THE QUESTION

What does the golden calf story show about Moses' character (Exodus 32:7–20)?

Asked by a THF member on April 12, 2026 · published November 9, 2026 · 10 numbered quotations · the 19 early Christian passages and 103 Bible verses we kept are listed at the back, each with a link.

Read it online: thehistoricfaith.com/early-church-questions/what-does-the-golden-calf-story-show-about-moses-character-exodus-32-7-20

The short answer *From the text: says what the passages say*

The early writers see in Moses a deep, self-giving love for a sinful people: he pleads with God to forgive them and even asks to be blotted out with them. They also call him the meekest of men, a faithful servant and friend of God, who broke the tablets when he saw the people's idols.

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POINT 1 OF 6

Moses loved his people more than himself

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Clement of Rome retells the scene. God offers to destroy the people and make a great nation from Moses, but Moses refuses and asks to be blotted out with them if they are not forgiven. Clement calls this marvelous love and perfection.

1 "But Moses said, "Far be it from You, Lord: pardon the sin of this people; else blot me also out of the book of the living.""

later in the same passage

"O marvelous love! O insuperable perfection! The servant speaks freely to his Lord, and asks for forgiveness for the people, or begs that he himself might perish along with them."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Rome,** *First Epistle to the Corinthians* **Source 18, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 2 OF 6

He spoke to God as a trusted friend

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Cyprian calls Moses the friend of God who often spoke with Him face to face. The Apostolic Constitutions say the same, using the picture of a man talking with his friend. This closeness is why he could plead so boldly for the people.

2 "He was the friend of God. He had often spoken face to face with the Lord."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Cyprian,** *Treatises* **Source 11, page 6** Read it in the library ›
(c. 248–258 AD)
THF's updated English

3 "To him God spoke face to face, as a man speaks to his friend."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** **Source 15, page 6** Read it in the library ›
(c. 250–380 AD)
THF's updated English

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POINT 3 OF 6

He was the meekest of all men

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

The Apostolic Constitutions describe Moses as free from arrogance, brave, and gentle, even though the people treated him with ingratitude. Ignatius holds up his meekness as an example for Christians who must answer anger with gentleness.

4 “He was the meekest man, free from arrogance, full of courage, and very gentle in his character.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** (c. 250–380 AD) **Source 15, page 6** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

5 “Conquer their harsh temper with gentleness, their passion with meekness. For “blessed are the meek;” and Moses was meek above all men; and David was exceedingly meek.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Ignatius of Antioch,** *Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians* (c. 98–117 AD) **Source 3, page 5** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

POINT 4 OF 6

He broke the tablets over the people's idols

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Barnabas tells how Moses fasted forty days, received the two tablets written by God, and came down to give them to the people. When he saw they had made molten images, he threw the tablets from his hands and they were broken.

6 “And Moses understood that they had made molten images again; and he threw the tablets out of his hands, and the tables of the testament of the Lord were broken.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Barnabas,** *Epistle of Barnabas* (c. 70–132 AD) **Source 2, page 5** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

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POINT 5 OF 6

He served faithfully as God's go-between

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Barnabas calls Moses a servant who received the covenant for the people. The Apostolic Constitutions list his many roles for Israel, showing a man who carried heavy duties for God on the people's behalf.

7 “Moses, as a servant, received it; but the Lord himself, having suffered on our behalf, has given it to us, that we should be the people of inheritance.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Barnabas,** *Epistle of Barnabas* (c. 70–132 AD) **Source 2, page 5** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

8 “He was their lawgiver, guardian, high priest, and king, the administrator of divine things.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** (c. 250–380 AD) **Source 15, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 6 OF 6

Even his prayer could not cancel every sin

Our note · compiled by machine learning · Interpretation: our reading of the passages, not their words

Cyprian notes that God answered Moses' plea by saying He would blot out whoever sinned against Him. For Cyprian, this shows that even a great friend of God could not win pardon for others by his plea alone.

9 “Yet he could not obtain what he asked, nor could he calm the wrath of an angry God by his plea.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Cyprian,** *Treatises* (c. 248–258 AD) **Source 11, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

10 “In Exodus, Moses prays for the people, and his prayer is not granted.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Cyprian,** *Treatises* (c. 248–258 AD) **Source 12, page 6** Read it in the library ›
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THE LIMITS

What these passages don’t tell us

- These passages say little about Moses' anger itself or whether it was right or wrong.
- Some of the scenes they use, like his offer to be blotted out, come just after verses 7 to 20 in the same chapter.
- A word-for-word match shows that a quotation really is in our text. It does not show that our reading of it is right, or who wrote each work.

WHERE EVERY QUOTE CAME FROM

The Sources

The 19 early Christian passages and 103 Bible verses we kept for this question (repeats and weak or off-topic search hits were left out): early Christian passages first (sources 1–19, grouped by writer, earliest first), then Bible verses in The Faith Once Delivered Bible (sources 20–97, in Bible order), then 25 more verses THF links to these passages, by reference. **Quote 1, page 2** beside a source shows where the study quotes it. Passages are in THF’s updated English unless marked “1885 English” (the Roberts–Donaldson translation, public domain). “… [continues online]” marks a passage the library gave only in part. **On paper?** At **thehistoricfaith.com**, Bible verses are in the **Audio Bible** and early Christian writings in the **Library** (search for the title).

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITERS *19 passages from 10 writers*

Barnabas, *c. 70–132 AD · sources 1–2*

1 *Epistle of Barnabas* (on point 4) “your sins and saying, “The covenant is theirs and ours.” But they ultimately lost it, even after Moses had received it. For the Scripture says, “And Moses was fasting on… [continues online] **read ›**

2 *Epistle of Barnabas* **Quotes 6, 7, pages 3, 4** “give it, but they were not worthy to receive it because of their sins. For the prophet declares, “Moses was fasting for forty days and forty nights on Mount Sinai… [continues online] **read ›**

Ignatius of Antioch, *c. 98–117 AD · source 3*

3 *Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians* **Quote 5, page 3** “blessed are the meek;” and Moses was meek above all men… [continues online] **read ›**

Irenaeus, *c. 175–202 AD · source 4*

4 *Fragments from the Lost Writings of Irenæus* (1885 English; on point 1) “Miriam’s punishment affected him to such an extent, that no sooner did she experience it, than he entreated [Moses], who had been injured, that he would by his intercession… [continues online] **read ›**

Tertullian, *c. 196–220 AD · sources 5–6*

5 *Against Marcion* 26 (1885 English; on point 1) “32:10 Accordingly, you maintain that Moses is better than his God, as the deprecator, nay the averter, of His anger… [continues online] **read ›**

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6 *Scorpiace* 3 (1885 English) “was apart with God on the mountain, when the people, not brooking his absence, which was so needful, seek to make gods for themselves, which, for his own part, he… [continues online] **read ›**

Hippolytus, *c. 200–236 AD · source 7*

7 *Exegetical Fragments* 1 (on point 5) “was not permitted to bring in a child who was uncircumcised. Moses was the elder, or legate, and mediator of the law, and he proclaimed the covenant of the fathers… [continues online] **read ›**

Origen, *c. 215–254 AD · sources 8–9*

8 *Against Celsus* 4 (1885 English; on point 4) “Moses having again hewn tables of stone, God wrote the commandments a second time, and gave them to him… [continues online] **read ›**

9 *Against Celsus* 72 do speak of the wrath of God. However, we do not mean that this indicates any passion in Him. Rather, it is something assumed in order to discipline, by stern… [continues online] **read ›**

Cyprian, *c. 248–258 AD · sources 10–14*

10 *Treatises* which your adversaries shall not be able to resist.” Luke 21:14-15 As in Exodus, God speaks to Moses when he delayed and trembled to go to the people… [continues online] **read ›**

11 *Treatises* (1885 English) **Quotes 2, 9, pages 2, 4** “For Moses also besought for the sins of the people… [continues online] **read ›**

12 *Treatises* (1885 English) **Quote 10, page 4** “in Exodus prays for the people, and does not obtain his prayer, saying: I pray, O Lord, this people has sinned a great sin… [continues online] **read ›**

13 *Treatises* (1885 English) “being able to bear the delays of Moses conferring with God, they dared to ask for profane gods, that they might call the head of an ox and an earthen… [continues online] **read ›**

14 *Epistles* (1885 English; on point 3) “Moses, moreover, we find it said in the Scriptures, Now the man Moses was very meek… [continues online] **read ›**

Apostolic Constitutions, *c. 250–380 AD · sources 15–16*

15 *Apostolic Constitutions* **Quotes 3, 4, 8, pages 2, 3, 4** “they stirred up a rebellion against Moses, the servant of God, who was the meekest of all men, Numbers 12:3, and faithful. They treated such a great man with… [continues online] **read ›**

16 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English; on point 3) “latter against Moses, concerning pre-eminence. And they both spoke evil… [continues online] **read ›**

Lactantius, *c. 290–320 AD · source 17*

17 *Divine Institutes* 10 (1885 English) “when Moses, their leader, had ascended into the mountain, and there tarried forty days, they made the head of an ox in gold, which they call Apis, that it might… [continues online] **read ›**

Clement of Rome · *sources 18–19*

18 *First Epistle to the Corinthians* **Quote 1, page 2** You understand, beloved, you understand well the Sacred Scriptures, and you have looked very earnestly into the oracles of God. Call then these things to your remembrance. When Moses went… [continues online] **read ›**

19 *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (on point 5) the blessed Moses also, “a faithful servant in all his house… [continues online] **read ›**

THE BIBLE *78 verses, The Faith Once Delivered Bible (Old Testament from the Septuagint), in Bible order*

20 **Exodus 3:1** Now Moses was tending the sheep of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the sheep near the wilderness and came to Mount Horeb. **read ›**

21 **Exodus 3:11** But Moses said to God, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh king of Egypt, and that I should bring the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt?” **read ›**

22 **Exodus 4:10** Then Moses said to the Lord, “I beg you, Lord, I have not been capable, either yesterday or the day before, or since you began to speak to your servant; I am weak in voice and slow of tongue.” **read ›**

23 **Exodus 4:13** But Moses said, “I beg you, Lord, appoint another able person whom you will send.” **read ›**

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24 **Exodus 4:14** Then the Lord, angered with wrath against Moses, said, “Look, is not Aaron the Levite your brother? I know that he will surely speak for you. And behold, he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you he will rejoice within himself. **read ›**

25 **Exodus 5:22** Then Moses returned to the Lord and said, “I beg you, Lord, why have you brought harm on this people? And why have you sent me? **read ›**

26 **Exodus 8:26** But Moses said, “It cannot be done this way; for we shall sacrifice to the Lord our God the abominations of the Egyptians. For if we sacrifice the abominations of the Egyptians before their eyes, we shall be stoned. (Septuagint Exodus 8:22 (Exodus 8:26 in most Bibles)) **read ›**

27 **Exodus 10:18** So Moses went out from Pharaoh and prayed to God. **read ›**

28 **Exodus 11:9** Then the Lord said to Moses, “Pharaoh will not listen to you, so that I may greatly multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt.” **read ›**

29 **Exodus 17:4** Then Moses cried out to the Lord, saying, “What shall I do with this people? A little longer, and they will stone me.” **read ›**

30 **Exodus 20:20** Moses said to them, “Take courage; for God has come to you to test you, so that the fear of him may be in you, that you may not sin.” **read ›**

31 **Exodus 24:4** And Moses wrote all the words of the Lord. Then Moses rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve stones for the twelve tribes of Israel. **read ›**

32 **Exodus 31:18** And when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, he gave to Moses the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone written with the finger of God. **read ›**

33 **Exodus 32:1** When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron and said to him, “Arise, make us gods who shall go before us; for this Moses, the man who brought us out of the land of Egypt—we do not know what has become of him.” **read ›**

34 **Exodus 32:7** The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Go quickly, go down from here, for your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have acted lawlessly. **read ›**

35 **Exodus 32:8** They have quickly turned aside from the way that you commanded them. They have made themselves a 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.’ **read ›**

36 **Exodus 32:9** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

37 **Exodus 32:11** But Moses prayed before the Lord God and said, “Why, O Lord, are you angered with wrath against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great strength and with your high arm? **read ›**

38 **Exodus 32:12** Lest the Egyptians say, ‘With evil intent he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the earth.’ Cease from the wrath of your anger, and be merciful concerning the wickedness of your people, **read ›**

39 **Exodus 32:15** Moses turned and went down from the mountain, and the two tablets of the testimony were in his hands, tablets of stone written on both their sides; they were written on the one side and on the other. **read ›**

40 **Exodus 32:16** The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets. **read ›**

41 **Exodus 32:19** When he came near the camp, he saw the calf and the dances. And Moses, wrathful with anger, threw the two tablets out of his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain. **read ›**

42 **Exodus 32:21** Moses said to Aaron, “What did this people do to you, that you have brought a great sin upon them?” **read ›**

43 **Exodus 32:22** Aaron said to Moses, “Do not be angry, my lord, for you know the rashness of this people. **read ›**

44 **Exodus 32:25** When Moses saw that the people had been scattered—for Aaron had scattered them, to the gloating of their adversaries— **read ›**

45 **Exodus 32:30** On the next day Moses said to the people, “You have sinned a great sin. And now I will go up to God, so that I may make atonement for your sin.” **read ›**

46 **Exodus 32:31** So Moses returned to the Lord and said, “I beg you, O Lord, this people has sinned a great sin; they have made themselves gods of gold. **read ›**

47 **Exodus 32:33** The Lord said to Moses, “If anyone has sinned before me, I will blot them out of my book. **read ›**

48 **Exodus 33:8** Whenever Moses went into the tabernacle outside the camp, all the people would stand, each one watching by the door of his tent; and they would gaze after Moses as he went, until he entered the tabernacle. **read ›**

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49 **Exodus 33:18** And Moses said, “Show yourself to me.” **read ›**

50 **Exodus 34:1** The Lord said to Moses, “Cut for yourself two tablets of stone like the first ones, and come up to me on the mountain; and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. **read ›**

51 **Exodus 34:4** So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the first ones; and rising early, Moses went up on Mount Sinai, as the Lord had commanded him; and Moses took the two tablets of stone. **read ›**

52 **Exodus 34:8** Moses made haste, bowed down to the ground, and worshiped. **read ›**

53 **Exodus 34:28** Moses was there before the Lord forty days and forty nights; he did not eat bread, and he did not drink water. And he wrote on the tablets these words of the covenant, the ten words. **read ›**

54 **Exodus 34:29** When Moses came down from the mountain, the two tablets were in Moses’ hands. As he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the appearance of the complexion of his face had been made glorious while he was speaking with the Lord. **read ›**

55 **Exodus 40:18** Moses set up the tabernacle, put on the pillar tops, put the bars through, and set up the pillars. **read ›**

56 **Leviticus 10:3** Then Moses said to Aaron, “This is what the Lord spoke, saying, ‘Among those who draw near to me I will be sanctified, and in all the congregation I will be glorified.’” And Aaron was stricken to the heart. **read ›**

57 **Leviticus 10:16** Moses searched diligently for the male goat of the sin offering, but it had been burned up. And Moses was angry with Eleazar and Ithamar, the sons of Aaron who were left, saying, **read ›**

58 **Leviticus 10:20** When Moses heard this, it pleased him. **read ›**

59 **Numbers 11:2** The people cried out to Moses; and Moses prayed to the Lord, and the fire died down. **read ›**

60 **Numbers 11:10** Moses heard them weeping by their clans, each one at his own door; and the Lord’s anger burned with wrath exceedingly, and in Moses’ eyes it was evil. **read ›**

61 **Numbers 12:3** Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the people who were on the earth. **read ›**

62 **Numbers 12:7** Not so with my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. **read ›**

63 **Numbers 14:11** The Lord said to Moses, “How long will this people provoke me? And how long will they not believe me, in spite of all the signs which I have done among them? **read ›**

64 **Numbers 14:41** But Moses said, “Why are you transgressing the word of the Lord? It will not prosper for you. **read ›**

65 **Numbers 16:15** Then Moses was very angry, and he said to the Lord, “Do not regard their sacrifice. I have not taken anything desirable from any one of them, nor have I harmed any one of them.” **read ›**

66 **Numbers 17:11** And Moses and Aaron did as the Lord had commanded Moses; so they did. (Septuagint Numbers 17:26 (Numbers 17:11 in most Bibles)) **read ›**

67 **Numbers 25:4** And the Lord said to Moses, “Take all the chiefs of the people and make a public example of them to the Lord before the sun, and the anger of the wrath of the Lord shall turn away from Israel.” **read ›**

68 **Numbers 27:4** And Moses brought their case before the Lord. **read ›**

69 **Numbers 31:14** And Moses was angry with the overseers of the forces, the commanders of thousands and the commanders of hundreds, who came from the battle. **read ›**

70 **Deuteronomy 9:8** Even in Horeb you provoked the Lord, and the Lord was angry with you, so as to utterly destroy you, **read ›**

71 **Deuteronomy 9:15** So I turned and came down from the mountain, and the mountain was burning with fire up to heaven; and the two tablets of the testimonies were in my two hands. **read ›**

72 **Deuteronomy 9:17** I took hold of the two tablets and threw them out of my two hands, and I broke them before you. **read ›**

73 **Deuteronomy 9:20** And he was angry with Aaron, to utterly destroy him; and I prayed for Aaron also at that time. **read ›**

74 **Psalms 25:9** He will guide the meek in judgment; he will teach the meek his ways. (Septuagint Psalm 24:9 (Psalm 25:9 in most Bibles)) **read ›**

75 **Psalms 37:11** But the meek shall inherit the earth, and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace. (Septuagint Psalm 36:11 (Psalm 37:11 in most Bibles)) **read ›**

76 **Psalms 106:23** And he said he would utterly destroy them, had not Moses his chosen one stood before him in the plague, to turn him from the wrath of his anger, so that he would not utterly destroy them. (Septuagint Psalm 105:23 (Psalm 106:23 in most Bibles)) **read ›**

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77 **Proverbs 15:1** Anger destroys even those of sound judgment, yet a submissive answer turns away wrath, but a hurtful word stirs up anger. **read ›**

78 **Proverbs 15:18** A hot-tempered man prepares quarrels, but he who is slow to anger calms even one that is coming. A man slow to anger will quench disputes, but the ungodly man rather stirs them up. **read ›**

79 **Isaiah 2:17** And every man shall be brought low, and the arrogance of men shall fall, and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day. **read ›**

80 **Jeremiah 24:9** And I will give them up to be scattered into all the kingdoms of the earth, and they will be an object of taunts and a proverb and an object of hatred and a curse in every place where I have driven them out. **read ›**

81 **Jeremiah 36:11** Micaiah the son of Gemariah, the son of Shaphan, heard all the words of the Lord from the book. (Septuagint Jeremiah 43:11 (Jeremiah 36:11 in most Bibles)) **read ›**

82 **Zephaniah 2:3** Seek the Lord, all you humble of the earth; do judgment and seek righteousness, and answer accordingly, so that you may be sheltered in the day of the Lord’s anger. **read ›**

83 **Wisdom of Sirach 3:17** My child, perform your works in meekness, and you will be loved by an acceptable man. **read ›**

84 **Wisdom of Sirach 16:11** Even if there is one stiff-necked man, it will be a marvel if he goes unpunished; for mercy and anger come from him; he is mighty in atonements, and pours out anger. **read ›**

85 **Wisdom of Sirach 45:1** And he brought out of him a man of mercy, who found favor in the eyes of all flesh, beloved by God and men, Moses, whose memorial is in blessings. **read ›**

86 **Wisdom of Sirach 46:7** And in the days of Moses he showed mercy, he and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, in standing against the enemy, in holding back the people from sin, and in quieting wicked grumbling. **read ›**

87 **Wisdom of Sirach 48:10** you were written down for rebukes at the appointed times, to calm anger before wrath, to turn the heart of a father to his son, and to restore the tribes of Jacob. **read ›**

88 **1 Maccabees 2:24** And Mattathias saw it and was filled with zeal, and his inward parts trembled; and he let his anger rise up in accordance with the judgment, and ran and slaughtered him on the pagan altar. **read ›**

89 **4 Maccabees 2:17** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

90 **4 Maccabees 17:19** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

91 **Matthew 2:3** When King Herod heard it, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. **read ›**

92 **Matthew 5:5** Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. **read ›**

93 **John 2:15** He made a whip of cords and drove them all out of the temple, both the sheep and the oxen. He poured out the money changers’ coins and overturned their tables. **read ›**

94 **Galatians 5:23** meekness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law. **read ›**

95 **Titus 3:2** to speak evil of no one, to be peaceable and gentle, showing all meekness toward all men. **read ›**

96 **Hebrews 3:5** Moses indeed was faithful in all his house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were afterward to be spoken, **read ›**

97 **Hebrews 12:21** So fearful was the appearance that Moses said, “I am terrified and trembling.” **read ›**

ALSO LINKED BY THF TO THESE PASSAGES *25 verses, by reference*

Partly machine-linked: related to the passages, not always quoted in them. Each reference links to the verse in our audio Bible.

Exodus 32:32

Numbers 17:2 · 25:1

Judges 2:8 · 2:12 · 2:20

Psalms 6:1

Isaiah 5:21 · 42:6 · 49:6

Daniel 7:7 · 7:24

Matthew 19:11 · 20:16

Luke 4:18 · 22:32

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Acts 13:22 · 15:10
Romans 2:11 · 8:16
2 Corinthians 3:3
Galatians 1:10
Ephesians 2:3
Colossians 3:8
Hebrews 10:25

Searched: Ante-Nicene Fathers volumes 1–9 and the Bible, including the Septuagint.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

A THF member asked “What does the golden calf story show about Moses' character (Exodus 32:7–20)?” on April 12, 2026. The Historic Faith answered it as a public study on November 9, 2026.

Library only. This study was written only from The Historic Faith’s library of early-Christian writings and the Bible, never from the web. Every passage we kept from what the library gave is listed above, with a link to read it.

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THE END OF THIS STUDY