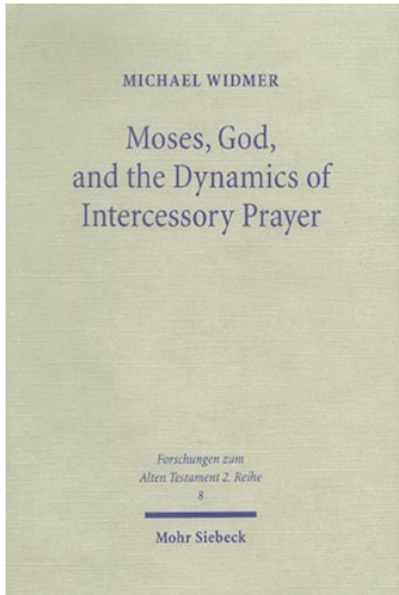


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Widmer, Michael

Moses, God, and the Dynamics of Intercessory Prayer: A Study of Exodus 32–34 and Numbers 13–14

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Michael Widmer's *Moses, God, and the Dynamics of Intercessory Prayer*—the published version of the author's doctoral thesis—is a helpful synthesis of research on Moses' prayers and God's responses in Exod 32–34 and Num 13–14. The book is not a particularly easy read, partially because of the dissertation genre and partially because it is not written in Widmer's native language (and thus exhibits quite a few awkward constructions). I frequently felt that significant chunks of the book served no larger purpose in the argument except to verify that Widmer was aware of certain interpretive issues that he otherwise preferred not to discuss. Even so, there are some very rewarding moments in the study for anyone interested in the theological dimensions of the canonical form of Exod 32–34 and Num 13–14.

The first three chapters of the book serve introductory functions. In chapter 1, following a time-honored convention of Ph.D. theses, Widmer surveys previous scholarly literature on Old Testament prayers in general and on intercessory prayer in particular. For the most part, here Widmer merely summarizes earlier scholars' approaches and general conclusions, reserving critical interaction with their arguments for other parts of the study.

Chapter 2 presents Widmer's interpretive approach to the texts, which he describes as a "canonical approach." By "canonical approach," Widmer seems at first to mean that he intends to focus on the canonical forms of the prayers under consideration and to use their present narrative contexts as hermeneutical keys to interpreting them, rather than attempting to reconstruct the forms of the prayers at earlier stages in the tradition. While Widmer does not deny that the canonical prayers stand at the end of a process of development, he contends that the "logic and integrity" of the narratives demand an interpretation of the prayers in their final form. In subsequent chapters, it becomes clear that Widmer is interested not just in interpreting the canonical forms of the prayers under consideration but in using materials from elsewhere in the canon as interpretive keys to his focal texts. Thus, in chapter 4 Widmer deploys material from the Psalms, Ezekiel, and Isaiah that utilize the metaphor of "standing in the breach" as hermeneutical aids for understanding Moses' prayers in Exod 32–34 and Num 14.

I found myself a bit confused by Widmer's pronouncement that "Old Testament interpretation is by its definition a confessional Christian discipline" (65), a position that Widmer simply posits rather than arguing. In part, Widmer simply means by this that only Christians have such a thing as an "Old Testament" and that a Jewish interpreter studying the same texts would be doing something called "Tanak interpretation" and a nonreligious interpreter would be doing something called "interpretation of the Hebrew Bible" or some similar term. The functional value of these declarations for Widmer's study is not at all clear. In fact, in chapter 4 Widmer argues that interpreters should *avoid* "reading YHWH's response [to Moses' intercession in Exod 32–34] against the Hellenistic perception of an unchangeable divine being and through that against the background of a long-lasting Christian tradition of an immutable God" and should instead work strictly with what Widmer calls "the canonical witness and its dynamics" (121). While I agree with Widmer on this particular point, I do not understand why he insists so heavily on a confessional Christian identity for "Old Testament interpretation" in chapter 2 and then in chapter 4 attempts to bypass a traditional Christian approach to the divine character. Indeed, restricting interpretation to "the [Hebrew] canonical witness and its dynamics," as Widmer advocates in chapter 4, is precisely the interpretive move that keeps biblical interpretation open to practitioners from a variety of confessional perspectives, *against* Widmer's proclamations in chapter 2.

In chapter 3 Widmer persuasively establishes two important points. First, Widmer shows that the canonical figure of Moses is in many ways the archetypal prophet. Second, Widmer demonstrates that intercession before God on Israel's behalf is an activity the biblical writers particularly associated with the prophetic role. Together these claims set the stage for Widmer's more detailed examinations of Moses' intercessory prayers in Exod 32–34 and Num 13–14.

Part 2 of the book presents Widmer's exegesis of Exod 32–34, focusing on the dynamics of Moses' intercessory prayers following the golden calf incident. In keeping with his stated methodological agenda, Widmer interprets the prayers in their canonical literary context (though he does acknowledge studies of the diachronic development of these traditions). Throughout this discussion, Widmer chiefly reviews earlier interpreters' proposals and adjudicates between them, offering little that is particularly new. The most intriguing discussions in part 2 center around Exod 32:10 and 34:7 and the rhetorical inversion of Exod 20:5–6 in Exod 34:6–7.

Widmer discusses at some length the provocative notion that the divine demand "Leave me alone!" in Exod 32:10 is actually a kind of reverse invitation for Moses to intercede for Israel. That is, by telling Moses "Leave me alone," God actually opens the door for Moses *not* to leave God alone and thereby grants Moses a certain power over the execution of God's wrath.

With regard to Exod 34:7, Widmer devotes much attention to the phrase "visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children." He briefly summarizes two interpretations with which he does not agree, namely, that the phrase in question reflects a concept of "collective punishment" in which a group experiences punishment for the misdeeds of one of its members and that the phrase reflects a concept of "trans-generational punishment," that is, that a punishment that begins with one generation persists for several subsequent generations. Widmer spends much more time on a model of "deferred punishment," according to which those guilty of the offense are not punished but the punishment is imposed upon their descendants generations later. Widmer agrees with the idea that the phrase "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the sons" involves a deferral. However, following Scharbert, Widmer prefers to gloss "visit" (בָּקַעַ) as "visit with view to examine." That is, in Widmer's view, the phrase "visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children" indicates that God defers the punishment from the sinful generation and examines subsequent generations to find out whether their forebears' wickedness still prevails in the new generation.

Picking up on suggestions from earlier interpreters, Widmer argues that Exod 34:6–7 represents a deliberate reformulation, in fact, inversion, of Exod 20:5–6. (Readers should recall that this is a claim about the internal dynamics of the canonical form of the text, not a historical claim about the origins of whatever texts and traditions might have preceded the canonical form.) In Exod 20:5–6, statements about God's jealousy, vengeance, and punishment precede the statement about God's covenant loyalty and graciousness; in Exod 34:6–7, that sequence is reversed. In Widmer's view, this "radical shift" is an important theological statement about the kind of deity the God of Sinai intends to be.

I found part 3 of the book—Widmer’s analysis of Moses’ intercession at Kadesh—more engaging than the preceding chapters. As in the first part of the book, Widmer focuses on the canonical form of the text. Even so, the frequent characterization of Moses’ prayer in Num 14 as an interpolation is an important component of the interpretive context for Widmer’s reading. So too is the idea that Moses’ intercession, in the canonical text, is basically ineffective. Widmer offers intriguing alternatives to both of these ideas.

Chapter 11 is both the heart of part 3 and the climax of the study. First, Widmer argues that the key verbs in Num 14:12, God’s statement of an intention to destroy the rebellious Israelites, should be read as cohortatives rather than simple imperfects. In Widmer’s view, God’s use of cohortatives in this speech to Moses constitutes an invitation to intercession. Earlier in the book, Widmer advanced similar arguments in relation to Exod 32:7–10; here he also adduces support from God’s dialogue with Abraham over the fate of Sodom (Gen 18). Widmer is justly impressed by Moses’ decision to accept this invitation to intercede for the people who moments before wanted to stone him and understands this decision to be an integral component of Moses’ prophetic role.

Both the story in Numbers and Widmer’s study reach a crucial moment when Moses “prays back” (to use Widmer’s phrase) to God in Num 14:18 the divine character as God had revealed it to Moses in Exod 34:6–7 (reading the Pentateuch as a canonical whole). Widmer pays special attention to the verbal *differences* between the two presentations of the divine character. On a conventional reading of the passage, it is surprising that Moses’ prayer omits key phrases that highlight God’s mercy and compassion but retains phrases that highlight punishment. Also, despite Moses’ intercession, God still declares that a punishment will be enacted. Widmer therefore argues that Moses’ prayer in Num 14 does not seek “forgiveness” in the sense of annulment of guilt and commutation of punishment. Rather, Moses seeks a continuation of the divine covenant that was established at Sinai. That relationship includes punishment for the guilty within the covenant community but also preserves the community as such and leaves open the possibility for God to fulfill the covenant promises in a subsequent generation. As with God’s response to Moses’ intercession at Sinai, here God’s response demonstrates the kind of deity God wants to be: one characterized by covenant loyalty.

Anyone interested in the canonical portrayal of God, Moses, or intercessory prayer will find parts of this book useful catalysts to thinking about these topics. Readers who are chiefly interested in the literary or preliterary histories of Widmer’s focal passages should probably look elsewhere (though Widmer’s bibliography can point in helpful directions).