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Encyclopaedia of Judaism

Idolatry in Judaism

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THE worship of a physical representation of a deity was a central aspect of Mesopotamian and Egyptian religions in the period of the emergence of the religion of Israel, detailed in the Hebrew Scriptures.¹ In light of the prevailing practices of the peoples around them, practices that we refer to as idolatry, the official religion of the Israelites was striking. In contrast to those religions, the Israelite doctrine took as its fundamental precept the prohibition against creating and worshipping any representation of the Israelites' own God, let alone of the gods of other peoples. Exod. 20:4–5 makes this point clear:²

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You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me.

The heart of the covenant between God and the people of Israel was the exclusive relationship between these two parties. God took Israel alone as his people and, in recognition of this exclusive bond, the Israelites were obligated to worship God alone. In the setting of the covenant, the prohibition against worship of other gods meant more than that the Israelites could not create images consciously conceived to be deities. Rather, insofar as any icon might be thought to represent a god, the people of Israel were prohibited from making images or likenesses of anything.

The Israelites' comprehension of God as invisible derives from the fact that God almost always appears to the people without physical form. The implication of this, as Deut. 4:12–18 makes clear, is that God cannot accurately be depicted by an icon:

Then the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire; you heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice. And he declared to you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, that is, the ten commandments; and he wrote them upon two tables of stone. And the Lord commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and ordinances, that you might do them in the land which you are going over to possess. Therefore take good heed to yourselves. Since you saw no form on the day that the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making a graven image for yourselves, in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any beast that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth.

The point is not that God may not, on occasion, be manifest in a visible image. To the contrary, Scripture itself on occasion describes God as taking a physical form. At Exod. 33:20–23, for instance, when Moses demands to be allowed to see God, he is shown God's back. God has a face, but Moses may not see it, since “man shall not see me and live.” Accordingly God instructs Moses:

Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand upon the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.

Similarly, at Exod. 24:10–11 the elders of Israel have the opportunity to look upon God:

[A]nd they saw the God of Israel; and there was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank.

Scripture's point in prohibiting icons accordingly is not that God does not have or might never take a corporeal form. Rather, the prohibition against the creation and worship of images is based upon the fact that God has chosen to make himself manifest to the people of Israel only through verbal revelation. For this reason, the people are to conceive of and worship their deity without the use of any image. But in stating this requirement, even the Bible itself recognizes the contrast between the people's experience and that of Moses. Moses sees and speaks to God directly. All others, including other prophets, do not have this opportunity. The point is explicit at Num. 12:6–8, where God questions how anyone among the people of Israel can challenge Moses' authority:

Hear my words: If there is a prophet among you, I the Lord make myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in dark speech; and he beholds the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?

The point again is not that God has no physical image or does not, at least on occasion, assume a corporeal form. Rather, it is that Moses alone has been allowed to see this image and so is different from all other Israelite prophets, let alone from all other Israelites. To all people other than Moses, God makes himself known in a vision or dream but not in a material image.

The people's experience at Sinai of a God who speaks but is not seen is paradigmatic of the way in which God was always to be known to the people: through a revelation in words rather than in a corporeal form or image. The logical development of this conception that God does not appear in a physical image appears at Is. 40:18–25. Here we are told not simply that God *should not* be depicted with an image but, more than this, that God is so great and incomparable that he *cannot* be depicted, insofar as no image can satisfactorily portray him:

To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him? The idol! a workman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold, and casts for it silver chains. He who is impoverished chooses for an offering wood that will not rot; he seeks out a skillful craftsman to set up an image that will not move. Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in; who brings princes to nought, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble. To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One.

From the ideology of Exodus, which holds that God may not be depicted graphically because God has chosen to appear to the Israelites without corporeal form, we move to the more developed prophetic ideology, which holds that God is incomparable and therefore cannot adequately be depicted. The result is that Israelites are forbidden not only from engaging in idolatry, that is, in the worship of foreign gods. They are, rather, also prohibited from iconolatry, that is, the use of images even in the worship of their own God.³

One result of its view that God cannot be accurately depicted and so is to be experienced only through verbal revelation is that Israelite religion comes to express contempt for all idols and their worship. Among many such passages, this perspective is explicit at Jer. 10:2–5:

Thus says the Lord: “Learn not the way of the nations, nor be dismayed at the signs of the heavens because the nations are dismayed at them, for the customs of the peoples are false. A tree from the forest is cut down, and worked with an ax by the hands of a craftsman. Men deck it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so that it cannot move. Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk. Be not afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good.”

In passages such as this, the Israelite attitude towards images of gods reaches its logical conclusion. The point is not simply that Israelites are forbidden from worshipping idols, though, of course, they are. More important, they are to recognize that such images are not

deities at all but only the products of human hands. Unlike the Israelite God, they have no power either to hurt or to help those who worship them. This means that idol worship is not simply a violation of the covenant with God. Rather, since idols are powerless, worshipping them is folly.⁴

The vocabulary used by Scripture to refer to idols matches this contemptuous attitude. Alongside terms that describe the method by which the idol is created,⁵ a number of terms found especially in the prophetic literature reflect the prophets' attitude towards idols. Normally translated as simply "idols," the word *gilulim* is associated with a root meaning "dung."⁶ *Elilim*, though it sounds like *el*, the term commonly used for God, is more likely associated with the adjective *elil*, meaning "worthless" or "weak," yielding the meaning "worthless gods."⁷ Elsewhere, idols are described with equally derisive adjectives: they are "works of delusion" (Jer. 10:15), "false" (Jer. 51:17), and "empty" (Ps. 31:7). Ezek. 20:7–8 refers to idols as "detestable things;" Is. 44:19, Jer. 16:18, and Ezek. 5:11 call them "abominations." The latter two sources state that idols defile the sanctuary and pollute the land.

The perspective expressed in Scripture's prohibitions against the worship of idols and the attitude towards idolatry revealed in the Bible's specific terminology were part of the continuing battle of the leaders of the Israelite cult against the actual practices of the people. For despite the clear and fundamental stance of the official Israelite religion against idolatry, many passages in Scripture make clear that the people of Israel continually participated in, and were excoriated for, syncretistic religious practices in which they created and worshipped idols. Examples range from the incident of the Golden Calf (Exod. 32–34) to the affair involving Micah, who, at Judg. 17–18, sets up a shrine for an idol made by his mother out of silver he had stolen from her and then returned. One of many prophetic exhortations against the Israelites for their constant idolatry is at Jer. 11:10–13:

They have turned back to the iniquities of their forefathers, who refused to hear my words; they have gone after other gods to serve them; the house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken my covenant which I made with their fathers. Therefore, thus says the Lord, Behold, I am bringing evil upon them which they cannot escape; though they cry to me, I will not listen to them. Then the cities of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem will go and cry to the gods to whom they burn incense, but they cannot save them in the time of their trouble. For your gods have become as many as your cities, O Judah; and as many as the streets of Jerusalem are the altars you have set up to shame, altars to burn incense to Baal.

Scripture thus attests to continuing, powerful syncretistic tendencies, described in detail throughout the hagiographa and prophets.⁸ Solomon, 1 Kgs. 11:3–8, condoned and participated in the idol worship of his foreign wives. His great-grandson Asa destroyed idols made by his father and “removed” his own mother because of her idolatry (1 Kgs. 15:11–13). But even Asa, who “did what was right in the eyes of the Lord,” did not destroy the high places at which foreign gods were worshipped. Jeroboam introduced golden calves into Israelite worship, proclaiming, as in the incident of the Golden Calf after the Exodus from Egypt, “Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt” (see 1 Kgs. 12:28–33). The marriage of the Israelite king Ahab to Jezebel, daughter of the Sidonian king, led him to introduce and promote the cult of Baal (1 Kgs. 16:31). Jezebel's entourage included 450 priests of Baal and 400 priests of Asherah (1 Kgs. 19:18). This meant that, subsequent to Ahab's actions, Elijah and Elishah continually confronted devotees of Baal and their followers among the people of Israel (see, e.g., 1 Kgs. 18:20–39).

These images of the syncretistic practices of Israelite kings and common people point to the long period of time that passed before the Deuteronomic ideal of the Israelite nation's worshipping only Yahweh and only at the single chosen cult-site—Jerusalem—became a reality. Still, the literature's frequent references to idol worship and to royal campaigns against idolatry⁹ should not lead us to assume that during the monarchy idolatry was always rampant, let alone normative. Rather, we should be clear that this literature's often negative focus upon the Israelite leadership served to legitimate the official religion and its cultic leaders, whose “correct” practice was contrasted with what others supposedly did and believed. The presence of this underlying polemic makes it difficult to ascertain the extent to which the common people in fact produced or worshipped images of deities or of the Israelite God. Many people appear to have engaged in idolatry, while many others did not. Edward Curtis surveys the problem as follows:¹⁰

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...

While many Israelites were true to the covenant ideal, a significant portion of the people also appears to have been attracted to the Canaanite religion from which their own faith had grown and with which it still shared important characteristics.¹¹ This dualistic picture, drawn on the basis of the biblical literature, is confirmed by archaeological evidence. For, on the one hand, this evidence suggests that, by the eighth century B.C.E., the majority of the people in fact worshipped the God of Israel. And yet, on the other hand, the number of Israelite cult-shrines uncovered from this period shows that Israelite religious practice remained diverse and had not yet achieved the Deuteronomic ideal that emerged in this period and that demanded the worship of an invisible God in the one place that God would choose.¹²

IDOLATRY IN THE TALMUDIC LITERATURE

Following the clear perspective of the Hebrew Scriptures, the rabbis describe an Israelite's worship of any deity other than the God of Israel to be one of the worst sins possible. Idolatry accordingly ranks as one of only three sins (alongside murder and sexual licentiousness) that one must not commit even at the cost of his life (B. San. 74a). Indeed, the rabbis see acceptance of the prohibition against idolatry as so definitive of what it means to be a member of the Israelite people that, in their view, a gentile who denies idols may actually be

called a Jew or, in different terms, can be held to have accepted the entire Torah (B. Meg. 13a). By contrast, recognition by a Jew of idols is tantamount to denying the entirety of law, as Sif. Deut. 54.LIV:III makes clear:

- A. “[... and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God but turn away from the path] that I enjoin upon you this day and follow other gods, whom you have not experienced” (Deut. 11:28):
- B. On the basis of this statement sages have ruled: Whoever confesses to idolatry denies the entire Torah, and whoever denies idolatry confesses to the entire Torah.

Idolatry brings God's curse upon the people of Israel, as Deut. 11:28 indicates. Accordingly, the rabbis recognized in idolatry the denial of the essence of the Torah, adherence to which, by contrast, brings blessing upon the people of Israel. But the opposite also is true: to reject idolatry is to accept the principle that stands behind the multitude of laws understood together to portray the single, essential truth of Judaism, that there is but one God.

Scripture lists in only general terms the actions prohibited as idolatry. One may not engage in pagan rituals (Deut. 12:30), bow down to idols (Exod. 20:5, 34:14), or offer sacrifices to them (Exod. 22:20). Expanding upon these brief references, M. San. 7:6 contrasts aspects of actual idol worship, for which one is culpable to death, with actions that involve an idol, so as to be forbidden, but that are not in the category of idolatry:

- A. He who performs an act of worship for an idol:
- B. all the same are the one who performs an act of service, who actually sacrifices, who offers up incense, who pours out a libation offering, who bows down,
- C. and the one who accepts [the idol] upon himself as a god, saying to it, “You are my god.”
- D. But the one who hugs it, kisses it, polishes it, sweeps it, and washes it,
- E. anoints it, puts clothing on it, and puts shoes on it, [merely] transgresses a negative commandment [Exod. 20:5].
- F. He who takes a vow in its name, and he who carries out a vow made in its name transgress a negative commandment [Exod. 23:13].
- G. He who uncovers himself to Baal Peor—[he is stoned, for] this is how one performs an act of service to it.
- H. He who tosses a pebble at Merkolis [that is, Hermes] [is stoned, for] this is how one performs an act of service to it.

In elaborating the content of idol worship, the rabbis thus distinguish actual acts of worship from acts that, although they show respect for the idol, do not comprise worship. While all such behaviors are forbidden, only the former, involving actual acts of idol worship, render one subject to the death penalty.

The rabbis devote an entire Talmudic tractate, *Avodah Zarah*, to idolatry. Despite this fact, they do not appear to have believed that, in their own time, idolatry was a serious threat. *Song of Songs Rabbah* to *Song of Songs* 7:7 makes this explicit:

- A. “You are stately as a palm tree” [Song 7:7]:
- B. R. Hunia in the name of R. Dosa b. R. Tebet: “Two inclinations to do evil did the holy one, blessed be he, create in his world, the impulse to worship idols, and the impulse to fornicate. The impulse to worship idols has already been eliminated, but the impulse to fornicate still endures.
- C. “Said the holy one, blessed be he, ‘Whoever can withstand the impulse to fornicate do I credit as though he had withstood them both.’”
- D. Said R. Judah, “The matter may be compared to the case of a snake-charmer who had [two] snakes. He charmed the larger and left the smaller, saying, ‘Whoever can withstand this one is certainly credited as though he had withstood them both.’
- E. “So the holy one, blessed be he, eliminated the impulse to worship idols but left the impulse to fornicate. He said, ‘Whoever can withstand the impulse to fornicate do I credit as though he had withstood them both.’”

Of the two main inclinations towards evil, only the inclination to fornicate remains in effect. Striking is the explanation for this, C and D–E, which, contrary to what Scripture portrays, holds that the desire to worship idols never had a very strong influence over the people of Israel in the first place. The continuation of the passage contains a debate concerning when God eliminated the impulse to worship idols, whether in the time of Esther and Mordechai or the period of Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian exile. In either view, the rabbis understand idolatry long to have ceased to be a problem for the people of Israel.

The rabbis depicted idolatry's threat to Israelite monotheism by claiming that so many idols are worshipped in the world that sufficient parchment does not exist to contain all their names (Sifre Deuteronomy 43). But despite this pronouncement, they seem to have had little concrete worry that the Jews of their period would actually engage in the worship of these idols. Indeed, the fact of the matter is that in the rabbis' own day, as in the Second Temple period, Jews quickly revolted when other nations' introduced into Israelite territory the

slightest aspects of idol worship. This meant that, rather than focusing upon stemming Jewish acceptance of pagan gods, which was in all events unnecessary, the Rabbinic treatment of idolatry could concern the broader question of how to assure that, in their contact with non-Jews, Jews did not *inadvertently* participate in or contribute to idol worship. This goal of preventing unintentional Israelite idolatry was accomplished through the placing of strict controls upon all contact between Jew and gentile. For instance, within three days of gentile festivals, Jews were forbidden from having contact with gentiles or from selling them objects that might be used in idol worship (M. A.Z. 1:1–2):

- A. Before the festivals of gentiles for three days it is forbidden to do business with them,
- B. to lend anything to them or to borrow anything from them,
- C. to lend money to them or to borrow money from them,
- D. to repay them or to be repaid by them.
- E. R. Judah says, “They accept repayment from them, because it is distressing to him [that is, to the gentile, to remain in debt to the Israelite].”
- F. They said to him, “Even though it is distressing to him now, he will be happy about it later [that is, after the festival, when he repays the loan].”
- G. R. Ishmael says, “Three days before them and three days after them [doing business with gentiles] is prohibited.”
- H. And sages say, “Before their festivals it is prohibited, but after their festivals it is permitted.”

Before, and, according to some authorities, after a pagan festival, economic exchange with an idol-worshipper is forbidden, since such interaction appears to be an acknowledgment by the Israelite of the pagan's religious practices. Especially repaying money owed to the gentile is forbidden, since the money might then immediately be used to support idol worship, and the Israelite then could be understood to have promoted idolatry. But while the concern for Israelite acknowledgment or promotion of idol worship appears real, we see at the same time a striking desire to assure friendly and appropriate relationships between Jews and non-Jews. In Judah's view, E, this goal even takes precedence over the concern that the Israelite acknowledge idolatry. Judah relaxes restrictions that in all events do not entail concrete Israelite monetary support of pagan rights, allowing, for instance, an Israelite to accept a gentile's loan repayment immediately prior to a pagan festival.

In dealing with the problem of an Israelite's travel around and business in cities that contain idols, the rabbis make a similar point. Business, they say, may not be done in an area containing an idol, and one is prohibited from using a road that leads to that city alone. But if there is no appearance that the Israelite intends to support or be involved in idol worship, these restrictions are relaxed (M. A.Z. 1:4):

- A. A city in which there is an idol—
- B. [in the area] outside of it one is permitted [to do business].
- C. [If] an idol was outside of it, [in the area] inside it is permitted.
- D. What is the rule as to going to that place?
- E. When the road is set aside for going to that place only, it is prohibited.
- F. But if one is able to take that same road to some other place, it is permitted.
- G. A town in which there is an idol,
- H. and there were in it shops that were adorned and shops which were not adorned—
- I. this was a case in Beth Shean, and sages ruled, “Those which are adorned are prohibited, but those which are not adorned are permitted.”

There is here no evidence of a concern that the Israelite might *actually* engage in idol worship. At issue, rather, is the appearance his actions project. Israelites may not travel on a road that only goes to a place where there is an idol, since others who see this might assume that the person is going there to engage in idol worship and might, in this way, be encouraged themselves to stray from worship of the one God. But Israelites may use a road that also leads to other places, even if their destination in fact is the place with the idol. As before, the concern with preventing a Jew from inadvertently supporting idol worship or from creating the impression of being involved in idolatry is ameliorated by the desire to allow Jews to engage as openly as possible in economic relations with those who worship idols.

Even the use by Jews of bath houses and other public areas in which idols stood could be countenanced. This was the case so long as there was no suggestion of the Israelite's participation in a cultic activity and no reason to believe that the individual's presence in that place somehow showed respect to the idol (M. A.Z. 3:4):

- A. Peroqlos b. Philosephos¹³ asked Rabban Gamaliel in Akko, when he was washing in Aphrodite's bath house, saying to him, "It is written in your Torah, 'And there shall cleave nothing of a devoted thing to your hand' [Deut. 13:18]. How is it that you are taking a bath in Aphrodite's bath house?"
- B. He said to him, "They do not give answers in a bathhouse."
- C. When he went out, he said to him, "I never came into her domain. She came into mine, [for] they don't say, 'Let's make a bathhouse as an ornament for Aphrodite;' but they say, 'Let's make Aphrodite as an ornament for the bathhouse.'
- D. "Another matter: Even if someone gave you a lot of money, you would never walk into your temple of idolatry naked or suffering a flux, nor would you urinate in its presence.
- E. "Yet this thing is standing there at the head of the gutter and everybody urinates right in front of her.
- F. "It is said only, '[You shall hew down the graven images of] their gods' (Deut. 12:3)—[this means] that which one treats as a god is prohibited, but that which one treats not as a god is permitted."

As B makes explicit, Gamaliel is scrupulous about the rules of the Torah that control Israelite behavior. Within a bath house, he will not even so much as answer a question regarding covenantal law, an action that would show disrespect to God. But, since he does not understand the figure of Aphrodite to be an object of actual worship, he sees no problem with

using the bath house in which it stands. Rather, the placement of the statue and the way gentiles treat it suggest that it is mere ornamentation and so not subject to any prohibition. Within this line of reasoning, Israelites might be permitted to make open use of many of the public spaces and facilities within the Greco-Roman world in which they lived. It need not have been assumed that contact with the statues of Greek or other gods that stood in these places was a threat to Israelite religion.

That the threat of idolatry in this period was viewed as more theoretical than actual further is suggested by the rabbis' frequent reference to idolatry as a metaphor for the worst sin people can commit rather than as an actual sin that people in fact do commit. Rabbis, this is to say, often refer to other types of immorality as being tantamount to idolatry. Thus “a drunk who says a prayer is like one who worships an idol” (B. Ber. 31b), and failing to give charity is tantamount to idolatry (B. Ket. 68a). T. B.Q. 9:31 even associates excessive anger with idol worship:

- A. R. Simeon b. Eleazar says in the name of R. Hilpai b. Agra which he said in the name of R. Yohanan b. Nuri, “If a person pulled out his own hair, tore his clothing, broke his utensils, scattered his coins, in a fit of anger, he should be regarded by you as though he performed an act of service for an idol.
- B. “For if his temper should say to him, ‘Go do an act of service for an idol,’ he would go and do it.
- C. “And that is the sort of thing that the evil impulse can do: Today it says to him, ‘Do this,’ tomorrow ‘Do that,’ until he tells him, ‘Go serve idols,’ and he goes and does just that.”

As understood in this and similar passages, idol worship is no longer defined as the concrete religious practice forbidden by Scripture. It is not, this is to say, the result of the Israelite's belief in the existence of deities other than God or the outcome of the person's reasoned hope that by following pagan rituals he or she can harness for personal benefit powers in the world besides those of the Israelite deity. The term idolatry, rather, has taken on a general

significance, so as to symbolize any sin in which an Israelite loses control of him or herself and so ceases to follow any of the precepts of the Torah. **Idolatry** thus is no longer about the actual making and worshipping of idols. It is, rather, a metaphor for what happens whenever a Jew loses his or her focus upon the tenets and ideals of the covenant with God. Through this development, the concept of **idolatry** remained a useful symbol of what Israelite's must not do even in a period in which actual Israelite worship of idols had long been a thing of the past.

The Rabbinic literature contains numerous references to specific deities, idolatrous rites, and products used in idol worship. Some actual practices and many familiar deities are mentioned, e.g., Peor, Aphrodite, Mercurius, and Asherah. Much of what is mentioned however seems idiosyncratic to the Rabbinic understanding of pagan rites, especially insofar as the rabbis more frequently mention biblical deities, no longer worshipped in their day, than they do the actual gods of the Greco-Roman world in which they lived. Included in the category of cult items mentioned by the rabbis but unknown from other sources are long lists of foods and animal products that, according to the rabbis, may not be sold to or bought from a gentile, lest they are to be used in **idolatry**. One such list appears at M. A.Z. 1:5:

- A. These are things [which it is] forbidden to sell to gentiles:
- B. fir cones, white figs, and their stalks, frankincense, and a white cock.
- C. R. Judah says, "It is permitted to sell him a white cock among other cocks.
- D. "And when it is all by itself, one cuts off its spur and sells it to him,
- E. "for they do not offer to an idol one which is lacking [a spur]."
- F. And as to everything else, [if] they are left without specification [as to their proposed use], it is permitted, but [if] they are specified [for use for idolatry], it is prohibited.
- G. R. Meir says, "Also fine dates, Hasab, and Nicolaus dates it is prohibited to sell to gentiles."

The association between these specific items and actual practices of idol worship is unknown, as is the source or currency of certain rites the rabbis associated with idol-worship, e.g., cutting a round incision through an animal's hide at the heart (M. A.Z. 2:3).

Unlike Scripture, the Talmud makes no specific mention of Israelites' obligation to destroy objects of idol worship or actively to prevent gentiles from engaging in their worship. Indeed, although idolatry is included among the seven Noahide commandments that apply to all people, as the economic statutes listed above suggest, the rabbis overall take a mostly neutral stance towards other people's practice of idol worship. Thus Tarfon held that idolaters are less dangerous than Israelite sectarians (Y. Shab. 16:9, 15c):

- A. Said R. Tarfon, “I swear by the life of my children [lit.: May I bury my children!], that if [sectarians] came to my house, I would burn them and all memory of them!
- B. “For if a pursuer were pursuing me, I would escape into the house of an idolater, but I would not escape into the house of a sectarian.
- C. “For idol-worshippers do not know him [that is, the true God], and [as a result unintentionally] deny him.
- D. “But sectarians recognize him and [even so] they deny him.
- E. “And regarding them, David said [Ps. 129:31], ‘Do I not hate them that hate thee, O Lord?’”

The rabbis were able to excuse idol worshippers, whom they understood to act out of ignorance. This was not the case for Jews who disregarded or denied the “true” practice of the religion of the covenant, as it was defined and described, of course, by the rabbis themselves. We see again in this attitude the extent to which the Talmudic rabbis defined idol worship as something other than a problem for Jews and Judaism. Idolatry, rather, was what other, misinformed people did. Unlike in the view of the Hebrew Scriptures, it was not acknowledged as a very real threat to the integrity of Israelite beliefs. These were threatened only by sectarian movements emerging from within Judaism itself, movements that, interestingly enough, were accused not of worshipping idols but only of incorrectly worshipping or thinking about the Israelite God.

A similar resignation to other people's idolatry and a sense that the worship of idols was not dangerous to Israelite practices may stand behind the understanding that, outside of the land of Israel, Israelites are not even required to destroy idols. Commenting on Deut. 12:1–3, which states, “Tear down their altars, smash their pillars, put their sacred posts to the fire, and cut down the images of their gods, obliterating their name from that site,” Sif. Deut. 61 explains:

- A. Is it possible that one is required to pursue them abroad?
- B. Scripture says, "...obliterating their name from *that* site."
- C. In the land of Israel one is required to pursue them, and one is not required to pursue them abroad.

Despite this general acceptance of idol worship practiced by other people, the rabbis were confident of the exclusive truth of their religious beliefs, stating that idols should not be referred to by favorable names (Sif. Deut. 61) and permitting Israelites to mock idolaters (B. Meg. 25b):

- A. Said R. Nahman, "All mocking is forbidden, except for ridiculing idols,
- B. "as it says [Is. 46:1]: 'Bel bows down, Nebo stoops.' And it [further] says [Is. 46:2]: 'They stoop, they bow down together, they cannot save the burden, [but themselves go into captivity].'"

The Mishnah moreover provides a benediction to be recited when one sees a place in the land of Israel in which idols previously were worshipped: "Blessed is he who uprooted idolatry from our land" (M. Ber. 9:1).

IDOLATRY IN THE POST-TALMUDIC TIMES

In the post Talmudic period, in particular by the fourteenth century, Rabbinic authorities largely rejected the notion that idol worship continued to exist within the religions with which Jews had regular contact. While adherents of religions other than Judaism continued regularly to be referred to as "worshippers of stars and constellations," rabbis of the medieval period and on denied that these people engaged in, or even knew, the rudiments of the actual practice of idolatry.¹⁴ Like the earlier Talmudic discussions of idolatry, this determination by Rabbinic authorities had concrete implications for business and social relationships between

Jews and non-Jews. It established, for instance, that wine produced by gentiles should not be forbidden to Jews simply on the assumption that a gentile would pour some of each vat as a libation offering to a false god. While other considerations, such as the desire to prevent inter-religious socializing that might lead to Jewish assimilation, continued to be taken seriously, no longer would the fear of intentional or unwitting Jewish participation in idolatry have a role in the determination of Jewish law.

Alan J. Avery-Peck

Notes

1. On the following, see Edward M. Curtis, "Idol, Idolatry," in ABD, vol. 3, pp. 376–381.
2. See also Exod. 20:23, 34:17, Lev. 19:4, 26:1, Deut. 4:15–19, 4:25, and 5:8.
3. Note, however, that some iconolatry at least appears to have been accepted as appropriate in the time of the patriarchs and in some other settings: Abraham (Gen. 21:33) planted a tree in Beer Sheba, where he called upon God; at Beth El, Jacob (Gen. 18:18, 18:22, 35:14) set up a pillar used in the worship of God (this practice was later prohibited by Deut. 16:22); the curtains of the tabernacle were embroidered with figures of cherubim (Exod. 26:1, 36:8), and there were also there and in the later Temple two golden cherubim (Exod. 25:18–22, 1 Kgs. 6:23–28), understood to be the resting place of God. These images also were carved on the doors and walls of the Temple (1 Kgs. 6:29, etc.). But other forms of iconolatry clearly were proscribed as idolatry, e.g., the making of the Golden Calf (Exod. 32:1–8), which Aaron declared actually to be the god that brought the Israelites out of Egypt.
4. This point is made dramatically at 1 Kgs. 18:21–35, where the prophets of Baal are unsuccessful in bringing down fire from Baal to ignite sacrifices laid out on an altar. Yahweh, by contrast, responds to Elijah, leading the Israelites to recognize that "The Lord, he is God."
5. E.g., Pesel, from the root meaning "to hew;" Asab, from a root meaning "to form;" Tabnit, from the root meaning "pattern." See Curtis, *op. cit.*, p. 378.
6. See, e.g., Jer. 50:2, Ezek. 22:3–4, and 1 Kgs. 15:12. See Curtis, *ibid.*, and Francis Brown, et al., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford, reprint, 1974), p. 165.
7. See, e.g., Jer. 14:14, Lev. 19:4, Ezek. 30:13. See Curtis, *ibid.*, and Brown, *ibid.*, p. 47.

8. See on this Curtis, pp. 379–400.

9. See, e.g., the actions of Jehu, 2 Kgs. 9:33 and 10:18–28; the uprising led by the priest Jehoiada, 2 Kgs. 11:17; and, most important, the purge of idolatry in Judah under Hezekiah, 2 Kgs. 18:3–5 and 2 Chr. 29–31. But then Hezekiah's own son, Manasseh, reinstated idolatry in perhaps the most consequential manner possible. Along with rebuilding the high places torn down by his father, he built altars for foreign deities within the central Israelite Temple in Jerusalem (2 Kgs. 18), something that even Queen Jezebel, who built new sanctuaries for pagan gods, had not done.

10. Curtis, *ibid.*, p. 380.

11. See R.A. Oden, Jr., “The Persistence of Canaanite Religion,” in *Biblical Archaeologist*, 1976, vol. 39, pp. 31–36.

12. See W. Dever, “Material Remains and the Cult in Ancient Israel. An Essay in Archaeological Systematics,” in C. Meyers and M. O'Connor, eds., *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman* (Winona Lake, 1983), pp. 571–587, and J. Tigay, *You Shall Have No Other Gods Before Me: Israelite Religion in the Light of Hebrew Inscriptions* (Atlanta, 1986). Both are cited by Curtis.

13. A “philosopher” clearly is intended. Perhaps the text should read: Peroqlos the philosopher.

14. See, e.g., *Tosafot* to B. A.Z. 57b, s.v., leafuqei midrav. On this issue, see *Other Religions, Judaic Doctrines of*.

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