

IDOLS, IDOLATRY, GODS

The medieval rabbi Rashi quotes the *Sifre*, “As long as idolatry (exists) in the world, (God’s) fierce anger (will exist) in the world” (cf. [Deut 13:17](#)). The prophets give voice to this jealous exclusivity: loyalty to Yahweh is incompatible with honoring other gods or divine images. Idolatry is the fundamental crime against Yahweh, a rejection not of some aspect of his ways for Israel but of his very place at the center of Israel’s life (see [God](#)). The passionate prophetic struggle against idolatry is, although not present in every book, pervasive and shares significant features across the prophets, although the various books exhibit differing emphases.

*[worship](#) of images and worship of other gods than Yahweh are conceptually distinct activities, and clarity in distinguishing them can be helpful (Greenspahn; Barton). However, the prophets generally connect both types of worship with turning away from Yahweh, and so in this article “idolatry” is used to refer to the overarching offense. It is worth noting that there are no clear examples of prophetic concern about worshipping images of Yahweh.

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1. Idolatry in Israel’s History

It is helpful to begin with the canonical and historical settings of the prophetic texts. Canonically, Israel’s religion in the OT follows a rough trajectory from unified focus on Yahweh alone under Moses in the exodus to continual struggles against idolatry and accompanying moral failures that begin in the wilderness and continue to the destructions of the northern and southern kingdoms. In the primary history, the most prominent idolatrous offenses include the golden calf at Sinai ([Ex 32–34](#); [Deut 9–10](#)), the Baal of Peor ([Num 25](#)), the cyclic pattern outlined in [Judges 2:11–23](#) and demonstrated throughout the book, Solomon turning to other gods ([1 Kings 11](#)), Jeroboam’s golden calves ([1 Kings 12:25–33](#)) and the institution of Baal worship by Ahab and Jezebel in the northern kingdom ([1 Kings 16:29–34](#)), and Manasseh’s idolatry in the southern kingdom ([2 Kings 21:1–18](#)). Focal points of struggle against idolatry in this history include Deuteronomy’s programmatic focus on Yahweh alone (e.g., [Deut 6:4–9](#)), Joshua’s covenant renewal ([Josh 23–24](#)), Elijah’s confrontation with the prophets of Baal ([1 Kings 18](#)), and the reforms of Jehu and Josiah ([2 Kings 10](#); [23](#)). The postexilic restoration is portrayed as a time largely concerned with other issues than idolatry.

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The canonical texts do not describe Israelite religion in neutral terms; they advocate particular beliefs and practices as normative for Israel. Historians, on the other hand, critically reconstruct the breadth of Israelite beliefs and practices based on both the biblical texts and a wide variety of other material, textual and iconographic evidence. That Israel's real-life religions were extremely varied and often failed to meet the biblical norms of orthodoxy should be unsurprising. Among historians there is a broad consensus on the major features of the history of Israel's religion (see, e.g., Hess, [347–51](#)). Pre-Israelite Levantine religion revolved around deities such as El and Baal, who bore significant similarities to Yahweh. These gods were worshiped through institutions of temples, sacrifices and feasts not wholly unlike later Israelite practices. There are no undisputed extrabiblical texts mentioning Yahweh during Israel's premonarchic period. But from the period of the rise of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, while strong connections continue between Israelite religion and its West Semitic background, Yahwistic religion emerges as a distinct and historically observable entity. This religion held distinctive traditions such as Yahweh's acts in the exodus, giving of the law, and taking of the land. Toward the end of the monarchic period there was a growing emphasis on Yahweh's striking intolerance of Israel's worship of other deities and use of images. The various forms of monotheism, from programmatically demanding the worship of Yahweh alone to denying the existence of other gods, likely gained prominence only in the latter period of the monarchy and the exile, respectively (Gnuse).

It is difficult to reconstruct the religious practices and ideas that came under attack by the prophets and the Prophetic Books. Scholarly positions can change quite drastically. One important example concerns fertility cults (Ackerman, *NIDB* 2:450–51). As is indicated by polemical biblical and classical texts, such ancient Near Eastern cults were long understood to be filled with sexual excess. But biblical polemics that accuse Israelites of “playing the whore” on “every high hill and under every green tree” (e.g., [Jer 2:20](#); [3:6](#)) should likely not be read literally to reconstruct religious practices that included sacred sexual intercourse. There is no convincing historical evidence of such. Rather, these powerful metaphors express prophetic outrage at Israelite idolatry. Beyond sexual issues, scholars have long made creative connections between the mythological dying and rising of Baal in the Baal Cycle and seasonal fertility rites. Such methods for reconstructing religious belief and practice are now questioned (Smith). In contrast to these straining reconstructions, [Jeremiah 44](#) presents a markedly less sensational vignette of a fertility cult where worshipers of the Queen of Heaven describe their practices and its expected results: burning incense and pouring libations in order to assure adequate harvests and protection from military defeat ([Jer 44:17–19](#)).

Although the fiery prophetic critiques can be read on their own terms, contextually sensitive readers should seek to comprehend the thoughts of those practicing the criticized religions. One recent advance has been in understanding the manufacture of cult images and the rituals by which the images became embodiments of the divine. These were carefully shaped religious acts that distanced the human maker from the worshiped images (Dick). Such rituals likely lay behind Isaiah's parody of image manufacture (e.g., [Is 44:9–20](#)), which should be read as high satire rather than a portrayal with which practitioners would have agreed. Similarly, readers of the prophets should always be vigilant to the use of creative literary forms. Recent studies of [Hosea 1–3](#), for example, suggest that the prophet may have been

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criticizing not a currently thriving Baal cult but oppressive socioeconomic or political policies (Kelle, 202–8).

2. Basic Features of Idolatry in the Prophets

Although some of the Prophetic Books emphasize certain aspects of idolatry, there is much in common across them. As a starting point, it is important to note that idolatrous worship often resembled acceptable worship of Yahweh except that the object of worship was an image or other god. Common elements included such things as sacred places, bowing down and offering incense and sacrifices.

In the prophetic analyses, idolatrous worship does not usually stand alone, but rather is connected to a wide variety of moral failures, including such things as oppression of the helpless, murder and adultery (e.g., [Jer 7:6, 9](#); [Ezek 22:2–12](#)). Most abominable to the prophets are the claims that idolatry is connected with child sacrifice ([Is 57:5](#); [Jer 7:31](#); [19:5](#); [32:35](#); [Ezek 16:20–21](#); [20:31](#); [23:39](#)) (Stavrakopoulou).

Idolatry is also not just a personal matter; it has social and political associations. For purposes of national prosperity and security, idolatry is juxtaposed with trusting material strength, such as wealth, military power and foreign alliances, which replace trust in Yahweh ([Is 2:6–9](#), [12–22](#); [Jer 2:9–19](#); [Ezek 16:23–29](#); [23:7](#), [30](#)).

In terms of metaphor, Israel’s idolatry is often described as sexual promiscuity, adultery and unbridled lust that offends the “marriage” with Yahweh. Within the metaphor, the jealous “husband” pours out humiliation and violence upon his disloyal “wife” ([Jer 13:26–27](#); [Ezek 16](#); [Hos 2](#)).

Yahweh is deeply provoked by Israel’s idolatry. He alone has been their God and savior, rescuing them from Egypt, caring for them in the wilderness, and bringing them into the good land. Despite this, Israel has forgotten Yahweh and his care and has instead turned to other gods. The prophets nowhere condemn idolatry by invoking laws forbidding it (e.g., [Deut 5:6–10](#)); rather, they present idolatry as an obvious and nonsensical personal offense against Israel’s beneficent God.

The structure of the prophetic description of Yahweh’s response to idolatry comes in three phases. First, Yahweh threatens to destroy the nation as punishment for its idolatry. Second, after the destruction has been realized against the northern and southern kingdoms, it is explained to be a result of their idolatry. In both of these phases, the powerless other gods cannot deflect Yahweh’s will; the prophets mock the very idea of calling for help from wood and stone (e.g., [Jer 10](#)). In the third phase, Yahweh reestablishes Israel with a vision for a relationship marked by faithfulness and no more idolatry ([Is 2:17–18](#); [30:22](#); [31:7](#); [Ezek 11:18–20](#); [36:25](#); [37:23](#); [Hos 2:14–23](#)).

3. Vocabulary

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The overarching term, characteristic of Deuteronomy, for gods other than Yahweh is simply “other gods” (*’ēlōhîm ’aḥērîm*). Among the prophets, this phrase occurs almost exclusively in Jeremiah (18x), but also once in Hosea ([Hos 3:1](#)). Jeremiah also uses the phrase “foreign/strange gods” (*’ēlōhê nēkār*) once ([Jer 5:19](#)). Generic reference to gods other than Yahweh is made with phrases such as “their gods,” “the gods of the nations,” “the gods of [place name]” and “the gods of the earth.”

Gods are also cited by name, though there are two special cases of an ambiguity between a name and a generic (Halpern, 61–78). First, the term *ba’al* sometimes refers to the personal name of a particular deity, but also it can be a title through its root meaning of “lord” or “husband,” as indicated by the definite article: “the baal.” It also often appears in the plural: “the baals.” This title seems to have also been associated with Yahweh, as Hosea hails the day when Yahweh will no longer be called “my Baal” ([Hos 2:16](#)). The second unusual case is *’āšērâ*, which can refer either to a sacred object (a pole or tree: “an asherah” or “the asherah”) or to a goddess (“Asherah”) who was the consort of the high father god El in the Ugaritic myths (Hadley). Noteworthy are the ninth or eighth-century BC inscriptions found in Kuntillet ‘Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom that refer to Yahweh and “his asherah/Asherah,” the interpretation of which is contested. All four references in the prophetic literature can be interpreted as sacred objects rather than the name of the goddess ([Is 17:8](#); [27:9](#); [Jer 17:2](#); [Mic 5:14](#)).

Clearer cases of proper names for gods in the prophets appear predominantly in later prophetic writings and include “Chemosh” ([Jer 48:7](#), [13](#), [46](#)), “Tammuz” ([Ezek 8:14](#)), “Amon” ([Jer 46:25](#); [Nahum 3:8](#)), “Apis” ([Jer 46:15](#)), “Bel” (“Lord” = Marduk/Merodach [[Is 46:1](#); [Jer 50:2](#); [51:44](#)]), “Meni” and “Gad” ([Is 65:11](#)), “Marduk/Merodach” ([Jer 50:2](#)), “Milcom” ([Jer 49:1](#), [3](#); [Zeph 1:5](#)), “Molech” ([Is 57:9](#) [debated]; [Jer 32:35](#)) and “Nebo” ([Is 46:1](#)). The “Queen of Heaven” ([Jer 7:18](#); [44:17](#), [18](#), [19](#), [25](#)) likely refers to a syncretism of West Semitic Astarte and Mesopotamian Ishtar (Ackerman, *NIDB* 4:703).

The terminology for idols is widely varied and can be divided into two types: terms referring to the physical objects or their manufacture and derisive terms of ridicule. Of the first sort, the terms *pesel* and *pāsîl* relate to the verb for “carving” and refer to idols hewn from stone, clay, wood or metal. Similarly, *šelem* likely relates to a verb for “cutting,” *’ōšeb* and *’āšāb* to “shaping” or “fashioning,” and *nesek*, *nāsîk* and *massēkâ* to “pouring” for idols made from molten metal. Debatable is (*’ēšâ* ([Hos 10:6](#); cf. [Hos 4:12](#)), possibly related to the word for “wood” to refer to a wooden idol.

Terms of the second type ridicule idols by naming them through demeaned objects. The term *gillûlîm* likely refers to balls of dung and is always used contemptuously (39x in Ezekiel; 1x in Jeremiah). Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Nahum and Zechariah use the term *šiqqûš* to refer to idols as “detested things.” Indicating insufficiency and worthlessness is the term *’ēlîl* (10x in [Is 1–39](#); 1x in Ezekiel; 1x in Habakkuk). The terms *hebel* and *šāwē’* mean, respectively, “ephemeral vanity” and “emptiness” ([Jon 2:8](#); and a few times in Jeremiah). Finally, *šeqer* means “falsehood” ([Is 44:20](#)). Such derogatory terms are also used adjectivally in many other places to express contempt for idols.

Less common and less clear terms for idols include *těrāpîm* ([Ezek 21:21](#); [Hos 3:4](#); [Zech 10:2](#)), sometimes simply transliterated as “teraphim” or translated as “household gods” or “idols,” and *sēmel*

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([Ezek 8:3, 5](#)), a term of unknown origin, found in Phoenician inscriptions and referring to a statue or idol. The term *šîr* seems to refer once to idols ([Is 45:16](#)) but may reflect a textual or interpretational error.

4. Idolatry in Particular Prophetic Books

Although prophetic treatment of idolatry overlaps substantially, emphases of particular books are worth noting (see [Wolff](#)).

The book of Jeremiah describes an existential struggle for Judah's loyalty to Yahweh against the lure of other gods, with dire consequences of destruction hanging in the balance. Although the people seem to find the deities exchangeable, the prophet obviously sees them as incomparable: "My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water" ([Jer 2:13](#) NRSV [cf. [Jer 2:11](#)]). Although the people cry out to Yahweh for help, he will not listen to their tainted voices, and their cries to other gods are useless ([Jer 11:11–12](#)). They think that the Queen of Heaven will provide for them, but such ideas only lead Yahweh, the only true God, to destroy them ([Jer 44:15–30](#)). The thrust is that the people wrongly think that Yahweh and the other gods are comparable and exchangeable. Although conflict over false prophecy is prominent in Jeremiah, this issue predominantly concerns conflicting claims to Yahweh's words, not the words of other gods (e.g. [Jer 28](#)).

Ezekiel's terminology is unusual in that the book never honors gods other than Yahweh with the label *'ēlōhîm* ("gods"), preferring the derogatory *gillûlîm* ("dung balls") to emphasize their disgusting impurity. This term is rarely used by other prophets and may represent Ezekiel's own creativity or something derived from his priestly tradition (Wolff, 407). This theme of impurity is prominent in his vision of increasingly abominable idolatry in the temple itself ([Ezek 8](#)) and Yahweh's threat to desecrate Judah's idolatrous altars and places of worship with corpses ([Ezek 6](#)). [Ezekiel 20](#) describes Israel's history from Egypt to exile as filled with defiling idolatry.

[Isaiah 1–39](#) is not focused on idolatry in particular, often subordinating it to dependence upon wealth and military power ([Is 2:6–9, 12–18](#)). This material prefers the term *'ēlîm* for idols, likely meaning "weaklings" in contrast to their purported and desired strength. This political conflict with other gods is dramatized in the narrative of Hezekiah's standoff with the Assyrians ([Is 36–37](#) // [2 Kings 18–19](#)). [Isaiah 40–55](#) takes a different tack with a message of hope and power that stood in contrast to the experience of defeat and *[exile](#): Yahweh is the unique divine power and alone announces what will happen and brings it to pass, as exemplified in the predicted exile and return ([Is 41:21–29; 43:8–15; 44:6–8; 45:20–25](#)). Yahweh is no mere national deity; he wields universal power, as demonstrated through creation ([Is 40:12–26](#)). These chapters are the high point of the prophetic exaltation of Yahweh and the complementary denial of the reality of other gods. The idol makers, idol worshipers and their idols are worthy only of ridicule, the idols being lifeless, silent and powerless ([Is 40:19–20; 41:5–7; 44:9–20; 46:5–7](#); cf. [Jer 10:2–10](#)) (MacDonald, 29–31), something that the nations will eventually realize, causing them to turn to Yahweh (e.g. [Is 45:22–24](#)). In [Isaiah 56–66](#) there is renewed condemnation of actual idolatrous practices ([Is 57:3–13; 65:2–5, 11; 66:3, 17](#)).

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In the Book of the Twelve, Hosea reflects the oldest use of *[marriage](#) metaphors for Israel's relationship to Yahweh and sexual metaphors of adultery and prostitution for idolatry ([Hos 2](#); [4:10–18](#); [5:3–7](#); [6:10](#); [7:4](#); [9:1](#)). Related metaphors are used by Jeremiah, Isaiah and Ezekiel (Moughtin-Mumby). In the book of Jonah, the non-Israelite sailors and Ninevites respond to Jonah's God in light of his mighty acts on the sea and threats against the city ([Jon 1:16](#); [3:5–9](#)). Micah presents a striking contrast between each nation walking in the name of its own god and all nations seeking Yahweh ([Mic 4:2](#), [5](#)). Condemnation of idolatry sometimes extends to other nations, as in Nahum's threat against Nineveh's gods and idols ([Nahum 1:14](#); see also [Jer 48:35](#) against Moab, and [Ezek 30:13](#) against Egypt). Habakkuk sees Babylon trusting its strength as a god ([Hab 1:11](#)), though their idols are worthless and lifeless compared to Yahweh ([Hab 2:18–20](#)). Zephaniah, set within the era of Josiah's reform, expresses Yahweh's intent to remove Baal, Milcom and their worshipers ([Zeph 1:4–6](#)) and looks forward to all nations bowing to Yahweh ([Zeph 2:11](#)). The explicitly postexilic prophets focus less on other gods than lack of regard for Yahweh and his temple ([Hag 1:4](#), [9](#); [Zech 7:5–6](#); [Mal 3:14](#)), though Malachi warns of other gods encroaching through marriage ([Mal 2:11](#); cf. [Ezra 9–10](#)). Idolatry does appear briefly in Zechariah, but it is largely envisioned as disappearing from the land, with Yahweh becoming the only God over the whole earth ([Zech 5:5–11](#); [10:2](#); [13:2](#); [14:9](#)).

In Daniel, the struggle is not primarily against idols and other gods but rather against the godlike Babylonian and Persian kings. The kings several times assert themselves as autonomous powers or even gods ([Dan 3:1–7](#); [4:30](#); [5:20–28](#); [6:1–9](#); cf. [Is 14:13–14](#); [Ezek 28:2](#)), but they are repeatedly compelled to acknowledge Israel's God ([Dan 2:47](#); [3:26](#), [28](#); [4:1–3](#), [34–37](#); [5:29](#); [6:16–27](#)). In the vision of [Daniel 11](#) a king asserts himself above every god, but the book ends with a promise of deliverance from the arrogant king ([Dan 11:36–39](#); [12:1](#)). In all of the prophets, no power can be compared with Yahweh.

See also [GOD](#); [LITURGY AND CULT](#); [WORSHIP](#).

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