



THE ATTRACTION OF
IDOLATRY



By Randall L. Adkisson

IN A FIELD OUTSIDE A VILLAGE IN central India, a man snuck away from his family and friends. There he set for himself an idol, an image of his chief deity. In the waning light of the day, Goli took a knife, sharp as a razor, and made long cuts into the flesh of his forearm. He lifted his arms; clasped his hands together; hovered them over the idol's form; and let his fresh, warm blood drain over his god.¹

A World Filled with Idols

Though perhaps a shock to the modern sensibilities of some people, idol worship is still common today. In communities, villages, towns, and cities all over the world—in homes, apartments, fields, caves, and on mountains, men and women bow before shrines to honor gods made by hands.

Genesis first hints at the prevalence of idol worship in reporting Rachel stole and then hid her family's idols (Gen. 31:19). The tone of the story seems to indicate that even then, idolatry was not uncommon. In the Old Testament period, people often recognized national, regional, and individual gods and their idol forms.

From the patriarchs through the later prophets, idol worship was a constant temptation for God's people. Neither warnings nor severe punishment broke them of the idol's lure. On Sinai Moses acquired the Law from God, a primary one stating, "You shall not make for yourself an idol" (Ex. 20:4).² In the camp below, the newly freed Israelites degraded themselves before an idol constructed by Moses' brother (32:2-4).

The lure of idol worship was not limited to ancient Israel. In fact, throughout most of their history, idolatry was a constant draw that enticed God's people—

although to a far lesser extent after the exile. History bears witness, though, that the Jews ultimately found the will to turn completely from idol worship during the intertestamental period. Still, idol worship was ubiquitous in the Gentile world of the New Testament.

Long-established deities had their place in the temples of Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome. To these the first century added new images of worship—images of Roman rulers and the national religions.

The New Testament church faced idol worship as a barrier to their witness and an enticement to their membership. Images of the gods were hot-selling items in the marketplaces of the New Testament world. Paul faced craftsmen's wrath when several people responded to his preaching in Ephesus. The artisans accused Paul of cutting into their ability to market their images and of threatening their profits (Acts 19:23-41).

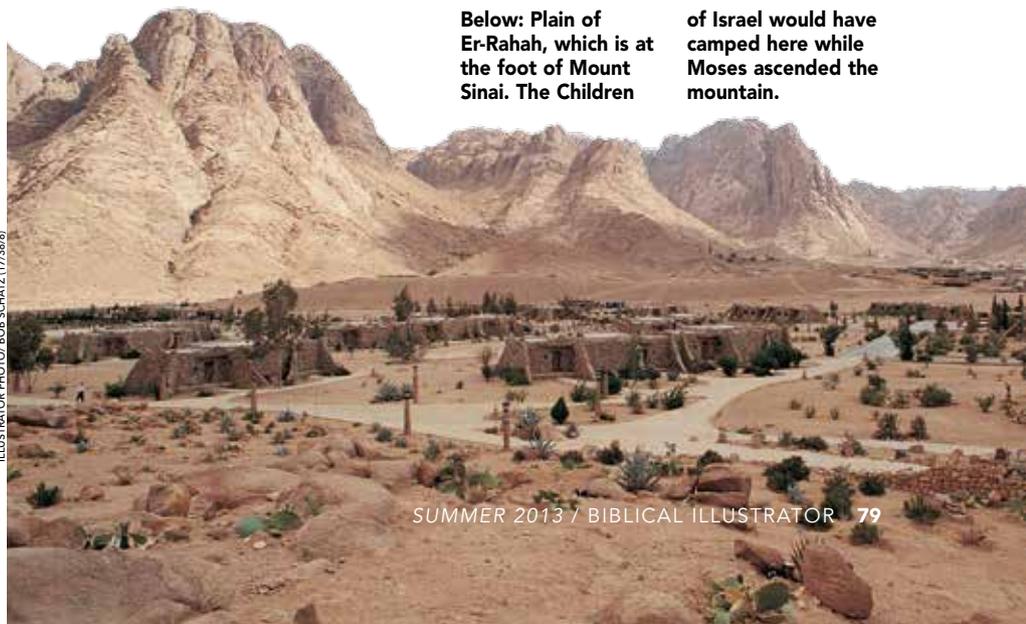
What Was (Is) the Attraction of Idols?

Individuals desire to be "normal," to be perceived by others as regular, as part of typical society. Readers today may not understand how far from normal were the demands of God and therefore the people of God. Every group of people with whom Israel related, fought, or came into contact believed in multiple gods and practiced idol worship. These people believed every need of life was under the watch of some god or the other. Procreation of livestock, fields, and family was assured or denied based upon the favor of a god.

Israel often succumbed the lure of the land in which they resided, whether Egypt, Babylon, or Canaan. Interaction with the surrounding peoples through trade, marriage, and government could not help but entwine God's people with idols. To the New Testament church the apostle Paul would write, "Do not be deceived: 'Bad company corrupts good morals.'"

Left: At Tell Brak in modern northern Syria, archaeologists unearthed a large number of eye idols, so many that they dubbed the location the "Eye Temple." The purpose of the figures is unclear. Some suggest the idols represent worshipers, who would be looking continually to the god, even in the absence of the actual people who left

the objects. Others believe the objects represent the gods themselves. The figures with double sets of eyes may represent children or a parent and child. These examples come from northern Syria and date to about 3500 B.C. This particular style of alabaster eye idol has been found only at Tell Brak; the zig-zag design may indicate clothing.



Below: Plain of Er-Rahah, which is at the foot of Mount Sinai. The Children

of Israel would have camped here while Moses ascended the mountain.



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Far left: The Temple of Apollo at Corinth. Seven of the original 38 Doric columns still stand. In the background is the Acrocorinth (or upper-Corinth). In Paul's day, temples to numerous Greek gods were atop the Acrocorinth.

Left: Asherah figurine. Mentioned throughout the Old Testament, Asherah was the primary goddess of Syria and Canaan. The people believed she was the wife of the Canaanite god El and also mother to 70 other gods, the most famous being Baal.

“Every need of life was assumed to be under the watch of some god.”

(1 Cor. 15:33). As today, influence of culture and family too easily swayed the people of God.

Another draw to idol worship was its simplicity of form and promise of results. According to one Old Testament scholar,

Pagan idolatry was attractive to the ancients because, among other things, it was based on an assumption that frequency and generosity of worship (bringing a lot of food to an idol's shrine) would establish a good relationship with one's god or goddess. Ethical living was not required.³

Thus a religion that required only simple forms of payment and ritualistic worship rather than taxing demands of moral standards held a lure for sinful mankind. The Book of Numbers records the simplicity with which Israel could enter into idol worship and remain enmeshed with immorality (see ch. 25).

Idols were pleasing, both visibly and to the touch. Israel struggled to restrict their worship to a God whom no one could see or touch. Although people could experience Yahweh's presence in: (1) creation, (2) His moral obligations communicated through the Law, and (3) His personal intervention recorded in national history, they still could not touch, handle, or see Him.

The allure of a god that could be handled, decorated, bowed to, and transported overcame for many the contradiction of worshiping an item created by the hands of the worshiper. Like present day charms, crystals, and amulets,

Right: Exterior of the Pantheon in Rome. Marcus Agrippa commissioned the original structure as a tribute to all of the Roman gods in 27-25 B.C. Emperor Hadrian (reigned A.D. 117-138) rebuilt the current structure, which still stands today. Although almost 2,000 years old, the building has the largest unreinforced concrete dome in the world.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO / BOB SCHATZ (19/2/16)

the convenience and imminence of idols captured people's imaginations. Worshipers felt they could be assured of a god's presence if they could touch or see its image.

“Sex sells” was as true in the ancient world as it is in the modern. Idol worship incorporated many forms of sexual vice. Craftsmen often shaped idolatrous symbols to resemble sexual organs or to resemble humans with exaggerated genitalia. The Scripture speaks of Asherah, a pole or tree representing a sex goddess in the Old Testament. Greeks and the Romans worshiped Artemis and Diana, represented by a multi-breasted idol.

Because many forms of idol worship sought to assure the fertility of the soil and the womb, ritualistic sexual practices were often a part of pagan temple worship. People

View of the Parthenon at night. Rising over 500 feet at its highest point, the acropolis initially served as a safe place for women and children of Athens during times of battle. Eventually, though, the site had a strictly religious purpose and was the location of several temples, the most prominent being the Parthenon, the temple that honored Athena.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ TOM HOOKE (66/14/18)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ TOM HOOKE/ ATHENS ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM (66/15/20)

Left: Statue of Athena, patron goddess of the city of Athens. This is a replica of the original, which was made of gold, silver, and ivory and stood in the Parthenon. Her crown has a sphinx in the center with a griffin on either side. Her breastplate has an image of Medusa on it. The god Victory is in her right hand, a spear and shield are in her left. The serpent near her feet is Erichthonius, a mythological creature born of the earth and supposed early ruler of the city of Athens. Even the patron goddess honored other mythological deities.

instance: “Have you seen what faithless Israel did? She went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and she was a harlot there” (Jer. 3:6b).

Still An Issue

Both ancient Israel and the early church stood in danger of being seduced by the gratification and promises of gods that could be fashioned by and in the likeness of mankind. Judgment for their sin at times was corporal punishment, as well as the inherent loss of purpose, witness, and influence in their communities. Perhaps the saddest form of judgment’s gavel was the loss of generations who watched the compromise of their parents and national leaders and followed them along paths of alienation from a relationship with their true God (Ex. 34:7).

Idol worship in many forms still permeates the land. Today false religions incorporate chants, talismans, and charms in worship. Images of gods reside in Hindu closets and new age shrines. Christians too have long been lured by horoscopes and good luck charms. Amazingly, modern idols retain their attractions. **B**

believed temple prostitution would excite the voyeuristic gods into procreative activities, which supposedly assured successful multiplication of earthy crops, herds, and people.

The images and language of the Old Testament often allude to the sexual nature of idol worship. The prophets’ words of whoring, adultery, and chasing after the gods of the pagans are blunt and condemning; for

1. This story came from an experience I had with someone I met during an international mission trip to India.

2. All Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Version (NASB).

3. Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, vol. 2 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 45.

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