

## 57—FORGOTTEN COVENANTS AND A GOLDEN CALF

(Exodus 32–33; Deuteronomy 9)

When Moses was so long upon the mountain,<sup>1</sup> the children of Israel became impatient. Many of them feared Moses would never return and that perhaps he was dead. Even Aaron and Hur, whom Moses had left in charge of Aaron's sons and the seventy elders<sup>2</sup> at the base of the mountain, had apparently grown weary of waiting and returned to the main camp. Forty days was a long time.

Fearing they had been left in the wilderness without a prophet, the children of Israel quickly let their fears become more important than their covenants. They came to Aaron and said, "Because we do not know what has become of the man Moses who brought us out of Egypt, you must make gods to go before us in the wilderness."

It is hard to believe these were the same people who, just days before, had made a solemn covenant to obey every word Jehovah had spoken to them through Moses.<sup>3</sup>

Aaron, apparently having some of the same fears as the people, yielded to their will. "Break off your wives' golden earrings and bring them to me," he told them. "I will make gods for you to follow."

Thinking it could calm their unrest, Aaron took their earrings and fashioned a golden calf like the ones the people had known in Egypt. Said he, "These are your gods, O Israel, which brought you out of the land of Egypt."

Aaron next built an altar and placed it before the golden image. He then made a very unusual announcement: "Tomorrow," he said, "we will make a feast to Jehovah." It seems Aaron had convinced himself that the golden calf, around which the children of Israel were to hold their riotous feast, was

only a representation of Jehovah, when in reality the people had traded their wealth for a false god.

The children of Israel rose early the next morning and made burnt offerings on the altar before their golden calf. They sat down to eat and drink, and then rose up to frolic and make merry.

Meanwhile on Sinai, Jehovah spoke to Moses. "Make haste and go down," he said, "for your people have corrupted themselves. They have made a molten calf and offered sacrifices to it. They say it is the god that brought them out of Egypt. My wrath has waxed hot against this ungrateful and stiffnecked people. Surely I will destroy them and make a greater and mightier nation than they."

Moses was frightened. He pleaded before Jehovah. "Do not let Thine anger wax hot against these people Thou didst bring out of Egypt with great power," he pleaded. "If Thou wilt destroy them now, it will be said that Thou didst bring them out of Egypt only to slay them in the wilderness. But if Thou wilt turn away Thine anger from them, they will surely repent of the evil they have done. Remember Thy covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to multiply their seed as the stars of heaven, and to give the land Thou didst speak of unto their seed forever. If that covenant means anything, Thou canst not now destroy this people."

"If they will repent," answered Jehovah, "I will spare their lives and turn away my anger. But you must execute judgment this day against all those who will not repent. If not, I will do all I have thought to do."

Moses descended quickly from the mountain, carrying the two stone tablets of testimony upon which Jehovah had written with his finger. And he brought Joshua with him.

When the two men came near to the camp of Israel and Joshua heard the revelry and shouting of the people, he said, "The noise of war is in the camp." Then, after listening more closely, he reconsidered his assessment. "This is not the voice of those who cry for mastery, nor the voice of those who are overcome," he said. "It is the noise of singing."

As Moses and Joshua came nearer, they saw the golden calf and observed the dancing and merrymaking of the people. Overcome by his anger, Moses threw down the stone tablets, breaking them

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<sup>1</sup> As indicated in story, "56—Come Up into the Mountain," Moses was six days on the mountain before going to the top and was then at the top of the mountain for forty days and forty nights conversing with Jehovah.

<sup>2</sup> The word "elders," as used here, has nothing to do with priesthood. The reference is to seventy of the older men.

<sup>3</sup> The children of Israel had made this covenant of obedience with Jehovah twice since they came into the wilderness of Sinai (see stories "55—God Has Come to Prove You" and "56—Come Up into the Mountain").

on the ground.<sup>4</sup> Then, entering the camp, he took the calf, burned it, and ground the residue into fine powder. When he had sprinkled the powder in the brook that flowed down from the mountain, he made the people drink it.

“What did these people do to you that you have brought such a great sin upon them?” Moses asked Aaron.

“Do not let Jehovah be upset by this,” answered Aaron, choosing his words carefully. “You know these people are set on mischief. They said to me, ‘Make us gods to go before us, for we know not what has become of Moses.’ And I told them that whoever had gold should break it off and bring it to me. Then, when they had brought their gold, I cast it in the fire and this calf was formed from it.”

Aaron’s story did not merit Moses’ reply. He turned and walked away, going directly to the gate of the camp as the people gathered to hear him. There Moses addressed the people. “Who is on Jehovah’s side?” he cried. “Let him come forward!” Then, when all the sons of Levi came forward, Moses said to them, “Take your swords in your hands and go in and out of every gate of this camp slaying those who do not repent of this great evil.” And that day there were about 3,000 men slain by the sons of Levi.

Moses charged those who remained to rededicate themselves to Jehovah. “If you will have God’s forgiveness,” he said, “every man must bestow a blessing this day upon his son and upon his brother.”

Jehovah was angry with the children of Israel because they had so quickly turned aside from the truths he had given them to the worship of idols, and Moses feared greatly for his people lest Jehovah should destroy them in his anger. He returned to the mountain where he fasted another forty days and forty nights, pleading with Jehovah to forgive the great sin of Israel.<sup>5</sup> “If Thou canst not forgive this people,” said Moses to Jehovah, “Blot me out of the book that Thou hast written.”

“I will not blot you out of my book,” answered Jehovah, “but I will blot out those who have sinned against me. Go now and lead this people into the land I have promised them. But, because they have worshipped their golden calf and are a stiffnecked people, I will not go up to the Promised Land in their midst, lest I become angry and destroy them. Nevertheless, I will send my angel before them to drive out the inhabitants of the land.”

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<sup>4</sup>Note that the tablets Moses threw down and broke were not the tablets that contained the Ten Commandments. They were tablets containing the higher law. Story “58—A Lesser Law” tells of the replacement of this higher law with what we know as the Law of Moses.

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<sup>5</sup>This is no doubt the same sojourn of Moses on the mountain, where he fasted for forty day and forty nights, that is explained in story “58—A Lesser Law.”