The first commandments of the Decalogue and the battle against idolatry in the Old Testament

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Early in World War II, Britain sent the battleships *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* to stop the Japanese advance into Malaya. Although lacking air cover, this force set out confidently on its first mission in the South China Sea. An American war correspondent aboard the *Repulse* noted with surprise how confidently the British dismissed the danger from air attacks. Statements like "Those Japs can't fly" were common. The correspondent said to one naval officer: "You British . . . always underestimate the enemy. . . . It seems to me the best thing is to figure the enemy is twice as good as you are and twice as smart, and then you make preparations in advance." Soon the Japanese planes attacked, and in a matter of hours the proud British capital ships lay at the bottom of the sea.[1]

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Don't underestimate the enemy

North American Christians, unfamiliar with the significance and power of idols in the form of images of gods in wood, stone, or metal in Israel's ancient Near Eastern context and elsewhere, tend to take the struggle against idolatry equally lightly. They are therefore as vulnerable to the onslaught of idolatry on their Christian faith as that British naval force was to Japanese air attacks.

The Old Testament, by contrast, tells us of Israel's intense struggle against idol worship through many centuries. Idolatry is the main form of covenant breaking in the Old Testament, and therefore the greatest threat to Israel's central relationship to God. We need only remind ourselves of the archetypal story of the golden calf (Exod. 32); the pattern of idolatry, judgment, and repentance in Judges (for example, Judg. 3:7–11); the religious decline under Solomon (1 Kings 11:1–13); the "sin of Jeroboam,"

that is, the introduction of heterodox worship involving calf images, continued by his successors (for example, 1 Kings 12:28–32; 14:14–16; 16:25–26); Elijah's contest with the priests of Baal on Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18); and the understanding of Israel's and Judah's defeat and deportation by the Assyrians and Babylonians as a result of their history of idolatry (see, for example, 2 Kings 17:7–23; Jer. 25:4–11).[2]

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Only after the Babylonian exile (sixth century BC) did monotheistic worship of Yahweh/the LORD gradually become the increasingly unchallenged faith among returned exiles and of orthodox Judaism.[3]

In the forefront of this struggle stand the preexilic and exilic prophets. But what about their frequent, apparently simplistic ridicule of idols, as for example, in Habakkuk 2:18–19?

> *What use is an idol*
> *once its maker has shaped it—*
> *a cast image, a teacher of lies?*
> *For its maker trusts in what has been made,*
> *though the product is only an idol that cannot speak!*
> *Alas for you who say to the wood, 'Wake up!'*
> *to silent stone, 'Rouse yourself!'*
> *Can it teach?*
> *See, it is gold and silver plated,*
> *and there is no breath in it at all.*[4]

Yet to see here a naive confidence that underestimates the threat seriously misunderstands the prophets' intent. The text quoted, for example, stands in a cycle of alas/woe oracles announcing divine judgment on various perpetrators of grave crimes, such as cruel oppression, exploitation, and bloodshed, who will become the objects of taunt and ridicule (Hab. 2:6). That idolatry stands last in this series may indicate its special gravity. Here and in similar prophetic taunts we have a battle cry, not a confident pronouncement about the harmlessness of idols.[5]

The foundational Decalogue texts

The foundational texts for the Old Testament's imageless worship of God/Yahweh alone are, first of all, the first two commandments of the Decalogue (Hebrew: "Ten Words") in Exodus 20:2–6 and Deuteronomy 5:6–10.[6] While the Exodus and Deuteronomy versions of the Ten Commandments diverge at some points, they are virtually identical in the verses quoted here, according to the NRSV (with the Exodus verse references):

> *2 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 3you shall have no other gods before me.*
>
> *4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, 6but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

Only a few exegetical comments can be offered here.[7]

1. The Ten Commandments are preceded by Yahweh's self-introduction (Exod. 20:2a), which claims Israel's obedient loyalty to Yahweh on the basis of his saving activity experienced by Israel (Exod. 1–18). This self-introduction is often treated separately as a prologue, and even if we follow here the tradition of associating it most closely with the first commandment, we must remember that its claim underlies every one of the subsequent commandments. Patrick Miller says it well: "The ethic of the Commandments is as much an ethic of gratitude and response as it is an ethic of obligation and duty."[8]

2. On this basis, God says to his covenant people: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3). For the phrase translated here as "before," and in a footnote "Or *besides*," the Hebrew uses a somewhat ambiguous set of two words: *'al-panay* ("upon/against my face"). Why not simply say "There are no other gods?" Are we dealing here with henotheism—the worship of one

particular god without denying the existence of others—rather than outright monotheism? Our consideration of the covenant context (below) will show that such a view is untenable. What we have here might be called implicit or practical monotheism. Our text is not a dictionary entry or a religio-philosophical formulation interested in defining different isms. God says, as it were: "Out of my sight with other gods *(imposed) upon my presence*!"[9]

3. "Other gods" is one of the most frequently occurring biblical terms for the gods of other nations tempting Israel to idolatry. The images were not always conceived of as being fully coextensive with the gods, but they represented the gods' presence realistically. Consequently they could be manipulated, through offerings, incantations, processions, and the like, to do the worshipers' will.

4. The second commandment (Exod. 20:4–6) forbids Israel to make such idols.[10] In addition to this thematic linkage of the first and second commandments, they are also grammatically connected through the pronoun "them" in verse 5 (two times), whose plural antecedent must be "other gods" (v. 3). These "other gods" or "idols" are characterized here as features of God's created world (v. 4). The "other nations" of the ancient Near East conceived of their deities in the form of living creatures (human or nonhuman), often representing aspects of the cosmos (heavenly bodies, sky, land, sea, rivers, storm, for example). To worship them in their manufactured statues/icons would be to divinize creation rather than the Creator. We are not told explicitly here that the prohibition of images also includes images of God/Yahweh. That it definitely does so will become clear when we discuss the Decalogue's narrative context (below).

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5. The characterization of God as "jealous" (v. 5), but even more merciful (v. 6), must be read in the covenant context, where jealousy expresses God's burning love that tolerates only an exclusive bond between the partners. The correlative human love for God is characterized in the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4). To direct such love and devotion to any other god/idol is idolatry. Idolatry

cannot be isolated; it affects future generations (Exod. 20:5), but God's "steadfast love" reaches many times further than God's wrath (Exod. 20:6).

Brian Rosner points to the marriage bond as the most dominant biblical metaphor for this intense and exclusive relationship between God and Israel, which logically leads to the designation of idolatry as adultery, and God's vehement reaction to it as the jealousy of a betrayed husband. The frequent practice of sexual rites in connection with worship by ancient Near Eastern nations undoubtedly contributed to this recourse to the marital bond and its breaking, especially in prophetic texts (for example, Hosea 1–3; compare also Exod. 34:11–16). Rosner names the political realm as the source of a second metaphorical conception. In this perspective, Yahweh, Israel's rightful king, will not tolerate Israel's, his subject's, turning to other nations, such as Egypt or Assyria, for help and protection. But reliance on Israel's own kings can also be idolatrous (compare 1 Sam. 8:6–9).[11] Common to both models is the element of exclusivity.[12]

There is a close connection between the third commandment (Exod. 20:7//Deut. 5:11) and the fourth commandment (Exod. 20:8–11//Deut. 5:12–15) and the first two commandments, since they also pertain to the right understanding and worship of God. This is especially true of the "name commandment," forbidding the wrongful use of God's name. Because the name embraces God's identity, and therefore (from the human vantage point) God's revelation, its wrongful use points to a serious jeopardizing of the God-Israel relationship. Like an image, the name of God may have been used for magical purposes. The Sabbath commandment, the only one of the ten directly addressing the nature of proper worship, is no less central to that relationship, but because it also encompasses proper treatment of fellow human beings, Patrick Miller rightly calls it "a crucial bridge" between the preceding and the following commandments.[13]

The Exodus context[14]

In the narrative context of Exodus it is of great significance that Israel breaks the barely concluded covenant through idolatry by constructing an image, a golden calf (Exod. 32:1–6): "He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf;

and they said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!' When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it" (vv. 4–5). Although this is outright idolatry, Aaron, apparently in an attempt at damage control, adds this proclamation: "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD [Yahweh]" (v. 5). This raises a question: was the calf meant to be a pedestal for Yahweh, rather than an image of Yahweh? The reaction of God, however, immediately rules out any significance of such a distinction (compare vv. 7–8).

Israel's idolatry occurs at the foot of the mountain at the very time when God is instructing Moses at the top about how God wishes to be present among his people in a noniconic form by way of the tabernacle and its rituals. This idolatry immediately cancels the covenant relationship, and is symbolized by Moses's breaking of the tablets of the covenant (Exod. 32:19). Only the persistent intercession of Moses moves the LORD to renew the covenant (Exod. 34), thereby giving permission to build the tabernacle. Just as there was no time of innocence for humanity between humanity's creation and fall, there was no time of a covenant-observing Israel between the covenant's conclusion and its breaking. An ongoing covenant relationship could only be one based on God's grace. In the tabernacle, the presence of God in the holy of holies was marked by a throne-space above the mercy seat covering the ark of the covenant, and flanked by two cherubim, but a throne without the image of a god where ancient nations would have expected one.[15] Thus covenant and idolatry are negatively correlated in Exodus (and elsewhere); they cannot coexist.

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The Deuteronomy context

In the Bible's canonical narrative, the book of Deuteronomy prepares Israel, after a generation's wandering in the wilderness (Leviticus, Numbers), for the new and different tasks and challenges of living faithfully in the promised land that lies ahead.[16] Moses, having reviewed this period of wandering (Deut. 1–4),

turns to the covenant concluded at Sinai (Deut. 5:1–5), beginning with the text of the Ten Commandments (Deut. 5:6–21), interpreted in the section on the foundational Decalogue texts (above). What new light does their Deuteronomic context shed on them?

The Decalogue in Deuteronomy is the basis for Moses's impassioned appeal to his people to keep their covenantal obligations in the land the LORD will give them. The central challenge will be to return God's "jealous" covenant love by fervent and unswerving allegiance and devotion to God alone.

This total and exclusive devotion is almost immediately expressed in the form of the *Shema* (Literally, "Hear . . . !"), which became Israel's central confession: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut. 6:4–5). That will not be easy in view of the many impending contacts with other nations and their gods. Therefore the battle against idolatry will be not only crucial but difficult. Covenant breaking, especially through serving other gods—that is, idolatry—will incur God's severe judgment. Yet God's blessing and goodness will be there for Israel in great abundance (see Deut. 5:8–10, and the blessings and curses in chapter 28).

Especially problematic for Christians is the extent to which the battle against idolatry, as presented in Deuteronomy, often takes the form of holy war against peoples of other faiths in order to destroy them. Dean McBride asks the crucial question for us: "Can we appreciate [the Deuteronomic theologians'] criteria without condoning the violent measures that they proposed to safeguard orthodox Yahwism?"[17]

Concluding reflection

What is at stake in the Old Testament's fierce and persistent battle against other gods and representations of those gods formed from the stuff of the created world? The short answer is: everything that biblical faith proclaims as good news or gospel!

If Israel's deliverance from Pharaoh had been accomplished by an even more powerful neighbouring ruler, or by Israel's own fighting, the whole exodus story would have played itself out on the level of inner-worldly power struggle.[18] Only by experiencing

it as the leading of the Creator of the universe—a transcendent power/love, although the Old Testament does not use such abstract, philosophical terms—could Israel truly worship that God.

When, at the end of the Babylonian exile, the empire established by Nebuchadnezzar was overthrown by the Persian Emperor Cyrus, the Judean exiles had learned not to elevate Cyrus to divine status. Nor would they later elevate Alexander the Great, or the Roman emperors who demanded it.

Our ultimate allegiance today is also claimed by immanent, this-worldly powers and forces: political states and empires; ideologies such as Marxism, fascism, capitalism, but also democracy if it makes imperial claims; sports, movies, and other forms of entertainment, including music; academic disciplines, such as the natural and social sciences, but also rigid theological systems that attempt to fully explain God's inherently mysterious nature. In sum, any aspect of creation can become idolatrous.

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Only a reality that transcends this world, that is not merely a part of it but comprehends the whole, can keep us from according ultimate allegiance to inner-worldly powers with their claims and counterclaims, often played out in violent confrontations. Such a transcendent reality remains by definition mysterious but allows us through revelatory signs to "see" its benevolent face. Everything else that lays claim to our total allegiance is idolatry.

As Israel discovered, it is not easy to resist eating from the tree of knowledge. We still find it hard to resist overstepping our God-set human boundaries. Nor is it easy even to become aware that we are doing so, when we elevate our own ideas and works to ultimate status and worship them—and thereby ultimately ourselves. And if we do that, God's jealous love could give us over to our own devices, to our "hardening of hearts" (Isa. 63:17),[19] if God's even greater love would not reach out to touch these hardened hearts (Jer. 31:31–34).

Notes

[1] Cecil Brown, "Tragedy in the China Sea," in *Combat: The War with Japan*, ed. Don Congdon (New York: Dell, 1962), 15, 43. This story is illustrative of battle dynamics; it implies no characterization on my part of any nation as righteous or idolatrous.

[2] Some scholars today hold that these judgments of idolatry are retroactive, reflecting the impact of Deuteronomic/Deuteronomistic reformers of late preexilic and exilic times, while historically, premonarchic and preexilic Israel was freely using varieties of images and worship forms that were later considered idolatrous. It is true that earlier Israel was more open to using images and other sacred objects (trees, pillars, memorial stones, etc.)—the very reason for the prophets' fierce indictments—but from my perspective, the battle against any syncretism and image use began in very early times.

[3] In the Diaspora, however, Jews living in Gentile contexts and Gentile Christian converts continued the struggle.

[4] For similarly derisive passages see Isa. 44:9–20; Ps. 115:4–8; 135:15–18; Jer. 10:3–5; Hosea 8:4–6.

[5] One is reminded of modern election campaigns that resort to caricature and satire when the battle gets fiercest.

[6] Following the counting used in most Protestant churches, which Mennonites have generally also adopted. For good reasons, others (among them Roman Catholics and Lutherans), consider verses 3–6 to be one commandment, and divide verse 17 into two to maintain the total of ten.

[7] For my fuller exposition, see Waldemar Janzen, *Exodus*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Waterloo, ON, and Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2000), 250–85.

[8] Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 16. This work is the fullest and most helpful recent treatment I know of (for Christians) of the Ten Commandments.

[9] The italicized words are borrowed from S. Dean McBride's solution to the apparent ambiguity of the Hebrew *'al-panay*, in his article "The Essence of Orthodoxy: Deuteronomy 5:6–10 and Exodus 20:2–6," *Interpretation* 60, no. 2 (April 2006): 143. McBride points out that God's "face" often refers to God's presence (compare the Aaronic blessing, Num. 6:24–26). This command, in effect, "prohibits allowing 'other gods' or their iconic surrogates to obtrude between Israel and the sublime, beneficent presence of Yahweh" (146). Such surrogates include statues of gods, but also sacred items such as altars, trees, sacred pillars or poles; whatever is meant to represent a god in the created order (144–46). There is a certain fluidity here; some sacred trees, memorial stones, or worship accessories (as in the tabernacle and temple) are not rejected in biblical orthodoxy.

[10] The phrase "idol, whether in the form of" in verse 4 (NRSV) combines a Hebrew phrase that can also be rendered by two parallel nouns: "a sculptured image or any likeness" (JPS). That is reminiscent of God's decision "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness" (Gen. 1:26), but the Hebrew words underlying that passage are different from those in the second commandment. Nevertheless, an intriguing connection seems to exist here; see Waldemar Janzen, *Still in the Image: Essays in Biblical Theology and Anthropology* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1982), 51–60.

[11] To the extent that the formal resemblance of covenant texts to ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaties is recognizable, which seems to be the case at least in Deuteronomy, this connection would underscore the propriety of the king/suzerain–Israel/subject bond as metaphorical context for covenant keeping or breaking.

[12] Brian S. Rosner, "The Concept of Idolatry," *Themelios* 24, no. 3 (May 1999): 21–30.

[13] Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, 117. For further comment, see Janzen, *Exodus*, 250–85.
[14] For my fuller interpretation, see Janzen, *Exodus*, 378–414.
[15] For an extensive presentation of the tabernacle, its structure, theology, and history, see Waldemar Janzen, "Tabernacle," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006–2009) 5: 447–58.
[16] That a complex process of transmission lies behind this loosely coherent narrative is assumed here and should be considered where necessary.
[17] McBride, "The Essence of Orthodoxy," 133 (part of motto). Of course, the same applies to other Old Testament texts, including the violent conquest of the land under Joshua (Josh. 1–12), Elijah's execution of the priests of Baal and Asherah (1 Kings 16:40), and Josiah's reformation (2 Kings 23:20), just to mention some salient examples. An intriguing step in the direction suggested by McBride is taken by R. W. L. Moberly, when he cautiously argues that *herem* in Deuteronomy, and perhaps beyond, had possibly become a metaphor for fidelity, no longer requiring actual killing. An analogous development can be seen in the transformation of "sacrifice," employed freely in the church now without implying the slaughtering of animals. See R. W. L. Moberly, "Toward an Interpretation of the Shema," in *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*, ed. Christopher Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 124–44.
[18] The latter, of course, is the Marxist interpretation.
[19] For the inherent connection between idolatry and the recurrent biblical theme of "hardening of heart," see Edward P. Meadors, *Idolatry and the Hardening of Heart :A Study in Biblical Theology*" (New York: T&T Clark International, 2006).

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