



**Israelite Idolatry: Golden Calf Incident, Ex 32:3-6; Indictment, vv. 7-9; Broken Contract, vv. 15-16, Gold Cocktail, vv. 19-20; Capital Punishment, vv. 27-28, 33-35**

**B. Violation of Paragraphs 1 and 2:**

1. The Law was revealed to Moses in increments. The first was the disclosure of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:1-17. It was summed up by the Lord in:

**Exodus 20:23** - "You shall not make other gods besides Me; gods of silver or gods of gold, you shall not make for yourselves.

2. The next section of Exodus contains the ordinance that sets up the establishment code for Israel: Exodus 21-23.
3. Next Moses and Joshua ascend Mount Sinai for a 40-day crash course on the Tabernacle. They are given a bill of materials, details on its construction, the organization of the priesthood and its wardrobe, and the selection of Bezalel and Oholiab as supervisors for the construction of the Tabernacle and its accessories. Exodus 24-31.
4. Exodus 32 is the account of Moses' descent from Sinai to find the Israelites in open defiance of the First and Second Commandments. Their disobedience was the result of an age-old Israelite tradition that now violated the Second Commandment and was revived by impatience over Moses' prolonged absence.
5. The religious lust of the people appealed to Aaron to build an idol before which they could worship.

**Exodus 32:3** - All the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron.

**v. 4** - And Aaron took this from their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, and made it into a molten calf; and they said, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt."

**v. 5** - Now 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."

**v. 6** - So the next day they rose early and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink and rose up to play.

6. Why did Aaron decide to mold a calf for the citizens of Israel to worship? The answer lies in the fact that you will worship what you have been trained to worship.
7. We should first note that the decision to mold an image of a bull calf has nothing to do with the Egyptian bull-god, Apis, but rather the cultic traditions practiced in Canaan prior to the Egyptian captivity. We get help from:

**Tenney. *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 1:692-93:**

It is a gross misconception, unparalleled in Biblical tradition, to view the golden calf as a direct representation of Yahweh. While it was indeed a common Egyptian practice to represent deities in animal form, this was not the case among the peoples of Syro-Palestine whose iconography often pictured the deity as enthroned or standing on the back of animals.

**Orr, James (ed.). *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing co., 1956), 1:543-44:**



“Calf” worship was almost if not quite universal among all the ancient Semitic peoples. The Babylonians revered the bull as the symbol of their greatest gods, Anu and Sin and Marduk. Hadadrimmon \hā-dad-rim’ on), an important Amorite deity, is pictured standing on the back of a bull. In Phoenicia the bull was a sacred animal, as well as in northern Syria where it ranked as one of the chief Hittite deities. In Babylon the goddess Ishtar has the cow for her symbol on very ancient seal cylinders and when this nude or half-nude goddess appears in Palestine she often stands on a bull or cow. Under slightly different forms this same goddess is revered in Arabia, Moab, Phoenicia, Syria and elsewhere, while among the Semitic Canaanites the bull was the symbol of Baal, and the cow of Astarte.

The one real controlling *motif* of all these various representations and functions of the “calf” god ... is life-giving power closely connected with the reproductive processes of the animal ...and also with the sun, which from earliest historic times was considered as preeminently the “giver of life.” But it seems certain that at least as early as the date of the Exodus these beasts were not regarded by all as being themselves deities, but rather as symbols or representatives of deity.

The bull and cow are now known to have been ordinary symbols for the most popular deities which were worshipped by all the race-relatives of the Hebrews and nowhere more devoutly than in Canaan and in the adjoining districts.

When Moses disappeared for forty days in the Mount, it was not unnatural that the people should turn back to the visible symbols worshipped by their ancestors, and should give to them the new name or new attributes which had been attached to deity by Moses.

**Walvoord, John and Roy B. Zuck (eds.). *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*. (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985), 155:**

Perhaps the people considered the calf-idol an image of God. Since only one idol was made, the word **gods** (Exodus 32:1, 4, 8, 23, 31) may refer both to the idol *and* to God whom it supposedly represented.

8. What we learn from these references is that the Israelites had maintained in their culture the memory of the Canaanite cults that were prevalent in the land prior to their Egyptian captivity.
9. In their cultic history, the bull was a representative of *Yahweh* who, invisible, rode on the back of the bull-calf.
10. Aaron remembered this from the oral tradition passed down generation to generation during the captivity in Egypt. His solution to calm the rabble was to pull the bull calf idol out of moth balls and present it as the symbol of *Yahweh*.
11. A problem emerges: by doing this, Aaron is manufacturing an idol in direct violation of the second commandment. Once done the people were happy to bow down and worship this idol whom they justified in their thinking to be a representation of *Yahweh*.
12. But the critical question is what did the Lord think about this rationale? Not much:

**Exodus 32:7** - Then the Lord spoke to Moses, “Go down at once, for your people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves.

**v. 8** - “They have quickly turned aside from the way [ דֶּרֶךְ **derek: wheel-track, the mandates to avoid idolatry** ] which I commanded them. They have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshipped it, and have sacrificed to it, and said, ‘This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!’”



**v. 9 -** And the Lord said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people.”

13. The word “obstinate” is the translation of two Hebrew words, first the verb:

**קָשָׁה** *qasha* - “hard; stiff,” followed by the noun:

**עֹרֵף** *oreph* - “neck”: “stiff-necked”

This metaphor arose from agriculture. It emphasizes the effect exerted by an overly heavy yoke, which is hard to bear, and secondly, the rebellious resistance of oxen to the yoke. This latter use in our passage is discussed by:

**Harris, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2:818:**

A frequent use of the word (*qasha*) relates to the stubborn (stiff-necked) subjects of the Lord. Like rebellious oxen, calf-worshipping Israel quickly turned aside from the Lord’s service. The spirit of Israel remained stubborn, intractable, and non-responsive to the guiding of their God and of his Holy Spirit.

14. The gravity of the Israelites’ disobedience to the first two commandments is indicated by Moses’ response to the dreadful scene of rebellion that greeted him following his descent from Mount Sinai:

**Exodus 32:15** -Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets which were written on both sides; they were written on one side and the others.

**v.16** - And the tablets were God’s work, and the writing was God’s writing engraved on the tablets [**a written contract**].

**Exodus 32:19** -And it came about, as soon as Moses came near the camp, that he saw the calf and the dancing; and Moses’ anger burned, and he threw the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain.

**v. 20** - And he took the calf which they had made and burned it with fire, and ground it to powder, and scattered it over the surface of the water, and made the sons of Israel drink it.

15. Moses did four things, all of which carried a message: (1) He shattered the tablets indicating that the contract had been broken. (2) He burned the idol demonstrating the fire of divine judgment against idols and idolatry. (3) Since gold cannot be consumed, he smashed its remains to powder illustrating the powerlessness of the idol versus divine power. (4) He scattered it over the surface of the water and made the people drink it to teach them the consequences of their sin.

16. Following this collective discipline, Moses then imposed divine justice on those who refused to rebound:

**Exodus 32:27** -And Moses said to the Levites, “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘Every man of you put his sword upon his thigh, and go back and forth from gate to gate in the camp, and kill every man his brother, and every man his friend, and every man his neighbor.’”

**v. 28** - So the sons of Levi did as Moses instructed, and about three thousand men of the people fell that day.

17. Those the Levites missed the Lord took care of personally:



**Exodus 32:33** -The Lord said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My book."

**v. 35** - Then the Lord smote the people, because of what they did with the calf which Aaron had made.

18. These passages document the Israelites' disobedience to the first two commandments and the severity of divine wrath. Capital punishment was assigned to those who did not adjust to the justice of God.