

GRAVEN IMAGES AND MODERN CHRISTIAN ARTWORK

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Origin Of The Phrase "Graven Image", Idolatry And Carved Idols, Twisting The Scriptures, Mount Sinai Moses And The Golden Calf, Israelites Worshipped Idols Made With Human Hands, An Angry Jealous God Sets Down The Law Concerning Idol Worship, Hezekiah And Brass Serpent Nehushtan, Jesus Was Lifted Up To Save Us Just Like The Brass Serpent, The Jews Continued Worshipping Idols And Sacrificing Children Until Babylonian Invasions, Prophet Ezekiel's Warnings, The Israelites Created And Prayed To Deaf Blind Mute Idols, Israel Was Divided Due To King Solomon's Serious Apostasy, God Foresaw The Wickedness To Come, Human Propensity For Worshipping The Creations Of Our Own Hands, Apostles Amazed By The Temple, Roman Catholic Idolatry, Modern Technology Robotics And Artificial Intelligence, Man's Desire To Become His Own Creator God, Tower Of Babel And Secular Humanism, Christians Who Condemn Other Christians For Using Christian Artwork, Do Any Christians Really Idolize Christian Artwork?, A Huge Difference Between Real Idolatry And Using Christian Artwork As A Teaching And Witnessing Tool, Nobody Knows What Jesus Looked Like, No Intentional Deception By The Artists, Let Every Man Be Fully Persuaded In His Own Mind, Don't Let Anyone Condemn You, My Personal Practices, Suggesting Reading

It seems that some Christians have a skewed understanding of exactly what was meant by the phrase "graven image" in the Holy Scriptures. In some cases, this misunderstanding may be due to simple ignorance. That is to say, they are not fully aware of what the Bible has to say regarding this issue. In other instances, it could also be that they're intentionally twisting the meaning of certain verses so that they conform to their personal belief system. Whatever the case may be, allow me to explain this phrase to those of you who happen to be confused regarding this particular issue.

According to the original Hebrew word which is used in the Old Testament of the KJV Bible -- that is to say, "pecel" -- contrary to the misguided belief which has been embraced by

some undetermined number of Christians, a graven image was NOT referring to classical paintings, pictures and drawings in books, Internet images and memes, etc., as some of these people have supposed. All of these are just different forms of artistic expression and nothing more. In actuality, a graven image, as described in the Scriptures, was an idol or image which was CARVED -- or graven -- out of wood. Then it was covered with thin plates of gold or silver, as well as other decorative ornaments. Sometimes these statues or images were made out of solid metal as well.

For example, the well-known Golden Calf which is found in the Book of Exodus chapter thirty-two was clearly a graven image. In fact, it was an Egyptian idol which had the solar disk between its horns. At any rate, its presence greatly angered both the Lord and Moses so much, that in his haste and anger, upon coming down from Mount Sinai and discovering what his brother Aaron and the people had so wickedly done during his absence, Moses proceeded to break the first two stone tablets on which the Commandments had been inscribed by the very finger of God.

To be very clear, the main thing about graven images which majorly upset the Lord, and which motivated Him to strictly forbid their creation, was the fact that the Israelites were turning such carved, plated images into false gods and then praying to them and worshipping them -- instead of Him -- as we can easily determine by the following sample verses which are found in the Book of Isaiah:

"They lavish gold out of the bag, and weigh silver in the balance, and hire a goldsmith; and he maketh it a god: they fall down, yea, they worship. They bear him upon the shoulder, they carry him, and set him in his place, and he standeth; from his place shall he not remove: yea, one shall cry unto him, yet can he not answer, nor save him out of his trouble."

Isaiah 46:6-7, KJV

Obviously, this was blatant, unabashed idolatry. That was their real sin which the Lord found so very offensive. Thus, in the Book of Exodus, twelve chapters BEFORE the incident with the Golden Calf had even occurred, we discover the following clear prohibition being given by the Lord through Moses. It seems apparent that the Lord already knew exactly in which direction those idolatrous people were headed, even before they committed their actual sin. So He set down the

Law with the following words:

"Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments."
Exodus 20:3-6, KJV

In fact, the brazen -- or brass -- serpent which Moses later made by God's very own command, in order to heal the people of poisonous snake bites in the Book of Numbers, also eventually became such an idol as well. That is why obedient King Hezekiah grew tired of it, and eventually had it -- they called it Nehushtan, meaning "a thing of brass" -- broken in pieces and destroyed hundreds of years later, as we see by the following two Bible verses:

"And he did that which was right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that David his father did. He removed the high places, and brake the images, and cut down the groves, and brake in pieces the brasen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it: and he called it Nehushtan."
2 Kings 18:3-4, KJV

Before moving on in our discussion, allow me to interject something rather interesting which is directly related to the brazen serpent which Moses created. It is my personal belief that this brass serpent which Moses raised up on a pole was a prophetic foreshadow of what Jesus Christ would do many centuries later when He was raised up on a stake or cross, and then died for the sins of the world, so that we too can be healed. Consider the following group of Bible verses:

"And 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 eternal life."
John 3:14-15, KJV

"And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men

unto me."

John 12:32, KJV

"Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed."

1 Peter 2:24, KJV

"But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed."

Isaiah 53:5, KJV

Continuing with our primary discussion, despite Hezekiah's wise actions, as the decades passed, the foolish, rebellious Israelites continued to make idols of carved wood which they covered with plates of precious metals, and then they bowed down and worshipped the same, in stiff contradiction to the Lord's commandment which He had given to them many centuries earlier. We find yet another clear example of this idolatrous practice in the Book of Jeremiah, as we can determine by the following group of Bible verses:

"For the customs of the people are vain: for one cutteth a tree out of the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the axe. They deck it with silver and with gold; they fasten it with nails and with hammers, that it move not. They are upright as the palm tree, but speak not: they must needs be borne, because they cannot go. Be not afraid of them; for they cannot do evil, neither also is it in them to do good."

Jeremiah 10:3-5, KJV

"A drought is upon her [Babylon's] waters; and they shall be dried up: for it is the land of graven images, and they are mad upon their idols."

Jeremiah 50:38, KJV

Tragically, idol worship in ancient Israel became so rampant, widespread and vile, that those Jews even went to the extreme of sacrificing their own children to them. This was precisely what was going on at the time that God decided to send King Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian armies to destroy Jerusalem and the temple compound, as we see by the following group of Bible verses:

"They did not destroy the nations, concerning whom the LORD

commanded them: But were mingled among the heathen, and learned their works. And they served their idols: which were a snare unto them. Yea, they sacrificed their sons and their daughters unto devils, And shed innocent blood, even the blood of their sons and of their daughters, whom they sacrificed unto the idols of Canaan: and the land was polluted with blood. Thus were they defiled with their own works, and went a whoring with their own inventions."

Psalms 106:34-39, KJV

Following are some additional Bible verses that were written by the Prophet Ezekiel. As I point out in a number of other Bill's Bible Basics articles, Ezekiel was a contemporary of the Prophet Jeremiah, and was himself part of the Jewish prisoners who were carried off to Babylonia to serve their Seventy Years of Captivity:

"Son of man, set thy face toward the mountains of Israel, and prophesy against them, And say, Ye mountains of Israel, hear the word of the Lord GOD; Thus saith the Lord GOD to the mountains, and to the hills, to the rivers, and to the valleys; Behold, I, even I, will bring a sword upon you, and I will destroy your high places. And your altars shall be desolate, and your images shall be broken: and I will cast down your slain men before your idols. And I will lay the dead carcasses of the children of Israel before their idols; and I will scatter your bones round about your altars. In all your dwellingplaces the cities shall be laid waste, and the high places shall be desolate; that your altars may be laid waste and made desolate, and your idols may be broken and cease, and your images may be cut down, and your works may be abolished. And the slain shall fall in the midst of you, and ye shall know that I am the LORD."

Ezekiel 6:2-7, KJV

"And the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their heart, and put the stumblingblock of their iniquity before their face: should I be enquired of at all by them? Therefore speak unto them, and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Every man of the house of Israel that setteth up his idols in his heart, and putteth the stumblingblock of his iniquity before his face, and cometh to the prophet; I the LORD will answer him that cometh according to the multitude of his idols; That I may take the house of Israel in their own heart, because they are all estranged from me through their idols. Therefore say unto the house of Israel, Thus saith the Lord

GOD; Repent, and turn yourselves from your idols; and turn away your faces from all your abominations. For every one of the house of Israel, or of the stranger that sojourneth in Israel, which separateth himself from me, and setteth up his idols in his heart, and putteth the stumblingblock of his iniquity before his face, and cometh to a prophet to enquire of him concerning me; I the LORD will answer him by myself: And I will set my face against that man, and will make him a sign and a proverb, and I will cut him off from the midst of my people; and ye shall know that I am the LORD."

Ezekiel 14:2-8, KJV

Sometimes the graven images of the Israelites were created in the shape of animals. In other instances, they were given a more human form, as we can again determine by the set of verses below. But in all cases, whether they were human-like in appearance or not, the idols were deaf, blind and mute to the Israelites' petitions and prayers to them, just like the idols of the heathen nations which surrounded them. In fact, they created special places which the Bible refers to as "groves" where they bowed down to and sacrificed to these abominations:

"Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they speak not: eyes have they, but they see not: They have ears, but they hear not: noses have they, but they smell not: They have hands, but they handle not: feet have they, but they walk not: neither speak they through their throat. They that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them."

Psalms 115:4-8, KJV

"The idols of the heathen are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they speak not; eyes have they, but they see not; They have ears, but they hear not; neither is there any breath in their mouths. They that make them are like unto them: so is every one that trusteth in them."

Psalms 135:15-18, KJV

As I also amply explain in a few other BBB articles, long BEFORE these events occurred, but long AFTER the idolatry which occurred at the foot of Mount Sinai -- which is also known as Mount Horeb -- King David's son, Solomon, likewise fell into a deep state of idolatry and apostasy, due to the pagan influences of the many heathen wives he had married. In fact, as I point out in articles such as "The Fruits of

Disobedience", Solomon sinned so greatly, that as punishment for his rebellion, God chose to rip ten tribes from David's kingdom. This occurred during the reign of Solomon's son, Rehoboam. This prophecy against King Solomon was fulfilled in 1 Kings chapter twelve. I encourage you to read it. For now though, consider the following Bible verses which verify this particular point, and which clearly describe Solomon's fall into a deep state of apostasy in his old age:

"But king Solomon loved many strange women, together with the daughter of Pharaoh, women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Zidonians, and Hittites; Of the nations concerning which the LORD said unto the children of Israel, Ye shall not go in to them, neither shall they come in unto you: for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods: Solomon clave unto these in love. And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines: and his wives turned away his heart. For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods: and his heart was not perfect with the LORD his God, as was the heart of David his father. For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Zidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. And Solomon did evil in the sight of the LORD, and went not fully after the LORD, as did David his father. Then did Solomon build an high place for Chemosh, the abomination of Moab, in the hill that is before Jerusalem, and for Molech, the abomination of the children of Ammon. And likewise did he for all his strange wives, which burnt incense and sacrificed unto their gods. And the LORD was angry with Solomon, because his heart was turned from the LORD God of Israel, which had appeared unto him twice, And had commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not go after other gods: but he kept not that which the LORD commanded. Wherefore the LORD said unto Solomon, Forasmuch as this is done of thee, and thou hast not kept my covenant and my statutes, which I have commanded thee, I will surely rend the kingdom from thee, and will give it to thy servant. Notwithstanding in thy days I will not do it for David thy father's sake: but I will rend it out of the hand of thy son. Howbeit I will not rend away all the kingdom; but will give one tribe to thy son for David my servant's sake, and for Jerusalem's sake which I have chosen."

1 Kings 11:1-13, KJV

So as you can see, the Lord views the creation of graven or carved images and worship of the same, as a very serious sin

and grave offence. He is a jealous God who refuses to allow any other man-made god to be exalted above Him or before Him. Those people in the Bible who fell to such folly paid a very steep price for their waywardness and rebellion.

As I mentioned earlier, in the case of the Golden Calf, God knew beforehand what would happen. Being as He is our very Creator, He understands what dwells in our hearts. He also recognizes that we humans have a particular weakness in that we have a natural propensity for worshipping the creations of our own hands. It does not matter what it is. Whether it is religious idols, or perhaps statues of famous people, or impressive buildings, or a person's fancy new car, truck or motorcycle, or any other fancy, human-made object, so many people just adore their idols. People simply love to lavish praise on such things. They burst with pride over them.

As some of you may recall, even Jesus' very own Disciples got tripped off and all goo-goo ga-ga over the beauty of Herod's magnificent, gleaming temple complex in Jerusalem, as we see by the following two Bible verses:

"And Jesus went out, and departed from the temple: and his disciples came to him for to shew him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said unto them, See ye not all these things? verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down."
Matthew 24:1-2, KJV

Ha! Wow! What a response from the Lord! I imagine that His reaction must have shocked the Disciples. I bet they were not expecting that kind of comment from Jesus. So that is the real problem; when people unwisely begin to worship the creations of their own hands, instead of the living God. To reiterate what I said a minute ago, that is what upsets and offends the Lord the most, because He is a jealous God who will not tolerate any other gods, real or imagined, before Him.

Sadly, some of us know that many people are quite guilty of doing this, beginning with the Roman Catholics themselves. Other denominations have followed suit. For centuries now, religious idol worship has been rampant everywhere, both in our Christian faith, and in other religions as well. As I have shared with my readers before, I was a Roman Catholic until the age of about sixteen. As such, I was both baptized and confirmed in the local Roman Catholic Church. As I point

out in articles such as "To Pray or Not to Pray? That Is the Question", I went to confession on weekends, did my penance, said the rosary, attended weekly catechism, and went to mass every Sunday. I also lit candles before statues of saints as well, due to ignorance in my youth. So as you can see, I do understand Roman Catholicism quite well.

But today there is a new type of worship creeping up on us at a very past pace. In fact, it is already everywhere, in our homes, in our places of employment, in our schools, etc. Furthermore, it is the work and creation of our own hands. Within a few short years, it will be totally unavoidable. So what am I referring to? Modern technology, robotics and artificial intelligence. We now possess the knowledge and the ability to create intelligent machines IN OUR OWN IMAGE, and they will only continue to improve as the years advance.

In his foolish pride, man wants to become his own god. He wants to create his own form of eternal life. He wants to create artificial bodies in which his mind can supposedly live forever, without the need for the true eternal God in the Heavens. As I explain in "John Lennon's 'Imagine' and Secular Humanism", centuries before the Israelites ever occupied the land of Canaan, people were already trying to become their own gods. They were trying to make a name for themselves, just as we see at the Tower of Babel. If you doubt that this is so, consider what we are told in these Bible verses which are found in the Book of Genesis:

"And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there. And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them throughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and LET US MAKE US A NAME, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."

Genesis 11:1-4, KJV

You see, it is all human endeavor without needing any help from God. It is secular humanism through and through. But in that case, God blew on it, and their efforts soon came to naught. But today, who knows how everything will eventually turn out. Some people have already given very stiff warnings regarding what is now occurring in the realm of robotics and artificial intelligence, while others have had nothing but

praise for the progress which has been made. But is all of this technology a two-edged sword?

Having now piqued your interest in the aforementioned topic, let us begin to wrap up this discussion. As I stated at the beginning of this article, in contrast to how I've explained the phrase "graven image" to you, there are some Christian brethren today who have taken the meaning of the phrase in a totally different direction. Not only that, but they have repeatedly used their personal -- and I believe, misguided -- understanding of the phrase "graven image" to condemn other Christians who enjoy having Christian-based artwork in their homes, places of work, etc.

In fact, I have personally seen some of them occasionally making posts about this very subject. However, in order to avoid online conflict -- and because I refuse to waste my time on futile doctrinal debates -- I have purposely kept silent about it until now. One reason why I refrain myself, is because I already know some of these brethren well enough to realize that they probably won't agree with my position. Nevertheless, I feel compelled to tell them the truth now, by way of this current article.

My dear friends, if you happen to be guilty of this kind of finger-pointing and condemnation of your Christian brethren, allow me to state the following for your consideration. If you lack the faith to have Christian artwork on display in your home, office or wherever, that is entirely your choice. It's truly between you and the Lord. As they say, your home is your castle where your own rules reign. As such, you are obviously free to do -- or not to do in this case -- as you wish.

However, to condemn other online Christians regarding this particular subject of admiring Christian artwork -- as I have personally witnessed some of you repeatedly doing -- is in my view simply wrong. Yes, as I already said, I know that some of you won't agree with me. However, my goal in writing this article is not just to try to persuade you to change your mind. It is also to reach out to those Christians who have felt condemned by your words, and to let them know that I personally do NOT view artistically admiring drawings or paintings of the Lord as idolatry, or as some terrible sin.

Before concluding this article, allow me to address a final question: Do some misguided Christians really idolize and

worship such classical paintings and drawings? Do any of them actually making gods out of them similar to what the Israelites of old did with their carved statues and images? Do they pray to such classical paintings, pictures, drawings or memes, and make petitions to them? Possibly. I really do not know for certain, but I seriously doubt it. If there are any, I would definitely view them as being a bit weird. All I can say is that I personally have never met any Christian who does this. In fact, in my view, there is no comparison between ancient Israelite idol worship and child sacrifices, and admiring modern Christian artwork today.

Please note that I'm NOT talking about statues or figurines. We already know that praying to those, making petitions to them, and kissing them, is wrong. We can agree that this is blatant idol worship. However, this article is specifically about using classical Christian artwork -- that is to say, painting and drawings -- and creating Internet memes with pictures of Jesus, as a form of teaching tools to share the message of the Scriptures with online users. This is where some Christians -- including myself -- have been criticized and attacked by more legally-minded brethren.

So my final word on this particular topic is the following:

In my view, there's a big difference between actual idols or statues, and paintings, pictures, drawings, Internet memes, etc. I personally believe that these forms of artwork which depict Biblical events and characters are in a different class altogether from graven images. In other words, statues and other such idols are purposely created to honor someone, which in the case of famous religious figures, can over time lead to actual worship of the same, as we all know. Mary is of course a prime example of this. Marian idolatry is found throughout the Catholic world.

However, as I have already made clear, the art forms I have discussed are simply meant to convey an idea in pictorial form. As I said, they are simply teaching tools. They are NOT intentionally made to be worshipped by anyone. Again, I don't know of a single Christian who worships such images.

Furthermore, in my view to admire a well-crafted painting or drawing which is an artistic expression of Jesus Christ, the Angels, a Biblical event or our Heavenly Father, is NOT idol worship, particularly if it in fact inspires faith in the divine. Likewise to include such images in our online memes

-- such as on the various social networks, for example -- is NOT idolatry whatsoever. We are simply using such images to share our Christian faith. Nothing more.

To those of you extremists who believe otherwise, and who will continue to criticize and condemn your Christian brethren who enjoy and use such Christian artwork, I think you need to learn to differentiate between REAL idolatrous worship, and simple artistic admiration and expression.

Now, I have noticed that some of you detractors make it a big point to mention the fact that Jesus' actual physical appearance remains a mystery to us all. Yes, I agree. We simply do not know for certain. We all realize that no one really knows what Jesus actually looked like. Because of this point, we also all understand that such paintings and drawings are merely artistic renditions, and nothing more. In other words, to my personal knowledge, nobody -- meaning no artist or painter -- is out to purposely deceive people into believing that their particular rendition is what Jesus actually looked like. As I already said, such drawings and paintings serve as tools of inspiration, and as a graphical mechanism to deliver the Gospel message -- or some other Bible-based truth -- to the viewer. Nothing more. There is no evil intent.

It is my hope then that some of my brethren who have been particularly harsh towards other Christians regarding this issue due to different points of view, will carefully and prayerfully consider my words. Thanks for taking the time to read this article. Let me leave you with two final verses which sum up the bottom line for me personally:

". . . Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind . . . Hast thou faith? have it to thyself before God. Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth."

Romans 14:5, 22, KJV

By the way, for any curious readers who may possibly be wondering, please know that I do NOT wear a crucifix or any other Christian paraphernalia. In fact, I do not wear any type of jewelry at all. Furthermore, neither do I have any religious statues, Last Supper paintings, etc., in my home. Are you legalists satisfied now? Let me also add that as for me, even though a few of my online Christian friends accuse me and condemn me for using such graphics in a number of my

memes, it is my intention to continue doing so, because to be quite frank, I do not see anything wrong with doing it. Neither do I sense that God is condemning me for doing it either. Neither should you feel condemned if you likewise use such images in your online ministry work.

With these thoughts, I will bring this article to a close. It is my hope that you've found it informative and enlightening, and I pray that it has been a blessing in your life as well. If you have an account with Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr or with any other social network, I would really appreciate if you'd take the time to click or tap on the corresponding link that is found on this page. Thanks so much, and may God bless you abundantly!

For additional information and further study, you may want to refer to the list of reading resources below which were either mentioned in this article, or which contain topics which are related to this article. All of these articles are likewise located on the Bill's Bible Basics web server. To read these articles, simply click or tap on any link you see below.

AI, Deepfakes and Humanoid Robots
Are You Flexible?
Facebook False Prophets and Misguided Teachers
Humility in Our Understanding of God's Word
John Lennon's "Imagine" and Secular Humanism
My Evolving Theology
Please Stop Misinterpreting the Scriptures
Robot Wars and Skynet: Is Sci-Fi Becoming Our Reality?
Should Christians Engage in Doctrinal Debates?
So, You Have Got It All Figured Out, Do You?
The Fruits of Disobedience
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Understanding the Bible in Context

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