If he forgives, no-one can doubt his justice; and if he punishes, no-one can question his mercy....The Mu'tazilites take the view that, first and foremost, God [Allah] is just. He shows his mercy only in as much as his justice is not undermined. Hence divine justice controls and restrict divine mercy.<sup>16</sup>

Since Allah will punish every single sin; not only faith but also good deeds demonstrated in obedience to his law are required in order for human beings to be admitted into paradise. When these two conditions are met, a Muslim will be rewarded and he or she will deserve Allah's forgiveness:

<sup>13</sup> Al Sh'arawi, *Khwater [Thoughts]*, on 47:9.

<sup>14</sup> Moucarry, *The Search for Forgiveness*, 41.

<sup>15</sup> See Tyan, "Adl" (Just), 209–10.

<sup>16</sup> Moucarry, *The Search for Forgiveness*, 46.

“Allah promised forgiveness and great reward to those who believe and do deeds of righteousness” (5:9; cf. 8:4; 22:50; 34:4).<sup>17</sup> Wahbah Al Zuhayli comments that Allah promised great rewards to the believers who will perform good works: covering their sins and paradise.<sup>18</sup>

#### D. Allah is the *Halim*: The Patient

In the Qur’an, Allah is described as *halim*, which means “patient.” Allah’s patience appears in judgment delayed; he does not hasten judgment on those who disobey him. Allah “observes the disobedience of the rebellious and notices the opposition to the command, yet anger does not incite him nor wrath seize him, nor do haste and recklessness move him to rush to take vengeance, although he is utterly capable of doing that.”<sup>19</sup> Zuhayli ties Allah’s mercy with his forbearance. Allah’s patience is an expression of his boundless mercy, which appears in delaying punishment (6:147).<sup>20</sup> The purpose of Allah’s forbearance is to give those who disobey him a chance to repent.

#### E. Allah is *Al Tawwab*: The Most-Returning

The divine name *Tawwab* is not easy to translate from Arabic. It is derived from the verb *taba*, which literally means “to repent” or “to come back.” This divine name occurs 12 times in the Qur’an.<sup>21</sup> With one exception it is always used in reference to Allah.<sup>22</sup> In these verses, Allah as *tawwab* is mainly understood in three different ways. In Zuhayli’s comment on 110:3, he portrays Allah as the Most

<sup>17</sup> The Arabic word for “reward” in this verse, *ajr*, literally means “wage.”

<sup>18</sup> Zuhayli, *Concise Interpretation of the Grand Qur’an*, 109.

<sup>19</sup> Ghazali, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, 99.

<sup>20</sup> Zuhayli, *Concise Interpretation of the Grand Qur’an*, 149.

<sup>21</sup> See (2:37, 54, 128, 160, 222; 4:16, 64; 9:104, 118; 24:10; 49:12; 110:3).

<sup>22</sup> The exception is 2:222, where the term is used to refer to people as “those who turn [in repentance] to Allah.”

Accepting of those who repent. For Razi, since Allah created Adam, he has turned graciously to people. He demonstrated that with Adam in the Qur'an (2:35–37). When Adam and Eve disobeyed Allah in Paradise, “Adam received from his Lord words [and repented], Allah accepted his repentance [*taba*]. Indeed, it is he who is the Acceptor of repentance [*tawwab*], the Merciful [*rahim*].” For Razi, this means first that Allah returns mercifully and graciously back to his people when they repent, since he turned away from people when they first turned away from him. Second, if a person disobeys Allah every hour and then repents, Allah will accept his repentance even if this person persists on doing so the rest of his or her life since Allah is the Most Merciful and Gracious. Samat translates this divine name as “The Acceptor of Repentance; the Relenting.” For Talib Samat, Allah, on the one hand, is the One who accepts repentance and forgives the sinners who repent. On the other hand, Allah is the one who brings sinners to regret their action and who puts them back on the right path.<sup>23</sup>

#### F. Allah is Sovereign

Sunni theology emphasizes that Allah has every right to show mercy and to punish. He is entirely free to do whatever he chooses. Allah will decide when he will grant forgiveness to those who deserve to be punished. The Qur'an states that “Allah will not be questioned for his act but they [his creatures] will be questioned for theirs” (21:23). Al Zuhayli explains that Allah cannot be questioned for his acts for he is the Most Great and because of his authority. But his creatures will be questioned because they are his slaves and owned by the Most High.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Samat, *The 99 Most Eminent Names of Allah*, 296.

<sup>24</sup> Zuhayli, *Concise Interpretation of the Grand Qur'an*, 324.

Allah's sovereignty gives him the right to choose whether he forgives or condemns regardless of their deeds. In other words, Allah's decisions are not determined by his creatures. Allah "will forgive whom he will and he will punish whom he will" (2:284; cf. 3:129; 5:20, 43; 48:14).

## II. Themes in Islamic Thought

### A. *Shafaa'a*: Intercession<sup>25</sup>

In Islam, intercession involves the theological principle that prayers and rituals on another's behalf have the power to bring forgiveness especially on the Day of Judgment. There are two main Arabic terms that express the idea of intercession, *shafaa* and *tawassul*, "the former emphasizing the substitutionary aspect and the latter the mediating aspect of intercession."<sup>26</sup> Muslim theologians are in disagreement on the power of intercessory prayer prior to the Day of Judgment. Their positions are well explained by Bigelow as follows:

Several passages [in the Qur'an] indicate that Allah grants intercessory power to those whom he chooses (Q 2:255; 10:339; 19:87; 20:109; 21:28; 34:23; 40:7; 42:5; 53:26)...However, several other verses in the Quran emphasize the futility of appealing to intercessors of any kind on the parts of the wrong-doers (Q 6:94; 7:53; 21:28; 30:13; 36:23; 39:43; 40:18; 74:48) and that the privilege of intercession is the sole province of Allah (Q 6:51; 6:70; 10:18; 32:4; 39:44).<sup>27</sup>

In her discussion on this topic, Anna Bigelow also speaks of the role of Muhammad and the saints in relation to intercession. Muslims are divided into two groups. The first group believes in the ability of Muhammad and the saints to bring the prayers of common people closer to Allah. This notion is challenged by the second group,

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<sup>25</sup> For a detailed study on this theme see, Schimmel, "Shafa'a," 177–79

<sup>26</sup> Bigelow, "Intercession," 360.

<sup>27</sup> Bigelow, "Intercession," 360.

absolute monotheists. They claim that such prayers commit *shirk* since they ascribe partners to Allah.<sup>28</sup>

#### B. *Shirk*: Idolatry<sup>29</sup>

*Shirk* is the Arabic term to describe idolatry. It is defined as an act of associating other deities (idols) with Allah. It is the worst form of disbelief in Islam. It goes against the most significant statement of belief in Islam which is the *Shahadah*. *Shahadah* affirms the Islamic belief of monotheism. It states that, “there is no Allah but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.”

The Qur’an speaks of *shirk* in two different ways. *Shirk* is used in terms of forbidding people to ascribe any other partners to Allah (31:13; 35:14). The Qur’an also confronts those who believe that other deities were Allah’s partner during creation (34:22; 35:40; 46:4).

The Qur’anic proclamation of *shirk* was directed to two groups of people, polytheists and Christians. The Qur’an confronts the polytheists for their worship of hundreds of deities. According to Muslims, “they were one group toward which Islam’s message of Allah’s unity and universal sovereignty was directed.”<sup>30</sup> However, the Qur’an also portrays Christians as unbelievers and infidels for saying “Allah is one of three [in a Trinity]” (5:73). It seems, moreover, that the Qur’anic anti-polytheism message has also been directed at Christians. For instance, Allah will punish *Karfrun* (disbelievers) who say that “Allah is Christ, the Son of Mary” (5:72), since they “associate” (the verb of the Arabic root *sh-r-k*) Jesus with Allah, which the Qur’an considers to be idolatry.<sup>31</sup> In this sense, the Qur’an considers Christians to be

<sup>28</sup> Bigelow, “Intercession,” 361.

<sup>29</sup> For a detailed study on *Shirk* in Islam see Gimaret, “Shirk,” 484–6.

<sup>30</sup> Armajani, “Shirk,” 627.

<sup>31</sup> See O’Connor, “Idolatry,” 343–4, and Campo, “Kafir [Disbeliever],” 420–2.

polytheists. Yet, the Qur'an identifies Christians as the People the Book. Armajani is accurate in stating that the Qur'anic perspective on Christians "is more ambiguous."<sup>32</sup>

Monotheism is taken so seriously in Islam that forgiveness is not possible to those who ascribe partners with God. Surah 4:116 says, "Allah forgives not (the sin of) joining other gods with Him; but forgives whom He pleases other sins than this. One who joins other gods with Allah has strayed far, far away."<sup>15</sup>

### C. Covenant

While the covenant mentioned in the Qur'an is the one between God and the people of Israel, a covenant which they are blamed for breaking (2:83), there is a universal primordial unique Covenant in the Muslim tradition.<sup>33</sup> This covenant is mentioned in the Qur'an (7:172–173), which reads:

And when your Lord brought forth from the children of Adam, from their loins, their descendants, and made them testify of themselves: "Am I not your Lord?" They said: "Yes, we testify"—lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection: "We have been unaware of this," or lest you should say: "It is only that our fathers were polytheists of old, and we were their seed after them; would you destroy us for what the falsifiers have done?"

These verses came to be referred to as "the Verses of the Covenant" or "The Day of the Covenant"; they offer, Kadi argues, "new reflections on Man's nature, the nature of sin, and the relationship between God and man."<sup>34</sup> In this covenant, Allah brought forth all of Adam's offspring and they acknowledge his oneness and sovereignty (7:172). Muslims, and the whole world, are obligated to keep Allah's covenant and fulfill its requirements so that they can return to paradise in the afterlife.

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<sup>32</sup> Armajani, "Shirk," 627.

<sup>33</sup> For detailed study on the nature of this covenant see Kadi, "The Primordial Covenant and Human History in the Qur'an," 332–3, Campo, "Covenant," 170.

<sup>34</sup> Kadi, "The Primordial Covenant and Human History in the Qur'an," 333.



Those who do not will be under Allah's curse and sent to hell on the Day of Resurrection (13:20–25).

From the perspective of the Verse of the Covenant, this covenant is mainly concerned with a commitment to monotheism. To help humans keep up with the covenant, Allah will send prophets to remind people of the covenant in case they have forgotten and to bring good tidings to believers and to warn the non-believers. The acceptance of the various prophets' calls represents, according to Kadi, a "renewal of their covenantal commitment to monotheism and its corollary, obedience, and not the formation of a new commitment."<sup>35</sup>

### III. The Qur'anic Narrative of the Golden Calf Narrative

#### A. Introduction

It is important to note that there are two major narratives that form the story of the golden calf in the Qur'an, 7:148–155 and 20:83–98.<sup>36</sup> In addition to this, there are two short versions in 2:51, 54, 92–93 and 4:153. These narratives differ in length, details, and purpose. Moreover, instead of limiting the study to a single chapter, I have chosen to harmonize the two major narratives, providing a complete picture of the golden calf story in the Qur'an, following the structure of the narrative in chapter 20.

It is beneficial to begin with the context of the Qur'anic narrative of chapter 20, which is somewhat similar to the biblical account. The chapter begins with the reason for Allah's revelation in the Qur'an, which is from the one who created the earth and the high heavens (vv. 3, 4). Then, the narrative claims the most important declaration in the Qur'an: "There is no Allah but Allah." This statement stresses the

<sup>35</sup> Kadi, "The Primordial Covenant and Human History in the Qur'an," 337.

<sup>36</sup> I will use the term "chapter" to refer to the Arabic word "*Surat*."

significance of worshipping one Allah and “repudiates other worships.”<sup>37</sup> In Islam, polytheism is the most serious sinful act and is completely forbidden. After this declaration, the narrative provides the story of Moses, which summarizes the whole book of Exodus, leaving out the account of the Tabernacle.<sup>38</sup>

Moses appears in the narrative as Allah’s chosen prophet (vv. 13, 41) who will carry his message to the Israelites and deliver them from Egypt. Moses’ primary task is to stand before Pharaoh, who is tyrannical, with the message from the Lord asking him to release the children of Israel without any torment.<sup>39</sup> Even though Moses has demonstrated all his signs in the presence of Pharaoh, Pharaoh rejects and refuses to release the people (v. 56). Allah’s continual revelation to Moses suggests that the Israelites have to travel by night and Allah will “strike a dry path for them through the sea” (v. 77). After his act of deliverance, Allah makes a covenant with the children of Israel at Sinai and provides them with manna and quail (v. 79).

Before providing the narrative analysis, it is worth noting that the narrative of the golden calf in chapter 7 of the Qur’an provides more details than the narrative in chapter 20 about the people’s journey after crossing the sea and also about Moses’ appointed time with Allah on the mountain. After crossing the sea the children of Israel come upon a people who are devoted to idols and they ask Moses to form a god for them like the gods of the other nation (v. 138). Moses describes the children of Israel as foolish for requesting such a thing and rhetorically asks how he can seek for them an Allah other than Allah who had set them apart from other nations (v. 140).

The narrative continues by describing Moses’ appointed time with Allah on the mountain. Moses charges his brother Aaron with leading the people and

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<sup>37</sup> Craig, *The Events of the Qur’an*, 76.

<sup>38</sup> Bernard Lewis states that the Qur’anic narratives are one-third of length of the biblical (*The Jews of Islam*, 86).

<sup>39</sup> The term “the children of Israel” is the preferred Qur’anic term to refer to Jewish people.

commands him to do right and not follow the way of the wicked (v. 142). On the mountain, Allah chooses Moses to carry his message and also provides the tablets, which contain all details of his covenant with the children of Israel.

It is very interesting that the biblical and Qur'anic narratives stress the fact that "while Moses was having these great spiritual experiences on the mount, his people below were ungrateful enough to forget Allah and make a golden calf."<sup>40</sup>

The Qur'anic narrative then enters a new phase where Allah is the "Omniscient Narrator. Allah narrates in these verses how He will deal with the polytheists and the believers."<sup>41</sup> Similarly, the biblical narrator is also concerned with how Allah will deal with the misdeeds of the people who broke the first two commandments which he had just given.

## B. The Qur'anic Narrative

Translation<sup>42</sup>

83 [Allah said]: "And what made you hasten from your people, O Moses."  
 84 He said: "They are close on my footsteps, and I hastened to You, O my Lord, that You might be pleased." 85 [Allah] said: "We have tested<sup>43</sup> your people in your absence, and Samiri has led them astray. 86 and then Moses returned to his people angry and sorrowing. He said: "O my people, did not your Allah promise you a good promise? Did the promise<sup>44</sup> seem too long for you? Or did you desire that the wrath of Allah descend upon you, so you broke your promise to me?" 87 They said: "We did not break the promise to you, of our own will, but we were made to bear the burden<sup>45</sup> of the ornaments of the people [the Egyptians], then we cast them [into the fire], and that was what Samiri suggested." 88 Then he took out [of the fire] a calf which had a hollow sound, so they said: "This is your Allah and

<sup>40</sup> The presidency, *The Holy Qur'an*, 444.

<sup>41</sup> Albayrak, "The Qur'anic Narratives," 50.

<sup>42</sup> Since Arabic is my first language, I preferred to have my own translation after consultation of four English translations of Qur'an. It is important to mention that this translation it is mostly literal but at the same time considers the meaning of a word when all Islamic translations prefer it.

<sup>43</sup> Some other translations prefer to use the word "tried."

<sup>44</sup> The Arabic word here means "the covenant."

<sup>45</sup> The Arabic word literally means "burden" but in the Qur'anic tradition this term is always used to refer to sin (Al Zuhayli, *Concise Interpretation*, 318).

the Allah of Moses; but he [Moses] forgot.” 89 Did not they see that it returned no word to them, nor it had no harm or benefit for them? 90 And Aaron indeed had said to them before: “O my people, you are only tried in this, and surely your Lord is the Merciful Allah, so follow me and obey my order.” 91 They said: “We will not cease to keep worshiping it until Moses returns to us.” 92 [Moses] said: “O Aaron, what prevented you when you saw them going astray.” 94 He [Aaron] said: “O son of my mother, do not seize my beard, or my head! I feared that you would say: ‘You have caused a division among the Children of Israel, and you have not respected my word.’” 95 [Moses said]: “And what is the matter with you, O Samiri?” 96 [Samiri] said: “I saw what they did not see, so I took a handful [of dust] from the footprint of the messenger and threw it [into the fire] and thus my inner-self suggested to me.” 97 [Moses] said: “Then go away! And verily, your [punishment] in this life will be that you will say: ‘Do not touch me,’ and you have a promise that will not fail [future punishment]. And look at your Allah, to which you have been devoted, we will burn it, and scatter it in the sea.” 98 [Moses said to the people]: “Your Lord is Allah, there is no Allah but He who has full knowledge of all things.”

The Qur’anic narrative of the golden calf begins with Allah’s rhetorical question inquiring about the reason for Moses’ rush, leaving the people behind. It is not clear whether Allah blames Moses for leaving the people or if he points out what the Israelites have done. However, in Qur’anic tradition, the concept of the prophetic immunity from sin prevents the reader from thinking that Moses has done something wrong by leaving the people behind.<sup>46</sup> Al Razi in his commentary on vv. 83–84 rejects the suggestion that Allah is not pleased with Moses and is angry at him since he is unworthy of status of the prophets.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, it is most likely that Allah points out to Moses what the children of Israel have done.

The narrative continues with Moses’ response which, according to Al Zamakhshari, includes both an excuse and a reason. The excuse is that the people are close to Moses and they are following his footsteps. The reason is Moses’ interest to

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<sup>46</sup> Albayrak, “The Qur’anic Narratives,” 50.

<sup>47</sup> Al Razi, *Al Tafsir Al Kabir (Grand Interpretation)*, on 20:83–84.

please Allah by being close to him.<sup>48</sup> Ali sees Moses' response to Allah as contrary to the Israelites: "While he [Moses] was in a state of ecstatic honour on the mount, his people were enacting strange scenes down below."<sup>49</sup> Moreover, Moses' use of the term "my Lord" is also designed to emphasize the oneness of Allah and his Lordship, while the people down below are practicing polytheism.

Allah's description of the crises is a problematic point in the narrative (20:85a). According to Al Tabari, Allah appears in this verse as the one who causes the people's wrong action.<sup>50</sup> Al Razi, however, discusses the theological interpretation of Mu'tazilites on this verse. Mu'tazilites reject the thought that it might be Allah who creates the disbelief inside the hearts of the people for two reasons. First, it is impossible, logically, for Allah to act this way. Second, if Allah creates the disbelief, he would not mention that Samiri had led them astray. When Moses goes back to the people to investigate the reason for worshipping the calf, the people would blame Allah for doing so. Mu'tazilites prefer the notion that *fitna* (trial) is for Allah to distinguish between the good and evil people.<sup>51</sup> Albayrak claims that "the verse makes it clear, however, that what happened to the children of Israel is in accordance with Allah's will."<sup>52</sup> To support his argument, Albayrak refers to Moses' claim, "It is only your test by which You lead astray whom You will, and keep guided whom You will" (Q 7:155). Al Sh'arawi suggests that the trial is not evil in itself, since it is a test. Rather, the result of this trial may be evil or good. Allah tested the people not to know who they are but rather that they may know themselves.<sup>53</sup> While Saied Qutb ignores

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<sup>48</sup> Al Zamakhshari, *Tafsir AL Kashaf [Interpretation of the Revelation]*, on 20:83–84.

<sup>49</sup> Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, 806.

<sup>50</sup> Al Tabari, *Magm'a Al Bian [The Collection of Declaration]*, on 20:85.

<sup>51</sup> Al Razi, *Al Tafsir Al Kabir [The Vast Interpretation]*, on 20:85.

<sup>52</sup> Albayrak, "The Qur'anic Narratives," 51. Al Zamakhshari believes that Allah created the calf and that this was a trial from Allah to prove who will stand firm in the faith and to mislead those wrongdoers (*Tafsir Al Kashaf [Interpretation of the Revelation]*, on 20:86–88).

<sup>53</sup> Al Sh'arawi, *Khawater [Thoughts]*, on 20:85.

Allah's role in this trial, he refers to the slavery period in Egypt and its evil impact on people's inner being as the cause for worshipping idols.<sup>54</sup>

Moreover, the responsibility is not just laid on Allah but also on Samiri who has led them astray (Q 20:85b).<sup>55</sup> The narrator neither presents who Samiri is nor how he misled the people. Nevertheless, the narrative has Samiri speak about this enigma at the end of the narrative. Moses asks Samiri, "What is the matter with you Samiri?" or, "Why did you do so Samiri?" (v. 95). The answer of Samiri indicates his responsibility in forming the calf, but, at the same time, Samiri blames his "inner-self," which has prompted him to act this way.<sup>56</sup> Samiri's story ends with Moses' announcement of his punishment, Samiri will remain forever outside of society. He will be required to say, "Do not touch me," to whomever he meets. Moreover, the Allah to which he has devoted himself will be burned and scattered in the sea.

The return of Moses to his people is associated with anger and sorrow.<sup>57</sup> Moses opens his critical speech with two rhetorical questions in order to clarify the reason behind *shirk*. Moses, in his first question, reminds the people of Allah's good promise to them, wondering whether the wait for the promise's fulfillment seemed too long for them.<sup>58</sup> The second question, ironically, inquires about the people's desire for the wrath of Allah to descend upon them since they have broken their promise to

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<sup>54</sup> Qutb, *In the Shadow of the Qur'an*, on 20:85.

<sup>55</sup> Most Qur'anic scholars agree that Samiri is not a Hebrew. Nevertheless, Ali suggests that as the Israelites had just left Egypt, they may, very well, have among them an Egyptian Hebrew bearing that nickname (*The Holy Qur'an*, 807). However, Albayrak treats Samiri as the national name of this character which reveals the "negative connection of Samiri and of the Samaritans to whom he belongs" ("The Qur'anic Narrative," 60).

<sup>56</sup> Albayrak, "The Qur'anic Narratives," 51.

<sup>57</sup> According to 7:150, Moses's anger appeared in his reaction toward his brother Aaron. It says that Moses pulled Aaron, dragging him toward himself.

<sup>58</sup> Scholars have different views on the nature of Allah's promise. While some understand Allah's promise in terms of giving the Torah (Al Zamakhshari, *Tafsir AL Kashaf [Interpretation of the Revelation]*, on 20:86; Al Zuhayli, *Concise Interpretation*, 318; Al Sh'arawi, *Khawater [Thoughts]*, on 20:86), others suggest that Allah's promise was to protect and lead them into the Promised Land (Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, 807).

Moses.<sup>59</sup> Al Razi explains that wrath and anger characterize acts, not the divine essence, since the divine essence is not incarnated in this narrative. However, Moses' anger in 7:150 is associated with the throwing of the tablets, but the narrative does not describe them as broken. It says "And when Moses' anger was subsided, he took up the tablets; and in their inscription was guidance and mercy for those who are fearful of their Lord" (7:149).

For Ali, the children of Israel broke their promise to obey Allah's law and commandments. This promise was a response to Allah's good promise to protect and lead them into the Promised Land. Ali claims that the promises of Allah and the people "form one Covenant, which was entered into through their leader Moses."<sup>60</sup>

The people's defense of themselves shows their attempt to escape the consequences. They rather lay the blame on the ornaments, Samiri, or Moses. They begin their defense by confirming to Moses that it was not their choice to break their promise to Moses. They were made to bear the burden of the ornaments of the Egyptians. The Arabic word *awzar*, which is translated as "burden" is mainly used in terms of carrying weight or representing sin. In this context, most Muslims scholars understand this term as representing sin.<sup>61</sup> Albayrak draws attention to the use and the meaning of the term "burden" in the same chapter. He concludes that the link between the word "burden" in 20:87 and 20:100<sup>62</sup> indicates that the burden which the Israelites bear "represents sin itself."<sup>63</sup> Albayrak agrees with Ali that even though Samiri is

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<sup>59</sup> The people's promise to Moses is understood, on one hand, as a promise to follow Moses' footsteps until they meet at the mountain. The people's promise is also understood as a promise to stand firm in the faith and to follow Allah's commandments. See (Al Razi, *Al Tafsir Al Kabir [The Vast Interpretation]*, on 20:86).

<sup>60</sup> Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, 807.

<sup>61</sup> See Al Razi, *Al Tafsir Al Kabir [The Vast Interpretation]*, on 20:87; Al Zamakhshari, *Tafsir Al Kashaf [Interpretation of the Revelation]*, on 20:87; Al Sh'arawi, *Khwater [Thoughts]*, on 20:87.

<sup>62</sup> "Whoever turns away from it [the Qur'an] he will bear a *burden* on the Day of the Resurrection." (20:100).

<sup>63</sup> Albayrak, "The Qur'anic Narratives," 57.

responsible for suggesting the making of the calf, the burden of sin is on the person who commits it, and cannot pretend that he or she was powerless to avoid it.<sup>64</sup>

The narrative continues by suggesting that Samiri brings the form of a calf, which is making a lowing sound, out of fire. While some scholars suggest that the lowing sound was the result of wind going through the calf, others believe that it was Allah who created life in this calf to make it appear as real in order to test the people.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, when the people see the calf, they claimed, “This is your Allah and the Allah of Moses” (Q 20:88). Albayrak suggests that the sin of the Israelites is defined, in this narrative, as a rejection of Allah by worshiping a false Allah.<sup>66</sup> Despite the fact that Samiri forms the calf, the people proclaim, “This is your Allah and the Allah of Moses, but he has forgotten.”<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, the narrative tells us that the people continue worshiping the calf even after Aaron’s warning, and they do stop until Moses’ return (Q 20:90, 91).

However, the narrative in 7:149 highlights the people’s recognition of their misdeed and pleading for Allah’s mercy and forgiveness. This verse, according to Al Zamakhshari, metaphorically describes the people’s recognition of their misdeed. Moreover, the formula “Unless our Lord has mercy on us, and forgives us, we will be the loser,” is considered as “a speech of repentant.”<sup>68</sup> Even though the people’s declaration shows no explicit repentance, Albayrak, like many other scholars, interprets it as an act of repentance which “invites every sinner to repent of his sin.”<sup>69</sup> It is worth noting that Allah’s mercy in Islam is mainly based on people’s repentance

<sup>64</sup> Ali, *The Holy Qur’an*, 807.

<sup>65</sup> Al Sh’arawi, *Khwater [Thoughts]*, on 20:88.

<sup>66</sup> Albayrak, “The Qur’anic Narratives,” 58.

<sup>67</sup> Moses has forgotten both the people and his Allah and has gone for so many days (Ali, *The Holy Qur’an*, 808).

<sup>68</sup> Al Zamakhshari, *Tafsir Al Kashaf [Interpretation of the Revelation]*, on 7:149. Translated from Arabic. Al Razi also sees this formula as “a speech of great confession” (*Al Tafsir Al Kabir [The Vast Interpretation]*, on 7:149, translated from Arabic).

<sup>69</sup> Albayrak, “The Qur’anic Narratives,” 58.



and good deeds. Therefore, scholars understand this declaration as an act of repentance, although not explicit.

The narrative continues with a critical dialogue between Moses and Aaron. Moses rebukes his brother for not preventing the children of Israel from going astray. Moses' expectation of Aaron is that he would follow and obey him, as if Moses was there. In other words, if Moses had been there, he would have been very angry and serious about such a situation and would not have allowed the people to act in such way. The narrative of chapter 7 shows how Moses acts in such a situation and it might shed light on how Aaron should have acted. When the children of Israel come upon a people who are worshiping idols then, they ask Moses to form a god for them like the gods of those around them (v. 138). Moses rebukes the people and does not respond to their request (v. 140). Thus, perhaps Moses expected that Aaron should have rebuked the people and not given in to their request.

Aaron's defense of himself shows his good intentions for the unity of the people. According to Aaron, the people would have been divided into two groups if he had rejected their request. Aaron preferred not to fight those who would oppose him but rather to warn them, attempting to avoid Moses' accusation of creating division among the people.<sup>70</sup> Aaron's defense of himself in chapter 7, however, appears to be based on weakness and fear. Aaron opens his pleading with the propitious statement, "O Son of my mother," trying to stop Moses from being angry.<sup>71</sup> He then introduces the reason for not preventing the people from worshiping the calf: when the people saw that Aaron was by himself, they were about to kill him. Al Sh'arawi sees the people's action as a confirmation and proof of Aaron's innocence,

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<sup>70</sup> Tantawi, *Al Wasitt [The Mediator/ The Moderate]*, on 20:94.

<sup>71</sup> Tantawi, *Al Wasitt [The Mediator/ The Moderate]*, on 7:150; Al Zamakhshari, *Tafsir Al Kashaf [Interpretation of the Revelation]*, on 7:150.

since he first rejected their action and stood against their will by warning and rebuking them.<sup>72</sup>

The narrative continues with a dialogue between Moses and Samiri. The dialogue begins with Moses' question concerning the role of Samiri: "What is the matter with you. O Samiri?" Samiri said: "I saw what they did not see, so I took a handful from the print of the messenger and threw it [into the fire]. Thus my inner-self suggested to me" (20:96). The classical interpretation of this verse was explained by Al Zamakhshari. It argues that when it is the time for Moses to go to mountain Sinai, Allah sends Gabriel, riding on the horse of life, to accompany Moses. Samiri saw Gabriel and the horse and decided to take a handful of dust from the hoof print of the horse and threw it into the fire to form, and to bring life to, the calf (on 20:95–96).<sup>73</sup> Tantawi, Razi, and Alusi disagree with the classical interpretation since the narrative itself does not support it and since there are many different versions of the story told by classical interpreters. These scholars, nevertheless, agree that the messenger was Moses and that Samiri learned from him about the religion. This is what Samiri took from the messenger, but later on he found out that Moses' teaching was wrong and decided to reject what he had learned.<sup>74</sup> This was what Samiri's inner being suggested leading people to worship the calf. Al Sh'arawi rejects both interpretations concluding that the messenger was a prophet who brought the message from Allah to the people. Samiri first accepted the message and then rejected it, leading the people to *shirk* (20:95–96).<sup>75</sup> It appears that Samiri's confession holds him responsible for leading the people to worship the calf. Consequently, Moses announces Samiri's punishment. Al Zamakhshari considers Samiri's punishment as severe; he is entirely prohibited from

<sup>72</sup> Al Sh'arawi, *Khwater [Thoughts]*, on 7:150.

<sup>73</sup> Al Zamakhshari, *Tafsir Al Kashaf [Interpretation of the Revelation]*, on 20:96.

<sup>74</sup> See (Tantawi, *Al Wasitt [The Mediator/ The Moderate]*, on 20:96; Al Razi, *Al Tafsir Al Kabir [The Vast Interpretation]*, on 96, Alusi, *Roh Al Ma'ani [The Essence of Meaning]*, on 20:96).

<sup>75</sup> Al Sh'arawi, *Khwater [Thoughts]*, on 20:96.

being in relationship with anyone for the rest of his life.<sup>76</sup> Samiri must shout, “Do not touch me” so that the rest of the community will not be in contact with him. Moses, moreover, will burn the calf and then scatter it in the sea.

Chapter 7 tells us that Moses prays for Allah’s mercy and forgiveness for himself and his brother, even though both of them are guiltless: “for himself because of his wrath and for his brother because he had been unable to suppress idolatry among his people. And like a true leader that he is, he identifies himself with his lieutenant for all that has happened.”<sup>77</sup> Here we can see the influence of the concept of the prophetic immunity from sin in scholars’ thought. This is how they see that their version “differs from that of the Old Testament... [They] cannot believe that Aaron, who was appointed by Allah to assist Moses as Allah’s messenger, could descend so low as to seduce the people into idolatry whatever his human weaknesses might be.”<sup>78</sup>

The narrative continues with Allah’s announcement of his punishment for the people’s guilt. He will pour out his anger by shaming and disgracing them in this life. This punishment will be for all who would commit the same misdeed, but Allah is thereafter forgiving and most merciful to those who have committed evil deeds and repented and believe (vv. 152, 153).

In chapter 20 Moses’ last word reminds the people of and emphasizes monotheism: “But your lord is only Allah; there is no Allah but He. He has full knowledge of all things” (v. 98). Al Sh’arawi discusses Allah’s oneness in this verse in light of 3:18, which says “Allah witnesses that there is no deity except Him, and the angels and those of knowledge.” He continues by asserting that Allah confirms the truth that “Allah has not taken any son, nor has there ever been with Him any deity”

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<sup>76</sup> Al Zamakhshari, *Tafsir AL Kashaf [Interpretation of the Revelation]*, on 20:97.

<sup>77</sup> The Presidency, *The Holy Qur’an*, 448.

<sup>78</sup> The Presidency, *The Holy Qur’an*, 447.

(23:91).<sup>79</sup> This confirmation of monotheism highlights the theme of this story, and stands against those who suggested worshipping a calf. Thus, this last statement, according to Al Razi, is a “manifestation of true religion.”<sup>80</sup>

The narrative in chapter 7 concludes with a dialogue between Moses and Allah. In this dialogue Moses intercedes on behalf of the people and himself. When Moses’ anger is calmed, he chooses 70 of his people to accompany him to meet Allah once again on the mountain. In this scene, the 70 people start to tremble and then Moses says:

...O my Lord, if it had been Your Will, You could have destroyed them and me before; would You destroy us for the deeds of the foolish ones among us? It is only Your Trial by which You lead astray whom You will, and keep guided whom You will. You are our benefactor, so forgive us and have Mercy on us, for you are the Best of those who forgive. And grant for us in this world good and also in the hereafter; indeed, we have turned back to you. (7:155b–156a).

Moses’ intercession opens with a question about whether or not Allah will destroy him and his companions for the deeds of others. This rhetorical question aims to deny the notion that Allah will punish some people because of others’ misdeeds.<sup>81</sup> Islamic scholars differ concerning the interpretation of Moses’ statement: “It is your trial by which you lead astray whom you will, and keep guided whom you will.” For Mu’tazalah, Allah’s trial is understood in term of the experience the people had, that is, trembling at the mountain. Al Tabarsi and Al Tusi represent this school of thought. Both agree that the trial comes from Allah and that Allah grants people patience through trials.<sup>82</sup> Al Razi, on the other hand, considers the worshipping of the calf as the trial. Allah is sovereign and everything comes from him. The trial, therefore, comes

<sup>79</sup> Al Sh’arawi, *Khwater [Thoughts]*, on 20:98.

<sup>80</sup> Al Razi, *Al Tafsir Al Kabir [The Vast Interpretation]*, on 20:98.

<sup>81</sup> Al Razi, *Al Tafsir Al Kabir [The Vast Interpretation]*, on 7:155.

<sup>82</sup> Al Tabarsi, *Magm’a Al Bian [The Collection of Declaration]*, on 7:155–156. Al Tusi, *Al Tabian Al Gam’a L’oloum Al Qur’an [The Collector of Statement in Qur’anic Science]*, on 7:155–156.

from him and Allah sends people astray and guides them according to his will.<sup>83</sup> Al Zamakhshari, like many Muslim scholars, agrees with Al Razi on this point as he affirms that Allah sends those who do not stand firm in faith astray, while He will guide those who know him.<sup>84</sup>

Moses' intercession concludes with pleading for forgiveness and mercy. His pleading is based on his confession that Allah is their benefactor and that he is the best of those who forgive. Moreover, since the trial of worshiping the calf is from Allah, according to Al Razi, Moses boldly seeks Allah's forgiveness, which is based on his grace and generosity.<sup>85</sup> For Allah to forgive, according to Ibn Kathir, means he covers and does not deal with humans according to their sin.<sup>86</sup> Moses, furthermore, petitions Allah to grant the people good life in this world and the hereafter. A good life in this world means success in doing good deeds, and a good life in the hereafter includes forgiveness and paradise.<sup>87</sup> Thus, according to Al Razi, the role of a benefactor is twofold: waving the punishment as a sign of forgiveness and bestowing benefits.<sup>88</sup>

The narrative closes with Allah's response to Moses' intercession: "I afflict with my punishment whom I will, but my mercy encompasses all things. I will grant it for those who fear me and give *zakat* and those who believe in our verses" (7:156b). It is important once again to mention the difference between the Mu'tazala and Sunni schools here. For Al Tabarsi and Al Tusi, as representatives of the Mu'tazala school, Allah will punish those who disobey him, those who deserve the punishment which they brought on themselves. However, Allah's mercy will be bestowed on the Day of

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<sup>83</sup> Al Razi, *Al Tafsir Al Kabir [The Vast Interpretation]*, on 7:155–156.

<sup>84</sup> Al Zamakhshari, *Tafsir Al Kashaf [Interpretation of the Revelation]*, on 7:155–156.

<sup>85</sup> Al Razi, *Al Tafsir Al Kabir [The Vast Interpretation]*, on 7:155–156.

<sup>86</sup> Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim [Interpretation of Grand Qur'an]*, on 7:155–156.

<sup>87</sup> Al Tabarsi, *Magm'a Al Bian [The Collection of Declaration]*, on 7:156.

<sup>88</sup> Al Razi, *Al Tafsir Al Kabir [The Vast Interpretation]*, on 7:155–156.

Resurrection on those who fear Allah by avoiding idolatry, pay *zakat*, and believe in reasoning and miracles.<sup>89</sup> Al Razi summarizes Mu'tazala's position as follows: "Mercy reflects good will, and that Allah created everyone to enjoy mercy and welfare."<sup>90</sup> Al Razi, nevertheless, disagrees with this school of thought. He, instead, affirms that the sovereign Allah has the right to punish whom he will and that nobody can argue or challenge him. For Ibn Kathir, Allah's sovereignty is controlled by His wisdom and justice.<sup>91</sup> Tantawi understands Allah's response to Moses as a sign of comfort. Though Allah has the right to punish those who err, it is not necessary that his punishment will include the people particularly after they repent.<sup>92</sup>

Al Sh'arawi considers Allah's statement, "I afflict with my punishment whom I will," as a statement of sovereignty, which means that nobody could force Allah to punish; when someone errs Allah has the right to punish or forgive.<sup>93</sup> He, however, speaks of Allah's mercy in terms of the hereafter, which will be given to believers as a sign of Allah's grace.

#### IV. Conclusion

Reading the Islamic materials alongside the OT, thus, can help us effectively communicate the biblical truth to Muslim people. In other words, our comprehensive reading of the Islamic materials provides a rhetorical Islamic context which should be addressed in writing biblical theology to Muslims. For the purpose of this study, this context will be summarized as follow.

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<sup>89</sup> Al Tabarsi, *Magm'a Al Bian [The Collection of Declaration]*, on 7:156. Al Tusi, *Al Tabian Al Gam'a L'oloum Al Qur'an [The Collector of Statement in Qur'anic Science]*, on 7:156.

<sup>90</sup> Al Razi, *Al Tafsir Al Kabir [The Vast Interpretation]*, 7:156.

<sup>91</sup> Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Al-Qur'an Al-Azim [Interpretation of Grand Qur'an]*, on 7:156.

<sup>92</sup> Tantawi, *Al Wasitt [The Mediator/The Moderate]*, on 7:156.

<sup>93</sup> Al Sh'arawi, *Khwater [Thoughts]*, on 7:156.

First, Allah is not subject to emotion, as explained by Ghazali, and his mercy is not based on compassion. This emphasis on the impersonal nature of Allah is repetitively recognized in Islamic theological thinking. One can recognize the echo of this Islamic notion about Allah in many different ways. For example, while the Qur'an uses human imagery language to describe Allah, Muslim theologians consider it figurative language of speech. Though Allah can see and hear this is not to say that Allah has eyes and ears or to think of Him as a person. This may help explain the struggle Muslims have accepting the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. While many Christian attempts have been made to address this issue from the New Testament, systematic theology, and philosophical perspective, this study will address this notion from the OT perspective, particularly from Exod 32–34. As it will be demonstrated in the next chapters, Exod 32–34 is a rich biblical narrative that uses figurative language of speech which reveals the nature of the person of God and the relation between mercy and compassion as they are demonstrated in the self-revelation of God (Exod 34:6–7).

Second, while Allah preserves the right to forgive and since forgiveness is ascribed to him, his forgiveness can be obtained on the basis of repentance and good deeds. The benefits of this forgiveness, on the one hand, are obtained not in this life but rather in the hereafter, since Muslims are promised Paradise only if they are qualified to gain Allah's forgiveness. To understand Allah's forgiveness in terms of reconciliation with God and experiencing his presence in this life, as the biblical narrative demonstrates, is to a large degree a foreign notion to Islamic thinking. This is due to the absence of the concept of covenant relationship and the presence of God among his people from the Qur'anic narrative. Here one can note that while the

biblical and the Qur'anic narratives both speak of the same incident, the details and the context of each story determine the theological outcome of both narratives.

Third, the character of Allah as *Tawab* is understood in relation to human beings, and not in connection with Allah himself. Allah returns to people, or accepts sinners, or brings sinners to regret their sins. The sovereign Allah will never change his mind nor does he relent nor does he repent. While Muslims believe in the power of *Shafaa'a* (intercession) on the Day of Judgment to bring forgiveness, Allah decides when he punishes and forgives and human beings play no role in making such decisions, especially prior to the Day of Judgment. It seems in this context that Allah responds to *Shafaa'a* only in as much as his sovereignty is not undermined. In this context, the biblical narrative of the golden calf will be challenged. In discussing the role of the mediator Moses in the biblical narrative and God's response to his appeals these Islamic questions will be addressed.

Fourth, the Qur'anic narrative serves as a warning to not worship idols and it affirms the sole worship of Allah. This is due to the fact that the biblical narratives of the OT are used as illustrations by the Qur'an. One can describe the Qur'an as a sermon full of illustrations, and these illustrations are mainly biblical narratives. To use the biblical narrative as illustration is one thing but to understand its original message is something else. Therefore, while the biblical narrative affirms the sole worship of God, this is indeed not its sole theme. For the purpose of this study, however, the biblical narrative will serve, among other things, to emphasize the sole worship of God and to address the Islamic understanding of *shirk*.

Fifth, the details of the Qur'anic narrative, as it is mentioned above, reflect major theological themes in Islamic thinking. In the Qur'anic narrative each character but Allah attempts to escape from responsibilities. While the people claim that they



are powerless to avoid worshipping the calf since they were made to carry it, the responsibility is rather laid on Aaron, Moses, or Allah, or Samiri. The concept of prophetic immunity from sin prevents the reader from thinking of Aaron or Moses as sinners. While the narrative allows the reader to think of the sovereign Allah as the leading agent for the sin of the people, it rather shows Samiri as the one who leads the people astray and deserves Allah's punishment. However, Samiri himself tries to escape the responsibility by blaming his inner being! The narrative, nevertheless, affirms that punishment is a natural consequence. While the punishment of Samiri is announced by Moses, Allah himself announces the punishment of the people (7:152).

The narrative portrays Allah as the Most Merciful and forgiving (7:153, 155–156), who preserves the right to punish and to forgive (7:156). The narrative portrays Moses as a prophet who intercedes for Aaron, the people, and himself, pleading for mercy, forgiveness, and good in this life and the hereafter (7:151, 155). Allah will specially forgive and pour his mercy on those who repent, pay alms, and believe by following the prophet Mohammad. The short version of the same story in 4:135 shows that Allah forgave the people but it does not explain how this could occur and what this means.

To conclude, it is essential to stress the fact that the biblical narrative will not address all the rhetorical Islamic questions that are raised in this chapter unless the biblical narrative itself examines these questions. This study carefully attempts to avoid using the biblical text as a proof-text to answer all Islamic questions that are addressed above. This study rather will address the rhetorical Islamic questions as long as the narrative of the golden calf addresses them. It is crystal clear that the biblical narrative is not originally written in an Islamic context or to Muslims.

Therefore, we need to understand the biblical narrative in its own context, considering how this narrative contributes to the writing of biblical theology in an Islamic context.

### Chapter 3: Exegetical Analysis of Exodus 32–34

This chapter will focus on the theological interpretation of Exod 32–34, showing how the narrative of the golden calf richly contributes to writing biblical theology in an Islamic context. The canonical placement of the Exodus narrative will be taken into account since the narrative of the book of Exodus is linked to the covenant that was made with the Patriarchs. This chapter, therefore, begins with an overview on the book of Exodus for the purpose of sitting forth the historical context of Exod 32-34.

#### I. Overview

The Book of Exodus opens with the story of Jacob's family. This story describes the unusual multiplication of the children of Israel (1:7). It recalls God's promise of a multitude of descendants (Gen 17:1–8) and affirms that part of God's promise has been fulfilled. It also serves as a continuation of the story of Jacob's family which began in the history of the fathers. The Book of Exodus, thus, "establishes continuity with the theological history of the fathers."<sup>1</sup> However, this story is not just a link with the past but also prepares the reader for what is to come, a continuation of the fulfillment of God's promise.

The narrative continues with a description of the oppression of the children of Israel under the Egyptians (1:8–14). In the midst of this miserable situation, the narrative says that Pharaoh's plan is defeated and that the growth of Israel is a sign of God's continued fulfillment of his promise (1:20). The narrative introduces the birth, adulthood, revolt and flight of the future deliverer, Moses, whom God will use in

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<sup>1</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, 8.

critical moments in the greatest events in Israel's history: the exodus from Egypt and the formation of the nation.

While Moses is living in Median, where God is preparing him for his future, the narrative reports the death of the king of Egypt (2:23). This is not the only thing happening in Egypt. The people cry out, not because of the death of the king but because of their slavery under the Egyptians. The narrative now brings God to the forefront of the story and prepares the reader for the continual active involvement of God in the history of Israel. God hears the cry of the people and remembers his covenant with the patriarchs (2:24). It is important not to miss the significance of the specific reference to the covenant promise to the patriarchs. Durham comments:

This covenant promise has been implicit throughout these first two introductory and transitional chapters of the Book of Exodus, and here, at the most appropriate possible point, it is mentioned outright, with each of the patriarchal fathers pointedly named. Just as these two chapters are begun with the names of the descendants of the fathers, in and through which the first part of the covenant-promise has been fulfilled, so they are closed with the names of the fathers themselves, a reminder that God remembers the whole of his promise.<sup>2</sup>

In response, God calls a deliverer to accomplish his plan (3:1–22). The significance of this call lies in its connection to theophany and the revelation of God's name. This text witnesses the advent of the presence of God in the theophany of fire. It also provides the revelation of the divine name and the only explanation of this unique name.<sup>3</sup> This chapter, thus, gives us the first glimpse of two significant themes in the Book of Exodus, theophany and the name of God, which will be discussed in more detail below.

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<sup>2</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, 26.

<sup>3</sup> The amount of interpretation on the name of God, Yahweh, from ancient to modern times is nearly endless. Due to the limit of space and the focus of this study, our comment on the name will only serve the purpose of this study.

Theophany is the term used in OT study to refer to “the appearance of God.” These appearances occur throughout the OT in narrative and poetic forms.<sup>4</sup> Of all the people of the Bible, Moses experienced the appearance of God in a very personal way. One of the most dramatic appearances of God in the OT through the elements of nature is the burning bush narrative, where God appeared to Moses to commission him to stand before Pharaoh, demanding the release of the Israelites (3:1–6). This is an unnatural occurrence; the bush is burning but not consumed. From this flaming bush, God speaks to Moses. Though Moses found favor in the eyes of the Lord and experienced a very special relationship with him, there were limits to God’s self-revelation (33:20–23).

Not just Moses but also the Israelites experienced God’s appearance. As Israel leaves Egypt, they are accompanied by a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire as symbols of God’s protective presence (13:21–22; 14:24; 33:9–10; 34:5).<sup>5</sup> God comes down in the cloud so that the people will hear him when he speaks with Moses (19:9–11). Later, when the temple is completed and the priest brings the Ark of the Covenant into the holy place, the cloud fills the temple. The priest cannot stand since the glory of the Lord fills the house of the Lord (1 Kgs 8:10–12).

As with other theophanies, the focus of the theophany, as we will see in Exod 34, is the spoken revelation of God. In this theophany, God speaks to Moses about his future plan to deliver Israel and to lead them to the Promised Land (3:7–10). God, moreover, identifies himself with his connection to the patriarchs twice in the narrative (3:6, 15) first to Moses and second to Israel, through Moses, in the second. This connection demonstrates the fulfillment of God’s promise to the patriarchs. In addition, God responds to Moses’ question with a revelation of his name. Since the

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<sup>4</sup> On these forms of appearances see Chisholm, “Theophany,” 815–9.

<sup>5</sup> Goldingay sees cloud as God’s means of transportation and a means of veiling his presence (*Old Testament Theology*, 2:384).

name revealed by God is connected to the Hebrew root “to be,” Childs suggests that Moses’ inquiry “was understood as a request not for information, but rather for an explanation of the significance of the name.”<sup>6</sup> The setting of Exod 3 suggests that the God of the patriarchs makes himself known to Moses and Israel through revelation, not discovery. The echo of this theme will be seen in the self-revelation of God in Exod 34, where God reveals his character through a theophany and the self-revelation of his names in terms of dealing with the incident of worshiping the golden calf.

The Book of Exodus, however, continues with the story of the mighty hands of God delivering the children of Israel out of Egypt and leading them miraculously through the Red Sea and then to Sinai. This redemptive story will serve as the foundation for the covenant at Sinai. It tells of the experience of Israel of how God miraculously brought Israel out of Egypt, bore them on eagles’ wings, and brought them to himself at Sinai. The invitation to enter into a covenant is based on the great divine acts which Israel has experienced.

The concept of the covenant is one of the most significant motifs throughout the Bible.<sup>7</sup> The Sinai covenant particularly reveals a unique relationship between God and his people. Although God is the Creator and the Father of all people, he reveals here his intention to create for himself a “treasured possession.” By bringing the children of Israel to himself, God takes “the initiative and is clearly the superior partner.”<sup>8</sup> Though the Israelites enter into the covenant by God’s invitation, they must obey and keep his covenant (v. 5), which is the basis for the Israelites’ call to live and keep their status as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod 19:6). Thus the

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<sup>6</sup> Childs, *Exodus*, 69.

<sup>7</sup> For detailed study on the covenant throughout the biblical texts see P. R. Williams, “Covenant,” 419–29.

<sup>8</sup> Boda, *A Severe Mercy*, 38.

primary concern of the covenant is the way in which the unique divine-human relationship between Yahweh and his people should be maintained.

Another important aspect of this covenant, according to Stuart, is that full monotheism is expressed in the words “although the whole earth is mine.” Stuart continues: “This is one of the clearest early statements of monotheism in the Bible and certainly must have represented a sudden education for many of those present to hear Moses first relay these words to the people, since so many of them had grown up polytheists.”<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the children of Israel are called to live as a holy nation, a people devoted to worship the only true God.

At Sinai, God gives the people the law, a revelation of God’s will to the covenant people. Exodus 20–23 describes what it means to live in a covenant relationship. It begins with what is traditionally called the Ten Commandments and follows with an “initial installment of laws.”<sup>10</sup> Note that the law is a gift from God to an already redeemed people but it is not “a means by which the relationship with God is established.”<sup>11</sup> It is a means by which the covenant people would be able to live as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Alternatively, it is a means by which the people would foster the covenant relationship through obedience.

However, the covenant people, by worshiping the golden calf, break the first two commandments of the ten, “You shall have no gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol.... You shall not bow down to them or worship them” (20:3–5). The covenant people disobey the commandments and show disloyalty to the covenant.

At Sinai, moreover, God gives Moses the instruction to build a “dwelling place” (Exod 25:8). It is a place where the people worship God, and the detailed

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<sup>9</sup> Stuart, *Exodus*, 422–3.

<sup>10</sup> Boda, *A Severe Mercy*, 40.

<sup>11</sup> Fretheim, *Exodus*, 255. See also Stuart, *Exodus*, 34–49.

description of the materials demonstrates the importance of worship to the narrator. The book of Exodus shows, among other things, a movement from slavery to worship, from service to Pharaoh to service to God.<sup>12</sup> It is also a place where God “dwells” among his people. For God to move from the mountain to a portable “dwelling place” in the midst of Israel is important theologically. God is not like other gods who remain at distance with a messy world. The God of Israel is the covenant God who “comes down” to them; his accompanied presence will guide and protect them. When God dwells in the portable place, it means that the covenant God is committed to the journey. It is moreover a commitment to intimacy rather than remoteness. The Israelites will experience this presence in a very special way, which distinguishes them from other nations.

God chooses a place because God has entered history. God is no longer the impersonal God. To speak of divine presence in a place, according to Fretheim, helps preserve the personal character of that presence, for persons are always associated with places. God’s presence in a place will also enhance the closeness of the relationship with the people whom God loves.<sup>13</sup> However, there is a concern for the divine holiness. Though God is dwelling in their midst, He is the Holy One in their midst (cf. Isa 12:6).

The canonical context of the instruction of building the dwelling place (chs. 25–31) and its fulfillment (chs. 35–40) provides key theological significance for the interpretation of the golden calf story in two different ways. First, while God at the top of the mountain gives Moses the instruction for the place where the people must worship him and how they will do so, Israel at the foot of the mountain worships a golden calf and alternatively creates their own liturgical practice with the help of

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<sup>12</sup> Fretheim, *Exodus*, 263.

<sup>13</sup> Fretheim, *Exodus*, 273–4.



Aaron. Second, the sudden interruption of the instruction to build a “dwelling place” with the story of worshipping the golden calf suggests that the presence of God among his people will be postponed due to the sinful act of Israel, a major theme throughout the narrative (ch. 33). The repetition in chs. 35–40 affirms that God’s initial plan to dwell among his people will be carried out based on his merciful and gracious character. With this canonical context in mind, we now turn to the interpretation of Exod 32–34.

## II. Commentary

### A. The Plot (Exod 32:1–6)<sup>14</sup>

The narrative begins with a statement that summarizes the sin of Israel at Mount Sinai at the outset.<sup>15</sup> In a panicked moment during the absence of Moses, the Israelites, under Aaron’s leadership, look for appropriate visible *gods* in their midst “who will go before” them. This expression suggests that the Israelites turned to Aaron to form *gods* who would lead them on their journey, since they do not know “what has become” of their visible leader Moses (v. 1).<sup>16</sup> In addition, the people of Israel do not

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<sup>14</sup> For Childs, even though Exod 32 reflects one basic source to which have been added two expansions, it forms an “integral part of the larger literary complex which includes chs. 33 and 34.” This can be observed in a series of major themes which run through the three chapters such as Moses’ speaking with God, Moses’ intercession on behalf of Israel, God’s presence, and the God who judges and forgives. In reading ch. 32 in its Old Testament context, Childs, moreover, raises the question of the literary unity of the chapter which “forms an impressive example of Hebrew narrative style.” Childs critiques literary critics for not being able to evaluate properly this literary shaping which has led them to fragment the chapter into multiple layers and sources. Instead, Childs reads these multiple layers and sources in their present context, attempting to reveal “the literary achievement of the final stage of composition” (*The Book of Exodus*, 562).

<sup>15</sup> There is a broad consensus among scholars that Exod 32 is related in some ways to the events in 1 Kgs 12:25–33. In this passage, Jeroboam sets up two golden calves and, similar to Exod 32:4, he announces: “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (v. 28). For this reason, the majority of scholars treat ch. 32 as a “late interpolation into the pentateuchal narrative which has been composed by the Deuteronomic writer as a polemic against Jeroboam’s policy and rejected back etiologically into the Mosaic period” (Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 560).

<sup>16</sup> There are different interpretations of the identity of the calf. Sarna reduces the weight of the crisis, stating that the people “intended nothing more than an appropriate object emblematic of the Divine Presence” (*Exploring Exodus*, 217). In other words, “The people were looking for an appropriate visible object that would recall the Divine Presence in their midst” (Sarna, *Exodus*, 204). Noth indicates that Israel had a good intention, since they were looking for a visible God who would lead

regard the exodus from Egypt as God's act; it is the act of Moses "the man who brought us out of the land of Egypt" (v. 1), and it will, moreover, be related to the newly manufactured god (v. 4).

If the Israelites recall the divine presence in their midst through the calf, this indicates that it is not clear yet who God is in the minds of the people. For the Israelites to urge Aaron to "cast gods" demonstrates their misconception of the true living God. Their minds might be still in Egypt thinking of the gods of the Egyptians, or thinking of Baal "who often is described as a bull in Ugaritic literature."<sup>17</sup> They wanted *visible* gods like every other nation. Moreover, if they were just looking for a visible leader they would first think of Aaron. Instead of turning to Aaron to appoint him as the new leader who can connect them with God, they urge him to cast gods! Cole accurately observes "the Israelites were not thinking of YHWH at all."<sup>18</sup>

The narrative reports no objection from Aaron's side when the people make their request. Instead of keeping the gold as a resource for making the tabernacle, Aaron rather commands the Israelites to "break off the gold," which they brought from Egypt at the time of the exodus (Exod 12:31–33), to cast a calf.<sup>19</sup> While the people have declared the newly manufactured god as their *gods* and have given it credit for the exodus from Egypt (v. 4), Aaron builds an altar in front of it and issues a

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them on their way (*Exodus*, 247). Enns agrees with Sarna and Noth in that the calf is "the earthly representative of Yahweh" but stresses the fact that "this does not make the offence any less severe" (*Exodus*, 569). He also refers to this conduct as an act of panic on the part of a people, who fear they have lost their contact with God, since Moses was the only means of contact that the Israelites had with God (*Exodus*, 568–9). Based on v. 5, the bull was considered to be "an image of Yahweh" (Hyatt, *Exodus*, 305). Cole, however, states that, "Whatever Aaron may have thought, the Israelites were not thinking of YHWH at all" (*Exodus*, 213). After all, "a decision on these matters is unimportant" (Longman, *How to Read Exodus*, 133).

<sup>17</sup> Longman, *How to Read Exodus*, 133. See also David, "Golden Calf," 368–71.

<sup>18</sup> Cole, *Exodus*, 213.

<sup>19</sup> In the ancient Near Eastern as well as in the biblical world, the bull was a symbol of divine strength, energy, fertility, and even leadership. Sometimes, gods are depicted standing on bulls and frequently wear horned headdresses (Meyers, *Exodus*, 285).

proclamation: “Tomorrow shall be a feast to Yahweh” (v. 5).<sup>20</sup> The Israelites not only make a visible representation of God but also a new version of their story, which must be told to generations to come every time they celebrate the Passover. The next day, the people sacrifice burnt offerings and present fellowship offerings; then they eat, become drunk and indulge in revelry (v. 6).

Aaron’s partial responsibility for making the calf appears here and throughout the narrative (32:21, 25). Aaron does not just assist in forming the calf, but also acts in priestly fashion: he builds an altar and calls for a feast to the Lord. By building an altar, proclaiming a festival, and receiving offering, Aaron constructs “a full alternative liturgical practice.”<sup>21</sup>

The heart of the matter is that the breaking of the first two commandments is extremely evil because they violate the prohibition on making any image of God or worshiping another god (Exod 20:3–4). It says:

You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me.

Though the Israelites appeared to be enthusiastically committed to “do everything the LORD has said” (24:7), worshiping the golden calf shows the fact that this commitment was quickly broken. Thus, the sin of the people was recognized in the light of the law as an act of disobedience, as this disobedience is emphasized in God’s address of the crisis (vv. 7–10).

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<sup>20</sup> Most English translations translate *elohim* in the plural, though some scholars suggest that a better translation would be in the singular and they argue that *elohim* here is none other than Yahweh. To worship Yahweh in the image of a calf is equal to worshiping a false god (Longman, *How to Read Exodus*, 133).

<sup>21</sup> Brueggeman, “Exodus,” 931.

## B. God's Address of the Sin of Israel (Exod 32:7–10)

God's address provides the interpretation of the sin and its consequences. God's address to Moses asserts that the people broke the commandments and showed disloyalty to the covenant. They "turned quickly out of the way" which God commanded them in Exod 20:3–5, and moreover, showed loyalty to the manufactured god by worshiping it, "they have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it." In addition, they announce a new version of their story: the manufactured god is the one who brought them out of Egypt (v. 8). Turning out of Yahweh's way is a serious sinful act which reveals that the people had no intention of devoting themselves to God. In contrast, they turned away from God's way and showed loyalty not to the covenant God but to the manufactured one. The "stiff-necked people," a compound adjective meaning stubborn, violated God's commandments and were disloyal to their God. Thus, God's interpretation defines sin as an act of disobedience to God's commandments and disloyalty to him.

God's address clearly lays the responsibility of worshiping the calf on the people. It is the people's suggestion from the beginning to Aaron to form a calf. The language of God's address also shows no indication of God's responsibility for the wrongdoing of the people. Rather, the Hebrew term *תָּשׁוּ* in *piel* indicates that the people have corrupted themselves. God's address, moreover, affirms the fact that associating any other deity with God is absolutely forbidden. God will not tolerate such a sinful act but severely punish it.

God's address to Moses proposes two aspects of the consequences. First, the Lord wishes to dissociate himself from the people by referring to them as "your people, whom [you] brought up out of Egypt" (v. 7). The disloyalty of the Israelites *broke* the covenant relationship, and they lost their status as God's own "treasured

possession.” Second, God proposes to treat Israel with wrath and destroy them; he will start over with Moses by making him “into a great nation” (v. 10).

A notable feature of this account is God’s response of anger, which reveals the very character of a jealous just God who will punish sin. This feature is a vital picture, recalling what Yahweh has set forth in Exod 20:5. Since the sin of the people is “like committing adultery on one’s wedding night,”<sup>22</sup> God’s just punishment that appears in destruction is the expression of His jealous character.<sup>23</sup> God is a jealous God who will not tolerate apostasy (Exod 34:14). His response to such a sinful act is severe.

Widmer, however, sees in Yahweh’s “leave me alone” an invitation to Moses to challenge his justified wrath. The statement “leave me alone” opens the door “not to leave me alone.”<sup>24</sup> Rather than being Abraham II, Moses chooses “the role of intercessor over that of patriarch.”<sup>25</sup> Stuart also considers the phrase “Now leave me alone” a rhetorical demand. He explains:

[God] was challenging Moses rather than commanding him. Moses had no power to stop God from doing anything, so there would have been no need whatever for God to ask permission of Moses to do something through the statement “leave me alone.” Rather, it was a rhetorical way of saying to Moses: “Here is what I will do unless you intervene.”<sup>26</sup>

The narrative thus portrays God announcing to Moses his intention to do something as a way of inviting intercession. It, moreover, shows a God who is open for possibilities and invites human beings to dialogue with him. On this basis, the narrative continues with a series of dialogues between God and Moses, emphasizing the significance of Moses’ intercession throughout the narrative.

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<sup>22</sup> Moberly, “Exodus,” 48.

<sup>23</sup> For more details on divine destruction see Gowan, *Theology in Exodus*, 130–49.

<sup>24</sup> Widmer, *Moses*, 333.

<sup>25</sup> Hamilton, *Exodus*, 538.

<sup>26</sup> Stuart, *Exodus*, 670.

C. Moses' First Intercession (Exod 32:11–14).

As the narrative develops, Moses is moved and sets out to placate the Lord *his God*. If God is not the God of the people, *he is the God of Moses*. The relationship between God and Moses is still healthy and this account mentions this fact many times by stating that Moses found favour in God's eyes.

In his first intercession, Moses appeals to God's dignity among the nations and faithfulness to the patriarchs. Moses' speech is divided in two parts. The first part takes the form of two questions, which expresses hope for God to change his mind. In the first question, Moses, in contrast with v. 7, identifies Israel as God's people (v. 11), which reminds Yahweh of his covenant with them. God had just brought them out of Egypt and promised them a land, not destruction. Since Moses knows that God has neither evil nor deceitful intent, in the second question Moses warns God that the proposed destruction of the people will create the impression among the Egyptians that evil motivation was behind the exodus. God's reputation is in some jeopardy and thus the purpose of the exodus of the nations knowing Yahweh as the Lord (7:5) will not be achieved. What will the nations think of such a God?

The second part of Moses' speech includes three imperatives addressing God. Moses does not challenge the justice of God's wrath. Rather he asks God to "turn away" from anger. In other words, Moses attempts to "convince God to peruse his initial intentions,"<sup>27</sup> asking him to relent/repent/change his mind and do not bring disaster. He finally appeals to God's faithfulness to the patriarch, reminding God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, to whom he swore by his own self.

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<sup>27</sup> Widmer, *Moses*, 333.

Consequently, Yahweh relents and does not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened (32:14).<sup>28</sup> As it appears here, God's relenting is based on the intercession, and it has nothing to do with the repentance of the people yet. This is, nonetheless, not at all the same as saying God forgave the people and will do nothing. He promised to punish the one who sins (32:33) and not to leave the guilty unpunished (20:5; 34:7). What he had threatened was to destroy the people; but what he ended up doing was to punish them (32:34–35). Moreover, God's response shows his willingness to respond to prayer. Indeed, as Stuart states, "this is one of many passages in Scripture that demonstrate God's responsiveness to the prayer of a righteous person prayed not for selfish reasons but out of a desire to see God's will accomplished."<sup>29</sup>

God's response to Moses' intercession, as it is read in its full context, is harmonized with his revealed character as merciful, compassionate, and slow to anger yet not being willing to clear the guilty (34:7). Thus, Moses' intercession had at least cut off the possibility of Israel's complete destruction but did not altogether eliminate the option of punishment, as it appears in 32:35. The God of Israel is revealed throughout the narrative as the One who is open to change; He is a living dynamic God who responds to intercession.

#### D. Moses' Anger (Exod 32:15–20).

After Moses saves Israel from complete destruction, he descends to the people, carrying the two tablets of the testimony in his hands. These tablets and their writings are "the work of God." While the camp is too far to be seen, Joshua

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<sup>28</sup> Instead of translating the Hebrew word *naham* "relent," Hyatt translates it "repent" (*Exodus*, 307). However, God never repents of sin but rather divine repentance is the reversal of a direction taken or a decision made (Fretheim, *Exodus*, 286). Thus, God's relenting leads him to reverse the decision for judgment as it appears here.

<sup>29</sup> Stuart, *Exodus*, 672.

mistakably misidentifies the shouting of the people as the sound of war. In contrast, Moses identifies the sound as singing. As soon as Moses draws near to the camp and witnesses the scene, he reacts the same way as Yahweh did: Moses' anger burns hot (v. 19). Ironically the phrase is similar to the one in (v. 11).

It is unexpected that the man who has saved the people from destruction breaks the tablets. Though this action may describe the nature of Moses' anger, it indeed goes beyond that. Moses's breaking of the tablets is an important symbolic act to signify in the ancient Semitic world a "breaking" of the covenant.<sup>30</sup> To smash the tablets is to declare the annulment of the covenant due to Israel's recent violation of the covenant. For the second time, the narrative reports that the covenant between God and the people is broken (see our comment above on 32:7). However, Moses not only smashes the tablets but also burns, grinds, and scatters the calf on the water and makes the Israelites drink it.<sup>31</sup>

#### E. Moses' Confrontation with Aaron (Exod 32:21–29).

The narrative moves from the tragedy of Moses' anger to Moses' confrontation with Aaron (32:21–24). The dialogue between the two brothers shows Aaron's partial responsibility. The dialogue begins with Moses' question, which shows "a heavy accusation."<sup>32</sup> Aaron, according to Moses, is the one who "led them into such great sin" (v. 21). After Aaron's lame excuse, the narrative reports the insistence of Moses that Aaron let the people get out of control and run wild (v. 25).

<sup>30</sup> In the same way, Zechariah breaks his "staff" which symbolically represents the covenant between God and his people. Just as that wooden staff was broken, so would God break his covenant with all the people. This means that God will withdraw his gracious protection of national Israel (Zech 11:10).

<sup>31</sup> For a detailed study on the difficulties of translating Exod 32:20 see Frankel, "The Destruction of the Golden Calf," 330–9. Burning, grinding, and scattering, according to Stuart, "were actions commonly employed in the ancient world to get rid of an idol so that it could never be reconstituted from its scavenged elements and be brought again worthy of worship" (*Exodus*, 678). For example see 2 Kgs 23:6, 15; cf. 2 Chr 34:4.

<sup>32</sup> Brueggeman, "*Exodus*," 932.



Aaron's version of what happened is accurate until he comes to his own role. The last few words of his defense, "out came this calf" (v. 24), show Aaron's attempt to minimize his responsibility to the extent that he did not participate in forming the calf. The calf itself is the subject of the verb. Brueggeman ironically writes, "Nobody did it, certainly not Aaron!"<sup>33</sup> However, whatever Aaron attempted to accomplish through his defense, it does not "excuse him for acting in a 'priestly' capacity at the worship of the bull-calf (Exod 32:5)."<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, Moses commissions the Levites to kill 3,000 people.<sup>35</sup> It appears that Moses "reflects Yahweh's anger as displayed at the mountain."<sup>36</sup> In addition, this severe action serves "to underline the severity of Israel's sin."<sup>37</sup> As Yahweh's representative, he does not tolerate such a sinful act.

However, this severe punishment from Moses' side was not without a call for loyalty to Yahweh. Moses invites the whole community to make a public stand. He stands at the entrance of the camp and calls, "Whoever is for the Lord, come to me" (v. 26). This is a call for "commitment to Yahweh alone."<sup>38</sup> This invitation is a chance for whoever is willing to renew his or her commitment to Yahweh. However, no one responded positively but the Levites. This may suggest that "the loyalty of such men [Levites]...provided in itself a kind of ordination to Yahweh's service that resulted in a blessing,"<sup>39</sup> while others decide to remain disloyal to Yahweh and therefore three thousand are killed as Moses commanded (v. 29).

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<sup>33</sup> Brueggeman, "Exodus," 932.

<sup>34</sup> Cole, *Exodus*, 219.

<sup>35</sup> Fretheim speak of modern sensitivities that may get in the way of our interpretation. However, he states that "for this juncture in Israel's life, when its entire future is at stake, radical sin is believed to call for radical measures" (*Exodus*, 289).

<sup>36</sup> Widmer, *Moses*, 124.

<sup>37</sup> Widmer, *Moses*, 125.

<sup>38</sup> Fretheim, *Exodus*, 289.

<sup>39</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, 432.

At this point in the narrative, Moses has two significant roles. At the top of the mountain, Moses is the advocate of the people before Yahweh, and, at the bottom of the mountain, he is Yahweh's representative.<sup>40</sup> Thus, the narrator echoes the prophetic role of Moses that was established on Sinai.

#### F. Moses' Second Intercession (Exod 32:30–35).

Though Moses was able to cut off the possibility of Israel's destruction (vv. 11–14), the issue of forgiveness and the nature of the God-Israel relationship remains uncertain. With that goal in mind, Moses "will go up to the Lord" (v. 30). However, Moses' use of "perhaps" introduces the uncertainty of how God will respond and "the dream" for which Moses is pleading. Moreover, for Moses to "make atonement" has nothing to do with blood and sacrifice. Rather, before Moses takes such a move, for the first time the narrative reports the confrontation of the people for their "great sin" (v. 33), a term that is first used in Moses' confrontation of Aaron (v. 21) and will be used one more time in this chapter (v. 31). Moses' use of this term shows not only the seriousness of what the Israelites have done but also defines it. Thus, to reduce the weight of the crisis is to underestimate its severity.

Moses begins his second appeal with confession. This confession on behalf of the people asserts Moses' role not just as the great giver of the law but also as an intercessor. Now, Moses makes an either-or request. He seeks to obtain forgiveness for the people, but if this is not acceptable, then God may blot Moses out of the book.<sup>41</sup> Both options are refused. Rather, God announces a key statement in terms of God's way of punishment, that is, the "one who sins" must be blotted out of the book

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<sup>40</sup> Widmer, *Moses*, 330.

<sup>41</sup> In the OT focus on divine reward and punishment in this life, the blessed on the list receive their blessings here and now and those stricken from the book suffer in this life, not in some eternal future" (David, "Book of Life," 74).

(Exod 33:33). It appears here that only God is able to make decisions related to sin and its remedy. This will be stressed even more in Exod 33:19.<sup>42</sup>

While the Israelites will not escape God's judgment, they will be granted entrance into the Promised Land and the company of an angel (v. 34). Thus, "neither the judgment nor the promise is permitted to crowd out each other."<sup>43</sup> Moreover, God reserves the right to punish "when the time comes" (v. 34). The narrative immediately reports that God's judgment breaks out, striking the people with a plague.<sup>44</sup> The biblical narrative thus affirms the people's complete responsibility for worshiping the calf, though Aaron is partially responsible.

Thus, the dialogue between God and Moses exhibits a tension in the way in which both parties approach the crisis of the calf. It is not Moses' either-or approach. Rather, it is God's approach, which permits "no final or systematic resolve."<sup>45</sup> Moreover, if Moses was able, up to this point in the narrative, to partially secure "forgiveness" in the form of entrance into the Promised Land, this "forgiveness" does not eliminate the punishment. Boda explains, "God's forgiveness involves what is called 'mitigated punishment,' that is, the people are given less than their sins deserve but are still punished."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Fretheim warns us to "use extraordinary care in drawing theological inferences from the text [v. 33]." For instance, one cannot suggest that forgiveness is not available to sinners. This key hermeneutical issue is indeed not just with this verse but throughout the narrative since "God is here [and throughout the narrative] represented as one who is sorting out possibilities with Moses, and hence interpretation should not move beyond such possibilities to reality" (*Exodus*, 291). This suggests that each verse and paragraph must be interpreted in light of the whole narrative.

<sup>43</sup> Brueggemann, "Exodus," 934.

<sup>44</sup> Noth believes the plague is the result of the "water of cursing" (*Exodus*, 251). Sarna also supports this position with the assumption that this verse (35) belongs after verse 20 (*Exodus*, 210). However, Hyatt believes that the nature of the plague cannot be determined (*Exodus*, 312).

<sup>45</sup> Brueggemann, "Exodus," 935.

<sup>46</sup> Boda, *A Severe Mercy*, 42.

### G. The Absence of God's Presence (Exod 33:1–6).<sup>47</sup>

The tension continues as the narrative develops. Once again the Israelites are identified as those whom Moses brought out of Egypt (33:1). Nevertheless, God will remain faithful to three promises: God will give the people the land (3:8; 17:6–8); will drive out its inhabitants (23:23, 28–31); and will send an angel to guide Israel in the way (23:20, 23).<sup>48</sup> Unfortunately, Moses was unable to secure God's presence in the journey: God "will not go" with them (33:3). Before the incident of worshiping the calf, the Israelites would have left Sinai with Yahweh dwelling among them in his new "portable Sinai,"<sup>49</sup> that is, the tabernacle (25:8; 29:45–46). Now, the Israelites were commanded to "leave this place" but without Yahweh. Thus, according to Myers, "God's withdrawal seems to negate the whole set of tabernacle instructions, which are meant to secure divine presence."<sup>50</sup> It seems, nonetheless, that God's absence is a positive sign for Israel. God's absence, according to Fretheim, is "a concern for their well-being." God's presence may destroy them in case the people continue of continuing being apostate "and their stiff-neckedness suggests that is a real possibility."<sup>51</sup>

The announcement of the absence of God is a dark moment in the history of the Israelites. Durham describes the seriousness at this point:

It is punishment...that negates every announcement, every expectation...there will be no special treasure, no kingdom of priests, no

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<sup>47</sup> For Childs, the literary analysis of ch. 33 is extremely difficult. Instead of assigning the variety of traditions in these chapters to sources, like J or E or both, "they have been brought together by a redactor to illuminate the one issue," which is the theme of God's presence (*The Book of Exodus*, 585). Here Childs prefers to assign the formation of the chapter to the redactor's hand rather than to the existing sources. In reading ch. 33 in its Old Testament context, Childs, moreover, interprets the present shape of the chapter in relation to ch. 32 and ch. 34. In his judgment, "there is no justification for a closer connection to ch. 32 that has been provided in 33.1ff" (*The Book of Exodus*, 587). Moreover, the final section of ch. 33 "forms the bridge to the restoration of the covenant in the succeeding chapter" (*The Book of Exodus*, 597).

<sup>48</sup> Fretheim, *Exodus*, 293.

<sup>49</sup> Fretheim, *Exodus*, 294.

<sup>50</sup> Meyers, *Exodus*, 262.

<sup>51</sup> Fretheim, *Exodus*, 293.

holy nation, no Yahweh being their God, no covenant, no ark, no tabernacle, no altar, no cloud of glory.<sup>52</sup>

Though the people will not be completely left alone and God will send his angel, this tiny glimmer of light has not kept the people from mourning.<sup>53</sup> The Israelites finally begin to recognize the seriousness of the situation. The Israelites express their grief over God's absence by taking their ornaments.<sup>54</sup> Even though the scene is dramatic, this is not a final decision written on stone. There is hope since God "will decide what to do with them" (33:5).

#### H. The Tent of Meeting (Exod 32:7–11).<sup>55</sup>

In this context, the tent of meeting primarily functions to highlight God and Moses' intimate relationship and Moses' role as a mediator. It is the place where God meets with Moses. Moses goes to the tent, which he can pitch by himself outside the camp, to meet with God. Though the relationship between God and his people is broken after the crisis, the relationship between God and Moses has not changed. Inside the tent, "the Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend" (v. 11). The expression "face to face" is here to be understood as "an idiom of intimacy, not as a reference to theophany."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, 437.

<sup>53</sup> The angel is functioning as a guide, not a replacement of Yahweh's presence, since Yahweh clearly states that he will not go with them. See Durham (*Exodus*, 437) for the full debate over this issue.

<sup>54</sup> Ornaments, according to Hayatt, "must have been associated with rejoicing and gaiety" (*Exodus*, 313). However, this kind of mourning, according to Boda, is expressed in many different occasions: the death of someone; a severe loss; a king's defeat (*A Severe Mercy*, 42). Moreover, there is a debate over the reason of the mourning of the people, whether it is over their sin or God's refusal to go with them. Even if the mourning of the people is over God's refusal to go with them, this certainly helps them recognize the seriousness of the sin they committed.

<sup>55</sup> Commentators have often considered this section disruptive and "out of place" in this context (Durham, *Exodus*, 443). Others have sought to find ways to understand it in its context, though they believe it belongs to a different tradition (Child, *Exodus*, 589–93). It is striking, however, to see some theological commentaries ignore it completely as if it is not there, for example, Gowan, *Theology in Exodus*.

<sup>56</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, 443.

The tent of meeting shows how God's presence is manifest to Moses. While Moses is inside the tent, the people stand at the entrance of their own tents watching "the pillar of cloud," which demonstrates the divine presence.

The God-Moses friendship is an essential foundation for God to go with them and to restore the broken relationship with the people. It is this quality of relationship that assists in making the future of Israel possible. The tent of meeting, which represents the quality of God and Moses' relationship, sets the stage for the next component of the narrative.

It is, however, clear that the "tent of meeting" differs from the "tabernacle" in many ways. For one thing, while the former is pitched some distance away, "outside the camp" (v. 7), the latter is made to be in "their midst" (25:8). Second, the tent of meeting is a simple tent that Moses could set up by himself, unlike the tabernacle, which requires a particular group of people to transport it and set it up (Num 1:49). Finally, the tabernacle is a portable place that regularizes God's presence "among them" and the center of community worship, while the tent of meeting, from its name, is a place where Moses, and the people could too, on a "God-seeking mission" would meet God (v. 7).<sup>57</sup>

#### I. Moses's Third Intercession (Exod 33:12–32).<sup>58</sup>

The purpose of Moses' intercession in this passage is to secure God's presence not only with him as leader (vv. 13–14) but also among the people (vv. 13–16) as they

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<sup>57</sup> Hamilton, *Exodus*, 561.

<sup>58</sup> One important feature in this passage and throughout the narrative is persistence. As it appears here, for example, "Moses includes the people in his petition, and the equal persistence with which God leaves them out." Moreover, Irwin observes one more feature of this passage, that is, "speaking at cross-purposes" as the key to the dialogue's "ingenious structure." To be precise about the cross-purposes, Irwin states, "neither party to the dialogue responds to what the other has just said. This single feature, more than any other, gives the dialogue its shape and tone. The dialogue is well constructed, as will be shown, and its technique has broader narrative and exegetical implications" (Irwin, "The Course of the Dialogue Between Moses and Yhwh in Exodus 33:12–17," 630).

depart from Sinai. Moses begins his dialogue with God by quoting him, saying, “you have been telling me” (v. 12). The subject of the first quotation is Moses’ desire to know whom God “will send” with him, especially after God’s commandment to “lead these people.” The subject for the second quotation is Moses’ desire to be taught God’s way on the strength of the favor he finds with God. Nevertheless, it is not all about Moses himself, but Moses’ main concern is the people. Therefore, Moses concludes with a quick but essential reminder, that is, “this nation is your people” (v. 13).

God’s promise of presence and rest to Moses relieves some of the tension built up in the narrative: “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest” (33:14). It is important to note that Moses will experience God’s presence through rest. In this sense, God’s presence is an active and experiential presence. Knowles explains: “It is worth pointing out that the second half of this sentence is as important as the first... This amounts to an assurance that God’s presence is not merely passive or inert. It is an active and saving presence, a presence that makes following possible and leads to rest.”<sup>59</sup>

However, Moses again affirms to God how essential His presence is for both Moses and the people (vv. 15–16). God’s presence is foundational to Israel’s existence among the nations. It is the sign that distinguishes the Israelites among the nations. It is also a testimony that God is pleased with Moses and His people. Durham skillfully observes that the theological insight of this marvelous passage is universal, “equally applicable to divine-human relationship and ministry in any age. No people, not matter how religious they are and for whatever reasons, can be a people of God

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<sup>59</sup> Knowles, *The Unfolding Mystery*, 36.

without the Presence of God... Without Yahweh's presence, in the dark and chaotic umbra of his Absence, Israel will cease to exist."<sup>60</sup>

Finally, God will do, for the first time in the narrative and in a direct way, "the very thing" for which Moses has asked; God's presence will be with Moses and the people. However, God clearly states the reason behind this vital decision; Moses has "found favor" with God, and God knows Moses by name. God's declaration shows a God who is responsive to human intercession. The restoration of the relationship between God and Israel up to this point in the narrative is built on the passionate intercession of Moses. Bruckner writes, "Friendship was the foundation on which the restoration of sinful Israel was built."<sup>61</sup>

The request of Moses to see the glory of God (v. 18) is indeed a request that will demonstrate and prove God's seriousness in his promise to be present.<sup>62</sup> Moses seeks assurance of God's promise to be present with them. For Moses, seeing God's glory proves that the relationship is as it was previously. However, God's response to Moses does not mention glory. Instead, God's response is the proclamation of his goodness and name. Exodus 34:5-7 is a description of what God meant by passing his "goodness" by Moses.<sup>63</sup> Durham understands the term in relation to identity, rather than appearance. It is not a description of how he looks but of how he is. The calling of the name of the Lord is an important clue to what God promises Moses in relation to his goodness. It refers not to an appearance of beauty but rather to a "recital of character."<sup>64</sup> For Knowles, God's replay to Moses suggests that "God's 'goodness' and

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<sup>60</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, 448.

<sup>61</sup> Bruckner, *Exodus*, 294.

<sup>62</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, 452.

<sup>63</sup> Hyatt gives general two meanings of the use of the word: (a) "beauty, fairness in appearance," or (b) "the goodness of Yahweh in bestowing good things upon his people." But he suggests that in this context the "goodness of Yahweh refers to his forgiveness of Israel and his willingness to save Israel by leading them out of Egypt" (*Exodus*, 317). It is possible to suggest that God's goodness refers partly to his forgiveness since it is a significant aspect of who God is in 34:5-7.

<sup>64</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, 452.



God's 'name' are in fact the essence of God's 'glory.'"<sup>65</sup> For Childs, what God is about to reveal is in terms of his attributes not his appearance. Since the use of this term in the OT signifies his benefits which are experienced by Israel, God's revelation in 34:5–7 is defined in terms of God's activity toward Israel. In this context, it is God's activity toward the apostasy of Israel.<sup>66</sup>

Yahweh continues with "a statement of his sovereignty" (33:19).<sup>67</sup> God will have mercy and compassion on whomever he has mercy and compassion. On the one hand, this statement reveals a God who is full of mercy and compassion. This shows the positive description of a God who is willing to forgive. On the other hand, it expresses the fact that "the exercise of God's attributes is an act of pure volition on His part."<sup>68</sup> The statement also leaves open the possibility of God's judgment. Moberly notes that "the judgment theme of 34:7b is not wholly lacking in 33:19b inasmuch as the formula used there has been seen to leave open the freedom of Yahweh to be merciful as he chooses in a way that cannot be presumed upon."<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, the formula in its present context shows more of the positive attitude of a merciful and compassionate God who is, in his pure volition, willing to forgive. Thus, the biblical narrative affirms that forgiveness is an act of divine sovereignty.

However, Moses' request to see God's glory is more than what God is willing to grant for Moses's sake. Moses cannot see God's face. God says, "For no one may see me and live" (v. 20). This is confirmed once again at the end of the preview of the vision of God's goodness, where God says, "My face must not be seen" (vv. 21–23).

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<sup>65</sup> Knowles, *The Unfolding Mystery*, 37. Knowles, moreover, recalls Exod 3:14 here and suggests that the simple tautology "I will be who I will be" now becomes "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy." In this way, God's statement in Exod 33:19b helps clarify "this otherwise puzzling statement" of Exod 3:14. For more detail on this discussion, see Knowles, *The Unfolding Mystery*, 37–8.

<sup>66</sup> Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 596.

<sup>67</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, 452.

<sup>68</sup> Sarna, *Exodus*, 214.

<sup>69</sup> Moberly, *At the Mountain*, 87.

Since “seeing” God is dangerous, a safe preview is necessary. So, Moses stands in a sheltered place and is covered by Yahweh’s hand. After the glory has passed, Moses then looks at Yahweh’s back. This statement confirms that Moses meeting God “face to face” in the tent of meeting is a term of intimacy. Though “face to face” expresses the idea of intimacy, it also “marks a specific type of divine encounter” in the OT in which every encounter has a different purpose, e.g. the Jacob story in Gen 32.<sup>70</sup>

This passage plays a significant role in its larger context. It represents a key rhetorical juncture; it looks back to affirm God’s promise to be present and it also looks forward to God’s revelation of his glory. Moberly writes that, the self-revelation of God is “in response to the prayer of the mediator.”<sup>71</sup> He also states, “In general contextual terms, it is the intercession of Moses, subsequent to Israel’s sin and YHWH’s wrath, which prepares the way for the divine self-revelation.”<sup>72</sup>

#### J. The Self-Revelation of God and the Petition of Moses (Exod 34:1–9)<sup>73</sup>

In order to prepare for the meeting, God commands Moses, “Chisel out two stone tablets like the first ones” (v. 1). God will rewrite on them what was on the first tablets. The tablets are mentioned here in connection with 24:12, where God gives

<sup>70</sup> Wilson, “Face to Face with God,” 114.

<sup>71</sup> Boda, *A Severe Mercy*, 43.

<sup>72</sup> Moberly, “How May,” 198.

<sup>73</sup> Childs’ literary and tradition historical analysis of ch. 34 follows the initial insight of Wellhausen that ch. 34 is J’s parallel account of the Sinai covenant and thus the covenant of ch. 34 is considered as original. “The theme of the covenant renewal, which is confined to vv. 1, 4, 28b, is redactional” (*The Book of Exodus*, 607). However, the present shape of the Sinai tradition in Exodus “bears the decisive shaping of a redactor who combined J and E” (*The Book of Exodus*, 607). Even though the complex literary and traditional development shows some tension in details, Childs seeks to interpret and understands the final stage of the story in its present form. Chapter 34 forms the climax of the narrative which began in ch. 32; thus, the breaking of the covenant of chapter 32 is restored in 34. Nevertheless, the question to be raised due to Childs’ use of source, literary, and tradition-historical methods is how one can reconcile all these methods and at the end read the text in its final form. Indeed, Childs’ use of all these methods, and particularly Wellhausen’s, raises sometimes challenges in interpreting and understanding the text in its final form. For instance, to consider the covenant in ch. 34 as original and assign it to J and at the same time to interpret it in its present form raises the challenge of having two different contexts where the chapter would be understood differently.

Moses the two tablets, and with 32:15–20, where the tablets are destroyed. This shows that God is open to renew the covenant, but the commandments, however, must stay at the heart of the covenant and Israel's life.

This meeting will take place in the morning and Moses is to be ready. However, it is a special invitation just for Moses and “no one is to come or be seen anywhere on the mountain” (v. 3). These requirements are parallel to those in Exod 19:10–11, but while there Moses, elders, and the people must be prepared, this time the instruction applies only to Moses.

In response to Moses' request to see the glory of Yahweh, Yahweh reveals himself to Moses through the proclamation of his names and attributes. This personal revelation of Yahweh is to fundamentally serve the larger purpose of the whole narrative and to put an end to the dialogue between God and Moses regarding the crisis of worshiping the golden calf. It mainly reveals the character of God in dealing with sinful Israel. Yahweh, moreover, begins his self-revelation by a deliberate repetition of his name. The calling out of the name Yahweh is an important to what Yahweh promised to Moses (33:19), and Durham observes its parallel in Exod 3:14. On the one hand, while God reveals his name to Moses, saying, “I am who I am” (3:14), in Exod 33:19 he promises Moses a revelation of who he is, not of how he looks. By proclaiming his name in Exod 34:6–7, Yahweh provides further description of himself and defines who he is. Thus, “I Am Who I Am,” the One who always is, provides “an anchor line for the list of five descriptive phrases that follow.”<sup>74</sup>

God is the merciful and compassionate God. These attributes are expressed through the Hebrew terms *rahum* and *hannun*. The former attribute shows “a tender

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<sup>74</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, 452–3.

attitude of concern and mercy that God holds toward His people,<sup>75</sup> and the latter shows a deep sympathy of God toward his people.<sup>76</sup> The two attributes of God's character will be expressed in his action of forgiveness.<sup>77</sup> The richness of God's forgiveness appears in its comprehensiveness in the face of the totality of the Israelites' sin, wickedness, and rebellion.<sup>78</sup>

God's attribute "slow to anger" means that "it takes a long time for him to get to the point of anger, emphasizing his patience with his people."<sup>79</sup> The best key text in Exodus to understand the delay in punishing sin, according to Bruckner, comes just after the golden calf rebellion (32:10–14, 33–35).<sup>80</sup>

The final aspect of God's attributes is the combination of two covenantal words: "abounding in benevolence and faithfulness." Sarna defines *hesed* as "God's absolute and eternal dependability in dispensing His Benefaction."<sup>81</sup> It describes God who is filled with generosity, benevolence, and lovingkindness. Note that *hesed* is the only word repeated in this description of God, but the second time it is associated with the word 'maintaining,' which can be understood in the covenant context. With its link with faithfulness, *hesed* affirms God's loyalty to His people. Knowles suggests that each term interprets the other. He explains:

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<sup>75</sup> Stuart, *Exodus*, 715.

<sup>76</sup> The meaning of this word is clarified in Ps 103:13: "As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him." This shows that the term *hannun* is used to refer to the pity of a father for his children. Boda also notes that the term is used to refer to the pity of a mother for her threatened children in 1 Kgs 3:26 (*A Severe Mercy*, 44). The root of this verb (*hen*), according to Routledge, refers to favour or goodwill freely given to benefit another" (*Old Testament*, 108). The meaning of term is also illustrated by God in the law against taking collateral for a loan to a poor person (22:26–7).

<sup>77</sup> For a detailed discussion on God's mercy and compassion and their implication for the people of Israel and their covenant relationship with Yahweh see Knowles, *The Unfolding Mystery*, 57–62.

<sup>78</sup> The Hebrew word is *nasa* and is often translated as "to take up," "to carry" (Smith, *Old Testament*, 224–5). It is difficult to determine the meaning of forgiveness in this context since God had not explicitly responded. Goldingay states, "It is not clear whether God takes the wickedness away with him or bears the burden of it" (*Old Testament Theology*, 414).

<sup>79</sup> Boda, *A Severe Mercy*, 44.

<sup>80</sup> Bruckner, *Exodus*, 303.

<sup>81</sup> Sarna, *Exodus*, 216.

[T]he *hesed* of Yahweh is manifested in covenant faithfulness; divine fidelity is an expression of steadfast love. The combination implies that in being loyal to his covenant and covenant people, Israel's God is by nature disposed to steadfast loyalty (*hesed*) and, as an extension of that love, is reliable and can be relied on.<sup>82</sup>

These two attributes of God's character would be expressed through His action of maintaining faithfully his benevolence to his people. He is faithful in his benevolence to the covenant people regardless of their loyalty. Thus, the creed affirms God's commitment to take care of the covenant people in their journey. It also shows that God's sponsorship of the people is based on his character as benevolent and faithful, regardless of their stiff-necked nature. By revealing his character as benevolent and faithful, God is fully committed to the covenant people.

The creed presents another aspect of God's character; he is just. Though God is merciful and compassionate, he will not leave the guilty unpunished. The judgment theme in the creed is an echo of 32:32, where God stresses the fact that he will punish whoever has sinned against him. Thus, the creed prevents the people from thinking of 'cheap forgiveness' or misinterpreting the meaning of God's mercy and forgiveness. Forgiveness in this context does not "neglect just punishment."<sup>83</sup> The creed thus provides a full balanced picture of Yahweh, especially to Moses. While Moses pleads for forgiveness, God reveals to him the fact that this is not the only option. There are more possibilities for Yahweh to deal with the sinful Israel.

A noteworthy feature of God's self-revelation is the relation between v. 6 and v. 7. In former God reveals who he is, while in the latter God explains how he will deal with Israel. Thus, God reveals himself not just a conceptual list of attributes, leaving out their explanation, but rather demonstrating how these attributes function in Israel's life. Throughout Scripture, the life of Israel reflects God's attributes in

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<sup>82</sup> Knowles, *The Unfolding Mystery*, 152.

<sup>83</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, 450.

action. The revelatory function of the creed reflects the revelatory nature of God himself. In response to Moses' request to see the glory of God, Yahweh willingly reveals himself to Moses, but not through his appearance but rather through the proclamation of words. The glory of God in this context is to be understood in terms of speech and proclamation through words, a revelation of who God is rather of how he looks.

While the self-revelation of God states all the options for dealing with Israel's sinful act, it is not clear how this revelation will play for Israel's life. Israel's case is to be determined and in this crucial moment in Israel's history, Moses has a role to play. The unsatisfied mediator is still at work. Based on the self-revelation of God and the fact that he has found favour in God's eyes, Moses appears before God asking God to go with them, forgive their sin, and take them as his inheritance (34:9), not forgetting to confess that Israel is a stiff-necked people. By this confession, Moses knows that Israel, as a stiff-necked people, deserves punishment, but he petitions Yahweh to act in mercy, graciousness, steadfast love, and faithfulness toward undeserving Israel. Childs wisely notes that the petition in v. 9 "picks up all the various themes of the last two chapters: finding favor with God, going in our midst, stiff-necked people, iniquity and sin, and your possession."<sup>84</sup> Once again in the narrative, Moses offers some possibilities, but it is up to Yahweh's determination how he will respond.

#### K. The Renewal and the Content of the Covenant (Exod 34:10–28).

God's response in v. 10 is what the compassionate mediator is waiting to hear, the renewal of the covenant. The renewal of the covenant relationship between God

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<sup>84</sup> Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 612.

and Israel is introduced by God's statement that he is again "making a covenant." This new beginning is made possible because of God's sovereignty to forgive (33:19), the self-revelation of the gracious God, and in answer to the petition of Moses (34:9). This remarkable theological statement asserts that the future of Israel depends on Yahweh's gracious and faithful character.

The nature of this covenant is unique since there are no longer commandments which the people must agree to keep. This covenant is in place simply because God has willingly determined that it be so. At the moment of its unfaithfulness, God graciously renews the covenant with Israel. Fretheim describes this moment, writing

No conditions are attached. Entirely at the divine initiative, at a moment in Israel's life where it is most vulnerable and can call on no goodness of its own or any other human resource, God acts on Israel's behalf: Its sins are forgiven. This is an entirely new reality for Israel, indeed for the world.<sup>85</sup>

The sign of this covenant is God's active presence among them. God's experiential presence will appear in his marvelous act on behalf of Israel. It is no longer the angel of the Lord in the picture, but Yahweh himself "will do wonders never done before in all the world" (34:10). One of the first of those deeds is the displacement of the inhabitants of the Promised Land (34:11). By renewing the covenant, God thus affirms that the consequences of worshiping the golden calf are now removed. The broken relationship is restored and the absence of God is replaced by his experiential presence. This is "a decisive turning point in the larger narrative. The severity of chap. 32 and the unresolved question of presence in chap. 33 have now been fully overcome and wondrously resolved."<sup>86</sup>

The content of the renewed covenant, however, requires faithfulness from Israel's part. Israel must not make any covenant with the people of the Promised Land

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<sup>85</sup> Fretheim, *Exodus*, 308.

<sup>86</sup> Brueggemann, "Exodus," 949.

(vv. 12, 15). Rather, they must destroy the altars, the sacred pillars, and sacred poles of these people (v. 13). Once again God recalls the first two commandments, emphasizing that the Israelites must not worship any other gods since Yahweh is a jealous God (v. 14; 20:5). Nor will they “make cast idols” (v. 17). This emphasis is a direct and specific reaction to Israel’s sin of the golden calf. Loyalty to Yahweh is not an option; they must avoid any involvement in the worship of the gods of the inhabitants of the land. Thus while Israel’s life has now begun again by Yahweh who graciously moves beyond the crisis of worshiping the calf, Yahweh jealously requires complete obedience.

The instructions that follow were carefully chosen to act as a reminder to the Israelites in the future. They emphasize the most significant feasts in Israel’s life, reminding the Israelites of the powerful work of Yahweh in their history. The Feast of Unleavened Bread, with its link to the Passover, is to be a strong reminder of the time when they came out of Egypt. The instruction of the firstborn sacrifice reminds the people of the last plague, the death of the Egyptian firstborn. The Sabbath is to be consistently observed as a reminder that Yahweh is the Creator. Next, God issues the instructions concerning two pilgrim feasts: the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Ingathering.

While Moses is on the mountain with the Lord for 40 days and 40 nights, God commands him to write “these words” (v. 27), and the final sentence says that Moses wrote the “words of the covenant, the ten words” (v. 28). Scholars have attempted to find harmony between these two verses, since they seem to be in tension. For Moberly, v. 27 refers to the commands of vv. 11–26, while in v. 28 the “ten words” refer to the Decalogue.<sup>87</sup> Durham suggests that there is the possibility that a deliberate

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<sup>87</sup> Moberly, *At the Mountain of God*, 101–6.



arrangement has been compromised by another redactor's arrangement. In this case, "these words" may be taken as a reference to the whole of Yahweh's explanatory revelation regarding the application of the principle set forth in his own "ten words."<sup>88</sup> Brueggemann's suggestion is somewhat similar to Durham's, which could be a preferable suggestion. There is no question for Brueggemann that this collection of commandments (vv. 11–26) could ever rival the Ten Commandments. What we have here, Brueggemann continues, is another perhaps well-known collection that is placed in a secondary position to reiterate some elements of the covenantal command, which aims at the particular temptation evident in the narrative.<sup>89</sup>

While certainty is of course impossible, the interpretation of these verses is still possible. In its canonical context and as it stands at the end of the narrative of the golden calf, the scene in these verses recall Exod 31:18, where Moses was receiving the tablets of testimony before the incident of golden calf. It is a clear sign of God's forgiveness, a testimony to a God who is willing to start over and continue his initial plan with Moses and the Israelites. It also shows God graciously moving beyond the crisis of the calf.

#### L. Moses' Radiant Face (Exod 34:29–35).

The narrative closes with an account of Moses' shining face. Verses 29-35 report Moses' descent from the mountain to the encamped Israelites. This descent is a deliberate contrast to Moses' previous descent in Exod 32:7–35. Moses' previous descent had been in anger. This time, however, Moses comes down in radiance. The former reflects God's anger with Israel, while the latter reflects his delight. As such, it

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<sup>88</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, 462.

<sup>89</sup> Brueggemann, "Exodus," 949.

is clear that the glory of God himself is reflected on the face of Moses, a sign of Moses' close relationship with God.

The reaction of Aaron and the Israelites to Moses' shining face is fear. Moses calls out to them to begin reviewing the commandments the Lord spoke to him on Mount Sinai. After this review, Moses covers his face with a "veil." This continues to be part of ongoing ritual practice. Moses' glowing face as he departed from Yahweh's presence to communicate Yahweh's word to Israel left no doubt about the authority of the words he spoke and the source of requirements Moses announces to Israel. This concluding section of the narrative is a deliberate contrast to Israel's reaction to Moses at the beginning of the narrative. While the people rejected Moses in a panicked moment at the beginning of the narrative, Moses' prophetic role is affirmed by Yahweh himself. Moses is God's authoritative mediator of spoken revelation, and Israel must not doubt that.

### III. Conclusion

All three chapters discussed above describe together a great critical moment in Israel's life with God. Chapter 32 shows the unfaithfulness of Israel to the covenant and God and Moses respond to this crisis. Chapter 33 stresses mainly the absence of God's presence as a consequence to Israel's rebelliousness. Chapter 34 provides a dramatic moment where Israel by the mercy and compassion of God is restored as God's covenant people. The whole narrative demonstrates the significance of the role of the passionate mediator and his intercessory prayers in saving Israel from complete destruction and shaping its future with Yahweh.

While it could be argued that the narrative of Exod 32-34 revolves around the theme of sin and its remedy in a covenant-tabernacle framework, one should not

neglect other contributions of this narrative to biblical theology. The narrative rather richly contributes to our understanding of the nature of God in light of his relationship with Israel. As it will be argued in detail in the next chapter, God in this narrative appears as the God who speaks, changes his mind, and responds to prayer. These characteristics contribute to our understanding of God as a living dynamic being, who is willing to be involved in humans' life. The self-revelation of God as a response to Moses' request to see the glory of God sheds a new light on our biblical understanding of theophany, that is, the glory of God can be seen in terms of God's self-revelation of his character through words. Theophany thus is a revelation of speech.

In addition to its contribution to biblical theology, this study suggests that the narrative of Exod 32–34 significantly contributes to the writing of a biblical theology in an Islamic context. The biblical narrative addresses major controversial Islamic questions on the nature of God in relation to humanity. For example, while Islamic theological thinking suggests that the static, transcendent Allah reserves the right to forgive and punish, the biblical narrative reveals a living dynamic God who reserves the right to forgive (Exod 33:19) and to punish (Exod 34:7b), but responds to prophetic intercession, a theme that is stressed through the whole biblical narrative. While Islamic theological thinking suggests the merciful, but not the compassionate, the biblical narrative, as well as the whole Scripture, reveals a merciful and compassionate God.

Exodus 32–34 as a biblical narrative, moreover, offers two foundational principles in communicating our theology in an Islamic context. The emphasis on the term *biblical* draws attention to the importance of Scripture as a starting point in writing theology in an Islamic context. The emphasis on the term *narrative* stresses

the contribution of a story in clarifying God's attributes in relation to human beings, instead of just a conceptual systematic approach. Based on exegetical study of the story, as it is offered in this chapter, writing theology in Islamic context will be less philosophical, systematic, and argumentative in nature. Rather, it will be a constructive biblical theology that addresses Islamic theological thinking as the biblical narrative allows it. The next chapter, thus, will serve this purpose.

#### Chapter 4: Biblical Theology of Exodus 32–34 in an Islamic Context

The second chapter of this study addresses the hermeneutical Islamic theological thinking in relation to the biblical narrative of Exod 32–34. The exegetical work on the biblical narrative in chapter three highlights the theological themes of the golden calf story. Grounded in solid exegesis, this study will finally move to reflection on a theology that serves the sort of community this study aims for.

The narrative of Exod 32–34 offers a variety of theological themes, but they all circle around the meaning of sin and its remedy in a covenant-tabernacle framework. This chapter provides a biblical theology of this narrative using a thematic approach that follows, to some extent, the literary-canonical shape of the text. Three major themes will be addressed in this chapter. First is the definition of sin in a covenant-tabernacle framework. Second is the impact of sin on the covenant people. Third is the remedy of sin through intercession and God's merciful and compassionate character.

It is important, however, to note that this chapter is not an explicit dialogue with Islamic theological thinking. It, rather, addresses Islamic theological thinking related to the golden calf story at a more subconscious level. The whole purpose is to avoid explicit challenges to the Islamic faith as well as to the Muslims. In this way, we will let the biblical text of the golden calf story speak to Muslim readers addressing their own theological context. Taking into consideration the academic nature of this study and the fact that it is written to a Western reader, this chapter will explicitly address the Islamic theological context in the footnotes so that a Western and academic reader is aware of the questions that addressed.

## I. The Definition of Sin

Sin is described in this context as an act of disobedience through the violation of the commandments of God as well as a disloyalty to the covenant God. This is addressed by God himself (vv. 7–10) in his interpretation of the sinful act of the people (vv. 1–6): The Israelites turned away quickly from the way which God commanded them (Exod 20:3–5) and showed loyalty to the calf through worship and sacrifice. To follow and walk straight in God’s path is what the covenant God expects from his people, and this demands complete obedience and faithfulness. The people, moreover, must worship God solely. This worship must be in agreement with God’s design of worship at the dwelling place, not according to Aaron had constructed for them.

The narrative plainly defines the act of worshiping the calf as a “great sin” (חטאה גדלה) (32:21, 30). Moses’ usage of the term גדלה reflects the seriousness of worshiping idols among the ancient Israelites’ community as well as throughout the biblical canon. Throughout the OT, the severe responses of God and the prophets to worshiping idols demonstrates the fact that associating any other deities with God was absolutely forbidden. That is clearly expressed through the severe punishment of God and the burning, grinding and scattering of the idols by the prophets. Destroying idols and their sacred places was the first action of new kings as a sign of their commitment to turn the nation back to God. Josiah, for instance, burns and grinds the Asherah idols after removing them from the Jerusalem temple and the altar from Bethel (2 Kgs 23:6, 15).

The narrative of the golden calf, thus, serves as a warning against idolatry and polytheism and emphasizes the biblical assertion of the sole worship of God, that is,

monotheism.<sup>1</sup> Monotheism is defined by Routledge as “the belief that there is only one God who is the proper object of worship *and beside him no other gods exist.*”<sup>2</sup> Brueggemann argues against the classical Western theological understanding of the term which is an intellectual claim that only one God presides over all existence. Such a claim, Brueggemann states, “is of little interest for the Bible and has caused endless mischief in understanding the Bible.”<sup>3</sup> From a biblical perspective, Israel’s monotheism is to be understood in the light of the relationship established by covenant between Israel and God at Sinai (Exod 19:3–8). Israel’s exclusive worship of God is a requirement of their relationship with God, which is reflected in the first two commandments of the Decalogue (Exod 20:3–5). Israel’s worship of the calf shows loyalty to other gods, which evokes God’s wrath (32:7–10). Since God entered into a covenant with the people, they became His treasured possession (Exod 19:9; Ezek 16:8). As a jealous God, he leaves no room for competitors; he warns the people to be careful not to make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land or follow their gods since it will be considered adultery (Exod 34:14–15; Ezek 16:41–42). Monotheism, thus, in biblical terms is the belief that there is only *one covenant God* who is the proper object of worship and beside him there is no other god.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Routledge argues against the notion that true monotheism developed late in Israel’s history. There is a debate among scholars about the development of monotheism in ancient Israel. While some believe in an evolutionary theory, that is, true monotheism is developed late in Israelite history, others argue against it, believing in the revolutionary theory. Routledge, for example, argues against the evolutionary theory claiming that “the roots of Israel’s monotheism go back to the time of Moses and the exodus.” For more details on this debate see Routledge, *Old Testament Theology*, 94–101, Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology*, 48–50, and Clements, *Old Testament Theology*, 72–8.

<sup>2</sup> Routledge, *Old Testament Theology*, 137.

<sup>3</sup> Brueggemann, *Reverberations of the Faith*, 137.

<sup>4</sup> This concept of *biblical* monotheism strongly stands against the notion that all three Abrahamic religions worship the God who presides over all existence. Though Israel worshipped the God who created heaven and earth, Israel had a covenant relationship with this God, which makes the relationship between God and the nation of Israel unique from any other nation. While it could be argued that the followers of all Abrahamic religions worship the God who creates heaven and earth with a different understanding of this God, the biblical concept of monotheism forces us to examine and evaluate this notion.

As the content of the Ten Commandments (Exod 20–23) begins with emphasizing the sole worship of God (Exod 20:2–4), the content of the renewed covenant begins with recalling the affirmation of the same commandments (Exod 34:11–17). This suggests that the core principle of the covenant between God and the people was found in their allegiance to God and belief that there are no other gods like him. To worship other gods is to put the covenant relationship at risk.

The recognition of the sole worship of God in the light of the covenant relationship, nonetheless, stands against viewing God as *only* a transcendent sovereign God.<sup>5</sup> Moses tells the people that they have seen that the Lord is God and there is no other (Deut 4:35, 39). Such a statement is the result, not of philosophical speculation, but of close experience of God’s activity.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Brueggemann states, “Israel insisted that God is to be understood, not as a transcendent sovereign who is unimpinged upon, but rather as a fully personal God who is known to be related to Israel and whose own life and power are relative to Israel and the life of the world.”<sup>7</sup>

While the OT, moreover, states God is one and He alone is God (e.g. Deut 4:35, 39; 6:4; 2 Sam 7:22; 2 Kgs 19:15; Ps 86:10; Isa 43:10–13; 44:6–8; 45:5–6), monotheism in terms of God’s uniqueness and superiority is also affirmed throughout the OT in sharp contrast with other gods, revealing that deserves Israel’s complete trust. For example, Ps 115:2–9 says:

Why do the nations say, “Where is their God?” Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him. But their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see. They have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but cannot smell. They have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but cannot walk, nor can they

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<sup>5</sup> According to Islamic thinking, God is sovereign and transcendent. This means that “the forbidding inaccessibility of the divine nature is resolutely maintained” (Gardet, “Allah,” 409). Here we can see an example of where the concept of the covenant sheds light on the character of God. Though the biblical texts claim the sovereignty and transcendence of the God (e.g. Exod 33:19), the covenant emphasizes a fully personal God who is known to be related to Israel.

<sup>6</sup> Eichrodt, *Theology of the OT*, 1:227.

<sup>7</sup> Brueggemann, *Reverberation of Faith*, 139.



utter a sound with their throats. Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them. All you Israelites, trust in the LORD— he is their help and shield. House of Aaron, trust in the LORD— he is their help and shield. (NIV)<sup>8</sup>

While these negative claims about other gods show that these gods do not merit any attention or worship, the metaphorical expressions of the God of Israel, in contrast, offer a “sense of the equally rich interiority” of God’s own life.<sup>9</sup> While there might be other gods who have ears, eyes, and nose, they do not hear, nor see, nor smell.

In the context of the OT, God speaks (Gen 1:3), hears (Exod 2:24), sees (Exod 32:9), has a back (Exod 33:23) and so forth. This use of anthropomorphic language in the OT clarifies an important way the OT views God. In speaking of himself in human terms, God comes to us in a human and earthly way. Dyrness notes that “these expressions give a great richness to our conception of God, for they make him accessible while preserving his greatness.”<sup>10</sup> We see too that God is personal from the way in which the OT describes the relationship between God and his people. The covenant relationship, for example, reflected later in the OT is as between husband and bride (Jer 2:2; 3:14; 31:32; Ezek 16:8–14; Hos 2:14–23). These images point to the way in which God will be known as a person. In this way, Eichrodt concludes, “the faith of Israel sets its face against both an abstract concept of deity and a nameless ‘ground of being.’ Both the intellectualist and the mystical misunderstandings of God are rejected.”<sup>11</sup>

The covenant relationship between God and Israel sheds new light on the meaning of sin, as it shows that the covenant is not merely a contract. What governs the relationship between God and his people is a covenant, not a contract. What this means is that sin offends God himself personally, and it breaks the covenant

<sup>8</sup> See also Ps 135:15–18; Isa 46:6–7; Jer 10:1–16.

<sup>9</sup> Brueggemann, *Reverberation of Faith*, 139.

<sup>10</sup> Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology*, 44.

<sup>11</sup> Eichrodt, *Theology*, 206.

relationship (as it will be explained in detail in the next section). Sin, thus, “is not just a transgression of the law; it is an offence against the lawgiver.”<sup>12</sup> This fact changes our perspective on sin. If we see sin as only a transgression against God’s commandments, our focus will be on how to follow these commandments for the sake of escaping God’s judgment in the hereafter.<sup>13</sup> It limits our view of recognizing the impact of sin in this life, and it restrains, moreover, our motivation for taking sin seriously.

For God to set forth the command that prohibits forming an image (Exod 20:4) is to affirm that God is different than any other gods and that we must worship him as he is, not as we envision him or would like him to be.<sup>14</sup> The Israelites, in the absence of Moses, attempt to form an image that represents the invisible God in their midst. By doing so, the Israelites created worship that is similar, simple, and familiar in nature to the nations around them. To be primitive in our understanding and worship of God just for the sake of being simple and similar to other nations is to underestimate the distinct holy nature of God.<sup>15</sup> God is a unique distinct holy God

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<sup>12</sup> Moucarry, *The Search for Forgiveness*, 88. Since there is no covenant between Allah and his people in Islam, except the universal covenant with the whole creation mentioned above (see p. 32), sin is understood more as a transgression of the law. This Islamic thinking suggests that the impact of sin has no implication for human’s relationship with Allah.

<sup>13</sup> In my own judgment, Muslims see sin as only a transgression against *Sharia*, that is, the moral code and religious law of Islam. This perspective limits Muslims’ view of recognizing the impact of sin in this life since their main concern is how to escape God’s judgment in the hereafter.

<sup>14</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, 286.

<sup>15</sup> The “primitive,” is used in two different ways: (1) positive and (2) negative. In its positive sense, the term means “early in history and therefore simple and similar in nature to other religions.” In its negative sense, the term means “stupid or naïve.” The term, however, is used also in its positive sense to describe Islam as a religion. This means that Islam is a religion that began early in history, since it goes back to Abraham according to Muslims, and therefore its doctrine and teaching is simple (worship one God and submit yourself to Him). Its simplicity appears in the fact that most of its doctrine and teaching connects well with the teaching of the early prophets, monotheism and the fear of Allah. In addition, the religion of Islam, according to Muslims, is in harmony with the logical common sense of what Allah requires from human beings, that is worship and submission. This sense of simplicity and familiarity of the religion of Islam to human beings creates a sense of pride in Muslims toward their religion. The challenge with that is it ignores the distinct holy nature of God. If human beings know what God requires then there is no need for revelation. God is holy, and therefore, He sits a side a holy nation, that worships him in a special way, different than any other nation. The second commandment, which the golden calf narrative reflects, affirms that God is different than all other gods and that we must worship him as he is, not as we envision him or like him to be. This is what Aaron

and our worship and view of this God must be unique as well, not as we like to envision and like him to be.

## II. The Consequences of Sin on the Covenant People

Breaking God's commandments by worshiping the calf is a serious matter and has critical and practical consequences.<sup>16</sup> According to the narrative, the consequences go beyond punishment. In the covenant context, the consequences also include a broken relationship and the absence of God's presence.<sup>17</sup>

### A. Punishment

Since worshiping the calf was a serious offence, God did not tolerate it, which is evident in God's request for Moses to leave him alone so that he could allow his anger to burn and destroy them (32:10). It is important to note that God's punishment throughout the OT is linked with divine wrath. The expression of God's wrath appears in his judgmental activity toward sinful people. It seems, however, that wrath is not the final word of God. Though God responds to the sin of the people in anger, God does not reveal himself as an angry person. The self-revelation of God in Exod 34:6–7, rather, reveals a God who is slow to anger. Eichrodt notes that, "wrath never forms

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did; he, according to Brueggeman, constructed "a full alternative liturgical practice" ("Exodus," 931). Here we need to recall what Paul says to the church in Corinth, "But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the the things that are, so that no one may boast before him" (1 Cor 2: 27–29).

<sup>16</sup> For more on the consequences of sin, see Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 413–443; Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:573–4.

<sup>17</sup> Here we can see an excellent example of how the narrative nature of the OT can contribute to our dialogue with Muslims as well as an illustration which explains the Christian faith. The narrative of the golden calf demonstrates in a practical way the consequences of sin from a biblical perspective. While Islamic thinking limits the consequences of sin to punishment, the biblical narrative shows that the consequences of sin go beyond punishment. The narrative demonstrates what it means for the covenant relationship to be broken, as well as how sin restrains the experience of God's presence.

one of the permanent attributes of the God of Israel; it can only be understood as, so to speak, a footnote to the will to fellowship of the covenant God.”<sup>18</sup>

The narrative, however, makes it clear that though God is slow to anger he will not tolerate sin. This is not to say God is not angry. While the intercessory prayer of Moses was able to save the people from destruction and God turns away from the disaster he had threatened, he still will punish them (32:35). God himself speaks of the punishment of the guilty twice in the narrative. First, in God’s response to Moses’s either-or request (32:32), he insists, “Whoever sins will be punished” (32:33). This is a biblical principle that is set here but also will be carried out through the history of Israel. Second, the self-revelation of God in Exod 34:6–7 affirms the fact that while God is slow to anger he will not leave the guilty unpunished. God’s justice requires punishment.<sup>19</sup> Thus, “sin’s seriousness is rooted in God’s careful attention to justice” but the only hope for the nation is “Yahweh’s character of mercy,” which brings “mitigated punishment.”<sup>20</sup> Boda explains:

Although the mediator secures forgiveness from Yahweh for the people’s rebellion, they do experience mitigated punishment. The people are not rejected and destroyed by their holy God but rather preserved because of God’s gracious character and action.<sup>21</sup>

It appears, thus, that justice requires punishment, while mercy shows mitigated punishment. This will be discussed more in detail below.

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<sup>18</sup> Eichrodt, *Theology of the OT*, 1:262.

<sup>19</sup> Like Islamic thinking, the biblical text affirms that God is just. Unlike the Mu’tazilites’ view on Allah’s justice, the biblical text does not claim that divine justice controls and restricts divine mercy. Like the Sunnites, the biblical text emphasizes the sovereignty of God in terms of dealing with sin (Exod 33:19). The self-revelation of God (Exod 34:6–7), however, provides a key theological answer to the dilemma, that is, God’s justice and mercy work together. The challenge with Islamic thinking, as sometimes with Christians as well, is when we attempt to emphasize one attribute of God over the other. The sovereign God is the God of mercy and justice. Being the sovereign God does not undercut his compassionate and just character.

<sup>20</sup> Boda, *A Severe Mercy*, 46.

<sup>21</sup> Boda, *A Severe Mercy*, 48.

Since punishment requires an agent to execute the punishment, the word of judgment is directed to the Levites as its agent.<sup>22</sup> Moses in his prophetic role proclaims the divine punishment and commissions the Levites to execute the severe punishment (32:27–28). Fretheim states, “Such methods are obviously not available to a modern community of faith.”<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the call for commitment to God was issued before such severe action. The subsequent killing could have been avoided at this point if the people had responded positively. The issue is not whether they participated in worshiping the calf but whether they are willing to commit themselves to God. It seems that the people insist on showing disloyalty to God.<sup>24</sup> However, this “punitive action is necessary without requiring the entire people to be destroyed.”<sup>25</sup>

## B. Broken Relationship

While God is the God of the universe, the covenant with a particular people reveals another aspect of the God-creation relationship. The covenant affirms that the God of all creation has made a commitment of fidelity to the chosen people. This commitment, Brueggemann states, “is not grounded in anything rather than God’s own resolve to be in relationship.... This bilateral commitment asserts that the Bible is fundamentally about a God who is related (not at all a God in isolated splendor).”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the idea of killing as punishment is one of the major ethical issues in the OT, especially in Islamic context due to the fact that in Islam, more specifically in the Qur’an, there are also many texts that suggest the idea of killing. This study, therefore, suggests that this issue, in my judgment, is one of the major challenges to the OT that must be dealt with in an Islamic context. However, Fretheim’s assertion that such methods are not available to a modern community of faith is one of the major differences between the biblical and the Qur’anic view on this issue.

<sup>23</sup> Fretheim, *Exodus*, 289.

<sup>24</sup> Fretheim, *Exodus*, 289.

<sup>25</sup> Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:419.

<sup>26</sup> Brueggemann, *Reverberations of Faith*, 37. The idea of a particular covenant with a particular people is absent from Islamic thinking. Islam speak more about a universal covenant (see pp. 32–33 above). The main concern of this covenant, as mentioned above, is a commitment to monotheism. It is striking that though the Qur’an speaks of God’s covenant with Israel, it does not explain it nor does it applies this covenant to Muslims. The Qur’an speaks of this covenant as something which happened in the past, mainly with Israel. This covenant is mentioned in the Qur’an within a narrative that is used as an illustration to teach a spiritual lesson. In this sense, thus, God’s covenant with Israel is not the main

This particular relationship with the God of the universe requires a commitment through obedience and faithfulness.

While the sin of worshiping the golden calf brings punishment, it stands too as a threat to the covenant relationship. There is no doubt that the unfaithfulness of the people has devastating implications for the relationship between God and Israel. Since the Israelites were in a covenant relationship with God, they must maintain this relationship through commitment and loyalty to God by obeying his commandments. The narrative stresses the effect of sin on the covenant people and their covenant relationship. The language in 32:7–9 and 33:1 demonstrates the fact that the relationship between God and the people is broken, since the people now are Moses'. They have lost their status as God's own possession. Moreover, the mediator in his anger broke the tablets, which are the sign and witness that the covenant was broken.

It is noteworthy, moreover, that the covenant at Sinai is more than a contract between partners. It is a mistake, according to Dyrness, to limit our understanding of the covenant relationship to this. The covenant is relational in nature. The relationship between the people and God, thus, could not be only described in term of suzerain-vassal relationship but also as a father-son relationship (Exod 4:22; Deut 8:5).<sup>27</sup> From the people's side, the consequences of sin restrain their relationship with the covenant God.

The nature of the holy covenant God, on the other side, restrains him from being in a relationship with a sinful nation such Israel. Since God's relationship with the people is covenantal in nature, fidelity is required. Thus, the Israelites at the outset

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point, nor the focus of Muslim scholars. This study, therefore, suggests that the biblical concept of the covenant is an essential theme that must be explained in an Islamic context. First the covenant demonstrates, as Brueggemann states above, God's own resolve to be in relationship. Second, this explanation helps those Muslim scholars who approach the biblical texts in order to understand the Jewish and Christian materials in the Qur'an, e.g. the covenant.

<sup>27</sup> Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology*, 119.

of the covenant relationship are called to be a holy nation (Exod 19:6), a nation that dedicated itself to worship only one God, the Covenant One. To live as a holy nation through obedience and faithfulness is the only way, up to this point of the narrative, to maintain the covenant relationship.

### C. The Absence of God's Presence

It is costly to take lightly the sole worship of God. What distinguishes the people from other nations is now missing, the presence of God. God will not go with the stiff-necked people. To speak of the absence of God's presence is better explained by speaking of what God's presence means.

Goldingay speaks of God's presence at the mountain, in a sanctuary, and in experience. The Sinai story, among other things, is a narrative theological discussion of what we mean by the presence of God being with us and of our being in God's presence. At the mountain, God comes down to reveal his will through words to the people through Moses. The mountain is a place where God summons Moses to speak with him. The people also can experience God's presence, but this experience is one for which they must carefully prepare. God's presence would be too much for the people to endure. The people, on the one hand, are invited to hear and see when God speaks to Moses (Exod 19:11–13). On the other hand, they do not have full access to the mountain; God has set some boundaries (Exod 19:12–13). For the people, experiencing the presence of God is terrifying (Exod 19:16), and therefore they prefer that Moses speak with God on their behalf (Exod 20:19). All the meetings God has with the people through Moses suggest that “meeting with God is mediated by words.... It is through their leaders' words that the people are brought into connection

with God (Exod 19:3–8).”<sup>28</sup> It seems that the people’s experience of God’s presence at Sinai is, among other things, as Brueggemann accurately notes, actually “an experience of speech.”<sup>29</sup>

While the people have to move toward the Promised Land, Sinai is no longer the proper place where God will meet with his people. In their journey to the Promised Land, God will provide a Dwelling (*miskan*), or a Sanctuary (*miqdas*), or a Tent of Meeting (*ohel mo’ed*), where the Israelites will experience the ongoing presence of God, God lives among his people (Exod 25:8), the people can meet with God to worship and seek guidance (Exod 33:7) through their leaders and priests. This place is to function as a portable Sinai. Goldingay explains:

The description of Yhwh’s appearing in the dwelling exactly corresponds to the description of Yhwh’s appearing on the mountain. The cloud covers the meeting tent as it previously covered the mountain. Yhwh’s splendor fills the dwelling as it previously came to dwell on the mountain. The cloud dwells on the meeting tent as Yhwh’s splendor dwelt on the mountain.

Thus, God’s presence will accompany the people through the journey, represented by the column cloud, as it was in the past to guide, protect and act on their behalf (Exod 13:21–22; 14:19–24; Num 9:15–32; 10:11–12; 14:14; Deut 1:33).

Goldingay writes about different forms of experiences of God’s presence: a regular presence and an occasional, extraordinary coming. He sees that the story of Sinai distinguishes between God’s presence and the experience or sense of God’s presence. Both, he concludes, represent insights on the nature of God’s relationship with his people. We too know that God is present

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<sup>28</sup> Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 389.

<sup>29</sup> Brueggemann, “Book of Exodus,” 837.



everywhere, but we also talk about going into God's presence or drawing near to him in prayer or experiencing God's presence in a particular time.<sup>30</sup>

Moses and the people will sense the presence of God in an experiential way. It is an active presence in the life of the people to fulfill the promises God has made. It is an experiential presence that distinguishes the Israelites from other nations. Moses asks who will accompany the people on the journey to the Promised Land (Exod 33:12), especially after God's command to move from Sinai (33:1). God's promise to Moses is that "my face will go and give you rest" (33:14). This promise assures Moses the rest he *personally* will need during the journey. However, making the promise to Moses alone raises the question of the future of God's presence with the people. In his response to God, Moses includes the people twice, "I and your people," and also stresses the importance of God's being with the people too, "your going with us" (33:16). If God's presence will not accompany Moses *and* the people, Moses prefers to stay at Sinai. It is only God's being with them that marks off the people from other nations (Exod 33:15–16). Goldingay explains:

God's being with them or God's face being with them signifies not a mere sense of God's presence or inner religious experience, but a presence that expresses itself in action. It is God's doing extraordinary things for Israel that draws the world's attention. It is in this sense that the accompaniment of God's face marks Israel off from other peoples.<sup>31</sup>

In this sense, the presence of God in a covenant relationship is more than an universal presence, or a mere sense of God's presence, or inner religious experience. It is indeed the distinctive presence of God experienced by the people of God.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 401.

<sup>31</sup> Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology* 1:404.

<sup>32</sup> It is rare, if any, to find Muslim scholars who speak about a distinctive presence of God experienced by his people. Muslim scholars, rather, speak of God's existence; He is the creator and Sustainer of the universe and of humanity (See Rahman, *Major Themes in the Qur'an*, 1–16).

Now, for God to threaten to withdraw from Israel as a consequence of worshipping the calf means the absence of God's accompanying presence. Israel will no longer experience the distinctive presence of God which guided, protected, and acted on their behalf in the past. The building of the tabernacle, moreover, will not be carried out. The Holy God cannot dwell among sinful people. Exod 33:7–11 confirms that God will not dwell *among* his people and the plan to build the tabernacle is aborted. Instead of building the tabernacle in *the midst* of the camp where God will *dwell* (25:8), Moses, in contrast, will set up a tent that he calls the "tent of meeting." It will be, moreover, located *outside* the camp and the cloud will not be in the midst of the camp.

The narrative thus reveals another aspect of God's presence, that is, God's presence among his people cannot be guaranteed. Here God's ban on the use of images has a new meaning. It suggests that while other gods were believed to make their presence available by means of images of wood, stone, or precious metal, God did not. He rather "attempted to resist the human inclination to feel we have God's presence guaranteed by something more tangible than God's word and our mutual commitment, or to have God under control or within our comprehension."<sup>33</sup> We cannot confine God to the image of a calf, but at the same time we cannot portray God so large as to be inaccessible to ordinary people. The holy covenant God desires to be present among his people but he reserves the right to withdraw whenever the children of Israel will not live as a holy nation dedicated only to their God.<sup>34</sup>

The narrative of the golden calf thus offers ways in which God responds to the sinful acts of Israel. The question to be asked now is whether there any other

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<sup>33</sup> Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 395.

<sup>34</sup> One of the challenges to Muslims related to the biblical notion of God's presence is his holiness. Muslims do wonder: How can a Holy God be present and in relationship with sinful human beings?

possibilities for God to respond to such a sinful act? Would it be possible for God to provide a remedy for sin? The biblical narrative will answer, “Yes.”

### III. The Remedy of Sin

#### A. Intercession

The dialogue between Moses and God is a matter of life or death. It makes a substantial difference in God’s response to the sin of the Israel. This dialogue reveals a God who responds to human requests, a personal God.<sup>35</sup> In light of this, Widmer states, “God is not an abstract deity who is detached from humanity; on the contrary, He seeks to accomplish His plans and purposes with human participation. In this divine-human-co-operation prayer plays an important role.”<sup>36</sup>

Moses’ intercession is an invitation from God to not leave him alone. God shares with his faithful servants what is in his mind and invites them to participate in “the outworking of the divine resolution.”<sup>37</sup> This establishes a key pattern that will continue throughout Israel’s history. The effectiveness of Moses’ intercession is based on the fact that these intercessions are in tune with God’s nature and in agreement with God’s plan for Israel.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> This biblical truth stands against the Islamic notion that Allah’s decisions are not determined by his creatures. From an Islamic perspective, it seems here there is a tension between God’s sovereignty in making decisions as it appears in Exod 33:19 and the role of intercession. The biblical narrative, however, shows that while God reserves the right to make decisions related to the consequences of sin (33:19), he also is a God who relents (32:14). When Moses, moreover, insists that God must be present with him and the people (33:15–16), the narrative reports that God will do the very thing that Moses asked for (33:17), for Moses has found favor or grace in God’s sight. The text suggests that God by his grace responds to Moses’ supplication. This is what the Hebrew word *khen* suggests. Bruckner explains that, “the basic meaning of the word *khen* is a heartfelt response toward someone who has need” (*Exodus*, 296). The biblical God, thus, is a sovereign God, but also the gracious and the merciful God. He is a dynamic and responsive God. He hears prayers and returns to us when we turn back to him. It appears also that Islamic thinking somehow supports this notion. Razi understands Allah’s attribute as *Al Tawwab*, (the Most Returning see p. 28 above) to mean that Allah returns mercifully and graciously back to his people when they repent. This suggests that there is a tension to be resolved in Islamic thinking between God’s attributes as sovereignty and *Tawwab*,

<sup>36</sup> Widmer, *Moses*, 10.

<sup>37</sup> Widmer, *Moses*, 348.

<sup>38</sup> Widmer, *Moses*, 349.

On these foundations, the passionate mediator is able to secure the future of the people and preserve them from complete destruction (32:14). As the advocate of the people before God, Moses is also able to secure God's presence among them (33:17). This shows that God's forgiveness was *partly* based on the special place of Moses in the eyes of the Yahweh and the significance of Moses' role in the life of the Israelites. The negotiation between Moses and God in these chapters protects the Israelites from complete destruction and shapes their future. Miller writes:

We do not know what God would have done if Moses had not entered into the discussion as he did. But the picture that finally emerges from this chapter is that Moses is responsible for shaping a future other than what would have been the case had he been passive and kept silent. This text lifts up the extraordinary impotence of human speaking and acting in shaping of the future. Simply to leave the future in the hands of God is something other than what God desires. Simply to leave the future in the hands of the people is not a divine desire either. That leaves chosen leaders in an uncomfortable position-between God and the people, but to such they are called.<sup>39</sup>

Moses is characterized as the intercessor who "has experienced both worlds, the top of the mountain with God and the valley below with the people."<sup>40</sup> The role of Moses as a prophet is clearly present in Moses' intercessory prayer and in passing God's word to the people. Widmer argues that prophetic ministry by its nature includes the proclamation of Yahweh's will and also involves advocating for a sinful people before the divine throne.<sup>41</sup> If these are the main criteria of the genuine prophet, then it does not come as a surprise that the narrative of the golden calf portrays Moses as a prophet.

The question that arises is why human beings do approach God if he does not respond? Prayer by its nature presupposes that God responds to intercession,

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<sup>39</sup> Miller, *They Cried*, 273.

<sup>40</sup> Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 563.

<sup>41</sup> Widmer, *Moses*, 185.

otherwise God will not invite us to intercede or to approach him. Being the sovereign God (33:19) does not undercut his compassionate character. Being a God who responds to prayers does not diminish his sovereignty. What the narrative of the golden calf shows us is that God welcomes friendship and intimate relationships. This is what the relationship between God and Moses affirms to us. God and Moses were in dialogue and the narrative reports no objection from God's side on this matter, but it in contrast encourages it.

Viewing God as a static God and overemphasizing his sovereignty blocks our mind from seeing the other side of God's character. The narrative shows us that God is a dynamic and responsive God. His merciful and compassionate character, his initial good intention to his people, leads him to relent. To state that God's decisions are not determined by his creatures is to call into question God's return to us when we turn back to him. God turns and returns to us when we turn back to him. This is God's promise to Israel in the past, "Ever since the time of your ancestors you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD Almighty" (Mal 3:7). As God responds to repentance, he also responds to intercession. Thus, we are neither slaves owned by God nor are we puppets in the hands of a master. The sovereign mighty God (33:19) is the merciful compassionate God (34:6); the one who invites us to dialogue with him responds with grace (34:10).

It seems also that the biblical prophets have a significant role to play in terms of the relationship between God and his people in this life.<sup>42</sup> In between Israel and God was the mediator, a role seen throughout Israel's history in many other prophets. The mediator protected Israel from the full wrath of God and secured for them the

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<sup>42</sup> The story of Jonah shows us that prophets have a significant role to play in the life of other nations as well (Jonah 3:1-10).

renewal of the covenant. What this means is that the role of a mediator is welcomed by God and it does indeed have an impact on human beings in this life, as well as the hereafter.<sup>43</sup>

#### B. The Merciful and Compassionate God

Laney argues that the importance of Exod 34:6–7 as a foundation for biblical theology is evidenced by the fact that this formula is repeated many times in the OT (Num 14:18; Neh 9:17; Pss 103:8, 17; 145:8; Jer 32:18–19; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). It is echoed by biblical writers in Deut 5:9–10; 1 Kgs 3:6; Lam 3:32; Dan 9:4; and Nah 1:3.<sup>44</sup> This is not originally a human description of God but is God’s self-revelation. It is this revelation that helps human beings know God by his own words.

The OT writers are not concerned with abstract knowledge of God. For these writers, Routledge states:

[God] is not a subject for study and speculation, but the living One who reveals himself through his activity in the world and his encounter with the people. Their understanding of God is expressed primarily through the narrative of what God has done (through the stories in which he involves himself in the life of the people) rather than through lists of attributes and abstract propositional statements, which attempt to set out who God is.<sup>45</sup>

In its canonical context, the self-revelation of God is the key for theological understanding of the character of God in a narrative context. In this sense, knowing God is more practical than conceptual since “what Scripture presents is less a series of statements about God than a practical invitation to respond that reflects Israel’s and the early church’s experience of God.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Laney, “God’s Self-Revelation,” 36.

<sup>45</sup> Routledge, *Old Testament Theology*, 101.

<sup>46</sup> Knowles, *The Unfolding Mystery*, 20. It is important to note that while Christian theologians, generally speaking, go back to the Bible to discover who God is and to know him Muslim scholars do

## 1) God's Transcendence and Glory

The example of God's transcendence and glory can be seen in Moses' request to see God's glory (Exod 33:18). The word "glory" when applied to God implies the manifestation of his divine presence. The glory of God becomes "the reflected splendour of the transcendent God."<sup>47</sup> However, "God is the One who cannot be experienced directly in His fullness by mortal man."<sup>48</sup> The deadly effect of Moses' request means this petition cannot be granted. It is by God's instruction only that Moses will be allowed to see the divine glory passing before his veiled eyes and from behind him in the form of cloud (Exod 34:5). The cloud is a rich symbol of God's presence and glory; it is a means that God uses to show his glory and affirm his presence (Exod 13:21; 16:10). The scene at the completion of the tent of meeting is an illustration of this feature. Exodus 40:34 tells us that, "the cloud covered the tent of meeting and the glory of God filled the tent of meeting."

The glory of God is a manifestation of his character rather than of his appearance. It is important to recognize the fact that the self-revelation of God is a response to Moses' request to *see* the glory of God in 33:18. The Lord responded by telling Moses that he would make his "goodness" pass before Moses and would "proclaim" his name in Moses' presence (v. 19). While Moses asks to *see* the glory of God, which is more than what God is willing to grant due to the fact that man cannot see God and still survive, God grants Moses a proclamation of his name. In ancient Israel "a personal name was often thought to indicate something essential about the

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not go back to the Qur'an for the same purpose. One of the major reasons is stated by Rahman: "The Qur'an is a document that is squarely aimed at man; indeed it calls itself 'Guidance for mankind' (*huda li' l-nas*) [2:185]... Yet the proper name for God occurs well over 2.500 times in the Qur'an... Still, the Qur'an is no treatise about God and his nature: His existence, for the Qur'an, is strictly functional—He is Creator and Sustainer of the universe and man, and particularly the giver of guidance for man and He who judges man, individually and collectively, and metes out to him merciful justice" (*Major themes of the Qur'an*, 1). This sheds light on the reason of why God is unknown and why Muslims are committed more to understand not the nature of Allah but his law.

<sup>47</sup> Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 1:32.

<sup>48</sup> Cole, *Exodus*, 37.

bearer's identity, origin, birth circumstances, or the divine purpose that the bearer was intended to fulfill."<sup>49</sup> For God to proclaim his name means that he would reveal to Moses who he is, the essence of his divine character. Thus, to see the glory of God is more than an experience of "seeing" God; it is rather a manifestation of his glorious character and attributes.

The revelation of divine names and attributes shows furthermore a connection to the personal nature of God.<sup>50</sup> Eichrodt notes this connection, writing, "By revealing his Name, God has, as it were, made himself over to them; he has opened to them a very part of his being and given them a means of access to himself... in the Name of the covenant God they encountered him in person and experienced his activity."<sup>51</sup>

Though God cannot be experienced directly, something of his presence can be experienced. The self-revelation of God shows that while God refuses to grant Moses' request to *see* him, God is willing to disclose himself in a way that neither underestimates his transcendence nor prevents him from being known. God appears for the purpose of revelation, and this revelation is through his Word.

The self-revelation shows a God who speaks, a God who reveals himself through words. Cole states that because God is a God who speaks, "He is a God who delights to declare His own nature."<sup>52</sup> God has revealed himself in history in many different ways, and one of these ways is through his word. For God to reveal himself affirms his desire to be known and willingness to disclose himself. It is one thing to attempt to know God by our own ways and it is another to know God based on his self-revelation. Moses' request to *see* the glory of God is an illustration of this truth.

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<sup>49</sup> For examples on names and its meaning in Hebrew Scripture see Knowles, *The Unfolding Mystery*, 27–30.

<sup>50</sup> For a full study on the character of God as personal see Clements, *Old Testament Theology*, 58–62; Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 1:206–10; Routledge, *Old Testament Theology*, 102–3; Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology*, 44–7.

<sup>51</sup> Eichrodt, *Theology*, 207.

<sup>52</sup> Cole, *Exodus*, 36.



While Moses' desire is to *see*, God revealed himself by speaking to Moses, proclaiming who he is.

## 2) Solving the Dilemma

The self-revelation of God provides a key answer to a fundamental theological question that runs throughout the narrative: what stance does God take the sin of the people? This is, however, not only the dilemma of this narrative but it also runs throughout Israel's history and the history of humanity. While Moses suggests some possibilities, God resolves the dilemma.

The first fact God wanted Moses to know about him is that He is merciful and compassionate. The manifestation of God's mercy and compassion will be experienced in his act of forgiveness of all sorts of wrongdoing. Throughout the narrative Moses pleads and hopes for God's forgiveness. Though God did not grant Moses' request, he here affirms to Moses that mercy and compassion are in the very nature of God and that he is willing to forgive the people. The only hope for sinful Israel is the very nature of the merciful and compassionate God. God will forgive because of his tender feelings of love toward his people. Forgiveness is secured as an act of God's grace. God, however, reserves the right to exercise mercy and compassion according to his will and purpose (33:19). Exodus 33:19 shows that only God is able to make a decision related to sin and its remedy.

The occurrence of mercy and compassion together throughout Scripture suggests that God is merciful and will forgive because of his tender feelings of love toward his people.<sup>53</sup> Both terms occur in Ps 103:8, a Psalm that is closely linked with

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<sup>53</sup> According to Ghazali, Allah is not subject to emotion and his mercy is not based on compassion (*The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, 53–54). This is due to the fact that Muslim scholars purposely attempt to avoid the language that speaks of Allah as a person. As mentioned on p. 47, while the Qur'an uses human imagery to describe Allah, Muslim theologians consider it a figure of speech.

Exod 32–34.<sup>54</sup> The Psalmist pictures the God of compassion (v. 10) as a father who has compassion for his children (v. 13). This does not mean that he is weak, nor does it diminish his transcendent character.<sup>55</sup> It rather shows a God who is full of mercy and love toward his people. When God revealed himself to Moses, and to us, he chooses to be known as both a God of mercy and compassion. God's mercy is rooted in his compassion.

God's mercy and compassion appears in his action of forgiveness. The purpose of forgiveness is to reconcile us with God and to restore our relationship with him. When God forgives, he does that for the sake of his people, not for himself. The focus of forgiveness is us, not God, and it is us who benefit from it. God forgives not because it is his duty to do so, but rather it is because of that unselfish nature of God's forgiveness which has a purpose to bring us back and to restore his friendship with us.<sup>56</sup>

Seeking God's forgiveness and compassion must go beyond a focus on the afterlife, desiring only to escape eternal punishment and enjoy paradise. Instead it must consciously recognize the fact that the influence of God's forgiveness will be experienced in this life. When the God of mercy and compassion forgives, we will experience his active presence in our life to fulfill his promises. We will see God is doing extraordinary things in our life, and that accompanying presence is what marks his people off from other nations.

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Though Allah, for example, can see and hear this does not mean that Allah has eyes and ears or that one should think of him as a person.

<sup>54</sup> For more detail on the echo of Exod 32–34 in Ps 103, see Goldingay, *Psalms*, 3:163–77.

<sup>55</sup> One of the major reasons why Muslim theologians separate mercy and compassion is that Allah is not subject to emotion. In their mind, emotion stems from weakness. If we speak of Allah who has emotion, moreover, this emotion may take over control of Allah's other attributes, which means that this emotion moves him and it may impact his decision. In this sense, Allah's transcendence and sovereignty may be diminished.

<sup>56</sup> Moucarry, *The Search for Forgiveness*, 44. Moucarry here argues against the Islamic notion that Allah ought to forgive in order to be Allah and that the purpose of mercy, as explained by Ghazali, is for Allah to look after himself and to seek his own goals.

What God wanted Moses to know, secondly, is that he is abounding in kindness and faithfulness, who will maintain his act of kindness with the covenant people. In a covenant context, God here shows Moses that he will keep his promises to their fathers and sponsor the people in their journey to the Promised Land, though they are a stiff-necked people.

Here we can see that the richness of the gracious God appears, as the Psalmist declares, in the fact that God responds graciously to our failures and wickedness since he does not deal with us in accordance with them (Ps 103:10). Our relationship with God is wholly dependent on his faithfulness and commitment. Yet unless that meets with a response in the form of obeying and respecting God, an actual relationship cannot come into being. This is one, according to Goldingay, of the trickiest theological question, that is the relationship between divine commitment and human obligation. He explains:

It would be misleading to say that the divine commitment is conditional on the human response, because that would imply that the relationship was a contract. But the commitment does require response. Conversely, it is not the case that our revering God is the initiative on our part that secures a response of commitment from God. But commitment, compassion, and faithfulness are for people who do revere God, because they are aspect of a relationship. Yet the double way the psalms speaks of benefits or rewards (vv. 1, 10) suggests how Yhwh's relationship with people is not contractual or legal but covenantal and personal.<sup>57</sup>

For God to seal the covenant does not mean that Israel is not obligated under this covenant. Goldingay observes, "Obedience is still absolutely required, but it is required because it is the right thing, not because it is a condition for the covenant relationship continuing."<sup>58</sup> It is obvious that there is a tension between conditional and

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<sup>57</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms*, 3:177.

<sup>58</sup> Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:423.

unconditional commitment to Israel.<sup>59</sup> However, this tension will reappear as the story of Israel continues. Though Israel is not somehow qualified to be lifted on eagle's wings, God delivers her from Egypt and initiates the covenant. While Israel was unfaithful to God (32:1–6), he sealed the covenant (34:10). Indeed, the self-revelation of God gives a full picture of himself: a God who is merciful and gracious but will not leave the guilty unpunished. It appears that “God will sustain his original purpose with a sinful nation in both mercy and judgment.”<sup>60</sup>

This sheds light on the third fact God wanted Moses to know about him, that is, that he is a just God who will not tolerate sin and will punish the guilty. His justice requires him to act in judgment. While one can speak of the gracious nature of God's self-revelation, one cannot ignore the fact that God promised punishment to the guilty. While the only hope for the nation is God's character of mercy and compassion, punishment shows God's careful attention to justice. The justice of God, thus, requires severe punishment, while his mercy and compassionate shows mitigated punishment. In this context, forgiveness does not eliminate the punishment but mitigates the punishment.

We must be reminded of the fact God is, first and foremost, merciful, compassionate, slow to anger, and the one who responds to intercession. These qualities play a significant role in the way in which God's justice functions. Our narrative shows that God's severe punishment of the people was mitigated by Moses' intercession. The statement of God's sovereignty in Exod 33:19 demonstrates, moreover, a God of compassion and mercy. While the self-revelation affirms that God will not leave the guilty unpunished, the consequences for the sinful Israel will only

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<sup>59</sup> See Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:371–3.

<sup>60</sup> Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 612.

have impact to the third and fourth generation, while the Psalmist confirms that God will not contend forever, nor keep his anger all the time (Ps 103:9).

What we must be very intentional about here is not to systematize the way God's attributes function. Rather, we must consciously recognize the lesson that God taught Moses throughout the narrative, that is, God is the God of possibilities and that Moses cannot control the way in which God function, but what Moses can assert is that God functions according to his good perfect will toward his people. God's initial plan to Israel was to lead them to the Promised Land, not destruction, and this is one of the main reasons why God responded to Moses' intercession. God's initial plan for us is neither punishment nor destruction. It is rather a perfect good plan that aims to reconcile and to bring us back to himself. What is needed to be reaffirmed here is also that God has neither evil will nor bad intent.<sup>61</sup>

The fourth fact God wanted Moses to know about him is that he is slow to anger. In this narrative, as well as the whole Bible, God has legitimate reasons for being angry. God reveals himself to Moses as not being quick to be rightfully angry over sin. God does not hasten to punish sinners; he instead is longsuffering. This is illustrated by how God responded to the sin of the people. Though God first responds to the sin of the people in anger, the narrative tells us that God relents (32:14). However, this does not mean that he did not punish the people. It rather might be suggested that God's "slow to anger" attribute held back his act of punishment. Instead of destroying the people at the moment of anger, God patiently punished the people. God's patience should not be interpreted to mean that sin is not serious or

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<sup>61</sup> Unlike the biblical narrative, the Islamic narrative shows, according to Albayrak, that what happened to the children of Israel is in accordance with Allah's will ("The Qur'anic Narrative," 51). See our discussion on p. 38 on this issue. The interpretation of Q 20:85a suggests that Allah has an evil intent since he is the one who sent this trial (test). The biblical narrative, in contrast, shows that God has nothing to do with the golden calf. It appears from Moses' and God's response to the crisis that the whole responsibility is on the people and Aaron.

does not matter. Rather, God's patience gives the wicked the opportunity to repent. As Peter wrote, God is "not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Pet 3:9).

The self-revelation of God, in sum, makes crystal clear that God will deal with Israel in the future with mercy and compassion on the one hand and on the other hand with justice. However, the people of God are from the outset the forgiven and restored community.

#### IV. Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates how the theological message of the golden calf story can speak in an Islamic context. This chapter, on the one hand, highlights the theological message of the golden calf story by primarily focusing on understanding this story in its covenant-tabernacle framework. In writing this theology, this chapter, on the other hand, attempts to address these questions of the Islamic theological context. In doing so, this chapter addresses key hermeneutical questions as much as the narrative allows it. What this means is that the narrative of Exod 32–34 restrains Islamic theological thinking.

By addressing the Islamic theological context, one should not ignore the fact that a sympathetic reading of the golden calf story in the Qur'an shows that there is common ground between the Qur'anic and biblical narrative of the golden calf, which could be the basis for a dialogue, though the main focus of this study goes beyond this purpose. Finding a common ground, however, serves as a starting point to dialogue. This dialogue is characterized with respect and the attempt to understand the other. To this end, this study finds it necessary to highlight the points of meetings.

Both narratives agree that worshipping a false god is a serious sin. The Qur'anic narrative demonstrates that in the proclamation of the children of Israel after the Samiri's formation of the calf: "This is your god and the god of Moses" (Q 20: 88). This is the greatest sin in Islam and shows the people's rejection of God.<sup>62</sup> In the biblical narrative, the Israelites have broken God's commandments by worshipping the calf. This shows the disobedience and disloyalty of the people to the covenant God.

Both narratives agree that whoever commits a sin will carry its punishment. In the Qur'anic narrative, even though the children of Israel tried to blame others for forming the calf, indeed they worshiped the calf and rejected God when they proclaimed the calf as their god and the god of Moses. Therefore, God has poured his wrath upon them (Q 7:152). Haqqani states that "if it is not the wrath of God that should fall upon man what else should happen to him, in such case, i.e., when he should not obey God and is led astray into error and sin?"<sup>63</sup> In the biblical narrative, God declares that whoever sins will be punished (Exod 32:33). This appears in God's severe anger against the people and his promise to destroy them (Exod 32:10). Even though Moses has cut off the possibility of destruction, God struck the people with a plague (Exod 32:35).

It is very interesting that scholars of both traditions speak of the meaning of God's forgiveness while acknowledging that he punishes those who sin. Haqqani claims that "the merciful God sometimes grants him a pardon after limited punishment, sometimes through His mercy without punishment, and sometimes He provides him with the means of obtaining pardon, i.e., those who are alive, pray God for his pardon and give alms and charity in his name."<sup>64</sup> Boda also states that "God's

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<sup>62</sup> In Islam, sin is divided under two main categories the greatest and the minor sin.

<sup>63</sup> Haqqani, *Al- Bayan*, 104.

<sup>64</sup> Haqqani, *Al- Bayan*, 104.

forgiveness involves what is called ‘mitigated punishment,’ that is, the people are given less than their sins deserve but are still punished.”<sup>65</sup>

These common grounds between the Islamic and Christian faith should help us to welcome one another for a better understanding of the “other.” This is not to suggest that we should be any less zealous, committed, or convinced. But this deeper conviction should not prevent us to dialogue.

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<sup>65</sup> Boda, *A Severe Mercy*, 42.



## Chapter 5: Conclusion

This study has attempted to show the importance of the OT for writing biblical theology in an Islamic context. It began with introducing the hermeneutical questions which arise from the Islamic context in relation to the narrative of Exod 32–34. This provided the Islamic context which our narrative attempted to address. The challenges associated with identifying this context were discussed under two main points.

The first point involved an exploration of the concept of Islamic theology, which is totally different from its counterpart in Christianity. Therefore, this study suggested the use of different terms in identifying this “Islamic theology,” such as “Islamic theological thinking.” This helps the reader to consciously distinguish between the Islamic and Christian use of the term “theology.” To understand Islamic theological thinking is to have a deeper grasp of both *Fiqh* (jurisprudence) and *Kalam*. The former is more concerned with religious practice and law, and the latter is more focused on Qur’an and Hadith. This study focused only on the discipline of *Kalam*.

To address an Islamic context involves more than addressing the Qur’an and Hadith, however, because of the textual nature of this study and the limits of time and space, this study focused on only the Qur’an and Hadith. This study, therefore, suggested that addressing Islamic contexts is to address Islamic culture, which depends heavily on the Qur’an and Hadith. This dependence is due to the fact that there is no separation between religion and state in Islam. In sum, to address an Islamic context one must take into consideration the Qur’an, the Hadith, *Fiqh*, and folk Islam. By defining and addressing Islamic contexts, biblical theologians can

attempt to permanently deposit the theological message of biblical texts in local cultural forms.

Based on the belief that biblical theology must be grounded on sound theological exegesis, the exegetical analysis of Exod 32–34 has shown that the narrative of the golden calf deals with one of the major theological questions raised throughout Scripture: how does God deal with sin? This study has drawn the conclusion that God is, on the one hand, merciful and gracious, but, on the other hand, he is just. This narrative, as well as the OT, contributes in depth to our understanding of God and his agenda for dealing with sin. Childs explains:

[T]he story of the golden calf has found a place in scripture as a testimony to God's forgiveness. Israel and the church have their existence because God picked up the pieces. There was no golden period of unblemished saintliness. Rather, the people of God are from the outset the forgiven and restored community. There is a covenant— a new covenant— because it was maintained from God's side. If there was a danger of understanding Sinai as a pact between partners, the rupture of the golden calf made crystal clear that the foundation of the covenant was, above all, divine mercy and forgiveness.<sup>1</sup>

This affirms the focus of this study: the OT contributes to our understanding that the relationship between God and humanity from the outset of its history is based on divine mercy and forgiveness, a major biblical theological message that must be addressed in Islamic contexts. The cumulative and progressive character of revelation helps the biblical theologian speak of the accumulation and progression of the narrative's theological message throughout history and how this theological message finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, if the biblical narrative affirms God's sovereignty in the way in which he deals with sin, it also shows that God is not systematic in dealing with sin.

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<sup>1</sup> Childs, *Exodus*, 580.

<sup>2</sup> For more detail on this see Boda, "Biblical Theology and Old Testament Interpretation," 134–5.

God appears in the narrative of the golden calf as the God of possibilities, not a static God. At the end, God decides how he will deal with his people. There is a covenant because it was initiated and maintained from God's side. God's sovereignty, it could be argued, gives him the right to be the author of the redemptive history.

This study also shows that the concept of biblical covenant is one of the major theological points of view that heavily impacts our understanding of the biblical God and sharply distinguishes between God and Allah. Here we are not to attempt to compare God and Allah, though a difference is obvious. Rather, the theological meaning of the covenant must be communicated and addressed in Islamic contexts in order for Muslims to understand the biblical view of God. We have seen throughout this study how the framework of the covenant has theological implications. Sin, for example, is not just against the law but the law-giver. The consequence of sin is not just punishment but also a broken relationship and the absence of God's presence. The covenant between God and humanity provides another dimension to the nature of this relationship.

The self-revelation of God's character, moreover, is the core of our proper understanding of who God is, since it is particularly a self-disclosing of God himself. When Moses asked to "see" God's glory, God responded with a proclamation of his character. Knowing God is based on the disclosure of God through words. This dynamic revelation shows the way in which God wants to be known by us. This suggests that self-revelation also sheds light on God's revelation through the Word Jesus Christ.

Writing biblical theology in Islamic contexts, thus, must take into consideration the significant contribution of the OT. Since the foundation of our faith is rooted in the OT, it is an arduous task to write systematic, apologetic, or New

Testament theology in Islamic contexts without the contribution of the OT being taken into serious consideration. This emphasis on the OT, however, is not to say the OT by itself is sufficient for such a task. The emphasis, rather, stresses the significant contribution of the OT to the task of writing biblical theology in an Islamic context.

The final word of this study is given to the writer of Hebrews: “In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (Heb 1:1–2). The writer of Hebrews shows us how God speaks through history; he speaks through the prophets at many times and various ways and finally through His Son. May our God today speak to the Islamic world as he has spoken throughout history through the spoken and written word of prophets and through the Living Word, Jesus Christ.

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