THE DYNAMICS OF THE GOLDEN CALF
STORY (EXODUS 32–34)

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ABSTRACT
Critical analysis of Exodus 32–34 has uncovered strong evidence that it underwent a complex compositional process. This article will argue that there is also strong evidence that its various parts—narrative, law, speech—have been put together skilfully to form a whole that is more than the sum of the parts. The result is a story that functions as an important piece of torah or catechesis at a crucial juncture in the Torah storyline—the golden calf apostasy. The thrust of the story is not so much whether the crisis triggered by this apostasy can be resolved but how it is resolved. It will be argued that this feature takes up the bulk of the story, running from Exod 32:7 to 34:32 where Moses reports the renewal of the covenant to the people. The way the resolution of the crisis is unfolded constitutes what I call the ‘dynamics’ of the story. Exod 34:6–7 plays a key role in these dynamics. The article includes an analysis of the nature of this text and its function in the story.

1. INTRODUCTION
IT IS A WELL-ESTABLISHED HYPOTHESIS THAT EXODUS 32–34 IS A COMPLEX piece, the work of a number of hands. Yet it is also a story. The basic structural components of the story form can be identified in the following: in the initial setting of Israel at Mt Sinai; in the critical factor that drives the story forward (Israel’s apostasy); in the climax or crisis of the story (God’s interven-

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1 There are of course disagreements over the identification and extent of particular contributions. For a recent survey of the literature see Thomas B. Dozeman, A Commentary on Exodus (Eerdmans Critical Commentary; Minneapolis: Fortress Press) 688–700 (on Exodus 32), 719–20 (on Exodus 33), 734–39 (on Exodus 34, in particular vv. 6–7). Comparative texts are the version in Deut 9:7–10:11 and also 1 Kgs 12:26–32, which reports that the first king of northern Israel, Jeroboam, set up bull calves in Bethel and Dan as rival shrines to the Jerusalem temple.
tion) and in the resolution (renewal of the covenant). It is remarkable that those who assembled this text were able to integrate their contributions within the framework of this particular story so that it also functions as part of the larger Torah storyline. Their achievement is all the more remarkable when one considers the following factors.

The story is located at a strategic point in the narrative, immediately after the covenant at Sinai where the terms of the foundational relationship between God and Israel are outlined. This has implications for a number of other relationships, especially between God and Moses, between Moses and Israel, between Israelites themselves, between God and the nations, and between Israel and the nations. These in turn have implications for the fulfilment of the promises to the ancestors, for how Israel is to carry out its God-given mission, and for key notions such as truth and falsehood, reward and retribution, repentance and forgiveness. According to texts in the Sinai covenant such as Exod 20:5b and 23:20–33, apostasy will reap a fearful response from God. Yet, as with earlier examples of human failure and its retribution—for example: the garden story, the flood story—there needs to be a way out of a “crisis” such as apostasy, otherwise the whole Torah enterprise grinds to a halt and its authors and editors have effectively put themselves out of a job. God’s choice of Israel cannot be a mistake that must be erased; this would impugn the theology that the authors and editors of the Torah were committed to promoting. Hence the story of Israel has to continue beyond the golden calf apostasy but in a way that is in accord with Torah requirements.

In my judgement, those responsible for Exodus 32–34 achieved this via the skilful application of Torah criteria in a variety of forms—narrative, speech, law, comment. This enabled them to account for the sin of apostasy and incorporate it within the overall Torah storyline. It involved a reshaping of what we might call the “standard” story form in which a key point of interest is whether

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3 Exod 22:20 is somewhat different in that it requires the presumably loyal covenant community to eliminate a member who is guilty of sacrificing to another god. Texts in Deuteronomy such as 4:26; 7:4 are even more severe than the Exodus texts cited, warning Israel that God will ensure it disappears from the land if it engages in worship of other gods.

4 As Francesca Aran Murphy sagely points out, the Bible is a comedy not a tragedy. Despite all the troubles and failures it promises “all’s well that ends well” (The Comedy of Revelation. Paradise Lost and Regained in Biblical Narrative [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000]).
the crisis will be resolved to the question of how it will be resolved.5 The story thereby becomes more a catechesis or instruction, a move that enhances its location and function within the Torah. It also allows for considerable expansion of the storyline as it unfolds how the crisis is resolved. In the golden calf story, for example, this component effectively runs from 32:7 to Moses reporting the renewal of the covenant to the people in 34:32. It is here that one finds what I have termed the dynamics of Exodus 32–34, an intricate and at times taut interplay between various elements. An article length study cannot of course take all of them into account; some selection and omission is inevitable. Hopefully the selection made is sufficient for the task in hand and the omissions are not critical.

2. Analysis of the Text

Exodus 32–34 can be divided into the following components:

- report of Israel’s apostasy in 32:1–6;
- first dialogue between God and Moses in 32:7–14 about its implications;
- report of Moses’ intervention in 32:15–29;
- second dialogue between God and Moses in 32:30–34 (35);
- God’s assessment of the people and their reaction in 33:1–6;
- report of the tent of meeting in 33:7–11;
- third dialogue between God and Moses in 33:12–23, presumably at the tent;
- God’s instructions for Moses to bring two new tablets of stone up the mountain and Moses’ compliance in 34:1–4;
- theophany in 34:5–9;
- renewal of the covenant and its stipulations in 34:10–28;
- report of Moses’ return to the people in 34:29–35.

Israel’s apostasy in 32:1–6 has been described as “the nearest equivalent to the concept of original sin.”6 Interestingly, there is a parallel with the sin in the garden story in that it arises because of a distorted perception of reality. The

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5 Other examples of this shift of focus are the garden story, the flood story and the murmuring stories in the wilderness, in particular the spy story in Numbers 13–14.

forty days during which Moses is on the mountain leads the people to conclude, wrongly, that he has abandoned them. The reader knows the people have no justification for this complaint because in 24:12–14 Moses instructs the elders to wait until he and Joshua return from the mountain where God is, while 24:17 reports that the people were able to see continually the fire of God’s presence on the mountain. The reader also knows from the intervening narrative that God and Moses have been attending to Israel’s welfare. But, as the garden story “teaches,” human beings have a fatal tendency to distort the good order of relationships that God (and here Moses) has established. Moses, who “brought us up out of the land of Egypt” has failed in his role as leader and, by implication, so has his God. Hence they are justified in replacing them. Also, as in the garden story, acting on such flawed and false knowledge has divisive and chaotic consequences. Aaron is appointed leader in place of Moses—a disastrous move (cf. 32:2–4)—while the people’s covenant relationship with their creator and saviour is transferred to something they (and Aaron) have created. Aaron appears to try and retrieve the situation in a confused way by proclaiming a feast to YHWH. Is the bull calf meant to be an image of YHWH? For their part the people claim the thing they have made is in fact “your gods who brought you up out of the land of Egypt” and engage in revelry. It is a mocking, sarcastic portrait of the people and their priest.

The intense dialogue that follows in 32:7–14 tackles the implications of this crisis for Israel’s relationship with God and Moses. Within the larger context, the people’s sin is clearly a breach of the first two commands of the Decalogue, and for such a breach there is the accompanying sanction in 20:5b. In my estimation, 20:5b–6 functions as a kind of template or paradigm that is applied to a variety of situations in a variety of ways in the subsequent story of Israel. In 32:10 God pronounces or judges that the people are stiff-necked and so worthy of destruction: coming from God this is by definition a just verdict. Being stiff-necked or stubborn could be likened to hating and, according to 20:5b, those who hate God will be punished. An unusual feature of God’s words is the reference in 32:7 to the people as “your people” rather than “my people,” as occurs in 3:7, 10; 4:22 (my son); 6:7. This implies the people are no longer God’s but still Moses’ people. One might ask why a narrator would have God say this when 32:7 clearly indicates that God knows the people have rejected Moses. A number of answers are possible but I would suggest that this, along with the offer in 32:10 to make Moses the father of a new and “great nation,” is part of a divine initiative that provides the opportunity or

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7 The plural reference to “your gods” fits the context of 1 Kgs 12:26–32 and its two calves rather than the single calf of the Exodus narrative. In terms of characterisation it may be meant to indicate the utter confusion that results from such sin; at the level of Torah, it may be a signal for the reader that the two texts are to be compared when reflecting on apostasy.
challenge for Moses to profess loyalty both to God and to the people even though they are apostates. These are two essential relationships in which Moses is engaged and, as commentators have noted, they form the foundations of the prophetic vocation.8

One might also ask why the all-knowing God of the story needs to put Moses to the test, as it were, in this way. Two reasons can be offered. One is that, although God knows Moses’ loyalty, this needs to be “revealed” to the reader as part of the story plot. Once this has been done, Moses can function within the story as God’s representative to the people. As already noted, stories of crisis and conflict within the Bible require someone or a group (a faithful remnant) that proves faithful and mediates God’s salvation for the wicked many, otherwise the story cannot advance God’s purpose or plan for humanity and creation. It must contain stories that point to the eventual triumph of good over evil; otherwise its claims for God and God’s purpose are compromised. Another reason is the Bible’s portrayal of relationships between God and human beings as dynamic—we are called to be active participants in the work of salvation, not passive recipients. This means commitment in word and deed to God and God’s purpose, particularly in times of crisis.

Moses displays such commitment in the second part of the dialogue (32:11–14). His loyalty to the people is shown by the way he does not deny they are his people despite their apostasy, nor accept the offer of becoming the “father” of a new and great nation in v. 10. His loyalty to God is evident in his concern for God’s reputation among the Egyptians, an allusion to the recurring refrain in the plague narrative that Pharaoh and the Egyptians “shall know that I am the Lord.” For the Egyptians (or anyone) to conclude that God acts “with evil intent” promotes a distorted perception and needs to be corrected. If God fulfils the promises to Israel’s ancestors of descendants and land, the nations have no case. The dialogue ends with God changing his mind about consuming Israel (32:14). To have God revise an earlier decision through the intercession of a loyal servant such as Moses serves the plot of the story in that it points to its positive outcome and provides scope for telling how it comes about. It also enhances the dynamic and positive nature of the relationship between the two and fuels hope among the faithful in the efficacy of intercessory prayer.

Exodus 32:7–14 effectively appeals to Israel’s role in a divine plan that involves the promise of descendants and land as well as God and Israel’s relationship with the nations (represented here by Egypt). Moses’ intercession invites a comparison with the one by Abraham in Genesis 18. There God does not appear to rule out the prospect of pardon for Sodom for the sake of fewer than ten righteous citizens, and the story concludes with the report that Lot was

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8 For example, as Jack R. Lundbom states, “The true prophet is one who speaks for Yahweh and leads people in Yahweh’s way” (*The Hebrew Prophets. An Introduction* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010] 146).
delivered because God “remembered Abraham” (19:29). These factors prompt one to ask whether in our text God spares Israel because of the intercession of righteous Moses (parallel to Abraham) or because there are some righteous ones still in Israel, or perhaps a combination of both. The description of Israel’s apostasy does not support the second or third as the reason, hence the first is the likely one. A danger with this theology is that it could encourage a somewhat cavalier attitude to sin, punishment and forgiveness. That is, God is committed to the terms of the ancestral promises and to maintaining the divine reputation among the nations, whether Israel is loyal or not—they are essential components of the divine plan of salvation. Furthermore, the intercession of a leader like Moses will gain forgiveness even for Israel’s worst breach of the covenant.

The subsequent narrative corrects such an attitude by the way it depicts Moses exercising leadership of the people (32:15–29) and God responding to a key aspect of Moses’ role as leader, that of interceding on behalf of the people (32:30–34:9). His leadership is immediately to the fore in 32:17–18 where it is Moses, not Joshua, who knows what the people are up to in the camp. His smashing of the tablets, presumably near the camp, is a sign to all that they have broken the covenant, a gesture that reflects God’s word in 32:8: “they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them.” He then singlehandedly destroys the calf. If it had divine power it would, as Pharaoh attempted in the plague narrative, oppose or resist God’s representative. Moses makes the people drink/consume the powdered calf to show that the divine power they attributed to it was simply a figment of their distorted imagination.

Following these authoritative actions Moses turns his attention to Aaron (32:21–24). He shares Moses’ relationship with God, being designated his assistant in the confrontation with Pharaoh (cf. 4:14–17) and in the Sinai covenant (19:24). He and his sons are to be consecrated priests to minister before the Lord in the sanctuary that is to be built (Chapters 28–29). Although Aaron, according to 32:5, is not guilty of the sin of apostasy, he has failed to act as God and Moses’ representative while they are on the mountain (cf. 24:13–14), and has allowed chaos and disorder to erupt. The description in 32:25 of Israel running wild to the “derision of their enemies” may, like

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9 The dialogue between God and Abraham in 18:23–33 does not establish the number ten as the bottom line.
10 Even though it is quite probable that the golden calf story originated independently of the surrounding priestly material in Exodus 25–31 and 35–40, my comment is made in terms of the present narrative sequence.
11 Exod 24:14 also mentions Hur as a representative. The lack of any reference to him in the calf story is an example of how biblical narrative focuses on what is relevant for the plot and ignores elements that are judged unimportant or would unduly complicate it if introduced. The focus on Aaron the priest provides a link with the surrounding narrative about the tent sanctuary and the priestly ministry there.
Moses’ earlier concern about the divine reputation among the Egyptians, refer to Israel’s reputation among its adversaries.

Within this context of seeming total corruption the question arises: is there anyone who is loyal to God and Moses? The dramatic scene in 32:25–29 supplies a positive answer. In response to Moses’ call, “all the sons of Levi” obey and execute 3,000. The scene may, as many propose, be an addition to the narrative: within the context of 32:3 that states all the people were involved, the reader is left unsure whether the Levites repented of their part in the apostasy or had not taken part in it. Moreover, the executions create some tension with God’s resolve in 32:14 not to destroy the people. Despite some unevenness the scene nevertheless plays an important role in the narrative. It teaches that relationship with God must take priority over all others. And so the Levites side with God and Moses “at the cost of a son or a brother.” Such loyalty identifies the Levites as worthy of having a privileged relationship within God’s saving plan, of being ordained “for the service of the Lord” (32:29). Presumably this includes the flawed Aaron who is himself a “son of Levi,” as is Moses (cf. 6:14–25). The text can thus be read as an example of another side of the relationship between the one and the many: in this case, the loyal Levites save the one disloyal Levite, Aaron. Some commentators see 32:25–29 as an enactment of divine punishment and even link it to the earlier scene where Moses makes the people drink water contaminated by the powdered calf. It is a case of trial by ordeal similar to the one described in Num 5:11–31. The 3,000 executed by the Levites are those that the ordeal (drinking the powdered water) exposes as (the key) perpetrators. To my mind there is insufficient evidence in the text to support this proposal. As already noted, Exod 32:3 states that “all the people” took part in the apostasy. The purpose of 32:25–29 is to provide a graphic teaching about the primacy of loyalty to God and its reward; however, the deaths do testify to the gravity of the sin and raise the question how, granted that God has decided not to destroy the people, a right relationship can be restored and what Moses’ role in it might be.

In keeping with the garden and flood stories the people cannot simply and immediately return to the situation before the apostasy. This would trivialise both their relationship with God and the nature of their sin. It would also imply that Moses’ role is redundant. How does his relationship to the people relate to the one between them and God? These issues are addressed initially in Exodus 32:30–34 and developed in the remainder of the story. In 32:30 Moses informs the people that he will approach God in the hope of making atonement for

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“your great sin.” Dozeman reads 32:32–33 (Moses’ proposal and God’s response) as installing a theology of individual guilt and salvation in place of the corporate theology that operates in the earlier chapters of Exodus and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. For example, the righteous Joseph is able to unite his family and save the world from starvation, whereas the evil of Pharaoh afflicts his people as well. Unlike Joseph, Moses cannot atone for the many because, as v. 33 states, God punishes each sinner for his/her sin.13

This seems to me to pay sufficient attention to the context. This second dialogue between God and Moses in 32:30–34 needs to be read in conjunction with the first in 32:7–14. There God proposes a plan and Moses counters with an alternative; here their roles are reversed. Moses proposes that if his request for the people to be forgiven is not acceptable to God then he should be eliminated. He is not offering himself in place of a people destined for destruction because God has already ruled this out in 32:14.14 Rather, the thrust of the text is about leadership. Moses is effectively proposing that God appoint a new leader. In a modern context his ultimatum could look like an exercise in brinksmanship but, in the biblical context, it is an expression of his commitment to restoring a right relationship (through forgiveness) between God and Israel. Moses thinks that, if God rejects his proposal, this is a sign that he is a failed leader, unable to intercede effectively for his people in their relationship with God. There is an intriguing and perhaps ironical allusion here to God’s proposal in 32:10 to make Moses the leader of a new people; here, Moses proposes a new leader for the people.

As Moses countered God’s proposal in 32:7–14 by appealing to key aspects of the divine plan, so God now counters Moses’ proposal by appealing to other key aspects. Exodus 32:33 is the first of what I would call three “codes of divine conduct” in this story; the other two are 33:19 and 34:4–7. Each is an application and interpretation of an element or elements of the template text in 20:5b–6. The first draws on the punishment clause in 20:5b and has two applications here. One is to Moses whom God will not replace because his loyalty is evidence that he is not one of “those who hate me.”15 Rather than be replaced, he is commanded to lead the people with the angel of 23:20–23 as guide. The second applies to the people. The references to “the day” of visitation/punishment and “their sin” in 32:34 are

13 Cf. Dozeman, Exodus 700, 712.
15 The image of a book in 32:32–33 may reflect the practice of recording the names and tasks of officials in ANE royal courts as a sign of their legitimacy and authority. If one were dismissed from office his/her name would be erased. Martin Noth saw a connection with the “book of life” in Ps 69:28 in which the names of the righteous are inscribed (cf. Exodus [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962] 251).
vague enough to include the golden calf apostasy and any future sin either as a people or as individuals. No sin escapes the scrutiny of the divine judge who alone decides the appropriate day to “visit” or punish the guilty in accord with 20:5b. The report in 32:35 that God struck the people is equally vague and it is not preceded by any announcement from God to the people. It may point to what is in store for the people on the day of God’s visitation: a taste of things to come as it were. A plague can bring death or serve as a warning, as is evident in the plagues of the exodus story. Here it would seem to function as the latter.

Up to this point, all the dialogue has been between God and Moses but, if the relationship between God and Israel is to be restored and once again become dynamic, the people need to be informed and respond. To meet this need there is a second speech by God to Moses in 33:1–3, the content of which is then passed on to the people in vv. 4–6. Because of their breach of the covenant, it is not fitting that God address the people directly as is the case with the Decalogue (20:1); hence they are brought into the loop in this indirect manner. They learn that God is committed to the promise of land made to their ancestors (cf. “place” in 32:34), but they also learn that God will not journey with them. This is because they are “stiff-necked” (cf. 32:3) and so will inevitably sin and again stir the consuming wrath of God, as in 32:7–10. While these are indeed “harsh words” (literally “evil word”) they are, coming from God, a just judgement that informs Israel of the truth. But they are made in the context of two positive statements by God toward Israel, one being the commitment to the promises, the other the order in 33:5 for Israel to strip off its ornaments and to wait until God decides “what to do to you.” The story of the golden calf commences with the people refusing to wait on God and Moses, and taking matters into their own hands: they are now challenged to do the opposite. The implication is that, if they obey, there will be a positive outcome.

The words and actions of Moses earlier in the story have shown that the biblical notion of a right relationship is a dynamic one that grows when one partner responds appropriately to the challenge or command of another. The report in 33:6 of the people obeying God’s directive is the first point in the narrative where they act in a correct way in their relationship with God. The implication is that a restoration of this relationship can now take place but, given the importance of Moses’ role in the unfolding of this story, it is only fitting that it comes about through his mediation.

The tent of meeting provides a locus of the divine presence that matches the liminal state of Israel’s relationship to God at this juncture in the story. Instead of on top of Mt Sinai the divine presence is now “outside the camp” where the

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16 The Hebrew verb הָגָד means “visit” or “pay attention to” as well as the applied sense of “punish.”
apostasy took place, but visible to the people and accessible, although it is not stated that any of them enters the tent. According to 33:9 only Moses does so. Whenever he enters the tent and the pillar of cloud appears, the people worship the Lord—a contrast to their earlier worship of the calf. In place of rebellious impatience they now patiently await what God has in store for them. Their attention to the actions of Moses shows that they accept his role as mediator and the initiatives that he takes.

Significantly, the third dialogue in the story between God and Moses, which takes place at the tent of meeting (33:12–23), focuses on correct knowledge and its implications for the key relationships that this story deals with. These are between God and Moses, between God and the people, and between Moses and the people, each of them being an aspect of the covenant at Sinai. The dialogue is in two sections: vv. 12–17 and 18–23. The first commences by resuming the preceding dialogue in which Moses is commissioned to lead the people to the land. The provision there of “my/an angel” (cf. 32:34; 33:2) recalls 23:20–23 and Moses now requests to know who this will be. This is necessary so that a proper relationship can operate between them and that the journey to the land is conducted in an orderly manner. Moses justifies the request by appealing to the right relationship between himself and God, as stated by the latter (v. 12b). It is notable that Moses reports God saying “you have found favour (יהוה) in my sight.” This is very similar to Gen 6:8 which reports that Noah “found favour in the sight of the Lord”; the reason for this being given in 7:1—Noah alone of his generation was righteous. Hence one could say that the reason Moses has found similar favour is because he, like Noah, is righteous; his righteousness is evident above all in his conduct in the golden calf crisis.

The last part of Exod 33:13 indicates that Moses is not making this request for his own advantage but for the nation that is “your people.” As has already been noted there are two sides to the Mosaic (and prophetic) vocation, namely, being at the service of God and of the people. The preceding dialogue, especially 33:5, signals that God has something positive in mind for Israel that relates to their journey Moses has been commanded to resume. Granted this, it is important to know the manner of God’s relationship to Moses and Israel on this journey. One might think the promise of an angel in 33:2 meets this need.
but this angel’s task is to go “before you,” marking out the journey. Moses seeks something more that cannot be denied to one who enjoys God’s favour—namely, to know God and God’s ways. This leads God to assure Moses that “my presence (literally, “my face”) will go with you and I will give you rest” (33:14). Moses knows that this promise assures him and the people not only that they have found favour with God but also that their unique status as the chosen people will be made known to all the nations (33:16; cf. 32:12–13). Israel is able to resume its role in the divine plan of universal salvation. Moses’ request is granted (finds favour) because God knows Moses (v. 17).

In light of the preceding dialogue it is not surprising that Moses asks to see God’s glory (33:18). If God grants this further request then Moses (and the reader) are assured that the Sinai covenant has been fully restored. According to 24:15–18 the glory of the Lord settled on Mt Sinai, the cloud covered the mountain and Moses entered the cloud. Seeing God’s glory at this point would therefore signal that Israel is restored to full covenant relationship with God. The request is granted but in a way that provides an important instruction about divine glory and in what way the human being, represented by Moses, can experience it. To see the fullness of God’s glory is to see God’s face (cf. 33:18, 20, 23) and this is not available to the human being. There are boundaries or limits to human experience and knowledge of the divine—the relationship between human beings and God—and these need to be protected by God for the latter’s welfare. Moses’ experience will therefore be limited to a theophany or manifestation of three aspects of divine glory: a parade of all God’s goodness that will “pass before you,” a proclamation of the divine name, and of the “code of divine conduct” (33:19). One should note that these are not new revelations; they are present in somewhat different form in earlier Torah texts. Gen 1:31 describes all of God’s work in creation as “very good,” the divine name is revealed to Moses in Exod 3:15, and the code of divine conduct is, like 32:33, an application of the template text in 20:5b–6, in this case 20:6. The implication is that while Moses’ experience of God is unique, as is every experience of the divine, it is of the one Lord of creation and history. It is also, as is every experience of the divine, not exclusively for Moses but an integral part of God’s purpose for humanity and all creation. Hence Moses’ encounter takes place within the context of the renewal of the covenant between God and Israel and Israel’s vocation as a covenant people. The re-

19 Although Exod 24:10 states that Moses and others “saw the God of Israel” on Mt. Sinai, the immediately following text focuses on what was under God’s feet. Exod 33:11 states that God spoke with Moses “face to face,” that is, on intimate terms (so Dozeman, Exodus 726–27).

20 While the terms for compassion (hăn̂n) and mercy (rhm) do not appear in 20:6 they are closely related to its reference to steadfast love (ḥesed), as shown by the way this term occurs in conjunction with the adjective merciful (and related term gracious) in the version of the code of divine conduct in 34:6–7.
newal involves the preparations in 34:1–4, the fulfilment of the promised appearance of God to Moses in 34:5–7, and the covenant and stipulations in 34:11–26. Although all this is reported as taking place only between God and Moses on the mountain, the narrative subsequently states that Moses reported to the people “all that the Lord had spoken with him on the mountain” (34:32).

The code of divine conduct in Exod 34:6–7 should be read in conjunction with the preceding versions, namely 20:5b–6; 32:33 and 33:19. It endorses them but in a manner appropriate to the context of covenant renewal after transgression. This leads to the sequence of statements in 20:5b–6 being reversed. The covenant is renewed because of God’s merciful (raḥûm) and gracious (ḥannîn) nature—as proclaimed earlier in 33:19—that accepts a wayward people, and because God is utterly committed to the chosen people and the purpose for which they are chosen. The terms that express this commitment or loyalty are steadfast love (ḥesed) to the thousandth generation—quoting 20:6—and faithfulness (eṭem). Taken in isolation the references in 34:6 to God as merciful and gracious could give the impression that this is how God behaves no matter how bad Israel is. The following “slow to anger” (or “forbearing of anger”) warns against such an assumption; there is a limit, although it is not spelt out. Taken together, the sense could be that the anger of God is displayed in concert with God’s mercy and compassion, as for example when God strikes down an evildoer or people threatening the helpless (22:21–24). In 20:6 God’s steadfast love or covenant loyalty is directed to those “who love me and keep my commandments.” There is no such specification in 34:6–7a; it claims that God keeps steadfast love for the thousandth generation (or “thousands”). But are these thousands only those who love and obey God (20:6) or those who are forgiven “iniquity and transgression and sin?” If this were the case it would apply to just about everyone.

The subsequent statements appear to be formulated—at least in part—to counter such an understanding. The merciful and compassionate God who forgives is also the righteous judge who always brings the guilty to book. There

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21 As John Van Seters notes, Exod 34:6–7 “is hardly adequate by itself as a confession of the deity’s total relationship to humanity or to this people” (The Life of Moses. The Yahwist as Historian in Exodus–Numbers [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994] 351).

22 As it stands, the subject of the verb “proclaimed” in 34:5 and 6 could be the Lord or Moses. Nevertheless, the fact that God is the speaker in 32:33 and 33:19 and that Moses bows down and worships at this encounter with the divine (v. 8) point to the Lord as the subject.

23 Widmer states that “YHWH’s visiting of Israel’s iniquities is not inconsistent with His fundamental covenant loyalty” (Moses, God, and the Dynamics of Intercessory Prayer, 183 and summary on 202). Also Matthias Franz, Der barmherzige und gnädige Gott. Die Gnadenrede vom Sinai (Exodus 34, 6–7) und ihre Parallelen im Alten Testament und seiner Umwelt (BWANT 160; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2003).
is little point having a forgiveness clause in this code of conduct if there is no guilty party to forgive. The second part of v. 7 adds the rider that God will by no means "clear the guilty" but will visit the iniquity of the parents on the children to the third and fourth generation. In the wake of the calf apostasy, this is a vital clause, a motivation not to repeat that sin. The most likely sense of the verb "visit" in this context is that God will "examine/assess" the iniquity or sins of each person.24 It is widely recognised that the Hebrew term for iniquity (אָבָט) can include punishment or the consequences that follow a particular transgression. One can therefore read the second part of 34:7 as an assurance that God will assess or examine the sins/iniquity of each person and his or her descendants in each of the generations listed before distributing mercy or punishment.25 This aligns it more closely with 20:5b and 32:33. In short, one’s understanding of 34:6–7 is enhanced by comparing it with the preceding statements about the divine code of conduct: 20:5b–6; 32:33; 33:19. The location of Exod 34:6–7 in the context of Moses’ passionate appeal on Israel’s behalf may explain why it tends to be the version of the divine code of conduct invoked in subsequent texts. A notable case within the Torah is the spy-story in Number 14; others are Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Pss 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Neh 9:17; 2 Chr 30:9; less explicitly Pss 111:4; 112:4; 116:5; Neh 9:31. A version more in line with Exod 20:5b–6 is Nah 1:3, within the context of a prophecy of Nineveh’s doom.

Exodus 34:8–9 provides further evidence of Moses’ solidarity with the people and his continuing intercession of their behalf. In asking for their forgiveness Moses, like God, displays a true knowledge of his people, describing them as “stiff-necked,” a signal that, despite gestures of repentance (33:6), there is an ongoing propensity for rebellion. Erik Aurelius and John Van Seters have noted a parallel here with the flood story, where humanity’s evil inclination is the reason why God unleashes the flood (Gen 6:5–7) but also the reason why God vows never to do so again (8:21). Exodus 34:6–7 is a measure of the Torah’s conviction of God’s unconditional commitment to Israel and humanity despite their inability to change.26

187 (“In der Endfassung ist das barmherzige Wesen Jhwhs der Grund für den neuen Bund”).

24 See the discussion in Widmer, Moses, God, and the Dynamics of Intercessory Prayer 199–201, and Franz, Der barmherzige und gnädige Gott 141–43.

25 The addition of “the children’s children” to the formulation in 20:5b adds to this sense of careful examination of each line of descent.

Although the law code in 34:11–26 may have originated independently it fits the context of the golden calf apostasy well. It teaches how Israel is to be exclusively devoted to God. Within the larger context it serves as a restatement of key elements in the Decalogue (20:2–17) and the Covenant Code (20:22–23:33). Apostate Israel is called to maintain the same loyalty to God demanded in these earlier codes and will be challenged at each step of its subsequent journey to stay loyal to the covenant that God has renewed and to its role within God’s saving purpose. All the divine epithets invoked in 34:5–7; that God is merciful, gracious, steadfast in love and faithful, forgiving sin and punishing the guilty after examination (visiting), testify to God’s commitment to this relationship and its ultimate purpose—that the whole world may come to know ‘I am the Lord’ (cf. 33:19; 34:5).

With the covenant renewed, the narrative can resume preparations for God’s dwelling among the people (Exodus 35–40). Its construction provides an opportunity for the people to be active and creative in their relationship with God and with one another. As long as they follow the blueprint provided by God and keep the divinely ordained rhythm of six days’ work and Sabbath rest (35:2–3) they will be acting in the image and likeness of God as described in the account of creation (cf. 31:16–17). The subsequent narrative reports how the men and women, in contrast to their behaviour in the golden calf story, contribute to its construction in accord with instructions. God enables the finest artistic work by bestowing “skill and understanding” (36:1–2).

27 Franz proposes the plausible thesis that the present text is a combination of a tradition that emphasises divine appearance to which 34:6–7 belonged (T G; Gottesschau Tradition), and one that emphasises divine laws to which 34:11–26 belonged (T G; Gebotstradition) (cf. Der barmherzige und gnädige Gott 158–62).

28 According to Brevard Childs, for the redactor of the present text “The laws in ch. 34 represented a convenient abbreviation of both these collections of laws on which the covenant is to be renewed” (Exodus. A Commentary [OTL; London: SCM Press, 1974] 608). The respective laws to which Childs refers are the Decalogue and the Covenant Code. Cf. also Dozeman, Exodus 741–42.