

Bible Study # 57 Exodus 32.1–14 04–13–2021

A significant part of the book of Exodus commences with 32:1 and proceeds until 34:35. The lengthy section dealing with the revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai (chs. 25–31) is followed by the account of the sin of Israel while he was still on the mountain.

The preceding section has much to say concerning holiness, but now the narrative focuses on the unholiness of the people. While Moses was receiving the tablets of the covenant, the people were already breaking the covenant.

The fullest account of this incident is contained in Deuteronomy 9:9–21, when Moses reminded the people of events in their past history that had to be avoided. The significance of the rebellion of Israel is repeatedly referred to later in Scripture (see, e.g., Deut. 9:15–21; Ps. 106:19–23; Acts 7:38–43; Rom. 1:22–23).

The children of Israel did not know how long Moses would be absent on the mountain. The elders had been told that in Moses' absence people were to look to Aaron and Hur; Hur was probably fulfilling a subsidiary role as Aaron's assistant (24:14). In Moses' prolonged stay on the mount, the people decided to seek a substitute object of worship instead of showing continuing allegiance to the LORD.

Two different constructions can be placed on the words 'the people gathered around Aaron'. They could mean simply that the people gathered together and surrounded him. However, the Hebrew text can also be taken to mean that they gathered against him, and this is the preferred translation. Moses' question later put to Aaron (v. 21, 'What did this people do to you?') supports this interpretation.

The threat of force was used against Aaron, and while this does not excuse him for his part in the events that transpired, yet it casts another light on what he did. Fear for his own safety influenced his decision to acquiesce in their demands. What they wanted was a replacement for the living God who had redeemed them from their slavery in Egypt.

Instead of the Lord continuing to lead them, they wanted another god to go before them. They spoke of Moses in a very derogatory way: 'as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of Egypt'.

Respect should have been shown to the one who under God had been their deliverer and leader. They claimed not to know what had happened to him because of the interval between his going up on the mount and the time when they were speaking.

Materials out of which an idol could be made had to be obtained. Hence Aaron called for the golden earrings worn by the people to be surrendered for this purpose. They obeyed and Aaron fashioned a golden bull from the gold. While most English translations use 'calf' here, the Hebrew word means a young mature bull, and it should be translated accordingly.

The corresponding feminine form is used in Genesis 15:9 of a three year old heifer. Nothing in the text suggests an idol of diminutive size. The amount of gold contributed would have been far greater than what was necessary for a small idol, and Psalm 106:19–20 refers to this incident in which the people exchanged their Glory for the image of a bull.

Bulls were worshiped in Egypt, and this seems to have been an adaptation by the Israelites to this practice. We have to assume that not every single woman among the people had to give up her golden earrings, for sufficient could be provided without full participation.

The exact meaning of the Hebrew words ('an idol cast in the shape of a calf' NIV) is uncertain. Most probably,

it was a wooden image shaped like a young bull with the gold overlaid (see v. 20 for the reference to its being burnt). This was an act of direct disobedience, for the Second Word (20:4–5) had prohibited the making of images.

The finished idol was presented to the people as the savior that had brought them up out of Egypt, which statement in itself was a parody on the opening of the Ten Words (see 20:2). The same claim was made much later in history when King Jeroboam, having set up two golden bulls, called upon the people to come and worship the gods who brought the people up out of Egypt (1 Kings 12:28–29).

The text does not define who is the subject of the verb ‘said’ in verse 4 (‘Then they said’). The best explanation is that they were the leaders of Israel (cf. v. 1, ‘they gathered’).

Aaron was the leader in Moses’ absence, and he proceeded to build an altar, and also to call for a sacrificial festival to the Lord on the following day. This was probably an attempt to see that the people did not turn away completely from the LORD. He did not know how far their apostasy would lead them.

The next morning, the people got up early, sacrificed burnt offerings, and brought fellowship offerings. This was to be the standard practice in Israel, as the fellowship offerings were subsidiary to the burnt offerings. The people were purportedly worshiping the LORD, but in reality they were worshiping an idol.

Instead of exclusive worship of their savior, Israel under Aaron’s leadership was engaging in religious syncretism. They sat down to eat and drink and ‘got up to indulge in revelry’. Their actions in this regard were more typical of Near Eastern idol worship than true worship of their God. The NIV translation, ‘to indulge in revelry’, is the translation of a Hebrew verb that can carry sexual overtones.

However, there is nothing in the context to suggest that the revelry was anything other than the singing and dancing to which Moses later referred (see v. 19).

On Mount Sinai Moses received the LORD’s instruction to go down to the people. He was told of their rapid descent into idolatry, contrary to his express command. They had bowed down and sacrificed to the idol they had made, claiming that it was their redeemer god.

The LORD’s words to Moses continue, with a description of the people that indicated that there would be no change in their character or of his judgment on them, even if Moses should intercede for them. The verb ‘see’ carries the sense of ‘know’ or ‘be aware of.’ The people are characterized as being ‘stiff-necked’, a frequent description of humans as being like rebellious oxen.

Several times in this section of Exodus the people are referred to by the same term (in addition to v. 9, see 33:3, 5; 34:9), and long after this incident Israel was still characterized as having a rebellious spirit (see Deut. 9:6; 10:16; Judg. 2:19; 2 Kings 17:14; Neh. 9:16; Acts 7:51).

The LORD asked that no more requests be made to Him concerning the matter, in order that His anger would be expressed against them and that they would be destroyed. Thus the threat expressed to the Canaanites of complete annihilation (see Deut. 7:24) was now directed to Israel.

If that happened, it would call into question the patriarchal promises of a great family, but instead God promised to fulfil His purposes of having a large family through Moses (‘I will make you into a great nation’).

The account here of Moses’ intercession is not repeated in the account in Deuteronomy 9:9–21, the narrative there moving from the threat of extinction for Israel (v. 14) to Moses’ descent from the mountain (v. 15). Moses implored God (‘sought the favor of’ NIV) to relent.

He put to the forefront the fact that the children of Israel were God's people ('why should your anger burn against your people?'). These were the people whom God had rescued from Egypt 'with great power and a strong hand'. This phrase became a standard expression to express the wonder of God's redemption of His people from the power of Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

The next reason on which Moses based his request was that destroying Israel would give the Egyptians grounds for mockery. They would attribute to God an evil plan of bringing the Israelites out of Egypt only to kill them in the mountains, doubtless referring to the region of which Sinai was a part. Egypt, argued Moses, should not be given the occasion to gloat about their former slaves.

The request was that God's anger would be turned away, and because God relented, disaster would be averted for His people. The only other joint occurrence of the Hebrew verbs for 'return' and 'relent' is in Psalm 90:13, a psalm attributed to Moses.

Other passages in the Old Testament speak similarly of God changing His mind (1 Chron. 21:15; Jer. 18:8; 26:3, 19; Amos 7:3, 6; Jonah 3:10). From a human point of view it appears that God's purposes had changed.

Moses' prayer continued with an appeal to God to 'remember', another anthropomorphic expression. What he wanted was for God to fulfill the promises he had given to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, and had confirmed to them by an oath that he swore by himself (cf. Gen. 22:16 and Heb. 6:13–18).

There could be no higher form of oath-taking, and no greater certainty of its fulfillment. Moses referred to two of the main promises to the patriarchs, a large family and a land in which to live. The family had become a large group of people (cf. the opening words of this book, 1:1–12), and they could also look ahead to having a place in which to live, an inheritance that would be theirs if they continued in the way of the LORD.

The result of Moses intercession is recorded in verse 14, on which Psalm 106:23 gives the verdict: 'So he [God] said he would destroy them—had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him to keep his wrath from destroying them.' What is not recorded here in Exodus is the fact that Moses pleaded for Aaron's life (Deut. 9:20), and his request was granted.

We will continue our study with Exodus 32.15–35.