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# The Golden Calf

## *The Covenant Broken*

### Exodus 32

**Introduction** On this July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend, people in the United States celebrate their independence from Great Britain. In a sense, it is the birthday of a nation. It is much celebrated with parades, fireworks, drinking and eating. In many pulpits today, the sermon will celebrate God and country. As with every nation that has ever been, God's providential hand has brought it into existence. Peoples and nations are formed and located to serve the often hidden purposes and plans of God. This is no less true and no more true of our nation than any other.

But we have been following the formation of another nation, Israel. We have seen a family gathered in Egypt. They become a clan of tribes and eventually a people group during the four hundred years of slavery in Egypt. They have been delivered by the mighty hand of God. They have now been brought to the place, to the mountain where God will hand them their constitution. He will do so in the form of a Covenant, the Mosaic Covenant.

What an amazing thing has transpired at this fenced and fearsome mountain. The elders of Israel, Aaron, Hur and Joshua had gone up, eaten in the presence of the Lord and seen the face of God and lived. They experienced what God intends for his people. They then went back down to the people to share what God had shown them. Moses ascends the mountain once again to receive the Law in further detail.

But now, forty days have passed and no Moses. No word is heard. The great smoking fire still rests upon the mountain. Life giving water still flows from the rock. Morning by morning, manna dewes the wilderness floor. Sweet blessings. Great expectations. But impatient, idolatrous and immoral hearts yearn for something more.

Exodus is like a map so that through the redemption of Israel we see "the geography of our own souls."<sup>24</sup> This morning through this difficult text, I am going to traverse the landscape of your soul. Be still before God this morning. Pray that He will illuminate His Word and enlighten our hearts.

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<sup>24</sup> Ryken, p.971.

## **Their Corruption**

**(v.1-6)**

This people, saved by the hand of God and promising to forever keep the Mosaic Covenant now exhibit their heart's corruption.

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, "Up, make us gods 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." <sup>2</sup> So Aaron said to them, "Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." <sup>3</sup> So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. <sup>4</sup> And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" <sup>5</sup> When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD." <sup>6</sup> And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.

## **In the People's Demands**

**(v.1)**

The people had become impatient with the delay. They were ready to move on to the blessing, to the Promised Land. The people demonstrate that they still have a lot of Egypt in them. They demand that gods be made who can lead them out of this place and to Canaan. They do not know what has happened to Moses. But they sure demonstrate a lack of belief in God and bowing to God's providence. As will unfold through the whole old covenant, most individual Israelites were unbelievers. Only a small remnant in each generation believed. So here are carping, complaining, unbelieving people demanding that they have their god now.

These forty days are a time of testing. Here they failed. With manna and water and the mountain nearby and God hovering over, they are not a well-pleasing son. They succumb to temptation and fail to keep the Covenant. But their failure points to another forty days in the wilderness where the true Israel, the Lord Jesus Christ is also tested and tempted. But He kept the covenant. He is the only one who can claim the blessings of the covenant. And all those who are placed into Jesus by faith in His saving work also participate in all the covenant blessings which he fulfilled.

## **With Aaron's Defection**

**(v.2-5)**

Here is an opportunity for a godly leader to say, "No." Aaron, the spokesman and the priest of God should confront the people with their impatience and their idolatry. Israel has committed idolatry in their hearts long before a golden calf springs up from the hand of Aaron. This is the first time he is put in charge of the nation. Instead of courage and conviction, the fear of man (a mob) rules his heart.

And Aaron has an immediate plan. They are to take the golden rings in their ears and bring them to supply for the golden idol he will make. So here he mimes what God had planned for the Tabernacle. The provision for this is not from the general wealth but rather from a limited supply – their golden earrings.

I am amazed at how quickly this unfolds. Basically over night, the gold is gathered and smelted. A large lump of clay is cast. Then by engraving or carving, a calf is formed. In doing this Aaron defects from faith in God and distorts the true God. This is what all false religion does. It presents something like God but not

God. Instead of the invisible, all-powerful, self-sustaining, sovereign, law giving, obedience demanding, heart delighting God, Aaron gives them what they want and declares that it is the Lord. He gives them a visible, dead, man-made, immobile, mute idol that makes no demands on them and fosters delight in the lusts of the flesh.

In the final distortion, Aaron builds an altar before the calf and declares that this is their god. So he makes an idol, builds an altar and schedules a worship day on the following day. But this altar and feast are declared to be *to the LORD* while being offered *to the idol*. Make no mistake. Aaron is pointing Israel to that which is not God, calling it god and the people believe they are worshipping Yahweh.

There is a very important lesson here. Idolatry is first about the heart and its imaginations. If your thoughts about God are not true to what God says of Himself, then you are not really thinking about God at all. When we worship intentional distortions of God, we are not worshipping God. When we change who God says He is for whatever reason we do so, then we have manufactured an idol in our hearts and are worshipping and serving a false God. This is why teaching and learning are important parts of the Christian faith. Yet, in the mercies of God, He is still truly worshipped when we are young in faith, ignorant of truth and immature spiritually. But intentional ignorance, distortions and falsehood lead people away from worshipping the true God of the Bible.

### **By the People's Degradation**

**(v.6)**

The next day, religious worship takes place. Burnt sacrifices and peace offerings are brought. They are doing going through the motions of worship – but there is a big problem. They are worshipping an idol using the guidelines for the sacrifices and the feasts which God had given. They are blending true and false worship. This is called syncretism. This is taking pagan worship and mixing it with Biblical worship. This is the essence of false religions that pretend to be Christianity.

Then the people get up from their sacrifices and their feast and “play.” Now what is that? Are they playing volleyball or games? No, this is same word used elsewhere in Genesis to refer to sexual play between a husband and wife (Genesis 26:8).

Paul connects their idolatry here with their later immorality in 1 Corinthians 10:6-8. In doing so we are clearly warned about their sin. The warning is focused on what we desire: “Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.” [ESV] So we may not be bringing gold earrings for the elders to make golden calves for you to worship. But your heart may be full of impatience with God, wrong and idolatrous thoughts of God and heart immorality. So we must take heed that we are careful over our hearts so that we do not “crave evil as they did.”

## Their Condemnation

(v.7-14)

The scene shifts to the mountain, where Moses is meeting with God. The Law has been given and the stone tablets are ready. The picture here is of a final audience before returning to the people below. But as Moses comes before God, he finds that God is angry.

### By God's Indictment

(v.7-10)

<sup>7</sup> And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. <sup>8</sup> They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!' " <sup>9</sup> And the LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. <sup>10</sup> Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you."

*GOD INDICTS THEM IN THEIR CONDUCT.* This is what they do. They have corrupted themselves and have turned away from God's commands. How have they done this? By making for themselves a false god, an idol. God refuses to identify Himself with that idol. Their religious acts of worship are not to God through the golden calf. Their religious worship is pagan, like that of Egypt.

This is essential to understand. Many are trying to say today that the God of the Bible can be discovered and worshipped apart from His own personal self-disclosure in the Bible. The God of the Bible is not worshipped at the golden calf of Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, Kingdom Hall, Mormon, or even Roman altars. The only way one may be saved from damnation and destruction is to believe in and bow to the God of the Bible. Just as Israel's only hope was to keep the covenant God had given them through divine revelation, our only hope is to believe and trust in the Jesus Christ *as He is taught in the pages of the Bible.*

*GOD INDICTS THEM IN THEIR CHARACTER.* This is the kind of people they are. They are a stiff-necked people. They are a stubborn people. They are a stubbornly sinful people. They want what they want and they want it now. This serious indictment is leveled against Israel over and over again. In being a stiff-necked people, God is saying that they are not easily turned by God. Their hearts do not easily bend to God. They stubbornly resist God and refuse to do what He requires.

*GOD INDICTS THEM IN THEIR COVENANT BREAKING.* God declares His judgment against them. They are worthy of His wrath. God will simply let the fire of His wrath flow like lava down the slopes of Mt. Sinai and across the valley floor and consume them all. They will be utterly destroyed.

*GOD INDICTS THEM IN THE CONSEQUENCES.* God will start over. He will make a new people. Rather than Abraham and the twelve sons of Jacob fulfilling the covenant, God will fulfill it through one man, the one faithful man who is standing in front of God. He will make the nation from Moses. He will not only be the mediator of the Law but he will be the father of the nation. This, brothers and sisters is a test of Moses' own heart idols. Will he swell with self-satisfied, self-focused pride and allow the whole nation of millions to be consumed so he can be the father of the nation?

## With Moses' Mediation

(v.11-14)

<sup>11</sup> But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? <sup>12</sup> Why should the Egyptians say, 'With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. <sup>13</sup> Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.'" <sup>14</sup> And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.

Moses humbly intercedes for the people. In his ways and in his words, he is the shadow of a greater One to come. Moses is the shadow of Jesus, the substance. He is a type of the intercessory work of Christ. He intercedes making three great arguments.

He reminds the Lord of *GOD'S REDEMPTION OF ISRAEL*; that is, His having delivered them from Egypt. Now I want to remind you that this is a national redemption from the slavery of Egypt which is a type, but not the reality of a personal salvation from sin. But Moses' argument is well founded. If God has delivered them, how can His wrath destroy them? Listen, my beloved, this is the gospel. God has redeemed us. He has poured out His wrath on Christ. Our heavenly mediator simply stands before God as our intercessor. No one for whom Jesus' suffered on the cross will ever bear the wrath of God.

He argues from *GOD'S REPUTATION BEFORE THE WORLD*. God has put His own Name and fame at stake in the deliverance of His people His reputation will be ruined if He destroys them now. The nations will hold Him in derision and justly so. God has placed His reputation on the line in the redemption of His people. Eventually, when the church is perfected in eternity, then all the people's will praise the fame of God through the people He redeemed.

He argues from *GOD'S REMEMBRANCE OF HIS PROMISES*. God is a covenant keeping God. He has made promises to Abraham and his descendents. This people are the people of that promise. They may have broken the national covenant. But they are still the promised descendents of Abraham. God must not break His own promises. And God will not. Every son and daughter He begets by the Holy Spirit is a spiritual son and daughter of Abraham. Jesus is the fulfillment, the promised son of whom Isaac was a type. Through our family union with Christ, we are joined to this unshakable covenant with Abraham. We are truly God's sons and daughters and the spiritual sons and daughters of Abraham by faith.

What a relief this last sentence: God relented of the disaster He spoke of. God does not bring that disaster upon them. He responds in time and history to the real and effective mediation of Moses. This failure of Israel, this wrath from God, this mediation by Moses and this turning away by God from that wrath, were all planned from eternity past. These events unfolded as a thread in the grand tapestry of redemptive history. Yet they are carried out in the minute by minute, real world interaction between God and Moses. Eternal in the heavens His councils stand and real in the world His actions flow.

## Their Confrontation

(v.15-24)

So God will not destroy this people, the nation of Israel. He will not start over with Moses. But God will not let it go. He is going to confront them over their sin.

### Over a Broken Covenant

(v.15-20)

<sup>15</sup> Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets that were written on both sides; on the front and on the back they were written. <sup>16</sup> The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets. <sup>17</sup> When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, "There is a noise of war in the camp." <sup>18</sup> But he said, "It is not the sound of shouting for victory, or the sound of the cry of defeat, but the sound of singing that I hear." <sup>19</sup> And as soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. <sup>20</sup> He took the calf that they had made and burned it with fire and ground it to powder and scattered it on the water and made the people of Israel drink it.

Israel is confronted by Moses over their broken covenant. As he and Joshua stride down the mountainside, they are enveloped in the sound of shouting and drums. Joshua, who was not at the morning meeting with God, thinks it is the sound of war. In a nice turn of irony, Moses says no it is sound of singing. As they approach the camp, they see the people swaying and singing in a sexual (and possibly, drunken) orgy.

Now he knows how God felt. His righteous anger boils up. In a dramatic display of the covenant broken, he hurls down the stone tablets of the covenant. They shatter at the foot of the mountain with a mighty crash. The covenant has been broken. They must know the utter powerlessness of the idol and perversion of their worship. So, Moses burns the golden calf with fire and grinds it down into powder (no mean feat, mind you). He strides over to the water flowing from the rock (remember, they are drinking the water flowing from the rock here at Sinai). He pours the gold into the stream as symbol of the pollution of their worship. Then he makes them all drink from it.

### Of a Faithless Leader

(v.21-24)

Now Moses turns to confront Aaron, the failed and faithless leader. Wonder where he has been covering all this time?

<sup>21</sup> And Moses said to Aaron, "What did this people do to you that you have brought such a great sin upon them?" <sup>22</sup> And Aaron said, "Let not the anger of my lord burn hot. You know the people, that they are set on evil. <sup>23</sup> For they said to me, 'Make us gods 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.' <sup>24</sup> So 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 out came this calf."

Moses wonders what they did to him to cause him to do this. What threat did they wield? Aaron's response is true up to a point. But note that his own participation is minimized as he uses the passive voice. The golden calf sprang up out of the smelting fires!

This is classic *BLAME SHIFTING*. As one writer put it, “He blamed the people for their depravity (v. 22), Moses for his delay (v. 23), and the furnace for its delivery of a calf!”<sup>25</sup> He failed to say no to the people because, well, you know, Moses, they are just set on doing evil. They are going to do what is wrong regardless. It is *MANIPULATION*. He is using Moses’ own words and thoughts to excuse himself. It is also a form of *DECEPTION*. He quotes them accurately without giving his own words and actions. It is half the picture. He threw the collected gold into the fire – no sin there, right? Then it is almost laughable. Notice the passive voice; “Out came this calf.” Brothers and sisters, there are no passive voice sins. Our sins do not happen to us. We think sin; we do sin. All sinful attitudes, thoughts, wants and actions are active voice. You are the actor in your sins. Golden calves do not jump out of smelting fires.

Now here are the challenges to leadership, in the home, at work and at church.

- We must know what is true and right and do it regardless.
- We must not allow fear of man nor the unwise or even sinful desires of people to rule us.
- We must be willing to confess and correct where we fail ourselves.

### **Their Correction (v.25-35)**

What will be done to reverse this great catastrophe? How do a people now under the curse because of breaking the covenant now return to the God they turned away from? Further, how does a failed and faithless leadership demonstrate deeds in accordance with repentance? Listen and be sobered at what transpires next.

#### **By a Courageous Remnant**

**(v.25-29)**

<sup>25</sup> And when Moses saw that the people had broken loose (for Aaron had let them break loose, to the derision of their enemies), <sup>26</sup> then Moses stood in the gate of the camp and said, “Who is on the LORD’s side? Come to me.” And all the sons of Levi gathered around him. <sup>27</sup> And he said to them, “Thus says the LORD God of Israel, ‘Put your sword on your side each of you, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill his brother and his companion and his neighbor.’” <sup>28</sup> And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And that day about three thousand men of the people fell. <sup>29</sup> And Moses said, “Today you have been ordained for the service of the LORD, each one at the cost of his son and of his brother, so that he might bestow a blessing upon you this day.”

Moses sees that people had “broken loose.” This word means to lose all restraint, to be out of control, to run wild like a mob. The point here is that all he can see is a depravity, debauchery and disorder. He does not know if *anyone* is uninvolved or repentant. So, he stands outside the camp at the gate. There he calls for those who are on the Lord’s side to leave the camp and join him. Out of the million or so people, only the sons of Levi join him. This would include Aaron, Joshua, Hur and presumably Aaron’s sons. But that is it. Not one of the elders that went up to the mountain responded. So Moses is depending on the grace of God to move the hearts so that they will leave the camp and stand with Moses and with God.

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<sup>25</sup>Warren W. Wiersbe, *Wiersbe’s Expository Outlines on the Old Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1993), Ex 32:1.

But now if they are going to stand with Moses, they are going to have to carry out an extraordinarily difficult and dangerous task. This task is what the Lord God of Israel says to them. If they will not carry out this task, then they are not on the Lord's side. Just stepping out to identify with the Lord is not enough. They have to be willing to do what He says, what He commands, regardless how hard it may be. In this case, they are to strap on their swords and go throughout the camp and kill family, friends and neighbors. Their obedience to God sent 3,000 souls into hell. As a result, at the end of the judgment slaughter, God publicly recognized them as His authorized servant and blessed them.

Now, do you shudder at this? Does this sound like God is a mad tyrant who wrecks totally disproportionate judgment in uncontrolled wrath? Does this in fact just sound like the horrors of Islam? Then, while I understand that this is shocking and disturbing, let me remind you that this is what God required and what He recorded. We crave a god who will overlook our sin and smile indulgently at our follies. We want a god who does not ever move in wrath, who would never send our sweet neighbor or our family to hell. But that is not the God who is. The God who is, hates sin. He has moved and will move in wrath against sinners. Every last unbeliever from creation to the Judgment Seat will suffer eternally in hell. According to God's holiness, righteousness and justice, this is perfectly right.

My beloved, this is why you must believe and bow today. This is why you must take your stand to be in the Lord's side. This is where your only safety lies. It is in this: that Jesus Christ, on the cross over 2,000 years ago, took on Himself His people's sins and suffered to the last drop the unimaginable wrath of God. What you deserved, He received. In order to fully comprehend and appreciate the salvation that God has provided for you, you have to embrace the truth of this text. God has loved His people in such a way that He sent His only beloved son into the world, into the camp and there, instead of slaughtering the sinners, Jesus took the sword for us. Praise God that Jesus was for sinners slain and has borne the sword of the wrath of God.

When Jesus speaks of discipleship in words like this, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple." [Luke 14:26-27] does he have texts like this in mind? I don't know. But my observation is that many today need to repent of the idolatry of family. If you will not put God above any of your family, then you cannot be Jesus' disciple, His follower.

Why such hard words? Why not speak with loving, tender calls to bask in the greatness and gentleness of God's astounding love for you? Because, my beloved, such talk apart from the gospel is simply pagan sentimentality. Our sin and its judgment is the great issue between us and God. Our Savior and His suffering and saving on our behalf is the greatest expression of God's love for us. We will *never* understand the love of God until we see the vileness of ourselves and our sins. And those who do and who believe and bow to their Savior and Sovereign, will worship and serve and love Him above all, even friends, even family.



**By an Intervening Mediator****(v.30-35)**

The nation now knows what their sin may cost them. Three thousand souls will need to be buried. It has been a long and fearful night. But what now?

<sup>30</sup> The next day Moses said to the people, "You have sinned a great sin. And now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." <sup>31</sup> So Moses returned to the LORD and said, "Alas, this people have sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. <sup>32</sup> But now, if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written." <sup>33</sup> But the LORD said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book. <sup>34</sup> But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; behold, my angel shall go before you. Nevertheless, in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them."

<sup>35</sup> Then the LORD sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf, the one that Aaron made.

These words from Moses simply imply that this is exactly what will happen to every one of them if His mediation is not accepted. If there is no place to cover their sin, to make atonement, then they are all doomed. So Moses goes back up into Mt. Sinai, that fenced and fearful mountain. He ascends up into the smoke and fire that hovers on its top. There he stands before God and confesses how great their sin was and exactly what their sin was. He appeals to God to forgive their sin. If God will not, then he requests that his name be blotted out of the book (scroll) that God has written. This is not the scroll of the Lamb's book of life. He is not asking God to do something that cannot be done. He is asking God to account him to be a sinner like the nation and to end his life along with theirs.

God moves in His own severe mercy. He does not punish the believer nor does He forgive the unrepentant. But He has mercy on them for the sake of another. He sends Moses to lead them to the Promised Land, His angel to go before them and His plague to visit them.

See in Moses mediation our great High Priest. He identifies Himself with His people. He fully acknowledges our sinfulness and sins. He then takes those sins upon Himself. Then, for three days, His name is blotted out of the book so that sins may be forgiven and righteousness given. See Him there! See Him there for you! Believe in Him. Bow to Him. Follow Him. Today

Israel demonstrates how easy it is to forget what God has done for us and return to the old and sinful person we used to be. Listen to the insightful words of Philip Ryken: **Conclusion**

... In a matter of weeks they forgot everything that God had ever done for them and started worshiping a cow that couldn't even moo! Then, in an appalling act of revisionist history, they gave the cow credit for what God had done. They said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt" (Exod. 32:4). Their spiritual amnesia astonished the psalmist, who wrote:

*At Horeb they made a calf and worshiped an idol cast from metal.  
They exchanged their Glory for an image of a bull, which eats grass.  
They forgot the God who saved them,  
who had done great things in Egypt, miracles in the land of Ham  
and awesome deeds by the Red Sea. (Ps. 106:19-22)*

The Israelites forgot what God had done and returned to their old wicked ways.<sup>26</sup>

Be very careful about joining in what is popular or what the crowd wants. So often, this has led people astray. While the leadership of this church is open to your counsel and want to receive it, be willing to follow its direction and decisions.

In your homes, at your jobs and in the church, may you lead well in what God has put to your hand. May you know what is right and wise. May you graciously but unwaveringly stand. May you never be ruled by the fear of man.

Do not be a stiff-necked person who will not hear or heed spiritual counsel or confrontation. Stubbornness is not a virtue. To speak of stubbornness in good things is simply confusion. Bend your heart and your will to God.

Be willing to acknowledge and confess your sins. Respond well to those who, out of love, confront your sin. Do not blame others. Do not manipulate with half-truths. Do not minimize your involvement. Do not describe your own actions in the passive voice. See yourself before God and others as the actor of your sins. Then, as your whole heartedly confess your sin and repent of it, God promises to forgive you and to cleanse you.

Be ever grateful for the cross. Be ever grateful for Christ. Know His love through the salvation from sin, its dreadful depravity and its dire damnation. Know that you will never experience the wrath of God, never. If you are forgiven, then you are free. So love the God who forgives and frees solely by the work of Christ.

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<sup>26</sup> Ryken , p.982.