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## **THE BRAZEN SERPENT WAS A GRAVEN IMAGE, YET NOT AN IDOL!**

**Today's text:** Ex. 20: 1-5; Num. 21: 7-9; John 3: 14-15

### **Extracts:**

1. **“And God spake all these words, saying, Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” [Ex. 20: 1,4]**
2. **“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” [Num. 21:7]**

*A radical pastor was giving a lecture at an interdenominational seminar on “idolatry.” Looking in the direction of the heavily clad religious leaders wearing dangling crosses over their flocks, he pontificated: “the use of graven images in churches is nothing short of idol worship!” Then, he invited questions. As he was about to sit down, a young seminarian [one training to become a priest] asked him, “What time is it?” The radical pastor drew up his left shirt- sleeve to look at his wristwatch. Before he could tell the time, the seminarian fired back, “I asked you for time and you are consulting a graven image?”*

*The relationship between graven images, as defined in **Exodus 2:4** and idolatry [the worship of any other gods other than God] is a problem for the average believer. At one extreme, there are those who believe that to kneel before or bow to any carved image [such as statues of Jesus Christ] or to use any rituals at all [candles, incense, etc.] is an act of idolatry. Yet, such people do not see idolatry in using anointing oil or handkerchiefs, as if those are not graven images. On the other hand, those who use graven images of Christ and others claim that such are mere representations of reality, and that their worship is directed at what the images represent. Yet, they tend to treat those objects as the real thing!*

*God who had commanded in the Ten Commandments that we should not make or worship any graven images was the same One who asked Moses to make the Brazen Serpent [Num. 21:7], a graven image, to which the children of Israel looked for healing when they were bitten by snakes. Did God break His own law? In today's lesson, we shall study the relationship between graven images and true worship. In the process, we may discover that idolatry is subtler than we think.*

## 1. Background

Moses had led the children of Israel to the foot of Mount Sinai where God planned to reveal the Ten Commandments to them. These commandments were comprehensive, and they were meant to cover our relationship with God and fellow human beings. With respect to Himself, God made it quite clear that He was a jealous God who will punish those who disobey Him up to the fourth generation and show mercy to the obedient people up to thousands of generation. Therefore, we must never have other gods before Him [Ex. 20: 1-6]. To emphasize this, He commanded that we should not make graven images of anything on land, air or sea [v. 4] or worship such.

Going by that, we are all idol worshippers! Let me give some examples:

- ❑ The wristwatch is made by man to represent invisible time. It is not time because your watch can stop working but time does not. Our lives are ruled by that graven image: appointments, business hours, sleeping and waking, etc. Without a watch, many of us will be disoriented. We will lose count of reality.
- ❑ At home and in the office, man-made gadgets surround us: television, computers, cookers, telephones, etc. Many of us have lost our commonsense and judgment to the computer!
- ❑ How many of us can feel comfortable or secure if we have no money in our bank accounts, or if we have no savings at all? What “rainy day” are we preparing for, and yet we claim to trust God for our daily bread? Remember, money is made from paper, silver and gold, all taken from the earth!
- ❑ Many of us worship our indulgences: alcohol, pornography, drugs, gambling, sports, work, ambition, pride and vanity, etc. Since they are all man-made, they are graven images!

From the forgoing examples, it is clear that even those of us who claim not to worship idols carry idols in our hearts [Ezek. 14: 3] without realizing it! Therefore, we need to do a more critical analysis of the matter.

## 2. When is a graven image an idol?

To answer this question, let us take three cases from the Bible:

### a) *The Golden Calf* [Ex. 32: 1-6]

While Moses was up in Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments and ceremonial laws from God, the children of Israel asked Aaron to make them a god “which shall go before us” [v. 1]. Aaron took the golden earrings from both the women and men, the same gifts that the Egyptians had by God’s grace lavished on them [Ex. 12: 35-36], and made them a

“molten calf” saying to them, “these be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt” [Ex. 32: 4]. Then, Aaron built an altar and proclaimed “a feast to the Lord” [vv.5-6].

The Golden Calf was a graven image of an animal. The people went ahead to worship it, claiming that that was the god that delivered them out of Egypt. Clearly, this was a violation of their covenant [Ex. 19:8]. This dumb thing could not be God because they had heard the bold voice of the living God speak to them, when they begged Moses, “speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die” [Ex. 20:19]. Therefore, the Golden Calf was an idol because God did not ask them to make it and now they worshipped it. That is idolatry.

b) *The Brazen Serpent* [Num. 21: 6-9]

The people were murmuring again, to the displeasure of God. They complained about the food and the lack of water and did not appreciate anything that God had done for them. So, God sent “fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died” [vv. 1-6]. The people came to Moses and confessed their sins. They asked him to pray to God to remove the snakes. God commanded Moses to “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” [vv. 7-8]. Moses did as he had been commanded. He made the snake of brass, and when those bitten by serpents looked at the Brazen Serpent, they lived [v. 9].

In this example, it was God Himself who commanded the graven image of a serpent to be made. Jesus Christ was to confirm this act as symbolic of His crucifixion when He told Nicodemus, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up; that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life” [Jn 3: 14-15]. The serpent of sin bit us but Jesus who is without sin died for us on the cross, and by His stripes we have been healed [Is. 53: 5; 1 Pet. 2:24]. All we needed to do was to look up to Him, the author and finisher of our faith! [Heb. 12:2].

A similar story can be found in Christian history. The symbol of Christianity was originally the fish, not the cross. In the year 312 A.D., Constantine I was leading his Roman troops to war. The day before the *Battle of the Milvian Bridge*, he and his troops observed in broad daylight a strange sign in the sky. He was not a Christian then. In the sky, they saw a cross of light and the words, *hoc signo victor eris* [‘by this sign you will be victor’]. That night, Jesus Christ appeared to Constantine and instructed him to place the heavenly sign on the battle standards of his army. He fought under this new “power of the Christians” and won a decisive

victory.<sup>1</sup> Soon after, he became a Christian and made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Therefore, the cross, symbolic of the crucifixion of Jesus, is a graven image, commanded by God to be used as a mark of His protection over Constantine's troops. As soldiers of Christ [2 Tim. 2:3], the cross has become the banner of our troops.

c) *The Philistines' Dagon and Israel's Ark of the Covenant* [1 Sam. Chapters 4-6]

While on Mount Sinai, God gave Moses instructions on how the Ark of the Covenant should be made [Ex. 25: 10-22]. It was a box made of acacia wood, overlaid with pure gold, both inside and outside. Four poles were inserted into rings on the four corners so that four persons could lift it. Its lid, called the mercy seat, was also laid with gold. Mounted on the lid were two winged creatures (cherubim), facing each other with spread out wings. The Ark was placed in the tabernacle, where the Lord Himself promised to dwell in [Ex. 25: 8], and it became very sacred to the church of the wilderness. So, although it was a graven image of things in heaven, God's power was there because He had commanded it.

One day, during the time of Samuel, the people of Israel went to war against the Philistines. The people of Israel were badly beaten, losing four thousand men [1 Sam. 4: 1-2]. They then said, "let us fetch the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord out of Shiloh unto us, that, when it cometh among us, it may save us out of the hand of our enemies" [v. 3]. They shouted for joy when it was brought. They carried it to the war front. The Philistines defeated them, killed 30, 000 men and seized the Ark! [vv. 5-10]. The Philistines took the Ark of God and put it in the house of their god, Dagon [1 Sam. 5: 1-2]. Then, strange things began to happen!

The next morning, the Philistines found that Dagon had "fallen upon his face to the earth before the Ark of the Lord" [v. 3]. They put it up. The next day, they found that Dagon had fallen to the ground, with its hands and head broken into pieces. Only a stump remained of their god! Neither the priests of Dagon nor the people dared to come near the house of their god. Moreover, God inflicted tumours on the whole country of the Philistines! [vv. 4-7].

The leaders consulted among themselves and decided to return the Ark to the owners. They asked their priests and diviners what to do to the Ark of God. They answered, "If ye send away the Ark of the God of Israel, send it not empty; but in any wise return him a trespass offering: then ye shall be healed" The prescribed trespass offering took the form of graven images of the tumours and of "your mice that mar the land; and ye shall

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<sup>1</sup> [www.roman-emperors.org/conniei.htm#](http://www.roman-emperors.org/conniei.htm#)

give glory unto the God of Israel” [1 Sam. 6: 1-9]. The Philistines put the Ark on a cart, with jewels of gold and trespass offerings, and latched the cart to cows, which led the Ark back to the people of Israel without any human help! [vv. 10-12].

### 3. Some general principles

Whether a graven image is an idol or not depends on the following factors:

- ❑ Whether it was commanded by God, or it is symbolic of His worship;
- ❑ Whether we see it as accessory to the worship of the true God or as the subject of our worship.

Using those two factors, we can see the following possibilities [see chart below]:

		WHAT DOES THE GRAVEN IMAGE REPRESENT?	
		Commanded by or symbolic of God	Symbolic of a human being or an idol
WHAT IS YOUR ATTITUDE TO THE GRAVEN IMAGE?	Accessory to Worship	(1) <i>True worship</i>	(2) <i>Idolatry</i>
	Subject of Worship	(3) <i>Idolatry</i>	(4) <i>Idolatry</i>

- a) *When a graven image is commanded by or symbolic of God and used by the worshipper as an aid to, not subject of worship*

As we saw in the earlier discussion, it was God Himself who ordered Moses to make the Ark of the Covenant and the Brazen Serpent. The former is symbolic of His heavenly throne [Rev. 5: 1-8] while the latter is symbolic of Christ’s crucifixion on the cross at Calvary. We have also seen that it was Christ Himself who gave Emperor Constantine I the cross as the symbol of His protection over his army at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in the year 312 A.D. Therefore, you will find in most churches today the cross or pictures and paintings of Jesus. The picture or painting of a dove is used to represent the Holy Spirit because at the baptism of Jesus, the Holy Spirit descended on Him “like a dove and lightning” [Matt. 3:16]. Since God the Father is invisible, any claimed graven image of Him is idolatrous.

However, we may be tempted to treat the said graven image as our subject of worship [cell 3 in the box above]. The people of Israel saw the Ark of

the Covenant in that light and they were defeated in battle because they treated it like a god [1 Sam. 4: 1-10]. Conversely, if we treat a graven image considered as sacred by God with disrespect, He can punish us for it. For example, the Philistines paid a dear price for putting the Ark of the Covenant in the house of their idol, Dagon. They were inflicted with tumours. [1 Sam. 5:1-6].

- b) *When a graven image is not commanded by or symbolic of God even when we claim it aids our worship*

Pictures or paintings of ancestors, animals, mythical gods or any other human beings cannot assist us to worship the true God, neither were they commanded to be made by Him. For example, when the people of Israel burnt incense and made drink offerings to the “queen of heaven,” God was angry with them because they were serving other gods [Jer. 44:14-30]. We also saw how God destroyed thousands of the children of Israel for worshipping the Golden Calf, thereby wilfully breaking their covenant of true worship [Ex. 32: 7-10, 35].

#### 4. Conclusion

At creation, God made man in His image and likeness [Gen. 1: 26-27]. God’s image was manifested on earth when His Son, Jesus Christ took human form [Jn 1: 14, 18]. Therefore, believers are to be fully conformed to the image of God’s Son [Rom. 8:29]. However, “it doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is” [1 Jn 3:2]. Therefore, God in His infinite mercy has shown us symbols that can aid us in our true worship. The danger, however, is that the object, the graven image, can soon become the subject, just as we have been enslaved by modern technology. I follow a simple rule to differentiate idol worship from true worship: *don’t worship a god that you can carry; instead, worship the One who can carry you, that is, God Almighty, the Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ.* That is why Jesus has taught [Jn 4: 23-24]:

*The hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for the Father seeketh such to worship Him. God is a Spirit; and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth.*