

A LITERARY STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF THE GOLDEN-CALF EPISODE IN EXODUS 32:1-33:6

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The following is a literary structural analysis of the Golden-Calf episode as found in the MT of Exod 32:1-33:6. This analysis does not purport to deal exhaustively with the manifold exegetical, homiletical, textual, and theological issues encountered therein. Rather, its goal is to reveal the structural framework of the passage within which these issues arise.

1. *Contemporary Views of Exodus 32:1-33:6*

There is quite a variety of source-critical views on the Golden-Calf episode, with no scholarly consensus in sight.¹ Brevard Childs, on the other hand, warns against focusing too closely on such topical "polarities"—a procedure which has "often led literary critics to fragment this chapter into multiple layers and sources which lack all cohesion."²

OT scholars recognize the multiplicity of themes within the episode. The central theme has been identified variously as disobedience, rebellion and atonement, or as the overarching theme of the danger of the departure of YHWH's presence from among his

¹Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia, 1974), p. 559, assigns it to one basic source, J, with 2 expansions, one of which is deuteronomistic. John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 3 (Waco, TX, 1987), pp. 417, 427-428, 435, presents a spectrum of scholarly views. Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York, 1987), p. 70, sees the episode as being originally E. Immanuel Lewy, "The Story of the Golden Calf Reanalysed," *VT* 9 (1959): 318, sees a Yahwist narrative groundwork and four editors, a Yahwist, a northern prophetic Elohist, a southern priestly Elohist, and a Deuteronomist.

²Childs, p. 563. For a refreshing combination of genre and structure analysis of 32:30-35 and 32:25-29, see G. Herbert Livingston, *The Pentateuch in Its Cultural Environment* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1974), pp. 250, 256.

TABLE 1
LITERARY STRUCTURE OF EXODUS 32:1-33:6

- A. 32:1-6** People act, and Aaron (YHWH's High Priest) reacts.
- B. 32:7-10** YHWH's two utterances: *way^cdabbēr*, *wayyōmer*
- C. 32:11-14** Moses intercedes
- D. 32:15-20** Moses goes down the mountain
- E. 32:21-25** Judgment: investigative phase
- F. 32:26a** Opportunity for repentance
- E'. 32:26b-29** Judgment: executive phase
- D'. 32:30** Moses goes up the mountain
- C'. 32:31-32** Moses intercedes
- B'. 32:33-33:3** YHWH's two utterances: *wayyōmer*, *way^cdabbēr*
- A'. 33:4-6** YHWH acts, and People react.
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people.³ These various identifications, however, do not take into account the literary structure of the passage, a structure which reveals a different central theme. The following discussion will attempt to remedy the situation.

2. *Literary Structural Analysis of Exodus 32:1-33:6*

The central theme of Exod 32:1-33:6 is a two-phased judgment of the people (investigative and executive), divided by an opportunity for repentance. Source-critical division leaves the "original" pericope asymmetrical and splintered.⁴ By contrast, the canonical form of the episode is balanced and coherent, pointing directly to the central theme of the passage, preceded and followed by sections that serve as counterparts in a chiasmic pattern with the **A-B-A'** form. **Table 1** sets forth this pattern in outline form, and the following paragraphs provide brief elucidation of the general content, concepts, and relationships involved.

A // A'—Exodus 32:1-6 // Exodus 33:4-6

In the first section of the pericope, Exod 32:1-6, the people desire cult modalities (v. 1). They lose patience with Moses, and by extension also with YHWH, so they ask Aaron to provide for their desires without YHWH's guidance. This Aaron does in the form of the infamous golden calf (vv. 2-4). The people act; and Aaron, as YHWH's representative, reacts. In the parallel section at the end of the pericope, 33:4-6, YHWH warns Moses and orders the removal of ornaments (v. 5). The Sons of Israel take off their ornaments (v. 6). Here YHWH acts, and the people react. The action/reaction is thus inverted in these paralleling sections.

Moreover, the activity involved in each section is similar: the disposition of jewelry. In the initial episode, the men provide (at Aaron's request) gold earrings belonging to their wives and daughters and sons for the purpose of making the image (32:2-3). In the closing episode, the Sons of Israel remove (at YHWH's request) their own ornaments (33:5-6).

³Childs, p. 558; R. Alan Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, vol. 2 (Downer's Grove, IL, 1973), p. 212; Durham, p. 418.

⁴E.g., Childs, p. 559, whose interpretation would leave the "original" pericope with a partial investigative phase, lacking a levitical executive phase, and having no opportunity for repentance (32:26).

Hence, sections **A** and **A'** both concern the question of following YHWH, an activity that is related closely with the issue of self-adornment. Both sections have actors and reactors, but they are inverted as to sequence. As indicated above, in the first section the people act by disregarding YHWH's leadership, with Aaron, as YHWH's representative, reacting. In the corresponding section it is YHWH who acts, and it is the people who react, doing so by showing their submission to YHWH's leadership.

B // B'—*Exodus 32:7-10 // Exodus 32:33-33:3*

In Exod 32:7-10, two words come from YHWH. In v. 7, YHWH "spoke," *way^edabbēr*; and in v. 9, YHWH "said," *wayyōmer*. This phraseology is paralleled, but inverted in Exod 32:33-33:3. Here YHWH again utters two words, and the text makes use of the same form of the same roots: first *wayyōmer* (32:33) and then *way^edabbēr* (33:1).

Additional evidence for the parallelism between these passages lies in the subject matter of YHWH's utterances in the two instances. YHWH's *way^edabbēr* statements both refer to the people "whom you brought from the land of Egypt" (32:7, 33:1; identical phrases are used in the MT). Both of the *wayyōmer* statements concern the destruction/punishment which YHWH will mete out upon the people (Exod 32:10, 34). Together, the terminology and subject matter in the two sections provide strong guidance for understanding the literary structure.

C // C'—*Exodus 32:11-14 // Exodus 32:31-32*

In both Exod 32:11-14 and Exod 32:31-32 we find Moses interceding for the people before YHWH. In the first intercession, Moses argues for salvation of the people of Israel on the basis of YHWH's reputation among the nations and his covenant promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. In the second intercession, Moses requests forgiveness for the people, without excuse for their sin, and adding only that he himself desires to share in their fate. Thus these two textual passages are parallel on the basis of Moses' intercessory activity.

D // D'—*Exodus 32:15-20 // Exodus 32:30*

In the next sections that are in inverse position—Exod 32:15-20 and 32:30—we find a contrast revealed through the particular direc-

tion of movements and actions. Moses' movement in going down the mountain in v. 15 is balanced by his going up the mountain in v. 30. His activity of breaking the tablets in v. 19 is balanced by his desire for restoring the people in v. 30. Still further, Moses' forcing the Israelites to drink the dust-laden water in v. 20 parallels his declaring their guilt in v. 30.

E // E'—Exodus 32:21-25 // Exodus 32:26b-29

Exod 32:21-25 and 32:26b-29 record two successive phases of Moses' judgment process. In the first phase, Moses questioned Aaron (v. 21) and he observed the camp (v. 25) in order to assess the sin of the people. That is to say, he investigated the condition of the people before deciding their fate. In the second phase, Moses related the will of YHWH and commissioned its enforcement. Childs comments: "The word is of judgment directed to the Levites as its agent who immediately proceeded to execute the awesome punishment."⁵ Thus Moses' judgment of the people was comprised of an investigative phase and a successive executive phase.

F—Exodus 32:26a

The structurally central verse of the Golden-Calf episode is Exod 32:26a, which sets forth the question, "Who is for YHWH?"⁶ Implicit in the very raising of this question is the concept that there is opportunity for repentance. Thus, the question has enormous theological significance. This is especially so, inasmuch as it occurs between the reporting of the investigative and executive phases of judgment.

Although investigation of the full theological implications of this phenomenon extends beyond the scope of this brief essay, it is pertinent to this study to notice and appreciate the placement of Moses' plea in this fashion within the literary structure of the pericope. In short, because section **F** is the central structural feature of the Golden-Calf episode, it directs attention to the central concern of that episode. Moses' plea in Exod 32:26a presents the ultimate question, the apex toward which all the emphases within Exod 32:1-25 are directed and from which all the tensions in Exod 32:26b-33:6 move toward resolution and abatement.

⁵Childs, p. 571; cf. Cole, p. 212.

⁶Cole, p. 219.

3. *Summary and Implications of the Literary Structure*

The Golden-Calf episode in Exod 32:1-33:6 displays an inverted parallelism or chiasmic structure that utilize several specific features: inversion of actions (A // A'), inversion of terminology (B // B'), parallelism (C // C'), contrasts of movements and of actions (D // D'), and succession of events (E // E'). The only structural element that remains without parallel is Moses' offer of repentance to his people (F), this being so because that element is the centerpiece for the chiasm. In this capacity it serves, as well, as the central element for the judgment process that is depicted.

The foregoing analysis of the literary structure of the Golden-Calf episode exemplifies the importance of studying the text in its canonical form. The structure of the text reveals the intention of the writer,⁷ and it cannot be dismissed or discounted if we are to ascertain the meaning of the passage. Indeed, the inverted parallel structure gives emphasis to a basic point in the pericope: namely, that the Golden-Calf episode is one that calls forth, and provides opportunity for, repentance within the context of a two-phased judgment. The two phases of that judgment are investigative and executive in nature.

SUPPLEMENTARY NOTE

I am indebted to William H. Shea for pointing out two further parallels within the Golden-Calf passage. These may be summarized as follows:

1. *In B and B' (32:13 and 33:1):*

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|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| a) "Abraham, Isaac, and Israel . . ." | c') "land . . ." |
| b) "to whom thou didst swear . . ." | b') "of which I swore . . ." |
| c) "land" | a') "to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" |

⁷Elmer B. Smick, "Architectonics, Structural Poems, and Rhetorical Devices in the Book of Job," in *A Tribute to Gleason Archer*, ed. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., and Ronald F. Youngblood (Chicago, 1986), p. 93; John H. Stek, "The Bee and the Mountain Goat: A Literary Reading of Judges 4," in *A Tribute to Gleason Archer*, ed. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., and Ronald F. Youngblood (Chicago, 1986), p. 59.

2. In *E* and *E'* (32:21-25 and 32:26b-29):

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|------------------|-------------------------------|
| a) "Aaron . . ." | a') "Sons of Levi . . ." |
| b) his failure | b') their success and loyalty |

It will be noticed that in the first set of these paralleling sections, not only are the sections themselves chiasmic (*B* and *B'*) but so also are the three items of phraseology (*a/b/c* and *c'/b'/a'*). In the second set of paralleling sections, the expressions are not inverted but occur in straight-forward sequence (*a/b* and *a'/b'*), with the sections themselves, however, being chiasmic counterparts (*E* and *E'*). This additional material shared with me by Shea thus amplifies still further the validity of the chiasmic structure that on other grounds I have elucidated in my discussion above.