

## APPENDIX J

# UNDERSTANDING THE SECOND COMMANDMENT

*The following has been adapted from a portion of a lecture delivered in the fall of 1994 as a part of the curriculum of Gutenberg College. An article, substantially identical to this, was published in McKenzie Study Center's newsletter News & Views in the spring of 1995 under this same title.*

*This reprinted article contributes two things of note to the arguments of this book:*

**1.** *It provides the requisite background to my claim in chapter 4 that the Babylonian god Marduk was sovereign without being transcendent. My point there was that, to have an adequately biblical concept of God, it is not sufficient to understand God as sovereign. While God is sovereign, he is more than that. He is transcendent. This is what God commanded Israel in the second commandment: "Do not conceive of me as merely sovereign such that you could capture the essence of my power and authority in a single image. Conceive of me as the transcendent author of all that occurs in reality. Nothing in the created order can adequately capture the essence of my power and authority, because my power and authority is reflected in everything that is."*

**2.** *It shows how the second of the ten commandments required a paradigm shift in Israel's conception of God. This same paradigm shift is required again of us modern Christians. The modern conception of God is more like that which an ancient polytheist would hold than it is like the conception of God that God himself commanded of Israel. I have been arguing that to conceive of God as the transcendent author of all reality is a valid philosophical option, and the one that most coincides with the biblical worldview. But, ultimately, this paradigm shift is not just a philosophical option. It is a moral requirement. It is commanded by the second commandment delivered on Mt. Sinai to Moses.*

## The Problem with the Second Commandment

The second of the ten commandments presents the thoughtful Christian with a difficulty. He cannot help but be bothered by it:

You shall not make for yourself any graven image, 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 [i.e., the graven images]; for I, Yahweh 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.

(Deuteronomy 20:4-6, adapted from the NASV)

This commandment seems to forbid Israel from representing Yahweh with a symbol. Is God serious? Isn't that just a wee bit unreasonable? Humans rely on symbolism. It is an inherent aspect of our abilities to reason and to use language. What can possibly be so wrong about symbolizing Yahweh?

After all, am I not making a symbol of Yahweh—a graven image—every time I write the word, G-O-D? But if, somehow, it is not inappropriate to represent God symbolically with a word, G-O-D, then why not with something else? What could possibly be so inappropriate about inventing a pictogram, an image, or anything else to simply symbolize the living God? What could God possibly be thinking when he commands Israel as he does in this second commandment? It is difficult to understand how this commandment is not just petty and trivial.

It is tempting to solve this difficulty by understanding the second commandment—like the first one—to be a prohibition against idolatry. Under this interpretation, the second commandment was not forbidding them to symbolize Yahweh. Rather, it was forbidding them to worship *other* gods. It was graven images representing *other* gods that they were commanded not to worship, not graven images of Yahweh.

But in Deuteronomy, Moses makes it clear that God's commandment was intended to forbid them from making graven images of Yahweh himself.

So watch yourselves carefully, since you did not see any form on the day Yahweh spoke to you at Horeb [i.e., Mt. Sinai] from the midst of the fire; lest you act corruptly and make a graven 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 sky, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water below the earth.

(Deut. 4: 15-18, adapted from NASV)

Moses links the prohibition to make a graven image to the fact that

God, at Sinai, did not show himself to them in any form. This makes it clear, I think, that Moses understands the prohibition to forbid their making any graven image of Yahweh himself. So the difficulty remains. Why is God so insistent on prohibiting what, on the surface, would appear to be a very trivial matter—representing God by means of a symbol?

## **My Analysis of the Philosophical Worldview of Ancient Polytheism**

To solve this difficulty, we must better understand the nature and structure of ancient near-eastern polytheism, for polytheism was the religious context into which God spoke the ten commandments.

I do not pretend to be an expert on ancient near-eastern religions. I do not have a serious scholar's grasp of the details of polytheistic beliefs and practices. But I think I have enough knowledge to attempt a reasonable analysis of the philosophical worldview and the philosophical assumptions upon which polytheistic beliefs and practices were founded. Perhaps an expert scholar on the subject could present evidence that would force me to modify or abandon this analysis, but short of presenting me with a philosophical essay written by an ancient Egyptian priest that offers an analysis of the philosophical underpinnings of his religion that is different from mine, it is hard to imagine what possible piece of contrary evidence a scholar could present. Either the following analysis makes sense, or it does not. I think it is as simple as that.

Life is full of events that are mysterious and are inexplicable in terms of those forces and realities that we can see. If two people with virtually identical resumes apply for a job, one gets chosen, the other does not. Why? How do we explain the outcome? We cannot reasonably explain the outcome in terms of their qualifications, experience, personality, or any other manifest reality, for we stipulated that they were virtually identical. How, then, do we explain the outcome? If I roll a die, it turns up one number rather than another. Why? Nothing I can see or know can explain the outcome. So how do I explain the outcome? I attribute the result to a god—the god *Chance*.

The philosophy behind ancient polytheism begins with this insight: nothing that occurs in our lives is explainable simply in terms of those realities that are known to us. How, then, can we explain the events of human experience and understand them so as to control them? Ancient polytheism has its roots in an attempt to answer this question from the

standpoint of a philosophical theory.

The philosophical theory that ancient polytheism advanced was based on two important distinctions:

First, it posited that there were both visible and invisible causes. Not only are there visible causes that one can readily observe, but there are also invisible forces that one cannot readily observe.

Secondly, polytheism distinguished between natural causes and personal causes. Most certainly the ancients understood (if they did not articulate) the concept of natural law. Ancients knew that water was essential to plant life, that water ran downhill, and that day followed night. It was simply in the nature of things. At a commonsensical level, the ancient near-eastern world believed in natural laws just as surely as anyone who came after them. Natural laws were automatic and predictable. You could count on them. If you dropped an object, it would predictably drop to the ground. If you withheld water from a plant, it would predictably die.

But natural causes are not the only forces that shape our reality. Human beings, what we might call *personal* causes, are also major players in the events of our lives. The actions of other humans are very significant in determining the outcome of events. Other humans can kill me, steal from me, lie to me.... Indeed, people are perhaps more important determiners of the events of my life than anything in impersonal nature.

Now personal causes are very different from natural causes. People are not orderly, predictable, and mechanical. They are quixotic, full of surprises, and hard to control. One minute they may like you, the next minute they do not. One day they may lie to you, the next day they tell the truth. They are driven by varied and conflicting desires that seem to roam free through their souls, not subject to any orderly or rational pattern. Unlike a natural cause, one cannot readily predict what a person is going to do.

It is not that we can't exercise any control over people. We can try to stay in their good favors and can expect, thereby, to be treated with kindness rather than harm. But it is so much more difficult to understand and control the behavior of a person than it is to know and control the behavior of any inanimate, impersonal object.

With these distinctions in mind, the philosophical worldview of ancient polytheism comes to this:

There exist two separate and distinct realms. There is the visible realm. In it lie all those forces that I can observe. In it I find both impersonal objects (natural causes whose nature I can come to know and whose behavior I can come to predict) and personal causes (humans), whose behavior is much more difficult to predict and whose actions are wild, free, and not altogether controllable. But there is also an invisible realm.

In it lie all those forces that I cannot see. Now what sort of forces exist in the invisible realm? Are they natural forces, analogous to the impersonal objects in the visible realm? Or are they personal forces, analogous to the free and unshackled choices of human beings?

The distinctive character of the ancient near-eastern worldview is founded on this: the ancient polytheist believed that the invisible realm is “peopled” by personal forces—forces which are analogous to the free choices of human personalities. The invisible forces of the invisible realm are fundamentally more like people than they are like water, fire, air, earth, or plants. The forces in the invisible realm are wild, free, and ultimately unpredictable rather than forces that slavishly obey their simple nature like the parts of a machine.<sup>235</sup>

What better way to represent such forces, then, than to represent them as personal beings—i.e., as anthropomorphic “gods.” Often their gods were represented as humans. But even when they were not represented as humans—as, for example, when they were represented as bulls, or dragons, or lions—they were nonetheless understood to be persons with very human-like motives, thoughts, intents, desires, etc.

Why assume the invisible realm to be peopled by personal causes rather than natural causes? Sometimes the rain comes in the spring, sometimes it does not. We cannot seem to predict when it will and when it will not rain, when there will be drought and when there will not. Accordingly, are the forces that dictate whether the rain will come more like natural laws that operate mechanically to produce an outcome, or are they more like personal forces that act as if they were free-will persons? Surely, one can understand how reasonable the latter answer would be.

So, in the ancient worldview, the coming of the rain is determined by personal forces, i.e., “gods,” who operate invisibly in a wholly other realm of reality that is beyond my knowledge and who act freely—and largely (but not wholly) unpredictably—to try to bring about whatever they want to bring about in our realm.

For our purposes in this article, the crucial thing to understand about polytheism is this: There were many such “gods” whose actions impinged upon the lives of these ancient people. Each of them was limited and finite, and they were all working at cross-purposes to one another. The society of the gods was conceived by analogy to human society. It was a

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235. This is where pre-Socratic philosophy made a decisive break with ancient polytheism. The pre-Socratic Greek philosophers answered, instead, that the invisible forces in the invisible realm were fundamentally more like water, fire, earth, and air (i.e., they were forces that mechanically obeyed the laws of their nature) than they were like people who acted out of a will that was fundamentally free.

community of roughly equal beings each of whom had his own purposes. Accordingly, the purpose of one god may work at cross-purposes to that of another. Some gods were stronger, some weaker. But all were seeking to bring their own will and purpose to fruition. The outcome in human affairs was the net result of all the activities of all these gods seeking to accomplish their purposes in this visible realm. Such an outcome, therefore, was hopelessly unpredictable. All that a human being could do was try to remain in the favor of as many of the most powerful gods as he could, so that they might be more disposed to do him good rather than harm.

For our purposes, the important point is this: a “god” in polytheism is nothing more and nothing less than a powerful force in the invisible realm of reality that potentially affects the outcome of human affairs. It is *not* invincible. It can be defeated or canceled out by the purposes of other “gods” and it can even be outmaneuvered by human ingenuity. Furthermore, it is not above and outside the cosmos, it is part of the cosmos—just one part among many.

But didn’t the Egyptians worship the sun? That is where we grossly misunderstand polytheism. How are we to understand the Egyptians’ claim that the sun is Ammon-Re? It is unthinkable that Ammon-Re, who is represented in all of their mythology as a personal being with a mind and will of his own, is nothing more and nothing less than the impersonal celestial object we call the sun. They do not mean to suggest that Ammon-Re just is the sun. Rather, they mean to suggest that Ammon-Re, like all the other gods, is visibly represented in this realm by a particular token. The sun is his token. The sun is not personal and is not in the least capable of doing the things attributed to Ammon-Re. The Egyptians surely knew that. They were not fools. But Ammon-Re is not the sun *per se*. Rather Ammon-Re is that invisible force working invisibly behind the scenes, out of our sight, in a wholly other realm. The sun is but a visible token of him that he has put in our realm. And it is an apt token, for the sun’s nature and character accurately represent to us something of the personality and nature of Ammon-Re himself. Ammon-Re is finite. He is not represented by everything. He is like one thing and not like another. He is like the sun, not the dew. When the Egyptians worshipped the sun, therefore, they were not worshipping the celestial object *per se*. They were worshipping the supremely powerful personal force in the invisible realm of cosmic reality—Ammon-Re—who put the sun in the sky as his token.

Much more could be said about the philosophy of ancient polytheism, but enough has been said to make sense out of the second commandment.

## The Meaning of the Second Commandment

When God commands Israel not to make and worship a graven image of himself, what is he forbidding them? Here, I think, is what he is commanding:

Do not conceive of me in the same way the rest of the nations conceive of their supreme god. They conceive of their supreme god as the most powerful of all the invisible forces to be reckoned with, but they conceive of him as finite, limited, and as just one of many influences in their lives. Their god can be aptly represented by just one aspect of the visible order, because his nature is so limited and finite. Do not think of me in such a way. I am not limited and finite. I am not one of many influences in your life. I am the one and only influence there is. When seen in the light of my all-controlling will, nothing else is a cause at all. There is nothing I cannot do. Nothing can thwart me in my purpose. There exist no other forces in reality that are even relevant compared to me. I determine everything, control everything, create everything, cause everything. Furthermore, nothing in the visible realm can adequately capture who I am and what I am like. In one sense, every visible thing reflects my nature and wisdom, for all of it is my handiwork. And in another sense, nothing in the visible realm is like me. Nothing can adequately represent who I am. I am too big to be understood in terms of any finite thing in the natural order.

Do not, therefore, conceive of me as a God who can be represented in terms of just one finite image. If you do so, then it will not be me, Yahweh, you worship. It will be some other god of your own imagination. I am a jealous God. I, Yahweh, the all-powerful, transcendent God that I am—I am the one you must worship. You must not worship the shrunken deity of your own imagination.

The purpose of the commandment, therefore, is not to command Israel with regard to *how* they must represent God—forbidding them to use symbols to represent him. Rather, it is to instruct them with regard to whom they are to worship and serve. In the context of Moses' day—when polytheism was the philosophy of the day—God was commanding Israel to have a radically different conception of God. They were to know and love a wholly transcendent God who was the only cause of anything and everything that happens. God could care less *how* they represented him to themselves. (Surely they could use a symbol to represent him. Indeed, how could they represent him any other way.) His concern was simply that they worship him in accordance with who he truly is—the wholly transcendent author of all that is and all that happens.

If our symbol represents the author of all that is, then we are not in violation of the second commandment when we worship him by means of that symbol. But if we forego symbols entirely, yet we worship and serve a shrunken god, then—for all our supercilious observance of the second commandment—we are, in fact, in violation of it.

## **The Contemporary Import of the Second Commandment**

Does the second commandment have any relevance today? Indeed it does. Modern Christian culture has largely shifted its allegiance away from the God of Sinai. Far too often we worship an imaginary shrunken deity. He is the supreme being, the most powerful force in reality. But he is not the transcendent cause of everything. He can be thwarted. Satan, demons, human free will—any or all of these realities can do substantial work at cross-purposes to this god. To the extent that we conceive of God in this way, to just that extent we have made ourselves polytheists and have failed to obey the second commandment.

As it did to Israel, the second commandment is commanding us to radically alter our conception of God. If we do not come to see him in the full light of his transcendence and his utterly unchallengeable sovereignty, then we worship a false god and must heed the warning attached to the commandment: “...I, Yahweh your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep my commandments.” Implicit in this warning is a very frightening suggestion: to fail to acknowledge the unchallengeable sovereignty of the God who is really there is tantamount to hating him; and hating God is something we dare not do.