

Idolatrous Images? Refuting Packer **Sheona Beaumont, Nov 08**

J I Packer (in 'Knowing God'; London, Hodder&Stoughton, 1975) tackles the issue of idolatry in chapter 4 of a book he introduces as a type of handbook for the Christian wanting to get their doctrine straight. Straight and narrow is indeed his interpretation of the second commandment in Exodus 20. The qualification for what he goes on to say is given with the assertion that this commandment must necessarily mean something different to the first one, otherwise it wouldn't be there (p.43). Without going into the many interpretations of the commandment structure (eg the 1/9 describing ideology/practicality, or the 4/6 describing relations respecting God/man), this is a rather odd way of using the perimeters of language given by the list of 1-10 (which are not clearly enumerated anyway) to enlarge the perimeters of interpretation. They are already naturally different, but one cannot make them more different than they are on the basis of an imposed numeric structure.

In fact Packer seems rather blinded by his logic to the extent of ignoring the cultural context that gives rise to the commands in the first place. Rather than fix on the abstraction of a list of rules to apply today, we need enter into the community of Israel in its early days where the suggestion of the commandments is more covenantal than legal (p.80, *Oxford Bible Commentary* – who points out that explicitly described laws come later in this Exodus passage). In this sense, the first part of the text (up to v.11) is most obviously concerned with the honour properly attributed to YHWH, it is 'instruction addressed personally to Israel, or to the individual Israelite' (p.80, OBC), it is about loyalty in the relationship between God and man.

That there should be a need for God to labour this point is understood by us today in the knowledge that the Israelites found themselves in a culture of polytheistic idol worship. Out of Egypt and landed in Canaan, the prevailing traditions assumed multiple deities, in fact they 'seemed more natural, reflecting the complexity and unpredictability of the world' (p.81, OBC). Against such a background 'you shall have no other gods before me' (Ex. 20:3) is already a stark assertion of the singular nature of the Israelite's YHWH in direct contrast to the gods worshipped around them.

The form of this worship, we also know today, was predominantly in the making and veneration of physical representations of such deities as were then believed to harbour or invoke the gods themselves. This is where the second commandment expands on the principles of the first, focussing on the particular temptation to follow, without thought, the tide of the local culture. It is no less a powerful reminder to us too that the Christian God does not share a platform with anyone/thing else.

However, there are two aspects of this injunction against image/idol-making which we must take care in interpreting. The first is this: Packer, along with other scholars, sees v.4 as prohibiting images of YHWH in particular, as v.3 has dealt with worshipping other gods. To my mind this is not clear – not only does the grammar and general flow of the passage suggest otherwise (OBC points out that the 'them' in v.5 refers to the 'other gods' in v.3, because it is plural where v.4 has only the singular), but the continuing offensiveness to God of **material** idols generally is borne out in Israelite history, regardless of who they honour; from the golden calf (Ex. 32, 1 Kings 12) to Asherah poles (2 Kings 18).

The point is surely that anything which takes the place of or attempts to share a platform with God (as understood as the one, true, holy and unseen 'I AM') should be shunned. There was then, pre-Jesus, a separation of God from man on account of YHWH's absolute holiness, and the Old Testament story hinges on how God creates the boundaries for a relationship to happen at all – it could only ever be a false start when the Israelites attempted to 'make' God in their fallible, human midst. This in fact is the second main issue we come to tackle in interpreting the second commandment, hinging as it does on the appropriate worship of this awesome YHWH, then and now.

Packer goes on to say that 'God says quite categorically, 'thou shalt not make *any* likeness of *any* thing' for use in worship' (p.44). My return is that God says rather 'thou shalt not make any likeness

of any thing' to worship, which is simply the original expressed differently: 'you shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything... you shall not bow down to them or worship them.' It is true that in image-making universally there is in some sense a personification of the thing represented – we may recognise a picture of the Queen as just a picture, yet we would feel uncomfortable about defacing it because of its perceived 'attachment' to the real thing. This has been the primitive fascination with images throughout history, this is their power. Yet to recognise this is not idolatry.

This may seem a brief departure from our specific subject, but the psychology of viewing something representational is one well-studied in art, and it is important to keep one eye on the basics of what happens in such an encounter while considering the cultural phenomena and belief-systems surrounding it. It is a matter of discerning the universal from the particular. In the Israelites' case, idolatrous practice in the neighbourhood led to material objects being attributed with divine status (a way, often, of explaining the unseen in nature which today we understand in scientific terms – eg. the weather). To the extent to which these objects were believed to be supernaturally controlling various aspects of life (as opposed to God), they were idols.

We need only turn a few pages further in Exodus to realise that the creation of material objects for use in worship was in fact authorised by God in the instructions for the building of the tabernacle – and this includes representational objects, for example the 'cups shaped like almond flowers' for the lampstand (Ex 25:33) or the 'cherubim worked into' the curtains (Ex 36:8). It is astonishing that the consideration of visual beauty, craftsmanship and richness in these pages is overlooked by Packer – let alone the later descriptions and worthiness given in scripture to the temple built by Solomon (1 Kings 6ff).

But perhaps we need come back again to his principle objection – that of images/representations of God himself. It is certainly the case that 'in a radical departure from their neighbors' practice, the Israelite's symbol for God was *the absence of an image* above the cherubim on the ark of the covenant' (p.417, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, my italics). I refer again to my previous point that holy YHWH was the instigator of his relationship with his people, and that while there is certainly the absence of a material object, there is not the absence of the presence of the divine – God reveals himself in 'thick darkness' covering the mountain where he met with Moses (Ex. 20:21), or a 'pillar of cloud' (Ex 33:9-11), or a 'burning bush' (Ex. 3:2). Throughout the OT, God, it seems, is busy creating his own image.

The crux of the issue for us today lies in the fact that Jesus Christ became God's ultimate image (Col. 1:15), giving us material representation of his divinity. This incarnation became iconography's defence against the iconoclasts: John of Damascus said 'I do not worship matter, but I worship the Creator of matter who for my sake became material and accepted to dwell in matter and who through matter effected my salvation' (p.iii, John Taylor, *The Methodist Church Collection of Modern Art: An Introduction*). The Word can take mortal form, and Spirit can dwell in jars of clay (John 1:14, 2 Cor. 4:7). Such is the change effected by Christ and his atoning death, that separation of God from man on account of God's holiness is no longer necessary – and therefore worship becomes not so much defined by laws from without, as by attitude from within.

It is, then, a gross perversion of the gospel to say that the material (such as man-made images used in worship) cannot be included in redemption - that, falling short of true representation, they can only ever dishonour God and mislead men (pp.45-47). Of course our attempts at depicting God fail to do his divinity justice (just as our lives do), but we are not therefore making idols, as it is not the material we are worshipping. Packer's sense of the impure in this process is one that would lead him to ban images both in church (materially) and in our thinking of God (immaterially), but surely again this is to refute the gospel celebration that mankind (and womankind) are made in his image, and though fallen, are given to creativity and imagination such as spills out of every pore of the Bible pages – whether representationally in characters such as Bezalel (Ex 31:1-5) or formally in the language of the Psalms and Revelation. It is contradictory to hold up the Bible as the only legitimate source of our understanding and worship of God and to say that images have no part in that understanding and worship (p.50).