**Exodus 20:22-26**

[*https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/exod/exod-20/exodus-2022-26/*](https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/exod/exod-20/exodus-2022-26/)

*Many scholars think that vv. 22 – 26 comprise the first part of a larger section called “the Book of the Covenant” (*[*Exodus 24:7*](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Exodus+24.7&t=NASB95)*), which starts here and extends through*[*Exodus 23:33*](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Exodus+23.33&t=NASB95)*. It contains forty-two judgments (*[*Exodus 21:1 – 23:12*](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Exodus+21.1+%E2%80%93+23.12&t=NASB95)*) and ends just like it begins – a prohibition against idolatry (*[*Exodus 23:13*](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Exodus+23.13&t=NASB95)*).*

*In an appropriate introduction, this first section of the Book of the Covenant concerns how the people were to worship the LORD. Having displayed His holiness in sight of all the people, the LORD then defined the proper format for worship. He prohibited any manufacture of idols representing Him or any other god that they could imagine. Worship was to involve sacrifice on an earthen altar, taking special care not to provide an occasion for any immorality.*

In vv. 22 – 23, the LORD commands His people against any form of idolatry. The LORD instructed Moses to *say to the sons of Israel, ‘You yourselves have seen that I have spoken to you from heaven*. In the Hebrew text, the phrase *from heaven* is first, implying it is to be emphasized. This was the basis for what follows. The LORD spoke directly *from heaven*, not through some inanimate object like an idol. The LORD did not (and still does not) want to be identified with any created object. He is the Creator, not a creation.

For this reason, He commanded in v. 23 that the Israelites*not make other gods besides Me; gods of silver or gods of gold, you shall not make for yourselves*. This repeats the second commandment, which indicates how pivotal it was to impress this upon the minds of the people. A core requirement of self-governance is the rule of law, and that can only exist if there is a lawgiver that transcends mere humans. Humans must have an external accountability to be others-focused. Humans have a tendency to want idols, and the idols they make always provide moral authorization for whatever it was they want for themselves.

The commandment to avoid idols was repeated to show how important it was to worship the LORD and Him alone. There is no other philosophical foundation that will lead people to believe it is in their best interest to love their neighbors as themselves. The phrase *besides Me* in the clause *You shall not make other gods besides Me* has been rendered “with me” or “alongside me” in other translations. It probably has a double significance.

They were not to create idols representing other gods and they were not to create an idol representing the LORD. He is in heaven reigning over nature, and not a force of nature (like most other pagan gods imagined by humans). Representing Him as an idol lowers Him to the level of His creation. God must be honored as the Creator, and as Creator, recognized as the ultimate authority, who is the Lawgiver—a Lawgiver who has declared that humans flourish best when they self-govern, and serve one another.

Verses 24 – 26 define how to worship the LORD Who has spoken from heaven. It involved making *an altar of earth for Me*. The idea here is that the *altar*was not to be ornate as the pagan altars were. It was to just be made of *earth*, and not feature human craftsmanship. On this altar, the LORD stated to Israel that *you shall sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen*. *Burnt offerings* dealt with forgiveness for the sins of the people, restoring relational fellowship between the LORD as Suzerain, and the people as vassals. *Peace offerings* dealt with praising and thanking the LORD and maintaining the fellowship of the people with their Sovereign LORD.

These sacrifices were to be carried out *in every place where I cause My name to be remembered.* Remembering the LORD is to bring to mind all of who the LORD is and what He has done. The result of such worship was that He *will come to you and bless you.*A likely part of the promised blessing would come from the natural effect of choosing gratitude. Grateful people are happy people. Another likely part of the promised blessing would come from the consequence of people being in fellowship with God, the Lawgiver, and following His command for people to love their neighbors as themselves. Both create a community that is healthy and prosperous.

Alternately, in v. 25, the LORD said that *if you make an altar of stone for Me* (note the repetition of the phrase *for Me* as in v. 24)*, you shall not build it of cut stones, for if you wield your tool on it, you will profane it*. The reason for not using *cut stones* is likely related to pagan practices. Pagan altars made of stone were made of cut, ornate stones that emphasized human effort or control. The worship of God was to emphasize the personal interaction of a true and living God with His people. Strict avoidance was urged for any semblance of pagan practices that created an illusion that people could manipulate or control deities to achieve their own ends

Thus, whether an *altar* was made of *earth* or *stone*, its purpose was to worship the LORD. The altar was not about the altar itself or the efforts of the altar makers—it was (and still is) about worshipping the Maker of all things.

Verse 26 contains the last stipulation of worship. The LORD warned that the people should *not go up by steps to My altar, so that your nakedness will not be exposed on it*. This last stipulation concerns the possibility of immorality when everyone’s minds should be on the LORD and worshipping Him.

Some pagan religions of the Ancient Near East (Sumerians and others) had priests that would perform their ceremonies completely naked. The Egyptian priests were scantily clad when performing their rituals. There was a close connection between sexual immorality and paganism. This could also be seen in Canaanite worship. The emphasis here is completely opposite of pagan practice. Even the potential of an inadvertent exposing of *nakedness* is forbidden.

To sum up, there should not be any hint of pagan practices in the worship of the LORD of heaven. In order to serve their appointed function as a priestly nation, demonstrating to the surrounding nations that living in a self-governing manner, loving and serving one another, Israel must keep their covenant with the LORD. This will not be possible unless they choose to keep His commands. A necessary part of keeping His commands is to continually recognize the authority and reality of the LORD their God, and avoid any synchronism with the pagan practices of the surrounding nations.

**Biblical Text:**
**22Then the Lord said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘You yourselves have seen that I have spoken to you from heaven.23You shall not make *other gods* besides Me; gods of silver or gods of gold, you shall not make for yourselves. 24You shall make an altar of earth for Me, and you shall sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause My name to be remembered, I will come to you and bless you. 25If you make an altar of stone for Me, you shall not build it of cut stones, for if you wield your tool on it, you will profane it. 26And you shall not go up by steps to My altar, so that your nakedness will not be exposed on it.’**