

Exodus 32:1-6

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After Moses stayed on Mt. Sinai longer than expected, the Israelites decided they would make their own god. Aaron went along with the plan and created a golden calf idol. After proclaiming the calf as their god, the Israelites worshipped the calf through sexual immorality, typical of pagan practice.

These six verses provide a record of Israel's first significant failure after agreeing to enter a covenant with the LORD ([Exodus 24:3](#)). The failure involved the making and worshipping of an idol in direct violation of Israel's promise to honor and obey the covenant. Ironically, it happened when Moses was on Mount Sinai as he was receiving instructions regarding the tabernacle, and how to worship the LORD.

It appeared to *the people* of Israel that *Moses delayed to come down from the mountain*. The Hebrew word for *delayed* ("bozes") is usually translated "to be ashamed." It could be that the people perceived Moses' failure to return to them as an embarrassment. Or perhaps that Moses had abandoned them, making them feel foolish for agreeing to the covenant. Or perhaps that Moses was falling away from the covenant, or that God was not meeting their expectations in other ways. They seem to have been disappointed, indicating that they expected Moses to return more quickly.

When they received the law in [Exodus 19-20](#), it appears that Moses was not up on the mountain for long. It also appears that the people were aware of God's presence during that time ([Exodus 20:18-21](#)). So now perhaps "out of sight out of mind" sets in. They expected Moses to be gone for a short time, and he has been gone for what was probably about a month at this point. They might have thought that he was never coming back to the camp, which would free them from being under Moses' (and God's) authority. They did seem inclined to resist being under Moses' authority anyway (see [Exodus 14:11 – 12](#) for an example). Moses had told them to wait for his return ([Exodus 24:14](#)), but instead they hastened to idolatry.

Actually, Moses was not *delayed* but was rather on the LORD's timetable. The people were on their own timetable. Moses was *delayed* based on their expectations. Therefore the root of their disobedience is unwillingness to walk

in obedience when God did not perform according to their expectations. This should be a cautionary tale for all believers. [1 Corinthians 10:5-7](#) states this overtly, that believers should learn from the negative example of this first generation, and take note of the negative consequences that resulted from their bad choices.

Instead of waiting for Moses to return to them from meeting with the LORD, *the people assembled about Aaron and said to him, "Come, make us a god who will go before us."* The faith and covenant commitment of the people was too weak to wait any longer, and they immediately reverted to the culture of Egypt. To justify their request for Aaron to make them an idol, they blamed *this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt*. The phrase *this Moses* illustrates that fact that without Moses (and God) having a visible presence, the people did not respect him or his authority. And they did not respect God, in spite of all they had seen of His mighty hand in delivering them from Egypt. In fact, they had complained to Moses on several occasions ([Exodus 14:11](#); [16:2](#); [17:3](#)).

Here, they express that Moses was unreliable because they *do not know what has become of him*. This is another expression of the fundamental problem: the people had to *know*. If they did not see, they would not believe. Further, they had to have things go according to their expectations or they would conclude, "We can't depend on (trust) God." Putting faith into action means trusting in God's benevolence when things do not go according to our expectations, but trusting/depending anyway. The first generation provides here a stark (negative) example of how a lack of active faith and commitment can be expressed.

Aaron's response was in complete agreement with the people. It appears that he did not oppose them or argue against creating an idol. We should have expected Aaron to walk in faith. Instead, he followed the will of the people and *said to them, "Tear off the gold rings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me."* The *gold rings* were probably those that the Israelites acquired from the Egyptians, jewelry which they brought with them when they left Egypt ([Exodus 11:2-3](#); [12:35f](#)). They were to give the wealth that the LORD gave to them so a dumb idol could be built.

In obedience to Aaron's command, *all the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears and brought them to Aaron*. The word translated *tore off* (Heb. "paraq") is the same as in verse 2 in Aaron's command to "tear off" the gold rings, showing enthusiastic and immediate

obedience. The people were quite obedient when they were commanded to do something they wanted to do anyway. This is another cautionary tale about the nature of living faith. It often involves doing things that go against our base nature, that which Paul calls the “flesh” ([Genesis 22](#); [Deuteronomy 8:3](#); [Galatians 5:13-18](#)).

Aaron then *took this* (the gold) *from their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool and made it into a molten calf*. The word translated *fashioned* (Heb. “tsur”) is related to the word in [Genesis 2:7](#) where it says that the LORD God “formed” man. It implies an artistic endeavor, which seems to be the case in this verse. Aaron used a “graving tool” to make the idol. This implies that Aaron spent a considerable amount of time creating the golden calf idol. In the Ancient Near East, the “calf” (or young bull or ox) represented fertility, sexual strength, and strong power.

When the idol was ready, *they said, “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt*. The *they* might refer to Aaron and other leaders. Aaron identified this idol as the *god* who delivered them from Egypt. The phrase *this is your god* could be translated “these are your gods” because the word for “god” (Heb. “elohim”) is plural.

The golden calf was now made and was accepted by the people. They had now moved from worshipping only the LORD to engaging in pagan idolatry, and worshipping multiple gods. They moved from swearing allegiance to the covenant offered them by the Lord God ([Exodus 24:3](#)) to breaking the first two of the Ten Commandments in one collective action. They reverted to following the practices of the pagan society (Egypt) that had enslaved and abused them, instead of trusting in their LORD who had delivered them. This is, sadly, a clear picture of what we do as believers when we follow the ways of sin ([Romans 6:12-16](#)).

In verse 5, it appears that Aaron had second thoughts about what he had done, because when he *saw this, he built an altar before it*. When he saw the people’s enthusiasm for this idolatry, he might have attempted to direct them back to worshipping the LORD by building an altar “before” (meaning “in front of”) the idol. He might have done this to distract the people from concentrating on the idol and get their minds back on the LORD.

Aaron might have reasoned that he had to accommodate the people’s request for an idol (or else they might replace or kill him). Perhaps he aimed to get them to worship both the LORD as well as the idol. This would be consistent with Aaron’s plural use of “gods” in the phrase *this is your god*. Aaron will

soon tell Moses that the Israelites are “prone to evil” (verse 22) which might have been part of his rationale for submitting to the people out of concern for his own position, and perhaps safety. Regardless of his reasons, Aaron’s actions led to a violation of at least the first three (and probably the first four) of the Ten Commandments, the foundation of the covenant Israel had just agreed to ([Exodus 24:3](#)). So he is leading the people astray.

Then, *Aaron made a proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord.”* The altar to the LORD was built, and it was now time to worship Him. This ceremony occurred *the next day*. So, *they rose early and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings*, which was an acceptable form of worshipping the LORD. But then, after they worshipped the LORD, the people engaged in Egyptian pagan worship.

Afterward, *the people sat down to eat and to drink*. They might have initially ate and drank unto the LORD. But the next phrase clearly refers to the sexual promiscuity involved in pagan idolatry. At a minimum, their eating and drinking devolved into pagan worship. Subsequent to feasting, the Israelites *rose up to play*.

The Hebrew word for *play*, “tsakhaq,” is related to the name Isaac, which means “laughter.” It is also used in [Genesis 26:8](#), which says that “Isaac was **caressing** Rebekah his wife.” This suggests sexual activity. That was probably the case here. Sexual immorality was intimately associated with pagan worship. This episode is referred to in [1 Corinthians 10](#) as an example of behavior that gains the displeasure of the LORD. Behavior Christians should learn from and avoid. Immediately after quoting verse 6 (*the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play*), [1 Corinthians 10:8](#) states, “Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day.” This indicates that pagan sexual practices were being engaged in. One of the primary attractions of paganism is that it provides a moral justification for immoral sexual behavior, since it is part of worshipping the idol.

So, it appears that the people were mixing pagan practices (probably learned in Egypt, see [Leviticus 18](#)) with worshipping the LORD. It seems they needed a visible representation of a god in order to worship Him. They were defining who they would worship and upon what terms they would worship instead of following the terms of the LORD (as defined in chapters 25 – 31).

The Israelites seemed to be fine following the LORD only so long as they stood in fear of the LORD’s mighty hand, He was meeting their expectations,

or it was consistent with their desires. Now that the LORD's presence was removed, and God's commands were inconvenient, they began to follow their own passions. Ironically, as they are doing this, Moses is on Mount Sinai receiving plans to give the people a visible representation of God in their midst, in the form of the tabernacle and its furnishings.

If Aaron was hoping to turn the people back to worshipping the LORD, it clearly didn't work. Once idolatry is allowed, it pollutes all else, and is difficult to eliminate. This supports God's complete prohibition of idols and all pagan practices associated with idolatry. Rationalization never substitutes for obedience.

On this occasion, at least two (and arguably four) of the Ten Commandments were broken. First, the people worshipped a god other than the LORD ([Exodus 20:3](#)). Second, they made an idol ([Exodus 20:4 – 6](#)). Third, they arguably took the name of the LORD in vain by identifying their "play" as a valid form of worship ([Exodus 20:7](#)). Fourth, engaging in this sexually immoral "play" violated the seventh commandment to not commit adultery ([Exodus 20:14](#)).

These actions on the part of Aaron and the people were a direct, comprehensive violation of the covenant that they had just agreed to obey ([Exodus 24:3](#)). An appropriate consequence for this gross violation and rebellion from the vassals (the people) would include death at the hands of the Suzerain (Ruler). Hundreds of years later, Israel would break its vassal covenant with Babylon by switching its allegiance to Egypt, and suffer the consequence of invasion, mass death, and exile ([1 Chronicles 9:1](#)).

Later in Israel's history, King Jeroboam, the first king of the northern kingdom (called Israel), made two golden calves ([1 Kings 12:26 – 33](#)). He placed one of them in Bethel, a city at the southern boundary of his realm, and he placed the other one in Dan, the northernmost city in the kingdom. Jeroboam's reason for doing this was to give his people a visible place to go and worship, without needing to travel to the rival southern kingdom of Judah in order to worship in Solomon's temple (as they were supposed to do, according to the LORD's command). Jeroboam was more concerned with maintaining political position than in obeying God's commands.

Biblical Text:

¹Now when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people assembled about Aaron and said to him, "Come,

make us a god who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.”² Aaron said to them, “Tear off the gold rings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring *them* to me.”³ Then all the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears and brought *them* to Aaron.⁴ He took *this* from their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool and made it into a molten calf; and they said, “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.”⁵ Now when Aaron saw *this*, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made a proclamation and said, “Tomorrow *shall be* a feast to the Lord.”⁶ So the next day they rose early and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play.