

‘The golden calf in Exodus 32: A relational  
approach’

by

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## DECLARATION

I, Morgan Mambwe, student number u20732326 hereby declare that this dissertation, “The golden calf in Exodus 32: A relational approach”, is submitted in accordance with the requirements for the Master of Theology degree at University of Pretoria, is my own original work and has not previously been submitted to any other institution of higher learning. All sources cited or quoted in this research paper are indicated and acknowledged with a comprehensive list of references.



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Morgan Mambwe

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this research to my mother, Esther Chibuye Mambwe. You taught me how to read and write and sparked my passion for reading and writing. Though you are not there to see this work, Dad and someone who is just like you, one who wants to see the best from me, my wife Loveness Chitalu Mambwe, are there.

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Last but not the least, all the people who supported me in ways too numerous to mention.

May God richly reward you all!

## SUMMARY

Exodus 32 is a narrative of the golden calf story at Mount Sinai. It has been argued to be a non-P text with bias of P and D. It is also strategically placed between the P text of the instructions for making the tabernacle and the making of the tabernacle. In this dissertation three questions have been addressed, that is,

1. What was relationship between the golden image and God?
2. What were the effects of making the golden calf on the relationship between Yahweh and the people; and the relationships among the people in Exodus 32?
3. Can the relational response espoused by Kessler (2013) shed any light on this question?

In trying to answer these questions, it has been highlighted that gold was an important metal in the Ancient near East. It was used in making several articles which were used for different purposes. It was used as a symbol of honour because of its high mercantile value and beauty. In the cults, it was associated with the presence of deities among the people. It was, therefore, used to make cultic images associated with deities. In the book of Exodus, the Cherubim and the golden bull have been depicted as associated with Yahweh. The use of the Cherubim has been depicted as acceptable while the golden bull has been depicted as apostasy. A historical-critical analysis of Exodus indicates that it is linked to the story of Jeroboam's golden bulls in 1 Kings 12. It further shows that the sin of Jeroboam is depicted as the reason for the fall of the Northern Kingdom and later the Southern Kingdom.

The sin of the golden calf affected the relationship between Yahweh and the people to such an extent that Yahweh wanted to annihilate them. It also affected the relationships among the people in the camp such that some were killed. Kessler's (2013) approach helps in understanding the text better as it emphasizes the relational responses which the passages required from its audience. Additionally, brings out the understanding that the passage is multi-layered, having several theological streams that have been weaved together in the process of redaction.

## **KEY TERMS**

Gold, Golden bull/calf, Cherubim, Image, Tabernacle, Temple, Jeroboam I, Apostasy, Theological Streams, Relational response.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Motivation of Study

Gold occurs in the Bible more frequently than any other metal (Ben-Dor 1976:437). The book of Exodus portrays several uses of gold, notably: as an offering to Yahweh (35:4-28); overlaying temple articles to beautify them (chap 25); for making jewellery (3:22); and in priestly garments (chap 28). Gold is recorded to have come from the land of Ophir, Havilah, Parvaim Egypt and Nubia which means gold in ancient Egyptian language (Ben-Dor 1976:438). Ancient Egypt is one of the places where gold was mined and used for royal accessories such as crowns, rings and bracelets (AbdelMaksoud & Emam 2019:901). One of the highest honours a king could give to a deserving individual in Ancient Egypt was known as the “Gold of favour, praise or honour”. The deserving person was given a golden neck chain which symbolized a position of honour and possibly one which made them to be revered by the people as Egyptian kings were understood to be incarnates of gods who could be revered (Binder 2011:41 - 51 & Evans 2009:199). In my view, given the above uses, one can conclude that gold can be said to be a symbol or indication of honour. Archaeological discoveries of various temple articles made of gold including one bearing a goddess holding two snakes which are known to be symbols of fertility in Canaanite temples (see Aharoni 1982:129), indicate that gold was used in cultic articles in Ancient Near East. The making of golden images and cultic elements were not an unusual practice. The Ark of the Covenant is described as overlaid with gold; the image of the Cherubim, the Mercy Seat and other vessels in the holy of holies in the tabernacle and later in the Jerusalem temple were accepted as part of the cult. The use of these golden images and vessels in the tabernacle and Jerusalem temple probably brought glory and honour to Yahweh given the understanding that gold was a mineral of honour.

However, the narrative in Exodus 32 gives an account of the golden calf image which resulted in Yahweh being angry with the people and Moses ordering the killing of about three thousand people. I find this narrative fascinating and at the same time, it raises interesting questions such as why did Moses order the Levites to kill the people and called this act ordination for the service of the Lord? (Exo 32:29). The narrative further

raises questions on the relationship of the people with Yahweh; the people with golden calf; and relationships with one another. This motivated me to explore this text using Kessler's (2013) approach which highlights the relational response. Therefore, this dissertation explores the narrative of the golden calf in a bid to apply Kessler's (2013) reading for a relational response approach.

## **1.2. Literature Overview and Research Gap**

Scholars like Noth (1972:143) have explored the narrative of the golden calf in Exodus 32 in relation to the act of Jeroboam I of Israel who built sanctuaries at Bethel and Dan and put a golden bull in each (1 Kings 12:28ff). Noth (1972:143 -145) argued that the Exodus narrative was a later insertion stemming from an oral tradition and not merely a product of literary elaboration, and polemic against the act of Jeroboam I. He further argues that, to condemn the action of Jeroboam I, the redactors from the Southern Kingdom had to reflect it back on Moses at Mount Sinai as the one who spoke against the apostasy of making the golden calf. This is from the background that Moses is a keyfigure in the history and religious practices of Jews and projecting the condemnation of the building of the golden bulls back to the Sinai Mountain attaches it to the law which was given there and implicitly the covenant. The people breaching the covenant meant a threat to their covenantal relationship with Yahweh. This indicates that Jeroboam had committed a similar sin to the one which was committed at Mount Sinai, therefore, the Northern Kingdom would be rejected by Yahweh. Reading Exodus 32 from Noth's perspective suggests a clear link between the golden calf narrative and the story of Jeroboam's bulls and tension between two groups, that is, the Northern cult and the Southern cult. According to Noth (1972:143) "the basis of the whole story (Exodus 32) was simply the existence of the 'golden calves' of Jeroboam and that in the time of this narrator these calves were still standing and, with cultic impunity could be worshiped in one form or another." For Noth, the sin of Jeroboam prompted the editing and insertion of the oral tradition story of the golden calf into Exodus in the Pentateuch.

Similarly, Childs (1974:560) writing also from a historical-critical perspective, though he was later known for a Canonical approach to the Old Testament, argued that even

though the evidence for the connection between the two chapters is strong, and convincing, the redactor of 1 Kings 12 did not create the Exodus story in light of the situation which was created by Jeroboam I, but rather depended on an existing oral tradition which he edited to suit his polemic against Jeroboam I. Recently Dozeman (2009:687) has argued that the inner-Biblical quotation moves from the story of Jeroboam to the story of Exodus 32. He seems to suggest that a written form of Exodus 32 was redacted, specifically the statement “Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt (Exodus 32:4 cf. 1 Kings 12:8,” and argues that the use of the plural noun gods fits well in the story of Jeroboam where there were two bulls but does not fit in the narrative context of Aaron’s proclamation where there is only one calf. The use of the plural word gods also does not conform to Nehemiah 9: 17-18 where Nehemiah quoted the Exodus story but used the singular word god. From this perspective Exodus 32 is judged to be more recent than 1 Kings 12:8 (Hundley 2017:562). Though Dozeman seems to suggest that a written form of Exodus 32 was redacted contrary to Noth and Childs, yet all three scholars acknowledge the crisis between the Southern Kingdom and the Northern one but do not explore in detail the implied understanding that the text was edited with a background of cultic tension or relational misunderstandings between the two cults.

Other scholars like Greer (2013:12) have argued that 1 Kings 12 was edited in light of Exodus 32, which is a reverse of the above discussion. Those who follow this line of thought note that, Jeroboam is depicted as appointed by Yahweh and portrayed to be like Moses by liberating the people from the oppressive rule of Solomon and Rehoboam. According to Greer (2013:12) “Ahijah of Shiloh relays the promise of Yahweh himself that Jeroboam’s kingdom will be as enduring as the House of David if he does his commands, walks in his ways, and does what is right in his eyes by keeping his statutes and commands (1 Kgs 11:38).” One wonders how the legitimate King of Israel would serve and worship the god of Israel without a cultic centre. From this perspective, it is argued that, though the final text condemns the building of the temple at Dan and Bethel and putting of the bulls there, it is possible that the act was acceptable until the redaction of the story considering the Exodus account.

This view indicates that the Southern writers edited the Northern history in light of the

Exodus story in a bid to condemn the Northern cult and account for the fall of the Northern Kingdom. In a similar line of thought Propp (2008:551) has noted that the statement “see your gods, Israel who brought you up from the Land of Egypt” attributed to Jeroboam was less likely to have been said by him as he was monolatrous (1 Kings 11:1-10). From this perspective Propp (2008:551) suspects “that the writers attributed to Jeroboam a statement designed to make him seem more of an apostate than he was.”

One has to note that if the text is put in the context of Jeroboam I’s revolt, it implies a time when the nation was divided into two after the reign of Solomon around 930/931—910/909 BCE when the Northern kingdom was ruled by Jeroboam and the Southern Kingdom by Rehoboam (see Kitchen 2005:187). Jeroboam erected the temple at Dan and Bethel to stop people in the Northern Kingdom from going to Jerusalem in the Southern kingdom for cultic festivals for fear that they would turn their loyalty to Rehoboam and kill Jeroboam (1 Ks. 12: 27 - 29). Given this attachment of kingship to the cult, the division of the kingship implied a division in the cult. But then one may wonder if what Jeroboam introduced was new or was a common practice?

According to Klingbeil (2005:9) “It is widely known in the iconography of the Ancient Near East that animals often functioned as cult stands for the deity, who was not always shown.” In the Canaanite context calves were known as symbols of fertility and bull or calf figurines made of bronze, or a combination of different metals have been discovered in several archaeological sites at Mount Gilboa, Hazor, and Ashkelon (Walton & Matthews 1997:235). Images of bulls were also found in Syria-Palestine and there have been arguments on whether they represent Baal or El, but evidence from the Ugaritic texts indicate that El the Canaanite god was the father of all and known to be the epithet bull (Tsumura 2005: 126). This suggests that the use of images of calves or bulls in cultic practices was not a new phenomenon but was widely practiced.

According to Propp (2008:581) “throughout the Ancient Near East, various gods and goddess are called ‘bull,’ ‘cow’ and ‘calves.” However, one should point out that gods were not depicted by the bulls or calves but were usually portrayed as riding or standing on their back and sometimes not shown but understood as the “invisible rider” probably indicating that the deity has dominance of the symbol of the animal such as fertility

(Walton & Matthew 1997:235). Could this be the same idea that is depicted in Exodus 32? That Yahweh was the “invisible god” riding on the golden calf? Propp, (2008:582) though he is open to multiple interpretations, has noted that one of the possible interpretations is that “both Aaron and Jeroboam, their plural grammar notwithstanding, are really pointing to the empty space above their calves when they acclaim the god of Exodus.” However, I am of the view that the rejection of the making of the golden calf by Yahweh suggests otherwise. In my view, this suggests that Exodus 32 can be understood not only as targeting the erection of golden bulls in the Northern kingdom but also the general practice of using images to represent deities in the Ancient Near East. It further suggests that Jeroboam I or Aaron did not initiate a new practice but rather adopted an already existing practice into the Jewish cult.

Slivniak (2008: 19-37) a postmodern reader proposes a deconstructive reading of the narrative of the golden calf which is preceded by a constructive reading. This approach reviewed that the narrative portrays two cults, namely, the normative cult represented by the tablets and the deviant cult represented by the golden calf (Slivniak 2008:19).

While this approach brings out important aspects of the text such as the understanding that the text is “about the people misinterpreting Moses’ absence as his possible death, as well as about Moses’ abolishing in his wrath the very opposition standing behind his anger, and re-inscribing it at a later stage in a displaced form (Slivniak 2008:36),” Other scholars like Twersky (2017: 55-63) question the role of Aaron in the sin of the golden calf in relation to the high esteem to which other parts of scripture hold him. This he does in comparison with the account in Deuteronomy 9: 8 -21 which portrays the making of the calf as an idea of the people and not of Aaron and argues that the redactors of the passage were trying to remove the understanding that Aaron the Priest was at the centre of the sin of the golden calf. This view can be emphasized from the Levites who were the priests killing 3000 people. It can be argued that the priests were trying to put blame on the people. Reading Exodus 32 from this perspective, in my view, reviews that the text presents a conflict between the priests and the people, differently put the relationship between the people and the priests is affected by the

making of the golden calf. As noted by Janzen (2000:379) Exodus 32 is “extremely complex in the construction and rich in themes (covenant breaking and renewal, sin and forgiveness, the form of God's presence, and Moses' role as mediator, just to name the main ones).” I am of the view that these themes are underpinned by the theme “relationship” which is at the centre of the covenant which can be described as the heart of this passage. This is in light of the understanding that Yahweh entered a covenant with the people and stipulated the peoples’ obligations one of which was not to make and worship images of anything in heaven, on earth in water or under the earth (Ex. 20: 4-5). The life of the people was, therefore, linked to them keeping the covenantal obligation. The theme of the covenant runs through the Pentateuch and much of the Old Testament. It is a very important theme of not only the book of Exodus but also the Pentateuch in general. The covenant is worth exploring in relation to how the people were to relate to Yahweh, one another and gold. In exploring Exodus 32 the relationship between Yahweh and the people has been portrayed to be very important but the relationship between people and gold has been down played by scholars such as Janzen (2000:381-382) who suggests that the material and the method of construction of the golden calf are not of theological importance, based on the understanding that the passage suggest two possibilities of the means by which the golden calf was made, that is, a wooden image overlaid with gold or casting of gold.

However, the question of how Aaron and the people related with or used gold or wood in my view is theologically important as the misuse of gold is presented as a threat to the relationship between Yahweh and the people, and the relationships among the people. As Kurle (2013:72) notes Exodus 32 “presents an extreme violation of the foundations of the relationship and balances it with the possibilities of a renewed relationship based on the merciful attitude of God.” Similarly, Kessler (2013:254) who holds that Exodus 32 is part of the Sinai Covenant theology notes that, in Sinai Covenant Theology “it becomes abundantly clear that Israel will not be able to keep the demands of the covenants perfectly and that failure to obey the law does not terminate the people’s relationship with Yahweh.” From this perspective, he argues that Exodus 32 - 34 is one of the examples of the instances where Yahweh’s grace and mercy prevailed over the sin of the people. For Kessler (2013:254) the *torah* “was given as a

means of maintaining rather than establishing a relationship. This being the case, there is provision within Sinai Covenant Theology for relational repair when Israel (either collectively or individually) sins and fails to abide by the law.” In this way he presents the relationship between Yahweh and the people as important in this passage. This research will focus on the use of gold to violate the foundation of the relationship between Yahweh and the people and its effects on the people’s relationship with Yahweh; and relationships among themselves.

### **1.3. Problem Statement**

The research will address the following questions:

1. What was relationship between the golden image and God?
2. What were the effects of making the golden calf on the relationship between Yahweh and the people; and the relationships among the people in Exodus 32?
3. Can the relational response espoused by Kessler (2013) shed any light on this question?

### **1.4. Objectives and Aim of Study**

The aim of this research is to explore the effects of making the golden calf on the relationship between Yahweh and the people; and the relationships among the people in Exodus 32. This will be achieved by meeting the following objectives.

- Explore the use of “golden images” in the Ancient Near East and the broader Old Testament
- Exegete Exodus 32 in light of the larger literary context of the book of Exodus and historical context of the worship of golden calves in ancient Israel.
- Discuss the effects of making and worshipping the golden calf on the relationship between Yahweh and the people and the relationships among the people.

### **1.5. Methodology**

#### **1.5.1 Relational approach**

Kessler (2013:1) has proposed what can be termed as “reading of the Old Testament



for a relational response”. In this approach, the nature of God – human relationship as well as God’s purpose of every relationship that humans find themselves in takes centre stage. He (Kessler 2013:512) proposes that “each OT text be investigated for the kind of relational responses it desires to see incarnated in the lives of the people of God.” He argues that a relational response is

the kinds of values and virtues, attitudes and behaviors, and character qualities that the text desired to see in the lives of the individuals or communities living in relationship with Yahweh. Simply put, it meant looking for the distinctive way in which each text formulated what a response to God should look like. Such responses involve the way individuals and communities of faith live out their life in relationship to God, to one another, to those outside the community, and to the creation (Kessler 2013:512).

In this research I will try to bring out the relational response Exodus 32 desired to see incarnate in the lives of the addressees in response to Yahweh, gold and to one another as a community of faith. For this to be achieved, three exegetical methods have been employed, that is, Literary analysis, Narrative-Critical approach and Historical-Critical approach.

### **1.5.2 Literary Analysis**

Literary criticism foregoes the questions of history and external referents and focus on the synchronic aspects of the texts with emphasis on the literary characteristics of the texts (Hawk, 2003:536). From this perspective the structure of the passage will be explored to bring out how the author shaped his story as a piece of literature. This calls for the analysis of the passage with regards to the plot of the narrative.

In grappling with this, the research will explore the structure of the passage and bring out the major themes and how they help in deriving the relational response which the passage required to be seen in the lives of the addressee. Hendrix (1990:212) proposed that Exodus 32 can be structured chiasmically and at the centre is verse 26a. He further notes that the central theme is “opportunity for repentance” from the question in verse 26a “who is for Yahweh?” I am of the view that the question can also be understood as a reminder of the covenant the people had with Yahweh, thereby echoing the relational

response expected of them.

### **1.5.3 Narrative-Critical Approach**

Hundley (2017:559) has rightly observed that “Exodus 32 presents various perspectives: those of the people, Aaron, God, Moses, and the storyteller. Each perspective is distinct and defensible, yet the text ultimately rejects those of the people and Aaron.” Using this method, the depiction of the main characters in the passage will be analysed. This will help us understanding the role each character played and how the characters are depicted. This will be done in relation to the story of Jeroboam’s bulls in 1 Kings 12.

### **1.5.4 Historical-Critical Approach**

In placing Exodus 32 in its historical context the research will begin by discussing issues surrounding the authorship and dating. This will be done by bringing out the sources of the redactors of the passage. Dating the passage will help in understanding the happenings in that time which shaped the text.

In exploring the narrative of the golden calf, one has to consider the understanding that the text narrates the history of the Israelites, therefore, the methodology as Davenport (1973: 88-9) has pointed out “must allow for the possibility that the text reflects an historical kernel which originated in a specific historical situation, and which can be corroborated by external ANE evidence.” Earlier, using this approach Albright (1968:43) noted that the destruction of the calf shares steps with destruction of death by the goddess Anath in the Baal Epic of Ugarit and uses the same verbs though in different order. This indicates that the concept of the destruction of rejected “practices” was not a unique practice to the Israelites but was practiced in Ancient Near East. Recently Greer (2013:22) has argued that ancient iconography shows that the use of calves, bulls and winged creatures to symbolize gods or the presence of gods was a common practice in Ancient Near East. He further argues that Yahweh was associated with a calf as evidenced in the Epigraphic Copus were according to Greer (2013:22 cf. Propp 2008:550) “the personal name עגליו identified on a Samaria Ostrakon (HI Samr 41), possibly translated as ‘Yahweh is a calf’ or, more likely, ‘Calf of Yahweh,’ may imply some connection.”

In exploring the narrative of the golden calf, I am of the view that, it is important to understand the broader Ancient Near Eastern context in which the text was written. This highlights the understanding that biblical texts were shaped by different events in the course of the Jewish history, therefore, placing the text in its historical context helps one understand the meaning of the text better. From this perspective, the text will be exegeted using the historical - critical approach to bring out the understanding of the narrative of the golden calf in the context of the Ancient Near East.

The use of gold in making of images for the cult in the Ancient Near East will be explored in light of its use in royalty to establish the extent to which the understanding affected the making of the golden calf in Exodus 32. Fretheim (1991:279) notes that “the problem with a molten calf idolatry was perceived not to be peculiar to one historical period. This coincides with the presence of such images elsewhere in that world and their likely impact on Israel.” This calls for the concept of the “the golden calf” to be explored from the wider view or in relation to the contemporary thoughts in other Ancient Near East cults. Further, the research will indicate whether the writers of the passage used the same understanding or deviated from the general understanding. In this regard the worshipping of images in the Ancient Near East will be explored to understand whether the making of the golden calf was influenced by the worship of images in Ancient Near East or not.

## **1.6. Outline of Chapters**

Chapter two will cover two aspects, that is, exploring the use of gold in Ancient Near East and the making and worshipping of images in Ancient Near East. The use of gold in marriage in general and for sealing diplomatic marriages will be discussed. Attention will be paid to the use of gold as symbol of honour and authority. Additionally, its use for paying tributes and sealing covenants will be discussed as well. In exploring the use of gold in cults, the use of gold in Ancient Near East in general will be discussed. The relationship between images and deities in general will then be discussed. Thereafter, I will narrow down to the use of gold in the wider Old Testament with a focus on, creation, symbol of honour, the tabernacle and the temple. I will then shift to discuss golden

images of the Cherubim and the calf/bull in the Old Testament taking examples from the Prophets, Writings and the Pentateuch.

Chapter three will exegete of Exodus 32. In this chapter the structure of the passage will be analysed and the position of the narrative in the book of Exodus will be explored to see how this has shaped the major theme in the passage. I will then give my translation of Exodus 32. This will be followed by a detailed analysis of the passage. Attention will also be paid to the main characters in the passage and how they are depicted. Authorship and dating of the passage will be discussed before explaining the relationship between the narrative of the gold calf and the story of Jeroboam in 1 Kings 12.

Chapter four will discuss the effects of the golden calf on relationships, that is, the people's relationship with Yahweh; the people's relationship to one another; and the relationship with gold. This will be done in light of Kessler's (2013) proposed reading for a relational response. It will also discuss what the sin of the golden calf was.

Chapter five will be the conclusion.

### 1.7 Definition of Key Terms

**Cherubim:** according to Steinmann (2003:112) "Cherubim are creatures associated with the presence of God." In the Old Testament they are first described as guarding the tree of life after the fall of Adam and Eva (Gen 3:23-24). They are depicted as winged creatures and sometimes referred to as chariots of God because they are associated with the movement of Yahweh. In this dissertation I have used the term to refer to winged creatures associated with the presence of God.

**Image:** the term "image" is close to the term "idol" according to Clifford (1996:448) an Idol is "an image or statue of a deity fashioned to be an object of worship." He further notes that "the English word, which has a pejorative meaning, reflects several different Hebrew words. Some of these are neutral terms describing the manufacture, e.g., *pasil* or *pesel*, '(carved) image,' and *masseka*, '(cast) image.' For these the pejorative 'idol' is not always appropriate; 'image' or 'statue' is sometimes better."

From this perspective an image can be defined as a fashioned object. In this

dissertation I have used the term in a more general sense to mean a “picture” of an object fashioned, imagined or seen in a vision.

**Tabernacle:** according to Averbeck (2003:807) “the tabernacle sanctuary was the Lord’s tented dwelling place in the midst of Israel as they traveled from Sinai to Canaan (Num 10—21). Even after they conquered the land, up until the time of Solomon’s temple, the tabernacle survived as a sanctuary (2 Sam 7:6; 1 Kings 8:4; 2 Chron 1:3-6).” There are three major terms used for what we usually refer to as the “tabernacle” that is “sanctuary” (*miqdas*), “tabernacle” (*misikan*) and “tent of meeting” (*ohel moed*). In this dissertation I have not gone into the discussion of the separate terms but use the term “tabernacle” in general.

**Temple:** in this dissertation the term “temple” has been used as noted by Meyers (1996:1096) to mean “the religious structure in Jerusalem that was the center of Israelite national life in the biblical period, beginning with the monarchy (tenth century B.C.) and continuing until its final destruction by the Roman legions in A.D. 70.”

**Theological Streams:** In this dissertation I have used the term “theological streams” following Kessler (2013:513) to mean “central themes”.

## **CHAPTER 2: GOLDEN IMAGES IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST AND BROADER OLD TESTAMENT**

### **2.1. Introduction**

Gold was obviously used for making a number of articles which may be too many for the scope of this dissertation. This chapter lays the foundation for the understanding of the golden calf in Exodus 32, moving from the broader understanding and use of gold in the Ancient Near Eastern royalty and cult to the use of gold in the broader Old Testament. This chapter discusses the use of gold: in marriages in general; to seal diplomatic marriages; as a symbol of honour; as a symbol of authority; to pay tributes and seal covenants. This will be followed by discussing the use of gold in general Ancient Near Eastern cults focussing on images associated with deities and the relationship between deities and images. I will then, shift to the wider Old Testament to discuss gold: in creation; as a symbol of honour; in the tabernacle; and in the temple. Then I will analyse the depiction of the image of the Cherubim and golden bull in: Prophets, Writings and the Pentateuch. The selection of passages to be considered will be based on content, that is, the image of the Cherubim and the image of the golden bull/calf.

### **2.2. Sources of Gold in Ancient Near East**

Ben-Dor (1976:438) argues that gold was one of the most valuable minerals in the Ancient Near East though at some point silver was the most valued mineral, this is the more reason in the Bible it is usually written as silver and gold to show that silver was more precious. Being a metal that only needs to be purified after it is mined; it was easy for it to be processed unlike alloys like bronze which needed metals to be mixed. In the Ancient Near East, the major supplier of gold was Nubia which supplied its gold via Egypt. It must be noted that gold was also mined in Ophir, Havilah, Parvaim and Egypt. Steen (2007:622) has noted that

the traditional source of gold was Ophir (1 Kings 9:28 probably South Arabia or Yemen). Other proposals for the possible location of Ophir include India and Western Africa, but the most probable and popular location is South Arabia (Graf 2009:334). Parvaim is also mentioned as a place of origin (2 Chr 3:6), but this has not been identified and may well be another name for Yemen, or the term may simply mean 'from the east'.

According to Bowes (1975:771)

gold ornaments and utensils have been used since the Bronze Age, with the Sumerians 3000 B.C using gold for domestic and ritual vessels and objects and for personal ornaments. Corresponding use of gold is recorded for Biblical times (e.g 2 Chron 9:20; Exodus 25:11; Gen 41:42 respectively).

According to Muhly (1997:7) “the great age of gold jewellery, was the third millennium BCE, a period that, with full justification could be called the Age of Gold.” This is probably because the mining and processing of gold in this period improved thereby resulting in increased production of golden jewellery.

## **2.3. Use of Gold in Ancient Near East**

### **2.3.1 In Marriage in General**

Van de Mierop (2015:138) observes that gold was used when sealing marriages. The use of gold in marriages seems to indicate that firstly it was paid as bride price to the family of the woman and secondly the woman was given golden ornaments and or jewellery which she would put on to look beautiful and keep as security in case of divorce. The latter implies that gold was used as a form of security of wealth for women while the former was probably to indicate how the groom valued the bride and her family and as means of sealing the new relationship of the two families and individuals who entered into marriage. From this perspective it can be argued that gold was used to seal a marriage relationship.

The use of gold as security for married women suggests some form of consideration or valuing of women in a society that was traditionally known to be highly patriarchal (see Meyers 2014:12-16). Unterman (2017:71) observes that in the Old Testament “most occurrences of ‘widow’ and ‘orphan’ presume penury. The husband/father was the protector and bread winner of the family, and without him subsistence was precarious.” In light of this understanding, it can be speculated that women were very vulnerable to abuse by the men. Married women depended on their husbands to sustain them. This depicts women as vulnerable socially as well as economically disadvantaged. The death of the husband implied that the widow become vulnerable

as her bread winner and protector has died. However, as noted by Meyers (2014:17) it is “clear that new knowledge about the social realities and cultural representations of classical civilizations would not support the traditional depiction of patriarchy in classical societies.” The Hebrew, Egyptian and Mesopotamian “laws” provided for the upholding of social justice for women and others who were perceived to be vulnerable people in the ancient civilization (see Unterman 2017:41-84). Such laws protected the vulnerable from been exploited by the powerful. Unterman (2017:69) has observed that “the prologue of the Ur-nammu (king of Ur) collection (ca. 2100 BCE) states, ‘I did not deliver the orphan to the wealthy man; I did not deliver the widow to the mighty man; I did not deliver the man of one shekel to the man of one mina [that is, 60 shekels]’.” Similarly, the epilogue of the Hammurabi law collection (ca 1750 BCE) declares his aim as “that the strong might not oppress the weak, that justice might be dealt the orphan [and] the widow... to give justice to the oppressed.’ Corresponding language appears also in the prologue.” This indicates that the Ancient Near Eastern laws provided for social justice for the widows and other vulnerable people.

Considering the understanding that the Ancient Near Eastern society was patriarchal give the impression that even in marriage, men were the dominant gender and women would be oppressed. For various reasons they would also be divorced which would make them destitute, as such women in marriage needed social protection of some sort from their husbands. From this perspective it can be argued that giving of golden jewellery to women by their husbands was one way of making sure social justice prevailed. Having gold would enable them to have something to start a new life on. Golden jewellery can be understood from this perspective as a means by which women would restore their honour even though they were generally considered as a property of men. It can be argued that gold in the hands of a woman gave a sense of security and freedom as they would earn a living from it should the husband divorce her. In other words, gold was used as a liquid asset or a means of storing wealth for the rich in society who would afford to buy it. It is therefore possible that people would buy golden jewellery and keep them for future convention to cash or exchange for item they wanted. According to Steen (2007:632) “fine jewellery, mostly earrings, probably unworn, and of high quality and craftsmanship was found in Tawilan in south Jordan,



dated to the 10<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE.” The understanding that it was unworn indicates that it was stored possibly for future selling or use.

### **2.3.2 Sealing Diplomatic Marriages**

Gold was used to make jewellery like earrings, and bracelets especially for women and such jewellery served two purposes, that is, as ornaments and a source of wealth which was used like insurance in case of divorce (Steen 2007: 623). Van de Mieroop (2015:138) has argued that “Women who were married to rich men would be given expensive jewelleries to beautify them by their husbands.” Such jewellery probably remained a property of the women, in case of divorce they would sell them, for them to earn a living from the proceeds. The practice of giving golden jewelleries to the woman who is been taken into marriage and to her family is recorded especially to have been used to seal diplomatic marriages by Kings and possibly other rich people. It is for this reason that Egyptian kings who were very rich in gold would marry daughters of other kings even when they would hardly give out their daughters in marriage to other kings. Diplomatic marriages were used to strengthen diplomatic relationships between nations. By giving the daughter of the king to another king in marriage the two kingdoms tied their relationship especially in terms of security. This is because the threat to the kingdom to which one king has given his daughter for marriage, is a threat to the princes, therefore a threat to the kingdom which has given out the princes in marriage too. In this case the two kingdoms would fight together to overcome the enemy.

### **2.3.3 Symbol of Honour**

In ancient Egypt gold was mined and used for royal accessories such as crowns, rings and bracelets (AbdelMaksoud & Emam 2019:901). Binder (2011:41-51) notes that one of the highest honours a king would give to a deserving individual in Ancient Egypt was known as the “Gold of favour, praise or honour”. The deserving person was given a golden neck chain which symbolized a position of honour and possibly one which made them to be revered by the people. Evans (2009:199) notes that Egyptian kings were understood to be incarnates of gods who could be revered. This could be said to be after the enthronement which was associated with the giving of gold of honour. From this perspective it can be argued that golden jewelleries were used when performing the act of enthronement of the King or noble official. Differently put gold

was used as a symbol of enthronement. Kings of equal status were known to be exchanging gifts especially when one is been crowned as king, when treaties were concluded, celebrating war victory and during other special occasions. Gold was a notable gift that would be given during such occasions (Van de Mieroop 2015:140).

The association of gold with nobility and royalty was not restricted to Egypt. In the Old Testament, the throne of Solomon is pictured as overlaid with gold (1 Ki. 10: 18 -20). The use of gold in making thrones with the understanding that gold was a metal of high economic value indicates the value and importance which the people attached to kingship. Besides the throne, other noted golden articles in Solomon's palace include the wooden shields which were overlaid with gold. Commenting on this, Cogan (2001:318) notes that "the shields were used in royal ceremonies." It can be speculated that they were used to celebrate war victories. Thrones in the Ancient Near East were built in a similar manner, what differentiated Solomon's throne was the six stepped approach to the throne's platform (Cogan 2001:319). This indicates that it was a common practice to use gold in making thrones or articles on the throne. One must note that the power of the throne can be understood as been with the one sitting on it rather than in the chair itself. In other words, the chair needs someone to sit on it for it to be effective. The beauty of the throne brought glory to the one sitting on it. This indicates that the use of gold in making royal articles brought honour not to the article itself but to the one using it. The House of the Forest of Lebanon as it was referred was rich in gold that all the drinking vessels were made of pure gold (1 Ki. 10:21). This demonstrated the value and honour which was attached to kingship. Kings like Solomon are depicted to have amassed gold and golden elements which were used in his palace.

LaSor (2001:547) observes that, "war, both in Israel and in ancient Near East, was in some respect a religious act. God was to be consulted before going to war." When one nation wins the war, it meant that their god had dominated or "dethroned" the god of the losing nation. The temple articles would be taken and placed in the temple of the

winning god, probably to indicate that the god of the losing kingdom has been made subject of the winning god. To indicate that a king has been conquered or dethroned their ornaments would be looted and put in the custody of their master. It must be mentioned here that to some extent, war was not only understood to be between the nations, but also their gods.

Van der Toorn (2002:56) has observed that “from the Mesopotamian evidence we know that temples harboured images of defeated divine adversaries demoted to guardian spirits.” While this may be understood from the perspective of mythological battles of gods it may be implied in the placing of images from temples whose people have lost the war. Therefore, to indicate that the king has been dethroned, their palace ornaments would be looted, and to indicate that their god has been dethroned or made a subject of the god of the kingdom that has worn the war, the temple as the home of the god was looted especially temple articles associated with the presence of the deity.

#### Symbol of Authority

Beck (2011:206) has observed that gold was also used for making signets for nobles and Kings. The signet was a symbol of authority which served more like a date stamp and signature in modern days. It was used to seal letters and or other items to indicate that they belong to or have come from the owner of the seal. Kings and wealth people who wanted to delegate authority would give the signet to the person to whom authority is delegated. The one with the King’s golden signet had authority to make binding decisions on behalf of the king. As such the position was almost equal to that of the king. Therefore, the use of gold in making signets can be understood as the use of gold to symbolize a position of honour and authority.

### 2.3.4 Paying Tribute and Sealing Covenants

Lemaire (2009:170-172) has highlighted a number of instances where Israelite and Judean kings opted to be vassals of strong kings rather than be looted. He has further noted that, in such instances the vassals would pay heavy tribute in the form of gold and other precious stones and minerals. Gold was one of the elements because of its high value and use as means of exchange. When a weaker kingdom entered a covenant relationship with a stronger kingdom, the weaker one would pay tribute for the relationship to be maintained. In such cases, the stronger kingdom would in turn provide military aid in case of the weaker kingdom being invaded by other kingdoms. In other instances, when the kingdom is conquered, it would be forced to sign a covenant to pay tribute. The covenant where the one party is forced is referred to as imposed treat or loyalty treat (see Kessler 2013:178). In this relationship the weak party would pay tribute as a sign of loyalty to the stronger party.

From this discussion gold was a metal of high value in the Ancient Near East which was used as a symbol of honour for the nobles and kings. It was used as a gift to seal diplomatic relationships ranging from treaties for different reasons to marriages. In marriage gold was given as bride price to the family of the woman. It was also given to the woman to indicate the love that the man has for her. Golden elements such as earrings and bracelets served as some form of security for the woman in case of divorce, they were a form of giving economic honour besides the honour that come through wearing them. Gold was highly used in making thrones for the kings and seals. A seal served as a symbol of authority and position of honour. It was also given as a special gift during enthroning of kings to show respect and honour for the king. A weak king with gold would enter in a treat with the strong by giving them gold as a tribute. In this regard gold was used as a means of security and getting protection. From this perspective a king without gold can be understood as weak and vulnerable. A strong king would amass gold and other riches; therefore, gold was understood as a measure of strength. Considering the use of gold as a symbol of “enthronement”, honour and respect, taking away golden elements from the king’s palace indicated dethroning the king as the symbol of honour and respect was taken away. In a similar way taking away golden jewels from a woman meant stripping her of honour and security thereby

rendering them weak and vulnerable.

### **3.3.5 The Use of Gold in Ancient Near East Cultic Articles**

Given the above use of gold by royalty, it is plausible that gold was used in making cultic articles for similar reasons. As noted by Brisch (2013:38) “Kingship was an important form of government for most of Mesopotamian history. From the earlier periods, political governance and religion were closely intertwined.” This is from the understanding that the cult and royalty were understood as noble and honourable. Gold was used to overlay temple and cultic objects made of other substances like wood, copper, bronze and silver because of its ductile and malleable nature, this was common especially in making of idols and statues (Steen 2007:622). Gold would be beaten into soft sheets which could be used to cover such objects. It was extensively used in cultic contexts in antiquity as noted by Amzallag (2019:297) because “it added prestige to sanctuaries and augmented the magnificence of representations of deities.

Furthermore, the inalterability and brilliance of gold spontaneously evoked timelessness and luminosity, two of the most essential characteristics of divine beings.” These characteristics of gold and its social implication as a prestigious metal made it to be used in making cultic articles and be associated with deities. Its presence in temples, shrines and other cultic places indicated the high social status which the deities had in the community and the radiance which was associated with the presence of the deity. Considering the understanding that deities were seen as divine leaders or rulers of the kingdom, it is not surprising that the cult was accorded honour just like kingship.

Amzallag (2019:298) has observed that in ancient Egyptian understanding “gold was the metal that typically conferred holiness on sanctuaries. It was even regarded as the material specifically constituting the skin and flesh of the gods.” From this perspective it can be argued that gold essentially was part of the gods. As an element which constituted the body of the gods, gold can be understood as intrinsically having the characteristics of the gods. This brings out the reason why essential attributes of the gods, such as luminosity and timelessness, were consubstantial to specific properties of gold in Egypt. Further, in Mycenaean Greece gold was believed to have a similar

intrinsic holiness. This is from the depiction where the golden funerary mask was not simply used as a mark of the deceased's social status but also as a symbol and/or marker of his transition from mortality to immortality. It is probably from this perspective that the rich in Ancient Near East were buried with golden articles.

Steen (2007:622) shows that archaeological findings all over the Levant in burial sites of kings and nobles have revealed that kings and nobles were buried with several articles made of precious stones, silver and gold. Gold might have played an important role in the burial rites of especially the nobles in Ancient Near East. It can be speculated that gold was used in the burial rites with the view that one who dies and is buried with gold would be connected to the gods especially in Egypt where it was understood as the material that made the skin and flesh of the gods. It can be argued from this perspective that some kings were deified or believed to have become gods when buried with golden articles because gold would connect them to the gods or make them deities. From another angle, it can be argued that gold gained prominent use in the cult as a metal that connected the gods to the people. This is from the understanding that gold was associated with the presence of gods or the bodies of gods, as such it was deemed as a holy metal.

Amzallag (2019:298) rightly notes that "gold acquired its holiness in two different ways: as the most appropriate material with which to symbolize the divine, and as a material of literal divine provenance." As an appropriate material, it had a high social and mercantile value which made it to be associated with the gods who were depicted to be of high social standing in the community. It also had the luminescence and beauty associated with the glory of the gods. The understanding of gold as a material of divine provenance indicates that gold was believed to have originated from the gods. Understanding gold as originating from gods further explains why it was regarded as special in cults. As a holy element coming from the gods and believed to comprise the body of the gods, it served as a perfect material to associate with the dwelling place of the gods. Additionally, what was from the gods could have been seen as the best to be given to the gods. Considering the view that the gods were known to be holy, what was to be given to them was also to be holy. As such gold as a metal which was associated with holiness was the best to be given to the gods. From this perspective, it can be

argued that people were compelled to give gold to the deities as the best gift they would give, thereby making it readily available for use in making cultic elements.

Given the use of gold in enthroning kings discussed above, it is plausible that gold was used in temple or cultic articles to symbolize the enthronement of gods. As observed by Olyan (1997:82) “divinities were enthroned within their temples; they were served by cultic functionaries — specialists responsible for the upkeep of the sanctuary and its proper functioning.” This indicates the understanding that temples were homes of the deities and within the temple there was to be a throne for the deity. This stems from the anthropomorphic presentation of deities as kings. Because, in the Ancient Near East deities were understood as leaders, the ideal way of presenting the deity was the picture of the highest leader of the land, as such the deities were pictured as Kings and the people as subjects. Making cultic articles with precious materials like gold indicated the respect which the people had for the deity as their king. The use of gold in making thrones for the deity and cultic articles suggests that deities were highly honoured and respected. Archaeologists have made discoveries of various temple articles made of gold including one bearing a goddess holding two snakes which are known to be symbols of fertility in Canaanite temples. The discovery of such articles in different sites in the Levant and dating them to different periods indicate that gold was widely used in cultic articles in Ancient Near East (Aharoni 1982:129).

### **2.3.6 Relationship Between Images and Gods in the Ancient Near East**

With the understanding that gold in the Ancient Near Eastern cults was having used to images which were associated with the presence of the deities, one may wonder, what was the relationship between the images and the deities? In trying to answer this question Hundley (2017:560 - 562) has proposed three possible answers.

The *first* is that an image would serve as a representation of the divine form. Some deities were believed to be taking the form of creatures like bulls. In ancient Egypt gods were known to take the form of creatures for example “live Apis and Mnevis bulls functioned much like cult statues, manifesting the divine presence of Ptah and Re, respectively (Hundley 2017:560).” From this perspective statues or images of creatures in the cult were understood to be realistic replicas of the deity. The deity was seen as present in the statue or image; therefore, worshiping the statue implied worshiping the



deity in the statue. According to Sommer (2009:19; cf. Dick 1999:57) “two closely related ceremonies allowed a god to enter an image: ‘mouth opening’ and ‘mouth washing’ rituals.” In these rituals which are recording in a number of Akkadian and Sumerian texts and known to have been practiced from as far back as the end of the third millennium BC, the heavenly origin of the statue or image was asserted. The ceremony effected the arrival of the god’s live presence into the image. In some texts, the people who made the statue would recite words to show that the gods were involved in the making of the image. In some cases, the hands of the makers would be symbolically cut off to signify that they no longer have a hand in the image, only the gods have (Sommer 2009:19). These rituals acknowledged the involvement of humans in making the images but emphasized their consecration by the god who entered them. It can be argued that the ritual made the image to no longer be an image but the deity as the deity was thought to enter the image, thereby; the image and the deity become one. According to Sommer (2009:20) one incantation for the ritual speaks of the ceremony as follows:

On the day when the god was created (and) the pure statue (*salmu*) was completed, the god was made visible in all the lands radiance, he is endowed with awesome radiance, he shines out splendidly, the statue appears brilliantly. He is clothed in splendour, suited to lordliness, lordly, he is full of pride, he is surrounded with.

This incantation suggests that through the image or in the image the god becomes visible to all. The description of the statue as splendour, shining, and surrounded with radiance may indicate that the image of itself was literary made of splendid materials and was surrounded with articles made of materials which are precious enough to indicate pride. In this case gold as a precious material and a material of honour fitted well in fashioning of cultic articles. Given Sommer’s (2009:19) view that the deity and the image become one, worshiping the image meant worshiping the deity in the image. The understanding that the deity was made visible in the image suggests that the deity was revealed to the people and the people were to relate with the deity as a visible god among them.

Winter (1992:130) notes that, through the rite of “mouth washing” or “mouth opening”



the image was empowered to speak, see, and act. From this perspective the image was understood as the able to speak and act, thus, the temple as the house of deity was understood as the place where the deity would speak to the people and the people would speak to the deity. This was possibly through the priests who served the deity. It was understood that the deity could leave the image and such instances the deity would not speak to the priests in the temple.

The *second* answer provided by Hundley (2017:560) is that the image served as a symbol of the deity. The image was understood not as representing the divine form but as presenting the attributes of the deity like strength, fertility and provision. Most of the deities in Ancient Near East according to Black (2000:94)

had their associated symbols (Akkadian *surinnu*) – animals, monsters, plants, heavenly bodies, items of daily life – each usually, though not always, specific to a deity, though most deities had more than one symbol. Gods and goddesses could be depicted together with their distinctive natural or high breed animals.

In this case the animal or creature was not literally presenting the divine form but was a symbol of the deity. A good example is an ancient stone record of land grant found in Babylonia from Kassite (middle Babylonian 1595 — 1155 BC) to Neo Babylonian period (626 — 539 BC), on which Black (2000:94) has observed that “the top of the stone was usually caved with symbols of gods, such as a sun for the solar god Shamash, a crescent for the moon-god Sin, an eight-pointed star for Ishtar (the goddess of the planet Venus, a turtle or Capricorn for the water-god Ea”. In this case the image can be said to have served as a metaphor of communicating the attributes of the deity; therefore, the image was understood as a way of explaining what the deity can do. In other ways the image was used to indicate how the deity related with the people. If the deity revealed him/herself as the strong one who conquers enemies, the people would use a symbol of a powerful animal like a bull to symbolize the deity, and if the deity revealed him/herself as the source of fertility a symbol indicating fertility would be used for that deity. It can be argued that it was possible for one deity to have multiple symbols depending on the relationship with the people and it was possible for the same image to be used for multiple deities. This is from the understanding that

cults shared a common worldview of which animals are the strongest and which ones are the swiftest ones. From this perspective it was possible for an image like the bull or sphinx to symbolize more than one deity. In Ancient Egypt the so-called tree goddess was identified as the goddesses Isis, Nephtys, Nut, Hathor and Maat. Some deities were also depicted in more than one form on the same object, for example, Mahes was depicted on the Hildesheim stela both as a lion and as a man with a head of a lion (Cornelius 1997:25).

Hundley's (2017:561) *third* answer is that the image was the throne or pedestal for the deity. The animal was depicted as the seat for the deity or the deity as riding the animal. Archaeological discoveries in Levant have revealed a metal icon of a divine couple standing on the back of a bull (Olyan 1997:82). According to Olyan (1997:83)

many cultic icons have been unearthed, some of which stood on platforms, in cultic niches, or elsewhere within temples. Some of these are clearly representations of deities or divine pairs in a variety of poses; others, such as images of bulls, appear to have served as thrones for deities; in some instances, deity and throne were discovered attached.

Some scholars have categorised this as the “empty space aniconism” (see Meyers 2005:228). In this view the image is understood not as a physical representation of the deity but as throne on which the invisible deity seats. It can be argued from this perspective that some deities were depicted as or understood as invisible but present on the image that served purely as a pedestal and not as symbol or form of the deity. The understanding of the image as the throne of the deity suggests that people understood the deity as their king. Therefore, the image indicated how they related with the deity. In this regard it can be argued that the deities in the Ancient Near East were accorded honour as the rulers of the people. Israel's surrounding cultures believed that the temple was the home of the gods. As noted by Van der Toorn (2002:28) “to the Babylonians, Canaanites, and Egyptians, a temple without a divine image was an abandoned house.” This indicates that the removal of the image from the temple implied the removal of the deity's throne. In other words, the deity as the king was believed to leave the temple if the image as the throne is removed.

Cornelius (1997:42) has summarised the discussion on the three understandings of images in the Ancient Near Eastern cults by noting that:

The iconic, and more specifically anthropomorphic, representation of God was very common in the ancient Near East. This was not so much idolatry, as certain theological traditions would have it, but rather a case of iconolatry. Sometimes the deities were only represented by certain summarising or abbreviating symbols, usually a central attribute — ‘iconographic shorthand’. The third type was absolutely aniconic, the empty space or throne, chariot or horse.

According to Hundley (2017:562) “the evidence for each of these positions is widely attested throughout the Ancient Near East both geographically and chronologically, which suggests that the biblical audience was at least familiar with the possibilities.” However, it can be noted here that it was possible for the people to have a combination of the understanding of images. For Example, some images mentioned were discovered in a manner that an image of a deity was found on a pedestal (Olyan 1997:83). Such can be interpreted as combining the first and the third understanding of the images. The deity was present in the image riding or seating on the other image which is the throne. From this perspective the visible god in the image was understood as king of the people. From another perspective such images may be understood as the combination of the second and the third understanding. In this regard, the image on top can be understood as the symbol of the deity and the one the deity is sitting on as the throne especially if the image has not undergone the ritual that indicated the deity entering the image. Therefore, the combination can be understood not as presenting the live presence of the deity in the image but a symbol of an enthroned deity. Given that the biblical audience was familiar with these possibilities, it is plausible to interpret the biblical images in this manner. It is worth noting with Hundley (2017: 562) that “these three options gave people access to the deity by giving them a concrete, visible access point.” In other words, the image explained the thought or the peoples’ understanding of their relationship with the deity. They could access the deity as the image, through the image as symbol or through the image as the throne of the deity.

It must be noted here that some scholars like Römer (2015:141) have argued against the third understanding of images. To those that hold Römer's view, Ancient Near Eastern cults were totally iconic. They argue that there is no evidence of the depiction of gods as invisible on pedestals of animals or other images. They hold that deities were either depicted as riding or standing on thrones or in the form of the image as form of the deity or using symbols. From this perspective every deity had a form or was presented iconically.

## **2.4 Use of Gold in the Wider Old Testament**

### **2.4.1 Creation**

In the Old Testament gold is first mentioned in the creation story in Genesis 2:12. In this verse, gold is depicted as one of the elements that were created by Yahweh. This passage is part of the narrative that describes how wonderful and rich the Garden of Eden was. The human was gifted by Yahweh with riches that would make his stay in the garden glorious and honourable. I am of the view that human beings as Yahweh's creation who were given the responsibility of taking care of creation, were gifted the riches of the land to use. From this perspective, gold is depicted as a gift from Yahweh which beautified the land in which the human being was put. Therefore, gold can be understood as a gift from Yahweh to the human being. The presentation of gold as originating from Yahweh evokes the general Ancient Near eastern perception of gold as originating from the gods, though here it is not presented as the skin or body of Yahweh.

Eco-theologians like the Earth Bible Team (2000:24) have argued that all creation have intrinsic value as objects created by God. While this applies to all creation, gold in the view of the Ancient Near Eastern people was exceptional as it was a holy element. This indicates that the depiction of gold here was slightly different from that of the general Ancient Near East. Mentioning it in the creation story further suggests that it was to bring honour and glory to Yahweh as creator. Creation especially in the Psalms (e.g., Ps 19 and 104) is depicted as giving honour to Yahweh the creator. In his analysis of the theme of creation in the book of Psalms. Kessler (2013:153) has noted that in the creation

the speaker experiences an intense sense of joy and wonder. Yahweh made those elements of the created order that bring such delight and amazement to the human spirit. Surprisingly, such texts also express the joy and pleasure that Yahweh personally experiences in looking at the wonders of creation.

Considering the social and mercantile value that was attached to gold, it gave people a sense of delight to see it. Therefore, it was also viewed as a metal that brought more delight and wonder to Yahweh its maker as well. Additionally, the understanding that gold was created by Yahweh indicates that Yahweh is above gold as its maker though making gold brought glory to him. In my view, the emphasis of the second creation account is on Yahweh as the provider of all that human need for sustenance and the creation as a beautiful place for fellowship between Yahweh and the human.

Westermann (2004:19) commenting on Genesis 2 notes that,

in the biblical Creation narrative, humanity is considered to be God's creation in all its relationships. Integral to the creation of the man is his environment (the garden), his food (the fruits of the garden), his work (v. 15), his community (vv. 18-24), and in all of these his relationship to his Creator. God has created the human race as a totality that includes these elements of its existence; if they are disordered, humanity is disordered.

This is shown in the depiction of Yahweh as giving food to the human and as talking to them respectively. As observed by Amzallag (2020:224) “gold, by its mere presence in the shrine, traces the activity of the god who produces it and impregnates it with his holiness. Gold is therefore the tracer of the activity of the divine metallurgical workshop.” According to Kessler (2013:130) “the creation is, in a certain sense, the temple in which God dwells.” This is in the sense that the first creation story closely resembles the making of the tabernacle with orderliness and booth culminating in the Sabbath (Gn. 2: 2-3, cf. Gn. 31:12 — 17). Just like the tabernacle as the home of Yahweh was so orderly and beautiful, creation as the home of Yahweh was depicted as beautiful and adorned with precious stones and gold. The Old Testament depicts the people as having an understanding of creation as the home of Yahweh. Isaiah 66:1 which seems to be a rejection of the understanding of temple as the dwelling place for Yahweh depicts heaven as the throne of Yahweh and the earth as a footstool.

Considering the use of gold and other precious elements in expressing royalty in the Ancient Near East, it is not strange for gold to feature in the depiction of how beautiful creation was considering that it was understood as the home of Yahweh or the footstool of his throne. The depiction of Yahweh as king according to Conrad (2008:504) “occurs primarily in the Old Testament in texts underscoring God’s unequalled power.” In my view the association of gold with Yahweh indicates that people related with Yahweh as their King or as royalty, his home and throne were understood as adorned with precious minerals and stones that symbolized glory and honour to the kingship. Just as the home of their human King was adorned with golden elements, the earth as home of God or the footstool of his heavenly throne was adorned with gold (Schifferdecker 2008:65). As observed by Ryken (1998:476) “in the Bible two royal images are found — God as king and human as king. It is important in the Bible’s theology that the latter reflects the former and that ultimately the two merge as one.” Therefore, it can be argued that the people’s imagination of the dwelling place of Yahweh was influenced by the picture of the king’s palace.

#### **2.4.2 Symbol of Honour and Authority**

When the Israelites were leaving Egypt, they are depicted as having plundered the Egyptians under Yahweh’s favour and took their silver and gold (Ex. 12:35 — 36). Yahweh is depicted as providing silver and gold to the Israelites just before the exodus from Egyptian slavery. Here the provision of gold can be interpreted as returning honour to the people of Yahweh who were slaves (see Hamilton 2011:68). With the understanding that gold was also a symbol of authority, plundering gold from the Egyptians implied taking away their authority. The Egyptians had their authority as masters over the Israelites taken away. Authority was now in the hands of the Israelites. Yahweh was giving the Israelites a new status of honour as they leave Egypt. As noted by Fretheim (1991:142) “their status has now changed, they leave Egypt ‘dressed out,’ not as slaves, but as persons who have been raised to new levels of life by their God. Their raiment and jewelry are those of persons no longer bound but free.” On the other hand, considering the understanding that Yahweh was starting a covenantal relationship with the people, it can be understood as a sign of the love and affection which Yahweh had for the people. Just like the bridegroom would give jewels to the bride, Yahweh

gave his people jewels to betroth them for the covenantal relationship that was to be finalised later by giving the laws and putting them in the ark which was overlaid with gold to seal the relationship. At the same time, it can be understood as an indication of the security which they had by entering in a relationship with Yahweh. It was an assurance that Yahweh could provide for them, and they would be safe if they entered a treaty with him.

Beck (2011:206) has highlighted that in the Ancient Near East giving of jewellery to the woman was understood as an indication of love and affection. The man would show love and affection to his wife by giving her expensive jewels. In the Old Testament the love of God for the children of Israel is sometimes depicted in this manner. The love that God showed to the covenant people in this respect can be understood as giving them honour. This is also depicted as abused by the people. Ezekiel 16:12 is one of the passages in which the people are depicted as lovingly lavished with jewels, but they used them in prostitution. The love that God showed to the people was used against him. At the bottom of this understanding is the concept of the special relationship that the wife and husband enter and the relationship that Yahweh entered with the people. The relationship between Yahweh and the Israelites is often referred to with a metaphor of marriage relationship where Yahweh is depicted as the husband and people as the wife. In a patriarchal society it was arguably the duty of the husband to take care of the woman as his wife and bestow honour on her. In a similar way Yahweh as the husband of the people in this relationship was to take care of the people and bestow honour on them. Just as the giving of gold to the woman brought honour to her, the giving of gifts to people by Yahweh brought honour to them. At the same time, just as the giving of golden jewellery to the woman gave honour to the man, Yahweh as maker and giver of gold was given honour. From this perspective it can be argued that a woman would in turn respect and praise the man for beautifying her and making her honourable. In the same way, the people were expected to respect and praise Yahweh for giving them honour.

As observed by Gravett (2008:153) the Old Testament is not clear about marriage, therefore, care has to be taken. This is in the sense that dowry was given to the woman



in the form of movable assets by her family as she gets married. In Genesis 24:59, Rebecca was given a maid. From this perspective, it can be argued that Yahweh giving the people gold indicates that he was marrying off the people.

When Judah was taken captive in Babylon their temple and palace ornaments were looted and taken to Babylon (2 Ki. 25:8 -20). For the children of Israel, it was Yahweh's obligation to fight their wars. As noted by O'Mathúna (2003:91)

God himself is called a man of war (Ex. 15:3), and an early Hebrew history is called the 'Book of the Wars of the LORD' (Num. 21:14). The wars commissioned by God were, in part, a way of bringing divine judgment upon sinful nations (Gen 15:16) and the unrighteous within Israel (Dt. 13:12-18 [MT 13:13-19]).

The children of Israel losing war indicated that Yahweh was bringing judgment on them which implied that he was no longer on their side. This is evidenced in the Babylonians taking the temple articles which symbolized the presence of Yahweh in the temple and city. A good example is from 2 Kings 24:1; 2 Chronicles 36:6, 7 and Daniel 1:1, 2. At around 605 BCE in the third year of Jehoiachin, the eighteenth king of Judah, the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar after overcoming the Egyptians at Carchemish, moved to attack Jerusalem with a great army. After a brief siege he conquered the city and took away the vessels of the sanctuary to Babylon, where he dedicated them in the Temple of Belus. He also carried away the palace treasures of the king, whom he made his vassal (Easton 1996:193). As observed by Lemaire (2009:171) the taking of the people into exile and looting of the temple were to fulfil the words of Yahweh who left the people because of their sins and used Babylon to punish them (2 Ki. 24:10–13; see 20:17; 21:14). Implicitly Yahweh had given the glory of the people of Judah to the Babylonians. Therefore, carrying away the palace treasures can be argued as showing that the Babylonians have dominance over Jehoiachin the King of Judah and carrying away the temple articles showed that Yahweh had given glory to the Babylonians or as Averbeck (2003:825) puts it Yahweh abandoned the temple. However, from the perspective that the treasury and throne of the king indicated his glory and honour; therefore, stripping the king of the treasures and throne meant stripping him of his glory. In a similar manner taking away the temple



articles which symbolized Yahweh's glory and honour can be argued as implying stripping Yahweh of his glory and honour. The dedication of the temple vessels from the Jerusalem temple in the Temple of Belus here suggest that the god of the Temple of Jerusalem was made a subject of the god of the Temple of Belus just like the king was made a vassal. From this perspective the removal of golden articles from the temple can be understood as indicating the dethroning of the god of the temple.

### **2.4.3 In the Tabernacle**

Gold was also used extensively in making the tabernacle. The tabernacle was divided into three partitions, that is, the holy of holies, the holy place and the outer courtyard. It is interesting that all the elements that were to be in the most holy place were to be made of gold and the poles of acacia overlaid with gold (Ex. 25:9 -25). The Ark of the Covenant was to be made of acacia wood and overlaid with gold inside and outside (Ex.25:10 -11). The poles for carrying it were to be made of acacia overlaid with gold as well (Ex. 25:12 -15). On top of the Ark of the Covenant was to be two Cherubim and a mercy seat, all made of gold (Ex. 25: 17-19). I must mention here that the image of the Cherubim will be discussed in detail later in this chapter. Additionally, there was to be a table made of acacia wood overlaid with gold. On it where to be placed the plates, bowls and pitchers made of gold for drink and food offering to Yahweh. The holy place unlike the most holy place was to be equipped with bronze articles. The pots, shelves, basins, forks and firepans were to be made of bronze. The altar, though made from acacia wood was to have a network of bronze for grating (Ex. 27:1-10). The reason for making this sanctuary or tabernacle was for Yahweh to dwell among the people (Ex. 25:8). According to Fretheim (1991:261)

the intricate craftsmanship mirrors God's own work. The precious metals with which they work take up the very products of God's beautiful creation and give new shape to that beauty within the creation. Just as God created such a world in which God himself would dwell (not explicit in Genesis but see Ps. 104:1-4; Isa 40:22), so now these craftsmen re-create a world in the midst of chaos wherein God may dwell once again in a world suitable for divine presence.

From this perspective the tabernacle can be interpreted as the dwelling place of Yahweh among the people. In a similar line of thought Hayes (2001:482) argued that

“the symmetry and wholeness of the tabernacle were reflective of the unity and perfection of God and of the divine relationship to creation.” He comes to this conclusion by noting the link between the P texts about the construction of the tabernacle and the Sabbath and the use of the six formulas of the divine address to Moses dividing the materials into six units as parallel to the six days in which God created all things in the P account of creation in Genesis 1:1-2:3. From this perspective the tabernacle is understood as a reflection of the creation story and creation as bringing glory to Yahweh. As observed by Schifferdecker (2008:65) in P, “it is Israel’s sanctuary, specifically, that the creator God has chosen to dwell (Ex. 25:8-9; 29:45-46; 40:34) and where, therefore, he can permanently be encountered (see especially Ex. 25:22 and 29:43), as in the creation before the flood.” As a result, Israel’s cult guaranteed permanence of the divine presence among the people. The association of the tabernacle with the creation by P seems to suggest that the tabernacle was to serve as a reminder of who Yahweh was to the people, that is, their creator. At the same time, the use of gold in making the tabernacle can be understood to be reminder of what gold was to be used for, that is, to bring honour to Yahweh as creator. It can, thus, be argued that gold was to be used to bring glory and honour to Yahweh as the creator. The choice of gold as the dominant metal to be used in creating the most holy place in the tabernacle can be argued to have stemmed from its association with royalty especially that it is depicted as the place where the mercy seat was to be put and that from their Yahweh was going to be talking to Moses.

Gold and bronze seem to have some connection with the level of holiness as gold was used in the holy of holies while bronze was used in the holy place. It would be possible for one to speculate that metals were used to depict the level of holiness. Haran (1978:158-165) argues that materials in the tabernacle were graded on the premise that the more important the object, the more expensive and magnificent it has to be. This is from the use of gold in the holy of holies and bronze in the holy place. Haran (1978:163) further observed that, “the text sometimes refers to *trh zhb* ‘pure gold’ and sometimes just *zhb*, ‘gold’ without the qualification, but the former phrase is strictly applied only to the inner furniture (see Ex. 25:11, 17, 24, 31, 36, 38-9, 30:3 & chap 37).” However, recently Hundley (2013:754) in his article has critiqued this view noting

especially the use of the term “holy” and “most holy” as descriptors. He has argued that the term “mostholy” is also used to refer to other articles in the tabernacle like the table in the holy place (Ex. 29:37; 30:28-29; 40:10). In a similar line of thought, more recently Amzallag (2019: 300) has argued that:

the idea of a gradation in holiness, however, is itself challenged by the appellation of the copper altar in the courtyard as ‘most holy’ (קֹדֶשׁ קְדוּשִׁים, Exod 29:37; 30:28–29; 40:10), the same term used for the inner sanctuary and its implements (Ex. 26:33–34). Such a designation for the copper altar discredits the idea of a gradation of holiness between the courtyard and the sanctuary as well as the subsequent premise of its parallel with the gradation of metal costliness.

Hundley (2013:750) has rightly noted that “the only difference is that the designator for the inner sanctuary has the definite article attached” but has not explained its function. He has further, noted that

the altar is referred to as ‘most holy’ in more places than the inner sanctuary (Ex. 29:37; 30:28-29; and 40:10 vs. 26:33-34). In 40:10, the bronze altar is even referred to as most holy in (deliberate) contrast to the tabernacle (מִשְׁכָּן) and all that is in it, including the inner sanctuary, which is simply labelled ‘holy’ in the preceding verse (40:9).

It must be noted that in Exodus 29:37, 30:28 — 29, 40:10 the term “most holy” is used relatively and not as a “noun” like in Exodus 26:33 -34. In the former verses the term most holy is relative to the act of consecration that made the altar to be most holy. In this case the holiness is the state of being while in the later verses the term “holy of holies” is the name of the place. Hundley (2013:750) has observed the use of the definite article *ha* but ignores its function in his interpretation. Holladay (1988:75) notes that the definite article is used with known nouns and proper nouns. In this regard, the definite article indicates that the holy of holies was a definite place and not the state of being. From this perspective I am of the view that the terms are not used in the same way as expressed by Hundley and Amzallag. It can, therefore, be argued that the use the terms “the holy of holies” and “the holy place” are literary related to the material used to make them, that is gold (Ex. 25) and bronze (Ex. 27:2-7). This indicates that though the stratification of materials according to the state of

being holy is debatable, the stratification of the materials according to the name and importance of the material was implied. The holy of holies is depicted as most important place as this is where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. The Ark of the Covenant is associated with the presence of Yahweh in the Old Testament. Houston (2007:85) argues that the presence of God in the holy of holies “is believed to generate an intense holiness which is like a physical influence, radiating outwards in declining degree. This is marked by the materials used and by the persons allowed to enter.” Only the high priest would enter the holy of holies once a year (Lev 16:2, 29) and only the high priest and priests would enter the holy place. As will be noted later, in the Priestly text the presence of Yahweh was always upon the Ark of the Covenant from the middle of the Cherubim he would speak to his servants while in the non-P texts Yahweh would descend upon the Ark of the Covenant to speak to his servants and in the D Yahweh is depicted as residing in heaven.

The tabernacle being the place where the ark was to be kept suggests that this is the place where Yahweh was to “reside”. According to Meyers (2005:222) “the idea of the tabernacle as dwelling may be more metaphorical than literal. It does not necessarily mean that God was believed to be literally or physically present in it.” On the contrary Hayes (2001:482) argues that “the tabernacle was the place where God was present among his people, where he met with them and communicated with them.”

#### **2.4.4 In the Temple**

Another cultic place where gold was used was in the temple. The temple is closely associated with the tabernacle. Scholars such as Spero (2004:60 - 77) have argued that the temple took the place of the tabernacle after Solomon constructed it. In 1 Kings 6:19-30 gold is depicted to have been used heavily in the construction of the temple. The Jerusalem temple is described as having much of the articles covered with gold. One notable article is the covenant box. It is depicted as having Cherubim made of gold. Given the understanding that gold was used as a symbol of enthronement, the use of gold in such articles implied the peoples understanding that Yahweh was enthroned and deserving articles of honour. The temple as the “home of the god” had many golden articles just like the palace as the home of the king.

From the on-going discussion it can be concluded that in the Old Testament gold was highly associated with kingship or royalty and the cult just like in the general Ancient Near East. It was used to show honour and wealth that was attached to kinship. According to Brettler (2008:508) “among attributes shared by Yahweh and the king are eternal life, wisdom, wealth and strength. These are bestowed by God, who can removethem as well...” The king was enthroned in the palace adorned with golden elements. In a similar manner Yahweh was understood as enthroned in the tabernacle and the temples. This presents the depiction or understanding of Yahweh as the king of the people who was enthroned in the temple/tabernacle adorned with splendour and honour. From this perspective the use of gold in the Israelite cult also indicated the respect which they attached to Yahweh as their ruler by using the most valuable metal in the cult. Gold was used in the Israelite cult just like in other Ancient Near Eastern cults though with some difference. While in some Ancient Near Eastern cults like in Egypt gold was understood as the element that made up the body the gods, in the Israelite cult gold was understood to have originated from Yahweh through creation. Given the depiction of the earth as the dwelling place of Yahweh gold adorned it to beautify it and bring honour and glory to him as creator.

Harrington (2001:47) notes that the holiness in Jerusalem was graded from the innermost part of the temple going out to the land outside the city walls. Following the Mishnah, Harrington has tabulated the degree of holiness as follows

<u>Area</u>	<u>Restrictions/qualification for entry</u>
Holy of Holies	Only the high priest on the Day of Atonement
Sanctuary	Only officiating purified priests
Area between Porch and altar	Only unblemished, properly groomed priests
Court of Israel	Only purified, Jewish men
Court of Women	No partially purified persons
Rampart	No Gentiles or corpse-contaminated persons
Temple Mount	No menstruant, parturient, or person with a flux
Jerusalem	Lesser holy offerings and second tithe are eaten within

Walled Cities

No leapers or corpses

Land of Israel

Produces holy agricultural gifts

From this perspective, it is possible to argue for the stratification of holiness in the temple according to the material used. However, this gradation seems to indicate that the entire land of Israel was understood as holy but restrictions as to who should be closer to Yahweh applied.

#### **2.4.5 Paying Tribute and Sealing Covenants**

In the Old Testament just like in the Ancient Near East, gold can be understood to have been used to pay gifts that sealed covenantal relationships between two parties. When the queen of Sheba visited Solomon, among the gifts that she gave him was gold (1 Ki. 10: 1-10). The meeting and giving of gifts sealed the diplomatic relationship between the two kingdoms. Around 738 BCE, during the reign of Menahem, king of Israel, Pul (Tiglath-pileser III) invaded Israel, however, Menahem gave him a huge gift of silver for him to confirm him as King (2 Ki. 15:19). From this perspective, Menahem used the precious metal to enter a diplomatic relationship with Pul who was about to overthrow him. As observed by Easton (1996:99)

Ahaz, the king of Judah, when engaged in a war against Israel and Syria, appealed for help to this Assyrian king by means of a present of gold and silver (2 Kings 16:8); who accordingly 'marched against Damascus, defeated and put Rezin to death, and besieged the city itself'.

In this case gold and silver were used as gifts to tie or enter a diplomatic relationship between Ahaz king of Juda and Tiglath-pileser III king of Assyria. Ahaz as the weaker king called for military aid from a strong king who helped fight his enemies. From this perspective gold in the hands of a weak nation could be used as security. With it the

weak king would enter an alliance with the stronger king to ensure the protection of the nation. From another angle, it can be understood as a means of securing peace with other nations. This is from the understanding that when the weaker kingdom sealed its diplomatic relationship with the stronger king, the chances of the weaker king being invaded were lessened; as a result, they would live in peace for as long as the relationship was standing. However, such a relationship was at risk if the tribute became a huge burden for the weaker king. The weaker king would then be more of a slave to the stronger king.

## **2.5 Golden Images in the Old Testament**

While there are several golden articles which were present in the temple and the tabernacle. I will focus on those that are expressed as directly related to the presence of Yahweh or are associated with Yahweh, that is, the golden bull and the Cherubim. I will focus on the general portrayal of the two images as either accepted or rejected in the cult.

### **2.5.2 Images in Prophets**

In the book of Ezekiel, we find the image of Cherubim. They are described as golden images and are associated with the presence of God. Steinmann (2003:113) has noted that

they not only formed his (Yahweh) throne above the ark but also adorned the tabernacle and temple where he dwelt among the Israelites. This is also true of the presence of God outside of the Pentateuch. They are described in detail in Ezekiel's vision of God (Ezk. 1) and are mentioned in the vision of the Jerusalem temple (Ezk.9-11). When God travelled, the Cherubim formed his chariot (Ps. 18:10).

It must be noted that the Prophet Ezekiel was a prophet at the time of exile and at this time the Jews were struggling with their identity as they identified themselves with the temple which was destroyed. Therefore, it only makes sense that the presence of Yahweh is associated with moving Cherubim with wheels and not static Cherubim on the lid of the Ark of the Covenant. This is from the understanding that at this time the temple which was associated with the presence of Yahweh on the Cherubim was destroyed. As argued by Odell (2017:17) the notion of

divine mobility would have been a critical theological principle allowing the exiles to



continue to worship the God of Israel. Divine mobility would also have been important for the legitimation of Ezekiel as a prophet, since his exilic location would presumably have cast doubt on his credibility.

According to Odell (2017:15) in this vision,

the prophet is allowed to peer directly into the heavenly throne room. Moreover, Ezekiel's designation of the experience as *marot elohim* suggests that this is a direct encounter with Yahweh, an event markedly set apart from the visionary experiences of the other prophets. In the biblical tradition, only Moses was also able to make that claim.

From this perspective, the Cherubim can be understood as the throne of Yahweh and associated with the presence of Yahweh as enthroned. This is in the sense that the vision presents Yahweh as king of the universe.

It must be noted that the Cherubim described by Ezekiel had the legs of a bull (Ezk. 1:7), four heads, that is, the head of a lion, a human being, an eagle and a bull (Ezk. 1:10). Of interest here is the association of the cherubim with the bull. Knowing that the bull was depicted as an idolatrous image, it seems not to be ideal to associate it with Yahweh. However, Ezekiel associated it with Yahweh though the Cherubim were the main images. Odell (2017:18) argues that Ezekiel creatively adopted the images of the lion, eagle and bull from the Ancient Near East and developed their theological view by way of including the image of the human being. From this perspective it can be argued that the image of the bull, lion, and eagle were of foreign origin or associated with other deities.

According to Sweeney (1998:91) Ezekiel

is fundamentally concerned with 'the glory of YHWH' (*kebod\* yhwh*), a technical term that describes the presence of YHWH among the people (Exod. 16:7, 10–12), in the tabernacle (Exod. 40:34–38), and in the temple (1 Kings 8:10–11; 2 Chron. 7:1–3; cf. 1 Sam. 4:21–22). The expression appears in the book of Ezekiel, where it describes the prophet's vision of YHWH mounted upon the throne chariot that transports the deity through the heavens when YHWH departs from the temple in Ezekiel 1-11 and returns to the new temple in Ezekiel 40-48 (Ezek. 1:28; 3:23; 8:4;



10:3–4, 19; 11:22–23; 43:1–5).

From this perspective it is argued that Ezekiel's vision is based on the ark in the temple at Jerusalem. It can, therefore, be noted that the Cherubim described by Ezekiel are connected to the Cherubim in the Jerusalem temple and the tabernacle. As Sweeney (1998:91) puts it

the four living creatures that bear the ark in Ezekiel's vision correspond to the two Cherubim who are mounted above the mercy seat of the ark (Exod. 25:18–22) and the two built by Solomon within the Holy of Holies (1 Kings 6:23–28; 2 Chron. 3:10–14).

The prophet Hosea in Hosea 8 depicts the image of the bull as totally rejected by Yahweh and one of the reasons why Israel was taken into Exile. In verse 4 two things are outstanding as the sin committed by the people, that is, making kings and princes not through Yahweh and making of idols. Verse 5 explicitly points out the idol as the calf of Samaria. As observed by Glenn (2013:192)

the connection between the rejection of the Lord's choice for king and the making of idols goes back to the beginning of the northern kingdom when Jeroboam split away from the house of David and made calves at Bethel and Dan (note this connection in 2 Chr. 13:8).

In this regard the prophet depicts the kingship of Jeroboam and the image of the golden bulls which he made as rejected by Yahweh.

### **2.6.3 Images in Writings**

Meyers (2005:228) observes that, the ark in the texts outside the Pentateuch (1 Sam. 4:4; Ps. 99:1,5), is depicted as having the Cherubim as the throne with a footstool on which an invisible God seems to be present from the understanding that the root of the word *kapporet* has its etymology from an Egyptian word that is equivalent to a place for resting one's feet. According to Brueggemann and Bellinger (2014:424) "Psalm 99 is one of the hymns of praise often categorized as an enthronement psalm because it celebrates the kingship of YHWH." Enthronement psalms celebrate the enthronement of Yahweh as king over Israel and are associated with the Jerusalem cult. In the Jerusalem cult tradition Yahweh was understood as an invisible deity enthroned on the

Cherubim. In this way the image of the Cherubim is associated with the presence of Yahweh.

Similarly, Psalm 18:10 depicts the Cherubim as the transport for Yahweh. According to Whybray (1995:50) Psalm 18 “is ostensibly a royal (individual) psalm of thanksgiving for deliverance from enemies and it is attributed in its superscription and by its position in 2 Samuel to David.” A similar version of this psalm is found in 2 Samuel 22. As a royal psalm of David, it depicts Yahweh as riding on the Cherubim to come and rescue David from his troubles. The Cherubim are expressed as the chariot on which Yahweh travels to rescue a troubled person who calls upon him. In this way the Cherubim as expressed as a means by which Yahweh’s presence was made present to David.

Psalm 106:19-23 refers to the golden calf. According to Brueggemann (2014:458) Psalm 106 can be categorised a “historical psalm. Based on the recounting of history, the psalm confesses sin and pleads for help.” The psalm recalls the mighty acts of God, but it focuses on the acts of Israel, which can be deemed as less than glorious, telling different sides of the events. One such an event is the making of the golden calf at Horeb/ Sinai. The passage describes the making of the calf as exchanging glory for a calf which eats grass. Further the people are said to have forgotten their God, thus, Yahweh wanted to destroy. Moses is said to have turned away the anger of Yahweh. In this passage the image of the golden calf is depicted as a sin which lead to the near destruction of the Israelites. Brueggemann (2014:461) argues that

the psalm operates from an analogy between Israel’s history and the current crisis of exile. Israel experienced trouble and woe as punishment for breaking the covenant, but when they cried out to YHWH, the divine compassion followed. The frame of the history of disobedience in Psalm 106 is the persistence of YHWH’s steadfast love.

From this perspective it can be argued that the Psalmist interpreted the making of the calf as a point in the history of the Israelites in which the people sinned, yet Yahweh showed compassion to them when Moses interceded for them. As noted by Ross (2016:289) the making of the golden calf is “that serious, because it denies the true nature of the God of revelation and salvation.” However, as noted by Brueggemann (2014:461) “the psalmist speaks as heir of the Pentateuch and the Deuteronomic history

and weaves their themes into the fabric of the penitence of the postexilic community.” This presents the understanding the making of the image of the golden calf was used in the postexilic period to plead to Yahweh for forgiveness just like the Israelites were forgiven after Moses pleaded with Yahweh. From this perspective, the story of making the golden was appropriated positively though the image itself is not accepted.

### **2.6.2 Images in the Pentateuch**

Exodus 25:18-22 records the Yahweh’s instruction to Moses on making the golden Cherubim and the Mercy Seat which were to be placed on the lid of the Ark of the Covenant. The text further indicates that Yahweh was going to talk with Moses from above the mercy seat and from between the two Cherubim. In this passage, the image of the Cherubim as Meyers (2005:228) argues, presents the understanding that God is

enthroned in the tabernacle and ever moving. Divine immanence and transcendence merge and are not in tension with each other in this feature of the ark. This invisible presence of God in specific spatial confines can be called ‘empty space aniconism,’ for it rejects images of the deity but provides for the highly important sense of divine immanence, usually inherent in cult images, by creating a numinous ‘empty space’.

In this way the image of the Cherubim is associated with the presence of Yahweh among the people. Considering the portability of the Ark of the Covenant, the presence of Yahweh among the people would be where the Ark was.

Critical scholars have tried to discuss which traditions uphold the view of the Cherubim as the image associated with God (Steinmann 2003: 112). In the Priestly texts *kabod*; is depicted as above the Cherubim and would become manifest in times of crisis (Nub 14:20, 16:19 and 17:7). Sommer (2009:81) has observed that in the Priestly texts the tabernacle in which the arch of the covenant was to be kept was dedicated for eight days as described in Exodus 40 and Leviticus 9 “during which the tabernacle was completed, the divine presence entered it, its altar was purified, and its priesthood was installed.” The indication that the divine presence entered the tabernacle seems to suggest some form of “mouth opening” ritual was done for Yahweh to enter in the tabernacle as his dwelling place. It must be noted that Exodus 40 does not mention the

Cherubim as present in the tabernacle; it only mentions the mercy seat. However, in Exodus 25-31 and 35-39 the Cherubim are depicted as being on top of the mercy seat and Yahweh would speak to Moses from the Cherubim. It can be argued as noted by Schifferdecker (2008:65) that from P's perspective the tabernacle was the home for Yahweh in which he resided on the Cherubim on the top of the Ark of the Covenant. One may argue that the Cherubim was deliberately not mentioned in Exodus 40 as it would seem to suggest that the Cherubim was the form of Yahweh, and the consecration was the mouth opening ritual for the Cherubim to begin speaking and acting. P further indicates that the law was given from the tabernacle (Lv. 1:1). As such Yahweh spoke to Moses from the Tabernacle and from there he would be worshiped as the enthroned God on the Cherubim.

A similar view is expressed in the Zion tradition where Yahweh is understood as an eminent God who sits on the Cherubim. According to Sommer (2009:85 cf. Averbeck 2003:823) Zionistic texts refer to Yahweh using the phrase "the one who sits enthroned on the Cherubim". This phrase appears especially in texts that emphasize God's presence in the temple on Mount Zion (e.g., Psalms 27:2-6, 46:8, 48:9; Isaiah 8:18, 18:7). The temple is central to the Zionistic text as the centre of the cultic. It can be argued that Zionistic texts have the agenda of centralization of the cult to the Jerusalem temple. The temple is depicted as the home of Yahweh who sits on the Cherubim. The Ark of the Covenant on which the Cherubim were, was no longer kept in the tabernacle after the construction of the temple in Jerusalem, it was placed in the holy of holies in the temple. It must be noted that the Jerusalem temple was endowed with golden articles just like the tabernacle and is depicted as unmovable replica of the tabernacle. In this regard the presence of Yahweh in the temple was associated with the Cherubim as they served the same purpose which they had in the tabernacle of P tradition. As the dwelling place of Yahweh, the temple was to display honour which the god deserved. As argued by Sommer (2009:85) in the Zionist tradition the presences of Yahweh on the Cherubim in the temple is further understood as depicting the presence of Yahweh in the whole Jerusalem. Therefore, Jerusalem is by extension depicted as the home of Yahweh and place of worship. It must be noted that it has been argued that the Priestly tradition is a branch of Zionism, and this accounts for similarities between the two, and

their main agenda was the centralisation of the cult, and the Cherubim was associated with the presence of Yahweh (Sommer 2009:98).

As argued by Sommer (2009:98) the difference between the understanding in the Zion tradition and the P tradition is that the tabernacle was portable while the temple was fixed. This presents the view that in the P tradition the presence of Yahweh was not attached to one place even though it presents the centralization of the cult to the tabernacle. For P the presence of God would be shifted and was not attached to one city. For the Zionists the throne of Yahweh was restricted to Jerusalem. It can be argued that the two traditions were against the decentralization of the cult. This is from the understanding that they depict the tabernacle and the temples as the sole place where Yahweh would be worshiped from.

Sommer (2009:82) holds that, the E tradition is expressed as presenting a different presentation of the tabernacle. For E the tabernacle was not the home of Yahweh but a place which Yahweh would visit. Yahweh is expressed as a cloud of fire that would descend upon the tabernacle to speak to Moses. It can, therefore, be argued that for E Yahweh would not reside in the tabernacle. It must be noted that the tabernacle in E is referred to as the “tent of meeting” and this suggests that in E the tabernacle was the place of meeting Yahweh unlike in P where it was the dwelling place of Yahweh. Therefore, the Cherubim were not a permanent throne but one on which Yahweh would only use occasionally. It presents the view that Yahweh was not always present on the image. The tent of meeting as is referred to is depicted as located outside the camp unlike in the P tradition where it is depicted as located in the middle of the camp (Num. 11:17, 25-26). This suggests that the presence of Yahweh is depicted not as been among the people or in the middle of the people but away from them. As observed by Sommer (2009:82) “the occasional presence in E’s tent is especially clear in Numbers 12: 4 -10, which narrate the arrival and departure of the cloud.” In contrast P emphasize the presentation that the cloud was always present at the tent moving out only to indicate that they should move to another place (Ex. 40: 36 — 38, Num. 19:15 - 23).

The D source presents a very different view from the P and E source. In the D the tent of meeting is not mentioned. The tent is not known or was completely removed from the

view of the Deuteronomists. According to Steinmann (2003:112) “Deuteronomy had no need to mention the ark. Most of its references to the ark are to the ark as a whole (including its lid) as it was carried by the Levites (Deut. 10:8; 31:9,25).” However, as noted by Sommer (2009:99)

D’s lack of reference to the tent is not surprising, because neither E’s tent nor P’s was possible in D’s worldview. Both conceptions of the tent involved divine immanence — fleeting immanence in E’s tent and on-going immanence in P’s. But for D, God never came down to earth at all, and consequently no sacred tent of any sort was necessary.

It can be argued that for D Heaven was the dwelling place for God. Therefore, for D the Ark of the Covenant was only a box in which the tablets of the law were kept (1 Ki. 8:9) and the temple was just place for learning. From this perspective it can be argued that for D images as the throne of God or the form of God as some scholars argue like Römer (2015:141) were to be completely done away with. However, Niehr (1997:75) argues that in the Old Testament

from the time of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah (ca 950-586 BCE) onward, there are no traces of the idea of YHWH living in heaven. What we have, however, are traces of YHWH’s solarisation, his conjunction with a host heaven, his commanding of meteorological phenomena and his riding in heaven.

What Niehr suggests is the understanding that Yahweh was associated with meteorological phenomena but was not understood as residing in heaven at that time. I am of the view that the presentation of Yahweh as residing in heaven was emphasised after the destruction of temple when the Jews would not identify themselves with the temple or Jerusalem but still identified themselves with Yahweh as the God in heaven and commander of the universe. The Deuteronomists can be said to have been driving the agenda of not having images in any form. As such one can argue from D’s perspective that images were not allowed either as a throne for the deity or as a form of the deity. In this regard the view of D was completely different from the other Ancient Near Eastern views including the view of P and E. One striking feature of D is the emphasis on the centralization of the cult to the temple in Jerusalem in tension to its

presentation of the heaven as the dwelling place of Yahweh. In D's perspective Jerusalem was not unique on account of Yahweh dwelling there but on account of Yahweh choosing it (see Sommer 2009:101). From this perspective Jerusalem can be understood as the chosen place of worshipping Yahweh, thereby, making it the centre of the cult. It can be further argued that D was against cultic centres in any other place except for the Jerusalem Temple. Therefore, D's agenda was two-fold, that is, the complete stoppage of the use of images in the cult and the centralization of the cult to the Jerusalem temple as the place chosen by Yahweh. This indicates that the cult in the light of D tradition is arguably depicted as aniconic or as deriving the agenda of having an aniconic cult centralised in Jerusalem.

At the centre of the various views and presentation of the purpose of the image of the Cherubim in the temple and the tabernacle in my view was the presentation of the relationship between Yahweh and the people. The Cherubim if understood as the pedestal of Yahweh in the temple or tabernacle indicated the view that Yahweh was an imminent God who resided with the people. The relationship between God and the people is depicted as one where God resides with the people in P and moves with them as their king. As the King, Yahweh is depicted as having the Cherubim as his throne in the tabernacle or temple as his dwelling place. In D where Yahweh is depicted as residing in heaven, God was transcendent, above all creation and creatures. It can be argued that from D's perspective the people were to relate with God as one who is above all creation and no creature can carry him. For E, Yahweh is depicted as immanent and transcendent. Yahweh would come down and be enthroned among the people on the Cherubim and return to heaven. Therefore, for E, people were to relate with Yahweh as transcendent and immanent. The understanding of the Cherubim as the throne or pedestal of the God further indicate that Yahweh was understood as God who is above the image and the material used to fashion the image. While the use of gold in making the Cherubim indicated glory and honour rendered to Yahweh, Yahweh was above the material. From this perspective, the people were not to relate with the material used to fashion the Cherubim or the Cherubim itself as Yahweh at least from the "divine empty space" perspective. However, the image was expected to be respected as the throne of the deity.



Though the Cherubim seem to have gained acceptance in the Israelite cult unlike the bull, they can also be argued to have a foreign origin. When building his house and the temple, Solomon had engaged Phoenician craftsmen. In these structures the Cherubim were widely engraved on the walls. It can be argued that the Cherubim were not originally a feature of the Israelite cult or royalty until the time of the construction of the Solomon temple. According to Harrison (1979:642)

the extent to which the Solomonic Temple was indebted to Phoenician religious theory and practice has been made evident by archaeological discoveries.

Excavations have revealed that in Canaanite temples a winged sphinx was a popular iconic element, and Hebrew Cherubim as fashioned by Phoenician craftsmen may have been intended to present such creatures rather than the Cherubim of the tabernacle period.

Some carvings of Cherubim were also discovered supporting the throne of King Hiram of Gebal dated around 1200 B.C. This indicates that the use of such image was not a late development in the Ancient Near East. Other scholars have suggested that the Cherubim were originally from the Egyptian cult (see Smith 2002:85). This is on grounds that the winged creatures were a common representation of Egyptian deities. There were some differences between the Cherubim in Mesopotamia and those from Egypt.

Though they had minor differences especially on the wings, Cherubim were present in the Egyptian and Mesopotamian cults and served the same purpose which was the image of the deities (Smith 2002:85). Given the understanding that the Ancient Near Eastern religions were polytheistic, they conceived the world as governed by different deities at the same time. From this perspective, as observed Ornan (2001:15) different deities would be believed to rule the same place at the same time and would be associated with the same attributes and objects. From this perspective one image would be associated with different deities. Therefore, it is possible that the Cherubim were associated with a number of deities in Ancient Near East Yahweh inclusive. In this regard the image of the Cherubim was possibly acceptable in a number of cults not necessarily because it was adopted but because it was associated with many deities. Though it is difficult to determine whether the use of the Cherubim in the Jerusalem



Temple was adopted from other nations, it is evident that it was not unique to Israel but seems to be acceptable in the Israelite cult and royalty. From this perspective the use of gold in making Cherubim for the cult and royalty is presented as the acceptable practice in Israel as depicted by the final form of the Old Testament.

It has been argued that the bull served a similar purpose for the Northern kingdom cult. According to Römer (2015:8) “the worship of Yahweh in Israel, as described in the Bible, took the form of veneration of bovine statues.” As earlier, observed by Smith (2002:87) “Biblical passages, all from the North, attest to the association of Yahweh and the bull-calf image.” Smith (2002:87) further argues that

the image of the bull rather than the Cherubim might have been chosen to adorn the temple walls and serve as Yahweh’s throne or pedestal. Symbolizing strength, virility, and aggression, the bull was associated with storm and warrior-gods, Mesopotamian Adad, Hittite and Hittite Teshub, West Semitic Baal/Haddu, and Israelite Yahweh.

Just like the Cherubim, the bull or calf figure was associated with several deities. Watanabe (2002: 89-106) has identified several ways in which the bull image was used in the cultic contexts: the bull could be used to express attributes of strength associated with deities of war, to express characteristics of storm deities or deities that overcome storms, and to express different forms of fertility, which would be agricultural or sexual. It must be noted that in the Old Testament Yahweh is depicted as the God of war (Ex. 15:3, Isa 42:13), the storm (Jr. 31:35), and fertility (Ps. 113:9). Therefore, the bull image combining all these attributes of Yahweh fits well as the image associated with him.

In other Ancient Near East cults, the bull was also associated with the deities. The Akkadian word for the bellowing of the bull and the noise of thunder are the same, with this understanding the god associated with the storm was linked to the bull (Watanabe 2002: 92, 97-98). In addition, the god Iškur of the Sumerians who was usually associated with the image of the Lion, according to Leick (1998: 95) is described in one text as “the great ox who is radiant, the lord who mounts the storm, who mounts a great lion, producing grain.” The depiction of the bull or ox as producing grain indicates

agricultural fertility and the understanding of the deity as the provider of grain.

Therefore, the bull image could be associated with attributes of deities such as power, authority and strength, and fertility. From this regard the bull could be used to depict the god or deity of power, authority and or fertility. For the people of Yahweh, Yahweh as their King was the God of authority, power and provider.

The bull gained prominence in the Israelite cult in animal sacrifices. As observed by Smolar (2006:508) “bulls were considered the pride of the head of Israelite sacrificial system.” This is evident from the presentation that they were sacrificed at “major” festivals like the Passover (Num. 28:8-9), the fest of weeks (Num. 28:26-31), and fest of booths (Num. 29:1-38) besides the Day of Atonement and others. According to Smolar (2006:508), “without becoming necessarily syncretistic or idolatrous, the Israelites used bulls as poetic symbols of power.” From this perspective he has argued that “the abundance of cattle attributed to Abraham was intended to reflect his wealth and power (Gen. 49:24).” Given the depiction of the bull as a symbol of wealth and power, the golden bull can be understood as combining the value of gold and the bull as symbol of wealth to depict the great honour and value attached to Yahweh as the deity associated with the golden bull.

In the Jerusalem cult two bulls served as a pedestal for the bronze bow in 1 Kings 7:25 and 2 Kings 16:17. As indicated earlier, one of the heads of the Cherubim which Ezekiel saw was of a bull (Ez. 1:10). This indicates that the image of a bull was not totally strange in the religious cycles of the Jews. It is interesting that some scholars like Smolar (2006:508) have argued that “the danger of syncretism was present, because the religion of Israel’s Canaanite neighbours included bull cults dedicated to the chief god of the Canaanite pantheon, El, and his son Ba’al representing virility, fertility, the weather, and war. The Prophets chose to denounce the use of the bull icons in the Northern Kingdom as marks of apostasy (Amos 4:4, 5:5, 7:9; Hos. 2:18, 8:4).” If the danger was their neighbours’ inclusion of the image of the bull in their cults, one wonders why there was no danger in the Sphinx or Cherub which was equally used in the cults of Israel’s neighbours? One may also wonder why the twelve bulls (1 Ki. 7:44) and the head of the bull on the Cherub were not condemned, yet the bull was condemned in the Northern Cult. Was the image of the bull only a mark of apostasy in

the Northern kingdom? These questions seem to point to the view that there was something beyond just the images between the two cults. It may be argued that the Southern cult was deliberately condemning the Northern cult to centralize the cult. It may also be argued that in the Northern cult the images were understood in a manner that was not accepted in the Israelite cult. In other words, the Northern cult misrepresented their relationship with Yahweh in the way they used the images.

According to Jacob (1992:939)

biblical criticism assumed that bull worship represented an old Israelite Semitic religious tradition which was particularly endemic to the northern kingdom. As historical evidence we possess only the ordinance of Jeroboam and later the effects of Hosea (8:5f.; 10:5-13:2) against worship of calves.

Recently Römer (2015:141) has observed that there is evidence of “images of gods enthroned on bulls or other animals, but there is no clear evidence of an animal serving as pedestal of an invisible god.” Römer (2015: 141 — 160 cf Niehr 1997) has argued that there are several indicators that both the Northern cult and the Southern cult had images of Yahweh. One critical question that he raises is why prohibit what was not in existence. It can be argued that the law in the Decalogue prohibiting the making and worshiping of the image of Yahweh was a later development possibly at the time Josiah’s reforms to consolidate the destruction of the images in high places especially in the Northern kingdom and later redacted during the Babylonian exile. Others like Dick (1999:2) argue that

careful study of the evolution of the prohibitions against the cult images suggests that they were largely the product of the 6<sup>th</sup> century redaction. The theological stresses of 586 B.C.E assured both the triumph of Yahwistic monotheism and of aniconic worship: Yahweh’s cult had probably always been iconic, but now there were no gods but Yahweh so there was utterly no room for any cult image!

I am of the view that the law against idols or images was a gradual development especially directed at the images in the Northern kingdom. It is possible therefore, that the Cherubim were the images of Yahweh in the South and the bull/calf the image of Yahweh in the North. As observed by Römer (2015:146) “Biblical texts frequently

criticise the image of Yahweh as a bull that were to be found in the Kingdom of Israel, but in contrast, no biblical text speaks of the existence of a statue of Yahweh in the temple of Jerusalem or anywhere else in the kingdom of Judah.” This is despite the depiction of the Cherubim as serving the same purpose as the calf. Other passages like Amos 9:1 “I saw the Lord placed above/on the altar” depicted the presentation of Yahweh as a statue or image. From this perspective, it is highly probable that Yahweh was depicted in the form of an image just like other Ancient Near Eastern deities and was probably depicted using several images of which the image of the bull and the image of the Cherubim are among them. As noted by Avigdor et al (2012:105) “there is no significant difference between the calves that stood in the temples in the Northern Kingdom and the Cherubs, those winged creatures that served as God’s chariot, that stood in the Temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 6:23–28).”

One other image or idol that was in the temple was the Asherah which is argued to have been the image of the wife of Yahweh. Van Der Toorn (2002:56) argues that

according to the Deuteronomist, the Temple in Jerusalem contained cultic ‘vessels’ (*kelim*) for Baal, for Asherah, and for all the host of heaven, (2 Kings 23:4). Even if the term ‘vessels’ is not a euphemism for images – which it may very well be – the expression implies a cult for the deities mentioned.

However, 2 Kings 23:6 explicitly mentions the image of Asherah as brought out of the house of God for it to be destroyed. This seems to indicate that several images of gods were present in the high places that were destroyed at this time and were possibly acceptable before. It can be argued from this perspective that the Israelites had several images. However, it can also be argued as Van der Toorn (2002:56 — 57) puts it that they were present in temples as lower ranking companion gods in the presence of the main god. From this perspective it can be argued the main god was the image of the bull in the North and the Cherubim in the South. The main contention of the difference between the Cherubim and bull/calf image lies in the words attributed to Jeroboam and Aaron “hear are your gods”, which will be discussed in the next chapter as we explore Exodus 32 in details.

## 2.6 Summary

In the Ancient Near East gold was an expensive metal and because of its prestigious value it was used by the nobles and royalty as a symbol of honour, power and authority. This can be seen from its use in making thrones and signets for the kings and nobles which were symbols of honour, power and authority. Additionally, it was used to seal diplomatic treaties and marriages between kingdoms. Gold would be given to the woman who is getting married and to her family. It served as a symbol of love and affection to the woman as well as security in case of divorce. It can also be understood as way of giving honour and power to a woman in a patriarchal society.

In the Ancient Near Eastern cults, gold was highly associated with deities. Its luminescence was associated to the glory of the deities as such it was understood as the symbol of the glory of the deities in the cult. It was, therefore, used to make cultic articles especially images and thrones of deities. At the same time, it indicated the high status which the people attached to the cult especially the temples which were understood as homes of the deities. Just like palaces as the dwelling places of the kings were adorned with golden elements as symbols of honour, the cultic homes of the deities were also adorned with golden elements as symbols of honour for the deities. In some cults like the Ancient Egyptian cult gold was understood as the element that made up the skin and flesh of gods, as such it was the ideal metal for making images of gods and cultic elements. It was also associated with holiness. As metal that was understood as coming from the gods, gold was believed to be intrinsically holy and from this perspective an ideal metal to associate with gods as they were believed to be holy.

Ancient Near Eastern deities were associated with various images such as animals, birds and celestial bodies. The relationship between the images and the deities can be understood in three ways, namely: as divine forms of the deity; as symbols of the deity; and as thrones of the deity. As a divine form of the deity, the image was believed to be the physical form of the deity. Though the image was made by humans, through the mouth opening ritual the deity entered the image and become the visible presence of the image. As a symbol, the image was not the divine form of the deity, it was used to show attributes of the deity. Some images were also understood as thrones on which

deities sat or which they rode. It must be noted that images signified the presence of the deity in the cult. However, the deity would also leave the image and would be an ordinary statue.

In the Old Testament gold was understood as coming from Yahweh through creation and was a symbol of honour to Yahweh as creator, just like creation in general. It is also depicted as a special gift that Yahweh gave to the Israelites as they left Egypt to symbolise their new status of honour and authority and to his love for them as a nation that he was going to enter a covenant with. It was used in making cultic elements for the tabernacle and the temple. Just like in other Ancient Near Eastern cults it was associated with the honour and glory to God who was believed to dwell in the temple/tabernacle. In the temple and the tabernacle, holiness was arguably stratified with gold associated with the most holy place and bronze with the holy place.

In the Northern cult, Yahweh was associated with the image of the bull/calf while in the Southern cult he was associated with the image of the Cherubim. Some scholars like Römer (2015) argue that the two images served as the divine form of Yahweh while others argue that they were pedestals or thrones for the invisible Yahweh. Though the two images were also used by other Ancient Near Eastern cults, the image in the Old Testament as we have it in the final form was rejected as apostasy. However, it can be argued that it was an accepted image of Yahweh that was associated with Yahweh.

## Chapter 3: THE GOLDEN CALF IN EXODUS 32

### 3.1. Introduction

The narrative of the golden calf is a story that takes us back to Genesis 3 (Fretheim 1991:279). This is because the life of the people becomes tangled in a mess; harmony to disorder; preparedness to confusion, thereby causing the future of the people's relationship with Yahweh to be uncertain. This indicates that the passage is of great importance in the life and history of the Israelites. To understand the passage better it is important to place it in its historical context especially in relation to the story of Jeroboam who made two golden bulls and placed them in Dan and Bethel respectively (1Ki. 12). However, it is also important to understand the passage in its final form as a literary unit that is part of the wider book of Exodus.

In this chapter, I will explore the narrative of the golden calf firstly by providing my translation of the passage from Hebrew to English. Then I will analyse the text. Further, the narrative of the golden calf in Exodus 32 in its literary sense will be explored. Attention will be paid to the position of the passage in the larger context of the book of Exodus to highlight the themes that cut across the book as a literary unity. This is because it helps the reader to understand the golden calf in relation to the entire book of Exodus. Additionally, the structure of the passage will be analysed to bring out the central theme in the passage. Then, the depiction of the main characters in the passage, that is, Yahweh, Aaron, Moses and the people will be examined to understand their roles in the passage. This will be followed by discussing the issues surrounding the authorship and dating. I will highlight the different sources that have been put together to form the passage as we have it. Emphasis will be placed on the history behind the text as this will help the reader to understand the historical events that influenced the writing of the passage. I note that the passage is related to Jeroboam's making of the golden bulls. The relationship of the two passages is important as it gives more details about the history that shaped the passage. From this perspective, the relationship between the two narratives with emphasis on the historical setting of the passages and the flow of inner-biblical similarities will be explored.

### 3.2 Structure



In the large context of the book of Exodus, the golden calf is placed in the middle of the narrative of the instructions of the Tabernacle and its ultimate construction. Behind the tabernacle is the theme of theophany which elaborates the self-disclosure of Yahweh among the people. According to Johnstone (1990:47)

theophany must be the central theme of Exodus. Though God is everywhere and can appear anywhere, yet within Exodus, as generally within the Old Testament as a whole, theophany is not merely sporadic mystical encounter with the numinous — though it can be that — but usually has its institutional counterparts. The fundamental institutional counterpart to theophany is the sanctuary.

The tabernacle as the sanctuary of Yahweh can be understood as the place where Yahweh was to review himself. It must be noted that theophany is generally linked to mountains or high places though the term high place is linked to idolatry. Yahweh is depicted to have reviewed himself to Moses for the first time at Mount Horeb (Ex. 3). The setting of giving of the law and covenant is Mount Sinai (Ex.19). The setting of the story at Mount Sinai presents it as part of the theme of theophany. In Exodus 32 the idea of the golden bull as the image for Yahweh is depicted as the idea of man and not God. On the contrary the tabernacle is depicted as the idea of Yahweh. The literary positioning of the narrative of the golden calf indicates that it is to contrast the self-revelation of Yahweh as the acceptable way of God disclosure as opposed to been reviewed in a way of man. In other words, man's revelation of Yahweh is depicted as a threat to self-revelation of Yahweh and the covenant.

For Johnstone (1993:39) the theme of theophany is linked to the theme of covenant and law. The wider context in which the narrative of the golden calf falls weaves these three themes together in such a manner that a threat to one affected the other. Yahweh reviewed himself to the Israelites at Mount Sinai to enter a covenant with them. For the covenant to be maintained and for Yahweh to continue being present among the people — continuously disclosing himself - they are to keep the law. The positioning of the narrative of the golden calf in this context consolidates this view. The making of the golden calf is depicted as breaking the law of not making images (Ex. 20:4-5). The result of this act is depicted as Yahweh not going with them (Ex. 33:1), affecting the



theophany and Yahweh threatening to annihilate them (Ex. 32:10) affecting the covenant. As concluded by Jacob (2013:131) Ex. 25-31

describes the tabernacle and all its apparatus as ‘the divinely authorized means of securing God’s Presence among the people. The story of the golden calf immediately follows, inviting the conclusion that the golden calf is ‘a perverted, humanly devised means of doing the same thing’.

The narrative of the golden calf falls within the broader story that covers Exodus 32-34. Janzen (2000:397) has tried to outline Exodus 32-34 following a three-step pattern as follows:

- (1) Israel's disobedient assertion of autonomy: the golden calf (32:1-6).
- (2) The immediate consequence: God's covenant presence with Israel jeopardized(32:7-33:6).
- (3) Prevailing grace: God's covenant presence re-established (33:7-34:35).

Outlining the passage in this way indicates that the covenant is the central theme. This is in the sense it brings out two aspects that is the immediate consequences of breaching the covenant by making the golden calf and the ultimate prevalence of God’s grace in renewing the covenant. It must be noted that in this approach chapter 32 covers two of the three topics, that is “Israel’s assertion its autonomy” (32:1-6) and “God’s presence jeopardised” (32:7-33:6). This structure shows that Exodus 32 emphasises the relationship between Yahweh and the people and that the making of the golden calf jeopardised this relationship. It further brings out the understanding that despite the covenant being jeopardised and nearly broken, God’s grace prevailed, and the covenant was renewed. However, I have to point out that the theme Janzen (2000:397) proposes for Exodus 32:1-6 “Israel’s disobedient assertion of autonomy” can be critiqued. Scholars like Hamilton (2011:532) argue that the people were not trying to replace Yahweh. The issue was not false god or gods but false perception of the true God. From perspective it can be argued that the people were not trying to be autonomous as they were not detaching themselves from Yahweh.

Hendrix (1990:212) has proposed that the narrative of the golden calf can be understood better if read from Exodus 32:1-33:6. This is because the passage is

structured chiastically as follows:

A. 32: 1-6 People act, and Aaron (YHWH's High Priest) reacts.

B. 32:7-10 YHWH's two utterances: *wayedabb* &, *wayydmr*

C. 32: 11 - 14 Moses intercedes

D. 32:15-20 Moses goes down the mountain

E. 32:21-25 Judgment: investigative phase

F. 32:26a Opportunity for

repentance

E'. 32:26b-29 Judgment: executive phase

D'. 32:30 Moses goes up the mountain

C'. 32:31-32 Moses intercedes

B'. 32:33-33:3 YHWH's two utterances: *wayydmr*, *wayedabbh*

A'. 33:4-6 YHWH acts, and People react.

Analysing this passage following this method shows that A and A' are about action and reaction. In 32:1-6 people act by rejecting Yahweh's appointed leader and demanding gods to lead them and Aaron reacts by getting their golden earrings and making a golden calf. This is done without the consent of Yahweh. In 33:4-6 Yahweh acts by ordering the removal of ornaments and the people react by obeying. As observed by Hendrix (1990:213)

the activity involved in each section is similar: the disposition of jewellery. In the initial episode, the men provide (at Aaron's request) gold earrings belonging to their wives and daughters and sons for the purpose of making the image (32:2-3). In the closing episode, the Sons of Israel remove (at YHWH's request) their own ornaments (33:5-6).

The two parallels point to the relationship between Yahweh and people and the

relationship between the people and gold. In the begging of the narrative the people chose to relate with gold in the form of a golden calf as a means of showing the presence of Yahweh. While in the end they are taught to be obedient to Yahweh. The order to take off their ornaments can be interpreted as pointing to the understanding that Yahweh is above gold. In this way the author brings out the people's way of relating with gold and Yahweh's required way of relating with gold. While the people thought of making an idol using gold, Yahweh required them to be obedient even when they are honoured with gold. It further shows that the passage begins with disobedience and ends with obedience. In this way, the people's forsaking their relationship with Yahweh anticipates their restoration and obedience to Yahweh.

B and B' reflect Yahweh's two utterances. Hendrix (1990: 214) has observed that

YHWH's *wayedabb* statements both refer to the people 'whom you brought from the land of Egypt' (32:7, 33: 1; identical phrases are used in the MT). Both of the *wayyo'mer* statements concern the destruction/punishment which YHWH will mete out upon the people (Ex. 32: 10, 34).

The reference to the people whom Yahweh brought out of Egypt as Moses' people indicate the impending rejection by Yahweh because they have rejected him by way of making the calf and worshipping it. It must be pointed out that though the punishments are different, the opening phraseology is the same. This suggests that the author deliberately structured the passage in this manner. The interpretation of the difference in punishment can be understood in light of C and C'.

C and C' Moses Intercedes. Moses' intercessions are depicted as yielding different results. In the first intercession Yahweh hears Moses and relents his plan to annihilate the people. In the second, Yahweh does not hear Moses' plea and punishes the people. In this way the author firstly presents Yahweh as God who considers the prayers of his faithful servants (Hamilton 2011:540). This brings out the understanding that the relationship of the people and Yahweh was not a dictatorship kind of relationship where Yahweh would always impose whatever he wants. Yahweh is presented as a God who listens to the people. In the second intercession, Yahweh does not grant Moses' request; he instead punishes the people by sending them a plague. This presents the

understanding that while Yahweh can grant the request of the people, he enters a relationship with, it is not every request that he grants. In relation to the two punishments, Yahweh is depicted as having relented on the punishment of annihilating the people. However, he is depicted to have meted the punishment of a plague. This can be understood as pointing to the presentation that Yahweh would punish his people in another way as opposed to annihilating them. This is because it would be in breach of his promise that he would raise a nation from them. As noted by Hamilton (2011:540) “of his promises blessings or threatened punishment, God may *naham* (relent/rescind), but of his decrees, he does not (see Ps. 110:4...).”

About D and D', Hendrix (1990:215) has observed that Moses' movement in going down the mountain in verse 15 is balanced by his going up the mountain in verse 30. His activity of breaking the tablets in verse 19 is balanced by his desire for restoring the people in verse 30. Still further, Moses' forcing the Israelites to drink the dust-laden water in verse 20 parallels his declaring their guilt in verse 30. Balancing Moses' breaking of the stone tablets of the covenant with his desire for restoring the people indicates that the passage is structured to show that the covenant was nearly broken by the sin of the golden calf but Moses was kin to have it restored. Further it was structured to indicate that Moses as a good leader broke the stone but was quick to seek reconciliation.

Reading E and E' one can argue that Exodus 33:21-25 and 32:26b-29 record two successive phases of Moses' judgment process, that is investigating phase and execution phase. In the first phase, Moses is depicted to have questioned Aaron (v. 21) and observed the camp (v. 25) in order to assess the sin of the people. In the second phase Moses heard the will of Yahweh and executed it (Hendrix 1990:215).

In F. the centre of the golden calf story is the question “who is for Yahweh?” The question indicates that at the centre of the passage is the people's relationship with Yahweh. Propp (2008:562) has concluded that “the entire chapter is a homily on responsibility, in essence asking the reader, ‘Who are you? Which side are you on?’” this from the observation that

the word *mî* ‘who’ is a running theme in the aftermath of the Gold Calf. Aaron

quoted himself as having said, *lēmī zāhāb hitpārākū* 'Who ever has gold, strip it off ' (v. 24); now Moses responds *mī ləyahwe(h) 'ēlāy* 'Whoever is for Yahweh, to me'; later Yahweh warns Moses *mī 'āšer ḥāṭā(')-lī 'emḥennū missiprī* 'Whoever sinned against me, I will erase him from my Document'.

This indicates that the goal of the passage is to show that the sin of the golden calf had an implication on the people's relationship with Yahweh and among themselves.

### 3.3. Translation

#### BHS

#### MY TRANSLATION

- א וַיִּרְא הָעָם, כִּי-בָשַׁשׁ מֹשֶׁה לָּרְדֹת מִן-הַהָר; וַיִּקְהַל הָעָם עַל-אֹהֶלן, וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו קוּם עֲשֵׂה-לָנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יֵלְכוּ לְפָנֵינוּ--כִּי-זֶה מֹשֶׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֵעֲלָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, לֹא יָדַעְנוּ מָה-הָיָה לוֹ.
- ב וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם, אֹהֶלן, פָּרְקוּ נְזָמֵי הַזָּהָב, אֲשֶׁר בְּאָזְנֵי נְשֵׁיכֶם בְּנִיכֶם וּבְנוֹתֵיכֶם; וְהָבִיאוּ, אֵלָי.
- ג וַיִּתְּפְּרוּ, כָּל-הָעָם, אֶת-נְזָמֵי הַזָּהָב, אֲשֶׁר בְּאָזְנֵיהֶם; וַיָּבִיאוּ, אֶל-אֹהֶלן.
- ד וַיִּקַּח מֵיָדָם, וַיַּצַּר אֹתוֹ בְּחַרְט, וַיַּעֲשֵׂהוּ, עֵגֶל מְסֻכָּה; וַיֹּאמְרוּ--אֵלֵה אֱלֹהֵיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל, אֲשֶׁר הֵעֲלוּךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם.
- ה וַיִּרְא אֹהֶלן, וַיִּבֶן מִזְבֵּחַ לְפָנָיו; וַיִּקְרָא אֹהֶלן וַיֹּאמֶר, חַג לַיהוָה מָחָר.
- 1 And the people saw that Moses had delayed to return from the mountain. The people assembled before Aaron, and they said rise! Make for us gods who will go before us because this Moses the man who brought us from the land of Egypt we know not what has become of him.
- 2 And Aaron ordered them saying “deliver the golden jewels which on the ears of the women; on sons, and on daughters and give them to me.”
- 3 And all the people delivered the golden jewels which were on their ears and they gave it to Aaron.
- 4 And he took from them and formed with an engraving tool; and he made a molten calf; and they said, “these are your gods Israel who brought you from the land of Egypt.”
- 5 And Aaron made an altar before it; and Aaron called and said, “a fest to the Lord tomorrow!”

**ו** וַיִּשְׁכְּמוּ, מִמֶּחֶרֶת, וַיַּעֲלוּ עֹלֹת, וַיִּגְשׁוּ שְׁלָמִים; וַיָּשֶׁב הָעָם לֶאֱכֹל וְשָׂתוּ, וַיִּקְמוּ לְצַחֵק. {פ}

**6** And they went out early the following day and raised up burned sacrifices, and brought peace offering (alliance sacrifice) and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose to joke. {P}

**ז** וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה, אֶל-מֹשֶׁה: לֵךְ-רַד--כִּי אֶשְׁחַת עַמֶּךָ, אֲשֶׁר הֵעַלִיתָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם.

**7** And the Lord spoke to Moses “take-go down, surely I will annihilate your people whom you lead out from the land of Egypt.;

**ח** סָרוּ מִהַר, מִן-הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתָם--עָשׂוּ לָהֶם, עֵגֹל מִסֶּכֶה; וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲווּ-לוֹ, וַיִּזְבְּחוּ-לוֹ, וַיֹּאמְרוּ, אֵלֶּה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֵעֲלוּךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם.

**8** They have gone off quickly from the way which I commanded, they have made for themselves a young bull (calf), cast image and they have bowed down to it, and they have sacrificed to it, and said these are your gods Israel who led you out from the land of Egypt.”

**ט** וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה, אֶל-מֹשֶׁה: רְאִיתִי אֶת-הָעָם הַזֶּה, וְהִנֵּה עַם-קָשֶׁה-לְעֹרֶף הוּא.

**9** And the Lord said to Moses “I have seen these people here and behold a hard necked people they are.

**י** וְעַתָּה הִנֵּיחָה לִי, וַיִּסַּר-אִפִּי בָהֶם וַאֲכַלְמָם; וְאֶעֱשֶׂה אוֹתָךְ, לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל.

**10** Now therefore let Me alone, that My wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them; and I will make of thee a great nation.”

**יא** וַיִּחַל מֹשֶׁה, אֶת-פְּנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהָיו; וַיֹּאמֶר, לְמַה יְהוָה יִחַרְה אַפֶּךָ בְּעַמֶּךָ, אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, בְּכַח גָּדוֹל וּבְיָד חֲזָקָה.

**11** And Moses grew weak before the Lord his God and he said, “about what will the Lord become angry in the face of your people which you lead out from the land of Egypt with great strength and a powerful arm.”

**יב** לְמַה יֹּאמְרוּ מִצְרַיִם לֵאמֹר, בְּרַעְיָה

**12** What will they think, the Egyptians will say in

הוציאם להרג אתם בְּהָרִים, וּלְכַלְתֵּם,  
 מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאָדָמָה; שׁוּב מִחֲרוֹן אַפְּךָ,  
 וְהִנָּחֵם עַל-הָרָעָה לְעַמֶּךָ.

evil he led them out to kill them in the mountain  
 and to annihilate them from all the face of the  
 land, turn back from the anger on your face and  
 be sorry over the disaster to you people.

יג זָכַר לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל  
 עֲבָדֶיךָ, אֲשֶׁר נָשְׁבַעְתָּ לָהֶם בְּךָ,  
 וַתְּדַבֵּר אֲלֵהֶם, אַרְבָּה אֶת-זַרְעֲכֶם  
 כְּכּוֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם; וְכָל-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת  
 אֲשֶׁר אָמַרְתִּי, אֶתֶּן לְזַרְעֲכֶם, וְנָחְלוּ,  
 לְעֹלָם.

13. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your  
 servants, which you gave a pledge to them by  
 yourself and said to them “I will increase your  
 offspring like the stars of the heavens and this  
 whole land which I said I will give to your  
 offspring will be their inheritance to eternity.”

יד וַיִּנָּחֵם, יְהוָה, עַל-הָרָעָה, אֲשֶׁר  
 דִּבֶּר לַעֲשׂוֹת לְעַמּוֹ. {P}

14 And the Lord was sorry on the evil which he  
 spoke (thought) to do to the people. {P}

טו וַיָּפֶן וַיֵּרֵד מִן-הָהָר, וּשְׁנֵי  
 לַחַת הַעֲצֻדָּת, בְּיָדוֹ: לַחַת, כְּתָבִים  
 מִשְׁנֵי עֲבָרֵיהֶם--מִזֶּה וּמִזֶּה, הֵם  
 כְּתָבִים.

15 And Moses turned back to go down from the  
 mountain with two tablets of the laws (testimony)  
 in his hand, the tablets were engraved from both  
 sides, from this side and from this side they were  
 engraved.

טז וְהַלַּחַת--מַעֲשֵׂה אֱלֹהִים, הִמָּה;  
 וְהַמְּכָתֵב, מְכָתֵב אֱלֹהִים הוּא--תְּרוֹת,  
 עַל-הַלַּחַת.

16 And the tablets were the work of God, and  
 the writing was the writing of God, he engraved  
 on the tablet.

יז וַיִּשְׁמַע יְהוֹשֻׁעַ אֶת-קוֹל הָעָם,  
 בְּרָעָה; וַיֹּאמֶר, אֶל-מֹשֶׁה, קוֹל  
 מִלְחָמָה, בַּמַּחֲנֶה.

17 And Joshua heard the noise of the thundering  
 voices of the people, and he said to Moses “the  
 noise of war in the camp.”

יח וַיֹּאמֶר, אֵין קוֹל עֲנוֹת גְּבוּרָה,  
 וְאֵין קוֹל, עֲנוֹת חִלוּשָׁה; קוֹל עֲנוֹת,  
 אֲנָכִי שָׁמַע.

18 And Moses said “not the noise of singing of  
 strength (victory) and not the noise of singing of  
 the defeated, noise of intense singing (reveling),



I hear”

**יט** **19** And it came to pass as he approached towards the camp, he saw the calf and dancing in a ring, Moses become angry and threw from his hands the tablets and shattered them at the bottom of the mountain.

וַיְהִי, כַּאֲשֶׁר קָרַב אֶל-הַמַּחֲנֶה,  
 וַיֵּרָא אֶת-הָעֵגֶל, וּמַחֲלֹת; וַיִּסַּר-אֶף  
 מֹשֶׁה, וַיִּשְׁלֹךְ מִיָּדוֹ אֶת-הַלְּחֹת, וַיִּשְׁבֹּר  
 אֹתָם, תַּחַת הַהָר.

**כ** **20** And he seized the calf which they had made and burnt it completely in the fire and crushed it so that it become fine (powder), and scattered it upon the water, and he provided it to the children of Israel.

וַיִּקַּח אֶת-הָעֵגֶל אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ,  
 וַיִּשְׂרֹף בָּאֵשׁ, וַיִּטְחֵן, עַד אֲשֶׁר-דָּק;  
 וַיִּזֶר עַל-פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם, וַיִּשְׁק אֶת-בְּנֵי  
 יִשְׂרָאֵל.

**כא** **21** And Moses said to Aaron “what did these people to you that you have brought over them great sin?”

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-אַהֲרֹן, מָה-  
 עָשִׂה לְךָ הָעָם הַזֶּה: כִּי-הִבֵּאתָ  
 עָלָיו, חַטָּאת גְּדוֹלָה.

**כב** **22** And Aaron said, “do not be angry at me my lord, you know the people, except in this evil.”

וַיֹּאמֶר אַהֲרֹן, אֵל-יְיָ אֵף  
 אֲדֹנָי; אֵתָה יָדַעְתָּ אֶת-הָעָם, כִּי בָרַע  
 הוּא.

**כג** **23** They said to me “make for us gods who will go before us, for this Moses the man who brought us from the land of Egypt we not what has become of him.”

וַיֹּאמְרוּ לִי--עֲשֵׂה-לָנוּ אֱלֹהִים,  
 אֲשֶׁר יֵלְכוּ לְפָנֵינוּ: כִּי-זֶה מֹשֶׁה  
 הָאִישׁ, אֲשֶׁר הֵעֵלָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם--  
 לֵאמֹר יַדְעֵנוּ, מָה-הָיָה לוֹ.

**כד** **24** And I said to them “to whoever (has) gold, tear off and give to me, and I threw it in the fire and outcome forth the golden calf.”

וָאֹמַר לָהֶם לְמִי זָהָב, הִתְפָּרְקוּ  
 וַיִּתְּנוּ-לִי; וְאִשְׁלַכְהוּ בָאֵשׁ, וַיֵּצֵא הָעֵגֶל  
 הַזֶּה.

**כה** **25** And Moses saw the people were running wild, because Aaron allowed them to run wild to the ridicule among those who arose in them.

וַיֵּרָא מֹשֶׁה אֶת-הָעָם, כִּי פָרַע  
 הוּא: כִּי-פָרַעַה אַהֲרֹן, לְשִׂמְצָה  
 בְּקִמְיָהֶם.



**כו** וַיַּעֲמֵד מֹשֶׁה, בְּשַׁעַר הַמַּחֲנֶה,  
וַיֹּאמֶר, מִי לַיהוָה אֵלַי; וַיֵּאֱסָפוּ אֵלָיו,  
כָּל-בְּנֵי לֵוִי.

**26** And Moses stood up in the gate of the camp and said, "whoever is for the Lord to me!" all the sons of Levi gathered to him.

**כז** וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם, כֹּה-אָמַר יְהוָה  
אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, שִׁימוּ אִישׁ-חַרְבּוֹ, עַל-  
יָרְכּוֹ; עִבְרוּ וְשׁוּבוּ מִשַּׁעַר לְשַׁעַר,  
בַּמַּחֲנֶה, וְהָרְגוּ אִישׁ-אֶת-אָחִיו וְאִישׁ-  
אֶת-רֵעֵהוּ, וְאִישׁ אֶת-קָרְבוֹ.

**27** And he said to them "now says the Lord God of Israel, man, mount the sword on your side, you must go on your way and turn back from places (house) to place (house) in the camp and kill every man his brother, every man his friend and every man his neighbor."

**כח** וַיַּעֲשׂוּ בְנֵי-לֵוִי, כַּדְבַר מֹשֶׁה;  
וַיִּפֹּל מִן-הָעָם בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא, כִּשְׁלֹשַׁת  
אֲלָפֵי אִישׁ.

**28** And the sons of Levi did according to Moses and brought down from the people in that day about three thousand men.

**כט** וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה, מִלְּאוּ יְדְכֶם הַיּוֹם  
לַיהוָה, כִּי אִישׁ בָּכְנוּ, וּבָאָחִיו--וְלָתַת  
עֲלֵיכֶם הַיּוֹם, בְּרָכָה.

**29** And Moses said, "you must consecrate as priests your hands today to the Lord as men at the price of a sons or brother, and you have brought on yourselves."

**ל** וַיְהִי, מִמָּחָרֵת, וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-  
הָעָם, אַתֶּם חָטְאתֶם חַטָּאתַ גְּדוֹלָה;  
וְעַתָּה אֲעֹלָה אֶל-יְהוָה, אוּלַי אַכְפְּרָה  
בְּעַד חַטָּאתְכֶם.

**30** It came to pass on the following day that Moses said to the people: "You have committed a great sin. And now I will ascend to the Lord; maybe I will make atonement for your sin."

**לא** וַיָּשׁוּב מֹשֶׁה אֶל-יְהוָה,  
וַיֹּאמֶר: אָנָּה, חָטְאָה הַזֶּה חַטָּאתַ  
גְּדוֹלָה, וַיַּעֲשׂוּ לָהֶם, אֱלֹהֵי זָהָב.

**31** And Moses returned to the Lord and said: "Please! These people have committed a great sin. And they have made themselves a god of gold."

**לב** וְעַתָּה, אִם-תִּשָּׂא חַטָּאתָם; וְאִם-  
אֵין--מִחַנִּי נָא, מִסְפָּרְךָ אֲשֶׁר כָּתַבְתָּ.

**32** And now, if you take away their sin, and if not, surely erase me from your book, which You

have written."

33 And the Lord said to Moses: "Whoever has sinned against me, him I will erase from my book."  
 לג וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה, אֶל-מֹשֶׁה: מִי אֲשֶׁר חָטָא-לִי, אֶמְחֶנּוּ מִסֵּפֶרִי.

34 And now go, lead the people to (the place) which I spoke to you. Behold My angel/messenger will go before you. Then on the day I visit, I will visit over their sin."  
 לד וְעַתָּה לֵךְ נַחֵה אֶת-הָעָם, אֶל אֲשֶׁר-דִּבַּרְתִּי לָךְ--הַנֶּחָה מִלְּאָכִי, יֵלֶךְ לְפָנַי; וּבְיוֹם פְּקֻדֵי, וּפְקֻדָתִי עֲלֵהֶם חֹטְאֵתָם.

35 And the Lord struck the people with a plague, on account of making the calf which Aaron made. {S}  
 לה וַיִּגַּף יְהוָה, אֶת-הָעָם, עַל אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ אֶת-הָעֵגֶל, אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה אַהֲרֹן. {ס}

### 3.4 Analysis

Verse 1: The delay by Moses to come down from the mountain is depicted to have prompted the people to ask Aaron to make *elohim* who were to go before them because they did not know what had become of Moses. What the people suggested was a replacement for Moses. One may wonder who this Moses was and why the people wanted to replace him? To answer these questions, it is important to look at the relationship between the people and Moses. Throughout the book of Exodus, Moses is depicted as the human agent that Yahweh used to deliver the Israelites from Egypt. The signs that convinced Pharaoh to allow them to leave the land of Egypt were done through him (Ex. 7-13); the separation of the water at the red sea was done through him (Ex. 14). Moses was the mediator between the people and Yahweh. As Sarna (1986:216) has noted

it is evident that Moses played the role of the exclusive mediator between Israel and God. He was the only recognised and acceptable channel through which the divine energy could flow to Israel, through which God's immanence could be perceived and his communication transmitted.

This understanding explains the void which the people experienced as a result of Moses' absence. They felt like God had abandoned them as there was no tangible indicator of his immanence. This coupled with their anxiety to get to the Promised Land prompted them to ask for something that would fill the void and show the presence of Yahweh. The emphasis of Moses as האיש (the man) in the statement

מֹשֶׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלֵנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, לֹא יִדְעֵנוּ מָה-הָיָה לוֹ .

in relation to their fight for Aaron to make them *elohim* can be interpreted as a call for a divine emissary of Yahweh to lead them rather a human being. It can thus be argued that the people wanted Yahweh to lead them by way of a divine emissary rather than Moses who was “shamefully” delayed. It must be noted here that the Hebrew word *boshesh* which is translated as delay in the NRSV can be derived from the root *bwsh* which means “put to shame” (Dozeman 2009:281). In this way the absence of Moses can be interpreted as shameful in the site of the people.

Without Moses the people become vulnerable because they perceived him as the one who brought them out of Egypt. Their perception of Moses as the “emissary” of Yahweh can also be seen in their insistence that Yahweh speaks to them through Moses and not directly (Ex. 20:18–19). To them Moses represented Yahweh; therefore, the absence of Moses meant the absence of Yahweh. Yahweh was seen as present among them in Moses.

The reference to the person they held in high esteem in a disrespected way as האיש indicates that they no longer have trust in him. He is just a man like them; they want someone/something divine to lead them. This answers the question of why they did not compel Aaron as the person Moses left in charge or any other person, they deemed fit to lead them. From this perspective, it can be argued that the delay by Moses made people lose trust in human leadership and called for divine leadership. As Sarna (1986:216) has observed, “what the people here demanded of Aaron, in order to counteract the pervasively oppressive feeling of hollowness that afflicted them, was precisely what the tabernacle was meant to fulfil.” This is in the sense that the tabernacle was going to symbolise the immanence of Yahweh among the people as it is depicted as a place where Yahweh was going to talk to Moses. In this way, verse 1

emphasises the theme of theophany. It is about the revelation of Yahweh to the people. Yahweh revealed himself through Moses; now that Moses is not around, the people demand what was going to reveal Yahweh among them.

If the people wanted to replace Moses and not Yahweh, why would the author use the word *elohim*? As noted by Dozeman (2009:682) in “Hebrew *’ēlōhîm* could be interpreted as singular or plural. But the verb *yēlēkû*, ‘will go,’ in the plural suggests that the plural form of the noun is intended, creating a problem of meaning in the context of Exodus 32.” The plural form is consistently used with plural verbs in verses 1, 4, 8 and 23 even though only one image was made. This points to the redactor’s relation of the golden calf to Jeroboam’s golden bulls discussed earlier. However, the verb *yēlēkû* points to the notion of a divine emissary who is closely related to the Israelites and the presence of Yahweh. Moses is first depicted to have met Yahweh through his divine emissary (Ex.3:2). After that, the emissary of Yahweh went before the Israelites from Egypt and protected them from the Egyptian army (Ex. 14:19-20). From this perspective, the demand of the Israelites to make gods “אֱלֹהִים יַלְכֹוּ” (Ex. 32:1) suggests that the people demanded an emissary. From this view, the golden calf is probably a representation of the divine emissary of Yahweh (Amzallag 2020:209). As for the people, they could not distinguish between this divine emissary and Moses. In this regard Fretheim (1991:281) has noted that the phrase *יָלַךְ לְפָנָיו* “is never used with Moses elsewhere in Exodus, nor with an unmediated Yahweh. It is used only of God’s messenger (14:19; 23:23; 32:34; cf. 23:20; 33:2) or God in the pillar (13:19), identified with the messenger in 14:19.” This suggests that the people are requesting an image of the messenger of God.

It must be noted that verse 1 suggests a confrontation between the people and Aaron. While *’al-’ahārōn* is translated as around Aaron in the New Revised Standard Version it can also be translated as “before Aaron” or “against Aaron,” since *nīqhal* ‘assemble’ plus *’al* always implies a threatening confrontation (Propp 2008:14, cf. Dozeman 2009:682). Additionally, the use of the commanding word *qum* “arise” or “come” indicates that Aaron was forced.

Verse 2: Aaron ordered that

פָּרְקוּ נִזְמֵי הַזָּהָב, אֲשֶׁר בְּאִזְנֵי נְשֵׁיכֶם בְּנִיכֶם

According to Garroway (2014:159)

the family functioned not only as an organisational unit, but as a socioeconomic unit. As such it was concerned with poisoning the *paterfamilias*'s name and property and increasing the family's production. Thus, children were important in carrying out the socioeconomic goals of the family.

In this regard it can be argued that children having gold indicate a high economic status for the family. From the understanding that gold was a symbol of honour and that giving it to women and by extension to children was a symbol of a man's love and affection, Aaron asked for the pride of the men (Steen 2007:623 cf. Meyers 2014:12-16). This is expressed in the use of the Hebrew word *nisheykem*. The root for *nisheykem* is *nashah*. According to Holladay (1988:247) when used as a noun *nashah* can mean a person who collects what has been given. In this context it may be understood as pointing to the jewels that were given to them by the Egyptian as they were about to leave Egypt by the instruction from Yahweh (Ex. 12:35-36). As observed by Fretheim (1991:142) "their status has now changed; they leave Egypt 'dressed out,' not as slaves, but as persons who have been raised to a new level of life by their God." From this perspective, taking of the golden elements from the Egyptians amounted to taking the position of honour from the position of slavery. At the same time, it can be understood from the general Ancient Near East and Old Testament view that gold was given to women to show love and affection (Beck 2011:206). In both senses, gold is depicted as very precious for the men. In the first it is precious because it came from Yahweh as a gift for their liberation from Egypt. In the second, it is precious because it shows love and affection for their women and children. Therefore, it can be argued that Aaron asked the men to strip themselves of their most prized possession to make the image. In other words, they were to strip themselves of their honour and give it to Aaron to make an image. It can be argued that at this point the people gave up the honour to the image that was to be made. They were to be servants of the image. However, if the image was understood as the emissary of Yahweh, it could mean that they were still going to be servants of Yahweh because they gave honour to the representative of

Yahweh — an indicator of Yahweh’s immanence among them. This indicates that the sin of the golden calf is not yet clear.

While some scholars argue that Aaron asked for gold to buy time (Propp 2008:569), I am of the view that he asked for gold because it was a medal of honour and was associated with gods in the Ancient Near East. With the fact that the people were just coming from Egypt, they understood the value of gold and its relationship with the deities in the Egyptian world view. It is probably for this reason that they did not hesitate to give it to Aaron as will be seen in verse 3.

As observed by Sarna in Propp (2008:549) the request for gold earrings and making of the golden calf which people worship is close to Judges 8:24-27 where Gideon made a golden Ophrah with which the people prostituted themselves with. In Judges, the gold comes from the loot after delivering the people from the Midianites while in Exodus the gold was looted after deliverance from Egypt. Gideon asked for golden earrings just like Aaron, people willingly gave the earrings just like we will see in the next verse. In both stories the product is a threat to the people’s relationship with Yahweh (Hamilton 2011:532). The people gave themselves to the worship of these images. In this regard gold is depicted as having a potential of threatening people’s relationship with Yahweh if not used appropriately.

Verse 3: The response of the people to Aaron’s request is overwhelmingly surprising in that all the people are said to have taken off their golden earrings and given them to Aaron. The men did not only give the golden earrings from their wives and children but also what they had. Some scholars have compared the giving here with the giving in chapter 25 and conclude that the giving in chapter 25 was free while in this passage, it was by compulsion (Fretheim 1991:280). It must be noted that Aaron did not force the people to give but they willingly gave even what he did not ask for. The only difference is that the giving of the materials for making the tabernacle is depicted as initiated by God while for the golden calf was initiated by Aaron. In this way, the author portrays the tabernacle as God’s desired way of revealing his presence among the people and the golden calf as man’s way of portraying God’s presence. By contrasting the two views, the author echoes the view that the image of the Cherubim in Exodus 25 was God’s idea while the image of a calf/bull was man’s idea. This clarifies the nature of the sin of

the golden calf. The golden calf image was the idea of a human being - Aaron. This speaks to Theophany. Israel sinned by acting in a manner that showed that man could reveal God by his own will without Yahweh's guidance. In this way Israel violated their relationship with Yahweh. As Fretheim (1991:281) notes, "the problem is thus fundamentally not of disobedience to a law code; it is a matter of unfaithfulness to the God who had bound himself to a people. Israel has violated the established relationship." In their relationship, Yahweh was going to reveal himself among the people, but Aaron thought he could reveal Yahweh to the people. It is from this perspective that Moses in verse 21 says Aaron brought a great sin upon the people. From this perspective by giving gold to make the calf the people exchanged their glory with the idea of man. Imperatively, the idea of the golden calf as an emissary of Yahweh might be viewed not as a bad one but it was not sanctioned by Yahweh. Because the idea came from a man, as noted by Hamilton (2011:532), "the issue is not a false god(s), but a false perception of who the true God is. Not only can you worship and obey him, but now you can also produce him! You can be responsible for his existence even if the product is intended for surrogacy." In this relationship the people were to be subject only to Yahweh. The people fashioning God implies that God is now subject to them.

Verse 4: The process of making the golden calf has been contentiously debated by scholars. Dozeman (2009:682) has observed that key in understanding this verse is the interpretation of the Hebrew *וַיַּצֵּר אֹתוֹ בְּחָרֶט*. The verb *וַיַּצֵּר* can be traced from the root word *sarar* which means "to tie up, press" which suggest that gold was pressed to make a sheet; or from *sur* which means "to confine or bind". It can also be from the root *yasar* which means "to form or shape" suggesting that it was melted and cast into a mould to make the calf. However, the word *heret* suggests a graving tool. *Heret* used with *sarar* suggests that the calf was graved from a material like wood. Gold was then pressed into a sheet to overlay the wooden calf. It is, therefore, possible to argue that the calf was made from wood and overlaid with bitten gold or that it was moulded from gold. For Propp (2008:550) the calf was made from wood then covered with gold and not solid gold. While the process may not be clear, it is clear that gold was used to make the calf. Considering the understanding that the image calf/bull was associated with strength and fertility, it was the perfect image to represent the God who was to go before the Israelites to fight the



inhabitants of the Promised Land and give it to them (Nyasha 2012:64). According to Sarna (1986:218) in the Ancient Near East, the bull “was a symbol of lordship, strength, vital energy, and fertility, and was either deified and made an object of worship or, on account of these sovereign attributes, was employed in representation of a deity.” From this perspective, it can be argued that the image of the golden calf served as a good way of showing the attribute of strength and power which Yahweh had demonstrated when delivering the children of Israel from Egypt. It must be noted that the Promised Land in Exodus 3:17 is described as the land of milk and honey; and in Deuteronomy 8:7-11 it is described as a fertile and productive land. In other words, the Israelites anticipated both human fertility and land fertility. Therefore, an image which was understood as a symbol of fertility was an ideal depiction for Yahweh who promised them fertility.

The phrase

אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלֹוֹד מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם.

According to Fretheim (1991:282) “indicates that they understand this divine messenger already to have some history among them. But it clearly implies a failure properly to acknowledge Yahweh’s role.” However, I am of the view that the people were trying to acknowledge Yahweh’s role in their history but used an image that was not sanctioned by him. In other words, they acknowledged Yahweh in a way that was not right. This point to their understanding that the image was not a new God, but it was the same God who had brought them out of Egypt. For them, the image was the sign of Yahweh’s immanence among them. As Propp (2008:552) has noted, “they understood it as a symbol of some god, either Yahweh (Rashbam) or his divine Messenger (14:19; 23:20, 23; 32:34; 33:2).” This implies that they did not rule out Yahweh from leading them out of Egypt, they understood that he did so through his messenger who they depict as the golden calf. At the same time, they understood the messenger as the means or symbol of Yahweh’s immanence.

Verse 5: After seeing the golden calf, Aaron made an altar for it and announced a feast to the Lord the following day. As far as Aaron was concerned, the making of the golden calf was neither intended to substitute Yahweh nor does he consider it to be sin until Moses tells him so in verse 21. For Aaron, the calf was a symbol of Yahweh as



indicated by calling the festival as the festival to the lord. As noted by Propp (2008:552) “Aaron clearly intends the calf as a Yahwistic symbol, like the historical bulls of the Northern Kingdom.” From this perspective the image was not another god but Yahweh. As noted by Smith (2011:212)

Aaron proclaims a feast of holocausts and peace offerings in honour of the Lord (vv.5-6; Lv. 1, 3), indicating that the calf is not dedicated to another god. Instead, the idolatry may lie in a confusion of symbol and deity, in other words, an idolatrous symbol used for the right God.

From this perspective, the passage depicts the calf as a wrong symbol for the right God. Therefore, the writer presents the sin not as abrogating the command “you shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 22:3) but rather the command “you shall not make for yourself an idol” (Ex. 22:4). The sin committed, therefore, was not polytheism as suggested by the use of the plural “these are your gods” but rather idolatry. As observed by Hamilton (2011:532) “the people’s ultimatum that Aaron ‘makes’ them *elohim* suggests an idol. In fact, the word ‘molten’ in ‘molten calf’ (*masseka*) in vv. 4 and 8 is a Hebrew word for ‘(cast) idol’ (Exod 34:17; Lev 19:4; Deut 9:12, 16; 27:15...).” In this regard Hamilton (2011:532) has rightly concluded that “the issue is not false god(s), but a false perception of who the true one God is.”

The creation of an altar for the golden calf suggests the enthroning of the golden calf as the symbol of Yahweh’s presence. As observed by Hamilton (2011:532) Aaron “does not use the altar that Moses has built for the ceremony of sealing the covenant.” This may be interpreted as pointing to the new god for whom a new altar should be made. However, care has to be taken. This is in the sense that Aaron calls for a festival to the Lord. This means that the altar was not for a new god. The fact that Aaron made the altar indicates that Aaron was at the centre of the golden calf ordeal. It must be noted that Yahweh is depicted as speaking from between the Cherubim on the top of the covenant box. Therefore, the Cherubim can be interpreted as a pedestal of an invisible God between the Cherubim. As for the golden calf, Yahweh is not depicted as speaking above it but is only associated with him by calling the festival as the festival of the Lord which suggest the presence of Yahweh. It can, therefore, be argued that while the

Cherubim is depicted as the pedestal of Yahweh, the golden calf is depicted as a symbol of Yahweh.

Considering the relationship of the golden calf narrative and Jeroboam's story Propp (2008:552) has made an interesting observation that according to 1 Kings 12:32–33,

Jeroboam inaugurated a festival calendar with a holiday in the eighth month, competing with the seventh month festival of Judah. If all the northern holidays were a month later than those in Judah, Aaron might be calling for the observance of Pentecost, in accordance with northern practice.

Propp (2008:552) has observed that two reasons have been advanced by scholars as possible solutions to calling for the festival on the following day (tomorrow). The first possibility is that Aaron was trying to buy time and the second is that it was late when the building of the altar was finished, and they could not proceed to have the fest. However, I am of the view that Aaron was giving the people time to prepare themselves and the necessary requirements for the sacrifices.

Verse 6: Could this festival be a mouth-opening festival? Considering the view by Sommer (2009:19) that in the Ancient Near Eastern practice, an image would be consecrated at the mouth-opening ceremony in order for it to be filled with the presence of the deity, it is possible to think that Aaron called for a similar festival. If the festival is mouth-opening, then the golden calf can be understood as a physical form of Yahweh. However, the passage does not give details that suggest the mouth-opening ceremony such as the symbolic cutting off of the hands of the makers of the image discussed in the previous chapter. The only elements mentioned as characterising this festival are offerings, sacrifices, a meal and revelling (joking). Though these were probably part of the mouth opening festival, they were not the many characteristics (Sommer 2009:19-20). Additionally, the mouth opening ceremony made the image to be the physical form of the deity and was believed to make the image able to talk and act. However, the golden calf is not depicted as talking but is depicted as acting before it was even made in the phrase

“אלה אלהיך ישראל, אשר העליוך מארץ מצרים”.

Considering that it was Yahweh who had brought them out of Egypt, it can be argued that the golden calf was a symbol of Yahweh.

As observed by Propp (2008:553) the activity of offerings and sacrifice “parody the Covenant ratification in chap. 24, which also featured sacrifices and a sacred meal before a visible Deity.” This indicates that sacrifices and sacred meals were to be in the presence of the deity. In this regard the golden calf is depicted as indicating the presence of God. At the Jerusalem temple sacrifices and sacred meals were before the Cherubim in the holy of holies which represented the presence of Yahweh. Eating, drinking and joyous celebration were a usual part of festival. Propp (2008:553) observes that, exegetes have different views on the interpretation of the root word *shq*. Some argue that it comes from *mšhqym* which refers to music and dancing (1 Sm. 18:6–7; 2 Sm. 6:5, 21; Jr. 30:19; 1 Cr. 13:8; 15:29); while others argue that *shq* has a sexual connotation as used in Genesis 39:17 where Potiphar’s wife accused Joseph of trying to have a sexual affair with her; and Genesis 26:8 where Isaac was seen having an affair with Rebecca that showed that they were husband and wife (Hamilton 2011:532 — 533, cf. Propp 2008:553). However, the word may not refer to sexual orgy here, it may indicate as Propp (2008:553) puts it “untrammelled behaviour. In 32:6, at least upon first reading, the context does not suggest sexuality. But, as we learn from David’s uninhibited dancing in 2 Sam 6:14–22, religious frenzy can lead to immodesty.” From this perspective the festival can be understood not as one which was characterised by sexual activities or orgy but one in which people were extremely excited and danced in untrammelled ways. Stone (1996:12-13) observes that

scholars used to associate Canaanite fertility religion with sexual orgies and prostitution in the cult. This led to the interpretation or linking of sexual activities with pagan religion. With new information about this there is a shift though it is early to conclude that it is a caricature of non-biblical religions by authors of biblical texts or vice versa or a combination.

Propp has proposed another possible interpretation of *shq*. According to him (Propp 2008:553) “Midrash (Exod. Rab. 42:1) finds in *šhq* an implication of bloodshed, as in 2 Sam 2:14-17, where it serves as a euphemism for ‘fight’.” From this perspective it can be argued that this is why the sound was like that of war to Joshua. However, this

interpretation does not add up with the description of offering sacrifices unless it was human sacrifice which is depicted as not allowed in the Israelite cult. The notion of human sacrifice can also be argued to be behind the killing of about three thousand people by the Levites and Moses calling it an act of ordination in verses 27-30. This is in the sense that Yahweh instructed the killing of the people. However, it must be noted that sacrifices were offered to the deity. In this case the people who were killed were not given to Yahweh as offering.

For Fretheim (1991:282) who understands the image as a messenger of Yahweh, by engaging into an act of worship through offering and sacrifices to the golden calf, the golden calf as the messenger of Yahweh is “elevated to a status alongside Yahweh in allegiance of the people.” Bruckner (2008:282) argues that “their sin was not their celebrating, singing, or dancing. Rather, it was worshipping a god of their own making and celebrating it on their own terms. They had reduced the revelation of the living God to an image they could control.” Sarna (1986:218) who holds that the image was the pedestal of Yahweh, argues that the problem was with putting the image on the open, this

could inevitably tend to divert human attention to itself as the focus of consideration and away from the invisible One that it was meant to evoke. In the popular mind, the image-pedestal could not but be endowed with divinity. God was put back into nature. The fundamental, distinctive idea of religion of Israel was thereby violated and nullified.

Verse 7: Here the scene shifts to the top of the mountain. God is depicted as being aware of what was happening at the bottom of the mountain and instructs Moses to go down at once. As observed by Coggins (2000:117) “Yahweh is envisaged as the all-knowing God, so that he is aware of what is going on among the people, but Moses remains ignorant.” In this way, the passage highlights that Yahweh was greater than Moses whom he associated with his presence. This echoes the presentation that the people were wrong to equate Moses with the presence of Yahweh. In this verse, God is depicted as referring to Moses as the one who brought out the people from Egypt just like the people did in verse 1. Does it then mean that the passage is distancing God

from the act of bringing the people out of Egypt? In Exodus 20:2 God is depicted as referring to himself as the one who brought the people out of Egypt. However, in this case Yahweh echoes the words of the people in verse 1 that Moses brought them out of Egypt. Coggins (2000:117) observes that “just as in verse 1 the people had in effect repudiated God by saying that Moses had brought them out of Egypt, now with irony Yahweh repudiates his people.” As Propp (2008:553) puts it, Yahweh “is also using against the people their own words from verse 1.” This indicates that Yahweh is rejecting the people. They are Moses’ responsibility.

Verse 8: In this verse the author describes the wickedness that the people committed from God’s view. Firstly, they have been quick to turn away from the commandment not to make idols for themselves which he had given them (Ex 20:4). Secondly, they have cast for themselves an image; they have worshipped and sacrificed to it and fourthly; they said,

“וַיֹּאמְרוּ, אֵלֶּה אֱלֹהֵינוּ: יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלֵנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם.”

The way this verse is structured suggests that the author was aware of the commandment “You shall not make cast for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is on earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them...” (Ex. 20:4-5). This is different from the version in Exodus 34:17 which only states that “you shall not cast idols.” It can be argued that Exodus 20:4-5 was deliberately redacted to have the forms of idols as anything that is; in heaven above (flying creatures), on earth (land creatures), and that is in the water (water creatures). In Genesis 1:20-25 living creatures are categorised into three groups, namely water creatures, flying creatures above the earth, and living creatures of the earth. This indicates that Exodus 20:4-5 prohibited all forms of idols.

Hamilton (2011:535) argues that “turn away from”, “can be used of Israel’s turning away from God, as here, or less often of God’s turning away from somebody (Judg. 16:20...)”. “From this perspective, the people had not only disobeyed God, but they had also rejected him, thereby, making the sin committed to be the worshipping of other gods.

However, Propp (2008:554) has rightly pointed out that “since they are probably

worshiping Yahweh, God does not say, 'they have departed from me'. Rather, they are disobeying his rules for proper worship." From this perspective the sin can be understood as the improper worship of Yahweh.

Verses 9-10: Yahweh describes the people as stiff-necked. According to Hamilton (2011:536) "to be stiff-necked is to be intractable, like a beast of burden in order to go its own way." Kugler (2016:543) observes that the notion of "stiff-necked" is usually associated with disobedience and opposition to authority (cf. Dt. 31:27; Jr. 17:23; 19:15; Neh. 9:29). For Kugler (2016:643) the making of the golden calf expresses the people's desire for a deity to accompany them rather than rebellion. From this perspective the notion of "stiff-necked" does not fit the case of making a golden calf. Kugler's understanding of the golden calf is that the people attempted to get close to Yahweh (Ex. 32:4) by actualizing him and celebrating his honour. What he does not consider is the presentation of the people's actions not as sanctioned by Yahweh but by themselves and Aaron. In this case, it can be argued that the problem with the people was not in what they did but in how they did it. They devised their own way of experiencing Yahweh rather than the way Yahweh wants them to experience him. From this perspective, Yahweh describes the people as determined to go their own way and cannot be changed. They are adamant about following Yahweh as revealed by humanity rather as he reveals himself. Since they are so adamant, the possible measure is to annihilate them and start a new generation with Moses. In these verses the author gives God's immediate reaction to the sin of the "golden calf". He is depicted to have seen how stiff-necked the people were, therefore, they should be annihilated. The sin of the people is so serious that God's immediate reaction was to destroy the people and start a new nation with Moses. The presentation of the people as stiff-necked implies that they were uncontrollable. They were not able to live by God's commandment. They were determined to give away the position of honour which God had given to them by taking them from gift and metaphorically implied by giving them gold. The position of honour as a liberated people by Yahweh was prostituted with an image which was an idea of man and not Yahweh himself. In this regard Yahweh wanted to annihilate them.

As observed by Fretheim (1991:282) "a key phrase for interpreting this passage is 'let

me alone’.” One may wonder why God wanted to be left alone. As Hamilton (2011:538) puts it “cannot almighty God do what he wishes to do, whether Moses is at his side or not? Why would a God who has promised to never leave or forsake us now say, ‘leave me alone’?” As argued by scholars like Fretheim (1991:283), Propp (2008:554) and Hamilton (2011:538) Yahweh was essential inviting Moses to intervene in the matter. According to Fretheim (1991:583)

for such a word to make sense one must assume that while God has decided to execute wrath (see v.14), the decision has not reached an irretrievable point; the will of God is not set on the matter. Moses could conceivably contribute something to the divine deliberation that might occasion a future for Israel other than wrath.

Yahweh makes known the intention to destroy the people and offers Moses a chance to start a new generation with him. As noted by Sarna (2000:572) “by saying what he does to Moses, God is in effect going back to Genesis 12 and posing Moses as the new Abraham. God is threatening to wipe out the Israelites and start over again.” This is a threat to the entire Exodus as is based on the promise to the patriarchs which must be fulfilled. Propp (2008:554) argues that “Exod 32:10 marks a pivotal change in Yahweh’s relationship with humanity.” This is from the understanding that, at first, Yahweh was displeased with all mankind, he destroyed them and started again with Noah, (Genesis 6–9). Secondly, Yahweh contracted his interest to Abraham, by implication rejecting all others; then again to Isaac arguably rejecting Ishmael; then finally to Jacob, rejecting Esau. As pointed out by Propp (2008:554) “why not start again from Moses? Would not the promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob be sufficiently satisfied, since Moses is their descendant (Exod. Rab. 44:10)?”

Verses 11-13: In this passage as observed by Hamilton (2011:538) “not only does Moses turn down the possibility of being Abraham two (‘I will make you into a great nation’; v. 10b), but he also intercedes fiercely and brazenly for idolatrous Israel.” In his plea Moses refers to the people as God’s people and to God as the one who took them out from Egypt. In this way Moses is depicted as denying all the glory of taking the people from Egypt and gives it to God. In other words, he glorifies God as the mighty warrior who with great power and a mighty hand delivered the people as indicated by



the phrase

“אָפּד בַּעַמּוּד , אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם , בְּכֶם גָּדוֹל וּבְיַד חֲזָקָה.”

(v.11). In this way Moses is depicted to have acted in a way God expected the people to have acted. While the people are depicted as giving the glory of taking them from Egypt to the golden calf as implied in the statement “these are your gods who brought you up out of Egypt”, Moses is depicted as giving the glory to God. This justifies why God wanted to start a new nation with him. It can be argued that Moses in this way is depicted as showing the ideal relationship expected between God and the people while the people are an example of a deviant relationship. In his intercession Moses puts the needs of the people first as a good leader Sarna (2000:572). Further, Moses’ plea for God to change his mind indicates that in the ideal relationship, communication was not only one way. The people had the right to talk to God and he was willing to hear them despite his determination to destroy them. The depiction of Yahweh as a God who can change his mind by the influence of man poses hermeneutical challenges with regards to the attributes of Yahweh. To explain this Sarna (2000:573) argues that “the bible gives us a varied portrait of the nature of God. At times we seem to be peering into heaven itself. At other times, the bible presents God in human pictures. The dialogue of verses 11-14 is more in keeping with the latter category than the former.” This is in sense that the focus of these verses is the role of Moses as an intercessor rather than the inner nature of God.

Furthermore, the mention of the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Israel re-echoes the covenant which Yahweh had established with the Abraham. The fact that God head Moses’ plea was a message of hope to the people that he will hear their cry if they give back the glory to him and acknowledge him as their “husband” who throughout their history had showed them love and affection. It must be noted here that verse 13 emphasises progeny of the descendants of the Patriarchs and inheritance of the land as forever. This suggests that despite experiencing a threat to the relationship between Yahweh and the people, the covenant would stand if the people acknowledged God and give him the glory that is due to him. By pointing to the covenant with the patriarch Moses is not compelling Yahweh to act from without but simply echoing Yahweh’s own word back to him. As observed by Sarna (2000:572) “Moses quotes God’s own words to



Abraham, that he promised to make Abraham's descendants as numerous as the stars and give them the Promised Land (see Gen 12:7; 15:5)."

Fretheim (1991:285 cf. Meyer 1983:155) observes that Moses' intercession is in threefold. (1) "An appeal to God's reasonableness." The people are in fact his people despite his effort to dissociate himself from them, because he has delivered them with his mighty hand. (2) "An appeal to God's reputation." He appeals to God to consider what the Egyptians would say. According to Fretheim (1991:285) "a recurrent theme throughout the narrative has been that God has acted on Israel's behalf in order that Egyptians and others might know that Yahweh is Lord (see 14:4, 18; 9:16)." (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 they would inherit the land." As argued by Meyer (1983:155) Yahweh "committed himself by his unconditional promise to the patriarchs, Israel's ancestors." Propp (2008:556) notes that the statement "you swore by yourself" "is Moses' greatest argument, citing God's oath by his own immortal self (Gen 22:16–17; 26:3–4, etc.). For Yahweh to go back on his word would paradoxically be to negate his own existence."

Verse 14 has attracted scholarly debate concerning the attributes of God mutability and foreknowledge. This is because he is depicted to have changed his mind about the disaster that he had planned. Some scholars from this presentation argue that God's foreknowledge is not absolute because if it was, he cannot be said to have changed his mind (see Hamilton 2011:540). It must be noted here that if God had gone ahead to destroy the people it was going to imply that he had changed his mind about raising a nation from the people he brought out of Egypt. It can be argued that by following what Moses said, God did not change his plan. However, this passage as Hamilton (2011:540) notes, "reminds readers that God does not always operate unilaterally." They depict him as one who listens to people and adjusts his intention. This echoes the understanding that the covenant relationship was not a dictatorship kind of relationship in which the people had no say but always compelled to do what Yahweh wanted them to do. However, it must be noted that it is not everything that Yahweh would agree to.

For example, he did not change his intention when Moses asked him to send another person to go and save the people from Egypt in Exodus 4:13. As argued by Fretheim (1991:287)

the God of Israel is revealed as one who is open to change. God will move from decisions made from courses chartered, in view of the on-going interaction with those affected. God treats the relationship with an integrity that is responsive to what they do and say.

Verses 15-16: Moses is now reported as going down the mountain after God relented on the plan to destroy the people and starting a new nation from Moses. Moses is said to have carried two stone tablets with writings on both sides. Verse 16 emphasises that the tablets and the writing were the work of God. This is different from the stone tablets which were the work of Moses and the writing of God in chapter 34:1. Bruckner (2008:284) argues that

the text places the ten commandments at the centre of the narrative (also 31:18). Two verses, (vv. 15-16) mention the tablets and writing on them three times each. They represented the agreement the people had made with the Lord in the covenant (24:3). The work of the living God in history and lives of these specific people is at stake.

According to Fretheim (1991:287 cf. Propp 2008:556) the tablets “symbolize the completed covenant, ‘the work of God,’ written in stone by God himself. They are intact; the covenant is not broken from God’s side.” From this perspective it can be argued that Yahweh wanted the covenant with the people to continue. However, by breaking the tablets Moses broke the covenant.

According to Dozeman (1989:172) “the shattering of the tablets must be interpreted in the context of the Decalogue.” In this case, the golden calf can be interpreted as breaking of the prohibition of the images in the first commandment in the Decalogue. Dozenman (1989:172) further argues that the golden calf can also be “interpreted as a rival cult to the Priestly legislation, with the result that the calf becomes a challenge to the presence of Yahweh. In this case the shattering of the two tablets of testimony symbolises the inability of God ‘to tabernacle’ with Israel.” The interpretation of the

golden calf as a threat to the presence of Yahweh reflects verse 1. In verse 1, the people demanded *elohim* because of the absence of Moses who was their mediator. To fill the gap of Moses whose presence among them assured them of the presence of Yahweh they make the golden calf. Additionally, it connects the narrative of the golden calf to the wider context in which the passage falls, that is, the construction of the tabernacle. As indicated earlier, the tabernacle is linked to the theophany. The temple was the place where Yahweh was going to review himself to the people and speak to them.

Verses 17-18: Joshua who is reported to have set out with Moses but mentioned to have gone up the mountain in 24:13 appears on the scene. He should have been waiting alone at the bottom of the mountain away from the camp. While the people lost patience, Joshua is depicted to have remained to wait until Moses returned. It is quite surprising that he is not mentioned in the discussion between God and Moses when God wanted to annihilate the people. One may wonder what would have been done to him. Was he going to be destroyed together with the people? The passage does not answer this question but depicts him as one who endured the loneliness of waiting for Moses without despair. He demonstrated loyalty and trust in his leader and master. It is probably because of the qualities he demonstrated here among many others that he was the one who was appointed to take over from Moses after his death (Jos. 1; Dt. 31). As noted by Bruckner (2008:284) “the mention of Joshua helps to validate his future leadership role.” Dozeman (2009:696-697) has observed that Exodus 32 has a number of inconsistencies. Verse 17 and 19 are not consistent with verse 7 to 14. In verses 7 to 14 Moses is made aware of what is happening in the camp by God. However, he is depicted to be like one who doesn’t know what is happening in verse 17 and 18. This is seen in his response to Joshua when Joshua said that he heard a noise of war in the camp. Moses said, “it is not the sound made by victors, or the sound made by losers; it is the sound of revellers that I hear.” If the narrative was consistent, Moses would have told Joshua what was going on in the camp. Further, Moses’ reaction after seeing the calf and the dancing is depicted as one who is not anticipating the scene. This inconsistency as alluded to earlier is attributed to the various layers in the passage. In one layer, Moses was made aware of the happening at the bottom of the mountain by

Yahweh and in another by seen. In reacting to the scenario Moses broke the tablets of the covenant.

According to Bruckner (2008:286 cf. Sarna 2000:575) “Moses responded with appropriate symbolic action in his confrontation with the people. He throws the tablets...breaking them to pieces. The original covenant with the Lord was shattered in the same place that it had been made, at the foot of the mountain (vv. 9; 24:4).” The people had agreed to the covenant terms so that they could be people of God and God would dwell among them, but Moses nullified the relationship with Yahweh. In the Ancient Near East smashing the covenant document meant nullifying the content (Propp 2008:558). The relationship is broken; they have to start over again. For this, Moses is later told to cut two stone tablets in chapter 34:1. It must be noted that while God is said to have written on the first stone tablets there is an inconsistency on who wrote on the second tablet. In Exodus 34:1 the author narrates that the “Lord said to Moses ‘cut two tablets of stone like the former one, and I will write on the tablets’. In Ex. 34:27 the narrator reports that “the Lord said to Moses: write these words; in accordance with these words, I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.” However, the narrative is clear that the first tablets were solely the work of God and for the second Moses was involved. This seems to suggest that God and the people were to interact to make the covenant successful.

What was solely from God is depicted as broken by Moses and the golden calf which was solely the idea of people without God being involved was a threat to the covenant. Both God and the people seem to have learnt that they were to mutually complement if the covenant relationship was to last.

Verse 20: Just like the process of making the golden calf, the process of destroying it has attracted the attention of biblical scholars. Some scholars like Gaitán et al (2021:1-8) have used interdisciplinary approach to analyse the three steps used to destroy the calf, that is, heating the calf; grinding; and dispersing the powder in water. Moses is reported to have burnt the calf, ground it to powder and put the powder in the water which he made the people drink. If the calf was made of wood overlaid with gold, it can be said that the wood was burnt to ashes. Therefore, it was only the gold that was ground, and people were made to drink a gold water solution. The same can be said if

the calf was purely made of gold. The calf was melted, and the gold was ground and given to people to drink in water. According to Bruckner (2008:286) “the action was practical as well as symbolic.” He further observes that “this resembles a trial by ordeal in which people were observed as they drank in order to discern the guilt from the innocent (Num. 5:16-20).” From this perspective it can be argued that those who were found guilty are the ones who were killed by the Levites. Especially with the understanding that verse 27 is not very clear on the criteria that was used to select the people that were killed. It can be argued that just like the water of a curse in Numbers 5:16-20 caused pain to the guilty woman, the gold water mixture cause pain to the guilty and in this way, they were identified. At the same time, knowing that gold was a symbol of Yahweh’s love and affection for people; and the position of honour which Yahweh had given them, drinking the gold amounted to metaphorically making the people and the gold as one. Implicitly the people were not going to carry their prized position on their ears; they were to carry it inside their bodies. From this perspective I am of the view that by making the people drink the gold, Moses was implying that they are bound to Yahweh eternally and by no means where they to give away their position of honour. Further, it was to serve as a reminder that giving away their honour would result in death. This is in the sense that they are metaphorically one with gold. Therefore, giving away their position of honour was only possible by death. In this way giving up on Yahweh as their “husband” would amount to sentencing themselves to death.

Verse 21: Up until this verse, Aaron’s role in the sin of the golden calf is not questioned. God did not mention him but Moses questions him albeit with reservations

“מָה-עָשָׂה לָךְ הָעָם הַזֶּה : כִּי-הִבְאֵת עָלַי, הַטָּאָה גְדֹלָה.”

Though the question is directed at Aaron, and he is portrayed as the one who brought the sin on the people; the phrase “מָה-עָשָׂה לָךְ הָעָם הַזֶּה:” points to the people as the cause of the sin. In this way the author put much of the blame on the people. It can be argued that the author was trying to bring out the presentation that in the sin of the golden calf the people were the ones at fault. From the way the question is phrased one would be sure that Aaron’s answer would point to the people as the ones who were at fault. Hamilton (2011:546) has made an interesting observation that “in Deuteronomy, Moses leaves out this altercation with Aaron, but he says something



practice which made it to be condemned.

Verse 25: This verse opens with the phrase “וַיֵּרָא מֹשֶׁה”. In verse 19 the author notes that “אֲשֶׁר קָרַב אֶל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ, וַיֵּרָא אֶת-הָעֵגֶל”. Is Moses coming from the mountain for the second time? The repetition here suggests different layers of the narrative. In the first narrative people were מְחֹלְתִים and before the calf while in the other they are described as כִּי פָרַע הוּא. It is interesting that the additional comment notes that

כִּי-פָרַע אֶהְיוֹן, לְשִׂמְצָה בְּקִמְיָהֶם.

One wonders who was rising against them? Could it be that they were in battle and Aaron failed to provide leadership and the people were ashamed before their enemies? If there was a battle, then Joshua was right when he said, “בַּמִּלְחָמָה, בְּמִחְנֶה”. However, it may also indicate the confusion that might have erupted in the camp among the people. It can be interpreted that some people were in support of the destruction of the calf while others were against and possibly the two groups clashed. It is interesting as observed by Propp (2008:562) that the Hebrew word translated as derision, “*Šimšâ*” may literally mean “whispering” (cf. *šemeš* in Job 4:12); an “upriser (*qām*)” is an enemy.” Hamilton (2011:550) shows that the word is used to indicate a message reaching someone’s ears. From this perspective, the passage can be understood not as indicating that enemies were not present, but should they be whispered to, it will be shameful to Israel. Propp (2008:562) further argues that the “people’s revelry contains something distasteful beyond Calf worship, which would have struck Israel’s polytheistic enemies as perfectly normal.” From this perspective the revelry has a sexual connotation which is shameful to the children of Israel.

Verse 26: Moses stood on the שַׁעַר (gate) to prevent people from escaping (Propp 2008:562). The statement attributed to Moses, “מִי לַיהוָה אֵלָי” indicates the war or division among the people, some for the idea of having the calf and some on Moses’ side against the idea of having the calf. Fretheim (1991:289) notes that “this is not a call for theological judgment or community loyalty; it is a call for commitment to Yahweh alone... The issue is no longer whether they had participated in idolatry but whether they were now willing to declare themselves for Yahweh.” In this view, the people can be understood to have rejected Yahweh as they did not respond to Moses



except for the Levites. Additionally, they reject Moses as their leader by not heading to his call. Their intentions of replacing are made clear. All the sons of Levi are depicted as the ones who gathered on the side of Moses.

Verses 27-28: After siding with Moses, the Levites are instructed to go through the camp and kill their brothers, friends and neighbours. As observed by Hamilton (2011:550) “earlier God has promised not to annihilate Israel in response to Moses’s intercession, but now that does not mean that all is forgotten and forgiven.” Moses makes an unverifiable quotation that Yahweh instructed the killing. He is depicted in apophetic style, all along Yahweh has been talking to him but now the message has come in an unexplainable way (Propp 2008:563). Hamilton (2011:550) argues that those who were killed were the ringleaders. However, the passage does not explicitly say that ringleaders were killed. As earlier mentioned in the analysis of verse 20, following Bruckner’s (2008:286) view “this resembles a trial by ordeal”, it can be argued that those who were killed were those found guilty after drinking the gold-water mixture. In a similar line of thought Dozeman (2009:699) argues that “the water ordeal develops the theme of individual guilt. It provides the means for identifying which people demanded the calf in the opening section.” From this perspective, the killing can be understood not to be random but of identified individuals. The Levites did as Moses had commanded and killed about three thousand men. The three thousand people can be argued to have been the ringleaders identified by the “trial by ordeal”.

Why is the same Moses who prayed that the people should not be annihilated order the Levites to kill others? Was he trying to establish a nation of the Levites? According to Fretheim (1991:289)

for this juncture in Israel’s life, when its entire future is at stake, radical sin is believed to call for radical measures; continued life for the community is believed to be possible only through the death of some. Declining Moses’ call to stand for Yahweh is not an open matter for Israel. The relationship with God even takes priority over all other relationships.

Meyer (1983:165) argues that “there is no denying the harshness of the judgment, but



no joy is expressed over the slaughter. Rather, emphasis is placed on the high cost at which the Levites have become a special class of Yahweh's servants among the people." In this regard, it can be argued as Coggins (2000:119) puts it that the "main purpose is apparently to validate the role of the Levites... these verses offer us an extreme picture of what is involved in being committed to the Lord's service." In this way, the Levites are portrayed to have put the relationship with Yahweh above all other relationships.

Verse 29: The killing of the people is described to have been the act of self-ordination to the service of the Lord and a blessing. Fretheim (1991:289) argues that the Levites "by their actions they demonstrated that they are suitable for leadership positions in Yahweh's service." However, Hamilton (2011:552) observes that, "some contemporary writers are offended by the content of chap. 32, for it seems to validate massacre and other horrors, all in the name of one's religion and all done with God's blessing." O'Mathúna (2003:91) notes that "this text has been central to debates over what constitutes a "just" war. However, this incident involved a direct command from God for a specific situation, making its application to modern situations questionable."

Propp (2008:564) proposes three possible interpretations of the phrase "at the cost of a son or brother". The *first* proposal is that "the Levites are enjoined to perform some sort of initiatory ritual upon one another, since as yet there is no senior priest to consecrate them." This is from the understanding that no high priest was consecrated yet. The *second* is that "'fill the hand' does not here refer to ordination but simply to sacrifice. If so, Moses is commanding the Levites to make atoning offerings for their sinful brethren, the Israelites." In this view, Moses' instruction can be understood as an instruction for the Levites to make atonement for their sinful brothers. The *third* and most likely "*bibnô ûb(ə) 'āhîw* simply means 'with/through one's fellow Israelites.' The slain sinners play the role assigned to the 'Filling Ram' of chap. 29, the priestly ordination, whose blood is applied to the new priests and their garment." This is from the depiction that the Levites are given a leadership position because of killing. This can be understood in light of the view that the passage was to validate the role of Levites as priests (Coggins 2000:119).

Verse 30: Moses goes up the Mount to the Lord with the view of making atonement for the people. According to Bruckner (2008:289) “this atonement (or ‘covering’) had nothing to do with the blood or sacrifice. Moses’ best restoration was by means of God’s friendship and through conversation.” This is from the understanding that atonement involved the shading of blood (see Lev. 17:11). One can quickly connect the killing that had just been done with the atonement mentioned here. This may be interpreted as human sacrifice. However, the atonement here was by way of intercession or pleading with Yahweh. This was based on the relationship which Moses had with Yahweh. Moses is depicted as able to talk to Yahweh one on one. In this way the passage emphasises the role of Moses as an intercessor (Sarna 2000:573). Nahan (2007:182) argues that atonement involved two goats, one which was killed and the other — the *hazel* — was released in the wilderness with the blood of the one which was killed. The killing in this passage lacks these features of a typical atonement sacrifice. In this regard the killing in this passage cannot be understood as sacrifice for atonement. The atonement here can be understood as intercession by Moses for the forgiveness of the people (Bruckner 2008:289). From this perspective, Moses is depicted as a leader who cares for the people’s relationship with Yahweh as he wanted to ensure that they are forgiven. However, he was not sure of what the outcome would be as implied in the use of the word “perhaps”, Hamilton (2011:553) rightly observes that the use of perhaps here “introduce a note of uncertainty about how God was going to respond.” This gives a picture that Moses is depicted as one who would talk to Yahweh, but it was not automatic that Yahweh would grant him every request. As Hamilton (2011:554) puts it “God is gracious and merciful, but his forgiveness cannot be presumed, as if he is duty bound to remove our sins anytime and anywhere.”

Verses 31-32: Unlike in verses 7-8 where Yahweh is the one who informed Moses about the sin of the people, it is Moses who is now telling Yahweh the sin which the people have committed. Moses said to the Lord “please these people have committed a great sin; they have made for themselves a god of gold.” As pointed out by Propp (2008:564) “having exacted vengeance against Israel on God’s behalf, now Moses represents Israel before the aggrieved Deity.” While Moses reminded God of the covenant and the perception the Egyptians were going to have of Yahweh in the first

intercession, here he puts his name at stake; “if you will only forgive their sin-but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written”. Moses as a leader demonstrates love for the people by putting the people first. But then what book is he referring to? Byrne (2017:673 cf. Meyers 2005:261) observes that, there are three different kinds of heavenly books that are recorded in the Old Testament. The first is the book of destinies of people (Ps. 139:16); the second is the book of remembrance (Mal. 3:16) and the third is the book of life (Ps. 69:16). I am of the view that the author was referring to the book of remembrance which recorded those who revered the Lord. This is because Moses is depicted as one who revered Yahweh and spoke to him. The author seems to be aware of the importance of the figure of Moses in this history and portrays that he was ready to give it up if Yahweh could not forgive the people. From this perspective it can be argued that Moses referred to the book of remembrance in which Yahweh kept the track of what people did. This implied that Moses was ready to die if the people are not forgiven; he offered his life as a ransom (Propp 2008:564). In this way the author presents the understanding that the future of the history of God’s people or the future of the book of Yahweh could be jeopardised if Yahweh does not forgive the people. However, Yahweh does not grant either of Moses’ requests.

Verse 33: God’s answer to Moses indicates that Yahweh has not forgiven the people

“מִי אֲשֶׁר חָטָא-לִי , אֶמְחָאוּ מִסֵּפֶרִי.”

According to Coggins (2000:120) “whoever is blotted out of the book will simply disappear from human record. Moses will not be blotted out, but the sinners among the people, presumably in particular the three thousand victims of the Levites, will.” This interpretation supports the killing of the three thousand people by Moses. However, this passage can also be understood as meaning that Yahweh will have nothing to do with the people who have sinned. He was going to blot them from his book. The relationship between him and the people who have sinned was going to be ended. This view seems to indicate that Yahweh was still going to annihilate the people because of the sin. Yahweh was going to blot out the names of sinners from the book, but the specific time when this was going to happen is not given. As noted by Hamilton (2011:556)

it appears that while Moses is eminently successful with his intercession recorded in 32:11-13, he is not successful with his intercession in vv. 31-32. To the first

prayer, God says, 'Yes!' To the second prayer, God says 'No!' He will *naham* but not *nasa*. Israel will have continued existence, but not immediate expiation, at least not yet.

Verses 34-35: As noted by Master (2022:590) the passage “reveals that the God of Sinai forgives, but that he also remembers. His forgiveness is an expression of mercy, and his remembrance guarantees judgment for the disobedient and yet, ultimately, surety for all of God's promises.” Furthermore, it presents the idea that God can punish the people but would not annihilate them because of the covenant with the Patriarchs. This indicates that the covenant with Abraham was an important commitment for both the people and Yahweh. As a faithful God, Yahweh would not abandon his plan to make a nation from the people he chose for himself. However, he would punish the people collectively as suggested by sending a plague and would get rid of some people by killing them as suggested by the killing of the three thousand. Yahweh instructs Moses to lead the people to the place he spoke about, however, the angel and not Yahweh was to go before them. While Yahweh rescinded his desire to punish the people by annihilating them after Moses' intercession in verse 14, here he is depicted to have told Moses that he was going to punish them when the day of punishment comes. This day is not specified, and the kind of punishment is not given either. However, verse 35 notes that “the Lord sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf-the one that Aaron made.” It is evident in Moses' first intercession that Yahweh is depicted as a God who forgave the people for the sin of the golden calf. In the second, he is depicted as the God who punished the people for the sin of the golden calf. In this way the author holds in tension two attributes of Yahweh in one narrative.

It is evident that the passage brings out the presentation that Yahweh approached the golden calf differently from Moses. Firstly, Moses calls the act a great sin but Yahweh calls it corruption (v. 7). Secondly Moses punishes the people by killing and does so hurriedly (vv. 25-28) while Yahweh's punishment depicted as futuristic (vv 34-35). Verses 34 and 35 only comprises a promise of future vengeance and a vague mention of Yahweh 'striking' (*ngp*) the Israelites, and these have no details of the time, location, amplitude and nature of the plague. As Amzallag (2020:211) has pointed out “it is abnormally weak and delayed. It does not eradicate the impression of YHWH's

disengagement from the Israelites consecutive to the event.” Therefore, it can be argued that by punishing the people Moses was attempting to palliate the delayed divine chastisement. Amzallag (2020:211) has further observed that “this divine passivity contrasts with the mention of 24,000 Israelites ‘killed by YHWH’ after the orgiastic festivities with the Midianites (Num. 25:8–9).”

Bruckner (2008:288) has observed that

God’s second and third decisions concerned whether God’s presence would go among the people (ch. 33) and whether God would forgive them (ch. 34). Exodus 32 ends with a preview of these issues. In both cases, the preliminary answer was ‘NO.’ God’s angel would go before them, and the Lord would not forgive the guilty.

### 3.5 Main Characters

Exodus 32 in the final form has got four main characters namely, the people, Aaron, Moses and Yahweh. To understand the golden calf, it is important to understand the depiction of each of the main characters and their role in the narrative.

- ***The People***

The people are depicted as the initiators of the situation which results in the making of the golden calf. In verse 1 they are depicted as impatient with the absence of Moses. They are impatient with the absence of Moses and which for the gods to lead them. This is evident in the statement “as for this Moses the man who brought us out of Egypt, we know not what has become of him.” Secondly, they rise against Aaron and order him to make them gods who will lead them. The person Moses left to lead the people is now being controlled by the people.

After the making of the calf the people say, “these are your gods Israel who brought you out of Egypt” (v. 4). In a literal sense, the people point to the calf as God. They echo the words they told Aaron in verse 1 “makes us gods”. This indicates that the idea of gods comes from the people. However, linking the image to their history “who brought you out of Egypt” suggest that for the people, the image was an image of Yahweh the god who brought them out of Egypt. Some commentators argue that the people’s words “these are your Gods Israel who brought you out of Egypt” indicate that the people were attributing their deliverance from Egypt to the calf. Therefore, the calf to the people was

a replacement of Yahweh (Meyer 1983:153). As will be seen in the detail analysis this view is incongruent with the people's understanding of who brought them out of Egypt.

In verse 6 they are said to raise up early on the day of the festival and gave burnt offerings and sacrifices of well-being, they sat to eat and drink and rose up to joke around/revel. In all this Aaron who was later ordained as priest (Lv. 8-9) is not mentioned suggesting that the people had taken the role of the priest and were offerings/sacrifices. The whole ordeal is out of control such that it amounts to joking about. It must be noted that the sacrifices here were not sanctioned by Yahweh neither was the festival. This implies that the people were no longer following Yahweh but their own/Aaron's human desire.

In verse 25 the people are said to have run wild after the destruction of the golden calf. The narrator depicts the people as protesting the destruction of the calf. This shows their determination to follow their way despite the return of Moses. In this way the narrator emphasises the level of destruction to the relationship between the people and Moses. Implicitly, the narrator also emphasises level of destruction to the relationship between the people and Yahweh.

- **Aaron**

Aaron was the leader who Moses left in charge of the people before going up the mountain with Joshua. When confronted by the people in verse 1 to make them gods, Aaron is depicted as not showing any resistance. Perhaps it can be argued that Aaron was trying to be peaceful with the people. The people request for gods, but what manner of god and the material of making the god is the idea of Aaron. The golden calf is solely the idea of Aaron. As noted by Coggins (2000:116) Aaron in this narrative "is presented not just as inadequate leader but also as a rather absurd figure." He directly acts contrary to the commandment in Exodus 20:4-6 which forbids making images of any kind. Meyer (1983:152) argues that for Aaron the golden calf was a symbol of Yahweh's divine presence just like the Cherubim in contrast with the view of the people who called the calf god. However, I have to point out that the idea of the golden calf was not sanctioned by Yahweh; therefore, Aaron was acting in his own capacity representing his will and not the will of Yahweh. Recently Byrne (2017:593) has

emphasised that “Moses alone was the mediator between God and the people; he alone was the revelatory vehicle through which the LORD communicated his Law.” Aaron was not the revelatory vehicle through which the Lord communicated; therefore, his act was all together not representing Yahweh. It can be argued that in trying to create peace with the people Aaron was putting the relationship with Yahweh at stake.

Aaron further made an altar for the calf and called for a festival to the Lord. The call for a fest to Lord indicates that for Aaron the image was a representation of Yahweh. As Meyer (1983:153) argues, by calling for a festival to the Lord Aaron was “attempting to redirect their attention to the source of their deliverance” in response to the people who referred to the calf as gods. Meyer (1983:152) argues that for Aaron the calf was “a symbol of the divine presences, comparable to the winged creatures which Moses has just been told are to stand on either side of the ark (25:19-20). According to Hamilton (2011:532) “his decision to proclaim, ‘a festival to the lord tomorrow’ (v. 5b) is not an attempt to temper the Israelites’ egregious sin as much as it is an act of baptizing blasphemy.” For Hamilton (2011:532) Aaron was depicted as affirming the words of the people than redirecting them. However, I am of the view that Aaron was at least trying to portray the picture that what they were doing was not replacing Yahweh. As indicated in the call for the festival for Yahweh. Perhaps the problem with Aaron is that what he was doing was not sanctioned by Yahweh himself.

When confronted by Moses in verses 21-23 Aaron behaves in a way that is similar to the behaviour of Adam when he was confronted by God after eating the forbidden fruit (Gn. 2:10-12). He pushes the blame to the people. This seems to point to the depiction that he was trying to point the people to Yahweh, but they were adamant. As observed by Meyer (1983:157) Aaron “begins with an echo of Moses’ words to Yahweh: ‘let not the anger of my lord burn hot’ (32:22). The irony is, however, that when Moses spoke like that, he was interceding for Israel, while Aaron is blaming Israel and making excuses for himself.” From this perspective the Aaron and Moses are depicted differently.

- **Moses**

Moses is depicted as creating peace people between Yahweh and the people and



among the people. Twice he plays the role of an intercessor for the people (vv. 11-15; 32). In verses 25-29 Moses orders the killing of people who were running wild. It can be argued that the idea behind the killing was to stop the people from running wild. It was to bring peace and harmony among the people in the camp. Unlike Aaron Moses would not follow everything which the people wanted. He showed the will to follow Yahweh's commandments by destroying the golden calf. For Moses the golden calf was "a great sin" (vv. 21, 31). Despite the people committing the sin Moses was willing to plead with Yahweh to forgive them even over his life (v. 32). The goal for Moses was to keep the covenant relationship between Yahweh and the people which he traces back to the patriarchs alive. Additionally, he was to keep relationships among the people peaceful.

- ***Yahweh***

Yahweh's view of the golden calf can be seen in verse 9; "I have seen these people here and behold a hard necked people they are." For Yahweh the golden calf shows how stubborn the people were. It is an indication that they were not willing to live by his terms and conditions are expressed in the statement "they have been quick to turn aside from the way I commanded them". It can be argued that the statement does not point to one particular commandment but all the commandments. This can be seen in the use of the word "way" which can be described as summarising the commandments. The law is about the way God wants the people to relate with him, one another and with other creatures. For Yahweh the sin of the golden calf was more about the people wanting to do things in their own way rather than in his way. While Yahweh relents from annihilating the people for this, he certainly punishes them. As noted by Gerstenberger (2002:274) Israel must "concentrate on its God, who has made his will known — that is a commandment for self-preservation." The will of Yahweh as revealed by him was to be the expected way of worshiping him and not as revealed by Aaron and the people. This emphasises the understanding the exodus is an account of the self-disclosure of God (Johnstone 1990:12).

### **3.6 Authorship and Dating**

Scholarly debate on the authorship of the Pentateuch in general and Exodus in particular, revolves around the Mosaic authorship and the Documentary Hypothesis. Though Mosaic authorship is the traditional view, the Documentary Hypothesis has



gained widespread acceptance in the scholarly world. The Mosaic authorship holds that the Pentateuch was written by Moses on account of it been attributed to him in other books especially the New Testament. On the other hand, the Documentary Hypothesis holds that the Pentateuch is a product of several writers and editors who redacted the documents from different sources to come up with the text as we have it in the final form (Schmidt 2015:44-48). The sources are usually classified in four major categories as (P) Priestly, (E) Elohist, (J) Yahwist and (D) Deuteronomistic (see Dozeman 2017:243, cf. Collins 2004:49). In this dissertation, I will accept the basic ideas of the Documentary Hypothesis.

Dozeman et al (2014:33) note that the instructions “regarding the construction of the sanctuary (Ex. 25-31) and the building report (Ex. 35-40) are part of P (or its expansions). But P is also a prominent textual layer in Exodus 1-24 and provides the basic structure for the exodus narrative as a whole.” As for Exodus 32-34 Fretheim (1991:279) notes that it “has been informed by various streams of traditions and a number of redactions (see Deut. 9:12-29 for a parallel version), but no scholarly agreement has been reached as to their identity.” According to Smith (2011:211) “the story is largely E or JE with a handful of priestly additions apparent. Despite the difficulty posed for analysis, the complexity of this section with its varied traditions is witness to the importance attached to this point in Israel’s covenant with God.” Recently Friedman (2017:229) has highlighted that Exodus 32 is generally an E document. From this perspective, it is argued that Exodus 32-34 is a non-Priestly text but has some indications of Priestly and Deuteronomistic elements. As observed by Propp (2008:148 cf. Johnstone 1990:68) “Yahweh’s speeches in 32: 7-13 manifest D like language: *sihet* ‘ruin’ (cf. Deut. 9:12), *maher* ‘quickly’ (Deut. 4:27, 9:3,12, Josh. 2:5); *saru min hadderek* ‘depart from the way’ (Deut. 9:12, 11:26).” Exodus 32:14 shows some characteristics of J. The depiction of Yahweh as having a human-like feeling of regret contrasts with other texts in which he is depicted as more transcendent, and these differences are the result of different sources. In this text and other Pentateuchal texts, the depiction of Yahweh in an anthropomorphic manner is attributed to J (Nyasha 2012:65). According to Childs (1974:559) “Exodus 32 reflects one basic source — probably J — to which there have been expansions.” It has to be noted here as pointed out by Ska (2006:145) that “along

with Elohist, the Yahwist has lost credit. The features of his face have become ever blurrier.” The features of the two sources are difficult to distinguish. It is more ideal to refer to them as non-P source.

As observed by Hamilton (2011:529-558) Exodus 32 has a number of inconsistencies. Firstly verses. 3 and 4 clearly indicate that Aaron is the one who made the golden calf. However, verse 5 opens with the phrase “when Aaron saw” this suggests that Aaron was not the one who made the golden calf, he only saw it after it was made and made an altar before it. Secondly the depiction of Moses as having learnt of the golden calf from Yahweh in verses. 6-7 is inconsistent with his depiction in verse.19 where Moses is only aware of the calf by seeing it. Thirdly, Moses’ act of ordering the Levites to kill the people in verse 27 is inconsistent with his prayer not to destroy them in verses 11-14. Why should he do the same thing that he requested Yahweh not to do? Has he forgotten that the Egyptians will say the very words he said that Yahweh took them out of Egypt only to kill them in the wilderness? Additionally in chapter 32, Moses was meeting Yahweh from the mountain; however, chapter 33:7-11 indicates that he was meeting him from the tent of meeting outside the camp. Further Joshua in chapter 32 would remain somewhere on the mountain as Moses meets Yahweh on top but in chapter 33 Joshua would not leave the tent of meeting. This implies that Joshua would be present when Yahweh was speaking to Moses. These inconsistencies point to the different traditions in the text and multiple redactions. For instance, the notion of the tent of meeting outside the camp was E tradition while the notion of the mountain of God is largely P (Sommer 2009:82). This indicates that Exodus 32–34 is a combination of narratives from different sources. As noted by Meyers (2005:258) “it thus seems certain that several sources, which no longer can be isolated, have been incorporated into the present narrative, probably by priestly redactors.”

From the foregoing discussion, Exodus 32-34 is a non-Priestly passage which is surrounded by Priestly passages. However, as observed by Smith (2011:211) “it may be viewed in terms of the ancient Middle Eastern pattern of building stories, which interrupt the construction project with an insurrection that must be subdued.” In this view, the story of the golden calf can be understood as a non-Priestly text deliberately placed in the middle of the Priestly story of the construction of the tabernacle as the place where

the Ark of the Covenant was to be kept. In this way it serves as warning to the possibility of breaching the covenant and the way of worship propagated by P. The Golden Calf is, thus, depicted as an uprising which should be overcome as it is a threat to the covenant. This seems to point to the presentation of the Golden Calf narrative as tailored to counter a practice that threatened the covenant. In this regard the tabernacle cult is depicted as the normative cult and the Golden Cult as the defiant cult. It must be mentioned here that the temple in Jerusalem can be understood as an archetype of the tabernacle. The golden bulls are associated with the cult in the Northern Kingdom. This presents the picture that the Southern Cult is depicted as the normative cult while the Northern Cult is depicted as the defiant cult.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the image of the calf/ bull was accepted in the northern cult. Its depiction as a great sin in this passage suggests that this text was edited later. As argued by Propp (2008:561) "Exodus 32 is probably a homily on the demise of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, which worshiped before gold calves and eventually suffered conquest, deportation, dispersion and assimilation." From this perspective I am of the view that the text was redacted at the time of Josiah's reforms to justify the destruction of the temples in Dan and Bethel along with the images of the bull and other images like the Asherah (2 Ki. 22-23, 2 Chr. 34). Additionally, it can be argued that the text was also polemically justifying the capturing of the Northern Kingdom by Assyria in 722 BCE. This is in the sense that the passage points to the possible rejection of the people who "worship image" by Yahweh. The taking of the Israelites into exile implies loss of the Promised Land and translates to breaking of the covenant. From this perspective, the story of the golden calf can be understood as redacted to polemically indicate that the erection of the bulls in the northern kingdom was against the covenantal obligations.

Other scholars date this passage from the exilic to the post-exilic period. According to Meyers (2005:258) "the overall message that people can sin and yet have God renew the covenant with them was particularly relevant to the exilic or postexilic community in which the Torah literature was organized." From this perspective it can be argued that the text was meant to give hope to the exilic community that God will renew the covenant with them despite breaching it and

God allowing them to be in exilic. This is from the understanding that God renewed the covenant with the people who abrogated it by making the golden calf. It can further be argued that during the exile and post-exilic period worship was aniconic as the temple was destroyed and temple articles looted. Therefore, by condemning the golden calf, the redactors were propagating aniconic worship of Yahweh and the possibility of worshiping Yahweh while in exile. This view re-echoes the depiction of Yahweh as a transcendent God who is not resident in the tabernacle or temple. At the same time, the surrounding context which propagates the construction of the tabernacle in light of the exilic and post-exilic Jews can be understood as giving hope of the possibility of rebuilding the temple. This is in the sense that the Tabernacle is depicted as pointing to the Jerusalem temple and the golden calf as a temporary setback in the covenant promise that is eventually overcome. From this perspective, the people going into exile as a result of their sin can be understood as a temporary setback just like the sin of the golden calf was temporary. The people, therefore, would find hope by reflecting back in time for a possibility of renewed hope despite experiencing a threat to the covenant and the possibility of losing their inheritance. However, Van der Toorn (2009:92) has observed that “in the pre-exilic view of Deuteronomy all legitimate priests are by definition Levites, and all Levites are priests; in the post-exilic view of Chronicles, Levites are by definition non-priests.” From this perspective it can be argued that the ordination of the Levites to priesthood in verse 29 point to a pre-exilic view of Deuteronomy in which all legitimate priests are by definition Levites. In this regard the passage fits well to a pre-exilic dating as post-exilic dating would contradict the post exilic understanding of Levites and Priests.

In summary, the story of the golden calf was originally a non-P narrative but was redacted by P and D redactors. Firstly, it was edited to counter Jeroboam’s bulls and justify the capturing of Israel. Secondly it was redacted at the time of Josiah to consolidate the centralisation of the cult to Jerusalem and justify the fall of the North Kingdom. Lastly it is possible to argue for late dating around the exile or post exilic period. This is because the passage has an idea of aniconic worship

of Yahweh which was prevalent after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. However, the definition of the post-exilic priests suggests otherwise.

### **3.7 The Relationship Between the Golden Calf and Jeroboam's Bulls**

As noted by Fretheim (1991:278-280) the final redaction of this passage "is not socially or historically disinterested, the discernment of the setting is difficult. This raises the question of the relationship of this material with 1 Kings 12:25-33 (cf. Ps 106:19-20; Hos. 8:5)." Similarly, Coggins (2000:116) has observed that "it is important that this episode should be read in conjunction with the striking story in 1 Kings 12: 25-33, where Jeroboam king of Israel is pictured as acting in a way very like what is set here."

In discussing the relationship of these two passages I will first give a brief background about Jeroboam's bulls. As observed by Hayes (2012:224) Jeroboam was the first king of the Northern Kingdom who came into power after the death of Solomon in 922 BCE. Yahweh divided the kingdom because Solomon was unfaithful to him and worshiped idols (1 ki.11:6-11). Therefore, as recorded in 1 Kings 11:31-32; 12:20, Yahweh gave ten tribes to the kingship of Jeroboam and one to Rehoboam who was from the lineage of David. Yahweh would not completely remove David's household from the throne because of his servant David (1ki. 11:13). It must be noted that the people enthroned Jeroboam in protest of the heavy taxes which Rehoboam had imposed on them (1 ki. 12:14-20). The division of the monarch created rivalry between the two kingdoms, and they were constantly at war. As noted by Boadt (1984:293) "now there were two kingdoms a northern one which called itself Israel, after the old tribal customs, and southern one, still loyal to the house of David and Solomon...Thus begun a period of rivalry between the two parts of the Israelite people." This indicates that the passage has a background of political tension between the Northern and the Southern kingdoms which has effects on the religious life of the people in the two kingdoms. 1 Kings 15:6 records that the war between the two kingdoms continued even during the time of Abijam who succeeded Rehoboam.

As observed by Bright (1981: 236) "Jeroboam had the task of creating a state where none existed. He had at the beginning neither capital nor administrative machinery, nor military organization, nor — what was most important in ancient world — official cult. All

had to be supplied.” As recorded in 1 Kings 12, Jeroboam built high places for worship and made two golden bulls which he placed in Dan and Bethel to prevent the people in the Northern Kingdom from going to Jerusalem for festivals. He also appointed priests from among all the people who were not Levites. Jeroboam was trying to consolidate the new splinter kingdom. As noted by Meyers (2005:225) in the Ancient Near East “the temple (or tabernacle) as an institution was inextricably intertwined with the political and economic organisation of the community in which it was located.... Indeed, the very existence of the temple legitimized the existence of the political community.”

Considering this view, it can be argued that, though the final form of the text condemns erecting of temple in the north and the placing of the calves at Dan and Bethel, Jeroboam’s decision was inevitable to legitimise the kingdom. As noted by Bright (1981:237) “Jeroboam’s most significant action was his establishment of an official state cult to rival of the Jerusalem (1 Kings 12:26-33). He had to do this, the theological legitimacy, which ancient kingship required was peculiar in this case.” Additionally, one of the major features of the Jerusalem temple cult was the celebration of Yahweh’s eternal covenant with David. This was a threat to Jeroboam as people going to Jerusalem would be celebrating his rival kingship.

Boadt (1984:293) notes that there were border wars between the two kingdoms. Therefore, it can be argued that it was not safe for people to travel from the north to the Jerusalem temple in south for the festival. The people would risk being caught up in the battle.

The first relationship between the narrative of the golden calf in Exodus 32 and the golden bulls in 1 Kings 12 can be seen from the authorship of the two narratives. According to DeVries (2003:161) what can be said about the possible authorship of 1 Kings 12:25-32 “is that it surely comes from Judah and reflects a strong Jerusalemite bias. With respect to the series of complaints listed in vv. 30b-32b, it can be conjectured that they are not only from Judah but from a definite group of sacral functionaries known as the Levites.” As observed by Rogerson (2012:35)

writing in the ancient world was an activity mainly confined to a professional class located in two powerful institutions, the temple and the royal court. The traditions out

of which the Old Testament grew were most likely by scribes trained in either or both of these institutions located in the northern kingdom, Israel, and the southern kingdom, Judah.

Levites were part of the class of writers at the temple (see Van der Toorn 2009:90).

Soza (2005:545) observes that “the initial introduction of Jeroboam in 1 King’s narrative is by no means negative. In particular 1 Kings 11:28 designates him as a ‘doer of work and might a ‘might man’ probably in physical and military way.” The negative presentation of Jeroboam indicates that the passage was from the South but about a leader in the Northern Kingdom. If the passage was from the Northern Kingdom, it would have a positive impression of Jeroboam. This is on account that Jeroboam is depicted as a “saviour” who saved the people from the oppressive leadership of Rehoboam and Solomon. As noted by Hayes (2012:218)

the northern kingdom that rejected the Davidide rulers de-emphasized Zion, with its Davidic orientation, and emphasized Sinai. By contrast, the southern kingdom of Judah, where a member of the house of David reigned until the destruction, emphasized Zion and its attendant royal ideology.

The royal ideology can be seen in this passage’s emphasis on centralisation of the cult to Jerusalem. Further, Jeroboam’s kingship is depicted to have come from Yahweh as he was told by the prophet Ahijah and the reason for tearing the kingdom into two was Solomon’s apostate of worshiping foreign gods (1 Ki. 11:29-35). From this perspective it can be argued that Jeroboam did not intend the calves to be a symbol of foreign gods as he was aware of the consequences of such an act. As noted in the previous topic the priests from the Southern Kingdom who are probably the ones who wrote the narrative of Jeroboam’s golden bulls, are the ones who edited the narrative of the golden calf.

The identification of the Levites as possible authors leads us to the tension between Jeroboam and the Levites (see DeVries 2003:161). It is clear from the passage that there was strong tension between Jeroboam and the Levites. This is because the passage indicates that Jeroboam is reported to have appointed priests who were not Levites from among all the people to serve at the temples and high places (1 Ki.



12:31). This indicates dissatisfaction from the Levites who portray the act of Jeroboam as sin.

Van der Toorn (2009:92) observes that “the position of the Levites is a classic problem in biblical scholarship and the subject of numerous studies.” This is because Deuteronomy speaks of Levitical Priest while Chronicles differentiate between Levites and Priests. Van der Toorn (2009:85) further observes that “Prosopographical studies indicate that there were close ties between the priestly dynasty at Jerusalem and the royal family.” The Levites were known to be agents of David; it is probably for this reason that Jeroboam could not trust them with the responsibility of being priests in the Northern Kingdom. It can be argued that the Levites in the north wrote this account and passed it to the high priest in the south (see DeVries 2003:161-162). Van der Toorn (2009:93) argues that Priesthood is further complicated by the observation that “Ezekiel took a very different position towards the Levites. In his visionary design of the new temple (Ez. 40-48) Ezekiel distinguishes between ‘the Levitical priests descended from Zadok’ (Ez. 44:15) and the other Levites.” In Ezekiel’s view the Zadokite priests were responsible for maintaining the service of the temple at the time Israel went astray. In this they are depicted to have earned the right to act as sole priests.

The tension between Jeroboam and the Levites is reflected in the golden calf story of Exodus. This is in the sense that the golden calf narrative seeks to legitimatise or critique the Priesthood of the Levites. This can be seen in Exodus 12:29 where they are said to be duly ordained to the service of the Lord and not any other tribe as was the case with Jeroboam’s appointments. The presentation of the Levites as ordained to priesthood in Exodus 32 can be understood as a reflection of their rejection from Priesthood by Jeroboam. In Exodus 32 they are depicted as defending the right worship of Yahweh by siding with Moses who was against the golden calf. Their depiction in 1 Kings 12:29 as rejected by Jeroboam who appointed priests from among all the people who were not Levites at the time when he made the two bulls, suggests that they were rejected for refusing to be part of the making of the bulls. From this perspective they are depicted as defending the right way of worshiping Yahweh. In this way the manner in which the Levites are depicted shows that the two passages are related. This further indicates that the flow of inner text linkage flows from the Jeroboam narrative to the

golden calf narrative.

It must be noted that 1 Kings 13 links Jeroboam's innovations to Josiah's reforms. An unnamed prophet is reported to have prophesied that Josiah was going to be born and was going to destroy the altars which Jeroboam had erected (vv. 1-3). While Ahijah is mentioned by name, the two prophets in this narrative are only referred to as the prophet from Judah and an old prophet. It can be speculated that this part was a later invention that was added to the story to depict Josiah's reforms as foretold long before him. As observed by Sweeney (2005:575) "unlike David who committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband Uriah, killed in a bid to cover up his actions (2 Sam. 10-12; cf. 1 Kgs. 15:5), Josiah is linked to Moses and Joshua." The destruction of the golden calf by Moses can also be linked to Josiah's reforms. This is because just like Moses Josiah destroyed the images and killed the priests who served at these places. As observed by Collins (2004:140) "the centralization of worship was a major innovation in the reform of King Josiah in 621 b.c.e. and is associated with the promulgation of the laws of Deuteronomy. The Priestly source, as reflected in Exodus 26–40, seems to presuppose this centralization."

The other relationship can be seen from the similarities in the texts. Avigdor et al (2012:104) have rightly highlighted the following similarities between the two narratives:

- Both stories refer to the calf as the "molten calf" (Ex. 32:4, 8; Dt. 9:12, 16; 1 Ki. 14:9; 2 Ki. 17:16).
- Declarations following the making of the calves use almost identical language. The Israelites in the wilderness call out, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (Ex. 32:8); Jeroboam tells the people, "Here is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt" (1 Ki. 12:28; note the striking resemblance to the first commandment: "I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt" [Ex. 20:2; Dt. 5:6]).
- An altar was built near the calf (Ex. 32:5; 1 Ki. 12:32), and sacrifices are offered on it in the ensuing celebrations (Ex. 32:6; 1 Ki. 12:32).
- Like Aaron, Jeroboam also serves as priest (Ex. 32:2–6; 1 Ki. 12:33, 13:1).
- The names of Jeroboam's two sons — Nadab, who ruled after his father,

and Abijah who died in childhood (1 Ki. 14:1, 20, 15:25) — remind us of Aaron’s two elder sons, Nadab and Abihu, who died because of their sin (Abihu and Abijah are spelled identically except for an added vav and he; Lv. 10:1–2).

The verbal links in these passages suggest that they are interdependent in some way. Either the writer of Exodus was aware of 1 Kings 12 or the other way round. It has been argued that the oral tradition of the golden calf from the north did not condemn the making of the golden calf as it was an accepted image of Yahweh just like the Cherubim in the south (Avigdor et al 2012:104 -105). In this view, Jeroboam’s act, in line with the northern history was going back to their acceptable way of worship. He was not inventing a new way of worshipping Yahweh but was rather getting back to the old practice of the people in the north. As observed by Avigdor et al (2012:105) it is evident,

that the prophets who prophesied in the Kingdom of Israel saw nothing amiss with the inclusion of calves in their cultic rituals: neither Elijah, the great enemy of Baal, Elisha, his disciple, nor the majority of Israel’s prophets raised their voices against the calves. The exception is the prophet Hosea.

Similarly, Amzallag (2020:209) has noted that

in the way they are described in Kings, Jeroboam’s golden calves are not considered idolatrous by the author of Kings, but rather as inappropriate worship of YHWH. This view is confirmed in 1 Kings 12:27–28, which explains that the setting of a golden calf in Bet-El was intended to challenge the worship of YHWH in the Jerusalem temple, not to abolish it.

This indicates that probably until at the time of Josiah who had the agenda of centralising the cult to Jerusalem, the calves were not seen as idolatry in the Northern Kingdom. To consolidate the agenda of centralisation of the cult to Jerusalem the redactors had to edit the history of the Northern Kingdom to portray as idolatry the very reason which stopped them from going to Jerusalem. Further, the leader who spearheaded their revolt was depicted as “heretical”. The best way to do this was to go back to their respected leader in history, Moses and depict him as having spoken against it. From this perspective the juxtaposition of Aaron and Moses in Exodus 32

can be seen as polemically juxtaposing Jeroboam and Moses. Moses in the final form of Exodus 32 defended the right way of worshipping Yahweh and destroyed the golden calf, thereby averting the destruction of the people. On the contrary, Jeroboam created the bulls and did not turn back to Yahweh; hence, he brought the downfall of his kingship and punishment of the people. In addition, while Moses ordained the Levites for defending the right way of worship, Jeroboam is depicted to have done the opposite by rejecting the Levites and appointing Priests from among the people. In this way the oral tradition of the Exodus story was edited to make it a polemic against Jeroboam.

Evidence in the text suggests that the story of the golden calf was the work of multiple traditions. This is evident from the multiple layers that the passage has. It is therefore inconceivable that all the layers were tailored on account of Jeroboam's action.

Dozeman (2009:695-700) has argued that inner text evidence shows that the story of the golden calf was from a shared source with the account in Deuteronomy. However, the narrative in Exodus 32 shows awareness of 1 Kings 12. From this perspective it is argued that the Exodus narrative is a combination of Deuteronomy 9:7-10:11 and 1 Kings 12:26-33 by a single author. While this view seems to suggest that the author depended on written documents, it can be argued that the author depended on the oral tradition that was used to write the account in Deuteronomy 9:7-10:11 and polemically adjusted it to reflect Jeroboam's golden bulls. As shown in the foregoing discussion the oral tradition from the north was redacted by redactors from the south to make it a polemic against Jeroboam. As observed by Dozeman (2009:696) the inner-biblical relationship pointing to the influence of the narrative of Jeroboam's bulls include "the motif of sin to describe the worship of the calf (Exod. 32:21, 30; 1 Kgs. 12:30), cultic sacrifices (Exod. 32:6; 1 Kgs. 12:32), a new festival (Exod. 32:5; 1 Kgs. 12:32), and non-Levitical worship (Exod. 32:25-29; 1 Kgs. 12:31)." These motifs are the ones that were inserted in the narrative of the golden calf to make it a polemic against Jeroboam.

From the inner-Biblical quotations, the statement "Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt" (Ex. 32:4 cf. 1 Ki. 12:8), is key indicator that the flow is from the narrative of Jeroboam to the narrative of Exodus 32. The use of the plural nouns fits well in the story of Jeroboam where there were two bulls but does not fit in the narrative context of Aaron's proclamation where there is only one calf. This

indicates that the words were originally in 1 Kings 12 and were put in Exodus 32 to link the narrative with the few of condemning the act of Jeroboam. The use of the plural word gods also does not conform to Nehemiah 9: 17-18 where Nehemiah quoted the Exodus story but used the singular word god. From this perspective Exodus 32 is judged to be more recent than 1 Kings 12:8 (Hundley 2017:562 cf. Riggans 1991:232).

The relationship between the two narratives can also be seen in the depiction of the characters in the stories. In the final form as we have it in the Bible, Exodus 32 juxtaposes Aaron's leadership with Moses' to show that Moses' leadership and relationship with the people was the ideal one. The depiction of Aaron and the people's way of worship as idolatry in Exodus 32 can be understood as pointing to Jeroboam's leadership and worship as idolatry and rejected by Yahweh. The only difference is that Aaron is depicted to have humbled himself before Moses and showed remorse, but Jeroboam is depicted not to show remorse. Therefore, unlike Aaron who continued to serve as a Priest, Jeroboam lost the kingship and his apostasy led to the fall of the northern kingdom.

Further, the tabernacle in Exodus 25-31 can be described as envisioning the Jerusalem temple, this makes the two accounts even closer as the preceding chapters (especially 7-9) of 1 Kings 12 are concerned with the temple and its way of worship as argued by Coggins (2000:116). It can, therefore, be argued that the two passages were tailored to juxtapose the right way of worshipping Yahweh against the wrong way of worshipping Yahweh. In this way the two passages point to the worship that involves calves as apostasy and worship at the tabernacle and the Jerusalem temple as the normative way of worship. Thus, the passages depict worship in the Northern Kingdom as apostasy and worship in the Southern Kingdom as normative.

Many scholars assume that the narrative of the bulls in 1 Kings 12 was an early tradition though it was later redacted by Deuteronomistic redactors. The redaction process is evident in the multiple layers present in the narrative (Pakkala 2008:503). It has been argued that the notion of the golden bull was an invention of D (Pakkala 2008:502-503). From this perspective it can be argued that temples and high places that Jeroboam built had no bulls placed in them but the depiction of Jeroboam as

having made the bulls was a later invention. As observed by Pakkala (2008:505) a close reading of 1 Kings 12 shows that verses 28-30 are not consistent with verse 27. The concern in verse 27 is the sacrifices and the house of the Lord. Verses 28-30 which record the making of the bulls and placing one in Dan and the other in Bethel does not provide the solution to Jeroboam's problem. The answer to the problem only comes in verse 31. This indicates that verses 28-30 were a later insertion to depict Jeroboam as having made two golden bulls. From this perspective the idea of the golden bulls can be said to have been coined by the redactors from the south to polemically condemn Jeroboam.

The cultic tension between the Northern and Southern Kingdom can be traced back to the division of the Monarchy. In ancient Israel the cult and state were highly connected. As noted by Van der Toorn (2009:85) "in ancient Israel, the major temples were state temples. The Jerusalem temple started as an annex of the royal palace." In a similar manner after the establishing of the Northern Kingdom under Jeroboam, state temples were established at Dan and Bethel. I am of the view that the tension between the two states was behind the links between the two passages. According to Van der Toorn (2009:92)

In the wake of the fall of Samaria, groups of Levitical priests from the North migrated to the Southern Kingdom; they tried to find employment at the temple of Jerusalem and other sanctuaries in Judah. Ancient rivalries between priests from the south and priests from the north flared up again; the conflict increased in intensity when Josiah decided to centralize the cult in Jerusalem.

From this perspective Josiah's reforms can be seen as having great influence on the similarities between the two passages. The agenda to centralise the cult which was propagated by P and D was behind the editing of the history of the Northern Kingdom to make Jeroboam's way of worship apostate. In this way the construction of the golden calf in the wilderness was adjusted to be an interpretation of the story of Jeroboam.

In summary the golden calf story was derived from an oral tradition from the north which was probably the same tradition that was used for the Deuteronomy account. However, the Exodus account was later redacted in light of Jeroboam's story. A critical look

show that the inner biblical similarities flow from the Jeroboam narrative to the Exodus 32 narrative. Further the golden calves in Jeroboam's story can be argued to have been a later development probably at the time of Josiah. However, the two narratives as we have them in the final form show that the two were tailored to depict Jeroboam's bulls as apostasy which was a serious sin and a threat to the covenant.

### **3.8 Summary**

The golden calf narrative of Exodus 32 can be understood as a narrative that has multiple layers. This explains why it has a number of inconsistencies. It is evident that the passage was originally a non-P text. However, it was redacted by P and D. The passage shares a lot of similarities with the story of the golden bulls in 1 Kings 12. From this perspective some scholars argue that the narrative of the golden calf was entirely coined to polemically address Jeroboam's bulls. However, it has been argued that the redactors from the south relied upon another source of the narrative which they redacted to suit the agenda of speaking against Jeroboam. The passage also shows that the redactors had the agenda of centralisation of the cult to Jerusalem. From this perspective it is linked with the reforms of Josiah who endeavoured to centralise the cult.

The passage was redacted with the background of tension between the Southern and the Northern kingdoms which arose after the division of the monarch around 930 BCE. The tension between the two nations affected the cult especially that there were strong ties between religious leaders and the Kingship. This tension explains the background of the account of Jeroboam's bulls to which Exodus 32 is termed to be a commentary. From the historical-critical perspective, it can be argued that the golden calf/bull was an acceptable symbol of Yahweh in the Northern Kingdom just like the Cherubim in the South. However, it was polemically depicted as rejected by Yahweh so that there can be only one acceptable cult in Jerusalem. The sin of the golden bulls in the history of the Israelites became to be known as the reason for which the Northern Kingdom was destroyed and later the Southern Kingdom.

The chapter has also explored the narrative as a literary unit that fits in the broader book of Exodus. It is placed in between the long narrative of the instructions for the making of the tabernacle and to highlight the understanding that the sin of the golden



calf was a threat to the self-disclosure of Yahweh to the people and the covenant. Additionally, the structure of the passage indicates that the passage has the relationship between Yahweh and the people as the central theme. This relationship is anchored in obedience on to Yahweh on the part of the people.

The passage has four main characters, that is, the people, Aaron, Moses and Yahweh. The people are depicted as the initiators of the entire ordeal and Aaron as a passive leader who compromises with people to make the calf. The calf is depicted as the idea of Aaron after been forced by the people to make gods for them. For the people and Aaron, the calf is not a sin but a symbol of the emissary of Yahweh who brought them from Egypt. However, Yahweh is angry with them for choosing to reveal him in a manner that he did not sanction. People sin by following their own made revelation of Yahweh. For this Yahweh threatens to annihilate them. Moses as a good leader intercedes for them. Moses is depicted as interested in building a good relationship among the people and between Yahweh and the people. Additionally, the passage presents Yahweh as the God who listens to people but at the same time punishes people for their sin.

## CHAPTER 4: RELATIONAL RESPONSE

### 4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will try to read for a relational response as espoused by Kessler (2013) with a view of finding out if the approach can shed any light to understand the golden calf narrative. Kessler (2013:72) argues that one can get to the heart of almost any biblical passage by asking what the text has to do with:

1. the relationship between Yahweh and Israel (individually or collectively), Yahweh and the nations, and Yahweh and the creation.
2. the relationships of the people of Yahweh with one another (a frequent term for this is "neighbour"; cf. Exod. 20:17) and with the creation; and
3. the relationship that exists between the people of Yahweh and the nations, and between all of humanity and the creation.

I will try to apply these questions to the passage and see how they can help us understand the passage. Kessler (2013:513) proposes four keys to his reading strategy which are:

1. determining which stream or streams are present in the section or portion of the OT one is studying.
2. understanding the broader theological world of the stream and how the text one is reading fits within it.
3. looking for the kinds of relational responses that stream usually expresses.
4. determining the specific shape of that relational response in the text under study.
5. asking how the same essential relational responses can be replicated in one's contemporary world and theological context.

From these keys I will try to look at how determining the theological streams can help us understand the passage. I will not go into the details of each stream and the kind of relational responses they usually express as it would be too much for the scope of this dissertation.

## 4.2 Theological Streams Present in Exodus 32

Kessler (2013) has proposed six major theological streams or themes and their expected relational responses, which are found in the Old Testament and each one makes a chapter in the book. He has highlighted themes and the relational responses as follows:

1. Creation theology: The Relationship of Knowing God as Creator and God's Purposes for Creation
2. Sinai covenant theology: The Relationship of Grateful Obligation
3. Promise theology: The relationship of confident expectation
4. Priestly theology: The gift of Yahweh's holy presence
5. The theology of divine accessibility: Speaking to God amidst the manifold experiences of life
6. Wisdom theology: The relationship of faith seeking understanding

Kessler (2013:256) rightly places Exodus 32 in the Sinai Theology stream. The golden calf was made when the people were at Mount Sinai. Mount Sinai is key in the Sinai

theology as the name entails. According to Kessler (2013:557) “the principal stipulation of the Sinai covenant was that Israel was to shun the worship of all other gods, eschew the worship of any visible form made to represent God, and to worship Yahweh alone (Exod. 20:1-6).” From this perspective, the narrative of the golden calf demonstrates that almost immediately Israel violated the covenant. In this regard, Exodus 32-34 is clearly a narrative of sin and forgiveness. The Sinai covenant is linked to the Abrahamic covenant. According to Levenson (2012:58) the connection of the Abrahamic and Sinai Covenants

yields a theology in which human deeds are critical to the divine-human relationship and yet not exhaustive of it. If the human community—in this case, the people Israel—obeys their divine Lord's commands, they will flourish. If they disobey and are “hostile” to him, then they will suffer. But the relationship transcends their obedience and their disobedience. The covenant does not reduce simply to the sumtotal of the human partner's deeds. It has a dimension of grace and mercy to it that allows, even necessitates, a second chance for the sinning nation.

The passage brings out the view that the Yahweh punished the people for making the golden calf (v. 35) but grace and mercy was shown by Yahweh through forgiveness. In this way the Sinai theology stream can be traced in the passage.

According to Kessler (2013:98)

the various streams that we find within the OT can be thought of as several related yet distinct 'theological worlds.' These theological worlds, or theological streams, consist of clusters of related concepts that, taken together, form a general pattern or vision of what it means to be in relationship with Yahweh, the God of Israel.

From this perspective, Exodus 32 can be said to be one of the passages which has a combination of different theological streams.

It has been argued that Exodus 32 is a non-priestly passage but has a Priestly and Deuteronomistic bias (Johnstone 1990:68, Propp 2008:148, Dozeman, Craig, Evans & Lohr 2014:33). It has also been argued that the Priestly test of the instruction and subsequent making of the tabernacle relates to Creation Theology (Hayes 2001:482). Exodus 32 is informed by the surrounding priestly passage and appreciates God as creator who gave gold to the Israelites. According to Fretheim (2003:252)

creation is the most basic theological category with which the book of Exodus works. It is the creator who has enabled Israel to be fruitful and multiply and grow increasingly strong (Exd. 1:7, 20; see Gen. 1:28). Without this creative work of God there would be no people to redeem.

For Kessler (2013:170) the main relational response in Priestly Theology is "the Relationship of Knowing God as Creator and God's Purposes for Creation." From this perspective Exodus 32 is linked to creation theology. Its placement in between P text of making the tabernacle can be argued to link it to creation. This from the understanding as noted by Schifferdecker (2008:65) that creation stories emphasise orderliness and are often intercepted by chaos which is overcome. From this perspective, the orderly making of the tabernacle is depicted as interrupted by the making of the golden calf which brings chaos in the camp. However, the chaos is overcome, and order is restored, and the tabernacle is successfully made. This may

point to the understanding that the narrative as connected to creation depicts the word as a sanctuary of God in which his reign is visible and unchallenged and all creation is orderly (Fretheim 1991:269).

It also hints on Promise Theology as it points to Yahweh's promise to Abraham. Kessler (2013:284-297) argues that Yahweh's promise to Abraham of making him a great nation is key in the development of Promise theology in the Old Testament. It must be noted that Exodus 32 is connected to this promise in Moses' intercession where he appealed to this promise (v.13). Kessler (2013:297-305) further argues that the other key in the development of Promise Theology is "the Promise to David and the Choice of Zion/Jerusalem." Yahweh chose and promised David that kingship will always be in his lineage and chose Zion/Jerusalem as the place of worship. In my view, relating Exodus 32 to Jeroboam's story brings out the understanding that Exodus 32 has elements of Promise Theology. It has been argued that Exodus 32 as polemic to Jeroboam has the idea of centralisation of the cult to Jerusalem by Josiah (Sweeney 2005:575). Additionally, behind the passage is the rivalry between the Southern Kingdom which is Davidic and the Northern which was against Davidic kingship.

The other theological stream as espoused by Kessler (2013:380-444) which can be noticed in Exodus 32 is "the theology of divine accessibility." The central relational response for this stream is, speaking to God amidst the manifold experiences of life. This theme and its expected relational response can be seen in Abraham's intercession (Ex. 32:11-14). In the midst of the sin committed by the people Abraham pleaded for the people not to be annihilated. Additionally, I am of the view that the passage gives a picture of people seeking divine accessibility through the golden calf as wrong while the surrounding P text gives the idea of divine accessibility through the tabernacle as acceptable.

This shows us that Exodus 32 has a number of theological streams which are weaved together. As noted by Kessler (2013:98) "the various theological systems (or theological streams) within the OT are never totally unrelated to one another. However, each one conceptualizes Israel's life and institutions in a slightly different way." The diversities arose from the way the texts were created and transmitted; they were redacted by

different people from different schools to address different life situations. From this perspective Kessler's approach brings to light the understanding that Exodus 32 has multiple layers. The passage has different theological streams which probably arose from the way the passage was transmitted. According to Kessler (2013:90) movements such as the Priestly and Deuteronomic Schools were

involved in the revision and editing of ancient texts and oral traditions. The literary works treasured and edited by these various literate sectors of Israelite society presented an understanding of Yahweh's relationship to Israel from diverse perspectives and with differing points of emphasis, yet within the broader context of faith in Yahweh.

### **4.3. Effects on Relationships Among the People**

Understanding that the narrative of the golden calf is related with the story of Jeroboam's bull is vital in understanding the effects of the golden calf on relationships among the people and the expected relational response from the text. This is in the sense that it brings to light the understanding that behind the text is a history of conflict between the Northern and Southern Kingdom. The division of the monarch into two different kingdoms created tension between them. As observed by Boadt (1984:293) "the border between the two kingdoms ran only ten miles north of Jerusalem, the southern capital, and the tribal area of Benjamin which lay on the border was constantly being fought over by both nations." The two nations were constantly at war. From this background, behind the story of Jeroboam is a broken relationship between the Southern and Northern kingdom. The division of the monarch is depicted to have been God's will because Solomon had sinned (1 Ki. 11:9-13). Whether God can be said to have orchestrated the tension between the two kingdoms can be a subject of another research. Jeroboam made the bulls and placed them in Dan and Bethel to stop people from going to Jerusalem for festivals (1 Ki. 12:27-29). Further, the understanding that the Northern Kingdom was formed as a result of the people's protest against Rehoboam who had imposed heavy taxes on the people (1 Ki. 12:1-19), emphasise the broken relationship between the people and their leaders. Some scholars like Marfo (2017:28-44) argue that 1 Kings 12 can be interpreted as failed servant leadership. This is from the depiction of Rehoboam as a leader who failed to show servitude to the people. On

the other hand, Jeroboam showed servitude to the people but brought a sin by making the bulls and high places. Marfo (2017:29) argues that servitude was a prerequisite for leaders in the Ancient Near East in general and Israel in particular. This tension between leaders and people is reflected in the narrative of the golden calf. The people's demand for gods (v. 1) and subsequently not siding with him (v. 26) can be seen as a revolt against Moses. The people forced Aaron to make the "gods" — though the idea of the golden calf is depicted as his. Aaron can be understood as acting to please the people. Like Jeroboam he wins the people. As observed by Fretheim (1991:281) the narrative of the golden calf shows that "without proper leadership the people can flounder." This creates confusion in the camp after Moses destroys the calf resulting in the killing of about three thousand men. From this perspective the golden calf affected relationships negatively among the people in the camp to an extent of killings.

It is interesting that the story shows tension between the people and the Levites. It must be noted here that Aaron and Moses were Levites (Dozeman 2008:563). The narrative begins with Aaron siding with the people (vv. 1-6) but later on the Levites are against the people (vv. 27-28). Some scholars like Meyer (1983:152-153) argue that Aaron was trying to direct the people to Yahweh throughout the narrative. This is from the understanding that by requesting for gold Aaron was asking for a near impossibility and the making of the golden calf was to buy time for Moses to return. It is further contended that for Aaron the calf was a symbol of the presence of Yahweh but for the people it was "the gods". Therefore, by calling for a feast to the Lord, Aaron was trying to redirect the people who called the image gods back to Yahweh. However, it is interesting that from God's perspective the whole ordeal was wrong and threatened the existence of all except Moses (vv. 7-10).

The relationship between the Levites and the people can also be understood as reflecting the story of Jeroboam's bulls. The tension between Jeroboam and the Levites is clearly from the understanding that Jeroboam appointed priests from all the tribes who were not Levites (1 Ki. 12:31). Therefore, from the understanding of Exodus 32 as polemic against Jeroboam it can be argued that the tension between Jeroboam and the Levites is reflected in Exodus 32. However, it is a complex situation because Aaron can



be understood as a reflection of Jeroboam because he is the one who made the image of the golden calf like Jeroboam made the golden bulls. The understanding of Aaron as a reflection of Jeroboam is complicated if related to the idea that Exodus 32 seeks to legitimatise the priesthood of the Levites. As observed by Watts (2011:417) the narrative seems to vilify Aaron but at the same time celebrate the Levites as divinely ordained Priests. It can be argued that the difference between Jeroboam and Aaron is that Aaron showed remorse while Jeroboam did not. According to Boadt (1984:277) “the little story of how Korah rebelled against Aaron’s role in Numbers 16 and was killed by divine anger was intended as a lesson to warn Levites and others from trying to usurp priestly roles.” This is from the understanding that the high priest and all priests were to be descendants of Aaron while others from the tribe of Levi may help in the care of the temple and worship (see Ex. 28-29, Lev. 8-10, Num.18). From this perspective it can be argued that the fight for priesthood can be seen in the history of the Israelites and the Aaronide priesthood was fairly defended. However, as observed by Boadt (1984:278) there are a number of people who performed priestly duties even though they were not descendants of Aaron. Among them is Samuel the prophet and kings like Saul (1 Sm.13), David (2 Sm. 6:13) Solomon (1 Ki. 8:16-24) and Ahaz (2 Ki. 16) who offered sacrifices but were not condemned. The tribe of Dan also took up the same responsibility as the tribe of Levi. As highlighted by Boadt (1984:278) “this lets us know that the actual history of priesthood is murky and leaves many problems yet to be solved.”

According to Watts (2011:418)

because of the negative depiction of Aaron, historical criticism has traditionally identified the ‘who’ (writers) as anti-priestly/anti-Aaronide but pro-Levite groups in various historical time periods. This claim finds its basis in the contrast between Aaron creating the calf (32:3) and the Lévités killing its worshipers, for which they are rewarded with ordination (32:26-29).

This presents another view of the tension behind the text. This is in the sense that it suggests tension between or among the redactors of Exodus 32. Some can be understood as anti-Aaron while others can be regarded to be pro-Aaron. From this

perspective it can be argued that the P texts surrounding the narrative of the golden calf are pro-Aaron while the narrative of the golden calf is anti-Aaron but pro-Levites (see Watts 2011:418-420). According to Dozeman (1989:183) “the prominent role of Aaron both as high priest of Israel and as the brother of Moses is judged to be one of the latesttradition-historical developments in the Pentateuch and is judged to be a contribution of the priestly theologians.” On the other hand, Exodus 32 is judged to be a non-Priestly text redacted by Priestly redactors. This presents tension between P and non-P redactors.

The tension in the camp is also presented as between the people and Moses. The people firstly rise against Moses because of his prolonged absence (v. 1) and later theyrun wild because he destroys the calf (v. 25). Because of this, Moses demands that those who are on his side go to him but only the Levites are depicted as been on his side (v. 26). This, points to the understanding that the people were against Moses. Verse 25 indicates how serious the problem in the camp was. According to Dozeman (2009:685) the “Hebrew *běqāmēhem*, ‘who would rise against them,’ can also be translated ‘their enemies’.” The people were out of control such that they would be contemptuous ridicule to their enemies. In other words, they were behaving in a way that would make others mock them. They probably showed no respect for one another and treated each other without dignity. The loose of dignity in the camp can also be seen in the manner which the worship was done. The Hebrew *ṣāḥaq* can be said to have a sexual connotation. According to Dozeman (2009: 683) “the actions of the Israelites in revelling at the altar of the golden calf have likely exposed (uncovered) theirnakedness (20:26), an action explicitly forbidden by the Deity.” Other scholars like Propp (2008:554) who oppose the sexual interpretation argue that *ṣāḥaq* can be interpreted as “‘fool around’, for, in general, the root describes untrammelled behaviour. In 32:6, at least upon first reading, the context does not suggest sexuality.” Though the two views are different, they agree on the understanding that the act of worship was shameful or involved an aspect of singing and dancing in a manner that is not dignifying. Given this understanding of *ṣāḥaq* and Moses’ description of the situation in the camp as out of control, it is plausible to argue that people lost respect for one another. In my view, this can be seen in the manner they addressed Moses

who was their leader in verse 1 as “the man”. The lack of respect for their leader can further be seen in their reaction when he called for those who were on his side. Only the Levites are depicted to be on his side. The narrator leaves the reader wondering how the people reacted when the Levites went around killing people. One can just imagine the Levites physically fighting with the people as it is only logical that there was some resistance from the people. The description of the people to be killed in verse 27 as brothers, friends and neighbours shows that close relationships were affected. At the end of the whole ordeal the camp was probably in distress. One can only imagine the psychological impact and the trauma which the people were left in, especially the children who witnessed the killings. The killing must have created fear and uncertainty among the people. It is interesting that the passage seems to point to the law which forbids the making and worshiping of idols, what about the law which forbids to kill? The author seems not to be aware of this law or understood it in a way that allowed killing in some instances. According to Lorenzen (2016:490) the commandment “you shall not kill (Ex. 20:13)” was to

protect from violence the citizen within a communal context. Such an exhortation could be made without specifically questioning whether war and capital punishment were morally acceptable in those days—just as it is common today for people to affirm ‘You shall not kill!’ without necessarily relating it to war, capital punishment, abortion, and euthanasia.

It can be argued that Moses’ action of killing people was some form of capital punishment which may be argued to be “ethically” right. However, the killing shows the devastating effects of the ordeal of the golden calf in the camp.

It is interesting that the passages mention that gold was collected from men, women and children in verse 2; however, only men are mentioned as killed in verse 27. This indicates that several women were left as single mothers in the camp. It can be argued that some women were left with the burden of raising children as single mothers. Though levirate marriage is alluded to in Deuteronomy 25:5-10; the emphasis is on the women whose husbands died without a male child to carry the name and inherit the property of the deceased man. This suggests that women who had male children would

not be subjected to the levirate marriage. Therefore, they were to be single mothers. Given this backdrop, it is plausible to argue that the killing of men adversely affected women and children especially with the view that they were in the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land.

Schifferdecker (2008:61) observes that,

the entire Priestly narrative in Genesis-Exodus should be defined as an elaborate *myth of origins*. It follows a traditional pattern of creation myths, in particular as regards the close intertwining of creation, victory over mythical enemies, and concluding with the building of the temple.

From this perspective, considering that creation in P emphasize order as opposed to chaos, it can be argued that Yahweh expected a relational response of order among the people rather than being wild. The presentation that Yahweh punished the people for the golden calf ordeal as depicted in verse 35, suggests that Yahweh expected a relational response of peace and harmony among the people as opposed to anarchy which is punishable.

#### **4.4. Effects on Relationship with Yahweh**

As observed by Fretheim (1991:279), the golden calf narrative is one of the few times that Yahweh threatened to wipe out the Israelites. It is one of the stories which give a picture that God wants to start all over again. Scholars like Propp (2008:554) and Dozeman (2009:683) argue that “seeing” in Exodus 32:9 reflect Exodus 3:7, 9. The motif of Yahweh seeing can also be seen in the narrative of Noah and the flood. In the story of Noah Yahweh wiped out the people and started afresh with Noah and his family. The reason for Yahweh’s wiping out of people and other creatures in Genesis 6:5 is that “the Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil.” It is not clear what the people did exactly, but Yahweh “saw”. The aspect of Yahweh “seeing” is expressed in Exodus 32:9 “the Lord said to Moses ‘I have seen this people, how stiff necked they are’.” According to Propp (2008:554) “formerly (Ex. 3:7, 9), his ‘I have seen’ held a promise of salvation: having beheld Israel’s suffering, Yahweh determined to save them and make them his own people. Now, seeing their incorrigibility, he determines to wipe

them out and found a new nation.” The two opposed sides of Yahweh’s seeing are that Yahweh saw the need for salvation of the Israelites in the former and that Yahweh saw the need for annihilation of the Israelites in the latter. This presents two polar sides of the relationship between Yahweh and the people. The exodus from Egypt can be argued as premised on the seen need for salvation. However, the golden calf narrative brings a shift in the direction of the relationship from salvation to annihilation.

As argued by Propp (2008:554) and Dozeman (2009:683) the relationship between Yahweh and the people is affected to such an extent that Yahweh who had seen the need for salvation now sees the need for annihilation. Considering the relationship of the narrative of the golden calf and the story of Jeroboam’s bulls, the sin can be argued to be the reason for the fall of the Northern Kingdom and later for the Southern Kingdom(see Propp 2008:60-61). Hundley (2013:136) has observed that

the connection between Aaron’s sin in Exodus 32 and Jeroboam’s sin in 1 Kings 12 is relevant. As already noted, the forging of Jeroboam’s calves is the sin par excellence of the Northern Kingdom. The view, especially in the Deuteronomistic History, is that the forging of the golden calves then led to syncretistic worship of other gods such as Baal and to pagan worship practices, including child sacrifice.

As argued by Dozeman (2009:687),

the golden calves are a religious and political metaphor in the Deuteronomistic History. They represent the apostasy of Jeroboam I (1 Kgs. 12:26–32), and, indeed, of all monarchs—even reforming kings like Jehu, who destroyed Baal worship, but continued ‘the worship of the golden calves at Bethel and Dan’ (2 Kgs. 10:29).

From this perspective the sin of the golden calf can be understood as the reason for the downfall of the two kingdoms. In this regard the near ending of the covenant relationship with the Israelites because of the making of the golden calf as a reflection of Jeroboam’s calves, can be said to have become the “bi-word” later for the loss of land by the two nations. In this way the sin of the golden calf in the history of Israel affected the relationship of Yahweh and the people resulting in the loss of land. As observed by Propp (2008:579) “the destruction and dispersion of Northern Israel in 722/1 B.C.E.

presented the Judahites with their first great theological crisis. Had not Yahweh entered into a Covenant with all the tribes? How could ten of them be eliminated?" The answer to the question lies in the golden calf which is the threat to the covenant. As observed by Dozenman (2009:686) "the golden calf signifies the Israelites' rejection of covenant, and it prompts the divine desire to destroy the nation." In this regard the sin of the golden calf implied that the people rejected the relationship with Yahweh, therefore, Yahweh was not obliged to fulfil the covenant promise of giving them land as their inheritance. As observed by Kessler (2013:315)

the primary relational responses in Promise Theology focus on confidence in the utter trustworthiness of the character of Yahweh as one who makes promises and then goes on to fulfil them. The human responses of trusting, hoping, and waiting for the fulfilment of Yahweh's words of promise are prized and prioritized in this theological stream.

Dozeman (2009:688) proposes an interpretation of "the idolatry of the golden calf in Exodus 32 as a political and religious allegory about the inherent conflict between Yahweh and kings." In this argument the sin of the golden calf is understood as the root of the sin of idolatry later in the Promised Land which was committed by a number of kings from both the Northern and Southern kingdom. It is from this perspective that prophets like Hosea criticised the Northern Kingdom and spoke against it. According to Dozeman (2009:688) "the content of the idolatry is worshipping the power of the king over Yahweh." This indicates that the people become devoted to the "declarations" of the kings rather than the "declarations" of Yahweh. Put differently the kings wanted the people to worship in the manner which they thought was right rather than the manner prescribed by Yahweh. This is reflected in the narrative of the golden calf in that the people opted to worship Yahweh by way of the image of the golden calf which was the making of Aaron rather than wait for Yahweh's self-disclosure through Moses. In this regard the narrative of the golden calf point to the broken relationship between Yahweh and the kings which resulted in their rejection by having them taken into exile. It can be argued that the sin of Idolatry premised on the golden calf become central in the life and history of Israel. This is because later prophets like Zechariah point to a time when Yahweh will become king. "And the Lord will become king over the earth, on that day

the Lord will be one his name one (Zec. 14:9).” It can be argued that Yahweh rejected kings and the prophet was looking forward to theocracy.

The narrative of the golden calf indicates that Yahweh punished the people with a plague (Ex. 32:35). In Exodus 33:2, Yahweh indicated that he will not go with the people but will send an angel to go before them. Fretheim (1991:293) argues that “the move in verse 2 from the messenger to the first-person pronoun (as also in 23:20-23; cf. 3:2; 14:19) indicates that the messenger is God himself.” However, the people’s reaction indicates that they did not understand the emissary as Yahweh himself. Upon hearing these words, the people wept. As observed by Meyers (2005:262)

the angel here is not a manifestation of God but a separate emissary, for God’s direct presence would be lethal rather than protective! This seems to contradict the notion of the beneficence of God’s presence and indicates again the tension between divine justice and unconditional blessing. Moreover, God’s withdrawal seems to negate the whole set of tabernacle instructions, which are meant to secure divine presence.

From this perspective the angel going with the people can be understood as Yahweh withdrawing from the people. It is for this reason that the people wept and acted in obedience to Yahweh by taking off all their ornaments. Later on, Moses pleads with Yahweh and Yahweh accepts to do as Moses pleaded (Ex. 33:12-17). It can be argued that the people’s weeping indicates their repentance and willingness to follow Yahweh in the manner that he wanted them. As noted by Fretheim (1991:295) the people “engage in abject mourning, and not only take off their status symbol, they *leave* them off. This obedience to God’s command, together with their *on-going* remorse, may be one important sign that affects ‘what to do to you’.” This indicates a turn in the relationship between Yahweh and the people.

It is interesting that although the narrative of the golden calf shows that the sin led to a disturbance in the relationship between the people and Yahweh as Fretheim (1991:279) puts it “the future with Yahweh became a highly uncertain matter.” However, the narrative does not end with uncertainty but with a renewed relationship. It gives hope to the people that Yahweh will go with them. Later, the broken stone tablets are



replaced, and the tabernacle is made. This indicates that the passage is not just about the broken relationship between Yahweh and the people but also the possibility of a renewed relationship. In relation to Jeroboam's story, the passage can be understood as presenting the understanding that despite the sin that was committed Yahweh would restore the relationship with the people. Some scholars like Johnstone (1990:380) argue that Exodus 33:2-6 is a late P text. Taking in account that P is dated late indicate that the passage can be understood as giving hope to the exilic Israelites for the possibility of renewed relationship with Yahweh and regaining the lost land.

#### **4.5 Effects on Relationship with Gold**

The narrative of the golden calf has two episodes in which people strip off their golden jewels. Firstly, the people strip off golden jewels in response to Aaron's demand who then makes the golden calf (Ex. 32:2-4). In the second they strip off the golden jewels in response to Yahweh who instructed them to do so as they wait for what he would do to them (Ex. 33:4-5). This gives the perspective that the passage gives two different ways in which people related with gold. Commenting on Exodus 33:4-5, Amzallag (2020:214) observes that there is a parallel "between the distance of the jewels from their owners' bodies and the relocation of the tent of meeting far from the Israelites' camp (Ex. 33:7). It creates a correlation between the golden jewels worn by the Israelites and the divine presence among them." In this perspective, gold is associated with the divine presence. Following Amzallag's (2019:298) argument that gold in the Ancient Near East was associated with the presence of the deity, it can be argued that the Israelites understanding and depiction of gold in this passage is close to the general understanding in the Ancient Near East. This is because it is associated with the presence of Yahweh. For those who ascribe to the view of the gradation of holiness in the tabernacle and temple as associated with metals used, like Amzallag (2020:222-224) and Haran (1978:158-165), gold was associated with the holy of holies. Amzallag (2019:298) notes that in the Ancient Near East gold was understood as intrinsically holy. Fretheim (1991:261) argues that in the P texts surrounding Exodus 32-34 the craftsmanship and use of gold in the tabernacle is a reflection of Yahweh's creation of the universe and its beauty. In this regard, gold was used as a symbol of honour to

Yahweh in the tabernacle. In the P test surrounding the narrative of the golden calf Yahweh gave the instruction of how gold was to be used in the tabernacle which was going to be his dwelling place among the people. It can be argued that gold was meant to beautify the tabernacle. This presents the difference with the view of the other Ancient Near Eastern cults where gold was understood as intrinsically holy. As argued by Fretheim (1991:261), for the Israelites gold was made by God and it was used for its beauty and economic value as a metal which symbolised honour. Its use in the cult showed the people's respect and honour for Yahweh as their God and master. From this perspective it can be argued that Yahweh expected a relational response in which people used gold to give honour to him.

Binder (2011:41-51) emphasises the understanding that, possessing gold in the Ancient Near East was a symbol of honour. As pointed out earlier, the gold which was used to make the calf can be understood as the symbol of their new status not as slaves of the Egyptians but as dignified people in a relationship with Yahweh. It was a symbol of Yahweh's love for them. Yahweh had shown love for the Israelites by liberating them from Egypt and imperative making them honourable. From this perspective gold was very important in the cult and for the children of Israel. As a symbol of their status, the people were to use gold with care. Given the understanding that gold was created by Yahweh and the connection with the creation account, the narrative can be argued to have a connotation of responsible use of resources by the people as stewards. As stewards of gold which Yahweh had given the people, they were expected to use it according to the way in which Yahweh directs or instructs them. In this case the surrounding text of the instructions and making of the tabernacle can be understood as the way in which the people were to relate with gold. Gold was to bring honour to Yahweh and the people.

The passage depicts the use of gold to have brought shame to the people. This can be seen in the manner Moses describes the situation in the camp in verse 25 "the people were running wild (for Aaron had let them run wild, to the derision of their enemies)." The use of the phrase "derision to their enemies" indicates that the ordeal was shameful. Instead of bringing honour to the people in the site of their enemies, the act

brought shame. It is like taking them back to the condition in which they were in Egypt (Friedman 2001:284). Commenting on the gold which was with the children Greenberg (1969:87) argues that “the recovery of dignity by the liberated slaves would be signaled by their being able to provide good things for their children.” In this regard the children were dignified by giving them gold. At the same time the parents can be argued to have received honour as they were considered to be responsible. In a similar way it can be argued that Yahweh gave gold to the Israelites as a liberated people to recover their dignity. This in turn brought honour to Yahweh as he is depicted to be responsible towards the people whom he liberated. The people, therefore, were expected to use gold in a manner which brought dignity to them and honour to Yahweh who provided it to them.

The people are depicted to have used gold in a manner that did not give honour to Yahweh and robbed them of dignity by making a calf. Additionally, they willingly gave away their prized possession for making an image. The use of gold in making the golden calf can be understood as an act of dishonour to the people themselves and to Yahweh who gave them the gold. In this regard the people used gold in a way which made them to be “derision to their enemies”. In Egypt they were slaves and would be treated in a shameful way as expressed in the manner they were overworked (Ex. 5). The difference can be that the shame of making the golden calf can be understood as self-inflicted. This is in the sense that it was out of their own will that they gave gold to Aaron.

The passage seems to suggest a way in which the people were expected to use or relate with gold. *Firstly*, it indicates that they were to use gold in a way that will give glory to Yahweh their God and maker of all things and bring dignity to the people. The metal was not to be given glory like Yahweh. It is for this reason that unlike in other ancient near eastern cults where images were the form of the deity, in the cult of the children of Israel the image was at best a symbol of the presence of Yahweh or a pedestal of Yahweh. *Secondly*, they were to use it in the cult in a way prescribed by Yahweh in relation to his disclosure rather than use it in their own way to disclose Yahweh. This is in the sense that the narrative of the golden calf can be understood as

speaking against people trying to reveal Yahweh in a way which is not sanctioned by Yahweh himself. Differently put, human attempts to bring about divine presence (seeLunn 2010:242-248).

Yahweh's instruction that the people strip off the golden jewels in my view can be understood as pointing to the depiction that Yahweh has ultimate authority over creation and can withdraw the resources from the people who abuse them. Additionally, this view can be compounded with the presentation that Moses used the gold and water mixture to punish the people. From this perspective it can be argued that if the people misuse God given resources, the same resource can be used to punish them. This resonates with some eco-theological views which postulate that creation reacts to damages caused to it (Earth bible team 2000:24). The golden calf can be argued to have created a situation where gold was used to punish the people or determine who should be punished.

The understanding that gold was a medal of honour and used to enthrone kings relates the golden calf narrative with the story of Jeroboam. The presentation that Yahweh ordered the people to remove the jewels can be understood as pointing to the removal of Jeroboam from kingship. However, it can be pointed out that the removal was only temporary as they waited for what Yahweh would do to them. In light of the exile, it can be argued that the removal of the people from the Promised Land was temporary they would be restored. This point to the possibility of the people regaining their broken relationship with gold. If people would renew their relationship with Yahweh, Yahweh would allow them to put on jewels. They would once again get the position of honour and dignity in the site of their enemies.

#### **4.6 What Was the Sin**

A quick look Exodus 32 suggests that the sin that was committed was either polytheism or idolatry. The people's demand for gods who would go before them (v. 1) suggests polytheism which was contrary to the first commandment "you shall have no other god besides me (Ex. 20:2; Deut. 5:6)." According to Hundley (2017:569)

the text is clear that the people seek a tangible divine presence. It remains unclear, however, if the presence they seek is Yhwh or another god. There is every reason to

think they hope to concretize Yhwh's presence, yet the text does not rule out the possibility that another deity may be intended.

This indicates that it is possible to argue that the sin was making another god. It is also possible to argue that the image was an image of Yahweh. In his article Jacobson, (2013:133-134) has observed that the basis for the argument for the sin of the golden calf as polytheism lies in the use of plural *Elohim* with plural verbs in verses 1,4,8 and 23. It is argued that this refers to other gods and not Yahweh. From this perspective the golden calf is interpreted as a different god. According to Jacobson (2013:134) "the occurrence of the plural demonstrative pronoun 'these' support understanding the 'sin' of the people as making and worshipping a (אלה) false god, other than the Lord who elected Israel and gave them the Decalogue." In this regard the narrative can be argued to be one of the earliest and most important commentaries on the first commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth (Ex. 20:3-4)." However, as observed by Kugler (2016:15)

the Golden Calf story lacks clear reference to the specific laws given in the supposed circumstances of the event makes it plausible that the Decalogue account was not taken into consideration in the first stages of the composition of the Calf story. It is quite likely that the process of composition was actually reversed, namely that some of the commandments of the Decalogue were influenced by the Golden Calf episode and written in response to it.

What the sin of the golden calf was, is a complex matter; this is because as Moberly (1983:161) points out "the examination of the story of the golden calf in Ex. 32 involves a complex of literary, historical, and tradition-historical issues." One of the complications arises from the relationship between the narrative of the golden and calf and Jeroboam's story. It is argued that Exodus in its final form was a redaction of an earlier source to polemically address Jeroboam's making of the two golden bulls and building of high places. From a historical-critical perspective, Moberly (1983:162) shows that Jeroboam did not create a new God or a new way of worshipping Yahweh; he rather,

followed an earlier tradition in which the image of the calf was an accepted image for Yahweh. From this perspective it has argued that the narrative of the golden calf was initially positive about the image of the golden and did not consider it as sin. Jeroboam understood the image of the golden calf as equivalent to the image of the Cherubim which was the pedestal of an invisible Yahweh. However, in the final form of both Exodus 32 and 1 Kings 12 the image of the golden calf/bull is condemned as sin. A literary analysis of Exodus 32 shows that making of the golden calf was contrary to the second commandment “you shall not make images (Ex. 32:4)”. As noted by Moberly (1983:168) “much of the problem lies in our uncertainty as the meaning and scope of the prohibition of images.” This is from the understanding that the image of the Cherubim which is close to the image of the golden calf was not condemned. It can be argued that the second commandment was a later development. However, Moberly (1983:169) argues that

the major difficulties of theories which suggest a comparative late introduction for the prohibition of images are two folds. Firstly, there are legal texts which contain the prohibition and are generally considered early, especially Ex. 34:17, Deut. 27:15. Secondly, and more significantly, such theories find it difficult to give a satisfactory account of how a commandment so out of keeping with general ancient Near Eastern religious practice was either introduced or accepted within Israel.

From this perspective the sin of the golden can be argued to be beyond idolatry. If some form of idols like the Cherubim were allowed in the Israelite cult, the golden calf was “beyond idolatry”. Dozeman (2009:15) has noted that idolatry

according to rabbinic and NT interpretation, is a form of human greed—the desire to possess and to control God. But the human desire to control God is so complex and multifaceted that the identification of the golden calf as idolatry merely adds to the uncertainty of the ‘original sin’.

Though Dozeman argues that the desire to control God is complex, I am of the view that it is one of the indicators to the “original sin”. This is in the sense that the people in Exodus 32:1 demand that Aaron makes them gods, and Aaron makes a golden calf, then later in verse 5 calls for a feast. The desire to control God is portrayed in the

presentation that God did not sanction all this. The people are portrayed as wanting to experience and worship God in a way they wanted rather than in a way that God wanted which is through the use of the tabernacle, and the Cherubim as the image which was sanctioned by Yahweh. The complex of understanding of the golden calf as idolatry in my view lies in the proclamation of the feast to Yahweh (v. 5) and the attachment of the calf to the history of the Israel “these are your gods, Israel who brought you out of Egypt” (v. 4). This, points to the understanding that the calf in the view of the people and Aaron was related to Yahweh. Jacobson (2013:132) proposes “areading of the sin in Exodus 32 as the creation not just of an idolatrous image of a false god, but rather as a false image of the true god.” However, Yahweh does not see himself in the image neither does he see his emissary in it. For Yahweh, it is an act of disobedience and stiff-necked (vv. 8-9). As observed by Hundley (2017:575) “from Yhwh’s perspective, whatever it is, it is not him. Rather than elucidating whether they are worshipping him the wrong way or another deity, Yhwh condemns the whole enterprise out of hand.”

In light of the relationship with the golden bulls of Jeroboam, Amzallag (2020:209) argues that “the golden calf should not be approached as a case of idolatry.” Amzallag (2020:227) further argue that

instead of merely opposing the worship of YHWH with that of other deities, the author of Exodus 32-33 points to a problem: the incompatibility of the indirect worship of YHWH through a secondary deity (represented by the golden calf) with the claim of closeness to YHWH and of his residence among the Israelites.

From this perspective, the sin of the golden calf borders on the residence of Yahweh among the people. In other words, it borders on the theophany. This can be understood better by placing the text in the broader context of the book of Exodus.

As postulated by Johnstone (1990:47) the theme of theophany is one of the major themes in the book of Exodus. Understanding of the structure of the book of Exodus which places the narrative of the golden calf in the middle of the instructions for the calf shades light on the theophany. The P text which surrounds the non-P narrative of the golden calf emphasises the tabernacle as the place where Moses was going to meet



with Yahweh. The tabernacle is portrayed as the way in which Yahweh's presences among the people was going to be revealed. In the book of Exodus, the narrative of the golden calf is strategically positioned to juxtapose the self-revelation of Yahweh among the people and the perceived revelation of Yahweh in the golden calf. From this perspective, it can be argued just as Fretheim (1991:273) has pointed out that, "the golden calf was meant to achieve what Yahweh intended to achieve through the tabernacle", that is, a tangible indicator of the presence of Yahweh among the people. Therefore, in relation to the theophany, the sin of the golden calf can be understood a revelation and worship of Yahweh in way not sanctioned by Yahweh. As pointed out by Van Dam (2003:37)

while the infinitely patient Yahweh in covenant faithfulness wanted to come to his people to make his dwelling in their midst (Ex. 25:8; cf. Jn. 1:14), impatient and faithless Israel sought to pull God down from Sinai in accordance with the religious thinking of their day, seeking to satisfy their need for security by keeping Yahweh near to them on their terms (Ex. 32:1-6).

As argued by Lunn (2010:242-248) the sin of the golden can be understood as "the attempt to fulfil divine promises." This is in the sense that Yahweh had promised to take the children of Israel to the Promised Land. What prompted the making of the golden calf was the absence of Moses the leader was to take them to the Promised Land. The people demanded for gods to go before them. From this perspective the people and Aaron took the matter of who was to go before them in their own hands and made the golden calf. The golden calf can, therefore, be understood as the image of the divine emissary who was to go before the people. It has been argued in chapter 3 of this paper that, the people sought to replace Moses whom they understood as the emissary of Yahweh who had brought them out of Egypt and through whom Yahweh communicated to them. Rather than waiting for Moses as the one appointed by God to fulfil the promise, the people and Aaron are depicted as doing it in a way which they thought was right. The understanding of the golden calf as a human attempt to fulfil the divine promise makes the narrative fit in the theme which runs through the book Exodus and the Pentateuch which is the covenant. In the covenant Yahweh made with Abraham, Yahweh promised to give land to his descendants and to multiply them. Dean

(2014:286) argues that the covenant has “obligations” and “regulations”. Covenant obligations can be understood as responsibilities which the parties in the covenant have to take. On the other hand, covenant regulations can be understood as “rules” which the suzerain put up to control the behaviour of the vassal. It was Yahweh’s obligation to give progeny and land to the children of Israel in the Abrahamic Covenant. From this perspective Lunn, (2010:237-249) shows that every attempt by human beings to fulfil Yahweh’s obligations of the covenant was catastrophic and threatened the covenant and the narrative of the golden calf is one of such instances. In Exodus 32, the demand for gods to lead the people point to the people’s ambition or attempt to fulfil Yahweh’s promise in their own way. Additionally, they attempted to reveal Yahweh in their own way by making the image of the golden calf. From this perspective, the sin of the golden calf can be understood to be beyond idolatry.

This interpretation of the golden calf fits in with its relationship with the understanding that it was tailored to polemically address Jeroboam and push for the centralisation of the cult. This is in the sense that it points to Jeroboam’s making of the golden bulls as human attempt to reveal Yahweh which was a threat to the covenant.

Considering the Ancient Near Eastern world view that gold was a medal of honour and connected with holiness. The narrative of the golden calf follows the broader Old Testament depiction of gold as gift from Yahweh though it was a symbol of honour and authority. Exodus 32 presents a shift from the Egyptian view of gold as making the body of the deity. Rather it serves as warning against the abuse of gold.

#### **4.7 Can Kessler’s Approach Shed Light?**

Kessler (2013:65) has proposed reading the Old Testament using an approach which he describes as “a relational-response, poly-systemic approach, since it focuses upon several key patterns of relational response found in the OT.” According to Kessler (2013:65)

such an approach flows out of the nature of the OT text itself: whatever other purposes these texts may have served (legal, social, political, ritual), in the end the OT is a text that provided Israel with a basis for understanding its own identity as the people of Yahweh and the benefits and obligations of being in relationship with its

God. And, within that relationship, we find the OT calling Israel to various differing, yet related, responses.

This arises from the understanding that Yahweh the God of Israel is a relational being who entered a relationship the children of Israel. The Old Testament tells the history of this relationship between Yahweh and the people. Like Kessler (2013:70) points out “at one level all of the OT can be seen as an exploration of the relational dynamics between two parties, Yahweh and Israel, extended over many centuries and through many circumstances.” The relationship between Yahweh and the people was one where Yahweh chose the children of Israel and extended grace to them. This relationship is premised on the covenant which Yahweh made with Abraham and later the Mount Sinai covenant. A covenant can be defined as a binding agreement or treaty between two or more parties. In the Ancient Near East (ANE) world the concept of covenant was widely used to denote agreements or treaty between or among Individuals or nations.

Kessler (2013:178) has identified four types of treaties as practiced in ANE (1) one where both parties have equal obligations which can be called Parity Treaty; (2) Imposed Treaty or Loyalty Oath: in this treaty the powerful party imposed themselves on the weaker party forcing them to pledge allegiance and threatening them grave consequences if they don't comply; (3) Promissory Covenant or Covenant of Grant: in this covenant one party made a promise to the other out of good will, the receiving party had no obligation of any kind, its fulfilment was up to the one who made it. For example, some masters would give land to their slaves who have served them well; (4) one where one of the parties has the upper hand which can be called Vassal or Suzerain Treaty.

This treaty was structured in such a way that it had the introduction in which the greatness of the suzerain was emphasized; the summary of the obligations; details of the obligations; and witnesses. Such treaties or covenants were common between less powerful kingdoms and more powerful kingdoms. The powerful Kingdom would provide protection and in turn receive tributes from the less powerful kingdom (see Kessler 2013:178).

It is argued by scholars like Krause (2018:152) that the Abrahamic covenant was purely

by grace and no obligations were attached on the part of Abraham. Yahweh was to fulfil the promise out of love. Like in a Promissory Covenant, God made a promise to Abraham that was out of good will. The covenant was an ongoing promise which called for trust in God to fulfil it. In my view Promissory covenant points to a covenant totally by grace and unbreakable. In Exodus 32 Moses evoked this covenant for Yahweh to relent on annihilating the people. The Sinai Covenant can be understood as a suzerain covenant in which Yahweh is the master and the people the vassal. The people have the obligation of following the law and Yahweh was to be their God who would fight for them and protect them. Boadt (1984:175) argues that the children of Israel “are bound to an everlasting unbreakable covenant-union with their God.” However, while God cannot breach the agreement as postulated by Aristotle and his followers, human beings have potential of breaching their obligations (Alfsvåg 2018:45-51). In this regard Yahweh expected certain relational responses in the covenant with the people.

#### **4.8 Summary**

Kessler’s relational reading sheds some light on the understanding of the narrative of the golden calf in Exodus 32. It can be used to highlight the understanding that the narrative was a product of different theological streams. At least five out of the six theological streams proposed by Kessler are noticeable in Exodus 32. These are, Sinai Covenant theology, Creation theology, Promise theology, Priestly theology, and theology of divine accessibility. The streams emphasise different theological standpoints but are creatively held together in the passage to highlight various relational responses which Yahweh expected from the people.

Understanding what the sin of the golden was is complicated as pointed out by Moberly (1983:161) because the narrative has been affected by the process of redaction in relation to the various situations in the history of Israel especially the time of Jeroboam. It can be argued that the bull was an acceptable image in the Northern Kingdom just like the Cherubim in the South. However, in the final form of the text, the bull is depicted as apostasy. It can be argued that the sin of the golden calf can be understood as the revelation and worship of Yahweh in a way not sanctioned by Yahweh himself.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

### 5.1 Summary

Gold was used in the Ancient Near East marriages in general and in sealing diplomatic marriages and treaties. It was also used as a symbol of honour and authority. In the cults, it was associated with the presence of deities. Its luminescence was associated to the glory of the deities; therefore, it was understood as the symbol of the glory of the deities.

Gold was used to make cultic articles such as images and thrones of deities. The economic value of gold in relation to its use in the cult indicated the high status which the people attached to the cult especially the temples which were understood as homes of the deities (Van der Toorn 2002:28). Just like palaces the kings' places were adorned with golden elements as symbols of honour, the cultic homes of the deities were also adorned with golden elements as symbols of honour for the deities (Olyan 1997:82). In the Ancient Egyptian cult gold was understood as the element that made up the skin and flesh of gods, as such it was the ideal metal for making images of gods and cultic elements. As Amzallag (2019:298) argues, gold was also associated with holiness. As metal that was understood as coming from the gods, it was believed to be intrinsically holy. From this perspective, gold was deemed as an ideal metal to associate with deities as they were believed to be holy.

Ancient Near Eastern deities were associated with various images such as animals, birds and celestial bodies. As noted by Hundley (2017:560-562) the relationship between the images and the deities can be understood in three ways, namely: as divine forms of the deity; as symbols of the deity; and as thrones of the deity. It can be argued that the image Cherubim and the golden calf can be understood as a symbol of Yahweh or a throne of Yahweh.

It has been established that in the Old Testament gold was understood as coming from Yahweh through creation and was a symbol of honour to Yahweh as creator. In line with Fretheim (1991:142) it has been argued that gold is depicted as a special gift that Yahweh gave to the Israelites as they left Egypt to symbolise their new status of honour and authority. In the Israelite cult, just like in other Ancient Near Eastern cults it was

associated with the honour and glory of God who was believed to dwell in the temple/tabernacle. In the temple and the tabernacle, holiness was arguably stratified with gold associated with the most holy place and bronze with the holy place (see Amzallag 2020:222-224 and Haran 1978:158-165).

In the Northern cult, Yahweh was associated with the image of the bull/calf while in the Southern cult he was associated with the image of the Cherubim. Some scholars like Römer (2015) argue that the two images served as the divine form of Yahweh while others like Smith (2002:87) and Meyers (2005:228) argue that they were pedestals or thrones for the invisible Yahweh. Though the two images were also used by other Ancient Near Eastern cult, the image in the Old Testament as we have it in the final form was rejected as apostasy. However, it can be argued that it was an accepted image of Yahweh that was associated with Yahweh.

Following Hendrix (1990:212), Exodus 32 can be understood chiastically structured and focussing on the question, who is on Yahweh's side? This emphasises Yahweh as he revealed himself through Moses as opposed to Yahweh as revealed through the golden calf. From this perspective, the narrative highlights the understanding that the relationship between Yahweh and the people was at the centre of the whole ideal. The Israelites were to worship Yahweh as he revealed himself through rather than making the golden calf.

It has been argued that the narrative of the golden calf is non-P but has the bias of P. in line with Fretheim (1991:278-280) it has been argued that Exodus 32 is related to the story of Jeroboam's bulls. Exodus 32 was redacted to polemically address the bulls which Jeroboam made. The sin of the golden calf was depicted as the reason for the falls of the Northern Kingdom and later the Southern Kingdom.

Though Kessler (2013: 256) rightly places Exodus 32 in the Sinai Theology stream, it can be understood as having other theological streams. Other notable theological streams include Creation theology, Priestly theology, divine accessibility and Promise theology. From this perspective Kessler's (2013) proposed reading sheds light on the understanding of Exodus 32 as multi-layered. This implies that the passage calls for multiple relational responses.

Kessler's (2013) approach of reading of reading for a relational response can shed light on the understanding of the golden calf narrative in Exodus 32. It highlights the understanding that Exodus 32 has been shaped by different redactors who had different theological standpoints. It further brings out the different relational responses which Yahweh expected from the community.

## **5.2 Dissertation Conclusions**

This dissertation suggests that gold was associated with deities in the Ancient Near East and was used as a symbol of honour and authority. In the Old Testament it was associated with Yahweh as the creator and was used as a symbol of honour and authority. Therefore, it served as a good metal to use in images associated with Yahweh. The image of the golden calf was an acceptable image of Yahweh in the Northern Kingdom which was latter condemned because the story was written in light of the Southern Kingdom. Unlike in other Ancient Near East cults where the image was understood as a form of the deity, the golden calf was understood as the symbol or pedestal of Yahweh.

The making of the golden calf affected the relationship between Yahweh and the people negatively resulting in near annihilation of the people. However, the relationship was restored with a punishment. This can be better understood in relation to Jeroboam's bulls which were understood as a symbol of apostasy.

## **5.3 Suggestions for further studies**

Arising from this dissertation I have two suggestions for further studies. Firstly, the relationship between Exodus 32 and Judges 8:24-27 observed by Sarna in Propp (2008:549) can be explored further. Sarna has pointed out the similarities in the source of gold and its use in making idols. It would be interesting to research on the possibility of either of the texts as having influenced the other. The question of the possibility of the author of Judges being aware of Exodus 32 or relying on the same source or the other way around can be explored further.

Secondly, the portrayal of Yahweh as the one who initiated the killing of people in verse 29 raises the question of whether Yahweh has been a God who allows massacre of people. This can be explored further especially in light of religious wars.



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