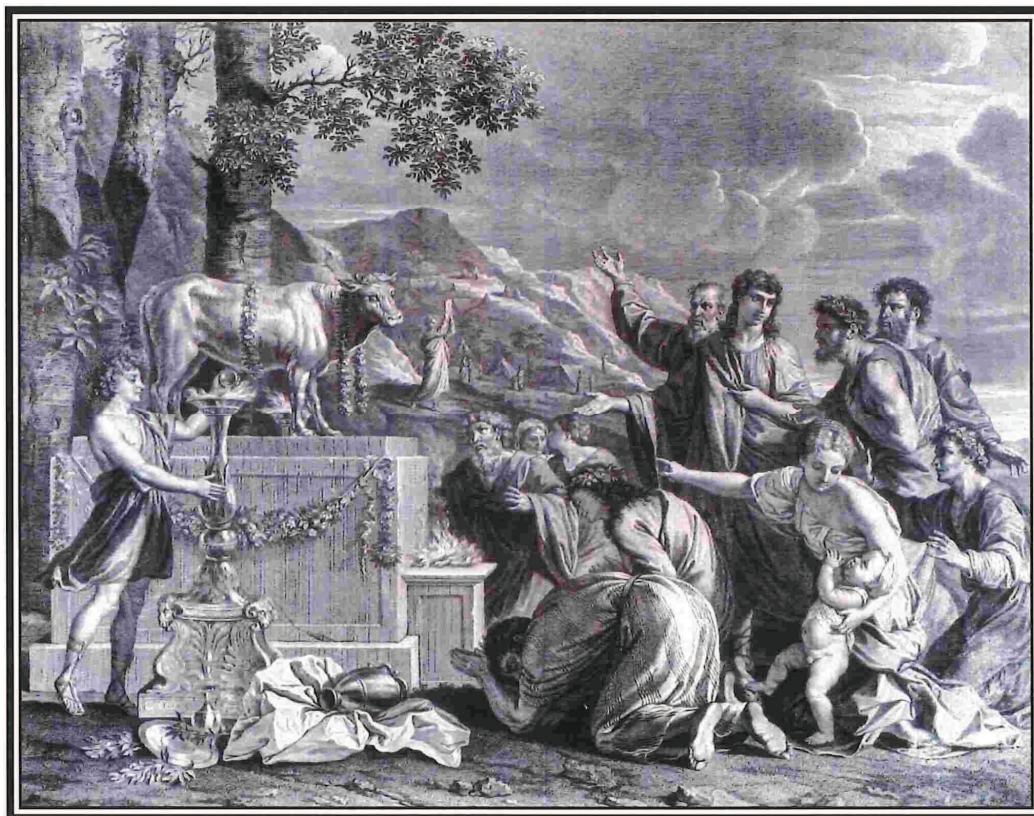


“Aaron Leading the Children of Israel In the Worship of the Golden Calf” by Tissot

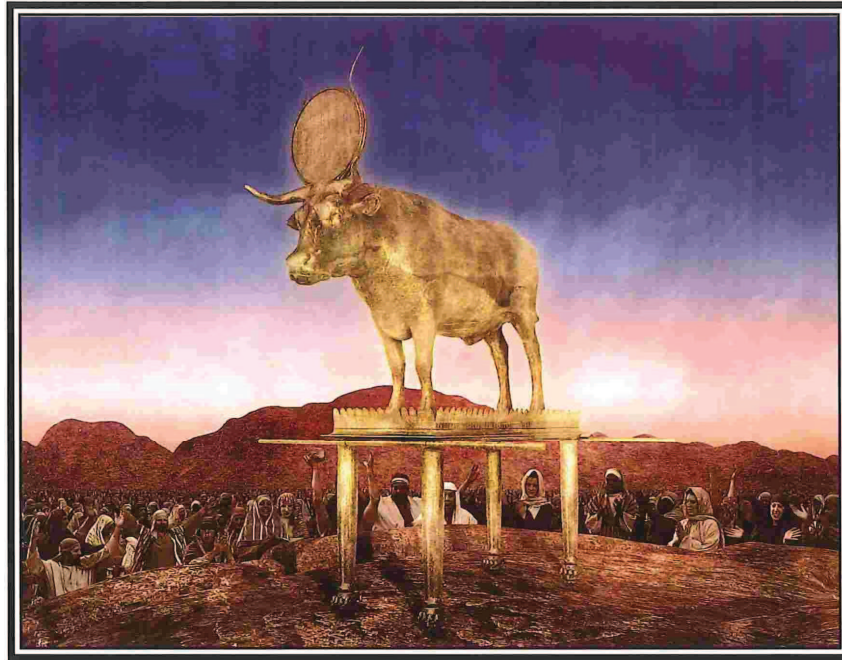
Exodus Chapter 32

(1) When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron, “Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.” (2) Aaron answered them, “Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.” (3) So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. (4) He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.” (5) When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, “Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord.” (6) So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterwards, they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry. (7) Then the Lord said to Moses, “Go down because your people whom you brought up out of Egypt have become corrupt. (8) They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it, and sacrificed to it and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.’” (9) “I have seen these people,” the Lord said to Moses, “and they are a stiff-necked people. (10) Leave Me alone so that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. And then I will make you into a great nation.” (11) But Moses sought the favor of the Lord his God. “O Lord,” he said, “why should Your anger burn against Your people whom You brought up out of Egypt with

great power and a mighty hand? (12) Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth?’ Turn from Your fierce anger. Relent, and do not bring disaster on Your people.’ (13) Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, to whom You swore by Your own self; ‘I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.’” (14) Then the Lord relented and He did not bring upon His people the disaster He had threatened. (15) Moses turned and went down the mountain with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands. They were inscribed on both sides, front and back. (16) The tablets were the work of God. The writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets. (17) When Joshua heard the noise of the people shouting, he said to Moses, “There is the sound of war in the camp!” (18) Moses replied, “It is not the sound of victory, it is not the sound of defeat; it is the sound of singing that I hear.” (19) When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain. (20) And he took the calf they had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it. (21) He said to Aaron, “What did these people do to you that you led them into such great sin?” (22) “Do not be angry, my lord,” Aaron answered. “You know how prone these people are to evil. (23) They said to me, ‘Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.’



“The Golden Calf” – 19th Century Bible Engraving



“The Golden Calf” By Larson

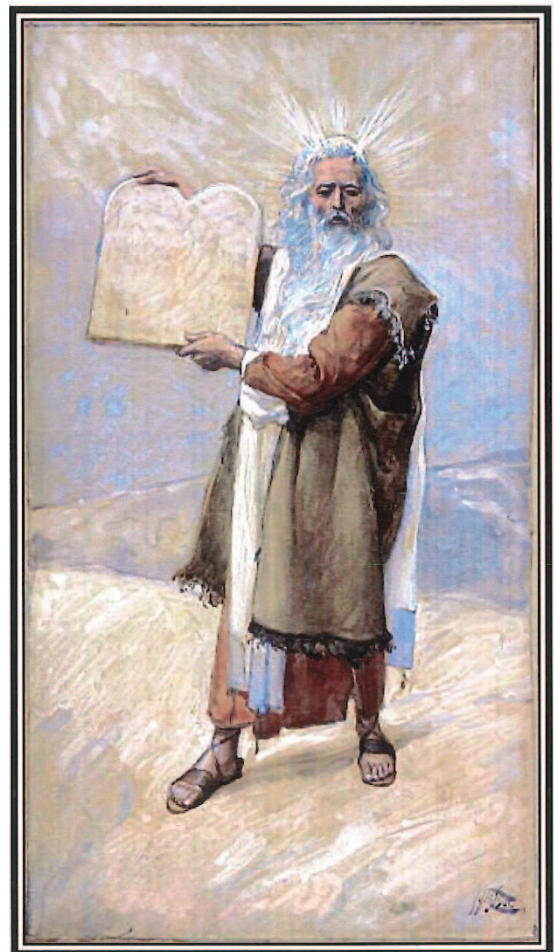
(24) So I told them, ‘Whoever has any gold jewelry, take it off.’ Then they gave me the gold and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf.” (25) Moses saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so became a laughingstock to their enemies. (26) So he stood at the entrance to the camp and said, “Whoever is for the Lord, come to me.” And all the Levites rallied to him. (27) Then he said to them, “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel says, ‘Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbor.’” (28) The Levites did as Moses commanded and that day about three thousand of the people died. (29) Then Moses said, “You have been set apart to the Lord today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and He has blessed you this day.” (30) The next day Moses said to the people, “You have committed a great sin, but now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.” (31) So Moses went back to the Lord and said, “Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. (32) But now, please forgive their sin - but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.” (33) The Lord replied to Moses, “Whoever has sinned against Me I will blot out of My book. Now go, lead the people to the place I spoke of, and My angel will go before you. However, when the time comes for Me to punish, I will punish them for their sin. (35) And the Lord struck the people with a plague because of what they did with the calf Aaron had made.

“When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain...” – The narrative of the Tabernacle and the establishment of the covenant based upon the Ten Commandments and the balance of the law presented to Moses upon Mount Sinai is abruptly and catastrophically interrupted in Chapters 32 - 34 by the episode of the Golden Calf and its aftermath. These sad events place the loving faithfulness of God in stark contrast to the ingratitude and disobedience of the Children of Israel. The insertion of this

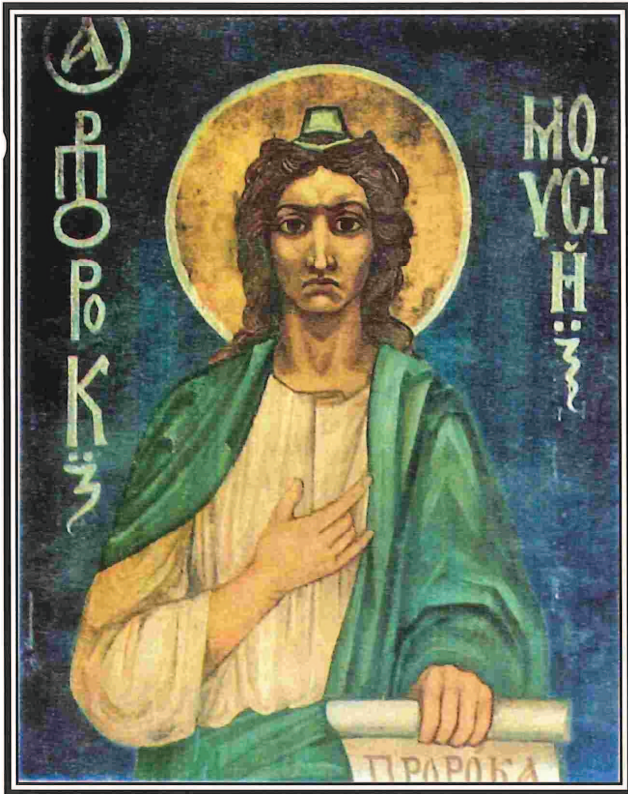
sad story here, between the design instructions for the Tabernacle and the report of the implementation of those instructions serves to emphasize the ominous implications of this apostasy. If the great majority of the people had not come to recognize their sin and turn away from that sin in genuine contrition and repentance, God's gracious intent to dwell among His people within the Tabernacle would not have been possible. Thus, in effect, the structure of the text indicates that the people's flagrant disobedience and denial of God had placed the entire covenant in jeopardy, even before it had been fully implemented. This crisis had to be resolved - either by the elimination of Israel and their replacement by the descendants of Moses (32:10); by God's abandonment of the people, leaving them to wander in the wilderness and/or attempt to seize Canaan on their own; or, by reconciliation as God extended His mercy to repentant sinners. In any case, this was a dire situation which threatened the very survival of the nation.

The precipitating factor for this crisis is Moses' prolonged sojourn upon the crest of Sinai, still shrouded in swirling black clouds and ablaze with the fire of heaven. There is no indication that in his previous trips to the mountain top he had ever stayed longer than a single day, returning before nightfall. In this instance, when the Lord had summoned Moses into His presence no indication of the duration of that encounter had been given. ***"The Lord said to Moses, 'Come up to Me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone with the law and commands I have written for their instruction.'*** (Exodus 34:12)

Accordingly, Moses' instructions to the tribal elders made no reference to the duration of his sojourn with the Lord. He simply informed them that Aaron and Hur would be in charge, and could resolve disputes among them during his absence: ***"He said to the elders, 'Wait here for us until we come back to you. Aaron and Hur are with you. Anyone involved in a dispute can go to them. When Moses went up the mountain, the cloud covered it and the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai.'*** (Exodus 24:14 - 15) The subsequent summary statement of the text - ***"Then Moses entered the cloud as he went up the mountain. And he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights."*** (Exodus 24:18) - was written after the fact. It is obvious, given the events which followed, that Israel never expected their leader to be gone for over a month. At the same time, the people's encounter with the glory of God upon the mountain had been a terrifying experience which they had no desire to repeat:



"Moses With the Two Tablets" by Tissot



“The Prophet Moses” by Vrubel

“When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses: ‘Speak to us yourself, and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.’” (Exodus 20:18 - 19) Exodus 24, in which Moses ascent to the Lord is described, specifically notes the fearsome appearance of Sinai and its impression upon the people: *“For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day, the Lord called to Moses from within the cloud. To the Israelites, the glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain.”* (Exodus 24: 16 - 17)

“When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain” -

The decisive leadership of Moses, whose leadership had been repeatedly affirmed by the miraculous endorsement of God, had been the single most decisive factor in keeping Israel on the right track up to this moment. Even when Moses had been present complaints and unhappiness had been a consistent theme. At the Red Sea their bitter accusation was that he had led them out into the desert to die:

“They said to Moses, ‘Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us out into the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, ‘Let us alone. Let us serve the Egyptians?’ It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!’ (Exodus 1 :11 - 12)

At the bitter waters of Marah they grumbled and complained that Moses had led them out into the desert to die of thirst (Exodus 15:23). Later when they were hungry at Elim, before the Lord sent down manna they lamented that Moses was starving them to death:

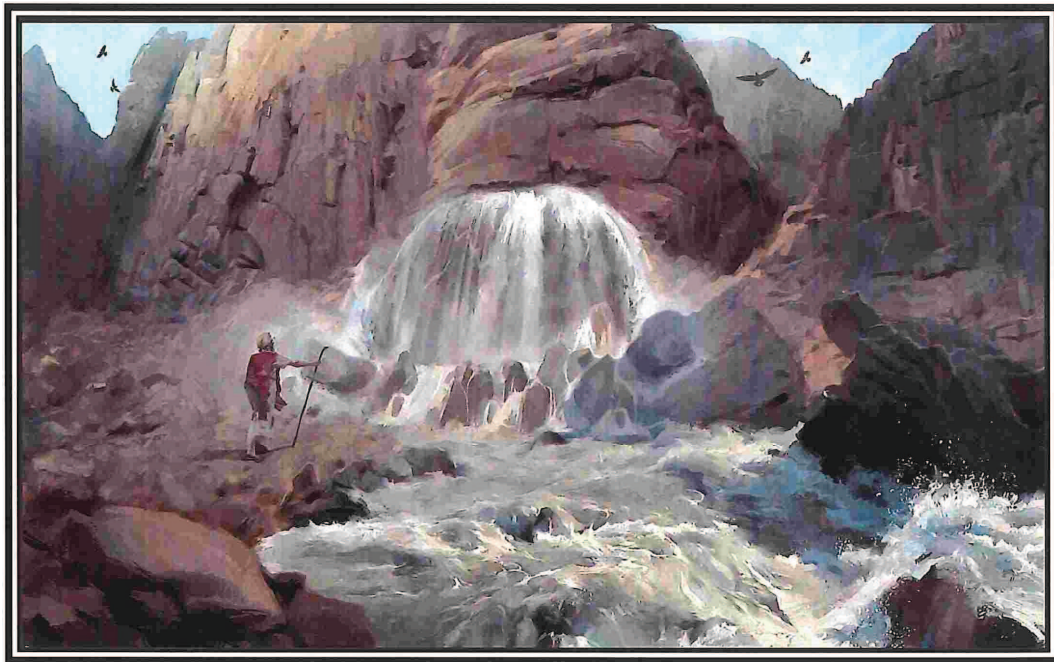
“In the desert, the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, ‘If only we had died by the Lord’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted. But you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death!’” (Exodus 16:2 - 3)

Moses admonished Israel, reminding them of the fact that their complaints were not actually against him but against God:

“So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites; ‘In the evening you will know that it was the Lord who brought you out of Egypt, and in the morning you will see the glory of the Lord since He has heard your grumbling against Him. Who are we, that you should grumble against us?...You are not grumbling against us, but against the Lord.’” (Exodus 16:6 - 8)

Their constant complaining continued before Moses provided them with water from the rock in the Desert of Sin to the point where the people came to the brink of open rebellion, ready to execute Moses and go on by themselves:

“But the people were thirsty for water there and they grumbled against Moses. They said; ‘Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?’ Then Moses cried out to the Lord, ‘What am I to do with these people. They are almost ready to stone me!’” (Exodus 17:3 - 4)



“Moses Producing Water From The Rock In The Wilderness”

Given this pathetic pattern of ingratitude, promptly forgetting every blessing and loudly lamenting every difficulty, the alacrity with which Israel abandoned the covenant at Sinai should come as no surprise. It was simply the most flagrant demonstration of the sinful self – centeredness which would consistently characterize the nation of Israel.

“They gathered around Aaron and said, ‘Come make us gods who will go before us.’” - As Israel’s anxiety and impatience increases at the base of the mountain, their typical pattern of selfish unfaithfulness promptly asserted itself once again. The Hebrew terminology implies a much more confrontational encounter between Aaron and the people than its English translation indicates. The preposition translated as ***“around”*** literally



“Victory Belongs to the Lord” Aaron and Hur Supporting Moses In the Battle With Amalek at Rephidim by Edward Vincent Mallais

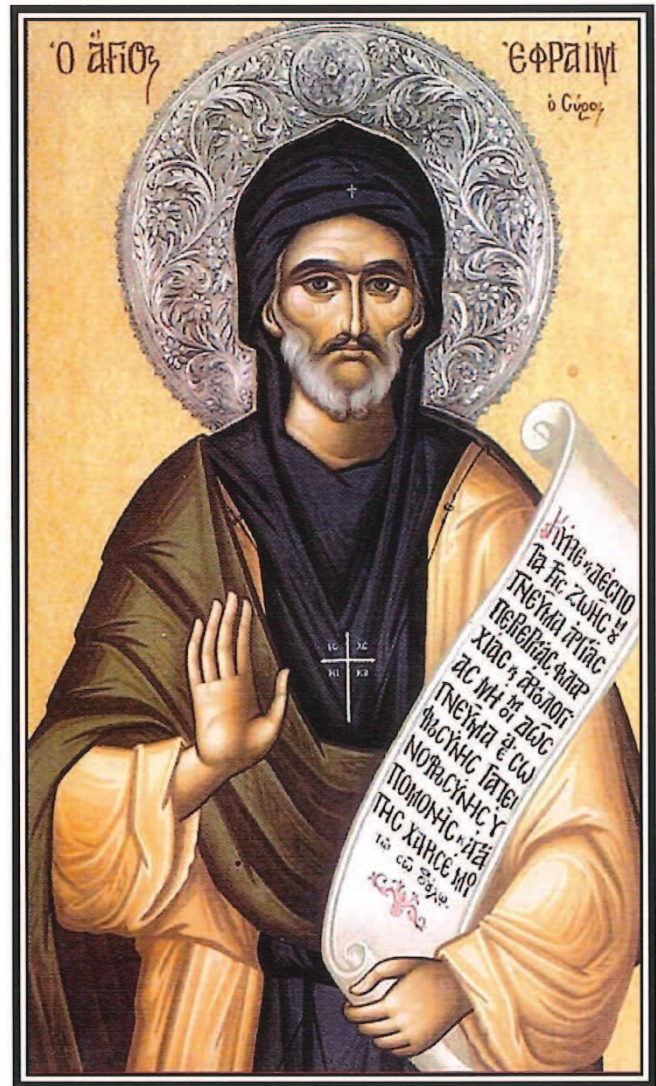
means “*against*” and carries the connotation of anger, threat and violence. “*The Hebrew ‘nikhal’al always carries a menacing nuance.*” (Sarna, p. 203) This was not a calm discussion but a high pressure argument which threatened to erupt into physical conflict. The absence of Hur, whom Moses had left in charge along with Aaron is noteworthy. One would have expected him to play a significant role in this struggle. Rabbinic tradition teaches that Hur was the husband of Miriam, and the father of Bezalel, the craftsman entrusted with the construction of the tabernacle. When the elders of the people confronted the two men with the demand that they fashion an idol, Hur adamantly refused and strongly condemned the men of Israel for their godless intentions. The Talmud indicates that Hur denounced the rebels as “*brainless fools*” who would bring the wrath of God down upon the entire nation. The people were enraged by his opposition to their plans and stoned him to death. In an improbable attempt to exculpate Aaron, the rabbis assert that as he looked

upon the bloody corpse of his comrade Aaron decided to yield to the people’s desires and take the guilt of committing this sin upon himself rather than burdening them with the crime of a second brutal murder.

“*Make us gods who will go before us.*” - It should come as no surprise that Israel’s first instinct would be to revert to the idolatry which permeated the land of Egypt in which their ancestors had lived for four hundred years. The Hebrew noun in this phrase is “*elohim*” in its customary plural form, thus the English translation “***gods.***” The people’s demand is most certainly idolatry, but idolatry of a somewhat more subtle form than is generally understood. Their self - perceived problem is not the absence of God. His presence was overwhelmingly evident in the black smoke and blazing fire which continues to enshroud the crest of the mountain. They do not propose to replace God, but rather to re-define Him on their own terms, in a manner consistent with the idolatry of Egypt and every other culture in the ancient world. Their intent was to replace the missing Moses. Maimonides, the medieval rabbi who became one of Judaism's most respected teachers, correctly observed: “*The men of Israel had in mind some instrument for determining the divine will as a replacement for Moses, the absent human medium of divine revelation.*” (Sarna, p. 203) At the same time, Israel intended to do away with the sovereign God of the covenant

who could not be manipulated and who reserved to Himself the authority to determine the only acceptable manner in which He could be worshiped. That worship would be determined by the truth of His divine being, not the desires, needs, or expectations of the worshiper. The idol figure would replace Moses and become their link to a much more “user friendly” like those of all the nations around them. In the view of paganism, in all of its endless variations, the idol statue is not the god itself. The idol statue becomes their link to the god or goddess whom the statue depicted.

“Ancients assumed that the presence of a god or goddess was guaranteed by the presence of an idol figure since the idol ‘partook’ of the very essence of the divinity it was designed to represent. When, for example, a statue of a given god was carved and certain ritual incantations spoken over that statue to cause the essence of the god to enter it, the statue was then understood to become a functioning conduit for anything done in its presence from the worshiper to that god...ancient people believed that the offerings they brought before the idol figure of a god and the prayer’s they said in the idol’s presence were fully and unfailingly perceived by the god whom that idol represented.” (Stuart, p. 450)



“Ephrem The Syrian”

The most attractive feature of this approach to religion is that man defines and controls the entire process. The deity, trapped, so to speak, in the figure can be manipulated and controlled by human actions implemented in the presence of the idol, unlike the sovereign Yahweh. Note again their language – **“make us gods.”** The whole concept of a man-made God is an ridiculous oxymoron - a self - contradiction - that is, in terms of any Biblical understanding of the nature of God as the only absolutely independent existence.

Viewed in this light, the disappearance of Moses was not a disaster for Israel, but an opportunity to be set free from the commands and demands of the grumpy old prophet. Ephrem the Syrian, one of the foremost Bible scholars of the early church (A.D. 350) observed that the apparent removal of Moses allowed the Israelites to openly reveal the idolatry which had always been lurking within their hearts.

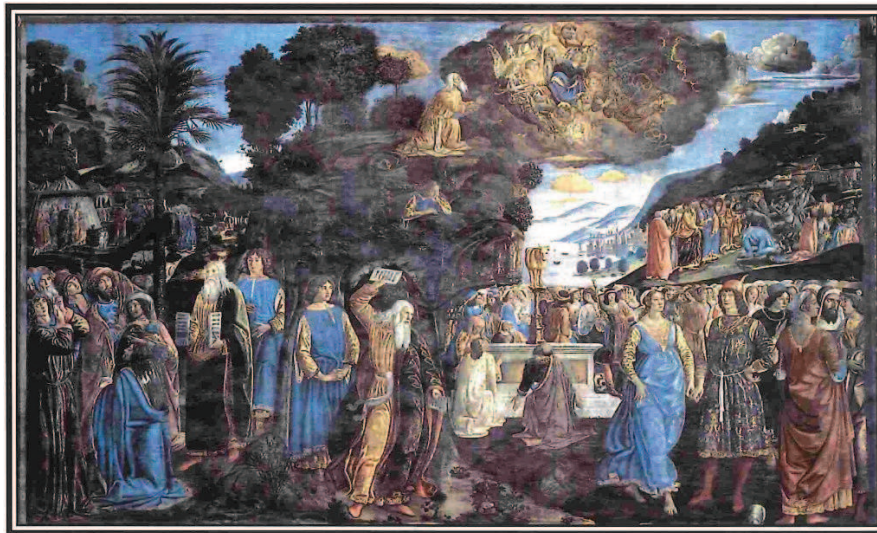


“These Are Your Gods, O Israel, Who Brought You Up Out of Egypt” Aaron Presenting the Golden Calf To the Children of Israel by Antonio Molinari

“Bitter signs had accompanied Israel as far as the Red Sea so that they would fear God. And blessed wonders surrounded Israel in the desert waste so that they would be reconciled to Him. But for want of faith Israel rejected the signs with the feeble excuse; ‘As for the man Moses who brought us out, we do not know what has become of him.’ They no longer considered the triumphs that had accompanied them. They saw only that Moses was not near. As so, with this as their convenient excuse, they could draw near to the paganism of Egypt. Therefore, Moses was not seen by them for a while so that the calf could be seen with them and so that they could worship openly what they had been worshiping in their hearts. When their paganism came out of hiding and into the open, Moses also came out of hiding and into the open to deliver openly the penalty to those whose paganism had become unrestrained beneath the holy cloud that overshadowed them. God deprived the flock of its shepherd for forty days, so that it would show that it trusted securely in the calf as the god that had pastured it with every delight. It made as its shepherd a calf that could not even graze! Moses, who inspired fear in them, was taken away from them, so that idolatry, which fear of Moses had quieted in their hearts would cry out from their mouths. And they did cry out, ‘Make gods for us to lead us I’” (Lienhardt, p. 140)

What these people were looking for is what most people are looking for in religion - a way to get them where they want to go and a way to get them what they want – ***“make for us gods who will go before us.”*** Up to this point, the God of the covenant - through Moses His chosen spokesman - had led them in the path of His will. The pillar of cloud and fire led them on their way at God’s direction. That path had led them away from what they had now chosen to recall as the secure comforts of Egypt out into the barren wilderness of the desert. They now found themselves at the foot of a terrible mountain confronted by an awesome deity who terrified them. This was not what they were looking for in a religion! Moses had disappeared and from now on they would do it their own way. They would tell their god where they wanted to go and it was his job to get them there.

“As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.” - Once again it is unmistakably clear that the replacement of Moses is the clear focus of their concern. The words of their casual dismissal of ***“this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt”*** are dripping with derision and contempt. Nahum Sama diplomatically identifies the Israelites’ language as *“a disrespectful manner of speaking.”* Eliminating God from their deliverance out of Egyptian bondage entirely, they attribute their exodus exclusively to Moses – ***“who brought us out of Egypt.”*** They don’t need a new God. They need a new Moses. That fact does not seem to greatly concern them. As to the fate of Moses – ***“we don't know what has happened to him.”*** Their obvious disinterest in Moses’ present status implies the unspoken conclusion to this sentence *“and we don't care.”*



“The Creation And Destruction of the Golden Calf - Mural From the Sistine Chapel in Rome” by Cosimo Roselli

Verses 2 - 4

“Aaron answered them, ‘Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons, and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me. So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast into the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. And then they said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.’”

“Aaron answered them...” - The role of Aaron in this sad series of events is difficult to decipher. Some within Judaism cast the man who would become the first high priest as a noble martyr, who did everything possible to dissuade, delay and discourage Israel’s determination to betray the Lord, and who selflessly took upon himself the responsibility for a course of what he knew to be sinful in order to minimize the burden of guilt upon the people. In this view, Aaron's demand- ***“Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons, and your daughters are wearing and bring them to me.”*** - was issued in the hope that the women would indignantly refuse to give up their beautiful jewelry and thereby put an end to this foolish scheme or that at least the prolonged argument aroused by his request would allow time for Moses to finally return or for Israel's silent majority - which did not favor the disobedience of Yahweh- to finally assert itself. If that was Aaron’s hope it was quickly dashed. The test indicates prompt response to his demand – ***“So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron.”*** *In A Torah Commentary For Our Time*, contemporary Jewish philosopher Yehudah Halevi endorses the view, that those who clamored for the idol were only one faction of the people, citing the relatively small number of people who were killed in the aftermath of the event (Exodus 32:28):

“Philosopher Yehudah Halevi agrees with this assessment of their situation and claims that only 3,000 of the 600,000 people liberated actually requested that Aaron build the golden calf. These people were not really idolaters, Halevi explains. In the absence of Moses they were simply desperate ‘to have a tangible object of worship like the other nations without repudiating God who had brought them out of Egypt.’ Having waited so long for Moses to



“The Worship of the Golden Calf”

return, they were overcome with confusion, frustration, and dissension. As a result they divided into angry parties, differing over what they should do. No longer able to control their fears, a vocal minority pressured Aaron into taking their gold and casting it into a golden calf. Furthermore, argues Halevi, the creation of the golden calf was not such a serious sin. After all, making images or using them for worship was accepted practice during ancient times. God had commanded the people to create the cherubim and place them above the ark. If some of the people made a mistake, Halevi says, it was not in refusing to worship God, but in their impatience. Instead of waiting for the return of Moses or for a message from God, they took matters into their own hands and acted as if they had been commanded to replace their leader with a golden idol. It was for their impatience, not for creating an idol, that they were punished.” (Fields, p. 81)



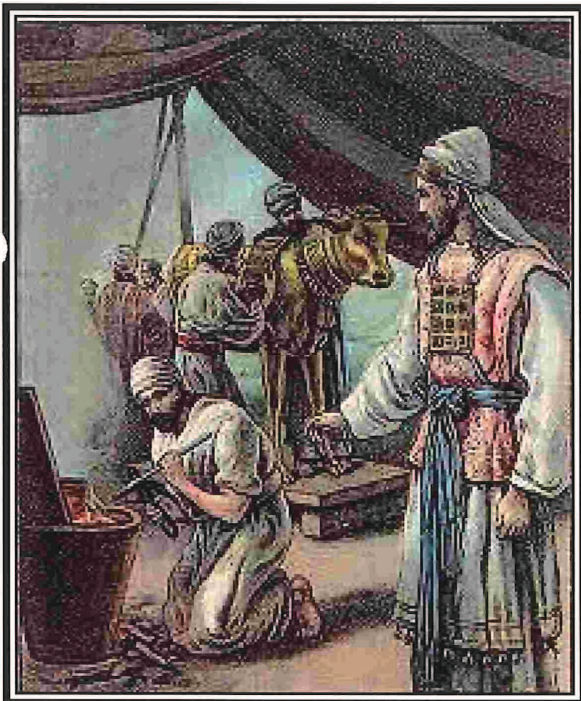
“Aaron Before Pharaoh” by Holbein

While there may be some elements of truth in this comforting view, its effort to minimize the guilt of Israel in this sad episode contradicts the Biblical evidence here and elsewhere in the Old Testament as will be subsequently demonstrated. Others suggest that the specific request for earrings as a cautiously subtle attempt on the part of Aaron to remind the Israelites that what they were proposing constituted an act of deliberate disobedience against the Lord.

“It may (or may not) be overreading to suggest that the donation of earrings, rather than nose - rings or arm bands is deliberately ironic. The very ears that heard Yahweh’s voice ban the worship of graven images are to provide the materials for an idol...Aaron’s collection of the people’s gold makes perfect sense; he intends to fashion a golden image. But there is an element of implied irony, too. Elsewhere in the Bible, removing one’s finery is an act of ascetic repentance associated with the repudiation of idolatry (Genesis 35:2; Exodus 33:4 - 6). And the next time the people collect their earrings it will be for the building of God’s tabernacle.” (Propp, p. 549)

Others pursue the exoneration of Aaron more overtly. In a manner tragically characteristic of our era's well developed skill at avoiding moral responsibility, commentator Adin Steinsaltz explains Aaron’s actions as nothing more than the application of a style of leadership significantly different than that of his more confrontational younger brother Moses:

“Modern commentator Adin Steinsaltz agrees with this assessment of Aaron. He labels the episode of the golden calf as ‘the worst failure of his career.’ Yet, just as Yehuda Halevi sought to excuse the behavior of the Israelites, Steinsaltz offers an apology for Aaron. When he agreed to help in the casting of the golden calf, he was undoubtedly proceeding along his own mode of leadership, given to compromise and acquiescence, with the accompanying perils ‘of distorting the truth for the sake of peace.’ Aaron is willing to indulge in idolatry in order to pacify the people. As Steinsaltz portrays him, Aaron leads by testing the wind, by sensing where the pressure is likely to be and then rushing to carry out the expectations of others. His guiding principle is peace at any price, compromise to avoid confrontation. He desperately wants to be loved and to be popular. If the price others demand is a golden calf, that’s what he will give them.” (Fields, p. 83)



*“Aaron Fashioning The Golden Calf”
19th Century Sunday School Picture*

Such leadership is, of course, no leadership at all. It is the self - serving counsel of cowardice. The inevitable consequence of such non - leadership is the triumph of evil and falsehood, resulting in death and destruction. Unfortunately, we are all too familiar with such path of least resistance non – leadership today in both church and state and are being overwhelmed with its catastrophic consequences.

“He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool.” - The specific method by which Aaron created the idol is unclear. Most commentators agree that the gold provided by the people was melted down. The wooden form of the desired figure was then carved and carefully overlaid with gold. The golden plates, having been molded to the wooden statue, were then

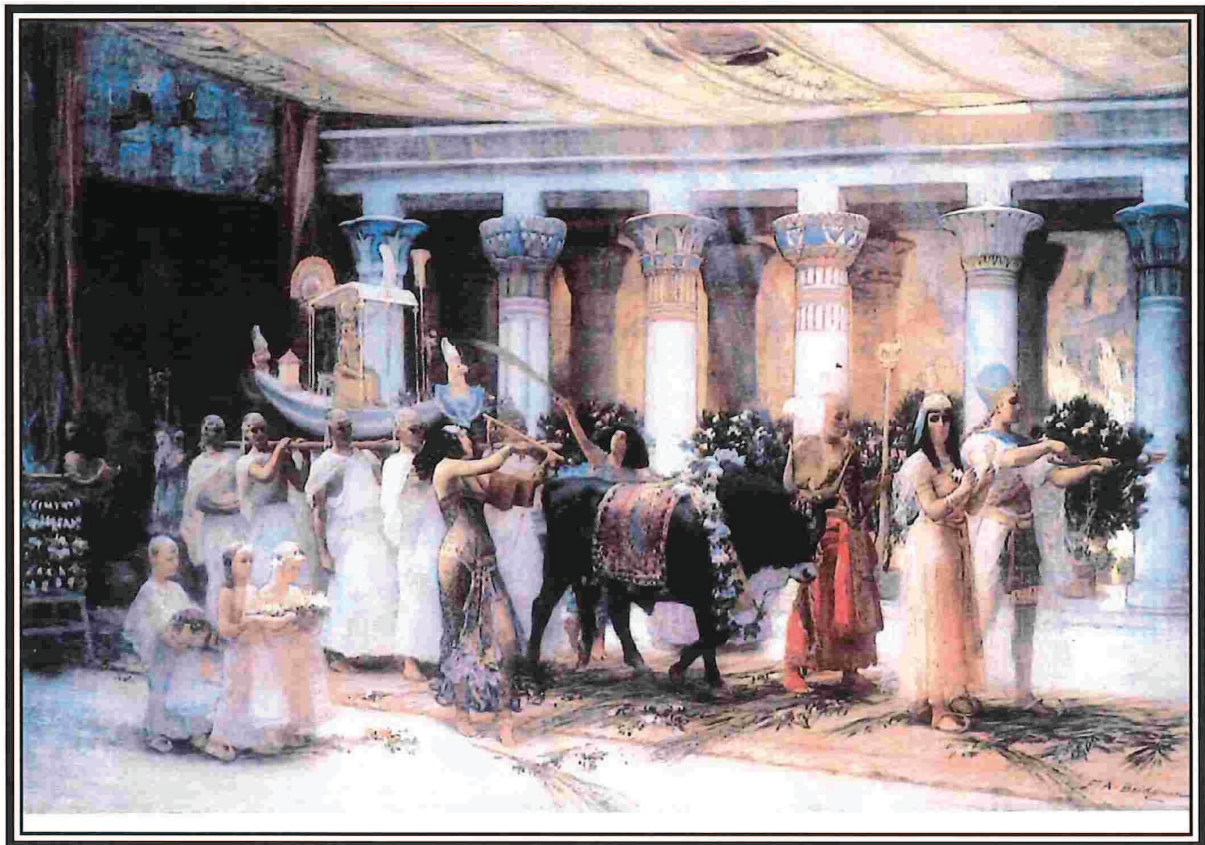
meticulously etched and engraved, and perhaps decorated with additional gems and precious stones, to complete the ornate figure of the calf which would have been suitably impressive to serve as the dwelling place of the divine spirit. The text provides no indication of either the size or the configuration of the idol.

The English translation *“calf”* is misleading. The Hebrew noun does not refer to an immature young animal, defenseless and dependent upon its mother, as in the case of the English term calf. Cassutto explains that this Hebrew word carries exactly the opposite connotation, denoting *“a young ox, an ox in the full vigor of its youth.”* (Cassutto, p. 412) The emphasis is on virility and strength. This animal is to epitomize potency - the ability

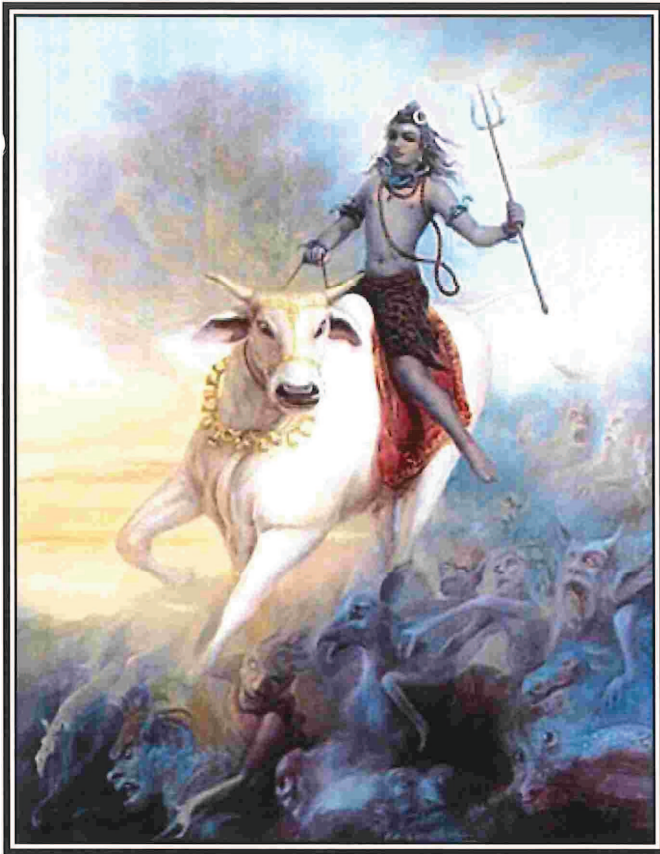
to bestow life - and power - the capacity to protect and defend those who have come to him as their divine guardian.

“Throughout the Near East the bull was a symbol of lordship, leadership, strength, vital energy and fertility. As such, it was either deified and worshiped or employed in representation of divinity. Often the bull, or some other animal served as the pedestal upon which the God stood, elevated above the human level. The particular animal might be suggestive of the attributes ascribed to the god who was mounted upon it. Aaron seems to have followed contemporary artistic convention. The young bull would have been the pedestal upon which the invisible God of Israel was popularly believed to be standing. His presence would be left to the human imagination.” (Sarna, p. 203)

The presence of bull gods of various was pervasive throughout the mythologies of both Egypt and Canaan. In Egypt the *“Apis Bull”* was the manifestation of the creator God Ptah, because of the animal’s strength and virility. The priests of Ptah would search throughout the land for a perfect specimen with precisely the markings traditionally associated with the god. The beast would then be taken to the ancient city of Memphis on the Nile were it would be cared for throughout the remainder of its life. Upon the bull’s death its body was mummified and reverently buried in a tomb beneath the temple. Among the Canaanites,



“Pharaoh Leading the Procession of the Apis Bull in the Temple of Ptah”



“Baal – The God Of Thunder Riding Across the Heavens Astride a Mighty Bull”

Baal, the god of thunder and the storm, was also depicted as a massive bull. At times a figure of Baal was shown as a golden warrior astride a black bull. Baal would bring fertility to the earth through the showers of rain and demonstrate his virile power by striking down his enemies of drought and death. It is most probable, given the 400 year sojourn of Israel in the land of Egypt, that this ancient land would have been the source of Aaron's golden calf. However, after their arrival in Canaan, the cult of Baal proved to be irresistibly familiar to the Children of Israel and his worship among them persisted throughout the Old Testament era. The compelling tenacity of the divine bull calf is revealed in the choice of *“golden calves”* by King Jereboam I as the signature feature of his new sanctuaries at Bethel and Dan at the time of the division of the kingdom. 1 Kings reports that Jereboam used the same unfortunate language which Aaron had proclaimed at

Sinai as the dedication of his sanctuaries: *“After seeking advice, the king made two golden calves. He said to the people: ‘It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.’ One he set up in Bethel, the other in Dan.”* (1 Kings 12:28 - 30) So that the connection between the two apostasies may be completely obvious, it is certainly no coincidence that the two oldest sons of both Aaron (Exodus 6:23) and Jereboam (1 Kings 14:1, 20) are named Abihu and Nadab.

The rabbinic tales which surround the creation of the golden calf tell of magic and mystery which caused not merely a statue but a living creature to spring forth from the fires of Aaron’s forge. A creature which entranced the Children of Israel. According to the legends, in order to retrieve the body of Joseph from the waters of the Nile, so that the patriarch might accompany his descendants home to Canaan, Moses had fashioned four leaves of silver. Upon each of the four leaves, he engraving the image of one of the four beasts which surround the throne of God in heaven - a lion, and eagle, a man, and a bull.

“He then cast upon the river the leaf with the image of the lion and the waters of the river became tumultuous and roared like a lion, parting to reveal their hidden depths. He then threw down the leaf with the image of a man, and the scattered bones of Joseph united themselves into an entire human body; and body; And when he cast in the third leaf with the image of the eagle, the coffin

floated up to the top. As he had no use for the fourth leaf with the image of the bull, he asked a woman to store it away for him while he was occupied with the transportation of the coffin, and later forgot to reclaim the leaf of silver. This was now among the ornaments that the people brought to Aaron, and it was exclusively owing to this bull's image of magical virtues, that a golden bull arose up out of the fire into which Aaron put the gold and silver.” (Feinberg, III, p. 122 - 123)



“The Adoration of the Living Figure of the Golden Calf” by Phillipino Lippi

The rabbis further explained that the Israelites knew of the four creatures surrounding the heavenly throne of God because they had been blessed with a glimpse of God's throne as they were passing through the parted waters of the Red Sea. Most distinctly among the four animals they had observed the bull. *“It was for this reason that they hit upon the notion that the ox had helped God in the exodus from Egypt, and therefore they wanted to worship the ox beside God.”* (Feinberg, III, p. 124) In the traditions which expand the Exodus account, all of this is instigated by the mixed multitude of Egyptians and other Gentiles who were allowed to flee from Egypt along with the Israelites. They were led by Jannes and Jambres, who had formerly served as the leaders of pharaoh's magicians. They had been forced to flee their royal master's wrath because of their failure to protect Egypt from the plagues, particularly the death of the crown prince. Now they sought their vengeance upon Moses and his God by leading His people astray. The devil enabled them to produce a vision of Moses' dead body stretched out upon a funeral pyre in the clouds above the mountain. They then proceeded to advise Aaron: *“The Egyptians were accustomed to carrying their gods around with them, to dance and to play before them, that each might be able to touch and see the gods whom he worshiped. And now we want nothing more than for you to make us a god like the Egyptians had.”* (Feinberg, III, p. 121)

“Then they said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt!’” - Putting aside the titillating enhancements of tradition to return to the text itself, it is clear that whatever semblance of control Aaron may have attempted to maintain up to this point, with the completion of the golden calf, events rapidly descended into utter chaos. Once again, the plural **“gods”** indicates the use of the Hebrew plural *“Elohim”* in the text. The legend of the golden calf statue which came alive was devised in an attempt to explain the sheer impossibility of this situation. Maimonides, the foremost teacher of Judaism in the Middle Ages, bluntly declared: *“The people could not have been so stupid!”* (Sarna, p. 204) He therefore decided that these words could not possibly mean what they appear to mean. How could Israel ever have come to such a ridiculous conclusion. Given the ongoing series of miracles which they had observed from the first of the plagues in Egypt to the voice of God addressing them for the fiery crest of Sinai just a few weeks earlier, with the manna and the quail still being provided daily, how could it have ever been possible for these people to have concluded that this pathetic idol could have had anything to do with their deliverance? Without resorting to dreams of life-like prancing idols, it would seem more realistic to conclude that many, perhaps most, of them didn’t. The **“they”** in this sentence refers to the ring leaders of the idol faction who had favored this conclusion all along. Their ascription of the exodus to the golden calf is not the assertion of a national consensus throughout the encampment but a mission statement, the truth of which they desperately hope will be accepted by others. They have taken the initial step. The idol has been fashioned. It looks fine, just like the gods of Egypt where they and their ancestors had lived for centuries. Now the task of convincing everyone else had to begin in earnest.



“The Sin of The Golden Calf” – 17th Century Dutch Bible Engraving by Van Leyden

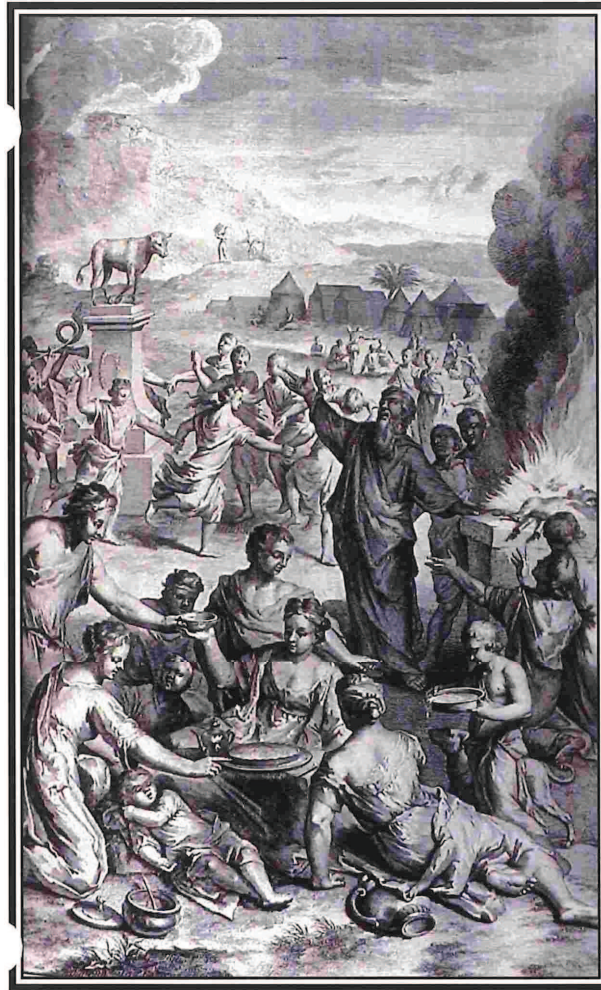


“Gathering The Treasures To Build The Golden Calf” by Franz Franken

Verses 5 - 6

“When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, ‘Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord.’ So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward, they sat down to eat and drink and indulge in revelry.”

“When Aaron saw this, he built and altar...” - A thoroughly intimidated Aaron complied with the mob’s demands without complaint and quickly constructed an altar directly in front of the idol. *“Building an altar in front of a god/idol conformed to the expected positioning of sacrifices in idolatry; it guaranteed that the god would see the offerings made to him through the eyes of the statue and accept them.”* (Stuart, p. 666) Aaron then proceeded to sanction the actions of the idolaters by proclaiming that ***“Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord.”*** By using the customary language and the name of Yahweh, Aaron helped to conceal the evil of what was being done beneath a veneer of legitimacy which would help to draw a greater number of people into the worship of the idol. His craven action marks the end of his involvement in the apostasy. He is no longer relevant - having forfeited his authority and betrayed his God. Even those whose favor he has attempted to secure now view him with contempt. He will not be mentioned again until he is called to account by Moses. Victor P. Hamilton’s scathing description of Aaron’s final words is most apt.



*“Here Are Your Gods, O Israel” 17th Century Dutch Bible Engraving
by Gerhart Hoet*

“Aaron’s decision to ‘proclaim a festival to the Lord tomorrow’ is not an attempt to temper the Israelites egregious sin as much as it is an act of baptizing blasphemy. Love may cover a multitude of sins, but religious ritual activity does not... Understandably, Aaron does not use the altar that Moses had already built for the ceremony of sealing the covenant.” (Hamilton, p. 532)

“So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings... - The pagan celebration of the following day form a tragic parody of the covenant ratification ceremonies in Chapter 24 when the nation pledged itself to Yahweh forever: “Then Moses sent young Israelite men and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the Lord... Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, ‘We will do everything the Lord has said, we will obey.’” (Exodus 24:5, 7) The establishment of Yahweh’s covenant had also included a sacred meal with the tribal elders in the presence of a visible deity (Exodus 24:9 - 11) The parallel is designed to indicate that the nation has now decided to establish a new covenant, on their own terms, with a new deity. Judaism continues to attempt to evade this shameful betrayal

by insisting that virtually all of those involved in these events were non-Jews of the “*mixed multitude*” which had attached themselves to Israel at the time of the Exodus. Thus, for example, Rabbi Schneerson observes at this point in his recent commentary on Exodus:

When the calf was fully formed, it magically came alive. Seeing this, the mixed multitude said, 'This, Israel, is your god who brought you up out of Egypt.' Instead of relating to the calf as a substitute for Moses, they treated it as a substitute for God Himself, thus making it into an idol. Some of the Israelites were swept up in the fervor of the moment, and participated in this sin as well.” (Shumash Shemot, p. 248)

Unfortunately there is no such exculpatory evidence provided anywhere here in Exodus or in the parallel texts elsewhere in Scripture.

The festival day got off to an early start with the customary “*burnt offerings*” and “*fellowship offerings*.” The burnt offerings were designed to placate the anger of the god for the sins of the people while the fellowship offerings celebrated the presence of the god among them and invoked his blessings upon them. The same two fundamental categories of sacrifices were used in the worship of Yahweh. From this relatively benign beginning the festival quickly degenerated into the sexual frenzy and violence which characterized



“Human Sacrifices Being Offered To Baal” – 19th Century Engraving



“Molech - Devourer Of Children”
 by John Sargeant

pagan worship of fertility/potency gods and goddesses. *“The rabble has taken over and has plunged into pagan orgiastic rites.”* (Sarna, p. 204) This was particularly true of Canaanite religion focused around the worship of Baal and Astarte. The Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible comes to the sweeping conclusion that Canaanite religion achieved the dubious distinction of being the most sexually depraved of all of the ancient mythologies:

“Four principal festivals associated with agriculture seem to have been celebrated by the Canaanites, invariably occasions of revelry, drunkenness, and sexual excess. Canaanite religion was evidently the most sexually depraved of any in the ancient world.” (BEB, I, p. 409)

The profound corruption of the Canaanite nations, reflected in their religion, remained an ongoing source of temptation and ultimately destruction to Israel. That remarkable level of depravity was the basis for God's command that Israel eliminate the Canaanite population of the Promised Land.

“Why then were the Canaanites singled out for such severe treatment? They were cut off to prevent Israel and the rest of the world from being corrupted (Deuteronomy 20:16 - 18). When a people start to burn their children in honor of their gods (Leviticus 18:21), practice sodomy, bestiality, and all sorts of loathsome vice (Leviticus 18:23, 24; 20:3), the land itself begins to ‘vomit’ them out like a body heaves under the load of internal poison (Leviticus 18:25, 27 - 30)...As the myths of ancient Ugarit demonstrate, the religion of the Canaanites was a crude and debased form of ritual polytheism. It was associated with a sensuous fertility cult worship of a particularly lewd and orgiastic kind which proved to be more influential than any other in the ancient Near East...The brutality, lust and abandon of Canaanite mythology is far worse than anywhere else in the ancient Near East at this time, and the astounding basic characteristic of Canaanite deities, that they had no moral character whatsoever, must have brought out the worst traits in their devotees and entailed many of the most demoralizing practices of the time such as sacred prostitution (both male and female), child sacrifice, and phallic serpent worship.” (Quartz Hill, p. 4)

The disgusting revels of the Golden Calf described in the text are fully consistent with the historical context of the land of Canaan from which their ancestors had come and the significance of the young bull as the personification of potency and virility.

The parallel accounts of these events are uniformly negative, both in regard to Aaron and to Israel. These severe condemnations make later rabbinic attempts to minimize the shame or shift the guilt to others all the more implausible. In Moses' valedictory to the nation, the prophet used this episode as the most drastic example of Israel's dangerous inclination to regularly provoke the wrath of God. The apostasy of the Golden Calf very nearly caused the destruction of Israel:

“Understand then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people. Remember this and never forget how you provoked the Lord your God to anger in the desert. From the day you left Egypt until the day you arrived here you have been rebellious against the Lord. At Horeb you aroused the Lord's wrath so that He was angry enough to destroy you. When I went up on the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the



“The Adoration of the Golden Calf” by Jan Steen

covenant that the Lord had made with you, I stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights. I ate no bread and no water. The Lord gave me two stone tablets inscribed by the finger of God. On them were all the commandments the Lord proclaimed to you out of the fire, on the day of the assembly. At the end of the forty days and forty nights, the Lord gave me the two stone tablets, the tablets of the covenant. Then the Lord told me; 'Go down from here at once because your people, the people whom you brought out of Egypt have become corrupt. They have turned away quickly from what I have commanded them and have made a cast idol for themselves...So I turned and went down the mountain while it was ablaze with fire. And the two stone tablets of the covenant were in my hands. And when I looked I saw that you had sinned against the Lord your God; you had made for yourselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. You had turned aside quickly from the way the Lord had commanded you...And the Lord was angry enough with Aaron to destroy him, but at that time I prayed for Aaron too. Also I took that sinful thing of yours, the calf that you had made, and burned it in the fire. And then I crushed it and ground it into powder as fine as dust and threw it into a stream that flowed down the mountain.' (Deuteronomy 9:6 - 21 passim)

The Psalmist recalled the tragic history of Israel's obsession with idolatry, ingratitude and disobedience, as he called upon his people to acknowledge their complete dependence upon the undeserved love of God and pleaded with God to continue to be gracious to His undeserving people. The worship of the Golden Calf figured prominently in that litany of unfaithfulness:



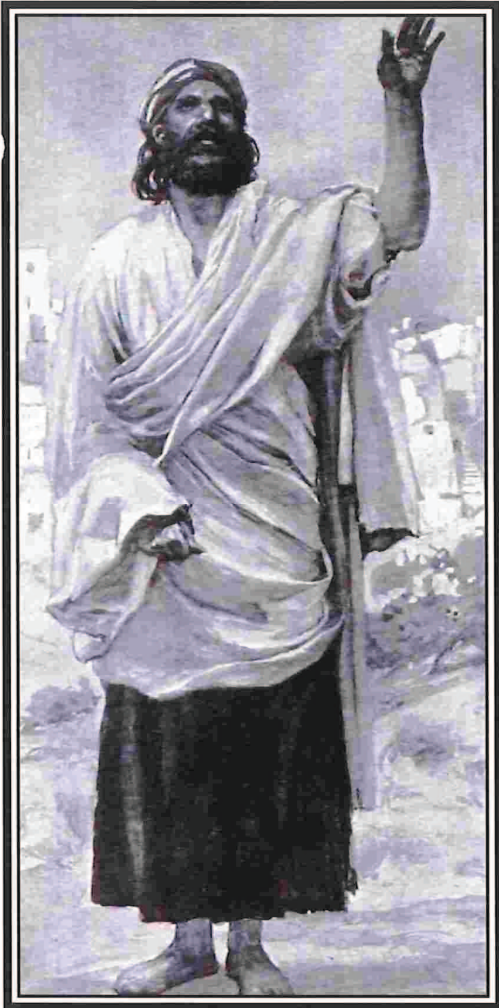
“Aaron At the Altar of the Golden Calf” by Poussin



“The Worship of the Golden Calf” by Corneliusz Moeyaert

“We have sinned, even as our fathers did; we have done wrong and acted wickedly. When our fathers were in Egypt, they gave no thought to Your miracles; they did not remember Your many kindnesses and they rebelled... At Horeb they made a calf and worshiped an idol cast from metal. They exchanged their Glory for the image of a bull which eats grass. They forgot the Lord who saved them, who had done great things in Egypt, miracles in the land of Ham and awesome deeds by the Red Sea. So He said He would destroy them - had not Moses, His chosen one, stood in the breach before Him to keep His wrath from destroying them... They did not destroy the peoples as the Lord had commanded them, but they mingled with the nations and adopted their customs. They worshiped their idols which became a snare to them. They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to demons. They shed innocent blood, the blood of their sons and their daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan, and the land was desecrated by their blood. They defiled themselves by what they did. By their deeds they prostituted themselves.” (Psalm 106:6 - 7; 19 - 23; 34 - 39)

The prophet Hosea spoke the Word of the Lord to the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah in the midst of the 8th Century B.C. The Northern Kingdom was at the pinnacle of its power under the great king Jeroboam II. The prophet's stern denunciations of Israel's idolatry and immorality at the Golden Calf sanctuaries at Bethel and Dan are interwoven with allusions to the original worship of the Golden Calf at Sinai. Hosea refused to refer to the site of Israel's major Golden Calf shrine by its historic title as Bethel - which means House of God. Instead, he contemptuously transformed Bethel into Beth Aven - which means House of



*“The Prophet Hosea”
by James Tissot*

Wickedness. He warned that God’s judgement was impending and that the hordes of Assyria would soon descend upon them to carry off their precious idol. *“The people who live in Samaria fear for the calf - idol of Beth Aven. Its people will mourn over it and so will its idolatrous priests, those who rejoiced over its splendor, because it is taken from them into exile. It will be taken away as tribute for the great king. Ephraim will be disgraced; Israel will be ashamed of its wooden idols...The high places of wickedness will be destroyed - it is the sin of Israel. Thorns and thistles will grow up and cover their altars.”* (Hosea 10:5 - 7) The prophet completely rejected the claim that the worship of the Golden Calves could be considered as worship of the true God. Recalling the demand of Israel at Sinai that Aaron make them a God, the Lord scorns the whole idea that a calf of gold built by a human craftsman could be a god as absolute idiocy. By trusting in such foolishness the nation has come to the brink of destruction:

“Israel cries out to Me, ‘O our God, we acknowledge You!’ But Israel has rejected what is good. An enemy will pursue him. They set up kings without My consent. These choose princes without My approval. With their silver and gold they make idols for themselves to their own destruction. Throw out your

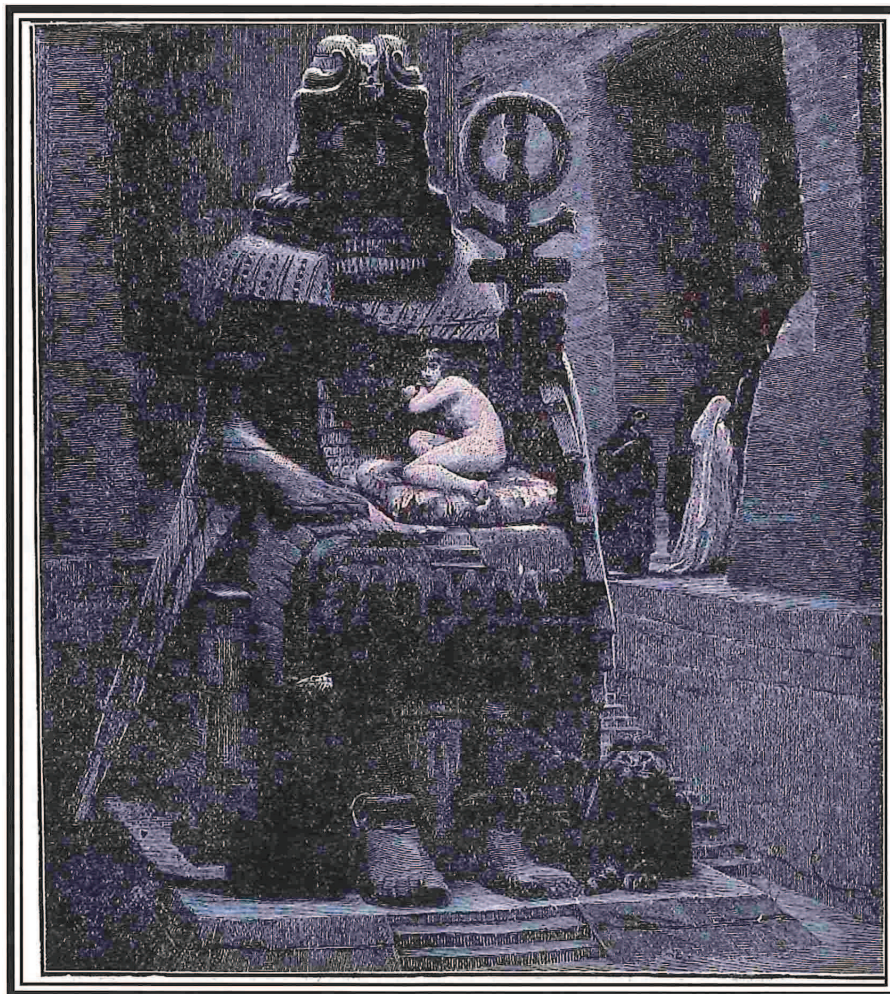
calf-idol, O Samaria. My anger burns against them! How long will they be incapable of purity? They are from Israel. This calf - a craftsman has made it; it is not a god. It will be broken in pieces, that calf of Samaria!.. Though Ephraim built many altars for sin offerings they have become altars for sinning.” (Hosea 8 :2 - 6)

In his indictment of the corrupt priesthood of Israel which had chosen to follow the king rather than remain faithful to the Lord, Hosea actually quoted from Psalm 106’s description of the folly of Israel at Sinai in exchanging the Glory of the Lord for the statue of a bull calf. As at Sinai, the consequence of their idolatry will be a descent into depravity and perversion. The prophet sarcastically declares that the Israelites are as stubborn as the bull calves which they worship:

“Because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you as My priests; because you have ignored the Law of the Lord your God, I will also ignore your children. The more the priests increased, the more they sinned against Me; they exchanged their Glory for something disgraceful. They feed on the

sins of My people and relish their wickedness...They will eat but not have enough; they will engage in prostitution but not increase because they have deserted the Lord to give themselves to prostitution, to old wine and new, which takes away the understanding of My people. They consult a wooden idol and are answered by a stick of wood. A spirit of prostitution leads them astray. They are unfaithful to their God. They sacrifice on the mountaintops and burn offerings on the hills, under oak, poplar, and tenebinth. Therefore, your daughters turn to prostitution and your daughter in - laws to adultery. I will not punish your daughters when they turn to prostitution, nor your daughter – in - laws when they turn to prostitution, because the men themselves consort with harlots and sacrifice with shrine prostitutes - a people without understanding will come to ruin...Do not go to Gilgal and do not go the shrine of the Golden Calf at Beth Aven. And do not swear, ‘as surely as the Lord lives!’ The Israelites are stubborn, like a stubborn heifer.”
(Hosea 4:6 - 8, 10 - 16)

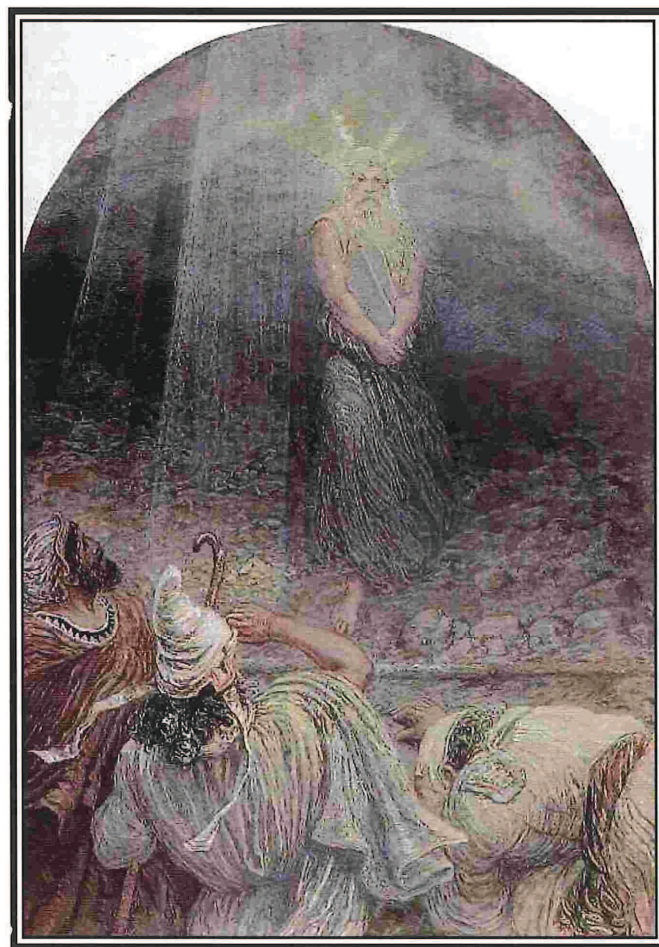
The unfaithfulness of Israel in the days of Hosea was nothing more than the continuation of the pattern of unfaithfulness and ingratitude which had characterized the Children of Israel's response to the grace of God since the beginning. And always at the heart of it was the worship of the Baals, the calf idol before whom they bowed down at Sinai:



“A Virgin Daughter Offered To Baal”

“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son. But the more I called Israel, the further they went from Me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt...The Lord used a prophet to bring Israel up from Egypt, by a prophet He cared for him. But Ephraim has bitterly provoked Him to anger...But he became guilty of Baal worship and died. Now they sin more and more. They make idols for themselves from their silver, cleverly fashioned images, all of them the work of craftsmen. It is said of these people, ‘They offer human sacrifice and kiss their calf idols.’ Therefore they will be like the morning mist...But I am the Lord who brought you out of Egypt. You shall acknowledge no God but Me, no Savior except Me. I cared for you in the desert, in the land of burning heat. When I fed them they were satisfied. When they were satisfied, they became proud; then they forgot Me.” (Hosea 11:1 - 2; 12:9, 13 - 14; 13:1 - 6)

The apostasy at Sinai remained the foremost example of Israelite rejection of God’s grace into the New Testament era. In the blazing speech which led to his martyrdom, Stephan used the Golden Calf to demonstrate their stubborn blindness and resistance to every faithful prophet of God from Moses to Jesus.



“The Return of Moses From The Mountain Top”

“But our fathers refused to obey him (Moses). Instead they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. They told Aaron, ‘Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt - we don’t know what has happened to him!’ That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and held a celebration in honor of what their hands had made. But God turned away and gave them over to the worship of the heavenly bodies.” (Acts 7:39 - 42)

St. Paul also refers to this sad episode in his admonition to the Corinthians to learn from the examples of Israel's history. He actually quotes Exodus 32:6 as he warns the Christians of his day to avoid the deadly mistakes of the past:

“Now these things occurred to keep us from setting our hearts on evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were, as it is written: ‘The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry.’ We should not commit sexual immorality as some of them did, and in one day twenty - three thousand of them died.” (1 Corinthians 10:6 - 8; cf. Num. 25:1 - 9)

Thus, the reverberations of this notorious betrayal of God’s covenant with Israel, in the midst of its ratification at Mount Sinai, echoed down across the centuries as a constant reminder of the depth of human sinfulness and therefore of the complete dependence of sinful man upon the undeserved love of God in Christ.

Verses 7 - 8

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them, and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.’”

“Then the Lord said to Moses...” - The scene now shifts from the riotous celebrations of the encampment to the sacred solitude of Moses’ interaction with God upon the crest of Sinai. Evidently, the tumult of idolatry at the base of the mountain cannot be heard at its peak, for it is God who abruptly brings it to Moses’ attention. The Hebrew text is actually a repetition two verbs – ***“Go! Descend!”*** The unusual, superfluous combination expresses the intensity and urgency of the moment. Moses is banished from the presence of the Lord and instructed to depart for the camp immediately. There is an ironic symmetry in the verbs of this segment. The preceding phrase had reported ***“and the people rose up to indulge in revelry.”*** The stem words of God to Moses reflect the exact opposite. Because the people



*“Aaron Conducting the Worship of the Golden Calf”
Mortier Dutch Bible Engraving – 1700*

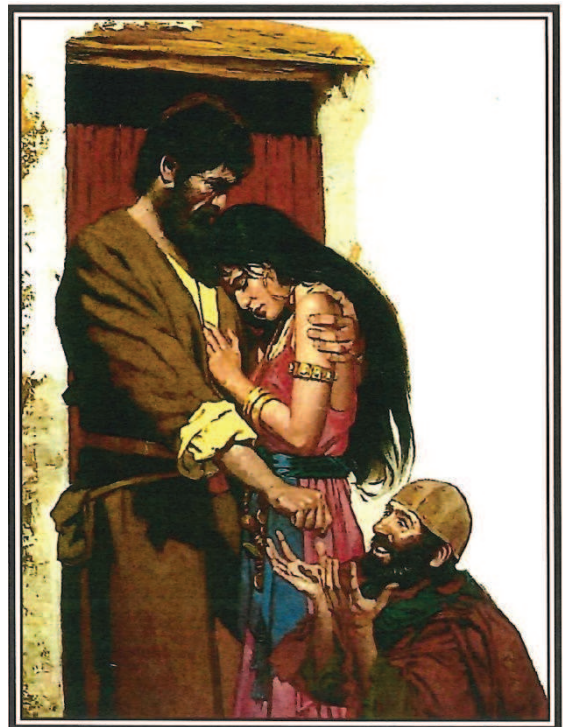
had risen up, Moses is to go down. The Lord’s command is curt, revealing His wrath at this unimaginable act of disobedience and rebellion. Israel has spumed and rejected Him in the most brazen manner, even as their leader stands in His presence to receive the covenant of life and hope which He had graciously bestowed upon them, chosen from all the nations of the earth. In light of their actions, God’s conversation with Israel is over. His relationship with them, the revelation of His Law to them, and the promise of His dwelling among them in the sanctuary which He had designed are null and void. Modern commentator E.B. Ehrlich paraphrases the substance of God’s dismissal of Moses in this way: *“You may go. I no longer need you; nothing will come of our dealings. I do not give you the tablets and no tabernacle will be erected.”* (Propp, II, p. 553) Dr. Cornelius Houtman reveals the full severity of the Lord’s dismissal of Moses from Sinai and its grim implications for the nation of Israel in his assessment of these words:

“Moses must go down because since the people are now engaged in idolatry the relationship with YHWH is now de facto broken and YHWH wants to destroy His people (32:10), and therefore the contact between YHWH and Moses as the representative of the people no longer makes sense.” (Houtman, III, p. 644)

The traditional rabbinic interpretation of God’s command to Moses to go down understands the words in reference not to a descent from the mountain but to a demotion from his position as the leader of the nation. Rabbi Schneerson asserts that this loss of status comes as punishment for his unauthorized decision to allow a mixed multitude of Egyptians to join in the exodus, the same gentiles who have now brought about the apostasy of the golden calf. While this view serves to remove the guilt and shame from the Jews to convenient Gentile scapegoats, it bears no resemblance to the narrative of the text.

“God then spoke to Moses, ‘Go down the mountain and descend as well from your present spiritual level, for the mixed multitude which you brought up out of Egypt without consulting Me, have become corrupt and have corrupted some of the Israelites. I elevated you to your present spiritual level only for the sake of the people; now that they have become corrupt, your spiritual status must drop as well.’” (Chumash, p. 249)

“Because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt have become corrupt” – This is not merely the frustrated exclamation of a parent to their spouse – *“Look what your kid has done!”* There is infinitely more involved here. Once again, the Lord’s language is a bitter parody of the faithless blasphemy of the Israelites. They had decided to build the golden calf because ***“As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.”*** (Exodus 32:1) Like the people themselves, God now credits Moses with the *“the now dubious honor of the exodus and lets it be known that He wants nothing to do with the people any longer.”* (Houtman, III, p. 645) For the first time, the Children of Israel are described as the people of Moses, not the people of God: ***“your people, whom you brought up.”*** With these words God disowns the people who have rejected Him. God used same bitter imagery through His prophet Hosea in regard to the northern kingdom of Israel. The prophet was commanded to marry ***“an adulterous wife”*** who would bear him ***“children of unfaithfulness.”*** These actions were to symbolize the fact that ***“the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the Lord.”*** (Hosea 1:2 - 3) Hosea’s role in this life parable is that of God, who rescues a lost one completely unworthy of his love while the ungrateful whore, who responds to her husband’s undeserved love with continued unfaithfulness and constant betrayal is the counterpart of Israel. The nation

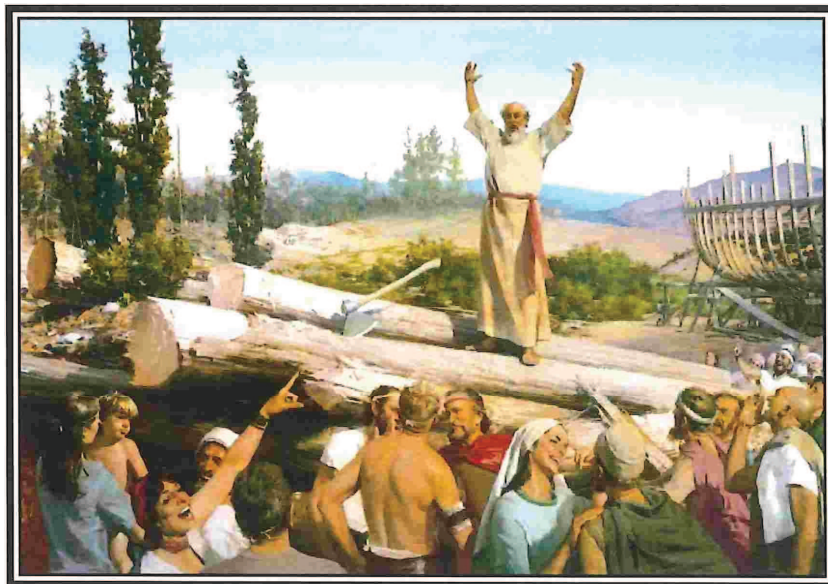


“Hosea Taking The Harlot Gomer To Be His Wife” by Hooke

spurned and rejected God, betraying Him at every turn. Hosea married a harlot named Gomer who bore three children of uncertain fatherhood. He was instructed to give each of them names which signaled the end of God's relationship with His people. The first one was named "***Jezreel***" which means "*God scatters*" warning of the impending destruction the kingdom by the Assyrians. His daughter was named "***Lo-Rummah***" ("*Not – Loved*") "***for I will not longer show love to the House of Israel, that I should at all forgive them.***" The youngest son's name indicated the saddest message of them all. "***Then the Lord said, 'Call him 'Lo – Ammi' for you are not My people, and I am not your God.'***" (Hosea 1:4 - 9) This tragic language, in both instances, refers to the total nullification of the covenant.

The basis for God's harsh declaration is similarly concise – "***your people...have become corrupt.***" The verb here describes the most perverse, decadent and defiant immorality symptomatic of the total rejection of God and His will. It results in chaotic lust and greed, and culminates as bloodshed and death as the strong prey upon the helpless and the weak. The same word is used in Genesis 6:11 to identify the corruption of humanity so degraded and complete that it resulted in the catastrophic judgment of the flood.

"Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and full of violence. God saw how corrupt the world had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways. So God said to Noah: 'I am going to put an end to all people for the earth is filled with violence because of them.'" (Genesis 6:11 - 13)

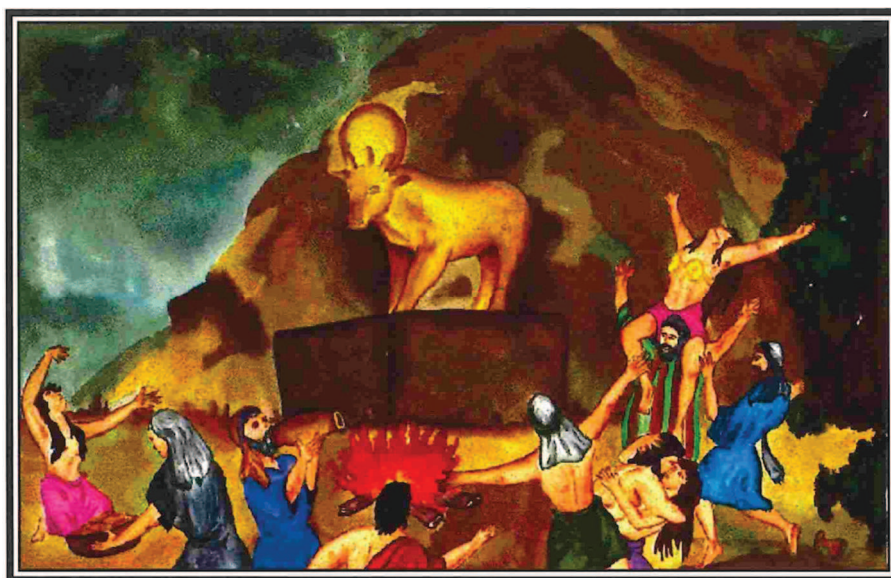


"Noah Preaching To His Contemporaries As The Ark Is Being Built Before the Great Flood"

In the aftermath of the great flood the awful word occurs again as God promised that despite the dreadful corruption of man He would not destroy humanity again by means of a world wide flood: "***Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures as I have done.***" (Genesis 8:21) The use of this terminology here is

designed to stress the gravity of Israel's offense. They deserve total destruction, as did the corrupt world destroyed by the Flood.

“They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf.” - The Lord provided Moses with a summary of the corruption in which Israel had indulged. The omniscient God is fully aware of everything that has taken place, and proceeds to inform Moses. The antecedent of the

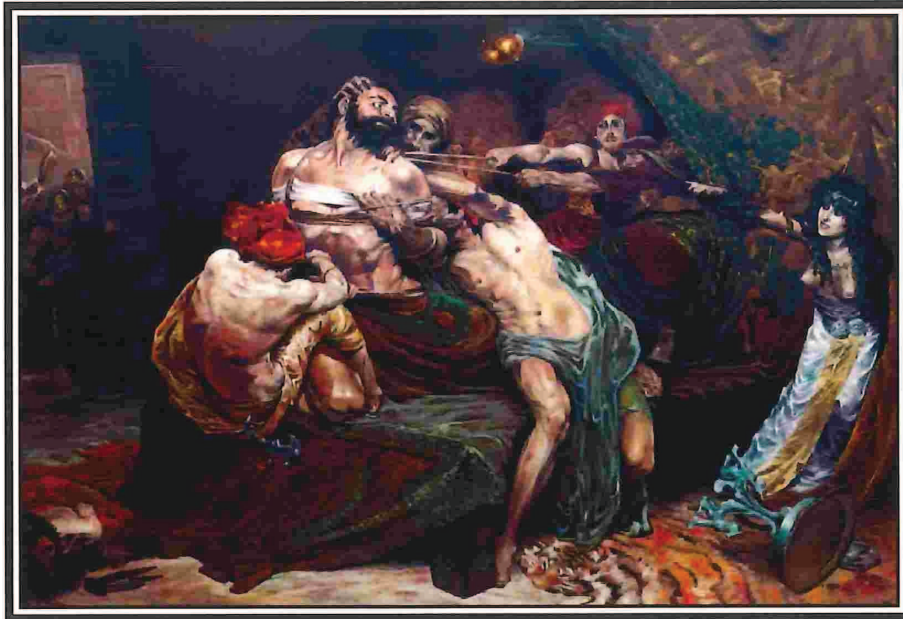


“The Revels Before The Golden Calf”

pronoun ***“they”*** is ***“your people”*** from the preceding phrase. There is no attempt to limit the apostasy or responsibility for it to any particular individual, group or faction.

“However, God’s summary for Moses of what had happened in the camp while he had been on the mountain indicates how much the nation had already turned from its promise to follow Yahweh’s covenant. Even if every single person had not participated, many had eagerly done so, and the rest had not acted to repudiate them, with the result that the nation as a whole, the nation on balance, can be simply described as ‘they.’” (Stuart, p. 668)

“They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them...” - The corruption of the people is demonstrated by the rapidity of their lapse into corruption. They had only received the Ten Commandments a few weeks earlier and already they have abandoned the commands of the God who had established His sacred covenant with them. The Lord seems to marvel. The words literally read *“have turned from the way”* - namely the way of God. The same verb appears in Judges 16:20 to describe God’s abandonment of Sampson because of his dalliance with Delilah (***“Sampson did not know that the Lord had turned away from him.”***) and 1 Samuel 28:15 in reference to God’s rejection of King Saul. (***“The Philistines are fighting against me and God has turned away from me.”***) In both instances the term expresses the withdrawal of presence and power which had previously been



“Delilah Taunting the Fallen Sampson”

experienced by a servant of the Lord as the punishment for sinful disobedience. The choice of terminology ***“they have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them”*** - recognizes that it was not Israel’s intent to replace God, but instead to establish a new means of worshipping Him in their own way. However, by so doing, they have thereby redefined the nature of God and subjected Him to their manipulation and control. In fact, they have replaced the true God with a new false god of their own, no different than any of the other idols of the heathen. The true God is the only independent existence, not a part of creation, but apart from creation. He does not have a source, He is the source of all that is. Therefore, God is subject to no one and to nothing. By fashioning their golden calf, the people have dragged God down to their own level and redefined Him and how He is to relate to them according to their own self - perceived needs and desires. Their rendition of Yahweh is not Yahweh at all. Rather, it is nothing more, as the next phrase unequivocally declares, than ***“an idol cast in the shape of a calf.”*** Douglas Stuart explained the bizarre combination of outright idolatry and syncretism at work here:

“God then defined this sin clearly, leaving no doubt that the Second Commandment (“You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath, or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them. For I the Lord your God am a jealous God.” Exodus 20:4 - 5) had been violated utterly. They made for themselves a metal plated idol in the shape of a bull, bowed down to it (worshipped it) clearly indicating their belief that it was god) sacrificed to it (further proving their belief that it had the power to bless and save them), openly stated that it represented the gods that they had chosen to believe in (thus, also, violating the First Commandment against worshipping any god but Yahweh), and attributed to the idol their rescue from Egypt, thus associating Yahweh syncretistically with the young bull, as if now, finally, Yahweh could

be properly worshiped and His presence properly represented among them in contrast to the inferior way that it had previously been manifest. Since God Himself had personally chosen His ways of manifestation in the past (fire, smoke, pillar, overpowering voice), the people's choice of a dumb idol which could do none of these things over the living God was also a rejection of His methods of demonstrating His presence. What they could see and touch at their convenience was what they wanted - a god who would let them live as they wished and have a good time when they wanted to, and who would not impose his covenant requirements upon them. Theirs was a foolish choice, reflecting badly on any people so self-absorbed and self-destructive as to make it.” (Stuart, pp. 668 - 669)

“And have made for themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf.” - Once again, the sinful action is not attributed to Aaron, the individual who actually constructed the calf figure. *“Those who gave the order, not Aaron who carried it out, are cited as the ones who fashioned the bull - calf YAHWEH discloses the true state of affairs; pressured by the people Aaron made the image. Not he, but the people are its real originator, its spiritual father.”* (Houtman, III, p. 645) Their choice of **“an idol cast in the shape of a calf”** was, as previously noted, fully consistent with the patterns of idol worship prevalent both among the Canaanites and the Egyptians focusing on the dual themes of potency and fertility among humans and throughout nature. Their attitudes and actions are a sobering demonstration of the influence of pagan culture upon the people of God throughout history. This sad episode further demonstrates the urgent need for an extended transition before the entry into the Promised Land during which they could be cleansed of the influence of four hundred years of Egyptian residency. The people’s rebellions against Moses, narrated in Exodus 16 and Numbers 14, for example, provide explicit evidence of the problem:



“Egyptian Golden Calf Idol”

“In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, ‘If only we had died by the Lord’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.’”
(Exodus 16:2 - 3)

“All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron and the whole assembly said to them, ‘If only we had died in Egypt, or in this desert! Why is the Lord bringing us to this land only to fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn’t it be better for us to go back to Egypt?’ And they said to each other, ‘We should choose a new leader and go back to Egypt!’” (Numbers 14:2 - 4)

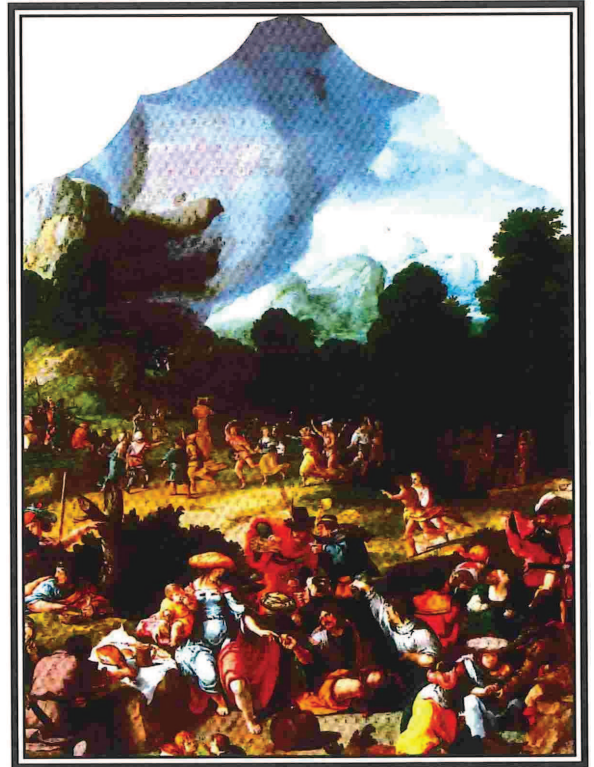
The ways of heathen Egypt, and their gilded memories of the good old days amid the comforts of Egypt have had a decisive influence upon the Israelites. Their perceptions of reality, their attitudes and actions, are still being defined and determined by the culture around them rather than by the Word of God. Until they are cleansed of that worldly influence they will not be capable of carrying out their responsibilities as the people of God.



“Moses Viewing the Revels of the Golden Calf” by Franz Fraencken

“A vigorous young bull seemed to the Egyptians an appropriate way to represent a truly powerful god. In other words, by their actions Aaron and the people showed themselves still to be ‘Egyptian Israelites’ rather than ‘Yahweh’s Israelites.’ They demonstrated that they were not really at home away from home but were beginning already to long for a reversion to the ways of living and thinking they grew up with and that in retrospect seemed comfortable, and indeed, better than what they were now experiencing. The people were, in other words, so wedded to their old culture that they could

manage to justify in their minds its false religion, even to the point of the type of animals used to represent a god, even though that religion had been proved false over and over again by Yahweh's mighty acts on their behalf right up to the present time. Old habits and ways of thinking die hard; in times of stress people often revert to them even though they are useless and destructive. Such are the limits of relying on human wisdom in a fallen world.” (Stuart, p. 669)



*“The Worship Of The Golden Calf”
by Lucas Van Leyden - 1520*

Aaron had attempted to salvage something of the disaster by declaring the worship of the calf to be **“a festival to LORD”** (32:5) thereby attempting to combine the calf with the worship of the LORD. God contemptuously dismissed this futile foolishness and identified the calf for what it actually was and what the people clearly perceived it to be – **“and have made themselves an idol.”**

“The calf, even if only intended as the pedestal of the invisible God of Israel, was very much the image of a living entity. It would inevitably divert human attention to itself and away from the invisible One it was meant to invoke. The popular mind would regard the image pedestal as an object endowed with divinity. By putting God back into nature, the people violated and nullified the fundamental distinctive idea of the religion of Israel.” (Sama, p. 204)

In His description to Moses of the ongoing rebellion in the camp, the Lord described the actions by which the people were acknowledging the image to be a god and quoted the very words of the idolaters which identified the golden calf as a god separate and distinct from the Lord: **“They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.’** The people had expressed their idolatrous convictions by according to this graven image the reverence and homage which belonged only to a deity – **“they bowed down to it.”** The terminology is the standard language for religious worship. They adored and fondled this statue as though it were actually divine, as if it provided them with direct access to and control over the power of the god. Their action in kneeling down before the statue demonstrated their belief that it was a god. Furthermore, by offering sacrifices to it, Israel expressed its allegiance to the calf deity and its confidence that in response to their offerings the calf would be able to fulfill their desires, and to bless and protect them. Even more blasphemously, in the frenzy of their orgiastic rites they ascribed their deliverance from Egyptian bondage to the calf idol and offered their praise and thanks to it for what the Lord had done.



“Moses Before the Lord Upon Mount Sinai”

Verses 9 - 10

“I have seen these people,” the LORD said to Moses, “and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave Me alone, so that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation.”

“I have seen these people,” the Lord said to Moses... God’s words sadly echo the first words which He had spoken to Moses at the burning bush. *“The Lord said, ‘I have indeed seen the misery of My people in Egypt.’”* (Exodus 3:7) In that instance God’s seeing had expressed His awareness of and His compassion for the suffering which the Israelites were enduring under the bondage of pharaoh and His resolve deliver them from their suffering. Now that which God’s sees is the wickedness and ingratitude of the people whom He had

rescued and chosen to be His own. The verb *“I have seen”* indicates more than mere awareness. It expresses a careful examination and assessment. One translator suggests the contemporary idiom *“I have taken a good look at these people”* as a more accurate rendering of the word in this context. *“In Hebrew the idiom ‘I have seen these people’ means ‘I am fully aware of what this people like’ or ‘I know all about this nation.’”* (Stuart, p. 670) The language does not suggest that God’s initial selection of Israel was ill - considered or based upon a casual or inadequate assessment. God’s omniscience precludes the possibility of any such interpretation. He has always been fully aware of the corrupt human nature which characterizes not only Israel but all of humanity. Unfortunately the unflattering characterization which follows could be equally applied to any and every nation throughout the world and across the sad history of mankind.

“And they are a stiff - necked people.” - This adjective occurs six times in the Hebrew Bible, all within the Torah, the five books of Moses. *“But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff - necked people and I might destroy you on the way.”* (Exodus 33:3) *“Tell the Israelites, ‘You are a stiff - necked people. If I were to go with you, even for a moment, I might destroy you.’”* (Exodus 33:5) *“Moses bowed at once to the ground and worshiped ... Let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, forgive our wickedness and our sin, and take us as Your inheritance.”* (Exodus 34:9) *“Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people.”* (Deuteronomy 9:6) *“And then the Lord said to me, ‘I have seen this people and they are a stiff-necked people indeed! Let Me alone so that I may destroy them and blot out their name from under heaven.’”* (Deuteronomy 13 - 14) It is significant to note that every one of these references is made in the context of the episode of the Golden Calf as the foremost demonstration of Israel’s stubborn rejection of God and willful determination to disobey Him and follow their own

desires. Variations of the term as a verb – “*to stiffen the neck*” - are found throughout the Old Testament typically in reference to the disobedience and unfaithfulness of the fathers in the wilderness. (Deuteronomy 10:16; 2 Kings 17:4; 2 Chronicles 30:8; Nehemiah 9:16, 17; Proverbs 29:1; Jeremiah 7:26; 17:23) The term originates in the context of a beast of burden which refuses to submit to the yoke, or which rejects the direction of its driver, no matter how severely it is punished, to turn from the path and move in its own direction. Accordingly, its origin in reference to the bull calf idol at Sinai is most appropriate, given the fact that oxen were the foremost draft animals throughout the ancient Near East. It denotes a particularly stubborn obstinacy in disobedience and defiance, which will not yield nor submit. In application to Israel it is often perceived to imply the defiant refusal to bow one’s head before the Lord, thereby acknowledging a humble submission to His Word and will.



The Lubavitcher Rebbe - Rabbi Menachem Schneerson

In this light, the persistent efforts of the rabbis to exempt the Jews from these indictments and to assert an inherent spiritual superiority over all the rest of humanity can be seen as tragic proof of the very corruption which Scripture here asserts. The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Schneerson, contends that the Hebrews were blameless in the worship of the calf all of which was instigated and carried out by the Egyptian gentiles whom Moses unwisely allowed to accompany the chosen people. The Rebbe argued that every Jew has an intrinsic, indissoluble link to God by virtue of his descent from Abraham:

“With this statement, Moses articulated a fundamental truth regarding every Jew’s intrinsic connection with God, inherited from the patriarchs and sealed at the Giving of the Torah. By virtue of our divine soul, we are all inherently and irrevocably bound to God, and are incapable of severing or denying – or even wanting to sever or deny - that bond. The Jew is able to contravene God’s will, even in the slightest way, only when this intrinsic bond recedes into his

subconscious and his conscious mind is overtaken by the temporary illusion that ignoring or denying this bond is somehow advantageous. But even then, deep down, the Jew remains faithful to his intrinsic bond with God. He knows that the illusion is a ruse, and refuses to be duped.” (Chmuash Shemot, p. 250)

This is the most blatant and outrageous expression of self - righteous based upon ethnic identity which could ever be imagined. No matter what you believe or what you do, as a Jew you cannot damage or destroy your bond to God. Those who are so foolish as to rely such intrinsic self - righteousness would be wise to heed the ancient warning of John the Baptist, God’s final prophet to Israel before the coming of the promised Messiah: **“And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.”** (Matthew 3:9)

“Now leave Me alone so that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them.” - The drama which ensues confronts us with the inscrutable mysteries of God and the incomprehensible way that an eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, sovereign chooses to interact with the finite beings whom He has created. Is it possible for such a God to change His mind, or to use the even more uncomfortable traditional language of the King James Bible, *“to repent”*? Most traditional commentators are compelled to reduce this interchange to the level of some sort of charade or test in order to affirm the Biblical attributes of the finite God. 19th Century Lutheran scholars Karl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitsch contend that this could only have been a test for Moses:

“God puts the fate of the nation into the hand of Moses, that he may remember his mediatorial office and show himself worthy of his calling. This condescension on the part of God, which placed the preservation or the destruction of Israel into the hands of Moses, coupled with a promise which left the fullest freedom to his decision constituted a great test for Moses, whether he would be willing to give up his own people, laden with guilt as they were, as the price of his own exaltation. Moses stood the test...But what if Moses had not stood the test?...The possibility of such a thing, however, is altogether an abstract thought; the case supposed could not possibly have occurred since God knows the hearts of His servants, and foresees what they will do, though notwithstanding His omniscience, He gives to human freedom room enough for self - determination, that He may test the fidelity of His servants. No human speculation, however, can fully explain the conflict between divine providence and human freedom.” (Keil/Delitsch, I, p. 550)

Douglas Stuart, in an even more tenuous effort to avoid the sense of the text, argues that by forbidding him to intervene God is actually inviting Moses to intervene, so that God would not have to destroy Israel as they deserved.



“Moses’ Intercession For the People Upon Sinai”

“In saying, ‘Now leave Me alone!’ God made Moses had not stood the test?...The possibility of such a thing, however, is altogether an abstract thought; the case supposed could not possibly have occurred since God knows the hearts of His servants, and foresees what they will do, though notwithstanding His omniscience, He gives to human freedom room enough for self-determination, that He may test the fidelity of His servants. No human speculation, however, can fully explain the conflict between divine providence and human freedom.” (Keil/Delitsch, I, p. 550)

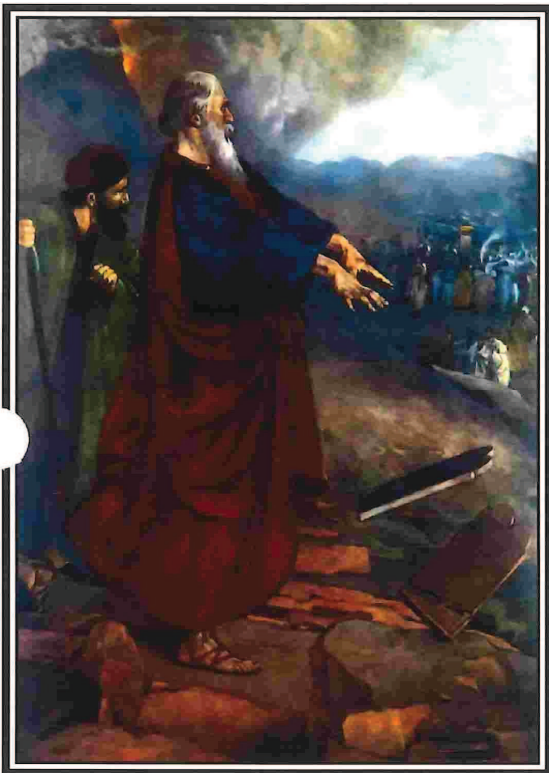
Douglas Stuart, in an even more tenuous effort to avoid the sense of the text, argues that by forbidding him to intervene God is actually inviting Moses to intervene, so that God would not have to destroy Israel as they deserved.

‘In saying ‘Now leave me alone,’ God made a rhetorical demand. He was challenging Moses rather than commanding him. Moses had no power to stop God from doing anything, so that there would have been no need whatever for God to ask permission of Moses to do something through the statement ‘leave me alone.’ Rather, it was a rhetorical way of saying to Moses ‘Here is what I will do unless you intervene.’ (Stuart, p. 670)

Victor Hamilton summarizes the assessments of his colleagues many of whom are even more blunt in their descriptions of what appears to them to be God’s devious manipulation of his prophet in this interchange:

“Cannot almighty God do what He wishes to do whether Moses is at His side or not? Why would a God who has promised to never leave or forsake us now say, ‘Leave Me alone?’” God Himself apparently believes that the presence of Moses at Sinai’s summit might throw a roadblock into God’s desired

judgement on the idolaters. As Kinlaw (2010:374) has put it: 'He (God) is saying that all that needs to happen to prevent His just anger from having its appropriate effect on these covenant breakers is for Moses to step in and intercede for them'; to which Kinlaw adds 'Will we leave Yahweh alone?' Moses will pray and then God will make some adjustment. O maybe God is using reverse psychology. Balentine (1989:606) calls the phrase a form of 'invitation by prohibition.' In his devotional book on prayer, Yancy (2006:94) similarly says, 'Moses hears that remark less as a command than as the sigh of a beleaguered parent who has reached the end of a tether, yet somehow wants to be pulled back - in other words, an opening stance for negotiation.'" (Hamilton, p. 583)

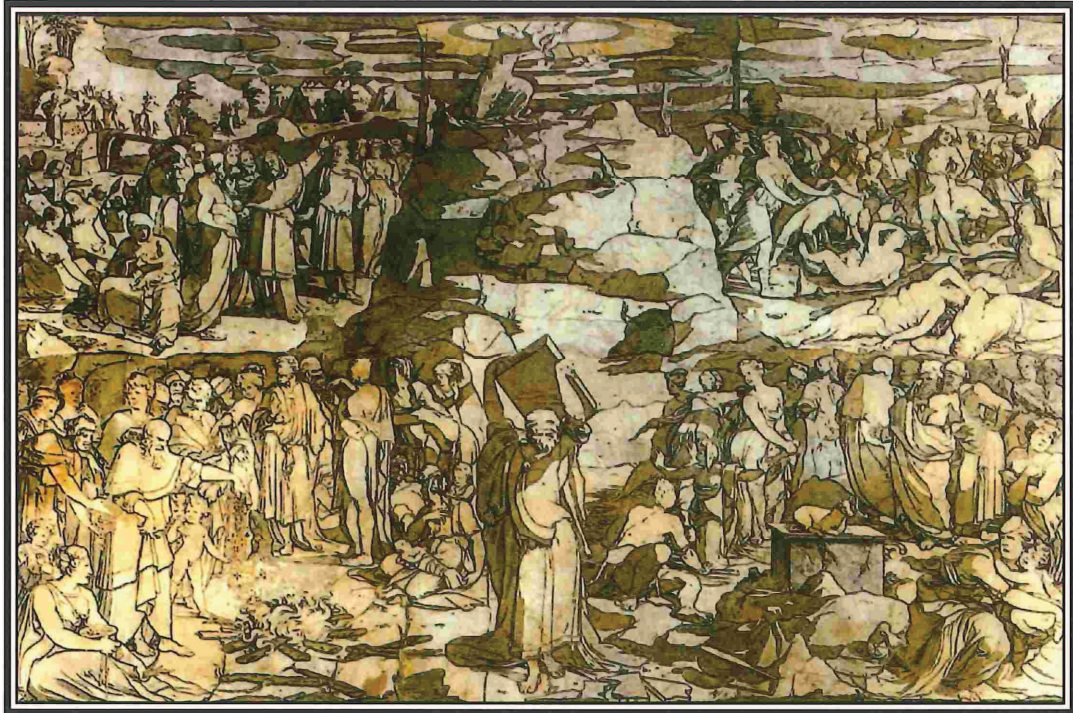


"Moses Descent From Sinai"

All of this nonsense, which appears to this author to have crossed the line between speculation and blasphemy, is the consequence of an unwillingness to simply allow the text to stand on its own terms with the humble acknowledgment that what is happening here far exceeds the comprehension of mortal men. God does not lie. Moses himself asserts the absolute truthfulness of God with specific reference to the fulfillment of His every intention in his citation of the Oracle of Balaam: ***"God is not a man that He should lie; no a son of man that He should change His mind. Does He speak, and then not act? Does He promise and then not fulfill?"*** (Numbers 23:19) When God states His intention to utterly destroy Israel and carry on the plan of salvation through the descendants of Moses, that is not a phony *"negotiating position."* It is the truth. Our inability to understand the ensuing conversation and its outcome does not and cannot be allowed to - alter the clear sense of the text. The

Word accurately reports the events which occurred and the words which were spoken. Our intellects are predictably boggled at this intersection of the finite and the infinite, but by faith we must remain ever willing to submit to the Word as the final standard of truth. Cornelius Houtman correctly asserts that taken as they stand the words of the text are unequivocally clear. They are in no way ambiguous:

"After reading 32:10 only one conclusion seems possible- the break with and the destruction of Israel are unavoidable. That YHWH might still change His mind appears out of the question. After all, He emphatically forbids Moses to defend Israel. Furthermore, He removes whatever residual impulse Moses might still have to plead for his people by holding out to him the promise that

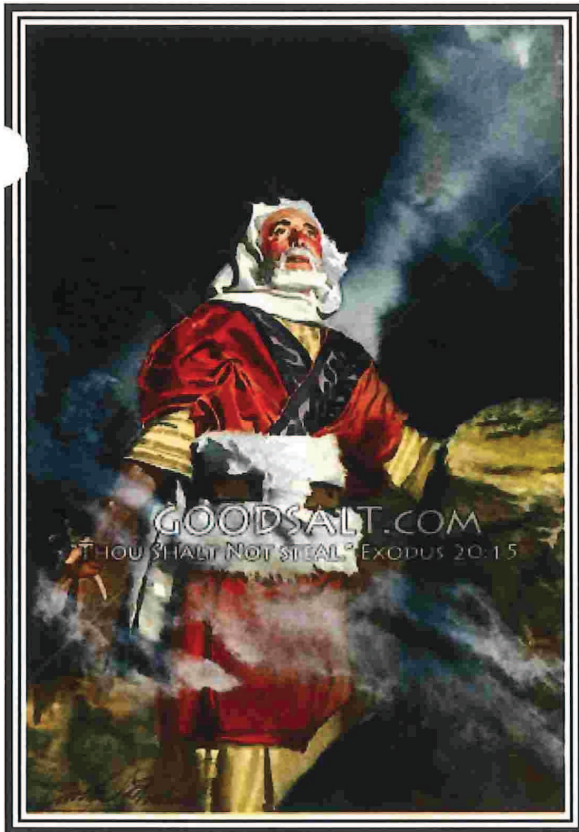


“The Story of the Golden Calf” by Domenico Beccafumi

he is predestined to be the patriarch of the people that are going to take Israel's place as the people of YHWH Given that prospect, who would still want to put in a good word for the so totally corrupt Israel? That is how the verse needs to be understood.” (Houtman, p. 647)

The dismissal of Moses – **“Now leave me alone”** - simply expresses the fact that Moses’ presence upon Sinai has become superfluous. In light of Israel’s flagrant disobedience, the covenant revelation which he had come to receive was no longer relevant or necessary. *“There is no purpose in continuing with covenant laws when the covenant has been shattered...Israel’s election is surely at stake because God is now prepared to annihilate her completely.”* (Childs, p. 567) There was no point in Moses’ continued presence as the Lord proceeded to implement His righteous judgement upon the apostate nation. The NIV’s translation – **“Now leave me alone so that I may...”** - suggests that Moses’ departure from God’s presence is necessary for the Lord to carry out His purpose. That implication is not present in the Hebrew text which simply states – *“Let Me be. I will show My indignation against them. I will destroy them entirely.”*

“So that My anger may burn against them and I may destroy them.” - Setting aside the interpretive paraphrase presented in the NIV (and a good many other English versions), the intention of the Lord is expressed in two stem verbs – **“My anger will burn against them”** and **“I will destroy them.”** The etymology of the first Hebrew word refers to the flaring nostrils of a face that is flushed bright red with fury. The burning anger of which God speaks is the righteous wrath of the Holy One over against the corruption of sin. This is not merely annoyance or personal irritation. Rather, because the essence of God is love, His



“Moses Intercession Upon Sinai”

angry response to sin the revulsion and rejection of that which will harm and destroy those whom He loves. The image of fire expresses the intensity of God’s anger - like the surging flames of a mighty fire - and, at the same time alludes to the ultimate penalty for sin in the eternal fires of Hell. This verb further indicates that because of the intensity of God’s wrath, action must be taken - judgement is forthcoming. So, for example, when Potiphar’s wife accused Joseph of sexually assaulting her, his response was burning anger which resulted in Joseph’s immediate imprisonment (Genesis 39:19 - 20) The destruction to which God refers is absolute. This Hebrew verb describes total annihilation, the extermination of the entire nation. When this sentence has been carried out every Jew, except Moses and Joshua and their families, will be dead.

“Then I will make you into a great nation.” –

The Lord’s third declaration of intent pertains to the future after His judgement upon apostate Israel. Moses will become the new Abraham, the patriarch of a new chosen people who will replace the extinct nation of Israel. So that there can be no confusion or uncertainty about the magnitude of this new beginning, the Lord uses the same language which had occurred in His original promise to Father Abraham: *“I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great and you will be a blessing; and whoever curses you I will curse; and all the peoples of the earth will be blessed through you.”* (Genesis 12:2 - 3) Later, in Numbers 12:3, the unique humility of Moses is noted: *(Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than any other man on the face of the earth.)*. That selfless humility is surely demonstrated here by the prophet’s complete lack of interest in this remarkable opportunity. William Propp does not exaggerate in the least when he characterizes this offer as *“Moses’ greatest temptation.”*

“This moment is Moses’ greatest temptation. Instead of fathering a somewhat obscure line of Levites, but otherwise serving, so to speak, as Israel’s midwife, Moses is offered the opportunity to supplant Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as the national ancestor...Moses’ selfless dealings with God set into harsh relief Israel’s recurrent ingratitude.” (Propp, II, p. 554)

Verses 11 - 14

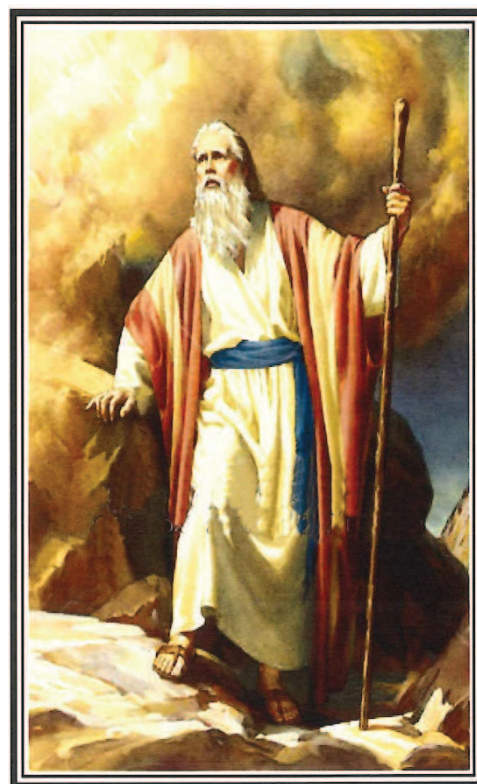
But Moses sought the favor of the Lord his God. “O Lord,” he said, “why should Your anger burn against Your people whom You brought out of Egypt with great power and

a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that He brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth.’ Turn from Your fierce anger, relent and do not bring disaster upon Your people. Remember Your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel to whom You swore by Your own self: ‘I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land, I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.’” Then the Lord relented and He did not bring upon His people the disaster He had threatened.”

“But Moses sought the favor of the Lord his God” - Up to this point Moses has been silent, no doubt overwhelmed by the immensity of Israel’s apostasy and the fury of God’s response to it. Now, however, he rallied his courage and in a most remarkable manner responded to the Lord. Moses would later recall that this intense intercession was prolonged over two periods of forty days:

“I lay prostrate before the Lord for those forty days and forty nights because the Lord has said He would destroy you. I prayed to the Lord and said, ‘O Sovereign Lord, do not destroy Your people, Your own inheritance that You redeemed with Your great power and brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand...But they are Your people, Your inheritance that You brought out with Your great power and You outstretched arm.’”
(Deuteronomy 9:25 - 29)

“Then once again I fell prostrate before the Lord for forty days and forty nights; I ate no bread and drank no water because of all the sin you had committed, doing what was evil in the Lord’s sight and provoking Him to anger. I feared the anger and wrath of the Lord for He was angry enough to destroy you. But again the Lord listened to me.” (Deuteronomy 9:18 - 19)

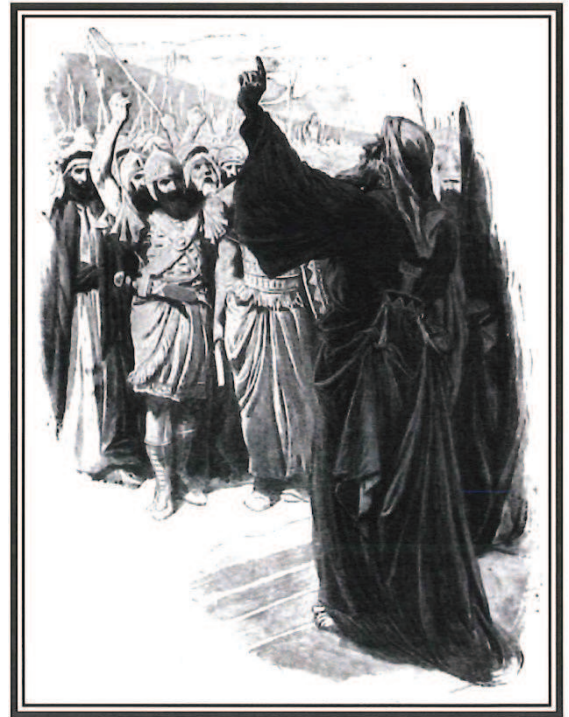


“Moses Pleading For Israel”

The phrase begins with the adversative conjunction **“But.”** Its use acknowledges that Moses has not obeyed the direct command of God. Instead of immediately departing as God proceeded to carry out His judgement – **“Now leave Me alone!”** - the prophet stood his ground and dared to address the Sovereign Lord. The text is careful to point out the bond of faith which united the man to his divine Master with the wondrous words **“the Lord his God.”** The magnificent message of grace which that all important pronoun **“his”** conveys ought to be treasured as a precious gift by every believer. The verb translated – **“sought the favor”** of literally means **“to stoke the face of”** drawn

from the same root as the term which had just been used to describe God's fiery wrath. Here the image is that of a loving hand reaching forth to soothe away the rigid creases of anguish and indignation which had furrowed the face of God as He looked down upon the flagrant ingratitude and defiant disobedience of His chosen people. The proper interpretation of this phrase is crucial for the understanding of that which follows. The broad variety of translation indicates the disparity of opinion among commentators. A few examples will suffice: *"But Moses tried to change the mind of his God, YHWH"* (Houtman): *"So Moses pleaded with GOD, his GOD."* (Schneerson): *"So Moses appealed to God."* (Stuart): *"But Moses implored the Lord his God."* (Sama): *"But Moses placated Yahweh, his deities face"* (Propp): *"And Moses implored the face of the Lord his God"* (Hamilton): *"But Moses sought to placate the Lord his God"* (Childs): *"But Moses humbly sought the favor of the Lord his God making no demands"* (Mackay): *"And Moses implored Yahweh, his Goel"* (Currid). Dr. Martin Franzman captured the wondrous mystery of that which Moses dares as he knelt before the wrathful God amid the fire and thunder of Sinai's crest: *"It is a mystery unfathomable, as God Himself is, that He should be persuaded by the remonstrances of fallible man to alter His announced course of action and to turn from wrath to compassion."* (Franzmann, p. 84)

"O Lord, he said, Why should Your anger burn against Your people..." - In Jeremiah 15:1 the Lord Himself would later identify Moses and Samuel as the two most effective intercessor/prophets of the Old Testament. The intercession of Samuel in the midst of Israel's Canaanite wars early in the reign of Saul is a classic example of the prophet's role as an intercessor for the nation. Like Moses before him, Samuel was well aware of the sinful unworthiness of his countrymen and had bitterly opposed their desire to establish a monarchy like all of their pagan neighbors. He was not at all pleased when the Lord acceded to the demands of His ungrateful people. (cf. 1 Samuel 8:1 - 21) Nonetheless, when the people came to him in their moment of crisis he interceded for them and sought the Lord's forgiveness on their behalf with such power and intensity that the people ***"stood in awe of the Lord and of Samuel"***:



"Samuel Praying For Israel"

"Now then, stand still and see this great thing the Lord is about to do before your eyes! I will call upon the Lord to send thunder and rain and you will realize what an evil thing you did in the eyes of the Lord when you asked for a king.' Then Samuel called upon the Lord, and that same day the Lord sent thunder and rain. So all the people stood in awe of the Lord and of Samuel. The people all said to Samuel, 'Pray to the

Lord your God for your servants that we will not die for we have added to all our sins the evil of asking for a king.’ ‘Do not be afraid,’ Samuel replied, ‘You have done this evil. Yet do not turn away from the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart. Do not turn away after useless idols. They can do you no good, nor can they rescue you, because they are useless. For the sake of His great Name, the Lord will not reject His people, because the Lord was pleased to make you His own. As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you.’” (1 Samuel 12:16 - 23)

In his appeal to the Lord Moses completely ignored God’s proposal that his own descendants become the successors of the Children of Israel as the chosen people of God. As previously noted, such humility is the true hallmark of greatness. Nor did he base his plea for mercy upon the Israelites themselves, or any merit of their own, thereby tacitly acknowledging the justice of God’s judgement upon them and their absolute unworthiness of the forgiveness which he implores. Once again, we learn more about Moses’ perspective on this issue in his retelling of these sad events in his farewell address to the nation in Deuteronomy 9. Having assured them that God would destroy their enemies and give them the Promised Land, Moses bluntly reminded them that they did not deserve any of the blessings which God would bestow upon them.

“After the Lord your God has driven them out before you, do not say to yourself, ‘The Lord has brought me here to take possession of this land because of my righteousness.’ No, it is on account of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is going to drive them out before you. It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations the Lord your God will drive them out before you to accomplish what He swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Understand then that it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people.” (Deuteronomy 9:4 - 6)



“Moses Gazing Sadly Down Upon the Worship of the Calf” by Arthur Szyk

Instead, the two questions which constitute the prophet’s appeal are based on a concern for the integrity of God, the mighty deeds of salvation which He has already performed on



“The Celebration At the Shores of the Red Sea” by Arthur Szyk

Israel’s behalf and the manner in which the pagan nations will misconstrue God’s judgement and dishonor His Name. The fundamental issue for Moses is the accomplishment of the divine plan for the salvation of mankind, even by means of this tragically flawed instrument.

“At no point does Moses excuse the people for their sin. He never suggests that God is overreacting with ‘much ado about nothing.’ His appeal is entirely directed toward God, and to His character, His reputation, and His past actions. Moses prays the way he prays not because of what he knows about his people, but he prays the way he does because of what he knows about his God.” (Hamilton, p. 539)

“‘O Lord’, he said, ‘why should your anger burn against Your people whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?’” - Moses began by boldly

restating, and the same time correcting, the initial words of God's judgement in Verse 7 in which Moses himself had been identified as the leader of the people who had brought them out of Egypt. Moses had been nothing more than a reluctant, insignificant instrument in the hand of ***“the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.”*** This gracious God had compassion on His suffering people and was prepared to exert His mighty power on their behalf: ***“I have indeed seen the misery of My suffering people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians.”*** (Exodus 3:7 - 8) These were the same unworthy, stiff - necked sinners who are now dancing and prancing at the base of the mountain. Moses also adds a reminder of the wondrous works which God had performed in the ten plagues and the deliverance at the Red Sea which had humbled the most ancient and powerful kingdom on the face of the earth – ***“whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand.”*** This had never been about the worthiness of Israel. Neither they, or their fathers before them, had ever been faithful, or grateful or worthy of anything that God had given them. But God had chosen them anyway, because He is gracious and merciful. Why destroy all of that now, because of this most recent demonstration of their chronic disobedience, ingratitude, and sin? Moses began where everything about God's dealings with mankind must begin with His wondrous love.

“Moses appeals to the divine attribute of mercy, and relies on the Lord’s paternal love for His people. They are, after all, Thy people whom Thou hast chosen and concerning whom Thou didst say to me, ‘Israel is My son, My firstborn’ - the people whom Thou Thyself hast brought forth out of the land of Egypt, and when I brought them out from there, I did so at Thy bidding and at fulfillment of Thy mission, and in the final analysis, it was Thou who didst bring them forth with great power and with a mighty hand, for my humble powers were insufficient for such a tremendous undertaking. Let not Thy work, pray; which Thou hast wrought by Thy power and might be in vain! Thus, the first reason for his plea for mercy was the Lord’s own love for His people.”
(Cassutto, p. 416)

“And why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth.’” – Moses’ second argument pertains to the perception of pagan nations, particularly that of the Egyptians from whom God had so dramatically liberated Israel. Once again the question opens with the interrogative ***“Why”***. It expresses the prophet’s appeal that the Lord reconsider based upon the broader implications of imposing a catastrophic judgement upon the Children of Israel. The fact that any man would dare to make such an appeal to God is not only mind boggling but breath-taking. Egypt had been humiliated in an unprecedented manner by the series of plagues, each of which was specifically directed at one of the god or goddesses of the Egyptian pantheon. The culmination of that humiliation was the fact that Pharaoh had been compelled to acknowledge the superiority of the God of Israel by yielding to Yahweh’s demand that His people be set free. The emphatic exclamation point at the end of that excruciating process was the divine destruction of pharaoh and his entire host in the waters of the Red Sea. This had been all the more shameful for Egypt because it had been accomplished not by the Israelites themselves but by their God. Yahweh did what the gods of Egypt - including the divine pharaoh himself - were incapable of doing. He protected His people and He destroyed their enemies. If that were now to be reversed, and Israel itself



“The Tenth Plague - The Angel of Death” by Arthur Hacker

was destroyed, the Egyptians would be able to gloat that the God of Israel had acted **“with evil intent.”** The verb **“Why should the Egyptian say”** more specifically means to jeer at someone or to insult them with good reason. In this instance the scorn is not directed at Israel or her disobedience, which would have been of little interest to the Egyptians. Instead, their mockery would have been directed at God Himself. The annihilation of Israel at Sinai would have enabled the Egyptians to deny their humiliation by the national deity of an insignificant nation of slaves. Instead, they would have been able to claim the Yahweh

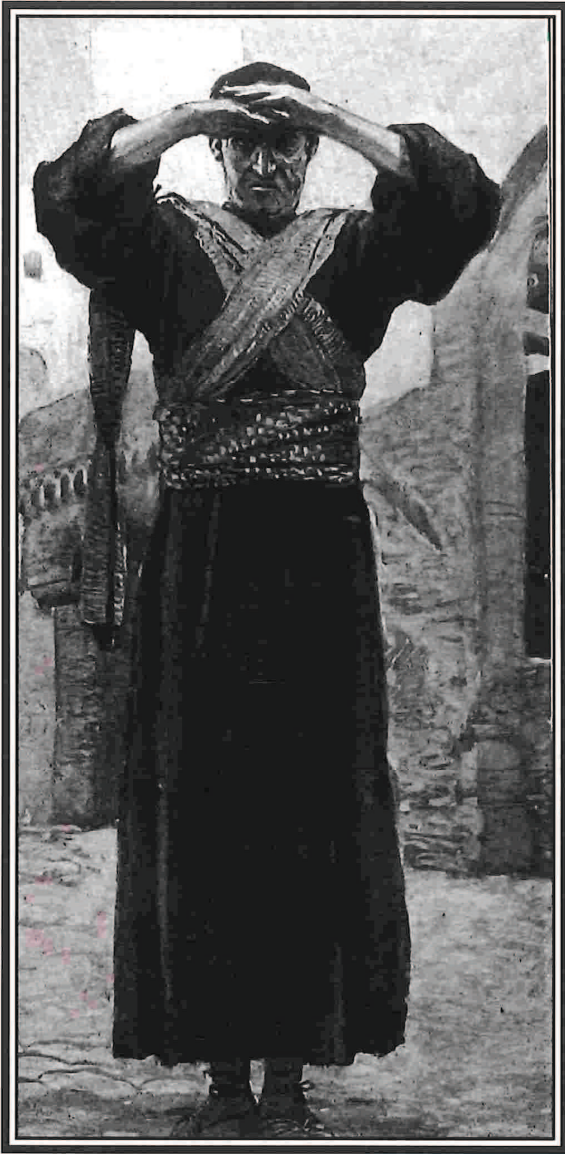


*“Pharaoh Grieving The Death of His Son And Heir”
by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema*

was nothing more than a wicked demon whose intent from the beginning had been to lure Israel out into the desert to destroy them. In this way it would have been possible to mitigate their shame and minimize the failure of their own gods. They cannot defy Yahweh’s power but they could corrupt His motives and challenge His integrity as a god who keeps His promises:

“In what sense would YHWH’s reputation have been destroyed...There is no reason for letting the Egyptians say that YHWH is a failing, weak god. The exodus as an impressive feat remains uncontested. YHWH’s reputation as the liberator who leads Israel to a land flowing with milk and honey is at issue. YHWH’s reputation as Israel’s liberator is tied to Israel’s existence. Israel’s demise kills YHWH’s reputation. The Egyptians will draw the conclusion that YHWH is an evil genius who uses His power to work evil. YHWH’s reputation as the God who is faithful to His promises is at stake.” (Houtman, p.649)

The Lord narrated the sad history of Israel’s persistent unfaithfulness and disobedience at the time of the Exodus and at Sinai to His prophet Ezekiel. That story reflected the theme of Moses’ second plea here at Sinai as God declared to Ezekiel again and again that He pardoned his rebellious children despite their sins **“for the sake of My Name”** so that it would not be profaned before the nations. God would not allow the sinfulness of His people to call His own honor and integrity into question:



*“The Prophet Ezekiel”
by James Tissot*

“But they rebelled against Me and would not listen to Me...So I said I would pour out my wrath upon them and spend My anger against them in Egypt. But for the sake of My Name I did what would keep it from being profaned in the eyes of the nations they lived among and in whose sight I had revealed Myself to the Israelites by bringing them out of Egypt. Therefore I led them out of Egypt and brought them into the desert. I gave them My decrees and made known to them My laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them...Yet the people of Israel rebelled against Me in the desert. They did not follow My decrees but rejected My laws. So I said I would pour out My wrath on them and destroy them in the desert. But for the sake of My Name I did what would keep it from being profaned in the eyes of the nations in whose sight I had brought them out...Their hearts were devoted to their idols, yet I looked on them with pity and did not destroy them or put an end to them in the desert.”
(Ezekiel 20: 8 - 20 *passim*)

The concept recurs in Ezekiel 36 where the Lord declares that He will bring an end to the exile despite the unworthiness of Israel in order to vindicate the honor of His holy name:

“And wherever they went among the nations they profaned My holy Name, for it was said of them, ‘These are the Lord’s people, and yet they had to leave His land. I had concern for My holy Name which the House of Israel profaned among all the nations where they had gone. Therefore, say to the House of Israel, ‘This is what the sovereign Lord says: It is not for your sake, O House of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of My holy Name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. I will show the holiness of My great Name which has been profaned among the nations, the Name which you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the sovereign Lord, when I show Myself holy through you before their eyes.” (Ezekiel 36:20 - 23; cf. also 20:8 - 20)

Martin Luther observed that this is the consistent theme of the bold prophet intercessors

who stood before the Lord and pleaded with Him to forego the judgement which Israel deserved. In his Preface to the Book of Joel, Luther described the pattern and used Moses on Sinai as a paramount example of that pattern at work. While acknowledging that this is “*a very difficult question*” the reformer explained:

“This is how the prophets always urge on the Lord - through His own personal glory. Surely this is a strong and powerful prayer before God. It is as if he were saying, ‘What is finally going to happen, O Lord, if You will have destroyed all of us? The matter will bring You into disgrace. Your glory will be in peril, for this affair will provide the unbelieving nations with an opportunity to blaspheme against Your people and against Your holy Word. If we should all perish, the shame would be Yours. ‘He certainly is pressing God hard with this prayer. This is something Moses knew too. In a similar fashion he objected to the Lord who intended to destroy Israel. He said that it was a matter of His glory - that it would be imperiled if He would thus destroy the very people He had chosen for Himself and had declared His own clearly with many signs and miracles. For Moses speaks as follows in Exodus 32:12 – ‘Why should the Egyptians say, ‘With evil intent did He bring them forth, to slay them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth?’ Etc. Undoubtedly today, for the sake categories His own glory He also spares us who hold His Gospel in contempt. Otherwise He would have punished us long ago already. This is not a common question, but a very difficult one.”
(Luther, AE, 18, 101)

It must be carefully observed that such an appeal to God’s glory is never an appeal to personal ego or pride. William Propp’s assertion that “*Moses’ second argument appeals to God’s vanity*” (Propp, II, p. 555) is blasphemous nonsense. Vanity is “*having an excessively high opinion of one’s own appearance, abilities, worth, etc., delighting in or desirous of attracting the admiration of others, conceited, proud.*” (Oxford English Dictionary, p. 3539) Such categories are exclusively human and cannot, by definition, be relevant to the Almighty. The concern here is not a divine need for human approval. Anyone who dares to make such an assertion is a fool. Instead, the substance of Moses’ concern is the inaccurate conclusions which would be drawn by sinful men as to the nature and justice of God, thereby providing- to use Luther’s well chosen words – “*an opportunity to blaspheme against Your people and against Your holy Word.*” Such mis - perceptions would then become significant stumbling blocks to the salvation of “*the unbelieving nations.*” God’s ultimate concern is always salvation. He does not need us or our approval. But we most desperately need Him. Without His undeserved love every descendant of Adam is doomed to the everlasting torment of Hell. Moses’ prayer is so powerfully effective because, once again it appeals to God’s love and His desire for the salvation often. This prayer works because it was prayed “*not for selfish reasons but because of a desire to see God’s will accomplished.*” (Stuart, p. 672)

“Turn from Your fierce anger; relent, and do not bring disaster on Your people.” – This is the point and the substance of Moses’ prayer. The prophet’s plea is stated with straightforward clarity. Using the very language of Yahweh’s condemnation, Moses pleaded for God to change His mind. The boldness of his appeal before the Lord is unparalleled in Holy Writ:

“I am not aware of anybody in the First Testament, maybe in the Second too, who speaks as bluntly to God as does Moses on this occasion. God has earlier spoken of Israel ‘turning away’ from His commands (vs. 8). Now Moses speaks of the Lord’s need to ‘turn away from’ His fierce anger. (vs. 12)...Furthermore Moses asks God to repent/relent/change His mind. And God does as Moses asks! (vs.14) I believe this is the only instance in Scripture of a prophetic intercessor’s asking God to repent only to read that God subsequently does repent...Hebrews 4:16 urges us to come boldly unto the throne of grace. But is Exodus 32:12 taking that truth a bit too far? I think not, if the pray - er is somebody like Moses. Only those who have stood for forty days and nights alone with a holy God, only those who are God’s confidants, will pray at this depth and with this audacity.” (Hamilton, p. 539)



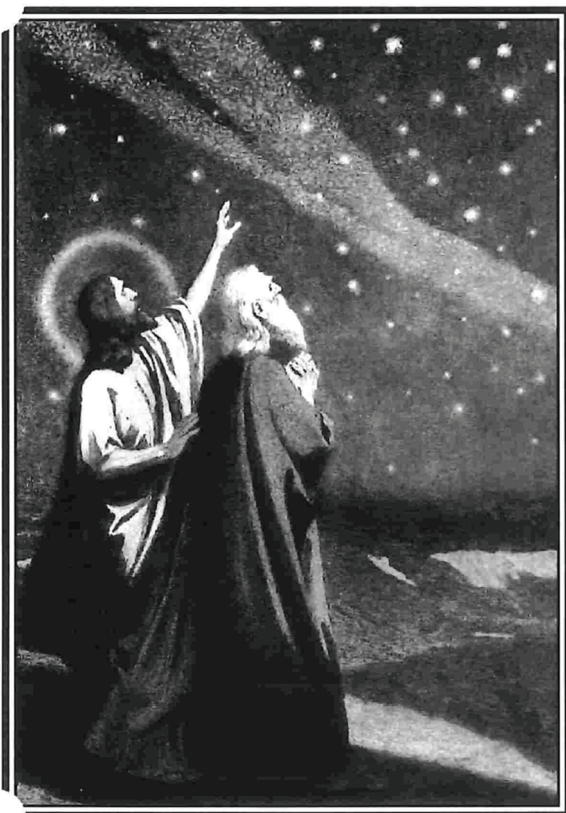
“The Rescue Of Isaac” by James Tissot

“Remember Your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel to whom You swore by Your own self...” - Finally, Moses recalled the promises which the Lord had made to the patriarchs of the great nation which He would raise up from them and bestow upon them the land of Canaan. The enumeration of the of the patriarchs as **“Abraham, Isaac and Israel”** is very unusual. Most probably the substitution of **“Israel”** in this instance in place of the customary Jacob is intended to connect the Children of Israel more closely to the patriarchs. The fathers are identified as **“Your servants”** This reminder is not an appeal to the merits of the fore-fathers, none of whom were without their own flaws and failures. Rather, as the

text's emphasis upon the sacred oath which God had sworn to each of these men indicates, Moses is encouraging God to affirm the reliability of His promises by sparing the descendants of these men. Rabbinic tradition errs dangerously in its contention that Moses is here reminding God of the combined good works of the fathers as a meritorious basis which has earned the pardon which is requested. As one rabbi paraphrases the intent of the petition:

“If you wish to execute them from transgressing the Ten Commandments then let the merit of Abraham - who has not yet received his reward for passing his ten tests - counterbalance their demerits. If you wish to execute them by burning, let the merit of Abraham who submitted himself to fire for your sake - counterbalance this. If you wish to execute them by the sword, let the merit of Isaac - who offered his neck to his father's knife - counterbalance this. If you wish to punish them by sending them into exile, let the merit of Jacob – who fled to Haran in order to secure the continuation of the patriarchal line - counterbalance this.” (Schneerson, p. 250)

Such egregious work righteousness is completely contrary to Bible teaching which teaches throughout Scripture that the only basis for man's relationship with God is God's undeserved love, His precious grace, extended to us by faith in the Messiah, Jesus Christ.



*“God's Promise To Abraham”
by Rudolf Schäfer*

“To whom You swore by Your own self” alludes to the standard Old Testament idiom for God making a most solemn promise. Human beings swear by something greater than themselves, namely God. There is nothing greater than God and so He must swear by His own holy name and His own absolute truthfulness. The phrase was explained by the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews in the context of God's commitment to Abraham as the basis for the certainty of our hope in Christ:

“When God made His promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater to swear by, He swore by Himself, saying, I will surely bless you and give you many descendants. And so, after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised. Men swear by someone greater than themselves and the oath confirms what is said, and puts an end to all argument. Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of His purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, He

confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged.” (Hebrews 6:13 - 18)

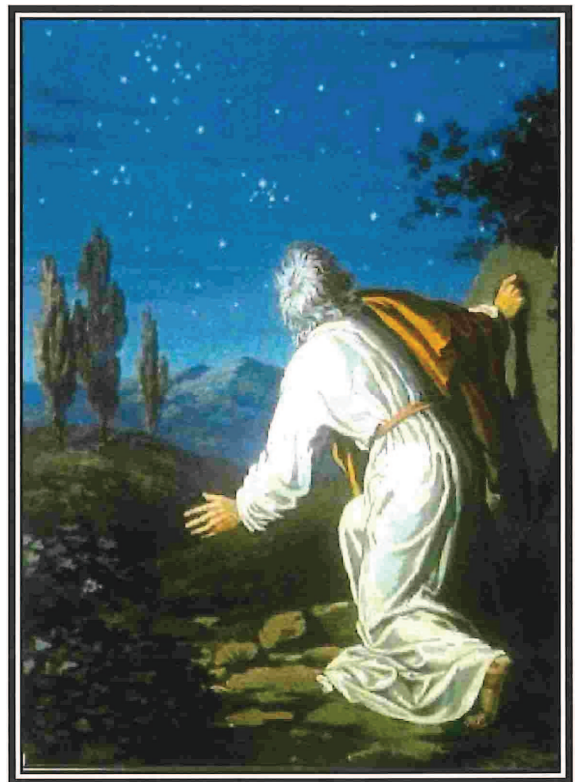
God swore by Himself, for example, in the reaffirmation of God’s promise to Abraham after he demonstrated his willingness to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah.

“The Angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time and said, ‘I swear by Myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your Offspring all the nations of the earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed Me.’” (Genesis 22:15 - 18)

This phrase becomes the standard expression for the most reliable and steadfast commitment from God with particular reference to the covenant and its fulfillment. ***“By Myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked. Before Me every knee will bow and every tongue will swear. They will say of Me, ‘In the Lord alone are all righteousness and strength.’”*** (Isaiah 45:23) ***“But if you do not obey these commands, declares the Lord, I swear by Myself that this palace will become a ruin.”*** (Jeremiah 22:5)

“I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance for ever.” Moses’ summary of God’s covenant promise to the patriarchs includes three components: (1) countless descendants; (2) possession of the land, and (3) the land would belong to their descendants forever. A brief sampling of the covenant promises to Abraham will indicate the accuracy of Moses summary:

“Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south and east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go walk through the length and breadth of the land for I am giving it to you.” (Genesis 13:14 - 16)



“Your Descendants Shall Be As Many As the Stars In the Heavens”

“He took him outside and said, ‘Look up at the heavens and count the stars - if indeed you can count them.’ Then He said to him, ‘so shall your offspring be.’” (Genesis 15:5)

“I will make you very fruitful. I will make nations from you and kings will come from you. I will establish My covenant as an everlasting covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan where you are now an alien I will give to you and to your descendants after you, and I will be their God.” (Genesis 17:6 - 8)

Moses appeals to the Lord to remain faithful to His promise despite the flagrant, constant unfaithfulness of His people. In fact, the contrast between the two will actually serve to highlight the difference between God and man all the more boldly. The tender love and compassion of God for His people, a love they forever disdained and abused is most poignantly expressed in Hosea Chapter 11 as the Lord recounted the long, sad history of His dealings with His chosen people, beginning with Moses and the exodus. This story becomes all the more tragic, given the fact that it is told on the eve of the final destruction of the Northern Kingdom as the longsuffering of God has finally come to its bitter end:

“When Israel was a child I loved him, and out of Egypt have I called My son. But the more I called Israel, the further they went from Me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images. It was I who



“Out Of Egypt Have I Called My Son” by David Roberts

taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms but they did not realize that it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them...My people are determined to turn from Me. Even if they call to the Most High, He will by no means exalt them. How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I had you over Israel?...My heart is changed within Me; all My compassion is aroused. I will not carry out My fierce anger, nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim. For I am God and not man - the Holy One among you. I will not come in wrath...Ephraim has surrounded Me with lies, the House of Israel with deceit. And Judah is unruly against God, even against the faithful Holy One...I am the Lord your God who brought you up out of Egypt...The Lord used a prophet to bring Israel up from Egypt, by a prophet He cared for him. But Ephraim has bitterly provoked Him to anger; his Lord will leave upon him the guilt of his bloodshed and will repay him for his contempt.” (Hosea 11:1 - 12 passim; 12:9, 13 - 14)



*“Moses' Descent From Sinai”
by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld*

The truthfulness of God is an essential component of His divine being. In this instance, of course, God’s annihilation of the Israelites would not have actually contradicted His covenant promises to the patriarchs. It is Israel who has broken the covenant. It is Israel who has been untruthful and unfaithful in their relationship with the Lord. In this final appeal Moses is pleading with God to recall the gracious love which caused Him to enter into covenant with these completely unworthy people in the first place, and to recognize the damage that could be done, in the distorted view of sinful man, to His own credibility in the eyes of the world, if the people whom He had chosen to be His own were now to be destroyed. This would, in tum, become yet another excuse to sinners to spurn God’s love and reject the plan of salvation which their gracious Creator has established.



“The Worship Of The Golden Calf” by Poussin

“Then the Lord relented and did not bring upon His people the disaster which He had threatened.” - The brief statement of Verse 14 indicates the positive result of Moses’ intercession before the Lord. The insertion of this comment in the narrative at this point serves to conclude the report of Moses’ first intercession before the Lord and indicate its success. Another is yet to follow. Scripture makes it very clear that this divine change of mind was very real. This was not merely some sort of test for Moses or a dramatic demonstration of the depth of God’s anger toward Israel’s betrayal. The survival of Israel actually hung in the balance. If Moses’ intercession had not been successful, or if he had accepted God’s offer to create a new nation from his own descendants, the entire nation of Israel would have been annihilated. Psalm 106 includes this observation in its description of Israel’s chronic unfaithfulness:

“At Horeb they made a calf and worshiped an idol cast from metal. They exchanged their Glory for an image of a bull which eats grass. They forgot the God who saved them, who had done great things in Egypt, miracles in the land of Ham and awesome deeds by the Red Sea. So He said He would destroy them - had not Moses, His chosen one, stood in the breach before Him, to keep His wrath from destroying them.” (Psalm 106:19 - 23)

Variations of the phrase ***“the Lord relented”*** occur thirty four times in the Old Testament. The verb means to change one’s mind, to repent, to rescind a decision or judgement. The NIV typically translates the term as ***“to relent”*** while the KJV uses the translation ***“to repent”*** in its traditional sense of changing one’s mind or altering a decision. Whatever translation is preferred it is clear that this is ***“anthropomorphic”*** terminology, that is, speaking of God or His actions as though He were a man. While such language is unavoidable, given the limits of human comprehension, we must always remain aware of

its limitations. It is the best we can do, so to speak, in describing God, but it is always, inherently inadequate in expressing realities which go far beyond our the limits of comprehension.

“‘Relent’ (in the AV ‘repent’) is an anthropomorphism (found later in Jeremiah 26:19 and Jonah 3:9). If we speak of God at all we must use human terms regarding Him. These undoubtedly are colored by our limitations, but since God has made us in His image (Gen. 1:26), meaningful communication can exist and can convey adequately to us what God intends for us to know. It is not that God is being forced to adopted a new course of conduct because of some flawed decision of the past, or because of some unforeseen circumstance having arisen. It was the Lord Himself who opened up the way for the threat against His people to be removed by the appropriate action of the covenant mediator. It was because Moses was so close to God as to share in His purpose that he expressed appropriate arguments and was able to intercede effectively on behalf of Israel.” (Mackay, p. 536)

In this instance, that which God changed His mind about was the annihilation of the Children of Israel. In twelve of the thirty four uses of this verb the object of God’s repentance the Hebrew noun “*naham.*” Depending on the context, the term may refer to evil, calamity, disaster, judgement or destruction. In this instance the specific reference is to **“the disaster He had threatened.”** One of the most dramatic indications of the sense of the term can be seen in 1 Chronicles 21:14 - 16 where God compassion on the plight of His people moved Him to rescind their punishment –

“So the Lord sent a plague on Israel, and seventy thousand men of Israel fell dead. And God sent an angel to destroy Jerusalem. But as the angel was doing so, the Lord saw it and was grieved because of the calamity, and said to the angel who was destroying the people, ‘Enough! Withdraw your hand!’ The angel of the Lord was then standing at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. David looked up and saw the, Angel of the Lord standing between heaven and earth with a drawn sword in his hand extended over Jerusalem. Then David and the elders, clothed in sackcloth, fell face down.”



King David Before the Angel of the Lord - 1 Chronicles 21 – Christoph Weigel Bible Engraving

As subsequent events will demonstrate, God has only King relented insofar as the total destruction of the nation. The people have not been forgiven, and blood

will still be shed as those most directly involved in the apostasy will be killed. Although the Exodus text does not specifically mention this aspect of Moses' intercession, Deuteronomy 9 also mentions that God was planning to slay Aaron for his role in the creation of the calf. ***“And the Lord was angry enough at Aaron to destroy him, but at that time I prayed for Aaron too.”*** (Deuteronomy 9:20)

Verses 15 - 20

Moses turned and went down the mountain with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands. They were inscribed on both sides, front and back. The tablets were the work of God. The writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets. When Joshua heard the noise of the people shouting, he said to Moses, “There is the sound of war in the camp!” Moses replied, “It is not the sound of victory, it is not the sound of defeat, it is the sound of singing that I hear.” When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain. And he took the calf they had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it.

“Moses turned and went down the mountain...” - The manner in which God indicated to Moses that He had relented in His intention to destroy the nation is not detailed. The fact that Moses now departed, however, indicated that he recognized at least this portion of his intercession to have been successfully concluded. The text does not indicate specific instruction from God. One can only assume that some direction was provided, and that God wanted to Moses to see for himself that which the people had done and to put a stop to it, before their conversations continued. In any case, Moses descends from the mountain



“Moses' Descent From Sinai With the Law” by Larson



“God Enthroned Upon Sinai With the Ten Commandments” by Gerome

toward the encampment below. The phrase **“Moses turned”** indicates that the prophet who had been standing upon the crest of the mountain looking up toward the Glory of God which was manifest above Sinai’s peak now redirected his attention toward the people, as he made his careful climb down the rugged slope.

“With the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands.” - The text places particular emphasis on the fact that Moses carried the Tablets of the Ten Commandments with him. The fact that he would do so indicates that after his intercession with the Lord the covenant between God and Israel remained intact. The detailed description of the Tablets is not relevant to these events. It is included here to impress upon the reader the unique sanctity of Moses’ burden and thereby the horror of the tragedy which is about to take place when the enraged prophet shattered that which the hand of God Himself had fashioned upon the stones at the base of the mountain. We had been previously informed of the existence of the two tablets and the fact that they had been personally inscribed by God at the conclusion of the previous chapter: **“When the Lord finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, He gave him the two Tablets of the Testimony, the Tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God.”** (Exodus 31:18) The additional information that each tablet was inscribed on both front and back is now added with the assertion that both the tablets themselves and the letters etched upon them was the personal handiwork of the Lord. **“They were inscribed on both sides, front and back. The tablets”** were the work of God; the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets. The deliberate repetition serves to drive home the wonder of that which Moses now held in his hands. Douglas Stuart does not indulge in overstatement when he identifies these two tablets as **“the most valuable material thing on earth at that time.”**

“Most of vss. 15 - 16 reminds the reader that the tablets of the Ten Words/Commandments were unique in that God wrote them Himself, as opposed to the laws Moses wrote on other tablets or papyrus or leather at

God's dictation... These two tablets were the most valuable material thing on earth at that time, as the reader is now clearly informed, so that later, when Moses breaks them, the reader can appreciate the severity of the sin that would have caused him to do something so destructive to something so precious." (Stuart, p. 674)

As pointed out in the notes for Chapter 31, the fact that there were two tablets, that they were inscribed on both sides, and that stone was the material used for the documents all accurately reflect the historic practice of the ancient Near East as revealed by archaeology. Each of the two tablets contained a complete copy of the commandments - contrary to the widespread assumption that commandments one thru five were on the first tablet and six thru ten on the second. The Decalogue took the form of a treaty between a king/master (God) and his servant/vassal (Israel). The traditional practice was to provide each of the parties to the agreement with their own original copy, thus the two tablets. In this instance, the tablets would be kept in the Holy of Holies within the Ark of the Covenant, the place where God deigned to dwell among His chosen people. The fact that both sides were inscribed, given the brevity of the commandments themselves, suggests that the print was

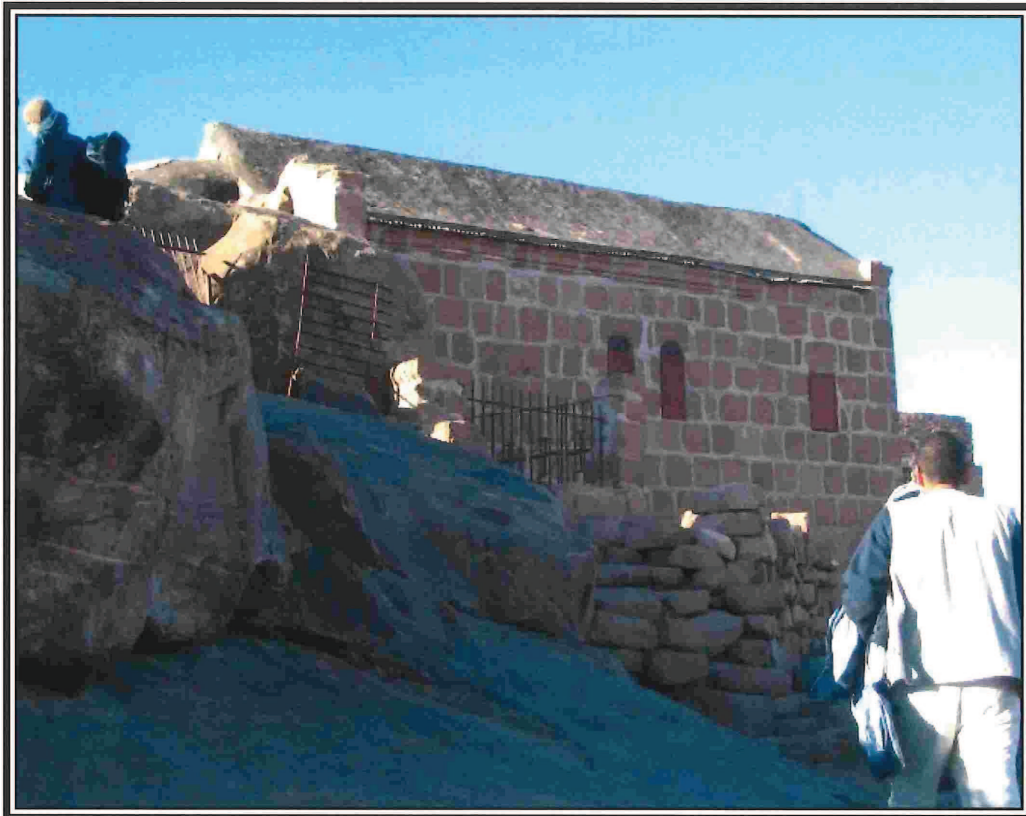
intentionally quite large. This would enable the tablets to be displayed before a crowd and read by them. At the same time the large writing would completely fill both faces of the tablets so that nothing could be subsequently added to them, thus expressing both the sanctity and the sufficiency of the perfect Law of God.



"Moses Bearing The Sacred Tablets" by Tissot

"The Ten Words/Commandments were designed to be a primary and fully sufficient locus of covenant expectation, lasting and settled, to which all the rest of the laws were explanatory rather than strictly supplemental or substitutionary. In other words, if a person truly and fully understood the Ten Commandments, he or she would understand the remaining 611 commandments." (Stuart, p. 675)

This is precisely the point which our Savior made to His legalistic critics in Matthew 22:37 - 40. The choice of stone further indicated the permanence and importance of this covenant statement. Four different writing surfaces were used in the ancient Near East, stone, clay, leather, and papyrus. The more important the document the more durable the surface upon which it was recorded. The use



“The Shrine of the Tablets Erected On the Crest Of Sinai by Monks of the Monastery of St. Catherine At the Site Where Moses Is Traditionally Believed to Have Received Two Tablets From God”

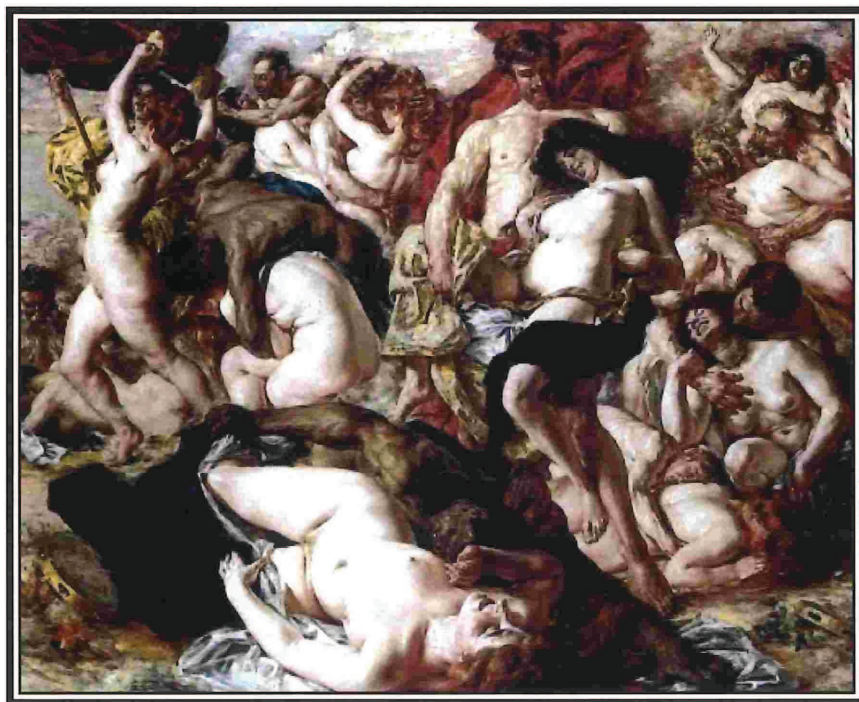
of stone was accordingly reserved for only the most precious and permanently significant texts, given the extreme difficulty, particularly in the primitive technology of the period, of inscribing a text in stone. The modern expression – “*etched in stone*” is still used to describe to describe a statement or agreement which cannot be changed or altered in any way. Scripture does not reveal information in regard to the type of stone or the size of the two tablets. Hebrew tradition tended to ascribe fantastic supernatural characteristics to the tablets. They were believed to have been fashioned of the same glowing sapphire gemstone which provided the foundation for the heavenly throne of God. Dr. Louis Ginzberg’s classic study *The Legends of the Jews* summarized the information in the midrashim as follows:

“Moses departed from the heavens with the two tables upon which the Ten Commandments were engraved, and just as the words of it were by nature Divine, so too are the tables on which they are engraved. These were created by God’s own hand on the dusk of the first Sabbath at the close of the creation, and were made of a sapphire - like stone. On each of the two tables are the Ten Commandments four times repeated, and they were engraved in such a way that the letters were legible on both sides, for like the tables, the writing and the pencils for inscription too were of heavenly origin. The particles of the stone which were completely circumscribed to form the letters remained perfectly suspended in their places, although they were no longer linked to the

stone. Between the separate commandments were noted down all the precepts of the Torah in all their particulars, although the tables were not more than six hands in length and as much in width. It is another of the attributes of the tables that although they are fashioned of the hardest stone, they can still be rolled up like a scroll. When God handed the tables to Moses, He seized them by the top third, whereas Moses took hold of the bottom third, but one third remained open, and it was in this way that the divine radiance was shed upon Moses' face.” (Ginzberg, III, p. 118)

All of these intriguing traditions notwithstanding, it is evident that the tablets must have been small enough for Moses to carry as he made his way down the steep slope.

“When Joshua heard the noise of the people shouting, he said to Moses...” – Exodus 24:13 had noted that Joshua accompanied Moses on his journey up the mountain. Evidently he now proceeded all the way to the peak, but had been left behind part way up the slope to await his master’s return. As the pair continued their descent the tumult from the encampment became increasingly apparent. As Israel’s military commander, Joshua’s first thought was that a military attack was under way and what they heard was the sound of battle – ***“There is the sound of war in the camp.”*** Given the nature of the pagan revelry in which the people were engaged, his mistake is understandable. Drunkenness, the blast of shrill music, frenzied choruses of lustful celebration, wild sexual orgies, and the violence which would have inevitably resulted from such things would indeed have produced a blast of noise which sounded very much like a battle in progress. But Moses, who had already been informed by the Lord as to what was happening, quickly corrected his aide: ***“It is not the sound of victory; it is not the sound of defeat; it is the sound of singing I hear.”***



“Bacchanalia” by Leveque



“Greek Frenzy Worshipping Bacchus, The God Of Wine”

The prophet rules out both of the two alternative possibilities, if the noise were military in nature – ***“It is not the sound of victory, it is not the sound of defeat.”*** As will soon be revealed, the source of the racket is much more serious than warfare. The NIV’s translation ***“the sound of people shouting”*** unnecessarily restricts the meaning of the Hebrew term. The word is much more general, referring to the tumult caused by any boisterous disorder among a large number of people. Dr. Houtman offers the fitting translation – *“It is the sound of partying that I hear.”* The magnitude of the sound also suggests that massive numbers of people were involved in this revelry. This was not an isolated group indulging in the pagan worship of the calf idol. Many, most probably most, of the nation had succumbed to the temptation and had abandoned the Lord.

“That sounds similar enough to those of war should have come from the Israelites pagan carousing indicates the degree to which the loss of self-control was generalized among the population. What Joshua and Moses heard was probably a mixture of sounds from such things as drunken singing, wild dancing, men shouting as they chased women and women screaming as they were being chased, people fighting over food and drink, women fighting over men and men fighting over women, and the sort of shrieking that pagans thought appropriate to rousing the gods.” (Stuart, p. 675)

The descent into frenzied ecstasy, often drug or alcohol induced, expressed in wild sexual passion and violence, was characteristic of much of pagan worship throughout the ancient world. Modern neo-paganism often demonstrates the same approach in its occult activities. Sadly, the same is true in much of contemporary Christianity, charismatic and otherwise, as feelings take precedence over thought, and worship is trivialized as overwhelming.



“Elijah and the Prophets Of Baal” by Lucas Cranach

entertainment designed to appeal to the senses rather than present biblical substance. Such departures from ordinary awareness and self-control were viewed in a positive perspective as a departure from this physical world into a superior spiritual realm which provided access to divine power and presence. This reality is reflected in the Old Testament confrontation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal and Asherah on Mount Carmel as Elijah mocked his opponents, urging them to descend further into their ecstatic furies and increase the volume of their rites to attract the attention of their idols:

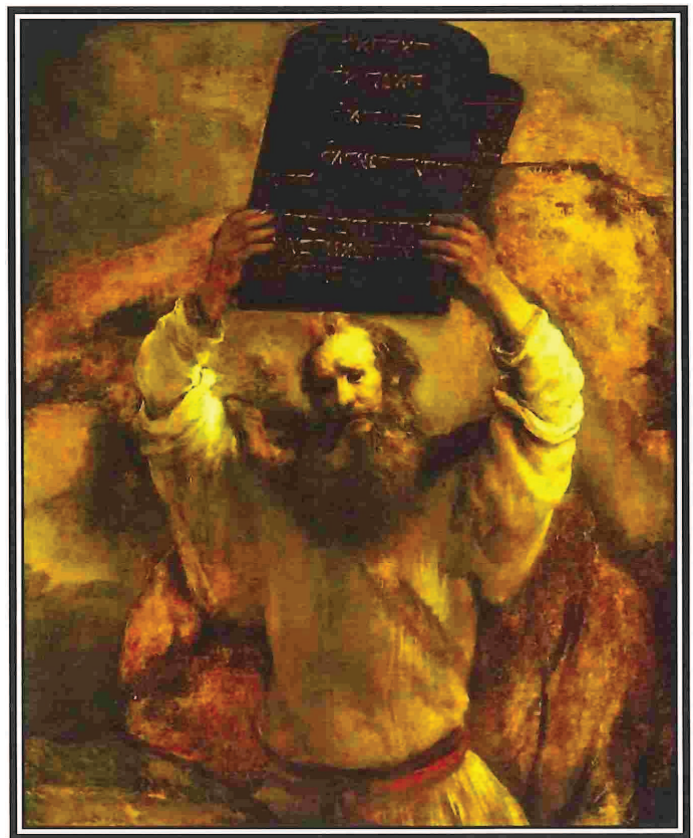
“At noon, Elijah began to taunt them. ‘Shout louder,’ he said. ‘Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must he be awakened.’ So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed.” (1 Kings 18:27 - 28)

Scripture spurns this retreat from consciousness into some imaginary spiritual realm. Proverbs 25:28 warns: **“Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control.”** Amid the charismatic chaos of the Corinthians, Paul rebuked their fascination with the dramatic ecstasy of speaking in tongues and concluded: **“In the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.”** (1 Corinthians 14:18 - 19) Writing to the Galatians, the apostle praised **“Self-control”** as one of the **“fruits of the Spirit”** which is to be sought by every believer. **“Passions,”** on the other hand, were included among the marks of the **“sinful nature”** which has been **“crucified”** in Christ (Galatians 5:22 - 26). The same connection is made in Paul’s pastoral advice to young Timothy where the lack of self-control is cited as one of the hallmarks of the sinfulness of the last days. **“People will be lovers of themselves,**

lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good.” (2 Timothy 3:2 - 3) Self - control also figures prominently in Peter’s listing of the foremost Christian virtues: *“For this reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self - control; and to self - control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness.”* (2 Peter 1:5 - 6) Commentator Douglas Stuart accurately observes: *“The fact that some religious groups, ancient and modern, have actually glorified loss of self - control as spiritual is an indication of how remarkably people can fool themselves in contrast to biblical teaching.”* (Stuart, p. 675)

“When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing his anger burned ...” - As Moses and Joshua continued their descent down the slopes of Sinai the spectacle of Israel's apostasy was gradually revealed. The prophet who had just succeeded in cooling God’s anger and sparing the people from well deserved destruction now finds his own anger burning as he is confronted with the disgusting reality of Israel’s idolatry and immorality. The Hebrew text uses the same term to describe the wrath of both God and Moses. As previously noted in vs. 11 the Hebrew word literally describes a face flushed red and nostrils flaring as the subject is overcome by rage. This word does not describe uncontrolled fury or irrational acts of destruction. There are other verbs in Hebrew typically used in such circumstances. This is no childish fit of temper but the righteous indignation of God and His prophet in the face of the most flagrant, contemptuous rejection of the Lord and the most blatant violation of the very covenant to which had solemnly pledged itself only a few days earlier.

“And he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them in pieces at the foot of the mountain.” - Nor should Moses’ action in shattering the sacred tablets of the Law be construed as some sort of temper tantrum in which a man blind with fury strikes out at random to destroy the first thing he can lay his hands on. There is no indication in the subsequent references to this episode in the Pentateuch or elsewhere in the Old Testament that Moses regretted his action or that God ever reproached him because of it. As he descended the mountain, Moses has had time to consider the gravity of this situation and to determine the most appropriate and effective manner in which to convey the

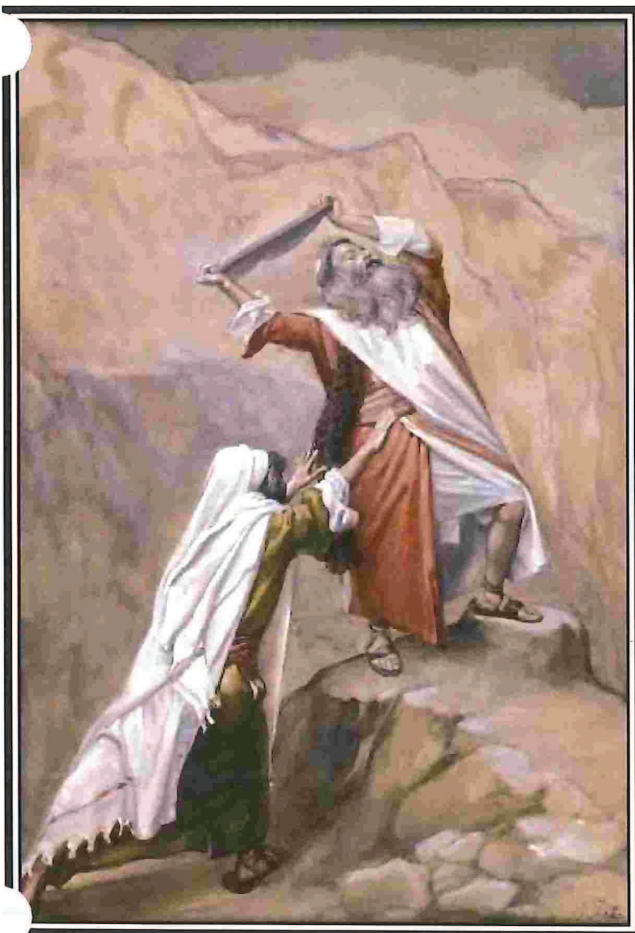


*“Moses Destroys The Tablets of the Law”
by Rembrandt*

immensity of what they had done to the Israelites. Smashing the tablets of the Law was a concrete expression of the actual meaning of what the Israelites had done.

“Moses’ breaking of the tablets was an important symbolic act, done carefully, deliberately, and openly for the benefit of the Israelites because of the way violation of a covenant is routinely described in the ancient Semitic world as “breaking” of that covenant...Nowhere in the Exodus narrative or anywhere else in Scripture is his breaking of the tablets described as impulsive. It was a reasoned, overt act demonstrating a fact (that the covenant had been broken) and warning of a consequence (divine wrath - far worse than that of Moses).” (Staurt, p. 677)

The place in which the tablets are destroyed – **“at the foot of the mountain”** - adds to the potent symbolism of the action. This is the place where the covenant had been established; where the altar had been built upon which the blood which sealed the permanent agreement had been poured out; where the standing stones had been erected for each of the tribes whose elders had banqueted with the Lord to indicate their commitment to one another; and, where the people themselves had proclaimed and promised **“We will do everything the Lord has said, we will obey.”** (Exodus 24:4, 7)



“The Destruction of the Tablets” - Tissoit

“Moses by his deed symbolically demonstrates the true meaning of what he sees; the bond between YHWH is broken; the constitution, the basic law of the covenantal relationship, has been violated. At the very spot where the covenant came into being, at the foot of the mountain, Moses sends the message that the relationship is no more.” (Houtman, III, p. 658)

Those rabbis in the centuries to come who would attempt to humble the Israelites and bring them to repentance correctly characterized this sad incident: *“Israel began like a shameless bride who plays the harlot within her bridal canopy.”* (Rushdooney, p.470) Such candor, however, was the exception rather than the rule. Josephus omits the shameful story of the Golden Calf altogether from his grand history *The Antiquities of the Jews*. Rabbinic legend tends to attribute the destruction of the tablets to supernatural intervention. The tradition indicates that the massive weight of the original tablets was 70 seah. A seah was a Hebrew measure of dry

volume equal to three gallons of grain. Thus, 70 seah would be the equivalent of 210 gallons of grain, a burden no man could carry. Moses was able to bear them only because the weight of the two tablets was actually being carried by the supernatural inscription which God had placed upon them. As he viewed the calf and its worship, those mystical letters disappeared and Moses could no longer carry the tablets. Thus, the rabbis argue that Moses' destruction of the tablets was actually brought about by God as He removed His magical inscription from them. Moses recognized the total unworthiness of these people to receive the Torah and his action was an attempt to spare the Jews from punishment for an action which had been instigated and largely implemented, not by Jews but by the mixed multitude within the camp.



“The Wrath of Moses At Sinai” by Schüfer

“Moses had now come close enough to the camp to see what was going on there, he thought to himself; How now shall I give to them the tables and enjoin upon them the prohibition of idolatry, for the very trespassing of which heaven shall inflict capital punishment upon them? Hence, instead of delivering to them the tablets, he tried to turn back, but the seventy elders pursued him and tried to wrest the tablets from Moses. But his strength excelled that of the seventy others, and he kept the tablets in his hands although they were seventy seah in weight. All at once, however, he saw the writing vanish from the tables, and at the same time he became aware of their enormous weight; for while the celestial writing was upon them, they carried their own weight and did not burden Moses, but with the disappearance of the writing, all this changed. Now, all the more did Moses feel reluctant to give the tablets without their contents to Israel, and besides, he thought ‘If God prohibited one idolatrous Israelite from partaking of the Passover Feast, how much more would He be angry if I were now to give all the Torah to an idolatrous people?’ Hence, without consulting God, he broke the tablets. God, however, thanked Moses for breaking the tablets.” (Ginzberg, Legends of the Jews, III, 129)

The text provides no suggestion of support for the view that Moses dropped the tablets because they had suddenly become too heavy for him to carry. Rather the Hebrew verb in

this sentence denotes a deliberate act of destruction. The tablets were “*thrown down,*” “*hurled to the ground,*” “*shattered upon the base of the mountain.*” This fact is clearly reinforced by Moses’ own description of the incident in Deuteronomy 9 with the unequivocal declaration that the prophet’s action was intended to convey to Israel the severity of their sin and the jeopardy into which they had placed themselves before the righteous wrath of God:

“So I turned and went down from the mountain while it was ablaze with fire. And the two tablets of the covenant were in my hands. When I looked, I saw that you had sinned against the Lord your God; you had made for yourselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. You had turned aside quickly from the way the Lord had commanded you. So I took the two tablets and threw them out of my hands, breaking them to pieces before your eyes...I feared the anger and the wrath of the Lord, for He was angry enough with you to destroy you.” (Deuteronomy 9:15 - 17, 19)

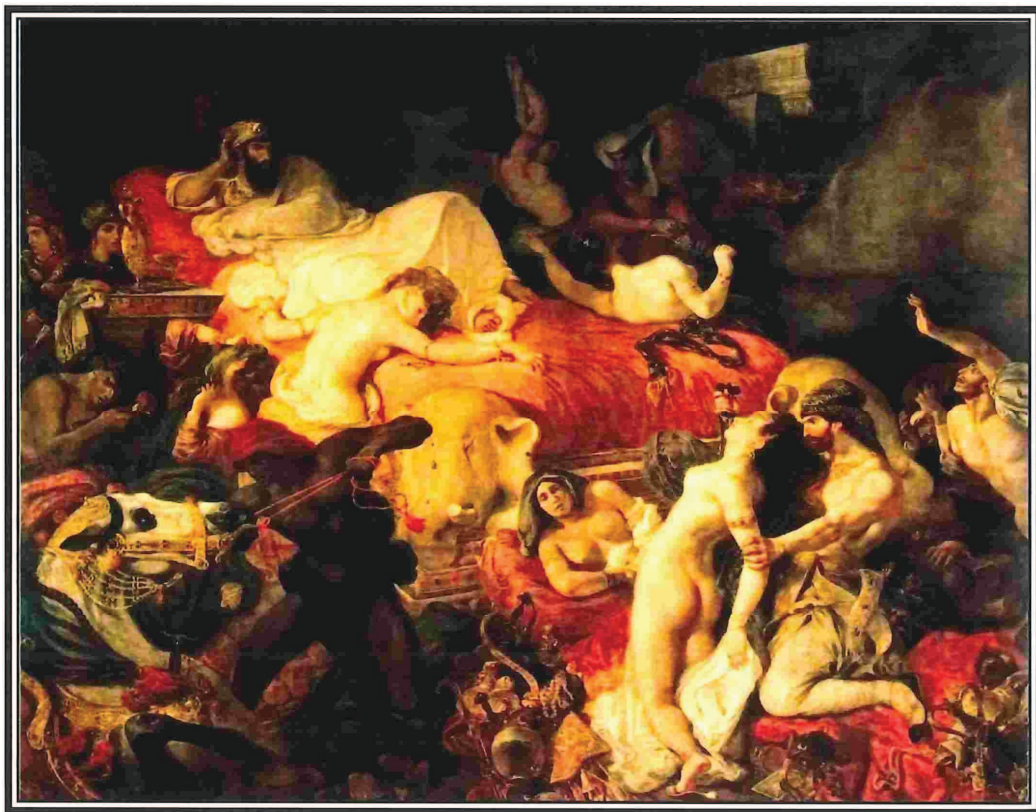


The Golden Calf and the Destruction of the Tablets by Nessenthaler – 1730

The deliberate destruction of the sacred tablets of the Torah as demonstration of the end of the covenant agreement between the Lord and Israel finds an intriguing parallel in one of the most dramatic transitions of power in the ancient Near East. In the language of the ancient Akkadians, the forerunners of great Babylon, the legal phrase “*to break the tablet*” means to invalidate or repudiate a treaty, contract, or agreement. The brutal empire of Assyria terrorized the ancient Near East from Egypt to Persia for centuries. Finally, in June of 612 B.C., an overwhelming Babylonian host under the command of Nabopolassar, the father of Nebuchadnezzar, besieged the city and breached the walls. The last Assyrian King, Sardanapalis, gathered the most precious of his treasures around his royal throne along with the members of his immediate household, his wives and children, and burned himself and all that was most precious to him on a huge funeral pyre. When the last

Assyrian resistance had been stamped out, Nabopolassar and his princes entered the sacred temple of Nabu, the chief god of the city. Within that temple were stored all of the vassal treaties which bound the kings of the lands which Assyria had conquered to serve as his vassals forever under penalty of divine destruction by the gods of their master. The nine tablets upon which those humiliating vassal treaties were inscribed were placed before the empty throne of the defeated king and totally obliterated, smashed into grains of pulverized stone. Then the image of Nabu was pulled down and destroyed. By destroying the treaty tablets, and the humiliating subservience which they represented, the victorious Babylonians and their allies demonstrated the complete destruction of their enemy and overlord, the casting down of his gods, and the repudiation of all of their oaths and obligations to him. Only in this historical context, can the profound significance of Moses' destruction of the sacred tablets be fully understood. There is no indication of a divine command to destroy the tablets. This was evidently done on Moses' own initiative, as he recognized the immensity of what Israel had done and sought the most powerful method of conveying the magnitude of this disaster to the Children of Israel. Moses' action does not cancel the covenant agreement. It simply acknowledges the new reality which has come about as the consequence of Israel's apostasy.

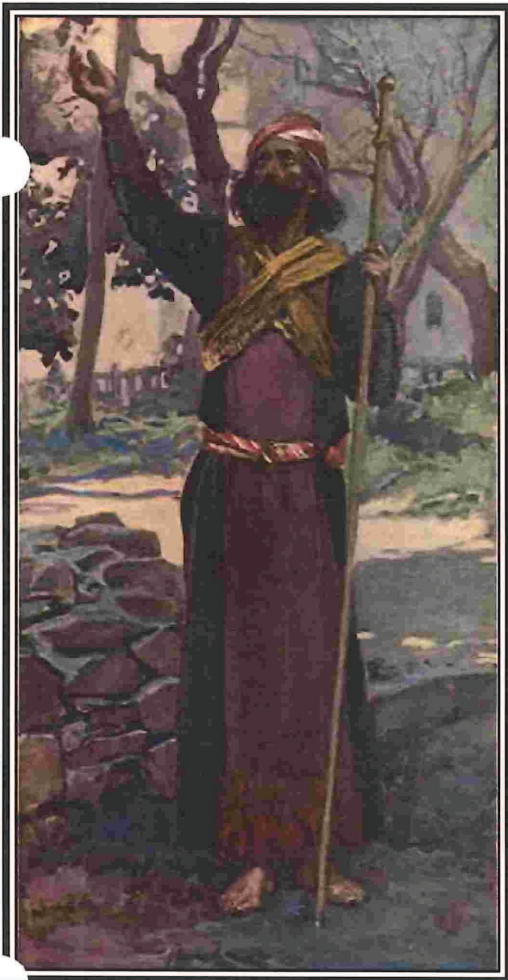
“Israel has already broken the covenant, Moses’ action is superogatory and symbolic, intended merely to impress and frighten Israel. With the tablets shattered, it would seem that YHWH and Israel no longer have any responsibility toward one another.” (Propp, p.558)



“The Death of Sardanapalus the Last King of Assyria” by Delacroix

An intriguing Biblical parallel to the destruction of the Tablets of the Torah by Moses can be found in the Book of Zechariah. Zechariah spoke for the Lord at the end of the OT era among the exiles who had been allowed to return to Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity. At the end of his book of prophecy he foretold the coming of the Messiah and the Jews' rejection of the Messiah using the image of a Shepherd and his flock. The Shepherd in the parable is given two staffs but when He is rejected by the flock he breaks those staffs into pieces to signify the revocation of the covenant relationship between God and His unfaithful people.

“Then I took the two staffs and called one ‘Favor’ and the other ‘Union’ and I pastured the flock...The flock detested Me and I grew weary of them and said, ‘I will not be your shepherd. Let the dying die and the perishing perish. Let those who are left eat one another’s flesh.’ Then I took My staff called ‘Favor’ and broke it, revoking the covenant I had made with all the nations. It was revoked on that day and so the afflicted of the flock who were watching Me knew it was the Word of the Lord...Then I broke My second staff called ‘Union,’ breaking the brotherhood between Judah and Israel.”
(Zechariah 11:7 - 14)



“The Prophet Zechariah Holding A Shepherd’s Staff” by Tissot

“And he took the calf they had made and burned it in the fire...” - It is striking that Moses is able to proceed into the camp and destroy the idol without any opposition whatsoever. It would seem that those who only moments before had been deliriously worshipping this idol were now so completely intimidated by the fury of the prophet that not one of them dared to resist him. Imagine the scene, as the music and merrymaking is replaced by hushed silence, the lustful dance partners disengage from one another, and the revelers shamefully hasten to cover their naked bodies. No doubt, those who were closest to the golden idol attempted to edge away from the abomination toward which the enraged man of God now made his way.

“At this point the moral force and authority of Moses is remarkable. He had only Joshua at his side, but he seized the golden calf, powdered the gold and then made all the people drink the gold dust mingled with water. At any time, the people could have killed Moses and Joshua but they did nothing. Perhaps it was too difficult for them to muster up much resistance as they stood there naked and ashamed.” (Rushdooney, p. 472)

Moses' ability to destroy the Golden Calf demonstrated the utter impotence of this false god. If there had been the least bit of authenticity to this supposedly sacred image, fire should have immediately rained down from heaven upon this blasphemer who had dared to raise his hand against the divine image. No doubt, the absence of such supernatural retribution further demoralized those who had acknowledged the Golden Calf for the text gives no indication whatsoever of any form of resistance to Moses' destruction of the idol or to the punishments which will follow.

“And burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it.”

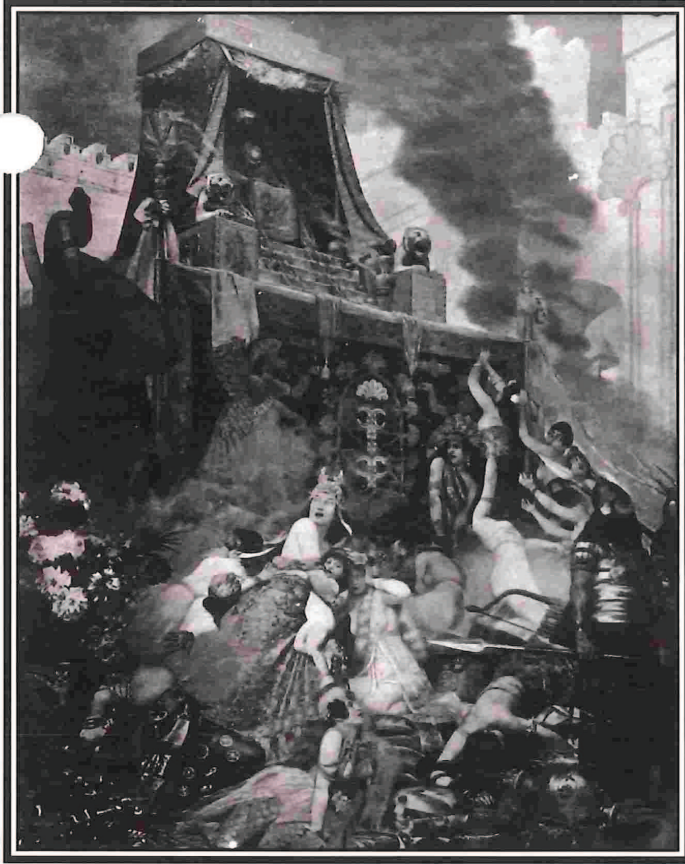
– The prophet's destruction of the Golden Calf is exhaustively thorough. This is consistent with the commands which Moses had received in regard to

the destruction of idols: ***“Do not bow down before their gods or worship them or follow their practices. You must demolish them and break their sacred stones to pieces.”*** (Exodus 23:24) ***“Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and cut down their Asherah poles. Do not worship any other God, for the Lord whose Name is Jealous is a jealous God.”*** (Exodus 34:13 - 14) The same approach is reflected in the dire threats of punishment which warn Israel of the penalty for disobedience: ***“You will eat the flesh of your sons and the flesh of your daughters. I will destroy your high places, cut down your incense altars, and pile your dead bodies on the lifeless forms of your idols and I will abhor you.”*** (Leviticus 26:29 - 30) The most emphatic expression of this prohibition is spoken on the eve of Israel's entry into Canaan as the people are warned to avoid even the precious metals and jewels of the heathen idols throughout the land:

“This is what you are to do to them. Break down their altars; smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire ... The images of their gods you are to burn in the fire. Do not covet the silver and gold on them and do not take it for yourselves, or you will be ensnared by it for it is detestable to the Lord your God. Do not bring a detestable thing into your house, or you, like it, will be destroyed. Utterly abhor and detest it, for it is set apart for destruction.” (Deuteronomy 7:5, 25 – 26)



“Moses Smashing The Tablets Of The Law”
by Gustav Dore



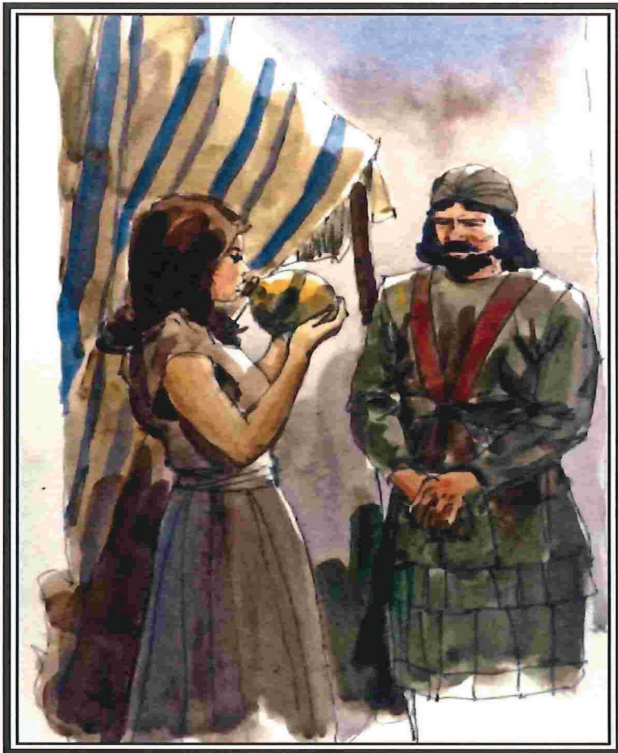
“The Self – Destruction of the Last King of Assyria Within the Royal Palace in Nineveh”

Having reduced their idol to nothing more than a powder made of ash and pulverized fragments of the metal, Moses proceeded to scatter that powder on the camp’s water supply and compelled the people to drink down the bitter dregs of what they had done – **“He ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it.”** Again, the text indicates no resistance or opposition to this humiliating ritual from the people. Some scholars contend that the scattering of the dust which was all that remained of the idol upon the water was merely the final step in the utter and absolute destruction of the false god. With bitter irony, the water upon which the idol dust was scattered was, no doubt, the same spring of water which the Lord had miraculously provided from the rock at Horeb to rescue the people from their desperate

thirst in the desert. Exodus 17:6 This view is supported by an ancient Ugaritic text which describes a battle between the gods and the total destruction of the god Mot by the goddess Anat. The language of that text is very similar to that of Exodus: *“She seized divine Mot, with a sword she split him, with a sieve she winnowed him, with a fire she burned him, with millstones she ground him, in a field she scattered him, his flesh, indeed, the birds ate.”* (Hamilton, p. 544) In this view, by placing the dust of the idol in the camp’s water supply, Moses compelled the people to consume the now bitter water polluted by their own idolatry in a manner which both humiliated them and degraded the remains of their idol in the most graphic manner possible. Furthermore, the inability of the deity to prevent this degradation of his material manifestation would totally discredit any pretense of genuine divine power.

“By means of putting the water into their water supply, he saw to it that eventually the powder was drunk with the water, and thus went through the Israelite’s bodies, came out as waste, corrupted and defiled, and therefore was ruined permanently as material for an idol.” (Stuart, p. 678)

The same process of desecration and humiliation can be seen in King Josiah’s treatment of the idols of Baal and Asherah during the restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem. In that stance, once the idols had been reduced to dust, that dust was scattered over the common graves in the Kidron Valley outside of Jerusalem, so that they would be forever unclean.



“A Priest Administering The Bitter Water Trial For A Woman Accused of Adultery

“When the Lord began to speak through Hosea, the Lord said to him, ‘Go take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the Lord.’” (Hosea 1:2 - 3)

The procedure for testing a suspected adulteress is described in detail in Numbers Chapter 5:

“The priest shall bring her and have her stand before the Lord. Then he shall take some holy water in a clay jar and put some dust from the Tabernacle floor into the water... Then the priest shall put the woman under oath and say to her; ‘If no other man has slept with you and you have not gone astray and become impure while married to your husband may this bitter water that brings a curse not harm you. But if you have

gone astray while living with your husband, and you have defiled yourself sleeping with a man other than your husband - here the priest is to put the woman under the curse of the oath - may the Lord cause your people to curse and denounce you when He causes your thigh to waste away and your abdomen to swell. May this water that brings a curse enter your body so that your abdomen swells and your thigh wastes away.’ Then the woman is to say, ‘Amen! So be it!’” (Numbers 5:16 - 22)

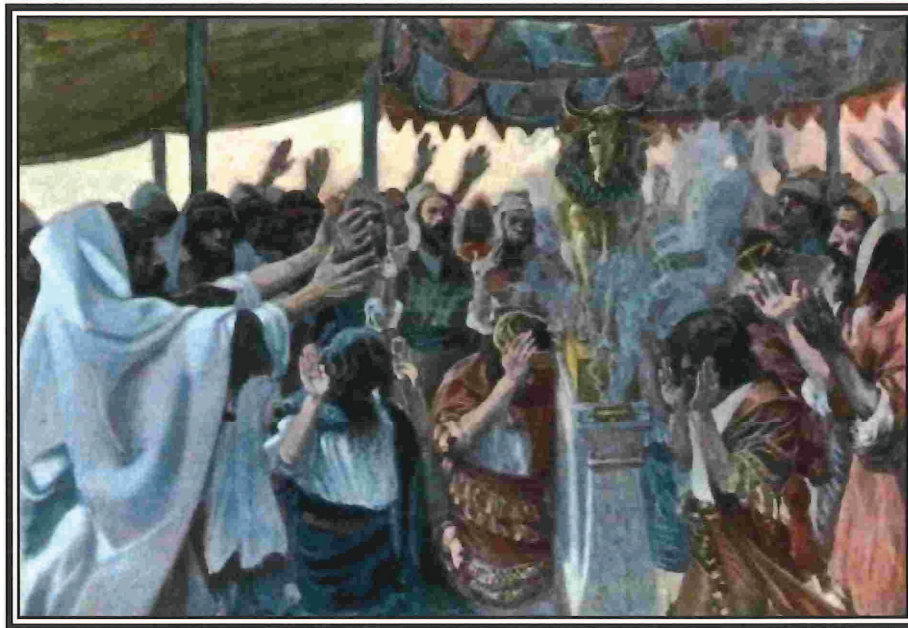
The rabbis taught that in a similar manner the drinking of the bitter water would serve to identify those who had been actively involved in the worship of the calf thereby making it possible to punish the guilty and spare the innocent. One of the earliest Christian commentaries of the Book of Exodus, written by Ephrem the Syrian shares this view: *“Moses pulverized the calf and made them drink it in the waters of testing, so that all who had lived to worship the calf would die by drinking it .”* (Lienhardt, p. 143) While the text of Exodus 32 provides no information in this regard, either about the bitter water as a trial or the means of identifying the guilty while exonerating the innocent the accounts in the Mishnah and the Talmud provide an abundance of fanciful detail.

“Whoever had donated a trinket of gold, a sign of it appeared on his nostrils; the tongues of the true devotees of the image fell off; the faces of those who had participated out of fear lighted up; in another explanation, the tongues of those who had secretly worshiped the image turned yellow and green, or the beards and lips of the guilty turned into gold. According to Zahar Exodus, the



“Moses Confronting Aaron At The Base Of Sinai”

beards and lips of the guilty turned into gold. According to Zahar Exodus, the also brought about the judgement. The next day the bodies were swollen and death ensued, and there was also the punishment of the Levites and the plague.” (Houtman, p. 659)



“Aaron Leading Israel In the Worship of the Calf” by Tissot

Verses 21 - 24

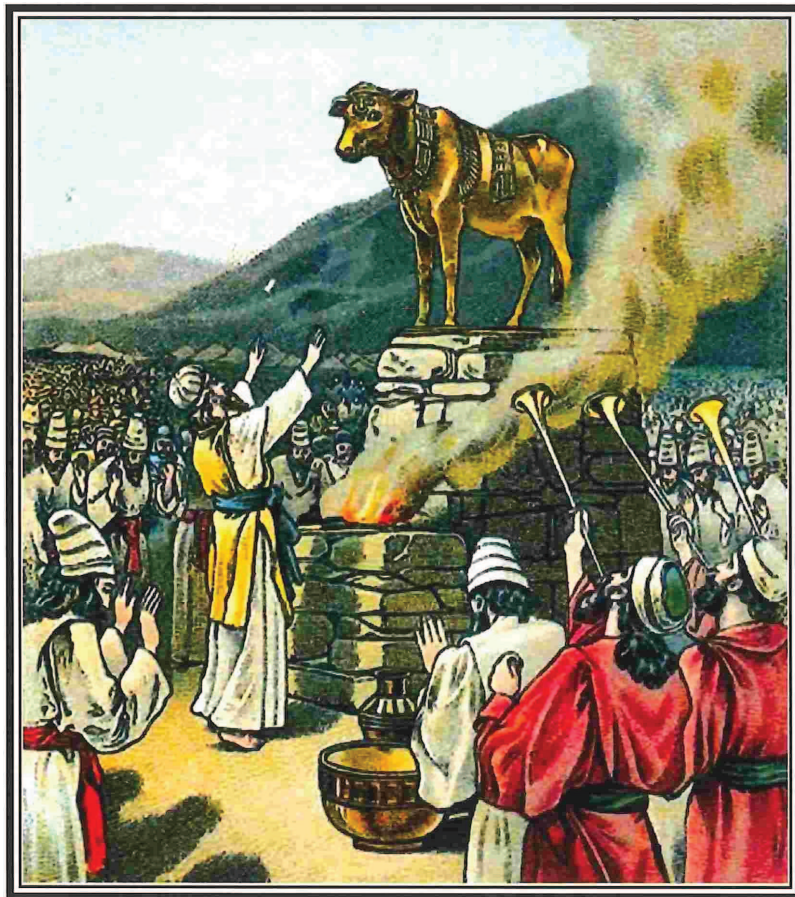
He said to Aaron. “What did these people do to you that you led them into such great sin?” ‘Do not be angry, my lord,’ Aaron answered. ‘You know how prone these people are to evil. They said to me, ‘Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.’ So I told them, ‘Whoever has any gold jewelry, take it off.’ Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!’”

“He said to Aaron...” Somehow, amid the chaos of the scene, Moses manages to locate Aaron. His anguish and anger are evident in this confrontation. Moses makes no attempt to gloss over or minimized the gravity of what has taken place. The nation was very nearly exterminated as the consequence of Aaron’s failure. Victor Hamilton observes that this language is often used in the Old Testament, in reference to leaders who misled Israel into idol worship, particularly of the Israelite king Jeroboam I, who re - introduced the worship of the golden calf within his kingdom.

“Moses pulls no punches. He goes directly for Aaron’s jugular Three times in this chapter Moses labels what Israel has done as a ‘great sin’ Frequently the Bible speaks of the northern Israelite king Jeroboam ‘causing Israel to commit sin’ (1 Kings 14:16; 15:30, 34, etc.) and of other kings, Israelite and Judean (like Manasseh, 2 Kings 21:16) who led the people into idolatry and caused Israel and Judah to commit sin. Verses like these teach the potential of

individuals, especially of people of power and position, to exercise a negative influence on the behavior of others, be they charlatan, priest, patriarch or king.” (Hamilton, p. 547)

Later in Deuteronomy, Moses recalls this calamity, he adds the chilling detail that God intended to kill Aaron because of what he had done, and only Moses’ intervention on his behalf had saved his life: **“And the Lord was angry enough with Aaron to destroy him, but at that time I prayed for Aaron too.”** (Deuteronomy 9:20) Moses appears flabbergasted that his own brother could have participated in this apostasy. His question seems to presume that some unimaginably horrendous pressure must have been applied by the people in order to coerce Aaron’s collaboration in this disaster – **“What did these people do to you.”** Moses is not attempting to excuse or minimize Aaron’s role. His blunt words **“That you led them into such great sin”** make it very clear that he holds Aaron fully responsible for everything that has taken place. He is simply struggling to comprehend how his brother could have betrayed his responsibilities to the Lord in such an egregious manner:



“Aaron Leading Israel In The Worship of the Golden Calf”

“Moses should not be understood as assuming that Aaron was not actually at fault. Not only so, but his words ‘such a great sin’ and his attribution of leadership into that sin ‘you led them’ make abundantly clear that Aaron deliberately committed a serious wrong against God.” (Stuart, p. 679)



“Aaron In The Vestments Of the High Priest Presenting The Golden Calf to Israel” by Tintoretto

At the same time, Moses acknowledges that while Aaron is to blame for a failure of leadership the people are also responsible for their own actions. The fault is not Aaron’s alone. This is indicated by the words **“What did these people do to you.”** He was not the instigator of the evil but it was nonetheless his failure of leadership allowed this desperate potentially fatal - crisis to occur. *“It should be noted that 3:21 assumes guilt on the part of both Aaron and the people. The people forced Aaron to do what was wrong. As deputy he should not have given in. Given his position, Aaron bears the brunt of the blame. Moses calls him to account.”* (Houtmann, p. 661) Moses’ identification of Israel as **“these people”** is typically perceived by commentators as a compassionate allusion to their helplessness, their need for strong leadership, and their vulnerability to temptation in the absence of such leadership. *“Here it has a compassionate sense, the hapless people.”* (Cassutto, p. 419) It may be that Moses’ question **“What did these people do to you?”** suggests that Moses perceives Aaron’s failure as a deliberate act of vengeance for some great wrong committed in the past. This would parallel the question of Abimelech to Abraham in Genesis 20:9 – **“What have you done to us, and how have I wronged you that you have brought such great guilt upon me and my kingdom?”** - after Abraham presented Sarah as his sister and the king took her into his harem which brought down God’s judgement. Whether or not this be the case, Moses is mystified as to how Aaron could have allowed this catastrophe to occur.

“Do not be angry, my lord,” Aaron answered. ‘You know how prone these people are to evil.’” – Aaron’s response is completely submissive, bordering on servile. He cringes and cowers before the righteous wrath of his younger brother without the slightest hint of defiance. Aaron refers to his brother as **“my lord,”** using the title of respect and deference

which fully acknowledges Moses' authority over him. And yet, there is no indication of repentance, that is, acknowledgment of sin, contrition, and a desire for forgiveness from God for having disobeyed His Word. The apathetic figure of Israel's future high priest is still trapped in a terrified need to evade responsibility, make excuses, shift the blame to others, and escape punishment. One German commentator observes that Aaron's smug defense is "*so clumsy and laughable*" that it is difficult to imagine these words falling from the lips of the man who had been chosen, because of his eloquence, to be Moses' spokesman before pharaoh.

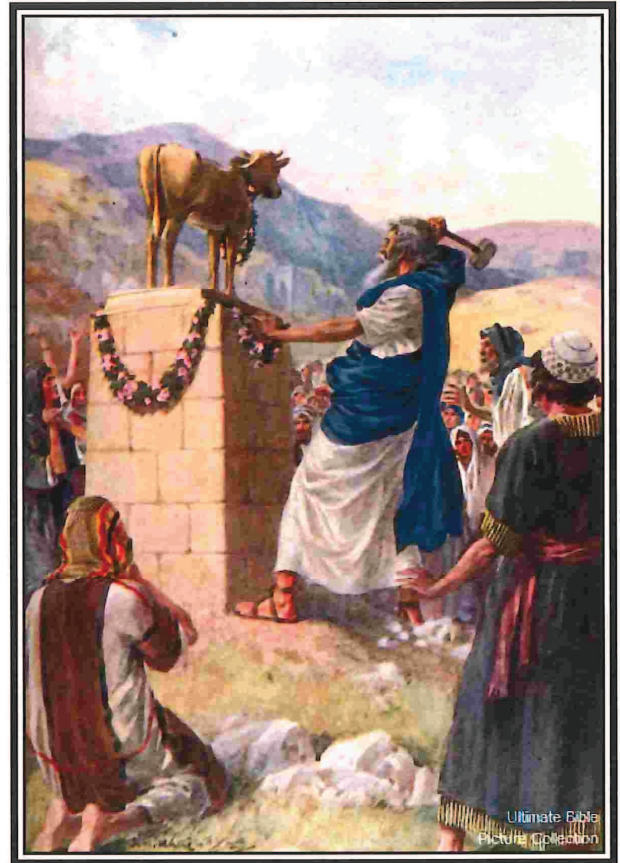
Aaron's first line of self - defense is to blame the people. It is sadly ironic that Aaron uses the same words, literally "*do not let your anger burn*" to describe the fury of Moses which



"Aaron Presenting The Golden Calf To Israel" by Nicholas Poussin

Moses had just used in his appeal to God to spare the Children of Israel. But in this instance Aaron has no interest in saving the people. His only desire is to shift the blame from himself to them. He demonstrates no concern about what will happen to the nation if his craven tactic succeeds. What Aaron said was true as far as it went. The guilt of the people in this matter is not in doubt. "*Aaron seems to suggest that Moses has forgotten that these very same people have already established a track record of grumbling, whining and faultfinding. So why be shocked?*" (Hamilton, p. 547) His tactic recalls that of Adam in the Garden who reports that the woman had given him the forbidden fruit. (Genesis 3:12) however, in both instances these accurate assertions are intended to absolve the speaker. Because the woman gave Adam the fruit, and because the people are prone to evil, Adam

and Aaron were not responsible for what they did. They had no choice and therefore they cannot be blamed. Therein lies the falsehood. No one would have known better than Moses how difficult it was to lead these stubborn, rebellious people. But nonetheless Moses was their leader and his leadership had never failed in this disastrous manner, thereby exposing the entire nation to the righteous wrath of God. To Moses above all Aaron's excusing words would be obviously falsehood. *"Aaron's response is both self - serving and unconvincing. It thus was dishonest and indefensible. By his inability to provide a reasonable account of why he would have agreed to the people's request for idolatry he condemned himself."* (Stuart, p. 679)



"Moses Destroys The Golden Calf"

"They said to me, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.'" - Again, Aaron's words are accurate as far as they go. The people

did instigate the entire episode as they grew restless and fearful during Moses' prolonged stay upon Sinai. The no so subtle implication of Aaron's tale is that at least to some extent the crisis is Moses' fault - not his - because he chose to linger in the presence of God at the peak of the mountain while Aaron was left with his hands full at the base of the mountain struggling to control these chronically disobedient people. Once again, this desperate effort to evade personal responsibility recalls Adam's effort to remind God that the source of his temptation had been *"the woman that you put here with me."* (Genesis 3:12) thereby implying that God was at least partially responsible for his fall into sin. It is almost as though Aaron is saying, *"I didn't ask for this job. You put me in charge of the unruly mob and then you abandon me by going off to the mountain top for weeks on end."* In his frantic fear Aaron is desperate to shift the blame away from himself in any and every direction.

"So I told them, 'Whoever has any gold jewelry, take it off' Then they gave me the gold and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!" - Aaron's pathetic narrative continues, providing a basic outline of the events, while presenting himself as the innocent victim of circumstance in every phrase. The unfaithful people, in a desperate panic because of Moses' failure to return from the mountain in a reasonable period of time, had demanded that Aaron fashion them an idol. It's the people's fault. It's Moses fault. Aaron is thus the innocent victim caught in the middle. What comes next is the result of these impossible circumstances which left him no alternative - "So I told them, 'Whoever has any gold

jewelry take it off.” His words suggest that he saw this command as a clever tactic to dissuade them from their evil intent. Aaron never imagined that they would part with their precious Egyptian gold or at very least he hoped that they would agonize over his demand and thus buy him some time to come up with an alternative. But instead, these evil people immediately complied with his request and he was showered with gold. It was not his fault. This was not what he expected. The people are the disobedient sinners here. At that point what choice did he have? **“And I threw it into the fire and out came this calf.”** Aaron continues to present himself in the most passive way in what is the most ludicrous passage in this sad presentation. The extent of his involvement in the creation of the idol was that he merely threw the gold they had unexpectedly given him into the fire, and to his dismay, out popped this calf. Such legends of the spontaneous generation of idols were not uncommon in the pagan mythology of the ancient Near East. Inscriptions in the temple of the Egyptian creation god Atum reflect that concept of self - origin.

“Praise to you, Atum! Praise to you Kheprer who created himself! You became high in this your name High Ground. You created yourself in this your name. See I am prosperous. I created my body in my glory; I am he who made himself; I formed myself according to my will and according to my heart I”
 (Currid, p. 284 - 285)



Aaron Leading The Worship of the Golden Calf – 16th Century Bible Woodcut

But in this context, Aaron’s tale of a divine self - generation comes across as nothing more than desperate nonsense, which Moses contemptuously ignores. Aaron’s claim is, of course, and outright lie, as vs. 4 clearly indicates: **“He took what they handed him and made it into an idol, cast in the shape of a calf, forming it with a tool.”** At the same time, while, no doubt, that was not Aaron’s intent, to suggest that the calf idol created itself ascribes to this idol the power of a deity. This entire conversation presents the man who would become Israel’s high priest in a completely unfavorable light. A forthright confession and humble repentance would have been much easier to respect, recognizing the most difficult circumstances in which Aaron found himself. As the old saying aptly observes – *“O what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive.”*

“Aaron uses a minimum of words as he relates his own part. He especially downplays his involvement in the making of the image. He makes it appear

that all he did was procure the gold and that the image sort of made itself. Aaron tries to make excuses for himself. He does not don the garment of penance. Nor does he come with a plea on behalf of the people. He only thinks of his own position.” (Houtman, p. 662)

The fact that Aaron was not punished for his central role in this apostasy remains a troubling question for Bible students. As noted above, Deuteronomy informs us that it was only the intercession of Moses which caused Aaron to be spared from the divine sentence of death which he most certainly deserved. The fact that he was still chosen to be the first High Priest of Israel:

“Aaron also succumb to temptation along with the people. Instead of courageously and decidedly opposing their proposal, and raising the despondency of the people into the strength of living faith, by pointing to the great deeds by which Jahweh had proved Himself to be the faithful covenant God, he hoped to be able to divert them from their design by means of human craftiness...But his cleverness was put to shame...The weak minded Aaron had no other course left than to make an image of God for the people...Aaron also shared the guilt of this transgression, although it was only out of sinful weakness that he has assented to the proposals of the people and gratified their wishes. He also fell with the people and denied the God that had chosen him, though he himself was unconscious of it, to be His priest, to bear the sins of the people and to expiate them before Jehovah. The apostasy of the nation became a temptation to him, in which the unfitness of his nature for the office was to made manifest, in order that he might ever remember this, and not excuse himself from the office to which the Lord had not called him because of his own unworthiness, but purely as an act of unmerited grace.” (Keil/Delitzsch, I, 549)



“Aaron The High Priest”

Rabbinic tradition goes to great length to exonerate this crucial figure in the history of Judaism. The classic *Jewish Encyclopedia* summarizes the traditional view in this way in its extended article on the Golden Calf:

“The very seriousness of the offense causes the rabbis to find circumstances extenuating the guilt of the people and apologizing for Aaron’s part in this tragic affair. The initiative was taken not by the Israelites but by the Egyptians who had joined them at the time of the Exodus and who were the source of a great deal of trouble to Moses and the Israelites; for the Egyptians, when the time fixed for Moses’ descent from the mountain had expired, came in a body, 40,000 of them, accompanied by the two Egyptian magicians, Jannes and Jambres, who had imitated Moses before Pharaoh in producing the signs and plagues of Egypt, to Aaron, and told him that it was the sixth hour of the fortieth day since Moses left, the hour that he had named for his return, and that Moses had not yet returned, and that he would never come. Satan took advantage of the opportunity and brought gloom and confusion to alarm the people. Then he told them Moses was dead as the sixth hour had come. Seeing that he was not believed, he showed them a bed on the mountain with Moses in it. This convinced them that Moses was really dead. They demanded that Aaron make them a god. Hur stepped in and rebuked them for their ingratitude to god who had performed so many miracles for them. He was at once put to death and Aaron was threatened with the same fate. The latter saw that he must accede to their request but he sought a device whereby the execution of their demand would either be made impossible, or at least delayed until Moses came, for he was not ensnared by the wiles of Satan. So he ordered them to bring the golden ornaments of their wives, knowing that the women would be more grateful to God and would refuse to part with their jewels for idolatrous purposes. His expectation was realized. Their jewels could not be obtained and the men had to give their own. Aaron had no choice but to put the gold into the fire and a calf came out, jumping and skipping! One explanation is that this was due to the magical manipulation of the Egyptian sorcerers, Jannes and Jambres...Others, based on Deuteronomy 33:17, that Micah (Judges 17) threw a magical splinter which Moses had used to raise the bones of Joseph from the bottom of the Nile, which he had inscribed with the words ‘Come Up Ox’ into the fire after the gold which brought forth the living ox calf.” (Jewish Encyclopedia, III, p. 508)

There is not the slightest hint of support for any of this fanciful speculation in the Biblical text.

Verses 25 - 26

“Moses saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughingstock to their enemies. So he stood at the entrance to the camp and said, ‘Whoever is for the Lord, come to me.’ And all the Levites rallied to him.

“Moses saw that the people were running wild...” - The Hebrew text of Verse 25 is somewhat obscure. The NIV’s translation that the chaos within the camp and their apostasy from Jahweh which had left the nation without His protection had reduced them to the pathetic status of ***“a laughingstock to their enemies”*** and therefore vulnerable to attack is one possibility. However, while this is grammatical feasible, it is difficult to imagine a potential enemy which could pose such a threat in the midst of the Sinai desert. The Hebrew could also be translated to indicate that in the midst of the raging rebellion which Aaron had allowed to occur, it was going to be difficult to bring the situation back under control. Thus, the verse would be translated: ***“Moses saw that the people were out of control - since Aaron had let them get out of control - so that they would pose a serious threat to anyone who dared to oppose them.”*** This translation would appear to be more consistent with the problem which Moses now confronted. In any case, either



“Moses Enraged By The Golden Calf”
by Georges Rochegrosse

translation indicates an urgent crisis which must be quickly and decisively resolved. The text once again emphasizes the failure of Aaron’s leadership and his responsibility for the desperate situation which had arisen as the consequence of that failure – ***“and that Aaron had let them get out of control.”*** Moses had to act firmly and quickly before matters deteriorated even further. Rebellion had degenerated into anarchy. It was not clear to anyone what would happen next and without decisive leadership armed conflict could quickly have arisen and individual tribes could have decided to break away from the tattered group and go their own way. ***“The people were running wild”*** is a description of chaos, panic anger and guilt boiling over into catastrophe. The idol worshipers may have been rioting in the aftermath of the destruction of the calf.

“So he stood at the entrance to the camp and said, ‘Whoever is for the Lord, come to me.’” - Unlike his weak-kneed older brother, Moses did not hesitate to act. He proceeded immediately the ***“entrance to the camp,”*** the traditional site where business would be transacted or announcements made. ***“In antiquity the area around the gate was the most important part of the town because it was there that much of the social, economic and political business of the community was carried out.”*** (Currid, p. 287) One would imagine that after the destruction of the calf and the admonition of Aaron, a large crowd of excited, and perhaps anxious onlookers would have been following him. At the gate Moses boldly



“The Levites Slaughter The Idol Worshipers” - Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld

confronted the idol worshipers and rallied the faithful and/or the repentant to his side. It is difficult to ascertain the levels of involvement in the idolatry among the people. There is no mention of overt opposition to the worship of the calf previously and the impression of general overall support is given. God’s resolve to destroy the entire nation and begin anew with the descendants of Moses further suggests that the great majority of the people were engaged in the worship of the idol. No doubt there were varying degrees of enthusiasm and different levels of commitment in this worship ranging from passive acquiescence to intense enthusiastic support. What is perhaps most striking at this point is the complete absence of any overt opposition. Those who only moments ago had been cavorting around the idol, fervently acknowledging the Golden Calf as the god who had delivered them from Egyptian bondage are now completely cowed before the righteous wrath of the furious prophet. No doubt, Moses ability to destroy their new god without divine reprisal of any kind had thoroughly deflated their confidence in the Golden Calf. But there is a good deal more involved in their passive acceptance of well deserved judgement:

“There is apparently a greater difficulty in that not only did the Levites execute the command of Moses without reserve, but the people let them pass through the camp and kill everyone who came within reach of their sword, without offering the slightest resistance. To remove this difficulty there is no necessity that we should either assume that the Levites knew who were the originators and ringleaders of the worship of the calf and only used their swords against them...or that we should introduce into the text a formal

conflict between the two groups in which some of Moses' party also were slain...The obedience of the Levites was an act of faith, which knows neither the fear of man nor the regard of persons. The unresisting attitude of the people generally may be explained, partly from their reverence for Moses, whom God had do mightily and marvelously accredited as His servant in the sight of all the nation, and partly from the despondency and fear so natural to a guilty conscience which took away all capacity for opposing the bold and determined course that was adopted by the divinely appointed rulers and their servants in obedience to the command of God.” (Keil/Delitzsch, I, p. 553)

Moses takes his stand at the entrance to the encampment, the boundary between those who are of the tribes of Israel and those who are not. Then he issues his unequivocal summons: **“Whoever is for the Lord, come to me.”** There will be no room for neutrality here. A choice must be made. As Jesus would later declare in regard to siding either with God or Satan: **“A kingdom divided against itself will be ruined and a house divided against itself will fall...He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters.”** (Luke 11:17, 23)

The tribe of Levi rallies to support Moses. Under the circumstances it is most unlikely that the entire tribe had refrained from the worship of the calf. No doubt a good many of them had followed Aaron's lead and joined in the idolatry. But evidently many of those who had fallen into sin had now repented and the tribe as a group responded to their summons of their kinsman Moses. The Hebrew text literally reads *“all Levi's sons”* emphasizing the nature of the response as one which included the men of the entire tribe of Levi. This is not to say that each and every Levite was included, but that the great majority heeded Moses' call. The description of the task which the Levites will shortly undertake preclude the assumption that their decision was unanimous since a number of their relatives were included in the executions.



“The Golden Calf” by Jim Yarborough

“Since Aaron was a Levite and had led the move toward idolatry, it can hardly be doubted that other Levites had also succumbed to its attractions. But now

everyone was being given a chance to repent and reestablish loyalty to Yahweh's covenant. All the Levites did so decisively, including, sure a chagrined and openly embarrassed Aaron...To their credit they all seized the occasion to align themselves with Yahweh and against the idolatry that many of them had so recently embraced.” (Stuart, p. 681)

It is ominous that only one tribe responded to the call. There does not appear to have been any remaining overt support for the calf, at least to the extent that they were ready to take a public stand and oppose Moses. But the hesitance of the majority is profoundly significant and does not bode well for the future. Dr. Terence Freitheim observes the implications:

“No coercion is involved. No threat is expressed. It is an invitation. This is not a call for theological judgement or community loyalty; it is a call for commitment to Yahweh alone. It is noteworthy that the subsequent slaughter could have been avoided at this point if everyone had answered positively. The issue is no longer whether they had participated in the idolatry, but whether they were now willing to declare themselves for Yahweh. The great majority of people, however, remain unmoved; their silent indifference to the call is deafening. In other words, this is an intensification of the apostasy evident in the golden calf episode; it is revealing of deep levels of disloyalty.” (Freitheim, p. 289)

This summons to make a decisive choice, like those of Joshua during the conquest of the



“The Worship of the Golden Calf” by Claude Lorraine



“The Worship of the Golden Calf”

promised land (Joshua 24:15) or Elijah before Ahab and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:21) in the days to come, represents a crucial turning point in the history of the people of God. The choice that is made will have profound implications for every individual. To stand with Yahweh is not merely an intellectual decision or an emotional feeling. It involves the commitment of one’s entire life and the willingness to repudiate self-interest and worldly priorities for the sake of a faithful confession in word and deed and a readiness to stand for the truth of God against any and all who would oppose it. *“In Verse 26 we have one of the great challenges of history - ‘Who is on the Lord’s side, let him come to me.’ To stand with God is equated with doing battle when necessary. No simple verbal affirmation can be a substitute for faith on the firing line.”* (Rushdooney, p. 473)

Verses 27-29

“Then he said to them, ‘This is what the Lord, the God of Israel says: ‘Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother, friend, and neighbor.’ The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died. Then Moses said, ‘You have been set apart to the Lord today, for you were against your own sons and brothers and He has blessed you this day.’”

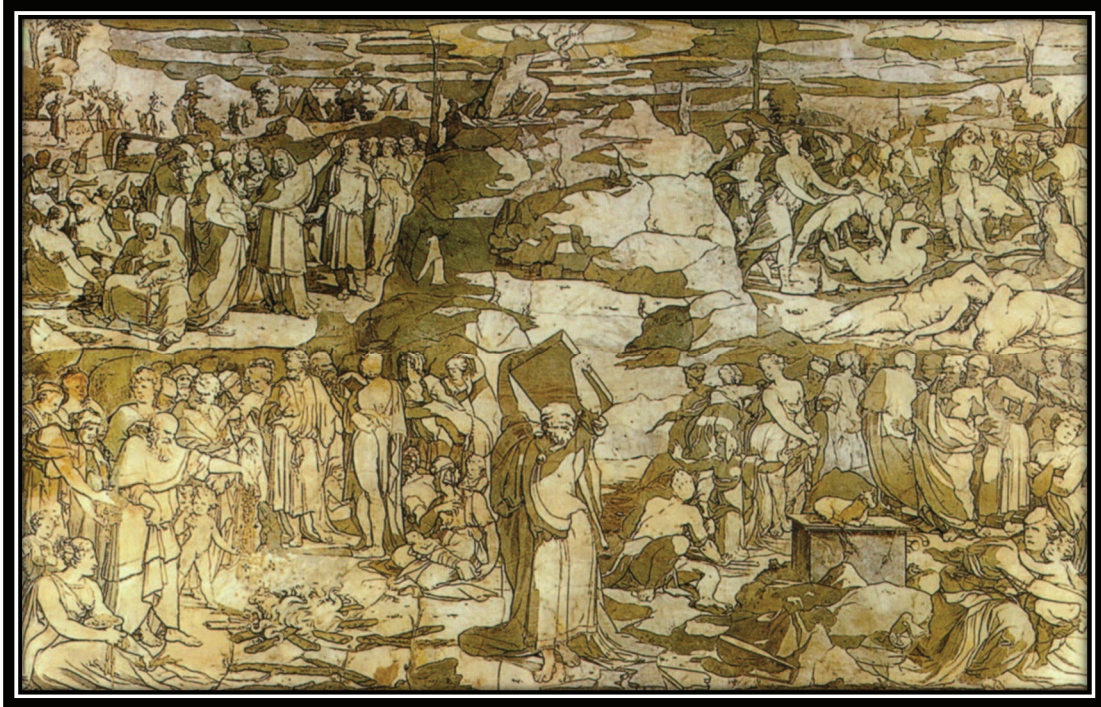
“Then he said to them, ‘This is what the Lord, the God of Israel says:” - Moses makes it clear at the outset that the stern commands which is about to issue are not his own. He is only the messenger. This is the Word of God. The specific command from God to which Moses refers is not recorded in Scripture. It must have been conveyed to Moses after his return to the encampment. The Levites are instructed to prepare to serve as God’s executioners in punishing the capital crime of idolatry - ***“each man strap a sword to his side.”*** The severity of the punishment indicates the

gravity of the crime and of the potential consequences for the plan of salvation if the idol worshipers would remain among the Children of Israel.

“A modern person accustomed to the sentimentalism of Western liberal thinking might find the idea of killing idolaters impossible to justify. Moses, on the other hand, understood that leaving idolaters in the midst of Israel, to influence others away from the opportunity for eternal life was impossible to justify. God revealed to him that a fight was under way over saving truth. If the idolatry were allowed to continue, many people in ancient Israel would turn from saving truth to condemning falsehood, from the promise of eternal life with God to destruction in Hell - and since Israel was the repository of God’s saving truth at this time, allowing the idolatry to continue might have affected the potential for eternal life of countless future generations of Israelites and Gentiles alike.” (Stuart, p. 680)



“Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbor.” It is virtually impossible to determine the specific details of this retribution. The number of warriors in the tribe of Levi is unknown. The text appears to suggest that the victims of the execution were chosen at random at the Levite warriors passed through the camp. Some traditions within Judaism indicate that the Levites were seeking out those who had been marked as the most active supporters of the idolatry by disfigurement resulting from the ordeal of drinking the bitter water containing the burned remains of the Golden Calf. The text provides no



“The Story of the Golden Calf” by Domenico Beccafumi

such indication. Utilizing the subsequent legal procedures for the trial of execution of adulterers, the rabbis divided the guilty into four different categories;

“Thus, with regard to trial and punishment of those who had worshiped the Golden Calf, there were four categories of people: 1. Those who had been both legally warned and witnessed. These were tried by the court and executed: 2. The born Israelites who had been neither legally warned nor witnessed. These were subjected to the trial by ordeal: 3. Those of the mixed multitude who had been neither warned nor witnessed: 4. Those who had not been warned but had been witnessed in the act. There was no legal way of trying or executing those who fell into the last two categories, so God planned on punishing them Himself. As will be recounted presently, Moses attempted to convince God to forgive these people.” (Schneerson, p. 252)

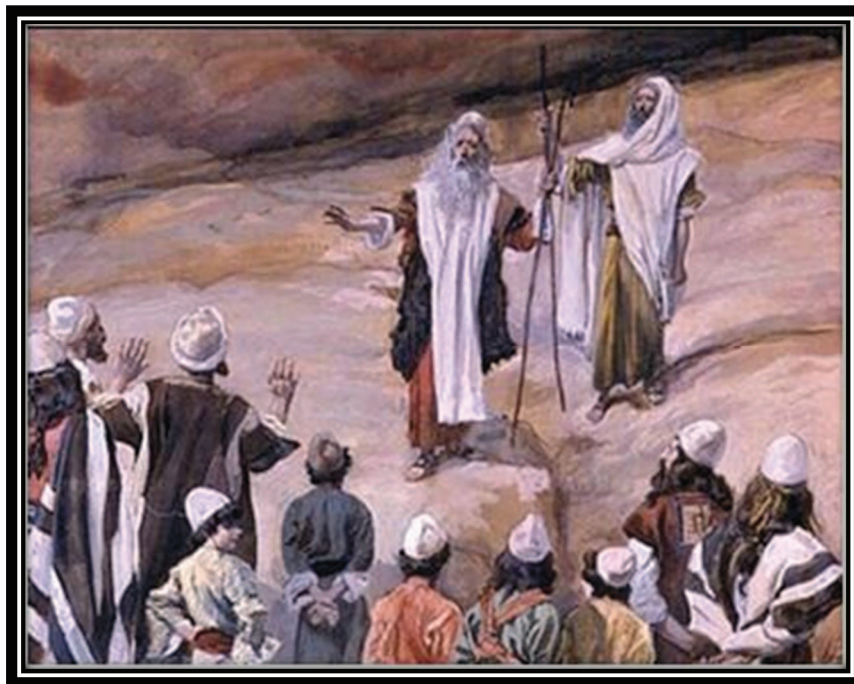
In this view, the first category were those whom the Levites would execute, marked for execution by the disfigurement of the ordeal. The second category were those who died during the trial by ordeal, after drinking the bitter water. Categories three and four would be executed by God directly through the plague mentioned in 32:35 - “And the Lord struck the people with a plague because of what they did with the calf Aaron had made.” This view ties up all the loose ends but indulges in a significant amount of speculation.

“The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died.” - The Levites carried out their instructions. The text does not indicate

whether the executioners were given a number to be killed or whether the warriors simply moved through the encampment randomly killing those whom they happened to encounter. Some commentators suggest that at a particular time Moses gave the signal for the killing to cease, when he believed that an appropriate number of executions had taken place. Others insist that those who were killed were the ringleaders of the rebellion, the spokesmen who had been in the forefront of pressuring Aaron to build the Calf and institute a new cult of worship dedicated to the idol. Those who advocate this view typically insist that this must have been the case because random slaughter throughout the people would have been unjust. The number of the slain - 3,000 - is proportionately insignificant in comparison to an encampment which is characteristically estimated to have included between two and three million people. Most commentators conclude that the executions carried out by the Levites were intended to be a symbolic expression of the death sentence which the entire population had incurred. If that were indeed the case, this would be consistent with the random selection of victims as the Levites moved back and forth through the camp.

“Were only 3,000 of the 60,000 adult men (or two to three million individuals) guilty? One has the impression that almost the whole people was implicated in the Calf worship. If so, then the death of a few is a ‘pars pro toto’ (‘few on behalf of the whole’) - with the potential of more deaths to follow. It is but the first stage of reconciliation to Yahweh.” (Propp, II, p. 563)

The concept that these 3,000 deaths were merely a symbolic representation of the nation’s guilt is reinforced by Moses’ announcement that he will now return to the crest of Sinai to continue his intercession in the hope that he will be able to deter the



“Moses Addressing the Levites” by Tissot



“The Levites Arrayed On the Steps of the Temple Sanctuary”

righteous wrath of the Lord and ***“make atonement for your sin.”*** The Levite executions are clearly only one step in a process of chastening designed to impress upon Israel the profound seriousness of their lapse into idolatry and bring them to genuine repentance which will allow reconciliation with God.

Whichever of these scenarios is preferred, perhaps the most striking feature of this bloody day is the absence of armed resistance from the overwhelming numbers of the men of the other twelve tribes. Under ordinary circumstances, the Levites could easily have been crushed by the warriors among their kinsmen. However, there is no indication of any resistance whatsoever. Moses’s success in destroying the calf idol, thereby demonstrating its impotence and revealing the fallacy of their initiative to follow a false god would certainly have resulted in profound discouragement and despondency among the most ardent supporters of the Golden Calf. This validation of YAHWEH should have caused a reluctance to oppose the true God or His representatives.

“There is perhaps a greater difficulty in the fact that not only did the Levites execute the command of Moses without reserve, but the people let them pass through the camp and kill everyone who came within reach of their sword without offering the slightest resistance... The obedience of the Levites was an act of faith which knows neither fear of man nor regard to person. The unresisting attitude of the people generally may be explained, partly by their reverence for Moses, whom God had so mightily and marvelously accredited as His servant, in the sight of all the nation, and partly from the despondency and fear so natural to a guilty conscience, which took away all capacity for

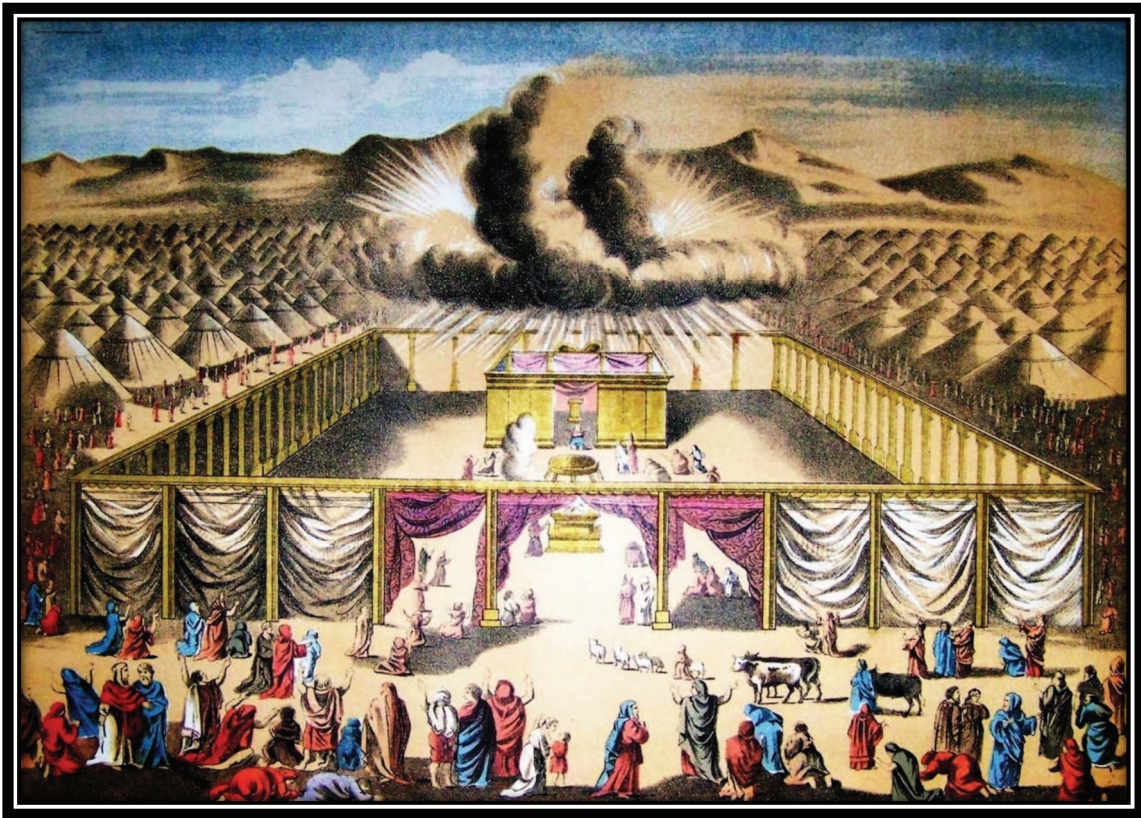
opposing the bold and determined course that was adopted by the divinely appointed rulers and their servants in obedience to the command of God.” (Keul/Delitzsch, I, p., 553)

“Then Moses said, ‘You have been set apart to the Lord this day, for you were against your own...’ - The Levites faithfulness in carrying out the difficult task which had been entrusted to them demonstrated their devotion to Yahweh and confirmed their appropriateness to be chosen as the priestly representatives of the nation before the Lord. They were so willing to obey the command of the Lord that they even struck down members of their own families at His command without showing partiality of any kind - ***“for you were against your own sons and brothers.”*** In his final blessing of the tribes in Deuteronomy 33, Moses directly referred to the willingness of the Levites to strike down their own kin as the decisive demonstration of their steadfast commitment to God: ***“About Levi he said: ‘Your Urim and Thummin belong to the man You favored...He said of his father and mother, ‘I have no regard for them.’ He did not recognize his brothers or acknowledge his own children, but watched over Your Word, and guarded Your covenant.”*** (Deuteronomy 33:8-9) The Lord had already indicated to Moses His selection of Aaron and his sons to serve as priests in the Tabernacle.

“In the Tent of Meeting that is in front of the curtain outside of the Testimony, Aaron and his sons are to keep the lamps burning before the Lord from evening till morning. This will be a lasting ordinance among the Israelites for generations to come. Have Aaron your brother brought to you from among the Israelites, along with his sons Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, so they may serve Me as priests.” (Exodus 27:22-28)



“Aaron’s Sons Nadab and Abihu Struck Down Before the Altar”



“The Encampment of the Levites Around the Tabernacle”

Nadab and Abihu were struck down by the Lord on the very day of their ordination because of their failure to observe the proper manner of presenting the sacrifices. Historically, many have perceived this disaster for Aaron’s family as one of the consequences of his disobedience at the time of the Golden Calf. The priesthood is broadened here to include the entire tribe of Levi. The language of the text is unambiguously clear in linking the consecration of the tribe to their obedience to the Lord’s command: ***“You have been set apart to the Lord this day, for you were against your own sons and brothers and he has blessed you this day.”***

“The Levites have done an outstanding piece of work in carrying out the order of 32:27. They had separated themselves from the other Israelites unto the service of YHWH (32:26). With total dedication they carried out the task laid upon them. They ‘filled their hands’ for YHWH as with holy zeal as they caused a slaughter among the renegades; so they gave proof of their unconditional loyalty to YHWH and thereby obtained a favored position and place of honor among Israel. In short, 32:26-29 relates how the tribe of Levi acquired its unique position, its separation unto the service of YHWH.” (Houtman, p. 670)

The unique responsibility of the Levite’s consecration to the Lord is spelled out in the census of the tribes which is recorded in the opening chapter of the Book of Numbers. The Levites were not to be counted like all of the other tribes to provide a count of fighting men nor were they to encamp around a tribal standard like those of all their kinsmen.

Their identity within the nation was determined by the bond to serve the Lord as His priests:

“The families of the tribe of Levi, however, were not counted along with the others. The Lord said to Moses; ‘You must not count the tribe of Levi nor include them in the census of the other Israelites. Instead, appoint the Levites to be in charge of the Tabernacle of the Testimony - over all its furnishings and over everything belonging to it. They are to take care of the Tabernacle and all its furnishings; they are to take care of it and encamp around it. Whenever the Tabernacle is to move, the Levites are to take it down, and whenever the Tabernacle is to be set up, the Levites shall do it. Anyone else who goes near it shall be put to death. The Israelites are to set up their tents by divisions, each man in his own camp under his own standard. The Levites, however, are to set up their tents around the Tabernacle of the Testimony so that wrath will not fall on the Israelite community. The Levites are to be responsible for the care of the Tabernacle of the Testimony.’” (Numbers 1:47-53)



“The Levites Carrying the Ark of the Testimony Across The River Jordan To Enter the Promised Land”

The Levites are to always remain the most zealous defenders of the Lord and His covenant. Phineas, the grandson of Aaron, is a prime example of that fiery dedication to the Lord. When Israel was seduced into immorality and idolatry by the women of Moab in a deliberate attempt to lure them away from Yahweh and thereby deprive them of their power, Phineas became so enraged by an Israelite fornicating openly with a Midianite temple prostitute that he seized a spear and drove it through both of them as they engaged in the act of intercourse. (Numbers 24:1-9)

This action may have taken place within the courts of the Tabernacle. The Lord commended the faithfulness of the Levite and promised his family an ongoing role in the priesthood of the nation:

“The Lord said to Moses, Phineas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, has turned My anger away from the Israelites, for he was as zealous as I am for My honor among them, so that in My zeal I did not put an end to them. Therefore, tell him I am making My covenant of peace with him. He and his descendants will have a covenant of a lasting priesthood, because he was zealous for the honor of his God and made atonement for the Israelites.”
(Numbers 24:10-13)

Verses 30-32

“The next day Moses said to the people; ‘You have committed a great sin, but now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.’ So Moses went back to the Lord and said, ‘O what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin - but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.’”

“The next day Moses said to the people...” - Moses does not proceed immediately. Instead he waits for his own anger and the consternation which had consumed the camp in the aftermath of the slaughter of the 3,000 by the Levites to begin to subside. After this cooling off period, Moses assures the people that he will attempt to intercede on their behalf before the Lord. The grim point of this assurance is God has not yet forgiven the sin which has been committed. The destruction of the calf, the drinking of the bitter waters, and the killing of the 3,000 have not resolved the problem. Moses goes out of his way to emphasize the gravity of that which Israel has done - ***“You have committed a great sin.”*** This was neither a casual nor momentary act of disobedience. What Israel has done strikes at the very heart of their relationship with God. Contrition, heartfelt sorrow for sin, is the beginning of the process of repentance. Such contrition cannot occur as long as the sinner remains in denial over the fact of his sin or the seriousness of that sin. In this instance, Israel is guilty of having repudiated and

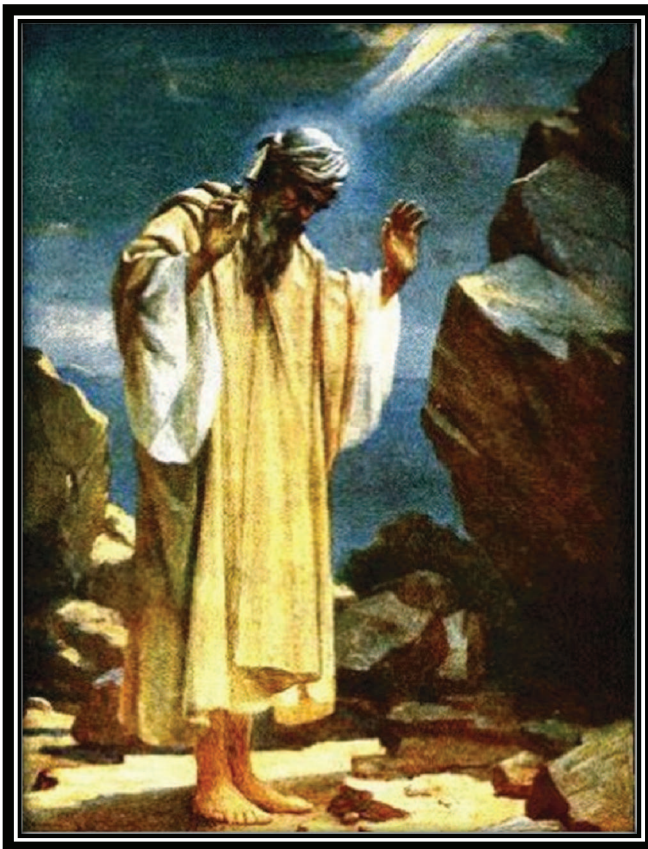


“Phineas Impales the Israelite and the Midianite Temple Prostitute”

violated their covenant with God in the most flagrant way imaginable. They deserve nothing other than judgement and destruction from the God whom they have rejected and defied. In effect, Moses must plead with God to reinstate the covenant which Israel has destroyed, even though Israel has demonstrated its absolute unworthiness to be participants in the gracious covenant with the Lord. They have broken all the promises which they had made and now Moses must ask God to accept their renewed commitment despite the fact that they have brazenly broken every prior commitment which they had made.

“It is instructive that Moses did not try to minimize the peoples’ sin in the process of trying to gain forgiveness for it. Biblically, confession of sin (being entirely honest with God in stating its nature and extent) is part of true repentance. The person who understates his sin is not really demonstrating repentance to God. So Moses bluntly described the peoples’, both in the prior verse in addressing the people and now to God directly as ‘a great sin’ and as ‘idolatry.’” (Stuart, p. 684)

It is clear that the problem has not yet been resolved. What has taken place thus far is only the beginning of the process. The wrath of God in response to their “great sin” has not yet been appeased. The execution of the 3,000 had quelled the rebellion within the camp, but “This bloodletting is insufficient to atone for the enormity of the peoples’ sin.” (Waltke, p. 470)



“Moses Interceding For Israel Before The Lord Upon the Crest of Mount Sinai”

“But now I will go up to the Lord. Perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.” - God had not replied to Moses’ initial appeal in vss. 11-14. However, the fact that Moses had been allowed to return to the encampment, destroy the Golden Calf, punish the people by compelling them to drink the bitter water and execute 3,000 with the help of the tribe of Levi, indicated that God had decided not to exterminate the entire nation. The prophet now sought a second audience in order that the Lord’s declaration of forgiveness might be obtained. Moses indicates that he will return to the crest of Sinai and stand before the Lord amid the fire and cloud of divine glory. Once again he will intercede on behalf of the nation in the hope that his plea will be achieve forgiveness for the terrible things which they have done. “The earlier divine repentance had at least cut off the possibility of Israel’s destruction. But the issue of forgiveness and the nature of the God/Israel



“Aaron Leading The People In the Worship of the Golden Calf” by Poussin

relationship remains uncertain.” (Freitheim, p. 290) The ominous **“perhaps”** which introduces his goal makes it clear that the outcome in this matter is far from certain. He does not yet know how the Lord will respond to his plea. The prophet Amos used similar language centuries later as he called upon the northern tribes of Israel to repent of their idolatrous worship of golden calves and seek the forgiveness of God: **“Hate evil, love good, maintain justice in the courts. Perhaps the Lord God Almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph.”** (Amos 5:15)

“That he begins with ‘perhaps’ indicates that Moses has no idea whether God is open to this...To be sure, God is gracious and merciful, but His forgiveness cannot be presumed, as if God is duty bound to remove our sins anytime and anywhere we ask Him. We cannot say, ‘God will forgive me. That’s His job,’ the words attributed to the German writer Heinrich Heine as he was on his deathbed conversing with a priest.” (Hamilton, p. 554)

Moses’ goal is simply stated - **“I can make atonement for your sin.”** **“Atonement”** refers to the restoration of harmony between two parties which have been estranged or separated from one another by the removal of the offense which has caused that division. In the context of atonement with God the word is used in reference to the forgiveness of sin which removes the division between the holy and righteous God and the penitent sinner. In the years to come, atonement will be the responsibility of the priesthood through the rituals and sacrifices of the Tabernacle and the Temple. However, at this moment those structures have not yet been put into place. Therein lies the problem which confronts Moses. In this



“Moses Interceding For Israel” by Larson

dire moment of crisis, there is no divinely sanctioned means through which sin can be forgiven and atonement accomplished. As Dr. Bruce Waltke pointedly observes: *“But Moses, unlike Christ, cannot make atonement.”* (Waltke, p. 470) Only the Messiah, who was without sin, could offer His own innocent blood as the atonement price for the sins of mankind. Moses, himself a sinful human being, was in no position to make such an offer. *“The atonement by Moses, and all the OT intermediaries, themselves in need of forgiveness, remained unsatisfactory and awaited the effectual expiation by the sinless Bearer of the world’s guilt.”* (Roehrs, p. 85) No matter how intense Moses’ love for his people or his desire to rescue them from the judgement they had brought upon themselves may have been, Moses could not be their redeemer.

“So Moses went back to the Lord and said, ‘Oh, what a great sin these people have committed...’” - Once again Moses ascended the steep slopes of Sinai, this time to act as an intercessor on behalf of his sinful countrymen. God’s acceptance of this role is indicated by His willingness to allow the prophet to stand before Him - *“So Moses went back to the Lord.”* Very few men, throughout the long history of humankind have been granted this awesome privilege or been asked to bear this burden of responsibility. The text makes it clear that this is not a bargaining session of a negotiation. Moses approached the Lord with a humble plea, a plea that came directly from his broken heart. That stance is more clearly signaled in the Hebrew text. The NIV translates the introductory particle with which Moses addressed the Lord simply as *“O.”* While this translation is possible most commentators note that the Hebrew word *“anna”* typically conveys a sense of entreaty. Some suggest its translation here as *“please.”* Victor Hamilton insists that in this moment of life or death crisis a more urgent *“I beg you”* is needed to convey the desperation of the circumstances. The prophet begins his plea for forgiveness with a forthright confession. The purpose of

these words is not to inform God of what has taken place. God has previously informed Moses of what was happening in the camp. Rather, his confession acknowledges the sin for which he has come to seek forgiveness. Moses makes no attempt to minimize the profound gravity of the sin which Israel has committed - ***“What a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold!”*** The overwhelming nature of their betrayal of God precludes any such evasion. There are no mitigating circumstances to present nor potential scapegoats to whom blame could be shifted. Israel is guilty of blatant idolatry. Moses’ phrase - ***“They have made themselves gods of gold”*** - recalls the language which God Himself had spoken when the Ten Commandments had been given: ***“Do not make any gods to be alongside Me. Do not make for yourselves gods of silver or gods of gold.”*** (Exodus 20:23)

The attempts of rabbinic tradition to concoct such tactics appear all the more pathetic in contrast to the blunt integrity of Israel’s faithful prophet. In this particular phrase, for example, the rabbis actually suggest that in the phrase ***“gods of gold,”*** Moses is implying that at least part of the blame for what has transpired must rest with God Himself for bestowing the golden riches of Egypt upon them and thereby putting them in a position where they could be tempted to use their gold to fashion golden idols like their heathen neighbors. One of Judaism’s teachers used this colorful analogy:

“Rabbinic exegesis offers an entirely different explanation: speaking to YHWH, Moses alleges that indirectly YHWH Himself is to blame;



“The Rugged Crest of Mount Sinai”

by giving Israel gold and everything else they wanted in abundance, YHWH, in fact, made the sin inevitable. Israel can be compared to the son of a king, who with a full money bag around his neck is placed at the entrance to a brothel.” (Houtman, II, p. 672)

Such are the ridiculous lengths to which man will descend in his efforts to maintain the shreds of his own self-righteousness.

By identifying the Children of Israel as **“these people”** Moses accomplishes two significant purposes. First, he recognizes that as the consequence of their flagrant transgression they no longer deserve to be considered the people of God. Secondly, he does not identify himself with the nation, as would have been the case if he had spoken of **“my people.”** This distinction enables him to stand apart from them as their objective advocate before the Lord. He had not been a participant in the apostasy and therefore had no need to request personal forgiveness in this matter. God had already recognized this fact with his proposal that the unfaithful nation be destroyed and that a chosen people be reconstituted from the descendants of Moses.

“But now, please forgive their sin - but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.” - Moses pleaded with the Lord to grant fallen Israel forgiveness for the great sin which they had committed, recognizing that God alone could grant them forgiveness. Biblical Hebrew has two basic terms to express the concept of the forgiveness of sins. Ultimately both of them mean the same thing, each using a different metaphor to express



“Moses’ Prayer Before the Lord Upon Sinai”

the thought that God acts to take away the guilt of the sinner. The first, “*salah*,” refers to washing or cleansing the corrupt sinner from the guilt of sin. This verse uses the second of these two terms, “*nasa*,” which means to lift or to carry away sin. “*Nasa suggests forgiveness through relieving or unburdening a person of their offense and consequent punishment. The forgiven person does not have to carry one’s sin any more. God carries it away.*” (Hamilton, p. 555)

The personal intensity of his plea is expressed in the poignant words - “***but if not, then blot me out of the book You have written.***” The book in question is not identified beyond the fact that it is written by God Himself. The Lord acknowledged the existence of such a book in His reply to Moses - “***Whoever has sinned against Me I will blot out of My book.***” The Old Testament refers to a variety of divine books. Psalm 69:29 refers to a “*Book of Life*” in which are recorded the names of all those who are alive on earth as citizens of the kingdom of God. David calls for the physical death of his enemies with the prayer: “***May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous.***” This would appear to be the sense in which “***the book You have written***” should be understood here. As Cornelius Houtman points out, this OT usage must be carefully distinguished from the New Testament’s Book of Life inscribed in the blood of the Messianic Lamb which is the complete record of every soul which God has predestined in Christ for eternal salvation.



“Aaron – High Priest of Israel”

“A reciprocal relation is assumed between one being on YHWH’s list or not and his existence. Not occurring on it means one is dead. Thus, Moses tells YHWH that he wants to die if his supplication is not heard. YHWH answers that He will kill the offenders. In sum, the record of Exodus 32 is the record of people who dwell on earth, not the record of those who are predestined to eternal life. In this last sense, the Book of Life occurs in the New Testament.” (Houtman, pp. 672-673)

In his careful review of the role of heavenly books in the apocalyptic writings of the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament, Dr. Leslie Baynes concurs with this conclusion while at the same time noting the emphasis which this image places upon an individual relationship with God reflected in the lifestyle and actions of that individual. There is not automatic birthright entitlement to earthly blessings or eternal salvation on the basis of one’s ethnicity or national identity:

“God’s book of life functions as a list of His people, those who are loyal to Him and to no other divine contender. A person may be enrolled as a citizen of Zion simply because of the luck of birth (Psalm 87:6), but remaining in the book of life is dependent upon each individual’s actions. While there is no indication that the deeds of a person are recorded in the book of life, they have everything to do with one’s inscription there. Even once written in it, a person may be blotted out of the book if he/she forsakes the covenant of the Lord. It is worth mentioning that there is no hint of predestination or determinism having to do with the heavenly book in this passage. Although the inscription indicates membership in a polity continued membership in the group is dependent upon the individual’s behavior.”

(Baynes, p. 35)



*“The Prophet Malachi”
by Buoninsega*

In a similar sense God foretold the death of false prophets in Ezekiel 13 using the image of names being omitted from *“the records of the House of Israel: “My hand will be against the prophets who see false visions and utter lying divinations. They will not belong to the council of My people or be listed in the records of the House of Israel, nor will they enter the land of Israel.”* (Ezekiel 13:9) Perhaps the clearest reference to such a record - *“the scroll of remembrance”* - is provided in Malachi 3:16-18 -

“A scroll of remembrance was written in His presence concerning those who feared the Lord and honored His name. They will be Mine, says the Lord Almighty, in the day when I make up My treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him. And you will see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.”

Dr. Baynes further argues that the use of the blotting out terminology in this passage strongly indicates that the punishment referenced here in Exodus 32:32 is physical death rather than eternal damnation.

“The vocabulary of ‘blotting out’ also supports the assertion that this is a book of life, and, what’s more, a book that has to do with the physical life of those written in it (cf. Genesis 6:7; 7:4; Exodus 17:14; 23:23)..It is important to note that registration in the Lord’s book in Exodus 32:32 does not entail heavenly citizenship or everlasting life in heaven. It indicates life on earth as the people of God. Similarly, ‘blotting from it’ means separation from that people via physical death.” (Baynes, p. 36)

This is completely consistent with the context of Moses’ prayer and the subsequent outcome of this sad series of events. The substance of Moses’ request to the Lord is that if He plans to punish Israel with death then Moses would prefer to be included in that death penalty despite the fact that he had not been involved in the sin - ***“But if not, then blot me out of the book that You have written.”*** It is important to recognize that Moses is not offering his own life as a substitute for that of sinful Israel. As mentioned previously Moses was himself a sinful man and to have made such an offer would have been not only futile but presumptuous. While St. Paul’s lament over Israel’s rejection of the Messiah in Romans 9 sounds very similar, it is substantively different. The apostle recognized the impossibility of such an exchange: ***“I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel.”*** (Romans 9: 2-3) In effect Paul is saying that if such a thing could be done, which it can’t, I would gladly give up my own salvation to for the salvation of my fellow Jews.

Verses 33-35

The Lord replied to Moses, ‘Whoever has sinned against Me I will blot out of My book. Now go. Lead the people to place I spoke of, and My angel will go before you. However, when the time comes for Me to punish, I will punish them for their sin.’ And the Lord struck the people with a plague for what they did with the calf Aaron had made.



“Christ Condemned By Caiaphas the High Priest” by Albrecht Dürer



**“God The Righteous Judge”
by Togliatti**

“The Lord replied to Moses, ‘Whoever has sinned against Me I will blot out of My book.’ - The Lord’s reply to Moses’ prayer is a simple and direct “No!” Those who have sinned in this matter will die and Moses will not be permitted to die with them. Moses’ prayer cannot be granted because that which he requested contradicted the righteous justice of God. The basic principle is expressed in repeatedly throughout the Old Testament-

“For every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son - both alike belong to Me. The soul who sins is the one who will die..The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wickedness of the wicked man will be charged against him...Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked?

Declares the Sovereign Lord. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their wicked ways and live?” (Ezekiel 18: 4,20,23)

“Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; He is the faithful God keeping His covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love Him and keep His commands. But those who hate Him He will repay to their face by destruction; He will not be slow to repay to their face those who hate Him...Fathers will not be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their fathers; each is to die for his own sin.” (Deuteronomy 7:10; 24:16)

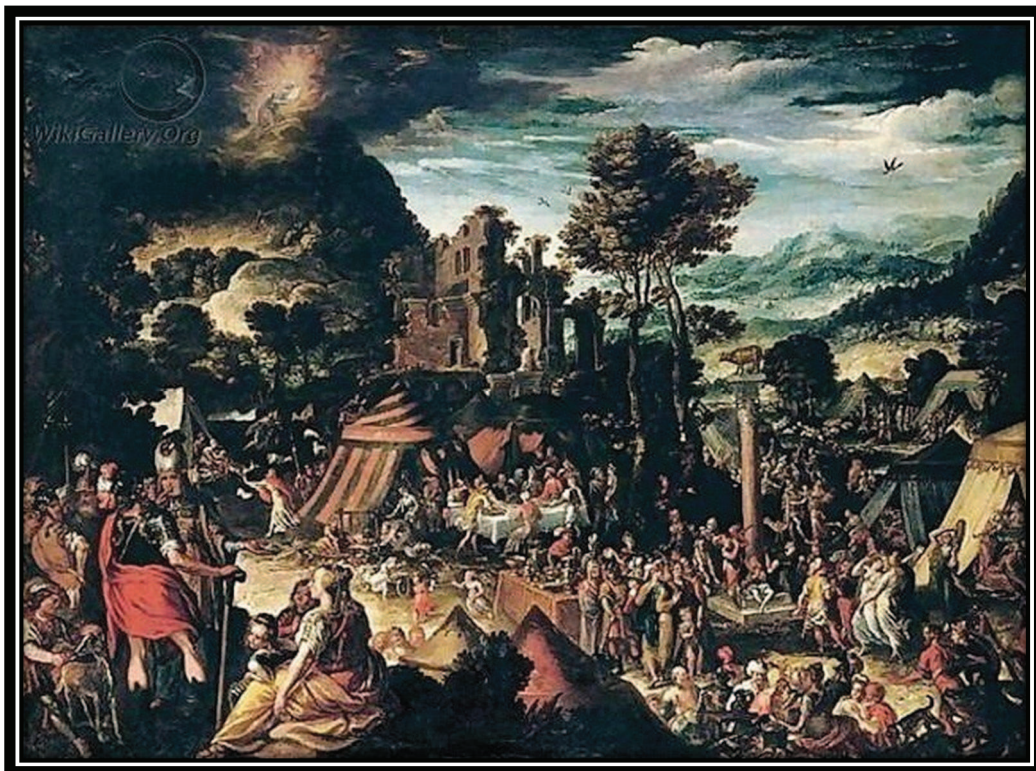
“Then the Lord said to me, ‘Even if Moses and Samuel were to come before Me, My heart would not go out to this people. Send them away from My presence. Let them go!..You have rejected Me, declares the Lord, You keep on backsliding so I will lay hands on you and destroy you. I can no longer show compassion.” (Jeremiah 15:1,6)

The holy God cannot tolerate evil. Judgement is the prerogative of God alone. The judgement of God must be righteous and just. The sinner who commits the sin is personally responsible for his own actions. Only the righteous, or the sinner who has obtained forgiveness of his sins by grace through faith by means of the substitutionary atonement of

the Messiah can be delivered from the eternal consequences of sin. *“Verse 33 is, then, one of the Bible’s strongest statements about the absolute necessity for the forgiveness of sins, and, therefore, for a Savior.”* (Stuart, p. 685)

At the same time, the Lord’s unequivocal response is indicative of the profound significance of the apostasy of the Golden Calf in the history of God’s covenant relationship with Israel. This unimaginable betrayal in the midst of the formal establishment of the national covenant, in the immediate aftermath of the dramatic series of miracles which had destroyed the mightiest nation on the face of the earth and brought about Israel’s deliverance from four hundred years of bondage, has to be considered one of the most drastic demonstrations of the perversity of human sinfulness in the history of the race. Only the impassioned intervention of Moses had prevented the immediate complete extinction of the nation. Even the rabbis, otherwise so prone to evade and excuse, are compelled to acknowledge the magnitude of this spiritual catastrophe. Rabbinic tradition, based upon Exodus 32:33-35, teaches that from this time forth every time God judges Israel for their sin, and additional is added for the apostasy of the Golden Calf. Modern Rabbi Schneerson paraphrases the words of God to Moses:

“Though this transgression does not merit their immediate death, I will add to its demerit whenever I punish them in the future. Thus, on the day of My reckoning of those sins, I will bring them to account for their sin in the matter of the calf as well.” (Lubavitcher Rebbe, p. 254)



“Israel’s Adoration of the Calf” - Dutch 17th Century

The Jewish Encyclopedia makes the bold assertion that the apostasy of the Golden Calf was the second most serious sin in the history of humanity:

“Next to the original fall of man the worship of the golden calf is, in rabbinic theology, regarded as the sin fraught with the direst consequences for the people of Israel. There is not a misfortune which Israel has suffered which is not partly a retribution for the sin of the calf.” (Sanhedrin, 102,a)

Other rabbis went even further, teaching that the apostasy of the Golden Calf far more damaging than the original sin of Adam and Eve and that it was this corruption which became hereditary for twenty-four generations, leading ultimately to the destruction of the Israelite nation in the promised land, first the ten northern tribes of Israel and then the southern kingdom of Judah.

“Some of the rabbis, while disclaiming the sin of Adam, made the sin of the Golden Calf, (‘the cloven foot’) a hereditary one, effecting twenty-four generations till the final destruction of the Jewish state in the time of King Hezekiah. ‘In the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them.’ (Exodus 32:34)” (Jewish Encyclopedia)



*“Moses Looking Down Upon the Golden Calf”
by Arthur Szyk*

While these views demonstrate the disdain for and disinterest in the Gentile world which characterizes classical Judaism, they also reflect the reluctant recognition of the profound significance of the apostasy of the Golden Calf in the history of the plan of salvation.

The Lord’s words *“Whoever has sinned against Me I will blot out of My book”* express a general principle which leaves both time and method for the specific application of that principle to the sin of the Golden Calf unspecified.

“Now go. Lead the people to the place I spoke of and My angel will go before you.” - The Lord terminated the conversation regarding Moses’ petitions with the affirmation that the journey toward the land of promise was to continue under his leadership. *“The place I spoke of”* is the Land of Canaan which the Lord



“The Pillar of Fire Over The Tabernacle Before Mount Sinai”

had promised, first to Abraham and then to his various descendants including the present Children of Israel. The Promised Land had been specified as the final destination toward which God had liberated the nation from their Egyptian bondage. In a similar fashion, God’s assertion that “My angel will go before you” is not the announcement of a change, but a reaffirmation that the Angel of the Lord, that is, the pre- incarnate Christ, would continue to guard and guide the Israelites on their journey through the wilderness. God had previously given this promise in Exodus 23:20-23 –

“See, I am sending an angel ahead of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. Pay attention to Him and listen to what He says. Do not rebel against Him; He will not forgive your rebellion since My Name is in Him. If you listen carefully to what He says, and do all that I say, I will be an enemy to your enemies and will oppose those who oppose you. My angel will go ahead of you and bring you into the land of the Amorites, Hittites, Perrizites, Canaanites, Hivites and Jebusites and I will wipe them out.”

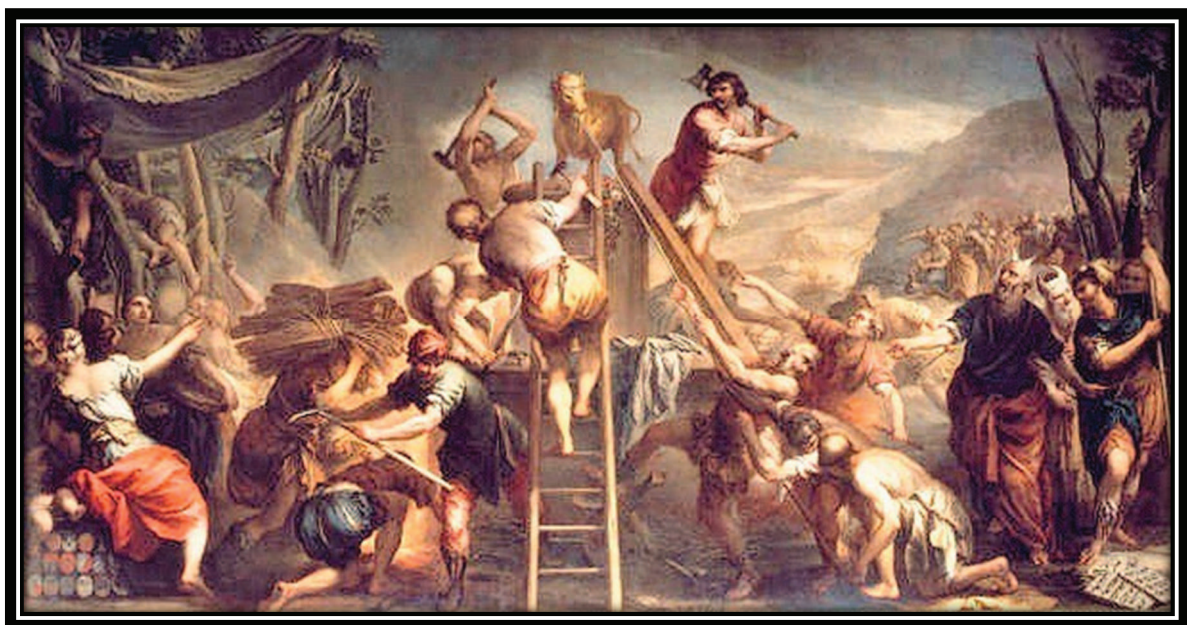
“However, when the time comes for Me to punish, I will punish them for their sin.” - Having reaffirmed that the journey toward the Promised Land would continue under the leadership of Moses, led by the Angel of the Lord, God concluded the conversation with a final reminder that further punishment would be forthcoming. The ominous words of the text appear to suggest that the punishment suggest both that the time for the fulfillment of this punishment had not yet come and that the punishment would be ongoing.

“The language of vss 34b-35 is not easy to interpret, but its ominous tone is clear enough. For this archetypal sin of the Golden Calf, a free-floating prospect of further retribution would seem to hover over the people like a dark shadow... the fallouts or the effects of the calf makers would extend far beyond the calf makers.”

“And the Lord struck the people with a plague because of what they did with the calf Aaron had made.” - The Lord not only made Moses aware of the long term implications but also acted immediately to demonstrate His righteous wrath in response to the sin of the people. The specific timing and scope of the plague imposed upon the nation is not indicated. This is the only reference to the episode in Scripture.

“The plague described in 32:35, in other words, was a small scale warning, a sample of God’s wrath, but by no means the actual full punishment for abandoning the covenant...we are not told how many people died in this warning plague...It was a one time, ad hoc punishment for what had happened at one point at Sinai on the way to the promised land. It was not the full-scale covenant imposition of curses that brought an end to the covenant with Israel (cf. Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28-32). That would come many centuries later.”
(Stuart, p. 689)

The closing sentence draws a careful balance of responsibility between the people’s desire for a new god and the failed leadership of Aaron who cravenly complied with the demands of the mob. Both are fully culpable before the Lord and both will experience just punishment for their sin. The equality of responsibility is emphasized by the repetition of the same Hebrew verb - translated **“they did”** and **“had made”** - in reference to both parties.



“Aaron Cowering Behind Moses As the Golden Calf Is Destroyed” by Celesti



“Moses’ Tent Of Meeting Outside the Camp With The Glory Cloud at Its Entrance”

Exodus Chapter 33

(1) Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Leave this place, you and the people you brought up out of Egypt and go up to the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, saying, I will give it to your descendants. (2) I will send out an angel before you and drive out the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perrizites, Hivites and Jebusites. (3) Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey, but I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way.’ (4) When the people heard these distressing words, they began to mourn and no one put on any ornaments. (5) For the Lord had said to Moses, “Tell the Israelites: You are a stiff-necked people. If I were to go with you even for a moment, I might destroy you. Now take off your ornaments and I will decide what to do with you.” (6) So the Israelites stripped off their ornaments at Mount Horeb. (7) Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp, some distance away, calling it the “Tent of Meeting.” Anyone inquiring of the Lord would go to the Tent of Meeting outside the camp. (8) And, whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people rose and went out to their tents, watching Moses until he entered the tent. (9) As Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance, while the Lord spoke with Moses. (10) Whenever the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance to the tent, they all stood and worshiped, each at the entrance to his tent. (11) The Lord would speak to Moses face to face as a man speaks to his friend. Then Moses would return to the camp, but his young aide Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent. (12) Moses said to the Lord, “You have been telling me, ‘Lead these people,’ but You have not let me know whom you will send with me. You have said, ‘I know you by name and you have found favor with me.’ (13) If You are pleased with me, teach me Your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation

is Your people.’ (14) The Lord replied, “M y Presence will go with you and I will give you rest.” (15) Then Moses said to Him: “If Your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. (16) How will anyone know that You are pleased with me and with Your people unless You go with us? What else will distinguish me and Your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?” (17) And the Lord said to Moses, “I will do the very thing you have asked because I am pleased with you and I know you by name.” (18) Then Moses said, “Now show me Your glory.” (19) And the Lord said, “I will cause all M y goodness to pass in front of you and I will proclaim M y name, the Lord, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. (20) But” He said, “you cannot see M y face, for no one may see M e and live.” (21) Then the Lord said, “There is a place near Me where you may stand on a rock. (22) When M y glory passes by I will put you in a cleft in the rock, and cover you with M y hand until I have passed by. (23) Then I will remove M y hand and you will see M y back; but M y face must not be seen.”



“The Hand Of God Covering Moses’ Face As He Passes By The Cleft Of The Rock” - 18th Century French Bible Engraving

Verses 1-3

“Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Leave this place, you and the people you brought up out of Egypt, and go up to the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants.’ I will send an angel before you and drive out the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go with you because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way.’”

“Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Leave this place, you and the people...” - There may have.



*“Moses’ Rage Over the Golden Calf”
19th Century Victorian Bible Engraving*

been a significant amount of time between the imposition of the plague noted in 32:35 and the resumption of the Lord’s conversation with Moses which begins Chapter 33. Assuming the plague took the form of a disease epidemic, it could have taken weeks for the pestilence to have run its course and for the people to have recovered from the devastation and death which it inflicted upon them.

In this context, the Lord introduces His instructions to Moses with a sweeping statement of the original purpose of the deliverance of His people from Egypt and a re-statement of the promises which had expressed that purpose:

“Leave this place, you and the people you brought out of Egypt, and go up to the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants.’ I will send an angel before you and drive out the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey.”

A potentially troubling component in the Lord’s words is the substitution of the phrase “the people you brought out of Egypt,” associating Israel with Moses, in place of the more typical direct association of God Himself in reference to the exodus. This subtle shift in vocabulary suggests - particularly in view of what will follow - a new sense of distance between God and the Children of Israel as the result of their apostasy with the golden calf. The citation of the patriarchs and God’s promises to them at this point also suggests that God is determined to fulfill His oaths to their fathers despite the unworthiness of their children.

At the same time, the terminology reflects the enhancement of Moses’ role and the mediator between God and the sinful nation which had come into being as the result of his intercession on their behalf upon the mountain. This expanded role will be defined in

subsequent verses. Nonetheless, the Lord's affirmation clearly indicate that their flagrant disobedience has not destroyed the covenant. Substantive changes in the covenant must now occur but God will remain true to His Word despite Israel's unfaithfulness. This must have been most comforting to a people anxiously waiting to see what would happen next.

“Thus, a reminder of the big picture- the general purpose of the exodus – was much in order once the plague was over. Such a reminder would keep Moses and the people focused on God’s plan for them, which they might have been tempted to doubt in light of the plagues severity, and also would be an encouragement to Moses that God’s provision and support had not ended, but had merely been interrupted, as it were, by the people’s idolatry.” (Stuart, p. 689)

The brusque command **“Leave this place”** indicates that Israel’s extended sojourn at Mount Sinai is over. The Hebrew text literally reads – “Go! Go up!” It is the verbal reversal of the command “Go! Go down!” which had announced the rupture of the covenant caused by the Israelites’ idolatry. Its deliberate usage here signals the end of this disastrous episode and the resumption of the trek toward Canaan. The nation’s encampment before the great mountain has been definitive, in both a negative and a positive sense, but the time has come to recall the purpose for which the deliverance from Egypt had occurred and continue the journey toward the land of promise. The stop-over at Sinai had lasted for almost ten months, the covenant had been revealed and recorded, and the land which God had promised to the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob awaited them. In the Biblical text, the departure here commanded will not actually take place until Numbers 10:33 – **“So they set out from the mountain of the Lord ...”** The intervening balance of Exodus, the entire Book of Leviticus, and the first third of the Book of Numbers present the great mass of legislation which Moses received upon the mountain and the events which accompanied its presentation. In the traditions of the rabbis, the **“Up”** and **“Down”** language of the Lord’s commands to Moses



“The Encampment At Mount Sinai” by Gerome

in these verses are a great deal more significant than the relative elevation of the crest of Sinai and the encampment at its base.

“In the Torah’s topography, Egypt is the lowest place on earth, Canaan, the highest. One always ‘descends’ to Egypt and ‘goes up’ to Canaan. The wilderness in which the people now camp, notwithstanding its mountainous terrain, occupies a middle territory between the depths and the heights. (Rashi)” (Propp, II, p. 597)

“I will send an angel before you ...” - This promise had been given before but in a very different way. In Exodus 23 Israel had been told that **“My Angel,”** the unique messenger of the Lord of whom God says **“My Name is in Him.”** This is the “Malach Yahweh,” the Angel of the Lord who is the pre-incarnate Christ, second member of the divine Trinity.

“See, I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared. Pay attention to him and listen to what he says and do not rebel against him; he will not forgive your rebellion, since My Name is in him ... My angel will go ahead of you and bring you into the land.” (Exodus 23:20-23; cf. 32:34)

However, in the sad aftermath of the Golden Calf, it would appear that the divine Angel of the Lord is withdrawn and replaced with another of the Lord’s angels. The role of this mighty angel will also be to guard and guide the nation through the wilderness and to destroy the sinful nations of Canaan when Israel arrives at the Promised Land – **“and drive out the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites.”** But this angel is not the divine “Malach Yahweh.” *“The promise of 23:20-23 is repeated, but the emissary is not here designated as ‘My Angel.’ The change is ominous.” (Sarna, p. 211)* Classic commentator John Currid observes:

“God describes the messenger going before them as ‘an angel’ not as ‘My Angel’ (23:23). The Septuagint further highlights the separation between Yahweh and His people by the translation ‘he will drive out,’ referring to the angel as the one who carries out this work, not Yahweh Himself. Thus, God will fulfill His promises - but only from a distance.” (Currid, II, p. 295)

Contemporary commentator Victor Hamilton also supports this consensus view but with a more forceful assertion of the judgement component in this action:

“Israel is shortly going to resume the journey to Canaan, but with a messenger/angel going before the people as a surrogate for the absent, infuriated Yahweh who has dwelled ‘among’ them. This is a considerably different role for this messenger/angel in 33:3 than was mentioned in 23:20-23.



“Israel Led By The Pillar of Cloud and Fire Through The Wilderness” by John Martin

In 20:20-23, the messenger/angel is a gracious provision of God for His people. In 33:3, the messenger/angel appears only because God has been deeply offended by His people’s behavior. Such messenger/angels can represent either God’s blessing (Exodus 23) or the withdrawal of God’s presence (Exodus 33).” (Hamilton, p. 558)

This fundamental shift is the consequence of Israel’s terrible sin. In the aftermath of the apostasy the holy God can no longer dwell, as He had promised, in the midst of His people.

“God withdraws His presence because of the presence of Israel’s sin ... Janzen points out that usually in the Bible ‘the Angel of God’ is virtually synonymous with God’s presence. This is the sense in which the guidance of God’s Angel was promised to Israel in 23:20-23. In our present text, however, the guidance of an angel (33:2a) is clearly contrasted with God’s more immediate presence.” (Tsai-Yun Lin, p. 187)

The text also repeats the traditional language which asserts the unique abundance and fertility of the land of Canaan – **“Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey.”** They will still receive that land but the nature of God’s participation in its conquest and His presence among them as they dwell therein must now be altered.

“But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way.” - The wrath of God and its consequences for Israel are explicitly presented in Verse 3. Up to this point, Israel had received the unique blessing of being led by God Himself Who deigned to dwell among them. The Septuagint version of Deuteronomy

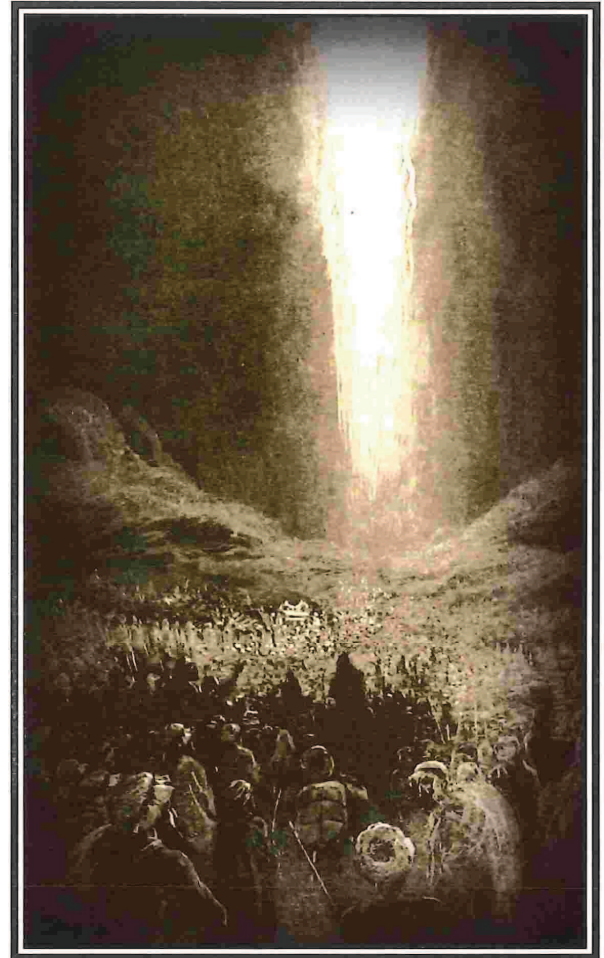
32:8-9 makes this point explicitly clear. All of the other nations were assigned a guardian angel, but the Lord took the nation of Israel as His own.

“When the Most High divided the nations, when He separated the sons of Adam, He set the bounds of the nations according to the number of the angels of God. And His people, Jacob, became the portion of the Lord. Israel was the line of His inheritance. He maintained him in the wilderness, in burning thirst in a dry land; He led him about and instructed him and kept him as the apple of His eye.”

Moses will make the same point, later in the chapter, as he pleads with the Lord to extend forgiveness to His repentant people: *“If Your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that You are pleased with me and with Your people, unless You go with us? What else will distinguish me and Your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?”* (33:16)

The wonder of God’s presence was most directly affirmed in the instructions for the construction of the Tabernacle: *“They shall make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them ...I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God.”* (Exodus 25:8, 29:45) In this context God’s declaration that He can no longer dwell among them must be understood in reference to the Tabernacle. It is certainly no co-incidence that in structure of Exodus, the episode and its grim aftermath occur in between the instructions for the design of the Tabernacle (Exodus 25-31) and its subsequent construction (Exodus 35-40) *“Accordingly, God’s absence from the midst of Israel should be understood, with Ibn Ezra, to mean the cancellation of the order to construct the Tabernacle.”* (Sarna, p. 211) Hebrew commentator Umberto Cassutto offers this enlightening paraphrase of the Lord’s words to Moses clearly indicating the significance of the Tabernacle as the locus of God’s dwelling among Israel:

“But I wish to make this reservation: I Myself will not go up among you. All that I have promised the Patriarchs I shall carry out, but on no account shall I cause My Presence to dwell in the midst of Israel’s camp through the Tabernacle that they will built to My Name, as I said I would, because the people are no longer worthy thereof Although I gave you detailed instructions



“Israel Led By the Pillar of Fire and Cloud Through the Wilderness”

with regard to the construction of the Tabernacle, and at the commencement of these instructions I said to you (XXV:8); ‘And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell in their midst.’ and at the end I said to you (XXIX: 46) that I brought the Children of Israel forth out of the land of Egypt that ‘I might dwell among them,’ yet now, seeing that they are unfaithful to Me, and I shall not dwell in their midst, I shall give them My protection and help from afar, but they shall not be privileged to see the symbol of My Presence in the midst of their camp.” (Cassutto, p. 426)



*“The Glory Of God Resting Over The Tabernacle”
18th Century Bible Engraving*

“Because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way.” - Even in the midst of wrath God’s merciful love for His people is demonstrated. Israel had quailed in fear before the direct manifestation of God’s glorious presence upon the mountain, and begged Moses to serve as their representative before Him. ***“When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet, and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, ‘Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.’”*** (Exodus 19:18-19) In the aftermath of Israel’s demonstration of its astonishing capacity to disobey God and spurn His Word, and the stubborn tenacity of this corruption in the face of consistent demonstrations of God’s power and love, the Lord’s concern is completely reasonable. If He were to continue to bless the nation with His immediate presence among them, the risk that they would once again choose to reject Him could place the survival of the nation in jeopardy. The Lord had been prepared to exterminate the people because of the Golden Calf. Only the desperate intercession of Moses had spared them from destruction (Exodus 29-16). If a repetition of these circumstances were to occur, as well it may, based on past performance, there would be no mercy.

“The reservation, namely, that I shall not cause My Presence to dwell in your midst, is, after all, in your own interest – ‘for you are a stiff-necked people’ - you do not readily accept My new teachings and cling to the old idolatrous concepts, and consequently if you sin against Me again when My Tabernacle is in your midst, as you have sinned now, and you defile the place sanctified to Me, there is the danger that I may consume you on the way. It was My intention to honor you in My Tabernacle, but every added honor imposes upon the one honored an added obligation and responsibility. If, now, I cause My Presence to dwell among you, your responsibility will be so much the greater, and the punishment for your sins so much more severe.” (Cassutto, pp. 426-427)



“The Presence Of The Lord Over The Tabernacle”

It is all too easy to underestimate the catastrophic nature of this punishment. It transforms the essence of Israel’s covenant relationship with the Lord. Dr. John Durham does not exaggerate in the least in his description of what has now transpired as *“a punishment worse than death”*:

“It is not to be a plague, and it will not be death by some other means. Indeed, it is to be the most appropriate response possible to Israel’s compromise of their relationship with Him, and a punishment worse than death. They are to go up, guided by His messenger, to the place He had chosen and in which He had intended to live in their midst, but without Him. In the place of His Presence there will only be Absence. It is a punishment, announced at this point in the sequence of the Book of Exodus, that negates every announcement, every expectation, every instruction except those now being given. There will be no special treasure, no kingdom of priests, no holy nation, no Yahweh being their God, no covenant, no ark, no Tabernacle, no altar, no cloud of glory. The Messenger promised in 23:20-24, was, as is so often the case in the Old Testament, a close equivalent, at very least of God’s presence – ‘My Presence

is with Him' but the messenger mentioned here is quickly and very specifically qualified: (1) his function is guidance only, and (2) Yahweh very quickly and plainly states that He Himself will not go up with them. Israel must leave Sinai, the place where they have known Yahweh's Presence, and they must journey forth in a way to have been graced by His Presence, to a place to have been filled with His Presence with no hope of His Presence ever again." (Durham, p. 437)

Martin Luther perceptively observed that idolatry always results in separation from God.

"Whatever man loves, that is his god. For he carries it in his heart, he goes about with it night and day, he sleeps and wakes with it, be it what it may, wealth or self, pleasure or renown. What preoccupies our thoughts? What do we treasure in our hearts? God wants to fill our lives with His Presence. But when we carry other things around with us, pursuing them by day and thinking about them at night, there is no room left for God." (Ryken, p. 1019)

The Lord aptly characterized the Israelites as **"stiff-necked."** The term is derived from the agricultural context of Israelite culture. The most common draft animal among the Hebrews was the ox. Oxen were used in common farm tasks of ploughing and harrowing. A team of oxen would pull the plow across the field while the farmer followed, one hand guiding the plow and the other holding an "ox-goad." This implement was a light pole with a pointed iron tip. When the oxen veered off course or he wanted them to turn he would jab them in front of their shoulders at the base of their necks with the goad, directly between the shoulder blades if he wanted them to move straight forward or on either side if he wanted



"Modern Palestinian Farmer With An Ox-Mule Team And Goad In An Early 20th Century Postcard"

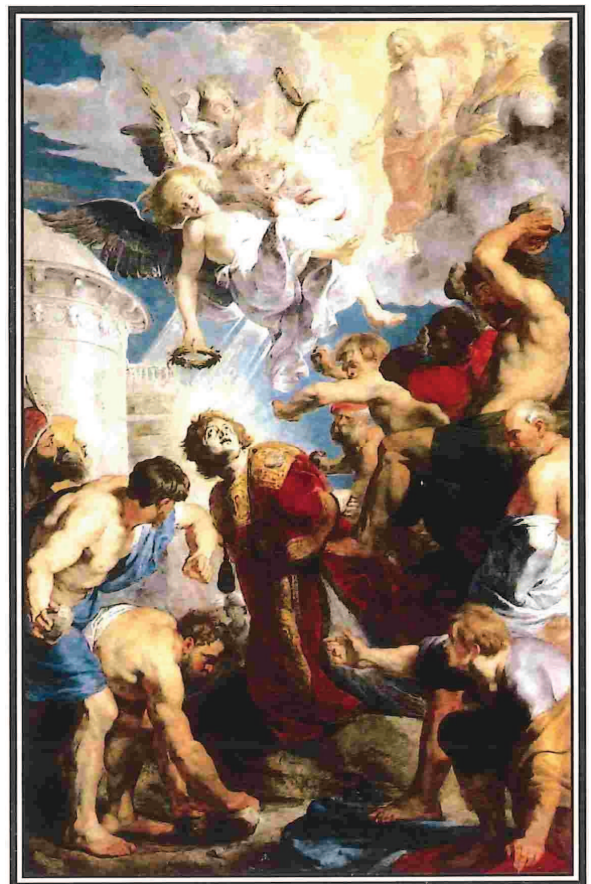
the team of oxen to turn one way or the other. The ox which failed to respond to its master's direction was described as "*stiff-necked*" or more literally "*hard of neck.*" In reference to people the term identified someone who was extremely stubborn or obstinate, someone who would not respond or submit to instruction, someone who was determined to go their own way despite all direction from their leaders or teachers. The term was particularly severe, describing these negative characteristics with the graphic image of a dumb animal which plodded stubbornly along oblivious to the pain of the increasingly sharp jabs of the ox-goad. A contemporary, although less dramatic parallel, would be the unflattering observation that someone is "*as dumb as an ox*" or "*as stubborn as a mule.*" The word is used often throughout Scripture. In his parting words to Israel Moses used the adjective in his grimly accurate them to turn to one side or the other. characterization of Israel's future:

"Take this Book of the Law and place it beside the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord your God. There it will remain as a witness against you, for I know how rebellious and stiff-necked you are. If you have been rebellious against the Lord while I am still with you, how much more will you rebel after I die!... For I know that after my death you are sure to become utterly corrupt and to turn from the way I have commanded you. In the days to come disaster will fall upon you because you will do evil in the sight of the Lord and provoke Him to anger by what your hands have made." (Deuteronomy 31:24-29)

King Solomon warned in the Book of Proverbs: "***A man who remains stiff-necked after many rebukes will suddenly be destroyed without remedy.***" (Proverbs 29: 1) Bold Stephen condemned the leaders of the Sanhedrin using this classic term just before his martyrdom: "***You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: you always resist the Holy Spirit! Has there ever been a prophet your fathers did not persecute?***" (Acts 7:51)

Verses 4-6

"When the people heard these distressing words they began to mourn, and no one put on any ornaments. For the Lord had said to Moses, 'Tell the Israelites, 'You are a stiff-necked people. If I were to go with you, even for a moment, I might destroy you. Now take off your ornaments and I will decide what to do with you.' So the Israelites stripped off their ornaments at Mount Horeb."



"The Martyrdom of Stephen" - Rubens

“When the people heard these distressing words...” - The Israelites immediately recognized the profound significance of the removal of God’s presence from among them. Their response is consternation, fear, and mourning. The construction of the Golden Calf had originally been an expression of their deep insecurity about the presence of God in light of Moses’ prolonged absence upon the mountain. “This decision has a shattering effect, for it was the want of a mediating representation of God’s immanence that generated the demand for a material image in the first place.” (Sarna, p. 211) They now belatedly realize that their disobedience has brought about exactly what they feared. They have driven God from their midst. Israel’s response is compared to the grief provoked by the death of a loved one – “They began to mourn.”

“The account of the peoples’ reaction makes sense both as a continuation of the narrative of vss. 1-3 and also as an expression of bitter and hopeless grief. The people could hardly be expected to be plunged into such abysmal grief by an announcement of a tempered judgement. What they are told by Yahweh, amounts to the worst of all possible outcomes, from their point of view, but the only one we could expect, given the theological framework of Exodus.”
(Durham, p. 437)

The mourning of Israel indicates that for the first time they have begun to recognize the enormity of their sin. The Hebrew text is much more forceful than the NIV’s translation ***“when the people heard these distressing words they began to mourn.”*** A more literal translation would read *“when the people heard this dreadful news they were plunged into the deepest mourning.”* Up to this point their submission to God and to His spokesman Moses had been sullen and resentful. Their compliance had been coerced by the superior power of God which sent pestilence through the camp and the rage of Moses who had



“God Punishes the Idolatry Of the People Through Moses” – Carolsfeld



“The Worship Of the Golden Calf” by Poussin

smashed their idol and forced them to drink the bitter water. Now, finally, reality has set in prompted by the devastating decree that God would no longer dwell among them. That just punishment has stimulated the process of genuine repentance. Repentance, as defined by Scripture includes the following four components: (1) an honest recognition of the sin, without attempt to minimize its gravity or evade personal responsibility; (2) contrition for the sin, that is, sincere regret that I have disobeyed the Lord and offended his righteousness; (3) a resolve not to repeat the sin in the future, and, (4) a willingness to undo the damage caused by the sin in the lives of others, whenever possible. All of these components of repentance had been absent up to this point - thus the necessity of God's pronouncement of judgement upon the impenitent sinners.

“And no one put on any ornaments” - The grieving process in the cultures of the ancient Middle East was always characterized by visual actions. Whether that be removing ordinary clothing and dressing in sackcloth, or covering one's self with dust and ashes, or putting aside all jewelry or adornment. The point of these actions was to demonstrate the presence of overwhelming sorrow, a sorrow so intense that it made it impossible for the ordinary routines of daily life to be carried on. Israel had been dressed in the gaudy finery appropriate for their worship of the calf, in the characteristic fashion of sensual paganism.

“The people have been concerned about Yahweh’s presence in their midst. Now, through their irresponsibility, they have driven Yahweh away, at least for the moment. Although the people have another reason to mourn - many have just died - this does not seem to motivate their grief. Ehrlich may well be correct in his suggestion that ‘they began to mourn’ does not refer to mourning as such but to putting on the accoutrements of mourning - sackcloth, ashes, ripped clothes, etc, in contrast to their festive finery.” (Propp, II, p. 598)

In this instance the **“ornaments”** in question are jewelry of all forms and descriptions.

Again, the precision of the Hebrew text indicates that they did not merely remove their jewelry temporarily but that they continued to refrain from wearing jewelry throughout the balance of the forty years in wilderness. The specific reference to jewelry here is all the more appropriate when we recall that the people's jewelry had been given up for the building of the golden calf. Ezekiel later refers to this fact in his denunciation of the corruption and idolatry of Jerusalem:

“They will throw their silver into the streets, and their gold will be an unclean thing. Their silver and gold will not be able to save them in the day of the Lord’s wrath. They will not satisfy their hunger or fill their stomachs with it for it has made them stumble into sin. They were proud of their beautiful jewelry and used it to make their detestable idols and vile images. Therefore, I will turn these into an unclean thing for them.” (Ezekiel 7: 19-22)

“I adorned you with jewelry. I put bracelets on your arms and a necklace around your neck, and I put a ring in your nose, earrings in your ears, and a beautiful crown on your head. So you were adorned with gold and silver ... But you trusted in your beauty and used your fame to become a prostitute. You lavished your favors on anyone who passed by and your beauty became his ... You also took the fine jewelry I gave you, the jewelry made of My gold and silver and you made for yourself male idols and engaged in prostitution with them ... And you took your sons and daughters whom you bore to Me and sacrificed them as food to the idols. Was your prostitution not enough? You slaughtered My children and sacrificed them to the idols. In all your detestable practices and your prostitution, you did not remember the days of your own infancy, when you were naked and bare, kicking about in your blood.” (Jeremiah 16: 11-12, 15-22)



“The Revelry of the Pagans” by Bougeureau



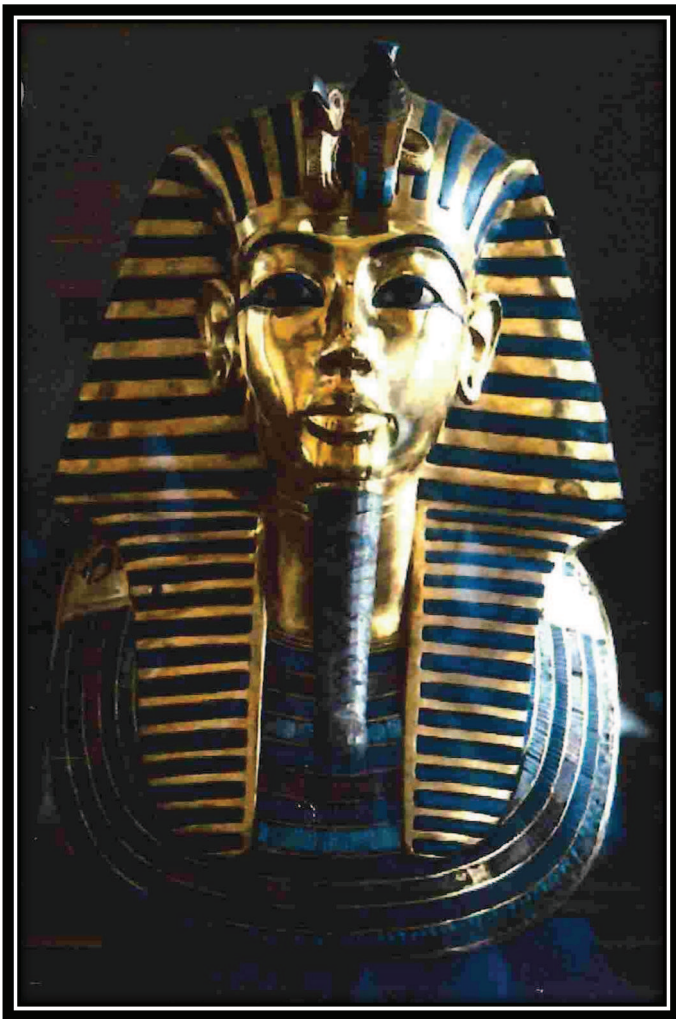
*“The Jews Presenting The Gold and Jewels To Aaron To Build The Golden Calf”
By Franz Francken*

It is most significant to observe that the people removed their jewelry without the least hesitation, when they were commanded to do so by the Lord. The Hebrew verb in this phrase literally says *“they stripped them off.”* The people could not act quickly enough to separate themselves from the treasures of Egypt which had played so prominent a role in their fall into sin. The verb which occurs here is a variation of the same term used previously in Exodus to describe the manner in which the Israelites would plunder the Egyptians who were then desperate to get Israel out of their land after the death of the first-born: *“Every woman is to ask her neighbor and any woman living in her house for articles of silver and gold and for clothing which you will put on your sons and daughters. And so you will plunder the Egyptians.”* (Exodus 3:22) *“The Israelites did as Moses had instructed and asked for articles of gold and silver and for clothing. The Lord had made the Egyptians favorably disposed toward the people, and they gave them what they asked for, so they plundered the Egyptians.”* (Exodus 12:35-36) The Lord had blessed them with these riches from their former masters. They, in turn, had abused His blessing to disobey and deny Him. Their continued use of these riches would only have served to remind them of the covenant which they had broken:

“Adornments consisted, in part at least, of the jewelry of silver and gold that the Israelites had received from the Egyptians; and since they had made improper use of some of the gold ornaments in donating them for the making of the calf, it was only right that they should themselves be deprived of what still remained in their possession of the spoil they had taken from others ... They had worn these jewels as they stood before the mountain arrayed in their finery to celebrate the establishment of the covenant. These jewels would now have appeared to them as witnesses of that sublime event and to the establishment of the covenant between them and the Lord. But now they had broken that covenant and they were no longer worthy of wearing the symbol of the voided compact.” (Cassutto, p. 428)

Their action now, in casting away their precious jewels is the willing expression of the genuine repentance which they are beginning to experience. Early 20th Century pastor and theologian W.A. Pink explains:

“The removal of their ornaments was for the purpose of demonstrating the genuineness of their contrition. Outward adornment was out of place with the taking of a low place before God. Contrariwise, external adornment and displays show up the absence of that lowliness of spirit and brokenness of heart which are of great price in the sight of the Lord.” (Ryken, 1020)



The Solid Gold Death Mask From the Tomb of Pharaoh Tutankhamum

The sequence of events described in these verses is fully consistent with the Biblical understanding of repentance defined previously. Their actions suggest that not only are they doing the right things but that they are doing them for the right reasons. The Lord’s decree of judgement has accomplished its purpose by revealing the perilous folly of their sin. In the traditional language of the Catechism we speak of God’s Law functioning as a curb, a mirror, and a rule. In this instance the mirror of the Law has confronted them with the ugly image of what they have done and the grim reality that those who choose the way of idolatry have destroyed the possibility of a relationship with the true God. They are now recoiling from their sin in horror and

disgust and are frantically seeking the mercy of God as the only possible basis for the forgiveness which they do not deserve.

“Israel’s heart was in the right place. When the people heard that God was not going with them, they were distressed in the right way and for the right reason. They were not just feeling sorry for themselves, instead they were repenting of their sin. They were doing this because they wanted to restore their relationship with God. This was everything to them. As far as they were concerned, if God was not in their midst then even if they still made it to the promised land, they had lost the only thing that really matters, which was their relationship with God. They did not want to be led by an angel; they wanted to walk with God.” (Ryken, p. 1021)

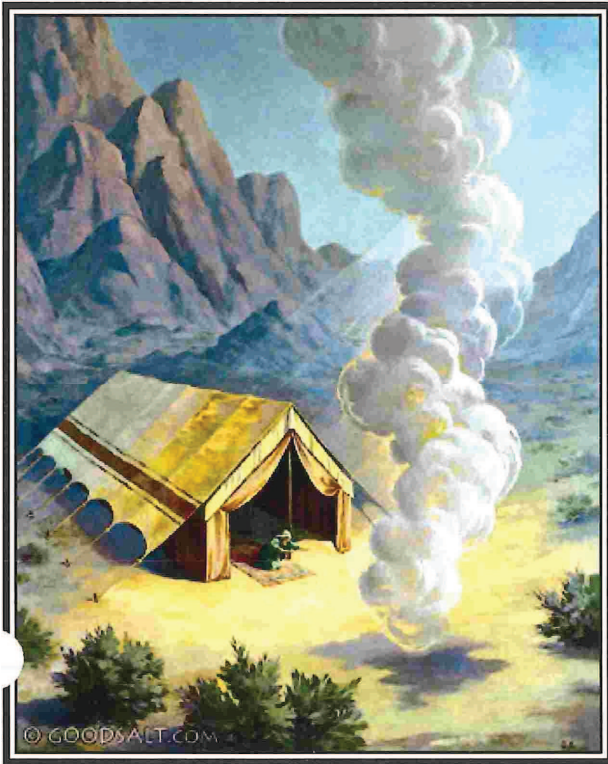


“The Repentance of Israel In The Wilderness” - Tintoretto

“For the Lord had said to Moses, ‘Tell the Israelites ...’” - Verses 5 & 6 reiterate that which the Lord had previously spoken to Moses as the prophet has now repeated the Word of the Lord to the Israelite nation. The only addition here - and it is a most critical addition indeed - is the phrase: **“And I will decide what to do with you.”** These all-important words indicate that the possibility of forgiveness still exists, if the people will humble themselves, turn from their sin, and repent. *“Thus the dramatic narrative of Exodus 32-34 is opened to its next and climactic stage by a tiny glimmer of light across the black darkness cast by the announcement of Yahweh’s. Yahweh must yet decide what He is to do with His ex-people.”* (Durham, p. 438)

“So the Israelites stripped off their ornaments at Mount Horeb.” - The Lord’s allusion to

the possibility of forgiveness is followed by a second reference to the people's removal of their jewelry as an expression of repentance. In this way the two concepts are linked together with one another. "**Mt. Horeb**" is an alternate designation for Mount Sinai. It means "*the mountain in the wilderness.*" The avoidance of the title Mount Sinai may be motivated by the close connection of that name with the establishment of the covenant which has, at least for the time being, been voided by the disobedience of Israel.



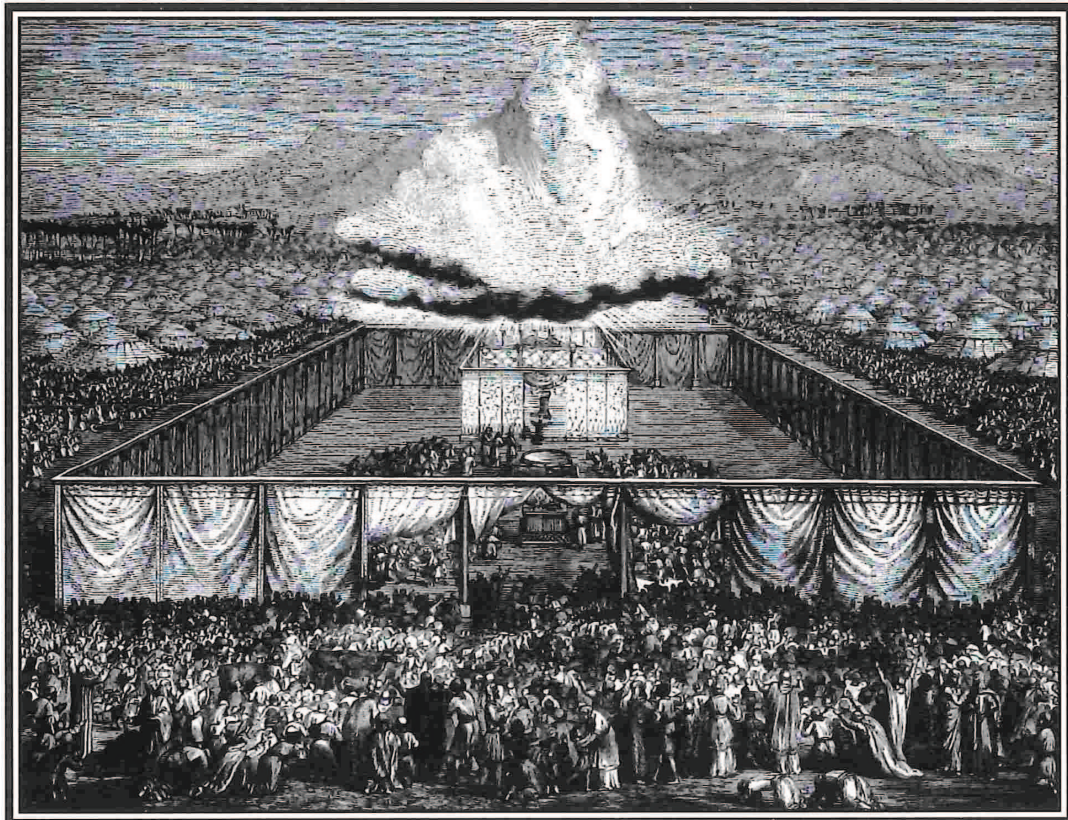
"Yahweh Meeting With Moses At His Tent Outside The Encampment"

Verses 7-11

"Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp, some distance away, calling it 'the tent of meeting.' Anyone inquiring of the Lord would go to the tent of meeting outside the camp. And whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people arose and stood at the entrance to their tents, watching Moses until he entered the tent. As Moses entered the tent, the Pillar of Cloud would come down and stay at the entrance, while the Lord spoke with Moses. Whenever the people saw the Pillar of Cloud standing at the entrance to the tent, they all stood and worshiped, each at the entrance to his tent. The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. Then Moses would return to the camp, but his young aide, Joshua, the son of Nun, did not leave the tent."

"Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp..." - While there are those who contend that this arrangement had already been in place prior to the distancing of God which had resulted from the idolatry of the golden calf, it would appear, given the absence of any mention of the make-shift tent of meeting prior to these events and the emphasis here upon the placement of the tent well outside the camp, that this was an interim arrangement consequent to the people's disobedience. The text does not specify whether the establishment of this tent outside the camp was by divine command or was in initiative of Moses himself, intended to drive home to the people, the most serious predicament in which they have placed themselves. In any case, God sanctioned the action of Moses by condescending to meet with him there. The text does indicate that it was Moses, not God, who labeled the tent as "*the tent of meeting.*" The fact that he would designate this structure as "*the tent of meeting*" - a title identical to that which had already been chosen to identify the Tabernacle (Exodus 27:21; 28:43; 29:4, 10, 30, 32, 42, 44; 30:16, 18, 20, 26, 36; (31:7) further reinforces the impression that Moses' tent was designed to be a substitute for the Tabernacle, reflecting the Lord's judgement that the tent of meeting would no longer be able to dwell in the midst of Israel because of the stiff-necked sinfulness. By using this title Moses further stressed the consequences of what Israel had done. *"Moses called it 'the*

meeting tent precisely because it was not the real 'Meeting Tent' -, now possibly never to be built." (Propp, II, p. 600) John Currid calls Moses' for this sad little tent a play on words – "designed to ridicule the Hebrews for their behavior at Mount Sinai." (Currid, 2, p. 298) The text also emphasizes the fact that this tent is not merely outside the camp, but "a long distance outside the camp." "Normally the expression 'outside the camp' means in the vicinity of the camp. If a greater distance is intended, then an additional phrase is necessary, as is the case here, 'outside the camp at a considerable distance from the camp.'" (Hamilton, p. 560) Rabbinic commentary argues that the tent of meeting as placed 2,000 cubits from the outer extremity of the camp since this is the farthest distance which a man is allowed to walk outside a settled area on the Sabbath. The rabbis concluded that if the tent had been any farther away Moses would not have been able to commune with the Lord on the most Holy Day. The differences between the role of Moses' Tent outside the camp and the Tabernacle in the midst of the camp far exceed the issue of location. Both served as a point of communication between God and the people. In His instructions for the design of the Tabernacle the Lord had promised: "**There I will meet you and speak to you; there also I will speak to the Israelites, and the place will be consecrated by My glory.**" (Exodus 29:43) Unlike the Tabernacle, Moses' tent of meeting lacked the wondrous golden furniture designed by God Himself, each piece symbolic of a dimension of God's presence among His people and the miracles which He had performed on their behalf. Most significantly, there was to be no sacred Ark of the Covenant in the improvised tent of meeting. The visible presence of the Lord was to rest upon the original Tabernacle



*"The Glory of the Lord Over the Tabernacle"
19 Century Victorian Bible Engraving*



*“God Speaking With Moses In His Tent Outside The Camp”
Mortier Dutch Bible Engraving - 1740*

continuously. In this tent of meeting the presence of the Lord was not linked to the place itself but to Moses. ***“As Moses went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would stay at the entrance while the Lord spoke with Moses.”*** Thus God’s presence in this tent of meeting would be only occasional and sporadic. No courtyard was established around Moses’ tent as a perimeter to protect the holy ground upon which the sanctuary stood. No priesthood served there. Only Joshua, Moses’ aide-de-camp, entered this tent and he remained there permanently, but in the role of a guard, not a priest. No rituals, sacrifices, or worship of any kind took place there. As the text of Exodus points out, each Israelite family worshiped in the entrance to their own tents when the glory-cloud descended upon the tent of Moses. ***“Whenever the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance to the tent, they all stood and worshiped, each at the entrance to his own tent.”*** The sight of the pillar of fire/cloud and the presence of God which it signified inspired a sense of reverence and awe among the people. The God whom they had so flagrantly betrayed still deigned to reveal Himself to them, although under fundamentally altered circumstances. Their humble worship, intensified by their ardent desire for His forgiveness, demonstrated their homage and their repentance, as each Israelite family knelt at the entrance to their own tents. They entrusted themselves and their future to His judgement, trusting that His judgement would, as always, be the expression of His gracious love.

“The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.” – Moses is the foremost prophetic figure in the Old Testament. The expression used here, and elsewhere in the Old Testament (cf. Deuteronomy 34:10), struggles to find an adequate way to describe *“the preeminence and the uniqueness of Moses as a prophetic figure who experiences a special mode of revelation. The experience is personal and direct, not*

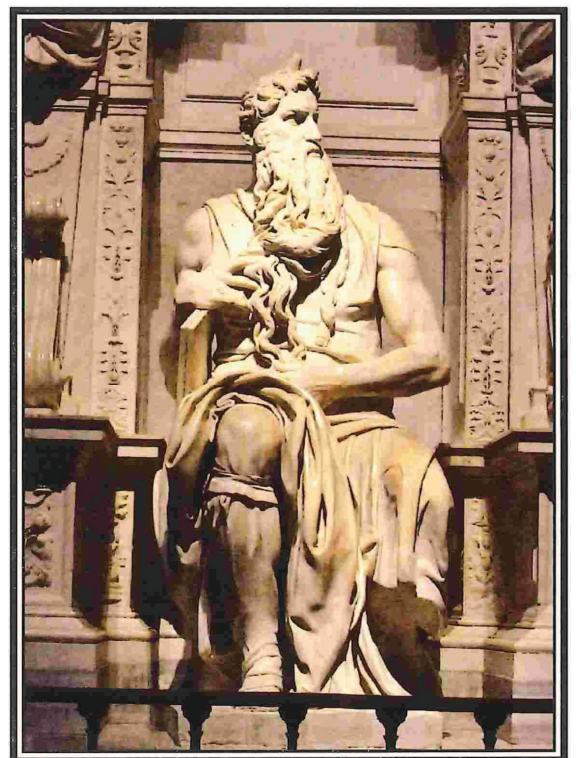
mediated through visions or dreams, and the message is always plain and straightforward, free of cryptic utterances.” (Sama, p. 212) The most forceful expression of this fact came when Miriam and Aaron would later challenge the leadership of Moses. The Lord’s response to their challenge was painfully blunt as He affirmed his relationship with Moses and the expression “face to face” was intensified to the more dramatic “mouth to mouth”:

“Listen to My words: When a prophet of the Lord is among you, I reveal Myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams. But this is not true of My servant Moses; he is faithful in all My house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the Lord. Why, then, were you not afraid to speak against My servant Moses?” (Numbers 12:6-9)

This sequence of events certainly serves to enhance the stature of Moses as the mediator of the covenant. The respectful posture of the people as Moses made his way through the camp indicates their recognition of the prophet’s importance: ***“And whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people rose and stood at the entrances to their tents, watching Moses until he entered the tent.”*** The text clearly stipulates that they did not worship Moses, as if he had acquired some semi-divine status. The posture of worship was only assumed if the cloud of the divine presence appeared in front of the tent. But they did interrupt their customary activities and rise to honor the prophet of the Lord. In the context of the aftermath of the Golden Calf and the as yet undetermined response of the Lord to what had transpired, these actions take on particular importance as indicative of genuine repentance.

“In vss. 8-10 we have a description of the behavior of the Israelites, who treated Moses with great deference and conducted themselves with reverence and humility towards God’s manifestation – an indication of the spirit of repentance and of perfect faith in the Lord their God and in Moses His servant that inspired them then. This portrayal is rightly introduced at this stage because it enables us to understand that on account of this penitent mood of theirs the Children of Israel received complete forgiveness, as will be related subsequently.”
(Cassutto, p. 431)

At the same time, this characterization of the unique role of Moses sets the stage for the bold negotiations which will shortly ensue between Moses and the Lord.



***“Michelangelo’s Moses”
The Church of San Pietro - Rome***

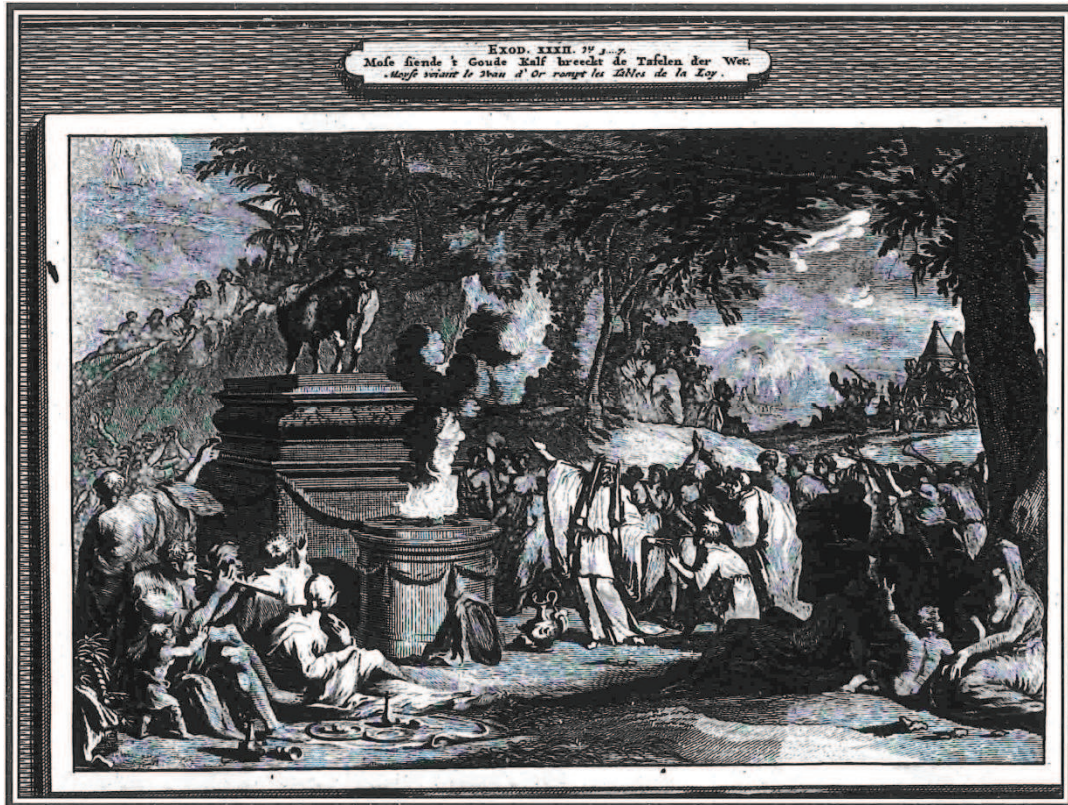
Verses 12-17

“Moses said to the Lord, ‘You have been telling me, “Lead these people!” but You have not let me know whom You will send with me. You have said, I know you by name and you have found favor with Me.’ If You are pleased with me, teach me Your ways, so that I may know You and continue to find favor with You. Remember that this nation is Your people.’ The Lord replied, ‘My Presence will go with you and I will give you rest.’ Then Moses said to Him. ‘If Your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that You are pleased with me and with Your people if You do not go with us? What else will distinguish me and Your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?’ And the Lord said to Moses, ‘I will do the very thing that you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name.’”

“Moses said to the Lord ...” - The prophet to whom the Lord spoke ***“as a man speaks with his friend”*** (vs. 11) now dared to use that precious access to put forward a desperate appeal on behalf of his people. It must be acknowledged at the outset that Moses has a significant personal stake in the outcome of this conversation. His motives are not purely altruistic. In the relatively short time which had passed since he had reluctantly accepted God’s call to deliver the people from Egyptian bondage and lead them to the Promised Land, Moses had had ample opportunity to experience the truth of the Lord’s assessment that the Israelites were a ***“stiff-necked people.”*** He knew from painful personal experience what it meant to be the leader of the Israelite nation. He had already been the brunt of disgruntled complaints and threats of violent rebellion. And even worse, the constant pattern of defiance, ingratitude, and disobedience which Israel had displayed had persisted while God dwelt among them and demonstrated His love and His power with an uninterrupted stream of wonders and miracles on their behalf. How much more incredibly difficult would Moses’ job become if God were to fulfill His threat to withdraw from their midst and separate Himself from them! Moses clearly understood that leading the Israelites to the Promised Land without the immediate Presence of God would be an impossibility.

“At this point in the story of the exodus, Moses very much needed the reassurance God now proposed to give him. The exodus assignment, not just to bring Israel from Egypt to Sinai, but now from Sinai to the promised land, was complicated by the vivid evidence of the people’s idolatry in Chapter 32 that they were a recalcitrant lot, suggesting that Moses’ task would not be a light one. Moreover, God’s refusal so far to grant His direct presence any longer means that Moses would, as it were, be more on his own in leading Israel hereafter than he had been before - and the job had proved hard enough already.” (Stuart, p. 700)

Moses lamented that while God had placed the responsibility of leadership upon his shoulders – “You have been telling me, ‘Lead these people’” - he had not been informed



*"The Worship Of the Golden Calf"
Mortier Dutch Bible Engraving- 1740*

of any of the details of the new arrangement which God had put forward in the aftermath of the Golden Calf. Moses specifically referred to the identity of the angel whom the Lord had indicated He would send before the people in His place – ***"but You have not let me know whom You will send with me."***

"Yahweh had not revealed to Moses what only He can reveal - who is to go with Moses to make possible the departure of such a people as Israel under the promise of Yahweh's absence, from such a place as Sinai, the one place where Yahweh's Presence has been most real! ... His assignment was daunting and his resources few." (Durham, p. 446)

Moses' inquiry as to the identity and the nature of the angel whom the Lord had indicated would lead the people from henceforth is not so much a request for information as a subtle indication of the inadequacy of a mere angel as a substitute for the presence of God Himself. Cassutto paraphrases the underlying concern in this way:

"If Thou dost abide by Thy decision not to go up with us Thyself, but only to send an angel before us, that means to say, to help us from afar, but how this help is to be rendered Thou hast not told me what or whom Thou wilt send to our aid - and this promise of general, indirect assistance gives no satisfaction to my spirit, which yearns for Thee to be near to us, and for Thy Presence to dwell in our midst." (Cassutto, p. 433)



“Moses Face To Face With The Lord At The Burning Bush” - Sebastian Bourdon

“You have said, ‘I know you by Name and you have found favor with Me.’ If You are pleased with me, show me Your ways, so that I may know You and continue to find favor with You.” - As Moses comes to the heart of his plea, he dares to remind the Lord of the unique relationship which God has graciously established between Himself and His foremost prophet. *“I know you by Name”* recalls the dramatic moment at the burning bush where for the first time in history God had revealed His personal name, *“Yahweh,”* to a human being. (Exodus 3:14) There, as Moses was called by God to be the man through whom He would rescue His people, as Moses had expressed his own inadequacy for this great task, God had promised *“I will be with you.”* (Exodus 3:12). Now that Presence, which had been the premise upon which this entire enterprise had been undertaken, seemed to be in jeopardy, because of the disobedience of Israel.

Moses contends that the only way that he could possibly be able to continue to please the Lord – *“so that I may know You and continue to find favor with You”* -is for God to clearly reveal His plan and purpose – *“show me Your ways.”* This is not merely a general inquiry into the nature of God but a plea for specific revelation of God’s *“ways”* as indicated by His intent as to the future of His relationship with Israel. Once again, Dr. Cassutto’s expanded paraphrase is most helpful in discerning the meaning and intent of Moses’s prayer.

“Let me know the principles by which Thy court of justice is guided, the criteria Thou dost employ in the bestowal of reward and punishment to people, and in what way man can obtain forgiveness from Thee for his sins, that I may be privileged ‘to know Thee’; and when I know Thy ways I shall know how to act and on what basis I may prevail upon Thee to forgive my people and allow Thy Presence to dwell in their midst.” (Cassutto, p. 433)

Moses is not seeking some sort of mystical experience of the Presence of God in a personal emotional experience. He is asking for objective information in regard to God’s standards and actions. Moses needs Truth, not a sense of elevated closeness to the deity. That Truth can only be obtained from God Himself as He deigns to reveal it. In an era when emotional

experience has virtually replaced objective Truth in what passes for Christianity this insight is particularly important. God can only be known through the study of His Word. Human emotional experience focuses upon the individual - not upon God - and is thus all too easily misled by my own shallow perception of my feelings, desires and needs.

“What is especially instructive to us is Moses’ understanding of how that would be accomplished; by being ‘taught’ God’s ‘ways.’ As Luther’s friend Melancthon once eloquently stated, ‘hoc is Christum cognoscere; beneficia eius cognoscer’” (‘To know Christ is to know His benefits’). There is little room for mysticism in Biblical religion; we do not know God by having some inexplicable ethereal communion with Him, in which our feelings are used as the evidence for our closeness to Him. We know Him by learning His ways - that is, His revealed standards, revealed methods, and revealed blessings – in other words by objective rather than subjective, emotional, means.” (Stuart, p. 701)

This approach to the Truth of God is clearly reflected in King David’s subsequent allusion to this prayer and what Moses learned about God as the result of his petition in Psalm 103:

“He made known His ways to Moses, His deeds to the people of Israel: the Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will He harbor His anger forever; He does not treat us as our sins deserve, or repay us according to our iniquities ... As a Father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him, for He knows how we are formed; He remembers that we are dust.” (Psalm 103:7-10; 13-14)



“The God Of Compassion” - by Koronaja

Israel was about to experience that gracious compassion, as the Lord granted forgiveness to His repentant people. As their actions had demonstrated their sinful nature so God’s action would reveal the wonder of His love.

“Remember that this nation is Your people.” - The selection of Israel as the chosen people had always been by grace. It was never a matter of qualification due to moral superiority or personal worthiness. The Lord knew full well what sin had done to these people and to all people. And yet He had chosen them as His own, to carry out a special function within the plan for the salvation of humanity. The basic



“Moses Shining With The Glory Of The Lord” by James Tissot

meaning of the verb which Moses uses, here translated **“remember,”** is not to recall to memory something which has been forgotten. Instead, it carries the more general connotation of *“to consider”* or *“to take into account.”* In light of the genuine repentance which had been demonstrated by the Israelites, Moses entreats the Lord to demonstrate once again the undeserved love which had been the basis of His covenant with this nation from the beginning, and thereby affirm His own nature as a God of mercy and compassion.

“The Lord replied, ‘My Presence will go with you and I will give you rest.’” – God’s reply directly addresses the *‘bottom line’* of Moses’ prayer. He does not specifically reply to Moses’ discreet request to be shown the ways of God in any theoretical or abstract sense. Instead the Lord acts, in an unequivocal and decisive manner to demonstrate that He is indeed ***“compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love.”*** The Lord proves ***“that He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.”*** (Psalm 103: 8-10) This magnificent declaration is entirely about the nature of God, not the influence of Moses and not the worthiness of Israel. They deserve only punishment.

It is God Himself who has brought about their repentance, leading them with meticulous care through a patient process of Law/Gospel ministry. The language of the text is spoken personally to Moses. This is fully consistent with the strong emphasis upon the bond between the Lord and His prophet which permeates this passage. The Hebrew noun for ***“My Presence”*** literally reads *“My Face”* - echoing the words of Verse 11 – ***“The Lord would speak with Moses face to face.”*** And yet, at the same time, Moses as the mediator between God and the people, personifies the entire nation. Thus, when the Lord promises Moses ***“My Presence will go with you”*** He is promising to restore His immediate presence not merely to Moses but to the Children of Israel. He will forgive their sin and dwell among them once again.

“It was a full restoration of the original ideal of God’s promise to bring to bring the Israelites out of Egypt and into the Promised Land personally as state in 3:8, 12, 17. It shows that Moses’ prayerful appeal had, in fact, been entirely successful - not because Moses could get anything he wanted from God, but because of God’s character of goodness, mercy, and compassion.”
(Stuart, p. 701)



“17th Century Bible Woodcut Depicting the Encampment of Israel Around the Tabernacle”

The restoration of God’s Presence also means that the plans for the construction of the Tabernacle may resume and that the Fire/Cloud will rest above the Ark within the Holy of Holies in the midst of the encampment.

The phrase which follows – *“and I will give you rest”* - is the wording characteristically used in the Pentateuch as the assurance that God will guard and guide His people safely to the Land which He had promised them and that they would dwell there securely under His divine protection. Moses used the same language in commanding the tribal contingents of those tribes on the east bank of the Jordan to remain with the army until the entire Land of Canaan had been conquered:

“The Lord your God has given you this land to take possession of it. But all of your able-bodied men, armed for battle must cross over ahead of your brother Israelites ... until the Lord gives rest to your brothers as He has to you and they too have taken possession of the land the Lord your God is giving them across the Jordan.” (Deuteronomy 3:18-20; cf. Joshua 1:3; 22:4)

The same terminology occurs in Moses’ warning not to imitate the pagan worship of the Canaanites after they have settled in the land:

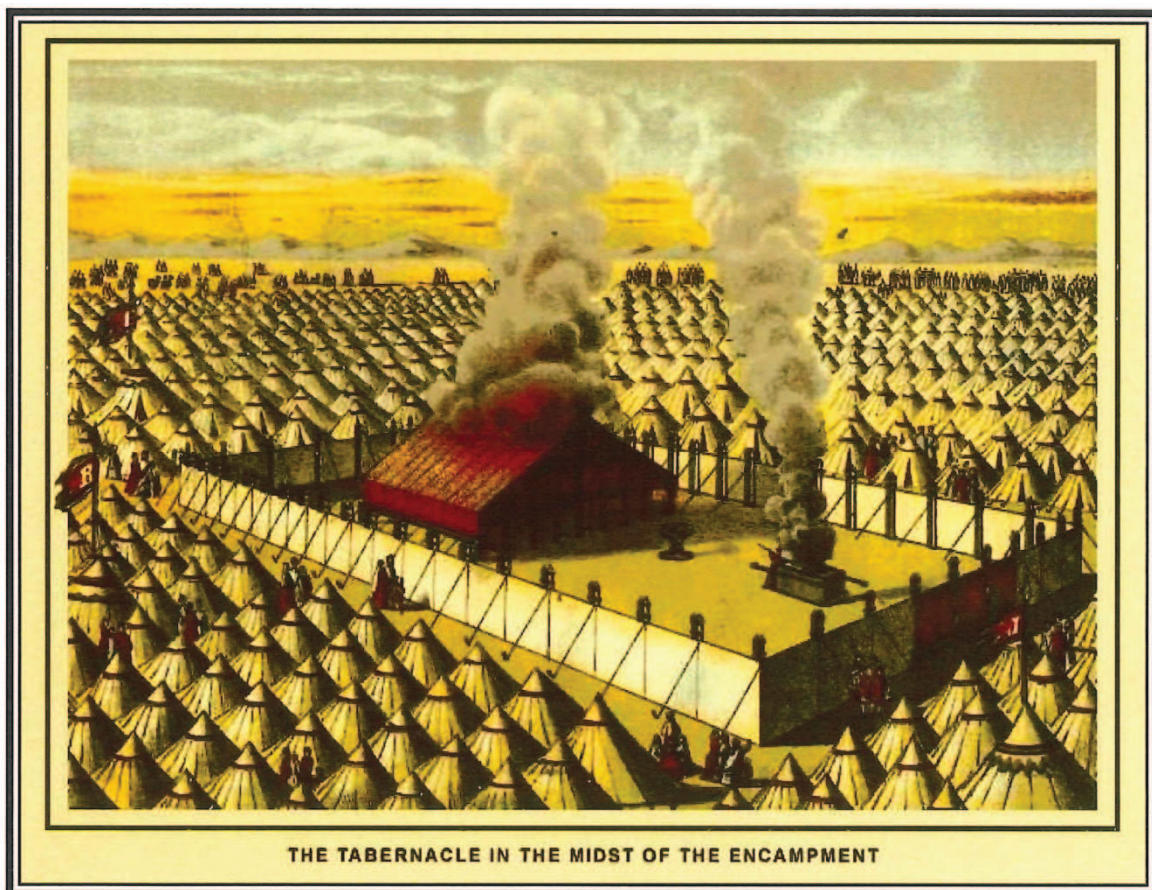
“You are not to do as we do here today, everyone as he sees fit, since we have not yet reached the resting place and the inheritance which the Lord your God is giving you. But you will cross the Jordan and settle in the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance and He will give you rest

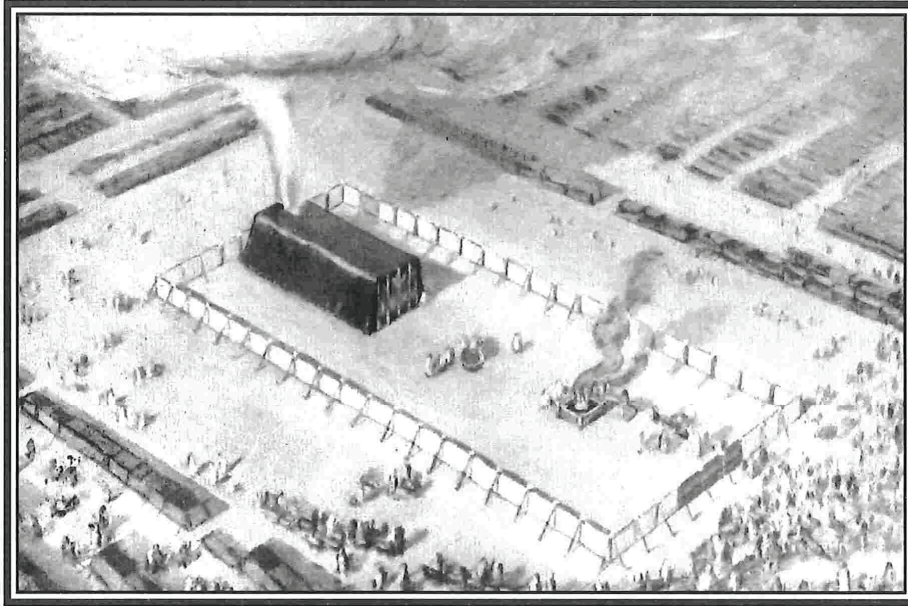
from all your enemies around you so that you will live in safety.”
(Deuteronomy 12:8-10; cf. 25:19)

As the prophet Isaiah recounted the mighty deeds of God in delivering His people from Egyptian bondage, leading them safely through the wilderness, and enabling them to conquer the land of Canaan - despite their disobedience and ingratitude - he linked “the Angel of His Presence” to the rest which Israel received in the Promised Land:

“In all their distress, He too was distressed, and the Angel of His Presence saved them. In His mercy He redeemed them, He lifted them up and carried them His people recalled the days of old, the days of Moses and his people Like a horse in open country they did not stumble; like cattle that go down to the plain they were given rest by the Spirit of the Lord. This is how You guided Your people to make Yourself a glorious Name.” (Isaiah 63:9,11,13-14)

The use of these words here indicates that God’s Presence will remain in the midst of His people all the way through the accomplishment of His promise and the conquest of the land of Canaan. “Thus, the third stage of divine forgiveness is now concluded. The pardon is now complete. The Lord will cause His presence to dwell in the midst of Israel’s camp, and to this end He will permit the Tabernacle to be built.” (Cassutto, p. 434)





“The Glory Of God Over The Tabernacle”

“Then Moses said to Him, ‘If Your Presence does not’” - Recognizing the desperate urgency of this discussion, and the need of the people for the most specific reassurance possible to provide the courage that will be needed to proceed on their journey toward the land of promise, Moses pressed on in his petition to the Lord. His comments in this segment deliberately include the entire nation so that Israel may know that God has not relented merely because of his relationship with Moses but because of His commitment to the covenant which He had established with them. The resumption of the journey without God’s Presence in their midst would be an impossibility, a pointless exercise in futility. Thus Moses bluntly declares: ***“If Your Presence does not go with us do not send us up from here.”*** Some are offended by what could be understood as a brazen attempt to tell God what to do. This view misunderstands the nature of the text. The Hebrew manner of expression differs from that of the English translation. *“His language is not brusque, and he was not commanding God, it was the language of prayerful appeal, which can be voiced normally in Hebrew with the imperative, as here.”* (Stuart, p. 703) Jewish commentator Umberto Cassuto clarifies the sense of the text in this manner:

“Here too we must understand the speaker’s intent rather than the superficial meaning of his words. Moses is saying, ‘This is actually what I wished to achieve, otherwise the survival of the people of Israel would be valueless, unless Thou didst consent to go with us Thyself, it would be better for us not to leave this desert.’” (Cassuto, p. 434)

“How will anyone know that You are pleased with me and with Your people unless You go with us?” - Without the immediate presence of God in their midst Israel would be no different than any other nation. The only thing which sets them apart is their divine calling, and the only demonstration of that calling is the Presence of God in the midst of the people whom He has graciously chosen to be His own. *“Israel’s singularity rests in its relationship*

with God.” (Sama, p. 213) ***“What else will distinguish me and Your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?”*** There is an admirable and accurate humility in this declaration.

“It was God’s presence with His people, and all that that implied, that made His people special - they did not have within themselves any particular intrinsic characteristics to ‘distinguish’ them. God’s distinction was what they received derivatively, but did not possess innately.” (Stuart, p. 730)

These words must not be misconstrued as the crass sort of appeals to divine vanity which often characterized the pagan religions of the ancient world. The true God does not require human approval or recognition to boost His sense of self-worth! The concern for the glory /reputation of God demonstrated here was often the theme of Moses’ petitions to the Lord. So, for example, in Numbers 14, when another rebellion provoked the righteous wrath of God and threaten to bring His judgement upon the nation, Moses pleaded that the Lord refrain, not because Israel deserved mercy, but because of what the destruction of the chosen people would do to God’s reputation among the heathen. Note also the connection drawn by Moses between his petition and the Presence of the Lord among the Israelites:

“Moses said to the Lord: ‘Then the Egyptians will hear about it. By Your power You brought these people up from among them. And they will tell the inhabitants of this land about it. They have heard that You, O Lord, are with these people, and that You, O Lord, have been seen face to face, that Your cloud stays over them, and that You go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. If You put these people to death, all at one



“The Glory Cloud Over The Ark As Israel Crosses The Jordan To Enter the Promised Land” by Benjamin West

time, then the nations who have heard this report about You will say; ‘The Lord was not able to bring these people into the land He promised them on oath, so He slaughtered them in the desert.’ Now, may the Lord’s strength be displayed, just as You have declared. The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love, and forgiving sin and rebellion.” (Numbers 14: 13-17)



“The Wilderness Encampment Of Israel Around The Tabernacle” – 19th Century Bible Engraving

This concern for God’s glory is not based upon petty vanity but upon God’s desire that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the true. Moses’ concern is the negative witness which the destruction or failure of Israel would seem to present to the world. That which may seem to discredit or deny God in the eyes of men detracts from that goal and makes it easier for the devil, the unbelieving world and my own sinful flesh to continue to reject Him and turn away from Him. As one commentator insightfully observed that God’s desire for glory is “*evangelistic*” as the loving Creator is constantly at work providing for the possibility that fallen mankind may be restored to the authentic life which can only be experienced in relationship with Him. In this instance, imposing upon Israel the punishment which they justly deserve, and abandoning the people whom God has chosen to be His own could easily be misunderstood as an indication of divine inability or unwillingness to fulfill His promises.

“The success of Israel versus their enemies was, in the old covenant, a witness to the world. When their enemies prevailed against them, they were shamed and disgraced to the world, indeed, cursed, and their special nature as the one people of the one true God was blurred to the vision of others.” (Stuart, p. 703)

This was the universal perception in the ancient world. The defeat of one nation by another

was viewed as the victory of one nation's gods over those of their opponents. That conclusion would have been inaccurate and untrue, but it would have been widespread nonetheless, for such are the inclinations of sinful men whose eyes have been blinded by the Prince of Lies.

“And the Lord said to Moses, ‘I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name.’” - Once again, the reaffirmed His forgiveness of the people and the restoration of His Presence among them – ***“the very thing for which you have asked.”*** This is the fifth time in this segment of Exodus that the formula ***“I am pleased with you and I know you by name”*** occurs. There is no more powerful example in all of Holy Writ of the effectual power of the persistent prayer of a faithful believer than this amazing conversation between Moses and his God.



***“18th Century Woodcut Of God Shielding Moses As His Glory Passes
By The Cleft In The Rock”***

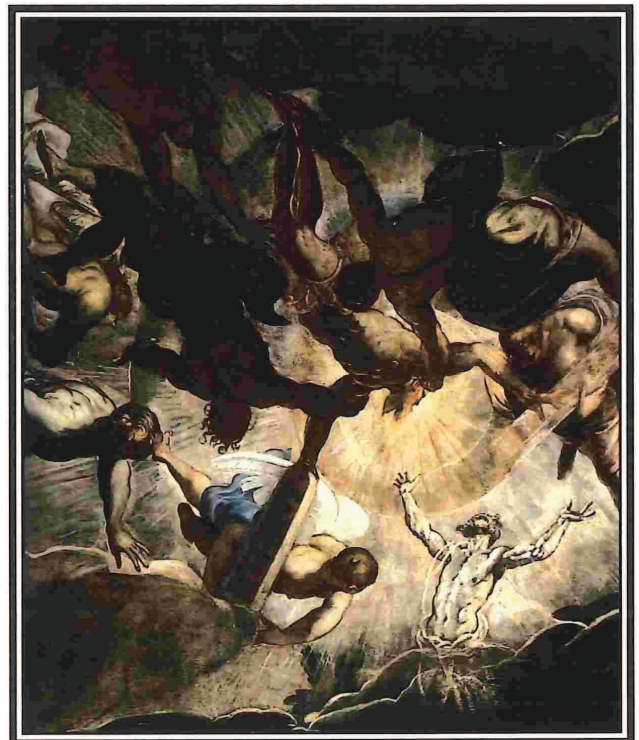
Verses 18-23

“Then Moses said, ‘Now show me Your Glory.’ And the Lord said, ‘I will cause all My goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim My Name, the Lord in your presence. I will have mercy upon whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion upon whom I will have compassion. But,’ He said, ‘you cannot see My face for no one can see My face and live.’ Then the Lord said, ‘There is a place near Me where you may stand upon a rock. When My Glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock, and cover you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove My hand and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen.’”

“Then Moses said, ‘Now show me Your glory ...’” - In this remarkable event, Moses is pursuing his previous request that the Lord would **“teach me Your ways.”** The intensity of Moses’ relationship with God is directly proportionate to Moses’ knowledge and understanding of God. Therefore, Moses requests a uniquely personal meeting with the Lord in which the Lord will reveal Himself, His attributes and His actions, in a manner which would be completely unprecedented. In this way, Moses will be able to represent God to the people and thus fulfill his responsibility to lead them to the land which God had promised. The Hebrew noun here translated as **“Glory”** in the NIV, is **“kavod.”** It was used in 24:17 to refer to the fiery cloud which enveloped the crest of Mount Sinai, and typically refers to a visual manifestation of some sort which demonstrates the immanent presence of God in a personal manner which transcends His omnipresence. The precise nature of that manifestation is difficult to specify. Both rabbinic tradition and Christian Bible scholarship are divided as to whether the language of the text should be understood to mean that the Lord literally took on a visible, human-like form of some sort or that the language of the text – **“face,” “hand,” “back”** should be understood as anthropomorphic symbolism to describe a unique method of conveying knowledge about God. Nahum Sama, summarized the options in this way:

“What then does Moses request? Maimonides, followed by Radek, understands the phrase figuratively: Moses asks for an intellectual assessment of God’s essential reality; not simply for what is observable through the senses. Ramban, by contrast, interprets the words literally; Moses actually requests a glimpse of the divine presence. In favor of this understanding is the fact that the ‘kavod’ is generally something visible, and usually refers to the supernatural effulgence that registers the intensity of God’s immanence.”
(Sama, p. 214)

The two views are not necessarily mutually exclusive and the truth of the matter may well be a combination of the two which involves both a visual component and a profoundly enhanced knowledge of the ways of God as per Moses’ previous request. This combination of a visual presence and revelation is suggested by the language of Verse 19. The Presence of God has been the issue throughout this segment and it would seem that Moses now seeks a individual encounter with the Lord which would, in the most compelling manner possible,



“Moses Before the Lord On Sinai”
Tintoretto



“Moses Hidden In the Cleft Of the Rock”

guarantee the restoration of God’s Presence in the midst of Israel. The prophet’s motive is not personal exaltation or the achievement of enhanced status for himself. *“The request of Moses to see the glory of Yahweh is effectively a request that Yahweh demonstrate the reality of His promise to be present, indeed that He prove His presence once again, as He did before the solemnization of the covenant that has since been shattered.”* (Durham, p. 452)

“And the Lord said, ‘I will cause all My Goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim My Name, the Lord, in your presence.’ - The Lord responded positively to Moses’ request indicated that He would *“cause all My Goodness to pass in front of you.”* The intriguing terminology, *“all My Goodness,”* refers to *“the benevolent attributes that God manifests in His dealings with His creatures.”* (Sarna, p. 214) In this context the term should

be understood in reference to the covenant

which God has now graciously re-established with His people and the undeserved love of God which that covenant reveals. Divine grace is the essence of the Goodness of God. The Hebrew word “tov” which appears in this phrase is frequently used throughout the Old Testament in this sense: *“I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness that You have shown Your servant.”* (Genesis 24: 10) *“However, the Lord your God would not listen to Balaam, but turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loves you. Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them as long as you live.”* (Deuteronomy 23:7) *“If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, He will turn and bring disaster on you, and make an end of you after He has been good to you.”* (Joshua 24:20) *“When the Lord has done for my master (David) every good thing He promised him and has appointed him leader over Israel.. and when the Lord has brought on my master success, remember your servant.”* (1 Samuel 25:30) *“And if at another time I announce that a nation or a kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in My sight and does not obey Me then I will reconsider the good that I had intended to do for it.”* (Jeremiah 18:9-10) The same usage can be seen in treaty documents throughout the ancient Near East in which the term is used to refer to friendship which has been established between two parties by means of a formal covenant. Accordingly, the use of the term here is designed to reinforce the fact that God has, in fact, re-established His covenant with Israel. The original establishment of the covenant in Chapter 24 has also been accompanied by a theophany, that is, a visible (manifestation of God before Moses, Aaron, and the elders of the tribes of Israel. (Exodus 24:9-11) Thus, the rabbis understood Moses’ request as the

prophet's recognition of the need for a second covenant ratification ceremony. Dr. Cassutto contends that the verb ***“to pass in front of you”*** alludes to the limited nature of man's comprehension in regard to the infinite wisdom and glory of God:

“From this point til the end of the paragraph it is clear from the wording that a number of things are expressed metaphorically. This is to be observed immediately in the answer to Moses' last request. Although the reply is positive, yet it contains a certain reservation; as far as a human being can understand... as far as seeing is concerned, that is to say in regard to comprehension of the divine attributes, there is a boundary that man cannot cross ... Pass before you - that is, I shall not cause them to stand before you, so that you may contemplate them, but I will make them pass before you in a momentary flash, whilst you stand by My side.” (Cassutto, p. 435)

“And I will proclaim My Name, the Lord, in your presence.” - Yahweh, the personal Name of God, had first been revealed to Moses at the burning bush (cf. Exodus 3:14). The reiteration of that sacred Name here further asserts the intimacy of the relationship between the Lord and His prophet Moses and expands the knowledge of God and His ways which the Lord is revealing to Moses. *“A name is understood to connote one's character and nature, the totality of personality. Hence, this clause parallels the preceding one and reaffirms God's intention of voluntarily revealing to Moses His defining characteristics.”* (Sarna, p. 214)

“I will have mercy upon whom I will have mercy and I will have compassion upon whom I will have compassion.” - The religion of Israel, revealed and defined in the Old Testament was radically different than its pagan counterparts among all the other nations in that God's actions are determined solely by the exercise of His will. They express His character and reveal His nature. The defining characteristic of paganism is the superstition that occult, magical practice in the form of spells, rituals, incantations, sacred objects or places endowed with supernatural power can manipulate or control divine behavior. This misguided conviction is of the devil who deceives men into believing that they are in control while in fact he is controlling them. Such deadly foolishness is completely alien to



“Moses And The Patriarchs” by Jean Duvet

Scripture. In this instance God, through this declaration, makes it unmistakably clear to Moses that His mercy dare not be misconstrued as license. His covenant of grace cannot co-exist with a pattern of willful deliberate sin. The Gospel cannot be genuinely understood apart from the Law.

“In the proclamation to Moses YHWH also made it known what He would be to Israel in the future. Israel has to know that He is very devoted to His people, but also that He takes wickedness seriously. He does not simply erase the past. With Him, forgiveness does not exclude punishment. The shadow of the bull worship, also after the restoration of the bond between Him and Israel, continues to lie over His people. Israel, again being in relationship with YHWH, will find itself in the field of tension between God’s overwhelming mercy and His justice. Hence, Israel is called to be faithful to YHWH The people are challenged to take evil seriously, lest it get out of hand and YHWH should be forced to have justice overrule mercy.” (Houtmann, II, p. 681)

“But, He said, you cannot see My face for no one can see Me and live.” - No creature can stand before God as an equal. There is an inherent distinction in category and kind which cannot be breached. This truth puts the wonder of the miracle of the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ in its proper perspective.

“That mankind cannot see God in the fulness of His attributes - goodness, immutability, eternity - is taught throughout Scripture. Man’s nature is fallen and unholy; thus, he cannot look upon the effulgence of God’s splendor, sinlessness and holiness. Not even the angels can look directly at God.” (Currid, II, p. 305)



“The Call of Isaiah” by Rudolf Schäfer

A few examples of this insight elsewhere in the Old Testament will suffice. When Sampson's parents were confronted by the Angel of the Lord in response to their request for a son their terrified reaction was: ***"We are doomed to die; he said to his wife. We have seen the Lord."*** (Judges 13 :22) When Gideon encountered the Angel of the Lord, he was given the assurance: ***"And when Gideon realized it was the Angel of the Lord, 'Ah, Sovereign Lord, I have seen the Angel of the Lord face to face.' But the Lord said to him, 'Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die.'"*** (Judges, 6:22-23) In the same way, the prophet Elijah covered his face with his cloak when the Lord passed by the mouth of the cave upon Mount Horeb: ***"Go stand on the mountain in the Presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by' ... After the fire came a gentle whisper, and when Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went and stood at the mouth of the cave."*** (1 Kings 19:11-13) The Lord appeared in a burst of heavenly glory when He called the prophet Isaiah to be His spokesman. The prophet's response was also the assumption that he would be struck down dead because of his sins:



"The Angel of the Lord Appears To Sampson's Parents"

"In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above Him were seraphs, each with six wings. With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another, 'Holy, holy, holy, the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of His glory.' At the sound of their voices the doorposts and the thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. 'Woe to me!' I cried. 'I am ruined. For I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.'" (Isaiah 6: 1-5)

"Here it is obvious that figurative expressions are being used: you will be able to perceive only My works and to discern from them some of My attributes, but you will be unable to comprehend My essential nature." (Cassutto, p. 437) These words further demonstrate that the previous references to Moses face to face and mouth to mouth relationship with the Lord were metaphors, verbal images, of the intimacy between God and Moses, not literal descriptions of visual encounters between God and His prophet. God would accommodate Moses' urgent desire for the visual/informational revelation which Moses required in a



“The Cleft Rock of Moses Upon Mount Sinai” - E. Finden, 1836

limited way which would not transcend the limited human capacity to encounter the divine Presence.

“Then the Lord said, ‘There is a place near Me where you may stand on a rock. When My Glory passes by I will put you in a cleft in the rock ...’” – *“Theophany”*- that is, a visible manifestation of the Presence of God - is rare in the Old Testament, but these are most unusual circumstances. In this moment of supreme crisis for Moses’ leadership and for the future of the covenant itself, the Lord agreed to provide further the reassurance which Moses had requested.

“Theophanies are the exceptions, not the rule. They strengthen the confidence of those to whom they are given in highly exceptional circumstances, where such strengthening is needed and where less sensory encouragement would not suffice. Most people must rely upon reports of theophanies rather than participation in one, and to seek a theophany, as Moses did here would have no warrant, unless one were on a par with Moses in job assignment and closeness to Yahweh and in an old covenant setting; neither of which is possible now. Fortunately, having the Holy Spirit indwelling in us is far better and far more permanent an asset.” (Stuart, p. 707)

The reference to the rock upon which God will place Moses and the cleft in that rock in which he would be concealed suggest that the prophet had left the encampment and ascended Mount Sinai once again. The Lord’s location of the rock as *“a place near Me”* further supports that assumption, since the mountain is the locus of God’s presence throughout this segment. The traditions of the Sinai identify a particular boulder with a

large crack piercing its surface as the site of the theophany which Moses requested. Others argue that the Lord's description suggests a more substantial place of concealment and contend that one of the caves which honeycomb the rugged hills of Sinai would be more likely. Proponents of this view cite the grotto of Elijah on Mount Sinai as at least a parallel and perhaps the same location since in both instances a faithful leader of God's people received a unique visitation from the Lord.

“He traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of the Lord. There he went into a cave and spent the night...The Lord said, ‘Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord for the Lord is about to pass by...When Elijah heard it he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.’” (1 Kings 19:8-9; 11,13)

In any case, the text provides no further clue as to the location of the event as that location is irrelevant to the substance of the event which occurred there. The image of “*the cleft in the rock*” would become a powerful expression of the intimacy with God which the believer is granted by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The classic English hymn by Toplady, “*Rock of Ages cleft for me, let me hide Myself in thee.*” is, no doubt, the best known example of this tradition. 19th Century composer Frances Crosby also made effective use of the image in her beloved hymn “*He Hideth My Soul In The Cleft of the Rock*” (1890) directly connecting this episode in the ministry of Moses to the incarnation of Christ as our Savior:

*“A wonderful Savior Is Jesus my Lord, A wonderful Savior to me;
He hideth my soul in the cleft of the rock, where rivers of pleasures I see.
He hideth my soul in the cleft of the rock, that shadows a dry, thirsty land;
He hideth my life in the depths of His love, and covers me there with His hand,
And covers me there with His hand.”*

Having acceded to Moses' request for reassurance and empowerment to carry out his task as the leader of the Children of Israel in the aftermath of the debacle of the Golden Calf, the Lord carefully stipulated the conditions under which He would graciously reveal Himself to the Prophet. These stipulations are provided in the context of the stern warning of Verse 20 - “***You cannot see My face, for no one can see Me and live.***”



“The Rock of Moses On Mount Sinai”



“The Cleft In The Rock” by Bill Wallace

Thus, God’s motive at this point in carefully defining the prophet’s exposure, is the well-being and the very survival of Moses.

“If Moses were to see a complete revelation of God in His eternal being, it would be so overwhelming that it would destroy him. God is absolute in His perfection. Moses was a fallen, finite creature and as such he could not see God and live. No one can. As Augustine said, No one living in this life can see Him fully as He is.” (Ryken, p. 1034)

In this context, the the incomprehensible miracle of the incarnation of the Son of God in the person of Jesus Christ is revealed with unique clarity. Gregory the Theologian, 4th Century Bishop of Constantinople, expressed the thought in this careful way:

“The incarnation gives us a sure and steady point from which we may observe and study God without being overwhelmed by the greatness of the revelation. The glories of the Divine Nature are tempered for us, as it were, by the human life which encompasses us as we look out to it from the divine. By the Incarnation, our field of vision is at once restricted and made clear.” (McNeile, p. 215)

“And cover you with My hand until I have passed by by.” - It is fascinating to note that the Hebrew word used in Verse 22 to describe the shelter which God would provide to Moses is a form of the same word which had been used in Exodus 25:20 to describe the function of the outstretched wings of the golden cherubim over the Ark of the Covenant: **“The cherubim are to have their wings spread upward, overshadowing the cover with them. The cherubim are to be looking toward each other, facing the cover.”** The word recurs in Exodus 40:3 in reference to the great curtain which separated the Ark within the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place: **“Bring the Ark of the Testimony into it and shield the Ark with the curtain.”** In each instance the word applies to veiling or screening of God’s Presence itself or the Ark which is the physical object most directly associated with the Presence of God in the midst of His people. The phrase **“and cover you with My hand,”** like those which follow in reference to body parts - **“My back”**

and **“my face”** - are **“anthropomorphism”** that is, speaking of God as if he were a human being with a physical body.

“The descriptions ‘cover you with my hand’ and ‘remove my hand’ do not mean that God is a very large human shaped being with a giant but human sort of hand capable of sheltering a person’s entire body; rather, these are the kinds of necessary anthropomorphisms without which little of God can be described. To Moses, the hand of God would seem a gentle, caring thing, as opposed to, say, a bolt of lightning, the means of placing him in the rock’s cleft. It was a way of saying to Moses, not that God has a huge hand, but that he would personally protect Moses from what otherwise would kill him.”
(Stuart, p. 710)

The image of God’s hand protecting and sheltering His people is common throughout the Old Testament. **“On that day they will say; ‘Surely this is our God. We trusted in Him and He saved us. This is the Lord. We trusted in Him; let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation. The hand of the Lord will rest upon this mountain, but Moab will be trampled under Him like straw is trampled down in the manure.”** (Isaiah 25:9-10) **“Before I was born, the Lord called me; from my birth He has made mention of my name. He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of His hand He hid me. He made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in His quiver.”** (Isaiah 49:1-2) **“I have put My words in your mouth and covered you in the shadow of My hand - I, who set the heavens in place, who laid the foundations of the earth, and who say to Zion, ‘You are My people.’”** (Isaiah 51:16) **“The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will bestow. You will be a crown of splendor in the Lord’s hand, a royal diadem in the hand of your God.”** (Isaiah 62:2-3) That is precisely the sense in which the terminology is being used here. The hand of God shall provide the loving care and protection that will shield Moses from direct exposure to the glory of God to the extent that such exposure would pose a danger or threat to him.

“God said that as His glory passed by He would cover Moses with His hand. There was a place in the rock where Moses would hide. There he would be under the shadow of God’s care. God would shield him from the radiance of His glory. To put it in a more provocative



“Moses’ Prayer Upon Sinai” - Larson