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IDOLATRY IN WISDOM LITERATURE

THE STATIC WITHIN THE FLUID

Submitted by

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Referee

Dr. David Weisberg

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for Ordination
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Thesis Digest

This thesis examines the phenomenon of the prohibition against idolatry within the context of biblical wisdom literature. Although both subjects are extensively researched and discussed by modern scholars, the influence of wisdom thinking on the prohibition against idolatry has been seldom addressed.

Prior to analyzing the way in which one influences the other, a clear understanding of the phenomena must be established. The first two chapters deal with defining and examining the phenomena of biblical wisdom literature and the biblical prohibition against idolatry. The ideas of major thinkers in both fields are presented.

The next two chapters discuss the prohibition against idolatry as it is found in the wisdom literature. They focus on both theoretical as well as textual material. In these chapters, the writer compares the differences between the manner in which the prohibition against idolatry is presented in the biblical literature and the way in which it is presented in the wisdom literature.

After probing the meaning of the prohibition against idolatry in the biblical and wisdom literatures, the writer questions the validity of defining wisdom as a separate category. The writer suggests that it may be possible to view the "wise" response to the prohibition against idolatry as the matured response of an increasingly secure religious system. In the early

biblical literature the prohibition may have functioned as an element which made the Israelite religious system different from those in its midst. As the religion developed and solidified its identity, it required more sophisticated reasoning behind its laws and precepts. This new response is documented in what is labeled the "wisdom" literature.

The concluding chapter continues examining the development of the prohibition against idolatry by investigating the prohibition as it appears in the Babylonian Talmud. Through analyzing the prohibition in all of the various contexts, it was found that the prohibition was not a static phenomenon. The writer discovered that the prohibition against idolatry was changing and fluid. It had adapted to various stages of religious development and functioned differently in every age.

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CHAPTER I

DEFINING WISDOM

An Effort To Apprehend the Essence of Wisdom

This thesis will examine the phenomenon of idolatry within the context of biblical wisdom literature. Although both subjects are extensively researched and discussed by modern scholars, the influence of wisdom thinking on the prohibition against idolatry has been seldom addressed[1]. Prior to analyzing the way in which one influences the other, a clear understanding of the two phenomenon must be established. The first task then is to define "wisdom literature".

There is a vast and growing literature on the subject of the wisdom tradition. Scholars posit their theories against those of other experts in the field. By reading each one's analysis of the other it appears that there is much controversy over the scope and the definiton of wisdom in ancient Israel. Some find the phenomenon limited in scope and precisely defined. Others approach the subject more generally in scope and definition. Most present the task of defining wisdom as a formidable challenge.

There are two main questions (sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit) that form the framework for each scholar's presentation of wisdom: How is wisdom defined, and how can it be identified in biblical and post-canonical writings? The answers to these questions are complicated by the similarities that exist in the postulated definition of wisdom, and differences that exist in the postulated

range of the literature.

At this point the concern is to establish a working definition of wisdom for the remainder of this thesis. This first challenge may be the greatest. Any definition that captures the essence of "wisdom" must be elastic yet concrete; situational yet pervasive; fluid yet constant. Defining the endeavor of apprehending wisdom may be in the truest sense הבל הבלים , chasing after vapors. Is any behavior always wise or foolish? Is even the sagest advice always wise? Can a single approach or style be salient to every new encounter, or is an open heart and a discerning eye the path to real wisdom?

Perhaps the frenetic quality of wisdom is understood only by opening the Book of Proverbs to practically any of the early chapters. Upon reading these, one must feel as though an interviewer sat down with microphone in hand with each of our grandparents and simply said, "Tell me all that you've learned all these years. Let me benefit from your experiences. How did you make it?" And one wise elder answered:

> A gentle answer turns aside anger, But a cutting retort makes a man angrier still.
>
> The tongue of wise men commends knowledge, but the mouths of fools spout folly.
>
> A fool is comtemptuous of his father's training, but he who will accept reproof shows intelligence.
>
> A happy heart lights up the face, but the spirit is lamed by an inner hurt.
>
> To the miserable every day is a bad day, while for the cheerful, life is a continual feast.

> Better a serving of vegetables where love is,
> than prime beef (garnished) with hate.
>
> The mind of a just man ponders what to answer,
> while the mouth of the wicked pours out threats.
>
> Reverence for the Lord is the foundation of
> wisdom, and humility must precede honors.
>
> (Excerpted from Proverb 16.)

Each statement is profoundly trite, as much a truism for modern America as it was for ancient Israel. Scholars seek to categorize these wisdom teachings in some transcendent way. They are trying to establish a definition of "wisdom" that captures its essence so that it may be indentified in literature. In the following pages, the work of several scholars will be presented in tabular form and discussed; the definition arrived at for the thesis will be stated and demonstrated using examples of wisdom texts.

Table I displays series of definitions of "wisdom" arranged by scholar. The purpose of the table is to allow the reader to compare and contrast the definitions of several leading scholars in the field. The table is arranged alphabetically by scholar. The first column presents a definition of "wisdom" in the scholar's own phrasing. The second column presents the scope of wisdom literature according to each scholar. Although the definitions may appear wordy and cumbersome, they represent each scholar's effort to capture that which is situational, fluid, yet enduring. The table will be discussed in the following pages.

TABLE OF DEFINITIONS OF WISDOM BY SCHOLAR

SCHOLAR	DEFINITION	SCOPE OF THE LITERATURE
Andre Caquot 1978	Wisdom implies a complex but very coherent whole of mental attitudes, of intellectual behaviors which combine flair, wisdom, forsight, flexibility of the mind, watchful attention, a sense of opportunity, varied skills, an experience acquired over time. The highest wisdom is the supreme skill for one to live in one's place, without the excesses which generate illusion and corruption. (Caquot p.26)	
James L. Crenshaw 1969,1976,1981	Wisdom comprises self-evident intuitions about mastering life for human betterment, gropings after life's secrets with regard to innocent suffering, grappling with finitude and quest for truth concealed in the created order and manifested in Dame Wisdom. But this pragmatism which sought to secure the good life must be understood in terms of the concept of order ordained by God and entrusted to humanity's discovery and safe-keeping. (Crenshaw, Studies, p.5)	Suggests that there be strict criteria for determining wisdom influence in Biblical literature. He reccomends that modern enthusiasts who rush to find conscious and direct wisdom influence hither and yon should think twice before venturing in that direction. (Crenshaw, Studies p.494) The literary corpus he includes in the catagory of wisdom is Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Sirah, Wisdom of Solomon, wisdom Psalms (37, 39, 49, 73) and parts of 1 Edras, Baruch and Enoch.
Hans-Jurgen Hermission 1978	Wisdom is the search for knowledge of order, for a certain regularity within the diversity of the phenomenon of the world. Ancient wisdom starts from the conviction that regularities within the human and the historical-social realm are not in principle different from the ones within the realm of nonhuman phenomenon. (Hermission p.44)	It is advisable to proceed from a central core as it is encountered literarily in Proverbs, and then move to further wisdom books like Ecclesiastes, Jesus ben Sirah, and also Job. The literary deposit is then to be related to its historic circle of transmission. Look for the conceptions of wisdom mentality. (Hermisson p.56) Includes: Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, Job, Jesus ben Sira, some psalms and all texts dealing with creation theology.
Roland E. Murphy 1978,1981	A literary expression of a quest for the order that makes the task of living easier and more profitable. While the modern can distinguish between degrees of religious and worldly, there is no evidence that Israel did so. (Murphy, Israelite, p.35)	Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job are technically wisdom literature. Some scholars propose that Song of Songs emphasizes values which are primary in wisdom thought (cf. Prov. 1-9). There is argument for Esther and Ruth to be put within the purview of the sages' goals, but this scholar does not accept these proposals. (Murphy, Forms, p.XIII)

	DEFINITION (cont.)	SCOPE OF THE LITERATURE (cont.)
	Hence Von Rad is correct in stating that "the experiences of the world were for her (Israel) always divine experiences as well, and the experiences of God were for her experiences of the world." (Murphy, Israelite, p.40)	
R. B. Y. Scott 1971	Wisdom in Israel was a way of thinking and speaking. It sought to provide guidance for living by propounding rules of moral order and to explore the meaning of life through speculation and debate. It was striving for a structure of order, meaning, and value through cultivation of the mind and conscience. The disciplined intelligence and integrity of people who sought to understand what they had observed and experienced, and to persuade others of the truth they saw. (Scott, Way, p.22)	States that scholarship views the following possibilities as contained in the corpus of wisdom literature: 3: Ecc., Prob., Job OR 5: above + Sirah and Wis. of Sol. OR 7: above + Psalms and Song of Songs Different scholars suggest the above formulae. Scott finds wisdom influence in many of the books of the Writings section of the Bible (Ezra - Nehemiah, Ruth, Esther Daniel). To these he adds Tobit, Baruch, The apocraphal books of Daniel (Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon). (Scott, Way, p.19)
Gerhard Von Rad 1972	Any attempt to try to understand the phenomenon from a constitutive point of unity and to try to describe it from that point of view would come to grief. That of the early monarchy was vastly different from that of Sirach. What lasted was only the general demand that man, through knowledge of Yahweh, must learn to be competent with regard to the realities of life. The one who listens, who reflects and who then entrusts oneself to his perceptions; that is the highest form of human existence in the eyes of the wise men. (Von Rad p.310)	Identifies wisdom themes and forms, and then liberally points to texts that are "influenced" by wisdom. His major work is primarily organized thematically which radically departs from the organization of the other scholars who analyze wisdom primarily by text (Crenshaw, Whybray, Scott Murphy). In addition to the traditional wisdom texts, he proposes that numerous texts from the Hebrew Bible and the post canonical literature are influenced by wisdom.
R. N. Whybray 1974	Wisdom is the ability to get on in the world,to adapt oneself to circumstances, to deal with difficult situations. Wisdom in the religious sense also is an intellectual quality which provides the key to happiness and success, to "life" in its widest sense. (Whybay, Intellectual, p.8 and 11)	Identifies wisdom in literature through a method of vocabulary analysis in order to determine which words, occuring in both the acknowledged "wisdom books" (Ecc., Prov., Job) and in some passages in other books, are characteristic of the intellectual tradition. He finds wisdom in the following: (Whybray, Intellectual, p.154, 155) Gen 2f. Gen 37-50 Dtn 1-4 Dtn 32 II Sam 9-20 IReg 1f. I Reg 3-11 Certain Psalms Isa 1-39 Jer. Ez 28 Dan Hos 14:10; Mi 6:9

In attempting to develop a definition of wisdom, each writer surveys the scholarship in the field in order to provide a comparison to his own scholarship. Many of the experts refer to one another's work. Gerhard von Rad is addressed in most of the other's writings. His work, **Wisdom in Israel** demands reponse from other scholars in the field. Crenshaw, a critical but appreciative reviewer, suggests that the book "towers over" other books on wisdom "in its magisterial survey of the phenomenon of Israel's quest for knowledge". (Crenshaw, Religious, p.11) So wide sweeping is the response to von Rad's work that it would appear that he is in dialogue with other major scholars, especially Crenshaw, Whybray and Murphy who refer to him and to one another extensively. This interaction between scholars is exhilarating for the student of wisdom and it is worthwhile to present certain of the "conversations" in which they contrast their viewpoints and analyses of wisdom.

Roger N. Whybray dialogues at length with Crenshaw, Von Rad and Murphy. In **The Intellectual Tradition in the Old Testament**, he researches the question of whether a special class in Israel which was explicitly known as "the wise" actually existed. He is particularly concerned with the precise scope of wisdom literature and analyzes the biblical literature in terms of each book's contents of identified "wisdom" vocabulary. In his introduction, a chapter he titles "The Problem", Whybray is critical of each scholar's subjectivity and implicit assumptions. He

states:

> This lack of unanimity is unfortunate since it is tending to create a state of scholarly confusion which may well make the word "wisdom" useless for the purposes of Old Testament study. Before any satisfactory investigation can be undertaken into the ramifications of "wisdom teaching" outside those books which are generally acknowledged to come under the heading of "wisdom literature", it is essential that some measure of agreement be reached about the fundamental character of this "wisdom" and the circles within which it was created and transmitted in Israel. (Whybray, Intellectual, p.2)

The scholar is impressed with Crenshaw's remark that the definition of wisdom must be "neither too broad nor too narrow". (Whybray, Intellectual, p.3) Crenshaw suggests that Von Rad defines wisdom too broadly. The former quotes von Rad's definition of wisdom as "practical knowledge of the laws of life and the world, based on experience". (Crenshaw, Studies, p.3, note 14) This definition is found in **Old Testament Theology I, 1962**, however von Rad's evolved statement on wisdom, **Wisdom in Israel**, was published in 1972 prior to the publication of Crenshaw's work. Why didn't Crenshaw glean von Rad's definition from his later and more complete work on the subject? In fact, in a footnote to his **Prologomenon**, in **Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom**, Crenshaw himself admits that they "are not as far apart as it appears at first glance". (Crenshaw, Studies, p.37, note 15) What is going on here? Crenshaw subjectively chooses an earlier piece of von Rad's work in wisdom to quote as a comparison to himself then later brings in von Rad's more current work to suggest that they

are closer in point of view than he previously led the reader to believe?

Whybray applauds Crenshaw's criticism of von Rad, but then goes on to criticize Crenshaw suggesting that while von Rad's definition is too broad, Crenshaw's is too narrow. Whybray quotes Crenshaw's definition as "the quest for self-understanding in terms of relationships with things, people and the Creator", (Whybray, Intellectual, p.3), from Crenshaw's 1969 article in the **Journal of Biblical Literature.** Whybray's work is published in 1974 and he may not have had access to Crenshaw's later works, however the latter's understanding of wisdom has evolved over time as can be seen in the table of wisdom definitions.

After having examined the perceived differences among scholars' definitions of the concept "wisdom", when one glances at the table, it appears that each definition presented is strikingly similar to the other definitions. The definitions indeed have many similarities. Each scholar insists that wisdom is more than "the ability to cope"[2]. They share the element of searching for order. Murphy describes this as the "mastery of life". (Murphy, Israelite, p.35) All of the scholars point to his statement that "humans seek to sift out the hidden orders in the confusion of varied experiences to which they are subject." (Murphy, Israelite, p.35) In each definition the emphasis is upon a particular world view that requires one to grapple with the practical art of daily life and which

leads one to the metaphysical question of creation.

These similarities of definition can be examined in the presentation of **Table I.** The tabular method limits the extent of the presentation of ideas but it displays the larger picture and lends itself to comparison of ideas. By its nature, it lacks an in-depth presentation of material. In order to understand the nuances of similarities between the scholars in general but particularly Crenshaw and von Rad, it is beneficial to delve more deeply into their analyses.

There is no question that the experience of mastering life involves the quest for order. This significant search is the link between the secular and religious realities in wisdom thinking. The "quest" points to the here and now of everyday living; to the question of creation from the beginning through the continuous re-creation day by day; and to the trust that the present is based upon the past and directed toward the future. Both Crenshaw and von Rad explain the link between the secular and the religious. Their explanations are frequently quoted by other scholars and for this reason their ideas will be presented here.

Crenshaw describes this perspective in terms of three complimentary postures: Skepticism, a viable alternative to the Yahwistic world, view and the ability to cope with reality. In the chapter dealing with the impact of wisdom thought he summarizes wisdom's outstanding features:

> The most noteworthy feature of wisdom's legacy is the capacity to recognize the limits imposed upon human reason and to face reality honestly, submitting every claim about knowledge to severe judgement. That awareness of human limits also applied to so called revelatory knowledge. The result was the growth of skepticism in ancient Israel.
>
> The sages also proclaimed a world view which offered a viable alternative to the Yahwistic one. According to their sapiential legacy, creation was the occasion for God's contact with those who bore the divine image. Revelation was pushed back to the beginning, and humans possessed the necessary means of discovering truth.
>
> A third feature...is its ability to cope with reality. This aspect of wisdom embraces the other two, for skepticism was her way of dealing with experienced ambiguities and the formulation of a new world view grew out of the actual practice of coping with events which had rendered traditional religious convictions obsolete. (Crenshaw, Old, p.190)

For Crenshaw then, skepticism (differentiated completely from pessimism and cynicism) is a posture for the willingness to deal with the full spectrum of reality including the possibilities of wealth and happiness to injustice and finitude. The confrontation with life itself will lead the wise person to discover the truth planted by God within the universe (Crenshaw, Old, p.209). This truth is apprehendable through the experience of coping with life.

Von Rad uses a different vocabulary to make a similar point. He emphasizes that to the "radical secularization of the world there corresponded the idea of an equally radical domination of the world by Yahweh, that is the idea of the world as a creation of Yahweh". (Von Rad p.211) He discusses at length the meaning of Israel's

search for knowledge directed at creation. For the wise, creation inspired and vindicated trust:

> In her wisdom Israel created an intellectual sphere in which it was possible to discuss both the multiplicity of trivial, daily occurences as well as basic theological principles. (Namely the hiddeness of God in the world p.299.) This wisdom is, therefore, at all events to be regarded as a form of Yahwism, although an unusual form and, in the theological structure of its statements, very different from the other ways in which Yahwism reveals itself. ...The presupposition for coping with life was trust in Yahweh and in the orders put into operation by him. (Von Rad p.307)

Von Rad is essentially presenting the same concept of Yahweh's participation in the wisdom world view as was presented by Crenshaw, though the former labels it Yahwism where the latter compares it against Yahwism. Although the ideas appear similar, this difference in labeling may be highly significant when it comes to the question of what can be considered "wisdom literature" or "wisdom" influence in biblical literature. If one writer suggests that wisdom theology is outside of Yahwism then certainly passages that are Yahwistic in nature cannot easily be considered "wisdom". However, if another scholar suggests that wisdom theology is a subset of Yahwism, then it is expected that these ideas will be found in Yahwistic passages. As we would expect, Crenshaw finds the scope of wisdom literature much more limited than his colleague von Rad. Therefore, while labels may present only superficial differences in the definition of wisdom, the application of these differences greatly influences the perceived literary

corpus.

Nevertheless, the definitions are clearly similar in meaning if not in scope. Scope will be of great concern to us further on in this paper. It appears that these modern thinkers propose compatible ideas expressed in different vocabularies especially in terms of the goals of wisdom and its theological framework.

There is an underlying assumption that is salient to each of the scholars' definitions -- an assumption that will become increasingly relevant in this investigation. That is the assumption of the conditional or situational nature of the wise response. Although this element of wisdom is crucial to any effort to define the phenomenon, it may be a highly radical element to explore because it denies the possibility of absolutes. Several scholars particularly address the issue of the variability of every new situation and the kind of response that is required to meet each new challenge. We will pursue this significant aspect of wisdom by reviewing the work of von Rad, Crenshaw and additionally introduce an as yet unpublished paper by Wolfgang Roth that reviews the work of Hermann Timm.

Crenshaw consistently presents his ideas clearly and concisely. We will begin by examining his discussion of wisdom as an open system. (Crenshaw, Studies, p.23) The scholar reminds the reader that wisdom is characterized by a belief in the ability of the wise person to create order in which to bring his or her life into harmony with the

established order. But the belief in an established order can imply a system that is fixed and unchanging. This is exactly the opposite of the the concept of wisdom. Recently this idea of order has been modified by the concept of "timeliness or propriety as the goal of all wisdom." Who is the wise person? The one who knows the appropriate behavior for a given time and place. This important concept explains the "outright contradictions in proverbial sayings as in Proverb 26, verses 4 and 5:

> Do not answer a fool in his own foolish terms, lest you put yourself on his level.
>
> Answer a fool in his own foolish terms so he will not think himself wise.

The emphasis is on the consideration of all variables in a given situation. Any statement has the possibility of being true. The wise person must discern the behavior that is salient to any situation. As Crenshaw states:

> The willingness to face up to contradictions arises out of the fact that wisdom is an open system...The sage knew that there were limitations to the comprehension of reality, both in terms of the intellectual capacity and divine inscrutablilty. Ultimately the wise man or woman had to concede the poverty of intellect, for "man proposes but God disposes" (Pr. 16:9; 19:21; 21:30-31). The ever present incalculable ingredient to every experience promoted an openness to various possibilities and a recognition of one's limits. (Crenshaw, Studies, p.24)

Rather than describing wisdom in terms of openness, von Rad prefers to discuss the feature as the "doctrine of proper time." To exemplify this doctrine he quotes the didactic poem par excellence, in Ecclesiastes chapter 3.

(Von Rad would appreciate Scott's translation in the Anchor Bible!)

> Everything has its season, and there is a proper time for every happening under the sun.

The remainder of the poem clarifies, through concrete example, the meaning of this statement. Von Rad is famous for describing wisdom in experiential terms. According to him, this feature of wisdom flows naturally from the experiental nature of all wisdom.

> Once again, we are dealing with a quite elementary experience which was available to men in every period and at every cultural level, namely the experience that human activity is not equally successful and meaningful on every occasion, that its success and meaningfulness, that, in a word, all ability to act successfully, is tied to specific times. Once again it is a question ... of the experience of a limitation which is imposed on men's energies. Man can do nothing but yield to this fact, for it is certainly not susceptible to any alteration...He is not, however, prevented from reflection on it; he can go further and even attempt to derive some profit from it and to perceive in it some kind of mysterious order. In any event, this experience confirmed the awareness...that in the experiences of the world in which men find themselves nothing of absolute validity can be affirmed. What is experienced on any given occasion has always shown itself to be in some way conditioned and relative. (Von Rad p.139)

According to Wolfgang Roth[3], Hermann Timm has recently amplified von Rad's interpretation. Timm discusses the concept of space. He suggests that:

> It is both the invitation to let the mind roam and the awareness that there is no safe, protected place to settle down. Comparable to the lifestyle of the nomad the large mind is both free and vulnerable. Especially early wisdom refuses to map out a comprehenseive system, be it in dogmatics, in morals, or even in the interpretation of history as a linear-temporal

> order. It is an understanding of reality full of breaks, tensions, and at times, contradictions. (Timm p.224-237)

Timm's ideas are poetically simple but perhaps capture the openness of wisdom better that any other scholar. He describes the process of catching that momentary wisdom and attempting to describe it in language.

> It (wisdom) manifests itself in maxims where breadth of experience and the ability to hear and express it hardens, coin-like, into language. Here a maxim of perception is caught in a minimum of words; universal width is shaped into the individual, short, reflected wisdom saying. "A golden ring in the snout of a pig is a lovely woman who lacks discretion." (Pr 11:22) Insight gained and thus worded is concentrated and yet not altogether contained in the formulation. It invites the listening human being to hear life anew, the maxim sharpening perception. (Roth p.7)

"Insight gained and thus worded is concentrated and yet not altogether contained in the formulation." That is the whole essence. The effort of capturing wisdom fails at the very moment of its victory since once that moment is past the wisdom may change even ever so slightly.

The reader must understand the radical implications of these statements. They deny the possibility of any absolutes-- a completely disarming posture. For without absolutes how are we to judge the correctness of any behavior, or to set limits and laws for human interaction? These questions are the true concern of wisdom. Their answers are found as much in the sphere of process as in the sphere of outcome. This can be very disconcerting for the person who must live by absolute formulae. As Timm suggests, the wise person is vulnerable because she or he

recognizes that there can be no place of comfort since each new situation demands its own response. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that wisdom is the endeavor of pointing toward wisdom, of identifying the direction if perhaps not the path.

In attempting to find an operational definition for "wisdom" we must come up with a few sentences that will by nature of the phenomenon be wrong and appear rigid. We are cautioned to keep the element of openness characterized by wisdom as we accept a definition.

Though we have not yet addressed the question of scope it is possible to accept the definitions of several of the scholars because of their similarities. The definition that will be used operationally throughout this work will be that of R. N. Whybray because it is the simplest and lends itself to the most open interpretation.

> **Wisdom is the ability to get on in the world, to adapt oneself to circumstances, to deal with difficult situations. Wisdom in the religious sense also is an intellectual quality which provides the key to happiness and success to "life" in its widest sense.**

NOTES ON CHAPTER I

1. In **Wisdom in Israel,** Gerhard von Rad devotes a chapter to this issue. His ideas will be presented in chapters three and four of this thesis.

2. The definition was proposed by Alexander Kenworthy. It is quoted by Crenshaw in the **Prolegomenon** to **Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom.**

3. I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. David Weisberg for sharing an unpublished munuscript by Dr. Wolfgang Roth of Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. The conception of the fluidity of "wisdom" discussed in this paper came directly from Dr. Roth's analysis of von Rad and Timm, in his paper **The Recovery of a Dimension 'Space' in Gerhard von Rad's Interpretation of Wisdom in Israel.** His fine work helped to clarify the definition of wisdom and its scope.

CHAPTER II

DISCUSSING BIBLICAL IDOLATRY

A Presentation of Varied Theoretical Positions

The previous chapter was concerned with establishing an operational definition of wisdom for this thesis. Before we can proceed with the major task of this work, probing the borders of the wisdom tradition through the analysis of the polemic against idolatry within the context of the wisdom teachings, we must first examine the polemic against idolatry within the general context of biblical literature.

In this chapter the questions to be investigated are the following: What is idolatry and why does the Bible disagree with it? As we will soon demonstrate, these questions are deceptively simple. The answer varies within disciplines of biblical scholarship. Several different theories will be presented in order to show the range of scholarship. This is a crucial step because it reminds us that, in this realm, we are ultimately dealing with theory and imagination. The task of the scholar is to attempt to recreate a set of circumstances and experiences. As we will see, the evidence can be interpreted from a variety of perspectives and biases.

While the first chapter was concerned with gleaning as much as possible directly from the text, this chapter must attempt to understand the circumstances from which the text was written. In preparation for this task a word must be said about historical reconstruction.

In his essay on historical imagination, R. Collingwood states:

> Every new generation must rewrite history in its own way: every new historian, not content with giving new answers to old questions, must revise the questions themselves...(Meyerhoff p.83)

In the essay, he suggests that an historian cannot help but use imagination in the reconstruction of history. Imagination is defined as the activity which, "bridging the gaps between what our authorities tell us, gives the historical narrative or description its continuity." (Meyerhoff p.76) For our purposes the authorities are the ancient texts and and the prohibition against idolatry as it appears in those texts. The act of imagination is required to reconstruct the circumstances under which this prohibition evolved, how it functioned and what it meant.

Therefore, inherent in the idea that each generation must rewrite history is the idea that each generation must attempt to understand changing truths. It seems only natural then that each historian will approach the subject with a set of pre-conceived biases depending on the commitment of her or his approach. So it should not surprise us to have varying and conflicting historical theories regarding the same phenomenon and based on the same authorities or texts.

Having discussed the methodology of historical recreation, the chapter will be organized in the following manner. The polemic against idolatry will be analyzed from

several different perspectives. The ideas of Albright and his student Bright will represent one possible analysis, followed by a presentation of Pedersen's more sociological perspective, then Kaufmann's radical perceptions and concluding with the ideas of Brichto. After the formal presentation of theoretical viewpoints, each of these perspectives will be called upon with its interpretation of the dramatic biblical account of the golden calf (Ex. 20).

While this chapter is concerned with understanding biblical idolatry, there are several other phenomena that must be defined in order to proceed with the main discussion. They are mythology, paganism and polytheism. It need not be said that each of the following concepts are worthy subjects of investigation in their own right. For the purpose of aiding our own quest, in this work we will accept a general definition acknowledging that it too can be debated and expanded. The definitions are as follows:

> **Mythology** is the organized bodies of myths belonging to peoples having in common a tradition and inheritance. All religions both primitive and advanced require myth. For the relating of the experience with the divine can be conveyed only in mythological conceptions. Myths are designed to tell in story form the nature of an experience or awareness of God. (Ferm p.515)
>
> **Myth** in the narrower sense, is a story about gods or other super human beings, or one told to account for a custom, institutuion or a natural phenomenon. In the broader sense, myth is that expresseion of the creative imagination which interprets the real in terms of the ideal, punctual events in terms of continuous situations. (Arthur p.481)
>
> **Pagan** is a term which was first applied to those who clung to Greek and Roman faiths. Since

> Christianity first spread in the cities, this was true more of the rural than urban population. Now it is defined as one who does not adhere to monotheism. It implies a disinterested rather than a hostile point of view. (Ferm p.566)

> **Paganism** is not defined in the scholarly sources. It is subsumed and mentioned under catagories of idolatry, worship, gentile and nation. It is used in this discussion as a system which practiced idolatry and the immoralities therewith connected. The biblical writings display passionate intolerance toward these practices as the aboriginal population of Canaan was the stumbling block for Israel, who was constantly exposed to the danger of being contaminated by Canaanitish idolatrous practices. (Singer, vol.V, p.615)

> **Polytheism** is literally the worship or belief in a plurality of gods. As far as epigraphic material, traditions and folklore throw light on the questions, the semites are shown to be of polytheistic leanings. Astral in character, primitive Semitic religion deified the sun, the moon and other heavenly bodies.. The storm-clouds, the thunder storms and the forces of nature making for fertility or the reverse were view as deities. (Singer, vol.VI, p.13)

These definitions will be assumed in the following presentation of scholarly theory.

> The light shed by the discoveries of modern archaeology on the history of civilization is apparent to all, but the bearing of these discoveries on the study of underlying historical processes is not yet generally understood. (Albright, Stone Age, p.25)

William Foxwell Albright begins his major work **From The Stone Age to Christianity,** with this thought. He utilizes the advances made by several scientific disciplines to facilitate his historiography. In both this work and **Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan,** Albright analyzes the religion of the Hebrew Bible in terms of the historical development of ancient societies and peoples. Albright does not di-

rectly address the issue of idolatry in his presentation. He is more concerned with the historical influence of pagan cultures (as well as Israel's response to these influences,) on the development of the religion of Israel. For this reason, he labels the effort to eliminate specifically polytheistic elements, archaic demythologizing.

According to the historical perspective which Albright presents, the process of "demythologizing" pagan myths took a very long time, from approximately the beginning of the thirteenth century to the sixth century B.C.E. (Albright, Yahweh, p.184) He emphasizes the point that every religion must use concrete language and symbolism to express the "ineffable," so it is therefore impossible, and undesirable to eliminate all "myth" and still maintain the element of elevated religious system. The writer aptly describes the manner in which he views the Hebrew Bible referring to vestiges from the Canaanite religion existing among the Hebrews. Cleverly he describes the idea in terms of our own modern experience.

> The names of many pagan gods and goddesses continued to be used in Hebrew for religious or nonreligious purposes, just as in English. For instance, when we speak of eating breakfast cereal we certainly do not mean to imply worship of the goddess Ceres. The word has simply been borrowed and applied to products previously believed to be under special protection of the goddess of that name. If anyone insists that these etymologies prove the mythological character of our beliefs, we should have every right to laugh him out of court, and yet such reasoning is still common among historians of religion. (Albright, Yahweh, p.185)

Using this kind of reasoning, he concludes along these

lines that no significant mythology permeates anywhere in the bible and that the vestiges that remain are what he calls the "debris of a past religious culture."

The question we are compelled to ask is, if this theory about the historical development (or what he would term, organismic development), is correct in relation to the gradual disappearance of the polytheistic elements why does there exist a stated and referred to prohibition against idolatry? Albright addresses this question directly when he introduces a major discussion of the archaeological findings of idolatrous objects erected by Israelite communities. The writer does not specifically define the meaning of idolatrous, but, if the reader is persistent, we are given an glimpse of his meaning when he states that:

> There are a good many illustrations of reaction against paganizing tendencies in early Yahwism-...according to official tradition the Israelites backslid at every opportunity and during every period of relative peace and prosperity. There is no reason to doubt that this point of view was essentially correct, though details may have been exaggerated. (Albright, Yahweh, p.199)

Why does this writer theorize that there was reaction against the "paganizing tendencies?" He answers most clearly in his presentation of monotheism in a section called Moses and Monotheism. (Albright, Stone Age, p.257) In his discussion, he identifies several particularly significant original characteristics of the Israelite God.

He suggests that there is ample biblical evidence that the Israelites had always considered "Yahweh as Creator of

All." (Albright, Stone Age, p.261) The Israelite God, in comparison to the pagan gods, stood completely alone and beyond, rather than among the other gods. The God of the bible is not restricted to any special location. Which is not to say that there were not special, holy places. Yahweh is the controlling force behind all the cosmic entities -- the sun, the moon, the heavenly bodies. A fundamental attribute of the God of the Bible is the anthropomorphic conception and presentation of Yahweh. Though always hidden, even Moses may not see the face of God, Yahweh is referred to in a way which suggests human form. Albright cannot emphasize this last point strongly enough. He states:

> ...the anthropomorphic conception of Yahweh was absolutely necessary if the God of Israel was to remain a God of the individual Israelite as well as of the people as a whole. All the human characteristics of Israel's deity were exalted; they were projected against a cosmic screen and they served to interpret the cosmic process as the expression of God's creative word and eternally active will. (Albright, Stone Age, p.265)

Not only was it impossible to see Yahweh's form but essential to the Mosaic religion is what Albright terms the "aniconic character of Yahweh." By this he means that there could be no tangible representations of Yahweh, no images. According to the scholar the written sources and the negative results of excavation prove that "Yahwism was essentially aniconic and that material representations were foreign to its spirit from the beginning." (Albright, Stone Age, p.266)

What Albright never manages to say is "why?" And this

question is our major concern. Although his work is enormously enlightening regarding the possible historical framework of the prohibition against idolatry, the initial question remains: What did the aniconic nature of the mosaic religion mean?

Fortunately, Albright's student John Bright succinctly addresses the question in his work **A History of Israel.** He states that:

> Israel did not deny the existence of other gods (gods were realities in the ancient world, their images to be seen in every temple), but she effectively denied them status as gods. Since she was bound in covenant to serve Yahweh alone, and accorded all power and authority to him, she was forbidden to approach them as gods...The gods were thus rendered irrelevant, driven from the field...To Israel only one God was **God:** Yahweh, whose grace had called her into being, and under whose sovereign overlordship she engaged to live. The other gods, allowed neither part in creation, nor function in the cosmos, nor power over events, nor cult, were robbed of all that made them gods and rendered nonentites, in short, were "undeified." (Bright, p.154)

The prohibition against idolatry from this perspective is part of the contractual agreement between Yahweh and the people of Israel.

Albright suggests that the ideas of J. Pedersen in his major work **Israel** are essentially sociological in perspective. Pedersen makes the explicit connection between polytheism and idolatry that Albright implies, but does not say directly.

> The fight against foreign gods was gradually connected with the fight against idols, the two things becoming inseparable. The main features in the history of this fight,...may illustrate

> the evolution of the nature of Yahweh. (Pedersen p.639)

According to Pedersen, Hosea is the first to denounce images. The prophet shows that the idols which the Israelites (Pedersen calls them Canaanitish Israelites) incorporate into their cult are no more than the work of men, produced by craftsmen. This is the idea that comes to permeate the bible. "All other gods but Yahweh are images made by men." (Pedersen p.640) These images are offensive to Yahweh for reasons the scholar will explain.

This scholar explains that in the ancient cult, the significance of idols and other holy objects is dependent upon their power to "embody a psychic content."

> But when the God was detached from the life of nature, and his relation to it consisted only in the creator's display of power, then the psychic strength was removed from nature, it became merely an instrument for the creator, a means for him to display his power. Then it would be absurd to seek divine life and holy strength in the things of this world. And if idols were formed in the shape of animals or men, it could only be understood as a ridiculous attempt to degrade the creator by ascribing to the imitations of creation that power which He alone possessed. (Pedersen p.641)

Idolatry degrades the very attributes of Yahweh. Precisely why is it so offensive? The reason for the prohibition against images was summarized in a single biblical passage that stated that the Israelites did not see Yahweh's shape at Horeb. (Pedersen p.647) Brichto will refer to the same passage in relation to the prohibition against images. This will be reviewed further on in this chapter. Pedersen best summarizes his own thoughts by concluding:

> Thus all images, whether of Yahweh or of other gods, become the greatest of all delusions, because they are aimed directly at the honor of Yahweh. (Pedersen p.641)

The ideas presented to this point about the prohibition against idolatry are here reviewed. It appears that polemic against idolatry was a developed response to the polytheistic practices of the surrounding cultures. As the religion itself became more cohesive and the properties of the God of Israel became clearer, what was formerly simply a response to polytheism developed into a specific battle against the now labeled idolatry.

Y. Kaufmann presents a completely different approach to the entire polemic. Kaufmann believes that the views of Israelite monotheism presented above must be entirely re-evaluated. He begins the introduction to his work by saying:

> Biblical scholars, and historians of antiquity in general, tend to interpret Israelite religion as an organic outgrowth of the religious milieu of the ancient Orient. Some scholars discover the origins of biblical faith in monotheistic tendencies of the religions of the ancient Near East, others point out pagan elements in the religion of Israel. All assume that an organic connection exists, that even the unique elements of Israelite faith must be understood in the light of surrounding religions. (Kaufmann p.2)

Kaufmann is clearly responding to the theories of Albright in these introductory comments. The latter's criticism of Kaufmann's theories will be presented after we examine his perspective.

After rejecting the theory of organismic development

in toto, as he is inclined to say, he then stresses that there is no relation between the Israelite religion and the pagan world. The Israelite religion was a completely unique creation. There was no monotheistic parallel or model in the pagan world. Although it sometimes appeared so, Israel was not polytheistic. These assertions are the basis for Kaufmann's radical and unique theories regarding the "peculiar" sort of idolatry plaguing the Israelite religion. His ideas will be presented at length.

According to the scholar, the Bible is completely unaware of the nature and the meaning of pagan religions. While biblical literature may be dedicated to fight "idolatry," and certainly the bible as a whole has left an abundant record of this generations-long battle, scholars who work in this area are mislead by the data and make two basically incorrect assumptions. The first is that the biblical age was intimately acquainted with paganism; the second is that during the biblical period, mythological polytheism was prevalent in Israel as in other parts of the region, and that biblical religion came into being only gradually as the outcome of a great struggle against it. (Kaufmann p.7)

From other sources of the time, we know that the polytheism during biblical times was quite sophisticated. The gods and goddesses are woven into the literature, art and culture. Elaborate myths that tell of their wars, lovers, dealings with people, histories, and adventures are related. These gods were seen as powers "embodied in

nature." In their cults, "material objects usually played an important part, the natural or manufactured object being taken as the bearer of divine power, the dwelling place of deity, or its symbol." (Kaufmann p.8)

Kaufmann finds that the biblical account of these gods misses the point altogether.

> But is it remarkable that not a single biblical passage hints at the natural or mythological qualities of of any of these named gods. (Baal, Ashtoreth, Chemosh, Milcom, Bel, Nebo, Amon, etc.) Had we only the Bible, we should know nothing of the real nature of the "gods of the nations"...The Bible has a great deal to say about the image cult that was associated with the named gods. But if the god is not understood to be a living, natural power, or a mythological person who dwells in, or is symbolized by, the image, it is evident that the image worship is conceived to be nothing but **fetishism.** (Kaufmann p.9)

We must pause for a moment to define the concept of fetishism. Fetishism is the attribution of power to a lifeless object or collection of objects. It is a phenomenon in the domain of magic rather than religion. According to Herbert Chanan Brichto, the distinction between magic and religion is that in magic the "powers are manipulated," while in religion "they are addressed in worship." (Brichto, Beauty, p.26)

The writer holds to the view that biblical idolatry was fetishism, although he does identify a list of biblical passages where the gods may not merely be alluded to as cult objects but as active beings. Nevertheless he finds evidence that the Bible does not recognize any mythological motifs as foreign or pagan. In all the legends and allu-

sions with these motifs, there is only one active divine being -- YHWH. YHWH may indeed do battle with the "gods of the nations," but in every case his fury is directed at the idols. For the scholar, the Bible's lackluster presentation of the dynamic nature of pagan gods and myths can only be explained by a new assumption -- "the biblical age no longer knew pagan mythology." (Kaufmann p.11) The evidence for this fact is most vividly illustrated in the story of the golden calf which we will examine later in this chapter.

According to the scholar, a significant part of biblical literature is dedicated to the battle against idolatry. He concisely defines the nature of biblical idolatry.

> The Bible conceives of idolatry 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. These objects, upon which the magical rituals are performed, are "the gods of the nations." The Bible does not conceive the powers as personal beings who dwell in the idols; the idol is not a habitation of the god, it is the god himself. Hence the oft-repeated biblical stigmatization of the pagan gods as "wood and stone," "silver and gold." Hence also its sole polemical argument that idolatry is the senseless deification of wood and stone images...Their whole condemnation revolves around the taunt of fetishism. (Kaufmann p.14)

The scholar cites many examples of this idea in the prophetic literature and rejects the idea of the relevance of the era of these pieces, stating instead that the dating is inconsequential since all of the prophetic literature is completely "unanimous" in its conception of idolatry. The same can be said of the conception of idola-

try in the Torah.

The polemic, therefore, was directed only against fetishism and not against polytheistic beliefs. He suggests that:

> the biblical polemic takes this form because in fact, the mass of people did have this fetishistic concept of the idols, and it was urgently necessary to combat it. (Kaufmann p.19)

Kaufmann cautions the student of history not to assume that the biblical writers knew the pagan religion, for if they knew the essence of polytheism there is no evidence in the biblical literature.

Other scholars address Kaufmann's ideas. The two scholars that will be presented here ultimately are forced to reject his theories, but both for different reasons. Albright finds an element of truth in Kaufmann's theories, especially in relation to the importance of monotheism for the survival of the religion of Israel. He states:

> The pious Israelite probably knew little about many pagan beliefs. But, on the other hand, there was so much exchange of culture influences between Israel and its neighbours on all sides of its tiny territory, and there were so many irruptions of paganism into Israel, that the ignorance presupposed by Kaufmann's view is simply incredible. (Albright, Yahweh, p.207)

The jist of Albright's criticism is that, according to Kaufmann's theory, the Israelite society would have to be completely negative regarding the true nature of the pagan religion, and since the societies were living side by side this is not a real possibility.

Brichto criticizes Kaufmann from a different perspec-

tive. Kaufmann demonstrates adequately to Brichto that pagan religions were not idolatrous. Like other meaningful religions, they sought a "key to the destiny of the world and the salvation of man." (Kaufmann p.59) Brichto admires the other scholar's understanding of the true nature of the pagan religion. However, he asserts that Kaufmann is demonstrably wrong in theorizing that the Israelites limited the religion of their neighbors to fetishistic idol-worship and lapsed into this same fetishism. According to Brichto:

> The biblical poets were versed in mythological lore, and did not hesitate to exploit its imagery in praise of their transcendent God.

Brichto's criticism of Kaufmann is that the latter does not give the biblical writer enough credit or sophistication.

Brichto himself asks, what is biblical idolatry? He rejects the traditional and expected definition.

> Idolatry, literally construed, means the worship of man-made images as gods. That is to say that the sculpted form is for the worshiper not a representation of powers superhuman but the embodiment -- the concretization, so to speak -- of those powers. It is doubtful whether such worship has ever existed anywhere on earth in the course of that recorded time we call history. (Brichto, Beauty, p.26)

One must wonder if idolatry includes only human-made images or if idolatry includes the worship of natural entities such as the moon, sun, stars, clouds, animals and so forth. Is ascribing superhuman powers to these natural phenomenon also idolatrous by definition? Like Kaufmann, this scholar

asserts that paganism was not idolatrous. Beyond Kaufmann, he asserts that the biblical writers were completely aware of this fact.

This scholar approaches the Bible as literature which allows him the freedom to interpret its meaning without tying it into a precise historical context. The writer defines history as "facts; that is to say, events to which we may apply the attributes of existence or reality." (Brichto, Worship, p.1) This very definition contradicts the perception of history as the imaginative process as it was discussed earlier in this chapter. While Brichto labels his efforts "literary anlyses", it appears that he too engages in the imaginative activity of "bridging the gaps" between what is found in the narrative and creating a relationship between a sequence of events, situations and characters.

He asks a most pertinent question: "How are we to construe these idolatrous characterizations of a rival religious system?" (Brichto, Beauty, p.27) He approaches his theory from the perspective of acknowledging the beauty and power of the pagan religion and believing that the biblical adversary also appreciated, with profound understanding, this pagan religion.

He concludes that the biblical meaning of the term and the modern usage correspond.

> Idolatry, then, is a term rarely, if ever, meaningfully used in the literal sense. And in its metaphoric usage it is not so much a descriptive as it is a value term. Idolatry is a judgment, the attribution to another of the wor-

> ship of false gods or the pursuit of false values. As today, so then; as then, so today. (Brichto, Worship, pps.41-42)

In addition to precisely defining the meaning of biblical idolatry and its import, he analyzes the meaning of the prohibition against images. It is worthwhile to examine his ideas in this area.

He suggests that this polemic must be understood within the context of the first two commandments of the decalogue.

> The introduction to the decalogue in Exodus is 20:2, I YHWH, am your God, Who liberated you from the land of Egypt, the house of bondage." The first command is verse 3, "You shall have no other gods alongside of me." This prohibition does not, in itself, deny the existence of other numina, divine agencies of major or minor order. In contrast with pagan practice, which often portrays a chief god's hospitable relations with kindred deities, often providing them with quarters in his own palace or niches in his own temples, YHWH forbids the association with Him of any such divinity. The second command is verse 4, "You shall not make for yourself a sculpted image, of any likeness that exists in the skies above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth." Verse 5, underlining the seriousness of what precedes, applies to both preceding commands, "You shall pay them no homage or service..." A point which often fails of appreciation is that the proscription of images is not in reference to representations of other deities, for worship of these and, a fortiori, of representations of them have already been precluded in the first command. The second command forbids representation of YHWH by any image. (Brichto, Worship, p.43)

"Why?" the scholar asks. And in order to find the answer he delves into the text itself. He cites the prohibitions in Deuteronomy 4 against creating an image of YHWH. The reason given at that time is that YHWH was not shown at the theophany therefore no images can be made. "In other words, you cannot represent YHWH in any natural likeness

for you saw no image when He revealed Himself to you." (Brichto, Worship, p.43) The answer to "why," then, is that when God was revealed to the people, the revelation itself was imageless. How does this answer the question? It states that the prohibition against idolatry cannot stand on its own within a vacuum, but must be viewed in terms of its infringement on the role of the Divine. What is the crime? From this perspective, the practice of idolatry itself may be beautiful and alluring, but the concept of deity within the Israelite religion simply does not allow for representation of the Divine within its boundaries. To this point, several theories have been presented. The ideas have been varied and abstract. Through examining each of their analyses of the golden calf narrative their abstract ideas will be more concretely illustrated.

The narrative begins in Exodus 32. The translation proposed by Brichto in his article, "Worship of the Golden Calf," will be presented here. Where this translation differs significantly from other major translations notes will be made on the text.

> 1) When the people realized how long overdue Moses was in coming down from the mountain, the people ganged up on Aaron. They said to him, "Come, make us a god, one which will go ahead of us. For that Moses -- the man who led us up from the land of Egypt -- we know not what has become of him." 2) Aaron said to them, "Snap off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daaughters, and bring them to me." 3) All the people snapped off the gold rings that were on their ears and brought them to Aaron. 4) He took (this) from them and

> engraved it with a stylus[1]. Thus he made it into a casting of a bull. They then exclaimed, "This now is your God, O Israel, which led you up from the land of Egypt." 5) When Aaron saw -- he set up an alter before it. Aaron proclaimed, "Tomorrow -- a feast to YHWH!" 6) Promptly on the morrow they offered up burnt offerings, presented sacrifices of well-being. They sat down to dine and wine; then they arose to make merry.

This vignette is quoted as the example of biblical idolatry par excellence. In dealing with the subject, Albright, Pedersen, Kaufmann and Brichto address the meaning of this narrative from the context of their own particular theoretical stances. In order to understand their theories more fully we will examine their statements regarding this text.

For Albright, the narrative of the golden calf is an example of the reaction against paganizing tendencies in early Yahwism. According to the scholar, this chapter directly battles these tendencies.

> ...it refers specifically to an attempted return by the Israelites of Moses' time to the ancient practice of representing the chief divinity in the form of a storm-god standing on a young bull. This practice had doubtless been shared by pre-Mosaic Hebrews with the pagans among whom they lived...(Albright, Yahweh, p.197)

Why the young bull? Albright traces the development from ancient glyptic art from the Bronze Age, documented on cylinder seals. The bull is first portrayed with a storm-god on his back, carrying a sheaf of lightening bolts. The next portrayal is the young bull with only the sheaf of thunderbolts on his back. The third development was documented from an Israelite seal dating no later than the

early ninth century B.C.E. and shows simply a young bull without anything on his back. (Albright, Yahweh, p.198) The scholar does not deal with the question of why a "storm-god" of all possible gods, but perhaps the text elucidates his theory. We are told that the theophany in the desert was heard amist thunder, lightening, the blast of a horn, violent trembling, and billows of smoke. There is much theory regarding the location and circumstances of the great theophany. The storm-god, carrying sheafs of thunderbolts, riding on a young bull, may have been the most appropriate pagan image for the Israelites. When Moses then was so long overdue, they erected the pedestal most appropriate for the kind of god Yahweh had thus far shown himself to be. This idea may be way off base in terms of Albright's analysis, but is perhaps an interesting connection.

The historian discusses this passage in relation to the postulated theories regarding the erection of a "golden calf" at Dan (I Kings 12;28 ff.) as well as at Bethel. He concludes that the golden calf could not have been erected as a visible image of Yahweh, rather it "simply formed the pedestal on which the invisible Yahweh stood." (Albright, Stone, p.266) He compares it to the concept that in the Temple, the invisible "Glory of God" was enthroned above the cherubim.

In summary for this scholar, the story of idolatry is not referring to idolatry at all, if idolatry is defined in terms of the worship of images, but is a story about the

tendency of early Yahwism to attempt to incorporate pagan rituals into its practices -- the practice of erecting a bull to be the pedestal of the invisible god.

Pedersen is interested in apprehending the historical significance of the golden calf narrative. His major point is that idolatry degrades the creator by ascribing to the imitations the power which Yahweh alone can possess. He suggests that the story of the golden calf is intended to strike a blow at the Canaanite cult of Yahweh. He calls the episode an "Israelitish festival of a Canaanite type, a Yahweh-Baal feast." (Pedersen p.468) He suggests that a major part of the Israelite cult was determined by the influence of foreigners. This story is an example of the kind of feast that demonstrates this relationship.

The writer is amazed that Aaron, the high priest of the royal temple, is the leader of the feast, the erection of the young-bull, the festal offerings, the dances and the ecstatic abandonment. (Pedersen p.644)

According to Pedersen, this kind of blending of cultic responses was the most harmful and dangerous to the covenant. The placement of this story is crucially important. "Its denunciation is directly associated with the fundamental making of the covenant." (Pedersen p.468)

> The main point is the representation of Yahweh as a bull, which makes the entire feast a sin. But the character of the feast, also, is of an evil kind, the licentiousness of the people may make them an object of derision to their enemies (v. 25).

In addition to attesting to the sinful nature of this

sort of feast, Pedersen takes this narrative as a general denunciation of images.

> The people's appeal to Aaron is full of the Jewish ironical feeling towards the gods. The people expressly demands "gods" (vv. 1.4.8), though the plural form which is emphasised in the verbs corresponds badly with the single image; it is the belief in several gods which is the delusion that is to be branded as the foolishness that it is. And when the people demands that such gods should be "made", it expresses the Jewish conception of the absdurdly simple way in which other gods come into existence...(Pedersen p.645)

One cannot be exactly sure to what Pedersen is referring when he introduces the term "Jewish." Previously he was examining the narrative in the light of Canaanite influence on Israelitish feasts and suddenly the denunciation of images is being interpreted within a Jewish context. Although he may be making a statement relevant to the biblical interpretation of the prohibition against images when he states that the way in which the god was formed was absurdly simple, the context is too loose to be accepted for this analysis.

He does go on to explain the relationship between the narrative and the portrayal of Yahweh. Although he finds the text irregular and at times without complete coherence, Yahweh's response to the incident is of great significance. Yahweh is portrayed as "the great keeper of accounts, who treats every one according to his conduct." (Pedersen p.645) In Pedersen's theory, the ultimate assertion of Yahweh rejects the possibility of images.

Kaufmann analyzes the story in a completely different

way. His examination demonstrates that the biblical age no longer understood pagan mythology and therefore idolatry was fetishistic. He states:

> In this portrayal of Israel's prototypal sin we have a classic representation of the biblical view of idolatry. The sin is not that the people represent YHWH in the figure of an ox. The people, having despaired of Moses and the God who brought them out of Egypt, demand that the priest make them a god in place of YHWH...They do not give their allegiance to a living god, one of the gods of the nations or of their own ancient pantheon, but to an anonymous image, just now fashioned out of their own trinkets. In this calf, this idol that was not the image of a god, but a god itself, the Bible embodies its conception of Israelite idolatry as fetishism. (Kaufmann p.13)

Accordingly, this fetishism is prohibited. Brichto criticizes Kaufmann for this interpretation of the narrative. He demonstrates that this narrative proves that biblical idolatry is not mere fetishism. According to Brichto "the function of this manufactured "god" is clear: to go in the lead of the Israelite host." (Brichto, Worship p.5) The people refer to the god as "your God, O Israel, which led you up from the land of Egypt." Fetishism is defined by ascribing magical powers to the object itself. Though the god is mysteriously produced, the Israelites clearly know that this particular image did not bring them out of the land of Egypt, they had only just "created" the thing. Brichto asks, "are we really asked to believe that mature adults would hail as their liberator from Egypt a man-made image which had not come into existence until that very moment." (Brichto, Worship, p.6) Therefore, by addressing

the god as the one who brought them out of Egypt, they are denying the fetishistic attributes of the god.

If Brichto's criticism is correct and biblical idolatry is not mere fetishism as proposed by Kaufmann, how does Brichto interpret the narrative of the golden calf? He discusses the story at length in an article entitled "The Worship of the Golden Calf: A Literary Analysis of a Fable on Idolatry". The essay approaches chapters 32, 33, and 34 in Exodus as one integral narrative and employs the tools of literary criticism to disclose the episodes of narrative and the technique of its construction.

He addresses a most significant question that arises from the text. Why do the people give this "thing" the label of god? In verses 23 and 24, Aaron explains precisely what happened in making the bull. The people asked for a god to lead them because Moses was long overdue. He asked them to give him their earrings and jewelry. He cast them into the fire and -- out came a bull. He threw this gold into the fire and a bull came out rather than a shapeless blob of melted down gold! This "miracle" explains why "the people were so confident of the bull-image's authenticity as a representation of the God who had delivered them from Egypt." (Brichto, Worship p.13) The scholar goes on to suggest that Aaron may have incised "To YHWH" on the ingot since it certainly appeared that YHWH was instrumental in its construction.

Brichto analyzes this miracle by stating:

Miracles cannot override faith. YHWH indeed,

> deploys miracles to put our faith to the test-...In the case of the Golden Calf, the people who asked for "a god to lead them" had already failed the test. Aaron had relied on natural law to expose their faithlessness as absurd. And YHWH went one step further. He suspended natural law, performed a miracle to demonstrate the dire consequences of faithlessness, to demonstrate that faithlessness to His will is unreasonable even when reason itself is called into question by the occurrence of a miracle. (Brichto, Worship, p.15)

Earlier Brichto defined idolatry in terms of its metaphoric usage. "Idolatry is a judgment, the attribution to another of the worship of false gods or the pursuit of false values." The very faithlessness of the people was their idolatry and not the creation of the image per se. This is not to say thay the prohibition against images is not also relevant in the story. For Brichto this must be understood in the context of the commandments in the decalogue that were presented earlier. The story directly addresses the polemic:

> Only the representation of YHWH in sculpted or cast form is prohibited. And this prohibition is limited to forms copied from nature. Fantasy images, not copied from nature, such as the cherubim which constitute the throne of the Invisible God atop the pedastal of the Ark of the Covenant, are not only proscribed, they may be prescribed. The immanence of God among men is not to be sought in form of fauna or celestial bodies, ...it is ideally best manifested in God's most special creation, the spcies which was alone "created in the very image and likessof God" (Genesis 1:26). This species alone can know and fulfill the will of God. This potential is realizable in the prototypical human-at-its best and most faithful to God, the prophetic exemplar. (Brichto, Worship, p.44)

For Brichto then, the narrative demonstrates his theories regarding the nature of biblical idolatry as well as the

prohibition against images.

This chapter was concerned with presenting the biblical position on idolatry and the polemic against images. As has been demonstrated, each scholar approaches the phenomenon from a different perspective and bias. In order to find a single biblical position, one must commit oneself to a single perspective and theoretical stance. From my perspective it is more important to present the choices and then examine them within the context of biblical wisdom literature. The outcome of the next investigation will be compared to the ideas presented in this chapter.

Notes on Chapter 2

A general note on the process of writing this chapter.

This investigation was particularly fascinating in that the breadth of material offered such a variety of ideas. I am increasingly grateful to my teachers for giving me the tools to understand and evaluate this material.

In the Spring of 1984 I studied the Golden Calf narrative with Rabbi Brichto. At that time he demonstrated his own theories in detail. Having had the enriching opportunity to consult directly with Rabbi Brichto, I wish that I had studied with each of the scholars presented in this chapter.

CHAPTER III

PROBING THE PHENOMENA

An Analysis of the Polemic Against Idolatry

in Wisdom Literature

Now that we have examined two distinct phenomena, biblical wisdom literature and the biblical polemic against idolatry, we are better able to observe how the two are related. The next two chapters will form a unit. These chapters are concerned with specifics rather than generalities. We will delve deeply into von Rad's analysis of the polemic against idolatry in the wisdom literature, and examine the opinions of other wisdom authorities. In the following chapter we will closely analyze certain biblical texts dealing with idolatry in order to investigate their "wisdom" characteristics. At that time von Rad's theories will be tested through textual analysis and commentary by scholars in the fields of wisdom and biblical literature. We have arrived at the primary goal of this thesis. Using the theoretical material that has been thus far presented, we will test the validity of von Rad's conclusions by close analysis of his supporting texts. In the final pages of the next chapter we will draw our own theoretical conclusions regarding the phenomenon of the prohibition against idolatry as it is presented biblical wisdom literature.

The chapter will be stuctured in the following manner. The nature of the polemic against idolatry in wisdom literature will be presented. This survey will focus primarily on von Rad's theories. We are particularly

interested in how this new material will intersect with nature of biblical idolatry presented in the preceeding chapter. Following, a textual analysis of certain primary passages in the theory of von Rad will follow. These texts are outside the generally accepted scope of wisdom literature. This analysis will focus on the texts themselves, as well as the theoretical material dealing with the possibility of the "wisdom" nature of these texts.

Von Rad devotes an entire chapter to the polemic against idolatry in his major work **Wisdom in Israel.** The chapter comes in the midst of a larger section of the book titled **"Individual Subjects of Instruction."** This section concentrates on what is required for coping with reality. Remember that this concept of coming to grips with reality within a certain theological famework is the essence of von Rad's interpretation of "wisdom." According to the scholar:

> The statement that the fear of the Lord was the beginning of wisdom was Israel's most special possesion. But this does not mean that everything is now clear. It will take the whole of this book to think through some of the consequences implied by this sentence. Starting from this basis, Israel is led into areas of knowledge of a particular type and exposed to experiences of a particular type. (von Rad p.68)

The discussion of the polemic against idolatry comes within the context of this statement and will have to be examined in relation to the theological basis of wisdom, as suggested by von Rad.

The reader must assume that the following statements

belong to von Rad and are here paraphrased. It would become quite cumbersome and disruptive to continuously state "he says, thinks, states ...". Direct quotes or opinions of other scholars will be identified for the reader, but unless otherwise identified the following ideas are presented by von Rod in his chapter "The Polemic Against Idols."

The polemic was unknown to cultures other than Israel. It belongs entirely to Israelite wisdom material which causes it to be of great interest to the student of wisdom. Two specific questions must be addressed: "On the basis of what internal and external presuppositions is this polemic to be explained, and how was it conducted?" (von Rad p.177)

The first clue to an answer is found in the Shechemite Dodecalogue, the oldest series of prohibitions in Israel. The original prohibition "Cursed be the man who sets up an idol in secret," has been amplified by further explanation until the verse reads:

> Cursed be the man who makes a graven or molten image -- an abomination to yahweh -- a thing made by craftsmen's hands -- and sets it up in secret. (Deut. 27:15)

The amplifications are the key to the wisdom understanding of the prohibition. The first statement 'an abomination to Yahweh' is labeled a violation of the statute of the sacral law, which is to say, a violation of the cultic structure. The second statement, 'a thing made by craftsmen's hands', is a very different reason for the violation. For if

inappropriate attributions to a humanly made product is the folly, rather than the explicit prohibition, the biblical author is appealing to a very different religious thought system.

> The fact that idols were manufactured by men was not, for ancient Israel, the really important thing (who else could have manufactured them?), but that behind this, there lay a specific declaration of will on the part of Yahweh. If one rejected the cultic image as absurd because a man cannot make a god, then a decisive change in the argument had already taken place, for now it was no longer the direct will of God but the logic of a secularized understanding of the world which prohibited such an activity. (von Rad p.178)

This is a very important statement, but to my mind very elusive. I'm not sure what the scholar means when he states that "if one rejected the cultic image as absurd because a man cannot make a god, then a decisive change in the argument had already taken place." What is the 'cultic image' being rejected? Is it the image itself, the representation of the image, or the feteshistic attributes of the image? What does the scholar mean by thes statement: 'The cultic image is absurd because man cannot make a god'? and therefore what? Does this imply that there does not have to be a prohibition against something that is known to be impossible (man cannot make a god)?

The scholar clearly presents the change of attitude, but to my mind he does not satisfactorily demonstrate the reason for this change. Yet he is willing to say that this is <u>the</u> argument that shall be encountered consistently in the literature. What precisely is the arguement? At this

point the scholar begins to use the texts to demonstrate his points. We will further examine his theoretical material before examining the texts.

It is legitimate to assume that the polemic became current in the schools only from the period of the exile. It was during this historical time period that Israel found herself among nations who worshipped idols. The texts are filled with the mockery of idol worship (Ps. 135; Is. 44; Jer. 10; Hab. 2; and others).

> One should not be misled by the preponderance of mockery; those to whom these instructions were addressed were not the worshippers of the images, but Israel herself who in no circumstances was to allow herself to be influenced by the aura surrounding these great cult images. (von Rad p.180)

Again we are motivated to ask why not? How are these theoretical ideas different from those presented in the preceeding chapter? The prohibition is a given with no apparent logical support. 'Israel...in no circumstances was to allow herself to be influenced...' Why wasn't Israel allowed to represent the deity in the form of an image? Perhaps the intention of this action would not be to ascribe religious or magical powers to an image, rather to symbolize or represent that which has no single form. The question must be rephrased, how does acceptable symbolism become translated into unacceptable idol worship? Von Rad may answer this question by presenting his definition of the potential of idolatry.

> In the religions of Israel's wider environment, images were considered to be possessed of a soul

> and filled with a divine aura. Men were convinced that the image was fully capable of punishing the sacrilege of those who despised and offended it. Israel's voice, as that of a whole religious community, was a lone one in the ancient world. Thus, the polemic against idols was completely topical for an Israel which lived in ever closer contact with the international world. This must be kept in mind ... (von Rad p.180)

As von Rad interprets the phenomenon, the image itself was considered the divine object, the ultimate object of worship. This is the idolatry that Israel faced -- the perception that the work of human hands could actually be (or perhaps become) divine -- the complete identity of deity and image. This assumption regarding the nature of idolatry is the basis of all the texts. The literature deals with this limited perception of idolatry by mocking the conception of a deity made from earth's stuff. This mockery avoids the serious nature of the worship of idols. (von Rad p. 181) The texts do not ask the obvious question of what motivates people to worship idols? Rather, the emphasis is on the folly of worshipping idols as well as describing precisely what the idols cannot do. Folly is a technical term denoting a lack of good sense or foolishness. One may hear echos of Kaufmann's theories though von Rad does not refer to the latter directly.

Though limited in scope, the texts produce a unified argument against idolatry. They do however raise an important question. The question arises if one compares the nature of the polemic against idolatry as it is presented in the "wisdom" texts to the prohibition as it is

presented in other biblical texts.

> It is well-known that the characteristic of the Yahweh cult from the earliest period was its lack of images. According to the prohibition of images in the Decalogue and the Dodecalogue, the worship of Yahweh in the form of an image was on a par with murder, adultery or theft (Ex 20.4f.; Deut. 27.15). Thus, it might appear as if the polemic of the wisdom teachers against any worship of images were simply a continuation of this old tradition. But things are not quite so simple. Is it not remarkable that not a singe one of these polemics refers, in its argument, to this old prohibitions of images? (von Rad p. 183)

The question is whether the polemic against idolatry as presented in the "wisdom" texts is significantly different from the prohibition as found in the biblical literature? In the latter the prohibition carries with it a severe penalty, whereas in the former the penalty is faulty thinking or folly. Wisdom asks the question: 'is a divine prohibition needed to keep one from something that was sheer nonsense?'

> The principal argument of these polemics certainly did not lie in saying that a divine command should not be violated, a divine command which is directed sharply against a temptation which is inherent in human worship, but, as we have seen, in an appeal to sound human intelligence. Basically, it requires no great effort in order to make clear the folly and ridiculousness of the worship of images as this appeared to the teachers; it was, after all, a truth which each one would have to see for himself. (von Rad p.184)

The difference between the prohibition as it appears in the wisdom literature and as it appears in biblical literature can be seen clearly through the example of the

golden calf narrative. From this interpretation of the story, Israel has yielded to a temptation by requesting a cultic image, and has therefore seriously disturbed her relationship with God. Imagine if Moses had come down the mountain and made a strong appeal to human reasoning and the folly of idol worship. This stance would have been situationally inappropriate. The narrator of this story still assumes a concept of cult and sacral reality which was relevant to the particular times in the Near East and which could not have been addressed by an appeal to reason. At the time of the golden calf episode the religion of Israel was still far removed from the "wisdom" stances. (Though, one is tempted to ask whether Moses' situationally appropriate response couldn't be considered a "wise" approach.)

How can the transition from a cultic prohibition to a reasoned method of argument be explained?

> The knowledge that Yahweh transcends the world theologically must surely have been substantiated by the very first experiences of Yahweh which Israel ever had. This completely sacral and cultic range of ideas about a world which was incapable of offering any figure as a representation of God also became of immense importance for the understanding of the world in later Israel too, for the simple reason that not only did it persevere, through all the attacks of enlightenment, and arrive at a rational understanding of the world, but it also changed at the same time. (von Rad p.185)

The idea implied here is significant for our investigation. It appears that the scholar is suggesting that a prohibition already in existence maintained its relevance because it evolved in response to the changing situation.

The relationship of God to the world was originally interpretted as a "religio - sacral" concept. This perceived relationship as it evolves helps to construct a more rational picture of the world.

> (The argument is) still a theological one in that it denies to the creature the possibility of providing a representation of the Creator. The argument that the worship of images is foolish because the true Creator can be recognized in what he has created is expressed nowhere so explicitly as in the Wisdom of Solomon (13.1-9); ... Whoever understood the world in this way -- sofull of testimony, full of evidence for the Creator -- for him the erection of an image of God made out of the elements of creation was real folly. (von Rad p.185)

There are many questions to be asked regarding this theoretical presentation. Von Rad himself asks the first fascinating question: "Is this total inablilty on Israel's part to understand any form of image worship not also a phenomenon?" (von Rad p. 185) What does he mean by this statement? For example, is he implying that Israel didn't understand idol worship in the same way that Kaufmann uses that phrase? For Kaufmann, fetishism is the nature of the idol worship that Israel comprehends and this nature does not give credit to the complexity of the phenomenon. Or pursuing a completly different vein, he tells us that the sacral prohibition evolved into a reasoned response to folly, but how and why? If we accept that this evolution of concepts was inspired by the exile, how does he explain the prohibition in its cultic stages? In short, the scholar presents some very intriguing ideas but does not substantiate them carefully enough and the

reader is left with many leaps in logical thought. In order to really analyze this intriguing proposition one must look into the texts themselves. Perhaps they reveal the evolution of response to the phenomenon. At the close of the next chapter we will have the advantage of the analyses of an early narrative dealing with the prohibition against idolatry, as was presented in relation to the golden calf narrative in the second chapter, and the presentation of latter texts dealing with the prohibition against idolatry.

Crenshaw, another prominent wisdom scholar, briefly discusses the meaning of idolatry in the wisdom system. It must be remembered that Crenshaw narrowly defines the scope of wisdom literature and therefore the statement comes in the context of analyzing the apocryphal text **Wisdom of Solomon**, which, according to the scholar, clearly falls within the boundaries of wisdom literature. While this text is extremely late, it provides a lenghthy discourse on the folly of idol worship. According to Crenshaw, the work is pervaded by a consciousness of belonging to an elected people. (Crenshaw, Old, p. 175) God is the creator, fashioner, seer and knower of all that transpires in the universe. From this theological framework comes the attack on idolatry. The scholar writes:

> Human perversion expresses itself most visibly in **idol worship**, according to this author (the author of Wisdom of Solomon, 13:1-15:17) He even considers idolatry the beginning, cause, and end of all evil (14:27). (Crenshaw, Old. p.176)

Three explanations are given to explain idol making: vanity, grief, and aesthetics. An example of vanity may be seen in this vignette: A desire to pay the appropriate respect to far away emperors may have prompted royal subjects to fashion images in the likeness of their ruler. (Is there any relationship between these representations and the symbol of the national flag that is saluted?) The erection of a wooden image may have been inspired by the grief of a parent who attempted to carve a piece of wood to resemble the lost child. (Is the picture on the mantle of the lost war hero different from the carved symbol of a parent's grief?) These explanations are both reinforced by the desire to make images that are pleasing to the eye. (Crenshaw, Old p.179) What is the relationship between the symbolic representation and idol worship? Again, we are motivated to ask: What is the reason for the prohibition against idolatry? Through analyzing the text, Crenshaw attempts to answer the questions.

> The author goes a long way toward condoning the worship of nature, since God is manifest in what has been created. The error lay in a failure to move one step further from the creation to the Creator. The stupidity of idolatry becomes evident in the requests made to lifeless objects: one prays to a dead thing for life, to an inanimate artifact for health, to an idol that cannot take a single step for protection on a journey (13:18). This author finds it ludicrous that people embarking on a voyage by ship will entreat a paltry piece of wood, when God is the helmsman who steers safely into harbor. (Crenshaw, Old, p.176)

It appears that the nature of the idol worship that Crenshaw is referring to is similar to the fetishistic idol

worship we examined in the previous chapter. The "wisdom" response to fetishism is a simple process of rational thinking. One need only use one's senses to determine that the Creator and not the created is the appropriate object of worship. If this is the case, it is important to examine the role of God in relation to the polemic against idolatry.

Von Rad discusses the relationship between Israel and God from a wisdom perspective in the chapter "Knowledge and the Fear of God". The scholar begins the chapter with a fascinating examination of the evolution of the concept of wisdom itself to a theological phenomenon. In summary, "wisdom", or the search for knowledge, began as a general human endeavor and ended as a special gift to Israel exclusively. This transition can be traced from the early proverbs to the late Ben Sirah. Von Rad looks at all of the phenomena of wisdom in terms of the evolution into mainstream theological thinking. He succintly traces the transition between the "very old-fashioned faith" and the search for knowledge, and attempts to historically recreate the ensuing change.

> This strong, intellectual movement must have been preceded by an inner decline, the disintegration of an understanding of reality which we can describe, in a felicitous expression of M. Buber's as 'pan-sacralism." (von Rad p.59)

Although he makes these assertions, the scholar admits that there is very little evidence to enable the reconstruction of the early spirituality in Israel. Even the early traditions, for example Moses in the wilderness,

have been influenced with the "spirit of the new age." He analyzes the episode of Saul's military involvement with the Philistines (I Sam. 13f) as an example of a 'pan-sacralistic' text in comparison to the Succession Narrative (II Sam. 6 - I Kings 2) in which the threads of all the events lay in Yahweh's hands. In the former narrative the narrator puts every decisive event, "military advantages and setbacks as well as all human conflicts, into association with the world of the sacral and the ritual." (von Rad p.58) Regarding the latter, the scholar comments:

> What a worldly sphere it is in which men play their parts here! Disasters are no longer traced back to sacral offences. Events are determined by the political will of a great king, but equally also by his weaknesses, by ambition, political intrigues and love affairs. They seem to unfold in accordance with a closely forged chain of causality, with a law which lies within the circumstances and within men themselves. (von Rad p.59)

The theological expression has changed considerably from the evidence and arguments presented by von Rad. He suggests that the ancients recognized a "relative determinism inherent in events" as well as the value of worldly things -- as, for example, honor, life, property, happiness. (von Rad p.60) The texts do not refer to this determinism by name, rather they imply the concept every time they teach of the recognition of orders which is an explicit acknowledgment of certain objectified experiences of the reality of the world.

The scholar himself asks the crucial question: "How faith in Yahweh's dealings with men was brought into

relationship with this fundamentally altered understanding of reality?" (von Rad p.60) Throughout the book **Wisdom in Israel** he cautions the modern reader not to impose the modern world view onto the ancient world view. In relation to this point he emphasizes that at no time did the heightened consciousness of deterministic factors come into open conflict with faith in Yahweh.

> The process of secularization which definitely began in the early monarchy does not, in the teachings of the wise men, go hand in hand with a disintegration of faith in Yahweh's power. That would be a simple and, to us, familiar process. Rather, we see the teachers -- with what sometimes appears to us as an uncanny confidence -- holding together the awareness of inherent determinism on the one hand and faith in Yahweh's power on the other, indeed even mingling the two. (von Rad p.60)

It is theorized that it is precisely because of the unassailable force of the knowledge of God that Israel was able to refer to the forces in this world in almost completely secular terms as they are referred to in the proverbs for example. The teachers were completely unaware of any reality not controlled by Yahweh and could not conceive that the experiences of the world, as they attempted to apprehend them, were separate from faith in God.

> It is, in other words, a truth to which one has already committed oneself; one could even call it a truth which has to do with character rather than with intellect. ...A man was considered to be wise only when he allowed his whole way of life to be modelled on these insights which put their emphasis on values. (von Rad p.64)

How is all of this relevant to our concern about the prohibition of idolatry as it relates to wisdom literature? It is imperative to understand the polemic within the greater system in which it operated. The wise man is continually contrasted to the fool. The one who is wise faces life with an assumed theological posture and set of moral obligations. The attempt of the wise to determine them both in any given situation is spoken of in great depth throughout the literature. The wise person's foil is the **fool.** The fool is not limited in behavior by intellect, rather than by the "lack of ability or readiness to accommodate himself to the orders." (von Rad p. 64) Again and again, the proverbs rally against folly. It is always something which endangers life (Prov. 17.24).

> Where a truth is offered to a man, there is no longer any free decision. Whoever refuses to accept it exposes himself to moral judgment...this lack of realism also included a misjudging of God himself...Folly is practical atheism. (von Rad p.65)

The possibility of idol worship falls into the category of complete and utter folly as was discussed earlier in this chapter. From this perspective, idolatry denies the very foundation upon which the wisdom thinker stands. The order of the universe may be understood by the one who makes the search through wisdom. Idolatry is a disruption and a denial of that order and of the thesis that "all human knowledge comes back to the question about commitment to God." (von Rad p. 67) The scholar emphasizes the point that the entire search for knowledge can go wrong

because of a single mistake at the beginning.

> One becomes competent and expert as far as the orders in life are concerned only if one begins from knowledge about God. To this extent, Israel attributes to the fear of God, to belief in God, a highly important function in respect of human knowledge. She was, in all seriousness, of the opinion that effective knowledge about God is the only thing that puts a man into a right relationship with the objects of his perception, that it enables him to ask questions more pertinently, to take stock of relationships more effectively and generally to have a better awareness of circumstances. (von Rad p.68)

There is no room in this system for the attribution of religious power to idols. If one is in appropriate relation with the Creator all else is mere folly.

CHAPTER IV

ANAYLZING TEXTS AND DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

A Textual Analysis of Isaiah 44:9-20

And a General Statement Regarding

The Probition Against Idolatry in Biblical Wisdom Literature

The last chapter presented the theoretical analysis of the meaning of idolatry within the wisdom system. The chapter focused on the ideas of von Rad and examined not only the theories about idolatry per se but the corollary theological commitments of wisdom thinking. Throughout the chapter "The Polemic Against Idols", Von Rad supports his presentation with numerous textual examples. In order to fully understand his discussion it is important to review the texts themselves. The variety of texts is highly significant for as often as not these texts do not belong to the clear category of wisdom literature, and yet the scholar would label them as wisdom texts or at the very least, texts that are influenced by wisdom thinking. Although there is a wide range of biblical texts from which to choose, and the reader is encouraged to read von Rad himself or herself, this analysis will focus on perhaps the most important text, Isaiah 44:9-20. This text represents to von Rad the wisdom approach to idolatry par excellence. The text will be translated and technically analyzed. Following the technical work the text will be discussed in terms of its meanings and wisdom content.

Prior to analyzing the text it is important to review the stance that von Rad takes with respect to idolatry within 'wisdom.'

> The fact that idols were manufactured by men was not, for ancient Israel, the really important thing, but that behind this, there lay a specific declaration of will on the part of Yahweh. If one rejected the cultic image as absurd because man cannot make a god, then a decisive change in the argument had already taken place, for now it was no longer the direct will of God but the logic of a secularized understanding of the world which prohibited such an activity. (von Rad p.178)

This statement is supported by the scholar in his presentation of biblical texts dealing with idolatry. In the preceeding chapter Von Rad's historical continuum regarding the evolution of wisdom thinking was presented. Accordingly, we learned that he traces "wisdom" influences from the time period of the early monarchy. As will be shown his liberal interpretation of "wisdom" will be debated by other scholars both in the fields of wisdom and biblical literature. Though the scholar may not demonstrate adequately, that is to say conclusively, that these texts are certainly influenced by wisdom, his theories challenge the perceived boundaries of the literature. I admire the scholar's daring and his willingness to risk the possibility of being wrong.

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Isaiah 44:9-20
Translation of Text

9 יֹצְרֵי־פֶסֶל כֻּלָּם תֹּהוּ[a] וַחֲמוּדֵיהֶם בַּל־יוֹעִילוּ
וְעֵדֵיהֶם[b] הֵמָּה[c] בַּל־יִרְאוּ וּבַל־יֵדָעוּ לְמַעַן יֵבֹשׁוּ׃

9. The makers of idols are all nothing[a]; their delightful things[b] are utterly useless; their devotees[c] are blind and ignorant, or they would be ashamed[d].

a. empty heads (North)

themselves "nothing" (Knight)
less than nothing (Herbert)
of nothingness (Levy)

b. darlings (North)
favorite gods (Knight)
cherished images (Herbert)
favorites (Levy)
objects of their devotion (McKenzie)

c. (the gods) witnesses (Knight)
their worshippers (Herbert)
their very witnesses (Levy)
their servants (McKenzie)

d. they neither see nor understand (Knight)
sheer ignorance makes fools of them (Herbert)
in order that they may be ashamed (Levy)
therefore they are ashamed (McKenzie)

10 מִי־יָצַר אֵל וּפֶסֶל נָסָךְ לְבִלְתִּי הוֹעִיל׃

10. **Who shapes a god or pours a molten image without intending some profit[a]?**

a. has but cast an image to no purpose or use. (North)
would pour a graven image that he did not expect to be of use to him? (Knight)
his labor is wasted. (Herbert)

11 הֵן כָּל־חֲבֵרָיו יֵבֹשׁוּ וְחָרָשִׁים ᵃהֵמָּה מֵאָדָם
יִתְקַבְּצוּ כֻלָּם יַעֲמֹדוּ יִפְחֲדוּ יֵבֹשׁוּ יָחַד׃

11. **See! All his colleagues[a] look sheepish[b] (even smiths are but men[c]), they gather, all of them stand[d] fearful and ashamed together[e].**

a. accomplices (North)
fellow guildsmen and craftsmen (Knight)
votaries (Herbert)
associates (Levy)
worshippers (McKenzie)

b. show their folly (Herbert)

c. because their gods turn out to be even less than human (Knight)
the artisians blush (McKenzie)

d. they hold a meeting (Knight)
Let them all gather together and confront me (Herbert)

e. all will be afraid and look the fools they are. (Herbert)

12 חָלַשׁ[a] בַּרְזֶל מַעֲצָד וּפָעַל[b] בַּפֶּחָם
וּבַמַּקָּבוֹת יְצָרֵהוּ[c] וַיִּפְעָלֵהוּ[d] בִּזְרוֹעַ כֹּחוֹ
גַּם־רָעֵב וְאֵין כֹּחַ לֹא־שָׁתָה מַיִם וַיִּיעָף[d]:

12. **The smith works over the charcoal and with his hammer he forms it[a]; he makes it with his strong arm, but when he gets hungry, he loses strength, and if he has not drunk water, he gets faint[b].**

Note: The Hebrew is impossible to translate -- notice the variations in interpretation.

a. The ironsmith works in the forge and shapes it with hammers; (North)
An Ironworker, for example first cuts one out, then works it in how charcoal, then fashions it with hammers, (Knight)
The blacksmith sharpens a graving tool and hammers out his work hot from the coals (Herbert)
The craftsman in iron (maketh) an axe and worketh in the coals and fashioneth it with hammers (Levy)

b. he is famished, his strength deserts him, he drinks no water, he is faint. (North)
even when he is hungry and his strength leaves him, when he drinks no water and is fatigued. (McKenzie)

13 חָלַשׁ עֵצִים נָטָה קָוֶ֫ה יְתָאֲרֵהוּ בַשֶּׂרֶד
יַעֲשֵׂהוּ[a] בַּמַּקְצֻעוֹת וּבַמְּחוּגָה יְתָאָרֵהוּ
וַיַּעֲשֵׂהוּ[b] כְּתַבְנִית אִישׁ כְּתִפְאֶרֶת אָדָם לָשֶׁבֶת בָּיִת:

13. **The woodworker stretches his tape-line[a], makes a crayon sketch[b], sets to work with chisels [c], and traces it out by compass[d]; he gives it the shape of a man, with the beauty of mankind[e], to be set in the temple[f].**

Note: The sense of this is, according to Rashi, to demonstrate the method of the carpenter. The words describing the peculiarity of the method are obscure and, as will be shown, open to a wide variety of interpretation.

a. sets his rule (Knight)
measures (McKenzie)

b. designs one with a stylus (Knight)
marks out a figure with a scriber (Herbert)
traces the outline with chalk (McKenzie)

c. works at it (Knight)
he planes the wood (Herbert)
he maketh it with planes (Levy)

d. (ignores the phrase completely) (Knight)
and measures it with callipers (Herbert)
designeth it with the compass (Levy)
executes the outline with a compass
(McKenzie)

e. a fine looking man (North)
with the features of a cultured townsman.
(Knight finishes the verse with this phrase)
comely as the human form (Herbert)
like the beauty of man (Levy)
with human features (McKenzie)

f. to settle down in his house (North)
to be set up presently in a house (Herbert)
to dwell in a house (Levy)

14 לִכְרֹת[a]־לוֹ אֲרָזִים וַיִּקַּח[b] תִּרְזָה וְאַלּוֹן
וַיְאַמֵּץ[c]־לוֹ בַּעֲצֵי־יָעַר נָטַע אֹרֶן[d] וְגֶשֶׁם יְגַדֵּל׃

14. **He cuts down a cedar, takes 'tirzah' wood and oak, he reenforced it with the trees of the forest, he planted a cedar and rain made it grow[a].**

Note: The syntax of this sentence is so varied that other interpretations will be presented in their entirity.

a. He goes out to fell cedars, selects cypress or oak, makes his choice among the forest trees; or he plants a laurel and the rain makes it grow. (North)

A third type cuts down cedars for himself, or takes a holm oak, or another kind of oak which he has tended by himself till it has grown mighty among the trees of the forest; or a cedar which he has planted and which the raid has made to grow. (Knight)

A man plants a cedar and the rain makes it grow, so that later on he will have cedars to cut down; or he chooses an ilex or an oak to raise a stout tree for himself in the forest. (Herbert)

He cuts cedar; or he takes tirzah wood or oak and joins with other wood; or he plants a cedar which the rain nourishes. (McKenzie)

15 וְהָיָה לְאָדָם לְבָעֵר וַיִּקַּח[a] מֵהֶם וַיָּחָם[b] אַף־יַשִּׁיק וְאָפָה לֶחֶם
אַף־יִפְעַל־אֵל וַיִּשְׁתָּחוּ[c] עָשָׂהוּ פֶּסֶל וַיִּסְגָּד[a]־לָמוֹ׃

15. **And when a man is in need of fuel he takes some of it and warms himself. He kindles some and bakes bread, some he makes into a god and they bow down to it, they make it into an idol and it is worshiped.**

16 חֶצְיוֹ שָׂרַף בְּמוֹ־אֵשׁ עַל־חֶצְיוֹ בָּשָׂר [a]יֹאכֵל יִצְלֶה[a] צָלִי וְיִשְׂבָּע
אַף־יָחֹם וְיֹאמַר הֶאָח חַמּוֹתִי רָאִיתִי[b] אוֹר׃

16. **Half of it he burns in the fire, with that half he eats meat, roasting it, feels satisfied, is warm.[a] He says: "ah ha, how warm I am looking into the light[b]."**

Note inversion of syntax.

a. On the other half he roasts meat; he eats his fill of the roast; (North, Herbert, McKenzie)

b. and laughs, "Ha Ha! I am warm, I can see the firelight! (North)

17 וְשְׁאֵרִיתוֹ לְאֵל עָשָׂה לְפִסְלוֹ[a] יִסְגָּוד[b]־לוֹ וְיִשְׁתַּחוּ[c]
וְיִתְפַּלֶּל אֵלָיו וְיֹאמַר הַצִּילֵנִי כִּי אֵלִי אָתָּה׃

17. **The rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, he worships it -- bows down do it, and prays to it saying 'Save me for you are my god!'**

18 לֹא יָדְעוּ וְלֹא יָבִינוּ כִּי טָח מֵרְאוֹת עֵינֵיהֶם מֵהַשְׂכִּיל לִבֹּתָם׃

18. **They don't know and they don't understand[a], their eyes are smeared so they cannot see nor discern their own hearts[b].**

a. They have neither sense nor perception (North)
Such people...(Herbert)

b. and their minds that they cannot understand (North)
their minds too narrow to discern (Herbert)

their heart so they cannot think (McKenzie)

19 וְלֹא־יָשִׁיב אֶל־לִבּוֹ וְלֹא דַעַת[a] וְלֹא־תְבוּנָה לֵאמֹר
חֶצְיוֹ שָׂרַפְתִּי בְמוֹ־אֵשׁ וְאַף אָפֵיתִי עַל־גֶּחָלָיו לָחֶם אֶצְלֶה בָשָׂר וְאֹכֵל
וְיִתְרוֹ לְתוֹעֵבָה אֶעֱשֶׂה לְבֻל עֵץ אֶסְגּוֹד׃

19. **So no one takes it to heart, nor has understanding nor discernment enough to say[a]: 'Half of it I burned in the fire, I even used its embers to bake bread, I roasted meat and I ate, and of the rest of it I made an abomination, and I have been grovelling before a block of wood.**

a. And it never occurs to him to reflect, nor has he the sense or perception to say (North)

20 רֹעֶה אֵפֶר לֵב הוֹתָל הִשָּׁהוּ וְלֹא־יַצִּיל אֶת־נַפְשׁוֹ וְלֹא
יֹאמַר הֲלֹוא שֶׁקֶר בִּימִינִי׃ ס

20. **The lover of ashes[a] is led astray by his own deluded mind; he will not save himself[b]; he won't say: 'Why, this thing in my right hand is a sham[c]!'**

a. He is like a sheep grazing on an ash-heap (North)
This is just feeding on ashes (Knight)

b. so that he cannot set himself free (North)
he cannot recollect himself so far as to say (Herbert)

c. Am I not clutching a lie? (North)
Is it not a deception I am holding in my right hand? (Knight)
Why! This thing in my hand is a sham. (Herbert)
Is this not a lie in my right hand? (McKenzie)

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COMMENTS ON
ISAIAH 44:9-20

9. ועדיהם -- McKenzie, and Herbert suggest that instead of witnesses the word be emended to ועבדיהם, meaning servants. Whybray finds no justification for emendation

and suggests that the word has probably been chosen to make an explicit link with verse 8. North concurs and expands on this idea proposing that just as the Israelites are Yahweh's witnesses (vs. 8) the idol- gods may be said to have their witnesses. This word may indeed be a catchword prompting the placing of this passage after verse 8. Rashi and Radak comment on this word, "The idols are witnesses of the shame of their worshippers for we see that they neither see nor know, yet they were worshipping them. המה -- North calls attention to the extraordinary punctuation and states that it may indicate that the letters are a dittograph from the preceeding word, ועדיהם .

* * *

10. נסך -- According to Rashi, an expression of pouring a molten image (מַסֵּכָה). is a radical sometimes omitted. Whybray suggests translating the entire verse according to Duhm, "Whoever fashions a god has cast an image which is profitable for nothing." According to Herbert, the Hebrew sentence is in the form of a question reminiscent of Gen 2:7 where the same verb is used regarding the shaping of man from dust.

* * *

11. חֶבְרָיו -- Many of the commentators refer to Duhm's comments which are the following: חֶבְרָיו -- would mean 'its spell, incantations' and also חַרָשִׁים -- means 'spells, magic arts' for חָרָשִׁים . The point being that the magic that is usual in idol cults all comes from a

human agency. The word is from the same root as Hosea 4:17, חבור עצבים . Whybray comments on two phrases in this verse, referring to Duhm's ideas. מאדם [ו]חבריו -- There are two difficulties here which suggest corruption of the text. 1. It is not clear who חבריו -- are and why they are mentioned; and 2. but men -- is a dubious translation of מאדם . Duhm obtains the translation 'all his incantations will be put to shame and the spells which originate from men.' The point will then be that the magical powers which are believed to belong to the idol are in fact non-existent and the magical rites merely human inventions which are therefore useless. Rashi and Radak comment on חבריו . The colleagues belong to the fashioner and molder of graven images who join him in worshipping his recreation. These people shall be ashamed. Radak comments that his colleagues might also refer to the colleagues of the idol since the idol is nothing they are also nothing. Radak comments further on חרשים -- They are not angels, but human craftsmen who do other types of work, yet they make a god? This is astounding!

* * *

12. חָרַשׁ -- Rashi, the word is a noun and not a verb as it appears to be from its vowels. מֵעָצַד -- The word appears only here and in Jer. 10:3. Many of the commentators discuss the difficulty of this expression. North states that the meaning of 'The ironsmith the axe' hardly makes sense. What should an ironsmith be doing with a woodworkers tool as this must be from the context of the

word in Jer. 10:3. According to North Torey emends it to מעצב -- meaning 'The ironsmith cuts metal, but this destroys the parallelism with חרש עצים , the woodworker in vs. 13. LXX omits מעצד and repeats from the preceeding verse. He concludes that it seems best to omit מעצד ופעל and read יפעל . Whybray identifies the same problems. He rejects the idea that מעצד is a gloss suggesting that there is not enough evidence. He explains the LXX repitition of יחד as probably not original but an accidental repetion of the last 3 consonants of vs. 11. Blank suggests that מעצד be deleted, and is in favor of יִפְעַל . Radak explains the verse as referring to the manufacture of the tools preliminary to the manufacture of the idol itself. He renders: 'The ironsmith (makes) an axe and he works with coal and with sledge hammers (in order that) he fashion it. Meaning, he makes the axe and the sledge hammers in order to fashion the idol.

* * *

13. קו -- here and in Job 38:5, and Zech 1:16. According to Levy it has a sinister significance implying the destruction of the object to be measured. שֶׂרֶד -- used only here. It must mean some kind of implement, perhaps a scraping instument, Kimhi says red earth or chalk. Ibn Ezra and Radak render יתראהו בשרד , 'He marks its shape with a colored line".

* * *

14. The Hebrew in this verse is clumsy. Some suggest that the LXX's shorter text may be the original:

לכרת -- North reads כָּרַת or יִכְרֹת, unless the infinitive can mean 'He goes out to cut.' Perhaps הלך was omitted by haplography. ארז -- written with the miniscule suggests that the reading was uncertain. To read as 'cedar' ארז, is criticized because the cedar is already listed. The LXX reads as אדן, Lord. Some translate as 'he plants an Adonis tree' through no evidence in the passage points to a specifically Adonis cult. Levy proposes that the word actually written in the text is probably a member of the cedar family. Whybray comments generally about the verse saying that the author now -- if the present order of the verses is original -- goes back in time to trace the way in which a particular piece of wood came to be selected for making an idol. The satire speaks for itself. A theological statement is made by Radak and Ibn Ezra on the phrase וגשם יגדל. The problem as the commentators saw can be inferred as why does something grow that is intended for bad purpose or gotten through ill means (here specifially, how does the Lord allow a tree to grow whose purpose is to be made into an idol?). They answer referring to Avodah Zara 54b. 'Suppose a man stole a measure of wheat and went and sowed it in the ground, it is right that it should not grow, but the world pursues its natural course and as for the fools who act wrongly, they will have to render an account.'

* * *

15. ישיק -- Hiph., √שלק , 'to cause to ascend,' ie. to burn. למו ,מהם -- The writer is not too particular about his concords in this verse.

* * *

16. חציו -- Commentators find the use of this term twice problematic. It is clear that the writer wants to put forth the idea that part of it is used for everyday living and another part of it is made into an idol. Perhaps the writer is referring to the same half in both phrases. ואכל יצלה -- the LXX implies a transposition of the two verbs so that the meat is roasted and then eaten.

* * *

17. לפסלו -- According to Levy, the word appears to be a prosaic gloss. It adds nothing and interrupts the rhythm.

* * *

18. טח -- qal pf. 3rd pers. sing. masc. root √טחח, with impersonal subject, 'smeared their eyes'. There is no need for verbs preceeding the subject to agree, according to North. Blank suggests read טחו , too besmeared for'. Whybray calls this verse a later addition by a reader commenting sententiously on the situation depicted in the previous verses. In fact it merely repeats the sentiments of verse 19a. Its plural verbs betray the fact that it is an intrusion. It's possible.

* * *

19. As Whybray noted above this verse is written in singular verbs following a similar idea presented in plural verbs. It is difficult for the translator to make a smooth transition from vs. 18. תועבה -- According to Levy, this word was frequently used to refer to idols, (Deut 7:26, 32:16; IK 14:24; Jer 16:18 and so on). בול עץ Rashi, a decay of wood from the root √בלה. Others take it from Job 40:20 as a block or branch of wood.

* * *

20. רעה If this means 'herding ashes', it may be a proverbial expression. There are many possibilities of interpreting this phrase -- none of them well explained. Ibn Ezra compares this usage to Hos 12:2, 'Ephraim feeds on wind' i.e. acts in a futile manner. The verse certainly deals with the futility of idols.

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DISCUSSION OF ISAIAH 44:9 - 20

The commentators engage in a lively discussion about this biblical passage, that one commentator quite aptly titles **The Stupidity of Idolatry.** Their opinions vary in regard to several relevant questions. Among them, they address the questions of whether or not this passage was written by the biblical author who is called Deutero Isaiah, or was it a later interpolation? Does this passage contain elements of 'wisdom' thinking? What is the intent and meaning of the passage? It is worthwhile to briefly summarize each scholar's theories in addition to those of

von Rad before we make our own conclusions.

North

The passage is not addressed to the makers of idols but it is a satirical description of their antic stupidity. If it were intended for audiences contemporary with the prophet, they must have been exiles who were in danger of being seduced by the idolatry around them (This statement is completely consistent with von Rad's perceptions as presented in the last chapter). What is castigated is not some grandiose variety of idolatry but a crude home-made variety. The Aramaisms (לשלק in verse 15 and לטגד, אסגד in vv. 15, 17, 19) are suspicious, even though, by the time of the exile, Aramaic may have begun to oust Akkadian.

Lately, there is more reluctance to say that this passage is not from DI, though it is probable that this passage is not from DI any more than Jer. 10:1-10 is from Jeremiah. The answer is of no great concern because someone, if not DI, was bound to point out the transcendence and sole Deity of Yahweh. (Though does this passage do that?).

The OT knows nothing about the distinction between an idol in which the god is supposed to reside, and which may therefore be said to be identical with the god, and a symbol intended to remind the worshipper of God's presence. Monotheism and polytheism are based on different conceptions of **reality.** (North pps. 139 - 140)

McKenzie

The author of this passage is in dispute. There are arguments to support both premises. While the subject matter is found elsewhere in Second Isaiah, the prose style of the passage is the only prose passage in the entire collection of Second Isaiah.

The tone of the passage, which centers on the smith and the carpenter who produce a divine image of wood plated with metal, is one of sarcasm and mockery. They may be playing with Genesis 1:26-27 where God made man in His image and likeness. In this passage, man makes God in his image.

The polemic is not entirely successful in that the religions of the surrounding cultures were not crass idolators as presented in this passage. This superficial presentation of idolatry can be found elsewhere in the Bible (Is. 40:19-20, 41:6-7; Jer 10:1-9 [doubtfully original to Jeremiah]; Ps. 115 4-8), and it should be called scoffing rather than polemic. The passage falls below the level of Second Isaiah who critiques idolatry more profoundly and with greater sophistication in chapter 46. (McKenzie pps 67-69)

Knight

"This passage is a brilliant piece of writing. It contains sarcasm to a degree." This passage is uniquely preserved in prose by DI. The passage follows in perfect sequence to the closing remarks of verse 8 ('You are my witnesses as to whether there is any god other than me.

There is no other Rock. (At least) I know of none.). In this passage, the biblical author subjects the idol-making of the Bablyonians to public scorn. For while the Hebrews knew of no other god, the Babylonians knew of many others, and DI must deal with the issue firmly before he can proceed with the main argument. The message of the passage is that, though the Babylonians possess idols, they are nothing and cannot bring salvation even when they are needed most by their worshippers.

Whybray

The style of this passage is extremely different from Deutero Isaiah's "authentic oracles". The style is clumsy, and the irony, while it may be effective, is much more labored and less subtle. A significant feature of the passage is that, although the contrast between the idols and God is strongly implied, God is not mentioned even once. Deutero Isaiah's characteristic signature of the praise and glory of God is completely lacking.

"It is probably best to regard the passage with von Rad, as a satirical tract of a type which flourished for many centuries from the time of the Exile, when Israel first encountered the heathen world at close quarters. Whether von Rad and Fohrer are correct in attributing the passage to a 'wisdom teacher' on account of its didactic tone is another matter. Israel's intellectual activity was not the exclusive preserve of 'wisdom schools'". (Whybray pps. 98-99)

Note: In the first chapter of this thesis, Whybray is presented as being the most limited in his perception of the scope of wisdom literature. In his book, **The Intellectual Tradition of the Old Testament**, he presents precise criteria by which to judge the 'wisdom' nature of any passage. Unfortunately, he does not discuss this passage in relation to his particular scholarship on 'wisdom'.

Von Rad

This passage is a polemic against the manufacture and worship of idols, similar to those found in Hab 2:18f, Jer. 10:1-9, Is. 40:19f, Is. 46:1f. This is the most important of these texts. The comic and pathetic aspect of the situation is worked out here more forcefully that in other texts. "We are not intended to be indignant, but to laugh at the way in which the artist is so engrossed in his work that he forgets to eat and drink and so becomes exhausted, and at how he uses half of the wood for baking and roasting, but makes the rest into a god." (von Rad p. 179)

It is possible to regard the polemic as part of the total statement of the prophet and therefore one cannot be sure that it is an interpolation (as is the case with Habakkuk and Jeremiah). "But even if we attribute Isa. 44 to the prophet, he is obviously following here a pattern of instruction which emanated from teachers and not originally from prophets." (von Rad p. 179)

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From the comments of these scholars it appears that there is little consensus about the authorship of the passage. There may never be an answer to this question. Fortunately, it is not crucial to our investigation. There

is, however, consenus about the meaning of the passage. As North stated:

> It shows acute observation and psychological penetration. The meticulous fuss of the whole business! The material from which the idol is made! Wood remnants after man has lighted his fire and cooked his food! The climax of irony comes when the accuser puts the indictment into the mouth of the idol-worshipper as if he would perforce acknowledge the truth of it, if only he has any sense! (North p. 141)

This is precisely the argument for the 'wisdom' nature of this text that the futility of idol worhip is evident to any one who uses her or his good sense! This clever text does not refer to religious law, rather it appeals to a thinking response. According to von Rad, the rational response causes this text to be considered part of the category of biblical wisdom texts though not in the traditionally included wisdom texts. This most explicitly exemplifies the scholar's encompassing view of "wisdom" and, at least for this student of wisdom raises the most important question of whether or not "wisdom" can be categorically defined?

If we choose to speak of a distinct category of wisdom, then we must attempt to impose methodological precision on our discussion. The scholar Crenshaw discusses the methodological difficulties at length. According to Crenshaw

> Various types of argument have been used to prove that sages left their mark outside the literary corpus usually attributed to them. These arguments consist of vocabulary, subject matter, and world view. Unfortunately they labor under two distinct disadvantages: (1) they cannot

> escape circular reasoning, and (2) they neglect to take with sufficient seriousness the existence of a common linguistic stock and the universality of many concerns dealing with the human situation. (Crenshaw, Studies p.9)

Crenshaw argues that if we are to call a text "wisdom" it is imperative to establish well defined criteria to capture the 'wisdomness' of a text. This appears to be the greatest challenge for the wisdom scholar interested in determining the scope of the tradition. However the phenomenon can be viewed differently.

Murphy theorizes that what he terms the sapiential understanding of reality was shared by all Israelites. According to this scholar:

> The mentality was far broader than the literary remains that have come down to us as 'wisdom literature.' Thus it should come as no surprise that Isaiah or any other prophet, should use a parable. But Isaiah is not to be considered among the sages, nor was his writing part of 'wisdom'. (Murphy, Forms p. 3)

If this is the case then we must ask once again, "what is wisdom?"

If wisdom is the situationally appropriate response to any given situation, then doesn't every response have the possibility of being a wise act? For example, in the second chapter of this work we examined the various explanations of the nature of idolatry in the golden calf story. Each scholar demonstrated that the erection of the calf was an inappropriate response for the burgeoning religion, whether the scholar found idolatry per se in the response, or whether the reponse simply posed a threat to the newly formed religious system. In the third chapter

of this investigation, von Rad's analysis of the text was presented in terms of the particular period of religious development which focused on cultic requirements. Moses made the situationally appropriate response to the episode considering the stage of religious development. If this is the case, though wisdom thinking categorically was not yet a religious element, wasn't Moses' response the wise response?

Is it possible to view "wisdom" as a matured response to an increasingly secure system rather than a separate category? Whereas the infant religious system required well defined limits and borders to insure its healthy development, the adolescent already required thoughtful reasoning. Early on it may have been enough to rail against idolatry because it was commanded to do so, but at some point the answer to the question 'why' had to go further than the response 'because'. While the prohibition against idolatry may have functioned as an element which made the Israelite religious system distinct from those in its midst, an Israel with more solidified identity required more sophisticated reasoning behind its laws and precepts.

If these texts were written in response to the exile and Israel clearly saw others worshipping within polytheistic, idolatrous systems and leading successful lives (with whatever depth of understanding she could ascertain), the question had to arise "Why not us?"

Without sounding glib, in hard times every little bit helps! It became incumbent upon a system undergoing transition to come up with new reponses, new theological answers.

The Israelites could see with their own eyes that the worshippers of what they would label 'idols' were not dying as promised by the sacral commandment. In order to maintain its unique position, the religion had to develop new responses adequate to meet the challenges of the time. The wise response as we have seen it in the area of idolatry, through examining the Isaiah text, must have developed to meet these overwhelming needs. We might have chosen for our analysis a number of different texts where we would find a similar kind of response. **Appendix a** provides a textual analysis of Psalms 135:15-18, and 115:4-8; and Deuteronomy 4:28. These texts yield similar conclusions. The wise response can be found developed even further in the Letterof Jer. vv 11ff., the book of Jubilees, and emphatically in the Wisdom of Solomon as we have previously mentioned. The question these texts address in a new way is, "Why not worship idols?" The answer appears to be clear and simple: How can an object formed by human hands be imbued with the power of salvation? There is only one source of this power and one must use all of her or his senses in every new situation again and again to try to apprehend the right response. Trust in any other source is complete folly and will lead one down the wrong pathways.

NOTES ON CHAPTER IV

1. The following sources were consulted in order to analyze the text. These sources will be referred to by parenthetical notation of the author only. They are listed here with the pages that deal with the Isaiah passage.

Blank, Sheldon H. **Text Notes on Isaiah 40-66.** Unpublished notes for use in classroom study. Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, 1939-40. Page 5.

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Knight, George A.F., **Deutero - Isaiah.** Abingdon Press, New York, 1965. Pages 117 - 120.

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Mikra-ot G'dolot on Isaiah

CHAPTER V

LOOKING BEYOND AND CONCLUDING

À Presentation of Idolatry within the Babylonian Talmud

And a Statement Regarding the Static Within the Fluid

We have examined in some depth the phenomenon of the prohibition against biblical idolatry and its development in wisdom literature in particular. As has been demonstrated, understanding the phenomenon is a vast and challenging task. In chapters two, three and four, several different approaches were illustrated in order to show the tremendous variances in theory and bias, as well as to present varying theoretical possibilities. In all probability the only idea that would achieve consensus among the scholars is that the process of recreating biblical realities lies within the realm of theory, hypothesis, and historical recreation. Far from being disconcerting this lack of scholarly agreement encourages the student to formulate her or his own ideas, and allows for the possibility of many truths.

In attempting to understand the phenomenon, I was concerned with apprehending what was the essence of idolatry and what made it such a serious crime? Why was it the object of changing but, nevertheless, constant prohibition? In the last chapters we have seen the the prohibition couched in different terms. It appears that in early biblical narratives the prohibition takes the form of absolute religious dogma. In this way, the early religion differentiated itself from the religions of other cultures. The prohibition may have served the purpose of

boundary maintainance. In the wisdom literature the prohibition takes on additional theological significance. At a period concerned with the order of life and the ability of humankind to apprehend that order and act in the most auspicious manner, the prohibition became an appeal to intellect and reason in order for one to ascertain the absolute folly of trust in idols. These have already been discussed at some length.

In this chapter we will look at the prohibition from a different, though not unrelated perspective. The last chapter concluded with the theory that the prohibition against idolatry had developed in accordance with the growing sophistication of the religious needs of each period. If we were to continue the investigation of this idea we would carefully trace the further development of the prohibition through the post-canonical literature, the rabbinic period, the great commentators, the responsa, all the way to modern times. The results would undoubtedly yield fascinating discoveries and the pursuit is highly recommended. While the focus of this investigation concentrates on the prohibition against idolatatry in the wisdom literature, it is worthwhile to conclude with a short investigation into one additional area. We will examine the prohibition as it appears in the Babylonian Talmud. Clearly this could be the subject of extensive research in and of itself. This chapter, by its cursory nature, can only present hypothetical ideas that must be

regarded as inconclusive at best and hopefully will be worthy of further investigation.

In his dissertation **The Prohibition Against Idolatry, Sexual Trespass and Bloodshed as a Moral Absolute in Rabbinic Judaism,** Louis Jordan Feldman analyzes idolatry from biblical times to the present. He presents idolatry as a phenomenon consistent through the ages. The thesis of his scholarship is that the entire essence of idolatry is self-deification and self-worship. The scholar presents many fascinating and worthwhile ideas regarding the rabbinic period. While self-deification and self-worship are forms of idolatry, his analysis is too narrow for such a vast and encompassing phenomenon.

Feldman describes the period in which the rabbis lived as:

> ...a world where apotheosis was the order of the day. Roman deification of the kings becomes customary after the time of Julius Ceasar. The rabbis found this to be insufferable. The rabbis also lived in a world of ascending Christianity and were most uncomfortable with the idea of the divinity of Jesus... (Feldman p.118)

Assuming that Feldman accurately captures the tone of the time, it appears from examination of the texts themselves that part of the literature regarding the prohibition against idolatry is devoted once again to maintaining the boundaries of the religious system as it confronts new and potentially threatening environments. Yet another part of the literature is concerned with defining the inner meaning of idolatry, its essence and how it effects the lives of humans on a day to day basis. We will examine examples of

both of these kinds of texts in order to grasp the meaning and the function of the prohibition against idolatry as it appears in certain texts of the Babylonian Talmud.

In the introduction to the Soncino translation of the tractate Avodah Zararah, the tractate which deals mostly with the avoidance of non-Jewish practices as well as blatent idolatry, idolatry is described within the context of Rabbinic Judaism. The idea that the corporate existence of the biblical religion required that practices of the heathen cults be entirely prohibited is stressed emphatically. Within this system the worship of God insured life, and idolatry spelled certain death. (Avodah Zarah p.XI)

> The difficulty of resisting alien influences grew much more severe in periods of dispersion when Jews were living in a heathen environment; and the Rabbis had to give serious attention to the problem of how to counteract the forces of assimilation which threatened to submerge the Jewish communities settled in countries where idol-worship was the state religion. (Avodah Zarah p.XI)

The rabbis took this task extremely seriously. Although theoretically there is no difference in gravity of committing an offense against the Divine Will, a distinction was made for three heinous crimes.

יכל עבירות שבתורה אם אומרין לאדם עבור ואל תהרג יעבור ואל יהרג ועון
מעבודת כוכבים וגילוי עריות ושפיכות דמים

... in every (other) law of the Torah, if one is commanded: 'Transgress and suffer not death' he may transgress and not suffer death, excepting idolatry, incest, (which includes adultery) and

murder. (Sanh. 74a)

The gravity of idolatry is made explicit in numerous passages.

חמורה עבודת כוכבים שכל הכופר בה כמודה בכל התורה כולה

Grave is idolatry in that he who denies it is as if he accepts the whole Torah. (Chul. 5a)

איזו היא מצוה שהיא שקולה כנגד המצות הרי אומר זו עבודת כוכבים

Now, which is the commandment that is as weighty as all other commandments? Surely it is that concerning idolatry. (Hor. 8a)

The rabbis go on to explain why this is the case by hearkening back to the giving of the ten commandments.

קרא אשר דבר ה' אל משה וכתיב אשר צוה ה' אליכם ביד משה איזו היא מצוה שהיא בדיבורו של הקב"ה וצוה על ידי משה הרי אומר זו עבודת כוכבים דתנא רבי ישמעאל אנכי ולא יהיה לך מפי הגבורה שמענום

Scripture says, 'Which the Lord hath spoken unto Moses, (Num. 15:22) **and it is also written, 'That the Lord hath commanded you by the hand of Moses.'** (Num. 15:23) **Now, which is the commandment that was given in the words of the Holy One, blessed be He, and also by the hand of Moses? Surely it is that of idolatry; for R. Ishmael recited: (The words) 'I and Thou shalt not have'** (Ex. 20:2&3) **were heard from the mouth of Omnipotence.** (Hor. 8a)

There is a great deal of speculation among the rabbis and the commentators even to the present day as to precisely what was heard at the theophany at Sinai. While some say that all of the commandments were heard by the people others say that only the thunder and lightening, and blast of the shofar were heard by the people. Still others stand somewhere in between theorizing that a certain word,

phrase, or sentence was heard by the people. This passage states, that according to R. Ishmael, the first and second commandments were heard by the people. This is a common opinion held by the sages and discussed in the Midrashim at length, as well as later reviewed by Maimonides in the **Guide to the Perplexed**, in part two, chapter 33. If, according to the Rabbis, these two commandments were apprehended in the same manner as Moses, and not through Moses, how much more important must they be in the eyes of the Rabbis?

Clearly, the prohibition against idolatry occupied a central area of concern for the Rabbis. Again we grapple with the same issues with which we were concerned when examining the phenomeona of biblical idolatry and idolatry within the context of wisdom literature. Why is idolatry per se so threatening? Precisely what was idolatry as it is presented in the Babylonian Talmud?

These questions can only be answered by delving deeply into the texts themselves. We will examine three related issues concerning the essence of idolatry: Idolatry as boundary reinforcer, the meaning of idolatry, and the possible appeal of idolatry at that time.

The Hebrew term most often used for idolatry in the Talmud is עבודה זרה avodah zarah. Literally it means alien worship. Much of the tractate Avodah Zarah deals with the potential influence of alien worship. According to Feldman:

> There are rabbinic texts that reveal an understanding attitude about the exigencies that may lead one to indulge in idolatrous rites, especially in Babylonia. Babylonian Jewry was more assimilated that Palestinian Jewry. Babylonian Jews made the diplomatic concession of having statues of Persian kings in their synagogues, and even indulged in the local custom of prostrating themselves before these statues. (Feldman p.127)

Though it may appear to be noting the obvious, it is imperative to remember that the Rabbis with whom we are concerned were living among cultures practicing completely different religions. The concept of 'separation of church and state' was non-existent.

Avodah Zarah explicitly discusses the festivals of other religions. As one reads the passage, one cannot help but think about our own celebrations today: Consider the celebration of January 1, or our own commemorative days such as presidents' birthdays.

מתני' *ואלו אידיהן של עובדי כוכבים קלנדא וסטרנורא וקרטיסים
ויום גנוסיא של מלכיהם ויום הלידה ויום המיתה

MISHNAH. These are the festivals of the idolaters: Kalenda, (the Roman New Year which was observed as a day of rejoicing.) **Saturnalia,** (Roman festival beginning on the 17th of December and lasting several days marked by a carnival atmosphere) **Kratesis,** (Roman festival commemorating the conquest of Eastern Countries) **The anniversary of accession to the throne as well as (Royal) birthdays and anniversaries of deaths.**

גמ' אמר רב חנן בר רבא
קלנדא ח' ימים אחר תקופה סטרנורא ח' ימים לפני תקופה וסימנך °אחור
וקדם צרתני וגו'

GEMARA. Said R. Hanan b. Raba: KALENDA is kept

on the eight days following the (winter) equinox, SATURNALIA on the eight days preceding the equinox. As a mnemonic take the verse. 'Thou hast beset me behind and before.' (PS. 139:5) (A.Z. 8a)

Note: The mnemonic verse is an aid to remember that KALENDA mentioned first in the Mishnah is behind the equinox and SATURNALIA mentioned later is before it.

What is the significance of these festivals to the Rabbis? They go on in the Gamara to demonstrate that with the appropriate intention these festivals are directed to God, but the others have misdirected their intentions and abused the festivals. The Rabbis describe the inception of the festival in the following Agadah.

*ת"ר לפי שראה אדם הראשון יום שמתמעט והולך אמר
אוי לי שמא בשביל שסרחתי עולם חשוך בעדי ותוזר לתוהו ובוהו וזו היא
מיתה שנקנסה עלי מן השמים עמד וישב ח' ימים בתענית [ובתפלה] כיון
שראה תקופת טבת וראה יום שמאריך והולך אמר מנהגו של עולם הוא הלך
ועשה שמונה ימים טובים לשנה האחרת עשאן לאלו ולאלו ימים טובים
הוא קבעם לשם שמים והם קבעום לשם עבודת כוכבים

Our Rabbis taught: When primitive Adam saw the day getting gradually shorter, he said, 'Woe is me, perhaps because I have sinned, the world around me is being darkened and returning to its state of chaos and confusion; this then is the kind of death to which I have been sentenced from Heaven!' So he began keeping an eight days' fast. But as he observed the winter equinox and noted the day getting increasingly longer, he said, 'This is the world's course,' and he set forth to keep an eight days' festivity. In the following year he appointed both as festivals. Now, he fixed them for the sake of Heaven, but the (heathens) appointed them for the sake of idolatry.

The legend legitimizes observance of the idolatrous festivals by demonstrating that they fall within the boundaries of acceptable practice. From this one passage we

learn so much about the appropriate posture of the human being. Adam is faced with what he believes is impending doom. He searches deeply within himself and humbly accepts the yoke of responsibility himself. His misfortune he ascribes to God's divine and just punishment for his own sin. And still without knowledge of the nature of that sin, he seeks to repair his offense to God through fasting. After the equinox he understands that this is a natural event, not caused by his misdeed and is sincerely overjoyed. With great humility he is grateful for his good fortune, and celebrates his gratitude to God. This is the explanation of the inception of the festivals preceeding and following the winter equinox. Their intention acknowleged the position of humans vis a vis God. The passage demonstrates how an authentic festival was twisted by the pagan religion, nevertheless, it makes the festivals authentic for Jewish observance.

The key word in the discussion is **intention**, for it appears that, in the broadest sense, idolatry is any behavior motivated by the inappropriate intention. For the Rabbis, idolatry existed in any behavior that detracted from the purest of values and hightest of intentions. Again and again the issue arises in the texts.

כל אדם שיש בו גסות הרוח כאילו עובד עבודת כוכבים

Every person in whom is haughtiness of spirit is as though he worships idols. (Sot. 4b)

In this passage idolatry is simply haughtiness. How

can this be? The appropriate stance of a person vis a vis God does not include haughty behavior. Therefore if one behaves haughtily, the behavior lies outside of the realm of religious acceptability. Clearly, if one stands in the right relation with the Creator, certain attitudes are impossible to cultivate. This can be seen in the following passage.

כל המעלים עיניו מן הצדקה כאילו עובד עבודתן כוכבים

Whoever turns away his eyes from (one who appeals for) charity is considered as if he were serving idols. (B.B. 10a)

Again when one understands her or his role within the cosmic order it is not possible to withhold charity from those in need. This concept of idolatry as a violation of the relationship between humans and the Divine Will is consistent with the concept of idolatry within the wisdom system. Whereas in our discussion of wisdom we found that the teachers were concerned with establishing the sheer folly of idol worship as a phenomenon, Talmudically the concept is explored in much greater depth. The Rabbis address the issue of trust in idols as will be shown shortly, but even further they interpret idolatry symbolically and dispense with the need of the physical representation.

In the next brilliant passage, idolatry is identified with behavior motivated by anger. The passage shows precisely how a misdirected intention leads to idolatry.

המקרע בגדיו בחמתו
והמשבר כליו בחמתו והמפזר מעותיו בחמתו יהא בעיניך כעובד ע"ז *שכך אומנתו של יצה"ר. היום אומר לו עשה כך ולמחר אומר לו עשה כך עד שאומר לו עבוד ע"ז והולך ועובד:

The one who rends his garments in his anger, the one who breaks his vessels in his anger, and the one who scatters his money in his anger, regard him as an idolater, because such are the wiles of the Tempter: Today he says to him, 'Do this'; tomorrow he tells him, 'Do that,' until he bids him 'Go and serve idols,'and he goes and serves (them). (Shab. 105b)

This passage demonstrates what the Rabbis mean when they say that a certain behavior is idolatry. The attitude that fosters a particular misguided act is the same attitude that allows one to literally worship idols. Intention or motivation is the most important deterrent to idolatry. This can be clearly seen in the following text.

*האי שגגג בלא מתכוין דע"ז היכי
דמי אילימא כסבור בית הכנסת הוא
והשתחוה לה הרי לבו לשמים ואלא °דחזי אנדרמא ומגיד לה היכי דמי
אי דקבלה עליה באלוה מזיד הוא ואי דלא קבלה עליה באלוה לאו כלום הוא

Now, how is an unwitting and unintentional transgression of idolatry possible? Shall we say that one thought it (an idolatrous shrine) to be a synagogue and bowed down to it -- then his heart was to Heaven! But if he saw a royal statue and bowed down to it -- what are the circumstances? If he accepted it as a god, he is a wilful sinner; while if he did not accept it as a god, he has not committed idolatry at all! (Shab. 72b)

The text needs little interpretation. It succinctly summarizes the Rabbinic conception of idolatry and why it

is such a crime. This interpretation has great relevance to contemporary times. Before making the great leap from Rabbinic times to the present we must first examine one other aspect of idolatry as it is presented in the Babylonian Talmud.

To this point the definition of idolatry within the system of Rabbinic Judaism has been discussed and passages of the Talmud themselves demonstrate the dramatic violation of idolatry. But the Rabbis delve even more deeply into the phenomenon by responding to its perceived appeal. They bravely address the real issues of what is compelling about idol worship. We will examine only two segments of their discussion from Avodah Zarah 54b and 55a.

מתני' שאלו את הזקנים ברומי אם אין רצונו בעבודת כוכבים
למה אינו מבטלה אמרו להן אילו לדבר שאין צורך לעולם בו היו עובדין היה
מבטלו הרי הן עובדין לחמה וללבנה ולכוכבים ולמזלות יאבד עולמו מפני
השוטים אמרו להן א"כ יאבד דבר שאין צורך לעולם בו ויגיח דבר שצורך
העולם בו אמרו להן אף אנו מחזיקין ידי עובדיהן של אלו שאומרים תדעו
שהן אלוהות שהרי הן לא בטלו:

MISHNAH. The elders in Rome were asked, 'if (your God) has no desire for idolatry, why does he not abolish it?' They replied, 'If it was something unnecessary to the world that was worshipped, He would abolish it; but people worship the sun, moon, stars and planets; should he destroy his universe on account of fools!' They said (to the elders), 'If so, he should destroy what is unnecessary for the world and leave what is necessary for the world!' They replied, '(If he did that),we should merely be strengthening the hands of the worshippers of these, because they would say, 'Be sure that these are deities, for behold they have not been abolished!' (A.Z. 54b)

This Mishnah asks the all important question, "Why doesn't the omnipotent God simply abolish idolatry?" There are many ways of interpreting and answering this question.

It is possible to require a response that deals with the theological question of free-will and determinism -- a question dealt with at length by the Rabbis. It is possible to find in this question a challenge to the strength of God -- does God have the ability to destroy a foe? The Rabbis deal with yet another possible meaning. They answer the question by focusing on the natural order of the world. This ordained order persists regardless of the people's misinterpretations or misdeeds. The following example emphasizes this point.

דבר
אחר הרי שבא על אשת חבירו דין הוא שלא תתעבר אלא עולם כמנהגו
נוהג והולך ושוטים שקלקלו עתידין ליתן את הדין

> **Another illustration; Suppose a man has intercourse with his neighbor's wife; it is right that she should not conceive, but the world pursues it natural course and as for the fools who act wrongly, they will have to render an account.** (A.Z. 54b)

Why should the result of an adulterous act be the birth of a beautiful child. (We could take that even further, using the language of the time, by preceding the sentence with the phrase, when so many virtuous women are barren...) The answer is that it shouldn't, however the birth cycle is determined, and if that intercourse transpires at the time of fertility then conception will take place regardless of the appropriateness of the act of intercourse. The question remains then, are the wrong-doers ever punished for their misdeed? The Rabbis had faith that each person would be forced to give an account

(a consistent metaphor in the traditional literature) of their deeds to the Creator.

Other questions that demand response are the, "Why does it appear that worshipping idols can be efficacious? Why does it appear that an idol can heal, save, protect and produce those things over which people have little control?" The following passage exemplifies this kind of passage as well as offers a response.

א"ל זונין
לר"ע לבי ולבך ידע דעבודת כוכבים לית
בה מששא והא קחזינן גברי דאולי כי מתברי
ואתו כי מצמדי מ"ט אמר לו אמשול לך משל
למה"ד לאדם נאמן שהיה בעיר וכל בני
עירו היו מפקידין אצלו שלא בעדים ובא
אדם אחד והפקיד לו בעדים פעם אחד שכח
והפקיד אצלו שלא בעדים אמרה לו אשתו
בוא ונכפרנו אמר לה וכי מפני ששוטה זה
עשה שלא כהוגן אנו נאבד את אמונתינו אף
כך יסורין בשעה שמשגרין אותן על האדם
משביעין אותן שלא תלכו אלא ביום פלוני
ולא תצאו אלא ביום פלוני ובשעה פלונית
ועל ידי פלוני ועל ידי סם פלוני כיון שהגיע
זמנן לצאת הלך זה לבית עבודת כוכבים
אמרו יסורין דין הוא שלא נצא וחוזרין ואומרים וכי מפני ששוטה זה עושה
ש"ס נת שלא כהוגן אנו נאבד שבועתנו

(An Israelite named) Zunin said to R. Akiba: 'We both know in our heart that there is no reality in an idol; nevertheless we see the men enter (the shrine) crippled and come out cured. What is the reason?' He replied, "I will give you a parable: To what is the matter like? To a trustworthy man in a city, and all his townsmen used to deposit (their money) in his charge without witnesses. One man, however, came and deposited (his money) in his charge with witnesses, but on one occasion he forgot and made his deposit without witnesses. The wife (of the trustworthy man) said to (her husband), 'Come, let us deny it." He answered her, "Because this fool acted in an unworthy manner, shall I destroy my reputation for trustworthiness!' It is similar with afflictions. At the time they are

> **sent upon a man the oath is imposed upon them, 'You shall not come upon him except on such and such a day, nor depart from him except on such and such a day, and at such an hour and through the medium of so and so, through such and such a remedy.' When the time arrives for them to depart, the man chanced to go to an idolatrous shrine. The afflictions plead, 'It is right that we should not leave him and depart; but because this fool acts in an unworthy way shall we break our oath!'** (A.Z. 55a)

Idolatry is non-efficacious. Nevertheless, at times it appears that a desired outcome can occur from idolatrous behavior. This passage asks how this can happen. It answers by giving a parable as well as a direct, though anthropomorphic, response. This latter response states that illness follows a natural course and no matter what transpires at the point of departure the illness must depart. Only fools however would ascribe the healing to the efficacy of idolatry and not the natural ordained order. The parable demonstrates this same point by asking the following question. Because a man acts in an unworthy way by going into the idolatrous shrine to be healed, should the afflictions (which are given human attributes) also act in an unworthy way by not fulfilling their obligation to depart at the appointed hour? The point of both responses to the question is that appearances are not reality. The reality is that the practice of idolatry is non-efficacious but the world will follow its ordained course and therefore it may at times appear that the outcome of idolatry is worthwhile, but only fools do not understand the deeper order.

For the Rabbis then, idolatry was a symptom as well as

a disorder. If one stood in proper relation to the divine then there was no possibility of idolatrous intent or behavior. When a person was not in the appropriate position then anything and everything had the possibility of being idolatrous.

Is this not the case for our times as well? In an age where the individual has both the greatest and least control of her or his own life isn't it possible to be swallowed by idolatrous urges. In his book **Judaism and Modern Man**, Will Herberg succintly describes the phenomenon.

> Idolatry, in Jewish thinking, is the root source of all wrongdoing and moral evil. But to grasp the full scope and significance of this principle it is necessary to understand the essential meaning of idolatry. Idolatry is not simply the worship of sticks and stones, or it would obviously have no relevance to our times. Idolatry is the absolutization of the relative: it is absolute devotion paid to anything short of the Absolute. The object of idolatrous worship may be, and in fact generally is, some good; but, since it is not God, it is necessarily a good that is only partial and relative. What idolatry does is to convert its object into an absolute, thereby destroying the partial good within it and transforming it into a total evil...Race, nation, empire, class, state or party, even church and humanity, these are among the gods who claim the allegiance of modern man [and woman]: so are science, culture, social reform, progress. Each of these things represents a significant and valuable aspect of human life: each of them, however, becomes delusive and demonic once it is absolutized and exalted into the god of our existence. (Herberg p.93-35)

Herberg's eloquent and accurate statement leads us directly to the title of this work. We began with the investigation of idolatry within biblical wisdom literature

suspecting that our quest would lead us to find that idolatry was a static phenomenon within the context of a fluid system. In our effort to determine the essence of idolatry, to our surprise we have discovered that the phenomenon itself is also fluid, changing, and adapting through the ages. Nevertheless, any single act of idolatry at any period was an act of rigidity, a static behavior in a fluid environment. This was no less the case in the biblical narrative of the golden calf as it was in the story of the woodworker using half the log to cook his dinner and the other half to carve into an idol, or as we found it in the person who attributes the cure of an illness to inappropriate causation.

Herberg defined this act as the absolutization of the relative. The process is subtle because the object of absolutization may contain relative good. Earlier, Crenshaw's theory of idolatry within the wisdom system was discussed at some length. He gave several examples of how a simple effort, for example the case of a bereaved parent who in the process of mourning makes a statue of a recently deceased child, might be abused until that statue took on the status of an idol. In our time it is not uncommon to hear of a bereaved parent who may leave the dead child's room untouched as a sacred sanctuary. The effort to remember, to face pain and loss contains much noble good, but this good, if it becomes fetishistic or absolute in nature, takes on a completely different value.

As were our predecessors in every age, we are faced with the possibility of idolatrous action if we do not question in every new situation what is required of us, what is the appropriate response? Even more importantly, we must constantly ask how we stand in relation to the Divine such that our efforts, allegiances, beliefs and relationships are not idolatrous, our intentions only the highest. This is the most difficult question of all. Time and time again in this project we have been forced to examine not only idolatry per se, but to understand how the theology of a particular period would require that an action be labeled idolatrous?

In our day, theology can be the most painful endeavor of all. We know too much and understand too little to accept the theologies of ages past. Perhaps the greatest risk of all is that we allow our relationship with the Divine to become idolatrous and fixed. We are challenged in every moment of our lives to look for the Highest and not to settle for an empty though useful image. Time is fluid and any effort to fix a particular image of God is an idolatrous act. This we learn from the theophany of the burning bush in Exodus 3:13-14.

> 13. Moses said to God, "When I come to the Israelites and say to them 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you," and they ask me, 'What is His name?' what shall I say to them?"
> 14. And God says to Moses," אהיה אשר אהיה "
> (Exodus 3:13-14)

God responds in the future and past tense, in fluid words with ambiguous interpretation. "I will be what tommorrow

demands." "I will be what is required at every new time in every new situation." When we stop seeking אהיה אשר אהיה then we have entered into idolatry.

Appendix

While the text of Isaiah 44:9-20 is clearly the most significant text of this nature, there are two other examples that yield a similar message. These examples, cited by von Rad, are Psalm 135:15-18 and Deut 4:28. These texts will be examined and discussed in a manner similar to the Isaiah text although the texts themselves are more clear and their meanings are less controversial.[1]

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Psalm 135:15-18

15 עֲצַבֵּי הַגּוֹיִם כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב מַעֲשֵׂה[a] יְדֵי אָדָם׃
16 פֶּה־לָהֶם וְלֹא יְדַבֵּרוּ עֵינַיִם לָהֶם וְלֹא יִרְאוּ׃
17 אָזְנַיִם לָהֶם וְלֹא יַאֲזִינוּ[a] אַף אֵין־יֵשׁ[b]־רוּחַ בְּפִיהֶם׃
18 כָּמוֹהֶם יִהְיוּ עֹשֵׂיהֶם כֹּל[a] אֲשֶׁר־בֹּטֵחַ בָּהֶם׃

15. **The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of mortal hands.**

16. **Mouth they have, yet speak not; eyes they have, yet see not.**

17. **Ears they have, yet hear not; nor is there any breath in their mouths.**

18. **Just like them are they who manufacture them, they who vest them with their trust.**

Translation note: Though there is little distinction between scholar's interpretations this translation is in accordance with Brichto who translated the parallel phrases '_____ they have, yet _____ not'; rather than 'they have _____ but _____ not'.

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Commentary on Psalm 135:15-18

There are very few technical notes on this passage.

17. אף -- II QPs[a] reads ואין -- and there is not... for אף אין .

* * * * * * * * * * *

Discussion

These verses are almost identical with Psalm 115:4-8. According to Anderson, although the idols have a close likeness to human form -- they have eyes, mouths, ears -- they simply cannot function.

> Therefore these images are far inferior to the men who made them, not to mention the God who is the creator of all things. In a way the satire on the idols is an indirect praise of God; the impotence of these images emphasizes, by contrast the power and majesty of Yahweh.

Again in this passage the futility of the god produced by mortal effort is demonstrated. Anderson points out that the Psalmist identifies the idols with the gods of the nations, and he does not present the idea that these images might be thought of as representations of the gods. As in the Isaiah passage we are faced with a crude example of idolatry. An example, in which it becomes painfully clear to the thinking person that this in and of itself cannot possibly be a god. To my mind the question remains, "Can be thought of as a representation of a god?" The question of symbol and representation not withstanding, the passage points to the incredibility of trust in idols and therefore supports von Rad's theories. There is no comment by scholars regarding the 'wisdom' nature of the text.

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Deuteronomy 4:28

28 וַעֲבַדְתֶּם־שָׁם אֱלֹהִים[a] מַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵי אָדָם עֵץ וְאֶבֶן אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִרְאוּן
וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּן וְלֹא יֹאכְלוּן וְלֹא יְרִיחֻן׃

28. **There you will serve gods who are the work of mortal hands of wood and stone, that cannot see or hear or eat or smell.**

* * * * * * * * * *

Commentary on Deut. 4:28

Rashi comments on the verse by focusing on the word 'there'. He suggests that the verse be understood as it is taken by the Targum: 'And there you shall serve people who serve idols, for since you serve those who serve them (idols) it will be as though you serve them.'

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Discussion

Von Rad theorizes that this verse dates to the same period as the Isaiah and Psalm passage. In this verse as well the arguments are precisely those that were discussed in terms of the Isaiah passage. (von Rad p. 179)

Notes

1. The following sources were consulted on each of the passages:

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Deut. 4

Mikra'ot G'dolot

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