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## The Second Commandment – What About Graven Images?

Perhaps you have heard it said that the Word of God clearly says that we are not to make an image of any likeness in heaven above or the earth below. Thus, we need to throw away that picture on the wall, our photos of our family, or any artistic rendering of anything remotely close to being an image of something found in heaven or earth.

One might go on to hear it said that the Word of God is very clear on this matter, based on Exodus 20:4.

### **Exodus 20:4**

**“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.”**

If we stop there and fail to consider the context, then we might come to the conclusion that nearly all art, sculptures, graphics, etc., are an abomination to YHWH; suddenly the trash cans become very full.

Please do not get us wrong—if that were the correct understanding of this commandment, then we would certainly want to follow and teach his instructions. However, is that really what God is stating here?

As always, we encourage all to test everything. We are big believers in context, and the context on this matter is critical. If we don't apply context by reading verses before or after other verses, we can walk away with some rather disturbing doctrines.

In Psalm 10:4 and 14:1, it clearly says that there is “no God.” Now, anyone who has read any of the rest of the Bible can easily see that such a claim does not line up with the rest of the Word of God. In fact, there is no such thing as the “Word of God” if there is “no God.” It is when the words before and after that it is said “there is no God” are read and comprehended that the true understanding of Psalm 10:4 and 14:1 are understood correctly. In doing so, we find that it is the foolish that say there is no God.

Likewise, understanding the second commandment includes the same approach. The solution to understanding the second commandment is to read the whole commandment, not just a portion of it in

verse four. When we examine the whole context of the second commandment, we quickly discover that it is about not making objects *in order to worship or bow down to them*.

### **Exodus 20:4-6**

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. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD [YHWH] 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, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commands.

What makes more sense? Let's consider two different examples of circumstances.

Are we to suggest that YHWH would be a “jealous” God if we painted or took a photo of a bird? Those focusing ONLY on verse four would suggest so. Or, does it make more sense that if we painted or sculpted a bull and then bowed down to it as the false god Molech, *then* YHWH would be a jealous God? When we focus on the context, does this appear to be the proper intent of the commandment?

Is the difference clear? See how both examples include the making of an object found in heaven or on earth, but one includes worship to false gods and the other does not? The difference between these two scenarios is the same difference we find in Exodus 20. In one interpretation, one pays attention only to verse four and yields an improper understanding and application. In the other interpretation one includes the whole context of verses four through six and results in a proper understanding and application.

We are certainly not to worship creation, but that doesn't mean God is against showing appreciation for its beauty by taking its picture.

Let's read the commandment again, noting the clear difference in application we just discussed as compared to the whole context of the commandment:

### **Exodus 20:4**

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.

And in what way are we not to make such images?

### **Exodus 20:5-6**

You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD [YHWH] 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, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Now, for most, that would be enough to understand the whole context of the commandment and then live it out in their daily practice of walking out the Torah. But, we will provide another example of how the context ALWAYS includes the worshipping and bowing down to creation and false gods.

### **Deuteronomy 4:16-18**

Beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves, in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any

winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth.

That seems to be rather clear to the person who stops here. However, the context and purpose continues into the very next verse; and we should want to take every bit of context into account.

### **Deuteronomy 4:19**

“And beware lest you raise your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them, things that the LORD [YHWH] your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven.”

There are also other examples in the Torah relating to not making images of what is in heaven above or the earth below. However, in every instance, the context is about worshipping and bowing down to them.

Again, that should be enough to settle the matter for most people. However, there is even more evidence to consider if one is still not convinced.

We should all agree that God’s character, holiness and righteousness is defined by his own law, his Torah. Meaning this: it is against God’s character and definition of the standard of holiness and righteousness for him to define what is good, and then violate that same standard.

Would we want to accuse God of violating what he calls good, holy and righteous? Would we want to accuse God of breaking the Torah? If breaking the Torah is sin, do we want to accuse God of being sinful? Of course not. Such thinking should be considered absurd for all the believers in the faith. That all being said, there is something very important to realize and consider.

Consider the ark of the covenant.

### **Exodus 25:18-20**

And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work shall you make them, on the two ends of the mercy seat. Make one cherub on the one end, and one cherub on the other end. Of one piece with the mercy seat shall you make the cherubim on its two ends. The cherubim shall spread out the wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings, their faces one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubim be.

Cherubim are heavenly beings. So, if the second commandment specifies that God’s people should not make images of anything in heaven above, and here we find in Exodus 25 God commanding his people to make images of the things in heaven above, would we not consider that a contradiction? It most certainly would be. Other examples we could mention would be the pomegranates on the high priest’s robes or the tabernacle or the menorah with its almond leaves; and there are many more possible examples.

Here is another one. Did YHWH instruct Moses to sin when he made the image of the serpent, which is an image found in the earth below?

### **Numbers 21:8-9**

And the Lord [YHWH] said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

So, did Moses sin by making an image of the earth below? Clearly not. Yahweh does not instruct us to sin. However, the serpent became an issue when Israel began to worship it. It was at that time that it escalated to a matter of breaking the second commandment in the Torah.

## 2 Kings 18:4

“He removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah. And he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it (it was called Nehushtan).”

All of this should serve to properly illustrate the importance of considering context. When the second commandment was spoken to Israel in Exodus 20, there was more to it than simply verse four. In the Torah, there are examples of those making images in heaven above and the earth below. It was (and is) not an issue unless they are being bowed down to or being worshipped.

So, in other words, to interpret the second commandment in such a way that we are not permitted to make any images of anything in heaven above or the earth below is clearly misguided. When you miss the context of it being related to using images to worship false gods, it is easy to see how we can make such an error. Such a narrow understanding of the second commandment is certainly not compatible with the Word. Thus making images is okay as long as it is in the right way for the right reasons.

We hope that this teaching has blessed you, and remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom.

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at [www.testeverthing.net](http://www.testeverthing.net)

**Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.**

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