Exodus 32:1-14

The people become impatient when Moses fails to return from the mountain, and Aaron fashions a bull-calf of gold for them to worship.

The Story

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they congregated before Aaron and said, 'Come, make us gods to go before us. As for this Moses, who brought us up from Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' Aaron answered, 'Take the gold rings from the ears of your wives and daughters, and bring them to me.' So all the people stripped themselves of their gold earrings and brought them to Aaron. He received them from their hands, cast the metal in a mould, and made it into the image of a bull-calf; then they said, 'Israel, these are your gods that brought you up from Egypt.' Seeing this, Aaron built an altar in front of it and announced, 'Tomorrow there is to be a feast to the LORD.' Next day the people rose early, offered whole-offerings, and brought shared-offerings. After this they sat down to eat and drink and then gave themselves up to revelry.

The LORD said to Moses, 'Go down at once, for your people, the people you brought up from Egypt, have committed a monstrous act. They have lost no time in turning aside from the way which I commanded them to follow, and cast for themselves a metal image of a bull-calf; they have prostrated themselves before it, sacrificed to it, and said, "Israel, these are your gods that brought you up from Egypt."' The LORD said to Moses, 'I have considered this people, and I see their stubbornness. Now, let me alone to pour out my anger on your people, so that I may put an end to them and make a great nation spring from you.'

Moses set himself to placate the LORD his God: 'LORD,' he said, 'why pour out your anger on your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a strong hand? Why let the Egyptians say, "He meant evil when he took them out, to kill them in the mountains and wipe them off the face of the earth"? Turn from your anger, and think better of the evil you intend against your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self: "I shall make your descendants countless as the stars in the heavens, and all this land, of which I have spoken, I shall give to them, and they will possess it for ever."' So the LORD thought better of the evil with which he had threatened his people.

Comments on the Story

This fascinating upstairs/downstairs story juxtaposes two simultaneous happenings. Up on the mountain, in the silent calm, hidden in the clouds, Moses listens to God. Down in the valley, in the frenzied cacophony of the worst kind of religiosity, the people rebel against what is going on up on the mountain. Deftly the writer exposes the enormity of human sinfulness, exemplifying the long history of humanity, stretching even into the late twentieth century.

For seven long chapters, the Lord has been doing quite a lot of "spaking" (to recall the KJV's dignified way of describing divine speech). The people's yawning silence, broken so pathetically in 32:1, began in 24:7. When they last spoke, their tune was "We shall obey and do all that the Lord has said." Their about-face in 32:1 proves that they are indeed "prone to wander." Are they resistant to all the "spaking"? Or are they anxious over whether there will indeed be "any word from the
Lord”? Wiesel is on target: “Despite the divine manifestations, the crossing of the Red Sea and the other miracles, something of this stiff-necked people had stayed behind in bondage in Egypt” (*Messengers of God*, p. 196).

The clever editor of Exodus sandwiches the boxed set of stories in chapters 32–34 between the detailed blueprints for the tabernacle (chaps. 25–31) and its actual construction (chaps. 35–40). But at the foot of Mt. Sinai, the people have received no memos about what is forthcoming. And, while we may criticize them for their forgetfulness, it has been forty days (v. 1: “so long”) with no sign of Moses. Was he ever coming back? Had he been (as would be expected) devoured by the fiery divine presence? They half-feared he wouldn't come back; they half-feared he would! Skillfully the text portrays an emotional distance between the people and Moses to match the physical and temporal with a tiny Hebrew demonstrative, zeh: "As for this Moses. . . .” Heretofore he has not been the most celebrated of leaders; part of the function for this segment will be to establish most firmly Moses’ (previously ambiguous) role as leader.

The pronouns in the dialogue are emphatic. The Lord's subtle reaction to the noxious revelry is a disclaimer, deeding the people over to the hapless Moses: They are "your" (not "my") people; "you" (not "I") delivered them. With temerity Moses deeds them right back in verse 11 ("your people whom you brought out"). The Lord even contemplates a new deluge to wipe out the people, preserving Moses as a new Abraham, the new progenitor of the promise (v. 10 matches Gen. 12:2). Indeed the shock of the story is not that the Lord might destroy such people, but that Moses is actually able to stand in the breach and deter God's wrath! The Lord says, “Let me alone,” but that is precisely what Moses will not do. How reminiscent of Jacob's "I will not let you go until you bless me" (Gen. 32:26); Moses did have some of his great-great-grandfather's blood!

The biblical God—not the omniscient, ineffable, infinite, absolute of philosophical theology—is unabashedly said to have changed the divine mind. God seems to "obey" Moses—a miracle that rivals the parting of any sea (see J. Clinton McCann's comments in "Exodus 32:1-14," *Interpretation* 44 [1990]: 278-81). The storyteller may with integrity play on the notion that God leaves the door slightly ajar for Moses, with a pregnant pause: “I'll destroy them. . . . Well, do you have anything to say?” God lets God's own self be persuaded. The story enfleshes grace most profoundly. The people know nothing of the mountaintop verdict. At the very moment God is relenting, they are indulging in a religious "orgy" (the root sense of zhq, "revelry," in v. 6). They are not getting their due! They are saved even before they know they have been indicted and condemned.

Aaron's self-defense is not as successful. In words reminiscent of the fall of Adam and Eve, Aaron faults the people: "You know how wicked they are" (v. 22). The Hebrew of verse 1 is ambiguous. Do they congregate "before" Aaron? "Around" him? "Against" him? Aaron himself probably wasn't sure. While in verse 4 Aaron "cast the metal in a mould and made it," his own revisionist history shrugs and wonders, placing the onus on some evidently higher power: "They gave the gold to me. I threw it in the fire, and out came this bull-calf." Out came? Aaron's job was to be a spokeman, not an innovator.

What were they really up to? Bull and calf images were extremely common in contemporary religion; the Apis bull of Memphis and the Mnevis bull of Heliopolis were renowned (see the photo in *Harper's Bible Dictionary* [1985], p. 145). Surely Aaron and the people weren't thinking that an Egyptian god delivered them from Egypt, although some have argued that Israel's yearning was to go back and worship the old Egyptian gods. In fact, the bull image was employed in many cultures. The bull or calf symbolized virility, vitality, and fertility.
Were the Israelites building a genuine idol in the sense of another God? Or were they merely trying to develop some symbol, so necessary for mortals in their religious practice? In a crucial sense, Israel downstairs got in trouble because they did not yet know what was going on upstairs. The tabernacle would fulfill what they sought through the bull. The cherubim, after all, were animal-like images fully endorsed by God. Of course, cherubim were mysterious, not exactly seen walking about in secular life, and they were basically hidden from view in the inner sanctum of the tabernacle. The bull, a well-known and often-used animal, was here publicly displayed. However vigorously the intentions of the Israelites might be defended (Aaron does proclaim a feast to the Lord in v. 5), the violation of the second commandment should have been clear; similarly the warnings of 23:32 were ignored.

The real purpose of the acquired gold (lifted humorously from Egypt) was to adorn the tabernacle. How risky to hoist the very image used by various foes. Even the Baal nemesis was imaged as a bull. Throughout Israel's history, the temptation was to take seemingly innocent elements from neighboring regions and make them "fit in" to Israel's worship. But a thread runs from Elijah through Hosea to Isaiah: no images, no syncretism, no accommodation. Even subtle compromise is intolerable in Israelite religion. A storyteller may profitably play upon the seeming innocence of the people. Indeed, religion itself often becomes the most pernicious vehicle of sinfulness in the human story.

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So vividly etched in Israel's memory is the lapse of memory that this story became paradigmatic of all human rebellion. Repeatedly within Scripture, this image is reintroduced as the very epitome of sin. Psalm 106, well-paired in the lectionary with our text, singles out this moment when "they exchanged their God for the image of a bull; they forgot God their deliverer who had done great things." This travesty punctuates the great confession in Nehemiah 9 (vv. 16-19), Stephen's peroration (Acts 7:39-41), and Paul's warning to Corinth (1 Cor. 10:7-8); indeed, Romans 1:25 may well mirror this incident. Like Stephen and Paul, Moses is even prepared to give up his own life (Exod. 32:32).

Indeed, the church fathers were zealous in parading this story as being indicative of Jewish intransigence. This kind of blatant anti-Semitism unmasks a nagging peril: Like Aaron, we are quick to point the finger rather than confess our own tendency toward idol making. Dare the storyteller actually name some modern-day bulls and calves we fashion in the very name of being religious? In our "therapeutic" society, are we not lured into doing whatever it takes to help people "feel good," enabling and indulging the idolatry of "religious needs"?

While the story could viably be retold from Nehemiah's or Stephen's or Paul's perspective, its fascinating links to 1 Kings 12 may offer an enriching point of view. Scholars have long noticed the odd plural in Exodus 32: gods. There was but one bull. But Jeroboam, the first king of the newly seceded northern kingdom of Israel, did commission a pair for the new sanctuaries of Bethel and Dan, with words identical to Aaron's in Exodus 32:4: "Here are your gods, Israel, that brought you up from Egypt" (1 Kings 12:28). Jeroboam's intentions were probably honorable as well (in a sense, a bull would rally popular support), but he had crossed a theological threshold that earned him the highest censure (see 1 Kings 13).

The story has an even closer analog in the fate of Saul. The people demand a physical, tangible substitute, a "king, like all the nations." Saul, too, grew anxious while waiting for Samuel (who almost seems to have been hiding behind a rock!). His own sacrifice, however religious and well-intended, was out of sync with God's mandate (1 Sam. 8–15).

Moses, so calm in negotiating the verdict of grace upstairs, comes downstairs and flies into a rage. The staging is brilliant. First, Moses hears a noise that grows into a din. Then he sees with his eyes the sorry source of the racket. The suspense is shattered when the wrath of Moses (not God) "burns hot." Swiftly he reacts, as did Jesus in clearing the Temple. Throughout the world, smashing tablets was a well-known symbol for dissolving a contractual relationship. The sequence, burn/grind/sprinkle, is attested in texts from other cultures that want to dramatize the utter annihilation of a god/idol. The forced drinking of the mixture, perhaps reflective of the "ordeal"
administered to ascertain adultery or lack thereof (see Num. 5:11-31), provides a poignant image of what the book of Isaiah calls "drinking the cup of the Lord's wrath to the dregs" (see Isa. 51:17, 22; Pss. 75:8).

The culminating stroke is at once the delight of militant revolutionaries and the nightmare of every pacifist. While the question, "Who is on the Lord's side?" may, out of context, be provocative, the draconian measures of the slaughter (were there three thousand or, as Paul has it, twenty-three thousand?) sound more like how the pharaoh would handle such misbehavior. Moses mobilizes his comrades (foreshadowing the Maccabean summons to arms in 1 Macc. 2:27). The text does not explicitly say that God ordered the bloodletting, but it's there, rather unique among these stories. Church leaders have justified capital punishment for heretics; many groups even today would justify "purges" in the name of revolution. The rabbis rationalized the vendetta: God must have ordered it. Such an "emergency measure" was not to be repeated; it was the "mixed multitude" that caused the problem. God orchestrated the whole affair precisely to unmask the idolaters in the crowd. The storyteller's luxury is not having to offer a rational explanation for what transpires. In this case, while the lectionary may wish to amputate the killing (as did Josephus), the biblical writer did think it worth passing along.

The story pairs the demanding severity of the Lord with the gracious loyalty of the Lord. The narrative is coming to grips with the very character of this Yahweh. The message is clear: The lukewarm may well be spat out. The drama forces a decision with unambiguous clarity: Who is on the Lord's side?

Retelling the Story

Moses was gone a very long time—forty days and forty nights. The people had no idea that Moses was in God's presence and was receiving further instructions from God. However, they feared that something had happened to God's spokesman and covenant mediator—the man who had led them out of Egypt. The people felt very vulnerable without him, and they began to say that he had disappeared.

Moses had left Aaron and the elders in charge while he was on the mountain with God. Aaron had no real authority of his own. Yet, he was very flattered when the people came to him and asked him to be their leader. He also saw an opportunity to seize power from his brother, Moses. The people wanted the gods to lead them. They rejected Moses' leadership for false gods. They did not really want Aaron to take Moses' place. Rather, they wanted a God over whom they had control, and they saw Aaron as one who could help them accomplish their rebellious goal.

The people of Israel had entered into a covenantal relationship with God. However, they wanted to renegotiate the covenant once they discovered that it was too demanding. They wanted God's help, but felt that God's demands were no longer in their best interest. Therefore, they decided to break the covenant.

Aaron cooperated fully with the people. He showed them how they could produce a god. He told them to take off their rings of gold and bring them to him, and they obeyed. Aaron melted all their rings and from the molten gold fabricated a golden calf, explaining that it was a symbol of fertility. The people exclaimed, "These are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt." When Aaron saw this, he built an altar and prepared to ratify a new covenant with this new god.

God observed everything that the people of Israel were doing. God went to Moses and said that Moses had been away from the people of Israel long enough and that it was time he returned to them. God warned Moses to go back to the people because they had become corrupt and had broken their covenant with God. "I told them that they should not have any gods before me. Now they have made themselves a golden calf. They have worshiped it, and they have sanctified it. They were even making fun of me! They say that this golden calf is the one who brought them out of the land of Egypt. I can't tolerate having these people attribute my acts to something else. This is beyond insult!
They have made me angry, and now something must be done to punish them. They have spoiled my plans. I had chosen them to make for me a great nation, but now they have let me down."

Moses began to talk to God. He told God to calm down—with great respect, of course. He then began to intercede with God on behalf of the people of Israel. Moses asked, "Why get so angry?" After all, it was God who had brought the people out of Egypt. Moses reminded God that perhaps even the Egyptians would question why God had brought the people out of their land. Was it only for some evil intent? Then Moses, in a bold move, told God to turn from wrath and repent of this evil feeling against the people of Israel. Moses called to God's mind the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel—that they would inherit a land and become a great nation. The Lord actually listened to Moses and repented of the wrath that was intended for the children of Israel.

Earthly rulers hold the best interests of their citizens at heart, as long as those citizens are loyal. Earthly kings bestow gifts on their subjects as long as the subjects do not rebel against them. But with God things are different. While the children of Israel were rebelling and making a golden calf to worship, God was preparing the gift of the Torah to give to them. (Exodus Rabbah 41.4)

Some say that God paved the way for Moses' pleading for the people by the very way the divine words of rebuke were spoken. It was like a friend who has something difficult to say to another but does not want to be alienated from that friend. God's gentle words provide the pathway of mercy that Moses walked for the people. (Exodus Rabbah 42.2)

The rabbis say that Moses acted as the defense attorney for the children of Israel. When he saw that God was about to destroy the people for worshiping the golden calf, Moses knew that if no one took their side they would vanish from the face of the earth. So he quickly began to remind God of all the stories of the people's faithfulness. After hearing these stories, God decided to give these wayward children another chance. (Exodus Rabbah 42.1)