IDOL, IDOLATRY An idol is a physical representation of a deity, usually used as an object of worship, though idols and images were used in a variety of ways throughout the ANE.

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A. Images in the ANE
B. Images in Israel
C. Images in the NT

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A. Images in the ANE

A major focus of worship in Mesopotamia from the Sargonic period on (Hallo 1983: 4–11; 1988: 54–66) and in Egypt was the cult image. While there are few extant examples of these statues, literary texts and artistic representations provide significant information as to their manufacture, appearance, and use in the ancient world. These statues varied in size, appearance, and method of manufacture (see *RLA* 6: 310–13), but cult statues in Mesopotamia were typically life-size and made of a wooden core overlaid with metal and precious stones. The statue played a central role in various cult festivals (*RLA* 3:480–83) and the proper care of the statue was an essential task of the priests. Hallo (1970) has suggested that many divine hymns were composed at the dedication of the cult statue and were used on important cult occasions involving the statue. Prayers were continually deposited before these images.

Akkadian texts give instructions for making these statues (Oppenheim 1977: 186). They were to be made of specific materials and detailed procedures were to be followed in their manufacture. In the Erra Epic, Erra points out to Marduk that his appearance and attire (i.e., that of his statue) have lost their luster, presumably because the people had neglected Marduk's cult. Marduk explains that after a previous disaster caused by him, he changed the location where *mesu* wood, lapiz lazulli, and the kind of gold needed to make cult statues could be obtained. Marduk's statue could not be properly restored without the specific materials and craftsmen required for the project.

In addition to the general requirements that prevailed for cult statues, some texts suggest that in Babylon images of particular deities had to be made in a specific way for the statue to be legitimate. A text describing Nabu-apla-iddina's restoration of the SÁamas¥ cult at Sippar (9th cent. B.C.E.) reports that the statue of SÁamas¥ had been taken in a raid by the Sutu, and consequently the SÁamas¥ cult had been neglected. An earlier king had tried to restore the cult and had sought instruction from the gods as to how the statue was to be made. He did not receive the necessary instruction and was thus unable to make the statue. He was forced to reinstitute the cult using another symbol of SÁamas¥. In the course of Nabu-apla-iddina's general restoration, a priest found a clay model of SÁamas¥, and this made it possible to make a new cult image. According to Lambert (1957–58: 399), "The providential finding of the model alone made possible the manufacture of a totally new statue, for had one been made without the model, it would not have been Shamash." In Assyria and Egypt more flexibility as to how images of deities were made seems to have been permitted, but fairly fixed general conventions were followed.

Apart from the earliest periods, when deities were sometimes depicted theriomorphically (Jacobsen 1967: 14), and a number of minor deities were depicted as animals or as part-human, part-animal (Köcher 1953: 57–105), gods in Mesopotamia were depicted anthropomorphically. It seems clear that the basic purpose of the statues was not to describe the appearance of the god since there is little difference in how the various deities are depicted. Often the only basis for determining the god represented is the symbol or weapon characteristic of that particular

god. [Vol. 3, p. 377] There is, in fact, little difference in size, shape, features, etc. between the way humans and deities are depicted in Mesopotamia, and many statues once thought to be gods are now recognized as votive statues of worshippers (Spycket 1968: 105) presented by them to the god. The criteria for distinguishing the image of a deity from that of a human being is that the gods are depicted wearing the horned crown and the flounced garment (Hallo 1983: 4–5). Occasionally a stone without any representation is called an image *(sΩalam)* of an individual. As Dalley (1986: 88) notes, "This shows that the noun [*sΩalmu*, 'image'] may also stand for an object that represents a person without bearing a picture of him."

In Egypt, too, "gods are recognized, not from their facial traits or bodily stature, but from the emblems they bear, or from the head of their sacred animal placed on a human body" (Bleeker 1973: 23). Often the face on Egyptian statues of gods is the face of the reigning monarch. Gods are depicted in various ways in Egypt (see Hornung 1982: 100–42), and the same god is often depicted in both human and animal form. Anthropomorphic depictions of gods are relatively rare in the early periods, but there is little evidence to suggest an evolutionary development. Certain gods like Min were from the earliest time only depicted anthropomorphically, and most gods were depicted in animal forms to the end of Egypt's independence. One way of representing a god did not replace other forms. Rather, different ways of depicting the same god existed side by side. In one example from the Louvre, 4 different ways of representing the goddess Hathor are presented next to one another (Hornung 1982: 113 n. 27). This makes it clear that images were not intended to describe the appearance of the god. Rather, they depict various ways in which the deity was thought to manifest himself or herself, and the images were meant to describe aspects of the function and attributes of the god. As Frankfort (1961: 12) has suggested the images were "probably pictograms rather than portraits."

While the incident about the statue of Dagan in 1 Samuel 5 makes it clear that cult statues were used by Israel's neighbors, representations of gods from Syria-Palestine are limited in number, and no cult statues are extant. There are, however, many figurines that have been identified as deities. It is likely, as Tigay (1986: 91) has noted, that some of these are in fact votive statues since they are lacking the distinctive symbols of divinity such as the Hathor headdress, papyrus stalks, and lotus blossoms or animals beneath their feet. At the same time certain statuettes and artistic representations have been plausibly identified as Baal. As Dever (1987: 226) points out, "The most common are rather standardized representations of a warlike Baal, often brandishing in his upraised arm a bundle of thunderbolts," representing his function as storm god. He is regularly depicted wearing a horned crown. In some instances he is represented as a bull or standing on the back of a bull. Several representations from Ugarit have been identified as El. They depict him as an old man with a thick beard seated on a throne and wearing a horned crown; as Caquot and Sznycer (1980: 12) note, "The representations of the god confirm and complete the descriptions given in the texts." Many female figurines, plausibly identified as Asherah (e.g., Maier 1986: 81–121) have been found. They are usually nude and with the reproductive aspects emphasized.

To the Egyptians and Mesopotamians—and almost certainly to the Canaanites as well—images were not the inanimate objects that the Hebrew prophets insisted they were; rather, they were living, feeling beings in which the deity was actually present. The primary significance of images lay in the fact that the life of the deity was thought to be present in the statue. The Egyptian view is expressed in a passage from the Memphite Theology which says, "He placed the gods in their shrines, He settled their offerings, He established their shrines, He made their

bodies according to their wishes. Thus the gods entered into their bodies, Of every wood, every stone, every clay" (*AEL* 1:55). The gods were thought to manifest themselves in a variety of ways and to animate a variety of objects, but the cult image was a primary focus of the god's presence on earth. Numerous Egyptian texts (though coming mostly from the Greek and Roman periods) describe the god in the form of a bird descending from heaven to alight on his image. Morenz (1973: 157) says that this figure "represents the living substance of the deity which is imparted to the inanimate image." A similar view of images existed in Mesopotamia and appears to be an idea commonly associated with the use of images in religion (Bernhardt 1956). Oppenheim (1977: 184) says, "Fundamentally, the deity was considered present in its image… The god moved with the image when it was carried off… Only on the mythological level were the deities thought to reside in cosmic localities." It is this living presence of the deity in the statue that accounts for the Mesopotamian practice of taking away the gods of a conquered people and depositing them in the temple of the victorious deity. This demonstrated the power of the conquering god and removed the deity from the conquered area so that he or she would not be able to help the people overthrow the conqueror's authority. Certain literary compositions celebrate the return of the deity from exile to his or her city and the subsequent prosperity that the god's presence brings.

This living presence of the god in the image was magically accomplished through the "opening (or washing) of the mouth" ceremony, a ceremony that Jacobsen (1987: 15–32) suggests was a cultic reenactment of the birth of the deity in heaven. The presence of the deity in the statue was then maintained through offerings and the proper care of the statue. Morenz (1973: 155) says that "from early times onward Egyptians were not satisfied with just fashioning an image, i.e., with the creation of a work of art. On the contrary, a ritual was performed on the statues while they were still in the sculptor's workshop … , as a result of which the work of human hands was thought to come alive. This ceremony of 'opening the mouth' had the purpose of making all the organs serviceable and so vitalizing the image." An Akkadian text (Ebeling 1931: 120–21) dealing with the consecration of a sacred object (perhaps a statue, although the text is broken at the point where the object is mentioned) describes the purpose of the ceremony. It reads "this [statue ?] without the mouth-opening ceremony cannot smell incense, cannot eat food, and cannot drink water." Some texts suggest that the opening of the mouth ritual was performed on the statue periodically in order to maintain the vitality of the statue.

The daily care given to the statue reflects the belief that the statue was alive and thus needed the same attention and sustenance that any living individual would require. Two meals a day were provided for the images in the Uruk temple, and Oppenheim (1977: 188–89) has provided a composite picture of these meals. A table was brought in and placed before the image, and water for washing was provided. Various dishes including specific cuts of meat were presented to the statue and finally fruit was brought in an aesthetically attractive arrangement. Musicians played during the meal and curtains were drawn around the statue while the image partook of the food. The table was cleared and water was again provided for washing after the meal. Great attention was also given to proper and splendid attire for the image.

A similar situation prevailed in Egypt. Except for festive occasions when the image was carried in procession along the festival routes in a special shrine—where it was still normally

hidden from the people—the cult statue was kept in a dark niche in the interior of the temple where it was accessible only to the officiating priest. Each day the priest opened the shrine containing the image, cleansed and perfumed it with incense, put a crown on it, and anointed and beautified it with cosmetics. According to Morenz (1973: 88) the purpose of this cultivation "was to furnish the image with vital force and to ensure that the deity—with whom it is not identical—lodges within it."

Among the numerous figurines used for apotropaic purposes are some that can be identified as deities, and perhaps some of these were household gods similar to the *te∑raœpˆîm* of Gen 31:30. The protective function of many of the Mesopotamian figures is clear from inscriptions like "that the foot of evil may not approach a man's house" or "overthrower of the evil *gallu®* demons" found on some of them (see Rittig 1977: 185–208 for a collection of these inscriptions). They also probably served to promote good fortune and prosperity for those who possessed them.

B. Images in Israel

The position of official Israelite religion as defined in the Hebrew Bible stands in striking contrast to the thought and practice of their ANE neighbors. The Israelite view is clearly stated in Exod 20:4–5a, "You shall not make for yourselves a graven image *(pesel)* or any likeness *(te∑mu®na®)* of what is in heaven above or on the earth below or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God am a jealous God." This prohibition of images is repeated in Exod 20:23; 34:17; Lev 19:4; 26:1; Deut 4:15–19, 25; 5:8, and is probably presupposed in Josh 24:18–23. The prohibition seems to underlie both the prophetic condemnation of Israel and Judah (e.g., Jer 11:10–13) and the prophetic contempt for images in passages like Jer 10:3–5.

The earliest date for the prohibition is difficult to establish without dispute (see Curtis 1984: 274–86) because of differences of opinion among critical scholars about the date of the various sources, and the various components of those sources generally assumed to underlie the Pentateuch. While some scholars argue for an origin of the prohibition that predates the conquest and provides a basis for the Israelites' resistance to assimilating their beliefs with those of the Canaanites, others would argue for a later date for the origin of the material. All would agree, however, that the prohibition was in place by the time of the 8th century prophets Isaiah, Hosea and Micah.

The negative attitude of Israel's official religion is clearly illustrated in the biblical vocabulary used for images. A number of words for images are descriptive of the way the image was made or the material from which it was made. The word *pesel* comes from a root that means "to hew, hew into shape" and the verb is used of shaping stones of various kinds. The word *{aœsΩaœb* comes from a root that means "to shape or form." The words *masseœka®, nesek,* and *nasˆîk* are all probably related to the root *naœsak*, "to pour out," and the words refer primarily to molten images. Words such as *semel, sΩelem,* and *te∑raœpˆîm* are of uncertain etymology. A few words denote the resemblance between the image and that which it depicts or represents. The word *tabnˆît* means "copy" or "pattern," and it can refer to the pattern from which something is made (e.g., Exod 25:9; 2 Kgs 16:10) or that which resembles its prototype (e.g., Deut 4:16; Josh 22:28). Other words for images such as *de∑mu®t,* "likeness," and *te∑mu®na®,* "form, shape," belong in this category as well.

Another group of words constitutes a theological evaluation of images and the gods they

represent (in general the biblical authors made little distinction between the two), and it is here that the contempt in which idols were held by the prophets is evident. Images were called *gillu®lˆîm,* (e.g., Jer 50:2; Ezek 22:3–4); irrespective of etymology, it appears that the negative and derogatory associations of the word come from its similarity to the words *geœl* and *gaœlaœl,* both of which mean "dung." Thus the idols are referred to as "dung pellets." The word *}e∑lˆîlˆîm* sounds much like *}e∑loœhˆîm,* "god," but it suggests rather an association with the adjective *}e∑lˆîl,* "weak, worthless." The biblical authors declare that the "god" that the person thinks he is worshipping is in fact worthless and weak and impotent (e.g., Lev 26:1). Habakkuk calls the images made by the craftsman "dumb, worthless idols" (2:18–20). Another word for idol is *s¥iqqu®sΩ,* "detestable thing" (e.g., Ezek 20:7–8). The related noun *s¥eqesΩ* is used of various ritually unclean creatures that would render anyone eating them ceremonially unclean. Thus idols pollute anyone using them and render them unclean before God. The word *to®{eœba®* refers to that which goes against established religious or ethical conventions, and more specifically to that which violates the moral and ritual standards of God's covenant with Israel. An idol is an abomination (Isa 44:19), and Jer 16:18 and Ezek 5:11 make it clear that idols are an abomination that pollutes the land.

Idols are *hebel,* "that which is insubstantial or worthless" (Jer 10:14–15); they are *s¥eqer,* "deception, falsehood" (Jer 10:14; 51:17); they are *s¥aœw},* "emptiness, vanity" (Ps 31:7; Jonah 2:9); and they are *miplesΩet*, "that which causes trembling" (1 Kgs 15:13).

The Bible does not give a clearly articulated basis for the prohibition of images, and in all probability there was not a single basis. From one perspective Israelite religion did not need an explanation for the prohibition: Yahweh had declared his sovereign will as to how he was to be worshipped, and no further justification was required (Faur 1978: 1). Deut 4:12–18 does provide an explanation, though it involves associative logic rather than formal [Vol. 3, p. 379] linear logic. The passage declares that because at Sinai the people saw no shape *(te∑mu®na®)* but only heard a voice, they were not to make an image *(pesel)* in the shape *(te∑mu®nat)* of any idol *(koœl samel).* Since the context has to do with the way God chooses to manifest himself, the point of the passage seems to be that God makes himself known to his people through words rather than through a form. Other passages make it clear that God does sometimes assume a form, and Moses is said to have seen the form *(te∑mu®na®)* of God in Num 12:8; presumably Moses and the elders who looked at Yahweh (Exod 24:10–11) could have made a figure of what they saw. Yahweh, unlike the gods of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Canaan, did not manifest himself through images. His self-disclosure came through a revelation in words, and the Sinai experience constituted a paradigm of God's self-disclosure to Israel; thus images were prohibited.

At a later time the author of Isa 40:18, 25 argued that Yahweh is incomparable and thus no form would be adequate to represent him. The prophets (e.g., Jer 10:3–5; 51:17; Isa 42:17) deny that idols are alive and thus ridicule the worship of a lifeless and impotent object made by a person. Finally an important pragmatic consequence of the prohibition was that it minimized the danger of assimilating foreign religious values and the resulting syncretism. The context in which the prohibition of images is given in the Ten Commandments suggests that its basic purpose was to prohibit images as a focus of worship rather than to eliminate the possibility of art (Gutmann 1961: 161–74).

Despite the prohibition of images in Israel's official religion and the contempt for images found throughout the prophets, a number of biblical passages make it clear that the problem of idolatry continued through much of Israel's history. It was only after the Babylonian Exile that

the problem was effectively eradicated. The exact nature of what is described is often not clear since the authors do not normally distinguish between worshipping other gods (with or without images), the worship of images, and the worship of Yahweh using images. From the standpoint of the official religion described in the Bible all were equally repugnant.

Exodus 32–34 recounts the making of a golden calf by the Israelites in the wilderness as they grew impatient about Moses' delay in returning from the mountain. It is clear that they were attempting to insure god's/God's presence, and the calf was meant to accomplish that. It is not clear whether the calf was meant as an image of Yahweh or of another god (either Egyptian or Canaanite). See also GOLDEN CALF. It is possible that the calf was meant as a pedestal on which Yahweh (perhaps conceived as invisible) was enthroned since various Canaanite deities are often depicted standing on an animal typically associated with them. Uncertainties in understanding the details of Exodus 32–34 are compounded by (1) the similarities between this passage and the account of Jeroboam's dedication of the golden calves in 1 Kgs 12:28, and (2) the failure of scholars to reach a consensus concerning the chronological priority of the passages.

The story of Micah's image in Judges 17–18 describes the use of an idol during the period of the judges. The context does not make it clear how Micah or the Danites viewed the image, or even whether they understood it as an image of Yahweh, though that seems probable. It does seem clear that both the Danites and Micah viewed the use of the image and the private shrine in which it was used as legitimate. The editor of the book of Judges evaluates the incident from the perspective of the official religion, and the point of the story in its present context is that the incident illustrates how bad things were when "there was no king in Israel" and when "every man did that which was right in his own eyes."

The incident about Gideon's ephod (Judg 8:26–27)—whatever exactly the ephod was—may only make the point that an object that was not originally intended as an idol can become an object of worship and thus lead to idolatry, a point also illustrated by the bronze serpent that Moses made in the wilderness (2 Kgs 18:4; cf. Num 21:4–9).

A kind of thinking similar to that associated with the use of images outside Israel is found in 1 Samuel 4–6, but the focus is the ark rather than an idol. The Israelites attributed their defeat at the hands of the Philistines to the fact that the LORD was not with them. They brought the ark into the next battle in order to insure that the LORD would be present so as to assure their victory. It seems likely from vv 6–8 that the Philistines understood the Israelite strategy in terms of bringing a cult statue into battle. The Israelites were defeated and the ark was captured by the Philistines; as was commonly done with cult statues in Babylon and Assyria, the Philistines took the ark (the functional equivalent of an image) and presented it to Dagan (i.e., to his cult statue). The subsequent story of the cult image of Dagan falling broken before the ark and the problems encountered in each city to which the ark was taken made it clear to both Israel and the Philistines that Yahweh, despite the loss of the ark, is sovereign.

Gen 31:30–35 describes Laban's search for his household gods *(te∑raœpˆîm)*, which were small enough to be hidden under a saddle. Their use reflects the custom in Aram, and perhaps they were similar to the numerous figurines, many of them of deities, found throughout the Near East. Other passages indicate that teraphim were used in divination (Ezek 21:21; Zech 10:2). Their use is condemned in 1 Sam 15:23 and 2 Kgs 23:24, though some have taken Hos 3:4 to imply that the use of teraphim was considered legitimate in some circles. The mention of teraphim in David's house in 1 Sam 19:13 is problematic in that it appears to refer to an object that was the size of a person and thus much larger than both the teraphim described in the other

texts or the figures known from archaeological excavations (see Pritchard 1943; Negbi 1976).

Many of the references to the use of images are connected with the court. Solomon permitted his foreign wives to bring the worship of their gods into the areas outside Jerusalem according to 1 Kgs 11:5–8, and this probably involved some physical representations of these deities. These syncretistic tendencies continued. Asa, Solomon's great-grandson, destroyed images made by his father and removed Maacah, the queen mother, because she set up an "object that caused trembling," apparently some sort of image to Asherah. Asa burned the object which was apparently made of wood (1 Kgs 15:12–13). However, these practices remained in Judah until the fall of [Vol. 3, p. 380] Jerusalem to the Babylonians, reaching their height during the time of Manasseh (2 Kgs 21:1–7).

Jeroboam I (1 Kgs 12:28–33) introduced a form of Yahweh worship into Israel that used images of bulls (perhaps as a pedestal for the invisible Yahweh), a form of worship that the prophets and religious leaders of Judah viewed as idolatry (e.g., 1 Kgs 13:33–34). Ahab's marriage to Jezebel brought the religion of Tyre into Samaria and began a period of regular confrontation between the prophets Elijah and Elisha and the devotees of Baal worship. It is probable that there was a statue of Baal along with a representation of Asherah in the Baal temple in Samaria (1 Kgs 16:32–33). Jehoram, son of Ahab "put away the pillar of Baal that his father made" (2 Kgs 3:2) and various representations appear to have been used throughout the history of the northern kingdom.

It is difficult to assess the extent of idolatry among the general population of Judah and Israel because the relevant biblical accounts are generally polemic in nature and make little attempt at statistical analysis; in addition the focus tends to be on the leadership rather than describing the practices of the common people. The texts describing the participation of the people in idolatry give a conflicting impression of its extent. The accounts of Baal worship during the time of Ahab suggest that the worship had a fairly extensive popular following. 1 Kgs 18:19 reports that there were 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah on Mt. Carmel with Elijah. In the midst of Elijah's discouragement, God declares that there were 7,000 who had not bowed down to Baal. If the number is not a figurative one, it would represent a fairly small portion of the population that had remained loyal to Yahweh. At the same time that Jehu killed all the worshippers of Baal—some 10 years after the death of Ahab—he gathered them together in one temple and had 80 soldiers kill the entire group (2 Kgs 10:18–28). The perspective of the prophets is that the people of both Israel and Judah were, at many points in their history, not deeply committed to strict obedience to the covenant; instead, they were involved, at least at a popular and superstitious level, in syncretistic religious practices, often influenced by their Canaanite neighbors whose religion seems to have retained many common features despite significant chronological, cultural, and geographical differences among those who practiced it (Oden 1976: 31–36).

Archaeological data from Israel have contributed significantly to reconstructing religious practices in Israel. Israelite personal names found on seals and inscriptions, most of which date to the 8th century B.C.E., suggest that the great majority of people worshipped Yahweh rather than other gods (Tigay 1986: 41). At the same time, Israelite shrines found at Arad, Kuntillet {Ajrud, and other sites (Dever 1987: 232–33) make it clear that actual practice in the 8th century and before was much more varied than the Deuteronomic ideal demanded.

The sanctuaries at Arad (Aharoni 1969: 25–39) date between the time of Solomon (10th century B.C.E.) and the end of the First Temple period (ca. 600 B.C.E.), and correspond in a

number of respects to the Temple in Jerusalem. Altars were found with evidence that sacrifices were offered at this sanctuary. In addition a stone pillar or *masΩsΩeœba®* was found in the sanctuary. Excavations from Kuntillet {Ajrud, a remote site in the NE Sinai, S of Beersheba, have revealed drawings of human and other figures along with graffiti and inscriptions which include the names Yahweh, Baal, Asherah, and El. The figures appear to be in violation of the commandment against making the likeness of anything in heaven, on earth, or under the earth (Deut 4:8). A large storage jar, dating to about 800 B.C.E., on which human and other figures were painted, includes the words *lyhwh s¥mrn wl}s¥rth,* "to Yahweh of Samaria (or our keeper) and his *}s¥rt.*" The inscription has been variously interpreted (see Tigay 1986: 26–29, 93; Emerton 1982:2–20; Dever 1984: 21–37; Holladay 1987: 258–59); some have argued that *}s¥rt* refers to a cult object of some sort while others have taken it as evidence that Yahweh was thought to have a consort (his asherah). Kuntillet {Ajrud most likely was a border fortress frequented by various ethnic and religious groups, and in addition to the uncertainty in interpreting the meaning of the drawings and inscriptions, it is difficult to determine whether the evidence for practices that differ significantly from the Deuteronomic ideal are typical of practices throughout Israel, and are in any sense illustrative of the kinds of practices condemned by the prophets. The evidence pertaining to the use of idols in Israel is sparse and as Dever (1983: 573) notes, "No monumental Israelite art survives. No Israelite statuary or sculpture, large-scale iconographic representations, or paintings are known to us save two 10th-century cultic stands from Ta{anach, with fantastic representations of what appears to be Asherah as the 'Lion Lady'."

For the most part the numerous figurines of male and female deities come from Late Bronze and earlier levels and thus are earlier than the Israelite presence in Palestine. Many figurines of nude females often pregnant or with large breasts have been found in clearly Israelite contexts. However, the function of these figures is debated (see Tigay 1986: 91–92). As Dever (1983: 574) points out, "Obvious fertility aspects, usually exaggerated sexual characteristics, connect these figurines with the ancient Near Eastern cult of the 'Mother-goddess'." He concludes, "Since these figurines are found almost without exception in domestic or tomb contexts, they are undoubtedly talismans to aid in conception and childbirth rather than idols in the true sense, designed for sanctuary use." The statues probably reflect popular practice and superstition more than formal religion.

C. Images in the NT

Christianity had its origins out of a Judaism that had been purged of idolatry, and there is little mention of idolatry in the Gospels. The NT concerns about idolatry came from penetration into the gentile world where a variety of religions involved ideas and practices similar to those found in the ANE. Fertility cults, emperor worship, and the mystery religions were practiced throughout the Greek and Roman world (see Stambaugh and Balch 1986: 41–46; 138–67) and these involved both the use of images/statues and the worship of other gods, either of which constituted idolatry in the eyes of early church leaders whose roots were in Judaism. Paul found Athens to be a city full of idols (Acts 17:16). He confronted idolatry in Ephesus (Acts 19:24–41) and in keeping with the perspective of Judaism declared that "gods made with hands are [Vol. 3, p. 381] no gods at all" (see Stambaugh and Balch 1986: 149–54). In some instances Paul seems to have argued that the idols have no real existence (1 Cor 8:4), while in others he suggests that there is a demonic reality that underlies the idolatrous practices (1 Cor 10:20). Paul explains the origin of idols as human rejection of God's revelation which replaces the worship of the Creator

with the worship of a creature (Rom 1:18–23). The NT exhorts believers to flee idolatry (e.g., 1 Cor 10:14), and the Jerusalem Council advised all believers to avoid things sacrificed to idols (Acts 15:29). The NT also understands idolatry as putting anything in the place that God alone should occupy as the proper focus of obedience and worship (e.g., Col 3:5).

One example of the practical problems faced by believers living in a pluralistic and idolatrous society is addressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10 (see Willis 1985). There a dispute existed over the extent to which a believer could appropriately participate in eating meat that had been offered to idols in the pagan temples in Corinth, a practice condemned in Jewish tradition (see Orr and Walther *1 Corinthians* AB, 228–29). While Paul does not refute those who argued that because idols have no real existence, meat offered to them cannot harm the believer, he does strongly caution them of the danger that participation in these meals presents to both them (1 Cor 10:1–14) and others (1 Cor 8:7–12). The problem for believers was further complicated by the fact that meat offered in the pagan temples could be encountered, not only in communal meals in the temples, but also in various social settings throughout the community as well as in the market (see Stambaugh and Balch 1986: 158–59 and Willis 1985).

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