

10-2017

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Recommended Citation

Hundley, Michael B. "What Is the Golden Calf?" *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 79, no. 4 (2017): 559–79.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/cbq.2017.0078>.

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What Is the Golden Calf?

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Abstract: The golden calf episode in Exodus is both popular and perplexing. While it has a shared ancient Near Eastern heritage of understanding divine presence, it chooses to undermine that heritage to promote its particular agenda. This study clarifies the text by situating it more firmly in its ancient Near Eastern context and by addressing the biblical adaptations that emerge when we address each of the chapter's distinct voices. I also consider the importance of perspective—what each character sees and how that vision affects the character's viewpoint—and the importance of divine visibility both in Exodus 32 and in the larger non-Priestly narrative.

Key Words: golden calf • idol • divine presence • cult statue

THE GOLDEN CALF TEXT in Exodus 32 is both dramatic and confusing, and much time has been spent trying to unravel its meaning and import. The text is an ancient Near Eastern tale with a shared heritage of understanding divine presence. At the same time, it promotes a distinctly biblical perspective that intentionally undermines that heritage. In this article, I have a dual focus—situating the text more firmly in its ancient Near Eastern context and addressing the biblical adaptation that emerges when we address each of the chapter's distinct voices. Exodus 32 presents various perspectives: those of the people, Aaron, God, Moses, and the storyteller. Each perspective is distinct and defensible, yet the text ultimately rejects those of the people and Aaron. Examining each perspective and exploring the grounds for its acceptance or rejection along with its use of language and logic will help to identify the rhetoric of this difficult passage. In addition, I will address the issue of divine visibility, which has often been overlooked by commentators yet plays a major role in Exodus 32 and in the larger non-Priestly narrative.

The general consensus is that Exodus 32 is a composite text. Beyond that, scholars have widely divergent views, dating the composition from monarchic

times to the Hellenistic period.¹ Although dating is undoubtedly an important issue, I set it aside. Rather than addressing the history of the text, I concentrate on the story being told in the text itself.

No text develops in a vacuum; instead, a text draws from and adapts from the world in which its authors live. The story of the golden calf is no exception; it was written in an ancient Near Eastern context, where, although there is considerable variation within and across cultures and times, religious practice and religious thinking appear remarkably stable throughout the millennia.² As a result, whenever or wherever our text was composed, we can reasonably assume that the same general ancient Near Eastern conceptions lay in the background. Thus, before turning to the story itself, I begin by sketching the use of bull images in the ancient Near East.

I. The Relationship between the Bull Image and Deity in the Ancient Near East

As an artistic representation, how was a statue of a bull understood to depict a deity? In a religious context, we have roughly three options. First, a bull could serve as a representation of a divine form. In some cases, the people believed that the deity could actually take the form of a bull. Thus, by fashioning a bull, they were making a realistic replica of this divine form.³ Second, a bull could function

¹ Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus*, vol. 3, *Chapters 20–40* (Historical Commentary on the Old Testament; Leuven: Peeters, 2000) 617, 619.

² For example, Wilfred G. Lambert contends that “no major changes [to Mesopotamian religion] took place over history except in the organization of the gods into a pantheon, and except where cities completely died out and ceased to be inhabited” (“Ancient Mesopotamian Gods: Superstition, Philosophy, Theology,” *RHR* 207 [1990] 115-30, here 123). Though perhaps overstated, his argument nonetheless captures the remarkable stability in official religion across the millennia, a consistency rooted in religious conservatism and a preoccupation with the idealized past. See Michael B. Hundley, “The Way Forward Is Back to the Beginning: Reflections on the Priestly Texts,” in *Remembering and Forgetting in Early Second Temple Judah* (ed. Ehud Ben Zvi and Christoph Levin; FAT 85; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012) 209-24, esp. 210-18; see also idem, *Gods in Dwellings: Temples and Divine Presence in the Ancient Near East* (WAWSup 3; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013) for an overview of the ancient Near Eastern portrait and 49-50 n. 2 for references to religious conservatism in Mesopotamia.

³ In ancient Egypt various gods could take bull form. For instance, the live Apis and Mnevis bulls functioned much like cult statues, manifesting the divine presence of Ptah and Re, respectively; see briefly Wolfgang Helck, “Stiergotte,” in *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* (ed. Wolfgang Helck, Eberhard Otto, and Wolfhart Westendorf; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1972) 6:14-17; Dieter Kessler, “Bull Gods,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt (OEA)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1:209-13; Stephen E. Thompson, “Cults: An Overview,” in *OEA* 1:331-32; John D. Ray, “Animal Cults,” in *OEA* 1:345-48. In Syria-Palestine as well, the high god El is called a bull (*KTU* 1.1 III 26; IV 12; V 22; 1.2 I 16, 33, 36; III 16, 17, 19, 21; 1.3 IV 54; V 10, 35; 1.4 I 4; II 10; III 31; IV 39, 47; 1.6 IV 1; VI 26; 1.16 IV 2; 1.92 15), while the weather-god Baal is

as a symbol, or shorthand, for the deity. Rather than literally depicting a particular divine form, people also used associated animals, which identified the intended god by association even when it was not literally depicted.⁴ In this case, the bull statue was meant to depict not the divine form but rather the associated attributes like strength and fertility.⁵ Third, since anthropomorphic deities took humanlike shape, artists employed various means to demonstrate their superhuman potency.⁶ One way was to picture them astride and thus in control of various natural and mythological creatures, for example, Marduk and the *mušḫuššu* (the mythological hybrid animal sacred to Marduk).⁷ Thus, the bull also could serve as a pedestal, a mount, or a throne for the deity.

called a bull-calf (*ʿgl*) (1.5 V 17-21; 1.10 II-III, esp. III 33-37); see Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 32. Both El and Baal also seem to transform themselves into their respective animals, especially for the purpose of mating (*KTU* 1.5 V; 1.10); see Marjo A. Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds: Ugaritic and Hebrew Descriptions of the Divine* (UBL 8; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1990) 524-28, 532-34; Theodore J. Lewis, "Divine Images and Aniconism in Ancient Israel," *JAOS* 118 (1998) 36-53, here 47, and the references cited therein. In the Hittite composition "The Sun God, the Cow, and the Fisherman" (Emmanuel Laroche, *Catalogue des textes hittites* [Études et commentaires 75; Paris: Klincksieck, 1971] 363), the sun-god changes into a young man to speak to a cow, which he then impregnates, presumably in the form of a bull.

⁴ Hundley, *Gods in Dwellings*, 234-36. It is also possible to have a combination of a representation and a symbol. For example, in Egypt divine images often combined human and animal features, which may represent in one form two distinct divine appearances and/or symbolize different aspects of the deity (see briefly Hundley, *Gods in Dwellings*, 164-67; cf. Ann Macy Roth, "Buried Pyramids and Layered Thoughts: The Organisation of Multiple Approaches in Egyptian Religion," in *Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Egyptologists, Cambridge, 3-9 September 1995* [ed. C. J. Eyre; Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 82; Leuven: Peeters, 1998] 991-1003; eadem, "The Representation of the Divine in Ancient Egypt," in *Text, Artifact, and Image: Revealing Ancient Israelite Religion* [ed. Gary Beckman and Theodore J. Lewis; BJS 346; Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2006] 24-37).

⁵ While there are multiple examples of bulls attested in archaeology, which may in fact be divine symbols, it is difficult to identify them definitively as symbols (rather than a divine form or associated animal) when we lack accompanying explanations or descriptions. We do, however, have other well-established examples of divine shorthand. For example, the Babylonian god Marduk could appear in anthropomorphic form alongside his associated hybrid being, the *mušḫuššu*. Alternatively, he could be represented by means of a symbol. The spade, Marduk's distinct symbol, alongside his *mušḫuššu*, could serve as a representation of Marduk, as a shorthand for him. This does not imply that Marduk looked like a spade or took the form of a spade. Rather, the spade was a shorthand for him, clearly indicating that Marduk was being depicted without actually depicting his true form.

⁶ With regard to Mesopotamia, see, e.g., Michael B. Hundley, "Here a God, There a God: Conceptions of Divinity in Ancient Mesopotamia," *Altorientalische Forschungen* 40 (2013) 68-107, here 83-84.

⁷ For example, the Maltai relief from northern Iraq, presumably from the time of Sennacherib (early seventh century B.C.E.), depicts a procession of deities astride various potent creatures (see Hundley, *Gods in Dwellings*, fig. 9.8). A stela from Arslan Tash (AO 13092) depicts a weather-god,

It is important to note here that we are not talking about how and to what extent the deity was present in the statue. Rather, we are dealing with the ways in which the statue visually represented the deity. Theoretically, the form of the divine receptacle or body did not determine the quantity or quality of presence,⁸ such that the deity could be understood to be fully present in each form (or, in the case of the pedestal, above the form).

These three options gave people access to the deity by giving them a concrete, visible access point. The evidence for each of these positions is widely attested throughout the ancient Near East both geographically and chronologically, which suggests that the biblical audience was at least familiar with the possibilities. I now turn to the biblical text to discover what it says about the golden calf, to see if we can discover which of these options it might be and why, or to see if any other options are more appropriate, and to see if we can determine whether the bull is understood to represent Yhwh or other gods. Although the ancient Near Eastern context informs our argument, the biblical text determines our answers.

II. The Biblical and Archaeological Data

The golden calf story in Exodus 32 finds a parallel in Deut 9:7–10:11 and Neh 9:16–21.⁹ In turn, analysis will concentrate on Exodus 32 with occasional and secondary attention to the parallel texts. In related biblical references, we find the golden bull-calves of Jeroboam, which he established in the northern kingdom of Israel as an alternative to the Jerusalem temple and which the Deuteronomistic Historian strongly rejects (1 Kgs 12:26–30). 1 Kings 7:25 also refers to the bronze oxen (בקר) that hold up the sea in the temple, providing a clear example where a metal bovid appears as a support for another object without censure. Archaeology

presumably Adad, carrying thunderbolts and standing on a bull. Bull figurines have also been discovered with postholes upon which anthropomorphic figures were likely mounted, while a statue from Hazor portrays an anthropomorphic figure astride a bull (Hundley, *Gods in Dwellings*, fig. 11.7). Posts in the feet of an anthropomorphic statue, however, did not mean that it was mounted on a bull or any other animal. As with the bull-calf from Ashkelon (see Lawrence Stager, *Ashkelon Discovered: From Canaanites and Philistines to Romans and Moslems* [Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeological Society, 1991] 3), such figures needed posts to stay upright.

⁸ Hundley, *Gods in Dwellings*, 220–21.

⁹ Interpretations vary on the relative chronologies of Exodus 32, 1 Kings 12, and Deuteronomy 9. Traditionally, Exodus was judged to be the oldest, but recently scholars have increasingly identified it as the most recent (see, e.g., John Van Seters, *Life of Moses: The Yahwist as Historian in Exodus–Numbers* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994] 290–318; Thomas B. Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus* [ECC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014] 688–700). For a summary of interpretation up to 1987, see Joachim Hahn, *Das 'Goldene Kalb': Die Jahwe-Verehrung bei Stierbildern in der Geschichte Israels* (2nd ed.; Europäische Hochschulschriften 23/154; Frankfurt am Main: Bern, 1987).

attests to bull figurines, and a number of them have been unearthed in the Levant, such as the ones found near Samaria and at Ashkelon.¹⁰ An ostrakon from Samaria also mentions the name *glyw*, translated as “Yhwh-Calf,” “Yhwh is the Calf” or “Calf of Yhwh.”¹¹

Context

Before turning to an analysis of Exodus 32, it is important to place the episode in its non-Priestly narrative context.¹² The story in Exodus up to this point has stressed divine deliverance, visibility, and guidance as well as the importance of exclusive worship. Yhwh has delivered the people from Egypt and visibly¹³ led them through the wilderness in a pillar of cloud and fire (Exod 13:21-22; 14:19, 24) until they reached Mount Sinai, where Yhwh visibly settled atop it (19:9, 11, 16, 18, 20).¹⁴ Thus, whereas in Genesis Yhwh appears occasionally, Exodus emphasizes Yhwh’s continual, visual presence.¹⁵

¹⁰ See, respectively, Amihai Mazar, “The Bull Site: An Iron Age I Open Cult Place,” *BASOR* 247 (1982) 27-42; Stager, *Ashkelon Discovered*, 3. The bull-calf from Ashkelon has posts on its feet to enable it to stand upright.

¹¹ Graham I. Davies, *Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions* 3.3.041. See further K. Koenen, “Der Name *GLYW* auf Samaria-Ostrakon nr. 41,” *VT* 44 (1994) 396-400.

¹² Despite the complexity of the text and the debate about its composition (see, e.g., Thomas B. Dozeman and Konrad Schmid, eds., *A Farewell to the Yahwist? The Composition of the Pentateuch in Recent European Interpretation* [SBLSymS 34; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006]; Thomas B. Dozeman, Konrad Schmid, and Baruch J. Schwartz, eds., *The Pentateuch: International Perspectives on Current Research* [FAT 78; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011]), for present purposes I choose to read the non-Priestly texts in Exodus holistically. The non-Priestly narrative moves directly from Exodus 24 to Exodus 32 (the intervening material is Priestly). For a reading of these Exodus texts according to the Neo-Documentary Hypothesis, see, e.g., Anne K. Knafel, *Forming God: Divine Anthropomorphism in the Pentateuch* (Siphut 12; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014).

¹³ *Pace* most traditional commentators, who maintain divine invisibility or at least hiddenness, Exodus stresses divine visibility. See, e.g., William H. C. Propp, who references divine invisibility (*Exodus: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [2 vols.; AB 2, 2A; New York: Doubleday, 1999, 2006] 2:566); cf. Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) esp. 1-11 for a summary of scholarly conceptions..

¹⁴ Exodus 24:9-10 even mentions Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy elders seeing the God of Israel, though it remains unclear what form God takes since the only description offered concerns the space under God’s feet. Following the golden calf story, in Exod 34:5 God descends visibly in a cloud and stands with Moses.

¹⁵ Exodus 33:20, perhaps uncomfortable with divine visibility like some commentators, stresses that seeing God’s face is fatal. It thereby suggests that previous visible encounters were somehow partial encounters yet by no means denies divine visibility. See Knafel (*Forming God*, 73-76), who adapts Sommer’s terminology to differentiate between a small-scale and full-scale manifestation of Yhwh (Sommer, *Bodies of God*, 40, 58-78).

At Mount Sinai in the wilderness, the people establish Moses as the sole mediator between them and God (אלהים, Elohim) since they fear that too close an encounter with God will prove fatal (20:18-21). Yhwh gives Moses his ten commandments, the first two of which prohibit the worship of other gods and the creation of a divine image (20:3-5).¹⁶ With the emphasis on exclusive worship, references to other gods feature in Exodus 20–23, occurring eight times, and are also prominent in chap. 34, where vv. 13-17 prohibit their worship and v. 17 proscribes making molten gods (אלהי מטכה).¹⁷

Exodus 24:18 indicates that Moses stayed on the mountain forty days, giving no indication that the people expected so long a stay and explaining their seemingly panicked reaction. Chapter 32 continues the non-Priestly narrative with Moses still on the mountain.¹⁸ The Israelites are alone in the wilderness with nothing to do and no idea where to go, with both god and guide nowhere to be seen.¹⁹ Apparently in a state of panic, they construct a golden calf, either to concretely manifest Yhwh's presence or to replace Yhwh as god and to replace Moses as guide and go-between (or simply to render his role redundant).²⁰ The text presents the encounter from multiple perspectives, starting with the people before proceeding to Aaron, God, and Moses. The verb "saw" (ראה) demarcates each perspective (v. 1 refers to the people; v. 5 to Aaron; v. 9 to God; and vv. 19 and 25 to Moses).²¹ While the text labels each of these perspectives, it does not isolate the storyteller's perspective. Nonetheless, this silent perspective should not be overlooked, as it is simultaneously the least obtrusive and most authoritative viewpoint. In essence,

¹⁶ The numbering and nature of the commandments remain a debated issue (see, e.g., Propp, *Exodus*, 2:302–4). For convenience, I follow the Septuagint and Christian Reformed numbering. The prohibition of other gods before Yhwh (על פני) is likely not a monotheistic statement. Rather, it seems to refer to exclusive commitment to Yhwh, using covenant/treaty language. As in a marriage, the relationship requires exclusive commitment but does not deny the existence of other gods (or other potential partners). The next command prohibits making and worshiping any image of Yhwh.

¹⁷ For possibilities regarding the translation, see, e.g., Propp, *Exodus*, 2:550; for the construction of the image, see *ibid.*, 548-51.

¹⁸ On Moses' multiple ascents (19:3, 8, 9, 20; 20:18; 24:9, 13, 15, 18), see, e.g., the source-critical solution of Baruch J. Schwartz, "The Priestly Account of the Theophany and Lawgiving at Sinai," in *Texts, Temples, and Traditions: A Tribute to Menahem Haran* (ed. Michael V. Fox et al.; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996) 103-34.

¹⁹ Yhwh may still be visible atop the cloud-encased mountain, yet remaining distant, intimidating and not very approachable.

²⁰ In the text, Moses is the sole mediator, yet the pillar of cloud and fire (Exod 13:21-22) serves as the primary guide. Without Moses or the moving cloud, the people have no guide. Cf. Houtman, who notes the indispensability of a guide in the wilderness (*Exodus*, 3:632). Without Moses, Aaron also may be taking the role of both guide and go-between.

²¹ Christoph Dohmen, *Exodus 19–40* (HTKAT; Freiburg: Herder, 2004) 290, 293-94; Dozeman, *Exodus*, 681.

the text we have is the perspective the storyteller “sees.” The remainder of the article will follow the contours of the text, analyzing the golden calf episode to determine what the golden calf represents for the major characters in the story—the people, Aaron, Moses, and God—and the storyteller.

III. Multiple Perspectives

The People

The episode starts from the people’s perspective (“and the people saw”; v. 1). Their viewpoint is seemingly the most straightforward, but their account also raises the most questions. It presents the people’s perspective monolithically²² as a simple sequence of words and actions without interpretation, interpreting it instead through the other characters’ responses.²³

When Moses, the guide and mediator, does not return, the people take matters into their own hands. The people gather around Aaron, Moses’ subordinate, and request that he “make *ʿēlōhîm*” (אלהים) for them, who will “go before” (ילכו) them.²⁴ Aaron proceeds to make a golden calf (v. 4), after which the people proclaim, “This is/these are your *ʿēlōhîm*, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.” The people then celebrate and present offerings (v. 6).²⁵

The text before us is fraught with interpretive complexities, and several issues require examination.²⁶ Since the people initiate the chain of events and because their intentions are particularly murky, we will devote a significant amount of

²² The Levites’ action differentiates them from the rest of the people as they respond to Moses’ call and execute three thousand people (vv. 26-29).

²³ This raises the question, Did the storyteller (and audience) imagine real Israelites or create hypothetical characters to make a point? It is difficult to say with any certainty. The storyteller treats the characters as real, embedding them in a historical narrative and presenting them as real actors whose actions have real consequences. Representing them in this way would carry more rhetorical weight than casting them as merely hypothetical. Nevertheless, the people’s response is monolithic (resembling that of a mob) with little of the complexity and multiplicity expected of a real group of people. Thus, whether the characters are real or imagined, the narrative does not seem to be interested in presenting their response in all of its complexity. Rather, their actions introduce a conflict to which the other characters must respond. Like the storyteller, we will treat the people as real characters in order better to understand their reasonable position, its place in the world of the ancient Near East, and the rhetoric of its rejection.

²⁴ The people’s confrontation may be aggressive in nature (Arnold B. Ehrlich, *Randglossen zur hebräischen Bibel 1* [Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1908] 389; Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus שמות: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* [JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991] 203; Dohmen, *Exodus*, 294; Propp, *Exodus*, 2:547).

²⁵ The recipient of the offerings is unstated.

²⁶ The compositional issue is thorny and will not occupy our attention here. See, e.g., Propp, *Exodus*, 2:148-53; Dozeman, *Exodus*, 688-700.

space to their viewpoint, which will gain clarity when situated alongside the other perspectives. To understand the people's intentions in constructing the calf, we will focus on two categories: which god is intended and what kind of image is intended? While the people's actions are relatively straightforward, their motives for and understanding of what they are doing remains relatively obscure—most notably regarding the identity of the deity whose presence they seek to manifest with the calf and their use of *ʿēlōhîm* seemingly as a plural. Whether purposeful or not, this very opacity serves the storyteller's purposes as it allows God (and the storyteller) to condemn their actions regardless of their motivation.

Which Deity Is Intended?

While it is clear that the people are seeking a replacement for Moses as guide, are they also attempting to replace Yhwh as God? The people's reference to *ʿēlōhîm* (32:1, 4) is enigmatic.²⁷ *ʿēlōhîm* refers both to the common Hebrew plural "gods" and to the single Israelite God, Yhwh, as an abstract plural, roughly translated as "divinity."²⁸ Like *ilānū* in western peripheral Akkadian and other Semitic cognate expressions, the morphologically plural *ʿēlōhîm* often functions as a singular.²⁹

In Exodus 32 *ʿēlōhîm* is accompanied by plural verb forms (יִלְכוּ [32:2, 23] and הֵעֲלוּךְ [32:4, 8]) and pronouns (אֱלֹהִים [32:4, 8]). In turn, grammatically, it reads most naturally as the plural "gods." Granted, there are scattered examples in which the abstract plural *ʿēlōhîm* takes plural modifiers even though it functions as a singular: verbs (Gen 20:13; 35:7; Exod 22:8),³⁰ adjectives (Josh 24:19; 1 Sam 17:26, 36; Jer 10:10; 23:36) and participles (Ps 58:12).³¹ Nonetheless, uses of the abstract plural *ʿēlōhîm* with plural verbs are rare, and nowhere else is *ʿēlōhîm* modified by a plural pronoun.³²

²⁷ Here, the point is whether *ʿēlōhîm* should be read in the singular or plural and whether it refers to Yhwh or other gods. For the use of *ʿēlōhîm* in reference to Yhwh, see Joel S. Burnett, *A Reassessment of Biblical Elohim* (SBLDS 183; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001); Erhard Blum, "Der vermeintliche Gottesname 'Elohim,'" in *Gott Nennen: Gottes Namen und Gott als Name* (ed. I. U. Dalferth and P. Stoellger; Religion in Philosophy and Theology 35; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008) 97-119; Konrad Schmid, "The Quest for 'God': Monotheistic Arguments in the Priestly Texts of the Hebrew Bible," in *Reconsidering the Concept of Revolutionary Monotheism* (ed. B. Pongratz-Leisten; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011) 271-89.

²⁸ Burnett, *Biblical Elohim*, 21-24.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 7-63.

³⁰ In Gen 20:13 Abraham's statement may be intended as a plural in keeping with the international context (Burnett, *Biblical Elohim*, 73).

³¹ See also Sarna, *Exodus*, 204 and 261 n. 15; Propp, *Exodus*, 2:551.

³² Except for the related and equally anomalous 1 Kgs 12:28. 1 Samuel 4:7-8 is also anomalous in that *ʿēlōhîm* starts in the singular before switching to the plural. Both will be addressed more fully below.

In context, the singular designator fits more naturally. Since there is only a single image, “gods” appears nonsensical. Recognizing this fact, Neh 9:18 appears to correct the plural to the singular: “this [זה] is your god [אלהים] who brought you up [singular העלהך] from Egypt.” Some commentators argue that the grammatically plural phrase in Exodus is borrowed from the Jeroboam episode (1 Kgs 12:26-30), where two golden bulls are in view, and with polemical intent.³³ Even in Jeroboam’s case, however, the plural is peculiar, since Jeroboam was a Yhwh worshiper—attempting to establish rival temples to Jerusalem—and even with two statues would likely have spoken of Yhwh in the singular.³⁴ In addition, the liturgical formula would have been recited in the presence of only one statue at a time, such that the discrepancy remains.³⁵ For now, we may conclude only that *ʔēlōhīm* seems to be a plural that does not make sense in a singular situation.³⁶

This enigmatic *ʔēlōhīm* was expected to “go before” (ילכו) them, but in what sense? The people’s language mirrors God’s in 23:20, where he promises to send an angel “before you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared,” thereby suggesting that the purpose of having something or someone “go before” them is to offer (continued) protection and guidance, so that they reach their destination or, more broadly, achieve their goal. This expression also finds a parallel in the common trope in Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions: “the gods who go before me (in battle).”³⁷ In turn, *ʔēlōhīm* going before them suggests divine protection and guidance.

With Moses’ absence, the people recognize that they require divine protection and guidance, especially in the unknown and treacherous terrain of the wilderness.³⁸ Their request resembles those of Saul in 1 Sam 13:15 and of the people in

³³ See, e.g., Richard Elliott Friedman, who contends that Exodus 32 is an allegorical attack on Jeroboam, just as 1 Kings 12 is a political attack against him (*Who Wrote the Bible?* [New York: Summit, 1987] 70-74).

³⁴ 1 Kings 16 states that Ahab went beyond Jeroboam to worship Baal, suggesting that Jeroboam worshiped only Yhwh, albeit in the wrong way. Cf. Propp, *Exodus*, 2:577.

³⁵ Burnett, *Biblical Elohim*, 81. In turn, either Jeroboam spoke anomalously of Yhwh in the plural, or his words were deliberately misrepresented (Propp, *Exodus*, 2:577).

³⁶ We will return to this issue while examining the storyteller’s perspective after all the evidence has been considered.

³⁷ Hundley, “Here a God,” 85.

³⁸ The reference to Moses as the one who “brought [them] up” from Egypt is suggestive. It may give credit to Moses instead of God or simply focus on Moses’ essential role, which now must be filled. Indeed, as noted by James W. Watts (“Aaron and the Golden Calf in the Rhetoric of the Pentateuch,” *JBL* 130 [2011] 417-30, here 424-25), the credit for the exodus is a prominent theme in Exodus 32, switching among Moses (32:1, 7, 23), *ʔēlōhīm* (vv. 4, 8), and Yhwh (vv. 11, 12). The people and Yhwh seem to credit Moses. The people also credit Elohim, while Moses and the Egyptians credit Yhwh. Cf. Num 23:22; 24:8, which ascribe the deliverance to El; see Stephen C. Russell, who argues that El and Yhwh are here understood as separate deities—El as the regional high god and Yhwh as the god of Israel (*Images of Egypt in Early Biblical Israel: Cisjordan-*

1 Samuel 4–7. In both parallel cases, the people are faced with an impending military threat. Desperate for divine assistance, they solicit it inappropriately in both cases leading to divine punishment on the guilty parties. In Exodus 32 as well, the people are punished for inappropriate divine solicitation. While in Samuel the people clearly seek Yhwh, in Exodus it remains uncertain whether the people seek Yhwh inappropriately or another deity or deities.

To this point in Exodus, Yhwh has demonstrated his power by leading the people out of Egypt, and Yhwh/Elohim has been the only god directly referenced. Indeed, nothing in the text to this point indicates that any deity other than Yhwh is in view. Thus, like Jeroboam in 1 Kgs 12:28, the people most likely seek to elicit Yhwh's presence by means of the golden calf. In the Exodus text, however, their identification of deity is slightly more complicated. Immediately following the crafting of the calf, the people go along with Aaron's identification of the calf with Yhwh. By contrast, in 32:26, the people do not respond to Moses' call, "Who is on Yhwh's side?"³⁹ Their inactivity opens up the possibility that they may have intended another deity.

The text's continual prohibition of worshipping other gods also implies that the Israelites were at least tempted to be practical polytheists. If no such temptation existed, there would be no need constantly to reaffirm the command for exclusive devotion. Faced with a seemingly absent deity and mediator, the people likely would have preferred Yhwh⁴⁰ but in their panicked state may have taken any god they could get. Perhaps while Yhwh was the preferred deity, in their minds he was certainly not the only one, and their exclusive commitment to him was not unwavering. In turn, it is possible that they may have invited the deity who brought them out of Egypt or, alternatively, any other deity who might want to take credit for it.

The people's affirmation, "These are your *ʾēlōhîm*" (32:4), and the following celebration and offerings are nonspecific enough to apply to any deity.⁴¹ In addition to reassuring themselves with the statement, they could be courting the prospective deity with acclaim and celebration in hopes of securing divine presence and favor. In an attempt to gain some measure of agency in a desperate situation, they construct a calf as a divine symbol and laud its achievement and celebrate its presence.

Israelite, Transjordan-Israelite, and Judahite Portrayals [BZAW 403; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009] 113-19).

³⁹ Cf. their complaints about being better off in Egypt (e.g., Exod 14:12).

⁴⁰ The onomastic evidence supports the primary worship of Yhwh in Israel; see Jeffrey H. Tigay, *You Shall Have No Other Gods: Israelite Religion in the Light of Hebrew Inscriptions* (HSS 31; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986).

⁴¹ For arguments for the calf as a representation of other gods—El, Baal, and the moon-god—see respectively Nicolas Wyatt, "Of Calves and Kings: The Canaanite Dimensions in the Religion of Israel," *SJOT* 6 (1992) 68-91; Rainer Albertz, *A History of the Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period* (2 vols.; OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1994) 1:144-46 and nn. 46-51; Lloyd R. Bailey, "The Golden Calf," *HUCA* 42 (1971) 97-115.

In short, the text is clear that the people seek a tangible divine presence. It remains unclear, however, if the presence they seek is Yhwh or another god. There is every reason to think they hope to concretize Yhwh's presence, yet the text does not rule out the possibility that another deity may be intended. As we will see, for Yhwh and the storyteller, their intentions do not matter. Leaving their position undefined more persuasively establishes that their actions alone condemn them.

What Kind of Image Is Intended?

Given the ancient Near Eastern options for concretizing divine presence, what are they trying to make—a representation of the divine form, a symbol, or a pedestal? The text itself remains silent yet provides the reader with enough clues to make an educated guess.⁴² Although a popular option among commentators, the calf as pedestal is perhaps the least likely, regardless of whether the calf represents Yhwh or another god.⁴³ Elsewhere in the ancient Near East, objects and images either depict an anthropomorphic image atop the bull or have holes for a missing anthropomorphic figure.⁴⁴ There is no clear archaeological or textual evidence for a bull or any other animal as the podium for an invisible deity. Although such a pedestal theoretically could be an Israelite innovation, it goes against the emphasis on divine visibility here and elsewhere in the Pentateuch.⁴⁵ In addition to

⁴² Since people did not generally believe that they could make a god by crafting an image, the Israelites' request to "make a god" is self-undermining (Benno Jacob, *The Second Book of the Bible: Exodus* [Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1992] 936; Propp, *Exodus*, 2:548). It either represents a comment on the futility of their task and/or an imprecise statement that implies making a divine image that they hope will serve as a concrete access point to the deity.

⁴³ For example, Propp (*Exodus*, 2:582) calls it the "majority position," supported by such notables as Ramban, W. F. Albright (*Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan: A Historical Analysis of Two Contrasting Faiths* [Jordan Lectures in Comparative Religion 7; London: Athlone, 1968] 197-98), and Frank Moore Cross (*Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973] 73 n. 117). Similarly, scholars like Cross have argued that Jeroboam's calves were "no doubt pedestals of the same god" (*Canaanite Myth*, 73). Though this is possible, Jeroboam's calves seem to function much more like regular cult statues, which are attested throughout the ancient Near East (see, e.g., the relief of the Hittite bull statue in Hundley, *Gods in Dwellings*, fig. 10.4). Perhaps this position is prompted by the idea that it exploits a loophole in the image prohibition. Since the bull is not explicitly an image of Yhwh, it technically is not a violation. As we will see, however, in the passage Yhwh does not deem the bull acceptable or view it as a pedestal, but as a prohibited object of worship.

⁴⁴ For example, the reconstructed statue from Hazor of an anthropomorphic figure astride a bull (Hundley, *Gods in Dwellings*, fig. 11.7) demonstrates that a bull could serve as a pedestal or mount for a visibly depicted deity. Nothing would indicate, however, that with the absence of a visible rider, an invisible deity was envisioned.

⁴⁵ For example, the ark and *kapporet* serve as a podium for the visible divine glory in the Priestly texts (Exod 25:22). In other words, they represent a human-constructed object that serves as the stage for a visible theophany. Nothing about the Priestly ark would suggest that it marks

being without clear precedent, making a podium for the deity would in no way guarantee its presence atop it. In short, for the practically minded populace, calf as pedestal seems too abstract.

It is perhaps more difficult to decide whether the calf was intended to be a realistic representation of divine form or symbol. In fact, ancient Israelites likely would have done little to distinguish between the two options. If the people are seeking to elicit Yhwh's presence, a symbol is preferable for various reasons. Thus far in the Exodus account Yhwh appears (shrouded) in elements of nature, cloud and fire.⁴⁶ Either the cloud and fire are themselves the form he takes or, as in the Priestly texts, they at once reveal his presence and conceal its form.⁴⁷ The latter remains more likely. Since Exod 33:20 indicates that an encounter with the divine face is fatal, one may assume that earlier encounters were understood to be in some way veiled.⁴⁸ Deuteronomy 4:12 argues along similar lines that, because Yhwh spoke to them from the midst of the fire, they did not see his form. While in most instances Genesis is silent about the divine form, Genesis 18 and 32 mention an anthropomorphic form.⁴⁹ Indeed, Anne K. Knafl has argued that, though distinct, each pentateuchal source envisions an anthropomorphic deity.⁵⁰ There is also little indication that the biblical god ever took bull form.⁵¹ Thus, the people either did not know what Yhwh looked like or presumed him to be anthropomorphic, such that the calf would not have been understood as a "true" representation of a divine form.

In turn, the calf as symbol seems more appropriate. Since the people see only the fire and cloud,⁵² attempting a realistic representation would run the risk of misrepresenting the deity. A symbol, however, is presumably safer, as it adds some distance. Rather than trying to depict the deity, the people merely attempt to create a concrete access point to him. If the people seek another deity or are leaving their

the invisible divine presence. In addition, while the idea of calf as pedestal would be a tangible, visible object, it would differ from previous and future manifestations, the pillars of cloud and fire and the Sinai theophany.

⁴⁶ Exodus 24:9-10 may suggest that Yhwh takes anthropomorphic form; the leaders see Yhwh, yet the text describes only what was beneath his (humanlike) feet.

⁴⁷ For the similar function of the Priestly glory, see Hundley, *Keeping Heaven on Earth: Safeguarding the Divine Presence in the Priestly Tabernacle* (FAT 2/50; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011) 39-52.

⁴⁸ Alternatively, we could be dealing with competing claims. If Exod 33:20 is a late text, it may be trying to qualify otherwise direct encounters with Yhwh as indirect, so as to provide more decorous distance between deity and humanity.

⁴⁹ See more fully, Esther J. Hamori, *"When Gods Were Men": The Embodied God in Biblical and Near Eastern Literature* (BZAW 384; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008).

⁵⁰ Knafl, *Forming God*.

⁵¹ Cf., however, the reference to God (El), who is "like the horns of a wild ox" for Israel and the name *glyw*, which may mean "Yhwh is a calf" (see above at n. 11).

⁵² Cf. Deut 4:12, 15-19, which prohibits an image on these very grounds.

options open, a symbol is likewise most appropriate for similar reasons. A symbol lessens the chance of misrepresentation and has wider appeal. It is thereby more broadly applicable than a strict representation, which would be especially useful if the Israelites were using it as an open invitation.

What features of an עגל, commonly translated “calf,” would make it a suitable image? On the surface, a juvenile calf seems a poor choice. Perhaps the people intended the more virile and powerful bull, but the storyteller renamed it pejoratively as a calf.⁵³ Alternatively, it may be translated as “young bull,” which represents “undiminished vitality.”⁵⁴ The people would likely have understood it in the latter sense, since they naturally would seek a strong deity to lead them. It is difficult to imagine them purposely constructing a weak or ungainly image, which would be unpalatable even to a “weak” deity. There is also some ancient Near Eastern precedent for עגל as “young bull.” As noted, Baal as the young, active warrior-deity is called a “bull-calf” (עגל), while El the more mature high god is called a “bull.”⁵⁵ Marduk, the active warrior and high god of Babylonia, is written AMAR.UTU in Sumerian, “Bull-Calf of the Sun.” In turn, a young bull would be an appropriate symbol for the Israelites, who are seeking a strong and active protector and guide. Fashioning a young bull need not imply that the deity took taurine form. Rather, the people associated the very attributes they sought with the deity. Since the attributes were positive and the form was common, a young bull would seem to be a safe choice for a divine symbol.

If the bull-calf was a symbol, what kind of symbol did the people have in mind—a cult statue or something more distant like a standard?⁵⁶ Again, the text is unclear. In the ancient Near East, the cult statue was the primary way of making the already existent and otherwise distant deity present and of eliciting divine aid through tangible service.⁵⁷ Cult images concretized the divine presence and provided humanity with a tangible access point.⁵⁸ The statue functioned like a divine

⁵³ Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962) 248; cf. Hos 10:5.

⁵⁴ Houtman, *Exodus*, 3:639; see also Propp, *Exodus*, 2:550-51, 580-81. *Exodus Rabbah* 42:5 contends that the calf was inspired by a vision of the divine chariot, which includes an ox (Ezekiel 1).

⁵⁵ Cf. Daniel Fleming, “If El Is a Bull, Who Is a Calf? Reflections on Religion in Second Millennium Syria-Palestine,” in *Frank Moore Cross Volume* (ed. Baruch A. Levine et al.; EriSr 26; Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1999) 23-27.

⁵⁶ For the association of calf with standard or “Führersymbol,” see Otto Eissfeldt, “Lade und Stierbild,” *ZAW* 58 (1940) 190-215.

⁵⁷ I assess the situation in greater detail in *Gods in Dwellings*, 139-371, and provide an overview in “Divine Presence in Ancient Near Eastern Temples,” *Religion Compass* 9 (2015) 203-15.

⁵⁸ Cf. Laura Feldt, “Monstrous Figurines: Textuality, Spatiality and Materiality in Rituals and Incantations for the Protection of Houses in First Millennium Aššur,” in *The Materiality of*

body to which the deity was symbiotically joined. The image provided people with consistent access to the deity and the ability to offer it gifts and service; it allowed them to influence the deity positively with the things they could offer and indeed the very things the gods wanted.⁵⁹

Standards essentially functioned as extensions of the deity beyond the temple sphere and in temple processions, more particularly its presence, power, and favor. Standards would lead the people in battle or on a journey.⁶⁰ In the field, soldiers treated battle standards much like cult statues; for example, they presented them with offerings and burned incense before them.⁶¹ Nonetheless, while considered access points to the deity, they likely were not so closely associated with the deity (e.g., they were not considered divine bodies).

The golden calf resembles a standard in several important respects. It was mobile and designed to provide an access point to the deity and to guide and protect the people. However, the textual description and form better fit a cult statue. The parallel reference to Jeroboam's calves clearly refers to cult statues, and, while standards are secondary access points, the calf was probably understood as a primary access point since there was no other cult statue. Ultimately, the people likely did not differentiate. Pragmatically, the calf combined the best of both objects, serving as the locus of presence as well as a movable guide and protector.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to dismiss the people's actions as blatant disobedience. From their perspective, however, the situation is critical. They try to do the best they can with what they see, yet their vision is limited, as

Magic (ed. Dietrich Boschung and Jan N. Bremmer; Morphomata 20; Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2015) 59-95, here 59 and the references cited therein: "The recent turn towards materiality and visual culture in the comparative study of religion has emphasized how attributing reality and presence to deities and other transempirical beings in the world's religions depends on material forms of mediation." Regarding ancient Near Eastern temples, see Hundley, *Gods in Dwellings*, 3-136, esp. 131-36 for a summary.

⁵⁹ Divine communication to humanity, however, usually came through different channels, primarily through indirect means such as omens and oracles (with regard to Mesopotamia, see Stefan Maul, "Omina und Orakel: A. Mesopotamien," in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* (ed. Erich Ebeling et al.; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1928-) 10:45-88.

⁶⁰ Regarding standards in Egypt and Mesopotamia, see respectively Matthias Seidel, "Götterstäbe," in *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* (ed. Helck, Otto, and Westendorf), 2:711-13; Dietrich Wildung, "Götterstandarte," in *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, 2:713-14; Winfried Barta, "Göttersymbole," in *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, 2:714-16; and Karlheinz Deller, "Götterstreitwagen und Götterstandarten: Götter auf dem Feldzug und ihr Kult im Feldlager," *Baghdader Mitteilungen* 23 (1992) 291-356, here 291-98; S. W. Holloway, "The *gišKakki Aššur* and Neo-Assyrian Loyalty Oaths," in *Proceedings of the XLV Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale*, part 1, *Historiography in the Cuneiform World* (ed. T. Abusch et al.; Bethesda, MD: CDL, 2001) 239-66; Beate Pongratz-Leisten, "Standarte. A. Philologisch," in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* 13.1/2:106-10; Hundley, *Gods in Dwellings*, 161, 235.

⁶¹ Deller, "Götterstreitwagen und Götterstandarten," 291-98.

they are not privy to the events occurring on the mountain above.⁶² Moses the guide and go-between is ostensibly gone. Yhwh is inaccessible. With no one to protect and lead them, no way forward and nowhere to return, they likely fear for their survival.⁶³ In their presumed desperation and with no other obvious solution available, they use whatever means and agency they have to forge a way forward. Like their neighbors, they make an image to serve as a focal point of presence, protection, guidance, and hope. Faced with the lack of a tangible, visible deity, they make a deity tangible and visible on their own terms.

Aaron

When the people request a tangible *ʔēlōhîm*, Aaron himself constructs the golden calf (Exod 32:2-4). In other words, he takes their request for (an) *ʔēlōhîm* and concretizes it in the form of an image. While the people's request for (an) *ʔēlōhîm* is nonspecific and thus ambiguous,⁶⁴ it is fairly clear what Aaron intends. When Aaron "sees" the people identify the calf as their *ʔēlōhîm* (v. 4), Aaron adds specificity to their identification. He builds an altar for it and declares a festival to Yhwh (v. 5), thereby implying that he understands the calf to be a representation of Yhwh. In turn, knowing the tremulous nature of the people's devotion and attention and perhaps under pressure to fill Moses' role, it would seem that Aaron makes sure to (re)direct attention to Yhwh. Like Jeroboam, however, the Yhwh he lauds is the one he makes present in concrete physical form.

When confronted by Moses, Aaron essentially shifts the blame (vv. 22-24). First, he seems to suggest he was coerced, intimating that the people are to blame since "they are intent on evil" (ברע הוּא) and essentially made him make (an) *ʔēlōhîm* for them. Rather than taking responsibility for its craftsmanship, Aaron also claims that the calf effectively made itself: "I threw [the gold] into the fire, and this calf came out" (v. 24). While this is, on the surface, a poor and passive excuse, there is nonetheless some ancient Near Eastern precedent for it.⁶⁵ There are various references to the deity crafting its own image, such that the calf

⁶² Dohmen, *Exodus*, 293; see further 283, on the change of perspective from below (32:1-6) to above (vv. 7-14) to below (vv. 15-29) and back to above (vv. 30-35). Below the people have a limited purview. Above God sees everything, while Moses' vision is limited. When Moses descends, he sees what is going on below, after which he returns above with what he has seen to converse with the deity, who has remained above.

⁶³ They also have nothing to do but wait, which would only add to their agitation.

⁶⁴ Just as elsewhere in the ancient Near East, the abstract plural *ʔēlōhîm* (or its cognates) applies to Yhwh but also to other gods as well (see, e.g., Gen 31:53).

⁶⁵ Samuel E. Loewenstamm, "The Making and Destruction of the Golden Calf," *Bib* 48 (1967) 481-90, here 488-89; Victor A. Hurowitz, "The Golden Calf: Made by Men . . . or God?," *Bible Review* 20 (2004) 28-32, 47; cf. the rabbinic view that the calf was crafted by Satan (Propp, *Exodus*, 2:562).

theoretically could be crafted by the divine hand, not Aaron's.⁶⁶ Most notably, in the Mesopotamian *mīs pî* ritual, the cult statue's craftsmen have their hands symbolically severed and declare that they had no part in making the statue; it is entirely a divine product (NR 173-189). As we will see, while it may accord with the logic of Israel's neighbors, Aaron's statement does not satisfy Moses, the deity, or the storyteller.⁶⁷

From Aaron's perspective, with a limited view of the situation, he too tries to make the best of a difficult situation. Both the people and Aaron seem to act out of desperation, yet for different reasons. Whereas the people's desperation likely is born out of the powerful need for communal survival, Aaron's seems to come from a different source. He appears pulled in different directions, on the one hand, needing to placate a restless mob and, on the other, wanting to preserve appropriate Yhwh worship.

Without Moses and a direct line to Yhwh and with a potentially mutinous people, Aaron finds himself in a difficult position. In essence, he attempts to reforge a tangible connection with Yhwh and to replace the absent Moses as guide and mediator, or simply to try to hold the people at bay until Moses returns. When Moses arrives, he does what he can both to justify his actions and to distance himself from culpability.⁶⁸

God

Exodus 32:7 introduces the divine perspective. While the people's and Aaron's perspectives are either unclear or conflicted, Yhwh's view of the situation is clear and straightforward. He "sees" all from the mountaintop (v. 9). Yhwh breaks off his encounter with Moses to accuse the people of acting wickedly (שָׁחָה (הָעַמֶּךָ)). Just as the people earlier distanced themselves from Moses (32:1), the deity now distances himself from the people, calling them Moses' people and ascribing their deliverance to him.⁶⁹ Yhwh accuses the people of not following his commands, making an image of a calf, worshiping it, sacrificing to it, and ascribing to it the deliverance from Egypt (vv. 7-8).

Yhwh said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted wickedly; they have quickly turned aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have

⁶⁶ For Egypt and Mesopotamia, see Hundley, *Gods in Dwellings*, 186, 263.

⁶⁷ The narrator affirms that Aaron made the calf (v. 35).

⁶⁸ While it casts Aaron in a dubious light, the passage itself likely does not function as a polemic against Aaron and the Aaronic priesthood (see Watts, "Aaron and the Golden Calf").

⁶⁹ The people's reference to Moses (זֶה מֹשֶׁה) seems to have a distancing function (Jan Joosten, "The Syntax of *zeh Moše* (Ex 32.1, 23)," *ZAW* 103 [1991] 412-15), as does Yhwh's assertion that they are not his people.

worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, ‘These are your *ʾelōhîm*, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’” (Exod 32:7-8; my translation)

Whereas the people do not specify the recipient of the offering and Aaron stresses that it is Yhwh, Yhwh himself indicates that the people are in fact sacrificing to the calf. Yhwh contends that they have “turned aside from the way that I commanded them” by explicitly breaking the second commandment to avoid making and worshiping an image (20:4-6) and, perhaps, breaking the first of worshiping other gods (20:3). In effect, any image is unacceptable, even one intended to be Yhwh, and its worship and service are a rejection of Yhwh. Since divine approval is necessary for divine presence,⁷⁰ Yhwh will not deign to associate with the image even if it was crafted for him.⁷¹ From Yhwh’s perspective, whatever it is, it is not him.⁷² Rather than elucidating whether they are worshiping him the wrong way or another deity, Yhwh condemns the whole enterprise out of hand. Having “seen” the people’s behavior and their character, he is prepared to destroy them and start again with Moses (32:9-10).

Moses

Moses’ perspective appears next (32:11-13, 15-21, 25-32), and his response ranges from divine pacification to personal outrage. Like the perspective of the people, Moses’ view is limited and is determined by what he is able to see. On the mountain, the contrast is between Yhwh, who has seen (v. 9) the people’s behavior, and Moses, who has not. At first, Moses does not see the people’s behavior and therefore can coolly reason with God. Rather than attempt to justify the people, he successfully persuades Yhwh not to destroy them by stressing that they are God’s people whom he has delivered and by appealing to the divine reputation and covenant.

Yet, when Moses actually “sees” their behavior (v. 19), he, like Yhwh, becomes enraged (cf. 32:10-11, 19). He punishes the people, questions Aaron, questions the people’s loyalty, and appeals to Yhwh for forgiveness.⁷³ The text stresses that

⁷⁰ For the elaborate ritual activation process of an image in the ancient Near East, see Hundley, *Gods in Dwellings*, 168-87, 239-70, and 301-22. For the issue of divine presence more generally, see Hundley, *Gods in Dwellings*, 139-371, and briefly idem, “Divine Presence.”

⁷¹ This view corresponds to the anti-idol polemic, most notably in Deutero-Isaiah, that rejects idols as nothing useful. If intended for Yhwh, he will not be present in or with it; it is merely an object.

⁷² Since Yhwh contends that they are worshiping the calf, he implicitly rejects the calf as pedestal.

⁷³ Interestingly, if granted, forgiveness does not mean that the people bear no punishment, since Yhwh sends a plague against them (v. 35). Instead, it means that Yhwh keeps the covenant relationship intact and does not destroy them (cf. Numbers 14).

Moses becomes angry when he sees the calf and the people celebrating, thereby suggesting that the existence of the calf and revelry because of and for it are the impetus for his ire. Moses three times calls their action a “great sin” (חטאת גדולה) (32:21, 30, 31). In Ugaritic and Egyptian marriage contracts and in Gen 20:9, the same term is used with reference to adultery.⁷⁴ 2 Kings 17:21 also uses the phrase “great sin,” which in this case refers to Jeroboam’s idolatry.⁷⁵ Thus, in Biblical Hebrew, the phrase “great sin” seems to refer to a breach of contract, whether a marriage or the exclusive relationship with Yhwh. In turn, Moses seems to view the people’s behavior as a breach of the contract they agreed to in Exod 19:8 and 24:3, presumably for the same reasons as Yhwh.

The Storyteller

The text does not explicitly label the storyteller’s perspective. It *is* the storyteller’s perspective.⁷⁶ Like God, the storyteller sees everything and offers his interpretation with all of the data in view. However, while God is emotionally involved, the narrator gives the impression that he is objective, simply reporting the facts.⁷⁷ In fact, he makes very few statements at all, preferring to let the dialogue carry the story. The storyteller functions rather like a director who stands offstage, without lines yet clearly shaping the production. In turn, the storyteller exerts significant influence on the story, especially with the plural use of *ʿēlōhîm* in an ostensibly singular situation.

Elsewhere, the biblical text uses plural references to the Israelite god in the context of a foreign understanding of orthodox worship.⁷⁸ Non-Israelites commonly use the plural “gods” (*ʿēlōhîm*), indicative of their acknowledgment of multiple gods, whereas biblical Israelites typically mention “god,” indicative of their exclusive commitment to Yhwh. For example, compare the oaths of foreigners, who appeal to the “gods” (1 Kgs 19:2; 20:10), with Israelites, who appeal to “god” (1 Sam 3:17; 14:44).⁷⁹ Compare also the contrasting use of the singular *ʿēlōhîm* in the Bible and the plural *ʿlhn* in the Deir ʿAlla inscriptions.⁸⁰ The Bible takes the common non-Israelite preference and extends it to situations in which it is an unnatural fit, referring to the otherwise singular Yhwh as plural “gods.” For

⁷⁴ Sarna, *Exodus*, 208 and 260 n. 37; cf. Gen 39:9, which refers to a great evil (הרעה הגדולה) also in the context of potential adultery.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 260 n. 37.

⁷⁶ The text does not tell us that the storyteller said anything. Nonetheless, the text would not exist without the storyteller, and the text that we have is what the storyteller “saw.”

⁷⁷ See Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974) 565.

⁷⁸ See Propp, *Exodus*, 2:551-52.

⁷⁹ Burnett, *Biblical Elohim*, 75.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 37, 75-76.

example, in an effort to defeat Israel in battle, the Arameans claim that the Israelite “gods are gods of the mountains” (1 Kgs 20:30). In 1 Sam 4:7-8, when the Philistines notice the presence of the ark in battle they at first proclaim, “Elohim has come [sg. אֱלֹהִים] into the camp.” Nonetheless, in the next breath, they resort to the plural, “Woe to us. Who will save us from the hand of these [pl. האֱלֹהִים הַאֲדִירִים] mighty אֱלֹהִים? These [pl. אֱלֹהֵי הַמִּצְרַיִם] are the אֱלֹהִים who struck [pl. הַמִּצְרַיִם] the Egyptians with every kind of plague in the wilderness.”

The Bible also uses plural forms for a singular deity in the context of heterodox worship, including both wrong worship practice and worship of the wrong deity. Isaiah 42:17 states, “Driven back and utterly shamed are those who trust in an image, who say to a molten image, ‘You [pl. אֱתָנִים] are our gods,’” thereby calling a singular image “gods.” Referring to Saul’s encounter with the medium of Endor, who summons the deceased Samuel, 1 Sam 28:13-14 reads, “The king said to her, ‘Do not be afraid. What do you see?’ The woman said to Saul, ‘I see אֱלֹהִים coming up [pl. עֹלִים] from the earth.’ He said to her, ‘What does it look like?’ She said, ‘An old man is coming up [sg. עֹלֵה].’” In the face of an impending Philistine threat, and after being rebuffed in his request to Yhwh through approved channels, he turns seemingly in desperation to a medium. Since necromancy is forbidden (28:9), the text calls the figure emerging “gods” even though a single man is in view.

In turn, the biblical writers often associate any illicit religious practice with foreign conceptions of the divine, who in their mind tend to use the plural אֱלֹהִים “even in defiance of logic.”⁸¹ By having the people and Jeroboam use the plural in defiance of logic (Exod 32:4; 1 Kgs 12:28),⁸² the text labels their understanding of Yhwh foreign and unacceptable. In essence, the storyteller seems to conflate the wrong worship of the right god and wrong god categories into one. In turn, there are essentially only two classifications—right worship and wrong worship—and the two may be identified according to their use of אֱלֹהִים. In effect, worshipping Yhwh inappropriately may fall into the same category as worshipping other gods, as both are grouped together with the plural use of אֱלֹהִים.⁸³

Within the category of wrong worship, there are different degrees of wrongdoing. Worshipping Jeroboam’s calves is a heinous crime (Hos 8:4-6; 10:5-6; 13:1-3)⁸⁴ and indeed brings about the downfall of the northern kingdom of Israel (2 Kgs 17:7-23). According to Kings, however, worshipping Yhwh improperly (e.g., in the case of Jeroboam) is not as great a sin as worshipping Baal (1 Kgs 16:31-3; 2 Kgs 3:1-3; 10:18-31).⁸⁵

⁸¹ Propp, *Exodus*, 2:552.

⁸² See Houtman, *Exodus*, 3:631-32.

⁸³ See *ibid.*, 626, 642; Propp, *Exodus*, 2:580.

⁸⁴ Houtman, *Exodus*, 3:627.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 3:626.

The Deuteronomistic History in particular promotes a distinctly Judean viewpoint, which is self-evident according to the majority view in the Bible.⁸⁶ It is anomalous, however, in its wider ancient Near Eastern context.⁸⁷ Two of the primary criteria that the Book of Kings uses to judge the monarchy are exclusive to Judah and doom Israel from the start: centralization of worship in a single sanctuary and the prohibition of images (see, e.g., 1 Kgs 15:9-15). Thus, Kings rejects Jeroboam's choice to set up two sanctuaries and install images in accord with typical ancient Near Eastern practice, even though it promotes exclusive Yahwism. The Judeans reject this northern approach as heterodox. Through the use of the plural *ʾēlōhîm*, they make this abundantly clear as they place it in the same broad category as worshiping other gods.

In Exodus 32, the storyteller promotes a similar position, allowing noncentralized worship yet forbidding image worship.⁸⁸ Worshiping the deity in an unapproved way—in this case through a calf image—even in a dire situation is unacceptable and subject to extreme censure. It lies in the category of heterodox worship, which leads to the worship of other gods and the rejection of Yhwh. The use of the grammatically plural *ʾēlōhîm* in a singular context is the storyteller's way of making his displeasure clear.

When we examine the people's perspective with these data before us, the text's rhetoric emerges more clearly. Perhaps the people's intentions are unclear precisely because they do not matter. Their illicit actions condemn them regardless of whether they are seeking Yhwh and regardless of what form they intend the calf to represent.

Synthesis

In the story, it remains murky whom the people intend to worship and how they intend to worship that deity. The people most likely view the calf as a symbol that served as an access point to Yhwh (functioning as either a cult statue or statue/standard hybrid), yet they may be willing to leave their options open to accept an alternative rather than face their situation without divine assistance. Either way, the responses from God and the narrator leave a clear message.

⁸⁶ For a recent accessible summary of the Deuteronomistic History in scholarship, see Thomas Römer, "The Current Discussion on the So-called Deuteronomistic History: Literary Criticism and Theological Consequences," *Humanities* 46 (2015) 43-66.

⁸⁷ See Hermann-Josef Stipp's ingenious reversal of the rhetoric of the Josianic reforms in "Remembering Josiah's Reforms in Kings," in Ben Zvi and Levin, *Remembering and Forgetting*, 225-38, here 225-28.

⁸⁸ While intriguing, Burnett's argument that the plural *ʾēlōhîm* refers to Yhwh and his entourage (*Biblical Elohim*, 92) is less likely, as there is no (nonpolemical) precedent in the Bible or ancient Near East for referring to a single image as housing or representing a plurality of deities.

The people's position seems reasonable, especially since they appear to have no other viable, visible options. Aaron's position is likewise defensible. He makes the most of a bad situation, avoiding mutiny and (re)directing worship to Yhwh by establishing a concrete access point and himself serving as the mediator. Yhwh, Moses, and the storyteller, however, all reject this pragmatic compromise according to their strict standards, and they expect the reader to do the same. According to the majority voice in the Hebrew Bible, the standards are clear, most notably here the prohibition of images. The biblical writings categorically condemn even well-intentioned heterodox Yhwh worship. Even when no clear alternative presents itself, the text suggests that heterodox worship will only bring destruction (e.g., Exodus 32; 1 Samuel 4–7; 13:15; 28:13–14; 1 Kings 12; 2 Kgs 17:7–23). Even when Yhwh seems inaccessible, especially through normal channels, the storyteller ultimately urges the reader not to compromise, which would be particularly tempting for an exilic or postexilic audience, where normal channels of worship were either unavailable or far less impressive and successful than in their glory days.⁸⁹ In this case, the storyteller tells his audience that religious compromise, especially in the form of image worship, is never profitable, even when seemingly better alternatives present themselves. Ultimately, his message transcends the text, turning the “golden calf” into a byword for future generations, warning against the dangers of constructing a divine image.

⁸⁹ See, e.g., the similar arguments in Chronicles and the Priestly texts that appeal to ancient precedent to bolster a precarious present situation. See Matthew Lynch, *Monotheism and Institutions in the Book of Chronicles: Temple, Priesthood, and Kingship in Post-Exilic Perspective* (FAT 2/64; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014); Hundley, “Way Forward,” 209–24.