

## General Comments on Exodus 32

This chapter recounts a rather unusual exchange between some Israelite men and Aaron. All of Israel has just witnessed an amazing array of miracles by the Lord, and yet here are a number of men demanding an idol of Aaron. And Aaron actually makes it. What could possibly explain such action given the context of the very recent exodus from Egypt?

To assist in determining the meaning of the text, the Jewish Publication Society (JPS) translation follows:

1 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!" 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.

### What were these guys thinking?

Note we have "guys", specifically males. In v. 1-3 the term translated to "people" is masculine in the Hebrew. In v. 2 Aaron says to them "your wives...your daughters...your sons". He must be talking exclusively to men, as he is telling them to go back to their wives. This is a group of men, and this group of men is hostile as v. 1 in the JPS states they "gathered against" Aaron.

Why were these men doing this? They had just seen a series of incredible miracles that delivered them from slavery, and the making or worshiping of idols was explicitly prohibited in the Sinaitic Covenant (cf. 20:3-6). Are they really that incredibly hard-hearted, or is there some other explanation?

To better establish the context review 24:12-18. There Moses is summoned up into the mountain by the Lord. In v. 14 Moses tells the elders he will be ascending the mountain, and in the mean time Aaron and Hur are in charge. Moses makes no mention is made of how long he will be gone, as this is only

pointed out to the reader in v. 18. It is only known after the fact that Moses was gone for 40 days. Upon his leaving none of them knew how long he would be gone. In v. 1 of the present text the people are sitting around waiting for Moses to come back, forty days have elapsed and where is Moses?

Next look at the latter half of v. 2, where the people indicate Moses has led them from Egypt but he is gone and they now need someone to "go before us"? Go where? The Promised land of Canaan. They are looking for a replacement leader to lead them into Canaan, as Moses had previously said the Lord would do. Return to 23:20-24 where the Lord tells them He is going to take them into the Promised land:

20 I am sending an angel before you [Hebr: malach l`fanecha] to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have made ready. 21 Pay heed to him and obey him. Do not defy him, for he will not pardon your offenses, since My Name is in him; 22 but if you obey him and do all that I say, I will be an enemy to your enemies and a foe to your foes.

23 When My angel goes before you [Hebr: malach l`fanecha] and brings you to the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, and I annihilate them, 24 you shall not bow down to their gods in worship or follow their practices, but shall tear them down and smash their pillars to bits.

Here is the Strong's entry for the Hebrew malach:

04397 mal'ak {mal-awk'}

from an unused root meaning to despatch as a deputy;  
TWOT - 1068a; n m

AV - angel 111, messenger 98, ambassadors 4, variant 1;  
214

- 1) messenger, representative
- 1a) messenger
- 1b) angel
- 1c) the theophanic angel

They had been previously told malach l`fanecha, an angel would go before them and lead them into Canaan. Previously they probably assumed the malach was Moses, but now Moses appears to them to be gone, they need this promised malach. And this is what the people in v. 1 demand "Come make as an elohiem - asher yalchu

l'fa'neinu". They don't know where Moses is, and for all they know he is dead. So they demand Aaron produce a new leader, this promised messenger from 23:20-24, to lead them into Canaan.

What these men did was use some bit of information out of context as a proof text to suit their own desires. They were tired of waiting for Moses, and wanted to be off for the land of milk and honey. The men here were not idolaters, but rather were self-promoters who sought to use the idolatrous image of the malach l'fanecha as a means of taking over the leadership of Israel in the absence of Moses.

### **What was Aaron thinking?**

Why then did Aaron seemingly go along with these men? As noted above, Aaron was confronted and outnumbered by a group of hostile men. So, he was hardly a willing participant. Look at what he does with them.

First, they demand he make a god to lead them, his reply is "Go back to your wives and children and get all their gold and bring it back and I will make a god from it". Read this carefully. He is sending back these hostile men to their wives and children, thereby attempting to dismiss and disperse them and force them to confront their families and strip them of their gold. Naturally, once the mob was split up their mobocrat attitude would wane, and their families would not be in any rush to give up their gold. So, the men would have been censured by their own wives and children. Aaron is trying to avoid a direct confrontation with these men by sending them away thinking he is willing to acquiesce to their demands. Note the men do not do what Aaron has suggested. They do not go back to their families, but rather take the gold from their own ears and demand he use that (v. 3). Aaron's initial clever ploy is thwarted, but Aaron comes up with another idea.

When he sees the men proclaiming the calf to be the god of Israel, he goes and calls a feast to the Lord on the next day (cf. v. 5). He knows all will be present for such a feast, the pious as well as these rabble. Aaron's intent is to expose the foolish behavior of these men. He is hoping the pious people of Israel will outnumber the miscreants and take actions to stop them. Previously, the men had come out against Aaron in a threatening manner, outnumbering him and demanding he make a god. Here he is turning the tables on them, having them outnumbered by Israel. It would also serve as a good object lesson to the pious among Israel, as these men who desire idols will be making fools of themselves publicly, showing forth a bad example.

The next day all the people gather in and participate in the feast, but afterwards the scene turns to mockery and contention rather than a constructive object lesson. In v. 6 the KJV says

after the feast the people "rose up to play" and the JPS says "rose to dance". Both of these are poor translations wherein the translators took liberties with the text based on the content of v. 18-19 where it says the revelers sang and danced. The Hebrew term translated in the KJV "to play" in v. 6 is "tsahek" and is defined by Strong's as follows:

06711 tsachaq {tsaw-khak'}

a primitive root; TWOT - 1905; v

AV - laugh 6, mock 4, sport 2, play 1; 13

1) to laugh, mock, play

1a) (Qal) to laugh

1b) (Piel)

1b1) to jest

1b2) to sport, play, make sport, toy with, make a toy of

In most cases when this term is translated in the KJV it is translated to "laugh" or "mock", as in the case of Gen. 17:17 and Gen. 18:12 when Abraham and Sarah laughed at the Lord's promise they would have a child. In certain contexts the term might have sexual connotations, as in Gen. 26:8 Isaac is seen "sporting" with Rebecca, and in Gen 39:14-17 where Joseph is accused of "mock[ing]". But, there it is plain from the context that sexual activity is only insinuated and the primary context is that of one person being mocked by another's actions, in the first case the king Abimelech and in the second case Potiphar's wife. The plainest use of the term appears in Judges 16:25 where Samson is made sport of by the Philistines. Clearly, Samson is mocked by the Philistines and held in public derision. Given these cases, the best translation of v. 6 would be "...they sat down to eat and drink, and afterwards rose and mocked", meaning Israel in general mocked the rabble who was now worshiping the idol. It is plain Aaron intended this from v. 25:

And when Moses saw that the people were naked; (for Aaron had made them naked unto their shame among their enemies:)

where "naked" is another poor translation. A better translation would be:

Moses saw that the people were out of control--for Aaron had let them get out of control to be a derision among their enemies (NAS).

Thus, Aaron's second plan had succeeded where the first plan failed. Aaron made a mockery of the idolaters in front of all of

Israel (v. 6) while they were sacrificing to the idol, singing, and dancing (v. 18-19). Aaron deliberately let the idolaters get out of control so the rest of Israel would see them for what they were.

Finally, is Aaron justified? Not at all. In v. 21 Moses censures him and Deut. 9:20 indicates the Lord was angry enough with Aaron to have killed him over it. Surely the Lord expected of Aaron the same thing Moses did, namely confront the sinners outright and deal with the matter expediently. Aaron tried to avoid a difficult situation by being clever and using popular opinion. Moses stood up and boldly and unequivocally addressed the problem. As a prominent leader among Israel Aaron's example in dealing with these men was less than ideal.

### Comments on Exodus 32

**1 AND when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down out of the mount, the people gathered themselves together unto Aaron, and said unto him, Up, make us gods, which shall go before us; for [as for] this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him. 2 And Aaron said unto them, Break off the golden earrings, which [are] in the ears of your wives, of your sons, and of your daughters, and bring [them] unto me. 3 And all the people brake off the golden earrings which [were] in their ears, and brought [them] unto Aaron. 4 And he received [them] at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, after he had made it a molten calf: and they said, These [be] thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. 5 And when Aaron saw [it], he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation, and said, To morrow [is] a feast to the LORD. 6 And they rose up early on the morrow, and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play.**

v1-5 After Moses has been up in the mountain for over a month, a group of hostile men approach Aaron and demand he provide the previously promised angel to lead them into the promised land since Moses appears to have disappeared (v. 1). Aaron tries to avoid a conflict by sending the men back to their wives and children to collect their gold from them to make the idol they want (v. 2), knowing full well the men will be loath to do so. Aaron's plan backfires when the men gather together their own gold rather than go back to their families (v. 3). Aaron's next plan is to go ahead with what the men want (v. 4), but to summon all of Israel to deal with these miscreants rather than have to deal with them himself (v. 5). Aaron's second plan succeeds when the people of Israel gather together the next day and mock the idolaters and cause a considerable row (v. 6).

v4 "fashioned it with a graving tool, after he had made it a molten calf", the precise meaning of the Hebrew is obscure. Regardless, the intent of the passage is to inform the reader that Aaron's subsequent alibi in v. 24 is patently false. Aaron made the idol himself.

"these be thy gods, O Israel", these men are attempting to usurp the leadership of Israel in Moses absence. Whereas Moses was proclaiming the Lord and leading Israel according to His will, these men are fabricating their own gods and telling Israel to follow them.

**7 And the LORD said unto Moses, Go, get thee down; for thy people, which thou broughtest out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted [themselves]: 8 They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them: they have made them a molten calf, and have worshipped it, and have sacrificed thereunto, and said, These [be] thy gods, O Israel, which have brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. 9 And the LORD said unto Moses, I have seen this people, and, behold, it [is] a stiffnecked people: 10 Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them: and I will make of thee a great nation.**

**11 And Moses besought the LORD his God, and said, LORD, why doth thy wrath wax hot against thy people, which thou hast brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power, and with a mighty hand? 12 Wherefore should the Egyptians speak, and say, For mischief did he bring them out, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth? Turn from thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against thy people. 13 Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, thy servants, to whom thou swarest by thine own self, and saidst unto them, I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have spoken of will I give unto your seed, and they shall inherit [it] for ever. 14 And the LORD repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people.**

v7-14 Moses' communion with the Lord is brought to an end with the Lord telling him they have made an idols (v. 7-8), and He is so angry over the matter He is going to destroy them and raise up a nation from Moses (v. 9-10). However, Moses intercedes on Israel's behalf and points out that if He destroys them now the Egyptians will interpret this favorably for themselves (v. 11-12). He then uses the Abrahamic covenant to get the Lord to relent from destroying Israel (v. 13), and the Lord relents (v. 14).

The arguments presented here are deliberately intended to be antithetical. The Lord's argument for destruction is effectively a disavowal of Israel. Note He refers to them as "thy people,

which thou broughtest out" and not "My people which I brought out". The Lord never refers to them as the lineage of Abraham or as Israel. He is in effect rejecting the covenant relationship. This then forms the crux of Moses' argument. Moses reminds the Lord if He destroys them then they will appear to be no different from the Gentile nations whom He has smitten. But the powerful argument is Moses' equation of these people with the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Once Moses makes this equation the Lord relents for the sake of the covenant.

The Lord's disavowal based on behavior is mitigated by the covenant based on lineage. This exchange illustrates the importance of the Abrahamic covenant. Prior to the Abrahamic covenant the Lord would have struck or annihilated the entire nation, as occurred with the Deluge, the tower of Babel, or the Jaredites. But, here, the previous pattern which has been in force is mitigated by the promises made to Abraham.

**15 And Moses turned, and went down from the mount, and the two tables of the testimony [were] in his hand: the tables [were] written on both their sides; on the one side and on the other [were] they written. 16 And the tables [were] the work of God, and the writing [was] the writing of God, graven upon the tables.**

**17 And when Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said unto Moses, [There is] a noise of war in the camp. 18 And he said, [It is] not the voice of [them that] shout for mastery, neither [is it] the voice of [them that] cry for being overcome: [but] the noise of [them that] sing do I hear.**

**19 And it came to pass, as soon as he came nigh unto the camp, that he saw the calf, and the dancing: and Moses' anger waxed hot, and he cast the tables out of his hands, and brake them beneath the mount. 20 And he took the calf which they had made, and burnt [it] in the fire, and ground [it] to powder, and strawed [it] upon the water, and made the children of Israel drink [of it].**

v15-20 Having received the word of the Lord, Moses descends out of the mount (v. 15-16). Joshua, not being apprized of the situation as Moses was in v. 7-10, hears the ruckus and thinks there is a battle breaking out in camp (v. 17). Moses informs him otherwise (v. 18). When Moses arrives at camp he is enraged at what he sees. He smashes the tablets he has received from the Lord (v. 19) and then destroys the calf as well (v. 20).

v15-16 These verses are intended to be ironic. Having communed with the Lord for some 40 days, Moses comes with the commandments the Lord has given him to govern Israel. But, in his absence, a considerable number among Israel have flagrantly offended the Lord. The dichotomy of Moses speaking with the Lord and men making idols with their own hands couldn't be any stronger as

they were coincident.

v20 The calf was probably made from wood and plated with gold, which was a common means of making idols, cp. Isa. 40:19, Isa. 44:13-17. Those portion of it which did not burn, the gold portions and the ashes, were then dumped into the brook that came down from the mountain (cf. Deut. 9:21). The brook was probably the single water source for the entire camp, so placing the ashes there forced all of Israel to participate in the punishment. The symbolism Moses intends is all of Israel suffers pollution when any part of Israel engages in such things.

**21 And Moses said unto Aaron, What did this people unto thee, that thou hast brought so great a sin upon them? 22 And Aaron said, Let not the anger of my lord wax hot: thou knowest the people, that they [are set] on mischief. 23 For they said unto me, Make us gods, which shall go before us: for [as for] this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him. 24 And I said unto them, Whosoever hath any gold, let them break [it] off. So they gave [it] me: then I cast it into the fire, and there came out this calf.**

v21-24 Moses questions Aaron as to why he did such a thing (v. 21) and his reply is weak and inaccurate. Aaron seeks to blame the people and minimizes his own involvement (v. 22-23), to the point of fabricating a rather unrealistic story (v. 24).

**25 And when Moses saw that the people [were] naked; (for Aaron had made them naked unto [their] shame among their enemies:) 26 Then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, Who [is] on the LORD'S side? [let him come] unto me. And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together unto him. 27 And he said unto them, Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, Put every man his sword by his side, [and] go in and out from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbour. 28 And the children of Levi did according to the word of Moses: and there fell of the people that day about three thousand men. 29 For Moses had said, Consecrate yourselves to day to the LORD, even every man upon his son, and upon his brother; that he may bestow upon you a blessing this day.**

v25-29 Those who were worshiping the idol are out of control because of the leeway Aaron has given them (v. 25). Moses calls on the faithful of Israel and all of the sons of Levi respond to his call (v. 26). He adjures them to consecrate themselves to the Lord, and if they do they will be blessed throughout their lives and their children's lives (v. 29). Moses instructs them to execute the idolaters irrespective of who they are (v. 27). The sons of Levi do so and about three thousand men are executed



(v. 28).

Here is a sharp contrast between the Abrahamic covenant and the Sinaitic covenant. The Abrahamic being lineage based and the Sinaitic being righteousness based. The unrighteous who indulge in the idolatry are destroyed from Israel by those who dedicate themselves to the Lord. Where Moses gets the Lord to relent from destroying all of Israel by appealing to the Abrahamic covenant, he then executes the wicked individuals based upon the Sinaitic covenant.

v25 "naked", a poor translation. A better translation would be "rioting" or "out of control". The poor translation of the KJV is based on the translator's presupposition the idolatrous activities, the "play" of v. 6, was lascivious in nature.

Unfortunately, what exactly these three thousand people were doing to be riotous is not stated. Whether they continued their singing and dancing unabated, were enraged by the destruction of the idol, seeking to overthrow Moses, or were crazed for some other reason is unclear. Given the context of their initial hostility to Aaron (v. 1) and their attempt to usurp control of Israel (v. 4) it seems likely their rioting is more politically motivated than anything else.

"all the sons of Levi", Moses himself was a son of Levi, as was his older brother Aaron. Whether Aaron himself responded to this summons and subsequently participated in the execution of the idolaters is unclear. Their faithfulness in this moment of distress is why the Lord chose them for their special calling to administer in the Priesthood, cf. Deut. 10:1-8.

v26 That it was the sons of Levi, Moses' and Aaron's own tribe that responded and apparently none other illustrates the relative ambivalence of the Israel in general at that time. There were only three thousand people executed, but only one of the twelve tribes responded zealously when asked "Who is on the Lord's side?" This leaves a lot of people in the middle.

v27 "his brother...companion...neighbor", they are to show complete impartiality in the task of executing the idolaters. Any who is guilty is to be executed, regardless of relationship.

v28 "three thousand men", given the census of Num. 1 the number executed is relatively small compared to Israel's total population.

**30 And it came to pass on the morrow, that Moses said unto the people, Ye have sinned a great sin: and now I will go up unto the LORD; peradventure I shall make an atonement for your sin. 31 And**

Moses returned unto the LORD, and said, Oh, this people have sinned a great sin, and have made them gods of gold. 32 Yet now, if thou wilt forgive their sin--; and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written.

33 And the LORD said unto Moses, Whosoever hath sinned against me, him will I blot out of my book. 34 Therefore now go, lead the people unto [the place] of which I have spoken unto thee: behold, mine Angel shall go before thee: nevertheless in the day when I visit I will visit their sin upon them. 35 And the LORD plagued the people, because they made the calf, which Aaron made.

v30-35 After executing the most rebellious individuals, Moses warns Israel they have sinned gravely. But, he will approach the Lord to see if he can make amends for what they have done (v. 30). Moses approaches the Lord and confesses their sins to Him (v. 32) and asks they forgive them. If He will not forgive them, then Moses also wants to be rejected along with them (v. 32). The Lord responds that He will judge those who have sinned against Him individually for their actions (v. 33), and Moses may continue leading Israel to the promised land. The previously promised angel will proceed before them, but Israel will be punished and chastened as they sin (v. 34-35).

Follows the same theme as that of v. 25-29, wherein the Lord strikes Israel for their sin. Previously in Exodus the Lord is presented as ultra-tolerant of Israel's incessant whining and complaining against Moses and Him. Only after entering into the conditional covenant at Sinai is the Lord now presented as striking them down as a result of their wickedness.

v30 "this people have sinned a great sin", Moses must be referring to the lack of zeal demonstrated by the vast majority of Israel when it came to choosing between the idol and the Lord.

v32 Moses' request to be rejected along with Israel in general is probably reactionary to the Lord's earlier statement that He would raise up a single nation from Moses in v. 10. Moses has dealt with the most grievous offenders and now presents Israel to Him as what he considers suitable to be led by himself. If the Lord disagrees, then Moses wants to be annihilated along with the rest of Israel and not be singled out as the sole progenitor of Abraham's lineage.

Moses' appeal is both an act of humility, in that he does not want to be the sole progenitor of Abraham's lineage, and an act of bravery, as he does not know for certain that executing only those perpetrators is sufficient to make Israel acceptable in the eyes of the Lord. Moses is confessing that he may be out of line in requesting the rest of Israel be spared death, and

thereby risking death himself.

v33-34 While the Lord has forgiven Israel in general for the events and they may proceed in their journey, individuals are still being held personally responsible for their actions.

v33 "mine Angel shall go before thee", the angel which the hostile men demanded in v. 1 is now provided by the Lord, not by the works of men's hands.

v35 What specifically this is referring to is unclear. Whether this is what is referred to in v. 20, or an additional plague is not clear from the text.

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