

CALF OF THE CHILDREN OF ISRĀʿĪL ‘IJL BANĪ ISRĀʿĪL

This article comprises the following sections: (i) Definitions and Usage; (ii) Context; (iii) Fashioning of the Calf; (iv) Destruction of the Calf; (v) Number of Calf-Worshippers; (vi) Repentance and Expiation; (vii) Bibliography.

Definitions and Usage

A calf made from *fine gold and silver jewelry* that was worshipped by the Israelites. The Qurʿān refers to this Calf eight times (Q 2:51, 54, 92, 93; 4:153; 7:148, 152; 20:88) in four suras (Q 2, 4, 7, 20), using the noun *ʿijl* from the root *ʿ-j-l*, which carries the basic meaning of “to hasten” (Farāhīdī; Azharī; Ibn Manzūr, *sub ʿ-j-l*). “A calf is called *ʿijl* because of its agility which is lost by the time it becomes fully grown” (Rāghib).

Context

The incident of the Calf took place after the Children of Isrāʿīl (*q.v.*) had been rescued from the tyranny of Pharaoh (see FIRʿAWN) and they had crossed the sea to safety. It was preceded by their demand to Prophet Mūsā (*q.v.*), upon him peace, to make for them a god like the gods of a certain people they saw after crossing through the sea (Q 7:138): *And We took the Children of Isrāʿīl across the sea and they came upon a people cleaving to their idols. They said, ‘O Mūsā, make for us a god, as they have gods.’ He said, ‘You are surely an ignorant people.’* The commentators identify “the people (*qawm*)” they met after crossing the sea as Lakhm, as per Qatāda (d. 118/736); or Lakhm and Judhām together, as per Abū Imrān al-Jawnī (d. ca 128/745)—both tribes being branches of Sabaʿ (Ṭabarī; Ibn Abī Ḥātim, *sub Q 7:138*; Samʿānī *sub Q 27:22*). A weaker opinion identifies them as a branch of Kanʿān or as Amāliqa (*cf.* Ṭabarī; Ibn ʿAṭīyya; Baghawī). The seaside locality where they lived is identified as al-Raqqa of Egypt (Thaʿlabī; Baghawī; Khāzin, *sub Q 7:138*).

The idols they saw were statues of cows (*tamāthil baqar*), which seemed pleasing to them and therefore they demanded that Mūsā, upon him peace, should make similar graven images for them because they considered these idols were a means for gaining closeness to Allah Most High, just as the idol worshippers claimed, “*We do not worship them, save to bring us closer to Allah*” (*cf.* Q 39:3; al-Ṭabarī, al-Baghawī, al-Rāzī; Ibn ʿAṭīyya, *sub Q 7:138*). Their demand also shows

that the reality of Divine Oneness (*tawḥīd*) was not yet firmly established in their hearts and they were inclined to worship “other than Allah” (*ghayr Allāh*) (Qushayrī). Although the verse ascribes the demand to the Children of Isrāʿīl, the commentators clarify that it does not mean that all Israelites made the demand; rather, the ascription is “according to the usage of the Arabs” (Abū Ḥayyān) and not all the Israelites had requested these idols, “because among them were the seventy chosen elders and there must have been others whose intellect was higher than such false demands” (Rāzī). Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (224-310/839-923), Abū Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Ḥaqq b. Ghālib Ibn ʿAṭīyya (480-546/1087-1151), and Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥusayn b. Masʿūd al-Farrāʿ al-Baghawī (d. 516/1122) aver that the sight of these statues was the beginning of the “test of the Calf (*fitnat-l-ʿijl*)” for the Children of Isrāʿīl (*cf.* their *Tafsīrs sub Q 7:138*). According to the majority opinion of the exegetes, it is their love of the Calf that is alluded to in Q 2:93, which causally links it to unbelief: *And they were made to imbibe the Calf into their hearts (ushribū fī qulūbihimu-l-ʿijl) on account of their unbelief*, and where *ushribū fī qulūbihimu-l-ʿijl* is a metaphor for their love of the Calf (*cf.* Ṭabarī; Māwardī; Rāzī; Ibn ʿAṭīyya).

Fashioning of the Calf

The graven image of the Calf was made by al-Sāmīrī (*q.v.*, Q 20:85-87)—variously said to be a hypocrite from an Israelite tribe called al-Sāmīra, or a man who had belonged to a cow-worshipping people and who had joined the Israelites in Egypt, but who remained a cow-worshipper in his heart (Bayḍawī, Qurṭubī, Zamakhsharī, *sub Q 20:85*), or a non-Arab from Kirmān (Ibn ʿAṭīyya; Ibn Kathīr)—from “*their fine gold and silver jewelry*” (*min ḥulīyyihim*, *cf.* Q 7:148), while the Prophet Mūsā, upon him peace, had gone to the mountain to meet his Lord. The jewelry from which the calf was made had belonged to the people of Pharaoh (*āl Firʿawn*); the Israelites had either borrowed it or it had come into their possession after the drowning of the original owners. In either case, it was not lawful for them to keep the jewelry and they were asked (either by Hārūn, upon him peace, or al-Sāmīrī) to give it up (*cf.* al-Ṭabarī; al-Qurṭubī; and Ibn Kathīr *sub Q 20:87-88*). When the Israelites piled the jewelry in a pit for fire to come down and consume it, al-Sāmīrī flung a handful of dust into it and said, “Be a calf’s body which lows,” and it became so. The wind went into it from the back and came out from its mouth, and a sound was heard (Ṭabarī,