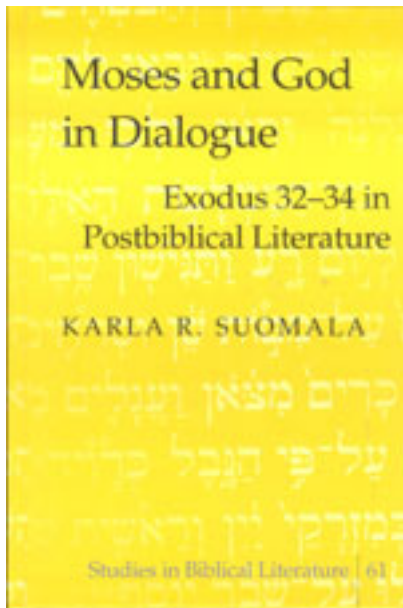


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Moses and God in Dialogue: Exodus 32–34 in Postbiblical Literature

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The book investigates the dynamics of power in the dialogue between God and Moses in Exod 32–34. Chapter 1 outlines the scope of the study, the methodological approach, and the rationale for the conceptual focus on power. After an all-too-brief review of past source-, genre-, and form-critical studies, Suomala settles on the form-critical category of dialogue, rather than prayer, to characterize the exchange between Moses and God in Exod 32–34. The genre of the dialogue develops three themes—divine presence/absence; the role of Moses; and the golden calf—which are held together by the conceptual framework of power. The dialogues between God and Moses explore the nature of power, according to Suomala, which is unequal in the relationship between the two characters. The nature of power in the dialogues is nuanced in the structure and organization of the exchange between the two parties and in the rhetorical style of the speech. The inferior position of Moses is evident in gestures and rhetorical features of deference. His inferior position is the clue to the interpretation of power. The success of Moses, the inferior party, to persuade the Deity to change is the gauge for evaluating the nature of power between the two parties.

Chapter 2 applies the methodology to Exod 32–34. Suomala concludes that the dialogues indicate Moses' inferior status in the relationship, while also portraying a rich and

complex relationship between him and the Deity. The rhetorical features suggesting an inferior status include “risk-averse strategies such as deflection, postponement, containment, cliché, rhetorical questions, and feigned ignorance” (36). The more complex relationship between God and Moses is evident in the balance between the characters, shared rhetorical tactics in their speech, intimacy, and mutual confidence in the development of the dialogues.

Chapters 1–2 provide the backdrop for the primary focus of the study, namely, the role of the dialogues in Exod 32–34 within subsequent faith communities. How were the dialogues read and appropriated in the ever-changing social and religious environment of the Jewish Diaspora, early Christian translation, Jewish-Hellenistic recounting of biblical narrative, rabbinic reflection, and, finally, the Targums?

Chapters 3–4 trace the movement of tradition away from the dynamic intimacy of the dialogues in Exod 32–34. Chapter 3 is a summary of the translations of Exod 32–34 in the LXX, 4QpaleoExod^m, the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Vulgate, and the Peshitta. There is a tendency to elevate Moses in these translations, moving his dialogue more to the genre of prayer. The role of God changes even more dramatically, according to Suomala. There is no divine repentance, and God’s actions become more abstract. Chapter 4 summarizes the further changes to the dialogues in Exod 32–34 within the work of Philo and Pseudo-Philo. Suomala characterizes the work of the two authors as “rewritten Bible.” The intimate relationship between Moses and God continues. But these authors extend the unique portrait of Moses, already evident in the translations, while transforming God even further with ever more abstract and universal portraits, so that the Deity loses all emotions.

Chapter 5 turns from the appropriation of the dialogues as translations and as rewritten Bible in a Hellenistic culture to the midrashic approach of the rabbis, who viewed Moses’ struggle to save Israel in Exod 32–34 as the most important event in his career. This chapter is the most extensive and, arguably, the heart of the book. Most of the texts under review are homiletical, including *Pesiqta de Rab Kahana*, *Leviticus Rabbah*, *Ecclesiastes Rabbah*, *Deuteronomy Rabbah*, *Tanchuma Buber*, *Pesiqta Rabbati*, *Numbers Rabbah*, and *Exodus Rabbah*. Suomala organizes the extensive rabbinic literature under leading questions such as: Why did God demand that Moses descend Mount Sinai? Why did Moses intercede on behalf of the Israelites? Is intercession appropriate? To whom do the people belong? Should the Egyptians share blame for the golden calf? Moses emerges in this world as a character who is deferential to God; his speech is not so much a dialogue as it is prayer and dispute, both of which are persuasive. God is all-knowing and omnipotent, yet the Deity also embodies emotions and desires. The relationship between Moses and God moves to a linguistic plain in the rabbinic exegesis, according to

Suomala, where God and Moses equally participate in the power of speech: “Together, in the interpreted world of the Rabbis, God and Moses were able to achieve a rapport, in their respective roles, unlike any other between God and human” (150).

Chapter 6 turns to the Targums, Aramaic versions of the Bible that reflect the development of tradition somewhere between the biblical translations summarized in chapter 3 and the rabbinic exegesis of chapter 5. The Targums strive to use language that is suitable to God’s being and action. Moses acts with deference to the Deity. His speech is prayer. References to God are more reverential. Direct references to the Deity are avoided; anthropomorphic language is guarded to avoid “improper ideas and expressions being used of God” (81). A final chapter summarizes the overall results of the study, and an appendix provides the primary texts.

This is a helpful study. Suomala clearly takes the reader through the changing contours of the dialogues between God and Moses in Exod 32-34, capturing the dynamic relationship between text and community from the Diaspora translation of the LXX to the midrashic interpretation of the rabbis. I conclude the review with two caveats. First, the place of chapter 6 on the Targums, after the extensive chapter on rabbinic interpretation in chapter 5, was unclear to this reader. Second, I was also disappointed that the conceptual framework of power was not developed in more detail. The introduction of power at the outset was far too brief. Important works such as B. Loomer’s, “Two Kinds of Power” (*Criterion* 15/1 [1976]: 11–29) were absent. And the subsequent chapters also lacked a rigorous study of power and its implications in the different faith communities.