

Pastor Jeremy M. Thomas
Fredericksburg Bible Church
107 East Austin
Fredericksburg, Texas 78624
830-997-8834 jthomas@fbgbible.org

C0713 – April 4, 2007 – Ex 32:1-14 – The Golden Calf Incident

B. The Nations Idolatry at the Foot of Mt Sinai (32:1-35)

1. The Making of the Golden Calf (32:1-6)

Exodus 32:1-6 Now when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people assembled about Aaron and said to him, “Come, make us a god who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” ²Aaron said to them, “Tear off the gold rings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring *them* to me.” ³Then all the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears and brought *them* to Aaron. ⁴He took *this* from their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool and made it into a molten calf; and they said, “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.” ⁵Now when Aaron saw *this*, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made a proclamation and said, “Tomorrow *shall be* a feast to the LORD.” ⁶So the next day they rose early and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play.

Verse 1, **Now when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain.** The impatience of the people is apparent. Moses was only on Mt Sinai for forty days and forty nights (Exod 24:18). Their impatience led them to quickly break the covenant they had promised to keep saying, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do!” (Exod 19:8). The whole nation had heard the Lord utter the first commandment recorded in Exodus

20:3-6. Not everyone agrees on the divisions of the Ten Commandments. I take verses 3-6 to be the first commandment. The commandment forbids idolatry. Idolatry can take two forms: *monotheistic nature identification* and *polytheistic nature identification*. Polytheistic nature identification teaches that there are many gods each identified with some aspect(s) of nature. Monotheistic nature identification teaches that there is one god identified with nature. The question is, "Which aspect of the first commandment did the Israelites break?" Were they saying the calf represented many gods or the calf represented the one true God, YHWH? Several observations indicate the latter. They were identifying the worshipping of the one true God, YHWH with the calf. They were saying the calf represented YHWH. How do we know this? *First*, in verse 1b the people say **Come make us a god** but the Hebrew word for **god** here is *elohim* which is a plural. It could be translated **Come make us gods** which would lead us to think they were polytheistic. However, *elohim* can be translated either as **god** or **gods** depending on the context. For example, Gen 1:1 "In the beginning God created the heavens and earth" uses the plural *elohim* but it is rightly translated in the singular. Here it should also be singular because of other observations. *Second*, in verse 5 it says Aaron **built an altar before it** singular and he said **Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord** and the Hebrew is YHWH. *Third*, YHWH confirms this interpretation in verse 8 when He says, **They have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it and have sacrificed to it** both singular and this **calf** is identified as the **god** who took them up from Egypt. *Fourth*, in Nehemiah 9:8 this passage is quoted and the singular verb is used, "This is your God who brought you out of Egypt". So, what we have is identification of YHWH with a **calf**. This is monotheistic nature identification. YHWH's response demonstrates that this is a frightening sin. YHWH can never be identified with some aspect of nature. YHWH is the creator of nature and can never be identified with it. The Bible throughout makes a strict distinction between the Creator and His creation. God is the creator and nature is His creation, never shall the twain meet. YHWH deliberately never showed up in a form so no form could be made to represent him. He had demonstrated during the ten plagues He was the Lord of nature and not like the Egyptian nature-gods.

Why did they want Aaron to make this god and not Moses? Verse 1 says **as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.**" This is a natural explanation.

They had watched as Moses ascended into a devouring fire atop the mountain. After he did not come out they assumed the fire devoured him. **Moses** had gone before them out of the land of Egypt. In his absence they look for something else to go before them, preferably a **god**.

PRINCIPLE: Redeemed man still has a sin nature and that sin nature is alive and well. These people have seen more than a dozen miracles (the ten plagues, parting of the Red Sea, provision of water, manna, quail, pillar of fire and cloud), they have been redeemed, they have verbally heard the voice of God on Mt Sinai, they said “all the Lord has said we will do” and not even forty days later they are fully embracing idolatry! To see such demonstrations of the power of God just a few days before and to depart from Him into wickedness just goes to show how quickly any one of us could depart from Christianity. If you think “I will never fall away” you better think again! In the course of a few weeks any of us might depart from the faith!

In verses 2-6 Aaron complies. The leader becomes a follower. He was second in command along with Hur. This shows us that leaders are fallen too. Leaders have sin natures and leaders can depart from the faith. It also raises many questions. For example, “Where is Hur?” Moses put Aaron and Hur over the people during his absence (Exod 24:14). “Why didn’t Hur stand up and stop this nonsense?” “Why did Aaron comply?” Pressure from the people.

Now what did Aaron say in verse 2, “**Tear off the gold rings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.**” ³**Then all the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears and brought them to Aaron.** ⁴**He took this from their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool and made it into a molten calf; and they said, “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.”** It is from these verses that Seventh Day Adventists say wearing jewelry is idolatrous. Of course, that’s not the point. The point is that they made a **calf** out of the gold and then identified that calf as YHWH who brought them **up from the land of Egypt**. What was this **calf**? It was “an idolatrous image of a young bull, probably made of wood and overlaid with gold,”ⁱ



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Why did the Israelites choose to fashion a **calf**? Because YHWH had demonstrated characteristics similar to the **calf**. Many scholars think the **calf** is the Apis bull of Memphis, Egypt. In Egypt the Apis bull was attributed with two primary characteristics; fertility and strength.ⁱⁱⁱ The Israelites thought the Apis bull was a good representation of YHWH. Why? *First*, YHWH was a fertility god because He had increased their numbers in Egypt despite Pharaoh's attempts to stifle the population (Exodus 1). This explains the **play** of verse 6, "orgiastic dance" which accompanied the nation's idolatry. They are continuing the pagan Egyptian celebrations. Second, YHWH was a god of strength since He had carried out the Ten Plagues and other powerful acts. "The ancients believed that the powerful bull represented the personality of the king; slate palettes dating back as far as 3100 BC even show kings as bulls. This animal was chosen because it symbolized the king's courageous heart, great strength, virility, and fighting spirit."^{iv} From their sinful perspective the Apis bull fit the bill. YHWH was therefore represented by the Apis bull, god of fertility and strength.

Verses 5-6 Now when Aaron saw *this*, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow *shall be* a feast to the LORD." "So the next day they rose early and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play. Some scholars think the Israelites imagined that YHWH was enthroned on the calf as He would later be enthroned above the ark between the cherubim (cf Unger, 141). Aaron is preparing for a celebration before the calf and its altar. "Egyptians celebrated the Festival of the Apis Bull, which lasted for seven days. Throngs of people gathered in Memphis to watch priests lead the sacred bull in a hallowed procession through the welcoming crowds. It was thought that any child who smelled the breath of the Apis had the ability to predict the future. In fact,

the Apis itself was often consulted as an oracle. Egyptians asked the bull a question and then offered it food: if the bull ate the food it was a good omen, but a rejection of the food was a bad omen.”^v The Festival of the Apis bull was a vital part of Egyptian life. It was so influential that Herodotus recounts an interesting story about it. In 525BC the Persian Cambyses overtook the city of Memphis but the next morning the Egyptians were celebrating rather than mourning. When asked why they were celebrating the morning after defeat the reply was that an Apis calf had been born. “The birth of an Apis calf was a time for celebration among ancient Egyptians, since this meant that a living god had been born into their midst.”^{vi} I think that when this calf was completed the Israelites celebrated with a feast and orgiastic dancing because they thought it meant a living god had been born into their midst. This explains Aaron’s lie about how the calf came to be in verse 24. The calf just came out of the fire! What we have here is full-scale pagan worship of YHWH. This is an abomination. On the mount Moses was receiving detailed plans on how to worship and approach a holy God. At the base of the mount the people had reduced YHWH to a golden calf and were celebrating with feasting and orgiastic dancing. The comparison between God’s prescribed worship in the Tabernacle and the peoples worship of the Calf form a startling contrast and explanation for God’s terrifying response.

PRINCIPLE: Pagan worship practices cannot be adopted so they bring glory to God. You can bring worldly pagan worship into the Church to worship but it will not be accepted by Him. It will be an abomination to Him. Most Christians think God will accept their worship as long as they are sincere. But that is wrong. God accepts our worship when and only when it conforms to His revealed plan for worship.

2. YHWH’s Warning of Destruction (32:7-10)

Exodus 32:7-10 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, “Go down at once, for your people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt, have corrupted *themselves*. ⁸“They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them. They have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it and have sacrificed to it and said, ‘This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!’ ” ⁹The LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, they are an

obstinate people. ¹⁰“Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation.”

Verse 7, **Go down at once**, go down from Mt Sinai because something terrible has happened. Moses doesn't know what's going on but God does, a demonstration of God's knowledge. Now notice how YHWH does not say, **Go down at once, for My people, whom I brought up from the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves** but **your people, whom you brought up**. This signifies that the covenant has been broken. The people had violated the terms of the Mosaic Covenant. They said “All the Lord has spoken we will do!” but “**They quickly turned aside from the way** God had **commanded them**. He had commanded them, “You shall have no other god before Me” but they have placed a molten calf before Him. They put a calf between themselves and YHWH as a visible representation of Him. Therefore they are **your** people Moses whom **you** brought up from the land of Egypt.

Verse 9, **The Lord said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people. this people** not My people but yours, this group of idolaters, **behold, they are an obstinate people**. The word **obstinate** is actually two Hebrew words (Heb = *oreh* & *qaseh*) and better translated “stiff-necked”. Realization is made of the fact that **this people** will need a “new heart”. God's law cannot be followed by human strength. A “new heart” was not promised in the Mosaic Covenant. The “new heart” Israel needs to do all that God commands is promised in the New Covenant.

Jeremiah 31:31-34 “Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. “They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to

the greatest of them,” declares the LORD, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

Ezekiel 37:15-28 The word of the LORD came again to me saying, “And you, son of man, take for yourself one stick and write on it, ‘For Judah and for the sons of Israel, his companions’; then take another stick and write on it, ‘For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim and all the house of Israel, his companions.’ “Then join them for yourself one to another into one stick, that they may become one in your hand. “When the sons of your people speak to you saying, ‘Will you not declare to us what you mean by these?’ say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD, “Behold, I will take the stick of Joseph, which is in the hand of Ephraim, and the tribes of Israel, his companions; and I will put them with it, with the stick of Judah, and make them one stick, and they will be one in My hand.” ’ “The sticks on which you write will be in your hand before their eyes. “Say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD, “Behold, I will take the sons of Israel from among the nations where they have gone, and I will gather them from every side and bring them into their own land; and I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king will be king for all of them; and they will no longer be two nations and no longer be divided into two kingdoms. “They will no longer defile themselves with their idols, or with their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions; but I will deliver them from all their dwelling places in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them. And they will be My people, and I will be their God. “My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd; and they will walk in My ordinances and keep My statutes and observe them. “They will live on the land that I gave to Jacob My servant, in which your fathers lived; and they will live on it, they, and their sons and their sons’ sons, forever; and David My servant will be their prince forever. “I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will place them and multiply them, and will set My sanctuary in their midst forever. “My dwelling place also will be with them; and I will be their God, and they will be My people. “And the nations

will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when My sanctuary is in their midst forever.” ’ ”

But at this point, **this people** is a “stiff-necked” people. Verse 10, “**Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation.**” Three things are vital to observe. *First*, YHWH’s words to Moses, **let Me alone**. Although the words are a command (insistent imperative) what do they imply? That if Moses intercedes for Israel YHWH will not destroy them. The words open the door for Moses’ intercession. *Second*, the warning is that YHWH will physically exterminate the people of Israel. *Third*, the proposition that YHWH will make of Moses a great nation. In his mind he must realize the magnitude and honor of such a proposition. God had only spoken these words to Abraham before.

With YHWH’s speech about Israel’s violation of the covenant, idolatry and obstinacy Moses is afforded an argument to plead with God in prayer. It is apparent from Moses’ prayer that he listened carefully to YHWH.

ⁱ Ronald F. Youngblood, F. F. Bruce, R. K. Harrison and Thomas Nelson Publishers, *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Rev. Ed. of: Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary.; Includes Index. (Nashville: T. Nelson, 1995).

ⁱⁱhttp://www.eternalegypt.org/EternalEgyptWebsiteWeb/HomeServlet?ee_website_action_key=action.display.element&story_id=&module_id=&language_id=1&element_id=62207

ⁱⁱⁱ D. R. W. Wood, *New Bible Dictionary* (InterVarsity Press, 1996, c1982, c1962), 159.

^{iv} <http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/bull.htm>

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