

# 119

## MINISTRIES

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### **Icons and Idolatry: The Case for Imageless Worship**

Have you ever wondered why so many churches are adorned with images and icons, despite the Bible's numerous condemnations of such practices? It's intriguing to consider that today, many Christians belong to denominations that incorporate these images into their worship.

For example, Roman Catholicism, the largest Christian denomination with approximately 1.3 billion followers, makes extensive use of statues and icons in both church settings and personal devotion. The Eastern Orthodox Church, with around 220 million members, also embraces icons as a central part of its worship, both publicly and privately.

Similarly, Oriental Orthodox churches, including the Coptic, Armenian, and Ethiopian branches, use icons among their roughly 60 million adherents. Even Anglicanism, with 85 million followers, and certain branches of Lutheran and Methodist Churches, which together have about 120 million members, include images and icons in their practices, albeit less prominently.

When you tally these numbers, it's evident that over 1.7 billion Christians, a substantial majority of the estimated 2.4 billion global Christian population, engage in some form of image-based worship. This widespread practice prompts us to revisit the biblical foundations of worship and understand the kind of worship YHWH truly desires.

Given how widespread these practices are, it's important to revisit the biblical foundations of worship. The original design and purpose of the temple, particularly its absence of physical representations of God, offer critical insights into the kind of worship YHWH desires (Exodus 25:8-9).

Whether you are part of a denomination that uses such images in worship or know someone who is, this teaching might be of some value to you. We aim to show that true worship according to the Bible means rejecting all forms of idolatry, including the use of images and icons in churches (Exodus 20:4-5).

By examining the biblical foundations of worship and comparing them with ancient and modern practices, we will argue that believers should strive to worship YHWH in spirit and truth, free from physical representations that can lead to idolatry (John 4:24).

In this teaching, we will explore the cultural backdrop of the Ancient Near East, the biblical command against graven images, and the theological significance of an imageless worship. We'll also examine the dangers of idolatry throughout history, draw parallels with modern Christian practices, and highlight the messianic connections and the role of Yeshua in guiding true worship.

Understanding the widespread use of images in modern Christian denominations requires us to look back at the origins of these practices. To do so, we must delve into the cultural and religious contexts of the Ancient Near East, where physical representations of deities were commonplace.

## **Part 1: Cultural Backdrop of the Ancient Near East**

The absence of any physical representation of God in the biblical temple set it apart from the surrounding cultures of the Ancient Near East (ANE). This unique feature reflects profound theological principles that starkly contrast with the religious practices of neighboring nations. To understand this contrast, we need to explore the cultural, literary, and theological motifs of the ANE, as well as examine the thematic connections within Scripture that emphasize God's transcendence and the form of worship he established.

In the ANE, religious practices were deeply intertwined with the creation and veneration of images. Temples were the epicenters of religious life, often adorned with statues and carvings representing various deities. These images were not merely decorative but were believed to be the physical manifestations of the gods themselves, serving as the focal points for worship and rituals. (Snell, D. C. (2011), *Religions of the Ancient Near East*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 42-48, 80-85; Jacobsen, T. (1976), *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion*, Yale University Press, pp.14; Greener, A. (2019). *Archaeology and Religion in Late Bronze Age Canaan. Religions*, 10(4), 258)

### **Mesopotamian Temples:**

In ancient Mesopotamia, city-states like Babylon and Assyria built massive ziggurats—towering temples that housed statues of their gods at the summits. These grand structures were believed to serve as the earthly dwelling places of the gods, connecting heaven and earth. (Bottéro, J. (2001), *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia*, University of Chicago Press, pp. 114-116)

Within these temples, deities such as Marduk and Ishtar were depicted in elaborate statues believed to contain the essence or spirit of the god, making these temples sacred spaces where the divine and human realms intersected. (Bottéro, J. (2001), *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia*, University of Chicago Press, pp. 112-115)

Worship in these temples involved elaborate rituals, offerings, and meticulous care of the gods' images, which were treated with the utmost reverence and devotion. (Jacobsen, T. (1976), *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion*, Yale University Press, pp. 84)

King Nebuchadnezzar's reign in Babylon is notable for its emphasis on idolatry, such as the stele he

erected—a massive golden image that he commanded all to worship, as recorded in the Book of Daniel. This event illustrates the widespread practice of idolatry and the enforcement of religious conformity in Mesopotamia.

### **Egyptian Practices:**

Similarly, in Egypt, temples to gods like Ra, Osiris, and Isis were filled with statues and reliefs depicting these deities. The Pharaoh, considered a living god, also had numerous statues, reinforcing his divine status. The images were integral to the daily temple rituals, where priests performed ceremonies to nourish and care for the gods, ensuring their favor and presence. (Wilkinson, R.H. (2003), *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt*, Thames & Hudson, pp. 41-59)

The Egyptians practiced a highly developed form of idolatry, with an extensive pantheon of gods and goddesses, each associated with specific aspects of life and the natural world. (Morenz, S. (1973), *Egyptian Religion*, Cornell University Press, pp. 102-110)

The gods were often depicted in anthropomorphic forms, with human bodies and animal heads, symbolizing their divine attributes (Wilkinson, R.H. (2003), *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt*, Thames & Hudson, pp. 90-98). Among the many deified animals, the calf held a significant place in Egyptian worship. The Apis bull, in particular, was considered a manifestation of the god Ptah and later associated with Osiris. (Budge, E.A.W. (1969), *The Gods of the Egyptians*, Vol. 1, Dover Publications, pp. 24-28; Apis, [Global Egyptian Museum](#); Ptah, [Encyclopedia Britannica](#))

The Apis bull was worshiped in elaborate ceremonies, and a living bull deemed to be the Apis was housed in the temple of Ptah in Memphis. When an Apis bull died, it was mummified and given a grand burial, signifying its importance in Egyptian religion. (Quirke, S. (2001), *The Cult of Ra: Sun-Worship in Ancient Egypt*, Thames & Hudson, pp. 109-110)

The worship of the Apis bull and other bovine deities may have influenced the Israelites during their time in Egypt, contributing to the golden calf incident described in Exodus 32 (Meyers, Carol (2005), *Exodus*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 258-264). This syncretism, where elements of Egyptian idolatry were blended with the worship of YHWH, highlighted the spiritual dangers of adopting pagan practices, as we'll explore more in this teaching.

### **Canaanite Religion:**

The Canaanites, who lived close to Israel, worshiped gods like Baal and Asherah through carved wooden poles and stone idols. Baal was considered the god of rain, storm, and fertility, while Asherah was regarded as the mother goddess associated with fertility and motherhood. Their religious practices included erecting Asherah poles and Baal statues, often in high places and groves. (Smith, M.S. (1997), *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, Eerdmans, pp. 80-85)

These sites were centers of fertility rites and agricultural festivals, reflecting their dependence on these deities for crop success and prosperity. High places, or "*bamot*," were elevated sites where worshipers believed they were closer to the gods. (High place, [Encyclopaedia Britannica](#); High Places, *Altars and the Bamah*. [Biblical Archaeology Society](#))

Here, they conducted sacrifices, offerings, and rituals to invoke the favor of Baal and Asherah. Fertility rites, involving symbolic acts believed to stimulate the fertility of the land, were common practices aimed at ensuring agricultural abundance. (Greener, A. (2019). *Archaeology and Religion in Late Bronze Age Canaan. Religions, 10(4), 258*)

The Israelites frequently encountered these Canaanite practices, leading to periods of syncretism where elements of Canaanite idolatry were blended with the worship of YHWH (Smith, M.S. (2002), *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, Eerdmans, pp. 86, 144-150). This syncretism is condemned in the Bible, as it led to spiritual corruption and a departure from the exclusive worship of YHWH. The prophet Elijah's confrontation with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, as recounted in 1 Kings 18, serves as a dramatic example of the rejection of Baal worship and reaffirmation of YHWH's sovereignty.

These ANE religious practices reveal a common theological perspective: gods were seen as being immanent and accessible through physical representations. The images served as a means to control or appease the deities, ensuring their favor and presence. What sets these types of images apart from ordinary statues, like those seen in WW2 memorials, is their intended purpose. These images were specifically crafted to assist and direct people in acts of worship, prayer, and veneration. They were not just artistic expressions but were believed to house the essence of the gods, acting as tangible focal points for spiritual connection. This intrinsic link to worship is what makes graven images distinct and theologically significant in ancient religious practices.

This understanding makes the contrast with the biblical temple even more striking. The biblical temple was deliberately devoid of any image of YHWH. This absence was not an oversight but a direct command from God, reflecting his unique nature and the form of worship he demanded.

#### **Exodus 20:4-5**

You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD [YHWH] your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me.

This command emphasized several key theological principles:

- **Transcendence of YHWH:** Unlike the gods of the ANE, YHWH is not part of the created order but exists beyond it. His essence cannot be captured or confined in any physical form, highlighting his incomparability and supreme sovereignty.
- **Spiritual Worship:** The absence of an image directed the Israelites towards a form of worship that was spiritual and relational rather than ritualistic and physical. This is echoed in Yeshua's teaching: "But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him." (John 4:23)
- **Holiness and Otherness:** YHWH's distinctiveness is further emphasized by his holiness. He cannot be reduced to any earthly form, setting him apart from the gods of the ANE.

Despite YHWH's clear commandments, the presence of idols in surrounding cultures repeatedly influenced Israel, leading them astray from pure worship. The Book of Judges highlights this struggle,

showing how the Israelites frequently turned to idolatry despite God's commands:

### **Judges 2:17**

Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the LORD [YHWH], and they did not do so.

YHWH continually called Israel back to himself, emphasizing the importance of worshiping him in spirit and truth, free from the idolatrous practices of the nations around them. This call remains relevant today, urging believers to reject all forms of idolatry and to focus their worship solely on YHWH. The biblical prohibition against images can be understood through various thematic connections within Scripture. For instance, the creation narrative in Genesis underscores the distinction between Creator and creation, a theme that runs throughout the Bible (Genesis 1:1). The Scriptures often condemn the use of idols, highlighting their impotence and the folly of idolatry:

### **Isaiah 44:9-10**

All who fashion idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit. Their witnesses neither see nor know, that they may be put to shame. Who fashions a god or casts an idol that is profitable for nothing?

### **Psalms 115:4-8**

Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths but do not speak; eyes but do not see. They have ears but do not hear; noses but do not smell. They have hands but do not feel; feet but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them.

Scripture consistently reinforces the distinction between YHWH and the gods of the nations, emphasizing that trust and worship should be directed solely to the true God.

While the Ancient Near East was filled with tangible representations of gods, the biblical commandment for an imageless worship stands in stark contrast. This theological stance on worship without images carries profound implications for our understanding of God's nature and how he desires to be worshipped.

## **Part 2: The Theological Significance of an Imageless Worship**

One of the most profound aspects of the biblical prohibition against images lies in its theological implications concerning God's transcendence and immanence.

In the Ancient Near East, gods were often perceived as immanent, meaning they were closely tied to the physical world through their images and statues. These representations made the gods seem accessible and controllable, as they were believed to reside within the images crafted by human hands. (Rubio, G. (2008), *"Gods and Humans in the Ancient Near East," in Religion and Power: Divine Kingship in the Ancient World and Beyond*, The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, pp. 17-42)

In stark contrast, YHWH's transcendence is a central theme throughout Scripture. YHWH exists beyond the confines of the physical universe and cannot be reduced to any form or likeness, emphasizing his supreme sovereignty and incomparability.

**Isaiah 40:18**

To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him?

This rhetorical question underscores the futility of attempting to represent YHWH with any image. His nature is beyond human comprehension and artistic expression. At the same time, YHWH's immanence is revealed through his actions and presence among his people, but without the need for a physical representation. This is highlighted six chapters later:

**Isaiah 46:5-7**

To whom will you liken me and make me equal, and compare me, that we may be alike? Those who lavish gold from the purse, and weigh out silver in the scales, hire a goldsmith, and he makes it into a god; then they fall down and worship! They lift it to their shoulders, they carry it, they set it in its place, and it stands there; it cannot move from its place. If one cries to it, it does not answer or save him from his trouble.

The absence of images in the worship of YHWH is connected to various literary motifs and thematic elements within the Bible. One such motif is the contrast between true and false worship. The narrative of the golden calf in Exodus 32 provides a stark example of the dangers of image-based worship. The Israelites' creation of a golden calf as a representation of YHWH leads to their swift judgment:

**Exodus 32:8**

They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'

This event highlights the Israelites' departure from the form of worship prescribed by God and the consequences of such actions. The golden calf incident serves as a warning against the adoption of pagan practices and the creation of physical representations of God. For more on graven images, see our teaching titled "[The Second Commandment – What About Graven Images?](#)"

Another significant motif is the depiction of YHWH as a speaking God rather than a seen God. Throughout the Scriptures, God's messages and revelations are delivered through his word, underscoring the importance of listening over seeing:

**Deuteronomy 4:24, 12**

For the LORD [YHWH] your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God... Then the LORD [YHWH] spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice.

**2 Corinthians 5:7**

for we walk by faith, not by sight.

**Romans 10:17a**

So faith comes from hearing,

This emphasis on God's voice rather than a visible form underscores the importance of his word and commandments in guiding the Israelites' worship and conduct. The New Testament continues this theme of imageless worship, emphasizing the word of God made flesh in the person of Yeshua. The

incarnation of Yeshua does not negate the command against images but fulfills the revelation of God in a personal and relational way:

### **John 1:14**

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Yeshua embodies the fullness of God's revelation, yet the emphasis remains on his teachings, actions, and sacrifice rather than any physical representation (Isaiah 53:2). The early believers continued to reject the use of images in worship, focusing instead on the teachings and example of Yeshua.

The Bible employs various literary genres and devices to communicate its messages, particularly concerning idolatry and true worship. Understanding these genres and devices enhances our comprehension of the biblical stance against images and idols.

- **Narrative:** The historical books, such as Genesis, Exodus, and Kings, provide narrative accounts that illustrate the dangers of idolatry through the experiences of the Israelites. These narratives often include detailed descriptions of events, dialogues, and the consequences of the people's actions, serving as instructive stories for the readers.
- **Prophecy:** The prophetic books, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, use vivid imagery, metaphors, and poetic language to convey God's displeasure with idolatry and to call his people back to faithful worship. The prophets often depict idols as powerless and mock those who create and worship them.
- **Law:** The Torah, particularly in books like Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, contains legal instructions that explicitly prohibit the creation and worship of images. These legal texts establish the framework for how the Israelites are to conduct their worship and maintain their relationship with YHWH.
- **Wisdom Literature:** Books like Psalms and Proverbs incorporate reflections on the nature of true worship and the folly of idolatry. These poetic and philosophical writings offer insights into the spiritual and ethical dimensions of worship.

These literary genres not only convey the dangers of idolatry but also interweave several thematic connections that reinforce the message against it throughout Scripture. By examining these themes, we can gain a deeper understanding of the consistent biblical call to reject idolatry and maintain pure worship.

Several thematic connections run through the biblical texts, linking various passages and reinforcing the message against idolatry:

- **Holiness:** A recurring theme is the holiness of God and his people. YHWH calls his people to be holy as he is holy, which includes abstaining from idolatry and maintaining purity in worship (Leviticus 19:2). This theme underscores the separateness and distinctiveness of God's people from the surrounding nations.
- **Covenant:** The covenant relationship between YHWH and Israel is central to the biblical narrative. Idolatry is often depicted as a breach of this covenant, akin to spiritual adultery. The

prophets frequently use marital imagery to describe Israel's unfaithfulness and God's call for repentance and restoration (Hosea 2:16-20).

- **Judgment and Restoration:** The theme of judgment and restoration is prominent in the prophetic literature. Idolatry leads to judgment and exile, but God also promises restoration and renewal for those who repent and return to him. This theme highlights God's justice and mercy.
- **Messianic Expectation:** The expectation of a coming Messiah who will establish true worship and restore Israel is a significant theme. The New Testament identifies Yeshua as the fulfillment of this promise, emphasizing his role in guiding believers back to authentic worship without images (John 4:23-24).

The theological significance of imageless worship is thus woven through the fabric of biblical literature, revealing the depth of YHWH's desire for a pure and undefiled relationship with his people.

By examining these literary genres and thematic connections, believers can gain a richer understanding of why YHWH commanded his people to avoid images and focus on worshiping him in spirit and truth. The significance of worshiping without images is further underscored by the historical accounts of idolatry among the Israelites. Examining these biblical narratives reveals the inherent dangers of idolatry and the devastating consequences it brought upon God's people.

### **Part 3: Israel and Idolatry: Lessons from Biblical History**

The biblical narrative consistently warns against the dangers of idolatry, portraying it as a fundamental departure from true worship of YHWH. The prophets vehemently denounced the Israelites' lapses into idol worship, highlighting its futility and the ensuing consequences. Consider the words of the prophet Isaiah:

#### **Isaiah 44:9-10**

*All who fashion idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit. Their witnesses neither see nor know, that they may be put to shame. Who fashions a god or casts an idol that is profitable for nothing?*

Isaiah's critique underscores the absurdity of worshiping man-made objects, emphasizing their impotence and the shame they bring to their makers. This prophetic literature employs literary devices such as irony and sarcasm to expose the foolishness of idolatry, contrasting it with the power and sovereignty of YHWH. As it is written:

#### **Jeremiah 10:5**

*Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk. Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good."*

#### **The Golden Calf Incident:**

One of the most striking examples of the dangers of idolatry is the golden calf incident detailed in Exodus 32. When Moses delayed on Mount Sinai, the impatient Israelites pressured Aaron into making a god to lead them. Exodus recounts:

### **Exodus 32:4**

And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”

They even proclaimed, “Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD [YHWH].” (Exodus 32:5), demonstrating their belief that the calf represented YHWH. This act of creating and worshiping the golden calf resulted in severe judgment upon the Israelites (Exodus 32:28). It was a blatant violation of the covenant they had just entered into with YHWH, showcasing how quickly and easily they reverted to the idolatrous practices of Egypt and the surrounding cultures, and how they misrepresented YHWH himself.

This syncretism—blending elements of Egyptian idolatry with the worship of YHWH—illustrates how deeply ingrained these practices had become, even after their deliverance from Egypt. The Israelites' quick reversion to creating a golden calf highlights the ongoing struggle to maintain pure worship and avoid the integration of foreign idolatrous elements into their faith. It is in our fallen human nature to desire something tangible to worship, something we can see and touch. This inclination arises from our flesh, which seeks physical representations of the divine rather than embracing the call to worship in spirit and truth.

### **The Bronze Serpent: From Healing Instrument to Idol:**

Another significant example is the bronze serpent that Moses made in the wilderness. Initially, this serpent served as a means of divine healing for the Israelites:

### **Numbers 21:8-9**

And the LORD [YHWH] said to Moses, 'Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.' So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

However, over time, the Israelites began to venerate the bronze serpent itself, transforming it into an idol. By the reign of King Hezekiah, this object, originally a symbol of God's provision, had become an object of worship:

### **2 Kings 18:4**

He removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah. And he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it (it was called Nehushtan).

This shift from using the serpent as a symbol to worshiping it as an idol illustrates how easily objects intended to point to God can become idols themselves. This misuse of religious symbols demonstrates the human tendency to shift from true spiritual worship to idolatry. And the consequences of idolatry were severe for Israel (2 Kings 17:15-18).

Just as the Israelites struggled with idolatry in the past, modern Christianity faces similar challenges. Understanding these historical precedents helps us recognize the parallels in contemporary practices, highlighting the need for vigilance against idolatry today.

The bread of the Last Supper, meant as a symbolic teaching device to help believers reflect on Yeshua's

teachings and sacrifice, has been elevated to an object of worship in the form of the Eucharist. Similarly, the cross, which represents the story of Yeshua's crucifixion, has been transformed into the crucifix—a religious symbol that many professing Christians bow down to and venerate. These instances mirror the misuse of the bronze serpent. Just as Hezekiah destroyed the bronze serpent to restore pure worship, we must critically evaluate and potentially reform modern practices that have deviated from biblical principles.

### **The Danger of Religious Syncretism:**

The blending of different religious practices, known as syncretism, has been a persistent issue throughout history. By examining both ancient and modern instances of syncretism, we can better understand its impact on pure worship and the need to guard against it.

The Bible repeatedly warns against adopting the practices of other religions. In Deuteronomy, YHWH instructs the Israelites:

#### **Deuteronomy 12:30-31**

take care that you be not ensnared to follow them, after they have been destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire about their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods?—that I also may do the same.' You shall not worship the LORD [YHWH] your God in that way, for every abominable thing that the LORD [YHWH] hates they have done for their gods, for they even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods.

Similarly, Jeremiah cautions:

#### **Jeremiah 10:2-4**

Thus says the LORD [YHWH]: "Learn not the way of the nations, nor be dismayed at the signs of the heavens because the nations are dismayed at them. For the customs of the peoples are vanity. A tree from the forest is cut down and worked with an axe by the hands of a craftsman. They decorate it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so that it cannot move."

Religious syncretism is a significant concern in the Bible. The Israelites frequently fell into this trap, incorporating elements of Canaanite worship into their practices. This mixing of worship forms diluted their devotion to YHWH and led to spiritual corruption (Judges 2:11-13).

### **Solomon's Apostasy:**

King Solomon's later years provide a notable example of syncretism. Despite his wisdom and initial faithfulness, Solomon's marriages to foreign women led him to build high places for their gods and participate in their worship (1 Kings 11:1-8). This syncretism provoked God's anger and ultimately led to the division of the kingdom.

### **The Northern Kingdom:**

The Northern Kingdom of Israel, under King Jeroboam, institutionalized syncretism by establishing golden calves at Bethel and Dan, claiming they represented YHWH (1 Kings 12:28-30). Not only did Jeroboam introduce idolatry with these golden calves, but he also setup a priestly system that was never sanctioned by YHWH. Similarly, modern Christian denominations like Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy,

Anglicanism, and certain branches of Lutheranism have established priesthoods that are counterfeits of the original Levitical system complete with priestly hierarchical structures, priestly garments, incense, temple articles, ritual washing, and priestly instruments. These modern practices, much like Jeroboam's actions, exemplify the dangers of going our own way and adopting practices condemned by God. Such actions led the entire kingdom into idolatry and ultimately resulted in their exile.

### **Israel in the Time of Judges:**

During the time of the Judges, Israel repeatedly fell into idolatry and abandoned YHWH to serve Baal and Ashtaroath. This period was marked by a cycle of sin, oppression, repentance, and deliverance, as the Israelites turned to other gods and suffered under foreign oppressors (Judges 2:11-19). Each time they repented, YHWH raised up judges to deliver them, but the cycle would begin anew, highlighting the persistent struggle with idolatry.

The lessons from Israel's history serve as a warning for believers today. The blending of foreign religious practices with the worship of YHWH not only diluted their faith but also brought severe consequences (Judges 2:11-15, 2 Kings 17:16-18, Hosea 13:2-3, Jeremiah 2:19).

This pattern of adopting non-biblical elements into worship practices is not confined to ancient times; it continues to be a challenge in the modern era.

## **Part 4: Modern Parallels and Christian Accretions**

Just as ancient Israel struggled with syncretism, modern Christianity faces similar challenges. The incorporation of non-biblical practices and symbols lead to a diluted and compromised faith. Let's look at a few examples of how these practices appear in the worship of many churches today.

**Icons and Statues:** In many churches, icons and statues of Jesus, Mary, saints, and angels intended to inspire devotion often become the focus of worship. Many believers attribute power and holiness to these objects themselves, mirroring the idolatry of the bronze serpent.

**Saint Veneration and Necromancy:** In thousands of churches worldwide, the veneration of saints closely mirrors the ancient practice of deifying lesser gods within a pantheon. Just as the gods under Zeus were viewed as intermediaries, saints are revered similarly with practices that can include bowing down, kissing, and praying to images of saints believing they can intercede and direct prayers. Seeking the intercession of the dead is explicitly forbidden in Scripture. This elevation of saints to an almost godlike status is a clear form of idolatry.

**Relics and Shrines:** Many religious relics, particularly the bones and personal items of deceased saints are often enshrined and venerated in ways that are reminiscent of ancient religious idolatrous practices. These relics are believed to possess spiritual power and are housed in elaborate shrines. This practice draws a direct parallel to the veneration of physical artifacts in ancient religions such as ancient Egypt where the bodies and objects associated with the pharaohs were treated with great reverence and believed to mediate divine presence.

**The Deification of Mary:** The view of Mary as the Queen of Heaven, depicted in various forms of Christian iconography, mirrors the idolatrous worship condemned in Jeremiah 7:18. According to mainstream Catholic tradition, she is regarded as the new tabernacle of the new

covenant carrying the divine presence. In their worship, they praise her through numerous Marian hymns. There are over 50 Marian feasts celebrated annually and hundreds of Marian prayers reflecting the extensive devotion directed toward her. This veneration elevates Mary to a near godlike akin to the deified goddesses of Canaan.

**Eucharistic Adoration:** In Eucharistic adoration, Catholics worship the “consecrated host,” believing it to be the actual body of Christ through transubstantiation. This practice, while intended to honor Yeshua, introduces a physical object into worship, which diverts focus from the spiritual relationship with YHWH and aligns more closely with the idolatrous practices warned against in Scripture.

**The Veneration of Angels:** The practice of honoring angels contained in many Christian traditions echo the ancient tradition of angel worship found in Gnosticism. This includes prayers directed toward angels and the use of statues and icons as focal points for veneration. Such practices involve offering devotions to angels reflecting the same kind of exultation that Gnosticism was known for and condemned in Scripture.

**Christmas and Easter:** The celebration of Christmas and Easter, appears to include elements rooted in pagan festivals. While these holidays commemorate significant events in Yeshua's life, the inclusion of traditions like Christmas trees and Easter eggs reflects a syncretism that distract from the true focus of worship.

**The Crucifix as an idol and talisman:** The cross, which represents the story of Yeshua's crucifixion, has become an object of worship for many professing Christians who bow down to it. Additionally, many wear the crucifix as a sort of talisman, believing it offers protection against evil spirits. This practice turns a symbol of faith into an object of superstitious reliance, paralleling the idolatrous use of physical objects in ancient worship.

Religious syncretism, whether ancient or modern, poses a continual threat to authentic faith. Believers are called to discern and reject practices that dilute or compromise their worship, ensuring that their devotion remains solely directed toward YHWH.

### **Systematic idolatry in the church:**

The introduction of images in worship within certain branches of Christianity represents a significant deviation from the biblical model and a form of idolatry that Scripture consistently warns against. Let's explore how these practices are present in different denominations.

#### **Catholicism:**

In Catholicism, the use of statues and images like the ones we discussed, involves practices that Scripture would consider to be idolatry. Catholic authorities defend such images by distinguishing between veneration and worship.

"The Christian veneration of images is not contrary to the first commandment which proscribes idols. Indeed, 'the honor rendered to an image passes to its prototype,' and 'whoever venerates an image venerates the person portrayed in it.' The honor paid to sacred images is a 'respectful veneration,' not the adoration due to God alone. Religious worship is not directed to images in themselves, considered as mere things, but under their distinctive aspect as images leading us on

to God incarnate. The movement toward the image does not terminate in it as image, but tends toward that whose image it is." - *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*, Paragraph 2132.

"For the honor which is paid to the image passes on to that which the image represents, and he who venerates the image, venerates in it the subject represented." - Second Council of Nicaea, 787 AD

"I do not venerate material, but the Creator of the material. God has made himself material for me; I venerate the material through which his salvation came to me." - Pope Benedict XVI, Catholic News Agency

Despite the theological distinctions made between veneration (*dulia*) and worship (*latria*), this practice leads to the misdirection of devotion, effectively constituting idolatry. Given our carnal nature, the line between veneration and worship is easily blurred. Our inherent desire for tangible representations of the divine leads us to attribute undue reverence to physical objects. What begins as a symbol meant to inspire devotion quickly becomes an object of worship. These images are perpetual stumbling blocks, diverting focus from true spiritual worship.

### **Eastern Orthodoxy:**

Similarly, icons in Eastern Orthodoxy are revered and considered conduits of divine presence. John of Damascus, a revered theologian of the 7th and 8th centuries in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, ardently defends the use of icons, stating:

I do not venerate matter, but I venerate the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take his abode in matter, who worked out my salvation through matter. I will not cease from venerating that matter through which my salvation was worked out. But I do not venerate it as God! How can that which has received existence from nothing be God? ... And I salute all the rest of the created matter which has become a means of my salvation, reverencing it, not as God, but because it is filled with divine energy and grace." - John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*

The theology behind icon veneration includes the belief that the honor shown to the image passes to its prototype. This practice mirrors what the heathen nations were doing, where they attributed divine presence and power to physical objects. The emphasis on icons as windows to the divine parallels the idolatrous customs of surrounding nations, which often involved worshiping physical representations of their gods. These images, intended as aids to worship, often become the primary focus, transforming into idols and diverting attention from the direct spiritual worship that YHWH commands. This practice contradicts the biblical principle of worshiping God in spirit and truth, as outlined in John 4:24.

Much like the Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodoxy; The Babylonians, Assyrians, Egyptians, and Canaanites all believed that the worship and honor given to the image was redirected to the deity that it represented. This redirection of worship through an image mirrors the practices of heathen nations that God told us not to follow.

### **Deuteronomy 4:16-18**

Beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves, in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the

likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth.

The New Testament reaffirms the prohibition against idols in clear terms. 1 John 5:21 states: "[Little children, keep yourselves from idols.](#)" Additionally, the Jerusalem Council, as recorded in Acts 15, established four preliminary requirements for Gentile believers attending church, one of which was to abstain from idolatry (Acts 15:20). This decision underscores the importance of fleeing from idols as a foundational aspect of early Christian practice.

Understanding this is crucial, as we turn to Yeshua's teachings, which address the correct approach to worship and highlight the true intent of the Torah.

## **Part 5: Messianic Connections and the Role of Yeshua**

One of Yeshua's missions was to provide the perfect interpretation and teaching of the Torah, exemplifying how to live it out in a way that honors YHWH by correcting misunderstandings and emphasizing its true intent. As Yeshua stated:

### **Matthew 5:17-18**

[Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.](#)

Yeshua's fulfillment of the law brought its true meaning to light, teaching and demonstrating how to obey God's commandments fully and faithfully. This includes the prohibition against graven images, which he reaffirmed through his teachings and actions, emphasizing worship focused on God rather than physical representations.

### **The Samaritan Woman and the Call to True Worship:**

One of the most explicit teachings on worship in the New Testament is found in Yeshua's conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well:

### **John 4:23-24**

[But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.](#)

This passage underscores Yeshua's teaching about the greater truth of spiritual worship. While the physical temple serves as an important tangible illustration of spiritual realities, Yeshua emphasizes that true worship involves both the physical and the spiritual, guiding believers to worship in spirit and truth while understanding the significance of the physical temple.

### **Yeshua as the Perfect Image of God:**

Yeshua is described as the perfect image of the invisible God, providing a divine revelation that does not violate the command against graven images:

### **Colossians 1:15**

[He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.](#)

Yeshua's life, teachings, death, and resurrection reveal God's character and will. His embodiment of divine attributes serves as the ultimate representation of God, directing believers to a personal, living relationship with the Father through the Son. This relational aspect is central to understanding Yeshua's role in guiding worship that is free from physical representations.

After Yeshua's ascension, the Holy Spirit continues the work of guiding believers into true worship. The Spirit's indwelling presence empowers believers to live out the principles of the law in a way that honors God:

**John 14:26**

But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.

The Holy Spirit leads believers into a deeper understanding of what it means to worship in spirit and truth, aligning their hearts and actions with God's commandments and avoiding the pitfalls of idolatry.

**Eschatological Hope and the New Creation:**

The ultimate fulfillment of worship in spirit and truth is realized in the eschatological hope of the new creation. In the book of Revelation, John envisions a future where God's presence is fully manifest among his people, eliminating the need for a temple or any physical representation:

**Revelation 21:22-23**

And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb.

This vision underscores the culmination of God's plan for his people to dwell with him in perfect unity, where worship is pure and unmediated by any physical structures or images.

Throughout history, the challenge of maintaining pure worship has persisted. Ancient Israel's struggles with idolatry find parallels in modern religious practices that incorporate images and symbols in ways that can distract from true worship. The story of the bronze serpent, initially a means of divine healing becoming an object of idolatry, illustrates this danger vividly.

In modern Christianity, practices such as the veneration of saints, the use of icons, and the incorporation of non-biblical traditions pose similar risks. These practices can lead to a form of idolatry that diverts attention from the direct worship of God.

The teachings and life of Yeshua, along with the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, provide a clear path away from idolatry towards true worship. By understanding the perfect interpretation of the law and the integration of worshiping in spirit and truth, believers are equipped to discern and reject practices that compromise their devotion to YHWH.

The eschatological hope of a new creation, where God's presence is fully realized, encourages believers to strive for purity in worship, free from the distractions of physical representations. This understanding calls for a continuous evaluation of worship practices to ensure they align with the biblical principles established by YHWH.

Yeshua's guidance brings us full circle, emphasizing the need for pure, imageless worship as outlined in Scripture. As we conclude, it becomes clear that maintaining this focus is essential for true devotion to YHWH.

## **Conclusion**

The absence of physical representations of YHWH in the biblical temple, in contrast to the idolatrous practices of the Ancient Near East, underscores the unique nature of the worship YHWH desires (Leviticus 19:4, Deuteronomy 4:15-19). The theological significance of this distinction emphasizes God's transcendence (Isaiah 55:8-9), and the emphasis on worshipping him in spirit and truth (John 4:24).

Throughout the Scriptures, from the Torah to the New Testament, the consistent message is clear: God cannot and should not be represented by physical images. The dangers of idolatry are vividly illustrated in the narratives of the golden calf and the bronze serpent, serving as warnings against allowing physical objects to become the focus of worship (Numbers 21:8-9, 2 Kings 18:4).

Yeshua, in his teachings and life, perfectly interpreted and embodied the Torah, calling his followers to a deeper form of worship that aligns with the principles established by YHWH (Matthew 5:17). He emphasized that true worship involves both the physical and the spiritual, guiding believers to worship in spirit and truth while understanding the significance of the physical temple (John 4:23-24).

The Bible employs various literary genres and devices to communicate its messages, particularly concerning idolatry and true worship. By understanding these genres and thematic connections, we gain deeper insight into why YHWH commanded his people to avoid images and focus on worshipping him in spirit and truth (Deuteronomy 12:3-4).

The ongoing guidance of the Holy Spirit helps believers maintain this focus, leading them into true worship and helping them avoid the pitfalls of idolatry (John 14:26). The eschatological vision of a new creation, where God's presence is fully realized and unmediated by physical representations, provides hope and encouragement for believers to strive for purity in their worship practices (Revelation 21:22-23).

In light of this understanding, it is crucial for believers, including those within Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and other denominations that incorporate images, to reevaluate their worship practices. Contrary to popular belief, the veneration of statues and icons is not a harmless tradition but constitutes a form of idolatry that Scripture consistently warns against. Believers are encouraged to consider leaving such organizations if they cannot align with the biblical model of imageless worship, ensuring their devotion remains focused solely on YHWH (2 Corinthians 6:16-17).

By continuously evaluating and aligning their worship with the biblical principles established by YHWH, believers can ensure that their devotion remains undivided and focused solely on him (Psalm 86:11). This calls for discernment of modern practices and traditions, recognizing where they deviate from the pure, unadulterated worship that God desires (Romans 12:2).

By focusing on the spiritual and relational aspects of worship, believers can honor the commandment against graven images and cultivate a deeper, more authentic relationship with YHWH.

### **John 4:24**

[God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.](#)

*We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at [www.testeverything.net](http://www.testeverything.net)*

**Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.**

**EMAIL:** [Info@119ministries.com](mailto:Info@119ministries.com)

**FACEBOOK:** [www.facebook.com/119Ministries](http://www.facebook.com/119Ministries)

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