

Exodus 20:4

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth:

Analysis

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth:

The second commandment prohibits 'graven images' (לְבָזֶב, pesel)—carved idols—and 'likeness' (תְּמִינָה, temunah)—any representation. The comprehensive scope ('heaven, earth, water') bans all visual depictions of deity. Why? Because God is spirit, infinite, transcendent—reducing Him to material form inevitably distorts Him. The command protects God's glory from human reduction. The three-tiered cosmos ('above, beneath, under') encompasses all creation—nothing created can represent Creator. Israel's imageless worship stood alone in the ancient world. Even Christian images, while not idols, risk reducing transcendent God to manageable forms. The Word-centered Reformation recovered this emphasis.

Historical Context

Ancient Near Eastern worship was intensely visual—statues, images, sacred poles. Israel's aniconism (worship without images) was revolutionary, forcing reliance on God's word rather than visual aids.

Related Passages

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Study Questions

1. Why does God prohibit visual representations of Himself—what distortions result from trying to depict deity?
2. How might Christians violate this command even without bowing to physical idols?

Interlinear Text

לֹא

H3808

תַּעֲשֵׂה

H6213

Thou shalt not make

לֹבֶן

H0

עַל־

תְּמִימֹת

H6459

יכַל

H3605

תְּמִימֹת

or any likeness

הַ

of any thing that

בְּשָׁמָן

is in heaven

מִן־

above

תְּמִימֹת

of any thing that

H8544

H834

H8064

H4605

H834

לְאַרְצָה

or that is in the earth

מִתְּהֵת

H8478

תְּמִימֹת

of any thing that

בְּמִזְמָרָה

beneath or that is in the water

H4325

לְאַרְצָה

H8478

or that is in the earth

H776

Additional Cross-References

Leviticus 26:1 (Parallel theme): Ye shall make you no idols nor graven image, neither rear you up a standing image, neither shall ye set up any image of stone in your land, to bow down unto it: for I am the LORD your God.

Deuteronomy 5:8 (Parallel theme): Thou shalt not make thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the waters beneath the earth:

Psalms 97:7 (Parallel theme): Confounded be all they that serve graven images, that boast themselves of idols: worship him, all ye gods.

Leviticus 19:4 (Parallel theme): Turn ye not unto idols, nor make to yourselves molten gods: I am the LORD your God.

Deuteronomy 27:15 (Parallel theme): Cursed be the man that maketh any graven or molten image, an abomination unto the LORD, the work of the hands of the craftsman, and putteth it in a secret place. And all the people shall answer and say, Amen.

Acts 17:29 (Parallel theme): Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device.

Revelation 16:2 (Parallel theme): And the first went, and poured out his vial upon the earth; and there fell a noisome and grievous sore upon the men which had the mark of the beast, and upon them which worshipped his image.

Isaiah 45:16 (Parallel theme): They shall be ashamed, and also confounded, all of them: they shall go to confusion together that are makers of idols.

Isaiah 42:8 (Parallel theme): I am the LORD: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images.

Romans 1:23 (Parallel theme): And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things.