Mediation in the
Old Testament

Identifying Relational Theology in
Mediative Structures

Scott A. Butler
Outline

Introduction ............................................................................................................................................... 1
  Mediating for the Mediators .................................................................................................................. 1
  Critique of Religion ............................................................................................................................... 1
  Thesis and Direction .............................................................................................................................. 2
I. Mediation Reveals Distinction ............................................................................................................. 3
  A. Israel’s Call to be Holy ...................................................................................................................... 3
  B. Mediative Structures ......................................................................................................................... 4
    1. Terrifying Portraits of Yahweh ......................................................................................................... 4
    2. Moses’ Intermediaries .................................................................................................................... 6
    3. Moral Holiness ................................................................................................................................ 8
II. Mediation Reveals Personality ........................................................................................................... 9
  A. The Ignorance of the Golden Calf ..................................................................................................... 9
    1. Ignorance, not Apostasy .................................................................................................................. 9
    2. Broken Covenant Relationship ..................................................................................................... 11
  B. Yahweh is Personal ........................................................................................................................... 11
    1. No Image Describes Yahweh .......................................................................................................... 11
    2. Relational Partner .......................................................................................................................... 12
    3. Invested Covenant Partner ........................................................................................................... 12
Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................... 13
  Mediation is Balance ............................................................................................................................. 13
  Jesus Christ as Mediator .......................................................................................................................... 13
Bibliography ............................................................................................................................................ 15
Introduction

Mediating for the Mediators

On Sunday, November 9th of this year, “Israeli police rushed into one of Christianity's holiest churches... [and] arrested two clergyman after an argument between monks erupted into a brawl next to the site of Jesus' tomb.”¹ The event unfolded as two groups of monks conflicted over the “...demand by the Greek Orthodox to post a monk inside the Edicule... during the Armenian procession. The Armenians refused, and when they tried to march the Greek Orthodox monks blocked their way. ... Six Christian sects divide control of the ancient church. They regularly fight over turf and influence, and Israeli police are occasionally forced to intervene.”² The argument escalated to violence and some of the monks were injured in the brawl, but the Israeli police were able to bring order back from the chaos.

Critique of Religion

It is often difficult to maintain balanced perspective on matters of truth. As the news story illustrates, beliefs and rights can lead to fisticuffs and bloodied faces. A very common critique of religion in the popular media these days is that it does little to foster the peace it preaches. Comedian Bill Mayer habitually “…mocks and attacks religion for what [he] sees as its dangerous excesses and its fundamental absurdity.”³ And, as the monks demonstrate, Christianity is not immune to the dangerous

¹. Mail Online, “Unholy Brawl: Israeli police break up battling monks next to 'Jesus's tomb,'” Daily Mail United Kingdom, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/worldnews/article-1084253/Unholy-Brawl-Israeli-police-break-battling-monks-Jessuss-tomb.html (accessed November 10, 2008). One of the long standing disputes is over “…a ladder placed on a ledge over the entrance sometime in the 19th century[, it] has remained there ever since because of a dispute over who has the authority to take it down.”

². Ibid.

and the absurd. But followers of God must develop a balanced perspective if they are to be witnesses for peace in the world.

The Israelites were faced a similar challenge upon leaving Egypt and entering the Sinai wilderness. They had left a familiar social and cultic setting in Egypt and ventured into new territory both geographically and religiously. Geographically they were on a journey to the land promised to Abraham’s seed, and religiously they were transitioning into their new role as blessing to all the nations. But they did not understand the round character of Yahweh essential to their role as mediators in the larger history of salvation. The narrative of Mt. Sinai records Israel’s introduction and orientation to Yahweh as a round character and the challenge of the Israelites to grasp it.

Thesis and Direction

This paper makes the case that mediation is the way in which the round character of Yahweh is communicated to the people of Israel. It will show how mediation is the vehicle through which the balance characteristics of distinction and personality are presented in the witness of the Sinai experience. Daniel Migliore makes the case that a proper understanding of God’s nature and plan of salvation is one that comes from a number of angles. An understanding becomes productive when the whole picture is painted. The whole picture presents a complete of Yahweh and fosters a balanced approach to religious fervor so that the mediators do not themselves require intervention. A fuller understanding of Yahweh means his salvation plan will be more effective and not get bogged down in excesses and absurdities.

4. Daniel L. Migliore, “Confessing Jesus Christ in Context,” in Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 197-222. Barth’s rediscovery of a vital aspect of God’s character (205) highlights the reality that those characteristics fall out of favour with the sorts of characteristics that are more desirable to a particular group at a particular time.
Mediation Reveals Distinction

Israel’s Call to be Holy

From the outset of Israel’s wilderness journey the call to be holy is made very clear. Moses recites Yahweh’s summary of the recent rescue from Egypt and proceeds to set down the basic terms of the covenant: “Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (Exod. 19:5-6a). Israel’s existence, re-affirmed in its rescue, is mission focused and holiness is to be the defining quality of a people with that mission.

In this way there is a difference between the patriarchs and the nation of Israel. The Abrahamic covenant centered on establishing the nation of Israel and drew no specific attention to the mission. In the Sinai wilderness, however, the nation is established. Here the focus turns to preparation so that Israel can 1) assume the Promised Land and 2) function as the blessing to all nations. The Patriarchal figures did not assume same burdensome mission as their descendants. Israel’s mission is to be a blessing to all nations for the purposes of salvation. In this way they are called to represent and mediate a holy God to a profane world. It is for this reason that mediation becomes important.

The people of Israel, however, were not aware of Yahweh’s holy character when upon entering Sinai. “The people are portrayed by the narrator as apostate and polytheistic at the outset.” Israel was bound in the cultic norms of their ancient Near Eastern setting. Pharaoh and the Egyptians had come to learn about Yahweh’s character in their experience of the plagues, but Israel had yet to learn. Interestingly, the character of Yahweh as distinct from the gods of Egypt came through the work of


Moses as intermediary between Yahweh and Pharaoh. This was the first instance of Mosaic mediation communicating the truth of Yahweh. It was not, however, intended for Israel; Israel’s tutelage began as they encountered Yahweh in the Sinai desert.

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. Here the reader learns that Yahweh’s goal for Israel is that they become a holy nation (v. 6a). 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.

Israel’s ignorance of Yahweh and its own mission is established early: they hear the pronouncement of covenant history and promptly agree to do “... everything that the Lord has spoken...” (19:8). A prompt response to the great task evinced an immature understanding of the mission and the one giving it. Israel needs to learn about the God they will communicate to the world.

Mediative Structures

_Terrifying Portraits of Yahweh_

Mediation has come to have two sides to its definition. It is common to think of a mediator as one who brings two parties into contact with one another. Ceslaus Spieq describes the mediator as one who “...unites, [or]... reconciles by bringing nearer.” Yet if the mediator is to bring together, he or she must then be in-between the two parties. Like an oven mitt that prevents the hand from coming into contact with a red hot baking sheet, so also is there a sense in which mediation prevents parties from coming


into direct contact with each other. Here a mediator is a ‘go between.’ Thus far in Exodus, Moses has operated in the prophetic office of delivering the word of the Lord. At this point in the Sinai narrative the main concern is over the character of Yahweh. Moses’ role as mediator prevents the direct contact of Yahweh and the people is established in order to demonstrate the nature of Yahweh. Mediation of this kind is the pedagogical tool used to demonstrate that character.

Yahweh reveals himself to be both terrifying and yet hidden. His disclosure in lightning and thunder evokes awe and some measure of fright in the people. Mt. Sinai is said to have been covered in darkness and smoke in anticipation of Yahweh’s presence (19:16-19; thick darkness came between Yahweh and the senses of the Israelites, preventing him from being easily accessed). The earlier example of the oven mitt is analogous to this discussion of mediation. Yahweh is like the baking sheet pulled from the oven in that he is very dangerous to human. The vivid and inescapable images of lightning, thunder, and violent shaking demonstrate Yahweh’s character. In the case of a baking sheet, the human hand would be severely burnt if it had nothing to go between it and the intensely hot metal. So it is with Yahweh. If there is nothing to function as a ‘go between,’ the danger is extreme. Mediation provides a means in which Yahweh and Israel can interact but remain intact.

Mediation in the opening portion of the Sinai narrative is accomplished through darkness and a physical barrier. The cloud of darkness provides a way in which Yahweh can exist near his people and yet be safely out of reach. Further, Yahweh is fully aware that if close proximity is reached between him and his people they will die. This is illustrated by Yahweh’s insistence that the barrier remain intact and that the Israelites know they are in mortal danger if they cross it. Moses believes the situation to be in

11. Ibid.
12. cf. 2 Sam. 22:12; I Kings 8:12.
hand, but “… the [additional] warning is given for the sake of the people, who have no experience as yet of the dimensions of divine holiness … Moses argues by citing the earlier command. But God overrules his mediator and insists on further warning.”14 Mediation functions to highlight the awesome distinctness of Yahweh to an inexperienced people.

At the conclusion of the chapter the people have begun to grasp the holiness of God when they “… were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance …” and asked Moses to go between them and Yahweh in fear of their lives (20:18-20). “An impressive display of divine power and presence initiates covenant-making at Sinai... As a consequence of the experience, the duly terrified people elect Moses to represent them henceforth before God ….”15 The culmination of the section highlights the fact that beyond physical images and barriers mediation is found in the role of a human being: Moses. Elements that ‘go between’ are instrumental in establishing Yahweh’s holiness.

**Moses’ Intermediaries**

Moses also had mediative structures in place when he communed with Yahweh. Readers of the Sinai narrative are quick to point out the ‘face to face’ communication between Moses and Yahweh. While Moses’ experience of Yahweh was undoubtedly more personal than the other members of the travelling community16, he was not without his own pair of oven mitts. Clues for this assertion come

———


15. S Dean McBride, "Transcendent authority : the role of Moses in Old Testament traditions," *Interpretation* 44, no. 3 (July 1990), ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed October 20, 2008): 234. A necessary corrective is provided to the idea that fright was the impetus for following the law is argued by Childs, 372-373. What is clear, however, is that the Israelites are beginning to understand the nature of this God and their fearful response is warranted.

16. Joshua was often present in the Tent of Meeting with Moses. Joshua may not have been any closer to Yahweh, especially if the Lord did not enter the tent but used the tent as a barrier. Moses, and not Joshua, is reported to have stood at the doorway.
from Moses’ experience inside the thick darkness on Sinai. Moses experience in darkness indicates that while he may have been closer in proximity to Yahweh, he did not look upon him with clarity. The cloud has been described by Ian Wilson as a means to identify Yahweh’s presence, but a way in which he is hidden from being directly perceived. Upon casual reading it appears that the Tent of Meeting (33:7ff.) was an enclosure for Yahweh and Moses to commune. Instead, as some have suggested, it was a barrier for Moses himself so that the glory of God could come near without being destroyed. Casual reading imports the idea of the Tabernacle into the Tent of Meeting, but it is clear from the time period, the location of the Tent, and a straightforward reading of the actions involving the Tent that the two were different. The Tabernacle was intended to house the presence of Yahweh whereas the Tent of Meeting shielded from the presence of Yahweh.

These suggestions also serve to clear up the seemingly contradictory material later in the same chapter (33). Why is Moses’ request to see Yahweh’s face denied when he has already been communing face to face? The answer must be that Moses’ experience in the Tent of Meeting was not the equivalent of having Yahweh pass before him. In both instances mediation is occurring. Outside the camp Moses is protected by the tent and in the latter half of Exod. 33 Moses is protected by the rock, Yahweh’s hand, and Yahweh’s back. So while Moses’ “...experience is personal and direct, not mediated through visions

17. Wilson, 1054.
19. Joe O Lewis discusses the range of scholarly opinion on the subject Tent vs. Tabernacle in "Ark and the tent," Review & Expositor 74, no. 4 (Fall 1977), ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed November 3, 2008): 538-541. He does not treat the notion that Moses used the Tent of Meeting as a sort of mediative structure, but establishes the difference between the Tent and the Tabernacle. Richard Averbeck (see above) presents Haran’ suggestion that the Tent of Meeting performed a mediative role. cp. 2 Sam. 7:6. Here the two seem synonymous; they both contain Yahweh.
or dreams...”\textsuperscript{20} he is still mediated in terms of Yahweh’s tangible presence. It is clear, then, that through intermediary structures in both Moses and Israel’s experience, Yahweh becomes known as wholly other.

\textit{Moral Holiness}

Another aspect of mediation that demonstrates the character of Yahweh has to do with matters of consecration. The Exod. 19:10-11 exhortation for the consecration of the people of Israel highlights Yahweh’s moral distinction. “At Sinai the people, though they have taken their stand at a distance from the mountain, are so transported with terror at the theophany that they beseech their mediator to stand between them and it (Ex. 20:18-21)... The Rabbis go still further, explaining because of their sins the Israelites could not look upon the countenance of their mediator.”\textsuperscript{21} In this way the Rabbis identify Yahweh as distinct and separate from the moral impurity of the Israelites. The mediative structures associated with the temple highlight the distinction of Yahweh over and against both the Israelites and the ancient Near East. Theodorus Vreizen captures the notion well when he says,

\begin{quote}
The idea of holiness of God has great influence on cultic forms. This is shown most clearly in the arrangement of the temple: Yahweh lives in the ‘Holy of Holies’, the hindmost part of the temple, shut off from all human coming and going.... It is dark inside... In complete seclusion of this divine residence there appears a new element, not to be found elsewhere in the ancient oriental world.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}


\end{flushright}
The kernel to understand here is that system of sacrifice surrounding the tabernacle, and later temple, is constant reminder of the necessary mediation between God and man. This mediation points to the holy character of Yahweh.

**Mediation Reveals Personality**

It would have been very easy for the Israelites to misunderstand the full character of God. After the great demonstration of Yahweh as terrifying, powerful, and separate, it seems reasonable to conceive of Yahweh as impersonal. But what may seem reasonable is not always correct, and the Golden Calf episode serves as a corrective to Israel’s disproportionate understanding. Yahweh is better understood as person.

**The Ignorance of the Golden Calf**

*Ignorance, not Apostasy*

The argument centers on interpreting the events surrounding the incident of the Golden Calf in Exod. 32. Nowhere else in the Hebrew Scriptures is such a blatant act of idolatry perpetrated as at Mt. Sinai. The act’s proximity to Yahweh’s prohibition to form idols (Exod. 10:2-6) intensifies the sin even more. But the act is based more on immaturity than apostasy. The creation of the Golden Calf is not a blatant rejection of Yahweh in favour of other gods, as some report. Rather it is an attempt from ignorance to represent him in a manner that 1) seemed appropriate to the foregoing demonstrations of his power, and 2) was the cultural norm. Thomas Dozeman notes that “... here, Israel’s lack of understanding about Moses as mediator has immediate consequences for their relationship with Yahweh... [creating] discontinuity between themselves and Yahweh, thereby halting their relationship. ...”

Lack of knowledge underscores at several important points in Exodus... J. Gerald Janzen makes a comprehensive study of this issue and sees that the Israelites were not engaged in apostasy per se:

Under Aaron's leadership, the people are engaged in a cultic celebration of the military might of their god, a military might calculated to fill their enemies with dread (cf. Exod. 15:14-15; Josh 5:1). Understandably they have chosen to represent this divine might by means of a material image whose meaning would be unmistakable throughout the ancient world—the mighty bull whose horns overcome all resistance, and whose connotations therefore are greatly fear-inducing.

The Israelite's panicked in Moses' absence. In the void, Aaron allowed his followers, in a moment of misguided “pastoral realism”, to represent Yahweh for their own comfort. The calf is called a “gross parody” by Walter Moberly in recognition that it was not a rejection of Yahweh, but a misinformed interpretation of his character.

The ignorance of the Israelites was their tendency to import pagan ideas into their experience of Yahweh. Mistaking power to be his central characteristic, Israel abandoned what its forefathers enjoyed: the personal nature of God. This ignorance, or immaturity, was expressed in the construction of the Golden Calf. It was not that they turned to other gods; it is that they characterized a person with an object. An object, no matter how large its horns are, does not capture the essence of Yahweh.

24. Dozeman, 50. Emphasis added. Dozeman's perspective on ignorance is not in complete harmony with the argument presented in this paper. He does not seem to think that the ignorance was of Yahweh's character, but of Moses ordained leadership. He states, in his comparison of the Golden Calf and the Baal and Mot poem (57) that Israel requested other gods. Other authors have focused on a rejection of Moses' leadership as impetus for the construction of the Golden Calf and the recognition of Mosaic leadership as the lesson learned: LaSor, et al (79). I have stated that the Golden Calf was a response to Moses' absence, not a rejection of his leadership and that the main point of the narrative is to highlight Yahweh's character, not Moses' leadership. So while Dozeman and I agree that ignorance is a theme, we apply it differently.


26. Ibid., 605.

Broken Covenant Relationship

To be sure, immaturity is a lesser charge than apostasy. But as someone once said: “ignorance is no excuse for breaking the law.” The act of making the Golden Calf was very much in violation of the commandments Yahweh laid down with his own voice (Exod. 20:2-6). So while it may seem that the foregoing argument lessens the responsibility of the Israelites, it does not. Strictly speaking, it is the commandment against forming an idol that is transgressed (the second commandment), rather than the commandment against possessing a god before Yahweh. Nonetheless, covenant relationship is broken between Yahweh and Israel.  

Yahweh is Personal

No Image Describes Yahweh

Can forgiveness be asked of your earring? Can an idol capture the depth of a person? It cannot:

In contrast to the scenes given in other ancient literatures, where, for instance, the texts speak of a physical brightness too great to bear, or of epic descriptions of the gods, our passage is remarkably brief and devoid of physical descriptions. All that is ventured here is a statement of God’s essence, or, more precisely, of his essence for human beings: merciful but just... it is almost as if the text is saying, ‘This is all that can be known, intimately, of this God, and this is all one needs to know.’ There is no shape, no natural manifestation (in contrast to the thunder and lightening approach at Sinai – but one should bear in mind what has just happened with the Calf): only words, which describe God’s relationship with human beings.”  

“That God is alive rests essentially on the fact that God is a person, He is not a force, nor a Power, but a personal being.” Bracketed by Egypt and Canaan, it is of supreme importance that the mediators of the living God have firm grasp of Yahweh’s character. That picture is complete only when the terrifying picture of holiness is viewed under the glass of personhood. A complete picture is the only picture

29. Childs, 567.
effective for the salvation plan of all the nations. That picture is painted far better through the active and heartfelt Moses than an immovable and breakable Golden Calf. And it is the personhood of Yahweh that allows for the reestablishment of covenant.

Relational Partner

Yahweh’s personal character shines through his willingness to reestablish covenant. The “mountain-shaker” the Israelites had witnessed forgoes wrath in favour of mercy, glory, and the revelation of his name. “God vows the severest punishment imaginable, but then suddenly he conditions it, as it were on Moses’ agreement. ... The effect is that God leaves the door open for intercession. He allows himself to be persuaded. That is what a mediator is for!” Yahweh’s character has little in common with an immovable idol or an uncaring monarch. Yahweh is best understood through a mediative relationship because he is best understood as personal. “God could have shut the door – indeed slammed it...” but he did not, because he was not the sort of god typified by self-deified individuals like Pharaoh. This God, Yahweh, the one true God, had approached Abraham out of gracious love for the world’s benefit. Mediation opens the door for dialogue – it proves that Yahweh is personal.

Invested Covenant Partner

Yahweh is different from the make-believe gods of the ancient Near Eastern pantheon in another way: he is not simply swayed by Moses requests (32:30-34; cp. Deut. 3:26) Rather, Yahweh is convinced on the basis of his own previous commitment as an invested covenant partner (32:13-14; 33:1-3; 34:6-7). He bases his decision not on Israel’s ethical ability, but on his own committed character. He does not change his mind to destroy Israel based on his propensity to change, but on the fact that his

32. Childs, 567. see also: Rendtorff, 546.
33. Ibid.
34. Rendtorff, 553.
personal character allows him to temper his righteous anger. The nation of Israel proceeds to occupy the land, live under the law, and take up the mission because they are able to see “… the focus of attention falls on God’s relationship with the people.” 35

Conclusion

Mediation is Balance

Romans 11:33-34a reads: “O the depth of riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord?” Grasping the fullness of Yahweh will never be possible, as the Apostle poetically exclaims. His nature is hidden from us in darkness, and even Moses was found in the cleft of a rock when he passed. And yet, God is personal. The Sinai narrative brings those two, seemingly paradoxical concepts, and joins them together through the office of mediator. In the mediator, Moses, a holy God is brought near. He is balanced as one who is not controllable, but approachable. The mediator allows us to conceive of Yahweh’s full character, a character that balances justice with mercy, distance with nearness. Rather than a dynamic, or changing, figure, the mediator reveals that the actions of God proceed from his round character. God is best known as the holy and invested covenant partner. His mission demands a balance of holiness with friendliness. The monks in Jerusalem, and all Christians, would do well to embrace this balance.

Jesus Christ as Mediator

Christ is the mediator. During the course of investigation for this paper, I did not go looking for an Old Testament type of Christ in Moses. Although it may have been unconscious, it was not what directed

-------------------

the study. Yet that seems to have been what came out. I have argued that a mediator provides the best interface with Yahweh because only a mediator can bring together the qualities of God to present a consistent picture. This is what I believe occurred at Mt. Sinai and it is what I believe occurred to a perfected degree in Jesus Christ. Christ has direct association with God and man because he mediates between the two. The best way to accomplish this was to literally be the combination of both, perfectly, within one being. Jesus Christ does what Moses could not do, what the Sinai experience could not fully do: portray the balanced picture of a holy and personal God within one frame. When balance between the two cannot be maintained, as it was not in Jerusalem and everywhere else, we have but to look closely at our perfect example, our mediator: Jesus Christ.
Bibliography


———. “Intercession.” In Bauer, 398-399.


Stöger, Alois. “Priest(hood).” In Bauer, 700-709.


