

Called to Stand in the Gap: Moses, a Golden Calf, and an Angry God (Exodus 32:1-14)

The absence of Moses simply gave the Israelites the opportunity to “worship openly what they had been worshiping in their hearts.” ~ Ephrem the Syrian (A.D. 306-373)

I. Investigation: An Examination of Exodus 32:1-14

A. Introduction

Similar to the crossing of the Red Sea, the Golden Calf incident of Exodus 32 serves as a recurring symbol throughout Jewish history. However, unlike the crossing of the Red Sea where the Lord saved His people, in this incident, the Lord expresses His desire to destroy the Israelites for their immense sin. Moses serves as a true intercessor in Exodus 32 as he stands between the Lord and Israel. The scene closes with a theologically troubling statement concerning God repenting. Can God really change His mind? Is the Lord won over by a good argument and surprised by something He had not yet pondered? A careful read of this passage answers these questions and highlights the importance of intercessory prayer.

B. The Worship of a Golden Calf (vv. 1-6)

vv. 1-6 - As noted by one scholar, since Israel has just recently entered into a holy covenant with Yahweh at Sinai, where the people still remain, the sin of chapter 32 is “like committing adultery at one’s wedding night” (Moberly, “Exodus,” 48).

Most likely, Israel is not guilty of worshiping false god(s), but “a false perception of who the true one God is” (Hamilton, *Exodus*, 532). Without Moses’ presence, the people desired an image which reassured them of a divine presence. However, their activity demonstrates their own depravity (cf. Exod 19:8). Their action also robs the Lord of His glory—the very message of the book of Exodus!

While Aaron is never singled out by the Lord in His condemnation of the event, Aaron plays an active role in this grotesque sin of the Israelites. Note how Aaron is involved:

Why a golden calf? Bovine deities were extremely common in both Egyptian and Canaanite religion. In the Old Testament, the Lord is often metaphorically associated with various animals (e.g., an eagle [Exod 19:4], a lion [Hos 13:7], but He is never associated with a bull (cf. Garrett, *Exodus*, 619). In fact, the bull is often depicted as the quintessential pagan deity. Ryken aptly comments on the crafting of an idol in Egyptian style, “Once again it was proving to be more difficult to get Egypt out of the Israelites than it was to get the Israelites out of Egypt” (*Exodus*, 972).

“rose up to play” - While the term could suggest a religious orgy (cf. 1 Cor 10:7), it probably speaks of simple festive activities associated with a religious event.

C. The Lord’s Response (vv. 7-10)

vv. 7-8 - The Lord’s response clearly portrays this event as an act of apostasy and outright disobedience.

The repetition of the phrase “And the Lord said to Moses” may indicate the Lord’s intense anger as well as Moses’ inability to respond in the midst of bewilderment at what has just transpired (cf. Alter, “Exodus,” 495).

Through the use of the second pronoun (“you”), the Lord implies that Moses’ leadership is desperately needed.

vv. 9-10 - The Lord provides Moses an opportunity to respond (also, cf. Ps 106:23). It is what one scholar calls “a form of invitation by prohibition” (Balentine, “Prayers for Justice,” *CBQ* [1989]: 606). By telling Moses to go down to observe the situation rather than simply wiping out the Israelites, appealing to Abraham, and seeking permission from Moses (i.e., “leave me alone”), the Lord is giving Moses the opportunity to intercede (cf. Childs, *Moses*, 567).

Ironically, “although the people had tried to disown Moses, he was the only one who could save them!” (Ryken, *Exodus*, 987).

D. Moses’ Response (vv. 11-14)

vv. 11-13 - Moses declines the offer of serving as the “second” Abraham. Instead, Moses appeals to what the Lord has already revealed as reasons for why the Lord should grant mercy to the Israelites (also, cf. Deut 9:26-29):

- Israel is the Lord’s people (e.g., Exod 4:22).
- The Lord has gone to great lengths to rescue His people (e.g., Exod 20:2).
- The Lord’s reputation is at stake (e.g., Exod 7:2).
- The Lord had made a covenant with the Patriarchs (e.g., Gen 12, 15).

Note what Moses does NOT say:

v. 14 - The term for “repent” can mean sorrow, compassion, or mercy (cf. Ps 90:13). In fact, translating the phrase as “change of mind” is misleading. One scholar has demonstrated the difference between God’s unconditional decrees (e.g., Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29) and retractable announcements pending human response. He writes, “Moses was able to succeed because God had only threatened judgment, not decreed it” (Chisholm, “Does God ‘Change His Mind?’,” *BibSac*, 396). Similarly, another scholar states, “God’s words to Moses were not to be viewed as unchanging promises, but rather as expressions of divine displeasure and righteous anger. Moses was invited to dialogue; he was expected to remember the revelation of God in the past; he was responsible to remember God’s promises to the nation” (Master, “Exodus 32,” *JETS* [2002], 598).

Thus, one cannot appeal to Exodus 23 to argue for a God who changes His mind based upon human reasoning. Such a depiction fails to account for the content, grammatical construction, and lexical nuances of this passage. In addition, this view of the Lord fails to adhere to the overall theology of Exodus. Instead, Exodus 32 portrays a holy God who demands repentance, forgives, remembers His promises, and responds according to His unchanging character.

II. Intersect

A. One of the most dangerous ways in which the Church can lose its fidelity to the Gospel is through embracing its culture. Often this trend is subtle and far more subversive than we acknowledge.

1 John 5:21 -

B. People need consistent and reliable godly leaders who can keep them walking in the way of righteousness.

Hebrews 13:7 -

C. We should not underestimate the vital role of intercessory prayer.

1 Timothy 2:8 -

“Our prayer must not be self-centered. It must arise not only because we feel our own need as a burden we must lay upon God, but also because we are so bound up in love for our fellow men that we feel their need as acutely as our own. To make intercession for men is the most powerful and practical way in which we can express our love for them.” ~ John Calvin