

Idolatry and the Golden Calf

SCOTT HOEZEE

Is the sin of idolatry something people typically really choose to engage in, or does idolatry, as often as not, creep up on us? Is idolatry as obvious as bowing down before a statue, or can it be as subtle as just a slight shift in how we think about and talk about God? Exodus 32 is among the unhappiest chapters in the Bible, as the people of Israel fall down in a kind of wild orgy of false worship in front of a golden calf. It sounds like an open-and-shut case of the very idolatry God tells them not to do in the Ten Commandments, and in many ways, it was. But behind the scenes something else was going on, and today on Groundwork, we will see what that is and why it is properly instructive also for our lives yet today. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, we are welcoming people back to this ongoing, eight-part series on the book of Exodus, and we are at our seventh program already, so we are getting pretty deep into this forty-chapter book. Today, we are up to Exodus Chapter 32. The people are still at Mount Sinai, where we saw them in the previous program. We are hearing the Law of God, getting the Ten Commandments, but God's voice was too much for them to bear, so they sent Moses up to the mountain to get the Law so they did not have to hear the thunder all the time; and that brings us up to Exodus 32.

DAVE BAST

Right; and let's dive right into that chapter, as we read these words: ¹When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow, Moses, who brought us up out of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him." ²Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons, and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me." ³So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. ⁴He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt!" ⁵When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord." ⁶So the next day, the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward, they sat down to eat and drink, and got up to indulge in revelry.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Now, forty days is not a very long period of time. In fact, if you are listening to this program, look on your calendar, count back forty days; it is not that long a period of time.

DAVE BAST

Just a few weeks, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

If you were hearing this on December 1, forty days earlier would be October 22; just a few weeks; it almost seems like yesterday, but in the case here with Israel, forty days proved to be long enough for the people to

have – it seems like they have lost their minds; they have lost their memories – there is something very strange going on here a scant forty days after Moses has gone up to commune with God and receive the fullness of the Law.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and I love some of their language in this passage, too. “As for this fellow, Moses...” What kind of a dismissive thing is... this fellow Moses was their great leader. The guy who saved their lives more than once, as God used him to deliver them. “Well, we do not know what has happened to him. He is gone. He is lost on the mountain. It is too long to wait. We are antsy. We are tired. We need someone to lead us; we need God to lead us, and since He seemed to work through Moses, we have to take this problem into our own hands; so help us, Aaron,” they go to Moses’ brother; his second in command, “Help us make some gods who can lead us out of this wilderness.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

“And show us,” they specifically say, “show us the God who brought us up out of the land of Egypt,” and what is interesting, Dave, about this chapter is that that phrase, “Who brought us up out of the land of Egypt,” will pop up again and again and again. In fact, we just read the first six verses; now, we will read seven more in the next segment of this program, but if you were to read the first 23 verses of Exodus 32, you would find the phrase, “Who brought us up out of Egypt,” popping up six different times, and it gets a different answer every time. Who brought us up out of Egypt? Was it Moses, Aaron, God? Maybe we do not know who brought us up out of Egypt, so show us who did; and eventually it will be a golden calf. This is who brought you up out of Egypt. The people have gotten very foggy here. They seem not to know who brought them up out of the land of Egypt.

DAVE BAST

Well, Scott, that is a great point, and it also brings up one of the basic questions of the book of Exodus: Who is really God?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Who is God?

DAVE BAST

In one sense – you could put it two ways: Who is God and who God is. Exodus wants to answer both of those questions. It wants to show us which God is the real God and what that real God is actually like. We know this is the book where we are told His name. It is Yahweh, “I am who I am.” You can even hearken back to the very first chapter and the first program in this series, where Pharaoh is doing his nasty against the people of God, against Israel, and then later when Moses comes to announce God has said, “Let My people go,” Pharaoh dismissively asks, “Who is this God that I should listen to Him?”

SCOTT HOEZEE

Who is Yahweh? Yes, that is a good point, Dave. That really is a theme here, isn’t it? Who is God? We get His name in Exodus 3; we get Pharaoh completely dismissing Him in Exodus 5: Who is this Yahweh? Never heard of Him; Yahweh? No, He is not in my reference book of Near Eastern gods and goddesses, so I am not going to respect Him. God educates Pharaoh. He supposedly educates the people; leads them through the Red Sea. The people should be getting a pretty good idea who God is. They should absolutely know that God led them through the Red Sea and brought them up out of the land of Egypt. They sang to Him about it in Exodus Chapter 15, after coming through the Red Sea; but now, here we are 16, 17 chapters later; Moses has been gone for a relatively brief period of time in the grand scheme of things – forty days – and they no longer know “who brought us up out of Egypt;” so, they say to Aaron, “We need a visual,” and so Aaron says, “Give me all your gold,” and he melts it and he takes an engraving tool and he makes it look somehow like a calf, and stands up and says, “There you go, this calf, this is who brought you out of the land of Egypt,” and you just have to wonder what was going through Aaron’s head?

DAVE BAST

Well, I do wonder that, and I think we should maybe talk about that some more, too; but getting back to Israel, let's just make sure we have our minds wrapped around exactly what is going on. These are the people of God. He has not only taught them by delivering through the Red Sea – and as you pointed out, Scott, they sang His praises – you know, wonderful theology in Exodus 15 – but in the intervening chapters, as we saw in earlier programs, He has fed them with manna from heaven, He has caused water to flow from the rock for them; He saved their lives; it is not just His salvation that has been shown to them and revealed to them, it is His providential care; so, they are getting a wonderful grounding in who God is, and He is doing it through action, not just through words; and now, suddenly, it is like they have not learned a thing. They have totally lost it. They have totally blown it; and they have turned around and broken the second commandment that He has just given them in the person of Moses.

SCOTT HOEZEE

A graven image.

DAVE BAST

So, what is going on?

SCOTT HOEZEE

What is going on for the people? Why cannot they remember? And what is going on with Aaron? Did he know, really, what he was doing? There are some indications that, in a way, he did not. We will take a look at that next.

BREAK:

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to Groundwork, where today we are looking at Exodus 32; the whole story of the golden calf – Israel's great sin at the foot of Mount Sinai – I think we should re-emphasize that. They have not left Sinai yet. They have received the Ten Commandments here, but Moses has gone back to talk some more to God, and he seems to have disappeared and the people have grown bored and restless, and they are also scared because they need a god to protect them in the wilderness. So, they convince Aaron to fashion this golden calf, and what they are doing is they are creating and fashioning a god like the gods of their neighbors; that is part of the problem here, but there is a further thing that Aaron says that is really rather puzzling.

SCOTT HOEZEE

What Aaron does here looks like a completely godless thing to do. It looks like Aaron has totally turned his back on the God who led them out of Egypt and revealed Himself to his brother in the burning bush; except he does not really. In verse 6 of Exodus 32 – we read it in the first segment – Aaron says, “Now tomorrow, we are going to hold a festival to Yahweh,”

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

“To the God of Israel,”

DAVE BAST

So, it is as though he is saying, “The calf represents Yahweh,” I mean, this is not an idol, this is Yahweh.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It looks like Aaron had the best of intentions here. He really did not want to move the people away from Yahweh; he wanted just to give them a way to picture Yahweh, except Aaron falls into one of the oldest traps in the book, which is the moment you make a visual, the moment you make a god, it turns out that that is a silent god. Nobody ever makes an idol that then rebukes the person who made the idol. You always make a very convenient god for yourself. So, Aaron wanted it to still be Yahweh, but as soon as the people started making revelry, as the text put it in verse 6...

DAVE BAST

Rather delicately.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; as soon as that happened, Aaron realized something had gone really wrong here; and we can read a little bit more about God's reaction a little more here in Exodus 32, starting at verse 7, where the Lord says to Moses,

“Go down because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. ⁸They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, ‘These are your gods, Israel, who brought you out of Egypt.’ ⁹I have seen these people,” the Lord said to Moses, “and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them, then I will make you into a great nation.” ¹¹But Moses sought the favor of the Lord, his God, “Lord,” he said, “why should Your anger burn against Your people, whom You brought up out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? ¹²Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that He brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth.’ Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on Your people. ¹³Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, to whom You swore by Your own self, ‘I will make your descendents as numerous as the stars in the sky, and I will give your descendents all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.’” ¹⁴And then the Lord relented and did not bring on His people the disaster He had threatened.

DAVE BAST

That is a great scene – a wonderful scene – and we are actually going to save the heart of that for the next program, where we think about Moses' role as a mediator – as the one who steps in between the wrath of God and the sin of His people, and bridges that gap; but it starts out – this conversation between God and Moses – it is almost funny if it weren't so serious, because God says – if you listen closely in verse 7 – God says to Moses: Hey, you know what's going on with those people you brought out of Egypt?

SCOTT HOEZEE

That *you* brought up out of Egypt?!

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; and Moses says: Whoa, wait a minute; time out. What do you mean, I brought them out? *You* brought them out!

SCOTT HOEZEE

You brought them out. The stakes here are mighty high and the drama is very important and rather grave, but there is, I think, some humor in here. We noted in the first segment that this phrase, “Who brought them up out of Egypt,” keeps popping up in this chapter, and it keeps alternating. It is like what happens when a husband and wife at a church potluck or something, where the husband comes up to the wife and says, “Dear, *your* son just kicked the minister in the shins. Will you get him please? He is not my son; he is your son, Honey, you go get him,” and that is what God is doing here. He is saying: Well, you brought them up. No, no, no; you brought them up. No, they are not my people. No, no; it is a funny back and forth, which mirrors, in its own way, the peoples' confusion and befuddlement on who is their God.

DAVE BAST

Sure; but then it very quickly turns not funny at all; in fact, it is rather chilling, because God makes a suggestion to Moses, in effect: All right, I will tell you what I am going to do, Moses. It is you and Me on the mountain; I am going to wipe them all out and I will start over with you. Almost overtones – echoes – of the story of the flood, where God wipes out an incredibly sinful human family and starts over with Noah. The problem is, right after the flood, Noah and his sons demonstrate that the evil has not been wiped out. But here, it is an even graver proposition because God is going to destroy His own people; the people that He has chosen, and the people that He has committed Himself to in covenant love; unbreakable covenant love; and so, it causes us to gasp. Could He really do this?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, he could; and in the next segment, the final segment of this program, we are going to look at how and why He doesn't, and what Moses suggests God do. We will save that for the next segment, but just to finish up this part of the story; Moses comes down off the mountain. He breaks the tablets of stone in anger against the people for what Moses sees; and then, of course, he confronts his brother and says: What did you do?! How did this happen? And a little later in Exodus 32, in verse 24, Aaron says: Well, look, I just told them whoever has any gold jewelry, take it off. They gave me the gold; I threw it into the fire and out came this calf.

DAVE BAST

Right; you know, it just happened. Poof! I did not have anything... Aaron sounds like the kid who has blown up the chemistry lab in school, and the principal comes to him and he says, "I don't know; I didn't do anything; it just happened."

SCOTT HOEZEE

It just happened.

DAVE BAST

Come on, Aaron; do you think he really believes that?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, I think he did in this way. Obviously, he has not really forgotten that he used an engraving tool very carefully to fashion this thing. He knows full well where the object came from, but I think, from Aaron's point of view, he does not know where the idolatry came from. He thought it was going to be Yahweh. He said it was going to be a festival to Yahweh, to the God of Israel; and so, to Aaron's mind, I think the idolatry part came *presto-poof*: I do not know how that happened?! He had the best of intentions, which is kind of chilling because as we said at the outset of this program, is idolatry always as obvious as bowing down to a statue or are there more subtle ways by which we fall into it? Aaron kind of fell into making a false idol for the people; he did not mean to. Does that ever happen to us?

DAVE BAST

Well, that is a really good question. The Bible has this way of imposing its relevance on us if we simply listen to it or read it carefully or a little more deeply than we usually do; and at first glance, it looks like Exodus 32 is a quaint story from a long distant past – golden calves, orgy in the camp – come on, what is going on here? And only as we dig into it, as we like to say on Groundwork, do we realize this has something very relevant to our life and situation; and that is what we want to talk about next.

BREAK:

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are finishing up our look at Exodus 32. It is the second to the last program in our eight-part look at some of the main stories in Exodus; and we were just saying, Dave, Aaron legitimately seems to have been startled that he did something that led to idolatry; and we were wondering, when does it happen to us, and does idolatry sneak up on us; and I think it does.

Dave Bast: Oh, I absolutely agree with you, Scott.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I did not mean to make an idol out of my work, but I am working 80 hours a week now, and it is clear that this is what I value more than anything. I did not mean to make money the most important thing in my life; but, out popped this calf! Aaron said, and we say: Out popped this money idol. I did not set out to do that. I did not mean to displace God's prominence in my life, but it happens.

DAVE BAST

Or think about this, too; another way that idolatry can creep up on us, which I think, frankly, is extremely relevant for our particular time in history; if you put this story of the golden calf in the context back of the Ten Commandments, which we just looked at in our last program, the first two commandments: You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make an idol to worship Me. The first commandment has to do with worshipping a false god, truly. It is possible to have the wrong god at the center of your life, and to truly worship that god; you devote everything you are to that god, but it is the wrong god. The second commandment has to do with worshipping the true God falsely. You do have your eye fixed on the God of the Bible, but what you have done is create an image of Him – maybe for good motives – you are trying to make Him more relevant – you are trying to bring Him up to speed, like Aaron was: Let's make Yahweh a little bit more like the gods of our neighbors and make Him relevant in that way.

Frankly, I think of the way people have created now an image of the God of the Bible who never says no to them; especially about sexual behavior...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Or any behavior...

DAVE BAST

Right; but that is the issue that is confronting us today, in particular; and any time you create such a view of the God of the Bible that He cannot say no to you; He cannot tell you, "No, that is wrong. You are not allowed..." even though you want to do it; even though you may be in love. No. If your god cannot say no to you, you are worshipping an idol.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes. I think the writer, Anne Lamott said recently that if you are sure your god lives in the same neighborhood where you live, votes exactly the way you vote, shops at all of the same stores that you shop in, you are probably worshipping a false god of your own devising. If your god looks just like, well, you; that is probably a bit of a problem. So, how do you avoid that?

DAVE BAST

That is the question, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In Exodus 32, God is going to wipe out Israel and start over with just Moses. Moses says: No, no, no; do not do that! And what is the key thing that Moses says? Well, it comes in Exodus 32:13 when he says: Now, Lord, remember Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. So, Moses jogs the divine memory: Remember You made promises, and that is going to become a real refrain in the rest of the Pentateuch; and the people are

eventually going to have to wander for forty years, and eventually we get to the book of Deuteronomy, where the next generation now, forty years later, are going to enter the promised land finally. So, Moses holds this massive review session, which is just – what is the book of Deuteronomy but a giant review session for the new generation. And the refrain again and again is: Remember and do not forget. Remember who God is; and that is how we keep ourselves from idolatry ideally. We remember the promises of God every time we baptize someone. We remember what Jesus did every time we come to the Lord’s Supper. We rehearse scripture through song and sermons and meditations. We try to remember, and that power of memory is sacred, but it is also powerful in keeping us connected to the true God.

DAVE BAST

I think of a phrase that I read somewhere. I think it was a wonderful professor of preaching at Fuller Seminary of a few years ago, Ian Pitt-Watson, who said that when the Bible uses the verb: to remember, it does not mean: Give a kind thought to or spare a thought for. It is not like we say: Oh, remember this or that. The analogy he used was of a will. If your rich, old aunt says, “I want to remember my nephew in my estate,” you do not expect from her a kindly thought. You expect something substantial. To remember means something much more substantial. In the Bible, to remember means to make present again; to relive, or to make it happen to you as though you were there; and in a sense, we were there. Whenever we break the bread and share the cup, we are there proclaiming the Lord’s death and sharing in it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, and I think, Dave, that powerful sense – that robust sense – of the word *remember* is not just a wistful: Oh, remember the time we walked on the beach in Miami and we saw the sunset? No, no, no; not just that; the thief on the cross says: Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom; and the thief was not hoping that Jesus would just recall him and think: Oh, yeah; I remember that guy.

DAVE BAST

I remember the guy who died next to me.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No, he wanted Jesus to make him present in that kingdom. He was asking for salvation, and that is that real robust sense of the word *remember* that you were just talking about. So, it is very powerful. It is in the Passover, of course; that has already been instituted in Israel, in that it was to be observed every year; but it is here, too.

It is curious here that in Exodus 32, Moses, in an act of brinkmanship, heads off the destruction of Israel by jogging the divine memory: Do not forget, God... remember, You made these promises.

DAVE BAST

I love that Jewish way of arguing. The Old Testament is full of that. But, it is really a double remembering we are talking about, isn’t it? As you point out, it is us remembering God; that is one way that will keep us from idolatry as we relive the great events of our salvation; but it is also us calling on God to remember us, because ultimately what will rescue us? What will save us from falling into a sin like idolatry – a really terrible sin – is if God remembers to be merciful; He remembers His covenant commitment; and He comes through the power of His Spirit and by His word He takes hold on us once again.

Thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. We are your hosts, Dave Bast, with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. Visit groundworkonline.com, our website, to tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into next on Groundwork.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/idolatry-and-the-golden-calf>

Printed on January 2, 2025

