

*Giovanni Lanfranco, 1625*

*“Council of the Gods”*

*Ceiling of the Galleria Borghese,*

*Rome*

*(See Psalm 29)*



# The Ten Words/Commandments: Jewish and Christian Understandings



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6:00 p.m. Wednesdays starting January 17*

## Part 1: January 17-February 7

Session 1: The Decalogue: What are the Ten Commandments; What is the first Commandment?

Session 2: "You Shall Have No Other Gods"

Session 3: "You Shall Not Make a Graven Image;" "You Shall not Bow Down to Them"

Session 4: "You Shall Not Swear Falsely By God's Name"

## Part 2 (After Easter, dates TBA)

Session 5: "You Shall Keep The Sabbath"

Session 6: "Honor Your Father and Your Mother"

Session 7: "You Shall Not Commit Murder;" "You Shall Not Commit Adultery;" "You Shall Not Steal"

Session 8: "You Shall Not Bear False Witness"

Session 9: "You Shall Not Covet"

Session 10: Review and Wrap-Up

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## Part 2: “You shall have no other gods”

**Hebrew, with Jewish Publication Society Translation** (2006, used by permission)

לֹא־יִהְיֶה־לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל־פְּנֵי:

You shall have no other gods besides Me.

**Septuagint, 3<sup>rd</sup> c. BCE**

οὐκ ἔσονται σοι θεοὶ ἕτεροι πλὴν ἐμοῦ.

You shall not have other gods except for me.

**Vulgate, 4<sup>th</sup> c, CE**

Non habebis deos alienos coram me.

You shall not have other gods before me (in my presence).

**Luther’s German Bible, 16<sup>th</sup> c, CE**

Du sollst keine anderen Götter neben mir haben.

You shall have no other gods in my presence.

**SO...** What is “al-panai?” אֲל־פְּנֵי

Literally, it means, “in my face” or “before my face.” Metaphorically it can be translated “before me” or “in my presence.” It can also mean in later usage, by extension, “besides me” or “except for me.”

But it doesn’t have to. And usually it does not, especially not in earlier Hebrew.

And how you translate this text makes a big difference in its final meaning.

This is why you see all these different translations above over time.

And it leads to serious questions about what this commandment means.

It is saying “consider YHWH as the greatest god” (no god is before/ahead of me)?

Or “Be loyal only to YHWH?” (given there are other choices out there).

Or, “YHWH is the only god there is”?

All of those meanings are possible, depending on how “al-panai” is translated.

All translation is interpretation. Historians and biblical scholars generally agree that the second commandment, as originally written in Hebrew, would have meant one or both of the two first translations. In other words, in an earlier period, the religion of Israel/Judah was not *monotheistic*, but *henotheistic*.

However, by the time of the translation of this text into Greek in the Septuagint (3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE) there was consensus within Judaism around monotheism, and so the third meaning above, and the modern Jewish translation below the Hebrew text of the verse above.

Christianity, like the Judaism of its time from which it developed, was also monotheistic. So why aren't the two Christian translations above (Vulgate and Luther) as explicit as the Septuagint and the modern Jewish translation? Because they were working not from the Greek of the Septuagint, but the Hebrew texts available at the time. And they went with the most common translation of al-panai Christians knew, "before" or "in the face/presence of."

## **Unpacking Monotheism and Henotheism**

The terms monotheism and henotheism come from Greek.

Theism < theos: god, divine being

Mono < monos: only, unique, sole

Heno < hes: one

Monotheism is the assertion that there is only one God. This means only this god may be worshiped by those who assert this is the only God there is. There are no other gods. Others claiming they have some other god are either deceived or deluding themselves.

Henotheism is the assertion that one god among the various gods is the supreme god, to be worshiped above all others. This allows for the real existence of other gods, but selects one of the many gods as the one to whom the highest devotion and loyalty is due.

Still, the third commandment makes it clear that loyalty and worship are appropriate only for YHWH. (More on that next week!).

It is clear that the leadership of Israel under the kings, at the very least, was not monotheistic. While the kings of Israel and Judah generally did not allow the worship of other gods in their central sanctuaries (though some did!), they also did two other things that indicate a basic henotheism, at least in their courts. First, they generally permitted many other "high places" to continue to operate. "High places" were places of sacrifice, usually on mountain tops or the peaks of high hills, and typically to deities other than YHWH. And second, as was customary in diplomatic practice of ancient Southwest Asia, the kings of Israel and Judah regularly received and displayed images of the gods of other countries as part of treaties and alliances they made with the leaders of those countries.

To be sure, the editors of the histories of these kings in the Bible condemn these actions, probably because those editors are either monotheists themselves, or they are henotheists who see permitting such actions to be a violation of loyalty to YHWH alone.

From Luther's *Large Catechism*:

“[I]t is the intent of this commandment to require true faith and trust of the heart which settles upon the only true God, and clings to Him alone... [L]et not your heart cleave to or rest in any other.”

“[T]o have a god is to have something in which the heart entirely trusts.” [And it may not be the only true God—but money, fame, popularity, skill, wisdom, any number of other things!]

So, “the meaning of the true honor and worship of God, which pleases God, and which He commands under penalty of eternal wrath: Namely, that the heart know no other comfort or confidence than in Him, and do not suffer itself to be torn from Him, but, for Him, risk and disregard everything upon earth.”

“Besides, there is also a false worship and extreme idolatry, which ... is still prevalent in the world ... and which concerns the conscience alone, that seeks in its own works help, consolation, and salvation, presumes to wrest heaven from God... as though unwilling to receive anything from God as a gift, but desires itself to earn or merit it superabundantly, just as though He must serve us and were our debtor, and we His liege lords.” (Prosperity gospel theology?)

“Ask and examine your heart diligently, and you will find whether it cleaves to God alone or not. If you have a heart that can expect of Him nothing but what is good, especially in want and distress, and that, moreover, renounces and forsakes everything that is not God, then you have the only true God. If, on the contrary, it cleaves to anything else, of which it expects more good and help than of God, and does not take refuge in Him, but in adversity flees from Him, then you have an idol, another god.”

Core questions for reflection :

1. How can you grow in entire trust of God?
2. How can you stop any continuing habits of trusting anyone or anything else as your source for all good things?