

# Idolatry

## Contents

**Idolatry**[Heb *terāpîm* (1 S. 15:23), *gillûlîm* (Ezk. 23:49), *zenût* (Ezk. 43:9); Gk *eidōlolatría* (Gal. 5:20; Col. 3:5; 1 Pet. 4:3); AV also IDOLS (Ezk. 23:49), “whoredom” (Ezk. 43:9); NEB also “wanton disloyalty” (Ezk. 43:9), WORSHIP OF IDOLS (1 Pet. 4:3). The Teraphim were apparently “household idols” (Gen. 31:19, 34f), although no text states that they were worshiped. In 1 S. 15:23 Heb *terāpîm* may be used as a general word for idols (P. K. McCarter, *I Samuel* [AB, 1980], p. 268). Heb *gillûlîm* is perhaps another general word for idols (cf. 2 K. 23:24, where both *gillûlîm* and *terāpîm* occur), although its etymology is uncertain; it may be related to Heb *gēl*, “dung,” and may have been coined by Ezekiel (cf. TDOT, III, 2). Heb *zenût* is derived from *zānā*, “have illicit intercourse”; its sexual connotations suggest the involvement of cultic prostitutes, who were a regular feature of Canaanite pagan worship.

**I. Ancient Near East** Deities of the non-Hebrew religions of the ancient Near East were commonly associated with animal forms. It is generally held today that this theriomorphic representation of deity was either a concrete expression of the attributes of the god (e.g., in UT 49:IV:34, *El*, the chief god of the Canaanite pantheon, is called *tr* [Heb *šôr*], “bull,” which connotes his power), or a localization of the spiritual presence of the deity, similar to the presence of Yahweh over the cherubim. Yet a stele from Râs Shamrah depicts *El* as a human figure (ANEP, no 493), and the portrayal of the deities in the Ugaritic epic material makes it highly unlikely that they were thought to have an essential animal form. W. F. Albright observes that in the Canaanite, Aramean, and Hittite cultures, a god was almost always depicted standing on the back of an animal. He also observes, “The

storm-god of Mesopotamia is actually represented on seal-cylinders of the second millennium b.c. as a schematic bolt of lightning set upright on the back of a bull, and this iconographic device may go back to Sumerian seals showing the bull who was the central figure in the ritual of consecration of a sacred drum with the winged shrine of music (so labelled!) on his back” (FSAC, p. 300).

This conception of the nature of idolatry seems to be consonant with the cult of the golden calf, which manifested itself early in Israelite history at Sinai (Ex. 32:1–6), and which resurfaced in the state cultus of the northern kingdom of Israel (1 K. 12:25–30). The worship of the golden calf was evidently a syncretistic form of Yahwism and not an outright rejection of Yahweh. This is clear from the attribution of the deliverance from Egypt to the image of the bull (Ex. 32:4), and from the fact that the worship associated with the image was directed to Yahweh (vv 5f). Evidently the image of the golden calf was understood as a visual representation of the spiritual presence of Yahweh. The plural verbs associated with the word “god” (*ēlōhîm*) need not indicate a plurality of gods (only one image was constructed); they may have been used by the writer to emphasize that the golden calf was not the true god. The word *ēlōhîm* (“God, gods”) is plural, but when used of God it is always construed with singular verbs. (For a viewpoint opposing this concept of the golden calf see Bailey.)

This concretization of the presence and attributes of deity could easily have degenerated in the popular religion to the point where the image was regarded as the deity itself. It is likely that this occurred in many ancient cultures. The use of the image of a bull was inherently dangerous in the Israelite cultus because of the close associations of that symbol with the pagan fertility cults.

See Religions of the Biblical World: Assyria and Babylonia, Canaanite, Egypt.

## II. Relation to Israel A. Patriarchal Period

The nature of the patriarchal religion has been the subject of much scholarly research. One of the most influential contributions to this field of study is that of Albrecht Alt. In his essay “The God of the Fathers” (in *Essays in OT History and Religion* [Engtr 1966], pp. 1–100), Alt contends that much of the material in the patriarchal narratives is secondary and only the most archaic strands are trustworthy. On this supposition Alt concludes that the individual patriarchs worshiped distinct numina which were identified with Yahweh by later writers. Thus Yahwistic monotheism developed long after the patriarchal times.

This view, as well as others of a similar nature, regards the patriarchal traditions as an idealistic representation of what was in reality a somewhat primitive religion, vestiges of which are observable in the narratives. It is asserted by some that the patriarchal religion involved the worship of deities other than Yahweh. Some scholars appeal to Josh. 24:2 to support this assertion. This verse states nothing more, however, than that Terah, Abraham’s father, worshiped other deities. Abraham may have been involved with these deities before his call, but there is no reason to assume that he was an idolator after his call by Yahweh. It is difficult to understand why this verse would follow the prohibition against worship of other gods in Josh. 23:16 if that were its implication.

Rachel’s theft of the household gods (*terāpîm*) in Gen. 31:19, 25–35, has been illuminated by archeological finds at the site of ancient Nuzi. While Rachel may still have had an affinity for the religion of her youth, it is more probable that the household gods had a legal or monetary value for her, rather than simply a religious one. The Nuzi material indicates that one who possessed the household gods stood to inherit the family estate; e.g., one tablet indicates, “Should Nashwi beget a son, [the latter] shall divide equally with Wullu but [only] Nashwi’s son shall take Nashwi’s gods ...” (C. Gordon, pp. 24ff). If Laban had natural sons during Jacob’s sojourn with him, the *terāpîm* would have been rightfully theirs. Rachel wished the advantage for Jacob her husband.

The pillar (*maṣṣēbâ*) erected by Jacob (Gen. 28:18, 22; 35:14) need not be regarded as a concrete representation of Yahweh, although such pillars were

certainly common to the Canaanite religion (Ex. 23:24; 34:13; Dt. 7:5; 12:3). The term *maṣṣēbâ* is used in the OT of a memorial (2 S. 18:18), a grave marker (Gen. 35:20), representations of the Israelite tribes (Ex. 24:4), and the visible sign of an agreement (Gen. 31:45, 51f).

The most common function of the *maṣṣēbâ* was that of memorializing individuals or solemn events. The pillar set up by Jacob seems to be best understood as a memorial of the extraordinary encounter that Jacob had with God at Bethel. The erection of the pillar would not only distinguish the area where the divine encounter occurred, but also serve as a token of the vow Jacob made to the Lord at that place (Gen. 31:13).

The command Jacob gave to his household to give up their foreign gods (Gen. 35:2–4) does not indicate that idolatry was an essential part of patriarchal religion. Rather, it demonstrates that Jacob recognized the inconsistency of idolatry with his Yahwistic faith.

There seems to be no compelling reason for believing that the use of representational forms of deity was an essential part of pre-Mosaic religion among the Hebrews. Still less is there reason for positing a primitive animism in ancient Hebrew religion because of the theophany that occurred to Abraham at the oaks of Mamre (Gen. 18:1). The reference to the oaks may be understood as a topographical reference similar to other such references in the Pentateuch (Gen. 13:10; Ex. 15:27). Any essential connection between the theophanic appearance and the oak trees is purely conjectural.

**B. Mosaic Era**The Mosaic covenant expressly forbids the practice of idolatry in its opening statements (Ex. 20:3–5 par Dt. 5:7–9). Not only does the Decalogue prohibit the Israelites from having any gods that would rival Yahweh (Ex. 20:3; Dt. 5:7), but it forbids the fashioning of images as objects of worship. The words “you shall not bow down to them or serve them” (Ex. 20:5; Dt. 5:9) make it clear that the command does not preclude the pursuit of art, nor the use of certain representations in worship, such as the cherubim on the ark of the covenant, but that one is not to worship an image or venerate it by bowing before it. Thus the Israelites were to make no symbolic representations of Yahweh in any form (Dt. 4:15–18). This commandment made Israel’s faith unique among the nations of the ancient world.

This prohibition of idol worship may not have encouraged advancement in the visual arts, but it

served to make the concept of God intensely spiritual. Efforts to concretize the spiritual nature of God were made in the realm of bold literary anthropomorphism. It may be that this verbalizing of the divine attributes caused Israelite religion to find its greatest expression in word rather than in artistic depiction.

The first major defection to idolatry on the part of the Israelites took place in the Mosaic era in the worship of the golden calf (Ex. 32:1–6). The representation of deity in the form of a bull calf may have had its origin in the worship of the Egyptian god Apis, who was so depicted. As mentioned above the bull was also a representation of the Canaanite god 'El. The institution of the bull cult in Israelite history was the first expression of a religious syncretism that was never entirely suppressed.

**C. Historical Books** Several passages in the historical books indicate that images continued to be made in Israel long after Moses' time (Jgs. 3:19; 8:27; 17:3–6; 2 K. 21:7). These instances do not mean that idolatry had a legitimacy in early Yahwism. The period of the judges was one of blatant lawlessness, and much that cannot be considered normative for Israelite faith and practice occurred then. Solomon's lapse into idolatry (1 K. 11:4–8) was clearly denounced (vv 9–13). The syncretistic religion of Manasseh cited in 2 K. 21:7 is depicted by the historian as contrary to the spirit of Israelite faith (vv 6–9). Even the bronze serpent that Moses fashioned in the wilderness (Nu. 21:9) became an object of worship (2 K. 18:4). In his reform Josiah removed both the high place at Topheth (2 K. 23:10) and the "horses ... dedicated to the sun" that had been installed in the temple (v 11).

These accounts testify that the desire for a visual representation of deity had not been completely expunged from the hearts of many generations of Israelites. The tendency toward syncretism that manifested itself during Moses' absence at Sinai (Ex. 32:1) continued to steal back into the Israelite cultus, creating a tension that ultimately led to a rending of the social fabric of Israel.

The tension between idolatry and the essential spirit of Israelite religion is reflected in the early prophetic protest of Samuel: "For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry" (1 S. 15:23). In this statement Samuel places disobedience to God and idolatry in the same category. In the final analysis idolatry was rebellion, for it constituted a violation of God's

commands.

The syncretistic expressions of religion that run like a thread through the early history of Israel were ultimately given legitimacy by Jeroboam I, king of the northern kingdom of Israel. The division of the nation into the northern and southern kingdoms posed a serious theological crisis for the northern kingdom. The geopolitical rift brought to the fore the question of access to the cultic center at Jerusalem. Jeroboam understood that if he was to bring stability to his fledgling kingdom, he could allow nothing that would foster the loyalties to the Davidic dynasty that were so deeply ingrained in the minds of the people (1 K. 12:26f). The temple had been built by Solomon the son of David, and Jerusalem was rich with Davidic traditions. Clearly, a new form of religious expression distinct from any association with David would have to be instituted. This was done in a revival of the cult of the golden calf (1 K. 12:28).

Once again the historian expresses displeasure with the use of concrete forms of deity, for he says, "And this thing became a sin, for the people went to the one at Bethel and to the other as far as Dan" (1 K. 12:30). The displeasure seems to be because the law of the central sanctuary had been broken. The placement of sanctuaries in different locations was dangerous because it could lead to the fractionalizing of the concept of Yahweh in the minds of the people, similar to the geographical localizations of the Canaanite god Baal.

The reference to *terāpîm* in 1 S. 19:13 ("image") seems best understood according to the suggestion of W. F. Albright as "old rags." He points out that no images "of comparable size have ever been found in Palestinian excavations" (ARI, pp. 11Of, 206f n 63).

**D. Classical Prophets** The 8th cent b.c. witnessed a resurgence of Israel and Judah. Economic prosperity, unparalleled in their history except for the golden age of David and Solomon, fostered a growing class of wealthy, influential people whose loyalty to the covenant stipulations of Yahweh was at best questionable. The erosion of the strong core of covenant obligation marked the 8th cent and led to the dissolution of the nation. One of the most obvious violations of the covenant standards was the popular religion of the day, a strange syncretism of Yahwism and the symbols and mind-set of pagan idolatry.

The situation in the northern kingdom seems to have been particularly dismal. Rites associated

with the fertility cults of Canaan were practiced at a number of shrines in Israel (Hos. 4:11–19; Mic. 1:7) and may even have been widespread.

The internal sickness affected the southern kingdom of Judah as well, although probably to a lesser degree. Isaiah presents a picture of Judahite syncretism that is remarkably similar to that of Israel (2:8; 57:4–10).

The prophets engaged in a bitter polemic against idolatry. They observed the incongruity of worshipping that which one fashions with one's own hands (Isa. 2:8; 44:12–20; Hab. 2:18), and pointed out that idols are impotent and therefore a delusion to those who worship them (Isa. 42:17; 44:9; 45:20; Jer. 10:14f; 51:17f). Idols provoke Yahweh to anger (Jer. 8:19) and they are a form of spiritual fornication (Mic. 1:7). The practice of idolatry will lead to Israel's downfall (Isa. 2:8f). The prophetic condemnation of idolatry had a more positive side, however. God will abolish the images that vie with Him for supremacy (Isa. 2:18; 10:10f; 31:6f).

Isaiah's denunciation of idols is the most theologically based of all the prophets. He finds the source of the inclination for the worship of idols in spiritual blindness (44:18) and self-delusion (44:20). Idolatry is thus the external manifestation of a spiritually impoverished mind.

Isaiah points to the impossibility of likening anything on earth to God (40:18–20) and thus roots his polemic against idolatry in the spiritual nature of the deity. At the heart of Isaiah's theological polemic is the fact that God cannot be likened to anything that is finite or temporal (cf. Dt. 4:15). Because God is pure spirit, any attempt to represent Him in symbolic form is a distortion of His person and hence a falsification of truth.

Isaiah also points his hearers to the attributes of Yahweh and then contrasts Yahweh and His glorious attributes with the brooding idol of stone or wood, incapable of thought, speech, or action. He speaks of the Lord's ability to declare future events, and denounces the idol as "empty wind" (41:26, 29; 44:7). The idol cannot stand before the inexorable progress of God's will in history (41:5–7; cf. vv 8–16). The Lord is the creator of the worlds, controlling the destinies of nations (40:21–23); an idol cannot compare with Him (40:25).

The later prophets also denounced idolatry. Jeremiah foresaw judgment on those who defiled the temple (7:30) and built high places (to Baal) where child sacrifice was practiced (7:31; 19:5).

Ezekiel also was faced with idolatrous practices in the temple (8:3–18), where apparently the sun and the Babylonian god Tammuz (Dumuzi) were being worshiped (vv 14, 16).

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**III. Intertestamental Period** What finally established the Jewish people in immovable opposition to idolatry is told in the Apocrypha (1 Macc. 2:1–48) and in Josephus (*Ant.* xii.5.4 [248–256]). The issue between Antiochus Epiphanes and the Jewish people in the time of the early Maccabees was idolatry. Antiochus demanded that as a pledge of political allegiance to his sovereignty, Jews make a sacrifice at an altar dedicated to the Olympian Zeus, perhaps before his statue (2 Macc. 6:2). Refusal resulted in execution. The Hasmoneans, Mattathias and his sons, and their followers, the Hasideans, defied the king's decree. They raised a guerilla army and fought a three-year civil war. With much heroism, they succeeded in obtaining from the state freedom to follow their own religious practices. Never again were Jews to take idolatry seriously. Rather, idol worship became for them a matter of semi-humorous satire and ridicule (cf. Bel and the Dragon).

**IV. New Testament** Idolatry was prevalent in the NT world. Idols were venerated in temples dedicated to the traditional gentile gods, in popular magic and superstition, as well as in the mystery religions and in emperor worship (Mk. 12:16 par; Rev. 13:14f). The subject is scarcely mentioned in the Gospels but receives attention in Paul's letters due to the circumstances of his mission (cf. Luke's comment that Athens was a "city full of idols," Acts 17:16; AV "wholly given to idolatry").

Reflecting his Jewish background, Paul stated plainly, "We [Christians] know that an idol has no real existence" (1 Cor. 8:4). Idolatry is "earthly"

(Col. 3:5; Phil. 3:19). The idolaters are “immoral men,” with whom Christians are not to associate (1 Cor. 5:10f), who will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:10; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5). Cf. “Little children, keep yourselves from idols,” 1 Jn. 5:21; “abstain from the pollution of idols,” Acts 15:20. Rev. 21:8 states that idolaters are doomed to be destroyed by fire; the new Jerusalem has no place for idolaters who love and practice falsehood (Rev. 22:15).

In Rom. 1:18–32, Paul taught that sexual laxness and social disorder among Gentiles were ultimately traceable to their idolatry, which he described as exchanging “the glory of the immortal God for images.” The wrath of God is against all such ungodliness and wickedness (v 18). God’s decree is that idolaters deserve to die (v 32). At Ephesus Paul was accused of successfully persuading a considerable company of people “that gods made with hands are no gods” (Acts 19:26).

In their dealings with gentile converts from Greco-Roman religious backgrounds, the early Christian evangelists encountered a new problem related to idolatry — eating food, especially meat, that had been offered to idols (Acts 15:29; 1 Cor. 8; Rev. 2:14, 20). Although to the enlightened Christian such food had not been contaminated by idolatrous rites, his eating it could possibly cause a weak brother to fall. To preserve the solidarity of the Christian community, the well-informed Christian

was to choose voluntarily to avoid customary social engagements where eating food offered to idols was involved (1 Cor. 8:1–13; 10:14–30).

Idolatry in the NT is also used figuratively. This was an interiorizing extension of the commandment against idolatry (Ex. 20:3). Especially in Paul’s letters, idolatry is used of a person’s commitment to any value other than to Jesus Christ as Lord. In Rom. 1:18–32, it is evident that the ultimate idolatry for Paul is putting love of self before honoring and serving God (cf. “You cannot serve God and mammon,” Mk. 6:24). For Paul, “the works of the flesh” — sexual immorality, impurity, licentiousness, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, and envy — were all, like idolatry, products of putting self before God (Gal. 5:19–21). In Col. 3:5 is a similar list of “what is earthly in you” — sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire — to which is added “covetousness,” which, Paul says, “is idolatry.” What is suggested again is that at the root of sinful actions is the idolizing of self, the pursuit, regardless of all else, of that which seems to offer self-gratification. The opposite of idolatry is self-giving, as in agape love (1 Cor. 13).

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