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EARLY CHRISTIAN CONDEMNATION OF IDOLS

Little children, keep yourselves from Idols.

1 JOHN 5:21

We know that “no idol in the world really exists.”

1 CORINTHIANS 8:4

The assumption that ancient Christians unflinching and universally condemned pictorial art because they believed it to be idolatrous has endured despite historians' efforts over the past half century to qualify this belief. The notion that early Christians were aniconic (against all pictorial images, especially of the divine) and even iconophobic was fostered by influential Protestant Reformers like John Calvin, who, citing the biblical commandment against graven images (Exod 20:4–5; Deut 5:8), believed that scripture condemns religious iconography, particularly any that depicts the Divine Being. According to Calvin, Christians avoided making or using any religious pictorial art for the first half millennium of the Common Era, the stretch of time that he judged to be free of doctrinal errors, before the faith degenerated and church authorities allowed pictures to adorn worship spaces.¹

Although the discovery of figurative frescoes decorating the third-century house church in Syria's Dura-Europos and the existence of Christian iconography in the Roman catacombs have proved Calvin's chronology to be off by a couple of centuries, his characterization of an early and pristinely aniconic Christianity has persisted. Much of the persistence of this error derives from centuries of misreadings of Christian apologetic texts that disparage depictions of polytheists' gods, wrongly judged to be sweeping and effective critiques of all types of religious pictorial art. Thus, commentators have presumed, like Calvin, that faithful Christians would have obeyed biblical injunctions against graven images and worshiped in spaces unadorned by figurative decoration of any kind. Accordingly, the third-century emergence of identifiably Christian art would signify a precipitous descent into superstitious idolatry.

Following Calvin, Edward Gibbon's great work, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, written in the mid- to late eighteenth century, describes early Christians as not only aniconic but vehemently anti-iconic:

The primitive Christians were possessed with an unconquerable repugnance to the use and abuse of images; and this aversion may be ascribed to their descent from the Jews, and their enmity to the Greeks. The Mosaic law severely proscribed all representations of the Deity; and that precept was firmly established in the principles and practices of the chosen people. The wit of the Christian apologists was pointed against the foolish idolaters, who bowed before the workmanship of their own hands; the images of brass or marble which, had they been endowed with sense and motion, should have stepped off their pedestals to rather adore the creative powers of the artist. . . . Under the successors of Constantine, in the peace and luxury of the triumphant church, the more prudent bishops condescended to indulge a visible superstition, for the benefit of the multitude; and, after the ruin of Paganism, they were no longer restrained by the apprehension of an odious parallel.²

Modern historians have echoed Calvin and Gibbon's belief that faithful early Christians avoided making or using religious pictorial art. During the mid-twentieth century, the art historian Ernst Kitzinger portrayed early Christians as otherworldly anti-materialists who vigorously resisted pagan visual culture, arguing that it was "not before the second half of the fourth century that any writer began to speak of Christian pictorial art in positive terms."³ A few decades later Kitzinger modified this slightly, claiming that the early church upheld its "taboo against religious images" until about 200 CE.⁴ Taking a more critical stance, Theodor Klauser, the German historian of Christian liturgy, archeology, and theology, similarly characterized early Christians as resisting their decadent surrounding culture.⁵ Henry Chadwick's 1967 church history handbook includes a chapter on Christian art that cites the anti-idol writing of early church fathers and applies it to religious visual art in general: "The second of the Ten Commandments forbade the making of any graven image. Both Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria regarded this prohibition as absolute and binding on Christians. Images and statues belonged to the demonic world of paganism." Chadwick then refers to Irenaeus's writing as evidence that the only early Christians who possessed images of Christ were "radical Gnostics, the followers of the licentious Carpocrates."⁶ More recently, Hans Belting maintained that "in the beginning, the Christian religion did not allow for any concession in its total rejection of the religious image" and offered the fact that "images in religious use were in open contradiction to the Mosaic law of the ancient Jews" as an overriding reason for this stance. The church's eventual acceptance of images, Belting claims, was "an unexpected change from very early and very important convictions."⁷

Such commonplace perceptions—that early Christians were uniformly hostile to any kind of pictorial imagery and therefore Christian art did not exist (or, if it did, belonged only to heretical groups)—remained fairly consistent among Christian historians until

the late 1970s. Perhaps the earliest gainsayer was Sister Mary Charles-Murray, whose 1977 essay “Art and the Early Church” opens with the question of whether the “universally held . . . fact” that the early church was hostile to art “has any foundation in reality.”⁸ Some years later, Paul Corby Finney followed Charles-Murray with an influential monograph, *The Invisible God*, in which he argues for the early acceptance of visual art by Christians and refuses to attribute that development merely to the accommodation of halfhearted pagan converts or pragmatic capitulation to the surrounding culture.⁹

Those scholars who concluded that early Christian apologists represented the position of church authorities as unambiguously hostile to religious pictorial art consequently attributed the advent of Christian iconography to either the desires of backsliding laity or overly tolerant leaders who grudgingly accommodated it. For them, the incorporation of art in places of worship therefore signaled a disconnect between popular and official religious practices and an unfortunate capitulation to polytheistic habits. Yet as historians like Charles-Murray and Finney have argued, Christian apologists’ denunciations of pagan idolatry never attacked works of art per se. Instead, they aimed their censure primarily at a specific type of object: cult images of pagan deities that devotees venerated as if they were the gods themselves. Thus, these early writers did not repudiate religious figurative sculpture or painting in any general sense or regard it as idolatrous; the definition of an idol depended on what or who the object depicted and how viewers regarded and treated it.

MINUCIUS FELIX’S FICTIONAL DIALOGUE BETWEEN A PAGAN AND A CHRISTIAN

In his dialogue *Octavius*, the late second- or early third-century African Latin apologist Marcus Minucius Felix recounts a conversation he purportedly shared with two friends as they strolled along an Ostian beach and debated whose religion was best. Caecilius Natalis opens the discussion by presenting a case for the cult of the traditional Roman deities against the Christian God. Minucius Felix and Octavius Januarius each respond in defense of Christianity’s beliefs about the Divine Being. Although this debate, fashioned after and much influenced by Cicero’s dialogue *On the Nature of the Gods*, is likely a literary invention, it nevertheless reveals how each side perceived the other’s observances and precepts.¹⁰

The pagan Caecilius presents many objections to Christian practices, among them the absence of pictorial depictions of the Christian deity. He contends that this deficiency is objectively perverse and incriminating. Because, he argues, the gods of honorable cults are both public and visible, Christians must be concealing a disreputable or scandalous deity.¹¹ In reply, Octavius admits that Christians do not make images of their god but insists that this is not because the deity is disgraceful but because God is invisible. The Christian god, he continues, does not inhabit a temple, cannot be contained by any human-made structure, and cannot be localized in an earthly dwelling. Although this

nameless and invisible god is beyond sense perception, the cosmos abounds with evidence of this divinity's power and majesty. Inconceivable, infinite, boundless, eternal, and uncircumscribable, this deity has no name other than God.¹² Thus, he asserts, Christian thought corresponds to that of pagan poets and philosophers: they agree that the Divine Being is pure mind, reason, and spirit, indescribable and incomprehensible.¹³

Octavius reminds his pagan friend that they both believe in invisible things: the wind, for instance, and the human soul. Turning to religious practices, he insists that cultivating a pure mind and a virtuous heart is far more devout than offering victims on sacrificial altars. Christians express their devotion and gratitude to their god by doing works of justice or by offering charity to neighbors, not by pouring libations or venerating statues.¹⁴ By this he aims to demonstrate that Christianity is ethically and intellectually superior to polytheism, insofar as it is truer than a cult that involves external objects or ceremonies while simultaneously ignoring the welfare of others or the development of a wholesome interior disposition.

Yet rather than simply claiming that Christianity's lack of images and temples demonstrates its rational and moral superiority, Octavius ridicules visual representations of polytheists' gods. He declares that it is simple minded to offer prayers or gifts to cult images and especially to be beguiled by costly or beautiful objects made by artisans from silver, bronze, ivory, or gold. Worshiping insensate objects crafted by human hands from base materials subject to rust and decay is absurd. Such things can harbor nests of mice and are often covered with spiders' webs or birds' droppings. The idol makers are themselves lewd, depraved, and immoral.¹⁵ Adding that the gods they depict are oblivious to the fabrication, consecration, and supplication of their portraits, he contends that they are not even really gods at all. They are simply long-dead kings or heroes, enrolled among deities (even against their will) by later generations. Similarly, illusory, ridiculous, and often made from sordid and discarded vessels, their images are in no way sacred.¹⁶ Here Octavius echoes Saint Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians to assert that idols don't actually exist (1 Cor 8:4).

Nevertheless, although he judges that venerating images is a pointless way of honoring the gods and portrays these statues as inert and useless objects, Octavius also claims that such things often become convenient vehicles for dangerous demons who lurk within or near them. When malevolent spirits enter and inhabit such images, they do so to deceive devotees and drag their souls into ruin. They take on the appearances and names of the gods whose images they occupy and whose shrines they haunt. They gorge themselves on the sacrificial offerings. Even verified auguries or oracles associated with cult effigies are contrivances of wandering spirits who are capable of animating entrails, producing oracles, directing the flights of birds, causing loss of sleep, inducing disease, and throwing lives into chaos. By distracting and defrauding their devotees, they prevent the latter from according proper devotion to the true gods.¹⁷

Perhaps because arguments from Christian scripture would be unpersuasive to his polytheist rival, Octavius never refers to the Mosaic commandment against graven

images (e.g., Exod 20:4). Somewhat ironically, he even contradicts Caecilius's favorable description of monotheistic Jews worshiping their God with altars and temples. He insists that Jews did so only in the distant past, before God abandoned them because they had deserted the Law.¹⁸ But although Octavius seems to afford little significance to biblical commandments against graven images, his arguments often echo the words of Roman philosophers, when he proclaims that the most acceptable offerings to God are an honest heart, a pure mind, and a clear conscience.¹⁹

OTHER CHRISTIAN APOLOGISTS' ATTACKS ON CULT IMAGES

Although certainly fictional, Octavius's disparagement of polytheists' cult images aligns with attitudes widely espoused by early Christian apologists. Like him, they accentuated the similarity of their views with the negative judgments of philosophers toward those who paid homage to gods' statues. And like Minucius Felix's character, they rarely called upon biblical condemnations of idolatry or vaunted the importance of Christianity's Jewish roots. Even though scattered references to the Decalogue and a presumed Jewish repudiation of cult images can be found in the writings of Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Origen, these were not major parts of their theological arsenal against idols.²⁰ More often, second- and third-century Christian writers ridiculed the images of Greco-Roman gods with tropes similar to Octavius's. In particular, they mocked polytheists as gullibly believing that inanimate human-made statues, fabricated by artisans from base materials (e.g., wood, stone, or metal), deserved any form of veneration. Also like Octavius, they cautioned that the statues might be contaminated by malevolent beings.

Christian critics judged that paying homage to material objects fundamentally misunderstands the difference between the unstable, sensible realm and the unchanging, intelligible one—it confuses appearances with reality. Such lack of discernment could be corrected only by retraining patterns of thought, reassessing the nature of sensory perception, and cultivating spiritual comprehension. Yet in this view, the problem was not the images themselves but rather the unwarranted value or intrinsic spiritual power attributed to them. This attribution was delusional in itself, but the delusion was compounded because these objects depicted false or powerless gods. Once again, the gods themselves were not the real problem: devotees endangered themselves by becoming duped by demons who fraudulently took on the appearances and names of those (false) gods.

For example, the second-century apologist Justin Martyr (d. 165) attacked polytheists' practice of offering sacrifices and garlands to what he describes as soulless and dead figures, senseless effigies of the gods cast, carved, or hammered by degenerate and intemperate artisans. Such items, he argues, dishonor and deny the form and glory of the ineffable Deity. He affirms that the true God neither has visible form nor needs the kinds of honors that misguided worshipers offer to statues. Like Minucius Felix, Justin both never expressly cites the biblical prohibition against graven images and claims that

wicked demons usurp the images of deities and take the names and appearances of those they depict.²¹

Another second-century apologist, Athenagoras of Athens (d. ca. 190), likewise castigated those who venerated images for their failure to distinguish matter from God, the sacred from the profane, or the created from the uncreated. He contended that things known only through the bodily senses are utterly different from what is mentally apprehended, adding that the two are as far apart as artists and their materials. His sharp critique includes a statement that exemplifies the view that created matter is fundamentally incompatible with the Divine Being:

Since the multitude, not being able to distinguish what a gulf there is between God and matter, approach with reverence material idols, are we on their account to come forward and worship their statues when we know and distinguish created from uncreated, being from non-being, intellect from sense, and give each its proper name? If God and matter are the same, two names for the one thing, then we are atheists for not reverencing as gods stones and wood, gold and silver. But if they are utterly different, as far apart as the craftsman from the materials of his trade, why are we being accused? . . . Even so, with God and matter, it is not matter that has the just praise and honour for the arrangement of beautiful things, but its maker, God. Therefore, if we consider the forms of matter to be gods, we shall be deemed blind to the true God for equating fragile and mortal things with the eternal.²²

Athenagoras evidently believed that his assertion that created matter is incapable of transmitting or representing the Divine Being also had to account for why images of pagan deities appeared to make things happen. It is unlikely, he explains, that dead objects can move themselves; they must have an internal mover. He denies, however, that gods produce these effects in their statues. Like Minucius Felix's Octavius, he claims that malevolent spirits usurp the gods' names and animate these objects.²³ Moreover, he says, these demons receive sustenance by inhabiting the images. They are eager to attract worshipers to idols because they consume the blood of sacrificial animals and the fragrant smoke wafting from the roasting flesh of the latter.²⁴

Clement of Alexandria (150–215) likewise stressed the essential dissimilarity of the material and spiritual realms. Rather than focusing on objects as such, he emphasized the problem of ontological misperception, reflecting the influence of Platonic disparagement of sense knowledge. He argued that since likenesses are inferior to their models, to regard visual representations as real—in any sense—is to mistake tangible things for transcendent things. In his *Exhortation to the Greeks*, Clement ridicules those who set up blocks of wood or pillars of stone along with images of gods in human form and includes a rare citation of the biblical prohibition against making graven likenesses of anything in heaven or on earth.²⁵ Here he even appears to attack all representational art, describing it in Platonic terms as imitative at best and deceptive at worst. He recognizes that arts

can make beautiful objects but maintains that when beauty is applied to the service of false gods, it gives these non-existences unjustified and dangerously seductive splendor.²⁶ In his treatise *The Stromata*, Clement again cites the Decalogue's prohibition of graven images, explaining that it was intended to inhibit overattachment to material things and reiterating his belief that giving homage to sensible things dishonors those that are purely intelligible and immaterial.²⁷ Elsewhere in *The Stromata*, Clement cites the commandment against theft rather than the prohibition of graven images, denouncing those who make images because they steal God's prerogative as the unique creator.²⁸ Clement then has to explain how this god, who prohibited graven figures, could have ordered Moses to make two golden cherubim to guard the Ark of the Covenant (Exod 25:18–21). These, he asserts, were merely allegorical figures and not actual beings, whose features were mystical references to the rational soul and its spiritual repose.²⁹

Clement's follower Origen of Alexandria (184–253) held views similar to those of his predecessor, but his work as a biblical scholar took him in a slightly different direction. Origen, like Clement, invoked Jewish reticence about figurative art, citing the biblical injunctions against idols in his refutation of the earlier polytheist Celsus. There he notes Celsus's contention that if, according to Saint Paul, idols were nothing (1 Cor 8:4), there could be no harm in them. Even if they were actually demons, they would therefore be God's creatures and deserve some kind of propitiation. Responding in terms much like those of Minucius Felix and Athenagoras, Origen maintains that if idols are nothing, any association with them is liable to mean association with demons.³⁰ These demons, he says, are invited into gods' statues through rituals, consecration, or other magical arts. Once ensconced, they savor sacrificial foods and gratify illicit pleasures.³¹

TERTULLIAN AGAINST IDOLATRY

Because Tertullian of Carthage (ca. 155–220) produced one of the earliest full-length treatises against idols, his work warrants more extended analysis. His treatise *On Idolatry*, probably written between 203 and 206, is not an apology addressed to outsiders but rather a kind of moral exhortation directed at Christians. While Tertullian includes many of the points made by his contemporaries, he differs from them in certain respects. Among these differences are his definitions of *idols* and *idolatry* and his distinctive attitude toward materiality.³²

Tertullian generally defines idolatry as honoring a deity other than the Christian God rather than confusing material or sensible things with spiritual or intelligible realities. Although he recommends spitting or blowing on smoking altars of sacrifice, he associates idolatrous acts with the sins of murder, adultery, and fornication.³³ In his view, idolaters who entertain false gods and thereby defraud the true one of requisite reverence condemn themselves.³⁴ Tertullian here echoes Paul's admonition that God will hand over to "degrading passions" those with "senseless minds" who trade "the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being" (Romans 1:26, 1:21, 1:23).

Because Tertullian understands idolatry as analogous to other personal sins, he proposes objective or practical remedies. He counsels against taking on activities, like building or repairing temples or altars, that necessitate contact with cult images, and he disapproves of certain professions, from astrology to stage acting—any kind of work in which someone might accidentally engage in idolatry, be it while participating in civic rituals, entering military service, or teaching secular literature. Setting lamps or laurel wreaths before doors, attending the circus or the theater, and even going to the public baths are similarly fraught with danger.³⁵ Tertullian allows certain exceptions, however. He grants that Christians might attend weddings or baby-naming ceremonies, as long as they avoid any sacrifices included in the celebrations. Similarly, someone may accept a civil magistracy, provided they can exercise the office without attending sacrifices, contracting for gladiator shows, making tax assessments for the maintenance of temples, donning purple raiment and gold insignia, or taking an oath of allegiance.³⁶ Tertullian thereby exhorts self-identified Christians to separate themselves from most ordinary social activities that could create a context for idolatry. The ubiquity of the gods' images set up in public places and in the private dwellings of friends and business colleagues meant that Christians needed to be continually on guard, lest they unwittingly engage in some form of idolatrous behavior. Of course, the fact that Tertullian is so vociferously opposed to these practices suggests that many in his audience were regular participants in the activities he denounces.

Despite all this fulmination against idolatry, Tertullian does not appear to regard most pictorial or figurative religious artworks as idols *per se*. Yet he does judge the producers of such objects as complicit with idolatry, insofar as their use is potentially idolatrous, whatever the artisan's craft (e.g., painting, sculpture, or weaving) and whether or not the objects have human forms or appearances (e.g., portraits of gods): "For it makes no difference whether a modeler forms the idol, an engraver chisels it out or an embroiderer weaves it, because it is also not important whether the idol is made of gypsum or colors or stone or bronze or silver or thread. For since even without an idol there may be idolatry, certainly, when the idol is present, its material and formal nature makes no difference, lest one should think that only that must be regarded as an idol which has been consecrated in human shape."³⁷

Unlike Minucius Felix but like Origen and Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian appeals to scripture to support his points, including the commandment against graven images.³⁸ In another work, he specifically cites the prohibition in Exodus 20:4 and adds references to Enoch 99:6–7, Isaiah 44:8–9, and Psalms 115:8 and 135:18.³⁹ Also like Clement, Tertullian addresses an apparent contradiction in the Hebrew scriptures in which Moses is ordered to produce a graven image: in this case, the bronze serpent (Num 21:6–9). Tertullian gives latitude to God's ordering Moses to make this particular object, insofar as it was a type or prefiguration of the cross (John 3:14) that freed humanity from the serpent's bite.⁴⁰ Although humans should make no graven images, here it was permissible because God ordained it. Tertullian's explanation diverges from Clement's by claiming that the object was both an actual, physical artifact and a figure of the instrument of human salva-

tion (the cross). Similarly, in his treatise *Against Marcion*, Tertullian responds to an adversary's charge of divine inconsistency on the matter of images by arguing that the Hebrew scriptures allow those that are either curative (like the bronze serpent) or purely decorative (like the cherubim), because they are not objects of veneration per se.⁴¹

Like Minucius Felix, Athenagoras, and Origen, Tertullian judges that the most pressing danger associated with cult images is not so much their foolishness as their attraction to demons. He too believes malevolent spirits are likely to inhabit gods' effigies and take on their names and identities to ensnare devotees' souls. He adds that these spirits gain control of the objects through the rituals of consecration and eagerly snatch up the offerings or sacrifices presented to the intended (but defrauded) recipients. Commandeering gods' effigies along with their names gives demons a platform from which to engage the sensible world and carry out their work.⁴² Hiding behind, beside, or within cult statues, malevolent spirits turn ordinary material objects into highly dangerous decoys.⁴³

Thus, for Tertullian the material realm is not impotent or unreal; it can be both potent and dangerous. When God orders it, as in the case of Moses and the bronze serpent, material may be endowed with a healing power that reveals the might and majesty of the Divine. To reiterate, Tertullian's concern is not that worshipers might mistake physical objects for intangible and transcendent realities. He grants that materiality has the capacity to be rendered powerful as well as dangerous. Therefore, distinguishing what is deceptive and demonic from that which derives from the true God is crucial for those who wish to adhere to the salutary and correct faith. Tertullian thereby views idols as false gods and warns against the dangers posed by their effigies.

SCRIPTURE AS A RESOURCE FOR ANTI-IDOLATRY POLEMICS

As noted above, early Christian apologists rarely cited the Bible to condemn idolatry, even the so-called second commandment (Exod 20:4–5; Deut 5:8), possibly because quoting scripture would not have been persuasive to polytheists. Nevertheless, these writers likely were aware of relevant scripture texts, as they seem to have indirectly referred to them. For example, Minucius Felix's Octavius echoes Isaiah railing against the makers of idols as utterly deluded and doomed to be disgraced or destroyed (Isa 37:19, 42:17, 44:9–20). Other early Christian texts resonate with Hebrew Bible passages that describe idols as lifeless, inanimate, mute, deaf, blind, powerless, and worthless (e.g., Ps 115:4–8, 135:15–18; Jer 10:3–5, 16:20; Hab 2:18–19).

Biblical references to idols vary according to whether they represent existing or non-existing entities. Sometimes the pagan gods are identified as demons and sometimes as long-dead humans. Occasionally, they are declared to be nothing at all.⁴⁴ The Wisdom of Solomon, an Old Testament apocryphal book written in Greek in the second century BCE, delivers an especially detailed discourse on the folly of idol makers, who fashion perishable objects to be honored and so construct traps for the unwary. The poet contends that the images perceived as gods' portraits are merely the representations of long-deceased

men or living but distant kings wishing to be flattered, an assertion that has resonance with comments of Tertullian, among others.⁴⁵ The worship of idols (e.g., *eidolon*), the author says, is the cause, beginning, and end of every evil (Wis 14:12–31):

For the idea of making idols was the beginning of fornication,
and the invention of them was the corruption of life,
for they did not exist from the beginning,
nor will they last forever. . . .

. . .
Then the ambition of the artisan impelled
even those who did not know the king to intensify their worship.
For he, perhaps wishing to please his ruler,
skillfully forced the likeness to take more beautiful form,
and the multitude, attracted by the charm of his work,
now regarded as an object of worship the one whom shortly before they had honored as
a human being.
And this became a hidden trap for humankind,
because people, in bondage to misfortune or to royal authority,
bestowed on objects of stone or wood the name that ought not to be shared.⁴⁶

Added to the legislation against the production of graven images in the books of Exodus (20:4–5) and Deuteronomy (4:16–17, 5:8), the fulminations of the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Habakkuk, and the Wisdom of Solomon's warnings mentioned above are a series of biblical narratives that recount the dangers of idolatry. For instance, the episode in which the Israelites first beg Aaron to fashion the image of a calf from contributed golden jewelry and then celebrate it with burnt offerings is not only related at length in the books of Exodus (32:1–25) and Deuteronomy (9:15–21) but also referred to either directly or indirectly in several other places in both the Old and the New Testament (Ps 106:19–20; Neh 9:18; Acts 7:39–43; 1 Cor 10:7). In the book of Judges, God raises up judges to repudiate the Israelites for transgressing the covenant and disobeying the divine commandment by lapsing into the idolatrous worship of Baal and Astarte (Judg 2:16–25).

Certain biblical figures are conversely rewarded for their refusal to worship idols. While the Exodus and Judges narratives illustrate the consequences of violating God's ordinance against worshiping images, the story of the three Hebrew youths' refusal to bow down and worship Nebuchadnezzar's idol (Dan 3) and the tale of Daniel thrown in the lions' den for refusing to worship the statue of Darius (Dan 6) exemplify God's deliverance of those who have the courage required to obey it. The deuterocanonical book Epistle of Jeremiah (Bar 6) is supposed to have been written to the Jews just as they were being led away to captivity in Babylon, and although it is of uncertain date, it purports to prophesy the kind of idolatry that those heroes of the book of Daniel had to withstand. It offers this admonition: "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 of these gods possess you when you see the multitude before and behind them worshipping them. But say in your hearts, 'It is you, O Lord, whom we must worship.'⁴⁷

Several New Testament passages reiterate these principles and demonstrate a continuum of thought in a first-century Jewish context. Paul's Epistle to the Romans declares that those who do not accord God proper glory instead are worshipping likenesses of mortals, birds, snakes, or other animals, exchanging divine truth for a lie by serving creatures rather than the creator (Rom 1:18–25). In his First Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul appears to declare that idols are nothing at all; they do not exist, because there is only one God (1 Cor 8:4–6), so eating meat sacrificed to idols is basically unproblematic. Further on in the same epistle, however, he admonishes his readers to flee from the worship of idols (1 Cor 10:14) and judges the consuming of sacrificial meat to be partaking of offerings to demons (1 Cor 10:20–21). Thus, Paul seems ambiguous about whether idols are unthreatening nonentities or are linked with dangerous demons.⁴⁸ In Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians, he insists that there can be no allowance for idols in the temple of God (2 Cor 6:16). Elsewhere, Paul mentions idolatry as simply one among various sins (1 Cor 5:10–11; Gal 5:20).

The book of Acts records Paul's speech to the Athenians, in which he proclaimed that Christians do not envision their God in an image fashioned by artisans from gold, silver, or stone (Acts 17:29). Later on, Acts reports that word reached Ephesus that Paul was persuading listeners that gods made by hand were false, prompting some panic over the loss of trade for those who made images of the goddess Artemis (Acts 19:26–27). The First Epistle of Peter, like Paul's letters, includes idolatry among such sins associated with Gentiles as drunkenness and licentiousness (1 Pet 4:3). More briefly, the First Epistle of John simply urges, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21).

Thus, the biblical texts that attack idolatry focus on objects of ritual practices related to deities other than the Lord of Israel and the ways that those practices are implicated in more general moral failure. Idolatry is linked with greed, fornication, jealousy, and strife. In these texts, idolatry is not simply the mistake of foolishly confusing ordinary material objects with immaterial or spiritual realities. It is certainly not about making works of pictorial art. Although scripture affirms that Jews and Christians neither make nor adore images of their god, the primary definition of idolatry is the worship of "false" gods and failing to recognize that the true One demands exclusive devotion and faithful obedience.

THE GODS' IMAGES THEMSELVES

The polytheists' gods were false. Thus, Christian censure of polytheist practices tended to regard any god's image as an idol. Some writers, like the late fourth-century bishop Theodoret of Cyrrhus, citing the second commandment, asserted that idols were forms