

# Free, Present, and Faithful: A Theological Reading of the Character of God in Exodus

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My aim in this essay is to contribute to an ongoing theological conversation about the character of the God whom Christians worship, but who is first revealed in the books of the Bible Christians call the Old Testament. It has become a sometimes necessary and often popular pastime for professional theologians to critique the God of so-called classical theism, suggesting, as Adolf von Harnack did more than a hundred years ago, that Christian theology borrows too heavily from neoplatonic philosophy when it conceives of God as impassable and unchangeable. The Christian doctrine of God consequently “takes the form, not of a Christian product in Greek dress, but a Greek product in Christian dress.”<sup>1</sup> This God of classical theism, it is furthermore often suggested, does not square with the God of the Bible whom we find getting angry, changing his mind, and grieving the corruption of his creation. I want to contribute to this debate by making two suggestions. First, I want to suggest that those who critique classical theism on these grounds *have a misunderstanding of the classical notion of God*. Second, I want to show how a reading of the book of Exodus can show exactly the opposite of what the critics think the Old Testament shows. Far from revealing a God of emotion and pathos, the book of Exodus *confirms the theological claims of classical theism properly understood*.

I begin with a note on my title and my method. Why “character” of God and not “identity” of God or “nature” of God? First, I avoid “nature” because that is the language of ontology, of essence — the very language under dispute for speaking of God. I think the language of nature is appropriate regarding God, especially since I think God’s nature cannot be known. We might discover, then, by the end of this essay, if I have shown adequately the apophatic stance of both classical theism and the book of Exodus, that the language of “nature” is entirely appropriate insofar as it designates the very unknowability of God. But God’s character and identity are knowable precisely because these words denote God as he is known by us. God’s character tells us what God is like, while God’s identity tells us which God we are talking about. As we will see in Exodus, the two

<sup>1</sup> Adolf von Harnack, *What is Christianity?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 221.

are practically interchangeable. It is the character of the God who reveals himself to Moses and the Israelites that distinguishes this God from all the other gods.

What is a theological reading? A theological reading, as I understand it, approaches the textual narrative as having integrity in its present form and asks how the narrative construes the character and identity of God. Furthermore, I am reading Exodus within the context of a particular theological conversation because my acquaintance with Exodus has suggested to me that it might have something to contribute to that conversation.<sup>2</sup>

### The Theological Conversation

Christian thinkers quickly realized, after the Gospel's penetration in the Greek culture, the metaphysical import of their faith. Indeed, the stage had already been set by Jewish philosophers like Philo. How could Christian theologians read the name of God in Exodus 3:14, especially after Jerome rendered it into Latin, *ego sum qui sum*, "I am who I am," and not take this to be a metaphysical statement akin to the neoplatonic affirmation of God as pure being? As the great historian of Christian theology and philosophy, Etienne Gilson, has written, referring to God's giving his name to Moses at the burning bush, "Here again historians of philosophy find themselves confronted with this to them always unpalatable fact: a nonphilosophical statement which has since become an epochmaking statement in the history of philosophy."<sup>3</sup> Christian theology began to affirm, in the language of Thomas Aquinas, that God is *ipsum esse subsistens*: Subsistent being in itself, metaphysical language consistent with the name God gave to Moses.

This way of talking about God has come under attack because it implies the impassibility and immutability of God, which seems to contradict the biblical notion of a compassionate God who suffers with his creation. Martin Buber makes the critique on historical and

<sup>2</sup> For a compelling argument for the theological reading of Scripture see Stephen E. Fowl's *Engaging Scripture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998). For a recent example of reading Exodus theologically see Donald E. Gowan's *Theology in Exodus: Biblical Theology in the Form of a Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994). My approach differs from Gowan's in that he maintains the disciplinary distinctions, performing the exegetical task before turning to how the text can be understood theologically in conversation with the tradition of Christian theology. He writes, "This book claims to be theology-writing rather than exegesis, since the reflection that begins with texts in Exodus does not end there or satisfy itself with references to related passages (as standard commentaries do), but includes extended discussion of what all of scripture says on the subject, and then moves on to consideration of its contemporary significance." x. In this he roughly follows the form of Brevard Childs's now classic commentary, *The Book of Exodus* (Louisville: Westminster, 1974). I do not think reflection on the biblical text and its present theological significance can be easily separated.

<sup>3</sup> Etienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale, 1941), 40.

philological grounds, writing, “This [the name of God given to Moses] is usually understood to mean ‘I am that I am’ in the sense that YHWH describes himself as the Being One or even the Everlasting One, the one unalterably persisting in being.”<sup>4</sup> But Buber points out that “that would be an abstraction of a kind which does not usually come about in periods of increasing religious vitality; while in addition the verb in the Biblical language does not carry this particular shade of meaning pure existence.”<sup>5</sup> Others similarly object on theological grounds that an impassible God is an unhelpful God if impassibility means that God can be neither compassionate nor sympathetic.

Objection to this Greek notion of God, the metaphysical God of being, is stated perhaps most forcefully by process theology. Arguing that “traditional theism said that God is completely impassive, that there was no element of sympathy in the divine love for the creatures” and lamenting the fact “that there was no awareness that this Greek notion of divine impassibility was in serious tension with the Biblical notion of divine love”<sup>6</sup>, they contend that God “is a factor in the universe which establishes what-is-not as relevant to what-is, and lures the world toward new forms of realization.”<sup>7</sup> To deny in God the capacity to experience love and sympathy by metaphysically sealing God from the world of creaturely being is, according to process theology, to deny of God much that the Bible affirms. Rather, God must be an interactive God, with some change taking place on God’s part, too, if we are to understand that God is the loving God revealed in the Bible.<sup>8</sup>

One theologian in particular has addressed this challenge against the notion that the “God of metaphysics is a Greek intrusion on Hebrew revelation.”<sup>9</sup> Herbert McCabe argues from the side of classical theology (he is an Aquinas scholar, after all) and I think his response is particularly important, for he has an amazing way of clearing up theological muddles. In a chapter entitled “The Involvement of God”<sup>10</sup> McCabe counters these popular attacks on classical theology on two grounds: He argues that the critics misunderstand classical theology (as it is presented by Aquinas) and that they misunderstand analogical predication.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Buber, *Moses* (Oxford: East and West Library, 1946), 52.

<sup>5</sup> Buber, 52.

<sup>6</sup> John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 44.

<sup>7</sup> Cobb and Griffin, 43.

<sup>8</sup> William C. Placher in his book *Narratives of a Vulnerable God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994) offers a more nuanced critique that better understands the categories of classical Christian theology. See the first chapter, “The Vulnerable God,” 3–7.

<sup>9</sup> Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (Springfield, Ill: Templegate, 1987), 39.

<sup>10</sup> McCabe, 39–51.

McCabe argues that process theologians and others misunderstand classical theology as defining the nature of God as Being, and that this being has the character of being impassible and immutable. God, they think, has been defined as a static, unsympathetic being. But McCabe convincingly shows that classical theological metaphysics does not use the language of being and ontology to establish the nature of God, but to distinguish between God, who is unknowable, and creation, which possesses creaturely being. According to McCabe, Aquinas is not in his famous Five Ways trying to prove the nature of God, but to validate the appropriateness of the question why there is any creation at all. Aquinas is using philosophical concepts borrowed from the Greeks to make sense of the theological concept of Creation of which the Greeks knew nothing but which he learned from Hebrew revelation. Thus Hebrew revelation motivates Aquinas' use of philosophical concepts. And it is, according to McCabe, precisely those philosophical concepts that help Aquinas distinguish God from the world which God created, and thus from the other gods (which are no gods at all) inhabiting the world. Thus, McCabe argues that to "lose sight of the Jewish creation question is, it seems to me, to settle for worshipping an inhabitant of the world, to betray the biblical inheritance and to regress to a worship of the gods."<sup>11</sup> Greek philosophy is co-opted by classical Christian theology precisely to support the biblical prohibition against worshipping anything that is part of creation. Thus the language of being serves an apophatic function; it delicately works in the theology of Aquinas to help him say what God is not, but does not define God's nature.

If God's nature is in this way unknowable, and if Greek metaphysics is used by Christian theologians to make apophatic distinctions between God and creation, what do we mean when we say God is impassible? If one thinks that to say God is impassible means the opposite, for instance that God is positively indifferent — and this is what most critics think it means — then one misunderstands analogical and metaphorical language regarding God. This is a point McCabe makes quite clearly.<sup>12</sup> In the human world of existence there are two options, according to McCabe. One is either compassionate or indifferent. Sympathy is an attempt, by one outside of another's feelings, to *feel with* that one who is suffering. But if God is not a part of creation then God is not outside of creation, for spatial metaphors do not apply to God; thus there is no distance between our feeling something and God which God needs to "make up." Unless we are compassionate we are indifferent; but God is neither of these. Rather, in "our compassion we, in our feeble way, are seeking to be what God is all the time: united

<sup>11</sup> McCabe, 44.

<sup>12</sup> McCabe, 44–45.

with and within the life of our friend.”<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, what “is true of compassion has to be more generally true of all experience and learning.”<sup>14</sup> McCabe writes. “Unless *we* learn, we are ignorant, but it is not the case with God that he would be ignorant if he did not learn. And our learning and experience is a feeble shadow of God’s understanding of the world which he makes both to be and to be intelligible.”<sup>15</sup> God has no emotions or experiences or passions. It is true both that God does not “have passions” and that God does not “not have passions,” for the language “have passions” and “not have passions” cannot literally refer to God. Aquinas, along with the best of classical theology, uses philosophical, metaphysical concepts to help make these kinds of distinctions.

If McCabe is right, and I think he is, then classical theism cannot be guilty of the charges leveled against it by theologians like process theologians. They are wrong about what classical theism is saying about God insofar as they think that classical theism is making positive and literal affirmations about God when it says God is without passions, as if an impassible God were like a human without passions. For sure, classical theism says that God does not have compassion; it does not say that God *is* incompassionate. God is not sympathetic; neither is he unsympathetic.

For the purposes of a theological reading of Exodus, we should note that the critics of the metaphysics of classical theism often point to the Old Testament narratives to argue against classical theism. When they read, for instance, that God “saw the people of Israel, and God knew their condition” (Ex. 2:25) or that the “LORD repented of the evil which he thought to do to his people” (Ex. 32:14) they see a clear contradiction of the classical notion of God. Now as we turn to the text of Exodus itself, I want to show that the text of Exodus 32:14, far from contradicting classical theism as understood above, is integral in establishing the character of God in Exodus in a way entirely consistent with the classical doctrine of God, indeed, supportive of it. The narrative of Exodus identifies God as — to use human language, the only language available to us — free, present, and faithful, a God who is no god at all.

### The Character of God in Exodus

As we move from the language of metaphysics to the text of Exodus I need to make one more distinction, that is, between the order of being and the order of knowing. I will argue that the utter faithfulness of God to be present with the Israelites in not a premise of the

<sup>13</sup> McCabe, 45.

<sup>14</sup> McCabe, 45.

<sup>15</sup> McCabe, 45.

narrative but its conclusion; God's faithfulness is established over the course of God's narrative involvement with the Israelites. More precisely, his faithfulness, his unchangeability, is narratively displayed and confirmed when God *changes* his mind after the golden calf episode. This all takes place in the order of knowing, the world of revelation, to which we have access. To say that God's faithfulness is narratively established does not mean that God was not always faithful. It merely means that if this were a short story and God were a character, God's faithfulness, or, in other words, his distinction from the other gods, would not be clear from the beginning. It is displayed as the narrative progresses.

There is not space here to treat the whole book in detail. I will look, then, at three areas of the book: 1) the beginning; 2) the burning bush episode; and 3) the golden calf incident.

### An Absent God

One of the overriding themes of Exodus is to identify God, to show God's character, as distinguishable from the other gods. If that is the case, then the first thing we should note about the character of God in the book of Exodus is God's seemingly utter absence from the beginning. The narrative begins with an adumbrated telling of the history of the children of Israel in Egypt, but it never mentions God. It tells how they multiplied and how they were enslaved, but it does not show God's hand in this, so we do not know why God let them be enslaved. God is briefly mentioned as dealing well with the midwives who did not kill the Hebrew children (1:20), but he could at this point hardly be called a main character. Even more amazingly, God is not mentioned in Moses' being rescued from the Nile by the daughter of Pharaoh (2:5ff). Moses grows up, kills an Egyptian, flees, marries Tzipora, and still no mention of God. Only at the end of chapter two do we find God waking up, so to speak, and hearing the cries of the people: "It was many years later, the king of Egypt died. The Children of Israel groaned from the servitude, and they cried out; and their plea-for-help went up to God, from the servitude. God hearkened to their moaning, God called-to-mind his covenant with Avraham, with Yitzhak, and with Yaakov, God saw the Children of Israel, God knew" (2:23–25).<sup>16</sup> It took the suffering and the loud cries of his people, it seems, to remind God of his covenant with their ancestors.

What does God's conspicuous absence and needing to be reminded of his covenant tell us of his character in these first two chapters? The

<sup>16</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all the Scripture quotations are taken from Everett Fox's translation of Exodus in *The Five Books of Moses: The Schocken Bible Volume 1* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995).



narrative itself seems to want to highlight the complicated question of God's character by presenting God as absent; the story opens with suffering people and an absent God. Indeed, as Gowan suggests, "As the story is told, [the Israelites] know about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and about his promises, but at this point there is nothing they could point to as evidence that God keeps his promises."<sup>17</sup> Gowan highlights in his theological commentary the conspicuous absence of God from these first chapters, and compares it to other places in the Old Testament that depict God's absence. The difference, as the above quotation indicates, is that in the Psalms of Lament, for instance, the Psalmist can appeal to the already established faithfulness of God. But as Gowan suggests, that faithfulness has not yet been established in the Exodus narrative. The children of Israel cry out, and they are heard, but the surety of their deliverance remains to be seen.

God's absence is one important feature of the first two chapters of Exodus, and it is important how that absence sets the parameters of the question of God's character. There is a blank slate, and the narrative, as it proceeds, will draw the portrait of God. But Gowan misses three subtle but important references in these first two chapters that already begin to establish God's character. First, the language of 1:7 echoes the language of Genesis 1 where God commands the creatures of the earth to be fruitful, thus placing the mentioning of their multiplication within a theological framework. It subtly suggests that the events of Exodus are no accident, just as the creation was no accident, but was accomplished by the hand of God. Furthermore, the language of the multiplication of the children of Israel suggests that God is already fulfilling his promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:2 to make a great nation of him, for as Exodus says, "they grew mighty (in number) — exceedingly, yes, exceedingly; the land filled up with them" (1:7). Second, Gowan does not mention the faithfulness of the Hebrew midwives in not killing the sons of the Hebrews because they "held God in awe" (1:17). In response "God dealt well with the midwives" (1:20). So, even though God is largely absent, the text is already suggesting that God *deals faithfully with those who are faithful*. Finally, Gowan does not see in the language of the "little-ark of papyrus" in which Moses' mother placed the child an allusion to God saving humanity on the ark of Noah. Indeed, as Everett Fox says, "The term used to designate the little basket/boat, *teiva*, has clearly been chosen to reflect back to Noah's ark in Genesis. The implication is that just as God saved Noah and thus humanity from destruction by water, so will he now save Moshe and the Israelites from the same."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Gowan, 6.

<sup>18</sup> Fox, 263n3.

Thus, there is a tension in these first two chapters the resolving of which will be the burden of the rest of the narrative. God is absent, conspicuously; but too God is subtly present in ways that foreshadow his covenant loyalty and saving faithfulness.

### Free and Present at the Burning Bush

A fourfold litany of verbs at the end of chapter two indicates God's fully entering the narrative as the primary character. When the children of Israel cried, God "hearkened" to their cry, "called-to-mind" his former covenant with the patriarchs, "saw" the Israelites and "knew" (2:23–25). Immediately following this litany God dramatically reveals himself to Moses at the burning bush.

When God speaks to Moses from the bush, the first thing he does, after warning Moses to take off his sandals, is to identify himself: "I am the God of Avraham, the God of Yitzhak, and the God of Yaakov" (3:6). Against some historical critics who think that Moses has discovered a new god here, perhaps the god of his wife's Midianites, Martin Buber forcefully argues, "This is no alien god 'discovered' by Moses on Sinai; it is the God of the Fathers."<sup>19</sup> He believes we can be sure it is the God of the Fathers by comparing the characteristics of each God; Buber thinks we already know enough to be sure Moses is talking to the same God. First Buber recognizes in this God the one who "approaches these men, addresses them, manifests himself to them, demands and charges them and accepts them in his covenant"<sup>20</sup> and "he does not remain satisfied with withdrawing them from their surrounding world and sending them on new paths, but wanders with them himself and guides them along those new paths; meanwhile, however, remaining invisible insofar as he does not 'make himself to be seen' by them."<sup>21</sup> Thus, Buber concludes that "this god is not bound to any place, and that the seats of his manifestation do not restrict him."<sup>22</sup> But how does Buber get all this from the narrative before us?

The first characteristic is clear. God *calls* to Moses and charges him to "bring my people, the Children of Israel, out of Egypt!" (3:10) without himself being *conjured* by Moses, in the same way that God called to Abraham in Genesis 12. Secondly, God promises his abiding presence with Moses, that God himself will accompany Moses on the journey and bring him and the people back to this very mountain (3:12). Thus, this God is whichever one first *reveals himself when he wills and remains present with those to whom he commits himself*. Taken together, these characteristics are enough to identify this God as the

<sup>19</sup> Buber, 44.

<sup>20</sup> Buber, 43.

<sup>21</sup> Buber, 43–44.

<sup>22</sup> Buber, 44.



God of Abraham and to distinguish him from the other gods who must appear when conjured by the magical use of their name and who are confined to a certain location and mode of manifestation. We should notice however that the character of God as the one who remains present has not been established insofar as this characteristic is revealed in the form of a promise. So in one sense this promise heightens the narrative tension already established in the first two chapters; the God who hears but is absent now promises to be present even though it seems he has not been for some time. And since this God freely reveals himself when he wills, his presence cannot be guaranteed by any human power to conjure or magical incantation. It rests solely on this God's to-be-established faithfulness.

Moses wants to tell the people more that just the God of their fathers has sent him. He wants to know the name of this God; and in giving that name God confirms the importance of the two characteristics mentioned above. Buber remarks that when Moses asks for this God's name he is not referring to the proper name of this God, for presumably the Israelites knew by what to call the God of their fathers, or how else could they cry out to him. Rather, "Moses expects the people to ask the meaning and character of a name of which they have been familiar since the days of their fathers."<sup>23</sup> We have already seen that Buber rejects the translation of the name of God as "I am that I am" on historical and philological grounds, even if the eventual misunderstanding of this name has born much philosophical fruit. Buber, rather, translates the phrase '*ehyeh 'asher ehyeh* in 3:14, "I will be present howsoever I will be present." If in Moses' ancient society a name "is the true essence of the person" and "anybody who knows the true name and knows how to pronounce it in the correct way can gain control of him"<sup>24</sup> then Buber suggests that the name God has given does not fit within this system of naming. Indeed the first part "I will be present" promises this God's being present is constitutive of who this God is; he is one that does not need to be conjured by his name because he is already there. But the second part, "howsoever I will be present" names the impossibility of conjuring this God who remains free to manifest himself however he wants. As Buber writes, "With his words, 'I shall be present howsoever I shall be present', [God] describes Himself as the one who is not restricted to any specific manner of manifestation, but permits Himself to be seen from time to time by those He leads and, in order to lead them, to be seen by them after the fashion which He prefers at the given moment."<sup>25</sup> God reveals himself to Moses at the burning bush as the God who is free and

<sup>23</sup> Buber, 49.

<sup>24</sup> Buber, 51.

<sup>25</sup> Buber, 126.

present, the God who promises to be with Moses and the people but who cannot be conjured or controlled. In this way God identifies himself, that is, he distinguishes himself from, for example, the god who might live on that mountain, by divulging his character as free and present. When these two characteristics of this God are established as true by God's behavior as the narrative unfolds we will know that this God is faithful to his name.

Before we move to examine the narrative of the golden calf incident and its aftermath, I want briefly to suggest that we can already see how this God is more like the God of classical theism than not. As we saw with McCabe it is God's utter presence, an apophatic presence, that cannot be understood according to spatial metaphors because God is not a part of creation, that prevents God from needing to be compassionate because compassion in the creaturely world makes up a gap that the presence of God does not need to overcome. But the freedom of God in classical theism consists in his not being metaphysically bound by his creation; he is absolutely free so that he cannot be controlled or conjured by creatures.<sup>26</sup> This, I want to suggest, is very close to the understanding of God we are beginning to get in Exodus. Furthermore, it shows a connection between the name of God as Buber understands it and as it is understood in the philosophical sense that transcends denials to the contrary.

### Faithful on the Mountain

It is an understatement to say that much happens between the burning bush in chapter 3 and the golden calf episode in 32. Since I cannot examine these intervening narratives in detail, for our purposes, two things are important to notice. First, one of the main purposes of the plague narratives, besides narrating the sheer fact of the Exodus, is to further identify this God who is present with Moses and distinguish him from all other gods. The job of the plague narratives is to answer the question of Pharaoh, "Who is YHWH, that I should hearken to his voice to send Israel free? I do not know YHWH" (5:2) for God himself declares that "the Egyptians will know that I am YHWH when I stretch out my hand over Egypt and bring the Children of Israel out of their midst" (7:5). The plague narratives are partly a contest between the conjuring occult arts of the Egyptian magicians and the true God of the Israelites who, as we have seen, cannot be conjured. These narratives, along with the final destruction of the

<sup>26</sup> Ellen Davis, too, points us to the radical freedom of God indicated by the divine name, writing, "Fixed images of God violate what is most characteristic of God: free-spiritedness. That was the very first truth God revealed to Moses out of the burning bush, with the Name that bespeaks God's radical freedom: 'ehyeh 'asher ehyeh, 'I will be who I will be' (Exodus 3:14)." *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2001), 157.

Egyptians in the sea, establish, as far as the narrative is concerned, the definitive fact that “there is none like [YHWH] throughout the land” (9:14). The song that the Israelites sang upon the successful crossing of the sea is their testimony that they, at least, and presumably the dead Egyptians, finally know that YHWH alone is God who will “render judgment” “on all the gods of Egypt” (12:12), a judgment definitively rendered by the destruction of the Egyptians. The Israelites sang, “I will sing to YHWH, for he has triumphed, yes, triumphed, his horse and its charioteer he flung into the sea!” (15:1).

Secondly, we must note that at this point in the narrative it should be no surprise that the commandments which Moses gives the people from God begin, “I am YHWH your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt, from the house of serfs. You are not to have any other gods before my presence. You are not to make yourself a carved-image or any figure... you are not to serve them, for I, YHWH your God, am a jealous God” (20:2–5). This is a fitting summary of the narrative portrayal of God thus far. God has indeed been present to the Israelites, rescuing them from Egypt, in a way that all but resolves the tensions created by God’s absence in the first two chapters. God has adequately been distinguished from the other gods both by his revelation to Moses at the burning bush and through the destruction of Egypt. We are not surprised that God forbids the worship of other gods, or forbids for himself to be worshipped in the form of an image, for that would violate God’s already established freedom. That God is a jealous God, then, adds no new information to what we have learned about God through the progression of the narrative. Rather, it captures vividly what we have learned so far. God is utterly present and absolutely free, like no other god.

Only one question remains: Will God live up to his name in the face of Israel’s apostasy?

It is not an overstatement to call the worshipping of the golden calf apostasy, even if they did not worship the calf itself but imagined it as the bull which YHWH was riding. Karl Barth recognizes that they do not think they are creating a new God, different from the one who revealed himself to them through Moses. He writes, “They do not plan and purpose any apostasy from their relationship with Him, but the deepest and most faithful and fitting interpretation of it, its actualization in all its particularity.”<sup>27</sup> Rather, they saw that Moses was “shamefully late in coming down from the mountain” (32:1). Until now, God’s own presence with them had been tied to Moses’ presence with them; with Moses gone the people feared God was gone, too. Buber’s reading of this passage is insightful. He writes that

<sup>27</sup> Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation: Church Dogmatics*, Volume IV/I trans. G. W. Bromiley (New York: Scribners), 428.

Moses has “brought them an assurance from this God, namely, that He wishes to lead and protect them” as is “indicated in His name.” But this man whom they have been following and who has been helping them to see God’s presence, “the man has vanished completely.”<sup>28</sup> Lost in the wilderness, desperate for God to guide them, there seemed only one choice: “An image had to be made, and then the power of the God will enter the image and there will be proper guidance.”<sup>29</sup>

The Israelites did not intentionally abandon this God in favor of another; they thought they were conjuring the presence of YHWH. But precisely insofar as they thought they could conjure the presence of the free and present God they *de facto* were worshipping a god who was not their God. They committed apostasy by relating themselves to God in such a way that denies he is the God who he is. They worshipped him as if he were one of the conjurable gods, a god whose power can be harnessed by the appropriate images and incantations. YHWH is radically free, but they had domesticated him, transformed him into the “champion and work and possession of Israel.”<sup>30</sup>

What transpires on the mountain between Moses and God is the climax of the book and a crisis in the identity of God. This episode for a few moments calls radically into question everything the narrative has revealed about God; it presents the real possibility that this God who has been with them may in fact *not* be the present God who manifests himself howsoever he will. While throughout the text God has referred to the Israelites as “my people” (see especially 15:3–7), consistent with his promise to be present to them, when God hears the reveling around the calf he commands Moses, “Go, down! for *your* people whom *you* brought up from the land of Egypt has wrought ruin!” (32:7; emphasis mine). In the wake of the people’s denying God’s identity and character, God himself denies it in a kind of divine self-apostasy when he says “whom you brought up.” God himself is contradicting his own self-description in the first of the ten commandments. God, it seems, is undergoing a radical change. God continues, “So now, let me be, that my anger may flare against them and I may destroy them — but you I will make into a great nation!” (32:10). The God who initially identified himself as the God of Abraham is now threatening to break the covenant he established with Abraham to make him into a great nation, and to reestablish the covenant with Moses.

I will pause here to suggest that those who critique classical theism on the grounds that it promotes a God who is impassible and immutable should stop reading Exodus at 32:10, for if the narrative

<sup>28</sup> Buber, 151.

<sup>29</sup> Buber, 151.

<sup>30</sup> Barth, 428.

stopped here we would be given a picture of God full of human emotions, able to change his mind, mostly steadfast, but completely changing his identity at the most crucial moments. We are now at the very kind of passage used to support the so-called biblical understanding of God against the so-called Greek notion. It shows that if we want a God whom we can understand as literally compassionate, that is, sharing our passions with us, we also have a God who is a veritable turncoat, untrustworthy to the deepest core of his identity.

Fortunately, the episode does not end here. Barth says that Moses “dares to remind God of His own promise, to appeal to His faithfulness.”<sup>31</sup> This is true. And yet the maxim of God’s faithfulness in Exodus 34:6 has not yet been established; it has not yet been reached. Rather, by appealing to God’s faithfulness, Moses *elicits* God’s faithfulness from the depths of God’s already revealed identity and character. From the perspective of the narrative, then, this is the climactic crisis in the identity and character of God as it is being revealed. Will this God, who throughout the story has been separating himself from all the other gods, identifying himself in a way consistent with the apophatic God of classical theism—free and present—will this God turn out to be a god? Will he destroy the people, destroy the covenant, will he burn hot with anger, thus showing himself to be a fickle, local deity like all the rest? We learn that the answer is no. For, “YHWH let himself be sorry concerning the evil that he had spoken of doing to his people” (32:14). In the act of changing his mind, God’s immutability is established. It is now possible for him to say “YHWH YHWH God, showing-mercy, showing-favor, long-suffering in anger, abundant in loyalty and faithfulness” (34:6).

It is no accident that after Moses returns to the mountain following his own burning-hot with anger against the people, the motif of God’s presence is more intense than it has been anywhere else in the narrative. For now God’s freedom and presence have been established in God’s utter faithfulness, in his refusal, if he wants to stay God, to abandon his identity as the God who goes with in radical freedom.

### Free, Present, and Faithful: The God of Classical Theism

The languages of philosophical theology and the biblical narrative are extraordinarily different. While theology seeks to discipline its language in order to speak as precisely as possible the biblical narrative paints in broad, anthropomorphic brush strokes. Nonetheless, if my interpretation, following McCabe, of the God of classical theism is right; and, furthermore, if my reading of the Exodus narrative is

<sup>31</sup> Barth, 425.

accurate, then we see that classical Christian theology is trying to say in its own idiom what the narrative of Exodus is showing us about God. Both want to distinguish God from God's creation, show God as radically present and utterly free, and affirm that God does not change. Exodus does this through the narrative heightening and resolving of tension regarding God's character and identity; classical Christian theology by employing the language of metaphysics to distinguish God from that which God has created. It is a mistake to pit one against the other. Rather, they are both doing largely the same thing in a way appropriate to each.

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