

Statuary and the Second Commandment

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Some sincere Christians wonder whether creating statuary is not a violation of the second of the Ten Commandments. Does this commandment recognize or does it ignore the distinction between art for its own sake and art for a religious purpose? And could there be art for a religious purpose that is acceptable to God? Because the Ten Commandments represent the core moral law and express the will of God answering such questions is of importance.

The underlying question deals with the second commandment. There God told the Israelites not to make graven images, specifically in the setting that they might bow down to them or worship them. Egypt, which they had fled, was filled with statuary of the gods. The Lord was saying to the Hebrews, "Do not do that kind of thing." His concern was clearly with the temptation to use images as worship aids. To create an image of the mighty and eternal Lord would distort their understanding of His majesty and reduce him in human understanding. God is invisible to humans and should be worshiped as the invisible ruler of the universe. The Egyptians also believed that their gods were living and invisible, but required statuary to remind the people of the hidden gods. God is saying to the Hebrews, do not in any way make worship of me dependent on artistic worship aids. Worship me directly, from the heart.

It is clear that this prohibition of statuary as a worship aid was not intended to exclude all kinds of art work outside the worship mode, as is claimed by Muslims. Evidence of this is found in God's instructions for building the tabernacle, and later the temple. The original laver that stood in the courtyard where the priests would wash was expanded in Solomon's temple to a much larger "sea of bronze, its perimeter being 30 cubits (about 14 meters), resting on the

backs of twelve bronze oxen (1 Kings 7:23-26). Even in the place of worship where God met with His people, it was legitimate to have functional statuary, but not to be used as objects or aids to worship. And we have other examples. The great curtains that hung in the tabernacle separating the holy place from the court, and a second one between the holy and most holy apartments had the figures of angels woven into the fabric (Ex 26:1). Even more, at either end of the mercy seat, the lid covering the holy ark of the covenant, an image of an angel was placed (Ex 25:18-22). These were, of course, out of sight of the worshipers but they knew of their presence. The people were to worship God alone, never the angels. Worship of angels, even though they stand in the very presence of God, is specifically forbidden in the Scriptures (Rev. 19:10, Isa. 6:10).

Beyond the tabernacle itself, we have an instance where God instructed Moses to make a brazen (actually bronze) image of a serpent in the wilderness (Num 21:8, 9), which in later centuries came to be worshiped by the Hebrews, leading Hezekiah to curb the idolatry by destroying the image (2 Kings 18:4). Clearly, it was not the making of the image that was offensive to God, but the misuse of that image.

Based on these Scriptures, we conclude that use of artistic decoration, including statuary, even in places of worship, is not in violation of the second commandment as long as it is not used in any format for worship. We need to think of these things in terms of art, not worship aids as is common in Roman Catholic practice, and not to incorporate them into our worship. God is a lover of beauty, of which we have many evidences, and we should bring Him the best of our gifts, whether music, paintings, or other gifts of skill, but never objects of worship.

The biblical approach to art in non-worship settings is described in the passages cited in this brief article. Because early Christians were viewed by the authorities as an illicit sect, and at times their lives were in peril, it was not until many decades later that they dared erect church buildings for worship. Those buildings were relatively simple and hardly ornamented at all.

Among the earliest places of Christian worship still in existence are the catacombs underneath the city of Rome, where Christians, operating under the rubric of burial societies for the dead, worshiped God in underground chambers and narrow hallways cut in the relatively soft tufa formations. There they left wall inscriptions and simple painted symbols, best known being that of the fish, as well as paintings on biblical themes and representations of the dead persons buried in wall crypts. Following legal recognition of Christianity in the Roman Empire in 313, church buildings rapidly appeared, increasingly ornamented with artistic worship aids that themselves became the objects of devotion. In this the works of art passed from secular and commemorative uses into objects assigned religious significance. At that point they came into clear violation of the second commandment.

Christians committed to biblical teachings and practices will keep clear the distinction between artwork as art and artwork as the object of religious devotion. The distinction is that illustrated in Hezekiah's destruction of the brazen serpent. Although it carried an impeccable heritage, having been prepared at the explicit command of God, its use descended to become the object of idolatry by a people whose religion had drifted from a personal walk with God to one of ritualistic honor lavished on an antiquity.