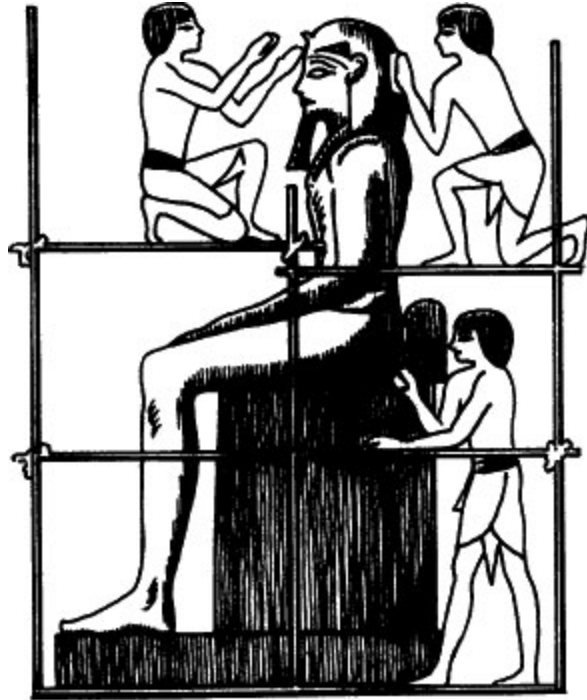


IDOL, IDOLATRY

With an outlook that is commonplace in our time but was radical in its own, the prophets and poets of the OT consistently denounced idols as mere sticks and stones, the handiwork of humans. On such occasions their *rhetoric* verges on the *genre* of prebattle *taunt* (Is 57:13; cf. 1 Kings 18:27). They repeatedly point to the *irony* of an idol maker worshiping his own *creation* (Is 44:19; Hos 13:2; Hab 2:18). Idols stand motionless, mute and dumb, like scarecrows in a cucumber patch (Jer 10:5). Isaiah mockingly commiserates with the poor weary beasts forced to transport the worthless cargo of idols (Is 46:1) as they traveled to and from ceremonies. The idols themselves decay and come to ruin (Ezek 6:6). They have human features that do not function, making them subhuman rather than superhuman (Ps 115:4–8). The NT picks up the OT refrain (Acts 17:29; Rom 1:18–32).

Idols as Deceit. Because idols are no-account gods, only the deceived (1 Cor 6:9; Eph 5:5–6) *worship* them; and when they do, they *worship* the Deceiver (Rev 12:9). False gods make people false (2 Kings 17:15). Those who engage in idolatry “suppress the *truth*” (Rom 1:18–25). Idolaters are grouped with liars (Rev 21:8); idol *worship* is lies that lead people astray (Amos 2:4). Yet the paradoxical nature of idols persists, and a simple piece of *metal*, *wood* or *stone* becomes a genuine spiritual evil. In nearly the same breath, Paul says that the idol is “nothing” (1 Cor 8:4) and that it is empowered by a demon (1 Cor 10:20).



Egyptian artisans make a statue of Thutmose III. The scene informs our understanding of idols that are “the work of human hands” (Ps 115:4 NRSV).

Idols as Spirit Habitations. Of course, idol craftsmen and worshipers alike understood that they had made the idol. We know from both Egyptian and Mesopotamian records that an idol’s inauguration required an elaborate, magical nocturnal ceremony that “opened” its eyes, “washed” its mouth and endowed it with “life.” These rituals rendered the artwork suitable for the presence of the god. Opposing these very beliefs, Jeremiah repeats his accusation against the goldsmith’s image: “There is no breath in them” (Jer 10:14 RSV; 51:17). Once it had become inspired, the idol was treated royally, dressed in kingly robes, carried in procession, offered the choicest foods. The temple staff served as its courtiers in a spiritual kingship. (Hebrew, like many ancient languages, uses the same word for both temple and palace.)

Idols as Personifications. Treating the idol as a person no *doubt* made the abstractions of deity and spirit easier to deal with. Monotheistic prophets and idol worshipers alike personified the idols, albeit for

different purposes. The idols will reveal their nondivine status when “all gods bow down before him” ([Ps 97:7 RSV](#)). Similarly, when the Lord comes, “the idols of Egypt will tremble at his presence” ([Is 19:1 RSV](#)). The naming of rocks (e.g. Bethel, Ebenezer; see “Idols as Witness” below) verges on personification.

Idols and Pagan Gods as Demons. Idols and pagan gods are parallel ideas ([Lev 19:4](#); [Deut 32:21](#); [Is 45:20](#)) and are even equated ([Ps 96:5](#)). “All the gods of the people are idols” ([1 Chron 16:26 RSV](#)). The author of Deuteronomy lumps foreign gods, idols and [demons](#) all together ([Deut 32:17](#)). The LXX translators understood the Hebrew *’lōhāyw* ([Is 8:21](#), either “his gods” or “his God”) to refer to pagan gods and so rendered it by *ta patachra* (a Persian word for idol borrowed through Aramaic into Greek, so also in [Is 37:38](#)). Sometimes the context suggests that the term *idol* means “god”: “My idol did them” ([Is 48:5 RSV](#)); “to carry the good news to their idols” ([1 Chron 10:9 RSV](#)). The Philistine “cursed me by his idols” (LXX [Ps 151:6](#); cf. [1 Sam 17:43](#), which reads “by his gods”). The “sacred tokens of the idols of Jamnia” ([2 Mac 12:40](#)) means amulets naming pagan gods.

Because the Jews understood pagan gods to be [demons](#), idols and [demons](#) are commonly paired (e.g., [Zech 13:2](#)). So too are [demons](#) and idol worship ([Rev 9:20](#)). In some cases the word *idol* appears to refer to [demons](#). The Greek term *eidōlon*, in addition to the standard meanings—“image,” “idol,” “false god”—retains the classical meaning “phantom (of the dead)” and the [demons](#) that empower and inhabit the idol. Although poorly documented in Koine lexica, several passages point to the overlap of meaning. Hosea says an (evil) spirit of harlotry (idolatry) has led the people astray ([Hos 4:12](#); [5:4](#)) and oppresses them ([Hos 4:19](#)). An early Christian writer of pseudepigrapha, placing in Solomon’s mouth the words “I became a laughingstock to the idols and [demons](#),” gives the idols not only personality but a “spirited,” vengeful attitude (*Testament of Solomon* 26:7). Paul sees [demons](#) lurking behind idols ([1 Cor 10:20](#); cf. [Ps 97:7](#) with [Phil 2:10](#)).

Idols as Symbols of Power. On the one hand, the idol is not really the deity but only a handle to

use in dealing with the spirit, the real power behind the idol. On the other hand, it becomes so identified with the god that the two are hard to separate. The genius of the symbol is that it gives humans a way to manipulate their gods. The presence of a god can be demanded in war, for oracles, at home, on a journey. Idols represent the presence of the god at state functions. (The religious and political are not clearly demarcated in antiquity.) They are dressed up for festivals, even carried to other cities for meetings ([Is 46:1](#); [Ps 68:24–25](#)). Portable gods filled the need for divine accompaniment ([Job 12:6](#)). With similar hopes, the Israelites take the ark of the covenant into battle, attempting to force God to join in the battle on their side. At the arrival of the ark the Philistines exclaim in dismay, “A god has come into the camp. Woe to us!” ([1 Sam 4:5](#)).

One cannot miss the symbolism of submission intended by the charade between the idol of Dagan and the ark of the Lord ([1 Sam 5:3–5](#)). (Akkadian omen texts fret about idols that have fallen down and what dire consequences such events portend.) The (dis)pleasure or the health and well-being of the god is reflected in the national fortunes, with or without an idol. Sometimes merely owning an idol gives power. Micah’s Levite is enlisted to join the migration of the Danites because he has an idol usable for divination ([Judg 18:18](#)). Rachel’s thievery of Laban’s idols might have been for their power or for their significance with respect to inheritance and blessing or both ([Gen 31:19–35](#)). Idols were frequently one of the spoils of war ([Hos 10:5](#)). At times Mesopotamian gods are said to be “in exile” (captured). The ark, even without an [image of God](#), still represents his presence and blessing, so the Philistines cart it off as trophy of war ([2 Sam 5:21](#)). A curse to its captors, its mere presence blesses Obededom’s house upon its return ([2 Sam 6:11](#)).

Idol as Witness. Just as Paul says “God is my witness” (e.g., [Rom 1:9](#); [Phil 1:8](#)), so also idols that stand for the presence of gods function as witnesses to oaths that sealed treaties, covenants and religious vows. Many of the circles of stones uncovered by archaeology are probably to be understood as divine assemblies of witnesses. The prophets berate the idolaters since their “witnesses neither see nor

know” (Is 44:8–9 RSV). In addition to the prophetic calls against witnessing idols, the narrative portions of the OT contain vestiges of such an outlook. Jacob and Laban erect a stone heap with a name meaning “witness” (Gen 31:44–52). Isaiah predicts an altar and a pillar to the Lord in Egypt as a “sign and witness” (Is 19:19–20). An altar, not for sacrifice but for a witness of proper worship, stands at the tribal border (Josh 22:26–27, 34). The religious component of other stone witnesses is less clear. Perhaps large stones, permanent elements of the landscape, played the role of a mute audience to historic events, serving as a fixed, tangible anchor to unwritten history (1 Sam 6:18). The concept of stones as testifying witnesses lives again in Jesus’ words, “If these were silent, the very stones would cry out” (Lk 19:40 RSV).

Idolatry as Actions. The gestures of idolatry employ unmistakable acts of submission and worship. Bowing, the proper attitude for prayer (1 Kings 18:42; 2 Chron 29:29), is also performed before idols (2 Kings 5:18; Is 44:15). (The Hebrew ideas of “bowing down,” “serving” and “worshiping” are nearly interchangeable and are forbidden of idols [Ex 20:5]). On other occasions worship is described by the phrase “lift the eyes” both of idols (Ezek 18:6, 12, 15; 33:25; Ps 121) and also of God (Ps 123:1). Some gestures of worship are confined to idolatry because they require an image. Such actions include kissing Baal or a calf (1 Kings 19:18; Hos 13:2) or kissing one’s hand (Job 31:27). The latter is perhaps to be construed as presenting one’s soul to the deity (Ps 24:4) and may be connected to artistic depictions of worshipers with a hand to the mouth or with an outstretched hand. In a radical departure from their neighbors’ practice, the Israelites’ symbol for God was the absence of an image above the cherubim on the ark of the covenant.

Idolatry as Sin and Abomination. The Bible reserves some of its strongest language for idolatry: abhor, detest, provoke, rebellion (1 Sam 15:23), stubbornness (Hos 4:16), disobedience, brutishness (see ABOMINATION). The prophets characterize idolatry as a pigheaded, willful disobedience of God’s law and even of natural laws—the kind of disobedience that would not occur to dumb animals, implying that idol worshiping humans are baser than the brutes

(Jer 8:7). Even so, the Bible and Jewish tradition record that some of the heroes of the past (or members of their entourage) succumbed to syncretistic thinking and to the seductive power of idolatry: Jacob (Gen 28:22; 31:19–35); Gideon (Judg 8:26–27); Micah (17:5; 18:14–20); David (19:13).

Idolatry as Political Prostitution. In the shifting tide of politics, political marriages were vulnerable (1 Sam 18:26; 25:44; 2 Sam 3:14). As the experience with Solomon’s wives shows, political alliances cemented by marriage stemmed from and lead to foreign politico-religious entanglements and so may also be characterized as lewd and idolatrous. Because of compromising political involvement, Judah is a wanton wench (Ezek 16), Samaria a slut (Ezek 16:46), Babylon a bimbo (Rev 17).

Idolatry as Religious Unfaithfulness. The most common and well-developed metaphor refers to idolatry as sexual impurity. But the metaphor reflects a link to, perhaps even an origin in, an idolatry built on many forms of sexual excess. Just as sexual purity was a religious mandate under the prophets (Ezek 22:7–11), idolatry made the opposite claim. Fertility cults encouraged instead the flaunting of human sexuality as a means of insuring the fecundity of the earth through sympathetic magic. Historically, idols represented nature gods, fertility gods and goddesses (Baals and Asherahs) and had long associations with fertility cults and their practices—practices believed necessary to ensure successful grain and livestock production. The rites prescribed ritualized prostitution, both female (Gen 38:21; Deut 32:18; Hos 4:14) and male (Deut 32:18–19; 1 Kings 14:24; 15:21; Rev 22:15), incestuous relations (Ezek 22:9–11; cf. 1 Cor 5:1, 11) and the sharing of one woman by several generations of men (Jer 5:7–8; 13:27; Amos 2:7). The stone idol or wooden pillar with its phallic symbolism seems to have been viewed as the mystical sire of resulting offspring or even of the people (Jer 2:27).

In such a religious climate the prophets found in the image of an unfaithful wife an obvious analogue for a nation abandoning its own deity for that of another people. Brazen and wayward, she breaks covenant and troth (Ezek 16, esp. 16:8), defiles herself with idols (Ezek 23:7, 37), commits adultery

with stone and wood ([Jer 3:9](#)). The prophets even dared to characterize the nation as a religious nymphomaniac ([Jer 5:7–8](#); [Ezek 16:32](#)). In this context God is a “jealous God” ([Ex 20:5](#)) and refuses to share his praise with idols ([Is 42:8](#)).

Idolatry and sexual immorality continue hand in hand in the NT, where idolatry appears in lists of sins that include several labels for illicit acts ([Acts 15:20](#); [1 Cor 6:9](#); cf. [1 Pet 4:3](#); [Rev 22:15](#)). Luke vividly conveys Paul’s revulsion at Athens, a city which, in its desire not to offend any god, became “full of idols” ([Acts 17:16](#)).

Idolatry as Desires Even Without Idols. While idolatry is clearly a code name for violation of purity laws, especially (but not only) sexual ones, it eventually comes to designate lawless living in general ([Col 3:5](#); [1 Pet 4:3](#)). The association with lawlessness derives from its origins in the express violation of sexual social mores to insure the fecundity of the earth. Yet zeal or pious disdain for idolatry must not breed lawless retaliation, so Paul cautions that even the justified abhorrence of idols doesn’t justify lawless acts against the idol’s temple ([Rom 2:22](#)). Since an idol is an object of adoration, “one who is covetous” becomes “an idolater” ([Eph 5:5](#); [1 Cor 5:10](#)) and any earthly desires, “sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed,” become idolatry ([Col 3:5](#)). A similar list of “works of the flesh” includes idolatry ([Gal 5:19–21](#)). Ultimately, any violation of God’s law is idolatry, and idols may serve as an image and label for all that is anti-Christian ([1 Jn 5:21](#)).

See also [APOSTASY](#); [DEMONS](#); [GOD](#); [GODS](#), [GODDESSES](#); [HIGH PLACE](#); [PILLAR](#); [STONE](#); [WOOD](#); [WORSHIP](#).