

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

## IMAGE-WORSHIP AND IDOL-WORSHIP IN THE OLD TESTAMENT.

THE worship of the *golden calf* in the neighbourhood of Sinai has ever been regarded as a humiliating spectacle. Does it not grieve us to see that the majority in Israel were disposed, soon after their deliverance from the Egyptian servitude, to offend against one of the fundamental principles of the Mosaic religion? We can well understand that the prophet Moses was so indignant at their action that he shattered the tables of stone. What a bitter disappointment for him was that worship of the *golden calf*! He had thought he might venture to hope that he had raised his people to a higher religion, and now he was compelled to witness this falling away of the main body. But in what, then, we ask, really consisted the religious error which is usually called the worship of the golden calf? *Was it image-worship, or was it idol-worship?*

The prevailing opinion is that it was merely *image-worship*, and this view is justified. Israel on that occasion simply repudiated the second principle in the Decalogue. They disobeyed the commandment which reads, "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness," etc. (Exodus xx. 4 f.), i.e., thou shalt not make unto thee as an *objective representation of the Deity*, a plastic or otherwise constructed copy of things which are in heaven above, or in the earth, or in the water. This is undoubtedly the true meaning of that passage. The prohibition refers only to the construction of such images as visible representations of God. This is made clear in the following words of the

second commandment, "Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them." It is also evident from the entire attitude of the Old Testament religion towards art, as I was obliged to prove in detail [in my *Geschichte der alttestamentlichen Religion* (1912, p. 104 f.), because not a few modern writers fancy they have discovered in the so-called Bedouin ideal the progenitor of the prophetic religion.

The conduct of the masses of Israel at Sinai affords, then, only a melancholy proof that man's spiritual eye dwells lingeringly on *outward manifestations*. The general body of the people were at first unwilling to accept as a reality that fact which is so distinctly emphasised in Deuteronomy iv. 12, etc., that when the law was given on Sinai Israel only "heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude." What a misleading influence on the general multitude of the people must also have been exercised by the custom of all surrounding nations to present their deities to the outward view in imitations of visible objects!

There were motives enough to inspire these masses of Israel with the desire to set forth their deity also in objective form before the outward eye. A point of secondary interest for our understanding of their action lies in the answer to the question, How did these circles within the Mosaic religion conceive the idea of choosing a small bull or a calf as the visible image of *their* God? The most probable answer to the question is this: The masses of Israel were influenced by memories of Egypt when they made that choice. Is it not a striking circumstance that the image of a calf was selected, not only by the people who had come out of Egypt, but also in later times by Jeroboam, who had also returned from Egypt? (1 Kings xi. 40; xii. 28-30). It is highly probable that this choice is connected with the worship of the white bull Mnevis, of which small models were made and dedicated to the sun-god Ra, who had his chief temple

at Heliopolis,<sup>1</sup> in the near neighbourhood of Goshen. Further material will be found in my *Geschichte* (1912), p. 40. On pp. 200–221, after a careful examination of all the more recent objections, I have once more proved decisively that the root-principle of the absence of images in the legitimate worship of God in Israël must have been laid down in the age of Moses.

But ought not the worship which the multitude of Israel practised at Sinai to be more properly described as *idol-worship*? Had not these Israelites quite forgotten the God Jahve or Jehovah, who was proclaimed to them by Moses, and turned themselves wholly to other gods? Had not these masses of Israel actually repudiated the *first* principle of the Decalogue (Exod. xx. 3)? An occasion for the serious study of this question was afforded us quite recently by an article published in the *Sunday School Times* of September 6, 1913, by Professor M. G. Kyle, of Philadelphia. He says that the worship of unfaithful Israel at Sinai was idol-worship. What are his reasons for this assertion?

In the first place he repeats a statement, often found elsewhere, that the Egyptian Apis-worship "was not the veneration of the image of a calf, but of the living calf itself." To this we reply, (1) that the golden calf of Exodus xxxii. might have had none the less an indirect association with the calf of Apis. (2) Professor Kyle, who had not at the time of writing read my *Geschichte der alttestamentlichen Religion*, has overlooked the facts there set forth (p. 40), about the small figures of the white bull Mnevis, which were dedicated to the sun-god Ra. It is noteworthy, in any case, that the eminent Egyptologist A. Wiedemann, in his recently published book *Der Tierkult der alten Aegypter* ("The Animal-Worship of the ancient Egyptians") has reached a similar conclusion to mine, that the worship of

<sup>1</sup> The On of Genesis xli. 45, of which we read in Joseph's history.

the golden calf had a connexion with Egypt. Professor Kyle finds support for his thesis in the cry with which the people at Sinai greeted the golden calf when it was formed : " This is thy God, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt " (Exod. xxxii. 4). He translates the opening of the passage thus [as in the English Authorised and Revised versions] : " These be thy gods, O Israel," etc. ; and he regards this translation, which Luther and others selected (following the Septuagint and the Vulgate) as grammatically justified. But this translation, with the plural " gods," is inadmissible on several grounds.

It rests, first of all, on a violation of the natural meaning of these words, which is forced on our attention by the context. Had not the demonstrative pronoun " this " a direct reference to the one calf which Aaron had prepared and set forth in view of the people ? Even in that sense the demonstrative word indicated only a single deity. But it is clear also from the concluding words, " which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt," that in the people's cry of greeting that calf was regarded as a visible image of the Saviour God Jehovah. The plural, " these," as used in this address, is now at once divested of its element of surprise.

The translation preferred by Professor Kyle and others, with the plural " gods," rests, in the second place, on the misunderstanding of a linguistic fact. The Hebrew expression *elohîm*, with its plural ending, is one of many plural forms which in Hebrew indicate a singular number only, as for instance, *zoqûnîm*, " old age," or *bînôth*, " insight " ; and for that reason *elohîm* is best translated " deity." This form *elohîm* admittedly refers in hundreds of passages to *one* God only (Gen. i. 1, etc.), and in *this* sense, as a merely verbal plural, is very naturally construed sometimes (Gen. xx. 13, etc.) with a plural verb and adjective. I have set these points out in detail quite recently in my *History*, etc.

(pp. 130-133), in replying to the views of Professor B. D. Eerdmans (Leyden). Further, the expression "which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt" makes it impossible, thirdly and lastly, for us to think of "thy God" as meaning any other than the God whom Moses had proclaimed as the deliverer of Israel from the slavery of Egypt (Exod. iii. 6 ff.).

Professor Kyle has no authority, therefore, for his assertion that the words of Exodus xxxii. 4 contain an allusion to the idolatrous worship which a section of the Israelitish people practised in Egypt (Josh. xxiv. 14, etc.).<sup>1</sup> How could the idols whom an unfaithful multitude in Israel served in Egypt have helped these worshippers to quit the land of Egypt? Almost all scientific interpreters of Exodus xxxii. 4 now rightly adopt the translation, "This is thy God, O Israel, who brought thee out of Egypt."<sup>2</sup> The opposition to this rendering is based in the last resort on the *confusion between image-worship and idol-worship*.

In confusing these two expressions Professor Kyle has had an associate in recent days who is certainly quite unknown to him. It was Friedrich Delitzsch who in the third of his writings in the Babel-Bible controversy said: "The Book of Kings informs us that the northern kingdom of Israel after its separation under Jeroboam I. worshipped as its national gods which had "brought it out of Egypt" two golden calves which were set up in Bethel and Dan; and during the entire two centuries of its existence clung to this *idolatry*, as compared with which the Sumerian-Babylonish worship represents an incomparably higher stage, while

<sup>1</sup> The significance of this and other nearly related passages of the Old Testament is closely examined in my *Geschichte*, etc., pp. 27-34, with special reference to the modern hypotheses of Ch. Piepenbring, B. Stade, G. Jahn, and others.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Driver, in *Cambridge Bible*, on Exodus xxxii. 4, and Barnes, in the *Cambridge Bible*, on 1 Kings xii. 28, in opposition to McNeile, in the *Westminster Commentary*, on Exodus xxxii. 4.

even that of Baal and Astarte is preferable to it" (*Babel und Bibel*, iii. p. 39). But the writer here blames unfairly the official worship of the kingdom of Samaria. For even if the golden calves of Bethel and Dan are in one place (1 Kings xiv. 9) called "other gods," they were really intended to be symbols of Jehovah. This is made evident by three facts. It follows first of all from the friendly relations which existed between the kings of northern Israel and the prophets Elijah and Elisha, etc., who strove for the true worship of Jahve, the Lord. The same conclusion may be drawn, secondly, e.g., from Hosea iv. 15, according to which the oath was sworn at Bethel, "The Lord liveth." And thirdly, it follows from the circumstance that in the sources that calf-image worship established by Jeroboam, that "sin of Jeroboam" (1 Kings xiv. 16, etc.) is distinctly separated from the worship of Baal and Astarte, and the latter devotion is represented as a much worse degree of Israelitish worship. For in reference to King Ahab, who with his wife Jezebel, a princess from the Phœnician Sidon, attempted to re-introduce the heathenism of the Canaanites, we read these most characteristic words, which are too often neglected, "And it came to pass as if it had been a *light thing* for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took to wife Jezebel . . . and went and served Baal and worshipped him" (1 Kings xvi. 31). So we see that in the historical sources the worship of two golden calves introduced by Jeroboam I. is represented as the *minor degree* of the religious aberration of Israel as compared with the worship of Baal and Astarte. But the twentieth century Assyriologist in criticising the Old Testament has *exactly reversed the matter*.

It follows also that in the words we have cited above he is mistaken in stamping the image-worship of Israel as idol-worship, as Professor Kyle has done again more recently.

Let us remark in passing that the former Assyriologist, even with his unhistorical conception of the sin of Jeroboam, would not have been justified in describing the Sumerian-Babylonish worship, in comparison with Israel's veneration of calves, as an "incomparably higher stage" of religiosity. In his next work (*Babel und Bibel*, iv. p. 28) he actually ventured to say that the Old Testament authors were "altogether" too contemptuous in their judgment when they mocked at the Babylonian divinities "as idols of wood and stone" (Isa. xlv. 9 ff. ; xlv. 1 f.).

But what proof is there to justify this reproach directed against the men of the Old Testament? The proof, it seems, lies in the following words of Professor Delitzsch: "The inmost sanctuary of the Babylonian temples occupied so small a space that it was sometimes entirely filled by the pedestal of the god's statue, and hardly permitted freedom of movement to a single priest. For this very reason the image as such could not have been intended as an object of popular veneration" (*Babel und Bibel*, iv. p. 28). As if this could possibly prove anything against the actual veneration of the Babylonian divine images! Was it not sufficient that the priests should lavish worship upon them? For that, at least, we have convincing testimony in the letter of Jeremiah v. 28 (=Baruch vi. 28),<sup>1</sup> in "Bel of Babel," v. 2, etc. We must ask, further, Were those Babylonian divinities always shut up in the small space of the innermost sanctuary? Among the facts brought to light by the excavations, this is noteworthy among others, that the image of the god Marduk (Hebrew, Merodach) was driven along the majestic procession-street in Babylon at the time of the New Year festival.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Full evidence for the fact that these interesting statements actually refer to the worship of the Babylonians, has recently been supplied in the scholarly work of W. Naumann, *Untersuchungen über den apokryphen Jeremiabrief* (1913), pp. 3-31.

<sup>2</sup> *Mitteilungen der Deutschen Orientgesellschaft*, Nr. 6, p. 10.

It was the king's duty at the time "to grasp the hands" of Marduk,<sup>1</sup> and at this festival the images of other gods were also borne in solemn procession to Babylon.<sup>2</sup> The religious spokesmen of Israel had therefore very *good ground* to oppose, with direct reference to the Babylonians, the custom of making images of gods (Isa. xl. 19 ff., etc.). They did this especially for the sake of those among their fellow-countrymen who might have been inclined after the Babylonian captivity to allow themselves to be so led away by the outwardly splendid ceremonies of the Babylonian religion as to forget the old principle of the *purely spiritual worship* of God.

The spokesmen of Israel who referred to the manufacture of gods' images with a satire which we can readily understand, must be defended also against Delitzsch's charge that they mocked at the Babylonian deities as "idols of wood and stone." Let us note, first, that they never did so in express terms. Can any passage be pointed out in which they distinctly said that the Babylonian gods were *no more* than images? They expressed quite definitely the very opposite view. For the same prophet who characterises the manufacture of divine images as a pitiful effort (Isa. xl. 19 f. ; xli. 7, etc.) cries out in triumph, "Bel boweth down, Nebo stoopeth" (xlvi. 1), and it is obvious that he does not mean simply the overthrow of images of these gods.

Secondly, the Old Testament authors must not be accused of a falsification of facts if we gather from their language here and there that in rejecting the Babylonian images of gods they repudiated the gods themselves. For it is a fact very easily comprehensible on psychological grounds that

<sup>1</sup> H. Zimmern, in *Keilinschriften und Altes Testament*, p. 515.

<sup>2</sup> "Neighbouring towns also brought the images of their gods to Babylon to join in this procession" (Hastings' *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, ii. p. 318).

among peoples which love images of their divinities, the divinities themselves are regarded as all one with the figures, and that the images themselves often receive the same veneration as if they were holy things and heavenly beings. Striking instances of this very regrettable practice are found, as we know, in all stages of religious development, and even in Christianity. How unjust it is, then, to condemn Old Testament writers in words like those of Delitzsch, because the frequent blending of the divine image with the divinity itself has caused Bible authors to express themselves here and there as if the images of gods were the gods themselves.<sup>1</sup>

Thirdly, we must defend the authors of the Old Testament writings against such a charge, on the ground of their religious faith. For the development of the true religion of Israel carried with it an ever clearer recognition that the gods of other peoples were powerless beings and vain imaginations. In my *Geschichte*, pp. 145, 199 and 357 and 473 f., I have set out this truth in detail. Filled as their minds were with this more perfect understanding, the writers of the later Old Testament books were all the more inclined to put the images of the heathen on the same footing as the gods themselves. No one will deny them the right unless, like Delitzsch,<sup>2</sup> he regards the religious conceptions of the Babylonians as living gods. But what student who has once been convinced of the unique character of the Old Testa-

<sup>1</sup> The author of Chronicles, indeed, adds in his account of Jeroboam's innovations (1 Kings xii. 28) "he-goats" to the calves (2 Chron. xi. 15, R. V.), and in Tob. i. 5 we read according to the best Greek text, "All the tribes which fell away together sacrificed to Baal the cow" [τῆ Βάαλ τῆ δαμάλει]. In this form of the narrative there lies a coarsening of the original facts. Such an exaggeration may have arisen in the post-prophetic period (my *Geschichte*, p. 416 ff.), partly from the greater sensitiveness of the religious conscience and partly from the natural tendency in this direction.

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Delitzsch in *Babel und Bibel*, iv. p. 28, expressly states that the Babylonians had "living gods."

ment prophets and their experiences could possibly share that view ?<sup>1</sup>

In order to define the main point clearly, I close my article with the following sentences :—

The Old Testament represents with conspicuous clearness the two religious practices which may best be described in the expressions “ idol-worship ” and “ image-worship ” (idololatri), as *two separate things*, as the two primary violations of lawful religion.<sup>2</sup> If, then, the representatives of that religion, among whom we reckon the historical writers of the Old Testament, occasionally speak of the image of a god as if it were itself a god (e.g. Exodus xxxii. 4 ; 1 Kings xii. 28) they did so merely in the effort after conciseness of expression. Every Old Testament critic ought, therefore, to regard it as a duty laid upon him by the laws of historical justice to distinguish clearly between definite statements of fundamental principle and language chosen in the effort after the utmost possible brevity, combined with usefulness for religious practice.

ED. KÖNIG.

## STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN ESCHATOLOGY.

### III. THE RETURN OF CHRIST.

THE *prima facie* meaning of the Gospel records is that Jesus spoke differently of the Parousia on different occasions. He is reported as having said not only “ There be some here of them that stand by, which shall in no wise taste of death till they see the kingdom of God come with power ” (Mark ix. 1), but also “ So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should

<sup>1</sup> The reader may compare the remarks on the origin of Old Testament religion in my *Geschichte*, pp. 92–118.

<sup>2</sup> In the decalogue, Exodus xx. 3, and v. 4 f. = Deuteronomy v. 7 and v. 8 f.