

“Exodus”

Fall Series 1

Lesson 4

“Exodus 32:1-14”

Objective: To examine the account of the exodus from Egypt and to learn as much as we can about the nature of God, His mercy and what He desires for His creation. We will seek to do this by examining the historical background of the Exodus account, the interpretive history of Exodus amongst both Jewish and Christian scholars, where helpful. We will seek to understand the message of Exodus for us as Christians living in the 21st century American context.

Materials: The Bible, Ancient translations, Commentaries, both ancient and modern, Books, journal articles, dictionaries, the internet, and other resources as may be appropriate.

Procedures

1. To explore the message God of hope that the original audience will have understood from this text.
2. To understand how this text has inspired, challenged, and educated people down through the centuries guiding them not only in their personal lives, but the destinies of governments and nations.
3. We will seek to find out how these beliefs have played a role in the history of Christianity and how they continue to impact our existence and service to Jesus Christ today.
4. We will provide a sheet to take home as a reminder of what has been examined and to provide additional opportunities for consideration of these truths and their application in our daily living out of our eternal destiny beginning now. This sheet can be used as a discussion guide for small group discussion. We have several groups using this effectively.

As we come to this section (32:1-14) we come to the account of Aaron making the golden calf. This event will represent one of the lowest points in the relationship between God and Israel, recorded in the exodus account. It comes right in the midst of the account of the making of the Tabernacle. This would certainly give the impression that the apostasy of the people interrupted the building of the Tabernacle. The alienation of the people from God would serve to interrupt their participating in the plan of God for redeeming creation. Their cooperation in God's reconciliation would only be able to begin again after their reconciliation with YHWH through the mediation of Moses and because of God's tremendous mercy.¹

As I have read varying commentaries and accounts on this incident I am amazed at the diversity of perceptions and foci. Some have chosen to focus on minute details and to look for reasons to excuse, at least the majority of the people from blame, in this situation like the Jewish scholar Rashi. Others focus on trying to find ways of removing Aaron from being to blame in this situation. Some seek to blame only a group of Egyptian

¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, The JPS Torah Commentary series (Philadelphia PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), p. 202.

troublemakers that Moses had allowed to come along with the people of Israel when they left Egypt, against the direction of God. There are even accounts that would seek to associate this trouble with the magicians of Pharaoh who had opposed Moses and later had converted (Jannes and Jambres), at least on the surface to Judaism, and travelled with Israel into the wilderness along with Egyptian rabble that travelled along with Israel when they left Egypt.²

In all of this, the account leaves us with a great many questions and difficulties to disentangle. This is a very compact text that is replete with things that cause us to scratch our head and wonder. It all seems to start from the fact that Moses appeared delayed in coming down from the mountain (32:1). The fact that the Moses was delayed coming down brings on a reaction from “the people” (אֲמָרָה - ha’am). Sarna sees the reference to “the people” here to be representative of the people of Israel and not just some minor portion of them.³ Moses’ absence on the mountain for forty days and nights provokes a crisis among the

² Albert Pietersma, *The Apocryphon of Jannes and Jambres the Magicians*, in the Religions in the Graeco-Roman World series, vol. 119 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994).

³ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, p. 202. U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1987), p. 411.

people who had been left behind on the plain.⁴ This account most naturally refers to the people of Israel, those at the base of the mountain, not just a portion of them. The blame seems to rest on them all as a group not just a small portion of them.

These words (“the people”) brings us back to the concrete narrative situation that was at the end of chapter 24.⁵ This section is meant to connect these two points in the narrative. Verse 1 is stark and direct in indicating that first the people have gathered around Aaron, seeing him in a role of leadership of some sort. It is of interest to me that this whole situation seems very democratic giving the appearance that the people are dictating what they want from their leader. There is great discomfort, this often happens at times when people feel out of control and not in control of their own lives and their own destinies. Everyone has an opinion, and the people here forcefully put forward that opinion. Herd mentality, mob mentality, and pack mentality, also lesser known as gang mentality, describes how people can be influenced by their peers to adopt certain behaviors on a largely

⁴ William Johnstone, *Exodus 20-24*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Inc., 2014), p. 386.

⁵ Robert Alter, trans. and commentator, *The Hebrew Bible*, vol. 1 (New York NY: W. W. Norton & co., 2019), p. 338.

emotional, rather than rational, basis. When individuals are infected by mob mentality, they may make different decisions than they would have made individually.⁶

We are not sure of the exact trigger that caused the response of Israel to be to choose to fall into this mass idolatry, but it appears that this is exactly what happened while Moses stood on the mountain receiving, from God, tablets written with His very own finger. One would have expected at least Aaron to have resisted this descent into idolatry: to have at least tried to offer some excuse for his behavior. Some have tried to put forward the theory that the response of Aaron was a ploy to buy time because he feared being killed. A part of the basis for this theory is that there appears to be no condemnation later of Aaron for his actions.⁷ I suppose that this is a possibility, though to me at least it seems a most remote one. Even if it is Aaron seems to stand in a very different place than that which was expected of a Jew and was seen as commendable in the years to come, and especially from the Maccabean period onward; when it was

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herd_mentality.

⁷ Rabbi Nosson Scherman, *The Chumash*, The Stone Edition (New York NY: Mesorah publications Ltd., 2014), p. 493.

considered a mark of loyalty to die rather than to commit idolatry, much less to actually construct and idol.

In verse 1 when the people ask Aaron to create gods for them the same word, in the exact same form is used to designate “gods” as is the normal word for the one true God (אֱלֹהִים - *Elohim*). Normally this word, in the plural form, refers to the “one” God and is considered to be a plural of majesty. Using a plural to express a clear sense of all the manifestations of a deity became common in Canaanite tradition.⁸ It is a unique feature, however of Hebrew that the form *Elohim* (אֱלֹהִים) occurs: Not even in Aramaic does this plural form occur.⁹ One of the things that distinguishes the usage of the plural form when referencing someone other than the God of Israel is that plural verbs and pronouns are used when *Elohim* is not referring to the God of Israel. In the early Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (The Septuagint - mid 3rd century B.C.) the plural form for “God” (θεοὺς - *theous*) was used. So, even when the same form is used in Hebrew it is made apparent when the God of Israel is

⁸ William F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity Monotheism and the Historical Process*, (Baltimore MD: The John Hopkins Press, 1940), p. 161.

⁹ Gustav F. Oehler, trans, Ellen D. Smith, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1874) p. 129.

being referred to by the use of singular pronouns and verb forms.

The author here means to refer to “gods” and not to the one unique God *YHWH*.

I have read from a rich variety of sources regarding this incident and have found it both remarkable and disturbing that over and over again the focus appears to be on the human characters in this story. There is a tremendous effort to whitewash the role of Aaron, who seems eager and willing to make an idol for the people. Some say his role could not have been all that serious since God lets him live and to continue as High Priest. This seems to me to focus attention and to give credit in the wrong place. At 32:2 Aaron seems all too ready to comply with the request of the people to make an image. Amongst the rabbis, there is an effort to demonstrate a resistance on the part of the wives and the children to turn over the gold to Aaron due to the shift in wording from verse 2 on your wives and children to “all the people” (כָּל־הָעָם - *cal-ha'am*) in verse 3.

This shift from more specificity to less specificity seems to be a natural shift in telling the story and if the author wished to indicate a rebellion among the wives and children against giving

over the gold he has not done a very good job of making that an issue that is apparent. Instead, the focus of the text seems to be on the all too ready compliance of those asked for gold to deliver it to Aaron. Again, the effort to obviate rebellion on the part of the wives and children seems to be an effort to whitewash the willing participation of the people in this horrendous betrayal of God like it was with Aaron.

At verse 4, there is another anomaly in the text that has led to a conclusion that is not really clear. “These are your gods, (אֱלֹהֵיךָ - *eloheyka*) O Israel ...” which some have taken as an indication that there were two idols made, one molten, and one with a wooden core covered in beaten gold. As we have said, in Hebrew, the word used for God is plural (*Elohim* - אֱלֹהִים) and in verse 5 there seems to be an effort on the part of Aaron to connect the image that is made with *YHWH* by declaring that tomorrow there would be a festival in *YHWH*'s honor. Some have seen this proclamation on the part of Aaron as indicating a loyalty to *YHWH* in some form that is positive.

This effort along with other efforts to somehow redeem the motives of Aaron are extensive and seem to try and make what

Aaron did seem less blameworthy. Some even try to indicate that the sin of Aaron here must not be all that bad because God still allows Aaron to become High Priest and does not mention what happens here again. However, Moses does mention it again and here is what he has to say about this incident: **²⁰ YHWH was so angry with Aaron that he was ready to destroy him, but I interceded also on behalf of Aaron at that time.**¹⁰ It appears to me that here we find an all too common human trait to make any sins that are committed less significant than they truly are. We all have the tendency to lower the significance of our wrongdoings.

In this story this seems to me to be what is happening and as interpreters have examined this story they too have failed to see how incredibly awful this betrayal is. In negating the magnitude of this sin the magnitude of the mercy and forgiveness of God is also reduced. What God does here in forgiving Israel is one of the most incredible acts of mercy to be found in the entire history of the people of Israel. To negate that forgiveness and mercy is to seek to justify the sins of the people as not being as bad as they truly are and to reduce the honor and glory that

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 9:20.

should rightly go to God. That, in and of itself, is what stands at the heart of what it means to sin. To place the status of self above the truth of who, and what, God is. In doing this we elevate ourselves at the expense of God and thus commit idolatry. We replace the reality of God with an image that is less than He truly is. This distorted worldview then creates a distorted reality in which we live and breath and have our existence. It is a virtual world that is created in our imaginations. It causes us to distort what we expect from God, how we serve God, and others, and lets us think more highly of ourselves than is warranted. Paul understood this as he makes clear in Ephesians 2:8-10 **You are saved by God's grace because of your faith. This salvation is God's gift. It's not something you possessed. ⁹ It's not something you did that you can be proud of. ¹⁰ Instead, we are God's accomplishment, created in Christ Jesus to do good things. God planned for these good things to be the way that we live our lives.¹¹**

Over and over, again and again, we repeat the same cycle of thinking that we are better than we are on our own; that we can

¹¹ CEB.

stand as an independent entity, independent of our dependence upon God. This is a mirage that brings no life, no relief from our thirst, it brings only a false hope that evaporates before our eyes as we reach for it. In all of this misunderstanding, and delusional thinking, God continues to reach out, to strive for genuine relationship with His ungrateful and unrighteous children despite all of our weaknesses and rebelliousness. God seeks to generate understanding in our hearts and to transform our souls into what He knows they can become. There is no excuse for what Israel did in the wilderness in making the golden calf, just as there is no excuse for our making of idols in our own lives. God has given us life, purpose, and hope, and yet still we rebel.

As we move on in our story to Exodus 32:7 and following we see more of the pain that this brings to the heart of God as we encounter the discussion between Moses and God. Here we find God informing Moses about what the people are doing and He tells Moses that the people have “acted perversely” (שָׁחַת - *shahath*). This is a word that carries with it the idea of corruption and ruin. In the context of Exodus 32:7, it indicates to “deal corruptly,” “to pervert.” What Israel does in the making of the golden calf is a

perverted act, it is an abomination. God is feeding the people every day, preserving their life, He has shown them His mighty arm by devastating the greatest superpower of the ancient world, protected them and led them to safety. In recognition of all these things that have been done for them, the people betray God in only a matter of days after Moses is not in their midst. This is a perverse and disgusting act perpetrated by a petulant, arrogant and childish people.

At 32:8 God recounts the full magnitude of their sins and points out that they have done this with a “haste” (מְהֵרָה - *maher*); they have done it “quickly.” The Old Greek translation uses the expression ταχύ - *tachu* to express the urgency with which they commit this betrayal. This is the same word that is used in the New Testament of the coming of Jesus to be “quickly” (ἔρχομαι ταχύ - *erchomai tachu* - “come quickly”). The “quickly” of the people of Israel’s betrayal is changed to a longing for Jesus to “come quickly” in the Book of Revelation by the followers of Jesus. What a contrast in the way the hopes of the people is contrasted between the two accounts. God wants His people to long for His

presence, not by replacing it with substitutes, but with a loyalty that genuinely desires His presence.

God longs for His people to recognize the reality of His greatness, to worship Him, and not to give credit, or to sacrifice, to false gods. In Exodus 32:8, we see the people of Israel giving what belongs only to God, to a golden calf, an idol, that was created by their own hands. This is praise and glorification of self, not of God. There appears to be no real logic to what Israel does as is so often the case with human beings. So often we see people doing things that make no logical sense. People have a unique ability to hold several conflicting ideas as if they are truth and reality at the same time. In this instance, for Israel it is that this idol is somehow representative of “gods” that freed Israel from Egypt.

The response of *YHWH* is to tell Moses that He has seen that “this people” are incredibly “stiff necked.” What does that mean? It means they are set on the path that they have chosen and are extremely resistant to making any alterations in their trajectory. In riding a horse that is “stiff necked” it is incredibly hard to get that horse to change directions. It will only turn if you exert huge force on the reins and sometimes even though they might turn

they will stop all forward progress and refuse to move forward. This is what it means to be “stiff-necked” and it is the same terminology that God is using to describe the people of Israel. Their obstinance is seen by God, and at 32:10 we are told that He pleaded with Moses to leave Him alone so that his “wrath” (אַפִּי - *aphi*) might “burn hot” against Israel. That anger was going to burn so hot that it was going to “consume” (אֶכְלֵם - *acalem*) them, or “put and end to them completely.” He was then going to make Moses into a great nation. This does not sound to me like a minor thing between God and Israel, this is huge. It is an extinction level event.

However, Moses implored *YHWH* his God to turn from His wrath against Israel. His reasoning for doing this to protect His (*YHWH's*) reputation among the nations and particularly among the Egyptians (32:12). Moses recognizes that this is important to God. Despite the fact that God had brought judgment on the Egyptians He is still concerned with what they think. This should be a hint for those that come later, that the judgment of God is not about God being finished with people it is about His hope to redeem them from their sins. God is angry with Israel and looks

to bring judgment upon Israel in order to redeem them and others. He is angry because these people continually make the wrong choices despite all of the evidence that God supplies to them with regard to His nature.

At 32:13, Moses brings out His most potent and powerful argument to God. This argument points to the heart of God's nature, His faithfulness. God is faithful, it is His nature, it is who He is. Moses understands this and it based upon this understanding that he makes his plea to God. Moses calls upon God to "remember" (זָכַר - *zakar* in Hebrew; μνησθεῖς - *mnestheis* in Greek). The Greek word used to translate what Moses asks of God comes from the same semantic domain as the word used by Jesus in Luke's account of the initiation of the Lord's Supper.¹² Perhaps there is at least some irony in Jesus calling His disciples to an act of "remembrance." Remembrance is a powerful thing and here it calls forth mercy, loyalty and sacrifice in the heart of God. As those called to bear the image of God it seems perhaps that God wants to call it forth from humans beings too.

¹² **After taking the bread and giving thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."** CEB.

Moses reminds God of the promise to multiply the descendants of Abraham and the renewal of this same promise to Isaac and his son Israel. He reminds God too of the promise regarding the inheritance of the land. At 32:14, we come to this incredible statement: "And *YHWH* was moved to have compassion, or pity, or mercy" (נחם - *naham* Hebrew - ἰλάσθη - *hilasthe* Greek). *YHWH* then does something different than was His original intent. He is moved through the intercession of Moses reminding Him of the patriarchs and His promises to them. Some people find it troubling to think of God changing His intent. I find it comforting that God is not robotic, but relational, and that He can be moved to be even more merciful and more gracious than He already intends to be. God listens to the plea of a man, Moses, and He responds. What comfort we should take from the fact that God listens to His people and in listening even more compassion flows from Him.

God intended to damage the people of Israel for their sin with the golden calf and yet through this His remembrance the course that was set is altered and the injury that was to be inflicted upon Israel is changed. This is a tremendous act of mercy

that comes about because God remembered the Patriarchs, His promises to them and through concern for what the people of Egypt might think of *YHWH*. Through these things we can understand more fully the nature of God and what He values. God is the hero of this account as indeed is the case in all of Scripture. Human beings are petulant, small minded, and arrogant and God is humble, merciful, and gracious beyond all imaginings. This should humble all of us and call all of us to prayer, worship and adoration of our great and merciful God.

Synopsis

As we come to this section of Scripture we are introduced to one of the most heinous acts of betrayal perpetrated by Israel against God during the exodus account. Moses is delayed coming down from the mountain and in the short span of 40 days the people revert to idolatry. As I have read numerous comments from scholars on this text there is a thematic tendency to make the betrayal less important and to place less blame on the people than is clearly stated in the text itself. There is also a tendency to try and whitewash the role of Aaron in producing this idol and giving into the demands of the people.

All of this seems to indicate an all too common human tendency to lessen the magnitude of the sin and betrayal of God. In doing this, people also lessen and diminish the magnitude of the mercy and the grace demonstrated by God in sparing the people and in continuing to pursue relationship with them. God is the hero of the Bible not human beings. This fact must always be stressed and expressed in our understanding of the nature of God and of understanding His seeking of relationship with people.

An interesting aspect of this account is to be found in the intercession of Moses on behalf of Israel. Moses appeals to God based on what the people of Egypt would think, and the promises to the patriarchs. These appeals are successful and God changes His intended destruction of Israel. This is remarkable at so many levels: God keeps His promises, God is concerned for what the nations other than Israel think, and God listens to people. God is a being that seeks genuine relationship with people and in that relationship He suffers loss and pain rather than pursuing justice for His person.

Questions

1. What are some things about God that cause you anxiety?
2. When is a time that you have seen mob mentality take over in a situation?
3. When you are anxious, how do you deal with that anxiety?
4. When you think of idolatry, what comes to your mind?
5. What are some ways that people today make idols?
6. What are some ways that you demonstrate loyalty to others? What are some ways that you demonstrate loyalty to God?
7. Why do you think people have the tendency to trivialize wrongdoing?
8. How would you define being a hero?
9. Why do you think Israel so quickly betrays God in the wilderness?
10. How do you feel when someone betrays you?
11. When good things happen to you, how do you give God the credit for them?
12. How do you think we might avoid being a stiff-necked people?
13. Why do you think God was angry with Israel for betraying Him?
14. Why do you think God is willing to listen to Moses as he pleads for Israel?
15. Why do you think Moses pleads for Israel?
16. How does it make you feel that God is willing to change what He was going to do because of the intercession of Moses?

17. What do you think we might be able to learn about the nature of God from this account?

18. How does the mercy that God shows to Israel indicate the nature of His heart?

To Take Home

What is Important to know?

It is important to know this incident starts right in the midst of God trying to prepare His people for their mission, they were receiving instructions on building the tent of meeting and being given instructions about the way they were to relate to one another. It is important to know that even in the midst of the mountain being on fire and God meeting with Moses there, the people feel acutely the need for the close presence of God. When do you feel the closeness of God most acutely?

Where is God in these words?

God is in these words in multiple ways. We see that God is not just passively engaged with Israel. His response, of anger, indicates that He cares for the people. God seeks relationship with the people of Israel. We also see an indication of God's desire for relationship in the interaction with Moses, and in the remembering of the promises to the patriarchs. Why do you think God is willing to listen to Moses?

What does any of this mean for how I live my life?

As we look at this account it should challenge our perceptions of God and how we need to relate to Him. It is perhaps the case that seeing God as being different, and more powerful than we are can cause us to depersonalize Him. Understanding that God truly desires relationship with me and the compassion He has, should call me to live a life through that lens. God is not impersonal and distant, He is personal and nearby. A part of what this account means is that prayer to God should take on renewed meaning and urgency. How does understanding that God feels emotions affect how you relate to Him?

What is the word of God calling us to do?

The word of God is calling us to express the same type of loyalty to Him that He demonstrates to us. God is devoted to redeeming His creation and partnering with His image-bearers in that redemption. We are called to be people that reflect His nature, act like He acts, keep promises the way He keeps promises, and are loyal like He is loyal. God is greater, more forgiving, seeks relationship more sacrificially and relentlessly than we often perceive. These things reflect the nature of God. In understanding this about the nature of God it should be reflected in our nature as image-bearers of God. What are some ways that we are called to demonstrate loyalty to God today?