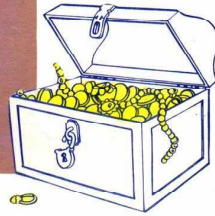


# The Ten Commandments

The first article by Neil Richardson in our year-long series

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## **First Commandment: You shall have no other gods before me.**

Does this imply that there are other gods but that Israel must not worship them? Or is this a monotheistic statement, that there are no other gods, but only one God?

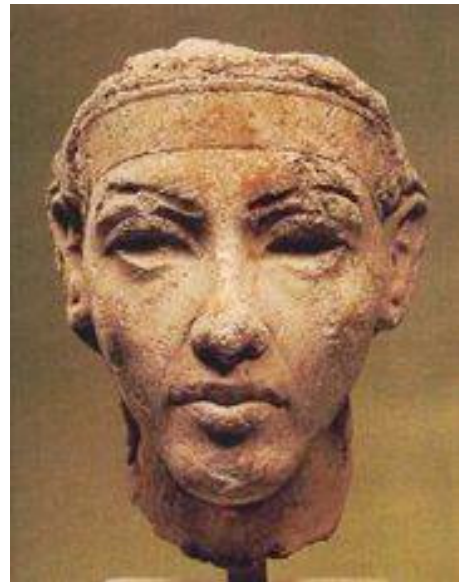
And what are gods?

Immediately we start thinking about the Ten Commandments, we hit a basic and continuing problem. Look out for it through all the pages of this series on the Decalogue! We are looking at documents with ideas and concepts and language from over 3000 years ago and before we may attempt to learn from them, we are obliged to learn about them. The context in which these words were written is really quite difficult to re-enter historically and understand from the inside. Influences may be bearing down from many places and ideas, including Egypt and the Pharaoh Akhenaton, (c. 1353 BC-1336 BC) credited by some as the first monotheistic leader. However, we are dealing here with the Jewish scriptures and we take them as we find them, and struggle as people have done for many centuries with the power of their ideas and the implications they have for our personal and public lives.

When we read these words, we may imagine that here was a community of people who were tempted to worship other gods than the God in whom they eventually came to trust and see as their God. What kind of gods? Well, all kinds of gods, we may assume. In those days, people saw influence and godhead in such objects as the sun or trees or animals. The spiritual leadership of the community which formed Israel taught the people to worship the creator rather than the creator's handiwork.

Why was that an issue? Because the great minds which developed theology in those days saw that in all the horror of war, death, destruction and betrayal, the created world still has integrity and human life in particular demands a moral response if our manifold relationships are to be creative and meaningful. After many years of life experiences and deep reflection on the many things which life brings, there developed a belief that all life has meaning, cogency and purpose, and so there must be a central and united power behind it, and a power with a moral quality which has implications for humanity.

In other words, the faith that became Judaism led to the conclusion that we exist and have a moral cogency as human beings because our creator made us and made us to reflect godly qualities. This is expressed in the theology that we are made in the "image of God" and this has huge, positive and wonderful implications for our life, for our living together and for our dying.



Akhenaton

Out of the maze of the many gods of the land and belief in spirits there emerged faith in a God of love, truth, mercy and justice. As this emerged, it became clear that to worship gods of the land would seem at best a waste of time and at worst, a denial of the true God. So, it was forbidden.

Of course, every generation has its own false gods. We don't worship the gods of the land anymore but we do have a tendency to worship our own little false gods. Money, power, and even more universal, self-interest are among the false gods which attract our devotion.

The key to this commandment is that God is alone to be worshipped and that has implications for us because when we acknowledge the true and living God we are caught up in a holistic system which requires us to be faithful, loving, honest, just and peaceful. We are meshed into a sense of community with all other human beings in a solidarity which is universal and timeless. We recognise God as our maker and so we come to see each other as brothers and sisters, and we accept that we have responsibilities for each other. How these issues work out in practice will naturally feature in the later commandments.



The false god Baal



The false god Dagon

Dagon was the god of the Philistines. This image shows that the idol was represented in the combination of both man and fish. The name "Dagon" is derived from "dag" meaning "fish." His powers were believed to affect human reproduction and fertility.

**Baal** gets quite a mention in the Jewish Scriptures. The prophet Elijah has a messy but successful confrontation with him and his worshippers and priests. He was probably the false god most actively worshipped in Canaan and Phoenicia. He is seen as the Storm God, the source of the winter rain storms, spring mist, and summer dew which nourish the crops and gives us earthlings our food. For these reasons, Baal was considered responsible for fecundity, particularly of the Earth, for the growth of vegetation, and for the maintenance of life. Israelites were often frequenting the shrines of Baal, much to the anger of the Prophets.

Oddly, in 2001 the Palestinian Authority brought out a postage stamp bearing his image, which upset quite a lot of people!

