

EXODUS 25-31 & 35-40 SIN IN GOD'S PRESENCE

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FORM & STRUCTURE

Exodus 32–34 offers the Old Testament's most sustained exploration of the intertwined themes of sin and judgment, intercession and mercy. The sacred authors pause the narrative to probe a central theological question: how can the holy presence of God remain among an unholy and disobedient people? In doing so, they present the most extensive treatment of Moses as intercessor, mediator, and restorer of covenant.

The golden calf episode is deliberately juxtaposed with the tabernacle instructions that precede it. The irony is sharp: while Moses receives detailed commands for preserving the LORD's holiness through the sanctuary, the people below abandon patience and fidelity, violating the most foundational command of the Decalogue. Instead of preparing for the divine presence, they expose and defile themselves, rejecting the covenant and endangering their future as the chosen people.

The sin at Sinai finds a striking parallel in the divided monarchy, when Jeroboam fashions two golden calves for the shrines at Bethel and Dan (1 Kgs 12:28–33). The resemblance is intentional: Jeroboam proclaims, "Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt," appoints his own priests, and establishes his own cult. Some scholars, such as North, argue that the Jeroboam narrative is older and that Exodus models its account anachronistically as a critique of the northern kings. Scarlata, however, maintains that the Exodus tradition is earlier. In either case, both narratives emphasize the central importance of authorized worship and the dangers of cultic innovation.

The episode is framed by the two major tabernacle sections—Exodus 25–31 (instructions) and Exodus 35–40 (construction). The Sabbath commands appear both before and after the sin (Exod 31:12–17; 35:1–3), underscoring the gravity of Israel's violation. G. A. Anderson notes that the placement highlights how quickly Israel falls into sin after receiving divine blessing—a

recurring pattern throughout Scripture. Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Abraham and Sarah, David and the kings all exhibit the same tragic rhythm: divine gift followed by human failure.

While the LORD and Israel are central to the narrative, the authors draw the reader deeply into Moses' inner struggle. Moses is the only figure in the Old Testament—apart from the possible exception of Adam—who speaks with God “face to face.” The reader becomes witness to this intimate dialogue. Moses alone intercedes for Israel, and Moses alone pronounces judgment. His role is both unique and indispensable.

The golden calf narrative wrestles with profound theological questions through a carefully crafted story. The reader is invited into the unapproachable and allowed to overhear the inexpressible. In the end, Israel survives as a chosen people because of God's mercy revealed through Moses' intercession. Mercy is the divine attribute that secures Israel's future, yet it is mediated through the one who stands between God and the people. Moses takes up this role and spares Israel from destruction, being himself further shaped into the *imago Dei* as he reflects the compassion and steadfastness of the God he serves.

ISRAEL'S REBELLIOUS WORSHIP (Exodus 32:1-6)

The events surrounding Israel's sin at Sinai begin with the acknowledgment that Moses was delayed on the mountain (Exod 32:1). In his absence, a leadership vacuum emerges, marked by a gathering either “to Aaron” or “against Aaron”—the Hebrew allows both readings. In either case, Aaron yields to the people's demand to make “gods” who will lead them forward. This request does not necessarily imply that Israel intended to abandon the LORD. As Moberly notes, the people likely meant the calf to represent the LORD, reverting to familiar religious patterns in which the gods were embodied in idols.¹ This interpretation is confirmed in Exodus 32:5, where Aaron proclaims, “Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD.”

Thus, the narrative does not portray Israel's sin as outright apostasy but as a violation of proper worship. The people attempt to approach God on their own terms. In impatience and disobedience, they adopt the practices of their neighbors, violating the covenant's central prohibition. The calf fashioned as a representation of the LORD resembles the bull imagery associated with the Canaanite Baal and the Egyptian Hathor. This reflects the syncretism that would plague Israel throughout its history. Yet Israel was called to be set apart—a holy nation consecrated to the LORD and distinct from surrounding cultures.

The declaration in Exodus 32:4—“These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt”—is grammatically awkward, since only one idol is present. The phrase was likely

¹ Moberly, *At the Mountain of God: Story and Theology in Exodus 32-34*, 1983, 45-48.

retained or inserted by later editors as an intentional echo of Jeroboam's proclamation when he installed two golden calves in the shrines at Bethel and Dan. Its use here serves as an additional condemnation of Jeroboam and the northern kingdom, reinforcing the theological critique of unauthorized worship that runs through both narratives.

MOSES THE INTERCESSOR (Exodus 32:7-14)

At Exodus 32:7 the narrative leaves the chaotic scene at the foot of Sinai and returns to Moses, where the LORD reveals what the Israelites have done. The shift in language is subtle but significant: God refers to Israel as "your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt." The responsibility for the people's failure is placed squarely on Moses' shoulders, emphasizing his role as leader and mediator.

After describing Israel's sin, God says to Moses, "Let me alone..."—a curious command, as though God were seeking Moses' permission to execute judgment and begin anew with Moses as the progenitor of a fresh nation. Fretheim argues that this phrase is actually an invitation. The cryptic "Let me alone" opens space for Moses to step into the role of intercessor, and Moses accepts the invitation, pleading on behalf of the people.² And Moses accepts the invitation and intercedes on behalf of the people.

Moses' intercession is effective. He shifts responsibility back to the LORD, reminding God of the divine promises and reputation among the nations. The text then declares that the LORD "relented" (Hebrew *niḥam*). The root *nḥm* carries the sense of regret or repentance, hence the NRSV's rendering that the LORD "changed his mind" (Exod 32:14). This does not imply inconsistency in God's character. As Fretheim notes,

"Divine repentance refers to God's ability to reverse an initial pronouncement of judgment in the light of his mercy and forgiveness."³

The authors of Exodus portray a God whose steadfastness includes responsiveness—whose mercy can reshape judgment.

The vision of intercession that emerges is profound. God invites Moses into a genuine dialogue, opening the possibility that divine judgment may be altered through human appeal. In Exodus, intercession becomes a means by which the LORD shapes the people into the divine image. Moses grows in his knowledge of God—learning how God acts, listens, and responds—and in that growth he himself is transformed. As Moses comes to reflect God's mercy and

² Fretheim, *Exodus*, 1999, 284-285.

³ Fretheim, *Exodus*, 1991, 286)

steadfastness, he is gradually and irrevocably shaped into the *imago Dei*, embodying the very character of the God he serves.

THE COVENANT DESTROYED AND MOSES' ANGER (Exodus 32:15-29)

Moses, presumably accompanied by Joshua, descends the mountain carrying the tablets of the law. Their description as “the work of God” (Exod 32:16) heightens the drama of what follows. When Moses reaches the base of the mountain and sees the people’s disobedience for himself, the anger he had restrained on God’s behalf now erupts. He shatters the tablets—the very gift of God—symbolizing the breaking of the covenant. The question now looms: can the holy God still abide with a people who have rejected him? Israel will remain God’s chosen people, but the covenant must be renewed.

Moses’ response in Exodus 32:19–29 unfolds in three movements, each arising from his zeal for the LORD. First, he destroys the golden calf, obliterating it entirely. Second, he confronts Aaron, who has allowed the people to “run wild.” The Hebrew *pārā* ‘ often carries connotations of adultery, underscoring the gravity of Israel’s unfaithfulness. Aaron’s role as high priest is tarnished; he appears weak, passive, and unable to restrain the people. Third, Moses calls for those loyal to the LORD to step forward. The Levites—Moses’ own tribe—respond, forsaking family and kin in service to the LORD. For this, they are ordained to divine service. This is clearly an aetiological narrative explaining the later Levitical priesthood and its connection to the tabernacle and temple. Yet the troubling nature of the scene must not be ignored: those consecrated to serve do indeed bear the blood of their kinsmen.

GOD’S RESPONSE (Exodus 32:30-33:6)

In Exodus 32:30 Moses tells the people they have “sinned a great sin.” Though he has prevented their destruction, he now ascends the mountain again to seek atonement, hoping to avert the LORD’s withdrawal. Moses pleads with God, offering himself in place of the people: “Blot me out of the book that you have written.” This is the ultimate act of self-sacrifice, anticipating later biblical portraits of the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. Gerard von Rad argues that this moment foreshadows the suffering servant of Isaiah⁴ and that “Moses had to die vicariously for the sake of Israel’s sin.”⁵ In this scene, Moses becomes the archetype of the servant leader in Israel.

⁴ Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1966, 124.

⁵ Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1966, 201..

But Moses' life is not taken. The "book" reflects a widespread ancient belief in a heavenly record of human life and deeds (cf. Ps 40:7; 139:16; Ezek 2:9–10; Zech 5:1–4; Mal 3:16). Moses has restored Israel's allegiance and offered his own life, yet the people's sin still requires judgment, and a plague is sent. The description in Exodus 32:35 is brief, serving simply to close the episode.

Then, in Exodus 33:1 the LORD commands Moses:

"Go, leave this place, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, and go to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, "To your descendants I will give it."

But the LORD will not accompany them, lest his holiness consume the people along the way. This is not further punishment—the plague has already fulfilled that role—but the natural consequence of an unholy people in the presence of a holy God. God remains faithful to the ancestral promise, yet the possibility of his abiding presence in the tabernacle now appears jeopardized.

The people respond by mourning and stripping themselves of their ornaments—a sign of humility and poverty in the wilderness. Their grief marks the beginning of a renewed search for restored relationship, setting the stage for Moses' next intercession and the eventual renewal of the covenant.

THE TENT OF MEETING (Exodus 33:7-11)

Exodus 33:7–11 interrupts the flow of the golden calf narrative with an abrupt shift, as though the reader has stepped into a liminal clearing in the wilderness. Moberly notes that the switch to imperfect verbs signals a "passing of time...a literary device to slow the narrative at this transitional point." The pause invites reflection on the central tension of the episode: if the divine presence cannot remain with Israel, where can the people go to encounter God?

For now, the answer is the tent of meeting. B. S. Childs argues that this tent likely reflects an ancient, perhaps pre-Mosaic, tradition in which Israel's leaders met with God and interceded for the people. Several features distinguish it from the tabernacle soon to be constructed:

- The tabernacle stands at the center of the community; the tent of meeting is pitched outside the camp.
- The tabernacle embodies a graded hierarchy of holiness; the tent is a single space where Moses alone meets God face to face.

- The tabernacle is ornate, reflecting the beauty and order of heaven; the tent is simple.

Both structures are places of encounter, yet their differing forms reveal distinct theological understandings of who may approach the divine presence and how that approach occurs.

In the tabernacle, worship is initiated by God and governed by divine command. In the tent of meeting, human invocation calls forth the manifestation of God's presence. Moses, acting as the sole mediator, meets the LORD while the community watches from a distance—waiting patiently, something they had failed to do when Moses was on the mountain. The tent thus highlights Moses' unique relationship with God, his ability to meet the one person—physical, emotional, and spiritual. Often used to describe sexual union, it expresses a desire for complete relational depth. Moses seeks to know God in the fullness of the divine presence. God responds, "I know you by name" (Exod 33:12, 17), a phrase used of no one else in the Old Testament. Moses alone is "known" by God in this way, signaling the depth of divine love and favor. As Rudolf Otto observes, to be known by God is to "encounter the numinous" and, through divine grace, to discover one's true self.⁶

In Exodus 33:15 the focus shifts from the personal to the communal. Moses presses the LORD again about fulfilling the covenant promises, insisting that Israel cannot proceed without God's presence. The LORD affirms that he will do what Moses asks because Moses has "found favor in his sight" (Exod 33:17).

Then Moses makes a final, audacious request: "Show me your glory" (Exod 33:18). Though Moses already meets with God "face to face," this plea reflects the inexhaustible human longing to behold the fullness of divine reality. The term *kābôd* ("glory") symbolizes the weight and radiance of God's presence. The LORD responds by promising to make divine "goodness" pass before Moses, expressed in grace and mercy rather than overwhelming splendor.

Exodus 33:20 introduces a paradox: "You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." This seems to contradict the earlier description of Moses' encounters. The tension underscores a central theological truth: no creature can bear the full manifestation of divine glory. Yet Moses somehow bridges the gap. The authors communicate that Moses' role as mediator allows him to enter a space of encounter that would otherwise be inaccessible.

At stake is the profound theological claim that human participation is essential in mediating and sustaining the covenant relationship. Moses' desire to know God, his bold intercession, and his willingness to stand between God and the people reveal the depth of the divine-human partnership at the heart of Israel's story.

⁶ R Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 1958, 10-11.

PRESENCE RENEWED (Exodus 34:1-35)

In Exodus 34:1 Moses is instructed to prepare for another theophany by cutting two new tablets. In the first giving of the covenant law in Exodus 19, the entire people were told to ready themselves (Exod 19:11, 15). Now, however, only Moses will witness God's revelation. Israel has transgressed, and Moses alone stands as mediator.

God's manifestation again comes in the form of a descending cloud, though without the dramatic signs that accompanied earlier appearances. With Moses sheltered in the cleft of the rock, the LORD proclaims the divine name. At first glance, Exodus 34:6–8 may seem redundant—God has already revealed the divine name at the burning bush and repeatedly throughout Exodus. Yet to “know” the LORD is to be drawn ever deeper into an unfolding revelation of God's identity. The LORD knows Moses by name; now Moses must know the LORD by name, fully and completely.

The characteristics proclaimed in Exodus 34:6–7 are known in Jewish tradition as the “Thirteen Attributes,” central to Jewish confession from earliest times. Their poetic form sets them apart from the surrounding prose, suggesting an older, perhaps pre-exilic tradition embedded within the narrative. Within the story, these attributes function as a means for Israel—through Moses—to know God, experience God, and imitate God's character.

In Exodus 34:8 Moses instinctively bows in worship as the covenant is renewed. Yet this renewal differs from the earlier scene in Exodus 24. Then, the elders ate and drank in joyful communion with the LORD. Now, the covenant rests not on communal celebration but on the LORD's long-suffering faithfulness and the favor found in Moses. The connection to Noah is striking. In Genesis 6 mercy is shown to creation because Noah “found favor in the sight of the LORD.” Here, mercy is shown to Israel because Moses has found favor. Only these two—Noah and Moses—are described this way in the entire Old Testament. In both cases, the righteousness of a single person brings salvation to many because the LORD listens, sees, knows, and responds.

Exodus 34:10–28 presents a series of stipulations that mirror earlier commands. Here, however, the focus is entirely on worship, Sabbath observance, and festivals—a natural response to the golden calf episode, where Israel failed in proper worship. The epilogue in Exodus 34:27–28 recalls Moses writing down the LORD's words, with the distinctive note that the covenant is made with Moses and Israel. After the sin at Sinai, the LORD renews the covenant first with Moses, the favored servant, and then—through Moses—extends that renewed relationship to Israel.

THE GLORY OF MOSES (Exodus 34:29-34)

Exodus 34:29 reveals that Moses' countenance has been transformed. One of the central themes in Exodus 33–34 is *pānîm*—"face" or "presence." To see the *pānîm* is to enter a realm of intimacy, vulnerability, and love, a revelation of one's deepest being. This theme reaches its climax when the reader learns, "Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God" (Exod 34:29). Moses' skin radiates the divine *kābôd* ("glory"), a power evident in the reaction of Aaron and the others, who are "afraid to come near" (Exod 34:30).

On one level, Moses' shining face testifies to his authoritative status as lawgiver. On a deeper, more ontological level, the radiance of divine glory evokes the theology of creation. The effulgence of the LORD's glory emanating from Moses is the natural outcome of living into the *imago Dei* of Genesis 1:27. Moses embodies the human possibility of union with the divine. The covenant began with the LORD's glory descending in the cloud; now that same glory is present in Moses himself, a sign of his transfiguration.

The God who longs to dwell among the people will indeed abide in the holy space prescribed for the tabernacle, but the divine presence will also be made known through the shining face of the servant Moses.