

# EXODUS 32: THE SLIPPERY SLOPE OF SYNCHRETISM

Things aren't always what they seem. I'm a people watcher. I love being in a public place and trying to figure out what is going on with people by their mannerisms and body language. Many times I have been correct in my assertions, but there are also many times in which I'm wrong. People do tend to move and behave according to patterns, but most of the time, as outsiders or 'flies on the wall', there is something missing as we attempt to put the pieces of the puzzle together. That missing piece is called context.

Without the context of any given situation, we can easily misread what is being said and done. This danger is also prevalent in our reading and studying of the Bible. Without the proper context we can easily read our own cultural beliefs and intentions into the text. One of the things we will see today is a great example of that.

Many of you will be familiar with the story of Exodus 32. The golden calf story has been seen in movies some time now. But I'm afraid one of the most important points of the story has been overlooked. We hope to correct this today and see how the context of the story applies to us. But first, we need to back up and set the scene. Moses, Joshua and a few elders have already been up the mountain and back down a time or two. A few weeks ago we read of the great feast that was had by Israel at the base of the mountain. This feast "sealed" the covenant between God and Israel. Meals were very important in the ancient Near East, even during Jesus' day. The Israelites had agreed to the covenant

presented by God and promised to obey His commands. After the meal, Moses and Joshua ascended the mountain once again, with Joshua stopping short of the peak, while Moses went to the summit. We can read of what things looked like at the top by going back to chapter 19.

### **Exodus 19: 16 – 18**

**16 Then it came to pass on the third day, in the morning, that there were thunderings and lightnings, and a thick cloud on the mountain; and the sound of the trumpet was very loud, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. 17 And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. 18 Now Mount Sinai was completely in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire. Its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked greatly.**

Imagine yourself at the foot of the mountain with all the lightening, thunder, fire and smoke erupting from the top. This is especially scary if you take into account that we aren't talking about Mt. Everest. The mountain was high, but it wasn't that high. So all the commotion was not so far away from the people. As we pick up the story, Moses has been on top of the mountain for some time now and the Israelites were getting restless.

***1 Now when the people saw that Moses delayed coming down from the mountain, the people gathered together to Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make us gods that shall go before us; for 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."***

***2 And Aaron said to them, "Break off the golden earrings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and***

***bring them to me.” 3 So all the people broke off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron. 4 And he received the gold from their hand, and he fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made a molded calf. Then they said, “This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!” 5 So when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, “Tomorrow is a feast to the Lord.” 6 Then they rose early on the next day, offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.***

- The people don't know what happened to Moses. He is missing as far as they are concerned. This is a vital part of the story. They aren't just impatient. Their leader is missing. The last they saw of him, he went into the top of the mountain from whence all the smoke and lightning are erupting.
- So they go to their default. Not understanding this means we miss the root of the story.
- What did all the smoke, lightning, thunder and fire mean in the ancient near eastern context?
- (Slide of the ancient storm god.) Explain the calf.
- Aaron commands them to give him all their golden earrings.
- Gods – plural (Elohim) singular usage elsewhere in this passage and in the prophets. Verses 4 and 5 are in the singular. Aaron declares this to be to the LORD, YHWH.
- Syncretism – mixing of things.
- The calf isn't the deity here. It is the base upon which the storm god rides. This is their default. They aren't just stupid pagans looking for any chance to act pagan. They don't carve an image of YHWH, they've already agreed that was wrong.

But they do carve an image of a created creature. This is wrong, but I believe in their minds it was something like making the ark of the covenant, because that was the function of the calf.

- They are wrong, but their heart is in the right place. They want to worship YHWH, but they are going about it the wrong way. They long for the presence of God and their leader. The calf, (storm god) was to “go before them.” This is war language. Just as the Ark will go before them at Jericho, they are looking for something that assures them that God will go before them now. So, let’s cut them a little slack. I’m sure if we had been there, in their context, we would have done the same.

God gets angry.

***7 And the Lord said to Moses, “Go, get down! For your people whom you brought 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 themselves a molded calf, and worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, ‘This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!’ ” 9 And the Lord said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and indeed it is a stiff-necked people! 10 Now therefore, let Me alone, that My wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them. And I will make of you a great nation.”***

- Your people, whom You brought out of Egypt.
- Stiff-necked – unable to be steered.
- Anthropomorphic language. This didn’t take God by surprise. This language is necessary to convey to us how this sort of

thing angers God.

Moses intercedes.

***11 Then Moses pleaded with the Lord his God, and said: “Lord, why does Your wrath burn hot against Your people whom You have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? 12 Why should the Egyptians speak, and say, “He brought them out to harm them, to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth”? Turn from Your fierce wrath, and relent from this harm to Your people. 13 Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants, to whom You swore by Your own self, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven; and all this land that I have spoken of I give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’ ” 14 So the Lord relented from the harm which He said He would do to His people.***

- Moses intercedes, “reminding” God of His reputation and His promises to Abraham.
- God sighs. (repent, relent)
- I love that God sighs. We have all done it, especially when we are dealing with a wayward child or any situation where we others make things more difficult than they should have been. Once again, this didn’t take God by surprise. He has just led Moses through an exercise of intercession. One of the things we are to do for other on a daily basis and what Jesus does for us on a daily basis. Moses is being a leader and God is moving through the act while allowing him to learn.

## Moses breaks the Law

**15 And Moses turned and went down from the mountain, and the two tablets of the Testimony were in his hand. The tablets were written on both sides; on the one side and on the other they were written. 16 Now the tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God engraved on the tablets.**

**17 And when Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, "There is a noise of war in the camp."**

**18 But he said:**

**"It is not the noise of the shout of victory,  
Nor the noise of the cry of defeat,  
But the sound of singing I hear."**

**19 So it was, as soon as he came near the camp, that he saw the calf and the dancing. So Moses' anger became hot, and he cast the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. 20 Then he took the calf which they had made, burned it in the fire, and ground it to powder; and he scattered it on the water and made the children of Israel drink it. 21 And Moses said to Aaron, "What did this people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?"**

As Moses descends, he meets back up with Joshua who heard a great commotion; not of war or victory, but of singing. The people were worshipping, albeit they were doing it in the wrong way.

- Moses gets angry and breaks the tablets upon which the Law was written with God's own hand. This was a common way of symbolizing that the covenant had been broken.
- Grinding up the calf and making the people drink it was a somewhat common way of "killing" the calf.

- Moses then interrogates Aaron, since he was left in charge and should have known better.

***22 So Aaron said, “Do not let the anger of my lord become hot. You know the people, that they are set on evil. 23 For they said to me, ‘Make us gods that shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ 24 And I said to them, ‘Whoever has any gold, let them break it off.’ So they gave it to me, and I cast it into the fire, and this calf came out.”***

- Aaron deflects and passes the buck. “The calf just appeared out of the fire!”

***25 Now when Moses saw that the people were unrestrained (for Aaron had not restrained them, to their shame among their enemies), 26 then Moses stood in the entrance of the camp, and said, “Whoever is on the Lord's side—come to me!” And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together to him. 27 And he said to them, “Thus says the Lord God of Israel: ‘Let every man put his sword on his side, and go in and out from entrance to entrance throughout the camp, and let every man kill his brother, every man his companion, and every man his neighbor.’ ” 28 So the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And about three thousand men of the people fell that day.***

Now a line has been drawn in the sand. The people, themselves, will determine who remain in a default condition of worship and who will remain loyal to God. The Levites – members of the newly established priesthood, aligned themselves with God and Moses, but others didn't and were killed. “God had to nip this in the bud.” We look at it as barbaric, but once again, we aren't in their

culture. Those who were killed CHOSE to remain on the wrong side of God and there was/ is a price to pay for it.

So what's next?

29 Then Moses said, "Consecrate yourselves today to the Lord, that He may bestow on you a blessing this day, for every man has opposed his son and his brother."

- Consecrate yourselves! Set yourselves apart for the worship of God! This is something of a reboot. And it is always what we are to do upon repenting of sin. We are to reboot and start over, having separated ourselves to the worship of God, and Him only. But we must remember, that even though we have repented and consecrated ourselves once again, there are consequences we must endure here on earth. Their "salvation" isn't at stake, but there are always consequences for our actions.

Moses once again intercedes.

***30 Now it came to pass on the next day that Moses said to the people, "You have committed a great sin. So now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." 31 Then Moses returned to the Lord and said, "Oh, these people have committed a great sin, and have made for themselves a god of gold! 32 Yet now, if You will forgive their sin—but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written."***

***33 And the Lord said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My book. 34 Now therefore, go, lead the people to the place of which I have spoken to you. Behold, My Angel shall go before you. Nevertheless, in the day when I visit***



***for punishment, I will visit punishment upon them for their sin.”  
35 So the Lord plagued the people because of what they did with  
the calf which Aaron made.***

- Moses once again treks up the mountain to intercede for the people. It worked before; it will work again.
- The name in the book. The idea that deities kept written records of human activities was common throughout the ANE. Those who perished by the sword were blotted out of the book. Those who didn't perish, were still alive, but would suffer the consequences of their actions.
- But look at verse 34. God would continue to lead the people by the Angel of the Lord. That Angel is Jesus! Though they had done wrong, God was not done with them. He still had a plan, just as HE does for each of us!
- The Israelites, upon missing Moses and the nearer presence of God, wanted to be near God. In that they are to be commended. But they erred in that they fell back on their default idea of worship, which was tainted by what they had seen in Egypt and elsewhere. God is not bound to accept our worship. Think of Cain and Abel. Remember Jephthah in the book of Judges. And I'm sorry, but, "God knows my heart" doesn't cut it. God does know our hearts. They are evil continually. If we throw up some half-baked idea of worship, then God knows it. If we worship Him according to the way the world knows worship, then He knows that also.
- Not talking about guitars/ contemporary vs. traditional.

- We are talking about whether or not we have the awe of God in our hearts. I believe the Israelites were sincere, but they were sincerely wrong.
- We can't allow syncretism to infect us.

### **1 Corinthians 10: 1 – 13**

**1** Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, **2** all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, **3** all ate the same spiritual food, **4** and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ. **5** But with most of them God was not well pleased, for their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. **6** Now these things became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted. **7** And do not become idolaters as were some of them. As it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play." **8** Nor let us commit sexual immorality, as some of them did, and in one day twenty-three thousand fell; **9** nor let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed by serpents; **10** nor complain, as some of them also complained, and were destroyed by the destroyer. **11** Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. **12** Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. **13** No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.

Our entire lives should be treated as worship. Everything we do

should be treated as worship, not just the songs that bookend a church service. If we really know the God we serve, then we can't help but be in awe of Him! Don't let anything or anyone hinder your worship.

The true measure of worship is not how or how many people are moving during the worship service, but how many are allowing themselves to be moved upon by the Holy Spirit.

**Romans 12: 1,2**

**1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. 2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.**