

MOSES: DIVINE SERVANT AND ISRAELITE HERO

by

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The polarization between Yahweh and Israel in Exodus 32 over the golden calf provides the context for a striking portrayal of Moses as mediator. The distance between Yahweh and Israel becomes so great here that mediation by Moses also becomes extreme. Thus at one moment in the narrative Moses pleads to Yahweh for the very survival of Israel (vv. 11–13), while within several verses he purges Israel for Yahweh (vv. 25–29). These extreme and seemingly contradictory actions by Moses have prompted some modern interpreters to conclude that Exodus 32 could not possibly be read as a unified narrative in its present form.¹ In contrast to this conclusion, more recent interpreters have demonstrated that the actions of Moses as mediator are actually a unifying element, not only in Exodus 32, but throughout Exodus 32–34.² Moberly, for example, has traced the motif of Moses as mediator from Exod 32:1 through Exod 34:29–35, where he functions as “a leader and mediator of the divine presence” in place of the golden calf (1983, pp. 46, 109). Yet the present study will be much more limited in scope and focus exclusively on Exodus 32. There are three aims in this study: first, to demonstrate that the conflicting actions of Moses are a unifying device in the present form of Exodus 32, which illustrate two sides

1. See, for example, Beyerlin (1965, p. 19) and Lehming (1960, pp. 19–20), who point out uneven aspects of the narrative by the way in which Moses learns of Israel's sin (Exod 32:7, 15) and intercedes for them (Exod 32:11, 30). Whether the tradition finds its source in J (Noth, 1962, p. 243; Lehming, 1960, pp. 25–29; Lewy, 1959, p. 317; Childs, 1974, p. 573, among others) or E (Beyerlin, 1965, pp. 20–22), as well as the number of layers to the present form of the text, are particularly troublesome in this narrative. The traditional historical development of the text is further complicated by the parallels between Exodus 32 and the golden calves of Jeroboam I in 1 Kings 12. On these parallels see Aberbach and Smolar (1967, pp. 129–140). Coats (1968, p. 184) goes so far as to conclude that it is impossible to identify the traditional pentateuchal sources in Exodus 32.

2. See Childs (1974, pp. 558–578 *et passim*); Coats (1977, pp. 91–109; Moberly (1983, pp. 44–109); and Brichto (1983, pp. 1–44).

to his role as mediator; second, to describe the qualities that are combined to create the complex characterization of Moses in this chapter; and third, to show how mythological motifs have also been incorporated into Exodus 32 to aid in idealizing Moses as mediator.

I

The significance of Moses has been debated by modern scholars, even though he is one of the central figures in the pentateuchal narrative. Literary historians interpreted Moses as a hero of Israelite *Sage*. Thus Gunkel concluded that the diverse roles of Moses as wonderworker, leader, judge, prophet, and intercessor combine to present the ideal image (*Idealbild*) of the man of God (1930, p. 235). Along this same line of interpretation, Gressmann (1913, pp. 225–227, 232) accentuated the heroic character of Moses to such a degree that he even reconstructed an *Ursage* in which Moses was so clever that he tricked Yahweh into accompanying Israel. For Gressmann Moses was “all in all” (p. 478).

Tradition historians, by contrast, have played down the ideal or heroic nature of Moses within the pentateuchal narrative. The minor significance attributed to the character of Moses by this school of biblical critics arises from their low appraisal of him as a tradition historical figure in Israel. For example, according to Noth, “Moses plays a negligible role in Old Testament Tradition.” Noth’s tradition-historical conclusion directly affects his interpretation of Moses as mediator in the present form of the Sinai narrative. He wrote,

Moses’ appearance exclusively in this role (as mediator at Sinai) is explained simply by the fact that here a law is involved which was not meant to say anything about Moses himself and the main significance of his life, but which, rather, as law, sought the point of contact with the great divine revelation . . . (1981, p. 161).

So also von Rad concluded that in all the stories of Moses, “it is not Moses himself, Moses the man, but God who is the central figure” (1960, p. 8).³ Therefore, according to Noth and von Rad, the figure of Moses is properly interpreted when his diverse roles and complex character are viewed simply as illustrations of his service to Yahweh.

More recently Coats has combined the conclusions of literary historians like Gunkel and Gressmann and of later tradition historians like

3. von Rad’s conclusion is exactly opposite to Gressmann (1913, p. 478), who concluded that the only consistent figure throughout the tradition-historical development of this material was the figure of Moses.

von Rad and Noth to argue that the character of Moses must be interpreted as both a dependent servant of Yahweh and as a heroic giant in his own right. For Coats it is this balance that is crucial for interpreting the complex character of Moses and for properly understanding pentateuchal theology (1975, p. 41). According to Coats, two complementary and, at times, competing patterns must be recognized in the stories of Moses. Some stories center on the actions of Yahweh for Israel, while others shift the focus to accentuate the heroic actions of Moses on Israel's behalf (1975, p. 38). Although Moses is a central figure in all of these stories, he functions differently as the focus moves back and forth between these two poles—servant of Yahweh and Israelite hero. The conclusions by Coats provide a framework for interpreting the extreme roles that Moses assumes as mediator in Exodus 32.⁴

Gressmann provides additional guidelines for interpreting the complex character of Moses in Exodus 32. In summarizing the introductory stories about Moses in Exodus 2, Gressmann noted three qualities in the presentation of Moses which combine in varying degrees to provide depth and complexity to his character. First, Moses portrays a strong sense of justice. He liberates Israel from forced labor and becomes their law giver. But second, he is also an impetuous and violent figure, as in his murder of the Egyptian, or in his frequent loss of temper with Israel or Yahweh. And finally, his character also incorporates a more cautious quality of prudence or discretion. Thus after the murder of the Egyptian, Moses immediately assesses the situation and flees, while later this quality averts the anger of Yahweh against Israel and also provides reasoned assurance to Israel's fears. Gressmann concluded that the narrator used this combination of qualities to present a sense of righteousness in his hero (1913, pp. 18–19). The qualities of *justice*, *violence*, and *prudence* come into sharpest focus in Exodus 32 to accentuate the character of Moses as servant of Yahweh and Israelite hero while he mediates between both parties.

II

The function of Moses as mediator in Exodus 32 not only leads into Exodus 33–34, but it also follows from the opening scene in Exodus 19, where the primary theme and the setting of Sinai narrative provide the context for the actions of Moses.⁵ Here the reader learns that

4. See also Moberly (1983, p. 51) for a similar discussion.

5. A number of scholars have seen the importance of this opening scene in Exodus 19 as an introduction for the Sinai narrative. Rudolf, for example (1938, pp. 40–41), argued that

Yahweh's goal for Israel is that they become a holy nation (v. 6a).⁶ But for Israel to be a holy nation required the presence and revelation of Yahweh. Thus the purity of Israel and the presence of Yahweh must be interrelated as two aspects of a larger theme which explores the relationship between Yahweh and Israel. Other themes such as vision, covenant, and worship are meant to clarify the larger theme by exploring the requirements, dangers, fears, and effects of this relationship. Furthermore, the narrative explores the relationship of Yahweh and Israel primarily through spatial metaphors associated with the setting of the mountain—Yahweh descends to the mountain top, while Israel is encamped at its base. In the context of the spatial boundaries separating Yahweh and Israel, the mediation of Moses between both parties is essential for the goal of the narrative.⁷ The story unfolds by following the progress of Moses up and down the mountain as he carries word to each party. When these cycles accumulate, Moses acquires depth both as the heroic representative of Israel and as the servant of Yahweh, until both roles reach a climax in Exodus 32.⁸

In addition to the function of Moses as mediator, several other features of Exodus 32 also provide criteria for reading the narrative as a unity. By the end of the story, the point of view of each of the *dramatis personae* concerning the golden calf is presented through the motif of "seeing" (*raʿâ* Israel v. 1; Aaron v. 5; Yahweh v. 9; and Moses vv. 19, 25).⁹ In fact, we might describe Exodus 32 as a story of conflicting perceptions. Furthermore, the three day sequence marked by "tomorrow" (*māḥār*, vv. 5, 6, 30) and "day" (*bayyôm*, v. 28 and *hayyôm*,

Exod 19:3b–8 presented a theological outline for the events in the Sinai narrative. See also Beyerlin (1965, pp. 67–68) and Childs (1974, p. 360) for further discussion of the introductory function of the opening scene in Exodus 19.

6. For a more detailed study of the structure of this unit, with its climax on the purity of Israel in Exod 19:6a, see Muilenburg (1959, pp. 351–353).

7. On the spatial dimension of the Sinai narrative and the function of Moses as mediator in the opening scene of Exodus 19, see Rivard (1981, pp. 337–340).

8. The repetitive movement of Moses throughout the Sinai narrative long ago caught the attention of biblical scholars. But it has been evaluated as an obstacle to interpretation. For example, after reviewing the many trips by Moses up the mountain, Wellhausen (1899, p. 83) concluded that they were "impractical" to the narrative. Yet at a redactional level the repeated movement of Moses appears to be organizing the material: Exod 19:1–8a, 19:8b–19; 19:2–20:20; 20:21–24:11; 24:12–32:35; and 34:1–40:38.

9. Perception is an important motif throughout the Sinai narrative. Israel is called 'to see' the exodus immediately in Exod 19:4 (compare the interrelationship of Exod 19:4 to Exod 14:13 through the repetition of *rʿh*), and the use of this motif continues with the repetition of *rʿh* in Exod 20:18, 22; 24:10, 17; 32:1, 5, 9, 15, 25; 33:10, 12, 13, 20, 22, 23; and 34:30, 35.

v. 29) also provides a minimal chronological framework for the events of Exodus 32.

The unified narrative divides into four scenes.¹⁰ Exod 32:1–5 introduces the construction of the golden calf at the foot of Mount Sinai to create discontinuity. After the introduction, the narrative focuses on Moses as the ideal mediator by illustrating the two aspects of this role—heroic representative of Israel and servant of Yahweh. Moses functions independently from Yahweh in Exod 32:6–14 to provide a counterpoint to the divine anger. Here he employs qualities of justice and prudence to persuade Yahweh not to destroy Israel. The narrator closes this scene by confirming the success of his mediation: “And Yahweh repented of the evil which He thought to do to His people.” The mediating role of Moses changes in Exod 32:15–29. When he sees how Israel has broken their covenant conditions, Moses combines the qualities of justice and violence to assume the divine anger as the servant of Yahweh. Thus Moses annihilates the calf and purges Israel with a holocaust by calling the Levites to service with the prophetic formula *kōh ʿāmar YHWH* (“Thus says Yahweh,” v. 27). Exod 32:30–35 concludes the narrative by recapitulating both aspects of Moses’ mediating role. A more detailed analysis will underscore the central role of Moses and the mythological motifs which idealize him as mediator.

Scene One

The narrative of Exodus 32 opens from Israel’s point of view. Their demand to Aaron in v. 1 is central to the story, for it sets in motion the events of the narrative and foreshadows the covenant breaking that is to follow. The magnitude of Israel’s offence comes into focus by examining their opening statement from several perspectives.

The semantics of Israel’s demand to Aaron in v. 1b can be illustrated in the following manner:

10. The conclusions by scholars concerning the division of the narrative in its final form vary widely. Cassuto (1967, p. 410) interprets four parts to the story: Exod 32:1–6, 7–14, 15–29, 30–35. Noth (1962, pp. 247–250) separates the story into five parts: Exod 32:1–6, 7–16, 17–20, 21–29, and 30–35. Childs (1974, pp. 564–572), Beyerlin (1965, pp. 20, 191), and Fensham (1970, p. 213) conclude that there are six parts: Exod 32:1–6, 7–14, 15–20, 21–24, 25–29, 30–35; while Brichto (1983, pp. 4–20) posits seven episodes: Exod 32:1–6, 7–8, 9–14, 15–20, 21–24, 25–29, 30–35. In addition, Cassuto (1967, pp. 425–427) and Moberly (1983, pp. 56–63) combine Exod 32:30–35 and Exod 33:1–6 as one literary unit. But see Childs (1974, p. 587), who notes the new introduction in Exod 33:1 and a different emphasis in Exod 33:2 from Exod 32:34 concerning the *malak* Yahweh to argue against this larger unit. The only point of agreement among scholars is the division of the first section after Exod 32:6. But a division after v. 6 does not take into account the shaping of the narrative by reference to “tomorrow” in Exod 32:6, 30.

	Arise, make	gods for us (^ʔ ēlōhîm)	who (^ʔ āšer) will lead us
(Because)	we do not know (lō ^ʔ yāda ^c nû) what happened	to this man Moses (<i>zeh</i> <i>mōšeh hā^ʔîš</i>)	who (^ʔ āšer) brought us out of the land of Egypt.

Although these sentences are structured differently in the text, by arranging them in this manner we see two statements which invite comparison. Of particular interest is the contrast between Israel's demand for gods (^ʔēlōhîm) to lead them, because of the absence of Moses, the man (*mōšeh hā^ʔîš*) whom they perceive to have led them thus far. Israel's request for gods to either replace or represent Yahweh breaks the covenant. Yet, since Moses is the primary means by which Yahweh is known to Israel throughout the book of Exodus, it is not surprising that their apostasy is bound up with a lack of understanding of Moses' mediating role as the servant of Yahweh.¹¹ Here, Israel's lack of understanding about Moses as mediator has immediate consequences for their relationship with Yahweh.

The need for Israel to understand properly Moses' mediating role in order for them to be in relationship with Yahweh becomes clearer by contrasting Exod 32:1 to their earlier perception of Moses and Yahweh in Exod 20:18. Previously, Israel saw (*rō^ʔîm*, Exod 20:18) the smoke and fire of theophany, feared God, and requested Moses to mediate for them, which resulted in the covenant ceremony with Yahweh (Exod 24:3b–8). But now the people only see (*wayyar^ʔ*) the absence of Moses, which prompts a request for gods. Thus Israel breaks the covenant because of their new, more limited vision, where lack of knowledge already begins with respect to Moses. Consequently, their conclusion to Aaron, "we do not know (*lō^ʔ yada^cnû*) what happened to him (Moses)," is actually interwoven with the larger theme of 'knowing Yahweh' within the book of Exodus.

A brief summary of the theme of knowledge within the book of Exodus will illustrate further how Israel's exclamation of ignorance about Moses at this point in the narrative creates discontinuity between themselves and Yahweh, thereby halting their relationship with Yahweh. Lack of knowledge about Yahweh is underscored at several important points in Exodus—even by Yahweh, who states to Moses,

11. So also concludes Sasson (1968, p. 384). But compare Coats (1968, pp. 188–189; and 1977, pp. 94–95), where he interprets Israel's request for the calf politically, "as an effort to replace Moses rather than a direct act of rebellion against Yahweh."

I am Yahweh. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as El Shaddai. I did not make known (*lō^ʔ nōda^ctī*) to them my name Yahweh. (Exod 6:2)

Furthermore, both Egypt and Israel are introduced as groups who do not know Yahweh.¹² Israel's cry due to the burden of their work in Exod 2:23 is without an object. Their groan merely drifts into the ears of God.

wayyē^ʔānēhū bēnē-yiśrā^ʔēl min-hā^cabōdā
wayyiz^cāqū
wata^cal šaw^cātām ^ʔel-hā^ʔēlōhīm min-hā^cābōdā

The people of Israel sighed from the work,
 and they cried out.
 Their cry for help from the work ascended to God

So also Pharaoh initially responds to Moses, “I do not know Yahweh” (*lō^ʔ yāda^ctī ^ʔet-YHWH*, Exod 5:2). The ignorance of Egypt and Israel about Yahweh in their introduction to the story contrasts sharply with the narrator's introduction of Yahweh. In Exod 2:24–25, the reader is told in rapid succession that God heard (*šm^c*) the cry for help, remembered (*zkr*) the covenant, saw (*r^ʔh*) Israel, and knew (*yd^c*). This contrast between the knowledge of God and the ignorance of Egypt and Israel establishes a major theme for the book of Exodus: Yahweh's instruction. Egypt must know that Yahweh is God (Exod 7:5, 17; 8:6; 9:14, 29; 14:4), while Israel must know that there is a difference between themselves and the Egyptians (Exod 11:7)—that Yahweh is their God (Exod 6:7; 16:12), who is leading them from the land of Egypt (Exod 6:7).¹³ In both cases Moses is the channel through which Yahweh educates. The plagues were Egypt's instruction, which culminated at the Red Sea. Israel's education also began in Egypt (Exod 4:29–31). But their course of instruction led to Mount Sinai and should have concluded in Exodus 32. For just prior to this narrative, Yahweh promised that Israel would come to knowledge through the construction of the tabernacle.

12. Knowledge or the lack of it is also important in the development of the character of Moses. This theme is woven into his call in Exodus 3, and it is central to his intercession with Yahweh in Exodus 33. For a detailed analysis of *yd^c* (to know) in Exodus 33 see Mulenbourg (1968, pp. 159–181).

13. The theme of Yahweh's instruction is accentuated by the recurring motif *wēyādē^cū mišrayim/wīda^ctem kī-^ʔānī YHWH* (“that Egypt may know/that you may know that I am Yahweh”, Exod 6:7; 7:5, 17; 8:6, 18; 9:14, 29; 14:4, 8; 16:12; 18:11; 29:46). For a discussion of this formula, see Zimmerli (1963, pp. 11–40).

I will dwell in the midst of the people of Israel,
 And I will be their God.
 Then they will know (wəyādē^cû) that I am Yahweh their God,
 who brought them forth out of the land of Egypt
 so that I might dwell in their midst.

(Exod 29:45–46a)

The narrator ironically heightens Israel's lack of perception and their rejection of Yahweh's instruction by including their demand in the narrative at the very moment when Moses has received plans for the house of God, which would have secured the divine presence and established Israel's relationship with Yahweh. But instead they cast off the salvation of Yahweh by crediting their exodus to Moses, and they break the covenant conditions by desiring other gods.

Finally, the syntax of Israel's statement is structured so that the reference to "Moses, the man" (*mōšeh hā'îs*) is at the center of their demand. The placement of Moses at the center of Israel's statement not only signals their rejection of Yahweh, but it also prepares the reader for the principal role that Moses is to play in the remainder of the narrative.

- (A) *qûm                *
 (Arise, make gods for us)
- (B) *                   *
 (who will go before us.)
- (C) *k     m     h    *
 (Because this man Moses)
- (B') *     h       m      m      *
 (who brought us out of the land of Egypt)
- (A') *           m         *
 (we do not know what happened to him.)

The introduction shifts our focus from the people of Israel to Aaron, after a brief description of the construction of the calf and a theological affirmation by Israel, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" (Exod 32:4). Although Aaron is the major protagonist in the construction of the calf, the narrative separates him from the people of Israel.¹⁴ When he sees the golden calf, he proclaims

14. The construction of the golden calf in Exod 32:4 by Aaron (*wayy  sar      bahere  * (*bah  r  *) has been interpreted in a number of ways: Aaron bound the gold in a bag *bah  r  * (Noth, 1959, pp. 419–422; Loewenstamm, 1967, p. 485); Aaron formed it with an engraving tool (Heinisch, 1934, p. 231); or Aaron formed it with a casting mold (Perdue, 1973, p. 244). Whatever translation one chooses, it does not seem necessary to harmonize the description of the construction of the calf in Exod 32:4 with Aaron's ironic response to Moses in Exod 32:24.

the following day as a feast to Yahweh (*ḥag layhwh māḥār*, Exod 32:5). Thus reference to Yahweh enters the narrative for the first time in the closing line of the introduction. Aaron's statement not only provides insight into his perception of the event, thus accounting for his exclusion from the later punishment, but his proclamation also ironically sets the stage for the devastating events which are to follow. At this point the reader knows that "the morrow" will usher in anything but a "feast to Yahweh."

Scene Two

The second scene opens on a new day (Exod 32:6–14). The narrator juxtaposes the closing line of Aaron with the realities of a new ceremony—like the covenant ratification in Exod 24:9, Israel sits to eat and to drink before their god. In addition, they also rise for cultic orgy.¹⁵ Suddenly, third person narration gives way to direct discourse; and Yahweh—at the top of the mountain—now occupies center stage. Yahweh informs Moses of the early morning events and condemns Israel—setting the stage for the mediation by Moses on behalf of the people.

The form and content of the divine discourse in Exod 32:7–10 are inseparable. The termination of the covenant by Yahweh accentuates Israel's responsibility, for His rejection of them is merely an acquiescence to their perception of the exodus. The frequently used "my people" is shifted in Yahweh's speech to the second person (Exod 32:7).¹⁶ Thus, in accordance with Israel's earlier confession in Exod 32:1, Yahweh now refers to them as Moses' people, whom he led from Egypt. The alienation between Yahweh and Israel is underscored further by the insertion of the demonstrative pronoun when Yahweh's perception of Israel is presented,

rāʔūī ʔet-hāʿām hazzeh
wēhinnēh ʿam-qēšēh-ʿōrep hū

I have seen this people,
and indeed they are a stiff-necked people.

(Exod 32:9)¹⁷

15. A thorough study of *ṣḥq* in the piel is beyond the scope of this study. I am following the interpretation presented by a number of scholars including Cassuto (1967, pp. 413–414) Hyatt (1971, p. 305) and Childs (1974, p. 566). But compare Sasson (1973, pp. 152–154) who argues that *ṣḥq* signifies "an orderly ritual."

16. The importance of the changing pronominal suffixes to convey characters' attitudes has been examined in more detail by Buber (1964, pp. 1150–1151), and more recently by Childs (1974, p. 567) and Moberly (1983, pp. 48–50).

17. The demonstrative pronoun *zeh* or *hazzeh* functions throughout the narrative to underscore distance or alienation between characters. In Exod 32:1 the people use it in

The covenant is broken, for, like the condition of humanity at the time of the flood, Israel is corrupted (*šht*).¹⁸ Thus they must be destroyed and a new people formed—perhaps from Moses, who, like Noah, has found favor in the eyes of God.¹⁹

At this brink of disaster, Moses begins to intercede for Israel. The command by Yahweh, “Now leave me alone!” (*wē^cattâ hannîhâ lî*, Exod 32:10), underscores the heroic quality of Moses—for he defies the anger of Yahweh in order to intercede for the people. Moses incorporates the qualities of justice and prudence in presenting a two-part argument to Yahweh in Exod 32:11–13. The argument by Moses begins with two questions which are followed by two imperatives. Both of Moses’ questions contain an affirmation which is meant to dissuade Yahweh from destroying Israel.²⁰ Moses frames his argument around the people of Israel. He first asks Yahweh,

Why (*lāmâ*) Yahweh, does Your anger burn hot against Your people,
whom You brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with
a mighty hand?

(Exod 32:11b)

Here Moses once again shifts the pronominal suffixes to the second person when addressing Yahweh. Israel is Yahweh’s people, whom He led from Egypt. Moses strengthens this affirmation by bringing the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to the memory of Yahweh with his closing imperative.

Remember (*zēkōr*) Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom
You swore by Yourself and said to them, “I will multiply your descendants
like the stars of heaven, and all this land which I have promised, I will give
to your descendants, and they will inherit it forever.”

(Exod 32:13)

The interior question and imperative by Moses concern the Egyptians.

reference to Moses; in v. 9 Yahweh in reference to the people; in v. 21 Moses in reference to the people; in v. 24 Aaron in reference to the calf; and, finally, in v. 31 Moses once again refers to the people with the demonstrative in his speech to Yahweh when he mentions their great sin.

18. *šht* is a *Leitwort* in the introduction to the flood story in Genesis 6.

19. This motif is applied to Noah in Gen 6:8. Moses also bases his arguments with Yahweh on this motif in Exod 33:12b, 13a, 13b, 16a; 34:9. For additional parallels between Moses and Noah, see Moberly (1983, pp. 91–93).

20. Gesenius-Kautzsch (1978, p. 150): “Of frequent occurrence also are questions introduced by *lāmā*, which really contain an affirmation and are used to state the reason for a request or warning.”

What (*lāmmâ*) will the Egyptians say?

(Exod 32:12a)

Although this question at first appears odd, when it is placed within the larger theme of Yahweh's instruction, Moses' question is very prudent. For, as we have seen, the exodus was meant to teach not only Israel, but also Egypt about Yahweh. Thus Moses follows up this second question with the imperative,

Turn (*sûb*) from Your anger and repent of this evil against Your people.

(Exod 32:12b)

The effectiveness of these arguments by Moses are once again illustrated through the use of suffixes. The narrator concludes in v. 14, "Yahweh turned from the evil which He sought to do to His people (*le^cammô*)."

Several phrases in this episode elicit motifs from ancient Near Eastern literature to accentuate the heroic character of Moses. First, the additional meaning of "laughter" (*leṣahēq*) to the cultic orgy by Israel in Exod 32:6 brings to mind related motifs of noise as the cause of divine anger.²¹ In *Atra-Hasis* the noise of humans angered Enlil and resulted in their destruction;²² while in *Enuma Elish* the more active gods also disturb Apsu and Tiamat with their noise.²³ Exodus 32 reinforces a reading of this motif by presenting Yahweh's condemnation of Israel on the second day as a specific reaction to their feast, even though Israel had already broken the covenant conditions on the previous day. Also, in the following scene the motif of noise is once again associated with the feast, when both Joshua (Exod 32:17) and Moses (Exod 32:18) hear noise before they reach the base of the mountain.

Second, in this context the demand by Yahweh to Moses—*wē^cattâ hannîhâ lî*—in Exod 32:10 also invites a double reading. The imperative, "Leave me alone!" could also be read as an exclamation, "Now give me rest!" The demand of a deity for rest from noise again brings to mind Enlil in *Atra-Hasis A* (Tablet II) i 8 and both Tiamat and Apsu in *Enuma Elish* I 38–40, 49–50, 121. These motifs not only highlight the anger of Yahweh, but they also underscore the heroic character of Moses. He risks mediation for Israel in the face of divine wrath—until the situation is reversed in Exod 33:14, when Yahweh promises to give Moses rest (*wahāniḥōtî lāk*).

21. The meaning of laughter for *ṣḥq* is limited primarily to the *qal* form of the verb. There is also an interplay between the *qal* and the *pi^cel* of the verb in Exod 21:6, 8.

22. *Atrahasis A* (Tablet II) i 2–8. See Pritchard (1969, pp. 104–106).

23. *Enuma Elish* I 20–28. See Pritchard (1969, pp. 60–72).

Scene Three

The third scene changes to the base of the mountain in order to examine mediation by Moses as the servant of Yahweh in Exod 32:15–29. The awkward elaboration of the tablets at the beginning of this scene (Exod 32:15–16) emphasizes the changed role of Moses—in his hands are the words of God,²⁴ which he is bringing to Israel. But when he sees the calf (*wayyar ʔet-hāʿēgel*, Exod 32:19), the justice of Moses now combines with his violent quality as he takes on the divine anger and functions as the advocate of Yahweh against the idol and Israel. Thus he becomes enraged and shatters what was within his grasp at the top of Mount Sinai.

The function of Moses as the servant of Yahweh also incorporates motifs from ancient Near Eastern literature. The verbal correspondence between the attack of Anath or Mot in *CTA* 6 ii 32–36 and the razing of the idol by Moses in Exod 32:20 has long since been noted. Just as Anath totally annihilated Mot by burning (*tšrpnn*), grinding (*tṯhnn*), and scattering (*tdrynn*), so also does Moses destroy the calf by burning (*wayyišrōp*), grinding (*wayyitḥan*), and scattering (*wayyizer*) it on the water.²⁵

The Ugaritic myth requires closer examination, for there is also a similarity of function in the interrelation of characters between the *Baal and Mot Poem* and Exod 32:15–29, which helps to define Moses as the servant of Yahweh. The context for Anath's attack against Mot begins when Mot kills Baal. When Anath hears of Baal's death, she descends to earth to find his body (*CTA* 5), bury it, and mourn his death (*CTA* 6 i). After she informs El of Baal's death (*CTA* 6 i), Anath searches out and annihilates Mot (*CTA* 6 ii) by burning, grinding, and scattering his body. Her actions are followed by the resurrection of Baal (*CTA* 6 iii–v).²⁶

24. See Noth (1962, pp. 248–249).

25. Loewenstamm (1967, pp. 481–485) concludes that there is a literary parallel between the Ugaritic and biblical text "to describe the total annihilation of a detested enemy." But compare Perdue (1973, pp. 239–244), who sees no parallel between Exod 32:20 and the Ugaritic literature, but rather concludes that "Moses' destruction of the golden calf is presented in realistic language, quite similar to that of the Deuteronomistic school." Fensham (1966, pp. 191–193) and Hvidberg-Hansen (1971, pp. 5–46) also see a parallel between these texts which, they conclude, points to a cultic setting.

26. Hvidberg-Hansen (1971, pp. 22–23) comes to much the same conclusion concerning the structure of the Ugaritic myth and its parallels between Moses and Anath. But, for Hvidberg-Hansen, both texts suggest a similar ritual background of the last grain during harvest. Thus for him, the parallel by the biblical writer is meant to be a polemic which turns "the weapon of the enemy against the enemy itself, namely, against the worship of Yahweh with Canaanite cult practices" (1971, p. 30).

The parallels between Yahweh-Baal in opposition to the golden calf-Mot provide a framework for comparing the actions of Moses and Anath. The domain of Yahweh is the people of Israel, rather than the earth with its regeneration, as it was for Baal. Nevertheless, when each rules there is life to that domain. When Yahweh is ruling Israel, their life is symbolized by the covenant. In Exodus 32 the golden calf signals the victory of death over life for Israel, just as Mot's victory over Baal signified death to his domain, the earth. This is clearly illustrated in Exodus 32 by the shattering of the covenant tablets and by the desire of Yahweh to destroy Israel. The annihilation of the golden calf by Moses is more than simply a verbal repetition from the Ugaritic Myth, for he also functions in a similar manner to Anath in her attack on Mot. As the servant of Yahweh, his action against the golden calf prepares the way for the new covenant, which will reaffirm the rule of Yahweh and bring life to Israel.

There are also striking differences between the two accounts. Unlike Baal, Yahweh is separated from the domain of His rule, so that the construction and worship of the calf does not signify the death of Yahweh, but only of Israel. In addition, there is also a more pronounced ethical tone to Exodus 32. The calf does not point to a cosmic struggle, but arises from Israel's request for gods. The people of Israel are responsible for their own death. The transcendence of Yahweh and the responsibility of Israel for the calf provide two points of contrast between Moses and Anath. First, since the conflict is not a cosmic struggle, it is not necessary for Moses to be a divine hero in order to participate in the struggle. And second, because of Israel's active role in the construction of the calf, it is not enough for Moses simply to destroy the calf in order to usher in the new covenant. Israel must also be purified.

In view of the parallels between the *Baal and Mot Poem* and Exod 32:15–29, the response by Moses to Joshua about noise rising from the camp of Israel also invites two readings.

ʔēn qōl ʿānôt gēbūrâ
wēʔēn qōl ʿānôt hālūšâ
qōl ʿannôt ʔānōkî šōmēã^c

it is not the sound of the cry of victory,
 nor the sound of the cry of defeat;
 it is the *qōl ʿannôt* that I hear.

(Exod 32:18)²⁷

27. See Greenstein (1974, p. 97) for his description of a weak form of climactic or staircase parallelism. Concerning the function of this tri-colon, Gressmann (1913, p. 202) long ago noted its role to stop action in order to emphasize this moment.

The *qôl* [°]*annôti* that Moses hears in the final line of this staircase tricolon could be alliteration and thus a description of Israel's feast, which plays off the earlier motif of noise—"it is the sound of singing that I hear."²⁸ Yet at the same time this discourse by Moses might also be an instance of paranomasia which adds definition to his mediating role as the servant of Yahweh by bringing to mind Anath—"it is the voice of Anath that I hear."²⁹

The last half of this scene (Exod 32:21–29) maintains the distinction between Aaron and Israel that was established at the beginning of the story. Moses first addresses Aaron (vv. 21–24), but his wrath is focused on the people (vv. 25–29). As the servant of Yahweh, Moses reflects the same alienation and anger toward Israel that Yahweh demonstrated in the previous scene. He now also employs the demonstrative pronoun in reference to the people when addressing Aaron in v. 21,

mah-°āsâ lēkâ hā°ām hazzeh

What did this people do to you?

A repetition of Moses' annihilation of the calf follows, but this time he calls the Levites to holy war against the people.³⁰ In the final verse of this scene, the reference to "day" draws our attention back to the day that was to be a feast to Yahweh. Ironically, Yahweh blesses those who destroyed the feast and its participants.

Scene Four

The narrative concludes by drawing the reader beyond the events of the previous day with the repetition of *mimmāḥārāt* ("tomorrow") in v. 30. The successful mediation of Moses has saved Israel from destruction (Exod 32:6–14) and vindicated Yahweh (Exod 32:15–29). Moses begins the new day by once again mediating. After he tells Israel of the magnitude of their sin (Exod 32:30), he turns to Yahweh in the hope of establishing a new covenant (Exod 32:31–32). Moses offers himself as atonement for Israel's sin, which Yahweh firmly rejects (Exod 32:33–34). The mediator cannot atone for the people.

28. See Dillmann (1880, p. 340), Childs (1974, p. 568), and Andersen (1966, pp. 108–109), who interpret [°]*annôti* as professional cult singers.

29. See Edelmann (1950, p. 56) and (1966, p. 355), Whybray (1967, p. 122), and Deem (1978, pp. 25–30).

30. See Walzer (1968, pp. 1–14 esp. 2–4).

III

Although Israel, Aaron, and Yahweh are important characters in Exodus 32, the preceding analysis has sought to illustrate how the narrative focuses on Moses as ideal mediator. The contradictory functions of Moses, pleading to Yahweh for Israel's survival and purging Israel for Yahweh, are not to be explained simply as the result of separate narratives.³¹ On the contrary, Exodus 32 accentuates these conflicting roles by presenting the devotion of Moses to Yahweh and to Israel with equal intensity through the qualities of justice, violence, and prudence. The structure of the narrative suggests that these conflicting loyalties are at the very core of mediation in ancient Israel and necessarily irreconcilable. Therefore the final scene of the narrative could not seek a resolution within the character of Moses and successfully present the mediating ideal. Rather, resolution—the promised relationship between Yahweh and Israel—must occur by means of Moses.

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31. So also Childs (1974, p. 559) concludes, "The alleged contradiction between God's informing Moses (vv. 7–8) and his own discovery (vv. 17ff.) arises from failure to recognize the literary nature of the story. A topical scheme of contrasting scenes often dislocates the chronological sequence of the narrative."

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