

The Golden Calves and the Egyptian Concept of Deity

John N. Oswalt

[p.13]

Recently, Professor Morton Smith issued a rather chilling call for a return to the more radical kinds of literary criticism of the Old Testament.¹ In the course of that article, he disparaged the value of archaeology and comparative studies. He indicated his preference for documentary analysis, a "science" which has been held in question for thirty years.² Professor Smith's opinion to the contrary, I suggest that comparative studies, founded upon archaeological and linguistic evidence, still constitute the most fruitful field for Biblical research. It is my purpose in this article to demonstrate in one particular the value of this approach for the understanding of the Bible.

For Israel the bull calves, or, equally likely, young bulls, are the ultimate symbol of apostasy. They are found at the beginning of her faith, and they are found again at the end for the northern tribes. Professor Cyrus Gordon has pointed out the irony that it is Moses' brother who makes the first golden bull and one of Moses' grandsons who consecrates the image, probably a bull, which the Danites stole on their migration northward.³ Professor Gordon suggests that all along the way normative Yahwism has this particular skeleton treasuring very closely behind. Notice the violent responses which the calves elicit. Moses, although normally impetuous, seems unusually overwrought at the sight of his people

[p.14]

at worship. Hosea (8:5, 6; 10:5, 6; 13:2) has bitter sarcasm for them. The act of consecrating the bulls at Bethel and Dan turns Jeroboam from the chosen of God into one condemned (I Kings 12:30; 14:9; 15:34; 16:31). Why is this? Is it simply the Israelite antipathy to idols, or is something more at stake?

Ever since the late 1920s, O.T. scholars have been accustomed to turn to Syria and Mesopotamia for illumination of the function and meaning of the golden calves. Various stelae have been discovered depicting the storm god (Hadad in Syria) standing upon the back of a young bull.⁴ It is commonly urged, especially by Professor Albright, that this is what the golden calves represent: pedestals upon which the invisible Yahweh is enthroned. As such, it is suggested, they are analogous to the ark, the throne of the invisible Yahweh.⁵

It is my conviction that the evidence both from within the text and from its Egyptian and Ugaritic backgrounds does not support this position. Since nowhere outside of the Bible is an

¹ Morton Smith, "The Present State of Old Testament Studies," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LXXXVIII: 1 (1969), pp. 19-35.

² R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1969), pp. 62ff.

³ In an unpublished lecture (cf. Judges 18:30). Professor Gordon implies that this theft establishes Dan as a center of Bull worship, a fact which Jeroboam later recognized. *Before the Bible* (Ventnor, New Jersey, 1953), p. 143.

⁴ James B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures* (Princeton, 1954), p. 170.

⁵ William F. Albright, *From Stone Age to Christianity* (Garden City, New Jersey, 1957), pp. 299ff.

invisible god supported by bulls, the argument that such is intended by the calves rests heavily upon the assumption that the ark was the throne for Yahweh. While it is granted that this may be so, the principal function which the Bible ascribes to the ark is the container of the condensed stipulations of the Covenant along with certain historical evidences. God's presence between the cherubim (sphinxes)⁶ is to that degree only incidental (Exodus 25: 10-22). God speaks from this place not because it is constituted as His throne or support, but because this particular box happens to contain the evidence of the peculiar agreement within history between God and man. Of course, it may be argued that the ark originally was a throne with all of the imagery of a throne and that later recensions obscured these details in the interests of high-lighting the Covenant. However, more and more O.T. scholars, following the lead of Eichrodt, are agreed that whatever else may be ancient about Israel's faith the Covenant certainly is.⁷ If this is so, it seems likely that the ark's covenantal significance prevailed from the beginning and was not a later accretion. Therefore, it cannot

[p.15]

be argued that the calves were constituted as supports for an invisible God just as the ark was constituted as a support for Him. The ark's primary significance was otherwise.

However, there are other, stronger arguments from the text against this view. The Hebrew people called on Aaron to make them a god, not a pedestal for God (Exodus 32: 1). In their agitated state, looking for a return to the familiar and known, I cannot think that they would have found very attractive a golden pedestal leaving Yahweh just as nebulous and as invisible as before. If indeed the calves were only a pedestal why did Moses become so upset (Exodus 32: 19-22)? Why did he mete out such stern punishment (25-29)? The reaction seems far too intense if the calf was not really an image of Yahweh, but simply dangerous in that it might tempt the people to consider it later as an idol. Note that Moses has no qualms about constructing the brazen serpent which later did become a snare. The logical way to harmonize these two events is to understand that the calf was intended to be an image while the serpent was not.

Of course, it may be argued that Moses' fierce reaction is the work of a post-exilic redactor who did not understand the original significance of the calf. The redactor could only see the calf as an idol and thus Moses' response is really the voice of the Judaic over-reaction resulting from Exile. Aside from the questionable nature of such reasoning (if the text does not support one's view, assume that the text is incorrect), there is other evidence which indicates that the calves were understood to be idols at the very time of their construction. This evidence is found in Hosea and, by extension, in Amos. The reaction of these men: Hosea specifically to the calves (8: 5, 6; 10: 5, 6; 13: 2), and Amos to the accompanying cult (2: 7, 8; 3: 14; 5: 21-27), is fully as fiery as was Moses'. They are represented as denouncing in the bitterest of terms the idolatry which they saw in the Northern cult. Hosea calls the calves idols and what he says about them indicates that the people understood them as such (esp. 8: 6). Amos also speaks of the "images" which they had made (5: 26), very likely referring to the calves. Very few scholars care to classify these passages as the work of redactors. Yet, if they are genuine, it is clear that calves, concurrent with their construction,

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, tr. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia, 1961), vol. 1, p. 36, and John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (Nashville, 1957), p. 133.

were understood, not by a mistaken few, but by a majority, to be a representation of Yahweh, not simply a pedestal upon which He was invisibly present.

One of the reasons why many scholars find the pedestal explanation helpful is that, particularly in the case of Jeroboam, they

[p.16]

cannot believe that any good Israelite would knowingly make an image of Yahweh. Perhaps he would make; one of Baal or of Asherah, but given the strong iconoclasm of Yahwism, it is suggested that the making of an image of Yahweh was almost psychologically impossible. In turn, I suggest that it is precisely this that explains the outrage of Moses and Hosea: it was indeed an image of Yahweh and was intended so to be. This alone explains the depth of their horror.

Some might accept the notion that the calves were idols but argue that they represent "other gods" (cf. I Kings 14: 9 and many other places where the Israelites are prohibited from, or condemned for, going after "other gods"). This might indeed account in some measure for the hostility toward the calves and this possibility ought not to be ruled out. However, it is significant that in both cases when the bulls are consecrated (Ex. 32: 4; I Kings 12:28) the same rubric is used; "Behold your gods (God?)⁸, who brought you up out of Egypt." Perhaps at the foot of Sinai the Israelites, being rather new to Yahweh and His election, could think of some other god than He as being responsible for their deliverance, but certainly the people of Jeroboam's day knew that only one God could be intended by that phrase. Thus, on this evidence, I think it fair to say that the bull calves were not intended by their makers to represent "other gods."

Up until this point the arguments have been mainly negative, aimed at showing why it is not likely that the bulls were either pedestals for an invisible Yahweh or representations of "other gods". Is there positive evidence which would help us understand the ways in which the Israelites conceived of the calves? It is here that a consideration of background can shed valuable light. It is ironic that Professor Smith at one point notes that Egyptian studies seem to attract "cranks."⁹ For it is from this area that the following suggestions arise. Furthermore, I suspect that one who takes seriously Scripture's testimony concerning its origins and development qualifies as a "crank" for that writer. However, the findings in the Ancient Near East during the past fifty years have demonstrated that such claims are remarkably reliable, e.g., the Patriarchal stories as genuine reflections of the life of the second millennium B.C. This being so, it is most logical that we should look to Egypt for illumination of the environment in which

[p.17]

the Hebrew faith sprung up. For the Scriptures state very clearly that the foundations, the principles, and the major details of the Covenant faith of Israel had been established at the very latest prior to 1200 B.C. This period was the one in which Egyptian cultural influence

⁸ Note that Nehemiah 9:18 in relating the events of Exodus 32 used the singular masculine demonstrative, thus identifying the number of the ambiguous word *elohim*. "This is your God—"

⁹ Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

was supreme in Palestine. Thus, it seems likely that if the Biblical tradition is correct, an understanding of Egyptian religion might help one to understand the Hebrew religion and particularly the recurring theme of bull worship within that religion.

When one studies the religion of Egypt during the last half of the second millennium B.C. and the first half of the first millennium B.C. one is struck by the significance of the data. Can it be only chance that in these years Egypt came closer to developing real monotheism than any other country in the Ancient Near East with the exception of Israel? Here I am not speaking of Ikhnaton's abortive attempt to force the worship of the sun disc alone. Rather I am speaking of the whole thrust of Egyptian religion before and after Ikhnaton toward an integration of the divine at tributes and prerogatives under one head. That head was the god of Imperial Egypt—Amon-Re. How Ikhnaton fitted into this development is far too complex to discuss here. Let it simply be said that although Amon-Re's nature and activity are expressed in mythological rather than naturalistic terms Amon-Re is much more nearly like Yahweh than is Ikhnaton's Aton. A study of the hymns and prayers to Amon-Re reveals some startling similarities with Yahweh. Like Yahweh, Amon-Re is exclusively one. Other gods are simply manifestations of the one. He is eternal; he is mysterious; he is awesome and powerful, yet just and compassionate. He is the creator, the sovereign, the sustainer, the protector, the conqueror. Time is not sufficient to go into the notable details of these similarities, but they are notable and thought-provoking.¹⁰

However, in two significant areas Yahweh is different. In the first place He is, like Aton, nearly without mythology, that is, the crass materialization and dramatization of the deity. Second, and more important, Yahweh is never confused with nature. In the final analysis the Egyptians could not draw that distinction. They could not distinguish between creator and created. For them God

[p.18]

was within the system; He was the system. With that confusion prevailing ethical monotheism cannot be maintained. In the first place, the system is too diverse for one to concentrate very long upon its unity. The many-sidedness of nature must inevitably force one to focus upon the complexity of its forces rather than upon the singularity which infuses these forces. This eliminates monotheism. Second, if God is the system, He is not best influenced and related to by ethical behaviour but by direct influence upon the system, i.e., sympathetic magic. One's ethical nature counts for little if in impregnating the cult prostitute one is, in reality, impregnating the universe. It is precisely in these two directions that Egyptian religion fell during the first millennium B.C. After straining to the heights just described it plunged back to the depths of grossest polytheism and crudest magic. So a study of Egyptian religion throws into bold relief the significance of the distinction between creator and created.

One may ask, why did not the Egyptians with all their expertise discover this distinction? One suggestion is that if one is reasoning from within the system, reason alone cannot lead beyond that system.¹¹ If one protests, "Aristotle," it may be answered that he is the exception who proves the rule. In the first place, it is not entirely clear that the "First Cause" transcends the

¹⁰ Interested readers will find full discussion and documentation of the above in my Ph. D. dissertation entitled *The Concept of Amon-Re as Reflected in the Hymns and Prayers of the Ramesside Period* (Brandeis University, 1968). (Available through University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan).

¹¹ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York, 1947), p. 129.

system. But even if that be granted, the very failure of this conception to take root in the minds of Aristotle's hearers supports the principle being maintained. At any rate, why, of all people, not being known for their logic, did the Hebrews discover this principle? Could it be that they did not discover it? Could it be that it and its necessary consequences were revealed? I suggest that the Hebrews were prepared for this truth in the remarkable intellectual soil of New Kingdom Egypt. Then in the fullness of time the mountain of Sinai thundered and shook and smoked with the presence of the revealed God whom the mind of no man can fully comprehend.

It is against this background of confusion between creator and created that the meaning of the golden calves can be understood. At one moment Amon-Re is the hidden, invisible, ineffable, almighty God. But at precisely the same instant he is the life force so powerfully portrayed in the strength and sexual prowess of the Bull. He is the invisible God and he is the Bull. In the

[p.19]

Great Hymn to Amon¹² he is called the "Bull of his mother" signifying his power of self-recreation (1: 3) and also his power to create all mankind (X: 8, 9). In the opening line of that hymn he is called the "Bull, chief of all the gods." He is also called the "Bull of the Ennead", that is, creator of the gods (1: 6). Other, similar, references may be found in the Leiden Hymn, the Tura Hymn and the Hymn of Nesichons.¹³ However, in the same contexts, Amon-Re is referred to in what seem to be the most transcendent terms. He is the unique One (VI: 2). His shrine, his ultimate home, is hidden (IV: 1). His power is limitless (III: 7, 8). He is the source of life and truth (III: 3-8). Similar references abound in the other religious literature. The Egyptian was able, then, to move between these conceptions with freedom.¹⁴

Thus, if Moses communed with the invisible Yahweh on the mountain top, his people understood themselves to be worshipping the visible Yahweh in the valley below. To people born and reared in Egypt there could never be a conflict between these conceptions. It was this God who had brought them out of bondage. This was no foreign god, no idol, it was Yahweh! Nor, on the other hand, was the young bull simply a pedestal. If in Egypt the Supreme God was at once transcendent in space and immanent in the Bull, it is only natural that the Hebrew people, especially at the moment of their wanting to return to Egypt, should conceive of Yahweh in the same terms.

In this context, it cannot be only coincidence that it was in Egypt that Jeroboam spent several years in exile before assuming the kingship of North Israel. To one steeped in Egyptian thought there is nothing wrong about representing the supreme God as a Bull; in fact, there is something supremely right. Given the borrowings from pagan temples to be found in the structure and fittings of the Jerusalem temple,¹⁵ Jeroboam perhaps felt entirely justified in his actions.

¹² Conveniently translated in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, ed. J. B. Pritchard (Princeton, 1955), pp. 365-367.

¹³ Hieroglyphic texts and fresh translations may be found in the above-mentioned dissertation.

¹⁴ For documentation and discussion of the same phenomenon in Ugaritic religion cf. Cyrus H. Gordon, *Common Backgrounds of Greek and Hebrew Civilizations* (New York, 1965), p. 157.

¹⁵ Albright, *op. cit.*, p. 294.

However, if Jeroboam and the descendants of Jacob saw nothing wrong in the worship of the Bull as Yahweh, Moses and the prophets did. They knew that the distinction between creator and

[p.20]

created was of critical importance. To worship Yahweh the Invisible and Yahweh the Bull was to doom themselves to return on the way they had come, back to the leeks and garlic, back to the animism and black magic. To worship Yahweh the invisible only was to begin to prepare the way, to begin to flatten the hills and to fill in the valleys, until one day that One from outside the system could step into the system to redeem the system.

I submit that an understanding of the Egyptian background to the Old Testament helps us to understand the incident of the Golden Calves correctly. In countless other cases, background has illuminated, and will illuminate, the Hebrew Bible. It is one of the most valuable correctives to the subjective excesses of documentary analysis.

© 1973 John N. Oswalt. Reproduced by kind permission of the author.

Prepared for the Web in December 2006 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>
