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What the Second Word Forbids

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Scripture doesn't use the phrase "Ten Commandments." Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 record Yahweh's "Ten Words" (Exod 34:28; Deut 4:13). These texts contain imperatives, but, like the rest of Torah, they include declarations, warnings, promises. That multiplicity of speech acts is better captured by the phrase "Ten Words."

The First of the Ten Words speaks to the question of *whom* we worship: We are to have no other gods before the face of Yahweh. The Second Word had to do with *how* we worship: We are to approach God as He commands us to approach Him.

The Second Word is frequently misunderstood. The question isn't whether physical things, man-made things, can become vehicles for God's self-communication, places and moments of communion with God. The question is *which* things and moments has God given as vehicles for His self-gift. Nowhere does God promise to be present through pictures or statues.

The Second Word has also has gotten tangled up in debates about whether or not we can paint or draw pictures, or make sculptures, of Jesus, or of God the Father. It's been taken as a prohibition of placing art, especially representational art, in a place of worship. Some claim that this prohibits all representational art.

That last interpretation at least takes the specifics of the commandment seriously. If the Second Word is a prohibition of making images, it prohibits *all* images. The commandment doesn't say "Don't make images of God." It says "Don't make graven images of things in heaven, on the earth, or the waters under the earth." That covers everything, because there aren't any things anywhere except in heaven, earth, or under the earth.

But the commandment *doesn't* prohibit making images. If it did, it would contradict other commandments, from the same book of Exodus. Just a few chapters after Yahweh speaks the Ten Words, He tells Moses to "make two cherubim of gold" (25:18), and a lampstand with cups "shaped like almond blossoms" (25:33), and pomegranates of blue and scarlet material (28:33). Cherubim are heavenly things, almonds and pomegranates are earthly things. Palm trees were carved on the walls of the temple, and Solomon's throne was flanked by lions.

If the Second Word was intended to prohibit all representational art, the Lord didn't stick with the program very long. The Lord doesn't contradict himself. He's not prohibiting making, or making things that resemble things that He made.

What is He forbidding, then? He's prohibiting making likenesses of anything *for a particular purpose* – to bow before them, and to serve them. The two verbs in verse 5 are common Hebrew words for worship. The word usually translated as "worship" actually means "prostrate oneself." It describes a bodily posture. "Serve" is a general priestly term, describing the work of Levites and Aaronic priests. God forbids making images that serve as the focal point of liturgical action.

Most directly, Yahweh prohibits the kind of service ancient priests performed before the images of their gods. For ancient people, a temple without an image was a temple without a god-in-residence, and the main services of a temple were performed before and for the image. Priests brought food, cleaned the image, bowed before it. On special occasions, the priests took the image out of the temple to process before awed worshipers.

What Yahweh specifically prohibits is "prostration" before images. He prohibits us from adopting a particular bodily posture before graven images. That is, He *doesn't* say it's OK if we bow with our bodies as long as we're not bowing in our hearts. He's *doesn't* say that we're free to use our bodies anyway we like, as long as we keep the

doesn't say that we're free to use our bodies any way we like, as long as we keep the right thoughts in our head. He prohibits a particular *bodily* action.

Of course, bodily actions embody intentions. If a priest dropped a piece of bread before the lampstand and bent down to pick it up, he wouldn't be violating this commandment. God is specifically prohibiting the bodily act of doing-homage-by-prostration, and more generally prohibiting the actions of doing-homage-to-images and serving-images. God cares what we do with our bodies, and a good intention doesn't make a bad action good.

Isaiah mocks idolaters for making a god from a log and using the rest of the log to cook food and warm themselves. It looks so obviously stupid that we have to ask: Did ancient people really think the image was divine? It's virtually impossible to know for certain what ancient people thought about their gods, but from the written sources it seems that the answer, at least for thoughtful elites, was No. Everyone understood the chunk of wood wasn't the same as Zeus or Athena, the bronze image wasn't Baal or Asherah or Ra.

Instead, they thought the image was a point of connection with the god. The image of the god was a sign of the presence of the god, and the service done to the image was implicitly service done to the god. Some rituals texts from ancient world indicate rites done before an image were intended to "download" the divine essence into the image. Priests do their work before the statue to "quicken" the divine essence in the statue. The metal wasn't the god, but it became identified with the god, filled with divine power, a ladder linking heaven and earth.

Yahweh's prohibition of images is even more radical than we might realize. He isn't just saying "I'm not made of stone, wood, bronze, gold." Everyone already knew that the gods weren't made of such things. He's saying, "Don't think you can serve Me by serving an image, that you can honor me by honoring a *likeness* of Me." The Second Word, in short, prohibits Israel from doing what ancient people saw as the normal business of worship.

In my judgment, nothing in the new covenant changes this prohibition. Jesus is the Son of God in flesh, visible and tangible, photographable and pictureable. There's nothing wrong with drawing a picture of Jesus. There's nothing wrong with stained glass windows, murals, or statues in church. But then there never was anything wrong with pictures, windows, murals, or statues. At Sinai and still today, the issue is how these images are *used*.

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