

Three Golden Calves

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Few examples of the power exerted by an evil influence are as striking as that of the golden calves.

It all began with Aaron, the first man to become a high priest of ancient Israel. The chosen people had left Egypt and were encamped at the foot of Mount Sinai, while Moses was up near the summit, receiving laws and instructions from God. After forty days of waiting, the Israelites grew restive and decided that their leader was not coming back.

They turned to his brother, who in his absence headed the twelve tribes. Ignoring the Decalogue, which they had heard the LORD pronounce so very recently, the multitude demanded an idol to represent the Deity and to go before them. Unfortunately Aaron was one of those religionists who are more interested in making friends and influencing people than in calling sin by its right name. He yielded to the pressure of the moment and made them a golden calf, which they found immensely pleasing, since it reminded them of the familiar Apis bull worshipped in Egypt.

Aaron was also gratified at the implied praise for his artistry when they fervently exclaimed, “These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt!” (Ex. 32:4, RSV); for he proceeded to erect an altar, proclaiming a feast to the *Lord* on the following day.

To us, this odd confusion of Yahweh with a graven image may be as incomprehensible as it was incongruous, but a people that had grown up in Egypt—with its worship of animals and animal-like beings—found it only too easy. Besides, they and Aaron discovered a pretext in the dual meaning of the Hebrew word *Elohim*. Throughout the Scriptures, this plural form refers to either the true God or false gods. Of course, the first commandment covers the point quite clearly, with the wording “You shall have no other Elohim [gods/God] before me.” Therefore, they had no excuse, but they wanted one, and so they pretended it was this calf that had performed all the miracles in and delivered them from the land of bondage.

Their blasphemy was punished swiftly and severely. Suddenly a wrathful Moses descended on their revels. Smashing the tablets of the testimony, which he had in his hands, he set to work and meted out immediate retribution. The calf was burned, ground into powder, and mixed with water. This unpalatable mixture the Israelites were compelled to drink. Three thousand impenitent idolaters were slaughtered by the Levites, who through this act “ordained” themselves “for the service of the LORD” (Ex. 32:29). In addition, God smote the encampment with plague.

Many people who perished at that time could have remained alive, if only Aaron had stood firm. No doubt it was not all his fault. The initiative for the sin had come from the would-be idolaters themselves, and evil is not entirely dependent on circumstances. But all the same, God’s own representative must be held accountable for a good deal of what happened on that dreadful day.

Unfortunately this was not the end of it. Aaron, of course, repented and was forgiven. He lived another thirty-eight years, served God faithfully, and helped to establish his descendants as the priesthood of Israel for over a thousand years. On the day of his death,

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he (and everybody else) may well have thought his brief weakness in making that golden calf was a thing of the past. After all, the transgressors had perished or repented. And yet the seed of the sin remained alive, waiting to bear an abundant and even more terrible harvest, half a millennium in the future.

But first a stirring sequence of events was unfolded in the scroll of history. The time of Joshua arrived, and Canaan became the Holy Land. An illustrious line of judges ministered to an erring people. Then a monarchy was instituted under a handsome giant of a man named Saul. After his failure, there was the god-fearing poet-king David, who built a prosperous empire. He was followed by Solomon, the wealthiest and wisest of monarchs, who became the greatest fool on earth through his addiction to many foreign women and consequent apostasy. Under him the first cracks appeared in the realm, which broke up when Rehoboam arrogantly refused to lighten the burden that his father had imposed on the people.

And now, at last, a long, long time after Aaron had turned to dust, the seed of his sin was about to germinate and bear its poisonous fruit. The influence of the golden image would reassert itself most powerfully.

Jeroboam, the new king of the ten northern tribes, felt insecure. He saw a mortal threat to his position in the circumstance that Jerusalem, with its magnificent temple, was destined to remain the center of worship for all Israelites. As he reasoned it out, these annual pilgrimages to the South would provide his enemies, the kings of Judah, with dangerous opportunities for wooing his subjects back to the allegiance they had so recently cast off.

Ignoring God's promise of a sure house, like that of David, Jeroboam racked his brains for a plan to solve the apparent problem. Possibly abetted by his own recent stay in Egypt, he suddenly remembered the golden calf that Aaron had made. This was it! An ancient precedent in Israelite history, and the maker of the image had been no less a personage than the man who subsequently became the Lord's own anointed high priest. .

And so Jeroboam instituted this identical cult, with twin idols, one each at Dan and Bethel, which were near the northern and southern extremities of his kingdom. Echoing the very words of the ancient apostates at Sinai, he said to his subjects, "Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt" (1 Kings 12:28, RSV). Poor Aaron! His rash, brief yielding to the mob now helped a faithless monarch establish a false worship that would eventually destroy not only his own house but the realm itself, for "like a virus, the influence of this apostate religion infected the new kingdom and turned its people away from the true God" (*The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary*, p. 515).

At the time, of course, Jeroboam thought it was a splendid idea, and so did all his successors to the throne, even those who belonged to other dynasties. Northern Israel had twenty kings, and in God's eyes every single one of them was wicked. This does not necessarily mean that they were all equally bad. Scholars inform us that some of them were—from a temporal point of view—able and successful rulers, like Jeroboam II. But the Lord has his own standards by which he judges. Without exception, he regarded these men as his enemies, for a single reason which (with minor variations) echoes like a sad refrain through both the books of Kings as a commentary on each successive monarch:

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“He did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and followed the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which made Israel to sin.”

Many of these rulers were assassinated by usurpers. None established an enduring dynasty. All passed into history branded as royal villains. By contrast, David’s line, during the same two hundred years, succeeded to their throne in a sequence unbroken, except for Athaliah’s *coup d’état* and short-lived reign. Indeed, the southern dynasty outlasted the state of the ten tribes by more than a century. Though Judah also had its share of bad kings, some of its rulers in the very period under consideration obtained immortal renown and, like good Hezekiah and Josiah, are still remembered for their pious achievements.

In the end, it was the cult of the golden calf that brought the calamitous Assyrian captivity, which obliterated northern Israel. No doubt there were additional factors, including other forms of idolatry, such as the execrable worship of Baal. Nevertheless, it was Jeroboam who had introduced the evil that was to bring disaster on his country.

But behind him there loomed the shadowy figure of Aaron, who had lived and sinned in a bygone age. It could never have occurred to the brother of Moses, but as he lifted his hand and fashioned the first golden calf, glistening in the desert sun on that distant day, he was striking the blows that would topple twenty kings and shatter more than half of the Lord’s inheritance.

Such is the influence of a wicked example, no matter how momentary, provided by an otherwise righteous man, especially in a position of leadership and trust.

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