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**Idol Notions:**

Exploring the Impact of the Second Commandment on the Exodus  
Community

By  
Anna Ochoa

A Project Submitted to  
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts in Biblical & Theological Studies.

Saint Louis, Missouri

2023

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Dr. Aaron Goldstein  
Faculty Advisor

---

Dr. Brian Aucker  
Second Reader

---

Dr. David Chapman  
Director of MABTS Program

---

Mr. Steve Jamieson  
Library Director

---

## **Abstract**

This thesis aims to address a question arising out of the Old Testament's constant condemnation of, and Israel's constant stumbling over, the practice of idolatry. Why was idol worship such a draw in the ancient Near Eastern world, being in fact the final straw that sent Israel into the ultimate covenant curse of exile (cf. Ezek 6)? Archaeological records have revealed an enthralling polytheistic practice that remained entrenched for millennia, which involved the ritual animation of an idol with the god's living presence, to be thereafter served relentlessly by ritual performance within a human-divine interplay directly opposed to Yahweh's revealed truth. The second commandment forbade such image making and worship on its face to God's people.

Much modern scholarship, however, has questioned the dating of the composition of the OT, and the idol ban of the second commandment in particular. Such historical criticism tends to hold an evolutionary view of Israelite religious development, proposing a national origin in polytheistic belief and a later shift into a new understanding of the aniconic worship of their primary deity. This follows a larger trend in biblical scholarship which proposes a cadre of later redactors with varied agendas and theological emphases who assembled the Hebrew Bible; and it was one of these who purportedly instated the strict image ban for his own, much later, political moment. These critical views ultimately hold the biblical text as a biased and unreliable historiography.

This thesis will instead employ a methodology that treats the text in its final form and adheres to a traditional view of divine instigation and guidance of Israel's national worship. It will argue that the idol ban of the second commandment was necessarily delivered at Israel's founding, being rooted in God's immutable character and making

explicit reference to the Creator-creation distinction in Genesis, a cosmology distinctly rebutting that of ancient polytheism. Further, a comparative method will be used to study the idol consecration rituals of the ancient Near East, revealing that idolatry was much more insidious than merely “bow[ing] to a block of wood” (Isa 44:19). As a gateway device to a deadly philosophy, idols were fundamentally and terminally opposed to the truth of God. With a view to the literary and theological unity of the text, therefore, it is imperative that the image ban be delivered to the exodus community at their national founding, and that it should stand in stone for Israel, and for the church, for all time.

There [are] not two pasts, one populated only by actions, the other only by theories. Every action is the bearer and expression of more or less theory-laden beliefs and concepts.

— Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.

The medium is the message.

— Marshall McLuhan,  
*Understanding Media: The  
Extensions of Man*.

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## Abbreviations

ANE	Ancient Near East
BDB	Francis Brown et al., <i>The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon</i> (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2015).
OT	Old Testament

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

The problem of idolatry pervades God’s Word from Genesis to Armageddon.<sup>1</sup> Yet for so central a theme concerning the true worship of the transcendent God, a modern ignorance of this ancient practice, expressly forbidden by the second commandment, can often fog the church’s comprehension. Because western Christianity hardly bows to blocks of wood, many church leaders expand the concept of “idolatry” into a catch-all category for every sin; yet one seminary professor strongly warned his students against what he views as sloppy metaphorizing.<sup>2</sup> *Idolatry*, he insisted, was a particular practice in the ancient Near East, and the church would do well to comprehend this context before attempting a hasty update. Still, Bible teachers often spiritualize the prohibition, citing Calvin’s famous observation that “the human heart is a perpetual idol factory” to support such figurative leaps.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in a disenchanting modern world, Protestant pastors struggle to apply the idol ban to a western church who struggles to relate.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Rachel and the household gods in Gen 31:19, and the judgment of “idolaters” as one of the Returning King’s final orders of business in Rev 22:15.

<sup>2</sup> C. John Collins, “Preserving the Prophets in Proper Perspective,” (class file, Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, MO, January 23, 2023), 5–8.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John Thomas McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1.11.8. Calvin appears to be addressing man’s proclivity toward making physical idols, not merely pointing to an abstract heart issue, as this article at <http://danielwiginton.blogspot.com> helped to clarify. Daniel Wiginton, “Calvin’s Idol Factory in Context,” *The Substance*, November 2, 2023, <http://danielwiginton.blogspot.com/2014/01/calvins-idol-factory-in-context.html>. However, Calvin’s quote was encountered in a more metaphorized usage by Dick Keyes, quoted in David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1994), 52, and has been often referenced throughout my own seminary and ministry contexts as a comment on the internal dimensions of idolatry. This spiritualizing of idolatry is common in the church—a recent book finds, for example, the current obsession with taking “selfies” as the “idolatrous” worship of self, concluding that “the human heart is so quick to create, follow, and worship idols.” C. Eric Turner, *Hollow Gods: Idolatry in a Postmodern Context* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2017), 15–18. This is no

This study was born out of a seminary deep-dive into the world of the Hebrew Bible, within whose pages, unlike the author's American context, the temptation toward graven images seems to lurk under every stone, inciting the prophets' scorn and fury, and ultimately pitching Israel into the gravest covenant curse of exile (cf. Ezek 6:9). Why, the curiosity simmered, was idol-making so alluring to the ancients; and what did they think was happening when they bowed to these lifeless images? The western mind, long past such "primitive" idolatry, might be tempted to scoff with the prophets that idols "cannot speak! Cannot walk!" (Jer 10:5). Yet the reader of Exodus and the covenant delivered at Mount Sinai cannot miss that a stress on *monotheism* (the worship of one God alone) and *aniconism* (no image worship) was so foundational as to make the Top Two of Yahweh's Ten Commandments; and these still stand in stone today.<sup>4</sup> What might an understanding, then, of the ANE context surrounding the second commandment offer to a church long steeped in the tenets of Judeo-Christian monotheism?

Research into the historical context of the OT revealed that, as the professor had stressed, idolatry was indeed a tightly organized practice, with ritual procedures and a vision of reality in direct conflict with the Bible's revealed cosmology. Not only did the manufacture of idols and their consecration rituals arise out of polytheistic beliefs, but daily re-created and reinforced these theories—in particular, a concept of the cosmos revolving around a symbiotic interplay between the divine and earthly realms. Idols stood as the portal between these two enmeshed and interdependent worlds; and to an ancient,

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unworthy warning to the modern church, but this thesis hopes to anchor such application within the context and primary function of idolatry in the ANE.

<sup>4</sup> The Ten Commandments are considered a "universal" ethical portion of Israelite law still in force for God's people today. T. Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary 2 (London: Apollos: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 394.

to worship the gods *was* to make idols. As Moshe Weinfeld asserts, for Israel, “‘having no other gods’ *actually means ‘having no images.’*”<sup>5</sup> For worshipers of the ineffable, invisible, transcendent God, there could be no accommodating this “detestable” practice among his holy people (Deut 29:17).

Still, idols held a magnetic sway. Cultic images involved much more than meets the eye. Though the initial carving was from wood or stone, through its consecration process, the image became “born from above”<sup>6</sup> and indwelt with the god’s living presence. From that moment on, the idol was considered alive, sentient, and, like a newborn emerging into the earthly sphere, required regular attendance, feeding, care, and adoration. Only by assiduously performing the prescribed cultic worship would the god (or goddess) confer blessing and protection onto king and people. To neglect a god’s ritual cult was to invite his wrath, abandonment, and curse; indeed, it was to jeopardize the very order of the cosmos, in which divine and human were interlocked in a mutual performance that pushed back the ever-encroaching chaos of the universe.<sup>7</sup> Idol-worship, then, was very serious business.

Through this compelling research, the stark injunctions of the second commandment, along with Israel’s struggle to keep it, come into full color within this thickly polytheistic setting. Idolatry was no mere margin note for the Sinai community,

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<sup>5</sup> Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 5 (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1991), 288. Emphasis mine.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Walker and Michael B. Dick, “The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian *mīs pī* Ritual,” in *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth: The Making of the Cult Image in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Michael B. Dick (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 114–15.

<sup>7</sup> Gay Robins, “Cult Statues in Ancient Egypt,” in *Cult Image and Divine Representation in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Neal H. Walls (Boston, MA: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2005), 1–2.

this former slave-people only recently rescued from four centuries of bondage to a deeply polytheistic Egyptian culture, and now marching through the desert to settle a land encompassed by still more rampant idol-worship. In preparation, Yahweh establishes his covenant with Israel in the wilderness, away from the pagan crowd, founding it on the frank lines of the Ten Commandments (Decalogue). He declares himself Israel's Redeemer, and issues two immediate demands: they must have no other gods before him, and they must not make graven images for worship.

Theologically, two issues are at stake in these two commands: the first is God's establishing his monotheistic identity and exclusive worship within a world in thrall to polytheistic practice; and the second is his aniconic mode of worship—no images must be worshiped in Yahweh's cult.<sup>8</sup> Although aspects of monotheism will be touched on in this study, an examination of the aniconic nature of Yahwistic worship will remain the focus. By considering the second commandment as delivered in Exodus 20:1-6 and its import to the Sinai community, as well as its setting within the wider narrative of the OT, this command will be seen to be pivotal in the shaping of a countercultural people amidst a hostile pagan milieu.

For a command so apparently foundational to Israel's religious identity, it can be surprising to learn the extent to which modern scholarship has challenged the "real" dating of the composition of the Pentateuch, including the Decalogue recorded in both Exodus and Deuteronomy. Ambiguous archaeological evidence, as well as critical trends in academia, have led scholars to question the development of Israelite religion: in terms

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<sup>8</sup> The word "cult" technically refers to a system of religious rites and worship and will be employed in this paper exclusively in this sense.

of image worship, they ask, was the religion fully aniconic from its founding, or did the cultic worship develop over centuries into a final rejection of idolatry?

This thesis will hold to the view that biblical history as presented by Scripture is factual, owing to its claims to divine inspiration; and from this vantage point, it will probe the literary and theological necessity of the prohibition of image worship in Israel from her founding. Chapter 2 will review the scholarship concerning the second commandment, and the methods employed by both conservative scholars and the more recent historical-critical methods. Chapter 3 will expound the methodology used in this study; and in Chapters 4 and 5, an exegesis of the second commandment found in Exod 20:1-6, and considered within the Pentateuchal context, will be carried out. Chapter 6 will include a historical survey of the ANE context and the mechanics of idol consecration and worship, and conclude with an argument for dating the second commandment at the time of the exodus community (and not to a later composition, as some scholars propose). Finally, Chapter 7 will consider the application of the ban on idolatry to the modern church, as well as avenues for further study.

Ultimately, this paper seeks to demonstrate that a ban against idols must have been given at Israel's inception, due to the pervasive threat that idolatry posed in the ANE context, and therefore being a vital component to Israel's distinctiveness among the nations. Though Israel would stumble and fall unto exile over this pagan temptation, any proposal of an Israelite religion that allows for polytheistic roots, or even a temple image of Yahweh himself,<sup>9</sup> must be considered in the final analysis as simply illogical, incongruous, and illicit.

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<sup>9</sup> A theory discussed further in chapter 6.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

To study the Decalogue within the context of the Pentateuch, there are critical issues in academic scholarship that must first be addressed. As any serious student soon discovers, OT scholarship has been divided on the dating and compilation of the Hebrew Bible for over a century.<sup>10</sup> This can make a study of the ban on idolatry less straightforward, as questions over the composition of the Hebrew canon impact two aspects of the second commandment: first, the prohibition of image-worship itself, and second, the attendant issue of monotheistic belief.<sup>11</sup> Although a full treatment of monotheism in Israelite worship is beyond the scope of this study, it is related to the study of aniconic worship and will be reviewed in chapter 6. This chapter, however, will trace the broad lines of modern biblical scholarship and its implications for a study of Israelite aniconism.

The chronology of Scripture's historical narrative has been challenged in higher-critical studies since around the 18<sup>th</sup> C. With the Enlightenment's newfound freedom to challenge formerly authoritative traditions, the ascendant field of "source criticism"

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<sup>10</sup> Alexander, *Exodus*, 13.

<sup>11</sup> *Monotheism* refers to the worship of one God alone without acknowledging any other gods' existence (the traditionally held theory of Israelite belief), as opposed to a religious stance in which the exclusive worship of one God is commanded while admitting other gods' existence (*monolatry*), or further, while also recognizing these other gods as being worthy of worship (*henotheism*). Alexander, *Exodus*, 400–401. These categories express the nuances between, "You must *worship* one God alone," and "There *is only* one God alone!" Scholars who hold a naturalistic view of the development of religious systems see Israel moving between such categories as her supposedly shifting beliefs about the supernatural became reflected in later religious reforms and retroactive Scriptural redactions.



began to be applied to religious studies.<sup>12</sup> This analytical method sought to identify the underlying source documents incorporated into a text's final version; and consequently, a formerly inchoate Documentary Hypothesis (DH) of the compilation of the Hebrew Bible finally emerged as the almost universally accepted theory for OT scholars (and most Christian theologians).<sup>13</sup> The DH proposed a patchwork editing of the biblical material by layers of later redactors who composed and arranged the text according to their particular theological and political agendas, though scholars continue to debate the specifics.

For example, some source-critical scholars contend that Deuteronomy (which includes a reiteration of the Decalogue) was written during the reforms of Josiah in the 7<sup>th</sup> C. BC, and that his "finding of the 'Book of the Law'" (2 Chron 34:14) was an invented pretense for justifying the king's new reforms and legal codes.<sup>14</sup> This would be the "D" (Deuteronomic) redactor in the DH's familiar "JEDP" sequence of the theoretical editorial layers of Scripture; and further, it was proposed that the Pentateuch was finalized two centuries later by the "Priestly" (P) redactor, who now emphasized the Abrahamic and Sinai covenants and added extensive codes for the newly central priesthood.<sup>15</sup> Another theory holds that Exodus may have been composed later than Deuteronomy, during the Babylonian exile, and drawn from unwritten but entrenched

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<sup>12</sup> T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 233–35.

<sup>13</sup> Alexander, *From Paradise*, 233–35.

<sup>14</sup> Alexander, *From Paradise*, 244.

<sup>15</sup> Alexander, *From Paradise*, 244.

rituals and traditions already long practiced.<sup>16</sup> With such complex theories of Pentateuchal composition abounding, whose implications cast shadows on the Sinai covenant and law recorded in both Exodus and Deuteronomy,<sup>17</sup> scholars now debated whether the Decalogue's commands were originally delivered to the exodus community at all, per the traditional view (as presented in the biblical account), or whether these were *actually* imposed onto the text by a later redactor hoping to press his own political and theological tenets onto the postexilic community.<sup>18</sup>

Returning, then, to the issue of idol worship, theories holding to a later composition of the Pentateuch now questioned whether Israelite religion was founded on programmatic aniconism, as the Bible asserts, or whether it either gradually evolved into this practice, or was in fact compelled into it by postexilic leaders wishing to enforce a new monotheistic identity and aniconic mode of worship on the returning Israelite remnant.<sup>19</sup> In contrast to the traditionally accepted "Mosaic" authorship at Sinai (whether Moses himself or aided by a scribe), the covenant and law were now proposed to be styled as an authoritative address by Moses to the exodus generation, but penned in real time to a 5<sup>th</sup> C. BC audience.

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<sup>16</sup> William Johnstone, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019), 19–20.

<sup>17</sup> "Theories about the formation of the book of Exodus are thus subsumed into considerations of the formation of the Pentateuch as a whole." Carol L. Meyers, *Exodus*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 16.

<sup>18</sup>In fact, in scholarship's most "minimal" view of OT composition, the entire Hebrew canon is dismissed as a fantastical national history whipped up out of whole cloth by the "puny Jewish community" after exile. K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2003), 2.

<sup>19</sup> Michael B. Dick, "Prophetic Parodies of Making the Cult Image," in Dick, 14.

Questions over the dating of the image ban also stemmed from, perhaps reasonably, the spotty archaeological record which has turned up evidence of polytheistic syncretism throughout Israel's history.<sup>20</sup> The evidence of idol worship in ancient Israel, as well as a skepticism toward the Bible's reliability as historiography, has led to a proliferation of proposals regarding the development of Israel's aniconic worship. Which, then, is the best interpretation of the evidence? Was idolatry truly banned from Israel's inception, yet posed a regular stumbling block until the exile? Or was ancient Israelite religion actually born out of polytheistic practice, evolving gradually toward a monotheistic understanding of the national deity and his aniconic worship?

Christoph Uehlinger and Othmar Keel represent a school of contemporary scholarship that proposes a later composition for the Pentateuch. Hailing from the Swiss "Fribourg School," these scholars advocate giving equal weight (if not preference) to any iconographic evidence over the purported "claims" of the biblical text in interpreting Israelite religious history. This stance, as might be expected, interprets Israel's history at times in contradiction to the Bible's own testimony,<sup>21</sup> and has found many adherents in academic circles. Karel van der Toorn exults that the "Success of the Fribourg School" and its "iconographical project" is demonstrated by Keel and Uehlinger's extensive and

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<sup>20</sup> For example, a blessing inscription found in a northern Sinai site which invokes "Yahweh and his asherah [Asherah?]," Asherah being a well-known Canaanite goddess. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, Jr., eds., *The Context of Scripture: Monumental Inscriptions from the Biblical World*, Vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 171. This will be discussed further in chapter 6.

<sup>21</sup> Karel van der Toorn, "Introduction," in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology 21 (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 15.

widely respected German tome, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel*,<sup>22</sup> a book often referenced by contemporary scholars throughout this study's research.<sup>23</sup>

Uehlinger helpfully lays out the four main views on the origins and development of Israelite aniconic worship:<sup>24</sup>

1. *Traditional*: this view aligns with the biblical testimony, that aniconism was prescribed at Sinai, and archaeological evidence of polytheistic worship in Israel simply demonstrates the use of illegal imagery that plagued Israel until the exile.

2. *Dichotomous* (state vs. popular religion): this view holds that the official Yahwistic cult was aniconic from inception, but private family worship could involve sanctioned iconolatry.<sup>25</sup>

3. *Evolutionary*: a naturalistic view which claims that Israelite religion was of a piece with Bronze and Iron Age polytheism, progressing gradually to condemn idol use as heterodox and ultimately outlawed by the 8<sup>th</sup> C. BC.

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<sup>22</sup> Christoph Uehlinger and Othmar Keel, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996).

<sup>23</sup> Van der Toorn, *The Image and the Book*, 15.

<sup>24</sup> Christoph Uehlinger, "Visual Representations: Israel," in *Religions of the Ancient World: A Guide*, ed. Sarah Iles Johnston (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 609–10.

<sup>25</sup> If I understand correctly, the theory was first proposed (or significantly developed) by Rainer Albertz in his distinction between official state and personal/family religion in Israel, referred to in Richard S. Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 66–67. Susan Ackerman further clarifies this view in a collection of articles edited by Albertz (and others): "Religion as it was practiced by families and their domestic affiliates in ancient Israelite households was of a very different sort than Israelite religion as it was manifest in priestly-based communities at major state temples such as Dan, Bethel, and Jerusalem." Susan Ackerman, "Women's Rites of Passage in Ancient Israel: Three Case Studies (Birth, Coming of Age, and Death)," in *Family and Household Religion: Toward a Synthesis of Old Testament Studies, Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Cultural Studies*, eds. Rainer Albertz et al., (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 1.

4. *Postexilic*: this view also holds to a naturalistic development of Israelite religion from polytheistic worship to strict aniconism, but claims the image ban was instated after the trauma of exile, which inspired new austerity and reformatory zeal in Israel's political leaders.

All but the first view question to some degree whether Israel was strictly aniconic from her formation, admitting skepticism (or outright denial) of the Bible's claim to divine guidance of Israelite religion in favor of a theory of the humanistic progression of religious systems.<sup>26</sup> Uehlinger himself holds to the last view, though he concedes the difficulty of conclusively dating the Pentateuch or finding evidence of later redactions to the text.<sup>27</sup> Still, he concludes that after their return from exile, the Israelites could not relate to the old cult anymore, and went on to develop a more metaphysical religion focusing on the divine attributes and the "Name" of God: "We know that after the exile, Deuteronomistic and Priestly theologians radically disconnected YHWH from all other deities of the region and even from traditional concepts of YHWH himself...in this situation, the image ban effectively contributed to the strength of exclusive Yahwism."<sup>28</sup>

The confidence such source-critics place in the speculative existence of the "JEDP" redactors of the DH can be puzzling, as well as the assertion that "*we know*" the "D" and "P" redactors were those who "radically disconnected" Yahweh from the gods of the nations. What is, of course, dismissed in such views is any idea that Yahweh *himself* may have disconnected his identity from the nations' gods, based on his own

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<sup>26</sup> Alexander, *Exodus*, 16.

<sup>27</sup> Uehlinger, "Visual Representations: Israel," 609-610.

<sup>28</sup> Uehlinger, 610.

exclusive and unchanging nature, and that he did so from the very outset of Israel's formation. Naturally, this is not the position one will overwhelmingly encounter in scholarship; and in fact, a student holding to a high view of Scripture must persevere through academic prejudice that an adherence to the Bible's claims to divine revelation and direction lacks "scholarly rigor."<sup>29</sup>

It must be stated, however, that the methods employed by historical-critical scholars have not met with unqualified acceptance amongst all biblical scholars, and within the last three decades, have even been challenged by those not holding a conservative or faith-based approach to Scripture.<sup>30</sup> There is a returning respect for the study of the OT in its final, received form, and growing pushback against the fragmenting of a corpus which, as a whole, presents a remarkably unified narrative, and whose "early" covenants and commands permeate the rest of the canon, giving them "every appearance of being a long-standing tradition."<sup>31</sup> Indeed, it has proven difficult to reassemble the pieces of such splintered theories of (de)composition with any more elegant and fitting plot than the text's own historical narrative.<sup>32</sup>

Richard Hess, as an example, warns against overconfidence in later Pentateuchal dating schemes; while he concedes to some later finalizing of the Mosaic literature, he cautions against the bold proposals of centuries between its "source texts" and final editing. For one thing, any manuscript reflecting a "pre-doctored" source version of the

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<sup>29</sup> Alexander, *Exodus*, 16.

<sup>30</sup> Alexander, *Exodus*, 11.

<sup>31</sup> Alexander, *Exodus*, 11.

<sup>32</sup> Alexander, *Exodus*, 13.

supposed “D” and “P” redactions of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, respectively, has not yet been found (the “missing link,” as it were); and it is worth mentioning that the full Aaronic blessing was discovered on two scrolls from 600 BC, when the “P” redactor was supposed to have appended all authoritative priestly distinctions only after the exile (mid-5<sup>th</sup> C. BC).<sup>33</sup> In addition, Hess views the Decalogue as foundational in distinguishing Israelite religion from that of the nations before the conquest of Canaan;<sup>34</sup> and Yehezkel Kaufmann, another revered OT scholar, finds that “the distinction between Canaanite image worship and Israelite aniconic monotheism was early and radical.”<sup>35</sup> Considerations such as these give scholars reason for modesty when speculating later dating schemes for the Pentateuch.

This paper will hold to a traditional date of composition of the Decalogue within the Sinai community, situated in either the 15<sup>th</sup> C. or 13<sup>th</sup> C. BC, depending on the date one holds of the exodus event itself (both theories have merit).<sup>36</sup> In either case, the covenant and law will be read as a product of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC, having been compiled and delivered to the people before they set forth to conquer the land of Canaan,<sup>37</sup> and forming at the outset their national identity and exclusive worship of Yahweh.

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<sup>33</sup> Hess, *Israelite Religions*, 49-59.

<sup>34</sup> Hess, 163.

<sup>35</sup> Hess, 64.

<sup>36</sup> Alexander, *Exodus*, 17-19.

<sup>37</sup> It is possible that a final version of Exodus (and the Hexateuch) was arranged after settlement in the land, with K. A. Kitchen offering a confident range of composition in a “period from about 1220 to 1180.” (Kitchen, *On the Reliability*, 304.) The point still stands that Israel’s formative documents were not likely the later invention of a postexilic hand.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

The methodology employed in this study will prioritize the text of the Hebrew Bible as received in its final form. This approach to the OT has found renewed favor in recent decades, challenging the DH's prevailing focus on form- and source-critical analysis.<sup>38</sup> In citing as examples Childs' canonical and Robert Alter's narrativel approaches, Carol Meyers describes the holistic focus of such methods: "While not ignoring the likelihood that the text as it now stands has a complex history, they emphasize the importance of the canonical whole and are often explicitly theological as they seek to understand what its constituent sections contribute to that whole."<sup>39</sup> These methods pull the focus to the full forest over isolated (and often sapped) source-critical trees.

Childs further elucidates his method: while accepting the proposed JEDP source layers of the Pentateuch, he takes a synchronic approach in his commentary on Exodus, promoting its study as "a piece of literature with its own integrity," and indeed, the sole format that can offer theological instruction to both Jewish and Christian faith communities.<sup>40</sup> Any prehistory of the text, he stresses, is important only insofar as it

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<sup>38</sup> This can include the method of a "canonical" reading, as per Brevard Childs' methodology, or "discourse analysis," which considers the full narrative (discourse) and communicated message of the final text. Both are opposed to making the identification of source material and competing agendas in the composition of a text the methodological priority, as does source-analysis. Alexander, *Exodus*, 12.

<sup>39</sup> Meyers, *Exodus*, 2.

<sup>40</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 2004), xiv.



illuminates the study of the final text at hand.<sup>41</sup> In a slightly more conservative take, T. D. Alexander, an OT scholar whose work underpins much of this study, discourages the fragmenting of the OT through spurious source speculation; while not rejecting potential proto-material and editors who shaped the OT (but challenging the extent to which Childs holds to traditional DH source layers<sup>42</sup>), he too prioritizes the study of the OT in its final, canonical form. Exodus, he says, resembles a collage; while its parts may not be totally “homogenous in terms of style and form,”<sup>43</sup> the book is yet “remarkably unified in the story that it communicates.” Thus, to consider a discrete passage or episode within the book’s full literary and canonical context will serve as “an important controlling factor in determining the meaning of the text.”<sup>44</sup>

Drafting behind these scholars’ comprehensive methods, this paper will offer a literary analysis of the Decalogue and the second commandment as fitted within the finalized (and divinely guided) canon of Scripture, the whole of which frames the theological interpretation for both the original exodus community and the Christian church. A second step will be to consider the historical context of idol-making in the ANE, using a form of comparative religion. While one must take care not to assume causality or a “genetic” relationship between contemporaneous religious systems (a lively debate uncovered in the research on early Canaanite and Israelite religion, a sort of

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<sup>41</sup> Childs, *Exodus*, xiv-xv.

<sup>42</sup> Alexander, *Exodus*, 12.

<sup>43</sup> Such mix of literary styles in Exodus, on the other hand, offers key evidence to source critics who postulate a cadre of later editors imposing their own genres and agendas onto this ostensible “open-source software” of OT compilation.

<sup>44</sup> Alexander, *Exodus*, 15.

which-came-first and who influenced who?),<sup>45</sup> Catherine McDowell affirms the value of comparative studies. We cannot, she asserts, understand the Hebrew Bible without surveying the contemporary culture, noting that “both Mesopotamia and Egypt exerted tremendous influence on Israelite culture and traditions, including but not limited to Israel’s architecture, iconography, material culture, religious practice and literature. Thus, comparative work is vital to biblical interpretation.”<sup>46</sup>

In surveying both Mesopotamian and Egyptian idol consecration rituals in the ANE context, this study will seek to demonstrate that, while Israelite religion employed synonymous ritual systems that rendered it “legible” within the religious context of its day, it was its strict departures from the polytheistic milieu, specifically in the monotheism of its deity and his aniconic worship, that set Israel apart conspicuously from the pagan world (and tellingly, the commands which proved most difficult for Israel to obey consistently). These distinctives, then, did not (and could not) simply evolve naturalistically, but had to be firmly instated by Israel’s God at her formation. Her strict aniconism would be imperative to Israel’s proper knowledge and worship of her God; and her repeated stumbling over temptations to idolatry would prove the enthralling pull of this practice to the polytheists of the ancient Near East.

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<sup>45</sup> David P. Wright, for example, sees early Israelite religion as wholly deriving from Syro-Canaanite religion, noting that the institutions such as temple, sacrifice, priesthood, etc. are “Northwest Semitic in character.” David P. Wright, “Syria and Canaan,” in Johnston, 178–79. This view is common among adherents to a naturalistic development of Israelite religion. On the other hand, McDowell presses that in comparative religious study, one must distinguish between a *historical* (genetic) relationship and a *typological* relationship, which merely reflects the common human experience of the time. Catherine L. McDowell, *The Image of God in the Garden of Eden: The Creation of Humankind in Genesis 2:5-3:24 in Light of the Mīs Pī, Pīt Pī, and Wpt-r Rituals of Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt*, Siphut: Literature and Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 209.

<sup>46</sup> McDowell, *The Image of God in the Garden of Eden*, 209.

## Chapter 4

### Exegesis of Exodus 20:1-6

This study will begin by examining the first explicit command against the making of idols in Exodus, found in the Ten Commandments of the Sinai covenant. After conducting an annotated translation of the Hebrew passage, a consideration of its literary context will follow, and a closer look at key words, as well as the reiteration of the Decalogue and further explication of idolatry in Deuteronomy. This exegesis will seek to establish the biblical context for God’s prohibition of the use of images in his worship.

#### Annotated Translation: Exodus 20:1-6

1: And God spoke all these words,<sup>47</sup> saying:<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> The Ten Commandments are called the “Ten Words” in Hebrew (cf. Exod 34:28 and Deut 4:13). They stand as the founding charter of Israel and the “core obligations of the covenant,” grounding the legal code that follows in an outline of fundamental moral character expected of God’s people. Alexander, *Exodus*, 394–96. So central is the Decalogue to Israel’s formation that it is often synonymous with the covenant itself. Childs, *Exodus*, 374. Cf. Deut 4:13: “He declared to you his covenant, which he commanded you to follow—the Ten Words that he wrote on two tablets of stone.”

<sup>48</sup> It is worth noting that God speaks the Ten Commandments directly to Israel (using second person commands: see footnote 52), without Moses’ mediation. Alexander, *Exodus*, 398. After Israel encounters the frightening voice of God, they request that Moses speak to them thereafter as God’s spokesman, and the LORD agrees (Exod 20:19).

2: I am Yahweh<sup>49</sup> your God,<sup>50</sup> who led you out from the land of Egypt,<sup>51</sup> out from the house of servitude.

3: You<sup>52</sup> shall not have other gods before my face.

4: You shall not make for yourself an image,<sup>53</sup> or any representation<sup>54</sup> (of that) which is in the heavens above, and (that) which is on the earth beneath, and (that) which is in the waters beneath the earth.

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<sup>49</sup> God's covenant name, by which he made himself known to Israel through Moses (Exod 3:14).

<sup>50</sup> This regal "self-presentation" of Yahweh fits the format of ANE royal inscriptions and serves as the basis for God's gracious covenant with Israel. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy*, 285. The historical prologue of this type of sovereign-vassal treaty enumerates the mighty acts performed by the sovereign on the vassal nation's behalf, and sets the terms of service and loyalty owed by the people in return. Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 214. Kitchen further asserts that this treaty follows a very specific late-2<sup>nd</sup> C. BC Hittite format and cannot point to a later (i.e. postexilic) date of composition, as many source-critical scholars propose. Kitchen, *On the Reliability*, 290.

<sup>51</sup> The phrase "out of Egypt" is used 114 times in the OT, and indicates the centrality of the exodus event in Israel's national identity and exclusive worship of her Redeemer. Alexander, *Exodus*, 5. Truly, any theory of the historical non-event of the rescue from Egypt (a "minimal" view of OT history: Meyers, *Exodus*, 3.) must contend with the exodus' being tightly woven throughout the canon and theology of the OT—a remarkable literary feat if merely imposed by later editors. (Cf. Kitchen's dispute that historical-critics are not consistent in evaluating ancient historiographies vs. that of the Israelites: Kitchen, *On the Reliability*, 300.)

<sup>52</sup> Each command in the Decalogue is addressed in the second person singular—to each "you" in Israel—in contrast to a typical law code which is addressed in the third person. The "Ten Words" model universal moral principles that are not bound to a national or historical setting (affirming their timeless relevance). Alexander, *Exodus*, 394. Moreover, the commands are not bound to social or religious status: "The Decalogue is not addressed to a specific segment of the population, to the priestly class, or a prophetic office within Israel, but to every man. It has no need of legal interpretation, but is straightforward and immediately manifest in its meaning." Childs, *Exodus*, 400. This supports the idea of individual responsibility to reject image worship, challenging any theory of a licit private worship that could employ idols. (Cf. Chapter 2, footnote 25; re: state vs. popular religion in Israel.)

<sup>53</sup> This word means "idol" or "image," and is a noun derived from the root *pesel*, which means "to hew into shape." BDB, s.v. "פָּסַל." See Word Study for further discussion.

<sup>54</sup> This word, *timûnâ*, from the root *mîn*, refers to a "kind" or "species," used markedly in Genesis when God makes the plants and animals "after their kind" (Gen 1). BDB, s.v. "מִינֵהוּם." This language emphasizes the Creator-creation distinction, a theme central to this study. See Word Study for further discussion.

5: You shall not bow down<sup>55</sup> to them, and you shall not serve<sup>56</sup> (them), for I am Yahweh your God, a jealous<sup>57</sup> God, visiting the sin of the fathers<sup>58</sup> upon the sons unto the third and unto the fourth (generations) to those who hate me,<sup>59</sup>  
6: but working<sup>60</sup> loving-kindness to the thousand (generation) to those who love me and to those who keep my commandments.

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<sup>55</sup> In the ANE, to “bow down” to a superior, whether god or king, was to display a reverence and willingness to be subject to the potentate. Alexander, *Exodus*, 404. This language stresses that idol worship was more than a casual curtsy to a statue. The rituals of fashioning and consecrating an idol, as well as serving it relentlessly, were an “embodiment” of fastidious and consuming service (discussed further in chapter 5), and one not easily abandoned, as evidenced in Israel’s stumbling over idolatry until the exile.

<sup>56</sup> This word “serve” (*’ābād*) stems from the same Hebrew root as the “servitude/slavery” of verse 2. BDB, s.v. “עָבַד.” The word can mean both “worship” and “serve,” and it is challenging to capture its fullness in English. Alexander, *Exodus*, 404. Negatively, the word can refer to the compelled labor exacted by enslavers. It can be difficult to paint this range of meaning to modern ears, who might hear “worship” as a song set, or “to serve” as a volunteer event. Unpacking the semantic range of *’ābād* can help illuminate the clash between serving the LORD and worshiping idols; one cannot, according to the stark lines of Scripture, engage in both. (Anticipating a much later but equally stringent voice: “No man can *serve* two masters...” Matt 6:24)

<sup>57</sup> The word *qannā’* means “Jealous,” and this adjectival form is used only of God, as in “demanding exclusive service.” (BDB, s.v. “קָנָא”) The LORD’s uniquely “Jealous” claims to Israel’s exclusive worship frame the study of idol worship as no innocuous habit, but a threat to usurp what belongs to God alone.

<sup>58</sup> God’s declaration of punishment for the sins of the fathers on future generations and his blessings on the faithful echo his self-revelation to Moses in Exod 34:6-7. Both declarations, curiously, are presented within a context of idolatry—the latter declaration occurring in the aftermath of the golden calf debacle, the first explicit breaking of the command against idol-making. Alexander, *Exodus*, 405–6. Idolatry and generational sin seem to be connected significantly within these passages.

<sup>59</sup> Not a threat against the innocent, but expressing the reality that children often repeat and worsen the sins of their forefathers. Though he delays retribution, the LORD will not let intransigent sin go unpunished. There may also be a corporate aspect of the righteous being swept into a community judgment, as occurred to the faithful during the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles. Alexander, *Exodus*, 406–7. It is noteworthy that the second commandment alone of the Ten carries this extended curse and blessing formula, even painting idolatry in terms of either “hating” or “loving” the LORD, and stressing its outsized danger to the community. In fact, all of Israel would reap the community consequence of exile due to her repeated refusal to purge idolatry from the land (cf. Ezek 6).

<sup>60</sup> The root *’āsā* denotes a “making” or “creating,” as in the “making” of an idol in verse 4. BDB, s.v. “עָשָׂה.” Although not explicit by the use of this word alone, a key question does arise from this command’s emphatic Creator-creation distinction and its subtle distinction between man’s and God’s “making”: what category of things has God the right to make (and command to be made), and what works are forbidden to man? In her essay describing an idol consecration ceremony in modern India, Waghorne articulates this core conflict in iconolatrous versus iconoclastic cultures: unlike the Hindus, followers of the biblical God “know not to violate His sole right to make life. The humans have been given the earth to do work *but not to do ritual work.*” (Joanne Punzo Waghorne, “The Divine Image in Contemporary South India: The Renaissance of a Once Maligned Tradition” in Dick, 241. Emphasis mine.) This concern over the sacred can touch on science and ethics in the “making (or taking) of life,” particularly the creating of biological clones or the destruction of viable embryos, and even the creation of artificial intelligence with the intention to abdicate human dominion to it (this last briefly discussed in the “Further Study” of chapter 7). Of course, these questions cannot be treated in depth here; but it is clear that the study of even the

## Literary Context

The giving of the law at Mount Sinai is a momentous event for the nation of Israel. Newly rescued from slavery and crossing the wilderness to the Promised Land, this covenant treaty will serve as the constitution for the people of God, organizing their national life and stipulating the terms of their obedience.<sup>61</sup> Literarily, the summit at Sinai is situated halfway through Exodus, a book which picks up where Genesis left off. Previously, Joseph, a descendant of Abraham and the line of promise (Gen 12), had been sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers; after he was elevated to rulership, his entire family was reunited, and, due to a famine in Canaan, settled with him in Egypt (Gen 47:11). Joseph's favor and standing with Pharaoh, unfortunately, did not long outlive his death, and the Hebrew people were soon conscripted into Egyptian slavery (Exod 1:8). Yahweh's decisive showdown with Egypt's leaders and her many "gods," and the redemption of his people from bondage (Exod 5-14), become the defining drama in Israel's history, grounding the Sinai covenant and its laws.

On the eve of the giving of the law, God reviews Israel's rescue with Moses on Mount Sinai and stresses its importance:

"You have seen for yourselves what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you will be my treasured possession out of all the nations—for the whole earth is mine. And unto me you shall be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod 19:3-6)."

Here, God prepares the people for their priestly role in the earth and lays out two core characteristics of his holy nation: one, they obey his voice; and two, they keep his

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"simplest" of God's apodictic law flings open a world of interpretive challenges for our modern and complex issues.

<sup>61</sup> Alexander, *Exodus*, 394-96.

covenant. These were not the typical demands of the ritual-craving deities of the ancient world,<sup>62</sup> but this was no typical God; his people must be known by his uniquely holy character, and they must obey his word. The prohibition of idols would be a significant aspect to their holiness, and as such, strongly suggests that it was commanded of the exodus community and was not a later addition.<sup>63</sup> As the Bible continually states, and the ancient context will show, Israel could not be in communion with both Yahweh and idols.

Exodus closes with the glory of the LORD descending and filling the newly built tabernacle, God's mobile desert dwelling (40:34). After a forty-year sojourn in the wilderness and the further establishment of the law and the priesthood in the books of Leviticus and Numbers, Moses prepares the community in Deuteronomy to finally enter the Promised Land (Deut 4). The narrative arc of the Pentateuch covers the covenant foundation of the holy nation of Israel, the Abrahamic people of God's promise; and within this holy constitution, the prohibition against idols would be crucial to Israel's separation from the pagan practices of the nations.

### **Word Study**

In any study on OT idolatry, it is essential to note that the English word "idolatry" comes not from the Hebrew command, but from the 3<sup>rd</sup> C. BC translation of the OT into Greek, the Septuagint. It is a compound Greek word, from *eidolon*, meaning "image," and *latría*, meaning "worship."<sup>64</sup> No one word in Hebrew, in fact, can be translated flatly

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<sup>62</sup> Kitchen, *On the Reliability*, 281. See Chapter 6 for discussion on the heavy ritual demands of the pagan deities.

<sup>63</sup> Hess, 163.

<sup>64</sup> Aaron Tugendhaft and Josh Ellenbogen, *Idol Anxiety* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 3.

as “idolatry,” although the rabbis came to refer to the practice as *‘ābōdâ zārâ*—strange worship—taking their cues from both the word for “worship” (*‘ābād*; see footnote 56) and the adjective “strange,” often shaded in Scripture with both the “foreign” elements of pagan nations and the “strange/foreign fire” inimical to Yahwistic worship (cf. Lev 10:1).<sup>65</sup> The Hebrew terms used in the second commandment itself will help to flesh out the biblical category of forbidden images.

The first “image” forbidden to the Israelites to make in Exod 20:4 is the Hebrew word *pesel*, which stems from a primitive root meaning “to hew into shape.” The infrequently used verb form, *pāsal*, refers to the carving of objects from stone, and curiously, is only used in the Pentateuch when God commands Moses to “hew out” the stone tablets of the covenant.<sup>66</sup> A Hebrew audience would hear this repetition, as Yahweh forbids the people to make a “hewed-thing” (idol), but commands Moses to “hew out” the tablets for the Ten Words.<sup>67</sup> This could suggest a category of sacred items that God himself may “hew” or command to be hewn, but that man may not fashion from his own fancy<sup>68</sup>—a subtle observation which contributes to a central theme of this passage, that of the repeated distinction between the sovereign Creator and his creation.

Next, the term “likeness” or “representation” (*timûnâ*) in verse 4 comes from the root *mîn*, which refers to a “species” or “kind,”<sup>69</sup> and again, conspicuously echoes the

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<sup>65</sup> Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 2.

<sup>66</sup> BDB, s.v. “פָּסַל.”

<sup>67</sup> Tryggve N. D. Mettinger and Andrew Knapp, *Reports From a Scholar’s Life: Select Papers on the Hebrew Bible* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 135.

<sup>68</sup> See footnote 60 for further discussion.

<sup>69</sup> BDB, s.v. “תְּמוּנָה.”



creation account of Genesis as God forms each plant and animal group “according to its kind.” The grammar of Genesis continues to feature in the list of verboten images: those depicting creatures “in the heavens above, the earth beneath, and the waters beneath the earth.” These are the precise categories, in fact, which Adam is given to command in the first chapter of Genesis: “fish of the sea, birds of the air, livestock and over all the earth” (1:26). Yet while Adam was formed by God and given command over the created order, he would now be tempted, in his sinful state, to fashion and “enliven” images for worship resembling these very creatures. These echoes of Genesis emphasize the distinction between the transcendent Creator and his creation, as well as uphold an orientation of man to his Maker that was unknown in the polytheistic world:

While the religions of Israel’s neighbours had gods in heaven, on earth, and in the underworld with their respective images, for Israel not only the earth but also heaven is incapable of offering anything to be compared with God. Here we approach what is perhaps the deepest motif in the prohibition of images: to safeguard the border between God and the world, to accentuate his transcendence.<sup>70</sup>

These borders between the transcendence of God and his created world would be blurred by polytheism’s view of immanence, an enmeshing of the human and divine realms that gave rise to its system of mutuality between men and the gods; and their idolatrous creaturely images played a pivotal role in this distorted belief system.

The Hebrew Bible, on the contrary, consistently denounces these cultic images as worthless and abominable. The prophets in particular heap scathing derision on idols. Jeremiah and Ezekiel refer to them as *gillûlîm*, a word that connotes “dung” and translates roughly to “little dung pellets” (Jer 50:2; Ezek 22:3-4); elsewhere, idols are

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<sup>70</sup> Mettinger and Knapp, *Reports From a Scholar’s Life*, 148.

decried as “weak,” “worthless,” “dumb (mute),” “detestable,” and “an abomination.”<sup>71</sup> A technical word used by Ezekiel in 20:7-8 echoes the Levitical category of ritually unclean animals; in the same way, “idols pollute anyone using them and render them unclean before God,” and as abominations, they pollute the land on a wider scale.<sup>72</sup> This prickly critique was not reserved for the prophets—Israel’s psalmists were also keen to condemn idols, citing their inability to see, hear, or bring any good to those who worship them (Pss 115; 106:36). The contempt expressed by prophets and psalmists alike toward idols is unmistakable.

Still, the modern mind might find such rebuke perplexing—how could images of wood and stone so threaten the worship of Yahweh as to be the first laws of the covenant and the last straw leading to Israel’s exile? This picture will be filled in by a survey of Mesopotamian idol consecration rituals in the next chapter; but first, there remain a few final points to glean from the OT witness.

### **The Idol Ban Restated (and Restated, and Restated)**

Exodus is not the only book to record the Ten Commandments. In “Deuteronomy”—the “repetition of the law”—Moses reiterates the Decalogue and expounds on the image ban as he prepares the Israelites to enter the land. Before restating the Ten Words in chapter 5, he expounds on the particular prohibition of image-making in chapter 4: Israel may not fashion images of Yahweh for worship because “you saw no

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<sup>71</sup> Edward M. Curtis, “Idol/Idolatry,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 3:378.

<sup>72</sup> Curtis, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 3:378.

form of any kind the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire” (v. 15).

Whereas the pagan idols displayed a visible identifying feature of the god or goddess,<sup>73</sup> God has no “form” to be beheld and represented through such visual mediums. To press the point, Moses here again invokes the creation language of the commandment: the people are forbidden to make any image in the shape of “a man or a woman, or like any animal on earth or any bird that flies in the air, or like any creature that moves along the ground or any fish in the waters below” (vv. 16-18).<sup>74</sup> Once again, firm boundaries are set as an “expression of the Creator’s transcendence over what he has created.”<sup>75</sup>

Moses states and, indeed, restates (for eleven more verses!) the warning against idol worship, reminding Israel that the LORD is a “Jealous” God (v. 24). He follows up a caution against “forgetting the covenant” with the injunction to “not make for yourselves an idol” (v. 23)—a telling corollary. It seems the evidence that Israel will have forgotten the Sinai covenant will not manifest primarily in rampant murder, say, or robbery (at least not at first), but foremost in *idol-making*. To hammer home his point, Moses warns

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<sup>73</sup> A. Leo Oppenheim and Erica Reiner, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, Rev. ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 184.

<sup>74</sup> There is a question in OT scholarship whether the second commandment prohibited all decorative image-making or merely the graven image intended for cultic use. In the biblical context, it seems clear that Israel’s aniconism only refers to cultic images meant to be “animated” with the divine presence, a common concept in pagan consecration rituals. Decorative and even religious imagery was ordered by Yahweh in the construction of his temple and atop the ark itself, and appear to be uncontroversial. Later generations, however, have grappled with and applied this command in varying and sometimes surprising degrees, and some scholars infer a strict ban on all visual art—one modern image theorist even suggesting that this passage suggests that *every* man-made image is a rival to God and “takes on a life of its own.” W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 134. Perhaps less extreme but still enduring is the controversy over Christianity’s historically shifting reactions to “icons” used in religious contexts, and the resulting “iconoclasm” that often arises out of a reformative zeal. The literature on these topics is extensive but well beyond the scope of this thesis. Interested readers are invited to pursue these and other fascinating trails of research at [oxfordbibliographies.com](http://oxfordbibliographies.com), a site which has been an indispensable source of scholarly publications for this paper’s research (under *Idol/Idolatry (HB/OT)*, ed. Aaron Tugendhaft).

<sup>75</sup> Mettinger and Knapp, *Reports From a Scholar’s Life*, 148.

against their becoming settled in the land, fruitful and complacent, and being drawn into—what else?—making “any kind of idol” (v. 25), even equating the crime with “becoming corrupt” and “doing evil.” The temptation and destruction that idolatry will bring on the newfound nation is cast in no uncertain terms, provoking a litany of scorn and warning from Israel’s exalted leader.<sup>76</sup>

Moses then switches tacks, this time condemning idolatry by commending Israel’s unique relationship with God—has any other people, he presses, been rescued from slavery by such awesome and mighty deeds? (Deut 4:34). Israel alone of the nations has heard the very “voice of God speaking out of fire” (v. 33), and will continue to “hear his voice from heaven” in order that he might discipline them (v. 36). They alone saw God’s “great fire” and “heard his words from out of the fire” (v. 37); all this was graciously revealed to them “so that you might know that the LORD is God; besides him there is no other” (v. 35). Not only is he God over all the earth, he is *Israel’s* God in an exclusive way. Israel has seen his fire and heard his voice. To reject this stunning privilege of divine revelation would be tantamount to the betrayal of an intimate relationship, and no mere misdemeanor.

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<sup>76</sup> In a contrasting take, it is just this polemical anti-idol language that suggests to some scholars a later, heavy-handed redactor. Mettinger, for example, proposes that the original (source) Mosaic material was handed down with a neutral stance on images. Beginning with Hosea in the 8<sup>th</sup> C. BC, the prophets began to denounce idol worship, finally influencing the Deuteronomist to retroactively pen the strong anti-iconic language of the Pentateuch’s final form (and further, either “inventing” or negativizing a formerly neutral Golden Calf account as a rebuke to Jeroboam’s calf-idols in Bethel and Dan). Mettinger sums up this point of view by noting that, if correct, “the prophets have here preceded the Law.” Mettinger and Knapp, *Reports From a Scholar’s Life*, 145–46. He raises interesting questions, asking why Hosea and other prophets do not explicitly name the second commandment in their fervid rants against idolatry (reasoning that it had not yet been instated); but finally, one can feel overwhelmed by the multiplied chronological rearrangements of Israel’s religious history. Though much research remains to be studied, and much respect is due to diligent scholarship, it is encouraging to see that for theological and instructive purposes, as this paper seeks to show, the Bible’s chronological development from start to finish is truly a marvel of consistency, and leads a worshipful heart to growing awe at the unity yet complexity of the God of Scripture.

In fact, the intimate betrothal between Yahweh and Israel grounds the entire covenant and sets the framework for the revulsion of idolatry. “[The exodus] creates an obligation because it is the event in which God consecrated Israel as a wife...in which God revealed his love for Israel and Israel revealed her willingness to follow her beloved into the desert.”<sup>77</sup> This metaphor of marital jealousy might fade within a modern casual approach to marriage vows and high divorce rates; but Israel’s obligation to her Lord was no casual affair. She was not bound to “a principle, or truth for truth’s sake, but as a personal obligation based on a history of relationship that began with the Exodus from Egypt.”<sup>78</sup> Israel was in covenant relationship with her God; and their union was grounded in love, loyalty, and obligation, a mutual knowledge and devotion patterned on the most intimate of earthly bonds. From this standpoint, it is clear that Israel could not know her Husband and at the same time be united with other gods.

This biblical concept of “knowing God” speaks to a deep communion with the LORD and obedience to his ways, and in fact, dominates the events of Exodus: “From start to finish Exodus explores how YHWH takes the initiative in order that the Israelites and others may know him more fully.”<sup>79</sup> Knowing God, for Israel, would involve much more than a mere assent to a list of rules or a sporadic return to idolatry:

What is lacking between those [“other gods”] and Israel is “knowledge,” *yedi’ah*, a term used to denote a personal and intimate relationship. As opposed to the worship of God, which has a historical [and] personal basis, the worship of other gods is characterized by the *lack of a history or*

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<sup>77</sup> Halbertal and Margalit, 21.

<sup>78</sup> Halbertal and Margalit, 31.

<sup>79</sup> Alexander, *Exodus*, 2.

*relationship*. Idolatry is associated with forgetfulness, whereas God demands remembrance again and again.<sup>80</sup>

Worshiping other gods, who contributed nothing to her rescue, and “forgetting” her covenant Redeemer, would render Israel guilty of traitorous infidelity. These stark lines make any scholarly proposal of the image ban’s being a post-exilic invention<sup>81</sup> theologically untenable. As his redeemed Beloved, the holy people of God were bound at the start by an eternal bond, which could admit no adulterous idolatry at any point.

In the final analysis, there should really have been no competition. Yahweh was utterly superior and set apart from these so-called “gods” of the nations, gods of wood and stone which “cannot see or hear or eat or smell” (Deut 4:27). Moses goes on to reiterate the Decalogue in chapter 5 in almost the exact form as in Exodus and concludes, “These are the commandments the Lord proclaimed in a loud voice to your whole assembly” (v. 22)—reminding them that while the idols could not even speak, Yahweh’s voice had been so audible as to frighten Israel with its thunderous blast. In fact, Yahweh continually stresses the priority of his “voice” and “word” as against the visual mediums preferred by the polytheists, with the Ten *Words* of the covenant taking primary place: “Other nations resort to images for their contact with the deity; Israel is pointed to God’s word.”<sup>82</sup> His emphasis will continue to be on his *voice* and his *words*, and on their hearing and obeying.<sup>83</sup> To be sure, Israel would not be without visual confirmation or

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<sup>80</sup> Halbertal and Margalit, 31. Emphasis mine.

<sup>81</sup> A view held by the adherents of a naturalistic religious evolution of Israelite religion, such as Christoph Uehlinger and William Johnstone, as mentioned in chapter 2.

<sup>82</sup> Mettinger and Knapp, *Reports From a Scholar’s Life*, 148.

<sup>83</sup> This dichotomy between God’s emphasis of his spoken word as against the visual mediums of polytheistic worship is well-noted by scholars, with one modern academic even admonishing his readers

comfort, as God's physical presence would dwell with and guide Israel by means of the tabernacle and the piloting pillars of cloud and fire (Exod 13:21). It would not, however, be summoned and controlled by an image fashioned by man's own hand and fantasies.

## Summary

The role that the exodus plays, both in the Pentateuch and the unfolding biblical narrative, is tough to overstate. This seminal event is the grounds for the gracious covenant between Yahweh and Israel, and for the law by which the Living God would begin to teach his people, and ultimately the world, his knowledge and righteousness, which was founded on his unchanging nature. Because of this immutable holy character, it is theologically necessary that the prohibition of idol worship, rooted in the firm distinction between God and his creation and the proper relationship between the two, must be delivered to the exodus community at their inception. As far as Scripture is concerned, the image ban is a first and final command; Israel could never engage in loyal worship of her God and also bow to idols.

As Israel grew in the knowledge of her God, however, there would be much to unlearn of her pagan past. The polytheistic practices of the ancient Mediterranean<sup>84</sup> world were drenched in religious concepts requiring relentless ritual within a consuming social imaginary ever opposed to the truth of God. The way to please *this* God of the exodus, as

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against viewing the aniconism of monotheistic religions as more "spiritual" simply because these systems are based on the unseen and the visually inexpressible. Van der Toorn, 15. Van der Toorn, moreover, refers to the major monotheistic systems as the "religions of the Book" as opposed to the polytheistic "religions of the Image," demonstrating that this distinction between Word and Image is a familiar one among religious scholars. Van der Toorn, 19.

<sup>84</sup> This term will refer in general to the ANE cultures of this study, as Egypt, Israel, Babylon, Assyria, and other Mesopotamian cultures were more or less clustered around the Mediterranean Sea.

he repeatedly insisted, was to “obey my voice” (Exod 19:5 ESV), not “serve my statue.” He would, however, have his work cut out for him with Israel; for the pounding cultural pressure to create, consecrate, and care for the cult images of pagan deities would be nigh on impossible to ignore.



## Chapter 5

### A Historical Survey of Idol Consecration in ANE Religion

The Bible's criticism of idolatry comes across loud and clear; but at times it can seem like a one-sided argument. Clarification is needed—why was this practice such a draw in the ANE in the first place? To answer this, a survey of Israel's historical context is crucial; and fortunately, the cultures of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt left ample amounts of religious images and textual artifacts in the dust of their empires. It was these cultures, in fact, who first began to record history, with the Sumerians inventing the first system of writing (cuneiform) around 3300 BC,<sup>85</sup> influencing the later Mesopotamian cultures surveyed in this study, including the Neo-Babylonian and Assyrian empires of the mid-first millennium BC.<sup>86</sup>

Relevant to the specific study of idol worship, substantial records of idol consecration rituals have been discovered in Egypt dating to around 1450 BC,<sup>87</sup> as well as from the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian civilizations of the 8<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> C. BC.<sup>88</sup> This lengthy timeframe encompasses the biblical account of Israel's bondage in Egypt and their later settlement and eventual monarchy in the land of Canaan; and the longevity of these consecration records reveals their widespread and entrenched use throughout the

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<sup>85</sup> Paul-Alain Beaulieu, "Mesopotamia," in Johnston, 166.

<sup>86</sup> James L. Kugel, *The God of Old: Inside the Lost World of the Bible* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2003), 74–75.

<sup>87</sup> McDowell, 87–88.

<sup>88</sup> Walker and Dick, *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth*, 67.

ancient context of Israelite history. Such comparative aspects help illuminate the Bible's repeated warnings against the temptation of idolatry.

According to the archaeological records, polytheistic idol worship was rampant within Mesopotamian culture; and one must consider this pervasive practice within the context of the human condition itself. Earthly existence has yielded thorns and trials since the Fall of Man (cf. Gen 3), and every generation must grapple anew with a deadly disconnect from their Creator, with sufferings of body, mind, and relationships, and the slog of sheer survival. The ancients felt these pressures no less, and they ascribed the work of divine and demonic forces to every joy and tear. Their response to the pressures of life and the power of these unseen forces, therefore, was to construct a sophisticated worldview founded on a vital interchange between the earthly and divine, instituting complex rituals to facilitate communion between the gods and men. It would be a mistake to dismiss such a mindset as “primitive” because it was pre-scientific and tied to earthly cycles. These ancient Mediterranean systems for dealing with the wild vicissitudes of life were in fact a “high-cultural” and inter-political advance from the insular tribal religions of the past,<sup>89</sup> and were to become so dominant as to remain firmly rooted for millennia. A modern man must drench his pores in this divinely permeated milieu to fully comprehend an ancient world that was drowning in idol worship.

To the ANE mind, the existence of the gods was beyond question. A Mesopotamian man, moreover, did not wander and ponder their precise theological identities; he simply submitted to their demanding ritual requirements for his own

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<sup>89</sup> Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 45.

survival, and the flourishing of farm and family.<sup>90</sup> Because he depended on fertility of field and womb in a world clearly beyond his control, the ancient cowered beneath a cosmos heavily enchanted with divine forces, and faced every struggle and every need from within this framework. Nothing in the ANE existed outside of “religion,” a saturating context that was no mere Sunday service but rather “occupie[d] the central position and play[ed] a unique role – informing, inflecting, integrating, stabilizing, even at times controlling and determining all others.”<sup>91</sup> Most Mesopotamian languages did not even have a single or separate word for “religion,” so fundamental was this divine-human collaboration undergirding all of existence.<sup>92</sup> In such a world, “separation of church and state” might be fighting words to an ancient, if not dismissed out of hand as flatly absurd.

To comprehend such a religiously saturated world, the western mind must rewind to an age long before modern medicine, science, fast cars and faster computers, to answer the quivering question born of an existence bound to the whims of nature and nations: should something go wrong with one’s body, spouse, city or subjects, “Who you gonna call?” No need lay beyond the supplication of the divine; and the ancient Mediterranean world can be seen as one in which “one treats toothache by reciting the account of creation, reads the organs of sacrificial victims before waging battle, secures the verity of speech acts with sacred oaths, and conducts international diplomacy through appeals to

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<sup>90</sup> Assmann, *Moses*, 39.

<sup>91</sup> Bruce Lincoln, “Epilogue,” in Johnston, 657.

<sup>92</sup> Lincoln, 658.

mythic genealogy.”<sup>93</sup> This pervasive polytheistic worldview remained entrenched and uncritically accepted, in fact, until the time of the Greeks.<sup>94</sup>

Small wonder, then, that a system of chronic ritual appeasement of these capricious forces became a core piece of pagan practice. Ancient society organized its very existence around its gods, their ritual worship, and the temple at the heart of the city. It is only a recent concept that religion could “be regarded as true or meaningful apart from or even independent of established communities and institutions,” and that individuals might consider themselves “believers even though they see no need to participate in cultic activity.”<sup>95</sup> This separation between belief and practice would have baffled the ancient mind; and the sense of one’s identity, place, and role as revolving around the gods and their earthly idols helps paint a thickly enchanted backdrop for ancient Israel. No minor fancy or fringe movement, idolatry rather served as a consuming and addictive gateway to a permeating worldview. It would prove almost impossible for Israel to get clean.

## **Characteristics of Mesopotamian Religion**

As mentioned, the earliest records of Mesopotamian religion date to around the invention of writing in 3300 BC,<sup>96</sup> and these records across time reveal that many aspects of the religious traditions, such as liturgical hymns and annual festivals, remained in

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<sup>93</sup> Lincoln, 658

<sup>94</sup> Lincoln, 658

<sup>95</sup> Uehlinger and Keel, *Gods*, 8.

<sup>96</sup> Lincoln, 658.

place for well over a thousand years.<sup>97</sup> This longevity allows for a comparison of the essential and repetitive features of ANE religion, including, for a biblical study, those of Egypt. As discussed further below, Egyptian consecration rituals parallel those of Mesopotamia and appear to have been in use for over a thousand years as well.<sup>98</sup> Such comparative material helps to confirm the long-standing vice grip that polytheistic belief and practice held on the ancient world of the Hebrew Bible.

The polytheistic religions of the ANE tended to include four general features: a pantheon of gods who ruled and the priests who attended them; a temple in which these deities dwelled; images of the gods enlivened through consecration rituals; and a system of ritual “feeding” and care for these animated idols.<sup>99</sup> This study will now take a closer look at each of these features.

### *The Gods: Polytheism*

The ancients were bound to the cycles of agriculture and depended on earthly blessings of waters and rain, fruitful wives and harvests, fishing and trade, thrusting them upon the mercy of seasons and stars, skies and seas. The earth was clearly run by invisible forces, enchanted at the seams with divine (or demonic) agents; and their lives were permeated with this god-consciousness. Society orbited around its local gods. Citizens brought offerings to the gods and supplicated them for blessings, protection,

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<sup>97</sup> Beaulieu, 166-167.

<sup>98</sup> McDowell, 87.

<sup>99</sup> Beaulieu, 166.

pregnancy, and favor; they worshiped and honored the gods, named their children after the gods—indeed, they “lived every minute of their daily lives in the gods’ shadow.”<sup>100</sup>

The deities were held to reside beyond the cosmos in a vaguely “mythological” sense, but they were not transcendent over creation like the God of Genesis. Rather, they comprised an immanent part of the seen, material world,<sup>101</sup> which was always in flux due to the divine realm’s repeatedly piercing the earthly veil and bending world affairs to their whims. Unlike the fixed creational categories of Genesis, the Mesopotamian cosmos was in an endless process of being re-formed, re-made, and in the case of idols, populated with “reproductions” of the gods that became as ontologically “real” in the material realm as their invisible referents.<sup>102</sup> In this way, the polytheistic world was a vulnerably open system, with unseen powers manipulating events in unpredictable ways; and much religious ritual revolved around the effort to harness and control this divine unpredictability.

Yet such ritualistic work involved more than keeping a fussy god satisfied. The ritual interplay between the gods and men held up the very beams of the cosmos itself and kept the ever-encroaching chaos at bay. In fact, through ritual worship, “[the ancient man] assumed the burden and awesome responsibility of caring for the gods and the

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<sup>100</sup> Kugel, *The God of Old*, 80.

<sup>101</sup> Oppenheim and Reiner, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, 184.

<sup>102</sup> Zainab Bahrani, *The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria*, Archaeology, Culture, and Society (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 132. Bahrani stresses that in the ancient view, a “copy” or “representation” was not an item of lesser quality that merely pointed to the “original,” as a modern Xerox copy or a portrait is only a copy of the “real” original; but rather, the representation became a manifestation of the referent in its own right, as valued and genuine as the original. Bahrani, 127–28. This opens up a wider discussion of when a mere icon transcends its “referential” and semiotic purpose and becomes the thing worshiped itself—a common concern in iconoclastic reforms.

cosmos;”<sup>103</sup> and as such, “the nonobservance of ritual interrupts the maintenance of cosmic and social order.”<sup>104</sup> To abandon the worship of all lesser gods to worship one God alone would be ludicrous, if not lethal: for the man who neglected a slighted deity’s worship was a man fated for calamity.<sup>105</sup> A Nietzschean “death of the gods” would be no thrilling freedom cry to a polytheist, but a dangerous courting of cosmic catastrophe.

Because of the ubiquity of the gods and their cosmic rituals, the ancient Mediterranean landscape was punctuated with sacred spaces. Altars and “high places” were a common visual language, illustrated by the traveler in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* who inquires, when coming upon a foreign altar, “whether this altar belongs to the nymphs, to Pan, or to a local divinity.”<sup>106</sup> Altars and sacred structures were a familiar and generally unthreatening sight to a traveling polytheist;<sup>107</sup> the anxiety of the pagan mind was not that his neighbor might worship a false god, but that he himself might neglect the worship of an unknown god and inadvertently fall under his curse.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Lincoln, 662.

<sup>104</sup> Assmann, 25.

<sup>105</sup> The only known major monotheistic effort in the ancient world, outside of Israel, occurred in the 15th C. BC in Egypt during Akhenaten’s reign. So disruptive was it to Egypt’s traditional polytheism that it was fiercely overturned after only twenty years, and its memory wiped out indelibly from the historical records. Egyptologist Jan Assmann describes the people’s rejection of Akhenaten’s Amarna revolution (and its tragic neglect of the former gods) in stark tones: “The nonobservance of ritual interrupts the maintenance of cosmic and social order. The consciousness of a catastrophic and irreparable crime must have been quite widespread.” Assmann, 25. This offers a vantage point on the chokehold of polytheism on the ancient mind and further supports its hostility against monotheistic belief—a factor which must be addressed by those proposing a gradual, “naturalistic” shift to monotheism in Israelite religion. This will be discussed further in chapter 6.

<sup>106</sup> Quoted by Fritz Graf, “What is Ancient Mediterranean Religion?”, in Johnston, 12. Gods and altars populated Greek culture, though by this time ancient belief was beginning to make way for “western” thought. Cf. Lincoln, 658.

<sup>107</sup> Assmann, 3.

<sup>108</sup> Assmann, 28.

Due to this anxiety to cover one's divine bases, peoples of the ancient world regularly mixed and borrowed gods and rituals in a sort of "religious comparison shopping."<sup>109</sup> Despite this hodgepodge approach to deity-swapping, important local gods tended to remain in place for generations, although new deities might be added to the divine pantheon or old ones shuffled around in importance. Gods were especially likely to shift during political changes—notably, the great Babylonian god Marduk, who figures prominently in the pages of the OT (e.g., Jer 51:44), was "initially a nondescript local god who got 'promoted' to top billing in the pantheon with a change in dynasty."<sup>110</sup> The pantheon could grow or shrink over time, as the case may be; what could not shrink was the relentless ritual attention paid to the official gods.

"Having many gods" may be a simple definition of polytheism, but the roots of this complex worldview ran deep in the ancient Near East and clashed violently with the stable and fixed structures of monotheism.<sup>111</sup> A polytheistic worldview eschewed any fixed center and shifted tolerantly and flexibly with changing times, powers, and politics; this adaptability, in fact, gave polytheism its staying power for thousands of years.<sup>112</sup> The gods became "translatable" within a sophisticated international system that recognized their new universality, against the ethnocentric exclusivity of the former primitive tribal deities and ancestral spirits.<sup>113</sup> That the deities were understood to be global in nature and

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<sup>109</sup> Johnston, *Religions of the Ancient World*, ix-x.

<sup>110</sup> Beaulieu, 167-168.

<sup>111</sup> Oppenheim and Reiner, 182.

<sup>112</sup> Oppenheim and Reiner, 182.

<sup>113</sup> Assmann, 45.



only different in geographical name gave rise to a common “semantic universe” that lent itself to trading, borrowing, and “cross-cultural translation” of the gods.<sup>114</sup> Thus, a religiously tolerant international culture took root, bearing a resemblance to modern religious clashes; for then as now, an exclusive (aniconic) monotheism makes disruptive and even distasteful claims on an otherwise “open-minded,” tolerant pagan culture. Unlike the inclusivity of polytheism, to a monotheistic people, “false gods cannot be translated.”<sup>115</sup>

### *The Temple: The Dwelling of the Gods*

If the gods were the unseen movers of worldly affairs, the temple was the earthly abode in which they were adorned and adored, and entreated (or enticed) for favor and protection. Through this rigorous ritual dance between human and divine, man took up his mantle of cosmic responsibility, “performing each minute part of the [ritual] in perfectly controlled, symbolically appropriate fashion.”<sup>116</sup> Temples were an omnipresent focal point of ancient society, and prodigious amounts of time and treasure were poured into their construction and the maintenance of their expensive priesthood and ritual systems.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Assmann, 45.

<sup>115</sup> Assmann, 3.

<sup>116</sup> Lincoln, 662.

<sup>117</sup> Carol Meyers, “Temple, Jerusalem,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 6:359.

The temple stood at the heart of ancient society and was located, literally, at the center of the city. In the ANE, people identified as members of their city more than of the nation—it was the city where a person was born, where he belonged, and where he wanted to be buried. As such, he was loyal to the god of his city, its lord and master.<sup>118</sup> The temple housed and fed the community’s divine leader,<sup>119</sup> who was joined in his temple by a spouse, children, and a pantheon of lesser gods.<sup>120</sup> The god was served vigorously by a retinue of officials and priests who worked to sustain him as he ruled and served the city in return.<sup>121</sup> In addition to the daily temple rites, annual feasts were held that reinforced the community’s sense of belonging, encouraging unity and identity amongst the people.<sup>122</sup> During such festivals, the gods were often brought outside and paraded through the city, so the citizens had a chance to behold their divinity, and the normally veiled “pageantry” of the temple was on display for the common man.<sup>123</sup>

It might be tempting to view the temple as a sort of “divine favor factory,” but it must be remembered that the ritual system was founded on a more nuanced idea of *reciprocity*. The relationship between the god and his (or her) subjects was one of mutual obligation and mutual sustenance—the gods did not simply nourish the earth and its denizens in a top-down direction, but the human and divine sustained each other.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Assmann, 26.

<sup>119</sup> David Lorton, “The Theology of Cult Statues in Ancient Egypt,” in Dick, 131.

<sup>120</sup> Frans Wiggerman, “Mesopotamia,” in Johnston, 601–2.

<sup>121</sup> Oppenheim and Reiner, 186.

<sup>122</sup> Assmann, 26.

<sup>123</sup> Oppenheim and Reiner, 187.

<sup>124</sup> Lorton, 135.

Israel, by contrast, would need to learn that the transcendent Creator had no need of her mutual sustenance (Ps 50:9-12), yet desired to bless her abundantly as she loved and obeyed him. The pagan, on the other hand, viewed himself as a vital partner in nourishing and sustaining the temple gods; and this reciprocity was reinforced daily in the temple.

### *The Idols: The Living Presence of the Gods*

If the temple was the earthly abode of the invisible god, the way in which he took up physical residence there was by means of his idol. It is here that this study's concern over the dubious worship of inanimate objects comes alive—quite literally—through the process of idol-making and consecration.

An idol, in ANE thought, was no lifeless chunk of wood. The purpose of the consecration ritual was, through performance of a precise procedure, to animate the statue with the living presence of the god himself. As such, a pagan did not recognize any object as an *idol*, per se—the image either became a *god* through the consecration ritual or it failed in its purpose.<sup>125</sup> Although an idol today might be viewed in a sanitized museum case, the cultic image cannot be understood apart from this living and interconnected context.<sup>126</sup> Idols were crucial and obsessed-over beings; they *were* the gods, and after indwelling their image, they were mysteriously acting, and being acted upon, through the temple ministrations.

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<sup>125</sup> Tugendhaft and Ellenbogen, *Idol Anxiety*, 3.

<sup>126</sup> Mary Beard, “Visual Representations,” in Johnston, 599.

The consecration ritual was the lengthy procedure by which a crafted object progressed into its new identity and status. Through a complex and meticulous process, often occurring over several days, the idol was distanced from its human manufacture and born anew as a living manifestation of the god. Both the Babylonian and Egyptian rituals involved the “Opening of the Mouth,” a process intended to open and activate the god’s senses so that he could eat, hear, see, and become sentient within the physical world.<sup>127</sup> As the Babylonian incantation declares, ““This statue without its mouth opened cannot smell incense, cannot eat food, nor drink water.””<sup>128</sup>

Although not limited to his statue, the god was yet held to be truly present and visible to the worshipers only through the medium of his idol. The god was considered to “move” into or away from the city as his image was so moved; and should a people be attacked and their god taken as spoil, this was seen as the god’s punishment due to some egregious oversight in his cultic ritual.<sup>129</sup> A victorious army might seize a city’s idols as a way of “controlling” the local deities and rendering the vanquished people helpless.<sup>130</sup> A captured god was imagined to fly away from his image, back to heaven, leaving the

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<sup>127</sup> McDowell, 82–83.

<sup>128</sup> Graf, 13.

<sup>129</sup> Oppenheim and Reiner, 184.

<sup>130</sup> In fact, in the Assyrian list of booty grabbed from the exile of Samaria, they list among the spoils, ““the gods in whom they trusted’ (i.e., divine images).” Christoph Uehlinger, 609. Not only does this confirm the ANE view of cultic images as “gods,” but also adds a complex archaeological layer to understanding Israel’s syncretistic worship in light of the ostensible ban against idols, as discussed in chapter 2.

image defunct—a tragic misfortune. A humiliated king might plead for the idol’s return. To return a god to his people was considered a great mercy.<sup>131</sup>

The consecration rituals of idols maintain a long-ranging presence in the ancient records. The most substantial records of this image-animating ritual in Egypt date from around 1450 BC,<sup>132</sup> placing it within the timeframe of Israelite slavery in Egypt (whether one holds to an early or late date of the exodus). Furthermore, the earliest reference to this same ritual appears in 3100 BC on the Palermo Stone,<sup>133</sup> attesting to its cultural longevity. Similarly, the Neo-Assyrian/Babylonian consecration ritual appears in copious records dating from the 8<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> C. BC, with the majority of its texts unearthed from Nineveh in the 7<sup>th</sup> C. BC,<sup>134</sup> and here, too, evidence of the mouth-opening ritual appears in Assyrian records dating back to 2200 BC—again confirming the ritual’s long tenure in ANE polytheistic practice.<sup>135</sup> As a matter of interest, and as a specific example, this paper will take a detailed look at the Babylonian consecration ritual of temple idols.

### **Excursus: The Babylonian Mīs Pî Consecration Ritual**

Mesopotamian rituals tended to be either less formal affairs of medicine and warding off evil spirits, or complex rituals involving incantations etched on numerous

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<sup>131</sup> José Faur, “The Biblical Idea of Idolatry,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 69, no. 1 (1978): 8–9, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1453972>. Or perhaps a tremendous relief, as seen in the Philistines’ return of the ark of the covenant after being hassled and cursed by the “captured” God of Israel (1 Sam 6).

<sup>132</sup> McDowell, 87–88.

<sup>133</sup> McDowell, 86.

<sup>134</sup> Walker and Dick, 67.

<sup>135</sup> Walker and Dick, 70.

tablets and performed over several days.<sup>136</sup> The Mīs Pî, or “Mouth-Washing,” Ritual of Consecration, belonged to this latter group, and its title echoes the language of birth and gestation and may have been named after the efforts of midwives to clean and open a newborn’s air passages for breathing.<sup>137</sup> In a similar way, this ritual was intended to “give birth” to the divinity’s image and open its sensing capacities. To this end, the idol passed through a three-stage process of transformation from inert matter into a living image “born in heaven.”<sup>138</sup>

This brief overview will trace the contours of this animation ritual, with example instructions to the priests and prescribed incantations, throwing open a window onto the mesmerizing steps of this procedure.

### *I. Pre-liminal Stage*

The image, after being fashioned in the temple workshop by the craftsman, is carried away and metaphorically “distanced” from its human fabrication. The idol is set down by the banks of a river in a country orchard.<sup>139</sup> The setting sun symbolizes the dying of the idol’s wooden existence and the forthcoming “birth” of a new day and his new identity.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Walker and Dick, 68.

<sup>137</sup> Walker and Dick, 68.

<sup>138</sup> Walker and Dick, 68.

<sup>139</sup> Walker and Dick, 85.

<sup>140</sup> Walker and Dick, 72.

A. Example instructions for the priests: “You place a red cloth in front of the god and a white cloth to the right of the god ... You raise your hand and the incantation, ‘Born in heaven by your own power,’ you recite three times ... You open the thigh of a ram, and an axe, a nail, a saw, a tortoise and a turtle of silver and gold you place inside; you bind it up and throw it into the river.”<sup>141</sup>

## II. *Liminal Stage*

In the hours before dawn, the statue is divinely “birthed.” A womb-like trough is filled with the river’s life-giving “semen” and placed on the bricks of the Birth Goddess. Nine deities are invoked, likely recalling the nine months of pregnancy.<sup>142</sup>

A. Example instructions: “Sifted barley you scatter, a censer of juniper you sprinkle, cedar in your hand you raise, and the incantation, ‘Born in heaven by his own power,’ you recite three times; the incantation, ‘Shamash, great lord of heaven and earth,’ the incantation, ‘Water of life, the river rising in flood...’”<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Walker and Dick, 75.

<sup>142</sup> Walker and Dick, 76.

<sup>143</sup> Walker and Dick, 79.

### III. *Post-liminal Stage*

At sunrise, the image is transformed into a living god: his mouth is opened, food is set before him, and “his eyes are turned towards the sunshine.”<sup>144</sup> The craftsman’s hands are symbolically bound and “cut off” with a wooden sword as he is made to swear, “I did not make him (the statue), Ninagal (who is) Ea (god) of the smith made him.” The god is then “taken by the hand” and led back to the temple for installation.<sup>145</sup>

A. Example instructions: “You take the hand of the god...all the way to that god’s temple you recite. At the door of that god’s temple you make an offering. You take the god’s hand and make him enter, and the incantation, ‘My king, to your heart’s content...’”<sup>146</sup>

The Mīs Pī ritual that gave birth to the god was a cooperative effort between the deity and his human servants. Craftsmen made the idol, but they were required to disavow their role in fashioning the image so that the god could be effectively reborn and transformed in essence. To the Babylonian, humans did not bestow life to the statue by their own power; the god had *already* been born in heaven and awaited entry into his earthly vessel by means of the participants’ magic liturgy. The ancients did not presume to make God—they simply gave him a body.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 82–83.

<sup>145</sup> Walker and Dick, 80–81.

<sup>146</sup> Walker and Dick, 83.

<sup>147</sup> Walker and Dick, 114–15.



### *The Ritual: Caring for the Gods*

The “birth” of the god’s image was only the beginning of its journey. “From the moment of creation, the image was indeed enmeshed in a ritual context that continued throughout its existence.”<sup>148</sup> The image birthed in heaven had now been born on earth—and this newborn god demanded continual care and provision if he was to shower favor on the people. Once installed in the temple, the priests took up the daily responsibility of maintaining the god’s meticulous feeding, clothing, worship, and attendance—no small task. Kitchen notes that, in contrast to Yahweh’s comparatively “light” ritual commands of a twice-daily sacrifice, plus a drink libation (equaling, as he counts it, about three ritual “acts”), the Ugaritic and Emar rituals of the 13<sup>th</sup> C. BC were “large and lavish,” and those of contemporary Egypt involved “not less than forty-eight to sixty-two ‘acts’ thrice a day!”<sup>149</sup>

In terms of the meal portion alone, these steps comprised the main “acts” for feeding the god: first, a table is brought in, and water set on the table so the god can wash his hands. (All of this occurs behind a curtain so the god can maintain his privacy.)<sup>150</sup> Meat is served, then fruit, and musicians play while the god eats. Though the meal was not physically consumed, the food was imagined to be transformed into nourishment for the god, “the transubstantiation of the physical offerings into that source of strength and

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<sup>148</sup> Irene J. Winter, “‘Idols of the King’: Royal Images as Recipients of Ritual Action in Ancient Mesopotamia,” *Journal of Ritual Studies* 6, no. 1 (1992): 30.

<sup>149</sup> Kitchen, *On the Reliability*, 281. This offers helpful context to the LORD’s exasperation at finding Israel sniffing contemptuously at his temple sacrifices and sighing, “What a burden!” (Mal 1:12) It is a sign of the LORD’s patient restraint that he didn’t send them back to Egypt to take comparative notes.

<sup>150</sup> Oppenheim and Reiner, 192–93.

power that the deity was thought to need for effective functioning.”<sup>151</sup> Afterward, the space would be aired out for lingering food odors, and water brought again for handwashing. After the meal had been “received” by the deity and blessed, it was sent to the king to eat, with the god’s blessing transferring to the king, and by extension, to the people.<sup>152</sup>

Although this performance might bewilder modern comprehension, ancient religion was founded on this regular participation with the divine through ritual activity, which was his only means of maintaining vital contact with the supernatural, to whom the ancient man was beholden.<sup>153</sup> He understood that his position within the cosmic order was fundamentally subservient to the gods: “Mesopotamian creation myths consistently portray humans as being created to serve the gods, doing toilsome labor to meet their needs.”<sup>154</sup> At the same time, it was considered an honor to be tasked to sustain a god and his cult;<sup>155</sup> such mutuality with the gods did not involve mere unilateral slavery, but a privileged (albeit painstaking) participation with the divine within the cosmic order.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Oppenheim and Reiner, 191.

<sup>152</sup> Oppenheim and Reiner, 189.

<sup>153</sup> Winter, ““Idols of the King,”” 16.

<sup>154</sup> Mary Schieferstein, “Created Male and Female: What Ancient Near Eastern Texts Can Reveal About Biological Sex in Genesis 1-2,” *Presbyterion* 48, no. 1 (2022): 197.

<sup>155</sup> Bruce Lincoln expresses the mutuality of the Babylonian temple rites further: “The priests of this temple [Esagila] were charged with the care, feeding, decoration, and worship of Marduk’s resident statue, which is to say his virtual, palpable presence. This was not mere servitude, however, since deity and people were engaged in an ongoing mutually beneficial exchange. The flow of benefits to humanity was particularly dramatized at the *Akitu* (New Year) festival, when the king clasped the hands of Marduk’s image and thereby had his legitimacy and power renewed by the god himself, with consequences for the prosperity of the land and people.” Lincoln, 661. Even polytheistic systems founded on the subjection of man to the gods seem to have offered a comforting semblance of stability and spectacle.

<sup>156</sup> The mutuality in Mesopotamian religious rites included the king, whose royal image was often endowed with divine life and power, as were the temple idols. Winter, 35. In Egypt, the king was considered one of

Admittedly, although no exact formula could be proven to “work” consistently, there was no avoiding the perpetual drive to appease the divine in the ancient world.<sup>157</sup> In a frightening and uncontrollable environment, the comfort and control that ritual offered was not easy to abandon; and the religious anxiety was not over correct belief as much as correct *practice*—one did not anger a god through theological errors but by neglecting his ritual care and worship.<sup>158</sup> God countered these false views in Israel by both insisting on right belief (*orthodoxy*) and right practice (*orthopraxy*): he vetoed from the start a worship of images which reinforced wrong beliefs about the human and divine relationship; and he also taught them correct beliefs that would lead to correct practice. Treating these two aspects together is important because, as the next chapter will demonstrate, wrong belief and wrong practice always go hand in hand.

## Summary

To the ancient Near Easterner, “idolater” was neither an epithet or scandalous business; and a polytheist would likely not have thought twice whether “this thing in my right hand is a lie” (Isa 44:20). However, for Israel, rescued out of paganism and thrust

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the gods, whereas in Mesopotamia, he acted as both their earthly emissary and at times their actual incarnation; in Israelite religion, by contrast, “the monarchy is not an institution rooted in the cosmic order, and it is not part of the primordial structure of the world ... the Israelite king has no special role in divine worship, and he is not responsible for the rainfall or the success of the crops.” Halbertal and Margalit, 220. In Mesopotamia, not only is the king a divine figure, but his “royal image stands as the absolute embodiment of the ruler. Indeed...the ruler is absolute only in his images.” Winter, 34. This offers context to the Hebrew aversion, not only to explicit idols, but to bowing before even a “royal” statue. Had this image been likewise consecrated with the divine animus, it becomes clear why an ancient king might command the people to “bow to *my image!*” (A request that, again, an aniconic Yahweh worshiper would have to politely refuse, as did the Jewish captives before Nebuchadnezzar’s golden image in Dan 3.) Further study could center on the relation of these ancient royal images to the living (and speaking!) “image of the beast” who compels worship in Rev 13:15.

<sup>157</sup> Walter Burkert, “Sacrifice, Offerings, and Votives,” in Johnston, 326.

<sup>158</sup> Assmann, 28.

immediately into the cold shower of aniconic monotheism, this cultural custom would prove to be a deeply rooted compulsion, an addiction of sorts that would require long-term “weaning” or a “withdrawal program” for the newly formed nation.<sup>159</sup> Yahweh was certainly long-suffering and methodical as he retrained this formerly pagan people; and though commanded to quit idols cold turkey, Israel was warmly gathered by God and graciously given a meaningful temple cult, rituals, and festivals—familiar cultural forms, but endowed with deep truths about their Redeemer and his holy ways. Separate from the nations they may be, and strange in aspects of their worship, but not so odd as to be incomprehensible. They would begin here, in this polytheistic setting, learning to embody Yahweh’s truth in a deluded world, and inviting the nations to the true worship and real blessing of the Creator God.

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<sup>159</sup> Assmann, 76. (Citing quotes from both John Spencer (1600s) and Maimonides.)

## Chapter 6

### **An Argument for Early Aniconic Worship in Israel**

Considering the Bible's unbroken stance against idolatry, and the corrupting nature of ANE idol worship, a strong case can be made for the literary and theological necessity of an early image ban, delivered at Israel's inception. Idolatry could be no harmless lark for a holy people; and yet, idol worship would remain a universal and manifest pressure. A pagan adopted a dependence on idolatry like a westerner might adopt the latest touchscreen technology (and turn to it just as often in stress!). Due to this ubiquitous idol compulsion, it is difficult to ascribe Israel's radical departure from the norm to a naturalistic shift rather than to a dynamic external catalyst.

In answer to the archaeological evidence of idolatry in ancient Israel, some scholars hypothesize a polytheistic origin of Israelite religion, claiming that it embraced idol worship until postexilic politics enforced a new austere national identity.<sup>160</sup> However, a move to aniconic monotheism by way of political agenda is tough to argue in light of a pervasive polytheism which was not unfriendly to shifting power plays.<sup>161</sup> Within this flexible framework, Yahweh might have been made the primary God of the new regime, as was Marduk in Babylon's regime change; but why should the leaders push an unnecessary, and in that era highly unlikely,<sup>162</sup> monotheistic identity, and an even more disruptive aniconic worship, without a super-natural stipulation? Indeed, it is just

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<sup>160</sup> Uehlinger, 609-610.

<sup>161</sup> Beaulieu, 167-168. See p. 38 where this is discussed further.

<sup>162</sup> Assmann, 169.

this divine instigation of Israelite religion claimed by Scripture which best explains such a countercultural and improbable leap within the ANE context.

That Israel wrestled with its temptations, of course, lends credence to the vice grip idolatry had on the ancient Mediterranean world; and as Scripture unsparingly relates, the people repeatedly fused pagan elements into their Yahwistic worship. It is here that the archaeological record can confirm such syncretism (or conversely, can support the argument for national polytheistic origins, depending on a scholar's interpretation). For example, a Hebrew inscription found in northern Sinai from around 800 BC carries the invocation, "By YHWH of Samaria [or of Teman] and his Asherah" (a well-known Canaanite goddess).<sup>163</sup> Archaeological digs have also unearthed Asherah figurines in Palestine, the goddess who is likely referenced in Jeremiah's attack on the worship of the "Queen of Heaven" (7:18);<sup>164</sup> and the Assyrians boasted of conquering Samaria and carting off "the gods [idols] in whom they trusted."<sup>165</sup> Scholars thus debate the dating of the strict "Thou shalt not" of image-making: was the 2<sup>nd</sup> commandment simply flouted by the nation, or was programmatic aniconism not instated until the reforms of King Josiah in the 7<sup>th</sup> C. BC (1 Kgs 23)<sup>166</sup> or even after the trauma of the Babylonian exile?<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Christoph Uehlinger, 609.

<sup>164</sup> John J. Collins, "Israel," in Johnston, 183.

<sup>165</sup> Uehlinger, 609.

<sup>166</sup> John J. Collins, 183.

<sup>167</sup> Other scholars see a progression of Israelite religion in which a sporadic, "grassroots" aniconic worship of the villages at last becomes the law of the land. As Becking has it, "Existing, and probably very old, traditions of *de facto* aniconism in village and family religion developed gradually into *programmatic* aniconism in the royal cult in Josianic times. In other words, after the images of the gods in whom the Samaritans had vainly trusted were carried away to Assyria, former Israelites living in Judah went on to develop a new view of God." Bob Becking, "Assyrian Evidence for Iconic Polytheism" in van der Toorn,

Whether instituted by monarch or postexilic leader, theories of an evolutionary development of Israel's aniconism have not been without pushback in the academic community.

### **On the Evolutionary “Progress” of Religion**

As recounted in chapter 2, the traditional dating of the writing of the Pentateuch has been challenged in biblical scholarship for well over a century. During the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> C., a Hegelian, humanistic approach was applied to the study of religion; drawing from a Darwinistic theory of the natural evolution of species, a similar progression of religious ideologies from “primitive” to “advanced” was postulated.<sup>168</sup> Scripture's claim to divine revelation, while perhaps acceptable for private religious instruction, was no longer admitted as an academically respectable starting point.<sup>169</sup>

Yet this thesis argues that it is the Bible's fundamental claim to divine guidance that is essential to Israel's peculiar religion. Israel's law cannot be understood apart from the immutable nature of God himself; and the archaeological record does appear to generally support, and at minimum does not outright refute, the Bible's historical narrative.<sup>170</sup> Archaeologists have found idols in ancient Israelite sites—the biblical authors found them too, and roundly condemned them. Additionally, many scholars have

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171. Here again is a naturalistic proposal of a discrepancy between household and national religious practice, though it appears to state the opposite view of Albertz' theory. (Cf. footnote 25)

<sup>168</sup> Hess, 28.

<sup>169</sup> Alexander, *Exodus*, 16.

<sup>170</sup> Kenneth Kitchen's support for the historical reliability of the OT is a trove of archaeological backing for conservative biblical scholarship—not to mention his having an unusually crackling wit for an academic writer. Kitchen, K. A. *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2003.

pushed back on the unwarranted skepticism seemingly reserved only for Israelite religion, the unique division of Israelite theology, what the text *claims* as its revelation and history, from the supposed *true* story of its religious evolution.<sup>171</sup> The narrative of the OT is dismissed as biased and untrustworthy because of its faith claims, with iconographical discoveries given precedence over the text, and even used to contradict the narrative of Scripture.<sup>172</sup> However, these naturalistic theories are not without their weaknesses.

One key issue lies in the presuppositions of evolution itself, proposing a natural “progress” from simple to more complex forms in ways that can prove difficult to explain without direction from an outside intelligence. In religious studies in particular, to propose a shift from a primitive to “advanced” theology as a natural shift can be problematic. Jan Assmann contends that the historical record gives no evidence of a “primary” (i.e., polytheistic) religion ever evolving gradually into a “secondary” (i.e., monotheistic) religion; when one encounters a secondary religion, it has either erupted out of revolution or “revelation,” and vigorously rejects and separates itself from key aspects of the primary religion. In other words, monotheistic belief, historically, tends to be reactionary, not a natural “next stage.”<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Hess, 16.

<sup>172</sup> A representative view of this approach is traced by Karel van der Toorn in discussing the “iconographical (i.e. archaeological images) project” of the Swiss Fribourg School: “Led by Othmar Keel, a team of dedicated scholars set out to convince students of ancient Israelite religion that they were well advised not to ignore the information on Israelite religion provided by the iconographic data. Since the latter constituted a source of information independent of the Bible (*and therefore free from biased editing*), they allowed a privileged perspective on early Israel.” Van der Toorn, 15; emphasis mine. The biblical account is here assumed to obfuscate historical fact, and a bias toward a contradictory interpretation of images is favored, as opposed to allowing both images and text to interpret each other—the traditionally accepted approach to archaeological studies.

<sup>173</sup> Assmann, 169.



Moreover, biblical scholars have argued that there is in fact a compelling consistency of Israelite belief over time, and evidence of widespread, long-term monotheistic worship and identity.<sup>174</sup> Additionally, if Israel was indeed a polytheistic nation until the Babylonian exile, as some scholars propose, she would almost certainly have viewed her exile as the triumph of *Babylon's* gods—not, as she actually did, as the ultimate covenant curse brought down by the nation's sovereign God, whom she admittedly had betrayed through her idolatry.<sup>175</sup> It was this trauma and penitence, not a spontaneous shift, that caused her to utterly abandon idols after returning to the land.<sup>176</sup> As Yehezkel Kaufmann insists, “Monotheism was the birthright of the nation from its inception.”<sup>177</sup>

## A Theological Case for Original Aniconism

A dating of the ban against idolatry to the time of the exodus community fits with the consistent theology and story of Scripture. In referencing the creation account of

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<sup>174</sup> Moshe Greenberg, for example, studied extemporaneous prayer in the Hebrew Bible and argues that “these prayers of ancient Israel do not give evidence of an evolution in popular beliefs over the centuries”; and Jeffrey Tigay studied Hebrew inscriptions in both North and South kingdoms and argues that “the evidence points to the widespread worship of a single deity.” Hess concludes, “The works of Greenberg and Tigay remain a strong contrast to the prevailing view that assumes a development in ancient Israel from polytheism to the worship of a single deity.” Hess, 69.

<sup>175</sup> Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, trans. Moshe Greenberg (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 12.

<sup>176</sup> Halbertal and Margalit, 2.

<sup>177</sup> Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, 23. Again, a full treatment of monotheism in Israel is beyond the scope of this thesis, but one must acknowledge the extensive and ongoing debate between humanistic and divine origins of Israel's religion. Any member of a faith-based biblical community, however, may take heart: an adherence to divine inspiration need not equate to an unscientific and ahistorical approach to the Bible. Indeed, to strip Scripture of its chronological and narrative unity, and dissect it amongst later purported editors and agendas, can end in such fracturing of the OT text that it becomes impossible to say anything meaningful about Israelite religion at all. Hess, 12.

Genesis, the second commandment grounds its mandate in the primary Creator-creation distinction—no arbitrary law, but one founded in the proper relationship of God to man, and man to creation. In contrast, the making and worship of idols was steeped in a view of the human and divine that staunchly opposed the truth revealed in Genesis. No part of idolatry could be redeemed; the medium itself promoted a false worldview.

Yet God’s strict prohibition of idolatry also had a positive side. By invoking the creation account, he was restoring man to his position of honor—in saying an emphatic “no” to idols, God was pronouncing a wholehearted “yes” to man’s creational dignity and dominion in the earth. Genesis proclaimed that man was made in the “image of God” (1:26-28); and the words “subdue” and “have dominion” in the creation account were usually applied to kings in the ANE context, underscoring that humanity—both male and female—was appointed to a royal role over creation.<sup>178</sup> How debased in comparison was man’s role of perpetual servitude to the capricious gods of polytheism (who were not even truly “gods!” Cf. Jer 2:11)! As Jeremiah declares: “They became as worthless as what they worshiped” (2:5). In bowing to lifeless idols, men were in bondage to death. Israel had been redeemed from such deadly slavery to serve the Living God.

Yet for the wider ANE world, polytheistic idol worship would continue to be the default setting. Even the patriarchs and Hebrew forebears of Genesis appear to incorporate idol use and totems without comment (cf. Gen 31:34); before the giving of the law, the boundaries surrounding idol use had not been defined and were not yet enforced.<sup>179</sup> But with the Decalogue’s drawing of firm moral lines, a new day had

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<sup>178</sup> Schieferstein, “Created Male and Female,” 197–98.

<sup>179</sup> Hess, 151.

dawned. Israel now drew her identity from her covenant LORD and the historic act of the exodus event.<sup>180</sup> This dramatic rescue had been her “big bang”—no naturalistic evolution, but a dynamic ignition from the God of Creation, grounding the covenant and justifying his jealous demands for Israel’s exclusive, aniconic worship. She could have no other gods before her covenant LORD, and she could not worship the one who rescued her out of pagan worship by means of its corrupting mechanisms.

### *The Second Commandment—the First to be Broken*

Interestingly, this command which took such prominence of place and space on the stone tablets was, tellingly, the first to be broken. In the infamous episode of the golden calf idol in Exodus 32, the Israelites were growing anxious: Moses seemed to have tarried (or expired?) in his solo tête-à-tête with the LORD on Mount Sinai, and in their impatience, the people pressured Aaron to fashion a golden god to comfort and guide them. Not only is the bull statue clearly intended in the text as an idol intended for worship, but evidence suggests that the Israelites’ celebration around the golden calf possibly mimicked the consecration rituals intended to animate a pagan image with the divine animus.<sup>181</sup> To a Sunday School student who might have scoffed and wondered, “How could Israel have thought what they made with their hands was a *god*?”, the study of consecration rituals in the previous chapter lends context for understanding such logic.

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<sup>180</sup> Hess, 155.

<sup>181</sup> Faur, “Idolatry,” 11.

First, the Israelites appear to allude to the divinely animated nature of pagan idols when they demand of Aaron, “Make us a *god!*” (not an “idol” or “image”).<sup>182</sup> Further, in the ANE context, a bull image was often used to indicate a Divine Throne on which an invisible god would sit; thus, it is possible that the Israelites recognized Yahweh’s inability to be imaged, but intended to make and ritually consecrate this bull-throne for his spirit to descend and dwell upon.<sup>183</sup> Hess suggests that Aaron’s claims to the calf’s “spontaneous generation” in Exod 32:24, instead of being a risible excuse, was rather spoken in the language of consecration completion, citing the craftsman’s distancing from his human role and claiming that the god was “born from above”<sup>184</sup> (as in the Babylonian disavowal: “I did not make it.”<sup>185</sup>) Bull imagery also often symbolized a divine military commander leading his people to victory, and seemed here to be a hasty substitute for the “God on the mountain, where the Israelites had lost patience in their wait for him to lead them.”<sup>186</sup> Although possible that they intended to induce their exclusive god, “Yahweh,” and not some foreign god, to inhabit or sit atop his statue, the making of any image for divine worship clearly breaks the freshly-given second commandment. Moses’ fierce response and harsh consequences (Exod 32:19-38), moreover, reinforce Scripture’s hardline stance against idolatry from Exodus to Revelation.

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<sup>182</sup> Faur, 11.

<sup>183</sup> Faur, 11.

<sup>184</sup> Hess, 156.

<sup>185</sup> Walker and Dick, 114–15.

<sup>186</sup> Hess, 158.

There is also notable irony in this passage that subtly comments on the pagan notions involved in idolatry. As the people consecrate their statue to compel God to come “down here” where they can interact with him, God remains firmly “up there” on Mount Sinai, growing quite incensed at their swift rebellion! If Genesis laid out Man’s proper orientation to his Creator, here is literary reinforcement as God remains transcendentally “above” the people, even as they try to take matters into their own hands. Some scholars propose, with (oddly) no archaeological evidence, that images of Yahweh, like other contemporary religions, must have been licit in the early Israelite cult and were in fact employed in Temple worship.<sup>187</sup> This infamous episode, with its typically swift reprisal for lawbreakers at God’s inauguration of new laws or administration,<sup>188</sup> appears to countermand any thought of legal idol use in Israel, “Yahwistic” or not.

Idols may have been forbidden on their face, but God did not subsume all ritual activity under the same broad condemnation. He established meaningful rituals and sacrifice in Israel’s worship, with the intention to guide the nation into knowledge of his truth. However, it would soon become evident that even the right ritual can be approached in the wrong way; and Israel’s temple worship, though aniconic, would yet need to be purified of pagan ideas.

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<sup>187</sup> Karel van der Toorn gives two examples of this temple image theory, citing Sigmund Mowinckel, “who argued that the rejection of images was a very late phenomenon in Israel, and that the temple of Jerusalem had long harboured an image of Yahweh,” and Oswald Loretz, who argues that the “beholding the beauty of the LORD” of Psalm 27 must refer to gazing upon a literal Yahwistic statue in the Jerusalem Temple. These views are provocative, but the fact remains that a cult image of Yahweh has not yet turned up in any archaeological dig, and for now the theory must remain purely speculative. Van der Toorn, 17.

<sup>188</sup> For example, Nadab and Abihu’s death after the first installation of the priesthood in Lev 10, and Ananias and Sapphira’s death at the inauguration of the Christian church in Acts 5. Cf. Jay Sklar, *Leviticus: The Lord’s Holy People Living out His Holy Character*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2023), 149.

## *Muddle Behavior*

The world of the ancient Near East was deeply steeped in ritual, and it is worth examining this phenomenon more closely. Ritual behavior should best be viewed as a two-way street, shaping the participant internally even as he performs his external rites. In this way, the idolatrous rituals of polytheism did not simply reflect beliefs about the human-divine relationship—it every day recreated and reinforced those beliefs. “Ritual does more than mirror social order and religious beliefs. It also *creates a reality in which the participants are brought to a new level of understanding.*”<sup>189</sup> Ritual can be deeply formative; and habitual behaviors both reveal and reinforce a person’s deepest beliefs. This truth is recognized throughout the biblical witness: just as God forbade idol practice to protect his people’s right beliefs, Jesus taught that where a person practices storing his treasure is where his heart (and true beliefs) will be found (Luke 12:34). In the same vein, James pronounces a “faith” without habitual good deeds as functionally dead (2:26); and John insists that it is those who regularly “practice” the truth who show themselves to be children of God (1 John 1:6). “What you practice, preaches”—through ritual behavior, a person’s most basic beliefs are broadcast to others and, at the same time, reinforced to his own soul.

On a larger scale, a culture’s core beliefs about reality are conferred to its members through its rituals. Because the ancient religious anxiety was concerned with correctly performing ritual procedure,<sup>190</sup> the very design of such pagan rituals reinforced a worldview in which a pantheon of immanent gods must be appeased by man, and who

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<sup>189</sup> Hess, 79. Emphasis mine.

<sup>190</sup> Assmann, 28.

also depended on their human servants for their earthly sustenance. These pagan presuppositions were not easy for Israel to overcome; and this sheds light on their woeful complacency in assuming, because the temple cult was humming along and the “God” was appeased by their sacrifice, they could carry on oppressing and exploiting their fellow man (cf. Jer 7:4-8). After all, the gods of the nations did not care about moral perfection and justice as much as precise adherence to “prescriptions and taboos.”<sup>191</sup>

However, the Israelites soon discovered they could not “practice” the rituals of Yahwism with a pagan mindset and please their covenant God (cf. Jer 7). Their paganized worship, he announces, not to mention their outright idolatry, was evidence that they were going “backward and not forward” (Jer 7:24). Idol worship and pagan systems were causing regression unto moral stupor, but God was trying to lead them into real progress: a heartfelt embrace of his ways, not empty ritual. “The prophets argued that all such [ritual] gestures were empty if they did not lead to the practice of justice.”<sup>192</sup> God is emphatic—Israel cannot render him hollow (pagan) ritual without heartfelt obedience to his ways:

“For when I brought your ancestors out of Egypt and spoke to them, I did not just give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices, but I gave them this command: Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in obedience to all I command you, that it may go well with you” (Jer 7:22-23).

Sadly, many Israelites would go on struggling with a sick heart that was stuck on pagan ways. They would learn in time not to fear the idol who can “do neither real harm

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<sup>191</sup> Assmann, 39.

<sup>192</sup> John J. Collins, 183.

nor good” (Jer 10:5), but the Living God who will not relent until his people are perfected in holiness.

## **Conclusion**

In the end, it is simply unworkable, from a literary and a theological standpoint, to date a prohibition of idolatry beyond Israel’s founding at Mount Sinai. An aniconic worship could be no trending move, but was grounded in the very nature of Yahweh and the exclusive worship owed him, rightfully, from creation. To argue that Israel progressed naturally into a later aniconic austerity is to disregard the rich cohesion of the biblical narrative, and the striking and humbling truths it holds for all who submit to its authority and instruction. Like Israel, the church would do well to learn the fear of this sovereign, transcendent God—for from start to finish, then as now, God will not rest until his people have no other gods before him, and learn to cast their worthless idols away (Isa 30:22).



## Chapter 7

### The End of the Matter

The ANE approach to idol-making was unabashed and unapologetic: the polytheists intended to, and believed that they did, give life to their gods in the physical realm. This practice was, moreover, utterly uncontroversial<sup>193</sup> until the God of Creation pushed back—hard—on that pagan fantasy. This thesis must conclude, therefore, that idols belong to a class of contraband that is wrong *per se*, a mechanism so anti-God and creational reality that it cannot be redeemed and used for godly ends. Like a website selling “Christian pornography,” or a business engaged in “Biblical human trafficking,” some mergers are so antithetical as to be obscene. Idols were just this kind of atrocity, presenting an instant portal into a deadly worldview—lulling man into perpetual regression, and incapable of ever leading him to truth. The suggestion that Israelite religion allowed for a temple idol of Yahweh would be akin to bringing a Ouija Board to a Bible Study and insisting, “We will only contact the LORD with it.” The medium itself promotes a contact with the spirit realm that is explicitly unauthorized (Lev 20:27; 1 Sam 28). Any reader of the OT within its ancient context, then, must also find incongruous any argument for a sanctioned use of idols in Israelite religion; these illicit objects must have been forbidden to the exodus community from its formation.

The upside is that God gave this command within a gracious covenant designed to nurture an intimate relationship with his people. This cannot be forgotten. God ever

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<sup>193</sup> Even in Akhenaten’s monotheistic revolution in Egypt, the sun god Aten was worshiped by means of a sun disk image in the temple; and other so-called “aniconic” religions employed shapes (rather than explicit images) that purported to house a deity. Hess, 165. Biblical aniconism appears to be unique in regard to its total prohibition of objects for worship.

desires the flourishing of his people; and to identify the ancients' ritual addictions that militated against fellowship with God is to help us identify our own temptations toward habits and false beliefs that war against our connection with Christ. Life under the sun will ever be rife with such temptations, whatever form they may take. The Jews who returned from exile did finally rid themselves of idolatry—praise God! —yet centuries later, the Messiah still found reason to call them a “wicked and adulterous generation” (Matt 16:4). Would it not behoove the church to engage in thoughtful self-inspection to ensure that she, too, is following the “spirit of the law” (Rom 7:6) in her own day? Just as Israel could not worship both Yahweh and idols, the church must identify the “other gods” that tempt her away from pure devotion to God.

### **Taking the God by the Hand**

In this vein, it is worth making a few observations about Israel's temptation toward idolatry that might help the modern church find a connection point. A central characteristic of idol worship seems to involve a desire to interact with the divine on one's own terms (e.g., the golden calf incident), maintaining a sense of control even if it brings enslavement and a degrading of human identity. A phrase from the final act of the Babylonian consecration ritual is telling: “You take the god by the hand” and lead him to the temple.<sup>194</sup> It is notable that the Babylonian found his newborn god so approachable and in need of assistance that the priest could take the deity by the hand and kindly help him to his pedestal. In striking contrast, Uzzah was struck dead after grabbing the ark of

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<sup>194</sup> Sidney Smith, “The Babylonian Ritual for the Consecration and Induction of a Divine Statue,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, no. 1 (1925): 51.

the covenant of God (2 Sam. 6:6-7)—to say nothing of the threat of death for any who saw God’s own face! (Exod 33:20). There appears to be a marked difference between the invisible and untouchable “holiness” of the Living God and the manipulability of the pagan idols. Truthfully, believers today are not above the desire for a tangible talisman, a problem-solving device that is a little more controllable and a little less frightening than the holy presence and sovereign commands of the LORD Almighty.

In addition to a desire for control, a related appeal of idolatry could be its immediacy. When the ancient world faced trouble, they summoned their god to his statue and began to supplicate and sacrifice for instant assistance. The Living God, on the other hand, would not be summoned at will; and although compassionate to those in need, he often kept his people waiting on his divine wisdom and timing. The patience God requires is not easy to maintain under pressure; and it can be suggested that taking matters into one’s own hands is a core compulsion of pagan worship. Consider again the Golden Calf affair—in their impatience with waiting on the real God and his servant on Sinai, the people panicked and compelled Aaron to “make us a god to lead us!” Of course, any deity fashioned with the hands and summoned at will is only a fantasy god made in man’s own image, no less imaginary and ineffectual than a child playing with dolls in a world that she controls: “What she wants is for [the dolls’] identity to be clear so that she can interact with them in here, on her own turf and terms, with herself in charge; for that purpose they are just perfect.”<sup>195</sup> Child’s play may be appropriate for children; but adults cannot toy with the divine on their own terms without courting death. In fact, the Bible declares that the faithless wicked who are “far from God” are slated for

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<sup>195</sup> Kugel, 78.

a bitter final destiny—it is they who will be despised as “fantasies” when the LORD appears (Ps 73:20).

To his own people, God repeatedly stresses obedience to his word over vain or improper ritual behavior. In a telling episode from Israel’s monarchy, King Saul ignored an explicit command of the LORD but excused it by proposing to offer him a special “sacrifice.” The prophet Samuel rebuked him, declaring that “obedience is better than sacrifice”; and in a significant addendum, he relates “rebellion” and “arrogance” to the sin of divination and idolatry! (1 Sam 15:22-23). This suggests that the root of idol worship is man’s rebellion against God and his endemic “suppression of the truth,” as Paul states in Rom 1:18.<sup>196</sup> The pressures of life that scream at us to “do something” must be withstood if taking action requires a disregard of God’s commands. This is a temptation in every age—and a question for the church could be: What are you taking into your own hands that the LORD has expressly forbidden, and has asked you to trust to his provision and timing?

Unfortunately for the Israelites, their long sojourn in a polytheistic culture influenced their notions about appeasing the divine, and it would take generations to uproot these fantasies from Israel’s heart. If idolatry springs from a root of rebellion, then mankind clearly had problems running deeper than mere image worship. Indeed, even though Israel cleansed the land of idolatry after the exile, individual hearts still carried corruption that could only be cured by the coming Messiah. In the meantime, however, the corrupt “fruit” of idolatry had to at least be cut off from Israel’s founding. Idols came

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<sup>196</sup> Again, recall Aaron’s two priestly sons who imagined they could offer “strange fire” at God’s altar of incense, as if he was any other pagan god who might be appeased through mix-and-match worship and not strict obedience to his spoken commands. A summary death was their sad end (cf. Lev 10).

fully loaded with fundamentally false and dangerous presuppositions. No good could come of their use.

## Idolatry Today

It may be difficult for the western world, with its long heritage of Judeo-Christian values, to envision a world in which an aniconic and monotheistic religious framework is not the norm. Yet even today, the ancient practice of idol worship is alive and well across the globe; and remarkably, many of these polytheistic cultures still hold beliefs and practices similar to those studied in the ANE. Joanne Punzo Waghorne describes a consecration ritual she observed in modern India, in which the men and women of the community perform distinct roles in deifying their late leader, Sai Baba, in his statue. She observes their process in light of former missional efforts to Christianize them:

The marble *murti* of Sai Baba is the great Master but is not all of Him. Humans have given Him life among their community in their own world. In such iconic cultures, humans retain the right to share in the process of life-making within the realm of their earthly life. In the theological formulation of John Foster [a 19<sup>th</sup> century British missionary to India], a wise human can communicate with the Great Communicator but humans know not to violate His sole right to make life. The humans have been given the earth to do work but not to do ritual work.... But in iconic cultures humans do not cede to the Gods all of the power of creation. In their time and in their place, priests have ritual as a means of re-making, re-doing, re-creating a body and a home for the Gods when They deign to dwell in the human world.<sup>197</sup>

In Waghorne's sympathetic observations, note the comparisons of the Indian ritual to Mesopotamian idol consecration, including the real but not confined presence of the divine leader within his image, and the unabashed claim to the human role in co-

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<sup>197</sup> Waghorne, "The Divine Image," 241.

creating the god's earthly vessel.<sup>198</sup> The Bible's ban against idolatry can still speak literally to such cultures today; but how can western civilization find a connection point with this OT activity? Is the ban against idolatry a dead letter for the Protestant church?

Although we must not leap to labeling all sin as "idolatry" in an over-metaphorizing of the second commandment, there are underlying principles about the nature of idolatry that a thoughtful student might glean from this study. After situating the command within its historical context, certain principles can be extracted for a modern setting. For example, as observed in the previous section, there is always a temptation to grab a means of control and comfort under pressure rather than to wait on the LORD to direct and provide. Perhaps we don't summon the gods through blocks of wood, but do we invest time, attention, or divine expectations onto objects or technology that properly belongs to God? When pressure mounts, do we scroll social media mindlessly for distraction from prayer or self-discipline? When loneliness hits, do we run to illicit relationships or addictions for immediate relief? If idolatry can be viewed in part as a trigger for the desire to control and manipulate the painful circumstances of life, it can reveal the ongoing conflict between self-serving control or trusting God for his best, even if that should involve patience and pain.

This temptation was not limited to the people of the OT; the stark dichotomy between God's ways and man's manipulation runs throughout the Bible. Just as ancient Israel could not serve both idols and Yahweh, the Pharisees could not serve both Mammon and God (Matt 6:24); and at the final judgment, there are only sheep and goats

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<sup>198</sup> On a personal note, on a recent visit to the Saint Louis Art Museum, I was able to observe talismans, totems, and magical paraphernalia from contemporary cultures in Africa and Oceania, revealing that idol worship, black magic, and ancestor worship is far from obsolete across the globe.

before Jesus—for a person cannot serve two masters (Matt 25:33). Although many in a present democratic context may not literally serve an earthly “master,” as the previous study on ritual behavior revealed, repeated actions display the heart’s devotion to God or to another lord. Follow the trail of one’s time, talent, and treasure, and a person can quickly discover where his love, service, and eternity lie (cf. Matt 6:21).

### **Further Study**

This fascinating dive into OT idolatry has turned up plentiful avenues for further study. The first obvious connection is the fact that the same God who emphasized his word over the visual images of polytheism, then sent this very Word in the flesh to dwell with man, to be “seen and touched!” (1 John 1:1). After studying how the pagans “enlivened” their graven images with the gods’ presence, one might study the much fuller way the “image of the invisible God” became a living God-man (i.e., the hypostatic union). What is already an unfathomable NT mystery becomes even richer within the study of polytheistic pretensions to divine indwelling.

In a similar vein, a comparison of man’s own creation from dust into the very image of God, with its arresting resemblance to ANE idol animation rituals, would be a provocative study, as God in Genesis appears to fashion and enliven his own inert material in parallel with the Mesopotamian rituals. As this study progressed, a hypothesis began to percolate that perhaps idols represent a grotesque counterfeit of an original truth; perhaps man was the original, and exclusive, earth-formed vessel created to house the divine presence—later fulfilled by the astonishing indwelling of Christ within a believer by the Holy Spirit (cf. 2 Tim 1:14). This line of questioning, as was soon

discovered, was not unique: an author in the research noted, “In the Hebrew Bible there are no texts mentioning a quickening ritual of a divine image,” but adds in a footnote, “Yet compare the description of God vivifying the human clay in Gen 2:7!”<sup>199</sup> Catherine McDowell presses further, proposing that the author of Genesis was familiar with, and overtly challenging, the Mesopotamian consecration rituals in his choice of language for man’s creation. She theorizes that the phrasing of the “opening of their eyes” after the humans ate the forbidden fruit was in fact a critique of the idolator’s pretensions to “open the mouth/eyes” of the god.<sup>200</sup> What was viewed as a powerful activation by the pagan is here painted in critical terms of man’s original sin, his effort to transcend God’s command and open his own eyes with divine knowledge. These potential connections of the text of Genesis to the idol consecrations of the Mesopotamian context could prove a riveting and fruitful area of research.

A relevant topic of study for today’s world might be the modern project of conferring life and consciousness to man’s latest high-tech inanimate object: namely, the field of Artificial Intelligence. Scientists are presently attempting to create machines with superhuman cognition, and zealots in the field view the ascendance of machines over sub-rate human capabilities as the eventual inevitable progress of evolution.<sup>201</sup> Interestingly, as with ancient idol-making, the supernatural “myths” of this project have also led to a devaluing of human ingenuity in a surrender to the supposedly inescapable

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<sup>199</sup> Theodore J. Lewis, “Syro-Palestinian Iconography and Divine Images,” in Walls, 90. See also Curtis, *Anchor Bible*, 3:390, for his similar observation in the Genesis account.

<sup>200</sup> McDowell, 42.

<sup>201</sup> Erik J. Larson, *The Myth of Artificial Intelligence: Why Computers Can’t Think the Way We Do* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021), 46.



dominion of these super-intelligent overlords (our new gods?!).<sup>202</sup> It is curious to note that, ancient or modern, the abdication of the God-given human mandate of earthly dominion and the degrading of human life consistently follow when man mislocates the divine, whether in block of wood or motherboard.

Perhaps more imminent than the threat of any AI singularity is the singularly pervasive placement of the divine today within each individual. Tara Isabella Burton has presented this thesis in a fascinating trace of the rise of the “self-made” man:

We have not so much done away with a belief in the divine as we have relocated it. We have turned our backs on the idea of a creator-God, *out there*, and instead placed God *within us*...the idea that we have the power that we once believed God did: to remake ourselves and our realities, not in the image of God but in that of our own desires.<sup>203</sup>

Truth and identity are now located in one’s inner feelings, not found in God’s revelation, Scriptural truth, or even the reality of one’s own biology.

Although all sin must not be labeled as “idolatry” in the technical sense, humans seem especially prone to err in the mislocation of the divine, whether bowing and fawning over a literal idol, himself, or a computer bot endowed with divine expectations. In man’s suppression of the truth, the authority of the monotheistic Creator over his creation is rejected; yet man will ever search and never find his identity outside of this reality. Here only, in the Creator’s love for man and man’s willing worship and obedience, is man’s true image and high calling.

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<sup>202</sup> Larson, *The Myth of Artificial Intelligence*, 271.

<sup>203</sup> Tara Isabella Burton, *Self-Made: Creating Our Identities from Da Vinci to the Kardashians* (New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2023), 5–6.

## **The Last Word**

Idolatry is condemned throughout Scripture, from the first giving of the law to the final judgment of Revelation; and this temptation erupts anew in every age, whether in literal idol worship or in its more subtle forms. Thus, the church must remain vigilant and committed to obey the LORD in every place and time, whether standing against physical idols, self-idolatry, numbing addictions and false distractions, or the fantasy of abnegating human dominion and responsibility to artificial intelligence. Idolatry, with its suppression of truth and rebellion against God's creational reality, will continue to plague and tempt a fallen world until Christ returns in glory. For this reason, John's final words in his first letter could speak boldly to the church in his day, and to every age to come: "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21).

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