

# Faith and Sight in Exodus 32-34

BY RALPH W. KLEIN

**T**HE STORY OF THE GOLDEN CALF and its aftermath in Exodus 32-34 has been a parade example of the merits and limitations of historical criticism. Scholars in recent decades have focused on the disunity of the text' and/or on its relationship to the unorthodox cult of Jeroboam I at Dan and Bethel.<sup>2</sup> Without denying the importance of this research, I shall approach the text more holistically in this essay and read it as a narrative unit in an attempt to see the literary brilliance of the present shape of the text. This approach has the additional advantage of highlighting the theological dynamics of these chapters in their final form and contributing to **Lutheran Forum's** discussion of grace and faith.

## The Precipitating Events (32:1-6)

According to the opening scene, the Israelites had grown tired of waiting for Moses, who was receiving the law from Yahweh on Mount Sinai, and they desired new leadership. Twice they invoked the Exodus event to express their sinful rebellion: "As for this man, Moses, who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what happened to him" (v.1). When Aaron created the golden calf, they added this twisted confession: "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt" (v. 6). The burnt offerings and peace offerings they prepared for the feast announced by Aaron were sacrifices to the calf according to the interpretation of Yahweh in v. 8. Their misdeed, in fact, was the "great sin" of idolatry in the eyes of Moses (vv. 21 and 30) and a violation of the first commandment: "You shall not worship another god" (34:14) nor "make for yourself molten gods" (34:17).

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## Reaction of Yahweh and Intervention by Moses (32:7-14)

The next scene takes place at the top of the mountain, when Yahweh tells Moses that "Your people, whom you brought up from Egypt" have departed quickly from the way. In Exod 24:3 and 7 the people had said, "All that Yahweh has spoken we will do." Their very next word in the Pentateuch is "Up, make us gods" (32:1). Yahweh distanced himself from Israel by calling them the people of Moses (your people) and by attributing the Exodus to Moses and not him-self (32:8). Yahweh cited the idolatrous confession of the people as evidence against them: "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt" (v. 8).' Finally, Yahweh

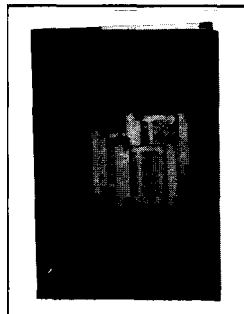
decided to vent his wrath on Israel and make of Moses a new, substitute "great nation" (v. 10; cf. the promise to Abram in Gen 12:2).

At this point Moses interceded successfully with Yahweh by presenting three theological arguments:

A. He reminded Yahweh that Israel was Yahweh's own people whom he—not Moses!—had brought out of Egypt (v. 11). This needs to be seen as an explicit contrast to the people who had complained that Moses, the Exodus leader, had disappeared and who had proclaimed that the idolatrous calf had produced the Exodus, and as an explicit contrast to Yahweh who attributed the Exodus event to Moses (32:7). According to Moses, Yahweh had brought off the Exodus event with great strength and with a mighty hand.

B. Moses attributed a perverse Exo-  
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du's confession to the Egyptians, who were made to say, "Yahweh brought them out with an evil intent in order to kill them." If Israel would not survive, Yahweh's reputation would be destroyed. What would the neighbors think if he vented his wrath on his people?

C. Finally, Moses appealed to the promises made to Israel's ancestors that they would have as many descendants as the stars, who would possess the land forever. Yahweh's proposal to make of Moses a new Abraham is trumped by Moses' appeal to the oath sworn to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel.'

Moses prayed fervently, "Change your mind about this evil planned for your people" (v. 12). The narrator subsequently observes: "Yahweh changed his mind about the evil he had threatened to do to his people" (v. 14). Thus, the narrator adopts the point of view of Moses: Israel was Yahweh's people, not just the people of Moses. Yahweh, who had seen the idolatrous activity of Israel, is persuaded by Moses, who, of course, had not yet seen the calf, to change his mind.

### Moses Sees and Changes His Mind (32:15-29)

When Moses left Yahweh's presence he was carrying the two tablets of the law (the deed of Yahweh, v. 16). Joshua, who had accompanied Moses on his trip up Mount Sinai, misunderstood the sounds emerging from the Israelite camp as military shouts. Moses knew that these sounds were not the noise of a warrior during or following battle. What he heard was the sound of (idolatrous) singing (32:17-18). When hearing the music was followed by seeing the calf, Moses became angry like Yahweh, broke the tablets, burned the calf, ground it to powder, and made the Israelites drink it. His actions expressed righteous anger, and they forced Israel to acknowledge its guilt by swallowing the remnants of their sin. His change of mind was complete. He had asked Yahweh why he was angry (v. 11), but now his own anger was kindled (v. 19).

In a subsequent scene with Aaron, Moses attempted to establish who was to blame for the incident (vv. 21-24). Aaron mimicked Moses' intercession with Yahweh by asking Moses not to be angry and reminding him of the evil propensities of Israel. He cited their

criticism of Moses as evidence against them: "As for this Moses, who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what happened to him." He added, rather lamely, that he had thrown the people's jewelry into the fire but it was a calf that came out. Mercifully, the narrator does not comment on this excuse.

Moses, however, saw that the people were out of control because Aaron had let them get out of control; this put them in jeopardy with their enemies (v. 25; cf. v. 12). When he appealed for those loyal to Yahweh to come to him, the Levites declared their fidelity, and they were instructed by Moses to kill the idolators, with no mercy even to kinfolk. Their bloody execution resulted in 3,000 deaths and in their own blessing as future priests.

### A Second Intercession (32:30-35)

The severity of the punishment was not enough to change Yahweh's mind again. After castigating the people on the next day for sinning a "big sin," Moses tried to return to Yahweh and make atonement for their misdeed. His approach this second time was quite different than the first. He begged for divine forgiveness for Israel, but asked that, if Yahweh would choose not to forgive, his own person should be blotted out of the book written by Yahweh. Such substitutionary recompense was not acceptable to Yahweh: "The one who sins against me I will blot out of my book." Yahweh instructed Moses merely to resume the trek toward the land and promised him the presence of his "messenger." A day of reckoning would still be coming when the divine wrath would be poured out."

The narrator concluded: "Yahweh smote the people because they made the calf which Aaron made." However much Aaron had tried to interpret the calf as dedicated to Yahweh (32:5) or as an accident of the smelting oven (32:24), both he and the people were condemned.

### Will Yahweh be Present with a Sinful People?

This question is prompted by chapter 32 and dominates all of chapter 33. The question seems to have two foci. How

can the holy Yahweh accompany so sinful an Israel? If he should accompany Israel, how will his presence be manifested? The answers to these questions are interrelated because the indirectness of Yahweh's presence constitutes also the graciousness of his presence.

Chapter 33 begins with a final reference by Yahweh to the Exodus theme. Moses is to lead the people whom he brought up from the land of Egypt to the land guaranteed by divine oath to the descendants of Israel's ancestors. Yahweh promised to send his accompanying messenger and even to drive out the pre-Israelite nations,' but declined to accompany Israel himself because he would have to consume them if he did. Any possibility for a more gracious future is linked to the changed behavior of the people: "Take off your [idolatrous] jewelry, and then I may know what to do with you." (33:5). The people removed such jewelry from Mt. Horeb [=Sinai] onward. God's indecision and the people's resolute action are essential parts of the background for Moses' later successful intercession.

### One Manner of Yahweh's Presence (33:7-11)

This important paragraph' demonstrates that Yahweh's presence was not confined to Mt. Sinai, and it also shows a changed attitude of the people toward Yahweh. Verse 7 indicates that many people sought Yahweh in wilderness times. When Moses went out to the oracle tent he had set up outside the camp, everyone stood at the entrance of their own tent in silent tribute. At the sight of the theophanic pillar of cloud, *all the people* would worship Yahweh (33:10), a direct contrast to *all the people* who contributed their jewelry toward the making of the golden calf (32:3). Moses had unusual, indeed unique, access to God: Yahweh would speak with him, just as one speaks with a neighbor, face to face. When Moses left the tent and returned to camp, Joshua kept silent guard at the tent (33:11). This notice about Joshua and the report of his innocent misunderstanding of the noise from the camp (32:17-18) fit in well with his role as the potential successor to Moses as leader of Israel.

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## Exodus

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### Yahweh and Moses Discuss Yahweh's Presence (33:12-23)

The remainder of chapter 33 consists of an impassioned dialogue between Moses and Yahweh, with each individual speaking three times. Here is an abbreviated account of that dialogue:

Moses: "Make me know your ways so that I may know you" (v. 13). The revelation of Yahweh's ways will bring about true knowledge of Yahweh. As is usual in the Bible, such knowledge is more than head knowledge. It really means acknowledgment with trust and obedience, or, as we might say, it means "faith." Yahweh: "My face will go with you, and I will give you rest" (v. 14). The manner of Yahweh's presence is defined as divine accompaniment on the journey to the land, and the gift of the land itself." Moses: "How then will it be known that I have found favor in your eyes—I and your people? Is it not in your going with us that I and your people are different from all the people who are on the face of the earth?" (vv. 15-16). Moses here identifies himself with Israel and confesses that Israel's uniqueness is effected by Yahweh's gracious, accompanying presence. Yahweh's going with Israel defines what is meant earlier by Yahweh's "ways." Yahweh: "This thing which you have spoken, I will do. You have found favor in my eyes, and I know you by name" (v. 17). Already in v. 12 Moses had complained that Yahweh had not told him who would be sent with him, though Yahweh knew him by name and though he had found favor in Yahweh's eyes. Twice, however, he had raised a question of whether he had really found favor in God's eyes (v. 13) and had begged for some tangible proof that he was in-deed favored by God (v. 16). Hence this-promise to do what Moses desired—this gospel!—and the following expression of election (I know you by name) are important guarantees that Yahweh will be present in a saving way.

Moses: "Make me see your glory" (v. 18). In the Old Testament God's *holiness* is what God is in himself; his *glory* is what is revealed to humankind. Recall the famous couplet from the call of Isaiah:

Holy, holy, holy is Yahweh of Hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory. (Isa 6:3)

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While Moses may have talked to Yahweh face to face on Mt. Sinai and in the oracle tent, he did not see Yahweh everyday, no more than anyone else did. No human can see the face of Yahweh and live (v. 20). *I will cover my hand over you until I pass by. Then I will remove my hand. You will see my backparts, but my face will not be seen* (vv. 19-23). Yahweh's glory is represented by the disclosure of his goodness and the proclamation of his name, first revealed in the context of the Exodus from Egypt. Grace is something totally at Yahweh's own disposal: He chooses to be gracious or merciful to whomever he will. Grace cannot be presumed, nor can it be forced when even a man as great as Moses offers himself in Israel's place. Yahweh's goodness, his name, his grace, and his mercy are not the same as seeing Yahweh face to face; they are even better. Unmediated divine presence would bring instant death; seeing God's backparts—his ways, his saving presence, his goodness, name, grace, and mercy—is the only way we humans see God safely. Seeing such backparts is to see Yahweh at his very best. Moses only saw God directly on Mount Siani or in the oracle tent; elsewhere he too saw only God's beautiful back.

### A Third, Successful

#### Intercession (34:1-10)

On the basis of the sights/insights of 33:12-23, Moses interceded for a third time. This was not the rash intercession he made on the mountain when he had neither heard nor seen what was really going on (32:11-13). Nor was it the unsuccessful intercession he had made after he had seen and initiated judgment. That intercession had tried to undercut divine justice by taking Israel's guilt upon himself. Yahweh had declined that intercession since sinners themselves needed to be expunged from the book of life (32:31-32).

Yahweh's presence descended on the mountain—the presence of Yahweh is not limited to nor confined to Sinai! Yahweh proclaimed: "Yahweh! Yahweh! A god merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. The one who keeps steadfast love for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression, and sin" (34:6-7).

Yahweh's presence is proclaimed, not seen. Yet, the munificence of this proclaimed presence might be misunderstood as some kind of cheap grace or as an undercutting of divine justice if it were not followed by: *"the one who by no means clears the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the parents on the children to the third and fourth generations."* It is precisely the God who punishes sin without fail who also is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The paradox of this God is his glory, his way, his face. No wonder Moses hurried to bow down to the ground and worship (34:8). His liturgical action echoed that of faithful Israel, who bowed to the ground when Moses went out to the oracle tent; his pious liturgical action stood in sharp contrast to idolatrous Israel who prostrated itself before the golden calf (32:8).

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Only now could Moses pray, *"Let the Lord go in our midst although this is a stiff-necked people"* (34:9). Yahweh had denied this possibility earlier: *"I will not go in your midst"* (33:3). Having seen and heard the report of Yahweh's paradoxical glory, Moses prayed for God to contradict himself once more. No longer did Moses see himself apart from the people either as their judge (32:25-29) or as their substitute (32:31-32). Instead, he prayed: *"Forgive our iniquity and our sin. Make us your heritage"* (34:9). Moses made their confession of sin his own and threw himself and his people on divine grace and mercy. Yahweh replied: *"Behold, I am making a covenant!"* (34:10).

Israel will see Yahweh after all. No, they will not see him on the mountain, nor in the tent, nor even in the periodic meetings between Yahweh and Moses when Moses will take the veil off his face and go to talk with God (34:34-35). But they will see those *opera ad extra*

of divine guidance in the wilderness, of divine victory in the conquest of the land, and of divine righteousness in the offer of grace and mercy to a stiff-necked people—theirself. They—no less than Moses—will "see" God's glory. Such sight is faith.

<sup>1</sup>A recent commentator for example attributed the main story line in chapter 32 to the so-called Elohist in vv. 1-6, 15-20, and 35, but ascribed vv. 21-24, 25-29, and 30-34 to a series of E supplements and vv. 7-14 to a Deuteronomistic redactor.

<sup>2</sup>According to 1 Kings 12 the first king of North Israel set up golden calves at his two royal sanctuaries. Although the biblical text interprets them as idolatrous, many modern scholars believe that Jeroboam was using an ancient way of indicating Yahweh's presence, linked to the history of Aaron in the wilderness period. Yahweh was thought to sit or stand invisibly on the calf's back just as in Jerusalem he was said to sit invisibly on the ark.

<sup>3</sup>Aaron's role in the account is ambivalent. While he makes the calf at their request, he proposes a festival for Yahweh (v. 5) and argues with Moses in v. 24 that he had thrown their gold into the fire from which a calf had (surprisingly?) emerged.

<sup>4</sup>Yahweh notes that he has seen that this people is stiff-necked (32:9). Aaron who saw the same events declared a festival (32:5). Moses, who does not see the calf until much later (32:19; cf. 32:25), talks Yahweh out of his anger.

<sup>5</sup>By choosing Israel instead of Jacob for the third patriarch's name, Moses underscores the importance of the people Israel in Yahweh's eyes.

<sup>6</sup>A diachronic reading of the text might associate this threat with the destruction of the Northern Kingdom in 721 B.C.E. A literary reading finds v. 34 fulfilled in v. 35.

<sup>7</sup>This fulfills the promise made in Exod 23:23. That promise, however, carried an obligation: "You shall not bow down to their gods" (23:24).

<sup>8</sup>It is often noted that this paragraph preserves an ancient tradition about an oracle tent from the wilderness period.

<sup>9</sup>The expression "I will give you rest" is a characteristic metaphoric description of the conquest of the land, the saving gift par excellence in the Old Testament.