

Moses: earth's meekest man

19. The reckoning

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The sin of Israel over the golden calf provokes an angry reaction from Moses but also brings out his love for his people, expressed in his willingness to forgo his own prospects of eternal life if God would forgive Israel.

EVEN BEFORE Moses had seen with his own eyes the depth of the degradation to which Israel had descended in the matter of the golden calf, as reported by Yahweh's angel, he had made an impassioned plea for their preservation from the wrath of the Almighty. But when he turned the corner of the bluff that had shielded the people from view and saw the calf, and the erotic dancing that was taking place around it, his anger "waxed hot", and in a great symbolic gesture he cast the tablets of stone, graven by the hand of Yahweh Himself, onto the rocks below. The nation, as a result of Moses' importuning, had been preserved. Now there had to be a reckoning.

Wrath upon Israel

Striding boldly through the quietening host, Moses made straight for the golden calf and burned it in the fire. Then he ground it to powder, which he strewed upon the camp's water supply, and made the children of Israel drink it, as though to make them swallow down their folly. Next he turned upon his brother Aaron, and demanded to know why he had allowed this terrible act of idolatry and declension to take place:

"What did these people do to you, that you led them into such great sin?", he asked.* "Do not be angry, my lord", Aaron answered. "You know how prone these people are to evil. They said to me, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him'. So I told them, 'Whoever has any gold jewellery, take it off'. Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!" Was there ever so lame an excuse as this, as though the calf had fashioned itself, when Aaron knew perfectly well that he himself had cast it and fashioned it?

And still the people were running wild with the licence to do so that Aaron had afforded them.

So now was the time for action. Moses may have been meek, but he was certainly not mild when circumstances justified it. The people's behaviour had made them a laughing stock in the eyes of the marauding tribes

through whose territories they were travelling. Here were the Israelites, who claimed that their invisible God was above all gods, even those of mighty Egypt, prancing around a golden calf, produced by art of man's devising, and crying, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt"!

But such contempt was not the heart of it, for they had spurned, blasphemed and denied their Deliverer, Who had set them apart from all other nations, destroyed their enemies, and unfailingly provided for them on their way to the land that He had sworn to their forefathers to give them. The time for mere remonstrance was past; the time had come for drastic action. Moses went over to the entrance of the camp, calling out as he went, "Whoever is for the LORD, come to me". And all the Levites, who stood in place of all the first-born of Israel as belonging to the Lord, rallied to him. To them Moses gave the God-given instruction, "Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbour".

The slaughter had to be indiscriminate as far as relationships were concerned, and executed without fear or favour, on the principle that God is not, and cannot be, mocked by whomsoever. But that very same principle implies a selection of those who were to be punished. They could not have been those who just got in the way of the Lord's avengers as they went through the camp from one end to the other. Were the three thousand who were killed those who persisted in their cavorting, both men and women (for the text does not differentiate between the sexes)? Were they those who, by their outlandish dress, or lack of it, and by their drunken behaviour,

* Quotations from Exodus 32 are from the NIV.

were still out of control, whereas others had gone, humiliated, to their tents? We do not know. What we do know is that, by putting God first, even above their closest ties, those Levites had given a lesson that is upheld throughout Scripture and is reinforced by the Lord Jesus himself when he said, "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Mt. 10:37, NIV)

For their single-mindedness, Moses commended the sons of Levi, saying, "You have been set apart to the LORD today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and He has blessed you this day". However, the attrition they had carried out was not the end of the matter as far as Moses and the children of Israel were concerned. They had still to realise the gravity and the consequences of what they had done. Leaving them overnight to contemplate their failure, he called a solemn assembly the following morning and told the people, "You have committed a great sin. But now I will go up to [Yahweh]; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin".

Moses pleads for the people

Then, in the greatest act of self-abnegation of his life, this humble man of God, who had been so humiliated and let down by his people, went up the mountain once more to plead for them: "Oh, what a great sin these people have committed!", he cried. "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". God's response was, "Whoever has sinned against Me I will blot out of My book".

Many have expressed opinions as to Moses' motives and exactly what he meant in saying this. Was he using his request for removal from the book of life as a lever towards the preservation of his people, knowing that, in the last resort, Yahweh, of His very nature, could only behave justly with him? Or was it that life, even the prospect of eternity, could have no meaning for

him without Israel? Was it that he loved them as the spiritual counterparts of the sheep he had so carefully tended on the back side of the neighbouring desert? Whatever it was, it represented an overriding love for his people, such as other shepherds of the sheep, even to the greatest, have also shown.

The Apostle Paul, in mourning the rejection of the Lord Jesus Christ by the descendants of these very same people, expressed a similar anguish when he said, "I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel". Paul then subsumed himself in the greater glory of Israel, saying, "Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is over all. God be for ever praised! Amen" (Rom. 9:1-5, NIV and margin).

In making such an ascription of praise to the eternal and unfailing purpose of God, Paul showed the same understanding that Moses received after his great offer of self-sacrifice: "For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children . . . it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring" (vv. 6-8, NIV). There was an election taking place even in the wilderness that no human intervention could in any way deter or deflect, however noble it might be, based on the justice of God. "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" (Ex. 33:19, NIV; cf. Rom. 9:15). This was the assurance given to Moses, and Paul himself uses it, after having expressed his own willingness to be obliterated from the book of life for the sake of his people.

[\(To be continued\)](#)

He who had rejected the idea that God would blot out Israel and make of him a great nation, now offers his salvation on their account: "Yet, now, if Thou wilt forgive their sin—and if not, blot me, I pray Thee, out of Thy book which Thou hast written". Such is intercessory prayer: a true obliteration of self in seeking a blessing for others. Not counting the cost, even to eternity, that sinners might be saved. Here was a foreshadowing of the Great One, the one who hanging even to the death would cry for all mankind: "Father, forgive them". Moses, too, was embraced in that atonement.

Harry Tennant, *Moses My Servant*, p. 91