

Deuteronomy

Lesson #3

A Sacred Covenant

(4: 1-43)

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Review

In Lesson #2 we noted that in Moses' 1st Discourse he speaks to the Israelites on the plains of Moab—the new generation that was born and bred in the wilderness—*as if* they had all been present in Egypt, had experienced the Exodus, and had rebelled continuously against God and Moses during their 40-year journey to the Promised Land.

On examining our text closely, we learned that although Moses may well have written the “core” of Deuteronomy in his day, it emerged in augmented form during the reign of king Josiah (640-609 B.C.) after it was discovered in the temple by the high priest Hilkiah.

Its discovery led Josiah to lead a vigorous religious revival, accompanied by a public reaffirmation of the covenant established between God and the Israelites at Mt. Sinai (2 Kings 22-23).

Review

Deuteronomy then underwent additional revisions after the Babylonian Captivity (605-539 B.C.), emerging as the book we know today, a book which speaks in the *ipsissima vox*, “the very voice” of Moses, a literary/theological persona.

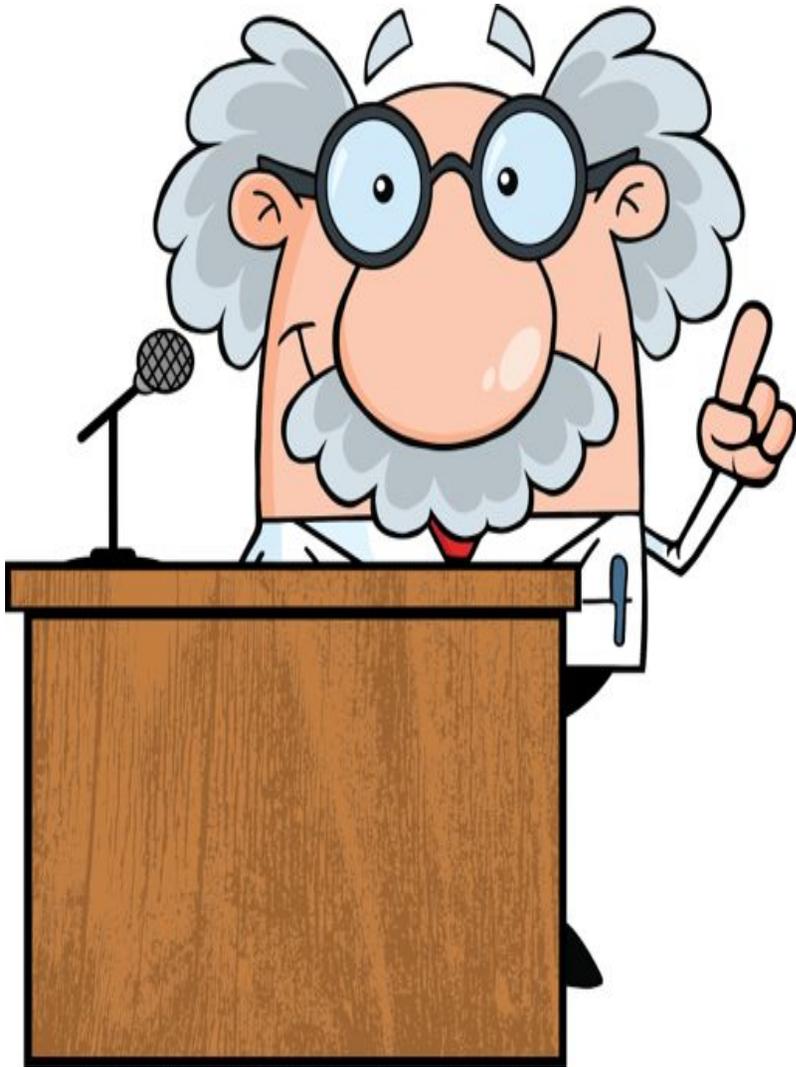
Crafting Deuteronomy in this way enables it to transcend its historical roots on the plains of Moab and become a universal statement, the narrative of all liberation stories: the very archetype for the narrative of redemption.

Preview

In Lesson #3 we conclude Moses' 1st Discourse (1: 1 – 4: 43) as Moses emphasizes the sacredness of God's covenant and the mutual obligations contained within it. As sovereign, God promises Israel land—real estate in the land of Canaan—as well as a rich, full life in a covenant relationship with him; conversely, Israel promises to “fear” the Lord and to obey his commands, commands that govern every aspect of human life, from the food the Israelites eat, to the land they farm, to the relationships they have with one another and with outsiders.

Most importantly, the Israelites are to worship YHWH exclusively.

If they do so, God will bless them abundantly and they will live long in the land; if they do not, God will curse them and they will lose the land—and their lives.



The conclusion of Moses' 1st Discourse emphasizes the enormity, the staggering, transcendent nature of the sovereign God with whom they are sharing a covenant relationship.

Recall the Israelites' first encounter with him at Mt. Sinai. After three days of preparation, three days of washing their garments and sanctifying themselves, God descends upon Mt. Sinai in the sight of all the people:

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“On the morning of the third day there were peals of thunder and lightning, and a heavy cloud over the mountain, and a very loud blast of the shofar, so that all the people in the camp trembled. But Moses led the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stationed themselves at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was completely enveloped in smoke, because the Lord had come down upon it in fire. The smoke rose from it as though from a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled violently. The blast of the shofar grew louder and louder, while Moses was speaking and God was answering him with thunder.”

(Exodus 19: 16-19)



This is an awesome, terrifying moment, amplified by the strict warning that had preceded it.

God had commanded Moses to . . .

“set limits for the people all around, saying: Take care not to go up the mountain, or even to touch its edge. All who touch the mountain must be put to death. No hand shall touch them, but they must be stoned to death or killed with arrows. Whether human being or beast, they must not be allowed to live.”

(Exodus 19: 12-13a)

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In Deuteronomy Moses poses a rhetorical question to the Israelites:

“Ask now of the days of old, before your time, ever since God created humankind upon the earth; ask from one end of the sky to the other: Did anything so great ever happen before? Was it ever heard of? Did a people ever hear the voice of God speaking from the midst of fire, as you did, and live?”

(Deuteronomy 4: 32-33)

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The answer, of course, is “no.”

Moses’ world, as well as the world of Josiah and of the post-Babylonian Israelites, was profoundly polytheistic: everyone believed in many gods.

The Israelites had spent the past 400 years in Egypt, and as we noted earlier, if the Israelites knew anything of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, it was but the faint echo of a folktale from a long time ago.

And even then, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was not the only god; he was their God.



After 400 years in Egypt, the Israelites knew the Egyptian gods, gods with stunning temples and armies of priests, gods associated with the forces of nature, gods whose existence explained the flawed human condition, the battle between good and evil, virtue and sin.



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The stunning Temple of Karnak in Luxor, Egypt is the 2nd-largest ancient religious site in the world, covering 200 acres. St. Peter's, Milan and Notre Dame Cathedrals could fit inside its walls, all at the same time!

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas
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Karnak's hypostyle hall covers 50,000 sq. ft. Its roof (now gone) was supported by 134 massive columns towering up to 80 feet in height and 33 feet in circumference. The hall is the centerpiece of the Precinct of Amun Re, chief Egyptian deity of the Theban Triad: Amun, Mut and Khonsu.

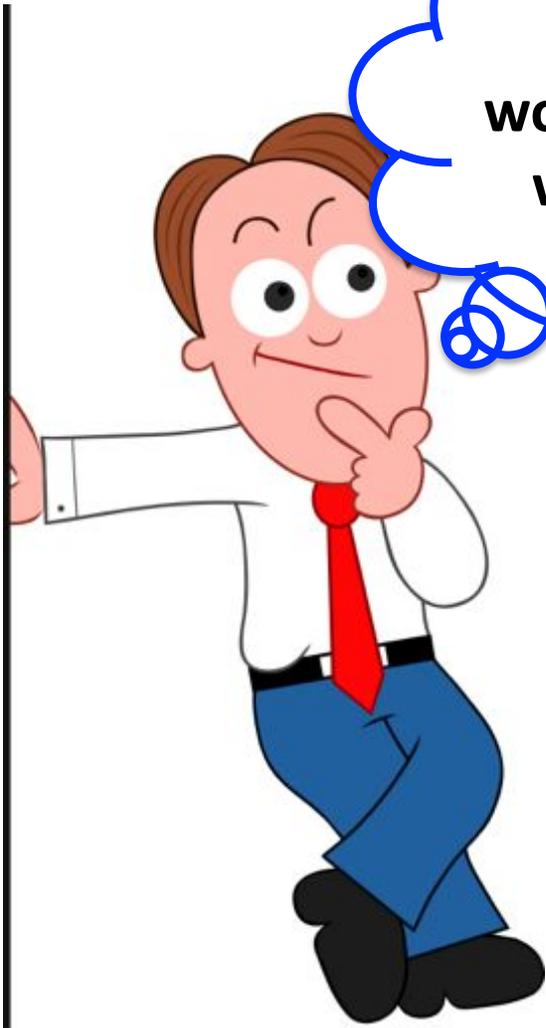
Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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That is an impressive temple complex! No wonder the Egyptian gods were held in such high esteem.



Especially compared to the God of Israel, whom Moses met on the back side of the desert in a bush!

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That's correct!

But God introduces himself to the Israelites dramatically through the 10 plagues he brings on Egypt, ten plagues he brings for three reasons:



1. To show the Israelites who God is.

“You may recount to your son and grandson how I made a fool of the Egyptians and what signs I did among them, so that you may know that I am the Lord” (Exodus 10: 1-2).

2. To show the Egyptians who God is.

“All Egyptians will know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of their midst” (Exodus 7: 5).

3. To bring judgment on the gods of Egypt.

“I will go through Egypt, striking down every firstborn in the land, human being and beast alike, and executing judgment on all the gods of Egypt—I, the Lord!” (Exodus 12: 12).

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**God is going to kick
their butts!**

And that's precisely what God does:

Plague

1st Plague, Water Turned to Blood

2nd Plague, Frogs

3rd Plague, Gnats

4th Plague, Flies

5th Plague, Pestilence

6th Plague, Boils

7th Plague, Hail & Fire

8th Plague, Locusts

9th Plague, Darkness

10th Plague, Death of the Firstborn

Egyptian god

(Osiris)

(Heqet)

(Geb)

(Khepri)

(Apis)

(ALL the gods deprived of their priests)

(Nut)

(*coup de grâce*, the death blow to Egypt)

(Ra)

(ALL the gods plundered of what is rightfully theirs)



As we observed, the conclusion of Moses' 1st Discourse emphasizes the enormity, the numinous, transcendent nature of the God of the covenant.

All other gods are dwarfed by comparison.

This is the sovereign Lord who has chosen to enter into a covenant relationship with the Israelites; *this* is the God who will defend them, bless them, prosper them and watch over them; *this* is the God who invites the Israelites into an intimate, spousal relationship with him.

And in return, God expects from the Israelites fidelity, love and obedience.

“Now therefore, Israel, hear the statutes and ordinances I am teaching you to observe, that you may live, and may enter in and take possession of the land which the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. In your observance of the commandments of the Lord, your God which I am commanding you, you shall not add to what I command you nor subtract from it. You have seen with your own eyes what the Lord did at Baal-peor; the Lord, your God, destroyed from your midst everyone who followed the Baal of Peor; but you, who held fast to the Lord, your God, are all alive today.

(Deuteronomy 4: 1-4)



“Now, therefore, Israel, hear the statutes . . .”

The Hebrew text reads simply “And now,” the usual way of transitioning from the elements of an argument to its conclusion, as our translation indicates by supplying “*therefore*.” At the same time, however, starting the sentence with “Now” suddenly shifts our attention from recalling past events at Mt. Sinai to the immediate present, stressing urgency.

As Robert Alter observes, the verb “to hear” (*shema*) is a signature term in Deuteronomy. Throughout, it carries the sense of listening, absorbing, understanding, and obeying. A fundamentally didactic work, Deuteronomy urges the Israelites to pay careful attention to the exhortations and laws that Moses delivers to them.¹

¹ Robert Alter notes both observations in *The Five Books of Moses, a Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), p. 897. As usual, he is right on target.



“. . . that you may live, and may enter in and take possession of the land which the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you.”

The land—real estate—is an essential component of the covenant that God makes with Israel. As we learned in our study of Leviticus, the land belongs to God, and the Israelites will be merely stewards of God’s land.

In the New Testament Jesus understands this quite well, when in the parable of the tenant farmers he says: *“A man planted a vineyard, leased it to tenant farmers, and then went on a journey . . .”* (Luke 20: 9-18). Like the tenant farmers, if the Israelites fail to be faithful to the landowner and responsible stewards, God will evict them from the land and hand it over to someone else.

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**Br. Nicholas. "Parable of the Tenants,"
Speculum Humanae Salvationis (illumination on parchment), c. 1450.
National Library of the Netherlands.**

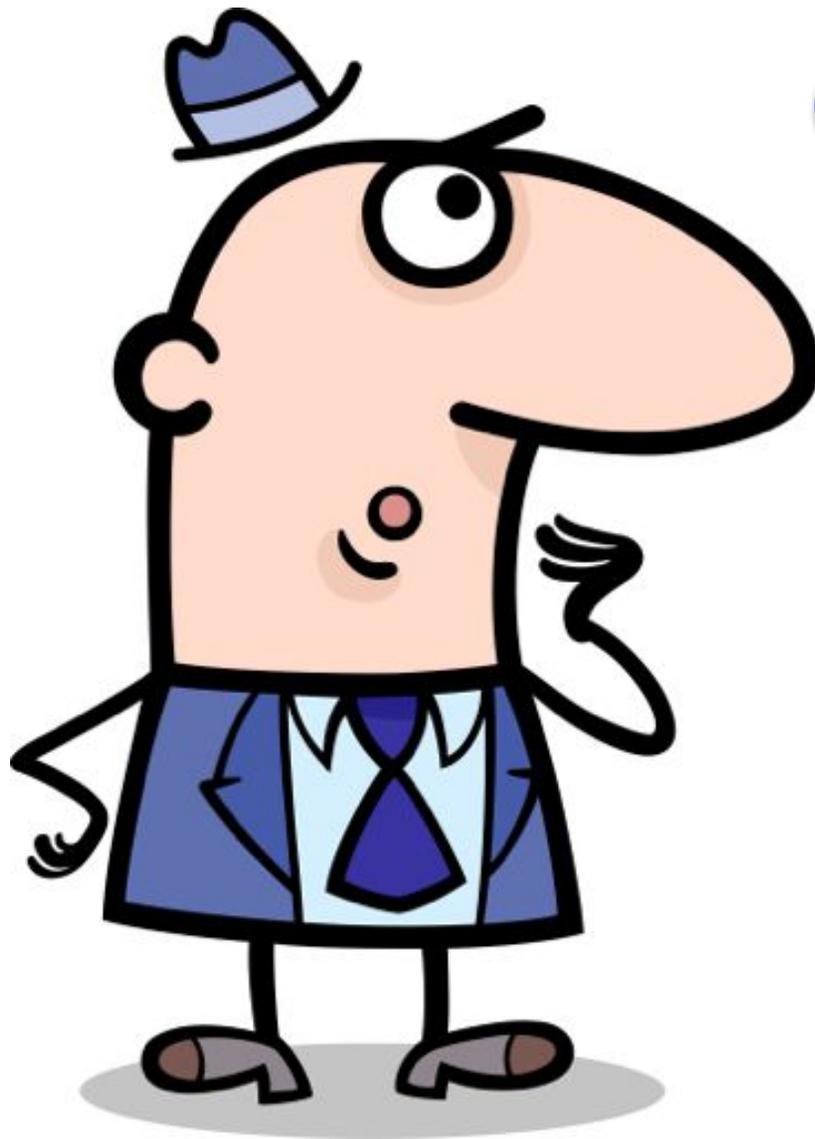


And he does just that to the Israelites in the northern kingdom when the Assyrians take the land in 722 B.C. and with the southern kingdom when the Babylonians take the land in 586 B.C. The Israelites don't return until 539 B.C.



And God evicts the Israelites for a third time when the Romans take the land in A.D. 70, and the Israelites don't return until May 14, 1948!

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Hummm!

“See, I am teaching you the statutes and ordinances as the Lord, my God, has commanded me, that you may observe them in the land you are entering to possess. Observe them carefully, for this is your wisdom and discernment in the sight of the peoples, who will hear of all these statutes and say, ‘This nation is truly a wise and discerning people.’ For what great nation is there that has gods so close to it as the Lord, our God, is to us whenever we call upon him? Or what great nation has statutes and ordinances that are as just as this whole law which I am setting before you today?”

(Deuteronomy 4: 5-8)



God requires faithfulness to the covenant if the Israelites are to enjoy the land and live life in it abundantly, blessed by God.

But the covenant carries with it far greater implications.

In Exodus, when God reaffirms with the people the covenant he made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, he says to them: *“You will be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation”* (Exodus 19: 6).



The Israelites are to be a shining light, an example for all of humanity. As Isaiah says: *“I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach the ends of the earth”* (49: 6).

And Malachi ensures the Israelites: *“Your own eyes will see it, and you will say, ‘Great is the Lord, even beyond the territory of Israel’”* (1: 6).



Honoring the covenant and being faithful to God has profound implications, not just for Israel, but for all of humanity.

We saw in Lesson #2 how Deuteronomy transcends its historical roots on the plains of Moab, becoming a universal statement, the narrative of redemption for all of humanity.

Here, Deuteronomy 4: 5-8 illustrates this explicitly.

“However, be on your guard and be very careful not to forget the things your own eyes have seen, nor let them slip from your heart as long as you live, but make them known to your children and to your children’s children, that day you stood before the Lord your God, at Horeb, when the Lord said to me: Assemble the people for me, that I may let them hear my words, that they may learn to fear me as long as they live in the land and may so teach their children.”

(Deuteronomy 4: 9-10)



“However, be on your guard and be very careful not to forget the things your own eyes have seen, nor let them slip from your heart as long as you live . . .”

The Israelites who stood at Mt. Sinai and heard the voice of God as the mountain quaked, belching smoke and fire, had an extraordinary, transformative experience. Nonetheless, in short order they forgot the intensity—and perhaps the reality—of the experience as their feet ached, their stomachs growled and their frustrations, discouragements and anger simmered and erupted during their 40-year journey through the wilderness.

By the time they reach the plains of Moab, Mt. Sinai had become but a parent’s memory, a tale told late at night around a campfire.

And memory has a way of dimming and of becoming personal mythology.

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“. . . but make them known to your children and to your children’s children, that day you stood before the Lord your God, . . .”

God had warned the Israelites, saying: *“I am commanding you, you shall not add to what I command you nor subtract from it”* (4: 2).

Although personal memory dims and often morphs into personal mythology, the words of Moses on the plains of Moab, as recorded in Deuteronomy, are meant emblazon the covenant in vivid detail on the hearts and minds of each generation.

It is *imperative* that each generation pass those words on accurately and fully—*as written in the book*—lest they be lost, as they were until Hilkiah re-discovered them in the Temple.

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“Assemble the people for me, that I may let them hear my words, that they may learn to fear me as long as they live in the land and may so teach their children.”

As Stephen L. Cook points out, “the language of 4: 10 is pregnant with meaning, extending dynamically out into Israel’s future.”

We learn in Deuteronomy 31: 10-13 that this is precisely what is to happen every seven years on the feast of Booths [or “Tabernacles”] at the singular place [the Temple in Jerusalem] which God will choose. The Hebrew word “assemble” is *qahal* in both 4: 10 and 31: 12, a verbal echo that is not coincidental.²

² *Reading Deuteronomy, a Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishers, Inc., 2015), p. 52.

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“Moses commanded them, saying, On the feast of Booths, at the prescribed time in the year for remission which comes at the end of every seven-year period, when all Israel goes to appear before the Lord, your God, in the place which he will choose, you shall read this law aloud in the presence of all Israel. **Assemble** the people—men, women and children, as well as the resident aliens who live in your communities—that they may hear and so learn to fear the Lord, your God, and to observe carefully all the words of this law. Their children also, who do not know it yet, shall hear and learn to fear the Lord, your God, as long as you live on the land which you are about to cross the Jordan to possess.”

(Deuteronomy 31: 10-13)



Notice that Moses emphasizes that the command to assemble the people and teach them is firmly rooted in the vivid, visceral experience of Mt. Sinai.

“You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain blazed to the heart of the heavens with fire and was enveloped in a dense black cloud. Then the Lord spoke to you from the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of the words, but saw no form; there was only a voice. He proclaimed to you his covenant, which he commanded you to keep; the ten words, which he wrote on two stone tablets. At that time the Lord charged me to teach you the statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land you are about to cross into and possess.”

(Deuteronomy 4: 11-14)



“Then the Lord spoke to you from the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of the words, but saw no form; there was only a voice.”

Indeed, in Exodus 19: 21 the Lord told Moses to *“go down and warn the people not to break through to the Lord in order to see him; otherwise many of them will be struck down.”*

And they don’t.

Exodus is less explicit about this than Deuteronomy, but even in Exodus *“all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the blast of the shofar and the mountain smoking . . .”* (20: 18). As Robert Alter points out, the great Jewish poet and scholar, Abraham Ibn Ezra (A.D. 1089-1164), reads *“You heard the sound of the words, but saw no form”* as *“all the people saw the sounds,”* ingeniously synchronizing Exodus 20: 18 with Deuteronomy 4: 12.³

³ *The Five Books of Moses, a Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), p. 899.



That's really interesting! Perhaps this provides the context for the 2nd commandment: *"You shall not make for yourself an idol or likeness [of God] . . ."* (Exodus 20: 4). God is transcendent, beyond our ability to "see," in all of its various meanings.

And maybe that's why Moses vanishes at the end of Deuteronomy. The Israelites would have ended up worshipping him instead of God!

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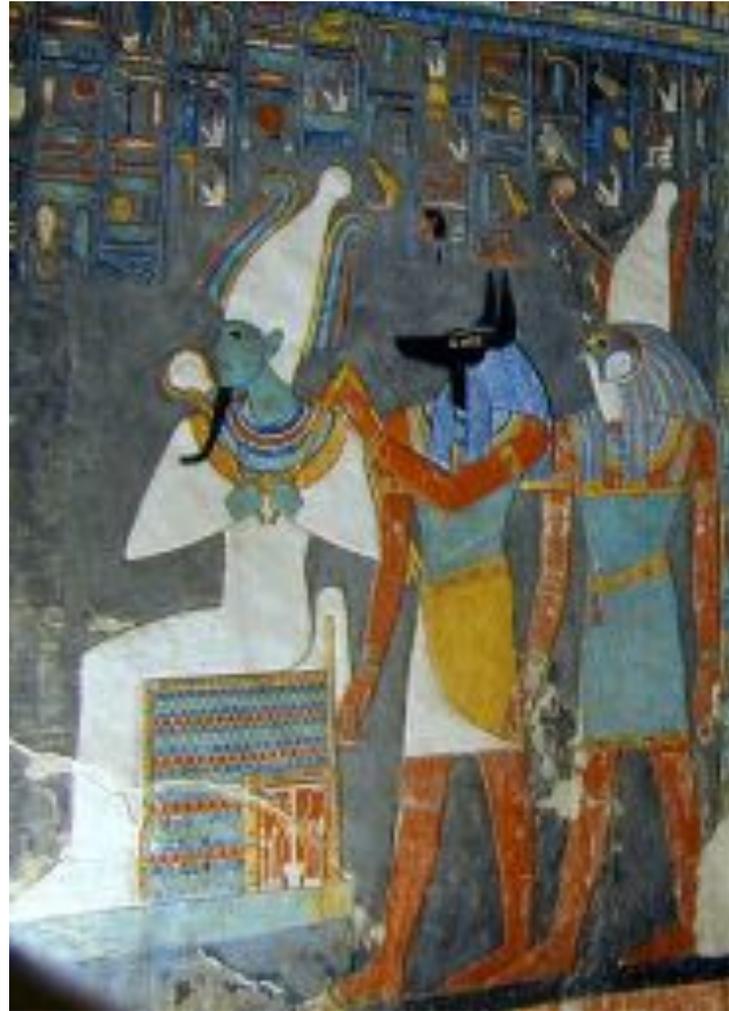
I think you're on to something here! Recall that John falls to his knees to worship the angelic messenger in Revelation *twice* (Revelation 19: 9-10a; 22: 8-9), and the angel instantly and sternly corrects him: "No! Worship God."

The commandment not to make "idols" for yourselves countermands our basic human desire to make the abstract concrete; the ineffable, tactile.

Iconography [εἰκόν, "image"; γράφειν, "to write," or "writing in images"] is the art form that expresses such desire.

Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Greek and Roman gods were all embodied iconographically.

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**Frieze in the tomb of Pharaoh Horemheb (c. 1319-1292 B.C.)
depicting the gods Osiris, Anubis and Horus (KN 57).
Valley of the Kings, Egypt.**



Yet, God is so far beyond our ability to capture him in concrete, tactile form that he commands the Israelites not to make any image of him.

Iconography is a window through which we see the ineffable, and frequently the window becomes opaque and people end up worshiping the image, rather than the reality beyond the image.

This happened with the “serpent of brass” that Moses made in the wilderness when the Israelites were being bitten by vipers. Recall Numbers 21: 4-9—

“The people’s patience was worn out by the journey; so the people complained against God and Moses . . . so the Lord sent among the people seraph serpents, which bit the people so that many of the Israelites died. Then the people came to Moses and said, ‘We have sinned in complaining against the Lord and you. Pray to the Lord to take the serpents from us.’ So Moses prayed for the people and the Lord said to Moses: Make a seraph and mount it on a pole and everyone who has been bitten will look at it and recover. Accordingly Moses made a bronze serpent and mounted it on a pole, and whenever the serpent bit someone, the person looked at the bronze serpent and recovered.”

(Numbers 21: 4-9)



**Benjamin West. *The Brazen Serpent* (oil on canvas), c. 1790.
BJU Museum and Gallery, Greenville, South Carolina.**



That's a very interesting episode! In our study of Numbers we learned that the serpent of brass foreshadows the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. As Jesus said to Nicodemus: *"Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life"* (John 3 14).



I wonder whatever happened to that serpent of brass. Did it become an artifact, like Og's iron bed?

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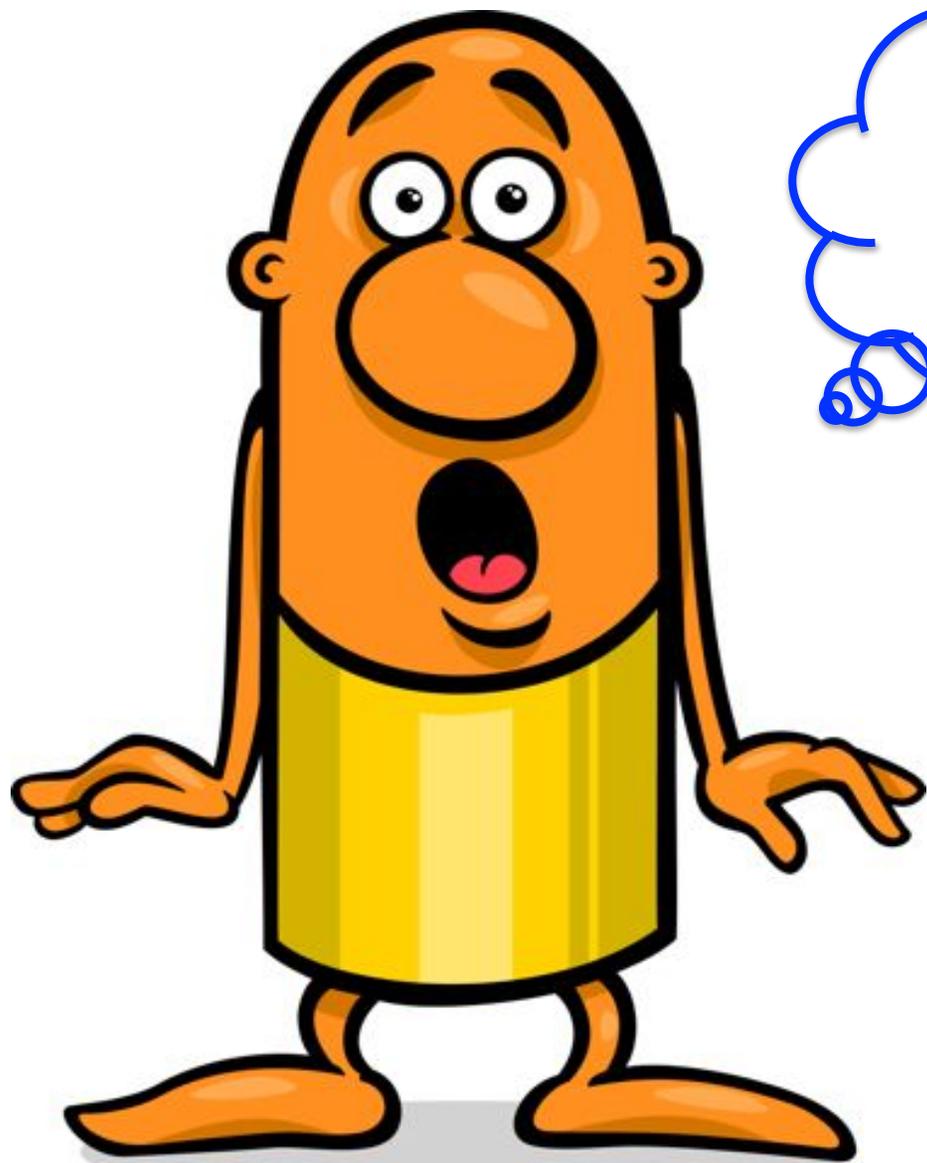


No, it didn't. Something much worse happened to it. When young Hezekiah becomes king seven centuries after the Exodus, we read:

"In the third year of Hoshea, son of Elah, king of Israel, Hezekiah, son of Ahaz, king of Judah, became king. He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem [715-686 B.C.]. His mother's name was Abi, daughter of Zechariah. He did what was right in the Lord's sight, just as David his father had done. It was he who removed the high places, shattered the pillars, cut down the asherah, and smashed the bronze serpent Moses had made, because up to that time the Israelites were burning incense to it. (It was called Nehushtan.)"

(2 Kings 18: 1-4)

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Yikes!



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Because of this tendency to make the abstract concrete; the ineffable, tactile and to end up worshiping the image rather than the reality, Moses warns the Israelites to avoid making any images of God whatsoever, and to shun those who do.

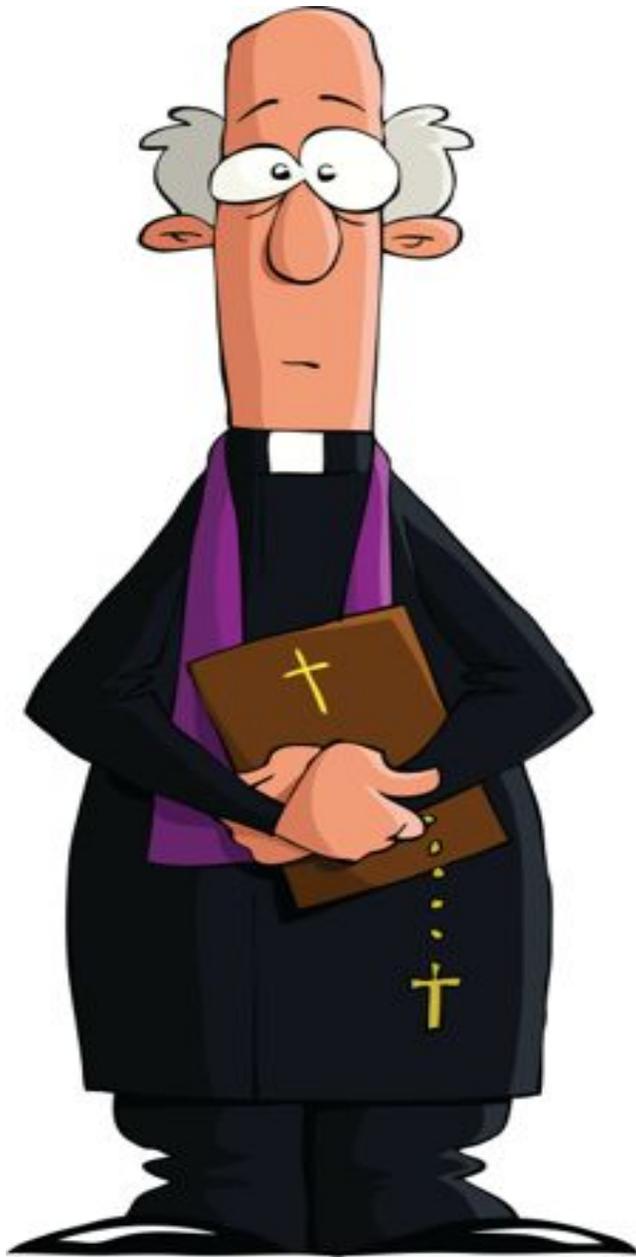
“Because you saw no form at all on the day the Lord spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the fire, be strictly on your guard not to act corruptly by fashioning an idol for yourselves to represent any figure, whether it be the form of a man or a woman, the form of any animal on the earth, the form of any bird that flies in the sky, the form of anything that crawls on the ground, or the form of any fish in the waters under the earth. And when you look up to the heavens and behold the sun or the moon or the stars, the whole heavenly host, do not be led astray into bowing down to them and serving them.”

(4: 15-19a)

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**That's precisely why
there are no images of
God, people or animals in
a synagogue—or in a
mosque.**



Properly understood, Christian art plays a profound role in our understanding of God, but the Church also went through a period of abolishing all images, the “Iconoclastic” era initiated by the Byzantine Emperor Leo III (A.D. 686-741), during which time many Christian “images” were defaced or destroyed.

Iconoclasm emerged again during the 16th-century Protestant Reformation, especially under those influenced by John Calvin.



Chludov Psalter (illuminated Ms. D. 129, fol. 67r), c. 850.

State Historical Museum, Moscow.

[One of only 3 Psalters to survive from the 9th century the clandestine manuscript protests iconoclasm.]

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Moses then stresses the importance of this prohibition against “graven images” and the importance of remaining faithful and obedient to God in the most serious of terms:

“When you have children and children’s children, and have grown old in the land, should you then act corruptly by fashioning an idol in the form of anything, and by this evil done in his sight provoke the Lord, your God, I call heaven and earth this day to witness against you, that you shall all quickly perish from the land which you are crossing the Jordan to possess. You shall not live in it for any length of time but shall be utterly wiped out.”

(4: 25-26)

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Seven hundred years later the prophet Isaiah (740-686 B.C.) produces a courtroom drama in which God sits as judge, with Israel in the docket, and he issues this accusation against his people:

“Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth, for the Lord speaks: Sons have I raised and reared, but they have rebelled against me! An ox knows its owner, and an ass, its master’s manger: but Israel does not know, my people has not understood.”

To which the witnesses—the *heavens* and the *earth*—testify:

“Ah! Sinful nation, people laden with wickedness, evil offspring, corrupt children! They have forsaken the Lord, spurned the Holy One of Israel . . .”

(Isaiah 1: 1-4)

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The courtroom drama spans Isaiah 1-35, wherein God finds Israel guilty of total apostasy, of forsaking him and turning to other gods, *“gods that are works of human hands, of wood and stone, gods which can neither see nor hear, neither eat nor smell”* (Deuteronomy 4: 28).

The punishment? Israel loses the land.

As we know, in 722 B.C. the Assyrians conquer the northern kingdom of Israel, taking the survivors captive to Assyria; and in 686 B.C. the Babylonians conquer the southern kingdom of Judah, taking the survivors captive to Babylon.

As 1 Chronicles 9: 1 rightly concludes: *“Judah had been exiled to Babylon because of its treachery.”*

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Questions for discussion and thought

1. Why does Moses 1st Discourse in Deuteronomy mention that the Israelites only hear God at Mount Sinai, not see him?
2. John's gospel claims that "*No one has ever seen God*" (John 1: 18), so what does it mean that the Lord knew Moses "*face to face*" (Deuteronomy 34: 10)?
3. How does Moses present the God of Israel as being superior to the gods of Egypt?
4. Why does God prohibit the Israelites from making any "images" of him?
5. Why do our churches today often contain images of people from Scripture, and even images of God himself?

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