

## **Who Really Belongs to the People of God?**

### **Exodus 32:1-14**

One recent writer has said: "Religion itself can be the means to disobedience." True in the case of Paul - at the very point he thought he was doing God service, at the height of his zeal - opposed to the Lord Jesus himself, even said to be *persecuting* him.

Today I want us to look at the question, for this is what the text confronts us with, *Who really belongs to the people of God?* All is not what it seems to be. I say it presses upon us from the text itself.

- v. 1            they are the people (of the Lord) who have been rescued out of Egypt. They are the covenant people.
  - v. 3            a people acting in disobedience.
  - v. 7            the Lord distances himself from them, after their sin, and says to Moses, they are "your people".
  - v. 9            the Lord describes them as a stiffnecked people, this people.
  - vv. 11,12     Moses calls upon God for mercy, describing Israel as "your people".
  - v. 14          So the Lord relented and did not bring on "his people" the disaster he had threatened.
- Finally v. 35 the Lord struck "the people" with a plague because of what they did with the calf Aaron had made.
- Remnant concept.

### **Presuppositions of Exodus 32-34**

1.            Substance of Exodus 19-24 presupposed, i.e., the Lord had brought the people of Israel out of Egypt and led them to Sinai where he has entered into a new and formal relationship with them. At the heart of this new relationship is the giving of the Decalogue, a revelation of the character of the Lord, and the moral and religious basis

of the future of life of the people. In other words the people have accepted their role as the exclusive people of the Lord.

2. After the covenant ratification ceremony in Exodus 24, the people were in principle ready to move off from Sinai to the land which the Lord would give them where they would live as his people. Already in Exodus 23 attention shifts to the future journeyings of the people of Israel and their consequent occupation of the land which the Lord is giving them (vv. 20-33).
3. They will need certain things as they journey on: 2 things are assumed in Exodus 32-34. Two tables of stone as a permanent reminder of the covenant.
4. A new symbol of the Lord's presence among the people is needed. The ark and the tabernacle fulfils this role: Exodus 25-27.

1. **Sin and Apostasy: A Dreadful Paradigm** **Exodus 31:1-6**

The story of the golden calf starts with the prolonged absence of Moses on the mountain, and our opening paragraph sets the scene by describing the sin of Aaron and the people.

The people are in a truculent mood as they approach Aaron, demanding a substitute to take Moses' place in leading them. There are threatening implications as "they gather against" Aaron and tell him (in an emphatic imperative) "Come, make us gods who will go before us".

Clear rejection of Moses - note the parallelism of vv. 1 and 4. Moses is the one who uniquely mediates the Lord's guidance and leadership to the people. It is in and through Moses that the Lord is known and his saving deeds experienced.

Aaron responds to the request by ordering them to strip the gold earrings from their wives and children and bring the gold to him. The people respond immediately and bring the gold to him. Aaron, by means of an engraving tool, makes the gold into a molten calf.

The people, on seeing the calf, immediately respond by assigning the image a function: "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of Egypt."

Aaron has responded to the people's demand for a substitute to take Moses' place in leading them. He has no idea of rejecting the Lord (v. 5). When Aaron saw the people's reaction, he proclaimed: "Tomorrow will be a feast to the Lord." Obviously Aaron had a different intention from the people when he made the calf. The fact that he could incorporate the calf in a Yahweh festival indicates he did not understand it as blatant apostasy from the Lord. But Aaron has been compromised (note apology 21ff.).

The scene closes on a tragic note. There is a burst of frenzied activity the effect of which is skilfully achieved by the piling up of Hebrew verbs. The people themselves assume control. They rise early, offer the sacrifices, eat and drink and "rise to play" - a religious orgy has begun.

Israel may have thought that Yahweh was not being replaced, but represented. (cf. Jeroboam in 1 Kings 12). But it is perversion of the true worship of the Lord. The people are in fact demanding a substitute for Yahweh himself: "Make us gods who will go before us."

The people are portrayed as apostate and polytheistic. They want gods which can be fabricated. In the words of Psalm 106:20, "They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass" (cf. Neh 9:18). The sacred writer is reporting the events of a great apostasy, but in a manner which makes it representative of all subsequent idolatry. Dreadful paradigm.

### **New Testament:**

1 Cor 10:7f. Incident referred to explicitly by Paul. For those upon whom the ends of the ages have come, a direct lesson written down for our instruction. Vv. 11-12 re warning not to be tempted.

## 2. **Judgment, Intercession and Forgiveness:**

### **A Merciful Paradigm.**

**Exodus 31:7-14**

There is a dramatic contrast between these words and what has preceded. What is occurring in the valley and what goes on in the top of the mountain are vastly different. The scene shifts abruptly from Israel's merrymaking before the calf to the Lord's reacting. His command to Moses to descend ("Go, descend") is expressed rather urgently, reflecting the urgency of the situation and the shattering of the calm on the mountain that had existed previously.

The Lord describes Israel's sin: they have acted sinfully, and quickly turned aside from the way, i.e. of his commandments and the proclamation of his will. She has transgressed the laws already given at Sinai (cf. 20:4; 20:23).

There is no ambiguity in Yahweh's judgment: Israel has corrupted herself. The evidence is marshalled in words from her own mouth. "These are your gods."

There is no purpose in continuing with covenant laws when the covenant has been shattered. Israel's election is at stake for the Lord is not prepared to annihilate her completely. They are described as "your people", whom "you (Moses) brought up", or else "this people" and "stiff-necked".

The Lord is about to destroy Israel and make of Moses a great nation, but he suddenly conditions it upon Moses' agreement. "Let Me alone that I may consume them." Incredibly the Lord himself leaves the door ajar for intercession. He allows himself to be persuaded. He could have shut the door - indeed slammed it - as he did in Deut. 3:26 when Moses requested permission to enter the promised land. Reflects God's character of justice and mercy.

So what does Moses do? He uses 3 arguments:

- a. He appeals to God's miraculous delivery of Israel from Egypt, which includes the gentle reminder of "thy people".

- b. He calls to mind how the Egyptians would interpret Israel's destruction, bring shame on God himself (cf. Deut. 9:28; Ezek. 20:14).
- c. He appeals to the promise of God to the fathers.

Note the dreadful seriousness of the threat. The intensity of Moses' intercession. Appeal not to some accumulated deposit of merit which can be tapped, but to the promise of God himself.

Moses does not attempt to excuse or mitigate Israel's sin, but casts himself on God's mercy (cf. v. 32). Note of judgment in v. 35. Does this look forward to a remnant, the Levites, note. Judgment and mercy.

34:7, "God is merciful and gracious ... but will not clear the guilty."

Jesus in Hebrews - merciful and faithful HP.