

S O U T H E A S T E R N

THEOLOGICAL REVIEW



Vol. 2, No. 1 Summer 2011

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Southeastern Theological Review

Is published biannually for the faculty of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

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Manuscripts should conform to the *SBL Handbook of Style*.

Journal subscriptions cost \$30 annually (2 issues).

For more information visit: www.southeasterntheologicalreview.com

All address correspondence to:

Attn: Editor, *Southeastern Theological Review*

Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

PO BOX 1889, Wake Forest, NC 27588-1889

ISSN 2156-9401

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Note: *The views expressed in the following articles are not necessarily those of the Editorial Board, the faculty, or the administration of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.*

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The Immutable Mutability of YHWH¹

David T. Lamb

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“And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people” (Exod 32:14 NRSV).

“God is not a human being, that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind” (Num 23:19a NRSV).

The problem: Does YHWH change?

Scripture states both that God changes and that he does not change. To complicate the problem, the mind-changing verb in these two verses from the Pentateuch is the same, *נִחַם*. If these two texts were unique in presenting this paradoxical perspective of YHWH, then reconciling them might not seem a daunting task. However, other texts support the doctrine of divine immutability and even more support the idea of divine change. How does one reconcile these apparently contradictory biblical perceptions? Does the OT affirm divine change or not?

Despite biblical evidence on both sides of the issue, the popular Christian perception is that God does not change. The pervasiveness of the doctrine of divine changelessness is testified to in hymns such as Thomas Chisholm’s *Great is thy Faithfulness*, “Thou changest not, thy compassions they fail not” (1923), as well as in contemporary songs such as Cindy Berry’s *Almighty, Unchangeable God* (1996) or Chris Tomlin’s *Unchanging* (2002). Thomas Aquinas, who argued for “The Immutability of God” in his *Summa Theologica* (question 9) has apparently won the debate, at least in popular theological circles. In my experience of teaching the OT, when students encounter Num 23:19 they experience no tension, but they are confused by Exod 32:14.

Certain theological traditions put great emphasis on divine immutability and frequently preach out of the OT to support their perspective. However, the OT

1. This article is modified from a chapter of my non-academic book, *God Behaving Badly: Is the God of the Old Testament Angry, Sexist and Racist?* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2011).

does not speak of divine immutability in a vacuum, so one needs to be careful when teaching from these texts, particularly since unchangeability can have negative connotations associated with rigidity, inflexibility and stubbornness. Unfortunately, these characteristics are often associated with Christians. When God's unchangeability is preached without an explanation of why, audiences could reasonably conclude that God is rigid, inflexible and stubborn, which could then in turn lead listeners to believe that these "divine" characteristics should be emulated.

Determining the biblical perspective on divine change is more complicated than Aquinas might have us believe, and will require examining many relevant texts within their contexts to discover the pattern of why God is described as changing or not. To do this I will examine texts that use נָחַם to describe YHWH both as not changing and as changing (section 3), as well as three relevant texts that do not use נָחַם (section 4), but first it will be necessary to survey scholarly opinion on the topic to see how they resolve the problem of these apparently contradictory texts (section 2).

Three solutions

God does not change (Maier, Master)

Scholars who argue that God does not change naturally focus on the handful of texts that support this position and typically explain the divine changing texts as necessary to convey the complexity of God's character in terms of human behavior (anthropomorphisms) or human emotions (anthropopathisms). Maier argues that God does not actually change, but only seems to change in texts like Exodus 32:14 and the anthropomorphic language is being used to communicate divine compassion.¹ However, he only looks at two of the many texts that are problematic for him (Gen 6:6; Exod 32:14) and provides little textual evidence to support his figurative interpretation.²

Master, in his analysis of Exodus 32, looks at the broader context of Exodus 1–31 and concludes that when God appears to change in 32:14, he is actually inviting dialogue and intercession.³ Master could be right about what was happening between Moses and YHWH, but that is not what the text states and while he accuses his opponents of having an argument from silence the same charge could be levied against him.⁴

The problems with these scholarly perspectives is that they do not take the

1. Walter A. Maier, "Does God 'Repent' or Change His Mind?" *CTQ* 68 (2004): 127–43.

2. Maier prefers translating נָחַם as "relented" instead of "changed his mind," yet relenting also implies a mind change about a decision, so his suggestion does not reduce the textual tension.

3. Jonathan Master, "Exodus 32 as an Argument for Traditional Theism," *JETS* 45 (2002): 585–98.

4. Unfortunately, both Master and Maier repeatedly misspell נָחַם without the final *mem* (as נָחַמ). Master, "Exodus 32," 594–95; Maier, "Does God 'Repent,'" 133.

biblical text seriously in three ways, in respect to clarity, quantity and quality. First, the text clearly states that YHWH changed his mind (“the LORD changed his mind”; Exod 32:14). If the text records without qualification that God changed, then one must conclude that God is changeable at least on some level. While it might feel more comfortable theologically to deny the straightforward meaning of a text because it does not appear to cohere with other biblical texts, it is theologically dangerous to conclude that what the text explicitly states, it obviously cannot mean. Other options need to be pursued before one resorts to changing the meaning of Scripture.

Second, there are not just a few, but numerous texts that describe God as changing. The extensive biblical support for the idea that God changes cannot be discounted lightly. I will be examining these later (in sections 3 and 4), but briefly here is a list of nineteen texts that support the idea that God changes (Exod 32:14; Num 14:20; 2 Sam 24:16; 2 Kgs 20:1–6; 1 Chr 21:15; Ps 106:45; Isa 38:1–6; Jer 15:6; 18:8, 10; 26:3, 13, 19; 42:10; Joel 2:13–14; Amos 7:3, 6; Jonah 3:9–10; 4:2).⁵ The fact that the vast majority of these references appear in narrative and not in poetic contexts (only three occur in poetry: Ps 106:45; Jer 15:6; Joel 2:13–14) undermines the perspective of these scholars who argue for a figurative or anthropomorphic interpretation of these divine changing texts since narrative is generally less figurative than poetry.

Third, the texts that support divine change are found not in obscure passages, but in crucial narratives within the history of Israel. The golden calf incident (Exod 32) came immediately after the reception of the Ten Commandments (Exod 20) and the people’s rebellion after the spies’ report (Num 14) prevented the original generation from entering the promised land. The narratives of the divine changing prayers of David and Hezekiah are deemed sufficiently important to be recorded each twice in the OT (2 Sam 24:16 and 1 Chr 21:15; 2 Kgs 20:1–6 and Isa 38:1–6).

God does change (Kuyper, Fretheim and others)

Most of the scholars who think God changes begin by mentioning Kuyper. In Kuyper’s discussion of “The Repentance of God,” he first examines the root נחם and then spends the bulk of his article discussing the history of translation and interpretation (8 pages) but unfortunately relatively little space (3 pages) directly examining the actual divine repentance passages in question.⁶ Fretheim argues that “divine repentance” should be considered a significant “controlling metaphor” for God because of its pervasiveness in a variety of OT traditions and genres.⁷ Since Fretheim stated that “divine repentance is one of the most neglected themes in

5. Richard Rice speaks vaguely of “forty or so” texts that assert that God “repents” but does not support this claim with a list or a systematic discussion of these texts, “Biblical Support for a New Perspective,” in Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994): 32.

6. Lester J. Kuyper, “The Repentance of God,” *RefR* 18 (1965): 3–16; cf. Lester J. Kuyper, “The Suffering and the Repentance of God,” *SJT* 22 (1969): 257–77.

7. Terence Fretheim, “The Repentance of God: A Key to Evaluating Old Testament

biblical scholarship⁷⁸ over twenty years ago, an increasing number of scholars have addressed the subject.

Willis and Gowan follow Kuyper and Fretheim (perhaps too uncritically) in their arguments for a God who “repents.”⁷⁹ Willis concludes by helpfully laying out four reasons why the idea of divine repentance has been rejected (biblical evidence, divine transcendence, divine foreknowledge and divine impassability) and how these concerns can be addressed.¹⁰ Gowan makes two important points: first, that biblical tensions need to be “lived with” and not “smoothed out” and second, that God’s changing “can be a basis for our petitions.”¹¹ Moberly is unusual as a scholar who argues that God changes but primarily focuses on problematic texts where God is described as not relenting (Num. 23:19 and 1 Sam. 15:29) and he concludes that as these texts speak of God not changing they are primarily emphasizing God’s faithfulness first to Israel (in Numbers) and then to David (in 1 Samuel).¹² (This point about divine faithfulness will be revisited in section 5.)

Just as three concerns were raised above concerning the position that God does not change, here I see three problems with the views of the scholars who argue that God does change. First, just as clearly as it states that God does change, the biblical text repeatedly states that God does not change. Therefore to conclude that God changes, based on certain texts, when other texts state categorically that he does not again runs the risk of devaluing Scripture, or using certain texts that one favors to “trump” texts that one does not favor. In our attempts to harmonize or systematize God’s word it is almost impossible to not downplay or perhaps even denigrate texts that we deem as “outliers” which leads to the next point.

Second, scholars who argue that God changes typically ignore some or all of the four key texts that speak of God not changing generally (Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29; Psalms 110:4; Mal 3:6) or the four texts that speak of God not changing in a specific context (Jer 4:48; 20:16; Ezek 24:14; Zech 8:14).¹³ Moberly only looks at

God-Talk,” *HBT* 10 (1988): 47–70. See also Terence Fretheim, “The Repentance of God: A Study of Jeremiah 18:7–10,” *HAR* 11 (1987): 81–92.

8. Fretheim, “A Key to Evaluating,” 47.

9. John T. Willis, “The ‘Repentance of God in the Books of Samuel, Jeremiah, and Jonah,” *HBT* 16 (1994): 156–75; Donald E. Gowan, “Changing God’s Mind,” in F. C. Holmgren and H. E. Schaalmann, *Preaching Biblical Texts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 90–104.

10. Willis, “Samuel, Jeremiah, and Jonah,” 168–71.

11. Gowan, “Changing God’s Mind,” 101, 104.

12. R. W. L. Moberly, “‘God is Not a Human that He Should Repent’ (Numbers 23:19 and 1 Samuel 15:29),” in Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal, *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998): 112–23. I will only occasionally mention other scholars who address the subject of divine change but are more interested in presenting an argument for the theory of an open view of God. See Rice, “Biblical Support,” 11–58; Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000); cf. Scott A. Ellington, “Who Shall Lead Them Out? An Exploration of God’s Openness in Exodus 32.7–14,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 14 (2005): 41–60.

13. I will basically ignore the second set of four references (but will briefly discuss Ezek 24:14 and Zech 8:14 later in a footnote). Because these four refer to specific situations they are less problematic than the first four references that describe God as unchanging more generally.

Num 23:19 and 1 Sam 15:29 and similarly Willis only focuses on relevant texts in Samuel, Jeremiah and Jonah. While Fretheim does mention the נחם texts where “God does not repent,” his brief discussion does not adequately explain how these texts do not undermine his perspective.¹⁴ Most blatantly however, Malachi 3:6 is ignored (perhaps because it does not use נחם ?) by Kuyper, Fretheim, Willis, Gowan and Moberly. Since Mal 3 affirms God’s unchangeability (“For I the LORD do not change”) and therefore undermines their perspective, it needs to be discussed (which I will do in section 4).¹⁵

Third, these scholars often use language of “divine repentance” (Kuyper, Fretheim, Willis) which is unnecessarily provocative and not warranted since נחם has a broader range of meaning than simply “to repent.” (However, Gowan and Moberly include helpful discussions of נחם which address this concern.¹⁶) Instead, speaking of God’s “repenting,” his “relenting,” “mind changing” or “showing compassion” fit better as translations of נחם in the context of the relevant passages. Kuyper’s statement that his use of the word “repentance” does not connote moral evil or guilt may have been accurate in the 1960s, but it is certainly inaccurate now.¹⁷

The “compromise” position (Ware, Rice and Chisholm)

A few scholars take what appears to be compromise positions, however since these perspectives acknowledge divine change, albeit limited, they are not actually a compromise. The strength, however, of these perspectives is that they tend to take texts on both sides of the issue more seriously than either of the two polarized positions.

While Ware’s conclusion that God is ontologically and ethically immutable, but relationally mutable sounds like a compromise, his arguments are similar to those who argue that God does not change.¹⁸ He does not discuss in depth the נחם texts that describe God as changing (relegating them to a footnote¹⁹) and argues that these texts should be understood anthropomorphically (like Maier). He believes the appearance of God changing is necessary to communicate in human terms what is taking place in the divine realm. Curiously, he only focuses on three texts that speak of “divine changelessness” (Ps 102:25–27; Mal 3:6; Jas 1:17), completely ignoring the three נחם texts (Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29; Ps 110:4).²⁰

Another way these tensions are often understood is to say that God’s decisions

14. Fretheim, “A Key to Evaluating,” 53.

15. Rice briefly mentions it but does not discuss it, “Biblical Support,” 47.

16. Gowan, “Changing God’s Mind,” 100; Moberly, “God is Not a Human,” 115. While Willis acknowledges the problematic nature of translating נחם as “repent” his explanation of its fundamental meaning (1994: 157–58) is still too focused on changing of the mind to accommodate the broader shades of meaning of נחם related to compassion.

17. Kuyper, “The Repentance of God,” 5.

18. Bruce A. Ware, “An Evangelical Reformulation of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God,” *JETS* 29 (1986): 431–46; cf. Bruce A. Ware, “An Exposition and Critique of the Process Doctrines of Divine Mutability and Immutability,” *WTJ* 47 (1985): 175–96.

19. Ware, “An Evangelical Reformulation,” 441, n. 25.

20. Ware, “An Evangelical Reformulation,” 432–34.

change, but his character does not. Rice, for example states, “most of the biblical references to divine changelessness pertain to God’s character rather than his existence.”²¹ While I generally agree with this idea, it is still not the most helpful way to explain the problem. By focusing on the difference between God’s unchanging character and his changing judgments a distinction is set up that Scripture simply does not make. The problem goes beyond just the text never stating a version of “God’s character does not change, but his judgments do.” Since the same verb נָחַם is used to communicate both that YHWH has changed and that he does not change, it is difficult to argue that in certain passages נָחַם clearly refers to his unchanging character and in other passages it clearly refers to his decisions which may change.

Chisholm’s solution that God’s announcements change, but his decrees do not is more satisfactory than many other scholarly solutions and has many compelling aspects, but some of his distinctions between announcements and decrees seem artificial or difficult to support from the text.²² What makes one divine speech an announcement and another one a decree? Apparently, we know a word of God is a decree if it does not change and it is an announcement if it does change. Thus, his logic may appear circular.

Therefore, none of these solutions are entirely satisfactory explanations for the problem of a God who is described as both changing and unchanging. However, as we examine the broader contexts of the specific texts, both those using נָחַם and those that do not, a consistent pattern will emerge.

The verb נָחַם

Basic meanings of נָחַם

If there is one Hebrew word that the issue of divine changeability centers upon, it would be נָחַם, since it is used in most of the references describing God as either changing or not changing his mind.²³ For this reason scholars discuss this verb at length (e.g., Fretheim, Gowan).²⁴

The root נָחַם has three basic meanings: 1) to change one’s mind, 2) to regret and 3) to show compassion. The context usually makes it clear whether נָחַם is referring to a mind change, to regret or to compassion. In this discussion, I will focus on texts which fit the first meaning because mind changing implies mutability or flexibility. While the second meaning of regret may imply a change of heart, and even perhaps repentance, it could simply involve sorrow or grief regarding the turn of events, so it would not necessarily suggest mutability. The third meaning involving compassion or comfort would also not necessarily infer a change on the part of the

21. Rice, “Biblical Support,” 47.

22. Robert B. Chisholm, “Does God ‘Change His Mind?’” *BSac* 152 (1995): 387–99.

23. See also the discussion on the consistency and flexibility of God in John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology* (vol. 2): *Israel’s Faith* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 88–92.

24. Fretheim, “A Key to Evaluating,” 53–54; Gowan, “Changing God’s Mind,” 100. For more detailed analysis, see also the נָחַם entries in reference works (*TDOT*; *NIDOTTE*).

subject. Therefore, texts that use נחם referring to divine regret (e.g., Gen 6:11; 1 Sam 15:11) or to divine compassion (e.g., Judg 2:18; Isa 40:1) will not be discussed here.

English versions translate נחם slightly differently in contexts where a divine change of mind is involved. For example, in Exodus 32:14 older translations inform us that YHWH “repented” (KJV, RSV), but since repentance is often associated with sin and God is without sin, the possible connotations of translating נחם with “repent” could be controversial. More recent translations of Exodus 32:14 state that YHWH either “changed his mind” (NAS, NRSV) or “relented” (NIV, ESV, TNIV). While “relent” may seem less controversial than “repent” or “change his mind” it also involves a mind change, particularly away from a harsh decision. Interestingly, the Latin root, *lentus*, from which *relent* is derived means flexible. Regardless of whether the English translation for נחם mentions change, relenting or repenting, each of these words implies flexibility or mutability.

Why does God not change?

As we work to understand the apparent biblical contradiction regarding the (im)mutability of God, an examination of the relevant texts will reveal a consistent biblical pattern of why God changes or does not change in certain contexts. Of the four primary OT texts that are used to support divine immutability, three of them use the verb נחם (the other, Mal 3:6 will be discussed in section 4), each time with a negative particle (לֹא), stating basically that God does not change. Balaam declares to Balak ruler of Moab that since YHWH has promised to bless Israel, he would not change his mind (נחם) and curse them instead (Num 23:19). Samuel tells Saul that YHWH is not like a man that he should change his mind (נחם) regarding the judgment to tear the kingdom away from Saul and give it to his neighbor David (1 Sam 15:29). The psalmist explains that YHWH will not change his mind (נחם) about his decision to make the addressee a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek (Ps 110:4).

In two of these three texts the divine immutability involves an explicit promise or commitment by YHWH to bless his people. In Numbers Moab will not be allowed to defeat Israel and in Psalms the messianic individual will not be removed from the priesthood. If God were to have changed his mind in these three contexts negative repercussions would have resulted for his people.

The third text, the judgment against Saul, includes an implicit promise to bless David, Saul’s neighbor (1 Sam 15:28), and even though David had yet to be anointed (1 Sam 16:13) YHWH has already expressed this promise to Saul once before (1 Sam 13:14). Therefore, Saul will need to be removed from power for YHWH to not change his commitment to David.

Thus, for all the individuals in these texts except Saul, YHWH’s lack of flexibility was a positive thing.²⁵ These texts testify that YHWH will not change his mind about blessing his people. In these situations flexibility would have resulted

25. Even for Saul, the consequences of his sin could have been far worse. He remained on the throne until his death in battle, recorded some fifteen chapters later (1 Sam 31).

in judgment and death, but divine rigidity results in mercy and life. Divine “stubbornness” is therefore good in these contexts.

The main point that these texts are making is not simply that God is unchangeable, but that he is unchangeable about his commitment to bless his people. And those additional words make a huge difference in how the message of divine immutability is perceived. Unchangeability is not necessarily a valuable end by itself, and in certain contexts, as we will soon see, it would be bad. What makes it good is that God is unwaveringly committed to doing good.

Why does God change?

While four OT texts clearly state YHWH does not change (three using נִחַם), many more describe YHWH as changing his mind and, as I stated above, the same verb נִחַם is used in most of these other passages to describe YHWH as changing. In general, these texts reveal YHWH to be changing in the context of showing compassion toward his people, often in response to human intercession.

Moses changes the mind of God twice (the second, Num 14:11–20, will be discussed in section 4). Shortly after agreeing to fully obey the covenant delivered on Mount Sinai (Exod 24:7), Israel breaks the first three commandments by worshipping the golden calf (Exod 32:1–6). In anger YHWH declares that he will consume the people, but Moses intercedes and YHWH relents (נִחַם) from destroying his people (Exod 32:12, 14). Maier notes that the imperfect verbs used in Exod 32:10, could imply conditionality, so instead of “I will consume” he suggests “I may consume them,”²⁶ but Maier’s nuanced and deliberative perspective on YHWH’s behavior in Exod 32 does not reconcile easily with the textual portrayal of a God who is intensely angry as “wrath” (אַף) is repeated three times in three verses (Exod 32:10, 11, 12). YHWH is not asking to be left alone to consider the options, but to consume the people.

In response to David’s assertion about the greatness of his mercy, YHWH relents (נִחַם) concerning the pestilence he had sent upon Israel for David’s census and therefore interrupts the punishment (2 Sam 24:16; 1 Chron 21:15). The psalmist describes a period when YHWH heard the cry of his oppressed people and remembered his covenant, so he relented (נִחַם)²⁷ according to his steadfast love (Ps 106:44–45). While specific incidents of divine immutability are narrated in the previously cited narrative texts, Psalm 106 describes a broader pattern or a general characteristic of YHWH as a God who relents which could fit easily into the cycles of the book of Judges where God repeatedly shows compassion to his people (Judg 2:18).

The theme of divine changeability occurs most frequently in prophetic literature, particularly in Jeremiah.²⁸ Using the image of potter and clay, Jeremiah

26. Maier, “Does God ‘Repent,’” 139. Chisholm argues similarly about Exod 32:10, “Does God ‘Change,’” 396.

27. Although the NRSV renders נִחַם as “showed compassion,” most other English versions translate the verb with a form of “relent” (ESV, RSV, NAS, NIV, TNK, NLT, NKJ).

28. In the book of Isaiah, YHWH poses the question, “Will I relent (נִחַם) for these things?”

pronounces an oracle describing the dual nature of YHWH's changeability in chapter 18. If an evil nation turns from evil, YHWH will relent (נחם) concerning the evil he was going to do to them, and if a nation that YHWH has promised to bless does evil in his sight, he will relent (נחם) concerning the good he had intended to do for them (Jer 18:7–10). As Jeremiah preaches in the temple, he twice exhorts the people to repent of their evil ways, so that YHWH would then repent (נחם) of the evil he had intended to do to them (Jer 26:3, 13). In the conclusion of Jeremiah's sermon, he reminds them of when YHWH changed his mind (נחם) about the judgment he had declared upon Hezekiah after the king entreated his favor (Jer 26:19; cf. 2 Kgs 20:5–6). Jeremiah delivers an oracle from YHWH to the remnant living in Judah, after the fall of Jerusalem, telling them that if they remain in the land of Judah, he will relent (נחם) of the punishment he was bringing upon them (Jer 42:10). In typical fashion, they do not believe him and not only flee to Egypt, but they also kidnap Jeremiah and take him with them (Jer 43:1–7). Apparently, YHWH changes his mind so often regarding potential judgments against Israel, that Jeremiah reports that YHWH complains of being weary of relenting (נחם) (Jer 15:6).

The Minor Prophets also speak of how God changes his mind regarding punishments he had intended to mete out. In a series of visions, YHWH first shows the prophet Amos what type of judgment he is about to perform against Israel, but then in response to Amos's desperate pleas for mercy after the first two visions (locusts and fire), YHWH twice relents (נחם) and declares that the punishment will not happen (Amos 7:1–3, 4–6).²⁹ In Joel's description of YHWH's attributes, along with graciousness, mercifulness and slowness to anger, YHWH is said to relent (נחם) from punishing (Joel 2:12–14).

In the book of Jonah, after all the Ninevites have repented (even the animals wore sackcloth), God changes his mind (נחם) about the evil that he had said he would bring upon them and he did not do it (Jonah 3:8–10). Jonah is not surprised because he knows that God is gracious, merciful, abounding in love and ready to relent (נחם) from punishing (Jonah 4:2). Thus, according to both Joel and Jonah, YHWH's willingness to change his mind in order to show mercy was not just a capricious whim, but it characterized his nature. God was concerned about all the Ninevites, even their cattle (bovine contrition always helps).³⁰

(Is 57:6). The question initially sounds like he will not relent, but 57:13 ends on an optimistic note, suggesting perhaps that a change was possible.

29. For an extended excursus on divine repentance in the context of Amos 7 and the entire OT, see Francis I. Anderson and David N. Freedman, *Amos: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 638–79.

30. While two prophetic texts speak of YHWH not relenting from judgment (Ezek 24:14; Zech 8:14), the immediate context of both passages reveal aspects of his merciful character. Ezek 24:13 describes how he had cleansed, and presumably forgiven, Jerusalem previously, yet it did not result in them remaining clean, so this time he will not forgive and relent. Zechariah describes how YHWH had planned to bring disaster previously and did not change his mind, so in the current situation he will not change his mind about his intentions to bless Jerusalem and the house of Judah (Zech 8:15).

Divine changeability is precisely what infuriates Jonah so much because he wanted Nineveh to be destroyed. Jonah perceives God's willingness to move from judgment to mercy as a weakness, while Joel saw it as a strength. Apparently, it depends upon your perspective whether or not divine flexibility is a good thing. YHWH's flexibility was good for Hezekiah as well as for many other people in the OT.

Similar to the **נחם** references that support divine immutability, a pattern emerges among these **נחם** texts supporting divine change. In only one text, does YHWH change from mercy to judgment (Jer 18:9–10) but in the other fifteen texts YHWH changes from judgment to mercy and what prompts the divine change in these texts is human intercession or repentance. In their discussion of **נחם** references Anderson and Freedman observe that God changes either from doing harm or from doing good.³¹ While their observation is certainly accurate, it misses the main point that in the vast majority of these references God is changing from harm to good.

Texts that do not use **נחם** (Mal 3:6; Num 14:20; 2 Kgs 20:5–6)

While discussions of God's (im)mutability reasonably focus on the verb **נחם**, other texts also address the issue. Since these texts do not use **נחם** they tend to get ignored (depending upon the perspective). I will examine three of them here.

In a context of divine judgment against Israel for their many sins, YHWH declares, "For I, YHWH, do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished" (Mal 3:6).³² YHWH exhorts them to return to him, so that he can return to them (Mal 3:7). The Hebrew verb in Mal 3:6 is **שנה**, which is used elsewhere for objects changing (fine gold: Lam 4:1; clothes: 2 Kgs 25:29) but is also used by YHWH to declare that he will not change or alter his spoken covenant to the house of David (Ps 89:34; cf. 2 Sam 7:12–16).³³ Divine change in the context of Mal 3 would have apparently resulted in destruction for Israel. Thus, Mal 3:6 fits the pattern seen above for the **נחם** texts where YHWH does not change because of his faithfulness to his people. It is therefore good for Israel in Mal 3 (and David's lineage in Ps 89) that YHWH does not change because it means that he will continue in relationship with Israel.

The second incident of Moses changing YHWH's mind in Num 14 shares striking parallels with the first incident in Exod 32, although this time **נחם** is not

31. Anderson and Freedman, *Amos*, 672.

32. Ryan E. Stokes argues that Malachi 3:6 does actually not speak of YHWH not changing ("I, Yhwh, Have Not Changed? Reconsidering the Translation of Malachi 3:6; Lamentations 4:1; and Proverbs 24:21–22" *CBQ* 70 (2008): 264–76). Without changing the consonantal text and by only changing the Hebrew letter *shin* to a *sin*, Stokes translates his emended Hebrew text as, "For I, YHWH, have not hated." While his idea is simple and therefore could be appealing (particularly to scholars who argue that God changes), I suspect that his view will not ultimately persuade many scholars since it lacks support in the versions.

33. In Mal 3:6 **שנה** is in the qal stem, but in Ps 89:34 it is in the piel.

used. After the Israelites refuse to enter the land based on the report of the twelve spies, YHWH initially declares he will strike all the Israelites and disinherit them and start over with Moses, but after Moses intercedes on the behalf of the people, YHWH changes his mind and promises to forgive (נָסַח) them (Num 14:11–20). Divine forgiveness here did not allow the current Israelite generation to enter the promised land, but it prevented them from being instantly destroyed as YHWH had originally planned. While it is conceivable that YHWH did not actually plan to wipe them out, there is no textual evidence to support this idea, and the fact that the text states that he will suggests otherwise. Scholars who argue consistently for divine immutability may conclude that YHWH did not really intend to strike down the Israelites as the text states (Num 14:12), but in their attempt to minimize the theological “problem” of a text that could support divine mutability, they create another problem by manufacturing (without textual support) a God who appears to be manipulative or deceptive. A straightforward reading of Num 14 leads to the conclusion that Moses’ mediation prevented YHWH from wiping out his own people as he had said he would do.

While the text records that many OT individuals changed the mind of God, Hezekiah was among a few (Moses, Amos) who did it twice. However, unlike Hezekiah’s encounter with the prophet Micah (Jer 26:19) discussed above, the verb נָסַח is not used in his encounter with the prophet Isaiah which is recorded in both 2 Kgs 20:1–6 and Isa 38:1–6. While the two parallel passages are very similar, here I will look at the slightly longer version in 2 Kgs 20:1–6.³⁴

When Hezekiah was sick and “at the point of death” (2 Kgs 20:1), the prophet Isaiah delivered a message from YHWH to the king that he would die. To make it clear, Isaiah repeated it: “you shall not recover” (20:1). There is no reason given in the text for Hezekiah’s illness or the death pronouncement but Isaiah’s message appears simply to give him an opportunity to prepare for the inevitable. Hezekiah, however, was not content just to “put his house in order” (20:1), so he prays, laying out his spiritual CV, but curiously he never tells YHWH to change his mind or prolong his life. The text states that he also broke down (literally, “he wept a great weeping”: 20:3). At this point YHWH changes his mind and sends Isaiah back to tell Hezekiah (20:5–6).

Lest one think that YHWH only appeared to change, the text makes the divine change explicit. At first, YHWH and Isaiah were in agreement that Hezekiah’s death was definite and imminent. In Isaiah’s second message, however, YHWH states that he will heal Hezekiah and add fifteen years to his life. What caused the change in YHWH? YHWH explains that he changed his mind because he had heard Hezekiah’s prayer and had seen Hezekiah’s tears.

Thus, both Num 14 and 2 Kgs 20 fit the pattern seen above with the נָסַח texts

34. The following phrases are present in English translations of 2 Kgs 20, but not Isa 38: “And before Isaiah had gone out of the middle court” (v. 4), “the leader of my people,” “I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of the LORD” (v. 5), “for my own sake and for my servant David’s sake” (v. 6).

where YHWH changes. In these texts, YHWH consistently changed from judgment toward mercy in response to a request. While the human mechanism varied (Moses interceded for the people, Hezekiah for himself), the divine response remained consistent.

Context is crucial

An examination of the relevant passages has thus revealed a pattern. The text portrays God as unchangeable or changeable in certain specific contexts. Context is therefore crucial to understand the apparent biblical paradox.

In contexts where there could be uncertainty as to whether or not he will be faithful, the text declares that God does not waver from his commitments. YHWH has promised to bless his people, so he will not suddenly start to curse them (Num 23:19–20). Since YHWH does not change, his people Israel have not perished (Mal 3:6). It is not simply that God never changes, but specifically that he does not change regarding his promises to his covenant people.

In contexts of imminent judgment from God, when people repent or intercede he changes his mind and shows mercy. Not only did YHWH change to show mercy to his people the Israelites but he also did it for Gentiles, specifically the Ninevites. YHWH listened and showed compassion based on the intercession of rulers (e.g., David, Hezekiah) and the efforts of prophets (e.g., Jeremiah, Amos).³⁵ The text includes both specific incidents of YHWH changing from judgment to forgiveness (Num 14:20; Jer 26:19) and general descriptions of YHWH being eager to relent and show mercy (Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). It is not that God always changes or is inconsistent, but specifically in situations where people deserve punishment, when they repent, he consistently changes from judgment to grace.

Unfortunately, scholarly discussions or sermons on this topic often can be characterized by a narrow, proof-texting approach to the Bible, which can distort the broader message of the text. One cannot simply base theological conclusions on one statement God speaks in isolation, but one needs to examine what he is doing more generally whenever he makes a particular statement.

The conclusion that God changes or does not change depending upon the context may sound similar to the views of scholars that conclude God's character or decrees are unchangeable but his judgments or announcements may change. How then does this conclusion focusing on context differ from the "compromise" positions (Ware, Rice and Chisholm) discussed above?

First, the focus on context points to more profound truths about God than simply whether or not he changes. The text consistently portrays God's unchangeability as a manifestation of his faithfulness and his changeability as a manifestation of his mercifulness. A focus on God's unchanging character misses the deeper point

35. While many English translations (e.g., NAS, NRSV) have Amos claiming not to be a prophet (Amos 7:14), since the verse in Hebrew lacks a verb of being Amos might be simply saying that he was not a prophet initially (e.g., NIV, ESV).

that God is faithful.³⁶ An emphasis on God's changing decisions could be misleading since the vast majority of God's decisions do not appear to change and when God changes it is for a specific reason—to show mercy. Therefore as we examine the contexts of these texts we learn not so much about divine (im)mutability, but about divine faithfulness and divine mercy. This leads to the next point.

Second, the focus on context takes seriously the biblical value of relationship. The texts that state God does not change do not support the idea that divine immutability should be understood as an end in itself, but rather God's faithfulness must be understood specifically in the context of his commitment to his people. Likewise, the texts that speak of God changing do not suggest that God is capricious or unpredictable, but that he changes his mind in a very predictable manner and in very specific contexts—when he is turning from judgment toward grace to his people. In fact, YHWH's merciful, mind-changing behavior in these contexts is so consistent that it could be considered unchangeable.

The Old Testament characters themselves understood both the changing and unchanging aspect of God's nature. Moses, David, Hezekiah, the psalmist, Jeremiah, Amos, Joel and Jonah all knew that the flexible aspect of YHWH's character does not change. According to the OT, God is predictably flexible, constantly changeable, and immutably mutable, at least in regards to showing mercy toward repentant sinners.

Jesus and the female dog

While one might reasonably wonder if examples of divine change are limited to the Old Testament, not surprisingly, Jesus displayed compassionate flexibility during his ministry, evidenced in his interaction with a Gentile woman from Syrophenicia (Mark 7:24–30). The woman approaches Jesus to ask him to cast a demon out of her daughter. Since he had previously performed numerous exorcisms (Mark 2:25–26, 34; 3:22; 5:8–13) one might expect him to respond positively, but shockingly he tells her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs” (Mark 7:27). For Jesus to grant her request would be like giving Jewish “bread” to a Gentile “dog,” and the term “dog” would have had worse connotations in Jesus' day than it has in ours.³⁷

Surprisingly, the woman does not seem to take offense at being called a dog by Jesus. She even uses the language of Jesus' analogy in her response: “But even the dogs get crumbs from under the table” (Mark 7:28). She realizes that even if she does not deserve to sit down at the table yet, the crumbs from Jesus' table will be

36. Both Moberly (“God is Not a Human,” 120–22) and Rice (“Biblical Support,” 47) argue convincingly that divine faithfulness is being emphasized primarily in these “immutability” texts.

37. In the world of the OT and the NT dogs were not considered man's best friend but were viewed with contempt, like we would view rats (see Deut 23:2; 1 Sam 17:43; 2 Sam 3:8; 16:9; Phil 3:2; Rev 22:15).

sufficient (presumably she envisioned a table with small children). She understood that Jesus had ample power to heal both Jews and Gentiles, so an exorcism of her daughter should be no problem for him. Jesus then replies that because of her response, her daughter has already been healed.

One could argue that Jesus was planning on helping the woman all along. In commenting on this incident, Maier states that “Christ knew all along what he would do,”³⁸ however that is exactly the opposite of what the text says. Jesus makes it explicit that he healed the girl not because he was planning on doing it already, but because of what she said: “For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter” (Mark 7:29). Jesus was not going to heal her daughter initially, but only after his interaction with the woman did he agree to do it. While this story may still seem strange on several levels, it should not strike us as odd that Jesus would change his mind to show compassion because, as we have seen throughout the Old Testament, God is both loyal towards his commitments and flexible when it comes to showing mercy.

Conclusion: It depends

So, does YHWH change or not? According to Scripture, it depends. In contexts where God’s faithfulness might be called into question, the text clearly states that he does not change but remains loyal to his people. However, when God has pronounced judgment and his people repent or intercede, he changes his mind and shows mercy. The fact that God does not change his commitments but remains faithful to his promises is great news, but the fact that he does change when people repent is even greater news.

What would it be like if Christians had a reputation of being like God in both of these ways? We were known as being unchangeable in a good way (faithful, loyal, reliable and dependable) and changeable in a good way (merciful, gracious, flexible and compassionate). One way to make this true would be to preach not only about divine immutability, but also about divine flexibility.

38. Maier, “Does God ‘Repent’,” 141.