

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF EXODUS

Ron Roberts

Lesson 20

CHAPTERS 32 – 40

The Golden Calf Idolatry

The Tabernacle Erected

The Command to Leave Mt. Sinai

The Golden Calf:

“Aaron and the golden calf” is a story every Sunday School child can tell. In fact, the excerpt quoted below came from a bible class lesson book for third graders.

“While Moses was on Mount Sinai, the people of Israel had become impatient waiting for Moses to return with a message from God. Moses had been gone for so long that the people gave up on him and begged Aaron (Moses' brother) to build them an altar so they could worship. Aaron answered them, ‘Take the gold earrings off your wives, your sons and your daughters. Bring the earrings to me.’ So all of the people took off their earrings and brought them to



Aaron. He took what they gave him and made it into a metal statue of a god. It looked like a calf. He shaped it with a tool. Then the people said, ‘Israel, here is your god who brought you up out of Egypt.’

Then they held a festival and bowed down to worship their idol. So quickly they had fallen back into the idolatry they were accustomed to in Egypt and disobeyed God's new commands. Especially after what they witnessed before Moses went up to Mt Sinai (remember that from the last lesson?) When Moses came down from the mountain with the tablets of stone, his anger burned when he saw the people given over to idolatry. He threw down the two tablets, smashing them to pieces at the foot of

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the mountain and took the calf the people had made. He burned it in the fire. Then he ground it into powder. He scattered it on the water. And he made the people of Israel drink it.”

That probably sounds familiar, but are all the details accurate?

Before we begin our discussion of this famous story, let’s not jump to the conclusion that the Israelites’ long battle with idolatry began here in the first six verses of Exodus 32. A lifelong exposure to idolatry must have made a lasting impact on the people who came out of Egypt with Moses. Those individuals were several generations removed from the 69 faithful souls that went into Egypt with Jacob when Joseph sent for his family. Every one of the people at the foot of Mt. Sinai had been born and raised in Egypt at a time when idol worship was a way of life. Perhaps some had learned of Jehovah from their parents’ retelling of the stories of Israel’s history – as they should have – but growing up in a country with a pagan lifestyle must have taken its toll.

As we have seen in earlier lessons, many of the ten plagues God brought on the Egyptians were specific judgments against a few of the many gods they worshiped. Some of their over 2,000 recognized gods were well-known to all Egyptians: Isis, Osiris, Horus, Ra, Hathor, and Anubis are some names you might even recognize. These, among others, had become “state deities,” meaning they were worshiped throughout the whole country of Egypt. But, there were also many others who were associated with specific regions. For example, in some areas they worshiped the goddess Qebhet, thought to offer cool water to the souls of the dead as they awaited judgment in the afterlife.

Egypt had a long-standing tradition of idol worship. And as for the Israelites, I don’t believe the golden calf incident was their first experience with it, either. As I already said, they had grown up surrounded by the worship of multiple gods, and had no doubt witnessed worship rituals that glorified freely satisfying fleshly lusts. I already alluded to the fact that although the Israelite parents should have been educating their children about the true God by relating stories of their history, with the passage of time it is almost certain that those accounts of God’s power and plan for His people faded away. Also, we cannot forget about the significant number of Egyptians who accompanied the Israelites as they left Egypt. Chapter 12:38 tells us: ***“A mixed multitude went up with them also, and flocks and herds – a great deal of livestock.”*** (NKJV)

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The Hebrew word translated “**mixed**” in verse 38 is “*ereb*” which occurs 14 other times in the Old Testament, each time carrying the idea of “*more than one type*.” According to Smith’s Dictionary, it doesn’t always refer to people, but most of those 15 references do point to “*a mixed group of foreigners who have not become Israelites*.” The group referenced here was all Egyptian, but keep in mind that their ethnicity was a combination of multiple nationalities of the countries around them. The word is used in that same way in Nehemiah 13, Jeremiah 25, Jeremiah 50, and Ezekiel 30.

Furthermore, the Hebrew word translated “**multitude**” in Exodus 12:38 is “*rab*,” which means “**abundant**” in size or quantity. So the Egyptians accompanying the Israelites out of Egypt formed a sizable group: an abundant number.

Why am I returning to Exodus 12 to revisit the mention of the “*mixed multitude*?” Because the events we are about to discuss concerning the golden calf incident were possibly dramatically exacerbated by that very group.

Here is the story exactly as it is recorded in Exodus 32:

“Now when the people saw that Moses delayed coming down from the mountain, the people gathered together to Aaron, and said to him, ‘Come, make us gods that shall go before us; for 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.’ And Aaron said to them, ‘Break off the golden earrings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.’ So all the people broke off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand, and he fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made a molded calf. Then they said, ‘This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!’ So when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, ‘Tomorrow is a feast to the LORD.’ Then they rose early on the next day, offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.”

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You've probably read and/or been taught the above many times. Let's now attempt to look "between the lines" in order to see what famed news broadcaster Paul Harvey often referred to as "the rest of the story."

Of course, the "story" actually started almost 240 years earlier when the Israelites were brought into Egypt by Joseph. They prospered there, but once a "*new king. . .who did not know Joseph*" (Exodus 1:8) came into power, things took a turn for the worse. Oppression quickly evolved into bondage, which eventually became slavery, and the Israelites suffered greatly. Some say the calling of Moses to undertake the task of delivering them from this condition was an "after the fact" decision. I prefer to believe God's plan had already been in motion for a number of years, and that Moses was born for this exact purpose, as I think can be seen in the first few verses of Exodus 2.

Perhaps the Israelites' exposure to rampant idolatry and the harsh treatment they received caused them to begin to doubt the existence of Jehovah, the God their fathers worshiped. Moses certainly witnessed brutality during his time in Egypt. After his escape to Midian and another 40 years had passed, he learned in his "burning bush" encounter with Jehovah that the situation had worsened.

And we know the rest of that story: After God's power was demonstrated through the 10 plagues, the Israelites – accompanied by a significant number (the "*mixed multitude*") of Egyptians – came out of Egypt with a renewed, albeit fragile, belief in the God of their fathers.

Over the next two months they passed through the Red Sea on dry land, fought a battle with the Amalekites and won, and were brought to the mountain of God – Mount Sinai in Midian – to receive His law. By the time the events of chapter 32 occur, they have been there for several weeks and Moses has made various trips up and down the mountain – sometimes in the company of others when God requested it.

Presently in our study, both Moses and Joshua are up on the mountain, and have been up there for close to 40 days, when the people below become troubled and approach Aaron. Remember that just a short time earlier, when God gave His Law to the Israelites, He began by directly

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addressing a known problem – the plurality of gods among the people of the world – and He warned His people about this very thing: ***“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me”*** (Exodus 20:2–5). In these verses, we see that He made his wishes very clear.

So, more than a month has passed since they’ve seen Moses, and the people are getting antsy in his absence. They are apparently feeling alone, even abandoned. In SPITE of having been guided through the desert by the fire and pillar of smoke; in SPITE of having witnessed the trembling of the mountain and hearing Jehovah speak; in SPITE of pledging their trust in Jehovah and agreeing to abide by His commandments, they turn to their temporary leader and ask Aaron to make a god for them to follow.

I presume this request to have originated from – or at the least, have been the result of the urging from – that ***“mixed multitude.”*** Granted, all of the people gathered at the bottom of the mountain had seen their fair share of idols, so perhaps the idea was a natural “alternative” for them. Aaron, however, had been present at the “burning bush” (Exodus 4) and was an integral part of the miracles performed in Egypt. He had been up the mountain with Moses, and had witnessed God’s presence. But even so... the general consensus reached by readers of this passage of scripture is that Aaron took the people’s gold and made a calf for them to worship, thereby participating in the idolatry.

You will notice I said that this is the “general consensus.” That is because I don’t think that is what happened.

Oh, I used to. How many times did I listen to my grandmother read story # 26 from *Hurlbut’s Story of the Bible*? Aaron didn’t come out too well in that one. How many Bible classes and sermons did I hear, even as an adult, that spoke of Aaron’s betrayal right along with the masses?

In fact, I had accepted his complicity for so long that over the next 50 years, it never occurred to me

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to doubt it. But one day, while doing some research on a word not even related to the golden calf subject, a reference included Exodus 32:4.

Below I'll share how that word study changed my understanding of this famous story. I can't do that in just a few lines, so please stay with me. It just might cause you to view Aaron in a whole new light as well.

First, Let's Set the Scene –

As we know, Moses and Joshua left the camp to go up the mountain in 24:15. Right before that, Moses had gathered the elders together, told them that Aaron and Hur would stay in the camp, and should some matter arise they were to go to them. (*The “elders” spoken of here are those men appointed by Moses at Jethro's suggestion when he observed how overworked Moses was in trying to handle everything himself.*)

Earlier I mentioned that the people must have begun to feel abandoned in Moses' absence. Keep in mind that the **“pillar of the cloud”** which had guided and protected them throughout their journey from Succoth to Sinai is now covering the mountaintop – for it is said, **“and the glory of the LORD rested on Mount Sinai.”** (24:15-16) So, the visible, physical symbol of protection had left the camp. The likely result of that pillar moving away was a feeling of abandonment. They needed something representing a “Divine Presence” to take the cloud's place.

So for 39 days – almost 6 weeks – they had been (to their minds) unprotected. Not only had the “pillar” left them, but the two men in charge were also MIA. They grew impatient and fearful. Perhaps they consulted the elders, perhaps not. But, as Moses instructed them to do, they came to Aaron and said, **“Come, make us gods that shall go before us; for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.”** (32:1)

How do we know they approached Aaron on day 39? Exodus 34:28 tells us that Moses and Joshua spent 40 days on the mount. We know that the celebration they witnessed on their return was the day after the people approached Aaron because it is said the people rose early **“the next day”** – after giving the gold to Aaron. We also know Aaron built an altar and said **“Tomorrow is a feast to the Lord.”** (32:5) It is the same day the people offered burnt offerings, brought peace offerings, and

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then “*sat down to eat and rose up to play.*” (32:6) We must conclude, therefore, that the making of the golden calf took place on the 39th day after Moses’ and Joshua left the camp.

A very long time ago, two influential men, Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430 AD) also known as Saint Augustine, a theologian and philosopher; and Theodoret of Cyrus (393 – 458 AD) a theologian and bible commentator at the School of Antioch, each expressed an interesting theory about Aaron’s compliance with their request for an idol. They believe his first thought was to turn them from their purpose, but he failed in his attempt because he miscalculated the magnitude of the people’s zeal. Both Augustine and Theodoret believed that Aaron tried to discourage them by asking the people to give up their valuable possessions in order to create this idol they wanted – thinking they would not be willing. But when the people more or less immediately complied by eagerly stripping off the earrings and bringing them to Aaron, he found himself between a rock and a hard place.

I think Augustine and Theodoret were on the right track. I believe they were correct in assuming Aaron was faced with an unruly crowd placing a demand on him that he did not want to carry out. It’s worth mentioning that we don’t know who approached him. Was it his own people or did it come from some of that “*mixed multitude*”? His decision on how to handle this issue might have been made with that information – which he had but we don’t – in mind. My point is, as we begin to delve into this story, let’s set aside what we’ve probably always been taught – the assumption that Aaron was guilty of participating in their idolatry, and examine the wording of the text with an open mind. The Hebrew words themselves, not to mention how they are used in other passages, are key to “the rest of the story”.

I will be quoting from the 1611 King James Bible simply because I have a copy in which the words in both the Old and New Testament are keyed to Smith’s Hebrew/Greek dictionary. With both the Bible and Smith’s dictionary open side-by-side it allows one to not only see the definition of each word, but also its most accurate usage (the rendering of the word in context). Furthermore, for comparison, it also provides every passage in which that word is used. Let’s focus first on these verses from Exodus 32:2-4.

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“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.’ And all the people broke off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them unto Aaron. 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.’”

The wording of the text seems to indicate it was the adult males that approached Aaron and made the request. They were told to get the golden earrings from the ears *“of your wives, of your sons, and of your daughters, and bring them unto me.”*

Next, the text says they brought them unto Aaron, and he *“received them at their hand,”* a simple statement that indicates that each man personally brought the earrings and gave them to Aaron. We have no way to determine how much jewelry was collected so we can’t know the size of the finished golden calf. While it is certainly possible that it was “life size” as many Sunday School lesson books indicate, more likely it was not.

Now we get to the crux of the story: What Aaron DID with the jewelry. The text reads he *“fashioned it with a graving tool, after he had made it a molten calf,”* which certainly makes it appear that he made them an idol. However, I don’t believe that English rendering expresses the true meaning of the phrase. After looking at other places in scripture where those same Hebrew words appear – and how they are rendered – we should be able to get a more accurate idea of what is actually being said in this passage.

To do that I copied the complete entry for Exodus 32:4 from my Bible with Strong’s numbers and pasted it here so you can see how this study tool looks and works:

Exodus 32:4: *“And he received (H3947) them at their hand, (H4480; H3027) and fashioned (H6696) it with a graving tool, (H2747) after he had made (H6213) it a molten (H4541) calf: (H5695) and they said, (H559) ‘These (H428) be thy gods, (H430) O Israel, (H3478) which (H834) brought thee up (H5927) out of the land (H4480, H776) of Egypt.’ (H4714)”*

Sometimes the number refers to a single (Hebrew) word, and sometimes to a phrase. Let’s focus first on the word *“fashioned”* which, when cross referenced with the number in Strong’s

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Hebrew dictionary, reveals the word **“tsûr,”** (*pronounced “soor”*). The root meaning is **“to cramp”** and Strong says: *“The literal meaning is: “to confine, bind up, enclose, put up in bags, cast out.” Figuratively, its meaning is: “assault, beset, besiege, lay siege, fortify, or fashion.”*

Strong’s concordance has the word **“tsûr”** listed 38 times in the Old Testament. Looking at each of those 38 times, I found it rendered as some form of **“besiege”** 27 times, **“distress”** twice, and each of the following once: **“fortify, cramp, bind up, bind them, bound, enclose, beset, put up in bags, fashion.”** There is something of a common thread running through many of those mentions. Of the 38 times it is used, the word **“tsûr”** implies some form of **“restriction”** possibly for the purpose of **“protection”** (look back at the literal and figurative meanings) 37 times. Only once is it rendered **“fashioned.”**

To *“fashion”* something is to *“make it into a particular form, in a particular manner”* which, of course, is what the rendered version of Exodus 32:4 tells us Aaron did: he **“fashioned”** a golden calf”. While **“fashioned”** is a legitimate meaning of the word **“tsûr,”** I seriously question its rendering as such here when in every other place in the Old Testament it is used in the ways indicated above. My conclusion, then, is that the translators had already determined in their own minds that Aaron was guilty of violating the First Commandment (even though God had not so spoken) and they allowed this prejudice to influence their treatment of this verse in chapter 32. I’m not alone. Spence believes the phrase *“And fashioned it with a graving tool...”* would be better stated as **“and bound it in a bag.”** He suggests we compare it to 2 Kings 5:23, where the word **“tsûr”** again appears in the same way and with a reference to a precious metal: *“... and he urged him, and bound two talents of silver in two bags, with two changes of garments, and handed them to two of his servants...”*

I also believe the translators were in error with their treatment of the second part of that phrase when they decided on the words: *“with a graving tool.”* The Hebrew word is **“chereṭ”** and does carry the meaning **“to engrave or chisel.”** But it can also refer to **“a style for writing,”** so **“chereṭ”** could simply be **“a pen.”** This word occurs only twice in the Old Testament: here in Exodus 32:4 as **“a graving tool,”** and in Isaiah 8:1 where it is rendered **“a pen.”** It doesn’t make sense that Aaron would **“engrave or chisel”** something into the gold that was immediately to be

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thrown into the fire to melt. Once melted, the “etching” would be gone. It makes more sense that Aaron put the gold into a bag or bags, then wrote something on the bag(s) with a pen, even though we have no idea what he would have written.

And, of course, the third part of that phrase is Aaron ***“made it a molten calf.”*** The Hebrew words used in this phrase are not in question – they mean exactly what is rendered here – but I do want to stress that God does NOT place any blame on Aaron. In verses 7 - 14, where God’s anger is shown while addressing Moses, it is directed at ***“your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt,”*** whom God says ***“have corrupted themselves.”*** Nowhere in those verses is Aaron mentioned. And, of course, having been a partner with Moses in the “bringing out,” he would not be counted among “your people” in this context.

So, what actually did happen when this group (whom I – along with Augustine – believe to have been the “mixed multitude”) approached Aaron? Let’s try to set the scene now that we have more information about the meaning of the Hebrew words in that pivotal verse of chapter 32. If we read between the lines as I mentioned earlier, now using the knowledge of ***“tsûr”*** (“put up in bags”) and ***“cheref”*** (“pen”) I think we can conclude the following: Aaron tried to deter this group. When he was unable to convince them of the sin involved in what they were suggesting, he asked them to bring him their gold earrings (possibly thinking the wives and children would not want to surrender their valuable jewelry.) When that didn’t work either, and they ***“stripped off their earrings”*** and brought them to him, I think he collected all the jewelry into a bag or bags, wrote something on the bag(s) then threw them into the fire. The bags quickly burned away leaving the gold to melt and run into the ashes and coals of the fire. Once it cooled and was drawn out of the fire pit, the shape of it must have favored a calf. Later, when Moses questioned Aaron about what happened, Aaron answered him in 32:24 by saying, ***“I said to them, ‘Whoever has any gold, let them break it off.’ So they gave it to me, and I cast it into the fire, and this calf came out.”*** Aaron did not say the calf came **walking** out, as some suggest, but that he threw in the gold, and when the fire went out, the molten gold resembled a calf.

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Keep in mind that as the molten – now hardened – gold was pulled out, it was NOT Aaron who called it *“the god who delivered them from Egypt!”* It was the people – most likely the same ones that incited the Israelites.

“So when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, ‘Tomorrow is a feast to the Lord.’ (Exodus 32:5a) Notice what Aaron said to the people when he built the altar: *“Tomorrow, is a feast to the Lord!”* Again, I believe Aaron was trying to get them to do what was right. I suspect he did NOT have the feast that same day because he did not want the people to associate it with the gold image. In fact, the Hebrew word rendered **“Lord”** in the KJV is **“yehôvâh!”** So this altar he built was in preparation for a feast to honor Jehovah, not the golden image. Aaron was not promoting idol worship... he was encouraging the worship of the one true God!

The Aftermath –

“...Then they rose early on the next day, offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play (Exodus 32:5b) It is the 40th day – the “tomorrow” that Aaron mentioned for celebrating a feast unto the Lord. First they made their peace offerings (food) and offered burnt offerings – most likely sin offerings because at least some of the people were remorseful for what happened the day before. But after the feast started – intended to be in honor of Jehovah – things at some point got out of hand. Joshua reported hearing the commotion below when they *“rose up to play”*. According to Strong, the Hebrew word for **“play”** is **“tsâchaq”**, from a primitive root that means **“to laugh outright – in merriment or scorn.”** He indicates it can imply **“to mock or make sport of.”** Many commentators suggest the people had diverted back to old practices learned in Egypt and by this point had shed their clothes and begun to participate in lewd acts. They were mocking the One True God with this behavior, and when Moses reached the bottom of the mountain and saw what was going on before him, he was so horrified, so angry, that he threw the stones to the ground. *(Later he was instructed by God to make two more blank tablets, after which God again wrote the same words on them. Those two were placed inside the Ark of the Covenant under the Mercy Seat).*

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Moses dealt with the abomination of the golden calf first by grinding it into dust, scattering it over the water and making the people drink it. Although not mentioned in this section, it made the people sick for a few days. Then, he questioned Aaron: ***“What did this people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?”*** No chastisement upon Aaron was forthcoming – from Moses or from the Lord Himself – so this further indicates that he had no part in the sinful behavior of the people.

At this point, ***“Moses saw that the people were unrestrained (for Aaron had not restrained them, to their shame among their enemies)...”*** Several commentators believe that these “enemies” mentioned here were the Amalekites that Joshua had previously defeated who were still lingering around the outskirts of the camp and spying on the people. And then we read this:

Exodus 32:26-28 ***“Then Moses stood in the entrance of the camp, and said, ‘Whoever is on the LORD’s side—come to me!’ And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together to him. And he said to them, ‘Thus says the LORD God of Israel: “Let every man put his sword on his side, and go in and out from entrance to entrance throughout the camp, and let every man kill his brother, every man his companion, and every man his neighbor.”’ So the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And about three thousand men of the people fell that day.”***

Some are disturbed or shocked by the death of these 3,000. To that I can only say that sin has its consequences! ***“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*** (Romans 6:23) While the average person does NOT have the right to end someone’s life, God – as the Creator of life in the first place – can certainly be the final Judge. His judgment on these 3,000 was, in that instance, just like it will be on the last day when Jesus returns: Accurate, Deserved, and Final.

Notice also that it appears Moses took it upon himself to call for the death of those who would not answer the call to follow the Lord! Some commentators believe it was this action on Moses’ part that appeased the Lord’s anger, thus saving the people as a whole.

A second question often raised about this passage is why Jehovah chose the Levites to be the ones to exact justice on those who did not positively respond to the question, ***“Who is on the Lord’s***

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side?” First I will call your attention to the phrase that indicates that ***“ALL the sons of Levi gathered themselves together to him.”*** While I certainly hope it wasn’t JUST the Levites, this passage makes it abundantly clear that they were “all in” and, sadly, that at least some from the other tribes had so hardened their heart, so completely chosen to disregard all that Jehovah had done for them, that they were willing to forfeit their relationship with Him and did NOT gather around Moses.

Secondly, I suggest that we go all the way back to Levi himself – the son of Jacob – and review the following story which will confirm that these descendents of Jacob were no “Caspar Milquetoasts”: *(For you youngsters who have never heard of Caspar Milquetoast, he was a comic strip character created in 1924 by cartoonist Harold Webster and became a widely recognized symbol of a timid or meek person.)*

Shortly after Jacob and his sons settled in the city of Shechem (Genesis 33), a man named Shechem raped Jacob’s daughter Dinah (Genesis 34). Two of Jacob’s sons – Levi and Simeon – went after him. Their plan, however, was not to just kill Shechem but every man in the city! They told Shechem and his father Hamor that if all the men of the city would volunteer to be circumcised, then Dinah could become Shechem’s wife. They complied and while they were recovering from the procedure, and therefore in a weakened state, Levi and Simeon killed all the men while the rest of their brothers plundered the city.

While sympathizing with their zeal in protecting their sister’s honor, Jacob worried about the consequences of their action. Near the end of his life when it fell to him to bless his sons, he said the following in reference to Levi and Simeon:

***“Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords.
Let my soul come not into their council; O my glory, be not joined to their
company. For in their anger they killed men, and in their willfulness they
hamstrung oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it
is cruel! I will divide them and scatter them in Israel”*** (Genesis 49:5-7).

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That is part of the reason why, when the Promised Land was divided, the Simeonites only obtained land within the territory of Judah (Joshua 19:1-9) and the Levites, in lieu of land, received 48 cities distributed throughout Israel among the other tribes. (Numbers 18:23-24; 35:1-8; Joshua 21:1-45). It was a consequence of their brash behavior.

So... when Moses made that call, ***“Whoever is on the LORD's side — come to me!”*** perhaps it aroused a somewhat dormant feeling among those who had the blood of their ancestor Levi coursing through their veins. Whatever the reason, one hundred percent of the Levites rose and stood with Moses. And by the way, it should come as no surprise that these Levites were also Moses' own tribe, as well.

There can be no denying the foolishness of the impulsive behavior of Simeon and Levi after the defilement of Dinah, but on this occasion, the actions of the Levites were righteous, and they were ***“ordained for the service of Jehovah”*** (32:29) Because of their zeal in defending God's honor, their descendants were blessed for their service to God.

I suspect that during his 40 days on the mountain, Moses gave little or no thought to what was going on in the camp below. He had left two capable men in charge and, I imagine him so engrossed in what he was obtaining from the Lord – even just being in the Lord's presence – that when God said to him, ***“Go, get down! For your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves. They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them. They have made themselves a molded calf, and worshiped it and sacrificed to it...”*** he must have been stunned. The Lord continued, ***“I have seen this people, and indeed it is a stiff-necked people! Now therefore, let Me alone, that My wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them. And I will make of you a great nation.”***

Moses must have occupied a very special place in God's heart because God allowed him to speak frankly and directly to Him without fear, and the next few verses provide Moses' plea: ***“Why does Your wrath burn hot against Your people whom You have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians speak, and say, 'He brought them out to harm them, to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from Your fierce wrath, and relent from this harm to Your people. Remember***

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Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants, to whom You swore by Your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven; and all this land that I have spoken of I give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'"

After the 3,000 were killed, Moses admonished the people for having committed a great sin, but announced he would go up the mountain again and intercede for them by pleading with the Lord on their behalf. ***"Perhaps I can make atonement for your sin."*** (32:30). He even went so far as to offer himself should God not forgive the people.

Then Moses returned to the Lord and said, "Oh, these people have committed a great sin, and have made for themselves a god of gold! Yet now, if You will forgive their sin—but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written." (32:30-31).

God's answer was clear: ***"Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My book."*** In other words, "Moses, your righteousness cannot make up for their sins or take their place." And to extend it even further, we need to realize that the only repentance God accepts comes from the mouth of the guilty one. Man cannot deliver his brother, or make an agreement with God on behalf of another.

Exodus 32:34 "Now therefore, go, lead the people to the place of which I have spoken to you. Behold, My Angel shall go before you. Nevertheless, in the day when I visit for punishment, I will visit punishment upon them for their sin." So the Lord plagued the people because of what they did with the calf which Aaron made.

The remainder of the book of Exodus records the actual carrying out of God's instructions in regard to the building and consecration of the Tabernacle and the priesthood. But let's not gloss over the promise to ***"visit punishment upon them"***. Some commentators believe the plague is literal, and that God caused a plague upon the people before they broke camp and began their march to Canaan. I do not accept that, because we do not read about such a pestilence. It is my opinion that God was referring to the fact that 40 full years would pass before anyone set foot on the soil of the Promise Land.

The book ends with these verses:

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“Then the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tabernacle of meeting, because the cloud rested above it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. 36 Whenever the cloud was taken up from above the tabernacle, the children of Israel would go onward in all their journeys. But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not journey till the day that it was taken up. For the cloud of the Lord was above the tabernacle by day, and fire was over it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel, throughout all their journeys.”

“Throughout all their journeys” are the final words. If this book had been a movie, we would expect the last frame to include the phrase *“to be continued”* because we never read of them arriving at their destination in this account. We know that among the people “starring” in this story, the only adults who would cross the Jordan — decades later — to occupy the *“land flowing with milk and honey”* would be Joshua and Caleb (mentioned first in Leviticus but present throughout the book of Exodus). Moses' death, the conquering of Jericho, the end of this particular “journey” — but the beginning of a new one — that’s a story for another study.

I suspect there are many people whose only “study” of the book of Exodus consists of watching the movie “The Ten Commandments” every year around Easter. In fact, many of us might even confess to picturing Charlton Heston talking to Yul Brenner as we read the biblical account of Moses confronting the pharaoh and asking him to “let my people go.”

The movie presents the law-giving event as a single dramatic scene, with Moses descending the mountain carrying the two tablets, amidst bolts of lightning and crashing thunder. In the scriptures it is actually an ongoing and lengthy process that begins on Sinai but does not end there! According to Hollywood, Moses descends from Sinai once, but the scriptures tell us (and we’ve covered this in our study) that he went up the mountain at least eight times. And in truth, while most of the “Law of Moses” was given there on Mt. Sinai, Jehovah continued to provide His commandments through the first part of the 40 years in the wilderness.

Quite honestly, perhaps we’re to be excused for not being as familiar with the biblical version of the giving of the law because, even for devoted readers of the Bible, it is rather difficult to follow. True, it starts at the foot of Mount Sinai in chapter 19, but the complete story takes us

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through the rest of Exodus, then Leviticus, Numbers and part of Deuteronomy – about 60 percent of the almost 190 chapters! At times it appears so disrupted and inconsistent – even contradictory and repetitive until you view the “big picture” – that it becomes difficult to read and comprehend. Let’s see if we can clarify a few things as we draw this study to a close.

TWELVE “LOOSE ENDS” OF EXODUS (in the order I thought of them):

1. Among the things Moses is told while receiving the instructions for the building of the Tabernacle is that it will serve as a place where God will meet with him to impart his laws, so that he can transmit them to the Israelites. (Exodus 25:22) So, from this we know that the entire Law was NOT given to Moses during his various visits to the top of Mount Sinai. It was indeed an ongoing process – even during the wandering in the wilderness.
2. God appeared to Moses *“face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.”* (Exodus 33:11) This is in the second **“Tent of Meeting”** – the tent set up outside the camp – far from it, in fact – and called the *“tabernacle of meeting.”* (Exodus 33:7) The statement in bold italics above, speaks of the relationship that existed between God and Moses, but does NOT mean Moses saw God’s face, because a little later in this same chapter Moses asks to see God, and is told, *“You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live.”* (Exodus 33:20)
3. Sometime after the “golden calf” incident, Moses is instructed by Jehovah to *“cut two tablets of stone like the first ones and I will write on them the words that were on the first tablets which you broke.”* (Exodus 34:1) These are the two tablets of stone that are placed in the Ark of the Covenant in the Most Holy Place.
4. After the Israelites broke this promise: *“All that the Lord has spoken we will do.”* and failed to obey God’s commands (Exodus 19:8) God did renew the covenant and promised, *“I will do marvels such as have not been done in all the earth, nor in any nation; and all the people among whom you are shall see the work of the LORD. For it is an awesome thing that I will do with you.”* (Exodus 34:10)

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5. When Moses returned from his last trip up the mountain — which also lasted 40 days — to get the second set of tablets (Exodus 34:28 - 29), he did not realize that the skin of his face had become radiant! He first discovered there was something different about him when people were afraid to come near him. (Exodus 34:30) He ended up covering his face with a veil, only taking it off when he spoke with God in the ***“Tent of meeting.”*** We are not told how long the effect lasted or if indeed it ever “wore off,” but we should note that at no point are we told that he stopped wearing it throughout the next 38 years.
6. It appears to have taken almost nine months to build the furnishings, sew the curtains, cast the silver, overlay the acacia wood with gold, and do all the other necessary work to erect the Tabernacle, because it was erected on the First Day of the First Month. (Exodus 40:2) We know their journey from Ramses to the base of Mount Sinai took about 62 days, having arrived at Sinai in the middle of the third month of the year (discussed in a previous lesson).
7. Speaking of the Tabernacle, notice in Exodus 40 that it is Moses who set everything in order. It is said in that chapter that ***“Moses raised the tabernacle, fastened its sockets, set up its boards, put in its bars, and raised up its pillars.”*** (Exodus 40:18) It is Moses who placed the ***“Book of the Testimony”*** and the tablets of stone in the Ark, and slid the poles through the rings. (Exodus 40:20) It is said, ***“Moses hung up the veil”*** and ***“partitioned off the ark of the Testimony.”*** (Exodus 40:21) Moses ***“put the table in the tabernacle on the north side of the tabernacle outside the veil.”*** (Exodus 40:22) Furthermore, we are told that it was Moses who put the bread in order, set up the lampstand, lit the lamps, burned the incense, hung the screen, set up the altar, and etc. Does this mean Moses personally and all by himself did those things? Perhaps, but since much of this work would have required some very heavy lifting, it could also mean Moses supervised every action to ensure they were all done exactly as God had commanded.
8. Once everything was in proper order God’s majesty entered the Tabernacle, ***“Then the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.”*** (Exodus 40:34). The cloud that had led them to this destination and served as a continual reminder of the protection God provided them was now “at home,” filling their place of worship with His glory.

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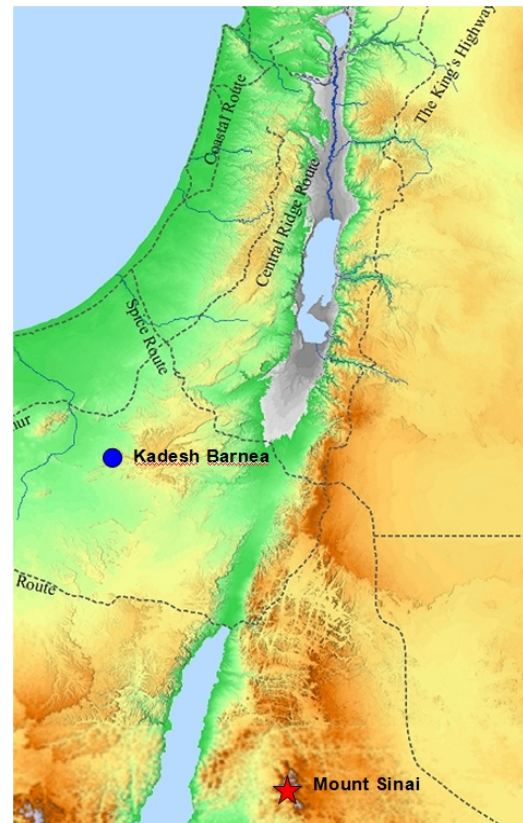
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9. A new method of lawgiving is now in force. Moses continues to receive commandments from God in a series of audiences in the Tabernacle then conveys them orally to the people. (Leviticus 1:1)
10. Finally, on the 20th day of the 2nd month, in the 2nd year, after remaining encamped around Mount Sinai for almost eleven months (they arrived on the 15th day of the 3rd month of the previous year) the Israelites left Sinai.

11. The green area in this image pretty well outlines the land that was promised to them – Canaan. The city of Kadesh Barnea was its southernmost city at this time. At the extreme bottom of the image is Mount Sinai, where the Israelites were camped – at incidentally, about a 5 day journey to Kadesh.

It will be when the Israelites are camped just a bit south and east of Kadesh that Moses will secretly send 12 men into the land on a “recon” mission. They will return to report that it indeed is a land *“that flows with milk and honey.”* (Exodus 3:8)

12. Ten of the spies are intimidated by what they see and their fear overcomes their faith to the point that they refuse to go in.



As a result of that decision, it will be after the adults of that generation have died off – 40 years later - that the second generation of Israelites will cross the Jordan and enter The Promised Land. Of the first generation, only Joshua and Caleb would live to walk out of Egypt and into Canaan.

We have a “Promised Land” awaiting us as well. When we cross the symbolic Jordan River at our death, how can we know that we will set foot in our “Canaan”? It’s very simple:

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“The first of all the commandments is: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ This is the first commandment.”

If we do this... if only the Israelites had done this... everything else will fall in line because ALL our decisions will be made from this place of priority. This love for the Lord will lead us into the pages of the New Testament where we will read of Jesus and His sacrifice on our behalf so that we might have eternal life in our heavenly “Promised Land.” When we have repented of our sins and been baptized in order to be forgiven of them, this “first commandment love” will lead us to dedicate the rest of our lives to His service. We can live each moment knowing that the same promise God made to Joshua when he was called to lead the Israelites into Canaan applies to each of us today:

“As I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you....Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

****editor’s note**

If in fact you are interested in a “sequel” to this story we have just studied, I would like to suggest a four-part video presentation (linked below) that Ron recorded several years ago about the Israelites entering Canaan. These video lessons are a fascinating look “behind the scenes” of a story we all **thought** we already knew. I found them inspiring and chock full of information that not only enhanced my understanding, but also stirred my faith as he made this story come to life in that special way of his. If they’d been a book, I would have added the word “unputdownable” to this review. Well worth your time.

<https://www.parkhillchurchofchrist.com/youtube-rons-ramblings/>

Select “An Old, Old Story Part 1” to begin.