

The Removal and Restoration of the Divine Presence in Exodus 32

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Introduction

Exodus is a glorious book recounting God's remembrance of his promises to ages past and his faithful provision to bring those promises to fulfillment. The powerful narrative begins with Moses being chosen of God to lead the Israelites out from under the oppressive thumb of the Egyptians. Performing miraculous signs and wonders in the sight of Pharaoh and all of Egypt, God's chosen one delivers the Israelites from slavery and leads them out of bondage. Once safe from the reach of the Egyptians who dare chase after them, the Israelites proceed to Mount Sinai where the Israelites enter a covenant with YHWH himself. He will be their God and they will be his people. He will protect them and provide for them and give them victory that they might inherit the land promised to their forefathers many years before. In exchange, the Israelites covenant to obey, worship and honor God: "When Moses went and told the people all the Lord's words and laws, they responded with one voice, 'Everything the Lord has said we will do'" (Exod. 24:3¹).

Now delivered from Egypt and in covenant with YHWH, the Israelites are to receive the very presence of God in their midst to lead them. Joy should move their hearts that the Lord, their Deliverer, should be gracious enough to now enter into their midst and dwell with them. Indeed, beginning in chapter 25, God has been presenting Moses with the "blueprints" for an elaborate tabernacle, replete with ornate furnishings and the finest of materials, in which God was to reside with his people. Images reminiscent of God's heavenly throne room flood the imaginations of the Israelites who receive these plans knowing that YHWH deserves only the best of their worship.

But then the moving narrative comes to a "screeching halt." Rather than transition from these elaborate plans for the tabernacle directly into its highly anticipated construction, chapters 32-34 present an untimely interruption. As

¹ All Bible verses are from NIV translation unless otherwise noted.

C.A. Coates aptly notes, “It would be great if we could pass directly from what has been before us to the construction of the tabernacle. But to do so would be to ignore matters which, though sorrowful and humbling, are necessary to be known.”² C.H. Mackintosh vividly underscores the significance of this interruption observing,

We have now to contemplate something very different from that which has hitherto engaged our attention. “The patterns of things in the heavens” has been before us – Christ in His glorious Person, gracious offices, and perfect work, as set forth in the tabernacle and all its mystic furniture. We have been, in spirit, on the mount, hearkening to God’s own words – the sweet utterances of Heaven’s thoughts, affections, and counsels of which Jesus is “the Alpha and the Omega – the beginning and the ending – the first and the last.” Now, however, we are called down to earth, to behold the melancholy wreck which man makes of everything to which he puts his hand.³

The “melancholy wreck” to which Mackintosh refers is the infamous account in Exodus 32 of the idolatrous worship of the golden calf. While it would certainly prove more expeditious and enjoyable to circumvent this disastrous sub-narrative, the interlude itself presents a powerful message that is both timeless and universal. That message is as simple as it is unmistakable: sin brings God’s people under judgment, compromising his very presence from within their midst, only be restored through the substitutionary work of a holy mediator. An exploration of the themes of sin, judgment, mediation and the divine presence in Exodus 32 reveals its import as an unexpected disruption of the flow of the Exodus narrative.

Idolatry: The People Of God Seek The Divine Presence In Graven Images

“The Lord said to Moses, ‘Come up to me on the mountain and stay here’” (Exod. 24:12). With those words, Moses ascends Mount Sinai, disappearing into the cloud of the glory of the Lord. As Moses nears the completion of his time on the mountain, the people down below become restless, turning to a molten calf to worship. Before even leaving the place where the covenant is ratified, the people break it. Verse 19 declares, “When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain”, the broken tablets powerfully symbolizing the broken covenant.

² C.A. Coates. *An Outline of the Book of Exodus*. (England: Stow Hill Bible and Tract Depot, no date), 274.

³ C.H. Mackintosh. *Notes on the book of Exodus*. (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, Inc., 1965), 355-6.

Discussions of the idolatry and sin of the Israelites in Exodus 32 typically revolve around a few themes. First, of what commands are the Israelites guilty of violation? George A.F. Knight, in his *Theology as Narration*, states, “We are to remember that at this point Israel has now broken the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 5th and 7th Commandments.”⁴ Text critical issues, such as the apparent ambiguity in verse 4 (verses 1, 8, 23 and 31 also share this same difficulty) surrounding the number attached to the noun “God”, raise even more pointed questions. Should it be read as “This is your God” as the New American Standard translates it or “These are your gods” as the New International Version translates it? Another common question to ask surrounds the involvement of Aaron in this incident. To what extent is he guilty of culpable? To what degree is he complicit in this collective transgression? In fact, Jewish tradition has fully developed arguments and scenarios where Aaron should be acquitted of any wrongdoing, though the plain reading of the text (corroborated in the Deuteronomy 9 account) clearly lays blame on Aaron.⁵ While these may be interesting questions, they fail to recognize the central focus of the passage.

The far more significant question is to ask is, “Why is the moral failure of the Israelites here so horrific?” This event in question is of great consequence in that it offers the first reference to sin and moral failure in the book of Exodus (see verses 30-31). Though this is not the first account of human shortcoming (consider Moses murdering the Egyptian in chapter 2 or the Israelites grumbling for water in chapter 17), it is the first incident labeled as such. Irrespective of “This is your God” or “These are your gods” as translational preferences, the remainder of the sentence reveals the text’s primary essence. “These are your gods, O Israel, *who brought you up out of Egypt*” (Exod. 32:4 – emphasis added). The Israelites, in their sin, attribute to a man-made image the very power and handiwork of YHWH in their deliverance from slavery. Three reasons best explain the importance of the idolatry committed with that confession from the lips of the Israelites.

The first reason that the idolatry of the Israelites is so terrible is because it clearly demonstrates the inability of the people to keep the terms of the covenant under their own power. They have not even left the location where they have made the covenant, yet already they have broken it. In the prelude to the Ten Commandments, God spoke the words, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Exod. 20:2). There they were, in the very location where they heard those words from YHWH ascribing that exact deliverance to the molten calf. In their own strength, the

⁴ George A.F. Knight. *Theology as Narration*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 188.

⁵ Scott M. Langston. *Exodus Through the Centuries*. Blackwell Bible Commentaries. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 239.

Israelites were unable to keep the terms of the covenant. Romans 3:20 elaborates, “Through the law we become conscious of sin” (NIV). Instead of being life and joy, the law reveals the wickedness of the Israelites and their inability to abide by its precepts.

Secondly, the idolatry of the Israelites is so awful in that it adversely effects not only their own generation, but also all foreseeable progeny. Moses writes the book of Exodus to the second generation of Israelites as they wait in the plains of Moab to enter Canaan, the Promised Land. Moses knows that on the other side of the Jordan they will be tempted to bow to the gods of the land, the Baals and the Asherahs, just as the first generation bowed to the molten calf. Moses highlights the appalling sin of the first generation as a warning to the second. Even a cursory overview of the book of Judges reveals that the Israelites did not heed the warning. Furthermore, idolatry continued to plague even the New Testament church, causing Paul to admonish the Corinthians, “Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry” (1 Cor. 10:14). The apostle John echoes that sentiment when he writes, “Dear children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21). Thus, idolatry is universal to the Israelite narrative and seems inimical to the human condition. Coates appropriately observes, “I suppose that much that is idolatrous in its nature has been furthered in Christendom by good men – true saints of God.”⁶

Thirdly, their idolatry is so dreadful because it tragically coincides with God’s own provisions for cohabiting with his people in the tabernacle. Instead of waiting for Moses’ imminent return and the construction of the tabernacle, they looked for another way to have the divine in their midst. They longed for the divine presence, but did so by exchanging YHWH for a golden calf. They wanted their God to be with them, as well they should. God’s presence among his people is a dominant theme throughout the Scriptures. The longing for the divine presence was not the problem but, rather, that “In their impatience they demand and make for themselves what Yahweh has already made provision for and is about to give them.”⁷

R.W.L. Moberly, in his seminal work on Exodus 32-34 *At the Mountain of God*, explores in detail the issue of the divine presence among the Israelites.

Finally, because the relationship between Yahweh and Israel has now been regularized and set on a formal basis, a new symbol of Yahweh’s presence among the people is needed. This is to be a portable shrine. The presence of Yahweh among his people is a central concern in the OT. Since, at least in the early period, Yahweh’s presence was not so much conceived abstracted as connected with some visible symbol or manifestation, and since Yahweh’s

⁶ Coates, 276.

⁷ R.W.L. Moberly. *At the Mountain of God: Story and Theology in Exodus*. (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1983), 48.

relationship with Israel has been set upon a permanent and regular basis, some permanent symbol of Yahweh's presence among Israel is now appropriate. It is the ark and tabernacle which fulfil (*sic*) this role.⁸

He continues, saying, "It seems clear that the calf was actually intended as a symbol of the divine presence in a more real" way than either Moses or the tabernacle could be.⁹ The idolatry of the Israelites is so deplorable because they looked to a golden calf to be "God with them", not to the very symbols of the divine presence provided by YHWH himself. As Mackintosh notes, "The human heart loves something that can be seen; it loves that which meets and gratifies the senses."¹⁰ They are unsatisfied with God's chosen means of self-revelation, instead longing for a visual depiction of the divine.

Again, Paul's letter to the Romans provides an insightful commentary. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:21-25).

This passage, though certainly bearing strong resemblance, was not about Exodus 32. Rather, it is about all humanity worshipping images of the created instead of the Creator. In the midst of trial and heartache people often ask, "God, where are you?" Humanity longs for the divine presence. Ironically, it is exactly that idolatry, of seeking the eternal in the temporal, the supernatural in the natural, the divine in the created, that costs the Israelites that which they most longed for as it costs them the presence of YHWH.

Judgment: The Divine Presence Revoked From The People Of God

Having been warned by God about the activities of the people below, Moses bounds down the mountain where he is reunited with Joshua. Even from far off, as they progress toward the camp, they hear the singing and dancing and revelry coming from the Israelites' camp. Upon his arrival at the camp, Moses immediately burns the calf into powder and dumps it into the stream that provides their drinking water, warning the people that they will have to drink the consequences of their actions. Coates states the case plainly, "If I make an idol I shall have to drink it in bitterness; I shall have to taste what it really is. God is set on reality with His people, and if we play with things of an idolatrous

⁸ Ibid., 45.

⁹ Ibid., 47.

¹⁰ Mackintosh, 356.

nature God will teach us, sooner or later, the real character of what we have played with.”¹¹ Drinking the polluted water anticipated the coming judgment resulting from their polluted hearts.

The Israelites' idolatry draws into focus an image of God's wrath and jealousy as their actions elicits his judgment. “Yahweh is a jealous God, and any attempt to make the worship of a god made in the image of man serve his glory is doomed to judgment,” writes Knight.¹² The punishment is more severe than even most recognize. There are three levels to the judgment for their sin. First, Moses, standing at the gate of the camp, calls out, “Whoever is for the Lord, come to me” (Exod. 32:26). As the Levites gather to him, he commissions them to go and slay the idolaters with the sword. The Levites proceed to kill three thousand of their own brothers, their fellow Israelites. The judgment does not end there. Moses sends the sword, but God sends a plague. The Israelites pay dearly for their sin as many die and many more become sick and diseased.

Though the judgments are severe thus far, it is the third aspect of the judgment that proves most costly. God wants the Israelites to learn that “sin and apostasy *matter*.”¹³ YHWH punishes the people for bowing in worship to the idol by removing his presence from among them.

God removed His presence from them. Read carefully 32:34, 33:1. God was here teaching the people the fundamental principle that sin separates from God, that He cannot live in the midst of a sinful people. Sin must go or God will go. Separation from God always has been and always will be an irresistible issue of sin.¹⁴

The sin of the Israelites is, as stated previously, a misappropriated longing for God in their midst, resulting in an idolatrous substitution of a false god for YHWH himself. As a result, they lose the divine presence of YHWH, the true God. The One who had delivered them from the bondage of slavery and with whom they had entered into covenant relationship removes His presence from among them. They have broken the covenant and will receive its curses. Nowhere in this passage is this seen more powerfully than when God tells Moses, “*Your* people, whom *you* brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt” (Exod. 32:7 – emphasis added). God disowns the people. He offers to give them an angel to lead them to Canaan (even yet, he would fulfill his

¹¹ Coates, 280.

¹² Knight, 186.

¹³ Knight, 186.

¹⁴ M. Ryerson Turnbull. *Studying the Book of Exodus*. (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1925), 84.

promises), but they will do so without him in their midst. “But I will not go with you” declared the Lord (Exod. 33:3).

The loss of the divine presence has always been the penalty for sin. When Adam and Eve ate from the restricted tree, they were expelled from the garden where they used to walk in intimacy with God (Gen. 3). When Jeremiah, long after Moses, was warning the Israelites (who had now been in Canaan for many years) of the impending exile from the land due to their sin, the Lord said to him, “Even if Moses and Samuel were to stand before me, my heart would not go out to this people. Send them away from my presence! Let them go” (Jer. 15:1). Jeremiah’s successor, Ezekiel, writing in the middle of the exile, had a vision of the temple. As the tabernacle was to be the portable home to God’s presence, the temple was God’s permanent home in the capital of Jerusalem. Because of the sin of the people, “the glory of the Lord departed from over the threshold of the temple” (Ezek. 10:18).

Sin does matter. It must be punished. God will judge fairly. And the punishment deserved by the deeds of idolaters is death. Romans 6:23 declares, “The wages of sin is death.” Death is ultimate separation from the divine presence and is the future that awaits all who bow their knee to another.

Mediation: Moses Goes Before The Divine Presence On The Behalf Of The People Of God

Having proclaimed them guilty of idolatry and having punished them for their sin, Moses declares to the people, “You have committed a great sin. But now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin” (Exod. 32:30). After speaking these words, Moses returns up the mountain he had just descended. This time he meets with YHWH, not with the glorious vision of a home for God amongst the people, but hearing from God’s own voice that he was removing his presence from them.

Moses, speaking to God as only a friend can, implores God to relent. “Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin – but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written” (Exod. 32:31-32). Moses goes before a holy God imploring for mercy, mediating on behalf of the people, begging for divine forgiveness, pleading for permission to stand as their substitute, and offering to bear the wrath of God for their sin. Turnbull notes the power of Moses’ intercession, saying, “Is there in the whole Bible a more God-like act than this? Is there anything that more nearly approaches Calvary?”¹⁵

¹⁵ Turnbull, 86.

But God rejects Moses' request. The people had to pay for their sin. Moses cannot stand as their substitute. Moses himself, though God's beloved friend, is still a sinner and the curse of the covenant prevents him from ever entering Canaan. He cannot make atonement for the people. Scott Langston, in his work *Exodus Through the Centuries*, Rabbi James K. Gutheim, of the Dispersed of Judah, his congregation in New Orleans in 1854, recounts Gutheim's argument against Christian claims for vicarious atonement based on this text.

He asserts that God rejecting Moses' offer to remove himself from God's book on Israel's behalf invalidates vicarious atonement. The rabbi warns against using "false means" to obtain God's forgiveness: "Every man is individually held responsible for his acts. He has the power to restore the disturbed relations between himself and his Maker by his own individual exertions. *The Bible sanctions no vicarious atonement, no expiation of sin by proxy.*¹⁶ Rabbi Gutheim correctly understands God's denial of Moses' request. Moses offers to give his life on behalf of the people only to have God reject his request. But Gutheim fails to grasp why the offer is rejected. YHWH denies the request not because "the Bible sanctions no vicarious atonement," but rather because Moses is an insufficient mediator of the covenant. Moses' own sin prevents him from taking upon himself the sin of the people.

The people bow in worship to a false god and for that they stand condemned. The loss of lives pales in comparison with the loss of YHWH's presence. Not even Moses, their mediator, can absorb the wrath of God for them. Such wrath, necessitated by human evil, raises the question, "What hope is there for the restoration of the divine presence?"

The parallel text of Ezekiel 10, previously referenced, in which the glory of the Lord, symbolizing God's presence, leaves the temple, renders some hopeful indication as to a future grace. Ezekiel presents a new temple to be constructed upon return from exile. Ezekiel describes it saying, "The glory of the Lord filled the temple" (Ezek. 43:5). He continues, quoting the words of the Lord to him, "Son of man, this is the place of my throne and the place for the soles of my feet. This is where I will live among the Israelites forever" (Ezek. 43:7) and "Now let them put away from me their prostitution and the lifeless idols of their kings, and I will live among them forever" (Ezek. 43:9). The book of Ezekiel closes with glorious imagery of this new temple and God's presence with his people, capped off by the magnificent words, "And the name of the city from that time on will be: The Lord is there" (Ezek. 48:35). God promises to restore his presence to his people. They are to put away their idols and live with him in their midst forever.

¹⁶ Langston, 248.

But this glorious image fails to answer several key concerns. If not even Moses can bear the wrath of God, how will that image become reality? How will the wrath of God be propitiated and the presence of God restored? Who can accomplish that which even Moses could not?

Restoration: The Divine Presence Restored To The People Of God Through The Atoning Work Of Christ

Gutheim was wrong. The Bible does teach vicarious atonement. But it would require one even greater than Moses to accomplish that atonement. Thus, God himself descends from the glory of heaven to come as a human to make atonement. Jesus Christ left the throne-room of heaven for a manger, where, as the prophet Isaiah foretold in Isaiah 7:14, he was called Immanuel, God with us. Jesus perfectly mediates the terms of the covenant and restores to Israel the presence of God in three phases.

In his first coming, Jesus brought the presence of God to bear on the world. John 1 powerfully declares that Jesus is “God with skin on.” He is God become man. The imagery of John 1 envisions the tabernacle that was to be God’s dwelling place with Israel when it says, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). “The verb translated ‘made his dwelling’ means ‘made his tent’ or ‘tabernacled.’ This language recalls Israel’s tabernacle, which served as the place of God’s presence on Earth in the days of Moses (Exod. 40:34-35) – Jesus fulfilled that purpose in his incarnation.”¹⁷

Jesus’ perfect mediation for the people of God did not end upon his ascension back to the heavens. No, even today he continues to mediate for the people. Jesus “bore the judgment of His people, in His own blessed Person, on the cross; and, having done all, He went back to heaven... to lay upon the throne of the Majesty in the highest the imperishable memorials of an atonement already accomplished.”¹⁸ Jesus continues to bring the presence of God to his people. He gives the Holy Spirit to his people such that his presence now indwells them, rendering a physical tabernacle obsolete. “For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, “I will dwell in them and walk among them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (2 Cor. 6:16, NAS).

Even now the imagery of Ezekiel and the restored presence of God remain incomplete. That new city whose name will be “The Lord is there” still looms on the horizon of the future. It is Jesus who will finally bring the people of God forever into the presence of YHWH. In his revelation, John describes that glorious day,

¹⁷ Richard L. Pratt, Ed. *Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Corporation, 2003), 1699.

¹⁸ Mackintosh, 362.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God' (Rev. 21:1-3).

Conclusion

It is YHWH whom delivered the Israelites from the bondage of slavery to the Egyptians and with whom they entered covenant relationship. And it is YHWH whom they longed to have in their midst. But instead of building the tabernacle to be God's dwelling place, they worshipped a molten calf. Moses was right when he exclaimed, "Oh, what a great sin these people have committed," (Exod. 32:31) a sin so great that the judgment resulted in the removal of the divine presence from among them and a sin so severe that not even Moses could atone for it.

As Coates says, "In thinking much of God's *grace*, we must also remember His righteous *government*; it is as certain and inexorable as His grace is rich and free."¹⁹ His righteous government led to judgment and YHWH removing his presence from the people. His grace sent Jesus, the only one who has ever perfectly kept the terms of the covenant and the only one who has never bowed to another god. It is this perfect Jesus, God's Son, who restored the divine presence to the people of God on the cross and, with his resurrection, lives even now, indwelling God's people in anticipation of that day when he will create a new heaven and a new earth. On that magnificent day the people of God will gather today and proclaim, "God is with us!"

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¹⁹ Coates, 280-1.

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