

EXODUS

Chapter 32

The Golden Calf

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, “Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” 2 So Aaron said to them, “Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” 3 So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. 4 And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who 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 the LORD.” 6 And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play. 7 And the LORD said to Moses, “Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. 8 They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’” 9 And the LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. 10 Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you.” 11 But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, “O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? 12 Why should the Egyptians say, ‘With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster 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 offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.’” 14 And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people. 15 Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets that were written on both sides; on the front and on the back they were written. 16 The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets. 17 When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, “There is a noise of war in the camp.” 18 But he said, “It is not the sound of shouting for victory, or the sound of the cry of defeat, but the sound of singing that I hear.” 19 And as soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses’ anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. 20 He took the calf that they had made and burned it with fire and ground it to powder and scattered it on the water and made the people of Israel drink it. 21 And Moses said to Aaron, “What did this people do to you that you have brought such a great sin upon them?” 22 And Aaron said, “Let not the anger of my lord burn hot. You know the people, that they are set on evil. 23 For they said to me, ‘Make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ 24 So I said to them, ‘Let any who have gold take it off.’ So they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf.” 25 And when Moses saw that the people had broken loose (for Aaron had let them break loose, to the derision of their enemies), 26 then Moses stood in the gate of the camp and said, “Who is on the LORD’s side? Come to me.” And all the sons of Levi gathered around him. 27 And he said to them, “Thus says the LORD God of Israel, ‘Put your sword on your side each of you, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill his brother

and his companion and his neighbor.” 28 And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And that day about three thousand men of the people fell. 29 And Moses said, “Today you have been ordained for the service of the LORD, each one at the cost of his son and of his brother, so that he might bestow a blessing upon you this day.” 30 The next day Moses said to the people, “You have sinned a great sin. And now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.” 31 So Moses returned to the LORD and said, “Alas, this people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. 32 But now, if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written.” 33 But the LORD said to Moses, “Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book. 34 But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; behold, my angel shall go before you. Nevertheless, in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them.” 35 Then the LORD sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf, the one that Aaron made.

32:1 *so long.* Forty days and forty nights. (CSB)

they. Probably the tribe and clan leaders. (CSB)

gods. The people requested multiple gods, but Aaron made just one idol (v 4). The people may have imagined that the calf carried another, invisible god. (TLSB)

Mose, the man who brought us up out the land of Egypt. A rebellious contrast to the gracious statement of Israel’s covenant Lord. (CSB)

As the Lord had gone before them in a pillar of cloud or fire, so the people wanted a visible representation of their idols to lead them. Ephraim Syrus: “They had been secretly worshiping [the idol] in their hearts. ... Moses who kept them in awe was removed from them, that the idolatry might cry aloud in their mouths, which the restraint of Moses had kept down in their hearts” (NPNF 2 13:312). (TLSB)

32:2–3 Both men and women wore earrings and donated them for the idol’s manufacture. Tertullian: “The people were about to lose, as a judgment upon themselves, the true ornaments for the ears [:] the words of God” (ANF 3:636). (TLSB)

32:2 *gold ethat are in the ears of your wives.* Probably part of the plunder brought from Egypt (see 3:21–22; 11:2–3; 12:35–36). (CSB)

32:4 *fashioned it with a graving tool.* After casting the gold into the right shape, Aaron finished it with a carving tool. The idol may have been made of wood that was overlaid with gold, allowing it later to be burned and ground up (v 20). (TLSB)

a golden calf. Either gold plating over a carved wooden calf (it was later burned, v. 20) or crudely cast in solid gold and then further shaped with a tool, later to be melted down in the fire. The calf was probably similar to representations of the Egyptian bull-god Apis (see note on Jer 46:15). Its manufacture was a flagrant violation of God’s commandment (20:4–5). (CSB)

An image of a calf or young bull; a common symbol of fertility and power in many religions. (TLSB)

they. The leaders among the people. (CSB)

These are your gods ... land of Egypt. A parody of 20:2. Centuries later, King Jeroboam would quote these words when he set up two golden calves in the northern kingdom of Israel (see 1Ki 12:28–29). (CSB)

Aaron is likely referring to the idol and Yahweh as Israel's gods, mixing truth and error. (TLSB)

32:5 *Aaron saw.* Or, "Aaron was afraid," which some believe to be the reason Aaron cooperated with the people in this false worship. (TLSB)

altar before it. Apparently Aaron recognized the idolatrous consequences of his deed and acted quickly to keep the people from turning completely away from the Lord. (CSB)

Aaron is mixing forbidden idolatry with the worship of the true God. (TLSB)

32:6 *they sat down ... rose up to play.* A pagan symbol evoked pagan religious practices. Paul quotes this sentence as a vivid example of Israel's tendency toward idolatry (see 1Co 10:7). The Hebrew verb translated "indulge in revelry" often has sexual connotations (see, e.g., "caressing," Ge 26:8). Immoral orgies frequently accompanied pagan worship in ancient times. (CSB)

peace offerings. Part of the animal was burned in sacrifice; the rest was eaten by the people. (TLSB)

to play. Implies immoral activity done for the honor of the god. See note, Gn 26:8, which describes the same term. Tertullian: "Understand the modest language of Holy Scripture: [genuine] 'play,' ... would not have [been] reprehended" (ANF 4:105). Melancthon: "When their stomachs were full and they felt at ease, they forgot all about God and became negligent and wanton" (Chem, LTh 2:668). (TLSB)

32:7, 9 *I have seen this these people.* By not calling Israel "my people" (as, e.g., in 3:10), God indicates that he is disowning them for breaking his covenant with them. (CSB)

Not "My people," as previous, because they are not acting like God's children. (TLSB)

32:7 *corrupted.* And, therefore, ripe for destruction (see v. 10; Ge 6:11–13). (CSB)

32:9 *stiff-necked.* Like unresponsive oxen or horses. (CSB)

A yoked or haltered animal might tighten its neck muscles to resist having its head turned to go a new direction. Like a farm animal that refused to be guided, Israel refused to follow God's new direction for them. (TLSB)

32:10 *wrath may burn hot.* God communicated His holy nature in terms that humans could understand. Here, He compared His reaction to human anger. (TLSB)

I may make you into a great nation. After Israel—Abraham's descendants—has been destroyed, God will transfer to Moses the pledge originally given to Abraham (see Ge 12:2). (CSB)

God promised Abraham that he would be a great nation. God could do this only through Moses, one of Abraham's descendants, and still be faithful to His promise. (TLSB)

32:11 *Moses implored.* Moses interceded for God's mercy on Israel. This shows that Moses has grown in love for Israel. Augustine: "Moses makes intercession for them.... And that he might not seem to have

acted thus from necessity rather than from love, God offered [Moses] another people.... But he did not accept it; he cleaves to the sinners, he prays for the sinners” (NPNF 1 6:387). (TLSB)

your people. Using God’s own words, Moses appeals to God’s special relationship to Israel, then to God’s need to vindicate his name in the eyes of the Egyptians (see v. 12), and finally to the great patriarchal promises (see v. 13). (CSB)

32:12 *Why should the Egyptians say.* Moses argued that God’s justified destruction of Israel might cause the nations to blaspheme God and become even more alienated from Him. (TLSB)

Turn ... relent. Though God would be just in punishing Israel, Moses cried for mercy. (TLSB)

32:13 *Israel.* Jacob (see 33:1; see also Ge 32:28). (CSB)

Moses trusted the divine promise to the patriarchs and asked for God’s mercy. (TLSB)

32:14 *the LORD relented.* Luther: “It is superfluous to enter on the subtle question here how God can repent, turn from and regret His anger, since He is unchangeable. Some people are deeply concerned about this; they complicate the matter for themselves unnecessarily” (AE 19:88–89). (TLSB)

His. Though they have sinned, God still acknowledges them as His people and not just Moses’ people (cf v 7). (TLSB)

32:15 *Testimony.* The Ten Commandments. These tablets were small enough for Moses to carry in one hand. (TLSB)

written on both sides. Tablets were often thus inscribed in ancient times. (CSB)

Detail often missing in artistic portrayals. (TLSB)

32:16 *work of God ... writing of God.* Words were cut into the stone. (TLSB)

32:17 *Joshua.* Perhaps he had accompanied Moses part of the way up the mountain (see 24:13). (CSB)

Moses’ assistant went part of the way with Moses, but Moses was alone when he spoke with God (24:15). (TLSB)

32:18–19 *singing ... dancing.* Likely reflecting practices associated with pagan worship. Cf v 6. (TLSB)

32:19 *broke them.* Thus testifying against Israel that they had broken the covenant. (CSB)

In anger, showing that Israel had broken God’s covenant. (TLSB)

32:20 *burned it ... ground it to powder.* King Jeroboam’s altar (see note on v. 4) at Bethel received the same treatment (see 2Ki 23:15). (CSB)

Moses completely destroyed the idol and made Israel drink the remains in water. This provided a strong reminder that their sin had polluted them thoroughly (cf Nu 5:24–26). Cyprian: “Why do you bow your body captive before foolish images and creations of earth? God made you upright; and while other animals are downlooking, and are depressed in posture bending towards the earth, yours is a lofty attitude; and your countenance is raised upwards to heaven, and to God” (ANF 5:462). (TLSB)

32:22–24 In his desperation, Aaron blamed the people. (CSB)

32:22 *they are set on evil.* The people wanted to sin and were bound to sin. Like Adam (Gn 3:12), Aaron tries to deflect responsibility to others without confessing his sin. (TLSB)

32:24 *out came this calf.* Aaron could hardly have thought that Moses would believe such an incredible story. (CSB)

Denying his guilt, Aaron implies that the idol was formed miraculously. (TLSB)

32:25 *Aaron had let them.* The people, out of control, had given in to their sinful passions. (CSB)

break loose. Hbr can also refer to nakedness. (TLSB)

enemies. The Egyptians and others who did not worship the true God would mock this behavior. (TLSB)

32:26 *gate.* Entrance at one end of camp. Gates commonly served as gathering places. (TLSB)

Whoever is for the LORD, come to me. See Jos 24:15; 1Ki 18:21; Mt 6:24. (CSB)

Those who had been faithful to the true God and had not participated in the idolatry. (TLSB)

all. A generalization since Dt 33:9 implies that some of the Levites were also slain. (CSB)

sons of Levi. The descendants of Levi (Ge 29:34) may have originally been regarded as priests (Dt 18:6–8). But at some stage they became subordinate to the priests who were descendants of Aaron, the brother of Moses (38:21; Nu 3:9–10; 1 Ch 16:4–6, 37–42). (CSB)

Priests would come from this tribe, as did Moses and Aaron. (TLSB)

32:27 *gate to gate.* From one end to the other. (TLSB)

killing his brother and his companion. Fellow Israelites, not just Levites. Anyone who did not come forward as being “on the LORD’s side” (v 26) was guilty of idolatry. Some of these were killed. (TLSB)

32:28 *The Levites did according to the word of Moses.* Their zeal for the Lord is later matched by Aaron’s grandson Phinehas, resulting in a perpetual covenant of the priesthood (see Nu 25:7–13). (CSB)

three thousand. Small percentage of those who had committed idolatry. The punishment was not as severe as it might have been. (TLSB)

32:29 *You have been ordained for service.* Because of their zeal for the Lord the Levites were set apart to be caretakers of the tabernacle and aides to the priests (see Nu 1:47–53; 3:5–9, 12, 41, 45; 4:2–3). (CSB)

The Levites had shown their dedication to God by placing Him above all people. (TLSB)

son ... brother. All Israelites were related. Levites showed that loyalty to God is more important than family ties. (TLSB)

bestow a blessing. The Levites (along with others) received God's blessing, first promised to Abraham (Gn 12:2–3), that they would be God's people. (TLSB)

32:30 *great sin.* All sin is serious, but this crass idolatry was a rejection of God. (TLSB)

make atonement for your sin. By making urgent intercession before God, as the mediator God had appointed between himself and Israel. No sacrifice that Israel or Moses might bring could atone for this sin. But Moses so identified himself with Israel that he made his own death the condition for God's destruction of the nation (see v. 32). Jesus Christ, the great Mediator, offered himself on the cross to make atonement for his people. (CSB)

Moses did not tell Israel how he proposed to do this, but the following verses made his intentions clear. (TLSB)

32:32 *book you have written.* Ancient kings would keep lists of their subjects—those who belonged to the king. Moses offered to be cut off from God's people or even lose his life if it might be helpful to Israel. But such an exchange is not possible. The life of one sinner is not enough to pay for another (Ps 49:7–8). Ambrose: "What reproaches Moses had to bear from his people!... With what gentle words used he to address the people, even after he was wronged! He comforted them in their labors, consoled them by his prophetic declarations of the future, and encouraged them by his works" (NPNF 2 10:48). St. Bernard of Clairvaux: "What a devoted advocate! who, because he does not seek his own interests, easily obtains everything which he seeks. What a benign chief, who, binding together his people with bonds of charity as the head is united with the members, will either save them with himself or else encounter the same danger as they!" (SLSB, p 72). (TLSB)

32:33 *Whoever has sinned ... I will blot out.* Moses' gracious offer is refused, because the person who sins is responsible for his own sin. (CSB)

A blunt reminder that sin merits death (Rm 6:23). Everyone who sinned would die, though not all died at that moment. (TLSB)

32:34 *Now go, lead the people.* Thus Moses received assurance that the Lord will continue his covenant with wayward Israel and fulfill his promise concerning the land. (CSB)

the place I spoken to you. Canaan (see 33:1). (CSB)

32:35 *they made ... Aaron made.* The people were responsible for their sin as Aaron was responsible for his. (TLSB)

Ch 32 Feeling alone in the wilderness, Israel soon doubts God's promises and turns to idolatry. Their idol is unable to help them, and they experience greater suffering. We, too, may grow impatient or doubt God's promises. In fear or doubt, we may turn to idols of our own: anything that we "fear, love, and trust" more than the true God. But these idols cannot help us. Thank God that He remembers His promises and is faithful to us, even when we are unfaithful. He sends His Son to offer atonement for our sin. He alone is able to take the sin of the world upon Himself and give us His perfect righteousness. We are God's people because of Him. • O Christ, Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, thank You for giving Yourself for me. Forgive my sins, and strengthen me to believe in You and love You. Amen.(LSB)