

Exodus 20:4-6

- Law and gospel in the second commandment -

Author: Evert Jan Hempenius

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Context and background

- ❖ The second commandment of the law – Exodus 20:4-6 and Deuteronomy 5:8-10 – is part of the 10 commandments given to the people of Israel at the Mount Sinai by the LORD God himself. For the understanding of the law and of the second commandment in particular, it is necessary to look at Exodus 19:5-6.
 - “Now if you **obey me fully and keep my covenant**, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a **kingdom of priests and a holy nation.**’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.”
 - “obey me fully and keep my covenant” = “love me and keep my commandments” (Ex. 20:6).
 - God is king of the world, and the Israelites are not expected to bow down before and worship his image, but to serve him as priests in daily life as a holy nation (See also Rom. 12:1-2).
- ❖ Why do people make idols? An idol represents a god or power (nature) or ancestor governing (parts of) the vicissitudes of life, fortune and misfortune, fate in general. Often it is described by the “DO ut DES” principle. I give you (god) my vows, my offerings, so that you (god) will give me fortune and protection against misfortune. The history of the golden calf (Ex. 32) gives us some insight in the role and function of an idol and the priest.
 - The following relations can be described:
 - (1) The LORD God <> Moses <> Aaron <> the Israelites.

The LORD God speaks to Moses. Aaron is the spokesman of Moses.
But now, the Israelites are fearing the fate of Moses (Ex. 32:1).

- (2) The LORD God <> ????? <> Aaron <> the Israelites.

Now Moses is gone, who or what will be the intermediary between God and his people? So they ask Aaron to make an idol, an image of (the) god(s) who will go before them. And Aaron makes an idol cast in the shape of a calf. He says: “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt” (Ex. 32:4). Or: “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.” Both translations are possible. The new situation is:

- (3) The LORD God <> golden calf <> Aaron <> the Israelites.

The role of the priest (Aaron) becomes in this situation very important. He brings offerings before the image, and he needs to interpret the image, because an image cannot speak, hear nor walk and show the direction.

- But why a golden calf and not something else? Did they worship the Egyptian god Apis before? See exposition of vs. 4. Or does a golden calf represent ‘strength and protection’ and ‘prosperity’?
- An idol represents the main aspects of a god, which people think that are important to them.
- An idol gives people the idea that a god is visible in their midst. They attribute power to the idol of a god. This attributes power to, strengthens the people. This is a rare religious phenomenon. See especially Isaiah 44:7-20!

- ❖ Important. The second commandment is not about idols and gods in general, but specifically about idols that represent the LORD God.

Form and structure

- ❖ “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.
- ❖ 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,
 - but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.”
- ❖ Within the text there are four opposites:
- “Bow down to them and worship them” <> “keep my commandments”
 - “Third and fourth generation” <> “thousand generations”
 - “hate me” <> “love me”
 - “visiting” or “punishing” (see technical notes) <> “showing love”

Technical notes

- ❖ paqad (vs. 5) = 1. *pay attention to, observe* (with care, practical interest)¹. This is a neutral translation and given preference to *punishing*, because of Ezek. 18:4: “The soul who sins is the one who will die.” See exposition.

Exposition

Verse 4

- ❖ The Israelites are not allowed to make an idol in the form of anything. They have just left Egypt, a country full of idols and gods. They need to worship God without an idol, because he is the invisible God (Col. 1:15).
- in heaven above > In Egypt the sun-god Ra or Amon was the most important of all gods. The falcon-god Horus was also worshipped widely in Egypt.
 - on the earth beneath > In Egypt the people were preoccupied with death and afterlife, with which the jackal-headed god Anubis was associated. There was also the bull-deity Apis, whose idol might have been a model for the golden calf (Ex. 32). Apis served probably as an intermediary between humans and an all-powerful god. The Egyptians worshipped many more gods, whose images were taken from the earth beneath.
 - In the waters below > The Egyptian crocodile-god Sobek can be mentioned.

¹ Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A. (2000). *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (electronised.) (p. 823). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems.

- The prophets of the Old Testament are mocking towards idols. A very nice example is found in Isaiah 44:9-20. (See also Ps. 115:4-8; Ps. 135:15-18; Isa. 40:18-20; Isa. 46:5-8.)
 - The apostle Paul writes: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. (...) Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles” (Rom. 1:20-23).
- ❖ The LORD God says: “I, the LORD **your God.**” He has a personal and covenantal relationship with his people, the Israelites (Ex. 19:5-6). Compare the outcry of Thomas when he encounters the risen Christ: “My Lord and my God!”
 - The LORD God has a covenantal loving relationship with his people. This is also shown by the words: “jealous”, “hate me”, “love me” and “keep my commandments.”
 - The LORD God is not represented by idols, but by his spoken word.
 - The LORD God doesn’t need an image to represent him. He has already an image: “man and woman” (Gen. 1:26-27).
 - Finally, Jesus Christ is the image of God (Col. 1:15; John 1:18; John 14:8-9).
 - It is very instructive to have a look at John 14-15, where Jesus repeatedly says: “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love” (John 15:9-10).
- ❖ He is “visiting”, which is a better translation than “punishing”, the children, the third and the fourth generation. When the LORD God visits his people he is calling them to repent from their sins. He sends his prophets.
 - The history of the kings of Israel gives an example. King Jeroboam I erected the golden calves at Bethel and Dan (1 Kings 12:25-33). God sends his prophet (1 Kings 13), but he did not repent. “This was the sin of the house of Jeroboam that led to its downfall and to its destruction from the face of the earth” (1 Kings 13:34).
- ❖ “thousand generations” = if one generation spans twenty years, this is equal to 20 000 years, equal to eternity. This is a promise and an invitation.
- ❖ “love me and keep my commandments” are not two separate entities. They are not synonymous, but they are like the two sides of a the same coin. Furthermore, the commandments of the LORD are only understood by love (Rom. 13:10). And when Christians fulfill the law through love, they will be clothed by Christ and the image of God is restored again.

Application

- ❖ Important. The second commandment is about Christ. He is the image of God. He dwelt among us. He made the Father known to us. He says to one of his disciples: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves” (John 14:9-11).
 - Make the comparison. Which of all idols the ever laid hands upon the heads of little children? (Matt. 19:13-15). Which of all idols of stone or silver spoke words of forgiveness (Mark 2:1-12)? Which idol ever touched a leper and cleansed him (Matt. 8:2-4)? Which idol ever spoke words of faith and love in a sermon (Matt. 5-7)?
- ❖ One should be aware of the fact that all Christians have some idea of God, which might become like an idol. John writes in his letter: “God is love” (1 John 4:16). This doesn’t mean that God is a permissive god or that God is present where people love each other. This happens when one or more character traits of God become absolute. But God is the incommensurable.
 - Nowadays the Prosperity Gospel is falling prey to the sin of creating an idol of God.
- ❖ Parents set an example in their religious behaviour and their children will follow in their footsteps (compare Deut. 6:4-9). God gives them a promise: “showing love” and a warning: “visiting.” The apostle Paul says: “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children” (Eph. 5:1).
 - How do parents listen to the Word of God? How do parents follow Jesus Christ? How do people pray for the Holy Spirit?
- ❖ By loving God and keeping his commandments, in each Christian the image of God will be restored through the Holy Spirit in the likeness of Christ.
- ❖ Although children’s Bibles and pictures or movies are helpful in communicating the Gospel, there is also the disadvantage of creating images in the minds of people.

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