

It's been just over a month since they received the Ten Commandments and the children of Israel have already begun to stray into idolatry. While Moses has been on Mt. Sinai with the LORD, the people convince Aaron to create a graven image (likely intended to represent the LORD) for them to follow and worship. It is incredible how quickly our heart wanders from serving the LORD to follow our sinful desires.

1 And when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down out of the mount, the people gathered themselves together unto Aaron, and said unto him, Up, make us gods, which shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him.

“And when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down out of the mount” – At this point Moses has been on Mt. Sinai with the LORD for almost 40 days receiving instructions for building the tabernacle and related items. The people apparently expected Moses to have returned before now and so they have become impatient. We are making a mistake when we become impatient with God's timing since doing so usually leads us to sin against Him as well as defeating the reason the LORD is waiting. Remember that Abraham and Sarah's impatience to see God answer His promise to give them a son eventually led to Abraham sleeping with Sarah's handmaid Hagar and producing a son named Ishmael. This mistake has haunted the descendants of Abraham ever since.

“the people gathered themselves together unto Aaron” – Moses had left Aaron and Hur “in command” during his absence (Ex. 24:14), so the people come to him to compel him to solve a situation that they perceive as a problem.

“and said unto him, Up, make us gods, which shall go before us” – They say “up” (essentially “get up and do this for us”) implying that they were not satisfied for Aaron to sit around and wait for Moses to return (which they were not sure would ever happen). They instruct Aaron to “make us gods.” The Hebrew word for “gods” is plural and is the same word used elsewhere in the OT for God, such as in Gen. 1:1. The phrase probably should have been better translated as “make us God” or “make us a god.” Commentators debate whether they wanted a physical representation of the LORD that they could see and follow or if they wanted an alternate god because the LORD's representative (Moses) was MIA. The clues in the following verses seem to better support the interpretation that they wanted a visible representation of the LORD. Being freshly departed out of an idolatrous nation (Egypt), they likely felt the need of seeing something tangible like an idol to follow because they wanted a god “which shall go before us.”

“for as for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him” – The people had no idea if Moses was coming back since he might have been taken to heaven by the LORD (like Enoch), died in the fire of the LORD's presence or had some accident climbing the mountain. They had been following the LORD with Moses as His spokesman but now that spokesman was missing and they no longer had direction in following the LORD.

2 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. 3 And all the people brake off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought *them* unto Aaron.

Surprisingly, Aaron, who ought to have known better, has the people contribute their golden earrings toward the project of creating a “god.” Some commentators suggest that Aaron may have been hoping that the people would not be willing to part with their gold and so the plan to “make us gods” would have been stopped or at least delayed until Moses returned. However, the people were willing to donate their gold to make a god for them to follow.

4 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.

“And he received *them* at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, after he had made it a molten calf” – Apparently Aaron poured the gold into a mold and made the calf. He then used a graving tool “after he had made it” to carve the details and finishing touches to complete the calf. Young bulls were common in pagan religions, including Egypt, and was symbolic of strength and power. The children of Israel had worshiped the gods of Egypt and so were familiar with the worship of such an idol (**Josh. 24:14** “*Now therefore fear the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in truth: and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye the LORD*”).

“and they said, These *be* thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt” – The people immediately embrace this golden calf and declare to one another that this is the god that brought them out of Egypt. This declaration implies that they saw this golden calf as a physical representation of the LORD. The creation of this calf was also a direct violation of at least the second commandment (**Ex. 20:4-6** “*Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments*”).

5 And when Aaron saw *it*, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation, and said, To morrow is a feast to the LORD.

“And when Aaron saw *it*, he built an altar before it” – What did Aaron see? He saw that the children of Israel had embraced the golden calf as an object of worship and were no longer making demands of him. When he saw that, he apparently decided to attempt to make their worship of this calf at least somewhat about the LORD and built an altar to keep the people engaged.

“and Aaron made proclamation, and said, To morrow is a feast to the LORD” – The fact that Aaron declared a feast for the next day implies that he had the misguided belief that the golden calf represented the LORD and that worship directed toward it was actually toward the LORD. However, the second commandment forbids the worship of any physical representation of the LORD.

6 And they rose up early on the morrow, and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play.

“And they rose up early on the morrow, and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings” – Rising early implied their excitement to worship this golden calf. This excitement illustrates our sinful preference for a god that we can see rather than the true and living God that we cannot. Rather than exhibiting this kind of excitement in worshipping the LORD the people instead expressed fear when they saw and heard the LORD speak from Mt. Sinai (Ex. 20:18-19).

“and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play [to jest; to make sport]” – They apparently spent the day alternating between eating and drinking (likely becoming drunk) and “playing.” The Hebrew word for “play” has a broad meaning, depending on the context. In some places it is translated as “laughed” (such as Gen. 17:17 and Gen. 18:12 when Abraham and Sarah both laughed at the idea of them having a son at their age), as “mocking” (such as Gen. 39:14, 17 when Potiphar’s wife was accusing Joseph of attempting to seduce her), and as “sporting” (such as in Gen. 26:8, when Isaac was sporting with his wife in such a way that the king recognized that she was Isaac’s wife and not his sister as he had claimed). The Apostle Paul quotes this verse in **1 Cor. 10:7-8**, mentioning fornication: *“Neither be ye idolaters, as were some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand.”* Apparently the children of Israel were imitating the pagan rituals they were familiar with in Egypt and were indulging their flesh through eating, drinking, dancing (v. 19) and even sexual promiscuity. The word “naked” in v. 25 means “to let go” or “to let loose” and essentially means that the people has lost all restraint in their behavior, perhaps because they were drunk and had lost their inhibitions.

7 And the LORD said unto Moses, Go, get thee down; for thy people, which thou broughtest out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves: 8 They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them: they have made them a molten calf, and have worshipped it, and have sacrificed thereunto, and said, These be thy gods, O Israel, which have brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.

It should come as no surprise that the LORD knew exactly what the children of Israel had been doing. He was aware of the molten calf that they were worshipping and even quoted verbatim what they had said about the calf when they credited it with bringing them out of Egypt. The LORD alerts Moses to the problem, instructing him to return to the camp to deal with it. Notice the LORD says “thy people, which thou broughtest out of the land of Egypt.” The people had rebelled against the LORD by violating the covenant between them and Him and so they were not acting like His people. They had corrupted themselves by turning aside “quickly” for it had only been 40 days since the covenant was established and they had already strayed from the commandments of the LORD.

Verses 9-16: The LORD threatens to destroy the children of Israel and start over with the descendants of Moses but Moses intercedes for the people and pleads for the LORD to spare them. When the LORD turned from His wrath and decided not to destroy the people, Moses takes the tablets of stone on which the LORD had written the Decalogue and heads back down the mountain to the camp.

17 And when Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said unto Moses, *There is* a noise of war in the camp. 18 And he said, *It is not* the voice of *them that* shout for mastery, neither *is it* the voice of *them that* cry for being overcome: *but* the noise of *them that* sing do I hear.

Joshua had apparently accompanied Moses on the mountain, and as the two come down Joshua hears what he believes is the sound of a battle taking place in the camp. The LORD had not mentioned anything about a battle, and so Moses remarks that it does not sound like warfare to him. Instead he hears singing.

19 And it came to pass, as soon as he came nigh unto the camp, that he saw the calf, and the dancing: and Moses' anger waxed hot, and he cast the tables out of his hands, and brake them beneath the mount.

When Moses got close enough to the camp to see what was going on, he saw that the people were celebrating and what they were celebrating (the calf). Having been raised in the pagan environment of Egypt, they were likely emulating the pagan worship they saw in Egypt by dancing before the calf. There was likely a lewd component to the dancing as well. When he saw this, Moses became extremely angry. After all the effort to bring the children of Israel to this mountain in order to bring his people into a relationship with the LORD, Moses apparently lost his temper and smashed the tablets on the ground when he saw that they had turned away so quickly.

20 And he took the calf which they had made, and burnt *it* in the fire, and ground *it* to powder, and strawed *it* upon the water, and made the children of Israel drink *of it*.

Moses melts the calf down and then grinds it into powder. He then pours the powder into the water, forcing them to drink it as punishment. Notice that he didn’t melt the calf down and use the gold for other purposes. He destroys the calf completely and forces the people to experience the bitter taste of their sin.

Verses 21-28: Moses confronts Aaron and asks why he allowed such a sin to happen. Aaron attempts to shift the blame to the people and even implied that the melted gold formed a calf on its own. Moses then recruits the men of the tribe of Levi to go through the camp and kill those who had taken part in the calf worship (about 3,000 men).

29 For Moses had said, Consecrate yourselves to day to the LORD, even every man upon his son, and upon his brother; that he may bestow upon you a blessing this day.

Moses calls on the people to repent and rededicate themselves to serving the LORD, as we all should when we sin.

Verses 30-35: Moses goes back up the mountain to intercede for the people before the LORD and ask for their forgiveness. Even though the LORD forgave them, they still had to suffer the consequences of their sin since the LORD continued to plague them.