

IMAGE. The term denotes a material representation, usually of a deity. Unlike the term ‘idol’, which has a pejorative overtone, ‘image’ is objectively descriptive. Throughout the ancient Near East numerous images of various deities were to be found in temples and other holy places, such as open-air shrines; many private houses also contained a niche where the image of the protective deity of the household stood. Images were commonly anthropomorphic (in human form), though theriomorphic images (in animal form) were also widely used, especially in Egypt.

The form of the image, especially of the theriomorphic examples, frequently represented some prominent characteristic of the particular deity; thus an image of a bull (e.g. of El in Cannann) portrayed the god’s power and fertility. The image was not primarily intended as a visual representation of the deity, but as a dwelling-place of the spirit of the deity enabling the god to be physically present in many different places simultaneously. A worshipper praying before an image would not necessarily accept that his prayers were being offered to the figure of wood or metal itself, but would probably have regarded the image as a ‘projection’ or embodiment of the deity. Of course, those in Israel who denied any reality to the deity represented by the image maintained that the worshippers of foreign deities were paying homage to mere

wood and stone (*[IDOLATRY](#)).

Images were made in various ways. A molten image (*massēkâ*) was cast in a mould from copper, silver or gold. A graven image (*pesel*) was carved from stone or wood; wooden images could be overlaid with precious metals (cf. [Is. 40:19](#), [NEB](#)). See [Is. 41:6–7](#); [44:12–17](#).

I. In the Old Testament

a. Images of foreign gods

Though the making and worshipping of images is forbidden by Pentateuchal law ([Ex. 20:4–5](#)) and condemned by the prophets (e.g. [Je. 10:3–5](#); [Ho. 11:2](#)), their use in Israel throughout pre-exilic times was common ([Jdg. 6:25](#); [1 Ki. 11:5–8](#); [16:31–33](#)), even at times within the Temple itself ([2 Ki. 21:3–5](#), [7](#)).

b. *Images of Yahweh.* Standing stones (*maššēbôt*) erected by the Patriarchs (e.g. [Gn. 28:18](#), [22](#); [35:14](#)) were perhaps originally regarded as images (similarly the sacred trees; cf. [Gn. 21:33](#)), but were later forbidden ([Asherah, Dt. 16:21](#)) or re-interpreted as merely commemorative objects (cf. [Gn. 31:45–50](#); [Jos. 4:4–9](#)). Later, images of Yahweh were denounced by pure Yahwists: the golden calf at Sinai ([Ex. 32:1–8](#)), the image (*EPHOD) made by Gideon ([Jdg. 8:26–27](#)), the golden calves at Dan and Bethel ([1 Ki. 12:28–30](#)), the calf of Samaria ([Ho. 8:6](#)).

c. *Man as the image of God.* In a few texts in Genesis ([1:26–27](#); [5:2](#); [9:6](#)) man is

said to have been created ‘in’ or ‘as’ the image of God, ‘according to his likeness’. Though many interpreters have thought to locate the ‘image’ of God in man’s reason, creativity, speech, or spiritual nature, it is more likely that it is the whole of man, rather than some part or aspect of him, that is the image of God. The whole man, body and soul, is the image of God; man is the corporeal image of the incorporeal God. As in the ancient Near East, man as the image of God represents him through his participation in the divine breath or spirit (cf. [Gn. 2:7](#); perhaps also the spirit of God is included in the ‘us’ of [1:26](#); cf. the reference to the spirit of God in [1:2](#)). Man’s role as ruler of the earth is established by his creation as God’s image ([1:27](#)). Elsewhere in the ancient Near East it is usually the king who is said to be the image of God, but in [Gn. 1](#) it is mankind as a whole that is God’s vizier and representative. Significantly, man is still spoken of as the image of God after the Fall: the force of [Gn. 9:6](#) depends on the belief that man represents God, so that an injury done to a man is an injury done to God himself (cf. also [Jas. 3:9](#)).

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