

Straight Talk #61 on Graven Images

By William Schnobelen © 2012

The Bible makes it clear that we are not to worship idols or make “graven images” of any sort. In the first use of the term, we read right from the Ten Commandments:

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. – Ex. 20:4

This is the very word and commandment of YHWH, so we need to be sure we understand what is meant here.

Now the key word here is “**graven**.” Since this is the first use of the term, we have no immediate basis from the Bible as to its *full* meaning. But other scriptural occurrences of the term and a good dictionary can help out (as well as historical evidence).

In general, the term would indicate that *graven* means something engraved or carved.

The word appears 53 times in the Authorized Version of the Bible; 52 times in Old Testament (Tenakh) Hebrew and once in the New Testament. The vast majority of usage refers to some sort of idol. It is especially interesting to see the one reference in the Book of Acts. Paul is speaking here, and says:

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.
– Acts 17:29

Note that the apostle is discussing things made of gold, silver or stone – things that would have to be *molten* or *carved* by “art and man’s device.”

Finally, Webster’s online dictionary defines the word as “an object of worship carved usually from wood or stone.”¹ Since this pretty much tallies with the way the Bible uses the term, this is our scriptural definition.

Some devout and sincere believers think that this means that they cannot have any pictures or photographs of any sort in their possession. Discussions are raised about pictures of Yah’shua, crosses or even fish symbols. Some believe it is wrong to have a cross hanging on your wall.

¹ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/graven%20image>

Indeed, even author Dave Hunt wrote years ago that it was idolatry to have a painting of the Master on the wall of your home or church. Some people who misuse these scriptures would say that you can have pictures of beloved family members (or pastors), but no pictures of anything religious in your home or church. It seems self-evident that this is making more from these texts than is intended. The word *graven* means something carved, something *three-dimensional*. That would be a sculpture or some sort.

Most people know that in the Roman church, they use statues of “Jesus and Mary” and the saints, etc. in their churches and private devotions. THIS is idolatry. Even though the devout Roman Catholic would say², “We are not praying TO the statue, we are just praying to what the statue *represents*.”

But that is a semantic quibble. The point is not the intent here, but that fact that it is a 3-D sculpture or statue! That is the issue scripturally. The most egregious example of this would be the statue of St. Peter in the basilica bearing his name in Vatican City. It is a large, black stone statue of Peter seated with his foot slightly extended. The toes have been worn off the foot from centuries of devout Catholics bowing and kissing the foot of the statue, even though the REAL St. Peter refused to receive such worship during his life and ministry.³

Images DO appear in the Bible before Exodus. There is Rachel who steals her father’s “images” and hides them under herself in the camel saddle.⁴ She is sitting on them! Surely, if they were paintings, they would have been damaged. No, these are suggested to be little sculptures – analogous to the “plastic Jesuses” you see on some Catholic car dashboards (and yes, those would be idols too).

The word in Hebrew is TERAPHIM.⁵ It is simply the word for images. While we are on the subject of Hebrew, the Hebrew word for “graven” is PECEL that means “idol or carved image.”⁶ So, we are back to carving and 3-d objects.

The other part of this is the peculiar fact that on a few occasions, YHWH actually *ordered* his people to make graven images. The most obvious example of this would be the Ark of the Covenant and the graven cherubim that spread their wings over the mercy seat.

And thou shalt make two cherubims of gold, of beaten work shalt thou make them, in the two ends of the mercy seat.

² The author spent 35 years as a Catholic and graduated with a Master’s in theology from a Catholic seminary in 1980.

³ Acts 10:25-26

⁴ Genesis 31:34-35

⁵ Strong’s #8655

⁶ Strong’s #6459

19 And make one cherub on the one end, and the other cherub on the other end: even of the mercy seat shall ye make the cherubims on the two ends thereof.

20 And the cherubims shall stretch forth their wings on high, covering the mercy seat with their wings, and their faces shall look one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubims be. – Ex. 25:18-20

Obviously, this could not be idolatry since the Almighty commanded it! Then there is the even more surprising account of the brazen serpent:

8 And the Lord said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live.

9 And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived. – Num. 21:8-9

Again, this was a divine command. Additionally, it ended up being a powerful *type* of Yah'shua that He Himself cited in His teachings.⁷ This makes it difficult to say with utter certainty that all graven images are evil. But certainly, as a good general rule, it means that one should not have statues or sculptures around that you are devoted to or “pray to.”

Finally, there is evidence of the reoccurring use of fish images, from the time of Yah'shua and later on, and the cross being used by the very early church. NO SCULPTURES, just two-dimensional paintings. That is the big distinction.

Some people have asked us why our first book, MORMONISM'S TEMPLE OF DOOM, has a Satanic symbol on the cover.⁸ It is there to graphically illustrate the connection between Mormonism, Freemasonry and witchcraft. It was there to expose the unfruitful works of darkness.⁹ Because it is a two-dimensional, it possesses no power to attract evil (unless of course it is being used by an evil magician for sinful purposes).

So, to sum up, there seems to be no scriptural warrant for believing that pictures such as fish symbols, pictures of crosses or of other Biblical things are in any way dangerous or idolatrous. Elsewhere, on our website we have a teaching on the Star of David (Magen David)¹⁰, which is a whole subject in itself. But generally, we have come to believe through

⁷ John 3:14

⁸ It is a goat's head inside an inverted pentagram, commonly known as the Baphomet symbol.

⁹ Eph. 5:11

¹⁰ <http://www.withoneaccord.org/assets/images/freedownloads/Davids%20Shield.pdf>

years of study of both the Bible and the history of the ancient faith, that these symbols are scripturally acceptable.

As Believers, we need to be cautious in these days of decadence and false teachings, but we also need to avoid thinking that the devil has *more power* over our lives than he really does. You can error in either direction, either by being too slipshod OR by being too fearful in your approach to spiritual warfare. Balance and serious study of the Scriptures is critical.

Of course, if you feel convicted about having a fish symbol on your car or whatever and earnestly believe it is wrong, then you should remove it. That is between you and the Almighty. But DO NOT let others put fear in your heart where no fear need exist. There are plenty of REAL issues Believers should take seriously, prayer being of the utmost importance - however, fish, crosses and family portraits are not among them.

Shalom!

With One Accord Ministries
www.withoneaccord.org
3500 Dodge St., Suite 7-290
Dubuque, IA 52003

[Join us on FaceBook!](#)