

Exodus 32:15-20

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/exod/exod-32/exodus-3215-20/>

Moses obeys the LORD and descended Mount Sinai carrying the two tablets of the law. He returned to the Israelite camp and saw the golden calf and the people's revelry. After throwing down and shattering the tablets, he destroyed the calf idol and made the people of Israel drink its residue.

Having successfully interceded for the disobedient Israelites and saving them from complete destruction, *Moses turned and went down from the mountain.*

With him he carried *the two tablets of the testimony in his hand*. These were probably the tablets mentioned in [Exodus 31:18](#), and upon them were written the Ten Commandments. *They were written on both sides; they were written on one side and the other.* This is the only place in the Bible where it states that the commands were *written on both sides* of the stones. These tablets *were God's work, and the writing was God's writing engraved on the tablets*. The *tablets* and the *writing* on them were of divine origin. This description was probably added to the text in order to give a stark contrast to the calf idol and its origin—sinful man.

According to [Exodus 24:13](#), Joshua went up Mount Sinai with Moses, but probably only halfway. This would explain why Joshua was not mentioned in the passage where the people asked Aaron for an idol. So, when Moses came back down from the top of the mountain, he met Joshua, and *when Joshua heard the sound of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, "There is a sound of war in the camp."* Moses, having been informed by the LORD about what was happening, corrected Joshua, saying that, *It is not the sound of the cry of triumph, Nor is it the sound of the cry of defeat; But the sound of singing I hear.* In other words, it was not the *sound of war* (victory or defeat) but the sound of revelry.

Moses and Joshua continued down the mountain, and *it came about, as soon as Moses came near the camp, that he saw the calf and the dancing*. Moses knew at once that the *dancing* was not a mere celebration but an act of pagan worship to the calf. The *dancing* probably included sexual immorality, a mainstay of pagan worship. Thus *Moses' anger burned, and he threw the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain*. The breaking of the tablets into pieces was probably meant to symbolize the

breaking of the covenant by the Israelites. The Suzerain LORD was on the mountain, and His vassals (the people of Israel) were at the foot of the mountain. The broken tablets between the two parties of the covenant showed that the covenant between them was broken.

Verse 20 describes the actions that Moses took in response to what he saw.

First, *he took the calf which they had made and burned it with fire*. This showed the people that the calf-god could do nothing to defend itself and thus was not a real god worthy of worship. Moses melted it down. It was made by man, now it was destroyed by man.

Second, he *ground it to powder*. Destroying the calf completely was an act of disrespect towards it. The calf had no power. It did not deserve to exist, and the people needed to see this. How they would have converted the melted gold into gold dust is unknown. It could be that the calf was made of wood and overlaid with gold, in which case much of the *powder* could have been like sawdust. In any case, the gold, which probably came from the pilfering of the Egyptians, would never be used in the worship of the LORD after it was offered to an idol.

Next, he *scattered it over the surface of the water*. Mixing the *powder* in water was a preparation for Moses' final action.

He *made the sons of Israel drink it*. This would likely have been unpleasant. But by consuming the idol that they had worshipped, several points were being made. It would show the people that the idol was completely powerless, having been consumed. And it would inevitably become human waste, showing the extent of it being unclean, and how low it ought to be valued. It is not likely that all two million Israelites drank the water with gold dust. Probably, only the leaders of the people drank it.

Doing these actions vividly demonstrated to the people that they had sinned a great sin against their LORD and violated the covenant that they had agreed to follow ([Exodus 24:3](#)). It also demonstrated the folly of claiming an idol made by their own hands actually had any divine power.

Biblical Text:

¹⁵ Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets which were written on both sides; they were written on one *side* and the other. ¹⁶ The tablets were

God's work, and the writing was God's writing engraved on the tablets. ¹⁷ Now when Joshua heard the sound of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, "There is a sound of war in the camp." ¹⁸ But he said,

"It is not the sound of the cry of triumph,
Nor is it the sound of the cry of defeat;
But the sound of singing I hear."

¹⁹ It came about, as soon as Moses came near the camp, that he saw the calf and *the* dancing; and Moses' anger burned, and he threw the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain. ²⁰ He took the calf which they had made and burned *it* with fire, and ground it to powder, and scattered it over the surface of the water and made the sons of Israel drink *it*.