



The Book of Exodus

Exodus 32-34: The Golden Calf

With Moses on top of the mountain for forty days and forty nights to receive the inscribed tablets of the Ten Commandments and the instructions for the building of the Tabernacle, the Israelites get restless. They confront Aaron, who has been left in charge, and demand that he—presumably in his role as priest—make them a god “who shall go before us, for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him” (Exod 32:1). They are feeling the loss of leadership; having previously accepted that Moses would intercede with God for them, they are now rudderless, stranded in the desert. Thus their request is specifically for a god who will lead them—that had been Moses’s job, but he is nowhere to be seen.

The Golden Calf

Aaron complies: he requests and receives all of the Israelites’ gold earrings—the gold that the Israelites had “borrowed” from their Egyptian neighbors—and melts them down, casting them into a calf-shaped form. The people then exclaim, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!” (32:4). Aaron announces a festival the next day, and the people bring sacrifices and eat and drink and dance and make merry.

Two significant elements of this famous story are raised right here at the beginning. The first is the strange use of the plural in the people’s exclamation: “These are your gods.” This seems odd in context, but is less so when we recognize it as a reference to 1 Kings 12:28. There we read about Jeroboam, first ruler of the northern kingdom of Israel after it had split from Judah in the wake of Solomon’s death, who in order to draw pilgrims away from the ark in Jerusalem built two sanctuaries, one at Dan and one at Bethel, and installed a golden calf in each, saying: “You have been going up to Jerusalem long enough; these are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!” There the plural makes sense: two sanctuaries, two golden calves. Here in Exodus 32, we are meant to recognize the political commentary in Israel’s apostasy at the mountain: the sin of Jeroboam is akin to the greatest sin in Israel’s history. The first moment of disobedience after Israel has received the law is aligned with the first moment of cultic infidelity after Israel has divided into two nations.

In other words, we must remember that many of the stories in the Bible, if not most, are not only about what is taking place on the level of plot. They interact with a wide frame of ancient

contemporary referents, some of which—as in this case—we can identify because we know them from elsewhere. But many such referents must be unidentifiable. Without the text of 1 Kings, would we know that the golden calf story was political-religious commentary on the cult of the northern kingdom? What would we make of the plural “gods”?

What the relationship to the story of Jeroboam also reveals is that the golden calf is not meant to represent any deity other than Yahweh. Jeroboam is not trying to make the Israelites worship another god; he wants them to worship the same god, just in a different place. So too the Israelites in Exodus 32 are not introducing a new god. They say explicitly that the calf represents the god who took them out of Egypt—and that was Yahweh. The festival that they hold the next day is not a festival to Baal, or any other foreign god—it is explicitly a “festival of Yahweh.” The story of the golden calf is commonly misconstrued to be about idolatry, but it is not. It is, rather, about the incorrect worship of Yahweh: the kind of worship that requires a physical shape. Although the text appears to make reference to it, the Israelites are not disobeying the first of the Ten Commandments: “I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage; you shall have no other gods besides me” (Exod 20:2–3). They are, rather, disobeying the first law of the Covenant Code: “You yourselves saw that I spoke to you from the very heavens; with me, therefore, you shall not make any gods of silver, nor shall you make for yourselves any gods of gold” (20:22–23).

Apostasy is therefore the wrong term for what takes place in Exodus 32. It is, rather, disobedience of the first law regarding the proper worship of Yahweh. This is precisely how God describes their actions: “They have been quick to turn aside from the way that I enjoined upon them” (32:8). That “way” is the Covenant Code, the laws on the basis of which God and Israel made a solemn covenant, sworn in blood. The sign of that covenant, the symbol that would stand before both God and the people to mark their mutually agreed terms (i.e., the laws), is the tablets of the Ten Commandments. And thus Moses’s famous destruction of those very tablets, despite having been inscribed by the finger of God, is a perfectly appropriate response to the people’s sin. They have broken the terms of the treaty—only mere moments after having agreed to it—and thus the tablets he carries are worthless and might as well be broken themselves.

The figure of the calf in particular has a long history in ancient Israel. In Canaanite religion it was deeply associated with the god Baal—son of El, who was represented as a bull. As the emerging Israelites began the process of separating themselves from their context and finding their own identity, they still could not help but adopt some of the traditions of the culture from which they emerged. Thus, although worship of Yahweh might have been particularly Israelite, the Israelite perception and understanding of Yahweh naturally took on some features of Canaanite religion: in particular, Yahweh has much in common with both El and Baal, including the storm imagery associated with the latter and, it would seem, the calf imagery as well. It is not that Yahweh was confused with Baal, or that the Israelites thought they were worshipping a Canaanite deity. But gods in the ancient world blended into each other more readily than we are usually willing to admit.

Before descending the mountain, Moses has a conversation with God that is of great theological importance. God, seeing the people's calf, declares his intention to destroy the "stiff-necked" Israelites entirely and make a new nation from Moses. This declaration reveals something of the relationship God envisions between himself and his people: God is not beholden to the Israelites by virtue of any history between them, but only because they have a contract, the covenant; and if the Israelites aren't going to hold up their end of the deal, then God may as well not have taken them out of Egypt. Moses's response does not deny the intransigence of the Israelites but appeals to God's ego: "Let not the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he delivered them, only to kill them off in the mountains and annihilate them from the face of the earth'" (Exod 32:12). In other words: God's reputation is at stake here. Moses then goes on to appeal to God's promise of land to the patriarchs, and God relents.

This is not the only time in the Pentateuch that God considers destroying the Israelites and starting again with Moses (see Num 14:12, in the episode of the spies—the other low point for the Israelites in the wilderness). The very possibility of such a thing gives some indication of the relative positions of God and the people: the people cannot do without God, but God can always find another people, or start again. The Israelites, it would seem, are not inherently special—God has chosen them not for their own sake but because, by virtue of having taken them out of Egypt, they owe him their obedience. They should be attached to him; he is not attached to them. The only thing that saves Israel from God's wrath is Moses's clever appeal to God's reputation.

And what of Aaron? It was his idea to make the calf; yet when Moses confronts him, he claims that rather than casting the mold himself, he simply threw the gold into the fire and "out came this calf!" (32:24). Somehow this suffices.

The Levites

The confrontation with Aaron is followed by perhaps the strangest episode in the story of the calf. Upon seeing that the Israelites are out of control, Moses asks for assistance in controlling them: "Whoever is for the Lord, come here!" (32:26). It is the Levites who heed Moses's call, and he proceeds to instruct them to go through the camp killing whomever they encounter: "Slay brother, neighbor, and kin" (32:28). The Levites do so, killing three thousand fellow Israelites, for which Moses declares that they have earned the right minister to the Lord. This passage, so odd in its context, participates in a broader tradition that associates the Levites with violence: there is their murderous response to the rape of their sister Dinah in Genesis 34; there is the declaration that they kill in anger in Genesis 49; and there is this story. It may be that the notion of righteous anger was associated with dedication to God—we might think of Samson as another potential example.

Exodus 33-34

The story of the golden calf continues in Exodus 34, with the making of a new set of tablets and a second trip up the mountain for Moses, complete with the forty-day-and-night stay (but

without any calf this time). The people having been punished for their disobedience—both by the Levites and by a divine plague at the end of Exodus 32—the covenant is back in force, and therefore a new set of tablets to symbolize the covenantal agreement must be constructed. This is the conclusion of the E story of the mountain in the wilderness, which comprises the entire golden calf narrative.

In between, in Exodus 33, we have a different account: a conversation between God and Moses regarding whether and how God will lead the people through the wilderness into the promised land. God tells Moses to lead the Israelites, but refuses to go along with them, because they are so difficult that God fears he will destroy them on the way (as, indeed, he almost does in the episode of the spies). Moses, however, implores God, and God quickly relents. But Moses presses his advantage: “He said, ‘Oh, let me behold your presence!’” (Exod 33:18). God says that he will make his “goodness” pass before Moses, and proclaim his qualities, but Moses cannot see his face. In Exodus 34, this is precisely what comes to pass: Moses goes up the mountain, and God passes before him, proclaiming, “The Lord is a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet he does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children’s children, upon the third and fourth generations” (Exod 34:6–7).

This famous statement resounds in different ways throughout the Hebrew Bible. Later in the Pentateuch, in the episode of the spies, when God threatens to destroy the Israelites, Moses looks back to these words, particularly the first ones. The question of transgenerational justice—the sin of the parents being visited upon the children—so unambiguously proclaimed here was evidently a point of theological contention in ancient Israel. There are numerous other biblical texts that take up and, at times, explicitly contradict the opinion expressed here. See, for example, Deut 24:16: “Parents shall not be put to death for children, nor children be put to death for parents.”

The final moment at the mountain, before the construction of the Tabernacle and the ritual laws that are proclaimed therein, is the divine speech that God delivers to Moses after proclaiming his divine qualities. The speech comprises a covenant—not the same covenant as was made back in Exodus 20–24, on the basis of those laws, but an entirely different covenant, with different terms. Here God promises to drive out the inhabitants of Canaan, as long as the Israelites promise to destroy all the Canaanite cult sites and refrain from engaging in social intercourse with the Canaanites (the laws in 34:17–26 are widely accepted in scholarship to be one of the latest texts in the Pentateuch, a compendium of legal materials from E, D, and P). This covenant in Exodus 34, along with the interactions between God and Moses that introduce it, are from J; the golden calf story, as noted above, is from E. When the two were interwoven, it was natural for the only covenant in J to be aligned with the refashioning of the tablets from E. This led to the canonical situation, in which this covenant in Exodus 34 looks like not a new thing, but rather like the renewal of the previous relationship, the one that was shattered during the sin of the golden calf. Given God’s proclamation of his qualities in Exodus 34, it appears that the relationship between God and Israel is restored with a new sense of grace and

mercy. Neither J nor E ever envisioned such a thing; but this is one of the places where the combination of the sources has led to a whole that may be greater than the sum of its parts.

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