

The Book of Acts: Verse-by-Verse

Acts 7:41-43

As we finished last time, I noted this quote from F.F. Bruce: “The invisible presence of God was not enough for them: they craved some form of divinity that they could see They persuaded Aaron to manufacture “gods to go before us.”

As we continue looking at Stephen’s defense, we will see how he is about to outline the ancient Israelites consistent pattern of unfaithfulness to Yahweh. He will show that the very ancestors of the Sanhedrin were idol worshippers who, as Paul puts it in Romans 1, “Exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.” – Romans 1:23

Let’s keep that focus in mind as we read verses 41-43:

“That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and reveled in what their own hands had made. But God turned away from them and gave them over to the worship of the sun, moon, and stars. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets:

‘Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the wilderness, people of Israel? You have taken up the tabernacle of Molech and the star of your god Rephan, the idols you made to worship. Therefore I will send you into exile’ beyond Babylon.’”

As I pointed out, in these verses Stephen is chronicling the Israelites consistent pattern of idolatry. He begins with that infamous scene in Exodus 32 at Mt. Sinai, when the Israelites decide that Moses isn't going to be returning to the camp. They convince Aaron, the High Priest, to make them a golden calf to carry before them as they return to Egypt.

Now, keep in mind that this is only three months after the Passover and Exodus and 40 days after God has given them the Covenant Law at Mt. Sinai.

Here's how Exodus 32:1-4 records their conversation:

“Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.”

Aaron answered them, “Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.” 3 So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. 4 He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, “These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.” – Exodus 32:1-4

We could just note those verses and move on, but I'd like to spend a bit more time on this, because I think there are a couple of insights that are important to our understanding of the true depth of this incident.

First, notice the people's request: “Come, make us gods who will go before us.” Exodus 32 tells us that Moses had received the two tablets while he was on Mt. Sinai. Exodus 32:16 records, “These tablets were God's work;

the words on them were written by God himself.” - Exodus 32:16

According to Exodus 20:1-5 what was the very first commandment written on those tablets?

“I am the Lord your God, the one who brought you out of Egypt where you were slaves. Do not worship any god except me. Do not make idols that look like anything in the sky or on earth or in the ocean under the earth. Don't bow down and worship idols.”

We can't miss the irony. Aaron, Israel's first high priest, is directing the workers to create an idol. They are going to have it carried in front of them as they return to Egypt.

God said, “I am the Lord your God, the one who brought you out of Egypt...”. Just a few chapters later, the people of Israel are saying this about the golden calf: “This is the god who brought us out of Egypt!”

Consider this: They are telling each other that the golden calf is the god who brought them OUT of Egypt ... but they are planning on having it lead them BACK to Egypt!

Why did they choose to construct a golden calf? As I considered this question (once again) I decided to dig deeper than my normal considerations. Let me give you two possible answers, one from history and another from Jewish theology.

First, let's look at historical sources.

Earlier, I mentioned Paul's statement in Romans 1, that

once human separated themselves from God, they “Exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.” – Romans 1:23

It doesn't take much research to learn that ancient Israel's contemporaries used calves or bulls as one of the personifications of their gods. For example:

- The Egyptian deity, **Apis** was pictured as a cal.
- Similarly, Hathor, the Egyptian bull goddess of joy, celebration, and love, was a common figure in ancient Egyptian religion.
- In ancient Canaanite literature we find both “El” pictured as a bull, as well as Baal, the chief god, portrayed as an ox.

That said, it could have been natural for the Exodus Israelites to have chosen a golden calf or bull because they had been in Egypt for some 400 years. They would have identified the golden calf with worship in Egypt.

Second, let's look at Jewish Theology:

Dr. Jeffrey Tigay give us a very different look at the golden calf incident. Let me summarize what he has to say about it:

The Jews built the golden calf in an attempt to ... draw Godliness all the way down into the world. They knew that one day God would tell Moses that the Jews should build Him a sanctuary, and that they should construct keruvim ... two golden, child-like forms [which] stood in the Holy of Holies on top of the ark From

there, from between the keruvim, God would communicate with humankind.

The Jews knew this and wanted to build their own version of the keruvim. However, their approach was wrong. For even though the golden calf was similar to the keruvim, there was a fundamental difference. While God had commanded the keruvim, He had not commanded the calf. True connection with G-d can be achieved only in the way God desires it, not in how we desire it." - Dr. Jeffrey Tigay

In Dr. Tigay's view, the original intention wasn't to replace God – it was to replace Moses. The golden calf was to represent an immediate mediator between God and the people, just like Moses had been.

There seems to be some evidence for this, because, after the golden calf was created, Aaron called for a festival to Jehovah. Exodus 32 records Aaron's words: *"Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord."*

What Aaron may have intended to be a festival to Yahweh quickly spiraled into something else. Exodus 32 also tells us, "So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry." – Exodus 32:5-6

Let me make one more note on this event: The golden calf was made of the molten gold that came from the Israelites.

In Exodus 32:2-4 we read, "Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me." So all

the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool.”

If we use what I call the “law of first mention”, we might ask, where did the Israelites get these gold earrings? I think we have a clue back in the Passover account. In Exodus 12:35-36 we read:

“The Israelites did as Moses instructed and asked the Egyptians for articles of silver and gold and for clothing. The Lord had made the Egyptians favorably disposed toward the people, and they gave them what they asked for; so they plundered the Egyptians.”

Let me draw a spiritual parallel: When God brought Israel out of Egypt, he allowed them to plunder the Egyptians. He had promised Abraham that his people would do this. In Genesis 15:13-14 God said,

“Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. “But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions.”

Here’s what I want you to see: The Israelites took the very symbols of their freedom from Egypt and produced the golden calf. What was meant to display victory over Egypt turned into an idol commonly seen in Egypt.

That’s the Exodus idolatry. But as Stephen points out, this was only the beginning of a pattern that could be traced throughout their history.

He goes on to say,

42 But God turned away from them and gave them over to the worship of the sun, moon, and stars. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets:

“‘Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the wilderness, people of Israel? You have taken up the tabernacle of Molech and the star of your god Rephan, the idols you made to worship. Therefore I will send you into exile’ beyond Babylon.”

Stephen traces Israel’s pattern of idolatry from the Old Testament wilderness wanderings to the Babylonian exile. As he does so, he cites Amos 5:25-27. He’s looking back at the time under the latter years of the monarchy when, Jerusalem had given itself over to what has been called “The full-blown worship of the “host of heaven,” the planetary powers”.

Notice how Stephen puts it: “God turned away from them and gave them over to the worship of the sun, moon and stars.” If you recall, Paul used that phrase, “God gave them over” many times in the Book of Romans.

- Romans 1:24 – “Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.”
- Romans 1:26 – “Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones.”
- Romans 1:28 – “Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave

them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done.”

Stephen tells us, “God turned away from them and gave them over to the worship of the sun, moon and stars.” F.F. Bruce makes this comment on that statement:

“God turned and “abandoned them to the worship of the host of heaven.” These are terrible words, but the principle that men and women are given up to the due consequences of their own settled choice is well established in scripture and experience.” – F.F. Bruce

That’s exactly what we just saw in those passages from the Book of Romans. In the Old Testament, both the gentile world and, at times, even God’s own people chose rebellion and separation from God. Eventually, as Paul puts it, “God gave them over” to their own choices.

I told you that Stephen was quoting chapter five of the book of Amos. He chose that passage because it was directly related to the idea of God giving his own people over to their choice of worshipping idols.

There are a couple of variations on how Amos 5:25-27 is translated. One is the Hebrew text, the other is the Greek Old Testament. Stephen is quoting from the Septuagint – the Greek Old Testament. As we will see in a few moments, that choice will be important to our understanding.

Let me give you the original background for the Amos text:

Amos was prophesying on the eve of the Assyrian invasions which brought the northern kingdom of Israel to an end. He warned them that they would be deported, as he said, “beyond Damascus” and that they would carry with them into exile the tokens of that idolatry.

Amos identifies these as “Sakkuth your king” and “Kaiwan your star-god”. Speaking through Amos, Yahweh asked his people, “Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?” The answer is, of course, “No”.

Now, there’s a bit of intrigue here. In Amos’ original text, it appears he is implying that there were no sacrifices offered during the entire 40 years of wilderness wandering. F.F. Bruce challenges that view, writing,

“This interpretation fails to bring out the main emphasis of his words. His question probably meant: “Was it mere sacrifices and offerings, sacrifices and offerings that were an end in themselves and not the expression of your loyalty of spirit, that you offered in the wilderness days?”

We might expect Israel to respond to God’s question with something like, “No, we offered our sacrifices out of loyalty to you.”

I said there were two ways of translating Amos’ words. Here’s where the difference between them comes into play. Stephen, quoting from the Greek Old Testament, understands Israel’s “No” to mean this:

“No: we offered sacrifices and offerings indeed, but to other gods, not to the God of Israel.”

Stephen’s understanding makes sense because he has just emphasized Israel’s idolatry in the case of worshiping the golden calf. As he quotes Amos, he is drawing a line between the Exodus idolatry and the wilderness idolatry. He’s telling the Sanhedrin that, even then, the Israelites were revealing the rebellion of their hearts.

Notice how Stephen references both Molech and Rephan. Let’s take a moment to identify who these gods were.

- **Molech:**

Molech was one of the gods of Canaan. Before the Israelites entered Canaan, God warned them not to participate in Molech worship. In Leviticus 18:21, we read: “You shall not give any of your children to offer them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord.”

As Leviticus is indicating, the Canaanite worship of Molech involved killing children and burning their bodies. The Canaanites built statues of Molech with outstretched arms. The body of Molech was actually a form of a crematorium. The bodies of the children were slid through an opening in the idol’s body, between its arms.

Throughout the Old Testament God instructed his people that any culture that worshipped Molech was to be exterminated. The Israelites not only disobeyed God’s instructions, they incorporated Molech worship into their own traditions.

How bad was it? According to 1 Kings 11:1–8, even Solomon was swayed by this cult and built places of worship for Moloch. 1 Kings 12:31 tells us that Molech worship took place in the “high places”, as well as a narrow ravine outside Jerusalem called the Valley of Hinnom. (See: 2 Kings 23:10).

Despite the efforts of some of Israel’s godly kings, worship of Molech wasn’t abolished until the Israelites’ captivity in Babylon. When the Jews returned to their land, they rededicated themselves to God, and the Valley of Hinnom was turned into a place for burning garbage as well as the bodies of executed criminals.

Jesus used the imagery of the Valley of Hinnom to describe hell. In Luke 12:5, He said, “But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear the One who, after you have been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear Him!” - Luke 12:5

- **Rephan:**

As Stephen quotes Amos he says, ““Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the wilderness, people of Israel? You have taken up the tabernacle of Molech and the star of your god Rephan, the idols you made to worship.”

As I mentioned, Stephen was quoting the Greek translation of the Old Testament Scriptures. Many of our English translations word Amos 5:26 this way: “You took up the tabernacle of Moloch, and the star of your god Rephan, the images that you made to worship them.”

The original Hebrew text translates Rephan as Kiyun –

which has several variant spellings – such as Chiun or Kaiwan. Some versions, like the NIV don't translate the word at all.

So who was the idol Rephan? The majority of scholars identify Rephan or Kiyun as the Babylonian name for the god of the planet Saturn. As such, the International Standard Bible translates Amos 5:26 this way: “And you carried the tent of your king—and Saturn, your star god idols that you crafted for yourselves.”

The historical evidence suggests that the Babylonians worshiped a god of their own imagination and named him “Kiyun” – a wandering star. This is not surprising as many ancient cultures observed that some stars – which we know were actually planets - moved through the sky, while others were fixed.

In case you don't know this, our English word for planets comes from the Greek term “asteres planēta”, which was shortened to just planētai - meaning “wandering stars.” Since the ancients did not distinguish stars from planets, for them they were all stars.

In light of this, the planet Saturn was considered to be a star and the pagan god associated with him was known as a “star-god.”

When Stephen references “the star of your god Rephan”, he is noting that some of the ancient Israelites worshiped it in the wilderness. By the way, some have erroneously insisted that the star of Rephan is the source of the six-pointed Star of David featured on the Jewish flag. There is no sound historical evidence for that theory.

Stephen has now demonstrated that the Israelites had a pattern of idolatry throughout the Old Testament. Next, he bring his message home with a statement about the inability of any one place housing God's presence on earth.