

[10 Commandments E4]

[Speakers in the audio file: Jon Collins and Tim Mackie]

Jon: Today, we begin reading through the 10 Commandments. Now I've been familiar with the Bible my whole life, and I've been familiar with the 10 Commandments my whole life, but I learned something completely new to me. I thought that Moses was up with God alone on the mountain when God gave Israel the 10 Commandments. And I thought this because there is a...a later scene when Moses is up on the mountain with God, and God inscribes the 10 Commandments into stone. But when God first speaks the 10 Commandments, Moses is down at the base of the mountain with the Israelites, and they hear the words blasting down like thunder, and it frightens them.

Tim: And the people's response to the 10 Commandments is, they think they're going to die. Getting in touch with what is really true is actually going to feel so counter—

Jon: That's interesting.

Tim: To what I think is normal life.

Jon: Yeah.

What they hear booming down is this: "I am Yahweh your Elohim, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." The first line in the 10 Commandments is not a command but a reminder of who God is and who they are.

Tim: This is a family whose fundamental identity is, "We used to be slaves, being slowly killed off. And we were liberated. How do we live as freed people?"

One way to think about the 10 Commandments is, it's like a freedom ethic.

Jon: This freedom ethic begins in the context of an intimate relationship with the divine.

Tim: "I will be your God, and you will be my people."

"I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine."

Jon: After this, we get to the first two commands.

"There will not be for you any other *elohim* before me," and "You will not make for yourself an idol."

These two commands are so tightly bound together that in some traditions, they're counted as just one command. But in today's episode, we'll look closely at the first: "You will have no other Elohim"—that is, no other gods.

Tim: When humans give our imaginations and desires and allegiances to anything that's not the source of all reality, it will eventually lead us on a path that dehumanizes us and other people.

Jon: How do we live in reality? How do we live as free people? This is the great mystery that the first word invites us into.

Thanks for joining us. Here we go.

[Musical Break]

Jon: Hey, Tim.

Tim: Hello, Jon Collins.

Jon: Hello. We've been in this series of conversations leading up to getting into the 10 Commandments—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: And today, we're going to start reading the 10 Commandments.

Tim: We are. Here we are, at Mount Sinai, with the Israelites. We surveyed in the last couple episodes a theme of God telling people what to do—

[Laughter]

Tim: Basically in the Genesis scroll.

Jon: Mm-hmm.

Tim: When God gives a command to people, it is for the preservation of their life and to enhance the flourishing of their lives.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: God told Adam and Eve, "Enjoy all the trees of the garden, and avoid the one that will kill you."

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: He told Noah, “Make an ark for the preservation of your life and your family and of all these animals”—

Jon: And the future of humanity.

Tim: And the future of humanity. And he told Abram, on multiple occasions, to “leave your family and go do this, and I’m going to bless all the nations through you.” And Abraham sometimes does what God says, but when he ultimately did what God said, leading up to Genesis 22, it led to the preservation of his life, his son’s life, and of God’s covenant promise—of blessing going out to all the nations again.

Jon: God is for life.

Tim: God is for life. He’s the author of life. And humans are his covenant partners.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So he’s brought the Israelite family now to the foot of Mount Sinai. And we ended our last conversation looking at the introductory speech to the commands that God gives Israel on Mount Sinai.

And God’s offer is this: Listen to my voice, and keep my covenant. And if so, then you’ll be my special crew among all the nations. You’ll be a priestly kingdom who represent me to the nations. You’ll be a holy nation set apart. These...the terms of the covenant are going to set you apart and then make you my representatives to the nations.

Jon: And the purpose then, even though not stated here plainly, is for life.

Tim: For—

Jon: For your life—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: For the life of the nations.

Tim: Yes. Yep.

Jon: This is for life.

Yeah. The end of the last conversation, it seemed really important to point out that when we talk about God’s commands, it seems easy to slip into this, just, moral obligation. Like okay, well, God’s got a standard, and we just gotta meet God’s standard—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: And keep God happy—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: And check off the list, and stay on God's good side.

Tim: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Jon: And I guess that's a caricature that becomes not very helpful when you think of the way the Bible presents God's commands, which are, "I have authored life. I'm inviting you in to participate with me in creating more life" —

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: "And I want you to find the good and eat and enjoy and be blessed and bless the nations, but it's going to be hard and you're going to...you're not going to always know the difference. And so I need you to learn to be wise by listening to my voice."

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: "And for us to have this kind of relationship, this covenant means you establishing a habit and an ability to listen to my voice."

Tim: That's good. That's a great summary.

[Laughter]

Tim: Yeah. It's a great summary.

Yeah. It is in my best interest to keep the commands of God, not because it makes God happy. Though when people live in line with reality and what is true and good, of course that brings pleasure to God. But it is also in my own best interest.

Yeah, that's...that's the ultimate frame. I become more human, more of an image of God, when my actions and desires are more in line with God's purpose and will. And that's what he's inviting this ancient Near Eastern, what is right now a tribal federation of migrating shepherd tribes.

Jon: Yeah. Somewhere, three to four thousand years ago?

Tim: Well, it depends on where and how you date it, but 32- to 3500 years ago—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Something like that. So, that's God's offer, and the 10 Commandments are the first of these terms of the covenant. Following these is equivalent to listening to the voice of God. And they're parked at the foot of this mountain.

Now, God shows up, and it's a pretty intense scene. There is in Exodus 19:18: "Now Mount Sinai was in smoke, all of it, because Yahweh came down upon it in fire. The smoke went up like the smoke of a furnace, the whole mountain was trembling. And it came about like a sound of a trumpet getting stronger and stronger, and Moses would speak, and Elohim would answer him with sounds."

I—

Jon: That is intense.

Tim: So intense.

Jon: Mm-hmm.

Tim: Yeah, it's super intense. That's the scene.

Jon: Okay. Fire on the mountain.

Tim: And then out of the fire. When it says Elohim would answer him with sounds. And then here you go. What is it that God said out of the fire and the cloud? Exodus 20 verse 1: The 10 Commandments.

So even just right there, let's just pause. The group of people sitting at the foot of a mountain—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And Moses is there with them at this point. God shows up.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: That's right. Yep.

Jon: So God shows up on the mountain. Fire, quaking, the sound, the trumpets—this is all happening. And it's at this moment?

Tim: Mm-hmm. Yep. "And Elohim spoke all these words, saying—"

Jon: Okay, and he's—

So wait, he's saying it from the top of the mountain while Moses is at the bottom?

Tim: Mm-hmm.

Jon: Really?

Tim: That's the scene.

Jon: That's the scene?

Tim: That's the scene.

Jon: That's how the 10 are given?

Tim: Is that new information to you?

Jon: Oh, yeah.

Tim: Wow, okay!

Jon: I thought Moses was up there hanging with God, and God gave it to him.

Tim: Okay. So—

Jon: It's being blasted from the heights?

Tim: Yeah, exactly right. Yeah.

So then what we're told is that the people tremble at the bottom of the mountain.

Jon: Mm-hmm.

Tim: But then you get this little narrative after the 10 Commandments that's saying, "Now, backflash..."

This is like a little, like, backflash scene. When the people were seeing all the thunder and lightning, and they trembled and stood at a distance—and you're like, "Oh yeah, I remember that"—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: They said something to Moses. What they said was, "Speak to us yourself, and we will listen. Don't let God speak to us. We're going to die!"

Moses said to the people, "Don't be afraid. No, God's here to test you so that the fear of him might be on you and so that you won't sin." But the people stood at a distance.

Jon: Uh-huh. Okay.

Tim: But what was it that freaked them out so much, that made them not want to go up there?

Jon: And this was the trembling and the trumpet?

Tim: And this was the trembling and hearing a voice come from the mountain. And what did the voice say? And what the voice said was the 10 Commandments.

Jon: Oh, really?

Tim: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Jon: Oh.

Tim: Mm-hmm. So the scene is that everybody heard the 10 Commandments, Moses and the people, down on the mountain—

Jon: Mm-hmm.

Tim: And the people's response to the 10 Commandments is they think they're going to die. And so they don't wanna hear God talk to them anymore.

Jon: Because the commandments are coming with such intensity.

Tim: Super intense. Yeah. Yep.

So then what they say is, "Moses, you go up, and you talk with God." And then—

Jon: Work this out amongst yourselves.

Tim: Yeah. And then Moses goes up. And that's when the 10 Words get written down on the tablets. And then 42 more words— it's called the covenant code, or the scroll of the covenant.

He writes the 42 first—

Jon: Mm-hmm.

Tim: In chapter 24. And the first time we hear about the two tablets is in chapter 31, which is near the end of Moses' 40 days and nights on the mountain.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: But the main point is that Moses was with the people, and everybody heard the 10.

Jon: Moses is at the bottom of the mountain with Israel—

Tim: That's the scene.

Jon: And they're booming down—

Tim: That's the scene.

Jon: And it's intense—

Tim: Mm-hmm.

Jon: It's freaking everyone out—

Tim: Mm-hmm.

Jon: And they're like, "Moses, we can't handle the voice of God"—

Tim: Mm-hmm.

Jon: We can't handle the situation.

Tim: Mm-hmm.

Jon: This is too much.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Go up there—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: And, like, work it out.

Tim: Mm-hmm. And then Moses is like—

He acknowledges that it's terrifying. But what he says is, it's a test.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: God's come to test you so that the fear of him might remain on you that you don't sin.

Jon: God wants you to be a little freaked out?

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Yeah. The fear of the Lord.

Tim: Yeah. The fear of the Lord, which is that for us outside of Eden, our current condition is such that—

Jon: Hearing the voice of God is intense.

Tim: Hearing the voice of God is intense. Getting in touch with what is really true is actually going to feel so counter—

Jon: That's interesting.

Tim: To what I think is normal life.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And the question is, am I normal and is God abnormal? Or maybe I'm abnormal and all...a weird, like, mutated, subhuman kind of creature now. And God is the one calling me to—

We're back to that theme with Abraham or Noah, of: When God shows up to invite you to become, like, the full version of who you really are, it's kind of terrifying.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: It looks like a kind of death or surrender.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: Something like that's happening. So that's the scene.

[pause]

Tim: Okay. So what did Moses and the people hear?

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: What they heard were, "I am Yahweh your Elohim, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. There will not be for you any other *elohim* before me. You will not make for yourself an idol or any likeness of what is in the skies above or the land beneath or in the waters under the land. You will not worship them. You will not serve them because I, Yahweh your Elohim, am a passionate Elohim, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the threes and the fours for those who hate me. But showing loyal love to thousands for those who love me and keep my commands."

Jon: Hmm. Okay.

Tim: That's what people hear.

Jon: Commands one and two are in there.

Tim: Commands one and two are in there. Yeah.

So what's really interesting is, you get this speech about how "I am Yahweh your Elohim." That was repeated two times in the thing I just read.

"So I brought you out of the land of Egypt." That's in the opening.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And then, "I am Yahweh your Elohim, the passionate Elohim." And then this thing about the iniquity of the fathers and showing loyal love. And then in between those are "no other *elohim*" and "no idols."

So that's the framework for the first two commands bound up in here.

Jon: Mm-hmm.

Tim: You could see them as so closely intertwined that some traditions see them as one.

Jon: The one command.

Tim: Command—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: That's kind of expressed in two ways.

So notice what we begin with is who God is to the people. And that makes sense. In other words, think if God had just started with like, "Don't murder." You know, I mean, that's...human life's really important.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: But there's something about how protecting human life, protecting marriages, protecting what belongs to them, you know—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: All of that is kind of subordinate or bullet points under something even more foundational—

Jon: Hmm. Which is their shared history.

Tim: Yeah, their shared history. And then who God is to them in that shared history.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: "I am the one that brought you out of the land of Egypt"—

Tim: Yeah. Let's start there.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Let's pause.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So, this is a family whose fundamental identity is, we used to be slaves—

Jon: Mm-hmm.

Tim: And we were being slowly killed off. And we were liberated. And we were liberated because Yahweh, the Elohim of our ancestors, raised up a deliverer for us.

Jon: Mm-hmm.

Tim: So we are a liberated people. Yahweh is our liberator. That's who we are. We are the liberated ones. That's fundamental—

Jon: "We are the free ones."

Tim: The free ones. Yeah. Which means that one way to think about the 10 Commandments is, it's like a freedom ethic.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: It's the ethic of the free.

Jon: How to live as a free people.

Tim: How do we live as freed...as freed people?

Jon: Pharaoh's not telling us what to do—

Tim: Yeah, yeah.

Jon: But how does this not descend into its own type of chaos and slavery?

Tim: Yeah. Think, I mean, they've lived in slavery and in a land not their own, four generations now.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So they've been shaped by that and probably been told many different stories about who they are as a people. So who you are is the people Yahweh has...has liberated. The New Testament scholar N. T. Wright has an easy-to-remember way of putting this. He says, "So Yahweh brings the people out of Egypt. And now that they're at Mount Sinai, it's about getting Egypt out of the people," so to speak.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Which is kind of a—

But it's just saying they've been steeped in a culture for a long time. And—

Jon: Like the values and the ethics of Egypt, the perspective, the...the way of being human there?

Tim: Yes. Yeah, exactly right. Yep. Yeah. So that is significant.

First of all, that you are a liberated people. Also this thing of, "I am Yahweh your Elohim." I'm yours.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: So you were mine. Like, I liberated you. So you're my people. But also the phrase, "I am Yahweh your Elohim." I belong to you, and you belong to me. So this little line is alluding back to what Moses introduced this relationship as, which is a covenant.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: Covenant. And—

Jon: Goes both ways.

Tim: Yeah. This is very interesting, there's a phrase that's going to get repeated throughout Exodus and Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, and the prophets. This phrase where God will say, "I will be your God, and you will be my people."

It was actually used first back in the early Exodus story, when God says to the people, "I'm going to take you as my people, and I will be your God."

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: So whenever God says, "I am Yahweh your Elohim," or "You are my people," we're alluding to that.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: A phrase from the Song of Songs: "I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine." So I belong to the one that I love. The one that I love belongs to me. That's covenant language.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So this opening line of "I am Yahweh your Elohim," it's just quick, but it is signaling the relationship between God and the people. So there's no command here. The first words of the 10 Commandments are not a command.

Jon: Mm-hmm.

Tim: They're just a statement.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: "I am Yahweh"—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: "I am yours, and you are mine." Fundamental context of this relationship is that we are bound together. And so, if that's the case, then there's a couple of things that follow, especially in an ancient polytheistic context.

One is, "There will not be for you any other *elohim* before me."

Jon: And *elohim* is the Hebrew word that just means "divine being"—

Tim: That's good. Yeah.

Jon: Spiritual being.

Tim: Yeah. Spiritual being. Mm-hmm. And it is used to refer to the one God of Israel, the creator of all. But then also to other spiritual beings, real or imagined.

The imagined sort are what would be called idols.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: So no other *elohim*, and no other idols. They are two separate sentences—

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: Two...these are the first two prohibitions. So let's get into it here.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So no other gods before me. And that little phrase "before me" is really interesting. It's a phrase, *'al-panai*. It most literally means, "in front of my face."

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Really interesting. So this phrase, *'al-pene* or *'al-panai*, is a very common prepositional phrase. This is the grammar term to refer to something being in a physical location, like right in front of you.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So, let's see. These are just a couple random examples. There's a story about David, who's on this march with a whole bunch of people. And so we're told that 600 men came with him from the town of Gath, and they passed on *'al-pene* the king—before the face of the king.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So it's literally like the—

What do you call it? The vanguard?

Jon: Processional.

Tim: The vanguard or something—

Jon: The vanguard?

Tim: Yeah. They're all marching together.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So you have, like, a group of soldiers who go ahead of you.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Something like that.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Before his face.

Jon: Oh, I see.

Tim: So it means literally—

Jon: In front of you.

Tim: In front of.

Jon: Oh, okay.

Tim: Literally, in front of. Mm-hmm.

So what is very interesting is that this phrase *'al-pene* can also—this can be confusing to us—can be used not in the sense of “in front of” you but in the sense of “beside” you. It is sometimes used in the sense of “instead of.”

Jon: Hmm?

Tim: Yeah, this is really interesting. So there's this law in Deuteronomy about, let's say that a guy has two wives. It doesn't tell the story of how he ended up with two wives, but he has two wives. And let's say he really loves one, but he doesn't love the other—

Jon: Mm-hmm.

Tim: Anymore. If both of these women have sons, but the firstborn son is not from the wife that he loves, he can't just, like, swap sons.

Jon: He can't withhold the firstborn, right?

Tim: Hmm-mm. No. He has to follow the custom and the tradition of giving the firstborn a greater share of the inheritance. So literally what it says in Hebrew is, “He cannot make the son of the wife he loves the firstborn before the face of the son that he does not love.”

Jon: Hmm. Okay.

Tim: It means “instead of.”

Jon:

I see. Mm-hmm.

Tim: So here's the point, is: This Hebrew prepositional phrase is actually really ambiguous.

Jon: It's very flexible?

Tim: It's very flexible.

Jon: Yeah. It's a spatial metaphor—

Tim: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Jon: That then can be used in many different situations.

Tim: Yes. Yeah. It also can be used in the sense of—I'm just...I'm working through the dictionary entry here—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: I'm just giving you examples.

Jon: Alright.

Tim: It also can mean “against the face.”

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So “before your face” is, it's in front of you.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: But then let's say, instead of David's men walking with him, like, going in front of him—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: What if you have a hostile army coming towards you?

Jon: That's also—

Tim: They are also before your face.

Jon: Before your face, but they're coming against you.

Tim: Against your face.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Yeah. Okay, I get that.

Tim: So this is—

Jon: So the same phrase can mean—

Tim: Same phrase, yes.

Jon: Coming against me.

Tim: Yep. Here's a couple examples in Nahum chapter 2: "The attacker advances against your face. So guard the fortress, and watch the road." So what's interesting is when you come back here, and when God says, "You shall have no other *elohim* against my face," would be the most literal way of rendering it—

Jon: Oh. It would be that connotation.

Tim: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So—

Jon: Or "instead of" me. The swapping—

Tim: Ex... Totally.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: It actually appears that all of these nuances—

Jon: Kind of work.

Tim: Work. And—

Jon: Yeah, because you can imagine him saying, "Look, I'm paying attention to everything. Don't put idols out there in front of me and start worshipping them"—

Tim: That's right.

Jon: Like—

Tim: That's right.

Jon: In front of me, beside me—

Tim: Or along with me.

Jon: Like—

Tim: Which happened many times—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: In Israel's history, that alternate statues of other deities were put up in the temple.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Mm-hmm.

Jon: But then there's also the connotation of—

Tim: Mm-hmm.

Jon: By doing this, you're swapping me out.

Tim: Right.

Jon: Or you're actually coming against me.

Tim: Mm-hmm. Yeah. You can actually plug this idea of “no other *elohim*” into every one of those meanings, and it works. This is just a wonderful instance of the biblical authors carefully choosing an ambiguous phrase, and it seems like they intend multiple meanings.

Jon: Yeah?

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: What's the Hebrew again?

Tim: *'Al-panai*.

Jon: *'Al-panai*.

Tim: *'Al-panai*.

[pause]

Tim: So let's just pause here. This idea, “no other *elohim*,” it often gets attached to a religious concept that has developed in, I don't know, modern academic discussion of this, called “monotheism.”

Jon: Yeah. “Mono”—one. “Theism”—God.

Tim: Yeah. That's right.

Jon: One God.

Tim: So, yes, one God. But here, the existence or the nature of other *elohim* isn't fully clear or worked out. It's less a claim about that, “I am the only Elohim that exists, the only spiritual being.” But it could be that, “Among many of the *elohim* that could claim your allegiance, worship me only.”

Jon: You've got the Canaanites who've worshiped Baal. And he's—

Tim: And Dagon and—

Jon: Right.

Tim: I mean, there's lots—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Of gods.

Jon: And so should I worship Yahweh? Should—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Should I—

Tim: Yep.

Jon: Or maybe I should also make a sacrifice to Baal as well. And you're trying to figure this out.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: But then I guess the question is, is that just an idol? Is that just a false thing? Or is there actually some sort of spiritual being connected?

Tim: Exactly. Yeah, totally. Yeah.

So the technical term given for "you give your worship and your allegiance only to one God" is "monolatry."

Jon: Okay.

Tim: I give my allegiance only to one God, because I have history with that God.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: And that's my God.

So here's the point, is that notice how the 10 Commandments say, "I am Yahweh your Elohim." And then it doesn't go on to say, "I'm the only spiritual being in the universe."

Jon: Mm-hmm.

Tim: What he says—

Jon: It's quiet up here except for me.

Tim: Yeah.

[Laughter]

Tim: Totally.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: He just says, “I’m the one who brought you up out of Egypt, so don’t have any other *elohim*.”

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And I guess maybe to clarify, I’m not saying that there are many creator gods in the worldview of the biblical authors. That’s not the point.

Jon: Wait. You just used a new phrase: creator gods.

Tim: Exactly right. That’s exactly right. Yes.

Jon: That everything comes from and just existed—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: And through his word. That’s unique.

Tim: Yes, it is. Yes, it is.

And so it’s significant then that command number four, which is the Sabbath, is going to call back to creation.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: “Remember the day of Sabbath to keep it holy.” You know, six days do your work, seventh day you rest. Why? Because in six days, Yahweh made the skies and the land and the sea.

And you’re like, “Oh yeah, the skies, the land, and the sea.”

Jon: Those are the things I could create idols out of.

Tim: Those are the three realms of, “Don’t make the likeness of anything in the skies above, the land beneath, or the waters on the land.”

Jon: These are all created things.

Tim: Yes.

Jon: Don’t turn them into more than what they are.

Tim: That’s right. So actually, in an important way, part of the reason for commands one and two are also given in command four.

So commands one and two are: Yahweh is your liberator.

Jon: Mm-hmm.

Tim: Command four is: Yahweh is the creator of all. And together those make up a combined reason for why you should have no other *elohim* before me and certainly no physical representations of any other *elohim*.

Jon: So there's one creator God in the story of the Bible.

Tim: Mm-hmm.

Jon: But this phrase *elohim*—

Tim: Right. Right.

Jon: As a class of beings, which if you just said was the class of spiritual beings—

Tim: Spiritual beings.

Jon: We do know that there's other spiritual beings. We call them the “host of heaven.”

Tim: Mm-hmm. Yeah. Elohim is one of the typical Hebrew words to describe the host of heaven. And then with the advent of the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Greek word *angelos*—messenger—gets introduced into the equation, from which we get our English word angel. So Deuteronomy 10:17, Moses says, “Yahweh your Elohim, he is the Elohim of *elohim*.” He—

Jon: Yeah. He's in a class of itself.

Tim: Any other spiritual being other than Yahweh is not worthy of your ultimate loyalty and allegiance.

Jon: Okay, yeah.

Tim: So the implicit claim there is, any other *elohim* isn't on the same rank as Yahweh.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So any other *elohim* is a creature—

Jon: Yeah, okay.

Tim: Not your liberator or the creator.

Jon: It's a created being.

Tim: It's a created being. Yeah.

Jon: So we're back to monotheism.

Tim: We're back—okay. So this is what's so interesting is that we're on our way to what will become a more robust and clear view of monotheism, which essentially says there is only one creator Elohim, who is not a being within creation—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: But is the author and source of all creation.

Jon: But that's the capital-G God.

Tim: That's the capital-G God.

Jon: That when we say, "There is but one God"—

Tim: That's right.

Jon: We mean the creator God.

Tim: Yeah. So when you get later to, you know, expressions of this, like in Isaiah, where it would just be like, "I am Yahweh, the creator of all. There is no *elohim* alongside me."

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Like, the main point is that it would be irrational to give my allegiance to anything other than the one creator Elohim.

Most of these other deities were connected to the cycles of nature, like weather, to economic institutions.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: They were connected to sex and fertility. And so you're offering sacrifices, you're living your life with these things as your ultimate aim.

Jon: Mm-hmm. In our context, we kind of dismiss this idea almost too much—

Tim: Oh, sure.

Jon: Of other spiritual powers.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Because our neighbors aren't saying, "This is God," you know.

Tim: True.

Jon: The god of war over here, like, let's worship—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: That god.

Tim: Yeah. But there are these entities that live in our imagination in the same slot—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: As what gods did, so—

Jon: Right.

Tim: I live in America, and there's a set of founding ideals that, in theory, unify this land and people that I live in. You know—life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness.

Jon: Mm-hmm.

Tim: So there's these core ideals. And actually, all these ideals have icons and pictures attached to them, with a history. And there are actual statues, you know, of justice—*Iustitia Eustetia*—that stand in. Or paintings of statues.

So many even of these modern, what we might think of as secular ideals—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: But the role they play in our imagination is the same as the gods. We just have the sense of—

Jon: Right.

Tim: Honoring justice.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: So we do actually still have these higher powers, higher ideals, that command our loyalty. And what Yahweh is saying is, all loyalties that you could imagine giving to something else, ultimately their source is Yahweh alone.

So why do you give your loyalty to something that's lower when ultimately it channels up to Yahweh as the creator and liberator?

Jon: Yeah. It's different context, but there's still wisdom here.

Tim: Mm-hmm. This begins a really important trajectory in Jewish and then in Christian thought, which is: When humans give our imaginations and desires and allegiances to anything that's not the source of all reality, it will eventually lead us on a path that dehumanizes us and other people.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: I guess it's kind of easy to see that with sex, for example—

Jon: Mm-hmm.

Tim: Or with money.

Jon: Or with greed.

Tim: Yeah. Or with power, like—

Jon: Sure.

Tim: Like, political or just social influence or power.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: When those become ends in themselves it, like, leads to our destruction.

Jon: So you rattled off a bunch of American ideals: justice, pursuit of happiness—

Tim: Lib—

Jon: Freedom.

Tim: Freedom, yes.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: It comes right from this story. That's the story—

Jon: We could—

But then, but don't worship freedom; worship the God who freed you.

Tim: Mm-hmm. That's right.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Yeah. That's right.

[Musical Break]

Tim: So I am Yahweh your Elohim. No other *elohim* liberated you. Yahweh wants to invite his people into a covenant partnership, an intimate bond. "I am yours, and you are mine."

But then also, apparently the way to live as freed people is to begin from this foundation—that there is for us one Elohim. The one who liberated us and the one who made all that is in the land, sky, and sea. And I will find what my greatest fulfillment, my greatest freedom, my greatest flourishing when that's my true north—is to give my allegiance to the one who is the source...the source of all and the one who freed me.

That's how the 10 Commandments begin.

Jon: Yeah, there's 10 Words for finding life.

Tim: Mm-hmm.

Jon: And the first—

Tim: Living as the free.

Jon: Living as the free.

Tim: Mm-hmm.

Jon: The first baseline one is about where your allegiance is.

Tim: Yes. When Jesus calls himself the truth—

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: "I am the truth"—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: In John 14, he's picking up a thread from earlier in John's Gospel, where he says, "If you listen to me and come to recognize who I am"—and "I am" is repeated multiple times in John's Gospel—and that's Jesus's way of claiming to be, have that intimate union with Yahweh.

Jon: Cause that's what Yahweh means "I am."

Tim: Cause "Yahweh" means "the one who is." And he says knowing that truth will set you free. That's what he says in John 10: "I am the truth. If you know the truth, the truth is what sets you free."

And that's essentially...Jesus is remixing like the ideas from the prologue and the first command right here.

Jon: Really?

Tim: Yeah. The truth is that there is one Elohim—

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: Who is the creator and liberator of all. And to give your allegiance to the truth is to live as the free.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: Yeah. Because you're living in reality. I don't have to constantly wonder, is there some other force at work in the universe that I need to hedge my bets for, that I need to watch out for?

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: It's a very bold claim. And it's a bold way to live in the universe, to say there's only one ultimate one that matters in the universe. And it's not me. It's also not my neighbor. And it's also not the weather—

[Laughter]

Tim: Right?

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: It's also not the ground.

Jon: It's not the accumulation of wealth. It's not my strength, or my nation's strength.

Tim: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. It's the creator of all. And the one, if I'm an Israelite, who liberated my ancestors from slavery. I just need to aim my life in allegiance and loyalty and love to that one. And somehow, like the rest, it'll all fall into place.

It's the first command.

Jon: Hmm. Yeah.

Tim: You could spend your life meditating on the implications of the first command—

[Laughter]

Tim: Which is—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Hmm. It's a negative: "Don't have any other gods."

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So if you flip it over—

Remember in our first conversation, you can kind of flip over each of the 10. And—

Jon: Have but one god.

Tim: Yeah. The negatives tend to be very specific. But then once you flip the negative into a positive, it becomes really open-ended.

So don't give your allegiance to any other god. Only give your allegiance to the one God, who is liberator and creator.

Jon: Hmm. And you're saying that's open-ended because now you're like—

Tim: Oh, wow!

Jon: What does that look like?

Tim: Wow!

Jon: What does allegiance look like?

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: What is a life like that?

Tim: Yeah. Cause who is that one, and what type of allegiance is due someone like that? Cause there's only one someone like that in all of reality. How do you give loyalty to that one alone?

Well, and there you go. That's, I guess, what it means to live as an image of God.

Jon: We are meant to create goodness on his behalf with him.

Tim: Mm-hmm.

Jon: And this is an invitation into something pretty grand.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: And at the base of it is to remember, one way to really screw this up is to start giving your allegiance to other things that aren't actually the creator God.

Tim: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Jon: This is the way of freedom. This is the way of life.

Tim: Mm-hmm. Yeah. Cause to acknowledge something that's not God as the ultimate source of my being is to live a lie. It's to live out of sync with reality, which means that it will eventually at some point turn ruinous to myself and other people. Cause lies don't set you free.

Jon: But this is a bold claim.

Tim: It's a very bold claim. Yeah. And it's precisely this trajectory of "no other *elohim*," you know, that will in the Christian tradition lead to Jesus saying things like, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. And the way to the Father is through me." That's a claim—

Jon: That's just as bold.

Tim: That's just as bold, but it's also carrying forward the logic of the first command right here. That it's possible to live your human existence in a lie, thinking that someone or something or some power has a claim on me that actually doesn't.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: But when I get in touch with the one who truly has a claim on my life, because they're the author of my life, then I'm living in the truth, and I'm living on the road to freedom. That's a concept that we're watching come into birth right here as we hear God say these words. These are world-shaping words. And it's just the first command.

Jon: Thank you for listening to this episode of BibleProject Podcast. Next week, we'll continue in the 10 Commandments, and we'll look at the second command, "You will not make for yourself an idol."

Tim: What's the significance of idols, and why is it such a big deal in the Bible? Idolatry. It's a pretty big deal. So what do these things mean in their ancient context that might help us think about what it means for us in our context?

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