MICHAEL WIDMER

Moses, God, and the Dynamics of Intercessory Prayer

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Mohr Siebeck

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Bernd Janowski (Tübingen) · Mark S. Smith (New York)
Hermann Spieckermann (Göttingen)

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Moses, God, and the Dynamics of Intercessory Prayer

A Study of Exodus 32–34 and Numbers 13–14

Mohr Siebeck

MICHAEL WIDMER, born 1970; 1996 BA in Theology; 1999 MTh (London School of Theology); 2003 Ph.D. (Durham); currently working at the University Library Durham, England.

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Preface

The following book is a revised and expanded version of my doctoral thesis accepted by the University of Durham in 2003. I am grateful to Prof. Dr Bernd Janowski, Prof. Dr Hermann Spieckermann and Prof. Mark S. Smith for accepting this study for publication in the series *Forschungen zum Alten Testament*.

In the opening pages of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, Karl Barth underlines the intrinsic connection between theological work and prayer. Thus it seems natural for the Swiss theologian to join the prayer with which Thomas Aquinas begins his *Summa Theologica*:

> Gewähre mir, barmherziger Gott, das, was dir wohlgefällig ist, brennend zu begehren, verständig zu erforschen, wahrhaftig zu erkennen und ihm vollkommen gerecht zu werden zum Lob deines Namens.

It may seem presumptuous to start my acknowledgements with the words of these two giants of the Christian tradition, but their prayer brings fittingly to expression the attitude which underlies this study as well. Thus, I wish to acknowledge the God who has motivated and sustained me throughout the years, not least through the help of numerous people.

First of all I wish to express my deep gratitude to my *Doktorvater* Revd Dr Walter Moberly, who, through his insightful and creative publications, lured me to the North of England to study under his supervision. He has been a constant source of inspiration, wise counsel, and encouragement. It is through his critical, but constructive thinking that I have become a better student of the Old Testament. I have also greatly benefited from Prof. Robert Hayward who read part of my work at an earlier stage and made several formative suggestions. As a member of the Old Testament seminar of Durham University, I am grateful to its participants who have advanced and sharpened my thinking in many ways.

Special thanks are also due to my examiners Prof. Chris Seitz and Dr Stuart Weeks. The oral defence of one's dissertation is one of few events which one will never forget. I will keep my viva in good memory as an intensely stimulating time from which new "theological impulses" emerged.

Studying and writing in a foreign language is not without its challenges. Thus a special tribute goes to Dr Nathan MacDonald and Joel N. Lohr (PhD cand.) who undertook the demanding task of proof-reading the penultimate draft and final version of this thesis respectively. They have kept me from many mistakes and have made insightful suggestions. I am also grateful to

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I would also like to acknowledge three of my former teachers: Ms Mary Evans, Dr Deryck Sheriffs, and Dr Jean-Marc Heimerdinger. They awakened my love for the Old Testament and encouraged me to search for hermeneutically responsible ways to read the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture.

I am deeply grateful to all our friends here in Durham, particularly to the members of House to House and St. Nicholas Church. They enriched our stay in many ways and provided the kind of congenial fellowship one can only hope for during an endeavour such as this.

As a Swiss national, there were times when I alternated between the libraries of Durham University and that of the *Evangelisch-Theologischen Fakultät* of the University of Berne. Having had access to two theological libraries has been a privilege for which I am grateful; it accounts, however, also for some inconsistencies in my dissertation because I did not always have access to the same books, editions, translations etc. Thus, for example, sometimes I use the *Theologische Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* (TWAT) and sometimes its English translation TDOT. I tried to be as consistent as was reasonably possible.

Devoting four years to doctoral studies cannot be done without financial support. Various people and bodies have carried this project. I am grateful to the department of education in Berne and to the department of theology at Durham. The former has provided the funding for my undergraduate and initial stages of my post-graduate studies, while the latter assisted my doctoral work with a substantial grant. I am also immensely indebted to my parents, Alfred & Renée Widmer-Villette, and my godmother, Susanne Greber-Widmer, who have constantly assisted me with generous support and love. My gratitude is extended to my mother in law, Toshiko Kunioka and Mochigase Church for their support and ongoing prayer. Above all, I wish to express my utmost thanks to Haruhi, my wife, who worked full-time for two years, in spite of demanding working conditions, surprising pregnancy, and the heartfelt desire to be a full-time mom. I can never hope to adequately express my appreciation to you. Together we experienced the existential reality of the wilderness narratives, being constantly torn between uncertainties and standing in awe of God's wonderful providence of which, among many other things, the amazing arrival of our daughter Ayuki Sarah is a living testimony. It is to her that this book is dedicated.

Michael Widmer, Durham, 7 April 2004

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Introduction

Luther once commented that he would be prepared to spend a large amount of money (200 Goldgulden) if he could pray like the Jews. The Jews, Luther believed, had learned to pray from the greatest man of prayer, their teacher Moses; Moses, however, learned to pray from God personally.[1] In terms of Scripture, Moses can rightfully be called the father of biblical prayer.[2] Heiler in his classic treatment on prayer writes:

> The ultimate roots of Christian prayer go back to the prophetic mediation of Moses between Jahve and Israel. He is the great man of prayer who intercedes for his people with Jahve; none of his contemporaries stand in such immediate relation to Jahve as he. He "sees Jahve's face"... He "speaks with Him mouth to mouth." The tremendous dramatic realism which is peculiar to the prayer of the great Christian personalities, is the creation of Moses. The prayerlife of the older leaders and prophets of Israel, of a Joshua, a Samuel, and Elijah, and an Amos, moves within the forms of the Mosaic intercessorship.[3]

Though often taken for granted as such, the intimate "I-Thou" dialogue which is characteristic to Jewish and Christian spirituality, finds its roots in the canonical Moses.[4] Scripture presents Moses as the archetype of Israel's prophets (Deut. 5:28ff., 34:10); YHWH[5] did not speak to him in visions, dreams, or riddles, but clearly, face to face (cf. Nu. 12:6–8). It thus seems natural that the most comprehensive biblical account of the nature of God is given in the context of a prayer-dialogue between Moses and YHWH (cf. Ex. 34:6–7).

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[1] Cited from JACOB, Exodus, 970. Unfortunately Jacob does not provide the source of Luther's statement.

[2] This is obviously not a "historical" statement. The canonical portrayal of Moses is likely the result of a long and complex process of recording, compiling, and editing. We shall look at the depth dimension of Exodus 32–34 and Numbers 13–14 at a later stage of this work.

[3] HEILER, Prayer, 121–122. Cf. WRIGHT, Deuteronomy, 138.

[4] From a canonical perspective, the first extensive intercessory prayer is found on the lips of Abraham for Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:23–33). Although Abraham is Israel's founding patriarch and his prayer is already characterised by an audacious and persistent tone (not unlike those of Moses), the content of his prayer does not bear resemblances to the "prayer-tradition" initiated by Moses. Abraham's intercession is presented as a pre-Sinai, pre-covenant, pre-Israel prayer.

See MILLER, They Cried, 5–31, for a helpful overview of Israel's neighbours at prayer.

[5] Throughout this work I will leave the tetragrammaton unvocalised. In quotes from other scholars, however, their own usage is retained.

Moses' intercessions raise ultimate issues about the nature of God and His dealing with His people. These intercessory prayers evoke questions about the divine nature and thereby raise the important and complex issue of how human participation in the divine decision-making process is envisaged. Clements suggests that the concept of intercession forces one to think through some of the most fundamental issues in theology:[6] the relationship between God and intercessor, the relationship between God and the party who is interceded for, and finally, the relationship between the intercessor and those being prayed for. There is, of course, a mystery about prayer in general, and about intercessory prayer in particular, but bearing in mind the function and role of Moses, there is possibly no better place to commence an investigation into the biblical understanding of intercessory prayer than with Exodus 32–34 and Numbers 13–14, two related key narratives which provide the context for Moses' most crucial intercessory activity.

A venture of this nature, however, raises considerable challenges. The subject of prayer is a very delicate matter. Although the act of prayer has been rightly described as the most fundamental expression of religion in general and of biblical faith in particular,[7] it is also one of the most attacked areas by critics of religion and raises seemingly insurmountable challenges for the interpreter. This is partially due to what Ebeling calls the "intellectual vulnerability" of prayer.[8] By this he shows awareness that the phenomenon of prayer is frequently juxtaposed with a number of apparently contradicting divine attributes.[9] In classic Christian understanding God is omniscient. Thus the question is often posed, why does God need to be told of human needs and why does He need to be reminded of His promises? Moreover, God is often confessed as impassible and immutable, and yet in prayer one apparently seeks to change Him or His plans. What is more, prayer by its very nature presupposes a personal God who adheres to human requests. This anthropomorphic picture of God, who is frequently addressed as "Father," has been a major point of critique throughout Christian history.[10]

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[6] CLEMENTS, The Prayers, 11.

[7] EBELING, Dogmatik, 193, 208, is convinced that if theology is based on the witness of the Old and New Testament, prayer is not one religious act among others, but in it is concentrated the entire divine-human relationship. Thus for Ebeling "Das Phänomen des Gebets wird somit zum hermeneutischen Schlüssel der Gotteslehre."

[8] EBELING, Dogmatik, 209. Especially KANT, Religion, 184–187, left a legacy of suspicion. According to Kant, the idea of a personal God who engages meaningfully with the needs of individuals is nothing but wishful thinking. Cf. REVENTLOW, Gebet, 14–21.

[9] Cf. CULMANN, Das Gebet, 19.

[10] Cf. REVENTLOW, Gebet, 2–80.

Given this wider background, it is not surprising that in Old Testament studies the subject of prayer has until recently been neglected and was at best treated as a marginal subject in the area of Israel's liturgy or cult.[11] Under the long hegemony of historical-critical methods, it is understandable that prayer was not a promising field of research. This is all the more true for biblical prose prayers which are in some circles regarded as "mere literary artifacts" that do not provide direct — or even indirect — data of what actually happened.[12] An approach which is committed to historical reconstruction can attempt to describe Israel's prayer-practice at various stages in Israel's history, or, with regard to specific prayer texts, it can allocate them to specific life-settings, sources, and dates. Although historical criticism asks important questions, when it comes to address the intrinsic logic of the narratives in their final form and context, or the theological concerns of scriptural prayers, the tools of the historian are not the most appropriate ones. By its own definition, a historical approach cannot address issues concerning the theology and spirituality of prayer, because these issues clearly go beyond historical verification.[13]

The primary objective of this study is to reconsider the significance of the canonical portrayal of Moses the intercessor and God in the aftermath of characteristic modern pentateuchal criticism. As we shall see, the only recent substantial treatment on Moses the intercessor is by Aurelius, and he is almost exclusively concerned with reconstructing the development of the Mosaic portrait.[14] Lohfink, though highlighting the importance of Aurelius' monograph, indicates regret that the "*synchrone Textstudium*" is neglected and goes on to express the need for a fuller study of the reconstructed layers and the final form of the text.[15] We hope to contribute to this *desideratum* at least as far as Exodus 32–34 and Numbers 13–14 are concerned. We shall attempt to adhere closely to the final form of these two narratives without disregarding their diachronic dimensions, while carefully analysing the dynamics of Moses' prayers in their narrative contexts. Thereby our focus

[11] E.g. EICHRODT, Theology 2, 172–176, VON RAD, Theologie 1, 366–467. As we shall see, WESTERMANN, Theologie, 21, initiated a shift by arguing that the divine-human dialogue is the primary theme of the Old Testament. Since the work of Westermann, several major treatments of Old Testament prayer have emerged. See e.g. GREENBERG, Prose Prayer, CLEMENTS, The Prayers, REVENTLOW, Gebet, BALENTINE, Prayer, MILLER, They Cried.

[12] Cf. GREENBERG, Prose Prayer, 18.

[13] These issues involve theological concerns such as faith, obedience, and discernment. Cf. LASH, Martyrdom, 80–81, BALENTINE, Prayer, 249.

[14] AURELIUS, Der Fürbitter.

[15] LOHFINK, Der Fürbitter, 87.

will be on the rich theological content of the prayers and their theological functions within the immediate and wider narrative contexts.

Prayer as a Hermeneutical Key to Theology

In both Exodus 32–34 and Numbers 13–14 the narrative setting of Moses' intercessions is that of rebellion and divine judgement. In fact these two accounts arguably witness to Israel's most severe offences against God in the Pentateuch.[16] In Exodus 32 the erection and worship of the golden calf endangers Israel's covenant relationship, while in Numbers 13–14 it is Israel's unbelief and rebellion against the divine purposes which leads Israel's future as God's people into jeopardy. The consequences in both are the same: in wrath YHWH intends to annihilate sinful Israel and make a new start with Moses (Ex. 32:10, Nu. 14:12). In both accounts, Moses' intercession plays a crucial and central role in the outworking of the divine judgement. On both occasions Moses succeeds in preventing YHWH from totally destroying Israel. Exodus 32:14 explicitly speaks about a change of God's mind (נחם), while in Numbers this is clearly implied in the modified judgement (Nu. 14:20ff.). As a result of Moses' persistent prayers, Israel is pardoned (סלח, Ex. 34:9ff., Nu. 14:20) and the battered covenant relationship is renewed.

This brief preview makes it evident that the nature of Moses' prayers evokes important theological questions, especially with regard to divine reputation and covenant commitment in the face of a rebellious and unbelieving people. Moreover, the puzzling notion of a God who "repents" (נחם) and changes His mind, as already mentioned, is not an unproblematic theological venture.[17] This underlines once more that prayer and theology are intrinsically related to each other.[18]

Moses the Prophetic Intercessor

Another central objective of this study is to examine and understand Moses' intercessory activity in relation to his prophetic qualities. Although it has long been noticed that Moses is presented as Israel's archetypal prophet, the intrinsic relatedness between his prophetic role and his successful intercessory

[16] BLUM, Studien, 134–135.
[17] JEREMIAS, Die Reue, 9.
[18] REVENTLOW, Gebet, 9.

activity has received less attention. We shall not only argue that both Exodus 32–34 and Numbers 13–14 stand in canonical relationship to texts which ascribe unique prophetic qualities to Moses (e.g. Ex. 3–6, Nu. 12), but also that the logic of genuine intercessory prayer presupposes prophetic prerogatives.

Canonical Relationship between Exodus 32–34 and Numbers 13–14

Apart from the fact that Exodus 32–34 and Numbers 13–14 provide the primary contexts for a study on Moses' intercessory prayers, the choice of the two narratives is endorsed by their often neglected and yet strong innerbiblical relations. The relationship, we shall argue, goes far beyond the numerous conceptual and linguistic parallels between Moses' intercessory prayers.[19] We shall see that Moses' intercessory prayer in Numbers 14:17–19 clearly intends to be understood in relation to Exodus 34:6–7, YHWH's fullest revelation of His name. In Numbers 14:18 Moses makes direct appeal to YHWH's newly revealed name. In other words, he prays that YHWH will do justice to His nature as disclosed to him on Sinai. It will be argued that Moses here sets a biblical paradigm of authentic prayer.[20]

Another, to my knowledge unnoticed, innerbiblical relationship exists between YHWH's newly disclosed attributes (34:6–7) and YHWH's response to Moses' intercessory prayer in Numbers 14:20ff. We shall see that YHWH's revelation of His name in Exodus 34:6–7 is presented as the result of an intense and engaging dialogue with Moses. Yet, interestingly enough, the fullest disclosure of YHWH's name remains a somewhat abstract reality in the unfolding of the golden calf narrative. We shall argue, however, that YHWH's full name is enacted in Numbers 14 in a specific and concrete situation. To be more precise, there is good reason to postulate that Numbers 14:11–35 stands as a kind of commentary on Exodus 34:6–7. It is particularly the important relationship between divine pardon and covenant maintenance, and the much debated logic of divine visitation to the third and fourth generation which receives an illuminating outworking in Numbers 14:20–35.

It will become evident that the following study has been informed in many ways by forerunners in the field. By providing a survey of recent literature on the subject of Old Testament prayer in general and intercessory prayer in

[19] See BLUM, Studien, 181–188.

[20] Cf. BRUEGGEMANN, The Psalms, 43–49.

particular, I wish not only to acknowledge my indebtedness to them, but also hope to provide a wider framework for dialogue in our reading of Moses' intercessory prayers.

Chapter 1

Prayer in the Old Testament

The objective of this section is twofold. It seeks to provide an overview of the most important and relevant recent works on the subject of Old Testament prayer in general and (Moses') intercessory prayer in particular. The various approaches and ideas as advanced by the following advocates will hardly be assessed at this stage. A critical engagement with their views will follow in the context of the biblical texts in question.

I. Survey of Approaches to Prayer in the Old Testament in General

Although the scholarly literature on ancient Israel's prayer is not insurmountable, this section does not attempt to be an exhaustive history of research on Old Testament prayer.[1] The subsequent selection of recent major contributions to Hebrew prayer will be guided by their degree of relevance to our theological narrative reading of Moses' intercessory prayers.[2]

A Theologian on Prayer (Barth, 1932–1953)

Karl Barth has greatly influenced key figures in the field of Old Testament theology, such as Eichrodt, von Rad, and Childs. His influence is felt particularly in his emphasis on revelation and the sovereignty of God, as well as his understanding and use of Scripture as an abiding witness. Barth, in a unique way, wrote his monumental dogmatics in close and substantial interaction with the biblical text. He provides imaginative and detailed "theological exegesis" on a vast number of biblical texts, including Exodus

[1] For more general issues regarding prayer, I refer the reader to REVENTLOW, Das Gebet, 9–80, and BALENTINE, Prayer, 13–32, 225–259, who provide helpful and informative (though not exhaustive) discussions of most of the influential scholarly works on prayer since the beginning of the twentieth century.

[2] Slightly more space is given to four major German works on the subject which have not received sufficient attention in the English speaking world. That is, HESSE, Die Fürbitte, SCHARBERT, Die Fürbitte in der Theologie, and, Die Fürbitte im Alten Testament, REVENTLOW, Gebet, and, AURELIUS, Der Fürbitter.

32–34 and Numbers 13–14. This, along with his extensive reflections on biblical prayer and its interrelated portrayal of God, will form the basis of our first exposition.

Barth's emphasis on God's sovereignty is to some degree a reaction to the anthropocentrism of the 19th century. God, he asserts, can never be the object of human knowledge and description. He is the sovereign subject who takes the initiative of making Himself known. In other words, under "natural" circumstances God cannot be known, but He reveals Himself "supernaturally." Divine revelation demands a human response engendered by a God-given faith and obedience.[3] God is not an abstract deity who is detached from humanity; on the contrary, He seeks to accomplish His plans and purposes with human participation.[4] In this divine-human co-operation prayer plays an important role.

Barth's theology of prayer is in strong continuity with that of the Reformers. He develops four central aspects of prayer.[5] First he notes that prayer is an obedient response to God's love. Because of God's gracious election, humans ought to give thanks to God for His love.[6] Prayer is not an option for the believer; rather, it is the mark / criterion of one who believes.[7] Barth characterises Joshua's and Caleb's response to the rebellious crowd (Nu. 14:6ff.) as an act of obedience to the divine promise, corresponding to the goodness and certainty of it. Their response, *a priori,* shares in the certainty that YHWH is with them. This takes us to the second aspect of prayer. Barth argues that the one praying ought to be certain of God's answer (*Erhörung*). "Our prayers may be feeble and inadequate, but what matters is not the strength of our prayers but the fact that God hears them; that is why we pray."[8] By this Barth does not only mean that human prayer is taken up and integrated in the divine plan and will, but also that God will respond in act and/or speech (cf. Matt. 7:7ff., 1 John 5:14f., Pss. 91:14–15, 145:19).[9] In the context of Barth's treatment of Moses' prayers in Exodus 32–34 and Numbers 14, we find this principle exemplified. Here, suggests Barth, the distinction is made between those who know God and His promises and those who do not. Moses' prayers essentially insist on YHWH's previously

[3] BARTH, Dogmatik I, 1, 238–241.

[4] BARTH, Docmatics II, 2, 9ff. Not least because God has elected humanity in Jesus Christ to be His covenant partners.

[5] Cf. BARTH, Dogmatik III, 4, 95–126, 121.

[6] BARTH, Dogmatics II, 2, 410.

[7] BARTH, Prayer, 19.

[8] BARTH, Prayer, 17, cf. Dogmatik III, 4, 117–118.

[9] BARTH, Dogmatik III, 4, 117.

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