

The Golden Calf File

By Dr. Dave Neale

Following the giving of the Law, the Exodus narrative has 11 chapters of painfully detailed exposition on how this Law is to be observed. It covers everything from an ox goring to festivals to the treatment of resident aliens.

Seven of the eleven chapters have to do with the details of the tent of sanctuary and its operation.

The second commandment says, ***“You shall not make gods of silver alongside me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold.”*** (Exodus 20:23)

And, Exodus 24 tells us, Moses told all these ordinances to the people and they all said with one voice, ***“All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do.”*** (Ex 24:3)

In the Text

It’s one of the more painful ironies of the drama of the Exodus that, after they pass through the Red Sea and arrive at Mt Sinai; after Moses is quite late coming down from the mountain of God; they assume he is dead; and the people of Israel melt down the gold they plundered from their captors and make a golden calf to worship.

Gold is always reserved for use in the temple in the Bible. In the penultimate chapter of the Bible, the city of God is described this way, ***...the city is pure gold, clear as glass.*** (Rev 21:18)

At the very moment that God was instructing Moses to collect the gold and silver to adorn his new sanctuary on Mt Sinai (Ex 25:3 ff), the people remade the gold and silver into their new god.

Aaron said, ***“Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” ...He formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, “There are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. ... Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord [Yahweh]!”*** (Ex 32:2-4)

Now, I always thought I knew what this passage was about. Then I actually read the story and I’m less sure than I was about the point. Was this just an egregious, bald-faced betrayal? Was Aaron acting in bad faith? Did not the people of Israel just want to pack up and go home?

That isn’t what it says. They didn’t want to return to Egypt and slavery. They asked Aaron to ***...make gods who will go before us; as for Moses... we don’t know where he is!*** They wanted to go forward.

They had a festival to “Yahweh.” It seems to me they understood their deliverance perfectly well.

Maybe Aaron thought what he was doing was the right thing. In one of the Bible’s great comic moments, Aaron seems too hapless to be evil. When Moses calls him to account, he explains, ***So, I says to them, I says, ‘Whoever has gold, take it off’; so, they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out comes this calf!*** (Ex 32:24) Who knew?!

Perhaps the people weren’t simply reverting to a mindless idolatry and polytheism, but wanted to move on having lost their leader – who knows how long Moses had been gone?¹

Why, if we had been there, we would have put on sackcloth and ashes and prayed for Moses until he came down! We wouldn't allow anything to supplant our loyalty to God – would we? Maybe this passage isn't about schadenfreude.

What they did do, was break the second commandment: ***You shall not make for yourself an idol... You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God...*** (Ex 20:4-5)

From the Text

It's hard to know how to apply this story to our modern experience. People making a statue of a calf has no particular interest to us. What does this story mean? When we say don't have "idols" in life, what does that really *mean*?

First let's look at the portrayal of the Lord in this narrative. We see, at times in the OT story, the attribution of emotions to God. I think this was perfectly normal in the ANE context. Although, under the influence of Greek philosophy, we westerners think more about God as an impassive being, above human emotions. Not so in the OT story.

I see two places in the Bible where the Lord expresses regret over humankind. The first is the flood.

This second place is here at the base of Mt Sinai. When they are found to be making burnt offerings, sacrifices of well-being, and frankly, in "revel" says the NRSV, it is צחק, *tsahach*, meaning "to laugh and play."²; and "running wild", it is פרך, *parah*, meaning to "remove restraint, uncover the head from a turban"(BDB, p. 828; Ex 32:6, 25).

"I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation. (Ex 32:9-10)

God is so heart-broken over his people's breaking out of the restraint of the Law, that he wants to be done with them.³

And after Moses intercedes with a pretty good argument for staying the divine hand, we are told: ***And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.*** (Ex 32:14)

Here are a few points I offer by way of application.

The first observation is that, if ever the heart of God has been broken, it must be breaking now, because of the state of the Holy Land.

What did this people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them. (Ex 32:21)

Such shameful wickedness, such barbarity is beyond comprehension. I'm an American and I feel the same way today as I felt after 9/11. I don't know what to think. I don't know what to feel. What do we do when the unthinkable happens?

At times like this I have turned to the great NT theologian, Rudolf Bultmann, who said this about evil.

"The consequences and effects of our sins become a power dominating us, and we cannot free ourselves from them." [we have] ...the knowledge, the insight, that the evil for which every man is

responsible individually has nevertheless become a power which mysteriously enslaves every member of the human race.”⁴

And so, we pray today, against all hope and reasonable expectation, for the peace of the Holy Land.

Here is another possible application for us. Perhaps this story shows us the almost irresistible allure of the known over the danger of the unknown.⁵ These folks returned to what they knew. Idols and revery.

Who are we to judge them? The *easiest path* in life is to sit in the pocket of what we have always known. The path of least resistance is to retreat to the place of comfort and ease. The siren song of a familiar lifestyle is one of the most powerful motivations in life.

This familiarity with the past, this rubber band reaction to their situation, is what the Israelites chose over the dangerous God who has engineered their liberty, with all of its appalling dangers, risks and responsibilities.

The *most difficult* path in life is the unknown... and it is to this we are often called. What they should have done was wait patiently *on God*. A very different and often difficult thing to do.

We find fault with the Israelites. We judge them. But are we not, perhaps, too glib about the challenges of a life of faith and living as a Christian - about how hard it is to formulate and sustain a loyalty to God in life?

This text teaches us to persevere in faith. It teaches us that the life of faith is not a one-time commitment, but an arduous life of continuous decision to choose loyalty to God. No matter how long it takes for the Presence to come.

Jesus said as much. ***“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.”*** (Matt 7:13-14)

We don’t quote that one so much!

I leave you with an inspiring story of one man who did not allow the *past to determine his future*.

Have you ever heard of Charles Feeney? I thought not; I hadn’t until this week. He just passed away and his obituary appeared in the NYT this past week.

He was the pioneer of the duty-free industry and began by selling to American soldiers homeward bound from Europe in the 1950s. Over time, as we know, the business went global and he became vastly wealthy. He invested; he owned “palatial homes in New York, London, Paris, Honolulu, San Francisco, Aspen and on the French Riviera.”⁶

And then he decided to give his fortune of 7 billion dollars away *before he died*. The reason that you’ve never heard of him is because he went to great lengths to conceal his generosity.⁷

Remember Jesus said give in secret ***...and your Father who sees in secret will reward you***

Chuck Feeney signed the papers winding down his foundation, Atlantic Philanthropies, in 2020. All the money was gone, distributed to countless good causes.

Of the “1000 building on five continents” that he built for universities, medical institutions, human rights groups and scores of causes, his name appeared on not a single one. All of his gifts were anonymous. Feeney was the one who inspired Gates and Buffett to start the give-it-all-away movement among the top 1%.

He and his wife lived modestly in a rented apartment in San Francisco at his passing. He wore a \$10 watch and flew coach. He was 92.

He seems to me to be the very personification of one on whom the golden calf had no hold.

I leave us with a question this morning, ‘By what means will we show the great I AM that we will walk forward into the new life before us, and not fall back into the old familiar, comfortable ways?

Grow. Question. Seek. Let’s show God that our hearts and minds are his by whatever humble means are at our disposal. ...**and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.**

Amen

Benediction:

And now, may the God who calls us to make bold decisions to step into the new life before us, give you courage and perseverance to walk in the path to which He calls you in this new week to come.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

¹ Idols in Ancient Near Eastern religion were never said to be the actual deity itself. The hunk of gold or block of stone, or whatever it may have been, was not thought to be the god. But to represent the god.

² Here it does not necessarily mean sexual excess (as it does in Gen 26:8).

³ The question that arises here in theology is the “passibility of God”. It is the idea that God can experience feelings. Or is God “impassible,” above all emotion?

⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, p. 21.

⁵ Such idols in the Ancient Near East are understood to be a *representation* of deities, not the deities themselves. They aren’t worshipping a golden statue; it never says anything like that in the narrative. What they are worshipping is the past.

⁶ New York Times, Oct 9, 2023. *Charles Feeney, Who Made a Fortune and Then Gave it Away, Dies at 92.*

⁷ **“When you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret...”**
(Matt 6:3-4)