

The Concept of Idolatry

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The concept of idolatry in the Bible is powerful and complex, diverse and problematic. Even though, as Halbertal and Margalit note, 'the central theological principle in the Bible is [the refutation of] idolatry' (10),¹ it is ironic that the 'category that is supposed to be the firmest and strictest of all... [exhibits] an astonishing fluidity' (250)². A theological treatment of the subject must consider the close association of idolatry with sexual immorality and greed and attempt to answer fundamental questions: What is idolatry? What constitutes a god?

Opposition to Idolatry

In the Bible there is no more serious charge than that of idolatry. Idolatry called for the strictest punishment, elicited the most disdainful polemic, prompted the most extreme measures of avoidance and was regarded as the chief identifying characteristic of those who were the very antithesis of the people of God, namely the gentiles. Fundamental to Israel's life and faith were the first commandment and its exposition in the Shema (Dt. 6:4-5), which were from early on regarded as touching every aspect of life. The early church likewise treated idol worship with the utmost seriousness.

Idolatry is the ultimate expression of unfaithfulness to God and for that reason is the occasion for severe divine punishment.³ The portrayal of the kings in 1 and 2 Kings is especially revealing. Kings are assessed as either good or bad purely on religious grounds, that is, on the question of whether they destroyed or introduced idols. Omri, one of the greatest kings of Israel, is a case in point. In spite of his political achievements and the 'might that he showed' (1 Ki. 16:27), he is only mentioned briefly, for 'he led Israel to... provoke the anger of the Lord their God with their worthless idols' (1 Ki. 16:26). The theme of judgement on idolatry is also widespread in the NT.⁴

The theological grounds for the judgement of idolatry is the jealousy of God. The belief that idolatry arouses God's jealousy is a sturdy OT theme with a long history. It is introduced in the second commandment (Ex. 20:5; Dt. 5:8-10) and in Exodus 34:14 ('Do not worship any other god, for the Lord whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God') it is the explanation of the divine name, 'Jealous'. In fact all the Pentateuchal references to God's jealousy have to do with idol-worship. An idol worshipped in

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¹ Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, Harvard University Press, 1992.

² Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*.

³ Cf. Lev. 26:27-33; Nu. 33:51-56; Dt. 29:16-28.

⁴ Acts 7:41-43; 17:31; Rom. 1:18-23; 1 Cor. 5:10-13; 6:9; 10:5-8, 22; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:5-6; Col 3:5-6; 1 Pet. 4:3-5; Rev. 2:20-23; 14:9-11; 16:1-2; 19:20; 21:8; 22:15.

Jerusalem in Ezekiel 8:3 is called 'the image of jealousy, which provokes to jealousy' (cf. Ezk. 16:38, 42; 23:25).

The conviction that God's jealousy inevitably leads him to stern action is also deeply rooted in the OT. God's jealousy, based upon his love for those he has redeemed at great cost, motivates him to judge his people; Nahum 1:2, 'The Lord is a jealous God and avenges'. The OT is replete with texts in which God's jealousy leads him to destroy the faithless among his people.⁵ The warning of 1 Corinthians 10:22 echoes this teaching.

A common strategy in the OT for opposing idolatry was that of ridiculing polemic in which the idols are portrayed as powerless and deceptive. The main examples include Psalms 115:4-8; 135:15-18; the words of Elijah,⁶ the prayer of Hezekiah⁷ and especially the prophets.⁸ Such material stresses the perishable nature of the idols, their human origin (in the mind and skills of the maker) and lifelessness and insists that idol worship leads only to the disappointment and embarrassment of those who trust in them. Habbakuk 2:18-19 contains all these elements.

The most commonly used Greek term for idol, *eidolon*, which occurs almost 100 times in the LXX, lends itself to such polemic and is effectively a term of derision. The established association of the word with insubstantiality and falsehood provided the pejorative element in the description of an image. Paul reflects such teaching in Romans 1:18-32 and in 1 Corinthians 12:2 ('dumb' idols). To worship idols is both an error and a foolish vanity (cf. 1 Thes. 1:9-10; Acts 14:15; and esp. 1 Jn. 5:21 where idols are contrasted with the living and true God). By contrast, the usual Greek term for cultic image, *agalma*, had positive associations of joy and beauty. Disgust and contempt for idolatry is also communicated in several derogatory terms used to describe the idols. Idols are 'unclean things', a common designation in Ezekiel, 'weak/worthless things', 'that which is insubstantial', and a 'vanity' or 'emptiness'. The Israelites were not simply to avoid idolatry; the language of prohibition could hardly be more emotive and urgent; they are to 'utterly detest and abhor' the heathen gods (Dt. 7:25f).

The call to resist pagan pressure for Jews to compromise their religion by contact with idolatry is nowhere more clear than in Daniel where the king's rich and presumably idolatrous food is shunned (ch. 1). This episode is followed by that of Daniel's three companions who refuse to worship the king's golden image (ch. 3) and Daniel's refusal to pray to the king (ch. 6). According to the Book of Daniel such earthly kingdoms will ultimately give way to the everlasting kingdom of the one true God (see 2:44; 4:3, 34; 6:26; ch. 7).

It is not just that idolatry was one vice among many of which the heathen were guilty, rather, idolatry is a defining feature of

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the heathen, whose way of life is characterised inevitably by this sin. 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5, read in conjunction with 1:9, is an early Pauline witness to this conviction. The

⁵ Cf. Dt. 6:14-15; Jos. 24:19-20; Ps. 78:58-64; Zp. 1:18.

⁶ 1Ki. 18:27.

⁷ Is. 37:17-20; 2 Ki. 19:16-19.

⁸ Hab. 2:18-19; Je. 14:22; 10:3-4; Is. 44:9-20; Ho. 8:4-6.

characterisation of the heathen by the three sins of sexual immorality, idolatry and greed comes through consistently in the Pauline catalogues of vice. Furthermore, these three sins are the only vices in the Pauline letters that are considered to be such a threat that they must be 'fled' (1 Cor. 6:18; 10:14 and 1 Tim. 6:11 respectively). In Romans 2:22 Paul takes it for granted that Jews abhor and detest idols. Opposition to idolatry was in effect an exercise in redrawing group boundaries for the people of God, set within the wider framework of issues to do with identity and self-definition. In making clear what they stood for, they took pains to underscore what they stood against.

The Worship of Idols

In striking contrast to her neighbours the religion of Israel prohibited the use of images.⁹ Whereas Deuteronomy 4:12-18 explains that God chooses to make himself known through words rather than a form, Isaiah 40:18, 25 reasons that the incomparability of the Lord renders all representative forms inadequate. Nonetheless, on numerous occasions the nation failed to keep the second commandment (see e.g. the golden calf in Ex. 32-34; Micah's image in Jdg. 17-18; and Jereboam's bulls in 1 Ki. 12:28-34).

In dealing with the subject of idolatry we confront a problem of definition, for the term can be taken to mean both the worship of images and the worship of foreign gods. Both senses are valid. The second commandment extends and applies the first. At least in the Israelite understanding, a pagan deity was present in its image.¹⁰ Disagreement over the division of the Ten Commandments also belies the close relation between the first and second commandments. Whereas the conventional Jewish division takes the opening verse as the first commandment and the prohibitions of worshipping other gods and the worship of images as the second, Augustine, the Roman Catholic and Lutheran traditions consider all of this material to be the first commandment. In most cases the OT authors do not distinguish between the worship of other gods, the worship of images and the worship of the Lord using images. While a formal distinction between having gods and having images is possible and may be useful, especially in exploring teaching about the latter, for our purposes idolatry is taken in the broadest sense including material relating to both.

Just as keeping the first commandment was expected to lead to obedience to all the commandments, so idolatry was thought to lead to other sins (Rom. 1; cf. Wisdom 14:27: The worship of idols... is the beginning and cause and end of every evil'), including and in particular, sexual immorality. In one sense the link between sexual immorality and idolatry could not be more

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concrete. Pagan temples were often the venue for illicit sexual activities. Religious prostitution was commonly practised by the cults of the ancient Near Eastern fertility religions and it was a problem for Israel from the moment they entered the Promised Land (Nu. 25:1; cf. Jdg. 2:17). This became especially prevalent in Judah and Israel during the divided monarchy from Rehoboam, 1 Kings 14:24 to Josiah, 2 Kings 23:7. According to Exodus 34:11-16 the extermination of the inhabitants of the land was commanded so that the Israelites would avoid the practice. Deuteronomy 23:17 forbids cult prostitution for Israel (cf. Am 2:7).

⁹ Ex. 20:4-5, 23; 34:17; Lev. 19:4; 26:1; Dt. 4:15-19, 25; 5:8; Je. 10:3-5; 11:10-13.

¹⁰ See Ex. 20:23, 'gods of silver' and 'gods of gold'; 32:31 'golden gods', Lev. 19:4, 'molten gods'; Jos. 24:14, 'remove the gods'; 2 Ki. 17:29; 19:18, 'remove the foreign gods'.

Prostitution at cultic events of a festive nature was well-attested in places like Corinth and is even mentioned in the OT. It was common in the ancient Near East for orgies to take place at heathen festivals. Hosea 4:13-14 probably refers to this kind of activity, where mountain top sacrifices, suggesting a pagan altar, and prostitutes are juxtaposed. Further possible references in the OT include Numbers 25:1ff, where Phineas' slaying of Zimri for sexual immorality occurred in the context of pagan sacrifice, and Isaiah 57:3ff, Jeremiah 2:20; 3:6 (cf. 2 Macc. 6:4-5). In Judges 21:19-23 even a feast to the Lord at Shiloh was the occasion for the Benjamites to take wives by force. The description of the cult of the golden calf can be considered as an archetype of the events (Ex. 32). During the celebrations 'the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play' (Ex. 32:6). The verb 'to play' in Hebrew is clearly a euphemism for sexual activities. According to both pagan and Christian writers feasting and sexual immorality inevitably went together.

There seems little doubt that the discussion of idol food in 1 Corinthians 8-10 included the problem of sexual immorality. Paul's response to the problem of the prostitute in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 should probably be read in this light. Apparently some Corinthians were eating in pagan temples and using the prostitutes on offer on such occasions and defending both behaviours with the slogan, 'all things are lawful for me' (6:12; 10:23). As already noted, 'rise up to play' in 1 Corinthians 10:7, which alludes to Exodus 32:6, is probably a reference to prostitution on a festive occasion in a pagan temple. Revelation 2:14ff may supply evidence of such activity in Asia Minor: The church in Pergamum is guilty of eating food sacrificed to idols and of sexual immorality. All this speaks for a close literal association between sexual immorality and idolatry.

The Concept of Idolatry

Idolatry is defined by a number of twentieth-century theologians in terms of making that which is contingent absolute. For Reinhold Niebuhr, for example, idolatry occurs when we 'make some contingent and relative vitality into the

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unconditioned principle of meaning' (178).¹¹ In fact Niebuhr defines not just idolatry but sin itself in such terms: 'sin is the vain imagination by which man hides the conditioned, contingent and dependent character of his existence and seeks to give it the appearance of unconditioned reality' (137-38).¹² Sin consists of placing such a high value on something that it effectively replaces God in some sense. Both the strength and weakness of this view of idolatry lies in it being so general. It can be readily applied to almost anything. To label all sin idolatry, as attractive as this may sound, does not do justice to the variety and depth of the Bible's treatment of sin. Lawbreaking, lawlessness, impurity and the absence of love are just a few of the many other ways in which Scripture conceives of different forms of sin. Romans 1 does not in fact take idolatry to be the pattern of all subsequent sins, but rather portrays indulgence in further sin, being given up to various vices, as being the appropriate punishment for giving up God in idolatry. In attempting to understand idolatry theologians like Niebuhr take a top-down approach, focusing on God as the absolute one. Another way of proceeding is to go from the bottom up, looking at what it is that idolaters do with their idols, what the charge of idolatry consists of and to what the sin of idolatry is compared.

¹¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man. Volume 1: Human Nature?* in London 1941 reprinted Westminster / John Knox Press, 1997.

¹² Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man. Volume 1: Human Nature.*

Two Models of Idolatry

The Bible uses a number of anthropomorphic metaphors to elucidate how God relates to humankind. God is at different points king, father, bridegroom, woman in labour, judge and so on. The relevant metaphor for the dominant and most familiar conception of idolatry in the OT is that of marital relations. The depiction of idolatry as sinful sexual relations is introduced in the Pentateuch (Ex. 34:15-16) and is used extensively in the Prophets, especially Hosea, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Common to all uses of the image is the idea that Israel is married to God but is unfaithful to her husband. The betrayed husband experiences both a fierce desire for revenge and a strong urge to win back his beloved wife. If Hosea describes idolatry as prostitution, even more daring is Ezekiel for whom it is outright nymphomania. However the marital model is not the sole conception of idolatry in the OT.

Another major conception of idolatry appears in the prophets, namely the political model in which God is seen as king, and his people as his subjects. If when God is conceived of as a husband he demands exclusive love and devotion, as king he demands trust and confidence in his ability to provide for and protect those under his care, loyal service and obedience. In both the marital and political models the choice of metaphor was reinforced or perhaps even occasioned by a potent literal association. Temple prostitution and the deification of human leaders made the marital and the political models of idolatry respectively all the more appropriate.

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When the Israelites requested a king in 1 Samuel 8, Samuel was displeased and prayed to the Lord. The Lord's comforting reply in 8:7-9 compares their rejection of God's kingship to idolatry. Likewise the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel denounce Israel's treaties with Assyria and Egypt in terms that add up to nothing less than the charge of idolatry, even though the literal worship of other gods is nowhere in view. Isaiah in 31:1-3 chides the nation for her treaty with Egypt against the threat of Assyria. The reliance upon Egypt is regarded as a form of deification. Since God is Israel's ruler, the nation is supposed to seek protection only from him. To seek it elsewhere is effectively to look to another 'god' ('the Egyptians are men and not God'). Isaiah 30:7 describes Egyptian help against the Assyrians as 'futililty', the same word which Isaiah 57:13 and Jeremiah 2:5 employ to condemn the idolatry of the fathers. In similar fashion Jeremiah 2:17-19 describes the treaties with the Egyptians and with the Assyrians as a forsaking of God in favour of someone else. The nation is guilty of idolatry because she sought protection from, trusted and relied upon something other than God. In Ezekiel the political and marital models merge. The treaties are described in the familiar terms of marital unfaithfulness: 'You engaged in prostitution with the Egyptians, your lustful neighbours, and provoked me to anger with your increasing promiscuity (Ezk. 16:26).' You engaged in prostitution with the Assyrians too' (Ezk. 16:28). In this case the request to foreign powers for protection is compared to adultery and the relation between God the king and the nation as to a husband and wife.

With a throne-room from which God rules the world, and twenty-four elders who sit on thrones and wear crowns, ruling the heavenly world on God's behalf, the Book of Revelation is not short on political imagery. Revelation portrays God's rule over against that of the Roman Empire which, like most political powers in the ancient world, represented its power in religious terms, claiming for itself the ultimate, divine sovereignty over the world. Its state religion, which featured the worship both of the deified emperors and of the traditional gods

of Rome, expressed a political loyalty in terms of religious worship (cf. Bauckham).¹³ Revelation presents an alternative, theocentric vision of the world, referring frequently to worship in its graphic portrayal of the conflict of sovereignties. Glimpses of worship in heaven punctuate the reports of God's victory over false worship on earth. Christians are called to resist the deification of military and political power, represented by the beast, and of economic prosperity, by Babylon (see Rev. 18:12-17), by worshipping the true God and living under his rule.

Texts involving the terms usually translated 'to serve' and 'to worship' supply unambiguous evidence that idolaters (and believers) were conceived of as serving and obeying their deities. Even in ceremonial contexts these words signify more than just isolated acts of cultic worship. When it is said that the people

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'serve' Baal (Jdg. 10:6, 10, etc.) or other gods (Jdg. 10:13, etc.) or the Lord (Jdg. 10:16, etc.) the term implies not only the exclusive nature of the relationship but the total commitment and, in effect, obedience of the worshipper. That to 'serve' a deity involved doing their bidding is made clear in passages like Matthew 6:24/Luke 16:13 where the 'service' is rendered to a master and the Pauline phrase 'bow the knee',¹⁴ which is a synonym for worship.

Even if it is difficult to reduce biblical teaching on idolatry to a simple formula, one element common to both models, the marital and the political, is worth noting. In both cases the notion of *exclusivity* is central: in one the exclusive claims of a husband to his wife's love and affection: in the other the exclusive claims of a sovereign to protect and provide for his subjects and receive their trust and obedience in return. Thus idolatry as a concept is an attack on God's exclusive rights to our love, trust and obedience.

Greed as Idolatry

With this definition in mind, what then qualifies as idolatry? Although a number of possibilities, including pride come to mind, the NT unambiguously judges only one thing outside of the literal worship of idols to be idolatry, namely greed. The charge that greed is idolatry appears at four points. It is stated in Colossians 3:5 ('greed is idolatry'), Ephesians 5:5 ('the greedy person is an idolater') and implied in the mammon saying in Matthew 6:24 and Luke 16:14. Whether worship of the belly in Romans 16:18 and Philippians 3:19 refers to Jewish preoccupation with food laws or circumcision, fleshly egocentricism or gluttony and by extension greed is difficult to say. Although falling short of explicitly branding greed idolatry, the two sins are treated as comparable in character and gravity in Job 31:24-28. Philo of Alexandria's repeated warnings against the idolatry of the love of money suggests the Jewish provenance of the notion. According to Philo the first commandment 'condemns strongly the money-lovers who procure gold and silver coins from every side and treasure their hoard like a divine image in a sanctuary, believing it to be a source of blessing and happiness of every kind.' (*On The Special Laws* 1:21-22).

In what sense is greed idolatry? Matthew 6:24 in context gives clear support to the idea that the worship of mammon instead of God involves love and devotion, using these very words, and service and obedience with the notion of rival masters. It also implies a negative

¹³ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, CUP, 1993.

¹⁴ Rom. 11:4; 14:11; Eph. 3:14; Phil. 2:10.

judgement on trusting in wealth since the verses which verse 24 effectively introduces, 6:25-34, point to the birds and lilies in order to inspire trust in God's providential care.

Another indication that the greedy are idolaters because they love, trust and serve money rather than God is that the greedy

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are condemned in the Bible in particular for their inordinate love, misplaced trust and forbidden service. A virtual synonym for 'greed', *pleonexia*, in a broad range of material is 'lover of money', *filarguria*,¹⁵ the thought of which is sometimes expressed in the form of an admonition (e.g., Heb. 13:5: 'Keep free from the love of money'). Furthermore in the OT the rich are not 'to set their heart', the spiritual organ of love and devotion, on their riches (Ps. 62:10; cf. 2 Pet. 2:14). That such love should be reserved for God is spelt out in T. Benjamin 6:1-3: 'the good man... does not accumulate wealth out of love for pleasure... the Lord is his lot'.

Numerous texts not only observe that the rich trust in their riches, but warn against such reliance as being incompatible with and an unacceptable alternative to trust in God. Jeremiah accuses Israel of trusting in her 'strongholds and treasures' 48:7.¹⁶ Psalm 52:7 states that the one who 'does not make God his refuge ... trusts in his great wealth' (cf. 49:13, 15). In Proverbs 'the wealth of the rich is their fortress' (10:15) and 'their strong city' (18:11); but 'those who trust in their riches will wither' (11:28). On the other hand, God is the only trust of the poor and those of humble means (Pss 34:6; 40:17¹⁷). Proverbs 18:10-11 suggestively juxtaposes trust in God and trust in money. In Proverbs 28:25 'a greedy person' is contrasted with 'the one who trusts in the Lord'.

Such teaching is carried on in the NT where the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12 warns against all active striving for the increase of material possessions as a means of security and 1 Timothy 6:17 counsels the rich not to trust in their riches but in God. The notion of trusting God, not money appears in a number of places in the NT.¹⁸ Hebrews 13:5-6 encourages its readers not to love money, with the promise of the Lord's help, implying that faith in God is the alternative to finding security in money.

Evidence of the greedy serving their wealth is less direct. It is implied in the Bible's frequent condemnation of the greedy for ignoring social justice and oppressing the poor. Furthermore the notion of sin as a ruling power can be seen in John 8:30-36 and Romans 6. Jewish moral teaching indicates in the Testament of Judah 8:6 that the love of money is 'contrary to God's commands' and 'enslaves' a person.

Greed is idolatry because the greedy contravene God's exclusive rights to human love, trust and obedience.

¹⁵ E.g. Lk. 16:14; 1 Tim. 3:3; 6:10; 2 Tim. 3:2.

¹⁶ Compare this with. 22:21; 49:4; Ezk. 28:4-5; Ho. 12:7-8.

¹⁷ Cf. 68:10; 86:1; Is. 66:2

¹⁸ For instance in the instructions to the disciples in the mission charges (Mk. 6:8-9); in the story of the widow's offering (Mk. 12:41-44; par); the calling of Peter and Matthew to leave all and follow Jesus (Mk. 1:18-20; Lk. 5:28); the example of Zacchaeus (Lk. 19:1-10); the call to store up treasures in heaven not on earth (Mt. 6:19-21) and supremely in Matthew 6:25-34, the Lukan version of which is introduced by the parable of the Rich Fool (12:13-34).

Conclusions

The fundamental question of theology, what do we mean by God, can be answered from a variety of angles by exploring God's various relations to the world and to ourselves. Ironically, the study of idolatry also allows us some insight into the nature of the true God. What constitutes a god? Martin Luther's

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answer, reflecting on the first commandment in his larger catechism, was 'whatever your heart clings to and relies upon, that is your God; trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and idol'. We wish to confirm his view, but also to emphasise the aspects of love and service: a god is that which one loves, trusts and serves above all else. This definition suggests both the possibility and urgency of making clear the relevance of idolatry to the modern world.

In one sense idolatry is the diagnosis of the human condition to which the gospel is the cure. At root, the problem with humans is not horizontal 'social' problems (like sexual immorality and greed), but rebellion against and replacement of the true and living God with gods that fail (which leads to these destructive sins). If the story of the human race is a sorry tale of different forms of idolatry, the height of human folly, the good news is that God reconciles his image-bearers back to himself in Christ. It is no accident that the prophets envisage a time when idols will ultimately be eradicated and replaced by true worship.

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