

Tuesday Morning Bible Study with Ted

Exodus 32:1-14

April 27, 2021

Exodus 32:1-6. “Come, make us gods!”

1. When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron, and said to him, “Come, make us gods, which shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we don’t know what has become of him.” 2. Aaron said to them, “Take off the golden rings, which are in the ears of your wives, of your sons, and of your daughters, and bring them to me.” 3. All the people took off the golden rings which were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron. 4. He received what they handed him, and fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made it a molten calf; and they said, “These are your gods, Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt.” 5. When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made a proclamation, and said, “Tomorrow shall be a feast to Yahweh. 6. They rose up early on the next day, and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play.

1a. “When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain

Moses has been on the mountain for a very long time—40 days and nights. The people were given no idea when to expect his return, and are clearly distraught that he has been gone for so long.

1b. “the people gathered themselves together to Aaron, and said to him, ‘Come, make us gods, which shall go before us’

The people come to Aaron, because Moses is gone and Aaron is Moses’ second-in-command. Yahweh has also designated Aaron and his sons to serve as priests (28:1, 4, 41), and the priests are responsible for worship practices.

The people want gods (they ask for the Hebrew word *Elohim* in reference to this request for gods) “who shall go before us”—who will lead them out of the wilderness to a better place.

FYI: “Elohim” is a generic word for gods used in Hebrew Scripture with the definite article (“the God”) to refer to Yahweh. However, in this case, the people are not asking for Aaron to make Yahweh. They are asking Aaron to make gods like the ones that they had seen in Egypt.

WHICH COMMANDMENT DOES THIS REQUEST VIOLATE?
HAVE THE PEOPLE SEEN THE COMMANDMENT AT THIS TIME?

1c. “for as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we don’t know what has become of him

Seeing the pyrotechnics on the mountain (thunder, lightning, etc.), the Israelites must wonder if Moses is dead. If he is alive, why hasn’t he returned? If he is dead, what will happen to them?

I believe the people have not seen Yahweh’s face—and they want a leader whom they can see with their eyes and feel with their hands. WHAT INFLUENCE FROM EGYPT WOULD PROMPT THIS REQUEST?

2. “Aaron said to them, ‘Take off the golden rings, which are in the ears of your wives, of your sons, and of your daughters, and bring them to me’

To me, this portrays Aaron as a weak leader to the extreme. Moses has modeled strong leadership, but Aaron doesn’t follow that model. He fails to rebuke the people for their idolatrous inclinations, and moves immediately to comply with their request.

Commentaries point out that Yahweh’s intent in having Israelites plunder “Egyptian jewelry was to give them precious metals for the construction of the Tabernacle. They would not need and silver to barter with wandering tribes for food. Yahweh provides for them by miraculous means.”

3. “All the people took off the golden rings which were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron

This phrase, “all the people,” does not necessarily mean that every Israelite complies with this request. Later, after Moses comes down from the mountain and discovers the Golden Calf, he will say, “Whoever is on Yahweh’s side, come to me!” and “All the sons of Levi (will gather) themselves together to him” (32:26).

WERE THEY WERE COMPLICIT IN THIS IDOLATRY IN THE BEGINNING, ONLY TO REPENT IN THE FACE OF MOSES’ ANGER? OR HAD THEY REFUSED TO BE A PARTY TO THIS IDOLATRY FROM THE BEGINNING? WE HAVE NO WAY OF KNOWING.

4a. “He received what they handed him, and fashioned it with an engraving tool

The word for “tool” suggests a graven image rather than a molten image. Aaron may have poured molten gold into a rough casting and then used an engraving tool to finish the work. Or, he could have used tools to pound the gold into gold leaf which could be used to cover a wooden figure in the shape of a bullock.

However, later in verse 8, the Hebrew word suggests a *molten* image.

To my way of thinking, the method of construction is of little consequence. The problem here is idolatry.

4b. “and made it a molten calf

The word “calf” is technically correct, but projects the wrong image. It brings to my mind the calves born on our farm, a very young calf of either gender suckling its mother—a weak and dependent creature.

But the word used for “calf” here suggests something altogether different. It was more like a young bull calf—not yet as strong as a mature bull, but strong nevertheless—and moving toward becoming stronger still.

Perhaps Aaron has seen Egyptian gods portrayed as young bulls, and is following that model. In any event, he intends to portray strength rather than weakness.

WHERE IN AMERICA DO WE HAVE A BULL IMAGE? WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF IT?

4c. “These are your gods, Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt

Note the similarity of this verse with “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the house of slavery” (20:2). The people are ascribing to the Golden Calf actions only completed by Yahweh.

It is the people, not Aaron, who make this pronouncement. They give this graven image credit for Yahweh’s work of freeing Israel from Egyptian slavery.

5a. “When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it

Aaron continues his willing complicity in this idolatry. He builds an altar, which will serve two purposes. First, it will give the Israelites a focus for their worship. Second, it will give the “gods” a place where they can receive the offerings.

5b. “and Aaron made a proclamation, and said, ‘Tomorrow shall be a feast to Yahweh

Aaron apparently feels uncomfortable with the idolatry in which he is participating. He declares a festival dedicated, not to the calf, but to Yahweh. Aaron is trying to turn the people from the idolatry of the Golden Calf to the worship of Yahweh.

But trying to reconcile idol worship and the worship of Yahweh is a futile enterprise. It is not possible to worship Yahweh alongside graven images, because Yahweh has specifically forbidden graven images (20:4).

I FIND THIS PART HILARIOUS: Later, when Moses confronts Aaron, Aaron will use the lame excuse that the Israelites “are set on evil” (32:22) and that he had simply thrown the gold into the fire, “and out came this calf” (32:24). That attempt at ducking responsibility confirms that Aaron knows that he has been involved in a prohibited activity and, he is guilty.

6a. “They rose up early the next day, and offered burnt offerings

Chapter 27 specified the construction of the altar for the Tabernacle and the burnt offerings to be made to Yahweh (27:1-8). The Israelites are making the right sacrifices to the wrong god—they should be giving their burnt offerings to Yahweh instead of this Golden Calf.

6b. “and brought peace offerings

Leviticus specifies three kinds of offerings: (1) The thanksgiving offering (2) the votive offering and (3) the freewill offering (Leviticus 7:11-18).

The *thanksgiving, votive and freewill* offerings are intended to be consumed by the people. Therefore, burnt offerings and peace offerings “are routinely paired in biblical ritual because the *ola* was the sacrifice that constituted the basic nourishment for the deity, while the (T. V. and F) in turn nourished the people (Anderson, “Sacrifices and Offerings,” *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*).

6c. “and the people sat down to eat and drink

Eating and drinking is perfectly appropriate following a *T.V. & F* offering, because those offerings are intended to be consumed by the people. The only problem here is that the people have made their offerings to the Golden Calf rather than to Yahweh.

6d. “and rose up to play

This Hebrew word translated “play,” and can suggest sexual play. Verse 25 says that the people have been running wild, which suggests that the reveling of verse 6d has become an orgy.

The Psalmist will later characterize this scene as follows:

“They made a calf in Horeb,
and worshiped a molten image.
Thus they exchanged their glory
for an image of a bull that eats grass.

They forgot God, their Savior,
who had done great things in Egypt,
Wondrous works in the land of Ham,
and awesome things by the Red Sea.

Therefore he said that he would destroy them,
had Moses, his chosen, not stood before him in the breach,
to turn away his wrath, so that he wouldn’t destroy them.”
(Psalm 106:19-23)

Exodus 32:7-10. Your people have corrupted themselves

7. Yahweh spoke to Moses, “Go, get down; for your people, who you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves! 8. They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them. They have made themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it, and have sacrificed to it, and said, ‘These are your gods, Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt.’” 9. Yahweh said to Moses, “I have seen these people, and behold, they are a stiff-necked people. 10. Now therefore leave me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them, and that I may consume them; and I will make of you a great nation.”

7a. “Yahweh said to Moses, ‘Go, get down’

There is urgency here. Yahweh breaks off law-giving and commands Moses to move quickly down the mountain.

7b. “for your people, who you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves

In the past, Yahweh spoke of these people as “my people” (3:7, 10; 5:1; 6:7; 7:4, 16, etc.)—but now he refers to them as “your people”—Moses’ people—the people whom Moses brought up.

DOES THIS SOUND FAMILIAR TO YOU? HOW SO?

8. “They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them. They have made themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it, and have sacrificed to it, and said, ‘These are your gods, Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt’

Yahweh describes exactly what we have seen in verses 1-6.

While the Hebrew word in verse 4a suggests a graven image, the word in this verse suggests a molten or cast image.

9. “Yahweh said to Moses, ‘I have seen this people, and behold, they are a stiff-necked people’

DO YOU HAVE PERSONAL EXAMPLES OF AN ANIMAL (OR PERSON) CONSIDERED “STIFF NECKED?”

10a. “Now therefore leave me alone

This is the beginning of Yahweh’s pronouncement of judgment on the Israelites. Yahweh commands Moses not to interfere with Yahweh’s plans—but it seems odd that Yahweh would instruct Moses in this way. Moses has no power to interfere with Yahweh’s plans. If Yahweh wants to destroy the Israelites, Moses has no power to stop him.

WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ABOUT THIS SCRIPTURE?

10b. “that my wrath may burn hot against them, and that I may consume them”

This is Yahweh’s announced intent with regard to the Israelites at the bottom of the mountain. He is angry, and intends to give full release of his anger to destroy them.

10c. “and I will make of you a great nation

This must come as a great surprise to Moses. Yahweh intends to destroy the Israelites, but also intends to bless Moses by making a great nation of him.

WHAT OTHERS RECEIVED THIS SAME PROMISE?

I bet this offer must be a great temptation to Moses. If Yahweh consumes the Israelites at the bottom of the mountain, the burden of leadership is no longer on Moses’ shoulders.

From my perspective that is no small matter, because these people have been difficult to lead.

Even more tempting, Yahweh is promising Moses a place in history. If Yahweh carries out this plan, Moses will become the great man through whose descendants Yahweh will bless the world.

Exodus 32:11-14. Moses begged Yahweh his god

11. Moses begged Yahweh his God, and said, “Yahweh, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, that you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? 12. Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, ‘He brought them forth for evil, to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the surface of the earth?’ Turn from your fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against your people. 13. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your seed as the stars of the sky, and all this land that I have spoken of I will give to your seed, and they shall inherit it forever.’” 14. Yahweh repented of the evil which he said he would do to his people.

11. “Moses begged Yahweh his God, and said, ‘Yahweh, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, that you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?’

In verse 7, Yahweh called these people “your people”—Moses’ people. Now Moses reverses that by calling them “your people”—Yahweh’s people. Moses doesn’t tell Yahweh that he declines the honor that Yahweh made in verse 10c, but he implies as much as he begins this defense of the Israelites.

Moses offers three good reasons why Yahweh should show mercy to the Israelites.

This is the **first of the good reasons**: Yahweh has brought these people out of Egypt “with great power and with a mighty hand.” Yahweh has a history with these people.

12. “Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, ‘He brought them forth for evil, to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the surface of the earth?’ Turn from your fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against your people’

This is the **second good reason** why Yahweh should change his mind and forgive the people. Yahweh very publicly brought Israel out of Egypt. Everyone, especially the Egyptians, knows what Yahweh has done. Yahweh has made it clear that these are his people and he is their God. If Yahweh now carries out his plan to destroy the Israelites, the whole world will regard him as false and fickle.

13. “Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your seed as the stars of the sky, and all this land that I have spoken of I will give to your seed, and they shall inherit it forever’

This is the **third good reason** why Yahweh should not destroy the Israelites. Yahweh has sworn an oath to the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel (Jacob). He has promised to multiply their descendants and to give them the Promised Land. Yahweh has a duty, not only to the patriarchs, but to himself. He must maintain his integrity by fulfilling the promises made earlier to the patriarchs.

14. “Yahweh repented of the evil which he said he would do to his people

But we should not imagine that God will never implement harsh justice. In this instance, he repents of his intent to destroy the people utterly, but nevertheless brings a plague on the Israelites (32:34-35)—a lesser but nevertheless serious judgment.

A NOTE ABOUT THE WAY WE'LL END EXODUS

As we learned above, Moses had been receiving instructions regarding the Tabernacle and its furnishings when Yahweh suddenly told him to go down the mountain to confront the wicked Israelites (see chapters 25-31). As soon as the Golden Calf incident is fully resolved and Moses makes new tablets (chapter 34) to replace the ones that he broke in anger (32:19), Yahweh will resume the giving of instruction regarding the Tabernacle (chapters 35-40) which I have chosen to not teach and will complete our study with Chapter 34.

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