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*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 2008 33: 19

DOI: 10.1177/0309089208094458

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# **The Golden Calf Story: Constructively and Deconstructively\***

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## **Abstract**

Unlike other postmodern reading practices, deconstruction suppresses the figure of the reader: the text is viewed as both engendering and undermining its meaning, while the reader's role is only to discover these processes. Yet, when one deconstructs biblical texts, 'anarchic' and 'lacking logic' according to traditional Western criteria, the illusion vanishes, and it is hard to get along without the reader as an active figure. The reader's role is actively to construct the meaning of the text, before it gets deconstructed. This is the reason why in some recent works the deconstructive reading of the text is preceded by a 'constructive' one. In this article the Golden Calf story (Exod. 32) is read both constructively and deconstructively. The constructive reading focuses on the opposition 'normative cult–deviant cult' which is viewed as central to the story. Normative cult and deviant cult are represented by the Tablets of the Law and the Golden Calf respectively. The deconstruction of this opposition is based on the fact that the tablets and the calf receive the same treatment: Moses destroys both of them.

**Keywords:** deconstruction, postmodernism, reading strategies, Golden Calf story, normative cult, forbidden cult.

\* This article is based on a chapter of the doctoral dissertation prepared by the author under the supervision of Professor Edward L. Greenstein (Tel-Aviv University). The work has been made possible by a grant from, among others, the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture.

In this article I present a constructive reading of the Golden Calf story (Exod. 32), which will be deconstructed subsequently. The deconstruction, in its turn, will consist of several stages discussed in detail below. In the Conclusion, the Golden Calf story, according to a widespread deconstructive practice, will be presented as allegorically depicting its own deconstruction.

Before I proceed to the reading itself, I want to make some methodological remarks in order to explain why, in my view, in biblical studies a need may arise to read a text constructively before one deconstructs it.

In fact, there is a common misunderstanding about the deconstruction—it is often confused with other postmodern approaches<sup>1</sup> that emphasize the role of the reader in shaping the meaning of the text. What is true about reader-response criticism or Harold Bloom's theory of misreading is, however, not true about deconstruction. On the contrary, unlike other postmodern reading practices, deconstruction suppresses the figure of the reader: the text is viewed as both engendering and undermining its meaning, while the reader's role is only to discover these processes.<sup>2</sup> As Sherwood (1996: 169) puts it, Derrida 'fails to react to one of the foundational hierarchies of structuralism: the exclusion of the reader in the concentration of the text'.

As far as we deal with philosophical and theoretical texts conceived in the Western intellectual tradition, the reader is dispensed with relatively easily. Yet, when one deconstructs biblical texts, 'anarchic' and 'lacking logic' according to traditional Western criteria, the illusion vanishes, and it is hard to get along without the reader as an active figure. To use a definition by Culler (1982: 86), 'to deconstruct a discourse is to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies, by identifying in the text the rhetorical operations that produce the supposed ground or argument, the key concept or

1. Generally speaking, there are serious doubts about whether deconstruction can be qualified as a postmodern enterprise at all (see Norris 2000, especially 6-25 and 75).

2. According to Culler (1981: 4), such an understanding of the deconstruction can be found especially in the work of critics such as Paul de Man and J. Hillis Miller. As to Derrida himself, his point seems to be slightly different. To quote Culler again, 'Derrida does not identify the thematic unity and distinctive meaning of any text but rather describes a general process through which texts undermine or reveal the rhetorical nature of the philosophical system to which they adhere' (1981: 3). In other words, Derrida's centre of interest has never been the individual text, but some general tendencies it reflects. Yet, even in Culler's formulation, the grammatical subject of the verbs 'undermine' and 'reveal' is still 'texts' and not, let us say, 'readers'.

premise'. Since biblical discourse is an ideological one, one can identify in it a 'philosophy',<sup>3</sup> hierarchical oppositions and key concepts, but the process is less 'automatic' and self-evident than in the texts of the Western tradition, and the reader becomes more 'visible'.

This is perhaps the reason why in some recent works (Greenstein 2001; Slivniak 2004) the deconstructive reading of the text is preceded by a constructive one. So, Greenstein reads Genesis 1–11 in a constructive fashion as opposing the 'good' design of God to 'evil' actions of humans who spoil the good world created by God. Good and evil are equivalent in this reading with cosmos and chaos, respectively. This reading is deconstructed by addressing fragments showing 'evil' activity from the part of 'God's sons' (6.1–4) and creation of elements of chaos ('the great sea monsters') by God (1.21a). In my own (2004) article on the book of Esther, I opened with a constructive reading opposing 'wise' Jewish characters (Mordechai, Esther) to 'foolish' Gentile ones (Ahasuerus, Vashti, Haman). I deconstructed this reading by a parallel between the behavior of 'wise' Mordecai and 'foolish' Vashti (in both cases the motives of their actions are not clear).

### **A Constructive Reading of the Golden Calf Story**

The reading proposed below focuses on the central opposition of normative cult to deviant cult—one of the founding oppositions (variants of the founding opposition) of the Hebrew Bible as a whole. Normative cult is prescribed, while deviant cult is forbidden (cf., e.g., Exod. 20.4, 23). In the Golden Calf story these cults are represented by the Tablets of the Law and the Golden Calf, respectively. According to Derrida, 'In a traditional philosophical opposition we have not a peaceful coexistence of facing terms but a violent hierarchy. One of the terms dominates the other (axiologically, logically etc.), occupies the commanding position. To deconstruct an opposition is above all, at a particular moment, to reverse the hierarchy' (Derrida 1981: 41).

The opposition of the normative cult to the deviant one, although not philosophical, is clearly a hierarchy: the normative cult is evidently better. The opposition is also violent in the most literal sense of the word: it is enough to mention that around 3000 Golden Calf worshippers were killed by the Levites (v. 28).

3. By using this word, I do not mean, of course, that biblical discourse is a philosophical one; cf. below.

One has to add that each of the cults has its own ideology, its own 'voice'. The 'spokespersons' of the normative cult are the narrator, God, and Moses, while those of the deviant cult are Aaron and the people. I will call the cults opposed in the story 'the cult according to Moses' and 'the cult according to Aaron' respectively.

It is convenient to start the reading with 'the cult according to Aaron', which makes its appearance in the absence of Moses (v. 1), and the necessity of which is motivated by his prolonged absence ('...this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him'). The ideology of this cult, forbidden according to the Bible, but, in fact, authentically Israelite (cf., e.g., Aberbach and Smolar 1967: 135), is based on the identification between the Golden Calf and God of Israel/YHWH. After making the calf, the people say *אלה אלהיך ישראל אשר העלוך מארץ מצרים* ('this is/these are your god[s],<sup>4</sup> Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt', vv. 4, 8). The feast that Aaron prepares for the people is called, in its turn, *יום ליהוה* ('the day/feast to YHWH', v. 5). The identification between the calf and the god (or God) it represents is implicitly present also in the demand of the people to Aaron: 'make us a god/gods (*עשה לנו אלהים*), which shall go before us' (v. 1b). It is not clear and probably irrelevant who or what is supposed to go before the people: the god (God), the divine image, or both. In any case, for the worshipers of the cult according to Aaron a 'god' is something that can be 'made'; a material artifact like the Golden Calf represents, signifies, and is, in fact, identical with God of Israel.

As I have remarked elsewhere (Slivniak 2005: 17), the spokespeople of the 'cult according to Moses' (God, Moses, the narrator) do not oppose the identification between the Golden Calf and God of Israel; they simply ignore it. God fails to recognize himself in the Golden Calf, despite the repetition in his speech of Aaron's cultic formula (v. 8b); he only sees the deviation from the 'way which [he] commanded' (v. 8a). The narrator provides us with nothing but the factual description of the making of the calf and the feast next day (vv. 1-6). As for Moses, in his address to God at the end of the chapter he recognizes that people 'have sinned a great sin' and 'made for themselves a god/gods of gold' (v. 31).

4. On the semantic indeterminacy surrounding the word *אלהים* ('god[s]') in the Golden Calf story and on its function in the story, see in detail Slivniak 2005: 14-18 and the literature quoted there (on the plural form, cf. especially Burnett 1999: 92).

This statement relates directly to the prohibition in Exod. 20.19,<sup>5</sup> which is violated by the erection of the calf: ‘You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold’. Although the word אֱלֹהִים can be used, among others, as the designation of (forbidden) divine images (Burnett 1999; Slivniak 2005), one finds here, if desired, also the meaning of ‘supernatural being’ appearing in a metaphoric<sup>6</sup> way: material images represent divine beings and may be identified with them.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, Moses, as the narrator and God before him, ignores the identification between the Golden Calf and the God of Israel suggested by vv. 4, 5, 8.

Let us turn now to the positive content of ‘the cult according to Moses’, whose central object is the Tablets of the Law. According to the biblical account, these tablets were ‘written on both sides; on the one side and on the other were they written. And the tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tablets’ (vv. 15-16). We do not learn anything from here about the distribution of the text between the tablets; in fact, one does not know why one needs two of them and not one (see the survey of Jewish traditional views on the subject in Sarna 1991: 108). Moreover, we do not know what text was written there. The verses quoted above (Exod. 32.15-16) do not contain any information about it. The same is true for Exod. 31.18. The only place in the book of Exodus where one may find some information about the contents of the text written on the tablets is Exod. 24.12: ‘And I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment (וְהַתּוֹרָה וְהַמִּצְוָה), which I have written for their instruction’. From this verse one can infer, at best, that the tablets contained ‘the law and the commandment’.<sup>8</sup> More specifically, one traditionally sees here the Ten

5. In the KJV the verse number is 23.

6. We have to do here, in fact, with a double metaphor: the image is similar in form to a calf, while the last is similar to God understood in a ‘pagan’ way (possessing with God such common features as strength and fertility).

7. The polemic with paganism in Isa. 44.9-20 is directed just against such identification: ‘And the rest of it [the tree] he makes into a god, his idol; and falls down to it and worships it; he prays to it and says, “Deliver me, for you are my god!”’ (v. 17). For the discussion of the question whether such a representation of ‘idolatry’ is historically accurate, see Faur 1978 and the literature quoted there.

8. ‘The law and the commandment’ can be also understood as something additional to the tablets: ‘I will give you the tablets of stone, *and* the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction’. The difficulty in this case lies in the fact that

Commandments proclaimed by God on Mount Sinai (Exod. 20.2-17). It seems that there are two reasons for such identification, which is usually taken for granted by the commentators:

1. The limited space of the tablets and their symbolic role as the embodiment of God's law compel one to look for a short text representative of the whole law. One should not forget, however, that there were two tablets written from both sides (v. 15), so they probably also could contain a longer text than the Ten Commandments given at Sinai.
2. In Deut. 9.10 the text on the tablets is identified in an unambiguous way with 'all the words which the LORD had spoken with you on the mountain out of the midst of the fire on the day of the assembly', i.e. with the Ten Commandments. Yet Deuteronomy presents a slightly different version of the whole story, including a different variant of the Ten Commandments themselves (8.6-18). Unless one wants to produce a harmonizing reading reconciling the differences between the two books, the text of Deuteronomy hardly can be used for the interpretation of the story contained in Exodus.

We do not know exactly what text was written on the tablets, according to the book of Exodus, but it seems rather clear that its contents were related to 'the law and the commandment' given by God. The tablets of the Law are thus opposed to the Golden Calf erected while breaking this same law. Another opposition is related to the fact that the tablets of the Law are made and written by God, while the Golden Calf is made by Aaron and the people. The relation of the tablets to God is thus metonymic, unlike the mentioned metaphoric relation of the Golden Calf to God (cf. Halbertal and Margalit 1992: 37-66). Unlike the calf, the tablets are not 'god' even to the worshipers of the normative 'cult according to Moses'.

The importance of the opposition is strengthened by a pun: the tablets are called *מעשה אלהים* ('work of God', v. 16), while the demand of the people to Aaron which brings about the construction of the calf is formulated as *עשה לנו אלהים* ('make us a god', vv. 1, 23). The Tablets of the

the only written document Moses obtains on the mountain is the tablets; there is no additional document mentioned which contains 'the law and the commandment' (see, in detail, Childs 1974: 499).

Law are *made* by God, while the Golden Calf is a ‘god’ *made* by the people.<sup>9</sup>

The constructive reading presented above focused on the hierarchical opposition between ‘the cult according to Moses’ and ‘the cult according to Aaron’ and drew out many other themes of the Golden Calf story (e.g. Moses’ intercession for the people, punishment of the sinners). The table below summarizes this reading:

<i>Cult according to Moses</i>	<i>Cult according to Aaron</i>
(Good)	(Bad)
Prescribed	Prohibited
Containing the law	Breaking the law
Moses <i>present</i>	Moses <i>absent</i> , the people takes initiative
The tablets <i>made by God</i>	The calf, a human-made <i>god</i>
The tablets represent the will of YHWH	The calf is identical with YHWH
(metonymy)	(metaphor)

‘The cult according to Moses’ is thus opposed to ‘the cult according to Aaron’ as ‘good’ is to ‘bad’, ‘prescribed’ is to ‘prohibited’, ‘law’ is to ‘transgression’, ‘presence’ is to ‘absence’, ‘divine’ is to ‘human’, and ‘metonymy’ is to ‘metaphor’. Let us see how this set of hierarchical oppositions can be deconstructed.

### Deconstruction: Step 1

The deconstruction of the hierarchical opposition between the prescribed and the prohibited cult starts with the observation that the tablets and the calf receive the same treatment: Moses destroys both objects. Moreover, the tablets are destroyed before the calf, and their destruction looks more violent/emotional than that of the calf: ‘Moses’ anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain’ (v. 19). The opposition between the central cultic objects of the normative and the deviant cult thus looks neutralized if not reversed:

9. In v. 24 Aaron presents a seemingly different version of the origin of the human-made ‘god’: ‘And I said to them, “Let any who have gold take it off”; so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and *there came out this calf*’. According to some commentators (e.g. Cassuto 1967: 420; Childs 1974: 570; Sarna 1991: 208), Aaron’s words represent an attempt to minimize his own responsibility for the things that happened. Yet, such medieval Jewish commentators as Rashbam and Bekhor Shor (quoted after Sarna 1991: 261), see in the verb נָסַח (‘came out’) a technical metallurgical term (cf. Isa. 54.16; Prov. 25.4).



the calf has even a 'better' fate than the tablets. No wonder that Moses' violent action presented a problem for so many exegetes.<sup>10</sup> More specifically, two questions arise in relation to Moses' act:

1. Why did Moses destroy the holiest object of the normative cult—in fact, its embodiment?
2. Why did he do it before destroying the Golden Calf?

While answering the first question, some commentators maintain that Moses did not smash the tablets, but that they fell from his hands by themselves (*Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, Rashbam); for others, Moses' intention was to show the people to what extent it was unworthy of the covenant (Rashi, Abarbanel). Certain commentators (Aqedath Yitzhaq, HaNetziv) thought that Moses wanted to divert the attention of the people from the idolatry. Finally, there is an exegetical position deserving special attention because it addresses not only the first question, but also the second one. According to such texts as *Exodus Rabbah* and *Avot de Rabbi Natan*, Moses wanted to justify Israel while canceling retroactively the covenant with God embodied in the tablets (cf. also Sarna 1991: 207; Noth 1962: 249; Cassuto 1967: 419; Childs 1974: 569). As the midrash *Exodus Rabbah* (43.1) puts it:

To what can this be compared? To a prince who sent a marriage broker to betroth a woman on his behalf. He went but she had compromised herself in the meantime with another. What did he do? He took the marriage deed which the prince had given him wherewith to betroth her and tore it up. He said: Better she should be judged as an unmarried woman than a married one. Moses did likewise. As soon as Israel perpetrated that deed, he too took the Tablets and broke them.<sup>11</sup>

In this interpretation the covenant/law embodied in the tablets has to be abolished as soon as possible. The people have to be 'freed' of it before investigative and 'educative' measures can be taken. In fact, after the transgression God and Moses have only two choices: to destroy the people and to choose another covenantal partner for God (cf. vv. 9-14), or to abolish for a while the covenant while preserving the people. Moses chooses the people (as Professor Yehuda [Jerome] Gelman remarked in an oral communication, God and Moses have only two choices).

10. See the review of Jewish traditional interpretations of the episode in Leibowitz 1976: 601-17.

11. Quoted according to Leibowitz 1976: 607. It is well known that such interpretation is accurate from the historical point of view: the Akkadian expression *tuppam hepû* ('to break a tablet') has also the meaning of invalidating a document (Sarna 1991: 207).

In other words, at a certain moment the existence of a valid legal order embodied in the tablets is an even greater obstacle to renewing the relationship between God and Israel than the presence of the deviant cult embodied in the calf. Pushing this idea to the extreme, one arrives at the Pauline theology with its conception of Law bringing sin into human lives, if not creating it (Rom. 5.13b;<sup>12</sup> 7.7-25). In this theology, the hierarchical opposition between Law and transgression, a particular case of which is the opposition between the normative cult and the forbidden cult, is almost reversed: the Law becomes a necessary precondition, 'giving life' to the transgression.

## Deconstruction: Step 2

Although the reversal of a hierarchical opposition is a necessary task of a deconstructive procedure (cf. above), it is not the only aim of the deconstruction. In Derrida's words, deconstructionism must 'put into practice a *reversal* of the classical opposition *and* a general *displacement* of the system' (1973: 195; quoted after Culler 1982: 85-86). The Rabbinic reading used above brings about a (partial) reversal of the opposition, but not the displacement of the system.

Besides, the way of interpretation chosen above possesses a flaw: while explaining the rationale of Moses' action, it does not take into account its spontaneous, emotional character. In other words, it fails to explain why Moses' anger is directed, first of all, against the tablets and not against the calf (Leibowitz 1976: 609). Therefore, it makes sense to introduce another Jewish reading, relatively recent this time, that ascribes an additional motive to Moses' smashing of the tablets (1976: 612-14). R. Meir Simkhah Hacoen of Dwinsk (1843-1926), in his posthumous 1927 book, *Meshekh Hokhmah*, proposed his own understanding of Moses' act. Moses, according to him, was enraged when he saw that the people identified the Torah with his physical presence. When Moses was absent for too long a time (probably dead, as the people thought), his teachings also were considered irrelevant by the Israelites—accordingly, the people violated one of the basic prohibitions of the Torah and built the calf. Yet, Moses' teachings are, in fact, God's Torah, which persists 'without any change' (1976: 613) and does not depend on the physical presence of Moses, the tablets, or any other material object created by

12. Paul's statement in this verse contains, in fact, the same idea that the Rabbinic sources quoted above: 'sin is not counted where there is no law'.

God. While breaking the tablets, Moses, according to R. Meir Simkhah, showed that there was no holiness in created objects.<sup>13</sup> Only the Creator is holy and the Creator's will is expressed in the unchanging Torah.

One can see that this reading is partly deconstructive. R. Meir Simkhah neutralized, in fact, the hierarchy between the tablets and the calf as embodiments of the normative and of the deviant cult, respectively (although he did not reverse it). Only one thing pertaining to the normative cult 'survives' this deconstruction: the Torah as an unchanging, ideal object. In fact, he replaced this hierarchical opposition with another one—an opposition between the unchanging, ideal Torah and its material embodiment in the written text of the tablets. One can, despite important differences which will be discussed below (see Deconstruction: Step 3), bring this opposition together with the widespread hierarchical opposition between voice (oral speech) and writing ('phonocentrism' or 'logocentrism' in the deconstructionist terminology). As Broitman (1996: 19) puts it, 'the smashing of the tablets is the ultimate phonocentric rejection of writing—even of divine writing. While God's voice inspired loyalty, God's writing gave birth to betrayal'.

Let us consider this point in more detail. Valuing oral speech over writing is an almost universal phenomenon in human culture. Oral speech is identified with presence, while writing is related to absence. Writing is blamed both for the distortion of the original oral message and for its mechanical repetition. Identification and deconstruction of this set of motives constitutes an essential part of the Derridean lore (see especially Derrida 1976). A *rapprochement* has often been made between Derrida's deconstructionism and Rabbinic Judaism where writing is sometimes valued over the oral speech and absence over presence (see in detail Sherwood 1996: 194-99). It seems, however, that the Hebrew Bible, unlike Rabbinic and Kabbalistic texts, represents a rather typical

13. As I remarked above, the relation of the tablets to God is metonymical (the tablets are written by God and embody the covenant with God), while relation of the calf to God is metaphorical and can reach the stage of identification. Generally speaking, the metonymy is more loosely connected with its object than the metaphor: 'an element of truth is involved in taking Achilles for a lion but none in taking Mr. Ford for a motor car' (de Man 1979: 14). The Golden Calf story values metonymy over metaphor (cf. the table above), but at the same time, from R. Meir Simkhah's perspective, the loose metonymical connection between the tablets and God allows their breaking and even makes it necessary in order to prevent the confusion between the tablets and God and between metonymy and metaphor.

logocentric/phonocentric phenomenon. It is enough to mention such a blatant statement as Jeremiah's complaint about 'the false pen of the scribes' that 'made [the Torah] into a lie' (Jer. 8.8) and the characteristic logocentric metaphor of 'ideal writing' (Derrida 1976: 15). I have in mind the famous passage in Jeremiah about the future 'new covenant' that God will conclude with Israel: 'I will put my law within them, and *I will write it upon their hearts*; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people' (Jer. 31.33).

In the case of the Golden Calf story there is a clear hierarchical opposition between presence and absence (cf. the table above), oral speech and writing. God's law is given and covenant concluded in God's presence (chs. 20 and 24). On the other hand, Moses' prolonged absence brings about the building of the calf, and only his return (a punishing presence) puts an end to the deviant cult. At the same time, the Ten Commandments are given in God's speech to the people (20.2-17) while Moses' absence is somehow related to writing: he ascends the mountain to receive the tablets written by God (24.12). The archetypal transgression takes place between the conclusion of the covenant and the reception of the written text fixed on the tablets, somewhere in the gap between oral speech and writing.

At this stage, some moves can be made in order to deconstruct the hierarchical oppositions of speech/writing and presence/absence in our text. First, it must be remarked that God's theophany at Sinai, the moment of 'presence' (chs. 19 and 20), takes place in the atmosphere of fear and mortal danger (19.21-23, 24b; 20.18-19; cf. 24.11a). Mount Sinai is forbidden to the people and even to the priests (19.12-14, 21-23, 24b). Only Moses is allowed to climb the sacred dangerous mountain and to disappear in the cloud, behind the 'devouring fire' of Lord's glory (24.16-18). When Moses is absent for too long, the people are easily induced into supposing that '[something] happened' to 'this man Moses' (32.1), a thing that could happen to anyone who dared to ascend the forbidden mountain. In other words, the harmful effect of the 'absence' is rooted in the frightening atmosphere of the 'presence'.

Another deconstructive move is the question whether Moses' absence on the mountain was really related to writing. Genesis 24.12b seems to point to the fact that the text on the tablets was written before Moses' ascent on the mountain. If so, for what purpose did Moses need to remain on the mountain forty days and nights? Chapters 25-31 contain instructions for building the Tabernacle, so one can suppose that he spent the

time obtaining these instructions.<sup>14</sup> Yet, it should be remarked that the theme of the Tabernacle is introduced unexpectedly in the beginning of ch. 25, without any connection with the previous text. It also looks peculiar that the writing of these instructions is not mentioned (was Moses supposed to rely on his memory?).<sup>15</sup>

As we see, even the later readers of Exodus do not receive an unambiguous answer to the question of what Moses did on the mountain for so long a time. What remains to be said about the people who obtained no information concerning not only the purpose of Moses' stay on the mountain, but also its length? The only thing Moses says to the elders is: 'tarry here for us, until we come to you again; and, behold, Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a cause, let him go to them' (Exod. 24.14). In other words, the archetypal transgression is situated not (only) in the gap between oral speech and writing, as I called it above, but (also) in the hermeneutic gap<sup>16</sup> related to the length and the purpose of Moses' sojourn on the mountain, a gap that persists also for the later readers of the story. The harmful effect of the 'absence' is rooted again in the 'presence', in Moses' failure to provide the necessary information for the people.

### **Deconstruction: Step 3**

Discussing the possibility of the displacement of hierarchical oppositions introduced by the constructive reading of the story and its (partial) deconstruction (normative cult vs. deviant cult, presence vs. absence, oral speech vs. writing), one cannot ignore a text in Exodus where such a displacement, in my interpretation, actually takes place. The text I am thinking of is ch. 34, which depicts the making and the writing of new tablets after the original ones were broken by Moses. In this account the tablets are not directly opposed to the Golden Calf, which has been destroyed. Yet, the memory of the transgression and the punishment has left its mark on the text (cf. vv. 6-9). The Golden Calf and the deviant

14. In the variant of Deuteronomy, he spent the time fasting and preparing for reception of the tablets (Deut. 9.9). The theme of the Tabernacle is ignored in this variant.

15. Theoretically, there is a possibility that the expression *התורה והמצוה* ('the law and the commandment', 24.12) refers not to the text on the tablets, but to some additional text (maybe the instructions for building the Tabernacle?), and in this case it also can be written by God. Both possibilities ('the law and the commandment' as the text on the tablets and as something external) arouse serious hermeneutic problems (cf. above, n. 9).

16. On hermeneutic gaps, see in detail Perry and Sternberg 1986.

cult are present there as a trace—the world of ch. 34 is a world ‘after the transgression’, unlike the world ‘before/during the transgression’ of the chs. 24–31. One sees memories of this event in the behavior of the people during Moses’ ascent on the mountain—this time his absence does not provoke the people to take a cultic initiative of their own, although it lasts forty days and forty nights, exactly as before. The people have learned something from Moses’ first absence and return.

Let us compare now the new Tablets of the Law with the broken ones. There is one major and unambiguous difference between these sets of tablets—the new ones are made by Moses and not by God (34.1a, 4). Two additional questions arise, the answers to which are neither easy nor unambiguous: Who wrote the text on the new tablets and what was written there? We obtain a seemingly clear answer from 34.1b: ‘...I will write upon the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke’. One sees from here that the tablets will be written by God and the text on them will be identical with the text on the first ones. Following this we find a set of cultic instructions (vv. 10–26), and right after these the following text (vv. 27–28): ‘And the LORD said to Moses, “Write these words; in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel”. And he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote upon the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten commandments.’ It seems clear that the words ‘write’ (כתב־לך) and ‘(and he) wrote’ (ויכתב) refer to the instructions contained in vv. 10–26, and the person who writes is Moses and not God. However, a contradiction arises with 34.1b where the one who writes is supposed to be God. Likewise, if we accept, as it is traditionally understood, that the first tablets contained the Ten Commandments from 20.2–17 (cf. above, Constructive Reading), there is a contradiction between God’s promise to ‘write upon the tablets the words that were on the first tablets’ (34.1b) and an entirely different text Moses is required to write in vv. 10–26.

The contradictions in the chapter have perplexed many of its readers. As Driver puts it, ‘the great difficulty is that one thing is commanded, and another done’ (Driver 1913: 39, quoted after Childs 1974: 605). Both traditional Jewish exegesis and modern critical scholarship try by their respective means to solve the problem. If biblical critics speak in this case about the complex editorial history of the text,<sup>17</sup> traditional Jewish commentators (e.g. Ramban, *ad loc.*) understand ויכתב (‘and he wrote’)

17. See the review in Childs 1974: 605–10.

of 34.28 as referring to God and not to Moses.<sup>18</sup> In this case we have not one act of writing, but two: Moses writes the text contained in vv. 10-26, while God writes 'the words of the covenant, the ten commandments', as promised in v. 1b.

The solutions proposed by biblical criticism replace the received text by something else; therefore, they can be of hardly any use for a post-critical literary reading. As for the traditional Jewish interpretation, despite being very ingenuous, it runs counter to the readerly intuition. If v. 27 says 'write these words' and v. 28 has 'and he wrote these words', it seems clear that the same words are meant, and not two different texts, as traditional Jewish sources maintain. The same is true about the phrase 'in accordance with *these words* I have made a *covenant*'<sup>19</sup> with you and with Israel' in v. 27 and the expression 'the words of the covenant' in v. 28.

As for the identity of the text on the new tablets, a contradiction arises only if we accept as proven that the first ones contained the Ten Commandments from ch. 20. If we leave the question undecided and limit ourselves to the context of Exodus (without turning to Deuteronomy), we obtain a picture devoid of contradictions, although somewhat extravagant. According to this scenario, the second tablets should have contained the text of 34.10-26, which 34.28 calls 'the ten commandments' (more exactly, 'the ten words', עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרִים). From 34.1b we learn retroactively, that the first tablets contained the same text.

The following objections can be raised against this 'reconstruction':

1. The conception of the so-called 'ritual Decalogue' looks obsolete today. Likewise, it is difficult to 'divide into ten' the instructions in 34.10-26 (see Childs 1974: 604-607, especially 605).
2. It is strange that a text as important as the Decalogue from ch. 20 does not receive a special treatment and is, at best, written down together with other 'words of the Lord' (24.4). On the other hand, the text contained in 34.10-26 does not appear before, and we have no previous mention of God proclaiming it to the people or to Moses. Why should it then be written on both sets of tablets?

18. See a modern attempt to justify the traditional Jewish viewpoint in Cassuto 1967: 447-48.

19. It seems that the reference here is to v. 10: 'Behold, I make a covenant...'

One can invent other ‘reconstructions’ in order to resolve the contradiction; for example, one can maintain that after the first address to Moses (34.1-3), God changed his mind and dictated to Moses a new text for the tablets instead of writing there the Decalogue of ch. 20. It seems, however, that in this case it is better to deconstruct rather than to ‘reconstruct’. To put it more exactly, it makes sense to view ch. 34 as a deconstruction/displacement of the hierarchical oppositions engendered by the reading of ch. 32. Let us consider this situation in more detail, summarizing first the conclusions that we reached in the present reading:

1. The direct opposition between the normative and the deviant cult is no longer present in ch. 34 (cf. above). Yet the deviant cult remains as a memory—the covenant is concluded/renewed against the background of the committed transgression. (Characteristically, our text does not speak of the renewal of the covenant, only of its conclusion.)
2. The tablets are prepared by Moses and not by God, so the opposition between the human-made calf and the Tablets of the Law made by God is no longer relevant.
3. The chapter gives two contradictory answers to the question of whether the writing on the new tablets was divine or human.
4. The question about the text on the new tablets remains undecided and so is the question about its identity with/difference from the text on the first tablets.

In the new, displaced system the deviant cult is present only as a trace, but the new tablets ‘absorb’ an important feature of the Golden Calf—they are human-made. The writing on these tablets can no longer be called divine in an unambiguous way—the text contains two contradictory statements on this subject. Neither is there an unambiguous answer to the question of whether the text on the new tablets was identical with the text on the old ones or different from it (cf. R. Meir Simkhah’s ‘unchanging Torah’).

Let us consider now what happens to the presence/absence opposition. On the one hand, Moses’ lengthy absence no longer provokes the people to transgression—the absence has lost its ‘harmful’ character. On the other, Moses’ renewed presence at the end of the chapter has acquired something of absence. I mean the veil that Moses has now to put on his face while speaking with the people (v. 35). Unlike Moses’ previous return, this time his presence is neither intensely frightening nor violent—the people have not sinned, so there is no need of punishment.



Yet, Moses' contact with God has given to it some numinous quality, and there has to be some separating element between Moses and the people (characteristically, Moses does not need such an element during his meetings with God—vv. 34a, 35b).<sup>20</sup>

To 'wind up' with the last stage of deconstruction, I see it necessary to draw a distinction between the hierarchical opposition 'speech—writing' characteristic for logocentric texts and the hierarchic opposition that we find in R. Meir Simkhah's book. In his thought, such material objects as the first and the second tablets are subordinated to an entity designed as 'God Himself', 'God's will', or 'the Torah, persisting without any change'. From the deconstructionist perspective, all three represent the privileged pole of a hierarchical opposition and can be viewed as variants of the Presence. A question arises whether they also can be identified with 'voice' or 'oral speech' as it usually happens in logocentric/phonocentric cultures. As was mentioned above (Deconstruction: Step 2), rabbinic and cabbalistic tradition is not exactly logocentric/phonocentric and does not necessarily identify Presence with voice/oral speech. In our case, R. Meir Simkhah's 'unchanging Torah' hardly resembles divine voice or divine speech. It is more akin to the 'pre-existing Torah' of rabbinic and cabbalistic mythologies (e.g. *Gen. R.* 1.1), for example, such views as the Torah existing before the creation of the world as a 'blueprint' for it. In any case, it looks to be a specimen of unchanging, eternal divine writing. This ideal divine writing is valued over the more 'empirical' divine writing of the first tablets.

It is interesting that the last kind of writing is hierarchically subordinated in R. Meir Simkhah's conception not only to the ideal writing of the 'unchanging Torah', but to the human writing as well: 'It was the first tablets which were the work of God—that were broken, not the tablets hewn by Moses, which remained whole; demonstrating that no holiness exists in any created thing other than that invested in it by Israel's observance of the Torah in accordance with the will of the Creator and His holy name' (quoted after Leibowitz 1976: 614).<sup>21</sup> In

20. The apostle Paul allegorically interpreted Moses' veil as a barrier between Israel and God hindering the reception of God's message: '...to this day, when [the Israelites] read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their minds; but when a man turns to the Lord the veil is removed' (2 Cor. 3.14-16).

21. In this case the preparation of the material for writing can be considered as a part of writing itself; as to the text on the new tablets, as I have shown above, we have no unambiguous answer to the question of whether it was written by God or by Moses.

other words, R. Meir Simkhah situates the real presence inside 'Israel'—only human observance of the Torah legitimates (gives holiness to) the cult and the cultic objects. His interpretation is thus not only deconstructive, but self-deconstructive—the dominating pole of his hierarchy is situated not so much with the 'author' (God), as with the 'readers' (people), who by virtue of their 'reading' (observance of the commandments) invest with holiness the cult and possibly the whole created world.<sup>22</sup>

### **Deconstruction: Summary**

Let us summarize the deconstruction of the hierarchical oppositions engendered by the reading of the Golden Calf story (cf. the table at the end of the constructive reading):

1. The Tablets of the Law are destroyed before the destruction of the Golden Calf, and their destruction bears a more emotional/violent character than that of the calf. In a certain sense, the forbidden cult is given here preference over the prescribed one.
2. According to certain interpretations, the destruction of the tablets meant the (temporary) cancellation of the covenant. The covenant is thus canceled before the destruction of the calf. If this is the case, the valid legal order ('law') is even greater an obstacle to re-establishing the relationship between God and people than the (vestiges of the) transgression.
3. During the writing of the new tablets, the deviant cult is present as a 'trace'—the opposition is not only reversed, but displaced.
4. The new tablets are human-made like the calf.
5. It remains undecided whether the writing on the new tablets is human or divine.
6. It remains undecided whether the text on the new tablets is identical to the text on the old ones or different from it.
7. The first tablets, the 'divine' ones, are broken, while the new, human-made ones survive. 'Human' is thus valued over 'divine'.
8. 'Divine' tablets can be broken by virtue of their 'metonymical' relationship to God—they contain no intrinsic holiness (R. Meir Simkhah Hacohen) and cannot be valued by themselves over any other material object, including the Golden Calf.

22. See in detail Leibowitz 2000: 956-60.

9. The harmful effect of Moses' absence is rooted in the frightening atmosphere of the theophany at Sinai ('presence'). In the situation of the writing of the new tablets, Moses' absence loses its harmful quality and does not lead to any new transgression.
10. Moses' renewed presence after the writing of the new tablets contains an element of absence/separation (veil).

## Conclusion

As was promised at the beginning of this article, the present deconstruction of the Golden Calf story was based on a constructive reading of the same text. Yet, this reading is not the only one that has been used in our deconstruction. It would have been impossible without turning to interpretations found in the Jewish tradition, at least one of which (that of R. Meir Simkhah Hachohen of Dwinsk) is partly deconstructive. When deconstructing the Golden Calf story, one is inevitably immersed in the atmosphere of earlier readings, texts written previously and devoted to this story.

On the other hand, the Golden Calf story itself is a text about text(s), about (mis)reading (misinterpretation), and about writing. Its plot evolves around the writing of a text, its destruction, and repeated writing. It is also about the people misinterpreting Moses' absence as his possible death, as well as about Moses abolishing in his wrath the very opposition standing behind his anger, and re-inscribing it at a later stage in a displaced form. In a certain sense, the Golden Calf story is about (its own) deconstruction.

Interpreting texts as thematizing (their own) deconstruction is not new for deconstructive criticism. As J. Hillis Miller put it once, 'Great works of Literature have anticipated explicitly their own deconstruction' (Miller 1975: 31, quoted from Culler 1981: 4; cf. also Miller 1981). In the Golden Calf story we have the sequence of writing, destroying the written text, and writing it (or something else?) again. The smashing of the tablets wipes out the hierarchies on which the text (of the tablets themselves, of the biblical narrative) is based—they are now 'under erasure'<sup>23</sup> in a truly deconstructive fashion. The second scene of writing

23. It is worth noting that our text also mentions another case of divine writing: a book written by God (the Book of Life of the later Jewish tradition?), from which Moses can be erased (32.32). Moses' words—'blot me, I pray, out of your book which you have written'—echo, without any doubt, one of the central motives of the story—that of divine writing and its destruction.

takes place in a world where all the founding oppositions are displaced, and we possess no unambiguous answers about the identity of the writer and the relation of the new text to that written previously on the tablets that have been destroyed.

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