

When Yahweh Changes a Prior Verdict

The king of Nineveh decreed citywide acts of repentance in the hope (“Who knows?”) that “God may turn and change his verdict and turn away from the fierceness of his anger so we will not perish” (3:9). That hope was realized when “God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way, and God changed his verdict about the evil that he threatened to do to them, and he did not do [it]” (3:10). Thus God changed his prior decision to destroy the city¹ and instead saved the inhabitants, who shall rise on the Last Day to everlasting life (Mt 12:41).²

The record of God’s turn and change in Jonah 3:9–10 (see also 4:2) offers an opportunity to consider two different ways of looking at God: open theism and classical theism.³ Since one major difference between these two theologies is how they understand OT texts depicting Yahweh’s change of disposition or a prior decision, the bulk of this excursus will analyze these passages.⁴ The amount of time and space devoted to these verses is necessary because the open theist believes they are to be taken so literally that they depict God as being limited in his ability to know the future. Traditional theism, however, has generally understood these texts as describing God in human language that is not to be taken as entirely literal, but at least partly as metaphorical. They are anthropomorphisms, that is, descriptions of God as having a human form and human characteristics.⁵ More precisely, they are anthropopathisms, that is,

¹ A key verb is the Niphal of **נָקַד**, translated as God may and did “change his verdict.” It occurs in Jonah 3:9–10 and 4:2 as well as other OT passages. For its translation, see the second textual note on 3:9. Other common translations of it are that God may and did “repent” (Jonah 3:9 KJV) or “relent” (Jonah 3:9 ESV, NASB, NKJV). The following excursus does not depend on the exact translation choice, nor even on this verb alone. Other verbs and expressions in the context convey the same theological point, namely, the change in God’s intent from executing judgment to bestowing salvation. These other verbs and expressions include that God “may turn [**שׁוּב**] ... and turn away from [**אֵרֶב קִיָּן**] the fierceness of his anger” (3:9); that God “did not do” what he had threatened to do (3:10); and the OT creedal formula that Yahweh averts his wrath because he is “a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abounding in loyal love” (4:2).

² See further the excursus “The Sign of Jonah.”

³ In Lutheran circles the debate has been analyzed most recently by Maier, “Does God ‘Repent’ or Change His Mind?”

⁴ Much of this excursus is an adaptation of Reed Lessing, “Pastor, Does God Really Respond to My Prayers?” *Concordia Journal* 32 (2006): 256–73. Used by permission of *Concordia Journal*.

⁵ John Calvin, a traditional theist, posits what he believes Scripture means when it says that God changes his mind:

Surely its meaning is like that of all other modes of speaking that describe God for us in human terms. For because our weakness does not attain to his exalted state, the description of him that is given to us must be accommodated to our capacity so that we may

portrayals of God as if he had human emotions and thoughts; thus they do not negate the doctrine of the immutability of God and his will.⁶ The biblical doctrine of God's immutability underlies the certainty and reliability of God's inerrant, efficacious Word. Both his warnings of judgment for unbelievers and his promises of forgiveness and mercy for repentant believers in Christ are trustworthy and true.

This excursus will draw on selected writings of Luther and offer insights that will indicate that open theists are wrong to deny God's omniscience and immutability. Yet also some classical theists build their discussions upon misguided categories. Some who overemphasize the sovereignty of God espouse double predestination—the view that God has determined the eternal fate of all people by electing some to salvation (as Scripture affirms) but also by electing or predestinating others to damnation (contrary to Scripture). Such overemphasis can also lead to the view that prayer is ineffectual.

Essential for the interpretation of biblical passages in which God changes his verdict are the categories of Law and Gospel, with a focus on Christ. God's purpose is for his Law work of judgment to prepare for his Gospel work of salvation. His warnings of condemnation for sinners stand firm. Yet for sinners who repent and believe in Christ, God's verdict changes from judgment to salvation. Jesus Christ is the reason why God can express toward repentant sinners his character as "a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abounding in loyal love" (Jonah 4:2). On the cross Jesus suffered the entirety of God's judgment against humanity's sin, and thus God's wrath is averted from all believers, including the Ninevites who "believed in God" (Jonah 3:5). For all in Christ, God has "change[d] his verdict ... so we will not perish" (Jonah 3:9). It is not God himself, his nature, his attributes, or his will that changes. Rather, God's *disposition* toward us changes so that we are no longer objects of his wrath but recipients of his love in Christ. This love is also the basis for our confidence that prayer is effective: God hears our prayers and answers them according to his will, in harmony with his gracious promises in Christ.



understand it. Now the mode of accommodation is for him to represent himself to us not as he is in himself, but as he seems to us. (Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1.17.13)

⁶ So Gerhard, "De Natura Dei," § 155, *Loci Theologici*, 1:314–15; Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:440–41. See also FC SD III 57; IV 16, 32; V 17; VI 3, 15, 17.

Hunter, *The God Who Hears*, 52, writes: "My conviction is that references to God's 'repenting,' 'relenting' or 'changing his mind' in Scripture are figures of speech; technically speaking, they are anthropopathisms—expressions which explain God in terms usually used to describe human emotions."

Classical and Open Theism

In recent years “open theism” has sparked a considerable debate concerning the doctrine of God’s immutability.⁷ Those who advocate the “open” position have likened it to a new reformation, the uncovering of a biblical truth that has long been obscured. According to open theists, God has decided and determined some future matters, and these are settled, but other matters he has left for people to decide. These are not settled. Open theists deny God’s omniscience and immutability, but they assert that this does not indicate a lack in God. God knows everything that can be known. The difference between their view and classical theism, they declare, is not the nature of God, but the nature of the future. The future is not something that has any reality; therefore, there is nothing there to be known.⁸

Richard Rice describes the “two basic convictions” of open theism: (1) love is the most important attribute of God, and (2) in addition to “care and commitment,” love means “being sensitive and responsive.” In his responsive love, God flexibly interacts with his creatures to accomplish his objectives so that “history is the combined result of what God and his creatures decide to do.”⁹ According to open theists, this dependence of God on his creation does not detract from his greatness. Rather, it enhances his greatness, since it takes an even greater God to be able to risk and to grow along with his creatures in a genuine relationship. A frozen, unchangeable God is inferior to the “God of the possible.”¹⁰

Open theists contend that the reason the church has clung to classical theism is that in its infancy, Christian theology came under the influence of Greek

⁷ Several of the standard works of open theists are Pinnock, Rice, Sanders, Hasker, and Basinger, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*; Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*; and Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness*. For an overview of the issues involved, see Erickson, *What Does God Know and When Does He Know It? The Current Controversy over Divine Foreknowledge*. Erickson weighs the arguments by considering hermeneutical issues, the historical development of the doctrine of divine knowledge, the philosophical suppositions of both open and classical theism, and the practical implications of the two competing views. In doing so, the book covers much more than just God’s knowledge. It discusses his immutability, impassibility, and relationship to time.

⁸ Open theism differs from process theology in at least two important ways. The first is that process theology believes God is dependent on the world, whereas open theism does not. The second is that according to process theology, God never acts unilaterally, whereas in open theism, God can and does sometimes intervene in the world, even overriding the will of people. Regarding these issues, Hasker (“A Philosophical Perspective,” in Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*, 134–54, especially p. 134) helpfully distinguishes between five theories about God’s foreknowledge and action in the world: (1) theological determinism (Calvinism); (2) middle knowledge (Molinism), which “attributes libertarian (indeterministic) freedom to human beings and yet retains a strong doctrine of divine providential control”; (3) simple foreknowledge, in which God has complete knowledge of the future but not the knowledge of all possibilities of the future; (4) open theism; (5) process theology.

⁹ Rice, “Biblical Support for a New Perspective,” in Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*, 15–16.

¹⁰ See Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 126–28.

philosophy. Because many of the early church fathers lived in an intellectual atmosphere dominated by Greek philosophy, especially middle Platonism, they read the Scriptures in light of God as a perfect being who is timeless, transcendent, immutable, and impassible. Among other things, this leads to equating God's faithfulness with the doctrine of his immutability. (It is true that in classical theism, God's unswerving faithfulness is linked to the immutability of his will.)

Open theism teaches that people have the ability to assert their own will in such a way as to change God and modify the course of history. Gregory Boyd writes: "In the open view, God has sovereignly ordained that prayer be one of our central means of influencing what transpires in history."¹¹ He also says: "The open view is able to declare, without qualification or inconsistency, that some of the future *genuinely depends on prayer*."¹²

According to classical theists, however, the omniscient God knows the future in its entirety. The Scriptures certainly affirm this (e.g., Is 41:22–23; 46:9–10; Jn 21:17; 1 Jn 3:20). God hears and answers prayer according to his will, but this does not change God's immutable will, nor does it undermine the permanency of his Word, which endures forever.^a

As a corollary, some classical theists also infer that all things (including evil ones) have been predetermined from eternity and that God is unpersuadable, for what God foreknows must happen. However, that corollary is not biblical. Scripture asserts that God desires all to be saved (1 Tim 2:4), has elected some to salvation (Rom 8:29–30; Eph 1:3–12), and responds to prayer (Mt 7:7, 11; Jn 14:13–14; 15:7). But God is not the author of evil, nor has he predestined anyone to damnation; no Scripture passages support those ideas.

Open theists read texts where Yahweh changes his disposition or a previous decision in a literal way and make this their paradigm for understanding the nature of God.

Classical theists understand these same texts as at least partly figurative or metaphorical. Biblical texts attributing change to God describe how he *appears* to us; they do not depict God as he really is in himself. To us it *looks* like God changes, but he really does not.¹³ A key text is Mal 3:6: "I, Yahweh, do not change" (see also James 1:17, and see below on Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29). Prayer is indeed heard and answered by God according to his will and his promises in Scripture, but prayer is not a way to manipulate God into doing

(a) Is 40:8;
54:10; Pss
102:26–28
(ET
102:25–27);
119:89, 160;
Prov 19:21;
Mk 9:44; Jn
3:36; 1 Pet
1:25

¹¹ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 97.

¹² Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 95.

¹³ This appears to be Maier's answer to the question that is the title of his article, "Does God 'Repent' or Change His Mind?" For example, Maier comments in this way on Exodus 32: "God is fully in control of the situation. He is acting and speaking according to a preconceived purpose and goal, and having his will accomplished, as was foreordained" (p. 143). Maier's answer to the question appears to be no. He believes that texts portraying God's change are best understood as being "anthropomorphic and anthropopathic" (p. 143).

what we want him to do nor a way for us to shape history according to our own desires (cf. Lk 22:42).

Yahweh May or May Not Change a Prior Verdict

An analysis of the texts that speak of Yahweh changing or not changing his disposition or one of his previous decisions gets to the heart of the debate, yet in-depth study of the language of such texts is one of the most neglected areas of biblical scholarship. Within the last two hundred years, only one monograph and several articles have been devoted to the Niphal of נָחַם , a key verb in passages where God “changes his verdict, repents, relents.”¹⁴ OT theologies treat the subject only in passing, if at all.¹⁵ Even commentaries on those biblical books that contain some of the nearly forty explicit references to a divine change of disposition or decision tend to skip past this term with little or no comment. A major exception is the excursus entitled “When God Repents” in the commentary on Amos by Francis Andersen and David Noel Freedman.¹⁶

This neglect of the Niphal of נָחַם is not a recent development. As early as the Septuagint and the Targumim, there is evidence that translators had difficulty coming to terms with this language. Through the centuries, Jewish and Christian interpretations that have upheld the doctrine of God’s immutability have sometimes struggled with passages where he reverses a previous decision and changes his disposition toward people. These passages pose a challenge for those who go beyond Scripture by assuming that God determines every situation (even evil) and is unresponsive to human repentance and prayer. Similar factors may account at least in part for the contemporary neglect of verses with this verb.

The KJV, followed by the RSV, usually translates the Niphal of נָחַם with “repent.” More recent translations have sought other words; the most common is “relent,” but others include “regret” (e.g., 1 Sam 15:11 ESV), “be sorry” (e.g., Gen 6:6 ESV), “be grieved” (e.g., 1 Sam 15:11 NIV), “show compassion” (Jer 15:6 NIV), “think better of” (e.g., 2 Sam 24:16 JB), “change one’s mind” (e.g., 1 Sam 15:29 NIV), and “go back on one’s word” (e.g., 1 Sam 15:29 JB). The essence of the verb seems to be the reversal of a decision or verdict as well as a change in disposition toward people. Hans Walter Wolff suggests that “to repent concerning” (the Niphal of נָחַם with עַל) “designates a change of mind prompted

¹⁴ Jeremias, *Die Reue Gottes: Aspekte alttestamentlicher Gottesvorstellung*; Van Dyke Parunak, “A Semantic Survey of *NHM*”; H. J. Stoebe, “ נָחַם ,” *TLOT* 2:734–39; Fretheim, “The Repentance of God.”

¹⁵ See, for example, Rowley, *The Faith of Israel*, 67, and Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 291. Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:198–99, deals with the subject only in passing in his comments on Jeremiah 18. Schultz, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:109–10, briefly comments: “The repentance of God ... grows into the assured conviction that human development is not for Him an empty, indifferent spectacle, that it is just this inner immutability of His being which excludes that dull, dead unchangeableness which remains outwardly the same, however much circumstances may change.”

¹⁶ Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 638–79.

by the emotions, a turning away from an earlier decision on the part of someone deeply moved."¹⁷ Thus, the word includes not only a change of attitude, but a reversal in action toward people who themselves have changed.

The verb נָחַם appears fifty-one times in the OT in Piel forms ("to comfort, console") and twice in Pual forms ("be comforted"). In Piel texts, Yahweh or people are variously presented as providing (or not providing) comfort to others in the face of death, misfortune, or divine anger.^b Some passages use the Piel of נָחַם in parallel with נָדַד , "to nod (the head); lament (the dead); show sympathy."¹⁸ This parallelism seems to indicate that the comfort involves a deeply emotional quality. As H. van Dyke Parunak points out, "sympathetic pain, or 'compassion,' lies at the heart of the biblical concept of comfort."¹⁹

(b) See, e.g.,
Is 52:9; Job
42:11; Ps
23:4; Ruth
2:13; Lam
1:17; 2:13;
1 Chr 7:22

Of primary interest here, however, are the occurrences of נָחַם in the Niphal and the Hithpael, since these are the forms of the verb used to refer to Yahweh changing (or not changing) his disposition or a prior decision. The Niphal occurs forty-eight times in the OT, and the Hithpael seven times. Of this total of fifty-five occurrences, thirty-five (thirty-four Niphal occurrences and one Hithpael) are used in reference to God changing his disposition or verdict.²⁰

The expression that Yahweh does or does not change his previous disposition or decision operates within numerous OT time periods and a wide variety of OT genres.²¹ It appears at some of the key junctures in the OT canon: the flood story (Gen 6:6–7), the Sinai revelation (Ex 32:12, 14), and the institution of the monarchy (1 Sam 15:11, 29, 35). Its appearance in psalmody and creedal statements seals its pivotal status in Yahweh's revelation of himself (see, e.g., Jer 18:7–10; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Ps 106:45).

Approaching this idiom as an anthropomorphism or anthropopathism involves metaphor. Because of the enormous gulf between God and us, his fallen creatures, James Voelz writes: "Metaphor is the essential means by which we are able to make statements about God."²² For God to condescend to speak to us in the Scriptures about himself in language we can understand requires at least some use of metaphor. An extended discussion on metaphor is not possi-

¹⁷ Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, 298. Efforts to discover the meaning of the word through its etymology have not been successful. The most reliable method for determining word meaning is a careful examination of contextual usage (see, e.g., Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, 116–17). The interpreter should rely on etymology only if the context indicates that the speaker or writer used the word with an awareness of its etymology or if a word is rare and attested in only a few contexts that may not be clear or helpful.

¹⁸ This parallelism occurs in Is 51:19; Nah 3:7; Ps 69:21 (ET 69:20); Job 2:11, 42:11.

¹⁹ Van Dyke Parunak, "A Semantic Survey of *NḤM*," 517.

²⁰ With God as subject, the Hithpael can mean "have compassion" (Deut 32:36; Ps 135:14) or "take vengeance" (Ezek 5:13). Only in Num 23:19 does the Hithpael pertain to a change of verdict by Yahweh, so that is the only Hithpael passage included in this total and considered below. Also, because the Niphal in Is 1:24 means "take vengeance," that passage is excluded from the total and the discussion.

²¹ This insight into approaching נָחַם by means of metaphor, as well as the discussion of its usages in the OT follows, to some extent, Fretheim, "The Repentance of God," 53–59.

²² Voelz, *What Does This Mean?* 170.

ble here,²³ yet for the purposes of this discussion a literary metaphor is defined as a figure of speech that draws a comparison between two things. Prime examples are the parabolic sayings of Jesus: “The kingdom of heaven is like ...” (e.g., Mt 13:24). Metaphorical language for God himself says, in effect, “God is like ...”

All metaphors inherently have continuity with the subject depicted, as well as discontinuity. That is, every metaphor speaks both a “yes” and a “no”—an “is” and an “is not.” When Jesus says, “The kingdom of heaven is like ...,” in some respects the comparison is literally true, but in other aspects the comparison breaks down and must not be taken literally.²⁴ Interpreters must seek to discern the extent to which the correspondence is literal and how it is merely figurative. There is danger on either side. The interpreter must not go too far in either direction: interpreting the metaphor literally in every respect or denying that there is any essential correspondence between the language and the reality it describes.

When Yahweh Does Not Change His Verdict

Most of the thirty-five OT passages in which the Niphal or the Hithpael of נָּחַם is used in reference to Yahweh changing his disposition or a prior decision affirm that he does change in this way. However, the statement that he does *not* change his disposition or a previous decision appears in seven texts.⁶ Of these, three describe Yahweh’s refusal to change his decision concerning the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC (Jer 4:28; Ezek 24:14; Zech 8:14). Jer 20:16 speaks of Yahweh not changing his prior decision to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. These texts speak the “no” of the metaphor. Yahweh carried out his threats to destroy those cities. Ps 110:4 speaks of his unwillingness to change Christ the Lord’s eternal priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek (cf. Hebrews 5–7). His promises in Christ also stand firm.

The remaining two verses in which Yahweh refuses to change his disposition or a decision are Num 23:19 and 1 Sam 15:29. They appear to place Yah-

(c) Num
23:19; 1 Sam
15:29; Jer
4:28; 20:16;
Ezek 24:14;
Zech 8:14;
Ps 110:4

²³ Recent movements in linguistic philosophy and literary criticism have engendered a lively discussion on the subject and definition of metaphor. For overviews, see Miall, *Metaphor: Problems and Perspectives*, and Levin, *The Semantics of Metaphor*. There are two aspects of metaphor: the “tenor” (idea or object described) and the “vehicle” (image used to depict it). The interaction of these two aspects provides meaning for the metaphor. This is the terminology of Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, 96–97. Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 24, groups metaphor theories under three headings: “those that see metaphor as a decorative way of saying what could be said literally [substitution theories]; those that see metaphor as original not in what it says but in the affective impact it has [emotive theories]; and those that see metaphor as a unique cognitive vehicle enabling one to say things that can be said in no other way [incremental theories]” (see her further description of those theories on pp. 24–32). She writes: “Metaphor should be treated as fully cognitive and capable of saying that which may be said in no other way” (p. 44).

²⁴ For example, it would be wrong to interpret the parable of the Sower (Mt 13:3–9, 18–23) to mean that Jesus calls pastors to cast literal seed into the pews when they preach or that parishioners must beware of literal birds that might deprive them of the Gospel.

weh's unwillingness to change within a statement of a standard principle: "God is not a man ... that he would change his will" (Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29 is similar). That principle understands "a man" as sinful and unreliable since the fall (Genesis 3), so it does not negate the fact that God the Son became incarnate as a sinless and perfect man in the person of Jesus Christ. Because some interpreters cite these two passages to refute the idea that Yahweh can ever change his verdict, a closer examination of each text is warranted.

Num 23:19 is set within the larger context of the Balaam narrative located in Numbers 22–24. Balaam, having been hired by Balak, the king of Moab, to curse the Israelites, instead pronounces a series of four oracles of blessing upon them. The text under consideration is within the second of these oracles. In his defiance of Balak, Balaam defends his action:

God is not a man that he should lie
 or a son of man that he would change his will [אִישׁ יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה].
 When he has said something, will he not do it?
 When he has spoken, will he not fulfill it?
 Behold, I have received [a command] to bless.
 He has blessed, and I cannot turn it back. (Num 23:19–20)

The four lines in Num 23:19 emphasize an important difference between Yahweh and people. The first statement, "God is not a man that he should lie," is reinforced by the second, parallel statement, "or a son of man [a human being] that he would change his will [אִישׁ יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה]." Similarly, the first rhetorical question, "When he has said something, will he not do it?" is reinforced by the second question, "When he has spoken, will he not fulfill it?" Unlike sinful humans, Yahweh is not capricious in distributing or revoking blessings and curses. Since he has promised to bless Abraham's descendents (Gen 12:2–3), he will not change this decision and remove his blessing. Here again we see the "no" of the metaphor. Yahweh has made an unconditional promise of grace for Abraham and his offspring, and he will never revoke it, but will fulfill it in Jesus Christ, the "Son of Abraham" (Mt 1:1; cf. Num 24:17). This promise now stands fulfilled, for all baptized believers in Christ are blessed children of Abraham (Gal 3:26–29).

1 Sam 15:29 is primarily focused upon the events surrounding Yahweh's final rejection of Saul in response to the king's unfaithfulness concerning the Amalekites. After Saul defies Yahweh's instructions, Yahweh informs Samuel that he regrets making Saul king and will give the kingdom to another. 1 Sam 15:29 reads: "And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change his decision [לֹא יִנְחַם], for he is not a man that he should change his decision [לֹא יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה]." 1 Samuel 15 is unique in this discussion because 1 Sam 15:29 uses the Niphal of נָחַם and appears to deny Yahweh's willingness to rescind any previous decision, but this verse falls between two other verses with the Niphal of נָחַם that each state that Yahweh "regretted" making Saul king (1 Sam 15:11, 35). Thus, as with Num 23:19, so also 1 Sam 15:29 must be interpreted as a specific refusal by Yahweh to change one particular decision—in this case, his choice of

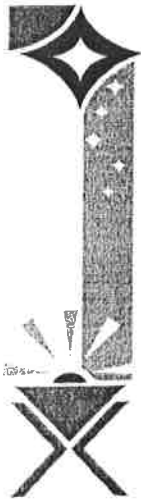
David as Israel's new king. Of course, the line of this new king will eventuate in the Messiah, the Son of David, the eternal King.

In both Num 23:19 and 1 Sam 15:29, the expression that God is not a man that he should change his decision is used as a response by a prophet to someone seeking to persuade Yahweh to reverse a specific previous decision that involved his election of Israel, leading to the Savior of all peoples, Jesus Christ. In both cases, the prophet responds in a way that affirms Yahweh's unswerving commitment to his previous decision. When we consider the significance of these two divine choices for Israel—the promise to Abraham of blessing and the election of David as king—it is not difficult to understand why God declared the inviolability of these decisions and the impossibility of a change of his will concerning them.

The covenant Yahweh established with Abraham is foundational to the promise he makes to David, since his covenant with Abraham included the promise of a future king. In Gen 17:6, Yahweh says to the patriarch, "And kings will go forth from you." Following Yahweh's promise to David of an everlasting dynasty (2 Sam 7:4–17; see also 1 Chr 17:3–15), 2 Sam 7:18–19 states: "Then King David went in and sat before Yahweh, and he said: 'Who am I, O Lord Yahweh, and what is my house, that you have brought me this far? And as if this were too little in your sight, O Lord Yahweh, you have also spoken about the house of your servant in the distant future. Is this your usual way of dealing with man, O Lord Yahweh?'" The phrase translated "your usual way of dealing with man" is *הַיְהוּדָה הַיְהוּדָה*. Here "Torah" is best understood as the "decree" that Yahweh has established for all people in Christ.²⁵

Reinforcing the connection between the divine promises to Abraham and David is the use of "Lord Yahweh" (*יְהוָה יְהוָה*) seven times in 2 Sam 7:18–20, 22, 28–29. This compound of the divine name was also used in the pivotal covenant of Yahweh with Abram in Gen 15:2, 8. It occurs only seven other times in other historical books, but nowhere else in Genesis or 1 and 2 Samuel. Its repeated use in both the promise to Abram in Genesis 15 and in the Davidic covenant of promise in 2 Samuel 7 is too striking to be accidental and without special reason: the two covenants are thereby drawn into a closer relationship. The plan of Yahweh that began with Abraham continues with David and eventuates in Jesus Christ.

Thus Num 23:19 and 1 Sam 15:29 express the "no" aspect of the metaphor: Yahweh is not a sinful, fickle human. He does not change his will and decision to grant blessing for all humanity through the Savior to be born from the line of Abraham and David. Yahweh is not capricious, leaving people in a perpetual state of anxiety regarding the course of his actions. His unconditional promises to Abraham and David are the foundation of the NT kerygma of Jesus, the Christ (see, e.g., Lk 1:54–55; 2:4; Gal 3:29).



²⁵ See Kaiser, "The Blessing of David: A Charter for Humanity."

When Yahweh Does Change His Verdict

The “yes” of the metaphor is located in Yahweh’s response to human disobedience, human repentance, or intercessory prayer. God can change his disposition and his actions in the world. Texts in Genesis, Exodus, Jeremiah, Joel, and Jonah will inform this discussion and provide important insights into the “yes” aspect of the metaphor.

The first reference in the OT to Yahweh’s change of disposition or of a previous decision occurs in Genesis 6–9. The spread of sin introduced in Genesis 3 reaches a climax as Gen 6:5 states that every thought of the human heart is continuously evil. This statement provides a clear theological reason for Yahweh sending the flood. Gen 6:6 then states: “Yahweh regretted [וַיִּנְחַם] that he had made mankind on the earth, and he was deeply saddened in his heart [וַיִּתְעַצֵּב אֶל-לְבָבוֹ].” This divine sorrow that accompanied the recollection of his previous action is expressed by the Hithpael of עָצַב, “have pain, be grieved, be deeply saddened.”²⁶ The phrase “in his heart” further emphasizes this divine grief.²⁷ The continuous evil emanating from the hearts of all people, according to Gen 6:5, is thus contrasted in Gen 6:6 with what Franz Delitzsch calls Yahweh’s “heart-piercing sorrow.”²⁸ It is only with this sense of deep grief that Yahweh decides to destroy all people and animals, with the exception of Noah and his family and the animals in the ark.²⁹ By thus revealing Yahweh’s sorrow over the situation, Gen 6:6 demonstrates that Yahweh does not delight in condemning sinners, but rather seeks their repentance and salvation (Ezek 18:23, 32). He grieves that he must judge. The “yes” of the metaphor is located in the human and divine pathos that often accompanies a decision that ends a relationship. Yahweh’s mercy may give way to judgment because of human sin. This is in accord with his unchanging will, expressed in his Law.

Yet Yahweh may also change from judgment to grace—even despite the ever-present sin of people. This is in accord with his unchanging will, expressed in his Gospel. In Ex 32:7–10, he informs Moses of Israel’s idolatry with the golden calf. Yahweh’s anger is evident as he disowns Israel by telling Moses that they are “*your* people, whom *you* brought up from the land of Egypt” (Ex 32:7). Yahweh then announces his intention to annihilate the nation (Ex 32:10). However, Moses intercedes for the people and offers a series of reasons why

²⁶ This is the only time that נָחַם and עָצַב occur together in the OT. Wenham points out that the root עָצַב is most often “used to express the most intense form of human emotion, a mixture of rage and bitter anguish” (*Genesis 1–15*, 144).

²⁷ The word לֵב, “heart,” does not primarily mean the seat of emotions; rather, it points to one’s decision, will, attitude, or inner life. See H.-J. Fabry, “לֵב,” *TDOT* 7:399–437.

²⁸ Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis*, 1:233.

²⁹ Wenham, *Story as Torah*, 34, notes:

The flood is presented as a great act of decreation, destroying human and animal life, covering the plants and mountains, so that the earth returns to the watery chaos that existed before the second day of creation. Noah, the survivor of this chaos, becomes as it were another Adam, the forefather of the human race after the flood.

Yahweh should reconsider (Ex 32:11–13). Here Moses uses a Niphal imperative of פָּנָה with the clause “turn from the fierceness of your anger” in a call for Yahweh to relent and reconsider.³⁰ Yahweh does change his verdict and spares Israel. Yahweh’s willingness to change in response to the intercessory prayer of Moses is responsible for the continued existence of Israel, leading to the eventual birth of Jesus (Rom 9:5), the great High Priest, whose intercession saves all who believe in him (Hebrews 5–7). The “yes” of the metaphor is located in Yahweh’s decision to respond to human prayer for Christ’s sake, so that his grace overrides his righteous judgment of human sin (cf. Rom 5:20).

No other book in the OT contains as many references to Yahweh’s changes of previous decisions as does Jeremiah.³¹ Perhaps the most significant passage dealing with Yahweh’s willingness to change his verdict is in Jeremiah 18. This chapter does not speak of Yahweh’s sovereignty as his complete control over passive “clay” as if he fashions some people for the purpose of destroying them. Rather, it describes his freedom and ability to recreate out of corrupted material a new vessel according to his good will and pleasure. William Holladay compares the force of the spinning clay to human obstinacy: “Because of the centrifugal force developed on the wheel the clay presses against the hands of the potter. . . . Though he [God] is sovereign, the people have a will of their own which they exert against him.”³² Yet despite the corrupted human will, Yahweh uses the Niphal of פָּנָה to say that if a people responds to his Word by repenting of its evil, he will change his verdict about its threatened destruction (Jer 18:8). Conversely, if he promises to build up a people, but that nation refuses to listen to his voice, he will change his decision about the good he had promised to do to it (Jer 18:10). The “yes” of the metaphor is located in God’s revealed will that he takes into consideration the human response to his Word (either repentance or unbelief) when he shapes his future actions for or against people.

The Niphal of פָּנָה is also used in Joel 2:1–17 in an oracle against Judah that has two sections. Joel 2:1–11 contains a description of the invasion and destruction of Judah that will accompany the coming of “the Day of Yahweh” (Joel 2:1, 11). The graphic tone of these verses emphasizes the certainty and finality of the coming destruction. Yet even as Joel envisions the final phase of

³⁰ The only other verse in the OT with a Niphal imperative of פָּנָה is Ps 90:13, in a psalm by Moses (Ps 90:1 [ET superscription]).

³¹ For example, in Jer 22:1–5 Yahweh’s future action is shaped by the response of human beings to his Word. He reviews some of the typical commands in the Torah and says, “For if you indeed carry out this Word, then kings who sit on David’s throne will come through the gates of this palace, riding in chariots and on horses. . . . But if you do not listen to these words, I swear by myself, declares Yahweh, that this palace will become a ruin” (Jer 22:4–5). So one possible future action is judgment, but this has not been predetermined from eternity; rather, this judgment upon Judah has arisen because of the nation’s infidelity. At the same time, Yahweh’s constant, unconditional Gospel promise is always at work through his Word, seeking to lead hearers to repentance and faith. Even in such times calling for judgment, the proper work is to forgive and save repentant sinners.

³² Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 515.

the invasion, he recognizes the possibility that Yahweh might change his decision if Israel will repent. In order to convey the reason why Yahweh may yet change, Joel uses a well-known confessional formula. Thomas Dozeman states that Joel's "confession of Yahweh's gracious character is a hinge in the prophet's speech between the finality of the divine judgment that was reflected in the description of the Day of Yahweh in Joel 2:1–11 and hope in Joel 2:14."³³

Joel's confessional saying (2:13) has the same five affirmations describing Yahweh that Jonah uses in 4:2. The first is the adjective רַחֻם , usually translated "gracious."³⁴ Next, Joel describes Yahweh as רַחֻם , normally translated "merciful," but since the cognate verb (the Piel of רַחַם) means "have compassion," the adjective may be translated "compassionate."³⁵ Yahweh is then described as "slow to anger."³⁶ Then Yahweh is described as possessing great אֱמוּנָה , one of the most significant words in the OT. While there is some debate concerning the precise meaning of the term, it is frequently used to describe, directly or indirectly, Yahweh's "faithfulness" and "loyal love" according to his covenant with Abraham. Finally, Yahweh is described as "changing his verdict about evil." By placing the last phrase with the Niphal of סָפַד alongside Yahweh's other attributes, Joel is stating that Yahweh is so great in grace, mercy, patience, and loyal love that he is willing to forgive a break in the relationship. Yahweh, in response to human repentance, changes a prior decision of judgment (Joel 2:1–11) and instead has mercy on his people and blesses them (Joel 2:18–27). The fact that he did this in the book of Joel is as sure as the fact that he is gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, and great in loyal, steadfast loving-kindness. The "yes" of this metaphor in Joel is located in Yahweh's characteristic graciousness and mercy, which leads him to withhold judgment even when it is well-deserved and instead to forgive and love his repentant people.

Following that fivefold confession of Yahweh's characteristics (Joel 2:13), the prophet Joel again uses the Niphal of סָפַד (2:14) to express the possibility that Yahweh may change his previous decision. Preceding it in 2:14 he asks, מִי יוֹדֵעַ , "Who knows?"³⁷ A comparable use of this expression is in Jonah 3:9, where the king of Nineveh commands his people to pray fervently in the hope that Yahweh may change his previous decision announced by Jonah in 3:4. The king employs the Niphal of סָפַד as a way to seek Yahweh's grace (Jonah 3:9),

³³ Dozeman, "Inner-Biblical Interpretation of Yahweh's Gracious and Compassionate Character," 212.

³⁴ With the exception of Ps 112:4, the adjective only describes Yahweh. In these contexts, רַחֻם is used to denote an active interest in the well-being of his people.

³⁵ Of the thirteen uses of this adjective in the OT, twelve refer to Yahweh. Since the adjective and verb are related to the noun רֶחֶם , "womb," they may connote motherly compassion as well as fatherly mercy.

³⁶ This phrase is anthropomorphic in that the word translated "anger" (אָרַץ) may also denote "nose." The picture is of Yahweh slowly drawing a deep breath as he calms his wrath.

³⁷ A brief look at this expression indicates that often in the OT people used this term to indicate their humility when they asked Yahweh to change his course of action. See the first textual note and the commentary on Jonah 3:9.

just as Joel does in 2:14. Those who pray this way are asking Yahweh to change from Law to Gospel. They believe his “anger lasts for a moment, his favor a lifetime” (Ps 30:6) and that Yahweh does not “take pleasure in the death of anyone,” but desires people to repent and live (Ezek 18:32; cf. 2 Pet 3:9).³⁸

These texts from Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, 1 Samuel, Jeremiah, Joel, and Jonah affirm two complementary aspects in the OT understanding of Yahweh. First, the unchangeable nature of Yahweh and the immutability of his will assure us that his gracious promises are trustworthy and certain, as confirmed by their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. These promises to Abraham and David form the backbone of the OT narrative, “an everlasting covenant” (Gen 17:7). No one and nothing will separate Yahweh’s people from his love (cf. Rom 8:31–39). This is the “no” of the metaphor: Yahweh’s faithfulness to his promises and to his ultimate purposes in Christ knows no change. He is God, not an unreliable man.

The “yes” of the metaphor indicates that the God of Israel was not an unfeeling, indifferent Deity. Yahweh enters into a real relationship with his chosen nation in which his love compels him to be responsive. He must punish those who do not believe, yet he is a compassionate God who in order to demonstrate his abounding love is willing to change prior decisions of judgment when people repent. This is particularly clear in texts where Yahweh’s change is rooted in his attributes of deep compassion and mercy. The “yes” is that God is a gracious and relational God, as manifested supremely in the incarnation and earthly ministry of Jesus Christ among us.

The OT is not ashamed to say that Yahweh can reverse prior decisions depending on how Israel may respond to his Word. He is responsive to what is happening and can adjust his actions. *This means Yahweh is not an impersonal or deterministic force; rather, he relates to people.* This is at least one reason for Israel’s aniconic perspective, since idols do not change (cf. Jer 10:3–5; Ps 115:4–7). Understood this way, the prohibition of images is concerned with protecting Yahweh’s relatedness and not just his transcendence. One of the characteristics of the gods of the nations is that they cannot be moved or affected by anything (cf. 1 Ki 18:27–29).³⁹

³⁸ See the first textual note and the commentary on Jonah 3:9.

³⁹ Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 642, 644, reflecting on the use of דָּמָה , write:

Just as there is an important and unbridgeable distance between Yahweh and the gods of Canaan, or those of Mesopotamia or Egypt or Greece or Rome, so there is at least an equal or greater distance from an Aristotelian unmoved mover, or even a Platonic Idea (or Ideal). The biblical God is always and uncompromisingly personal.

Andersen and Freedman also opine that an “essential feature of biblical theology” is “the biblical interpretation of the divine status and involvement in human affairs” (p. 641). Also helpful is the discussion by Bolin in *Freedom beyond Forgiveness*, 141–45. Roberts, “A Christian Perspective on Prophetic Prediction,” 243, comments: “The biblical God, unlike the static, eternally unchanging god of Greek philosophy, can change his mind. He repents of proposed plans of action, he reacts to the changing attitudes of his human subjects, and this may result in a divinely inspired prediction failing to materialize.”

Luther taught this doctrine of prayer in accord with his understanding of *Deus absconditus*, “the hidden God,” and *Deus revelatus*, “the revealed God.”⁴⁷ With these categories of the hidden and revealed God, Luther attributed to God a will that is immutable, eternal, and infallible while at the same time affirming that he responds to prayer. That is to say, Luther teaches that God has a complete and certain foreknowledge of the future and his will is absolutely immutable. However, about God’s will and future actions, we can know only what God has revealed in Christ and in the Scriptures. The rest must be placed in the category of “the hidden God.” If we seek God apart from his self-revelation, we find that God is beyond dealing with; he is hidden in his majesty from us mortal sinners, who deserve nothing but wrath and damnation. But in grace and mercy, this same God comes to us as “the revealed God” through Scripture and, climactically, in the person of God the Son, Jesus Christ. It is from this perspective that we see him changing prior decisions, such as sparing the Ninevites who repented (Jonah 3:5–10) despite his earlier decree that they would be destroyed (Jonah 3:4). This paradox between the hidden and the revealed God enables the baptized to embrace the substance of classical theism while also listening to the concerns of open theism.⁴⁸

Luther’s distinction between the hidden and the revealed God is a biblical one. Moses may have said it best: “The hidden things belong to Yahweh our God, but the revealed things belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this Torah” (Deut 29:28). The hidden things are known to God alone. The revealed things are ours through his Word and Sacraments, with all his gracious promises, including those that depict God as responding to our prayers, such as “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Mt 7:7).

The debate between classical and open theism is often framed in the categories of divine foreknowledge versus human freedom. However, the discussion would be better served by utilizing the categories of Law and Gospel. In Scripture, and for Luther, it is for Christ’s sake (*propter Christum*) that God is moved from anger and judgment to mercy and clemency. God’s shift between



⁴⁷ Luther discusses the differences between *Deus absconditus* and *Deus revelatus* in *The Bondage of the Will* (AE 33:138–40, 145–46). In *God Hidden and Revealed*, Dillenberger offers a thorough and valuable summary of various interpretations of Luther’s *Deus absconditus*. Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 117–26, also discusses the *Deus absconditus* and its place in the doctrine of God. The phrase *Deus absconditus* comes from the Vulgate translation of Is 45:15. For discussions of the theme in the OT, see Balentine, *The Hidden God: The Hiding of the Face of God in the Old Testament*, and Saebo, “Yahweh as *Deus absconditus*: Some Remarks on a Dictum by Gerhard von Rad.”

⁴⁸ McGrath notes this in his critique of open theism: “A quick read of this volume [Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*], however, showed that the contributors seem not to realize that Luther has been down their road long before them. This alarmed me” (“Whatever Happened to Luther?” 34). Open theists have addressed Luther’s view of God’s immutability, but only by virtue of a passing reference to one of the reformer’s chief works: *De servo arbitrio* (*The Bondage of the Will*). See Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 153–55.

his *opus alienum* (his “alien work” of judging sinners according to his Law) and his *opus proprium* (his “proper work” of justifying repentant sinners through faith in Christ alone) is all part of his one unchanging will.

Put another way, the triune God is living and active and continually operates through the power of his Word. In his Word, he shows himself as changeless in his attributes and purposes, but his attitude toward people and his relationship with them can—and do—change from judgment to grace as he moves them to repentance and faith in Christ. Thus divine immutability does not imply that God is unconcerned, inactive, or unrelated to his creatures. Therefore, when speaking about how God reveals himself, we can use terms in biblical creeds such as Jonah 4:2,⁴⁹ including that God changes his verdict, implying that God’s attributes remain constant even as he changes his actions in the world.

Peter Toon offers a summary that is a fitting conclusion for this excursus when he writes this: “God as perfect Deity does not change in his essential nature; but because he is in relationship with people who do change, he himself changes his relation and attitude from wrath to mercy and from blessing to judgment, as the occasion requires.”⁵⁰ God has chosen to interact with his human creatures by entering into a personal relationship with humanity, first in his covenant with Abraham, Israel, and David, and ultimately through Jesus Christ, who has reconciled us to God through his incarnation, perfect life, atoning death, resurrection on the third day, and ascension to the right hand of the Father. The triune God is constantly at work to fulfill his ultimate and changeless purposes. God accomplishes them through his Law and his Gospel, and this involves changes in his disposition toward people and even in his actions for or against them as people respond in obduracy or in repentance and prayer.

NT passages such as Rom 9:6; 11:29; Titus 1:2; and Heb 6:17–18; 7:21 do not refer to the unchangeableness of God in a general way, but to two specific unchangeable characteristics: (1) his righteous judgment and (2) his loyalty in carrying out his redemptive purpose in Christ. The more general reference in James 1:17 refers to God as being totally reliable: he is the giver of every good and perfect gift, and he never tempts his children with evil (James 1:13). Corresponding to the OT passages that refer to Yahweh changing his prior verdict are NT passages that refer to God responding to prayer and his forbearance and self-restraint in judgment, so that people may repent, believe in Christ, and so be saved.^d

And so Israel’s God is revealed as a relational God, living and dynamic, whose ways of relating to the world can be captured in the language of personality and activity. It is ironic that some Christian theologies have difficulty with this language, for in Jesus Christ, God has revealed himself in a most per-



(d) E.g., Lk 11:1–13; 13:6–9; 18:7–8; Rom 2:4; 3:25; 9:22; 1 Pet 3:20–21; 2 Pet 3:9, 15

⁴⁹ For the credal language of Jonah 4:2, see the textual notes and commentary on it.

sonal way. The Athanasian Creed probes the biblical mystery of the triune God: each of the three persons is uncreated, infinite, and eternal, yet God the Son became a man who “suffered for our salvation, . . . rose again the third day from the dead, ascended into heaven, . . . will come to judge the living and the dead.”⁵¹

The people of Nineveh were thankful for this God who was willing and able to change his verdict from judgment to salvation. Finally, it is only under a God who is “gracious and merciful” and “slow to anger” (Jonah 4:2) that anyone can possibly live. If he were not patient, the ancient Ninevites (and Israelites and Jonahs!) as well as all peoples of the world would have been consigned to destruction long ago. Without his change from judgment to grace, no one ever would have been saved. God works through his Law and his Gospel to enable us to live by faith (cf. Hab 2:4). For all who, like the Ninevites (Jonah 3:5), believe in this God, he turns aside his wrath and instead bestows life everlasting in communion with him.⁵²

⁵¹ *LSB* 320.

⁵² That the Ninevites shall rise to everlasting life is affirmed by Jesus in Mt 12:41. See the commentary on Jonah 3:5 and the excursus “The Sign of Jonah.”