

THE SECOND COMMANDMENT

A Prohibition Against Idolatry

“You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments” (Exodus 20:4-6, NASU).

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One of the most important commandments that God gave the Ancient Israelites, to make them different from the pagan nations around them, was to forbid idolatry and the creation of images for worship. The specific Hebrew word for “image” used here is *temunah*, meaning “likeness, representation,” and “form, semblance” (BDB).¹ Obviously, if one is familiar with ancient history, you can see how this would have set the Ancient Israelites apart, as virtually all societies in the Ancient Near East at the time of the Exodus, and well past the time of the Messiah, worshipped idols and graven images, made of either stone, gold, silver, or other valuable materials.² This also continues among many (but not all) pagan religions today.

As God’s people we are called out and are prohibited from worshipping idols. We are not permitted to represent our Creator by any graven form intended for worship, be that in the form of a man or woman, or in the form of an animal or sea creature.

¹ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 568.

² For a good summary, consult P.L. Garber, “Idolatry,” in Geoffrey Bromiley, ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 2:796-800.

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The Psalmist declares, “The mountains melted like wax at the presence of the LORD, at the presence of the Lord of the whole earth. The heavens declare His righteousness, and all the peoples have seen His glory. Let all those be ashamed who serve graven images, who boast themselves of idols; worship Him, all you gods” (Psalm 97:5-7, NASU).

While not always true of Protestantism, it is most certainly true that Roman Catholicism has employed the intense veneration of religious images. Via the so-called authority of the pope, the Second Commandment is widely considered null-and-void for Catholics. It is most clearly evidenced by the many statues of Mary and other Biblical figures that are placed within Catholic churches and cathedrals, which are often not there to just depict Biblical scenes and events, but actually for people to revere and prostrate before. Even worse, almost every Catholic church is adorned with a crucifix, which represents a dying, or dead—rather than a resurrected Savior! All of these Catholic practices are in violation of the Second Commandment. Thankfully, many Christians throughout the centuries saw the errors of this and protested against Catholicism.

But it cannot be said that Protestantism is completely innocent in regard to not producing images of God. The Anglican Church is considered Protestant, yet it still has many of the images and symbols of Catholicism. While it can be rigorously debated whether or not paintings or stained-glass images of Christ are objects of worship, many of which appear in Protestant churches, it can be easily argued that it is better *not to have such images*. Many of the paintings of the Renaissance, for example, while portraying Biblical events—have the people dressed in Fourteenth or Fifteenth Century Italian clothing, *and are not even historically accurate*. Moving forward to today, some consider artistic portrayals of Jesus by actors to be in violation of the Second Commandment, although I would personally just be cautious about this.

Orthodox Judaism has interpreted this commandment as pertaining to a total prohibition on the reproduction of images of God, involving both one and three dimensional objects.³

The fact that Christian churches throughout the world have not totally obeyed or followed the tenor of the Second Commandment, and have produced images of the Father and the Son, has been a serious deterrent to Jewish evangelism. While we certainly cannot castigate all churches, as there are those Protestants in particular who would strongly agree with Jewish interpretations; many churches, both Protestant and Catholic, have or have had images of God in them.

A safe solution for all of us would be to avoid and eliminate images for display, which represent God, in our homes. Nahum M. Sarna usefully observes how, “A homiletic interpretation of the same words comes to a contrasting conclusion: ‘You shall not make yourself into an

³ Nossou Scherman, ed., et. al., *The ArtScroll Chumash, Stone Edition*, 5th ed. (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 2000), 408.

idol, and come to believe that you are God.”⁴ By having images of God, people can get the impression that as human beings they have power over those images, and thus may be “God” themselves or that they can control God.

We do have to recognize also that a few people in the Messianic community have gone to an extreme on this issue. Some have interpreted the Second Commandment as pertaining to all images or representations of people. But the commandment specifically deals with representations of people *for worship*. It does not pertain to paintings or portraits of human individuals or photographs of people to record historical events. Likewise, it does not pertain to stuffed animals or dolls used exclusively as children’s toys. And, it does not prohibit us from owning pets.

I mention this because some time ago I heard a second-hand story that an individual burned his driver’s license and passport because his photograph was a “graven image.” He was in a foreign country at the time and was deported for not having proper identification. Likewise, many have thrown their stuffed teddy bears and other toy animals away as “idols.” This is an overstated interpretation of the Second Commandment. The Scriptural admonition specifically pertains to representations of God, and then representations of earthen and sea creatures, for objects of worship.

But even so, people can and do venerate pictures, especially of themselves, and have too close connections to dolls and play things, including their pets. At the same time, any object or representation (i.e., piece of writing like a book) can be an idol. This can include a person’s house, car, boat, laptop computer, or the paper money in one’s pocket.

Let us be very careful in determining what an “idol” or graven image is so we do not make foolish decisions like burning our passports. But let us also be careful that we endeavor ourselves to worship the Infinite God, who is and cannot be put into a packaged box that our finite mortal minds can comprehend. Let us indeed not place physical objects or things above the Eternal One, who cannot be entirely confined to three-dimensional space.⁵

⁴ Nahum M. Sarna, “Exodus,” in David L. Lieber, ed., *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 2001), 443.

⁵ Religious symbols like the cross, the Christian fish, or the Star of David are specifically discussed in *Torah In the Balance, Volume II*.