

# **The Interpretations of the Golden Calf Story in Exodus 32: A New Suggestion Based on Comparison with Syriac Christianity**

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## **1. The Golden Calf Story in Exodus 32**

In this paper, I describe various interpretations of the Golden Calf story in Exodus 32 and explore previous research on this story and the possibility of further research on the subject. There seems to be no doubt that this story is one of the most important and influential incidents in the Hebrew Bible for both Judaism and Christianity. To recount the exact content of the story, I cite the English Standard Version of verses 1 to 6 below. The incident happens when Moses is receiving the Torah at the top of Mt. Sinai:

1. When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, “Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” 2. So Aaron said to them, “Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” 3. So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. 4. And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” 5. When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord.” 6. And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.

At this point, God tells Moses what happened at the foot of the mountain, which causes him to descend from the mountain. Moses rages against the people and breaks the table, and finally summons the Levites to kill 3000 people. On the one hand, this incident provides Christians with the ideal excuse to attack the Jewish people and Judaism, claiming that they had foolishly and greedily turned to idolatry, that their covenant with God was canceled because of this incident, and so on. On the other hand, Jewish biblical interpreters have also made a number of exegeses about this story with a variety of purposes. In the next chapter, we will look at some of the many different interpretations of the Golden Calf story, in both Judaism and Christianity.

## **2. Various Interpretations**

In this chapter, we investigate some of the interpretations of the Golden Calf story up to the completion of the Babylonian Talmud, around the sixth century. This partition is due to the fact that many different interpretations had been documented by this point; newer literature after the completion of the Babylonian Talmud copied older interpretations in many cases. In what follows, we will list several different interpretations in turn.

### **2.1 Judaism**

Firstly, one interpretation involves retelling the story of Exodus without the Golden Calf episode; Josephus in the Roman Empire used this technique.<sup>1)</sup> However, many others have mostly retold the Golden Calf story while adding explanations or comments alongside the biblical text. Commonly used motifs are the idea that the people who gathered around Aaron were very fearful for some reasons, and therefore their blame should be mitigated<sup>2)</sup>; that Aaron, who the biblical narrative says made the Golden Calf, unsuccessfully tried to calm the people down and persuade them that they did not to ask for the calf<sup>3)</sup>; that Aaron was endeavoring to buy time until Moses came down from the mountain<sup>4)</sup>; that the women refused to hand in their gold rings to the men, so the men used their own rings to make the calf<sup>5)</sup>; that it was the people, rather than Aaron, who made the calf,<sup>6)</sup> and so on. I cite one of the Jewish interpretations here in detail, with the aim of comparing it with a Christian interpretation in the next chapter.

Leviticus Rabbah 10:3, which is thought to have been compiled in Palestine during the fifth century,<sup>7)</sup> states that “when the Israelites were about to commit that act,” i.e. making the golden calf, “they went first to Hur.” He was appointed by Moses as a mediator among the people. “They [the people] said to him: ‘Up, make us a god.’ As he did not hearken to them, they rose against him and slew him. . . . Afterwards they went to Aaron, and said to him: *Up, make us a god*. As soon as Aaron heard of it [i.e., Hur’s death], he became frightened, as it is said, *Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it*. This is to be read, *he was frightened when he saw the slaughtered man before him*. Aaron said to himself: ‘What shall I do? They have already killed Hur who was a prophet; if they kill also me whom am a priest, there will instantly be fulfilled against them the verse saying, *Should priest and prophet be slain in the sanctuary of the Lord* (Lamentations 2:20), Israel will immediately be liable to exile.’”<sup>8)</sup>

The gist of this part of the text, which differs from the biblical account in Exodus 32, is that the people go first to Hur and then to Aaron and demand that each make a god; Hur refuses and is killed;

Aaron sees this violent act and is fearful. The modified reading of the biblical text (32:5) is suggested as proof of this interpretation; thus וַיַּרְא אַהֲרֹן וַיָּבֹאוּ מִזְבֵּחַ לְפָנָיו (*vayyar aharon vayyiven mizbeach lefanav*) is read as “*vayyira aharon vayyaven mizavuach lefanav*”; this modification has Aaron bowing to the people’s demand to make the Golden Calf because he is afraid that they will commit further crimes if they kill him, a priest of the Lord. The parallel tradition is recorded also in the Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 7a.

It can be said that these interpretations seem to mitigate the responsibility either of the people or of Aaron, although there is no evidence to identify the real intention. In contrast, a number of interpretations affirm that the making of the Golden Calf was a real sin and that the people and Aaron were guilty and were punished, but were later forgiven.<sup>9)</sup> In the course of the history of these interpretations, we can note some trends in specific periods, which will be discussed in the following chapter on previous studies.

## 2.2 Christianity

Many Christian interpretations are aggressively against Judaism. As early as New Testament times, there were Christian interpretations that seemed to be opposed to Judaism or Jewish people. These interpretations state that the Jewish people, or the Israelites, were abandoned by God because of the Golden Calf,<sup>10)</sup> that they broke their covenant with God as a result of the Golden Calf,<sup>11)</sup> and that the incident was a manifestation of their foolishness or greed.<sup>12)</sup> Although less frequently, some church fathers have interpreted the Golden Calf story in a way that was not so aggressively against Judaism. These interpreters state that Aaron tried to persuade the people not to ask for the Calf to be made, and that Aaron was so afraid of being killed that he decided to make the Calf so that the people would not commit the sin of killing their priest,<sup>13)</sup> and so on. Judging from these apparently contradictory attitudes of the church fathers toward the Golden Calf story, we cannot assume that there is a consistent Christian interpretation.

Before analyzing the background of these various interpretations, both in Judaism and in Christianity, we will review what has already been discussed, considered, or revealed about this significant incident in the Hebrew Bible and its interpretations, by looking at several pieces of previous research of the interpretations of the Golden Calf story.

## 3. Previous Research

In this chapter, I will look at five characteristic studies relating to the Golden Calf story: this does

not mean that these studies are the most important studies in this field, or that other related studies are worthless.

### **3.1 Leivy Smolar and Moshe Aberbach, 1968**

Nearly half a century ago, Leivy Smolar and Moshe Aberbach published a comprehensive analysis of the different interpretations of the Golden Calf story. Their paper, “The Golden Calf Episode in Post-biblical Literature,”<sup>14</sup> is seen as “the first study, which properly focuses on the early history of the reception of the golden calf episode.”<sup>15</sup> Smolar and Aberbach collected a variety of interpretations from pre-rabbinic literature such as Josephus and Philo, early Christian literature, rabbinic literature, and the works of the church fathers, and described the intentions behind the rabbinic interpretations. They classed their materials into several categories including “rabbinic defense methods,” “Christian views,” “moderate rabbinic apologetics,” “militant defense of Israel,” and so on. Although their comprehensiveness is valuable and they were influential in helping later scholarship to grasp the general representation of the Golden Calf story, their study has various problems. Firstly, they collected a variety of interpretations and traditions under the single category of “rabbinic,” and did not take into account the differences, between even the Tannaitic and Amoraic periods. As they stated: “From the end of the first century onward, both the Tannaim and the Amoraim were deeply concerned with polemical attacks of Christianity” (p. 95), thus they only considered the external reasons for the Golden Calf story and did not pay attention to the inner changes or developments within “rabbinic” interpretations. Secondly, according to them, Jewish apologetic interpretations of the Golden Calf story always seemed to respond to the Christian polemic, as if the Jews of that time had no contact with or did not come under attack from anyone but Christians.<sup>16</sup> In any case, this study is a good way to acknowledge the various interpretations of the Golden Calf story, though its treatment of them is problematic.

### **3.2 Irving J. Mandelbaum, 1990**

In his article, “Tannaitic Exegesis of the Golden Calf Episode,”<sup>17</sup> Irving J. Mandelbaum examines the Tannaitic interpretations that deal directly with the Golden Calf story, with detailed textual analysis. He says, “virtually all of these exegetical traditions treat the incident of the calf as a classic story of sin and atonement. All assume that Aaron and Israel commit serious sins, are punished for their transgressions, and are ultimately forgiven by God” (p. 207). In order to demonstrate this idea, he cites texts from Tannaitic works such as Tosefta, Mekhilta, Sifra, and Sifre, and classifies them into three categories: “the seriousness of the sin,” “the punishment for the sin” and “atonement and

forgiveness.” Although his classification is convincing and I have no objections to his conclusion, I have nevertheless several comments to make on his work. Firstly, regarding Tosefta Kippurim 5(4), 17, he says, “this is the only tradition among exegeses attributed to Tannaim that denies Israel’s responsibility for the sin of the calf” (p. 222) and does not explore it further. This is left to us to research further. Secondly, he does not pay attention to anything outside of Judaism. Although I am not sure of the strength or influence of the mutual relations between the Jewish community and the exterior world, such as the Roman Empire and incipient Christianity, influence from outside of Judaism should be taken into account, even if it does not alter our conclusions.

In any case, there is no doubt that Mandelbaum presents a probable general representation of the Tannaitic interpretation of the Golden Calf story.

### **3.3 Pier Cesare Bori, 1990**

In his book, *The Golden Calf and the Origins of the anti-Jewish Controversy*,<sup>18)</sup> Bori analyzed how the Church has used the Golden Calf story as an attack against Judaism. This book is mainly based on the materials and analysis of Smolar and Aberbach, mentioned above, and considers them in more detail. Therefore, in a sense, it can be said to be a development of Smolar and Aberbach’s study. Although it has some problems, such as an over-simplification of the Christian attitude toward Judaism and the Jewish people, which we are not likely to find from reading the texts of the church fathers, it can be a help in considering how Christians respond to Judaism and read the Golden Calf story.

### **3.4 Chung, 2010**

As the title suggests, Youn Ho Chung’s book, *the Sin of the Calf: the Rise of the Bible’s Negative Attitude toward the Golden Calf*,<sup>19)</sup> considers the Golden Calf or Calves traditions throughout the whole Bible. As well as the description in Exodus 32, there is also an important tradition of the Golden Calves made by Jeroboam in 1 Kings 12. Using the medium of biblical studies, Chung analyzes several biblical texts that mention calf worship, with some mention of non-Jewish concepts of calves, such as Mesopotamian and Egyptian ideas. In conclusion, he states, “the image of the calf was not considered negative or contradictory to the aniconic Israelite religious tradition. (...) it was in fact regarded within the Israelite religion as a footstool of their invisible God, YHWH” (p. 204). Although I do not go deeply into the validity of Chung’s contention and the inner-biblical problems here in this paper, it is obvious that the Golden Calf story has some critical issues from its origin and has been controversial even within the Bible itself.

### **3.5 Lindqvist, 2008**

The last study that I will mention here is Pekka Lindqvist's *Sin at Sinai: Early Judaism Encounters Exodus 32*. This is the latest monograph about the interpretations of the Golden Calf story in Exodus, and refers to all the studies mentioned above (except Chung's). Lindqvist explores in detail each of the previous studies and different interpretations up to the sixth century, using textual and literary analyses; he states, in conclusion, that "since expressions of the apologetical attitude throughout the entire period were encountered in various types of texts, contexts and historical circumstances, one hardly can speak of a cause or a reason behind this attitude" (p. 322). More specifically, he states "there are indications that the inner-Judaic catechetical needs were the primary reason for the vindication of Aaron" (p. 323). This means that, according to him, "the Inner-Judaic catechetical needs" were a stronger reason to defend Aaron than Christian polemics. He also states that the need to defend the people in Jewish interpretations was caused by external reasons, including Christian polemics. In this manner, Lindqvist's contribution was to focus on the details and subtle differences in each text, the context, and the set of historical circumstances. With this perspective, possible avenues for further research are described in the next chapter.

## **4. The possibility of further research**

All of the above-mentioned previous studies being considered, we need to focus on a limited period and place in order to present a more detailed analysis of the Golden Calf story and its interpretations. As one such case study, I propose the comparison of Tannaitic and Amoraic interpretations with those of Syriac Christianity.

### **4.1 Comparison with Syriac Christianity**

Syriac Christianity was developed during the first centuries CE, mainly in Antioch and Edessa. There are many similarities between Syriac Christianity and Judaism at that time: geographically and linguistically, Syria is very close to Palestinian Judaism, and we can find some literary materials in Syriac works that are relevant to the Jewish traditions. This is one of the reasons for comparing Syriac Christianity with Judaism here. In this paper, I will explore some Syriac Christian works, especially those of Ephrem the Syrian, and compare them with the Jewish interpretations of the Golden Calf story.

#### **4.1.2 Ephrem the Syrian and his interpretation**

Ephrem the Syrian, who was born in Nisibis in the fourth century, is considered a major representative of the Syrian church fathers. He is known for his severe attacks on Judaism, although his attitude is now being reconsidered by Elena Narinskaya,<sup>20)</sup> amongst others. Therefore, it is appropriate to investigate Ephrem's interpretation of the Golden Calf story. In the following, we see his interpretation in detail and compare it with a parallel Jewish interpretation. This is part of his commentary on Chapter 32 of the Book of Exodus, based on Salvesen's translation:<sup>21)</sup>

Aaron argued with them, and he saw that they wanted to stone him as they had stoned Hur. For when Moses went up the mountain, he told the elders to bring their judgments to Hur, but after Moses' descent, Hur is nowhere mentioned. Because of this people say that the Israelites killed him when they rioted against Aaron over the image of the Calf, since Hur forbade them to change gods. So Aaron was afraid that he too would die, that they would incur blood-guilt for this murder, and that they would make themselves not one calf but several; and even though they would not enter Egypt, they might turn back. So he shrewdly sent them a message, asking them to bring their wives' earrings, in the hope that the women might prevent their husband from casting the Calf, either in order to hold onto their earrings, or out of love for their God.

In this interpretation, we find such motifs as "Hur killed by the people," "Aaron's fear," "Aaron's effort to avoid the killing of priest by the people," and "Aaron's expectation for the wives." It can be said that the deeds of the people are clearly criticized, while Aaron is defended for the same reason as found in the Jewish tradition discussed above. Given this fact, it is probable that the source of Ephrem's interpretation is Jewish tradition, and this could be a reason for the similarities between Judaism and Syriac Christianity, as described above. In any case, if there are some church fathers who defended Aaron in this incident,<sup>22)</sup> why did even Ephrem, who used many harsh descriptions of Judaism, criticize the people and defend Aaron at the same time?

#### **4.1.3 The background of Ephrem's interpretation**

In response to the question above, it is likely that he found a Christian signification rather than a Jewish one in the figure of Aaron. As some previous scholarship has indicated regarding the general tendency of the traditions defending Aaron, he had the status of a priest; thus, both Aaron and Jesus were appointed by God. I cite Chapter 5 of the Letter to the Hebrews (English Standard Version) as proof:

<sup>1</sup> For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. . . . <sup>4</sup> And no one takes this honor for himself,

but only when called by God, just as Aaron was.<sup>5</sup> So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”;<sup>6</sup> as he says also in another place, “You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.” . . .<sup>9</sup> And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him,<sup>10</sup> being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

Both Aaron and Jesus were chosen as priests (I realize that Jesus is described as the priest of Melchizedek, but I am not investigating here the difference between the priesthood of Aaron and Melchizedek.) Thus, it can be said that some of the church fathers, or Ephrem at least, saw Jesus as the priest behind Aaron the priest. Although it is possible that Ephrem only cited Jewish tradition without this background in mind, the audience for or the readers of his commentary would have understood the setting.

In this example, the key to investigating the similarity of interpretations between *Leviticus Rabbah* and Ephrem’s commentary of Exodus is the character of Aaron. On the one hand, in order to decrease the sense of guilt in the Golden Calf story, which may be motivated by the desire to defend Judaism against external attacks such as those by Christianity, the composer(s) of the tradition in *Leviticus Rabbah* attempted to mitigate the blame of Aaron as a representative of Judaism. On the other hand, the church fathers—or at least Ephrem the Syrian—defended Aaron in the Golden Calf story because he was the archetype of the priest, which Jesus would also be. It can be said that, in this context, Judaism and Christianity do the same thing by defending Aaron in order to defend themselves, because Aaron is both the representative of Judaism and the archetype of Jesus.

## **5. Conclusion**

So far, we have explored the Golden Calf story itself, the Jewish and Christian interpretations of this story, and previous studies concerning it; we have compared and analyzed two similar interpretations in *Leviticus Rabbah* and Ephrem’s commentary on Exodus as an example of further research. By comparing interpretations from rabbinic literature and Syriac Christianity in this paper, we can see that defending Aaron is not only a feature of Jewish apologetics, but could also result from respect for Jesus. Although it is difficult to issue a comprehensive statement about the Golden Calf story now, by adopting other perspectives we can demonstrate, albeit in a small way, that there are other important facts hidden behind the story. In any case, there is no doubt that the Golden Calf story is, for Bible readers, a source of interpretation that never runs dry.

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**Notes**

- 1) *Jewish Antiquities* III, ch. 5.
- 2) E.g., Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 89a.
- 3) E.g., Leviticus Rabbah 10:3.
- 4) E.g., *ibid.*
- 5) E.g., Song of Songs Rabbah 4:9.
- 6) E.g., Pseudo-Philo, ch. 12.
- 7) Strack, H. L. and Stemberger, G., *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 291.
- 8) This English translation is based on, Israelstam, R. J. and Slotki, J. J. (tr.), *Midrash Rabbah: Leviticus* (London and New York: The Soncino Press, 1983), with slight modifications derived from the critical edition of Margulies, M., *Midrash Wayyikra Rabbah*, 2 vols. (New York and Jerusalem: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1993); some of its passages are omitted.
- 9) E.g., Sifra, Shemini 1:3.
- 10) E.g., Acts 7:38–42.
- 11) E.g., The letter of Barnabas 4:6–9.
- 12) E.g., Tertullian, *Against Marcion* II, 18.
- 13) Those interpretations, which can be seen in *Exodus Commentary* of Ephrem the Syrian, will be discussed below.
- 14) In *Hebrew Union College Annual* vol. 39 (1968), 91–116.
- 15) Lindqvist, P., *Sin at Sinai: Early Judaism Encounters Exodus 32* (Vaajakoski: Gummerus Printing, 2008), 40.
- 16) These problems with this article have already been noted by Lindqvist. See Lindqvist, *op. cit.*, 40–44.
- 17) In Davies, P. R. and White, R. T. (ed.), *A Tribute to Geza Vermes: Essays on Jewish and Christian Literature and History* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 207–223.
- 18) Ward, D. (tr.) (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1990).
- 19) New York: T & T Clark, 2010.
- 20) Narinskaya, E., *Ephrem, a 'Jewish' Sage: A Comparison of the Exegetical Writings of St. Ephrem the Syrian and Jewish Traditions* (Vienna: Brepols, 2010).
- 21) Salvesen, A. (tr.), *The Exodus Commentary of St Ephrem* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2011).
- 22) E.g., Tertullian, *Antidote for the Scorpion's Sting* 3.