

Exodus 32 (Cf. Ps 106.1-23)

Week 1 – Exod 19, Eagles' wings and Israel's fear

Week 2 - Decalogue

The law and Israel's relationship with YHWH = predicated on fact that God – and no other – had redeemed them from slavery in Egypt. This is the basis for the decalogue – Exod 20.2

“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 an idol, 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.”

An exclusive, covenantal relationship, with promise of obedience – 19.8 and the fear of the LORD;

YHWH = a jealous God, and Israel strictly forbidden from worshipping any other god - 20.4-6

⁴You shall not make for yourself an idol, 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. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, ⁶but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

The sign that God was with Moses and would deliver Israel by his hand was that he would bring them to this mountain to worship him (3.12)

Up till now YHWH has been patient and borne with their lack of faith/trust.

Chs 25-31 have been concerned with true worship.

Ch. 32 = idolatrous worship.

This is Genesis 3 all over again as God's people take their future into their own hands, rejecting God's ordinances, particularly not to make any graven image/idol.

1-6 The people rebel

- “Come, make a gods/a god for us. Who shall go before us (Hullo?? – pillar of fire and cloud 13.21-22 ²¹ And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. ²² The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.
- as for this Moses, *the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt* (cf. 19.4; 20.2), we do not know what has become of him.”
 - She denies the Lord having led them by fire and cloud
 - They attribute their deliverance to Moses rather than YHWH
 - Israel seeks to create for herself what God has just already provided for (Tabernacle)
- Aaron gathers their gold earrings and casts a golden calf
- They said, “These are your gods/this is your god, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”
- Aaron: “Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD”
- The people rose early to offer sacrifices... and sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

Idolatory or polytheism? Is the golden calf an image of YHWH or another god?

- Aaron’s proclamation in v.5 indicates an image of YHWH
- Most commentators aver that idolatry rather than polytheism, “a false perception of who the one true God is” (Hamilton).
- Either is worse than the other!
- Hamilton describes Aaron’s action as “an act of baptizing blasphemy”

In worshipping the golden calf they have

- a) denied the one who has redeemed them, and all that he has done for the,
- b) They have given his glory to something they have made with their own hands.
- c) They not only credit the calf for their past redemption, but look to the calf to lead them into the future – to go before them (v.1).

Fretheim: “The problem is thus fundamentally not one of disobedience to a law code; it is a matter of unfaithfulness to the God who had bound himself to a people. Israel has violated the relationship.”

7-10 YHWH addresses Moses

- YHWH to Moses: “Go down at once, for *your people, whom you brought out* of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely...”
- Fretheim: In view of the fact that have just made a covenant with YHWH (Exod 24), the worship of the golden calf is ‘like committing adultery on one’s wedding night’!
- YHWH to Moses: “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone (lit. “Give me rest”) so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.”
 - YHWH’s asking Moses to let him alone suggest he knows he is open to persuasion not to destroy Israel. He doesn’t want Moses to influence/sway his decision.
 - Moses turns down flat the offer to be Abraham #2. “He chooses the role of intercessor over that of patriarch” (Hamilton).
 - Moses places commitment to his people ahead of self-advancement

NB. no particular blame on Aaron

11-14 Moses intercedes and YHWH relents

- Moses does not “let God alone”! Stunning boldness of Moses.
- Moses implored (lit. “softened the face of”) *the LORD his God*, “O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot *against your people, whom you brought out* of the land of Egypt
- Moses gives 3 reasons why YHWH should temper his judgment:
 1. Rational: why save Israel, then destroy the people? Surely God is reasonable and can see this would defy reason.
 2. Reputational: why give the Egyptians reason to gloat? One of God’s main reasons for redeeming Israel was that Egyptians would know the YHWH has gotten glory over Pharaoh and is LORD – 14.4, 18. See too 9.16.
He reminds YHWH they are *his* people, set apart. His name is on them, and his glory is bound up with their redemption – which is of course why he’s so angry with them for rejecting him in favour of their dumb idol.
 3. Covenantal: How can he ignore the promises he made to the patriarchs? How can he not be true to himself?

NB. He makes no excuses for the people or their sin; rather he appeals to YHWH’s character, reputation and past actions (promises).

- He asks the LORD to change his mind – and he does! Ps 106.19-23
They made a calf at Horeb
and worshiped a cast image.
20 They exchanged the glory of God^[f]
for the image of an ox that eats grass.
21 They forgot God, their Savior,
who had done great things in Egypt,
22 wondrous works in the land of Ham,
and awesome deeds by the Red Sea.^[g]
23 Therefore he said he would destroy them—
had not Moses, his chosen one,
stood in the breach before him,
to turn away his wrath from destroying them.

Does God repent?

1. Intercessory prayer can influence God – cf. Gen 18 (Sodom and Gomorrah). There is always a tension between God's mercy and his wrath. See too [Jeremiah 26:13](#), [1 Chronicles 21:15](#), and [Joel 2:13](#)
 2. C J H Wright: "Moses was not so much arguing *against* God... as participating in an argument *within* God."
 3. Fretheim: "It is not a matter of Moses winning the argument but of a relationship that God takes seriously."
- V.14 And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster (lit. "evil")/renounced the punishment that he planned to bring *on his people*.

15-20 Moses (and Joshua) go down and Moses destroys the golden calf

- He clearly hasn't shared with Joshua what God has told him.
- When he sees the calf and dancing, Moses' anger burned hot and he threw/hurled the tablets *from his hands* broke them at the foot of the mountain.
 - Hamilton: "To hear about something is one thing; to see it is another, Job voices this truth when he says, "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you" (Job 42.5). Moses has heard; now he sees." Cf. Thomas, Jn 20
 - Whereas God warns that his anger would burn hot (v.9), Moses' actually does! He is harsher on the Israelites than YHWH.
 - Moses destruction of the tablets, the work and writing of God, foreshadows his destruction of the calf. From Moses' perspective the covenant is broken.

- He took the calf, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water – and made the Israelites drink it. (= parody of the Lord's Supper!)
 - Ironically, the water would have been the water that sprung from the rock struck by Moses

21-24 Aaron gives an account to Moses

NB. It is Aaron whom Moses holds accountable.

- Aaron begs Moses not to be angry at him: "You know the people, that they are bent on evil. They said to me, 'Make us gods...' And they gave it to me, and I threw/hurled it (cf.v.19) into the fire, and out came this calf!"

Aaron uses similar language to Moses as Moses did to YHWH – he thinks Moses is over-reacting, just as Moses thought YHWH was.

25-29 Moses rallies those who are on YHWH's side

- Moses acts decisively: "Who is on the LORD's side? Come to me!" And all the sons of Levi rallied to him. CF. Elijah's call on Mt Carmel in 1 Kgs 18.21. No coercion or threat, but a call/invitation.
- Moses tells the Levites that God has ordered them to slay brother, friend, neighbour... They slay around 3,000. NB. 600,000 men had come up out of Egypt, c.2-3 million individuals.
 - i.e. those who refused to rally to Moses' call in v.26. None would have needed to be slain if all had responded positively to Moses' call.
 - Presumably the 3,000 are the ringleaders. They do not include Levites, yet are referred to as "brother... and kinsman".
 - As in Jesus' teaching in Luke 14.26, loyalty to God takes precedence over all other loyalties
 - Moses and Aaron are both Levites. Aaron escapes punishment!
- Moses tells them, "Today you have ordained yourselves for the service of the LORD, each one at the cost of a son or a brother, and so you have brought a blessing on yourselves this day."

Moses has interceded for the people asking YHWH not to destroy them, but now pulls no punches with them. His judgment is harsher than YHWH's. He is zealous for the LORD.

30-34 Moses intercedes for the people

- The next day Moses told the people “You have sinned a great sin. But now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement/win forgiveness for your sin.”
 - NB. He doesn’t call on them to repent, as will the prophets.
 - He is not sure that he will be able to persuade YHWH: “perhaps...”
- So Moses returned/went back to the LORD and makes confession for the people. “But now, if you will only forgive their sin – but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written.”
 - Moses first pleads for forgiveness for the people, then – if that isn’t granted – that he might make atonement for them
 - The LORD will not allow Moses to atone for anyone. Unlike Christ, he cannot make atonement.
 - Whereas Moses’ intercession was successful in vv.11-13, it is not in vv.31-21.
 - Further retribution is to follow, though God will keep faith with his earlier commitment not to destroy Israel.

35 YHWH sends a plague on the people

- Then the LORD sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf – the one that Aaron made. NB. blame firmly back on Aaron.

Conclusions

1. This is Israel’s Fall story. Idolatry = no#1 sin
2. YHWH is a jealous God: jealous for his own name, jealous for his people
3. By the end of ch 34 though the future will rest solely with God, who renews the covenant and reveals his character – 34.6-7.
Deut 1.30 **The LORD your God, who goes before you**, is the one who will fight for you, just as he did for you in Egypt before your very eyes.
4. Tension sustained throughout between God’s mercy and God’s judgement. This is best summarised in the longest description in the entire Bible of God’s character. What we see in chs 32-34 is that God will not abandon his promises or purposes. But wilful rebellion will be punished.
5. Moses’ intercession does make a difference. God hears his prayers and takes them seriously. Nevertheless, he remains sovereign.
6. Mystery of Aaron: goes unpunished. Illustration of weak/bad leadership.

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. What does the Israelites' idolatry reveal about the human heart? In what ways do we seek to shape our own futures today? How does this violate our baptismal covenant with God?
2. In what ways is Aaron a weak leader? How does his response to the people, and then, Moses reflect on his character? Why do you think he calls for a festival to the LORD (v.5)? What can we make of the fact that God (unlike Moses) does not single out Aaron for blame or punish him?
3. In Numbers 12.3 we are told that Moses was the most humble man in the world. What evidence is there of this in this passage? Why is humility so important in a Christian leader?
4. Moses relents after Moses first prayer of intercession. Why do you think he did so? Why do you think he didn't relent in response to Moses' second prayer?
5. Do you struggle with the tension between God's compassion/mercy and his execution of justice? Compare his speech in Hosea 11. What does that teach about how God wrestles within himself? Is this something we can ever fully comprehend, or need to fully comprehend? If not, how do we live with this tension?