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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

“Does God Change His Mind? An Old Testament View”

written by

Colton Sims

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the requirements for completion of
the Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

Dr. J. Daniel Hays, thesis director

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OUACHITA BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

DOES GOD CHANGE HIS MIND?

AN OLD TESTAMENT VIEW

CARL GOODSON HONORS PROGRAM

SENIOR THESIS

DIRECTOR: DR. J. DANIEL HAYS

BY COLTON SIMS

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Introduction

God is changeless. That is perhaps the simplest way to define the doctrine of Divine Immutability. Such a definition is non-controversial in the Evangelical world. For the most part, such a definition is non-controversial in Christendom as a whole and has been readily affirmed by Christians for two thousand years.

Unfortunately, Immutability is not that simple. The three word definition of “God is changeless” does not address an important and highly controversial issue. What does it mean for God to be changeless? Even among evangelicals there is significant debate over what it means to for God to changeless. One of the most significant and controversial questions in that debate has to do with whether or not God can or does change his mind.

In the Old Testament there are several passages which show God seemingly changing his mind, usually over a judgement he declared on Israel. However, there are some passages in the Old Testament which appear to teach that God does not change his mind at all. Both sets of passages use the same Hebrew verb to describe God’s actions.

The resultant theological tension has often times been explained through viewing passages portraying God as having a change of mind as anthropomorphisms. In which case the language describing God as having a change of mind is just an accommodation to our finite human minds. However, many scholars have challenged this traditional interpretation on the grounds that it is more informed by philosophy than on the Biblical text itself.

The question we must ask here is what does the text actually say? How does God reveal himself to us in the scriptures? This paper seeks to understand God the way he revealed himself to us. Rather than accepting the typical systematic and philosophical answers this paper will approach the text through Biblical Theology. In order to answer the question of whether or not

God changes his mind we will examine the usage of the Hebrew verbal root *nun het mem* which is used to describe God relenting or changing his mind. Then we will examine four key passages that speak to God changing his mind: Jeremiah 18, Exodus 32, 1 Samuel 15, and Numbers 23.

The exegesis of these passages will be followed by a summary theological reflection.¹

nun het mem נחמ

Any discussion on divine immutability in the Old Testament must begin with addressing the meaning and translation of the Hebrew verbal root *nun het mem* (נחמ, *nḥm*). In particular, any discussion of this sort must begin with a discussion of the difficulty of understanding the full range of meaning of *nḥm*. With a wide semantic range, it is a notoriously difficult root to classify.²

The root does not appear in the Qal (G) stem in the Hebrew Bible. Out of its 119 occurrences (excluding proper names), it appears in the Niphal (N) Stem 48 times and in the Piel (D) Stem 51 times. It also occurs in the Pual (Dp) 2 times, the Hitpiel (HtD) 7 times, and is used substantively 11 times.³ The root carries a wide range of meaning across its usage in the Hebrew text; it is unclear what unites all of those meanings.

It was once suggested that the basic meaning of *nḥm* was related to the Arabic root *nḥm* which conveys the idea of a “breathing deeply” or “a deep sigh.” It was thought that the root, at

¹ Paper formatting and citations done according to the Pruet School of Christian Studies Guidelines for Research Papers, 2006. Available online at: <https://www.obu.edu/christianstudies/files/2011/06/Guidelines-for-Research-Papers.pdf>

² Mike Butterworth, “נחמ,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, vol. 3, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 81.

³ H. J. Stoebe, “נחמ,” in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 734-735.

its core, had to do with some type of physical display of feelings or emotions.⁴ However, most scholars no longer associate the Arabic root with the Hebrew root since Classical Arabic is a later development and the two roots differ widely in their semantic range.⁵ It is unlikely the emotional element of the Arabic root is the semantic foundation of the Hebrew root.⁶

Piel and Pual

The largest number of occurrences of *nḥm* in the Old Testament are in the D stem where it consistently means “to comfort” or “to console” often in the context of bereavement. However not exclusively.⁷ The meaning of *nḥm* in the Dp is closely related to that of the D stem; it is the passive of the D as expected.

Hitpiel

The Hitpiel is normally the reflexive of the Piel so its meaning is closely related to that of the Piel. With three exceptions the HtD means “to comfort” or “to be comforted.”⁸ The three exceptions have unexpected special meanings. Genesis 27:42 and Ezekiel 5:13 are similar to the Niphal meaning found in Isaiah 1:24 and 57:6 where comfort comes through taking vengeance. The meaning in Numbers 23:19 is similar to the Niphal meaning of “to change one’s mind/actions.”

⁴ Marvin R. Wilson, “נחַם,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, ed. R. Laird Harris (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 570.

⁵ Rome Simian-Yofre, “נחַם,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 9, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Hienz-Josef Fabry (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1984-1986; in English, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 341; H. Van Dyke Parunak, “A Semantic Survey of *nḥm*,” *Biblica* 56 no 4 (1975): 513 and 515.

⁶ Stoebe, 734.

⁷ Butterworth, 82; Stoebe, 735.

⁸ Simian-Yofre, 350.

Niphal

Our main focus is the N stem. With the exception of Numbers 23:19, all of the instances of *n̄hm* describing God changing or not changing his mind occur in the N stem. The Niphal meanings are also unique when compared to the usage of the verb in the other stems.

The N stem is not as consistent as the D stem; the Niphal is where *n̄hm* shows the full breadth of its semantic range. For example, below are the possible semantic senses provided by Parunak, the Dictionary of Classical Hebrew, and the Dictionary of Biblical Languages:

- Parunak:
 - 1. Suffer Emotional Pain.
 - 2. Be comforted.
 - 3. Perform declared action.
 - 4. Retract declared punishment.
 - 5. Retract declared blessing.
 - 6. Retract declared sin.⁹
- DCH:
 - 1. Regret, be sorry (of), relent.
 - 2. Be moved to pity, have compassion.
 - 3. Comfort oneself, be comforted, be consoled.
 - 4. Gain satisfaction for oneself, avenge oneself.¹⁰

⁹ Parunak, 527.

¹⁰ David Clines, *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, vol. 5 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Press, 2001), 663-664.

- DBL Hebrew:
 - 1. Comforted.
 - 2. Change one's mind.
 - 3. Be grieved.
 - 4. Repent.
 - 5. Relent.¹¹

Chisholm, largely building on Parunak's work, gives four possible semantic senses which are helpful for this study:

- 1. To experience emotional pain.
- 2. To be comforted/comfort oneself.
- 3. Relent from an action underway.
- 4. Relent or change one's mind from a stated action.¹²

The last two senses given by Chisholm could and probably should be thought of as one broader sense. We could then give a simpler semantic range for N *n/hm* with the following three, broad, senses:

¹¹ James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew (Old Testament)* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 5714.

¹² Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "Does God Change His Mind?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (October-December, 1995): 388.

1. To feel sorry for/about (regret, compassion).

- Genesis 6:6,7; Judges 2:18*, 21:6, 15; 1 Samuel 15:11, 35; Psalm 90:6*; Jeremiah 42:10

2. To change one's mind/actions (relent, repent).

- Exodus 13:17, 32:12, 14; 1 Samuel 15:29; 2 Samuel 24:16; Job 42:6; Psalms 106:45, 110:4; Jeremiah 4:28, 8:6*, 15:6*, 18:8, 10, 20:16*, 26:3, 13, 19, 31:19; Ezekiel 24:14*; Joel 2:13, 14; Amos 7:3, 6; Jonah 3:9, 10, 4:2; Zechariah 8:14*; 1 Chronicles 21:15

3. To comfort oneself, be comforted.

- Genesis 24:67, 28:12; 2 Samuel 13:39; Psalm 77:3; Isaiah 1:24, 57:6; Jeremiah 31:15; Ezekiel 14:22, 31:16, 32:21

* Could possibly fall under more than one sense.

While Parunak probably gives the best range for N *nħm* this three sense range can help us to see the larger picture. The point of this simpler three sense chart is to show the underlying ideas that unite the various possible translations of N *nħm*. Parunak as well as the Hebrew dictionaries and lexicons do a splendid job of showing us what the best English translations are. However, the answer to the question ‘what does *nħm* mean?’ is not “relent” or “regret” or any other gloss that we might assign to it. *Nħm* means *nħm*. So for our purposes it is better to think more broadly about the underlying idea that the ancient Hebrew speakers associated with this verb; rather than how to best render it into English.

To feel sorry for/about

The occurrences listed under the first sense N *nħm* can, for the most part, be translated as either “regret” or “compassion.” The underlying feeling of the agent of the verb is sorrow. In Genesis 6:6, 7 and 1 Samuel 15:11, 15, God is shown feeling sorrow over an action he has done, namely creating man and making Saul king. In Judges 2:18 and Jeremiah 42:10, God feels sorry

for his people because of the punishment he has placed on them. Judges 21:6, 15 are the same but instead of the agent of the verb being God the Israelites are the agent. The sorrow they feel is for the Benjaminites because of the punishment they brought on them. Psalm 90:6 is unique in that the Psalmist asks God to feel sorry for the people who are going through punishment rather than a description of God feeling sorry.

To change one's mind/actions

The second sense of the N *nħm*, “to change one’s mind/actions,” is the most frequently used sense of *nħm* in the Niphal. Most commonly, this is a change of mind about a stated course of action or an ongoing course of action. The change described almost always has an action attached to it. It is not merely a change of opinion. Instead, the change involves a reversal in a planned or stated course of action. We could think of this sense simply as “to change one’s actions” but when N *nħm* is used in this sense it is most commonly describing a change of planned actions. The subject is then “changing their mind” about bringing about a potential action, typically judgment.

When Man is the subject, the verb is used once to describe the possibility of the Israelites changing their minds on the way to the Promised Land (Exodus 13:17). In the other three instances, the verb is used to describe human repentance (Job 42:6, Jeremiah 8:6 and 31:19).

Except for those four passages, God is always the subject of the verb when used in this sense. With God as the subject, it is normally used in the context of judgment; usually future judgment. Most of the instances of N *nħm* in this sense speak either of the possibility of God relenting of a declared judgment or narrate that God did relent of a declared (or ongoing) judgment. Below is a list of the instances where God is the subject and *nħm* carries the sense of “to change one’s mind/actions” organized by speaker:

- **With God as Speaker:**

- Stated Negatively: Jeremiah 4:28; ~15:6¹³

Jeremiah 4:28: “Because of this the land will mourn and the sky above will grow black. For I have made my purpose known and I will not relent or turn back from carrying it out.”¹⁴

- Stated Positively: Jeremiah 18:8, 10, 26:3; Ezekiel 24:14; Zechariah 8:14

Jeremiah 18:8: “But if that nation I threatened stops doing wrong, I will cancel the destruction I intended to do to it.”

- **With Man as Speaker:**

- Stated Negatively: 1 Samuel 15:29*; Jeremiah 20:16

1 Samuel 15:29: “The Preeminent One of Israel does not go back on his word or change his mind, for he is not a human being who changes his mind.”

- Stated Positively: Jeremiah 26:13, 19; Jonah 4:2

Jeremiah 26:13: “But correct the way you have been living and do what is right. Obey the LORD your God. If you do, the LORD will forgo destroying you as he threatened he would.”

¹³ While God does not say that he will not relent in Jeremiah 15:6 he does say that he has grown weary of relenting. While it does not necessarily exclude the prospect of God’s relenting if the people repent, the statement does convey God’s frustration with his people and the imminence of the judgement that he promised to bring on them.

¹⁴ Unless otherwise stated all scripture quotations are from the New English Translation, Biblical Studies Press, 2005.

- Stated as a Possibility: Joel 2:13,14¹⁵; Jonah 3:9

Joel 2:13-14: “Return to the LORD your God, for he is merciful and compassionate, slow to anger and boundless in loyal love—often relenting from calamitous punishment. Who knows? Perhaps he will be compassionate and grant a reprieve, and leave blessing in his wake—a meal offering and a drink offering for you to offer to the LORD your God!”

- Stated as a Request: Exodus 32:12

Exodus 32:12: “Why should the Egyptians say, ‘For evil he led them out to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your burning anger, and relent of this evil against your people.”

- **With the Narrator or Psalmist as Speaker:**

- Stated Negatively: Psalm 110:4

Psalm 110:4: “The LORD makes this promise on oath and will not revoke it: “You are an eternal priest after the pattern of Melchizedek.”

- Stated Positively: Exodus 32:14; 2 Samuel 24:16*; 1 Chronicles 21:15*; Psalm 106:45*; Amos 7:3, 6; Jonah 3:10

Exodus 32:14: “Then the LORD relented over the evil that he had said he would do to his people.”

* A relent from an ongoing Judgement

¹⁵ It is unclear whether or not Joel is speaking of God relenting from an ongoing judgement or a future judgement. This would largely depend on the date and context of the book itself which is also uncertain. For a brief discussion on the date of Joel see Mark W. Chavalas, “Joel,” in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary Old Testament*, vol. 5, ed John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 43-44.

To comfort oneself, be comforted

The third sense of N *nħm* is more closely related to the D stem meaning of *nħm*. This meaning is about what one would expect given the D meaning. The only peculiarities here are the two passages in Isaiah where, in context, N *nħm* means to take vengeance. The idea is God is comforting himself and his oppressed people by taking vengeance on the oppressors. A similar idea is found in the New Testament in 2 Thessalonians 1:6-7 where Paul states, it is right for God to take vengeance on those who persecute the church.¹⁶

Similarities Between the Senses

These are not perfectly clean divisions. The sense of “to feel sorry for/about” is not that different from “relent/ change one’s mind.” All of the verses which have been marked with an * in the list on page 6 seem to fall somewhere between “to feel sorry for/about” and “change one’s mind.” This section is meant to show how similar these two meanings can be in a particular context as well as how they can convey the meanings of the first and second senses seemingly at the same time. Also, how they could easily go either way in context without much effect on the meaning of the passage in question if any. In most of these instances, one of the two senses seems to be secondary; the following discussion is an explanation of why a few of these passages have been assigned the primary sense it appears under in the list on page 6. All of these passages speak about God relenting (or not relenting) over a judgment. Each example below serves as further evidence that the meaning of N *nħm* is more nuanced than a simple one to one English translation can convey.

In Judges 2:18, *nħm* is used in the context of God relenting from the judgments he was placing on the Israelites. However, the usage of the verb more closely fits the sense of God being

¹⁶ Chisholm, 388; Parunak, 521-522.

grieved. In the passage, God had already relented by sending a judge; the usage of *nĥm* is focused on why God intervened for his people. He was grieved and moved to compassion because of their crying out. The author probably has the relenting sense in the background, but he is not primarily using the verb that way here. A similar thing is happening in Psalm 90:13 where the Psalmist is asking the Lord to *nĥm* on the people. The New English Translation gives the translation “have pity on your servants.” While the author is ultimately asking the Lord to relent of the judgment he placed on the people the usage of the verb is something along the lines of “have compassion” which better fits the sense “to feel sorry for.” Both senses are probably intended, however the sense of relenting is secondary.

Jeremiah 8:6 uses N *nĥm* to describe the people’s lack of repentance (“none of them regrets the evil they have done.”) Either sense could work here; *nĥm* could be taken to mean the people do not feel sorry about their sin or they do not relent/repent of it. Both possibilities are closely related as one cannot repent if one does not feel sorry about their sin and vice versa. This phrase is the same as the phrase found in Joel 2:13, Jonah 4:2, and Jeremiah 18:6 with God as the subject. In each of those passages, God is described as one who relents over the destruction he had planned. Literally he “relents upon the bad stuff.”¹⁷ In Jeremiah 8:6, this phrase is probably being used to contrast the people with God. While God relents over the “bad stuff” he had planned, the people will not relent over their “bad stuff.”¹⁸ For this reason, this passage has been categorized with the sense of “to change one’s mind” as the primary sense.

¹⁷ The Hebrew word is *ra’* (רָע). It is often translated as evil but is more literally “bad stuff” and is used to describe the people’s actions alongside God’s, the word play is further discussed in the section on Jeremiah 18.

¹⁸ William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 1-25*, Hermeneia-A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 279.

In Jeremiah 15:6, God expresses that he has grown weary of *nḥm*-ing. N *nḥm* in this instance is either translated as “relenting” (ESV, NASB, NRSV) or as “feeling sorry for”/ “having compassion” (NET, CSB). The LXX (translated into English) reads “and I will no longer spare them”¹⁹ which seems to suggest that the LXX translators read *nḥm* here closer to “relenting” than “having compassion.” The idea here is probably best reflected in the NIV translation. God has “grown tired of holding back.” The usage of *nḥm* does not perfectly fit with the sense of “changing one’s mind/actions” but it is rather close, so it is probably best to think of this verse in terms of relenting. The people would not relent of their sin; so God grew weary of relenting from judgment.

Jeremiah 18

Jeremiah 18 is a crucial passage for understanding the *nicham-ing*²⁰ activity of God. Nowhere else in scripture does God lay out the terms of his governance of the nations so clearly. Not only does God describe the principle by which Israel could repent and avert disaster but by which any nation can do so. He also lays out the same principle in reverse: any nation, including Israel, can bring evil on themselves despite God’s intention to bring good on them. Therefore, we can view Jeremiah 18 as God’s paradigm for his *nicham-ing* activity in the world since these are the conditions God gives for his *nicham-ing*.

Chapter 18 opens with God instructing his prophet to go down to the potter’s house to simply watch and wait. As Jeremiah watches the potter at work, an interesting thing happens.

¹⁹ Peter C. Craigie, Page H. Kelly, and Joel F. Drinkard Jr., *Jeremiah 1-25*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1991), 199.

²⁰ For reader ease from this point on *nḥm* (נחם) will be transliterated with vowels.

The vessel becomes spoiled. Instead of scrapping the project, the potter reworks the clay into another vessel as the potter sees fit to do. At this point the Lord speaks again and says: “I, the LORD, say: ‘O nation of Israel, can I not deal with you as this potter deals with the clay? In my hands, you, O nation of Israel, are just like the clay in this potter’s hand.’”²¹

When we think of God as a potter, we think of the image conveying God’s absolute control over the affairs of man, but such a picture is not given to us here. After all, why did the vessel spoil, was it not in the potter’s hands? Did the potter make a mistake? If so would not God be comparing himself to a potter who cannot control his clay? The potter imagery here cannot be equated to the common understandings of the potter imagery used by Isaiah and Paul where the focus is more on God’s sovereignty. Where the image is often thought to be conveying God’s complete and total determining power over the clay.²² Such a one-sided relationship between the potter and the clay does not work here. The relationship is two-sided. The vessel was spoiled, but it was not spoiled by the potter.²³

Woodenly translated, the Hebrew reads: “It was spoiled, the vessel which he was making in the clay in the hand of the potter.” We could translate this more smoothly by saying “The vessel that the potter²⁴ was making from the clay in his hand was spoiled.” What is important to notice is that the phrase, “that the potter was making from the clay in his hand” is merely describing the vessel; its purpose is to identify which vessel was spoiled. The potter is not the

²¹ Jeremiah 18:6.

²² While God does have the ability to do this if he so chooses, the imagery in Isaiah does not necessarily demand that God be understood as doing so or at least always doing so. This is especially true if we take into count the potter imagery of Jeremiah.

²³ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Message of Jeremiah: Against Wind and Tide*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2014), 211-212.

²⁴ In Hebrew the noun and pronoun are in opposite positions in the MT than in this translation, the change was for a smoother sounding sentence in English.

subject of the verb. The verb meaning spoiled (*shachat*)²⁵ is in the Niphal stem, which is normally the Middle/Passive or Reflexive of the Qal. Like *nicham*, *shachat* is unattested for in the Qal, but it cannot take an active meaning here.²⁶ The verb is most likely an incomplete passive which would leave the agent of the spoiling implicit or ambiguous. The verb in this context could take a reflexive meaning (the vessel spoiled itself).²⁷ While syntactically the reflexive is unlikely, contextually we will come out with a meaning that is at some level reflexive.²⁸ If not then we have God as potter spoiling his vessel in order to rework it,²⁹ which would make little sense in light of the rest of this narrative section.

The only way this analogy works in context is if the clay is resisting the potter in some way and therefore is the cause of its own reworking. The clay has the responsibility to go along with the potter's plans. If it does not, then the potter simply changes his plans concerning the clay and makes another vessel. The potter is ultimately in control of the final shape of the vessel, but the responsiveness of the clay to the plans of the potter can alter the potter's plans. He is not

²⁵ Hebrew: שָׁחַט.

²⁶ Verbs in the Niphal that don't appear in the Qal can sometimes take an active meaning (See Christo Van der Merwe, Jackie Naude, and Jan Kroeze, *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield, 1999), 78), however that is impossible here since it would require that "vessel" to be the subject with a different object. The vessel cannot merely be the agent doing the spoiling, the vessel is clearly what is spoiled.

²⁷ Bruce K. Waltke and Michael Patrick O'Conner, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, In: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 384 and 387-389.

²⁸ A reflexive verb would allow the vessel to be both agent and object. The agent of the spoiling can be ambiguous, but in context the vessel is the vessel and Judah is spoiled itself and is the cause of God's reworking. Though it does seem strange to make the yet to be completed vessel an animate object, the picture that we are given does show the clay taking on a life of its own and attempting to thwart the Potter. Contextually it would make sense to take the verb reflexively but grammatically it does seem to be a stretch as the syntax does appear to fit the pattern of an Incomplete Passive.

²⁹ Though such an interpretation may please some from certain schools of theological thought the immediate context does not allow it.

ultimately committed to any particular form and has the freedom to reshape the clay until he is satisfied with it.³⁰

God explains what he means by treating Israel as the potter treated his clay in verses 7-10 using two parallel hypothetical scenarios. Verses 7 and 8 set up a scenario of announced judgment, while verses 9 and 10 set up a scenario of announced blessing. In both instances, God is not bound to his announcement if the people respond poorly to it. We must not forget, though, God is not just speaking about Israel here. God is talking about announced judgment or blessing on a nation which implies any nation.³¹ Therefore, what we have is a general principle for how God interacts with all nations.³²

The principle we have here is if the people will *shub*³³ (turn) from their *ra'*³⁴ (bad stuff), then God will *nicham* (change his actions/relent) from his *ra'* (bad stuff). However, if the people do *ra'* then God will *nicham* (change his actions/relent) from his good. In verse 8, God's *nicham-ing* activity is placed parallel to mankind's *shub-ing* activity, and it is implied in verse 10. *Shub* means to turn from; it is commonly used to describe repentance in the Old Testament. The repentance of the people is placed next to the relenting of God to show if the people turn from their actions, God will turn from his stated actions.

³⁰ Wright, 211-212; Holladay, 515; Terence E. Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 269-71; Walter Brueggemann, *To Pluck Up, To Tear Down: A Commentary on the Book of Jeremiah 1-25*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 160; J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 433-435.

³¹ Hebrew: גוי, *Goy* means nation and can refer to any nation, including Israel, but it is commonly used to refer to Gentiles.

³² Fretheim, 270-271; R. E. Clements, *Jeremiah*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), 114.

³³ Hebrew: שוב.

³⁴ Hebrew: רע.

We could say God is changing his mind, but that might be a mischaracterization of what is happening here.³⁵ God is not promising to change his course of actions towards a nation just because he feels like it; he is promising change for change. God is laying out a pattern by which he consistently *nicham-s*. He is not changing his mind about the matter; he is just simply doing what he promised to do. Namely, change his actions towards people when they change their actions towards him.³⁶

The text displays God's responsive sovereignty. God remains in complete control. He is still reigning over his creation, but he does so while also taking the actions of his creatures into account. God is not arbitrarily deciding the events of history while we passively go through motions that he planned for us. Human actions do affect the way God implements his plans in the same way the spoiled clay affected the way the potter shaped the vessel.³⁷

The text also displays an aspect of divine justice that should not be missed. When God declares judgment is coming, repentance is not excluded, but is expected.³⁸ God makes himself known as one who relents from carrying out judgment numerous times in scripture. When he declares judgment he expects those hearing to repent. If they do so in earnest, then he will relent from the judgment.³⁹ The same is true in reverse, if God declares good on a nation then he

³⁵ Thompson, 434.

³⁶ Wright, 213; J. Daniel Hays, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, Teach the Text Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 126; F.B. Huey Jr. *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, New American Commentary Series (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 181; J. Andrew Dearman, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 185.

³⁷ Huey, 181; Wright, 213; Hays, 126; Brueggemann, 161.

³⁸ Clements, 113.

³⁹ Such as in the book of Jonah. God gave Jonah a message of destruction when the Ninevehites repented God relented (*nicham-ed*) of the judgement he declared on them. This is in spite of the fact that they were gentiles outside of the covenant. Jonah also seemed to understand the *nicham-ing* nature of God in Jonah 4:1-2. Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh because he knew the Lord would relent.

expects good from that nation. If they do not do good but instead turn from good to evil then God will relent of the good he promised for them.

It is important to notice that the text seems to imply a sort of covenantal relationship, though it may not be a formal one.⁴⁰ The text is speaking of those to whom God has declared judgment or blessing.⁴¹ We should not take this too legalistically, the principle laid out here is primarily for peoples, and it is for collective sin or repentance; not for every individual act of sin.⁴² However, this principle can be applied to individuals (see discussion on 1 Samuel 15) on whom God has announced blessing or judgment or who have a special relationship with God through some kind of covenant.⁴³

The principle is applied to Judah and Jerusalem in Jeremiah 18:11. God declares to Judah that he is shaping⁴⁴ a disaster for them. Therefore, they should repent. The message is clear, Judah is in hypothetical scenario number one. God has declared judgment, but if they will change their actions God will change his. It is implicitly stated that Judah is now in scenario one only because they have gone through scenario two. Judah was promised blessing, however, they acted wickedly; now God has removed the blessing. This is contra to what many of the leaders of

⁴⁰ Craige, Kelly, and Drinkard, 244-245.

⁴¹ God's *nicham-ing* in Gen. 6 uses a different sense of the word, there is only at thin line of a difference between the two possible meanings and *nicham* in the Niphal almost always concerns changing one's actions. So when God *nicham's* that he made mankind he is expressing regret but also a change of actions towards mankind though there doesn't appear to be any clear covenant or blessing given to all of mankind unless we just understand that mankind has a basic covenant relationship with God that began in the garden. The principle stated here still seems to apply regardless, mankind brought about God's judgement on themselves. If we continue with that principle, though, mankind could have repented and God would have *nicham-ed* again.

⁴² Fretheim, 272.

⁴³ Ezekiel 18 also lays out nearly the same principle but applies it directly to individuals.

⁴⁴ Interestingly the same verb used to make the word for "potter" back in verse 4, this serves as a word play that continues the potter and clay metaphor: Hays, 125.

Judah in Jerusalem were saying, they thought the presence of the temple would prevent God from letting them be destroyed.⁴⁵ However, God is reminding them their actions have consequences and that he will reverse their promised blessing and already has.

Judah does not listen though. In verse 12, we have what should be probably taken as Jeremiah's report back to God after giving this message.⁴⁶ Judah is too far gone. She had the freedom to change her fate but lost the freedom through sustained resistance to God and thus hardened herself. Though we are examining this passage in order to attempt to understand what it means for God to *nicham* that is not the primary concern or message of the text. The text is more concerned with what happens when people continually resist God. The answer is clear; they lose the ability to choose life. Judah is so hardened that she has become irrationally obstinate. Ironically, her determination to act autonomously forfeits her ability to do so.⁴⁷

It is unclear at what point in Jeremiah's ministry this event took place, but it can be assumed it was probably earlier; certainly before Zedekiah's reign while Judah still had some hope of repentance.⁴⁸ The events of Jeremiah 18 and 19 appear to be directly related to one another though it is impossible to know how close the succession of these events were.⁴⁹ Regardless, the events of chapter 19 result from the negative response of the people to God's call to repentance in chapter 18 which included trying to silence Jeremiah (18:18). Jeremiah is told to buy a clay jar and to take the leaders and Priests of Jerusalem to the Potsherd Gate which faced the valley of Hinnom. He was instructed to pronounce judgment on Judah there and to break the

⁴⁵ See Jeremiah 11.

⁴⁶ Holiday, 514.

⁴⁷ Bruggemann, 161-162.

⁴⁸ Craigie, Kelly, and Drinkard, 243.

⁴⁹ Dearman, 184; Thompson, 432.

pot in front of them. Through Jeremiah, God declares “I will do just as Jeremiah has done. I will smash this nation and this city as though it were a potter’s vessel which is broken beyond repair.”⁵⁰

At the beginning of Jeremiah 18, Judah still had hope; she was still a vessel made of wet clay. She could still be molded.⁵¹ By the time of the events of Jeremiah 19:10-11, Judah is a hardened and flawed pot, there is no hope for reworking her anymore. Eventually, the potter will discard the vessel and move on to another lump of clay.⁵² The message is clear: the time for *shub-ing* and *nicham-ing* does eventually come to an end.⁵³

When God Does Not *nicham*

1 Samuel 15:29 and Numbers 23:19 are the only two places where scripture appears to be suggesting that God never changes his mind. They are often cited as explicit texts which should be taken as teaching that God never changes his mind; he does not *nicham*. While it was stated in our discussion on Jeremiah 18 that “a change of mind” might be misrepresenting what God is often doing, God is indeed changing a previous decision. When 1 Samuel 15:29 and Numbers 23:19 are cited, they are cited in order to say passages like Jeremiah 18:7-10 should be seen only as anthropomorphic statements about God’s actions in the world rather than statements by God about how he will act.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Jeremiah 19:11.

⁵¹ Holliday, 517.

⁵² Bruggemann, 162.

⁵³ Hays, 124.

⁵⁴ Bruce A. Ware, “An Evangelical Reformulation of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29 (December, 1986), 441-443.

The traditional interpretation of these two passages has led many to disregard passages where God describes himself as having “a change of mind.” Instead of exploring what God meant in those self-revelations many theologians have relegated the *nicham-ing* of God to the level of a mere accommodation to our human weakness.⁵⁵ Rather than taking seriously what God says about himself, the words of two prophets have been given more weight than the words of God when it comes to the nature of God. This is in spite of passages such as Jeremiah 18, in which God himself spells out clearly a universal pattern for his *nicham-ing*.

The conclusion of this paper, however, is that God’s *nicham-ing* action in 1 Samuel 15 is actually consistent with the principles God lays out for himself in Jeremiah 18. Numbers 23 should be viewed as a statement on God’s covenant faithfulness. Both Numbers 23:19 as well as 1 Samuel 15:29 are speaking situationally.

1 Samuel 15

The rejection of Saul is a familiar passage. There is much to be said about this interesting section of scripture that narrates one of the most pivotal moments in Israel’s history. This passage has also long garnered much attention from scholarly circles for a multitude of reasons. One of the chief reasons is what the passage can tell us about the *nicham-ing* of God.

One of the most notable things about this passage is it contains an apparent contradiction. In verse 11, echoing Genesis 6:7, God tells Samuel that he “regrets” (or is grieved) that he made Saul king. The narrator again tells us the same thing in 1 Samuel 15:35. The verb usually translated as “regret” here, is *nicham* in the Niphal.

⁵⁵ Walter A. Maier III, “Does God “Repent” or Change His Mind?” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 68 (April 2004), 130-131.

However, in verse 29, Samuel tells Saul God does not change his mind, for he is not a man to change his mind. Again here the underlying verb for “change his mind” is *nicham* in the Niphal stem. So within the span of a chapter we are told by God that he *nicham-ed*, we are told by Samuel God does not *nicham* because God is not a man, then we are told by the narrator God did *nicham*.

There are five basic ways⁵⁶ to try to ease the tension in these verses:

1. Samuel’s statement is not original to the text and is the product of a later redactor that viewed the notion of a Divine mind change as unacceptable.⁵⁷
2. Pointing out 15:11 and 35 are using the verb in a different sense than verse 29 so there is no contradiction here as the two uses of the verb would be understood differently.
3. Taking Samuel’s statement as a clear and universal theological statement and taking the statements from God as well as the narrator as being anthropomorphic. Therefore, not literal statements about God’s actions or feelings.⁵⁸
4. Taking Samuel’s statement as unreliable since he is contradicting God and the narrator both of whom are infallible in the Biblical text.⁵⁹
5. Viewing Samuel’s statement as situational and only referring to the rejection of Saul.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ There are undoubtedly many more nuanced ways of doing this but most will boil down to doing one of these five things.

⁵⁷ Willis, 158-159.

⁵⁸ John T. Willis, “The ‘Repentance’ of God in the Books of Samuel, Jeremiah, and Jonah,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 16 (December, 1994), 159.

⁵⁹ Yairah Amit, “‘The Glory of Israel does not Deceive or Change His Mind’: On the Reliability of Narrator and Speakers in Biblical Narrative,” *Prooftexts* 12 no 3 (September, 1992): 205.

⁶⁰ Willis 160-161.

Each view has some strengths and weaknesses. View 1 and 2, however, are probably the weakest. View 1 is naturally rejected by evangelicals. Proponents of this view believe the contradiction is just too blatant for it to have been original. This view only has strength if the other views entirely fail to explain the tension. A fundamental flaw of this view is the fact that verses 11 and 35 exist in their present form. If a later redactor was trying to correct the text we have no reason to believe that he would have left verses 11 and 35 unaltered, or in the text at all. Especially since by doing so the redactor created a contradiction⁶¹ which left the text still leading away from the redactor's favored theological stance.

View 2 fails to take into account the two senses of the verb, which appear in this chapter are not that different. It only appears to be a thin line of difference between the two uses of the verb, which some translators have even decided not to differentiate between, in order to preserve the theological tension. Goldingay⁶² translates all four occurrences of the verb in this chapter as "relent." The ESV translates them all as "regret." While most translators do appear to see at least a slight distinction in usage between 15:11/15:35 and 15:29 they could all be taken to have similar meanings. "Relent" appears to work just fine in all three verses, especially if one believes that *nicham* in the Niphal does not intrinsically carry an emotive sense.

View 3 is, of course, the traditional interpretation of this text and others like it. The strength of this view lies with its age. This view has been held by many Christians for centuries. For that reason, it should be given serious weight. The problem with the traditional view is it does not seem to take seriously enough the words of God in this passage. It is

⁶¹ Amit, 204.

⁶² John Goldingay, *The First Testament: A New Translation* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2018), 279-280.

argued that it is impossible for God to feel “regret” because he is God. God can do no wrong; therefore, cannot feel regret.⁶³ However, one need not do something wrong to feel regret, or to be grieved especially when we consider that a fuller sense of the verb has to do with changing a course of actions. God’s “regret” was not brought on by his mistake but by Saul’s. God regrets making Saul king in the sense that he now wants to remove Saul from being King. Also, who are we mere men to say what emotions God can and cannot feel? God does indeed relate to us in anthropomorphisms, and by being in his very nature divine does not experience emotions in the same way we do. However, we cannot just dismiss his self-revelation as anthropomorphisms whenever it is convenient for us to do so.

God reveals himself to us as a God who feels pain, who is grieved, a God who has emotions. If this is how God reveals himself to us, then it is pretty safe to say this is how God expects us to view him and to relate to him. When God says he feels something or has done something we must take it seriously. This is the fundamental flaw with this view. It is taking Samuel’s words about God, over God’s words about himself.

View 4 is peculiar, and at first glance, does not seem that different than view 1. It is built on the idea that in Biblical narrative, there are always two voices and only two voices which are always right, God and the Narrator. These two constants aid the reader in understanding who they are to believe. Those characters whose statements or conduct are not consistent with that of God and the statements of the narrator are not to be taken as reliable sources.⁶⁴ So the argument in regards to 1 Samuel 15 is that Samuel, by contradicting both God and the

⁶³ Maier, 136.

⁶⁴ Amit, 204-205.

narrator is no longer reliable. It is a reasonably strong case. God and the narrator are always right. Samuel does indeed appear to be contradicting them. But why?

In this view, Samuel would have preferred to have forgiven Saul and was angry at God because of the implications of rejecting Saul and anointing a new king. So, Samuel pleads with God all night to change his mind, but God will not budge. Samuel then goes and delivers God's message of judgment. By the end of Saul's pleading, Samuel is angry at Saul for only making the situation worse. After Saul tears his robe, Samuel, in anger from the situation and in recognition that he has already tried to change God's mind tells Saul God does not change his mind because he is not a man. The text presents Samuel exaggerating out of frustration, reminding us he is still just a fallible human.⁶⁵

We do not have to understand the text that way though. While that option is a possibility, it does ultimately seem like we could better explain the passage by explaining it as Samuel speaking situationally. To understand this view, we need first to understand the context of 1 Samuel 15.

At this point in the kingship of Saul, God has already ended the possibility of a lasting dynasty due to Saul's disobedience in 1 Samuel 13. However, God has not disposed him from the throne; the judgment is only on his dynasty. Chapter 15 begins with God, through Samuel, commissioning Saul to go and eliminate the Amalekites whom God promised to destroy once Israel was settled in the Land (Exodus 17:14; Deuteronomy 25:19). Although God has passed judgment on Saul for his disobedience, he is given the honor of utterly destroying one of Israel's oldest enemies. Who knows, this could have been a second chance for Saul. Had he done well the Lord may have relented from his judgment on Saul or at least

⁶⁵ Ibid, 208-209.

let his son see the throne.⁶⁶ God certainly let Ahab's dynasty last longer than anticipated because of his repentance, even though God cast judgment on his dynasty like he did Saul's.⁶⁷ Regardless, this was Saul's last chance to show his allegiance to the Lord.⁶⁸

However, we learn quickly that Saul did not follow the Lord's commands. The type of war he was supposed to wage was *herem*; it is holy war; everything and everyone was to be devoted to God by destruction. The Amalekites were under the ban similar to the city of Jericho during the conquest which meant there was to be absolutely no spoil taken from them; everything was to be destroyed.⁶⁹ In 15:9, we see Saul and his men did not put the Amalekites under the ban as they had been instructed to do. They spared the best of the livestock and kept Agag, the king, alive. The narrator's use of a singular verb with a plural subject in verse 9 is meant to signal to the audience that Saul is the principal actor in this offense. Contra his numerous excuses later, the troops were just accessories.⁷⁰

Saul has only partially obeyed God and "partial obedience is really only disobedience made to look acceptable."⁷¹ Saul did not keep the ban and selfishly kept the best of the spoils for himself and his men, thus committing the sin of Achan.⁷² This grieves the Lord. The Lord

⁶⁶ Bill T. Arnold, *1 and 2 Samuel*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 219.

⁶⁷ John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Gospel*, vol. 1 (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2003), 639.

⁶⁸ Evans, 73.

⁶⁹ V. Philips Long, "1 and 2 Samuel," in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary Old Testament*, vol. 2, ed. John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 337-338.

⁷⁰ Robert Alter, *The David Story* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), 88.

⁷¹ Arnold, 220.

⁷² Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, New American Commentary Series (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 169 and 172; Evans, 74.

tells Samuel he *nicham-ed* that he had made Saul king in a nighttime revelation. Which is somewhat reminiscent of the boy Samuel being told of the judgment coming on Eli's house.⁷³

As Samuel travels to meet Saul, he is informed that Saul is setting up a monument for himself at Carmel. This was not an uncommon thing for kings to do in the Ancient Near East after a major victory. It shows us Saul's heart though.⁷⁴ This was the Lord's campaign, not Saul's, Saul was just an instrument in it, and now he is taking the glory for himself instead of giving it to God.⁷⁵ This also probably explains why Saul kept Agag alive. Another common Ancient Near Eastern practice was to make royal slaves out of defeated kings, so Agag served as Saul's victory trophy to parade around.⁷⁶

At this point, it is clear Saul disobeyed God and in a way which was worse than Achan. At least Achan tried to hide his sin, Saul is flaunting it. Which is why his greeting to Samuel is so striking. He tells Samuel that he has carried out the command of the Lord when it is so evident he did not. At best, Saul is ignorant of what utterly destroy means. At worst, he is being outright deceitful.⁷⁷ When Samuel calls him out, he says it was the troops who spared the best of the livestock in order to sacrifice them. Samuel stops him and reminds him it was

⁷³ Bergen, 174.

⁷⁴ Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *1 & 2 Samuel*, Teach the Text Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 100-101; Evans, 74; David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 397.

⁷⁵ Chisholm, 99.

⁷⁶ Arnold, 220.

⁷⁷ Evans, 74.

the Lord who made him king and the Lord that sent him to utterly destroy the Amalekites. Then, Samuel asks Saul bluntly why he did not follow the Lord's command.

The nerve of Saul in his response is truly amazing. He protests. He argues that he did obey the Lord, *Samuel's* God, by bringing Agag back alive and keeping the best of the plunder to sacrifice. Samuel responds by saying:

“Does the LORD take pleasure in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as he does in obedience? Certainly, obedience is better than sacrifice; paying attention is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and presumption is like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has rejected you as king.”⁷⁸

The word translated as “presumption” in the NET would better be translated as “coercion” in this context.⁷⁹ Which is precisely what Saul is trying to do. He is thinking of God as if he is some other Ancient Near Eastern deity, a mere idol, which could be won over with massive amounts of sacrifice.⁸⁰ This is why rebellion and coercion are tantamount to divination and idolatry; they are all attempts at displacing God by elevating human self-will to God's rightful position.⁸¹

Saul's response to Samuel is to finally say he has sinned, but he still does not take full responsibility for his sin. He again blames the troops; this time he says he only disobeyed out of his fear of them. Even if this were true, it is still self-indictment. Saul feared his troops more than God and thus failed as king for failing to lead the people to follow the Lord.⁸² The primary

⁷⁸ 1 Samuel 15:22–23.

⁷⁹ Chisholm, 104.

⁸⁰ Evans, 75.

⁸¹ Bergen, 172.

⁸² Bergen, 173; Tsumura, 400.

concern of Saul's half-hearted repentance is revealed in 15:25, he only wanted forgiveness so Samuel would worship with him in front of the people in order to save face.

When Samuel turns to leave, Saul tries one more desperate move. He grabs the hem of Samuel's robe (a deferential sign of humility in the Ancient Near East)⁸³ accidentally tearing it. Samuel uses the moment as an object lesson and informs Saul his kingdom has been torn away from him on that day and given to another.

Then Samuel utters the famous line in 15:29: "The Preeminent One of Israel does not go back on his word or change his mind, for he is not a human being who changes his mind." In this context, it seems best to understand the statement as Samuel making it clear to Saul that God has taken the kingdom from him and he is not giving it back.⁸⁴ Saul has not come close to genuine repentance; all he has done is continually shift blame, argue, and save face. He has treated God like a man who can be easily talked out of judgment.⁸⁵ God is no man; he does not back down for half-hearted repentance. Saul has made it clear that his heart is not in the right place and God desires a king with a heart after his own.⁸⁶

The Hebrew of verse 29 is not exceptionally hard. In fact it is amazingly clear. However, it could be taken in one of two ways. It could be woodenly translated as either "Indeed the preeminent one of Israel does not deceive and does not change his mind⁸⁷ for he is not a man to change his mind" or "Indeed the preeminent one of Israel will not deceive and will not change his mind for he is not a man to change his mind." The question is whether or not the *lo* (article of

⁸³ Tsumura, 406.

⁸⁴ Tsumura, 407; Chisholm, 105; Alter, 92.

⁸⁵ Long, 340.

⁸⁶ Arnold, 226; Evans, 75-76

⁸⁷ We could just as easily put "relent" here.

negation) plus imperfect should be translated as a present or future verb. It all boils down to context. Most of the time the imperfect aspect has a future meaning. However in some contexts such as the Decalogue, which uses the *lo*+imperfect formula, it is an ongoing present. Most major translations have treated this as an ongoing present (ESV, NET, CSB, and NIV). However, several translations translate the passage as future (NASB, KJV, NKJV, LEB, NLT, and The Message). Although a future imperfect could still signify that God will not *nicham* in the future at all, the context of 1 Samuel 15 does not demand that. Given the context, it seems best to take the statement as Samuel saying God will not deceive or change his mind in Saul's situation, he is not a man that would change his mind.

This interpretation also fits the pattern God lays out later to Jeremiah. In Samuel 13, Saul offered up an inappropriate sacrifice. God retracts his blessing from Saul's house and pronounces judgment on Saul's dynasty through Samuel (as he later does to Judah through Jeremiah). We hear nothing of Saul repenting or asking for forgiveness. Saul's apparent reaction to this judgment on his family is reminiscent of Eli who just accepted the Lord's judgment instead of repenting (1 Samuel 2-3).

Despite Saul's failure, God is still working with him. Saul is still wet clay and still has hope. In giving Saul the chance to prove himself by destroying Amalek, God is giving him one final chance. If he would have been obedient who knows, God may have retracted the judgment or at least delayed it. However, Saul only further proves his heart is hard and he is unwilling to change. Because Saul is unwilling to change, so is God. The time for repentance and *nicham-ing* has passed, Saul is now a hardened and flawed vessel good for nothing but to be smashed.

Numbers 23

1 Samuel 15:29 has very similar wording to Numbers 23:19 and is likely an allusion to it. Both passages are addressing kings who were trying to manipulate God as if he were one of the idols of the Ancient Near East that could be won over by impressive sacrifices. Unlike 1 Samuel 15:29, the context is not a judgment. It is that of a foreign king trying to curse God's chosen people. The focus of God's unwillingness to *nicham* is not on God refusing to relent. It is actually on God being unwilling to go back on his promises. While God might change his plans in response to human repentance or evil, he cannot be bought.

Most people are unsure of what exactly to make of Balaam. No one is exactly sure of what Balaam's relationship to the God of Israel is. He is not an Israelite, and while he performs the role of a prophet in this text, the king of Moab certainly does not seem to view him as a prophet in the Israelite sense. Balak seeks him out as a sorcerer, one who could manipulate the gods, to act in accordance with the human will. Balaam never gives the Moabites any pretext for thinking he could do such a thing with the Lord. Instead, Balaam appears to be some kind of diviner, a person who could discern the will of the gods through reading certain omens and signs. Some forms of divination were acceptable in ancient Israel so it would seem that Balaam is a kind of diviner/prophet.⁸⁸

Later Biblical references to Balaam only add to the confusion surrounding him. The New Testament does not hold him in any kind of esteemed light. In fact, followers of Jesus are told not to be like Balaam (2 Peter 2:15; Jude 1:11; Revelation 2:14). Two of the three references

⁸⁸ R. Dennis Cole, "Numbers," in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary Old Testament*, vol. 1, ed. John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 380.

pointing to this episode warn believers of false teachers who forsake God for money.⁸⁹ The third reference (Revelation 2:14) points to Numbers 31,⁹⁰ where we learn Balaam was killed by the Israelites (Numbers 31:8). He apparently did help Balak by giving him advice on how to get the Lord to be angry at Israel. Namely by enticing them to sin and thus bringing the Lord's judgement on themselves (Numbers 31:16). This may help us to understand Balaam's motives here.

Understanding his motives from our text alone is a complicated matter. While Balaam was forbidden from going the first time Balak sent messengers to him. He was given divine approval to go with Balak the second time. However, with the condition he could only say and do exactly what the Lord told him (Numbers 22:7-20), but the Lord sent an angel to oppose Balaam while he was in route to Balak. We are told it is because the Lord's anger was kindled against Balaam for going (Numbers 22:22).

This is a curious case. We presume that Balaam must have had a change of heart while going to Balak in hopes of becoming rich and God was simply reminding him of who was in charge.⁹¹ This is still a little surprising though since Balaam seemed to understand this in 22:18. Perhaps it was a mistake for Balaam even to entertain the second round of messengers since he already knew God would not curse Israel and should have known better. Milgrom notes he was not entirely honest with the first round of messengers by only telling them he could not go with them. By failing to tell the Moabites that he could not go with them because Israel was blessed

⁸⁹ D. A. Carson, "2 Peter," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beal and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 1056-1057; D. A. Carson, "Jude," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beal and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 1076-1077.

⁹⁰ G. K. Beal and Sean M. McDonough, "Revelation," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beal and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 1094.

⁹¹ Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 798-799.

by God, he thus failed to inform them that their mission was a futile one.⁹² He may have done this to leave open the prospect of being paid by Balak. If this was the case, then we can see God allowing Balaam to go to Balak as God giving in to the greedy diviner's wishes; in order to teach both him and Balak a lesson.

The idea that Balaam prompted God's anger by thinking about doing as Balak wished (or at least saying what Balak wanted to hear to get paid) while on the road, is given at least a little more weight if we take Ashley's suggestion of translating the *ki* in 22:22 as temporal. So that the verse would read "God became angry with him *as he was going*."⁹³ The grounds of God's anger are still left to the reader to infer from the context, but it is certainly easier to do so with a temporal clause. This would also make more sense of Balaam's encounter with his donkey and the angel of the Lord.

Balaam could also have angered the Lord by thinking he could perhaps change the Lord's mind allowing him to do what Balak requested and curse Israel. After all, God had allowed him to go with Balak's servants. Maybe he was warming up to the idea. Perhaps, Balaam thought like Balak that he could manipulate the Lord or somehow he was now in control of Israel's destiny. The encounter may have been to quell such a notion brewing within Balaam.⁹⁴ Whatever Balaam was thinking or did we can assume was for his own benefit. Considering he did at least work with Balak later to conspire against Israel, presumably for money, which makes Numbers 23:19

⁹² Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 188.

⁹³ Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 454-455.

⁹⁴ Denis R. Cole, *Numbers*, New American Commentary Series (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 389.

a little ironic coming out of Balaam's mouth. In some ways, we may be able to see his second oracle as a lesson that he has already learned the hard way.

Regardless, the second oracle, like the first, is meant to counter Balak's theology.⁹⁵ The king failed to get the message both times and oddly thought changing the site of diviner would change God's mind. The point of the second oracle is God will fulfill his promises, no force can revoke Israel's blessing (except God).⁹⁶ As verse 23 makes clear, no sorcery will be effective against Israel. God's intentions are not subject to human manipulation.⁹⁷

In this context, verse 19 is not meant to be a universal statement about how God always acts, especially given that God is shown to *nicham* in the Torah (Exodus 32:14). The point is God is not capricious like men; he cannot be manipulated; he is always faithful to fulfill his promises.⁹⁸ God is not incapable of *nicham-ing*, but only does so on his terms which are in response to human evil and repentance⁹⁹ (Jeremiah 18) and in response to intercession (Exodus 32:14).

It should be noted, the verbal root *kzb*, which is often translated here as "lie," can also and probably does mean in this passage "fail." So the text should read "God is not a man that he should fail." This is in more in line with the message of the oracle that God is faithful to fulfill his word concerning Israel (which is how this episode is interpreted in the rest of the Old

⁹⁵ Gordon J. Whenham, *Numbers*, Old Testament Guides (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield, 1999), 175.

⁹⁶ Cole, 409-410 (NAC)

⁹⁷ Alter, 807.

⁹⁸ Milgrom, 199; Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven, CT: Yale, 1993), 182.

⁹⁹ Milgrom, 199.

Testament¹⁰⁰).¹⁰¹ With this in mind, the usage of *nicham* here is very similar to Psalm 110:4 where it is used to confirm God will not turn from his promises to David.¹⁰²

God's *Nicham-ing* as a result of Intercession

While most instances of God's *nicham-ing* in scripture can be explained through the lens of Jeremiah 18, there are a few instances of God *nicham-ing* as a result of prophetic intercession. The most famous of these instances is Exodus 32:14, where Moses intercedes for Israel after they have sinned by creating a golden calf.

In Exodus 24, Israel formally enters into the covenant relationship with the Lord. Moses read them the terms of the covenant, and they agreed to follow. The chapter ends with Moses going back up the mountain to receive further instruction from the Lord, particularly on the construction of the tabernacle. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights, which is presumably when the opening events of Exodus 32 took place.¹⁰³

Apparently, this was the first time Moses had been away from the people for an extended period. The people did not think he would return.¹⁰⁴ While the people showed some disdain for Moses ("as for this Moses fellow"),¹⁰⁵ his absence seemed to really panic the Israelites. Moses was the only intermediary between them and God. Without Moses present they had no way to

¹⁰⁰ See Deuteronomy 23:4-5; Joshua 24:9-10; Nehemiah 13:4; Micha 6:5.

¹⁰¹ Ashley, 477; Levine, 182.

¹⁰² Levine, 182.

¹⁰³ Eugene Carpenter, *Exodus 19-40*, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2012), 288; Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 520.

¹⁰⁴ Duane A. Garrett, *A Commentary on Exodus*, Kregel Exegetical Library (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2014), 618; Doug Stuart, *Exodus*, New American Commentary Series (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 661.

¹⁰⁵ Garrett, 298.

communicate with God.¹⁰⁶ Showing their true pagan colors, they asked Aaron to make them gods to worship since they thought Moses might never come back, after all, it had been over a month since they had seen him.

It is not entirely clear which of or how many of the commandments they broke. The fact *elohim* is rightfully taken to have a plural meaning here¹⁰⁷ is interesting since only one calf was made. Aaron, referring to the one calf, says “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.”¹⁰⁸ The plurality could indicate polytheism¹⁰⁹ but Aaron’s declaration of a feast to YHWH to dedicate the idol makes this unlikely since it would appear that the calf was associated with YHWH.¹¹⁰ Even though it is not out of the question that the Israelites thought their God was one of many, especially given their quick return to idol worship which closely mirrored the cultic practices of the Egyptians and Canaanites.

The bull imagery itself is unsurprising. It was fairly common in Ancient Near Eastern religious imagery. Notably, there was a popular bull cult in Egypt around this time, and the bull was the principal image associated with the chief Canaanite God, El.¹¹¹ The choice shows Israel’s tendency to be like the other nations, which begins their long history with their most recurrent sin, idolatry.¹¹²

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 618; Peter Enns, *Exodus*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 568-569.

¹⁰⁷ Carpenter, 298.

¹⁰⁸ Exodus 32:4.

¹⁰⁹ Hamilton, 528.

¹¹⁰ Bruce Wells, “Exodus,” in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary Old Testament*, vol. 1, ed. John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 259.

¹¹¹ Garrett, 618-619; Stuart, 663; Wells 259.

¹¹² Enns, 569.

Israel, most likely associated the bull with YHWH, but were unlikely to believe the idol they just created was actually a god.¹¹³ They either believed the calf was the image of God¹¹⁴ or that the calf was his seat or pedestal which he dwelled above.¹¹⁵ The latter was common in the Ancient Near East, and if it is the case here, it would make the calf comparable to the cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant. In such a case, the calf serves as an anti-ark or anti-tabernacle.¹¹⁶ The irony is in desiring to have God's presence among them, the Israelites created an idol in order to feel assured the Lord was truly with them. As they are doing this, though, the Lord is giving Moses instructions for building the tabernacle where God will actually dwell in their midst. By taking matters into their own hands, they exchange the real presence of God for an idol.¹¹⁷

Israel broke the covenant just forty days in. Their impatience led them to create their own religion and consecrate a pagan feast to YHWH.¹¹⁸ In practicing idolatry, the people broke the second commandment. Even worse, they honor the calf idol as being the god that brought them out of Egypt. While they may have been worshiping YHWH in name, associating a man-made image with their deliverance from Egypt is tantamount to denying the prologue of the Decalogue

¹¹³ Though, admittedly, the overall Torah narrative does make it hard to put anything past them.

¹¹⁴ Nahum N. Sarna, *Exodus*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 204.

¹¹⁵ Wells, 259.

¹¹⁶ Hamilton, 528; Enns, 569.

¹¹⁷ Garret, 618; Carpenter 298.

¹¹⁸ While the revelry may have been sexual in nature it is more likely a religious feast meant to honor God albeit in a very pagan way. This in no way excuses the people's sin in fact it highlights it because they attempted to treat the living God as if he were just some other ANE idol. See Hamilton, 532-534 and Stuart 666-667.

itself. The ‘Yahweh’ they worship is not truly YHWH, it is a syncretism of the true faith and pagan religion.¹¹⁹

God is not happy about this. Despite the multitude of miracles he has performed in front of Israel to deliver them from Egypt, his presence on the mountain, and the fact he provided manna for them each day, the Israelites have turned to idolatry and regarded a statue they created as containing his presence. They have completely turned from following the way he instructed them, so he sets out to destroy them. In Exodus 32:7, God refers to Israel as Moses’ people, implying that they are no longer his people.¹²⁰ The Israelites have proven themselves to be a “stiff-necked” (stubborn) people, and the Lord had enough.

In verse 10, God gives Moses an interesting command and opportunity: “So now, leave me alone so that my anger can burn against them and I can destroy them, and I will make from you a great nation.” God anticipates that Moses will try to intercede for Israel and seemingly invites him to do so by telling Moses to leave him alone.¹²¹ However, he does give Moses a choice. He can be an intercessor or he can become the new Abraham. Presumably, Moses would have been justified in either choice. He can step in and save the people, or he can do as God says and allow the people to face the consequences of their actions. The people had violated the covenant, which unlike the covenant with Abraham, was conditional. God had every right to terminate the relationship with Israel. Since Moses was a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, none of God’s promises would have been made void by restarting with Moses.¹²²

¹¹⁹ Stuart, 666-667.

¹²⁰ Carpenter, 304; Hamilton, 537.

¹²¹ Sarna, 205; Hamilton, 538.

¹²² Carpenter, 305-306; Garrett 626.

Moses is the only thing that stands in the way of the Israelites destruction,¹²³ and almost amazingly he chooses the role of intercessor over the role of Abraham. Moses selflessly intercedes on Israel's behalf and, in a scene reminiscent of Abraham interceding for Sodom, Moses argues from God's character that he should not destroy his people.¹²⁴ His argument consists of 3 points:

1. Reminds the Lord he brought them out of Egypt (why destroy the Israelites after delivering them).
2. Why let the Egyptians say the Lord only delivered Israel to destroy them (why let your reputation be tarnished).
3. Asks God to remember his promises to the Patriarchs to multiply their descendants and to give them the Promised Land.

Moses convinces God not to continue with his plan to restart with him. The Lord *nicham-s* in verse 14 just as Moses asked in verse 12. Which is striking, because this is the only instance in scripture of someone ever directly asking God to *nicham* and God subsequently *nicham-ing*.¹²⁵ God does judge the people. His *nicham-ing* is always on his terms, but he does not destroy them completely.

Moses legitimately saved Israel. There appears to be no other way to read this. Had Moses not interceded, the Lord would have destroyed rebellious Israel. Most other prophets are not as successful as Moses is here. Indeed, the Lord often does not *nicham* as a result of prophetic

¹²³ Garrett, 626.

¹²⁴ Hamilton, 538.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 539.

intercession. There are many ways to try to understand this passage, but we may be best off by just taking it at face value and understanding that it may create theological problems for us.

There are similarities with this episode and the pattern that is laid out in Jeremiah 18. God follows his pattern of retracting blessing from a wicked people, but he does not follow the pattern of relenting from declared judgment as a result of the repentance of the people. The people do not repent at all, and are clueless about the impending judgment. Perhaps, we can infer God knows the people well enough to know that without Moses they will not repent. After all, even with Moses, this generation of Israelites rebels and will not go into the Promised Land. Their hearts may just be too hard. Still, the fact that Moses' intercession saves them is peculiar.

The problem many have with this passage is, at face value, God really does change his mind. Not only that, a man changes his mind. We seem to have the same problem with Abraham's intercession for Sodom, but it is easy to disregard since Sodom still receives judgment. Both episodes seem to portray God as inviting input from his servants. We may explain this as God testing them, but the text does not seem to lend itself that way. Also, the Old Testament appears to suggest later, if Moses had not acted Israel would have been destroyed (Psalm 106:23). If God's threat to destroy Israel is real, then the text portrays Moses as changing God's mind. Which makes us wonder, would this not contradict Numbers 23:19? Is not the point there that Man cannot change God's mind? No, the point in Numbers 23 is God's faithfulness and man's inability to manipulate God. Moses is not attempting to prosper himself; he is doing quite the opposite given what is on the table. Moses is selflessly asking God to have mercy based on God's own character.

In the end, we will have to accept some mystery, as we know God does not always respond to intercession for reasons known only to him. What we can learn about God's *nicham-ing* nature

from this passage is he does take human actions and thoughts into consideration when he acts in the world. He is completely sovereign yet willing to let his creatures have a say in the affairs of the world. We ultimately do not know why Moses' intercession for Israel was successful while other attempts were not. We can take educated guesses,¹²⁶ but the answer is within the divine mind which we can only hope to understand in part. All we can know is had Moses not thrown himself between God and Israel, Israel would have been destroyed.

Theological Reflection

This paper has sought to understand key Biblical texts which speak to God's *nicham-ing* nature in their historical and Biblical contexts. This has largely led the discourse away from some traditional views concerning God's actions in the world and at times divine foreknowledge. Thus far it has been made clear this paper contends that in order to understand many Biblical passages which speak about God *nicham-ing*, we must take the view that God does at times act in response to human actions. This is in opposition to the traditional way of understanding these passages which regards them as merely anthropomorphic and not actually being descriptions of God's feelings and actions.

¹²⁶ While this is probably not the full reason it is not out of the question that Moses choosing to be intercessor rather than new Abraham is the key to why God *nicham-ed*. Moses' argument to God itself was probably not what ultimately saved Israel (God certainly had considered all of this things) it was the fact that Moses made it. It may be the case that it is Moses rejection of the covenant offer that leads God to *nicham*. He did not fully retract judgement, he just did not start over. If Moses would not accept the role of second Abraham (and in some ways second Noah) then Israel had to be preserved to fulfill God's promises. Though God had every right to destroy them and he knew that they would only continue to rebel he does not go back on his own word. If Moses is willing to stand with them instead of becoming his own nation then they are Moses' people. If God was willing to enter into an Abrahamic relationship with Moses then he would be willing to protect his rebellious people for Moses sake. At this point they are no longer (at least directly) God's people (they are in an abstract sense through being Moses' people) and will not be his people again until the covenant is renewed in chapter 34 and God again agrees to dwell in the Midst of Israel.

To be clear, I am not trying to argue there is no anthropomorphic language in the Bible. I am also not arguing that the passages describing God as *nicham-ing* are not at some level anthropomorphic. At some level, all of our language describing God is anthropomorphic. Human language and imagery cannot fully capture the nature of the divine. God is an infinite being that our finite minds cannot fully comprehend. However, this does not mean we can write off anything that makes no sense to us as anthropomorphic language, which can be disregarded because it does not speak to the true nature of the deity. If we did that, then we would need to disregard all language concerning God, because none of it can speak to the true nature of the deity.

Of course, such an approach is not advocated here. The approach advocated here is to understand God as he reveals himself, not as our theological constructs reveal him.¹²⁷ We must let our reading of scripture change our view of God; not let our view of God change our reading of scripture. Even if it is confusing to us, we must accept that God has revealed himself to us in scripture the way he wants to be understood. This means he is not truly the transcendent God, and he is not truly the immanent God, but he is both the transcendent and immanent God. He is both at all times and in all circumstances, though some passages may emphasize one aspect of his nature more than the other he is always both.¹²⁸ If we overemphasize one over the other, then we will misunderstand God and misunderstand his word. The truth of God's immanence and transcendence often creates theological tension. However, this is a tension that the Biblical authors seemed to be willing to live with. If they were willing to live with it, maybe we should

¹²⁷ That is not meant to necessarily sound disparaging, we need consistent theology that we can live by so creating constructs such as Calvinism, Wesleyanism, and Free Will Open theism is not a bad thing to do so long as the construct can account for all that we see in scripture and as long as we don't bend scripture to fit into our constructs.

¹²⁸ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 274.

be too. There will always be some mystery to God. We have to have the faith that he has given us all we need to know to understand him enough to follow him. So as we move forward, we do so humbly acknowledging our inability to fully comprehend the divine mystery which is our God's immanence in and transcendence of his creation.

The chief concern here is properly defining the doctrine of divine immutability. As we have observed God does often appear to change his plans concerning his dealings with men. However, the traditional understanding of God's immutability would hold that God is utterly changeless, and since he is utterly changeless, he cannot have quantitative change (he cannot increase or decrease) and he cannot have qualitative change (his character is constant); this rests on his eternal nature.¹²⁹ This much is not disputed. However, from here, the traditional view states that immutability means God does not change his mind, plans, or actions. These too rest on his eternal nature and do not change regardless of what happens. The passages where God seems to change his mind or plans, are seen as anthropomorphic (including passages where God experiences pain or regret), they are just the next stage in God's unfolding plan, or are just a change of orientation due to mankind's sin or repentance.¹³⁰

The problem with this view is while it states to believe in a God who is active and dynamic in the world, all of his activity is portrayed as a pre-planned illusion. If immutability means God cannot change his plan at all, because the eternity of his plan is rooted in the eternity of his being then how can he change his orientation towards a group of people? Presumably, his changed orientation is an action planned from eternity past. If it is, then God's orientation towards a group of people really never changed, contra the depiction of the Biblical

¹²⁹ Ibid, 249.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 249-250.

text. If this is the case, then it was somehow determined from eternity past that God would act in a certain way and his decision and actions are then unalterable. Meaning that God is not free to change his future actions.

Such a conclusion is enormous. That would mean Moses' intercession for Israel was practically pointless. God was never going to destroy Israel anyway; he was essentially just toying with Moses.¹³¹ When Samuel says that God would have established a lasting dynasty for Saul, he is lying at worst or at best is simply wrong since God's decision to reject Saul was made in eternity past. Also, what are we to make of God's multiple calls of repentance in the prophetic literature? Are they genuine? If there was no chance what so ever of Israel repenting, then a significantly large portion of the Old Testament seems to be an exercise in futility. Not to mention Jeremiah 18 scantily makes sense. The passage is setting forward conditional situations that in reality have already been unconditionally and unalterably decided. This makes much of the divine speech in the latter Old Testament appear deceptive.¹³²

Also, a change of orientation and a change of mind seem only to have a hairline of difference between them, if even that. The problem with the change of mind language, and the reason many reject it, is because it implies that God thought wrongly about someone or something. I will admit I also have reservations about saying God changed his mind because in our popular usage it implies God had decided his previously stated intentions were wrong (especially in the case of Exodus 32). Saying that God has changes in orientation due to human sin; and repentance is not saying much different. It sounds nicer; so the language may be

¹³¹ This also means the Psalmist is wrong in Psalm 106.

¹³² Terence E. Frethiem, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 48-49.

preferable, but to use that language to say God's plans do not change is not staying true to the text. When God's orientation towards a group of people changes, God often changes his plans concerning that group. This is what he declares in Jeremiah 18. The whole point of Jeremiah 18:1-10 is God can and will change his plans regarding blessing and judgment on a nation, if that nation changes its actions towards God.

This means we can affirm something which should be uncontroversial, God's actions towards us can and will change if our actions towards him change. If God so desires, he can change his short-term plans in response to human actions. This in no way creates a change in God. He has the freedom to act in any way he pleases. However, God only acts in ways that are consistent with his nature. This means God's nature and character are unchanging.¹³³ However, God can change his actions as he sees fit to do. In light of this, Grudem seems to put forward a more favorable definition of Divine Immutability, which is more consistent with the text: "God is unchanging in his being, perfections, purposes, and promises, yet God does act and feel emotions, and he acts and feels differently in response to different situations."¹³⁴

This definition is more consistent with Biblical depictions of God seemingly changing. God's being, perfection, purposes, and promises are in no way in any danger by God acting and feeling differently in response to different situations arising from the actions of human beings.¹³⁵ God himself does not change, it is the situation that changes. It is his ability, freedom, and

¹³³ James Garrett Jr, *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 219.

¹³⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 163.

¹³⁵ Garrett, 218.

willingness to change his behavior in response to the behavior of men that makes him the living God rather than merely the abstract unmoved mover of natural theology.¹³⁶

God's plan in the Old Testament is never portrayed as a micromanaged detailed account of how everything will play out¹³⁷ down to the last detail. Instead, God's plan for the world, in the Old Testament, has more to do with his intentions for humanity and his overall goals.¹³⁸ God can adjust his plan if he desires, without forfeiting his sovereignty. God is still in control of the world even if he does not determine every little thing that happens; even if he changes the outworking of his plans in response to human actions God still is in ultimate control.¹³⁹ This does not make God smaller, it makes him greater. He is not a God that has to control mankind like puppets on a string to accomplish his purposes. He is a God that can accomplish those purposes while working with free human agents.

God does indeed *nicham*, but he does so in ways which are consistent with his unchanging nature and character. God is graciously willing to adjust his plans when the actions of mankind necessitate it, but he will only do so on his own terms and in his own way. God changes his actions towards man when man changes his actions towards God.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Goldingay contends that the "First Testament" never speaks of plan for the world or individual salvation. Goldingay, 60.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 60; 98; 647.

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