

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED AFTER MOSES BROKE THE TABLETS?

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There are three radically different accounts of what happened after Moses angrily smashed the tablets containing the Ten Commandments when he came down from Mount Sinai..

I.

Exodus 32:19–20, 26–29

19 And as soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned hot, and he threw the tables out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. 20 And he took the calf which they had made, and burnt it with fire, and ground it to powder, and scattered it upon the water, and made the people of Israel drink it. . . . 26 then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, "Who is on the LORD's side? Come to me." And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together to him. 27 And he said to them, "Thus says the LORD God of Israel, ' Put every man his sword on his side, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbor.'"¹ 28 And the

II.

Deuteronomy 9:17–21 and 9:25–27

17 So I took hold of the two tables, and cast them out of my two hands, and broke them before your eyes. 18 Then I lay prostrate before the LORD as before, forty days and forty nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water, because of all the sin which you had committed, in doing what was evil in the sight of the LORD, to provoke him to anger. 19 For I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure which the LORD bore against you, so that he was ready to destroy you. But the LORD hearkened to me that time also. 20 And the LORD was so angry with Aaron that he was ready to destroy him; and I prayed for Aaron also at the same time. 21 Then I took the sinful thing, the calf which you had made, and burned it with fire and crushed it, grinding it

sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses; and there fell of the people that day about three thousand men. 29 And Moses said, “Today you have ordained yourselves for the service of the LORD, each one at the cost of his son and of his brother, that he may bestow a blessing upon you this day.”²

very small, until it was as fine as dust; and I threw the dust of it into the brook that descended out of the mountain. . . . 25 So I lay prostrate before the LORD for these forty days and forty nights, because the LORD had said he would destroy you. 26 And I prayed to the LORD, ‘O Lord GOD, destroy not thy people and thy heritage, whom thou hast redeemed through thy greatness, whom thou hast brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand. 27 Remember thy servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; do not regard the stubbornness of this people, or their wickedness, or their sin.’

III.

Exodus 32:26a, 32:30b–35

Then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said: “You have sinned a great sin. And now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.” 31 So Moses returned to the LORD and said, “Alas, this people have sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. 32 But now, if thou wilt forgive their sin—and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written.” 33 But the LORD said to Moses, “Whoever has sinned against me, him will I blot out of my book. 34 But now go, lead the people to the place of which I have spoken to you; behold, my angel shall go before you. Nevertheless, in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them.” 35 And the LORD sent a plague upon the people, because they made the calf which Aaron made.

According to Exodus 32:35, God sent a plague upon the people, but according to Exodus 32:20, Moses made the people drink water contaminated with the toxic powder from the ashes of the golden calf, seemingly for the purpose of fatally poisoning all who had worshiped the golden calf. However, according to Deut 9:21, Moses threw the toxic ashes into a brook so that the waters would carry the ashes into oblivion—without anyone being made to drink a concocted toxic beverage.

As presented above, Exodus 32:26a appears as the introduction to Moses' statement in Exodus 32:30b–35. If this is correct then Exodus 32:30a, “on the morrow Moses said to the people,” would be an editorial edition to accommodate the transition to the separate narrative telling of Moses' seeking to atone for the sin of the Israelites by offering his own life (“blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written”). Moses' willingness to die to atone for the sins of the Israelites finds a perfect parallel in Jesus' willingness to die to atone for the sins of all (Matthew 16:21–26).

Exodus 32:26b–29 was an independent narrative—created by the Levites to legitimate their priestly control—similar to the narratives found in Numbers 16, which tell of the death of many Levites deemed to be unrighteous. Who would dare challenge the authority of the surviving righteous Levites who, according to their own tradition, killed in a single day 3,000 of their sons, brothers, companions, and neighbors as the first step in achieving perpetual priestly power?

NOTES

1. Twelve words in Biblical Hebrew can be translated into English by the verb “to kill, to slay” but only *rāṣah* appears in the Decalogue. It was not a general term for killing but a technical word for “murder,” either *with premeditation* (as in Numbers 35:16–21, 30–31; Hosea 4:2; and Jeremiah 7:9) or *without intention* (as in Deuteronomy 4:42; 19:3–6; Numbers

35:6, 11, 12, 25–28; Joshua 20:3–6 and 21:13, 21–26). Hebrew *rāṣah* was used for (1) “illegal killing inimical to the community,” or (2) killing which was related to blood vengeance and the role of the avenger, or (3) killing out of personal malice, hatred, or deceit, which came to include murder and assassination. This verb did not deal with killing for religious reasons. Therefore, Moses was free to command the Levites to kill idolatrous Israelites, Joshua was free to kill the pagan Canaanites indiscriminately, and King Pekah of Israel felt free to kill one hundred twenty thousand Jews in a single day (2 Chronicles 28:6). Holy wars, crusades, and *jihad* were not prohibited by the Sixth Commandment as they had been in the covenant God made with Noah. (Genesis 9:6).

2. Moses’ call in Exodus 32:27–29 for the Levites to kill those who worshiped the golden calf may be alluded to in the *Qur’an*,

Lo! Allah has bought from the believers their lives and their wealth—because the Garden shall be theirs! They shall fight in the way of Allah and shall slay and be slain. It is a promise that is binding on him in the *Torah* and the *Gospel* and the *Qur’an*. (*Sura* 9:111)

Similarly, the statements of Jesus in Matthew 10:34–36, “I have not come to bring peace but a sword,” and Matthew 26:52, “all who take the sword will perish by the sword,” may be the basis for the *Gospel* also being mentioned in *Sura* 9:111. However, Jesus’ statement in Matthew 10:34 may go back to a Hebrew statement meaning, “I have not come to bring the *end* (where the original שָׁלוֹם should have been read as שָׁלֵו , not as שָׁלוֹם) but a *change* (where the original הַלְלִיף should have been read as *hillûf*, not as *halîf*).” A detailed study of this verse is now available online at <http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/cbbp-chapter30.pdf>.