

GOLDEN CALF

GOLDEN CALF (Heb. עֵגֶל מַסֵּכָה, Ex. 32:4; עֵגֶל זָהָב | Kings 12:28), the golden image made by Aaron at the behest of the Israelites and venerated near Mount Sinai (Ex. 32). Exodus 32 relates that the Israelites, anxious about Moses' prolonged absence, demanded that *Aaron provide a god to lead them. Complying, Aaron collected the golden ornaments of the people and fashioned the gold into the shape of a calf or a small bull. The image was immediately hailed by the people as a representation of the God who had brought Israel out of Egypt. Aaron then built an altar, and on the following day sacrifices were offered and the people feasted and danced and played. Thereupon the Lord told Moses of the apostasy of the "stiffnecked people," whom He proposed to destroy. Moses, however, interceded on behalf of the Israelites and persuaded the Lord to renounce His intended punishment. Carrying the Tablets of the Covenant down from Mt. Sinai, Moses saw the people dancing around the golden calf. In great anger Moses smashed the Tablets, melted down the image of the calf, pulverized the precious metal, and scattered the powdered gold over the available source of water, thus making the people drink it (verse 20); and there is doubtless a causal nexus between this and the plague that is reported in verse 35 (see Ordeal of *Jealousy).

Exodus 32 relates that Moses then upbraided Aaron for having "brought great guilt" upon the people. The parallel account in Deut. 9:20 relates that but for Moses' supplication on behalf of Aaron the Lord would have destroyed Aaron. Stern punishment was, however, meted out to the calf-worshippers, 3,000 of whom were slain by the *Levites who had responded to Moses' call for volunteers. Henceforth the Levites were consecrated to the service of the Lord. Despite Moses' prayer for divine forgiveness, the Lord threatened that on the day of His visitation punishment would overtake the people. Soon afterward a plague broke out among the Israelites (see above). In addition the Lord announced that He would no longer abide amid this "stiff-necked people." The Israelites mourned the departure of the Divine presence and stripped themselves of their ornaments (Ex. 33:1–6).

Critical View

The extant text of Exodus 32 is according to certain Bible critics an expansion of a basic narrative into several strata by secondary additions; for another interpretation see Cassuto (Exodus, ad loc.). The critical view does not see the chapter as a literary unity on the basis of inconsistencies. Others, however, believe that Aaronic authorship (and divine sanction) of the practice of calf symbolism was claimed from the very beginning by Jeroboam I and the priesthoods of Bethel and Dan, and that the version in Exodus 32, in boldly "representing Aaron, the ancestor of Israel's priestly caste, as a man of somewhat feeble character" (H.L. Ginsberg, in JBL, 80 (1961), 345) is motivated by a desire to discredit the practice which he instituted.

Calf and Bull Symbolism

The narrative of the golden calf cannot be understood without relating it to the erection of two golden calves in the temples of *Beth-El and *Dan by *Jeroboam I of Israel (I Kings 12:26ff.). Not only are the general features of the story similar in both accounts, but the explanatory formula in Exodus 32:4b, 8b – "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt" – is virtually identical to the one in I Kings 12:28b. Scholars are divided on the question of the chronological relationship of the two accounts. The traditional view is that the Jeroboam incident is dependent on the Exodus story (see Cassuto, loc. cit.). Other scholars, however, hold the view that Exodus 32 presupposes I Kings 12.

The bull had an important role in the art and religious texts of the ancient Near East. The storm-god *Hadad is frequently represented standing on a bull. Taking these facts into account it is generally assumed (after H. Th. Obbriek) that Jeroboam's calves corresponded to the *cherubim of Solomon's Temple, i.e., they were regarded as seats or pedestals upon which the Lord was thought to stand invisible to human eyes. M. Haran remarks that if Jeroboam's calves were considered pedestals, then they were not meant to be an exact replica of cherubim connected with the *Ark of the Covenant because the Ark and its cherubim were kept in the publicly inaccessible Holy of Holies while the calves were placed in the courts of the Temple, where the people could see and kiss them (cf. Hos. 13:2). It is also possible that the calves were, from the beginning, meant to represent the Lord like the images in the sanctuaries of Micah and Dan (Judg. 17:4; 18:14, 15–31; cf. M. Haran, in B. Zvieli (ed.), *Siḥot ba-Mikra*, 1 (1968), 214; idem, in: *Biblica*, 50 (1969), 264).

In any case Jeroboam's initiative must have had some basis in an old tradition, otherwise he could not have succeeded in his enterprise. Jeroboam's bulls, contrary to the Ark symbolism, were meant to be accessible to worshipers in the temples (cf. I Kings 12:27); and thus they developed from symbols of the Lord to fetishes in their own right (cf. e.g., II Kings 17:16; Hos. 8:5–6; 10:5).

In the Aggadah

The rabbinic attitude toward the episode of the golden calf is guided by the need to explain how the Children of Israel could demand an idol so soon after hearing the Ten Commandments and giving liberally to the erection of the Sanctuary and how Aaron could agree to the construction of the calf and still not forfeit his future role as high priest. The initiative in demanding the idol is attributed by some rabbis to the mixed multitude who joined the Israelites at the time of the Exodus (Ex. 12:38). Forty thousand of them, accompanied by two Egyptian magicians, *Jannes and Mambres, came to Aaron and claimed that it already was the sixth hour of the 40th day since Moses had left, the hour which he previously had designated for his return. They claimed that since he had not yet appeared he would never come. Satan added to the state of helplessness of the people by showing them a vision of Moses' bier which convinced them that he had died. Only then did they demand that Aaron produce a god for them (Shab. 89a; Tanh. B., Ex. 112–3). The error of the people consisted in including in their calculation the day of the ascent, whereas Moses had excluded it (Rashi, Shab. 89a). God was also blamed since He enslaved them in Egypt where they were exposed to the most idolatrous of ancient civilizations (Ex. R. 43:7) and for giving them an abundance of gold and silver when they left Egypt (Ber. 32a). *Hur, who is regarded as the son of Miriam and Caleb, attempted to dissuade the people from the sin and was put to death by them. Aaron feared that he would share the same fate (Lev. R. 10:3; Tanh. B., Ex. 112–3) and in accordance with his passion for the pursuit of peace (Avot 1:12; see *Aaron in the aggadah), felt it better to acquiesce than to permit the people to commit the unpardonable sin of slaying two leaders on the same day (Sanh. 7a). Hoping to gain time, he ordered them to bring the golden ornaments of their wives, relying on their known piety to refuse. The men thereupon donated their own jewelry (PdRE 45). Aaron then threw the gold into the fire, still hoping that Moses would return. Instantly, however, a calf appeared, alive and skipping, the result of a splinter which was thrown into the fire by the wicked Micah. This splinter, containing the words עלה שור (*aleh shor*, "Come up, Ox"; Joseph being compared to an ox; cf. Deut. 33:17), had previously been thrown into the Nile by Moses when he desired that Joseph's coffin rise to the surface so that he could transport his remains to Ereẓ Israel (Tanḥ. *Ki Tissa*, 19). According to another version, the Egyptian magicians made the calf move as if it were alive (Song R. 1:9, no. 3). Aaron then postponed the celebration to the next day again to gain time. Since God knew that Aaron was motivated by good intentions the high priesthood was not withheld from him (Lev. R. 10:3; Ex. R. 37:2). Nevertheless, he still was severely punished in that the subsequent death of two of his sons was attributed to his role in this incident (Lev. R. 10:5).

The tribe of Levi (Yoma 66b) and its 12 heads (PdRE 45) did not join the worship of the calf. The remaining Israelites were severely punished. Whoever sacrificed and burned incense died by the sword; whoever embraced and kissed the calf died by the plague; and whoever rejoiced in his heart died of dropsy (Yoma 66b). "There is not a misfortune that Israel has suffered which is not partly a retribution for the sin of the calf" (Sanh. 102a). [Aaron Rothkoff]

In Christianity

During the Roman period and long after, the golden calf episode was a source of embarrassment to the Jews in their relations with the increasingly aggressive Church, which fully exploited the story in its polemics with the Synagogue. Even Josephus, who was concerned only with pagan antisemitism, was evidently afraid that the biblical account might be employed by Alexandrian antisemites to lend credence to their allegation that the Jews worshiped an ass's head in the Temple (cf. Apion 2:80, 114, 120; Tacitus, *Historiae* 5:4). Josephus accordingly omits the entire golden calf episode from his account of the Israelite migrations in the desert. Instead, he graphically depicts the deep anxiety of the Israelites concerning Moses and their joy when at last he came down from Mount Sinai (Ant. 3:95–99). Not only did Moses not break the tablets, but he actually displayed them to the rejoicing people (3:101–2). Josephus also omits any reference to Aaron, and the same is true of Philo who does not, however, completely suppress the golden calf narrative (Mos. 2:161–74, 271).

As early as the immediate post-crucifixion era, Stephen, the first Christian martyr, sharply denounced the Jews (but not Aaron who was held in veneration by the Church) for having made the golden calf, which became the fountain-head of Jewish crimes throughout their history, culminating in the crucifixion of Jesus (Acts 7:41–52). For the Church the golden calf episode served as proof that the divine covenant with Israel had never been consummated, so that the Jewish claim to a special relationship with the Almighty was unacceptable (see Smolar in *bibl.*, p. 91). By worshiping the golden calf, the Jews had revealed their foolish, stubborn, unrepentant, and immoral character (*ibid.*, 100). Augustine also associated the calf cult with the worship of the devil, and the Jews who had drunk the water into which the powder of the golden calf had been cast with the body of the devil (*ibid.*, 100–1). The medieval identification of the Jew with the devil was no doubt influenced by this extreme patristic interpretation (*ibid.*, 101, n. 12).

While the rabbinic reaction to such violent attacks by the Church was bound to be militant, as has been seen, some of the criticism was frankly accepted, and the seriousness of the offense was by no means played down: Israel was compared to "a shameless bride who plays the harlot within her bridal canopy" (Shab. 88b). [Moses Aberbach]

Source: *Encyclopaedia Judaica*.

