



Moses, the Golden Calf, and the False Images of the True God

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Exodus 32:1–14 contains a familiar story, which is most often referred to simply as the tale of “The Golden Calf.” In the story, while an absent Moses lingers for forty days and forty nights with God on Mount Sinai, the deliverer’s brother Aaron—the high priest, mind you—engages in an act of liturgical innovation. In response to the people’s request, he forges a golden calf for use in the people’s worship life. Then Aaron proclaims a “festival to the LORD” and leads the people as they rise up to revel in the desert.

The story can be understood as one of the earliest and most important commentaries on the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (Exod 20:3–4).¹ Lucas Cranach the Elder was following that understanding of the story when he crafted woodcuts for an illustrated edition of Luther’s catechism. His artistic interpretation of the first commandment shows Moses on the mountain receiving the law, while Aaron and the people worship the

¹The commandments are numbered differently in various traditions. In some traditions (Jewish, Catholic, Lutheran), the commands against other gods and graven images are considered a single commandment (in Judaism this is the “second word,” whereas in Lutheranism and Catholicism it is the “first commandment”). In other traditions (Reformed, Baptist), they are considered separate commandments.

In Exod 32, the people demanded of Moses, “Make gods for us.” Or did they say, “Make us a god”? Translations differ. In this article, Jacobson argues for the latter, that is, that the issue is not more than one god but a false image of the true God—a sin God’s people continue to perpetuate today.



Lucas Cranach the Elder, *The Worship of the Golden Calf*. This version of Cranach's woodcut comes from the 1547 edition of Luther's *Small Catechism* (Nürnberg: Jobst Gucknecht), reprinted 1979 (Nürnberg: Medien & Kultur). Illustration used courtesy of Luther Seminary Library Rare Book Collection.

not have golden calves, but we still have false gods. As Martin Luther famously wrote in his *Large Catechism*, “That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God.”⁵

Without denying the vitality of that traditional interpretation of the story of the golden calf, I wish to commend an alternative interpretation of the story—

²The version was published in 1529 as *Der x. gebot ein nutzliche erklerung/Durch den hochgelernten D. Martinu[m] Luther Augustiner ordens Beschriven vnd gepredigt, geistlichen vnd weltlichen dienende. Item ein schone predig von der .vij. todsünden, auch durch jn beschrieben* (for a 1547 version of Cranach's woodcut, see the illustration above).

³Jeffrey H. Tigay, “Exodus Introduction and Annotations,” in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) 183.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, trans. Robert H. Fischer (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959) 9.

golden calf in the valley.² The narrative arrangement of Exodus supports this interpretation. The Ten Commandments are given in Exod 20. The so-called “Book of the Covenant” follows (20:22–23:33), which contains statutes that elaborate on the Ten Commandments. Especially noteworthy for the purposes of this essay are the laws concerning worship in Exod 20:22–26, which specifically prohibit “gods of gold” and specify an altar of unhewn stones. Then, in a lengthy, detailed discourse, Exod 25–31 describes the tabernacle and all its apparatus as “the divinely authorized means of securing God’s Presence among the people.”³ The story of the golden calf immediately follows, inviting the conclusion that the golden calf is “a perverted, humanly devised means of doing the same thing.”⁴

The “sin” in this story has often been understood as the making of “another god”—that is, a false god—for the people to worship in place of God or instead of God. The insights for the life of faith of that venerable interpretation of the story still preach today. We may

alongside of the traditional interpretation, but not in place of it. I offer a reading of the sin in Exod 32 as the creation not just of an idolatrous image of a false god, but rather as *a false image of the true god*. This interpretation is not new.⁶ But the standard English translation—“these are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (v. 4)—obscures for many readers the connection between the golden calf and the Lord.

“GOD,” “GODS,” OR “A GOD?”—THE SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

At the heart of this brief story lies a textual and grammatical problem. Does the Hebrew word אלהים (elohim) refer to the one “God” of Israel, or to a false “god” such as Baal, or more generically to many “gods”? The scope of the problem can be illustrated by comparing the translations offered by two modern versions—the NRSV and the NJPS—of the first few lines of the story:

“*Make gods for us*” (New Revised Standard Version)

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, “Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; 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.” ...He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD.”

“*Make us a god*” (New Jewish Publication Society)

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron and said to him, “Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him.” ...This he took from them and cast in a mold, and made it into a molten calf. And they exclaimed, “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!” When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron announced: “Tomorrow shall be a festival of the LORD!”

Notice that the NRSV takes אלהים as referring to plural (unnamed) false gods—“Come, make gods for us”—and thus presumably NRSV assumes the sin is worship of gods other than the Lord. But the NJPS takes אלהים as referring to a singular god—“Come, make us a god”—and thus presumably either as referring to a false god other than the Lord or to a false image of the Lord.

The reality is that the Hebrew in Exod 32 is inconsistent. Some aspects of the text support the NRSV’s translation, while other aspects support the NJPS. Put simply, the text has conflicting, contradictory grammatical features. As already noted, the Hebrew noun אלהים can refer generically to the God of Israel, to a singular

⁶See, for example, Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary*, trans. J. S. Bowden (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962) 247–252.

false god such as Baal, or to more than one god (“gods”). The noun itself is plural in form (the ending מִ- is the masculine plural suffix) but is most often singular in meaning. Normally, when trying to understand whether the Hebrew word “elohim” refers to God, a god, or several gods, the reader relies on context. So if אלֹהִים is referring to more than one god, the term takes plural verbs and is modified by plural adjectives. Thus, in Gen 1 it is clear that אלֹהִים refers generically to the one God of Israel, because all the verbs are singular, for example בָּרָא אלֹהִים, “God created”; וַיֹּאמֶר אלֹהִים, “and God said.” Similarly, in Ps 73:1 clearly refers to Israel’s God because the adjective “good” is singular: לִישְׁרָאֵל אלֹהִים טוֹב, “God is good to Israel.” By contrast, in Exod 20:3 it is clear that אלֹהִים refers to false gods, because אלֹהִים is modified by a plural adjective: אלֹהִים אֶחָרִים, “other gods.” Similarly, it seems clear that אלֹהִים in Ps 82:1–2 refers to the false gods of the nations because the verbs in v. 2 are plural, as in: הַשְׁפֵּט־עֹזֶל, “you [pl.] judge unjustly.”

But in this case of Exod 32, context alone does not solve the matter—it only further confuses the issue.

Does the Hebrew word אלהים (elohim) refer to the one “God” of Israel, or to a false “god” such as Baal, or more generically to many “gods”?

The contextual case for the plural

Let us consider the case for understanding אלֹהִים as plural. There are two significant factors that support the NRSV and other versions that translate with the plural. First, multiple times in the chapter, variations on a common phrase, “who brought you out of the land of Egypt,” occur. In every case except the last one the verbs are plural, suggesting a plural subject (“gods”). Second, note that in vv. 3 and 8, the plural demonstrative pronoun “these” (אֵלֶּה) modifies אלֹהִים:

- The people speak to Aaron: “Come, make gods for us, who shall go (ילכו; pl.) before us; as for this man Moses who brought us up out of the land of Egypt....” (v. 1).
- The people exclaim together: “These (אלֵהֶם) are your gods, O Israel, who brought (העלו; pl.) you up out of the land of Egypt!” (v. 4).
- The Lord speaks to Moses, explaining what the people have done and said: “...they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, ‘These (אלֵהֶם) are your gods, O Israel, who brought (העלו; pl.) you up out of the land of Egypt!’” (v. 8).
- Aaron speaks to Moses, explaining what the people said to him: “Make us gods, who shall go (ילכו; pl.) before us; as for this man Moses who brought us up out of the land of Egypt...” (v. 23).

Only when Moses speaks back to God, reminding the Lord that it was the Lord who brought the people out of Egypt, does the singular form of the verb occur:

Moses speaks to God: “O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out (*הצאתה*; sg.) of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?” (v. 11).

The consistent use of plural forms of the verb—with the exception of when Moses speaks to God!—and the occurrence of the plural demonstrative pronoun “these” (*אלהן*) support understanding the “sin” of the people as making and worshiping a false god, other than the Lord who elected Israel and gave them the Decalogue.

The contextual case for the singular

Now we turn to the case for understanding **אלהים** as referring to a singular subject. There are three strong factors (and a weak fourth) that support the NJPS and other versions that favor the singular translation of **אלהים**.

First, note that Aaron makes only one calf: “He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’” There is only one calf. Why would the people, upon seeing a singular calf, exclaim, “These are your gods...”? The narrative makes little sense at this point.

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Second (and this is the strongest argument for the singular in my opinion), when Aaron in v. 5 declares a festival, he does so not in the name of a false god such as Baal or Asherah or “the gods,” but in the name of the Lord (Hebrew: *יהוה*): “When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, ‘Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD.’” The word “festival”—*גָּמָר* in Hebrew—is important here. The term refers not just to any generic religious commemoration but to one of the major pilgrimage festivals of the year. Not dissimilarly to the three major Christian festivals of Easter, Christmas, and Pentecost, ancient Israelites celebrated three annual pilgrimage festivals: Passover (the festival of unleavened bread), Pentecost (also called the festival of “Weeks”), and Booths (the festival of ingathering). These three festivals are introduced in chapter 23, so from the perspective of the biblical narrative, Aaron and the people are aware of the festivals. The important point here is to note that if this is a festival to the Lord (*יהוה*), then a singular antecedent for **אלהים** is implied. Because the forging of the calf is the occasion for proclaiming a festival, and because the festival is “to the LORD,” there is a logical link between the image of the calf and the Lord.

Third, it can be noted—in support of the singular translation—that in some

cases אֱלֹהִים refers to a singular entity (God) but takes plural adjectival modifiers. For example, in Deut 5:26, the phrase “living God” refers to the one God of Israel, but the modifier “living” is plural: “For who is there of all flesh that has heard the voice of the living God (אֱלֹהִים חַיִם) speaking out of fire, and remained alive?”⁷ Similarly, in rare instances אֱלֹהִים clearly carries a singular sense, yet takes a plural verbal form. Thus, in Gen 35:7, the phrase “God had revealed himself” unambiguously refers to the one God of Israel (note the definite article on the word אֱלֹהִים), but takes a plural verb: “There he [Jacob] built an altar and called the place El-bethel, because it was there that God had revealed himself (נִגְלָו אֲלֹהִים הָאֱלֹהִים) to him when he fled from his brother.”⁸

Fourth (and in my opinion this is the weakest part of the argument for the singular translation), in very rare cases the otherwise plural demonstrative pronoun אֲלֹהִים (“these”) can carry a singular sense and modify a singular noun. Thus, in 1 Sam 2:23b—“For I hear of your evil deeds from all this people (אֲלֹהִים כָּל-הָעָם)” —the singular noun “people” is modified by אֲלֹהִים. Similarly, in Judg 20:35b—“That day the Israelites slew 25,100 Benjaminites, each an armed sword [wielder] (כָּל-אֲלֹהִים שָׁלֵף חֲרֵב)” —the singular construct phrase “armed sword [wielder]” is modified by אֲלֹהִים.⁹ In jurisprudence, the saying goes that “difficult cases make bad law.” Applied here, the rule would warn against concluding that the word אֲלֹהִים can be construed as a singular. Admittedly, אֲלֹהִים is predominantly plural in form and meaning, but these “difficult cases” at least show that both in form and meaning the demonstrative pronoun אֲלֹהִים can be singular.

The case for ambiguity—accurate translation is not always possible

So where does this leave the interpreter? The most ready conclusion would be to assume that an ancient Hebrew-speaking audience would have recognized the ambiguity inherent in the passage and been comfortable with both the plural and the singular sense of אֱלֹהִים. An example might help. When a person asks me if I interpret the Bible figuratively or literally, I usually answer, “Yes.” Similarly, in answer to the question of whether אֱלֹהִים here means gods or God, an ancient hearer of this story might have answered, “Yes.” This is most likely one of those cases where a translation cannot render the unresolvable ambiguity of the original language. I suppose a translator could run with something inelegant, such as “This/These is/are your (G)god(s)....” But really, who could stomach that?

JEROBOAM’S GOLDEN CALVES

Interpreters of Exod 32 have long pointed out that the words spoken several times in Exod 32—“These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the

⁷See also 1 Sam 17:26, 36; Jer 10:10, and Ps 58:12 (Hebrew: a “judging [pl.] God”; v. 11 in NRSV).

⁸See also Gen 20:13; 31:53; Exod 22:8; 1 Sam 28:13; and 2 Sam 7:23.

⁹Compare with Judg 20:25, where the “armed sword [wielders]” is plural: שָׁלֵפי חֲרֵב. See also Judg 20:44; 20:46; etc.

land of Egypt?"—are almost identical to the words found on the lips of Jeroboam I in 1 Kings 12:15–33. Having rebelled against Jerusalem, Jeroboam set up two rival places of worship—one in Bethel and one in Dan. He had a golden calf forged for each site, and announced, "Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt" (1 Kings 12:28). In this vein, it is important to note that the Deuteronomistic History regarded the forging of the golden calves as the sin *par excellence* of the northern kingdom and the reason that kingdom failed: "They rejected all the commandments of the Lord their God and made for themselves cast images of two calves; they made a sacred pole, worshiped all the host of heaven, and served Baal" (2 Kings 17:16).

The parallel in 1 Kings 12 offers a historical explanation to the confusing grammar of Exodus. It is often suggested that the editor of Exodus borrowed the plural formulation from 1 Kings 12—"these are your gods"—and placed them on the lips of the people in Exod 32. Exodus 32 originally may have had the singular, "this is your god." The editor's purpose in doing this, the argument goes, was to make the story of the golden calf into an anti-northern polemic.¹⁰ This approach to the text classically assumes the "clumsy redactor." The view is the editor altered the verbs to make them plural, but clumsily left the "calf" singular and retained the reference to the Lord. Such an explanation may explain how the text got into its present form, but it does not offer an explanation for what the text means in this present (canonical) form—which is the form of the story that has authority for church and synagogue.

In terms of understanding the canonical form of the text, the connection between Aaron's sin in Exod 32 and Jeroboam's sin in 1 Kings 12 is relevant. As already noted, the forging of Jeroboam's calves is the sin *par excellence* of the northern kingdom. The view, especially in the Deuteronomistic History, is that the forging of the golden calves then led to syncretistic worship of other gods such as Baal and to pagan worship practices, including child sacrifice ("they made their sons and their daughters pass through fire"; 2 Kings 17:17) and also pagan sexual practices. In the story of the golden calf in Exod 32, the reference that the people "rose up to revel" is probably a reference to such sexual practices. The verb פָּנָא, translated in verse 6 as "revel," can also be translated as "he laughed," which is likely a euphemism for sexual intercourse (see Gen 26:8).¹¹ In light of the broad polemic against cultic sexual practices, the reference to "reveling" in Exod 32 is likely intended to portray the depth of the depravity into which Israel so quickly fell—within forty days—after the covenant was formed. At the very least, as Walter

¹⁰See, for example, James Plastaras: "The narrative as it now appears in Exodus 32 has an unmistakably polemic note about it. There is an obvious intention to draw a parallel between Israel's sin of apostasy in the desert with the later sin of the Northern Kingdom in the worship at the sanctuaries of Bethel and Dan." James Plastaras, *The God of Exodus: The Theology of the Exodus Narrative* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1966) 237.

¹¹See Martin Noth, *Exodus*, 248. The historicity of Canaanite cultic sexual practices is disputed. But there seems little doubt that the Old Testament polemics against Canaanite religion included sexual charges (cf. Hos 2:10–13; 4:14; 13:1; Deut 23:17–18; 1 Kings 14:24; 15:12; 22:46; 2 Kings 23:7).

Brueggemann wryly observes, the term indicates “an act of self-reference and, we may imagine, self-indulgence.”¹²

ON WORSHIPING FALSE IMAGES OF THE TRUE GOD

So how does one interpret the main message of the passage? In the reading I offer here, the most important element to which I wish to draw attention is Aaron’s speech in v. 5: “When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, ‘Tomorrow shall be a festival to the *LORD*’” (emphasis added). These words suggest that Aaron regarded the golden calf as in some way representative of the Lord. Most likely, Aaron did not view the calf as the Lord per se. Based on parallels with some of Israel’s neighbors, it is more likely that Aaron and other ancient Israelites would have regarded the calf as a throne for the Lord. The calf would have been imagined as a steed or pedestal for the Lord, not the Lord himself. But the important point is that the calf is related to the worship of Lord, *not some other deity*. The reference to the festival as “for the Lord” suggests that the sin of Aaron and of Israel can be regarded as *worshiping a false image of the true God*. And to worship a false image of the true God is every bit as much of a violation of the first commandment as worshiping a false god.

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As noted at the beginning of this essay, the story of the people’s worship of the golden calf in Exodus can be understood as a commentary on the first commandment. In this story Israel utters a word of self-critique. Israel confesses that the people of God are sinners—stiff-necked, quick to lose trust, stuck deeply in sin. Within forty days of the formation of the covenant, the people lost trust in God’s providence and presence. Not only did sin happen fast, it also happened deep. Just as Jeroboam’s golden calves were the source and norm of all of the northern kingdom’s later depravity, the placement of this golden calf story as Israel’s first sin after Sinai suggests the depth of Israel’s depravity. The story claims that God’s people are broken people and that brokenness both rises to the surface quickly and also runs very, very deep. The canonical placement hints that just as the northern kingdom’s idolatry led to other great sins, so among all of God’s people the fundamental orientation toward sin is ever at work.

Happily, this message preaches just as powerfully today as it did 3,000 years ago. The story suggests that as broken people, we are easily tempted to follow two forms of idols—both false images of the true God.

¹²Walter Brueggemann, “Exodus: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) 931.

The first false image of God that we are liable to follow is the human leader. Notice in the story that things start to go wrong because the people have lost sight of Moses. They say, “Come, make a god for us, who shall go before us; 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.” Did Moses bring the people out of Egypt? Yes and no. Yes, Moses brought the people out of Egypt. But Moses was only the agent through whom God acted. In Exod 3, God says “I have come down to deliver them [the people] from the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land” (v. 8). But God acts through Moses, to whom God says, “when you have brought the people out of Egypt” (v. 12).

Human agents of the divine are good and wonderful tools. God has acted through many people in history—all of them imperfect, yet all valuable. The problem with human agents is that they are mortal and broken. They fail. They sin. They die. They leave.

Often, people confuse the human agent, whom God has chosen and through whom God has acted, with God. God can start to look a lot like one’s favorite pastor, or bishop, or professor. Sometimes our loyalty to the human leader is greater than our faith in God. When that happens, things go wrong. In the story of the golden calf, what goes wrong goes very wrong. So the story serves as a warning to all of us against loving and serving God’s agents more than we love and serve God.

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A second false image of the true God in the story is the golden calf itself, the art and image that Aaron used to focus the people’s worship. The story can serve as a polemic and warning against our human inclination to love the art, architecture, music, and liturgy more than we love God. The story tells us a hard truth about ourselves: in spite of the lip service we give in our creeds saying that we believe in God, we can be more stubbornly loyal to the stuff of religion than we are to God. We can love the organ music (or bluegrass music) that we use to praise God more than we love God. We can be more devoted to the statue of Jesus in front of the sanctuary than we are to the Jesus whom we meet in the least of our neighbors. We can care more about the tradition than we care about doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. When we give our hearts more to the stuff of religion than to God, we are right there with Aaron, reveling around the calf.

So what is the answer? Is there some way to avoid these temptations? Is there some way to guard our hearts against such idolatries? No. According to the story, we are not able not to sin. The story’s canonical place—immediately after the revelation of the law and the gift of the tabernacle—suggests that we cannot by our own strength or understanding cling to God or flee from sin.

What then? Is there any hope for us? Yes, according to the story. But that

hope cannot come from within us. Rather the hope arises from the character of God. God is inclined, the story says, to let the divine wrath burn hot against a wayward people. But Moses reminds the Lord of the divine promise made to the ancestors. Moses says, in effect, you promised! “Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self” (Exod 32:13a). Remember those men—none of them perfect, each of them sinners—Moses says to God, but you promised *by your own self*.

The Lord kept the promise. Because that is who the Lord is and what the Lord does. 

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