

Bite Size Bible Study

In God's Image #97

By Pastor Lee

I was just reading Jeff Benner's book "Benner's Commentary on the Torah", and ran across two points that really open up the meaning of two of the commandments. They were so convicting, I needed pass them on.

First point: Exodus 20:4-5 Making an image:

The Hebrew word often translated as "graven" or "carved images" is the word תמונת (temunah). This word comes from the root מין (miyn) meaning "a species." Because all animals of the same species look alike, the word temunah means a likeness:

You shall not make for yourself a graven image [pesel], or any likeness [temunah] of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Exodus 20:4 (RSV)

Does this command prohibit the making of statues, paintings, figurines, photographs, etc.? If so, how could God instruct Moses to make an image of a serpent (Numbers 21:8) or Cherubim (Exodus 25:18) on the cover of the ark? The key is the next verse, which does not prohibit the forming of the images, but forming them and bowing down and serving them.

You shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me. Exo 20:5 (RSV)

Second point: *Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain...* (Exodus 20:7, KJV)

Take: The Hebrew verb behind this English word is נשא (N.S.A) and is a very generic verb used in a wide variety of ways in the text. This word has been translated as "lift," "carry," "accept," "exalt," "regard," "obtain," "respect" and many other ways. In the context of this verse, it is the "name" that is being "lifted up." One lifts up a name by making it known to others.

Name: In our modern western culture, a name is nothing more than an identifier, nothing different from being assigned a number. The Hebrew word for a name is שמ (shem), but in the Ancient Hebrew culture, the "shem" was much more than just a name. It was the "breath" of the individual. To the Hebrews the breath was more than just the exchange of air in the lungs; it was his "character," the internal qualities of an individual that make him unique. This idea of the word shem meaning "character"

can be seen in 1 Kings 4:31, "and his fame was in all the nations round about." Here, the word "fame" is understood as being his "character."

All Hebrew names are words with meaning and these words reflect their characters. For instance, Eve (*Havah* in Hebrew) means "life" because she is the mother of all the living (*Hay*, a related word to *Havah*, see Genesis 3:20). The names for God are no different. The name YHWH means "he exists" and God (Elohiym) means "one of power and authority." Some other names of God include "Jealous" (Exodus 34:14), "One" (Zechariah 14:9, which literally reads "his name is one"), "Holy" (Isaiah 57:15) and others. What is God's name? Most will answer "YHWH" or "God," but we must remember that a name or *shem* in Hebrew is the character of the individual. Therefore, the correct question should be: "What is God's character?"

Vain: The third word that we need to understand correctly is the word "vain." This is the Hebrew word שווא (sheva). This word literally means "empty," and vain actions are empty of substance. This word can also be understood as "falsely" in the sense of being empty of its true substance, as clearly seen in Exodus 23:1, "You shall not utter a false report." The word "false" is the very same Hebrew word שווא (sheva).

Now that we have a more complete understanding of the words in the passage above, we are able to make a more Hebraic interpretation:

You shall not represent the character of Elohiym falsely

So, what does this mean? In Genesis 1:27 we read that "God created man in his own image." This verse is, in fact, saying that God had placed within us a representation of himself. This representation is his *shem* or character and we are to show this character to others.

If, however, we represent that character falsely, or, in other words, live our lives contrary to the character of God, then we are violating this command and taking his name (character) in vain (representing it falsely).

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