

JBTS

VOLUME 4 | ISSUE 2

JOURNAL OF
BIBLICAL AND
THEOLOGICAL
STUDIES

Idolatry: A Rhetorical-Critical Analysis of Deuteronomy 4:15–16, 23

Joshua K. Smith

Idolatry: A Rhetorical-Critical Analysis of Deuteronomy 4:15–16, 23

JOSHUA K. SMITH

*Joshua K. Smith is a Ph.D. student in theology at Midwestern
Baptist Theological Seminary*

Introduction

The biblical injunction against בָּסָל (“graven images”) in the rhetoric of Deuteronomy 4 serves as a foundational text in framing the central idea of the second commandment for a further intertextual study of idolatry in the Scriptures. Exodus 20:4 provides a prohibition against idolatry; Deuteronomy 4 provides the theological rationale for such a prohibition. The formless image juxtaposed to the auditory revelation of the LORD¹ at Horeb posits concern for fidelity to the covenant as Israel encounters Canaanite cultures whose static representations of deities were prevalent and authoritative. The polemics in the Bible against idolatry are rooted in two primary concerns: (1) fidelity to the covenant made at Horeb, and (2) the substitution and worship of creation instead of the Creator. In order to examine the nature and meaning of idolatry in Deuteronomy 4:15–16, 23, this study will employ a rhetorical-critical² analysis of the specific framing structures, literary patterns, discourse, and logic in the text.³

1. Out of respect for the Jewish reader יהוה will be rendered “the LORD.”
2. In this study the external structure will frame the literary context, and the internal structures will inform the exegetical and theological context. Together these components accomplish the exegetical means for informing the reading of the external (historical) framing and how the audience of the text might have best understood its rhetoric and applied its theology. Of less concern is imposing Greek manuals of rhetoric onto a Hebraic text. The focus here is on interpretation which is informed by historical-context, grammar, linguistics, all of which seek to hold the unity and integrity of the final form of the text. Cf. Phyllis Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah*, Guides to Biblical Scholarship (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), ch. 1, 2, and 4.
3. Due to the brief nature of this study, a full intertextual analysis of idolatry is out of scope. However, there is still greater work that needs to be done in this area of research. Cf. *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008).

Framing Structure of Deuteronomy 4⁴

There is great irony in scholarship's struggle to visualize a theology of the ban on images in Exodus 20:4.⁵ In Exodus 20:4, God prohibits the making of any פֶלֶל ("graven image"). This prohibition of divine anthropomorphic representation (i.e., aniconism) reverberates throughout the law codes of the Old Testament.⁶ The ban or prohibition of divine imagery is often encapsulated in the term "idol" or "idolatry;" however, there are fourteen different terms used for idol/idolatry in the Masoretic Text (MT). From descriptive terms like פֶלֶל ("image") or צְלָם ("image") to more pejorative terms like שְׁקֹדֶם ("abomination") and גִּלְעִילִים ("idols"),⁷ one can see the theological concern for proper modes of the LORD's worship: monolatry.⁸ The Septuagint (LXX) leans toward a transliteration of the word idol which accounts for its negative associations but misses the fullest sense of translation. As Charles Kennedy has noted, the LXX's strict rendering of idol as εἴδωλον does not employ the full Hebraic understanding of the term, using one Greek term to explain fourteen different Hebrew terms.⁹ This appears problematic because the MT does not exclusively use idol in a negative sense.¹⁰ However, Kennedy does not consider the possible theological rationale

4. Additional texts that also carry the central idea in Ex 20:4 and Dt 4 further: 1 Kgs 12:28, 29-27; 2 Kgs 17:15; Pss 106:20, 115:4-6; Is 6:9-10; 43:17-20; Jer 2:5; Hos 4:16-17, 8:4b-7a, 10:11a, 13:2-3; Mt 13:10-15; Rom 1:21-25; 1 Cor 10; Col 2:18-22; Rv 2:20, 24, 5:20, 16:13-14.

5. Trygve N. D. Mettinger, *No Graven Image? Israelite Aniconism in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1995); Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1992); Youn Ho Chung, *The Sin of the Calf: The Rise of the Bible's Negative Attitude Toward the Golden Calf* (New York; London: T&T Clark, 2010); Richard Lints, *Identity, and Idolatry: The Image of God and its Inversion*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 36 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

6. Ex 20:23, 34:17, 23:12b; Lv 19:4b, 26:1; Dt 4:16-18, 23, 5: 8-12, 7:25. Samuel R. Driver, Alfred Plummer, and Charles A. Briggs, *Deuteronomy*, The International Critical Commentary of the Old and New Testament, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1896), vii.

7. Douglas Mangum, "Idolatry," ed. Douglas Mangum et al., *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, Lexham Bible Reference Series (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2014); Jože Faur, "Idolatry," eds. Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum., *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed, vol. 9 (Farmington Hills: Keter Publishing, 2007), 710-15; Edward P. Meadors, *Idolatry and the Hardening of the Heart: A Study in Biblical Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 14-13.

8. Monolatry is commonly understood to mean the worship of The LORD according to the prescribed and proper means.

9. Charles Kennedy, "The Semantic Field of the Term 'Idolatry,'" in *Ancient Stones*; Friedrich Büchsel, "Εἴδωλον, Εἰδωλόθυτον, Εἰδωλεῖον, Κατείδωλος, Εἰδωλολάτρης, Εἰδωλολάτρια," eds. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 375-78.

10. Some scholars leave out this fact in their analysis of the terms. See Robert Pfeiffer, "The Polemic Against Idolatry in the Old Testament," *Journal of Biblical Studies* 43 (1924): 235; C. R. North, "The Essence of Idolatry," *Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 77 (1961): 151-60. For example, the images of cherubs are never considered as idolatry; in fact, they are prescribed to be woven on "curtains" (Ex 26:1; 36:8) and placed on the Ark (Ex 26:31; 32:35). More to this, the rendering of *teraphim* (household idol) also holds no condemnation in the account of 1 Sm 19:13ff.

behind such a rendering. The LXX removes the ambiguity of whether idol or image is meant, thus capturing the theological usage of the term in the Old Testament and carrying its meaning forward, which is not “anti-iconic but anti-idolic.”¹¹ The lexical¹² and theological usage of נָדֵךclarifies its meaning in three ways: (1) the terms describe a manufactured object made for pagan worship, (2) the terms refer to a physical representation or the actual deity, and (3) they refer to worship of a deity other than the LORD.

Terminology is not the only issue surrounding a biblical theology of idolatry, historical-criticism has also played its part. In the investigations to understand the second commandment, the textual development was favored over the understanding of the literary structure.¹³ This is problematic because the literary structure of Deuteronomy 4 not only serves as a structural allusion to the second commandment but also a theological commentary on its rationale. Despite this shortcoming in methodological approaches,¹⁴ which concerns text-blocks, redactions,¹⁵ or layered interpretation, there is an agreement concerning the major structuring of Deuteronomy 4.¹⁶ In addition, the focus on the historicity over the historiography in the textual analysis of scholarship further ossifies the literary unity and comprehension of Deuteronomy. However, in the mid-twentieth century, there was a literary shift back to the structure of the text in light of the emergence of archaeological and textual evidence.

Many of the textual problems, mentioned above, are obviated by realizing that while there is a substantial structural resemblance to a Hittite Suzerainty-Vassal

11. Barnes Tatum, “The LXX Version of the Second Commandment (Ex. 20, 3-6 = Deut. 5, 7-10): A Polemic Against Idols, Not Images,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 17 (1986): 178-181.

12. Appearing in the following: Ex 20:4; Lv 26:1; Dt 4:16, 23, 25; 5:8; 27:15; Judg 17:3, 4; 18:14, 17, 18, 20, 30, 31; 2 Kgs 21:7; 2 Chr 33:7; 34:3,4; Is 40:19, 20; 42:17; 44:9, 10, 15, 17; 45:20; 48:5; Jer 10:14; 51:17; Nah 1:14; Hab 2:18; Ps 97:7.

13. M. A. O’Brian, “The Book of Deuteronomy,” in *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* 3 (1995), 95-128; C. Begg, “The Literary Criticism of Deut 4:1-40,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 56 (1980): 10-55.

14. Holter notes three main groups of literary critical approaches to Deuteronomy 4: (1) an atomistic approach (fragmented layers and sources), (2) a holistic approach (unified structure), and (3) a block approach (addresses previous two sides). He rightly notes that each approach logically leads to different results and there is much need for a synthesis of the atomistic and block approach. See Kunt Holter, “Literary Critical Studies of Deut 4: Some Criteriological Remarks,” *Biblische Notizen* 81 (1996): 91-103.

15. Kunt Holter, *Deuteronomy and the Second Commandment*, SIBL 60 (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 11.

16. See A. D. H. Mayes “A. D. H. Mayes, “Deuteronomy 4 and the Literary Criticism of Deuteronomy,” *Journal of Biblical Studies* 100, no. 1 (1981): 23-51. However, Mayes notes that Deuteronomy 1-4 is a speech (sermon); therefore, it is not a treaty document and should be cautiously considered in regard to the book as a whole. This analysis is unsubstantiated by geographic-cultural understandings of LBA treaty text. This view is held by the majority in the tradition of interpretation of this text. Mayes also notes that Deuteronomy 1-4 the primary rationale behind the the historical operation of Dt 4 from the rest of the structure is based on the conjunction וְיַהֲיֵ “and now.” Cf. J. D. Levenson, “Who Inserted the Book of the Torah?” *Havard Theological Review* 68 (1975): 203-33.

Treaty (SVT), there are also literary similarities between Deuteronomy and Ugaritic and Assyrian treaties. Perhaps this impasse is resolved by seeing Deuteronomy as a *mischattung* (mixed genre).¹⁷ Meaning, Moses uses familiar discourse patterns and repurposes them in his exhortation to the Israelites. In Deuteronomy there are ten different discourse patterns,¹⁸ which approached from a form-critical methodology is understandably confusing. Scholars such as Kline¹⁹ and Mendenhall²⁰ have noted the numerous parallels to ancient Near Eastern (ANE) treaty structures found within Deuteronomy. Kline clarifies that historical prologues typically follow the preamble and stipulations, which more than qualifies Deuteronomy 1:5-4:49 as a historical prologue.²¹ More to this, in Deuteronomy 4 alone, there is sufficient evidence of the entire treaty pattern: summons to obedience (cf. Dt 5:1; 6:1; 12:1), identification of author (Dt 4:1, 2, 5, 10), devotion to the suzerain (Dt 4:26), and filial knowledge (Dt 4:21-22).²²

The considerable usage of *wayyiqtol* and *qāṭal* in the prologue of Deuteronomy frame the historiographical discourse, which is typical of SVT. Moses builds on the *realis* mood form (Dt 2:34.3, 36.1, 37.1; 3:4.2; 4:12.3) in his hortatory dialogue. Embedded in the discourse of chapter four is a legal disputation for the anticipated failure of Israel (i.e., 4:25-31). Chapter four is an exhortative core and adjuratory core of Deuteronomy.

17. Shemaryahuu Talmon, “The Comparative Method in Biblical Interpretation—Principles and Problems,” in *Essential Papers on Israel and the Ancient Near East*, Frederick E. Greenspan, eds. (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 411. See Talmon’s description emphasizing cultic function: “[A] literary *Gattung* has a specific *Sitz im Leben*, i.e., a well-circumscribed anchorage in the cultic and cultural structure of the society which produced it; it is the formalized literary expression of ideas, social concepts and cultic values which that society fostered.”

18. Neal Huddison’s dissertation notes that of the ten, three are absent from the ANE treaty texts: “Of these, instructional, predictive, and epitaphic discourse do not appear in the ancient Near Eastern treaty corpora.” In “Deuteronomy as *Mischgattung*: A Comparative and Contrastive Discourse Analysis of Deuteronomy and Ancient Near Eastern Treaty Traditions,” (PhD diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2015), 103.

19. Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority*. rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975); G. E. Mendenhall, «Convenant Forms in Israelite Tradition,» *The Biblical Archaeologist*, vol. 27, no. 3 (1954): 50-76; Dennis J. McCarthy, *Old Testament Covenant: A Survey of Current Opinions*. Growing Points in Theology (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972).

20. Mendenhall notes that, “[T]he Hittite form of this treaty, it seems certain that the Hittites themselves did not originate the covenant form which we shall discuss. Rather, there is abundant indication that they borrowed the form from the East, frequently it must have been common property of any number of peoples and states in the second millennium B.C. It is by its very nature an international form.” 54. Cf. The most relevant treaty texts currently available at the time of this study are the treaty texts of Munatalliš and Alakšanduš (Hittite), Muršiliš II and Duppi-Teššua (Hittite), Suppilumliuma and Mattiwaza (Assyrian), and Muršilliš II and Niqmepa of Ugarit.

21. Kline, *Structure of Biblical Authority*, 136; cf. M. G. Kline, *The Treaty of the Great King: The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 28-31.

22. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King*, 58-60.

Kerygma of The Episodes in Deuteronomy 4:15-16, 23

With brief analysis of the structures' historical and literary frame, exegesis of the kerygma of the episodes of Deuteronomy 4 is now in order.

Deuteronomy 4:15-16

נִשְׁמַרְתֶּם מֵאָדָם לְנַפְשֹׁתְיכֶם כִּי לֹא רָאִיתֶם כָּל תָּמוֹנוֹת בַּיּוֹם ذֶ בְּרוּךְ מִתּוֹךְ הַאֲשָׁפָן
תְּשַׁחֲתֻוּן וְעַשְׂיוּתְמָכֶם פְּסָלֶם תָּמוֹנוֹת כָּל סָמֵל תְּבִנִּית זָכָר אוֹ נָקָבָה:

Watch over your soul carefully; you did not see a form on the day the Lord spoke to you at Horeb in the midst of the fire. So you do not lack integrity, and make a divine image in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female.²³

A brief discourse analysis of Deuteronomy 4:15-16 displays that these verses are primarily hortatory. Verse 15 begins with the primary injunction moving into the setting and ending with motivation for adhering to the five clauses (InjP-Set-Set-Motiv-Motiv).²⁴ The setting of this secondary injunction, “watch over your soul carefully,” is framed in a historiographic summary of Israel’s oath in the covenant of the LORD. The exhortation in this cluster is the beginning of the palindrome that leads to the prediction of Israel’s failure to keep the stipulations.²⁵ The *weqātal* which begins in this section will resume in the negative clauses of 4:23-24.

The verb חָשַׁשׁ (“to corrupt”) is used in the *hifil* in verse 16 to denote a sense of destructive behavior, “to go to ruin or corruption,” but perhaps a better rendering in English is “to lack integrity” for this relates to the first cause of the injunction against idolatry throughout the Law, infidelity to the covenant at Horeb. The noun *תָּמוֹנוֹת* helps demonstrate the marriage between the covenant at Horeb and the theological rationale behind the polemic against idolatry. This noun occurs ten times in the Old Testament and five of them are used in Deuteronomy 4 (vv. 12, 15, 16, 23, 25). From verse 15 to verse 16a there is an inversion and shift in meaning: *כל תָּמוֹנוֹת* develops into *תָּמוֹנוֹת כָּל*. D. Knapp, Noth, and von Rad suggest this inversion is due to a later constitution of text blocks; however, there is an alternative interpretation.²⁶ Perhaps the development is due to a shift in theology: moving from an emphasis from the theophany at Horeb to a theological reasoning behind the prohibition of idolatry in verses 16, 23, 25. This analysis is warranted, for Deuteronomy 4 is a theological commentary on the second commandment.

23. Author’s translation.

24. InjP: Primary Injunction; Set: Setting; Motiv: Motivation.

25. See Appendix: Chiasm of Deuteronomy 4:15-40.

26. D. Knapp, *Deuteronomium 4* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987), 112-14, 205-06; G. von Rad, *Moses*, ed. K. C. Hanson, 2nd ed. (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 28-36. I am indebted to K. Holter for pointing this analysis out in *Deuteronomy 4 and the Second Commandment*, 30ff.

The rhetoric in Deuteronomy is concerned with the memory motif. Law and liturgy are related through the medium of memory—faithfulness to preserve the words and deeds of the LORD. Moses reminds a new generation as they transition from a rural environment to an urban one that they are contractually bound to reflect the image God (via the *torah*). The Law juxtaposed to the prescribed rituals objectively grounded the past deeds and faithfulness of the LORD in the present. Law and liturgy remove the dissonance and subjectivity of memory, preserving a faithful representation of the identity and ideology of the LORD.²⁷ The deliverance of the past generations becomes the deliverance of the present generation.²⁸ The theological construct of the Deuteronomic Law (deed-consequence nexus) is built upon the explicit agreement and remembrance of the people to make the mark (keep the commands).²⁹ That is, Israel agreed to keep the covenant of God and accepted the divine justice and retribution that will follow in the typical suzerain treaty.³⁰

Moses primarily speaks here in the second person plural, addressing Israel as a community and their temptation to manufacture visual representations of the LORD. This endeavor is problematic for reproducing a faithful image requires dependence on some original medium. Moses reminds the Israelites they saw no form of the LORD; therefore, qualitatively and teleologically, any form created by humanity is improper. Qualitatively, God transcends the physical order and rather creates humanity to consist of His image³¹ (Gen 1:26).³² Teleologically, the creation of an idol reflected humanity's desire to seek meaning or purpose apart from the confines of the covenant relationship. This fallacy was indicative of the hardness of heart and desire for control and security through the possession of a deity.³³ As opposed to surrounding cultures

27. Von Rad discusses this idea when he mentions the notion of getting back the “root-memory,” in *Studies in Deuteronomy* (Chicago: Henry Regency, 1953), chapters 1-2. Cf. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 99.

28. Charles L. Kessler, “The Memory Motif in the God-Man Relationship of the Old Testament,” (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1956); Bobby B. Box, *The Role of Memory in the Faith of Israel*” (ThD diss., New Orleans Baptist Seminary, 1968); James M. Kennedy, “The Root G'R in the Light of Semantic Analysis,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106, no. 1 (1987): 47-64; John F. A. Sawyer, “Root-Meanings in Hebrew,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 12 (1967).

29. Cf. Ancient Near Eastern parallels to covenant administration through references to tablets: tablet of silver that Hattusilis III had made for Ramses II, Iron tablet for Ulmi-Tesumb.

30. Angelika Berlejung, “Sin and Punishment: The Ethics of Divine Justice and Retribution in Ancient Near Eastern and Old Testament Texts,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, vol. 69, Issue 3 (2015): 272-287; Kandy Queen Sutherland, “The Futility Curse in the Old Testament,” (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1982); Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), 266.

31. ‘Image’ is semantically close to ‘idol’ as a theological construct. Lints notes, “The Bible often speaks of this dynamic [image and idol] of the connection between sacred artist and the work of art created.” in *Identity and Idolatry*, 81; Tryggve Mettinger, “The Veto on Images and the aniconic God in Ancient Israel,” 15-29.

32. D. J. A. Clines, “Humanity as the Image of God,” in *On the Way to the Postmodern: Old Testament Essays, 1967-1988*, vol. 2 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 447-97.

33. This is prevalent in ANE thought, that the idol created was a living medium that one could

who believed that through the cult, they could manipulate gods,³⁴ the Israelites are to see the LORD through the lens of the covenant-relationship and their experience from Egypt to Canaan. In all things, they are to look to God for self-preservation, security, and significance.³⁵ The main rationale for the polemic here is pragmatic. The socio-cultural influence of 400 years in Egypt is not easily removed.³⁶ Whether animalistic or cosmic representation was depicted in worship, the temptation was to replace the uniqueness of the creator with the creation.³⁷ Moses reminds Israel (cf. Dt 4:5-7) of her responsibility to display the uniqueness of the LORD in her moral conduct and worship.³⁸ Infidelity to the covenant at Horeb is an obvious formal component to the Deuteronomic injunction against idolatry; however, there is also a functional aspect in the idea of “forming.” Both constructs in these verses are used in a negative connotation concerning the representation of the LORD. The milieu of ANE religions displays a predilection towards the physical representation of deities, especially that of a bull, cow, and calf.³⁹ Abel Ndjerareou notes that these idols function in several ways: “reflecting man’s need for substance, serving as a pedestal for the deity, serving as a companion, and as a direct object for worship.”⁴⁰ Therefore, it is easy to see the temptation of Israel to falsely assimilate these functional aspects of pagan worship into the worship of the LORD.

The oration of Moses in this passage reveals two critical components concerning representation: (1) the creator’s image can only be properly represented through an imageless form (i.e., words), and (2) humanity is the mirrored physical representation of the creator (not exact replicas). The reflection of God’s likeness is connected to Israel’s covenant-relationship and redemption. Therefore Deuteronomy 4 memorializes the prohibition in the Decalogue and why Hosea speaks of the

manipulate to achieve security. However, that is not to say that the Israelites believed the object was animated with life and breath.

34. J. L. Burns, “Aspects of Babylonian Theocracy as Background for the Biblical Polemic,” (ThD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary), 4.

35. J. Muilenburg, “The Speech of Theophany,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 28 (1964): 39-42.

36. W. F. Albright, *The LORD and the Gods of Canaan: A Historical Analysis of Two Contrasting Faiths* (New York: Double Day, 1969), 122ff.

37. Von Rad states, “The present form of the commandment (Ex 20:4; Dt 5:8) is shaped by this doctrine. For wherever we go in creation, heaven, earth or under the earth all things are created by The LORD and subject to Him so that they cannot be compared with Him. Hence, it would be ridiculous to seek a likeness of The LORD in the created order.” In *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. “εἰκόν” by von Rad, 2:382.

38. E. Merrill, “A Theology of the Pentateuch.” in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 12.

39. In Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Canaan the gods were commonly represented by a bull, cow, or calf. If not, they were described as wearing horns.

40. Abel L. Ndjerareou, “The Theological Bases for the Prohibitions of Idolatry: An Exegetical and Theological Study of the Second Commandment,” (PhD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1995), 83ff.

adulteress nation of Israel's relation to the LORD.⁴¹ The construction of an idol is the deconstruction of the covenant-relationship.

Deuteronomy 4:23

הַשְׁמָרוּ לְכֶם פֵּן תִּשְׁכֹּחוּ אֶת בְּרִית יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר כָּרָת עָמָךְ וְעַשְׂתֶּם לְכֶם פְּסָל תְּמוֹנוֹת כָּל־
אֲשֶׁר צָוָק יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךְ:

So watch yourselves, that you do not forget the covenant of the Lord your God which He made with you, and make for yourselves a graven image in the form of anything against which the Lord your God has commanded you.⁴²

The discourse of Deuteronomy 4:23 reflects a similar pattern to the verses of 15-16 with a slight variation. This verse carries the logic of verses 15-16 further, revealing the consequence in verses 26-27. It starts with the primary injunction and alternates between motivation and setting (InjP-Motiv-Set-Motiv-Set). The verb *הַשְׁמָרוּ* in verse 23 is semantically tied to *וְעַשְׂתֶּם* in the discourse framing of this pericope. Both are used in the *niphal* and should be understood regarding cause and effect. The negative telic particle *פֵּן* is also evidence of a transition of focus on the Decalogue's version of the second commandment to its theological exposition in Deuteronomy 4.

This means when Israel is not mindful of the living presence of God's commands, she by default manufactures an artificial substitute for God's image and presence. This concept of memory is not unique to Israel and is found throughout antiquity.⁴³ God's divine election, evidenced through her deliverance from Egypt (Ex 10:2), was to remain an operative part of her identity and worship. It is not just a reminder of the LORD's deliverance and blessings, but also of the judgment the followed forgetting. The actualization of such is realized in Deuteronomy 28:28-29,

41. Hos 4:16-17, 8:4b-7a, 10:11a, 13:2-3 carries this central idea infidelity through in the analysis of the form and function of Idolatry.

42. Author's translation.

43. Cf. The LXX's rendering of the verb ἐπιλάθησθε and its usage in the Greco-Roman world in connection to the memory-motif. Andreas Will, *Origins of the Greek Verb* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2018), 72ff; Aristotle, *On Memory and Reminiscence*, trans. W. D. Ross, in vol. 8 of *The Great Books of the Western World*. eds. Mortimer J. Adler and Robert M. Hutchins (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), 695; Barbara DeConcini, "Remembering: A Hermeneutic of Narrative Time," (PhD diss., Atlanta: Emory University, 1980); Guy G Stroumsa, "Religious Memory, Between Orality and Writing," *Memory Studies* 9 (2016): 332-40; Doron Mendles, *Memory in Jewish, Pagan and Christian Societies of the Graeco-Roman World*, Library of Second Temple Studies 45 (London: T&T Clark International, 2004); Bradford Vivian, *Public Forgetting: The Rhetoric and Politics of Beginning Again* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010); Robert B. Hardy III, "The Uses of Memory in the Poetry of Vergil" (PhD diss., Brown University, 1991); Charles Price, "Remembering and Forgetting in the Old Testament and Its Bearing on the Early Christian Eucharist" (ThD diss., Union Theological Seminary, 1962); James A. Notopoulos, "Mnemosyne in Oral Literature," *Transaction and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 69 (1938): 465-93.

where the breaking of the covenant will lead to a “madness of mind” (cf. VTE 40).⁴⁴ On a spiritual level, Israel will become numb, hardened, and stick-necked towards the worship of the LORD. Thus, she will give allegiance of mind and heart to the things of creation (i.e., sex, money, and power) and in this process she becomes worthless—devoid of the meaning and purpose she was created and redeemed to accomplish. From a sociological standpoint, the means that Israel will be vulnerable to the surrounding nations. They will have the power of sight over her. In the pursuit of security through the mediums of idols, she ironically forfeits the protection and security the LORD is providing.

This exhortation resumes with a second injunction which summarizes the appeal to reject idolatry based on the revelation at Sinai (Dt 4:11-14). This is recalled again in the chains formed in *weqātal* at the conclusion of the prologue (Dt 4:39-40). Moses takes his adjuratory discourse further by recalling the reality of malediction.⁴⁵ The future and fate of Israel in Canaan are contingent on the stipulations of the covenant (cf. Dt 28). According to this exhortation, forgetting is not merely a psychological act of cognitive displacement, but an act of improper worship (cf. Dt 8:19). The physical is fused to the mental and leads either to praise and obedience or forgetfulness and destruction.

The verb שָׁכַח (“to forget”), an antonym of זְכָר (“to remember”), is used four times in Deuteronomy 4 and twelve times throughout the book.⁴⁶ Deuteronomy uses the *hiphil* thirteen times in reference to forgetting.⁴⁷ The sense in the present verse is “to make one forget” or “not on one’s mind.” Idolatry and forgetfulness go hand in hand.⁴⁸ The grammar of this construct informs the theological rationale that by creating an idol, the worshiper’s distances themselves from the morality of God and the capacity to adhere to God’s commandments. Memory of past deliverance is Israel motivation to fulfill the law. Forgetting means the nothingness of the idol is

44. “May Shamash, the light of heaven and earth, not judge you justly. May he remove your eyesight. Walkabout in darkness!” In C. L. Crouch, *Israel, and the Assyrians: Deuteronomy, the Succession Treaty of Esarhaddon, and the Nature of Subversion* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 57.

45. See Sheldon H. Blank, “The Curse, Blasphemy, the Spell, and the Oath,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 23, no. 1 (1950): 73-95; M. Kline, “Oath and Ordeal Signs,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 27, no. 2 (1965): 115-39; F. Fensham, “Malediction and Benediction in ancient Near Eastern Vassal-Treaties and the Old Testament,” *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 74 (1962): 1-9.

46. Bernd Wannenwetsch, “Sin as Forgetting: Negotiating Divine Presence,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 28 (2015): 3-20. Even Nietzsche recognized the implications of forgetfulness within social memory, *Civilization, and its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1961), 16ff; Childs, *Memory, and Tradition in Israel*, Studies in Biblical Theology, no. 37 (London: SCM Press, 1962), 18; Barat Ellman, *Memory and Covenant: The Role of Israel’s and God’s Memory in Sustaining the Deuteronomic and Priestly Covenants* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).

47. Gn 41:30; Dt 31:21; Job 28:4; Pss 9:18; 31:12; Ecc 2:16; 9:5; Is 23:15, 16; 65:16; Jer 20:11; 23:40; 50:5.

48. Halbertal rightly notes, “Idolatry is rooted in forgetfulness—forgetting what God has done for Israel. Fidelity is rooted in remembering.” In *Idolatry*, 35.

transposed onto the LORD, in the eyes of humanity; the living presence of God (Dt 4:9) is substituted for a plastic presence.

The functional aspects of verses 23-24 are subtle and often confused with metaphysics,⁴⁹ when, the Israelite's theological concern was the transcendence of God.⁵⁰ To forget the covenant was to forget the relationship of the LORD forged during the deliverance from Egypt. The theological rationale for the prohibition of images has more to do with faith than epistemology (cf. נָרָא vs. עַדְיוֹ).⁵¹ The idol was about the presence of the deity. The Decalogue incorporates this prohibition because of the cultural norm that deities dwelt in the manifestation of the idol created.⁵² Although veiled in the judicial language of a typical SVT, the jealous love of God (Dt 4:24) is displayed in this covenant renewal formulation. The theological motivation for avoiding idolatry is redemption. However, God's love must be reciprocated in order to inherit the blessings He desires to bestow upon Israel.⁵³ The lure of the idol is that it promises to mediate the needs of humanity and provide security and control. However, the overarching chides of the biblical authors (e.g., Moses, Isaiah, and Paul) is that idols do not create or redeem; in fact, they make one blind and deaf.⁵⁴

Conclusion

The analysis of Deuteronomy 4 shows the theological rationale behind the prohibition of idolatry in Old Testament is because the LORD desires the sole devotion of His image bearers. The covenant at Horeb and the warning against manufacturing representations for worship provided a grounding for Israel to avoid becoming hardened to the LORD's revelation and relationship. Indeed, but what has this to do with the New Testament and the local church? The struggle with idolatry, evidenced by intertextual study, reaches from creation in Genesis 1-3 to consummation in Revelation 22. The writers of the New Testament witnessed the draw of idolatry in all of its new forms. Likewise, the local church must address the new forms of idolatry and proffer the biblical rationale that idols distort and invert the worship of Creation for the creator. Cultural customs and clothing changes over time, but the hearts of men remain the same. The forms of idolatry change over time, but their draw and seduction remain a strong tendency for the local church.

49. Duane L. Christensen notes this is most likely due to the influence of Jungian understandings of the relationship between images and psychological implications. See *Deuteronomy 1-11*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 6a (Dallas: Word Books, 1911), 87.

50. See Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1976), 136.

51. Cf. M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 5 (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1991), 291.

52. Cf. Ex 6:1, 14:31, 16:32; 34:10.

53. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, 37.

54. Ex 15; Dt 4:35; Is 43:8-13; 44:6-8; 45:5-6; 46:5-11; Acts 17:29; 19:26; Gal. 4:8.

Appendix: Chiasm of Deuteronomy 4:15-40⁵⁵

A *Entreaty for fidelity to the Covenant* (4:15-19)

B *Egyptian Deliverance As A Memory Trace* (4:20-22:1)

C *Exhortative Appeal:* (4:22:2-24:2)

D *Prediction and Outline of Israel's Future Failure* (4:25-31)

C' *Exhortative Appeal:* (4:32-34)

B' *Egyptian Deliverance As A Memory Trace* (4:35-38)

A' *Entreaty for fidelity to the Covenant* (4:39-40)

55. Adapted from the analysis of Kunt Holter in *Deuteronomy 4 and the Second Commandment*, ch. 1, 4, and 8.