

YHWH: Great in Kindness
An Exegetical Study of Exodus 34:5-8

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Introduction

Picture the scene. Moses has led his people out of Egypt by the hand of God and by this same hand been given the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone.¹ These same tablets he subsequently broke after learning that Israel had compromised their commitment to YHWH by making a golden calf as an object of worship.² As a result of Israel's unfaithfulness, God sent punishment upon them, first by sword and then by plague.³ Though YHWH was willing to spare Israel and send them to the promised land with an angelic presence, He was no longer willing to go with them.⁴ This announcement caused both Israel and Moses great distress. Moses pleaded with YHWH that His presence would go along with them and that he might see His glory; God promised that He would grant both requests.⁵ Finally, YHWH asked Moses to chisel two new stone tablets and to ascend Mount Sinai to present himself to YHWH.

In what follows, God revealed His character to Moses using words which would play a central role in directing Jewish discourse about the divine being for millennia to come:

Exodus 34 (Hebrew) וַיֵּרֶד יְהוָה בְּעָנָן וַיִּתְיַצֵּב עִמּוֹ שָׁם וַיִּקְרָא בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה:	5	Exodus 34 (my translation) And YHWH descended in the cloud and he stood with him there ⁶ and he proclaimed the name of YHWH.
וַיַּעֲבֹר יְהוָה עַל-פְּנֵי וַיִּקְרָא יְהוָה יְהוָה אֵל	6	And YHWH passed by before his face and

¹ See Exodus 31:18.

² See Exodus 32:19.

³ See Exodus 32:25-35.

⁴ See Exodus 33:1-3.

⁵ See Exodus 33:16-19.

⁶ Who is proclaiming the name of YHWH in this verse? Though YHWH is the clear subject of the verb ירד (*yarad*, meaning descended), it is less clear who the subject of יצב (*yatzav*, meaning stood) and קרא (*kara*, meaning proclaimed/called) is. Childs surveys the range of options and provides this distillation: "The issue can only be decided in terms of the context. Accordingly, commentators have been divided in their interpretation. Yahweh as subject is defended by AV, RSV, NJPS, NEB, NAB; Moses as subject by AV margin, Dillman, Bantsch, Driver, Hyatt." (Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* [Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 2004], 603). This is likewise the view defended in Douglas Stuart's volume *New American Commentary* and the NET Bible's translator notes.

The view that Moses is the one standing with YHWH and proclaiming YHWH's name can be defended with appeal to 33:21 and 34:2 which see Moses as the one standing and waiting for YHWH. However, 34:6 (the verse immediately following) uses קרא again to describe YHWH proclaiming His own name, seemingly as an expansion upon the proclamation of the name in verse 5. The view that YHWH is the subject of these latter two verbs and not Moses seems to be the most persuasive.

<p>רַחוּם וְחַנּוּן אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב־חַסֵּד וְאַמֶּת׃</p> <p>נִצֵּר חֶסֶד לְאַלְפִים נִשָּׂא עֵז וּפִשַׁע וְחַטָּאָה וְנִקְהָ לֹא יִנְקָה פֶקֶד׃ עֵז אָבוֹת עַל־בָּנִים וְעַל־בְּנֵי בָנִים עַל־שְׁלֹשִׁים וְעַל־רִבְעִים׃</p> <p>וַיִּמְהַר מֹשֶׁה וַיִּקְדַּ אֶרֶצָה וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶ׃</p>		<p>proclaimed, “YHWH, YHWH God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger⁷ and great in kindness and faithfulness.</p> <p>7 Keeping mercy to thousands, taking away iniquity and transgression and sin yet by no means acquitting, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the sons and upon the grandsons to the third generation and to the fourth generation.”</p> <p>8 And Moshe hurried and bowed toward the earth and worshiped.</p>
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In the material after these four verses, God promises to go along in Israel’s midst but commands them to make no covenant with the pagans in the land lest they be ensnared into the worship of other gods. He also (seemingly) asks Moses to write on the tablets the ten commandments of the covenant He made with Israel.⁸

⁷ Here YHWH is described as “אַרְךָ אַפַּיִם,” (*erech afayim*) or “long of nostrils/nose.” Many translations render this phrase as something like “slow to anger” or “long suffering.” In the majority of places where “אַפַּיִם” (*afayim*) is used in the Old Testament, it has as its reference a part of human anatomy, often to one bowing with this part of their body to the ground (Gen. 19:1, 42:6, 1 Sam 25:41, Neh 8:6, etc.). In a number of other places, it is paired with the adjective “אַרְךָ” (as it is here), often seemingly as a quotation of this very verse (Num 14:18, Neh 9:17, Psalm 86:15, Psalm 103:8, Psalm 145:8, Joel 2:13, Jonah 4:2, Nahum 1:2-3). It is also used with this adjective’s antonym “קָצָר” (*kitzar*, meaning short) to describe someone who is hot-tempered (Prov. 14:17, 15:18). It is debatable how closely associated the word’s meanings of anger and nose really are, particularly since Proverbs 30:33 distinguishes these two meanings, using the singular form for nose and the plural form for anger: “pressing the nose produces blood, and pressing anger produces strife” (ESV). In any case, the noun’s multiple uses in passages describing patience or temper provide ample justification for the translation “slow to anger” or “longsuffering.”

⁸ See Exodus 34:10-14, 27-28. These sections, along with the verses between them, has been a subject of consternation for biblical interpreters since it appears to give a very different list of commandments, including, for instance, “do not cook a young goat in its mother’s milk.” After this list of directives, God commands Moses to “write these words” as they are the basis of God’s covenant with Israel (v. 27) and that Moses wrote on tablets “the words of the covenant” (v. 28). Though critical scholarship has differed (as it does on most things) in its account of how these different lists arose and how the list in chapter 34 should be enumerated to reach ten commandments, one reading is that the ten in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 are a later addition and the list in Exodus 34 is an early list from the J source. This timeline is grounded at least partly on a view popular among critical scholars that Israel began cultic and insular (thus favoring laws that appear more idiosyncratic than universal) and became more focused on broad ethical concerns over time. Though the words “ten commandments” are not used after the list in Exodus 20, Deuteronomy 5:22 does identify the list in Exodus 20 to be the words written on the two tablets.

Though this appears to introduce a contradiction into the text, such a contradiction may be erased by highlighting another apparent contradiction: that in 34:1 God claims that He Himself will write the words on the tablets but in verse 27 Moses is commanded to “write down” the words by which God “made a covenant with... Israel” (NASB). Though perhaps less grammatically satisfying, the third person masculine form of the verb for “write” (כתב) could be understood to refer to YHWH and not Moses, which would mean that the words Moses wrote down were the preceding “ritual commandments” while God wrote something else—the ten commandments from Exodus 20.

The Characteristics of YHWH

What do we learn about YHWH from the characteristics used of him in this passage? We learn that He is long-suffering⁹ to be sure. What else?

For one, we learn that He is חַסֵּד (pronounced *chesed*, translated as “kindness” above). One popular translation, going back to the 1535 Coverdale Bible and also employed by the NASB, ASV, and WEB, is “loving kindness.” Other translations include love (NIV), unfailing love (NLT), steadfast love (ESV), goodness (KJV, JPS 1917), faithful love (CSB, HCSB), loyal love (NET), and mercy (ERV).

Nelson Glueck’s *Das Wort Hesed* helped set the trajectory for how this word was understood, arguing that its key component in divine-human relationships was that of covenant faithfulness. However, Whitley highlights biblical uses of the word which challenge this understanding. For instance, Psalm 59:17’s seeming parallel of singing of God’s strength and praising His חַסֵּד in the morning, suggesting to Whitley a meaning of something like “strength” (see also Ps. 21:8, 44:27, 94:18, 109:26). He also highlights Jonah’s use of the word to describe God’s relationship with Nineveh, a people with whom He had made no covenant (Jonah 4:2). After reviewing a selection of passages which challenge Glueck’s view, Whitley concludes, “primarily denoting strength or might, the concept developed to include such notions as fortitude, confidence, pledge, resolution and health.”¹⁰

However, there are also places where the nuance of faithfulness seems present, such as when Abimelek made a treaty with Abraham, asking the latter to show him the same חַסֵּד that he had shown Abraham. Though in the context of making a treaty, it is the former faithfulness which Abimelek appeals to, asking Abraham to not “deal falsely” with the other man’s children or descendants.

There are likewise numerous places where something like the traditional understanding of “kindness” makes far more sense in context. In Jonah 4:2, it is used to describe God not in His power but in His mercy in relenting from judgment: it is even listed among other descriptors for God such as merciful, compassionate, and long-suffering. It would be quite strange for a word meant to convey strength to be placed into this list, and no doubt Jonah did not select the word to convey this idea. As the word is used among roughly the same list of attributes in Exodus 34:6, it would not be inappropriate to understand it to mean “kindness” here.¹¹

YHWH is also רַחוּם (*rachum*, compassionate) and חַנּוּן (*chanun*, gracious), both used in Psalm 112:4 of a man who is generous with his wealth and does not cheat others. God’s רַחוּם means He will

⁹ See footnote 7.

¹⁰ C. F. Whitley, “The Semantic Range of Chesed,” *Biblica* 62 no 4 (1981): 526.

¹¹ Though speculation about the origin and development of words is a risky business, it seems to me that Whitley’s proposed order of development for this word is not logical, even if it does turn out to be correct as a matter of etymology. Even if not a root meaning, a common meaning of something like “faithful” could easily be imagined to have given rise to the seemingly disparate meanings of “kind” and “strong,” since one who is faithful in the context of the ANE is both strong in protecting those whom they are in relationship with and kind in offering them unrelenting favor. This conceptual core may be more helpful for understanding the word in different contexts than Whitley’s proposal of seeing it primarily as a word denoting strength.

not forget His covenant (Deuteronomy 4:31) and that He forgives iniquity¹² (Psalm 78:38). His **חַנּוּן** entails that He will hear the cry of those taken advantage of by those who have more (Exodus 22:27). However, generally these two words are paired together to describe God.¹³ For instance, because God is both **חַנּוּן** and **רַחוּם**, He will not turn His face from those who turn to Him (2 Chronicles 30:9), did not forsake His people (Nehemiah 9:17, 9:31), removes the transgressions of His people (Psalm 103:8), provides for those who fear Him (Psalm 111:4), and relents concerning calamity (Jonah 4:2).

We also discover that Israel's God shows mercy to thousands [of generations]¹⁴ but visits iniquity upon the third and fourth generations. The sixth century Brescian bishop Paterius highlighted, in his capacity as editor and compiler for Gregory the Great, various understandings of this passage in his day, including one which saw the transmission of original and parental sin as normative unless interfered with by baptism (though this doesn't explain the great difference in the number of generations receiving judgment and mercy) as well as the view that children are guilty by *imitating* the fault of their parents:

“thus it happens that the sinful son of a sinful father pays the penalty not only for his own sins, which he committed, but also for his father's sins... Thus Scripture says rightly, ‘To the third and fourth generation.’ For the sons can see the lives of the parents they imitate up to the third and fourth generation.”¹⁵

Although the mechanism for visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children can be contested, perhaps the more significant detail here is that God's mercy extends much further than his wrath. Sin may be punished for three or four generations, but mercy extends for thousands of generations.

Use of This Passage in Other Biblical Material

As briefly noted above, this passage found its way into many later Old Testament citations and allusions. This is particularly so for verses 6 and 7 which detail the character of YHWH. Below are comparisons of parallel passages in English translation:

Exodus 34:6-7 (NASB)	Psalm 86:15 (NASB)	Nehemiah 9:17 (NASB)	Psalm 103:8-10 (NASB)	Jonah 4:2 (NASB)
Then the Lord passed by in front of him	But You, O Lord, are a God	“[The Israelites of the exodus] refused to	The Lord is compassionate	He prayed to the Lord and said,

¹² In 34:7 we also read that YHWH not only forgives transgression (**עֲשָׂוָה**), but also iniquity (**רָעָה**) and sin (**חַטָּאת**). Holladay gives definitions for these three as rebellion, activity that is crooked or wrong, and the straightforward “sin,” respectively. The implication seems to be that God's forgiveness is complete and thorough, as this Psalm communicates with the metaphor of God removing our transgressions from us as far as the east is from the west (verse 12).

¹³ This is often a likely allusion to or quotation of Exodus 34:6. Other Old Testament references to this passage are discussed below.

¹⁴ “Generations” is not used in the text but seems to be implied. YHWH visits iniquity to the “thirds” and “fourths,” terms paired with children and grandchildren and thus implying generations. If keeping mercy to thousands is meant to contrast with visiting iniquity to thirds and fourths, “generations” can be more than plausibly supplied to explain “thousands.”

¹⁵ Joseph T. Lienhard, ed., *The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2001), 153.

<p>and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.”</p>	<p>merciful and gracious, Slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness and truth.</p>	<p>listen, And did not remember Your wondrous deeds which You had performed among them; So they became stubborn and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt. But You are a God of forgiveness, Gracious and compassionate, Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness; And You did not forsake them.</p>	<p>and gracious, Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness. He will not always strive with us, Nor will He keep His anger forever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.</p>	<p>“Please Lord, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity.</p>
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All of these passages contain elements of the pericope in Exodus 34. Psalm 86:15 and 103:8 use the exact phrase “יְרַחֵם וְיַחַנּוּן” (merciful/compassionate and gracious) in describing God. Though configured differently, both words also appear in the description of God in Nehemiah 9:17 and Jonah 4:2, the former which actually recounts our passage’s context of God’s mercy to disobedient Israel in the wilderness. Psalm 103:8 and Jonah 4:2 also reproduce the concept (if not the exact wording) of God forgiving sin. God’s “long nose” is praised in all of these passages.

Finally, though not displayed above, the description of a God showing mercy to thousands of generations even as he repays iniquity is reproduced in Jeremiah 32:18, Deuteronomy 5:10, and Numbers 14:18 (though it also appears earlier in Exodus 20:6).¹⁶

The fondness for the concepts and motifs in this passage extended past the period of the Old Testament authors and into the New Testament. Just as God descended in a cloud to proclaim His name in Exodus 34:5, so He also descended in a cloud to proclaim, “This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!” in Luke 9:35 (ESV).

Indeed, because God has declared His name through Christ’s incarnation, we see His **שְׁמִי** even more clearly.¹⁷ The concept of sin and its punishment transferring to later generations, but mercy

¹⁶ It is worthy of note that it is the name of YHWH which YHWH declares. In the Old Testament, God’s name connotes His character and His presence, indeed His very self, so that His name is trusted by His people (Psalm 20:7), His name is in in the angel—also identified as YHWH—which leads Israel into the promised land (Exodus 23:20-21), and the name of YHWH comes to judge the nations (Isaiah 30:27). In the New Testament, Jesus manifests to His disciples the name of God which God gave to Jesus (John 17:6-11). Thus, when God descends in the cloud and declares, “This is my Son,” He is declaring His name.

extending much further, is a key component in the soteriology of Paul. In his epistle to the Romans, he writes that “through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin,” but “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Romans 5:12-21, NASB). Paul sees Jesus as a second Adam, a new fount of humanity that the redeemed claim “descent” from,¹⁸ so that we may be among the thousands for whom God forgives transgression and shows רַחֲמֵי to, and not be relegated to those short and decaying generations of those whose Adam iniquity is revisited upon.¹⁹

Though the theology of God reflected in Exodus 34 and reflected *upon* in the passages which cite and allude to it does not contradict the notion that God punishes sin, it does contrast His desire to judge with His desire to show mercy to those who turn and seek Him. The latter is so much greater.²⁰ This was understood by the Old Testament writers and prophets but made clear with the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Practical Implications

How does a fuller understanding of this passage contribute to practical theology? How might it affect how I relate to God or how a pastor might minister to His people? On the one hand, it serves as a reminder that God judges sin. This is relevant for how seriously I will take the call to follow Christ, knowing that there are consequences for my sins, both in this life and the next, even for those who may have at one time been delivered and in fellowship with YHWH. It also affects who I prioritize proclaiming the gospel to other, knowing that there is a distinct possibility of God’s judgment both in terms of natural consequences and supernatural punishment.

On the other hand, it brings to the forefront that God is much more desirous to show mercy than wrath. This is good news for how we live in the day to day—desiring to follow Christ but remembering that when we are not perfect, God is still merciful.

Perhaps this is why this passage was so influential for later Jews, including those who wrote or were quoted in Old Testament works. We find this passage reflected in Psalms and in worshipful celebrations of God’s kindness (and also once in a not so celebratory exclamation about God’s mercy

¹⁷ Note the epistle to the Hebrews which highlights the superiority of Jesus not only to Moses and to angels, but to all previous revelation: "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe" (Hebrews 1:1-2, NIV).

¹⁸ See 1 Corinthians 15:45.

¹⁹ Incidentally, there is a similar debate about what it means to be in Christ or in Adam. Do we inherit their guilt/obedience and with it the consequences, whether punishment or blessing, regardless of our own actions? Or, on the contrary, do we affirm or choose our familial bonds by following in the footsteps of one fount of humanity or another? From the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy, we affirm that our sin nature and its natural consequences are inherited from Adam before we are able to choose to follow in his footsteps. At the same time, an Arminian view which highlights the essentiality of responsibility will also contend that our choice to either remain in sin or to receive Christ’s forgiveness and the impartation of His Spirit so that we may walk in holiness is a real and meaningful one.

²⁰ As the apostle Peter wrote, "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Peter 3:9, ESV).

to sinners by a prophet who wanted to see them punished).²¹ It facilitated genuine expressions of praise for a God who would not abandon His people and whose kindness out-measured His wrath.

It's also good news for the people we minister to—God is not looking for an opportunity to condemn them but is calling them to Him to be loved. This impacts how we see them, how we treat them, and how we reflect Christ to them. If God appears, through the prism of our attitudes and actions, to be more wrathful than He is merciful, then we are not reflecting His light but warping it. We serve a God who is great in kindness.

²¹ See Jonah 4:2.

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