

CMCL
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Today's lectionary reading is Exodus 32, verses 1 through 14 – the very beginning of the story, basically up to where Moses manages to convince God not to destroy everyone out of anger. From the New Revised Standard Version: “And Yahweh changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.” This is where it ends, and next week's verse is more about Moses interceding on behalf of the people – this time, from Exodus 33.

There is a rich depth in this chapter, however, beyond just intercessory prayer. I became aware of it last spring, when I chose that reading – verses 1 through 14 – as the subject for my final paper in my Old Testament course at LTS. One of the things that struck me at the time was that this text doesn't easily break down into smaller parts for in-depth analysis – at least, not without severely limiting the tools one chooses to bring to bear to understand what's going on.

What do I mean by that? For much of Genesis and Exodus up to this point it is not hard to choose a passage that makes sense, and study it with a wide variety of methods – source criticism, form criticism, historical criticism, redaction criticism, literary narrative criticism, social world criticism, and so on. The limitations of one tool provide clarification and insight toward the use of a different tool; together, the tools provide a clear and nuanced view.

For these three chapters in Exodus, however, it doesn't work out so well. The body of scholarly work on this text is extensive, but there are very few things that everybody agrees on. James Watts, professor of Hebrew Bible at Syracuse University, says it well: “There is sufficient unevenness in vocabulary and plot to justify the critical judgment that the internal contents of Exodus 32–34, as well as their placement in the book, are the result of a great deal of editorial activity.”¹ This story bears the fingerprints of a wide variety of editors who lived over a wide variety of times in a wide variety of contexts. And that makes interpreting this story difficult. But I don't think that the answer to that is to give up. So roll up your sleeves; let's dig in and see what themes come up for us, now.

Let's start with some context – from a story standpoint, this narrative takes place immediately after the events of Chapters 20–24: the people met God at the mountain, God spoke the Ten Commandments, the people freaked out and chose Moses to be their intermediary: “[They] said to Moses, ‘You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.’”² Moses acts as a relay for the full set of ordinances, rules, and promises God offers to the people; and they agree. Then Moses heads up the mountain to meet with God and obtain the written contract of the covenant (the tablets of stone). To fully understand what this looked like from the point of view of the people, hear the description given in chapter 24: “Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.”³

1 James W. Watts, “Aaron and the Golden Calf in the Rhetoric of the Pentateuch,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130, no. 3 (2011): 417–430; pg426.

2 Exodus 20:19 (NRSV).

3 Exodus 24:15–18 (NRSV).

That's where today's story starts – Moses, the high priest of the community, is gone for over a month! It's important to understand the significance of this: in the ancient world, almost everything, for good or for ill, is attributed to the action of some god. Worshiping and offering sacrifices is supremely important – it's the method by which you secure prosperity and security for yourself, your family, and your community. So when Moses doesn't return, people start to get antsy. "Uh... how long has it been since we made our last offering? Where is Moses?!" Given the awesome display described, it isn't hard to imagine what the people must have been thinking. "He's gone – probably dead. He's not coming back."

So they turn to Aaron, who had authority due to his relationship with Moses, and say, "Hey, you're our high priest now – we need to worship!" And Aaron, in response, creates this golden calf.

Commentators and scholars argue vigorously about the nature of this calf – Was it a flat, beaten image, like a picture? Was it a full three-dimensional mold? Was it just a carving into which molten gold was poured? And what was the purpose of it, with respect to worship? Scholars and commentators are divided on whether the calf was supposed to represent foreign gods or Yahweh; not only is the text not clear on this point, but several clues suggest that the story has been redacted by later Hebrew editors, with their own various political and theological agendas. In any case, the people can now worship, much to their relief, and so they do. And even though it's not unreasonable to presume that they intended to worship God – after all, that's what Aaron insists: "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD." – this ends up being Wrong, with a Capital W – it's a violation of either the first or second commandment⁴. God gets upset; Moses gets upset.

Before we get to the consequences of this upset, however, consider this: the people were trying very hard to do the right thing, based upon what they knew and could perceive at the time. In an attempt to glorify, exalt, and honor God, they ended up violating what God had commanded them.

Many commentators, in examining this passage, draw a conclusion against putting 'modern idols' before God: wealth, fame, success, privilege, and so on. But I wonder – how often do we end up worshiping idols even as we're trying to live up to our obligations to God? Many conservative Christians hold fast on issues like abortion and homosexuality, and in doing so fail to remember that Jesus said, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."⁵ Many liberal Christians hold fast on issues of social justice and fairness, and in doing so forget the same. What are the ways in which we are so absolutely sure that we have it right, that we lose sight of the fact that we might be getting it wrong?

But the story's not over – The people have sinned, and there are consequences. (Rod, I realize that this is one of those "good stopping points" you mentioned during retreat; I beg your forgiveness for continuing right on past.) Moses descends from the mountain, and what he observes makes him so angry that he breaks the tablets – the ones inscribed with the laws, commandments, and promises – the ones laying out the covenant between God and the people. Basically, he rips up the contract. That security and prosperity that the people wanted for themselves, their families, and their community? Gone – destroyed by Moses. That, however, is evidently not enough to sate his anger, nor is the complete and utter destruction of the calf or his interrogation of Aaron. Instead, in an act that echoes his murder of the Egyptian⁶, he calls together an army of Hebrews to slaughter the worshipers, specifically using the words, "Thus says the

4 Which it is depends upon how one chooses to count off the commandments, as well as whether one believes that the people intended to worship the LORD or not.

5 Luke 6:37–38 (NRSV).

6 Exodus 2:11–12 (NRSV).

LORD.”⁷ And after the deed, when his army has killed thousands of (presumably) unarmed celebrants, he assures them that they have bought, with the blood of their family as coin, blessings upon themselves. From God, of course.

Now, I’m pretty sure that at no point God said, “Gather a group and tell them this, so that they may kill a bunch of other people.” The narrative is quite careful to document God’s words before Moses came down, and Moses hasn’t gone back up to talk to God again yet. Even when he does, God does not say, “Oh, good job for taking out those folks, Moses – kudos.” In both circumstances, God clearly states God’s prerogative for dispensing punishment, but at no point does God ordain Moses to dispense punishment. Furthermore, up until this point, everything Moses has done has been under God’s direction. Against Pharaoh and while wandering, the flow of the narrative clearly shows that Moses is acting as God’s agent.

That is not the case here. Motivated by anger, Moses impulsively chooses act as judge, jury, and executioner against the “enemies of God” – without God’s authorization. Eventually, this tendency to impulsiveness leads to God punishing Moses⁸, but in this instance it is the people who suffer the consequences of his actions. How often do we end up claiming the mantle of God in punishment of others? What are the ways in which we sign up to sacrifice our loved ones, because someone called to us, “Thus says the LORD?”

I found it harder to come up with plausible examples of this, not because it’s any less common than idolatry (of whatever persuasion), but because it’s so shockingly common that often we accept it without question – without even recognition. It is deeply inherent in the structure of modern storytelling – how many movies or television shows have you seen recently that set “good” versus “evil” – often with the “evil guys” being a bunch of faceless minions who exist only to be cut down by the heroes? “Wonder Woman,” “Harry Potter,” “Star Wars,” “Lord of the Rings,” almost any story featuring Nazis... the narrative eases the transition into slaughter first by exalting the righteousness of the cause, then by suppressing the humanity of the enemy. Even movies like “Interstellar” do it – it’s perfectly ok to lie to your family and abandon them, so long as you’re doing it with noble intentions.

The website TV Tropes has a wonderful one-line description of the compelling justification that’s often used in service of this idea: “Sometimes a decent person has to do something bad, because it is the only way to prevent something *worse* from happening.”⁹ It was necessary to mobilize for the murder of 3,000 family and friends, Moses said, because the alternative would be the loss of God’s covenant. It was necessary to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Truman said, because a land invasion of the Japanese islands would be costly to everyone. It was necessary for the United States to fight proxy wars with the USSR, Niebur said, because the alternative would be nuclear war. It is necessary to exonerate police officers for the murder of innocent black people, the justice system says, because the alternative is to completely undermine the individuals that maintain peace in our communities. It is necessary to permit the slaughter of innocent children, or theater goers, or concert attendees, or churchgoers, the NRA says, because the alternative is the inability for the people to forcibly stand up for their rights. It is necessary to ruin our planet’s ecosystems, economist say, because the alternative would stifle economic growth, and eventually lead to widespread poverty. It is necessary to suppress the healthcare options of millions of women, anti-abortionists say, because the alternative is allowing the slaughter of unborn children. We must be willing to do whatever it takes for the greater good. And very often, we don’t pause to consider whether

7 Exodus 32:27 (NRSV).

8 Numbers 20:7–12 (NRSV).

9 TV Tropes, “I Did What I Had to Do,” TV Tropes.com, accessed October 15, 2017, <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/IDidWhatIHadToDo>.

or not we can clearly see what the greater good is.

These – well, some of these – are hard questions, and I certainly do not wish to suggest that either side of the decision is the clear winner. In fact, that's the problem – often it feels like the solution is so obvious that we jump straight to implementing it, without considering what it might mean for others. We impulsively act as judge, jury, and executioner of whatever plan seems best. “We do what we have to do.” Perhaps. Sometimes. Maybe? The easier it is to justify that leap, however, the more I distrust it – especially when that decision pushes the burden of cost onto others, who have no say in the decision. Are we willing to acknowledge that we might not be speaking for God when we propose these solutions? That, despite our best efforts, the outcome might not be for the greater good, or even remotely good? Are we willing to be humble enough to admit that sometimes we just don't know?

I have no answers to these questions, and I don't have a neat bow to tie all of this together – some final sound-bite of wisdom for you to walk away with. Maybe that's why most of Exodus 32–34 isn't part of the lectionary – it raises too many uncomfortable questions that don't have easy answers. Maybe, though, we need to spend more time considering questions, instead of simply accepting answers that follow the words “Thus says the LORD.”