The Golden Calf: Bull-El Worship

Northern Israel worshipped El/YHWH in the form of a golden bull. The Bible mocks this graven representation of the divinity by describing it as a calf.

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Bronze Statue of a bull discovered at the 12th century B.C.E. cultic site at Dhahrat et-Tawileh, Samaria. Picture: Nathaniel Ritmeyer, Wikimedia.

While Moses is atop Mount Sinai receiving the tablets from YHWH, the people below worry that he will never return:

שמות לב:א וַיַּרְא הָעָם כִּי בֹשֵׁשׁ מֹשֶׁה לָרֶדֶת מִן הָהָר וַיִּקָּהֵל הָעָם עַל אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו קוּם עֲשֵׂה לָנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יֵלְכוּ לְפָנֵינוּ כִּי זֶה מֹשֶׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֹא יָדַעְנוּ מֶה הָיָה לוֹ.

Exod 32:1When the people saw that Moses delayed coming down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, “Come, make a god/gods[1] for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.”[2]

Why they want a god(s) is never explained,[3] but Aaron seems to understand what they want and responds accordingly:

שמות לב:ב וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם אַהֲרֹן פָּרְקוּ נִזְמֵי הַזָּהָב אֲשֶׁר בְּאָזְנֵי נְשֵׁיכֶם בְּנֵיכֶם וּבְנֹתֵיכֶם וְהָבִיאוּ אֵלָי. לב:ג וַיִּתְפָּרְקוּ כָּל הָעָם אֶת נִזְמֵי הַזָּהָב אֲשֶׁר בְּאָזְנֵיהֶם וַיָּבִיאוּ אֶל אַהֲרֹן.

Exod 32:2 Aaron said to them, “Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” 32:3 So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron.

Having gathered all the people’s golden jewelry, Aaron makes the requested *elohim*:

שמות לב:ד וַיִּקַּח מִיָּדָם וַיָּצַר אֹתוֹ בַּחֶרֶט וַיַּעֲשֵׂהוּ עֵגֶל מַסֵּכָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלֶּה אֱלֹהֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלוּךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם.

Exod 32:4He took the gold from them, formed it with/in a *cheret*, and formed an image of a calf; and they said, “These are your *elohim* (god/s), O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”

How exactly did Aaron form this calf? The only other use of the word *cheret* suggests that it means a stylus:

ישעיה ח:א וַיֹּאמֶר יְ־הוָה אֵלַי קַח לְךָ גִּלָּיוֹן גָּדוֹל וּכְתֹב עָלָיו בְּחֶרֶט אֱנוֹשׁ.

Isa 8:1 Then the Lord said to me, “Get yourself a large sheet and write on it with a human stylus” (my translation).[4]

Some translations rendered it in Exodus according to this meaning:

* LXX: “formed them with a graving tool” (ἔπλασεν αὐτὰ ἐν τῇ γραφίδι);
* Onkelos: וְצָר יָתֵיהּ בְּזִיפָא, “and he formed it with a chisel,”
* Martin Luther’s 1545 translation: “designed it with a stylus” (*entwarf's mit einem Griffel*),
* King James (KJV): “fashioned it with a graving tool.”

Yet it is difficult to envision how to make a statue with a stylus, thus we find an alternative translation based on how metal statues are generally made:

* Targum Neofiti: ורמה יתה בטופסא “placed it in a mold,”[5]
* Jerome’s Vulgate: “he fashioned them by founders’ work” (*formavit opere fusorio*).
* NRSV: “formed it to a mold.”
* NJPS: “cast in a mold.”

NJPS adds a note that the meaning “is uncertain,” yet the meaning of the word is not the problem—it means stylus. We should translate it as such, and understand the story more broadly as presenting Aaron not as an expert metallurgist, but as naïve, as made clear from the conversation Moses and Aaron have later in the story.

Moses Rebukes Aaron

Up on the mountain, YHWH informs Moses of the sin of the calf, and Moses descends immediately from the mountain. Seeing the people dancing before the calf, Moses smashes the tablets and destroys the calf (v. 20).[6] Moses then turns to Aaron, whom he had left it charge while he was upon the mountain:

שמות לב:כא וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל אַהֲרֹן מֶה עָשָׂה לְךָ הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּי הֵבֵאתָ עָלָיו חֲטָאָה גְדֹלָה.

Exod 32:21 Moses said to Aaron, “What did this people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?”

Aaron attempts to justify his actions by telling Moses that the people were in a bad way, and insisted that he make for them a god (vv. 22–23). Then he continues:

שמות לב:כד וָאֹמַר לָהֶם לְמִי זָהָב הִתְפָּרָקוּ וַיִּתְּנוּ לִי וָאַשְׁלִכֵהוּ בָאֵשׁ וַיֵּצֵא הָעֵגֶל הַזֶּה.

Exod 32:24 So I said to them, ‘Whoever has gold, take it off’; so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!

Aaron’s response that he threw gold in the fire and out came a calf contradicts the earlier description of him forming it with a stylus; he is lying to escape responsibility. It also depicts him as inept; the fact that the statue came out as a calf is presented as a surprise even to him.

Inspired by this bizarre claim, several midrashim imagine the use of magic to make the calf appear. For example, Midrash Tanchuma (Ki Tissa §19, Warsaw ed.) tells a story about Micah, envisioned as Moses’ adopted child who went bad:

ויש אומרים שמיכה היה שנתמכמך בבנין מה שהציל משה מן הלבנים נטל הלוח שכתב עליו משה עלה שור כשהעלה ארונו של יוסף השליכו תוך הכור בין הנזמים ויצא העגל גועה כשהוא מקרטע,

There are those who say that it was Micah [who formed the calf], the boy who was almost crushed [during Israel’s slavery] when they were building [the storage cities]. Moses saved him from the bricks. He took the tablet upon which Moses wrote the words “rise oh bull” [an epithet for Joseph] which he used to bring up Joseph’s casket [from the bottom of the Nile, where it was hidden], and he (Micah) threw it into the smelting furnace between the jewelry pieces, and the calf came out bleating and limping.

The imagery of the limping calf may derive from Psalm 29, which compares the clumsy walking of a calf to dancing:

תהלים כט:ה קוֹל יְ־הוָה שֹׁבֵר אֲרָזִים וַיְשַׁבֵּר יְ־הוָה אֶת אַרְזֵי הַלְּבָנוֹן. כט:ו וַיַּרְקִידֵם כְּמוֹ עֵגֶל לְבָנוֹן וְשִׂרְיֹן כְּמוֹ בֶן רְאֵמִים.

Ps 29:5 The voice of YHWH breaks the cedars; YHWH breaks the cedars of Lebanon. 29:6 He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild bull.

This fanciful retelling of the story calls highlights two problems in the story: golden statues don’t simply pop out of furnaces and, more subtly, that the statue is not a mighty bull, a classic divine image in the ancient Near East, but a weak, vulnerable calf.

Divine Bulls in the Ancient Near East

Until the end of the 18th century, before the invention of steam locomotives and a century later, internal combustion engines, bulls were the strongest power in the farmyard. Thus, bulls were considered in antiquity as symbols of a powerful god.

In Egypt, the bull Apis was the symbol of Ptah, the creator god in the Memphite theology, and the son of the goddess Hathor (who was often depicted as a cow). In the Mesopotamian epic Gilgamesh, the Bull of Heaven is the favorite animal of Ishtar and the symbol of the generator of the world, the moon-god. The crescent of the moon was viewed as the horns of the heavenly bull pushing the moon across the sky. In Crete the carnivore bull of king Minos, the Minotaur, was a mighty bull that only Theseus with his divine sword could kill (Ovid, Ars Amatoria 2.24).



Fig. 1 A bronze figurine from Strata XII-XI at Hazor, Iron Age I (1200-1000 BCE). Most scholars identify it with EL.

Bull-El

Closer to home, the head of the Canaanite pantheon, El, is referred to as תור אל *Thoru El,* Bull El—thor in Ugaritic is cognate to Hebrew *shor*—and was often symbolized by a bull.[7] The Israelites also worshiped El, whom they identified with YHWH.[8]

Hazor strata XII-XI, from the Iron Age I (11th century), had a small shrine with a hoard of bronze items, including a well-preserved bronze figurine of a seated deity, which the excavators identified with El (fig. 1). There is a projection under his behind, that was made to attached to a staff. This would imply that the deity was carried out in processions like in Mesopotamia. The small size of the figurine also indicates this. While the archaeologists ascribed this hoard to a leftover ruin of the Canaanite city, the cult site at Hazor and the figurine of El are probably Israelite.[9]

The Bull Site

El in bull form was found in Dhahrat et-Tawileh in the northern Samarian hills. On the ridge of a mountain, archaeologists discovered a circular area of 20 meters in diameter, bordered by a wall of one course of large stones.[10] The center was slightly elevated, recalling the biblical high place (*bamah*):

מלכים ב יז:י וַיַּצִּבוּ לָהֶם מַצֵּבוֹת וַאֲשֵׁרִים עַל כָּל גִּבְעָה גְבֹהָה וְתַחַת כָּל עֵץ רַעֲנָן. יז:יא וַיְקַטְּרוּ שָׁם בְּכָל בָּמוֹת...

2 Kgs 17:10 They set up for themselves pillars and *asherot* (sacred trees/poles) on every high hill and under every green tree; 17:11 there they made offerings on all the high places…

This open cultic site dates to the Iron Age I (c. 1200-1000 B.C.E.), and was empty of installations. An upstanding stone or a stele (*matzebah*) was found five meters from the wall, and the excavators presume, based on the biblical verse, that the raised site once held a tree.

Among the few archaeological finds was a small bronze bull figurine. It displays high skill of casting bronze, probably rooted in Canaanite metallurgic tradition. The excavators name this site “the Bull ” (fig. 2), and associated the bull with the storm god Baʿal/Hadad. Yet, the Israelite regional context and date implies that this site was Israelite and the bull is El.

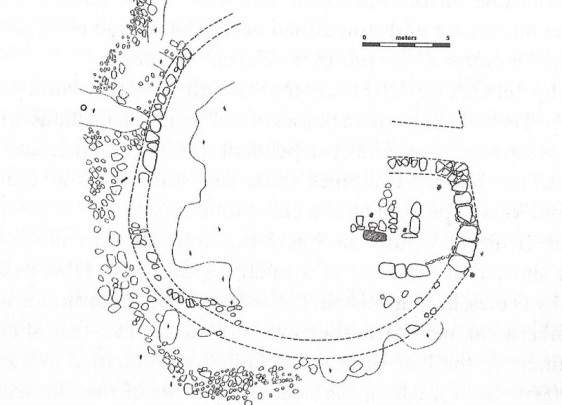


Fig 2. The Bull Site, Dhahrat et-Tawileh, in Samaria, 12th cent. B.C.E.

Indeed, in Balaam’s blessing, the Bible uses bull imagery for Israel’s God, called here El:

במדבר כג:כב אֵל מוֹצִיאָם מִמִּצְרָיִם כְּתוֹעֲפֹת רְאֵם לוֹ.

Num 23:22 El, who brings them out of Egypt, is like the horns of a wild bull for them.[11]

Contrary to bulls, which often had this divine status, I can think of no ancient civilization that made a calf a divine symbol or incarnation. By presenting Aaron as having made a golden calf instead of a golden bull, it mocks the attempt of Aaron and the Israelites of trying to create a divine statue to represent the God who took them out of Egypt.

Poking Fun at the North and Their Baby Bulls

The story of the golden calf was written as a polemic against a pair of statues that, according to the Bible, were situated in the two ends of the northern kingdom of Israel.[12] According to the book of Kings, when Israel defects from the kingdom of Rehoboam and its capital in Jerusalem, its first king, Jeroboam, creates two worship sites to compete with Jerusalem, placing a golden calf in each:

מלכים א יב:כח וַיִּוָּעַץ הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיַּעַשׂ שְׁנֵי עֶגְלֵי זָהָב וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם רַב לָכֶם מֵעֲלוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַ‍ִם הִנֵּה אֱלֹהֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלוּךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם. יב:כט וַיָּשֶׂם אֶת הָאֶחָד בְּבֵית אֵל וְאֶת הָאֶחָד נָתַן בְּדָן.

1 Kgs 12:28 So the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold. He said to the people, “You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.” 12:29 He set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan.[13]

Jeroboam’s act here is presented as negative and sinful, although the Israelite priesthood would not have seen it this way. Moreover, the statues themselves would not have been described by its priests as calves, but as bulls, i.e., representations of Bull-El. The very term “calf” used by the Bible is meant to belittle this graven image.[14]

Hosea’s Polemic

The northern prophet Hosea also mocks the Israelite use of a bull statue by calling it a calf:

הושע ח:ה זָנַח עֶגְלֵךְ שֹׁמְרוֹן חָרָה אַפִּי בָּם עַד מָתַי לֹא יוּכְלוּ נִקָּיֹן. ח:ו כִּי מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל וְהוּא חָרָשׁ עָשָׂהוּ וְלֹא אֱלֹהִים הוּא כִּי שְׁבָבִים יִהְיֶה עֵגֶל שֹׁמְרוֹן.

Hos 8:5 Your calf is rejected, O Samaria. My anger burns against them. How long will they be incapable of innocence? 8:6 For it is from Israel, an artisan made it; it is not God. The calf of Samaria shall be broken to pieces.

Later, Hosea describes a ritual of kissing these calves:

הושע יג:ב וְעַתָּה יוֹסִפוּ לַחֲטֹא וַיַּעְשׂוּ לָהֶם מַסֵּכָה מִכַּסְפָּם כִּתְבוּנָם עֲצַבִּים מַעֲשֵׂה חָרָשִׁים כֻּלֹּה לָהֶם הֵם אֹמְרִים זֹבְחֵי אָדָם עֲגָלִים יִשָּׁקוּן.

Hos 13:2 And now they keep on sinning and make a cast image for themselves, idols of silver made according to their understanding, all of them the work of artisans. To them they say. “O sacrificers of man, kissers of calves.”

Although the verse is difficult, the juxtaposition between human sacrifice and kissing calves appears to be ironic, mocking the piety of the Samaria worshipers.

The Bull of Bethel: Papyrus Amhurst 63

That Hosea is using calves here purposefully, instead of a bull, to belittle the idols, can be supported by a comparison with an unusual set of hymns found on Papyrus Amhurst 63.[15] Written in Demotic, these hymns are the product of a religious group made up of exiled Israelites and Egyptians.

At one point, the hymn states:

Horus-Yahu our bull, is with us! May the lord of Bethel answer us on the morrow.[16]

The supplicant recalls the bull worshipped by the Israelites, here associated with Bethel. Elsewhere, the text mentions the same “kissing” form of worship mocked by Hosea:

Let them kiss [your] bull[s], let them desire your calves![17]

Here bull and calf are used in parallelism, highlighting the interchangeability of the terms. What Israel venerated and called a mighty bull, could be mocked by Judahite scribes, and described as merely a calf.

A Double Polemic

The authors of the Bible were uncomfortable with any graven image that purported to represent their deity, and strenuously objected to the Northern practice of including Bull-El statues in their temples. When the biblical text has Aaron and Jeroboam say about the calf “This is your god O Israel, who brought you out of Egypt,” the absurdity of the point is supposed to be clear to the readers: The God of Israel is like a mighty bull, not a weak calf, and in any event, should not be represented in a graven image.

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-golden-calf-bull-el-worship)

1. The word *elohim* can refer either to gods in plural, or to Israel’s god Elohim, in the singular.
2. Translation of verses is NRSV with adjustments.
3. Editor’s note: For some discussions of what the people want in this story, see Joel S. Baden, [“What Was the Sin of the Golden Calf,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/what-was-the-sin-of-the-golden-calf) *TheTorah* (2017); Deena Grant, [“What Was the Golden Calf?”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/what-was-the-golden-calf) *TheTorah* (2013).
4. The same term appears in The War Scroll (1QM, 12:3), in the phrase חרט חיים, “stylus of life.”
5. The Syriac Peshitta translates similarly, וצרה בטופסא (ܘܨܪܗ ܒܛܘܦܣܐ) “and he formed it in a mold” (though this could also be translated as “portrayed it in a model”). This reading is also adopted by the Samaritan Targums, ואריט יתה במרכי “and he cast it in a mold”; וצר יתה במרכי “and he placed it in a mold.” Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, unsure of the meaning, double translated the phrase, וצר יתיה בשושיפא ורמא יתיה בטופ(ר){ס}א, “he wrapped it in a cloth and placed it in a mold.” In support of the first possibility, HALOT suggests emending the text slightly to read חָרִ(י)ט, which means “bag” or “purse” (see, 2 Kgs 5:23, Isa 3:22), and this is also the translation preferred by William Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 539, 549–550. According to this translation, the Torah isn’t trying to describe how Aaron made the calf at all.

שמות לב:כ וַיִּקַּח אֶת הָעֵגֶל אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ וַיִּשְׂרֹף בָּאֵשׁ וַיִּטְחַן עַד אֲשֶׁר דָּק וַיִּזֶר עַל פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם וַיַּשְׁקְ אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Exod 32:20 He took the calf that they had made, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink.

This is generally understood as Moses making the Israelites drink the calf, but the text does not say this. As water is a purifying agent, this could be understood as a purification ritual.

1. The Canaanite religion is particularly known from discoveries at Ugarit, a city situated in today’s northwestern Syria.
2. The names are used interchangeably and in poetic parallelism in the Bible. Scholars have longed speculated on how this developed and in what time frame. See some discussion in Mark S. Smith, *The Memoirs of God: History, Memory, and the Experience of the Divine in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 110­–119. The name Israel, of course, has the name El in it.
3. See the short summary in William G. Dever, *Beyond the Texts, An Archaeological Portrait of Ancient Israel* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), 157-158*.*
4. Amichai Mazar, “The ‘Bull Site’: An Iron Age I Open Cult Place,” *BASOR* 247 (1982), 27–42.
5. Editor’s note: For a discussion of Bull-El in the context of Balaam’s prophecy, see Robert Harris, [“Who Was Balaam’s God: YHWH El? Or Bull El?”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/who-was-balaams-god-yhwh-el-or-bull-el) *TheTorah* (2014).
6. Editor’s note: For some discussion of the connection between these stories from different angles, see Frederick Greenspahn, [“Reading the Golden Calves of Sinai and Northern Israel in Context,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/reading-the-golden-calves-of-sinai-and-northern-israel-in-context) *TheTorah* (2015); Nathan MacDonald, [“The Golden Calf: A Post-Exilic Message of Forgiveness,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-golden-calf-a-post-exilic-message-of-forgiveness) *TheTorah* (2021).
7. The golden bulls of Beth El and Dan were never found. The excavations at Dan revealed a religious compound with a raised high place. Cult paraphernalia were discovered in the compound but no trace of the Golden Calf. The excavations at Beth-El were even more frustrating. The Iron Age remains of the city did not display any remains of a cultic place.
8. This explains why the Bible allows cherubim in the Temple and Tabernacle but not the calf/bull. A cherub is not El/YHWH but a divine attendant; the bull in El himself, and thus forbidden.
9. For a discussion see Karol van der Toorn, [“Rosh Hashanah with the Early Israelites,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/rosh-hashanah-with-the-early-israelites) *TheTorah* (2020); Mark Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1990), 83–85. The translation comes from Richard Steiner, *The Context of Scripture [COS]*, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 1.309–327. For a book length treatment, see Karel van der Toorn,*Papyrus Amherst 63*, Alter Orient und Alter Testament 448 (Münster, Ugarit-Verlag, 2018).
10. Steiner, *COS*, 1.318. YHWH here has been combined with the Egyptian god, Horus.
11. Steiner, *COS*, 1.313.