

THE EFFECT OF THE SIN OF THE GOLDEN CALF

Rev. Dr. R. Dean Anderson (last Revised: 23 December 2016)

In the following we briefly sketch some of the more salient points relating to the effect of the sin of the golden calf for the regulations given by God to Israel.

When Israel arrived at Mt. Sinai God told them that they were to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod. 19:6). Every family could send a priest to serve the Lord in His sanctuary according to what the Lord had said at the exodus and indicated by the Passover feast—namely, that he would claim every first-born son for Himself. We read in Exodus 13:2

Sanctify to Me every first-born, the first offspring of every womb among the sons of Israel, both of man and beast; it belongs to Me.

The beasts would be sacrificed to God. The first-born sons would be dedicated to God’s service in His sanctuary.¹ And so it is that in the Book of the Covenant (the law which God gave to Israel through Moses before the sin with the golden calf) the provision for redemption of first-born sons is not even mentioned:

You shall not delay the offering from your harvest and your vintage. The first-born of your sons you shall give to Me. You shall do the same with your oxen and with your sheep. It shall be with its mother seven days; on the eighth day you shall give it to Me. (Exod. 22:29-30)²

From what we have adduced it is reasonable to conclude that the “priests” who served under the Israelites when they arrived at Mt. Sinai were first-born sons (see Exod. 19:22-24).³

All this was to change after the Israelites profaned themselves by worshipping God in the form of a golden calf.⁴ The law after this incident once again provides for redemption:

The first offspring from every womb belongs to Me, and all your male livestock, the first offspring from cattle and sheep. And you shall redeem with a lamb the first offspring from a donkey; and if you do not redeem it, then you shall break its neck. You shall redeem all the first-born of your sons. And none shall appear before Me empty-handed. (Exod. 34:19-20).

In fact, after the sin with the golden calf this redemption became mandatory for that Israelite generation.⁵ The tabernacle was no longer to be staffed by first-born sons, but instead of the service of the first-born sons the Levites were appointed. We read in Numbers 3:12-13 ...

Now, behold, I have taken the Levites from among the sons of Israel instead of every first-born, the first issue of the womb among the sons of Israel. So the Levites shall be Mine. For all the first-born are Mine; on the day that I struck down all the first-born in the land of Egypt, I sanctified to Myself all the first-born in Israel, from man to beast. They shall be Mine; I am the LORD.

In the same chapter we read that both the first born sons of the Israelites and the Levites were counted off, but it was found that there were 273 more first born sons than there were Levites. These 273 sons had

¹ Already in the book of Genesis we see that God laid claim to first-born sons, cf. Gen. 22 and compare Gen. 4:4.

² See further my commentary in *The Laws of the Book of the Covenant*. Note that Exod. 13:11-16 gives the law as it applied in the promised land. Given that it speaks of the redemption of first-born sons, the law clarifies to the reader (presumed to be in the promised land) what the law means for him now. The transition from first-born sons dedicated to God to first-born sons being redeemed only actually occurred at Mt. Sinai (see below).

³ The law of Exod. 20:24-26 seems to presuppose that a pre-Aaronic priest would be wearing some kind of simple linen loincloth which upon the ascent of stairs would expose one’s genitals (cf. 2 Sam. 6:14, 20).

⁴ That the Israelites intended the golden calf to be a representation of Yahweh is clear from Exod. 32:4-5. This was sin against the second commandment, not the first.

⁵ Later, because of the continuing service of the Levites, redemption was also the rule, although first-born sons seem to occasionally have been given to the temple, cf. the prophet Samuel.

therefore to pay a ransom of five shekels per person to redeem them from the temple service.⁶ And henceforth the Lord expected that five shekels be paid to redeem every first born son (Num. 18:15-16).

Why did the Levites replace the first-born among the Israelites? When Moses returned from the mountain and discovered the great sin of the Israelites, the Scripture records:

Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, "Whoever is for the LORD, come to me!" And all the sons of Levi gathered together to him. And he said to them, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Every man of you put his sword upon his thigh, and go back and forth from gate to gate in the camp, and kill every man his brother, and every man his friend, and every man his neighbour.'" So the sons of Levi did as Moses instructed, and about three thousand men of the people fell that day. (Exod. 32:26-28)

The Lord Jesus would later reflect on this incident when he warned his disciples:

For I came to SET A MAN AGAINST HIS FATHER, AND A DAUGHTER AGAINST HER MOTHER, AND A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW AGAINST HER MOTHER-IN-LAW; and A MAN'S ENEMIES WILL BE THE MEMBERS OF HIS HOUSEHOLD. He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who has found his life shall lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake shall find it. (Matt. 10:35-39)

Because of the fact that the Levites showed such great dedication to the Lord that they were even willing to mete out the Lord's drastic punishment in this fashion, they were chosen to serve Him. Deuteronomy 33:8-11 records it as follows:

And of Levi he [i.e. Moses] said, "Let Thy Thummim and Thy Urim belong to Thy godly man, Whom Thou didst prove at Massah, With whom Thou didst contend at the waters of Meribah; Who said of his father and his mother, 'I did not consider them'; And he did not acknowledge his brothers, Nor did he regard his own sons, For they observed Thy word, And kept Thy covenant. "They shall teach Thine ordinances to Jacob, And Thy law to Israel. They shall put incense before Thee, And whole burnt offerings on Thine altar. "O LORD, bless his substance, And accept the work of his hands; Shatter the loins of those who rise up against him, And those who hate him, so that they may not rise again."

In this way the Levites reversed a curse which had long ago been placed upon their tribe because of the cruel action of the brothers Simeon and Levi to avenge the rape of their sister Dinah (Gen. 34). The patriarch Jacob had worded the curse as follows:

Simeon and Levi are brothers; Their swords are implements of violence. Let my soul not enter into their council; Let not my glory be united with their assembly; Because in their anger they slew men, And in their self-will they lamed oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce; And their wrath, for it is cruel. I will disperse them in Jacob, And scatter them in Israel. (Gen. 49:5-7)

Because the tribe of Levi dedicated themselves to the Lord after the dreadful sin with the golden calf, the Lord put a new twist on this curse. Yes, they would be scattered in Israel, but no longer as a sign of shame. They would be given special privileges, special cities, flocks and herds because they would be responsible for teaching the people God's laws and serving him in worship. Only the tribe of Simeon would remain scattered in shame.

We ought also to note that the coming of Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God to die for our sins has abolished the need to redeem first-born sons from serving God in formal public worship. The Levitical priesthood has been done away with and Christ is now the High-priest of the family of God's church. He is, as it were, the great first-born son among many brothers (cf. Rom. 8:29; Hebr. 2:11-12). We may also

⁶ We also read that the cattle of the Levites was taken in the place of the (already mature) first born among the cattle of the Israelites. This was evidently a ruling which prevented much of the cattle born to the Israelite herds in the preceding years from being confiscated. Henceforth the newly born first offspring would need to be dedicated to the Lord. No similar provision is recorded with respect to the flocks or to the donkeys, but a similar rule was probably applied.

partake in His priesthood and offer ourselves up as thankofferings to God (Rom. 12:1). The original promise of Exodus 19:6 has in Christ found its final fulfilment (cf. 1Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:6).