

# **“The Allure of A Golden Calf”**

October 11, 2020

The Prayer for Understanding:

The Witness of the Scripture:

Old Testament: Exodus 32:1-14

The Sermon:

This has to be one of the most delicious stories in the Bible. I mean, who doesn't know about the Golden Calf? Actually, to call it a “calf” is a bit off, it was bull size, and pure gold at that.

How it came to be makes a compelling story. This may be Old Testament, but I think it strangely contemporary. People still create their golden calves.

A golden calf represents a supreme thing in our life, standing in place of the real thing, the authentic thing, life as God intends. It might be financial success – the almighty dollar ... but gained at any price. Popularity, the “I've got to be top dog” attitude that runs over people.

A golden calf is what supremely engages our life, be it alcohol, or sex, or drugs, or pride, or prejudice. For example, the Proud Boys have their golden calf. Tucked away in the Old Testament, this ancient incident becomes contemporary. Let's unpack this story.

## II.

This is a segment in the saga of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. It begins with no Moses ... which is the presenting problem.

We discover quickly that Moses is around, but otherwise engaged. He is on the sacred mountain, Mount Sinai. For forty days and forty nights, he received the Law, the Ten Commandments, and then continued in conversation with YHWH. Meanwhile, below his brother Aaron had been deputized to be in charge.

But Moses is taking too long. We like instant results. If we see a line of four or five cars at a Starbucks, we think, “Maybe this isn't the time for coffee.” At the foot of the mountain, gathered on the plain, glimpsing the flashes of fire from the cloud above, the people are becoming nervous.

Robert Alter, one of the great translators of the Hebrew Bible writes:

“It is understandable that after 40 days, they should wonder whether Moses would ever return, and it is not surprising they should be terrified at the idea of being stranded in the wilderness without the leader on whom they had become entirely dependent.”

In truth, we are looking at mob psychology. Anxiety surges through the crowd. Finally it explodes as they bombard Aaron with a demand: “Get up and makes us gods,” they shout. “This man Moses” (that’s how they refer to him) “has obviously left us to die, and we cannot last another day, another minute, without some sort of god to lead us.”

Swiftly the scene moves into overdrive. How Aaron responds to this astonishing demand is quite amazing and deeply puzzling. He turns to the people: “Your gold jewelry, give it up.” And with this booty he makes a golden bull; the jewelry melted down, poured into a mold, shaped and finished with an engraving tool. Aaron becomes the Michelangelo of the bogus god.

Great stories work on the basis of expectations, and this one is no different. Aaron has been chosen by Moses as his agent. As the one in charge, we might expect him to reject this ridiculous demand out of hand.

“Who you think you are?” He could have said. “Do you not know that even now Moses is conversing with the only God there is in the universe, and that Moses will come back to you with news from this great God to make your lives richer and fuller? Your request for other gods is offensive to me. Go back to your tents and settle down.”

But it doesn’t happen that way. Aaron caves in this leadership challenge. He fudges what he believes. He is willing to compromise what he clearly knows in order to appease the people. It’s a “give them what they want” kind of situation. So the first commandment will soon be trashed: one graven image coming up.

Standing before the calf, the people say, “Israel, this is our God, who led us out of Egypt. And Aaron goes along with it, building an altar in front of the Golden calf and announcing, “We’ll have a festival tomorrow to honor the Lord.”

The next day, after worship, a party begins. It gets out of hand quickly because the Hebrew word for “revel” has precisely the sense conveyed in our Scripture reading, an orgy of wild drinking and debauchery.

Now if you are following the action carefully, the people mixed together the worship of God within the presence of the Golden Calf.

### III.

Scene Shift! In a flash, we are taken to the top of the mountain. The Lord who see all is burning with fury at Israel's actions and tells Moses his patience has ended. He will annihilate his chosen people.

Now commentators are split on their understanding of this. Either God is so thoroughly fed up with the people that he really contemplates total destruction, or these words are intended to test the resolve and leadership of Moses.

This major crisis tests the relationship between God and his people. Moses shows himself a staunch advocate of Israel. He argues that destroying Israel would overturn all that has been achieved through the Exodus. The great promise given to Abraham and his decedents must surely stand.

Ultimately, God refuses to give up on the sometimes-stiff-necked former slaves. Even in his anger, God is seen here as responding to the anxieties beneath the people's fears.

### IV.

So what does this passage suggest to me?

First, it is very easy for us to construct our own Golden Calves and then rationalize them as the right thing to do in the circumstance. To somehow mix the calf together with the faith so that everything turns the way we want it. The people take one look at the gleaming calf and proclaim, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt." We rationalize our Golden Calves into respectability.

Secondly, we surely have to look at Aaron's "give them what they want" type of leadership; then contrast that with the picture of Moses. Moses, who goes back to the principles of the faith and says, "This is what we must stand on."

Thirdly, we have to look at ourselves as we live the life of faith.

- It's too easy for folks to assume their own expertise and rush ahead, without looking toward or waiting for God's guidance.
- It is too easy for us to act without asking the hard questions.
- It is too easy for people to make their most important life decisions – marriage, calling, career, family – without bringing God into the conversation.
- It is sometimes too easy to be like Aaron rather than follow the route of Moses.

I am thinking of this hymn:

1. Take my life and let it be,  
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee.  
Take my moments and my days;  
Let them flow in ceaseless praise,  
Let them flow in ceaseless praise.
  
2. Take my love; my Lord, I pour  
At Thy feet its treasure store.  
Take myself, and I will be  
Ever, only, all for Thee,  
Ever, only, all for Thee.

## THE OLD TESTAMENT LESSON:

**Exodus 32:1-14**

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<sup>1</sup>When the people saw that Moses had not come down from the mountain but was staying there a long time, they gathered around Aaron and said to him, “We do not know what has happened to this man Moses, who led us out of Egypt; so make us a god to lead us.” \*

\*[“Do something. Make gods for us who will lead us. That Moses, the man who got us out of Egypt—who knows what’s happened to him?” *from “The Message”*]

<sup>2</sup>Aaron said to them, “Take off the gold earrings which your wives, your sons, and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.” <sup>3</sup>So all the people took off their gold earrings and brought them to Aaron. <sup>4</sup>He took the earrings, melted them, poured the gold into a mold, and shaping it with an engraving tool, made a gold calf.

The people said, “Israel, this is our god, who led us out of Egypt!”

<sup>5</sup>Then Aaron built an altar in front of the gold bull-calf and announced,  
“Tomorrow there will be a festival to honor the Lord.”

<sup>6</sup>Early the next morning they brought some animals to burn as sacrifices and others to eat as fellowship offerings. The people sat down to a feast, which turned into an orgy of wild drinking and sex.

<sup>7</sup>The Lord said to Moses,

“Hurry and go back down, because your people, whom you led out of Egypt, have sinned and rejected me. <sup>8</sup>They have already left the way that I commanded them to follow; they have made a bull-calf out of melted gold and have worshiped it and offered sacrifices to it. They are saying that this is their god, who led them out of Egypt. <sup>9</sup>I know how stubborn these people are. <sup>10</sup>Now, don't try to stop me. I am angry with them, and I am going to destroy them. Then I will make you and your descendants into a great nation.”

<sup>11</sup>But Moses pleaded with the Lord his God and said,

“Lord, why should you be so angry with your people, whom you rescued from Egypt with great might and power? <sup>12</sup>Why should the Egyptians be able to say that you led your people out of Egypt, planning to kill them in the mountains and destroy them completely? Stop being angry; change your mind and do not bring this disaster on your people. <sup>13</sup>Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Remember the solemn promise you made to them to give them as many descendants as there are stars in the sky and to give their descendants all that land you promised would be their possession forever.”

<sup>14</sup>So the Lord changed his mind and did not bring onto his people the disaster he had threatened.