

The Right Approach to Worship Yahweh

Yahweh is forming a nation of priests to be an example of holy and righteous living under the sovereignty of the One True God. This unique nation of priests is to model Yahweh's approach to right relationship between man and God and man and man. Yahweh is jealous that his creation should be his – and not turning to false gods and idols. These laws were created to teach Israel how to relate with him and with one another.

Israel was no longer a small tribal family, it was a nation of over 2 million people. It needed a body of laws to govern its daily life and interactions. One of the main purposes of the body of law set forth in Exodus (as well as, Leviticus and Deuteronomy) was to restrain people from uncontrolled wrongdoing that would result in complete chaos and apostasy. They needed to know Yahweh's expectation for appropriate interaction between man and God and man to man. It was also designed to teach Israel to order its personal, social, and religious life in accordance with the holiness of God. The purpose of the God's Law does not lead to spiritual salvation. It reveals the sinfulness of man left to his own devices and imagination. It points out what is sinful and depraved in contrast with holiness and righteousness. It is impossible for any man (or woman) to keep and obey the law fully as intended by God. The law reveals that we need a mediator between us and the righteous Judge of mankind. It points to the necessity of Christ as that mediator.

Before even issuing the Ten Commandments, Yahweh sets forth his goal and covenant: *“Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation”* (Ex. 19: 5-6). His goal with the Israelites is to establish them as a special people unto himself. His Purpose: create a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. How can Israel become Yahweh's treasured possession? Obey Yahweh fully and keep his covenant.

The Covenant held two purposes. First, it was a means to lead or teach the Israelites a life of practical holiness – how to worship Yahweh. Secondly, it was a guide on how to teach the community to meet the needs of each individual in a loving and responsible way. If Israel can keep the Covenant as Yahweh designed it the results are two-fold. First, as Yahweh's treasured possession, they reap the blessings promised in 23:22-31:

1. Oppose their enemies and wipe them out
2. Blessing on their food and water

3. Take sickness from among them
4. Neither miscarry or be barren (Increase in numbers)
5. Will give them the land gradually *as* they increase in number
6. Establish boundaries Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines and from the desert to the River

Second, they become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. They are established as intercessors between Yahweh and the rest of the nations. Jesus who came to fulfill the law also came to draw the nations (gentiles) to the one true God (Luke 2:30-32). Through keeping the Covenant they become an example to the nations of how Yahweh designed humans to live in relationship *with* Him. The Covenant is a means of drawing humans back to Yahweh. This leads to the fact that the Jews had a choice. The Jews could choose to be obedient to the Law and the Covenant, or they could choose not to reject both the Law and the Covenant. In fact, we all have this choice. God wants us to choose to be in relationship with him; or, choose a relationship with our own creations or perception of gods. Humans have a choice in keeping the covenant. Blessings await those who obey the Covenant, and curses (or ultimately, punishment) for those who don't choose to obey.



Deuteronomy 28:1-25

The key to understanding Yahweh's vehement prohibition of idolatry and the absolute necessity of holy war goes back to the first and second commandments. The first two Commandments are to instruct Israel in how to relate with Yahweh. Exodus 20:3 says, "*You shall have no other gods before me*". Yahweh has already proven in Egypt that there are no other gods. He controls every aspect of human life and nature. There is nothing beyond his reach, because everything is his creation and under his sovereignty. Human perceived gods are false. They are idols having no power over human life or nature. Idolatry was the common religion of the ancient world. Every nation/tribe/peoples had their pantheon of gods to whom they turned for every aspect of life. They did not recognize the One True God, Creator of the Universe.

Exodus 20:4-6 continues: "*You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.*"

Idolatry was not just the practice of worshiping by means of pictures or statues as a focal point of worship. It was an elaborate religious system that contradicted what Yahweh desired for His creation. In the pagan system idols and gods could be manipulated by offerings to do the

will of a human. Idolatry did not require ethical behavior, just ritual provision of offerings – anything from food to human sacrifice. Idols could be worshipped anywhere, even in the home. Idolatry was logical to the ancients who did not think in terms of there being just one god. They believed in a multiplicity of gods, none in completion with each other, and each governing a different aspect of life. Worship of an idol was dependent upon the particular needs of an individual at a given time. Idolatry was indulgent, burnt offerings were presented in portions: One portion for the priest for his consumption, a portion burnt for the idol, and a portion consumed by the individual. The better the quality of the sacrifice, the better the result to be obtained for the individual. And lastly, idolatry was erotic. Belief in the notion that all creation is procreation, anything in existence is born into existence. Actions done symbolically in one location could have an effect in another location. Sex with a temple prostitute would encourage the gods to procreate in other areas – crops, livestock, and human fertility.¹

Idolatry easily corrupts successive generations, keeping them from receiving God's blessings and forcing him to mete out justice. Yahweh repeatedly admonishes Israel not to bow down to idols. Ex 23: 32-33, "*Do not make a covenant with them² or with their gods. Do not let them live in your lands, or they will cause you to sin against me, because the worship of their gods will certainly be a snare to you.*" Yahweh repeats this injunction against idolatry in Ex 20:4-6; 20:23; 22:20; 23:24; 23:32-33. In fact it is their failure to follow through on this command that causes them to not receive the promise land in its entirety; causes them to be at war with their neighbors; and eventually to be exiled in Babylon by the Assyrians. They lose Yahweh's blessing of protection because they cannot keep this commandment.

The Canaanite gods could not be tolerated because they were rivals to Yahweh's own exclusive claim on his people (Ex 20:2). Yahweh is a jealous God, jealous *for* all of his creation. Only Yahweh can offer true salvation and relationship with Him. False gods and idols draw men away from Yahweh, turning His creation against Him. (Recall the Egyptians and the plagues). The people of Canaan and their idols had to be removed because otherwise they would draw Israel away from Yahweh and into sin. The nations that Yahweh will "wipe out" in Canaan have traversed so far into idolatry that they refuse to recognize Yahweh's Sovereignty. We see Yahweh's will in this in Gen 15:12-16: "...*the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure*" and Ex 23:23 "...*I will wipe them out.*" Extermination of the native population of Canaan through holy war is Yahweh's justified punishment for the sinfulness of that culture. For Israel to survive as his holy nation, they must be protected from the allures of idolatry that would otherwise cause Israel to turn its back on Yahweh.

¹¹ Stuart, Douglas K.; New American Commentary: Exodus, 2006.

² Pagan peoples already established in the Promise Land: Canaanites, Amorites, etc.