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The Relationship between the Worship of Other Gods  
And the Worship of Idols within the Old Testament

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Submitted as a thesis for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Theology  
University of Durham  
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## Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols within the Old Testament. The ambiguity of the relationship is evident in the differing enumerations of the Ten Commandments in Jewish and Christian tradition. While Protestant Reformed and Eastern Orthodox traditions distinguish the prohibition of other gods from the prohibition of idols as the first and the second commandments, Jewish, Catholic and Lutheran traditions view them as one. Similarly, while some interpreters find reason to distinguish between the issues, others view them as more or less synonymous. This thesis questions why the relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols within the Old Testament is difficult to define.

With the intention of developing the ideas presented in John Barton's brief article "'The Work of Human Hands' (Ps. 115:4): Idolatry in the Old Testament," it begins with an exegetical examination of the ambiguities involved in the relationship between the prohibitions and then moves onto an examination of the Old Testament depiction of the war against idols before and after the fall of the Northern Kingdom. Themes that receive particular attention are the historic interpretations of the relationship between the prohibitions, the worship of YHWH via divine images, the fall of Israel, the prophetic idol polemics, the existence of other gods and monotheism.

The thesis presents four factors that make the relationship difficult to define. The first three are introduced through an examination of the relationship between the prohibition of other gods and the prohibition of idols in Part One of the thesis and the fourth through the comparison of the biblical depiction of the war against idols before and after the fall of the Northern Kingdom in Part Two. I argue that the differing depictions of the eras provide alternative literary contexts for understanding the relationship between the issues.

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This work has been submitted to Durham University in accordance with the regulations for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. It is my own work, and no part of it has been previously submitted to the Durham University or in any other university for a degree.

*For Joseph*

ויפילו גורלות משמרת לעמת כקטן כגדול מבין עם תלמיד

1 Chr. 25:8

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## Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
AHCANE	Studies in the History and Culture of the Ancient Near East
ANEP	<i>The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament</i>
ANF	<i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i>
AOTC	Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries
AV	Authorized Version
BBC	Blackwell Bible Commentaries
BHS	<i>Biblia hebraica stuttgartensia</i>
BiberOr	Biblica et Orientalia
BibSem	The Biblical Seminar
BJRL	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester</i>
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
BJS UCSD	Biblical and Judaic Studies The University of California, San Diego
BO	Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry
BRS	Biblical Resource Series
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CBST	Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges
CCC	Catechism of the Catholic Church
CCL	Corpus Christianorum <i>Series Latina</i>
ConBOT	Coniectanea Biblica: Old Testament Series
CTHPT	Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought
EBR	<i>Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception</i>
ECC	Eerdmans Critical Commentary
ECF	Early Church Fathers
EDB	<i>Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible</i>
EQ	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
ESV	English Standard Version
ETL	<i>Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses</i>
ExAud	<i>Ex auditu</i>
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
FOTL	Forms of the Old Testament Literature
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
GKC	<i>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar</i>
HCOT	Historical Commentary on the Old Testament
HorSoe	Horae Soederblomianae
HS	Hebrew Studies
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs
HTL	Harper Theological Library
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
ICCHSONT	The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures on the Old and New Testaments

<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>IOS</i>	<i>Israel Oriental Studies</i>
<i>JANER</i>	<i>Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JEA</i>	<i>Journal of Egyptian Archaeology</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JL</i>	Jordon Lectures
<i>JNES</i>	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
<i>JNSL</i>	<i>Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages</i>
<i>JPS</i>	Jewish Publication Society
<i>JPSTC</i>	Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary
<i>JQR</i>	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
<i>JRitSt</i>	<i>Journal of Ritual Studies</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JSOTSup</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series</i>
<i>JSJ</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism</i>
<i>KPG</i>	Knox Preaching Guides
<i>LAI</i>	Library of Ancient Israel
<i>LHB/OTS</i>	Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
<i>LXX</i>	Septuagint
<i>MT</i>	Masoretic Text
<i>NASB</i>	New American Standard Bible
<i>NCamBC</i>	New Cambridge Bible Commentary
<i>NCBC</i>	New Century Bible Commentary
<i>NIBCOT</i>	New International Biblical Commentary Old Testament Series
<i>NICOT</i>	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
<i>NIDOTTE</i>	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> (ed.W.A. VanGemeren; 5 vols.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997)
<i>NIGTC</i>	New International Greek Testament Commentary
<i>NIV</i>	New International Version
<i>NIVAC</i>	New International Version Application Commentary
<i>NRSV</i>	New Revised Standard Version
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>OBO</i>	Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis
<i>OER</i>	<i>Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation</i>
<i>OTE</i>	<i>Old Testament Essays</i>
<i>OTG</i>	Old Testament Guides
<i>OTL</i>	Old Testament Library
<i>OTS</i>	Oudtestamentische Studiën
<i>Pesh.</i>	Peshitta
<i>PPFBR</i>	Publications of the Perry Foundation for Biblical Research in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem
<i>PPS</i>	Popular Patristics Series
<i>RTR</i>	<i>Reformed Theological Review</i>
<i>SAALT</i>	State Archives of Assyria Literary Texts
<i>SB</i>	Subsidia Biblica
<i>SBL</i>	Studies in Biblical Literature
<i>SBLBE</i>	Society of Biblical Literature Biblical Encyclopedia Series

SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
SemeiaSt	Semeia Studies
SP	Samarian Pentateuch
SRTH	Studies in Reformed Theology and History
<i>ST</i>	<i>Studia theologica</i>
<i>Strom</i>	<i>Stromates</i>
SubBi	Subsidia biblica
<i>Targ.</i>	<i>Targum</i>
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
<i>TDOT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i>
TCL	Textes cunéiformes, Musées du Louvre
<i>Them</i>	<i>Themelios</i>
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
UCOP	University of Cambridge Oriental Publications
Vulg.	Vulgate
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i> , Supplement Series
WB	Welt der Bibel
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WestBC	Westminster Bible Companion
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

## Introduction

The relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols within the Old Testament<sup>1</sup> is not one that can be neatly defined. The biblical ambiguity is probably reflected most clearly in the differing enumerations of the Ten Commandments in Jewish and Christian tradition. While Protestant Reformed and Eastern Orthodox traditions see the prohibition of other gods and the prohibition of idols as distinct commandments, Catholic, Lutheran and most Jewish traditions treat them as one. Similarly, while some interpreters view “the worship of other gods” and “the worship of idols” as more or less synonymous issues (so that the idea of a “relationship” between the two might sound somewhat non-sensical), others find reason to distinguish between them. While much scholarly work has been done on each of these broad biblical concerns,<sup>2</sup> little has been done to deal directly with the

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<sup>1</sup> As a member of the Christian tradition, I will use the term “Old Testament” rather than “Miqra,” “Tanakh,” or “Hebrew Bible.” On the question of the most appropriate way to refer to what is both the Jewish canon and the first part of the Christian canon see MacDonald, “One God or one Lord? Deuteronomy and the Meaning of ‘Monotheism’,” (PhD Thesis, University of Durham 2001) 14. Cf. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (London: SCM, 1985), 7-9.

<sup>2</sup> Any scholar attempting to neatly categorize the sizeable body of secondary literature associated with “the worship of other gods” and “the worship of idols” will immediately be confronted by the fact that some works treat as a single issue (“idolatry”) what others divide into distinct concerns (the worship of alien deities and aniconism). Since the vast majority of these studies are not specifically focused upon explaining the *relationship* between these issues, in order to set my work within this broad scholarly context, I will simply refer readers to a few works which provide helpful literature reviews and/or bibliographies on the related topics. On the topic of aniconism I would refer readers to MacDonald, “Aniconism in the Old Testament,” in *The God of Israel*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). MacDonald reviews the body of secondary literature and offers his own take on the biblical rationale for the Israelite aniconic tradition. He helpfully suggests that scholars should distinguish whether they are seeking to answer (1) the exegetical question of the rationale for aniconism *according to the biblical texts*, or (2) the religious historical questions regarding de facto aniconism or (3) the religious historical questions regarding programmatic aniconism. On the distinction between de facto and programmatic aniconism, see Mettinger, *No Graven Image? Israelite Aniconism in its Ancient Near Eastern Context* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1995), 17-18. Beyond this, on the broad category of “idolatry” I would echo Beale’s recommendation to see Eix, “Bibliography” in *ExAud* 15, (1999), 143-150; the review of secondary literature on Old Testament idolatry compiled by Ben Zvi, *Hosea* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 119, the chapter on idolatry in Wright, *The Mission of God Unlocking the Bible’s*

relationship between the two. Therefore, this thesis will address this under-developed area of Old Testament research. Specifically, I attempt to explain why the relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols within the Old Testament is difficult to define.

In order to do so, I will build upon the ideas presented in one of the few works that have touched upon the question. John Barton's brief but insightful article entitled "'The Work of Human Hands' (Ps. 115:4): Idolatry in the Old Testament," identifies the key issues that are involved.<sup>3</sup> Beginning with the differing enumerations of the Ten Commandments, Barton suggests that the Protestant Reformed tradition which distinguishes between the prohibition of other gods and the prohibition of idols corresponds to a distinction that runs through many strands of the Old Testament.<sup>4</sup> However, he argues that when Isaiah condemned the gods of the nations as "the work of human hands," the issues associated with the prohibitions were fused because alien deities were no longer viewed as real sources of divine power but as lifeless lumps of wood and stone. For this reason, Barton suggests that it is from Isaiah that the distinct ideas relating to the prohibitions were fused exactly

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*Grand Narrative* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2006), 136-188, the articles and bibliographies provided in Barton ed, *Idolatry: False Worship in the Bible, Early Judaism and Christianity* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), and Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992). See Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 20. On the closely related topic of monotheism, I would refer readers to Moberly, "How Appropriate is 'Monotheism' as a Category for Biblical Interpretation?," in *Early Jewish and Christian Monotheism*, (eds. Stuckenbruck and North London: T&T Clark, 2004). Moberly helpfully summarizes five emphases concerning monotheism in the body of modern secondary literature, provides examples for each, and questions whether any of them do justice to the idea of YHWH's "oneness" in the Old Testament. For a more in-depth review (yet still representative rather than exhaustive) see the chapter section entitled "The Origin and Meaning of 'Monotheism' in Modern Study of the Old Testament" in MacDonald, "One God or one Lord?," 35-70. MacDonald provides a sketch of the history of research on monotheism that reviews the work of Kuenen, Wellhausen, Albright, Kaufmann, von Rad, Gnuse and Dietrich.

<sup>3</sup> Barton, "'The Work of Human Hands' (Ps 115:4): Idolatry in the Old Testament," *ExAud* 15 (1999). Also see Barton, "'The Work of Human Hands' (Psalm 115:4): Idolatry in the Old Testament," in *The Ten Commandments: The Reciprocity of Faithfulness*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004). Throughout this thesis I will refer to the article as it appears in *Ex Auditu*.

<sup>4</sup> Barton, "'The Work of Human Hands'," 64.



as the Jewish, Catholic and Lutheran understanding of the prohibitions suggests.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, Barton explains the biblical ambiguity in terms of the presence of threads within the Old Testament which distinguish between the issues set alongside threads which fuse the issues together.<sup>6</sup>

Barton's brief article is an excellent introduction to the question I have posed and this thesis will attempt to build upon his suggestions. Although I will diverge from his conclusions at a few points, I would argue that his primary argument is sound. While I will argue that the issues are not quite fused in the way that Barton suggests, I would agree that, at least from the perspective of the book of Isaiah, the worship of other gods and the worship of idols are very nearly treated as synonymous issues.

Like Barton, I will begin the thesis by considering the differing enumerations of the Ten Commandments. I will then examine the treatment of the issues within the wider Old Testament context. In order to do this, I divide the work into two distinct parts. Part One is composed of three short chapters which focus on the relationship between the prohibition of other gods and the prohibition of idols within the context of the Ten Commandments. In these chapters I identify three ambiguities that affect how interpreters understand the relationship between the prohibitions. Interpreters must wrestle with a linguistic ambiguity, a grammatical ambiguity and a theological ambiguity. Each of the chapters in Part One will address one of these ambiguities and follow a basic pattern. I first present the ambiguity, then survey the

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<sup>5</sup> Barton *ibid.*, 67.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to Barton, a few other works touch upon the relationship. I will provide a review of this literature in section 5.1. See Hutton, "A Simple Matter of Numbering? 'Sovereignty' and 'Holiness' in the Decalogue Tradition," in *Raising Up a Faithful Exegete*, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010); Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Curtis, "The Theological Basis for the Prohibition of Images in the Old Testament," *JETS* 28 (1985): 277-287; Evans, "Cult Images, Royal Policies and the Origins of Aniconism," in *The Pitcher is Broken*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 192-212.

differing ways that interpreters have historically attempted to deal with it, offer my own perspective, and finally explain how the ambiguity is reflected in the wider Old Testament context. Therefore, in this first part of the thesis I use the examination of the ambiguities present in the relationship between the prohibitions in order to introduce the first three of four factors which make the relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols difficult to define. Presenting these four factors is the primary aim of the thesis and my focus upon the relationship between the prohibitions is therefore a means to that end rather than an end in itself.

In Part Two I present a fourth factor. I make the case that the relationship between the issues is difficult to define because there is a difference between the biblical depiction of the war against idols before and after the fall of the Northern Kingdom. This difference creates two literary contexts in which the relationship may be understood. Part Two is therefore composed of four chapters which examine the biblical depiction of the war against idols before and after the fall of the Northern Kingdom.

In chapter four I argue that texts depicting the era before the fall of the Northern Kingdom treat the worship of other gods and the worship of idols as differing issues because the war against idols in these texts is not only fought on a foreign front against alien deities and the divine images associated with them, but also on a domestic front against the worship of YHWH<sup>7</sup> via divine images. In this context there is a legitimate difference between the worship of the “wrong gods” (i.e., alien deities and the divine images associated with them), and the worship of the “right God” in the wrong way (i.e., the worship of YHWH via divine images). The

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<sup>7</sup> When using the tetragrammaton I will leave it unvocalized. However, where other scholars are cited their own practice is retained.

primary texts that I will deal with in this chapter are the directions for worship at the place YHWH will choose in Deut. 12, the rationale for the prohibition of idols in Deut. 4, the narrative of Micah's idols in Judg. 17-18 and three texts dealing with the golden calves of Aaron and Jeroboam: Exod. 32; Deut. 9; and 1 Kgs. 12. In chapter five I argue that the sequence of events associated with the fall of the Northern Kingdom marks the end of the Old Testament's battle on the domestic front against the worship of YHWH via divine images. The primary texts that I deal with in this chapter will be the description of the fall of Israel, the repopulation of Samaria, Hezekiah's "reform" and the siege of Jerusalem as presented in 2 Kgs. 17-19, Isa. 36-37 and 2 Chr. 29-31. In chapter six I make the case that texts depicting the era after the fall of the Northern Kingdom appear to fuse the worship of other gods and the worship of idols because the war against idols in these texts is exclusively fought against alien deities and the divine images associated with them. In this context, to worship a divine image is to worship a foreign god—without exception. I offer a brief and representational (rather than exhaustive) sketch of the idol polemics in these texts. At the close of the chapter I question two assumptions. I first question Barton's suggestion that the work of Isaiah fused the issues associated with the prohibitions. I then move beyond Barton's work and question the commonly held assumption that the biblical treatment of the gods of the nations as "the work of human hands" constitutes a shift from monolatry to "monotheism" within the Old Testament. In the seventh and final chapter I return to the Ten Commandments in order to reconsider them in light of the Old Testament war against idols. Here I draw together the connections between the depiction of the eras and the differing enumerations.

However, before proceeding to the study itself, it is important to discuss the presuppositions and hermeneutical approach that underlies the way I will interpret the biblical texts. I would argue that, while there is certainly significant theological diversity in the texts of the Old Testament, this diversity can be approached within the overall context of the canonical presentation.<sup>8</sup> I therefore find legitimacy in attempting to trace a theme as is presented in various texts. Moreover, because the ambiguity I am attempting to address emerges from the juxtaposition of the issues within the texts, I would argue that the explanation for this ambiguity must not ignore the particular narrative framework in which the issues are found. This thesis will therefore be an exercise in the interpretation of the received form of the texts of the Old Testament, and what those texts have to say about the relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols. It is therefore not a work on archaeology, the religious history of Israel, or even source, form or redaction criticism. However, because I do not *only* examine the biblical ambiguities but also the differing enumerations of the Ten Commandments in various traditions as well as the variety of historical scholarly positions on the relationship between the prohibitions, the work also touches upon reception history.

Although I speak of a war against idols “before” and “after” the fall of the Northern Kingdom, I always refer to the biblical depiction of these eras. In other words, in this work, I am dealing with the relationship between the issues *within the Old Testament* rather than within the history of ancient Israel or the development of

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<sup>8</sup> Moberly, *Old Testament Theology: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 282-288; McConville, *God and Earthly Power: An Old Testament Political Theology--Genesis-Kings* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 8-10; Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*, 3-4, 212. See McConville’s justification for his approach which considers an issue within Genesis to Kings instead of the more common approach of examining an issue within an individual passage, book or even within the Deuteronomistic history.

its religion.<sup>9</sup> The distinction between the two is recognized in Sommer's discussion of monotheism in the Hebrew Bible and in ancient Israel when he writes: "The question 'Is it really monotheistic?' needs to be asked separately for the Hebrew Bible and for ancient Israelite religion. The religious ideas of the former represent a subset of the latter (or, more likely, several closely related subsets)."<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Von Rad refers to this distinction in his discussion of the Second Commandment when he writes, "In the history which Israel herself wrote of herself, she believed that the commandment which forbade images had been revealed from the time of Moses onwards. This view has again and again been vehemently disputed down to the present day."<sup>11</sup> Here von Rad highlights the difference between biblical depiction and historical critical reconstruction. Within this thesis, I am particularly interested in "the history which Israel herself wrote of herself" rather than a historical critical reconstruction of the history of Israel or the development of its religion. If the latter were my concern, it would call for an approach that would prioritize the dating of the texts and the ordering of these texts within a wider historical and religious framework.<sup>12</sup> However, because this is explicitly *not* my aim, these questions are largely marginalized within this thesis.

For example, in Part Two, I will deal with Deut. 4, a text that is commonly dated after the fall of the Northern Kingdom.<sup>13</sup> However, within the biblical

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<sup>9</sup> Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, 148.

<sup>11</sup> von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (trans. Stalker; 2 vols.; vol. 1; Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), 215.

<sup>12</sup> E.g. Carr, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Sacred Texts and Imperial Contexts of the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), xvii. Here Carr provides a detailed chart which attempts to date the texts of the Old Testament and set them within their historical context.

<sup>13</sup> E.g. Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 50; Römer, *The So-called Deuteronomistic History: A Sociological, Historical and Literary Introduction* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 173. Though see MacDonald, *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of 'Monotheism'* (Tubingen:

narrative, it is presented as a sermon that Moses gives to the people before they enter the Promised Land and therefore I classify it as a text which depicts the era *before* the fall. If the goal of my thesis were to consider the treatment of the issues within the history of ancient Israel and the development of its religion, I would most likely proceed by attempting to set Deut. 4's treatment of the issues within the context of the era in which it is assumed to have been written. However, because I am dealing with the relationship between the issues within the Old Testament, I attempt to consider the biblical depiction on its own terms. This represents an attempt to conduct an exegetical examination of the issues as they are presented within their narrative contexts.<sup>14</sup>

Although I will draw conclusions regarding the differences between the treatments of the issues in different eras, I do not immediately transpose my findings into the quite different issue of whether or not the Old Testament's depiction is historically accurate.<sup>15</sup> While the question of historical accuracy is a valid one, as I have noted above, the differing enumerations of the Ten Commandments and the differing interpretations of the relationship between the issues within the Old Testament primarily arise in response to the presentation of the issues within the texts themselves and are only secondarily related to differing assumptions regarding

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Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 201; Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11* (5; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1991), 204 and Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1-11* (6A; Dallas: Word, 1991), 73.

<sup>14</sup> As Moberly writes, "In the first place, one should distinguish between 'the world within the text' (Moses's addressing Israel in Moab, as Israel is about to cross the Jordan into the promised land) and 'the world behind the text' (a possible reform movement in seventh-century Judah, or some other comparable scenario). These different perspectives, or 'contexts,' should be carefully distinguished and not prematurely conflated. Certainly the way in which one reads the world within the text can and should be appropriately informed and nuanced by one's best guesses as to the likely world behind the text. Yet to collapse the former into the latter is not to take seriously the dynamics of the text." Moberly, *Old Testament Theology*, 17. More broadly, see Frei's distinction between ostensive reference and narrative meaning in Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

<sup>15</sup> See Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*, 16.

a sequence of events which may be assumed to have played a part in the history of ancient Israel. In other words, the critical issues which this study will focus upon arise from readings of the Old Testament texts themselves, whether those texts are assumed to be historically accurate or not.

Pre-modern interpretation before the rise of historical criticism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century would have made little distinction between the Old Testament's depiction and the events to which they may be assumed to refer. But with the coming of modernity, there was a detachment of the "real" historical world from its biblical description.<sup>16</sup> This was in some ways understandable, given the rise of modern scientific history writing and the differences between it and biblical narratives. While I would agree that history writing with respect to Israel may, with intelligence and integrity, make use of the biblical materials, the biblical texts themselves do not easily fit into the mould of modern history writing.<sup>17</sup> It has been suggested that they may be more helpfully understood as "cultural memory."<sup>18</sup> Specifically, they may be understood as Israel's cultural memories of its past. In my opinion, this can be a useful heuristic tool as long as the difference between modern history writing and cultural memory is not exaggerated. In this regard, I would disagree with the idea that seeing the biblical texts as Israel's cultural memory of the past "severs all connection" between the biblical depiction and historical events.<sup>19</sup> Along the same lines, I would disagree with what I find to be specious dichotomies which suggest

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>17</sup> Davies, *Memories of Ancient Israel: An Introduction to Biblical History--Ancient and Modern* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 154.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 105-123. Here Davies defines cultural memory as "Stories about the past shared by people who affirm a common identity."

<sup>19</sup> Contra *ibid.*, 122. See Provan, et al., *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 80-81, 99. For an excellent defense of the use of the biblical materials for measured historical reconstruction see Young, *Hezekiah in History and Tradition* (vol. 155; Leiden: Brill, 2012), 3-6.

that Israel's cultural memories were used to create and sustain identity *instead of* recording the past.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, because the Old Testament texts do not fit the typical mould of modern history writing, and because the biblical texts are not merely attempts to record the past, I would also argue that the Old Testament's depiction and the sequence of events to which the depictions are assumed to refer should not be conflated as if biblical exegesis alone were sufficient to produce a modern scientific history of ancient Israel or an account of the development of its religion. Davies is correct to argue that such works would be little less than paraphrasing of the biblical texts and would have little to do with what is typically meant by modern scientific history.<sup>21</sup>

For these reasons, I note from the start that there is a gap that lies between the exegetical aims of my research and a work of historical critical reconstruction. As mentioned above, moving from one to the other would most typically involve prioritizing the dating of the texts and the ordering of these texts within a wider historical and religious framework. Specifically in terms of the argument that I will make, it would also require an attempt to demonstrate that there was a difference between the war against idols in Israel and Judah before and after the fall of the Northern Kingdom. Of course, interpreters who assume that the majority of Old Testament texts were written long after the periods they supposedly describe and that they are therefore "cut off from the events and so are imagining and creating a past whose contours are determined by the present context and a not-reliable recollection

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<sup>20</sup> Contra Davies, *Memories of Ancient Israel*, 149. See Provan, et al., *A Biblical History of Israel*, 8, 62.

<sup>21</sup> Davies, *Memories of Ancient Israel*, 16, 115. Cf. Barton, "Post-Script: Reflecting on Religious Diversity," in *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah*, (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 192.



of the past...’’<sup>22</sup> would find such a reconstruction baseless. These interpreters may prefer to explain the Old Testament’s dual concern that Israel neither worship the “wrong gods” nor worship the “right God” in the wrong way in terms of issues facing the Persian or Hellenistic communities in which the documents are assumed to have been written. For instance, a number of scholars have suggested that the eradication of images of YHWH has to do with the determination to accept no images of YHWH in the restoration of the cult of the Second Temple.<sup>23</sup>

However, if the case is made that texts rejecting the worship of YHWH via divine images represent the concern of these later communities, then it seems odd to me that this concern would only be found in texts depicting the era before the fall of the Northern Kingdom and never in texts depicting the era in which the concern would supposedly have arisen. Why, for instance, wouldn’t texts describing the construction of the Second Temple (e.g., Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah) deal with the issue of images of YHWH? Why wouldn’t the Chronicler’s history extend the attack upon the worship of images of YHWH? I find that it would make better sense if the battle against the use of images of YHWH largely came to an end directly after the fall of the Northern Kingdom as the biblical texts suggest and that in the exilic and post-exilic eras the war against idols was exclusively fought against the worship of alien deities and the divine images associated with them.

Nevertheless, whether one assumes the distance between literary depiction and historical reconstruction to be surmountable or not, the interpretation of the

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<sup>22</sup> Davies, *Memories of Ancient Israel*, 147; Lemche, *Ancient Israel: A New History of Israelite Society* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), 29-73. It is often argued that the events and themes dealt with in these texts are so theologically motivated as to be useless in terms of historical reconstruction, e.g. Brettler, “The Book of Judges: Literature as Politics,” *JBL* 108, no. 3 (1989): 412.

<sup>23</sup> See Berlejung, “Aniconism,” *EBR* 1 Aaron-Aniconism:1212; Römer, *The So-called Deuteronomistic History*, 173.

relationship between the issues within the Old Testament does not hinge upon the assumption. Again, I would instead argue that the question of interpretation which I have chosen to focus upon in this thesis has to do with the way in which the issues are presented within the biblical texts depicting the eras before and after the fall of the Northern Kingdom. It is attention to these literary contexts which will help interpreters to better understand the unique relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols *within the Old Testament*.

## PART ONE: THE TEN COMMANDMENTS AS INTRODUCTION

# 1

## THE LINGUISTIC AMBIGUITY

*Jews and Christians have always known that there are Ten Commandments, but there is disagreement about exactly how the count of ten is derived. The question hinges on how the first two and the last two commandments are to be identified.*

John Barton<sup>24</sup>

In both Exod. 20 and Deut. 5, the prohibition of other gods is followed by the prohibition of idols. Three ambiguities have led interpreters through the ages to arrive at differing conclusions as to whether these prohibitions should be treated as one commandment or two.<sup>25</sup> In this and the following two chapters, I will examine these ambiguities in order to introduce three factors which make the relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols within the Old Testament difficult to define.

As Barton has pointed out, differing religious traditions number the Ten Commandments (or Decalogue) differently. For example, the Second Commandment for Catholics and Lutherans is “You shall not take the name of the

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<sup>24</sup> Barton, “‘The Work of Human Hands’,” 63.

<sup>25</sup> Of course, it is acknowledged from the start that the reverse is also true. An interpreter’s understanding of the relationship between the prohibitions will affect their reading of the ambiguities as well. Those who are accustomed to reading the prohibitions as two distinct commandments (as am I) are likely to interpret the ambiguities in a way that favours a distinction between the two. Conversely, those who are accustomed to reading the prohibitions as a single commandment are likely to interpret the ambiguities in a way that favours the fusion of the two. Nevertheless, while I will state my own position on each of the ambiguities, my primary purpose in this thesis is not to argue that one enumeration is correct and another is not, but to identify the ambiguities that lead interpreters to differing conclusions.

LORD your God in vain.” For Protestants of the Reformed tradition it is “You shall not make for yourself an idol.” And finally, for most Jewish traditions it is “You shall have no other gods before me” as well as “You shall not make for yourself an idol.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, the meaning of the “Second Commandment” differs from tradition to tradition. As Barton has pointed out, “At one level it may not seem to matter very much precisely how the commandments are divided up. Either way, the same material is included, and how exactly it is listed is of small consequence... On the other hand, there are distinctive merits in the two different systems.”<sup>27</sup>

It is common in scholarly treatment of the Ten Commandments to review the differing enumerations in the various traditions.<sup>28</sup> I do so here in order to draw attention to the alternative conceptions of the relationship between the prohibition of other gods and the prohibition of idols. As Miller has observed, “the opening of the Commandments is a complex directive that can be sorted out but not easily separated into distinct units.”<sup>29</sup> In Exod. 20:2-6 and Deut 5:6-8 we read:<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> For helpful charts on the differing enumerations see Harrelson, *The Ten Commandments and Human Rights* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 47 and Coogan, et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical Books* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 110, 260.

<sup>27</sup> Barton, “‘The Work of Human Hands’,” 63.

<sup>28</sup> E.g. Hutton, “A Simple Matter of Numbering?,” 212-213; Barton, “‘The Work of Human Hands’,” 63; Miller, “The Psalms as a Meditation on the First Commandment,” in *The Way of the Lord: Essays in Old Testament Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 93-94; Johnstone, *Exodus* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 90; Weinfeld, “The Uniqueness of the Decalogue and its Place in Jewish Tradition,” in *The Ten Commandments in History and Tradition*, (eds. Segal and Levi; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1985), 6-7; Greenberg, “The Decalogue Tradition Critically Examined,” in *The Ten Commandments In History and Tradition*, (ed. Levi; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1990), 99; Zimmerli, “Das Zweite Gebot,” in *Festschrift, Alfred Bertholet zum 80. Geburtstag*, (Tübingen: Mohr, 1950), 550; Charles, *The Decalogue: Being the Warburton Lectures Delivered in Lincoln’s Inn and Westminster abbey, 1919-1923* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1926), 15; Gregg, “The First and Second Commandments in Relation to Jewish and Christian Worship,” *Irish Church Quarterly* 3, no. 11 (1910): 12.

<sup>29</sup> Miller, “The Story of the First Commandment: The Book of Joshua,” 80

<sup>30</sup> These prohibitions in Exodus and Deuteronomy are nearly identical. For this reason, throughout the thesis I will often simply refer to “The prohibition of other gods” or “The prohibition of idols.” However, one notable difference is the presence of a ו in Exod. 20:4 (לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה לְךָ פֶסֶל וְכָל) in Exod. 20:4 (לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה לְךָ פֶסֶל כָּל תְּמוּנָה) which is absent in Deut. 5:8 (לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה לְךָ פֶסֶל כָּל תְּמוּנָה). On Deut. 5:8 see *BHS* for the many translations that add the ו as in Exod. 20:4. I will return to this point in chapter two when considering

2 אנכי יהוה אלהיך אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים מבית עבדים	6 אנכי יהוה אלהיך אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים מבית עבדים
3 לא יהיה לך אלהים אחרים על-פני	7 לא יהיה לך אלהים אחרים על-פני
4 לא תעשה לך פסל וכל-תמונה אשר בשמים ממע ואשר בארץ מתחת ואשר במים מתחת לארץ	8 לא תעשה לך פסל כל-תמונה אשר בשמים ממעל ואשר בארץ מתחת ואשר במים מתחת לארץ
5 לא-תשתחוה להם ולא תעבדם כי אנכי יהוה אלהיך אל קנא פקד עון אבות על-בנים על-שלישים ועל-רבעים לשנאי	9 לא-תשתחוה להם ולא תעבדם כי אנכי יהוה אלהיך אל קנא פקד עון אבות על-בנים ועל-שלישים ועל-רבעים לשנאי
6 ועשה חסד לאלפים לאהבי ולשמרי מצותי	10 ועשה חסד לאלפים לאהבי ולשמרי מצותי

6 I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;

7 you shall have no other gods before me.

8 You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

9 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, 10 but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.<sup>31</sup>

Philo,<sup>32</sup> Josephus,<sup>33</sup> Eastern Orthodoxy<sup>34</sup> and the Protestant Reformed

tradition<sup>35</sup> identify two commandments within these five verses.<sup>36</sup> The first is,

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the grammatical ambiguity involved in assessing the relationship between the prohibitions. On the syndetic and asyndetic constructions see Waschke, “תְּמוּנָה, *temûnâ*,” *TDOT* 15:688; Schmidt, “The Aniconic Tradition: On Reading Images and Viewing Texts,” in *The Triumph of Elohim*, (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1995), 79-80; Johnstone, *Exodus*, 90 and Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1902), 84.

<sup>31</sup> Despite minor differences in the Hebrew, the NRSV translates these prohibitions identically in both Exodus and Deuteronomy. I have chosen to use the NRSV rather than providing my own translations because the ambiguity between the issues is partially created by the range and usage of the Hebrew terminology used to refer to divine images Old Testament and the subsequent translation of this terminology into Greek, Latin and English (see section 1.3). Because I intend to present a number of views on the linguistic ambiguity rather than simply “resolve” it, I have decided to use a fairly standard translation and then comment on possible approaches. Therefore, unless otherwise indicated, translations will be taken from the NRSV.

<sup>32</sup> Philo, “On the Decalogue,” in *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 12.51-65 and Amir, “The Decalogue According to Philo,” in *The Ten Commandments in History and Tradition*, (eds. Segal and Levi; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1990), 121-160.

<sup>33</sup> Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* (trans. Whiston; London: George Routledge & Sons, 1875), 3.5.5: “The first commandment teaches us that there is but one God, and that we ought to worship him only. The second commands us not to make the image of any living creature to worship it.”

“7 you shall have no other gods before me.”

and the second is,

“8 You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

9 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, 10 but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.”<sup>37</sup>

However, Origen,<sup>38</sup> Clement of Alexandria,<sup>39</sup> Augustine,<sup>40</sup> and the Catholic<sup>41</sup> and Lutheran<sup>42</sup> traditions have understood the prohibition of other gods and the prohibition of idols as a single commandment dealing with false worship.<sup>43</sup> The count of ten is reached by seeing the verse against coveting as two commandments so that the ninth commandment prohibits desiring your neighbour’s wife and the tenth prohibits coveting your neighbour’s house or land, his manservant or

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<sup>34</sup> E.g. John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images* (trans. Louth; Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003) and St Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons* (trans. Roth; NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1981)

<sup>35</sup> E.g. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (trans. Beveridge; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 2.8.13-21. Westminster Assembly, *The Larger Catechism* (Stirling: Randall, 1800), Questions 100-110. Cf. Miller, “The Commandments In the Reformed Perspective,” 129.

<sup>36</sup> This is a standard listing, e.g. Barton, “‘The Work of Human Hands’,” 63-64; Greenberg, “The Decalogue Tradition Critically Examined,” 99-100; Zimmerli, “Das Zweite Gebot,” 550-551.

<sup>37</sup> Deut. 5:6/Exod. 20:2 is understood as an introduction rather than a commandment.

<sup>38</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum* (trans. Chadwick; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 7.64; Charles, *The Decalogue*, 39.

<sup>39</sup> Clement of Alexandria, “The Stromata, or Miscellanies,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1887), 6.16. “The first commandment of the Decalogue shows that there is one only Sovereign God...withdraw from idolatry of created things, putting all their hope in the true God. The second word intimated that men ought not to take and confer the august power of God (which is the name...) and transfer His title to things created and vain...”

<sup>40</sup> Augustine of Hippo, “Quaestiones in Exodum,” in *CCL*, (Turnhout: Brepols, 1958), 102-103. However, see Miller, *The Way of the Lord: Essays in Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 129-130.

<sup>41</sup> CCC 2066. Cf. Article 1 The First Commandment. English translation: Konstant, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Burns & Oates, 2004), 450.

<sup>42</sup> E.g. Luther, “The Large Catechism,” in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, (ed. Tappert; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 342.

<sup>43</sup> Codex Vaticanus and Codex Alexandrinus make of the preface in Exod. 20:2 the first commandment and treat Exod. 20:3-6 as the second. See Koster, “The Numbering of the Ten Commandments in Some Peshitta Manuscripts,” *VT* 30 (1980): 473. Koster notes that Syrian tradition also supports the Latin, Roman Catholic and Lutheran rather than the Jewish (possibly referring to Philo and Josephus), Eastern and Protestant tradition of numbering the Ten Commandments. For a summary of the rationale for this position see for example, Miller, “The Psalms as a Meditation on the First Commandment,” 93-94.

maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour. This approach follows Deut. 5:21 which uses two different verbs for desiring/coveting (חמד to designate “desiring” another’s wife and איה for “coveting” property) as opposed to Exod. 20:17 which uses a single verb (חמד) for both.<sup>44</sup> Like the Catholic and Lutheran traditions, conventional Jewish enumeration also sees the prohibition of other gods and the prohibition of idols as a single unit.<sup>45</sup> However, instead of counting the verse against coveting as two separate units, the number ten is reached by taking verse 6, “I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery”, as the first of the ten “words,” pointing out that neither Exodus nor Deuteronomy speak of ten “Commandments” but ten “words” (עשרת הדברים), hence, “Decalogue.”<sup>46</sup>

Therefore, at least from the second century AD to the present day, while many interpreters have preferred an enumeration of the commandments which treat the prohibition of other gods and the prohibition of idols as two separate commandments, many others have preferred an enumeration which treat them as one. This raises the obvious question: “What is it about this ‘complex directive’ that makes it difficult for interpreters to agree on whether it should be counted as one commandment or two?”

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<sup>44</sup> On the differences of the coveting commandment(s) in Exod. and Deut. see Hutton, “A Simple Matter of Numbering?” 212.

<sup>45</sup> See Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 243-245; Weinfeld, “The Uniqueness of the Decalogue and its Place in Jewish Tradition,” 7-8; Greenberg, “The Decalogue Tradition Critically Examined,” 99-100; Chung, *The Sin of the Calf: The Rise of the Bible’s Negative Attitude towards the Golden Calf* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 84. Both Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (eds. Sarna and Potok; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1996), 65, and Miller, *The Ten Commandments* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 13, point out that in the Masoretic Hebrew text of both versions of the Decalogue these verses [Exod. 20:2-6 and Deut. 5:6-10] are held together as a single paragraph.

<sup>46</sup> In line with Exod. 34:28, Deut. 4:13 and 10:14. In addition to these three differing enumerations, the Samaritan Pentateuch adds a tenth commandment to build an altar on Mount Gerizim and considers all that comes before to constitute only nine of the Ten Commandments.



In this first chapter I will argue that the difficulty partly arises because interpreters must wrestle with a linguistic ambiguity which has to do with the usage of the “idol” terminology. An interpreter’s perception of the relationship between the prohibitions is directly affected by the way in which that interpreter defines the term “idol” and subsequently, how he or she views “idols” in relation to “other gods.” Is the term used specifically to refer to “divine images” or generally to refer to “false gods”? Or again, are “divine images” and “other gods” mutually interchangeable? If, on the one hand, interpreters assume that the terms are mutually interchangeable, they are unlikely to immediately see a significant distinction between the prohibitions. If, on the other hand, interpreters understand “idols” specifically in terms of “divine images”, they may find a distinction between “other gods” as a general term and “divine images” as a specific designation. These interpreters may prefer to speak of “apostasy” on the one hand and “aniconism” on the other.<sup>47</sup>

Therefore, I will consider two approaches to this linguistic ambiguity. In sections 1.1-2 I present the argument in favour of understanding the prohibition of idols specifically as a prohibition of *divine images*. In sections 1.3-4 I present the argument in favour of understanding the prohibition of idols as a prohibition of *false gods*, whether those gods are made by human hands or not. In section 1.5 I argue that the prohibition of idols is best understood as a prohibition of divine images within the context of the Ten Commandments and argue that this approach to the ambiguity maintains a distinction between the prohibitions. Nevertheless, I also

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<sup>47</sup> For an example that tends toward the latter understanding, note Barton, “‘The Work of Human Hands’,” 65. He writes, “‘You shall have no other gods before me’ means that there are ‘gods’ other than Yahweh, but they are forbidden. In this context the prohibition of images is really a quite separate issue (and NRSV, with its consistent rendering of ‘image’ by ‘idol,’ is misleading).”

maintain that, within the wider context of the Old Testament, understanding the prohibition of idols as a prohibition of “false gods,” is also justified. Thus an interpreter’s approach to the linguistic ambiguity is likely to be influenced by the scope of their study. In section 1.6 I explain how the linguistic ambiguity is evident in the wider Old Testament context and in section 1.7 I offer a brief summary.

### 1.1 The Case for a Prohibition of Divine Images

There are a number of points which support the idea that the prohibition of idols should be understood specifically as a prohibition of divine images. The Hebrew term which is found within the Decalogue is פסל. With a total of fifty-four occurrences, פסל is the most common term associated with idols within the Old Testament.<sup>48</sup> We first note that the term is firmly anchored to the material. Understanding the limits of etymology,<sup>49</sup> it is nevertheless relevant that from the verb פָּסַל, to cut or carve, is derived the noun פסל, “a carved thing”—hence the AV translation: “graven image.”<sup>50</sup> The term is used within the Old Testament to refer to objects made by human hands<sup>51</sup> which could be erected, cut, burnt, made into dust, broken into pieces or shattered on the ground.<sup>52</sup> Carpenters and workers of gold,

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<sup>48</sup> There are sixty occurrences of the root פסל, (6 occurrences of the verb and 54 occurrences of the noun forms. There are two distinct lexemes for the noun: פסל, occurring 31 times and פסיל, occurring 23 times). Dohmen, “פָּסַל, *pesel*,” *TDOT* 12:33.

<sup>49</sup> Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 107-160; Silva, *Biblical Words and their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 35-52.

<sup>50</sup> In terms of English translations, while versions which aim for “formal equivalence” often prefer “graven” or “carved” image (e.g. AV, ESV, JPS), versions which aim for “dynamic equivalence” often prefer “idol” (e.g. NRSV, NIV, NASB).

<sup>51</sup> E.g. Deut. 27:15; Mic. 5:12-13.

<sup>52</sup> E.g. Lev. 26:1; Isa. 44:9-20; Deut. 7:3-5; 2 Chr. 34:1-7; Isa. 21:9.

silver and iron are all noted in their manufacture.<sup>53</sup> They are made of stone or wood and often covered in precious metals.

For example, in Deut 7:25 we read:

25 פסילי אלהיהם תשרפון באש לא־תחמד כסף וזהב עליהם ולקחת לך פן תוקש בו כי תועבת יהוה אלהיך הוא

“25 The images of their gods you shall burn with fire. Do not covet the silver or the gold that is on them and take it for yourself, because you could be ensnared by it; for it is abhorrent to the Lord your God.”

In Is. 40:18-20 we read:

18 ואל מי תדמיון אל ומה דמות תערכו לו  
19 הפסל נסך חרש וצורף בזהב ירקענו ורתקות כסף צורף  
20 המסכן תרומה עץ לא ירקב יבחר חרש חכם יבקש לו להכין פסל לא ימוט

“18 To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him? 19 An idol? — A workman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold, and casts for it silver chains. 20 As a gift one chooses mulberry<sup>54</sup> wood—wood that will not rot—then seeks out a skilled artisan to set up an image that will not topple.”

And finally, in Hab. 2:18-19 we read:

18 מה הועיל פסל כי פסלו יצרו מסכה ומורה שקר כי בתח יצר יצרו עליו לעשות אלילים אלמים  
19 הוי אמר לעץ הקיצה עורי לאבן דומם הוא יורה הנה הוא תפוש זהב וכסף וכל רוח אין בקרב

“18 What use is an idol once its maker has shaped it—a cast image, a teacher of lies? For its maker trusts in what has been made, though the product is only an idol that cannot speak! 19 Alas for you who say to the wood, “Wake up!” to silent stone, “Rouse yourself!” Can it teach? See, it is gold and silver plated, and there is no breath in it at all.”

These few examples provide a glimpse of the biblical usage of the term פסל.<sup>55</sup> I first make the simple point that the term for “idol” used in the prohibition is consistently used within the Old Testament to indicate the manufacture of material objects. As Hayward writes, “Whatever else [פסל] may signify, it clearly refers to a concrete

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<sup>53</sup> Judg. 17:3-6; Isa. 40:18-20; 44:9-13; Jer. 10:14-16.

<sup>54</sup> The AV’s “A tree that will not rot” is a closer translation.

<sup>55</sup> Because I see very little diachronic progression in the usage of the term, I would argue that there is justification for speaking of its “biblical usage.”

object, something which may be handled and perceived by the senses.”<sup>56</sup> Similarly, Childs notes “it is generally agreed that the prohibition of making a *pesel* refers, first of all, to an image carved of wood or stone.”<sup>57</sup> Neither writer denies that the term could potentially refer to something more. Nevertheless, the typical biblical usage explicitly speaks of material objects.

However, I secondly point out that the term is frequently used to refer to a material object that is held to be a god.<sup>58</sup> Of course, interpreters might do well to ask: “Held to be a god *by whom?*” While the question raises a number of complexities,<sup>59</sup> I would simply note here that the objects to which פסל is used to refer are presented as having been regarded as gods by those who make use of them in worship. While it is often noticed that this judgment may have at times been unfair to these worshipers,<sup>60</sup> as Barton has pointed out, this “unfair” interpretation has

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<sup>56</sup> Hayward, “Observations on Idols in Septuagint Pentateuch,” in *Idolatry* (ed. Barton; London: T&T Clark, 2007), 422.

<sup>57</sup> Childs, *Exodus: A Commentary* (London: SCM, 1974), 404. Also note Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline* (trans. Green; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1978), 120 where he writes, “The word פסל *pesel* used in Exodus 20:4 refers initially to a divine image carved or chiselled out of wood or stone, or the non-metallic core of such an image. Later it is used less precisely for metal images as well (Isa. 40:19; 44:10).”

<sup>58</sup> Schmidt, *The Faith of the Old Testament: A History* (trans. Sturdy; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 77; Moore, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1895), 375.

<sup>59</sup> For example, do certain biblical texts hold these objects to be “gods” but not “God” (e.g. the divine image of Dagon bows before the ark) while others view them as wood and stone (e.g. the idol polemics of Isaiah 40-48) and therefore not gods at all? MacDonald, “One God or one Lord?,” 123 notes that both Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 634 and Horsley, “Gnosis in Corinth: 1 Corinthians 8:1-6,” *NTS* 27, no. 1 (1980): 38 argue that the Old Testament contains two polemical traditions against idolatry, one, associated with Deutero-Isaiah which derided them as powerless and another associated with Deut. 4:18; 29:25; Jer. 16:19 and Mal. 1:11 which argued that YHWH had subjected other peoples to subordinate cosmic powers. Moreover, it could be argued that the only “legitimate” image of “God” which the Old Testament recognizes is man (Gen. 1:26f; 5:1-3; 9:6). On this, see for example Hallo, *Scripture in Context II: More Essays on the Comparative Method* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 2; Fletcher-Louis, “Humanity and the Idols of the Gods in Pseudo-Philo’s Biblical Antiquities,” in *Idolatry: False Worship in the Bible, Early Judaism and Christianity*, (ed. Barton; London: T&T Clark, 2007), 58; Miller, “In the ‘Image’ and ‘Likeness’ of God,” *JBL* 91, no. 3 (1972): 289-304; Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, 68-70, 225.

<sup>60</sup> E.g. Hyatt, *Commentary on Exodus* (London: Oliphants, 1971), 211; Durham, *Exodus* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 285. Durham notes, “As Bernhardt (*Gott und Bild*, 17-68) has shown, such images were used throughout the ANE as a means of suggesting the presence of deity, not as objects

established itself within the pages of the Old Testament.<sup>61</sup> The term is therefore used within the Old Testament to refer to material objects which the writer assumes are held to be gods by those who use them in worship.

For example, in Judges 17-18 (which incidentally, is where the term פסל appears with the highest frequency), Micah uses the silver given to him by his mother to make “a carved image and a cast idol” (פסל ומסכה).<sup>62</sup> When these objects, along with an ephod and “idols” (תרפים), are stolen by the Danites, Micah calls after them saying, “You took the *gods* I made!”<sup>63</sup> Similarly, in 2 Kgs. 17:29-41 we hear that the Samaritans had made “their idols” (פסיליהם). In doing so, the narrative tells us that the Samaritans had “made *gods* for themselves.” In Isa. 42:17 we read:

17 נסגו אחור יבשו בשת הבטחים בפסל האמרים למסכה אתם אלהינו

“17 They shall be turned back and utterly put to shame—those who trust in carved images, who say to cast images, ‘*You are our gods.*’”

And finally, in Isa. 44:16-17 we read,

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of worship: the image ‘was much more something corporeal than the divine influence (das göttliche Fluidum) possessed’.” See also discussions in Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 64; Walsh and Cotter, *1 Kings* (Collegeville, MN.: Liturgical Press, 1996), 172; Carroll, “Aniconic God and the cult of images,” *ST* 31, no. 1 (1977): 52-53. However, as Jacobsen has shown, this is a blurry line. See Jacobsen, “The Graven Image,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, (ed. Miller; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987). The divine image was not merely a symbol to point worshipers to a deity. Once it had gone through rituals to enliven it, the image was considered a god. Nevertheless the deity was not limited to any particular image.

<sup>61</sup> Barton, “The Work of Human Hands,” 67. Cf. Kaufmann, “The Bible and Mythological Polytheism,” *JBL* 70, no. 3 (1951): 188-189; Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline*, 120. Though see Wright, *The Mission of God*, 149-153. For the role of divine images in the wider ancient Near Eastern context see for example, Jacobsen, “The Graven Image,”; Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, 12-37; Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 114-118; Winter, “‘Idols of the King’: Royal Images as Recipients of Ritual Action in Ancient Mesopotamia,” *JRitSt* 6, no. 1 (1992); Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 128-134; Walker and Dick, “The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian *mīs pī* Ritual,” in *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth: The Making of the Cult Image in the Ancient Near East*, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 55-121.

<sup>62</sup> Judg. 17:4.

<sup>63</sup> Judg. 18:24. In this example, it is not clear whether some or all of the objects were being referred to. However, three of the four terms (תרפים, פסל, and מסכה) are elsewhere clearly referred to as “gods.”

16 חציו שרף במו אש על חציו בשר יאכל יצלה צלי וישבע אף יחם ויאמר האח חמותי ראיתי  
אור  
17 ושאריתו לאל עשה לפסלו יסגוד לו וישתחו ויתפלל אליו ויאמר הצילני כי אלי אתה

“16 Half of it he burns in the fire; over this half he roasts meat, eats it and is satisfied. He also warms himself and says, ‘Ah, I am warm, I can feel the fire!’ 17 The rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, bows down to it and worships it; he prays to it and says, ‘Save me, for *you are my god!*’”<sup>64</sup>

These four examples are intended to show that the term פסל was often used within the biblical text to refer to material objects which were held to be gods.<sup>65</sup> This is reflected in the actions which are performed toward these objects. In addition to being directly referred to as “gods”, we are told that men offer sacrifices to them, serve them, worship them, fall down before them, praise them, pray to them for salvation, believe that they are able to bring about events and expect them to teach.<sup>66</sup>

These points suggest that the prohibition of idols is not merely a prohibition of cultic art in general.<sup>67</sup> We can easily point to a number of images found within the temple precincts such as the palm trees, open flowers and cherubim engraved upon the gold plated walls, the lions, bulls and cherubim on the stands, or the twelve bronze bulls upon which the bronze sea rested.<sup>68</sup> The term פסל is never used to refer to these objects because it does not merely refer to cultic objects but to cultic objects

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Ps. 97:7; Isa. 45:20-22.

<sup>65</sup> Moreover, while construct relationships such as “The carved images of their gods” (פסילי) leave room for the possibility of a possessive sense (i.e., the carved/molten images *belonging to* their gods), in light of the references above, it seems reasonable to suggest that they probably reflect the idea of referring to these objects as “gods” (Deut. 7:25; Cf. 12:3; Isa. 21:9).

<sup>66</sup> Lev. 26:1; 2 Kgs. 17:41; 2 Chr. 33:22; Ps. 97:7; Isa. 42:8, 44:16-17, 45:20; 48:5; Hos. 11:1-3; Mic. 5:13; Hab. 2:18.

<sup>67</sup> On these distinctions see Gutmann, “The ‘Second Commandment’ and the Image in Judaism,” in *HUCA*, (ed. Blank; Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1961). Gutmann’s article can alternatively be found in Gutmann, *No Graven Images: Studies in Art and the Hebrew Bible* (New York: KTAV, 1971), XIII-XXX. Cf. Evans, “Cult Images, Royal Policies and the Origins of Aniconism,” 194-195; Chung, *The Sin of the Calf*, 10-11; Meyers, *Exodus* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 170; Durham, *Exodus*, 285; Houtman, *Exodus, Vol. 3: Chapters 20-40* (trans. Sierd; Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 25; Greenberg, “The Decalogue Tradition Critically Examined,” 100; Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary* (London: SCM, 1962), 162-163.

<sup>68</sup> 1 Kgs. 6:29; 7:25, 29, 36, 44.

which were held to be gods. Therefore a distinction can be made between the two.<sup>69</sup>

The former are accepted and found throughout the Temple while the latter are repeatedly condemned.<sup>70</sup>

I would therefore argue that the biblical usage of פסל leans away from an understanding which is either devoid of a material aspect or devoid of a divine aspect. The two are held together in the majority of texts. On the one hand, while texts making use of the term refer to a “god”, it is not just any god but a god of a certain kind, i.e., the material kind. On the other hand, while texts making use of the term refer to cultic images, they are particularly cultic images which are *held to be gods*. Given these two aspects, I prefer the term, “divine image” over “cultic image,”<sup>71</sup> “cult statue”<sup>72</sup> or merely “image”<sup>73</sup> because it attempts to capture both the divine and material aspects and distinguishes these objects from cultic images in general.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Though I present the relationship between cultic images and פסל with a slightly different emphasis, I agree with Dohmen that the term פסל is “circumscribed” by the expression “cultic image.” However, its usage points to cultic images which are *held to be gods*. See Dohmen, “פסל, pesel,” 33-34. As Berlejung writes, “Biblical aniconism...is a limited rejection of making material representations of the divine” Berlejung, “Aniconism,” 1112. Cf. Carroll, “Aniconic God and the cult of images,” 51-52; Hadley, “Idolatry,” *NIDOTTE* 2:718.

<sup>70</sup> Faur uses the terminology of Israel’s “licit and illicit iconolatry.” See Faur, “The Biblical Idea of Idolatry,” *JQR* 69, no. 1 (1978): 1. Cf. Appendix 1: “Divine Images,” “Cultic Images,” and the Ark.

<sup>71</sup> On his use of “cultic image” see Mettinger, *No Graven Image?*, 27.

<sup>72</sup> See Dick, “The Mesopotamian Cult Statue: A Sacramental Encounter with Divinity,” in *Cult Image and Divine Representation in the Ancient Near East*, (Boston: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2005), 47-48.

<sup>73</sup> Barton, “‘The Work of Human Hands,’” 64.

<sup>74</sup> In making this point I do not mean to suggest that the term פסל itself captures the sense that the object was “held to be a god.” Instead, that sense is provided by the context in which the term is found. On the importance of distinctions of this kind see Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, 222; Silva, *Biblical Words and their Meaning*, 25-27; Thiselton, “Semantics and New Testament Interpretation,” in *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, (ed. Marshall; Exeter: Paternoster, 1977), 83 and Louw, *Semantics of New Testament Greek* (Fortress Press, 1982), 34. Neither do I mean to say that all contexts explicitly state that the cultic image being referred to is worshiped as a god (see for example Deut. 27:15; Judg. 3:19, 26 where it does not). This point is emphasized by Dohmen, “פסל, pesel,” 33. However, the majority of texts do make this clear and this is relevant for interpretation of the prohibitions of “idols.”

How then are “divine images” related to “other gods” within the Old Testament? To put it simply, the expression “other gods” is not limited to the material. Its usage indicates a linguistic category with a broader frame of reference.<sup>75</sup> The phrase “other gods” does not tell us whether they are foreign or native to the land of Canaan, material or immaterial, iconic or aniconic. Only context can tell which of these further specifications might be meant. For these reasons Dozeman simply writes, “‘other gods’ is a general term for all rival deities.”<sup>76</sup> To cite a single example which emphasizes the broader usage of the phrase, in Deut. 11:26-28 we read:

26 ראה אנכי נתן לפניכם היום ברכה וקללה  
 27 את הברכה אשר תשמעו אל מצות יהוה אלהיכם אשר אנכי מצוה אתכם היום  
 28 והקללה אם לא תשמעו אל מצות יהוה אלהיכם וסרתם מן הדרך אשר אנכי מצוה אתכם  
 היום ללכת אחרי אלהים אחרים אשר לא ידעתם

“26 See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: 27 the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today; 28 and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn from the way that I am commanding you today, to follow other gods that you have not known.”

While “following other gods” within the ancient Near Eastern context may very well have amounted to bowing down before divine images,<sup>77</sup> linguistically, the expression points to a broader frame of reference. Therefore, “divine images” and

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<sup>75</sup> The expression אלהים אחרים occurs sixty-two times within the Old Testament. Israel is told not to “walk after” other gods (e.g. Deut. 6:14; 8:19; 11:28), not to “fear” other gods (e.g. 2 Kgs. 17:35-38), not to “mention” or “speak in the name of” (e.g. Deut. 18:20) other gods, not to “turn to” (e.g. Deut. 31:18, 20) or “go whoring after” other gods (e.g. Judg. 2:17). The expression is clearly not limited to gods which are made by human hands.

<sup>76</sup> Dozeman, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 480. Along the same lines Cassuto writes, “The expression other gods became a regular, stereotyped term for the gods of the gentiles, who are no-gods. Every deity apart from the LORD is another god.” Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (trans. Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), 241.

<sup>77</sup> Though as Mettinger has shown, this was not always the case: Mettinger, *No Graven Image?*, 7.



“other gods” are not interchangeable concepts within the Old Testament. Instead, the linguistic relationship suggests a specific type within a broader category.

## 1.2 Implications

How then, might these considerations affect an interpreter’s understanding of the relationship between the prohibitions? In light of the biblical usage of פסל, the texts of Exod. 20 and Deut. 5 do not present a prohibition of “other gods” which is followed a mere prohibition of “images.” It could be argued that both are prohibitions of “gods” but that the later deals with gods which are made by human hands.<sup>78</sup> There is therefore a sense in which seeing פסל as a *divine* image and not merely a *cultic image* tends to draw the prohibitions together.<sup>79</sup> Specifically, the פסל prohibition appears to be drawn under the shadow of the prohibition of other gods, which is the broader of the two, for to prohibit the larger category is to prohibit the sub-category. While the prohibition of other gods stands against every פסל, the פסל prohibition stands specifically against the type of gods which are made by the hands of men.

However, there is also a sense in which understanding פסל as a divine image may suggest a distinction between the prohibitions. The very fact that the broader prohibition of other gods is followed by the narrower prohibition of divine images may point toward a further and more particular concern. As Barton puts it; having gods other than Yahweh, the God of Israel, is not exactly the same as worshipping

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<sup>78</sup> This point holds in regard to פסל even if one regards the ך in the Exodus version to make a distinction between פסל and תמונה so that, *in addition to divine images*, all artistic representation is prohibited. Though again, see Gutmann, “The ‘Second Commandment’ and the Image in Judaism,” 161-174.

<sup>79</sup> On this see Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 65; Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 291.

images as gods.<sup>80</sup> For this reason, some interpreters see the prohibition of other gods as defining *who to worship* while the prohibition of idols defines *how to worship*.<sup>81</sup> Or to put it another way, the first commandment deals with exclusive worship and the second with proper worship.<sup>82</sup> Understood along these lines, Israel is not only meant to avoid the worship of alien deities, they are also to avoid forms of worship which are presented as alien to the worship of YHWH. Therefore an interpreter which understands the prohibition of idols as a prohibition of “divine images” may also find a significant distinction between it and the prohibition of other gods which precedes it.

### 1.3 The Case for a Prohibition of False Gods

However, some interpreters who agree that the Hebrew term פסל refers to a material object, would nevertheless argue that the פסל prohibition within the context of the Ten Commandments should not be understood exclusively in terms of the biblical usage of פסל. For example, the LXX translators chose to translate forty-three of the fifty-four occurrences of פסל with the Greek term γλυπτός meaning “something that is carved.” Nevertheless, when it came to the Ten Commandments, they chose εἰδωλον.<sup>83</sup> The choice of εἰδωλον is particularly odd for the translation of פסל

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<sup>80</sup> Barton, “‘The Work of Human Hands’,” 64.

<sup>81</sup> E.g. McConville, *Deuteronomy* (5; Leicester: Apollos, 2002), 126; Charles, *The Decalogue*, 15; Gregg, “The First and Second Commandments,” 199-212; Nielsen, *The Ten Commandments in New Perspective: A Tradition-Historical Approach* (7; London: S. C. M. Press, 1968), 98.

<sup>82</sup> Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, 51.

<sup>83</sup> On the peculiarity of the word choice Tatum writes, “Only in the Second Commandment, Ex. 20:4 = Deut. 5:8, in the entire Pentateuch does *eidōlon* appear as a translation of *pesel*; and this occurs only on 3 other occasions in Scripture.” Tatum, “The LXX Version of the Second Commandment (Ex. 20, 3-6 = Deut. 5, 7-10): A Polemic Against Idols, Not Images,” *JSJ* 17, no. 2 (1986): 185. Hayward tentatively suggest that εἰδωλον may have begun life as a technical term in LXX to translate the Hebrew word הבל, “vapour, breath” in Deut 32.21. Hayward, “Observations on Idols in Septuagint Pentateuch,” 42. Cf. Wevers, “Two Reflections on the Greek Exodus,” in *God’s*

because, while פסל strongly leans toward the material, εἶδωλον strongly leans toward the immaterial. While it would probably be going too far to directly equate εἶδωλον with “that which is without substance,” it is significant to note that the Greeks used the term to refer to reflections in water or in a looking glass, shadows, a mental image or idea and phantoms or apparitions. By using εἶδωλον at times to translate פסל and at other times to translate both הבל (vapor or breath) as well as אלהים (god or gods)<sup>84</sup> the LXX translators remove the material aspect from the פסל prohibition and blur the distinction between the prohibition of “idols” and the prohibition of other gods.<sup>85</sup>

What might account for this unusual word choice when it came to the context of the Ten Commandments? One could imagine a type of logic running along the following lines.<sup>86</sup> In the first, it could be pointed out that one of the most obvious and immediate infractions of the פסל prohibition was the creation of the golden calf.<sup>87</sup> However, the calf is almost exclusively referred to using the term מסכה rather than פסל.<sup>88</sup> Therefore, it should not be assumed that the prohibition stands exclusively against *carved* images, but is more broadly directed against divine images whether they are referred to using the term פסל or not.<sup>89</sup> However, these

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*Word for Our World*, (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 21-37; Dohmen, “פֶּסֶל, *pesel*,” 35 and Hadley, “Idolatry,” 715. For examples see Büchsel, “εἶδωλον, *eidōlon*,” *TDNT* 2:375-376.

<sup>84</sup> For examples see Büchsel, “εἶδωλον, *eidōlon*,” 377.

<sup>85</sup> Using εἶδωλον to translate both פסל, a term clearly bound to the material, and הבל, a term that is pointedly immaterial, surely marginalizes the question of materiality in the Greek translation. The English term “idol,” therefore, derived from the Greek εἶδωλον, need not exclusively refer to a divine image. Like the Hebrew phrase אלהים אחרים “other gods,” the usage of εἶδωλον suggests that it represents a broader frame of reference which may refer to other gods generally or divine images specifically.

<sup>86</sup> In the following explanation I have chosen to present the primary points in the body of the text. I have limited technical explanation to the footnotes

<sup>87</sup> Exod. 32, Deut. 9. On this connection see MacDonald, “One God or one Lord?,” 256.

<sup>88</sup> E.g. Exod. 32:1-8, 19-24; Deut. 9:12, 16. Cf. 1 Kgs. 14:9; 2 Kgs. 17:16; Neh. 9:18; Ps. 106:19.

<sup>89</sup> As Dohmen and a number of others have pointed out, it is likely that images of wood or stone were typically covered with precious metals so that the end result was both a פסל and a מסכה.

objects are referred to within the Old Testament using a wide range of Hebrew terms, each having their own distinctive nuance.<sup>90</sup> Like פסל, some of the terms are clearly anchored to the material,<sup>91</sup> but the majority are not.<sup>92</sup> For example, although מסכה,

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See Dohmen, “פסל, *pesel*,” 43. Moreover, Dohmen argues that while the etymology of פסל indicates “something that is carved,” its biblical usage is not limited to objects which are made of wood or stone. Cf. Hurowitz, “What Goes in is What Comes Out: Materials for Creating Cult Statues,” in *Text, Artifact and Image: Revealing Ancient Israelite Religion*, (eds. Beckman and Lewis; Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2006), 5; Holter, *Deuteronomy 4 and the Second Commandment* (60; New York: Lang, 2003), 43. These points may suggest to some that the idol prohibition is a prohibition of material objects that were held to be gods regardless of their material or manufacture.

<sup>90</sup> In addition to the treatment of the individual terms in *TDOT*, a number of studies have attempted to classify the terminology of “idols” within the Old Testament. See for example, Kennedy, “The Semantic Field of the Term ‘Idolatry,’” in *Uncovering Ancient Stones*, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 193-204; Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth: Divine Presence and Absence in the Book of Ezekiel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 28-35 (Here, Kutsko deals with six terms used to refer to idols in Ezekiel) and 42-47 where he attempts a wider biblical definition of “idolatry”; Ackerman, “Idol, Idolatry,” *EDB*:625-627; Curtis, “The Theological Basis for the Prohibition of Images,” 277-287; Knight, “Idols, Idolatry,” *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*:297-298; Barr, “The Image of God in the Book of Genesis—A Study of Terminology,” *BJRL* 51 (1968-1969): 11-26. Barr examines *selem*, *d’mut*, *mar’e*, *t’muna*, *tabnit*, *pesel*, *masseka* and *semel* in an attempt to better understand the use of *selem* in Gen. 1. Cf. Schroer, *In Israel gab es Bilder: Nachrichten von darstellender Kunst im Alten Testament* (vol. 74; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987) who in her [Schroer’s] fifth chapter deals with the semantic field of “picture/idol” in the Old Testament and Dohmen, *Das Bilderverbot: Seine Entstehung und seine Entwicklung im Alten Testament* (Königstein: Hanstein, 1985) who begins his study with a detailed examination of the terminology.

<sup>91</sup> Like מסכה, פסל is etymologically anchored to the material. From the verb נָסַךְ, “to pour,” is derived מסכה, “a poured or molten” thing—hence the AV translation “molten image.” The derivation and usage of the term points to the manufacture of a material object, particularly one that is metal. The two terms are often paired together (Deut. 27:15; Judg. 17:3, 4; 18:14, 17, 18; 2 Chr. 34:3, 4; Isa. 30:22; 42:17; 48:5; Nah. 1:4; Hab. 2:18) and like פסל, מסכה also frequently points to objects which are referred to as gods. Exod. 32:1, 4, 23; Lev. 19:4; Judg. 17-18 (18:24); Isa. 42:17.

<sup>92</sup> Terms such as הָבֵל, אֵלִיל, גִּלּוּל, עֵצָב, צֶלֶם and שִׁקּוּץ (to name only a few) demonstrate a wider frame of reference and a greater flexibility of usage. There are three factors which allow for this greater flexibility. As mentioned above, unlike פסל and מסכה, the majority of the terms used to refer to divine images are not anchored to the material. While פסל and מסכה are not merely used to refer to “other gods” but to gods which are made by human hands, most of the terms do not intrinsically carry a material aspect. Secondly, in a number of contexts, it is unspecified whether the terms are being used to refer to divine images specifically or to other gods in general, e.g. Ps. 96; Jer. 14:22; 1 Kgs. 11:5, 7-8. Thirdly, many are simply terms of derision: גִּלּוּלִים (dungy thing), שִׁקּוּץ (detestable thing), תוֹעֵבָה (abominable thing), אֵימָה (dreadful thing), מַפְלָצָה (horrid thing), הָבֵל (empty or worthless thing), and עֵצָב (hurtful or wicked thing). While these adjectival connotations serve to denigrate the object being referred to, they provide no clues by which to determine whether they are being used to refer specifically to divine images or generally to false gods. Both divine images and other gods could be referred to as “worthless things” (Jer. 14:22). As Curtis has pointed out, “Hebel perhaps refers to idols in various... passages such as Deut 32:21, though in general no real distinction is made between idols and the gods they represent. In both cases they are *hebel*; they are insubstantial and worthless.” Curtis, “The Theological Basis for the Prohibition of Images,” 279. Linguistically, these three factors tend to blur the idea of a clear sub-category of material divine images within the broader category of “other gods” and leave the impression that an “idol” can be either a divine image or a false god whether a divine image is intended or not.

צֶלֶם,<sup>93</sup> סֶמֶל,<sup>94</sup> עֶצֶב,<sup>95</sup> and תְּרָפִים,<sup>96</sup> are strongly associated with material objects in the majority of their occurrences, clear associations with the material diminish when considering the usage of terms such as גִּלּוּל, שִׁקּוּץ, תּוֹעֵבָה and especially הֶבֶל. While all of these terms are at times used to refer to divine images,<sup>97</sup> none are bound to the material. In fact, הֶבֶל pointedly refers to that which is *immaterial*.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, many of the terms are used ambiguously so that it is unclear whether they refer to divine images specifically or false gods generally. For these reasons it could be argued that the choice of εἰδωλον is reflective of the broader usage of the Hebrew terminology. Therefore, the LXX, as well as the English translations that follow it by adopting the term “idol” within the context of the Ten Commandments (such as the NRSV, the NASB and the NIV), interpret the פֶּסֶל prohibition in a sense that is broader than the meaning of the term פֶּסֶל itself.<sup>99</sup>

Before moving on to consider the implications of this perspective, a few examples should be provided to support the claim that the Hebrew terms are used ambiguously so that it is unclear whether they refer to divine images specifically or

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<sup>93</sup> 2 Kgs. 11:18. Sommer has argued that the biblical usage of צֶלֶם suggests that the term is used to refer to “concrete representations of physical objects.” Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, 69-70. Though also note Barr, “The Image of God in the Book of Genesis,” 11-26, esp. 20-22. Here Barr emphasizes that it is the “ambivalent” usage of צֶלֶם that allowed the P writer to use it. “...*selem*, though unquestionably usable as the name of a physical imitation of something, did not therefore necessarily and simply designate it as idolatrous and evil.” 21.

<sup>94</sup> Ezek. 8:3, 5; 2 Chr. 33:7, 15. Ackerman and Tigay point to Old Testament usage as well as comparative Phoenician usage to argue that סֶמֶל is best understood as a “statue or free standing image” Ackerman, *Under every Green Tree: Popular Religion in Sixth-Century Judah* (no 46; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 55-57; Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 49. Cf. Barr, “The Image of God in the Book of Genesis,” 11-26.

<sup>95</sup> Ps. 115:4-8.

<sup>96</sup> Gen. 31:19, 34, 35.

<sup>97</sup> גִּלּוּל: Deut. 29:17; Ezek. 6:6; שִׁקּוּץ: Deut. 29:17; Dan. 11:31; תּוֹעֵבָה: Deut. 7:25-26; 27:15; הֶבֶל: Jer. 8:19; 2 Kgs. 17:15.

<sup>98</sup> Seybold, “הֶבֶל, *hebhel*,” *TDOT* 3:313-320, Deut 32:17, 21; Jer. 14:22. Cf. Hayward, “Observations on Idols in Septuagint Pentateuch,” 40-57.

<sup>99</sup> The idea that εἰδωλον is reflective of the range of Hebrew vocabulary is supported by the fact that it is not only used to translate פֶּסֶל, but also צֶלֶם, עֶצֶב, אֱלִיל, שִׁקּוּץ, גִּלּוּלִים, חֲמֵן and הֶבֶל.

false gods generally. The ambiguity is probably most evidently seen in the use of אֱלִיל in Ps. 96:5.<sup>100</sup> There we read:

5 כִּי כָל אֱלֹהֵי הָעַמִּים אֱלִילִים וַיְהוֶה שָׁמַיִם עָשָׂה

“5 For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the LORD made the heavens.”

Is the verse stating that the gods of the nations are divine images or simply that they are false? On the one hand, we might note that אֱלִיל is used elsewhere referring to divine images. For example, in Is. 2:8, 20 we read:

8 וּתְמָלָא אֶרְצוֹ אֱלִילִים לַמַּעֲשֵׂה יָדָיו יִשְׁתַּחֲווּ לָאֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ אֲצַבְעֹתָיו  
20 בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יִשְׁלִיךְ הָאָדָם אֶת אֱלִילֵי כֶסֶף וְאֶת אֱלִילֵי זָהָב אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ לוֹ לְהִשְׁתַּחֲוֹת לַחֹפֶר  
פְּרוֹת וּלְעַטְלָפִים

“8 Their land is filled with idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their own fingers have made...20 On that day people will throw away to the moles and to the bats their idols of silver and their idols of gold, which they made for themselves to worship.”<sup>101</sup>

Or again, in Is. 10:10-11, אֱלִיל is used in close association with פֶּסֶל:

10 כֹּאֲשֶׁר מִצָּאָה יָדִי לַמַּמְלָכָה הָאֱלִיל וּפְסִילֵיהֶם מִירוּשָׁלַם וּמִשְׁמֶרֶן  
11 הֲלֹא כֹאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי לְשִׁמְרוֹן וּלְאֵלִילֶיהָ כֵּן אַעֲשֶׂה לִירוּשָׁלַם וּלְעַצְבֶּיהָ

“10 As my hand has reached to the kingdoms of the idols whose images were greater than those of Jerusalem and Samaria, 11 shall I not do to Jerusalem and her idols what I have done to Samaria and her images?”

These examples use the term אֱלִיל to refer to a divine image.<sup>102</sup> In light of these texts it could be argued that the use of אֱלִיל in Ps. 96:5 may also refer to divine images. Understood in this way, the verse would draw a contrast between the gods

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<sup>100</sup> Cf. 1 Chr. 16:26. On the ambiguity of אֱלִיל, see Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities: Metaphor, Semantics and Divine Imagery* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 159-62.

<sup>101</sup> Cf. Isa. 31:7.

<sup>102</sup> Cf. Hab. 2:18-19.

of the nations which are made by human hands and YHWH who made the heavens.<sup>103</sup>

On the other hand, unlike *מסכה* or *פסל*, *אליל* is not anchored to the material and (aside from the contrast suggested above) there is little in the context of the psalm itself to point toward divine images. While *אליל* is used to refer to divine images in some texts, it is elsewhere used adjectivally meaning “weak”, “insignificant”, or “worthless.” For instance, the friends of Job are called *רפאי אלל*, “*worthless physicians*”<sup>104</sup> because they offer him poor counsel. Zechariah declares that a shepherd who leaves his flock is a *רעי האליל* “*worthless shepherd*.”<sup>105</sup> Jeremiah declares that those who speak lies in the name of the LORD are prophesying *אליל*, “*worthless divination*.”<sup>106</sup> In light of these occurrences of the term, an interpreter could also argue that the use of *אליל* in Ps. 96:5 may not point to divine images *per se* but to the idea that the gods of the nations are weak, insignificant and worthless. Understood in this way, the verse would draw a contrast between the weakness of the gods of the nations and the strength of the LORD who is the maker of heaven.<sup>107</sup> Therefore, while some interpreters may find in Ps. 96 a specific reference to divine images, others may just as easily find a general reference to “false” or “worthless” gods. In this case it seems to me difficult to definitively rule out one or the other. Therefore *אליל* is not only used to refer to “divine images” but is used more broadly to refer to various “worthless things”, the gods of the nations being one example.

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<sup>103</sup> On this contrast see for example Isa. 44:6-23, section 3.5 and Barton, “‘The Work of Human Hands’,” 68-69.

<sup>104</sup> Job 13:4.

<sup>105</sup> Zech. 11:17.

<sup>106</sup> Jer. 14:14. “Worthlessness.” Cf. Sir. 11:3.

<sup>107</sup> Moreover, if anything is made of Preuss’ suggestion that *אלילים* was created as “a disparaging pun and as a diminutive of *’el* or *’elohim* (little god, godling)” and was “used to bring about a conscious antithesis between *’elil* [that which is weak] and *’el*, ‘the Strong One’”, then one could also see how the term could apply to the gods of the nations without any particular concern for divine images. Preuss, “אֵלִיל, *’elil*,” *TDOT* 1:285.

The ambiguity is also evident in the use of הבל in Jer. 14:22 which says:

22 היש בהבלי הגוים מגשמים ואם השמים יתנו רבבים הלא אתה הוא יהוה אלהינו ונקוה לך  
כי אתה עשית את כל אלה

“22 Can any idols of the nations<sup>108</sup> bring rain? Or can the heavens give showers? Is it not you, O LORD our God? We set our hope on you, for it is you who do all this.”

Is the writer referring to divine images specifically or generally referring to worthless deities? The usage of הבל in this verse is ambiguous and it is again difficult to rule out one or the other.

Finally, the ambiguity is again evident in the use of שקוץ in 1 Kgs. 11:5, 7-8.

There we read:

5 וילך שלמה אחרי עשתרת אלהי צדנים ואחרי מלכם שקץ עמנים...  
7 אז יבנה שלמה במה לכמוש שקץ מואב בהר אשר על פני ירושלם ולמלך שקץ בני עמון  
8 וכן עשה לכל נשיו הנכריות מקטירות ומזבחות לאלהיהן

“5 For Solomon followed Astarte the goddess of the Sidonians, and Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites... 7 Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Molech the abomination of the Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem. 8 He did the same for all his foreign wives, who offered incense and sacrificed to their gods.”<sup>109</sup>

Is שקוץ being used in these verses to refer generally to the detestable gods of the nations or specifically to the divine images associated with them? The term is elsewhere used to refer specifically to refer to cultic images<sup>110</sup> but the usage here is ambiguous.

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<sup>108</sup> AV: “vanities of the gentiles”; ESV: “false gods of the nations”; NIV: “worthless idols of the nations.”

<sup>109</sup> Cf. 2 Kgs. 23:13 where תועבה is used in the same way.

<sup>110</sup> Deut. 29:17; Ezek. 20:30; 37:27. Kutsko notes that the word is commonly used within the book of Ezekiel for “idolatry” and “More than half of the 29 occurrences of this term in the Hebrew Bible refer to idols, and 5 of the 8 occurrences of this term in Ezekiel are explicit references to idolatry.” Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 25, 29-30. It seems to me that Kutsko includes all contexts in which the term is used to refer to cultic paraphernalia as examples of “idolatry.” While the contexts clearly suggest that the term is being used to refer to cultic images in general, it is often unclear whether it is specifically referring to divine images. Nevertheless, that the term is specifically



These few examples demonstrate that a number of the “idol” terms are used ambiguously so that it is unclear whether they are referring to divine images or false gods.<sup>111</sup> This seems to be reflected in the LXX choice to use εἰδωλον to translate not only פסל, but also אלהים. The linguistic ambiguity, therefore, does not revolve around the meaning of פסל itself (for the LXX translators almost always use the term meaning “graven image”), but around the question of whether the פסל prohibition should be understood exclusively in terms of the meaning of פסל or in terms of the usage of the wider Hebrew terminology used to refer to divine images. The translators of the LXX seem to have favoured the latter view and this is reflected in many English translations today.

#### 1.4 Implications

A reading of the prohibition of idols in light of the range of Hebrew terms used to refer to divine images tends to blur the distinction between the prohibitions. This is because the “idol” terminology within the Old Testament is not only used to refer to divine images but also to false gods. Approached from this angle, the command not to make an idol is a command not to make a false god. That false god may or may not be one that is made by human hands. In other words, the question of whether the “idol” is material or immaterial is marginalized. Subsequently, the prohibitions are more likely to be viewed as a single commandment.

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used to refer to divine images seems likely in the examples noted above and this lends weight to the idea that the term may have been used for divine images when further clarification is not provided.

<sup>111</sup> This ambiguity is evident in differing modern English translations. “Idol” appears 119 times in the AV while the number nearly doubles in the NIV where it appears 223 times. NRSV: 203.

### **1.5 How Then Shall we Approach the Linguistic Ambiguity?**

Within the context of the Ten Commandments, I see the prohibition of idols as a prohibition of divine images. For the reasons explained in section 1.1, I would argue that this distinguishes it from the broader prohibition of other gods which precedes it. Nevertheless, in light of the range and usage of the Hebrew terminology used to refer to divine images addressed in section 1.3, I also recognize that the issues have been genuinely merged within the Old Testament text and subsequent tradition and that this treatment leans toward a reading which fuses the prohibitions.

### **1.6 The Linguistic Ambiguity in a Wider Context**

Like the difficulty in defining the relationship between the prohibitions, the relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols within the Old Testament is difficult to define due to a linguistic ambiguity. “The worship of idols” can be understood as either the worship of alien deities or the worship of divine images. While I have argued that the usage of פסל within the context of the Ten Commandments specifically calls for a prohibition of “divine images,” within the wider Old Testament context the range and usage of the Hebrew terminology used to refer to divine images must be taken into account. This creates a wider linguistic ambiguity because, as mentioned in section 1.3, the Hebrew terms used to refer to divine images are also used to refer to false gods. Rosner puts it this way: “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.”<sup>112</sup> This of course does not justify reading a broader meaning back into each individual occurrence, but it does suggest that the terminology can be used in different ways.<sup>113</sup>

As the example of Ps. 96:5 demonstrates, it is often unclear whether the terms are being used to specifically refer to divine images or generally to refer to false gods. By broadly affirming: “The gods of the peoples are idols”,<sup>114</sup> the Psalm suggests that “idols” and “other gods” may be one and the same. This in turn leads to the assumption that the term “idolatry” is appropriately used to refer to the worship of other gods whether a divine image is intended or not. Childs uses the terminology in this way when he writes, “The essence of Israel’s idolatry is reflected in Elijah’s contest on Mount Carmel.”<sup>115</sup> The text mentions nothing of a divine image but it clearly speaks of the god Baal. If the worship of idols is understood generally as the worship of other gods, then Elijah’s confrontation is surely a classic example of idolatry. However, if the worship of idols is understood specifically as the worship of divine images, the narrative is not an example of idolatry at all.<sup>116</sup> Consequently, interpreters who see “The worship of idols” as “The worship of ‘false’ or ‘foreign’ gods” are likely to find the relationship between the issues as one

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<sup>112</sup> Rosner, “The Concept of idolatry,” *Th* 24 (1999): 23. Similarly, Gregg writes, “The word ‘idolatry’ is very vague, and covers two distinct ideas, (i) the worship of false gods...and (ii) the use of images in worship.” Gregg, “The First and Second Commandments,” 202-203.

<sup>113</sup> On this see Appendix 2: Differing Conceptions of Meaning and Illegitimate Totality Transfer.

<sup>114</sup> Ps. 96:5.

<sup>115</sup> 1 Kgs. 18. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*, 65. This usage of the terminology is typical in the secondary literature. For example, in regard to Deut. 13, which says nothing of divine images, Childs writes: “The homilist warns against the temptations of idolatry. Even if a prophet or soothsayer were to entice the people to serve other gods with miraculous signs, that option was to be flatly rejected” *ibid.*, 22; Rosner, “The Concept of idolatry,”; Levine, *Numbers 21-36: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 2000), 279-280. Though see Greenspahn, “Syncretism and idolatry in the Bible,” *VT* 54 (2004): 480-494. Greenspahn argues that “idolatry” should be limited to the use of images.

<sup>116</sup> See Greenspahn who argues for this usage of the terminology.

of near synonymity. On the other hand, interpreters who see “The worship of idols” as the worship of divine images are likely to distinguish between the issues.

Differing approaches to the linguistic ambiguity directly affect interpretation. For example, when attempting to demonstrate that Deut. 4 is tied together by the theme of divine presence, MacDonald considers Weinfeld’s proposal that “The central concern of the chapter is the preservation of Israel’s uniqueness by its abstention from idolatry.”<sup>117</sup> MacDonald critiques this perspective noting that this central concern only touches vv. 9-29.<sup>118</sup> If it is assumed that “idolatry” refers exclusively to the worship of divine images, then MacDonald’s point stands. Only vv. 9-29 deal with divine images. However, if it is assumed that “idolatry” refers to the worship of gods other than YHWH, then there surely are grounds for seeing the theme of “idolatry” both before and after verses 9-29. Verses 3-4 refer to the incident with the Baal of Peor and 30-40 affirm that YHWH is God and there is no other, i.e., there is no *other god*. For Weinfeld, these are also clear references to “idolatry.”<sup>119</sup> Therefore each author’s conception of “idolatry” shapes how they understand the unity of the chapter. I have argued that there are grounds for using the terminology in either way but confusion arises when interpreters with differing definitions comment on biblical texts which deal with the issues.

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<sup>117</sup> Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 221.

<sup>118</sup> MacDonald, “One God or one Lord?,” 228.

<sup>119</sup> I have argued that the Greek εἰδωλον (from which is derived the English “idol” and therefore “idolatry”) is not exclusively used to refer to divine images (as its usage to translate both פסל and אלהים clearly shows). See section 1.3. However, MacDonald frequently refers to “The prohibition of idolatry” (e.g. 16, 213, 223, 255...etc.) and distinguishes it from the First Commandment (213). Similarly, I refer to a “Prohibition of idols” and yet distinguished it from the prohibition of other gods. On the one hand, it could be argued that using the terminology of “idol” or “idolatry” to refer to divine images is justified by the translation of פסל with εἰδωλον. On the other hand, it could also be argued that distinguishing a “prohibition of idols” or a “prohibition of idolatry” from the prohibition of other gods is unjustified because the Greek terminology is used to refer to both divine images and “other gods.”

Therefore, I would first note that the relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols within the Old Testament is ambiguous because the terminology of “idols” is used to refer to both divine images and alien deities.

## **1.7 Chapter Summary**

In this first chapter I have argued that the differing enumerations of the Ten Commandments have to do with the fact that some traditions view the prohibition of other gods and the prohibition of idols as distinct commandments while others view them as one. This is partly the product of a linguistic ambiguity revolving around the “idol” terminology. Within the context of the Ten Commandments the prohibition of idols is best understood as a prohibition of divine images and this distinguishes it from the broader prohibition of other gods which precedes it. However, the issues have been fused within the Old Testament and subsequent tradition and this leans toward a reading which understands the prohibitions as a single commandment. Within the wider Old Testament context, the relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols is ambiguous because “the worship of idols” can be understood either as the worship of alien deities or the worship of divine images. This is the first of four factors that make the relationship difficult to define.

## THE GRAMMATICAL AMBIGUITY

*The redactional enclosing of the second commandment within the first points to the earliest level of interpretation, and explains in a most illuminating fashion the reason behind the later ecclesiological diversity in understanding the sequence of the Decalogue.*

Brevard Childs<sup>120</sup>

The second difficulty in discussing the relationship between the prohibition of other gods and the prohibition of idols arises from an ambiguity of the grammar.

In Deut. 5:7-9a we read:

7 לא יהיה לך אלהים אחרים על פני  
8 לא תעשה לך פסל כל תמונה אשר בשמים ממעל ואשר  
בארץ מתחת ואשר במים מתחת לארץ  
9 לא תשתחוה להם ולא תעבדם

“7 you shall have no **other gods** before me.

8 You shall not make for yourself an **idol**, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

9 You shall not bow down to **them** or worship **them**...”

In his article, “Das Zweite Gebot” (The Second Commandment),<sup>121</sup> Walther Zimmerli pointed out that “idol” is in the singular and yet it is followed by the command not to bow down to “them” or worship “them.” This construction, in which a singular noun is followed by plural pronouns, creates a grammatical ambiguity which makes the relationship between the prohibitions difficult to

<sup>120</sup> Childs, *Exodus*, 406.

<sup>121</sup> Zimmerli, “Das Zweite Gebot,” 550-563.

define.<sup>122</sup> Do the Hebrew plural suffixes refer back to the singular “idol” mentioned in verse 8 or must they refer back to the plural “other gods” mentioned in verse 7? Or again, is it possible that they refer to the combination of the plural “other gods” and the singular “idol?” If an interpreter concludes that the pronouns refer to the idols implied in verse 8, he or she is likely to see a short prohibition of other gods followed by an extended prohibition of idols. If they conclude that the plural pronouns must refer back to the plural “other gods,” then they are likely to see a short prohibition of idols wrapped up within an extended prohibition of other gods. Finally, if they conclude that the plural pronouns refer back to both the “other gods” and “idols,” then they may see a short prohibition of other gods followed by a longer prohibition of idols that is finally followed by an addendum which applies to both. Each of these interpretive choices will affect how the relationship between the prohibitions is understood.

In this second chapter I consider each of these three approaches to the grammatical ambiguity. In sections 2.1-2.6 I survey the differing ways that interpreters have historically attempted to deal with it. I begin in section 2.1 by presenting the position that the plural pronouns refer to the idols which are implied in the construction of verse 8. According to this position, Israel is commanded not to bow down and worship *idols*. In section 2.3 I present Zimmerli’s position regarding a textual pre-history which would suggest that the plural pronouns did not originally refer to the singular idol of verse eight but instead referred back to the plural “other gods” of verse seven. According to this position, Israel was commanded not to bow down and worship *other gods*. Zimmerli’s proposed textual pre-history is relevant

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<sup>122</sup> On this issue as a grammatical ambiguity see Propp, *Exodus: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (2; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1999), 171.

for my discussion because it has been influential in terms of how interpreters understand the relationship between the prohibitions in the MT. In section 2.5 I present the case that the plural pronouns refer to both the plural “other gods” of verse seven as well as the idols implied in verse eight. According to this perspective, Israel is commanded not to worship other gods or idols. Having summarized these three positions, I present my own reading of the grammatical ambiguity (2.7). While I agree with the first position which argues that the pronouns refer to the implied idols and I also agree with the second position which argues that they also refer to the plural “other gods,” I do not agree that they *exclusively* refer to either one. Therefore I ultimately find the third position to be the most persuasive. I argue that this reading of the grammatical ambiguity maintains a *distinction* between the prohibitions. In section 2.8 I explain how the grammatical ambiguity is evident in the wider Old Testament context and in the chapter summary in section 2.9 I identify the second factor that makes the relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols within the Old Testament difficult to define.

## **2.1 You Shall Not Worship *Idols***

I begin with the position that understands verses 8-9 as a command for Israel not to bow down and worship “idols.” A number of points could be marshalled in defence of this position. In the first, it could be argued that the sequence suggests it. In the present construction, the idol prohibition is immediately followed by the command not to bow down to them or worship them. This may suggest to some interpreters that it is the idols implied in Deut. 5:8 which Israel is commanded not to bow down



and worship in verse nine.<sup>123</sup> At least in my own experience of reading the text, it was only upon closer examination that the grammatical imprecision was noticed and the sequence questioned. When the imprecision was noticed, the question immediately arose as to whether the plural pronouns might not refer to the various forms which an idol may take mentioned in verse 8. This question leads to the second point in favour of the idea that Israel is commanded not to worship “idols.” It could be argued that the plural pronouns agree with the plural *idea* implied in verse 8. While “idol” is in the singular, Israel is commanded not to make an idol in the form of anything “in the heavens above, the earth beneath or the waters below.” This reference to the various forms which an idol may take constitutes a plural idea to which the plural pronouns may refer.<sup>124</sup> In other words, it could be argued that we have in these verses a *constructio ad sensum*: a construction in which a word does not take the grammatical number of the word with which it should regularly agree, but the sense of another word or phrase that is implied.<sup>125</sup> Although the objection could be made that, to be grammatically precise, the plural idea should have been followed by the singular command, “You shall not bow down to *it* or worship *it*”, the construction as it stands is hardly incomprehensible.

Thirdly, it could be argued that it is reasonable to say that the plural pronouns refer to the implied idols because the combination of the verbs “bow down” and “worship” is used elsewhere to refer to idols, albeit in reverse order. In 2 Kgs. 21:21 we read of Amon, son of Manasseh:

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<sup>123</sup> Miller, “The Story of the First Commandment: The Book of Exodus,” 69.

<sup>124</sup> Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 65.

<sup>125</sup> Gesenius, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar* (trans. Kautzsch; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), 446; Jouon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (14; trans. Muraoka; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1993), 148a. Cf. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 330, 337, 399. Though also see Zimmerli, “Das Zweite Gebot,” 554.

21 וילך בכל הדרך אשר הלך אביו ויעבד את הגללים אשר עבד אביו וישתהו להם

“21 He walked in all the way in which his father walked, served the idols that his father served, and worshiped them...”

Readers of this description could easily conclude that Amon had broken the command not to bow down and worship idols.

Finally, a fourth point in favour of the idea that Israel is commanded not to bow down and worship idols can be drawn from the reception of the verses within the Christian Church. A great many interpreters throughout the history of the church have understood these verses as a command against bowing down and worshipping *images* or “idols.”<sup>126</sup> For example, during the Reformation period Calvin used the second commandment to condemn what he viewed as the worship of images in the Catholic Church.<sup>127</sup> Calvin writes, “Whether it be God or a creature that is imaged, the moment you fall prostrate before it in veneration, you are so far fascinated by superstition... For the same reason, the second commandment has an additional part concerning adoration.”<sup>128</sup> Here Calvin assumes that the “additional part”, i.e., the command not to “bow down to them or worship them,” specifically applies to *images*. The Catholic response was not to argue that the prohibition did not stand against the worship of images but that the respect paid toward images in the Catholic Church was veneration (*dulia*) and not worship (*latria*).<sup>129</sup> In other words, the

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<sup>126</sup> See for example the historical review provided by Charles, *The Decalogue*, 15, 68-71. For an example of the Reformed position and a Catholic response see Willis-Watkins, *The Second Commandment and Church Reform: The Colloquy of St. Germain-en-Laye, 1562* (Princeton: Princeton Theological Seminary, 1994), 22. Cf. Calvin, *Inst*, 1.11.9 and Carroll, “Aniconic God and the cult of images,” 63-64.

<sup>127</sup> Willis-Watkins, *The Second Commandment and Church Reform*, 37.

<sup>128</sup> Again, see Calvin, *Inst*, 1.11.9.

<sup>129</sup> On the Catholic distinction see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (vol. 3; Notre Dame: Christian Classics, 1981), 2-2.1-3.3 and Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God Against the Pagans* (trans. Dyson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 10.1. On Calvin’s response to these distinctions see Calvin, *Inst*, 1.12.2. Willis-Watkins notes that Calvin viewed the Catholic response

debates revolved around the question of whether the images in the Catholic Church were or were not being worshiped. Within these debates, it was held as a common assumption by both Protestants and Catholics that the prohibition of idols stood against the worship of *images*.

Therefore, to summarize this first approach to the grammatical ambiguity: because the sequence of the present construction suggests it, because the plural pronouns agree with the plural idea, because the combination of the verbs “bow down and worship” is elsewhere used to refer to idols, and because these verses have been widely received as a prohibition against the worship of images, it could be argued that verses 8-9 command Israel not to bow down or worship *idols*. To these points it could be added that this perspective provides a relatively simple answer to the grammatical ambiguity without resorting to a speculative textual pre-history.

## 2.2 Implications

Those who make sense of the grammatical ambiguity by means of a *constructio ad sensum* may find little grammatical reason to merge the prohibitions. The interpreter is likely to see a short prohibition of other gods followed by an extended prohibition of idols. Those who handle the grammatical ambiguity in this way may see the enumeration of the commandments by Philo, Josephus, Origen, Eastern Orthodoxy and the Protestant Reformed tradition as the more “natural” reading of the prohibitions.

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as “a semantic nicety to mask idolatry.” Willis-Watkins, *The Second Commandment and Church Reform*, 49. For the Catholic defense see *ibid.*, 24.

### 2.3 You Shall Not Worship *Other Gods*

However, the case could also be made that the plural pronouns do not refer to the singular “idol” but instead refer back to the plural “other gods.” Since the publication of Zimmerli’s influential article on the second commandment in 1950,<sup>130</sup> this position has found a wide following.<sup>131</sup> In order to present the case for this approach, I will briefly review Zimmerli’s original argument.

Zimmerli begins by making a few comments about the grammatical structure of the first and second commandments. He points out that while the first commandment is curtly phrased, the second possesses an unexpected breadth and a conspicuously awkward syntactical construction.<sup>132</sup> Particularly incongruous is the construction in which the singular “idol” is immediately followed by the plural pronouns. Having highlighted the grammatical awkwardness of the construction, Zimmerli then attempts to provide an explanation for it. He begins by asserting that historical-critical research has made it very clear that the Decalogue available to us today is not in its primary form. The short sentences of an *Urdekalog* have been extended over the course of time. While some interpreters have assumed that the awkward sequence of the second commandment should be held as the original “ur-text”<sup>133</sup> and the meaning should be maintained through a *constructio ad sensum*,

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<sup>130</sup> Zimmerli, “Das Zweite Gebot,” 550-563.

<sup>131</sup> E.g. Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, 14; Nelson, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 202; Childs, *Exodus: A Commentary* (London: SCM, 1974), 405; Mayes, *Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 167; Stamm and Andrew, *The Ten Commandments in Recent Research* (London: SCM, 1967), 85; Noth, *Exodus*, 163. Also see list in Holter, *Deuteronomy 4*, 74. However, it is important to note that, while the authors listed above would agree that the plural pronouns refer to the plural “other gods,” they do not necessarily agree that it refers to other gods *exclusively*.

<sup>132</sup> When speaking of the “first commandment” Zimmerli is referring to Exod. 20:3/Deut. 5:7 and when speaking of the “second commandment” he is referring to Exod. 20:4-6/Deut. 5:8-10.

<sup>133</sup> Zimmerli cites both Schmidt, “Mose und der Dekalog,” in *Eucharisterion: Festschrift H. Gunkel* (FRLANT; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1923), 79, 107 and Köeler, “Der Dekalog,”

Zimmerli disagrees. He affirms that the plural pronouns *cannot* refer to the singular idol and that a smoother connection is found with the plural “other gods” of the first commandment.<sup>134</sup> He therefore makes the suggestion that an originally curt form of the prohibition of idols, (“You shall not make an idol”), was expanded by subsequent redactors who added the phrase, “You shall not bow down to them or worship them.” This redaction, which sequentially followed the idol prohibition and yet grammatically referred back to the plural “other gods” that came before, effectively drew the second commandment under the shadow of the first.<sup>135</sup> Against the idea that a *constructio ad sensum* would make sense of the grammatical ambiguity (as described in the first position), Zimmerli notes that the description of the various forms which an idol may take is loose and awkward and is clearly a later addition. He then points out that the combination of the verbs השתחוה and עבד (to bow down and worship), is a set Deuteronomistic expression which is overwhelmingly used to refer to “other gods” and not “idols.”<sup>136</sup> For example, in Deut. 8:19 we read:

19 והיה אם שכח תשכח את יהוה אלהיך והלכת אחרי אלהים אחרים ועבדתם והשתחווית להם העדתי  
בכם היום כי אבד תאבדון

“19 If you do forget the LORD your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish.”

Similarly in 2 Kgs. 17:35 we read:

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*Theol. Rundschau*, no. 1 (1929): 179 who affirm that “You shall not make an idol...you shall not bow down to them or worship them” should be held as original. Zimmerli, “Das Zweite Gebot,” 554.

<sup>134</sup> Zimmerli, “Das Zweite Gebot,” 552

<sup>135</sup> Though see Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 291.

<sup>136</sup> Zimmerli, “Das Zweite Gebot,” 553. On the use of the phrase in reference to “other gods” see Deut. 11:16; 17:3; 29:26; 30:17; Josh. 23:16; Judg. 2:19; 1 Kgs. 9:6, 9; 2 Kgs. 17:35; 2 Chr. 7:19, 22; Jer. 13:10; 16:11; 22:9; 25:6. In addition to these references, the expression is also used in reference to bowing down and worshiping the gods of the Canaanites (Josh. 23:7; Exod. 23:24), Baal in particular (1 Kgs. 16:31; 22:53; 2 Kgs. 17:16), and the celestial bodies (Deut. 4:19; 2 Kgs. 17:16). Zimmerli does however, note the occurrence in 2 Kgs. 21:21 referring to Amon’s sin. For a review of Zimmerli’s conclusions, see Holter, *Deuteronomy 4*, 72-74. On the dispute regarding the root or stem of השתחוה see P. Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew, Part 1* 79t.

35 ויכרת יהוה אתם ברית ויצום לאמר לא תיראו אלהים אחרים ולא תשתחוו להם ולא תעבדם ולא תזבחו להם

“35 The LORD had made a covenant with them and commanded them, ‘You shall not worship other gods or bow yourselves to them or serve them or sacrifice to them.’”

Finally, Zimmerli suggests that the explanation which follows the prohibition of idols is a more fitting explanation for the prohibition of other gods. As it stands, the text suggests that Israel is not to make an idol because YHWH is a jealous God. If however, the explanation refers back to the “other gods,” the text would suggest that Israel is to have no other gods because YHWH is a jealous God. Zimmerli points out that this very idea is presented in Exodus 34:14 which reads: “For you shall worship no other god, because the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.”<sup>137</sup>

Therefore, to summarize this second position: Zimmerli suggests that the plural pronouns do not refer to the singular “idol” but instead refer back to the plural “other gods.” In support of this conclusion he points out that the combination of the verbs “to bow down and worship” is a set Deuteronomistic expression which is overwhelmingly used to refer to “other gods” and not “idols.” He also suggests that the description of YHWH as a jealous God finds a better fit in relation to the prohibition of other gods. Against the idea that the grammatical ambiguity could be resolved through a *constructio ad sensum*, he points out that the description of the various forms which an idol may take is a later addition. For all these reasons, Zimmerli suggests that the grammatical ambiguity is best explained by a redaction of the text which drew the prohibition of idols into the shadow of the prohibition of other gods.

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<sup>137</sup> Zimmerli, “Das Zweite Gebot,” 551; Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline*, 116. Though note that Deut. 4:23-24 commands Israel not to make a graven image “For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.” On this see Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, 59 and Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 65.

## 2.4 Implications

How then, might this approach to the grammatical ambiguity affect an interpreter's understanding of the relationship between the prohibitions? Those who conclude with Zimmerli that the plural pronouns refer to the plural "other gods" and not to the singular "idol" may find strong grammatical reason to merge the prohibitions. Instead of seeing a short prohibition of other gods followed by an extended prohibition of idols (as in the previous position), the reader may instead see a short prohibition of idols wrapped up within an extended prohibition of other gods. As Zimmerli writes, "The prohibition of images was drawn into the shadow of the prohibition of foreign gods and the prohibition of images lost the dignity of an independent commandment."<sup>138</sup> Although Zimmerli primarily introduces a conjectural textual pre-history, it is not uncommon for interpreters to use Zimmerli's suggestion in order to interpret the meaning of the construction in the MT. For example, Preuss points out, "The prohibition of images is thus—now!—an extended development of the first commandment and is to be so understood."<sup>139</sup> Those who handle the grammatical ambiguity in this way may see the enumerations of the commandments which merge the prohibitions into a single commandment following Clement of Alexandria, Augustine, and the Catholic, Lutheran and most Jewish traditions as a more "natural" reading of the prohibitions.

Of course, some interpreters who accept Zimmerli's argument may nevertheless emphasize the idea that the prohibitions *once stood* independently of

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<sup>138</sup> "Das Bildverbot ist hier in den Schatten des Fremdgötterverbotes getreten und hat die Würde eines selbständigen Gebotes verloren." Zimmerli, "Das Zweite Gebot," 557.

<sup>139</sup> Preuss, "חזה, *hwh*," *TDOT* 4:254.

one another. For example, commenting on the second commandment in Exodus Childs writes, “Although this commandment once functioned independently, in its present canonical position it has been subordinated to the first commandment which brackets it...It seems clear that the second commandment must originally have served a function distinct from the first commandment which prohibited the worship of other gods.”<sup>140</sup> Alternatively, Stamm accepts Zimmerli’s argument and yet notes, “Such fusion of the commandments would not have been possible if they had not been felt to be intrinsically homogeneous. If the worship of foreign gods was an encroachment on Yahweh’s sovereign right of rule over Israel which belonged to him exclusively, then it cannot have been otherwise with the worship of images.”<sup>141</sup> Because Zimmerli’s argument suggests that the relationship between the prohibitions has changed over time, interpreters like Childs may accept Zimmerli’s point regarding the merging of the prohibitions in the MT and yet emphasize an earlier distinction between them. As noted in the chapter’s epigraph, this led Childs to conclude that, “The redactional enclosing of the second commandment within the first points to the earliest level of interpretation, and explains in a most illuminating fashion the reason behind the later ecclesiological diversity in understanding the sequence of the Decalogue.”<sup>142</sup> I think that Childs is correct to connect the grammatical construction with the later ecclesiological diversity. However, it is only one of many factors which are involved and the grammatical construction itself is reflective of wider patterns found within the Old Testament.

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<sup>140</sup> Childs, *Exodus*, 405-407.

<sup>141</sup> Stamm and Andrew, *The Ten Commandments in Recent Research*, 86.

<sup>142</sup> Childs, *Exodus*, 406.



## 2.5 You Shall Not Worship Either

Finally, it could be argued that the statement “You shall not bow down to them or worship them” refers back to both the implied idols and the “other gods.” Tigay presents this perspective in his commentary on Deuteronomy when he affirms that the command not to “bow down to them or serve them” refers to the “various types of idols mentioned in verse 8 and the gods mentioned in verse 7.”<sup>143</sup> This position would agree with many of the points made in defence of the first two positions. However, it rejects the idea that it is justifiable to *limit* the command not to “bow down and worship them” to either the implied idols or the other gods. In the present construction, the command not to worship applies to both. While the first position is right to suggest that Israel is commanded not to worship “idols”, idols are “other gods.” While the second position is right to suggest that Israel is commanded not to worship “other gods,” the broad prohibition of other gods must include those “gods” that are made by human hands. I have already presented evidence in favour of the idea that the plural pronouns either refer to the implied idols or to the plural “other gods” in sections 2.1-2.4 and so will not repeat it here. Instead, I will focus on the reason interpreters have rejected the idea that the command must refer to either one or the other. While many have agreed with Zimmerli that the plural pronouns refer back to the plural “other gods,” Zimmerli also argued that the plural pronouns *cannot* refer to the singular “idol.”<sup>144</sup> This point has received a mixed scholarly response for primarily three reasons.

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<sup>143</sup> Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 65.

<sup>144</sup> “Das Pluralsuffix in *lāhām* kann sich nicht auf das singularische *pāsāl* beziehen.” Zimmerli, “Das Zweite Gebot,” 552. The idea that the plural suffix *cannot* refer to the singular פסל, is taken up by Stamm and Andrew, *The Ten Commandments in Recent Research*, 86 and Mettinger, “Israelite Aniconism: Developments and Origins,” in *The Image and the Book*, (CBET; Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 175.

In the first, several scholars have argued that the plural antecedent that is missing in Deuteronomy is supplied in the Exodus version.<sup>145</sup> In Exod. 20:4-5a we read:

4 לא תעשה לך פסל וכל תמונה אשר בשמים ממעל ואשר בארץ מתחת ואשר במים מתחת לארץ  
5 לא תשתחוה להם ולא תעבדם...

“5Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, *or* any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5 Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them...”<sup>146</sup>

In this construction, the conjunction ו separates פסל and כל תמונה. The presence of the conjunction in Exodus creates two grammatical objects. Therefore, Exodus provides a construction in which “an idol *or* any likeness” would be the preferable plural antecedent because it is syntactically closer than the plural “other gods” of the previous verse. The implications of the difference between the constructions in Exodus and Deuteronomy are summed up well by Waschke when he writes: “In Dt 5:8 *tāmūnā* [likeness] must be understood in apposition to *pesel* (they have the same referent), whereas in Ex 20:4 the presence of the copula means that it must be understood as a synonym of *pesel* and thus as a separate object.”<sup>147</sup> This difference has led some scholars to conclude that in Exodus the plural pronouns find a plural antecedent in the prohibition of idols whereas in Deuteronomy the plural pronouns must find their plural antecedent in the “other gods” as Zimmerli has argued.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> See Dozeman, *Exodus*, 484. For a succinct review of this argument and subsequent discussion see Holter, *Deuteronomy 4*, 71-77. Holter reviews Hossfeld, *Der Dekalog: Seine späten Fassungen, die originale Komposition und seine Vorstufen* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1982), 21-24 and Dohmen, *Das Bilderverbot*, 71-77.

<sup>146</sup> Here I have used the KJV because it reflects the addition of the ו.

<sup>147</sup> Waschke, “תַּמּוּנָה, *temūnā*,” 688. Cf. Dozeman, *Exodus*, 483-484; Johnstone, *Exodus*, 90.

<sup>148</sup> E.g. Johnstone, *Exodus*, 90-91. Typically associated with this position is the assumption that the Exodus version preserved in Exod. 20:3-14 which includes the ו is dependent on the version in Deuteronomy 5:7-18. See Schmidt, “The Aniconic Tradition,” 78-79. Schmidt points to the work of Hossfeld, Dohmen, Nicholson, Schroer, Johnstone, Schweingorst, and Van Seters. All of these emphasize the priority of Deuteronomy. To these I would add Mettinger, “Israelite Aniconism:

Therefore, we first note that Zimmerli's point that the plural pronouns cannot refer to the singular "idol" has met with a mixed scholarly response because the Exodus version of the prohibition supplies a syntactically closer plural antecedent.

Secondly, Zimmerli's point that the combination of the verbs *עבד* and *השתחוה* is overwhelmingly used to refer to "other gods" and not "idols," should be considered in light of the individual use of the verbs. When this is done, it becomes clear that it is common for the biblical writers to speak of "bowing down" before and "worshipping" idols.<sup>149</sup> In other words, the verbs are used individually to refer to idols. While Israel is told thirty-six times not to "bow down" (*חווה*) to foreign gods,<sup>150</sup> they are also told twelve times not to "bow down" (*חווה*) to idols.<sup>151</sup> For example, in Lev. 26:1 we read:

1 לא תעשו לכם אלילים ופסל ומצבה לא תקימו לכם ואבן משכית לא תתנו בארצכם להשתחוות עליה  
כי אני יהוה אלהיכם

"1 You shall make for yourselves no idols and erect no carved images or pillars, and you shall not place figured stones in your land, to *worship* at them; for I am the Lord your God."

In Ps. 106:19 we read:

19 יעשו עגל בחרב וישתחוו למסכה

"19 They made a calf at Horeb and *worshipped* a cast image."

And finally, in Isaiah 2:8 we read:

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Developments and Origins," 175. However, as Dozemann points out, Weinfeld, Houtman, Levin, A. Graupner and Johnstone maintain the priority of a version of the Decalogue in Exod. 20:1-17. Cf. Dozemann, *Exodus*, 471.

<sup>149</sup> See Holter, *Deuteronomy* 4, 73; Miller, "The Psalms as a Meditation on the First Commandment," 94. Again, Holter refers to Hossfeld, *Der Dekalog*, 24-26.

<sup>150</sup> Exod. 23:24; 34:14; Num. 25:2; Deut. 8:19; 11:16; 17:3; 29:26; 30:17; Josh. 23:7, 16; Judg. 2:12, 17, 19; 1 Kgs. 9:6, 9; 11:33; 16:31; 22:53; 2 Kgs. 5:18; 17:35; 19:37; 2 Chr. 7:19, 22; 25:15 (also a divine image); Ps. 81:9; Isa. 37:38; 44:15, 17 (also a divine image); Isa. 46:6 (also a divine image); Jer. 1:16 (also a divine image); 13:10; 16:11; 22:9; 25:6.

<sup>151</sup> Exod. 32:8; Lev. 26:1; 2 Kgs. 21:21; 2 Ch. 25:15; Ps. 106:19; Isa. 2:8, 20; 44:15, 17; 46:6; Jer. 1:16; 5:13.

8 ותמלא ארצו אלילים למעשה ידי ישתחוו לאשר עשו אצבעתיו

“Their land is full of idols; they *bow down* to the work of their hands, that which their fingers have made.”

These few examples demonstrate that it is not at all unusual to hear of Israel “bowing down” (חווה) before idols.

Neither is it unusual to hear of Israel “worshipping” or “serving” (עבד) idols.

Holter is correct when he points out that the verb עבד is used only three times with פסלים or פסל.<sup>152</sup> However, as noted previously, the Old Testament writers used a variety of Hebrew terms and phrases to refer to divine images. The usage of these terms, especially in the context of Deuteronomy, should be taken into account.

Therefore in Deut. 4:28 we read:

28 ועבדתם שם אלהים מעשה ידי אדם עץ ואבן אשר לא יראון ולא ישמעון ולא יאכלון ולא יריחון

“28 There you will *serve* other gods made by human hands, objects of wood and stone that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell.”

The “gods” which Israel is told that they will serve are the kind made by human hands.<sup>153</sup> Beyond Deuteronomy, in 2 Kgs. 17:41 we read of the Samaritans:

41 ויהיו הגוים האלה יראים את יהוה ואת פסיליהם היו עבדים...

“41 So these nations worshiped the Lord, but also *served* their carved images...”

In 2 Chr. 33:22b we read:

22 ולכל הפסילים אשר עשה מנשה אביו זבח אמון ויעבדם

“22 Amon sacrificed to all the images that his father Manasseh had made, and *served* them.”

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<sup>152</sup> Holter, *Deuteronomy* 4, 73. (Ps. 97:7, 2 Kgs. 17:41, 2 Chr. 33:22).

<sup>153</sup> Cf. Deut. 28:36, 64; 29:26 (where the context of 29:17-18 makes clear that the gods of the nations which Israel will serve are gods of wood and stone, silver and gold).

And finally, in Ps. 97:7 we read:

7 יבשו כל עבדי פסל המתהללים באיללים השתחוו לו כל אלהים

“7 All *worshippers* of images are put to shame, those who make their boast in worthless idols; all gods bow down before him.”<sup>154</sup>

These few examples are provided to show that it is not at all uncommon to hear of Israel “bowing before” or “worshiping” idols. While this does not negate the fact that the specific combination of verbs is overwhelmingly used in reference to “other gods,” it does qualify Zimmerli’s point.

Thirdly, the idea that the plural pronouns *cannot* refer to the singular idol has met with mixed response because some scholars argue that divine images are “other gods.” For example, Weinfeld writes,

“There is no justification for the distinction between the gods and their representatives, the idols. Both the Exodus version and the Deuteronomic version, then, when speaking about bowing down and worshiping, refer to ‘other gods,’ which is to ‘images.’ W. Zimmerli’s suggestion that the prohibition of worshiping idols in Exod 20:4/Deut 5:8 is an interpolation because it disrupts the connection between ‘other gods’ and the ‘bowing down’ to them, therefore, cannot be accepted.”<sup>155</sup>

Even if interpreters understand “idols” specifically as “divine images” and distinguish “idols” from the broader category of “other gods,” the point could still be argued that to prohibit the worship of the broader category is to prohibit the sub-category. To prohibit the worship of other gods necessarily prohibits the worship of those gods which are made by human hands.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Cf. 2 Chr. 24:18; 33:22; Ps. 106:36; and Ezek. 20:39.

<sup>155</sup> Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 291. Similar arguments are found in Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 65; Greenberg, “The Decalogue Tradition Critically Examined,” 99-100; Cassuto, *Exodus*, 242; Dozeman, *Exodus*, 484-485; Nelson, *Deuteronomy*, 75; Durham, *Exodus*, 286; Propp, *Exodus*, 171. Miller writes, “As the First Commandment is connected to the Prologue, so also is it connected substantively to the Second Commandment because the other gods and the idols are often one and the same thing (e.g. Exod. 32:4, 8; Deut. 4:28; 28:36, 64; 32:16-21).” Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, 14-15.

<sup>156</sup> See Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 482-483.

This last point seems to be supported by the treatment of the most obvious and immediate infraction of both prohibitions, i.e., the golden calf. Although Aaron makes one calf he nevertheless cries out:

4 אלה אלהיך ישראל אשר העלוך מארץ מצרים

“4 Behold your gods O Israel, who brought you out of Egypt.”<sup>157</sup>

At the foot of the mountain where the prohibitions were received, Israel worshiped a single idol which was referred to in the plural as “the gods who brought you out of Egypt.” Scholars have frequently explained this apparent incongruity as a direct reference to Jeroboam’s two golden calves. For example, Johnstone writes, “The odd plural ‘gods,’ given that there was only one golden calf in the exodus narrative, is a deliberate cross-reference to the DtrH account of the golden calves set up by Jeroboam I at Bethel and Dan.”<sup>158</sup> Whether or not interpreters find this explanation persuasive, this example seems to demonstrate that the plural pronouns of the prohibition could very well have referred to the singular idol as well as the

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<sup>157</sup> Exod. 32:4. Cf. 32:8; 1 Kgs. 12:28. On the plural of majesty see Khan, *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics* (vol. 3 P-Z; Leiden: Brill, 2013), 145-146; Waltke and O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 122-124 and Jouon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 150 point 5, 553.

<sup>158</sup> Johnstone, *Exodus*, 79 Cf. Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, 55-56; Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 445; Gray, *I & II Kings: A Commentary* (London: SCM, 1970), 316; Curtis, “Some Observations on ‘Bull’ Terminology in the Ugaritic Texts and the Old Testament,” *OTS* 26 (1990): 21. However, for the argument that the use of the cultic formula, “Behold, your gods who brought you up out of Egypt” preserved in Exod 32:4b and 1 Kgs. 12:28 did not stem from the interdependence of the two texts, or from the preference of one over the other, as some scholars claim, but rather from the same cultic background, see Chung, *The Sin of the Calf*, 54-206. Also note the objections presented by Bailey, “The Golden Calf,” *HUCA* 42 (1971): 97. In particular, both Chung and Bailey refer back to Buber who points out that the plural is no more appropriate for Jeroboam than Aaron because only a single calf would have been at Bethel when Jeroboam spoke. Buber, *Moses* (Oxford: East and West Library, 1947), 148. Finally, on the relationship between Aaron’s calf and Jeroboam’s calves, see Bailey, “The Golden Calf,” 97, footnote 2; Aberbach and Smolar, “Aaron, Jeroboam, and the Golden Calves,” *JBL* 86, no. 2 (1967): 86; Fritz and Hagedorn, *I & 2 Kings* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 147.

plural “other gods” in the same way that the plural form of the verb refers to the singular calf.<sup>159</sup>

These three objections argue against the idea that the plural pronouns cannot refer back to the implied idols. Therefore the case that the command not to “bow down to them or worship them” not only refers back to the plural “other gods” but also to the implied idols can be summarized in this way: On the one hand, Zimmerli’s point that the plural pronouns refer back to the plural “other gods” has received general consensus for the reasons outlined in section 2.3. Moreover, the combination of “to bow down and serve” refers directly to “other gods” in the great majority of its occurrences and this provides grounds to argue that it is also referring to “other gods” in the prohibition. Therefore Israel is commanded not to bow down and worship “other gods.” On the other hand, the pronouns can also refer back to the implied idols because (1) the Exodus version provides a plural antecedent within the prohibition of idols, (2) references to “bowing down” before idols or “worshipping” idols are not uncommon, and (3) divine images are “gods” made by human hands and therefore to prohibit “other gods” is to prohibit divine images. For all these reasons, it could be argued that the prohibition which commands Israel not to bow down and worship applies to both the “other gods” and the implied idols.

## **2.6 Implications**

How then, might this approach to the grammatical ambiguity affect an interpreter’s understanding of the relationship between the prohibitions? On the one hand,

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<sup>159</sup> Also note Gen. 20:13; 35:7, and 2 Sam. 7:23 where the plural verb is used to refer to YHWH. I will address these constructions in section 4.3.

interpreters who argue that the plural pronouns refer back to both the plural “other gods” as well as the implied idols may find little reason to distinguish between the prohibitions. According to this perspective, Israel is commanded not to bow down and worship other gods, *which are* idols (as Weinfeld has argued). On the other hand, it is possible to affirm that Israel is commanded not to worship either “other gods” or “idols” while maintaining a distinction between the two. This position is reflected in Miller’s comments when he deals with the question of what the plural pronouns refer back to. He writes,

“The immediate context indicating ‘them’ refers to the manufactured idols, but also includes the ‘other gods’ (which, syntactically, is the only plural antecedent to which ‘them’ of ‘you shall not serve them’ can refer). This conjoining of a prohibition against the making of idols with an expression that nearly always refers not just to idols but also to ‘other gods’ –you shall not bow down to them or serve them—is one of the primary reasons for seeing the First and Second Commandments as inextricably one directive with two foci: against the worship of other gods and against the making and worshipping of images of any god.”<sup>160</sup>

Therefore, while a number of interpreters conclude that Israel is commanded not to worship any “other gods” or any “idols,” a distinction may nevertheless be maintained between the prohibitions.

## **2.7 How Then Shall we Approach the Grammatical Ambiguity?**

Each of these three approaches to the grammatical ambiguity reflects certain exegetical interests. Zimmerli wrestles with the grammatical incongruity and looks for an explanation in textual pre-history. Weinfeld points to the close relationship between “other gods” and “idols” within the wider Old Testament context and rejects Zimmerli’s conclusions. Depending on the method, aim and scope of their study,

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<sup>160</sup> Miller, “The Story of the First Commandment: The Book of Exodus,” 68-69.



interpreters may at times be interested in what a text *meant* (possibly at some pre-textual stage) and at other times interested in what a text *came to mean* within the context of the canon or subsequent tradition.<sup>161</sup> These differing approaches at times produce readings that genuinely contradict one another and at other times produce readings that merely appear to do so. This is particularly relevant in light of Zimmerli's suggestion that the relationship between the prohibitions may have changed over time.

For the purposes of considering the meaning of the construction within the context of the received text (which is my interest within this work), I find the third position which sees the prohibition not to “bow down to *them* or worship *them*” referring to both the “other gods” and the implied idols to be the most persuasive reading of the text. For all the reasons cited in regard to the first position, I would certainly argue that the plural pronouns refer to the implied idols in the present construction. However, Zimmerli's point that the phrase, “bow down and serve” is overwhelmingly used within the wider Old Testament context to refer to “other gods” matched with his point that the plural pronouns grammatically agree with the plural “other gods” suggest to me that there is also reasonable justification to conclude that Israel is here commanded not to worship “other gods.” Moreover, because the prohibition of idols does not merely refer to “images” but to *divine* images, the command that Israel should not worship “idols” is a command not to worship other gods. Therefore, along with Tigay and others, I would argue that the

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<sup>161</sup> On the interaction of differing approaches see Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 237-246.

command not to “bow down to them or serve them” refers to the “various types of idols mentioned in verse 8 *and* the gods mentioned in verse 7.”<sup>162</sup>

For all the reasons cited in section 2.5, I do not find Zimmerli’s point that the plural pronouns *cannot* refer to the singular “idol” to be persuasive. I realize that Zimmerli’s argument should be taken on its own terms and that his brief article focused on a proposed pre-history of the text. However, using his conclusion to determine the “meaning” of the present construction in the MT appears to me to be holding the text to a certain level of grammatical precision which ultimately results in a poorer reading within the text’s wider Old Testament context. Within this context, to prohibit the worship of other gods is to prohibit the worship of gods made by human hands. To argue that the text prohibits the one but not the other is problematic.

While some interpreters who take this third approach to the grammatical ambiguity find reason to merge the prohibitions into a single commandment, I would nevertheless maintain a distinction between the two. Like Miller, I see the prohibitions as “one directive with two foci: against the worship of other gods and against the making and worshipping of images of any god.”<sup>163</sup>

## **2.8 The Grammatical Ambiguity in a Wider Context**

The grammatical ambiguity present in the relationship between the prohibitions has no direct equivalent in terms of the relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols within the wider Old Testament context. However, the

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<sup>162</sup> Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 65.

<sup>163</sup> Miller, “The Story of the First Commandment: The Book of Exodus,” 68-69.

issues that have led interpreters to differing positions in response to the grammatical ambiguity are surely involved in the wider ambiguity. For example, Zimmerli affirmed that the plural pronouns *cannot* refer to the singular “idol” but must instead refer to the plural “other gods.” Weinfeld objected to this arguing that, “There is no justification for the distinction between the gods and their representatives, the idols.”<sup>164</sup>

Whether Weinfeld is judged to have followed the line of Zimmerli’s argument well or not,<sup>165</sup> his statement finds ample support in numerous texts which attack the worship of gods made by human hands. This line of polemic within the Old Testament treats the worship of other gods and the worship of idols as a single issue. A few examples will demonstrate the point. In Deut. 4:28, Israel is told that if they forget the covenant they will be scattered among the nations where they will “serve other gods made by human hands, objects of wood and stone that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell.”<sup>166</sup> According to the logic of the text, there is no reason to distinguish between serving foreign gods and serving wood and stone. To serve the one is to serve the other.

In the same way, in 1 Sam. 5 we hear of the Philistine god Dagon. However, we only hear of the god in terms of the statue associated with him. For example, in verse 4 we read,

4 וישכמו בבקר ממחרת והנה דגון נפל לפניו ארצה לפני ארון יהוה וראש דגון ושתי כפות ידיו  
כרתות אל המפתן רק דגון נשאר עליו

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<sup>164</sup> Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 291.

<sup>165</sup> Zimmerli begins with a grammatical point and offers a theory regarding the compositional pre-history of the text. Weinfeld responds with an argument based upon a view of the relationship between deities and divine images that he sees in the treatment of the two within the Old Testament.

<sup>166</sup> Deut. 4:28. Cf. Deut. 28:36, 64; 29:15; 2 Kgs. 19:18; 2 Chr. 32:19; Ps. 115. 3-7; 135:15-18; Isa. 2:7; 37:19; Ezek. 20:32; Dan. 5:1-4, 23; Hab. 2:19.

“4 When they rose early on the next morning, Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the Lord, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off upon the threshold; only the trunk of Dagon was left to him.”

To speak of the god was to speak of the statue. Again, to introduce a distinction

between the two would be foreign to the logic of the text.<sup>167</sup>

Finally, in Isaiah 44 we read,

10 מי יצר אל ופסל נסך לבלתי הועיל...  
13 חרש עצים נטה קו יתארהו בשרד יעשהו במקצעות...  
14 לכרת לו ארזים ויקח תרזה ואלון...  
15 והיה לאדם לבער ויקח מהם ויחם אף ישיק ואפה לחם אף יפעל אל וישתחו עשהו פסל  
ויסגד למו

“10 Who would fashion a god or cast an image that can do no good?...13 The carpenter stretches a line, marks it out with a stylus, fashions it with planes...14 He cuts down cedars or chooses a holm tree or an oak...15 Part of it he takes and warns himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Then he makes a god and worships it, makes it a carved image and bows down before it.”<sup>168</sup>

This text seems to suggest that the “god” is nothing less and nothing more than the block of wood that the carpenter shapes and bows before. Once again, no distinction is made between deity and divine image. As Carroll has argued, “Insofar as there is any argument in the polemics it lies in the assertion that there is an *equivalence* between deity and image.”<sup>169</sup>

Now before moving on to consider texts which deal with the issues individually, a point should be made in regard to the difference between the presentation of the relationship between deity and image in the Old Testament polemics which unite the issues and the perception of the relationship between deity and image in the eyes of those who made use of divine images in worship. It is often

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<sup>167</sup> Of course it could be assumed that this passage implies the reality of both existence of Dagon and the effectiveness of the divine image. Nevertheless, whether this is assumed or not, there is little reason to distinguish between alien deity and divine image according to the logic of the text.

<sup>168</sup> Isa. 44:10, 13-15. Cf. Isa. 2:8; 17:8; 31:7; 37:19; 44; Jer. 1.16; 10:2-5, 9; 25:6, 7, 14; 32:30.

<sup>169</sup> Carroll, “Aniconic God and the cult of images,” 53, italics mine.

pointed out that these polemics either naively misunderstand<sup>170</sup> or knowingly reject<sup>171</sup> nuanced conceptions of the relationship between deity and divine image. Many have previously noted that in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and other parts of the ancient Near East, images often went through ceremonies which were meant to quicken them so that the presence of the deity in the divine image was regarded as real.<sup>172</sup> Nevertheless, as Tigay and others have pointed out, “The god was not present in the statue before the quickening ceremony and it might abandon the statue at will.”<sup>173</sup> It is therefore unlikely that divine images were understood by those who made use of them as the embodiments of the deities in totality.<sup>174</sup> Jacobsen summarizes the ambiguity of the Mesopotamian conception of the relationship between deity and divine image when he writes,

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<sup>170</sup> E.g. Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile* (trans. Greenberg; London: Allen & Unwin, 1961), 3, 7, 11-12; Carroll, “Aniconic God and the cult of images,” 52-53; Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 53; Greenspahn, “Syncretism and idolatry in the Bible,” 483-485; Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 288-298. Cf. Hoffman, “The Concept of ‘Other Gods’ in the Deuteronomistic Literature,” in *Politics and Theopolitics in the Bible and Postbiblical Literature*, (ed. Reventlow; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 68.

<sup>171</sup> E.g. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 116; Schmidt, “The Aniconic Tradition,” 90; Faur, “The Biblical Idea of Idolatry,” 4; Greenberg, “The Decalogue Tradition Critically Examined,” 101.

<sup>172</sup> On the opening and washing of the mouth rituals see Berlejung, “Washing the Mouth: The Consecration of Divine Images in Mesopotamia,” in *The Image and the Book*, (CBET; Leuven: Peeters, 1997); Jacobsen, “The Graven Image,” 15-32; Greenspahn, “Syncretism and idolatry in the Bible,” 481-485; Walker and Dick, “The Induction of the Cult Image,” 55-121; Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, 21-22, 47; Berlejung, *Die Theologie der Bilder: Herstellung und Einweihung von Kultbildern in Mesopotamien und die alttestamentliche Bildpolemik* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1998); Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 58; Blackman, “The Rite of Opening the Mouth in Ancient Egypt and Babylonia,” *JEA* 10, no. 1 (1924); Weeks, “Man-Made Gods? Idolatry in the Old Testament,” in *Idolatry: False Worship in the Bible, Early Judaism, and Christianity*, (ed. Barton; London: T&T Clark, 2007), 8; Rudman, “The Theology of the Idol Fabrication Passages in Second Isaiah,” *OTE* 12 (1999): 118-119; Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 57, footnote 109; Winter, “‘Idols of the King,’” 13; Oppenheim and Reiner, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 183-193; Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 302-306; Bevan, *Holy Images: An Inquiry into Idolatry and Image-worship in Ancient Paganism and in Christianity: Four Lectures Given on Lord Gifford’s Foundation for the University of Edinburgh in 1933* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1940), 13-45.

<sup>173</sup> Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 53. Though see Hurowitz, “What Goes in is What Comes Out,” 3-23. Hurowitz argues that the divinity of the material exists before the divine image is made.

<sup>174</sup> Weeks, “Man-Made Gods?,” 9-10; Barton, “‘The Work of Human Hands,’” 67.

“The evidence for identity of god and cult statue in the minds of the ancient Mesopotamians seems clear and consistent...Unfortunately, however, equally clear and consistent evidence can be quoted to show that to the ancients god and cult statue were two different and quite separate things...The evidence is thus clearly contradictory: the god *is* and at the same time *is not* the cult statue.”<sup>175</sup>

This nuanced perspective, however, is generally unrecognized by the texts of the Old Testament. According to the examples I have presented, to serve a foreign god was to serve a block of wood or stone.<sup>176</sup> In other words, regardless of the way in which the nations conceived the relationship between deity and divine image, the biblical polemics condemn divine images as “fetishes,” i.e., material objects which are held to be gods or more broadly, any object to which people attribute powers that they do not have.<sup>177</sup> Nevertheless, whether these polemics are considered naïve or otherwise, they are provided here only to demonstrate that there is a line of polemic within the Old Testament which strongly supports Weinfeld’s claim that (from the biblical perspective), “There is no justification for the distinction between the gods and their representatives, the idols.”

Nevertheless, the Old Testament is perfectly comfortable dealing with the issues individually as well. In other words, while the polemics which refer to other gods as the work of human hands unite the issues, not all texts follow suit (or at the very least, many texts do nothing to draw a connection between the two). For example, in the last chapter I considered the narrative of Elijah’s confrontation with the prophets of Baal in 1 Kgs. 18. The text clearly deals with the worship of Baal in

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<sup>175</sup> Jacobsen, “The Graven Image,” 16-18. Cf. Hallo, “Cult Statue and Divine Image: A Preliminary Study,” in *Scripture in Context II: More Essays on the Comparative Method*, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 11-13; Dick, “The Mesopotamian Cult Statue,” 43-67.

<sup>176</sup> Barton, “‘The Work of Human Hands’,” 67; Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 39.

<sup>177</sup> See Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 41-42; Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 53; Greenspahn, “Syncretism and idolatry in the Bible,” 485; Carroll, “Aniconic God and the cult of images,” 52-53; Greenberg, “The Decalogue Tradition Critically Examined,” 101. Kaufman defined fetishism as “the belief that divine and magical powers inhere in certain natural or man-made objects and that man can activate these powers through fixed rituals.” Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, 14.

Israel and describes the altar, sacrifice and cultic frenzy toward the god. However, there is no mention of a divine image. The passage has no particular “aniconic” concern at all but it is clearly concerned with “The worship of other gods.” In other words, the worship of other gods is dealt with as an issue in its own right and it would be reading too much into the text to assume an aniconic interest. The issues are not simply interchangeable.

Similarly, in Deut. 13 we read:

2 כי יקום בקרבך נביא או חלם חלום ונתן אליך אות או מופת  
3 ובא האות והמופת אשר דבר אליך לאמר נלכה אחרי אלהים אחרים אשר לא ידעתם ונעבדם  
4 לא תשמע אל דברי הנביא ההוא או אל חולם החלום...

“1 If prophets or those who divine by dreams appear among you and promise you omens or portents, 2 and the omens or the portents declared by them take place, and they say, ‘Let us follow other gods’ (whom you have not known) ‘and let us serve them,’ 3 you must not heed the words of those prophets or those who divine by dreams...”<sup>178</sup>

The chapter goes on to present a number of scenarios in which various groups and individuals may tempt Israel saying “Let us go and worship other gods.” For each case the appropriate course of action is outlined. However, nowhere in the varied warnings and instructions is there a word about divine images. Once again, these passages are not specifically concerned with “aniconism” but they are obviously concerned with “The worship of other gods” as an issue in its own right.<sup>179</sup>

To these two examples could be added numerous commands which generally relate to the worship of other gods. Israel is commanded not to “walk after” other gods,<sup>180</sup> not to “fear” other gods,<sup>181</sup> not to “mention” or “speak in the name of”<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Deut. 13:1-3. The Hebrew and English numbering of verses differ here.

<sup>179</sup> I would hold to this point despite the fact that Deut. 12 deals with the destruction of the divine images of Canaan. Chapter 13 is broadly warning against any who would tempt Israel to worship alien deities.

<sup>180</sup> E.g. Deut. 6:14; 8:19; 11:28.

<sup>181</sup> E.g. 2 Kgs. 17:35-38.

other gods, and not to “turn to”<sup>183</sup> or “go whoring after” other gods.<sup>184</sup> All of these commands demonstrate that the worship of other gods and the worship of divine images are not inseparable issues within the Old Testament despite their fusion in the polemics which attack other gods as “the work of human hands.” Although the subjects clearly overlap, they often do not and reading one concern into the other is often inappropriate.

Interpreters who primarily have in mind the idol polemics which attack the gods of the nations as the work of human hands are unlikely to see any significant distinction between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols within the Old Testament. Emphasizing a distinction between the two surely runs contrary to the logic of these texts. However, interpreters who hold these polemics in tension with texts such as Deut. 13, 1 Kgs. 18 or any of the numerous commands which deal with the worship of other gods but say nothing of divine images, are likely to see the worship of other gods as an issue in its own right which can be distinguished from the issue of the use of divine images. For this reason, they may find biblical warrant to distinguish between “apostasy”<sup>185</sup> on the one hand and “aniconism”<sup>186</sup> on the other. As Barton noted, “Worshipping gods other than Yahweh, and using images in worship, are essentially two different phenomena, not merely two different aspects of the same aberration.”<sup>187</sup> If the Old Testament *only* contained rhetoric which attacked other gods as the work of human hands or if it *only* contained distinct

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<sup>182</sup> E.g. Deut. 18:20.

<sup>183</sup> E.g. Deut. 31:18, 20.

<sup>184</sup> E.g. Judg. 2:17.

<sup>185</sup> Barton, “‘The Work of Human Hands’,” 65.

<sup>186</sup> Mettinger, *No Graven Image?*, 19; Berlejung, “Aniconism”; Barton, “‘The Work of Human Hands’,” 65.

<sup>187</sup> Barton, “‘The Work of Human Hands’,” 64, 67.



treatment of each of the issues, the relationship would be unambiguous. Because it contains both, the ambiguity remains.

This suggests to me that interpreters attempting to hear the whole must nevertheless recognize and maintain the difference of the parts. Interpreters whose studies touch upon “The worship of other gods” or “The worship of idols” within the Old Testament must be careful that they are not presenting a dominant voice as the *only* voice. Doing so would appear to me to be guilty of Barr’s “illegitimate totality transfer” on the level of larger linguistic complexes.<sup>188</sup>

For these reasons, I would make the fairly simple suggestion that the ambiguous relationship between the issues arises as a product of the variety of approaches taken towards the issues within the texts of the Old Testament. Any attempt to grapple with issues which span the breadth of the Old Testament are likely to be confronted with the juxtaposition of texts which approach the issues in different ways. In regard to the relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols within the Old Testament, the variety of approaches increases the ambiguity of the relationship because certain texts clearly join the issues while others treat them separately.

## **2.9 Chapter Summary**

In this chapter I have made the case that interpreters have come to differing conclusions about the relationship between the prohibitions because of a grammatical ambiguity present in the text. An interpreter’s decision regarding the proper antecedents for the Hebrew plural suffixes will directly affect how they

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<sup>188</sup> See Appendix 2.

understand the relationship between the prohibitions. I have argued that, in the MT, Israel is commanded not to bow down and worship both the other gods and/or the implied idols. Although the grammatical ambiguity involved in the relationship between the prohibitions has no direct equivalent in terms of the relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols within the Old Testament, the issues that led interpreters to differing positions on the grammatical ambiguity are clearly involved. While the polemics which attack the gods of the nations as the work of human hands fuse the issues, there are many texts which are concerned with the worship of other gods but have no concern for aniconism. From the perspective of the former, the issues are synonymous. In light of the latter, the issues are distinct. Therefore, the relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols within the Old Testament is difficult to define because some texts treat the worship of other gods and the worship of idols as a single issue, while others treat the issues individually. This is the second factor which makes the relationship difficult to define.

## THE THEOLOGICAL AMBIGUITY

*The close association between the prohibition of foreign gods and the prohibition of images...has added fuel to the fire of the continued debate whether the prohibition of images refers to images of Yahweh or to images of foreign gods.*

Walther Zimmerli<sup>1</sup>

*The worship of the true God in the form of an idol is accounted no less grave a sin than the worship of devils.*

John Milton<sup>2</sup>

The third difficulty in discussing the relationship between the prohibitions arises from a theological ambiguity. How an interpreter understands the relationship between the prohibitions depends on whether he or she sees the prohibition of idols standing against divine images of alien deities, divine images of YHWH, or against *all* divine images, whether they are associated with alien deities or YHWH himself. As Zimmerli noted nearly fifty years ago, the question of “which divine being did the prohibition of images represent?” has long been, and continues to be a point of scholarly debate.<sup>3</sup> His comment is no less relevant today. As Hutton has recently written, “A crux in the debate is whether these images are taken to be icons

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<sup>1</sup> Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline*, 119. Cf. Schmidt, *The Faith of the Old Testament: A History*, 78.

<sup>2</sup> Milton, *Christian Doctrine* (trans. Carey; vol. 6; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 2.5.24, 690-2.

<sup>3</sup> Stamm and Andrew, *The Ten Commandments in Recent Research*, 83.

representing YHWH, Israel's God, or icons of *other* deities in direct competition with the God of Israel.”<sup>4</sup>

How interpreters approach the theological ambiguity will affect their understanding of the relationship between the prohibitions. If interpreters see the idol prohibition standing against divine images of alien deities, they are likely to see a strong connection between the prohibitions. According to this perspective, Israel is not to worship other gods or the divine images associated with those gods. For example, Israel is neither to worship the Philistine god Dagon nor Dagon's image.<sup>5</sup> However, if interpreters see the idol prohibition standing against the worship of images of YHWH, then they are likely to find a significant distinction between the prohibitions. According to this perspective, the first prohibition stands against the worship of gods other than YHWH (such as Dagon) while the second prohibits the worship of YHWH via divine images. This perspective seems to suggest a difference between the worship of what could be called the “wrong gods” (i.e., alien deities and the divine images associated with them), and the worship of the right God in the wrong way (i.e., the worship of YHWH by means of divine images).<sup>6</sup> Finally, interpreters who see the idol prohibition standing against *all* divine images are likely to find a sense in which the prohibitions are tightly joined and a sense in which they are distinct. In that the prohibition of idols stands against the divine images of alien deities it represents something of an addendum to the prohibition of other gods. However, in that the prohibition also stands against the worship of images of YHWH, it represents a significantly different issue.

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<sup>4</sup> Hutton, “A Simple Matter of Numbering?,” 214.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Sam. 5.

<sup>6</sup> On this distinction, note McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 126; Holter, *Deuteronomy* 4, 112; Charles, *The Decalogue*, 15.

In this chapter, I consider each of these approaches to the theological ambiguity. In sections 3.1 and 3.2 I present the position that the prohibition of idols stands against divine images of alien deities. In sections 3.3 and 3.4 I present the position that it stands against divine images of YHWH. In sections 3.5 and 3.6 I present the position that it stands against *all* divine images, whether they are associated with alien deities or YHWH himself. Following the presentation of each position I consider how an interpreter's reading of the divine ambiguity is likely to influence the way in which the relationship between the prohibitions is understood. Having surveyed the differing ways that interpreters have historically attempted to deal with this ambiguity, in section 3.7 I present my own perspective. I argue that the prohibition (as it stands in the MT) is a rejection of *all* divine images and that this suggests a sense in which the prohibitions are tightly joined and a sense in which a significant distinction between the two remains. Particularly, as described above, there remains a distinction between the worship of the "wrong gods" and the worship of the "right God" in the wrong way. I then demonstrate how the theological ambiguity present in the relationship between the prohibitions is evident in the wider Old Testament context in section 3.8 and in the chapter summary in section 3.9 I present the third factor which makes the relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols within the Old Testament difficult to define.

### **3.1 You Shall Not Make for Yourself a Divine Image of an Alien Deity**

I begin by considering the perspective that the prohibition, "You shall not make for yourself an idol" means "You shall not make for yourself an idol *of an alien deity*." Seven points have been argued in support of this reading. The first has to do with

the fact that the prohibition of idols immediately follows the prohibition of other gods. This sequence suggests to some that it is the divine images of gods other than YHWH that are being prohibited. For example, concerning the relationship between the prohibitions, Houtman writes, “The one flows logically from the other; the prohibition to have other gods alongside of YHWH implies the prohibition to make images of other gods.”<sup>7</sup> Along these lines, Hutton paraphrases the version of the prohibitions in Deuteronomy as, “You shall have no other gods before me. [That is to say], you shall not make for yourself a cast image [of these gods].”<sup>8</sup> Therefore some interpreters argue that the sequence of the prohibitions suggests that divine images of alien deities are being referred to.

A second point could be made in connection with the various shapes which an idol may take. Israel is told not to make an idol “whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.”<sup>9</sup> This description appears to include, for example, the sun and stars, birds, cattle, creeping things, and fish. Some scholars argue that these forms are most likely to represent alien deities and not YHWH. For example, Nelson writes, “The initial apodictic prohibition (‘do not make an idol’) suggests at first that this ‘idol’ would be an image of Yahweh, but...the sentence develops into multiple potential shapes that, in the context of Deuteronomy, must be understood as idols of heathen deities.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Houtman, *Exodus, Vol. 3: Chapters 20-40*, 19.

<sup>8</sup> Hutton, “A Simple Matter of Numbering?,” 213-214. Cf. Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 44.

<sup>9</sup> Deut. 5:8b/Exod. 20:4b.

<sup>10</sup> Nelson, *Deuteronomy*, 80. Cf. Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, 49-50; Mayes, *Deuteronomy*, 153, 166; Holter, *Deuteronomy 4*, 46.

A third point has to do with the jealousy of YHWH. Following the command, “You shall not make for yourself an idol...” an explanation is provided: “For I the Lord your God am a jealous God.” In regard to this explanation, H. Th. Obbink raised the question, “how can Yahweh be jealous if Israel makes an image of him and bows down before this image of Yahweh? But if Israel shows the honour due to Yahweh to other gods, then Yahweh’s jealousy is stirred up. Since he cannot tolerate that his honour should be given to other gods.”<sup>11</sup> The idea here is that the jealousy of YHWH is best understood if the prohibition of idols is particularly a prohibition of divine images of *alien deities*.

A fourth point has to do with what some scholars see as an absence of divine images of YHWH within the Old Testament as a whole. Both Obbink and Pfeiffer have argued that there were no real representations of Yahweh in Israelite religion.<sup>12</sup> For example, Robert Pfeiffer, in his 1926 JBL article entitled “Images of YHWH”, writes: “The Old Testament, with its exhaustive denunciation of the worship of foreign gods and of idols (the first two of the ten commandments being correlative), contains no condemnation of images of Yahweh.”<sup>13</sup> While Gideon’s ephod,<sup>14</sup> the golden calves of Aaron and Jeroboam,<sup>15</sup> Micah’s image,<sup>16</sup> and the Bronze Serpent<sup>17</sup> could be suggested as representations of YHWH or images associated with the worship of YHWH, these scholars point out that the connections are not explicit. In

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<sup>11</sup> Obbink, “Jahwebilder,” ZAW 47 (1929): 265. For reviews of Obbink’s arguments, see Stamm and Andrew, *The Ten Commandments in Recent Research*, 83; Childs, *Exodus*, 406; Durham, *Exodus*, 285. These three reject his main point. However, for a defense of Obbink’s position note Houtman, *Exodus, Vol. 3: Chapters 20-40*, 21.

<sup>12</sup> Obbink, “Jahwebilder,” 264-274; Pfeiffer, “Images of Yahweh,” JBL 45, no. 3-4 (1926): 211-222.

<sup>13</sup> Pfeiffer, “Images of Yahweh,” 220.

<sup>14</sup> Judg. 8:22-28.

<sup>15</sup> Exod. 32, Deut. 9, 1 Kgs. 12.

<sup>16</sup> Judg. 17-18.

<sup>17</sup> 2 Kgs. 18.

contrast, explicit references to divine images of alien deities are ubiquitously found within the Old Testament.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, within this broader context, it could be argued that the prohibition of idols is best understood as a prohibition against the worship of divine images of alien deities.

A fifth point may be drawn from Zimmerli's study of the second commandment.<sup>19</sup> Zimmerli pointed out that the specific combination of the verbs "bow down and worship" is never used to refer to YHWH or an image of YHWH. As mentioned in chapter two, the phrase is overwhelmingly used within the Old Testament to refer to "other gods." Interpreters who would argue that prohibiting "other gods" includes prohibiting "idols" might find in this "non-Yahwistic" usage of the phrase "Bow down and worship" a fifth reason to assume that the idols being prohibited are divine images of "other gods." Because occurrences of the phrase outside of the context of the commandments never refer to an image of YHWH, it is unlikely to have referred to an image of YHWH in the prohibition of idols.

A sixth point also arises in connection with Zimmerli's argument. If Zimmerli's theory of redaction is accepted, it could be argued that the redactor who added the phrase, "You shall not bow down to them or worship them," saw the prohibitions of idols as an elaboration or concretization of the prohibition of other gods and therefore as a prohibition of the divine images of those "other gods."<sup>20</sup> Along these lines, Tatum writes, "Consequently, the *scope* of the Second Commandment—as defined by traditional Judaism and confirmed by the critical analysis of Zimmerli—indicates that what Yahweh prohibits is 'a sculptured image' or 'likeness' of 'other gods.'" Whatever the original form and meaning of the

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<sup>18</sup> E.g. Deut. 29:17-18, 2 Sam. 5, Isa. 46.

<sup>19</sup> Zimmerli, "Das Zweite Gebot," 553-554.

<sup>20</sup> Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 288.



prohibition against images, therefore, it has been interpreted in the MT of the Second Commandment as not universally anti-iconic but as anti-idolic—as not against all images but as against images representative of alien deities.”<sup>21</sup>

A seventh and final point may be made in connection with the Deuteronomic version of the Ten Commandments. As described in the introduction to chapter one, the Deuteronomic version uses one verb to command Israel not to “desire” (חמד) their neighbour’s wife and another verb to command Israel not to “covet” (ארה) their neighbour’s house and property. If this is taken to indicate separate commandments (as in the Catholic and Lutheran traditions), then there would be eight commandments left instead of nine.<sup>22</sup> It could therefore be argued that the merging of the prohibitions is the most reasonable way to arrive at the count of ten and that this was possible if the prohibition of idols was understood as a prohibition of divine images of alien deities.

Therefore, to summarize the points in favour of this first approach to the theological ambiguity: It could be argued that the prohibition, “You shall not make for yourself an idol” means “You shall not make for yourself an idol *of an alien deity*” because (1) The sequence in which the prohibition of idols follows the prohibition of other gods suggests that the idols of concern are the divine images of “other gods,” i.e., alien deities. (2) The various forms an idol may take are unlikely to represent YHWH. (3) It makes the most sense of YHWH’s jealousy (4) There are no real representations of YHWH in Israelite religion within the Old Testament but

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<sup>21</sup> Tatum, “The LXX Version of the Second Commandment ” 180-181. Cf. Houtman, *Exodus, Vol. 3: Chapters 20-40*, 21; Preuss, “חזה, *hwh*,” 254.

<sup>22</sup> This seems to be the way that the Masoretes understood these prohibitions in Deut. The Masoretic notation in Deuteronomy includes a break (a setumah) after the command not to desire the wife and before the command not to covet the house or property. On this see Hutton, “A Simple Matter of Numbering?,” 212.

the hand-made gods of the nations are ubiquitously criticized. (5) The phrase “Bow down and worship” is never used of YHWH or images of YHWH, (6) If Zimmerli’s theory of redaction is accepted, then the redactor saw the prohibition of idols as an elaboration of the prohibition of other gods and therefore a prohibition of the divine images of alien deities. And (7) The separation of the coveting command in Deuteronomy points toward the merger of the prohibitions and this is most reasonable if the idol prohibition is concerned with the divine images of “other gods.”

### **3.2 Implications**

Interpreters who conclude that the prohibition of idols is best understood as a prohibition of divine images of alien deities are likely to find a tight connection between it and the prohibition of other gods which precedes it. The first stands against the worship of, for example, the Philistine god Dagon, and the second stands against the worship of an image of Dagon. It could be argued that the Old Testament as a whole makes little distinction between the two and there is therefore little reason to distinguish between the prohibitions within the context of the commandments. According to this position, the prohibition of idols simply extends the prohibition of other gods. Such a reading favours an enumeration of the Ten Commandments which merge the prohibitions into a single commandment. Again, I do not rehearse these points because I agree with this position but simply in order to present one way that the theological ambiguity might be approached.

### 3.3 You Shall Not Make for Yourself a Divine Image of YHWH

However, other interpreters argue that the prohibition, “You shall not make for yourself an idol” means (or at one point meant) “You shall not make for yourself an idol of *YHWH*.” To cite one of many examples, von Rad writes, “The image implied in the commandment was certainly an image of Jahweh, and not one of an alien or foreign deity...”<sup>23</sup> Five points can be made in support of this approach toward the divine ambiguity.

In the first, just as some scholars argue that the sequence of the prohibitions points to divine images of alien deities, others argue that the sequence points to divine images of YHWH. For example, Noth writes, “As the strict prohibition of other gods has already been expressed previously, the prohibition of images is hardly concerned with the images of strange gods but with any images which might possibly be made for the legitimate worship of Israel.”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Clements writes, “Since the first command excludes the worship of any other deity, the implication is that such an image would be a symbol of the LORD, the God of Israel.”<sup>25</sup> And finally, Durham suggests, “A paraphrase of the commandment might even be, ‘Not a one of you is to have a shaped image for the worship of Yahweh.’”<sup>26</sup> Therefore we first note that a number of scholars find that the sequence of the prohibitions points to divine images of YHWH because all “other gods” have already been forbidden by the previous prohibition.

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<sup>23</sup> von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 215. Cf. Chung, *The Sin of the Calf*, 188; von Rad, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (trans. Barton; London: SCM, 1966), 49; Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 48.

<sup>24</sup> Noth, *Exodus*, 162-163.

<sup>25</sup> Clements, *Deuteronomy* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989), 123. Clements is commenting on the prohibition of idols in Exod. 20:4. Cf. Childs, *Exodus*, 406; Durham, *Exodus*, 285; Rowley, “Moses and the Decalogue,” in *Men Of God: Studies in Old Testament History and Prophecy*, (London: Nelson, 1963), 22; von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 213-216.

<sup>26</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, 286.

The second point has to do with Obbink's argument that there were no real representations of YHWH in Israelite religion.<sup>27</sup> A number of scholars have strongly argued against Obbink's conclusions. For example, Stamm writes, "[Obbink's] thesis must finally be rejected, for two reasons in particular [of which I will only cite one]. First, the existence of images of Yahweh in Israelite popular religion cannot be contested. The main proof of this is the image of Micah, which, according to the context of the passage, cannot be understood as an idol image, even though it may have appeared as such to a later age..."<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Childs writes, "The reasons against Obbink's thesis appear quite decisive... The general picture of pre-monarchical Hebrew religion seems to confirm the judgment that images of Yahweh were forbidden, even though contraventions are recorded."<sup>29</sup> Therefore, contrary to Obbink, some scholars argue that the existence of images of YHWH within the Old Testament cannot be contested. If so, then the prohibition of idols does not necessarily deal with divine images of alien deities but may stand against divine images of YHWH.

Thirdly, the fullest rationale for the prohibition of idols that the Old Testament provides suggests that divine images of the God of Israel are the primary concern.<sup>30</sup> In Deut. 4 Israel is called to remember that on the day they received the commandments, they heard the voice of YHWH but saw no form. For this reason they are not to make an idol. This seems to suggest that Israel is not to make an

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<sup>27</sup> Obbink, "Jahwebilder," 265.

<sup>28</sup> Stamm and Andrew, *The Ten Commandments in Recent Research*, 83. On the treatment of Micah's "Idol" within the DtrH, see Hutton, "A Simple Matter of Numbering?," 214. However, of its 54 occurrences, פסל appears 8x referring to Micah's "idol."

<sup>29</sup> Childs, *Exodus*, 406.

<sup>30</sup> On Deut. 4 as an explanation of the prohibition of idols see for example Holter, *Deuteronomy 4*, 112; McConville and Millar, *Time and Place in Deuteronomy* (179; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 134-136; McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 107-108. Also see section 4.2.3 where I will deal with this passage in further detail.

image of YHWH because they did not see YHWH's form when he spoke.<sup>31</sup> As Tigay notes, "Since the immediate context does not refer to other gods, the prohibition must refer to images representing YHWH or members of His retinue."<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Hutton writes, "Taken this way, logic demands that idols were understood to be images of YHWH..."<sup>33</sup> Therefore, the Old Testament rejects the worship of YHWH by means of divine images and Deut. 4's rationale focuses upon this issue.<sup>34</sup>

A fourth point has to do with assumptions regarding the relationship between the prohibition of idols and the statements which follow it. In the MT, the prohibition is first followed by the command not to "bow down to them or worship them" and then by the statement, "For I the Lord your God am a jealous God". Zimmerli pointed out that the phrase, "bow down and worship" is never used in reference to YHWH or images of YHWH<sup>35</sup> and Obbink argued that the jealousy of YHWH would not make sense unless the divine images of alien deities were intended.<sup>36</sup> Both of these points seem to argue against the idea that divine images of YHWH are intended in the form of the text we now have. However, as pointed out in section 2.3, Zimmerli's argument suggests that the relationship between the prohibitions has changed over time. Subsequent redaction drew the prohibition of idols under the shadow of the prohibition of other gods. Therefore, some interpreters

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<sup>31</sup> The same logic is presented more concisely in Exod. 20:22-23: "22 The LORD said to Moses: Thus you shall say to the Israelites: 'You have seen for yourselves that I spoke with you from heaven. 23 You shall not make for yourselves gods of silver alongside me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold.'"

<sup>32</sup> Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 48. Cf. Barton, "'The Work of Human Hands,'" 65-66.

<sup>33</sup> Hutton, "A Simple Matter of Numbering?," 214. Cf. Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, 49-50; Curtis, "The Theological Basis for the Prohibition of Images," 283-284; Schmidt, "The Aniconic Tradition," 84-85.

<sup>34</sup> Though note the objection in Houtman, *Exodus, Vol. 3: Chapters 20-40*, 20.

<sup>35</sup> Zimmerli, "Das Zweite Gebot," 554. Though note the individual uses of each of the verbs: While *חזה* occurs 36x referring to the worship of "other" or "foreign" gods it refers to the worship of Yhwh 46x. While *עבד* occurs 43x referring to serving 'other' or 'foreign' gods, it refers to serving Yhwh 42x. See section 3.5.

<sup>36</sup> Obbink, "Jahwebilder," 265.

who agree with Zimmerli's point about the redaction of the text nevertheless argue that the idol prohibition *originally* had to do with images of YHWH.<sup>37</sup> In other words, the fact that the command not to “bow down or worship” is never used in reference to the God of Israel does not mean that the original object of the prohibition must have been divine images of alien deities. Along these lines, both Stamm and Childs rejected Obbink's point regarding YHWH's jealousy.<sup>38</sup> Following Zimmerli, Childs points out that the statement of YHWH's jealousy does not refer to the singular “idol” but to the “other gods” of the previous verse. He then writes, “The fact that the jealousy of God refers to strange gods does not touch on the original meaning of ‘image.’”<sup>39</sup> In other words, Childs argues that the original prohibition of idols was directed against divine images of YHWH and the subsequent redaction which drew it under the shadow of the prohibition of other gods does not alter that original intention. Therefore interpreters may agree that the redaction of the text *now* suggests that the prohibition of idols is concerned with divine images of alien deities while maintaining that this was not its original intention.

A fifth and final point may be made in regard to the version of the commandments in Exodus. Unlike Deuteronomy, the coveting command in the Exodus version uses only one verb (חָמַד). If this is taken to indicate a single commandment (as in the Protestant Reformed and Jewish tradition and probably indicated by the absence of the *setumah* in Exodus), then there would be nine

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<sup>37</sup> E.g. Nelson, *Deuteronomy*, 80; Childs, *Exodus: A Commentary* (London: SCM, 1974), 406-406; von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 215-216.

<sup>38</sup> Stamm and Andrew, *The Ten Commandments in Recent Research*, 83; Childs, *Exodus*, 406. Cf. Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 65; Nielsen, *The Ten Commandments in New Perspective: A Traditional-Historical Approach*, 96.

<sup>39</sup> Childs, *Exodus*, 406. Though again, see Houtman, *Exodus, Vol. 3: Chapters 20-40*, 21.

commandments left instead of eight. It could be argued that the distinction between the prohibitions is the most reasonable way to arrive at the count of ten and that this suggests that the prohibition of idols was understood as a prohibition of divine images of YHWH.

Therefore, to summarize the points in favour of this second approach to the theological ambiguity: It could be argued that the prohibition, “You shall not make for yourself an idol” means (or at one point meant) “You shall not make for yourself an idol *of YHWH*” because: (1) The sequence first prohibits all “other gods” which would include the divine images associated with them and therefore when it goes on to speak of “idols,” it is referring to divine images of Israel’s God, YHWH. (2) The Old Testament rejects divine images of YHWH. Therefore, once all “other gods” are forbidden by the first prohibition, the prohibition of idols is most likely referring to divine images of Israel’s God. (3) Deut. 4, the clearest rationale for the prohibition of idols, suggests that it is concerned with divine images of YHWH. (4) Although the present construction in the MT does not emphasize the point, the original intention of the prohibition was concerned with divine images of the God of Israel. And finally, (5) The single verb in the coveting commandment found in Exodus points toward a distinction between the prohibitions and this distinction is most reasonable if the prohibition of idols is understood as a prohibition of divine images of YHWH.

### **3.4 Implications**

Interpreters who understand the prohibition, “You shall not make for yourself an idol” to mean, “You shall not make for yourself an idol *of YHWH*” are likely to find

a significant distinction between the prohibition of “other gods” and the prohibition of “idols.” According to this perspective, the first forbids the worship of the “wrong gods” (i.e., alien deities and their divine images), and the second forbids the worship of the right God in the wrong way (i.e., the worship of YHWH by means of images—whether the image represents YHWH directly or is conceived as a pedestal upon which YHWH is to be worshiped). As Charles puts it, “The second [commandment] forbids the worship of the true God in a wrong way, that is, by means of images or the likeness of anything in heaven or earth.”<sup>40</sup> Practically speaking, the first stands against the worship of gods like Dagon, Chemosh, or Bel and the images associated with those gods, while the second stands against the worship of YHWH by means of divine images. Interpreters who understand the prohibition of idols in this way are unlikely to see it merely as an addendum to the prohibition of other gods. Instead, it represents a significantly different concern. Such a reading favours an enumeration of the Ten Commandments which sees the prohibitions as separate commandments.

### **3.5 You Shall Not Make for Yourself a Divine Image.**

While some interpreters understand the prohibition of idols as a prohibition of divine images of *alien deities* and others see it as a prohibition of divine images of *YHWH*, it could also be understood as a prohibition of *all* divine images, whether they are

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<sup>40</sup> Charles, *The Decalogue*, 15. Charles is of course drawing on a long tradition. In addition to Calvin, *Inst*, 1.12.1 and the epigram noting Milton in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, see also Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (vol. 3; London: James Clark & Co, 1872 Reprint 1960), 291, 290-304. Hodge writes, “Idolatry consists not only in the worship of false gods, but also in the worship of the true God by images.” More recently, see McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 126; Carroll, “Aniconic God and the cult of images,” 51; Hallo, “Cult Statue and Divine Image,” 2. For a popular presentation see Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 47.



associated with alien deities or with YHWH himself. Miller presents this position neatly when he writes, “The question inherent in the commandment is images of what? The answer to that is twofold: images of the Lord, and images or representations of other gods.”<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Carroll writes, “The cultic directions of the decalogue outlawed foreign gods and their icons and icons of the Israelite god.”<sup>42</sup> In addition to the arguments mentioned above, a number of points may be made in support of the idea that the prohibition stands against all divine images.

In the first, it could be argued that the prohibition of idols stands against all divine images because, while reasonable arguments can be made for either one, neither can be ruled out. The text does not go so far as to say, “You shall not make for yourself an idol *of an alien deity*” or “...*of YHWH*.” It simply says, “You shall not make for yourself an idol.” In other words, the prohibition is comprehensive and inclusive rather than specific.<sup>43</sup> As Weinfeld noted, the non-specific phrasing of the prohibition “perfectly suits the categorical nature of the commandments of the Decalogue.”<sup>44</sup> This categorical nature argues against the idea that either type is left unaddressed. As Greenberg puts it, “What is prohibited is the making of images of the Deity. No distinction is made between the Israelite God and pagan gods.”<sup>45</sup> Along the same lines, Dozeman writes, “The second command does not clarify whether the prohibition against idols is aimed at images of Yahweh, of rival deities,

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<sup>41</sup> Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, 49. Cf. Driver, *Deuteronomy*, XXV.

<sup>42</sup> Carroll, “Aniconic God and the cult of images,” 51.

<sup>43</sup> Dozeman, *Exodus*, 482.

<sup>44</sup> Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 291. Cf. Dohmen, “פֶּסֶל, *pesel*,” 35.

<sup>45</sup> Greenberg, “The Decalogue Tradition Critically Examined,” 100 Cf. Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 65.

or both.”<sup>46</sup> Therefore I first note that the idol prohibition may be assumed to stand against all divine images because neither type of image can be ruled out.

This first point affects a number of the points made in defense of the approaches previously mentioned. In sections 3.1 to 3.4 I pointed out that scholars on both sides used the sequence of the prohibitions to make their point. However, as the conflicting deductions demonstrate, the significance of the sequence can be interpreted in different ways and it is difficult to rule out either the one or the other. I also noted that the version of the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy may be used to support the rationality of merging the prohibitions but that the version in Exodus may be used to support the rationality of distinguishing between them.<sup>47</sup> Interpreters who recognize these differences and yet also attempt to make sense of *both versions* may lean away from conclusions that appear to ignore the one or the other. Finally, I noted that some scholars point to the various forms that a divine image may take as evidence that the prohibition is concerned with divine images of alien deities.<sup>48</sup> However, it could just as easily be supposed that the text mentions the various shapes in order to tell Israel that they are not to worship YHWH in the way that the nations worship their gods.<sup>49</sup> For all of these reasons, I would again suggest that it is difficult to definitively rule out either one or the other. It could be argued that this difficulty is further evidence that the comprehensive prohibition of idols stands against both types of images.

Secondly, it could be argued that the prohibition of idols is best understood as standing against all divine images because both types are “other gods.” In section

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<sup>46</sup> Dozeman, *Exodus*, 482.

<sup>47</sup> On this see Hutton, “A Simple Matter of Numbering?,” 212-213.

<sup>48</sup> Nelson, *Deuteronomy*, 80.

<sup>49</sup> Alternatively, it could also be argued that the various shapes could represent the chariot or mount of YHWH. On this see Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 49; Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, 54-55; 66-67.

3.1 I presented the view that divine images of “other gods” were being prohibited.

This point was used as evidence to support the idea that the divine images being prohibited associated with alien deities and not Israel’s God. However, a number of scholars argue that the biblical writers condemn images of the latter as “other gods.”

For example, referring to the prohibition of idols, Tigay writes,

“Since idolaters often spoke of idols as if they were gods, not merely symbols of gods, and since the Bible insists that no statue can be the Lord, it considers any idol as de facto another god no matter whom or what the worshiper identifies it with [see Kaufmann, *Religion*, 9-20, 236-37]. The reference to God’s jealousy thus applies to the second commandment as well as the first; this is why it comes only after the second.”<sup>50</sup>

Mayes puts the idea succinctly when he notes, “...The very attempt to make a representation of Yahweh means serving another god who is not Yahweh.”<sup>51</sup> If this is so, then (at least to some interpreters), arguing that the prohibition of idols refers to “other gods” does nothing to prove that the prohibition is exclusively concerned with divine images of alien deities. Therefore, it could be argued that the prohibition stands against all divine images because all divine images would be regarded as “other gods.”

In regard to this second point we may additionally note that, as Tigay’s comment shows, the idea that a divine image of YHWH would be considered “another god” also argues against Obbink’s point that the jealousy of YHWH would not make sense unless it was directed against gods other than YHWH. Whether the worshipers identified the divine images with alien deities or with YHWH himself,

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<sup>50</sup> Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 65. Cf. Miller, “The Story of the First Commandment: The Book of Exodus,” 77-78; Greenberg, “The Decalogue Tradition Critically Examined,” 100; Houtman, *Exodus*, Vol. 3: Chapters 20-40, 19-21.

<sup>51</sup> Mayes, “Deuteronomy 4 and the Literary Criticism of Deuteronomy,” *JBL* 100 (1981): 27. Cf. Lohfink, *Höre, Israel: Auslegung von Texten aus dem Buch Deuteronomium* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1965), 107; Houtman, *Exodus*, Vol. 3: Chapters 20-40, 20; Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, 50-51; 55-56; Curtis, “The Theological Basis for the Prohibition of Images,” 281; Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, 18.

both may have been condemned as “other gods” by biblical writers and would therefore arouse the jealousy of YHWH. For the same reason, Zimmerli’s argument that the phrase “bow down and worship” is only used to refer to “other gods” does not rule out a concern for divine images of the God of Israel.

Thirdly, the prohibition of idols is probably best understood as a prohibition against all divine images because the rationale provided in Deut. 4 stands against *all* divine images and not exclusively divine images of YHWH. At Houtman points out,

“[In Deut. 4] the fabrication of any kind of image is deemed very objectionable since it conflicts with the mode of YHWH’s self-revelation: YHWH could be heard but he was not visible to the human eye (Deut. 4:12-15). Is the fabrication of YHWH images disallowed here? One could easily get that impression from the context. Explicitly, however, it is the making of cultic images in general that is forbidden.”<sup>52</sup>

Therefore, because some scholars argue that Deut. 4’s rationale is not *exclusively* concerned with either type of idol, it is unlikely that the prohibition of idols is exclusively concerned with the one or the other.

Fourthly, the prohibition of idols is probably best understood as a prohibition against all divine images because concern for both types are found within the Old Testament and therefore the comprehensive prohibition of idols within the Ten Commandments may reasonably stand against both. In section 3.1 I mentioned that both Obbink and Pfeiffer argued that there were no real representations of YHWH within the Old Testament.<sup>53</sup> If this point is accepted, then it could be argued that the prohibition is likely to be a prohibition of the divine images of alien deities because these were the only divine images of concern within the Old Testament. However, Stamm, Childs, von Rad and others have argued that certain texts within the Old

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<sup>52</sup> Houtman, *Exodus, Vol. 3: Chapters 20-40*, 20. Cf. Mayes, *Deuteronomy*, 153; Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, 50.

<sup>53</sup> Obbink, “Jahwebilder,” 264-274; Pfeiffer, “Images of Yahweh,” 211-212.

Testament are clearly concerned with the worship of YHWH via divine images.<sup>54</sup> If this point is accepted, it shows that the prohibition *could have* originally been directed against divine images of YHWH. However, it does not prove that the prohibition is exclusively concerned with these images. If it is assumed that both concerns are present in the text, then it could be argued that neither should be excluded when considering the inclusive or “categorical” prohibition of idols.

Fifthly and finally, some interpreters may argue that the prohibition is best understood as a prohibition of all divine images because the assumed redaction of the text suggests an earlier concern for divine images of YHWH and a later emphasis on divine images of alien deities. For this reason, it is no longer possible to rule out one or the other. As Meyers writes, “The layers of tradition are so complex here that it is difficult to determine whether this prohibition assumes or prescribes aniconism for Yahweh as it does for other gods.”<sup>55</sup> Since Zimmerli’s article on the second commandment, it is not uncommon for scholars to affirm a transition from a concern for the one to a concern for the other.<sup>56</sup> As Miller writes, “The commandment prohibiting images may have originally enjoined against representations of Yahweh, but it clearly came to prohibit images of any deity.”<sup>57</sup> However, other scholars suggest just the opposite and affirm that the original concern was for divine images of alien deities and the later concern was for divine images of YHWH.<sup>58</sup> These differing perspectives are the product of the ambiguity of the present construction of the MT. Because many scholars argue that the prohibition at one time was directed

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<sup>54</sup> Stamm and Andrew, *The Ten Commandments in Recent Research*, 83; Childs, *Exodus*, 406; von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 215; Hutton, “A Simple Matter of Numbering?,” 214.

<sup>55</sup> Meyers, *Exodus*, 170.

<sup>56</sup> E.g. von von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 215-216; Childs, *Exodus*, 405-406; Nelson, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 80.

<sup>57</sup> Miller, “The Place of the Decalogue in the Old Testament and Its Law,” 11.

<sup>58</sup> E.g. Obbink, “Jahwebilder,” 264-274.

toward the one or the other, and because it is difficult to definitively “prove” the direction of the change (if a change is assumed at all), the prohibition is probably best understood as a prohibition of *all* divine images.

Therefore to summarize this third approach to the theological ambiguity: The prohibition of idols is best understood as a prohibition of *all* divine images, whether they are associated with alien deities or YHWH himself because: (1) Neither can be ruled out, (2) Both are “other gods” and therefore arguments aiming to prove that the prohibition of idols is a prohibition of “other gods” do not prove that divine images of alien deities are the sole concern, (3) Although the rationale provided in Deut. 4 primarily stands against all divine images of YHWH it also stands against divine images of alien deities, (4) A concern for both types is found within the Old Testament and therefore the comprehensive prohibition of idols within the Decalogue may reasonably address both concerns, and (5) The construction in the MT may be assumed to reflect a transition either from a concern for the one to a concern for the other or vice versa and the difference of opinion of modern commentators on this matter demonstrates the ambiguity of the text and once again suggests that it is difficult to justify ruling either type out.

### **3.6 Implications**

Interpreters who affirm that the prohibition of idols is a prohibition of *all* divine images, whether they are associated with alien deities or YHWH himself are likely to find a sense in which the prohibitions are tightly joined and a sense in which a

significant distinction remains between the two.<sup>59</sup> In that the prohibition of idols stands against divine images of alien deities there is little reason to distinguish between the prohibitions. However, in that it also stands against divine images of YHWH, it represents a distinction between the worship of the gods of the nations and the God of Israel.

### **3.7 How Then Shall We Approach The Theological Ambiguity?**

In my judgment, the prohibition of idols stands against divine images of alien deities *and* divine images of YHWH. I do not find the arguments that are drawn from the sequence of the prohibitions, the various forms an idol may take, nor even the wider use of the phrase “bow down and worship” to rule out either one or the other. In terms of the idea of a transition from one concern to the other based on redaction, neither theory of development rules out a concern for the one or the other. I would argue that the rejection of divine images of alien deities spans the whole of the Old Testament and that this is paired with a rejection of the worship of YHWH via divine images in texts depicting the era before the fall of the Northern Kingdom.<sup>60</sup> Because both concerns are present within the immediate context of Sinai/Horeb as well as within the wider Old Testament context, an unrestricted prohibition of idols is mute to neither concern. The longevity of the argument seems to me to bear witness to the ambiguity of the text.

Therefore, I find a sense in which the prohibitions are tightly joined and a sense in which a significant distinction remains between the two. The distinction has

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<sup>59</sup> Again, see Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, 49.

<sup>60</sup> See chapter 4.

to do with the difference between the worship of the “wrong gods” and the worship of the right God in the wrong way. Even if it is granted that the worship of the right God in the wrong way may have been regarded as the worship of “other gods,” the issues present significantly differing concerns within the Old Testament texts. For this reason, I find value in maintaining a distinction between the prohibitions. Therefore, the third ambiguity which interpreters must deal with in terms of the relationship between the prohibitions is a theological ambiguity.

### **3.8 The Theological Ambiguity in a Wider Context**

This theological ambiguity directly affects how interpreters understand the relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols within the wider Old Testament context. The relationship is ambiguous because the Old Testament not only rejects the worship of divine images of alien deities but also the worship of YHWH via divine images. While the prohibition of idols does not explicitly state, “You shall not make for yourself an idol of an alien deity”, or “You shall not make for yourself an idol of YHWH,” both concerns are evident in the wider Old Testament context.<sup>61</sup> The presence of both concerns creates a theological ambiguity because the Old Testament demonstrates little concern to distinguish between alien deities and the divine images associated with them but the worship of

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<sup>61</sup> While the claim that the Old Testament rejects the worship of divine images of alien deities is obvious (E.g. Gen. 35; Num. 33:52; Deut. 4:28; 7:1-5, 25-26; 12:2-3; 28:36, 64; 29:16-17; 1 Sam. 5; 2 Sam. 5:21; 2 Kgs. 10:26; 11:18; 17:29-32; 2 Chr. 23:17; 28:2; Ps. 115, 135; Isa. 10:5-11; 21:9; 46:1; Jer. 10:1-14; 50:2; 51:47, 52; Ez. 21:21; 23; Nah. 1:14.), the claim that the Old Testament also rejects the worship of YHWH via divine images is somewhat controversial. Nevertheless, in Part Two I will argue that both issues are addressed within the wider Old Testament context. In chapter 4 I will argue that the directions for worship in Deut. 12, the narrative of Micah’s idols in Judg. 17-18, the rationale for the prohibition of idols provided in Deut. 4, and the presentations of the golden calves of Aaron and Jeroboam in Exod. 32, Deut. 9 and 1 Kgs. 12 all deal with the worship of YHWH by means of images.



alien deities and the worship of YHWH via divine images represent significantly differing concerns. Therefore, there is a sense in which the Old Testament shows no concern to distinguish between the issues and another sense in which it clearly does. In other words, if the texts dealing with divine images within the Old Testament exclusively dealt with those that were associated with alien deities, then the relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols within the Old Testament would be one of near synonymity. Emphasizing a distinction between the two would run contrary to the idol polemics which reject the worship of gods made by human hands. However, because the Old Testament also condemns the worship of YHWH by means of divine images, a legitimate distinction can be made between the issues. Therefore, I thirdly note that the ambiguous relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols within the Old Testament partly arises from the rejection of *all* divine images, whether they are associated with alien deities or YHWH himself.

### **3.9 Chapter Summary and Summary of Part One**

In this chapter I have sought to demonstrate that interpreters have come to differing conclusions about the relationship between the prohibitions because of a theological ambiguity present in the text. While some have argued that the prohibition of idols is a prohibition of the divine images of alien deities and others have argued that it is a prohibition of divine images of YHWH, I have argued that it is not limited to either one. The wider Old Testament context deals with both and therefore the unqualified prohibition of idols is mute to neither concern. However, this does not mean that the two are synonymous. For these reasons, I would argue that the relationship between

the worship of other gods and the worship of idols within the Old Testament is ambiguous because the Old Testament rejects both types of “idols” and yet each has a different relationship with “other gods.”

Therefore, within this first part of the thesis, I have used ambiguities present in the relationship between the prohibitions in order to introduce three factors which make the relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols difficult to define. Again, my focus upon the relationship between the prohibitions is a means to that end and not an end in itself. The ambiguity of the relationship is the product of the idol terminology, the presence of certain texts which distinguish between the issues set alongside other texts which fuse them, and the Old Testament’s rejection of all divine images, whether they are associated with alien deities or YHWH himself. If the Old Testament only spoke of divine images as “false” or “worthless gods” there would be little linguistic reason to distinguish between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols. However, because the terminology is also used specifically to refer to divine images, a distinction is created between the two. If the Old Testament only included texts which rejected other gods as the work of human hands, there would be little rhetorical reason to distinguish the issues. However, because it also contains texts which deal with the issues individually, alternative conceptualizations again arise. And finally, if the Old Testament only rejected divine images of alien deities, there would be little reason to distinguish between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols. However, because it also rejects the worship of YHWH via divine images, there is a legitimate sense in which the issues are fused and a legitimate sense in which they are distinguished. My primary purpose in these first three chapters has not merely been to add my own perspective to the many others who have wrestled with these

ambiguities, though I have done that as well. Instead, I have attempted to explain why the relationship between the issues has remained difficult to define and why “Counting to Ten” in regard to the Commandments is not as easy as it may at first appear to be.

The presentation of these three factors in this first part of the thesis is intended to establish the ground work for the presentation of the fourth factor in the second part. In Part Two, I will examine the Old Testament’s war against idols before and after the fall of the Northern Kingdom. By grouping the biblical texts according to the era which they depict within the biblical narrative, I will deal with a diverse range of texts which (1) use a variety of terms to refer to divine images (2) sometimes fuse the issues and sometimes treat the issues distinctly and (3) not only deal with the worship of divine images of alien deities but also with the worship of YHWH via divine images.<sup>62</sup> I have no intention of harmonizing the texts which I will consider or minimizing the differing ways that these texts approach the issues. However, I hope to demonstrate that there is a clear difference between the war against idols before and after the fall of the Northern Kingdom and that this difference is directly (though not exclusively) responsible for the ambiguity of the relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols within the Old Testament.

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<sup>62</sup> Again, as mentioned in the introduction, grouping the texts together in this way (rather than examining the presentation of the issues within, for example, the book of Deuteronomy, the Deuteronomistic History, or various sources) represents an attempt to conduct an exegetical examination of the issues as they are presented within their narrative contexts.

PART TWO: THE WAR AGAINST IDOLS  
BEFORE AND AFTER THE FALL OF THE NORTHERN KINGDOM

4  
THE WAR  
BEFORE THE FALL

*Two stories illustrate vividly the nature of Israel's battle with idolatry: the story of the golden calf, in which Israelite idolatry is typified (Exod. 32), and the late story of the image set up by Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 3), in which the worship of the pagans is portrayed.*

Yehezkel Kaufmann<sup>63</sup>

In Part One I argued that the relationship between the prohibition of other gods and the prohibition of idols within the Ten Commandments is difficult to define because of certain linguistic, grammatical, and theological ambiguities present in the texts. Scholars have addressed these ambiguities in a variety of ways historically and this is reflected in the differing enumerations of the commandments in Jewish and Christian tradition. The relationship between the prohibitions was then used to introduce three factors which make it difficult to define the relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols within the Old Testament. However, there is a fourth factor that cannot be introduced through an exegetical study of the commandments and their reception alone but only emerges when attention is given to the wider Old Testament context.

In this second part of the thesis I attempt to demonstrate that the relationship between the issues is difficult to define because the depiction of the war against idols within the Old Testament dramatically changes with the fall of the Northern

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<sup>63</sup> Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, 12.

Kingdom. This creates two significantly different ways of understanding the relationship between the issues. In other words, there is a difference between the war against idols in texts depicting the eras before and after the fall of the Northern Kingdom and this difference directly corresponds to the alternative conceptions of the relationship between the prohibitions. This is the fourth factor that makes the relationship between the issues difficult to define.

In order to demonstrate this, I will consider the relationship between the issues in texts depicting the war against idols before and after the fall of the Northern Kingdom. In this chapter I will consider the war against idols before the fall. In chapters five and six I will consider the war against idols after the fall. In chapter seven I will return to the prohibitions in light of the war against idols. Therefore, I will begin with the war before the fall.

In the quote above, Kaufmann suggests that Israel's battle with idolatry is fought against both "pagan" and "Israelite" idolatry. Although I will redefine these categories, I nevertheless find them useful for introducing the war against idols in texts depicting the era before the fall. I prefer to say that, in these texts, the war is fought on two fronts: one foreign and one domestic. I will begin in sections 4.1 and 4.2 by defining and examining each front. The battle on the foreign front will be briefly sketched and the battle on the domestic front will be outlined through four key examples. In section 4.3 I will consider how the two fronts might relate to the context of the divided kingdom of Judah and Israel, and in section 4.4 I will consider how these two fronts relate to the prohibitions. In the chapter summary in section 4.5 I argue that, within the literary context of the war against idols before the fall of the Northern Kingdom there are strong grounds for distinguishing between the

worship of other gods and the worship of idols. I argue that this calls into question one of Barton's points.

#### 4.1 Battle on the Foreign Front

Texts depicting the era before the fall of the Northern Kingdom are obviously concerned with the gods of the nations and the divine images associated with them.<sup>64</sup> Many examples could be cited here but for my purposes, only a very brief summary is required. These texts take aim at the gods of Egypt,<sup>65</sup> the god of the Philistines,<sup>66</sup> the god of the Moabites<sup>67</sup>, the gods of the Phoenicians<sup>68</sup> and the gods of the Canaanites.<sup>69</sup> Although the texts repeatedly command Israel to avoid following the gods of the peoples around them and to destroy their idols,<sup>70</sup> they also tell the story of Israel's repeated lapses into disobedience.<sup>71</sup> These texts paint a picture of Israel's struggle with an extraordinarily persistent temptation—one to which they repeatedly give in and for which (according to the history presented in Deuteronomy to Kings) they are ultimately destroyed.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> E.g. Gen. 35; Num. 33:52; Deut. 4:28; 7:25-26; 12:2-3; 28:36, 64; 29:16-17; 1 Sam. 5; 2 Sam. 5:21; 2 Kgs. 10:26; 11:18; 2 Chr. 23:17; 28:2; Isa. 10:5-11. Cf. Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 108.

<sup>65</sup> Exod. 12:12; Ezek. 20:6-8.

<sup>66</sup> 1 Sam. 5.

<sup>67</sup> 1 Kgs. 11:7.

<sup>68</sup> 1 Kgs. 16:31. Jezebel, the wife of Ahab brought a form of the worship of Baal from the Phoenician city of Sidon. See Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* (265; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 74. Day argues that this Baal was essentially the same as the Ugaritic Baal and the Baal known elsewhere in the Old Testament.

<sup>69</sup> E.g. Num. 25; Deut. 4:3-4; 7:1-6; Judg. 2-3; 1 Kgs. 18; 2 Kgs. 16-18. Hos. 2, 9, 13. Cf. Day, "Hosea and the Baal Cult," in *Prophecy and the Prophets in Ancient Israel*, (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 202.

<sup>70</sup> Deut. 6:12-15; 7:1-6; Deut. 12-13.

<sup>71</sup> E.g. Judg. 2-3; 1 Kgs. 11.

<sup>72</sup> 2 Kgs. 17. Although Kaufmann and others (more recently Greenspahn) have argued that the struggle was exaggerated or superficial, and that idolatry was not nearly as widespread in popular culture as the texts may superficially suggest, I am wholly concerned with the biblical depiction and I am not asking the question of the degree to which that depiction accurately reflects the practices of

Within these texts, this struggle is often associated with the lure of foreign women. Although Israel is directly commanded not to intermarry with the Canaanites because this would lead them to worship other gods,<sup>73</sup> they repeatedly do just this. The men of Israel go after the women of Moab and end up serving the Baal of Peor,<sup>74</sup> Solomon, king of Judah, marries seven hundred foreign women and they turn his heart after other gods,<sup>75</sup> and Ahab, king of Israel, marries Jezebel and leads the Northern Kingdom into the worship of Baal.<sup>76</sup>

In light of this picture, very little needs to be said in order to demonstrate that texts depicting the era before the fall of the Northern Kingdom fight a battle against the gods of the nations and the divine images associated with them whether they are found within or without Israel. I refer to this as the “Battle on the foreign front.” It is “foreign” not because of the location of the battle but because of the enemy with whom Israel struggles.

## 4.2 Battle on the Domestic Front

However, it would be a serious misunderstanding to assume that the war against idols in these texts is *exclusively* fought on the foreign front. As I have demonstrated in chapter three, it is also fought against the worship of YHWH via divine images.<sup>77</sup> This is what I refer to as Israel’s “Battle on the domestic front.” It is an in-house

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ancient Israel. See Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*; Greenspahn, “Syncretism and idolatry in the Bible,” 480-494.

<sup>73</sup> Deut. 7:3-4. Cf. 1 Kgs. 11:2; Ps. 106:34-39.

<sup>74</sup> Num. 25.

<sup>75</sup> 1 Kgs. 11:1-8.

<sup>76</sup> 1 Kgs. 16:29-34. On the foreign woman who leads Israel into apostasy see Tan, *The ‘Foreignness’ of the Foreign Woman in Proverbs 1-9: A Study of the Origin and Development of a Biblical Motif* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), 65-80.

<sup>77</sup> See especially sections 3.3-3.4.



battle fought against the worship of the “right God” in the wrong way. I refer to it as a “domestic” battle, not because of its location but because it is fought against those claiming to worship YHWH, the God of Israel, and not some alien deity. Moreover, by defining it as a battle fought against “the worship of YHWH via divine images,” I mean to include both representations of YHWH (which I will argue are addressed in Deut. 4) as well as images which may have either served as “pedestals for” or “representations of” YHWH but are nevertheless presented by biblical writers as divine images themselves (i.e., the Golden Calves).<sup>78</sup>

By arguing that certain images were regarded by biblical writers as “divine,” I do not mean that these writers themselves held the images to be gods but that they suggested that those who made use of them in worship did. Again, as Barton has pointed out, this may or may not have been quite fair but it is nevertheless the way that the objects came to be regarded within the pages of the Old Testament.<sup>79</sup>

Of course, as mentioned in Part One, there have long been those who have flatly rejected or seriously downplayed this conception of a battle on the domestic front.<sup>80</sup> Again, Pfeiffer provides an example of this position when he writes, “The Old Testament, with its exhaustive denunciation of the worship of foreign gods and of idols (the first two of the ten commandments being correlative), contains no

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<sup>78</sup> Many scholars who would strongly object to the idea that the texts of the Old Testament are ever concerned with representations of YHWH, nevertheless affirm that the calves most likely served as pedestals for Yhwh much like the Ark of the Covenant, e.g. Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, 13; Greenberg, “The Decalogue Tradition Critically Examined,”; Kaufmann, *History of the Religion of Israel: From the Babylonian Captivity to the End of Prophecy* (trans. Efroymson; vol. 4; Jerusalem: Ktav, 1977), 184. On this point, it is important to clarify the difference between the question of whether *the text of the Old Testament* ever deals with representations of YHWH and the quite different question of whether representations of YHWH existed within the cult of ancient Israel. For a summary of the positions regarding the latter see Chung, *The Sin of the Calf*, 8-9.

<sup>79</sup> See section 1.2 and Barton, “‘The Work of Human Hands’,” 67

<sup>80</sup> See section 3.1, Obbink, “Jahwebilder,”; Pfeiffer, “Images of Yahweh,”; Houtman, *Exodus, Vol. 3: Chapters 20-40*, 20-21.

condemnation of images of Yahweh.”<sup>81</sup> These comments are of course reflective of the position presented in chapter three which fuses the prohibitions on the assumption that the prohibition of idols is exclusively concerned with the divine images of alien deities.<sup>82</sup> Around twenty years later, in his work; *The Religion of Israel From its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, Yehezkel Kaufman affirmed that Israelite religion “...never knew of nor had to sustain a polemic against representations of YHWH.”<sup>83</sup> More recently, in their insightful 300-plus page study entitled *Idolatry* (1992), Halbertal and Margalit provide the following lengthy description. I include the full excerpt here in order to give the reader an idea of the relative weights that the authors give to Israel’s battles on the foreign and domestic fronts. They write:

The story of the war against idolatry in the Bible is the story of a struggle against the idol-worshipping nations who seduced the Israelites into joining their acts of ritual worship. The worship of idols is described as a foreign import, especially as something brought in by gentile women: ‘The Israelites settled among the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites; they took their daughters to wife and gave their own daughters to their sons, and they worshiped their gods’ (Judges 3:5-6). This was the case when the judges ruled over Israel, and it continued when the judges were replaced by kings, whose wives—King Solomon’s and especially King Ahab’s wife, Jezebel—served as the great importers of alien worship. At any rate, the three large classes of idols in the Bible—the gods of the other side of the river, the gods of Egypt, and the gods of the Amorites—all represent alien gods from a foreign source. One exception was perhaps the worship of the golden calves introduced by King Jeroboam (1 Kings 12), whose source, according to Hosea, was in Israel. But in general the war against idolatry in the Bible is a war against forms of ritual worship imported from foreign nations.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Pfeiffer, “Images of Yahweh,” 220.

<sup>82</sup> See sections 3.1-3.2.

<sup>83</sup> Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, 237. It is important to avoid flattening Kaufmann’s arguments. While he fully acknowledges that Jeroboam’s calves were likely regarded in the north as legitimate symbols associated with the worship of YHWH, he focuses on the perspective of the biblical writers who present them as fetishes (p. 131). Moreover, he is concerned with the question of whether the biblical depiction of Israel’s war against idols is historically accurate. As noted above, he suggests that the biblical texts exaggerate the war in order to provide an explanation for the exile (p. 135).

<sup>84</sup> Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 108. Although Halbertal and Margalit go on to make the point that the late rabbinic term for idolatry (*avodah zarah*) can refer to both the worship of other gods and worshipping the right God in the wrong manner (p. 240), they suggest that, as far as the biblical text goes, the war against idols was fought against alien deities and the divine images associated with them. Cf. Faur, “The Biblical Idea of Idolatry,” 1.

I find nothing to fault here in regard to Halbertal and Margalit's description of Israel's battle on the foreign front. They provide an excellent sketch of the depiction of Israel's long struggle against "the idol-worshipping nations." However, I find their summary to seriously misrepresent the war that is fought against idols in the Old Testament as a whole and certainly in texts depicting the era before the fall of the Northern Kingdom. The description misses the mark because the war on the domestic front is all but ignored.<sup>85</sup> Even if the texts dealing with Jeroboam's calves were the only examples of Israel's battle against "idolatry" on the domestic front (which they clearly are not), their prominence within the biblical narrative<sup>86</sup> would strongly argue against Halbertal and Margalit's minimizing presentation.<sup>87</sup>

Therefore, in this section of the chapter I will argue that the texts depicting the era before the fall do in fact fight a battle on the domestic front against the worship of YHWH via divine images and that this battle is far from negligible. I will re-consider the texts which Pfeiffer dismisses and others minimize. I will begin in section 4.2.1 with Deut. 12, a text that is rarely dealt with in regard to these questions but one which I would argue clearly stands against the worship of YHWH via divine images. I will then deal with a number of texts which are cited more frequently as examples of the same: the narrative of Micah's idols in Judg. 17-18, the

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<sup>85</sup> The same seems to be the case in Greenspahn, "Syncretism and idolatry in the Bible," 480-494

<sup>86</sup> On the prominence of the golden calf Tigay calls it "The greatest scandal of the wilderness period," Weinfeld "the gravest sin in Israel's history," and Aberbach & Smolar describe the sin of the calves as the "sin par excellence" Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 445; 97-98; Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 411; Aberbach and Smolar, "Aaron, Jeroboam, and the Golden Calves," 132 Cf. Woods, *Deuteronomy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011), 135, 162. Childs suggests that "In many ways, the story of the Golden Calf (Ex. 32) offers the most extended canonical witness regarding the use of images." Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*, 67.

<sup>87</sup> Even more recently, see Greenspahn, "Syncretism and idolatry in the Bible," Greenspahn emphasizes the lack of clarity of the texts dealing with "Israelite idolatry" and concludes saying that there are simply too few examples to support a claim of widespread and ongoing Israelite idolatry. While the question of whether Israelite idolatry was "widespread" and "ongoing" is highly subjective, Greenspahn's argument ultimately minimizes the battle on the domestic front which is evident in texts depicting the era before the fall of the Northern Kingdom. See especially p. 488.

rationale for the prohibition of idols found in Deut. 4, and three texts which deal with the golden calves of Aaron and Jeroboam in Exod. 32, Deut. 9 and 1 Kgs. 12. In section 4.2.5 I will consider two relevant objections and in 4.2.6 I will summarize Israel's battle on the domestic front.

However, one point of clarification should be made from the start. In making the case that certain biblical texts fight against the worship of YHWH via divine images, I am not attempting to prove that the writers of these texts regarded these images as legitimate "representations of" or "pedestals for" YHWH. Instead, I am making the case that these writers are fighting against those whom they portray as having regarded them in this way. I would argue that an awareness of this is evident in the texts themselves. Moreover, while the texts are not interested in spelling out the way in which those who would make use of divine images in the worship of YHWH might conceive of the relationship between divine image and deity, I will argue that they connect the two in such a way as to make clear that a battle is being fought against the worship of YHWH via divine images rather than against the gods of the nations or even against mere "fetishes," i.e., material objects that are treated as gods. I will therefore begin with Deut. 12.

#### **4.2.1 Deut. 12 "You Shall Not Do So Unto the LORD Your God"**

I would argue that Deut. 12 fights a battle on a domestic front against the worship of YHWH via divine images. However, it doesn't begin that way. It instead begins with a focus upon the idols of the nations. In verses 2 and 3 we read these words:

2 אבד תאבדון את כל המקמות אשר עבדו שם הגוים אשר אתם ירשים אתם את אלהיהם על ההרים  
הרמים ועל הגבעות ותחת כל עץ רענן

3 ונתצתם את מזבחתם ושברתם את מצבתם ואשריהם תשרפון באש ופסילי אלהיהם תגדעון ואבדתם את שמם מן המקום ההוא

“2 You must demolish completely all the places where the nations whom you are about to dispossess served their gods, on the mountain heights, on the hills, and under every leafy tree.  
3 Break down their altars, smash their pillars, burn their sacred poles with fire, and hew down the idols of their gods, and thus blot out their name from their places.”

So far, the text fights on what I refer to as the foreign front. However, verse 4 clearly turns toward the domestic front. There we read these words:

4 לא תעשון כן ליהוה אלהיכם

“4 You shall not do so unto the LORD your God.”<sup>88</sup>

What exactly is Israel being told *not* to do here? Rather than commanding Israel to destroy the cultic locations and paraphernalia associated with YHWH, verse four is commanding Israel not to serve YHWH in the way that the Canaanites served (עבד) their gods. At the very least, two points can be drawn from verses 2 and 3 regarding the way in which the Canaanites did this. In the first, they served their gods at multiple locations (“on the mountain heights, on the hills, and under every leafy tree”). Secondly, they made use of idols. I would therefore argue that when verse 4 commands Israel not to “do so unto the LORD” they are commanded not to serve YHWH at multiple locations by means of idols.<sup>89</sup> In other words, a contrast is being drawn between the way that the Canaanites served their gods and the way that Israel is meant to serve YHWH. While the Canaanites served their gods at multiple locations by means of idols, pillars and sacred poles, the Israelites are charged to

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<sup>88</sup> I have here chosen to use the AV which better reflects the literal Hebrew construction.

<sup>89</sup> Here it should be noted that a distinction can be drawn between worshipping YHWH at one place and worshipping Yhwh at one place at a time. As Craigie points out, “though there was only one tabernacle, it would be moved from place to place; there would be many places over the course of time, but only one place at a time.” Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 217. Cf. Kitchen, “The Old Testament in Its Context, 6,” *TSFB Bulletin*, no. 64 (1972): 9-10 and Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1:1-21:9* (6A; Dallas: Word, 2001), 243. On the contrast between the plural “places” of worship with the singular “place” of the worship of YHWH see McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 218.

serve their God at the place where YHWH would choose to put *his name*.<sup>90</sup>

Although the text makes clear that Israel will bring their offerings and sacrifices “in the presence of the LORD” (לפני יהוה), as verses 7 and 18 indicate, it also makes clear that YHWH would not be present via idols like the gods of the nations. In place of a divine image, YHWH’s name would be there.<sup>91</sup> This stands in stark contrast to the names of alien deities which could be “blotted out” by the destruction of their divine images.<sup>92</sup>

Therefore, although the chapter’s introduction is clearly fighting a battle on the foreign front, the chapter also fights on a domestic front.

The conclusion of the chapter works in the same way. In verses 29-30 we read:

29 כי יכרית יהוה אלהיך את הגוים אשר אתה בא שמה לרשת אותם מפניך וירשת אתם וישבת בארצם

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<sup>90</sup> For a fuller discussion of this contrast see McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 219-220.

<sup>91</sup> In critique of earlier discussions on a Deuteronomic “name theology” in the text of Deut. 12 (e.g. von Rad, *Studies in Deuteronomy* (London: SCM Pr, 1953), 38-39 and Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 192-196), McConville argues that “The present text is not directly concerned with conceiving the nature of God’s presence, and it is wrongly used in pursuit of such arguments.” McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 221. I would agree that this is not a direct concern of the text and I am not attempting to draw wider conclusions regarding “Deuteronomic name theology” and Israelite aniconism (though on this see Mettinger, “Israelite Aniconism: Developments and Origins,” 175-178; Mettinger, *The Dethronement of Sabaoth: Studies in the Shem and Kabod Theologies* (Lund: Gleerup, 1982), 38-79, 54-55). McConville is arguing here against the idea of a “name theology” which is assumed to assert that Yahweh himself does *not* dwell in the sanctuary, but only in heaven, the “name” being a kind of hypostasis representing him. (On this Cf. Mayes, *Deuteronomy*, 224-225; Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, 62-63; Richter, *The Deuteronomic History and the Name Theology: lesakken semô in the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (318; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002), 53-63, 204-207). However, the point that I am making here is that the text suggests that YHWH will be present at the place he will choose but he would not be present there via idols like the gods of the nations. This stands against the use of images in the worship of YHWH. On the antithesis between the presence of God at the sanctuary and the presence of alien deities at their places of worship see Mann, *Deuteronomy* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 108 and Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1-11* (6A; Dallas: Word, 1991), 265. For a fuller explanation of McConville’s position on the nature of God’s presence in Deuteronomy which is set in contrast with idols see McConville and Millar, *Time and Place in Deuteronomy*, 110-123; MacDonald, “The Literary Criticism and Rhetorical Logic of Deuteronomy i-iv,” *VT* 56 (2006): 214-218; Wilson, *Out of the Midst of the Fire: Divine Presence in Deuteronomy* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 71.

<sup>92</sup> Deut. 12:3. On the idea that “the use of the divine name here was a polemic reaction against all attempts to localize God’s being in some specific place or in some physical structure,” see Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 244.

30 השמר לך פן תנקש אחריהם השמדם מפניך ופן תדרש לאלהיהם לאמר איכה יעבדו הגוים  
האלה את אלהיהם ואעשה כן גם אני

“29 When the LORD your God has cut off before you the nations whom you are about to enter to dispossess them, when you have dispossessed them and live in their land, 30 take care that you are not ensnared into imitating them, after they have been destroyed before you: do not inquire concerning their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations worship their gods?’ I also want to do the same.”

As in the introduction, the chapter’s conclusion begins with the battle on the foreign front. Thus Mayes is surely correct when he connects these verses with the following chapter and writes, “The common concern here is with the problem of apostasy.”<sup>93</sup> I would agree with the idea that the text is concerned with the possibility that the people of Israel might be enticed into serving the gods of the nations. In other words, I would agree that a battle is being fought on the foreign front.

However, the text immediately turns to the domestic front. In verse 31 we read,

31 לא תעשה כן ליהוה אלהיך כי כל תועבת יהוה אשר שנא עשו לאלהיהם כי גם את בניהם  
ואת בנותיהם ישרפו באש לאלהיהם

“31 You must not do the same for the LORD your God, because every abhorrent thing that the LORD hates they have done for their gods. They would even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods”

While the preceding verses deal squarely with what Mayes refers to as “apostasy,” this verse deals with the service of the right God in the wrong way. Like verse 4, the concern here is that Israel might serve YHWH in the ways that the Canaanites served their gods.

Therefore, both the introduction and conclusion of Deut. 12 identify certain aspects of Canaanite worship and then charge Israel not to serve YHWH in the same

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<sup>93</sup> Mayes, “Deuteronomy 4 and the Literary Criticism of Deuteronomy,” 230. Cf. Mann, *Deuteronomy*, 111.

ways. One of the aspects which Israel is to avoid adopting is the use of divine images. For this reason, I would argue that Deut. 12 not only battles on a foreign front against alien deities and the divine images associated with them, but also on a domestic front against the worship of the God of Israel through divine images.

#### 4.2.2 Judg. 17-18 “Now I Know the LORD Will Prosper Me”

If Deut. 12 prohibits the worship of YHWH via divine images, then the narrative of Micah’s idols in Judg. 17-18 shows how dismally Israel failed to keep that charge.<sup>94</sup> Although Deut. 12 commands Israel to worship YHWH by doing “what is right in the sight of the LORD,”<sup>95</sup> the narrative in Judges makes clear that Micah establishes his own form of worship by doing what was right in his own eyes.<sup>96</sup> Although Deut. 12 stands against the worship of YHWH at multiple locations via divine images, Micah’s “house of God” or “house of gods” (בית אלהים) is full of idols which are ultimately established in Dan, despite the fact that at the same time the legitimate house of God is in Shiloh.<sup>97</sup> As 18:31 says:

31 וישימו להם את פסל מיכה אשר עשה כל ימי היות בית האלהים בשלה

“31 So they maintained as their own Micah’s idol that he had made, as long as the house of God was at Shiloh.”

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<sup>94</sup> On the antithetical relationship between Deut. 12 and Judg. 17-18 see for example, Younger, *Judges/Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 235-236; O’Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 238-241; Mueller, *The Micah Story: A Morality Tale in the Book of Judges* (Frankfurt: Lang, 2001), 20; Matthews, *Judges and Ruth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 171-172; Mullen, *Narrative History and Ethnic Boundaries: The Deuteronomistic Historian and the Creation of Israelite National Identity* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 166-167.

<sup>95</sup> Deut. 12:25, 28; 13:18.

<sup>96</sup> Judg. 17:6. See Miller, *Deuteronomy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 132.

<sup>97</sup> Judg. 17:5; 18:31. On the contrast between Shiloh as the legitimate sanctuary and Micah’s as the illegitimate, see Younger, *Judges/Ruth*, 343.



Instead of the worship of YHWH at the place where he had chosen to put his name, an alternative place of worship is established and divine images are employed there.

However, these points would do nothing to suggest that the text is concerned with the worship of YHWH via divine images were it not for the connections between YHWH and Micah's worship which are made in the text. The silver used to make the idol is consecrated to YHWH,<sup>98</sup> the man who sets up the idol believes that the combination of Levite priest and idol would surely cause YHWH to prosper him,<sup>99</sup> and the blessing which the Levite priest gives to the Danites is the blessing of YHWH.<sup>100</sup> Moreover, the name "Micah" ironically means "Who is Like YHWH?" or as Boling translates it "YHWH the Incomparable."<sup>101</sup> While none of these points go so far as to "prove" that Micah's idols were representations of YHWH as opposed to say, pedestals for YHWH, they do seem to argue against the idea that they are perceived by those who made use of them as mere fetishes and there is surely no evidence that they are associated with an alien deity. These points seem to suggest that the text is concerned with ridiculing what the writer perceives to be a corrupt form of the worship of YHWH via divine images.<sup>102</sup> As Butler notes, "Micah and

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<sup>98</sup> Judg. 17:3.

<sup>99</sup> Judg. 17:13.

<sup>100</sup> Judg. 18:6. On the Danite request and its connection with the *ephod* and *teraphim*, see Webb, *The Book of Judges* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 433; Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary* (trans. Bowden; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 272.

<sup>101</sup> Boling, *Judges* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 258. On the irony of Micah's name and the incongruity of the worship offered see Gunn, *Judges Through the Centuries* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 241; Younger, *Judges/Ruth*, 336, 338; Yee, "Ideological Criticism: Judges 17-21 and the Dismembered Body," in *Judges and Method*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 158; Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 169; Schneider, *Judges* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 230-231.

<sup>102</sup> For further argumentation along these lines see, for example, Greenspahn, "Syncretism and idolatry in the Bible," 488; Wilson, "'As You Like It': The Idolatry of Micah and the Danites (Judges 17-18)," *RTF* 54 (1995); Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, 270-271; Bray, *Sacred Dan: Religious Tradition and Cultic Practice in Judges 17-18* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 71; Haran, *Temples and Temple Service in Ancient Israel: An Inquiry into the Character of Cult Phenomena and the Historical Setting of the Priestly School* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 29-30; Stamm and Andrew, *The Ten Commandments in Recent*

his mother do everything explicitly in the name of Yahweh...but they do these things in religious forms alien to the Yahwism taught in the Torah and the prophets.”<sup>103</sup>

Therefore, the text is not primarily dealing with the worship of the wrong gods, but with the worship of the right God in the wrong way.<sup>104</sup> It is not fighting on the foreign but on the domestic front.

The setting of the narrative within the book of Judges seems to support this conclusion. As others have pointed out, the book not only has a “double introduction,” but a “double conclusion” which form a type of inclusio.<sup>105</sup> As Younger points out,

The first introduction (A1) is concerned with foreign wars of subjugation with the *חרם* being applied. In its counterpart, the second conclusion (A2) narrates domestic wars with the *חרם* being applied. The second introduction (B1) relates the difficulties Israel had with foreign religious idols of the Canaanites. Its counterpart, the first conclusion (B2), describes the difficulties that Israel had with its own domestic idols. Thus the inclusio is clearly perceived as follows:

A1 Foreign wars of subjugation with the *חרם* being applied (1:1-2:5)  
B1 Difficulties with foreign religious idols (2:6-3:6)  
B2 Difficulties with domestic religious idols (17:1-18:31)  
A2 Domestic wars with the *חרם* being applied (19:1-21:25).

...In the double conclusion (17:1-21:25), Israel’s enemy is no longer external but internal... The war of occupation with which the book begins (Israel vs. the Canaanites) and the civil war with which it closes (Israel vs. Benjamin) brackets the book, reinforcing its theme.<sup>106</sup>

To my mind, this structure strongly suggests that the book of Judges not only fights a battle against idols on the foreign front, but also fights on the domestic front. The narrative of Micah’s idols does precisely the latter. Therefore, like Deut. 12, I would

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*Research*, 83; Gregg, “The First and Second Commandments,” 203. Though also note Pfeiffer, “Images of Yahweh,” 213-215.

<sup>103</sup> Butler, *Judges* (Nashville: Nelson, 2009), 380.

<sup>104</sup> This is strongly reflected in the reception of the text. See Gunn, *Judges Through the Centuries*, 231-242.

<sup>105</sup> See Younger, *Judges/Ruth*, 30; Younger, “Judges 1 in Its Near Eastern Literary Context,” in *Faith, Tradition, and History: Old Testament Historiography in Its Near Eastern Context*, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 223-227; Exum, “The Centre Cannot Hold: Thematic and Textual Instabilities in Judges,” *CBQ* 52 (1990): 413, 429; Boling, *Judges*, 29-38; Mayes, *Judges* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 13-16.

<sup>106</sup> Younger, *Judges/Ruth*, 30-32 Cf. Schneider, *Judges*, 230.

argue that Judg. 17-18 can be counted as one of the texts depicting the era before the fall which are deeply concerned with the worship of YHWH via divine images.

#### 4.2.3 Deut. 4:16-18 “You Saw No Form When the LORD Spoke”

To these examples I would surely add the text of Deut. 4. It too fights a battle on a domestic front. However, like Deut. 12, it begins on the foreign front by reminding the Israelites of the incident with the Baal of Peor.<sup>107</sup> In verses 3-4 we read:

3 עיניכם הראת את אשר עשה יהוה בבעל פעור כי כל האיש אשר הלך אחרי בעל פעור השמידו יהוה  
אלהיך מקרבך  
4 ואתם הדבקים ביהוה אלהיכם היום

“3 You have seen for yourselves what the LORD did with regard to the Baal of Peor—how the LORD your God destroyed from among you everyone who followed the Baal of Peor, 4 while those of you who held fast to the LORD your God are all alive today.”

The point is made that those who follow alien deities are destroyed.

The battle on the foreign front continues in verses 27-28 where Moses derisively describes the gods of the nations which Israel will serve if they fail to keep the covenant:

27 והפיץ יהוה אתכם בעמים ונשארתם מתי מספר בגוים אשר ינהג יהוה אתכם שמה  
28 ועבדתם שם אלהים מעשה ידי אדם עץ ואבן אשר לא יראון ולא ישמעון ולא יאכלון ולא יריחון

“27 The LORD will scatter you among the peoples; only a few of you will be left among the nations where the LORD will lead you. 28 There you will serve other gods made by human hands, objects of wood and stone that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell.”

These references fight a battle against idols on the foreign front.

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<sup>107</sup> Num. 25; Hos. 9:10.

However, verses 9-20 address the domestic front. The context describes Israel's encounter with YHWH at Horeb. In verses 12 and 15-16 we read these words:

12 וידבר יהוה אליכם מתוך האש קול דברים אתם שמעו ותמונה אינכם ראיתם זולתי קול...  
15 ונשמרתם מאד לנפשותיכם כי לא ראיתם כל תמונה ביום דבר יהוה אליכם בחרב מתוך האש  
16 פן תשחתון ועשיתם לכם פסל

"12 Then the LORD spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice...15 Since you saw no form when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire, take care and watch yourselves closely, 16 so that you do not act corruptly by making an idol for yourselves."

As mentioned in section 3.3, the logic of the text seems to be that, because Israel saw no form (תמונה) when YHWH spoke, they are not to make an idol in the form (תמונה) of anything they have seen.<sup>108</sup> Concerning these verses Barton writes, "This seems to imply that Yahweh cannot be pictured in any physical representation."<sup>109</sup> Similarly, Schmidt argues that the text has to do with "symbolizing YHWH, not other gods."<sup>110</sup> While the line of reasoning drawn from Israel's encounter with YHWH at Horeb is secondarily relevant in terms of the divine images of alien deities, it appears to hold the most argumentative weight against representations of YHWH.<sup>111</sup> Israel did not see a form when YHWH spoke and therefore they are not to make a representation of him.<sup>112</sup>

Against the objection that the various forms which an idol may take suggests that representations of alien deities are implied,<sup>113</sup> I have already argued that the

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<sup>108</sup> Deut. 4:16-18. Cf. Exod. 20:19-22. Tigay 48.

<sup>109</sup> Barton, "'The Work of Human Hands'," 66.

<sup>110</sup> Schmidt, "The Aniconic Tradition," 84-85.

<sup>111</sup> Referring to Deut. 5 on the one hand and Deut. 4 on the other, Kutsko notes, "For the Deuteronomist, it seems quite clear that idolatry included both the fashioning of an idol as an object with which to worship Yahweh and the worship of other gods (and their images)." Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 44-45.

<sup>112</sup> Similar logic appears in Exod. 20:19-22.

<sup>113</sup> See section 3.1.

point of mentioning the forms is to make the case that YHWH is not to be worshiped in the ways that the nations worship their gods.<sup>114</sup> Therefore, while I would fully agree that alien deities are typically represented in these forms, I would nevertheless argue that, like Deut. 12, the text is explaining why Israel is not to worship YHWH in the same way. As Holter puts it, “Deut 4’s interpretation of the Second commandment intends to prevent Yahweh from being understood like the other gods, who are known through their images.”<sup>115</sup> For these reasons, I would argue that verses 9-20 are fighting a battle on a domestic front.

One further point should be added in support of this conclusion. As others have persuasively argued, the tie that holds the chapter together is the theme of divine presence.<sup>116</sup> Particularly, the chapter deals with the issues of divine immanence and transcendence. These issues are most prominent in verses 32-40. In verse 36 we are told that at Horeb YHWH let the people hear his voice *from heaven* and yet they also heard his words *out of the fire* (on top of the mountain). Then, in verse 39 Moses declares to the people of Israel, “So acknowledge today and take to heart that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other.” Wilson is probably correct when he argues that these verses suggest that, although YHWH dwells in heaven, he is also actually present on earth.<sup>117</sup> However, this raises the question of how this could be so.<sup>118</sup> The text affirms that YHWH will not be present with his people on earth via divine images like the gods of the

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<sup>114</sup> See section 3.5.

<sup>115</sup> Holter, *Deuteronomy 4*, 112. Cf. Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, 9.

<sup>116</sup> For argumentation along these lines, see MacDonald, “The Literary Criticism and Rhetorical Logic of Deuteronomy i-iv,” 214-218; MacDonald, “One God or one Lord?,” 240-241, 249-260; Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 48-49; McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 115; McConville and Millar, *Time and Place in Deuteronomy*, 132-138; Wilson, *Out of the Midst of the Fire*, 71; Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, 141; McConville, *God and Earthly Power*, 134-136.

<sup>117</sup> See Wilson, *Out of the Midst of the Fire*, 71.

<sup>118</sup> On the tension between the transcendence and immanence of God and how this relates to the question of God’s body or bodies, see Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, 141.

nations.<sup>119</sup> The rejection of divine images as a mode of YHWH's presence on earth leaves room for YHWH to manifest himself when and how he would choose. Deut. 4 particularly emphasizes that YHWH would be present with his people through his word<sup>120</sup> and this contrast (between divine image and YHWH's words) seems to be supported in the texts which juxtapose the golden calf and the tablets.<sup>121</sup> However, I would agree with Curtis who points out that the rejection of divine images as a mode of YHWH's presence also preserves YHWH's freedom to manifest himself in other ways such as theophanies, dreams, the pillar of cloud and fire, the ark of the covenant, visions, and numerous historical acts such as the exodus, conquest, etc.<sup>122</sup> In this way YHWH both differs from and is superior to alien deities. As MacDonald writes,

YHWH is superior to the other gods because he is not a god who can be made 'present' by images or by celestial objects...making an image of YHWH, then, is to make YHWH 'present' in an inappropriate manner. To do so is to contradict what YHWH is, or rather, what he has shown himself to be in the revelation at Horeb: the God in heaven above and on the earth below.<sup>123</sup>

Therefore, the text contrasts the way in which the gods of the nations are present with those who worship them and the way in which YHWH will be present with Israel in the midst of their worship. The text rejects the worship of YHWH via divine images because they are judged to be an illegitimate mode of his presence.

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<sup>119</sup> Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 48-49.

<sup>120</sup> Note the parallelism of Deut. 4:7-8; 30:11-14. On this see Miller, *Deuteronomy*, 56. On the analogy between YHWH's words in Deuteronomy and the image in Babylonia, see Toorn, "The Iconic Book: Analogies between the Babylonian Cult of Images and the Veneration of the Torah," in *The Image and the Book*, (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 229; MacDonald, "One God or one Lord?," 222. As Albertz wrote, "Only in connection with his commandments is Yhwh also present for Israel in the cult." Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period: From the Beginnings to the End of the Monarchy* (trans. Bowden; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 226-227.

<sup>121</sup> Deut. 9-10; Exod. 32-34.

<sup>122</sup> Curtis, "The Theological Basis for the Prohibition of Images," 284.

<sup>123</sup> MacDonald, "One God or one Lord?," 240. For similar argumentation in regard to the calf of Aaron in Exod. 32-34 see Curtis, "The Theological Basis for the Prohibition of Images," 284-286.

For this reason, and because the rationale drawn from Israel's encounter with YHWH at Horeb suggests it, I would argue that, along with Deut. 12 and Judg. 17-18, Deut. 4 also fights a battle against idols on a domestic front against the worship of YHWH via divine images.

#### 4.2.4 Exod. 32; Deut. 9 and 1 Kgs. 12 YHWH and The Golden Calves

Finally, although the narratives dealing with the golden calves of Aaron and Jeroboam<sup>124</sup> treat the calves as fetishes—in other words, they do not suggest that the calves are *associated with* gods but that they *are* gods—they nevertheless draw a number of connections between YHWH and the calves which may suggest that a battle is being fought on a domestic front against the worship of YHWH via divine images.<sup>125</sup>

For example, in the Exodus version (Exod. 32:1-35), the people ask Aaron to “make them a god” and Aaron makes them an image of gold and calls it a god.<sup>126</sup> At least superficially, this way of telling the story seems to imply that the people who made use of the calf were not using it *in order to* worship a god but that they regarded the statue itself as a god to be worshiped.<sup>127</sup> Therefore one might conclude

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<sup>124</sup> On the relationship between Aaron's calf (Exod. 32; Deut. 9) and Jeroboam's calves (1 Kgs. 12:25-33), see Knoppers, “Aaron's Calf and Jeroboam's Calves,” in *Fortunate the Eyes That See*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 92-104; Aberbach and Smolar, “Aaron, Jeroboam, and the Golden Calves,” 129-140; Chung, *The Sin of the Calf*, 49; Childs, *Exodus*, 560; Cassuto, *Exodus*, 409; Bailey, “The Golden Calf,” 97, footnote 2; Buber, *Moses*, 147.

<sup>125</sup> Of course, from a Mesopotamian perspective on divine images, affirming that the divine image itself is a god would not rule out the idea that the image was also associated with a deity. On this see Jacobsen, “The Graven Image,” 17-18. However, the biblical writers ignore this point in order to ridicule those who make use of divine images as worshipers of wood and stone.

<sup>126</sup> Exod. 32:1-4.

<sup>127</sup> Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, 13. Cf. Kaufmann, *History of the Religion of Israel: From the Babylonian Captivity to the End of Prophecy*, 184.

that the text is neither fighting against divine images of alien deities (for the narrative does nothing to suggest this)<sup>128</sup> nor fighting against divine images of YHWH, but merely condemning the absurd worship of statuary.

However, the narrative also makes clear that the calf is made by YHWH's appointed priest,<sup>129</sup> at the request of the people of Israel,<sup>130</sup> and that it is found at the centre of a festival dedicated to YHWH.<sup>131</sup> Therefore, when Moses comes down the mountain he is met with a scene in which the people of Israel are celebrating a festival to YHWH with an altar built in front of the golden image of a calf and the priest of YHWH presiding over it all. It seems to me that it would be difficult to paint a better picture of the worship of YHWH via divine images.

In support of this suggestion I would add that, like Deut. 4, the theme of divine presence plays a part in the narrative of Exod. 32-34 and this provides another point of contact between YHWH and the calves. In 32:1 the people say to Aaron, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us." Then, in chapter 33:3-5 YHWH tells Israel that he would not go up among them for if he should go up among them for a single moment, he would consume them. Then, after Moses' intercession, YHWH says, "My presence shall go with you."<sup>132</sup> After the calf is destroyed, the two tablets of the covenant are remade. This sequence contrasts the calf with YHWH's word (and his glory) as illegitimate and legitimate modes of his presence.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> The mere fact that the image is a "calf" does nothing to prove that it represented an alien deity for the reasons mentioned in 4.2.3.

<sup>129</sup> Exod. 32:3-4; Deut. 9:12

<sup>130</sup> Exod. 32:1.

<sup>131</sup> Exod. 32:5.

<sup>132</sup> Exod. 33:14.

<sup>133</sup> For a similar contrast see Deut. 9-10.



These points suggest that, although the narrative condemns the calf as a mere fetish, it also suggests that those who made use of the calf in worship may have held it to be a legitimate “representation of” or perhaps “pedestal for” YHWH.<sup>134</sup> In other words, the connections between YHWH and the calf within the text itself point to a battle on a domestic front.

The same could be said in regard to Jeroboam’s calves described in 1 Kgs. 12:25-33. Jeroboam makes the calves and then introduces them to the people as “gods.” Like Aaron, he declares,

הנה אלהיך ישראל אשר העלוך מארץ מצרים...28

“28...Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.”<sup>135</sup>

On first glance, the narrative again seems to suggest that the people of the Northern Kingdom were not worshiping a deity *associated with* the calves but that they were worshiping *the calves themselves*.<sup>136</sup> However, eight points appear to support the connection between the calves and YHWH.

The first three have to do with the narrative itself. In the first, Jeroboam makes the calves in order to keep the people of the north from going down to Jerusalem to worship YHWH. It seems unlikely that Jeroboam would attempt to secure the allegiance of these worshipers at this time by imposing upon them either the worship of alien deities or the worship of fetishes. Instead, it seems more

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<sup>134</sup> However, as mentioned previously, the biblical writes do nothing to explain how this relationship may have been conceived.

<sup>135</sup> 1 Kgs. 12:28; Exod. 32:4.

<sup>136</sup> See Walsh and Cotter, *1 Kings*, 172, 2 Chr. 13:8-11.

probable that he was offering alternative locations for the worship of YHWH in the Northern Kingdom.<sup>137</sup>

Second, the criticism brought against Jeroboam's cult in 1 Kgs. 12:25-33 makes the most sense if the cult was intended for the worship of YHWH. The writer criticizes Jeroboam for installing priests who were not Levites,<sup>138</sup> for *inventing* a feast in the eighth (as opposed to the seventh) month<sup>139</sup> and for establishing the worship of the calves at Bethel and Dan.<sup>140</sup> These three points of criticism stand in stark contrast to the picture presented in 1 Kgs. 8 where all the people of Israel<sup>141</sup> had gathered to worship YHWH in Jerusalem (the place which YHWH had chosen),<sup>142</sup> led by the Levites (the priests whom YHWH had chosen)<sup>143</sup> on the fifteenth day of the *seventh* month (one of three days YHWH had chosen for every Israelite male to appear before him at the place where YHWH would choose).<sup>144</sup> It seems to me that the criticism of Jeroboam's cult would be meaningless or at best highly tangential unless the text was fighting against an illegitimate form of the worship of YHWH. If the people of the Northern Kingdom were worshipping alien

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<sup>137</sup> 1 Kgs 12:27. This point was made long ago by Driver who pointed out that it is unlikely that Jeroboam would have attempted to secure his rule by adopting the symbolism of a foreign cult. Driver, *The Book of Exodus: In the Revised Version, with Introduction and Notes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1918), 346-348. Cf. Curtis, "Some Observations on 'Bull' Terminology," 21-22. On Jeroboam as an archaizer, see Evans, "Cult Images, Royal Policies and the Origins of Aniconism," 201-205. Particularly note Evans' footnote on page 202 for a number of other sources addressing the issue.

<sup>138</sup> 1 Kgs. 12:31.

<sup>139</sup> 1 Kgs. 12:32-33.

<sup>140</sup> 1 Kgs. 12:28-33.

<sup>141</sup> Ten times over the narrator tells us that "all" Israel is present (1 Kgs 8:1, 2, 3, 5, 14, 22, 55, 62, 63.): all the children of Israel, all the men of Israel, all the elders, all the heads of the tribes, and five times over we are told that "all the congregation" was there. Knoppers suggests that through the repetition of "all Israel," the Deuteronomist was making the case that *all Israelites* originally were faithful to the cult in Jerusalem. Knoppers, "Aaron's Calf and Jeroboam's Calves," 95.

<sup>142</sup> 1 Kgs. 8:44, 48. As Knoppers notes, "For the Deuteronomist there could be only one central sanctuary: 'the place where YHWH said he would make his name dwell,' and that long hoped-for sanctuary was the temple in Jerusalem (Deut 12:21; 2 Sam. 7:7-12; 1 Kgs. 2:3; 3:6; 5:3-5; 6:1; 8; 9:3; 11:38, etc.)." *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>143</sup> Deut. 18:5.

<sup>144</sup> Deut. 16:16. Cf. Lev. 23:33-36, 39-43; Exod. 23:16-17; Num. 29:12-32.

deities or mere fetishes, why would it matter that Jeroboam didn't have Levite priests, or that he invented a feast day in an alternative month, or that he chose to set up the calves in Bethel and Dan? These points only prove that the cult of the calves is illegitimate if it was intended for the worship of YHWH.

The third point is small but nevertheless relevant. Jeroboam gives his son a yhwistic<sup>145</sup> name: Abijah, meaning 'YHWH is my Father.'<sup>146</sup> While this of course could merely amount to tradition, it could also indicate that Jeroboam maintained a form of devotion to YHWH, albeit not a form which the biblical writer regarded as legitimate.<sup>147</sup>

Points four to seven have to do with the narrative of Jeroboam's calves within their wider biblical context. In the fourth, although Elijah, Elisha and Jehu are strict Yahwists, they are not once noted for having criticized Jeroboam's calves.<sup>148</sup> If the calves were used in the Northern Kingdom as representations of alien deities or even as fetishes, then it would be shocking that they escaped the condemnation of both Elijah and Elisha as well as the purge of Jehu. Moreover, as Day has argued, the escape of the calves from Jehu's purge argues against the idea that they were associated with the worship of Baal (at least up to the time of Jehu's purge).<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> While I choose this spelling, I maintain alternative spellings when quoting other writers.

<sup>146</sup> 1 Kgs. 14:1

<sup>147</sup> Note the honorable distinction that the writer gives Abijah in 1 Kgs. 14:13: "...He alone of Jeroboam's family shall come to the grave, because in him there is found something pleasing to the LORD, the God of Israel, in the house of Jeroboam." On the continuance of the rejection of the calves see for example Tobit 1:5-6.

<sup>148</sup> On this see for example, Chung, *The Sin of the Calf*, 7.

<sup>149</sup> Day, "Hosea and the Baal Cult," 215-216. Day persuasively argues that the Old Testament does not affirm that Jeroboam's calves signified the worship of Baal (contra Andersen and Freedman, *Hosea* (24; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 493, 631; Östborn, *Yahweh and Baal: Studies in the Book of Hosea and Related Documents* (Lund: Gleerup, 1956), 15, 23, 26; Barstad, *The Religious Polemics of Amos: Studies in the Preaching of Amos 2:7b-8; 4:1-13; 5:1-27; 6:4-7; 8:14* (Leiden: Brill, 1984), 189). He instead argues that they signified the worship of Yahweh-El.

Fifth, Hosea appears to take offence at those who would go up to Bethel and take the oath “As the LORD lives.”<sup>150</sup> This seems to suggest that there were those in the Northern Kingdom who would go up to the location of one of Jeroboam’s calves and make oaths to YHWH. This of course provides no explanation regarding the relationship between YHWH and the calf at Bethel, but it does seem to reveal a perspective that did not hold the worship of YHWH and the calves as mutually exclusive.

Sixth, if the account of the calf at Horeb is taken as a polemic against Jeroboam’s calves, then Aaron’s declaration, “Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD,”<sup>151</sup> could also be taken to suggest that Jeroboam’s cult was intended for the worship of YHWH. Interpreters often note the plural reference to the singular calf in Exod. 32 to suggest that the narrative is a veiled attempt to defame Jeroboam’s calves.<sup>152</sup>

Seventh, if the narrative of Micah’s idol<sup>153</sup> is understood as an attack upon the worship of YHWH via divine images, then the ending of the story (which makes clear that the idol remained in Dan “until the day of the captivity of the land”)<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Hos. 4:15.

<sup>151</sup> Exod. 32:5

<sup>152</sup> E.g. Dozeman, *Exodus*, 687; Knoppers, “Aaron’s Calf and Jeroboam’s Calves,” 93; Johnstone, *Exodus*, 79; Fohrer, *History of Israelite religion* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 82; Ringgren, *Israelite Religion* (London: SPCK, 1966), 37; Noth, *Exodus*, 246. Though see Chung, *The Sin of the Calf*, 49-58.

<sup>153</sup> On the relationship between the calves and Micah’s idol see Bray, *Sacred Dan*, 65; Amit, “Hidden Polemic in the Conquest of Dan: Judges 17-18,” *VT* 40, no. 1 (1990): 4-20; Haran, *Temples and Temple Service*, 29-30; Bartusch, *Understanding Dan: an Exegetical Study of a Biblical City, Tribe and Ancestor* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2003), 183, 198; Butler, *Judges*, 379, 381; Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan: In Honour of the 80th Birthday of Otto Eissfeldt* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 171-172; Webb, *Judges*, 449.

<sup>154</sup> Judg. 18:31.

would suggest that the place where Jeroboam sets up one of the calves already had a long history of worshipping YHWH via divine images.<sup>155</sup>

And finally, some find connections between YHWH and Jeroboam's calves from extra-biblical evidence. As Day has pointed out, the one personal name from Israel referring to a bull is 'g<sup>lyw</sup>, "calf of Yahweh" (or possibly "Yahweh is a calf") found on Samaria ostrakon 41.<sup>156</sup> This small extra-biblical note seems to fall in line with the connections between YHWH and the calf that I have identified within the biblical texts.<sup>157</sup>

Again, while none of these points prove that Jeroboam's calves were either "representations of" or "pedestals for" YHWH, they demonstrate that the texts themselves draw multiple connections between the calves and the worship of

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<sup>155</sup> On the relationship between Judg. 17-18 and the cult at Dan, see Younger, *Judges/Ruth*, 343; Tollington, "The Book of Judges: The Result of Post-exilic Exegesis?," in *Intertextuality in Ugarit and Israel: Papers Read at the Tenth Joint Meeting of the Society for Old Testament Study and Het Oudtestamentisch Werkgezelschap in Nederland en België Held at Oxford, 1997*, (ed. Moor; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 192; Webb, *Judges*, 450-451; Soggin, *Judges*, 267-269, 277-278; Niditch, *ibid.* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 184; Amit, "Hidden Polemic in the Conquest of Dan," 4-20; McCann, *Judges* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 124-125; O'Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*, 237-241; Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 170; Schneider, *Judges*, 229-244; Yee, "Ideological Criticism: Judges 17-21," 151; Guillaume, *Waiting for Josiah: The Judges* (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 129-143; Begg, "The Danites and Their Land according to Josephus," *ETL* 81 (2005): 177-185; Aberbach and Smolar, "Aaron, Jeroboam, and the Golden Calves," 137-138.

<sup>156</sup> Day, "Hosea and the Baal Cult," 216. Cf. Dobbs-Allsopp, et al., *Hebrew Inscriptions: Texts from the Biblical Period of the Monarchy with Concordance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 463-464. To these eight points some interpreters add the texts of Num. 23:22 and Ps. 22:22 because they appear to connect YHWH and the horns of wild oxen: Ps. 22:22 (Heb 21), "22...From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me." However, Num. 23:22 could be explained in terms of a widely known symbol of strength and Ps. 22:22 by the horns on the corners of the altar in the tabernacle/temple, e.g. Exod. 27:2; 1 Kgs. 1:50.

<sup>157</sup> It could be objected that taking note of Day's point regarding the use of the name "Calf of YHWH" is not focusing on the biblical depiction but on the history of ancient Israel. I would simply respond by saying that I am in no way attempting to set up something of an impermeable barrier between what is often referred to as "the world of the text" and "the world behind the text" (On this see McConville, *God and Earthly Power*, 6-11; Moberly, *Old Testament Theology*, 17; Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (trans. Theology; London: SCM, 1999), 61; Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation* (trans. Thompson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 140-142; Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*, 86. I am happy to take Day's point in order to support what I see happening in the text. In other words, my primary interest in the biblical depiction does not preclude a secondary interest in historical and archaeological evidence that may either support or contradict my reading of the text.

YHWH and that these connections seem to receive support from wider biblical and extra-biblical evidence. For all these reasons, and because Jeroboam's calves are never associated with alien deities, although the texts condemn Jeroboam's calves as mere fetishes, they also may be fighting a battle on a domestic front against the worship of YHWH by means of divine images.<sup>158</sup>

Therefore, to conclude this very brief consideration of the calves, although there has been an enormous amount of scholarly debate on whether the calves of Aaron and Jeroboam were regarded by those who made use of them as pedestals for YHWH,<sup>159</sup> representations of YHWH,<sup>160</sup> divine images of alien deities,<sup>161</sup> or simply

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<sup>158</sup> See Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan*, 36; Niditch, *Judges*, 181; Gray, *I & II Kings: A Commentary* (London: SCM, 1970), 315. Knoppers suggests that "The biblical authors deliberately obfuscate the origins and nature of Aaron's and Jeroboam's religious commitments. They scorn Jeroboam's iconography, positing as much distance between it and the iconography in Jerusalem as possible." Knoppers, "Aaron's Calf and Jeroboam's Calves," 100.

<sup>159</sup> Köckert, "YHWH in the Northern and Southern Kingdom," in *One God - One Cult - One Nation*, (eds. Kratz and Spieckermann; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 369-370; Mayes, *Deuteronomy*, 199-200; Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 424-426; Sweeney, *I & II Kings: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 177; Aberbach and Smolar, "Aaron, Jeroboam, and the Golden Calves," 135; Chung, *The Sin of the Calf*, 204-208, 1-10, 107-140; Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, 56; Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion: Assyria, Judah and Israel in the Eighth and Seventh Centuries B.C.E.* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1974), 104-105; Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 BCE* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 683; von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 58; Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity: Monotheism and the Historical Process* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1940), 299-300; Albright, *Yahweh and the gods of Canaan*, 171-172; Cassuto, *Exodus*, 409; Buber, *Moses*, 148; Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, 270-271; Obbink, "Jahwebilder," 264-279; Noth, *History of Israel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 232-233; Zevit, "Deuteronomistic Historiography in 1 Kings 12-2 Kings 17 and the Reinvestiture of the Israelian cult," *JSOT* 32 (1985): 61-62; Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (vol. 1; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 107-108; Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 46, 49, 10, 445-446 [Pointing to examples in Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), figures 470-474, 479, 486, 500-501, 519-521, 530-531, 534, 835], Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline*, 121-122; Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 74; Vaux, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 101-3. Though note Day's arguments against this position in Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan*, 40ff. and Soggin, *Judges*, 267.

<sup>160</sup> Day, "Hosea and the Baal Cult," 215-216 (though note that Day suggest that El and Yahweh were originally distinct deities that became amalgamated); Edelman, "Cultic Sites and Complexes Beyond the Jerusalem Temple," in *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah*, (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 85-86; Sprinkle, "Law and Narrative in Ex 19-24," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47 (2004): 248; Haran, *Temples and Temple Service*, 29; Kraus, *Worship in Israel: Cultic History of the Old Testament* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1966), 150; Driver, *Exodus*, 346-348; Curtis, "Some Observations on 'Bull' Terminology," 21; Oswalt, "Golden Calves and the Egyptian Concept of Deity," *EQ* 45, no. 1 (1973): 45.

fetishes,<sup>162</sup> the longevity of the debate demonstrates (at least to me) that there are enough significant connections between YHWH and the calves within the texts themselves to suggest that they are fighting on a domestic front against the worship of YHWH via divine images. Therefore, along with Deut. 12, Judg. 17-18, and Deut. 4, the three texts dealing with the golden calves appear to be fighting against the worship of the right God in the wrong way.

### 4.3 Two Objections

Against this conclusion it could be argued that, from the perspective of some biblical writers, the worship of YHWH via divine images is nothing less than the worship of “other gods” and therefore trying to distinguish between a battle on the foreign front and a battle on the domestic front runs contrary to the judgment of these writers.<sup>163</sup>

Along these lines it could be noted that Jeroboam’s calves are regarded by the writer

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<sup>161</sup> Day (who does not hold to this view) notes that the general consensus prior to the nineteenth century thought that Aaron and Jeroboam’s calves were Egyptian in origin. He cites Philo of Alexandria, the Church Fathers and others. Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan*, 35. Knoppers helpfully notes, “The proposals include Apis, Baal, El, Hathor, YHWH, Sin, and a deified Moses. See the options surveyed in Sasson, “Bovine Symbolism in the Exodus Narrative,” *VT* 18, no. 3 (1968): 384-387; Bailey, “The Golden Calf,” 97-115 and, more recently, Curtis, “Some Observations on ‘Bull’ Terminology,” 17-31. Knoppers, “Aaron’s Calf and Jeroboam’s Calves,” 100; Pfeiffer, “Images of Yahweh,” 216; Danelius, “The Sins of Jeroboam Ben-Nabat,” *JQR* 58, no. 2 (1967): 109-112; Oswalt, “Golden Calves and the Egyptian Concept of Deity,” 13-20. Day also points to Hahn, *Das ‘Goldene Kalb’: Die Jahwe-Verehrung bei Stierbildern in der Geschichte Israels* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1981), 314-324 for a thorough survey of attempts to see Egyptian influence on the calf cult. Though again, note Day’s arguments against this perspective. Day’s criticism follows and builds upon Driver, *Exodus*, 348.

<sup>162</sup> See Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, 56. Miller argues that although they may have been pedestals, they eventually became fetishes. Although Kaufmann points out that the Judean polemic in 1 Kgs. was designed to denigrate the calves as fetish idols, he clearly assumed that the calves were regarded by the north as a legitimate symbol of the YHWH cult. See Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, 270.

<sup>163</sup> On the biblical tendency to condemn the worship of YHWH via divine images as the worship of “other gods” see for example, Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, 67; Curtis, “The Theological Basis for the Prohibition of Images,” 280-281; Mayes, “Deuteronomy 4 and the Literary Criticism of Deuteronomy,” 26-27; Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, 18; Rosner, “The Concept of idolatry,” 23; Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, 20; Lohfink, *Höre, Israel: Auslegung von Texten aus dem Buch Deuteronomium*, 107.

of 1 Kgs. 14:9 as “other gods” and Jeroboam is judged as having thrust YHWH behind his back and driven all Israel away from following the LORD.<sup>164</sup>

In response to this objection, I would first of all agree that the golden calves of Aaron and Jeroboam, as well as the idol of Micah and the form of worship which Deut. 4 and 12 fight against are obviously not regarded as legitimate forms of the worship of YHWH by any of the biblical writers. Furthermore, I would also grant that it seems reasonable to assume that many if not all of the biblical writers may have viewed all divine images as “other gods” whether they were associated with alien deities or YHWH himself.

Nevertheless, I would argue that the distinction between a battle against idols on a foreign and a domestic front does not run contrary to the judgment of the biblical writers primarily because many of these writers distinguish between their judgment and the perspective of those whom they are judging. In other words, although the worship of YHWH via divine images is condemned as illegitimate, it is nevertheless recognized and addressed. Deut. 12 argues that Israel is not to worship YHWH like the pagans who make use of divine images, Micah assumes that the worship he set up would result in YHWH’s blessing, the rationale provided in Deut. 4 argues that Israel is not to make idols because they did not see a form when YHWH spoke, and 1 Kgs. 12 explains how Jeroboam’s cult falls short of legitimate YHWH worship. As Kaufmann has pointed out, “*the stories themselves* [italics mine] obliquely testify that Micah and Jeroboam did not regard the idols they made as ‘other gods’, but instead associated them with the worship of YHWH.”<sup>165</sup> The fact that the writers of these texts condemn both the worship of alien deities and the

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<sup>164</sup> 1 Kgs. 14:9b; 2 Kgs. 17:21-23.

<sup>165</sup> Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, 270-271.



divine images associated with them as well as the worship of YHWH via divine images does not prove that these writers viewed the two without distinction. Their approach to the latter suggests that they recognized it, even while judging it to be no better than the worship of other gods. To argue that the distinction is irrelevant strikes me as akin to assuming that the distinction between Israel and the nations is irrelevant because a few of the biblical writers condemn Israel for having become worse than the nations who were cast out before her.<sup>166</sup> However, it is possible to agree with the judgment of these biblical writers without ignoring the biblical distinction between the two. In the same way, it is possible to affirm that the worship of YHWH via idols is no better than the worship of alien deities without losing the ability distinguish between the battle on the foreign and domestic fronts.

A second objection is closely related to the first and specifically has to do with the exact words that Jeroboam utters concerning the calves. Again, in 1 Kgs. 12:28 Jeroboam declares:

28 הנה אלהיך ישראל אשר העלוך מארץ מצרים

“28 Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.”<sup>167</sup>

In section 2.5 I spoke of the apparent incongruity of the use of the plural verb in regard to the single golden calf of the Exodus narrative. The construction might appear more sensible in the context of the production of two calves. Nevertheless, it could be objected that if Jeroboam meant to worship YHWH via the calves, the verb would not be in the plural. Jeroboam would simply have said, “Here is your God, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.” One response to this objection

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<sup>166</sup> Ezek. 5:7; 2 Kgs. 21:11; 2 Chr. 33:9.

<sup>167</sup> 1 Kgs. 12:28. Cf. Exod. 32:4.

might be to assume that the narrator simply does not provide an accurate record of Jeroboam's words and that the statement found in the biblical text is best understood as the polemic of the Deuteronomist. From this perspective, the declaration we have in 1 Kgs. 12:28 would provide no insight into Jeroboam's intentions regarding the calves and therefore would not exclude the possibility that those who made use of them in worship nevertheless intended to worship YHWH.

A second way to respond to this objection might be to point to texts in which similar plural constructions are clearly used to refer to YHWH. Although such constructions are rare, they are found in Gen. 20:13; 35:7; and 2 Sam. 7:23. The construction in Gen. 35:7 is particularly relevant in regard to Jeroboam's calves because it describes the altar that Jacob first built in Bethel. It reads:

7 ויבן שם מזבחה ויקרא למקום אל בית אל כי שם נגלו אליו האלהים בברחו מפני אחיו

"7 And there he built an altar and called the place El-bethel, because it was there that God had revealed himself to him when he fled from his brother."

The verb here (גלה) is in the plural so that the verse might literally be translated "the gods revealed themselves to him" or alternatively "the gods were revealed to him."<sup>168</sup> However, within the context, the construction is surely referring to YHWH.<sup>169</sup> The plural construction is usually explained in terms of grammatical attraction: the verb is influenced by a nearby noun resulting in a deviation from the expected number or gender. In this case, the verb that would normally refer to

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<sup>168</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 377. Hamilton points out that SP, LXX, Vulg., Targ., and Pesh. read *niglâ* (3<sup>rd</sup> masc. sing. Niphal perfect), which is the form one would expect when *elohim* refers to the one God. Thanks to N. Gordon for directing me to this point.

<sup>169</sup> Wenham writes, "It is unusual that 'God' here takes the plural verb suggesting that 'gods' might be a better translation, and this may represent an accommodation to Abimelek's polytheistic outlook. But the majority of commentators see the plural verb here as an anomaly." Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1994), 73. Cf. Gesenius, *GKC*, 145i.

YHWH in the singular is influenced toward the plural by the usage of אֱלֹהִים, which is a “majestic plural.”<sup>170</sup>

I find it interesting that this unique construction happens to be found in the description of the first establishment of an altar to YHWH at Bethel by the patriarch Jacob, who is declared to be “Israel” just three verses later (35:10). Taken out of context, it could be taken to mean that Jacob had built the altar at Bethel because “The gods had revealed (pl) themselves to him.” Similarly, the declaration “Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought (pl) you up out of Egypt”, when juxtaposed in the text of Kings with the two golden calves of Jeroboam can easily be assumed to be referring to the calves themselves as gods. Nevertheless, the construction in itself does not rule out the possibility that the declaration may have authentically referred to YHWH.<sup>171</sup>

#### **4.4 Summarizing the Battle on the Domestic Front**

Therefore, in this section of the chapter I have argued that texts depicting the era before the fall of the Northern Kingdom fight a battle on a domestic front against the worship of YHWH via divine images. I have argued that the texts of Deut. 12, Judg. 17-18, Deut. 4, Exod. 32, Deut. 9 and 1 Kgs. 12 are all concerned with this domestic front. In my opinion, Deut. 4 and 12 provide the most direct rejection of the worship of YHWH via divine images while the narratives of Judg. 17-18 and the texts

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<sup>170</sup> See section 2.5.

<sup>171</sup> On Jeroboam’s declaration as a genuine cultic formula associated with the cult at Bethel which predated Jeroboam, see Chung, *The Sin of the Calf*, 49-58. Cf. Sommer who writes, “Jeroboam sets up two calves and refers to them as ‘gods’ not because he encourages polytheism but because both calves are divine in the sense that they embody Yhwh. One of these calves, more specifically, is a deity we can refer to as ‘Yhwh in Dan,’ and the other we can call ‘Yhwh in Bethel’...” Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, 51.

dealing with the calves are more ambiguous. As mentioned above, while certain biblical writers surely condemn this form of Yahwistic worship, even referring to Jeroboam's calves as "other gods,"<sup>172</sup> they nevertheless recognize and address it. Again, as Childs put it, "The general picture of pre-monarchical Hebrew religion seems to confirm the judgment that images of Yahweh were forbidden, even though contraventions are recorded."<sup>173</sup> These texts stand against the idea of YHWH being worshiped in the same way that the nations worship their gods, particularly, via divine images. This domestic concern is apparent in all of the texts I have examined. It distinguishes these texts from those that fight on the foreign front. For this reason, I would argue that the distinction between Israel's battle on the foreign and domestic fronts is thoroughly justified.

It is also for this reason that I would argue that descriptions of Israel's war against idols in texts depicting the era before the fall which dismiss or minimize Israel's battle on the domestic front are thoroughly unjustified.<sup>174</sup> The divine images which receive the most attention, explanation and description within these texts (Aaron's calf, Micah's idol and the calves of Jeroboam) are never associated with alien deities but instead are closely associated with the worship of YHWH. The kings of Israel are repeatedly condemned for failing to depart from the sins of Jeroboam and the writer of Kings connects Jeroboam's sin with the fall of the Northern Kingdom.<sup>175</sup> Although Jeroboam's sin is not limited to the calves,<sup>176</sup> the establishment of the calves is the only sin that is specifically referred to several times

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<sup>172</sup> 1 Kgs. 14:9.

<sup>173</sup> Childs, *Exodus*, 406.

<sup>174</sup> E.g. Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 108.

<sup>175</sup> 2 Kgs. 17:21-23.

<sup>176</sup> On the establishment of places of worship in Bethel and Dan in conflict with the centralization of the worship of Yhwh in Jerusalem as Jeroboam's sin, see for example, Fritz and Hagedorn, *1 & 2 Kings*, 146-147.

in connection with Israel's fall.<sup>177</sup> Moreover, the only explanation for the prohibition of idols (Deut. 4) holds the most argumentative weight against representations of YHWH. Finally, if it is accepted that the narrative of Micah's idol represents a text ridiculing the worship of YHWH via divine images, then the highest number of occurrences of the Hebrew term used in the prohibition of idols (פסל) are found in an example which has nothing to do with alien deities but is strongly connected with the worship of YHWH.<sup>178</sup> Of the 21 occurrences of the term פסל in texts depicting the era before the fall,<sup>179</sup> only three are associated with alien deities<sup>180</sup> while nine are associated with the worship of YHWH!<sup>181</sup> All of these points demonstrate that the battle on the domestic front in these texts is far from negligible. They argue against presentations of the war against idols within these texts that dismiss or minimize Israel's battle on the domestic front.

#### 4.5 Two Fronts and Two Kingdoms

The depiction of the divided kingdom provides a fitting context for a war against idols fought on both a foreign and a domestic front. Within this context, the war is not only fought against the worship of the nations surrounding Judah, but against the worship of YHWH in the Northern Kingdom. This is evident in the narrative of 1 Kgs. 11-12 which describes the division of the kingdom. In chapter 11 Solomon

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<sup>177</sup> See Chung, *The Sin of the Calf*, 22.

<sup>178</sup> The term occurs eight times within the narrative of Micah's idol: Judg. 17:3, 4; 18:14, 17, 18, 20, 30, 31.

<sup>179</sup> Exod. 20:4; Lev. 26:1; Deut. 4:16, 23, 25; 5:8, 7:5, 25; 12:3; 27:15; Judg. 3:19, 26; 17:3, 4; 18:14, 17, 18, 20, 30, 31; Ps. 78:58.

<sup>180</sup> Deut. 7:5, 25; 12:3.

<sup>181</sup> Deut. 4:16; Judg. 17:3, 4; 18:14, 17, 18, 20, 30, 31. Of the remaining nine occurrences of the term, two are accounted for in the prohibitions themselves (Exod. 20:4; Deut. 5:8) and the remaining seven make connections with neither alien deities nor YHWH (Lev. 26:1; Deut. 4:23, 25; 27:15; Judg. 3:19, 26; Ps. 78:58).

goes after foreign gods and the kingdom is torn in two. This text is a classic example of what I refer to as Israel's battle on the foreign front. However, in the very next chapter,<sup>182</sup> Jeroboam maintains the division by setting up the golden calves. I have argued that this text is a prime example of Israel's battle on the domestic front. Therefore the divided kingdom provides a fitting context for the battle on both a foreign and domestic front.<sup>183</sup>

However, it could nevertheless be argued that the battle on the domestic front has a very narrow focus and therefore is after all only a very small part of the biblical war against idols. For example, it could be assumed that all of the texts dealing with the domestic front find their connection in a common attack on the worship of the Northern Kingdom. Deut. 12, which condemns the worship of YHWH at multiple locations via divine images, appears to offer Mosaic condemnation of Jeroboam's cult at Bethel and Dan long before it is established.<sup>184</sup> Judg. 18:30-31 ridicules the corrupt history of the cult at Dan where Jeroboam sets up one of the two calves.<sup>185</sup> Deut. 4 deals with Israel's encounter with YHWH at Horeb, which is also the site of

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<sup>182</sup> 1 Kgs. 12:25-33.

<sup>183</sup> Cf. Deut. 4 and Ps. 106 which both depict the era before the fall of the Northern Kingdom and present the golden calf on the one hand and the Baal of Peor on the other.

<sup>184</sup> Although much has been written on the antithetical relationship between Deut. 12 and Judg. 17-18 (see previous footnote in section 4.2.2) the establishment of the cult of the calves at both Bethel and Dan—if it is supposed that it was intended for the worship of Yhwh—would represent a clear case of the worship of Yhwh at multiple locations by means of idols, just like the worship of the Canaanite gods.

<sup>185</sup> On the relationship between Judg. 17-18 and the cult at Dan, see Younger, *Judges/Ruth*, 243; Tollington, "The Book of Judges: The Result of Post-exilic Exegesis?," 192; Webb, *Judges*, 450-451; Soggin, *Judges*, 267-269, 277-278; Amit, "Hidden Polemic in the Conquest of Dan,"; Niditch, *Judges*, 184; McCann, *Judges*, 124-125; O'Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*, 237-241; Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 170; Gray, *I & II Kings*, 362-371; Schneider, *Judges*, 229-244; Yee, "Ideological Criticism: Judges 17-21," 151; Guillaume, *Waiting for Josiah*, 129-143; Begg, "The Danites and Their Land according to Josephus," 177-185; Aberbach and Smolar, "Aaron, Jeroboam, and the Golden Calves," 137-138 On the relationship between the calves and Micah's idol see Bray, *Sacred Dan*, 65; Amit, "Hidden Polemic in the Conquest of Dan," 4-20; Haran, *Temples and Temple Service*, 29-30; Bartusch, *Understanding Dan*, 183, 198; Butler, *Judges*, 379, 381; Albright, *Yahweh and the gods of Canaan*, 171-172; Webb, *Judges*, 449.

the creation of Aaron's golden calf.<sup>186</sup> And finally, the Mosaic condemnation of Aaron's calf authorizes the subsequent condemnation of Jeroboam's calves. These connections may suggest to some that the battle on the domestic front is limited to texts dealing with Jeroboam's calves and texts that provide the background for their defamation.<sup>187</sup> If all of the texts are viewed in terms of a veiled critique of the Northern Kingdom, it could be argued that the entirety of the battle on the domestic front actually presents a very limited concern, while the battle on the foreign front is ubiquitously found.

However, if the Old Testament narrative is taken seriously, then it suggests that the worship of YHWH via divine images was a problem long before the establishment of the Northern Kingdom. In fact, the narrative tells us that Israel had been fighting a battle on this domestic front from the very first day they had entered into covenant with YHWH at Horeb.<sup>188</sup> The biblical depiction suggests not only a long struggle on the foreign front but also a long struggle on the domestic. Therefore, while the depiction of the divided kingdom provides a fitting context for a war against idols fought on two fronts, the battle on the domestic front is not limited within the narrative to the era of the divided kingdom but is presented as having begun at Horeb.

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<sup>186</sup> On the connection between Deut. 4, the golden calf and the prohibition of idols, see MacDonald, "One God or one Lord?," 257 and Childs, *Exodus*, 67.

<sup>187</sup> See Greenspahn, "Syncretism and idolatry in the Bible," 487.

<sup>188</sup> Again, as Sommer and von Rad point out, there often is a significant difference between "the history that Israel herself wrote of herself" and historical critical reconstructions. See introduction.

#### 4.6 Two Fronts and Two Commandments

I would argue that the depiction of a war against idols that is fought on two fronts provides a literary context that strongly calls for the distinction of the prohibitions. In this context, the idol prohibition is surely not exclusively concerned with the divine images of alien deities. While the open-ended nature of the prohibition obviously includes the rejection of the latter, stronger and more immediate connections are made with the worship of YHWH via divine images.

As mentioned above, the division of the kingdom itself provides further warrant for the distinction between the prohibitions. The kingdom is torn in two when Solomon goes after alien deities and that division is maintained when Jeroboam sets up the golden calves. Read in light of the prohibitions, Solomon breaks the prohibition of other gods and Jeroboam breaks the prohibition of idols. While it could be said that Solomon and Jeroboam both sinned by “going after idols,” it is difficult to avoid the obvious difference between the two: Solomon went after alien deities while Jeroboam did not.

These conclusions are of course drawn from a synchronic reading of the prohibitions within the wider context of the Old Testament narrative.<sup>189</sup> I recognize that such findings may at certain points clash with the concerns of those focused upon the original intent of the prohibition or the concerns of those attempting to establish a certain *Sitz im Leben* for the texts dealing with Israel’s battle on the domestic front. However, I am intentionally avoiding these diachronic lines of

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<sup>189</sup> See Childs, *Exodus*, 67. Here Childs suggests that, although the prohibition of idols once functioned independently, it may be understood within its present canonical position in light of Deut. 4, Judg. 17-18 and the golden calves.



inquiry in order to consider the insight that a narrative approach can bring toward the differing enumerations of the commandments. As noted above, I would argue that the differing enumerations have arisen from the attempts of interpreters to grapple with the relationship between the prohibitions in light of the wider biblical context.

#### **4.7 Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I have sought to demonstrate that the war against idols in texts depicting the era before the fall of the Northern Kingdom is fought on a foreign front against alien deities and the divine images associated with them as well as on a domestic front against the worship of YHWH via divine images. This depiction directly affects how interpreters understand the relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols within these texts and subsequently, how they understand the relationship between the prohibitions. If the war in these texts was exclusively fought on a foreign front, there would be very little reason to distinguish between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols in these texts. However, because the texts also fight a battle on a domestic front, the distinction between the issues and the prohibitions finds ample warrant within the wider biblical context. Worshiping other gods and worshiping “idols” cannot simply be equated in this literary context.

I would argue that these conclusions call for a re-examination of one of Barton’s points. Barton suggests that the biblical traditions point to an earlier belief in the existence of other gods which gave way to a later denial of their existence and that the fusion of the commandments reflects the later idol polemics which treat the worship of other gods as the worship of the work of human hands. This can easily

lead to the assumption that the distinction between the issues was the result of an earlier belief in the existence of other gods as “real sources of divine power” which could be distinguished from the images associated with them. However, I would argue that this is surely not the reason for the distinction between the prohibitions which either the immediate context of the Ten Commandments or the wider Old Testament context suggests. Instead, the impetus for the distinction between the prohibitions is the context in which the war against idols is fought on both a foreign front as well as on a domestic front.

However, as we shall see in the following chapter, the depiction of the fall of Israel brings about a shift in the war against idols within the Old Testament and this shift certainly appears to eliminate the distinction between the issues.

## THE WAR AND THE FALL

*Fundamental changes took place in Judah following the destruction of Israel. We need only mention the immigration of Israelites into Judah, the devastation of Judah by the Assyrians at the end of the eighth century BCE, and the frequent changes in royal policy from Hezekiah onward to indicate the profundity of these changes.*

Evans<sup>190</sup>

*Was it not Israel's apostasy that brought about its demise? Could not similar deviations from the prescribed cult be pointed to within Judah?*

Cogan<sup>191</sup>

In the last chapter I argued that, in texts depicting the era *before* the fall of the Northern Kingdom, the war against idols is fought on two fronts. On the one hand it is fought on a “foreign front” against alien deities and the divine images associated with them. Israel is commanded to destroy the idols of the Canaanites, the statue of Dagon falls before the Ark, and multiple references are made to “the gods of the nations” which are “wood and stone.”<sup>192</sup> On the other hand, the war is also fought on a “domestic front” against the worship of YHWH via divine images. I have made the case that the directions for worship in Deut. 12, the narrative of Micah’s idols in Judg. 17-18, the rationale for the prohibition of idols provided in

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<sup>190</sup> Evans, “Cult Images, Royal Policies and the Origins of Aniconism,” 200.

<sup>191</sup> Cogan, *2 Kings: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1988), 220.

<sup>192</sup> Deut. 7; 1 Sam. 5; Deut. 4:28; 28:36, 64; 29:16-18.

Deut. 4:15-16, and the texts dealing with the golden calves of Aaron and Jeroboam<sup>193</sup> are all concerned with this “domestic front.”

Within this literary context, the worship of other gods and the worship of idols are not quite synonymous issues. Again, as Barton put it, “Worshipping gods other than Yahweh, and using images in worship, are essentially two different phenomena, not merely two different aspects of the same aberration.”<sup>194</sup> A distinction can therefore be made between the worship of YHWH via divine images and the worship of alien deities and the divine images associated with them. This creates a literary context which strongly calls for a distinction between the prohibitions.

However, in this and the following chapter I will argue that any distinction between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols is lost in texts depicting the era after the fall of the Northern Kingdom. What can account for this apparent fusion of the issues? In section 5.1 I will review five works that touch upon the question. Although a few of these works employ methodologies that I have not adopted in this thesis (e.g. source critical approaches), they have each offered an explanation to the question I am interested in and therefore merit some review. Having reviewed each one, I then introduce my own explanation. I argue that the issues appear to be fused in these texts because the war against idols is exclusively fought on a foreign front against alien deities and the divine images associated with them. In sections 5.2 to 5.4 I demonstrate that the sequence of events associated with the fall of the Northern Kingdom marks the end of the biblical battle on the domestic front. Then, in sections 5.5-5.8, I explain how this paves the way for a war

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<sup>193</sup> Exod. 32; Deut. 9; 1 Kgs. 12.

<sup>194</sup> Barton, “‘The Work of Human Hands’,” 64.

against idols that is exclusively fought on a foreign front against alien deities and the divine images associated with them.

### **5.1 What Can Account for the Apparent Fusion of the Issues?**

Although none of the following five interpreters have directly attempted to answer this particular question, all of them have relevantly touched upon it. For example, in his article “A Simple Matter of Numbering? ‘Sovereignty’ and ‘Holiness’ in the Decalogue Tradition,” Rodney Hutton addresses the question along source critical lines. He suggests that, on the one hand, the Deuteronomic version of the Decalogue (Deut. 5) fuses the prohibition of other gods and the prohibition of idols because the wider Deuteronomic emphasis rests upon the idols of foreign gods. On the other hand, the priestly version of the Decalogue (Exod. 20) distinguishes between the prohibition of other gods and the prohibition of idols because the emphasis of the priestly work rests upon the separation of creator from creation. Thus Hutton argues that the Deuteronomic version reflects a concern for the sovereignty of God while the priestly version reflects a concern for the holiness of God.<sup>195</sup>

I agree with Hutton’s basic assumption that the tendency to either fuse or make a distinction between the prohibitions reflects wider Old Testament patterns and is closely connected to the question of whether divine images of alien deities or divine images of YHWH are in view. Moreover, I find his reason for the distinction between the issues in the priestly version to be fascinating. However, I find his suggestion that the Deuteronomic work is primarily concerned with the idols of foreign gods and that this explains the fusion of the prohibitions in Deuteronomy 5

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<sup>195</sup> Hutton, “A Simple Matter of Numbering?,” 211-223.

to be problematic. As I have argued in the previous chapter, it is precisely the history that is presented in Deuteronomy to Kings which demonstrates the clearest concern for divine images that are *not* associated with alien deities. In other words, the texts that are traditionally viewed as the work of the Deuteronomist provide the strongest reason to distinguish between the prohibitions, not to fuse them. While these texts are obviously concerned with “foreign gods” as well, this concern is ubiquitously found throughout the Old Testament. It is the presence of *both* concerns that distinguishes these texts. Moreover, as mentioned in chapter four, within this history, the term used in the prohibition of idols (פסל) occurs with the highest frequency in a text that has nothing to do with alien deities or the divine images associated with them: i.e., the narrative of Micah’s idols in Judg. 17-18. Therefore, while Hutton’s work addresses the question, I do not find his discussion to provide an adequate explanation for the distinction and fusion of the issues within the texts.

A second work that touches upon the question (though more broadly) also runs along source critical lines. In his book *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*, Ben Sommer argues that the gods of the ancient Near East were “fluid” in terms of their bodies and their “selfhood.” A deity could exist simultaneously in several bodies and could have a fragmented or ill-defined self. This was reflected in the cult statues, which in Mesopotamia, were regarded as genuine gods after the *mīs pî / pīt pî* (‘washing/opening of the mouth’) ritual.<sup>196</sup> Sommer suggests that this “fluidity model” is true of YHWH in the JE materials and is connected with the patriarchal religion. He argues that these conceptions of the

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<sup>196</sup> Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, 12-37.

divine were characteristic of the Northern kingdom and are thoroughly rejected by the Priestly and Deuteronomic traditions.<sup>197</sup> D says God, who has a body, is in heaven and only his name is on earth. P says God, who has a body (the כבוד) is present in one place only at a time. Sommer argues that “For the deuteronomists, there can be no incarnations of the exclusively transcendent God. Even representations of that God are illicit, lest they come to be viewed as embodying the divine. Indeed, for Deuteronomy, any representation of Yhwh should be regarded as a false god, a god of other nations.”<sup>198</sup> For P, “although God is able to perceive what happens throughout the world and can effect His will anywhere, He is located only in one place, and emanations of His presence do not take up residence in pillars, trees, statues, or even temples.”<sup>199</sup>

Although Sommer’s work does not deal directly with my question, it does suggest that there are some strands within the Old Testament which affirm that YHWH can be made present in wood and stone (JE) and others which reject the idea (D and P). In the context of the latter, these biblical writers do not only reject divine images of alien deities but also the worship of YHWH via divine images. However, the presence of these two concerns within the sources can be construed in different ways. Whereas I emphasize a distinction between the worship of the “wrong gods” and the worship of the “right God” in the wrong way, Sommer argues that, at least for D, “any representation of Yhwh should be regarded as a false god, a god of other nations.” Therefore, it seems to me that Sommer would explain the fusion of the issues in terms of the rejection of representations of YHWH as “gods of other nations.”

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 38-79.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

I have offered reasons why I do not think this last point removes grounds for the distinction between the issues and so I will not repeat myself at length here.<sup>200</sup> However, I would note this: While the texts which Sommer identifies with D and P surely reject representations of YHWH as “false gods,” I think that it is going too far to say that these representations are regarded, even in Deuteronomy, as “gods of other nations.” Worshiping representations of YHWH may very well have been regarded as *no less grave as sin* (as Milton put it) than the worship of alien deities, but they are not presented as the gods of other nations. Nevertheless, whether interpreters prefer to emphasize the points of distinction or similarity, to regard representations of YHWH as false gods does not provide an adequate explanation for the fusion of the issues in texts depicting the era after the fall of the Northern Kingdom. I will instead argue that the apparent fusion has a much simpler explanation.

A third text which briefly addresses the question is the article by Ed Curtis entitled, “The Theological Basis for the Prohibition of Images in the Old Testament.” There Curtis writes, “Neither the prophets nor the historiographers clearly distinguish between the violation of the first and second commandments.”<sup>201</sup> Curtis suggests that this lack of clear distinction may either reflect the fact that “much of the idolatry practiced in Israel and Judah resulted from the influence of foreigners with whom Israel came in contact and thus would involve the use of images” or perhaps it may reflect the idea that “an image of Yahweh would not be Yahweh, and any worship of a Yahweh image was then by definition the worship of other gods.”

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<sup>200</sup> See section 4.3.

<sup>201</sup> Curtis, “The Theological Basis for the Prohibition of Images,” 281.



Curtis explains what he sees as a lack of clear distinction in both the prophets and the historiographers by first emphasizing the focus upon the divine images of alien deities and then, (like Sommer), suggesting that the use of an image of YHWH would amount to the worship of other gods. I would agree with Curtis when he suggests that the prophets do not clearly distinguish between the violation of the first and second commandments. Moreover, I will go further and say that they clearly do not. However, as I have mentioned, I do not find the same to be true of the history presented in Deuteronomy to Kings. While Curtis emphasizes something of a unified lack of distinction, there is a biblical context in which the distinction between the issues is justified and a biblical context in which the distinction is unjustified.

A fourth work that touches upon the question is Carl Evans' article entitled "Cult Images, Royal Policies and the Origins of Aniconism."<sup>202</sup> Evans suggests that the origin of the aniconic tradition in ancient Israel can be found in a complex of social forces that produced an exclusive Yahwism in the late monarchic period. Following the destruction of Israel by Assyria, numerous features of early Israelite cult were rejected in Judah as Canaanite and non-Yahwistic. One of the most prominent of these was the use of the calves in the North. Evans therefore finds the origin of the aniconic tradition in the cult programs of Hezekiah and Josiah. He suggests that a "transformation of the cult of Yahweh took place in the period from Hezekiah to Josiah, and that the Deuteronomistic literature was produced in this period by royal scribes to provide both a law code (Deuteronomy) and a national history (the Deuteronomistic History) to support the religio-social programs of these kings."<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Evans, "Cult Images, Royal Policies and the Origins of Aniconism," 192-212.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 209.

Like Sommer and Curtis, Evan's proposal would suggest that the fusion of the issues can be explained by the rejection of features of early Israelite cult (i.e., the worship of YHWH via divine images) as Canaanite and non-Yahwhistic. Following Weinfeld, he locates the shift historically in the reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah. Again, I would argue that, in regard to divine images of YHWH, these were rejected as non-Yahwhistic but not "Canaanite." Moreover, I will demonstrate that it is not simply a redefinition of the worship of YHWH via divine images that explains the apparent fusion of the issues in texts depicting the era after the fall of Israel. Nevertheless, I find much in Evan's proposal that is reflected in the biblical narrative and that is helpful for understanding the biblical shift from a war against idols on two fronts to a war on a single, foreign front.

Finally, as mentioned previously, Barton has also addressed the question. He suggested that before Isaiah, Israel had viewed foreign gods as real sources of divine power. However, as he puts it, a "breakthrough in Israel's thinking about the matter" came about when the prophet Isaiah referred to the gods of the nations as "the work of human hands." "It is thus from Isaiah that there develops the tradition of seeing 'idols' not as warped representations of the true deity but as images of false gods, and then of identifying the other gods with their images, as if the image were all there was."<sup>204</sup> According to Barton's suggestion, the Protestant Reformed distinction between the prohibitions reflects earlier traditions that viewed foreign gods as real sources of divine power and the Jewish, Catholic and Lutheran fusion of the prohibitions would reflect later traditions that viewed foreign gods as nothing more than wood and stone.

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<sup>204</sup> Barton, "'The Work of Human Hands,'" 67.

While I agree with Barton's recognition of a distinction of the issues in certain texts and an apparent fusion of the issues in others, and while I also agree that, from the perspective of Isaiah, who attacks foreign gods as "the work of human hands," the worship of other gods and the worship of idols are treated as a single issue, I nevertheless find his explanation problematic. The difficulty with the proposal lies in the assumption that the distinction between the prohibitions is reflective of a biblical distinction between alien deities and the divine images associated with them. Specifically, I do not find a concern to distinguish between the two anywhere in the Old Testament. Therefore I find little justification for the distinction between the prohibitions for this reason. Instead, I have argued that the distinction between the prohibitions has more to do with the difference between the worship of alien deities on the one hand and the worship of YHWH via divine images on the other. Again, as Miller writes,

The question inherent in the [prohibition of idols] is images of what? The answer to that is twofold: images of the LORD, and images or representations of other gods. The latter is where the Second Commandment overlaps with the First... The particularity of the Second Commandment, however, marking it off from the First Commandment, is probably to be seen in its prohibition of any representation of the LORD.<sup>205</sup>

Barton is surely aware of the distinction between images of YHWH and the worship of alien deities and states it quite plainly when he writes,

It [the prohibition of images] says that Yahweh cannot be captured in any likeness of anything else that exists. Unlike the worship accorded to other gods, who all had their statues in temples and probably in the home, Yahweh is to be worshipped (to use the technical term) 'aniconical-ly'—not using any physical representations.<sup>206</sup>

However, having noted the distinction, he goes on to explain the apparent fusion of the issues in other texts as the result of a denial of foreign gods as real

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<sup>205</sup> Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, 49.

<sup>206</sup> Barton, "'The Work of Human Hands,'" 65.

sources of divine power. But if the original distinction between the issues was not primarily due to a belief in foreign gods as real sources of divine power, then it seems to me that the rejection of this belief does not explain the later fusion. Even if it could be demonstrated that earlier texts reflect a belief in foreign gods as real sources of divine power, this would surely not be the primary reason for the distinction between the prohibitions. Even if the God's of the nations are reduced to the work of human hands, the distinction between divine images of alien deities and divine images of YHWH remains. In other words, the primary reason for the distinction between the prohibitions is not eliminated or explained by a shift in belief regarding alien deities as real sources of divine power. For these reasons, I find Barton's suggestion—that the fusion of the issues is the result of Isaiah's condemnation of foreign gods as the work of human hands—to be in certain ways illuminating but ultimately unsatisfying.

As mentioned previously, the primary reason to distinguish between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols in texts depicting the era before the fall has to do with a number of texts which reject the worship of YHWH via divine images. However, texts depicting the era after the fall simply provide no comparable examples. In other words, the apparent fusion of the issues in these texts is not because they regard divine images of YHWH as "Canaanite" or "gods of other nations" but simply because they do not address the issue. Within these texts, the war against idols is exclusively fought on the foreign front. In this literary context, the worship of idols refers to the worship of alien deities—without exception. There is no "alternate category" of idol which must be taken into account. The war is no longer fought on two fronts but on one. There is no longer a demonstrable concern for the worship of YHWH via divine images and therefore no reason to distinguish

between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols. Therefore, in the following chapter I will argue that texts depicting the era after the fall appear to treat the worship of other gods and the worship of idols as a single issue because the war against idols is exclusively fought against divine images of alien deities.

However, in this fifth chapter I attempt to explain the biblical shift from a war against idols that is fought on two fronts to a war against idols that is fought on one. I begin by making the point that the depiction of the sequence of events associated with the fall of the Northern Kingdom marks the end of the Old Testament's battle against idols on the domestic front.<sup>207</sup>

## **5.2 The Removal of the Golden Calves**

I would first argue that the removal of the golden calves serves as an excellent marker of the end of the Old Testament's battle on the domestic front by eliminating the most prominent examples of this kind of worship. In other words, with the end of the cult of the calves came the end of the Old Testament's battle against the worship of YHWH via divine images. There simply is nothing comparable to be found in any of the texts depicting the era after the fall of the Northern Kingdom. With the fall of Israel and the removal of the golden calves, the "domestic enemy" had been defeated and the only battle against "idols" was the ongoing battle against the gods of the nations and the divine images associated with them.

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<sup>207</sup> When referring to "the sequence of events associated with the fall of the Northern Kingdom" I am primarily referring to 2 Kgs. 17-19 which is composed of an explanation for the fall of the Northern Kingdom, the repopulation of Samaria, Hezekiah's reform and finally the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem. Additionally, 2 Chr. 29-32 greatly expands upon Hezekiah's reform and deals with the siege of Jerusalem but does not deal with the fall of Israel or the repopulation of Samaria. Isa. 36-37 is an account of the siege of Jerusalem that is in most respects similar to the one found in 2 Kgs. 18:13-19:37 and for this reason interpreters have argued back and forth over whether Kings or Isaiah is the original context for the narrative.

While biblical writers provide little explanation in regard to the fate of the calves, Hosea 10:5-6 declares that the calf at Bethel would be taken to the king of Assyria<sup>208</sup> and 2 Kgs. 23:15 indicates that the calf was no longer in Bethel by the time of Josiah's reform. When Josiah arrives to break down and defile the altar at Bethel, there is no calf there to destroy.<sup>209</sup> For the purposes of my argument, the fate of the calves—whether they were destroyed or taken to Assyria—is not relevant. What is relevant is that, with the fall of Israel, the cult of the calves came to an end and with it came the end of the Old Testament's battle on the domestic front.

Of course, I should pause here to note that while the removal of the calves *marks* the end of the battle on the domestic front, it does not explain it. As the worship of the Samaritans demonstrates, divine images could be remade and cults could be re-established.<sup>210</sup> According to the biblical depiction, many of the people of the Northern Kingdom remained in Samaria or fled to Judah as refugees after their defeat at the hands of the Assyrians.<sup>211</sup> This remnant could have remade the calves or at least desired to do so.<sup>212</sup> Nevertheless, the biblical texts offer little to suggest this. Therefore, although the removal of the calves does not quite explain the end of the biblical battle on the domestic front, it does *mark* the end of this battle. However, an explanation is provided by the repudiation of Samaritan worship and the reform of Hezekiah.

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<sup>208</sup> Cf. Hos. 8:5-6. For extra-biblical evidence of the Neo-Assyrian practice of capturing or destroying divine images of conquered enemies see Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth*; Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, 22.

<sup>209</sup> 2 Kgs. 23:15.

<sup>210</sup> 2 Kgs. 17:24-41.

<sup>211</sup> 2 Kgs 17:28; 2 Chr. 30.

<sup>212</sup> On the view that the subsequent reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah were motivated by the influx of northern refugees with their alternative iconography, see Evans, "Cult Images, Royal Policies and the Origins of Aniconism," 192-212.

### 5.3 The Repudiation of Samaritan Worship

I would secondly argue that the biblical condemnation of the worship of the Samaritans in 2 Kgs. 17:24-41 marks the end of the Old Testament's battle on the domestic front against the worship of YHWH by making it clear that any so-called worship of YHWH that is mixed up with divine images is no worship of YHWH at all. 2 Kgs. 17:33 and 41 describe the worship of the nations that the king of Assyria had transplanted into Samaria saying:

33 את יהוה היו יראים ואת אלהיהם היו עבדים

“33 They worshiped the LORD but also served their own gods.”

41...ויהיו הגוים האלה יראים את יהוה ואת פסיליהם היו עבדים

“41 So these nations worshiped the LORD, but also served their carved images.”

The text makes clear that the “gods” that the Samaritans worshiped in addition to YHWH were divine images.<sup>213</sup> Therefore Samaritan worship is characterized as the worship of YHWH alongside the worship of divine images of alien deities. Yet after having just acknowledged that the Samaritans “worshiped the LORD,” the writer goes on to declare in the very next verse:

34 עד היום הזה הם עשים כמשפטים הראשנים אינם יראים את יהוה ואינם עשים כחקתם וכמשפטים וכתורה וכמצוה אשר צוה יהוה את בני יעקב אשר שם שמו ישראל

“34 To this day they continue to practice their former customs. *They do not worship the LORD* and they do not follow the statutes or the ordinances or the law or the commandment that the LORD commanded the children of Jacob, whom he named Israel.”

For the biblical writer, the Samaritan worship that combined the worship of YHWH with the use of divine images of alien deities was judged to be no worship of YHWH

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<sup>213</sup> 2 Kgs. 17:29-33, 41.

at all.<sup>214</sup> This judgment draws a hard line between what is and is not worship of YHWH. Simply put, those who worship YHWH do not make use of divine images and anyone who does this is no longer worshipping YHWH. There is no middle ground in which the two can coincide.<sup>215</sup>

Because the judgment upon Samarian worship deals with the worship of their own gods, I would argue that it does not continue a battle against the worship of YHWH via divine images. However, by clearly affirming that the worship of YHWH has nothing to do with divine images, the repudiation of Samarian worship (along with the elimination of the calves) marks the end of the Old Testament's battle on the domestic front. It makes clear that, after the fall of the Northern Kingdom, the only cults that made use of divine images were the cults of alien deities and not the cult of YHWH. This strong affirmation is fittingly followed by a reform of the cult of YHWH in Judah.

#### **5.4 Hezekiah's Reform<sup>216</sup>**

I would thirdly argue that the reform of Hezekiah marks the end of the Old Testament's battle on the domestic front by removing certain objects from the cult of

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<sup>214</sup> See Fretheim, *First and Second Kings* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 194.

<sup>215</sup> Although this text is arguably the most explicit, repudiation of this sort is not without precedent in texts depicting the era before the fall of the Northern Kingdom. Cf. 1 Kgs. 14:9.

<sup>216</sup> "Reform" is obviously a loaded term that adopts the view of the biblical writers. According to the biblical depiction, Hezekiah's actions are surely presented as a "reform" of the cult in the sense of a correction of some deficient present situation with or without predominant reference to the past. I use the term in order to reflect this perspective. Others may prefer something like "cultic innovations" or "religio-socio programs." For example, Evans argues against Weinfeld's references to the "reforms" of Hezekiah and Josiah when he writes, "that language inevitably suggests a purging of pagan accretions from a more traditional religion." Evans, "Cult Images, Royal Policies and the Origins of Aniconism," 209. For a critique of those who unwittingly put on the "canonical glasses" see Edelman, "Cultic Sites and Complexes Beyond the Jerusalem Temple," 83-85 and Barton, "Post-Script: Reflecting on Religious Diversity," in *ibid.*, 191. Also note Repgen, "Reform," *OER* 3 Marb-Scan:393.



YHWH that could be taken for divine images. In this section, I will first make the case that the descriptions of Hezekiah's reform in both Kings and Chronicles suggest a reformation of the cult of YHWH rather than the abolition of high places and cultic objects associated with alien deities (5.3.1). I will then argue that, while the text does not suggest that Hezekiah was removing divine images of YHWH, it does suggest that he removed cultic objects that could be taken as such (5.3.2).

#### 5.4.1 A Reform of the Cult of YHWH

The biblical texts suggest that Hezekiah's reform is a reform of the cult of YHWH and not merely the removal from Judah of cultic locations and objects associated with alien deities. However, the description of the reform is not without ambiguity. Immediately following the description of Israel's fall and the condemnation of Samaritan worship,<sup>217</sup> we read these verses:

3 ויעש הישר בעיני יהוה ככל אשר עשה דוד אביו  
4 הוא הסיר את הבמות ושבר את המצבת וכתת את האשרה וכתת נחש הנחשת אשר עשה משה כי עד  
הימים ההמה היו בני ישראל מקטרים לו ויקרא לו נחשתן

“3 He [Hezekiah] did what was right in the sight of the LORD just as his ancestor David had done. 4 He removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole. He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan.”<sup>218</sup>

While the description of Hezekiah's reform is greatly expanded upon in 2 Chr. 29-31, these two verses in Kings provide a succinct summary which is convenient to begin with. Verse four mentions the removal of the high places, pillars, a sacred pole and the bronze serpent. Only the last item receives any immediate explanation and this

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<sup>217</sup> 2 Kgs. 17.

<sup>218</sup> 2 Kgs 18:3-4. Cf. 2 Chr. 29:5, 15-19; 30:14; 31:1.

explanation connects it with the cult of YHWH rather than the cults of alien deities.<sup>219</sup> However, the lack of description regarding the first three creates an ambiguity because the Old Testament makes clear that high places and pillars were not only used in the worship of alien deities<sup>220</sup> but in the worship of YHWH as well.<sup>221</sup> YHWH had met with and blessed Solomon at the high place at Gibeon,<sup>222</sup> Jacob had set up and anointed a pillar in Bethel when he vowed that YHWH would be his God<sup>223</sup> and Moses set up twelve pillars when all Israel committed themselves to doing all that YHWH commanded them to do.<sup>224</sup>

Even the mention of the cultic pole [האשרה] does not exclusively point to the worship of alien deities. Within the biblical texts, the term is most often used to refer to a cultic object and only rarely is it explicitly associated with the goddess Asherah.<sup>225</sup> Hadley concludes that the wooden object gradually lost its previous association with the goddess.<sup>226</sup> Sommer has suggested that these objects, which at one time had been associated with the goddess, came to be regarded as cult objects belonging to and associated with YHWH himself.<sup>227</sup> The biblical commands

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<sup>219</sup> Cf. Num. 21:8-9.

<sup>220</sup> E.g. Deut. 12:1-3.

<sup>221</sup> For high places used in the worship of YHWH see for example, 1 Sam. 9:12, 13, 14, 19, 5; 10:5, 13; 1 Kgs. 3:2, 3, 4; 2 Kgs. 18:22; 2 Chr. 1:3, 13; 32:12; 33:17; Isa. 36:7. On the term itself see Vaughan, *Meaning of 'bāmā' in the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ Press, 1974). For the pillars see Gen. 28:18, 22; 31:13, 45; 35:14; Exod. 24:4; Isa. 19:19.

<sup>222</sup> E.g. 1 Kgs. 3:2-4.

<sup>223</sup> Gen. 28:18, 22; 31:13, 45; 35:14.

<sup>224</sup> Exod. 24:4-7.

<sup>225</sup> See Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah: Evidence for a Hebrew Goddess* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 54-83 and Emerton, "Yahweh and His Asherah: The Goddess or Her Symbol?," VT 49 (1999): 315-337. I would agree with Sommer who has argued that, although 1 Kgs. 18:19 provides the clearest reference to the goddess in the biblical texts, the contexts almost always refers not to the goddess but to the cult object. See Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, 45. On the suggestion that the plural reading "cultic poles" as in 2 Chr. 31:1 may be preferable, see Cogan, *2 Kings*, 216.

<sup>226</sup> Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah: Evidence for a Hebrew Goddess*, 206.

<sup>227</sup> Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, 44-49. Cf. Evans, "Cult Images, Royal Policies and the Origins of Aniconism," 201; Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh in Israel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 9. Saggs associates the asherah with the goddess as does Ahlström though they make

prohibiting the planting of these cultic poles by the altar of YHWH may support the idea that they came to be treated in this way by some worshipers of YHWH.<sup>228</sup>

Moreover, as Sommer has pointed out, like the calves, the Asherah (sg.) also appears to have escaped Jehu's purge and this calls into question whether they were identified with an alien deity at that time.<sup>229</sup> Of course, they are also rejected by the biblical writers as non-yhwhistic cultic objects but that does not rule out the possibility that Hezekiah was purging from the cult of YHWH objects which had previously been accepted in some quarters as legitimate.<sup>230</sup> Therefore, this verse, which simply notes that Hezekiah removed the high places and broke down the pillars and cut down the sacred pole, is ambiguous because it is left unexplained whether these cultic places and objects were used for the worship of YHWH, the worship of alien deities or a mixture of the two.

However, the biblical context provides a bit more detail. In the first, when Judah is besieged by Sennacherib and the Assyrian army, the Assyrian representative directly affirms that the high places were used for the worship of YHWH. In both Kings and Chronicles, the account of Hezekiah's reform is followed by the Assyrian

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clear that there was syncretism in the YHWH cult. See Saggs, *The Encounter with the Divine in Mesopotamia and Israel* (London: Athlone Press, 1978), 22-23 and Ahlström, *Aspects of Syncretism in Israelite Religion* (Lund: Gleerup, 1963), 50-52, contra Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* 223.

<sup>228</sup> Deut. 16:21-22; Lev. 26:1. On the role of the asherah in the worship of YHWH see Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 81; Day, "Asherah in the Hebrew Bible and Northwest Semitic Literature," *JBL* 105 (1986): 385-408. Day argues that the inscription from *Kuntilet Ajrud* is most likely referring to a cult object but also to the goddess.

<sup>229</sup> Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, 46, 2 Kgs. 13:6.

<sup>230</sup> For a thorough examination of the high places, pillars and altars in the Old Testament texts which emphasizes their use in the cult of Yhwh see Larocca-Pitts, *'Of Wood and Stone': The Significance of Israelite Cultic Items in the Bible and Its Early Interpreters* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2001). Particularly on the *bāmôt* see chapter five 127-159, on the *'āššērim* see chapter six 161-20 and on the *maššēbôt* see chapter seven 205-228. On the *maššēbôt* also see Toorn, "Worshipping Stones: On the Deification of Cult Symbols," *JNSL* 23, no. 1 (1997): 1-14.

siege of Jerusalem, in which the Assyrian representative urges the people of Jerusalem not to trust in either YHWH or Hezekiah saying,

22 וכי תאמרון אלי אל יהוה אלהינו בטחנו הלא הוא אשר הסיר חזקיהו את במתיו ואת מזבחתיו ויאמר ליהודה ולירושלם לפני המזבח הזה תשתחוו בירושלם

“But if you say to me, ‘We rely on the LORD our God,’ is it not he whose high places and altars Hezekiah has removed, saying to Judah and to Jerusalem, ‘You shall worship before this altar in Jerusalem’?<sup>231</sup>

As far as the Rabshakeh is concerned, the high places that Hezekiah removed were used for the worship of YHWH. Of course, the reader may reasonably question whether the biblical writer may have included the Rabshakeh’s words knowing them to be false, but if so then it should be noted that no corrective is provided. Therefore the only direct reference to Hezekiah’s reform within its immediate literary context suggest that he removed the high places that were used for the worship of YHWH and the biblical writer does not contradict it.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> 2 Kgs. 18:22; Isa. 36:7; 2 Chr. 32:11-12.

<sup>232</sup> Interpreters have gone back and forth on the authenticity of the speech of the Rabshakeh with some advocating that it is less authentic (Zvi, “Who Wrote the Speech of Rabshakeh and When?,” *JBL* 109 (1990): 79-92; Smelik, “King Hezekiah Advocates True Prophecy: Remarks on Isaiah xxxvi and xxxvii // II Kings xviii and xix,” in *Converting the Past*, (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 125-126. Cf. Smelik, “Distortion of Old Testament Prophecy: The Purpose of Isaiah 36 and 37,” in *Crises and Perspectives*, (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 85-86. In the latter Smelik writes, “Rabshakeh is a literary figure who plays the opposite to Isaiah and has to speak in a similar way. His intimate knowledge is not the result of the activities of the Assyrian secret service”) and others advocating that it is more so (Cohen, “Neo-Assyrian Elements in the First Speech of the Biblical Rab Šāqēh,” in *IOS*, (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 1979), 32-48; Machinist, “The Rab Šāqēh at the Wall of Jerusalem: Israelite Identity in the Face of the Assyrian ‘Other’,” *HS* 41 (2000): 151-168; Weinfeld, “Cult centralization in Israel in the Light of a Neo-Babylonian Analogy,” *JNES* 23, no. 3 (1964): 202-212; Evans, “Cult Images, Royal Policies and the Origins of Aniconism,” 180-181; Childs, *Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis* (3; London: SCM, 1967), chapter III, especially 80-83; Cogan, *2 Kings*, 230; Gallagher, *Sennacherib’s Campaign to Judah: New Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 187; Dubovsky, *Hezekiah and the Assyrian Spies: Reconstruction of the Neo-Assyrian Intelligence Services and its Significance for 2 Kings 18-19* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2006), 238-241; Young, *Hezekiah in History and Tradition*, 128-130. Cf. Rudman who sets these questions aside and focuses on literary/rhetorical aspects in Rudman, “Is the Rabshakeh also Among the Prophets? A Rhetorical Study of 2 Kings xviii 17-35,” *VT* 50 (2000): 130. Whether the speech is considered “authentic” or not cannot tell us if the Rabshakeh’s assertion regarding the high places is correct. We are left with a biblical text which presents to its readers the suggestion that Hezekiah removed the high places which had been used for the worship of YHWH. I find that the Rabshakeh’s assertion appears to fit with the biblical context whether interpreters assume that it was historically accurate or not.

Secondly, the much-expanded account in Chronicles strongly presents Hezekiah's cultic reforms within the context of a purge of the worship of YHWH.<sup>233</sup> Hezekiah opens the doors of the house of YHWH and consecrates the house by carrying every unclean thing out from the holy place. He then restores temple worship, invites all the Israelites to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover and removes the incense altars that were in Jerusalem. When the Passover was finished, all Israel who were present went out to the cities of Judah, broke the pillars in pieces, cut down the sacred poles and pulled down the high places and the altars throughout all Judah and Benjamin, as well as in Ephraim and Manasseh, until they had destroyed them all.<sup>234</sup> Having done this, they then bring in the tithe to the house of YHWH in Jerusalem. All this seems to fall in line with the Rabshakeh's suggestion that the high places that Hezekiah had removed were for the worship of YHWH and that Hezekiah had told all the people that they should worship YHWH in Jerusalem. Therefore, I would secondly point out that the Chronicler's presentation of Hezekiah's reform suggests that Hezekiah's removal of the high places, the pillars, the cultic pole and the bronze serpent suggests that Hezekiah's reform was a reform of the cult of YHWH.

Thirdly, Hezekiah's son Manasseh, who seems to reverse much that his father had accomplished, re-establishes the high places and the text explicitly notes that these high places were used for the worship of YHWH.<sup>235</sup> Given the history of the worship of YHWH at the high places before Hezekiah's day<sup>236</sup> and the re-establishment of the high places for the worship of YHWH after Hezekiah's day, it

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<sup>233</sup> 2 Chr. 29-31.

<sup>234</sup> 2 Chr. 31:1.

<sup>235</sup> 2 Chr. 33:17.

<sup>236</sup> E.g. 1 Sam. 9:12-14, 19, 25; 1 Kgs. 3:2-5.

seems reasonable to assume that the reference to Hezekiah's actions in 2 Kgs. 18:4 was addressing the reform of the cult of YHWH. Moreover, when Josiah goes on to defile the high places of Judah, although the priests of the high places were not allowed to come up to the altar of YHWH in Jerusalem, they were allowed to eat unleavened bread among their brethren the Levites. As Edelman has pointed out, it seems reasonable to assume from these verses that YHWH was worshiped at the high places in Judah but that the priests had been contaminated either simply because YHWH was worshiped at locations other than the temple in Jerusalem or because he was worshiped at those locations in association with the worship of alien deities.<sup>237</sup>

Fourthly, in 2 Kings 17, the account of Hezekiah's reform is preceded by the explanation for the fall of Israel to Assyria and Israel is condemned for worshiping at high places with pillars and cultic poles. The description of this worship is immediately preceded by a note that may connect these locations with the worship of YHWH. In 2 Kgs. 17:9-10 we read:

9 ויחפאז בני ישראל דברים אשר לא כן על יהוה אלהיהם ויבנו להם במות בכל עריהם ממגדל נוצרים  
עד עיר מבצר  
10 ויצבו להם מצבות ואשרים על כל גבעה גבהה ותחת כל עץ רענן

"9 And the children of Israel did impute things that were not right unto the LORD their God, and they built them high places in all their cities from the tower of the watchmen to the fortified city; 10 and they set them up pillars and Asherim upon every high hill, and under every leafy tree."<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> 2 Kgs. 23:8-9. On the likelihood that these high places were used for the worship of YHWH, see Edelman, "Cultic Sites and Complexes Beyond the Jerusalem Temple," 86-87. On the reform of Hezekiah following "exclusivist logic" by reforming the cult of YHWH in Judah and Josiah's reform as carrying this logic to its extreme, see Evans, "Cult Images, Royal Policies and the Origins of Aniconism," 209-210 and Halpern, "Jerusalem and the Lineages in the seventh Century BCE: Kinship and the Rise of Individual Moral Liability," in *Law and Ideology in Monarchic Israel*, (ed. Halpern; Sheffield: JSOT, 1991), 78. Cf. Young, *Hezekiah in History and Tradition*, 104-108.

<sup>238</sup> JPS translation. On the translation of the *hapax legomenon* ויחפאז, see Cogan who translates it as "the Israelites ascribed untruths to YHWH, their God; and built themselves high places in all their cities, from watchtower to fortified city..." "The context suggests that the Israelites followed practices unauthorized by YHWH, yet attributed by them to divine command." Cogan, 2 *Kings*, 205. Cf. Gray, *I & II Kings*, 646.

Because there clearly are texts which refer to “high places, pillars and cultic poles” associated with alien deities,<sup>239</sup> the idea that general references to these cultic locations and objects may refer to the worship of alien deities is not without warrant.<sup>240</sup> However, as mentioned above, the biblical texts clearly suggest that YHWH was also worshiped in these ways. If the JPS translation above is a reasonable one, it may suggest that one of the ways in which the children of Israel “imputed things that were not right unto the LORD” was by building him high places in all their cities and making use of pillars and cultic poles in his worship. If so, then the fall of the Northern Kingdom is partly blamed on their worship of YHWH at high places by means of idols, pillars and sacred poles. In doing this, the people of the Northern Kingdom were worshiping YHWH in the way that the Canaanites worshiped their gods and for this reason they were destroyed. In an attempt to avoid the same punishment, Hezekiah discontinues similar worship of YHWH in the Southern Kingdom. Therefore, I would fourthly argue that Hezekiah’s reform is best understood as a reform of the cult of YHWH because the text condemns the Northern Kingdom for worshiping YHWH as the nations worship their gods and Hezekiah’s reform is an attempt to avoid the punishment that came upon the Northern Kingdom for doing so.

The fifth point has to do with what appears to be a contradiction between Kings and Chronicles in regard to the high places. In Kings, Hezekiah is the first king of whom it is said, “he removed the high places...”<sup>241</sup> However, Chronicles says that both Asa and his son Jehoshaphat removed the high places long before

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<sup>239</sup> Deut. 12:1-3.

<sup>240</sup> E.g. Fritz and Hagedorn, *1 & 2 Kings*; Gray, *I & II Kings*, 646; Brueggemann, *1 Kings* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1983), 491.

<sup>241</sup> 2 Kgs. 18:4.

Hezekiah's day.<sup>242</sup> Moreover, Kings explicitly says of both Asa and Jehoshaphat that they *did not* remove the high places and yet notes that their hearts were right before YHWH.<sup>243</sup> What can explain this apparent discrepancy? While some may prefer to chalk it up to conflicting presentations, two very small details in Chronicles may offer an alternative option for those who are interested in finding one. The text in Chronicles describing Asa's actions notes that the altars that Asa removed were explicitly "foreign"<sup>244</sup> and the text describing the removal of the high places by Jehoshaphat is preceded by the notice that Jehoshaphat did not seek the Baals...but took pride in the ways of YHWH.<sup>245</sup> Although these details are admittedly very small, there is nothing comparable to either of them in the presentation of Hezekiah's reform in either Kings or Chronicles and reading the two together may suggest that Asa and Jehoshaphat removed the high places associated with alien deities while Hezekiah did something that no other king had done before his time: he removed the high places that had been used for the worship of YHWH. Therefore, I would fifthly note that Hezekiah's reform is probably best understood as a reform of the worship of YHWH because, although other kings removed high places associated with alien deities, Hezekiah is probably distinguished in Kings as the first to remove the high places used for the worship of YHWH.<sup>246</sup>

Of course, it could be objected that, although Hezekiah's reform was a reform of the cult of YHWH, the cult may have been reformed through the removal

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<sup>242</sup> 2 Chr. 14:2-5; 17:6. Though note 2 Chr. 15:17 as well.

<sup>243</sup> 1 Kgs. 15:14; 22:43.

<sup>244</sup> 2 Chr. 14:2.

<sup>245</sup> 2 Chr. 17:3, 6.

<sup>246</sup> A similar point could be made in regard to the מַצֵּבָה and the אֱשֵׁרִים. Jehoram and Jehu remove מַצֵּבָה long before Hezekiah's day but they are explicitly associated with Baal (2 Kgs. 3:2; 10:26). Gideon, Asa and his son Jehoshaphat remove אֱשֵׁרִים but Gideon's is clearly associated with Baal and, as noted above, small details suggest that both Asa and Jehoshaphat were dealing with the worship of alien deities.



of cultic objects associated with alien deities.<sup>247</sup> While this suggestion seems perfectly reasonable in theory, I would first respond by saying that it obviously does not fit in regard to the bronze serpent which is explicitly presented as an object associated with the cult of YHWH. Secondly, I would argue that there is very little to suggest that the other cultic objects Hezekiah removed were associated with alien deities. As I have pointed out above, simply referring to “high places, pillars, and sacred poles” does not prove that a reference is being made to the worship of alien deities. The biblical texts make clear that all of these objects were used in the worship of YHWH as well. Therefore, without any clear evidence to suggest that these objects were associated with alien deities, and in light of the evidence cited above, I find that, although the text in Kings describing Hezekiah’s reform is admittedly ambiguous, the literary context suggests that these cultic places and objects were probably used in the worship of YHWH.<sup>248</sup>

#### 5.4.2 Discarding Cultic Objects that Could be Taken for Divine Images

Hezekiah’s reform of the cult of YHWH is relevant in terms of my discussion of the biblical war against idols, not because the objects which Hezekiah removes are presented as divine images, but because they could be taken as such. It may have

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<sup>247</sup> See Cogan, *2 Kings*, 218.

<sup>248</sup> The ambiguity may be explained in terms of what Mark Smith refers to as “differentiation”: the process by which “numerous features of early Israelite cult were rejected as Canaanite and non-Yahwistic.” Smith, *The Early History of God*, 7-11. Commenting on this process, Evans notes, “The differentiation process sought to define ‘Yahwism’ in narrow and exclusive terms. The native altars, *מצבות* and *אשרים* were rejected as ‘non-Yahwistic’, even though other Yahweh worshippers included these features in their form of ‘Yahwism’.” Evans, “Cult Images, Royal Policies and the Origins of Aniconism,” 201. For further argumentation regarding the worship of Yhwh at the high places see Edelman, “Cultic Sites and Complexes Beyond the Jerusalem Temple,” 84-89; Young, *Hezekiah in History and Tradition*, 104-108. For Hezekiah’s reform as the removal of provincial but legitimate locations for the worship of YHWH see Weinfeld, “Cult Centralization,” 202.

been for this reason that they were removed from the cult of YHWH in Judah. The description of the treatment of the bronze serpent most clearly illustrates the point. It was a cultic object whose manufacture had been commanded by YHWH and therefore it could be argued that it had a legitimate place within YHWH's cult.<sup>249</sup> It was not meant to be a divine image and yet it came to be misused when the people of Israel burned incense to it and called it Nehushtan.<sup>250</sup> For these reasons, it was discarded from the cult of YHWH.

Similar points can be made in regard to everything that Hezekiah removes from YHWH's cult. In each case, Hezekiah removes places and objects which had previously been considered legitimate but came to be regarded (at least by the biblical writers of Deuteronomy and Kings) as illegitimate.<sup>251</sup> As mentioned previously, YHWH had met with and blessed Solomon at the high place at Gibeon.<sup>252</sup> Nevertheless, the high places came to be regarded as illegitimate and were therefore removed from the cult of YHWH by Hezekiah. As mentioned previously, Jacob had set up and anointed a pillar in Bethel when he vowed that YHWH would be his God<sup>253</sup> and Moses sets up twelve pillars when Israel committed

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<sup>249</sup> Num. 21:8-9.

<sup>250</sup> 2 Kgs. 18:4.

<sup>251</sup> The idea that these cultic locations and objects were "illegitimate" is obviously one perspective among many. Those attempting to emphasize the historic diversity of religious perspectives in ancient Israel are likely to point this out. For example, Edelman comments that B. Long's characterization of the *bāmôt* as "illegitimate shrines outside the Jerusalem temple's authority", "illustrates well the effect of reading with canonical glasses." She then goes on to point out how the *bāmôt* were considered legitimate in many yhwistic circles. Edelman, "Cultic Sites and Complexes Beyond the Jerusalem Temple," 86; Long, *2 Kings* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 195. However, it is possible to recognize the variety of religious perspective in ancient Israel while attempting to follow the logic of the biblical perspectives. By referring to the rejection of the high places, the pillars, the cultic poles and the bronze serpent as "illegitimate," I am attempting to do the latter without denying the former. Moreover, I have no intention of denying the variety of perspectives on these cultic locations and objects within the Old Testament text. On the variety of perspectives within the Old Testament texts regarding these cultic locations and objects, again, see Larocca-Pitts, *'Of Wood and Stone'*, esp. Part 2, 125-250.

<sup>252</sup> E.g. 1 Kgs. 3:2-4.

<sup>253</sup> Gen. 28:18, 22; 31:13, 45; 35:14.

themselves to doing all that YHWH commanded them to do.<sup>254</sup> However, these cultic objects eventually came to be regarded as illegitimate and were therefore removed from the cult of YHWH by Hezekiah.<sup>255</sup> Finally, although the cultic poles are never considered legitimate objects in the cult of YHWH within the biblical texts, these texts suggest that they were accepted as legitimate by some worshipers of YHWH. Analogous examples can perhaps be found in the burning bush<sup>256</sup> (YHWH is referred to as “the one who dwells in a bush”),<sup>257</sup> the Tamarisk tree that Abraham planted in Beersheeba when he called on the name of YHWH there<sup>258</sup> or the golden lampstand in the tabernacle with its branches, bulbs and flowers.<sup>259</sup> Nevertheless, the cultic poles found at the high places which appear to have been accepted in some circles of yhwistic worship eventually came to be regarded as illegitimate and were therefore removed from the cult of YHWH by Hezekiah.

Therefore, I would argue that Hezekiah not only reformed the cult of YHWH but that he reformed it by removing cultic objects which had previously been considered legitimate. In doing so he removed cultic objects that could be taken for divine images.<sup>260</sup> From the biblical perspective, immediately following this reform it could be argued that only the cults of alien deities made use of the high places,

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<sup>254</sup> Exod. 24:4-7.

<sup>255</sup> See Mettinger, *No Graven Image?*, 26; Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline*, 121-123.

<sup>256</sup> Exod. 3:2.

<sup>257</sup> Deut. 33:16.

<sup>258</sup> Gen. 21:33.

<sup>259</sup> Exod. 25:31-40.

<sup>260</sup> W.I. Toews has made a similar point in regard to Hosea’s rejection of the altars, pillars and sanctuaries. He notes that while these were intended “to point the worshiper to Yahweh,” they had lost their representative function and thus had become “the object of devotion and misplaced confidence.” Toews, *Monarchy and Religious Institution in Israel under Jeroboam I* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 168. Toews’ point is developed in Evans, “Cult Images, Royal Policies and the Origins of Aniconism,” 206-207. There is an important difference to be noted here between the use of divine images of YHWH on the one hand and the use of images *that could be mistaken for* divine images of YHWH on the other. The biblical depiction of the era after the fall of the Northern Kingdom deals with the latter and provides no clear evidence that it is dealing with the former.

pillars and cultic poles. Therefore, along with the removal of the calves and the repudiation of Samaritan worship, Hezekiah's reform marks the end of the Old Testament's battle on the domestic front against the worship of YHWH by removing from the cult of YHWH objects that could be taken or possibly *mistaken* for divine images.

At this point, a number of objections could be raised. In the first, it could be objected that Hezekiah did not simply remove objects that could be taken for divine images, but that he removed objects that were genuinely regarded as divine images of the God of Israel by those who made use of them. If this is assumed to be the case, then it could also be argued that Hezekiah was directly waging a war against the worship of YHWH via divine images after the fall of Israel. Sommer has argued that the pillars<sup>261</sup> and the cultic poles<sup>262</sup> may have been regarded as incarnations of YHWH in ancient Israel.<sup>263</sup> He suggests that "...sacred stones, like the sacred wood with which they were associated, were regarded as legitimate embodiments in some yhwistic circles in early Israel."<sup>264</sup> If this was so, then Hezekiah's removal of these

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<sup>261</sup> Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, 49-51. Sommer likens Jacob's anointing of the pillar at Bethel with the Mesopotamian *mīs pī* ritual in which a mere stone might become a place of divine dwelling. On pillars as manifestations of the gods themselves and the very incarnation of the sacred in the ancient Near East see Toorn, "Worshipping Stones," 1-14.

<sup>262</sup> Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, 47.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid., 44-57. Sommer's interpretation of the pithoi from Kuntillet Ajrud referring to "Yhwh of Teman and his Asherah" and to "Yhwh of Samaria and his Asherah" as well as his comments regarding the inscription from Khirbet el-Qom support the idea that the asherah may have been understood as an incarnation of Yhwh. While Sommer clearly affirms that some texts refer to the goddess Asherah (1 Kgs. 18:9; 2 Kgs. 23:4), he argues that the inscriptions from Kuntillet Ajrud are not likely referring to the goddess partly because pronominal suffixes never attach to proper names in Hebrew or other Canaanite languages. On the pithoi from Kuntillet Ajrud see for example Meshel, *Kuntillet Ajrud (Horvat Teman): An Iron Age II Religious Site on the Judah-Sinai Border* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2012), On the inscriptions themselves see chapter five 73-142. For a bibliography of English and Hebrew works see 358-364; Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 210-247; Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallactic Approaches* (London: Continuum, 2001), 370-437 and Miller, *The Religion of Ancient Israel* (London: SPCK, 2000), 31-36.

<sup>264</sup> Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, 51 Cf. Mettinger, *No Graven Image?*, 37.

objects from the cult of YHWH may have been an attempt to bring to an end the worship of YHWH via pillars and cultic poles.

In response, I would first point out that this may very well have been the case in terms of the history of the religion of ancient Israel. It is not difficult to conceive of worshipers of YHWH who understood the pillars and sacred poles as divine embodiments of the deity. However, whether this was or was not the case in ancient Israel, the biblical writers clearly do not present Hezekiah's reform in this way. Instead, they suggest that Hezekiah was removing cultic objects that could be taken or mistaken as such.

Secondly, as noted previously, Manasseh reversed many of his father's accomplishments and Josiah in turn reversed many of the works of Manasseh. It could therefore be questioned whether Hezekiah's apparently "short-lived" reform could be said to be one of the events which marks the end of the Old Testament's battle on the domestic front. In response, I would first point out that, following the fall of the Northern Kingdom and the removal of the golden calves, the Old Testament simply provides no clear references to the worship of YHWH via divine images. As I will argue in the next chapter, all of the texts depicting the era after the fall fight a war against idols exclusively on a foreign front against alien deities and the divine images associated with them. Nevertheless, the Judean response to Israel's disaster is relevant in terms of the end of the biblical battle on the domestic front because it thoroughly disassociates the worship of YHWH from the use of divine images. However, I would maintain that it does not do so by means of direct attack upon the worship of YHWH via divine images. Instead, the text suggests that Hezekiah established a cult that avoided even the appearance that YHWH was

worshiped via divine images by removing objects from the cult of YHWH that could be taken as such.

Therefore, when the text describes Manasseh's rebuilding of the high places and his return of the cultic pole to the Temple, it does not affirm that he re-established the worship of YHWH via divine images in Judah but that he returned to a form of the worship of YHWH which could again more easily be mistaken as such. To use an analogy, the removal of the golden calves closed the door on the worship of YHWH via divine images and the reform of Hezekiah put a lock on the door by moving a step beyond the removal of divine images of YHWH to the removal of objects that could possibly be mistaken as such. Manasseh's re-establishment of the high places and the return of the cultic pole to the Temple may have taken a step backward and removed Hezekiah's lock, but the door was not re-opened. In other words, while he clearly re-established a worship of YHWH that made use of images *that could be mistaken* for divine images of YHWH, there is little evidence to suggest that the cultic objects he sets up were meant to be representations of YHWH. Therefore, despite Manasseh's actions, I would nevertheless argue that Hezekiah's reform marks the end of the Old Testament's battle on the domestic front.

Thirdly, more a point of clarification than objection, I am not suggesting that Hezekiah removed *all* objects that could potentially be taken for divine images of Israel's God. For example, he did not remove the Ark. Whether this is viewed as something of a double standard or not, the ark and certain other cultic objects simply do not fall under the same biblical condemnation.<sup>265</sup> Therefore, despite these two objections and the point of clarification just noted, I would maintain that, along with

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<sup>265</sup> See Appendix 1.

the removal of the calves and the repudiation of Samaritan worship, Hezekiah's reform also marks the end of the Old Testament's battle on the domestic front.

## **5.5 Summary**

Thus far in the chapter I have argued that the sequence of events associated with the fall of the Northern Kingdom marks the end of the Old Testament's battle on the domestic front. The elimination of the golden calves removed the most prominent examples of the worship of YHWH via divine images. The repudiation of Samaritan worship asserts that any worship of YHWH that makes use of divine images is no worship of YHWH at all. And finally, Hezekiah's reform removes from the cult of YHWH cultic objects that could be mistaken for divine images of YHWH (i.e., the pillars, the cultic pole and the bronze serpent).

## **5.6 Practical Justification for a Strong Distinction**

This narrative sequence of events paves the way for a war against idols that is exclusively fought on a foreign front by providing practical justification for a strong distinction between YHWH, who is the living god, and the gods of the nations, which are wood and stone made by human hands. Having made clear that the cult of YHWH in Judah has nothing to do with divine images, the claim can now be made that, while the nations worship wood and stone, Judah worships a living God. This

strong distinction is evident in Hezekiah's prayer for deliverance when Jerusalem is threatened by Assyria.<sup>266</sup>

Immediately following Hezekiah's reform, the biblical writers describe the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem. The version in Chronicles emphasizes the connection between the reform and the events that follow:

1 אחרי הדברים והאמת האלה בא סנחריב מלך אשור ויבא ביהודה ויחן על הערים הבצורות ויאמר לבקעם אליו

“1 After these things and these acts of faithfulness, King Sennacherib of Assyria came and invaded Judah and encamped against the fortified cities, thinking to win them for himself.”<sup>267</sup>

The Assyrian challenge to Jerusalem is put forth clearly: none of the gods of the nations were able to save their peoples from the hand of Assyria and therefore the Judeans should not trust that YHWH would deliver Jerusalem either.<sup>268</sup> Hezekiah's prayer explains why the Assyrian challenge is baseless:

15 יהוה אלהי ישראל ישב הכרבים אתה הוא האלהים לבדך לכל ממלכות הארץ אתה עשית את השמים ואת הארץ  
16 הטה יהוה אזנך ושמע פקח יהוה עיניך וראה ושמע את דברי סנחריב אשר שלחו לחרף אלהים חי  
17 אמנם יהוה החריבו מלכי אשור את הגוים ואת ארצם  
18 ונתנו את אלהיהם באש כי לא אלהים המה כי אם מעשה ידי אדם עץ ואבן ויאבדום  
19 ועתה יהוה אלהינו הושיענו נא מידו וידעו כל ממלכות הארץ כי אתה יהוה אלהים לבדך

“15 O LORD the God of Israel, who are enthroned above the cherubim, you are God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth. 16 Incline your ear, O LORD, and hear; open your eyes, O LORD, and see; hear the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock the living God. 17 Truly, O LORD, the kings of Assyria have laid waste the nations and their lands, 18 and have hurled their gods into the fire, though they were no gods but the work of human hands—wood and stone—and so they were destroyed. 19 So now, O LORD our God, save us, I pray you, from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, O LORD, are God alone.”<sup>269</sup>

The prayer of Hezekiah makes clear that the gods of the nations did not save their people because they were the work of human hands. Therefore, they were thrown

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<sup>266</sup> 2 Kgs. 19:14-19; Isa. 37:14-20.

<sup>267</sup> 2 Chr. 32:1.

<sup>268</sup> 2 Kgs. 18:32-35; 19: 11-13; Isa. 36:18-20; 37:10-13.

<sup>269</sup> 2 Kgs. 19:15-19; Isa. 37:15-20.



into the fire. But the same cannot be said for YHWH. He is “enthroned above the cherubim,” the maker of heaven and earth, the God who has ears to hear and eyes to see. He is “the living God.” The prayer emphasizes the difference between the aniconic worship of YHWH in Judah and the iconic worship of alien deities in order to explain why Jerusalem has reason to hope that it will be delivered.<sup>270</sup> The distinction between YHWH as the living God and the gods of the nations is put succinctly in 2 Chronicles 32:19:

19 וידברו אל אלהי ירושלם כעל אלהי עמי הארץ מעשה ידי האדם

“19 They spoke of the God of Jerusalem as if he were like the gods of the peoples of the earth, which are the work of human hands.”

I would argue that it would be difficult to justify such a strong distinction before the description of the sequence of events associated with the fall of Israel. Before the fall, the nations could simply point to the golden calves in order to show the hypocrisy of the contrast. Even after the fall, they could either point to the Samaritan worship of YHWH that made use of divine images or they could point to the use of pillars, the cultic pole or the bronze serpent in the worship of YHWH in Judah. However, after the capture or destruction of the calves, the condemnation of Samaritan worship, and Hezekiah’s reform, the distinction could be made without being open to the obvious counter-claim that the cult of YHWH appeared to make use of divine images in much the same way as the cults of alien deities.

Of course, in making this point I do mean to imply that there are no literary precursors to the distinction that Hezekiah makes within the texts depicting the era before the fall of the Northern Kingdom. For example, as pointed out in chapter two,

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<sup>270</sup> On this see Childs, *Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis*, 100; Fritz and Hagedorn, *1 & 2 Kings*, 374; Faur, “The Biblical Idea of Idolatry,” 10.

Deut. 4 contrasts the gods of the nations which are the work of human hands, wood and stone, with YHWH who is the God in heaven above and on the earth below.<sup>271</sup> Nevertheless, according to the biblical depiction, for the entirety of Israel's time in the Promised Land, this derisive contrast was repeatedly open to the accusation of blatant hypocrisy. According to this depiction, it was only after the sequence of events associated with Israel's fall that the distinction found strong justification *in practice*. Following these events, the claim could be made that it is only the worship of alien deities that involves divine images, not the worship of YHWH.<sup>272</sup> Therefore, I would argue that this sequence of events paves the way for a war against idols that is exclusively fought on the foreign front by providing justification for the strong distinction between YHWH who is the living God and the gods of the nations, which are wood and stone made by human hands.

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<sup>271</sup> Deut. 4:28; 39.

<sup>272</sup> In his studies attempting to trace the origins of Israel's aniconic traditions, Mettinger distinguishes between *de facto* aniconism (indifference to icons, mere absence of images, or tolerant aniconism) and *programmatic* aniconism (repudiation of images, iconophobia, or iconoclasm) and notes that, while Israel's *de facto* aniconic tradition may very well pre-date the Solomonic Temple by centuries, Israel's *programmatic* aniconic tradition is a much later phenomenon. Mettinger, *No Graven Image*; Mettinger, "Israelite Aniconism: Developments and Origins," 173-204. Similarly, Keel distinguishes between the mere absence of images and the conscious repudiation of such in Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel*. Cf. Schmidt, "The Aniconic Tradition," 78 and Meyers, *Exodus*, 170-171. These studies are of course attempting to trace the development of aniconism within the history of the religion of ancient Israel. While this is not my intention, I would add that the biblical depiction clearly presents an earlier period in which the strong distinction that is found in Hezekiah's prayer as well as the idol polemics found in texts depicting the era after the fall of the Northern Kingdom only found justification in practice after the sequence of events associated with the fall of the Northern Kingdom. Therefore, the heavy reliance on the aniconic distinction within the texts of the Old Testament was largely unjustified in practice before this sequence of events and this seems to correspond to Mettinger's earlier *de facto* aniconism that is followed by the later *programmatic* aniconism. Cf. Evans who has argued that the aniconic tradition may have been developed to justify the policies that called for the elimination of images. In other words, instead of theological motivations prompting the reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah, he suggests that the reforms, prompted by socio-political realities, motivated the theological explanation that is evident in the work of the Deuteronomist. See Evans, "Cult Images, Royal Policies and the Origins of Aniconism," 192-212.

## 5.7 A Distinction that Fits the Biblical Context

Studies interested in tracing the compositional history of these texts suggest that this history, and especially the history of the texts dealing with the siege of Jerusalem, is highly complex.<sup>273</sup> Within these studies, the prayer of Hezekiah is almost always regarded as a late addition, most often because of its assumed “late monotheism.”

However, I would argue that, whether it is regarded as late or not, Hezekiah’s strong distinction between YHWH and the gods of the nations fits very well within the biblical context of the aftermath of the fall of the Northern Kingdom for two reasons. In the first, it fits well because, within the narrative, the Northern Kingdom, who at least appeared to worship YHWH via divine images, had just been destroyed and Judah intended to avoid the same fate.<sup>274</sup> Cogan, describing the historical reaction in ancient Judah puts it this way:

“The Assyrian invasions, the destruction of the land, and the successive deportations must have had repercussions in neighboring Judah. The political and religious leadership in Jerusalem saw in the downfall of Israel a foreboding lesson: Was it not Israel’s apostasy that brought about its demise? Could not similar deviations from the prescribed cult be pointed to within Judah?”<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> It is not my intention to minimize the potential complexity of this textual history. However, I would once again note that the ambiguity I am attempting to explain is not the product of either the texts that we do not have (i.e., the sources which are assumed to comprise the narratives in the received text) nor even the product of a sequence of events that interpreters may assume that the texts refer to (i.e., the ostensive historical reference). Therefore, my approach does not rely upon the answers to the questions of historicity or textual composition as much as it relies upon the examination of the juxtaposition of the issues in the texts as we now have them. For this reason, although Hezekiah’s prayer is often considered a late addition, I am most interested in the way in which it now functions within the biblical context of the siege of Jerusalem and the sequence of events associated with the fall.

<sup>274</sup> I say “at least appeared” because, in regard to Judah’s reaction, the question of the precise understanding of the nature of the calves in the perspective of those who made use of them is largely irrelevant. Whether Israel thought of the calves as pedestals, symbols, or something else, Judah’s reaction to the fall of the Northern Kingdom surely does not reflect a nuanced perspective of the calves. Although those who made use of the calves would most likely have objected to their presentation in the biblical texts, the portrayal of the calves in these texts suggests that YHWH was worshiped in the Northern Kingdom via divine images.

<sup>275</sup> Cogan, *2 Kings*, 220. Here Cogan uses the term “apostasy.” I would conjecture that he does not use the term exclusively to refer to the worship of alien deities but instead uses it generally to refer to deviation from the prescribed worship of YHWH. However, if the term is used in this exclusive sense, I would argue that it is Josiah’s reform that puts the greater emphasis upon the

Following the fall of Israel, Judah thoroughly disassociates YHWH from the Samarian worship and removes objects that could be taken for divine images from the cult of YHWH. Based upon these actions, Hezekiah is able to make a strong distinction between YHWH and the gods of the nations. The distinction makes sense within the biblical context of the aftermath of the fall of the Northern Kingdom because Israel had been destroyed for worshipping YHWH via divine images and Judah seeks to avoid the same fate.

Secondly, the strong distinction between YHWH and the gods of the nations fits well within the biblical context of the aftermath of Israel's fall because it undermines the Assyrian propaganda that is being brought against Judah within the biblical narrative. Within the biblical depiction of the siege of Jerusalem, the Rabshakeh first suggests that YHWH was angry with Hezekiah for removing the high places and then declares that YHWH had sent Assyria to destroy Jerusalem.<sup>276</sup> Although the text does not expand upon the motives lying behind the speech of the Rabshakeh, a brief aside addressing Neo-Assyrian imperialistic propaganda may shed light on both the speech of the Rabshakeh and the response of Hezekiah. I do

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removal of the worship of alien deities while the sequence of events associated with the fall of the Northern Kingdom puts the greater emphasis upon disassociating the cult of YHWH in Judah from the use of divine images. Either way, Cogan's point that the fall of the Northern Kingdom caused Judah to critically re-examine the worship in Judah surely fits with the biblical narrative.

<sup>276</sup> 2 Kgs. 18:22, 25; Isa. 36:7, 10. In regard to centralization of the cult of YHWH in Jerusalem referred to in 2 Kgs. 18:22 and Isa. 36:7, I would only note that, when viewed within the context of the repudiation of Samarian worship and Hezekiah's reform, the text suggests that the centralization of the cult reduced "the way that YHWH was worshiped" to "the way that YHWH was worshiped in Jerusalem." According to this narrower perspective, the worship of YHWH via divine images or even via objects that could be taken for divine images was judged to be no worship of YHWH at all. To use Halbertal and Margalit's analogy regarding "idolatry" and "the city of God," it could be said that, in the aftermath of the fall of the Northern Kingdom, the walls of the city of God were redrawn leaving the Samarian worship of YHWH as well as the previous worship of YHWH in the Northern Kingdom outside the walls. Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 236. Therefore, along with the removal of the golden calves, the repudiation of Samarian worship, and the reform of Hezekiah, the centralization of the cult of YHWH in Jerusalem also marks the end of the biblical battle on the domestic front against the worship of YHWH via divine images.

not include the following historical aside with the aim of unearthing the world behind the text but in order to better understand the narrative itself.

The idea that the very same gods whom the nations trusted were actually fighting against them was a common element of Neo-Assyrian imperialistic propaganda. It has long been recognized that it was common in Mesopotamian historiography for nations to attribute their military victories and defeats to their own gods. If a nation was victorious in battle, it was because their god had been pleased with them and had given their enemies into their hands. When a nation was defeated in battle it was because their gods had been angry with them and given them into the hands of the enemy. The idea of a nation being given into the hands of an enemy by their own gods is often referred to as “divine abandonment.”<sup>277</sup> The Neo-Assyrian Empire clearly made use of the divine abandonment motif within its imperialistic propaganda. When Assyria would lay siege to a city, it would declare that the gods of that city were fighting against their own people either for some wrong they had done or because these gods had recognized the might of Assur.<sup>278</sup> This suggested that the nation that resisted Assyria was fighting against the will of its own gods.

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<sup>277</sup> See for example Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*; Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 111-112; Block, “Divine Abandonment: Ezekiel’s Adaptation of an Ancient Near Eastern Motif,” in *The Book of Ezekiel*, (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000).

<sup>278</sup> Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, 1. In terms of divine abandonment, see the following from Albrektson: Speaking of the Sumerian and later Akkadian deity Enlil, Albrektson writes: “His terrifying wrath may...be directed against his own city: the calamities and destructions which befall it are ultimately not the achievement of the enemy but a result of Enlil’s anger.” Describing the destruction of the city of Akkad by Enlil, Albrektson writes, “The tutelary goddess left her shrine in Akkad and turned her weapons against her own city.” In regard to the destruction of Ur, he writes, “Ur had been made into ruins through the attacks of the Subarians and the Elamites, and this catastrophe is represented in the lamentation as the work of divine powers, who used the foreign invaders as their instruments.” Albrektson also refers to the Mesha Stone: which reads, “Omri was king of Israel and he humbled Moab for many days, for Chemosh was angry with his land.” He points out that “Esarhaddon’s accounts of the rebuilding of Babylon...were probably part of Esarhaddon’s endeavors to placate the Babylonian part of his empire, which had suffered grievously under his father, Sennacherib. Naturally he could not simply state that he intended to remedy and restore what his father had destroyed. So the devastation is represented as a divine punishment, the duration of which was shortened through the mercy of Marduk.” Finally, Albrektson notes, “If a king

Within this line of propaganda divine images played an important role. Once the nation was conquered, the Assyrians would enter into the defeated city and lay hands on the divine images. One Assyrian account<sup>279</sup> describes how the image was brought out to the gate of the city in order to oversee the pillaging of the cities' goods. Then, when all had been taken, the image itself was carried off to Assyria. The defeated nation was made to see that their god had not only overseen their destruction but that he had gone to Assyria in recognition of the might of Ashur. If the nation submitted to the Assyrian yoke, the divine image would be returned but if the nation continued to resist, the divine image would remain in Assyrian hands. This suggested that a nation's obedience to its deities went hand in hand with submission to Assyria. Of course, not all divine images were preserved. Some Assyrian accounts show that, at times, they were destroyed. In either case, the divine image was used in Assyrian propaganda to demonstrate that the deity had abandoned its people either by abandoning its divine image to destruction or by physically departing from its temple through the removal of the divine image by the hands of the Assyrians.<sup>280</sup>

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commits sin, his own gods may dethrone him." Albrektson, *History and the Gods: An Essay on the Idea of Historical Events as Divine Manifestations in the Ancient Near East and in Israel* (1; Lund: Gleerup, 1967), 17, 25, 27, 100, 102, 103. Cogan's broader thesis that the Assyrians did not impose their national cult upon Judah has generated ongoing debate. Cogan responds (primarily to Spieckermann, *Juda unter Assur in der Sargonidenzeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982)) in Cogan, "Judah Under Assyrian Hegemony: A Reexamination of Imperialism and Religion," *JBL* 112 (1993): 403-414. Mark Smith summarizes the debate in Smith, *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 156, footnote 96.

<sup>279</sup> Sargon's Letter to the Gods, *TCL 3*, 346-47, noted in Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, 23.

<sup>280</sup> See Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 103-123. For a helpful and extensive chart documenting the removal, repair, and return of divine images in the ancient Near East see, *ibid.*, 157-169. On the continued practice of the capture and strategic return or withholding of divine images through the Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian and Hellenistic periods, note the references provided in Becking, "The Return of the Deity: Iconic or Aniconic?," in *Essays on Ancient Israel*, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 55.

This tactic, by which divine abandonment was demonstrated tangibly by the destruction or capture of the divine image, rested on two assumptions. In the first, it rested on the assumption that a divine image was not merely a representation of a deity or a symbol to remind worshipers of the deity. As many scholars have noted, through the washing and opening of the mouth rituals,<sup>281</sup> the image was thought to have become something similar to an incarnation of a deity on earth.<sup>282</sup> It was believed that the image gained the ability to become the god, without however, in any way limiting the god, who was understood to remain transcendent.<sup>283</sup> During rituals of this sort, the officiating priest pretends to cut off the hands of the craftsmen who made the image using a wooden knife and the craftsmen swear an oath declaring that they did not make it but that instead the gods of their craft had made it.<sup>284</sup> Through these symbolic actions, “the fact that the statue is the work of human hands is ritually denied.”<sup>285</sup> For those who accepted this mystical relationship between deity and divine image, when the Assyrians captured a divine image and carried it off to Assyria, it was not merely the removal of a cultic object but the departure of a god.

Secondly, the use of divine images in Assyrian propaganda rested on the assumption that the fate of a divine image was an indicator of the disposition of a deity toward its people. The capture or destruction of a divine image demonstrated that the nation’s god was displeased with them and that this god had punished his

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<sup>281</sup> On the relationship between the two see Blackman, “The Rite of Opening the Mouth in Ancient Egypt and Babylonia,” 47-59 and Walker and Dick, “The Induction of the Cult Image,” 55-121. Walker suggests that on the first day of the ritual the mouth was washed and on the second it was opened so that the deity could speak.

<sup>282</sup> Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, 47.

<sup>283</sup> Jacobsen, “The Graven Image,” 20-23.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-24.

people through the Assyrians. The restoration of the divine image by the hand of the Assyrians demonstrated that the gods of the nations had been pacified.

With these points in mind we return to the presentation of the Assyrian propaganda within the biblical text.<sup>286</sup> In addition to suggesting that YHWH was angry with Hezekiah and declaring that YHWH had sent Assyria to destroy Jerusalem, the last card that the Assyrian representative plays is to warn the people of Jerusalem not to rely on YHWH because none of the gods of the nations were able to save their land from the king of Assyria.<sup>287</sup> Hezekiah responds by affirming that YHWH is the living God but the gods of the nations were cast into the fire because they were not gods but the work of human hands—wood and stone. It seems to me that this response makes good sense in light of the role of divine images within Assyrian propaganda. The Rabshakeh’s reference to “the gods of the nations” is best understood to refer to both the divine images and the deities with which they are associated. To refer to the divine image was to refer to the god, though of course, without assuming that the deity was limited to any particular image. Conversely, to refer to the god was to refer to the divine image. In this regard, the inscription of Sargon the 2<sup>nd</sup> recounting the conquest of Samaria is relevant. He writes:

The people of Samaria, who conspired and plotted with a king hostile to me not to do service and not to bring tribute... I fought against them. I counted as spoil 27,280 people, together with their chariots *and the gods in which they trusted*.<sup>288</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> It is important to note here the direction I am moving in when using these historical practices of the Neo-Assyrian Empire in my consideration of the biblical perspective. Instead of attempting to use the information regarding the role of divine images in Neo-Assyrian imperialistic propaganda in an attempt to get at the historical reality to which both may refer, I am using it in an attempt to illuminate the biblical perspective on the siege of Jerusalem.

<sup>287</sup> 2 Kgs. 18: 32-35; 19:10-13; Isa. 36:18-20; 37:10-13.

<sup>288</sup> Hallo and Younger, *The Context of Scripture: 2. Monumental Inscriptions from the Biblical World* (COS vol. 2; Leiden: Brill, 2000), 295-296. For an alternative source with this inscription see Hallo, *The Books of Kings: Sources, Composition, Historiography and Reception* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 190.



In this inscription, the gods in which the people of Samaria trusted are counted as the spoils of war that are taken by Assyria along with captives and chariots. Although Sargon simply refers to “the gods in which they trusted,” he is obviously referring to the divine images of Samaria. In the same way, the Rabshakeh’s reference to “the gods of the nations” should be taken to refer not only to the deities in general, but also to the divine images associated with them.

Hezekiah therefore responds by affirming that the divine images of the nations who fell to Assyria were not able to save from the hand of Assyria because they were wood and stone. He thoroughly rejects the assumption that the fate of a divine image was an indicator of the disposition of the deity toward its people and also objects to the idea that YHWH should be compared with gods that are the work of human hands. Therefore, I would secondly note that the strong distinction between YHWH, who is the living God, and the gods of the nations, which are wood and stone, fits well in the biblical context of the aftermath of the fall because it undermines the propaganda that the Rabshakeh brings against Jerusalem.

Finally, on a more speculative note, it could also be pointed out that Israel was among the nations that Assyria had destroyed and that their divine images had been taken as spoil by the Assyrians. Setting aside the question of how the golden calves were viewed in the eyes of those who made use of them in worship, the Assyrians would surely have associated them with the worship of YHWH. Given the role of divine images in Assyrian propaganda, it does not strike me as unreasonable to assume that Assyria would have used the calves to demonstrate that YHWH had been angry with Israel and had sent Assyria to destroy them. This may partly explain the reluctance on the part of the biblical writers to associate Jeroboam’s calves directly with the worship of YHWH. It may also provide some

explanation for Hezekiah's removal of objects in the cult of YHWH that could be taken for divine images. Whether the objects which Hezekiah chose to remove were associated with the worship of YHWH or alien deities, the Assyrians surely would have taken them for divine images of Judah's God. Hezekiah's prayer would affirm that, like all the other divine images of the nations that Assyria had conquered, the Assyrians had been able to cast the so-called "gods" of the Northern Kingdom into the fire because they were the work of human hands—wood and stone. Judah, on the other hand, served a living God.

## **5.8 Chapter Summary**

Within this chapter I have argued that the sequence of events associated with the fall of the Northern Kingdom marks the end of the Old Testament's battle on the domestic front against the worship of YHWH via divine images. The removal of the golden calves eliminates the most prominent example of this type of worship, the repudiation of Samarian worship makes clear that any worship of YHWH that makes use of divine images is no worship of YHWH at all and the reform of Hezekiah removes objects from the cult of YHWH that could be taken for divine images. This sequence paves the way for a war against idols that is exclusively fought on a foreign front. It also provides practical justification for Hezekiah's strong distinction between YHWH, who is the living God, and the gods of the nations, which are the work of human hands, wood and stone. This distinction, which is evident in Hezekiah's prayer, fits well within the biblical context of the aftermath of the fall of Israel because Judah seeks to avoid Israel's fate and because the distinction undermines the Assyrian propaganda that is being brought against Jerusalem. For all

of these reasons, the sequence of events associated with the fall also paves the way for the war against idols that is exclusively fought on the foreign front.

6  
THE WAR  
AFTER THE FALL

*By this stage the ridicule of idols has ceased to be a way of criticising  
Israelite practices and has become a stick with which to beat foreign nations.*

John Barton<sup>1</sup>

*[After Josiah's reform] Heathenism and idolatry became synonymous terms;  
in fact, 'abodah zarah (foreign worship) came to mean idolatrous worship.*

Pfeiffer<sup>2</sup>

In the previous chapters I have argued that the relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols within the Old Testament is an ambiguous one because there is a difference between the war against idols before and after the fall of the Northern Kingdom. Texts depicting the era before the fall appear to treat the worship of other gods and the worship of idols as differing issues because the war is not only fought on a foreign front against alien deities and the divine images associated with them, but also on a domestic front against the worship of YHWH via divine images. In these texts a distinction between the worship of the wrong gods and the worship of the right God in the wrong way is readily identifiable because the most prominent “idols” dealt with have nothing to do with alien deities (i.e., Micah’s idols and the golden calves of Aaron and Jeroboam) but are instead

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<sup>1</sup> Barton, “‘The Work of Human Hands’,” 68.

<sup>2</sup> Pfeiffer, “Images of Yahweh,” 221. Cf. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 288-289; Carroll, “Aniconic God and the cult of images,” 51.

associated with the worship of YHWH. It is therefore difficult in this biblical context to simply view the worship of other gods and the worship of idols as synonymous issues.

However, with the fall of the Northern Kingdom came the end of the Old Testament's battle on the domestic front. The removal of the calves, the repudiation of Samaritan worship and Hezekiah's reform mark the end of the battle on this front and pave the way for a war that is exclusively fought on a foreign front. Because neither the texts depicting the era before or after the fall demonstrate a concern to distinguish between alien deities and the divine images associated with them, when the war on the domestic front comes to an end, "heathenism and idolatry become synonymous terms." Therefore in this chapter, I will argue that the reason texts depicting the era after the fall appear to fuse the worship of other gods and the worship of idols is not because Israel has had a breakthrough in their thinking and come to the realization that alien deities are nothing more than wood and stone, but because the war against idols is exclusively fought on the foreign front against the divine images of alien deities.

In section 6.1 I will briefly deal with the absence of the worship of YHWH via divine images in the texts depicting the era after the fall of the Northern Kingdom and in section 6.2 I will provide a survey of the war against idols as it is presented in these texts. Without attempting to minimize the diversity of approaches to divine images in these texts, I will highlight three factors that are commonly found in them all. Having surveyed these idol polemics, I will then consider whether they represent a fusion of the issues which accounted for the distinction between the prohibitions (section 6.3). While I argue that they do *not*, I nevertheless recognize that the war against idols in texts depicting the era after the fall provide a literary

context in which the fusion of the prohibitions appears reasonable (sections 6.4 to 6.5). In section 6.6 I will include an excursus which questions whether the strong idol polemics in these texts reflect a progression from monolatry to monotheism (and conclude that it does not) and in section 6.7 I will draw a few conclusions.

It should be noted from the start that I fully recognize that I am dealing with a variety of differing genres when I compare the war against idols as it is found in texts depicting the eras before and after the fall of Israel. The texts depicting the era before the fall are largely law and narrative and texts depicting the era after the fall are primarily prophecy/poetry, though of course both groups are varied. While many of the poetic oracles obviously cannot be correlated with specific events, there is little question that the texts I will consider (Isaiah 40-48; Jeremiah, Ezek...etc.) broadly deal with the era after Israel's fall. Therefore, I would argue that the points I will make are valid despite the differing literary forms.

### **6.1 An Absence of Battle on the Domestic Front**

In the first, I would note that there is a noticeable absence of battle on the domestic front in texts depicting the era after the fall of the Northern Kingdom. In chapter four I pointed out that a number of texts depicting the era *before* the fall have generated ongoing scholarly controversy revolving around the question of whether they are dealing with divine images of alien deities or the worship of YHWH via divine images.<sup>3</sup> In this section I simply point out that no comparable controversy has been generated by any text depicting the era after the fall.

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<sup>3</sup> Deut. 12, Judg. 17-18; Deut. 4; Exod. 32, Deut. 9, 1 Kgs. 12.

No texts depicting the era after the fall of Israel deal with divine images made by Levite priests (as Exod. 32 and Deut. 9 do when they tell of Aaron and the production of the golden calf). Neither do any texts deal with Israelites setting up divine images and Levite priests with an expectation of gaining YHWH's favour for doing so (as Judg. 17-18 does when it tells the story of Micah and his idols). Never do the texts provide a rationale against divine images that has to do with Israel's inability to accurately depict YHWH's form (as Deut. 4 does when it says that Israel is not to make an idol because they did not see a form when YHWH spoke but only heard his voice). Finally, no texts charge Israel to avoid worshiping YHWH as the Canaanites worship their gods i.e., at multiple locations by means of idols (as does Deut. 12). None of these details are included in texts depicting the era after the fall and accordingly, none have generated comparable scholarly controversy. Although the polemics against divine images multiply, there is little to suggest that they are dealing with the worship of the God of Israel. Therefore, I would argue that there is no evidence to suggest that the battle against idols on a domestic front continues in texts depicting the era after the fall of Israel.

Nevertheless, four qualifications should be kept in mind. In the first, I do not mean to imply that the idol polemics found in, for example, Isaiah 40-48 or Jeremiah 10, have nothing to say in regard to *the idea* of worshiping images of YHWH. To the contrary, if it is utter stupidity for the nations to trust in the works of their own hands, it would have been all the more foolish for Israel to make and worship images of YHWH. However, the point is derivative rather than primary. The targets of these polemics are the divine images of alien deities and clearly not images of YHWH.

Secondly, it should not be assumed that every text depicting the era after the fall of the Northern Kingdom makes explicit that the divine images being ridiculed are associated with alien deities. As we shall see in the following section, some include more detail and others less. However, unlike the texts I have used to represent the domestic front, in no case is there strong evidence to suggest that the worship of YHWH via divine images is the concern.

Thirdly, in referring to an absence of a battle “on the domestic front” I do not mean to imply that texts describing the era after the fall of Israel contain no criticism of the use of divine images within Israel and Judah (which they surely do),<sup>4</sup> but rather that, whether within Israel or without, the war is fought against divine images of alien deities.

Finally, to say that these texts do not deal with the worship of YHWH via divine images is not the same as saying that there were no longer images of YHWH in ancient Israel after the fall. As the old adage goes, “absence of evidence does not equal evidence of absence.” There may or may not have been images of YHWH in the era after the fall. But if there were, the texts depicting that era do not deal with them. As far as the texts suggest, the war on the “domestic front” came to an end with the fall of the Northern Kingdom.

## **6.2 All Arms to the Foreign Front**

I secondly point out that the war against idols in texts depicting the era after the fall exclusively wage war against alien deities and the divine images associated with them. In this section I will review a number of the texts themselves. I intend to

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<sup>4</sup> E.g. Ezek 8. See section 4.2.



provide a very brief survey of the war as it is presented in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Nahum, Habakkuk and three apocryphal (or Deuterocanonical) texts. Within these texts, there surely is a variety of creative ways in which divine images are attacked.<sup>5</sup> However, as noted above, I will focus on the threads that are most commonly found in them all. I will do this in order to comment on the assumption that the treatment of divine images in these texts represents a shift from monolatry to “monotheism” (section 6.6). Coupled with the absence of concern for the worship of YHWH via divine images, the examples presented in this section are intended to make a simple point: Within these texts, the war against idols has only one front and the enemy is foreign. For this reason the worship of other gods and the worship of idols are roughly synonymous in texts depicting the era after the fall.

### **6.2.1 Isaiah 40-48: Bel Bows Down, Nebo Stoops**

I begin by briefly touching upon the famous “idol-fabrication passages” found within what is often referred to as “Second” or “Deutero-Isaiah.”<sup>6</sup> These chapters contain some of the most derisive attacks upon divine images in the Old Testament.

Concerning these polemics, Zimmerli wrote:

Granted that this ridicule cannot really do justice to the way religious images were used and understood in Babylonia, it is still impressive how totally free the faith of the Old Testament

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<sup>5</sup> See Weeks, “Man-Made Gods?,” 17-20; MacDonald, “Recasting the Golden Calf: The Imaginative Potential of the Old Testament's Portrayal of Idolatry,” in *Idolatry*, (ed. Barton; London: T&T Clark, 2007), 23.

<sup>6</sup> On the legitimacy of referring to the texts in this way see Coggins, “Do We Still Need Deutero-Isaiah?,” *JSOT* 81 (1998): 77-92 and Clifford, “Deutero-Isaiah and Monotheism,” in *Prophecy and the Prophets in Ancient Israel* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 267. On the passages themselves, see Rudman, “The Theology of the Idol Fabrication Passages in Second Isaiah,” 114-121. Rudman builds upon Holter’s point that these passages draw a contrast between YHWH as the creator and the idol-makers. Holter, *Second Isaiah's Idol-Fabrication Passages* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1995).

has become of any internal temptation to fall into idolatry, which is here associated directly with worship of the images of foreign gods.<sup>7</sup>

Here Zimmerli argues that the polemics are totally free from internal temptation and that they are exclusively directed against the divine images of alien deities. I would agree on both counts. However, the freedom from “internal temptation to fall into idolatry” is not only relevant in terms of freedom from the temptation to worship divine images of alien deities but freedom from the temptation to worship YHWH via divine images. With the description of the fall of the Northern Kingdom within the biblical narrative, the battle on the domestic front had come to an end and the polemics exclusively focus on the images of foreign gods. This exclusive concern is surely evident in the idol polemics of Isa. 40-48.<sup>8</sup>

For example, in Isa. 46:1-2 we read:

1 כרע בל קרס נבו היו עצביהם לחיה ולבהמה נשאתיכם עמוסות משא לעיפה  
2 קרסו כרעו יחדו לא יכלו מלט משא ונפשם בשבי הלכה

“1 Bel bows down, Nebo stoops,  
their idols are on beasts and cattle;  
these things you carry are loaded  
as burdens on weary animals.  
2 They stoop, they bow down together;  
they cannot save the burden,  
but themselves go into captivity.”

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<sup>7</sup> Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline*, 123, italics mine. Also note Barr’s comments regarding the use of *selem* (image) to refer to an image of God in Gen.: “As a matter of historical development, it is not unlikely that the appearance of the term ‘image of God’ in the late source P was itself a reflex of the fact that idolatry had now been decisively expelled from the Israelite cult.” Barr, “The Image of God in the Book of Genesis,” 15.

<sup>8</sup> Rudmann considers and then reject the idea that the passages might be aimed against Judean idol makers. He instead argues, “The idol makers with their pretensions to utilizing and dispensing divine creative power in their processes are representative of foreign nations in general and not just a class of artisans.” Rudman, “The Theology of the Idol Fabrication Passages in Second Isaiah,” 119-120. Cf. MacDonald, “Monotheism and Isaiah,” in *Interpreting Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 54.

I first point out that the biblical context describes the destruction of Babylon.

The divine images of the Babylonians<sup>9</sup> are ridiculed because they have no power to save. They instead must be carried by those who worship them. These useless and heavy burdens are then contrasted with YHWH who carries and saves his people:

3 שמעו אלי בית יעקב וכל שארית בית ישראל העמסים מני בטן הנשאים מני רחם  
4 ועד זקנה אני הוא ועד שיבה אני אסבל אני עשיתי ואני אשא ואני אסבל ואמלט

“3 Listen to me, O house of Jacob,  
all the remnant of the house of Israel,  
who have been borne by me from your birth,  
carried from the womb;  
4 even to your old age I am he,  
even when you turn gray I will carry you.  
I have made, and I will bear;

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<sup>9</sup> As Williamson writes, “In this passage, at least, we can therefore be sure that the idols being manufactured are Babylonian deities, not representations of the God of Israel. The probability that this is the case throughout Isaiah 40-48 is strengthened by the observation that the main purpose of all this polemic is likely to have been the concern of the prophet to retain his audience’s undivided loyalty to their own national deity... The suggestion that these idols might somehow be representations of Yahweh thus misses the point of the polemic altogether.” Williamson, “Idols in Isaiah in Light of Isaiah 10:10-11,” in *New Perspectives on Old Testament Prophecy and History: Essays in Honor of Hans M. Barstad*, (eds. Thelle, et al.; VTSup; Leiden: Brill, 2015), 25-26, 28. In contrast, Becking seems to suggest a connection between the use of divine images of YHWH and Isaiah 40-48 when he writes, “The Hebrew Bible indicates that the veneration of יהוה was to be aniconic; phrased otherwise, orthodox Yahwism was seen as an aniconic religion. Nevertheless, various prophetic passages (especially in DtIsa) make clear that the veneration of the divine in the form of an image was an ongoing religious threat in ancient Israel.” Within this article Becking argues that a number of passages allude to the return of a cult image of YHWH from exile and he suggests that this is reflected in the references to the return of the cultic vessels in Ezra 1:7; 5:14-15; 6:5; 7:19 and Neh. 10:40. Becking, “The Return of the Deity,” 56. Cf. Becking “Silent Witness: The Symbolic Presence of God in the Temple Vessels in Ezra and Nehemiah” 267-282 in *Divine Presence and Absence in Exilic and Post-Exilic Judaism*, 2015. While I would agree that cultic vessels surely share many functional similarities with divine images in the ANE, they are not presented as divine images in the texts of Ezra or Nehemiah. However, Williamson goes on to write, “By contrast, the passages in Isaiah 1-39 are better understood as referring to idol worship within the Yahwhistic religion.” Williamson, “Idols in Isaiah in Light of Isaiah 10:10-11,” 26. This comment must be understood in light of Isaiah 10:5-15 (the passage which Williamson begins with). There, he builds a case that the passage is referring to Samaria. He goes on to connect the idol passages in Isa. 1-39 with the use of idols within Yahwhistic worship, particularly noting the golden calf and the call to deep repentance. I would agree with Williamson’s main point that Isa. 40-48 is dealing with the divine images of alien deities while 1-39 deal with the worship of divine images within Israel. I would go further and say that passages such as 10:1-15 in Isa. 1-39 may very well not only be dealing with the worship of divine images of alien deities within Israel, but also with the battle on the domestic front against the worship of YHWH via divine images. These texts may allude to the golden calves. On this see Williamson, “A Productive Textual Error in Isaiah 2:18-19,” in *Essays on Ancient Israel*, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 382-385. However, I would once again point out that this concern is present in texts depicting the era *before* the fall of the Northern Kingdom but absent in texts depicting the era *after* the fall.

I will carry and will save.”<sup>10</sup>

This first example typifies attacks upon idols in texts depicting the era after the fall of the Northern Kingdom. Three elements frequently emerge. In the first, the majority of idol polemics are found within biblical contexts describing the judgment which is to come upon a nation, most often a foreign nation. Secondly, the point is made that the divine images which that nation worships are utterly unable to save them from the judgment that YHWH has prepared for them. Thirdly, a contrast is often made between the divine images of the nations which are not able to save their worshipers and YHWH, who is able to save his people Israel. While the order of these three elements is often shuffled and a few times the contrast between the divine images and YHWH is omitted, the basic pattern is consistently identifiable. Moreover, while proper names of foreign gods such as “Bel” or “Nebo” are not often found, the biblical contexts of the polemics frequently make it obvious that divine images of alien deities are the targets.

For example, all three elements are found in regard to the famous passage about the carpenter who uses half the wood for a fire and half to make a god in Isa. 44:9-20. In 43:14 (which sets the polemic in its literary context) we find the first element: the declaration of judgment which is to come upon a nation. The prophet declares that YHWH will break down the bars of Babylon and turn the shouting of the Chaldeans into lamentation.<sup>11</sup> The polemic itself provides the second element: the declaration of the utter inability of the divine images to save from YHWH’s judgment. The prophet declares that all those who look to divine images saying,

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<sup>10</sup> Isa. 46:3-4.

<sup>11</sup> Isa. 43:14.

“Save me, for you are my god!” will be put to shame.<sup>12</sup> Finally, the passage ends with the third element: the contrast between the impotence of the divine images and the power of YHWH who is able to rescue Judah.<sup>13</sup> Although the divine images of Babylon neither see nor know, YHWH reminds his people that he formed them and will not forget them. He has swept away their transgressions and Jerusalem will be rebuilt.

Although the names of foreign gods are not mentioned in this example, the biblical context surely suggests that the divine images of Babylon are being referred to. The people of Babylon trust in their divine images but they will be sorely disappointed when YHWH raises up Cyrus to break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron.<sup>14</sup>

### 6.2.2 Jeremiah: The Way of the Nations

The idol polemics of Jeremiah 10 are similarly set within the biblical context of coming judgment. However, in this case, the judgment will come upon Judah. In chapter 9 it is declared that YHWH will make Jerusalem a heap of ruins and the towns of Judah a desolation without inhabitant.<sup>15</sup> Then in chapter 10 the impotence of the divine images of the nations is ridiculed:

2 כה אמר יהוה אל דרך הגוים אל תלמדו ומאתות השמים אל תחתו כי יחתו הגוים מהמה  
3 כי חקות העמים הבל הוא כי עץ מיער כרתו מעשה ידי חרש במעצד  
4 בכסף ובזהב ייפהו במסמרות ובמקבות יחזקום ולוא יפיק  
5 כתמר מקשה המה ולא ידברו נשוא ינשוא כי לא יצעדו אל תיראו מהם כי לא ירעו וגם היטיב אין  
אותם

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<sup>12</sup> Isa. 44:9-20.

<sup>13</sup> Isa. 44:21-28.

<sup>14</sup> Isa. 45:1-3.

<sup>15</sup> Jer. 9:11.

“2 Thus says the LORD:  
 Do not learn the way of the nations,  
 or be dismayed at the signs of the  
 heavens;  
 for the nations are dismayed at them.  
 3 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  
 an artisan;  
 4 people deck it with silver and gold;  
 they fasten it with hammer and nails  
 so that it cannot move.  
 5 Their idols<sup>16</sup> are like scarecrows in a  
 cucumber field,  
 and they cannot speak;  
 they have to be carried,  
 for they cannot walk.  
 Do not be afraid of them,  
 for they cannot do evil,  
 nor is it in them to do good.”

Although it is Judah which is being rebuked, the attack is directed against the  
 divine images of the nations. The point is again made that these images have no  
 power to save. These so-called “gods” are then contrasted with YHWH in verses 9-  
 10 where the prophet writes:

9 כסף מרקע מתרשיש יובא וזהב מאופז מעשה חרש וידי צורף תכלת וארגמן לבושם מעשה  
 חכמים כלם  
 10 ויהוה אלהים אמת הוא אלהים חיים ומלך עולם מקצפו תרעש הארץ ולא יכלו גוים זעמו

“9 Beaten silver is brought from Tarshish,<sup>17</sup>  
 and gold from Uphaz.  
 They are the work of the artisan and of the  
 hands of the goldsmith;  
 their clothing is blue and purple;  
 they are all the product of skilled workers.  
 10 But the LORD is the true God;  
 he is the living God and the everlasting  
 King.  
 At his wrath the earth quakes,  
 and the nations cannot endure his  
 indignation.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Heb *they*.

<sup>17</sup> A city of the Phoenicians.

<sup>18</sup> Jer. 10:9-10. Cf. 10:16.

Once again, the polemic is found within a biblical context of judgment, it emphasizes the utter inability of the divine images of the nations to save, and includes a contrast between these divine images and YHWH.<sup>19</sup>

The attack upon idols in Jeremiah 50-51 is set within the biblical context of coming judgment upon Babylon. In 51:11 we read: “The LORD has stirred up the spirit of the kings of the Medes, because his purpose concerning Babylon is to destroy it...” Within this literary context, the divine images of Babylon are shown to be worthless:

2 נלכדה בבל הביש בל חת מרדך הבישו עצביה חתו גלוליה

“Babylon is taken,  
Bel is put to shame,  
Merodach is dismayed.  
Her images are put to shame,  
Her idols are dismayed.”<sup>20</sup>

17 נבער כל אדם מדעת הביש כל צרף מפסל כי שקר נסכו ולא רוח בם  
18 הבל המה מעשה תעתעים בעת פקדתם יאבדו

“Everyone is stupid and without  
Knowledge;  
Goldsmiths are all put to shame by their  
Idols;  
For their images are false,  
and there is no breath in them.  
They are worthless, a work of delusion;  
At the time of their punishment they shall perish.”<sup>21</sup>

This affirmation of the worthlessness of the idols of Babylon is immediately followed by a contrast between these images and YHWH. In 51:19 we read:

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<sup>19</sup> In regard to the polemics in 10:12-16, Rudman notes, “it would seem that the *Sitz im Leben* of Jer. x 12-16 is the Babylonian exile and attempts by Jews to refute the assertions of the idol makers that they used divine creative knowledge in the manufacture of a ‘living’ image within which the spirit of the appropriate god dwelt.” Rudman, “Creation and Fall in Jeremiah x 12-16,” VT 48 (1998): 70. Rudman notes the worthlessness of these gods (and their makers) in the face of the judgment of YHWH when he writes, “Foreign gods and the efforts of their human assistants are equally worthless and puny in the face of the true God.” Ibid., 73.

<sup>20</sup> Jer. 50:2b.

<sup>21</sup> Jer. 51:17-18.

“Not like these is the LORD, the portion  
Of Jacob,  
For he is the one who formed all things,  
and Israel is the tribe of his inheritance;  
the LORD of hosts is his name.”<sup>22</sup>

Therefore once again, the attack upon idols is set within the biblical context of judgment, it is focused upon the worthlessness of the divine images of the nations, and a contrast is made with YHWH who formed all things and will deliver his people.<sup>23</sup>

### 6.2.3 Ezekiel: Two Sisters Defiled with the Idols of Assyria and Babylon

While the book of Ezekiel does not contain quite the same kind of ridicule against divine images which is found in the idol polemics of Isaiah and Jeremiah, what it does say is consistently directed against the divine images of the nations. For example, in chapter 23 the prophet recalls the judgment upon Israel and declares the future judgment upon Jerusalem. The fall of both Israel and Judah is explained as the result of their love affairs with foreign nations. Particularly, Samaria (figuratively called Oholah) went after Assyria and Jerusalem (figuratively called Oholibah) went after both Assyria and Babylon. In doing so, these adulterous sisters

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<sup>22</sup> Jer. 51:19.

<sup>23</sup> Becking suggest that Jer. 31:21bβ should be read as “the road that I will go” and refers to the return of a divine image of YHWH. Becking, “The Return of the Deity,” 53-62. Here I would note that there is a difference between the question of whether the texts depicting the era after the fall of the Northern Kingdom fight a battle against the worship of YHWH via divine images and the question of whether or not these texts subtly allude to a divine image of YHWH that was considered legitimate. In regard to the latter, while it seems to me possible, I do not find it probable. The anti-idol polemics in texts depicting the era after the fall seem to reject *all* divine images, not just those of a particular type. They broadly argue that these material objects are not gods. I find it difficult to imagine how the prophets could make these arguments and yet sanction a divine image of YHWH.



are accused of defiling themselves with foreign idols. In regard to Samaria, we are told that,

7 ותתן תזנותיה עליהם מבחר בני אשור וכל אשר עגבה בכל גלוליהם נטמאה

“She bestowed her favours upon them, the choicest men of Assyria all of them; and she defiled herself with all the idols of everyone for whom she lusted.”<sup>24</sup>

In regard to Jerusalem, the prophet declares:

29 זנוניך וזמתך ותזנותיך  
30 עשה אלה לך בזנותך אחרי גוים על אשר נטמאת בגלוליהם  
31 בדרך אחותך הלכת ונתתי כוסה בידך

“29 Your lewdness and your whorings 30 have brought this upon you, because you played the whore with the nations, and polluted yourself with their idols. 31 You have gone the way of your sister; therefore I will give her cup into your hand.”<sup>25</sup>

While the judgment in this case comes upon both Samaria and Jerusalem, it comes upon them because they went after the idols of Assyria and Babylon. This passage contains no comparison between the divine images of the nations and YHWH, except the contrast that might be drawn between the inability of these images to save either Israel or Judah and the power by which YHWH carries out his judgment upon them.

Ezekiel 8 deals particularly with the judgment that will come upon the Temple in Jerusalem. The prophet is brought in visions to Jerusalem where he digs through the wall of the temple court and sees “all the idols of the house of Israel.”<sup>26</sup> On first glance, it could be argued that these may have been images of YHWH. They are, after all, found within the Temple in Jerusalem. However, the text immediately goes on to say that seventy of the elders of Israel who worship before these idols say to themselves, “The LORD does not see us, the LORD has forsaken the

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<sup>24</sup> Ezek. 23:7.

<sup>25</sup> Ezek. 23:29b-31.

<sup>26</sup> Ezek. 8:10.

land.”<sup>27</sup> On the one hand it could be argued that, although the text does not explicitly state that Israel worshiped the idols of foreign gods, it is unlikely that those who claim that the LORD does not see them are worshiping divine images of YHWH. This seems to be Kutsko’s perspective when he writes, “The exile forces Ezekiel to explain defeat, destruction, and deportation and to restrain the loss of national-cultic identity...while others turning to foreign gods and claiming Yahweh’s own defeat by Babylon complained, ‘Yahweh does not see us; Yahweh has abandoned the land’ (8:12; also 9:9).”<sup>28</sup> After specifically considering Ezek 8:10-12, Kutsko concludes “...it seems certain that Ezekiel would have associated idolatry with other gods and the material representation of other gods.”<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, it could be argued that these were in fact divine images of YHWH and the exclamation that the LORD does not see them simply reflects the horror of the fall of Judah despite these worshipers reverence of YHWH in this way. The former seems to me much more likely than the latter. However, there is very little to suggest divine images of YHWH are the concern of the text while the text goes on to explicitly name foreign gods.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, the text is again most probably dealing with judgment that is to come upon Jerusalem for the worship of alien deities and the divine images associated with them.

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<sup>27</sup> Ezek. 8:12.

<sup>28</sup> Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 4.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 47. In context, Kutsko considers whether Ezek. 8 is dealing with a divine image of YHWH in the Temple. Therefore, his mention of “other gods” Kutsko is particularly referring to alien deities.

<sup>30</sup> Ezek. 8:14.

#### 6.2.4 Daniel: Belshazzar's Gods and the Golden Image

The war against idols in the book of Daniel is obviously directed against the same. Once again, judgment is declared upon Babylon, the divine images of that nation are shown to be utterly unable to save those who worship them, and a contrast is made between the divine images of Babylon and YHWH who is sovereign. In chapter 5 we are told that:

4 אֲשֶׁתִּיּוֹ חֲמֵרָא וְשִׁבְחוּ לֵאלֹהֵי דְהַבָּא וְכֶסֶּפָּא נְחֹשֶׁת פְּרֻזְלָא אַעֲא וְאַבְנָא

“4 [Belshazzar, king of Babylon and his lords] drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.”<sup>31</sup>

The fingers of a human hand immediately appear and write a message which declares (with the help of Daniel's translation) that God had numbered the days of Babylon and brought it to an end. Daniel tells the king that the divine images do not see or hear or know but YHWH is sovereign over the kingdoms of mortals. That very night, the king of Babylon is killed and Darius the Mede receives the kingdom.<sup>32</sup> The narrative demonstrates that the king of Babylon praised the divine images of his gods and was utterly disappointed.

In chapter three Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refuse to praise the divine image of Babylon and are miraculously saved.<sup>33</sup> Once again, the text is taking aim against the divine images of foreign gods.<sup>34</sup> Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego trust in YHWH and are delivered. As in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, the war in Daniel is a war which is exclusively fought against the divine images of the nations. The

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<sup>31</sup> Dan. 5:4 (Aramaic).

<sup>32</sup> Dan. 5:5, 23-31.

<sup>33</sup> Dan. 3.

<sup>34</sup> It is often pointed out that the golden statue mentioned in Daniel matches the dimensions of the golden statue of Zeus (Bel) which is described by Herodotus. Herodotus, *The Histories* (trans. Waterfield; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1.183. E.g. Towner, *Daniel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1984), 49.

consistent message is that that the divine images of the nations have no power to save those who trust in them but those who trust in YHWH are delivered.

### **6.2.5 Nahum: The Idols of Nineveh will be Cut Off**

The book of Nahum is explicitly an oracle concerning Nineveh. The prophet declares that YHWH is a jealous and avenging God who will make an end of that nation.<sup>35</sup> Though the Assyrians may trust in their divine images, these images cannot save them. YHWH declares,

14 מבית אלהיך אכרית פסל ומסכה אשים קברך כי קלות

“From the house of your gods I will cut off the carved image and the cast image. I will make your grave, for you are worthless.”<sup>36</sup>

Neither the houses of their gods nor their divine images will save Assyria from YHWH’s vengeance. Nineveh will fall as YHWH has decreed and the divine images of her gods cannot save her. As the gods of the nations had been thrown into the fire by the Assyrians because they were wood and stone, the work of human hands, so now the divine images of Nineveh will not be able to save from the vengeance of YHWH.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Nah. 1:1-2.

<sup>36</sup> Nah. 1:14b.

<sup>37</sup> Becking suggests that Nah. 2:3 [2] which is usually translated “for the LORD shall restore the pride of Jacob,” should instead be translated as “for the LORD shall return with the pride of Jacob, which is the pride of Israel.” Becking, “The Return of the Deity,” 56. Becking suggests that this alludes to the return of a divine image of YHWH. Again, I would note that, whatever may have been the reality on the ground, there is scant evidence for this in the texts themselves.

### 6.2.6 Habakkuk: What Use are the Idols of Babylon?

The book of Habakkuk contains an oracle against the Chaldeans. Although they have destroyed many nations and have become proud, YHWH has marked them for judgment and punishment.<sup>38</sup> The cup in YHWH's hand will come to them and they will be destroyed.<sup>39</sup> It is (unsurprisingly) within this biblical context of coming judgment that Habakkuk's idol polemics are found:

18 מה הועיל פסל כי פסלו יצר יצרו מסכה ומורה שקר כי בטח יצרו עליו לעשות אלילים אלמים  
19 הוי אמר לעץ הקיצה עורי לאבן דומם הוא יורה הנה הוא תפוש זהב וכסף וכל רוח אין בקרבו  
20 ויהוה בהיכל קדשו הס מפניו כל הארץ

“18 What use is an idol  
once its maker has shaped it—  
a cast image, a teacher of lies?  
For its maker trusts in what has been made,  
though the product is only an idol that  
cannot speak!  
19 Alas for you who say to the wood, ‘Wake  
up!’  
to silent stone, ‘Rouse yourself!’  
Can it teach?  
See, it is gold and silver plated,  
and there is not breath in it at all.  
20 But the LORD is in his holy temple;  
let all the earth keep silence before him!”<sup>40</sup>

Within the biblical context of the coming judgment upon the Chaldeans, the prophet ridicules the divine images of the Chaldeans. None of these images will protect them from the judgement that YHWH has prepared. Like many others, the passage concludes with a contrast between the helplessness of the divine images of the Chaldeans and the LORD who is in his holy temple.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Hab. 1:12.

<sup>39</sup> Hab. 2:16-17.

<sup>40</sup> Hab. 2:18-20.

<sup>41</sup> In terms of the verses themselves, Anderson is right to note that “We do not know if this ‘woe oracle’ is hurled against idolaters within Israel or against those of some more distant heathen power.” Andersen, *Habakkuk: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 2001), 257. However, whether the text is directed against the worship of divine

### 6.2.7 A Few Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Examples

Finally, the Letter of Jeremiah, the addition to the book of Daniel known as Bel and the Dragon, and the Wisdom of Solomon, are all deeply concerned with divine images. Although the element of coming judgment upon the nations is often absent in these texts, the attacks consistently emphasize the utter worthlessness of the divine images of the nations and contrast these “gods” with YHWH, the God of Israel. For example, in the Letter of Jeremiah, the attack begins with these words:

4 Now in Babylon you will see gods made of silver and gold and wood, which people carry on their shoulders, and which cause the heathen to fear. So beware of becoming at all like the foreigners or of letting fear for these gods possess you when you see the multitude before and behind them worshipping them. But say in your heart, ‘It is you, O LORD, whom we must worship.’<sup>42</sup>

The writer harps upon the inability of these gods to save themselves or any who worship them. He notes that they cannot defend themselves from war or robbers, cannot save anyone from death or rescue the weak and can offer no resistance to kings or enemies.<sup>43</sup> He points out that even the door of a house provides better protection for its contents than these useless gods!<sup>44</sup> For these reasons Israel is repeatedly told, “From this you will know that they are not gods; so do not fear them.”<sup>45</sup> The attack is directed against the divine images of Babylon and they are ridiculed because they have no power to save those who worship them. Instead of fearing them, Israel is commanded to worship the LORD.

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images within or without Israel, there is nothing to suggest that it is dealing with the worship of YHWH via divine images.

<sup>42</sup> Ep Jer. 6:4-6.

<sup>43</sup> Ep Jer. 6:15; 49, 57.

<sup>44</sup> Ep Jer. 6:59.

<sup>45</sup> Ep Jer. 6:16, 23, 29, 40, 44, 52, 56, 65, 69, 72.

In the addition to the book of Daniel known as Bel and the Dragon, the attack upon idols begins in this way:

3 Now the Babylonians had an idol called Bel, and every day they provided for it twelve bushels of choice flour and forty sheep and six measures of wine. 4 The king revered it and went every day to worship it. But Daniel worshiped his own God. So the king said to him, 'Why do you not worship Bel?' 5 He answered, 'Because I do not revere idols made with hands, but the living God, who created heaven and earth and has dominion over all living creatures.'<sup>46</sup>

The story goes on to show how Daniel proves that the statue is no living god. Once again, the ridicule is directed against the divine images of the nations and these are contrasted with the living God.

Finally, chapters 13 to 15 of The Wisdom of Solomon contain a strong polemic against idols. Like Isaiah and Jeremiah, the text speaks of how the woodcutter uses half of the tree for a fire to cook his supper and the other half he makes into a god to worship.<sup>47</sup> As the polemic progresses, it becomes clear that the writer is particularly attacking the divine images of the nations. In chapter 15 we read:

But most foolish, and more miserable than an infant, are all the enemies who oppressed your people. For they thought that all their heathen idols were gods, though these have neither the use of their eyes to see with, nor nostrils with which to draw breath, nor ears with which to hear, nor fingers to feel with, and their feet are of no use for walking...<sup>48</sup>

These "heathen idols" are then contrasted with God who is the creator of all.<sup>49</sup> Once again, the ridicule is directed against divine images of alien deities.

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<sup>46</sup> Bel. 1:3-5.

<sup>47</sup> Wis. 13:11-19.

<sup>48</sup> Wis. 15:14-15.

<sup>49</sup> Wis. 13:1-5.

### 6.2.8 Summary

This very brief survey sketches a picture of the war against idols as it is presented in the texts depicting the era after the fall of the Northern Kingdom. I will draw two points from it. In the first, the difference between the war in texts depicting the era before and after Israel's fall becomes readily apparent. The obvious difference is not that texts depicting the era after the fall attack divine images of alien deities as the products of wood and stone and texts depicting the era before do not. This is found in both sets of texts. The difference is that texts depicting the era after the fall have this as their *exclusive* concern. The war that is fought on two fronts in texts depicting the era before the fall is fought on only one in texts depicting the era after the fall. As mentioned in the introduction, there is nothing in these texts comparable to the narrative of Micah's idols, the treatment of the golden calves, the rejection of YHWH's worship at multiple locations by means of idols in Deut. 12, or the rationale for the prohibition of idols provided in Deut. 4. Therefore, in texts depicting the era after the fall of the Northern Kingdom, there is no reason to distinguish between "The worship of other gods" and "The worship of idols." In this literary context, to worship a divine image is to worship a foreign god—without exception.

Secondly, nearly all of the attacks upon idols in texts depicting the era after the fall of Israel contain three elements. In the first, they are almost always set within oracles of judgment against Assyria or Babylon. Even when Israel and Judah are the targets for judgment, they are condemned for going after the divine images of Assyria or Babylon. Second, the point is consistently made in various and creative ways that the divine images of the nations are utterly powerless to save from the judgement that is to come. And third, the polemics often draw a contrast between



the divine images of the nations and YHWH. They are the work of human hands, but YHWH is the creator.<sup>50</sup> They will perish from the earth but YHWH is the everlasting God.<sup>51</sup> They are dead but YHWH is the living God.<sup>52</sup> And finally, they are powerless but YHWH is mighty to save Israel from the hand of their oppressors.<sup>53</sup> In the previous chapter I argued that such a derisive comparison would have been repeatedly open to the accusation of blatant hypocrisy in light of the depiction of Israel's time in the Promised Land. However, the removal of the golden calves, the repudiation of Samarian worship and the reform of Hezekiah all provide practical justification for such a distinction. Immediately following this sequence of events, it could boldly be said that it was only the nations that worshiped wood and stone because the worship of YHWH had been thoroughly disassociated from the use of divine images.

### **6.3 Fusion?**

In this literary context is is no reason to distinguish between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols. However, does this mean that the issues associated with the prohibitions have been “fused” in these texts? In his article, Barton writes, “Ancient Israel did indeed develop traditions in which the two ideas [i.e., the ideas associated with the prohibitions: that no gods besides YHWH are to be worshiped and that no images are to be made] were fused together, exactly as the Catholic

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<sup>50</sup> Isa. 40:28.

<sup>51</sup> Jer. 10:11, 16; Isa. 40:28.

<sup>52</sup> Jer. 10:10 Bel. 1:5.

<sup>53</sup> Isa. 46:1-4.

understanding of the first commandment might lead us to expect.”<sup>54</sup> In response, I would note that, although there is a fusion of the worship of other gods and the worship of idols in these texts, it is not a fusion of the issues which account for the distinction between the prohibitions. Texts depicting the era after the fall do not fuse the worship of alien deities and the worship of YHWH via divine images. Instead, they simply do not address the latter and the lack of concern to distinguish between alien deities and the divine images associated with them which is evident in texts depicting the era *before* the fall of Israel is amplified through the polemics of texts depicting the era after the fall.

Therefore, I agree with Barton that, from the perspective of Isaiah, who attacks foreign gods as “the work of human hands,” the worship of other gods and the worship of idols are treated as a single issue. However, this does not explain the apparent fusion of the issues represented by the prohibitions. Texts depicting the era after Israel’s fall appear to treat the worship of other gods and the worship of idols as a single issue because the war in these texts is exclusively fought on a foreign front against divine images of alien deities. In this biblical context, there is no reason to distinguish between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols.

#### **6.4 One Front and One People**

While the depiction of the divided kingdom and the era before the establishment of the temple in Jerusalem provides a fitting literary context for a war against idols that is fought on both a foreign and a domestic front, the depiction of Judah standing alone under Assyrian and Babylonian threat, followed by Judah in exile, and finally

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<sup>54</sup> Barton, “‘The Work of Human Hands’,” 66.

the return of the Judean remnant out of Babylon, provides a fitting literary context for the war against idols that is fought on a single front against alien deities and the divine images associated with them. There are no longer two kingdoms with differing conceptions of the worship of YHWH but one people and they do not worship idols. As the prophet Ezekiel writes:

22 ועשיתי אתם לגוי אחד בארץ בהרי ישראל ומלך אחד יהיה לכלם למלך ולא יהיה עוד לשני גוים ולא יחצו עוד לשתי ממלכות עוד 23 ולא יטמאו עוד בגלוליהם ובשקוציהם ובכל פשעיהם והושעתי אתם מכל מושבתיהם אשר חטאו בהם וטהרתי אותם והיו לי לעם ואני אהיה להם לאלהים

“22 I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king over them all. Never again shall they be two nations, and never again shall they be divided into two kingdoms. 23 They shall never again defile themselves with their idols and their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions. I will save them from all the apostasies into which they have fallen, and will cleanse them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God.”<sup>55</sup>

The text captures well the idea of a shift to a war that is exclusively fought on a foreign front against alien deities and the divine images associated with them. Following the fall of both Israel and Judah, the biblical texts suggest that those who defile themselves with idols are the nations, not the people of YHWH. As Kaufmann writes, “With the destruction of the temple and the Babylonian exile, the period of Israel’s idolatry comes to an end... Later Judaism expressed its astonishment at this transformation in a legend telling how the ‘Men of the Great Synagogue’ captured the ‘Evil Yeşer of idolatry’ and put it to death (Bab. Yoma 69b; Sanhedrin 64a).”<sup>56</sup> While the end of “Israel’s idolatry” appears to have come to an end with the fall of Judah, the end of the biblical battle against the worship of YHWH via divine images came to an end with the fall of the Northern Kingdom. The end of battle on this domestic front provided justification for the increasingly

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<sup>55</sup> Ezek. 37:22-23.

<sup>56</sup> Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, 133. Though see Ackerman, *Under every Green Tree*.

derisive polemics against the divine images of the nations in texts depicting the era after the fall. Therefore the depiction of Judah standing alone against the nations is a fitting biblical context for the war against idols fought on a single foreign front.

### **6.5 One Front and One Commandment**

Texts depicting the era after the fall of the Northern Kingdom which exclusively fight a war against idols on a foreign front provide a literary context that strongly calls for the fusion of the prohibitions. As noted above, in this context, to worship a divine image always means worshipping an alien deity. In light of this context, the idea that the prohibition of idols should *primarily* be understood in regard to the divine images of alien deities appears reasonable. Although the prohibition of idols itself is open-ended, this context suggests that there is no reason to assume that the prohibition should be concerned with the worship of YHWH via divine images. In other words, the war in texts depicting the era after the fall provides a literary context in which the fusion of the prohibitions makes sense.

### **6.6 Excursus: A Single Front and “Monotheism”**

At this point I would like to take a moment to address a related issue. It is often suggested that the treatment of alien deities as the work of human hands in the prophetic idol polemics reflects a shift from monolatry to “monotheism.” For example, Römer writes,

“At the beginning of the Persian period there was apparently a switch among the elite to a more radical monotheism as is especially shown in the polemic against cultic statues and the

deities of the nations in the so-called Second Isaiah (Isa. 40-55). Some late texts in the Deuteronomistic History reflect this change from monolatry to monotheism.”<sup>57</sup>

Similarly, Kutsko writes,

“To be sure, Deutero-Isaiah explicitly describes Yahweh as the sole god in existence. He does so in two ways that we have already seen in some form in Deuteronomic texts. First, he ridicules the process by which idols are formed, as well as the persons who trust in these so-called gods.”<sup>58</sup>

In response, I will argue that the war against idols within the Old Testament offers very little in support of the idea of a demonstrable progression from “monolatry to monotheism” if the expression is used to indicate a shift from “belief in” to “denial of” the existence of the gods of the nations.<sup>59</sup> I offer three reasons why I think this to be the case.

In the first, although it could be assumed that the war demonstrates a progression from a “belief in” to “denial of” the existence of other gods, the pattern is not best explained in this way. In my opinion, Barton rightly identifies that a distinction can be made between the issues of the worship of other gods and the worship of idols in certain texts. I have argued, however, that the distinction is not at all based upon a concern to distinguish between alien deities and the divine images associated with them. Neither is the apparent fusion of the issues in the prophets

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<sup>57</sup> Römer, *The So-called Deuteronomistic History*, 173.

<sup>58</sup> Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 37. Cf. Kutsko’s footnote 37 on the same page which lists other works along these lines.

<sup>59</sup> Sommer is surely correct to note that “Much of the debate in scholarship about ancient Israelite monotheism is really a debate about terminology, rather than about our understanding of the ancient texts themselves.” Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, 145. In his appendix entitled “Monotheism and Polytheism in Ancient Israel”, Sommer offers a narrow and a broad definition for monotheism. The first says that one God exists and that no deities exist other than this one God. Sommer argues that this definition of monotheism does not fit the biblical text. However, he offers a broad definition of monotheism which he suggests does fit the biblical text. According to this definition, monotheism is a belief that there exists one supreme being in the universe, whose will is sovereign over all other beings. Sommer also suggests that “monolatry” can either be defined in a way that can be classed as a subset of “polytheism” or in a way that includes but is not limited to “monotheism.” *Ibid.*, 145-174. Cf. Moberly, “How Appropriate is ‘Monotheism’ as a Category for Biblical Interpretation?,” 216-234. Although Moberly rejects the idea that the Old Testament texts deny the existence of alien deities, he suggests that the term “monotheism” can be retained if it is carefully defined.

based upon a denial of the existence of other gods.<sup>60</sup> Instead, in texts depicting the era before the fall, a legitimate distinction can be made between the worship of alien deities on the one hand and the worship of YHWH via divine images on the other. The *apparent* fusion of the issues in the prophets is the result of the exclusive focus upon divine images of alien deities and the complete absence of texts battling against divine images of YHWH. Therefore what could appear to be a shift produced by an earlier belief in the existence of alien deities to a later denial of their existence is better understood as the product of a shift from a war fought against idols on two fronts to a war fought on only one.

Secondly, the war offers little to support the idea of a demonstrable progression from monolatry to monotheism because the relationship between divine images and deities is never spelled out. It is one thing to say that *divine images* are not gods and another to say that the deities associated with those images do not exist. In attempting to make a case for monotheism in the Old Testament, scholars often turn to the idol polemics of the prophets, particularly those of Deutero-Isaiah.<sup>61</sup> The assumption appears to be that, in conjunction with the incomparability and exclusivity formulae, the prophetic ridicule of divine images constitutes a denial of the existence of the deities with which the divine images are associated. For example, referring to the idol polemics in Deutero-Isaiah, Aaron writes, “The juxtaposing of Yahweh with the now non-existent gods seen in idols would never have occurred to the earlier writers.”<sup>62</sup> Similarly, defending monotheism in Deutero-Isaiah, Clifford writes, “There are grounds for interpreting Deutero-Isaiah as

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<sup>60</sup> See Moberly, “How Appropriate is ‘Monotheism’ as a Category for Biblical Interpretation?,” 228-231 and the works listed there which support this point.

<sup>61</sup> E.g. Clifford, “Deutero-Isaiah and Monotheism,” 267-289; Barton, “Post-Script,” 191-192.

<sup>62</sup> Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities: Metaphor, Semantics and Divine Imagery*, 194.

representing a later stage of development in biblical thought. The most obvious is that, unlike biblical texts in which local gods are acknowledged (e.g. Exod. 12.12; Judg. 11.24; Ps. 106.28), Deutero-Isaiah uniformly reduces another god to an idol.”<sup>63</sup> Clifford argues that the idea of “Creator versus gods as idols” in Isaiah 40-48 is the leading basis for the monotheistic message of Deutero-Isaiah.<sup>64</sup> He claims that the polemics of 44:18-20 demonstrate that “there is no life beyond its image except in the mind of its devotee.”<sup>65</sup> However, the text itself reads as follows:

18 לא ידעו ולא יבינו כי טח מראות עיניהם מהשכיל לבתם  
 19 ולא ישיב אל לבו ולא דעת ולא תבונה לאמר הציו שרפתי כמו אש ואף אפיתי על גחליו  
 לחם אצלה בשר ואכל ויתרו לתועבה אעשה לבול עץ אסגוד  
 20 רעה אפר לב הותל הטהו ולא יציל את נפשו ולא יאמר הלוא שקר בימיני

18 They do not know, nor do they comprehend; for their eyes are shut, so that they cannot see, and their minds as well, so that they cannot understand. 19 No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, ‘Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals, I roasted meat and have eaten. Now shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?’ 20 He feeds on ashes; a deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot save himself or say, ‘Is not this thing in my right hand a fraud?’

There is no question that these verses affirm that divine images are utterly impotent. However, is Clifford correct to affirm that the text also makes the claim that there was no life beyond the image? While a denial of the existence of the deities with which the images are associated *may* lie behind the polemic, it is not found within the polemic itself. The same words could just as easily represent the belief that the gods associated with the images were merely weak or in a class below YHWH.<sup>66</sup> As Schmidt has noted,

It should be pointed out that two passages that are frequently cited as exemplary of the polemic of the ‘lifeless idol,’ Isa 44:9-20 and Jer 10:1-9, appear as part of a larger context in which the theme of YHWH’s incomparability predominates. For the biblical writers and their early audiences, this theme might well have entailed a distinction at the level of degree,

<sup>63</sup> Clifford, “Deutero-Isaiah and Monotheism,” 280-281.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 273.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 276.

<sup>66</sup> See Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 55.

not of kind as it did in other ancient Near Eastern cultures (i.e., there is no denial of the existence of other gods); YHWH is more powerful than the other gods, an argument likewise consistent with a monolatrous outlook.<sup>67</sup>

For this reason it should not be assumed that the polemic amounts to a denial of the existence of gods other than YHWH.

Therefore, even in Deutero-Isaiah, I would argue that it is one thing to say that divine images are not gods and another to say that the gods which are associated with the divine images do not exist. The two are not the same and the jump from one to the other should not be assumed. The idol polemics in the prophets surely make the point that divine images are not gods. In doing so, they deny the efficacy of the opening or washing of the mouth rituals.<sup>68</sup> However, because the relationship between divine image and deity is never spelled out, it is not possible to determine whether the writers also denied the existence of the deities with which the divine images were associated or merely viewed them as weak or powerless to save those who YHWH had doomed for destruction.

Before moving on to the final point, it could be objected that, because divine images are referred to as “the gods of the nations” and then rejected as gods, that this must constitute a denial of the existence of gods other than YHWH. The problem with this argument is that it fails to acknowledge that those who made use of divine images would in fact hold these images to be “gods” and yet would not hold to the idea that the deity was limited to the divine image.<sup>69</sup> Divine images could be damaged, destroyed, stolen, or replaced. Moreover, a deity might abandon its image to capture or destruction. Nevertheless, those who made use of divine images would

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<sup>67</sup> Schmidt, “The Aniconic Tradition,” 89-94.

<sup>68</sup> Clifford, “Deutero-Isaiah and Monotheism,” 269; Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 553. On the rituals themselves see section 2.8.

<sup>69</sup> Weeks, “Man-Made Gods?,” 10; von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 213-214.



not have assumed that the destruction of the divine image equalled the destruction of the god. Therefore, while it is correct to say that the idol polemics declare that the gods of the nations (i.e., the divine images) are not gods, it is incorrect to assume that texts which declare that divine images are not gods constitute a denial of the existence of the deities to which the images are supposed to refer.

If it again be objected that Israel would not have understood the difference between the divine image and the deity then I would point out that, at least in Dan. 2:11, the biblical writer seems to be well aware of it. This writer affirms that the Babylonian officials who subsequently bow down before the image that Nebuchadnezzar sets up nevertheless assume that the dwelling place of the gods is not with mortals. Therefore, because the perspective of the biblical writers regarding the relationship between deity and divine image is never spelled out, because those who made use of divine images would not have assumed that the deity was limited to the divine image and finally, because certain biblical writers appear to be aware of this distinction, I would argue that it should not be assumed that the affirmation that divine images are no gods constitutes a denial of the existence of alien deities. The issue being dealt with is the value of images, not the existence of deities.

Thirdly, the war against idols within the Old Testament offers little to support the idea of a progression from monolatry to monotheism because the attacks upon idols in texts depicting the era after the Israel's fall are primarily soteriological rather than ontological. As I attempted to demonstrate in the previous section, the vast majority of attacks upon divine images in the prophets contain three elements: (1) They are found within texts proclaiming judgment upon a nation, usually a foreign one, (2) They claim that the divine images of alien deities are not able to save those who trust in them (they are merely wood and stone) and (3) They draw a contrast

between the divine images of the nations who have no power to save and YHWH who does. The question that these texts are dealing with is not whether alien deities exist but whether the divine images of the nations are of any value in protecting those who worship them.<sup>70</sup> The answer is repeatedly, creatively and derisively, “No!” The point is made that the divine images of the nations will do nothing to save them.<sup>71</sup> The polemics are making a soteriological point and offer little evidence for ontological conclusions. Moreover, I would argue that the polemics may focus upon the divine images themselves in order to emphasize the impotence of the deities with which the images are associated. In other words, the point that they make is that the deities are as impotent as the divine images associated with them. However, to say that a deity is not able to defend its people from the hand of YHWH is not the same as saying that the deity does not exist.<sup>72</sup>

Therefore, although the war against idols within the Old Testament has often been taken to reflect a progression from monolatry to monotheism, I would argue that it offers little toward this end. This is in the first because the apparent fusion of the issues is not best explained by a previous belief in the existence of other gods which was superseded by a denial of their existence but by a shift from a war fought against idols on two fronts to a war fought on one, secondly because the relationship

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<sup>70</sup> It is also correct to note that the passages contrast the creative power of YHWH with the idol-makers (e.g. Is. 44:9: “All who fashion idols are nothing.”). This point is made by Holter, *Second Isaiah’s Idol-Fabrication Passages*. Cf. Rudman, “The Theology of the Idol Fabrication Passages in Second Isaiah,” 114-121 and MacDonald, “Monotheism and Isaiah,” 54. However, as the verse goes on to say, “...their desirable things do not profit.” It is inappropriate to exclude a comparison between the power of YHWH and the impotence of the divine images of the nations, even if this comparison is understood as secondary.

<sup>71</sup> Wright, *Deuteronomy* (4; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 54; Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 55.

<sup>72</sup> See Moberly, “How Appropriate is ‘Monotheism’ as a Category for Biblical Interpretation?,” 230-231.

between divine images and deities is never made clear, and thirdly because the attacks upon idols are primarily soteriological rather than ontological.<sup>73</sup>

## **6.7 Chapter Summary**

Within this chapter I have argued that texts depicting the era after the fall of the Northern Kingdom treat the worship of other gods and the worship of idols as a single issue because they are exclusively concerned with divine images of alien deities. The apparent fusion of the issues does not mark a shift from an earlier belief in the existence of alien deities as real sources of divine power to a denial of their existence. Instead, it marks a shift from a war fought against idols on two fronts to a war fought on one. This conception of the shift offers very little in support of the idea of demonstrable progression from monolatry to monotheism within the Old Testament. However, it does provide a literary context in which the fusion of the prohibitions appears to make good sense.

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<sup>73</sup> Cf. Olyan, "Is Isaiah 40-55 Really Monotheistic?," *JANER* 12 (2012): 190-201.

## RETURNING TO THE COMMANDMENTS IN LIGHT OF THE WAR

*Statements are embedded in context that can alter the conditions of relevance in such a way as to significantly influence meaning.*

Aaron<sup>74</sup>

I began in Part One by considering the differing enumerations of the Ten Commandments and suggesting that the differences largely hinge upon how interpreters understand the relationship between the prohibition of other gods and the prohibition of idols. I argued that the differing interpretations of the relationship between the prohibitions arise in response to certain linguistic, grammatical and theological ambiguities of the texts.<sup>75</sup> However, in Part Two I have argued that the differing interpretations of the relationship between the issues also have to do with the particular Old Testament context in which the prohibitions might be read. In this regard, I made the point that there is a difference between the Old Testament's presentation of the war against idols before and after the fall of the Northern Kingdom. Therefore, in chapters four, five and six I considered the way in which the war against idols is presented in texts depicting these two eras. In this seventh chapter I return to the prohibitions in light of the biblical war against. I will briefly

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<sup>74</sup> Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities: Metaphor, Semantics and Divine Imagery*, 123-124.

<sup>75</sup> Exod. 20; Deut. 5.

draw together the connection between the depiction of the eras and the differing enumerations of the commandments.

In section 7.1 I will review my conclusions from chapters four to six and in sections 7.2 and 7.3 I will explain how the depictions of the eras before and after the fall provide alternative literary contexts for reading the prohibitions. In section 7.4 I will offer my own judgment on the enumeration of the commandments and in 7.5 I will summarize my conclusions.

### **7.1 The War Before and After the Fall of the Northern Kingdom**

In chapter four I considered the presentation of the war against idols in texts depicting the era before the fall. I argued that in this biblical context, the war is fought on two fronts. On the one hand, it is fought on a foreign front against the worship of alien deities and the divine images associated with them.<sup>76</sup> On the other hand, it is also fought on a domestic front against the worship YHWH via divine images.<sup>77</sup> I demonstrated that in this context a distinction can be made between the worship of alien deities and the worship of the God of Israel via divine images.

However, in chapters five and six I argued that any basis for a distinction between the issues is lost in texts depicting the era after the fall. The sequence of events associated with the fall of the Northern Kingdom marks the end of battle on the domestic front and paves the way for a war that is exclusively fought on the foreign front. Particularly, it is a war that is fought against the divine images of Assyria and Babylon. Although the polemics in these texts increase in variety and

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<sup>76</sup> E.g. Deut. 7; 1 Sam. 5; 1 Kgs. 11.

<sup>77</sup> E.g. Deut. 4; Judg. 17-18; 1 Kgs. 12.

derisiveness, one aspect that clearly connects them is the exclusive focus upon divine images of alien deities.

Therefore, in the depiction of both eras, the war against idols is fought on a foreign front against alien deities and the divine images associated with them. These images are rejected, whether within or without Israel. However, only in texts depicting the era before the fall of Israel is this battle on the foreign front matched with a battle on the domestic front against the worship of YHWH by means of divine images. This difference creates two literary contexts in which the relationship between the prohibitions may be read.

## **7.2 The Prohibitions in the Narrative Context of the Era Before the Fall**

The Old Testament's depiction of the era before the fall of the Northern Kingdom provides a literary context in which there is significant reason to distinguish between the prohibitions. In addition to the war against idols that is fought against the divine images of alien deities, a line of attack is also drawn against the worship of YHWH via divine images. This appears to be what is going on in Deut. 12, Judg. 17-18, Deut. 4 and the texts dealing with the calves of Aaron and Jeroboam.<sup>78</sup> While Micah's idols and the golden calves clearly deal with the use of divine images within Israel, there is nothing within the texts which connect these images with foreign gods.<sup>79</sup> Given that the golden calves are probably the most prominent idols found within the Old Testament, a rather large exception must be made if interpreters dealing with texts depicting the era before the fall are to assume that "idols" and

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<sup>78</sup> Exod. 32; Deut. 9; 1 Kgs. 12.

<sup>79</sup> See section 4.2.4.

“foreign gods” are one and the same or that the worship of idols and the worship of other gods are simply synonymous issues. Moreover, the only rationale provided for the prohibition of idols (Deut. 4:15-16) demonstrates a primary concern for representations of YHWH. Finally, in texts depicting the era before the fall, פסל, the term used in the prohibition of idols, appears three times as often in texts dealing with the worship of YHWH via divine images.<sup>80</sup> In this context, I would argue that viewing the prohibitions as a single commandment obscures the distinction between the worship of the alien deities and the worship of the YHWH via divine images. For these reasons, I would argue that the Protestant Reformed distinction between the prohibitions better reflects the war against idols as it is presented in texts depicting the era before the fall.

### **7.3 The Prohibitions in the Narrative Context of the Era After the Fall**

However, the Old Testament’s depiction of the war against idols after the fall of the Northern Kingdom provides a literary context in which there is no reason to distinguish between the prohibitions. According to these texts, to worship a divine image is to worship a foreign god—without exception. “Idols” and “foreign gods” are one and the same. I have argued that this is probably not because of any dramatic change in the conception of the relationship between alien deities and the divine images associated with them (contra Barton),<sup>81</sup> and consequently, that it provides little support for the idea of a demonstrable progression from monolatry to

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<sup>80</sup> Again, the term appears 8x in Judg. 17-18.

<sup>81</sup> Barton, “‘The Work of Human Hands’,” 71.

monotheism (contra Clifford, Römer and others).<sup>82</sup> Instead, the contrast between the interchangeability of “foreign gods” and “idols” in these texts and the lack thereof in texts depicting the era before the fall has more to do with the presence or absence of texts dealing with the worship of YHWH via divine images.

Therefore the dual concern which allowed for a distinction in texts depicting the era before Israel’s fall is absent in texts depicting the era after the fall. In these texts the war is exclusively fought on the foreign front against alien deities and the divine images associated with them. As Barton put it, “By this stage the ridicule of idols has ceased to be a way of criticising Israelite practices and has become a stick with which to beat foreign nations.”<sup>83</sup> From this literary context, “Heathenism and idolatry became synonymous terms; in fact, ‘*abodah zarah* (foreign worship) came to mean idolatrous worship.’”<sup>84</sup> It could even be said that, from the reading and interpretation of the literary context depicting the era after the fall of Israel, the prohibition of idols became a dominant marker of Jewish separation from pagans. For this reason, there is certainly a sense in which Halbertal and Margalit are correct to note that “The prohibition against idolatry is the thick wall that separates the nonpagans from pagans.”<sup>85</sup> However, according to the biblical depiction, it might be more precise to say that the prohibition of idolatry *increasingly became* the thick wall that separates the nonpagans from the pagans. According to the literary context of the era before the fall, it was also the thick wall that separated differing approaches to the worship of YHWH. Therefore, I would argue that the Jewish,

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<sup>82</sup> Clifford, “Deutero-Isaiah and Monotheism,” 267-289.

<sup>83</sup> Barton, “‘The Work of Human Hands’,” 68.

<sup>84</sup> Pfeiffer, “Images of Yahweh,” 221. Cf. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 288-289.

<sup>85</sup> Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 236.



Catholic and Lutheran fusion of the prohibitions appears to make good sense in light of the texts depicting the era after the fall of the Northern Kingdom.<sup>86</sup>

#### **7.4 My Judgment on the Enumeration of the Commandments**

In the foregoing argument I have attempted to show that each of the enumerations of the commandments has certain merits. Those which distinguish between the prohibitions and those which merge the two into a single commandment can each draw support from the depiction of certain eras in the Old Testament's long war against idols. However, in my judgment, the Protestant Reformed distinction between the prohibitions is ultimately to be preferred because it does better justice to the immediate literary context of the prohibitions within Deuteronomy and Exodus as well as the wider context of the war against idols within the whole of the Old Testament narrative. It is a rather small point which reflects a wider Old Testament concern. Namely, it reflects the concern that Israel should avoid the worship of the right God in the wrong way. In my opinion, the merger of the prohibitions obscures this point and encourages interpreters to overlook the ground gained in the battle on the domestic front.

In the first, the distinction between the prohibitions better reflects the immediate context of the Commandments. The Deuteronomic version is immediately preceded by a Mosaic homily which reminds Israel of the judgment that came upon them when they had worshiped a foreign god—the Baal of Peor—and then charges Israel not to make an idol because they didn't see a form when YHWH spoke but only heard his voice. The first story illustrates the importance of the

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<sup>86</sup> See Miller, "The Psalms as a Meditation on the First Commandment," 93-94.

prohibition of other gods while the second illustrates the importance of the prohibition of idols. In this literary context, it seems to me more appropriate to distinguish between the prohibitions.<sup>87</sup>

Secondly, the distinction between the prohibitions better reflects the Old Testament presentation *as a whole*. The Old Testament not only provides an account of the era after Israel's fall but an account of the era before. Consequently, it does not only describe a war fought against alien deities and the divine images associated with them but also a war fought for the proper worship of YHWH within Israel. Certain texts have been preserved within the whole which strongly reject the worship of YHWH via divine images.<sup>88</sup> The distinction between the prohibitions is a small point which serves to maintain the warning that Israel is not only meant to avoid the worship of alien deities and the divine images associated with them, but the worship of YHWH via divine images as well.

## 7.5 Chapter Summary and Summary of Part Two

In Part One I suggested that interpreters are reading the text of the Ten Commandments in different ways. While some distinguish between the prohibition of other gods and the prohibition of idols, others fuse the two. In this second part of the thesis I have argued that there is a literary context in which it is legitimate to

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<sup>87</sup> Tigay draws out the connections between the illustrations in Deut. 4 and prohibitions in the following chapter when he notes: "In the first unit of the chapter [Moses] preached against violating the first commandment by worshiping foreign gods, represented by Baal-Peor. Here [4:9-20] he warns against two aspects of idolatry that might mistakenly be considered acceptable, making images of the Lord—violating the second commandment and..." Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 46. Similarly, Miller writes, "Deuteronomy 4 is in effect a Mosaic sermon on the Second Commandment with resonances, inevitably and appropriately, to the First Commandment." Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, 49.

<sup>88</sup> Deut. 4; Judg. 17-18; Exod. 32; Deut. 9; 1 Kgs. 12.

distinguish between the issues and another literary context in which there is no reason to do so. Therefore I would argue that the relationship between the prohibitions can be read in either the context of the Old Testament's depiction of the war against idols before or after the fall of the Northern Kingdom. Hearing the voice of the former involves recognition of a significant distinction between the issues while hearing the voice of the latter involves recognition of how the issues appear to have been merged. In my opinion, recognition of the difference between these two literary contexts can go a long way toward helping Old Testament interpretation speak more precisely in regard to the worship of other gods and the worship of idols within the Old Testament. In regard to the prohibitions themselves, I have noted that I find the Protestant Reformed distinction to be ultimately preferable because it maintains the distinction between the worship of the wrong gods and the worship of the right God in the wrong way. This of course does not mean that those who prefer to see the prohibitions in terms of a single commandment cannot maintain the same point, but that they need to work against the enumeration to do so. In other words, it becomes less obvious.

## CONCLUSION

In this work I have attempted to explain why the relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols within the Old Testament is difficult to define. I have argued that four primary factors are involved. Beginning with an exegetical study of the relationship between the prohibition of other gods and the prohibition of idols within the context of the Ten Commandments, I introduced the first three.

In the first, I demonstrated that the relationship between the issues is difficult to define because the terminology of “idols” can refer to both divine images and alien deities. In that the terminology is legitimately used to refer to “foreign” or “false gods” without any hint that material objects are being referred to, “the worship of idols” is roughly synonymous with “The worship of other gods.” However, in that the terminology is also used to refer specifically to divine images, “the worship of idols” represents a more specific category. This linguistic ambiguity is not merely the product of the choice of εἰδωλον and the subsequent English “idol.” Instead, I have argued that the LXX choice of εἰδωλον in the prohibition of idols may very well have been an attempt to grapple with the variety and variant usage of the Hebrew terminology as well as the apparent fusion of the worship of other gods and the worship of idols that is evident in a number of texts (e.g., Ps. 96). Therefore I first argued that the ambiguous relationship between the worship of other gods and

the worship of idols in the Old Testament is partly due to the “idol” terminology itself.

I secondly demonstrated that the relationship between the issues is difficult to define simply because there are a variety of approaches to the issues within the Old Testament. While some texts appear to fuse the issues, others treat them individually. While the prophetic idol polemics refer to gods of wood and stone and therefore appear to treat the issues without distinction, there are many texts that are directly concerned with the worship of other gods but do not deal with the particular issue of aniconism (e.g., Elijah’s encounter with the prophets of Baal in 1 Kgs. 18 or the numerous warnings not to go after other gods). Therefore the relationship between the issues is also difficult to define because, while some of the biblical writers appear to fuse the issues, others deal specifically with the one with no intention of addressing the other.

Thirdly, I have argued that the relationship between the issues is ambiguous because the texts of the Old Testament do not only deal with the worship of divine images of alien deities but also with the worship of YHWH via divine images. While none of the Old Testament writers emphasize a distinction between alien deities from the divine images associated with them, a reasonable distinction can be made between the worship of the “wrong gods” and the worship of the “right God” in the wrong way. If the worship of idols within the Old Testament exclusively referred to alien deities and the divine images associated with them, then the relationship between the issues would be unambiguous. However, because the worship of idols also encompasses the biblical concern for the worship of YHWH via divine images, the ambiguity remains.

Each of these first three factors was introduced in Part One. Again, presenting these four factors has been the primary aim of this thesis and my focus upon the relationship between the prohibitions was therefore a means to that end and not an end in itself. However, introducing the fourth factor required an examination of the relationship between the issues as they are dealt with within the wider Old Testament context. Chapters four to seven were devoted toward this goal. I fourthly made the case that the relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols within the Old Testament is difficult to define because there is a difference between the biblical depiction of the war against idols before and after the fall of the Northern Kingdom. In chapter four I argued that texts depicting the era before the fall appear to treat the worship of other gods and the worship of idols as differing issues because the war in these texts is not only fought on a foreign front against alien deities and the divine images associated with them, but also on a domestic front against the worship of YHWH via divine images. Within this literary context, a distinction can be made between the worship of the alien deities and the worship of the God of Israel. However, in chapter five I argued that, with the fall of the Northern Kingdom, comes the end of the biblical battle on the domestic front. Through the removal of the golden calves, the repudiation of Samaritan worship and the reform of Hezekiah, the use of divine images is thoroughly disassociated from the worship of YHWH. This sequence of events paves the way for the war against idols that is exclusively fought on the foreign front. Therefore in chapter six I made the case that texts depicting the era after the fall appear to fuse the worship of other gods and the worship of idols because the war against idols is exclusively fought on a foreign front against alien deities and the divine images associated with them. In this literary context, to worship an “idol” always means to worship an alien deity. In

this context the ridicule of idols became “a stick to beat foreign nations” and “heathenism and idolatry became synonymous terms.”

Therefore, in chapter seven I argued that the relationship between the prohibitions can be read in either the context of the texts depicting the era before or after the fall of the Northern Kingdom. The texts depicting the era before the fall strongly favour a distinction between the two while the texts depicting the era after the fall strongly favour a reading which views the two prohibitions as a single commandment. This thesis therefore makes the case that there *is* a relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols within the Old Testament and offers four reasons for the ambiguity of the relationship.

These conclusions challenge a number of commonly held scholarly positions that are reflected in the secondary literature. In the first, it challenges the assumption that the prohibition of images is closely related to and derived from the first commandment so that the prohibition concerns the images of foreign gods.<sup>89</sup> While I have argued that this must be one of the concerns of the prohibition of idols, within the wider Old Testament context it is surely not the exclusive concern. Whatever may have been the original intent of the prohibition, within its present Old Testament context, there is strong justification to conclude that the prohibition of idols also addresses the issue of the worship of YHWH via divine images.

Secondly, this thesis challenges Barton’s suggestion that Isaiah’s treatment of other gods as the work of human hands explains the apparent fusion of the issues relating to the prohibitions. While Barton is right to note that the worship of other gods and the worship of idols appear to be fused in Isaiah and other traditions, I have

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<sup>89</sup> See Chapter 3.

argued that this is not because the texts suggest that an earlier belief in the existence of other gods gave way to a later belief that these gods were nothing more than lifeless lumps of wood or stone. Instead, the issues appear to be fused in these texts because the attacks are exclusively dealing with the divine images of the nations. Texts depicting the era after the fall do not deal with the worship of YHWH via divine images and there is therefore no category of “idol” that represents an exception to the rule. While these texts provide a literary context in which the fusion of the prohibitions appears more fitting, this is not because the issues that warranted the distinction between the prohibitions are fused but because the attack upon the worship of YHWH via divine images is absent in these texts.

Thirdly, this work specifically challenges Barton’s suggestion that Isaiah’s attack upon gods that are the work of human hands is a departure from the belief that other gods are alternative sources of divine power. More broadly, it challenges the commonly held assumption that the treatment of idols as the work of human hands in the prophetic idol polemics reflects a shift from monolatry to “monotheism” within the texts of the Old Testament. While it is often assumed that the rejection of foreign gods as wood and stone constitutes a denial of the existence of alien deities, this assumption does not reflect either the soteriological nature of these polemics or the commonly held understanding of the relationship between deity and divine image in the ancient Near East. While the biblical writers reject the idea that these images are divine and emphasize the impotence of alien deities through a belittling association with the images associated with them, their attacks do not go so far as to constitute a denial of the existence of the deities associated with these images.

Fourthly, these conclusions challenge the assumption that the worship of other gods and the worship of idols within the Old Testament are interchangeable



issues. While the assumption fits best when interpreters are specifically referring to the worship of alien deities and the divine images associated with them, it becomes problematic when this specific frame of reference is not clarified and it is highly problematic when referring to the worship of YHWH via divine images.

Fifthly, these conclusions challenge scholarly presentations of the biblical war against idols that emphasizes Israel's battle on the foreign front to such an extent that the battle on the domestic front is effectively ignored. Such a presentation poorly reflects the biblical war against idols in texts depicting the era before Israel's fall. I have argued that it is difficult to maintain such a perspective when the most prominent idols in these texts have nothing to do with foreign gods and the clearest rationale for the prohibition of idols (Deut. 4) is primarily directed against the worship of the God of Israel by means of divine images. Chapter four has argued in favour of a more balanced presentation of the biblical war against idols in texts depicting the era before the fall of the Northern Kingdom.

Of course, as this work has challenged a number of scholarly positions, a number of objections could be raised in regard to its methods and conclusions. I will address three. In the first, it could be argued that texts dealing with Israel's battle on a domestic front may be dated after the fall of Israel and therefore the neat literary categorization of a war against idols "before and after" the fall would be artificial. In response, I would once again argue that the objection reveals a valid aim which nevertheless falls outside the scope of this work. In other words, it prioritizes the goal of establishing a history of ancient Israel and the development of its religion over and against an exegetical examination of the issues within their narrative contexts. Even if it were granted that the entire narrative depiction of Israel's life and times in the Promised Land was "artificial," the question of whether the biblical

depiction is historically accurate or not is irrelevant to the question I have set out to answer. Because I have attempted to explain why the relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols *within the Old Testament* is so difficult to define neatly, I have taken the biblical depiction on its own terms. As mentioned in the introduction, if the goal of my thesis were to explain why the relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols *within the history of ancient Israel and the development of its religion* is difficult to define, the question of the dating of the texts and the ordering of the treatment of the issues within a wider historical and religious framework would be unavoidable. Therefore, whether the biblical depiction is assumed to be artificial or not, it is within that depiction that the issues have been presented, distinguished, and interwoven.

Secondly, it could be pointed out that I have identified a problem without offering a solution! In other words, I have explained why the relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols within the Old Testament is difficult to define but I have not offered a better set of terms with which to speak of the issues. In response, I would note that scholars have attempted to do so in the past and have been largely unsuccessful. It may very well be that the terminology of “idols” and “idolatry” continues to be used precisely because of its versatility (the other side of ambiguity). But whether this is so or not, I would object to the idea of developing a set of terms that attempt to “resolve” the ambiguity, primarily because the ambiguity is not the product of poor translation but the product of good translation. In other words, the interweaving of the issues is evident not only in the usage of the range of Hebrew terms but also in the narrative of the Old Testament’s war against idols. While I have made clear that I prefer the term “divine image,” and I acknowledge that there surely is a level of descriptive precision that comes from

the language of “aniconism” that is helpful in some contexts, the issues have genuinely been merged within the texts of the Old Testament and subsequent tradition and attempts to limit “idolatry” to the worship of images is somewhat artificial to the text and the history of the term. Therefore, while I admittedly have not offered a better set of terms, I hope to have demonstrated the complexity of the relationship between the issues so that interpreters may handle them with greater precision.

Thirdly, it could be pointed out that dealing with the texts within the narrative context of the war against idols before and after the fall leaves texts that fall outside of the narrative context unaddressed. For example, Psalm 96, 115 and 135 are all significantly involved in the question of the relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols within the Old Testament and yet they do not clearly depict either era. I would first respond by saying that all of these texts are surely relevant in regard to the question this thesis attempts to answer and for that reason they were addressed in Part One. This first part of the work touched upon a number of texts that fall outside of the parameters of the wider narrative context. However, I would secondly (and more importantly) repeat that this thesis has attempted to answer a specific question: “Why is the relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols within the Old Testament difficult to define?” While this work has a scope that is unusually broad for a doctoral thesis, it does not assume to be exhaustive. Moreover, to assume that the examination of the texts within the narrative contexts of the eras before and after the fall of Israel was merely a heuristic tool used to address a large number of relevant texts is to thoroughly misunderstand my reason for the division of the material in this way.

Despite wishing to defend this thesis against various objections, it is right to recognize its limitations. In the first, although I have touched upon the derisive nature of many of the Hebrew “idol” terms in chapter one, more could be done to consider how the relationship between the issues is affected by the use of figurative language. For example, while on the one hand the term גלול (dungy thing) appears most often in Ezekiel,<sup>90</sup> אליל (worthless thing) appears most often in Isaiah,<sup>91</sup> and עצב (hurtful or wicked thing) appears most often in the Psalms and Hosea,<sup>92</sup> on the other hand, Exodus, Deuteronomy and Judges prefer the terms פסל (graven image) and מטסה (molten image). Although I have not found any outstanding patterns thus far, a study which considers the way in which the terminology either serves to distinguish or meld the issues could be helpful.<sup>93</sup>

Secondly, in making the case for the biblical battle against idols on the domestic front, I have chosen the least controversial examples and have avoided those examples that I found unpersuasive. For example, although scholars have suggested that the אפוד and the תרפים should be included in this category, I have not been persuaded by the arguments. Nevertheless, a study that addressed these examples as well may have been more persuasive to some. However, for the

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<sup>90</sup> For a discussion of the use of the term in Ezekiel see Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 28-35.

<sup>91</sup> Though Williamson points out that the term only occurs in 1-39 and never in 40-66. Williamson, “Idols in Isaiah in Light of Isaiah 10:10-11,” 23.

<sup>92</sup> 4x each.

<sup>93</sup> Barton’s suggestion that Isaiah’s treatment of the gods of the nations as “the work of human hands” opens the door for the view that idolatry consists in making gods for ourselves and putting our trust in them represents a move from the literal to the metaphorical. Barton, “‘The Work of Human Hands’,” 71. While I would agree with Barton on this point, I have found no straightforward correlation between this move and the literal/figurative usage of the idol terminology. Despite the occurrences of terms listed above, the trends are not conclusive. Similarly, despite Aaron’s suggestion that the iconic imagery develops from an early stage of literalism to a later metaphorical meaning, I see no clear correlation in the biblical usage of the terminology. Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities: Metaphor, Semantics and Divine Imagery*, 13-14.

purposes of my argument, I found Deut. 4, 12, Judg. 17-18 and the texts dealing with the calves to be sufficient.

Along a similar vein, I would thirdly note that I have done very little to address the unique place of the texts dealing with the worship of celestial bodies and these may provide further explanation for the ambiguity of the relationship between the issues. However, the arguments I have made regarding the biblical concern to avoid worshipping YHWH in the way that the nations worship their gods would apply to the worship of celestial bodies as well. In other words, while the nations worshiped their gods via the celestial bodies, Israel was not to do the same in their worship of YHWH.

Fourthly, I have offered four factors which make the relationship between the issues difficult to define. However, other factors are surely involved. I have approached the question through a certain narrative methodology and this has emphasized certain factors. Other approaches could fruitfully provide explanations for the ambiguity as well. As MacDonald has pointed out in regard to the golden calf, "I wish to suggest that the understanding of idolatry is already multidimensional in the Old Testament and that this stems from redactional structuring and intertextual linking that creates and has the potential to create various understandings of idolatry." Therefore, while I would argue that the four factors I have presented are the primary reasons for the biblical ambiguity, I do not assume that they are the only factors involved.

Finally, I would note that I have limited my study to the presentation of the issues within the text of the Old Testament. I would find it highly valuable to consider how the relationship between the issues is taken up and developed within

the New Testament and subsequent reception. Particularly, I would be interested in reconsidering the question of how the incarnation affects the relationship.<sup>94</sup>

Despite these shortcomings, this thesis has attempted to provide some explanation for the ambiguous relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols within the Old Testament. I have argued that hearing the voice of the texts depicting the era before the fall of the Northern Kingdom involves recognition of a significant distinction between the issues while hearing the voice of the texts depicting the era after the fall involves recognition of that ways in which the issues appear to have been merged. Once again, it is attention to these literary contexts which will help interpreters to better understand the unique relationship between the worship of other gods and the worship of idols *within the Old Testament*.

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<sup>94</sup> The question of the how the prohibition of images was to be understood in Christian tradition in light of the incarnation was certainly addressed in iconoclastic controversies of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. On this see Baranov, "The Second Commandment and 'True Worship' in the Iconoclastic Controversy," in *Congress Volume Ljubjana 2007*, (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 541-554. However, as far as I have seen, there has been no attempt to consider how the differing perspectives on this question affect interpreter's readings of the relationship between the prohibitions and the subsequent conception of 'idolatry'. Cf. Achtemeier, "Gods Made With Hands: The New Testament and the Problem of Idolatry," *ExAud* 15 (1999).

## Appendix 1

### “Divine Images,” “Cultic Images,” and the Ark

The distinction between the specific category of פסלים and the broader category of cultic images is particularly evident in the biblical treatment of the Ark. The ark was not only a cultic image, but one which occupied a central position within the cult of Israel and was uniquely associated with the presence of YHWH.<sup>95</sup> As Weeks has pointed out:

“The ark of the biblical histories is carefully prepared, according to Yahweh’s own specifications, as a vehicle for his constant presence amongst his people, who can worship and sacrifice before it in the knowledge that they are doing so before their god; it can be taken into battle as a way of bringing Yahweh himself into the fight, and it can reside in the tent or the Temple as a way of ensuring the presence of God at the heart of Israel. In all these respects, the ark functions in a way comparable to the cult-statutes of other ancient religions, and reflects a similar conception of the way in which a deity may be made constantly present in a specific location within the world, without being confined to that location.”<sup>96</sup>

For these reasons, the ark appears to have more in common with the פסלים than say, the twelve bronze bulls within the temple. Nevertheless, the ark never falls under the biblical condemnation of the פסלים.<sup>97</sup> Why not? Weeks goes on to point out that while the ark provided a specific point of presence for YHWH in the world, it was neither a depiction of nor a container for him. Instead it functioned as his

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<sup>95</sup> E.g. 1 Sam. 4-7; 2 Sam. 7; Ps. 131.

<sup>96</sup> Weeks, “Man-Made Gods?,” 12. Cf. Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 40; Faur, “The Biblical Idea of Idolatry,” 1, Mettinger, *No Graven Image?*, 22.

<sup>97</sup> Notice that the biblical writer of Deut. 10:1-5 uses the verb פסל for the stone tablets but not for the Ark. The tablets are “hewn” but the ark is simply “made.”

seat.<sup>98</sup> YHWH himself is “enthroned above the cherubim.”<sup>99</sup> As Knoppers has observed, “Israelite authors sometimes speak of the ark as YHWH’s footstool (e.g., Ps 132:7; 1 Chr 28:2). But never does an Israelite author equate the ark or the cherubim with deity.”<sup>100</sup> In terms of our discussion, the ark did not fall under the biblical condemnation of the פסלים because the term was not merely used to refer to cultic objects, nor even cultic objects which held a central position within cultic worship, but to cultic objects which were *held to be gods*. Biblical writers obviously made a distinction between these items and the ark. Whether this distinction is regarded as something of a double-standard or not,<sup>101</sup> it has nevertheless been established within the biblical texts and is therefore relevant in terms of understanding the meaning of the term פסל within these texts.

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<sup>98</sup> Weeks, “Man-Made Gods?,” 12-13.

<sup>99</sup> 2 Sam. 6:2; 2 Kgs. 19:15; 1 Chr. 13:6; Ps. 80:1; 99:1; Isa. 37:16.

<sup>100</sup> Knoppers, “Aaron’s Calf and Jeroboam’s Calves,” 101.

<sup>101</sup> For example, interpreters may question why the Golden calves of the Northern Kingdom are condemned as other gods while the Ark is not. Note Faur who writes, “The distinction between licit and illicit iconology is fundamentally arbitrary and is an extension of the Biblical idea of monolatry...certain images were included in the Biblical ritual others were proscribed.” Faur, “The Biblical Idea of Idolatry,” 1-2.



## Appendix 2

### Meaning and Illegitimate Totality Transfer

As Barr pointed out in his *Semantics of Biblical Language*, there very well may be a difference between the meaning of a term within a larger body of literature and the meaning of a term in an individual occurrence.<sup>102</sup> His comments regarding the meaning of ἐκκλησία in *the whole of* the New Testament as opposed to ἐκκλησία in an individual occurrence can be adapted to consider the Old Testament terminology of idols. If I ask “What is the meaning of ‘idol’ in the Old Testament?” the answer given may be an adding or a compounding of different statements about idols made in various passages. Thus (to narrow it down to the senses relevant for this discussion) we might legitimately say that an idol is (a) a divine image *and* (b) a “false” or “worthless god” even if there is no hint that a material object is being referred to. The meaning of “idol” in the Old Testament could then be legitimately stated to be the totality of these relations. Therefore, it could be assumed that the meaning of “idol” in the Old Testament may be “a ‘false’ or ‘worthless’ god whether a divine image is intended or not.” This meaning would encompass both senses in which the terminology is used. Based on this conception of meaning, it could therefore once again be argued that “idols” and “other gods” are roughly synonymous. Just as the phrase, “other gods” is at times used to refer to divine

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<sup>102</sup> Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, 216-218. Cf. Silva, *Biblical Words and their Meaning*, 19.

images and yet represents a broader frame of reference, so too the idol terminology is at times used to refer to divine images and yet also represents a broader frame of reference. This is one sense of “meaning.”

But when we take an individual text, for example Isaiah 40:18-20, and ask what is the meaning of “idol” in these verses, we are asking something different. The semantic indication given by “idol” is now something much less than “the Old Testament conception of ‘idols.’” In this context, it could be argued that the meaning of “idol” is “a divine image.” Based on this conception of meaning, it could therefore be argued that “idols” and “other gods” are not synonymous terms. This is a second sense of meaning. Therefore, the wider linguistic ambiguity not only has to do with the differing senses in which the idol terminology is used, but also with differing ways in which the “meaning” of that terminology may be conceived.

In light of these differing conceptions of meaning, a word of caution seems especially appropriate when considering issues such as “The worship of other gods” and “The worship of idols” which span the breadth of the Old Testament. Barr suggested that interpreters mishandle individual texts when they read the “meaning” of a word (understood as the total series of relations in which it is used in the literature) back into a particular case as its sense and implication there.”<sup>103</sup> He called this “illegitimate totality transfer.”<sup>104</sup> I find this point relevant in regard to scholarly treatment of “idols” and especially the usage of the term “idolatry” in the secondary literature. I have suggested that, according to one conception of meaning, interpreters may see idols as “worthless gods” whether divine images are intended or not. While this may be legitimate in wider biblical contexts, it is surely

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<sup>103</sup> Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, 218.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 218, 70-71.

inappropriate to read this wider meaning back into each individual occurrence so as to erase any distinction between “divine images” and “other gods.” Both the wider meaning and the individual meaning should be maintained.

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