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Abstract This article provides insights on the story of Aaron and the golden calf in the Bible, explaining why Aaron may have decided to make it and why his punishment for doing so was minor in comparison to other biblical reprimands.

AARON'S GOLDEN CALF

Paul Y. Hoskisson¹

Have you ever wondered why Aaron made the golden calf? Did he not know that making graven images was wrong? Or why, after being chastised for making it, his punishment seems so light compared with other punishments in the Old Testament? With a little information from the Bible itself and from other ancient Near Eastern sources, I will answer these questions. Some of the answers will lead to unexpected implications.

Setting the Stage

Aaron's actions will not seem so strange when we realize that the Israelites came out of an uncertain religious background and found themselves in an unsettling situation in the Sinai desert while the man who had successfully brought them out of Egypt was away. According to Exodus 12:40, the Israelites lived in Egypt for 430 years. Prior to that, the patriarchs lived in the Holy Land and had some contact with Haran, located in the great western bend in the upper Euphrates River system where Abraham had once lived. This background would have

1. My thanks to Adam Anderson and Stephenson Smith for their help with updating my research. This article was first given as a lecture at the 1975 Annual Welch Lecture Series and was published as "Another Significance of the Golden Calf Motif" in typescript form in 1978 in *Tinkling Cymbals: Essays in Honor of Hugh Nibley*, ed. John W. Welch. A copy is on deposit in the Harold B. Lee Library of Brigham Young University.

allowed the Israelites to continue in a Canaanite cultural identity,² as mentioned in Joshua 24:14. (“Beyond the river” refers specifically to Haran—that is, “beyond the Euphrates River.”) While in Egypt, the Israelites would also have had the chance to pick up considerable Egyptian cultural baggage. Ezekiel 20:8 specifically mentions that the Israelites did not “forsake the idols of Egypt” when they exited. As verses 5 through 32 in this chapter explain, from the time of the exodus onward, the Israelites were not on the religious plane on which the God of Israel would have had them. Aaron’s actions took place within this somewhat uncertain religious and mixed cultural background.³

In addition, the Israelites had passed from Egyptian slavery into one terrifying experience after another. By the time Aaron made the golden calf, Moses, who had visibly wrought miracles in their presence and who had more than once occasioned their physical safety, had been missing for almost forty days. Anyone who is a stranger to the Near Eastern deserts, as the Israelites must have been after more than one generation in Egypt, knows how frightening the absence of an individual for even one or two days can be. Thus, the demands of the people and Aaron’s acquiescence, though improper, seem all too human.

What Was the Golden Calf?

I suggest that the golden calf or young bull (the Hebrew word means “a young ox or bull”)⁴ was not a pagan god. Rather, it was a symbol of the God of Israel. The relevant passage, Exodus 32:4–8, reads (with the Hebrew words substituted in italics for the terms for

2. *Canaan* is used here as the designation for the land between the Sinai Peninsula and the present Turkish border with Syria. In general the “Canaanites” spoke Northwest Semitic languages closely related to Hebrew. Their religious practices are known from the Bible (which presents a negative view), from Ugaritic and other Northwest Semitic literature, and from archaeological findings.

3. For an interesting exploration of this subject, see Roland de Vaux, “El et Baal, le Dieu des Pères et Yahweh,” *Ugaritica* 6 (1969): 501–17. Compare also M. H. Segal, “The Religion of Israel before Sinai,” *Jewish Quarterly Review*, n.s., 52/1 (1961–62): 41–68, continued in *Jewish Quarterly Review*, n.s., 53/3 (1962–63): 226–56.

4. *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, comm. Nahum M. Sarna (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 203.

deity of the King James English translation—for example, *elohim* for “gods,” *Jehovah* for “the LORD”):

After he had made it a molten calf: and they said, These be thy *elohim*, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.

And when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation, and said, To morrow is a feast to *Jehovah*.

And they rose up early on the morrow, and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play.

And *Jehovah* said unto Moses, Go, get thee down; for thy people, which thou broughtest out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves:

They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them: they have made them a molten calf, and have worshipped it, and have sacrificed thereunto, and said, These be thy *elohim*, O Israel, which have brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.

It is clear from this passage that Aaron and the people spoke not in pagan terms but in terms that denote the God of Israel. When the calf was completed, the people spoke of the calf as being the “*elohim*, O Israel,” that brought them out of Egypt. While it is true that *elohim* can be used in the Hebrew Bible to refer to pagan gods, its predominant use is for the God of Israel.⁵ Almost as a confirmation of the Israelite nature of the calf, Aaron then declared, “Tomorrow is a feast to *Jehovah*.” If the calf had been a pagan god or pagan symbol, Aaron would not have proclaimed a feast to “*Jehovah*” nor would the people have said with reference to the calf, “These be thy *elohim*.” And when God told Moses what was happening, he made no mention of a pagan god, just that the Israelites “have made them a molten calf, and have

5. For example, Genesis 1:26 reads, again with the Hebrew word in place of the English name for deity (God): “And *Elohim* said, Let us make man in our image.”

worshipped it, and have sacrificed thereunto, and said, These be thy *elohim*, O Israel.”

If then the calf was not a pagan god or the symbol of a pagan god, what was it? H. Th. Obbink has suggested that the calf was a syncretism between the worship of Jehovah and the cult of Baal.⁶ In this view, the cultic figure of a young bull or calf was borrowed from the Baal cult, divested of its Baalism, and employed in an Israelite setting as the pedestal or throne upon which the invisible Jehovah stood,⁷ analogous to the cherubim that flanked the throne of Jehovah on the ark of the covenant.

As Latter-day Saints, though, we do not have to appeal to syncretism to explain why an animal was used as a symbol of the God of Israel. As Christians we are familiar with “the Lamb of God” as a symbol for the Savior, the Son of God. Passages such as Isaiah 53:7, John 1:29, several verses in the book of Revelation, 1 Nephi 10:10 (see also 1 Nephi 11–14 and other places in the Book of Mormon), and Doctrine and Covenants 76:21 all mention “the lamb.”⁸ Both the calf and the lamb were prominent as sacrificial animals in the law of Moses. The blood of calves was used by Moses to sprinkle the people as a symbol of the covenant (Exodus 24:6–8). The calf was also used symbolically in covenant settings (see Jeremiah 34:18–19; see also the use of a heifer

6. H. Th. Obbink, “Jahwebilder,” *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 47 (1929): 272. For other general treatments, see, for example, Ziony Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel* (New York: Continuum, 2001); John N. Oswalt, “Golden Calves and the ‘Bull of Jacob,’” in *Israel’s Apostasy and Restoration: Essays in Honor of Roland K. Harrison*, ed. Avraham Gileadi (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 9–18; and J. Gerlad Janzen, “The Character of the Calf and Its Cult in Exodus 32,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52/4 (1990): 597–609. See Alberto R. W. Green, *The Storm-God in the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003).

7. Obbink, “Jahwebilder,” 268.

8. As far as I can determine, the first use of the word *lamb* to symbolize Jehovah (as the Savior) occurs in Isaiah. Prior to that time, the word *calf* was used, as will be clear shortly. I would speculate that the use of a *calf* as Jehovah’s animal fell out of favor at least by the time of Elijah and his efforts to purge Baalism from among the Israelites. The symbolic animal of Baal was also the *calf* or *bull* and therefore would have been a source of possible syncretism between Jehovah and Baal. After Elijah, *baal* could no longer be used as an epithet of Jehovah. Perhaps under these circumstances, Isaiah introduced or drew on an otherwise unknown tradition of the *lamb* as Jehovah’s symbolic animal.

in Genesis 15:9–10). Therefore, both the lamb and the calf could function as an appropriate symbolic animal for the God of Israel.

In addition, other animal designations are used symbolically in the Old Testament. One of the names for the God of Israel is the “אֲבִיר (*byr*) of Jacob” (Genesis 49:24), usually translated the “mighty *God* of Jacob” or the “mighty One of Jacob.”⁹ The original meaning of the root may have been “mighty” or “powerful,” but it is also the name of an animal. The cognate in Ugaritic (a language closely related to Hebrew) is *ibr* and stands in poetic parallel with two words, *r* and *rum*, that mean, respectively, “bull” and “buffalo.”¹⁰ For this reason, “the *br* of Jacob” can be translated as “the Bull of Jacob.”¹¹ That “the Bull of Jacob” refers to Jehovah in post-Mosaic times as well is clear from passages such as Isaiah 49:26, 60:16, and Psalm 132:2, where the *br* of Jacob is paralleled with Jehovah (LORD in the KJV).

Along with the passage at hand in Exodus 32:4, in which the calf is specifically connected to the God of Israel, other passages also bring Jehovah and the calf into a symbolic relationship. When Jeroboam wanted to dissuade the people of the newly established northern Israelite kingdom from going to Jerusalem to worship Jehovah there, he had two golden calves made and installed at the northern and southern ends of his kingdom. It would not have been possible to use the calves in the cultic setting Jeroboam constructed and to convince the people to stay away from Jerusalem if the people had not already

9. The consonantal root of אֲבִיר (*byr*) is אֲבִר (*br*).

10. Cyrus Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* [hereafter *UT*], *Analecta Orientalia* 38, revised reprint (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1998), Glossary 2664 for *r* and 2294 for *rum*. For the parallels in Ugaritic, see respectively CAT 1.12 I 31–32 and CAT 1.10 III 21–22. These are the standard notations for Ugaritic texts. CAT stands for Manfred Dietrich, Oswald Loretz, and Joaquín Sanmartín, *The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1995).

11. See Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* [hereafter *KB*], CD-ROM edition (Leiden: Brill, 1994–2000), s.v. “אֲבִיר.” Thus also Frank Moore Cross in *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 4. Note that in Jeremiah 8:16 אֲבִיר is paralleled with “horses,” which corresponds with the meaning of Egyptian *ibr*, “stallion” (see *UT*, under *ibr* in the glossary).

had the concept that the calf was the symbolic animal of the God of Israel.¹²

I need to point out specifically, however, that the calf was not a representation of the God of Israel—it was merely a symbol of Jehovah, perhaps even of his pedestal. The concept of a god standing or riding on an animal is widespread in the ancient Near East. While one of the most famous representations features the goddess Qadesh standing on a striding lion,¹³ the majority of the animal representations are symbolic of male gods. “Among Canaanites, Aramaeans, and Hittites we find the gods nearly always represented as standing on the back of an animal or as seated on a throne borne by animals.”¹⁴ Indeed, no Canaanite gods were ever represented “as themselves in animal form.”¹⁵ Just as the Canaanite “storm-god Hadad is frequently represented standing on a bull”¹⁶ but is never represented as a bull himself, so also the golden calf symbolized the God of Israel, perhaps in the mode of a pedestal. But it was not an image of Jehovah. W. F. Albright, in speaking of the golden-calf incident, stated, “It refers specifically to an attempted return by the Israelites of Moses’ time to the ancient practice of representing the chief divinity in the form of a storm-god standing on a young bull.”¹⁷

The Nature of Aaron’s Sin

If Aaron was not guilty of constructing an image of Jehovah or any other god, what was his sin? Certainly it does have something to do with the second commandment, in Exodus 20:4–5, which reads:

12. See Aaron Rothkoff, “The Golden Calf,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 7:711a: “In any case Jeroboam’s initiative must have had some basis in an old tradition; otherwise he could not have succeeded in his enterprise.”

13. James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), plate 140.

14. William F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity: Monotheism and the Historical Process*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1957), 299. For examples, see Pritchard, *Ancient Near East*, plates 129, 141, 142.

15. Albright, *Stone Age*, 299.

16. Rothkoff, “Golden Calf,” 7:711a.

17. William F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 197.

“Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that *is* in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God” (emphasis changed). I suggest that Aaron’s sin had more to do with the second half of the commandment than the first half.

If we take a strict interpretation, as some religions do, of the first part of the commandment (“Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image”), then any image would be prohibited, including photographs and realistic sculpture of any kind. Surely this is not what is prohibited. For example, the Lord himself told Moses to make images of pomegranates to decorate the priestly robes (see Exodus 28:33–34) and to adorn the mercy seat with cherubim, a type of image with wings (Exodus 25:18–20). It seems to me, therefore, that the commandment not to make any images was not a general prohibition against all images of all kinds. There must be more to the correct understanding of the commandment.

A rephrasing of the Ten Commandments in Leviticus 26:1 helps to clarify the prohibition: “Ye shall make you no idols nor graven image, neither rear you up a standing image, neither shall ye set up any image of stone in your land, to bow down unto it: for I am the Lord your God.” The prohibition against images has more to do with using the image in religious services than with constructing a likeness. In other words, there is reason to read the two parts of the second commandment together rather than to separate the parts.

Aaron’s sin, then, was not so much in making a likeness of a calf but, rather, in allowing the image of a calf, even if it was a symbol of Jehovah and not of a pagan god, to be used in a significant way in the “feast to *Jehovah*.” After the construction of the calf, Aaron allowed the people to declare, “These be thy *elohim*, O Israel, which have brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.” He then built an altar in front of the calf, and the people offered sacrifices to the calf during a “feast to *Jehovah*.” The calf had been allowed to become a central figure in the Israelite religious services.

It is hard for Latter-day Saints to imagine Aaron allowing such a practice. Currently in the church we do not use any images in our worship services. With the exception of a few grandfathered chapels, we do not even have any passive images or likenesses (except flowers) in our chapels. We can have a statue in the Relief Society room, paintings on the walls of the foyers, and pictures as part of our Sunday School lessons. But we do not have images or realistic figures in our chapels. What Aaron did would be tantamount to bringing a beautiful sculpture of a lamb into one of our chapels and placing it in a prominent position, perhaps next to the sacrament table, during a sacrament meeting. Though bringing the image of a lamb into our worship services might be well intentioned, it would certainly be inappropriate. Perhaps Aaron's good intentions, in spite of his poor judgment, account for the relatively light rebuke that Aaron eventually received (Exodus 32:30–32).

Implications of the Golden-Calf Motif

Similarities between the revealed gospel of Jesus Christ and various facets of non-Christian religions create no problems for Latter-day Saints. In general, we believe that the gospel was taught to Adam and his posterity and that remnants of the gospel have survived in all religions. We also believe that, from time to time, “the Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word, yea, in wisdom, all that he seeth fit that they should have” (Alma 29:8). Therefore we expect to find tenets of the truth in all religions and would be disappointed or surprised if there were none. Because Latter-day Saints can examine such similarities without taking umbrage, we can also view the golden calf as the symbolic animal of Jehovah and not be afraid to look for parallels in other ancient Near Eastern mythologies.

In his seminal article many years ago, H. Th. Obbink pointed out numerous similarities between the cult of Canaanite Baal and many aspects of Jehovah worship in the Old Testament.¹⁸ He ascribed the

18. Obbink, “Jahwebilder,” 264–74.

similarities to syncretism—that is, the Israelites appropriated some characteristics of Baal worship into Hebrew religion. While this is possible and no doubt happened, especially on the level of popular religion, there are other explanations. It is also possible, if Canaanite religion was a corrupted form of the truth, that some of the similarities could ultimately have a common source in the gospel. The similarities, however, do exist and, rather than viewing them as a threat to our understanding of the Old Testament, we as Latter-day Saints can examine the similarities for what they tell us about religion among the ancient Hebrews.

One of the shared points between Canaanite and Hebrew religion is, surprisingly, the word *baal*. It has long been known that *baal* comes from a Semitic root *b l* that means simply “lord,” “master,” “owner,” or “husband.”¹⁹ It could be used of ordinary men and women²⁰ and of various gods, especially as an epithet. Just when the epithet began to be used as the name of a god is not known, but “it was certainly common from the fifteenth century on.”²¹ In the earlier texts of the Bible, *baal* is applied to Jehovah and to the Canaanite god Hadad,²² whom the Israelites almost exclusively referred to as Baal.

Two examples of *baal* being used in place of Jehovah should suffice. When King David achieved a victory over the Philistines, he named the place “Baal-perazim,” which can be translated literally as “lord of the breaking forths.” He named it such because, reading with the Hebrew, “*Jehovah* hath broken forth upon mine enemies before me, as the breach of waters. Therefore he called the name of that place Baal-perazim” (2 Samuel 5:20). The parallel here makes it clear that one of Jehovah’s epithets was “baal,” in its meaning of “lord.”

19. KB, “בעל.”

20. For example, see the Hebrew text of Judges 9 passim. For the feminine form, see the Hebrew of 1 Kings 17:17. Especially interesting is the last phrase in Genesis 20:3, where the verb and the noun form a cognate accusative combination (היא בעלת בעל). Literally translated, the Hebrew reads, “She [the pointing in Hebrew makes it clear that this is the third person feminine singular nominative pronoun] is lorded of a lord.” The KJV has simply, “She is a man’s wife.”

21. Albright, *Yahweh*, 124.

22. De Vaux, “El et Baal,” 515.

The second example is even more interesting. One of Saul's sons bore the name "Esh-baal" (1 Chronicles 8:33 and 9:39), which means "Man of Baal" or, more literally, "Man of the Lord." Saul would not have allowed his son to have a name containing as its theophoric element the name of a non-Israelite god, especially not the name of a Canaanite god. Just as with "Baal-perazim," *baal* here must have been a title for the Israelite God Jehovah. Later in Israelite history, after Saul had been killed, his legacy tarnished, and his remaining son removed from the throne, and when *baal* began to take on a totally negative connotation, Saul's son's name was changed to read "Ish-bosheth" (2 Samuel 2:8 and passim), which means "Man of Shame." (This is technically known as a dysphemism, the opposite of a euphemism. In a dysphemism, a perfectly acceptable word is changed into something negative or disgusting.)²³ Concerning such name changes, Albright stated, "Just what this oscillation in the use of [Baal in] personal names meant, we do not know, but its very existence indicates that there was still much uncertainty as to whether 'Baal' could be used as an appellation of Yahweh in the sense of 'lord.'"²⁴

These two examples make it clear that *baal* was a title that could be applied to Jehovah²⁵ or, for that matter, to any god. Just when the title took on the negative connotations we now associate with it cannot be determined with precision. A good guess would be that by the time of Elijah's sparring with King Ahab and his contest with the priests of the Canaanite god called Baal in 1 Kings 18, the title would have begun to become repugnant. That a change in attitude toward

23. The Israelites were not the only ones who engaged in disphemisms. In Babylon those who were not particularly enamored with Nebuchadrezzar changed his name to Nebuchadnezzar (both KJV spellings). The former is his real name and means "Nabu protect the heir." This is the form employed by Ezekiel and preferred by Jeremiah. The latter is the disphemism and means "Nabu protect the mule." This is the form used in Kings and Chronicles.

24. Albright, *Yahweh*, 200.

25. Other examples include the passages Isaiah 54:5, "Thy Maker is thine husband; the LORD of hosts is his name . . . the God of the whole earth," and Hosea 2:16, "Thou shalt call me Ishi [my husband]; and shalt call me no more Baali [my husband]." Other examples of personal names include Judges 6:32, Jerubbaal (Gideon's other name); 1 Chronicles 14:7, Beeliada; and 1 Chronicles 12:5 Bealiah, all of which contain the name *baal*. The latter is particularly instructive because it means "Jehovah is Baal."

the title *baal* did take place, though, is certain. As mentioned above, Saul's son's name was changed to a dysphemism. And the name of the site of David's victory over the Philistines, Baal-perazim, was changed in Isaiah 28:21 to "mount Perazim."

Besides their sharing a common title early in the Bible, there are other shared features between Jehovah and the Canaanite god designated as "Baal." As mentioned above, both were represented by the figure of a young bull. Both were considered to be gods of the storm.²⁶ For example, in the Ugaritic literature, Baal is called *rkb rpt*, "rider of the clouds,"²⁷ In Psalm 68:4, Jehovah carries exactly the same epithet, in transliteration *rkb b rbwt*, "rider in/from the clouds."²⁸ Because both were thought to control the weather, the contest staged by Elijah on Mount Carmel between Jehovah and Baal took the form of proving who really could control the heavens by bringing fire down from the sky.²⁹ After the proof was given that Jehovah was the only true God who controlled the heavens, Elijah, as Jehovah's prophet, could add to that proof by declaring an end to the drought that Jehovah had commanded him to initiate several years earlier.

It should not be surprising to Latter-day Saints that the God of Israel shared several titles with the gods of its neighbors.³⁰ Judaism and Christianity also share many of the same titles for God. The different Christian churches also share most of their titulary for deity. Such sharing of titles and epithets among Christians and Jews also comes from the fact that churches and synagogues share in part a common scripture. No doubt the sharing of titles between Israel and its Canaanite

26. It may seem strange to us as Latter-day Saints that Jehovah would be called a god of storms. This somehow seems to limit him. Therefore, it is helpful to view such a designation not as his only attribute, but as one of his all-encompassing attributes.

27. *UT*, Glossary 2331.

28. See KB, "רִכַּב." Compare also Mitchell J. Dahood's commentary on this verse in volume 17 of the Anchor Bible series, *Psalms* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 136.

29. See Fred E. Woods, *Water and Storm Polemics against Baalism in the Deuteronomian History* (New York: Lang, 1994), 97–103; see also Woods, "Who Controls the Water? Yahweh vs. Baal," *FARMS Occasional Papers* 4 (2004).

30. There are other shared titles besides *baal*. For example, without going into the details and the machinations of the scholarly debates, "El Shaddai [KJV: "Almighty God"] must have been taken over by Israel from its Canaanite neighbours" (KB, "שַׁדַּי").

neighbors may be as innocent as having a common language base, though certainly syncretism could also have played a role.

With the acceptance of the fact that many common aspects of Israelite religion were shared with Canaanite religion,³¹ it is now possible to theorize about an added significance of the golden calf. As we have seen, the God of Israel shared symbols and titles with the gods of its neighbors. This shared cultural baggage may point to a reason that the calf was chosen as a symbol of Jehovah. Albright presumed that “early Hebrew popular religion” consisted of a set of three gods similar to other Semitic divine triads, namely “a father, El, a mother whose specific name must remain obscure, . . . and a son who appears as the storm-god.”³² The father god of the Canaanites was called El, the same term that is used in the Hebrew Bible for generic “god.” As mentioned above, El was called “the bull.” Is it not possible that the choice of a calf as the symbolic animal of Jehovah was appropriate because Jehovah was understood to be a son? The evidence that Jehovah was perceived as the Son of the Most High has been conveniently gathered by Margaret Barker.³³ The massive amount of data she has collected from early Judaism to early Christianity leaves little doubt that in ancient Israel there was a Father God and a Son God, that Jehovah was the Son, and that, therefore, a calf was an appropriate symbol for Jehovah.³⁴

A surprising number of father-and-son god pairs are at home in the geographic vicinity of Israel. The Sumerian god Enlil, whose name means “Lord Wind”³⁵ and who is later identified with the Babylonian

31. There were also many dissimilarities. For example, honey is not allowed in any Israelite offering to Jehovah, but it was quite common in Canaanite offerings.

32. Albright, *Stone Age*, 247.

33. Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel's Second God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992). See especially the first chapter. However, she does not mention the golden-calf incident or the supporting Canaanite material.

34. It is interesting to note that Jesus, in his role as the “Lamb of God” (John 1:29) and the “Son of the Highest” (Luke 1:32), exercised control over the wind and sea (Matthew 8:23–27; Mark 4:34–41; and Luke 8:22–25), thus claiming dominion over the storm, as Jehovah had done through the contest on Mount Carmel.

35. Thorkild Jacobsen, *Toward the Image of Tammuz* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 31.

storm-god Marduk,³⁶ is the son of An, the Bull of Heaven.³⁷ Marduk in his own right is called the son of Ea in *Enuma Elish*.³⁸ Like Enlil he is also linked with a bovine creature because the first element of the Sumerogram for his name can mean “calf” or “son,” rendering his full name either “son of the storm” or, according to Thorkild Jacobsen, “calf of . . . the Sungod.”³⁹ Ranging a little further abroad beyond the Semitic language connection, the Egyptian god Seth, often equated with Semitic Baal,⁴⁰ is the product of the union of Geb and Nut.⁴¹ Even further afield, the Greek god Zeus, another god of the storm, is the son of Cronus⁴² and is often syncretized with Baal.

Conclusion

The calf Aaron made represented neither a non-Israelite god nor a statue of Jehovah. The calf was simply used as the symbolic animal of Jehovah, perhaps as his pedestal. Aaron's transgression was in allowing the image to take center stage in the Israelite sacrifices and celebrations. The shared symbolism and titles between Jehovah and Canaanite Baal point to a third prevalent feature of ancient Near Eastern religions—namely, the existence of father-and-son god pairs. The choice of the symbolic calf, like Isaiah's choice of the lamb, indicates that Jehovah is a son, the Son of the Most High, and that one of his defining attributes would be to become the ultimate sacrifice that would redeem the sons of Adam.

36. Jacobsen, *Toward the Image of Tammuz*, 21.

37. Jacobsen, *Toward the Image of Tammuz*, 27, 31.

38. See Benjamin R. Foster, trans., “Epic of Creation (*Enuma Elish*),” in *The Context of Scripture, I: Canonical Compositions*, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr. (London: Brill, 1997), 1.111 I 81–85.

39. Pinchas Artzi and Raphael Kutscher, “Marduk,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 11:951a.

40. Henry O. Thompson, *Mekal, the God of Beth-Shan* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 132.

41. Thompson, *Mekal*, 129.

42. Hesiod, *Theogony* 1.69–70.

