

**Session 27– Study Notes**  
**Exodus 32:1 – 33:6**  
**Rev. Janice Y Cook – The Village Church**

1. The episode of the golden calf shocks and disturbs us. As it comes so quickly on the heels of Yahweh's giving of the Torah to Moses and to the nation on Mt. Sinai.
2. Having been compassionately embraced and delivered from their peril, the people restlessly turn away from God to gods of gold, gods shaped by their own hand.
3. The ironic effect of their idolatry is that the people forfeit the very divine presence they had hoped to bind more closely to themselves.
4. The problem is fundamentally not one of disobedience to a law code; It is a matter of unfaithfulness to the God who had bound himself to a people.
5. The issue presented initially in chapter 32 is that of a leadership vacuum. Without proper leadership the people can flounder.
6. The people confront Aaron, who was given responsibility of leadership in Moses' absence.
7. The people demand that he make an image of "a god" to go before them to lead them to the promised land. Without hesitation Aaron accedes to their request.
8. The calf image is represented as Aaron's idea, no doubt picking up on ubiquitous symbol of deity in the ancient Near East.
9. The golden calf represented God's power for having delivered the Israelites from Egypt.
10. The people are requesting an image of the messenger of God (not a substitute).
11. The construction of an image of the divine messenger would give the messenger a more permanent place at the lead of the community.
12. The people begin to engage in acts of worship reserved for worship of Yahweh.
13. The sections that follow, through chapter 34 present a veritable "mosaic" of traditions that has been built up to provide a multifaceted look at the efforts of God and Moses to come to terms with this apostasy, this rebellion and abandonment of faith in God's leadership and the rejection of a covenanted relationship.
14. In this story, the God of Israel is revealed as one who is open to change.
15. God will move from decisions made, from courses charted, in view of the ongoing interaction with those affected
16. Human prayer (in this case intercession) is honored by God as a contribution to a conversation that has the capacity to change future directions for God, people, and the world.
17. Moses dissuades the Lord from destroying the people with two arguments. (Vs. 11 -14)

- The effect the destruction of the Israelites would have on the Egyptians
  - The Lord's covenant with the ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
18. Moses confronts Aaron about his lack of leadership. Moses then calls all the Israelites who fear God to join him in an act of holy war against the others. The Levites respond, killing 3,000 persons.
  19. It is helpful to remember that the writer or editor of Exodus was writing during or after the exile.
  20. The writer is responding to both the destruction of Judah and responding to life under a foreign idolatrous power (Babylon or Persia)
  21. Moses invites the entire community to make a public stand.
  22. Do they belong to Yahweh or not? The great majority of people remain unmoved. Their silent indifference to the call is deafening.
  23. For this juncture in Israel's life, when its entire future is at stake, radical sin is believed to call for radical measures.
  24. Continual life for the community is believed to be possible only through the death of some.
  25. The divine promise of land remains central to the Israelites salvation. God also repeats the promise of an angel or messenger to lead the Israelites into the promised land.
  26. The Lord will not accompany the Israelites on their journey because of their sin of worshiping the golden calf.
  27. The promise of land without the presence of God leads to mourning, not in joy, by the Israelites.
  28. God's directive that they leave Sinai without a tabernacle means that God's dwelling would remain on Mt Sinai rather than among the people.
  29. God leaves the future open. Their obedient response to God's command concerning repentance, together with their ongoing remorse, may be one important sign to God that affects "what to do to you."

## **REFLECTION**

1. What might be your golden calf? That thing that occupies your thoughts and attention and which you direct your energy? That thing that you have come to believe will deliver happiness, joy, or peace?
2. Try to see the human side of this story. What factors could have contributed to their disloyalty to God?
3. Discuss the philosophical question of the death of a few for the survival of many. What do you believe? How would you approach this dilemma in modern times.
4. In this text, Moses appears to be the cooler head than God. What lessons do you think the text teaches us about the nature of God? What about the human ability to influence God?

## **Sources**

1. The Book of Exodus by Brevard Childs
2. Exodus (Interpretation) by Terence Fretheim
3. The Particulars of Rapture by Rabbi Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg

4. Covenant and Conversation by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks
5. The New Interpreter's Bible