

Robert Vannoy, Exodus to Exile, Lecture 4B

Treaty, Tabernacle, Apostasy, God's Relenting

Review

d. ANE Vassal Treaties and the Sinai Covenant

2. The Literary Genre of Deuteronomy

a. Prohibition Against Altering Treaty Document

We're under point d, "Ancient Near Eastern vassal treaties and the Sinai covenant, the treaties and the Biblical Covenant." We were looking at Meredith Kline's comments on page 28 of your citations about the implications that this treaty covenant analogy has for the date of Deuteronomy as being Mosaic in origin, but then it also has implications for the transmission of the material of Deuteronomy. That's on page 29, paragraph C, middle of the page, where Kline says, "The literary genre of Deuteronomy also has important implications for the way in which, having once been produced, this document would have been transmitted to subsequent generations. By their very nature treaties like Deuteronomy were inviolable. They were sealed legal contracts. Indeed, as has already been observed, it was standard practice to deposit such treaties in sanctuaries under the eye of the oath deities." In fact, in some of the Hittite treaties, as well as the biblical material, there's an explicit prohibition against altering anything in the treaty. So that idea of the way in which Deuteronomy would have been transmitted as an intact document without any modification or change certainly is important. The critical theories where you had this kind of viable, provisional original form with a lot of additions and accretions and changes over time doesn't fit with this genre of literature.

That brings Kline to the conclusion that he draws, and there is a long discussion of this in that volume, *The Treaty of the Great King*, and that is paragraph D on page 29. Here's his conclusion about what the implications of this treaty-covenant analogy are for the date and composition of the book of Deuteronomy. He says, "These facts stand in diametrical opposition to the whole modern approach to the Book of Deuteronomy."

According to the current speculations Deuteronomy was produced by an extended process of modification and enlargement of a pliable tradition. The most relevant evidence, however, indicates that once they had been prepared for a particular historical occasion, documents like Deuteronomy would not be susceptible to ready modification. They were in fact protected from all alteration, erasure, and expansion by the most specific, solemn, and severe sanctions. And the force of these facts is intensified in the case of the Deuteronomic treaty by the reverence which the Israelites will have had for it not simply as a sealed and sanctioned covenant but as in truth the very word of God revealed to them from heaven.

b. Josiah Date (621 BC) Still Held by Most Critics

Now that the form critical data compel the recognition of the antiquity not merely of this or that element within Deuteronomy but of the Deuteronomic treaty in its integrity, any persistent insistence on a final edition of the book around the seventh century B.C. can be nothing more than a vestigial hypothesis, no longer performing a significant function in Old Testament criticism.” Now, he wrote this *Treaty of the Great King* in the nineteen sixties, I think. Notice his last line. “Is it too much to hope that modern higher criticism's notorious traditionalism will no longer prove inertial enough to prevent the Deuteronomic bark from setting sail once more for its native port?” In other words, it will be returned to the Mosaic era, where it belongs. Well, as I said, he wrote this in the sixties, nothing’s changed. You’ve got the critical studies and Deuteronomy is still viewed as written in the Josianic age in spite of this kind of evidence. I think this is pretty strong evidence for the Mosaic authorship. It’s not proof, you can’t prove something like that by an analogy like this, but I think you can ultimately say that Deuteronomy is where it claims to be, it comes from the time of Moses. It fits with the time in which Moses lived.

c. Treaty Obligations

So, there are those implications of the treaty-covenant analogy for the date and

character of the book of Deuteronomy. It also has other implications. Turn to page 31 of your citations. Wenham gets back on the question of grace and law in the Old Testament, and he connects this matter of the treaty-covenant analogy with the issue of grace and law in the Old Testament. He says, “The Sinaitic covenant is not modeled on a royal grant but on a vassal treaty, a legal form in which the vassal's obligations are much more prominent. But even here the laws are set in a context of a gracious, divine initiative. Obedience to the law is not the source of blessing, but it augments a blessing already given. The covenant setting of the law emphasizes that salvation is not based on works.”

#### d. Treaty Form

Now, you see, if you put law in the covenant setting, it has theological implications that are important. “The covenant was made with those who had already been saved from Egypt, ‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.’ The Decalogue itself is preceded by a reminder about the Exodus, ‘I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.’” See, right in that statement, you have a preamble and historical prologue, an identification of the Suzerain, the great king, “I am the Lord your God,” and what have I done for you? “I brought you up out the land of Egypt.” “The structure of the covenant form, with the historical prologue preceding the stipulations section, makes it clear that the laws are based on grace. In Deuteronomy the saving acts of God, Deuteronomy 1-3, are related before the stipulations are imposed on Israel in Deuteronomy 4 and following.” Now, there you get some variation. Some will say that Deuteronomy 1-11 is the historical prologue instead of 1-3, and the stipulations begin with 12. However you divide that, you can debate that, you still have a historical prologue, then stipulations of law. “Israel is expected to obey because God has brought the people out of Egypt and preserved them in the desert. The priority and absoluteness of God's grace are constantly reiterated: ‘The Lord your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness; for you are a stubborn people.’ God's grace in history is always the primary motive for obedience to the demands of the

covenant. Deuteronomy 4-11 is a passionate plea to love God with all the heart, soul and mind. This demand is constantly being reinforced by appeals to the past history of Israel.”

#### e. Shema as a Basic Stipulation

Now, right in the middle of chapters 4-11 you get the Shema, in Deuteronomy 6:4, “The Lord our God is one, therefore love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and soul.” That is a basic stipulation, on the analogy it is the fundamental obligation of loyalty. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind.” The detailed stipulations start at chapter 12, “These are all the laws I have set out before you.” So, this analogy, I think has helped, grant understanding even to the theology of the Sinai covenant.

### 3. Directions for the construction of the Tabernacle – Exodus 25:1

Let’s go on to 3, “Additional detailed instructions given on Mount Sinai – Exodus 24:9-31:18,” and there are five sub-points. I don’t want to spend a lot of time on these sub-points, but just make a few comments. You’ll notice a is, “Directions for the construction of the Tabernacle – Exodus 25:1.” Remember, in chapter 24, you had the ratification of the covenant. The very next thing after the Ten Commandments, the foundational law, is the Book of the Covenant and ratification. The very next thing is directions for the construction of the tabernacle that runs for three chapters, Exodus 25, 26, and 27. I should say that there’s more material on the tabernacle later; when you get to chapter 35 to 40, you have a description of the actual building and setting up of the tabernacle. But at this point there are instructions for construction of the tabernacle. The first thing that God addresses after giving the foundation law and the Book of the Covenant is material that pertains to the setting up of the tabernacle. The tabernacle, as I mentioned very early on some weeks ago, is a very important event in the book of Exodus, because up to this point, God occasionally appeared to Israel, and that’s going to change into what will become his permanent presence in the midst of his people. It’s the

tabernacle that will be that place of God's abode in the midst of his people. You can read through those chapters, and you get kind of lost in all the details about materials, the various pieces of furniture, and the dimensions, and all that sort of thing. It's not the most interesting reading in some respects. I want to talk more about psychological significance of the tabernacle.

At this point, look at your citations, page 32, because I think what Motyer says here helps give perspective in how to understand what's going on with these details about the construction of the tabernacle. Go down to the third line of the first paragraph on page 32, "The second half of the book of Exodus is concerned with the plans for the tabernacle and the setting up of the tabernacle. Let us look first of all at 29:44, 'I will sanctify the tent of meeting, and the altar: Aaron also and his sons will I sanctify, to minister to me in the priest's office. And I will dwell among the children of Israel, and I will be their God.' The tabernacle is central to God's covenant dealings with his people. This is the covenant promise – that 'they should be my people and I will be their God' – and the tabernacle is the visible focus of the covenant – 'I will dwell among the children of Israel, and be their God. They shall know that I am the Lord their God, that brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, in order that I might dwell among them.' God's tabernacle is the climax of redemption; he brought them out of Egypt for this very purpose that he might dwell among them. Don't weary over all those tedious details to do with the tabernacle; they are describing to you the climax of God's redemptive covenant program for his people. The second half of the book of Exodus is integral to the Exodus story and must not be separated from it."

Now, I think that's where you get the perspective. You get lost in those details, but you shouldn't forget what the significance of this Tabernacle is. It's the climax of redemption, it's God coming to dwell in the midst of his people. Motyer says, "Well then, with what anticipation the people must have looked forward to the setting up of the tabernacle! This was the climax, this was the covenant in operation," and then, notice this next statement (he's an Englishman), "God's coming to live at Number 10," Do you know what Number 10 is? Number 10 Downing Street is the residence of the prime

minister. “God’s coming to live at Number 10 – his tent amongst all the other tents, God in the midst of his people. Consider the situation at the end of Exodus, ‘Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.’ God had taken up residence in the midst of his people. But in verse 35 we read, ‘And Moses was not able to enter...’ So here again is the same tension; God is present but not available; he is next door but not a neighbor. Moses was not able to enter.” You get into this question of sinful human beings in the presence of a holy and a gracious God and how that was to be accomplished, and that’s through sacrifice. That’s the significance of the Tabernacle, and a is, “Directions for construction of the Tabernacle.”

b. Directions for the Priesthood – Exodus 28:1-30:38

c. Workmen Provided by the Lord – Exodus 31:1-11

Subpoint b is, “Directions for the priesthood – Exodus 28:1-30:38.” I’m not going to discuss that material. c is, “Workmen provided by the Lord – Exodus 31:1-11,” that is, workmen for the construction of the Tabernacle. I just want to make a brief comment because I find it interesting here about the work of the Holy Spirit. You read in 31:1, “The Lord said to Moses, ‘See, I have chosen Bezalel, son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skilled ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship. Moreover, I have appointed Oholiab, son of Ahisamak of the tribe of Dan to help him. I’ve also given skill to all the craftsmen.’” How often do you think of the work of the Holy Spirit in equipping a person to do artistic design and the work of a craftsman? Normally, we think of the work of the Holy Spirit in relation to works of sanctification and spiritual kinds of things. I think the work of the Holy Spirit is much broader and wider than that. Here, the Holy Spirit is equipping these people to do skilled work in artistic design and craftsmanship, and certainly, I think that’s something that’s not limited to this period in the Old Testament. So, the Lord provides workmen, anointed by his Spirit to do his work of building the tabernacle.

d. The Sabbath is Stressed – Exodus 31:12-17

d is, “The Sabbath is stressed – Exodus 31:12-17.” There’s all this work to be done, but Israel is to remember to keep the Sabbath holy and not to work on the seventh day. Notice verse 12, “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Say to the Israelites, “You must observe my Sabbath.” This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so that you may know that I am the Lord who makes you holy. Observe the Sabbath, because it is holy to you. Anyone who desecrates it must be put to death,’” That’s a severe penalty, ““Whoever does any work on that day must be cut off from his people. For six days, work is to be done, but the seventh is the Sabbath of rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day must be put to death. The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath day, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever. For in six days, the Lord made the heavens and the earth, on the seventh he abstained from work and rested.”” So there is an emphasis on observance of the Sabbath in connection with all the work that needed to be done.

Remember, the Sabbath was observed back in Exodus 18:16 in connection with the manna that was provided; they were not to gather manna on the Sabbath. They took twice as much on the day before, and it didn’t fall on the Sabbath day, and it didn’t spoil when they did that. When you get to the foundational law, it says, “Remember the Sabbath,” so the Sabbath, is a creation work. And of course, that then raises an interesting question: what do we do on the Sabbath today? Sabbath law is part of that foundational law; I think those are abiding, eternal principles. There’s a ceremonial aspect to the observance of the Sabbath in the Old Testament time that I think connects with the transition from the organization of God’s people as a nation of Israel into a spiritual body.

Certainly in the New Testament there are indications that those regulations for the Sabbath were not observed. In the New Testament, there were those things that aren’t in the Old Testament. I think in evangelical Christianity, we’ve probably gone too far in the other direction; we make a verbal distinction between the Lord’s Day and the first day of the week. There’s one aspect of the transition ceremonially. But it seems to me the

principle remains, there should be one day set apart in which you rest from your work, in which you worship the Lord and serve others, and it shouldn't be just another day of the week. I had to work that out, I think there's a measure of freedom, but it seems to me that in general, in evangelical churches, there's not the kind of emphasis and respect for this one day out of seven to be devoted to worship service that there should be. They've become more Superbowl Sundays, it's very sad. The whole country is taken up in that. Now, I'm not necessarily knocking that, but it does raise questions, how to observe the Lord's Day. Here, it's pretty clear, in the Old Testament material, what the Lord expected of his people – to respect the Sabbath.

e. The Tablets of Stone Given to Moses – Exodus 31:18

Then, e is, “The tablets of stone given to Moses – Exodus 31:18.” “When the Lord finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, He gave him the two tablets of stone, inscribed by the finger of God.” Now, you wonder what was on them. It doesn't say what was on them there, but if you go over to chapter 34, after that golden calf incident where Moses comes down from the mountain and smashes those tablets, you read in 34:1, “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Chisel out two stone tablets like the first ones, and I will write on them the words that were on the first tablets.’” And if you go to the end of this chapter 34, you read, “Moses was there with the Lord for 40 days and 40 nights,” verse 28, “without eating bread or drinking water, and he,” that is, God, “wrote on the tablets the words of the Covenant – the Ten Commandments.” So you see, the foundational law, the Ten Commandments were written by the finger of God on stone tablets; and when those tablets were destroyed in the aftermath of the golden calf apostasy, the Lord told Moses to provide some more tablets, and he wrote on those tablets the words that were on the first tablets, namely, that foundational law.

4. The Golden Calf—Exodus 32:1-35:3

That brings us to 4, “The golden calf – Exodus 32:1-35:3.” When you get to 32:1 and read, “When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the



mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, ‘Come, make us gods that will go before us.’” Exodus 32:1 really relates back to 24:18. In chapter 24, you had the ratification of the Covenant. And at the end of that chapter, you read, “Moses entered the cloud,” this is verse 18 of chapter 24, “Moses entered the cloud as he went up on the mountain. He stayed on the mountain 40 days and 40 nights.” So, Moses has gone back up on the mountain, and he’s up there for 40 days and 40 nights. Then in between 24:18, you get this material about the Tabernacle and some other legal material. But if you read in 32:1, “When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, ‘Come, make us gods who will go before us.’”

So, in the material before chapter 32, in other words, from 25 to 31, we see what was going on up on the mountain, where Moses was receiving all this instruction from the Lord about the Tabernacle and other matters. When you get to 32:1, we then see what was going on down below the mountain at the same time. Moses is 40 days up at the top, the people are down at the bottom, and the people are saying, “What’s happened to Moses?”

a. The First Great Apostasy of Israel – Exodus 32:1-6

So, a under 4 is, “The first great apostasy of Israel – Exodus 32:1-6.” I think I should read those verses. They said to Aaron, “‘Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.’” He’s been 40 days gone. “Aaron answered them, ‘Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.’ So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.’ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, ‘Tomorrow there will be a festival to Yahweh.’ So the next day the people rose early, sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.” So, here we get a picture of what’s going on below the

mountain while Moses is receiving this further revelation of God up on top of the mountain.

I think what you see here is, you get a view of the fallen nature of God's covenant people. You might say before the ink is dry on the Covenant documents, Israel is already violating one of the most important prohibitions of the Covenant. You might say, "What was the violation?" on the basis of the statement of verse 5, where you read, "Tomorrow, there will be a festival to Yahweh," it seems like this is not going after other gods, but it's an attempt in some way to combine the worship of Yahweh with this image of a calf or a bull.

### 1. Archaeological Parallels

There's a picture on slide 29 of the storm god, Hadad or Adad, on the back of a bull with forked lightning in his hand, that's from the eighth century B.C. Archaeology has brought to light a number of figurines like that, with images of gods standing on bulls or calves, and some interpret what is going on here in a similar way in the sense that the calf was a pedestal, in this case, with no figure on it, because they wouldn't make an image of Yahweh himself, but it would have been a pedestal for Yahweh. Others think it's really an attempt to symbolize Yahweh by the calf or the bull. In other words, the calf or the bull was a symbol of the power of fertility and strength, so you would pretty much, if you take that view, reduce Yahweh to a nature god, and identify Yahweh with the gods of Canaan.

### 2. Violation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Commandment

If you look in your citations, page 32, bottom of the page, there's a paragraph from Charles Hodge's *Systematic Theology*, where he is discussing the commandments 'You shall have no other gods before me,' and 'You shall not make any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in the heaven above or the earth beneath.' And Hodge says, "When the Hebrews in the wilderness said to Aaron, 'Make us gods which shall go before us,' neither they nor Aaron intended to renounce Jehovah as their God; but they

desired a visible symbol of God, as the heathen had of their gods. This is plain, because Aaron, when he fashioned the golden calf and built an altar before it, made proclamation, and said, 'Tomorrow is a feast to Jehovah.' Their sin then lay, not in their adopting another god, but in their pretending to worship a visible symbol of him whom no symbol could represent."

Now, I think what Hodge there is suggesting is that this is more a violation of the second commandment than it is of the first, "You shall not make any graven image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above or the earth beneath." It wasn't so much that they were seeking to worship some other deity, but that they were violating the prohibition of the second commandment. What we're seeing here by way of contrast, is up on the mountain, Moses is receiving instruction about the way in which God intends to make his presence visible among his people, and that's through the construction of the Tabernacle, and he's coming to dwell in the Tabernacle. Below the mountain, among the people, you see the people's humanly divined means of attempting to secure God's presence by making this image, which was a violation of the second commandment. Ultimately, ironically, the making of that image leads the Lord to say that his presence would no longer go with them. Go over to Exodus 33:3, he says, "Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey, but I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people, and I might destroy you on the way."

b. Moses' First Intercession – Exodus 32:7-14

Well, that was the first great apostasy of Israel, that is a. Sub-point b is, "Moses' first intercession – Exodus 32:7-14." What happens with verse 7 is the scene transfers from the camp up to the top of the mountain again, where Moses is in the presence of God. And you read in verse 7, "The Lord said to Moses, 'Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol, cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." I have seen these people,' the Lord

said to Moses, ‘and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation.’ But Moses sought the favor of the Lord his God. ‘O Lord,’ he said, ‘why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, “It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth”? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: “I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.”’ Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.”

Did you notice the switch in pronouns there? It’s almost humorous, the Lord says to Moses in verse 7, “Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt,” and when Moses responds and intercedes for them in verse 11, he says, “Why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt?” And then, “Why should the Egyptians say...” by which he makes some other arguments there.

### 1. First Intercessory Argument

But the Lord tells Moses what the people are doing, and he says he will consume them, and make of Moses a great nation, that’s the end of verse 10. What’s Moses’ response? It’s really the response of a true mediator. He disregards the honor offered him, doesn’t give the permission that seems to be requested there when the Lord says, “Leave me alone,” in other words, don’t intercede for these people, “so that my anger may destroy them and I will make you a great nation.” He asks the Lord why his anger burns against his people, “...whom you brought out of Egypt,” and then he uses three arguments as he intercedes for the people. In verse 11, his first argument is what God had done: “Why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?” You delivered them out of Egypt, they’re your

people.

## 2. Second Intercessory Argument

Secondly, he speaks of what Israel's enemies will say, and the argument really is the Lord's own honor is at stake over and against the Egyptians. Verse 12, "Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains...?' Turn from your fierce anger." And then thirdly, he argues on the basis of previous promises, that's verse 13, "Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob [or Israel], to whom you swore by your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky.'"

## 3. God Relents (nhm)

And then, you find that in the aftermath of that intercessory prayer by Moses, for God's covenant people, verse 14, "Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened." So, Moses' intercessory prayer is effective and is honored by God, and he doesn't do what he proposed to Moses.

But that statement in 14 raises theological questions. Look at page 33 under Marvin Wilson and his discussion of the Hebrew root *naham* in TWOT, which you find in verse 14, "The Lord relented..." that's a Niphal, verbal form of *naham*. And, if you go back up to verse 12, the last phrase, Moses intercedes, saying, "Turn from your fierce anger and relent," that 'relent' is *naham*. I think the King James translates that "Repent, and do not bring disaster," and then in 14, "The Lord repented, and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened." So, sometimes it's translated "repented," sometimes, "relent." Notice what Wilson says, "The KJV translates the Niphal of *nhm* "repent" thirty-eight times. The majority of these instances refer to God's repentance, not man's." In fact, out of the 38, I think it's 35 of them. "The word most frequently employed to indicate man's repentance is *shub*, meaning 'to turn' (from sin to God). Unlike man, who under the conviction of sin feels genuine remorse and sorrow, God is free from sin.

#### 4. Contrast Immutability of God Statement

Yet the Scriptures inform us that God repents, that is, he relents or changes his dealings with men according to his sovereign purposes. On the surface, such language seems inconsistent, if not contradictory, with certain passages which affirm God's immutability: 'God is not a man... that he should repent,' 1 Samuel 15:29, contrary to verse 11, you might say also contrary to verse 35 in that chapter, and we can look at that in a minute. "'The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind,' Psalm 110:4." Here's the way Wilson deals with this, "When *naham* is used of God, however, the expression is anthropopathic," You're probably very familiar with the term "anthropomorphic," "the hand of God" is an anthropomorphism. An anthropopathism is where you speak of some emotion or feeling; this is anthropopathic, "and there is not ultimate tension. From man's limited, earthly, finite perspective it only appears that God's purposes have changed. Thus, the OT states that God 'repented' of the judgments or 'evil' which he had planned to carry out. Certainly Jeremiah 18:7-10 is a striking reminder that from God's perspective, most prophecy (excluding messianic predictions) is conditional upon the response of men." We'll look at Jeremiah 18 in just a minute. "In this regard, A. J. Heschel has said, 'No word is God's final word. Judgment, far from being absolute, is conditional. A change in man's conduct brings about a change in God's judgment.'" I think that's a pretty good statement, that paragraph, of the issues that are involved here.

#### 5. Jeremiah 18 and God's Relenting Based on Human Response

Look at that Jeremiah 18 passage, because I think that's a key one. Jeremiah 18:6. The first six verses of Jeremiah 18 tell about Jeremiah going down to a potter's house and watching the potter forming vessels, and verse 5 says, "Then the word of the Lord came to me: 'O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?' declares the LORD. 'Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.'" And then notice 7-10, "'If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn

down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil,” that’s *shub*, ““then I will relent [that’s *naham*]; repent, and I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.”” But on the other hand, ““And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.”” So, I think the principles of Jeremiah 18:7-10 are what are operative in a situation like what’s going on here in Exodus 32.

#### 6. 1 Samuel 15: God’s Grief and Relenting Over Saul

I think that, when you think of God’s immutability, that idea, while a valid idea, can be distorted. When we speak of God’s immutability, I think what we are talking about is his unchangeability with respect to who he is, his character. He’s perfectly consistent in his character, but he’s not an unmoved mover, some kind of fatalistic, static principle. God is a person, and God responds to his people; when his people repent, he relents, as Jeremiah says. When his people pray to him, he responds to their prayers. That’s what Moses does here, he prays, and God responds.

1 Samuel 15 is interesting in this connection. 1 Samuel 15 is the chapter where Saul is rejected from being king and you read in verse 11 of 1 Samuel 15, the Lord says, “I am grieved that I have made Saul king,” now, “grieved” is *naham*, the King James translates that, “It repenteth me that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and not carried out my instructions.” So, “it repenteth me that I have made Saul king,” and in verse 35, you read, “Until the day Samuel died, he did not go to see Saul again, though Samuel mourned for him. And the Lord was grieved, [that’s *naham*] that he had made Saul king over Israel.” The Lord repented that He had made Saul king over Israel. So you have those two statements in verse 11 and verse 35 where the Lord says, “it repenteth me,” or “I am grieved that I have made Saul king.” But then, you look at verse 28, “Samuel said to him, ‘The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to one of your neighbors – to one better than you. He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind [that’s *naham*], for he is not a man, that he should

[*naham*] change his mind.”

The interesting thing is in 1 Samuel 15, you have in verse 11 and verse 35 the statement that the Lord relents or repents. In verse 29 you have the statement the Lord does not relent or repent. Is that an inconsistency? How do you put those together? It's not easy, but it seems to me that in 11 and 35, the language is in terms accommodated to human understanding; this is that anthropopathic language, whereas in 29, you have language that's descriptive of the constancy of the divine nature and purpose, and the two are not ultimately inconsistent.

#### 7. Repentance of God Resulting in Judgment (3x) and Exoneration/Respite (35x)

Let me say a few more things about this, because this has become a larger subject. I know many of you have read some of the literature on the openness of God. They appeal to these texts, and, I think, attempt to make too much out of them. Wilson says this *naham*, or these repentance texts, occur 38 times in the Old Testament, the majority of these refer to God's repentance, and I think that's 35 of them that refer to God's repentance. If you look at those texts, where it says God relents or repents, and it's the verb *naham*, you have two categories of texts: texts that speak about a repentance of God that results in judgment, and then texts that speak about a repentance of God that results in exoneration, or respite. The vast majority of the texts that talk about God repenting are texts that result in respite or exoneration. There are only three of those texts that speak of God's repentance resulting in judgment. In other words, if you go back to this one that started this discussion in Exodus, God relents, he does not kill; there is respite, exoneration.

#### 8. Three Texts in God's Repentance Resulting in Judgment

There are only three where God's repentance results in judgment; that's in Genesis 6:6, where God says, "It repents me that I have made man," and what's the result? It's the flood – judgment. And the other two are the two we just looked at in 1 Samuel 15, where



God says “It repents me that I have made Saul king,” and it results in judgment, Saul is removed. So there really are only two places, the flood, and Saul, where God’s relenting results in judgment, and in both those places, if you look at the context, what happens? That judgment results in a new promise. In the case of Genesis, there is the new promise to Noah, and in Samuel, a promise to David, who will be the replacement for Saul. So, what happens is God is going to take up his plan and purpose for his people, and through that judgment, move that plan forward. The purpose remains the same, but the way in which the purpose will be reached is modified. When you look at the vast majority of these texts, apart from these three that refer to the Flood and to Saul, that speak of a repentance of God it results in exoneration or respite, those texts describe the long-suffering and grace of God for his people, his willingness to respond to their prayers and their repentance. That’s really what Jeremiah 18 is all about. “If I pronounce judgment, and you repent, I will relent.” God responds to prayers and repentance.

#### 9. On the Nature of God’s Repentance

I think in this discussion it also needs to be recognized that when you speak of God repenting, and I think that’s probably why that ought to be translated, as the word “relent” rather than “repent,” when you speak of God’s repentance, it’s not the same as human repentance, although there’s a certain analogy, because both involve a change in action. But, there’s an important difference. When we speak of human repentance, that’s usually the result of some culpability or shortcoming, when a person repents. When God repents, it has nothing to do with some shortcoming or with some culpability. At that point the analogy between God’s repenting and human’s repenting breaks down, and that maybe is part of the problem of understanding what’s involved here.

#### 10. God’s Response to the Behavior of His People

But, I think when you find these references to God’s repentance, and then try to harmonize those with God’s unchangeableness, his immutability, those are not contradictory, they’re complimentary. The texts that speak of God’s repentance tell us

about a God who responds to the concerns and behavior of his people. He's not some static abstraction; he's not some unmoved mover. The texts that speak of God's unchangeableness are telling us that when God relents, that's not something capricious or arbitrary, but it is something that moves God's purposes forward.

## 11. Strategy and Tactics Distinction

Someone that I was reading on this subject said that there's a parallel here, and I think that this is perhaps helpful, with two terms used in warfare, and the two terms are "strategy" and "tactics." "Strategy" is the larger plan, the ultimate goal and purpose. "Tactics" are the means used to accomplish the ends. In any given war, the tactics may change, while the strategy remains constant, and this writer was suggesting that in the Old Testament, you might view the texts that speak of God's relenting, his repentance, as at the level of tactics, while his unchangeableness functions at the level of the strategic plan, his eternal purposes that remain constant. So, I think that's probably helpful. But in Exodus 32, with this first great apostasy of Israel, where the Lord says, "Let me destroy them," Moses intercedes, and the Lord relents, and he doesn't do what he proposed to do, but that he responds to Moses' intercessory prayer, is a great manifestation of God's grace.

Transcribed by Chris Allison  
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt  
Final edit by Katie Ells  
Re-narrated by Ted Hildebrandt