

and that this was overlaid with gold. Why should the bull have been chosen as a symbol? We know that a living bull was worshipped at Memphis in Egypt, and some have supposed that bull worship on the part of the people betrays Egyptian influence. But it is more probable that agricultural life suggested to the Israelites the bull as the symbol of strength. The sin of the people at this time is often misunderstood. It was a breach, not of the first commandment, but of the second. They were not worshipping another God, but their own; only they were worshipping Him under the form of an image. It is only of Him that the people could have said, "This is thy God, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt" (v. 4, Rev. Ver. Marg.), and Aaron says distinctly in v. 5, "To-morrow shall be a feast to Jehovah." The worship of Jehovah under this form at Bethel and Dan lasted for long in Israel—down to the time of Hosea, at any rate (740 B.C.).

Vs. 5, 6. *When Aaron saw; that is, the effect of the image upon the people, he built an altar, and appointed a sacred festival for the following day. On the morrow. Sacrifice was offered, burnt offerings . . . and peace offerings—and a sacred meal eaten. Rose up to play; singing and dancing were indulged in, vs. 18, 19. All this was done in honor of their own God, whose image was now in their midst. But not in this way was Jehovah to be worshipped. So, for their unspiritual conception of God, the people had to be humiliated, and the image destroyed.*

### III. A Genuine Patriot, 30-32.

V. 30. *Ye have sinned a great sin.* Notice in this section, the frequency of the word "sin." The people had not realized that image worship was a sin. But sin it was all the same; for God is a Spirit. *Peradventure I shall make an atonement for your sin.* Moses first brings home the sin of their idolatry to their conscience, and then speaks of the hope he cherishes of making atonement. It is worthy of notice that this atonement is made here, not by sacrifice but by intercession. The fervent prayer of the righteous Moses availed much.

Vs. 31, 32. *Moses returned unto the Lord.*

He lays the case before God, beginning by confessing the sin of the people in making a golden god, a "great sin" he calls it. *If thou wilt forgive their sin.* He pleads for the guilty people with the most exquisite tenderness. His prayer is a peerless model of unselfishness. "If thou wilt forgive their sin, good." But if not, he was content to perish with them. *Blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book.* God is like a sovereign who keeps a register of His subjects (Compare Ps. 87). Those whose names are written there have a right to the privileges of citizens in God's city—a right to life and salvation. Moses is content to forfeit these, if his people cannot enjoy them with him.

### IV. A Deserved Punishment, 33-35.

V. 33. *Whosoever hath sinned . . . him will I blot out.* God's answer is first one of justice and then of love. This verse announces the great principle of individual responsibility and individual retribution. Moses had not sinned, therefore God would not let him be blotted out of His book. But just as surely would He blot out of that book those who had sinned, one and all of them.

V. 34. *Mine angel shall go before thee.* God is also merciful. He will give the people time. He will put off the evil day, and will meantime give them tokens of His goodwill, which may yet convince and convert them. He will graciously send His angel to lead them, under Moses, to the promised land. *In the day when I visit.* If, after all, He has to come to them in punishment, He will punish in earnest. Thus the two essential aspects of God's nature are brought out with unusual clearness: His justice, in virtue of which the sinner must be punished, and His love, which makes him ready to listen and yield to the intercession of Moses. The great revelation of Jehovah as a God of pity and love receives one of its noblest expressions in ch. 34: 5-7, a passage which should be read in connection with this passage, and which indeed forms part of the same story. Besides thus throwing strong, clear light on the nature of God, this last section forcibly suggests the power of intercessory prayer. Moses struggled with God and prevailed.