

6. Israel's Violation of the Covenant

After the remarkable fellowship meal on the mountain, the Lord again called Moses into His presence to receive the tablets of the covenant. There He instructed him concerning His sanctuary and the men who would stand before Him and mediate His covenant with Israel. But unknown to Moses, even while Yahweh was providing the means for communing with His chosen son, Israel was formulating a plan that would fracture the integrity of the covenant and set a precedent from which the nation would never depart.

As the days and weeks passed with Moses up on Mount Sinai, the sons of Israel became increasingly anxious. They had pled with Moses to act as their mediator and God had granted them their desire; the nation was now Yahweh's son by covenant, but the interaction of Father and son depended upon Moses' mediation. God had affirmed to Israel His commitment to lead them to the land promised to their fathers, but here they sat in a barren and hostile wilderness waiting for their leader and mediator to return. With each passing day it seemed more likely that Moses wasn't coming back and the people became increasingly fearful that they were going to die there at the foot of Sinai unless they took alternative action. That action was to seek Aaron's help in constructing an image by which they could move forward toward Canaan (Exodus 32:1).

A common assumption is that this image signified Israel's departure from Yahweh in favor of another "god." But nothing could be further from the truth (ref. 32:4-5): *Israel's intent wasn't to forsake their covenant God, but to find an alternative way to continue their interaction with Him.* It wasn't that they doubted Yahweh's commitment to their well-being; they merely recognized that His leadership and care were expressed through Moses. From the time He revealed Himself to them in Egypt, all of the Lord's interaction with them had come through this man, and now it appeared that he was dead.

- a. This dynamic provides crucial insight into the thought process that led the sons of Israel to make their request of Aaron. Their action represented a crisis of faith, but not in the way commonly assumed. It wasn't "faithless" in the sense of rejecting Yahweh for an alternative deity, but in resorting to natural human reasoning.

In the ancient world, every nation and people group had its own gods to whom it was committed and who were, in turn, committed to it. This worldview afforded people a sense of personal and national identity, power, protection, and provision. So closely were nations associated with their deities that a people's prosperity and might were regarded as proof of the power of its gods (ref. Deuteronomy 6:13-15; Joshua 2:1-11, 5:1; 1 Samuel 5:1-7; Isaiah 10:5-11; cf. Psalm 96:1-13).

Nations and individuals looked to their gods for guidance and provision and attributed their circumstances to them (in many instances they still do). But that very fact implies that they believed they were able to gain access to their deities and effectively recruit their aid. Within the context of religious societies, human success and power are indications of divine favor, and *magic* is the means for securing that favor.

As used here, the term “magic” doesn’t refer to the magician’s slight of hand or even the religious activities of occult practitioners (so-called “black” and “white” magic). Magic is the way the natural man expresses in his own innate spirituality in relation to himself and the spiritual forces he instinctively discerns: *Magic refers to the mindset, process and techniques by which men attempt to make spiritual entities and forces – however they may conceive them – accessible and useful to them.* Understood in this way, it’s clear that magic is a universal human phenomenon. More importantly, **it testifies to the creational reality of sacred space and the fact of its destruction because of estrangement.**

- 1) Israel’s faithlessness consisted in its retreat from what God had revealed to them to once again trust in their former, natural way of thinking and living. Like all of fallen humanity, they recognized the inherent distance between deity and humanity, but, like other men, they were now seeking to bridge that distance in the way humans naturally do within the context of their estrangement: by means of tangible symbols and sacraments.

*The essence of sin is **unbelief** resulting from autonomy and estrangement, and these two defining human conditions find their most significant convergence in **religion** as men attempt to make the divine present and amenable to them through personal acts of manipulation.*

Though this manipulation has a myriad of expressions and is often very subtle and difficult to detect, it nonetheless lies at the heart of all religious form and practice (even much of what passes for Christianity).

- 2) As it explains Israel’s action, so the dynamic of magic also illumines God’s prohibition regarding the making of images (20:4-6). Christians widely debate the meaning of this commandment, and out of concern to obey it many refuse to even look at a painting that portrays Jesus. One common view is that, because God is transcendent and uncreated, it amounts to blasphemy to represent Him in the form of any created thing. This can certainly be inferred from the biblical text (ref. esp. 20:4), but there is a more profound reason for His forbidding images.

The issue isn’t the formation or viewing of a religious image or even the expression of the Creator in the form of a created thing (which is precisely what occurred in the incarnation). The matter of concern is the *purpose* – unconscious or otherwise – that lies behind such representations. Men form likenesses of divine entities in order to invoke and manipulate them – make them present, accessible, and amenable. This is true of all religion, regardless of the particular rituals and symbols associated with them.

Thus the second commandment is effectively God’s prohibition against the continuation among His people of natural human religious conceptions and practice.

Geerhardus Vos well summarized this episode and its significance:

“We must set aside this whole modern way of thinking about the matter [that is, the notion that the wrongfulness of images resides merely in the use of tangible objects to represent deity], and endeavour to reproduce for ourselves the feelings with which the ancient idolatrous mind regarded and employed the image it possessed of its god...While not easily described in its true inwardness, we may perhaps define it by subsumption under the category of magic. Magic is that paganistic reversal of the process of religion, in which man, instead of letting himself be used by God for the divine purpose, drags down his god to the level of a tool, which he uses for his own selfish purpose...Because it lacks the element of objective divine self-communication from above, it must needs create for itself material means of compulsion that will bring the deity to do its bidding.”
(Biblical Theology)

Yahweh is the true Creator God and not an imagined pseudo-god. He is therefore to be worshipped and served as such rather than treated like the false gods invented by men within the framework of their self-obsessed estrangement – deities conceived in the human mind and made accessible for the purpose of manipulation and exploitation.

Israel’s action at the foot of Sinai signified its retreat back to the natural human practice of magic. They were camped in the middle of the Sinai wilderness and couldn’t survive without God’s supernatural care and provision. Moreover, they needed Him to lead them forward into Canaan. But Moses was their point of contact and interaction with God and it seemed increasingly clear that he wasn’t coming back. Therefore, they needed an alternative way to make Yahweh present and responsive to their situation. If they could “materialize” Him in the form of an image, they could, through ritual manipulation of this representative symbol, invoke His continued care and leadership.

- b. Ironically, even while God was assigning Aaron to minister as His priest on behalf of His covenant son, Aaron was himself being petitioned by the people to assume the priestly role, but as Israel’s false priest – as the minister of their idolatry. Before he ever knew of his holy calling Aaron had already defiled it by serving as *Israel’s* priest rather than *Yahweh’s*. Yielding to their pleas, Aaron collected their gold jewelry and cast for them a golden calf. Then, to facilitate their appeal to Yahweh through this image, he constructed an altar before it and proclaimed the following day a feast *to the Lord* (32:2-6).
- c. God’s response to the nation’s idolatry was to inform Moses of what was transpiring and order him back down the mountain with the two stone tablets containing the Ten Words. Israel had violated the covenant and their oath regarding it, and the Lord declared His just intention to destroy the nation and raise up a new people through Moses himself (32:7-11).

- 1) On the one hand, this declaration demonstrated God's unaltered commitment to His covenant with Abraham: Despite Israel's sin, He would keep His promise to make Abraham a great nation, but He would do so through Moses alone. The line of covenant descent would still be traced through Abraham, but only through Jacob's one son Levi.
 - 2) This narrowing of the covenant to Moses, however, would have a huge impact on the outworking of the Abrahamic Covenant in that it would effectively negate all that had transpired from Jacob forward. Forming a new nation through Moses would eliminate the twelve tribes of Israel as Abraham's seed and make Moses a new Jacob – a new *Israel* as patriarch of the replacement covenant nation.
- d. Given what God's announcement entailed, Moses' reaction to it is remarkable.
- 1) Here God was affording him the incredible privilege of becoming the fountainhead of a new covenant people. He would assume the enviable place of the patriarch Israel and see God's promise to Abraham realized through himself. Beyond that, the sons of Israel had willfully and egregiously violated the covenant and they fully deserved to be destroyed.
 - 2) But Moses, keenly aware of his role as Israel's mediator, responded to the Lord's pronouncement by fervently imploring Him to turn away from this course of action (vv. 11). At the same time, it is important to note that it was not the destruction of the sons of Israel as such that caused his angst; Yahweh was the sole object of his concern. He called upon God to reconsider on the basis of how this decision would impact His own integrity and credibility among men (vv. 12-13).
- In sharp contrast to his brother Aaron – whose mediation for Israel amounted to a self-serving deference born out of a natural frame of mind, Moses interceded for the people as a true mediator: one whose mindset was determined by a jealousy for God and an understanding of the larger role and significance of the covenant.
- In the person of Moses the Scripture reveals what sort of man is suited to stand before God and intercede on behalf of a sinful people.
 - And given that Moses' typological function in salvation history focuses on his role as covenant mediator and intercessor, this revelation is profoundly important (cf. again 20:18-21 with Deuteronomy 18:13-19).
- e. The result of Moses' pleading was that the Lord relented and agreed to turn from His declared intention to destroy the covenant nation (32:14). The NAS renders this verb as Yahweh "changing His mind," and the Bible's assignment of such an action to God has been a source of much doctrinal and practical controversy regarding the matter of divine sovereignty.

- 1) First of all, this passage and others like it are used to biblically support the common notion that “prayer changes things.” The underlying idea is that people have a say in God’s decisions and actions, whether in the extreme sense that outcomes are ultimately determined by the fervency of “prayer warriors,” or in the more benign sense that prayer exerts a very real influence on God’s thinking and the way He responds in a given situation.
- 2) For obvious reasons, such contexts are also paraded by Arminian Christians who reject the concept of absolute predestination in God’s interactions with His creation, as well as by open theists who deny that the future is in any sense predetermined.
- 3) On the other hand, recognizing the apparent implications to their doctrine of divine sovereignty, many Calvinists feel compelled to try to show that God’s “changing His mind” means nothing of the sort, but is merely an anthropomorphic expression that accommodates human limitations.

But despite the diversity of their perspectives and concerns, such apologists tend to fall prey to the same fundamental error: failing to listen to the text itself and attempting instead to use it to vindicate a set of preexisting doctrinal beliefs. Coming to the text with predetermined answers, the reader is naturally (and unconsciously) inclined to ask questions of it that lead back to those answers.

But keeping this passage within the larger biblical storyline makes it readily evident that it isn’t a proof-text for divine sovereignty or the theology of prayer; it is concerned with answering the question of how God’s covenant relationship with Abraham’s offspring will be preserved in the context of their unfaithfulness to the covenant. **And proceeding upon that contextual foundation, it interacts with the more comprehensive principle of sacred space as mediated distance.** Richard Lints’ observations are helpful:

*“The meaning of a text like Exodus 32 is intimately wrapped up with the epochal significance of Moses as a mediator of the covenant and the canonical significance of his action as a foreshadowing of Christ, the final mediator of the covenant with God’s people. The epochal and canonical horizons [reflecting where a text is situated within salvation history and the terminus of salvation history in Christ] help to determine which questions are important to the passage and which are not. Failure to pay attention to the epochal and canonical horizons might lead the modern reader into the mistake of reading the passage too narrowly – for instance, focusing on the question of whether prayer can change God’s mind. This is **not** the fundamental question of the text. The question that the epochal and the canonical horizon want to ask of the passage is who might be an acceptable mediator between God (who is faithful) and the Israelites (who are unfaithful). This is the thread that links this particular passage to the rest of the Scriptures, and we must not lose sight of that as we attempt to build a biblical theological framework. (The Fabric of Theology, emphasis author’s)*