

REBELLION AT MT. SINAI

THE SABBATH: SIGN OF THE COVENANT

EXODUS 31:12-18; 32:1

The next section reiterates the command to observe the Sabbath. We discussed this to some degree during the exposition of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:8-11. The primary importance of these verses was the establishment of the Sabbath as the sign of the Mosaic Covenant. That is new revelation concerning this covenant. Just as the sign of the Noahic Covenant was the rainbow and the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant was circumcision, the sign of the Mosaic Covenant was the Sabbath.

Exodus 31:12–13, 17 ¹²The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ¹³“But as for you, speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘You shall surely observe My sabbaths [שַׁבָּת]; for *this* is a sign [אוֹת] between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the LORD who sanctifies you.... ¹⁷“It is a sign [אוֹת] between Me and the sons of Israel forever; for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, but on the seventh day He ceased *from labor*, and was refreshed.”

Observing the seventh day of the week as a day of rest in order to rest and recuperate from the week’s labor was part of God’s plan that set Israel apart from the other nations. I couldn’t find any record of Sabbath keeping prior to the Mosaic Law and it seems to be a particularly Jewish practice instituted by God. The first revelation of the Sabbath was in the wilderness when God commanded the Jews to gather enough manna the day before the Sabbath to last for two days (Ex. 16:22-30). The first identification of the seventh day as a Sabbath was in Exodus 16:23 when God specified that day as a “a sabbath ob-

servance, a holy sabbath to the Lord” in connection with gathering manna. In Exodus 16:29, the first mention of the day being given to the Jews was revealed, “the Lord has given you the Sabbath” which seems to negate any idea the Jews observed the Sabbath prior to that time. It was codified in the Mosaic Law in Exodus 20:8-11.

During the days of the Roman Empire, Sunday worship of the sun god took place, but that is not the Sabbath. If only the Jews observed the Sabbath, then that is a very distinctive feature of their society in contrast to other people groups, nations, and religions.

If the Sabbath was a day no one practiced but the Jews, and that seems to be correct, then it was another way, in addition to their dietary laws and circumcision, that set them apart from all the other nations. The most obvious fact of Judaism that set them apart was monotheism, but they weren't very good at observing that until they returned from the Babylonian captivity.

Some people claim observing the Sabbath was a Babylonian practice the Jews adopted, but Unger refuted that idea.

Unger wrote, “The assertion that the Sabbath rest was a Babylonian as well as a Hebrew institution and the inference that the Hebrews may have borrowed the idea from the Babylonians requires some ingenuity to demonstrate. By way of answer the following should be noted: (1) The Babylonians paid special attention to the nineteenth day as well as those that were multiples of seven; they called only the fifteenth day *shabatum*. (2) The Babylonian tablets call

the seventh day 'an evil day' or 'an unlucky day,' whereas Scripture describes it as 'a holy day.' (3) The Babylonians placed prohibitions only on the 'king,' 'seer,' and 'the physician,' whereas the OT makes the Sabbath binding on all. (4) There was no cessation of business activity on Babylonian special days. (5) Though Babylonians had special regard for days that were multiples of seven, those days rarely ever fell on the seventh day of the week in their lunar calendar and thus were not equivalent to the Hebrew Sabbath."¹

The word Sabbath, שַׁבָּת, does not only refer to the seventh day of the week. God instituted other Sabbath days to mark special observances and a Sabbath year every seventh year. The Day of Atonement was twice called a Sabbath of Sabbaths. In Leviticus 16:31, שַׁבְּתוֹן שַׁבָּת is translated a "sabbath of solemn rest," and in Leviticus 23:32 the same words are translated a "sabbath of complete rest."

The Lord did connect the Jewish Sabbath observance with His rest on the seventh day of the creation week.

Genesis 2:1–3 ¹Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their hosts. ²By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done, and He rested [שַׁבָּת] on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. ³Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested [שַׁבָּת] from all His work which God had created and made.

In these verses, the word "rested" is שַׁבָּת and it is used as a verb which means it is not identifying a specific day as a Sabbath day. It is simply saying

¹ Merrill F. Unger, s.v. "sabbath," in *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, rev. ed., ed. R. K. Harrison (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 1095.

God finished His work in six days and rested on this the seventh day and that was probably meant to be an example to Adam and his descendants. The Sabbath as practiced by the Jews is not identified in these verses; there is no command to observe a Sabbath day here. However, God did bless and sanctify this day which did elevate it and attach significance to it above the other six days. This highlights in advance the significance God attached to the day in connection with His people when He did make it a mandatory observance, but He didn't do that in Genesis 2:1-3.

It has been noted several times, the Sabbath day was a day of rest from labor; it was not set apart to be a day of worship. The only act performed on the weekly Sabbath that was different from the other six days was the offering of two rams at the morning and the evening sacrifices instead of one ram at each. This was done by the priests and required no special observance or activity on the part of the Israeli citizen. People could and did attend these morning and evening services, but it wasn't mandatory they do so.

One of the problems with the Sabbath was the imposition a legalistic observance onto the day to the extent the Sabbath became an immense burden on the people rather than a simple day of rest. Jesus said the Sabbath was instituted for man's benefit; it was not meant to be a burden. The desire to appear godly led to the disregard of the basic needs of people on that day. Whether or not they actually were godly is another issue altogether.

Mark 2:27–28 ²⁷Jesus said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸“So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”

The Sabbath was connected not only to the seventh day of creation, but it was connected to the slavery the Israelites experienced in Egypt. One can only presume the Israelites were worked seven days a week while in bondage.

Deuteronomy 5:12–15 ¹²Observe the sabbath day to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. ¹³Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁴but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; *in it* you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant or your ox or your donkey or any of your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you, so that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. ¹⁵You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to observe the sabbath day.

What does it mean when the Scriptures says the Sabbath was a sign between Yahweh and the Israelites? Sign, אֵימָה, has a wide range of meanings including a sign, mark, token, ensign, standard, proof, warning, or miracle. It refers to a non-verbal symbol or signal which has meaning either as a crafted or as a natural object. Its purpose is to transmit information. The rainbow was a sign between God and all living things on earth. Circumcision was a sign identifying those who belonged to the covenant community. The Sabbath was a sign between God and the Israelites that they would know He was Yahweh, the One who sanctified them, or set them apart, from all other people groups and nations.

Two other additional elements of new revelation were the commands to observe the Sabbath in perpetuity and the imposition of the death penalty for violating the prohibition of working on the Sabbath.

Exodus 31:14–15 ¹⁴Therefore you are to observe the sabbath, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does any work on it, that person shall be cut off [כָּרַת] from among his people. ¹⁵For six days work may be done, but on the seventh day there is a sabbath of complete rest [שַׁבַּת שְׁבִיחוֹן], holy to the LORD; whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall surely be put to death.

Cut off, כָּרַת, means to cut off or cut down. It refers to severing an object from its source or cut into parts implying a violent action. It can variously mean to be removed, ostracized, or destroyed. This concept has been discussed at least a couple of times to this point in our discussion of the book. We've debated whether or not this refers to banishment from the covenant community or to death. At least in this context, it is directly related to the death penalty.

The word was also used in connection with death and the flood when God said "...all flesh shall never again be cut off by the water of the flood..." (Gen. 9:11). It was used in Exodus 9:15 when God spoke through Moses and told Pharaoh that God allowed Pharaoh and his people to remain in order to show His power and strength over the Egyptians. God told Pharaoh He could have struck them with pestilence and then "you would then have been cut off from the earth." This is clearly a reference to death.

In most other verses where the word is used, the meaning is ambiguous and could go either way. First, context rules; therefore, it could carry either

meaning depending on its context. In these three verses, it clearly refers to death. My interpretive preference is to pay close attention to the context which means the word “cut off” can refer to either meaning, banishment or death.

The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* takes this position. “In addition to the literal meaning of this root, ‘to cut off’ and ‘to cut down’ there is the metaphorical meaning to root out, eliminate, remove, excommunicate or destroy by a violent act of man or nature. It is sometimes difficult in a given context to know whether the person(s) who is ‘cut off’ is to be killed or only excommunicated. Verses like Gen 9:11 ... clearly refer to destruction, but Ex 12:15 appears to refer to exclusion from the community.”

The death penalty was not instituted earlier in connection with gathering manna in the wilderness and no explanation was given at that time. Now, the death penalty was imposed for violating the Sabbath. The problem then becomes one of definition: What constitutes work on the Sabbath? We know that gathering wood was a violation that resulted in the imposition of the death penalty by means of stoning.

Numbers 15:32–36 ³²Now while the sons of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering wood on the sabbath day. ³³Those who found him gathering wood brought him to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation; ³⁴and they put him in custody because it had not been declared what should be done to him. ³⁵Then the LORD said to Moses, “The man shall surely be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp.” ³⁶So all the congregation brought him outside the camp and stoned him to death with stones, just as the LORD had commanded Moses.

Over time, the problem was all the other rules the religious hierarchy imposed on the people concerning the Sabbath every one of which subjected the people to the death penalty for violating them. When Jesus and the disciples picked some grain to eat as they were walking through grainfields on the Sabbath, itself a violation of Rabbinic rules, the Pharisees challenged them. They didn't kill anyone at that time because it wasn't yet the Lord's time, but their attitude suggests they wanted to do so (Mt. 12:1-7). They were also enraged when the Lord healed people on the Sabbath (Mt. 12:8-14). In Matthew 12:8, they were so angry over this breach of rabbinic rules, they sought to "destroy Him." When it came to working on the Sabbath, it seems the line people were not supposed to cross in order to keep from violating the commandment kept moving as time progressed. When the standard keeps changing, confusion reigns and people begin to scheme to get around rules that are overly strict.

Sabbath observance was a perpetual command for the Israelites.

Exodus 31:16 ¹⁶'So the sons of Israel shall observe the sabbath, to celebrate the sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual [עוֹלָם] covenant.'

Perpetual, עוֹלָם, in its most literal meaning refers to a very long time, farthest time, distant time (past or more commonly future), or constancy. The Jews didn't think in terms of eternity, yet the word often comes very close to or implies that meaning. It carries the sense of forever, eternity, and perpetuity. It is used 439 times in the Old Testament translated by "forever" (207), "eternity" (110), and "perpetual" or "perpetuity" (30) times. It is a very common word to which

we would assign the meaning of forever or everlasting. Forever means an indeterminate and unending time going on into the future, perpetuity is the property of being perpetual or seemingly ceaseless, and eternity refers to time as a continuum of existence without beginning in the past or end in the future.

Since the Exodus, the Jews have not always observed the Sabbath just as they were not faithful to the Law in other areas. Among other issues, Nehemiah had to restore Sabbath observance when the Jews returned to Israel from Babylon. At this time during the diaspora, they have continued the observance. When the Millennial Temple is built, the Sabbath will be observed in the Kingdom.

Nehemiah 13:17–19, 22 17Then I reprimanded the nobles of Judah and said to them, “What is this evil thing you are doing, by profaning the sabbath day? 18“Did not your fathers do the same, so that our God brought on us and on this city all this trouble? Yet you are adding to the wrath on Israel by profaning the sabbath.” 19It came about that just as it grew dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and that they should not open them until after the sabbath. Then I stationed some of my servants at the gates so *that* no load would enter on the sabbath day.... 22And I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come as gatekeepers to sanctify the sabbath day....

Ezekiel 46:1, 4 1“Thus says the Lord GOD, “The gate of the inner court facing east shall be shut the six working days; but it shall be opened on the sabbath day and opened on the day of the new moon.... 4“The burnt offering which the prince shall offer to the LORD on the sabbath day shall be six lambs without blemish and a ram without blemish;

Moses received all the commands he was going to receive from God at that time. At this point in the narrative, God presented Moses with the two tablets of stone.

Exodus 31:18 ¹⁸When He had finished speaking with him upon Mount Sinai, He gave Moses the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written by the finger of God.

The tablets were written in the Hebrew of the time. It was probably some form of a pictograph alphabet. Languages evolved over time and Hebrew is no exception. The modern form of Hebrew assumed its current box-like script from the Babylonian style of script during the Babylonian captivity. From that fact, we know the tablets were not written in the form of Hebrew we see today.

All the representations we have of the tablets are certainly incorrect. We have to remember, all of this is being done in the covenant format of the time. Each party to the covenant received a copy of it; therefore, each tablet had all ten of the commandments written on it and on both sides. Later, both tablets, representing the covenant parties, Yahweh and the Israelites, would be placed together in the Ark of the Covenant in the Most Holy Place in the Tabernacle's sanctuary which was the place where God met with man.

It's reasonable to assume the "finger of God" is an anthropomorphism informing us the tablets were of divine origin. Moses didn't carve the inscriptions on them; Yahweh wrote on them. In whatever manner Yahweh accomplished that in terms of writing the words on them is not known. Whatever the method, it was supernatural in nature and that's what the expression the "finger of God" is conveying to us. In Exodus 8:19, the "finger of God" was used by Pharaoh's magicians to refer to the epidemic of gnats they could not duplicate in order to indicate the supernatural origin of that plague.

In the next three chapters, the revelation of the rebellion of Israel at Mt. Sinai took place, Moses interceded for the people so God would not destroy them, and the covenant was renewed.

Moses was on the mountain forty days and the people grew restless. It is alarming just how quickly the Israelites were willing to turn from God and embrace idolatry despite all the miraculous things they had seen over the past months. People today are no different. How many people have claimed they would believe if they could only see a supernatural act of God? Many have made that claim, but the experience of the Israelites proves that to be a boastful, dishonest claim. Faith comes by hearing and not by sight (Rom. 10:17). "This record [meaning the Exodus record of miracles], however, serves as a lesson and a warning to all who feel that miracles are the final answer to weak faith. Witnessing great and spectacular miracles may encourage one for the moment, but it does not guarantee a mature faith that will resist the temptations that lie ahead. No other people in the history of the earth received more encouragement through miracles than the people of Israel and yet their history is dotted with multiple periods of apostasy and failure."²

Idols can do absolutely nothing and the Israelites had seen miracles the likes of which the world never saw before and have not seen since, yet they quickly and willingly abandoned Yahweh at the first blush of insecurity and turned to powerless idols. This was a continual problem with them until the Baby-

² John J. Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt: Studies in Exodus*, 2nd ed. (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1986), 292.

lonian captivity. Most people believe the Babylonian experience “cured” them of their idolatry, but did it really? During the intertestamental period, Judaism evolved into rabbinic legalism. Legalism is a form of idolatry. It makes man the arbiter of what’s right and what’s wrong and makes him the authority which usurps God’s proper place in life all of which is properly considered idolatry. Today, most Jews are atheists which is also nothing more than man making himself his own god. Obviously, all human beings have the inclination to fall into these spiritual traps, but the subject here involves the Israelites and they had the advantage of an intimate relationship with the Creator God. They had a real propensity for embracing idolatry and for these Israelites who had known only paganism in Egypt and even before, the pull to bring them back was strong. Perhaps since Babylon they haven’t overtly embraced pagan gods, but they have elevated themselves into the god status of autonomy that is at the heart of paganism.

Another problem that plays into this situation is the fact that it is much easier for people to walk by sight rather than by faith. That was true then and that is true today. Moses had been with them since he arrived in Egypt to liberate them from slavery and it would have been a natural tendency for the Israelites to connect the prophet’s presence with Yahweh. We have to remember these are not spiritually mature people; they are new to all of the things they have been hearing and seeing. His absence made them nervous. They thought something happened to him up on that mountain. What we don’t know is whether or not

supernatural manifestations continued to occur on that mountain while Moses was up there as they previously occurred when He spoke to the Israelites. We do know that when Moses went up the mountain for those forty days, he went up into what appeared to be a consuming fire which was the glory of the Lord. I think its likely the fire was visible the whole time which makes the rebellion even more egregious.

Exodus 24:17–18 ¹⁷And to the eyes of the sons of Israel the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a consuming fire on the mountain top. ¹⁸Moses entered the midst of the cloud as he went up to the mountain; and Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

That suggests there was a supernatural manifestation on the mountain that continued while Moses was up there, but the text doesn't say it continued. It may have stopped once Moses got up on that mountain, but that doesn't seem likely. If the mountain continued to show the glory of the Lord, it would have been reasonable for the Israelites to assume Moses was still communing with God up there. The text also doesn't say whether or not some of the manifestations such as lightning with crashing thunder and a shaking mountain were continuing. If the mountain maintained its fiery appearance, after a time, the people may have begun to suspect Moses died on the mountain.

However, we also know the people were so frightened by these supernatural manifestations when God spoke to them, they asked Moses to be the intermediary between themselves and God so they wouldn't be exposed to those supernatural events again.

Exodus 20:18–21 ¹⁸All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw *it*, they trembled and stood at a distance. ¹⁹Then they said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die.” ²⁰Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin.” ²¹So the people stood at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God was.

We cannot discount the fact the Israelites were often described by God as stubborn, stiff necked, and rebellious. Later in their history, they were warned not to stiffen their necks like their fathers which was a reference that began with this wilderness generation (2 Kings 17:14; 2 Chron. 30:8). They were called stubborn and rebellious, an unfaithful generation (Ps. 78:8). God called them an obstinate or stiff-necked, people four times in these three chapters of Exodus.

Psalms 78:8 ⁸And not be like their fathers, A stubborn and rebellious generation, A generation that did not prepare its heart And whose spirit was not faithful to God.

When Moses recounted this incident to them just before they crossed the Jordan to possess the land, he reminded them of their stubborn, rebellious nature.

Deuteronomy 9:6, 13, 24 ⁶“Know, then, *it is* not because of your righteousness *that* the LORD your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stubborn people.... ¹³“The LORD spoke further to me, saying, ‘I have seen this people, and indeed, it is a stubborn people.... ²⁴“You have been rebellious against the LORD from the day I knew you.

We are now at the point in Exodus where the people begin their rebellion.

Exodus 32:1 ¹Now when the people saw that Moses delayed [בוֹשָׁה] to come down from the mountain, the people assembled about [עַל קֶהֱל] 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.”

Psalm 106 is a recitation of Israel's rebellious history which includes a summary of this incident.

Psalm 106:19–23 ¹⁹They made a calf in Horeb And worshiped a molten image. ²⁰Thus they exchanged their glory For the image of an ox that eats grass. ²¹They forgot God their Savior, Who had done great things in Egypt, ²²Wonders in the land of Ham And awesome things by the Red Sea. ²³Therefore He said that He would destroy them, Had not Moses His chosen one stood in the breach before Him, To turn away His wrath from destroying *them*.

The words “assembled about” in the NASB may not adequately convey the intended meaning. The Hebrew is *עָלָה קָהָל* meaning to assemble or gather combined with the preposition meaning upon, over, against, by, to, or for. The way it is worded in English makes it sound as though it is a somewhat peaceful group suggesting something to Aaron, but a more accurate rendering in this context may be “assembled against” Aaron and that is how the TANAKH translates it. One commentator noted it carried the sense of to “gang up on.”³ That particular grammatical construction is used four times by Moses in the Pentateuch and the other three times all clearly refer to opposition and hostility (Num. 16:3, 42; 20:2). The NASB translators recognized that use and translated it “assembled against” in all three of the other verses. Ezekiel 16:40 and 23:46 use *קָהָל* in a hostile sense. Ezekiel 38:7 uses this grammatical structure where the context

³ Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 529, n. 32:1.

makes it clear it is a gathering of friendly military allies and troops and, in that verse, it is appropriately translated “gathered about.”

There is an element of hostility and coercion in this assembly that isn't really made clear in our English translations. It seems very likely that Aaron felt threatened by the people and that contributed to his acquiescence to their demands to build a golden bull idol. It's easy for those of us who weren't facing the crowd to say he should have been the kind of godly man who stands up to that sort of thing, but he wasn't and he didn't. Perhaps we wouldn't have stood up to the pressure of a crowd either. Before going back up the mountain, Moses told the people they could go to Aaron and Hur in order to settle legal matters that came up (Ex. 24:14). Certainly, the elders and the people looked to him as a leader which he in fact was. As such he had a responsibility to lead the people according to the godly precepts to which he had been exposed to that point in the Exodus. That's the real issue. Whether Aaron was frightened or not, he had a position that carried with it some serious responsibility to Yahweh and he failed to live up to that responsibility. Obviously, Aaron was not faithful in that instance.

Delayed, בּוֹשׁ, means to be ashamed, to act shamefully, or to put to shame. The “Hebrew means “to come to shame’ and stresses the sense of public disgrace, [which is] a physical state.... [I]t is used idiomatically to express a long delay or cessation.... It is used to express the sense of confusion which either the waiter or the waited upon feel when a delay becomes excessively

long.”⁴ A viable interpretation in place of “delayed” would be “Moses was shamefully late.” The people were thinking Moses was rude or inconsiderate by taking so long on the mountain. That thinking reflects a somewhat low view of God, Moses, and the amazing acts God has already performed in freeing them from their captivity. This concept also somewhat negates the idea they thought he may have died on the mountain, but, on the other hand, they also said “we do not know what has become of him.”

Up to this point, there has been a learning curve for the Israelites. They have been introduced to many new things. They've been freed from slavery after seeing numerous signs, wonders, and miracles. They were miraculously delivered from death at the hands of the Egyptian Army when God parted the sea and took them to safety on the east side of the Red Sea. They were miraculously fed and their shoes and clothing were not wearing out. They have been doubtful and skeptical at times, but they haven't been overtly rebellious. They never really trusted Yahweh; their hearts were never in the right place. That's not to say that generation was composed of unbelievers because we know the people believed when they heard God was concerned about their welfare (Ex. 4:31). However, as Psalm 78:8 revealed, they were stubborn and rebellious and did not prepare their hearts neither to be faithful to God nor to remain faithful to God.

This was an extremely important episode in the history of Israel. We've already noted the comparisons made between the later Israelites and their fa-

⁴ R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, s.v. “בִּזְזָה,” *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1980), 97.

thers and the admonishments to turn from their father's faithless example. When Adam rebelled, mankind rebelled. When this generation of Israelites rebelled, their progeny followed suit. This wasn't in the same way that mankind rebelled in Adam, the Israelites were in Adam as well and already had a sin nature from Adam. The sad fact is subsequent Israelite generations have followed the example set by their fathers. Then and now it is true that a believing generation that turns away from the Word of God and lives unfaithfully, will produce an unbelieving generation that continues to live unfaithfully. Once unfaithful generations become the norm, it is extremely difficult to turn back, start over, and produce a faithful generation again. Just as that was evident with Israel, it is evident in the Christianity of Western Civilization today. Concerning Israel, that's why we speak of a believing remnant of Israelites which suggests only a few have ever been and are being faithful believers.

Theologians have noted some similarities between Adam's rebellion and the Israelite's rebellion, but I wouldn't press that comparison too far. Adam's rebellion was a macro rebellion involving all mankind; Israel's rebellion is a micro rebellion under the umbrella of Adam's rebellion by God's specifically created people. "Fretheim says of this incident, 'It is Genesis 3 all over again.' Similarly, Janzen remarks, 'It is Israel's version of the universal human turn in Genesis 2-3.' Moberly suggests that because Israel has just recently entered into a holy covenant with Yahweh at Sinai, where the people still remain, the sin of chap. 32 is

'like committing adultery on one's wedding night.'"⁵ Needless to say, this event marks a very important milestone, albeit a negative milestone, in Israel's history.

Theologians debate the meaning of the golden calf. Was this a reversion back to the idolatry they knew in Egypt and before? Were they actually worshipping the bull god? Did this god represent other pagan gods as well? Or, were they thinking this golden calf represented Yahweh in a form they could see and whose prophet had gone up onto a mountain that appeared to be on fire and had seemingly vanished? It could be either one, but my personal conviction is they were quickly reverting back to pagan idolatry in the absence of a strong leader. The actions of the Israelites after making this calf suggest pagan worship practices which causes me to think they weren't simply trying to have a visible presence of Yahweh in their camp. Instead, they reverted back to the kind of visible pagan god they had worshiped in the past. Their subsequent history reveals their propensity to worship the pagan gods which they did not consider to be visible representations of Yahweh. They abandoned Yahweh in order to worship false gods which replaced Him. This generation of Israelites set that example. Bear in mind, that's my opinion, but I think it is based on reasonable arguments.

Garrett concurred with this assessment of the meaning behind the casting of a golden calf, although he kind of tried to come down on both sides. He wrote this rebellion "demonstrates Israel's proclivity toward apostasy in the one

⁵ Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 531.

crucial area of idolatry. This episode is thus the paradigm for Israel's greatest failing, the sin that would dominate the nation until the exile.... Their desire for an idol is based in a pagan sense that the image is reassurance of a divine presence; absent the image, the people are in dread that they have no supernatural protection. It is important to see that the making of the calf, while from one perspective an act of gross apostasy and rebellion, was from another perspective an act driven by a need for reassurance and even by a misguided piety. Even so, the desire for the image expresses itself with words of contempt ('this guy Moses') and has as its outcome a full-fledged pagan rite of Dionysian revelry."⁶

We have to remember just how pervasive the image of a bull was in pagan worship at that time in that area. We discussed this at length as it was practiced in Egypt when we discussed the plagues and in Canaan, the pagan god El was referred to as a bull. The theology and the image of a bull was totally pagan; the bull was never used as a metaphor for God. I believe the Israelites knew exactly what they were requesting Aaron to cast for them.

Davis represents the other argument that this idol was used to represent Yahweh. "The process by which they were caught up in this idolatry was subtle. It is a prime example of religious syncretism, that process by which ideas from one system are mingled with those of another. These chapters do not record total abandonment of the worship of Jehovah, however. On the contrary, they il-

⁶ Duane A. Garrett, *Kregel Exegetical Library: A Commentary on Exodus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2014), 615, 618.

lustrate that subtle process by which idolatrous practices were used in the worship of the God of Israel.”⁷ I disagree. This was not subtle; it was about as subtle as an atomic bomb blast is subtle—which it isn’t. They blew up their relationship with Yahweh and returned to pagan worship. Syncretism may be very subtle and infiltrate a system over a long period of time, that isn’t what happened here. Here, idolatry showed up in a day.

⁷ John J. Davis, *Moses and the God's of Egypt: Studies in Exodus*, 2nd ed. (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1986), 291.