

The Sin of the Golden Calf: Who, What, Where?

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1. The Core Narrative (Exodus 24; 32)

a. Preface (Exodus 24:1, 9–18): Then He said to Moses, “Come up to the LORD, with Aaron, **Nadab and Abihu**, and seventy elders of Israel, and bow low from afar... 9 Then Moses and Aaron, **Nadab and Abihu**, and seventy elders of Israel ascended; 10 and they saw the God of Israel: under His feet there was the likeness of a pavement of sapphire, like the very sky for purity. 11 Yet He did not raise His hand against the leaders of the Israelites; they beheld God, and they ate and drank. The LORD said to Moses, “Come up to Me on the mountain and wait there, and I will give you the stone tablets with the teachings and commandments which I have inscribed to instruct them.” 13 So Moses and his attendant Joshua arose, and Moses ascended the mountain of God. 14 To the elders he had said, “Wait here for us until we return to you. You have Aaron and Hur with you; let anyone who has a legal matter approach them.” 15 When Moses had ascended the mountain, the cloud covered the mountain. 16 The Presence of the LORD abode on Mount Sinai, and the cloud hid it for six days. On the seventh day He called to Moses from the midst of the cloud. 17 Now the Presence of the LORD appeared in the sight of the Israelites as a consuming fire on the top of the mountain. 18 Moses went inside the cloud and ascended the mountain; and Moses remained on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

b. The Deed (מעשה העגל) (Exodus 32:1–35)

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron and said to him, “Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to 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 And all the people took off the gold rings that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. 4 **This he took from them and cast in a mold, and made it into a molten calf. And they exclaimed, “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!”** [וַיִּקַּח מִיָּדָם וַיִּצַר אֹתוֹ בַּחֶרֶט וַיַּעֲשֶׂהוּ עֵגֶל מִסָּכָה] [וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלֶּה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלֵינוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:] 5 When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron announced: “Tomorrow shall be a festival of the LORD!” 6 Early next day, the people offered up burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; they sat down to eat and drink, and then rose to dance.

Exod 32:7 The LORD spoke to Moses, “Hurry down, for your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, have acted basely. 8 They have been quick to turn aside from the

way that I enjoined upon them. They have made themselves a molten calf and bowed low to it and sacrificed to it, saying: **“This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!”** [סְרוּ מִהֵרָא מִן־הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתֶם עֲשׂוּ לָהֶם עֵגֶל מִסִּכָּה וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ־לוֹ וַיִּזְבְּחוּ־לוֹ וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלֶּה אֱלֹהֵינוּ] [יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלוּךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:]

Exod 32:21 Moses said to Aaron, “What did this people do to you that you have brought such great sin upon them?” 22 Aaron said, “Let not my lord be enraged. You know that this people is bent on evil. 23 They said to me, ‘Make us a god to lead us; for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him.’ 24 So I said to them, ‘Whoever has gold, take it off!’ They gave it to me and I hurled it into the fire and out came this calf!” [וַאֲמַר לָהֶם לְמִי זֶהב הַתְּפָרֶקוּ וַיִּתְּנוּ־לִי וְאִשְׁלַכְהוּ בְּאֵשׁ וַיֵּצֵא הָעֵגֶל הַזֶּה:]

Exod 32:25 Moses saw that the people were out of control—since Aaron had let them get out of control—so that they were a menace to any who might oppose them. 26 Moses stood up in the gate of the camp and said, “Whoever is for the LORD, come here!” And all the Levites rallied to him. 27 He said to them, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Each of you put sword on thigh, go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay brother, neighbor, and kin.” 28 The Levites did as Moses had bidden; and some three thousand of the people fell that day. 29 And Moses said, “Dedicate yourselves to the LORD this day—for each of you has been against son and brother—that He may bestow a blessing upon you today.”

R. Abraham Ibn Ezra on Exodus 32:1:

ועתה אחל לפרש קצה הסוד: חלילה חלילה שעשה אהרן עבודה זרה. רק ישראל לא בקשו עבודה זרה, רק חשבו שמת משה שהסיעם מים סוף, כאשר פרשתי (ראב"ע שמות פירוש שני ט"ו: כ"ב-כ"ג), כי ראו שהמן אינו יורד בהר סיני, ומשה התעכב שם ארבעים יום, ואין כח באדם לחיות זה הזמן בלא מאכל. כי הוא לא אמר להם מתי ירד, גם הוא לא ידע, כי השם אמר לו: עלה אלי ההרה והיה שם (שמות כ"ד: י"ב) עד שאתן לך לוחות הברית.

And now I will begin to explain to you part of the secret: Far be it, far be it for Aaron to make an idol. Moreover, Israel did not ask for an idol. What happened was that Israel thought that Moses, who, as I have explained, had led them on their journey from the Red Sea, had died, for Israel noticed that the manna did not come down at Mount Sinai. Furthermore, Moses tarried on the mountain for forty days. A human being does not have the stamina to live that long without food. Also, Moses did not tell them when he would descend. Moses himself did not know this, for God told him, "Come up to Me onto the mount and be there until I give you the tablets of stone."

Rashbam on Exodus 32:4:

אלה אלהיך ישראל אשר העלוך – וכי שוטים היו, שלא היו יודעים שעגל זה שנוצר היום לא העלם ממצרים? אלא כל עובדי עבודה זרה יודעים שאלהינו שבשמים ברא את העולם, אך בזה היו טועים: שהתרפים יש בהם רוח טומאה כמו הנביאים שיש בהם רוח הקדש, וסבורים שהעגל שהיה מדבר ברוח הטומאה, כאילו היה מדבר ברוח הקדש של מעלה. ולכך אומרים: אלה אלהיך ישראל אשר העלוך – כלומר: רוח הקדש יש בו וכאילו רוח הקדש הולך לפנינו. וכן לבן אמר על התרפים: למה גנבת את אלהי (בראשית ל"א:ל').

THIS IS YOUR GOD, O ISRAEL, WHO BROUGHT YOU OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT: Were they so foolish as to think that this calf, that was just made that very day, was the one that took them out of Egypt?! Rather [one must understand that] all idolaters know that it is our God in heaven who created the world. But their error was as follows: Teraphim have an impure spirit in them, just as prophets have a holy spirit. When the calf spoke to them using impure spirits, the Israelites felt that it was speaking through the divine holy spirit. That is why they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt." In other words, they said: "The holy spirit is in this calf, and it is as if the holy spirit is going before us." That is also why Laban, in speaking of his teraphim, [refers to them as gods, when he] says (Gen. 31:30), "why did you steal my gods?"

R. Yosef Bekhor Shor on Exodus 32:4:

אלה אלהיך ישראל – דרך לדבר אלהות ואדנות בלשון רבים, כמו אלהים קדושים (יהושע כ"ד:י"ט). אי נמי: שתפו אהרון עמו, ובכך טעו שהיו סבורים שיוכל להנהיגם. לפי שידעו: אהרון מלומד בניסים, וסברו שיעשה לו שידבר ויסבור אותם.

This is your God, O Israel: It is (often Scripture's) way to speak of "Godliness" and "Lordliness" in the language of plurality, such as *Holy God* (Joshua 24:19, using a plural modifier for God). Another way of understanding: he (Aaron) included it (the calf) with "him" (God), and in that sense they erred, thinking that he was able to lead them. For they knew that Aaron was learned/skilled in (being the agent of) miracles. And they Israelites reasoned that he would make it possible for it (the calf) to speak and explain (to them).

Ramban on Exodus 32:4:

ויאמרו אלה אלהיך ישראל אשר העלוך – גם זה הכתוב יורה אותך, כי אין טיפוש בעולם שיחשוב כי הזהב הזה שהיה באזניהם הוא הוציאם ממצרים, אבל אמרו כי כח הצורה הזו העלם משם. והנה לא תמצא שיאמר בעגל בשום מקום: אשר הוציאנו ממצרים, כי הם מודים במי שאמר: אנכי י"י אלהיך אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים (שמות כ"ב:), כי שמו הגדול הוא המוציא אותם משם, אבל יאמרו במקומות רבים אשר העלוך, כי יקחו זה במקום היד הגדולה המחרבת ים השמה מעמקי ים דרך לעבור גאולים (ישעיהו נ"א:י'). וזהו

שנאמר: וימירו את כבודם בתבנית שור אוכל עשב (תהלים ק"ו:כ'), ושם נאמר: שכחו אל מושיעם עושה גדולות במצרים נפלאות בארץ חם נוראות על ים סוף (תהלים ק"ו:כ"א-כ"ב) – שכחו דברו אשר צום, והנה עברו על: לא תעשה לך אלהים אחרים על פני (שמות כ':ב'), כאשר רמזתי שם, והבין זה.

AND THEY SAID, THESE ARE YOUR GODS, O ISRAEL, WHICH BROUGHT THEE UP OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT. This verse also will teach you [that they had no intention of worshipping it as an idol], for there is no fool in the world who would think that this gold which was in their ears is that which brought them up out of the land of Egypt. Rather, they said that the power of that figure brought them up out of there. Thus you will find that in no place does it say of the calf, "which brought us 'out' of Egypt," for they acknowledged Him Who said, I am I am YHWH your God, who brought you 'out' of the land of Egypt, and that it was by God's Great Name that God delivered them from there. Instead, they said in many places who brought you 'up,' for they took it to be in place of the great hand — that dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep; that made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over. It is with this intention that Scripture says, *Thus they exchanged their Glory for the likeness of an ox that eateth grass, and there it is said, They forgot God Who had delivered them, Who had done great things in Egypt; wondrous works in the land of Ham, terrible things by the Red Sea* (Psalm 106:21–22). They forgot God's word which God commanded them. Thus they transgressed the prohibition, *You shall have no other gods before Me* (Exodus 20:2), as I have hinted there, and you will understand this.

2. Another Version of the Golden Calf Story: Deuteronomy 9–10

Deuteronomy 9:8 At Horeb you so provoked the LORD that the LORD was angry enough with you to have destroyed you. 9 I had ascended the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the Tablets of the Covenant that the LORD had made with you, and I stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights, eating no bread and drinking no water. 10 And the LORD gave me the two tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God, with the exact words that the LORD had addressed to you on the mountain out of the fire on the day of the Assembly.

Deut 9:12 And the LORD said to me, "Hurry, go down from here at once, for the people whom you brought out of Egypt have acted wickedly; they have been quick to stray from the path that I enjoined upon them; **they have made themselves a molten image.**" [וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵלַי] [קום יד מִהַר מִזֶּה כִּי שָׁחַת עַמֶּךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתָ מִמִּצְרַיִם סָרוּ מִהַר מִן־הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתָם עָשׂוּ לָהֶם מִסְכָּה:]

Deut 9:15 I started down the mountain, a mountain ablaze with fire, the two Tablets of the Covenant in my two hands. 16 I saw how you had sinned against the LORD your God: you had made yourselves a molten calf; you had been quick to stray from the path that the LORD had enjoined upon you; 20 Moreover, the LORD was angry enough with Aaron to have

destroyed him; so I also interceded for Aaron at that time. [וּבִאֲהָרֶן הִתְאַנַּף ה' מֵאֵד לְהַשְׁמִידוֹ וְאֶתְפַּלֵּל]
[גם־בְּעַד אֲהָרֹן בְּעֵת הַהוּא]

Rashi on Deuteronomy 9:20:

להשמידו – זה כילוי בנים, וכן הוא אומר: ואשמיד פריו (עמוס ב':ט').
ואתפלל גם בעד אהרן – והועילה תפילתי לכפר מחצה, ומתו שנים ונשארו השנים.
ובאהרן התאנף ה' להשמידו

TO DESTROY HIM – this denotes the extermination of one's children, and so, too, it states,
And I destroyed (ואשמיד) his fruit (offspring) from above (Amos 2:9) (Leviticus Rabbah 7:1).

AND I PRAYED FOR AARON ALSO, and my prayer availed to expiate half, so that two of
his sons died, and two remained alive.

3. Yet Another Version of the Golden Calf Story: 1 Kings 12:1–13

1 Kgs 12:25 Jeroboam fortified Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim and resided there; he moved out from there and fortified Penuel. 26 Jeroboam said to himself, “Now the kingdom may well return to the House of David. 27 If these people still go up to offer sacrifices at the House of the LORD in Jerusalem, the heart of these people will turn back to their master, King Rehoboam of Judah; they will kill me and go back to King Rehoboam of Judah.” 28 So the king took counsel and made two golden calves. He said to the people, “You have been going up to Jerusalem long enough. **This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!**” [וַיִּוְעֵץ הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיַּעַשׂ שְׁנֵי עֲגֻלֵי זָהָב וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם רַב־לָכֶם מַעַלּוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם הִנֵּה אֱלֹהֶיךָ] [וְיִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלוֹךְ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם.] 29 He set up one in Bethel and placed the other in Dan. 30 That proved to be a cause of guilt, for the people went to worship [the calf at Bethel and] the one at Dan. 31 He also made cult places and appointed priests from the ranks of the people who were not of Levite descent.

Radak on 1 Kings 12:28:

...ולמה עגל אמר להם הלא אהרן עשה לישראל עגל להשרות השכינה בו במקום משה שלא היה להם גם אתם.
עתה שאין לכם מקום השכינה שהוא ירושלים נעשה עגל במקומו להשרות שכינה בו לפיכך אמר אלה אלהיך
ישראל אשר העלוך מארץ מצרים כמו שאמר בעגל המדבר כי לא היתה כוונתו לעבודת גילולים ולמה עשה שנים
כדי שלא להטריח ישראל שיבאו כלם למקום אחד.

...and why did he say (to build) a calf? Did he not know that Aaron had made for Israel a calf (with the intention of) causing the Divine Presence to be instilled among them instead of

Moses, for he wasn't there (or: they did not have the wherewithal to bring the Divine Presence), just as you do (not) now have a (proper?) place for the Presence, which is Jerusalem, let us make a calf in its stead, to caused the Divine Presence to be instilled on its account, therefore (Jeroboam) said this is your God, O Israel who brought you up from the land of Egypt, just as (Aaron) had said about the calf in the desert. For it was not his intention to engage in idol worship. And why did he make two? So as not to trouble Israel that they should all come to one place.

Radak on 1 Kings 12:29:

וישם את האחד בבית אל ואת האחד נתן בדן – בבית אל לפי שאמר להם זה המקום גם כן נבחר כמו ירושלם כי יעקב אבינו אמר על המקום הזה יהיה בית אלהים...

He (Jeroboam) said to them, “This place (Beth-El) is also chosen, like Jerusalem, for Jacob our father had said of this very place: ...*it will be a house of God* (see Genesis 28:22).

Related Biblical Texts

Psalm 106:19–20:

יַעֲשׂוּ-עֵגֶל בְּחֶרֶב וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לְמַסֵּכָה: וַיִּמְרֹוּ אֶת-כְּבוֹדָם בְּתַבְנִית שׁוֹר אֲכָל עֵשֶׂב:

They made a calf at Horeb / and bowed down to a molten image. 20 They exchanged their glory /for the image of a bull that feeds on grass.

Nehemiah 9:18:

אִף כִּי-עָשׂוּ לָהֶם עֵגֶל מַסֵּכָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ זֶה אֱלֹהֵיךָ אֲשֶׁר הָעֵלְךָ מִמִּצְרַיִם וַיַּעֲשׂוּ נֹאצוֹת גְּדוֹלוֹת:

Even though they made themselves a molten calf and said, ‘This is your God who brought you out of Egypt,’ thus committing great impieties...

Hosea 8:4–6:

הֵם הִמְלִיכוּ וְלֹא מִמְּנֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְלֹא יָדַעְתִּי כִּסְפָם וְזֹהָבָם עָשׂוּ לָהֶם עֲצָבִים לְמַעַן יִפְרֹתוּ: 5 זָנַח עֵגֶלְךָ שְׁמֶרֶן חָרָה אִפִּי בָם עַד-מָתִי לֹא יוֹכְלוּ נִקְיִן: 6 כִּי מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל וְהוּא חָרָשׁ עָשָׂהוּ וְלֹא אֱלֹהִים הוּא כִּי-שָׁבְבִים יִהְיֶה עֵגֶל שְׁמֶרֶן:

4They have made kings,/But not with My sanction;

They have made officers,/But not of My choice.

Of their silver and gold/They have made themselves images,/To their own undoing.

5 He rejectse your calf, Samaria!/I am furious with them!
 Will they never be capable of purity?/6 For it was Israel's doing;
 It was only made by a joiner,/It is not a god.
 No, the calf of Samaria shall be/Reduced to splinters!

Hosea 10:5–6:

Hos 10:5
 לְעִגְלוֹת בֵּית אֵוֶן יִגְוְרוּ שֶׁכֶן שְׁמֵרוֹן כִּי־אֲבֵל עָלָיו עֲמוּ וּכְמִרְיוֹ עָלָיו יִגְלוּ עַל־כְּבוֹדוֹ כִּי־גָלָה מִמֶּנּוּ: 6
 גַּם־אוֹתוֹ לְאֲשׁוּר יֻבָּל מִנְחָה לְמֶלֶךְ יָרֵב בְּשָׁנָה אֶפְרַיִם יִקַּח וַיְבוֹשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵעֲצָתוֹ:

5 The inhabitants of Samaria fear/For the calf of Beth-aven;
 Indeed, its people and priestlings,/Whose joy it once was,
 Mourn over it for the glory/That is departed from it.
 6 it too shall be brought to Assyria/As tribute to a patron king;
 Ephraim shall be chagrined,/Israel shall be dismayed/Because of his plans.

William Propp, Anchor Bible: Exodus

The Bible does not distinguish clearly between polytheism and idolatry. The moment one makes a statue, even in the service of YHWH, one is worshipping “other gods” (580).

...We face three possibilities:

1. The calves/young bulls of Aaron and Jeroboam represent a deity other than YHWH (but see Exodus 32:5)
2. The calves represent YHWH God's Self (Exodus 32:4, 8 = 1 Kings 12:28)
 >> note Numbers 23:22 (also 24:8):

אֵל מוֹצִיאָם מִמִּצְרַיִם כְּתוּעַפַת רְאִים לוֹ:

El who freed them from Egypt/Is for them like the horns of the wild ox.

3. The calves represent YHWH's mount or throne support: ancient depiction of gods features them seated between or standing upon bulls and also the analogy of the Griffins/Cherubim, between which YHWH sits enthroned or upon which God rides (see Ezekiel 1).

By this interpretation, both Aaron and Jeroboam, their plural grammar notwithstanding, are really pointing to the empty space above their calves when acclaim the God of the Exodus

Joel Baden (thetorah.com)

The sin of the Golden Calf was none of the preceding (which all somehow address Exodus 20:2-4, but rather...

4. Exodus 20:22–23:

אַתֶּם רְאִיתֶם כִּי מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם דִּבַּרְתִּי עִמָּכֶם. לֹא תַעֲשׂוּן אִתִּי אֱלֹהֵי כֶסֶף וְאֱלֹהֵי זָהָב לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ לָכֶם.

You yourselves saw that I spoke to you from the very heavens. With me, therefore, you shall not make gods of silver, nor shall you make for yourselves any gods of gold.

While the first laws of the Decalogue are about how (not) to worship gods other than YHWH, the first law of the Covenant Collection is about how (not) to worship YHWH himself. The laws are not identical; they are complementary. The Decalogue states “no other gods besides me”; the Covenant Collection says “with me, therefore, you shall not make any gods.” There is a right way and a wrong way to worship YHWH; about this YHWH could hardly have been clearer.

Because YHWH did not reveal himself to the Israelites in any reproducible shape — “I spoke to you from the very heavens” — therefore proper worship cannot include any physical representation, especially a figural one, and especially one made of precious metals. The creation of the golden calf violates this opening law of the Covenant Collection: the Israelites, in ill-advisedly attempting to represent YHWH’s presence, make for themselves a god of gold.

Ibn Ezra on Exodus 20:22–23:

ואחר שדברתי אני עמכם פנים בפנים בלא שליח, אין לכם צורך לעשות אלהי כסף וזהב, כי רבים מעובדי הפסילים שהם אומרים עד היום: שזאת הצורה תליץ בעדי ותעזרני מול השם.

And since I have spoken with you face to face, without an intermediary, you should have no need to make gods of silver or of gold. Indeed, many idolaters say to this very day that such an such an image will function as an intermediary for me and will help me with respect to God.