

## Exodus 20 v3 Who comes first?

### Introduction

In every sphere of life there are requirements that must be followed. Each country, for example, will draw up building regulations that must be followed by architects when planning designs for potential new buildings. It would be no use these professional complaining that their creativity is being stifled by concerns about the safety and security of the premises concerned. In matters of law and order the police can only do their job if the guidelines under which they operate are consistent and clear. Imagine the situation where two officers at the scene of a crime were arguing over whether the events that had taken place were actually a breach of the criminal law or not? Someone, in this case the Government, had to have produced a rule on this matter that determined which opinion here was right or wrong. Or imagine a motorist stopped for speeding by a traffic officer, responding to a question about the speed limit for the road with a response like this. 'I know officer that the sign indicates a 30mph limit but that's just the Government's view they have no right to tell me how fast I can drive my car!' Contrary views may be fine over the choice of which clothes to purchase; what food to eat for dinner or which football team to support, but there are other scenarios where our opinions are neither here nor there; instead the standard rule must be followed. With respect to some of the other commandments there would be widespread agreement amongst people of different faiths and none that they are good values to hold if society is to function adequately. However, Exodus 20:3 is firm in stating this essential truth: *You shall have no other gods before Me*. All of us have heard it said by sincere individuals: 'All roads lead to heaven' or 'all religions have part of the truth but not the whole', but that is in direct contradiction to the teaching of Jesus who said: *I and I only am the way, I and I only am the truth, I and I only am the life, no-one comes to the Father except through Me* (John 14:6). The early Church taught exactly the same message. In Acts 4:12 Peter made this bold declaration in the grounds of the Jerusalem Temple: *Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved*. In 1993 the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland was presented with a resolution calling on the churches to reaffirm that Jesus Christ was the only way of salvation. This motion was defeated by four hundred votes to three hundred [Brian Edwards, *The Ten Commandments for Today*, p.58]. Yet those same delegates all possessed Bibles that contained sentences like this: <sup>11</sup>*I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from me there is no saviour.* <sup>12</sup>*I have revealed and saved and proclaimed— I, and not some foreign god among you. You are my witnesses, declares the Lord, that I am God* (Isaiah 43:11-12). This is not a new challenge. I was shocked to note the observation made by the leading Evangelical Christian politician and social reformer, William Ashley (Lord Shaftsbury), who wrote in his diary, as early as 18 March 1868 the following point: 'The larger proportion of those who profess to believe are eagerly eliminating from their creed all dogma and doctrine. They accept the Scripture just as far as it suits their philosophy. Such will be the religion of the future, in which Vishnu, Mahomet [sic], Jupiter and Jesus Christ, will be upon a level; with some, all equally good, with others, all equally bad.' This is not fifty years ago when we might have expected such comments to have been made, but nearly 150 years ago at a time when Evangelical Christianity was at its most influential in our national life. What does the Bible teach on this subject?

### 1. An Exclusive Relationship Demanded in the Old Testament

(a) **A Shocking Revelation** Although undoubtedly the first humans alive were aware of the one true God, it is most revealing that when God spoke to Abraham, the Father of the Jewish nation, that he was a follower of the moon god Sin, like his family. Were there no faithful believing people alive from whose ranks a man of God could be found? If the answer to that question is ‘no’, then it is both appallingly sad and shocking, but also provides very real hope because God intervened in the life of a man and his wife who had not previously know His name or had any kind of relationship with Him. When the Jewish faith was practised in the Patriarchal Period all the surrounding nations believed in a plurality of nature and fertility gods. Anyone proclaiming belief in one true God would have been seen as decidedly odd. Likewise in Moses’ day in Egypt and beyond the same situation pertained. The idea that there was a golden age in the past when everyone believed in the one true God is simply untrue. There are many temptations to believe in other gods whether they are of religious or secular origins. In the light of such a universal reality in their world and ours, God says: *You shall have no other gods before Me* (Exodus 20:3). A.W. Tozer (1897-1963) once said, in his classic text *Knowledge of the Holy*: The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him. I believe there is scarcely an error in doctrine or a failure in applying Christian Ethics that cannot be traced finally to imperfect and ignoble thoughts about God. When the Jewish faith was established in the time of Abraham, God promised to make a covenant or agreement with this man and his descendents, so that He would be their God and they would be His people (Genesis 17:7-8). This was a special revelation that some years previously had transformed the lives of Abram and his extended family, though most were unwilling to give up their comfortable lives to travel to the land which the Lord would later reveal to them. Yet Abram and Sarah entrusted their lives to the One who had called them to follow Him. This is no different in many respects to the call God gives to you and me today to follow Him in a world of many voices inviting us to live contrasting lifestyles to that which is commended in God’s Word. (b) **A Foundational Revelation** This commandment is the ground of all the other nine. Arthur Pink once wrote: if the first commandment received the respect it deserved, obedience to the other nine would follow as a matter of course [*Gleanings in Exodus*, p161]. It is impossible to truly follow the Lord and other gods at the same time. This is a statement of the obvious, like  $2 \times 2 = 4$ . Yet time and again the people of Israel needed to be reminded of the requirement of faithfulness in their relationship with God. Joshua, Moses’ successor at the end of his life put this solemn challenge to the Israelite nation concerning their exclusive relationship with Him: *Now fear the Lord and serve Him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshipped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord.*<sup>15</sup> *But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.*<sup>16</sup> *Then the people answered, Far be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods!*<sup>17</sup> *It was the Lord our God Himself who brought us and our fathers up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we travelled.*<sup>18</sup> *And the Lord drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the Lord, because He is our God* (Joshua 24:14-18). This special relationship was often described as a marriage between God and Israel. Hosea used this picture of the special relationship between God and His people in his book to declare the faithfulness of God, but the unfaithfulness of the Jewish people to their Lord. This painful reality was illustrated by Gomer, Hosea’s wife, who was repeatedly unfaithful to him, yet he kept taking her back and seeking to restore their marriage relationship, explaining to the nation that their behaviour, spiritually-speaking, was like that of his wife. This demand of God for the exclusive obedience of His people is true jealousy. This characteristic in a human being is a vice, but is a necessary virtue in God. We may be jealous of another person’s talents or possessions or status, because we want in essence to change places with them and are dissatisfied with our lot. By contrast, God lacks

nothing that we possess and is only demanding that which is His by right. He alone has the right to worship from His creatures as He is our creator. The words here *before Me* were used at that time with reference to marriage and the exclusive union that entailed, when a couple swore total loyalty and commitment to one another. Another usage of these words is seen in Exodus 23:15, 17, in the context of worshipping God. (c) **A Disobeyed Revelation** The Jewish people time and again turned their backs on the Lord their God. As early as Judges 2: 10-15, describing the generation after Joshua's lifetime, there are these depressing words: *After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the Lord nor what He had done for Israel.<sup>11</sup> Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals.<sup>12</sup> They forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshipped various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the Lord to anger<sup>13</sup> because they forsook Him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths.<sup>14</sup> In His anger against Israel the Lord handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist.<sup>15</sup> Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the Lord was against them to defeat them, just as He had sworn to them. They were in great distress.* There was a repeated pattern in the books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles of wilful sin, judgement, repentance; the nation and their various rulers in the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah rarely ever grasped how they ought to have been living. Even the most committed kings like Josiah and Hezekiah could not eradicate this bias towards idolatry and turning away from the God who had redeemed them from Egypt. By Jeremiah's day the decline was so bad that idol worship was even taking place in the Temple courts, including Ishtar/Astarte, the goddess of love/sex/fertility, known to her followers as the 'Queen of Heaven'. In his famous and powerful Temple sermon in Jeremiah, the prophet in anguish of heart pleads with the people to turn back to their God. However God's message to His servant concerning his sinful nation was very solemn: *So do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them; do not plead with me, for I will not listen to you.<sup>17</sup> Do you not see what they are doing in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem?*<sup>18</sup> *The children gather wood, the fathers light the fire, and the women knead the dough and make cakes of bread for the Queen of Heaven. They pour out drink offerings to other gods to provoke me to anger.<sup>19</sup> But am I the one they are provoking? declares the Lord. Are they not rather harming themselves, to their own shame?* (Jeremiah 7:16-19). Did they heed his call for repentance over the remaining years of his ministry? No! In fact the very opposite was the case. In Jeremiah 44: 15-19 there is a record of it towards the end of his ministry with their frank response: *Then all the men who knew that their wives were burning incense to other gods, along with all the women who were present— a large assembly— and all the people living in Lower and Upper Egypt, said to Jeremiah,<sup>16</sup> We will not listen to the message you have spoken to us in the name of the Lord!<sup>17</sup> We will certainly do everything we said we would: We will burn incense to the Queen of Heaven and will pour out drink offerings to her just as we and our fathers, our kings and our officials did in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. At that time we had plenty of food and were well off and suffered no harm.<sup>18</sup> But ever since we stopped burning incense to the Queen of Heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her, we have had nothing and have been perishing by sword and famine.<sup>19</sup> The women added, When we burned incense to the Queen of Heaven and poured out drink offerings to her, did not our husbands know that we were making cakes like her image and pouring out drink offerings to her?* The extent of the departure from loyalty to Yahweh even affected people who were otherwise outwardly committed to the God of Israel. For example, Jonathan, Saul's son and King David's closest friend was one of many Israelites over the centuries who named their children after pagan gods, in his case, his son Merib-Baal (I Chronicles 8:34; or as 'son of shame' Mephibosheth II Samuel 4:4, 9:6); (We might also wonder if this child's disability and his banishment from public view –as happened with children from our own Royal family with disabilities well into the Twentieth Century- was connected with the choice of names given to him. This is an issue our own society has only begun to address in recent years.) Yet the story ends well through the pain and suffering of the exile in Babylon after 587/6BC. The Jews were

determined never to return to idolatry and to honour this commandment. After their return around seventy years later they ensured the keeping of this commitment. They honoured it with the blood of many of their number when the evil Greek ruler Antiochus Epiphanes IV desecrated the altar in the Jerusalem Temple by offering swine's flesh upon it. A Jewish guerrilla-army was established that eventually defeated the mighty occupying army. They were all prepared to die rather than violate this commandment. At last the message had got through.

## 2. An Exclusive Relationship Enforced in the New Testament

(a) **Clear Monotheism proclaimed** Jesus told Satan during His time of testing: *Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only'* (Matthew 4:10). This clear response was given to the tempter after he had asked Jesus to worship him. This was no off-the-cuff response from Jesus. He repeated the same message on other occasions. The first commandment was non-negotiable to Jesus. In a discussion with a religious lawyer in Luke 10:23-28, the Ten Commandments were emphasised as central to obtaining eternal life for this Jew; <sup>25</sup> *On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. Teacher, he asked, what must I do to inherit eternal life?* <sup>26</sup> *What is written in the Law?* he replied. *How do you read it?* <sup>27</sup> *He answered: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'* <sup>28</sup> ***You have answered correctly, Jesus replied. Do this and you will live.*** This quotation from Deuteronomy 6:5, following a repetition of the Ten Commandments in the previous chapter, is strengthened by some very solemn words in Deuteronomy 6:13-15: *Fear the Lord your God, serve Him only and take your oaths in His name.* <sup>14</sup> *Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you;* <sup>15</sup> *for the Lord your God, who is among you, is a jealous God and His anger will burn against you, and He will destroy you from the face of the land.* Paul makes similar points in his writings: Romans 11:36: *For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory for ever! Amen.* In Ephesians 4:6 Paul declares that there is only: *one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.* God alone is worthy of worship and praise. (b) **Clear Trinitarianism proclaimed** The New Testament combines an emphasis on the one true God with the insistence that He revealed Himself in the persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In Titus 2:13 Paul states: *we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ.* Jesus spoke of the Spirit in personal terms. *When the Counsellor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, He will testify about Me* (John 15:26); In John 16:7-8 Jesus spoke of the Spirit in similar terms: *But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you.* <sup>8</sup> *When He comes, He will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment:* Notice the baptismal language Jesus uses with respect the God under whose auspices the ceremony is carried out: *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,* <sup>20</sup> *and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age* (Matthew 28:19-20). Notice here it is *name* (singular) not *names* (plural); that is one God but in three persons. Note also the grace we often use to close services on a Sunday: *May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all* (II Corinthians 13:14). It is explicitly Trinitarian in form. (c) **Clear Condemnation of Materialism** There is a huge New Testament emphasis on not allowing material possessions or our financial strength (if we are privileged to be in that position!) to take a higher place in our affections than God; Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount stated, in Matthew 6:24-25: *No-one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.* <sup>25</sup> *Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will*

*eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?* The remedy in contrast to this common perspective on life is given in Matthew 6:33: *But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.* The challenge to the rich young ruler to give away his wealth and instead have treasure in heaven was given to a person Jesus knew was controlled by what he possessed (Mark 10:17-31). Do you own your possessions or do they control you? How do we value the things we own? Are there things we cannot do without –if we had to? This is a very tough question for Western Christians like us. There is no quick answer to these questions. We can get too comfortable in this world and loose touch with how short our stay here is.

### 3. An Exclusive Relationship Required Today

This means: A **What we exclude:**

(a) **Divine Consorts are excluded** This may seem a strange issue to raise that is irrelevant to us here. If this is true-praise God! However, some New Agers and strands of the Green environmental movement are devoted to Gaia, Mother earth, and speak of her with almost the language of deity. Some feminist theologians appear more concerned to fashion God in their own feminist image rather than exalt in the God of the Bible. Some strands of traditionalist Roman Catholicism have a view of Mary that is also idolatry. Gabriel Roschini, [in his book *The Marian Era*, Vol.3, p. 34] wrote: Mary transcends all other creatures...she is not at the base or centre of the universe, but at its summit, and she is there at its apex...Above her there is only One: God...She immerses herself in the infinite luminous sphere of the Most holy Trinity. She was and will be the beloved Daughter of the father, the affectionate Mother of the Son, and the Faithful Spouse of the Holy Spirit. She is related to the three divine persons and belongs to their family, a family which transcends all human families, that is, all that is created. This is idolatry to use such language of a creature, even one so highly respected as Mary. It was most disturbing that Pope Pius XII designated Mary as the ‘Queen of Heaven’, in a papal bull, as recently as 1950, despite this title being so repugnant to God and condemned in the book of Jeremiah. Equally disturbing was the fact that some medieval images of Mary were replicas of statues of the pagan goddess given that title and condemned by Jeremiah. God is neither male nor female. All the positive characteristics of fatherhood and the positive feminine virtues are supremely found in God, although He has chosen to reveal Himself using masculine gender pronouns. Jesus was not afraid likewise to define His love for people in similarly exclusive terms: *O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing* (Matthew 23:37). Psalm 91:4a uses the same imagery to speak of the love of God the Father for His people. Let us always be careful to use the biblical language and terms that God has revealed to us of His nature and character qualities.

(b) **Occultism is excluded** This was stressed very strongly in the Old Testament with very severe punishments given for infringements of the law. Visits to palm readers, mediums, or similar persons, together with attempts to contact the dead in séances and similar activities are all prohibited. How often spiritual deception of a naïve individual who unconsciously gives away information that may be fed back to them after some form of telepathy has been used to obtain details of the life of the deceased person they wish to contact. We laugh at the horoscopes, but some people live their lives by them, despite numerous stories emerging from various newspapers of other staff members making up horoscopes when the columnist is on holiday and finding no difference in the responses from devotees of that section of the newspaper. Occult films and books of that genre are to be explicitly avoided and repentance sought from the Lord if we have participated in this kind of activity. In the Church at Ephesus under Paul’s ministry a number of people were converted from belonging to these kinds of

religious groups. Acts 19:18-20: *Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds.*<sup>19</sup> *A number who had practised sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas.*<sup>20</sup> *In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power. Fifty thousand drachmas was the equivalent of a few million pounds in today's money. No wonder the whole city, twice the size of Dundee in population (c.300,000) was deeply affected by this response to God at that time, by these new converts to Christianity.*

(c) **Other Secular Ideologies are excluded** (i) **Materialism** Is your /my attitude any different from the average citizen of our country to possessions? It should be! Is it always necessary to purchase the latest....? How many adverts urge us to have our lives transformed by the purchase of products we had not previously heard of and which would be, at best, of marginal benefit to us if we purchased them? Paul wrote these wise words to Timothy: ***But godliness with contentment is great gain.***<sup>7</sup> *For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it.*<sup>8</sup> *But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.*<sup>9</sup> *People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction.*<sup>10</sup> ***For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs*** (I Timothy 6:6-10). Do I really need that promotion and lose time for family and God? Do I need that extra money the new job 'promises'-or is the cost too high? (ii) **Hedonism** In 1985 American social critic Neil Postman wrote a classic text: *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the age of Show Business*. Television, the Internet in its many forms; Facebook; Twitter; as well as traditional media like theatre, cinema and familiar sports; the options are endless –but do they dominate our lives or is our interest proportionate? One newspaper claimed that 25% of divorce petitions in the UK mention activity on Facebook as a contributory factor to the demise of marriages -it is a warning to be wise in our choices of entertainments. (iii) **Hero-worshipping** pop-stars, sports figures even TV preachers or? Keep our eyes on the One who alone is worthy of adoration, the Lord Jesus Christ.

## B. **How we behave**

(i) **A Recognition of who God is** Take time to meditate on the greatness and glory of our wonderful God who alone is entitled to our supreme allegiance and devotion. (ii) **A Recognition of God's love for us** He gave His Son to save us –no greater love than this. (iii) **A Recognition of God's requirements from us** –the total dedication of our lives (Romans 12:1-2) (iv) **Three tests to apply to our lives** (a) **The Money Test** Look at your spending over the last full month, for example, exclude the essential items –what impression comes from our spending choices from our disposable income? Would it reveal Christ-honouring priorities? (b) **The Thought Test** When you actually are alone with free time (it does exist!) – what subjects most excite you, take up the majority of that time? 'We are not what we *think* we are. What we think, *we are* (David Searle, *And then there were nine...*, p.24); (c) **The Time Test** How do you allocate your free time? Combining the results of these three tests will be very revealing of what is most important to us. May we never forget that God said: *You shall have no other gods before Me* (Exodus 20:3), Amen.