

How and Why Does God Change?
Exploring the Logic of the Divine Shift after the Golden Calf

J. Richard Middleton

After the idolatry of the golden calf, God tells Moses that the covenant is effectively canceled and that he intends to destroy the Israelites and start over with Moses. Not only does Moses refuse the offer, he convinces God not to destroy Israel, and even to accompany them on the journey to the Promised Land (which God initially refused to do). Finally, Moses receives from God a personal theophany (a revelation of divine glory), accompanied by a new revelation of the meaning of the divine name (beyond that given in Exodus 3). This new revelation signifies a change in God's modus operandi with Israel, evident from a comparison of Exodus 20:4–6 with Exodus 34:5–7. This paper will explore the nature and significance of the change and the role of Moses in precipitating the change. Although Moses certainly has a crucial role to play as Israel's intercessor (especially highlighted in many midrashim), this paper will argue that not only did God invite the intercession in the first place, but that the divine shift seen between Exodus 20 and 34 is part of a pattern found in other places in the Bible. The paper will conclude by asking what the significance of this pattern might be for understanding the complicated characterization of the God of Israel.