An Examination of the Golden Calf Incident, Exodus 32:1-6

We cannot over-emphasize the significance of the Exodus event in the ongoing relationship between God and his people. For example, as a result of God’s redemption, Israel was to serve (worship) him the rest of their days, 4:23; 7:16; 8:1, 20; etc. God’s miraculous deliverance of his covenant people from Egyptian captivity into his presence—he bore them on eagles wings and brought them to himself, Ex 19:4—and into the promised land was the single most important event in all of the Old Testament.

Above all, Yahweh had purposed and executed it in order that Israel would come to know him personally. [T. Desmond Alexander, From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch, 3rd edition. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 187]. They would know him as the self-existing, independent, infinite God, Ex 3:14. They would revere him as “The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, .. ” v. 15-16. They would honor him as “the LORD God of the Hebrews”, v. 18, who was personally involved in their lives and who would redeem them from their affliction and settle them peacefully in a land flowing with milk and honey, vv. 16-17. Further, in his supernatural once-for-all deliverance of his people, they would come to know him as the sovereign God of the world. Yahweh’s victory over Pharaoh and his terrifying army was also a victory over the gods of Egypt over whom he is described as executing righteous judgment. “For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD.” 12:12. See also Num 33:4. Because Yahweh’s sovereign supremacy over all the gods of Egypt extended to (the gods of) the pagan nations who cowered in fear on hearing of this awesome deeds, Ex 15:11-16, they would come to know him as the sovereign Lord of all creation. In summary, Yahweh’s victory over Egypt, by which he would “get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, .. his chariots, and his horsemen”, was achieved for the specific purpose that the Egyptians (and derivatively, the rest of the nations) would know that he alone is the LORD, 14:4, 18 [Ibid., 188].

All of these events were established by the efficacious Word of God, the very word of promise that he declared to Moses and that he performed at the Red Sea in the very sight of the people, 19:4; Dt 29:2; etc. This was the very word with which God spoke to his people at Mt. Sinai where he constituted them as “his treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; .. [as] a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” These were the words the Lord gave Moses “to speak to the people of Israel.” Ex 19:5-6.

Bearing in mind the glorious indicative of God’s monergistic deeds in the redemption of Israel and in his consequent establishment of them as his most treasured covenant people over all the nations of the earth, an indicative that he beautifully summarizes thus: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery,”, 20:2; it is no wonder that the first imperative to proceed from his mouth was “You shall have no other gods before me. “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.” vv. 3-4. This was the Word that Israel sadly forgot. Yes, Israel forgot to the offers word for many reasons, paramount among which is the fact that they thought it insufficient for their daily and eternal needs.