

## Bible Study # 58 Exodus 32.15–35 04–14–2021

Moses' audience with the LORD on Mount Sinai being complete, he turned and went down, carrying the two tablets that had already been given to him (see 31:18). Their content is again called 'the Testimony' (see 25:21), and in keeping with known practices, they were inscribed on both sides.

In verse 16, the making of the tablets and the writing on them are both ascribed to God. As in 31:18, the content of the Testimony was so important that God Himself inscribed it on the tablets.

No mention of Joshua has occurred since it was stated in 24:13 that Moses and Joshua his assistant arose, and Moses went up the mountain. The phrasing there may suggest that Joshua only went part of the way and then waited for Moses to descend.

As they came near the camp it was Joshua who heard the 'noise' in the camp, as the people shouted. He said to Moses: 'There is the sound of war in the camp.' The word for 'sound' comes from a verb 'to shout' that is often used in military contexts, and hence Joshua's comment follows on from what he thought he was hearing.

To him the indications were that battle was taking place. But Moses quickly disabused him on the matter, telling him that the sound was not of battle but of the people singing. His answer formed three lines of poetry:

It is not the sound of victory,  
it is not the sound of defeat;  
It is the sound of singing that I hear.

It is possible that some or all of this poem was already known to the children of Israel, and its antiquity may explain some of the difficulty in translating and interpreting it. Its point is that Moses denied that the sounds they heard were connected with battle at all. Instead, he recognized that they were associated with revelry.

While he had been on the mountain with the LORD, the religious life of the people had degenerated, and this singing and dancing were outward expressions of the inward change of heart.

Moses' words to Joshua were confirmed when they came near the camp. When he saw the bull that Aaron had made and the dancing, he was angry. This was hardly surprising, as the LORD had already expressed the desire that his anger would burn hot and consume the people (v. 10).

The action of Moses in throwing down and breaking the tablets should not be looked upon as a fit of anger. It was a deliberate action to show that the covenant was already broken because of the people's sin. No other step could have indicated so profoundly the breach of the covenant that had taken place, and this was a public demonstration of the fact (see Deut. 9:17, 'breaking them to pieces before your eyes').

Breaking the tablets was to lead on to other consequences. The Tent of Meeting could not be constructed while the relationship between the Lord and His people was in disarray (see comment on 33:7–11). Moses took the bull, burned it and then ground it to powder. The idol they had made was most probably wooden with a golden overlay, and hence it could be reduced to powder by burning.

Afterwards it was scattered on the water, and the Israelites were forced to drink it. While elements of a practice like this are known from Ugaritic documents, not sufficient comment is made on it in the biblical text for absolute certainty regarding its purpose. It has similarities to the trial of an unfaithful wife (Num. 5:12–31), and the fact that all the people had to drink of it may have been an admission of guilt on their part.

Interrogation of Aaron was intended to bring out the reasons that led up to the incident. The implication is present that the people put pressure on Aaron (see v. 1); yet it was he who brought upon Israel this great sin (see the double reference to this sin in vs. 30–31).

This question highlighted both the role played by Aaron and also the real nature of the offence. He deliberately led them to commit a crime of such magnitude against their covenantal God, and this was why Moses had to make intercession specifically for him (see Deut. 9:20).

Aaron offered several excuses. His first one was that he was dealing with a people who were bent on evil. Committing sin was indeed a natural inclination of Israel, and various incidents have already been cited in chapters 15–18 to show their nature as covenant breakers. However, to place this emphasis here minimized the lack of leadership on his part. Israel failed because he failed.

Verse 23 accurately reports what has already been stated in verse 1, but a change comes in verse 24. Aaron's explanation is that the gold he was given by the people was thrown into the fire and miraculously came out as the bull! Even if this interpretation is set aside as too condemnatory of Aaron, yet his explanation is very general, and it lacks mention of the specific role he played in making the golden bull.

The meaning of verse 25 is difficult to determine because of two exegetical problems. The first relates to the expressions describing what the people were doing ('running wild', 'out of control' NIV). The Hebrew verb in question seems to have the basic meaning of 'letting loose', such as letting one's hair down, and thus could be applied to unconstrained behavior.

The second concerns especially the word translated in the NIV as 'a laughing stock'. This word only occurs here in the Old Testament (it is preceded by the Hebrew preposition 'for'). A similar word appears in Job 4:12 and 26:14 with the idea of 'a whisper'. What adds to the uncertainty here is that the following word, rendered by the NIV as 'their enemies', is not the normal word for an enemy.

It is a participle of the verb 'to arise', which can at times mean those who rise up to oppose (see Exod. 15:7; 2 Sam. 18:31). On balance, when all the possibilities are considered, it is best to take the verse to mean that because of the people's actions any potential enemy would hold them in derision. They were so embarrassingly out of control that this fact could only be mentioned in whispers.

Seeing the situation, Moses decided that he had to bring about a division among the people to see if any were committed to the LORD. Hence he stood at the entrance to the camp (called here 'the gate'), and cried out: 'Who[ever is] for the LORD—to me!'

The absence of a verb in the first clause is quite typical Hebrew, though the absence of one in the second is unusual. It is a very abrupt call, though most English translations insert 'Let him come', or 'Come'. The reference to 'all the Levites' coming to Moses is probably a generalization, for Deuteronomy 33:9 seems to indicate that not all the Levites were spared the judgment of God.

The instruction to the Levites to kill, though mediated through Moses ('he said to them'), was specifically a command of 'the LORD, the God of Israel'. It was divine retributive justice against impenitent transgressors. The command was to go back and forth throughout the camp and kill, whether the victim was brother, friend, or neighbor.

Presumably the Levites made enquiries of the people, and any who showed a repentant attitude were spared, for the number killed was about three thousand (v. 28). The later incident at Baal-Peor (Num. 25:1–18) provides a parallel situation to this one, but there it is expressly stated that the idolatry was accompanied by sexual revelry (Num. 25:1, 6–8).

This is one of the numerous passages in the Old Testament in which the ethics of the final judgment intrudes into God's administration of His rule in Israel. Because of the faithfulness of the Levites that day (i.e., they did not spare their own sons and brothers), the Lord instructed them to set themselves apart for Him.

The choice of the Levites had already been made by God (see 27:21; 28:1), but their faithfulness at this juncture served as confirmation of their priestly role (cf. the appointment of Phinehas and his descendants to a perpetual priesthood after the incident at Baal-Peor, Num. 25:10–13).

The following day Moses indicated that he was going to return to the LORD on Mount Sinai. The purpose is stated as being to make atonement for the 'great sin' of the people, something with which he charged them (Heb. lit. 'you [pl.] have sinned a great sin'). The use of the word 'perhaps' must be understood in reference to what Moses suggested ('make atonement') and what he proposed ('but if not, then blot me out of the book').<sup>1</sup> He was raising the question as to whether there was a way whereby the Lord would accept his life as a substitute for the people. But no sacrifice, no matter who made it or what it was composed of, could atone for this sin (cf. Ps. 49:7: 'No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him').

Moses returned to the LORD and confessed to him the sin of the people. It was indeed a great sin, in that they had substituted the worship of their guide and savior in favor of manufactured gods of gold. He posed an alternative with the LORD, in an impassioned plea. Either He forgave the sin of Israel, or else blotted Moses' own name out of the book of life.

This is one of several Old Testament references to a book of remembrance (see Pss. 69:28; 139:16), and the idea carries over into the New Testament (see Rev. 3:5; 13:8; 20:12). It is an anthropomorphic concept to highlight the certain knowledge that God has of His own children. The comparison should rightly be made with Paul's statement that he could wish himself cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of his Jewish brothers (Rom. 9:3).

The divine reply was confirmation of God's judgment expressed already in verses 9–10, as well as a gracious refusal to accept Moses' offer. Those who had sinned against God in the incident of the golden bull must accept the punishment that was the consequence of their sin. The instructions to Moses relating to the blessing of the land was reinforced, as he was commanded to lead the people to the place of God's choice.

This, in itself, was a reassurance, as it indicated that the covenant would continue, and the promise of the land of Canaan would stand. However, the warning of punishment was given, that would occur in the time of God's visitation of His people.

The Hebrew verb used twice at the end of verse 34 ('to visit') can denote visiting either for good or evil. There is no doubt that here it marks out a visitation in judgment. No escape was possible for those who participated without remorse in the worship of the golden bull.

The ultimate punishment on Israel for rebellion against God was going to be expulsion from the land of Canaan, as Moses later predicted (Lev. 26:31–33 and Deut. 28:65–68). However, as an interim judgment Israel was going to be smitten (using the same verb used of God's smiting of Egypt, Exod. 7:25 MT).

No mention is made of the precise nature of the punishment for 'what they did with the calf Aaron had made'. Some have suggested that there is absence of chronological order here, and this statement refers to the 3,000 deaths recorded in verse 28. It is probably better to think of some sickness that afflicted them as a sign of the ultimate full judgment of exile that awaited them much later.

Our study will continue with Exodus 33:1–11.