



EXODUS 31-40 THE GOLDEN CALF; THE PRIESTLY GARMENTS

The Sabbath: a sign between God and His people

It is instructive that after God gives Moses all of the instructions about the Tabernacle, He ends his commands with the Sabbath as a sign: "Surely My Sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you...It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever; for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed. And when He had made an end of speaking with him on Mount Sinai, He gave Moses two tablets of the Testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God" (Ex. 31:13-17).

It is important to note that Christ mentioned the Sabbath was made "for man" in general (Mr. 2:26), something that took place right after the creation of the first man and woman (Genesis 2:1-3). God said Israel would be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" and would be a light to the rest of the world. Whoever repented of his pagan ways and was converted to the true religion would become an Israelite, and would keep the Sabbath as a sign between God and himself. In the New Testament, we become "spiritual" Israelites by repentance and faith (Rom. 2:26-29; 1 Cor. 7:19; Gal. 6:15-16), and therefore, must keep the Sabbath as a sign between God and ourselves. It's that simple.

The sin of the Golden Calf

Moses was very inspired with all that had transpired during these 40 days. God maintained him nutritionally supplied during all that time while He was fed God's Word—what a privilege!

Meanwhile, the Israelites waited and waited, but Moses didn't appear. Soon they became restless, and some started devising their own for to worship the God they had come to know. This is known as syncretism – the mixing together of two or more religious systems by taking elements from both. Aaron was intimidated by the mob and yielded to their requests. This led to syncretism, for the Israelites blended their Egyptian gods with the God of Israel. They chose one of the chief symbols of Egyptian religion—the sacred Apis bull—so venerated from when the time it was a calf that it had its own temple and was embalmed after death.

Just a few years back, archaeologists discovered an idol of a calf in Israel.

Since the calf was a symbol of fertility and strength, pretty soon the people not only reverted to worshipping the bull, but started enacting many of the same ceremonies that included a sexual orgy. Aaron proclaimed this calf was now a symbol of the true God: "This is your god, O Israel that brought you out of the land of Egypt!...So when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, 'Tomorrow is a feast to the Lord...and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose to play'" (Ex. 32:4-6). The term "play" here, as *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* brings out, means "drunken, immoral orgies and sexual play."

Today, it is so easy to fall into the religious syncretism of modern Christianity—accepting the pagan religious holidays that mask as the true ones, and using physical religious objects, such as the cross, to represent Christianity. Similar to the Israelites, they proclaim: 'Behold, this cross represents Christ and His sacrifice! Ironically, the cross is an old Egyptian symbol of divinity, the Tau cross, and is now mixed to represent the cross of Christ. But does this make sense? If Jesus would have been hung by a rope, would people go around wearing a symbol of a hangman's noose? Of course not! This also breaks the Second Commandment which says you are not to make an image that represents God in any way.

God is incensed with the Israelites syncretism and says, "They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them...I have seen this people, and indeed it is a stiff-necked people! Now therefore, let Me alone, that My wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them. And I will make of you a great nation" (Ex. 32:8-10).

Another man could have been tempted to accept God's offer, but not Moses. He pleaded with God to forgive the Israelite's sins, and God yielded. That is why Moses is known as one of the great intercessors in the Bible. Yet, Moses let his temper get the best of him when he saw the orgy going on and lost control, throwing the precious tablets with the Ten Commandments down the mountain and

breaking them into pieces. When he realized what he had done, it was too late.

When confronted, Aaron lamely gives an excuse that the people obligated him to do it. Moses knew drastic steps had to be taken to eliminate the budding religious syncretism, or the true religion would be hopelessly corrupted. He told the congregation to separate into parts—those that were willing to follow God without a religious mixture on one side, and those that wanted the mix on the other. The first to back Moses was the tribe of Levi, and then Moses gave the instructions to root out this evil among the Israelites. Three thousand were slain that day. Remember, though, that God was willing to slay all of them, so the casualties were actually quite small in comparison to the millions saved. God also brought a plague upon them for their sin.

The meaning of being “stiff-necked”

Because they were a stiff-necked people, a term first used here, and the idiom refers to “farm animals that stubbornly refused to wear and accept the yokes on their necks. For the Israelites, obedience to the covenant stipulations was bearing the yoke, while disobedience was breaking the yoke (Jer. 2:20; 5:5); therefore, to wear God’s yoke was the ideal, but to break the yoke was apostasy and to stiffen the neck was a refusal to wear it. The prophets frequently used the expression to describe Israel’s refusal to listen to God’s word through His prophets. In Acts 7:51 Stephen compared the Jewish leaders of his day with “stiff-necked” Israel of old, and criticized them for their stubborn resistance of the Holy Spirit” (IBSE, vol. 4, 619). Christ mentioned following Him would result in a much lighter yoke than the way the Pharisees were teaching their religion to the people (Mt. 11:29-30).

As a result of the incident of the golden calf, God knew He could not be as close to the people as before, “lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people” (Ex. 33:3). He would use Moses more as His intermediary, and Moses would now place his tent apart from the Israelite camp. There, the cloud would descend, and God would speak directly with Moses. “So the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend” (Ex. 33:11). This does not mean Moses saw God’s face, but that it was a direct communication, back and forth, as a man speaks to a friend. Moses continues his intercessory role and pleads with God to continue His presence with the Israelites and

God again yields to the petition. Then Moses asks to see His glory and God answers, “You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live. And the Lord said, ‘Here is a place by Me, and you shall stand on the rock. So it shall be, while My glory passes by that I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen’ (Ex. 33:21-23). This, by the way, shows God *does* have a spirit form, not as some speculate that He is formless.

God then makes two more tablets for Moses to bring down the mountain and then renews His covenant with Israel, forgiving their sin. He warns them when they possess the Promised Land not to make treaties with them, knowing they would eventually corrupt their faith with religious syncretism, what God calls here, “play the harlot with their gods” (Ex. 34:16). God regarded Israel as His wife, and this mixing of religions would be spiritual fornication to Him. He then explains how to avoid this religious syncretism by keeping God’s feasts instead of the pagan Canaanite feasts (34:18-27). Today, this principle is the same for us.

When Moses came down with the tablets of the law, his face shone, due to being so close to God for such a long time. The Israelites were afraid to get close to him, and so they put a veil upon his head (34:32-35). This veil would later serve as a symbol that the giving of the law was not completed with Moses, but would be given a greater glory in the New Covenant through the pre-incarnate Christ, the one whose glory Moses saw (2 Cor. 3:3-18).

Now, the work on the Tabernacle would commence, and there was a danger that with all the smelting going on for quite a while, the Sabbath law would be broken. So Moses gives them God’s instruction: “These are the words which the Lord has commanded you to do: Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh day shall be a holy day for you, a Sabbath rest to the Lord. Whoever does any work on it shall be put to death. You shall kindle no fire throughout your dwellings on the Sabbath day” (35:1-3). Since work is the subject here, and in particular, the work on the Tabernacle, it was important for the Israelites to put out those fires on the Sabbath, and rekindle them on the following day. Certainly, God intended the Sabbath to be a delight in winter time, and heating the house up is part of His law of love, but clearly, keeping an oven

for smelting purposes going during the Sabbath violates the principle of resting on that day.

Although the Israelites were a stiff-necked people, they also had some positive attributes—they were very generous. When the call was offered to donate to the building of the Tabernacle, people gave so abundantly, it actually exceeded the needs. “And the people were restrained from bringing, for the material they had was sufficient for all the work to be done—indeed too much” (Ex. 36:7).

God had inspired two artisans to oversee the work, Bezalel and Aholiab (36:2), and the work was begun. Also involved was the making of the garments for the priests, mentioned in chapters 28 and 39. As with the Tabernacle, the garments also had symbolic meaning, all made “as the Lord had commanded Moses” (39:1). It is important to focus on the symbolism of each part.

The Tunic: It was to be made of pure, white linen, not of wool that would cause them to sweat and stain them. Revelation explains its symbolism: “And to her (the Church) it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is *the righteous acts* of the saints” (Rev. 19:8).

The Turban: “The turban of the priest was to be made of linen and had a plate of pure gold engraved with the words HOLY TO THE LORD. This engraving was a “sacred diadem” (29:6; 39:30; Lev. 8:9). As representative of the people, the high priest bore their guilt when presenting their sacrifices to God. The role of Aaron was symbolic of Christ’s future role, as the great Mediator between God and man. Also, this symbolism applies to us. One day, if we are faithful, as future priests in God’s kingdom we will have God’s name engraved on our foreheads: “He who overcomes...I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name” (Rev. 3:12). The 144,000 thousand and later all will have the Father’s name written on their foreheads (Rev. 14:1; 22:4).

The Ephod: The ephod was a sleeveless outer garment that covered the priest’s upper body, with two parts, a front and a back fastened on two shoulder pieces with chains of gold with mounted onyx stones and held to the body with a belt at the waist. On the two onyx stones were to be engraved the names of Israel’s 12 tribes so that as Aaron entered the tabernacle he would bear Israel’s names

before God. The symbolism is that their names would in mind to plead their cause, as Christ does this now as our High Priest (Heb. 4:14-16).

The Breastplate with the Urim and the Thummin: The high priest’s breastpiece was to be made of the same cloth as the ephod with 12 precious stones in gold mounted in four rows of 3 stones each. On each stone was to be engraved the name of one of the tribes of Israel. The breastpiece was attached snugly over the ephod by four gold chains and “folded double” to form a kind of pocket for the Urim and Thummim. These mean “lights” and “perfections,” referred to in Numbers 27:21; 1 Samuel 30:7-8, Ezra 2:63; Nehemiah 7:65. They were means of seeking God’s will through the priest and receive answers to questions and crises beyond human capacity. Apparently the Urim and Thummim were two stones that would shine. How they were used in determining God’s will is unknown, but some suggest the Urim represented a negative answer and the Thummim a positive answer. Perhaps this view is indicated by the fact that Urim begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and Thummim with the last letter.

The Robe: Under the ephod the high priest was to wear a blue sleeveless robe that hung below his knees and was reinforced at the collar. It was to be seamless with pomegranates (either hanging like bells on the hem or embroidered on the robe) and gold bells on the hem. The tinkling bells would allow the people to hear the high priest when he ministered in the holy place. The sound of the bells assured the people of God’s mercy in allowing a priest to minister on their behalf. Only a priest properly attired could enter the holy place.

The book of Exodus ends with the Tabernacle in its place and the priests arrayed in their priestly robes. “Then the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle...Whenever the cloud was taken up from above the tabernacle, the children of Israel would go onward...For the cloud...was above the tabernacle by day and fire was over it by night” (Ex. 40:37-38).