

Numbering the Decalogue, Images, and Iconoclasm: A Historical and Theological Survey

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The importance of the Decalogue, commonly known as the Ten Commandments, is a given. Images and their standing in Christianity have continued to be a troubling issue. Due to divergent interpretations, the variability of their enumeration throughout history, and major translation issues, there is a strong connection between one's preferred numbering of the Decalogue and one's attitude toward art. The consequences of this correspondence are far-reaching and have effected many time periods in Church history. Many of a Protestant background have an aversion to certain types and uses of art. This is not a new iconoclastic attitude or hatred of specific material objects. It predates Christ in Judaism, which like Islam, looks to the law given to Moses for iconoclastic authority. Christianity inherited this thinking.

A look at various numbering schemes of the Decalogue will show no universal method of enumeration. But certain theologies are aligned with choices of the specific ten. This paper will survey doctrinal positions on images, starting with Jews and extending to Christian communities. During every major period of the Church, images have been a source of conflict. Besides the issue of art, the implications of iconoclastic ideas may be seen in other doctrinal topics, including the sacraments. There is benefit in studying a topic that highlights the violent side of religion, in that it refines one's beliefs. God's Word and its doctrine must be reconciled with a confusing and disturbing history of images among believers.

Ten Words

The history of numbering the Decalogue is quite simply a mess. The earliest evidence shows no consensus or universal scheme. Although it is easy to talk of a "catholic position," the hard evidence is rarely that even. We have little Jewish writing and also few Christian works from

the first two centuries after Christ. Even the Middle Ages suffer from this problem, since those on the losing side of a issue were censured and their writings destroyed. Often historians must learn from an opponent, since few complete writings of men branded heretics remain. History, after all, is written by the victors.

Ten What?

The first problem is with the term “Ten Commandments.” There is no such thing—it is a fiction, even if it is practically a universal phrase in English. It is simply not biblical language. The “Ten Commandments” contain no less than 12 demands with the לֹא (lo) negative particle, while the Lutheran fourth (honor your father and your mother), does not use the “not” (לֹא) at all.

Although the New Testament speaks of “commandments” (Mk. 10:19; Lk. 18:20), they are not numbered and no where is “ten” mentioned. For the Decalogue, traditional ecclesiastical terminology and the Bible do not match up precisely.

If there are not Ten “Commandments,” where does the phrase come from? Although the biblical headings say it, nowhere in Ex. 20 and Dt. 5, where God gives the law, does it speak of “ten.” Later in Ex. 34:28 and also in Dt. 4:13 and 10:4, we read in English translations of “Ten Commandments.” Dt. 10:4 reads: “And he wrote on the tablets, in the same writing as before, the Ten Commandments that the Lord had spoken to you on the mountain out of the midst of the fire on the day of the assembly.”¹ Despite commonality among the many English versions, the original Hebrew shines a different light.

In Hebrew it reads עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרִים (aseret haddebarim) for all three passages. דְּבָר (dabar) is a noun which means “word,” among various other things, but not commandment.² Literally the Scriptures speak of the “ten words” or “ten sayings.”

The pre-Christ Septuagint (LXX) Greek translation has ῥήματα (hremata), which can mean

¹All Passages ESV unless otherwise noted.

²“Bar-mitzvah” is derived from the root meaning command (צִוָּה; tzavah) and signifies the age of legal responsibility. Some of the definitions of דְּבָר (dabar) are: speech, word, message, counsel, promise, sentence, theme, story, divine communication, matter, affair, occupation, act, event, cause, way, manner, and something (indefinite). *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, eds. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 2003), 182-184.

utterance, saying, word, or matter, for Ex. 34:28 and Dt. 4:13.³ Dt. 10:4 of the LXX reads δέκα λόγους, or “deka logous,” the Greek basis for “decalogue,” meaning ten words. Even the Wycliffe Bible of 1395 has “ten wordis whiche he wroot in two tablis of stoon” for Dt. 4:13.⁴ The English tradition for “ten commandments” does not seem to extend before 1560 and is likely of Calvinist origin.⁵ This insight provides perspective, even as men throughout history have struggled to find ten precise and logical commandments.

Greek Jews

The earliest reliable sources specifying a definite numbering of the Ten Words come from Greek-speaking Jews: Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BC – 50 A.D.) and Titus Flavius Josephus (37 A.D. – c. 100). They both held to the modern-day Reformed numbering of the Commandments. So Ex. 20:4 (“You shall not make for yourself a carved [graven] image”) is numbered the Second Command, while the last two statements on coveting are together the Tenth.⁶

While this Hellenistic numbering of the Decalogue is old and remains popular to this day, that is not the whole picture. These men are not simply biblical commentators. Philo was a philosopher of Platonic leanings, while Josephus was a military leader in Judea who defected and became a Roman citizen and a historian of some importance. Their ideologies, though not all that biblical, play a role in later Christian understandings of the Decalogue.

³Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1956), 397.

⁴It translates the Vulgate’s “decem verba.” The 1899 Douay-Rheims American Edition likewise has “ten words.” Young’s Literal Translation of 1898 reads “Ten Matters.” Tyndale (1530) has “x verses,” as do the 1535 Coverdale, 1537 Matthew, and 1540 Great Bible. The Luther Bible of 1545 has “Zehn Worte.”

⁵The first edition 1560 Geneva Bible is the oldest English version the author has found with this translation. It differs from the Tyndale (1530) and Coverdale (1535) versions upon which it was based. Through the Bishops’ Bible (1568), which became the basis for the KJV, the Geneva Bible’s rendering is felt today. It appears to be a Calvinistic introduction into English, since the translation was done by English refugees in Switzerland, which was still under the auspices of John Calvin. Wikipedia contributors, “Geneva Bible,” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geneva.Bible>.

⁶M. D. Koster, “The Numbering of the Ten Commandments in Some Peshitta Manuscripts,” in *Vetus Testamentum*, vol. 30:4 (1980), 469.

Early Christianity

Though later denounced as a heretic, Origen (185-254) was one of the great Bible scholars of the Christian Church. Origen was from Alexandria like Philo and fancied himself a philosopher. It is not surprising that they numbered the Decalogue in the same way. Through Origen, the Philonian, or Alexandrian, enumeration became the standard for those in the Greek-influenced churches. The various Eastern Orthodox churches of today have always held that the second commandment is “You shall not make for yourself a carved [graven] image.”

The early Latin church too, for roughly four centuries, followed the Alexandrian numbering. It seems that Augustine (354-430) was in contact with Jews who numbered the Ten Words differently than the Hellenistic Jews and Greek Christians. While he likely did not fully adopt the alternate Jewish numbering, he did subsume the command about graven images under the First, like the Hebrew-speaking Jews presumably did. To arrive at a total of ten, Augustine split the last part on coveting in two. The Western church followed Augustine’s lead until the Reformation.

Modern Judaism

Today Jews do not hold to the Philonian, or Alexandrian, numbering for the Decalogue. The Rabbinical enumeration sees literally Ten Words rather than Ten Commands—an important distinction. The first Rabbinical Word is Ex. 20:2: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” This is not a command, but positively sets forth the true God. The Augustinian 9th and 10th Commandments are then merged into the last Word.

This actually may be the elder scheme, but the earliest first-hand source for this goes back to the Talmud, which was completed late 5th century A.D.⁷ Origen appears to make an allusion to this Rabbinical understanding: “This word, indeed, is not yet a word of command, but shows who he is who commands. . . .Some think that all these words together [Ex. 20:3-6] are one

⁷“It goes back at least to Origen’s day, for he makes mention of it.” Charles F. Aiken, “The Decalogue, its Division and Arrangement,” in *The American Ecclesiastical Review*, vol. 55 (December 1916), 627.

commandment. But if it be thus supposed, the number ten of the Commandments will not be completed—and where now will be the truth of the Decalogue?”⁸ Issues besides theology may have affected his choice.

By understanding the Ten Words as more general statements (words), the most natural and logical division is had. After all, before false gods are condemned, the true God must be set forth—that is no minor point.

The traditional Jewish numbering is exegetically more faithful to the tone of the original Hebrew than either of two Christian versions, which, if they do not ignore the first “word” altogether, demote it to some sort of prologue or preamble. But what a preamble—a pithy summary of the heart of the Old Testament articulation of the “Gospel,” i.e., the exodus!⁹

In this Rabbinical enumeration, deeper issues surface than just counting to ten. The theological understanding of law also plays a role in which division is preferred.

Syriac Peshitta

One of the older (after the LXX) translations of the Bible is the Peshitta. Its language is Syriac or Middle Aramaic. Words are formed out of three letter roots, like Hebrew, a sister language. Syriac was a language of the Middle East, very close to the Aramaic spoken by Christ and by many early Christians.¹⁰ It was a common language, along with Greek, in Mesopotamia before Arabic became dominant through Islam during the Middle Ages.¹¹ The Peshitta, meaning simple or common, is considered an important translation of the Bible.¹² The Old Testament is believed to have been translated from the Hebrew into Syriac in the first century, the time when the Greek New Testament books were being written.

⁸Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, trans. Ronald E. Heine, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 71 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 317-18.

⁹Horace D. Hummel, “Numbering the Ten ‘Commandments’: A Response to Both Jastram and Maier,” in *Concordia Journal*, vol. 16:4 (1990), 377.

¹⁰Francis Crawford Burkitt, *Early Eastern Christianity: St. Margaret’s Lectures on the Syriac-speaking Church* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1904), 43.

¹¹Wikipedia contributors, “Syriac language,” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syriac_language.

¹²Burkitt, *Early Eastern Christianity*, 39, 41.

In some of the Peshitta manuscripts, the scribes attempted to number the Ten Words as a rubric.

But—easy as it is to “use one’s ten commandments” for memorizing purposes—the Syrian scribes had difficulties with the actual assignment of the numbers one to ten to each single commandment, and in this they were not alone. Even the order of the Commandments seems to have been liable to change, especially that of the sixth, seventh, and eighth (concerning manslaughter, adultery, and stealing).¹³

A variety of attempts appear in this venerable translation’s tradition.

Numbering the First Word was the initial task for these scribes. Out of fourteen total numbered manuscripts, two have the modern Jewish division, with Ex. 20:2 as the First Word. Two ancient manuscripts “have an *alphah* as an indication of the first commandment already before *v. 1*: ‘and God spoke all these words, saying.’” Interestingly enough, “they are followed in this by the majority of the later manuscripts.”¹⁴

One manuscript has *v. 5* marked as the Second Word: “You shall not bow down to them or serve them.” But none of the marked manuscripts have *v. 4* (about “graven images”) marked as a separate Word. A majority of these Peshitta manuscripts actually follow the Roman/Lutheran method of splitting *v. 17* on coveting to arrive at ten. Of course, because they have an additional First Word, that required skipping one of the other commandments (misusing the name of the Lord). While these attempts are in no way authoritative, from the Peshitta “it has become clear that numbering the ten commandments is not as easy as it seems.”¹⁵ However, they do give some evidence to not overweighting the testimony of the Hellenistic Jews.

Samaritans

The Samaritans are a very ancient Semite community. According to tradition they date to the conquering of Israel by the Assyrians, when Jews intermarried and began a parallel Jewish religion. They are mentioned in the New Testament, along with their negative reputation as apostate Jews.¹⁶ The Samaritans, which still exist as a small community of under 800 people,

¹³Koster, “The Numbering of the Ten Commandments in Some Peshitta Manuscripts,” 468.

¹⁴Koster, “The Numbering of the Ten Commandments in Some Peshitta Manuscripts,” 471.

¹⁵Koster, “The Numbering of the Ten Commandments in Some Peshitta Manuscripts,” 473.

¹⁶“For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans” Jn. 4:9.

hold that Mt. Gerizim is the right place to worship.¹⁷ The Samaritan woman at the well addressed Jesus: “‘Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father’” (Jn. 4:20-21). For Samaritans, Mt. Gerizim replaced Jerusalem as the place of worship.

While Samaritans hold to a version of the Pentateuch, this distinctive location influenced their numbering of the Decalogue. Their commandments match the Augustinian division for the first nine, except that the Augustinian number three (misusing the Lord’s name) is not numbered. The coveting prohibitions are split between the Eighth and Ninth Words. However, an additional one not in the Hebrew Bible is added—one concerning worship on Mt. Gerizim.¹⁸ This peculiar numbering of the Samaritans shows how fundamental beliefs shape the numbering of the Ten Words.

Middle and Late Periods

While the Augustinian division wins over the West, it does not become a dogmatic matter. King Alfred the Great, writing in 887 A.D., skips over the Philonian Second about “graven images.” But in his preface to a legal code, he does not split coveting into two. Instead, he adds as the Tenth: “Thou shalt not worship gods of gold and silver.”¹⁹ Even at a relatively late period, though originally engraved on stone, the Decalogue’s numbering is not fixed in stone.

It is commonly said that Lutherans simply kept the Roman division, and in the main, that is true. But Martin Luther did not exactly follow the Roman tradition. By changing the biblical text for the Decalogue, the Ninth and Tenth are exchanged. The official Roman version of the Decalogue comes from Dt. 5. Luther followed the Hebrew of Ex. 20, so that “coveting your neighbor’s house” is the ninth, while Rome considers it “coveting your neighbor’s wife.” So even

¹⁷Chavie Lieber, “The Other Torah: A New English translation of the Samaritan Torah Offers Scholars a Different Version of the Sacred Text,” <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/132004/the-other-torah>.

¹⁸“It shall be, when you are passed over the Jordan, that you shall set up these stones, which I command you this day, in Mount Gerizim. There shall you build an altar to Yahweh your God.” *The Samaritan Update* (December 19, 2002), <http://shomron0.tripod.com/update12.19.2002o.html>

¹⁹Thomas Fuller, *The Church History of Britain, from the Birth of Jesus Christ Until the Year MDCXLVII*, vol. 2 of 3. (London: William Tegg, 1868), 185.

the two Hebrew accounts do not follow the same precise order, unless they are joined as one, as is done in the Philonian tradition. Calvin called it “absurd” to split Ex. 20:17 (or Dt. 5:21) and rationally it is less than satisfying to have two commandments so closely related in content.

For Lutherans (and even Rome), this is not a dogmatic stance. Even Luther did not appear to be wedded to the distinction of the last two words. In the Large Catechism they are treated together. Throughout his explanation, he alternates between considering them one and two Words: “these two commandments,” “the last commandment,” “this commandment,” and “these commandments.”²⁰ While he kept a total of ten, it was not a dogmatic or theological matter to Luther. This has to do with his theological understanding of the law in relation to the Decalogue.

Luther’s flexibility is representative of the New Testament, which often quotes the LXX. Its translation of the Hebrew in Ex. 20:13-15 reads: οὐ μοιχεύσεις – οὐ κλέψεις – οὐ πονεύσεις (Augustinian 6, 7, 5). Dt. 5:17-19 reads: οὐ πονεύσεις – οὐ μοιχεύσεις – οὐ κλέψεις. (5, 6, 7), which Jesus cites in Mk. 10:19: “Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother” (5, 6, 7, 8, 9/10, 4).²¹ The Augustinian Fourth Word is Jesus’ last, while “do not defraud” is not exactly “do not covet.”²² Rom. 13:9 follows neither of the LXX readings: “οὐ μοιχεύσεις – οὐ πονεύσεις – οὐ κλέψεις” (6,5,7). By biblical example, the ordering of the Words is quite variable.

While it would seem that in the Lutheran tradition the Commandments are fixed and immutable, that is not the case. As recently as 1990, a prominent scholar in the LCMS advocated changing to the Alexandrian enumeration. Paul L. Maier, who at the time of this writing is the Third Vice President of the LCMS, wrote: “The prohibition against images should be restored to its rightful place as the Second Commandment for several significant reasons.”²³ The chief issue, in his view, is that “Augustine’s splitting of the last precept into two as a means of achieving the ten is forced and absolutely unconvincing.” While also arguing that the content of the Decalogue demands the Alexandrian Second Commandment, Maier mainly points to the logical absurdity

²⁰ *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 425-27; LC I, 293, 300, 309, 310.

²¹ *Septuaginta*, ed. Alfred Rahlfs (Nördlingen, Germany: C.H. Beck, 1979), 120, 296.

²² The Hebrew suggests not to delight in another’s possessions.

²³ Paul L. Maier, “Enumerating the Decalogue: Do We Number the Ten Commandments Correctly?” in *Concordia Journal*, vol. 16:1 (January 1990), 24.

of the Roman/Lutheran Ninth and Tenth: “Surely ‘coveting’ is one of the lesser evils, and yet must *it rate two commandments?*” Thankfully, this call to re-enumerate our “arbitrary” division went nowhere.²⁴

The churches which descend theologically from Calvin, agree with the oldest evidence which numbers the Decalogue. The Greek-speaking churches have always held, along with them, that the second commandment is about “graven images.” It must be admitted, that we know very little of how ancient Jews numbered the Ten Words. The Talmudic or Rabbinical enumeration, used today by Jews, is only attested to 500 years after Christ. The absence of testimony, however, can mean giving undue gravity to extant witnesses. Even Martin Chemnitz calls one of the best early witnesses, Josephus, of “more recent tradition.”²⁵

This historical survey shows that there is no universal enumeration scheme, nor does there need to be biblically. But why exactly has this been such a confounding issue, if the numbering itself is *adiaphora* (free to God)? Why was there no compromise? The Philonian Second Commandment is more than a number. It has been a battle cry for iconoclasts and aniconics, those against religious art. There is a much more fundamental theology often underlying the division of the Ten Words given by God.

Interpretations of the Alexandrian Second Word

Images connected with religious use have throughout history elicited strong emotion. Pagan religions were image religions, while the Jews were carefully warned by God to avoid such idols and superstition. The Jew’s “primary concern is with God’s Word, not God’s picture.”²⁶ Judaism, Islam, and Christianity have all wrestled with Ex. 20:4, with varying and often contradictory conclusions, but none as much as Christianity. In the earliest days, Christians (at first they were Jews) imported the same aniconism, or even iconoclasm, of Judaism. This proclivity towards aniconism (avoiding religious images) reappears during various periods of Christian history. At

²⁴Maier, “Enumerating the Decalogue,” 23-24.

²⁵Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), 4:81.

²⁶Joseph Gutmann, “The ‘Second Commandment’ and the Image in Judaism,” in *Hebrew Union College Annual*, vol. 32 (1961), 161.

times this aniconism leads to iconoclasm, the violent hatred for religious images which demands their removal. What is significant is not one's personal taste for certain art, but fundamental philosophical notions which can color one's entire theology. It is not an exaggeration that the doctrinal position on images separates Lutherans from virtually every other Christian confession.

Philo and Josephus

Though seemingly obscure as a philosophical Greek-speaking Jew, Philo's influence is felt among Christians today, in regards to the Philonian Second Commandment.

A prolific author, Philo worked on a synthesis of Greek Philosophy and Jewish Scripture. He presented the Ten Commandments of Moses as the best moral guide for all mankind. His universalistic interpretation helped shaped Christian theology. Philo formulated his Mosaic philosophy in the Greek language, using Greek philosophical concepts to show that the Jew lived by the most intelligible and loftiest morality possible.²⁷

Much more than a biblical expositor, Philo of Alexandria saw "you shall make no graven images" as a key component in his philosophical and religious framework. He explains:

[Moses] banished from his own commonwealth painting and sculpture, with all their high repute and charm of artistry, because their crafts belie the nature of truth and work deception and illusions through the eyes to the souls that are ready to be seduced.²⁸

This is not straightforward exegesis of the biblical text. "What Philo has done is to echo the Platonic concept that certain arts—the 'amusement' and 'imitative' arts—should be banished from the ideal state, since they are deceptive and arouse passions which the reasonable faculty is unable to control."²⁹ Philo, through the Decalogue, is presenting a very general view of matter and God's creation—that it is unworthy of the spiritual and God Himself.

Josephus, though from a historian's vantage point, nonetheless sounds like Philo:

God possesses all things, [being] perfect and blessed, self-sufficient and sufficient for all, he is the beginning and middle and end of all things; he is visible in works and

²⁷Paul Grimley Kuntz, *The Ten Commandments in History: Mosaic Paradigms for a Well-Ordered Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 11.

²⁸Quoted in Gutmann, "The 'Second Commandment' and the Image in Judaism," 172.

²⁹Gutmann, "The 'Second Commandment' and the Image in Judaism," 173.

favors, even more manifest than anything else, but concerning his form and greatness he is most invisible to us. Thus every material, however expensive it might be, is inadequate for an image of this [deity], and every work of art is incapable to imagine his likeness.³⁰

Similar to Philo, Josephus is proving his aniconism, not by the Decalogue itself, but through rational thought based on God's assumed nature.

Josephus expounded a rigorous aniconism, bordering on the iconoclastic. This included Roman military symbols: "But the law forbids those who are determined to live by it to think of setting up statues and to make dedications of [statues of] any living creatures."³¹ He said that God forbid "not simply images of foreign gods or the Jewish God but *figurative art*, i.e., any representation of living beings, whether theriomorphic or anthropomorphic."³² In summary, Josephus claimed that the law flatly "forbids the making of images [εἰκότων]."³³

How ones understands the forbidding of "graven images" impacts not just one's view of art, but of physical nature itself. This strain of Platonic thinking can be traced though Christianity to those who presently deny God's working in the material of creation.

A Different Judaism

Although chronologically earlier, Philo and Josephus do not represent mainstream Judaism.

Were the [Alexandrian] Second Commandment in its entirety to be taken literally, the construction of Solomon's Temple, with its graven images, such as the cherubim and the twelve which supported the molten sea, would obviously have been a direct violation and transgression.³⁴

Likewise, the bronze serpent foreshadowing faith in Christ's death would be unthinkable (Num. 21:9; Jn. 3:14).

Josephus could justify rebellion against Rome's ubiquitous images, based on his interpretation of the Alexandrian Second Commandment.

³⁰Jason Q. Ehrenkrook, "Sculpting Idolatry in Flavian Rome: (An)Iconic Rhetoric in the Writings of Flavius Josephus," (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2009), 106.

³¹Ehrenkrook, "Sculpting Idolatry in Flavian Rome," 114.

³²Ehrenkrook, "Sculpting Idolatry in Flavian Rome," 115.

³³Ehrenkrook, "Sculpting Idolatry in Flavian Rome," 116.

³⁴Gutmann, "The 'Second Commandment' and the Image in Judaism," 163.

Furthermore our Lawgiver forbade the making of images, not as if prophetically indicating that the power of the Romans was not to be honored, but as though scorning a matter that was useful neither to God nor man.³⁵

He advocated a strict and literal observance of the Decalogue by having no images at all, an anti-Roman notion.

The numbering scheme of Philo and Josephus was no neutral matter to them. “The effect of Josephus’ enumeration of the Decalogue is that, insofar as it distinguishes the prohibitions of other gods (ὁ πρῶτος) from the prohibition of images (ὁ δεύτερος) it ‘possibly opens the way for a more anti-iconic statement.’”³⁶ One credible thesis is that “the portrait of strict aniconism that emerges in Josephus is in part a rhetorical construct, an effort to reframe Jewish iconoclastic behavior not as a resistance to Roman hegemony but as an expression of . . . Jewish identity that functioned to mitigate an increasingly tense relationship between Romans and Jews in the wake of the Jewish revolt against Rome.”³⁷ But this would not be the end of making more of the Decalogue than it contains.

Wisdom, a non-canonical book, also takes a Platonic course:

For the idea of making idols was the beginning of fornication, and the invention of them was the corruption of life For through the vanity of men they entered the world, and therefore their speedy end has been planned. When men could not honor monarchs in their presence, since they lived at a distance, they imagined their appearance far away, and made a visible image of the king whom they honored, so that by their zeal they might flatter the absent one as though present.³⁸ . . . For neither has the evil intent of human art misled us, nor the fruitless toil of painters, a figure stained with varied colors, whose appearance arouses yearning in fools, so that they desire the lifeless form of a dead image. Lovers of evil things and fit for such objects of hope are those who either make or desire or worship them.³⁹

In fact, this apocryphal book is associated with Philo’s city of Alexandria, though of a slightly earlier time period. Nonetheless, it fits with Philo’s expressed Platonism. It warns about the

³⁵Quoted in Gutmann, “The ‘Second Commandment’ and the Image in Judaism,” 170.

³⁶Ehrenkrook, “Sculpting Idolatry in Flavian Rome,” 101; quoting W. Barnes Tatum, “The LXX Version of the Second Commandment (Ex 20:3-6 = Deut 5:7-10): A Polemic against Idols, Not Images,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Periods*, vol. 17 (1986): 177-95.

³⁷Ehrenkrook, “Sculpting Idolatry in Flavian Rome,” xvi-xvii.

³⁸This tradition becomes influential leading up to the Eastern Iconoclastic Controversy.

³⁹Wisdom 14:12-14; 15:4-6 (RSV).

inherent power of man-made images—a thought that is out of step with the Old Testament Scriptures.

Later Jews were not for all images, but neither were they Platonists with a hatred of materials objects. Under the Rabbinical division (and the Roman/Lutheran today), the prohibition against “graven images” is related to “having other gods.” It refers to instances of idolatry, not representative art in general. While Jews were generally aniconic, many were not iconoclastic. Rabban Gamaliel (possibly as early as 100 A.D.) said that a statue in front of a bathhouse is not idolatrous—it is be judged on its treatment and use:

Would you enter in to your idolatry naked, . . . [or would you] urinate in front of her? And she [Aphrodite] is standing by the drainage and all the people are urinating in front of her. It is said only “their gods,” [in the Decalogue] [i.e.,] that which *he treats as a god* is prohibited, but that which he does not treat as a god is permitted.⁴⁰

One historian summarizes the startling find of recent archaeological excavations:

Something of a surprise has been the presence of art in many of the synagogues. Apparently not all Jews applied the prohibitions in the Decalogue as strictly or extensively as rabbinic interpretation attempted. In addition to sculptured architectural elements (column capitals, etc.) were mosaic floors with scenes from the Bible and nature (from the fifth and sixth centuries) and wall paintings.⁴¹

While this physical evidence is much later than Philo and Josephus, even the Scriptures paint the arts with considerable more freedom than Philo and Josephus did.

Early Christianity

It may come a surprise to some today, but images were hardly a part of Christianity in the immediate centuries following Christ. Art, including the symbol of the cross, is not a universal or catholic practice of the Church.⁴² Thankfully, we are not bound to such decisions they made

⁴⁰Ehrenkrook, “Sculpting Idolatry in Flavian Rome,” 138.

⁴¹Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 475.

⁴²Conversely, we may say that the cross (as art) is not uniquely Christian. “In various shapes and designs the cross appears as both decorative ornament and religious symbol on objects of art almost everywhere in the ancient world from the most remote pre-Christian ages. . . . Among the Egyptians it is said to have been the symbol of divinity and eternal life . . . [and among] the Incas and Aztecs, perhaps signifying the four seasons.” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4 vols., ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), I:827.

in freedom for their context. But it is helpful to realize their concerns and the history of art in the Church's earliest days, lest we unfaithfully project our prejudices onto the whole canvas of Christianity.

The first Christians were Jews, the New Testament makes clear. The apostles of Christ and the majority of believers were Jewish in thinking and custom. Jesus preached in synagogues (Mt. 4:23), Peter struggled with eating "unclean foods" (Acts 11), and Jewish circumcision was a major pastoral problem (Gal.).

In the early Church, Christians had ringing in their ears the denunciations of graven images in the Old Testament and rearing up before their eyes the idols of the pagan Greco-Roman world. Only by about 200 did Christian art make its appearance and by the fourth century were churches filled with cycles of Christian painting.⁴³

Besides the pagan idols before their eyes and the aniconism carried over from Judaism, there was also the difficulty with their Second Commandment.

As late as the fourth century, religious images were considered unthinkable. In 315 the Synod of Elvira (in present-day Spain) approved this statement: "There are to be no pictures in the church building, for this may cause the worship and praise of what is painted on the walls." Clement of Alexandria, reminiscent of Philo, also condemned the dangerous images:

Moses, much earlier, made an express and public Law against the making of any carved or molten or moulded or painted image and representation, in order that we might not direct our attention to sensible objects, but might proceed to that which is perceptible to the mind.⁴⁴

The work of Philo to combine Greek thought and the Scriptures "was to be brought to fruition in the interests of orthodoxy by Clement and Origen."⁴⁵

In the fourth century Eusebius of Caesarea responds to Constantine's sister's request for a picture of Christ with incredulity:

What did you have in mind, and of what kind should this icon of Christ be, as you call it? . . . Which icon of Christ are you looking for? The true, unchangeable image

⁴³Leo Donald Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787): Their History and Theology*, (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 291-92.

⁴⁴Gutmann, "The 'Second Commandment' and the Image in Judaism," 173.

⁴⁵W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 368.

that by nature shows the likeness of Christ, or rather the other image that he has taken on for our sake? . . . I cannot image you are requesting an icon of his divine likeness.⁴⁶

Chemnitz summarizes this period:

Whenever in true histories there are found any descriptions of the rites which the primitive Church used for 300 years and more in church assemblies and in the exercise of divine worship, no mention is made of images or statues being used, either of God or of the saints. But since the idolatry of the heathen consisted in the worship and adoration of images, likenesses, and statues . . . the Christians simply abhorred images and condemned as heretics those who wanted to worship and adore either the statues of others or also Christ Himself in statues or through images.⁴⁷

Despite empty churches, early Christians were not like Muslims or the Amish. The tombs of Christians presumably became the spontaneous birth place of distinctively Christian art. Symbols and decorations arose organically in the catacombs as expressions of their belief in the resurrection.⁴⁸

Following the conversion of Constantine in the early 300's and the replacement of pagan idolatry with Christianity, art began filling the churches. The cross as an image, now synonymous with Christianity, is also quite a late development, although there are earlier mentions of it as simply a hand sign and greeting.⁴⁹

Under Constantine, however, the sign of the cross began to be represented by two pieces of wood joined crosswise, or painted in this form. For Constantine reports that while he was earnestly considering whether he wanted to cast off heathen idolatry and embrace this worship of Christ, he had seen above the sun in the heavens the sign of the cross formed by the splendor of the light, and as it were the inscription added: "In this sign conquer!"⁵⁰

The cross was originally a military symbol used by soldiers, not an image in churches.

For over 300 years the Church was surrounded with pagan statues, images, and their myths. This made Christians extremely sensitive to the religious use of images.

⁴⁶Christoph Schönborn, *God's Human Face: The Christ-Icon* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 58.

⁴⁷Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, 4:83.

⁴⁸*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, ed. and trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 2:387.

⁴⁹"The cross is one of the most ancient human symbols, and has been used by many religions, most notably Christianity." Wikipedia contributors, "Cross," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cross>.

⁵⁰Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, 4:94.

Representations of God were obviously just as objectionable to early Christianity as to Judaism. Yet it must be remembered that, so far as we can see, the question of depicting God or even man or animal never arose at all in the NT, whether from the positive or negative standpoint. It never entered the head of any early believers to hand down a picture of Jesus or the Apostles, let alone to set up a cultic image. The complete lack of interest in this regard marks off the young religion from the syncretistic religions of the surrounding world.⁵¹

The record shows that Christian art primarily evolved in the catacombs, not places of public worship. Though Christians were somewhat aniconic, as the Jews were, it was not necessarily due to legalism, a philosophical view of matter, or a literal application of Ex. 20:4, but mainly a consequence of their idol-filled environment.

Iconoclastic Controversy

While the Western church did not struggle much with iconoclasm, the Greek church had a bitter, century-long struggle. It culminated in the Second Nicean Council of 787. A more intricate theory of images developed among those who spoke Greek.

St. Basil of Caesarea's (330-379) much earlier maxim typifies the more sophisticated view of images among later Byzantine Christians: "the honor rendered to the image passes to the prototype."⁵² This theory may be traced to a pagan view of the emperor.

In both pagan and Christian times, the imperial portrait had long been displayed at all official government functions, civil and military. The portrait represented the sacred person of the emperor, even more, it made him present vicariously at the function. By the sixth century the attitude toward imperial portraits was carried over to the icons. . . . The image [of Christ] had begun to be thought of not simply as a reminder of the Incarnation, but as an organic part, an extension, or even a re-enactment thereof.⁵³

This Platonic theory was held by those venerating images and also the iconoclasts.

The Iconoclastic Controversy in the East started with the head of the "Roman Empire" in Constantinople. Leo III was a governor who successfully repelled the Muslims. After becoming

⁵¹ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 2:387.

⁵² Theodore Sideris, "The Theological Position of the Iconophiles During the Iconoclastic Controversy," in *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, vol. 17:3 (1973), 213.

⁵³ Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 294-95.

the Byzantine Emperor, he saw himself a sort of church reformer. Despite the presence of a patriarch in Constantinople, he saw himself as the head of the Church. He viewed the growth and enthusiasm surrounding images as idolatry. Though modern scholars see his motives as political, his concerns are entirely consistent with the aniconic tenor of the Early Church.

The controversy officially started when Leo III had an image of Christ removed in 726. By 730, after his power was consolidated, he issued an edict against religious images. Despite the protestations of many, including the patriarch, Leo had his way and the patriarch was removed. “The main accusation of the Iconoclasts against the Church concerning the use and veneration of the images was that of idolatry.”⁵⁴ It seems a rather practical aim, at least until Leo’s son succeeded him in 740.

Constantine V continued the iconoclastic policy and even increased its intensity. “The emperor geared up iconoclasm once again, destroying icons and plastering over the art on church walls. Only the Cross, scenes of hunting, and circus events, or gardens full of birds or animals were permitted.”⁵⁵ A long trend was started of making images a doctrinal matter, one which continues in the East to this day, though now in reverse. Images at this time were dismissed by a christological argument, not simply the danger of possible idolatry.

A sizable iconoclastic council of 338 Eastern bishops was convened in 754.⁵⁶ It “quoted the prohibition of the Ten Commandments against the worship of images.”⁵⁷ Its decisive act was to make having images of Christ a christological error.

According to them, the divine nature cannot be circumscribed. Therefore, if one represents the humanity of the Savior in an image it will be necessary to represent it apart from his divinity, and this would immediately lead to a division of the two natures for which Nestorianism was condemned.⁵⁸

Conversely, if the divinity were represented, it would lead to the christological error of Monophysism, the confusing of the natures. The Eucharist was held to be the only true image of

⁵⁴Sideris, “The Theological Position of the Iconophiles,” 210.

⁵⁵Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 300.

⁵⁶Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 302.

⁵⁷Justo L. González, *A History of Christian Thought: From Augustine to the Eve of the Reformation*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 of 3 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 2:199.

⁵⁸González, *A History of Christian Thought*, 2:200.

Christ.⁵⁹

While the iconoclasts seemed to officially win, images had support from many monks, clergy, and common people. Leo VI succeeded Constantine V in 775 and had those who supported images physically punished. The long struggle against images was full of uprisings and bitter violence. But after his death, his wife ruled as regent over their son.⁶⁰ Known as Empress Irene, she took the side of the iconodules, those who supported the veneration of religious images.

Under Irene's savvy political leadership, she completely reversed the policy of the previous emperors. It is said she even had her own son blinded in the very room in which she gave birth to him, to become sole emperor.⁶¹ Apart from political maneuvering, the theological justification for reintroducing images came from theologians. The chief apologist for images was St. John of Damascus.

The iconodules, those who venerated icons, reversed the decision of the iconoclastic council. They forcefully stated that "by rejecting the image of Christ, the Iconoclasts refused Christ the possibility of being circumscribed as man. Therefore they rejected the reality of the Incarnation of God."⁶² The image must be honored, since it is said to be intimately connected to the prototype. "The power and the glory of Christ is not divided in two, between image and prototype, but the glory of the image becomes the glory of the prototype (Christ)."⁶³ The iconoclasts were put on the defensive and labeled Nestorians, the precise error they had leveled at the iconodules.

Empress Irene installed a laymen named Tarsius as patriarch. She then called a council to reverse the iconoclastic council of 754. This is called today the Seventh Ecumenical Council. Despite the presence of two papal legates, it actually had less bishops than the iconoclastic one of 754.⁶⁴ Neither was it universally accepted in the West, at least in part due to a bad Latin translation of its proceedings. It decreed:

⁵⁹Sideris, "The Theological Position of the Iconophiles," 214.

⁶⁰Wikipedia contributors, "Irene of Athens," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irene_of_Athens.

⁶¹Lynda Garland, "Constantine VI (780-797 A.D.) and Irene (797-802 A.D.)," *An Online Encyclopedia of Roman Emperors*, last modified April 16, 2002, <http://www.roman-emperors.org/irene.htm>.

⁶²Sideris, "The Theological Position of the Iconophiles," 215.

⁶³Sideris, "The Theological Position of the Iconophiles," 213.

⁶⁴Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 308.

Just as the figure of the precious and life-giving Cross, so also the venerable and holy images, as well in painting and mosaic as of other fit materials, should be set forth in the holy churches of God For by so much more frequently as they are seen in artistic representation, by so much more readily are men lifted up to the memory of their prototypes, and to a longing after them; and to these should be given due salutation and honorable reverence, not indeed that true worship of faith which pertains only to the divine nature For the honor which is paid to the image passes on to that which the image represents.⁶⁵

Veneration was commanded, with punishment threatened against those abstaining.

This Nicean council “resulted not only in a restoration of images, but also in a theological consensus which saw in the veneration of icons an affirmation of the Chalcedonian doctrine of the full and distinct human nature of Christ.”⁶⁶ The West did not understand the subtle distinction between worship (*προσκύνησις*) and veneration (*λατρεία*), though this was crucial to the iconodules’ argument. Neither did a female ruler and a layman “universal patriarch” win over a hesitant Western church.

Instead of clarifying biblical doctrine, serious christological formulae were used trivially to make optional images necessary. Also, their veneration was commanded. While the West had at least as many images, this lesser kind of worship seemed odd to them. Icons became sacramental, a means of grace in the East—a counterpart to the Roman sacrifice of the mass.⁶⁷

In the final analysis, it signaled the weakening of the Eastern church. “The cost of victory was enormous, and tensions in the Church were not solved by it. The Church in Byzantium has never recovered again her inner unity, which has been distorted or lost in the Iconoclastic strife.”⁶⁸ As such, it is quite a stretch to consider the Nicean Council of 787 ecumenical. Even after this council, the iconoclastic fight continued until 842 (the Feast of Orthodoxy).

The true loss was the freedom found in Christ concerning images, a true *adiaphoron*. The philosophic ideas seen in Philo of Alexandria came to flower during the Iconoclastic Controversy.

We find nothing specifically “Semitic” in Iconoclastic theology; both the arguments

⁶⁵Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 310.

⁶⁶Williston Walker, Richard Norris, David Lotz, and Robert Handy, *A History of Christian Thought*, 4th ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1985), 231.

⁶⁷González, *A History of Christian Thought*, 202.

⁶⁸George Florovsky, “Origen, Eusebius, and the Iconoclastic Controversy,” in *Church History*, vol. 19:2 (June 1950), 77.

and the proofs seem to be rather Hellenistic. The Iconodules were Platonic to be sure. But was not the Iconoclastic attitude also rather Platonic? ...It should be described as a Christianization of Hellenism.⁶⁹

By using vital christology so frivolously over a non-essential aspect of Christianity, the triumph of “orthodoxy” was pyrrhic, that is, a self-defeating victory. Chemnitz rightly laments: “It is greatly to be wondered at ... [that] such dreadful, hostile, and even bloody fights arose in the church about pictures or statues, that is, about a thing in which the Christian religion and piety are not even partially located.”⁷⁰

Images in the West

A curious artifact of the Iconoclastic Controversy in the East, is that they have eschewed “graven images,” that is, statues. Three-dimensional art is a Western legacy. Painting, mosaics, and bas-relief (low relief) art dominate the East. Perhaps not dogmatically, but the echo of a literal Ex. 20:4 and the iconoclasts’ charge of idolatry still ring in the Eastern tradition.

The West, on the other hand, had no major iconoclastic struggle. Statues and crucifixes came in late, but proliferated with but minor opposition.⁷¹ Not so much theological rationale, but common piety and superstitious veneration, promoted the status of images. At the Council of Trent, the Second Nicean Council is cited, but there is a practical, conservative bent. Superstition is curbed, while the placing of new images requires the bishops’ approval. Though the images are not to be worshiped, the “images of Christ, of the Virgin Bearer of God, and of other saints are to be had and retained particularly in the churches, and that due honor and veneration be shown them.”⁷²

In contrast to the speculative Platonism of the East, the Roman church did not emphasize the connection of image to prototype. It was mostly a matter of popular piety and tradition.

The Douay Catechism of 1649 states:

⁶⁹Florovsky, “Origen, Eusebius, and the Iconoclastic Controversy,” 95-96.

⁷⁰Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, 4:55.

⁷¹Claudius of Turin (780-827) and the English Lollard movement associated with John Wycliffe (1320-1384) stand out as iconoclastic.

⁷²Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, 4:53.

Q. 400. What benefits do we receive by images?

A. Very great, because they movingly represent to us the mysteries of our Savior's passion, as also by martyrdoms and examples of his saints.

Q. 401. Is there not some danger of Idolatry in the frequent use of idols?

A. Truly none at all; for it is not possible that any rational man, who is instructed in Christianity, would conceive or think a piece of painted wood or marble, is that God and man, Jesus Christ, who was born of the Virgin Mary, died on the cross, arose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and sits now on the right hand of God.⁷³

Rome distinguished between latria, dulia, and hyperdulia, in much the same way as St. John of Damascus. It is ultimately a scholastic distinction and not of practical use.

The Reformation

The veneration, miracle myths, and cult of images in the Roman church were soundly denounced during the Reformation. The reformers agreed that the Roman church had fallen into such a sad state that the abuse of images was indistinguishable from pagan idolatry. However, the proposed solutions ran the gamut, including renumbering the Decalogue and using it to justify iconoclasm.

Possibly the first iconoclastic teaching among Protestants was found in Wittenberg with Andreas Karlstadt, who published an inciting pamphlet in 1522.⁷⁴ He wrote "that it was a greater sin to have images on the altar than to commit adultery and robbery since the worship of images was against the first commandment."⁷⁵ He placed unique stress on their order: "Furthermore, murder, lewdness, theft, and similar crimes are forbidden in the tables (i.e., of the Law) in which images are forbidden, and the prohibition of images stands above all as the most (i.e., important) and the greatest. The prohibition of lewdness and theft and so forth brings up the rear as the least and the smallest."⁷⁶

The twin issue of iconoclasm is that of government authority. Early Lutherans were not fond of images in churches either, but it was not up to each individual to act for all. While Luther was in hiding, riots broke out and churches were vandalized. Luther condemned this action strongly.

⁷³Henry Tuberville, *The Douay Catechism of 1649: An Abridgment of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Excelsior Catholic Publishing House), 44.

⁷⁴It has been claimed that Karlstadt, through his tract, influenced Zwingli significantly. Charles Garside, Jr., "Ludwig Haetzer's Pamphlet Against Images: A Critical Study," in *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, vol. 34:1 (January 1960), 21, 35.

⁷⁵Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Luther and the False Brethren*, (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1975), 24.

⁷⁶Garside, "Ludwig Haetzer's Pamphlet Against Images," 24.

Lutherans today might not have the same variety of art if not for the efforts of Karlstadt. In Wittenberg it had been decided to remove images from the churches. Though the mayor wanted to keep the crucifix, the “City Council and the University supported the Wittenberg Ordinance” which set a date for the official removal of images.⁷⁷ However, Karlstadt and his followers could not permit the “idolatrous” images unchecked for any length of time. So, thanks to iconoclastic violence instigated by Karlstadt, Wittenberg opposed the insurrection and kept much of its traditional religious art.

Karlstadt’s teaching represents the widespread iconoclasm of Anabaptists during the Reformation. The Amish of today trace their roots directly to the Anabaptist movement. They hold to a strict enforcement of their Second Commandment. Photography and even faces on children’s dolls are avoided. They do not see a difference between images used religiously and those used secularly. While not mainstream, elements and variations of this rigid iconoclasm are often found in churches influenced by Calvinism.

John Calvin’s position most accurately reflects customary Protestant aniconism today. He reacted against religious imagery in churches, such as the cross and crucifix, but not all secular art.

“You shall not make for yourself a graven image, not any likeness.” By these words he restrains our waywardness from trying to represent him by any visible image and briefly enumerates all those forms by which superstition long ago began to turn his truth into falsehood [sun, stars, animals, humans]. . . . But God does not compare these images with one another, as if one were more suitable, another less so; but without exception he repudiates all likeness, pictures, and other signs by which the superstitious have thought he will be near them.⁷⁸

Calvin was not opposed to art itself—only its intrusion into the religious realm. This mediating (and reactionary) position, in contrast to the Amish, is common in varying decrees today.

⁷⁷Edwards, *Luther and the False Brethren*, 11.

⁷⁸John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, in 2 vols., The Library of Christian Classics, vol. XX, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 100; I.xi.1.

The Lutheran Position

Lutherans took the Roman abuse of images as seriously as Calvin and enthusiasts like Karlstadt. However, they had a different solution to the same problem. Martin Chemnitz did not criticize Rome any less than the wild-eyed iconoclast.

I note these things [how the pagans worshiped statues] because a comparison shows that there is a very great similarity between the divine worship which was at one time practiced in the shrines of the heathen and that which is now seen at the statues in the churches of the papalists, so that Ludovicus Vives [Spanish humanist (1492-1540)] confesses that it is not possible to show a difference, except that they changed the names and titles, so that it could now rightly and truly be said about the papalists what Faustus once upon a time tried to throw up to the Christians: “You have turned the idols into martyrs or saints, whom you worship with similar prayers.”

And lest the papalists try to escape by means of the objection that they do not ascribe any power to the matter or form of the statues, that they do not worship or honor the devil, as the heathen do, but in the images honor God Himself or the saints who live with God and who have merited well of the church, so that the honor shown the images is referred back to the prototype, that it, to those who are signified and represented through the images or statues, we shall show clearly from the histories of the heathen that they themselves referred the honors and worship which they showed to statues or pictures, not principally to the material or form of the statues, but either to the highest God or to those whose spirits they thought lived with God and who could help mortals much with God as mediators or intercessors, as those who in life had merited well of the human race.⁷⁹

The problem for Luther was not images or the physical form of idols, but connecting them to the divine and imbuing them with supernatural powers without the promise of God:

They called the idols or statues gods not because they were mad enough to regard and worship wood, gold, and silver as a god, but they bound to that place the god who hears and has regard for that worship, thought out by human rashness. Of such silver, golden, wooden, and stone images the papacy was full. For although we knew that all these were carved and formed by the hands of craftsmen, we nevertheless fell down before statues and worshiped them on the supposition that God has regard for this or that image. We also set up the fiction that Saints Barbara, Anne, and Christopher individually had regard for their statues and heard our prayers. This was Egyptian Darkness and exactly the same raving madness which was formerly among the heathen in the invention of an infinite number of deities.⁸⁰

He describes papal false doctrine, not merely an image or statue problem.

⁷⁹Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, 4:64.

⁸⁰Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* (1542/43), LW 6:237-38.

Luther wanted to overthrow the cult of images—yet, not by physically breaking statues or vandalizing churches. He saw this as crass as kissing and venerating man-made objects.

I might well endure his uproar against images, since my writings have done more to overthrow images than [Karlstadt] ever will do with his storming and fanaticism. But I will not endure any one inciting and driving Christians to works of this kind, as if one cannot be a Christian without their performance. Nor can we tolerate anyone imprisoning Christian freedom by laws and laying a snare for consciences.⁸¹

Luther equated outlawing images to demanding their veneration. Both misunderstand the Word of God and rail against justification, by making an external work necessary. Both cling to man-made materials without God’s instruction and make them central to faith in Christ.

It is not Lutheran to care strongly about images. Although it is easy to react against those who despise art and think it sinful to have images in churches, the reverse is equally false. As demonstrated earlier, Wittenberg came very close to ridding themselves of the abused images, a path with which Luther and his compatriots could easily live. “Furthermore, I have allowed and not forbidden the outward removal of images, so long as this takes place without rioting and uproar and is done by the proper authorities.”⁸²

Lutherans have had no established position on images. For example, crucifixes are not Lutheran, nor are they a particularly strong Christian tradition.⁸³ Forbidding them and demanding them are both wrong. It is not Lutheran to judge a church by its decoration or images.⁸⁴ It is purely an external matter of beautification and not of the Gospel. There is no religious connection between image and prototype, such that orthodoxy can be judged by a visible sign.

The pure Gospel is iconoclastic, but not in a rebellious or physical way. Luther relates:

I approach the task of destroying images by first tearing them out the heart through God’s Word and making them worthless and despised. . . . For when they are no

⁸¹Luther, *Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments* (1525), LW 40:68-69.

⁸²Luther, *Against the Heavenly Prophets* (1525), LW 40:85.

⁸³“It may be noted that the custom of placing the crucifix over the altar does not date from earlier than the eleventh century,” and then only in the West. Marucchi, Orazio. “Archeology of the Cross and Crucifix,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 4 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1908) [<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04517a.htm>].

⁸⁴The website *lutheranliturgy.org*, which maintains a list of “Evangelical-Lutheran liturgical congregations,” lists the presence of a crucifix as an identifying mark. But decorative art is irrelevant compared to the true marks of “the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments.” Kolb/Wengert, 41; AC V, 1. The pop star Madonna is quite fond of crucifixes, but not Christ who is God.

longer in the heart, they can do no harm when seen with the eyes. . . . For where the heart is instructed that one pleases God alone through faith, and that in the matter of images nothing that is pleasing to him takes place, but is a fruitless service and effort, the people themselves willingly drop it, despise images, and have none made.⁸⁵

Those who demand necessary action in what is not sin, add to Christ's righteousness, which is to take it away and violate freedom of the conscience. The Gospel alone can free the superstitious heart from trusting in the real idol of works righteousness.

It is Lutheran to neither care greatly about images, nor despise and destroy them, but preach purely faith in Christ. Love for the weak and uniformity are more significant than personal artistic preferences. The Lutheran position is to leave them free.

One is obligated, however, to destroy [images] with the Word of God, that is, not with the law in a Karlstadtian manner, but with the Gospel. This means to instruct and enlighten the conscience that it is idolatry to worship them, or to trust in them, since one is to trust alone in Christ. Beyond this let external matters take their course. God grant that they may be destroyed, become dilapidated, or that they remain. It is all the same and makes no difference, just as when the poison has been removed from a snake.⁸⁶

This scriptural teaching allows connection to the Early Church, which had bare churches, but still the Gospel. It also allows one to trust with a forgiven conscience in Christ if in a Roman cathedral filled with the saints' "idols." Images are truly an external matter of no importance.

Very rarely in the history of the Church have images been free. Iconoclasts call them dangerous and sinful, while the lovers of images require their presence and veneration. Luther short-circuited these overreactions, by cutting the link between image and prototype. Both errors give images power, one positive and the other negative. But Luther says they are for children, decoration, and ornamentation. They are nothing for one righteous in Christ, just as an idol is called nothing (I Cor. 8:4).

In direct response to the iconoclastic uprising instigated by Karlstadt, Luther preached upon his return to Wittenberg:

But now we must come to the images, and concerning them also it is true that they are unnecessary, and we are free to have them or not, although it would be

⁸⁵Luther, *Against the Heavenly Prophets* (1525), LW 40:84-85.

⁸⁶Luther, *Against the Heavenly Prophets* (1525), LW 40:91.

much better if we did not have them at all. I am not partial to them. A great controversy arose on the subject of images between the Roman emperor and the pope [the Iconoclastic Controversy]; the emperor [Leo III] held that he had the authority to banish the images, but the pope insisted that they should remain, and both were wrong. . . . They wished to make a “must” out of that which is free. This God cannot tolerate.⁸⁷

Only doctrine marks one as Christian, not externals. The Muslims have no images and avoid all likenesses, and the heathen see images as windows to their gods—but neither have Christ. Images can neither bring to Christ nor harm true faith. The absence of images can just as easily be an idol in heart, if the Word of God does not take their place.⁸⁸ “No one concerns himself with faith and a good conscience before God, but only what glitters and shines before reason and the world.”⁸⁹

Due to their abuse and actual neutrality, early Lutherans did not delight in images. If the article of justification was preserved, they could tolerate the proper authorities removing images. This is not to say they did not value art. They saw it as a gift of God, but not a theological matter. “Therefore to make, have, and use images for ornament, for a memorial, for a reminder, and for a representation of histories does not militate against the law of God if there does not come to it worship and adoration of the images.”⁹⁰ For example, Luther eagerly gave directions concerning the illustrations for his Bible. In reproving iconoclastic heresy, church images were kept and purified. All superstition was removed by preaching, so that art could take its proper place.

Theological Underpinnings

When interpreting God’s Word, Luther asked a simple question: To whom is the text speaking? Luther could exclaim that the “entire text [of the Decalogue] does not pertain to the Gentiles. . . . For God never led us out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Ex. 20:1).⁹¹ However, where

⁸⁷ “Third Invocavit Sermon” (March 11, 1522), LW 51:81-82.

⁸⁸ “He who only smashes them in pieces outwardly, while he permits idols to remain in the heart and sets up others alongside them, namely false confidence and pride in works.” Luther, *Against the Heavenly Prophets* (1525), LW 40:85.

⁸⁹ Luther, *Against the Heavenly Prophets* (1525), LW 40:80.

⁹⁰ Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, 4:78.

⁹¹ *How Christians Should Regard Moses* (1525), LW 35:164-65.

the same content is written on man's heart (the natural law), the Decalogue is valid and should be taught.

A false interpretation of the Alexandrian Second Word was key to the iconoclast's argument.

And although these spirits cling to the little word "make" [a graven image] and stubbornly insist, "Make, make is something else than to worship," yet they must admit that this commandment basically speaks of nothing else than the glory of God. It must certainly be "made" if it is to be worshiped, and unmade if it is not to be worshiped. It is not valid, however, to pick out one word and keep repeating it. One must consider the meaning of the whole text in its context. Then one sees that it speaks of images of God which are not to be worshiped.

For this saying, "You shall have no other gods," is the central thought, the standard, and the end in accordance with which all the words which follow are to be interpreted, connected, and judged. . . . Therefore the words "make," "images," "serve," etc., and whatever else follows, are to be understood in no other sense than that neither gods nor idolatry are to develop therefrom.⁹²

Even if a different interpretation were convincing, it would have no import for Christians. It would be a ceremonial law and therefore not applicable. "God himself has expressly introduced two ceremonial laws, namely, concerning images and the sabbath."⁹³ Luther then cites an important passage: "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ" (Col. 2:16-17).

Luther is not denigrating the law, on the contrary, he is uplifting it. The law of Moses included ceremonial law, but the true Decalogue, the law of God, is eternal: "The Decalogue does not belong to the law of Moses, and he was not the first one to give it, but the Decalogue pertains to the entire world, it is written and etched in the minds of all people from the beginning of the world."⁹⁴ While the Jewish Decalogue was given by God, it was given to the Jews only. The Christian Decalogue is not the same.

In a striking comparison, Luther says that the law is better than the Gospel and the sacraments:

⁹²Luther, *Against the Heavenly Prophets* (1525), LW 40:86.

⁹³Luther, *Against the Heavenly Prophets* (1525), LW 40:93.

⁹⁴Martin Luther, *Only the Decalogue is Eternal: Martin Luther's Complete Antinomian Theses and Disputations [1538-1540]*, ed. and trans. Holger Sonntag (Minneapolis: Lutheran Press, 2008), 118.

The Decalogue, however, is greater and better because it is written in the hearts and minds of all and will remain with us even in the coming life. Yet not so circumcision, as baptism also will not remain, but only the Decalogue is eternal—as such, that is, not as law—because in the coming life things will be like what the Decalogue has been demanding here.⁹⁵

The “Decalogue” here is God’s eternal will, not the literal Ten Words, while “law” is the resulting accusation and curse that is the power of sin (I Cor. 15:56). But even the eternal Decalogue is powerless to save sinners, which is why Christ descended. Though in heaven, there will be no sin or condemning office of the law—we will simply be as the eternal law describes. Therefore, it is not the Old Testament law which is abrogated, but the ceremonial aspects which do not agree with the natural and moral law.

One can see how giving into a Philonian numbering of the commandments, which emphasizes a inapplicable ceremonial law, would be quite dangerous. It would certainly give the wrong impression. If there was another way to get to ten, without the Third Commandment, concerning the Sabbath, it would have been agreeable to Luther. In His explanation in the Small Catechism, Luther completely ignores any particular day of the week. Along with the one on images, it is a prohibition which many Christians fail to understand as purely ceremonial. Nevertheless, Luther sticks to the biblical number of ten and teaches that all days are valid for honoring God and His Word. The Lutheran method of defusing iconoclasm by teaching a right view of freedom in the Gospel was successful in combating those who provoked ungodly violence and insurrection.

Calvin’s Reasoning

The Decalogue is cited by Calvin as proof against religious images, though he freely admits he is going beyond the bare words and their meaning. “For although Moses only speaks of idolatry, yet there is no doubt but that by synecdoche, as in all the rest of the Law, he condemns all fictitious services which men in their ingenuity have invented.”⁹⁶ “Calvin, by claiming the consistent use of synecdoche in the Decalogue, is able to expand the extent of the commandments . . . the second

⁹⁵Luther, *Antinomian Theses and Disputations* (1538-1540), 75.

⁹⁶John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses*, Ex. 20:4; Quoted in Karl A. Plank, “Of Unity and Distinction: An Exploration of the Theology of John Calvin with Respect to the Christian Stance Toward Art,” in *Calvin Theological Journal*, vol. 13:1 (April 1978), 20.

commandment is the ‘genus of a species.’”⁹⁷

The words simply express that it is wrong for men to seek the presence of God in any visible image, because he cannot be represented to our eyes . . . and hence too the vanity of men is declared, since, whithersoever they turn their eyes, they everywhere lay hold of the materials of error . . . since, therefore, men are thus deluded, so as to frame for themselves the materials of error from all things they behold . . . and hence that His glory is defiled, and His truth corrupted by the lie, whenever He is set before our eyes in a visible form.⁹⁸

A theory of image-making reminiscent of Philo is evident in Calvin’s reading of the Decalogue. In his *Institutes* under the heading “Any use of images leads to idolatry” it reads:

For just as soon as a visible form has been fashioned for God, his power is also bound to it. Men are so stupid that they fasten God wherever they fashion him; and hence they cannot but adore. And there is no difference whether they simply worship an idol or God in the idol. It is always idolatry when divine honors are bestowed upon an idol, under whatever pretext this is done.⁹⁹

Though Calvin does have Early Church history on his side, he is not simply repristinating ancient practices. Calvin speaks of “materials of error,” not simply the idolatry of false faith in the heart. He implies a negative view of matter and the senses which perceive it—not simply what is done without God’s Word and command. The Decalogue was meant to bar “all the senses from beholding God, and thus correct men’s rashness.”¹⁰⁰ Calvin does not trust the Word to correct such abuses of the senses.

On the subject of images, Calvin also mentions the sacraments. After all, they are visible and perceptible by the senses, like images, so how can they have any real power connected to the elements? Perhaps not in a faulty view of material things, but according to the promise of God, who can do all things, it is surely possible. “Applying this sacramental perspective to the context of art, one first senses a harmony with Calvin’s prohibition of images earlier in the *Institutes*, for both arise out a concern to oppose idolatry. God is sovereign and other. Neither bread and wine, nor skilled artistry can contain him.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁷Plank, “Of Unity and Distinction,” 21.

⁹⁸Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses*, Ex. 20:4; Quoted in Plank, “Of Unity and Distinction,” 21.

⁹⁹Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 109; I.xi.9.

¹⁰⁰Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 102; I.xi.3.

¹⁰¹Plank, “Of Unity and Distinction,” 33.

By denigrating the senses and physical objects, Calvin implicitly uplifts reason as the pathway to God. Luther fought against enlightened reason more than the corruptible senses, though.¹⁰² Neither is a “way” to God. He must come to us in Christ because man is stuck on earth with unspiritual senses and reason, and an unbelieving heart. Therefore, He comes to sinners in tangible means, where He has promised to be, so that they may be certain of forgiveness in Christ:

Now when God sends forth his holy gospel he deals with us in a twofold manner, first outwardly, then inwardly. Outwardly he deals with us through the oral word of the gospel and through material signs, that is, baptism and the sacrament of the altar. Inwardly he deals with us through the Holy Spirit, faith, and other gifts. But whatever their measure or order the outward factors should and must precede. The inward experience follows and is effected through the outward. God has determined to give the inward to no one except through the outward. For he wants to give no one the Spirit or faith outside of the outward Word and sign instituted by him.¹⁰³

Even the preached Word is received by the sense of hearing, not by direct spiritual illumination or by reason’s intuition.

Sacramental Images

Since the Reformation, there has been an intrinsic relationship between iconoclasm and those who think less of the sacraments than does Scripture. While the Lutheran Ten Words might be the most unsatisfactory and illogical of all divisions, it is a free matter and more importantly safeguards against the misunderstanding regarding “graven images.” So, Lutherans keep what is somewhat unsatisfactory, so that the pure doctrine is not compromised. Calvin’s charge that his opponents “absurdly tear in two the Tenth Commandment about not coveting the possessions of one’s neighbor” is minor, compared to making creation opposed to the Creator.¹⁰⁴

The enthusiast Ludwig Häzter, who piggy-backed on Karlstadt, wrote: “Are not images and oil idols [paintings] murderers when they kill souls and lead them away from God their spouse.” This Platonic doctrine attributes a special negative power to all images, that is to material and

¹⁰²Reason is offended at the Gospel and God’s goodness.

¹⁰³Luther, *Against the Heavenly Prophets* (1525), LW 40:146.

¹⁰⁴Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 378; II.ix.12.

forms. The human heart which trusts is not the issue with these iconoclasts. They do the same as the Eastern and papal churches, by giving spiritual power to man-made objects. Perhaps a Platonic understanding underlies both approaches?

The Decalogue is not against matter itself or man-made objects, but the lack of fear, love, and trust in the true God. Its intended role is to expose the transgressions of sinners. “False worship” is not about externals, but “involves only that the conscience that seeks help, comfort, and salvation in its own works and presumes to wrest heaven from God.”¹⁰⁵ Since Plato “was convinced that knowledge . . . cannot be obtained from anything so variable and evanescent as sense-perception, he was led to posit a transcendent, non-sensible world of Forms or Ideals (εἶδη) which are apprehended by the intellect alone.”¹⁰⁶ This sort of thinking, unfortunately, dominated during certain periods of the Christian Church.

For Josephus (and many Christian theologians): “the ‘second’ commandment [is] a philosophical critique of images in which the inappropriateness of εἰκόνας [images] flows directly from the nature of the deity. In other words, Josephus’ affirmation of aniconic worship . . . is a logical outcome of God’s character.”¹⁰⁷ It is a wrong view of sin to degrade the external and visible, while elevating fleshly man’s reason (and its product philosophy) as more compatible with the Spirit.

Though a biblical text is cited and a few words of the Decalogue seems to support such thinking, images are not necessarily an interpretative problem. Man’s underlying way of seeing the world, his philosophic presuppositions, and sinful reason often cause him to “hear what he wants to hear and disregard the rest.”¹⁰⁸

Biblical Examination

Theologically, Old Testament-based aniconism can be dismissed by separating the eternal, moral law from the temporary, ceremonial law. Yet the charge that the Philonian Second Command-

¹⁰⁵Kolb/Wengert, 388; LC I, 22.

¹⁰⁶J.N.D. Kelley, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), 10.

¹⁰⁷Ehrenkrook, “Sculpting Idolatry in Flavian Rome,” 129.

¹⁰⁸Paul Simon, “The Boxer” (1968).

ment prohibits religious or secular art should be addressed. Though the text applied directly only to Jews, not Gentiles, it is still God’s Word and helpful to address exegetically.

Hebrew Definition

The problem for many in understanding the Decalogue is the phrase “graven image.” This phrase translates one Hebrew word: **פֶּסֶל** (pesel). The Hebrew definition is problematic itself, but when a questionable translation gets saddled with iconoclastic baggage and ripped from its textual context, much mischief is the result.

While it is common today to do theology by creative and fanciful etymology (such as with the word “Gottesdienst”), that is not the right way to do theology. Etymology is the historical study of how words have actually been used. There may be little relation between what a word means in two different time periods. In English, “an apology” is of a different character than the *Apology* [or defense] (ἀπολογία in Greek) of the Augsburg Confession and “gay” is not a complimentary adjective for a Christian anymore. Words shift in meaning over time. Without ample evidence of actual usage, etymology is guesswork.

פָּסַל (pasal), the verbal root, means to “hew, to cut, to carve.”¹⁰⁹ However, in the Hebrew Scriptures **פֶּסֶל** (pesel), a noun, is not used that way. The primary definition is “idol,” that is, an image with cultic association.

At first glance the meaning of the verb *psl* seems to be accurately circumscribed with “to carve out, hew [stone],” especially since the semantic field that the root *psl* encompasses in other Semitic languages is restricted to the dressing or hewing of wood and stone. Closer observation, however reveals that in the OT only 1 K. 5:32[18] unequivocally refers to a “neutral” hewing in its reference to the preparation of the stones for the temple. Although the other occurrences of the verb *psl* also take the same basic meaning as their point of departure, their actual meaning is ultimately so strongly colored by the context that they require separate semantic consideration. Both Ex. 34:1,4 and Dt. 10:1,3 are directly associated with the prohibition against images and can be understood only within that context.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹Alexander Harkavy, *Student’s Hebrew Chaldee Dictionary to the Old Testament* (New York: Hebrew Publishing, 1914), 574. This verb is used in Exodus 34:1: “Cut for yourself two tablets of stone.”

¹¹⁰*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, eds. Gerhard Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, Heinz-Josef Fabry; trans. David E. Green, Douglas W. Stott (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 7:33.

When a word's etymology suggests something different than its actual usage, the context must be the guide, not an assumed definition.

Two examples suffice to show the extreme negative connotation of the noun פֶּסֶל (pesel). “What profit is an idol when its maker has shaped it, a metal image, a teacher of lies? For its maker trusts in his own creation when he makes speechless idols!” (Hab. 2:18). “They are turned back and utterly put to shame, who trust in carved idols, who say to metal images, ‘You are our gods’” (Is. 42:17). Almost all uses of this word denote idolatry (false trust) and are strongly condemned. In fact, the word “idol” (פֶּסֶל) stands for the false god it represents, so that the two are conflated in Old Testament polemics.

Cultic Use

Except for the most strict, such as Philo, Josephus, the Amish, and Muslims, few take פֶּסֶל (pesel) to mean an image without any religious significance. The question is: who determines the extent of religious use? While it is quite easy to make a poor confession on behalf of someone else, who is to say that a statue that one venerates is not decoration in a different context? That was Luther's point—it is the doctrine preached publicly, not historic abuses, which determine the right use of images.

What is in a church building is not necessarily venerated. Carpet, (graven) pews, and colored walls can be practical and a part of the ornamentation or adored as divine. Images in a church are separated from those in a home by followers of Calvin. But does their mere presence near a pulpit or pew constitute a religious use? No. The presence of the cherubim over the ark and the bronze serpent would then also have to be condemned. In the Bible, the derogatory mention of idols is assumed to include a violation of “having other gods,” not simply the presence of representational art.

The full context shows that “graven images” are either fully cultic, that is used in idolatry, or not at all.

You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved 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. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God (Ex. 20:3-5).

An image for decoration, even in a place of preaching, must be distinguished from “bowing down” and “serving them.” If the two clauses are completely separated, then it condemns all use of images, not just the religious. This explains why this passage has had such a wide variety of interpretations. There has been a general failure to grasp the overall unity within this section, especially in connection to opening phrase “You shall have no other gods.”¹¹¹

But it is countered that these prohibitions “positively forbid the making or likenesses for any religious use ... [and] making any images or likeness for religious service is forbidden.”¹¹² However, religious and divine service is a matter of trust, not merely being visible to the eyes when hearing the proclaimed Word of God. A spiritual power is wrongly attributed to objects neither holy, nor sinful. The real issue is whether images are trusted in or said to convey a spiritual benefit, as the heathen bestowed on their idols. The iconodules demand a work of veneration which is foreign, and even against, the Scriptures. The iconoclasts demand a work of banishing images, which is also against the Word of God. Neither work has the promise or command of Christ.

Common to iconoclastic theology is a distrust of the Word—as if the common man cannot help but worship images installed in a religious place.¹¹³ “We know that ‘an idol has no real existence,’ and that ‘there is no God but one’” (I Cor. 8:4). There is no need to fear man-made objects where God’s Word is rightly preached.

Babel Confusion

There is a problem with “graven image.” Not that it is a wrong translation, but it is liable to be misunderstood today. It means “a carved idol or representation of a god used as an object

¹¹¹This is an unproven thesis: “The prohibitions against polytheism (First Commandment) and against idolatry (true Second) are two entirely discrete directives, and have every justification for separate listing in enumerating the Decalogue.” Maier, “Enumerating the Decalogue,” 25.

¹¹²William S. Plumer, *The Law of God as Contained in the Ten Commandments* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1864), 203.

¹¹³Baptists likewise “fix” latent alcoholics by forbidding all to drink, even in moderation. The problem is then the substance, not the heart of sinful man.

of worship.”¹¹⁴ It was a term coined for biblical translation, one of many Middle English words invented for the Wycliffe Bible. It reads in Ex. 20:4 from the 1395 edition: “Thou schalt not make to thee a grauun ymage.”¹¹⁵

Over 600 years later we are stuck with the same technical term, designed specifically for this context.¹¹⁶ The venerable Septuagint translation of the Old Testament is helpful in showing how the Decalogue was understood centuries before Christ.¹¹⁷

It is worth noting that with a single exception, the LXX always renders the noun *pesel* in the Pentateuch with a corresponding form of γλυπτός [*gluptos*, carved]; only in the two versions of the Decalogue in Ex. 20:4 and Dt. 5:8 does the LXX use εἶδωλον [*eidōlon*, idol], betraying a late interpretation¹¹⁸ that reads the first and second Decalogue commandments together and against this background understands the second as prohibiting “divine images” (idols) rather than cultic or similar images in a general sense.¹¹⁹

“Idol” comes from the Greek εἶδωλον. It is “not the usual term for the cultic images of the Greeks.” In Homer it denotes what is unreal and unsubstantial.¹²⁰ “The term εἶδωλον had never before been used to refer to the gods themselves. Only a Jew or a Christian could therefore say, ‘For all the gods (θεοί) of the peoples are idols’” (I Chron. 16:26).¹²¹ Therefore, לִפְסֵל (*pesel*), as evidenced by the Greek εἶδωλον (idol), is mostly a polemic technical term. This determines also how “graven image” should be understood.

Conclusion

The problem of images is not new, nor will it subside. They must be kept free, so no iconoclastic overreactions are encouraged. Despite false attacks that Lutherans misnumber the Decalogue,

¹¹⁴“Graven image,” Oxford Dictionaries, <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/graven-image?q=graven+image>.

¹¹⁵This is a translation from the (at times questionable) Latin Vulgate, not the Hebrew.

¹¹⁶Perhaps the worst offense in the 2011 NIV is here where it exchanges “idol” from the 1983 edition for “image.”

¹¹⁷“Only Philo and Josephus depart from this pattern. They consistently prefer to avoid the vocabulary of the LXX to describe cultic images, when they are free from quoting or close dependence upon the text of the LXX itself.” Terry Griffith, “EIDOLON as ‘Idol’ in Non-Jewish And Non-Christian Greek,” in *Journal of Theological Studies*, vol. 53:1 (April 2002), 96.

¹¹⁸If this thesis were true it would be our earliest source, predating Philo by several centuries.

¹¹⁹*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 35.

¹²⁰*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 376.

¹²¹Griffith, “EIDOLON as ‘Idol’,” 101.

there is a much deeper problem: the understanding of how God relates to the matter of this world which He created. While enumeration of the Ten Words is free, it is often reflective of one's theology, especially in relation to images.

Views of God's working within creation reveal themselves in the teaching on images, but also in the special rites He instituted which demand the use of physical elements. The Decalogue forbids idolatry and confesses "a strong belief in the spiritual nature of Yahweh." This is not a philosophy derived from pure reason, anymore than the Ten Words are philosophic axioms. "Yet [the prohibition against idols] is not speculative. God is not conceived as essentially remote from matter or from this world. He is rather a God whom man cannot master and control, least of all in the form of a visible, material representation."¹²² The Decalogue is a divine revelation, founded on God's historical actions of leading His people out of Egypt. That is why Luther had no problem taking the sacramental institutions at face value, regardless of whether they make sense to reason or philosophy.

Rational assumptions about God's transcendent nature and His relation to this world belie their origin—they are not of God's written Word, which is tangible and received by the senses just as was Christ by the Apostles:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us (I Jn. 1:1-2).

¹²² *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 381.