

THE COMPASSIONATE GOD OF TRADITIONAL JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN EXEGESIS

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Summary

The comparison in the Zohar (Noah, 67b-68a) of Noah, Abraham and Moses serves as the starting point of this paper. Its aim is to investigate how traditional Jewish (e.g. the Targum, Midrashim, the Talmud, the medieval commentators) and Christian (e.g. the New Testament, the Church Fathers, Luther and Calvin) exegetes interpret the responses of these three individuals to divine foreknowledge (Gen. 6-7; 18:16-33; Exod. 32:10-14). Two main responses are suggested – intercession and/or proclamation of repentance. As shall become apparent, strikingly similar answers are given. First, foreknowledge is seen by nearly all scholars, regardless of religious affiliation and historical background, as a veiled hint at the possibility of influencing God, with the desired result of cancelling the prediction. Secondly, the majority of scholars read intercession and/or repentance into these texts to a greater extent than the texts themselves warrant. This uniformity suggests that the questions asked are shared by people across the borders of time and specific denominations. Even so, there are differences: Jewish scholars tend to emphasise the motif of intercession, existing or non-existing, on behalf of the guilty, while Christian ones are more prone to stress the idea of repentance.

‘Know that even when the creation sins and angers before Him and He is angry at them, what does the Holy One, blessed is He do? He relents and seeks an advocate to plead in their defence, and opens a path to the advocate’ *Tanhuma-Yelammedenu*, Vayera, 8 (Gen. 19:1)

1. Introduction

The Zohar (*Noah*, 67b-68a) compares the behaviour of Noah, Abraham and Moses.¹ All three men are given insight into God's future punitive actions against the people around them but their resulting behaviour differs: Noah does nothing, Abraham argues with God for the sake of the just, and Moses intercedes for the sake of the sinners, even willing to sacrifice his own life for their sake. Evaluating their behaviour, the Zohar faults Noah for his inactivity while it praises Moses and to a lesser extent also Abraham. The reason for the praise is that the latter two used their foreknowledge as a platform upon which to attempt to cancel or at least to modify God's plans.

Inspired by this comparison, the aim of the present paper is to investigate how traditional Jewish and Christian exegetes from a range of time periods interpreted the respective responses of Noah, Abraham and Moses to divine foreknowledge, as attested in Genesis 6–7; 18:16–33 and Exodus 32:10–14. Two main responses are suggested – intercession and/or proclamation of repentance. As shall become apparent, strikingly similar answers are given. First, nearly all scholars, regardless of their religious affiliation and their time and place in history, agree that foreknowledge is a tool which can and should be used to influence God with the aim of cancelling the prediction. Secondly, the majority of scholars read intercession and/or repentance into these three texts to a greater extent than the texts themselves warrant. This uniformity suggests that the questions asked are of a universal character, shared by people across the borders of time and religious communities. Even so, there are nonetheless differences: as we shall see, Jewish scholars tend to emphasise the motif of intercession, existing or non-existing, on behalf of the guilty, while Christian scholars are more prone to stress the idea of repentance.

2. General Attitudes Towards Foreknowledge

The motif shared by all three cases is that of God communicating his future plans to a human being. This is not a rare motif but instead one that is prevalent throughout much of the biblical literary corpus. For

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Pacific North-West Regional SBL, Seattle, April 29, 2005. I am grateful for the various helpful comments made in the ensuing discussion.

example, Amos 3:7-8 states explicitly that God does nothing without first revealing his plans to his prophets. Furthermore, the way in which this sharing of foreknowledge was understood by the ancient Israelites was as a means of influencing the deity. As highlighted by Miller, prayer and intercession were considered to be inherent parts of God's decision making.² He cites Wright who aptly states that intercession is 'an integral part of the way God's sovereignty in history is exercised [...] God not only allows human intercession, God invites it and builds it into the decision-making processes of the heavenly council in ways we can never fathom.'³ Thus, it was assumed that when God made a decision, he took the independent opinions of his prophets into consideration. Thus the ultimate goal of prophecy was understood in many cases to be its own cancellation: future insight was given with the explicit intent of enabling the people to respond with either repentance or intercession. The book of Jonah serves as a good example. One likely reason why Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh was his fear that the Ninevites' hypothetical repentance would bring to naught his own prophecy.⁴

This understanding of foreknowledge is also prevalent in much of Jewish and Christian exegetes. For example, Rabbi Jose, cited in the Zohar, comments that when a man wants to take vengeance on another, he says nothing for fear that if he disclosed his intention, the other would be on his guard and thus would escape him. Hence, when God tells about his destructive intent, God wants his prophets to proclaim the divine plan in order to cause his people to change their behaviour.⁵ Along similar lines, Saint John Chrysostom writes that God gives us warning so that we may learn of his plans and thus be brought to our senses through fear. This in turn will placate his anger and thus render his sentence null and void.⁶

² P. D. Miller, 'Prayer and Divine Action' in *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann*, ed. T. Linafelt and T. K. Beal (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998): 218-20. See also T. E. Fretheim, 'Genesis', *NIB*, 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994): 476-77, and B. Jacob, *The First Book of the Bible: Genesis* (New York: Ktav, 1974): 120, who, in his comparison of Gen. 18 with Exod. 32, claims that the fact that God informs his prophets about his intentions to destroy people invites contradiction.

³ C. Wright, *Deuteronomy* (NIBC; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996): 139.

⁴ For an extended discussion of this topic and its political implication, see L.-S. Tiemeyer, 'Prophecy as a Way of Cancelling Prophecy: The Strategic Uses of Foreknowledge', *ZAW* 117 (2005): 329-50.

⁵ *The Zohar*, Bereshith, 58a (Gen. 6:7).

⁶ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis* 25.9 (FC 82:130-31).

3. Noah – Genesis 6:5–7:16

Beginning with Noah, Noah is given foreknowledge of the oncoming deluge (Gen. 6:5–7:16) but the biblical flood narrative reports merely that he obeyed God and built an ark, not that he in any way sought to influence the course of events. Many exegetes, regardless of time and place, are uncomfortable with this silence: can God destroy the world without giving its population a chance to redeem itself? Given the theological magnitude of this question, these same scholars scrutinise the biblical text for clues that Noah proclaimed repentance to his contemporaries or alternatively, that he interceded on their behalf.

3.1 Did Noah Preach Repentance?

Beginning with Rabbinical exegesis, several Rabbis detect such a hint in the word ‘man’ (אִישׁ) in Genesis 6:9. The fact that Noah is called ‘a man’ is interpreted to refer to ‘a righteous man who admonishes [his age]’. For example, the Talmud quotes the sages saying that ‘Noah was righteous and admonished them saying to them: “Repent, for if not, the Holy One, blessed be He, will bring a deluge upon you”’, נח הצדיק מוכיח בהם ואומר להם עשו תשובה ואם לאו הקב"ה מביא עליכם את המבול.⁷ Similarly, Rabbi Abba, cited in Genesis Rabbah, states that Noah was the one herald in his generation who stood up for God.⁸ In this latter text, the envisioned result of his proclamation, i.e. the people’s repentance and the resulting cancellation of the flood, is merely implied.⁹ The fact remains, however, that several Rabbis, like the ones cited in the Talmud (above, see also further below), were open to the possibility that, had the people surrounding Noah listened to Noah’s call to repentance, the flood might have been avoided.

The idea of Noah preaching repentance is present also in Christian writings. Starting with the New Testament, 2 Peter 2:5 calls Noah ‘a

⁷ *B.San.* 108a.

⁸ *Gen. R.* 30.7. All translations of the Hebrew text of Genesis Rabbah depend upon that of J. Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis*. Vol. I-II (Brown Judaic Studies 104-05; Atlanta, Georgia: Rowman & Littlefield, 1985).

⁹ Cf. also *b.San.* 108b (‘he admonished them and spoke to them words as hard as fiery flint’); *Eccl. R.* 9.15.1 (‘woe to you foolish ones, tomorrow a flood will come, so repent’); *Gen. R.* 31.3 (‘Fools, you abandon the one whose voice breaks the cedars and bow down to petrified wood’). These examples were brought to my attention by J. P. Lewis, *A Study of the Interpretation of Noah and the Flood in Jewish and Christian Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1968): 135.

preacher of righteousness' (δικαιοσύνης κήρυκα), an epithet pointing to the author's belief that Noah proclaimed repentance to his generation. The same interpretation is further alluded to in 1 Peter 3:19-20 which describes how Jesus preached to those dead who once refused to listen to Noah.¹⁰ Later, among the Church Fathers, Theophilus of Antioch states that Noah informed his contemporaries of the coming flood, saying 'Come, God calls you to repentance'.¹¹ Similarly, Clement of Rome urges his own contemporaries to repent on the basis that each generation has been given a chance to repentance: Noah preached repentance and those who obeyed him were saved.¹² Again, centuries later, Luther adopts the same position, taking for granted that Noah tried to warn his generation of the coming punishment, and he treats the biblical account as evidence that the people refused to believe him.¹³

3.1.1 A Period of Grace

Another idea, common to both Jewish and Christian exegesis, is that of a 'period of grace', i.e. the time between a predication and its foretold execution. This origin of this idea is probably the forty days between Jonah's announcement to Nineveh and its expected destruction.¹⁴ In a sense, this idea suggests that at the time of the divine announcement, the fate of the person(s) involved is not yet sealed but open for revision.¹⁵ In the case of Genesis 6, this grace period would have begun at the time when Noah's contemporaries learnt about the coming flood.

¹⁰ See Lewis, *Interpretation of Noah*, 103, including fn. 9 for additional bibliography on the topic.

¹¹ Theophilus of Antioch, *Ad Autolyicum* 3.19 (tr. R. M. Grant; Oxford: Clarendon, 1970).

¹² *1 Clement* 7.6 (*ANF* 1:15). Their obtained salvation should, however, likely be understood in Christian terms since there are no reasons to believe that Clement envisioned anyone apart from Noah and his immediate family to have entered into the ark.

¹³ Luther, Gen. 6:5-6, in *Luther's Works*, 2, ed. J. Pelikan and D. E. Poellot (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1960): 39-53. Concerning Noah's alleged warning of his generation, see specially pp. 52-53. Interestingly, however, a few pages earlier, Luther states that Noah did not call the people to repentance but kept silence for fear of retribution from the wicked people of his time and discussed only the coming punishment with his immediate family (p. 50).

¹⁴ Cf. Ibn Ezra, *Rabbinic Bible*, 6:3; 6:14, who connects the flood narrative with that of Jonah.

¹⁵ Cf. the idea expressed in *b.San.* 108a: on the basis of Gen. 6:13, Rabbi Yochanan argues that the fate of the pre-flood generation was not sealed until they extended their hands to robbery.

From that point onwards until the final destruction, they would have had the opportunity to alter their behaviour as a means of revoking God's plan (cf. Jer. 18:7-9).

Many Rabbis see a reference to such a period in the temporal reference in Genesis 6:3b 'and his days were 120 years', *והיו ימיו מאה ועשרים שנה*, and deduce that God had allotted these years for repentance.¹⁶ For example, Numbers Rabbah states that God granted the pre-flood population a long time of immunity, but finally, he called them to account.¹⁷ Standing in the same tradition, the medieval scholar Rashi surmises that God had forbearing with the people in 120 years during which Noah repeatedly warned them: if they had repented within this time period, God would not have brought the flood upon them.¹⁸ Rashi and also Ibn Ezra gather further support for the idea of a grace period from the expression 'my spirit shall no more abide in humankind' in the first part of the same verse (Gen. 6:3a). They render the verb *יִדּוֹן* in keeping with its basic meaning 'to judge', rather than 'to remain/ abide', the more commonly used translation in the present context.¹⁹ Accordingly, the clause as a whole can be rendered 'I shall not go on suspending judgement', in this way alluding to an earlier time where God *did* overlook their sins.

The idea of a grace period is also present among Christian traditional exegetes. In contrast to the Rabbinical scholars, however, they derive this idea from the two references to Noah's age (500 and 600 respectively) in Genesis 5:32; 7:6, and from the forty day duration of the rain (Gen. 7:17). In the first case, Ephrem the Syrian states that God granted Noah's generation a hundred years while the ark was being built but still they did not repent.²⁰ Similarly, Augustine writes

¹⁶ *Gen. R.* 30.7 states that during the 120 years it took to build the ark, the people around him observed him planting and cutting down cedars, and asked him about the purpose. In response, Noah told them about the coming flood, but the people rejected the information. See also *b.San.* 108b, and *Sefer Hayashar*, 5.11 'And the Lord granted them a period of one hundred and twenty years, saying, if they will return, then will God repent of the evil, so as not to destroy the earth' (online: linked from *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, <http://www.ccel.org/a/anonymous/jasher/home.html>).

¹⁷ *Num. R.* 14.

¹⁸ Rashi, *Rabbinic Bible*, 6:3; 6:14.

¹⁹ Rashi, *Rabbinic Bible*, Gen. 6:3 *הנה רוחי נקון בקרבי אם להשחית ואם לא ירהם לא יהיה מדון זה ברוחי לעולם כלומר לאורך ימים*, Ibn Ezra, *Rabbinic Bible*, Gen. 6:3.

²⁰ Ephrem the Syrian, *Commentary on Genesis* 6.10.2 (*FC* 91:140). Moreover, 'he summoned beasts that they had never seen and still they showed no remorse, and who established a state of peace between the predatory animals and those who are preyed

that [Noah's] preaching went on for a hundred years.²¹ Slightly differently, through an elaborate discussion of the various chronological data found in the biblical flood narrative, Chrysostom reaches the conclusion that God gave the people on earth fifty years to repent. During this time, Noah neither ceased to remind them of their sins nor to encourage them to give up their wickedness and return to God. Not only that, Chrysostom states that the fact that the building of the ark was done in public served as yet another factor that could influence them to turn to God 'and to persuade them to placate this so kind and loving Lord'. Interestingly, Chrysostom interprets this shorter time period as an example of God's loving kindness: seeing that no repentance was forthcoming, God cut the time short lest they render themselves liable to worse punishment, i.e. a punishment which would last not only in this world but also in the one to come.²² In addition to these fifty years, Chrysostom detects a second period of grace in the forty days it took for the deluge to come, commenting that they were ordained as a last change for people to repent and somehow to escape the ruin.²³

3.1.2 'God said to his heart'

There exists, alongside the tradition that Noah proclaimed repentance, another, contradictory reading that the flood came without forewarning.²⁴ This reading is closer to the flood narrative as recorded in

upon and still they did not fear, delayed yet seven more days for them, even after Noah and every creature had entered the ark, leaving the gate of the ark open to them [...] Although those of that generation saw all that went on outside and inside the ark, they were still not persuaded to renounce their evil deeds.'

²¹ Augustine, *De Catechizandis Rudibus*, 19.32 (*The First Catechetical Instruction* [tr. J. P. Christopher; London: Newman Press, 1962]). 'Likewise with regard to His destruction of all men by the flood, save one just man with his kindred whom He willed to preserve in the Ark, He knew indeed that they would not amend; yet during the hundred years that the Ark was building, the wrath of God, which was coming upon them, was at any rate preached to them, and if they had turned to God, He would have spared them, even as afterwards He spared the city of Nineveh which repented, when He through His prophet had foretold its impending destruction.'

²² Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis* 23.4 (FC 82:125-26).

²³ Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis* 25.11 (FC 82:132).

²⁴ Given the exhaustive character of traditional Jewish midrashic exegesis, this interpretation should not be understood as replacing the previously mentioned one but as supplementing it, bringing out yet another dimension of the Biblical text. Notably, there is textual evidence in favour of yet another divergent exegetical tradition connected with the phrase 'to his heart' in Gen. 6:6. According to Ibn Ezra, *Rabbinic Bible*, Gen. 6:6, some [Rabbis], being uncomfortable with the anthropomorphic idea of God having a heart, suggested that 'his heart' was not a reference to God's own heart

Genesis than the one previously discussed in that it accepts that Noah does nothing in response to his knowledge of the divine plans. As such, it has a certain apologetic character in that it defends Noah's inactivity as intended by God. Thus, by seeking to cleanse Noah, it ultimately places the blame on God.

Receiving most of its support from the expression '[it] grieved [him] at his heart' (וַיִּתְעַצֵּב אֱלֹהִים לִבּוֹ) in Genesis 6:6, several Jewish sources put forward the idea that this phrase indicates that God did not reveal his planned destruction. Accordingly, Noah's contemporaries had no chance to modify the divine plans. For example, according to the Midrash Hagadol, this reference to God's heart (cf. 8:21) indicates that God did not reveal his anger to the people, neither by prophet nor by messenger.²⁵ Among the medieval Jewish exegetes, the same view is advocated primarily by Nachmanides. Likely to be influenced by Maimonides' interpretation,²⁶ Nachmanides understood the word אֱלֹהִים לִבּוֹ to mean that God kept his own counsel and accordingly did not send a prophet to rebuke the people.²⁷ Nachmanides' interpretation is connected with the idea of the prophet as a watchman (e.g. Ezek. 3; 33). Nachmanides' underlying assumption is that if God had wanted to give the people an opportunity to repent, thereby opening the possibility for him to revert his plan, he would have sent them a prophet to inform them of the impending catastrophe and to encourage them to turn to God. The fact that no such prophet was sent indicates that God's decision to destroy in this particular instance was irreversible.

The New Testament testifies to a parallel tradition, although without specific reference to Genesis 6:6. In the reference to the flood narrative, Matthew 24:39 states that Noah's contemporaries 'did not know until the flood came and took them away' (καὶ οὐκ ἔγνωσαν ἕως ἡλθεν ὁ κατακλυσμὸς καὶ ἔρην ἅπαντας). Similarly, Luke 17:26-29 speaks

but instead a metaphoric reference to Noah. In this way, this phrase indicates that God did speak to Noah, his prophet. Ibn Ezra does not specify who these people are. In any case, he discards the interpretation on the basis of grammar: had the author intended Noah's heart, the word 'heart' would have been the direct rather than the indirect object. Furthermore, a prophet is nowhere else called 'God's heart'.

²⁵ *Midrash Hagadol*, Bereshith, 6.6, ולא גילה להן לא על ידי נביא ולא על ידי שליח.

²⁶ Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, 1:24 (tr. S. Pines; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963): 54, where Maimonides discusses the idea of 'going away' as a way of expressing the withdrawal of the divine providence.

²⁷ Nachmanides, *Commentary on the Torah*, Gen. 6:6 (tr. C. B. Chavel; New York: Shilo Publishing House, 1971): 104.

of the abruptness of the flood, thus implying that there was no prior knowledge of the catastrophe.

3.2 *Did Noah Intercede?*

The counterpoint of calling to repentance is intercession. Again, the Noah of the biblical flood account is nowhere recorded as pleading on behalf of his contemporaries, and again, traditional scholars supplement this absence. As already mentioned, the Zohar compares Noah with Abraham and Moses, but rather than assuming, like Luther, that he did intercede, they criticise the absence of intercession as testified by the biblical text: if Noah had interceded, just as Moses did, then the people of Noah's time might have survived, just as Israel did at the time of Moses. In other words, Noah did not show enough compassion.²⁸ Notably, similar comparisons are made by modern Jewish scholars. For example, Sarna comments that Genesis 18:22 (cf. further below) is a pause in the narrative, 'as though to insinuate the idea of Abraham briefly struggling with himself as to whether he should plead the cause of Sodom or, like Noah before him, remain indifferent to the fate of his fellow beings'.²⁹

To my knowledge, Luther is the only Christian exegete who connects Noah with intercession. In contrast to the Jewish exegetes, however, Luther includes Noah among the biblical intercessors. Just as Abraham pleaded with God for the sake of the people of Sodom, just as Samuel refused to give up on Saul (1 Sam. 16:1) and just as Jesus grieved at the sight of Jerusalem (Matt. 23:37-39), so Noah grieved when he saw the 'dreadful wrath of God'. By further comparing him to Paul in Philippians 3:18 ('I tell you with tears' – *νῦν δὲ καὶ κλαίω λέγω*), Luther argues that like Paul, Noah and his forefathers prayed on behalf of the generation of the flood, setting themselves up 'like a wall against the wrath of God' (cf. Ezek. 13:5).³⁰

3.2.1 Noah's Faith

Comparisons are also made in other areas. Anew, similarly to the case of intercession, the Christian and the Jewish scholars diverge. Their

²⁸ *The Zohar*, Vayera, 106a (see also below).

²⁹ N. M. Sarna, *Exodus* (JPSTC; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1991): 132.

³⁰ Luther, Gen. 6:6, in *Luther's Works*, 2, p. 50. Note, however, that Luther's interpretation of Phil. 3:18 is not the only possible one. It is equally likely to interpret Paul's tears as due to the general situation of enmity against Jesus.

interpretations are similar insofar as they both compare Noah with other biblical characters, notably with Abraham and Moses. Yet while the Noah of Christian exegesis is on the same level or even superior to the other two, the Noah of Jewish exegesis falls far short.³¹

First, Noah's faith is often discussed. In this respect, Noah is compared disparately with Abraham in *Genesis Rabbah*. While both are described as תמים ('innocent'), their relationships with God differ: the phrase 'and Noah walked with God' (אֵת הָאֱלֹהִים הִתְהַלֵּךְ נֹחַ) in Genesis 6:9 is compared with the phrase 'Abraham walked before [God]' (הִתְכַּלֵּךְ לְפָנָי) in Genesis 17:1. Rabbi Judah sees this as a matter of maturity: Abraham, whose strength was great, was able to walk *before* God while Noah, whose strength was weak, had to walk *with* God.³² To cite Koltum-Fromm, 'Noah withers in comparison to Abraham. Noah, the young, immature child, needs guidance by walking next to the parent, whereas Abraham, the grown child, can walk on his own or even shed light for the parent – by walking before him and clearing the path'.³³ Along the same lines, Rabbi Yohanan questions Noah's faith. Due to the phrase 'because of the water of the deluge' (מִפְּנֵי מַי הַמְּבֹרָל) in Genesis 7:7, Rabbi Yohanan argues that Noah needed to see the water before he actually believed in the flood.³⁴

In contrast, the New Testament and the Church Fathers constantly praise Noah for his faith.³⁵ For example, the long eulogy to faith in Hebrews 11 places Noah alongside Abraham and Moses, praising in particular the earlier two for their faith. In the specific case of Noah, it

³¹ Other scholars have already noted how the Rabbis and the Church Fathers differ in their estimate of Noah's character. The Rabbis are ambivalent, discussing not only his faith and obedience but also his nakedness and drunkenness. In contrast, the Christians laud him loudly for his faith and obedience and by and large pass over the other incidents in silence (e.g. Heb. 11:7). For example, N. Koltun-Fromm, 'Aphrahat and the Rabbis on Noah's Righteousness in Light of the Jewish-Christian Polemic', in *The Book of Genesis in Jewish and Oriental Christian Interpretation: A Collection of Essays*, eds. J. Frishman and L. Van Rompay (TEG; Leuven: Peeters, 1997): 57-71, gives ample examples of Rabbinical and Patristic exegetical comments and suggests that the Rabbis' comparably negative estimate of Noah is the result of the 'Christianisation' of Noah especially in the Syriac church where Noah is portrayed as the exemplary ascetic. Noah is held in much higher regard by the earlier Biblical and deuterocanonical authors (e.g. Ezek. 14:14; Ben Sira 44:17; Jubilees 5:19). The Rabbis attacked Noah in three areas: his righteousness, his drunkenness and sexual status.

³² *Gen. R.* 30.10.

³³ Koltum-Fromm, 'Aphrahat', 63.

³⁴ *Gen. R.* 32.6.

³⁵ For an overview, see Koltum-Fromm, 'Aphrahat', 58-61.

was his faith that led him to build the ark, even though he had not yet seen any evidence of a flood. By doing so, he condemned the world and inherited the kind of righteousness that comes through faith (v. 7). Notably, given the focus on faith of the passage as a whole, no word is said about any intercession of Abraham and Moses (vv. 8-19, 23-29).

3.2.2 Noah's Righteousness

Secondly, Noah's righteousness is examined. The key phrase is 'in his generation' (בְּדֶרֶתוֹ) in Genesis 6:9. The Talmud discusses its two possible meanings: Rabbi Yochanan says: in his generation but not in another. Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish says: in his generation, and how much more in another.³⁶ In the same way, Genesis Rabbah tells how Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Nehemiah disagreed about Noah's righteousness. Rabbi Judah claimed that had Noah been born in the same generation as Moses or Samuel, he would not have been considered righteous. In contrast, Rabbi Nehemiah argued that if he managed to stay righteous in his own (wicked) generation, all the more so in Moses'.³⁷ Earlier, Philo qualified Noah's righteousness according to the former interpretation: Noah is only righteous with regard to his own generation. Thus, he pales beside Abraham and Moses.³⁸

In contrast to the negative or at best the ambivalent standpoint of the Jewish scholars, Augustine comments that the phrase 'in his generation' means that Noah was perfect as far as citizens of the city of God can be perfect during the pilgrimage of this present life.³⁹ Similarly, Chrysostom states further that this phrase highlights Noah's endeavour to be righteous at a time when the obstacles to virtue were too many.⁴⁰ During the later period of the reformation, Calvin expresses the same positive sentiment, regarding the statement 'in his generation' as the ultimate praise of Noah's uprightness: 'we know how great is the force of custom, so that nothing is more difficult than to live holy among the wicked, and to avoid being led away by their evil examples.'⁴¹

³⁶ *B.San.* 108a.

³⁷ *Gen. R.* 30.9. Cf. *Gen. R.* 31.1 where, on the basis of Gen. 6:8, the sages exclaim that Noah did not survive the flood due to his worthiness but only because he found grace.

³⁸ Philo, *On Abraham* 34, 36, 47.

³⁹ Augustine, *City of God*, 15.26 (tr. M. Dods; New York: Random House, 1950): 516.

⁴⁰ Chrysostom, *Homilies on John* 71 (FC 41:266).

⁴¹ Calvin, *Genesis*, 6:9.

3.3 *No Ability to Influence God's Plans*

Both of the two preceding interpretations, i.e. Noah proclaiming repentance and Noah interceding, focus on the people surrounding Noah and on their choices and possibilities. In contrast, the lone voice of Calvin argues that there is no possibility for a human being to revoke God's decision. Instead, he understands God's information about the flood to be for the benefit of Noah alone. First, God's sharing of his punitive plans with Noah (Gen. 6:13) served to keep the latter focused firmly on the building of the ark: by having the destruction before his eyes all the time and thus being alarmed by God's judgement, Noah sought his safety in the ark and eagerly embraced this possibility to life offered him. Calvin concludes that it is this knowledge and fear of destruction that is the greatest privilege of foreknowledge.⁴² Secondly, Calvin argues that the divine utterance in Genesis 6:6-7 declaring God's realisation of the sinfulness of the flood generation and his subsequent decision to punish them (Gen. 6:6-7) was said in consideration of our (human) weakness – that we would always know that the deluge was God's vengeance and moreover, that it was just.⁴³ Thirdly, in the case of Noah's contemporary, Calvin does not attribute to them any possibility of changing God's will, and he shows no compassion for their fate. In contrast to Chrysostom's more benevolent interpretation mentioned earlier where Noah's contemporaries were given a second chance to repent during the forty days of rain, Calvin states that the prolonged duration of the rain served to make sure that the wicked people, even before their death, would feel that the warnings which they had held in derision were not empty threats. Thus, those who had considered Noah's ark building and statements of a coming flood as fables, in this way scorning God's patience, deserved to perish slowly. God could have destroyed everything in one instance but chose temperance to enable the people to consider these judgements over a longer period of time.⁴⁴

⁴² J. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Genesis* (tr. J. King; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), Gen. 6:13.

⁴³ Calvin, *Genesis*, 6:7.

⁴⁴ Calvin, *Genesis*, 7:12.

3.4 Conclusion

In summary, we find that exegetes of both Jewish and Christian affiliation perceive Noah's lack of action in response to the divine information to be in need of rectification. Hence, they proceed by filling in the blanks of the narrative, in this way creating new readings of the text which better fit their requirements. In these new narratives, Noah did not remain silent but instead proclaimed repentance and/or pleaded with God on behalf of his contemporaries. Notably, there is an overall uniformity between the Christian and the Jewish readings. Nonetheless, I suggest that the cases of cross-influence are few between the evidence of the New Testament and the Church Fathers on the one hand and of the Talmud and the Midrashim on the other. As noted, the same conclusions are arrived at via different routes. A case in point is that both interpretative communities read a time of grace into the Noah narrative but reach this conclusion by appealing to different biblical verses. The case of the parallel reading, i.e. that God did not intend Noah to spread the news of the coming punishment, points in the same direction: both groups of scholars arrive at the same conclusion through appeal to different biblical texts. In view of this, it seems likely that we are dealing with a similarity in outlook stemming from the shared heritage of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible rather than with direct influence. As noted earlier, the idea that foreknowledge is a tool to be used in order to cancel God's plans is present through the biblical corpus. Furthermore, it may be argued that the theological idea that justice demands of God to give forewarning of his planned destruction is a concept inherent to the Judaeo-Christian tradition as a whole.

The cases of Luther and Calvin are different. It is well-known that much of Luther's exegesis is influenced by that of the 14th century biblical scholar Nicholas of Lyra. Nicholas was familiar with the Jewish exegetical tradition, especially with that of Rashi, and he incorporated much of it into his own *Postillae*.⁴⁵ Accordingly, the similarities of Luther's exegesis with that of the Jewish scholars are likely to be the result of direct or indirect influence. In contrast, Calvin's interpretation stands on its own. It is possible, although not

⁴⁵ It is clear that Nicholas of Lyra was familiar with Rashi's commentary on Gen. 6:3 and that Luther had access to this work. See W. Bunte, *Rabbinische Traditionen bei Nikolaus von Lyra*, ed. J. Maier (Judentum und Umwelt: Realms of Judaism 58; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1994): 41-42.

verifiable, that his views of foreknowledge are the result of his views on predestination in general.

4. Abraham – Genesis 18:16-33

The next narrative to be discussed is Abraham's dialogue with God about the fate of the people of Sodom (Gen. 18:16-33). Two issues in this text relate directly to our inquiry. First, the divine decision to inform Abraham about the coming destruction of Sodom in Genesis 18:18 ('and the Lord said: "should I conceal from Abraham what I am about to do?") needs to be addressed. This material is often understood by traditional exegetes as an indirect way of telling Abraham to intervene into God's decision making, either by interceding on behalf of the Sodomites or by preaching repentance to them. Secondly, traditional exegesis often transformed the message of the text as a whole. A close reading of the biblical narrative reveals that its key issue is *justice* for the righteous. Abraham is primarily interested in the hypothetical just persons in Sodom and that they should not perish together with the unjust. Hence, with one exception (Gen. 18:24 – 'will you then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent fifty who are in it?'),⁴⁶ the biblical text does not focus upon the wicked of Sodom. In contrast, much traditional exegesis is concerned with mercy for the guilty. Both Rabbinic and Patristic scholars ask whether or not Abraham called the people of Sodom to repentance and whether or not he interceded on their behalf. Nonetheless, the Rabbinic interest in this narrative is stronger than the Patristic one, resulting in more textual evidence from the former tradition.

4.1 *The Purpose of Foreknowledge*

In Genesis 18:17, God declares that he does not wish to hide from Abraham his plans for Sodom. Two reasons are given as to why just Abraham is the chosen recipient of the foreknowledge (18:17-18): first, he shall be a mighty nation and all nations shall be blessed through

⁴⁶ In view of these words, many exegetes, e.g. Nachmanides, *Commentary on the Torah*, Gen. 18:24 (p. 248), assumes that Abraham, each time when he is pleading, is thinking about saving all five cities. Along similar lines, modern scholars such as Sarna, *Exodus*, p. 133, argues that the issue is no longer merely justice for the righteous but includes also mercy on the guilty, testifying to the idea that the whole city would be forgiven for the sake of its righteous.

him, and secondly, he shall teach his descendants to walk in God's way and to do righteousness and justice. Yet the text does not address why foreknowledge is given in the first place. Seeking to fill this gap, Jewish and Christian traditional exegetes suggest a variety of reasons.

4.1.1 God's and Abraham's Close Relationship

A few scholars argue that God's sharing of his knowledge with Abraham had no ulterior motif beyond what is stated in the biblical text. For example, Rabbi Joshua ben Levi discusses the idea that God, despite his omnipotence, asks for Abraham's permission, even though the opinion of the latter would make no difference. R. Judah bar Simon continues by highlighting the difference between God's relationship with Adam, Noah and Abraham. In contrast to the former two who were either exiled (Adam) or shut in (Noah), Abraham, his favourite, is fully consulted. Later in the same *parasha*, the Rabbis compare Abraham's relationship with Lot and the people of Sodom as one between father and son, and they ask whether one would judge a son without the knowledge and consent of the father.⁴⁷

From a different and less benevolent angle, Calvin, along similar lines as in his commentary on Genesis 6:6-7 (above), states that God had already decided what to do. Hence, the decision was not open to reconsideration. Instead, following the biblical text closely, Abraham is admitted into God's counsel because of his assumed trustworthiness of instructing future generations. It is important to teach these yet unborn persons that punitive occurrences that may seemingly have happened by chance are in fact due to God's designs. God's punishment of the unbelievers proves that he is the judge of the whole world. Thus, the iniquities of Sodom are mentioned as proof of the justice of destroying them.⁴⁸

4.1.2 God's Desire for Repentance

More common among traditional Jewish scholars is the suggestion that God shared his plans with Abraham for the implicit reason of encouraging the latter to proclaim repentance to the people of Sodom, thus in a roundabout way giving God a pretext to cancel his own punitive plans. For example, Rabbi Hiyya is cited saying:

⁴⁷ *Gen. R.* 49.2

⁴⁸ Calvin, *Genesis*, 18:17-20.

For the Holy One desires to associate with Himself the righteous so that they may admonish and call the people to repentance in order that they may escape the punishment decreed by the judgement-seat on high and, in any cases, so that they should not be left with any loophole for complaining that the Holy One metes out punishment without justice.⁴⁹

Similarly, Rabbi Levi suggests that Abraham had previously reflected on whether there had not been twenty or at least ten righteous men in the pre-flood generations for whose sake God might have abrogated his decision. Because of this, God decided to reveal his plans to Abraham so that he cannot contend with him.⁵⁰

This line of exegesis is nearly absent among Christian scholars. To my knowledge, Luther stands alone in claiming that there is no doubt that Abraham, together with the other people of his lineage that were still alive according to the biblical count of their age, e.g. Shem and Lot, as well as Melchizedek, six people is total, tried to call back the people of Sodom to the right way.⁵¹ Given that we know of Luther's dependency upon the Jewish exegetical tradition via Nicholas of Lyra, this may be yet another example of direct or indirect influence.

4.1.3 God's Desire for Intercession

A similar absence in Christian traditional exegesis holds true also for the alternative interpretation, i.e. to see God's disclosure of his plans as an incentive for intercession. As far as I am aware, this idea is attested only in Jewish exegesis.⁵² For example, the *Tanhuma* suggests that God shared his plans for Sodom with Abraham with the explicit purpose that the latter might plead on its behalf (v. 23).⁵³ Similarly, Nachmanides proposes that one reason why it is explicitly written that God revealed his plans for Abraham is to forestall future generations from asking how Abraham could have refrained from interceding. The answer is positive: he did intercede because God told him about the plans.⁵⁴ This interpretation is supported by the tradition of the scribal

⁴⁹ *The Zohar*, Vayera, 104b. See also *Tanhuma-Yelammedenu*, Vayera, 5 (Gen. 18:17).

⁵⁰ *Tanhuma-Yelammedenu*, Vayera, 5 (Gen. 18:17).

⁵¹ Luther, Gen. 18:22-26, in *Luther's Works*, 3, ed. J. Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1961): 234.

⁵² A possible exception is Luther's interpretation mentioned further below, but it differs from the Rabbinic ones listed here in that it looks at the issue from Abraham's rather than from God's perspective.

⁵³ *Tanhuma-Yelammedenu*, Vayera, 8 (Gen. 19:1).

⁵⁴ Nachmanides, *Commentary on the Torah*, Gen. 18:18.

emendations (תיקוני הסופרים).⁵⁵ The MT of Genesis 18:22 states that after the individuals accompanying God had left for Sodom, ‘Abraham lingers before God’ (וַאֲבֹרָהָם עֹדְנֵנוּ עֹמֵד לְפָנָי ה'). According to the scribal emendations, however, the original text would have read that *God* remained standing before Abraham. Discussing this variant reading, the Rabbis are quick to see this as an indication that God waited for Abraham to intercede.⁵⁶

4.1.4 God's Justice

Lastly, especially Jewish scholars see God's telling of his future plans as a mean to uphold his reputation. The sages suggest that by informing the people of the punishment beforehand, there should be no complaints that God punishes unjustly.⁵⁷ From a slightly different angle, Rabbi Abba bar Kahana argues that God gave the people of Sodom every opportunity to repent, on the basis of the phrase ‘I shall go down to see whether they have done altogether’, אֲרִדָּה נָא וְאֲרִאָהּ, עֲשׂוּ כָלָה [...] (Gen. 18:21). In other words, God was just towards the inhabitants of Sodom on his own volition, not merely due to Abraham's urgings.⁵⁸ Furthermore, Rabbi Abba bar Kahana interprets the ensuing phrase ‘and if not, I shall know’, וְאִם לֹא אֲדַעָהּ, to mean that if they were not as evil as the outcry had led God to believe, God would know how to punish them in order to vindicate the demands of justice but not to destroy them completely.⁵⁹

4.2 Justice or Mercy?

In the biblical text, the dialogue between God and Abraham reaches an end when it becomes clear that ten righteous persons do not exist in Sodom. Rather than treating this as an open end, it can be surmised that

⁵⁵ The scribal emendations are a tradition that claims that eighteen existing words in the Biblical texts were exchanged by the Rabbis in order to protect God's honour. The first list is cited in *Mekilta* of Exod. 15:7 and *Sifre* on Num. 10:35, both commenting on Zech. 2:12 (ET. 2:8). For an in-depth study of this tradition, see C. McCarthy, *The Tiqqune Sopherim and Other Theological Corrections in the Masoretic Text of the Old Testament* (OBO 36; Freiburg/Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981).

⁵⁶ *Gen. R.* 49.7; *Lev. R.* 11.5. The original intent of this emendation was to avoid God appearing to stand before Abraham like a servant. It should be noted that several exegetes, e.g. Ibn Ezra, *Rabbinic Bible*, Gen. 18:22, reject this tradition, on the basis that the context does not support such a reading.

⁵⁷ *Tanhuma-Yelammedenu*, Vayera, 5 (Gen. 18:17), *The Zohar* 1, 104b.

⁵⁸ *Gen. R.* 49.3. For the commentary, see Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah*, 1, 201.

⁵⁹ *Gen. R.* 49.6.

God and Abraham have reached a conclusion.⁶⁰ Destroying the sinners of Sodom and Gomorrah was a just thing to do from the outset: justice demands punishment of the guilty as much as acquittal of the innocent.⁶¹ Accordingly, the biblical narrative implies that if the number of righteous men in a city did not come to ten, it would then be a just thing to destroy the place.⁶²

Several traditional exegetes, however, do not accept this ending as the only possible one but ask instead whether another ending might in fact be preferable. As the biblical text stands, God was willing to spare the wicked for the sake of ten hypothetical righteous. What about five, or even one? Thus, they look at the motive behind Abraham's discussion with God and discuss why he did not continue his intercession further. Again, we see a distinction between the Christian and the Jewish exegetes. Beginning with the former, the Christian scholars tend to maintain the focus on the just. For example, Chrysostom sees Abraham's discussion with God as an example of Abraham's compassion for the just person, in particular for Lot and his family. Since Abraham was not bold enough to speak outright in favour of Lot, he makes a general entreaty in order to save him along with the rest.⁶³ In contrast, Calvin objects to this limited scope of Abraham's concern and argues that Abraham was 'touched with a common compassion [...] that he drew near to God as their intercessor'. Nonetheless, later in the same passage, Calvin rejects the idea that Abraham was concerned with the entire population of Sodom:

Abraham, therefore, does not desire that the wicked, being mixed with the righteous, should escape the hand of God but only that God, in inflicting public punishment on a whole nation should nevertheless exempt the good who remained from destruction.

Moreover, Abraham did not extend so far as to ask God not to punish the cities in question, only not to destroy them completely.⁶⁴

There are also, of course, exceptions. Luther depicts an Abraham who is rather charitable towards the wicked ones of Sodom. In fact,

⁶⁰ Cf. G. Von Rad, *Das erste Buch Mose: Genesis* (ATD 2/4; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958): 182 (*Genesis* [OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961]: 209).

⁶¹ Jacob, *Genesis*, 121.

⁶² A. P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1988): 348.

⁶³ Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis*, 42.16 (FC 82:426-27).

⁶⁴ Calvin, *Genesis*, 18:22.

Luther commends Abraham for not being influenced by the outcry (v. 21) and by the gravity of the sins of the people of Sodom. Instead, he willingly intercedes on their behalf. Luther concludes that 'there is no greater love than to intercede with God for bloodthirsty enemies'.⁶⁵ Luther further expresses his conviction that after the destruction, Abraham went home 'full of sorrow and spent that night without sleep and in tears and sighs because of the destruction of so great a multitude'.⁶⁶ The lesson to be learnt is that 'persistence is needed in praying. It does not offend God; it pleases him'.⁶⁷ Looking at the situation from God's perspective, Salvian the Presbyter, commenting on the phrase 'their outcry is great', states that God shows how unwilling He is to punish even the greatest sinner. Salvian interprets this to mean that God's mercy urges him to spare them, but the cry of their sins compels him to punish them.⁶⁸

In contrast to the majority of Christian exegetes, the Jewish scholars tend in general to stress Abraham's compassion for the sinners. As exemplified by Genesis Rabbah, R. Azariah, in the name of R. Aha, narrates a dialogue between God and Abraham. According to this text, Abraham confronts God's planned destruction, comparing it with the flood at the time of Noah, and asking God whether he is going to break the vow not to destroy taken at that time. In an attempt to defend himself, God claims that his vow concerned destruction by water only, not destruction by fire which would be the case with Sodom. The discussion culminates with God's concession to Abraham whereby he honours him for making the plea. The same point is made by Rabbi Abba, and Rabbi Levi observes that if God desires the world to endure, he must let mercy go before justice.⁶⁹ Focusing more on God's compassion or perceived lack thereof, another interpretation in Genesis Rabbah depicts Abraham as appealing to God's compassion rather than to his justice when he declares repeatedly that 'You, who are compassionate'.⁷⁰ From a different angle, Rabbi Judah bar Rabbi Simon comments that just like in a Roman court of law where a decision can

⁶⁵ Luther, Gen. 18:22-26, in *Luther's Works*, 3, 231. See also p. 233 where he commends Abraham's ardent love for the 'very wicked people'.

⁶⁶ Luther, Gen. 18:22-26, in *Luther's Works*, 3, 238.

⁶⁷ Luther, Gen. 18:22-26, in *Luther's Works*, 3, 236.

⁶⁸ Salvian the Presbyter, *The Governance of God* 1.8 (FC 3; Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1947): 43-44.

⁶⁹ *Gen. R.* 39.6.

⁷⁰ *Gen. R.* 49.13.

be appealed, so must there be a possibility to appeal to God. God's reigning supreme should not be a reason for him not acting justly.⁷¹

There are, however, other Jewish voices that criticise Abraham for having shown insufficient compassion. Notably, in the passage which serves as the starting point of this paper, the *Zohar* faults Abraham for ceasing to plead with God after realizing that there were less than ten righteous persons present in Sodom. If he had continued, like Moses did, all of Sodom might have been saved.⁷²

To sum up, the evaluation of Abraham's intercession is mixed and only the most general tendencies can be established. Thus, a difference in outlook can be detected between the Christian and the Jewish scholars but there are many exceptions to this rule. For example, we notice anew that Luther's interpretation has more affinities with Rabbinic than with Patristic exegesis.

5. Moses – Exodus 32:7-14

This brings us to our last text, Exodus 32:10-14, and our last person, Moses. Similarly to Genesis 6–7 and 18, this text in Exodus speaks about divine foreknowledge. Jewish and Christian exegetes alike ponder about the ulterior motive for God's disclosure of his plans. In contrast to the other texts, however, since Exodus 32 explicitly depicts Moses as interceding, they see no need to read intercession into the text.

In Jewish tradition, Moses is the intercessor *par excellence*, a reputation based primarily on his intercession for the Israelites after their fashioning of the golden calf as recorded in Exodus 32 (// Deut. 9:14, 25-10:11). In contrast, Christian exegetes devote comparatively little time to Moses' intercessory role whilst focusing more on other areas of his life. The key issue here in Exodus 32 is the divine statement 'leave me alone' (הניחזו לי)⁷³ in verse 10. To cite Nehama

⁷¹ *Gen. R.* 49.6.

⁷² *The Zohar*, Noah, 67b-68a.

⁷³ BDB, 629, translates the *Hiphil* of נוח = 'let alone' i.e. 'refrain from interfering with'. In the parallel account in Deut. 9:14, the same request is phrased מניחזו, an expression carrying roughly the same meaning (see BDB, 952). The major difference between the two versions is that in Exodus, Moses proceeds immediately to intercede whereas in Deuteronomy, Moses first descends from the mountain and begins his intercession only when he sees the golden calf in the camp (9:18). In the present context, the former text is the one under investigation.

Leibowitz, this verse records the curious fact that ‘the Most High requests permission from mortal man’.⁷⁴ God asks Moses to ‘let [him] be’ so that he can destroy the people of Israel. In their place, God suggests making a new people out of Moses.⁷⁵ In response (vv. 11-13), Moses intercedes, pleading with God to turn from his anger and to cancel his planned evil (שוב מחרון אפך והנחם על-הרעה לעמך). Moses’ intercession is successful and verse 14 states that God refrained (נחם) from doing what he had threatened to do.⁷⁶

There is a strong feeling among Christian and Jewish scholars alike that by requesting to be left alone, God is in fact *encouraging* Moses to intercede. Beginning with the Targums, they all interpret the divine statement as a reference to intercessory prayer. Targum Onqelos paraphrases as ‘So now, *let go of your prayer from before Me*’, וכען אנח בעותך מן קדמי, as do Targum Neofiti, (‘and now refrain yourself *from beseeching mercy for them before me*’) and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (‘and now, abandon *your prayer* and *do not entreat on their behalf before me*’).⁷⁷ In addition, Neofiti adds the expression ‘I pray’ twice in verse 12 in order to stress Moses’ intercession.⁷⁸ Going one step further, the Tanhuma comments that ‘the Holy One, blessed be He, created an opening (i.e. ‘an opportunity’) for Moses to seek (i.e. ‘pray for’) mercy for them’, מכאן את למד שפתח לו הקדוש ברוך, הוא למשה פתח לבקש עליהם רחמים. ⁷⁹ The same idea is also mirrored in the Talmud. Rabbi Eleazar claims that after God’s first statement to Moses to ‘go down’, לך-רד, v. 7, Moses became powerless and had no strength to speak.

When, however, [God] said, ‘Let Me alone that I may destroy them’, Moses said to himself: this depends upon me, and straightway he stood

⁷⁴ N. Leibowitz, *Studies in Shemot Part 1 and 2* (WCO; Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1976): 564-65.

⁷⁵ Cf. Num. 14:12.

⁷⁶ As highlighted by, among other texts, *Tanhuma-Yelammedenu*, Ki Tissa, 22 (Exod. 32:7), there is a clever play on the possessive pronouns attached to the word ‘people’ (עם) throughout this section. God begins by referring to the children of Israel as *Moses’* people (v. 7). In response, Moses shifts the responsibility by calling them *God’s* people (vv. 11-12). Finally, God accepts the responsibility and calls them *his* people (v. 14). This word play adds a dimension to Moses’ intercession in that He pleads with God to reassume the care for his people. They are ultimately God’s rather than Moses’ responsibility.

⁷⁷ M. McNamara and R. Hayward, *Targum Neofiti 1 and Pseudo-Jonathan: Exodus* (Aramaic Bible 2; Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1994): 130, footnote 9.

⁷⁸ McNamara and Hayward, *Exodus*, 130, footnote 9.

⁷⁹ *Tanhuma-Yelammedenu*, Ki Tissa, 22 (Exod. 32:7).

up and prayed vigorously and begged for mercy. It was like the case of a king who became angry with his son and began beating him severely. His friend was sitting before him but was afraid to say a word until the king said 'were it not for my friend here who is sitting before me I would kill you'. He said to himself, 'this depends on me', and immediately he stood up and rescued him.⁸⁰

Moreover, Rabbi Abbahu said:

Were it not explicitly written, it would be impossible to say such a thing. This teaches that Moses took hold of the Holy One, blessed be He, like a man who seizes his fellow man by his garment and said before Him: Sovereign of the Universe, I will not let go of You until you forgive and pardon them.⁸¹

This idea is further explored in Exodus Rabbah where the biblical narrative is compared with a story about a king who becomes angry with his son and who takes him to a separate room in an attempt to kill him. While doing so, he shouts through the locked door 'leave me alone to kill him'. The boy's tutor is standing outside the door. Upon hearing the shouting, he asks himself why the king is crying 'leave me alone' since he is already alone with the door closed. The tutor reaches the conclusion that what the king actually wants is for him to interfere and to make peace between him and his son.⁸² Thus, the midrash makes the point that God *wanted* Moses to intercede on Israel's behalf.

The same sentiments are also voiced by several of the medieval Jewish scholars. For example, Rashi makes the same point by highlighting the fact that God tells Moses to leave him alone *before* Moses has begun interceding. Hence, in doing so, God is actually informing Moses that if Moses were to intercede, God would listen and not destroy the people.⁸³ Similarly, Ibn Ezra suggests that God's declaration informs Moses about his intercessory power. Once realizing this power, Moses felt compelled to intercede.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ *B. Ber.* 32a.

⁸¹ *B. Ber.* 32a.

⁸² *Exod. R.* 42,9.

⁸³ Rashi, *Rabbinic Bible*, Exod. 32:10, עדיים לא שמענו שהתפלל משה עליהם והוא אומר הניחה לי, אלא כאן פתח לו פתח והודיעו שהדבר תלוי בו, שאם יתפלל עליהם לא יכלם.

⁸⁴ Ibn Ezra, *Rabbinic Bible*, Exod. 32:10 (Hebrew). See also *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch: Exodus (Shemot)*: Translated and Annotated by H. N. Strickman and A. M. Silver (New York: Menorah, 1990): 666, footnotes 19-20.

This line of interpretation is also found, although less often, among traditional Christian exegetes.⁸⁵ For example, Ephrem the Syrian conveys by way of similes that by declaring his desire to destroy Israel, God gave Moses a reason to intercede.⁸⁶ Similarly, Jerome argues that the words ‘leave me alone’ informed Moses that he had the power to hinder God from doing what he threatens.⁸⁷ On another occasion, Jerome compares Moses’ prayers to a shield before the people against God’s arrow or javelin.⁸⁸

Moreover, this interpretation is held also by several modern scholars. Childs, for example, states that God leaves the door open for intercession: ‘God could have shut the door – indeed slammed it – as he did in Deuteronomy 3:26 when Moses requested permission to enter the Promised Land’.⁸⁹ Placing more emphasis on Moses’ courage and compassion, Cassuto prefers to interpret God’s statement as a plain command ‘do not intercede for them’. This, however, is a command which Moses chooses to disobey, discerning that in the midst of God’s anger, there was still love for his people.⁹⁰

Calvin is again the exception who sees God’s declaration to be left alone as a testing of Moses’ faith. It reflects God’s straightforward wish to freely execute his vengeance without human intervention. There is, however, a contradiction in Calvin’s interpretation in that he, later in the same context, states that God quickened Moses’ mind to be more earnest in prayer.⁹¹ Thus, despite the serious theological implications for Calvin’s view on predestination, Calvin himself cannot

⁸⁵ E.g. Theodoret, *Quaestiones in Exodum*, 67 (Theodoretus Cyrensis, *Questiones in Octateuchum* [Textos y Estudios ‘Cardenal Cisneros’ 17; Madrid, 1979]: 148). Notably, Gregory of Nyssa does not relate to Moses’ intercession in Exod. 32 in his *The Life of Moses* (translation, introd. and notes by A. J. Malherbe and E. Ferguson; New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

⁸⁶ Ephrem the Syrian, *Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron* 14.27 (C. McCarthy, tr. and ed. *Saint Ephrem’s Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron: An English Translation of Chester Beatty Syriac MS 709. Journal of Semitic Studies* Supplement 2 [Oxford: Oxford University Press for the University of Manchester, 1993]: 227).

⁸⁷ Jerome, *Letter* 128.4 (NPNF² 6:260).

⁸⁸ Jerome, *Homilies on the Psalm 26* (FC 48:211-12).

⁸⁹ B. S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974): 567, citing Jacob, *Genesis*, 944. See also Sarna, *Exodus*, 205.

⁹⁰ U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (tr. I. Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967): 415.

⁹¹ J. Calvin, Exod. 32:9, in *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, vol. 3 (trans. C. W. Bingham; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950): 340-41.

disregard the fact that the biblical narrative portrays Moses as successfully altering God's plans.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, we have seen how Jewish and Christian traditional exegetes alike throughout much of pre-critical exegetical history understood foreknowledge as a tool to be used in order to influence God's decisions. In addition, both groups showed the propensity to read intercession and/or repentance into certain texts where it was perceived to be lacking. This homogeneity testifies to the shared Judaeo-Christian, not to say the universal, aspect of the underlying theological concern. The overarching picture of God as painted in the Bible, both the Hebrew Bible and the Old and the New Testaments, is that of a merciful God who would rather forgive than punish. Traditional scholars, attempting to create a coherent theology based on the entire biblical text, thus presuppose the divine attribute of mercy to be present even in those texts where it is not directly apparent. Accordingly, in *all* cases where God is portrayed as bringing about destruction, God's mercy would have compelled him to provide foreknowledge of the destruction in order to enable his followers to respond to the divine decision and if possible, to cancel or modify it.

Despite these general similarities, however, there are also significant differences between the Christian and the Jewish exegetes. The former tend to regard human repentance to be the main way to change God's mind. If humans changed their behaviour, then God would alter his plans accordingly (cf. Jer. 18:7-10). The situation envisioned by the latter is more complex. God is often thought of as having designed a way for a representative of his people to debate with him about the outcome of any given plan. If the arguments are compelling enough, then God will agree to modify his plans.

There are, however, several exegetes who deviate from these tendencies. Markedly, Luther's interpretations share many elements with that of the Rabbis. This similarity is probably not accidental but rather the result of indirect Jewish influence via the works of Nicholas of Lyra. It should also be noted that Calvin is the one exegete who is reluctant to accredit Noah, Abraham and Moses with any real power to influence God's plans. It is likely that this disinclination is an ex-

pression of Calvin's belief in predestination. Thus his conviction in that different area surpasses that of the theological problem of unannounced divine destruction. Yet uneasiness lingers in Calvin's interpretation, pointing to the unresolved tension between predestination and the human need to believe that they have bearing on God's decision.