

Dr. Anthony Tomasino, Ten Commandments

Session03: No Idols

NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Briefing Document, 3) Study Guide, 4) FAQs

Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino's "The Ten Commandments, Session 3: Commandment 2: No images" explores the controversial nature of the second commandment, **"You shall not make for yourselves any graven images."** The lecture highlights the **differing interpretations** of this commandment among various religious traditions, particularly whether it prohibits all images or only those of pagan gods. Tomasino discusses the **historical context of idolatry** in ancient cultures, detailing the diverse forms idols took and the rituals believed to imbue them with divine presence. He further examines the **Biblical rationale for banning idols**, emphasizing that God cannot be limited by physical representations and that idols can be manipulated and embody human biases. Finally, the lecture suggests that the **true image of God** is found not in man-made objects, but in humanity itself and in serving others.

2) Briefing Document: Briefing Document: The Second Commandment - No Images

Overview

Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino's "The Ten Commandments, Session 3: Commandment 2: No images" delves into the complexities and controversies surrounding the Second Commandment, "You shall not make for yourselves any graven images." This commandment, seemingly straightforward, has been a source of significant historical and theological debate across different religious traditions. The core discussion revolves around whether it prohibits *all* images or specifically *idols* (images of pagan gods), and the implications for the nature of God, human worship, and the dangers of limiting the divine.

Key Themes and Ideas

1. Interpretation of the Second Commandment: "No Images" vs. "No Idols"

- **Historical Controversy:** The commandment's interpretation has been "probably the most controversial of the Ten Commandments" throughout church history.
- **Wording Ambiguity:** The text "You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on earth beneath or in the waters below" does not explicitly state "images of God or the Lord," leading to different interpretations.
- **Diverse Interpretations: Jews, Protestants, and Orthodox:** Generally understand it as a "prohibition of all images, not just pagan gods," viewing it as a distinct Second Commandment. Jewish tradition has, at times, interpreted this "very, very strictly to mean no representational art of any kind."
- **Catholics and Lutherans:** Tend to view it as "1b," the second half of the First Commandment ("You shall have no other gods"), suggesting it "does not prohibit any kind of images of the Lord, but rather only images of pagan gods."
- **Iconoclastic Controversy:** This historical "icon war" in the Eastern Orthodox Church (726-787 AD and 814-842 AD) demonstrates the deep divisions over the use of icons, with some believing Christians were "influenced in this direction by Muslims, who, of course, reject any images at all."

2. Defining and Understanding Idols in the Ancient World

- **More Than Famous People:** While modern usage might refer to "sports heroes, singers, or political figures," an "idol really is referring more to an image of some kind of god."
- **Variety of Forms:** Idols in the ancient world took "a wide variety of forms," including:
- **Anthropomorphic figures:** Human-shaped (e.g., Baal).
- **Theriomorphic figures:** Animal forms (e.g., Egyptian gods).
- **Symbols:** Representing gods (e.g., Aten disc, sun/star symbols).
- **Massabots:** Standing stones or pillars.

- **Sacred Trees/Groves:** Designated as representations of gods.
- **Embodiment of Divine Presence:** A crucial aspect of ancient idolatry was the belief that idols "embodied the spirit of the god they represented." This was achieved through elaborate rituals, such as the "Cleansing of the Mouth" and "opening of the mouth," designed "to forge a connection between the god who is out there somewhere and this image that is sitting here somewhere." After these rituals, a statue "can actually be called a god."
- **Ubiquity of Idols:** "Everybody in the ancient world had their idols, some kind or another." The Greeks were "amazed at the fact that the Jews didn't have any images," describing them as "a nation of atheists because they saw no gods."
- **Israel's Uniqueness:** Israel was unique in rejecting iconic representations of their God. While "they did" have idols, "usually their idols were not of the Lord, or at least as far as we can tell, they weren't."

3. Why Were Images of the Lord Banned? (Rationale for Aniconism)

The Bible doesn't explicitly state *why* images of the Lord were banned, but Tomasino identifies several rationales:

- **God is Incomprehensibly Great:** "No idol, no set in stone image, could do justice to the Lord."
- **1 Kings (Solomon's prayer):** "but will God indeed dwell upon the earth? See, the heavens and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less so this house that I have built."
- **Isaiah 66:** "heaven is my throne and earth a stool for my feet. Where's the house that you would build for me? Where would be my place of rest?"
- "God is too big, too much. Simply put, idols will limit our vision of God. Cats fit in boxes. God does not fit in a box."
- **Idols Limit Vision of God:** If images become "set in stone or painted on the wall, then there becomes the danger that they can be limiting to us." Examples include a child mistaking a picture of Jesus for God and believing "God has long hair."

- **Idols Can Be Manipulated:** Prophets criticized idols because "you can basically make an idol do whatever you want the idol to do." Ancient practices included pouring libations into images and painting smiles on them. The Golden Calf incident is cited as an example of Israelites attempting to "manipulate God."
- **Idols Embody Human Biases:** "Idols will embody our values." People project their ideals and biases onto images of God (e.g., race, gender, characteristics). "God, on the other hand, would have his people embody his values."

4. Idolatry in Israelite History and Later Judaism

- **Persistent Problem:** Even as Moses received the commandments, Israel was "already in the process of demanding that they have an idol" (the Golden Calf). Idolatry "continues throughout the history of Israel."
- **Archaeological Evidence:** Recent excavations have found "clearly divine images" in Jerusalem and other Judean cities (e.g., Sekhmet, Bez, Eye of Horus, mother goddess figurines, Baal Seth Scarab, Hezekiah seal, Shalemite seal, Masu).
- **Political Alliances:** Many symbols likely represented "a kind of political alliance" with neighboring kingdoms and their gods, especially with Egypt.
- **Reforms and Resurgence:** King Josiah (640-609 BC) "banned idols in Israel," but his reforms didn't last. Idolatry "provoked the destruction of Jerusalem."
- **Second Temple Period Shift:** After 515 BC, there was a significant shift in Judaism, with "no idols, no images in Israel." This led to "a kind of obsessiveness about this second commandment, to the extent that representational art in general seemed to have been rejected." This is evident in riots over Roman eagles and standards. Herod the Great "was very careful to include no representational art."
- **Ebbing and Flowing:** This strictness "ebbed and flowed," with later periods (4th century AD) showing renewed embrace of representational art in synagogues (e.g., Zodiac mosaics). However, common artistic motifs were geometrical patterns, plant motifs, menorahs, and the Star of David.

5. The Church and Icons

- **Jesus and Paul:** "Jesus never mentioned the second commandment." Paul and 1 John discussed keeping "from idols," but "clearly talking about images that were of pagan gods."
- **Emergence of Iconography:** Iconography began in the church around the "third century AD."
- **Iconoclasm:** The "iconoclasm controversy" (icon war) in the Eastern Orthodox Church saw factions opposed to icons. Although iconoclasm was eventually "rejected, and the Orthodox Church came to embrace them," its "spirit and the arguments of the iconoclasts were later resurrected by the Protestants."
- **Tomasino's Concern:** While acknowledging that many Christians use icons, Tomasino expresses nervousness, not necessarily believing they violate the Second Commandment directly, but the "principles behind the Second Commandment" – that "God is too big to be contained in a solid form." He worries that imagery "could, in fact, limit our vision of God."
- **Danger of Permanence:** "It is fine to have images of God... The problem, of course, is when we let those images get set in stone, when they become too permanent in our minds, because that's when we become limited and we become constricted in our understandings of who God is, how God works." They can "take the place of the real Lord."

6. The Permitted Image of God: Humanity

- **The Human Image:** The Bible "does permit one image of God, and in fact endorses one image of God. And that image is, of course, the human image. God made humanity in the image of God."
- **God Manifest in Humanity:** "How is God manifest in this world? God is manifest in this world through humanity."
- **Jesus as the Image:** "Jesus, of course, affirms this when he tells his followers, How can you say, Show me the Father? If you have seen me, you have seen the Father." Jesus, in his "fully human form," "embodied the Spirit of God."

- **The Body of Christ:** Christians are called "the body of Christ, still here in the world."
- **True Worship and Service:** The "greatest devotion that we can show, the greatest way that we can see the image of God, is to look for that image in the neighbors who are called in the Bible, the image of God." This means "feeding our neighbors, by clothing the naked," rather than "pouring out libations in front of an image."

Conclusion

The Second Commandment's prohibition against graven images is not merely a historical artifact but a profound theological statement about the nature of God and appropriate worship. While its interpretation has varied, the core message emphasizes God's transcendence, incomprehensibility, and resistance to human manipulation or reduction. The ultimate "image of God" to be cherished and served, according to Tomasino, is not an inanimate object but humanity itself, reflecting God's presence in the world.

3) Study Guide: The Ten Commandments, Session 3: Commandment 2: No Images - Study Guide

I. Overview of Commandment 2: "No Graven Images"

- **Controversy of Interpretation:**
 - Is it Commandment 2 or 1b (extension of "no other gods")?
 - Jewish, Protestant, and Orthodox traditions view it as Commandment 2, prohibiting *all* images, not just pagan ones.
 - Catholic and Lutheran traditions view it as 1b, prohibiting *only* images of pagan gods.
 - This distinction is crucial for the debate over icons and images of God.
- **Biblical Wording and Implication:**

- "You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on 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..."
- The phrase "bow down to them or worship them" suggests a focus on pagan gods.
- However, Jewish tradition, and some Islamic strands, interpret it strictly to mean *no representational art of any kind*.

II. Understanding "Idol" in the Ancient World

- **Beyond Famous People:** Modern understanding often links "idol" to celebrities; ancient context refers to images of gods.
- **Variety of Forms:Anthropomorphic:** Human-shaped figures (e.g., Baal).
- **Theriomorphic:** Animal forms (e.g., Egyptian gods).
- **Symbols:** Abstract representations (e.g., Aten disc, sun/star symbols, Christian triangles).
- **Massabots:** Standing stones or pillars.
- **Sacred Trees/Groves:** Natural objects designated as representations of gods.
- **Embodiment of Divine Presence:** Ancient peoples believed idols *embodied* the spirit or presence of the god they represented.
- **Rituals:** Elaborate rituals like "Cleansing of the Mouth" and "Opening of the Mouth" were performed to forge a connection between the god and the image.
- Before rituals, it was a statue; after, it could be called a god.
- **Ubiquity of Idols:** Idols were common across ancient cultures; the Greeks found the Jews unique for *not* having images, even calling them "atheists."

III. God's Permitted Images and Aniconism

- **God-given Images:** God provided tangible images for Israel (pillar of fire, pillar of cloud) for guidance.

- **Biblical Imagery of God:** The Bible itself uses various images to describe God:
 - Human-like actions (writing with a finger, showing his back).
 - Husband, mountain, rock, mother, fortress, king (most common).
 - These images embody qualities for human understanding and relation.
- **Aniconism:** The rejection of *physical representations* of God in worship.
- Israel was unique among ancient peoples in rejecting iconic representations of their God, though they did possess idols (usually of pagan gods).

IV. Historical Persistence of Idolatry in Israel

- **Immediate Violation:** Israel demanded a golden calf *while* Moses was receiving the commandments.
- **Throughout Old Testament History:** Idolatry remained a persistent problem in Israel, even involving images that *might* have been intended for the Lord.
- Examples of pagan idols found: Sekhmet, Bez, Eye of Horus, Mother Goddess fertility figurines, Baal Seth Scarab, Egyptian scarabs.
- Political alliances often involved honoring neighbors' gods.
- The Hezekiah seal and Shalemite seal show possible violations even among "good" kings or within Israelite communities.
- **Second Temple Period Shift:** After 515 BC, overt idolatry largely ceased in Judah until Hellenistic reforms (e.g., Abomination of Desolation).
- Judaism became obsessive about Commandment 2, rejecting *all* representational art (human/animal depictions).
- Later, attitudes ebbed and flowed, with some representational art appearing in synagogues (4th century AD).

V. Rationale Behind the Prohibition of Images of the Lord

- **God is Immeasurable and Uncontainable:** 1 Kings (Solomon's temple dedication): "Heavens and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less this house."

- Isaiah 66: "Heaven is my throne and earth a stool for my feet. Where's the house that you would build for me?"
- Idols limit God's vastness; "God does not fit in a box."
- **Images Limit Our Vision of God:** Once images become "set in stone," they can restrict our understanding and imagination of God, leading to misconceptions.
- **Idols Can Be Manipulated:** Prophetic critique: Idols can be made to conform to human desires (e.g., pouring libations, painting smiles).
- Golden Calf: An attempt to manipulate God's approval and facilitate a return to Egypt.
- **Idols Embody Human Biases and Ideals:** People project their own values, aesthetics, and biases onto images of God (e.g., beauty, strength, race, gender).
- God, however, wants his *people* to embody *His* values, not the other way around.

VI. The Church and Iconoclasm

- **Jesus and Paul:** Jesus did not mention Commandment 2. Paul and 1 John address pagan idolatry.
- **Emergence of Iconography:** Iconography appeared in the church around the 3rd century AD.
- **Iconoclasm Controversy (Icon War):** Eastern Orthodox Church; two main periods (726-787 AD, 814-842 AD).
- Possibly influenced by Muslim rejection of images.
- While iconoclasm was eventually rejected by the Orthodox Church, its arguments influenced Protestantism.
- **Modern Relevance:** The principles behind Commandment 2 (God is too big to be contained, images can limit vision, etc.) remain relevant.
- The danger is when images become permanent and take the place of the real Lord.

VII. The Permitted Image: Humanity

- **Humanity as God's Image:** The Bible explicitly states that humanity is made in the image of God.
- God is manifested in the world through human beings.
- **Jesus as the Fullness of God's Image:** "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father."
- Jesus, in his full humanity, embodied the Spirit of God. Rejecting his humanity is heresy.
- **The Body of Christ (Believers):** Followers of Jesus are his body in the world.
- True service to God is not through ritualistic devotion to physical images but through serving neighbors (the poor, the wealthy, the orphan, the waitress, etc.) who bear God's image.

Quiz

1. **Interpretational Divide:** Briefly explain the main difference in how Jews, Protestants, and Orthodox Christians interpret the Second Commandment compared to Catholics and Lutherans.
2. **Scope of Prohibition:** Does the Second Commandment, according to Tomasino, only prohibit images of pagan gods, or does it extend further? Explain the strict interpretation held by some traditions.
3. **Ancient Idol Embodiment:** How did ancient peoples typically understand the relationship between a physical idol and the god it represented? What rituals were involved in this belief?
4. **Israel's Uniqueness:** In what way were the ancient Israelites unique among other ancient peoples regarding idols, and how did this lead to the Greeks calling them "atheists"?
5. **God's Immeasurability:** According to the rationale presented, why can no physical image truly do justice to the Lord? Reference a biblical example given in the text.

6. **Idols and Manipulation:** Explain how idols, unlike the true God, could be manipulated according to ancient beliefs and the Old Testament critique. Provide an example.
7. **Human Biases:** How do idols often embody human biases and ideals, and why is this problematic in understanding God?
8. **Second Temple Period Shift:** Describe the significant change in Jewish attitudes towards representational art during the Second Temple period. Was this a strict or lenient interpretation of the commandment?
9. **Iconoclasm in the Church:** What was the "Iconoclasm Controversy," where did it primarily occur, and what was its lasting impact on Christianity?
10. **The Permitted Image:** What is the *one* image of God that the Bible explicitly permits and endorses, and how does this relate to serving God in the world?

Quiz Answer Key

1. **Interpretational Divide:** Jews, Protestants, and the Orthodox interpret the Second Commandment as a standalone prohibition against *all* images, not just pagan ones. In contrast, Catholics and Lutherans view it as an extension of the First Commandment, prohibiting *only* images of pagan gods, allowing for images of the Lord.
2. **Scope of Prohibition:** According to Tomasino, while the wording might initially suggest only pagan gods, the commandment is understood by Jews, Protestants, and the Orthodox as prohibiting *all* images, including those of the Lord. Some strands of Jewish tradition and Islam interpret it very strictly to mean no representational art of any kind.
3. **Ancient Idol Embodiment:** Ancient peoples believed that idols could embody a portion of the god's presence or spirit. This embodiment was achieved through elaborate rituals, such as the "Cleansing of the Mouth" and "Opening of the Mouth," which were designed to forge a connection between the god and the physical image, transforming it from a mere statue into a representation of the divine.
4. **Israel's Uniqueness:** Ancient Israel was unique in rejecting iconic representations of *their* God. Other ancient peoples universally had idols.

This distinct practice led early Greeks, upon encountering the Jews, to describe them as "atheists" because they saw no physical gods or images to worship.

5. **God's Immeasurability:** No physical image can truly do justice to the Lord because God is immense and uncontainable. As Solomon states in 1 Kings, "the heavens and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less this house that I have built." The idea of making a statue to "hold" God is therefore seen as nonsensical, as God cannot be limited by physical structures.
6. **Idols and Manipulation:** Idols could be manipulated by humans to appear to confirm their desires or beliefs. For instance, people could pour liquid offerings into an idol's mouth, and since it wouldn't spit it out, they'd assume the god accepted the gift. The golden calf incident is an example where the Israelites created an image, perhaps to manipulate God into approving their return to Egypt, expecting the calf to "go before them."
7. **Human Biases:** Idols often embody the human biases and ideals of those who create or worship them. People project their own values concerning beauty, strength, race, or gender onto images of God. This is problematic because God wants his people to embody *His* values, rather than allowing human values to define or limit their understanding of God.
8. **Second Temple Period Shift:** During the Second Temple period, Judaism exhibited a significant shift towards an "obsessiveness" about the Second Commandment. This led to a general rejection of *all* representational art, especially human and animal depictions, as seen in the riots over Roman eagles and standards, and Herod's temple lacking such art. This was a very strict interpretation.
9. **Iconoclasm in the Church:** The "Iconoclasm Controversy" was a major conflict within the Eastern Orthodox Church (726-787 AD and 814-842 AD) concerning the use of religious images or icons. While iconoclasm was eventually rejected, its spirit and arguments were later resurrected and influenced many Protestant traditions, shaping their views against the use of icons.

10. The Permitted Image: The one image of God the Bible explicitly permits and endorses is humanity itself, as human beings are created in God's image. This relates to serving God in the world by affirming that God is manifested through humanity, and the truest devotion and way to "see" God's image is by serving and honoring our neighbors, who embody God's image.

Essay Format Questions

1. Discuss the historical controversies surrounding the interpretation of the Second Commandment. Analyze how different religious traditions (Jewish, Protestant, Orthodox, Catholic, Lutheran) have understood its scope, and evaluate the implications of these varying interpretations for the use of religious imagery.
2. Explore the ancient understanding of idols beyond mere statues. How did ancient peoples believe idols functioned, and what rituals were involved in establishing their divine presence? Compare and contrast this ancient view with how modern society might superficially define an "idol."
3. Analyze the primary rationales given in the source material for the prohibition of making images of the Lord. Discuss how the concepts of God's immeasurability, the potential for manipulation, and the projection of human biases contribute to the negative view of such images.
4. Trace the historical trajectory of idolatry in ancient Israel, from the demand for the golden calf to the Second Temple period. How persistent was the problem, what forms did it take (pagan vs. potentially Israelite images), and how did Jewish attitudes towards representational art evolve over time?
5. Examine the concept of "aniconism" in Israelite religion and its distinction from other ancient cultures. In what ways does the source argue that the Bible *does* permit images of God, and how does this lead to the surprising conclusion that humanity itself is the ultimate "image" of God? Discuss the practical implications of this understanding for worship and service.

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Aniconism:** The rejection or absence of iconic representations, particularly of a deity, in worship.

- **Anthropomorphic:** Attributing human form or characteristics to a god, animal, or object.
- **Aten disc:** A symbol, often depicted as a sun disc with rays ending in hands, representing the Egyptian deity Aten, particularly during the Amarna period.
- **Baal:** A common title used for gods in various ancient Near Eastern religions, often associated with fertility and weather.
- **Bez:** An ancient Egyptian dwarf deity, popular as a protector god, especially associated with childbirth, music, and dance.
- **Cleansing of the Mouth (ritual):** An ancient ritual performed on idols or statues, believed to purify them and prepare them for divine indwelling.
- **Dais:** A raised platform, typically at the front of a room, for a throne, speaker, or other important person.
- **Diaspora communities:** Jewish communities living outside of the traditional homeland of Israel.
- **Graven images:** Carved or sculpted images, especially those worshipped as idols. The term used in the Second Commandment.
- **Hathor:** An ancient Egyptian goddess often depicted as a cow or a woman with cow's ears or horns, associated with love, beauty, music, motherhood, and joy.
- **Hellenistic reforms:** Cultural and political changes introduced in the ancient world following the conquests of Alexander the Great, which sought to spread Greek language, culture, and influence.
- **Huromazda:** A corrupted form of Ahura Mazda, the supreme being in Zoroastrianism, often represented by the winged sun disk.
- **Icon:** A religious image, typically painted on a wooden panel, used in the Eastern Orthodox and other Eastern Christian churches as an aid to devotion.
- **Iconoclasm:** The belief in, or practice of, destroying or opposing religious images/icons.

- **Iconoclasm Controversy (Icon War):** A period in the Eastern Orthodox Church (8th-9th centuries AD) marked by a theological and political dispute over the veneration of religious icons.
- **Idol:** An image or representation of a god used as an object of worship. More broadly, an object of extreme devotion.
- **Ishtar:** An ancient Mesopotamian goddess associated with love, war, and fertility.
- **Josiah:** A king of Judah in the 7th century BC, known for his religious reforms that sought to centralize worship in Jerusalem and eliminate idolatry.
- **Lampoon:** A sharp, often sarcastic, piece of writing that ridicules a person, group, or institution. In the context of the prophets, often used to mock the absurdity of idolatry.
- **Libations:** A pouring out of a liquid (wine, oil, etc.) as an offering to a deity.
- **Manasseh:** A king of Judah (7th century BC), son of Hezekiah, known for his widespread reintroduction of idolatry and pagan practices.
- **Massabots:** Standing stones or pillars, often simple and unadorned, used in ancient Near Eastern religions as cultic objects or symbols of divine presence.
- **Opening of the Mouth (ritual):** An ancient ritual performed in Mesopotamia and Egypt on cult statues or mummies, designed to animate them and enable them to interact with the world of the living.
- **Representational art:** Art that depicts recognizable subjects from the natural world (e.g., humans, animals, objects).
- **Scarab:** A type of beetle-shaped amulet or seal common in ancient Egypt, often inscribed with symbols and believed to represent rebirth and eternal life.
- **Second Temple Period:** The period in Jewish history between the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem (c. 515 BCE) and its destruction by the Romans (70 CE).

- **Sekhmet:** An ancient Egyptian warrior goddess as well as goddess of healing, often depicted as a lioness.
- **Sumerian excavations:** Archaeological digs in Sumer, an ancient civilization in Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq), known for early urban cultures and religious practices.
- **Theriomorphic:** Having an animal form or characteristics; specifically, deities depicted in animal forms.
- **Vassals:** In a feudal system, a person or state owing allegiance and service to a sovereign or lord. Used here metaphorically to describe Israel's relationship to God.
- **Winged sun disk:** A symbol common in ancient Near Eastern cultures, often associated with royalty, divinity, and protection.

4) FAQs What is the Second Commandment and why has it been controversial?

The Second Commandment states, "You shall not make for yourselves any graven images." Its interpretation has been highly controversial throughout history, largely due to its wording. Some traditions, including Jews, Protestants, and the Orthodox, view it as a distinct commandment prohibiting all images, not just those of pagan gods. Conversely, Catholics and Lutherans often see it as a sub-point (1b) of the First Commandment ("You shall have no other gods"), meaning it only forbids images of pagan deities, not images of the Lord. This difference in interpretation led to significant historical conflicts like the Iconoclastic Controversy in the Eastern Orthodox Church, where the use of religious icons was fiercely debated.

How have different religious traditions interpreted the prohibition of images?

Jewish tradition has historically understood the Second Commandment very strictly, at times prohibiting any form of representational art. Similar interpretations exist within some strands of Islam. This strict view extended to the point where early Greek observers reportedly described Jews as "atheists" because they lacked physical idols or images of their God. In Christianity, the interpretation has varied significantly. While early church leaders criticized the use of icons, the practice became more widespread around the 3rd century AD. The Iconoclastic Controversy in the Eastern Church saw periods where images were rejected, though ultimately

embraced. Protestants later revived many iconoclastic arguments, often emphasizing the principle that God is too immense to be confined by a physical image.

What constitutes an "idol" in the ancient world, and how did people interact with them?

In the ancient world, an idol was primarily understood as an image of a god, not merely a famous person. Idols took various forms, including anthropomorphic (human-shaped) figures like the god Baal, theriomorphic (animal-shaped) figures like Egyptian gods, symbols such as the Aten disc, and even simple standing stones or pillars (massabots). It was widely believed that these idols could embody a portion of the god's presence, requiring elaborate rituals like the "Cleansing of the Mouth" and "Opening of the Mouth" to establish a connection between the god and the image. Idols were ubiquitous; virtually all ancient peoples had them, and they were often captured as spoils of war to signify the subjugation of both the people and their gods.

Did ancient Israel always adhere to the Second Commandment, and what archaeological evidence supports this?

Despite the clear prohibition, the history of Israel shows a persistent struggle with idolatry, even involving images that might have been intended to represent the Lord. Archaeological excavations in Jerusalem and other Judean cities have unearthed numerous idols, including Sekhmet idols, Bez figures (an Egyptian god of childbirth), the Eye of Horus, mother goddess fertility figurines, and scarabs. Some findings, such as the Hezekiah seal from the 8th century BC depicting the Egyptian Ankh and a winged sun disk, raise questions about whether even good kings like Hezekiah engaged in practices that violated the Second Commandment. These discoveries suggest that pagan idolatry was a continuous problem in Israel up until the Second Temple period, after 515 BC.

Why did God prohibit images of himself, according to the sources?

While the Bible doesn't explicitly state all the reasons, several rationales are suggested. Firstly, no physical image or structure can adequately capture or contain the immensity of God. As Solomon acknowledged when dedicating the Temple, "the heavens and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less so this house

that I have built." Secondly, idols can be manipulated by humans to serve their own desires or biases, leading to a distorted understanding of God. The incident of the golden calf illustrates this, as the Israelites created an image they believed would approve of their desire to return to Egypt. Thirdly, idols tend to embody human biases and ideals, projecting human values onto God rather than allowing God to instill His values in humanity. Creating a fixed image of God requires choices (e.g., gender, race, attributes) that limit our understanding of a boundless deity.

How did interpretations of the Second Commandment evolve in Judaism during the Second Temple period and beyond?

During the Second Temple period (after 515 BC), Judaism developed a strong aversion to idolatry, which became an "obsessiveness" regarding the Second Commandment. This led to a general rejection of representational art, including human and animal depictions, to the extent that even Roman standards with animal figures caused riots in Jerusalem. Herod the Great's temple, for instance, avoided all representational art. While this strictness ebbed and flowed (e.g., later synagogues included Zodiac mosaics), geometrical patterns, plant motifs, menorahs, and the Star of David became common artistic symbols. This period saw a literal interpretation of the commandment, even for images not intended for worship, which some argue might have been "pedantic."

What is the Christian perspective on images of God, and what is the "one image" permitted by the Bible?

Christianity's approach to images has been complex, marked by periods of acceptance and rejection of icons. While early church leaders sometimes criticized icons, the practice became more widespread over time. The New Testament, particularly Paul and 1 John, warns against "idols," but the context often points to pagan gods rather than images of the Christian God. The primary concern expressed by some Christians regarding icons is not necessarily a direct violation of the Second Commandment, but rather a worry that physical images might limit one's understanding of an infinite God.

The Bible, however, does endorse one specific "image" of God: humanity itself. Human beings are created "in the image of God." This means God is manifested in the world through people. Jesus further affirmed this by stating, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father," implying that God is fully revealed in His human form.

Christians are called to be the "body of Christ," manifesting God's presence in the world not through static images, but through acts of service to their neighbors, especially the poor and vulnerable, recognizing that every human being bears the divine image.

What are the dangers of allowing images of God to become "set in stone" in our minds?

While the Bible uses many images (e.g., God as rock, king, mother) to help people relate to God, the danger arises when these mental images become "set in stone" or too permanent. Such fixed images can limit our vision of God, analogous to a child mistaking a picture of Jesus for God himself and defining God by physical traits. If images become rigid, they can restrict our understanding of God's boundless nature and how He works. Furthermore, fixed images risk becoming manipulative or embodying human biases, as people may project their own ideals onto God. The core principle of the Second Commandment, relevant even today, is that God is too vast to be contained or fully represented by any static, physical form, and allowing images to become too permanent can lead to a substitution of the image for the true Lord.