

SUNDAY MORNING BIBLE STUDY
WEEK 23: EXODUS 32 – THE GOLDEN CALF

OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS 32-34

I. The Golden Calf – Exodus 32

- A. ***Aaron makes a golden calf*** and the people worship “their gods” (Exodus 32:1-6)
- B. God’s anger and Moses’ intercession (Exodus 32:7-13)
- C. God changed his mind (Exodus 32:14)
- D. Moses smashes the tablets and destroys the golden calf (Exodus 32:15-20)
- E. Aaron defends his actions (Exodus 32:21-24)
- F. Sons of Levi step up and kill 3,000 (Exodus 32:25-29)
- G. Moses intercedes again (Exodus 32:30-34)
- H. God sends a plague on the people (Exodus 32:35)

II. The Command to Leave Sinai – Exodus 33

- A. Command to leave Sinai but God won’t go with them (Exodus 33:1-6)
- B. The tent outside the camp where God and Moses speak (Exodus 33:7-11)
- C. Moses wants to see God’s glory and Moses cuts new tablets (Exodus 33:12-34:4)

III. Moses Makes New Tablets – Exodus 34

- A. God descends in the cloud and speaks (Exodus 34:5-7)
- B. Moses bows and worships (Exodus 34:8)
- C. Moses and God renew the covenant (Exodus 34:9-27)
- D. Moses spends 40 days and 40 nights with God and writes the ten commandments (Exodus 34:28)
- E. ***Radiant-faced Moses*** comes down, gives commandments, and puts on a veil (Exodus 34:29-35)

There is a clear message being conveyed in this section of the book of Exodus: Rebellion, Mediation, and Restoration. We have just left the final instructions for the tabernacle in chapter 31 and now we find ourselves with open rebellion at the foot of the mountain. Will this event unravel God’s plan? Will God continue to dwell with them? Will God continue fight for them? Or have they ruined everything?

Before we move ahead, we must remember that Moses was their only means of contact with God. In Exodus 20:18-26, just after having received the Ten Commandments, we see that it was at Israel’s own request that Moses act as a buffer between them and God and it is interesting how God responds.

Exodus 20:18–26 (NRSV)

¹⁸ When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, ¹⁹ and said to Moses, ***“You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.”*** ²⁰ Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.” ²¹ Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.

²² The LORD said to Moses: Thus you shall say to the Israelites: “You have seen for yourselves that I spoke with you from heaven. ²³ ***You shall not make gods of silver alongside me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold.*** ²⁴ You need make for me only an altar of earth and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your offerings of well-being, your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you. ²⁵ But if you make for me an altar of stone, do not build it of hewn stones; for if you use a chisel upon it you profane it. ²⁶ You shall not go up by steps to my altar, so that your nakedness may not be exposed on it.”

So, in Exodus chapter 20, we see that God tells the Israelites twice not to make idols for themselves: once as part of the ten commandments and then after giving them, after the people ask Moses to be the buffer between them and God. And it’s also interesting what God says in verse 24: “You need make for me only an altar of earth and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your offering of well-being.” This comes up in our Golden calf story.

The other thing we need to be aware of is how this section of the book of Exodus that is book-ended by the stories of the golden calf and the story of Moses' radiant face is placed right in the middle of the story about the tabernacle; the place where God was to dwell among God's people.

In Exodus chapter 24, we have another significant story that mustn't be overlooked as it is the lead in to the story about the Tabernacle. Its structure looks like this:

SUMMARY OF EXODUS 24

- Exodus 24:1-2 God tells Moses that he and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu and 70 elders of Israel should come worship
- Exodus 24:3-8 Moses recites the law to all the people, writes it down, builds an altar and 12 pillars, makes sacrifices, and then spreads the blood of the covenant on the people.
- Exodus 24:9-11 Moses and the group of 73 go up and they actually see the God of Israel who has pavement of sapphire stone under "his" feet.
- Exodus 24:12-14 God tells Moses to come on the mountain to receive the tablets of stone and so Moses goes with his assistant Joshua while Aaron and the elders wait.
- Exodus 24:15-18 Moses is on the mountain covered by a cloud and on the 7th day, God speaks out of the cloud. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

It's immediately after chapter 24 that God gives Moses the instructions for the tabernacle.

OUTLINE OF EXODUS 25-40

- Exodus 25-31 How to build the Tabernacle
- Exodus 32-34 Crises: Israel breaks the covenant**
- Exodus 35-40 Moses builds the Tabernacle

And so, it is interesting that the stories in this section are placed right in the middle of the tabernacle section, sandwiched in between the instructions for building the tabernacle and the actual building of it.

EXODUS 32

EXODUS 32:1-6 – The Golden Calf

¹ When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." ² Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." ³ So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" ⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD." ⁶ They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

This passage becomes the quintessential example of rebellion in the Old Testament. But right away we have a translation issue that can greatly affect the way we read this passage. The NRSV says that "the people gathered **around** Aaron" which might seem innocent enough. In chapters 28 & 29, we have already learned that Aaron and his sons will serve God as priests and that they will have a special role in worship and in the tabernacle. And so, it makes sense that they turn to Aaron about the future of their worship.

AROUND OR AGAINST

The question we must first ask is whether they are turning to Aaron for simple guidance or whether their gathering around Aaron is more adversarial in nature. The phrase that is translated "the people gathered around" is found three other times in the Pentateuch and each time it is in the context of opposition and hostility and each time it is properly translated as "gather against" instead of "gather around" (see Numbers 14:35, 16:11 and 20:2). There is only one time when this phrase means "gather around" as in gathered in support and that is in Ezekiel 38:7.

And so “gathered against” seems to be the better understanding of what is intended here. It seems that a group of Israelites have gathered against Aaron and command him to make them an idol.

This interpretation is supported by the fact that they no longer speak respectfully of Moses. *“As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt...”* It’s like they have already written him off. It’s clear that they doubt that he will ever return. He’s been gone more than a month and so they want Aaron to make “gods” (Elohim, plural) for them. Perhaps they are a little tired of waiting and a little panicked, but we have already seen them get angry with Moses before and we’ll see it again later.

ONE GOD OR MANY; THE GOD OR OTHER GODS

Before we jump all over the “people” with indignation, we should keep in mind that the word they use is Elohim, which is the same word we find when at the beginning of the book of Genesis when it says, “In the beginning when **God** created the heavens and the earth.” Even in Genesis, it is in plural form, but that doesn’t mean that it represents a plurality of gods. And so, the question we have to ask ourselves is this:

Did the Israelites think that they were making an idol to represent their God (singular) or were they thinking that Aaron was making them an idol to represent their gods (pagan and plural)?

It makes a lot of a difference. Is it that they are breaking both the first commandment and the second or simply the second?

Were they abandoning their devotion to the one true God of Israel and settling for the worship of pagan gods with a graven image? Or were they simply adopting a pagan representation of their God, who had already demonstrated his power over the gods of Egypt and had lead them out of Egypt?

THE CALF

Growing up, I always assumed that they were abandoning God for some sort of pagan god or gods represented by a calf, not realizing that a calf was a very common image used to represent gods in the ancient Near East. The calf idol wasn’t thought to be the god, but rather was seen as a pedestal on which the god was seated or standing.

And so, in a way, the golden calf was created to function much like the Ark of the Covenant and mercy seat, as described in Exodus 25:10-22 and actually made in Exodus 37:1-9. The ancient Israelites believed that God sat upon the mercy seat that covered the Ark of the Covenant. In Exodus 25:22 God says, *“There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the covenant, I will deliver to you all my commands for the Israelites.”*

And so, we could ask, “What’s the big deal?” because both are meant to represent the place on top of which God’s presence dwells, where God promises to meet with them. But think about what this golden calf represents. The Israelites have now changed the item that is supposed to represent God’s presence. They have gone against the instructions God has given them and have done things their own way. And in the process, they have broken the second commandment as well as the instructions God gave them after giving the ten commandments.

AARON’S INTENTION

Aaron clearly intends that it represents the one true God because when he sees it, he builds the one thing that God commanded them to build back in chapter 20, verse 24: *“You need make for me only an altar of earth and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your offerings of well-being.”* So, Aaron builds an altar. He then says, “Tomorrow will be a festival to the LORD” using the name Yahweh in Hebrew which is the divine name.

And the very next day, they celebrate the festival, make their burnt offerings and offerings of well-being to God and party hearty. They see it as a cause for celebration. But God is not pleased.

What’s interesting here is that this celebration almost exactly parallels the celebration that occurs in chapter 24 when Moses and Aaron and the seventy elders worship God at the foot of the mountain. In Exodus 24, verse 4, it says that Moses rose early in the morning, built an altar, set up 12 pillars corresponding to the 12 tribes. Then they offered burnt

offerings and sacrificed offerings of well-being to the LORD (Yahweh). And it's after that that Moses dashes the blood of the covenant on the alter and on the people.

Here in chapter 32, their celebration almost seems like a perversion of that other celebration and worship. In chapter 24, their worship results in their declared commitment to the covenant and being dashed with the blood of the covenant. Here in chapter 32, their worship results in revelry (the Hebrew word is *ṣaḥeq*) which when used in the book of Genesis had sexual connotations. It was used once Genesis 26:8 (where Abimelech sees Isaac "fondling" his wife Rebekah). And it was used twice in Genesis 39:14-17 (where Joseph is accused of being inappropriate with Potiphar's wife). And so, the worship in chapter 32 results in inappropriate partying and raucousness which explains why God is so upset and not, apparently, in the partying mood.

EXODUS 32:7-13 – MOSES INTERCEDES

⁷ The LORD said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸ they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!' " ⁹ The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰ Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation." ¹¹ But Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with 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 consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. ¹³ Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants and they shall inherit it forever.'"

God is angry and, after venting that they have acted perversely, wants to be left alone so that God can do what God wants to do to these people. Notice how when God is speaking to Moses, God refers to them as "your people." To God, they are no longer "my people."

God is upset that they have so quickly exchanged God's way for their own way and disregarded God's instructions. They are stubborn. What's also interesting is that in verse 9, God talks about them the same way they had talked about Moses. God refers to them as "this people" the same way they referred to Moses as "this Moses". And so, God is angry and wants to get rid of them and start over again with descendants of Moses (see verse 10). It's almost as if God is going to take us all the way back to Genesis and make Moses the new Noah (chapters 6-9) or better yet, the new Abraham (chapter 12).

But, Moses intercedes on their behalf, reminding God that they are "**your** people, whom **you** brought out of the land of Egypt." Moses plays against God's ego by alluding to what the Egyptians might say if God were to take this course of action as well as to the historic covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (though Jacob is named Israel here in verse 13).

EXODUS 32:14 – GOD CHANGED GOD'S MIND

¹⁴ And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Apparently, Moses is a good lawyer because God changes God's mind. What does this mean for us that this story says that God can change God's mind? Should we be troubled by this? I personally think that we shouldn't avoid this or try to explain it away. Throughout the scriptures we get very different portraits of God painted for us. Remember, I see our scriptures kind of like an ancient scrap book collected from throughout the ages. And our study of source theory throughout has shown us that different people at different times understood God differently. I believe that this is just one such situation.

EXODUS 32:15-20 – MOSES SMASHES THE DANCE PARTY

¹⁵ Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain, carrying the two tablets of the covenant in his hands, tablets that were written on both sides, written on the front and on the back. ¹⁶ The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved upon the tablets. ¹⁷ When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they

shouted, he said to Moses, "There is a noise of war in the camp."¹⁸ But he said, "It is not the sound made by victors, or the sound made by losers; it is the sound of revelers that I hear."¹⁹ As soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain.²⁰ He took the calf that they had made, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it.

On the way back down, Moses connects with Joshua (his assistant, see Exodus 24:13). Joshua doesn't understand what is happening back down in the camp, but explains it to him. Moses throws the stone tablets (that contain the ten commandments) on the ground and breaks them; which is symbolic of what they have done to the covenant between them and God. If they are not prepared to follow the law of God, they don't deserve to have it. He destroys the golden calf and grinds it into powder, mixes it with water, and makes them drink it. This is a very strange detail.

There is an old Ugaritic myth about the goddess Anat and how she treats the god Mot. In this story, the goddess seizes him, splits him in two with a knife, winnows him with a winnowing fork, burns him with fire, pulverizes him with a grindstone, and sows him in a field. The understanding here is she totally annihilates him. What's not in the Ugaritic story is that she doesn't mix him with water and make him into a potion. She scatters him in a field.

But this story of what Moses does might have a connection to what we find in Numbers 5:12-31:

Numbers 5:12–31 (NRSV)

¹² *Speak to the Israelites and say to them: If any man's wife goes astray and is unfaithful to him,* ¹³ *if a man has had intercourse with her but it is hidden from her husband, so that she is undetected though she has defiled herself, and there is no witness against her since she was not caught in the act;* ¹⁴ *if a spirit of jealousy comes on him, and he is jealous of his wife who has defiled herself; or if a spirit of jealousy comes on him, and he is jealous of his wife, though she has not defiled herself;* ¹⁵ *then the man shall bring his wife to the priest. And he shall bring the offering required for her, one-tenth of an ephah of barley flour. He shall pour no oil on it and put no frankincense on it, for it is a grain offering of jealousy, a grain offering of remembrance, bringing iniquity to remembrance.* ¹⁶ *Then the priest shall bring her near, and set her before the Lord;* ¹⁷ ***the priest shall take holy water in an earthen vessel, and take some of the dust that is on the floor of the tabernacle and put it into the water.*** ¹⁸ *The priest shall set the woman before the Lord, dishevel the woman's hair, and place in her hands the grain offering of remembrance, which is the grain offering of jealousy. In his own hand the priest shall have the water of bitterness that brings the curse.* ¹⁹ *Then the priest shall make her take an oath, saying, "If no man has lain with you, if you have not turned aside to uncleanness while under your husband's authority, be immune to this water of bitterness that brings the curse.* ²⁰ *But if you have gone astray while under your husband's authority, if you have defiled yourself and some man other than your husband has had intercourse with you,"* ²¹ *—let the priest make the woman take the oath of the curse and say to the woman—"the Lord make you an execration and an oath among your people, when the Lord makes your uterus drop, your womb discharge;* ²² *now may this water that brings the curse enter your bowels and make your womb discharge, your uterus drop!"* *And the woman shall say, "Amen. Amen."* ²³ *Then the priest shall put these curses in writing, and wash them off into the water of bitterness.* ²⁴ *He shall make the woman drink the water of bitterness that brings the curse, and the water that brings the curse shall enter her and cause bitter pain.* ²⁵ *The priest shall take the grain offering of jealousy out of the woman's hand, and shall elevate the grain offering before the Lord and bring it to the altar;* ²⁶ *and the priest shall take a handful of the grain offering, as its memorial portion, and turn it into smoke on the altar, and afterward shall make the woman drink the water.* ²⁷ ***When he has made her drink the water, then, if she has defiled herself and has been unfaithful to her husband, the water that brings the curse shall enter into her and cause bitter pain, and her womb shall discharge, her uterus drop, and the woman shall become an execration among her people.*** ²⁸ ***But if the woman has not defiled herself and is clean, then she shall be immune and be able to conceive children.*** ²⁹ *This is the law in cases of jealousy, when a wife, while under her husband's authority, goes astray and defiles herself,* ³⁰ *or when a spirit of jealousy comes on a man and he is jealous of his wife; then he shall set the woman before the Lord, and the priest shall apply this entire law to her.* ³¹ *The man shall be free from iniquity, but the woman shall bear her iniquity.*

Apparently, the ancient Israelites used mixtures of water like this as a sign from God for who was guilty. Is this what is going on with Moses and the concoction he makes with the powder from the golden calf? And was this the method by which Moses determined who was guilty of disobeying God?

²¹ Moses said to Aaron, “What did this people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?” ²² And Aaron said, “Do not let the anger of my LORD burn hot; you know the people, that they are bent on evil. ²³ They said to me, ‘Make us gods, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ ²⁴ So I said to them, ‘Whoever has gold, take it off’; so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!”

First, Moses confronts Aaron. I love Aaron’s deflection and excuse. He claims that the Israelites are bent on evil. They said “Make us gods” (in Hebrew “make us Elohim” who shall go before us). He then relays how they spoke disrespectfully about “this Moses”. And then perhaps the best line of all is where he says he collected their gold, threw it into the fire and “out came this calf!”; as if it just sort of made itself.

²⁵ When Moses saw that the people were running wild (for Aaron had let them run wild, to the derision of their enemies), ²⁶ then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, “Who is on the LORD’s side? Come to me!” And all the sons of Levi gathered around him. ²⁷ He said to them, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘Put your sword on your side, each of you! Go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill your brother, your friend, and your neighbor.’ ” ²⁸ The sons of Levi did as Moses commanded, and about three thousand of the people fell on that day. ²⁹ Moses said, “Today you have ordained yourselves for the service of the LORD, each one at the cost of a son or a brother, and so have brought a blessing on yourselves this day.”

Moses stands at the gate of the camp and asks “Who is on the side of Yahweh?” A line in the sand is drawn. And the sons of Levi respond; all of them. These are the people who were tasked with the maintenance of the tabernacle. They “gather around” him. The words here for “gather around” are different from the ones in verse 1. וַיִּקְהָל הָעָם (verse 1) and וַיֵּצְאוּ אֵלָיו (here in verse 26). Moses’ instructions are to go throughout the camp and kill all the people who are guilty, no matter who they are, whether brother, friend or neighbor. The guilty parties will be put to death by those responsible for maintaining order in the community.

The question is, “How did they know who to kill?” It says that they killed 3,000 people that day. How did they know which ones to kill? The text never declares how. But, if we see a connection between this story of Moses making a concoction and having people drink it and the story in Numbers where the priest has a woman drink water mixed with dust, then we can make an informed *guess* that it is those people who have a negative reaction to what they were made to drink (Moses own version of Goldschläger).

For killing the guilty, Moses declares that the Levites have brought a blessing upon themselves. Doesn’t this trouble us? God (or Moses) ordained capital punishment! This is troubling. But that’s *their* world, *their* culture, *their* view of God.

³⁰ On the next day Moses said to the people, “You have sinned a great sin. But now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.” ³¹ So Moses returned to the LORD and said, “Alas, this people has sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. ³² But now, if you will only forgive their sin—but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written.” ³³ But the LORD said to Moses, “Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book. ³⁴ But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; see, my angel shall go in front of you. Nevertheless, when the day comes for punishment, I will punish them for their sin.”

Moses to the rescue... but again, not before 3,000 are slaughtered. Apparently, the 3,000 weren’t the only sinners. The Israelites still deserve punishment, but apparently not death. So Moses intercedes and asks God to forgive them; talking about the sin of “this people”. If God won’t forgive, Moses wants his name removed from the book of life. Essentially, Moses is saying, if you won’t forgive them, “take my life instead”. But God rejects Moses offer saying that he will blot out the sinners. Then God commands Moses to continue the journey.

³⁵ Then the LORD sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf—the one that Aaron made.

HOW ECHOES OF THIS SCENE ARE HEARD THROUGHOUT SCRIPTURE

The passage that follows contains a retelling of the events of the Exodus just as the Israelites are about to cross the Jordan and enter the promised land.

Deuteronomy 9:8–22 (NRSV)

⁸ *Even at Horeb you provoked the LORD to wrath, and the LORD was so angry with you that he was ready to destroy you. ⁹ When I went up the mountain to receive the stone tablets, the tablets of the covenant that the LORD made with you, I remained on the mountain forty days and forty nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water. ¹⁰ And the LORD gave me the two stone tablets written with the finger of God; on them were all the words that the LORD had spoken to you at the mountain out of the fire on the day of the assembly. ¹¹ At the end of forty days and forty nights the LORD gave me the two stone tablets, the tablets of the covenant. ¹² Then the LORD said to me, “Get up, go down quickly from here, for your people whom you have brought from Egypt have acted corruptly. They have been quick to turn from the way that I commanded them; they have cast an image for themselves.” ¹³ Furthermore the LORD said to me, “I have seen that this people is indeed a stubborn people. ¹⁴ Let me alone that I may destroy them and blot out their name from under heaven; and I will make of you a nation mightier and more numerous than they.”*

¹⁵ *So I turned and went down from the mountain, while the mountain was ablaze; the two tablets of the covenant were in my two hands. ¹⁶ Then I saw that you had indeed sinned against the LORD your God, by casting for yourselves an image of a calf; you had been quick to turn from the way that the LORD had commanded you. ¹⁷ So I took hold of the two tablets and flung them from my two hands, smashing them before your eyes. ¹⁸ Then I lay prostrate before the LORD as before, forty days and forty nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water, because of all the sin you had committed, provoking the LORD by doing what was evil in his sight. ¹⁹ For I was afraid that the anger that the LORD bore against you was so fierce that he would destroy you. But the LORD listened to me that time also. ²⁰ The LORD was so angry with Aaron that he was ready to destroy him, but I interceded also on behalf of Aaron at that same time. ²¹ Then I took the sinful thing you had made, the calf, and burned it with fire and crushed it, grinding it thoroughly, until it was reduced to dust; and I threw the dust of it into the stream that runs down the mountain. ²² At Taberah also, and at Massah, and at Kibroth-hattaavah, you provoked the LORD to wrath.*

Psalm 106 is a confession of sin call for salvation that recalls the nation’s historic faults and failures which includes the golden calf story.

Psalm 106:19–23 (NRSV)

¹⁹ *They made a calf at Horeb and worshiped a cast image. ²⁰ They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass. ²¹ They forgot God, their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt, ²² wondrous works in the land of Ham, and awesome deeds by the Red Sea. ²³ Therefore he said he would destroy them— had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him, to turn away his wrath from destroying them.*

This next prayer in Nehemiah chapter 9 recounts Israel’s historic sins (including the golden calf), acknowledges God’s just judgments, and asserts God’s mercy.

Nehemiah 9:9–25 (NRSV)

⁹ *“And you saw the distress of our ancestors in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea. ¹⁰ You performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants and all the people of his land, for you knew that they acted insolently against our ancestors. You made a name for yourself, which remains to this day. ¹¹ And you divided the sea before them, so that they passed through the sea on dry land, but you threw their pursuers into the depths, like a stone into mighty waters. ¹² Moreover, you led them by day with a pillar of cloud, and by night with a pillar of fire, to give them light on the way in which they should go. ¹³ You came down also upon Mount Sinai, and spoke with them from heaven, and gave them right ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments, ¹⁴ and you made known your holy sabbath to them and gave them commandments and statutes and a law through your servant Moses. ¹⁵ For their hunger you gave them bread from heaven, and for their thirst you brought water for them out of the rock, and you told them to go in to possess the land that you swore to give them.*

¹⁶ *“But they and our ancestors acted presumptuously and stiffened their necks and did not obey your commandments; ¹⁷ they refused to obey, and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them; but they stiffened their necks and determined to return to their slavery in Egypt. But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and you did not forsake them. ¹⁸ **Even when they had cast an image of a calf for themselves and said, ‘This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt,’ and had committed great blasphemies, ¹⁹ you in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness; the pillar of cloud that led them in the way did not leave them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night that gave them light on the way by which they should go. ²⁰ You gave***

your good spirit to instruct them, and did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and gave them water for their thirst. ²¹ Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness so that they lacked nothing; their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell. ²² And you gave them kingdoms and peoples, and allotted to them every corner, so they took possession of the land of King Sihon of Heshbon and the land of King Og of Bashan. ²³ You multiplied their descendants like the stars of heaven, and brought them into the land that you had told their ancestors to enter and possess. ²⁴ So the descendants went in and possessed the land, and you subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gave them into their hands, with their kings and the peoples of the land, to do with them as they pleased. ²⁵ And they captured fortress cities and a rich land, and took possession of houses filled with all sorts of goods, hewn cisterns, vineyards, olive orchards, and fruit trees in abundance; so they ate, and were filled and became fat, and delighted themselves in your great goodness.

This next passage follows immediately after the secession of the Northern Tribes from the united kingdom after the death of Solomon and the uprising of his servant Jeroboam who makes two golden calves and sets them at opposite ends of his kingdom for the people to go and worship.

1 Kings 12:25–33 (NRSV)

²⁵ Then Jeroboam built Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and resided there; he went out from there and built Penuel. ²⁶ Then Jeroboam said to himself, “Now the kingdom may well revert to the house of David. ²⁷ If this people continues to go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the LORD at Jerusalem, the heart of this people will turn again to their master, King Rehoboam of Judah; they will kill me and return to King Rehoboam of Judah.” ²⁸ So the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold. He said to the people, “You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.” ²⁹ He set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. ³⁰ And this thing became a sin, for the people went to worship before the one at Bethel and before the other as far as Dan. ³¹ He also made houses on high places, and appointed priests from among all the people, who were not Levites. ³² Jeroboam appointed a festival on the fifteenth day of the eighth month like the festival that was in Judah, and he offered sacrifices on the altar; so he did in Bethel, sacrificing to the calves that he had made. And he placed in Bethel the priests of the high places that he had made. ³³ He went up to the altar that he had made in Bethel on the fifteenth day in the eighth month, in the month that he alone had devised; he appointed a festival for the people of Israel, and he went up to the altar to offer incense.

This next passage is part of the Pentecost story and comes after Peter’s speech to the crowd about Jesus. The important connection is the number of people who were added to their number.

Acts 2:37–42 (NRSV)

*³⁷ Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” ³⁸ Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the LORD our God calls to him.” ⁴⁰ And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” ⁴¹ So those who welcomed his message were baptized, **and that day about three thousand persons were added.** ⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

Finally, this next passage is part of Stephen’s speech after he was arrested and brought before the High Priest and the Sanhedrin who then take him out and stone him to death.

Acts 7:39–43 (NRSV)

³⁹ Our ancestors were unwilling to obey him; instead, they pushed him aside, and in their hearts they turned back to Egypt, ⁴⁰ saying to Aaron, ‘Make gods for us who will lead the way for us; as for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him.’ ⁴¹ At that time they made a calf, offered a sacrifice to the idol, and reveled in the works of their hands. ⁴² But God turned away from them and handed them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets: ‘Did you offer to me slain victims and sacrifices forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?’ ⁴³ No; you took along the tent of Moloch, and the star of your god Rephan, the images that you made to worship; so I will remove you beyond Babylon.’

NEXT WEEK: Read Exodus 33 & 34