

THE SECOND COMMANDMENT

(Exod 20:4-6; Deut 5:8-10)

Overview

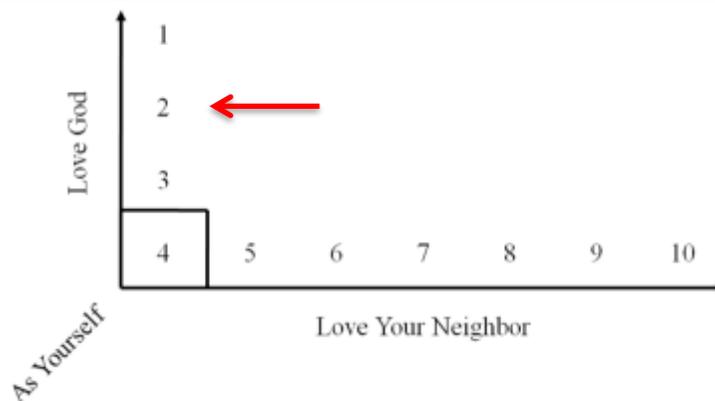
- I. Clarification of the Author’s Original Meaning
- II. Insights about God and His Ways from the Text
- III. Application of the Theological Insights to Our Context

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<p>⁴ “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.</p>	<p>⁴ “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.</p>

I. Clarification of the Author’s Original Meaning

A. The Literary Context

1. The prohibition against idolatry is the second of the Ten Commandments (using the Reformed/Anglican enumeration scheme). Consequently, it is one of the “vertical” laws in the collection, given the literary arrangement we are advocating in these studies:
 - a. Commandments 1-3 focus on some key responsibilities to God (vertical).
 - b. Commandments 5-10 focus on some key responsibilities to others (horizontal).
 - c. Commandment 4 focuses on a key responsibility to God, to others, and to oneself (vertical-horizontal-personal).



2. As noted previously, this structure corresponds to Jesus' summary statement of the entire law (cf. Matt 22:37-40; Luke 10:26-28). Indeed, the Ten Commandments begin with a vertical orientation (“**I am Yahweh your God**” in 20:2a) and end with a horizontal orientation (“**your neighbor**” in 17d). The fourth commandment is the pivot point of the collection, encompassing a vertical, horizontal, and personal orientation.
3. As the second of the Ten Commandments, the prohibition against idolatry represents one of Israel's key responsibilities to God, following closely behind the central concern of the first commandment (i.e., “no other gods before me”). But whereas the first commandment addresses the prohibited *objects* of worship, the second commandment addresses the prohibited *modes* of worship (i.e., making carved images and likenesses, and serving or bowing down to them). They are related yet distinct concerns. The Reformed enumeration scheme (which separates v. 3 from vv. 4-6) is therefore justified.

B. The Prohibition

1. The prohibition in the second commandment is against making a **לִפְסֵל** (*pěsēl*), which is an “**image**” or “**idol**” (whether carved from wood, chiseled from stone, or molten from metal), or a **תְּמוּנָה** (*temūnāh*), which is a “**form,**” “**shape,**” “**likeness,**” or “**representation**” (v. 4). The two words are nearly synonymous, referring to a handcrafted icon in the form of a god to be worshipped. For Israel, the worship of the one true and living God was not to be directed toward an object.
2. Also prohibited in this commandment are the practices of **bowing down** to such images, or **serving** them in any way—perhaps a further clarification to forbid the worship of idols that one did not personally make. (“I didn't *make* this idol; I'm simply worshipping one that somebody *else* fashioned. Therefore, I'm not in violation of the second commandment.”)
3. The commandment outlaws idolatry in every form. The reference to multiple spheres in v. 4 is comprehensive—“in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.” Nothing from *any* realm could be copied and used as an object of worship.

C. The Cultural Context

1. The prohibition against idolatry would have been a massive paradigm shift for anyone living in the ancient Near East. Idols were ubiquitous, and idolatry was a near universal institution. The gods of Egypt (Israel's departure point) and Canaan (Israel's destination) were often associated with various aspects of creation and were worshipped through objects representing them. Human and animal forms were often utilized in these objects to depict various attributes of a deity.



Fig. 1: Worshiper bowing down to Sebek-Re (Louvre).



Figs. 3-5: Bronze statue of Sebek-Re wearing horns, solar disk, and plumes (British Museum); artistic renderings.

2. It was thought that a deity’s “numinous reality” was *in* the image. In other words, an idol was “a localization of the spiritual presence of the deity, similar to the presence of Yahweh over the cherubim.”¹ People would therefore bow down and pray to their idols, as well as serve them (i.e., feed them, dress them, entertain them, put them to sleep, etc.). It was understood to be a *quid pro quo* arrangement: “We serve the idol, and the idol serves us in return.” So the second commandment was a revolutionary overhaul of ancient cosmology and worship. A pagan priest could have complained, “Without an idol, we can’t see anything. We can’t control anything. We can’t manipulate anything.” God thus takes Israel completely out of sync with the prevailing worldview of the day.

3. God made it abundantly clear through the plagues against Pharaoh and the ensuing exodus from Egypt that he has power over every aspect of creation. Consequently, Yahweh commanded the Israelites to strictly refrain from making a representation of anything in heaven or on earth for worship—even an icon that might represent *him*, the true and living God. Any attempt to concretize his identity using images of this world would yield a distorted and diminished picture of his true nature. Moses said to his people:

¹⁵ You saw **no form of any kind** the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire. Therefore watch yourselves very carefully, ¹⁶ so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, whether formed like a man or a woman, ¹⁷ or like any animal on earth or any bird that flies in the air, ¹⁸ or like any creature that moves along the ground or any fish in the waters below. ¹⁹ And when you look up to the sky and see the sun, the moon and the stars—all the heavenly array—do not be enticed into bowing down to them and worshipping things the LORD your God has

¹ P. L. Garber, “Idolatry,” In *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, (Eerdmans, 1979-1988), 796.

apportioned to all the nations under heaven.²⁰ But as for you, the LORD took you and brought you out of the iron-smelting furnace, out of Egypt, to be the people of his inheritance, as you now are (Deut 4:15-20).

4. Why was God so adamantly opposed to the use of icons in worship? John H. Walton writes:

“One possible reason was **to prevent the Israelites from associating their worship of Yahweh with religions that practiced iconic worship.** Most ancient Near Eastern societies were polytheistic and used a variety of divine statues in their worship. Some of these images were anthropomorphic (= they had human features), some zoomorphic (= they had animal features), some astral (= related to stars and planets), and some utilized plants and vegetation. All types are forbidden here. Perhaps the idea was that entanglement with certain types of religious practice, such as the use of images, would lead to entanglement with the religions in which those practices prevailed.

“Second, **Yahweh’s superiority had to be maintained and consistently reaffirmed.** Banning images of Yahweh may have presented him as a deity of such transcendence that he could not be represented satisfactorily by any image. In the Babylonian creation story *Enuma Elish*, the superiority of the god Marduk is proclaimed. Aspects of this superiority come through in an attempt at a physical description of Marduk. . . . The prohibition on images [in the second commandment] . . . reinforces Yahweh’s superiority and demonstrates the futility of trying to place him into the confines of an image.

“A final possibility has to do with **the mediatory function that a divine image was believed to fulfill in societies.** The transformation of a newly crafted image into the embodiment of a god’s presence entailed lengthy and complex rituals. The purpose of these rites was to make the statue holy and fit for inhabitation by the god—‘to become the pure epiphany of its god and to be a fully interacting and communicating partner for the king, the priests and the faithful’ (Bereljung). It was by means of the image that the deity could appear to, interact with, and communicate to its worshipers. Thus, it served as an intermediary agent for the god’s relationships with humans and for the god’s revelation of himself and his decrees.”²

Walton’s third suggestion is especially insightful. **For the Israelites to manufacture idols at will would have led them to believe that they could initiate and localize—and therefore control—God’s interactions with, or manifestations among, his people. The net result would be that the Israelites could believe that they were in some ways sovereign over God.** The second commandment goes a long way toward preventing such a severe misunderstanding.



Fig. 6: Relief from the tomb of Ankhmahor shows sculptors working on two statues (Werner Forman Archive).

² John H Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Old Testament): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 231-32.

5. The golden calf incident (Exod 32) reveals both the *necessity* of the second commandment (in light of Israel's desire to stay in sync with the prevailing worldview by having a visual representation of God) and the severe *consequences* of disregarding it (vv. 5-6).

¹ When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, **make us gods who will go before us**. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him."² Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me."³ So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. **He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt"** (Exod 32:1-5).

⁷ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become **corrupt**.⁸ They have been quick to **turn away from what I commanded them** and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, '**These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.**'"⁹ "I have seen these people," the LORD said to Moses, "and they are a stiff-necked people."¹⁰ Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation" (Exod 32:7-10).

D. All Artwork Forbidden?

1. In all likelihood the second commandment was not meant to forbid *all* statuary or *all* religious art or *all* spiritual symbolism. After all, the ark of the covenant had cherubim on it; the tabernacle veil had cherubim embroidered into it; the high priest's robe had pomegranates sewn into the hem; and Solomon's temple had bulls holding up the laver and plant life chiseled into the gable. The second commandment simply prohibits the creation *and worship* of such images. Total censure of artistic expression was not the intent; the absolute censure of idolatry and false worship was.
2. Moreover, God endows some people with artistic skill, ostensibly to (a) represent the beauty of the world he has created, (b) make various creative designs with the materials he has provided, and (c) help inspire or facilitate true and dynamic worship for the people of God. Exodus 31:1-11 and 36:1 record God's artistic mandate for his own tabernacle:

¹ Then the LORD said to Moses, ²"See, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, ³and **I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts—** ⁴**to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze,** ⁵**to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship.** ⁶ Moreover, I have appointed Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, to help him. Also I have given skill to all the craftsmen to make everything I have commanded you: ⁷ the Tent of Meeting, the ark of the Testimony with the atonement cover on it, and all the other furnishings of the tent— ⁸ the table and its articles, the pure gold lampstand and all its accessories, the altar of incense, ⁹ the altar of burnt offering and all its utensils, the basin with its stand— ¹⁰ and also the woven garments, both the sacred garments for Aaron the priest and the garments for his sons when they serve as priests, ¹¹ and the anointing oil and fragrant incense for the Holy Place. They are to make them just as I commanded you. . . . ¹ So Bezalel, Oholiab and every skilled person to whom the LORD has given skill and ability to know how to carry out all the work of constructing the sanctuary are to do the work just as the LORD has commanded.

3. The serious tone of the second commandment, however, gave most Israelites pause. Many Jews would not make a copy of *anything* in nature. Even King Herod in Jesus' day had only geometric designs installed at Masada, but no engraving of any objects or creatures at all. The mosaic floor pictured here is from the private bathhouse in the Western Palace. The multicolored geometric designs are typical of his construction. Made from many tiny stones of different mineral types (called "tesserae"), mosaics became a significant skill of the Jewish people during and after Herod's time.



Fig. 7: Close-up of the mosaic in the landing above the stairwell at Masada (bible-lands.net).

E. Rationale for the Prohibition

1. It is significant that the second commandment contains a rationale for the prohibition against idolatry. This rationale is presented by means of a "motive clause," which is introduced by the word "for" (עַד, *kî*): ". . . **for** I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God" (v. 5b).
 - a. Motive clauses are a hallmark of biblical law. Unlike the Code of Hammurabi and other Mesopotamian law codes, the Mosaic code often grounds its commands in Yahweh's divine character or historical activity. In other words, God does not always simply issue a raw command; he often explains his reasoning behind it. The presence of motive clauses in the Sinai corpus is surprising, as a sovereign power is not obligated to explain his thinking and ways to his subjects. That God often takes the time to explain his rationale says something about his character, not to mention the value he places upon his people.
 - (1) "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. . . . **For** in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day" (Exod 20:8, 11a).
 - (2) "Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, **for** you were aliens in Egypt" (Exod 22:21).
 - (3) "If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, return it to him by sunset, **because** his cloak is the only covering he has for his body. What else will he sleep in? When he cries out to me, I will hear, **for** I am compassionate" (Exod 22:26-27).
 - (4) "Do not accept a bribe, **for** a bribe blinds those who see and twists the words of the righteous" (Exod 23:8).
 - b. The Israelites are commanded to imitate Yahweh, who acted in history according to his character. In doing so, he set an observable pattern for them. By contrast, other ancient laws are almost never motivated by historical events or the character of the lawgivers. As

Rifat Sonsino notes, “Unlike biblical laws, no cuneiform law is ever motivated by reference to an historic event, a promise of well-being, or . . . a divine will.”³

2. The prohibition against idolatry is rooted in a specific aspect of God’s character, namely that he is a “**jealous**” (קנא, *qānnā*) God (v. 5a). The root קנא appears in the Old Testament 85x and has a wide range of meanings. It can have a negative sense (“resent” or “bear a grudge”) or a positive sense (“advocate zealously for the benefit of someone else”). Both usages share the connotation of an “intense, energetic state of mind, urging towards action. The cause of the קנא actions is the . . . infringement of someone’s rights or injury to the subject’s honor” (NIDOTTE).
3. The positive sense is no doubt intended in the second commandment. God is “jealous” in the sense that he is the one who rights all wrongs, rising up—in passionate, holy anger if necessary—to avenge, vindicate, or undertake for his people. He is zealous for their well being, not wanting his people to dishonor themselves by dishonoring him.
4. The first commandment established that Yahweh is worthy of all honor and total allegiance from his creation. The second commandment reinforces that his people function uprightly and in sync with reality only when they give God the honor and glory that is due him, and in the manner he has determined.

F. The Seriousness of the Prohibition

1. The second commandment contains a severe warning: “. . . **visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me**” (v. 5b). Clearly, entire families could be affected by one generation’s idolatrous practices. The spiritual consequences are far reaching, not to mention sobering. But is such a judgment just? One can see, for example, how the sins of a mother addicted to drugs could easily produce a baby addicted to crack, but it would hardly be considered a just situation for the child. Is God so vindictive and capricious as to punish innocent people for their ancestors’ moral crimes?
2. It is true that two, three, or sometimes even four generations could live in the same household (or family compound) in the ancient Near East. Still, the text is probably not suggesting that God punishes three subsequent generations for the sins of the first generation. Deuteronomy 24:16 states, “Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their fathers; each is to die for his own sin” (cf. 2 Kgs 14:6). To read the second commandment this way creates an irresolvable contradiction with other Scripture. The tension is resolved when one notes that God says in the text of the second commandment that punishment falls specifically on “**those who hate me**” (v. 5), not arbitrarily on those in a family’s future generations.
3. Douglas K. Stuart argues that the warning speaks of “God’s determination to punish successive generations for committing the *same* sins they learned from their parents. In other words, God will not say, ‘I won’t punish this generation for what they are doing to break my covenant because, after all, they merely learned it from their parents who did it too.’ Instead, God will indeed punish generation after generation (‘to the third and fourth generation’) if they keep doing the same sorts of sins that prior generations did. If the children continue to do the sins their parents did, they will receive the same punishments as their parents.”⁴ In other words, people cannot claim immunity by appealing to their parents having committed the same sins.

³ Rifat Sonsino, *Motive Clauses in Hebrew Law: Biblical Forms and Near Eastern Parallels* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1975), 174; he notes the “relative scarcity of motive clauses in cuneiform laws” in contrast to the “greater frequency in biblical legislation” (173).

⁴ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, the New American Commentary, vol. 2 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 454.

4. The seriousness of the prohibition raises another important question. In Scripture, idols are mocked as nothing (e.g., Isa 44:6-20; 1 Cor 8:4). But if idols are nothing, why is the commandment so categorical? In addition to Walton's considerations cited above, the answer is likely rooted in the fact that while idols may be nothing, they are a *dangerous* nothing. Even false gods hold a certain spiritual power over their worshippers because they can be harnessed by the realm of the demonic (cf. Deut 32:16-17; Prem Shastri's encounter with idols in India.)
5. God will certainly hold his people accountable for their idolatry, but he is phenomenally gracious to those who obey him in this regard. Note the disproportionate math—four generations compared to thousands: “ . . . **but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments**” (v. 6). Clearly God is more eager to bless than punish.

II. Insights about God and His Ways from the Text

A. The second commandment yields some similar theological insights as the first commandment.

1. Yahweh is the only true God and king. He has no rivals, and there are no *real* substitutes for him. He is therefore worthy of his people's total allegiance. Other gods are no gods at all and must not become the objects of his people's devotion.
2. God allows the existence of alternatives in this life, but he wants his people to choose the best (which is himself). His people are valuable to him, and he wants them to live in sync with reality. To worship other gods is to live in unreality.
3. God wants to be the ultimate authority in his people's lives. Nothing else should be “king” besides him (e.g., one's job, family, peers, desires, country, denomination, etc.). Jesus underscored this insight when he taught, “No one can serve two masters” (Matt 6:24).
4. God does not call his people to be unkind to those who do not share their beliefs. Nevertheless, worshiping any other God besides Yahweh is a form of insanity, and his people are obligated to avoid it. Tolerance may be a biblical value, but syncretism is not.

B. Additional insights also emerge from the second commandment:

1. God does not want to be misrepresented by those who claim to belong to him. Specifically, he does not want to be thought of like Baal, Marduk, Chemosh, Dagon, etc.
2. God wants to (and has the right to) define himself. His people are not authorized to be innovative in their conception of him (cf. modern “re-imagining God” conferences, etc.).
3. God is jealous for his people's highest and best; he wants them to live in sync with reality—which means living in sync with his true identity. As the sovereign king of the universe, he has a right to claim his people's exclusive allegiance. (Is this an example of God being petty? No. Would it be petty for a wife to want her husband to have only *one* spouse?)
4. God cannot and will not be controlled by his people. He is sovereign over them, and no religious practice can alter that fact. As G. K. Chesterton noted, “Idolatry is when you worship what you should use, and use what you should worship.”
5. God confers dignity upon his people. That he would provide a rationale for some of his laws indicates the esteem with which he holds his people as he seeks to motivate them with reasons rather than with raw dictatorial power (e.g., “Come, let us reason together . . .”). For a person to

have access to the rationale behind a particular law gives him greater insight into the heart and mind of the lawgiver.

6. God is more eager to bless than to punish.

III. Application of the Theological Insights to Our Context

- A. It would be foolish and senseless of me to create an alternative to God, or to follow someone else's alternative to God. The alternatives are not real. The real God has offered me a covenant relationship with himself, and I would be foolish not to embrace it.
- B. God wants me to cast out every false notion I have of him (i.e., to let go of erroneous beliefs I have of his character and ways). This will require that I be a good steward of who he is as revealed in his Word. I am not authorized to "re-imagine" him as I wish him to be, but to know him as he really is.
- C. My conception of God is profoundly influenced by my family of origin, especially my father. If I was a child who received nothing but condemnation and/or disgust from my dad, that would be an insufficient experience from which to develop my theology. It is my responsibility to know God as he really is (i.e., as he has revealed himself to be), not as he has been misrepresented to me by others.
- D. I am not to make God in my own image. This error would include being selective and prejudicial in my use of Scripture. I must consider "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27), not simply the parts I like or am drawn to.
- E. I must keep in mind that Ezekiel 14:7 refers to "idols of the heart," and Colossians 3:5 calls "greed" idolatry. So the second commandment goes way beyond worshiping wood, stone, or metal images. As Tim Keller has said, "Idolatry is making a good thing an ultimate thing." Where in my life have I made good things ultimate things (e.g., my children, career, possessions, reputation, etc.)?
- F. I must know that while God will hold me accountable for my actions, he is more eager to bless than punish me. That should encourage my repentance and realignment to God's thinking and ways. After all, it is God's kindness that leads to repentance (cf. Rom 2:4).

A Concluding Thought

God made humanity in his own image. Sadly, humanity has been repaying the favor ever since. The result is always some sort of distortion. No wonder many Israelites in the first century "missed" God in Christ when Jesus walked the earth. Edmund P. Clowney has said, "God makes man in his image, but man may not replicate that image as the center of his worship. Of course, Israel had to be taught that God is an invisible Spirit, not a material being. But there was a further reason. God claimed a monopoly on his own self-revelation. He would appear to men as he chose, not as they might imagine. The empty seat about the ark was reserved for the One who was to come."⁵

⁵Edmund P. Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery: Discovering Christ in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: R&R, 1988), 23.