

# As It Is Written

As it is written, Exodus 20:3<sup>1</sup> tells us that God requires that there,

*“Not shall there be for you, other (*a·chey·reem*) gods above me”.*

Understood correctly, Exodus 20:3 is not a declaration of monotheism as is often claimed<sup>2</sup>. Rather, it is the description of an exclusive [covenantal] relationship requiring unqualified fidelity. The author’s use of the Hebrew word *acheyreem* is instructive: it is usually translated as *another* or more rarely, as in this verse, *other*. But, neither of these words quite capture the connotation. Perhaps a better translation would convey the idea that honoring a god who is *acheyreem* is out of place in the way that a plumber attending a carpenter’s convention would be inappropriate. Here, again, we have an echo of Genesis 1:26-27. Mankind was made in God’s image. It would be inappropriate, claims the text, to honor any deity other than the one in whose image mankind was made. Our image is of God, not the sun, nor the moon. We’re connected to God, not because He’s prominent or beneficent or all-powerful. These characteristics can also be attributed to, say the sun, or the rain. No, we’re connected to God because we are His image on earth. Moreover, we are exclusively God’s. No other of God’s creation bears God’s image.



Having established the principle of exclusivity, God speaks next to correct another error, namely, the natural human inclination to worship nature through artfully made visible idols (Exodus 20:4-6),

*Not shall you make for you an idol or any likeness which is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters underneath the earth. Not shall you bow down to them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting (*po·qed*) the iniquity (*a·vohn*) of the fathers upon the sons on the third and fourth generations of those who hate me, but showing grace to the thousands who love Me and guard My commandments.*

With these words, God reminds the Israelites, that the worship of natural objects – from dung beetles to Pharaoh – will not be tolerated. The overall message is clear: any being that can be represented as a visible image cannot be God. The unstated reason, of course, arises from Genesis 1:1-5 in which we first learned that God is incorporeal and transcendent.

What’s wrong with worshipping visible images or the things they represent? The answer is that the idolization of nature or its elements, elevates that over which God commanded mankind to rule (Gen 1:26-28). This constitutes a perversion of God’s created order. Mankind, though objectively natural, was charged with ruling over nature and his own material inclinations. In the text, the divine author makes explicit the consequences of ordering our lives to something other than God’s will. Such practices lead to iniquities (*avohn*) and the Lord vows to *poqed* these iniquities unto the third or fourth generation.

<sup>1</sup> All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

<sup>2</sup> This statement is not a tacit recognition of the existence of other gods. Rather, God is simply recognizing that mankind believes that other gods exist and are worthy of worship.

An iniquity differs from a sin (*het*). To sin is to miss the mark, as in missing a bull's eye. An iniquity is to do something inappropriate! For the sin, only the sinner gets punished. However, iniquities persist and have long term consequences. How this comes about, the text leaves wonderfully ambiguous thanks to the Hebrew verb *poqed* – which means both *visiting* and *remembering*. Either the Lord promises to inflict the parent's inappropriate deeds on the children, or He promises to allow its consequences to be expressed across the generations until repentance or cleansing is affected. Either way, the perversity of the parent's iniquity will reverberate through the ages.

Thus, we are put on notice: where we place God in our lives will affect future generations because our iniquities are perpetuated. Thankfully, overshadowing all is the promise of God's grace bestowed "*to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and guard My commandments*".

From this simple statement against idol-worship we learn that God is not indifferent to the conduct of human beings. Our choice is between living either in relation to the Lord or in relation to gods that are inappropriate (or strange) for us. Further, we learn that while our choices will have consequences for those who come later, the blessings that follow from God-loving conduct are more far-reaching than are the miseries caused by iniquitous conduct. There will be perversity in every generation, but still the world overflows with God's grace.

And the surprising turn in this reflection on idolatry highlights the decisive (and perhaps most important) difference between *acheyreem* gods and our God: under the rule of the former the world cannot embody the kind of grace, kindness, and blessing here foretold<sup>3</sup>. The implications for how we are to live in the light of this teaching are clear. The generations to follow are at risk from the iniquities we commit; but nearly endless generations will benefit from the good that we do. An enormous responsibility, to be sure, but yet we know also that we are not *solely* responsible for the world's fate. Redemption is always possible. Even as we fail, there is grace.

Now, go and study.

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<sup>3</sup> Think of it this way: nature doesn't build hospitals or care for the poor, sick, or helpless.