

Exodus 32: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 25 March 2020

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[0 : 00] Exodus chapter 32 When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, Up, make us gods who shall go before us.

As for this Moses, the man who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him. So Aaron said to them, Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons and your daughters, and bring them to me.

So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf.

And they said, These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord.

And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play. And the Lord said to Moses, Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves.

[1 : 09] They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it, and said, These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.

And the Lord said to Moses, I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. Now therefore, let me alone, that my wrath may burn heart against them, and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you.

But Moses implored the Lord his God and said, O Lord, why does your wrath burn heart against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?

Why should the Egyptians say, With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people.

Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel your servants, to whom you swore by your own self and said to them, I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.

[2 : 14] And the Lord relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people. Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets that were written on both sides, on the front and on the back they were written.

The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God engraved on the tablets. When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, There is a noise of war in the camp.

But he said, It is not the sound of shouting for victory, or the sound of the cry of defeat, but the sound of singing that I hear. And as soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burnt hot.

And he threw the tablets out of his hand and broke them at the foot of the mountain. He took the calf that they had made and burned it with fire, and ground it to powder, and scattered it on the water, and made the people of Israel drink it.

And Moses said to Aaron, What did this people do to you that you have brought such a great sin upon them? And Aaron said, Let not the anger of my Lord burn hot.

[3 : 22] You know the people that they are set on evil. For they said to me, Make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not

know what has become of him.

So I said to them, Let any who have gold take it off. So they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf. And when Moses saw that the people had broken loose, for Aaron had let them break loose to the derision of their enemies, then Moses stood in the gate of the camp and said, Who is on the Lord's side?

Come to me. And all the sons of Levi gathered around him. And he said to them, Thus says the Lord God of Israel, Put your sword on your side, each of you, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill his brother and his companion and his neighbour. And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And that day about three thousand men of the people fell. And Moses said, Today you have been ordained for the service of the Lord, each one at the cost of his son and of his brother, so that he might bestow a blessing upon you this day. The next day Moses said to the people, You have sinned a great sin, and now I will go up to the Lord. Perhaps I can make atonement for your sin. So Moses returned to the Lord and said, Alas, this people has sinned a great sin.

[4 : 44] They have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will forgive their sin, but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written. But the Lord said to Moses, Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book.

But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you, Behold, my angels shall go before you. Nevertheless, in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them.

Then the Lord sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf, the one that Aaron made. After the making of the covenant in chapter 24 of the book of Exodus, there is a large body of material devoted to the building of the tabernacle, the instructions for it, in chapters 25 to 31. And then suddenly we get this new passage of narrative, a very pivotal narrative within the whole story of scripture, let alone the story of Exodus. There's an interruption to the story of the tabernacle, which will be resumed later on in the book.

This story is a very familiar one to us. We've heard it since our childhood, perhaps, but there are many questions that maybe we've never thought to ask. Simply because of its familiarity, we've never actually probed deep enough into some of the puzzles that it raises.

[5 : 58] Perhaps one of the most basic things we should ask is why worship a golden calf in the first place? What purpose is the calf actually designed to perform? If you hadn't read this story before and read it for the first time and ended halfway through verse 1 with the people speculating about Moses perhaps being dead because he hadn't returned yet from the top of the mountain, what would you think would happen next?

Would you have guessed that they would ask to make a golden altar and for that to serve as their god? It's a puzzling course of action. Likewise, it can be difficult to understand all the aftermath. Why is there such a long aftermath to this? And what is the purpose of what happens next? What is the underlying logic of this story? Rabbi David Foreman has a very interesting reading of this passage which I found very persuasive and which I substantially follow.

One of the keys to understanding his reading is recognising that the request to make this golden image is in response to the apparent death of Moses. Moses, the man who brought them out of Egypt, has died, it seems.

And what is the response? They don't seem to mourn. Rather, there's a crisis. As Moses has died, they need something. And why don't they just establish Aaron as lead in his place?

[7 : 16] That doesn't seem to be good enough. There seems to be something more that they need. They ask Aaron to make them gods because Moses, the man who brought them up out of Egypt, seems to have died.

They need an alternative to the mortal Moses. Moses is as a god to them. And what they are looking for is not a replacement for the Lord so much as a replacement for Moses.

In chapter 4 verse 16, Moses is described as god to Aaron and later on as god to Pharaoh. And when we think about that language of being a god, we tend to think about it exclusively in reference to the creator god.

But Elohim can be a more generic word for judge or ruler. Moses is a power. But Israel isn't supposed to worship any other power. Moses is like a god with a small g for Israel.

But now he's died and there's a crisis. They aren't looking to the Lord. They're looking for another god to replace Moses. They attribute taking them out of Egypt to Moses.

[8 : 21] Now they use different language for that than they use of God. God's bringing the people out of Egypt is typically described using a different verb from Moses bringing the people out of Egypt.

Now what are they looking for in such a god? What they seem to want is a blast shield between themselves and the Lord. They want a mediator, a go-between, someone that they can relate to almost as a substitute for God.

And as you go through the book of Exodus, you'll see a lot of this playing out. Moses is in a partnership with God. They believe God and they believe Moses his servant in chapter 14. And they complain against Moses particularly. Moses is the complaint department. They can't complain to God so directly, so easily. So Moses is the one who constantly bears the brunt of their complaints and their objections and their grumbling.

But God himself, the Lord, seems to be a dark and unknown being to the Israelites. They want Moses to go between them, to shield them from God and to relate to Moses rather than relating to God very directly.

[9 : 28] They're very fearful of him and want Moses to interact for them. For instance, in chapter 16, verses 2 and 3, the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.

And the people of Israel said to them, Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat parts and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.

So God seems to be this unknown being, this terrifying being, who lies behind Moses and Aaron, who deal with him, who are in partnership with him. But you can complain against Moses, but not really against God in the same way.

God is an untethered power, a great dark power lying behind Moses. And in chapter 20, we see a similar thing. The people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking.

The people were afraid and trembled and they stood far off and said to Moses, You speak to us and we will listen, but do not let God speak to us lest we die. Moses said to the people, Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin.

[10 : 36] The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was. In response to the complaint about the manor, God had tried to show them grace, to feed them in the wilderness, to show that he wasn't just the great powerful God who could defeat the Egyptians, he was the God who was with them, who was for them, who was going to give them food, who was going to show his love to them.

And the importance of the Ten Commandments is similar. God is making clear that he is the one who took them out of Egypt. And what they are trying to do in part is by emphasising the human Moses, they have this sort of demigod figure who gives them someone to complain to and someone to attempt to control.

And so what they are looking for at this point is a replacement for Moses in many ways. They are looking for someone to relate to as a substitute for relating directly to God, as a sort of blast shield for them.

While God is trying to come close to his people, his people are trying to turn away from him, to avoid him, to avoid relating to him, as he wants to relate to them. And the people gather themselves together against Aaron.

It says here, gather to Aaron, but where we find this language elsewhere, in Numbers 16 verse 3 and Numbers 20 verse 2, it's the language of rebellion, gathering together against.

[11 : 52] And Aaron seems to do his best to try and channel the rebellious crowd as he can. Okay, we'll construct this golden idol, but we'll worship the Lord. So it's a replacement for Moses, but we're not replacing the Lord.

When Moses returns, the people abandon the golden calf fairly quickly, it seems, and let Moses destroy it. Also, Aaron's weak response to Moses becomes more understandable in the light of this. They weren't trying to replace the Lord, just the missing in action Moses. The God is described as having brought them out of Egypt, but using the verb that's usually described for Moses' part in that, not the verb for the Lord's part in that.

And we should think back now to the commandments at the end of Exodus chapter 20 in verses 22 following. And the Lord said to Moses, Thus you shall say to the people of Israel, You have seen for yourselves that I have talked with you from heaven.

You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold. An altar of earth you shall make for me and sacrificed on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen.

[12:56] In every place where I cause my name to be remembered, I will come to you and bless you. If you make me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones, for if you wield your tool on it, you profane it.

And you shall not go up by steps to my altar, that your nakedness be not exposed on it. They were not trying to replace the Lord then, they were trying to replace Moses with a god of gold, something that they had been explicitly commanded not to do.

And we should probably reflect here a bit upon the meaning of images and the purpose of images. Images can be a way that people try and intermediate between themselves and the divine, a symbolic medium that stands between them and God.

A person can relate to the image rather than relating to God. It's difficult to relate to God. You can't really control God in the same way. You can't really grasp God.

But you can do with the image. They're sort of masks and they're also blast shields protecting you from direct encounter. And it can be a substitute for a direct relationship. When you relate to the image, you relate on your own terms.

[14:00] You can master the image in terms of your imagination. You can project onto it. You can make it what you want it to be. But when you're relating to God himself, that's terrifying. And so the image is a way of protecting you, shielding you from that actual encounter with the living God.

And a sort of worship characterized by worship of images seems to produce a masking of people themselves. The people rise up to play or to laugh.

And laughter or play can be a sort of mask. It shields us from the significance of our own actions. If I'm just joking or just playing, it's a denial that my actions have serious import.

And in the same way, when worship becomes a masking of God, we can also try and mask ourselves and our deeper selves that are exposed by his gaze. The place of the golden calf can be better understood when it's seen in juxtaposition to the tablets of the testimony, the tablets of stone. Those tablets protect, but they also reveal. They aren't things fashioned by human power. They're the writing of God himself in a form that can be understood and related to human life.

[15:09] So it's not an idol that we've put forward projecting onto God a safe mask, that we can relate to instead of relating to the living God. Rather, it's God speaking into the situation of his people.

God declares that the people have corrupted themselves and that he will destroy them. And here we can have maybe some sense of the background in the story of Genesis chapter 6, where God describes the corruption of the whole earth in the days of Noah.

And there are lots of parallels between Noah and Moses here. We've already seen some in the previous chapters, but here they continue. God declares to Moses that these are your people who you brought out.

He's identifying the people with Moses rather than with himself. And then he calls for Moses to leave him alone and that he will wipe out everyone and start anew with Moses alone.

Now, that is a very similar thing to what we see in the case of Noah. God wipes out everyone and then starts anew with one person. But Moses starts his speech by claiming that the people are the Lord's people.

[16:13] It's a direct response to God's statement. They are his people. The people are still engaged in the idolatry though, so Moses can't yet ask for forgiveness. Rather, what he does is he questions the purpose of God's anger.

What is the end of this anger? What will this anger achieve? He appeals to the Egyptians and to the forefathers. So on the one hand, the Egyptians will blaspheme the name of the Lord when they believe that the Lord has just taken them out of the wilderness to destroy the Israelites.

And he also appeals to the forefathers, the forefathers to whom God had made great promises that he would multiply them. So he doesn't appeal to God's forgiveness or his mercy, nor does he apologize for the people.

This isn't a time when any of those things will work because the people are still engaged in the sin. Rather, he highlights God's covenant purposes. Displayed in his actions towards Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and his deliverance of Israel from Egypt.

And all that is achieved at this particular point is that God doesn't destroy the people. All that Moses is saying is do not destroy the people. He's not saying forgive them. He's not saying have mercy upon them even.

[17 : 21] He's saying do not destroy them. You cannot carry out this anger. And Moses takes the tablets down the mountain and he breaks them. He doesn't seem to have been commanded to do so.

Was he being disobedient in doing this? He shatters the tablets in the same place as the Israelites said that they would observe the covenant in chapter 24. And then he grounds the calf to powder and makes the people drink it.

Maybe we could see some parallels with the law of jealousy in Numbers chapter 5 here. Moses' anger flares up and it's the same response as God had to the sin of Israel.

Moses had told God not to be angry but then he is angry in the exact same way himself. What is the reasoning behind this? Aaron tries to pacify Moses' anger and he uses words that are almost exactly the same as Moses uses when he tries to pacify God's anger.

Note how close the language is between verses 11 and 22. Moses is the one who is protecting Israel from God's wrath by enacting God's wrath.

[18 : 26] Wrath has to be enacted. But if God were to enact his wrath the people would be wiped out. Moses, by enacting the wrath as a human being for God is able to preserve the people from the full force of God's wrath while identifying fully with God within the situation.

He's fully identified with God's wrath. He has the same response and yet his inaction of that is not one that will destroy the people. Prophets can sometimes act as representatives of God as ones who stand in God's part relative to the people.

And the prophet can often enjoy a certain purview given by God with a seeming degree of liberty to pursue different courses of action in the name of the Lord.

So David can consult Nathan concerning his desire to build a temple and Nathan says, yes, the Lord is with you in this. And then the Lord says, no, actually I do not want David to build a temple.

And that seems to suggest that the prophet could speak on behalf of God in situations and God could check if they went against his will. But in many situations, they could speak as a sort of mouthpiece even without being directly told to do something.

[19 : 42] Rather than having everything dictated to them, they are inspired by the spirit of God and given a degree of autonomy as they act out God's purpose within the limits that he has given them.

So what Moses does here is a very strong prophetic action. He stands on God's side relative to the people and enacts God's anger towards the people, his fierce wrath, the wrath that God couldn't express himself without destroying the people.

He stands in the way of God's wrath by enacting the wrath himself. And he summons all who are on the Lord's side to come to him. We can maybe think of the Lord's side in a richer sense than just fighting for God more generally.

On the Lord's side is identifying with God's posture relative to this act. And it is the sons of Levi that come to him at this point. They stand on God's side enacting God's anger with Moses.

Note the reminder of Levi's action in Genesis chapter 34 where Levi, along with his brother Simeon, is characterized by a zealous anger but not in a way that's positive.

[20 : 47] Here, they stand with the Lord, they stand on Moses' side with the Lord and then they act in the name of the Lord with his vengeance, with his jealousy, with his zeal.

And they are blessed for that. They're set apart. They're ordained for divine service. They represent, from that point forward, God to the people. They stand as God's servants within the house of Israel.

Moses now returns to the Lord and asks for forgiveness. He identifies himself fully with the Israelites. If God is going to blot them out, Moses asks for the Lord to blot him out too.

God then declares that he will send his angel before them and he will bring them into the land. But the Lord will visit their sin upon them when he visits them. His glorious presence will no longer accompany them.

Rather, Moses and the angel will bring them into the land and God won't really relate to them in the same way anymore. They're no longer really identified as his people. This chapter ends then on a very negative note.

[21 : 46] We're wondering what's going to happen next. How is the purpose of the Exodus going to be fulfilled after this setback? A setback that there seems there's no recovery from. A question to consider.

What are some of the similarities and contrasts between the construction of the golden calf and the construction of the tabernacle? A second question to consider.

How can we see the pattern of the story of the fall playing out in the story here?