

ANIMADVERSIONES

Small Lexemes, Large Semantics: Prepositions and Theology in the Golden Calf Episode (Exodus 32–34)

For over a century the general scholarly consensus has been that Exod 32–34 is a pastiche of sources more or less at odds with one another⁽¹⁾. More recently, synchronic approaches have sought to understand compositional features or unexpected dynamics within the text as part of the text's literary fabric, and several such studies have helped advance our understanding of this pericope⁽²⁾. This study, which studies the prepositions that describe divine presence (or absence) within Exod 32–34, plots a course between these two camps in contending that the pericope shows both dynamic development in the theme of Yahweh's presence and an overall coherence. In fact, the developments in divine presence are essential to the narrative's flow, and link the literary transitions in the text with the changing historical circumstances it describes⁽³⁾.

1. *Exegetical Analysis*

The treatment of divine presence in Exod 32–34, leaving aside the negative attempt represented by the golden calf, contains the following stages: the angel replaces Yahweh's anticipated presence and Israel repents (32,29–33,6), the tent of meeting serves as an interlude (33,7-11), progressive restoration of divine presence is secured via intercession (33,12-17), Moses witnesses a culminating theophany (33,18–34,8), and a request for Yahweh to fully restore the covenant (34,9) is finally granted (34,10-28).

a) Promised Divine Presence Revoked (32,29–33,6)

Exod 33 opens with Yahweh continuing the speech to Moses which in chapter 32 enumerated the continuing consequences of the sin committed with the golden calf. First comes a command for Moses and his people to go from Sinai to the land Yahweh swore to the fathers (33,1); Yahweh will send an angel before them, and will extirpate the present inhabitants of Canaan (33,2). The reason that Yahweh will not go up among (בְּקִרְבּוֹ) the Israelites is given in 33,3 — since they are stiff-necked, he would consume them *en route*.

⁽¹⁾Noth's opinion is representative when he states regarding these chapters that "the state of the sources is certainly extremely confused" (*Exodus* [OTL; London 1962] 243).

⁽²⁾For example, R.W.L. MOBERLY, *At the Mountain of God. Story and Theology in Exodus 32–34* (JSOTSS 22; Sheffield 1983).

⁽³⁾Thus Noth, who likewise recognizes that the theme of divine presence ties the section together, still underestimates the passage's unity: the pericopae have in common not merely a theme but a theme and its development due to theological mechanisms that they hold in common.

This is an explicit denial of the possibility of constructing the tabernacle at this point, the most horrific development possible given God's original intention in Exod 25,8⁽⁴⁾.

Once Yahweh sends Moses away to lead the people to Canaan without his being in front of or among them, this news reaches the people's ears and they mourn deeply (Hithpael of אבל) and refrain from putting on their ornaments. The differences between the two episodes of 33,1-4 and 5-6 are noteworthy. In the first, Yahweh's absence is the topic (לא אעלה בקרבך), and is in fact necessary lest he destroy them in the course of the journey (not immediately). In the second, Yahweh's punitive presence is the topic (אעלה בקרבך, not negated), and it is equal to the Israelites' being destroyed immediately. This suggests that Yahweh's two speeches here contain an escalation of the threat of judgment. Corresponding to this is a development in the people's responses. In Yahweh's first speech he gives no commands, and the people spontaneously abstain from donning their ornaments⁽⁵⁾. His second speech commands the permanent jettisoning (Hifil of ירד) of the people's ornaments, and the people obey heartily (Hithpael of נצל) and remain obedient to that command from Horeb on⁽⁶⁾. The mourning noted after the first speech (33,4) is intense (Hithpael of אבל), and it is reasonable to suppose that a similar disposition was continued or enhanced by the events described in the second response, since that involved long-term obedience to Yahweh (a rarity in this pericope!). The last important difference involves Yahweh's pondering of Israel's fate (33,6), unique to the second speech. The suspense this creates is heightened by the narrative's hiatus in 33,7-11, establishing this as a critical juncture in the golden calf episode. The tabernacle project remains canceled, and Yahweh's beneficent presence among the people is still ruled out.

b) The Tent of Meeting (33,7-11)

Most interpreters, regardless of their methodology, see this passage as hopelessly misplaced, often assuming that it represents an older, competing prophetic tradition (deriving from J) regarding the "tent of meeting." Consequently, there is thought to be a "profound theoretical and conceptual gap between the two concepts of the tent of meeting that have been preserved in the Torah"⁽⁷⁾.

⁽⁴⁾ The thematic ties between Exod 32-34 and the tabernacle context of 25-31; 35-40 show that there is appreciable continuity between them. The fact that the non-Priestly material (on the usual understanding of 32-34) stresses the importance of Yahweh's presence in the same way as the key P passages of 25,8 and 29,45-46 is significant for showing that their treatment of divine presence is quite compatible.

⁽⁵⁾ "In a setting of idol production, the non-use of the ornaments alludes to a general background of purification and renunciation." M.R. HAUGE, *The Descent from the Mountain*. Narrative Patterns in Exodus 19-40 (JSOTSS 323; Sheffield 2001) 77, with reference to Exod 19,10-15; Gen 35,1-4; Isa 3,18-26. A.M. Rodriguez reaches similar conclusions in his "Jewelry in the Old Testament," in *To Understand the Scripture*. Essays in Honor of William H. Shea (ed. D. MERLING) (Berrien Springs, MI: Institute of Archaeology/ Siegfried H. Horn Archaeological Museum 1997) 103-125 (esp. 115, 118).

⁽⁶⁾ On the temporal nature of constructions like מחר, דוּחַב, see Num 10,33; 21,4; 23,7; 33,24.41.48; 34,8, inter alia.

⁽⁷⁾ I. KNOHL, "Two Aspects of the 'Tent of Meeting'", *Tehillah le-Moshe*. Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Moshe Greenberg (ed. M. COGAN ET AL.) (Winona Lake 1997) 74.

It is worth pondering whether the standard diachronic approach to this question has not adopted too simple a solution to the problem of these two clearly distinguished structures. Given the unsurpassed emphasis that Exodus puts on the tabernacle, if we assume the general competence of the book's final redactor he must not have considered the *'ōhel mō'ēd* a threat to the tabernacle's unique identity and function⁽⁸⁾. Ralph Hendrix, in a recent series of articles, attempts to make sense of the various terms used for Israel's cultic structures in the Sinai period and to demonstrate, without appealing to multiple source documents, the resultant coherence of the tabernacle section in Exod 25–40⁽⁹⁾. His studies succeed in highlighting the nuance that each term often possesses, even if their use remains puzzling at points. Hendrix concludes that “whereas the literary context of *miškān* was about construction, the literary context of *'ōhel mō'ēd* appears to involve the function of the cult of YHWH”⁽¹⁰⁾. But in contrast to a source-critical approach, Hendrix overemphasizes the similarity of the two structures to the point of seeing them as one, something that Exod 33,7-11 and Numbers 11, 12 do not allow.

Careful attention to the tent of meeting passage suggests that another understanding is possible. The question may be clarified, first, by defining the tent of meeting per its description in Exod 33: it is a tent located outside the camp for oracular purposes. This immediately distinguishes it from Moses' personal tent, mentioned earlier in Exod 18, and from the tabernacle, which is constructed later in Exod 40⁽¹¹⁾. Second, the silence of Exodus regarding any tent with cultic or oracular functions prior to this point favors seeing the tent of meeting as first used at some time between Exod 19 and Exod 32–34⁽¹²⁾. This approach has the advantage of using more proximate textual and chronological contexts to understand the tent of meeting than solutions which connect the *'ōhel mō'ēd* with Moses' personal tent, with the tabernacle, or with Canaanite parallels⁽¹³⁾.

⁽⁸⁾ M. Haran argues that the tabernacle and the tent of meeting served very different purposes, as their names (*miškān*, *'ōhel mō'ēd*) imply. The former was “where God dwells,” the latter “the place to which he comes at an appointed time . . . only to leave it when the communion . . . is over”, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel. An Inquiry into Biblical Cult Phenomena and the Historical Setting of the Priestly School* (Winona Lake 1985) 269.

⁽⁹⁾ “A Literary Structural Overview of the Golden-Calf Episode in Exodus 32:1–33:6”, *AUSS* 28 (1990) 211-217; “*Miškān* and *'ōhel mō'ēd*: Etymology, Lexical Definitions, and Extra-biblical Usage”, *AUSS* 29 (1991) 213-224; “The Use of *miškān* and *'ōhel mō'ēd* in Exodus 25–40”, *AUSS* 30 (1992) 3-13; “A Literary Structural Overview of Exodus 25–40”, *AUSS* 30 (1992) 123-138.

⁽¹⁰⁾ HENDRIX, “Use”, 9.

⁽¹¹⁾ Moses' personal tent is mentioned in 18,7 (with the definite article), but the placement of that episode is thematic rather than chronological. See E.E. CARPENTER, “Exodus 18: Its Structure, Style, Motifs and Function in the Book of Exodus”, *A Biblical Itinerary. In Search of Method, Form and Content. Essays in Honor of George W. Coats* (ed. E.E. CARPENTER) (JSOTSS 240; Sheffield 1997) 91-108, and D.A. GLATT, *Chronological Displacement in Biblical and Related Literatures* (SBLDS 139; Atlanta 1993).

⁽¹²⁾ The frequentative verbal syntax in 33,7-11 strongly suggests that the tent of meeting existed prior to the events of Exod 33.

⁽¹³⁾ A.M. COOPER – B.R. GOLDSTEIN, “At the Entrance to the Tent: More Cultic Resonances in Biblical Narrative”, *JBL* 116 (1997) 201-215, assert Canaanite influence on the presentation of the *'ōhel mō'ēd* here.

Exod 33,7-11 itself introduces additional considerations that shed light on the nature and function of the tent of meeting, though their exact placement in the flow of events in Exod 32-34 is unclear due to the frequentative verbs: Moses pitched the tent for himself (וַיִּסֶּדֶק לְיָמֹוֹ); it was at a good distance from the camp (מִדְּרוֹם לַמַּחֲנֶה, occurring three times in 33,7-8); it was accessible to any Israelite who was seeking Yahweh (33,7); Moses' trips to and sessions at the tent were publicly noticed and valued (33,8); the pillar of cloud would descend upon Moses' reaching the tent, whereupon Yahweh would speak familiarly with him and the people would worship (33,9-11); and after each episode Moses (and any Israelite who may have accompanied him) would return to the camp, while Joshua would stay at the tent (33,11). The verbal syntax distinguishes the section 33,7-11 from its context, beginning with a *w-x-yiqtol* sequence which breaks the *wayyiqtol* string of the previous section, then continuing with several instances of וַיְהִי (14).

We can now summarize the import of Exod 33,7-11 in the context of Exod 32-34. The location of the tent of meeting traces, in the pictorial language of divine presence, the progress of Moses' intercession, coming between the accompaniment of Yahweh's angel and Moses' prayer that Yahweh himself be present "with" corporate Israel (33,16). As 33,1-6 has just stated, Yahweh cannot appear in Israel's midst without breaking out in judgment against them. Thus the stress on the location of Moses' oracular tent outside the limits of the camp very closely follows the narrative's development. The possibility of a good spiritual disposition on the part of some Israelites is hinted at by the fact that some desired to meet with Yahweh at the tent, and that others esteemed these occasional theophanies important and appropriate for worship. Thus the later restoration of divine presence and the related reinstatement of the covenant are not without their subjective counterparts on the part of the Israelites. Lastly, the centrality of Moses as the only one by whom individual Israelites can approach Yahweh correlates with his indispensable role as corporate Israel's mediator (15). While Israel still stands exposed to Yahweh's wrath, and Yahweh will not come near them lest he destroy them, Moses' relation to Yahweh has not suffered at all because of the people's sin.

c) Progressive Restoration of Presence Secured via Intercession (33,12-17)

While at this point in the narrative Israel's apostasy has not had the dire effect first threatened by Yahweh, the material that follows it has until now very patiently spelled out its grave consequences in terms of the covenant (now fractured), sin (punished and yet not forgiven), and Yahweh's presence among Israel (now a *non est*). Moses' third prayer, to which we now turn,

(14) P.J. GENTRY, "The System of the Finite Verb in Classical Biblical Hebrew", *Hebrew Studies* 39 (1998) 13. The interruptive quality of *w-x-yiqtol* may signal an "actualising presentation" which highlights the information presented without necessarily locating it chronologically, as suggested by W. Schneider and also by A. NICCACCI, "Workshop: Narrative Syntax of Exodus 19-24", *Narrative Syntax and the Hebrew Bible*. Papers of the Tilburg Conference 1996 (ed. E. VAN WOLDE) (Biblical Interpretation Series 29; Leiden 1997) 213.

(15) This is emphasized in 33,11 and by the framing of 33,12-17 by references to Yahweh's close relationship with Moses.

accelerates the pace of the story but retains the thematic complexity evident in earlier sections. It is concerned with the need for God's presence, both among Israel and with Moses. Moses first speaks in terms of "with me" (33,12) and "show me" (33,13); in response God promises rest to Moses (33,14). Subsequently Moses prays with regard both to Israel ("with us," 33,16) and to himself ("show me," 33,18). At the end of the interchange God promises to pass before Moses alone while revealing more of his character (33,19–34,4).

The initial part of Moses' conversation with God refers to the promised presence of the angel (32,34; 33,2). While noting that the angel will go before Israel (לְפָנָיו), Moses further requests that the divine presence go with (עִמּוֹ) him, supporting George Coats's contention that "there is no indication that the angel alleviates the threat posed by God's absence"⁽¹⁶⁾. Moses' request assumes that his unique relationship with God entails God's sending someone with Moses and making God's ways known to him.

At this point in the story Moses' expectations and hopes for Israel have been placed in severe jeopardy, and that by the actions of the same God whom Moses had come to know over several decades. Moses' request has his own needs in view (albeit his needs as Israel's representative and mediator) even as it culminates in a request that Yahweh graciously reconsider his withdrawal from Israel. In requesting that Yahweh send someone *with* him, and that he show Moses his way, Moses is moving toward asking Yahweh to fully restore his presence among Israel.

Yahweh's response to this first petition of the third prayer is directed exclusively to Moses⁽¹⁷⁾. His presence (פָּנָיו) will go with Moses (לְפָנָיו, though without an accompanying preposition), and he will give Moses "rest" (33,14). While presence has been a consistent theme in these chapters, the concept of rest is unexpected here. As a result translations ancient and modern have rendered the Hebrew in a variety of ways, but it seems best to retain the common rendering of the phrase as "I will give you rest," with that term signifying the full enjoyment of the covenant's goals⁽¹⁸⁾.

God's response in 33,14 is still not a full resolution of the situation. Widmer correctly observes that it merely deals with the ambiguity of who would accompany Moses, leaving aside entirely the issue of God's presence among Israel. It is to this, then, that Moses returns in 33,15–16. The increasing clarity and particularity of his prayer confirms that his ultimate concern is Yahweh's presence *among Israel*. In 33,15 Yahweh's presence is ambiguously "going," albeit in the context of Moses and the people leaving Sinai (note the first-person plural object on the verb הֵעָלֵנוּ). In 33,16 Moses mentions the gracious nature of Yahweh's relationship with his people and

⁽¹⁶⁾G.W. COATS, "The King's Loyal Opposition: Obedience and Authority in Exodus 32–34", *Canon and Authority. Essays in Old Testament Religion and Theology* (eds. G.W. COATS – B.O. LONG (Philadelphia 1977) 100.

⁽¹⁷⁾In favor of seeing the rest promise addressed only to Moses, see COATS, "Opposition", 102; NOTH, *Exodus*, 257. Moberly argues (*Mountain of God*, 74) that "the promise of rest is given to Moses alone (*l'kā*, second person singular suffix), and Moses is seeking the divine favour not for himself alone but for the people too."

⁽¹⁸⁾Given the importance of the covenant throughout Exod 32–34 (note the tablet inclusio in 31,18; 34,29), it is difficult to adopt a more limited definition.

with Moses before asking God to go *with* (אִתּוֹ) them (again, a first-person plural suffix identifying Moses and Israel). The last element in this portion of the prayer ties Israel's unique identity to Yahweh's presence *with* Israel. Moses is praying that the full experience of Yahweh's presence that he knows, and the rest that he will experience, would be granted to Israel.

Yahweh's response in 33,17 to the petition of 33,15-16 is the clearest and most significant step in the restoration of his relationship with Israel since the breach occasioned by the golden calf. By affirming to Moses that he will grant "this thing you have mentioned," Yahweh commits to going *with* Israel. But not all has been resolved, as attention to the prepositions describing the proximity of divine presence will show. No less significantly, "there is still no explicit word about forgiveness" (19).

d) The Culminating Theophany and Covenant Renewal (33,18–34,8)

Yahweh's definition of the forthcoming theophany describes how he will grant Moses' request to see his glory (33,18). Notably, "the revelation of God is in terms of his attributes rather than his appearance" (20). This is important for understanding how God's two self-descriptions (33,19; 34,6-7) relate to their context. First, the order and selection of divine attributes in Exod 34 exhibit differences with respect to the descriptions of Yahweh earlier in Exodus. Widmer has contrasted the two self-disclosures of Exod 20,5-6 and 34,6-7, and shows that the latter differs significantly from the former.

In Exodus 34:6, YHWH commences with a fundamental statement about his nature. YHWH declares that He is basically merciful and gracious. Whereas [*sic*] in the Decalogue the "negative portion," i.e. the warning of divine visitation, precedes YHWH's merciful and gracious attributes. Moreover, in the first divine disclosure divine jealousy is given as the reason for judgment (20:5), while after the golden calf incident YHWH's jealousy is no longer directly related to judgment, but comes only later to expression as a general warning regarding the worship of other gods (cf. 34:14) (21).

Second, the ordering and selection of the divine attributes point toward their role in resolving the crisis in Israel's relation to Yahweh. The burden of 33,19 is God's sovereignty in exercising his mercy toward whomever he will. This makes possible its application to Israel, despite their having demerited any divine indulgence. In 34,6-7 the predominance of Yahweh's compassionate and forgiving character "provides the basis for Moses to request a divine pardon for Israel in Exod 34:9" (22).

(19) D.R. DAVIS, "Rebellion, Presence, and Covenant: A Study in Exodus 32–34", *WTJ* 44 (1982) 77.

(20) B. CHILDS, *The Book of Exodus*. A Critical, Theological Commentary (OTL; Philadelphia 1974) 596.

(21) M. WIDMER, *Moses, God, and the Dynamics of Intercessory Prayer*. A Study of Exodus 32–34 and Numbers 13–14 (FAT II/8; Tübingen 2004) 184–185.

(22) T.B. DOZEMAN, "Inner-Biblical Interpretation of Yahweh's Gracious and Compassionate Character", *JBL* 108 (1989) 220–221.

e) Request for Yahweh to Fully Restore the Covenant (34,9)

Immediately after witnessing the theophany, Moses shows the relevance of the divine character just displayed and described by praying God to “go along in our midst, even though the people are so obstinate; and do pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us as your own possession.” Moses’ request to see God’s glory is not, as Terrien colorfully puts it, *libido theologica*, since both before and after the event Moses’ ultimate concern is Israel’s preservation as the people of God⁽²³⁾.

Both the theological and narrational elements of the theophany connect directly to the final request of Moses in 34,9 and the subsequent renewal of the covenant in 34,10-28. First, the preposition בקרב in Moses’ last petition establishes that the account has finally come to discussion of fully restored divine proximity and presence among Israel. That God’s presence בקרב Israel was the ideal appears from the equivalent description of Yahweh’s dwelling among (בתוך) Israel in the tabernacle in 25,8 and 29,45, and especially from the denial in 33,3.5 that Yahweh could be בקרב Israel without destroying them⁽²⁴⁾. Second, the problem of sin is not ignored, as the people’s repentance (33,4-6) and Moses’ importunate intercession together incline God to forgive graciously Israel’s sin. Finally, the first indicators of the covenant’s fracture in 32,7.19, Yahweh’s telling Moses that Israel belonged to Moses and Moses’ breaking of the tablets, have likewise been resolved by Moses’ petition that Yahweh once again take Israel as his inheritance and by Yahweh’s call for new tablets.

2. Theological Reflections

On the basis of the above exegesis we can now summarize the developments in the treatment of divine presence within Exod 32–34, recognizing the equally critical role of Israel’s sinfulness which jeopardizes it⁽²⁵⁾. After its introduction in Exod 32, this tension between divine presence and its endangerment by Israel’s sin continues in the following chapters. On the one hand stands the (still inchoate) tabernacle, to be built expressly to establish Yahweh’s permanent presence among the people; on the other stand the golden calf and Israel’s apostasy and idolatry, which have rendered Yahweh’s beneficent presence impossible at this point in the narrative. As we

⁽²³⁾ S. TERRIEN, *The Elusive Presence. Toward a New Biblical Theology* (Religious Perspectives 26; San Francisco 1978) 144.

⁽²⁴⁾ See S.S. TUELL, “תוֹךְ”, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (ed. W. VAN GEMEREN) (Grand Rapids 1997) IV, 279-280; S. RATTRAY – J. MILGROM, “קָרַב”, *TDOT* XIII, 148-152. Especially in the context of the tabernacle (cf. Exod 25,8; 29,45-46; Lev 26,11-12), one would indeed expect that full divine presence would be described with בתוך and בקרב rather than simply via עַם.

⁽²⁵⁾ Thus W. Brueggemann’s aptly titled “The Crisis and Promise of Presence in Israel”, IDEM, *Old Testament Theology. Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text* (ed. P.D. MILLER) (Minneapolis 1992) 150-182. Notably, Brueggemann focuses on the paradox of God being “present in Israel but hidden from Israel” but does not integrate Israel’s forgiveness in his discussion (169, his emphasis). For an exploration of the interrelation of divine presence and forgiveness in this context, see my “Creation, Tabernacle and Sabbath: The Function of the Sabbath Frame in Exodus 31:12-17; 35:1-3” (Ph.D. diss., Trinity International University 2006).

have seen, the resolution of this tension is a primary theme in Exod 32–34, and its gradual realization is seen in the careful choice of the prepositions that specify Yahweh’s proximity to Israel. After Yahweh agrees not to destroy Israel immediately after their making of the golden calf, Moses (and later the Levites) execute judgment on the offenders (32,15-29). The next day Yahweh speaks of his presence vis-à-vis Israel only negatively, with the verb פָּקַד, so that when he “visits” Israel he will punish their sin (32,33-34). But beginning in chapter 33, Yahweh’s proximity to Israel takes on increasingly positive aspects: first he sends his angel in front of Israel (לְפָנַי), as originally promised in 23,30-23), then himself agrees to go with Israel (עִמּוֹ) and finally to go among them (בְּקִרְבּוֹ). The significance of this movement is bolstered by its correlation with the progressive covenant reestablishment that culminates in chapter 34 (see table below).

Dynamics of Divine Presence in Exod 32-34

<i>Reference</i>	<i>Moses’ Action</i>	<i>Divine Response</i>
32,30-35	Moses attempts to atone for people’s sin	Yahweh says his proximity (פָּקַד) will involve punishment; an angel will go לְפָנַי Israel
33,1-33,11	Moses prays that God would forgive Israel (חַנּוּן + נְשָׂא)	Yahweh says his angel will go לְפָנַי Israel; God himself will not go בְּקִרְבּוֹ Israel lest he destroy her
33,7-11	Interruption: the <i>’ōhel mō’ēd</i>	
33,12-34,3	Moses intercedes, asking God to go with (עִמּוֹ) him, then with (עִמּוֹ) Israel	First Yahweh will go with (עִמּוֹ) Moses (33,12; cf. 33,14), then perhaps go with (עִמּוֹ) Moses and Israel (33,15), and finally <i>will</i> go with (עִמּוֹ) Moses and Israel (33,16)
34,4-9	Moses asks God to go among (בְּקִרְבּוֹ) Israel and fully restore her	Yahweh agrees to go בְּקִרְבּוֹ Israel

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SUMMARY

Despite the current methodological impasse with which OT studies continues to wrestle, this study shows that dynamic elements within the text can, somewhat surprisingly, contribute to the text’s coherence. The various prepositions and statements regarding divine presence in Exod 32–34 are fundamental to the development and integrity of the narrative as it stands. Further, the fact that this complex progression in divine presence spans pericopae usually attributed to various sources suggests that the various pericopae are more in harmony with one another than is often recognized. These conclusions call for renewed attention to the text of Exodus as it stands, both within the golden calf episode and more broadly.