

Deuteronomy 4:14-18

“The Lord Spoke to Israel Without Any Form”

“The LORD commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and judgments, that you might perform them in the land where you are going over to possess it. So watch yourselves carefully, since you did not see any form on the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the fire, so that you do not act corruptly and make a graven image for yourselves in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the sky, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water below the earth.”

Proponents of a low Christology of Yeshua the Messiah being supernatural, but ultimately created, may claim Tanach support for their premise from the statement that the Ancient Israelites “did not see any form on the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the fire” (Deuteronomy 4:15). It is deduced that God does not possess any kind of form, and it is thus impossible for God to take on human flesh via the doctrine of the Incarnation. Yet, it can be questioned—indeed it can be contested—whether Deuteronomy 4:14-18 even raises the issue of whether or not God can manifest Himself, at any time, via any kind of “form.” The context of what is detailed in Deuteronomy 4:14-18 is actually not describing the nature of God, but rather the activity of the Israelites in relation to God.

The statement of Deuteronomy 4:15 is: *ki lo re'item kol-temunah b'yom diver YHWH Eloheikhem b'Horeiv mitokh ha'eish* (כִּי לֹא רִאִיתֶם כָּל־תְּמוּנָה בְּיוֹם דִּבֶּר יְהוָה אֲלֵיכֶם בְּהַרְבֵּי מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ), “for not you-saw any-of form on-day he-spoke Yahweh to-you at-Horeb out-of the-fire” (Kohlenberger).⁹¹ When the Israelites encountered God, they did not see any *temunah* (תְּמוּנָה), “**form, shape, image, representation**” (CHALOT),⁹² most often rendered as “form,” but also seen as “shape” (NJPS), “likeness” (ATS), “image” (Alter), or “similitude” (KJV). And, what no one needs to overlook is that the time of God giving His people the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai or Mount Horeb, is in view. The basis for Ancient Israel being prohibited from representing God via any sort of graven image, is rooted in the fact that God’s voice simply spoke from the midst of great fire to them. J.A. Thompson indicates, “Since God did not reveal Himself in physical form, Israel was not to represent Him in physical form.”⁹³

If God, for example, had appeared as a calf or a cow, then there would have been some legitimacy for the Israelites to represent Him via the golden calf. But this is not what God wants. God does not just want a people which do things differently from others, but He wants them to interact with Him on an entirely different basis. Far be it from the pagans who would create some kind of idolatrous image of a god or goddess, likely employing some animal form or hybrid human-animal form—to entice the deity to give them favors, and perhaps also exercising some mastery over the deity via the image—Israel was to approach God at the places where God specified He could be approached. Jewish commentator Jeffrey H. Tigay offers the following, excellent thoughts regarding the prohibition of idolatry here in Deuteronomy 4:15:

“Since Israel saw no visible form (‘shape’) when God spoke, it is to make no idols of any form. Since the immediate context does not refer to other gods, the prohibition must refer to images representing YHVH or members of His retinue...This line of reasoning is spelled out more fully in Exodus 20:19-22: Israel has seen that God spoke directly to it from heaven; it is therefore to make no idols, but only an earthen altar, and wherever God causes His name to be mentioned, He will come and bless Israel. The sequence of ideas implies that idolaters used idols to bring

⁹¹ Ibid., 1:494.

⁹² CHALOT, 391.

⁹³ J.A. Thompson, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1974), 106.

deities near and thereby secure their blessings or receive communications from them, but that since God spoke to Israel directly from heaven, without the mediation of idols, it sees that idols are not necessary for these purposes. In idolatry, the purpose of an idol was to draw the presence of a deity to the place where the statue stood. It assumed that by a kind of sympathetic magic, like that connected with voodoo dolls, a being was somehow present in its representation. Here Moses forbids Israel to use idols to attract God: since no form was seen in the original contact with Him, none is to be made for future contacts.”⁹⁴

A further point is made by Daniel I. Block, who draws out how idols most frequently employ animal creatures, and thusly the people who worship idols forfeit humanity’s right to govern the Earth (Genesis 1:28):

“Moses elaborates on the general prohibition of idolatry by listing four classes of forbidden creaturely representatives of divinity: large land creatures, flying creatures, crawling dirt creatures, and creatures of the sea, categories borrowed directly from Genesis 1. By worshiping them humans violate Yahweh’s formlessness (v. 15) and displace him with creatures, but they also challenge his rule by submitting as vassals to the creatures they were to govern. Whereas idolaters worship forms that have mouths but do not speak, the Israelites worshiped the One who has no form but who speaks and calls on the Israelites to serve as his representatives.”⁹⁵

Deuteronomy 4:15 does communicate, “Take good care of yourselves! For you saw no image on the day the LORD spoke to you at Chorev, from within the fire” (Keter Crown Bible). Given the importance of the Sinai theophany for Ancient Israel and human history since, that God did not appear via any definite form to those present, should serve as an indication that it is entirely prohibited for mortals to try to represent God via any kind of image for veneration. This does not mean, however, that under specific circumstances—quantitatively indifferent than God taking on human form to meet with Abraham (Genesis 18:1-33)—that God cannot take on human form. Deuteronomy 4:15 prohibits human beings creating images of their own imagination to represent God; Deuteronomy 4:15 hardly prohibits God from ever manifesting Himself in human form (cf. Philippians 2:7), those very humans actually being created in His image (Genesis 1:27).

Deuteronomy 6:4-5 **“The Shema, The Lord is One”**

“Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”

In the debate over whether or not Yeshua the Messiah is a created being, or is actually God Incarnated in human flesh, are some firm opinions involving the Deuteronomy 6:4-5 *Shema*. All sides can be easily agreed how this exclaim was originally given to Ancient Israel, so that the population would demonstrate exclusive loyalty to the LORD, and that they would love and obey Him, especially as they were entering into a Promised Land occupied by Canaanites which would tempt them to abandon their God, or at least cheat on Him with other gods and goddesses. Israel was to demonstrate its exclusive loyalty and veneration to YHWH.⁹⁶

Deuteronomy 6:4 declares, *Shema Yisrael, ADONAI Eloheinu, ADONAI echad* (אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד), “Hearken O Israel: YHWH our God, YHWH (is) One!” (Fox). From a translation standpoint, there is some discussion on whether the term *echad* (אֶחָד), customarily rendered as

⁹⁴ Jeffrey H. Tigay, *JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), pp 48-49.

⁹⁵ Daniel I. Block, *NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), pp 129-130.

⁹⁶ If necessary, do consult the previous analysis provided in this publication, “What Does the Shema Really Mean?”