



# "Rebellion Against a Faithful God"

*Exodus 32:1–14; Exodus 34:1–7*

***The golden calf is the darkest moment in the story of rebellion against God.***

After being saved from slavery to Pharaoh, at the foot of Mt. Sinai God's people have been taught how they should live with God and one another. They are about

to begin construction of a dwelling place for their God. But, as has been their story, they choose rebellion against God even in this moment. They are impatient and restless. Moses is taking too long.

## ***Moses dares***

While Moses was on the mountaintop receiving the very word of God, a terrible thing happened. Pretty much the worst thing ever. So chilling was it in its execution that the consequences could only be disastrous.

When Moses had been gone longer than the people expected,<sup>1</sup> they panicked and turned to Aaron, Moses's brother, and pleaded for gods that could lead them as they thought they ought to be led. That's bad enough. But it got worse, much worse. Aaron led the people in constructing a golden calf out of their melted down jewelry. And they worshipped this pagan idol, this abomination. They worshipped it and thanked the statue for bringing them out of Egypt. Was this any way to love God? The people had promised to do just that . . . but, gee, that was weeks ago.

God hurried Moses down the mountain to see for himself the depth of Israel's sin. And then God tells Moses that he is done with these people. God is ready to let his fury devour them and start over with Moses alone. But Moses pleads with God on behalf of the people and God relents . . . the people will live.

But that isn't the end of it. The people will live but God tells Moses to go ahead without him. The people are so rebellious they will never complete the trip. At some point, they will be consumed by God's holy anger, much as you and I would be consumed were we to fly too close to the sun.

And so Moses again comes before God, ready to plead for the Israelites, to persuade God that he must go on with the Israelites to the Promised Land. What courage it must have taken for Moses to again appeal to God, not deferentially, but firmly and directly. A foremost Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, reflects on this in his commentary:

Moses' performance in vv. 12–18 is a model for daring, insistent prayer. He prays with enormous *hutzpah*, and is prepared to crowd God in insistent ways. First, he asks to know God's ways. Then he insists on the face as accompaniment. Finally, he asks to see the glory. Moses refuses to let God determine the limits of asking. This model of Jewish prayer offers much to learn for Christians, whose piety is characteristically too deferential.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps Moses' courage in confronting God was born in his understanding of God's nature. Like Moses, prayer should sustain our commitment to God and his purposes. But that prayer must be genuine and grounded in the deeply faithful relationship God desires to have with each of us, a relationship to which we can bring all our hopes and all our fears. Moses has come to know something of God and is relentless in his daring appeals. Terence Fretheim expands on this for us:

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<sup>1</sup> This story begins at 32:1 and continues the narrative 24:14. The truth is that it is very difficult to be confident of the chronological ordering of the events at the mountain.

<sup>2</sup> Brueggemann, W. (1994–2004). The Book of Exodus. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 1, p. 942). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

Remarkably, Moses does not accede to God's request; he does not leave God alone. In fact, he speaks on behalf of the people (see Ps. 106:23; Jer. 18:20), though he has not yet seen for himself what has happened. The boldness of his reply indicates something of the nature of the relationship between God and Moses. God has so entered into this relationship that such dialogue is invited, indeed welcomed: God is not the only one who has something important to say. Moses' argument is stunning in its directness, but without excusing Israel in any way (cf. Num. 14:11–20). It is reminiscent of the lament psalms, particularly those designed to motivate God to act (see Ps. 13:3–4; 79:9–10). His argument is threefold; he states two matters in question form and concludes with three imperatives.

1. An appeal to God's reasonableness. God has only just delivered this people (Moses has the confession straight!), and so what sense does it make for God to reverse that action so quickly? The assumption on Moses' part is that God is the kind of God who will take into account factors of reason and logic in making decisions and considering options.
2. An appeal to God's reputation. Moses raises the concern: What will the neighbors say? A recurrent theme throughout the narrative has been that God has acted on Israel's behalf in order that the Egyptians and others might know that Yahweh is Lord (see 14:4, 18; 9:16). What would they now think, if God destroyed them (see Num. 14:13–16; Deut. 9:28; Ezek. 20:14)? Moreover, in the commandments (see at 20:7) God has shown himself to be concerned about reputation and the contexts in which the divine name is used. If God were to destroy this people, would not that place the divine purpose with respect to non-Israelite peoples, indeed God's very name, in some jeopardy?
3. A reminder of God's own promise—to which God has personally sworn!—to this people that their descendants would be multiplied (not killed off!) and that they would inherit the land. God has made a commitment to Israel, and would not God be following the same course as the people by going back on such a promise? It is a matter of God being true to self. Moses extends this argument somewhat beyond what God had said would be done. God had in fact promised Moses, "Of you I will make a great nation" (v. 10). Hence God does have those promises in mind. There would be a way for God to remain true to these promises in and through Moses, but that would be like starting with Abraham once again.<sup>3</sup>

So, God does not smite all the Israelites, abandoning the project begun with Abraham. Instead, remarkably, God will reveal himself to Moses, to the Israelites, to the whole world. If you want to know God, there is no better place to start than with God's self-description in Exodus 34, remembering that it follows on the heels of the Israelite's terrible sin with the golden calf.

### **Knowing God**

Moses has persuaded God to go forward with his rebellious and ungrateful people and has even asked to see God's "glorious presence" (Exodus 33:18). Since even Moses is unholy and cannot stand before God and live, God tells Moses, in beautiful figurative language, that he will pass by Moses and protect Moses, so he only sees God's back. God also writes on new stone tablets, as Moses broke the others in his anger over the golden calf. As God then passes by Moses, God reveals himself in seven Hebrew words (Exodus 34:6-7). Walter Brueggemann sketches the meaning of each term. Together, they are a staggering portrait of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This is the God who so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son (John 3:16).

**Merciful** ( מ ר ח ם *rahûm*). Phyllis Tribble has effectively made the case that this term is related to the noun *womb* ( מ ר ה ם *rehem*) and thus speaks of the kind of positive inclination a mother has toward her child, a "womb-like motherlove."

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<sup>3</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 285–286.

**Gracious** (חַנּוּן *hannûn*). This term refers to completely gratuitous positive inclination, given without cause or warrant, unmerited favor.

**Slow to Anger** (אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם *'erek 'apayim*). The phrase literally is “long nosed.” It apparently suggests that whatever “heat of rage” there was in Yahweh’s anger has a chance to cool off, as it must be breathed out the long nostril.

**Abounding in Steadfast Love** (רַב־חֶסֶד *rabhesed*). Katharine Sakenfeld has shown that *hesed* refers to sustained covenantal solidarity. This formula affirms that Yahweh has a great capacity and resolve to remain loyal in covenantal commitment to Israel. In this context, the phrase suggests that Yahweh will “put up with” a great deal because of Yahweh’s own powerful resolve to sustain covenant, even when the partner reneges.

**Faithfulness** (אֱמֶת *'emet*). This term is frequently used in a pair with *hesed* and is a close synonym. It witnesses to Yahweh’s complete reliability. Keeping Steadfast Love (*hesed*), for the thousandth generation. This formula reiterates the term *hesed* and assures that God’s *hesed* continues to operate for a long time, and for a host of subjects.

**Forgiving** (נָשָׂא *nāsā'*). The verb literally means “lift,” which here means to relieve covenant violators of the burden of their violation.<sup>4</sup>

In light of all that has happened in our community and world lately, I need to speak about verse 7 in chapter 34. The Hebrew word translated “visiting” or “to visit,” *padaq*, is often, and regrettably, rendered as “punish” in some translations. But it is literally “visit,” thereby helping us to see that, generally in the Old Testament, the consequences of an evil deed grow out of the deed itself, rather than being imposed from the outside, as if from God.<sup>5</sup> A good example is Ezekiel 22:31, “I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath; I have returned *their conduct* upon their heads” (NRSV). There is a loosely woven moral fabric in God’s creation. Love begets love (usually!). Violence begets violence (usually!).

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<sup>4</sup> Brueggemann, W. (1994–2004). The Book of Exodus. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Vol. 1, pp. 946–947). Nashville: Abingdon Press. I’ve abridged the comments a bit

<sup>5</sup> See Fretheim, Terence. *Creation Untamed: The Bible, God, and Natural Disasters*. Baker Academic. 2010. P. 50-51