

YOU SHALL NOT MAKE FOR YOURSELF AN IDOL

Exod 20:4-6

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“Monumental Battle for the Bible”¹—As we saw last Sunday, perhaps the hottest religious topic of the 21st century in America is the Ten Commandments.

We live in a post-modern age: a time in which “pluralism” is worshipped and “tolerance” is the supreme virtue. My simple, and admittedly sarcastic, definition of “pluralism” is this: everyone is right unless he or she thinks that they are. Into our world of infinite shades of gray, where all beliefs or no beliefs at all are viewed as equally valid, come the stark, straightforward yet simple, black-and-white Ten Commandments. Perhaps, while driving down the highway, you have seen this billboard: “Some things are carved in stone”—God.

Exodus chapter 20, beginning at verse 1, reads as follows:

Then God spoke all of these words saying: “I am Yahweh, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. **You shall have no other gods in My presence**” (20:1-3).

We come now to the second of the Ten Commandments:

“You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in the heavens above, or that is on the earth below, or that is in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down in worship to them nor shall you serve them, because I, Yahweh your God, am El Qanna [a jealous God], punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but lavishing loyal-love to a thousand [generations] of those who love Me and obey My commandments” (20:4-6).

Interestingly, in the Lutheran and Roman Catholic traditions, the command against “graven images” is either not listed at all or it is included in the first commandment, making the second commandment the prohibition against taking God’s name “in vain.” For the reformed and Orthodox Christian traditions, the second commandment deals with

¹Power Point slides showing pictures from *U.S. News & World Report* (September 1, 2003) and *Detroit Free Press* (August 22, 2003) of the Ten Commandments monument Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore refuses to remove from Montgomery’s state judicial building.

idols and the third commandment concerns the use of God's name "in vain." For the sake of this sermon, we will follow the numbering of the reformed tradition, the ordering best known in the majority of Protestant churches.

The second commandment is really a series of three prohibitions: (1) "you shall not make an idol"; (2) "you shall not bow down in worship to an idol"; (3) "you shall not serve an idol." Making a god for oneself leads both to prostration before it and finally to service of it. The recognition of other gods leads to disaster because it takes one away from the very One who brought you out of Egypt, out of slavery. The word "slavery" in the first commandment is the noun from the verb used now in the second commandment, here translated "serve." To serve an idol or other god is once again to become a slave. Yahweh, the Lord God, did not free us from captivity in order that we fall again into slavery, into bondage to a false god.

The most common understanding of the second commandment is that God warns against idol-making because He will not tolerate rival gods. The second commandment then is a further elaboration of the first commandment and both declare that God will tolerate no other gods in His presence.

However, if we use the word "image" instead of "idol" (the word "idol" is acceptable, it just usually leads us to think of *other* gods)—"you shall not make for yourself an image"—the second commandment becomes a prohibition against making a visible representation of Yahweh. The first commandment states that Yahweh will tolerate no rival gods and the second commandment says that He will tolerate no distortions of Himself. Yahweh wants no image or idol made of Him, for to do so, is to misrepresent Him and misunderstand Him. Unlike images, which are lifeless and immobile, deaf and dumb, unfeeling and unthinking, and fix God at a point in time and space, Yahweh is a God who can speak and feel and act in both nature and history. To use images for the worship of Yahweh is to deny the very nature of His being and is to deny the nature of His relationship to the world. To use images for the worship of Yahweh is to use a false form to worship the true God.

But does Yahweh say *why* He will tolerate no distractions from Himself and no distortions of Himself? The "why" of these commandments is: "because I, Yahweh your God, am El Qanna—the Jealous God."

“Jealous” . . . “Jealousy”—most of us, if not all of us, do not think positive thoughts when we hear these words. To us, jealousy is a smothering and stifling possessiveness; it is passion that has lost its senses and its self-control. It is bad. To refer to Yahweh as “the jealous God,” probably makes a poor impression.

Five times, in the Hebrew Bible, Yahweh is described as El Qanna – אֱלֹהֵי קַנְיָן (*‘ēl qannā’*)—“the jealous God.” In Exod 20 and Exod 34, El Qanna is the name by which Yahweh calls Himself. Chapters 32, 33, and 34 of Exodus, as many of you recall, tell the tale of the golden calf. The Hebrews produce for themselves a golden calf and then proclaim, “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (Exod 32:4). Yahweh is furious, and yet through the intercession of Moses, His fury is turned to forgiveness. The apostate people receive grace and the covenant is re-established. The people, however, are warned: “you must not bow down in worship to another god, because Yahweh’s very name is Qanna (אֱלֹהֵי קַנְיָן)—He is El Qanna (אֱלֹהֵי קַנְיָן)” (Exod 34:14).

Jealousy *can be* a good thing. It is a good thing when it describes the emotional response to a relationship that is being jeopardized. It is a good thing that Yahweh is a jealous God. He is not aloof and detached from the world of human beings. On the contrary! Yahweh is a God who is deeply involved in human affairs and who vigorously seeks a relationship with us. To assert that Yahweh is El Qanna, is to affirm that He is *not* indifferent to the infidelity of His people, anymore than a loving husband is indifferent to an unfaithful wife. Yahweh’s fierce jealousy is the manifestation of His faithful love when that love has been spurned and spit upon. In humans, jealousy can be selfish and senseless; in God, jealousy is pure love.

Yahweh’s violent jealousy, which tolerates no rival, is without parallel in the religious literature of the Ancient Near Eastern World.² In that world, a fundamental religious tolerance prevailed. In fact, in *one* temple *different* gods could be worshipped. It was like going to Baskin-Robbins: one place, lots of flavors. But unlike the pagan

²J. J. M. Roberts, “El,” *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, supplementary vol. (ed. Keith Crim; Nashville: Abingdon, 1976): 257. Cf. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols. (trans. by D. M. G. Stalker; New York: Harper & Row, 1962 & 1965), 1:208: “This intolerant claim to exclusive worship is something unique in the history of religion, for in antiquity the cults were on easy terms with one another and left devotees a free hand to ensure a blessing for themselves from other gods as well.”

gods, Yahweh's jealousy is *not* the envy of other deities and His jealousy is *not* directed against the idols—it is directed against the disloyal covenant partner. He is not jealous *of* any rival; He is jealous *for* His people. For Yahweh to call Himself a jealous God is His way of saying, “I will have nothing less than your full devotion, and you will have nothing less than all My love.”

Rightly understood, the concept of a jealous God flies in the face of our post-modern world. In an age when “you can have it your way,” from hamburgers to lifestyles to spirituality, a God who demands exclusive devotion and who dictates how He is to be worshipped, is a primitive, narrow-minded, self-centered deity best forgotten or, at the most, best treated as a religious relic of the past. Such a deity is smothering and stifling at best, and oppressive and offensive at worst. What we need is a god worthy of our times—or so we are told. Human jealousy, more often than not, is unrightful possessiveness. However, God has every right to make an absolute claim upon those He has created. Such a thought is distasteful to the post-modern mind.

For several years now, I have studied this subject of “the jealous God.” This past Spring, I taught a class at the Pepperdine University Bible Lectureship on “El Qanna—The Jealous God.” Here is why I tell you this. My goal, this morning, is not to keep you from making idols. I doubt that is a real problem for most, if not all, who are present here today. My goal is not to preach the normal sermon that talks about all the things that are our modern-day idols: power, prestige, or prosperity. No, my goal in this sermon is to challenge the way you think about God. What is the “image” of God that exists in your mind? Who and what is God? Be forewarned: smashing your mental image of God will produce discomfort; furthermore, you may not be happy with the smasher, which happens today to be me.

Ok, here comes the “hammer” part of this sermon. God does not and cannot change in His essential nature. For example, He cannot be a good God today but an evil God tomorrow. So, while God does not and cannot change in His essential nature, the fact is His essential nature is “jealous holiness.” And this “jealous holiness” means that God is not and cannot be *unaffected* and *unaltered* by the actions of human beings whom He created in His own image. It is impossible for a jealous God to be apathetic. The *fact*

that Yahweh is El Qanna is unchangeable. The fact that Yahweh is El Qanna means *He* is changeable.

In the ugly episode of the golden calf, fickle and faithless Israel arouses both God's fury and God's forgiveness. Fury and forgiveness—the two faces of El Qanna—the Jealous God. If God, in response to Moses' intercession, had not changed His mind, Israel would have ceased to exist. Because He is El Qanna, He cannot ignore the golden calf. Because He is El Qanna, He cannot ignore Moses' intercession.

In C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, a delightful and insightful series of books, one of the children asks Mr. Beaver about Aslan the Lion.

“Is he—quite safe?” . . .

“Safe?” said Mr. Beaver. . . . “Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you.”³

Yahweh. He is El Qanna—the Jealous God. He demands nothing less than our full devotion, and He promises nothing less than all His love. El Qanna sacrificed His one and only Son that you and I might escape His fury and experience His forgiveness. The cross of Christ—it is the supreme manifestation of God's abounding love for the sinner and it is the supreme manifestation of God's awful wrath against sin. Only, only a God who is El Qanna *could* and *would* die on a cross for creatures such as you and me.

Walter Brueggemann, *The Book of Exodus*, New Interpreter's Bible, vol. 1 (Abingdon Press, 1994).

Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation (John Knox Press, 1991).

Stanley M. Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *The Truth About God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life* (Abingdon Press, 1999).

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Rubel Shelly, *Living by the Rules: The Contemporary Value of the Ten Commandments* (20th Century Christian Foundation, 1982).

³C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (New York: Collier / Macmillan, 1950), 75-76.