



# The Bad Faith Argument in Ancient Jewish Thought

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presented by **Jesse I. Mirotznik**

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**The Bad Faith Argument in Ancient Jewish Thought**

**by Jesse I. Mirotznik**

August 2021

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ABSTRACT

**The Bad Faith Argument in Ancient Jewish Thought**

Though much scholarly attention has been devoted to the relations between Jews and gentiles in antiquity, surprisingly little literature has investigated how Jews constructed and portrayed the religion of gentile pagans. This study will seek to investigate one question within that broader topic: how did Jews explain to themselves the existence of these other forms of worship?

After evaluating the scholarly literature on Jewish explanations for other worship in Chapter 1, the remainder of the dissertation will focus on one such explanation in particular: the portrayal that we label the “Bad Faith Argument,” namely the rejection of the sincerity of worship seen as transgressive. After establishing in Chapter 2 that the biblical sources do not apply this kind of argument to the worship of other gods and the reverence of their icons, Chapter 3 will demonstrate the emergence of Bad Faith portrayals of these forms of competing worship in the mid-Second Temple period and continuing into tannaitic literature. Chapter 4 will then directly juxtapose texts from the biblical period with thematically-similar texts from mid-late Second Temple and tannaitic literature, highlighting the shift toward a Bad Faith portrayal of the worship of other gods. Chapter 5 will apply this framework to *m. ‘Abodah Zarah* 3:4. Chapter 6, the Conclusion, will then attempt to unravel some of the broader implications of the emergence of this Bad Faith portrayal of the religion of the Other.

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The Talmud speaks of two paths, one “short but long” and another “long but short” (*b. Erub. 53b*). Writing a dissertation, however, falls into that unfortunate third category, the path which is “long but long.”

There are so many people without whom this project—and my own learning—would be severely diminished. I wish first of all to thank my friends and colleagues, especially Erez DeGolan and Omri Sharet, from whom I learned Hebrew, Iosif Zhakevich, who taught Aramaic with constant enthusiasm, Rabbi Dani Passow, who gave of his time to teach me my first lessons in Talmud, and Michael Ennis, my *hevruta*.

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## Chapter 1—Introduction

### Jews and Gentiles in Antiquity: The State of the Scholarship at Large

Scholarship on Jews and gentile pagans in the Second Temple and rabbinic eras has tended to concentrate on three areas: the construction of identity, the influence of the Greco-Roman world upon Judaism, and the identification of non-Jewish historical realia in Jewish texts.<sup>1</sup> Surprisingly little attention, however, has been paid to how Jews viewed and constructed the *religion* of their gentile neighbors.

Those few scholars who have taken an interest in the question of Jewish perspectives on pagan gentile religion have generally restricted their focus to the *normative* element of Jewish views.

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<sup>1</sup> For literature on identity, see, for example: Gary Porton, *Goyim: Gentiles and Israelites in Mishnah-Tosefta* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), Sacha Stern, *Jewish Identity in Early Rabbinic Writings* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), Shaye Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), Erich Gruen, *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), and most recently Adi Ophir and Ishay Rosen-Zvi, *Goy: Israel's Multiple Others and the Birth of the Gentile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). For the influence of Greco-Roman culture on Judaism, see Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period* vol. 1 trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), John Collins, *Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), and Daniel Boyarin, *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012). For the identification of non-Jewish historical realia in Jewish texts, see Gideon Bohak, "Rabbinic Perspectives on Egyptian Religion," *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 2:2 (2000), 215–231, Rivka Ulmer, "The Egyptian Gods in Midrashic Texts," *The Harvard Theological Review* 103:2 (2010), 181–204, Michael Wojciechowski, "Ancient Criticism of Religion in Dan 14 (Bel and Dragon), Bar 6 (Epistle of Jeremiah), and Wisdom 14" in Géza G. Xeravits and József Zsengellér eds. *Deuterocanonical Additions of the Old Testament Books: Selected Studies* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), Emmanuel Friedheim's *Rabbinisme et Paganisme en Palestine Romaine* (Leiden: Brill, 2006) as well as Friedheim's "Who Are the Deities Concealed Behind the Rabbinic Expression 'A Nursing Female Image,'" *The Harvard Theological Review* 96:2 (2003), 239–50, Fritz Graf, *Roman Festivals in the Greek East: From the Early Empire to the Middle Byzantine Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 61–84, and especially Mireille Hadas-Lebel, "Le paganisme à travers les sources rabbiniques des IIe et IIIe siècles. Contribution à l'étude du syncrétisme dans l'empire romain," in Wolfgang Haase and Hildegard Temporini eds. *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II, 19.2 (New York: de Gruyter, 1979). The literature on these areas, and in particular on the latter two, is extensive.



Their research, that is, has studied how Jews in the Second Temple and rabbinic periods attacked, hated, mocked or even tolerated forms of worship which were alien to them. Characteristic analyses in this normative mode of inquiry have asked whether pagan worship was, from a Jewish perspective, “a legitimate ancestral way of life” for gentiles, or whether in fact it was “always wrong for everyone?”<sup>2</sup> They have observed that “literature regarding the cult of the sun reveals that Palestinian rabbis presented this rite as a contemporaneous phenomenon that must be fought because of its despicable nature.”<sup>3</sup> They have posited that Jews chose either “accommodationist” or “rejectionist” approaches to gentile religion.<sup>4</sup> And they have noted how “in post-biblical antiquity, core Jewish responses came in two basic varieties, which were by no means mutually exclusive. One was to regard other religions as simply erroneous, beneath contempt; the other was to think that they were nevertheless good enough for the gentiles.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Goldenberg, *The Nations That Know Thee Not: Ancient Jewish Attitudes toward Other Religions* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 1–2, and *passim*.

<sup>3</sup> Emmanuel Friedheim, “Sol Invictus in the Severus Synagogue at Hammath Tiberias, the Rabbis, and Jewish Society: A Different Approach,” *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 12:1 (2009), 107. The normative focus of Friedheim’s article on Sol Invictus is, like much of his work, ultimately directed toward a historical end, in this case the contention that solar images in Roman Palestine were not neutrally decorative but rather possessed potent pagan theological significance. See Friedheim, “Sol Invictus,” 90–94 and 106.

<sup>4</sup> Paula Fredriksen and Oded Irshai, “Include Me Out: Tertullian, The Rabbis, and the Graeco-Roman City,” in Katell Berthelot et al., eds. *L’identité à travers l’éthique: Nouvelles perspectives sur la formation des identités collectives dans le monde gréco-romain* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 119.

<sup>5</sup> Seth Schwartz, “Review: Robert Goldenberg, *The Nations That Know Thee Not*,” *Hebrew Studies* 40 (1999), 282–83. For other discussions with a similar focus on the normative, see also Alan Brill, *Judaism and Other Religions: Models of Understanding* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), Jan Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism*, trans. Robert Savage (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 24–29, Maurice Gilbert, *La Critique des dieux dans le Livre de la Sagesse* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1973), 94, Geert Roskam, “Philo of Alexandria on the Twelve Olympian Gods,” *Classical World* 112:3 (2019), 169–92, and Victor Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews*, trans. S. Applebaum (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1959), 351–52 and 374–75. Consider also the essay collection Graham Stanton and Guy Stroumsa eds. *Tolerance and Intolerance in Early Judaism and Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). We might also note here Sacha Stern’s discussion of the ways in which

Such investigations into the normative element of Jewish views are, of course, entirely valid; Jewish views of other worship were, after all, rarely without a judgmental valence. Yet inquiry into the normative becomes problematic when it obscures or precludes investigation into the *descriptive* element of how Jews viewed other worship in antiquity. Rather than asking only how Jews judged, attacked, or accommodated foreign worship, we must take the further step of asking how they *understood, conceptualized, and constructed it*.

To Jews in antiquity, gentiles were not indistinguishable, nor were their forms of worship simply a featureless black box to be attacked.<sup>6</sup> Jews saw, considered, and conceptually categorized gentile worship and, more importantly, projected their own ideas onto it.<sup>7</sup> Even when Jews judged,

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the Rabbis constructed gentile libations, the primary conclusion of which is that “the myth of compulsive libation” by gentiles “was, in other words, a powerful way of demeaning and demonizing *avodah zarah*” and “a ploy to differentiate it from similar Jewish practices.” See Sacha Stern, “Compulsive libationers: non-Jews and wine in early rabbinic sources,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 64 (2013), 41. Though see Stern, “Compulsive,” 43–44 for a less normative and indeed more captivating take. Apposite are the words of William James who, speaking in 1902, declared that only “of late, impartial classifications and comparisons have become possible, alongside of the denunciations and anathemas by which the commerce between creeds used exclusively to be carried on.” See William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004), 374. The viewing of one religion by another in pre-modern times was, for James, “exclusively” an exercise in “denunciation.” Compare also Judah Bergmann’s statement that “in der religiösen Polemik wird man selten Sachlichkeit und Unbefangenheit in der Beurteilung des Gegners finden. Der Wille, den Gegner zu verstehen, das Vermögen, in seine religiöse Gedanken und Empfindungswelt sich zu versetzen, fehlt in der religiösen Polemik gerade bei denen, die überzeugte und begeisterte Anhänger der eigenen Religion sind.” See Judah Bergmann, *Jüdische Apologetik im neutestamentlichen Zeitalter* (Berlin: Reimer Verlag, 1908), 30.

<sup>6</sup> On rabbinic (and biblical) differentiation and non-differentiation among gentiles, see Christine Hayes, “The Complicated Goy in Classical Rabbinic Sources,” in Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, Wolfgang Grünstäudl, and Matthew Thiessen eds., *Perceiving the Other in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Jenny Labendz’s *Socratic Torah: Non-Jews in Rabbinic Intellectual Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), where Labendz notes that the Rabbis “included within their epistemological repertoire (what they imagined to be) the assumptions and truth standards of outsiders,” Labendz, *Socratic Torah*, 18, and cf. 95–96 where this notion is expanded to the Letter of Aristeas. See also Christine Hayes, “Displaced Self-Perceptions: The Deployment of Minim

criticized, and attacked those forms of worship which they saw as transgressive, their polemics of necessity assumed a descriptive account of the worship being criticized—of its rituals, its values, its organization, and of the ways in which it created meaning for its participants.

A movement away from the normative toward analysis of the descriptive or conceptual might facilitate an entirely new set of topics for investigation. We might ask, for example, whether Jews in Greco-Roman antiquity had a notion of other ethnic groups with specific covenantal links to specific (even if “imaginary”) gods, analogous to the Jews’ relationship with their own God; we might ask whether they had a notion of foreign, alternative scriptures or sacred traditions analogous to their own, and how they imagined these scriptures or traditions to be approached by their devotees; we might consider which elements of non-Jewish worship ancient Jews chose to emphasize or deemphasize; or we might perhaps ask whether the metaphors in which they described (or even attacked) foreign worship changed over time, and what this might tell us about shifts in their understanding not only of foreign worship, but of their own.<sup>8</sup>

Our account, however, will attempt to take the first step in answering, if partially, only one such descriptive question: *How did Jews explain to themselves the existence of other forms of worship, in particular the worship of gods apart from the Israelite god, and the reverence of these*

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and Romans in b. Sanhedrin 90b–91a,” in Hayim Lapin ed. *Religious and Ethnic Communities in Later Roman Palestine* (Bethesda: University Press of Maryland, 1998), 254.

<sup>8</sup> It is occasionally possible, though only with difficulty, to find examples of secondary literature which does engage in this kind of descriptive investigation of Jewish views toward other religions in the Second Temple and rabbinic periods. The clearest example is probably Gerard Mussies, “The Interpretatio Judaica of Sarapis,” in M. J. Vermaseren ed. *Studies in Hellenistic Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), in which Mussies analyzes Jewish (and patristic) biblicizing re-articulations of the god Sarapis. Katell Berthelot’s “Regards juifs alexandrins sur les religions,” *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 234:4 (2017), 635–60 on foreign religion in the works of Philo and the Wisdom of Solomon, and especially the euhemerist views therein, also contains much investigation of the conceptual, and Berthelot even suggests there *in nuce* a similar distinction between the normative and the descriptive. See Berthelot, “Regards,” 636–37. These exceptions, however, are few and far between in the scholarship on Second Temple and rabbinic Judaism.

*gods' icons?* As a “cognitive minority,” surrounded and indeed ruled by communities with worship practices and religious systems often inimical to their own, how did Jews provide etiologies or motives which could make the practices of their gentile neighbors in some way intelligible to them?<sup>9</sup>

### **Jewish Explanations for the Reverence of Other Gods and Their Icons: A Literature Review**

In the years between approximately 200 B.C.E. and 200 C.E., both within the Land of Israel and outside of it, Jews offered, we would suggest, at least four major theories in response to the intellectual challenge posed from, and the cognitive dissonance created by, the very existence of foreign religion. These four theories were: first, that such worship was not truly sincere or genuine, a position which we might term “the Bad Faith Argument”; second, a psychologizing application of the Greek concept of euhemerism; third, the ascription to the gentile worshiper of a rational error leading to deviant worship, which we might call “the Cognitive Error” hypothesis; and, lastly, the attribution of agency to demons or evil spirits who led the transgressive worshipers astray.<sup>10</sup>

On close inspection, it is possible to discern, scattered throughout the secondary literature, a number of brief engagements with the question of Jewish explanations for other religions in general, and with these four theories in particular. Several of these engagements concern themselves largely with early *Christian* explanations for pagan worship, and the majority attempt to grapple with Jewish explanations only at the level of a fleeting comment.<sup>11</sup> Beyond such

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<sup>9</sup> On the concept of a “cognitive minority,” that is, “a group of people whose view of the world differs significantly from the one generally taken for granted in their society,” and who are “formed around a body of deviant ‘knowledge,’” see Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), 6–8.

<sup>10</sup> By “transgressive worshipers” and similar such phrases, I, of course, do not intend here any normative judgement on my own part, but rather a short-hand for “worship which ancient Jewish authors saw as transgressive.”

<sup>11</sup> On early Christian explanations for and responses to pagan religion, see for example Adolf Harnack, *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*

transitory asides, a handful of works do present slightly more substantial attempts to grapple with our topic, though even these discussions range from one or two paragraphs to a maximum of several pages of relevant material. Nonetheless, they hit on a number of the major elements of our question and represent the most developed analyses of the topic to be found in existing scholarship.

Several of the accounts in which these discussions appear, like those of Louis Ginzberg, A.D. Nock, and Gerhard von Rad, are still well-known to scholars. Others, like Wolf Wilhelm von Baudissin's *Studien zur Semitischen Religionsgeschichte* and Wilhelm Bousset's *Die Religion des Judentums im neutestamentlichen Zeitalter*, were influential in the years after their publication, but have since fallen into relative obscurity. And still others, like those of Paul Krüger or Judah Bergmann, seem never to have made a particular impression on scholarship. What most of these discussions have in common, however, is the ambition to capture a rather sprawling topic in the history of religion, be it "*Die Religion des Judentums im neutestamentlichen Zeitalter*" in Bousset's case, Jewish apologetic in Krüger's and Bergmann's, ancient Jewish legends in Ginzberg's, or even, in a sense, the religious psychology of the ancient world as a whole in Nock's *Conversion*.<sup>12</sup> It seems that these works, precisely due to their capaciousness, stumbled onto our topic even as so many other scholars either overlooked it entirely or confined it to a brief aside.

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(Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1902), 210–25 and Edwyn Bevan, *Holy Images: An Inquiry into Idolatry and Image-Worship in Ancient Paganism and in Christianity* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1940), 84–95. For passing references to the issue as it developed in ancient Judaism see, for example, Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1994), 121, E.R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 116–17 and 117, n. 3, David Flusser, "Paganism in Palestine," in S. Safrai and M. Stern eds. *The Jewish People in the First Century* vol. 2 (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1976), 1085, E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 BCE – 66 CE* (London: SCM Press, 1992), 268–69, Louis Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 56, and Lester Grabbe, *A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period* vol. 2 (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 88–90.

<sup>12</sup> Krüger's discussion ostensibly focuses on Philo and Josephus but in practice is somewhat more wide-ranging.

Yet, due to this same grand breadth of investigation, these discussions never attain to any real depth, nor address our topic in a focused and direct manner. Rather, the question of Jewish responses to pagan religion in antiquity is almost always mixed in with related topics in pagan thought, Christian thought, and even medieval Jewish thought, or attended to as a diversion from a main investigation.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps as a consequence of this marginal treatment, the existing discussions of our topic demonstrate little cohesion or intellectual development.

Normally, working backwards through footnotes and references, a narrative emerges of itself and links one scholarly account to the next, as the ideas under discussion gradually take clearer shape from author to author. In the case of our topic, however, a certain set of basic points seems early on to have crystallized and, recycled by each scholar, are redeployed with minimal deliberation or elaboration. And while the consistency of many of the points these scholars raise, and even of the order of their presentation, seems to suggest some degree of direct influence from one scholar to the next, this chain of influence has rarely been acknowledged in footnotes or references.<sup>14</sup> As a result, the reader may discern, in the following attempt to lay out a path through the secondary studies, a certain lack of continuity or flow, perhaps even a manner of artificiality.

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<sup>13</sup> Though the description “pagan” has been, and continues to be, widespread in the literature on Jews and gentiles in antiquity (as a number of works already cited demonstrate), the term has come under criticism, due both to its perceived negative connotations and the fact that few ancient individuals would have categorized or understood themselves in the manner suggested by the term. The validity of these objections notwithstanding, it is hard, as Alan Cameron points out, to find a superior substitute term with which to designate these historical groups. We will continue, then, to employ the term, though always with due caution. On the issues involved in this term, as well as the term “polytheist,” see Alan Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 25–32.

<sup>14</sup> Included among the few direct citations of one author by another we may note, for example, that Krüger cites Bousset’s discussion, Bergmann cites Krüger’s, and Barbu cites Ginzberg’s. Some of the accounts under consideration do cite their predecessors here in reference to topics other than the ones we are considering. Nock, for example, cites Bousset’s article on Greco-Roman and early Christian understandings of demons, “Zur Dämonologie der späteren Antike,” *Archiv für*

Yet the rather disheveled and marginal state of our question in the secondary literature should strike us, more than anything, as the ideal witness to the importance of our project. For all of the scholars to be analyzed below testified by their attentions, though limited, to the worthwhileness of our topic for study, and even suggested *in statu nascendi* some of the central ideas which we ourselves shall pursue. None of them, however, developed the topic beyond the rudimentary. In Nock's own words, as we shall see below, "the subject is not exhausted."<sup>15</sup>

The first significant discussion of our topic appears in Baudissin's 1876 *Studien zur Semitischen Religionsgeschichte*, in an essay treating of "Die Anschauung des Alten Testaments von den Göttern des Heidenthums." In the essay, Baudissin seeks to trace the development of biblical attitudes toward the existence of other gods. In so doing, he maps a progression from an initial acknowledgement of other gods' existence, to a rejection of their reality, up through their rearticulation as demons.<sup>16</sup>

In the midst of this broader undertaking, Baudissin detours into a sub-section entitled "Die Aussagen des A.T., welche die heidnischen Götter als dämonische Mächte anzuerkennen scheinen."<sup>17</sup> Despite the focus on the Hebrew Bible suggested by this title, however, Baudissin immediately pivots to the mid-Second Temple period, proposing to approach the biblical material

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*Religionswissenschaft* 18 (1915), 134–72, but not Bousset's account, more relevant to Nock's own discussion, from *Die Religion des Judentums im neutestamentlichen Zeitalter* analyzed here.

<sup>15</sup> A.D. Nock, *Conversion: the Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019), 300.

<sup>16</sup> See Wolf Wilhelm von Baudissin, *Studien zur semitischen Religionsgeschichte* Heft I (Leipzig: Verlag Grunow, 1876), 49–177, and in particular 54–55 and 177, where Baudissin concludes that "es sind also drei Stufen...für die Entwicklung der Vorstellung von der Einzigartigkeit dieses Gottes usw." For a critical take on Baudissin's analysis, see Friedrich Baethgen, *Beiträge zur Semitischen Religionsgeschichte: Der Gott Israel's und Die Götter der Heiden* (Berlin: H. Reuther's Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1888), 132–42 and 179–80.

<sup>17</sup> Baudissin, *Studien*, 110.

through the lens of this later vantage point.<sup>18</sup> In pursuance of this methodology, Baudissin begins by identifying those places in the Septuagint, Baruch, Enoch, and the Sibylline corpus in which the Greek term δαιμόνιον (or its Ge'ez equivalent) is deployed as a description of pagan gods. Much of Baudissin's discussion here is directed toward demonstrating that these early demonological discussions reflect an exclusively "üble Bedeutung von δαιμόνιον." These demons are not positive forces which have been misunderstood, but rather "böse Geister" by their very essence.<sup>19</sup>

From here, Baudissin turns to the later reception of such demonological views of the pagan gods in the Pauline epistles and the Book of Revelation.<sup>20</sup> On Baudissin's view, Paul (and the Church Fathers in his wake) adapted notions of the gods as demonic forces which originated among Alexandrian Jews. Furthermore, Baudissin contends, we can detect this same Alexandrian Jewish conception of the gods in the literature of the Rabbis, as he learns from Johann Eisenmenger's *Entdecktes Judentum* that "die Götter der Heiden gelten bei ihnen [the Rabbis] als gefallene Engel."<sup>21</sup>

For Baudissin, however, this account of the pagan gods must be distinguished entirely from the view which we find in Philo.<sup>22</sup> In sharp contrast to the demonological view, Philo "erklärt als

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<sup>18</sup> Baudissin, *Studien*, 110.

<sup>19</sup> Baudissin, *Studien*, 110–13. Baudissin compares this exclusively negative demonology with the perspectives of Philo and Pseudo-Aristeas, who, in his view, are willing to ascribe a more positive character to at least some subset of the gods of the nations. And cf. also Baudissin, *Studien*, 52 and 130.

<sup>20</sup> Baudissin, *Studien*, 113–15. Baudissin is particularly interested here in reconciling the seemingly inconsistent views on the ontology of the gentile gods to be found in Paul's epistles and Revelation.

<sup>21</sup> Baudissin, *Studien*, 115, and n. 3 for Baudissin's citation of Eisenmenger. Emphasis added.

<sup>22</sup> It is worth noting here Baudissin's insight that, unlike in the other texts which he analyzes, in Jubilees the demons or fallen angels are not clearly represented as the gods themselves, but "nur als die *Verführer* zum Götzendienst." See Baudissin, *Studien*, 116. Emphasis added.



die eigentlichen, nur durch die Mythologie verhüllten Gegenstände der Verehrung nach dem Vorgang der Stoiker theils grosse Männer der Vergangenheit, theils die Gestirne und Elemente.” We have in Philo, then, two distinct perspectives on the nature of the gods: first, a “bewusste euemeristische Anschauung, dass die Götter des Heidenthums aus der Verehrung Verstorbener entstanden seien,” which appears also in the Wisdom of Solomon.<sup>23</sup> Second, notes Baudissin, we find in Philo a perspective which in “den Göttern des Heidenthums die Gestirne erkennt.” According to this latter view, in which the stars are “vernünftige und gottähnliche Wesen,” it must be conceded that “die Götter des Heidenthums werden hier also für wirklich seiende gute Wesen erklärt.”<sup>24</sup>

In conclusion, summarizes Baudissin, “zwei Anschauungen haben wir im Alexandrismus nebeneinander gefunden, als herrschende diese, dass die Götter der Heiden böse Geister seien, bei Philo eine andere, welche in ihnen die Gestirne erkennt, diese aber für gute Geister erklärt. Kehren wir von hier aus zum A.T. zurück.”<sup>25</sup> Euhemerism, addressed by Baudissin shortly before, seems to have dropped out of this concluding schema.

Already in 1876, then, Baudissin succeeds not only in raising the question of Jewish explanations for other gods in antiquity, but also in identifying two of their main attempts to grapple with that question: the Demon Explanation and euhemerism. He also, in discussing Philo’s notions of astral worship as a veneration of real—and even godlike—celestial entities, seems to gesture at a third explanation, the Cognitive Error hypothesis in the form of a confusion of the creator and the created, though this remains only implied. Baudissin also seeks, at least in theory, to make some distinction between biblical and Hellenistic Jewish sources. And, crucially,

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<sup>23</sup> Baudissin, *Studien*, 116. And cf. also Baudissin, *Studien*, 37.

<sup>24</sup> Baudissin, *Studien*, 116–17.

<sup>25</sup> Baudissin, *Studien*, 117–18.

Baudissin attempts, albeit in one sentence only, to incorporate rabbinic literature into his otherwise Greek-leaning discussion of ancient Jewish views.

Baudissin's account, however, leaves much to be desired. Though in principle endeavoring to make a distinction between biblical and post-biblical texts, Baudissin's approach—the attempt to read post-biblical views back into the biblical texts themselves—seems in practice to obliterate this partition. Meanwhile, though Baudissin's attempt to organize the views offered by Second Temple texts into conceptual categories is laudable, the categories chosen appear poorly considered and even confusing: either they contrast the “Alexandrian” demonological view with the dual euhemeristic/Astral views of Philo (apparently not quite “Alexandrian” on this analysis), or they set out an overall contrast between “die Götter der Heiden [als] böse Geister,” and as stars who are “für gute Geister erklärt,” excluding euhemerism entirely. We have, then, an arrangement of views which seems to muddle the material both diachronically from the biblical to the Second Temple period and synchronically within the Second Temple period itself.

Furthermore, Baudissin's textual sources are extremely limited in number, receive little in-depth analysis, and reflect a clear bias toward Hellenistic or pseudepigraphic Jewish literature, with an almost complete disregard of rabbinic sources. One might note with appreciation, of course, Baudissin's lone reference to rabbinic thought in his discussion of demonological views, even if this reference relies entirely on Johann Eisenmenger's anti-Semitic tractate *Entdecktes Judentum*.<sup>26</sup> What is difficult to accept, however, is Baudissin's particular source for the claim, namely Eisenmenger's restatement of Nachmanides' medieval commentary on the Pentateuch, which Baudissin presents as though a witness to classical rabbinic thought.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> On *Entdecktes Judentum*'s anti-Semitic agenda, see Stern, *Jewish Identity*, 4.

<sup>27</sup> Baudissin cites Johann Eisenmenger, *Entdecktes Judentum Erster Theil* (Königsberg: 1711), 816f, which begins with a citation of part of Nachmanides' interpretation of Exodus 20:3 and

Lastly, the Bad Faith Argument, the negating-explanation for transgressive worship which will occupy most of our time in this dissertation, is missing entirely.

Though Baudissin's analysis is not directly cited by any of the subsequent discussions which we shall lay out, it seems nonetheless, in its structure and indeed in its shortcomings, to have set the mold for many later scholars. Beginning with a discussion of demonic explanations for other gods, he leads into euhemeristic explanations in the Wisdom of Solomon (though also here in Philo). Baudissin then abruptly turns from these two topics to a discussion of Philo's normative evaluation of astral worship. And, lastly, in an attempt to provide some structure to these discussions, he offers a set of rather unhelpful or contradictory categories to organize the different views under consideration. We shall see many of these weaknesses, as well as the arrangement of Baudissin's discussion itself, resurface in various forms in the subsequent accounts.

The second significant discussion of our topic in the literature appears within the "Bekenntnis, Dogma, und Glaube" section of Wilhelm Bousset's 1903 *Die Religion des Judentums im neutestamentlichen Zeitalter*, in a short sub-section entitled "Beurteilung des Heidentums."

Like Baudissin, Bousset begins with an assessment of two biblical views of other gods, specifically at the time of the Babylonian exile. "Je entschiedener das monotheistische Dogma in der Religion des Judentums heraustritt und an Bedeutung gewinnt," states Bousset, "desto entschiedener wird auch die Beurteilung des Heidentums."<sup>28</sup> This trend, he contends, provoked dual reactions in biblical polemic. According to one of these conceptions, represented by Second

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proceeds to cite other medieval or early modern works describing demonic influence on the nations of the world before moving on to a discussion of Samael in Jewish literature.

<sup>28</sup> Wilhelm Bousset, *Die Religion des Judentums im neutestamentlichen Zeitalter* (Berlin: Verlag von Reuther und Reichard, 1903), 171.

Isaiah and the later sections of Jeremiah, “sind die heidnischen Götter ein nichts, ihre Verehrung gilt als ein Unrecht und eine Thorheit.” As for the second conception, represented by Deuteronomy 4:19 and 29:25, as well as Jeremiah 16:19, and continuing down to Ben Sira and perhaps Jubilees, “hat Gott sich Israel als sein Volk auserwählt, die andern Völker aber hat er den untergebenen Mächten... unterworfen.” On this view, “der heidnische Polytheismus gilt hier als etwas berechtigtes, ja von Gott geordnetes.”

In contrast to the conflicting views of the biblical period, however, this more permissive view “tritt nun im Spätjudentum vollständig zurück.”<sup>29</sup> Instead, in the later Second Temple period, “ueberall, wohin wir schauen, gilt das Heidentum als ein Unrecht. Der Götzendienst ist eine Erfindung des Satans (Mastemas) auch für das palästinensische Judentum (Jubil. 11 3-5), eine Erbschaft der gefallenen aufrührerischen Engel (I. Hen. 19 1).”<sup>30</sup>

After offering a list of Hellenistic Jewish texts which contain negative assessments of polytheism or iconolatriy (though not necessarily the demonological views he has just mentioned), Bousset proceeds to note that this “niedrigste Beurteilung des Heidentums, die wir in diesen Zeugnissen finden, lehnt sich an die Polemik des Deuterjesaia gegen das Heidentum an. Das Heidentum ist Verehrung toter Bilder, welche die Menschen selbst mit Händen gemacht haben.”<sup>31</sup> Here an additional list follows, now from Second Temple Jewish texts which, in Bousset’s view, are inspired directly by Second Isaiah.<sup>32</sup> He then closes with the comment, “mit dieser Polemik

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<sup>29</sup> Bousset, *Die Religion*, 172.

<sup>30</sup> Bousset, *Die Religion*, 172.

<sup>31</sup> Bousset, *Die Religion*, 172 specifically lists the “letzten Teil der Sapientia, den Brief des Jeremias, die Schriften vom Bel und Drachen zu Babel, an den jüdischen Bestandteil des vierten (und siebenten) Pseudo-Heraklitischen Briefes, endlich auch an Philos Polemik gegen das Heidentum.”

<sup>32</sup> Bousset *Die Religion*, 172 cites in this connection specific passages from Judith, Jubilees, 1 and 2 Enoch, the Epistle of Jeremiah, the Sibylline Oracles, the Letter of Aristeas, the Wisdom of Solomon, and selected works of Philo.

verbinden sich Einflüsse des Euhemerismus.”<sup>33</sup> On this claim, Bousset refers the reader to Wisdom of Solomon 14, as well as passages in the Sibylline Oracles. He then states that “Bilderdienst und Priesterbetrug, nur Gegenstand des Spottes, ist das Heidentum, der Dienst des Bel, auch der Schrift vom Bel zu Babel.”

Following this first list of texts, each of which rejects the existence of powers behind the icons, Bousset lists a “zweite Beurteilung” which ascribes “dem Glauben des Heidentums eine grössere Realität. In Anlehnung an die stoische Beurteilung des populären Gottesdienstes bildet sich...die Anschauung, dass das Heidentum in Verehrung der Dämonen bestehe.”<sup>34</sup> In fact, infers Bousset from Jubilees and the Sibylline Oracles, “die Dämonen werden dann auch bereits den im Hades wohnenden Seelen der Abgeschiedenen gleichgestellt,” thus evidently positing a certain identity between euhemerism and the argument which we have called “the Demon Explanation.”<sup>35</sup>

Finally, after presenting these two categories, distinguished by the degree of reality which they ascribe to the pagan gods, Bousset proceeds rather abruptly to present a further grouping: “Endlich,” he states, “wird das Heidentum als Dienst und Verehrung der Gestirne gesehen, namentlich da wo man sich das orientalisches-babylonische Heidentum...vergegenwärtigte.”<sup>36</sup> Such worship is, in some sense, less censorious; indeed Philo and the Wisdom of Solomon are “in charakteristischer Uebereinstimmung” in considering “die Verehrung der Elemente und die der Gestirne” as “die wertvollsten Formen der heidnischen Gottesverehrung.” It is only at this point

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<sup>33</sup> Bousset, *Die Religion*, 172.

<sup>34</sup> Bousset, *Die Religion*, 172–73. As sources for this claim (and related claims about fallen angels), Bousset points to passages from 1 Enoch, several Septuagint passages (most importantly Deut 32:17), Jubilees, and the Sibylline Oracles.

<sup>35</sup> Bousset, *Die Religion*, 173, and cf. 333, n. 1.

<sup>36</sup> Bousset, *Die Religion*, 173. Bousset here too offers a list of citations from 1 Enoch, Wisdom of Solomon 13, the Epistle of Jeremiah, Philo, the Sibylline Oracles, Jubilees and the Apocalypse of Abraham. He also notes: “vgl. Berachot 7b. Wünsche I 20... und Nedarim 32. Wünsche II 1. 204.” See Bousset, *Die Religion*, 179.

that Bousset notes that “die Heiden, die diese Verehrung betreiben, machen sich zwar auch der *Verwechslung von Schöpfer und Geschöpf* schuldig. Aber sie sind dennoch zu entschuldigen.”<sup>37</sup>

Bousset’s discussion is noteworthy for the wide array of sources which it presents, ranging from Philo and the Wisdom of Solomon, to Jubilees, Enoch, the Sibylline corpus, the Epistle of Jeremiah, the Letter of Aristeas, and the Septuagint, among others. Bousset’s attempt to distinguish between biblical polemics and the views of later texts, and even to articulate to some degree the discontinuities between them, incorporates more successful chronological nuance than many other discussions of our question. And while Bousset does not mention the polemic perspective which we have labelled the “Bad Faith Argument,” his discussion does hit on all three of the other major theories to be identified in the mid-late Second Temple and early rabbinic periods: euhemerism, the Demon Explanation, and, though mentioned somewhat perfunctorily, what we have termed the “Cognitive Error” hypothesis.

These contributions notwithstanding, Bousset’s account remains far too brief to allow for a presentation of all relevant sources, or indeed a satisfactory analysis of those texts which he does consider. Furthermore, Bousset’s discussion, like Baudissin’s before it, relies exclusively on Hellenistic and Pseudepigraphic Jewish literature, with the exception of two references to the Babylonian Talmud which are brought in merely for “vgl.,” and which are taken not directly from the Talmud, but rather through the intermediary of August Wünsche’s translation and commentary, *Der Babylonische Talmud in Seinen Haggadischen Bestandtheilen*.

Lastly, Bousset’s attempts to introduce theoretical principles on which to organize the texts and arguments which he presents seem rather to multiply confusion. Bousset initially divides the material into two categories: a first category, going back to and drawing influence from Second

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<sup>37</sup> Bousset, *Die Religion*, 174. Emphasis added.

Isaiah, in which the reality of the gods and the idols is simply denied, and a second category in which their reality is acknowledged but classified as in some way demonic. However, after presenting these two categories, Bousset seemingly introduces a third category based instead on the specific *identity* of the objects of worship as they correspond to local cultures—in this case, Jewish descriptions of the gentile worship of stars and elements “da wo man sich das orientalisch-babylonische Heidentum...vergegenwärtigte.” This is further complicated by Bousset’s abrupt transition at this point into the *normative* evaluation by Philo and the Wisdom of Solomon of such astral worship. Only mixed into this evaluative discussion does Bousset briefly mention the explanatory theory that we have labelled the “cognitive error” model.

Paul Krüger, citing Bousset in a short 1906 treatise called *Philo und Josephus als Apologeten des Judentums*, offers a brief comment on our topic, comprising only one concise paragraph and an attached footnote.<sup>38</sup> After a discussion of Philo’s tiered evaluation of pagan worship, Krüger states that “Die übrige Litteratur der Diaspora bekämpft ebenso wie Philo den Polytheismus. Die Heiden verehren die Geschöpfe anstatt den Schöpfer, auf den die Welt als sein Werk hindeutet. Der Bilderdienst gilt Toten; die Bilder sind leblos, weiter nichts als Abbilder Verstorbener und tief beklagter Menschen.”<sup>39</sup> And on a footnote to this comment, Krüger notes “Diese euhemeristische Anschauung über die Entstehung des Götzendienstes findet sich sap. Sal. 14, 15 ff. Nach palästinensischer Vorstellung gilt der Bilderdienst nicht Toten, sondern realen

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<sup>38</sup> For Krüger’s citation of Bousset’s discussion, see Paul Krüger, *Philo und Josephus als Apologeten des Judentums* (Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1973), 44, n. 3. Krüger cites Bousset’s discussion shortly two pages after his analysis, considered here, of Jewish views on the emergence of other religions. It is clear, however, that he is reliant on Bousset’s discussion already here as well.

<sup>39</sup> Krüger, *Philo und Josephus*, 42. For the statement “die Heiden verehren usw.,” Krüger offers Wisdom of Solomon 13:3 ff. in a footnote as an example.

Mächten, den Dämonen. Vgl. Jubil. 11, 4. 22, 17. Diese in Palästina übliche Beurteilung des Heidentums ist auch der Diaspora nicht fremd: deut. 32, 17 LXX. Vgl. Auch Jes. 65, 11 LXX.”<sup>40</sup>

This brief analysis contains within it a number of the major Jewish explanations of foreign worship in post-biblical antiquity. First, Krüger notes that diasporic Jewish literature criticizes pagan religion on the grounds that pagans “verehren die Geschöpfe anstatt den Schöpfer, auf den die Welt als sein Werk hindeutet.” The created world, perhaps including everything from stars to hand-made icons, is the object of gentile reverence, even though the world itself should provide sufficient means for inferring the inimitability of the creator—“den Schöpfer, auf den die Welt als sein Werk hindeutet.” Krüger, then, offers us here the clearest articulation yet of our “Cognitive Error” hypothesis, namely that a mistaken but intelligible thought process—in this case, the failure to discern the creator through his works and thus distinguish him from the created—has led to a corrupt view of worship. Beyond this, Krüger notes the Jewish view that the worship of idols is actually the worship of “Abbilder Verstorbenen und tief beklagter Menschen,” which he identifies as “euhemeristisch” and even explicitly labels as a Jewish explanation for the “Entstehung des Götzendienstes.” Furthermore, Krüger suggests that, while this euhemeristic explanation was prevalent in the diaspora, in its stead Palestinian Judaism saw in the idols the operation of “realen Mächten, den Dämonen.” And lastly, Krüger proposes that this Demon Explanation was also operative in the diaspora, as evidenced by select verses in the Septuagint.

Like Bousset, Krüger manages in this brief analysis to present three of our four major Jewish theories of transgressive worship (that is to say, all of them except the Bad Faith Argument),

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<sup>40</sup> Krüger, *Philo und Josephus*, 42, n. 7. Krüger, *Philo und Josephus*, 42 also offers the brief explanatory comment that “diese Polemik gegen den Polytheismus ist allgemein jüdisch. Das Judentum als die Religion des Monotheismus muss, von den Heiden wegen seiner Gottesanschauung verklagt, gegen den Glauben der Gegner zu Felde ziehen und seine Fehler und Mängel aufdecken, damit das eigene Licht heller leuchten kann.”



if in a highly abbreviated manner. Yet Krüger’s analysis is also marred by a number of deficiencies. Krüger offers no attempt to date the ideas under discussion historically, simply ascribing them to “diasporic” and “Palestinian” literature without additional contextualization. Furthermore, his examples—two passages from Wisdom of Solomon, two from Jubilees, and two from the Septuagint—overlook entirely the relevance of rabbinic literature. And, lastly, the stark division which Krüger posits between “diasporic” and “Palestinian” Judaism seems strongly to overstate the distinction between these two Jewish contexts in their attempts to explain the existence of other religions and forms of worship.

Judah Bergmann, in his 1908 *Jüdische Apologetik im neutestamentlichen Zeitalter*, notes that Krüger’s account of two years prior focuses largely on Hellenistic Jewish apologetic.<sup>41</sup> As such, Bergmann sets himself the task “zu schildern, wie das palästinensische Judentum, das Judentum des Lehrhauses, durch seine Lehrer verteidigt wurde.”<sup>42</sup> In a chapter entitled “Der Kampf,” following a brief discussion about rabbinic views on heresy, he presents a sub-section entitled “Gegen das Heidentum.” According to Bergmann, it was in their attempt to defend Jewish religious life from unwanted “Vermischung mit heidnischem Wesen”<sup>43</sup> that the Rabbis “nahmen den Kampf mit dem Heidentum auf,” and were in this sense “die Vorgänger der christlichen Apologeten.”<sup>44</sup> Bergmann further remarks that while the Talmud’s tendency “das tägliche Leben

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<sup>41</sup> Bergmann, *Jüdische Apologetik*, v.

<sup>42</sup> Bergmann, *Jüdische Apologetik*, v.

<sup>43</sup> Bergmann, *Jüdische Apologetik*, 10–11.

<sup>44</sup> Bergmann, *Jüdische Apologetik*, 11. Bergmann stresses in particular the parallels between rabbinic discussions of idolatry and those of the early Christian author Tertullian. Such parallels with Tertullian have remained a mainstay of academic literature on religious polemic in rabbinic Judaism. See, for example, Fredriksen and Irshai, “Include Me Out,” passim, Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine*, 111–12, Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism*, 71, and Stephanie Binder, *Tertullian, On Idolatry, and Mishnah Avodah Zarah: Questioning the Parting of the Ways between Christians and Jews* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

mit einem Zaun von Gesetzen zu umgeben” is often presented as a “kleinliche Kasuistik,” the comparison between these Talmudic provisions and “der Kampfmethod der christlichen Schriftsteller wird zu einem objektiveren Urteil in dieser Frage führen.”<sup>45</sup>

Despite Bergmann’s insistence in the preface to his work that the “vorliegende Arbeit will eine geschichtliche und keine apologetische sein,”<sup>46</sup> Bergmann seems here to propose an apologetic aim, one thoroughly consistent with the bugaboos of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement. Rabbinic Judaism, on his view, has been burdened with accusations of pedantic casuistry. If, however, Bergmann can demonstrate that early *Christian* apologetic literature is no different from its rabbinic counterparts—or indeed even proceeds from them—he can counter the inferior evaluations of these early Jewish texts, at least as concerning religious polemic. Bergmann, then, seeks to offer an apologetic by means of comparing ancient apologetics.

Bergmann begins his discussion here with the observation that “der Polytheismus gilt den jüdischen Lehrern als eine Verirrung. Die Heiden haben ihre Religion von ihren Vätern übernommen und üben durch das Festhalten an ihrer Religion Treue gegen ihre Väter.”<sup>47</sup> Bergmann then adds, in a footnote thereon, the quote, with no additional comment: “‘Die Heiden im Auslande sind nicht als Götzendiener zu betrachten, da sie nur an der Religionsübung ihrer Väter festhalten’ (Chulin 13b).”<sup>48</sup> Here, then, Bergmann seems poised already in his opening remark on rabbinic views of gentile religion to take a first pass at something resembling the Bad Faith Argument. He has noted that a rabbinic view exists according to which pagans practice their

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<sup>45</sup> Bergmann, *Jüdische Apologetik*, 11.

<sup>46</sup> Bergmann, *Jüdische Apologetik*, v.

<sup>47</sup> Bergmann, *Jüdische Apologetik*, 11. Bergmann’s account of Jewish views “Gegen das Heidentum” reaches approximately 15 pages, yet only select remarks from this section (and from the following section, “Gegen das Christentum”) have direct bearing on Jewish explanations for transgressive worship.

<sup>48</sup> Bergmann, *Jüdische Apologetik*, 11, n. 1.

religion out of loyalty to their fathers' tradition (rather than, evidently, true conviction), and even quoted as evidence R. Johanan's dictum in *b. Hul. 13b* to the effect that they practice it, at least outside of the Land of Israel, "*nur*" as a customary inheritance of their fathers.<sup>49</sup> Yet, rather than pursue this line of thinking and the Bad Faith Argument which it entails, Bergmann immediately pivots in a different direction entirely.<sup>50</sup>

Shortly thereafter, Bergmann suggests that the Rabbis lacked an informed understanding of the religions surrounding them, and instead "die Heiden werden im Hinblick auf den orientalisch-babylonischen Gestirndienst Verehrer der Sterne und der Planeten genannt."<sup>51</sup> In the rabbinic view of such worship, "die Minderwertigkeit der heidnischen Religion offenbart sich darin, daß in ihr *statt des Schöpfers die Geschöpfe verehrt werden.*"<sup>52</sup> Here again we seem to find, though once more muddled with the analysis of normative Jewish views of "Minderwertigkeit," the confusion of creature and creator—a subtype of our Cognitive Error hypothesis—highlighted in the context of astral worship.<sup>53</sup>

At this point in his discussion, Bergmann again seems to come extremely close to a clear recognition of the Bad Faith Argument in classical Jewish sources. He states that "die Inferiorität der heidnischen Religion zeigt sich nach der Meinung der jüdischen Lehrer auch in der unwürdigen Art, in der die Heiden die Götter anbeten, und in dem Mangel eines veredelnden Einflusses der

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<sup>49</sup> The "only" in R. Johanan's dictum in *b. Hul. 13b* is, in fact, merely implied, rather than stated explicitly. On the dictum, see Chapter 3 below.

<sup>50</sup> Bergmann, *Jüdische Apologetik*, 11. Bergmann turns here to citing a number of Jewish texts in which gentile devotion to paternal custom is held up as a model against the Jews' alleged caprice toward their own God and his commandments

<sup>51</sup> Bergmann, *Jüdische Apologetik*, 12. One might question to what extent this statement perhaps exaggerates rabbinic ignorance about contemporaneous gentile religions, seemingly on the sole basis of the phrase "worshippers of the stars."

<sup>52</sup> Bergmann, *Jüdische Apologetik*, 12. Emphasis added.

<sup>53</sup> Bergmann also relates here a King-Parable from Lamentations Rabbah on Lam 3:24 which he takes to be connected to such a confusion of creature and creator.

Religion auf ihre Bekenner.” As an example, he cites the Mekhilta’s interpretation of Exodus 20:23 that “die Heiden ehren ihre Götter im Glücke und verfluchen sie im Unglücke.”<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, he continues, citing Genesis Rabbah, “die Frevler (‘Pharao stand über dem Nil’ Gen 411) nehmen ihren Standpunkt über ihren Göttern ein—eine Anspielung auf die Selbstvergötterung der heidnischen Könige—, die Frommen (‘der Ewige stand über Abraham’ Gen. 2813) dagegen sind sich dessen bewußt, daß ihr Gott über ihnen steht.”<sup>55</sup> The gentiles, then, respect their gods only transactionally, and even place themselves *above* these gods, just as Pharaoh placed himself above his god, the Nile river. Furthermore, Talmudic texts imagine that “der Götzendienst hängt mit Ausschweifung und Unsittlichkeit zusammen (Sanh. 63b)” and “im Gegensatz zur Thora, die den Priestern strenge Pflichten auferlegt, ‘tut der Götzendienst seinen Anhängern Gutes’ in den laxen Vorschriften über Priester and Opfergaben (j. Ab. z. 39 a).”<sup>56</sup> So too “Philo die göttliche Weihe der jüdischen Sabbate und Festtage den heidnischen Festen gegenüberstellt, die mit ‘Schamlosigkeit...ungeziemenden Freuden, beständiger Wollust’ gefeiert werden.”<sup>57</sup> The religion of the Jews places strict demands on them, their sacred officers, and their sacred days; the religion of the gentiles, by contrast, is easy, uninhibited, even fun.

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<sup>54</sup> Bergmann, *Jüdische Apologetik*, 13. For the statement in its original context in the Mekhilta, see Jacob Z. Lauterbach, *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Ishmael* vol. 2 (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 2004), 344. See also Chapter 3 below.

<sup>55</sup> Bergmann, *Jüdische Apologetik*, 13.

<sup>56</sup> Bergmann, *Jüdische Apologetik*, 14. On this type of Bad Faith Argument, see Chapter 3 for the “Carelessness and Disesteem” subtype of the Bad Faith Argument.

<sup>57</sup> Bergmann, *Jüdische Apologetik*, 14–15. Bergmann suggests *b. Meg. 12b*, Esther Rabbah on Esther 1:10, and Song of Songs Rabbah on Songs 8:13 as rabbinic parallels to Philo’s discussion. Several pages later, Bergmann also recalls the narrative of the Bathhouse of Aphrodite in *m. ‘Abodah Zarah* 3:4, in which the gentiles’ degrading treatment of a statue of Aphrodite is understood to demonstrate their fundamentally irreligious attitude toward it. See Bergmann, *Jüdische Apologetik*, 22–23, n. 3. For a dedicated treatment of this mishnah in the context of the Bad Faith Argument, see Chapter 5 below.

Once again, however, Bergmann seems to overlook the Bad Faith element of the texts cited, instead articulating them within the prescriptive framework of pagan “Inferiorität” to Jewish practice, and even emphasizing the value of the texts as historical evidence for pagan attitudes, comparing them in a footnote with Greek and Latin authors who describe similarly disdainful treatment of pagan religious objects.<sup>58</sup> It may be, of course, that these conclusions are correct. In emphasizing them, however, Bergmann misses the far more intriguing arguments of Bad Faith which emerge from and perhaps even motivate such passages.

Following his “Gegen das Heidentum” section, Bergmann’s section “Gegen das Christentum” seems in its midst to return rather abruptly to the issue of paganism. “Der Volksglaube,” Bergmann notes, “hat immer und überall die Begründer der ‘Häresie’ mit Dämonen in Verbindung gebracht und zu Zauberern gestempelt. Wie die eigene Religion das Werk gottes ist, so ist die Religion des Gegners das Werk der Dämonen.” As such, “das jüdische Jubiläenbuch führt die Entstehung des heidnischen Götzendienstes auf den obersten der bösen Geister.”<sup>59</sup> Here, then, Bergmann presents us with a clear articulation of the Demon Explanation of transgressive religion, in particular as it appears in Jubilees.

Bergmann’s comments on our topic are distinguished by the attempt to provide a clear geographical and historical context for Jewish views of other worship—rabbinic Palestine—rather than simply mixing together all ancient sources, both biblical and post-biblical. Even more significant, perhaps, is Bergmann’s attempt to provide a *cause*, if poorly explicated, for the Jewish views “Gegen das Heidentum,” specifically the Jewish attempt to prevent a “Vermischung mit

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<sup>58</sup> Bergmann, *Jüdische Apologetik*, 13, n. 2.

<sup>59</sup> Bergmann, *Jüdische Apologetik*, 32. Bergmann then proceeds to detail comparable pagan and Christian views connecting Judaism with demons and the magic arts, and analogous pagan views of early Christianity.

heidnischem Wesen” through various prohibitions on behavior and interconfessional interaction. Bergmann’s discussion also constitutes a dedicated analysis of rabbinic views, a welcome corrective in a constellation of monographs characterized by an overwhelming predisposition toward Hellenistic and pseudepigraphic literature. Lastly, Bergmann’s remarks are also unique, prior to Urbach’s work in the 1950s, in even approaching the concept of the Bad Faith Argument, clearly appreciating that such rabbinic attitudes of dismissal had some particular significance.<sup>60</sup>

Nonetheless, Bergmann’s observations leave much underdeveloped or conceptually jumbled. Unlike Urbach several decades later, Bergmann does not recognize the exact nature of such rabbinic portrayals of pagan worship as an argument of “Bad Faith,” subsuming them instead under normative categories of the ‘Inferiorität’ of gentile religion. Furthermore, Bergmann’s discussion fails to distinguish within rabbinic literature between tannaitic, amoraic, and even somewhat later material, and offers no analysis of how rabbinic views of transgressive worship developed or disrupted Biblical and Second Temple perspectives. Additionally, while Bergmann recognizes the Demon Explanation and a variant of the Cognitive Error hypothesis, he misses the role of euhemerism altogether. And lastly, as in so many of these discussions, Bergmann’s various reflections, while connected by a common theme—Jewish views of gentiles and gentile worship—seem to lack any clear schema or conceptual arrangement, instead meandering haphazardly through various selected texts on the basis of the shared topic alone.

Louis Ginzberg’s *Legends of the Jews* is perhaps the classic compilation and index of Jewish narrative material. In his 1925 notes to volume 1 and 2 of this work, Ginzberg offers a number of terse but important points on our topic. Commenting on interpretations surrounding the figure of Enosh, Ginzberg states that:

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<sup>60</sup> On Urbach and the Bad Faith Argument, see Chapter 3 below.

The origin of idolatry occupied the minds of the Greeks, and the Jewish-Alexandrian schools accepted, with some modifications, the theory of Euhemerus, according to which its origin was due to the worship of dead heroes. Through the Jewish writers this theory reached the Church Fathers; comp. Wisdom 14. 12–13.<sup>61</sup>

After a brief discussion of euhemerism in patristic sources, Ginzberg then suggests that:

The statement frequently found among Church Fathers that the demons and the fallen angels, respectively, seduced men to idolatry...goes back to pseudepigraphic writings of the Jews...but is entirely unknown to the older rabbinic literature.<sup>62</sup>

Instead, suggests Ginzberg:

The beginning of idolatry, according to the older rabbinic sources, based on their interpretation of Gen. 4. 26, took place in the time of Enosh.<sup>63</sup>

In the exiguous account comprised by these three comments, then, Ginzberg contends that it was Greek gentile thinkers who first developed an interest in explaining “the origin of idolatry.” Furthermore, Ginzberg seems to suggest that Hellenistic Jews adopted this subject of inquiry from them directly, along with one of their major solutions to the problem, the widely-circulating Hellenistic theory of euhemerism. This theory was, on Ginzberg’s account, evidently confined to the Jews of the Greek speaking diaspora, while the Demon Explanation, which he then addresses, was present in the Greek diaspora as well as in the pseudepigraphic Jewish literature of the Land of Israel. Rabbinic literature, by contrast—or at least its early layers—contains, in Ginzberg’s view, no hint of either of these theories, instead ascribing the onset of idolatry to “the time of Enosh.”

Much like Bergmann’s analysis, Ginzberg’s discussion offers us two things which are strikingly absent in most of the other works under consideration here. First, rather than articulating

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<sup>61</sup> Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* vol. 5 (Philadelphia: JPS, 1947), 150.

<sup>62</sup> Ginzberg, *Legends* vol. 5, 151. And compare Ginzberg’s statement in *Legends* vol. 5, 108–09 that “the demons as seducers to idolatry and other transgressions does not occur at all in rabbinic literature.”

<sup>63</sup> Ginzberg, *Legends* vol. 5, 151.

his account of these ideas in a historical vacuum, Ginzberg places these arguments in the specific period of pre-Christian Alexandria, presumably around the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 1<sup>st</sup> centuries B.C.E., and even suggests a causal explanation, the direct adoption of the inquiry by Jews from Greeks. And second, he makes a concerted attempt to bring rabbinic literature into the scope of his analysis.

Yet even so, one might wonder whether Ginzberg underestimates the relevance of rabbinic literature to the Jewish investigation of “the origin of idolatry,” perhaps as a result of his contention that the topic was first adopted into Jewish thought by the Alexandrian community. The existence of the Demon Explanation in *tannaitic* literature, which Ginzberg strangely denies, is to be found clearly in *Sifre Deuteronomy*.<sup>64</sup> And, while Ginzberg is right to note that euhemerism as adopted by Jewish thinkers had its own “modifications”—though he does not specify what these might be—he may overstep again in categorically denying the presence of euhemeristic ideas in early rabbinic literature.<sup>65</sup>

Furthermore, one cannot help questioning whether Ginzberg’s analysis engages in something of a category error. Euhemerism and the seductive power of Demons are *explanations* for the origins of idolatry, seeking to provide the motivations which *caused* people to turn toward transgressive worship, be they grief, deception, or any other factor. Early rabbinic midrashim about Enosh, by contrast, simply pinpoint the practice of idolatry in the *era* of Enosh as described in Genesis 4:26, but do not explain how or why this move toward transgressive worship took place.

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<sup>64</sup> See Eliezer Finkelstein and Hayyim Saul Horowitz, *Sifre ‘al Sefer Devarim* (New York: Beit Hamidrash Lerabbanim Beamerika, תשנ”ג), 364 for Piska 318 on Deuteronomy 32:17: “[יזבחון] לשדים, מה דרכו של שד נכנס לאדם וכופה אותו.” All citations from the *Sifre ‘al Sefer Devarim* taken from Finkelstein and Horowitz’ edition unless otherwise noted. See also the discussion of Urbach in Chapter 3 below, where this topic will briefly resurface.

<sup>65</sup> It is our intention to discuss the “modifications” which characterized Jewish versions of euhemerism in a future work, and to argue furthermore that euhemerism is present in *amoraic* literature and perhaps in *tannaitic* literature as well.



In these narratives, the Rabbis are perhaps not so interested in explaining the “origin of idolatry” per se, but rather, after the fashion of an antiquarian, in discovering which verse in their Torah must surely relate the onset of an important world-historic phenomenon, namely idolatry.<sup>66</sup> The assignation of the onset of idolatry to the particular *time* of the generation of Enosh, however, does not, in the absence of any discussion of the motives or reasons propelling it, constitute an explanation.

A further significant discussion of our topic appears in A.D. Nock’s seminal 1933 work on religious subjectivity in the Greco-Roman world, *Conversion*. Therein, alighting incidentally on the topic of Jewish etiologies of foreign religions, Nock pursues the issue in only one paragraph (in the endnotes). As so often in Nock’s discussions of Judaism, even this paragraph is merely tacked on to an analysis of Christian views. Nonetheless, Nock’s brief excursus here is dense with arguments—most insightful, some perhaps premature.

In his chapter on “The Teachings of Christianity as viewed by a Pagan,” Nock comments, perhaps relying on Bousset’s conceptual division of Jewish views, that for early *Christians*, “two views might be held of pagan deities. First, that they were figments of the imagination, or at least not existing supernatural beings; second, that they were in fact supernatural beings but evil *daimones* or *daimonia*.”<sup>67</sup> This first early Christian view, that the pagan gods were figments of the imagination, “derived considerable support from those ancient writers who held that the

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<sup>66</sup> As Steven Fraade suggests in his monograph on rabbinic legends of Enosh, “since Rabbinic literature contains frequent polemics against ‘strange worship,’ considering it to be not only one of the cardinal human sins, but the sin that is the root of all others, it would be logical to assume that they would have been interested in determining when such behavior first began.” See Steven Fraade, *Enosh and His Generation: Pre-Israelite Hero and History in Postbiblical Interpretation* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1984), 196. Fraade also notes here Eusebius’ euhemeristic discussion of the etiology of idolatry, and in this connection references the Wisdom of Solomon, as well as Josephus and Pseudo-Clement.

<sup>67</sup> Nock, *Conversion*, 221.

gods...[were] dead men to whom... divine honours had been accorded,” or were “personifications of the elements and heavenly bodies and natural forces.” Thus, “this view drew its material from Greek speculation, which was the source of the frequent Jewish and Christian criticisms of the immorality of Greek myth and the crudity of Greek cult.” By contrast, the second early Christian view, that that pagan gods were malicious supernatural beings, “is developed with great elaboration by Justin. All sins and delusions are due to the activity of these demons.”<sup>68</sup>

It is as an endnote to this discussion of Christianity that Nock adds the comment most relevant to our purposes: “The Jews,” he says, “regarded pagan gods as (1) angels set by God over the seventy peoples of the world, (2) devils, (3) (the Hellenistic Jews) deified dead men, (4) nothing.” He comments, furthermore, that “the subject is not exhausted.”<sup>69</sup>

Nock’s account is particularly helpful for his attempt to provide an exhaustive list of ways in which Jews in antiquity attempted to respond to the intellectual challenge posed by the existence of other religions. His analysis, however, is still liable to a number of criticisms. Nock’s claim that “the Jews regarded pagan gods as (1) angels set by God over the seventy peoples of the world” is a reference to Deuteronomy 32:8 as preserved in the Septuagint (and, in a similar version, in the Dead Sea Scrolls) that “When the Most High divided up the nations, when he scattered the sons of man, he established the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the angels of god.”<sup>70</sup> A verse from Deuteronomy, however, cannot safely be used as evidence for what “the

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<sup>68</sup> Nock, *Conversion*, 221.

<sup>69</sup> Nock, *Conversion*, 300, endnote to Nock, *Conversion*, 221. In fact, Nock’s account here is derived substantially from Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* vol. 3 (Munich: Beck’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung: 1926), 48–53 which, because of its rather rambling nature, we have omitted in this list, opting instead to present Nock’s more concise version here.

<sup>70</sup> My translation. The Septuagint reads: Ὅτε διεμέριζεν ὁ ὕψιστος ἔθνη, ὡς διέσπειρεν υἱοὺς Ἀδάμ, ἔστησεν ὄρια ἔθνῶν κατὰ ἀριθμὸν ἀγγέλων θεοῦ. All passages from LXX taken from Alfred Rahls, *Septuaginta* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006) unless otherwise noted. On the

Jews” thought about pagan religions hundreds of years after the biblical period. Additionally, Nock asserts that the theory of euhemerism, namely that the gods were “dead men” who had been “deified,” was the exclusive province of “Hellenistic Jews.” As mentioned above, such a claim might well be challenged, though we will be unable to address it in this project. Nock’s statement, meanwhile, that some Jews regarded pagan gods as “nothing,” rather than as angels, demons, or dead men, seems elliptical at the very least. And, lastly, though Nock seems to suggest that his list is exhaustive, two major ancient Jewish explanations of pagan religion are absent from Nock’s accounting: the Cognitive Error argument and, of course, the Bad Faith Argument which will be our primary topic of investigation.

Gerhard von Rad, in his seminal *Weisheit in Israel*, first published in 1970, notes that, while the earliest biblical prohibition on idolatry (in his view, a segment of Deut 27:15) condemns icons as a violation of sacred law, subsequent biblical polemics disparage them rather on the basis of their *irrationality*. As von Rad notes, “verwarf man aber das Kultbild als widersinnig, weil der Mensch doch keinen Gott fabrizieren könne, so hatte sich ein entscheidender Wandel in der Argumentation vollzogen, denn nun war es gar nicht der unmittelbare Gotteswille, sondern die Logik eines weltlich gewordenen Weltverständnisses, die so ein Tun verbot.”<sup>71</sup> For this reason, von Rad categorizes such biblical polemic (including that in Hosea 13, Psalm 135, and of course Second Isaiah) as a form of *wisdom* discourse.<sup>72</sup>

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textual history of this passage in the LXX as well as at Qumran, see Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012) 248–50, Jeffrey Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 514, and Ronnie Goldstein, “A New Look at Deuteronomy 32:8–9 and 43 in the Light of Akkadian Sources,” *Tarbiz* 79:1 (2010), 5–21.

<sup>71</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Weisheit in Israel* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1985), 230.

<sup>72</sup> See von Rad’s overall discussion in *Weisheit*, 229–39.

In the midst of his discussion of biblical polemics against idolatry, however, von Rad ventures on something of a detour into Second Temple literature. In a discussion of *Bel and the Dragon* and the Epistle of Jeremiah, he suggests that in these works the “Spott an dem Ernst der Verehrung von Kultbildern vorbeigeht.”<sup>73</sup> Indeed, not only is the complex and serious nature of ancient iconolatry treated only superficially, “die doch nicht ganz fernliegende Frage, was denn die Menschen überhaupt dazu bewegte, Bilder anzubeten, *wird so gut wie nirgends gestellt*. Es liegt eben an ihrem verfinsterten Verstand; sie sind von bösen Geistern verführt, heißt es im Jubiläenbuche.”<sup>74</sup> One cannot help wondering what von Rad intends here. By which texts is this question “*so gut wie nirgends gestellt?*” By *Bel and the Dragon*? By the Epistle of Jeremiah? By all polemical texts without distinction? And how does von Rad’s citation of those in Jubilees who are “von bösen Geistern verführt” cohere with his claim that the question of the motivation for idolatry was practically never asked?

In sharp contrast to all of these works, in von Rad’s view, stands the Wisdom of Solomon. Though “zwar ist auch hier die Torheit des Bilderdienstes das große Thema,” the subject of idolatry is treated in a manner “wieviel bedachter” and “wieviel nuancierter.”<sup>75</sup> The work presents some who “die Elemente...für Götter halten, sei es daß sie von ihrer Schönheit oder von dem Entsetzlichen beeindruckt sind.”<sup>76</sup> While, concerning these worshipers, “kann man sie auch nicht entschuldigen, denn sie müßten doch den Schöpfer im Geschöpf erkennen,” nonetheless “so spricht es doch zu ihren Gunsten, daß sie Gott suchen und finden wollen.”<sup>77</sup> We have in von Rad’s

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<sup>73</sup> See von Rad, *Weisheit*, 233–34, and my analysis of his argument in the context of *Bel and the Dragon* in Chapter Four below.

<sup>74</sup> Von Rad, *Weisheit*, 234. Emphasis added.

<sup>75</sup> Von Rad, *Weisheit*, 235.

<sup>76</sup> Von Rad, *Weisheit*, 235–36.

<sup>77</sup> Von Rad, *Weisheit*, 236. For a discussion somewhat similar to von Rad’s, see Johannes Geffcken, *Zwei Griechische Apologeten* (Leipzig: Verlag von B.G. Teubner, 1907), XXII–

account, then, a certain recognition of what we have termed the Cognitive Error hypothesis, explaining transgressive worship as the consequence of an intellectual error specified and elaborated by the text, here again the failure to recognize the creator in the created world. Beyond this, von Rad also notes that in the Wisdom of Solomon “werden auch Reflexionen eingeschoben über die Motive, die die Künstler veranlaßt haben, solche Werke [of idols] überhaupt zu erstellen,” including “das Streben nach Verdienst.”<sup>78</sup> This assessment is, evidently, an acknowledgement, if transitory indeed, of something approaching the Bad Faith Argument, namely that the author of Wisdom of Solomon attributed to the craftsmen of icons insincere motives, specifically “das Streben nach Verdienst,” in order to explain their behavior.<sup>79</sup> Lastly, von Rad notes of the euhemeristic account in Wisdom of Solomon 14 that “interessant ist vollends, daß der Verfasser [of Wisdom of Solomon] sogar eine Ätiologie des Bilderdienstes versucht.”<sup>80</sup>

We might, then, award to von Rad the distinction of identifying in one discussion, if quite obliquely and with rather limited scope, all four of our ancient Jewish explanations of transgressive worship. Yet, even here, von Rad seems to swing back into a focus on the normative element of Jewish views of the other, following up his discussion of the “Ätiologie des Bilderdienstes” in Wisdom of Solomon with the comment that “aber bei all der Beweglichkeit seiner Gedankenführung—das Satirische wird von der ernsthaften Reflexion [about pagan worship] fast ganz in den Hintergrund gedrängt—*urteilt der Verfasser über den Bilderdienst grundsätzlich fast ebenso schroff wie die palästinensischen Lehrer*. Ja, in einer Hinsicht überbietet er sie sogar, indem

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XXVIII, though Geffcken is less concerned with the etiological element of the material and more interested in distinguishing between the characteristically “Jewish” and “Greek” elements of the texts which he analyzes.

<sup>78</sup> Von Rad, *Weisheit*, 236.

<sup>79</sup> On this, see our discussion of Wis 15 and the “ulterior motive” subcategory of the Bad Faith Argument in Chapter 3 below.

<sup>80</sup> Von Rad, *Weisheit*, 236.

er den Bilderdienst auch für die Wurzel aller moralischen Verwilderung ansieht.”<sup>81</sup> Von Rad himself seems to recognize that the various explanatory conceptions about pagan worship in the Wisdom of Solomon are a form of more “ernsthaften Reflexion” than the merely “Satirische,” and yet he cannot but revert into analysis of the normative, how the text “urteilt” pagan worship and attributes to it “die Wurzel aller moralischen Verwilderung.” As such, he does not pursue the “ernsthaften” subject-matter any further here.

Lastly, we might note the relevance to our question of Daniel Barbu’s 2016 *Naissance de l'idolâtrie: Image, identité, religion*. Barbu’s monograph primarily explores not ideas about the origins of idolatry itself, but rather the development of the normative *concept* “idolatry” and its role in creating boundaries against the outsider. In this broader context, however, mixed in with discussions of Greek and Roman thought, patristic thought, medieval thought, and etymology, Barbu does hit on several key points relevant to Jewish views on the origins of transgressive worship in antiquity. First, in a discussion of interpretations of Abraham as “celui qui le premier, après le Déluge, sut reconnaître dans la Création l'œuvre d'un dieu créateur,” Barbu gathers a large number of key sources for our “Cognitive Error” theory, primarily those pertaining directly to the patriarch.<sup>82</sup> He later notes, in a discussion not of Judaism but rather of the Church Fathers, that “deux thèmes fondamentaux pourront être combinés”: the first, “c’est l'evhémérisme, qui associe les dieux de la mythologie classique à des rois du passé, ou aux inventeurs de bienfaits culturels,” and a second based on an “appelle à une intervention diabolique.”<sup>83</sup> From here, Barbu transitions

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<sup>81</sup> Von Rad, *Weisheit*, 237. Emphasis added.

<sup>82</sup> Daniel Barbu, *Naissance de l'idolâtrie: Image, identité, religion* (Liège: Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2016), 36. See also Barbu, *Naissance*, 37–41, as well as 90–91 for similar themes in Maimonides.

<sup>83</sup> Barbu, *Naissance*, 62.

into a discussion of astral worship.<sup>84</sup> Only subsequently in the account does he observe that euhemeristic ideas are also found in the Letter of Aristeas and the Wisdom of Solomon, and point out a small number of Jewish texts with demonological interpretations of the gods, in particular Paul's epistles, Jubilees, and, he suggests, the Septuagint.<sup>85</sup> Attempting to marshal rabbinic literature into his discussion as well, Barbu comments that "le midrash rabbinique rapporte les origines de l' 'idolâtrie' à une période antérieure dans l'histoire primordiale de l'humanité" and that, in ascribing the origins of idolatry to the generation of Enosh, "se satisfait d'une interprétation évhémériste des origines de l' idolâtrie, au détriment de tout autre explication."<sup>86</sup> On this basis, Barbu concludes that "si l'on compare les discours chrétiens et les discours rabbiniques sur les origines de l' idolâtrie...les Pères de l'Église rapportent celles-ci à l'activité de puissances maléfiques autonomes (les 'démons')" while by contrast the Rabbis "développent une perspective fondamentalement anthropocentrique, attribuant les causes de l' idolâtrie (et du mal en général) aux hommes et aux hommes seuls."<sup>87</sup>

Such a sharp interreligious distinction in attitudes toward human agency and guilt, however—with euhemeristic Jewish texts in which humans deify dead men and demonological patristic texts in which humans are compelled by diabolic powers—seems difficult to maintain. In the midrashic accounts in the Mekhilta and elsewhere, Enosh and his generation do invent idolatry but, as mentioned above, it is far from clear that they are portrayed as the *objects of worship*, as we should expect of these primordial figures in the euhemeristic interpretation proposed by

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<sup>84</sup> Barbu, *Naissance*, 63.

<sup>85</sup> Barbu, *Naissance*, 65, 68–69, 79, and 285.

<sup>86</sup> Barbu, *Naissance*, 87–88.

<sup>87</sup> Barbu, *Naissance*, 90.

Barbu.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore Barbu, like Ginzburg, seems to reject the existence of rabbinic literature which ascribes idolatry to the work of demons, even though in at least one case such literature is indeed to be found. And, lastly, as Barbu himself notes elsewhere in his monograph, patristic literature possesses its own share of euhemeristic accounts.<sup>89</sup> A distinction between rabbinic and patristic, then, in the degree of human agency ascribed to the origins of idolatry does not emerge clearly from the sources themselves.

### **Jewish Explanations for Transgressive Worship: A New Approach**

The descriptive or conceptual question of how Jews explained to themselves the existence of transgressive worship has received no dedicated or extended treatment in scholarship. The few scattered discussions of the question which are to be found consistently alight on some of the major topics which an inquiry into the subject must consider—euhemerism, Cognitive Error, and Demons. These discussions, however, suffer from more than just brevity. They consistently downplay or ignore rabbinic texts—indeed Hebrew texts in general—in favor of texts written or surviving in Greek. So too they exaggerate the divide between the Hellenistic and rabbinic discussions of the issue by denying that euhemerism or the Demon Explanation are to be found in any capacity in rabbinic literature. Even Ginzberg, a scholar intimately familiar with both the Hellenistic and the rabbinic materials, is dismissive of the relevance of the latter. Furthermore, these discussions concentrate themselves for the most part on a relatively narrow subset of texts, particularly Jubilees, the writings of Philo, the Sibylline Corpus, and especially the Wisdom of

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<sup>88</sup> On the difficulty of interpreting the relevant portion of the Enosh narrative in rabbinic literature, see Peter Schäfer's "Der Götzendienst des Enosch" in his *Studien zur Geschichte und Theologie des rabbinischen Judentums* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 138–39, 148.

<sup>89</sup> Barbu, *Naissance*, 66–67, and cf. Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome*, 623–24. Barbu seems to think euhemeristic accounts in patristic literature are somehow inextricably linked to demonological ones, but it is not clear from his discussion why this must be so. See Barbu, *Naissance*, 68–70.



Solomon, and even these texts do not receive any in-depth treatment. The existing analyses generally do not attempt to situate the ideas that they reference in any particular historical period, nor, with the exception of Bousset and perhaps Baudissin, do they attempt to arrange the texts and ideas diachronically to discern developments in Jewish views on transgressive worship. And, even as the few scholars above grasp at the descriptive question of how Jews explained to themselves such forms of gentile worship, the majority of their discussions are still hopelessly tangled up in the kind of normative analysis—of “Beurteilung” and “Kampf”—which we have seen to dominate the secondary literature on Jewish views of other religion in antiquity in general. We might also note the frequent employment of various partially-applied and seemingly *ex post facto* categories, already in evidence in Baudissin’s 1876 account, which seem consistently to introduce more confusion into the topic than clarification. And lastly, and indeed most importantly for our purposes, these discussions fail almost entirely to note the Bad Faith Argument and its key role in Jewish understandings of iconolatriy and the worship of other gods in the mid-late Second Temple and rabbinic periods.

Our investigation, by contrast, will begin the project of systematically analyzing Jewish explanations for transgressive worship in antiquity in a manner which will address these limitations and deficiencies. Our account will seek to analyze the relevant textual material in an in-depth manner; it will incorporate both Hellenistic Jewish and rabbinic materials, demonstrating how texts in both of these traditions sought to respond to the intellectual challenge of being a religious “cognitive minority;” it will distinguish carefully between the Second Temple/rabbinic materials and their biblical precedents, demonstrating the development and change between Jewish views in the different eras; and it will strive not to get bogged down in the normative considerations which

have occupied other scholars. It will also assiduously avoid the vague and confusing ex-post facto categories which have characterized much of the existing literature.

Ideally, our project would seek to address all four major theories which, we have suggested, Jews offered in approximately the years 200 B.C.E. to 200 C.E. to explain transgressive worship: the Bad Faith Argument, euhemerism, the Demon Explanation, and the Cognitive Error hypothesis. The latter three of these theories sought to explain the worship of Others by ascribing to the worshipers intelligible, if ultimately destructive, motivations, grounded on the basis of emotion, deception, or abstract rational error. The Bad Faith Argument, by contrast, sought to account for strange worship by simply denying its sincerity—to explain it, that is, by explaining it away.

Due to the constraints of time, however, in this dissertation we shall limit ourselves to the exclusive investigation of the most important of these four explanations: the Bad Faith Argument. In particular, we will investigate the way in which the Bad Faith Argument represented a stark departure from the portrayal of transgressive worship in the Hebrew Bible, a new attempt to explain what, in previous generations, had been seen as simply self-explanatory. As such, we will begin our analysis with a chapter on the portrayal of the worship of other gods and the reverence of their icons in the biblical corpus, demonstrating that the biblical texts never questioned the sincerity of such worship nor took an interest in explaining it. We will then proceed to an exposition and taxonomy of the Bad Faith Argument as it appears in mid-Second Temple and tannaitic literature. Having thus articulated a schema for understanding the biblical and the post-biblical material, we shall juxtapose texts from the two periods directly in order clearly to demonstrate the sharp divide in the portrayal of transgressive worship which separates these eras in Jewish history.

## Chapter 2—The Biblical Portrayal of Transgressive Worship

### Introduction

In Chapter One above we outlined a series of four theories which, we suggested, Jews in approximately the years 200 B.C.E. to 200 C.E. deployed to explain the existence of other forms of worship. In this dissertation, we set ourselves the task of investigating one of these theories, which we have labelled “the Bad Faith Argument.” This argument attempted to *explain away* the worship of other gods and the reverence of their icons by simply rejecting the sincerity of the practitioners and thus dissolving the cognitive dissonance created by sharp religious difference. It will be our contention that this argument began to appear in Jewish sources only in the mid-Second Temple period. To demonstrate such a shift, however, we must first begin with an understanding of the biblical material as a base-line against which to compare this later Bad Faith Argument. Accordingly, in this chapter, we will seek to present an analysis of the portrayal of transgressive worship in the corpus of the Hebrew Bible.

### Kaufmann’s Question

In his *The Religion of Israel*, published in Hebrew between 1937 and 1956, Yehezkel Kaufmann advanced what would become a seminal investigation of biblical portrayals of non-Israelite religion. In his account of ancient Israelite religion and its history, Kaufmann attempts to disprove the earlier conception, articulated perhaps most effectively by Julius Wellhausen, that pre-exilic Israel was, by and large, a pagan society, analogous in many ways to its ancient Near Eastern neighbors.<sup>1</sup> In sharp contrast to this, Kaufmann argues that the pre-exilic Israelites—not

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<sup>1</sup> See Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, trans. and abridged Moshe Greenberg (Jerusalem: Sefer ve Sefel Publishing, 2003), 2–7.

only the authors of the biblical texts but the broader population as well—existed at a total conceptual disconnect from the pagan religion of their gentile neighbors.

In the historical paganism of the ancient Near East, notes Kaufmann, “the cult of images” was “intimately bound up with the belief in *personal gods*, who have specific forms, who inhere in natural phenomena or control them.”<sup>2</sup> The pagans, that is, conceived of the gods as active and discrete entities who could manifest in the created world in a variety of ways—in particular through cult images—and exert power over it. These gods had “specific roles” in their areas of competence, as well as “sexual qualities,” “theogonies,” and “myths” about them which “tell of their wars, loves, hatreds, and dealings with men.”<sup>3</sup> While the Bible, Kaufmann concedes, does know the names of some of these pagan gods, its portrayal of them seems entirely to omit the complex background of identities associated with them. “Not a single biblical passage,” Kaufmann writes, “hints at the natural or mythological qualities of any of these named gods.”<sup>4</sup>

Rather than condemning the real mythological substance of ancient Near Eastern religion, the Bible attacks a straw-man version of paganism which appears stilted and inaccurate:

“The Bible does not conceive the powers [whom the pagans worship] as personal beings who dwell in the idols; the idol is not a habitation of the god, *it is the god himself*...Hence also its sole polemical argument that idolatry is the senseless deification of wood and stone images. We may, perhaps, say that the Bible sees in paganism only its lowest level, the level of mana-beliefs [i.e. the belief in magical powers activated and accessed in physical objects].”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Kaufmann, *Religion of Israel*, 8. Emphasis added.

<sup>3</sup> Kaufmann, *Religion of Israel*, 8–9.

<sup>4</sup> Kaufmann, *Religion of Israel*, 9. In addition to the total absence of pagan mythological material in the Hebrew Bible, Kaufmann posits a related disjuncture between the unconditioned existence/power of the Israelite God and the conditioned existence/power of the gods of ancient Near Eastern mythology. For a concise explanation of Kaufmann’s position, see Job Y. Jindo, “Recontextualizing Kaufmann: His Empirical Conception of the Bible and Its Significance in Jewish Intellectual History,” *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 19:2 (2011), 114–117.

<sup>5</sup> Kaufmann, *Religion of Israel*, 14. Emphasis added.

The Bible, then, displays only the most reduced and two-dimensional version of a system of religious practices and ideas which, in actuality, was highly complex. Rather than the mythological “personal gods” of pagan antiquity which we know from the cultural artifacts of the pagans themselves, the Bible portrays the gods as *identical to their icons*. The icon *is* the god, rather than simply the god’s vessel, representation, or dwelling-place.

What is the reason for this reductionist portrayal? As Kaufmann explains later in his work:

“Israelite idolatry was a vulgar phenomenon; *it was magical, fetishistic, ritualistic and never attained the level of a cultural force*. The fact that the Bible never shows awareness of the symbolic, representative character of images, but takes them to be gods in themselves, reveals how shallow was the impression made by idolatry, and *how far Israel was from a true understanding of pagan beliefs.*”<sup>6</sup>

Though surrounded from the first by pagans, in Kaufmann’s view the religious conceptions of these gentile neighbors made at most a “shallow...impression” upon the Israelites, who were “far” from a “true understanding of pagan beliefs.” Insofar as the Israelites were engaged in “idolatry,” it was a mere shadow of true paganism, the icons perhaps representing at most a grey area, something closer to the consulting of a psychic or an astrologer than true pagan worship *per se*. And indeed, when these so-called “idolatrous” practices came to an end during the Babylonian exile, their cessation represented no change in the fundamental religious conceptions of the Israelites, but merely the breaking off of a set of black-magic bad habits:

“The revolution in the life of the nation which occurred during the Babylonian exile was not a change in its religious world outlook, not a transition from polytheism to monotheism. Rather, it was a firm determination to end pagan cultic practices. Monotheism was the birthright of the nation from its inception; and idolatry had long since been forgotten. Even the paganism of Babylon seemed to be only stupid belief in idols.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Kaufmann, *Religion of Israel*, 147. Emphasis added.

<sup>7</sup> Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Babylonian Captivity and Deutero-Isaiah: History of the Religion of Israel* vol. 4, trans. C.W. Efraymson (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1970) 29, and see Kaufmann’s broader discussion in 16–32. For a related assessment, specifically arguing against the applicability of the label “syncretism” to biblical texts about transgressive

In essence, then, we might distill Kaufmann's overall project in *The Religion of Israel* into three central claims:

1. The biblical portrayal of pagan religion is *empirically inaccurate* because it omits the mythological/personal qualities of the gods and depicts them as fully reducible to their icons.
2. The inaccuracy of its representation stems from the failure of the biblical authors properly to understand pagan religion.
3. We can infer from their failure to understand pagan religion that the biblical authors themselves had radically different religious conceptions—namely monotheistic ones—than those of the pagans.

The exile, on this interpretation, could not have entailed any movement away from “paganism” or “polytheism” toward “monotheism” because, in Kaufmann's account, the Israelites were already monotheists. Whatever shift occurred among the Israelites during the exile, then, must therefore have been a shift only in practice, not affecting the Israelites' fundamental religious or theological conceptions; there was “not a change in its religious world outlook.”<sup>8</sup>

Kaufmann's grand theory has, unsurprisingly, been subject to a great deal of challenge. In his “The Biblical Idea of Idolatry,” for example, José Faur attempted to dispute what we have characterized as the first and second of Kaufmann's three main contentions, namely that the Hebrew Bible fundamentally mischaracterizes the religion of Israel's historical neighbors, and that this misrepresentation stems from misunderstanding. According to Faur, the biblical authors neither misrepresented nor misunderstood the distinction between pagan icon and pagan god; indeed, it was precisely this distinction which they sought to reify through their polemics. The key

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worship, see Frederick E. Greenspahn, “Syncretism and Idolatry in the Bible,” *Vetus Testamentum* 54:4 (2004), 480–494.

<sup>8</sup> Kaufmann's theory of Israelite religious history also entails a number of corollary sub-theses, perhaps most importantly the chronological priority of the P source to the D source. See Kaufmann, *Religion of Israel*, 169–208.

issue under contention in the biblical attacks on idolatry, Faur suggests, was “the notion that ritual consecration had the intrinsic power to induce the spirit of the gods to dwell in the image and thus identify itself with it.”<sup>9</sup> The biblical authors sought to deny that individuals could, through their own volition, initiate the descent of a heavenly power into objects in the physical world.<sup>10</sup> As far as the biblical polemics were concerned, such a drawing of the divine into the physical could not be initiated by humans, but only by God.<sup>11</sup> Such a deliberate and conscious rejection of the “intrinsic power” of rituals to draw the god into the icon had major consequences for the portrayal of pagan religion: “once the intrinsic power of consecration is denied, all image worship is reduced to the worship of ‘wood and stone.’”<sup>12</sup> It was thus precisely the distinction between the god and the icon which the biblical authors were seeking to *emphasize* by consciously rejecting the man-made summoning of the former into the latter.

The portrayal of pagan worship in the Hebrew Bible, then, is for Faur no misrepresentation of “authentic paganism,” but rather a fully comprehending and accurate representation of pagan worship *from the perspective of one who denies the inherent metaphysical power of rituals to enact theophany*. “Therefore,” Faur concludes, “Kaufmann’s argument as to why the Biblical writers did not dispute the existence of the pagan deities in their polemics against idolatry misses the point.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> José Faur, “The Biblical Idea of Idolatry,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 69:1 (1978), 13. Faur lodges a number of criticisms against Kaufmann’s account in “The Biblical Idea of Idolatry,” but we shall only focus here on what appears to be the central criticism of his article.

<sup>10</sup> Faur, “The Biblical Idea of Idolatry,” 13. And see Faur, “The Biblical Idea of Idolatry,” 8–12 for biblical passages which, on his reading, reflect a nuanced understanding of ancient Near Eastern iconolatry, and in particular of the process by which icons were ritually consecrated and the god summoned into the statue.

<sup>11</sup> “The determining factor in image worship is not the *object* of the ritual but whether or not it is ‘*abōdāh zārāh*, i.e., *unprescribed ritual*.” See Faur, “The Biblical Idea of Idolatry,” 14. Some emphasis added.

<sup>12</sup> Faur, “The Biblical Idea of Idolatry,” 14.

<sup>13</sup> Faur, “The Biblical Idea of Idolatry,” 14.

If the biblical polemics by and large ignore the pagans gods and portray their idols as so much chopped-up wood, this is no mix-up which misses the existence of independent mythological gods, but rather a sophisticated understanding of ancient Near Eastern religion, yet with one of its central conceptual supports, the instantiation of the god in the object, intentionally rejected.<sup>14</sup>

Jon Levenson, by contrast, seems by and large to accept Kaufmann's first point, that the biblical polemics do on some level misrepresent historical paganism, but disputes what we have articulated as Kaufmann's second argument. Analyzing the Bible's portrayal of non-Israelite worship, Levenson suggests that "beneath the cognitive dimension, represented by the factor of ignorance, lies a volitional dimension, the will to misperceive and to misrepresent, fueled by the fear of a blurring of the boundaries that establish and maintain identity."<sup>15</sup> For Levenson, that is, instead of—or perhaps in addition to—ignorance, the fundamental driver behind the Bible's straw-man portrayal of pagan religion was the desire to distance it from Israelite religion by depicting it in as diminished and ridiculous a manner as possible. If such an interpretation of the biblical data is correct, Levenson notes, it would imply "a conclusion which is the reverse of Kaufmann's. The Israelite misrepresentation of 'pagan' religion as fetishism indicates not distance between two

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<sup>14</sup> Faur's point is a subtle one, and the explanation which he offers in "The Biblical Idea of Idolatry" does not, frankly speaking, do his own idea justice. Perhaps introducing an analogy might help to clarify Faur's idea, as well as its relationship to Kaufmann's thesis. If a person rejects transubstantiation, and as a consequence claims that Catholics eat a wafer and think they are consuming Jesus, is his statement "inaccurate?" Or a "misrepresentation?" Perhaps not. This is, after all, a fully accurate assessment of Catholic ritual, yet from the perspective of one who denies the metaphysical underpinnings on which the ritual relies. If an observer, however, were to portray the ceremony with no reference to Jesus, as though the eucharist were in and of itself the deity being consumed, then this would venture into the realm of misrepresentation and inaccuracy, and would be unrecognizable to the participants themselves. As I understand it, on Faur's view, Kaufmann thinks the biblical portrayals of illicit iconolatry fall into this latter category, whereas Faur himself thinks the biblical portrayals fall into the former—tendentious insofar as they reject the metaphysical assumptions of pagan worship, but not misrepresentation per se.

<sup>15</sup> Jon D. Levenson, "Yehezkel Kaufmann and Mythology," *Conservative Judaism* 36:2 (1982), 38.



cultures, but proximity.”<sup>16</sup> On this view, the Bible’s reduction of the complex religious and mythological systems of the ancient Near East is the result not of an ignorance of the other resulting from separation but rather an irking awareness of similarity born from proximity; when the biblical writers pretend that the nations worship mere sticks and stones, they do protest too much.

### **Our Question**

Kaufmann’s account has proven so influential in the field of Biblical Studies that any discussion of foreign religion in the Hebrew Bible must inevitably grapple with it. In our case, we have analyzed the central thread of arguments in Kaufmann’s *The Religion of Israel* primarily to distinguish it from the question which we will ask in this project. That is to say, Kaufmann’s question, whether the biblical authors accurately understood the religions which they criticized, *is not the question of this dissertation*. Though also concerned with biblical portrayals of transgressive worship, this dissertation will ask a different question altogether: does the Hebrew Bible (and, in turn, the Second Temple and Rabbinic texts written in its wake) portray the worshipers and propagators of foreign gods and their icons as *sincere* in their devotion, or does it try to deny or undermine the sincerity of such practices?

Asking this question first of the Hebrew Bible, we will discover that its portrayals of the worship of other gods and the reverence of their icons uniformly assume—or at least never question—the sincerity of these practices. Those who engage in or propagate such worship, whether Israelites or non-Israelites, are motivated by a genuine attraction to the worship. The

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<sup>16</sup> Levenson, “Kaufmann,” 38. Cf. also Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, who note that one “criticism of Kaufmann’s thesis is that the state of closeness and friction between the biblical society and its idolatrous environment makes the hypothesis of ignorance implausible.” A possible alternative is that “the fact that the Bible regards idolatry as mere fetishism and not as a comprehensive mythic worldview may be a polemical strategy whose purpose was to ridicule idolatry.” See Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 75–77.

reasons for this attraction either go unstated (as in the vast majority of cases), or are articulated as an earnest confidence in the efficacy of the god or icon to perform, to prosper or punish the worshiper. In no case, however, is such worship characterized as phony, as so much play-acting, nor are ulterior motives ever ascribed to it.

Perhaps some subset of these portrayals may be accurate to the emic lived conceptions of ancient pagans. Perhaps others, as in Kaufmann's schema, may be obviously inaccurate. And perhaps others still may deliberately mischaracterize such foreign worship for polemical aims, as Levenson would have it. But for our purposes, the degree to which these portrayals reflect the genuine religious concepts of ancient Near Eastern pagans is simply not relevant. Our concern is not with historical pagans, but with biblical authors and their imagination and construction of the worship of Others. As such, it is our intention to put the issue of the historical accuracy of these portrayals, of the ignorance or deliberate mischaracterization which they may involve, entirely to one side over the course of this dissertation, though we shall have recourse to return to these questions in our concluding remarks.

### **Worship of Other Gods and Reverence of their Icons: Four Categories of Biblical Texts**

Due to the large quantity of biblical material dealing with transgressive worship, it would likely prove prohibitive to analyze every relevant passage. Instead, in the remainder of this chapter we will seek to divide the biblical material up into four categories which together constitute a large sample of the biblical sources dealing with the propagation and worship of foreign gods and their icons—that is, texts dealing with what we might describe, to risk anachronism, as “other religions.” These four categories are: *direct proscription*, *indirect proscription*, *narrative anecdote*, and *polemic*. These categories are, of course, merely ideal types, heuristic devices which may in practice overlap and which certainly do not exhaust every discussion of transgressive worship in

the Hebrew Bible. Such a categorization, however, will help us effectively to divide up and digest the large array of biblical material on the worship of other gods and the reverence of their icons.

Analyzing one key example within each of these categories, while providing references to numerous analogous passages, we will attempt to demonstrate that the worship practices depicted are always assumed to be genuine—or at least that the sincerity of these practices is never questioned—whether those participating in them are gentiles or even, from the authors’ perspectives, “apostate” Israelites. Though our investigation will, of necessity, be limited to select examples, it is our contention that these examples are representative of all of the dozens—or perhaps hundreds—of passages which reference the worship of other gods and the reverence of their icons within the Hebrew Bible.

At the end of the chapter, we will discuss potential exceptions and caveats to this general schema.

### **Direct Proscription: Deuteronomy 27:15**

There are, in the Hebrew Bible, any number of passages which directly prohibit the worship of other gods and the reverence of their icons. Foremost among these we might call to mind, for example, Exodus 20:3–5, 20:23, 22:19, 23:24, 34:17, Leviticus 19:4, and Deuteronomy 5:7–9, 6:14 and 12:30–31. But for our purposes, a particularly illuminating proscription is found in Deuteronomy 27, within the set of commandments known as the “Schechemite Dodecalogue.” There in Deuteronomy 27, Moses instructs the nation that, upon their crossing the Jordan river into the land of Israel, they must enact a ritual oath on Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal, accepting upon themselves both the rewards and the punishments associated with keeping or breaking their covenant with God. In the course of this ceremony, the Levites will announce to the gathered congregation of Israel a series of curses on specific prohibited activities; the Israelites, in turn, will

accept these “legal-curse formulations,” as Patrick Miller describes them, upon themselves in the event of their transgression.<sup>17</sup> The first curse in the series reads:

Cursed be anyone who makes a sculptured or molten image, abhorred by the LORD, a craftsman’s handiwork, and sets it up in secret.—And all the people shall respond, Amen.  
(Deut 27:15)<sup>18</sup>

Straightaway, the curse-list here in Deuteronomy 27 begins with a proscription on transgressive worship.<sup>19</sup> As in a number of the activities forsworn in this ceremony—moving the marker separating landholdings, misdirecting a blind person on their way, and lying with a beast, for example—this ritual cursing of secret iconolatry seems to reflect a concern with transgressions which are unlikely to admit of witnesses.<sup>20</sup> In the event that, in the absence of any means of detection, a specific transgressor cannot be identified and punished, guilt for the crime could come to rest upon the collective as a whole; these curses serve preemptively to disavow responsibility from the group and to transfer it directly onto the unknown individual responsible.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 195.

<sup>18</sup> All translations from the Hebrew Bible taken from the JPS translation found in Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds. *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) unless otherwise noted. Some capitalization and punctuation has been altered for formatting purposes. All emphases in the biblical text are mine.

<sup>19</sup> The legal material preserved here in Deut 27—and, by extension, the chapter’s proscription of iconolatry—may be among the oldest in the Hebrew Bible. As von Rad notes, “dies ist das 1. Verbot der wohl ältesten Verbotsreihen Israels, des sichemitschen Dodekalogs,” even if, in its current form, “dieses Verbot ist, wie man sofort sieht, durch mehrere [subsequent] Interpretamente erweitert.” See von Rad, *Weisheit*, 230. And cf. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* vol. 1, trans. D.M.G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 190.

<sup>20</sup> Tigay describes this as an “anathematization of clandestine sins.” See Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 253.

<sup>21</sup> “By affirming these curses with an ‘amen,’” writes Richard Nelson, “the community separates itself from these behaviors and thus protects itself from the consequences [i.e. divine punishment] of transgressions it cannot control or even discover. Retribution is fixed squarely and exclusively on the unknown perpetrator so that the power of curse does not endanger the people as a whole.” See Richard D. Nelson, *Deuteronomy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 319–320. Cf. also Deut 21:1–9.

Particularly interesting for our purposes, however, is what this secrecy implies about the mindset of the unidentified perpetrator in the first curse. The scenario envisioned, making an image and setting it up clandestinely, precludes, firstly, any possibility of an ulterior motive for the worship—the use of the image, for example, to defraud another person for money or persuade them into sex. If the image is set up in secret, the worshiper cannot hope for anything from the transaction except whatever will emerge from his direct relation to the icon or god. Not only this, but the transgressive Israelite here envisioned, evidently fearful of the community, is yet determined enough to set up the icon in secret that he is willing to run the risk of discovery and punishment.<sup>22</sup> The raising up of the icon, then, must be motivated by genuine attachment on the part of the Israelite being imagined. Why, however, should this transgressor be so intent on setting up the image? The curses move on to their next target, and no explanation is offered; evidently the appeal for him is simply self-evident.

#### **Indirect Proscription: Exodus 34: 11–16**

Beyond the category of direct proscriptions laid out above, we can also discern in a number of biblical texts what we might label “indirect proscriptions.” These are commandments which do not prohibit the worship of other gods and the reverence of their icons *per se*, but rather proscribe a range of behaviors and objects which might *indirectly lead* to such illicit worship. In a sense, these commandments already anticipate in the Hebrew Bible the much-later category of “fence” decrees in rabbinic literature, articulated there as attempts to distance Jews from sin. Among such indirect proscriptions we might list Exodus 23:32–33, Deuteronomy 7:25–26 and 12:2–3, and perhaps Exodus 23:13 and Leviticus 17:1–7 as well.

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<sup>22</sup> As Tigay notes, “the anticipation that such attempts would be made in secret reflects the Torah’s expectation that idolatry would be stigmatized and punished by the sinner’s contemporaries.” See Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 254–55.

A particularly prominent example of such indirect proscription appears in Exodus 34: 11–16.<sup>23</sup>

Here, in the legal compilation often known as the “Ritual Decalogue” or the “Small Covenant Code,” God instructs Moses as follows:

<sup>11</sup> Mark well what I command you this day. I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. <sup>12</sup> Beware of making a covenant with the inhabitants of the land against which you are advancing, lest they be a snare in your midst. <sup>13</sup> No, you must tear down their altars, smash their pillars, and cut down their sacred posts; <sup>14</sup> for you must not worship any other god, because the LORD, whose name is Impassioned, is an impassioned God. <sup>15</sup> You must not make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, for they will lust after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and invite you, and you will eat of their sacrifices. <sup>16</sup> And when you take wives from among their daughters for your sons, their daughters will lust after their gods and will cause your sons to lust after their gods.  
(Ex 34: 11–16)

After establishing the situation which is about to confront the Israelites—namely their conquest of the land—God instructs as follows: “Beware of making a covenant with the inhabitants of the land against which you are advancing, lest they be a snare [פן-יהיה למוקש] in your midst” (v. 12). If proximity to the inhabitants of the land, particularly through the making of a “covenant” with them, is allowed, these inhabitants will inevitably turn into a “snare,” entrapping the Israelites into their forms of worship. As Brevard Childs notes, “the whole emphasis of the admonition falls on Israel’s complete separation from the inhabitants of the land...and in the subtle temptation to idolatry which contact with the Canaanites inevitably brings.”<sup>24</sup>

After pronouncing the dangers of contact with the local inhabitants, the passage immediately offers a strategy designed to preempt the idolatrous hazards of the land: “You must tear down their altars, smash their pillars, and cut down their sacred posts; for you must not worship any other god, because the LORD, whose name is Impassioned, is an impassioned God” (v. 13–

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<sup>23</sup> And see also the parallel instructions in Deuteronomy 7:1–6.

<sup>24</sup> Brevard Childs, *Exodus: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1974), 613.

14). The Israelites are commanded to destroy the physical worship-paraphernalia of the previous inhabitants, as proximity to these objects will lead them to worship the gods associated with them.

At this point, the passage rather abruptly returns to, and expands upon, the statement with which it began:

“You must not make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, for they will lust after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and invite you, and you will eat of their sacrifices. And when you take wives from among their daughters for your sons, their daughters will lust after their gods and will cause your sons to lust after their gods.”

It would appear that we have here in v.15, “You must not make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land,” a *Wiederaufnahme*, directing our attention back to v.12 above after the intervening imperative in v.13–14. This time, however, the initial statement—that proximity to the locals will provoke a lapse into idolatry—is concretized into two examples.<sup>25</sup> First, intimacy with the local inhabitants will lead the Israelites to consume meat deriving from sacrifices to other gods, and second it will facilitate marriage with local women, who will inevitably influence their Israelite husbands to worship the local gods.<sup>26</sup>

We can discern in Exodus 34:11–16, then, four main elements: first, an overall thesis statement, as it were, illustrating the general relationship of cause and effect between proximity to the locals and transgressive worship, and then three specific cases of this thesis’ application: the physical presence of the locals’ worship paraphernalia will lead to the worship of other gods,

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<sup>25</sup> See the analogous assessment of the logical flow of the passage in Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), 444. Some commentators have interpreted these verses as a sort of narrative, in which the eating of sacrificial meat together with the inhabitants of the land then leads to marriage with local women, which then leads to idolatry (see, e.g., Rashi ad loc.), but this understanding of the verses is not self-evident.

<sup>26</sup> “The concern expressed here,” summarizes Israel Knohl, “is that the Israelite men will take foreign wives and they will cause the Israelite men to whore after their gods.” See Israel Knohl, *Biblical Beliefs* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2007), 55. My translation.

covenanting with the locals will lead to eating from their idolatrous sacrifices, and marrying Israelite men to the local women will lead the men to fall into the worship of the women's gods. In every one of these cases, the pull of the local worship is assumed to be so powerful that drastic measures of social and physical distancing must be enjoined in order to preclude the temptation it poses. There is no hint of a Bad Faith portrayal anywhere in the passage—no suggestion that these practices are somehow insincere, or that some ulterior motive for money, sex, power, or whatever else *actually* stands behind them. The worship of the local inhabitants exercises a genuine attraction, one which, through any number of vectors, threatens to draw the unsuspecting Israelites under its sway.

#### **Narrative Anecdote: Jeremiah 44**

Frequently in the biblical corpus the worship of other gods and the reverence of their icons is portrayed in narrative form, in the relating of a brief event or encounter. In this category we might note Numbers 25, Ezekiel 8, and 1 Kings 11, among many possible examples. As paradigmatic of this type of transgressive anecdote, consider the confrontation of Jeremiah with the worshipers of the “Queen of Heaven” in Jeremiah 44. The prophet, criticizing the worship of foreign gods by the Judahites living in the land of Egypt, reminds them that similar transgressions brought suffering and destruction upon the kingdom of Judah, and warns them that by continuing such behavior they will provoke even more divine punishment (Jer 44:1–14). “Die gleiche Sünde wie in der Vergangenheit führt zu der gleichen Strafe, ebender, die auch über Jerusalem erging.”<sup>27</sup>

In response, the Israelites whom Jeremiah chastises offer the following defense of their behavior:

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<sup>27</sup> Winfried Thiel, *Die deuteronomistische Redaktion von Jeremia 26–45: mit einer Gesamtbeurteilung der deuteronomistischen Redaktion des Buches Jeremia* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1981), 73.



<sup>15</sup> Thereupon they answered Jeremiah—all the men who knew that their wives made offerings to other gods; all the women present, a large gathering; and all the people who lived in Pathros in the land of Egypt: <sup>16</sup> ‘We will not listen to you in the matter about which you spoke to us in the name of the LORD. <sup>17</sup> On the contrary, we will do everything that we have vowed—to make offerings to the Queen of Heaven and to pour libations to her, as we used to do, we and our fathers, our kings and our officials, in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem. For then we had plenty to eat, we were well-off, and suffered no misfortune. <sup>18</sup> But ever since we stopped making offerings to the Queen of Heaven and pouring libations to her, we have lacked everything, and we have been consumed by the sword and by famine. <sup>19</sup> And when we make offerings to the Queen of Heaven and pour libations to her, is it without our husbands’ approval that we have made cakes in her likeness and poured libations to her?’  
(Jer 44:15–19)<sup>28</sup>

Jeremiah, they contend, has it entirely backwards. Not only was the Judahite worship of other gods not responsible for the calamity which befell the kingdom, but in fact it was the *failure* to worship these other gods—in particular Astarte, the Queen of Heaven—which led to Judah’s downfall.<sup>29</sup> In prior times, the Judahites (in particular the Judahite women) had made proper offerings to the Queen of Heaven, and in return she had guaranteed their safety.<sup>30</sup> When they became lax in this worship, however, they suffered famine, war, and ultimately the destruction of their kingdom.<sup>31</sup> As such, these expatriot Judahites in Egypt have sworn to resuscitate the worship

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<sup>28</sup> For Jeremiah’s response—more a fatalistic condemnation than a counter-argument—see Jer 44: 20–30.

<sup>29</sup> On the identification of the “Queen of Heaven” in Jeremiah as the goddess Astarte, see William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 1–25* ed. Paul D. Hanson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1986), 251, 254–55, and cf. the discussion in John Bright, *Jeremiah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), 56. For the historical referents of the purported disruption in the worship of the Queen of Heaven in pre-exilic Judah, see William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah* vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 1087–89.

<sup>30</sup> The role of gender in the exchange is somewhat obscure. It is likely that the current text has been confused through rewriting. Holladay suggests that initially the men answered Jeremiah, followed by the women. See e.g. William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah: A Fresh Reading* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1990), 143.

<sup>31</sup> The confrontation, as Leslie Allen points out, involves a “thesis” and a “counterthesis.” See Leslie C. Allen, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 444.

which in former times had proved so efficacious.<sup>32</sup> “We will do everything that we have vowed—to make offerings to the Queen of Heaven and to pour libations to her, as we used to do, we and our fathers, our kings and our officials, in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem. For then we had plenty to eat, we were well-off, and suffered no misfortune” (v.17). What we have here, in effect, is a version of the covenanting (and re-covenanting) ceremonies which we see depicted periodically in the Hebrew Bible (e.g. Josh 24, 1 Sam 12, Ezra 10); this time, however, the god to whom loyalty and service is re-confirmed is not the Israelite God, but rather one of his rivals.<sup>33</sup>

For our purposes, the fundamental question to be asked of this text is again one of subjectivity: are the worshipers of the Queen of Heaven portrayed here as earnest in their practice, or is their worship hollow and counterfeit, perhaps directed by ulterior motives rather than a real confidence in the goddess’ power and a sincere desire to propitiate her?

The exiles’ own argument decisively reveals the seriousness of their devotion to the goddess. “Ever since we stopped making offerings to the Queen of Heaven and pouring libations to her, we have lacked everything, and we have been consumed by the sword and by famine” (v.18). The Queen of Heaven has the power to punish those who are lax in her ritual devotion and to reward those who serve her, as demonstrated so vividly by the tribulations of Judah. And indeed, the passage goes so far as to draw an analogy between the motivations which, according to Jeremiah, should return these worshipers to the sole service of the Israelite God and those drawing

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<sup>32</sup> As Robert Carroll, among others, notes, “the argument is essentially a *post hoc ergo propter hoc* one, but implicit in its presentation is the view that the cult of the queen of heaven guaranteed prosperity.” See Robert P. Carroll, *The Book of Jeremiah* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 736.

<sup>33</sup> As Holladay points out, these worshipers “are portrayed not only as loyal to Astarte but as arguing for her on the basis of *Heilsgeschichte*.” See William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 2: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 26–52* ed. Paul D. Hanson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 304. For a contextualization of Jer 44 within the “confession literature” of the late biblical period, including Ezra 9–10 and Neh 8–10, see Ronnie Goldstein, *Haye Yirmiyahu* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2012), 105–30.

them to the reverence of Astarte. “The women’s argument...,” as William McKane points out, “is essentially the same as that of the argument used by Jeremiah which proceeds to opposite conclusions.”<sup>34</sup> No attempt can be found here to question the sincerity of these worshipers of the Queen of Heaven; nothing of a Bad Faith Argument is on display. The author constructs the worship of the goddess, catastrophic as it may be in its consequences, as genuine in its entirety, no less so than Jeremiah’s belief in the jealous power of his own deity.<sup>35</sup>

### **Polemic: Isaiah 44**

Perhaps the category of texts about transgressive worship which has received the most attention in scholarship, as our discussion of Kaufmann’s analysis may already have implied, is that of “polemic.” This genre, geared toward mocking or attacking transgressive worship, appears in a number of biblical passages, most prominently Deuteronomy 4:28, Psalms 115:2–8 and 135:15–18, Jeremiah 2:26–27 and 10:2–15, Habakkuk 2:18–19, Isaiah 42:17, and Isaiah 46:1–7. In our discussion here, however, we will focus only on Isaiah 44, probably the most developed religious polemic in the Hebrew Bible. What we shall determine about Isaiah 44, however, proves equally valid for the other biblical polemics as well.

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<sup>34</sup> McKane, *Jeremiah*, 1088–89. In fact, because Jeremiah and his interlocuters rely on the same form of *post hoc ergo propter hoc* argument and base their claims on the same historical data, there is no logical means of adjudicating between them. Only future events, like the destruction of the Judahite community in Egypt and the defeat of Pharaoh Hophra as predicted in Jer 44:27–30, can reveal the correct position in retrospect. On this, see John M. Bracke, *Jeremiah 30–52 and Lamentations* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 105.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. also 2 Chron 28: 22–23: “In his time of trouble, this King Ahaz trespassed even more against the LORD, sacrificing to the gods of Damascus which had defeated him, for he thought, ‘The gods of the kings of Aram help them; I shall sacrifice to them and they will help me’; but they were his ruin and that of all Israel.”

Likely written around the late 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., Isaiah 44 delivers a stinging caricature of the worship of idols.<sup>36</sup> This pericope, bracketed by declarations of comfort to the Israelites by their God, constitutes the longest continuous polemic against idolatry in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>1</sup> But hear, now, O Jacob My servant,  
Israel whom I have chosen!

<sup>2</sup> Thus said the LORD, your Maker,  
Your Creator who has helped you since birth:

Fear not, My servant Jacob,  
Jeshurun whom I have chosen,

<sup>3</sup> Even as I pour water on thirsty soil,  
And rain upon dry ground,  
So will I pour My spirit on your offspring,  
My blessing upon your posterity.

<sup>4</sup> And they shall sprout like grass,  
Like willows by watercourses.

<sup>5</sup> One shall say, “I am the LORD’s,”  
Another shall use the name of “Jacob,”  
Another shall mark his arm “of the LORD”  
And adopt the name of “Israel.”

<sup>6</sup> Thus said the LORD, the King of Israel,  
Their Redeemer, the LORD of Hosts:  
I am the first and I am the last,  
And there is no god but Me.

<sup>7</sup> Who like Me can announce,  
Can foretell it—and match Me thereby?  
Even as I told the future to an ancient people,  
So let him foretell coming events to them.

<sup>8</sup> Do not be frightened, do not be shaken!  
Have I not from of old predicted to you?  
I foretold, and you are My witnesses.  
Is there any god, then, but Me?

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<sup>36</sup> On the dating and historical context of so-called “Second Isaiah” as a whole, see Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66: A Commentary*, trans. David M.G. Stalker (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), 3, 8, 54, John Goldingay and David Payne, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 40–55* vol. 1 (London: T&T Clark International, 2006), 6–8, 29–30, and 25–28 on redaction of the work, Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 104, as well as Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel’s Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 179–88.

<sup>37</sup> Sonja Ammann, *Götter für die Tore: Die Verbindung von Götterpolemik und Weisheit im Alten Testament* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 82.

“There is no other rock; I know none!”  
(Isa 44:1–8)

The prophet, building on the themes of divine promise and reconciliation which structure his account, begins by offering a vision of the redemptive wonders which the Israelite God will imminently effect for his people. “Fear not, My servant Jacob, Jeshurun whom I have chosen,” says the LORD, “Even as I pour water on thirsty soil, And rain upon dry ground, So will I pour My spirit on your offspring, My blessing upon your posterity” (v. 2–3). From this vision of approaching prosperity, the passage quickly transitions into a declaration of the uniqueness of the Israelite God. “Thus said the LORD,” it states, “the King of Israel, Their Redeemer, the LORD of Hosts: I am the first and I am the last, And there is no god but Me” (v. 6). On the basis of this uniqueness, the God of Israel challenges any potential rivals to judgement, contending that he is singular in his ability to issue predictions and, consequently, singular in his divinity. “Who like Me can announce, Can foretell it—and match Me thereby?... Do not be frightened, do not be shaken!” he commands. “Have I not from of old predicted to you? I foretold, and you are My witnesses. Is there any god, then, but Me? ‘There is no other rock; I know none!’” (v. 7–8).<sup>38</sup> The uniqueness of the Israelite god’s status and power serve as an effective guarantee of the upcoming acts of redemption which the prophet has foretold in the first verses of the chapter. The prophet aims to convince his hearers of the LORD’s unparalleled power in order thereby to render his promises of deliverance to Israel credible.

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<sup>38</sup> For a concise summary of both the internal logic of the passage and its role within the so-called *Gerichtsreden*, or “trial speeches,” of Second Isaiah, see Peter Machinist, “Mesopotamian Imperialism and Israelite Religion: A Case Study from the Second Isaiah,” in William Dever and Seymour Gitin eds. *Symbiosis, Symbolism, and the Power of the Past: Canaan, Ancient Israel, and Their Neighbors from the Late Bronze Age through Roman Palaestina* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 238–41.

This affirmation of the Israelite God's status, however, is an incomplete attempt at persuasion unless it is accompanied by a rejection of potential alternatives. Thus, after positively asserting the unique power of the LORD, the prophet proceeds to attack his competition, that which might seem to threaten the LORD's putative monopoly on divinity.

<sup>9</sup> The makers of idols  
All work to no purpose;  
And the things they treasure  
Can do no good,  
As they themselves can testify.  
They neither look nor think,  
And so they shall be shamed.

<sup>10</sup> Who would fashion a god  
Or cast a statue

That can do no good?

<sup>11</sup> Lo, all its adherents shall be shamed;  
They are craftsmen, are merely human.  
Let them all assemble and stand up!  
They shall be cowed, and they shall be shamed.

<sup>12</sup> The craftsman in iron, with his tools,  
Works it over charcoal  
And fashions it by hammering,  
Working with the strength of his arm.  
Should he go hungry, his strength would ebb;  
Should he drink no water, he would grow faint.

<sup>13</sup> The craftsman in wood measures with a line  
And marks out a shape with a stylus;  
He forms it with scraping tools,  
Marking it out with a compass.  
He gives it a human form,  
The beauty of a man, to dwell in a shrine.

<sup>14</sup> For his use he cuts down cedars;  
He chooses plane trees and oaks.  
He sets aside trees of the forest;  
Or plants firs, and the rain makes them grow.

<sup>15</sup> All this serves man for fuel:  
He takes some to warm himself,  
And he builds a fire and bakes bread.  
He also makes a god of it and worships it,  
Fashions an idol and bows down to it!

<sup>16</sup> Part of it he burns in a fire:  
On that part he roasts meat,

He eats the roast and is sated;  
 He also warms himself and cries, “Ah,  
 I am warm! I can feel the heat!”  
<sup>17</sup> Of the rest he makes a god—his own carving!  
 He bows down to it, worships it;  
 He prays to it and cries,  
 “Save me, for you are my god!”  
<sup>18</sup> They have no wit or judgment:  
 Their eyes are besmeared, and they see not;  
 Their minds, and they cannot think.  
<sup>19</sup> They do not give thought,  
 They lack the wit and judgment to say:  
 “Part of it I burned in a fire;  
 I also baked bread on the coals,  
 I roasted meat and ate it—  
 Should I make the rest an abhorrence?  
 Should I bow to a block of wood?”  
<sup>20</sup> He pursues ashes!  
 A deluded mind has led him astray,  
 And he cannot save himself;  
 He never says to himself,  
 “The thing in my hand is a fraud!”  
 (Isa 44:9–20)

The idols, assumed as the alternative to the worship of the Israelite God, are, in and of themselves, nothing.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, rather than attacking them directly, the prophet hones in on their makers; in contrast to the LORD’s unique power as the guarantor of Israel’s comfort, it is the *inability* of the idols to act—to see, to hear—which is the witness to their craftsmen’s foolishness and, consequently, shame. “Who would fashion a god Or cast a statue That can do no good?... Let them all assemble and stand up! They shall be cowed, and they shall be shamed” (v. 10–11).

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<sup>39</sup> Here “monotheism,” in Smith’s view, “offers a ‘reality check’ that should be clear in the minds of Jacob/Israel [i.e. the Israelite audience],” and “helps to illuminate the vacuity of Babylonian images: if there is no god present in the cult statue, the cult statue is only an assemblage of materials. And, therefore, images are worthless.” See Smith, *Origins*, 192. However for a challenge to Smith’s characterization of “monotheism” in the passage, see Saul Olyan, “Is Isaiah 40–55 Really Monotheistic?” *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 12 (2012), 190–201.

In a list of thorough technical specificity, perhaps drawing upon the ancient Near Eastern genre of “occupational satire,” the prophet narrates how these smiths and carpenters arrange their instruments, judiciously prepare the blueprints, and plant the trees.<sup>40</sup> Then, carefully harvesting the wood, the craftsman of the idol “takes some to warm himself, And he builds a fire and bakes bread. He also makes a god of it and worships it, Fashions an idol and bows down to it! Part of it he burns in a fire: On that part he roasts meat, He eats the roast and is sated; He also warms himself and cries, ‘Ah, I am warm! I can feel the heat!’ Of the rest he makes a god—his own carving! He bows down to it, worships it; He prays to it and cries, ‘Save me, for you are my god!’” (v. 15–17).

The idol-maker, having completed his act of craftsmanship, utterly forgets that the base physical material which was casually hurled into the flames is entirely of a piece with the statue which he now worships. “He pursues ashes! A deluded mind has led him astray, And he cannot save himself; He never says to himself, ‘The thing in my hand is a fraud!’” (v. 20). As Smith notes, “leaving aside the satire, these verses simply declare the *lack of understanding* on the part of the images’ makers, perhap as *pars pro toto*, for any who would treat these images as gods.”<sup>41</sup>

Having ridiculed the absurdity of the religious alternative, the prophet returns to the fundamental message with which he began, and toward which the entire polemic was ultimately directed.

<sup>21</sup> Remember these things, O Jacob  
For you, O Israel, are My servant:  
I fashioned you, you are My servant—  
O Israel, never forget Me.

<sup>22</sup> I wipe away your sins like a cloud,  
Your transgressions like mist—  
Come back to Me, for I redeem you.

<sup>23</sup> Shout, O heavens, for the LORD has acted;

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<sup>40</sup> On Isaiah 44 as “occupational satire” see Assmann, *Price of Monotheism*, 25.

<sup>41</sup> Smith, *Origins*, 192. Some emphasis added.



Shout aloud, O depths of the earth!  
Shout for joy, O mountains,  
O forests with all your trees!  
For the LORD has redeemed Jacob,  
Has glorified Himself through Israel.  
(Isa 44:21–23)

The God of Israel is the supreme power, the prophet asserts, to whom his people owes complete and exclusive fealty; this is the fact which secures confidence in the saving God, and in the imminent redemption which he will bring. This passage and its parallels elsewhere in Second Isaiah, as Clifford notes, “are not discussions of idolatry” per se, but rather “dramatizations deliberately juxtaposed to dramatizations of Yahweh speaking to Israel.”<sup>42</sup> The religious alternatives are shown to be too absurd to be reasonable, and therefore the audience should be persuaded to accept the only remaining option: the worship of the LORD. It is here, in recalling how God “fashioned” Israel, that the higher irony of the passage, the contrast between the creatorship of God and the creatorship of the idol-craftsmen, comes to the fore.<sup>43</sup>

As Knut Holter points out in his monograph on idol-fabrication scenes in Second Isaiah, much, perhaps most, academic interest in this passage (and in parallel scenes elsewhere in Second Isaiah) has concerned itself with one of two questions: first, the authorial relationship between this chapter and the rest of “Second Isaiah;”<sup>44</sup> and, second, whether the portrayal of idol-fabrication

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<sup>42</sup> Richard Clifford, “The Function of Idol Passages in Second Isaiah,” *The Catholic Bible Quarterly* 42:4 (1980), 451.

<sup>43</sup> “The irony then lies in Second Isaiah’s deliberate *comparison* between two *incomparable* entities,” namely, the “contrasting of the idol-fabricator with Yahweh.” See Knut Holter, *Second Isaiah’s Idol-Fabrication Passages* (Berlin: Lang, 1995), 29 n. 31.

<sup>44</sup> For Holter’s division of the academic literature into these two primary questions, see Holter, *Second Isaiah’s Idol-Fabrication Passages*, 16–20. For debates on Isaiah 44 as a later interpolation, see, e.g., Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55*, 240, John L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1968), 67, Clifford, “Function,” 450, and Andrew Wilson, *The Nations in Deutero-Isaiah: A Study on Composition and Structure* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), 162–63.

and worship offered by the prophet here corresponds to the actual religious practices and conceptions of ancient Near Eastern iconolaters.<sup>45</sup> For our part, however, the issue at stake is something rather different: how does the prophet understand the religious subjectivity of the makers and devotees of the icons? Does he accept their devotion at face value? Or does he attempt to undermine it in some way, perhaps through the ascription of ulterior motives?

Jean Steinmann, in his 1960 monograph on Second Isaiah, seems to suggest that the makers and worshipers of the icons in Isaiah 44 are not sincere devotees, but are instead portrayed as motivated by base financial interest. Second Isaiah, he claims, “accuse les sculpteurs d’idoles d’être des imbéciles et reprend, pour les leur appliquer au v.18, les vers d’Isaïe [i.e. Isa 1:3, “Israel does not know, My people takes no thought”] sur le peuple qui ne comprend rien. *La thèse du Second Isaïe c’est que les sculpteurs de Babylone agissent par intérêt*. Mais lors de l’épreuve à venir, ceux qui se confient aux idoles seront confus.”<sup>46</sup> *Mirabile dictu*, however, Steinmann provides no evidence whatsoever for this rather radical Bad Faith interpretation of the passage’s portrayal of idol-makers.

Klaus Baltzer meanwhile, in his own monograph on Isaiah, attempts to build upon Steinmann’s claim of a financial ulterior motive in Isaiah 44 from four decades prior. Baltzer comments that “the text is addressing the manufacturers of images, and *their* concern is not devoid of an additional commercial interest: that is where their ‘desire’ lies.”<sup>47</sup> Indeed, Baltzer asks, “Was it possible to participate in the manufacture of these things even if one no longer believed in the

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<sup>45</sup> On the accuracy of the portrayal of iconolatriy in Isaiah 44, see Holter, *Second Isaiah’s Idol-Fabrication Passages*, 19–20, and cf. our discussion of Kaufmann above.

<sup>46</sup> Jean Steinmann, *Le Livre de La Consolation D’Israël et Les Prophètes du Retour de L’exil* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1960), 129. Emphasis added.

<sup>47</sup> Klaus Baltzer, *A Commentary on Isaiah 40–55*, trans. Margaret Kohl and Peter Machinist ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 194.

gods?...The full sting of the polemic [in Isaiah 44] becomes clear if it is a dispute with questionable belief as well as with questionable business.”<sup>48</sup>

Baltzer seems to ground his claim primarily on Isaiah 44:9–11a, and in particular on the words “חבריו” and “יע”ל”:

<sup>9</sup> The makers of idols

All work to no purpose [בל-יועילוי, lit. they will not profit];

And the things they treasure

Can do no good,

As they themselves can testify.

They neither look nor think,

And so they shall be shamed.

<sup>10</sup> Who would fashion a god

Or cast a statue

That can do no good [לבלתי הועיל]?

<sup>11</sup> Lo, all its adherents [הן כל-חבריו יבשו] shall be shamed.

Baltzer interprets the חבריו of verse 11a as implying a guild of financial interest, as the noun חבר “could be used for professional associations, especially associations formed for economic purposes.”<sup>49</sup> In the Hebrew Bible, however, the word חבר simply expresses a connection or similarity between individuals, and precious few of its uses in the biblical text are laden with financial connotations.<sup>50</sup> An economic understanding of the word חבריו is thus far from obvious or intuitive. Furthermore, following logically from his financially-colored reading of חבריו, Baltzer suggests that the future shame of the idol-makers in 11a “refers to the *commercial* ‘disappointment’ of the producers of the idols.”<sup>51</sup> Such an interpretation of the verse, however,

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<sup>48</sup> Baltzer, *Isaiah 40–55*, 196.

<sup>49</sup> Baltzer, *Isaiah 40–55*, 195.

<sup>50</sup> On the meaning of חבר, *BDB* offers “united, associate, companion,” as well as “associate, fellow,” the latter including “of children,” “of like rank,” “of like calling,” and “worshippers (associates, belonging to the society or guild) of idols,” citing our verse as an example of this last option. See F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Boston: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 288. Cf. חָבֵר in *HALOT* Online, which defines the word as “companion,” “follower,” or “worshipper.”

<sup>51</sup> Baltzer, *Isaiah 40–55*, 195. Emphasis added.

seems to make little narrativ or contextual sense. Are we to imagine that הן כל-חבריו יבשו, that “Lo, all its adherents [i.e. the idol-makers] shall be shamed,” because, when knowledge of God takes its proper place in a quasi-eschatological future, demand for their wares will decrease? Such a reading seems farfetched indeed, especially in the context of the many other references in Second Isaiah to the eventual shame of the idol-worshippers, none of which seem connected to financial motives.<sup>52</sup>

Beyond his interpretation of חבריו, Baltzer endeavors to find a commercial sense in the root ע"ל. On the appearance of the root in v. 9, Baltzer comments that, for Second Isaiah, “*the gods cannot ‘help’ (יעל)*: this has been the theme of polemic for a long time; we find it in Jeremiah, for example. ‘Do not help—do not see—do not know’”: according to DtIsa this applies both to the gods and to their images. It is the very opposite of what is acknowledged of Yahweh.”<sup>53</sup> Unlike the God of Israel, the icons themselves are utterly *powerless to benefit their devotees* (“בל-יועילו”), an incapacity sardonically contrasted with the worship they receive. Baltzer then proceeds, however, to offer quite a different interpretation of that same root as it appears in the very next verse. “The verb [יעל] is used again here in v.10. Of course here too the word can be rendered ‘help,’ but the meaning is more probably ‘to have the benefit of, *to profit from.*’”<sup>54</sup> On this statement Baltzer then cites Steinmann’s comment that “DtIsa’s thesis is that the Babylonian sculptors are acting out of self-interest,” thus harnessing the word יע"ל in v. 10 as support for Steinmann’s interpretation of the idol-makers as primarily financially-motivated.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> On the eventual shame of the idol-worshippers in Second Isaiah see, for example, Isa 42:17, 45:16.

<sup>53</sup> Baltzer, *Isaiah 40–55*, 194. Emphasis added.

<sup>54</sup> Baltzer, *Isaiah 40–55*, 194. Emphasis added.

<sup>55</sup> Baltzer, *Isaiah 40–55*, 194, n. 293.

It is indeed true that יעל possesses a range of meanings including “profit, avail,” and “benefit.” Only rarely in the Hebrew Bible, however, is the “profit” or “benefit” expressed by this word financial in nature, and the context of Isaiah 44 gives us no reason to suppose that it reflects the exception rather than the rule.<sup>56</sup> Rather, in its context here in v. 10, the meaning of יעל fits perfectly the definition offered by Baltzer himself for v. 9 immediately prior: “The gods [i.e. the icons] cannot ‘help’ (יעל): this has been the theme of polemic for a long time; we find it in Jeremiah, for example.”<sup>57</sup> As Baltzer himself rightly notes there, this is the sense of the word in Jeremiah and indeed in a whole series of biblical polemics against idolatry.<sup>58</sup> Here, as in these other cases, the producers and worshipers of the idols will be put to shame when knowledge of the Israelite God’s uniqueness demonstrates publicly *their own gods’ powerlessness* and thus, by extension, the irrationality and futility of their devotion.<sup>59</sup> Baltzer’s financially-motivated view, by contrast, seems almost certainly grounded in a projection onto Isaiah 44 of the pericope of Demetrius and the Silver Smiths in Acts 19.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, Baltzer connects our passage to Acts 19 in a footnote explicitly, and his description of a financial guild of idol-makers who are primarily interested in their bottom line would fit *that* narrative perfectly.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> On the semantic range of the root, see *BDB*, 418. On the question of the potential financial meaning of יעל, see “יעל” in *HALOT* Online, which distinguishes between “profit, benefit,” covering the vast majority of biblical appearances of the word, and “to **get profit**,” for which *HALOT* lists only three biblical occurrences, Isaiah 44 not among them.

<sup>57</sup> Baltzer, *Isaiah 40–55*, 194.

<sup>58</sup> On the negation of the root יעל to describe the powerlessness of icons and foreign deities to help their makers or worshipers, see the list of verses in Menahem Zevi Kaddari, *Milon ha-‘Ivrit ha-Mikra’it: otsar leshon ha-Mikra’im mi-alef ‘ad tav* (Ramat Gan: Universitat Bar-Ilan, 2006), 438.

<sup>59</sup> Those “die mit den Bilder-Göttern in Beziehung stehen...werden beschämt durch die Nutzlosigkeit ihrer Bilder-Götter. Dass sie selber nicht merken, dass ihre menschengemachten Götterbilder nicht retten können, zeigt ihre Erkenntnislosigkeit.” See Ammann, *Götter für die Tore*, 104. Cf. also Holter, *Second Isaiah’s Idol-Fabrication Passages*, 136–38.

<sup>60</sup> On which, see the discussion of the “ulterior motive” subtype of the Bad Faith Argument in Chapter 3 below.

<sup>61</sup> Baltzer, *Isaiah 40–55*, 196, n. 307.

Here in Isaiah 44, however, disconnected from the anachronistic input of later sources, the meaning of these verses, and of the chapter as a whole, is just what it appears to be: the idol-makers, and in particular the cleaver-believer who forms the crux of the polemic in verses 13–17, are sincere, and therefore sincerely ridiculous. The earnestness of their worship is never questioned nor their devotion ascribed to ulterior motives; the very force of the polemic revolves around the absurd sincerity of their idol-worship. As Richard Clifford states of verses 18–19 here, the author’s focus concerns “what the artisans do *not* think about while they work.”<sup>62</sup> This, indeed, is the core of the attack; it is precisely the *sincerity* of the idol-worshiper which the prophet emphasizes to such powerful effect.<sup>63</sup> The idol-worshiper goes in for mockery precisely because he does *not* think, does *not* understand that the idol is a mere piece of wood which he himself has crafted.<sup>64</sup> Beyond accusations of stupidity and irrationality, Second Isaiah offers no causal explanation or ulterior motive. He simply assumes the sincere appeal of the icon for the worshiper, and on that sincerity he bases his satirical depiction.

## **Caveats and Complications**

### **Potential Exceptions to be Dismissed**

A small number of passages in the Hebrew Bible might, on first glance, appear to question the sincerity of the worship of other gods and the devotees of their icons. Upon further investigation, however, it may be confidently confirmed that these cases do not constitute

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<sup>62</sup> Clifford, “Function,” 463.

<sup>63</sup> North captures the sense of the text when he states that for Deutero-Isaiah “the makers of idols swink and sweat, and encourage one another with *ludicrous seriousness*.” See Christopher R. North, “The Essence of Idolatry,” in J. Hempel and L. Rost eds., *Von Ugarit nach Qumran: Beiträuge zur Alttestamentlichen und Altorientalischen Forschung, Otto Eissfeldt dargebracht* (Berlin: Verlag Alfred Toepelmann, 1958), 159. Emphasis added.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Ammann, *Götter für die Toren*, 102: “Die Beurteilung der Handwerker erfolgt nach weisheitlichen Maßstäben: Ihnen wird vor allem mangelnde Erkenntnis vorgeworfen.”

exceptions, and that in fact there is no sense in which the participants or propagators of transgressive worshiper are portrayed as acting in Bad Faith. For our purposes, let us consider the two most prominent examples, those of Naaman the Syrian in 2 Kings 5 and Jehu King of Israel in 2 Kings 10.

Let us begin with the former case. In 2 Kings 5, Naaman is introduced as the commander of the army of Aram, one of Israel's primary rivals throughout the Book of Kings. This Naaman, the narrative informs us, is a *meşora* or leper, but discovers through his wife's Israelite maidservant that a prophet in Israel might have the power to cure him of this affliction (2 Kgs 5: 1–3).<sup>65</sup> The prophet, Elisha, instructs that Naaman should immerse himself seven times in the Jordan river and, having done so, Naaman finds himself miraculously cured of his leprosy (2 Kgs 5:9–14). Thereupon follows an encounter between Naaman and the prophet:

<sup>15</sup> Returning with his entire retinue to the man of God, he stood before him and exclaimed, “Now I know that there is no God in the whole world except in Israel! So please accept a gift from your servant.” <sup>16</sup> But he replied, “As the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will not accept anything.” He pressed him to accept, but he refused. <sup>17</sup> And Naaman said, “Then at least let your servant be given two mule-loads of earth; for your servant will never again offer up burnt offering or sacrifice to any god, except the LORD. <sup>18</sup> But may the LORD pardon your servant for this: When my master enters the temple of Rimmon to bow low in worship there, and he is leaning on my arm so that I must bow low in the temple of Rimmon—when I bow low in the temple of Rimmon, may the LORD pardon your servant in this.” <sup>19</sup> And he said to him, “Go in peace...” (2 Kgs 5:15–19)

The immediate and overwhelming success of the Israelite prophet's ritual advice evidently inspires in Naaman the Syrian something akin to a conversion experience. He now recognizes that “there is no God in the whole world except in Israel” (v. 15), requests dirt from the Israelite God's

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<sup>65</sup> Though often translated as “leprosy,” the precise nature of this biblical skin-condition is unclear. It is, however, not the “Hansen's disease” which is often associated with leprosy today. See e.g. Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1988), 63 and Isabel Crazz, “Naaman's Healing and Gehazi's Affliction: The Magical Background of 2 Kgs 5,” *Vetus Testamentum* 68 (2018), 540–41, n.1.

holy land to bring back to Aram (perhaps to build there an altar to the LORD), and even vows to abstain from offering sacrifice to any other gods. Lastly, however, he makes to Elisha one final appeal, indeed rather a strange one: when he returns to Aram, he will accompany his master the king into the house of Rimmon (probably the god Hadad).<sup>66</sup> At that point, his master will bow down—presumably in front of an icon of the god—while leaning upon Naaman, and consequently Naaman will be brought into bowing by the downward force of his master’s weight upon him.

The extensive academic literature on 2 Kings 5 has, in many cases, assumed that Naaman’s anticipated bowing constitutes a form of prostration to the god Rimmon. Naaman’s petition to Elisha, then, is in essence a request for *permission to worship a foreign god*, if perhaps under some coercion from his master the king. Such an understanding of the pericope has prompted two predictable reflexes in the secondary literature.

First, it has led to some puzzlement or surprise over how the prophet Elisha could evidently countenance such an idolatrous petition.<sup>67</sup> Stuart Lasine, in an article investigating the meaning of Elijah’s response, asks whether the prophet’s statement “Go in peace” does indeed represent an assent, and thus gives “permission for someone to claim exclusive devotion to the one God Yahweh and nevertheless bow down to a false god in that god’s temple?”<sup>68</sup> Walter Brueggemann notes that “we might expect that he [Elisha] would reprimand the general for his phony faith...but

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<sup>66</sup> On Rimmon as, in all likelihood, an appellation for the storm-god Hadad, see Cogan and Tadmor, *II Kings*, 65, and cf. Iain Provan, *1 and 2 Kings* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 193.

<sup>67</sup> As von Rad points out, some ancient interpretations too already “found it difficult that the prophet...seems to concede something he had no business conceding.” See Gerhard von Rad, *God at Work in Israel*, trans. John H. Marks (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 53.

<sup>68</sup> Stuart Lasine, “‘Go in peace’ or ‘Go to Hell’?: Elisha, Naaman and the Meaning of Monotheism in 2 Kings 5,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 25:1 (2011), 4. And cf. also Lasine’s description of Naaman as “feigning loyalty to an Aramean god while professing belief in Yahweh as the only God in all the earth.” See Lasine, “‘Go in peace,’” 23.



he does not.”<sup>69</sup> And Karin Schöpflin notes that “In der Endgestalt des Kapitels hat Elisas Antwort (19a), die die unorthodoxen Wünsche Naamans zu billigen scheint, Anlass zu Diskussion gegeben, weil diese Genehmigung der Bitten Naamans schlecht mit dtr Konzeptionen vereinbar ist.”<sup>70</sup>

And, second, this reading of Naaman’s request as a petition to worship Rimmon has led scholars to posit, in a wide variety of phrasings, a contradiction between Naaman’s internal state and his external activity. If this reading of 2 Kings 5:18 is correct, that is, then Naaman is asking permission from Elisha to engage in a form of “Bad Faith” devotion, *internally* rejecting the pagan god but *externally* worshiping him. Walter Brueggemann, for his part, writes that Naaman “wants Elisha to know that his confession to YHWH in verse 15 is genuine, and his necessary *performance to another god* in verse 18 is *only a social requirement and not a serious theological act.*”<sup>71</sup> Robert Cohn suggests that “Naaman is depicted as a marrano of sorts, forced to feign reverence to Rimmon...while *inwardly* remaining faithful to Yahweh.”<sup>72</sup> Iain Provan, meanwhile, states that, for Naaman, “the Syrian god **Rimmon**... is now clearly understood to be a mere idol, and Naaman’s ‘worship’ of Rimmon will be restricted to those unavoidable occasions when he is found in Rimmon’s **temple** in the course of official duties.”<sup>73</sup> Naaman’s bowing in the temple of Rimmon is ‘worship’ in quotes—that is, while it has the *form* of veneration, this apparent worship is actually

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<sup>69</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “2 Kings 5: Two Evangelists and a Saved Subject,” *Missiology: An International Review* 35:3 (2007), 269.

<sup>70</sup> Karin Schöpflin, “Naaman: Seine Heilung und Bekehrung im Alten und Neuen Testament,” *Biblische Notizen* 141 (2009), 41.

<sup>71</sup> Brueggemann, “2 Kings 5: Two Evangelists,” 269. Emphasis added. Cf. Lasine, ““Go in peace,”” 4 and 23, as well as von Rad, who states, presumably referring to this issue, that the tale of Naaman “does give inner feelings their due insofar as it introduces very delicate questions of the king that could have arisen on in this particular person [i.e. Naaman].” See von Rad, *God at Work in Israel*, 52.

<sup>72</sup> Robert L. Cohn, “Form and Perspective in 2 Kings V,” *Vetus Testamentum* 33:2 (1983), 178. Emphasis added.

<sup>73</sup> Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, 193. And cf. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, 196 that Naaman hoped to receive forgiveness “even in the midst of sin, as he *worshipped another god.*” Emphasis added.

insincere, as the god “is now clearly understood to be a mere idol.” And for Yair Zakovitch, though Naaman “reveals...his opinion about the faith of the Arameans” that “this is not a faith of true substance [זו אינה אמונה של ממש], and its god is not a true god [אינו אל של ממש],” yet “his formal, *external* subordination to a man, his king, obligates *external* subordination [i.e. bowing] to the god of Aram, to Rimmon.”<sup>74</sup>

In sharp contrast to these modern academic interpretations stands the analysis of the 19<sup>th</sup> century rabbinic commentator known as the Malbim. In his reading, the Malbim is particularly concerned with the apparent repetition in Naaman’s statement: “so that I must bow low in the temple of Rimmon—when I bow low in the temple of Rimmon.”<sup>75</sup> Ultimately, he attempts to explicate the repetition by positing an *additional* act of bowing:

It means to indicate that there were two issues: First, at the time that the King of Aram would go to bow down in the house of Rimmon, when he [the King] is leaning on him [Naaman], he [Naaman] needed to bend down his stature in order that he [the king] might bow, and in this there is, technically speaking, no prohibition, because he [Naaman] is not bowing, but rather only bending down in order for the king to bow [הוא אינו משתחוה רק שוחה קומתו לצורך השתחוויית המלך], and this is only forbidden because of how it *appears* [ואינו אסור רק משום מראית העין] as it is written [in *b. ‘Abodah Zarah 12a*] ‘if a thorn got stuck on him [a person] in front of an idol, he should not bow down to pick it up [because he *appears* to be bowing to the idol] ...’ Second, [Naaman requested forgiveness for the fact] that afterwards he was forced to bow down himself in order that the king should not notice that he denied the legitimacy of the idol [שכפר בעבודה זרה], and in this case the bowing *was* to idolatry.<sup>76</sup>

According to the Malbim, the repetition in Naaman’s *words* must reflect a repetition in *deed*, lest even the briefest utterance in the biblical text should prove superfluous. Naaman’s first “so that I must bow low in the temple of Rimmon,” then, represents an initial bowing, and his second “when I bow low in the temple of Rimmon” must signal one further bowing. In the first

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<sup>74</sup> Yair Zakovitch, *‘Every High Official Has a Higher One Set Over Him’: A Literary Analysis of 2 Kings 5* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1985), 89–90. My translation. Emphasis added.

<sup>75</sup> On two attempts to explain the apparent repetitiveness of the passage through literary analysis, see Cogan and Tadmor, *II Kings*, 65 and Zakovitch, *‘Every High Official,’* 88.

<sup>76</sup> See Malbim on 2 Kgs 5:18. My translation.

act of prostration, however, Naaman is not, as the Malbim sees it, engaged in any form of worship whatsoever, whether insincere or otherwise. Instead, he is simply functioning as a human-crutch for his master, who alone is engaged in a religious motion.<sup>77</sup> In other words, to paraphrase the Malbim's own language, Naaman is *bending*, but he is *not bowing* [אינו משתחוה רק שוחה קומתו]. This first bending of Naaman, the Malbim concludes, is thus certainly not an act of idolatry because it is not an act of worship at all. If it is prohibited, it is only out of concern that it may give the *mistaken impression* of transgression. Unlike this first act of bowing, however, the second act of bowing which the Malbim posits does indeed entail the performance of worship: "Afterwards [i.e. after his first bowing together with the king] he [Naaman] was forced to bow down himself in order that the king should not notice that he denied the legitimacy of the idol, and in this case the bowing *was* to idolatry." This second bow was indeed an act of worship in Bad Faith, "forced" upon Naaman only to prove his loyalty to the king's religion.

There is, of course, a major difference between the Malbim's hermeneutic assumptions, motivating much of his analysis here, and the academic mode of reading texts. Unlike traditional rabbinic interpretation, we are not compelled to explicate or justify every repetition in the text as meaningful. As such, the Malbim's attempt to posit two bowings here in order to explain the doubling of Naaman's language seems not only unnecessary but, indeed, fundamentally eisegetical. Excluding, however, his conjectural second bowing, the bulk of the Malbim's interpretation of the scene—of what, on his view, describes the first bowing—nonetheless stands the test of plain-sense: Naaman is not asking for permission to engage in false-hearted worship in the house of Rimmon—he is not asking permission to engage in any worship at all. The entire

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<sup>77</sup> This in contrast to Cohn, who proposes that "the phrase, 'and he leans on my hand', appears to be an idiom denoting not that Naaman was his [the king's] physical support but, rather, his 'right-hand man'." See Cohn, "Form and Perspective," 179.

point of Naaman's request, in fact, is to emphasize that he himself will *not* be engaging in worship, even if so it should *appear*. As Zakovitch himself notes:

“Naaman does not use the language of bowing *to* Rimmon—and also does not mention the word ‘god’ in connection with Rimmon—but rather he says that he will bow *at the house* of Rimmon—‘to bow down there;’ this stands in contrast to the definitive majority of the biblical verses which discuss bowing *to* a god!...Naaman prefers to present his bowing as a bowing *in the house* of Rimmon and not *to* Rimmon, since he now serves the LORD alone.”<sup>78</sup>

Zakovitch explicitly acknowledges, then, that Naaman's language is conspicuous precisely because he does *not* mention any bowing to Rimmon but only bowing in the house of Rimmon. And yet, Zakovitch insists that Naaman will bow to Rimmon, stating, as we saw before, that “his formal, external subordination to a man, his king, obligates external subordination [i.e. bowing] to the god of Aram, to Rimmon.”<sup>79</sup> In a sense, then, Zakovitch refuses to accept Naaman's own description at face-value; Naaman, despite his own phrasing, will in fact be bowing down to the god. Perhaps out of embarrassment, however, or as a negotiating-tactic in his request to Elisha, he simply wishes to avoid *saying so*—he “*prefers to present* his bowing as a bowing in the house of Rimmon and not to Rimmon.”

Rather than rejecting Naaman's own testimony as the obfuscation of an embarrassed sinner or as a tactic to downplay the severity of his activities, let us simply take the general at his word. There is no Bad Faith portrayal of Naaman's future-worship here, because there is no portrayal of Naaman engaging in the worship of Rimmon at all. His request is only that he might be pardoned for *facilitating his master's worship* of Rimmon, or perhaps, as the Malbim suggested, for *appearing* to worship the god when his master's body-weight forces him to bend down:

When my master enters the temple of Rimmon to bow low in worship there, and he is leaning on my arm so that I must bow low in the temple of Rimmon—when I bow low in the temple of Rimmon, may the LORD pardon your servant in this.

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<sup>78</sup> Zakovitch, ‘*Every High Official*,’ 88–89. My translation. Emphasis added.

<sup>79</sup> Zakovitch, ‘*Every High Official*,’ 89–90. My translation.

Just as the Jew in *b. 'Abodah Zarah 12a*, stuck by a thorn while in front of an icon, “should not bow down to pick it up because he *appears* to be bowing to the idol,” so too Naaman runs the risk of incrimination by appearance. He is, however, not himself bowing down to the idol.<sup>80</sup> If he were, what relevant content would be added to Naaman’s request by mentioning the king’s leaning on his arm? Rather, as the dignitary honored with officially serving as the king’s bodily support, when the king bows in worship, Naaman must bend along with him out of physical necessity.<sup>81</sup>

Such an understanding of the passage clarifies the two rather difficult downstream issues which we noted before. If Naaman’s request for preemptive pardon concerns only his possible *appearance* of prostration—when in fact he is merely bending under the king’s weight—or perhaps concerns his indirectly facilitating his master’s prostration, it is far less difficult to understand how this might be “mit dtr Konzeptionen vereinbar,” to borrow Schöpflin’s terminology.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, we saw above how the notion of Naaman engaging in worship of Rimmon led scholars to posit a divide between his internal rejection of all other gods based on v. 15 and his and purported external worship of Rimmon. Indeed, such a contrast between the internal and the external is crucial to the concept of Bad Faith, as we shall see in detail in Chapter 3. And yet, note how such a contrast is *not even hinted at* in the text of 2 Kings 5, let alone stated explicitly. The idea of an “internal” Naaman and an “external” Naaman in the house of Rimmon is entirely the product of readers seeking to resolve the contradiction which they themselves perceive between verses 15 and 18, a contradiction which falls away completely when Naaman’s behavior is

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<sup>80</sup> A small minority of scholars do seem to imply an account in line with our “bending, not bowing” model. See, for example, Cranz’s statement that Naaman “asks for permission to accompany his master to the temple of the god Rimmon,” Cranz, “Naaman’s Healing,” 545.

<sup>81</sup> For another instance of this same official honor, see 2 Kgs 7:2 and 7:17.

<sup>82</sup> Schöpflin, “Naaman: Seine Heilung und Bekehrung,” 41.

properly understood: not as worship in Bad Faith, but as bending in the service of his master's worship.

Our second apparent exception concerns the usurper-king Jehu in 2 Kings 10. We are first introduced to the character in 2 Kings 9, where he appears as a military commander serving in the army of King Jehoram. After being designated by Elisha, through one of the prophet's disciples, to serve as the next ruler of the northern kingdom of Israel, Jehu embarks on a bloody quest to eliminate the reigning Ahabic dynasty root and stem. Having eliminated the king and the remaining members and associates of the royal house (2 Kgs 9:24–10:17), Jehu now turns to the worshipers of Baal:

<sup>18</sup> Jehu assembled all the people and said to them, "Ahab served Baal little; Jehu shall serve him much!" <sup>19</sup> Therefore, summon to me all the prophets of Baal, all his worshipers, and all his priests: let no one fail to come, for I am going to hold a great sacrifice for Baal. Whoever fails to come shall forfeit his life." Jehu was acting with guile [בעקבה] in order to exterminate the worshipers of Baal. <sup>20</sup> Jehu gave orders to convoke a solemn assembly for Baal, and one was proclaimed. <sup>21</sup> Jehu sent word throughout Israel, and all the worshipers of Baal came, not a single one remained behind. They came into the temple of Baal, and the temple of Baal was filled from end to end. <sup>22</sup> He said to the man in charge of the wardrobe, "Bring out the vestments for all the worshipers of Baal"; and he brought vestments out for them. <sup>23</sup> Then Jehu and Jehonadab son of Rechab came into the temple of Baal, and they said to the worshipers of Baal, "Search and make sure that there are no worshipers of the LORD among you, but only worshipers of Baal." <sup>24</sup> So they went in to offer sacrifices and burnt offerings. But Jehu had stationed eighty of his men outside and had said, "Whoever permits the escape of a single one of the men I commit to your charge shall forfeit life for life." <sup>25</sup> When he had finished [ויהי ככלתו] presenting the burnt offering, Jehu said [ויאמר יהוא] to the guards and to the officers, "Come in and strike them down; let no man get away!" The guards and the officers struck them down with the sword and left them lying where they were; then they proceeded to the interior of the temple of Baal. <sup>26</sup> They brought out the pillars of the temple of Baal and burned them. <sup>27</sup> They destroyed the pillar of Baal, and they tore down the temple of Baal and turned it into latrines, as is still the case. <sup>28</sup> Thus Jehu eradicated the Baal from Israel. (2 Kgs 10:18–28)<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> The JPS translation renders v. 25a: "When Jehu had finished presenting the burnt offering, he said to the guards etc." We have altered this to fit the Hebrew more closely. See the discussion below.

Jehu, having mercilessly eradicated all his potential rivals, sets his sights on the worshipers of Baal, a god whose cult is strongly associated with the deposed dynasty. On pain of death, Jehu calls all the devotees of the god to a “a solemn assembly” where he will “hold a great sacrifice for Baal” (v. 19–20). Verifying that only worshipers of the god are present, and instructing his men to prevent any of them from escaping, he completes an offering to Baal and then commands his soldiers to slaughter everyone present. In a brutally ironic twist, the “great sacrifice for Baal” which Jehu had declared turns out to be a sacrifice of the devotees of Baal themselves.<sup>84</sup>

Jehu thus pretends to be a devotee of Baal while in fact being zealous for the Israelite God. And indeed, in the process of faking-out the Baal-worshipers unto death, he goes so far, apparently, as to present a burnt offering to Baal in v. 25. As such, we have here in 2 Kings 10 a character who inwardly rejects the worship of Baal, but outwardly pretends devotion to the god, even to the point of offering sacrifice. Do we have here, then, a biblical Bad Faith portrayal of the worship of other gods?

Certainly, Jehu’s sacrifice here comes closer to Bad Faith than any other depiction of the devotion to other gods and their icons in the Hebrew Bible. And yet, the narrative of Jehu in 2 Kings 10 is not quite a Bad Faith portrayal of transgressive worship, but rather something distinct: a portrait of simple deception, of “guile.” And while this tale of “guile” is much like the Bad Faith Argument in entailing a contradiction between the external and the internal, unlike the Bad Faith Argument it makes no attempt to portray the psychological state of the worshipers and propagators

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<sup>84</sup> “The irony in this remark is that only too late will the devotees of Baal learn that they are the ones to be sacrificed!” See Richard D. Patterson and Hermann J. Austel, *1 & 2 Kings* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 997. The bleak narrative twist here in 2 Kgs 10 is in fact quite similar to the surprise-ending of the 1962 Twilight Zone episode “To Serve Man,” in which an alien race purporting to “serve man” in the sense of assisting humankind turns out rather to “serve” man as a culinary dish. Just so, the worshipers of Baal think they will witness a great sacrifice to the god but themselves end up on the chopping-block.

of other gods, Jehu himself being neither. Those in the category of “worshippers of Baal” are evidently assumed to be sincere—Jehu is simply not in that category. He is a spy from the outside pretending to be an insider, not an insider pretending to be sincere. Had we only 2 Kings 10, then, we could infer little about the subjectivity of the transgressive worshippers themselves, and certainly not the insincerity of their religious practice.

In many ways, the case of Jehu is analogous to that of an actor playing the role of a worshiper in a film. The actor’s task entails a certain disconnect between the external and the internal, and thus bears a resemblance to the Bad Faith Argument, but ultimately this is entirely distinct from, say, an actual church-goer who is secretly an atheist. The latter is a case of worshipping in Bad Faith, the former a case of pretending to worship.

It is perhaps worth mentioning nonetheless, however, that it is far from clear whether Jehu himself even does, in fact, offer sacrifice to Baal in our pericope. Consider the relevant passage once again:

<sup>24</sup> So they went in to offer sacrifices and burnt offerings. But Jehu had stationed eighty of his men outside and had said, “Whoever permits the escape of a single one of the men I commit to your charge shall forfeit life for life.” <sup>25</sup> *When he had finished presenting the burnt offering, Jehu said* [וידי ככלתו לעשות העלה ויאמר יהוא] to the guards and to the officers, “Come in and strike them down; let no man get away!” The guards and the officers struck them down with the sword and left them lying where they were; then they proceeded to the interior of the temple of Baal.

On first glance, it would indeed seem that the “he” who “finished presenting the burnt offering” in v. 25 is Jehu himself, and indeed this has proved the majority opinion in scholarship touching on the scene.<sup>85</sup> This view, however, has by no means gone unquestioned. John Gray,

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<sup>85</sup> On Jehu as officiant, see, for example, the JPS translation itself, as well as J. Robinson, *The Second Book of Kings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 100, and Lissa M. Wray Beal, *The Deuteronomist’s Prophet: Narrative Control of Approval and Disapproval in the story of Jehu* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 134. These are representative of the vast majority of academic perspectives on the issue.



though suggesting that “the natural sense of *k<sup>e</sup>kallōtō* is that Jehu himself was sacrificing,” cautions that “the pronominal suffix, however, may denote the officiating priest [rather than Jehu] or even be a corruption of the *m* of the third masculine plural suffix, there being a great similarity of *m* to *w* in the proto-Hebraic script.”<sup>86</sup> Richard Patterson and Hermann Austel comment that “although the NIV implies that Jehu himself offered the heathen sacrifice, he may simply have seen to its accomplishment by the proper priests.”<sup>87</sup> So too Yehudah Q̄il states that “the reference is to the chief priest of Baal...though it is possible that the reference is to Jehu himself through whose command the burnt-offering was done.”<sup>88</sup> And Donald Wiseman notes that “the person who made the sacrifice is not stated, it may be indefinite (‘one made’), NIV supplies *Jehu*. The text does not say that Jehu acted as sacrificing priest.”<sup>89</sup>

Out of these three non-Jehu alternatives—a corruption of an original third plural suffix to a third singular, an assumed chief-priest of Baal, and an indefinite subject—we would suggest the third as the most plausible reading of the text. Such an indefinite-subject understanding of the verb requires us to make no emendations to the verse, falling as it does entirely within the range of

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<sup>86</sup> John Gray, *I and II Kings* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), 561. Cf. Otto Thenius’ 1849 commentary on the Book of Kings, in which he suggested of the verb ככלתו that “an *eigenhändiges* Opfern Jehu’s (*Ew. Gesch. Isr.*) ist bestimmt nicht zu denken.” See Otto Thenius, *Die Bücher Der Könige* (Leipzig: Weidmann’sche Buchhandlung, 1849), 319. Gray himself concludes that “in view of the unconscionable treachery of Jehu, however, we find no difficulty in referring the sacrifice to him.”

<sup>87</sup> Patterson and Austel, *I & 2 Kings*, 997 and cf. Metzudat David ad loc: “When Jehu finished doing the burnt offering *by their hands* [i.e. not directly himself] since after they did the burnt offering the truth of the matter was made public, namely that they were worshipers of the Baal, and consequently no one would say he [Jehu] had killed innocent people.” See also Abravanel ad loc: “And after *they finished* doing the burnt offering, he [Jehu] ordered the guards and the officers [לרצים ולשלישים] to slaughter all the worshipers of the Baal.” My translations. Emphasis added.

<sup>88</sup> Yehudah Q̄il, *Sefer Melakhim* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Q̄uk, 1989), 582. My translation.

<sup>89</sup> Donald J. Wiseman, *I and 2 Kings* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), 228.

acceptable Biblical Hebrew syntax.<sup>90</sup> More importantly, however, reading ככלתו in v. 25 as referring to an indefinite subject would solve a number of serious narrative difficulties which arise in the text if Jehu is assumed to be the subject of the infinitive construct. In v. 24, the verse immediately prior, it is apparently the worshipers of Baal who “went in to offer sacrifices and burnt offerings.”<sup>91</sup> If Jehu, however, is the subject of “when he had finished [ויהי ככלתו] presenting the burnt offering” in v.25, the identity of the officiant has changed from one verse to the next. Furthermore, both in the context of distributing the garments “for all the worshipers of Baal” (v. 22) and in declaring “search and make sure that there are no worshipers of the LORD *among you*, but only worshipers of Baal” (v. 23) Jehu makes a repeated division between himself and the “worshipers of Baal;” if Jehu is distinct and separate from the Baal-worshipers, is he now to function as their chief-priest? Thirdly, for the most part the Deuteronomistic narrator of the scene portrays Jehu and his actions approvingly, with the exception only of Jehu’s subsequent maintenance of the calves of Jeroboam.<sup>92</sup> Does the Deuteronomistic narrator, praising Jehu so highly, intend nonchalantly to portray him sacrificing to Baal? And lastly, why should Jehu offer this sacrifice at all? If his aim is to verify the guilt of the congregation before executing them—something he does seem concerned to do in v. 23—does allowing them passively to witness his own sacrifice accomplish this? Are we to picture Jehu standing in front of the congregation,

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<sup>90</sup> On the third singular person as indefinite subject see, Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, ed. E. Kautzsch and trans. A.E. Cowley (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2006), 459–60, though Gesenius’ discussion largely concerns finite verbs rather than infinitive constructs with a third singular suffix as in our case. See also Chaim Rabin, “The Ancient Versions and the Indefinite Subject,” *Textus* 2 (1962), 60–76.

<sup>91</sup> Though against this, see the LXX of v. 24a: καὶ εἰσῆλθεν τοῦ ποιῆσαι τὰ θύματα κτλ.

<sup>92</sup> See David T. Lamb, *Righteous Jehu and his Evil Heirs: The Deuteronomist’s Negative Perspective on Dynastic Succession* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 93, 97-101 and cf. Walter Brueggemann, “Stereotype and Nuance: The Dynasty of Jehu,” *Catholic Bible Quarterly* 70:1 (2008), 20.

sacrificing a cow to Baal, and then spinning around and immediately turning his sword on the crowd? What kind of sense would this make?<sup>93</sup>

Rather, the most contextually attractive interpretation is that ככלתו is indefinite. Jehu gathers the worshipers of Baal together, makes sure none can escape, brings them all the necessary paraphernalia for their worship, and waits for the sacrifice to be offered. Then, having confirmed their guilt, he goes for the jugular. He himself, however, in all likelihood offers no worship to Baal, insincere or otherwise, or even pretends to do so.

### **Transgressive Yahwism and the Bad Faith Argument**

Up until now we have contended, on the basis of select examples, that the Hebrew Bible, in all of its references to the worship of other gods and their icons, numbering perhaps in the hundreds, assumes without exception the sincerity of that worship, or at least never questions it. The biblical corpus, that is to say, presents no Bad Faith portrayal of the worship of other gods and the reverence of their icons, whether by Israelites or non-Israelites. Does this mean, however, that no Bad Faith Argument can be found in the Hebrew Bible whatsoever?

In fact, in the pages of the biblical corpus, we can discern several examples of Bad Faith Arguments. These, however, are never directed at the worship of other gods and the reverence of their images, but rather exclusively at worship of the *Israelite God* in a manner deemed by the authors to be either insufficient or inappropriate. In other words, the Bad Faith Argument in the

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<sup>93</sup> Though admittedly one alternative might be simply to conclude that “der Text nicht aus einem Guß ist,” as Ernst Würthwein contends on the basis of several other narrative inconcinnities in the chapter. See Ernst Würthwein, *Die Bücher der Könige* vol. 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1984), 341.

Hebrew Bible is never lodged against what we might perhaps describe, if risking anachronism, as “other religions,” but only against forms of what we might call “transgressive Yahwism.”

Consider the following example from Isaiah 29, directed against insufficiently committed worship of the Israelite God:

<sup>13</sup> My Lord said:  
Because that people [i.e. Israel] has approached [Me] with its mouth  
And honored Me with its lips,  
But has kept its heart far from Me,  
And its worship of Me has been  
A commandment of men, learned by rote—  
<sup>14</sup> Truly, I shall further baffle that people  
With bafflement upon bafflement;  
And the wisdom of its wise shall fail,  
And the prudence of its prudent shall vanish.  
(Isa 29:13–14)

Here, we have an unambiguous statement of Bad Faith, and of the contrast between outward reverence and inward insincerity which it entails. Externally, with “its mouth” and “its lips,” (v. 13) the people Israel have drawn close to their deity and honored him. Their internal state, however, as represented by the heart, exists in total opposition to their behavior, is “far from Me” (v. 13). And in fact, though this first half of v. 13 already constitutes by itself a complete accusation of Bad Faith, the prophet goes so far as to restate the condemnation in even more vivid terms:

ותהי יראתם אתי מצות אנשים מלמדה  
And its worship of Me has been a commandment of men, learned by rote.

The Israelites’ *yir’â*, their fear or reverence of the LORD rendered here as “worship,” is a מצוה מלמדה, a commandment studied and absorbed but, evidently, lacking in any true commitment or devotion, as their rebelliousness and iniquity so clearly testify (see Isa 29:15–21).

Examples of such Bad Faith portrayals of the transgressive or insufficient worship of the Israelite God appear in 1 Samuel 2:12–17, Jeremiah 3:10, perhaps Hosea 4:8 and 2 Kings 17:24–

41, and, if only speculatively, even in Esther 8:17. Perhaps the most striking example of such a depiction, however, appears in 1 Kings 12.

Here, in reaction to King Rehoboam’s antagonistic governance (1 Kgs 12:1–19), the ten northern tribes split off from the Judahite monarchy to form a new, independent kingdom, crowning Jeroboam the son of Nebat as their king just as Ahijah of Shiloh had prophesied (see 1 Kgs 11:26–40). The legitimacy of the new ruler, however—a usurper against the David line—is far from secure. As such, Jeroboam quickly initiates a number of strategies designed to consolidate his position, among them several important religious initiatives:

<sup>26</sup> Jeroboam said to himself, “Now the kingdom may well return to the House of David. <sup>27</sup> If these people still go up to offer sacrifices at the House of the LORD in Jerusalem, the heart of these people will turn back to their master, King Rehoboam of Judah; they will kill me and go back to King Rehoboam of Judah.” <sup>28</sup> So the king took counsel and made two golden calves. He said to the people, “You have been going up to Jerusalem long enough. This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!” <sup>29</sup> He set up one in Bethel and placed the other in Dan. <sup>30</sup> That proved to be a cause of guilt, for the people went to worship [the calf at Bethel and] the one at Dan. <sup>31</sup> He also made cult places and appointed priests from the ranks of the people who were not of Levite descent. <sup>32</sup> He stationed at Bethel the priests of the shrines that he had appointed to sacrifice to the calves that he had made. And Jeroboam established a festival on the fifteenth day of the eighth month; in imitation of the festival in Judah, he established one at Bethel, and he ascended the altar [there]. <sup>33</sup> On the fifteenth day of the eighth month—the month in which he had contrived of his own mind to establish a festival for the Israelites—Jeroboam ascended the altar that he had made in Bethel.  
(1 Kgs 12:26–33)<sup>94</sup>

Jeroboam is concerned, first and foremost, with *political* considerations, and in particular with the threat posed by the ongoing cachet of the Jerusalem Temple.<sup>95</sup> If, he fears, his subjects in

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<sup>94</sup> The JPS translates ‘*eglê zāhāb*’ here in v. 28 as “golden calves,” but strictly speaking an ‘*ēgel*’ in Biblical Hebrew is any male bovine, regardless of age (not necessarily, that is, a “calf”). See Naphtali Meshel, *The “Grammar” of Sacrifice: A Generativist Study of the Israelite Sacrificial System in the Priestly Writings with a “Grammar” of Σ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 37.

<sup>95</sup> Though our discussion treats the chapter as a unity, see Jules Francis Gomes, *The Sanctuary of Bethel and the Configuration of Israelite Identity* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), 17–22 and the

the north continue to travel to the Temple to offer sacrifice, they will be swayed by the preeminent (or perhaps even, in the author's mind, exclusive) sacred status of Jerusalem, eventually relapsing into support for the Davidic dynasty associated with it. As such, Jeroboam initiates a series of reforms designed preemptively to neutralize the threat of southern cultic prestige. He places golden calves at Bethel and Dan, builds cult places [בית במות], appoints priests who are not of Levitical descent, and institutes the celebration of a festival (presumably the Feast of Tabernacles) in the eighth month of the calendar (rather than the seventh) in order to break the hold of the Jerusalem Temple and its personnel on the religious imagination of his subjects.<sup>96</sup>

We have here, then, a clear example of a Bad Faith portrayal of the propagation of transgressive worship in the Hebrew Bible. Jeroboam, as conceived by the author of 1 Kings 12, was moved to religious innovation not by any genuine conviction, not by any sense that the calves he introduced would please or propitiate the God of Israel, but rather by the basest instincts for political self-preservation. As Kaufmann notes of the narrative:

*“Moved by political considerations, Jeroboam built for his kingdom royal sanctuaries after the manner of the Jerusalem temple...Jeroboam needed a symbol that would replace the southern ark, and in this also he was guided by pagan motifs.”*<sup>97</sup>

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literature cited therein for an attempt to disentangle the complex compositional and redactional history of the narrative.

<sup>96</sup> The preeminent status of the Levites as priests is also at issue in the narrative of the Icon of Micah in Judg 17–18, among other places. It is worth noting, however, a key difference between the two pericopes: here 1 Kgs 12, the narrator criticizes Jeroboam for failing to acknowledge and respect the unique priestly status of the Levites; in Judg 17, the criticism of Micah concerns the fact that he *does acknowledge* the preeminent priestly status of the Levites but uses it for inappropriate forms of worship. On Judg 17–18 as a form of religious polemic, see Horst Dietrich Preuß, *Verspottung fremder Religionen im Alten Testament* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1970), 60–67. On the debate surrounding the precise identity of the festival celebrated by Jeroboam in the eighth month, see Gomes, *The Sanctuary of Bethel*, 35–36.

<sup>97</sup> Kaufmann, *Religion of Israel*, 271. Emphasis added. Kaufmann seems to present this as a statement of historical fact. Cf. also Roland de Vaux, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East*, trans. Damian McHugh (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972), 98, where de Vaux similarly sees in the pericope a reflection of the real motives of the historical Jeroboam. For our purposes,

It has been our contention thus far that the Bad Faith Argument is never applied in the Hebrew Bible to the worship of other gods or their icons, but rather to the transgressive or insufficient worship of the Israelite God alone. As presented by 1 Kings 14:9 (as well as, evidently, 1 Kgs 12:28–32, 2 Kgs 17:16, and 2 Chron 13:8), however, the golden calves which Jeroboam established for ulterior motives (and therefore in Bad Faith) were themselves gods and served as objects of the northerners’ worship. Does Jeroboam’s Bad Faith institution of the Calves of Samaria, then, contradict our claim?

On this question, let us again turn to Kaufmann’s analysis of the pericope. For Kaufmann, Jeroboam’s calves, in point of historical fact, were not intended to be worshiped as other gods, but were instead purely Yahwistic symbols calculated to “replace the southern ark.”<sup>98</sup> The attempt by 1 Kings to describe the calves as “other gods” was only “Judean polemic designed to denigrate the calves as fetish-idols.” Beyond this, however:

“The story itself testifies obliquely that the calves were not ‘other gods.’ It blames Jeroboam for inventing a festival and appointing non-Levite priests. But what additional sin can possibly consist

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however, what actually motivated Jeroboam is of little significance. What is crucial is only the way in which the biblical author constructs Jeroboam’s religious reforms.

<sup>98</sup> Kaufmann, *Religion of Israel*, 271, and see Kaufmann’s discussion in *Religion of Israel*, 270–273. Our inquiry, as we have stressed, concerns itself not with history “wie es eigentlich gewesen”—with, for example, the origins of Jerusalem’s monopoly on legitimate sacrifice or the religious policies of the historical Jeroboam—but with the perceptions and portrayals of the biblical authors alone. It may yet be germane, however, to note that, in point of historical fact, the reforms of the historical Jeroboam in introducing the calves of Samaria were indeed probably Yahwistic in nature. Gomes notes that “most scholars agree that the calves were pedestals for Yahweh, a counterpart to the cherubim in the Jerusalem Temple.” See Gomes, *The Sanctuary of Bethel*, 25, and see also 26–28. And cf. Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 17 n. 2, de Vaux, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East*, 100, Avigdor Shinan and Yair Zakovitch, *From Gods to God: How the Bible Debunked, Suppressed, or Changed Ancient Myths and Legends* trans. Valerie Zakovitch (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 103 and 105, and Ralph W. Klein, “The ‘Sin’ of Jeroboam,” in Eric F. Mason & Edmondo F. Lupieri eds. *Golden Calf Traditions in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 26–31.

in worshiping golden calves in this manner? What has Israel been commanded by YHWH concerning the festivals and priests of a calf-cult?”<sup>99</sup>

To put Kaufmann’s insight in modern terms: what sense would it make for a rabbi to criticize the Catholic mass because the priests are not *kohanim*? Or to disapprove of Easter because it is not intercalated according to the *halakhah*? So too here in the Book of Kings. Even though the author describes the calves as “other gods” to attack them, in enumerating specific criticisms he unwittingly shows his hand. His denunciations are only intelligible if he conceives of the calf-cult as essentially Yahwistic, as designed, like the ark, to signal or channel the presence of the Israelite God.<sup>100</sup> Jeroboam’s institution of the golden calves is thus, for 1 Kings 12, a propagation in Bad Faith of the transgressive service of the Israelite God, not the worship of his rivals.

This biblical deployment of the Bad Faith Argument against transgressive Yahwism—and only against transgressive Yahwism—is far more than a point of mere curiosity in our investigation of the portrayal of illicit worship. Rather, it demonstrates something fundamental: that this form of Bad Faith rhetoric was available to, and even in use by, an array of biblical authors. The fact, then, that the Hebrew Bible nowhere deploys such a Bad Faith Argument against the worship of other gods and the reverence of their icons is not due to any limited range of rhetorical options in the culture of the ancient Israelites, in their era, or in their modes of disputation. They could have used this type of Bad Faith Argument in their portrayals of the devotees of other gods and their icons, but they did not.

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<sup>99</sup> Kaufmann, *Religion of Israel*, 270.

<sup>100</sup> Cf. also Paul Ash, who states that “the creation of cast images of Yahweh” is “what he [the Deuteronomist] understood the calves to be.” See Paul Ash, “Jeroboam I and the Deuteronomistic Historian’s Ideology of the Founder,” *The Catholic Bible Quarterly* 60 (1998), 22. According to Ash, the description of the calves as “other gods” in 1 Kgs 14:9 is a gloss. See Ash, “Jeroboam,” 22, n. 32.



## Chapter 3—The Bad Faith Argument: Analysis and Taxonomy

### The Bad Faith Argument in Secondary Literature

That some Jews in antiquity expressed skepticism about the sincerity of pagan worship has been noted parenthetically in scholarly literature. We saw in Chapter One above how Judah Bergmann, in his 1908 *Jüdische Apologetik im neutestamentlichen Zeitalter*, seemed almost to approach the Bad Faith Argument, grouping together a number of examples from rabbinic literature, but ultimately did not take the step of identifying it explicitly. We can also find hints or passing references to the idea in academic commentaries on local verses within specific texts, as we will see below. Only in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century with the work of Ephraim Urbach, however, do we arrive at anything close to a direct, if yet rather slight, discussion of the phenomenon itself. Urbach's 1958 article, "The Laws of Idolatry in the Light of Historical and Archaeological Facts in the Third Century," and its English version the following year, amount in conjunction with his 1969 *The Sages* to the longest sustained treatment of the topic in the literature.

Let us begin with Urbach's magnum opus, *The Sages*. There, in a discussion of rabbinic monotheism, Urbach writes in a tangent:

The repudiation of idolatry became the common heritage of the Jewish people in the days of the Hasmoneans, and with the limitation of proselytization the feeling prevailed that idolatry presented no danger, since it had no substance; and this view was so deeply rooted that it even posited that actually even the Gentiles cannot believe in the reality of idolatry. In truth there were many pagans in the second and third century, who regarded the images and idols not as having intrinsic worth, but as symbols. But the Sages, needless to say, looked even upon such a cult as a form of idolatry, and certainly did not accept the view that the idols were only the work of demons who were active through the medium of representations and images, a view that was widely current in Hellenistic literature and in the writings of the Church Fathers (in the Septuagint the word δαίμονες frequently occurs instead of idols).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1979), 23.

In this short paragraph, Urbach rapidly advances a number of important claims. First, he assumes that by the time of the Hasmonean dynasty, as a consequence of the “limitation of proselytization,” Jews by and large no longer found “idolatry” plausible or dangerous.<sup>2</sup> Second, he concludes that some Jews found these practices and beliefs so unappealing that they rejected the possibility that even the *gentiles* could truly accept them (what we have labelled the “Bad Faith Argument”). Thirdly, he suggests that this skepticism toward pagan devotion to statues, at least in the second and third centuries of the Common Era, reflected a genuine development within gentile religion itself. And lastly, he contends that the sages did not, in the manner of the early Church fathers, offer an etiology of demons as the motivating power behind idols.<sup>3</sup>

Urbach here leaves vague the precise relationship between points two and three—the development of the Bad Faith Argument among Jews and trends away from iconolatry among contemporary gentiles themselves. On the basis of Urbach’s 1958–59 article, however, we are able to fill in this missing connection. Here Urbach states of tannaitic-era Jewish leniency to images

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<sup>2</sup> The relevance of a purported “limitation of proselytization” seems rather unclear here, but elsewhere, in a parallel of this same analysis, Urbach notes that “the conquests of the Hasmoneans and their forced mass-conversions to Judaism had been followed by the eradication of idol-worship and the destruction of pagan temples in these cities.” See Ephraim Urbach, “The Rabbinical Laws of Idolatry in the Second and Third Centuries in the Light of Archaeological and Historical Facts,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 9:3 (1959), 156. Cf. also Urbach’s description in the Hebrew version of the article of “כיבושי החשמונאים ומעשי הגיור ההמוניים שלהם, שהיו כרוכים בעקירת הפולחן של עבודה זרה,” Ephraim Urbach, “The Laws of Idolatry in the Light of Historical and Archaeological Facts in the Third Century,” *Eretz-Israel: Archaeological, Historical and Geographical Studies* 5 (1958), 191, and see also Urbach, *The Sages*, 22. It seems, then, that when Urbach, in our selection from *The Sages*, mentions the “limitation of proselytization,” he means this as a synecdoche for the execution of the Maccabean religious reforms as a whole, the “כיבושי החשמונאים ומעשי הגיור ההמוניים שלהם.” With the completion of these reforms, on Urbach’s view, few practitioners of alien religion were left in the areas of Jewish habitation, and as such the Jews found themselves at an intellectual and emotional distance from these forms of worship.

<sup>3</sup> Though Urbach does nuance this claim, stating “Although the idea of the deception of the Gentiles [by demons] is expressly mentioned in the homily of Rav on Deuteronomy iv 19...yet his statement contains no reference to demons who are active in the idols,” Urbach, *The Sages*, 25. See also Urbach’s longer discussion in Urbach, “The Rabbinical Laws,” (1959), 154, n. 19.

that there was a “clear recognition that there was no longer any danger in the making of idols, or in the trade in fragments of idolatrous objects, or in the use of vessels and ornaments bearing artistic designs, or even in the 'statue in the house'. Within the Jewish camp the idolatrous impulse was virtually dead, *while even in the surrounding gentile world its influence had been greatly weakened*. It was a fact that many Gentiles used their idols and images for decorative purposes only, and were ready to desecrate them when necessary. *This is the reason why R. Johanan did not upbraid his contemporaries for starting to decorate their walls with paintings.*”<sup>4</sup> In fact, “the later *tannaim* at the end of the second century [C.E.], as well as the *Amoraim* of the third century, knew gentiles who doubted the substance of the statues: some who continued to worship them, since indeed ‘the custom of their fathers was in their hands,’ and some who grasped something from the general sentiment of the philosophers like Porphyry of Tyre, whose words are not just the expression of his lone opinion, but rather reflect the stance of the majority of the intellectual circles [of the gentiles] in the third century. According to them, the worship of statues is not directed to forms, but rather to that which they symbolize.”<sup>5</sup> Not only that, but “this insight, that even the gentiles believed that statues had no fitness or strength, served Jewish craftsmen as the fundamental argument in creating leniencies for their activity and profession, and was accepted by the *aggadists* and legal decisors, who gave it expression in their way.”<sup>6</sup> This purported gentile rejection of traditional Greco-Roman religion extended not only to icons, but even to the very gods themselves, as “in the second century [C.E.] both those who rejected idolatry and *even those*

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<sup>4</sup> Ephraim Urbach, “The Rabbinical Laws of Idolatry in the Second and Third Centuries in the Light of Archaeological and Historical Facts,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 9:4 (1959), 236. Emphasis added.

<sup>5</sup> Urbach, “The Laws of Idolatry,” (1958), 194. My translation. Urbach refers the reader here to secondary literature focusing for the most part on neo-Platonist philosophers.

<sup>6</sup> Urbach, “The Laws of Idolatry,” (1958), 195. My translation.

*devoted to it* certainly agreed with the view that the Caesars, as the visible gods, *were deserving of greater honor than the Olympian gods*, since what was known about the Olympian gods was uncertain.”<sup>7</sup>

For Urbach, then, increasing Jewish skepticism toward the sincerity of gentile religion, and a consequent rabbinic lenience toward icons and images themselves, was primarily a reflection of trends occurring within the Greco-Roman religious world itself, of an increasing skepticism toward the Olympian gods and their statues—or at least toward whatever meaning had been formerly ascribed to them. Note also Urbach’s slip, characteristic of the classical scholarship of his own day, from the “majority of the intellectual circles” who expressed skepticism about the idols (or at least interpreted them more symbolically than had been previously the custom) to the bolder claim that “*even the gentiles*” in general “believed that statues had no fitness or strength.” In Urbach’s portrayal, then, not only for Porphyry and his circles but even for the man on the street had Greco-Roman religion, with its Olympian gods and its icons, lost much of its significance.<sup>8</sup>

Let us then, while giving credit to Urbach’s early recognition of the “Bad Faith” argument in these two studies, nonetheless note the numerous limitations which emerge from his account.

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<sup>7</sup> Urbach, “The Laws of Idolatry,” (1958), 200. My translation. Emphasis added.

<sup>8</sup> This is quite surprising when juxtaposed with Oded Irshai’s analysis that, despite acknowledging the contact between Greeks/Romans and the Rabbis, Urbach nonetheless believed “their impact on the rabbinic mind was marginal,” and that “it is important to reiterate what has been stressed above [in Irshai’s discussion] time and again that for Urbach the rabbinic world of thought was more a product of the deliberations on, and the insights into, an internal Jewish tradition than of the disputations as well as the dialogues with external religious and cultural forces.” See Oded Irshai, “Ephraim E. Urbach and the Study of Judeo-Christian Dialogue in Late Antiquity—Some Preliminary Observations,” in Matthew Kraus ed. *How Should Rabbinic Literature Be Read in the Modern World* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2006), 172, 195. Irshai himself does note that “when it concerned the boundaries between Judaism and other religions” Urbach on occasion “took into account the transformations taking place in the surrounding religious atmosphere,” citing Urbach’s 1958 article on the laws of idolatry as an example. See Irshai, “Ephraim E. Urbach,” 184. Why this sphere should seem to constitute such an exception for Urbach is perhaps unclear.

Urbach's discussions, limited to only a handful of paragraphs in total, are brief, tangential to his main arguments, and based on only three explicitly cited examples:

Zonin said to R. Akiva, 'My mind knows, as does yours, that idolatry has no substance. Yet we see men who go broken [to seek the help of idols] and return whole. What is the reason for this?'  
(*b. 'Abod. Zar. 55a*)

Rav Judah related that Rav had said: the Israelites knew about idolatry that it has no substance, and only participated in it in order to free themselves from the sexual restrictions of the Torah in public [להתיר להם עריות בפרהסיא].  
(*b. Sanh. 63b*)

R. Hiyya the son of Abba related that R. Johanan had said: Gentiles who live outside of the Land of Israel are not [true] idolaters, but rather the custom of their fathers is in their hands.  
(*b. Hul. 13b*)<sup>9</sup>

Urbach, furthermore, makes no effort to analyze the Bad Faith Argument or its various forms and subtypes. Nor does Urbach attempt to examine the development of the argument against the backdrop of earlier Jewish literature—particularly the Hebrew Bible—and as such it is difficult from his discussion to see in what way precisely this new Bad Faith Argument marks a departure from earlier Jewish portrayals of transgressive worship or gentile consciousness. Furthermore Urbach, touching on Jewish skepticism toward pagan religious sincerity only tangentially (either

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<sup>9</sup> My translations. See the endnotes to Urbach, *The Sages*, 23, and cf. Urbach, "The Rabbinical Laws" (1959), 154, n. 18, and Urbach, "The Laws of Idolatry," (1958), 194. Urbach's latter article also discusses the story of Abraham and the idols in Genesis Rabbah 38, as well as Resh Lakish's famous dictum, "it [the idol] did not save itself; could it possibly save that man [the worshiper]?" in *b. 'Abod. Zar. 41b*, yet without directly placing these within the broader argument under consideration here. It is worth noting that, in the case of Genesis Rabbah 38, Abraham the idol-craftsman may indeed "prove the nothingness" of the idols to his own satisfaction, but their worshipers do not themselves reject the validity of the icons which they revere, as Urbach himself notes: "הכרה זו אינה מונעת מן השומע להישאר נאמן לפולחנו, ואף לאיים על המלעיג למסרו למלכות." See Urbach, "The Laws of Idolatry," (1958), 194–95. So too, in the case of Resh Lakish's dictum, "it [the idol] did not save itself; could it possibly save that man [the worshiper]?" the iconolater, according to Resh Lakish, worships the icon and *then subsequently* rejects its validity once it has failed, but he never worships the icon in Bad Faith.

in the context of rabbinic laws on statuary or rabbinic monotheism in general) does not articulate this argument as of a form of Jewish *explanation* for gentile/transgressive worship.

Perhaps most importantly, Urbach explains this new ascription of insincerity to pagan worship as a reflection of genuine trends among gentiles in the second or third century C.E., the age, as Urbach puts it, of the “later *tannaim*.” Urbach’s contention is based upon the assumption, inferred in particular from the writings of the Neoplatonist philosophers, that the overall vivacity of Greco-Roman traditional devotion, and in particular devotion to icons, had withered away at some point in the second or early third century C.E. In Urbach’s own words, “this insight, that even the gentiles believed that statues had no fitness or strength, served Jewish craftsmen as the fundamental argument in creating leniencies for their activity and profession, and was accepted by the *aggadists* and legal decisors, who gave it expression in their way.”<sup>10</sup>

In positing such a decline in traditional pagan religion in the Roman Empire, Urbach continues a trend in Classical scholarship which reaches as far back as the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Consider Edward Gibbon’s assessment of a fading of Greco-Roman religion (already, evidently, prior to the first century C.E.) in his monumental *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*:

When Christianity appeared in the world...human reason...had already obtained an easy triumph over the folly of Paganism...the fashion of incredulity was communicated from the philosopher to the man of pleasure or business, from the noble to the plebeian, and from the master to the menial slave who waited at his table... On public occasions the philosophic part of mankind affected to treat with respect and decency the religious institutions of their country, but their secret contempt penetrated through the thin and awkward disguise; and even the people, when they discovered that their deities were rejected and derided by those whose rank or understanding they were accustomed to reverence, were filled with doubts and apprehensions concerning the truth of those doctrines to which they had yielded the most implicit belief.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Urbach, “The Laws of Idolatry,” (1958), 195. My translation.

<sup>11</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* vol. 1 (New York: The Modern Library, 1932), 431. Part of this quote also cited at Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 259.

Already in Urbach's day, however, such notion of a collapse in Imperial Roman traditional religiosity was becoming outdated. Johannes Geffcken's 1920 *The Last Days of Greco-Roman Paganism* began with the now notorious opening salvo that "no scholar of ancient history who is to be taken seriously... will now believe the dogma of earlier days, that there is a direct connection between the coming into existence and spread of Christianity on the one hand and the decline of paganism on the other." Rather, for Geffcken, "the struggle of Christianity against the deep faith of the pagan multitudes and against the conviction of leading spirits was incomparably harder than its conflict with the power of the Roman state."<sup>12</sup> Geffcken, surveying some of the major phenomena and thinkers of the second and especially third century C.E., concludes that "so we see again and again that the old faith, so-called paganism, did not go downwards on a steeply declining plane, as is supposed by those who have a teleological view of history," and that "in short, there was much vitality."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, in the third century "there can be no question of any lessening of intensity in religious experience. Until the middle of the century most of the cults were flourishing; among the educated in society, the life of the spirit took on increasingly religious forms, while superstition, long prevalent, reached alarming proportions even among philosophers and men of letters."<sup>14</sup>

This recognition of the vibrancy of traditional Greco-Roman religion has only grown since Geffcken's time. Against Urbach's portrayal, in which "the Caesars, as the visible gods, were

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<sup>12</sup> Johannes Geffcken, *The Last Days of Greco-Roman Paganism* trans. Sabine MacCormack (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1978), vii. And for similar assessments of Roman religion specifically, consider J.A. North, *Roman Religion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 31, 76, 79, and passim.

<sup>13</sup> Geffcken, *The Last Days*, 9.

<sup>14</sup> Geffcken, *The Last Days*, 85.

deserving of greater honor than the Olympian gods, since what was known about the Olympian gods was uncertain,”<sup>15</sup> consider J. Linderski’s assessment from the turn of our own century:

The Romans had their own tribal gods but were also ready to incorporate the gods of other cities and tribes...it was that openness of the system that was unnerving to its ancient and modern opponents. Many modern scholars and ideologues of that bent were hardly prepared to regard the *religio* of the Romans as a religion at all. Quite wrongly, for in one respect at least it was a system as dogmatic as that of the hardest fundamentalists: the very existence of gods was not a matter of doubt or dispute.”<sup>16</sup>

And furthermore:

We must beware of transferring the cool legalism of Roman state cult to popular religiosity...we are rather referring to that spontaneous, overpowering, and humble feeling of attachment to the Deity that individuals experience out of fear or gratitude. This we must not deny to the Romans. Only the blind or deaf or indoctrinated will not see or hear or comprehend it. For it is omnipresent in the Roman world in countless dedications, vows and offerings.”<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, as Robin Lane Fox painstakingly demonstrated in his *Pagans and Christians*, traditional Greco-Roman religion, with its oracles, ceremonies, gods, temples, and statues, was alive and well far into and even past the third century C.E. “From the [Homeric] epics to [Roman] Egypt’s epiphanies,” notes Lane Fox, “less had changed for most people’s religious life than historians have tended to believe.”<sup>18</sup> Even into the late third century C.E., “the gods still commanded a very large majority and the Christians had certainly not won the argument.”<sup>19</sup> When Gibbon posited a withering-away of traditional religion in the Roman Empire, he—and, we might add, Urbach—“mistook the views of a few unrepresentative thinkers for a ‘vacuum’ which he

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<sup>15</sup> Urbach, “The Laws of Idolatry,” (1958), 200. My translation. Emphasis added.

<sup>16</sup> J. Linderski, “Religio et cultus deorum,” *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 13 (2000), 456.

<sup>17</sup> Linderski, “Religio et cultus deorum,” 462.

<sup>18</sup> Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 167.

<sup>19</sup> Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 585.



ascribed to the majority.” In fact, “the gods were still ‘evident,’ standing beside their clients in dreams and guiding them with words or signs of their will. There was no ‘disengaged’ majority.”<sup>20</sup>

Urbach’s attempt to attribute the cause of Bad Faith portrayals to actual gentile attitudes of the late 2<sup>nd</sup> and early 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries C.E., then, is unpersuasive. Furthermore, such a chronological schema necessarily excludes from relevance all Second Temple writings and many tannaitic texts as well. Urbach’s almost exclusive reliance on examples from Amoraic texts follows naturally as a consequence. As we shall see, however, Jewish ascriptions of insincerity to devotees of other gods and to the propagators of their icons are already to be found in the *Epistle of Jeremiah*, written perhaps as early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.E., and the argument remains well represented through the Second Temple period and into the tannaitic era.<sup>21</sup> There is thus a gap of several hundred years between the earliest examples of the Bad Faith Argument in Jewish sources and the purported 2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> century C.E. decline in pagan religiosity which Urbach portrays as its origin. Not only, then, is Urbach’s explanation based upon a collapse in pagan religion which now seems dubious, but his account requires us to place the result, the Bad Faith Argument, before its alleged cause, the collapse of traditional Greco-Roman religious appeal.

We might note one last problem with Urbach’s historical schema. For Urbach, Jewish skepticism toward the sincerity of idolatry was simply a rabbinic recognition of the actual attitudes of third century gentiles. This led him quite intuitively to assume throughout his discussions quoted above that the Bad Faith Argument was lodged by Jews only against precisely those contemporary gentiles. In fact, as we shall see, the same insincerity attributed to

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<sup>20</sup> Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 259. On the complex relations between icons and gods in Greco-Roman thought, see Clifford Ando, *The Matter of the Gods: Religion and the Roman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 22–27 and 31–34.

<sup>21</sup> On the dating of the *Epistle of Jeremiah*, see the discussion below.

contemporary pagans was retroactively ascribed to the transgressive worshipers of the Biblical account itself—Israelite and non-Israelite personages alike. Neither the historical era of the transgressive worshiper, nor the worshiper’s identity—be it Jewish or gentile—were considerations in the use of the Bad Faith Argument.

The Bad Faith Argument, then, was not, as Urbach assumed, a reflection of an actual religious decline among gentiles.<sup>22</sup> Rather, it was a *projection* of Jewish ideas and inclinations onto them. And indeed, for students of Jewish Studies, this recognition makes the Bad Faith Argument that much more significant, representing, as it does, not simply a report on Greco-Roman devotion, but rather an internal development of the psychology of Jewish devotion and identity.

We can summarize Urbach’s contribution in these two studies, then, as insightful yet highly limited, both in the depth and breadth of its analysis of the phenomenon and in the causes which it ascribes to it. Urbach’s assumptions are colored by the classical scholarship of his own day, rendered far less persuasive by the insights of the past decades, and his peripheral discussions of the topic fail to render to the Bad Faith Argument the full treatment which its creativity and indeed pervasiveness deserve.

An additional account of the Bad Faith Argument, if perhaps one less extensive than Urbach’s, appears in David Novak’s 1983 *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism*, a monograph on the Noahide laws, the seven laws in which the Rabbis oblige the gentiles (and perhaps the Jews as well). According to Novak, the introduction of these Noahide expectations replaced an earlier view, in which gentiles were permitted to worship idols (if still ridiculed for doing so) with a new

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<sup>22</sup> See also Friedheim, “Sol Invictus, the Rabbis, and Jewish Society,” 93–94, where Friedheim also expresses skepticism toward Urbach’s portrayal of waning pagan religion, and emphasizes in particular the vitality of solar worship in late Imperial Palestine.

prohibition on gentile idolatry.<sup>23</sup> For Novak, this new requirement that gentiles worship only the Jewish God brought forth of necessity a novel idea, if only ever expressed incompletely: the notion of gentiles who are *not* idolatrous. If, that is, the Noahide laws condemned gentiles for the worship of other gods, fairness would demand that a reasonable prospect be given for gentile worship of the one God. “The assumption of the pervasiveness of gentile idolatry,” writes Novak, “is expressed by R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, a first century C.E. Tanna [as cited in *m. Hul. 2:7*], ‘thoughts of a gentile in general are idolatrous...’”<sup>24</sup> In the tannaitic period, that is, the widespread assumption among the Rabbis was that all gentiles are convinced practitioners of *avodah zarah*, transgressive worship. “Although this opinion is disputed by others, who were, as we shall see, undoubtedly more influenced by the concept of the Noahide, R. Eliezer’s opinion reflected the view of the gentile which had been accepted by Jewish thinkers *since the Biblical period*.”<sup>25</sup> Not only, then, was this assumption of convinced gentile idolatry predominant in the early tannaitic period, it was, in Novak’s view, the direct continuation of the biblical view of gentiles. Only later, with the introduction of the Noahide laws, did a break with the earlier view take place: “The concept of the Noahide ban on gentile idolatry had the effect of judging certain forms of non-Jewish culture to be non-idolatrous.”<sup>26</sup> That is, “its development [of the Noahide prohibition on gentile idolatry] *had to* constitute an understanding of non-Jewish culture which does not make it automatically idolatrous.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See David Novak, *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism: An Historical and Constructive Study of the Noahide Laws* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1983), 109–23, 126.

<sup>24</sup> Novak, *The Image of the Non-Jew*, 115.

<sup>25</sup> Novak, *The Image of the Non-Jew*, 115. Emphasis added.

<sup>26</sup> Novak, *The Image of the Non-Jew*, 124.

<sup>27</sup> Novak, *The Image of the Non-Jew*, 130.

We can see, then, in Novak's discussion, a certain schema of progression, though one perhaps more implied than explicitly delineated: first, a biblical account in which convinced, sincere idolatry is ascribed to all gentiles; second, a continuation of this biblical view in the early tannaitic era as expressed by the words of R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus (with perhaps some slight opposition from other rabbis); and finally a marked though never unanimous movement toward the concept of a "non-idolatrous gentile" following the ascension of the concept of the "Noahide laws" at some point in the second or early third century.<sup>28</sup> Novak adds to this schema the historical contextualization that "all of this was undoubtedly influenced by the observation that many pagans were monotheists in theory although polytheists in practice."<sup>29</sup>

On Novak's read, we can see the ways in which the *amoraim* seek to apply and work out the development of this new Noahide concept of non-idolatrous gentiles in their halakhic disputes. In particular, Novak quotes: "R. Nahman, in the name of Rabbah bar Aboha, who states, 'there are no confirmed idolators (ayn minim) among the gentile nations,'" and "R. Johanan, who said, 'gentiles outside of the Land of Israel are not idolators but are only practicing ancestral custom.'"<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See Novak's discussion on the historical origins of the Noahide laws in Novak, *The Image of the Non-Jew*, 3–30 and especially his conclusion that "there is no convincing evidence that this doctrine was conceived earlier than the Tannaitic period in which it was enunciated [in *t. 'Abodah Zarah* 8:4], specifically after the destruction of the Temple and the Christian schism," Novak, *The Image of the Non-Jew*, 29.

<sup>29</sup> Novak, *The Image of the Non-Jew*, 128.

<sup>30</sup> Novak, *The Image of the Non-Jew*, 124. The statements are found in *b. Hul.* 13*b* (see above for the latter). Novak also offers the *tanna* R. Tarfon's statement comparing the transgressive worship of gentiles and of "minim" in *b. Šabb.* 116*a*, as well as two other vague parallels to it in *b. 'Abod. Zar.* 27*b* and *Sifre Deuteronomy* sub vers. Deut 13:8, as potential examples, but, as Novak himself notes, these three cases are only ambiguously relevant. On the afterlife of R. Johanan's *memra*, see Jacob Katz, "The Vicissitude of Three Apologetic Passages," *Zion* 23–24:3–4 (1957–58), 186–93. On connections between the statement and the Roman concept of *mos maiorum*, see Boaz Cohen, *Jewish and Roman Law: A Comparative Study*, vol. 2 (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2017), 386. See also the attempt to contextualize this statement historically according to a developmental schema of pagan religion in José Faur, *Iyunim ba-Mishneh Torah leha-Rambam* (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kuk, 1978), 226–30.

Such statements, Novak contends, “emphasized that gentile idolatry is more a matter of custom than actual conviction.”<sup>31</sup>

We have here in Novak’s discussion, then, a clear recognition of what we have termed “the Bad Faith Argument,” with two examples selected from *amoraic* literature in the form of *memras* from R. Nahman in the name of Rabbah bar Aboha and from R. Johanan. And, much as in Urbach’s analysis, we find in Novak an attempt to date the onset of this rejection of the “actual conviction” of gentile worship to the tannaitic period, and especially toward its later generations. Where Urbach saw, however, the motivating force behind this development in a real historical collapse in belief in the gods among the gentiles of the Roman Imperial era, Novak explains the onset of the Bad Faith Argument primarily as a logical extension of the Noahide laws. From the moment that Jewish thinkers began to extend their own ancestral requirement of monolatry to their gentile neighbors, a conceptual space had to be opened up for the notion of a “non-idolatrous gentile.” As Novak conceives of it, “the Noahide ban on gentile idolatry had the *effect* of judging certain forms of non-Jewish culture to be non-idolatrous.”<sup>32</sup> While “all of this was undoubtedly influenced by the observation that many pagans were monotheists in theory although polytheists in practice,” the fundamental cause was not reflection on contemporary gentile religion, but rather the logical consequences arising from the diffusion of the Noahide concept.

As we shall see in numerous examples from the mid-Second Temple period, ranging from the Epistle of Jeremiah to the narrative of Bel to Jubilees and the Wisdom of Solomon, this arrangement does not stand the test of evidence. For all of these texts precede, in many cases by hundreds of years, the development and propagation of the Noahide laws as articulated by Novak,

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<sup>31</sup> Novak, *The Image of the Non-Jew*, 124.

<sup>32</sup> Novak, *The Image of the Non-Jew*, 124. Emphasis added.

and yet all of them contain examples of the Bad Faith Argument. As such, Novak's causal explanation for the development of the Bad Faith Argument, though differing from Urbach's, results in the same problem: Novak's scheme requires us to place the posited cause, the spread and predominance of the Noahide laws in the *tannaitic* period, long after the alleged effect, the Bad Faith Argument visible already in the third or fourth century B.C.E.

One final example of the scholarly exposition of the Bad Faith Argument appears in Géza Vermes' 1961 *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism: Haggadic Studies*, within a discussion of post-biblical interpretations of the life of Abraham. Vermes, analyzing the portrayal of Abraham's father Terah in the medieval *Sefer HaYashar*, notes that:

Terah's religious attitude is, in the eyes of the author, thoroughly incoherent. On the one hand, he [Terah] seems to believe that one of his idols is the Creator of the world... On the other, he is well aware that these same statues have no power whatsoever: 'Are there spirit and soul in these gods...? Are they not wood and stone? It is I who made them'. The inference is that Terah's beliefs must be based either on stupidity or, which is worse, bad faith.

In this judgment of idolatry, *Yashar* [i.e. *Sefer HaYashar*], in fact, reflects the common Jewish attitude. From biblical times it was held that only fools could imagine God to be a wooden or stone image; perhaps this would explain why idolatry was rarely imputed, as in the Apocalypse of Abraham, to stupidity alone. Usually, other motives were added, such as self-interest, or fear.<sup>33</sup>

Already in 1961, then, Vermes not only identifies a possible Bad Faith portrayal of idolaters in a Jewish text, but even explicitly deploys the term "bad faith." Furthermore, he takes the additional step of formulating two possible motives which Jewish authors might ascribe to explain purportedly insincere worship—specifically "self-interest, or fear." In a sense, then, Vermes sets us on the path toward taxonomizing the Bad Faith Argument, even providing, if only in incipient form, the first two subtypes of the argument which we will lay out below.

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<sup>33</sup> Géza Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism: Haggadic Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 1961), 83–84.

Nonetheless, we might note the rather sweeping and even anachronistic manner in which Vermes frames the phenomenon of Bad Faith. On the basis of a text from the Middle Ages, Vermes infers a certain set of motivations imputed to Terah and then projects them back two millennia, all the way to the biblical text itself: “From biblical times it was held that only fools could imagine God to be a wooden or stone image... Usually, other motives were added, such as self-interest, or fear.” Evidently, for Vermes, the Bad Faith Argument begins already in the biblical account—a claim for which he does not provide evidence—and then proceeds uninterrupted, “the common Jewish attitude” toward the worship of icons. No real attempt, of course, at offering an explanation for the historical development of this attitude is necessary for Vermes, as he assumes it to be *ab origine*.

We have in these three scholars, then, two distinct chronological accounts of the Bad Faith Argument. For Vermes, adopting as it were a “maximalist view,” the argument is simply perennial, a feature of Jewish reckoning of the Other already from biblical times. For Urbach and Novak’s more “minimalist” position, by contrast, the Bad Faith argument only begins to develop in the late *tannaitic* period, either as a Jewish recognition of contemporary religious trends among gentiles or as an internal philosophical outgrowth of the development of the Noahide laws.<sup>34</sup>

Our account, however, will suggest a different chronology altogether. The biblical text, as we saw above in Chapter Two and as Urbach’s and Novak’s discussions rightly seem to imply, does not contain any deployment of the Bad Faith Argument against the worship of other gods and the reverence of their icons. Without exception, it presents these devotees and propagators of transgressive worship as sincere. And indeed, in the texts of the mid-late Second Temple period,

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<sup>34</sup> I use the terms “maximalist” and “minimalist” here in a delimited sense, contrasting scholarly assessments of phenomena which place their origins relatively early with those which date them relatively late.

this biblical assumption continues to be deployed. At some point in the third or second centuries B.C.E., however, the Bad Faith Argument begins to surface *alongside it*. Emerging out of the consistent biblical assumption of earnestness in transgressive worship, then, a new muddling disorder characterizes the Jewish literature of the mid-late Second Temple and rabbinic periods, in which transgressive worship is sometimes portrayed as genuine, but perhaps more often—and at times even in the same texts—depicted as lacking in sincerity or in dedication.

It is worth taking a moment here to acknowledge the presence of the Bad Faith Argument in Early Christian literature as well. Clear instances of the argument appear, for example, in the writings of Clement, Athanasius, Augustine, and Firmicus Maternus, and surely in much more of the voluminous patristic literature.<sup>35</sup> Unfortunately, as we seek to focus on Jewish texts, we will be unable to engage substantially with these early Christian iterations of the Bad Faith Argument. Yet, as many of these patristic sources rely on a number of the Jewish texts to be analyzed herein, our project will perhaps in any case prove a useful and necessary first step toward future analysis of the Bad Faith Argument in the patristic authors.

### **The Basic Features of the Bad Faith Argument: A Paradigmatic Example**

What is a Bad Faith Argument, and how exactly does it work? In order to make its basic features clear, let us consider a paradigmatic example from the *Sifre Deutoronomy*. The text, a collection of tannaitic midrash probably redacted around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century C.E., proceeds linearly through much of the Book of Deuteronomy, and after making its way to Deuteronomy 32, a song

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<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Clement of Alexandria's *Exhortation to the Greeks* 4.52.1, Athanasius of Alexandria's *Contra Gentes* 9, Augustine's *City of God* IV:30–32, and Firmicus Maternus' *The Error of the Pagan Religions* 12.1–7. I wish to thank Prof. Khaled Anatolios for pointing me to some of these sources. See also Leivy Smolar and Moshe Aberbach, "The Golden Calf Episode in Postbiblical Literature," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 39 (1968), 98 for a brief allusion to the issue.



of warning and reproach taught by Moses to the Israelites, it soon arrives at Deuteronomy 32:17.<sup>36</sup>

The JPS translation renders this verse:

They [the Israelites] sacrificed to demons, no-gods,  
Gods they had never known,  
New ones, who came but lately,  
Who stirred not your fathers' fears [*lō' śā'ārûm 'ăbōtêkem*].<sup>37</sup>

The precise meaning of the Hebrew word *śā'ārûm*, however, translated here as “to stir fear,” is extremely unclear.<sup>38</sup> The Septuagint renders the phrase as οὐς οὐκ ἤδεισαν οἱ πατέρες αὐτῶν, “whom their fathers *did not know*,” thus understanding the word *śā'ārûm* as connected not to fear but rather to knowledge. Meanwhile Targum Onkelos construes the phrase as ‘ דלא אתעסקו בהון אבהתכון,’ new gods with whom “your fathers *did not busy themselves*,”<sup>39</sup> apparently understanding the word as related neither to fear nor to knowledge. Medieval commentators like Rashi and Rashbam suggest a potential connection with the biblical *śā'îrîm*, an object of worship prohibited in Leviticus 17.<sup>40</sup> And the Jewish Study Bible, noting that the “meaning of Heb. uncertain” in this part of the verse, suggests a reading of *śā'ārûm* connected with the Arabic *sha'ara* signifying *knowing*, resulting perhaps in a translation similar to that offered by the

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<sup>36</sup> On the dating of the Sifre to Deuteronomy, Strack and Stemberger state that the final redaction for the “halakhic part of SifreDeut” should be placed “in the late third century,” and “the same is true for the *haggadic sections*.” See H.L. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996) trans. and ed. Markus Bockmuehl, 273. Fraade ascribes the redaction of Sifre Deuteronomy to the “mid-third century C.E.” See Steven Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), 17, 61, 98.

<sup>37</sup> The Hebrew reads: וְזָבְחוּ לַשְּׂדִים לֹא אֱלֹהִים אֲלֵהֶם לֹא יָדְעוּם הַדְּשִׁים מִקְרֵב בָּאוּ לֹא שְׁעָרוּם אֲבֹתֵיכֶם

<sup>38</sup> See Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 306, who states that “the meaning of the verb *se'arum* which the translation renders as ‘stirred fears,’ is uncertain.” See also *BDB*, 973, which suggests “perh. **be acquainted with**.”

<sup>39</sup> Targum Onkelos to Deut 32:17.

<sup>40</sup> See Rashi ad loc., who suggests this as one possible interpretation, and Rashbam ad loc., who seems to accept this option as the plain sense.

Septuagint.<sup>41</sup> Suffice it to say, then, that the meaning of the word *śā ‘ārûm* was confusing to many readers already in antiquity and remains so.

The rabbinic authors of the Sifre Deuteronomy were no less puzzled by the meaning of this word and, in an apparent attempt to explain it, offer two short comments about the subjectivity of this transgressive worship.

First, the Sifre comments:

לא שערום אבותיכם—שלא עמדה שערת אבותיכם בפניהם.

*‘lō’ śā ‘ārûm ‘ābōtēkem*—that is, the *hair* [*śā ‘ārâ*] of your fathers did not stand up in front of them.<sup>42</sup>

Here in Deuteronomy 32:17, the obscurity of the word *śā ‘ārûm* presents a difficulty for the commentator, and thus provokes an interpretation. The Sifre attempts to respond to this difficulty by positing synonymy between the word *śā ‘ārûm* and the almost identical word *śā ‘ārâ*, ‘a hair.’ “Your fathers,” the Sifre explains, “did not *hair* these no-gods,” that is to say, their “hair did not stand up in front of them.” The Israelites whom Moses here addresses in Deuteronomy 32, according to the Sifre’s interpretation, have begun to serve gods who are no-gods, even though their own ancestors neither knew these gods nor revered them in any way. Unlike the audience of Moses’ speech, the ancestors of the nation were so indifferent to the powers of these gods and their attraction that their “hair” in no way “stood on end” from them.<sup>43</sup>

On the most basic level, then, we have here an interpretation which, provoked by a lexically difficult word, simply attempts to offer an explanation for that word by connecting it with a similar word whose meaning is well known. On a deeper level, however, we have in the Sifre, perhaps, a

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<sup>41</sup> *The Jewish Study Bible*, 442.

<sup>42</sup> See Piska 318 in *Sifre ‘al Sefer Devarim*, 364. My translation and punctuation.

<sup>43</sup> On the meaning of שערת אבותיכם בפניהם see Rashi’s comment on Deut 32:17 that לא יראו מהם, לא עמדה שערתם מפניהם, דרך שערות האדם לעמוד מחמת יראה. כן נדרש בספרי.

certain bold movement in the perception of religious subjectivity as well. Let us consider again the definitions of *lō' šə'ārûm* offered above. If, against JPS' uncertain translation of "Who stirred not your fathers' fears," we accept the Septuagint's "whom your fathers did not know"—or indeed the similar rendering suggested by Targum Onkelos—we wind up with a plain sense of the verse which deals not with "fear" but with knowledge or activity. In contrast to the addressees of Moses' speech, who "sacrificed to demons, no-gods, gods they had never known," the ancestors of the nation were pure and innocent, knowing no such forbidden forces nor busying themselves with them. Emphasizing the blamelessness of the Israelites' ancestors, Moses' words come to condemn, all the more harshly by force of contrast, the devotional transgressions of the Israelites present and future.<sup>44</sup> Yet this assessment, this juxtaposition of praise and blame, revolving as it does around knowledge and activity, carries with it *no description of subjective psychological* state toward the transgressive gods in question or their worship. It remains for the Sifre's interpretation, bringing in the notion of "fear" from the no-gods (or rather the absence of fear from them), to introduce an element of subjectivity, or religious emotion, absent in the biblical verses themselves.

The Sifre, then, develops in its interpretation of these verses an interest in the psychological dimensions of transgressive worship which is absent in the verses themselves. As of yet, however, the Sifre's interpretation, while adding a new emphasis on subjectivity to the verses, in no way presents a Bad Faith Argument. There is no sense here that the fathers of the Israelites worshiped these no-gods insincerely; rather, in both Deuteronomy 32:17 and this first Sifre interpretation, they simply did not know (or fear) these gods at all. When we proceed to the Sifre's further interpretation, however, we find that the portrayal of religious subjectivity becomes quite a bit more complex:

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<sup>44</sup> On what we might term "condemnation by contrast," see also Mal 1:11–12.

דבר אחר: לא שערום אבותיכם—אל תהי קורא לא שערום אבותיכם אלא לא שעום אבותיכם, שאף על פי שמזבחים ומקטרים להם לא היו יראים מהם, כענין שנאמר: ואל קין ואל מנחתו לא שעה.

An alternative interpretation: ‘*lō’ śā’ārûm ’ăbōtêkem*’—do not read *lō’ śā’ārûm*, but rather read *lō’ śā’ûm*, ‘your fathers did not heed [*śā’û*] them.’ Even though they would sacrifice and offer incense to them, they did not fear from them, just as it says ‘And to Cain and his offering he [God] did not heed [*śā’â*].’<sup>45</sup>

Again, the obscure word *śā’ārûm* provokes an exegesis.<sup>46</sup> Unlike in our previous case, however, in which the midrash, searching for an intelligible interpretation, simply read the root *ś’r* in accordance with one of the nouns that can be derived from it, “hair,” here the midrash suggests instead *replacing* the word with an entirely distinct root, *śā’â*. When the verse tells us, that is, *lō’ śā’ārûm ’ăbōtêkem*, that the ancestors of the Israelites did not engage in a certain kind of behavior vis-à-vis these ‘no-gods,’ and we find ourselves puzzled regarding the precise behavior signified by the difficult word *śā’ārûm*, we should simply replace the word with a different word which we do understand, *śā’ûm*, heed. The midrashic equation of these two distinct roots is probably based not only on the vague phonetic similarity between them, but also on the *visual* resemblance of the letters ו and ר; by shortening the head of the ר, the Sifre is able to transition from an unintelligible *śā’ārûm* to an intelligible *śā’ûm*.<sup>47</sup> Having thus performed a quick act of interpretive algebra, we are satisfied with a new, comprehensible meaning of the verse: the ancestors of the Israelites did

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<sup>45</sup> Piska 318. The 18<sup>th</sup> century rabbi David Pardo notes on this midrash in his commentary *Sifre Devei Rav* that “דיא דקאמר אל תיקרי נראה דמפרש אע”פי שהיו עובדים אותם מ”מ לא קבלום עליהם באלוהות.” See David Pardo, *Sifre Devei Rav* (Thessaloniki: 1798) on piska 318, on the lemma יזבחו. Note that Pardo not only explicitly articulates the Sifre’s Bad Faith Argument here, but also introduces an “ulterior motive” of sexual desire which is absent in the Sifre’s interpretation itself. On the “ulterior motive” as a subtype of the Bad Faith Argument, see the taxonomy below.

<sup>46</sup> In Finkelstein and Horwitz’s edition these two interpretations are separated by an intervening comment, “דבר אחר: לא שערום אבותיכם שלא שערום אבותיכם לידע אם יש בהם צורך אם לאו.”

<sup>47</sup> This interpretive equation of שערום and שעום based on visual similarity would be even more intuitive if the rabbinic authors of the Sifre knew the word שערום in a defective form, rather than the *plene* of our MT. I wish to thank Dr. Hillel Mali for his assistance on this midrash.

not *heed* these new no-gods whom their descendants honor. Our second midrash, then, at least in its first step, interprets the obscure word *śə'ārûm* within the same semantic field as our first midrash—the psychological arena of fear, attentiveness, and reverence. To our two midrashim, then, we might well apply Steven Fraade's general observation that the “collector and subtle shaper” of the Sifre “creates a commentary out of such traditions” of exegesis “configuring them not only in relation to the atomized texts of Deuteronomy but also in relation to one another.”<sup>48</sup>

Our midrash, however, does not end here. Indeed, this lexical replacement in Deuteronomy 32:17 is followed by an additional exegetical move, one perhaps even more substantial. Let us consider the Sifre's second reading again.

An alternative interpretation: '*lō' śə'ārûm 'ăbōtēkem*'—do not read *lō' śə'ārûm*, but rather read *lō' śā'ûm*, 'your fathers did not heed [*śā'û*] them.' Even though they would sacrifice and offer incense to them, they did not fear from them, just as it says 'And to Cain and his offering he [God] did not heed [*śā'â*].'

As we have seen, the Sifre replaces the obscure word *śə'ārûm* with the known and somewhat-similar sounding word *śā'ûm*, thus in a sense providing a new path for understanding the verse. What is the connection, however, between this word-specific replacement, “do not read *lō' śə'ārûm*, but rather read *lō' śā'ûm*, 'your fathers did not heed [*śā'û*] them,’” with the brief narrative which follows? How do we move from the new meaning of the verse, that the ancestors of the Israelites “did not heed” the new “no-gods,” to the declaration that “even though they would sacrifice to them and offer incense to them, they did not fear from them?”

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<sup>48</sup> Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary*, 17. Cf. also Fraade's statement that “our understanding of a particular interpretation may be shaped in part by those that have preceded it...even as that understanding prospectively points forward in anticipation of the interpretations that will follow. However, once we arrive at what follows, we may, retrospectively, alter our previous understandings,” Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary*, 125.

It would appear that, building on the first interpretive step of replacing *śā'ārûm* with *śā'ûm*, the midrash is now employing as a second step the hermeneutic technique known as *diyyuq*. *Diyyuq* has been varyingly defined as “an inference (derived from the precise wording of the text),”<sup>49</sup> or as a “deduction, argument, implied opinion,”<sup>50</sup> but perhaps the most precise way to explicate it is as an “exacting inference,” or even an “over-exacting inference.” The *diyyuq*, the over-exacting inference, operates by reading a certain word in the text almost as though it were in italics, emphasized and singled out from the rest of its context, and then on this basis infers that the text applies only to *this* word, *rather than to an implied alternative*. In our case, the Sifre reads the word “*lō' śā'ûm*,” did not *heed* them, as a *diyyuq*: the ancestors of the Israelites did not *heed* these no-gods—*heed them* they didn't, but sacrifice to them they did. The ancestors of the Israelites were indeed, according to this midrash, actively engaged in the worship of the no-gods, but their worship was in some sense hollow or irreverent.

We have, then, the basic schema of the exegetical workings of this midrash: first, a lexical replacement, and then, on that basis a *diyyuq*. In a sense, then, we have understood the midrash. And yet, a lingering doubt should still needle at us: what, indeed, has this exegesis accomplished? After all, in contrast to the first midrash, which defined the word *śā'ārûm* by equating it with the homonym *śā'ārâ*, this second midrash has done little to lessen the obscurity of the word *śā'ārûm*, instead merely replacing it with another root entirely. If the midrash has simply changed the word *śā'ārûm* rather than explaining it, what exegetical benefit has been obtained? And furthermore, why should the midrash, in this moment of relative interpretive freedom, go out of its way to

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<sup>49</sup> Yitzhak Frank, *The Practical Talmud Dictionary* (Ariel: United Israel Institutes, 2001), 70.

<sup>50</sup> Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli, and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 297.

convict of idolatry a group of Israelite ancestors whom the verse explicitly declares to be *innocent* of that transgression?

As in so many midrashim, it is difficult to pin down exactly the problem which the exegete is trying to solve. But perhaps the true exegetical goal of this midrash is not lexical at all, but rather theological and harmonizing. The Rabbis encounter here, in Deuteronomy 32:17, a fairly clear statement that the ancestors of those Israelites being addressed by Moses were *not* engaged in transgressive worship (or at least not the transgressive worship with which their descendants were corrupted).

They [the Israelites] sacrificed to demons, no-gods,  
Gods they had never known,  
New ones, who came but lately,  
Who stirred not your fathers' fears.

And yet, in other statements in the Bible, we come across clear declarations that the ancestors of the Israelites *did engage* in precisely such worship, apparently contradicting the statement here in Deuteronomy 32:17. Joshua 24:2, for example, tells us, that

Then Joshua said to all the people, 'Thus said the LORD, the God of Israel: In olden times, your forefathers—Terah, father of Abraham and father of Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and *worshiped other gods.*'

And indeed precisely these gods, according to Joshua 24:14, were still being worshiped by the Israelites up until Joshua's own time, as indicated by his instruction to the Israelites:

Now, therefore revere the LORD and serve Him with undivided loyalty; put away the gods that your forefathers served beyond the Euphrates and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.

So too in Ezekiel 20 the prophet declares that

<sup>5</sup> Thus said the LORD GOD: On the day that I chose Israel, I gave My oath to the stock of the House of Jacob; when I made Myself known to them in the land of Egypt, I gave my oath to them. When I said, "I the LORD am your God," <sup>6</sup> that same day I swore to them to take them out of the land of Egypt into a land flowing with milk and honey, a land which I had sought out for them, the fairest of all lands. <sup>7</sup> I also said to them: Cast away, every one of you, the detestable things that you are drawn to, and do not defile yourselves with the fetishes of Egypt—I the LORD am your God. <sup>8</sup>

But they defied Me and refused to listen to Me. They did not cast away the detestable things they were drawn to, nor did they give up the fetishes of Egypt. Then I resolved to pour out My fury upon them, to vent all My anger upon them there, in the land of Egypt.  
(Ezek 20:5–8)

This same claim is repeated throughout the chapter—the fathers, the ancestors of the Israelites, practiced idolatry even before leaving Egypt.<sup>51</sup> In Genesis 31:19, 30–32, 53, and 35:2 the Rabbis would have seen further indications that Laban, and perhaps Rachel, along with other members of Jacob’s household as well, practiced iconolatry and worshiped multiple gods. It thus seems well-established in several biblical sources that the ancestors of the Israelites addressed by Moses *did* practice transgressive worship. How, then, could the Rabbis understand our verse, Deuteronomy 32:17, which seems to suggest that these ancestors did not even *know* these no-gods? Simply put, through an application of the Bad Faith Argument.

Jacob Neusner, in his translation of the Sifre, offers on this section only the comment that “the systematic amplification of the verse [Deut 32:17] underlines the novelty of Israelite idolatry, on the one side, and its essentially futility and insincerity, on the other.”<sup>52</sup> This brief statement is indeed perceptive in noting the key role our midrash assigns to insincerity, but hardly does justice to the complexity of the Sifre’s exegesis here. By positing a division between external worship and internal subjectivity, and then ascribing to that internal subjectivity a total lack of sincerity, the Sifre is able to harmonize the evidently contradictory biblical accounts of the nations’ ancestors and their devotion. The ancestors of the Israelites were indeed entangled in the worship of other gods. This the Rabbis know from Joshua 24, Ezekiel 20, and Genesis 31 and 35. When Deuteronomy 32:17 seems to make the opposite claim, that these gods had been entirely unknown,

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<sup>51</sup> See, e.g. Ezek 20:18, 24.

<sup>52</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Sifre to Deuteronomy: An Analytical Translation* vol. 2 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 348.



the Sifre minimizes that claim from “unknown” to “unfeared” and thus squares it with the evidence from these other texts. “Even though they would sacrifice to them and offer incense to them, they did not fear from them.” The no-gods were indeed worshiped with blood and incense, but the worship was ultimately *insincere*.<sup>53</sup> By opening up a new, internal dimension of the worshiper’s subjectivity, and placing that subjectivity in complete opposition to the external worship itself—by denying, that is, the sincerity of acts of transgressive worship—the Sifre manages to harmonize these opposing biblical accounts of the religious passions of the nation’s ancestors. Even against the external evidence of sacrificing to other gods and burning incense to them, the Sifre tells us, these transgressive worshipers had no true reverence for their new gods.

This Bad Faith Argument, this rejection of the sincerity of transgressive worship, was not unanimous or systematic in the post-biblical period—quite to the contrary, it was ad hoc and often incompatible with other statements expressed by the same thinkers or written in the same texts. Along with its somewhat impromptu nature of the Bad Faith Argument, the target and scale of the Bad Faith Argument also varied widely. Insincerity was at times ascribed to all transgressive worship, and at times just to specific instances of it; sometimes to historical or biblical figures (as in our example from the Sifre) and sometimes to contemporary pagans. But for all that the Bad Faith Argument was not unanimous or systematic, it was, indeed, pervasive. Both in frequency and intensity, the Bad Faith Argument was the foremost Jewish attempt to grapple with the

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<sup>53</sup> Reuven Hammer claims that “one of the prominent literary characteristics of the work [the Sifre Deuteronomy] is the search for a deeper meaning following the *rejection of the more obvious surface meaning of a Scriptural verse or tale*.” See Reuven Hammer, *Sifre: A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 14. Emphasis added. In a sense, we can certainly apply this assessment to our midrash. Discounting the apparent plain sense of Deuteronomy 32:17, the Sifre has replaced it with a view that they did practice the worship of other gods, albeit insincerely. In a broader sense, however, as much as the Sifre does militate against the plain sense of this verse, it does so only to harmonize it with the plain meaning of other scriptural pericopes.

existence of competing forms of worship in the literature of the mid-late Second Temple and early rabbinic periods.

### **The Bad Faith Argument: A Taxonomy**

Though the basic concept of the Bad Faith Argument is the refusal to accept Others' worship as a reflection of genuine internal devotion, this one basic argument can manifest in a number of distinct configurations. In the Jewish literature of the late Second Temple and early rabbinic periods, we can discern at least two broad categories of this fundamental Bad Faith approach. In the first category, the arguments deployed attempt to supplant the sincerity of the transgressive worship with an alternative psychological motivation. The motivations supplied tend to fall into two subcategories: either a) the desire for benefit of some kind, generally either financial or sexual, or b) the fear of persecution. The Bad Faith arguments in this first category, then, not only explain away the worship of the Other by positing its insincerity, but also provide what they posit to be the *true etiologies* of the worship, that is, the "actual" stimuli prompting the insincere behavior. The second category of Bad Faith argument, by contrast, lacks this latter step. Here, as in the first category, the sincerity of transgressive religious practices is undermined or rejected. Here too, this is done through one of two modes: either a), by portraying transgressive worshipers as treating their purported sancta in a degrading or unbecoming manner or b), by depicting their devotion to their gods and icons as fickle or tenuous. Yet this second broad category does not offer any alternative logic or motivation as a replacement to explain the allegedly insincere behavior.

We can discern in the texts of the mid-late Second Temple and tannaitic periods, then, two categories of Bad Faith Argument, each with two sub-types of its own. While each of these arguments calls into question the sincerity of worship and devotion perceived as transgressive, the rhetorical means and psychological assumptions which they employ to reach this same end are

strikingly diverse. Though these are, of course, merely ideal types and therefore abstractions, they can help us to discern a broad array of nuances and distinctions within the larger category of Bad Faith. In the remainder of this chapter, then, we will seek to present examples of the Bad Faith Argument from an array of sources in mid-late Second Temple and *tannaitic* texts, and to arrange these instances of the Bad Faith Argument into a taxonomy of different categories and sub-categories, providing one typical example for each different form of argument within the broader contention of Bad Faith. In our subsequent chapters, we will then seek to apply these sub-categorizations to further examples of the Bad Faith Argument.

### ***Bad Faith Type 1a: Ulterior Motive***

The form of the Bad Faith Argument which is most easily recognizable—indeed, perhaps the archetypal Bad Faith accusation—is the assertion of an *ulterior motive* which is actually responsible for the apparently implausible commitments of the other. Given that the beliefs and practices of the Other are too outlandish—that is, radically disparate from the ideas of the in-group—possibly to be sincere, the Others must express dedication to them merely because they *seek to gain an ulterior good*, generally either money or sex, from their claimed convictions.

The first century B.C.E. Wisdom of Solomon provides a particularly clear example of this “Ulterior Motive” subtype of Bad Faith.<sup>54</sup> As we saw briefly in Chapter One, those few scholars

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<sup>54</sup> On the majority—though not unanimous—assignment of the Wisdom of Solomon to approximately the first century B.C.E., see for example J.A.F. Gregg, *The Wisdom of Solomon in the Revised Version: With Introduction and Notes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909), x–xiii, John Geyer, *The Wisdom of Solomon: Introduction and Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 17, and Lester L. Grabbe, *Wisdom of Solomon* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 87–90. For an in-depth analysis of the various opinions on the book’s dating, see C. Larcher, *Le Livre de la Sagesse ou La Sagesse de Salomon* vol. 1 (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1983), 141–49, and cf. the discussions in Joseph Reider, *Book of Wisdom* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 12–14 and F.W. Farrar, *Wisdom* (London: John Murray, 1888), 420–22. See also David Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1979), 20–25, who tentatively assigns the work to the first half of the first century C.E.

who have considered the question of Jewish explanations for transgressive worship have almost always referred themselves to this work, a reflection of its status as the most in-depth engagement with religious etiology in all of ancient Jewish literature. At different points in the work, Wisdom's author presents a variant of every single one of the four theories of pagan religious origins to be found in our period, several of which are entirely incompatible with each other. We shall have recourse to return to a number of these accounts in later chapters. In exploring the Bad Faith Argument, however, it is the pericopes of the carpenter and the potter in Wisdom of Solomon 13 and 15 respectively which draw our attention.

Beginning in Wisdom of Solomon 13:11, the author composes a polemic against the makers and worshipers of wooden idols.

<sup>11</sup> A skilled woodcutter may saw down a  
tree easy to handle  
and skillfully strip off all its bark,  
and then with pleasing workmanship  
make a useful vessel that serves life's needs,  
<sup>12</sup> and burn the cast-off pieces of his work  
to prepare his food, and eat his fill.

<sup>13</sup> But a cast-off piece from among them,  
useful for nothing,  
a stick crooked and full of knots,  
he takes and carves with care in his leisure,  
and shapes it with skill gained in idleness;  
he forms it in the likeness of a human  
being,

<sup>14</sup> or makes it like some worthless animal,  
giving it a coat of red paint and coloring its  
surface red  
and covering every blemish in it with  
paint;

<sup>15</sup> then he makes a suitable niche for it,  
and sets it in the wall, and fastens it there  
with iron.

<sup>16</sup> He takes thought for it, so that it may  
not fall,  
because he knows that it cannot help

itself,  
 for it is only an image and has need of  
 help.  
<sup>17</sup> When he prays about possessions and  
 his marriage and children,  
 he is not ashamed to address a lifeless  
 thing.  
<sup>18</sup> For health he appeals to a thing that is  
 weak;  
 for life he prays to a thing that is dead;  
 for aid he entreats a thing that is utterly  
 inexperienced;  
 for a prosperous journey, a thing that  
 cannot take a step;  
<sup>19</sup> for money-making and work and success  
 with his hands  
 he asks strength of a thing whose hands  
 have no strength.  
 (Wis 13:11–19)<sup>55</sup>

The scene here in Wisdom 13 is patently based on the pericope of the idol-maker in Isaiah 44. As in Isaiah, the author here reports in detail the intricate preparations of the wood-cutter, step by step. As in Isaiah, the wood-cutter uses part of the material to heat his food, and part of it for the construction of his god. With good reason, then, does A.T.S. Goodrick note, in line with much of the literature: “In the long passage vv. <sup>11-18</sup> [of Wis 13] there is scarcely an original idea. All is derived from Isa. 44 <sup>9-20</sup>, Jer. 10 <sup>3-5</sup>, and Baruch (*Ep. Jer.*) 6.”<sup>56</sup> And indeed, just as in Isaiah 44,

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<sup>55</sup> All translations from Apocrypha and New Testament taken from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* eds. Michael D. Coogan, Marc Z. Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, and Pheme Perkins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) unless otherwise noted. Any emphases in these texts are my addition.

<sup>56</sup> A.T.S. Goodrick, *The Book of Wisdom: with Introduction and Notes* (London: Rivingtons, 1913), 284. Varying forms of this assessment are almost universal in the literature. See, for example, Gregg, who notes that “the writer displays no originality in this section. It recalls the argument and phraseology of Is. xl... Jer. ii... and resembles the apocryphal Epistle of Jeremiah,” Gregg, *The Wisdom of Solomon*, 129. Cf. also Reider, *Book of Wisdom*, 163, Paul Heinisch, *Das Buch der Weisheit* (Münster: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1912), 262, Farrar, *Wisdom*, 500, Ernest G. Clarke, *The Wisdom of Solomon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973),

the wood-cutter here is evidently a genuine devotee of his idol. This carpenter is “not ashamed to address a lifeless thing. For health he appeals to a thing that is weak; for life he prays to a thing that is dead” (Wis 13:17–18).

Following this scene, Wisdom of Solomon 14 presents a discrete euhemeristic interlude. After this interlude, however, the author then returns in Wisdom 15 to imagining an idol craftsman. At first, little seems to have changed here from the portrayal in Wisdom 13.

<sup>4</sup>For neither has the evil intent of human  
art misled us,  
nor the fruitless toil of painters,  
a figure stained with varied colors,  
<sup>5</sup>whose appearance arouses yearning in  
fools,  
so that they desire the lifeless form of a  
dead image.  
<sup>6</sup>Lovers of evil things and fit for such  
objects of hope  
are those who either make or desire or  
worship them.  
(Wis 15:4–6)

According to the speaker, he and his group, the “us,” have not fallen into the seductive trap of painters, whose idols do in fact provoke “yearning” and “desire” in other people, in particular the fools who “make or desire or worship” them (v. 5–6).<sup>57</sup>

At this point, however, a sharp twist in the narrative occurs. Though the author persists in much of his tight reliance on Isaiah 44’s language, the idol-maker is transformed from the wood-worker of Isaiah 44 and of Wisdom 13 into a potter or sculptor working with clay.<sup>58</sup>

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92, and Gilbert, *La Critique*, 94. For a somewhat more positive estimation of the author’s creativity in his use of Isaiah, see Luca Mazzinghi, *Libro della Sapienza* (Rome: G&B Press, 2020), 530.

<sup>57</sup> For the “us” imagined by the text as the Jews of the author’s time, see Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon*, 282.

<sup>58</sup> The term “potter” is used here pejoratively to include “sculptors” as well. See Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon*, 286.

<sup>7</sup>A potter kneads the soft earth  
and laboriously molds each vessel for our  
service,  
fashioning out of the same clay  
both the vessels that serve clean uses  
and those for contrary uses, making all  
alike;  
but which shall be the use of each of them  
the worker in clay decides.

<sup>8</sup>With misspent toil, these workers form a  
futile god from the same clay—  
these mortals who were made of earth a  
short time before  
and after a little while go to the earth from  
which all mortals are taken,  
when the time comes to return the souls  
that were borrowed.

<sup>9</sup>But the workers are not concerned that  
mortals are destined to die  
or that their life is brief,  
but they compete with workers in gold and  
silver,  
and imitate workers in copper...

<sup>12</sup>But they considered our existence an idle  
game,  
and life a festival held for profit,  
for they say one must get money however  
one can, even by base means.

<sup>13</sup>For these persons, more than all others,  
*know that they sin* [οὗτος γὰρ παρὰ πάντας οἶδεν ὅτι ἀμαρτάνει]  
when they make from earthy matter fragile  
vessels and carved images.  
(Wis 15:7–13)

Here, with the potter of Wisdom 15, we have a clear example of the *ulterior motive* type of the Bad Faith Argument. For the author, this worker in clay must surely know that his idols are not worthy of any devotion. His dealing in the icons is, in the absence of any religious sentiment, exclusively directed toward profit. On this scene, Maurice Gilbert notes that the potter “sait fort bien que ces idoles sont faites du même glaise que les vases et les bassins; peu lui importe la

croyance qu'on puisse attacher à ces statues ; une seule chose l'intéresse : gagner de l'argent, à n'importe quel prix...aux frais des dévots niais."<sup>59</sup>

Then, at last, the author seems to abandon this Bad Faith portrayal and return to his earlier depiction of idol-worshippers as sincere but reprehensible.

<sup>14</sup> But most foolish [ἀφρονέστατοι], and more miserable [τάλανες]  
than an infant [ὑπὲρ ψυχὴν νηπίου, lit. than the *soul* of an infant],  
are all the enemies who oppressed your  
people.

<sup>15</sup> *For they thought that all their heathen  
idols were gods* [ὅτι καὶ πάντα τὰ εἰδῶλα τῶν ἐθνῶν ἐλογίσαντο θεούς],  
though these have neither the use of their  
eyes to see with,  
nor nostrils with which to draw breath,  
nor ears with which to hear,  
nor fingers to feel with,  
and their feet are of no use for walking.  
(Wis 15:14–15)

We have then, as it were, three stages of portrayal here in Wisdom of Solomon. Beginning in Wisdom 13, we have a conscious replication of the style and content of Isaiah 44, in which the idol-carpenter unabashedly hopes in and prays to his idol—a pericope which continues, after an excursus in Wisdom 14, into the beginning of Wisdom 15. The middle of Wisdom 15, however, witnesses a shift to a potter molding images out of clay, who in fact knows entirely that the works of his hands are not gods, and sells them for profit in total Bad Faith.<sup>60</sup> Then, at last, we return in

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<sup>59</sup> Gilbert, *La Critique*, 202. And cf. Gilbert, *La Critique*, 220, 222–23, and 274, where Gilbert restates this point. Cf. also William J. Deane, *The Book of Wisdom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1881), 192, Gregg, *The Wisdom of Solomon*, 145, Reider, *Book of Wisdom*, 180, Grabbe, *Wisdom of Solomon*, 58, Carl Ludwig Wilibald Grimm, *Commentar über das Buch der Weisheit* (Leipzig: Hochausen und Fournes, 1837), 323, and Goodrick, *The Book of Wisdom*, 312.

<sup>60</sup> Our NRSV translation renders v. 13a (“these persons, more than all others, know that they sin”) in the plural, whereas the Greek presents the maker of clay idols in the singular, though presumably as representative of the larger group of which he is an example. Furthermore, it is worth noting that although the NRSV translation of ἀμαρτάνει as “sin” certainly captures the verb’s most prominent meaning in later Greek, it is possible that the sense here verges closer to “err,” another frequent meaning of ἀμαρτάνω. See H.G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-*



Wisdom 15:14 to the earlier view, which accepts the disgraceful sincerity of the idol-workers: “For they thought that all their heathen idols were gods.”

This peculiar vacillation in portrayal, and in particular the conceptual gulf between the sincere carpenter in Wisdom 13 and the insincere potter in Wisdom 15, have been widely noted by scholars. Gilbert notes that, while “en 13,10 et surtout 11ss., il s’agit d’artisans qui croient vraiment en leurs idoles, tandis qu’en 15,7ss., la potier mis en scène ne manifeste aucune *piété particulière* pour les statues d’argile qu’il façonne.”<sup>61</sup> So too David Winston: “Whereas the woodworker [i.e. in Wis. 13:10–14:1] was depicted as at least a believer in his wooden idols, the potter appears as a mere mercenary (v. 12), and is much more vehemently denounced.”<sup>62</sup> And J.A.F. Gregg: “the idol-maker in this v. is distinguished from the idolater of xiii. 17, in that he has no belief in the idols he makes.”<sup>63</sup> Paul Heinisch, meanwhile, notes that “während aber dort [in Wis 13] der Verfertiger wenigstens an die Kraft des Bildes glaubt und zu demselben betet (13, 17ff.), erscheint der Töpfer [in Wis 15] als ungläubig und irdisch gesinnt.”<sup>64</sup> F.W. Farrar, for his part, observes that, in contrast to the treatment of the idol-makers in Wisdom 13, in Wisdom 15 “there is something curious in the vehemence with which the makers of these particular [clay]

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*English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1889), 41. The context of the idol-maker’s “knowledge” that he sins [οἶδεν] might hint in this more cognitive (rather than theological) direction. More importantly, however, the emphatic contrast between this idol-maker and the foolish “enemies” in v.14 and 15 who “καὶ πάντα τὰ εἰδωλα τῶν ἐθνῶν ἐλογίσαντο θεοῦς,” reckoned even all the idols of the nations as gods, demonstrates that the issue at stake is one of intellectual recognition, not “sin” per se. The idol-maker is distinguished from the enemies insofar as they are ἀφρονέστατοι, *extreme idiots*, and more miserable than the soul of a νηπίου, translated here as “infant” but often carrying the sense of “fool,” as famously captured in the opening lines of the *Odyssey* (*Odyssey* 1.8). Perhaps, then, “err” captures the sense of ἀμαρτάνει here better than does “sin.”

<sup>61</sup> Gilbert, *La Critique*, 203.

<sup>62</sup> Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon*, 286. Cf. also Trent A. Rogers, *God and the Idols: Representations of God in 1 Corinthians 8–10* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 81–82.

<sup>63</sup> Gregg, *The Wisdom of Solomon*, 148.

<sup>64</sup> Heinisch, *Das Buch der Weisheit*, 290, and cf. 293–94.

images are overwhelmed with scorn and abhorrence. They are charged with peculiar futility (8), with dishonesty (9), with worthlessness (10), with godlessness (11), with folly and greed (12), and with conscious hypocrisy (13).”<sup>65</sup> It may be, he suggests, that “this concentration of hatred against this class of idol-makers [i.e. of clay] perhaps arises from their being a large community in Egypt; from the seductive beauty which could be given by their skill to dead images; and from the *writer’s strange assumption* that the makers of painted clay idols *must be more consciously insincere than the makers of wooden idols.*”<sup>66</sup>

All of these commentators, then, have explicitly noted the divergence in subjectivity between the carpenter of Wisdom 13 and the potter of Wisdom 15. Yet, rather remarkably perhaps, not one of them attempts to explain the difference in the portrayal of these idol-makers. The closest we come to an explanation is Farrar’s ascription to the author of Wisdom of a “strange assumption” to this effect—hardly a satisfying resolution of the issue.

Interestingly, a rare attempt to offer an explanation to this incongruence does appear in a rabbinic commentary to the non-canonical Wisdom, written by the 18<sup>th</sup> century *maskil* Naphtali Hirz Wessely. Remarking on Wisdom 15, Wessely notes:

This earthenware potter, who makes gods from lumps of dust, knows his transgression more than all of the other transgressors who make images from silver and gold and copper and wood, since there exists in all metals and in every plant and animal an issue which persists for its time [ענין לשעתו] and its form has already entered into it [וכבר בא בו צורתו] which has distinguished it from a different species. And perhaps a mischievous man might be found who, in the multitude of his abominations and the licentiousness of his heart, might conjure a false imagining [ידמה דמיון] to attribute to his statue an issue that it might cause good or bad to happen to him [ליחס לפסלו] [ענין מה שייטיב ויריע בו]. But this is not possible in the case of the earthenware potter who makes images from soft dust, and through kneading and firing it is prepared to be a vessel. And the vessels which are made from it smash when they fall and return to dust, because they are no longer useful for anything. And this will happen to the statues which are made from it, and without doubt his sin is in front of him at all times, since he cannot ignore the fact that his creation is vanity and

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<sup>65</sup> Farrar, *Wisdom*, 509. And cf. Farrar, *Wisdom*, 511.

<sup>66</sup> Farrar, *Wisdom*, 509. Emphasis added.

worthlessness, and it is made evident that he is from the sect of complete heretics [ וְנוֹדַע שֶׁהוּא מִכַּת ] [הַכּוֹפְרִים בְּכָל], and it is as we interpreted.”<sup>67</sup>

Wessely attempts here to explain the difference in idol-devotion between the carpenter in Wisdom 13 and the potter in Wisdom 15 on the basis of a difference in the *nature of the materials* used. Metals, plant growth, and even animals are more elevated in their substance than dirt, and for this reason the potter does not believe in his own dirt-based icon, even though the carpenter does believe in his. The precise logic of the argument, evidently influenced by Aristotelian philosophy, is in fact rather abstruse. It would appear, however, that Wessely intends something along the following lines: metals, plants, and animals have a certain *form* which distinguishes them essentially (“כִּבְרָא בָּא בּוֹ בְּצוּרְתּוֹ, שֶׁהִבְדִּילוּ מִמִּין אַחֵר”). As long as they persist or maintain their essence (“עֲנִיין קִיִּים לְשַׁעֲתוֹ”), they maintain that *quiddity*, that special characteristic of “goldness” or “cypress-ness” or “crocodile-ness” which defines them. It is to such a *category*, to such a *form*, that a sinful, destructive, and delusional person might potentially ascribe power or even divinity (“אִישׁ מִשְׁחִית שְׁבֵרֹב תּוֹעֲבוֹתָיו וְהוֹלֵלוֹת לְבוֹ יִדְמָה דַּמְיוֹן שׁוֹא לִיחַס לְפַסְלוֹ”). The carpenter in Wisdom 13, being such a man, might genuinely worship his tree-based idol by ascribing divine status to it through its *cypress-ness* or *oak-ness* or *pine-ness*. In Wisdom 15, however, the potter makes his idol out of dust (i.e. clay), which is pure matter with *no form inherent in it*.<sup>68</sup> Because, evidently, the value or substance of an object lies in its *form*, and the clay is formless, the potter must know that the object which he makes from it is without value or substance. And indeed, if this were not

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<sup>67</sup> Naphtali Hirz Wessely, *Sefer Hochmat Shlomo with Commentary of the Ruah Hen* (Warsaw: Levin-Epshtein Brothers Press, 1923–24), 273–74. My translation and punctuation. On Wessely, see Moshe Pelli, *The Age of Haskalah: Studies in Hebrew Literature of the Enlightenment in Germany* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 113–30, and in particular 124–25 on his translation of and commentary to Wisdom of Solomon. Cf. also Reider, *Book of Wisdom*, page 9.

<sup>68</sup> It would seem rather strange to suggest that dust, dirt, or clay are pure matter with no form, yet this does seem to be the assumption of the passage.

already proof enough, the formless-ness (and therefore lack of value) of the clay idol is empirically verified for the potter when the clay icon breaks, because it then returns to its initial state of dust (וּבְלֵי סֶפֶק (ההכלים שנעשים ממנו בנפלים מתפוצצים וישובו לעפר), showing that the *form* into which he had previously made it was only temporary and accidental, and thus never truly inherent in the image (ובלי ספק ( חטאו לנגדו תמיד, כי לא יתעלם ממנו שמעשהו הבל ושוא). This is a fascinating take on the discrepancy between the carpenter in Wisdom 13 and the potter in Wisdom 15, if perhaps too clever by half.

But for our part, we might suggest a somewhat different explanation, based not on any difference between materials, but rather on the literary aims of the author. Wisdom 13 is a conscious attempt at a pastiche of biblical polemics, in particular of the wood-chopper of Isaiah 44. Indeed, as we noted above, the pericope clings so closely to Isaiah 44, both in content and diction, that some scholars have dismissed it rather coldly as mere mimicry: “in the long passage vv. <sup>11-18</sup> [of Wis 13] there is scarcely an original idea. All is derived from Isa. 44 <sup>9-20</sup>, Jer. 10 <sup>3-5</sup>, and Baruch (*Ep. Jer.*) 6.”<sup>69</sup> It comes as no surprise, then, that the portrayal of the idol-maker here in Wisdom 13 faithfully reflects the idol-maker of Isaiah 44: ludicrous and pathetic precisely because he *does believe* in his idol. And indeed, this continuity with the portrayal in Isaiah 44, assuming as it does the *sincerity* of the idol-maker’s worship, persists into the beginning of Wisdom 15, where the author picks up the topic of idol-makers again after his excursus in Wisdom 14. The “toil of painters” and the images “stained with varied colors” (Wis 15:4) do in fact “arouse” a real “yearning” (Wis 15:5) in the worshipers of icons; the idolaters are “*lovers* of evil things” who “*make or desire or worship*” (Wis 15:6) the idols.

Yet, despite his conscious attempt to emulate Second Isaiah, the author of Wisdom lapses into a sort of Freudian-slip, in which he suggests something entirely contrary to the portrayal of

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<sup>69</sup> Goodrick, *The Book of Wisdom*, 284.

Isaiah 44: after all of his descriptions of the sincerity of idol-worshippers, he cannot help adding an accusation of Bad Faith, declaring that the makers of clay idols “say one must get money however one can, even by base means. For these persons, more than all others, *know that they sin* when they make from earthy matter fragile vessels and carved images” (Wis 15:12–13). In so doing, the author of Wisdom unwittingly shows his hand, revealing the centuries’ long gap in outlook between his own conceptions of pagan worship and those of the anonymous prophet of Isaiah 44. After such a careful imitation, extending to the choice of imagery and even vocabulary, the author of Wisdom cannot but contradict Isaiah 44’s portrayal at its very fundament. Indeed, even if, on the basis of internal linguistic criteria and external historical criteria, we did not know the approximate dating of the Wisdom of Solomon, we would, if our overall developmental schema is correct, be able to identify it as significantly later than the biblical polemics solely on the basis of this slide into the Bad Faith Argument.

At this point, however, it would appear almost as though the author realizes that he has deviated too significantly from his biblical models, and as a consequence must go out of his way to correct, as it were, his slip into the Bad Faith Argument with a direct reassertion of the idolaters’ sincerity. “But most foolish,” he immediately continues, “and more miserable than an infant, are all the enemies who oppressed your people. *For they thought that all their heathen idols were gods*, though these have neither the use of their eyes to see with, nor nostrils with which to draw breath, nor ears with which to hear, nor fingers to feel with, and their feet are of no use for walking.” (Wis 15:14–15). Evidently contradicting what he has just said about the potter, the author forcefully reasserts the biblical assumption of the sincerity of transgressive worship, and indeed bolsters his attempt to maintain continuity with biblical polemic by directly adopting some

of its most famed language: that of the idols' faked faculties in Psalm 115, Psalm 135 and, if in quite a different mode, Jeremiah 5.

On this read, then, we have a three-part movement in Wisdom 13 and 15. The author begins by closely adhering to his biblical models, particularly Isaiah 44, both conceptually and linguistically. Midway through his description of the potter in Wisdom 15, however, he slips into a Bad Faith Argument which contradicts his biblical sources entirely, not to mention his own pastiche of them in Wisdom 13 and the beginning of Wisdom 15. Realizing on some level that he has deviated too far from the source material he has been attempting to imitate, he quickly swerves back to the initial position, straightforwardly reaffirming the sincerity of idolatry through the use of biblical language. We are thus left with a series of depictions of idolatry which, though superficially similar, offer portrayals of the subjectivity of transgressive worship which are, in fact, *entirely antithetical*.<sup>70</sup>

### ***Bad Faith Type 1b: Fear of Persecution***

The Wisdom of Solomon furnished us with a clear example of an “ulterior motive” Bad Faith Argument, in which desire for a good—in the case of Wisdom 15, financial profit—is imputed to the adherents and propagators of transgressive worship in lieu of genuine devotion.

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<sup>70</sup> For a parallel example of the “Ulterior Motive” Bad Faith Argument, consider the narrative of Demetrius the Silversmith from Acts of the Apostles 19. Here in Acts, a work from approximately the same time period as Wisdom, the author portrays Demetrius, a dealer in shrines for the goddess Artemis, as defending the goddess' honor primarily in order to protect his own profits. See J.W. Packer, *Acts of the Apostles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 164, G.H.C. Macgregor, *The Interpreter's Bible* vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1954), 259, and Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 578. See also Johannes Munck, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967), XXII and 196, where Munck seems to miss the sardonic tone of the scene. Heinisch, commenting on our passage from the Wisdom of Solomon, makes the parallel between the two narratives explicit, noting that “man erinnere sich, daß der Silberschmied Demetrius in Ephesus einen Aufstand anzettelte, als er sich in seinem Erwerb beeinträchtigt sah.” See Heinisch, *Das Buch der Weisheit*, 293, n. 1.

Beyond this first “ulterior motive” accusation, we can discern in ancient Jewish texts a second subtype of the Bad Faith Argument, one related yet still in itself distinct: namely, the “fear of persecution.” In this second type of Bad Faith Argument, the sincerity of transgressive worship is again rejected. Now, however, rather than attributed to the search for an ulterior good, the true impetus for the transgressive worship is ascribed to the worshiper’s cowardice; the transgressive worshiper would willingly admit the folly of their gods and rites, if only they did not fear the retribution of their fellow idolaters.

Philo of Alexandria, writing in the first half of the first century of the Common Era, provides a striking example of this second type of Bad Faith Argument in his re-telling of the episode of the Golden Calf.<sup>71</sup> In the process of interpreting the Tabernacle and its service as presented in the Pentateuch, Philo seeks to offer an explanation for the ritual designation of the tribe of the Levites for sacral service. In his view, this special distinction of the Levites was “the prize and reward of a deed well pleasing to God,” (*Mos.* 2.160) namely the Levites’ support of Moses in the aftermath of the Golden Calf.<sup>72</sup> After relating a version of the events of this episode

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<sup>71</sup> Though Philo does use, and perhaps even originates, the term “golden calf” elsewhere, in our selection he refers to the object rather as a “χρυσοῦν ταῦρον” or “golden *bull*” thus assimilating the transgressive worship of Ex 32 to Egyptian bull-worship. See *Mos.* 2.162 and cf. *Mos.* 2.165. On Philo’s Egyptian construction of Ex 32, see Sarah J.K. Pearce, *The Land of the Body: Studies in Philo’s Representation of Egypt* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 292, 300–04, and 307. Cf. Pekka Lindqvist, *Sin at Sinai: Early Judaism Encounters Exodus 32* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 122. The classic discussion of ancient interpretations of the Golden Calf episode is that of Mandelbaum, who contrasts the apologetic tendencies of amoraic discussions with those of earlier *tannaitic* texts. See Irving J. Mandelbaum, “Tannaitic Exegesis of the Golden Calf Episode,” in Philip R. Davies and Richard T. White eds. *A Tribute to Geza Vermes: Essays on Jewish and Christian Literature and History* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990). Mandelbaum’s focus on rabbinic texts, however, and in particular on their varying attributions of guilt to the Israelites and to Aaron, have little bearing on our reading of Philo here. For a focus on rabbinic interpretations of Exodus 32 in the context of Jewish-Christian polemics, see also Smolar and Aberbach, “The Golden Calf Episode in Postbiblical Literature.”

<sup>72</sup> All quotations of Philo in English are taken from the Loeb Classical Library translation by F.H. Colson and G.H. Whitaker unless otherwise noted.

from Exodus 32 (see *Mos.* 2.161–166), including the role played by drunkenness and confusion, Philo arrives at the dramatic culmination of the scene. Moses, breaking himself away from direct communion with God, descends from the mountain and witnesses the idolatrous chaos which he had heard from afar but been unable fully to grasp.

When he [Moses] arrived at the middle of the camp, and marvelled [θαυμάσας] at the sudden apostasy of the multitude and their delusion, so strongly contrasting with the truth which they had bartered for it, he observed that the contagion had not extended to all and that there were still some sound at heart and cherishing a feeling of hatred of evil. Wishing, therefore, to distinguish the incurable from those who were displeased to see such actions and from any who had sinned but repented, he made a proclamation, a touchstone calculated to test exactly the bias of each to godliness or its opposite. (*Mos.* 2.167)

For Philo, Moses' first reaction upon witnessing the idolatrous chaos of the Israelites is a stupefaction, in essence a question, in the face of something incomprehensible: how, Moses *marvels*, could people in possession of true worship devolve into a state of false devotion; how could they “barter” the “truth” for this “sudden apostasy of the multitude and their delusion?” In other words, Philo attributes to Moses the very question of the origins of transgressive worship: how could the Israelites, already in possession of right worship, degenerate into apostasy, and indeed so rapidly at that?

Evidently unable to distinguish between those who were genuinely devoted to the calf and those who were yet “sound at heart and cherishing a feeling of hatred of evil,” Moses must enact some test to reveal the inner, subjective states of the Israelites.

‘If any is on the Lord’s side,’ he [Moses] said, ‘let him come to me.’ Few words, indeed, but fraught with much meaning, for the purport was as follows: ‘Whoso holds [νομίζει] that none of the works of men’s hands, nor any created things, are gods, but that there is one God, the Ruler of the universe only [ἀλλ’ ἓνα τὸν ἡγεμόνα τῶν ὅλων], let him join me.’ (*Mos.* 2.168)

Anyone who still clings to the LORD—that is, anyone who rejects the worship of icons and created objects and instead intellectually affirms only one God—should reveal this inner



conviction by abandoning the worship of the calf and joining Moses' crusade. Note how Philo takes a biblical passage concerned in its entirety with prohibited *action*, with the construction and adoration of the calf, and rephrases it in terms of intellectual principle. No longer is the issue at stake one of prohibited worship per se, but rather theological opinion, of who "*holds* that none of the works of men's hands...are gods, but that there is one God only, the Ruler of the universe."

Now at last Philo relates the response of the Israelites themselves to Moses' appeal.

Of the rest [of the Israelites], some, whom devotion to the vanity of Egypt had made rebellious, paid no heed to his words, while others, possibly in fear of chastisement, had not the courage to take their place beside him [Moses], either because they feared the vengeance they might suffer at the hand of Moses or the onslaught of an insurgent mob. For the multitude always set upon those who refuse to share their madness. Among them all one tribe alone, known as Levites, when they heard the proclamation, came running with all speed. (*Mos.* 2.169–170).

In stark contrast to the account in Exodus 32, in which responsibility for the calf seems ascribed to the entire people indiscriminately, Philo here divides up the Israelites into three distinct sub-groups.<sup>73</sup> Within the mass of the nation, there are those who are genuine enthusiasts of the calf and its worship, even to the point of willingness to inflict violence on those who dissent from its reverence. Additionally, there are those, in particular the tribe of the Levites, who utterly reject the worship of the calf and rally to Moses' call to oppose it. In between these two, however, is an additional group of *reluctant idolaters*, those who internally reject the worship of the calf but are too frightened, either of Moses' possible chastisement or of the crowd's own manic commitment to the idol, publicly to declare their internal sentiment and meet the demands of the moment.

Thomas H. Tobin, in his analysis of the scene, notes that for Philo "Moses's response to this situation [of the Golden Calf] is that of a true philosopher and ruler. He distinguishes...He sees

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<sup>73</sup> As Thomas Tobin notes, "this kind of parsing of responsibility is basically absent from Exod 32." See Thomas H. Tobin, "Philo of Alexandria's Interpretations of the Episode of the Golden Calf," in Eric F. Mason and Edmondo F. Lupiere eds. *Golden Calf Traditions in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 76–77.

that the disease [of worshipping the calf] has not touched all. Not all are incurable.” As such, “in order to sort out these different groups, Moses proclaims: ‘If anyone is for the Lord, let him come to me.’”<sup>74</sup> While some Israelites indeed worshiped the calf with enthusiasm and rejected Moses, “others did not join him [Moses] perhaps out of fear.” As such, “the primary emphasis obviously of this section in Philo is on Moses, a true philosopher and ruler, sorting out the different levels of moral responsibility of different groups in this episode of the golden bull.”<sup>75</sup> For Tobin, then, the main import of the passage for Philo, the main significance of emphasizing and expanding the Mosaic triage of idolaters, is panegyric: to demonstrate the unique moral and leadership qualities of the great lawmaker himself.<sup>76</sup>

Louis Feldman, in his analysis of the scene, notes by contrast that “we are told that some, whose particular devotion was to the Egyptian life style, rebelled, fearing either the punishment that would be inflicted upon them by Moses or the onslaught of the mob, since, as Philo remarks (*Mos.* 2.169), in an editorial-like comment revealing his distrust of the masses, ‘The multitude always set upon those who refuse to share their madness.’”<sup>77</sup> For Feldman, Philo’s judgment here reflects an aristocratic distrust of the mob, the crazed and vengeful hoi polloi. Imagining such a

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<sup>74</sup> Tobin, “Philo of Alexandria’s Interpretations,” 78.

<sup>75</sup> Tobin, “Philo of Alexandria’s Interpretations,” 79.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. also Tobin, “Philo of Alexandria’s Interpretations,” 80 for the reiteration of this overall theme, as well as Philo’s specific attempt to justify Moses’ judgment by explaining, through dividing out the guilty, why only a small fraction of the Israelites were executed at Moses’ direction.

<sup>77</sup> Louis Feldman, “Philo’s Account of the Golden Calf Incident,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 56:2 (2005), 259. One might note here that Feldman seems to have collapsed two distinct groups—the pro-calf Egyptizers and those participating in the sin out of fear alone. As Tobin correctly suggests, the “parsing of responsibility” among the Israelites, which “is crucial to understanding what Philo is about in *Mos.* 2.159–173,” is “something that Feldman does not pay enough attention to.” See Tobin, “Philo of Alexandria’s Interpretations,” 76.

large rabble, particularly in the context of sin, cannot but provoke from the patrician Philo a somewhat haughty “editorial” remark.

Michael Pregill, meanwhile, in his monograph on Late Antique interpretations of Exodus 32, suggests that, for Philo, the attempt to differentiate out the guilty among the Israelites “provides the Israelite majority with an excuse for allowing the worship of the Calf to occur, casting it as a temporary aberration and providing mitigating factors that allow the reader to understand how this terrible sin could occur, while also underlining the fact that the community as a whole merited God’s forgiveness.” For Pregill, then, Philo’s portrayal here works at dual purposes: first, it functions defensively, as an exoneration of some portion of the Israelite ancestors from the claim of willing idolatry. Secondly, however, Pregill rightfully notes that Philo’s interpretation serves as a *causal explanation* of this transgressive worship act, helping the reader “to understand *how this terrible sin could occur*.”<sup>78</sup>

For us, it is ultimately this last proposal, that of a causal explanation, of “how this terrible sin could occur,” which strikes directly at the heart of the passage. If Pregill is right, however, and Philo intends to offer here a causal account of the rapid and catastrophic degeneration of the Israelite religious community in the wilderness, what exactly is the nature of his explanation? The answer, we would suggest, lies at least partly in the Bad Faith Argument. Philo, pondering, in the guise of Moses, how the Israelites could have fallen so quickly away from true worship, quickly transitions into the Bad Faith Argument, first by suggesting that there must have been Israelites who remained “sound at heart and cherishing a feeling of hatred of evil,” and then by providing

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<sup>78</sup> Michael E. Pregill, *Golden Calf Between Bible and Qur’an: Scripture, Polemic, and Exegesis from Late Antiquity to Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 116.

the motivation, namely fear, which explained the apparent devotion of some of these Israelites to the idol:

Others, possibly in fear of chastisement, had not the courage to take their place beside him [Moses], either because they feared the vengeance they might suffer at the hand of Moses or the onslaught of an insurgent mob.

We have in Philo, then, a clear example of our second type of Bad Faith Argument, the attribution of insincerity to the adherents or propagators of transgressive worship on the grounds of fear from their fellow transgressors. In the absence of any clear scriptural data to such an effect, Philo introduces into the narrative idolatrous worshipers who reject the calf internally but externally accede to it. As Sarah Pearce notes of Philo's retelling, "his concern is, above all, to show that this cult was false. Neither the sacrifices nor the choirs of the idolaters were genuine, and their hymns were really laments, no doubt, we are meant to understand, in anticipation of their deaths."<sup>79</sup>

In light of this new understanding of the passage, it may be informative to revisit Feldman's characterization of the narrative. Feldman, as we saw above, would understand Philo's comment that "the multitude always set upon those who refuse to share their madness" as simply a psychological reflection of the author's condescending attitude, "revealing his distrust of the masses." If we recontextualize Philo's comment within the framework of a Bad Faith Argument, however, we can see that this "editorial" on the mania of the crowd is driven not merely by some personal antipathy but rather by the argumentative logic of the passage itself. In forwarding a Bad Faith Argument based on the fear of persecution, Philo is able effectively to answer, to an extent at least, the question at which his Moses marvels: how could the Israelites have fallen into such transgressive worship, from truth into falsehood? Philo's answer: many of them, in fact, did not.

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<sup>79</sup> Pearce, *The Land of the Body*, 302.

Many Israelites simply feigned worship publicly but knew, internally, that the calf was an apostasy from true worship. In order to furnish even such a partial explanation, however, Philo must find a way to rationalize the feigned worship of these *unconvinced* idolaters. Positing a coercive violence on the part of the enthusiasts of the calf provides precisely such an explanation: many of the Israelites in fact *rejected* the legitimacy of the calf altogether, but a manic majority threatened them into sinful compliance.<sup>80</sup>

***Bad Faith Type 2a: Carelessness and Disesteem***

We have now seen, then, a first category of the Bad Faith Argument, comprised of two distinct subtypes: the “ulterior motive” subtype and the “fear of persecution” subtype. Both of these subcategories function by *replacing* the apparent devotion of the transgressive worshiper with an alternative interior impetus, either desire or fright. Our second category of Bad Faith Argument, however, does not seek to *replace* the sincerity of that devotion with an alternative motive, but rather simply to undermine it. Within this second category, our first subtype functions by depicting transgressive worshipers relating to their own sancta in ways which appear dismissive or undignified. If these devotees degrade the very gods and icons which they claim to revere, they surely cannot be sincere in their worship; they too must know that their gods and images are false. We can label this type of Bad Faith Argument “carelessness and disesteem.”

We can see this “carelessness and disesteem” subtype already on display in the Epistle of Jeremiah. The Epistle, the earliest extant Jewish text to deploy a Bad Faith assessment of transgressive worship, was likely written in Hebrew, perhaps as early as the third or second century

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<sup>80</sup> For a parallel interpretation of Exodus 32 through the lens of the “Fear of Persecution” Bad Faith Argument, see Pseudo-Philo’s *Biblical Antiquities* 12. See also Pregill, *Golden Calf Between Bible and Qur’an*, 110–14 on the pericope.

B.C.E.<sup>81</sup> In it, an anonymous author speaks in the persona of the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. prophet Jeremiah, and presents his words as though directed to those Jews of Jeremiah's time who were undergoing exile from Judah to Babylon.<sup>82</sup> Vigorously attacking the worship of icons throughout the Epistle, the author warns the purported 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. audience that, when they arrive in Babylon, "you will see gods made of silver and gold and wood, which people carry on their shoulders, and which cause the heathen to fear. So beware of becoming at all like the foreigners or of letting fear for these gods possess you when you see the multitude before and behind them worshipping them" (Ep Jer 4–6).

In his attempt to dissuade the imagined Exilic audience from this threat of transgressive worship, the author imagines Jeremiah articulating a series of criticisms very much in line with

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<sup>81</sup> On the likely Semitic (either Hebrew or Aramaic) composition of the Epistle, see J.C. Dancy, *The Shorter Books of the Apocrypha* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 197, Sean A. Adams, *Baruch and the Epistle of Jeremiah: A Commentary Based on the Texts in Codex Vaticanus* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 147, Carey Moore, *Daniel, Esther, and Jeremiah: The Additions* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977), 323 and 326–27, C.J. Ball, "The Epistle of Jeremy," in R.H. Charles ed. *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), 597–98, and Charles Cutler Torrey, *The Apocryphal Literature: A Brief Introduction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1945), 65–66. Though see Adams, *Baruch and the Epistle of Jeremiah*, 150–51 for a more nuanced—and hesitant—analysis, and cf. also Benjamin G. Wright III, "The Epistle of Jeremiah: Translation or Composition," in Géza G. Xeravits and József Zsengellér eds. *Deuterocanonical Additions of the Old Testament Books* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010). On the dating of the Epistle there is some contention, but a date between 300 and 100 B.C.E. seems secure consensus. Dancy suggests that the "probable date falls in the period 300–100 B.C." See Dancy, *The Shorter Books*, 197. Torrey suggests "a date near the beginning of the 2d century B.C." as the "most probable," Torrey, *The Apocryphal Literature: A Brief Introduction*, 66. Karina Hogan notes that "most scholars date it [the Epistle] to the second or early first century BCE." See Karina Martin Hogan, "Letter of Jeremiah," in Jonathan Klawans and Lawrence M. Wills eds. *The Jewish Annotated Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 309. Adams, meanwhile, states that "scholars widely agree that the Greek text of EpJer dates to after the Alexandrian conquests, probably to the third or second centuries BC." See Adams, *Baruch and the Epistle of Jeremiah*, 149. Cf. also Moore, *Daniel, Esther, and Jeremiah: The Additions*, 327–28.

<sup>82</sup> "Since the recipients have yet to go into exile to Babylon, the letter purports to be written prior to 586 BC or even 597 BC." See Adams, *Baruch and the Epistle of Jeremiah*, 174.

those of the biblical polemics. As in Psalms 115 and 135, the Epistle of Jeremiah expatiates on the idols' lack of sensory perception: their worshipers "light more lamps for them [the idols] than they light for themselves, though their gods can see none of them" (Ep Jer 19) and "they do not notice when their faces have been blackened by the smoke of the temple" (Ep Jer 20–21). As in Isaiah 44, the author details the banal material provenance of the icons: "their tongues are smoothed by the carpenter, and they themselves are overlaid with gold and silver" (Ep Jer 8), "people take gold and make crowns for the heads of their gods, as they might for a girl who loves ornaments" (Ep Jer 9), and "they are made by carpenters and goldsmiths; they can be nothing but what the artisans wish them to be" (Ep Jer 45). As in Isaiah 45, where the prophet criticizes those "who carry their wooden images And pray to a god who cannot give success" (Isa 45:20), the Epistle of Jeremiah arraigns the incapacity of the idols to rescue their followers: "Whether one does evil to them or good, they will not be able to repay it... They cannot save anyone from death or rescue the weak from the strong. They cannot restore sight to the blind; they cannot rescue one who is in distress" (Ep Jer 34–37). And as in Isaiah 46 and Jeremiah 10, the author attacks the inability of the idols even to move, since, "having no feet, they are carried on the shoulders of others, revealing to humankind their worthlessness. And those who serve them are put to shame because, if any of these gods falls to the ground, they themselves must pick it up" (Ep Jer 26–27).<sup>83</sup>

All of these polemical verses are essentially consistent with the biblical material as laid out above in Chapter 2. We should not wonder, then, when a commentator like Moore claims that the Epistle presents "few, if any, images, analogies, or comparisons unparalleled by earlier biblical

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<sup>83</sup> On the Epistle's reliance on biblical passages, see Moore, *Daniel, Esther, and Jeremiah: The Additions*, 319–23.

materials, i.e. the Epistle has little in the way of imagery or phraseology that is new or memorable.”<sup>84</sup> Nor should we be surprised when Charles Torrey contends that “the writer of the Epistle *enlarges on the old models* with an exuberant imagination,” as “ridicule of the Gentile gods was not uncommon in the later Hebrew literature, beginning with the ironical poetry of Is. 44:9–20, and continued especially in Psalms 115 and 135.” Indeed, for Torrey, the Epistle, “rambling and repetitious,” contained “not many items of interest.”<sup>85</sup> Just so, in an essay on “Satirical Polemics Against Idols and Idolatry in the Letter of Jeremiah (Baruch Ch. 6),” P.C. Beentjes “especially examines which polemical descriptions concerning idols and idolatry found in the Old Testament have been included in EpJer and what transformation(s) are possibly involved in such an operation.”<sup>86</sup> Despite such an investigation into the Epistle’s use of biblical polemic, however, Beentjes makes no note of the fundamental shift represented by the Bad Faith Argument, here in its subtype of “carelessness and disesteem.”

So too Roth, in his seminal article on anti-idol polemics, notes that the Epistle does “introduce motifs which are not derived from a Biblical tradition.” Among these, Roth notes, the Epistle portrays “the fate of dusty, candle-illuminated, decaying, blackened and animal-abused images,” and “idols are denied the possession of divine power by reason of women making offerings to them.” Furthermore, “direct reference is made to Chaldeans [i.e. Babylonians] *dishonoring their gods by accepting their inability to heal a mute person brought before them*, and by allowing sacred prostitution.”<sup>87</sup> Rather than interpreting these divergences from the Biblical

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<sup>84</sup> Moore, *Daniel, Esther, and Jeremiah: The Additions*, 323–24.

<sup>85</sup> Torrey, *The Apocryphal Literature: A Brief Introduction*, 65. Emphasis added.

<sup>86</sup> P.C. Beentjes, “Satirical Polemics Against Idols and Idolatry in the Letter of Jeremiah (Baruch Ch. 6)” in Pieter W. van der Horst ed. *Aspects of Religious Contact and Conflict in the Ancient World* (Utrecht: Faculteit der Godgeleerdheid Universiteit Utrecht, 1995), 122.

<sup>87</sup> Wolfgang M.W. Roth, “For Life, He Appeals to Death (Wis 13:18): A Study of Old Testament Idol Parodies,” *The Catholic Bible Quarterly* 37.1 (1975), 41. Emphasis added.



corpus as changes or developments in Israelite or Jewish rhetoric, however, Roth evidently accepts the polemical testimony of the Epistle at face value, suggesting that “these references to the Babylonian setting are telling: they show how the author [of the Epistle] incorporated up-to-date information.”<sup>88</sup> Kratz, meanwhile, in summarizing the argument of the Epistle, notes that its purpose is “den Nachweis führen, daß die Exilierten in Babylon die dort verehrten Götter nicht zu fürchten brauchen, da diese sowohl der materiellen Beschaffenheit als auch der von ihnen erwarteten Wirkungen nach in Wahrheit keine Götter sind. *Der Gedanke ist nicht sonderlich originell oder differenziert*, aber mit sonderbarem Fleiß und beinahe schon systematischer Akribie durchgeführt.”<sup>89</sup> Evidently implying a comparison with the Epistle’s precedents in the canonical texts of the Hebrew Bible, Kratz concludes that no idea or argument of particular novelty, nothing “sonderlich originell,” is to be found in the Epistle, but at best a more organized and biting arrangement of the pre-existing biblical polemics. While Kratz does concede that “nicht alles in EpJer ist aus den Schriften des nachmaligen Alten Testaments entlehnt,” he contends that those “viele Details” which “gehen darüber hinaus” in fact “sind doch nicht frei erfunden, sondern spiegeln tatsächliche religionsgeschichtliche Sachverhalte wider.”<sup>90</sup>

Readers like Moore, Torrey, and Beentjes, then, seem drawn by the many biblicalizing arguments in the text into an over-emphasis on continuity. Roth and Kratz, by contrast, do seem to recognize certain distinctions between the Epistle and its biblical models, but attribute them to the author’s reliable reporting about actual Babylonian religion.

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<sup>88</sup> Roth, “For Life, He Appeals to Death,” 41.

<sup>89</sup> Reinhard Gregor Kratz, “Der Brief des Jeremia,” in Odil Hannes Steck, Reinhard G. Kratz and Ingo Kottsieper, *Das Buch Baruch, Der Brief des Jeremia, Zusätze zu Ester und Daniel* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 77. Emphasis added. And see also the continuation of Kratz’ discussion there, in which he notes the literary influence of the biblical polemics—in particular of the canonical Book of Jeremiah, and indeed of Bel and the Dragon—on the Epistle.

<sup>90</sup> Kratz, “Der Brief des Jeremia,” 79.

If, however, we focus our attention on the way in which the Epistle *constructs and imagines* the subjectivity of the Babylonian idol-worshippers, we can quickly discern a series of arguments which are fundamentally incongruous with the polemics of the Hebrew Bible. Most prominent among these is our third subtype of Bad Faith, that of “carelessness and disesteem,” in which the sincerity of transgressive worshipers is undermined through the attribution to them of irreverent or degrading treatment of their own sancta. Consider the following five statements, presented here in the order in which they appear as they punctuate the rather rambling Epistle:

1. Sometimes the priests secretly take gold and silver from their gods and spend it on themselves, or even give some of it to the prostitutes on the terrace. (Ep Jer 10–11)
2. The priests sell the sacrifices that are offered to these gods and use the money themselves. (Ep Jer 28)
3. Sacrifices to them [the idols] may even be touched by women in their periods or at childbirth. Since you know by these things that they are not gods, do not fear them. (Ep Jer 29)
4. The priests take some of the clothing of their gods to clothe their wives and children. (Ep Jer 33)
5. Besides, even the Chaldeans themselves dishonor them; for when they see someone who cannot speak, they bring Bel and pray that the mute may speak, as though Bel were able to understand! Yet they themselves cannot perceive this and abandon them, for they have no sense. (Ep Jer 40–41)

In the first, second, and fourth passages (Ep Jer 10–11, 28, and 33, respectively), the priests of the Babylonians are imagined robbing their own sacred idols in various ways, either by pilfering the idols’ gold and silver, stealing the profits from the meat which has been offered to them, or pinching even their very clothing. The priests then use these embezzlements for their own selfish purposes—even to the point of spending the money gained thereby to hire prostitutes. Each of these accusations blend into and partake of the “ulterior motive” subtype of the Bad Faith Argument which we analyzed above: the idolatrous priests are depicted taking advantage of their

office for *financial gain*, rather than serving their gods in any true purity of spirit. As Marko Marttila notes, “the priests [in the Epistle] obviously know more than the ordinary people; they know that the idols are futile. Priests use this knowledge for criminal purposes. They exploit their office and people’s sincere belief in idols.”<sup>91</sup>

And yet, the stress in the Epistle seems to fall not on the priests’ desire for gain per se, but rather on the disesteem for their gods which that gain entails. The priests here are not merely hoodwinking the unsuspecting congregation of devotees, the “ordinary people;” they are plundering the very idols themselves. So little respect do they have for their own gods that they are willing to rip the clothes off their backs.

Such an attitude of carelessness and disesteem for the Babylonian’s own purported gods is on even clearer display in the third passage above: “Sacrifices to them [the idols] may even be touched by women in their periods or at childbirth” (Ep Jer 29). As an object in direct contact with the holy, meat sacrificed to a god should be considered sacred and therefore subject to stringent standards of handling and consumption. Yet here, the Babylonians are portrayed allowing menstruating and parturient women—that is to say, women who would be considered ritually impure according to internal Jewish standards—to touch this selfsame hallowed meat.<sup>92</sup> In so

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<sup>91</sup> Marko Marttila, “Babylonian Priests in the Description of the Epistle of Jeremiah,” in Géza G. Xeravits, József Zsengellér, and Ibolya Balla eds. *Various Aspects of Worship in Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2017), 232. And cf. Marttila’s statement that “one basic aspect in his [the author of the Epistle’s] work is the conviction that the Babylonian priests are actually aware of the vanity of their divine images, but they fulfill their duties in order to make their living and even to exploit their social position,” Marttila, “Babylonian Priests,” 243. Marttila, “Babylonian Priests,” 236 also notes the similarity of these passages with the portrayal of the priests in the Bel narrative in the so-called “additions to Daniel.” On this, see Chapter Four. Cf. also Adams’ comment that “the priests do not respect their gods and steal gold and silver from them in order to spend it on themselves and hire prostitutes.” See Adams, *Baruch and the Epistle of Jeremiah*, 178.

<sup>92</sup> See, for example, Lev 12:1–8 and Lev 15:19–28. Hayes suggests the possibility that this passage may be the “one reference in the postbiblical, nonrabbinic literature to Gentile impurity, arising

doing, the Babylonians demonstrate that *they do not treat such meat with the care becoming of sancta* and, consequently, that they do not take seriously the gods to whom the meat is sacrificed and through contact with whom it is consecrated.<sup>93</sup> Or, as the author of the Epistle phrases it, “You know by these things that they are not gods.” In such an accusation, no issue of ulterior motive, of greed for profit, can be at stake. Rather, as the author imagines them, the Babylonians implicitly undermine their own claim to sincere worship of the idols through their attitude of *carelessness and disesteem* toward them.

It is only our fifth passage (Ep Jer 40–41), however, which renders explicit the specific type of Bad Faith Argument that has been lurking behind the first four: “*Besides, even the Chaldeans themselves dishonor them*; for when they see someone who cannot speak, they bring Bel and pray that the mute may speak, as though Bel were able to understand! Yet they themselves cannot perceive this and abandon them, for they have no sense” (Ep Jer 40–41). The precise meaning of these verses, even here in the NRSV translation, is rather difficult to unravel, and indeed all the more so in the Greek.<sup>94</sup> Adams suggests that the intention is to state of the Babylonians that “their actions dishonour the gods by putting them in a position to fail.”<sup>95</sup> Marttila

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from one of the three physical states of P: genital flux, death, and scale disease,” but notes that “it is possible that the author ridicules the described practice because he deems it to be disrespectful or unseemly.” See Christine Hayes, *Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities: Intermarriage and Conversion from the Bible to the Talmud* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 238, n. 21. Based on our analysis, it would seem that the verse is motivated in large part by the Epistle’s overall attempt to present a Bad Faith assessment of the Babylonians’ sincerity in worship. If this analysis is correct, it may provide further support for Hayes’ hesitance in inferring broader principles of impurity from the passage.

<sup>93</sup> As Adams states it, “from a Jewish perspective there were few greater pollutants (Lev 15.19–28), and there could therefore be no greater disgrace or insult to the impiety of the priests.” See Adams, *Baruch and the Epistle of Jeremiah*, 186–87.

<sup>94</sup> See, e.g. Moore, *Daniel, Esther, and Jeremiah: The Additions*, 347, who notes that “the translation is uncertain, primarily because in the Greek the subject of the verbs ‘may speak’ and ‘were able’ is uncertain.” Cf. Marttila, “Babylonian Priests,” 240.

<sup>95</sup> Adams, *Baruch and the Epistle of Jeremiah*, 191.

proposes that “if we regard Bel as the object” of the passage’s rather ambiguous Greek, “we can undoubtedly note an ironic detail in the comment that the mute does not come to the temple, but that Bel will be brought to him...this gives the impression that Bel is not a lord but rather a servant.”<sup>96</sup> Meanwhile, E. Sh. Harṭom proposes that “the intention of the verse is probably this: in their bringing the mute before Bel, the god of the Babylonians, in order that he might give them voice, they admit that the status of a mute is bad, and in so admitting they thus denigrate their gods, as their gods themselves are silent to this mute man.”<sup>97</sup> However we choose to understand Epistle of Jeremiah 40–41, the essential substance of the argument here, as in the four passages preceding it, is clear: the Babylonians, and in particular their priests, treat their own purported gods with such *carelessness and disesteem* that the sincerity of their worship is undermined and thrown into question.<sup>98</sup>

### ***Bad Faith Type 2b: Tenuous Commitment***

We have seen thus far, then, three distinct subtypes of the Bad Faith Argument. The first and second deny the sincerity of the worship of other gods and their icons by *substituting* for it

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<sup>96</sup> Marttila, “Babylonian Priests,” 240.

<sup>97</sup> E. Sh. Harṭom, *Ketuvim Aḥaronim: Tosefot Lesifre ha-Miḳra* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1967), 22. My translation.

<sup>98</sup> Above, in our discussion of the “ulterior motive” sub-type of the Bad Faith Argument, we had reason to analyze both Wis 13 and Wis 15. We left Wis 14, however, to one side, as a discrete euhemeristic interlude. Within that chapter, however, it is possible to detect an additional example of the Bad Faith Argument—this time, not an “ulterior motive” argument as in Wis 15, but rather a “carelessness and disesteem” Bad Faith Argument of the sort we have just now been analyzing. Within Wis 14, after a substantial disquisition on the etiologies of idolatry and its negative moral implications, we find the following claim about the worshipers of icons: “For because they trust in lifeless idols *they swear wicked oaths and expect to suffer no harm*” (Wis 14:29). In other words, according to the author of Wisdom, despite the iconolaters’ ostensible devotion to their idols, by whom they even swear oaths, on some level these transgressive worshipers know that their gods are powerless to enact judgments or punishments. As a consequence of this attitude of indifference and disrespect toward their own gods, the iconolaters feel they can swear oaths with impunity, and thus cannot be trusted.

either an ulterior motive for gain or a fear of persecution. The third, by contrast, undermines the sincerity of that worship by portraying the carelessness and disesteem of worshipers for the objects of their own worship. Beyond these, however, we can distinguish an additional, fourth subtype of the Bad Faith Argument, one which functions not by denigrating the sincerity of such transgressive worship per se, but rather by calling into question the *commitment* of its adherents and propagators. Instead of suggesting that transgressive worshipers consciously know that their gods or icons are false, this “tenuous commitment” type of Bad Faith Argument grants on some level that their devotion is perhaps genuine, but denies to it any kind of dedication or steadfastness. The seemingly absurd worship of the other may perchance be sincere, but it is not serious; the slightest wind will blow the house down.

We can identify an instance of this “tenuous commitment” Bad Faith Argument in the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, a collection of midrashim probably redacted around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century C.E.<sup>99</sup> The collection, commenting on Exodus 20, preserves a series of interpretations of the Decalogue and the divine imperatives following them. Among these is Exodus 20:23, “With Me, therefore, you shall not make any gods of silver, nor shall you make for yourselves any gods of gold.”<sup>100</sup> This verse, it would seem, presents at least two problems for any rabbinic interpreter:

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<sup>99</sup> On the dating of the so-called “halakhic midrashim” generally, Strack and Stemberger state that “the final redaction of the halakhic midrashim should not be removed too far from that of M[ishna] and T[osefta]” and that “the late third century as the date of redaction probably accounts for the majority of halakhic midrashim,” though cautioning that “this needs to be more accurately established for each individual midrash.” See Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud*, 251. On the Mekhilta specifically, they state that “the form of the individual traditions, the cited rabbis and the historical allusions suggest a date of final redaction in the second half of the third century [C.E.]” See Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud*, 255, as well as their detailed discussion in Strack and Stemberger, 253–55. For a much later, though less widely accepted, dating, see Ben Zion Wacholder, “The Date of the Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 39 (1968), 117–144.

<sup>100</sup> The MT reads: לֹא תַעֲשׂוּן אֱלֹהִי אֲתָי אֱלֹהֵי לְטָרְףָּ וְאֱלֹהֵי זָהָב לֹא תַעֲשׂוּן לָכֶם.

first, why is this verse necessary when the worship of molten icons has already been prohibited earlier in the very same chapter, namely in Exodus 20:4–5? And, second, what is the sense of the rather strange “with me” in the verse? R. Akiba, in an attempt to solve these two problems, explicates as follows:

R. Akiba says: *Ye Shall Not Do with Me*. Ye shall not behave towards Me in the manner in which others behave toward their deities. When good comes to them they honor their gods, as it is said: ‘Therefore they sacrifice unto their idol [הַרְמֹו],’ etc. (Hab. 1.16). But when evil comes to them they curse their gods, as it is said: ‘And it shall come to pass that when they shall be hungry they shall fret themselves and curse their king and their god’ (Isa. 8.21). But ye [Israelites], if I bring good upon you, give ye thanks, and when I bring suffering upon you, give ye thanks.<sup>101</sup>

In this selection from the Mekhilta, Rabbi Akiva interprets the “gods of silver” and the “gods of gold” in Exodus 20:23 almost adverbially, as a kind of specification of attitude or mode, as though to state “*in the way* in which one acts with gods of gold and silver.” Meanwhile, the strange “with me” R. Akiva reads as a referent of interest, “toward me” or “in respect of me.” The result is nothing less than an evaluation of the very subjectivity of transgressive worship: they show deference to their idols in good times, but curse them as soon as the going gets rough. “When good comes to them they honor their gods... but when evil comes to them they curse their gods.” This caprice is, according to R. Akiva, precisely what should separate the nations from Israel, who should learn to worship their god unconditionally and with unflappable devotion. Exodus 20:23, then, is no mere duplication of the commandments against the worship of graven images in Exodus

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<sup>101</sup> Lauterbach, *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Ishmael* vol. 2, 344. Cf. *b. Ber.* 48*b*. All translations from the Mekhilta taken from Lauterbach unless otherwise noted. Lauterbach translates הַרְמֹו here as “net,” as in the original context of the cited verse in Habakkuk 1. So too Avram Richard Shannon, *Other Peoples’ Rituals: Tannaitic Portrayals of Graeco-Roman Ritual*, Ohio State University, 2015, unpublished dissertation, 257. In the context of the midrash, however, it seems rather that הַרְמֹו is read to mean “idol” or “prohibited worship,” a meaning which it often carries in rabbinic literature. I have thus rendered הַרְמֹו here as “idol.”

20:4–5, but rather comes to teach an entirely different lesson, one concerning the *manner* of worship.

We have here, then, a clear example of the “tenuous commitment” type of the Bad Faith Argument. Unlike the Jewish worshipers of the Israelite God—at least aspirationally—the devotees of the icons are mere bandwagon worshipers. Even if these transgressive worshipers do maintain some degree of genuine attachment to their images, they are always on the verge of abandoning their reverence if the going should get tough.

### **Conclusion**

In the mid-late Second Temple period, a new form of argument appeared in the textual record: a Jewish attempt to deny the sincerity and dedication of the worship of other gods and the reverence of their images. This new portrayal of such transgressive worship was not a reflection of genuine Greek and Roman religious and intellectual trends in the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century C.E., but rather an internal Jewish intellectual development, one in evidence already in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.E. Epistle of Jeremiah.

Due to its ad hoc and unsystematic character, the exact scale and parameters of the argument varied. At times the Bad Faith Argument was a rejection of the seriousness of contemporary worship practices; at times it sought retroactively to dismiss the sincerity of the transgressive worship portrayed in the Bible. At times, it denied the genuineness of all devotion to other gods or reverence of images, at times only that of a particular individual. The argument was deployed in many varieties, sometimes through the ascription of an ulterior motive for gain or a fear of persecution, sometimes through the allegation of abusive behavior toward objects claimed to be holy, and sometimes simply through the depiction of transgressive worshipers as flighty and lacking in dedication. Always, however, the instinct motivating the argument was the same: the



outward witness of such devotion must be at odds with the inner subjectivity of the worshiper, who surely knows their own worship to be false.

## Chapter 4—The Idolatrous Professional and the Emergence of the Bad Faith Argument

### Introduction

In the previous chapter, we defined and mapped out the Bad Faith Argument as it appears in a selection of mid-late Second Temple and early rabbinic literature. In this chapter, we will seek to demonstrate the movement from the conception represented consistently in biblical sources—in which devotees of other gods and their icons were seen as passionately committed to the objects of their reverence, and in which this reverence was simply assumed as self-evident—to a later conception of Bad Faith as represented in numerous post-biblical texts, in which the worshipers of other gods and their icons are portrayed as lacking any true commitment to their own divinities.<sup>1</sup> This intellectual transition in the conception of foreign worship is evident in a broad array of texts, and therefore any number of examples might have been selected. In this chapter, however, we have chosen to focus on six texts, three biblical and three from the mid-late Second Temple and tannaitic era, dealing with what we might term “idolatrous professionals,” such as priests and icon-makers. Arranged into three groupings, the narrative and thematic similarities within each set conceal the crucial shift in perspective which separates them: the emergence of a Bad Faith assessment of the worship of other gods and the reverence of their icons. And while our discussions of each set must vary to fit the tracks and tendencies of existing secondary literature on the specific texts, all of our analysis will drive toward the same, unified point, so far barely registered in scholarship: that the sincerity of this transgressive worship, uniformly assumed in Biblical literature without comment, is, in the literature of mid-late Second Temple and tannaitic Judaism, widely challenged or denied.

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<sup>1</sup> Though most of the texts in this latter category are definitively post-biblical, some (such as Jubilees) may have been written at a time overlapping with the composition of the very latest additions to what would become the canonical writings of the Hebrew Bible, including parts of Daniel. On the dating of the texts under discussion, see below.

## The Emergence of the Bad Faith Argument: Three Sets of Diachronic Comparisons

### I. The Priests of Baal (1 Kings 18) and the Priests of Bel (Daniel 14)

#### The Priests of Baal (1 Kings 18)

In the days of Elijah, reports the biblical Book of Kings, the wicked ruler Ahab provokes the God of Israel by deviating from his proper worship—in particular, by turning to the god Baal (a title for a North West Semitic god) and by marrying Baal’s violent devotee, Jezebel (1 Kgs 16:29–33).<sup>2</sup> In his anger, God strikes the land of Israel with a terrible drought—foretold, initially, by the character Elijah himself—which lasts nearly three years and brings Ahab’s kingdom to the brink of utter ruin (1 Kgs 17:1, 18:1–5). When Elijah finally confronts Ahab in 1 Kings 18, the King implicitly accuses Elijah of responsibility for the catastrophic lack of rain (1 Kgs 18:17). The prophet counters that “It is not I who have brought trouble on Israel, but you and your father’s House, by forsaking the commandments of the LORD and going after the Baalim” (1 Kgs 18:18). Then gathering, with Ahab’s consent, the Israelites and the priests of Baal to Mount Carmel,

<sup>21</sup> Elijah approached all the people and said, “How long will you keep hopping between two branches? If the LORD is God, follow Him; and if Baal, follow him!” But the people answered him not a word. <sup>22</sup> Then Elijah said to the people, “I am the only prophet of the LORD left, while the prophets of Baal are four hundred and fifty men. <sup>23</sup> Let two young bulls be given to us. Let them choose one bull, cut it up, and lay it on the wood, but let them not apply fire; I will prepare the other bull, and lay it on the wood, and will not apply fire. <sup>24</sup> You will then invoke your god by name, and I will invoke the LORD by name; and let us agree: the god who responds with fire, that one is God.” And all the people answered, “Very good!” <sup>25</sup> Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “Choose one bull and prepare it first, for you are the majority; invoke your god by name, but apply no fire.” <sup>26</sup> They took the bull that was given them; they prepared it, and invoked Baal by name from morning until noon, shouting, “O Baal, answer us!” But there was no sound, and none who responded; so they performed a hopping dance about the altar that had been set up. <sup>27</sup> When noon came, Elijah mocked them, saying, “Shout louder! After all, he is a god. But he may be in conversation, he may be detained, or he may be on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and will wake up.” <sup>28</sup> So they shouted louder, and gashed themselves with knives and spears, according to their

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<sup>2</sup> On the considerations surrounding the precise identity of the god here described as Baal, see Mordechai Cogan, *1 Kings: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 421, 439–40.

practice, until the blood streamed over them. <sup>29</sup> When noon passed, they kept raving until the hour of presenting the meal offering. Still there was no sound, and none who responded or heeded... <sup>36</sup> [then] the prophet Elijah came forward and said, “O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel! Let it be known today that You are God in Israel and that I am Your servant, and that I have done all these things at Your bidding. <sup>37</sup> Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that You, O LORD, are God; for You have turned their hearts backward.” <sup>38</sup> Then fire from the LORD descended and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the earth; and it licked up the water that was in the trench. <sup>39</sup> When they saw this, all the people flung themselves on their faces and cried out: “The LORD alone is God, The LORD alone is God!” (1 Kgs 18:21–39)<sup>3</sup>

As the extended drought pushes the kingdom itself to the brink of utter destruction, the need for appeasement of the true god (and, in particular, the rain that it will bring) is existential. The Israelites, however, are unwilling to commit themselves fully to either side in this theological struggle, evidently seeing no contradiction in the worship of both deities.<sup>4</sup> Having failed to force a definitive resolution, Elijah decides to offer a challenge: a direct contest in summoning divinity.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The JPS translation gives “hopping between two opinions” rather than “hopping between two branches,” but this is already a clarifying interpretation of the Hebrew סַעֲרִי, meaning “cleft” or “branch.” See *BDB*, 703. Contrast this, however, with *BDB*, 704, which tries to interpret the “branches” in our verse, in conjunction with סַעֲפִים שְׁנֵאֵת in Ps 119:113, as “divided opinion.” There are a number of other, similarly difficult or obscure elements in the original Hebrew of this passage, but most of these have little significance for our investigation.

<sup>4</sup> As Rice notes, that the people, in response to Elijah’s demand to follow *either* the LORD *or* Baal, “answered not ‘a word’ confirms the absence of any sense of conflict of loyalties.” See Gene Rice, *Nations under God: A Commentary on the Book of 1 Kings* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 150.

<sup>5</sup> The dramatic logic, what we might even describe as the “cinematic necessities,” of the scene require that the priests of Baal go first in the contest; were Elijah to precede them and call down divine fire first, the entire tension would be ruined, and the failure of the priests to summon a reaction from Baal would read as completely anti-climactic. Apparently the author himself felt somewhat uncomfortable with this arrangement, evidently crafted for dramatic reasons, and attempted to supply a more substantial explanation for the priests’ priority, ascribing to Elijah the direction: “Choose one bull and prepare it first, for you are the majority.” Dramatically or cinematically, however, there was, of course, no alternative. We can note a similar necessary cinematic logic at work in Genesis 44, where Joseph orders his steward to frame Benjamin for stealing his silver goblet. Though Joseph, ordering the steward to pursue his brothers and search for the goblet, does not specify the order in which order he should search them—and of course the steward must search them so as to pretend he does not know which one is in possession of the goblet—it is of course necessary to the drama that the steward search Benjamin last. And, in fact, this is precisely what transpires. We can compare also Laban’s search for his *teraphim* in Genesis 31.

The priests of Baal, evidently accepting the contest, took a bullock, prepared it, “and invoked Baal by name from morning until noon, shouting, ‘O Baal, answer us!’ But there was no sound, and none who responded; so they performed a hopping dance about the altar that had been set up” (v. 26). Noon arriving, “Elijah mocked them, saying, ‘Shout louder! After all, he is a god. But he may be in conversation, he may be detained, or he may be on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and will wake up’” (v. 27). Elijah’s comments drip with sarcasm; this a mockery born of bile.

The priests of Baal, in the face of Elijah’s jab, redouble their efforts, and in fact, evidently take his advice! “So they shouted louder, and gashed themselves with knives and spears, according to their practice, until the blood streamed over them. When noon passed, they kept raving until the hour of presenting the meal offering. Still there was no sound, and none who responded or heeded” (v. 28–29). The priests of Baal are true devotees—they accept Elijah’s challenge (evidently believing their god will intervene to assure their victory), cry out to their god, and dance fervently around his altar; they are so desperate to gain his treasured attention that they pierce their own flesh until the blood flows from their veins. Their faith in Baal is misplaced, yes, but *it is faith*. Indeed, the contrast between their passion and Baal’s utter silence is poignant, even tragic. To be sure, the priests of Baal are the villains in this story, but they are equally the victims of naïveté, almost pitiable, almost *sympathetic* in their misplaced confidence, reeling in their impotent imprecations.

Now, after hours of fruitless effort by his opponents, Elijah finally jumps into action, directing himself to the assembled Israelites. “Then Elijah said to all the people, ‘Come closer to me’; and all the people came closer to him. [And] He repaired the damaged altar of the LORD” (v. 30). After preparing his own sacrificial offering, Elijah declares, “O LORD, God of Abraham,

Isaac, and Israel! Let it be known today that You are God in Israel and that I am Your servant, and that I have done all these things at Your bidding. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that You, O LORD, are God; for You have turned their hearts backward” (v. 36–37).

As portrayed by 1 Kings 18, then, the days of Elijah are marked by a collapse in loyalty to the Israelite God. The people have turned to Baal and his priests, provoking, as a result, a crippling drought. Faced with this crisis, Elijah attempts, through a miraculous disputation, to persuade the Israelites away from the worship of Baal, which they have adopted, and toward a return to the LORD. The priests of Baal are utterly sincere in their devotion, and evidently expect that their god will rise to defend his own honor. Furthermore, the narrative presents their devotion as a self-evident and recognized (though unfortunate) reality. No explanation, or even puzzlement, is offered for why the Israelites, or indeed the priests of Baal themselves, should have embraced the worship of a god who, as the story repeatedly emphasizes, is utterly powerless in comparison with the Israelite deity. We may perhaps detect a certain attribution of agency to God for the Israelites’ waywardness, if such is the meaning of Elijah’s cry to the deity: “for You have turned their hearts backward” (v. 37). However, as has oft been noted, the meaning of this verse and its relationship to its context is “very difficult to understand,”<sup>6</sup> “inscrutable,”<sup>7</sup> and “ניצב לפנינו עדיין כחידה.”<sup>8</sup> And

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<sup>6</sup> J. Robinson, *The First Book of Kings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 212.

<sup>7</sup> Cogan, *1 Kings*, 443. As Cogan points out, the phrase “has been understood in two contrary ways,” either as “you have caused them [the Israelites] to be backsliders” or as “thou dost bring them back to their allegiance.” On the latter sense, see Cogan’s discussion, and cf. also Metzudat David ad loc., “בהנס הזה תסבב אליך את לבם, אשר היה עד הנגה אחרנית, להפנות אליך.”

<sup>8</sup> Moshe Greenberg, “ואתה הסבת את לבם אחרנית,” in Jacob J. J. Petuchowski and Ezra Fleischer eds., *Studies in Aggadah, Targum and Jewish liturgy in memory of Joseph Heinemann* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1981), 52. Greenberg, after a detailed discussion of rabbinic and medieval interpretation of the verse, ultimately proposes that:

שיעורו של פס' לז הוא אפוא: ענני ה' באמצעות נס שיברר לעם כי אתה אלהים לבדך, וכי להנהגתך הטמירה לבדה לא סניגוריה ולא עקרון ואין ללמוד מכאן השקפת עולם. הפסוק אפשר לייחס את גודל עוון נסיגתם מאחריך. אין כאן מביע את הנכונות לתפוש ברגע של יאוש...את הכל כמעשה האל—כדי שניתן יהיה לתקן את הכל בהתערבות ניצחת

indeed, even if we understand this verse as an attribution to God of some sort of agency for the Israelites' waywardness, the statement nonetheless does not rise to the level of an attempt at causal explanation, and certainly does not entail a rejection of the devotees' sincerity. The religious devotion of the priests of Baal provokes scorn, but it never provokes suspicion.

### **The Priests of Bel (Daniel 14)**

In a narrative from the Septuagint version of Daniel, likely written in the second or first centuries B.C.E., we find another story which, on its surface, might seem rather similar to 1 Kings 18.<sup>9</sup> Here, in the first half of a longer narrative often titled “Bel and the Dragon” after its two component parts, we encounter a tale not of the priests of *Baal* in Israel, but rather imagining back

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אחת.” See Greenberg, “ואתה הסבת את לבם אחרנית,” 66. One cannot help feeling that Greenberg loads the clause with more weight than it can reasonably bear.

<sup>9</sup> Carey Moore, analyzing this narrative and the one that follows it in the Septuagint of Daniel, suggests that “a late second- or early first-century B.C. Palestinian provenance for ‘Bel and the Snake [i.e. Bel and the Dragon]’ is far more tempting and likely than ever before.” See Moore, *Daniel, Esther, and Jeremiah: The Additions*, 128. Meanwhile, Malka Simkovich proposes a date as early as “sometime during the Persian period.” See Malka Simkovich, “Bel and the Dragon,” in Jonathan Klawans and Lawrence M. Wills eds. *The Jewish Annotated Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 339. The narrative’s date of composition, however, is complicated by the broader issue of the relationship of the “additions” to the canonical chapters of Daniel, as well as the question of Semitic Vorlagen. Furthermore, Bel and the Dragon, of which only the first half is directly relevant to our inquiry, exists in two somewhat distinct ancient recensions, an Old Greek/LXX and a “Theodotion” version; our translation from the New Oxford Bible is based upon the latter. The numerous differences between the two recensions have been the subject of much academic inquiry, but do not have substantive implications for our discussion. For our overall purposes, it is sufficient to note that the narrative of Bel and the Dragon was likely composed far later than the vast majority of material preserved in the canonical Hebrew Bible. On the recensions and textual history of the narrative see Marti J. Steussy, *Gardens in Babylon: Narrative and Faith in the Greek Legends of Daniel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 28–37, 56–64, 80–99, as well as Alexander Di Lella “The Textual History of Septuagint-Daniel and Theodotion-Daniel,” in John J. Collins and Peter W. Flint eds. *The Book of Daniel: Composition and Reception* vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 597–600 and passim. See also Jonathan R. Trotter, “Another Stage in the Redactional History of the Bel Story (Dan 14:1–22): The Evidence of Polemic against Foreign Priests and the Focus on Daniel in the Old Greek,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 44 (2013), 481–96. Trotter, comparing the two recensions, argues that the Old Greek version in fact heightens the drama of the polemic against the priests of Bel.

several hundred years to the priests of *Bel* (here a title for Marduk) in Babylon at the time of the Judean exile.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Now the Babylonians had an idol called Bel, and every day they provided for it twelve bushels of choice flour and forty sheep and six measures of wine. <sup>4</sup> The king revered it and went every day to worship it. But Daniel worshiped his own God. So the king said to him, “Why do you not worship Bel?” <sup>5</sup> He answered, “Because I do not revere idols made with hands, but the living God, who created heaven and earth and has dominion over all living creatures.” <sup>6</sup> The king said to him, “Do you not think that Bel is a living god? Do you not see how much he eats and drinks every day?” <sup>7</sup> And Daniel laughed, and said, “Do not be deceived, O king, for this thing is only clay inside and bronze outside, and it never ate or drank anything.” <sup>8</sup> Then the king was angry and called the priests of Bel and said to them, “If you do not tell me who is eating these provisions, you shall die. <sup>9</sup> But if you prove that Bel is eating them, Daniel shall die, because he has spoken blasphemy against Bel.” Daniel said to the king, “Let it be done as you have said.” <sup>10</sup> Now there were seventy priests of Bel, besides their wives and children. So the king went with Daniel into the temple of Bel. <sup>11</sup> The priests of Bel said, “See, we are now going outside; you yourself, O king, set out the food and prepare the wine, and shut the door and seal it with your signet. <sup>12</sup> When you return in the morning, if you do not find that Bel has eaten it all, we will die; otherwise Daniel will, who is telling lies about us.” <sup>13</sup> They were unconcerned, for beneath the table they had made a hidden entrance, through which they used to go in regularly and consume the provisions. <sup>14</sup> After they had gone out, the king set out the food for Bel. Then Daniel ordered his servants to bring ashes, and they scattered them throughout the whole temple in the presence of the king alone. Then they went out, shut the door and sealed it with the king’s signet, and departed. <sup>15</sup> During the night the priests came as usual, with their wives and children, and they ate and drank everything. <sup>16</sup> Early in the morning the king rose and came, and Daniel with him. <sup>17</sup> The king said, “Are the seals unbroken, Daniel?” He answered, “They are unbroken, O king.” <sup>18</sup> As soon as the doors were opened, the king looked at the table, and shouted in a loud voice, “You are great, O Bel, and in you there is no deceit at all!” <sup>19</sup> But Daniel laughed and restrained the king from going in. “Look at the floor,” he said, “and notice whose footprints these are.” <sup>20</sup> The king said, “I see the footprints of men and women and children.” <sup>21</sup> Then the king was enraged, and he arrested the priests and their wives and children. They showed him the secret doors through which they used to enter to consume what was on the table. <sup>22</sup> Therefore the king put them to death, and gave Bel over to Daniel, who destroyed it and its temple.

(Bel 3–22)

The Babylonians at the time of the Exile, the narrative recounts, offer huge quantities of food-stuffs to an idol called Bel on a daily basis, and the idol evidently consumes the offerings. Though this proves the divinity of the idol to the satisfaction of the king, Daniel remains

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<sup>10</sup> Here, “*Bel*, or Baal, is another name for the Babylonian deity Marduk.” See Simkovich, “Bel and the Dragon,” 340. Cf. Amy-Jill Levine, “Bel and the Dragon,” in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 1552.



unconvinced, and rejects the possibility that the statue truly accomplishes this miraculous feat. Like Elijah, then, Daniel insists that the purported rival god is fraudulent, yet note how greatly Daniel's tone differs from the earlier prophet's. Elijah in 1 Kings 18 is caustic, filled with meanspirited sarcasm against the enemies of the LORD: "Shout louder! After all, he is a god... perhaps he is asleep and will wake up" (1 Kgs 18:27). Daniel here, by contrast, seems utterly unperturbed; he is not threatened or challenged in any way by the presence of the false god—*laughing*, he simply informs the king, matter-of-factly, that the idol is, of course, mere clay and brass.

The king, apparently unnerved by Daniel's certainty, issues a life-and-death challenge to the priests of Bel to determine definitively whether the statue truly consumes the offerings and, by extension, is really a god worthy of worship: the food-offering is placed in the God's chamber, and then the chamber is sealed-off to prevent any outside interference. The next day's glance into the chamber will reveal whether the idol has eaten.

The narrative creates an effect almost like that of a magic show; the audience knows that magic is not real, and yet the magician has promised to make his assistant disappear. The tension, the intrigue, lies not in *whether* the magic is real, but rather how the magician will fulfill the enchanting task through ordinary means. Just so, the reader of our narrative exists in a position of informational privilege—the reader knows that, in the imagined world of the Book of Daniel, the idol of Bel *cannot act*, cannot perform wonders, is only "clay inside and bronze outside." Furthermore, the reader knows that Daniel must somehow emerge the victor of the story. The

dramatic intrigue, then, lies not in *whether* Bel is really animate, but rather in how the priests of Bel will *simulate* his animacy—in awaiting, that is, the prestidigitation.<sup>11</sup>

Immediately, however, the narrator betrays the plot, relating that the priests “had made a hidden entrance, through which they used to go in regularly and consume the provisions” (v. 13). Here, then, the analogy to our magic show breaks down, because the secret of the magician’s trick is revealed even before the trick is performed.<sup>12</sup> The dramatic tension and intrigue of the priests’ ruse is immediately deflated through its unveiling, and in its place the narrator rushes to shine the spotlight not on the craftiness of the priests but instead on the cleverness of Daniel, catching the charlatans by surreptitiously scattering a layer of ash on the floor to track their footprints.<sup>13</sup>

From this point on, the drama unfolds exactly as expected. During the night, the priests and their families enter through their secret passage and consume the food. When the king opens the chamber the next day, he is initially confirmed in his faith, shouting out “You are great, O Bel, and in you there is no deceit at all!” (v. 18). The king, seeing the table—now empty of the sumptuous offerings which he had placed upon it the previous night—knows that the seals of the chamber were intact, and thus concludes that the priests of Bel have won the contest.

Indeed, by the rules of the ordeal, the king’s declaration means that Daniel must be put to death. This moment ought, then, to represent a climax of narrative tension, as the hero is faced with nothing short of imminent execution. And yet, narrative tension is utterly absent. To both the

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<sup>11</sup> In fact, Hellenistic records of priests’ attempts to simulate divine activity demonstrate that the portrayal here in Bel and the Dragon may not be so far from historical reality. See, for example, Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 136.

<sup>12</sup> Unlike a modern magician’s trick, the priests’ scheme is malicious, and its intrigue is not the central point of the narrative, but rather must give way to the true meaning of the tale: Daniel’s vindication of his God against the supporters of the vain idol.

<sup>13</sup> Moore refers to the narrative as a “essentially a detective story, celebrating the cleverness of Daniel.” See Moore, *Daniel, Esther, and Jeremiah: The Additions*, 127.

reader and Daniel, the outcome is foreknown. By the time the king sees that the food has been consumed and makes his bold proclamation in favor of Bel, the reader has long been aware of the priests' false passage and of Daniel's clever dusting of the floor, and Daniel himself can see the incriminating tracks. Narratively, the outcome is never in doubt, and therefore any dramatic tension is preempted. Instead, we find only confident bemusement. "But Daniel laughed and restrained the king from going in. 'Look at the floor,' he said, 'and notice whose footprints these are'" (v. 19). Daniel, not exactly the most light-hearted of characters elsewhere, is depicted here laughing from the beginning of the narrative until the end.<sup>14</sup> Unlike Elijah's mocking in 1 Kings 18, sour and embittered, Daniel's humor is confident and unthreatened. Coolly, Daniel informs the king of the truth, lays his trap, and then laughs when his opponents are inevitably unmasked as charlatans.

In her monograph on the Greek additions to Daniel, Marti J. Steussy notes of contemporary scholarship that "two issues dominate discussions of Bel and the Dragon: source and genre."<sup>15</sup> Discussions of the *source* of the narrative material, either analyzing the historical context of Bel or the biblical texts which served as its models, tend to involve "questions of historicity and almost always ends up concurring with Jerome's evaluation of the tale as a 'fable.'"<sup>16</sup> By contrast, scholars focusing on *genre* have tended to interpret the narrative either through the lens of "the story's court setting" or through an emphasis on its function as "ridicule of pagan worship."<sup>17</sup> In this latter area of inquiry, as articulated by Steussy, we can see here again in the literature on Bel and the Dragon

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<sup>14</sup> This in contrast to Daubney's claim that "his [Daniel's] character to a great extent resembles that portrayed in the rest of the work bearing his name." See William Daubney, *The Three Additions to Daniel: A Study* (Cambridge: Deighton Bell, 1906), 197, and cf. 243–46.

<sup>15</sup> Steussy, *Gardens in Babylon*, 41.

<sup>16</sup> Steussy, *Gardens in Babylon*, 41.

<sup>17</sup> Steussy, *Gardens in Babylon*, 42.

the same tendency toward the evaluative, toward questions of “ridicule” and judgment, the prominence of which in scholarship on Jews and gentiles in antiquity we noted in Chapter One.<sup>18</sup>

Our interest, however, lies in a different direction. Rather than the questions of source or genre which have occupied the attention of the existing scholarship, we seek to understand the narrative’s portrayal of the idol worshiper’s *subjectivity*, and whether this portrayal stands in continuity or discontinuity with biblical depictions.

Insofar as they have compared Bel with its biblical predecessors, scholars have assumed rather uniformly that Bel and the Dragon stands in conceptual conformity to earlier polemics, perhaps distinguished from the biblical scenes in minor ways but not in its fundamental portrayal of idolatry. Claudia Bergmann, in an article on the role of eating in structuring the narrative of Bel and the Dragon, suggests that the primary distinction between Biblical and Second Temple polemics against idolatry, including Bel, concerns human agency. In the Hebrew Bible, she contends, “nowhere do human agents act out of their own will based on their own understanding that idols are made by hand.”<sup>19</sup> By contrast, “the most impressive and elaborated texts” of the Second Temple period, like Bel and the Dragon, “feature the enlightened human being as the main agent of destruction who realizes that idols are pointless.”<sup>20</sup> Daniel Barbu reiterates this claim, stating that “si Bel et le dragon apparaît comme une mise en récit de la satire biblique contre l’idolâtrie, Dieu cède ici la place à un protagoniste humain.”<sup>21</sup> On Barbu’s read, then, as on

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<sup>18</sup> See Steussy’s overall discussion of scholarship on Bel and the Dragon in Steussy, *Gardens in Babylon*, 42–48. On academic analyses of the court setting, see Lawrence M. Wills, *The Jew in the Court of the Foreign King: Ancient Jewish Court Legends* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), passim and especially 129–38.

<sup>19</sup> Claudia Bergmann, “The Ability/Inability to Eat: Determining Life and Death in *Bel et Draco*,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period* 35.3 (2004), 266.

<sup>20</sup> Bergmann, “The Ability/Inability to Eat,” 266–67.

<sup>21</sup> Barbu, *Naissance*, 268.

Bergmann's, Bel is distinguished from the biblical polemics by Daniel's agency. So too Wolfgang Roth suggests that "while in Dan 3 and 6 the challenge [of religious confrontation] is forced onto Daniel, in Dan 14 it is the hero himself who brings the issue to the breaking point."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Roth hypothesizes, the narrative of Bel and the Dragon "owes its existence to the desire *to extend the inherited idol parodying tradition* [of the Bible] to zoolatry (similarly Wis 15:14–19)."<sup>23</sup> Insofar as Bel represents a discontinuity with biblical polemic, then, it is in the increased agency of Daniel and the specific zoolatric target.<sup>24</sup> The fundamental nature of the polemic itself, however, remains unchanged from its antecedents in the Old Testament. Bel and the Dragon, in Roth's words, "extend[s]" the biblical polemics.

Lawrence Wills, for his part, proposes that what separates Bel and the Dragon, along with other Jewish polemics of its age, from the biblical pericopes is that "the later idol parody narratives...must show the idol to be not just a vanquished or otiose god" as in the biblical texts, "but thoroughly without substance, and must rub the pagans' noses in it. In the post-exilic parodies this is usually effected not by God, but by a mortal, who uncovers the idols for all to see."<sup>25</sup> Bel and the Dragon, then, is in essence of a piece with the biblical polemics, but is more ruthless and, as in the analyses of Bergmann, Barbu, and Roth, places a greater emphasis on human agency. Stuart Weeks, meanwhile, notes that "several (probably late) prophetic passages, the most famous of which are in Second Isaiah, seem to use the worship of images in the foreign cults as a way in which to attack those cults," and states that "this theme is picked up and further enlarged upon in

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<sup>22</sup> Roth, "For Life, He Appeals to Death," 42.

<sup>23</sup> Roth, "For Life, He Appeals to Death," 43.

<sup>24</sup> Roth also notes that the Bel narrative entails a "historicization" of the biblical polemics in a particular chronological context, that of Daniel. See Roth, "For Life, He Appeals to Death," 43.

<sup>25</sup> Wills, *The Jew in the Court of the Foreign King*, 132. And see the continuation of this discussion, focusing on human agency as well as obedience to the monarch, in Wills, *The Jew in the Court of the Foreign King*, 133.

later Jewish literature,” such that “it already dominates the Epistle of Jeremiah and Bel and the Dragon.”<sup>26</sup> For Weeks, works like Bel and the Dragon or the Epistle of Jeremiah are an “enlarge[ment]” of the biblical polemics. And Daubney, though noting “the unabashed effrontery of the idol-priests (vv. 11, 12),”<sup>27</sup> and how “religious fraud, deceit under mask of piety, is dealt with very severely,”<sup>28</sup> still finds it fit to state that “Daniel’s laugh in v. 7 accords with Jeremiah’s view of idols (x.15).”<sup>29</sup> And Andreas Wysny, who compares the Bel narrative directly to the contest in 1 Kings 18, notes between the two tales “erstens den Unterschied, daß Elija als Prophet gilt, Daniel in Dan 14 jedoch nicht Prophet genannt wird, zweitens die Unheilworte Elijas gegen den König und drittens beispielsweise die deutliche Kritik Elijas am eigenen Volk.”<sup>30</sup>

Even Gerhard von Rad, in his seminal *Weisheit in Israel*, places a clear emphasis on the continuity between Bel and the Dragon and earlier biblical descriptions of idolatry. Here, in a chapter on “Die Polemik gegen die Götter,” Von Rad presents an analysis of a number of biblical diatribes against the worship of idols, including the polemics in Hosea 13, Isaiah 2, Psalm 135, Habakkuk 2, Jeremiah 10, and, of course, Second Isaiah.<sup>31</sup> After discussing these biblical attacks on the worship of icons, however, von Rad adds that “gehen... auch die noch jüngeren didaktischen

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<sup>26</sup> Stuart Weeks, “Man-made Gods? Idolatry in the Old Testament,” in Stephen C. Barton ed. *Idolatry: False Worship in the Bible, Early Judaism and Christianity* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 15. Cf. Bousset’s statement that Bel and the Dragon, among other Second Temple texts, “lehnt sich an die Polemik des Deuterojesaja gegen das Heidentum an,” insofar as these texts present the worship of icons as the “Verehrung toter Bilder, welche die Menschen selbst mit Händen gemacht haben.” See Bousset, *Die Religion*, 172. Here Bousset also seems to imply a certain uncomplicated continuity. See our analysis of Bousset’s discussion in Chapter One above.

<sup>27</sup> Daubney, *The Three Additions to Daniel*, 212.

<sup>28</sup> Daubney, *The Three Additions to Daniel*, 242.

<sup>29</sup> Daubney, *The Three Additions to Daniel*, 219. The verse in Jeremiah to which Daubney refers states of idols: “They are delusion, a work of mockery; In their hour of doom, they shall perish” (Jer 10:15).

<sup>30</sup> Andreas Wysny, *Die Erzählungen von Bel und dem Drachen: Untersuchung zu Dan 14* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk GmbH, 1996), 165.

<sup>31</sup> Von Rad, *Weisheit*, 230–33.

Texte (von einer Ausnahme abgesehen [i.e. Wisdom of Solomon]) *kaum hinaus*. Da wäre etwa die apokryphe Erzählung vom Bel zu nennen.”<sup>32</sup> The story of Bel, then, is a mimic of the biblical material, *going no further* than its biblical models, and contributing nothing new. After proceeding to give a brief restatement of the plot of the Bel narrative, however, von Rad comments that “neu an dieser fast burlesken Erzählung ist nur dies, daß bei dem Bilderdienst nicht nur Unwissenheit, sondern auch offenkundiger Betrug der Priester im Spiel ist.”<sup>33</sup> In some tension, perhaps, with his initial statement that these later texts “gehen...kaum hinaus” from the biblical polemics, Von Rad does recognize that the “offenkundiger Betrug der Priester” represents an innovation not found in the biblical literature. Yet, for von Rad, it is “nur dies” which is new, hardly significant enough to trouble the fundamental continuity between the Bel narrative and its biblical forerunners.<sup>34</sup>

Every one of these scholars, then, directly compared Bel and the Dragon with polemical texts in the Hebrew Bible. And yet, for all their insights, every one of these scholars either overlooked entirely the shift in the portrayal of transgressive worship or, in the case of von Rad, noted it in passing but failed to see its significance. In the narrative of Elijah at Mount Carmel, the Israelites are so attracted to the religion of the Baals that they have abandoned the LORD in droves; they, and indeed the priests of Baal themselves, are genuinely devoted followers of their god. And

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<sup>32</sup> Von Rad, *Weisheit*, 233. Emphasis added.

<sup>33</sup> Von Rad, *Weisheit*, 233–34. And cf. Preuß, *Verspottung*, 261 that Bel’s “Priester Betrüger sind” and that this “Argument ist neu.” Preuß attributes this rhetorical development to a purported “stärkeren Zug zur rationalen Argumentation” but does not elaborate on the issue.

<sup>34</sup> Sonja Anderson, in her dissertation *Idol Talk: The Discourse of False Worship in the Early Christian World*, also notes that “the priests in the story are charlatans” who “know that Bel is not ‘real.’” Anderson does not, however, elaborate this as a “Bad Faith” argument, instead contextualizing it, along with similar scenes, within a number of contemporary theories of ritual and signification, and ultimately arguing that by assuming a “theory of ritual that sees action and belief as so tightly connected” such texts are “articulating a theory of ritual in which the charge of idolatry can arise. They are creating idolatry—and converts from it.” See Sonja Anderson, *Idol Talk: The Discourse of False Worship in the Early Christian World*, PhD diss. Yale University (2016) 134–39, and 145.

while the narrative of 1 Kings 18 mocks the impotence of their worship bitterly, it never questions the sincerity of that worship or the reason for its appeal. In total contrast to the fanatic dervishes of Baal, the priests of Bel in Daniel 14 are themselves entirely aware that their idol is a simple chunk of clay and metal. Their piety is only a façade designed to ensure access to the luxurious sacrificial rations. The priests know, as Daniel does, that the statue of Bel is just a statue. The only true follower of Bel is the king, and his devotion is a mere consequence of the priests' trickery.

J.J. de Bruyn, in his analysis of space in the Bel narrative, suggests that “the plot of *The disempowerment of Bel* revolves around the character Daniel who uncovers the god Bel as a fraud and not a living god.”<sup>35</sup> Through Daniel’s cleverness, “Bel is indeed disempowered and recreated as not only a *deceitful deity*, but also a ‘dead’ god.”<sup>36</sup> Yet to describe the god Bel as a “fraud,” or even as “deceitful” is, perhaps, to miss the fundamental twist of the narrative. It is not Bel who deceives, but rather his priests. The transformation from 1 Kings 18 to Daniel 14 is the transformation from foreign worshipers as, if irrational, nonetheless self-evidently sincere, to foreign worshipers as suspect and counterfeit. We have here, then, a clear example of the emergence of the Bad Faith Argument in its first, “ulterior motive” subtype.

## **II. Terah the Pious (Joshua 24) and Terah the Impious (Jubilees 11–12)**

### **Joshua 24:2–3**

In the last chapter of the Book of Joshua, probably dating to the Persian period but perhaps earlier, the eponymous hero gathers the entire congregation of Israel at Shechem before his death and delivers one final oration.

<sup>2</sup> Then Joshua said to all the people, “Thus said the LORD, the God of Israel: In olden times, your forefathers—Terah, father of Abraham and father of Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and

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<sup>35</sup> Joseph Jacobus de Bruyn, “Constructing a Deceitful Deity: The Disempowerment of Bel,” *Journal for Semitics* 23.1 (2014), 391.

<sup>36</sup> de Bruyn, “Constructing a Deceitful Deity,” 397. Emphasis added.



worshiped other gods. <sup>3</sup> But I took your father Abraham from beyond the Euphrates and led him through the whole land of Canaan and multiplied his offspring. (Josh 24:2–3)

There follows an abbreviated retelling of the *Heilsgeschichte* of Israel, beginning with God’s generosity to the Patriarchs of the nation and continuing up through the Exodus from Egypt, the deliverance from Balaam’s curse, and ultimately to the conquest of the land of Israel in Joshua’s own time. The recounting of these *magnalia dei*, however, is not an end in and of itself, but is rather directed toward a particular protreptic goal: “Now, therefore,” Joshua exhorts, “revere the LORD and serve Him with undivided loyalty; put away the gods that your forefathers served beyond the Euphrates and in Egypt, and serve the LORD” (Josh 24:14). Indeed, Joshua warns the Israelites, “*You will not be able to serve the LORD*, for He is a holy God... If you forsake the LORD and serve alien gods, He will turn and deal harshly with you and make an end of you, after having been gracious to you” (Josh 24:19).<sup>37</sup> The forefathers of the Israelites worshiped foreign gods in Mesopotamia and in Egypt, and the transgressive worship of these gods poses an ongoing risk to apostasy that is almost insuperable. If the jealous God of the covenant is to be served, these “other gods” must be “put away” once and for all.

Joshua’s speech reflects precisely the same assumptions about the subjectivity of the idol-worshippers as those found in 1 Kings 18. These other gods are the object of fierce, genuine devotion from their followers, be they the priests of Baal who dance and bleed for their deity, or the ancestors of the Israelites “beyond the Euphrates” whose dedication to their idols is so strong that their descendants here in Joshua 24, generations later, are evidently still worshiping them.

### **Jubilees 11–12**

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. Joshua’s speech to the Israelites (and their responses) in Josh 23 and 24:20–24 for the further development of these themes.

If we consider the Book of Jubilees—written around 150 B.C.E., several hundred years after the Book of Joshua—a superficially similar scene presents itself to us.<sup>38</sup> Here too, in Jubilees 11–12, we see a version of the life of Terah and the other forefathers of the Israelite nation, likely based partially on our scene from Joshua 24.<sup>39</sup> In this imagined, distant past, Terah is born into a society in which the semi-mythical ancestors of the Near East “made carved images for themselves. Each one would worship the idol that he had made as his own carved image. They began to make statues, images, and unclean things” (*Jub.* 11:4).<sup>40</sup> At fourteen years of age, however, Terah’s son Abram begins “to realize the errors of the earth—that everyone was going astray after the statues and after impurity.... he separated from his father [Terah] *in order not to worship idols with him*” (*Jub.* 11:16). Terah is portrayed here as an idol-worshiper and, to extricate himself from this idol worship, Abram must break off relations with him in some way. In line with

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<sup>38</sup> On Jubilees, see James VanderKam, *The Book of Jubilees* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 17–21, James VanderKam, *Jubilees: A Commentary in Two Volumes* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 3–38, and James Kugel, *A Walk Through Jubilees* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 4. Consider also the discussion in Michael Segal, *The Book of Jubilees: Rewritten Bible, Redaction, Ideology and Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 35–41, though Segal complicates this dating through his critical approach to Jubilees’ compositional history. See, e.g. Segal, *The Book of Jubilees*, 263–69, 319–22. On the dating of Josh 24, see Thomas Dozeman, “The Current State of Scholarship on Joshua 24,” *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 6:2 (2017), 145–47. See also Schmid in the same volume, who gives the Priestly document as a *terminus ante quem non*, and assigns Neh 13:28–30 as a *terminus ante quem* on the basis of changes in conceptions of the Samaritans, concluding that Josh 24 “likely emerged between the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.E.,” Konrad Schmid, “Jews and Samaritans in Joshua 24,” *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 6:2 (2017), 153–54. Thomas Römer’s contribution suggests on the basis of three articles in the volume that there may be a “growing consensus concerning the date, composition, and function of Joshua 24” in the Persian period, and that this does “indeed reflect a trend in critical biblical scholarship that is becoming the majority view on this chapter.” See Thomas Römer, “The Date, Composition and Function of Joshua 24 in Recent Research,” *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 6:2 (2017), 203, 205.

<sup>39</sup> On Jubilees’ likely dependence on Joshua 24, see Kugel, *A Walk Through Jubilees*, 88, and VanderKam, *Jubilees: A Commentary*, 428, 434.

<sup>40</sup> All quotations from Jubilees taken from VanderKam’s *Jubilees: A Commentary*, unless otherwise noted. VanderKam’s notes calculating the ages of characters and various dates within the narrative chronology of Jubilees have been removed for simplicity, and the slashes separating verses have been changed to periods. All emphases are added.

Joshua 24, here in Jubilees 11 Terah serves other gods, and it is Abraham who represents a moment of discontinuity, rejecting the worship of the idols. We have in Jubilees 11, then, a narrative *expansion* upon Joshua 24—providing details about Terah and Abram which are absent in the earlier account.<sup>41</sup>

The apparent congruity between our narrative expansion in Jubilees 11 and the pericope in Joshua 24 on which it is based, however, collapses when we turn to the following chapter. Here, in Jubilees 12, Abram confronts his father directly about the illogic of idol worship.

<sup>1</sup> During the sixth week, in its seventh year, Abram said to his father Terah, “My father.” He said, “Yes, my son?” <sup>2</sup> He said, “What help and advantage do we get from these idols before which you worship and prostrate yourself? <sup>3</sup> For there is no spirit in them because they are dumb. They are an error of the mind. Do not worship them. <sup>4</sup> Worship the God of heaven who makes the rain and dew fall on the earth and makes everything on the earth. He created everything by his word; and all life (comes) from his presence. <sup>5</sup> Why do you worship those things that have no spirit in them? For they are made by hands and you carry them on your shoulders. You receive no help from them, but instead they are a great shame for those who make them and an error of the mind for those who worship them. Do not worship them.” <sup>6</sup> Then he said to him, “I, too, know (this), my son. What shall I do with the people who have ordered me to serve in their presence? <sup>7</sup> If I tell them what is right, they will kill me because they themselves are attached to them so that they worship and praise them. Be quiet, my son, so that they do not kill you.” <sup>8</sup> When he told these things to his two brothers and they became angry at him, he remained silent.  
(*Jub.* 12:1–8)

The author of Jubilees, drawing largely from a series of biblical tropes about idolatry,<sup>42</sup> ascribes to Abram an in-depth sermon, haranguing his father for four full verses in order to persuade him away from the worship of idols in which he has been sunk. Indeed, the deeply repetitious nature of the speech—opening and closing with the imprecation “do not worship them [the idols],” and emphasizing that “there is no spirit” in the idols and that “they have no spirit in

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<sup>41</sup> On the concept of “narrative expansion,” that is to say interpretations in which “all manner of ‘extras’ not found in the biblical text itself...are inserted in a retelling of the text by some later author,” see James Kugel, *In Potiphar’s House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 276.

<sup>42</sup> See VanderKam, *Jubilees: A Commentary*, 445.

them,” since they are “are an error of the mind” and “an error of the mind for those who worship them”—serves literarily to draw out the impression which the speech makes upon the reader and to emphasize the passion and earnestness of Abram’s attempt to convince his father.

After such an extensive build-up, we would surely expect a strong reaction from Terah—presumably either a conversion to Abram’s message or, as we find in a number of parallel narratives, a violent rejection of it. Instead, in a startling—indeed, even anti-climactic—twist, Terah responds by conceding that he is *already well aware* of the very message to which Abram has been doggedly trying to convert him. “Then he [Terah] said to him, ‘I, too, know (this), my son. What shall I do with the people who have ordered me to serve in their presence? If I tell them what is right, they will kill me because they themselves are attached to them so that they worship and praise them. Be quiet, my son, so that they do not kill you’” (v. 6–7). Terah is already fully cognizant of the vanity of the idols; Abraham’s great religious innovation is no innovation at all!

Indeed, narratively, Terah’s response comes precisely at the *expense* of the uniqueness of Abraham’s revolution—by granting Terah pre-existing knowledge of the futility of idol-worship, the author of Jubilees effectively undercuts the greatness of Abraham’s discovery and therefore of the narrative as a back-story for Abraham’s rise to semi-mythic glory. Though Abraham admittedly reclaims some of this grandeur later in Jubilees 12 by defying his countrymen and burning down the house of the idols in Ur (*Jub.* 12:12–14), this is a demonstration of unique bravery rather than unique intellectual insight.

Our narrative had seemed, in Jubilees 11, a simple expansion of Joshua 24 in line with its presumptions of pre-Abrahamic idol worship. In just such a spirit, Thomas Römer comments that the mention of idolatrous ancestors of the Israelites in Joshua 24 “seems to presuppose a tradition that is fully developed in the book of Jubilees (chap. 12), where Terah is forced by the habitants

of Ur to worship idols.”<sup>43</sup> In other words, Römer suggests, we can somehow read the narrative of Jubilees 12 back into the much earlier text of Joshua 24, which must be presaging it. Yet in fact, if we refrain from such a retrojection and instead take the texts on their own terms, and if we pay careful attention to the subjectivity assumed about or attributed to the idolatrous worship in each of them, we find, quite to the contrary, that Joshua 24 is not implying a tradition later spelled out in Jubilees 12, but rather that Jubilees 12 is simply making an entirely different point from Joshua 24. Whereas the Terah of Joshua 24 was a confirmed idolater who passed on his gods to his descendants—up until their very entry into the Land of Israel—the Terah of Jubilees 12 is, in truth, no idol-worshiper at all. His apparent devotion to the icons is a mere front, motivated not by faith or piety but by fear of reprisal from the believing public.

This recognition, however, immediately raises a problem for our understanding of Jubilees: Why would the author of Jubilees militate *against* the plain sense of Joshua 24 by attributing to Terah a pre-existing knowledge of the futility of the idols? Indeed, his reason must have been doubly compelling, because in so doing, the author appears willing even to attenuate the distinctiveness of Abraham’s own insight into the uniqueness of the creator God. Only a handful of scholars have stopped to consider this rather odd plot twist, and even these largely in passing. In a recent commentary on the text, James VanderKam attempts to fit our passage into his larger presentation of Jubilees 11–12 as an encomium to Abraham’s spiritual genius. Recapping our scene, VanderKam states of Abraham that this “remarkable son of Terah...had already [in *Jub.* 11] arrived at a unique theological insight (worship of the one God, the creator of all).”<sup>44</sup> In addition, “Abram’s experiential knowledge of God deepened through his discovery that God was

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<sup>43</sup> Römer, “The Date, Composition and Function of Joshua 24 in Recent Research,” 212.

<sup>44</sup> VanderKam, *Jubilees: A Commentary*, 444.

the one who controlled the annual weather cycle.”<sup>45</sup> Ultimately, Abraham “becomes an advocate for monotheism within his family,” VanderKam states, “though his father and brothers proved intransigent.”<sup>46</sup> Here in Jubilees 12, we find “a reversal of the norm: here Abram instructs his father rather than Terah teaching his son.”<sup>47</sup> It is “the wise son,” then, who “reproves the foolish father.”<sup>48</sup>

Certainly, attempts to glorify Abraham as the father of the nation and to supply a rationale for his divine calling are prominent throughout the narrative of Jubilees.<sup>49</sup> Yet, in seeking to apply this broader theological agenda to our passage, it would seem that VanderKam quickly runs up against a problem: Terah’s preexisting rejection of the idols militates against an understanding of Abraham as a unique spiritual genius. Here, if anything, it is not Abraham who discovered the primordial principles of Israelite religion, but rather his father Terah—or perhaps any number of

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<sup>45</sup> VanderKam, *Jubilees: A Commentary*, 444.

<sup>46</sup> VanderKam, *Jubilees: A Commentary*, 444.

<sup>47</sup> VanderKam, *Jubilees: A Commentary*, 444.

<sup>48</sup> VanderKam, *Jubilees: A Commentary*, 445.

<sup>49</sup> Charles notes that one of the primary ideological purposes of Jubilees is the “glorification of the patriarchs,” who are “transformed into saints by our author,” yet he does not seem to note the tension that Terah’s independent rejection of the idols causes for this interpretation. See R. H. Charles, *The Book of Jubilees or The Little Genesis* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1902), liii, 89–92. See also Werman’s statement that Jubilees’ discussion of Abraham seeks to “elevate him above the other descendants of Shem in order to provide an explanation for his election. Abraham is the only one who is not under the control of the evil spirits because of his refusal to worship the false gods,” Cana Werman, *Book of Jubilees: Introduction, Translation, and Interpretation* (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak Ben-Tzvi, 2015), 264. My translation. For similar statements see Jacques T.A.G.M Van Ruiten, *Abraham in the Book of Jubilees: The Rewriting of Genesis 11:26–25:10 in the Book of Jubilees 11:14–23:8* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 338, and George Nickelsburg, “Abraham the Convert: A Jewish Tradition and Its Use by the Apostle Paul,” in Michael Stone and Theodore Bergen, eds. *Biblical Figures Outside the Bible* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 1998), 156.

others.<sup>50</sup> If Jubilees' primary purpose in the pericope is to portray Abraham as the stand-alone founder of the proper worship of God, it has done a very poor job of it!<sup>51</sup>

As a result, VanderKam evidently finds himself required to downplay or dismiss elements of the narrative in which Abraham's uniqueness seems undermined—particularly those involving Terah—resulting in a somewhat disordered account. First, VanderKam relates that “in a sense, one could say that Abram convinced his father—or, rather, his father needed no convincing because Terah acknowledged the truth of what he said.”<sup>52</sup> Indeed, Terah “seems to have known the facts of the situation [i.e. the falseness of the idols] even before Abram spoke to him.”<sup>53</sup> Immediately, however, VanderKam seems to undercut this assessment and turn toward skepticism, saying that “*whatever his own beliefs*, Terah claims that the local population... ‘have ordered me to serve [the idols] in their presence.’”<sup>54</sup> VanderKam then suggests that Terah's use of the term “truth”<sup>55</sup> to describe rejection of the idols “suggests that he was being sincere in his response to Abram,”<sup>56</sup> thus apparently returning to the view that Terah did oppose idol-worship. Finally, in discussing how Abram's brothers “reacted more emotionally than Terah had”<sup>57</sup> in rejecting Abram's message,

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<sup>50</sup> Daniel Machiela notes that “Eventually we discover that Abram was not the first to make this breakthrough, for upon attempting to convince his father Terah of the error of worshipping idols we are surprised to hear Terah answer ‘I, too, know (this), my son.’” He does not, however, attempt to explain the intention behind this plot-twist. See Daniel A. Machiela, “On the Importance of Being Abram: *Genesis Apocryphon* 18, *Jubilees* 10:1–13:4, and Further Thoughts on a Literary Relationship,” in eds. Eric Mason, Kelley Coblenz Bautch, Angela Kim Harkins, and Daniel A. Machiela, *A Teacher for All Generations: Essays in Honor of James C. VanderKam* vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 729.

<sup>51</sup> Perhaps VanderKam's analysis is influenced here by parallel narratives, such as those in *Genesis Rabbah* 38 and the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, in which the portrayal of Abraham as unique entrepreneur of monotheism is less ambiguous than here in *Jubilees*.

<sup>52</sup> VanderKam, *Jubilees: A Commentary*, 446.

<sup>53</sup> VanderKam, *Jubilees: A Commentary*, 446.

<sup>54</sup> VanderKam, *Jubilees: A Commentary*, 446. Emphasis added.

<sup>55</sup> Translated as “what is right” in the translation above, *Jubilees* 12:7.

<sup>56</sup> VanderKam, *Jubilees: A Commentary*, 446.

<sup>57</sup> VanderKam, *Jubilees: A Commentary*, 446.

VanderKam suggests that Abram's brothers, "*perhaps* unlike Terah, may actually have believed in the idols."<sup>58</sup> Here again, then, VanderKam seems to turn back to a position of skepticism about whether Terah preceded Abraham in rejecting the divinity of the idols.

Just so, in his monograph on the figure of Abraham in Jubilees, Jacques T.A.G.M Van Ruiten sees Abraham as a spiritual genius who enlightens his benighted father. "In *Jub.* 12:1–8," Van Ruiten recounts, "he [Abraham] *shows his father* again that the God of heaven, the creator, is the only one (*Jub.* 12.4) and that the idols have no *raison d'être*."<sup>59</sup> Terah, that is, was initially (in Jubilees 11) a sincere worshiper of the idols, and only in Jubilees 12 does Abraham "show" him of the error of his ways.<sup>60</sup> Faced, however, with the fact that later, in his response to Abraham in Jubilees 12, Terah now already "seems to be openly a follower of the true God (*Jub.* 12:29–31)," Van Ruiten infers that a "change in attitude" by Terah must have taken place between Jubilees 11 and Jubilees 12, and that this change from devout idolatry to secret skepticism is simply "not mentioned in the text."<sup>61</sup> According to Van Ruiten, then, Terah, having been a sincere idolater in Jubilees 11, experiences an inner movement to skepticism about the idols of which the reader is told nothing, and then reveals this new attitude (and, implicitly, the inner movement which must have led to it) only after he is confronted by his son.

Van Ruiten is certainly correct that such a "change in attitude is not mentioned in the text," but this is precisely because no such change in attitude has taken place. And while Abraham does indeed preach and sermonize to Terah, he does not "show" Terah anything of which he was not already well aware. In fact, the author of Jubilees goes out of his way to make it perfectly clear

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<sup>58</sup> VanderKam, *Jubilees: A Commentary*, 446–47. Emphasis added.

<sup>59</sup> Van Ruiten, *Abraham in the Book of Jubilees*, 55. Some emphasis added.

<sup>60</sup> Urbach's similar mischaracterization that "in the *Book of Jubilees*, xii, 4 Terah is won over by Abraham's words" is surprising. See Urbach, "The Rabbinical Laws" (1959), 162 n. 51.

<sup>61</sup> Van Ruiten, *Abraham in the Book of Jubilees*, 55.



that, though Terah *seems* devoted to the idols, he knows their vanity all too well. Terah’s practice of idolatry in Jubilees 11—a practice which prompts Abraham to “separate... from his father in order not to worship idols with him” in Jubilees 11:16—lures the reader into falsely ascribing to Terah a level of devotion to the idols which is sharply and ironically undermined by Terah’s own response to Abraham in Jubilees 12:6. It is this very tension between Terah’s internal awareness and his external performance which forms the dramatic crux of the pericope: Terah’s initial devotion in Jubilees 11 *seemed* sincere, but was in reality motivated by fear alone—a fact only revealed retrospectively when Terah undercuts all the suspense built up by Abraham’s sermon with the bathetic response, “I, too, know.”

Yet, for what purpose? How might we explain the narrative decision to portray a Terah who is outwardly devoted to the idols but inwardly rejects their substance altogether?

In his own commentary on Jubilees, James Kugel notes explicitly that in Jubilees 12, “even Terah is not a true idol-worshiper.” Indeed, he states, “*Jubilees* holds that Abram’s father *must have been a righteous man*, but ‘the people’ of Ur ‘have ordered me [i.e. Terah] to serve in their presence.’”<sup>62</sup> Kugel, then, confirms outright that Terah is not a “true” believer in the idols. But why, according to Kugel, “*must*” this be so? Why, for the authors of Jubilees, “*must*” Terah have

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<sup>62</sup> Kugel, *A Walk Through Jubilees*, 89. Some emphasis added. Kugel formats this verse with bold font to indicate quotations, but I have altered this here for the sake of clarity. Kugel may be less ambivalent on this point because, unlike VanderKam, he understands our text not primarily as an encomium to Abraham’s greatness, but rather as part of Jubilees’ broader attempt to demonstrate that God’s covenantal relationship with the Israelites began far earlier than the covenant at Sinai. For Jubilees, the Sinaitic covenant “was not the first and sole basis of the alliance between God and Israel, but only one covenant among several; its violation, therefore, could hardly have occasioned a definitive rupture between the two parties,” that is, between God and his people Israel. For this reason, Jubilees emphasizes God’s preexisting relation with the forefathers of the nation. “Things really did not begin at Sinai, but with Israel’s ancestors—especially Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” See Kugel, *A Walk Through Jubilees*, 7–8. On this, see also VanderKam, *Jubilees: A Commentary*, 40.

been “a righteous man?” After all, the plain sense of Joshua 24, on which the author of Jubilees is relying, clearly suggests that Abraham’s ancestors were idolaters—that is, were *not* righteous—and other ancient versions of the narrative of Abraham and the Idols, such as those in Genesis Rabbah and the Apocalypse of Abraham, are all too willing to portray Terah in a decidedly negative light.<sup>63</sup>

Kugel does not provide a direct explanation of his statement here, but he does imply one elsewhere in his commentary, in a discussion of Jubilees’ portrayal of Esau. Kugel comments that, although “one would expect that Esau would be presented here [in Jubilees 35] and henceforth in an entirely negative light,” yet “the opposite seems to be true.”<sup>64</sup> Indeed, Esau “pledges his undying love for Jacob” even though he knows that Jacob and his descendants will someday conquer and control his own offspring. Kugel postulates that “the apparent reason for this virtuous side of Esau is that, for *Jubilees*’ author, genealogy is ineluctable (see above on 12:1–8 concerning Terah’s virtue). Esau is the son of the good Isaac and grandson of the even better Abraham; he must have had good instincts.”<sup>65</sup> Kugel, then, seems to suggest that, for the author of Jubilees, virtue—and, indeed, an intuitive rejection of idolatry—is heritable, as it were. Terah, as the father of Abraham (and, ultimately, of the Jewish people) “must” therefore be righteous, and “must” reject, at least on an intellectual level, the transgressive worship practices of his unenlightened neighbors.

Kugel’s hypothesis—that the author of Jubilees had a desire to sanitize, as it were, his own ancient family tree—would certainly explain Terah’s role as an Abraham *avant la lettre*. Yet, does this explanation, that “genealogy is ineluctable,” fit the other data of the narrative? In fact, according to Jubilees, after recounting his arguments against idolatry to Terah, Abraham then “told

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<sup>63</sup> See e.g. Genesis Rabbah 38 and Apocalypse of Abraham 4.

<sup>64</sup> Kugel, *A Walk Through Jubilees*, 170.

<sup>65</sup> Kugel, *A Walk Through Jubilees*, 170.

these things to his two brothers and they became angry at him, [so] he remained silent” (v. 8). In sharp contrast to his father’s concurrence, Abraham’s brothers “became angry”—evidently themselves true devotees of the idols. So too, as Kugel notes, Jubilees 11 states that Abraham’s great-grandfather Serug “was a worshiper of idols” (*Jub.* 11:7) and he instructed his son Nahor, Abraham’s grandfather, in “the studies of the Chaldeans: to practice divination and to augur by the signs of the sky” (*Jub.* 11:8).<sup>66</sup> Kugel’s suggestion of familial “good instincts,” then, may indeed help elucidate Terah’s independent rejection of the idols, but cannot constitute a complete explanation.

Adopting an entirely different approach, Cana Werman attempts to set our narrative in the context of broader social-religious conflicts within Hellenistic Judaism. “It is possible to conjecture,” Werman suggests, “that this [pericope in Jubilees 11–12] is a polemic against the argument which was to be heard in Hellenistic Judaism, according to which there was no need to distance oneself from worship of the gods—and one might even take part in it—insofar as it was nothing.”<sup>67</sup> Some Jews in the Hellenistic period, that is, saw room for a certain accommodation toward the worship of other gods and the reverence of their icons, insofar as these gods and icons, being vain and powerless, could ultimately do no harm, and therefore their worship held no meaning—or threat. On this basis, Werman hypothesizes that “there is then space to consider whether the author of Jubilees is polemicizing not against idolatry, but rather specifically with Jews who imagine that there is no concern with taking part in worship rituals that include worship of idols because there is nothing in them which could harm the worship of the true God.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Kugel comments that “Serug **was a worshiper of idols** and he passed the practice onto his son **Nahor**, Abraham’s grandfather,” Kugel, *A Walk Through Jubilees*, 87.

<sup>67</sup> Werman, *Book of Jubilees*, 274. My translation.

<sup>68</sup> Werman, *Book of Jubilees*, 264. My translation.

Abraham could have claimed, that is, that if the idols are truly powerless chunks of wood and metal, then worshipping them could do no harm. Instead, upon concluding that the idols are nonentities, Abraham adamantly declines to participate in their worship, taking a bold stand against them and even burning down their temple in Jubilees 12:12. Thus “in Jubilees, the elevated status of Abraham is constituted by his refusal to worship idols, *even though he knows there is no truth in them*”<sup>69</sup> and might thus have rationalized his participation in their worship. In sharp contrast, then, to VanderKam and Van Ruiten, Werman maintains that Abraham’s greatness in Jubilees consists not in intellectually *comprehending* the nothingness of the idols, but rather in refusing to bend to social pressure in worshipping them, as did his father Terah.

If this is indeed part of the underlying intellectual tendency of Jubilees, Werman suggests, it may provide an explanation for the author’s ascription of secret anti-idol sentiment to Terah. “Here [in Jubilees 12] the superiority of Terah over his two sons [i.e. Abraham’s brothers] becomes clear, along with another issue. Even though the father [Terah] knows that there is no truth in the gods, his sons [Abraham’s brothers] believe in them” in Jubilees 12:8, as evidenced from their angry rejection of Abraham’s message. Thus, “from the perspective of educating [children], the author of Jubilees argues, proximity to the worship of idols breeds belief.”<sup>70</sup> On this interpretation, then, the author of Jubilees presents Terah as a stand-in for the Jews of his own age: devotees of the one God, but peer-pressured into the worship of idols known to be vain. Though these permissive Jews might not see the danger in yielding to pressure and worshipping chunks of clay and metal—after all, the idols are nothing—their children would bear the consequences and

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<sup>69</sup> Werman, *Book of Jubilees*, 264. My translation. Emphasis added.

<sup>70</sup> Werman, *Book of Jubilees*, 274. My translation.

become true believers, just as did Terah's sons.<sup>71</sup> Terah is a negative example, presented by the author precisely in order to reject that Jewish view which was lenient toward the worship of images as mere harmless nonsense.

Werman's hypothesis here is doubly intriguing, at once explaining Terah's rejection of the idols and simultaneously placing the scene within a Second Temple intellectual context. At least two difficulties, however, call this proposal into question. First, as Werman herself intimates, there is little evidence from within the text of Jubilees itself that the work is in dialogue with the particular issue of what we might call "accommodating monotheism." Framing Jubilees 11–12 within this particular polemic context, therefore, is speculative. Secondly, on Werman's interpretation of Jubilees 11–12 as an attack on "accommodating monotheism," we would expect the brunt of the polemic to target the revelation that Terah in fact secretly rejects the idols and only worships them out of societal pressure; this is precisely the unacceptably lenient monotheism which is purportedly under attack. Instead, once it becomes clear that Terah's idol-worship is performed insincerely, Jubilees itself seems to drop any criticism of Terah altogether. Quite to the contrary: from this point onward, the author seems to do everything possible to turn Terah into the very model of an Israelite patriarch. Without denying Terah's worship of idols—a fixed scriptural datum from Joshua 24:2–3—the author of Jubilees nonetheless disinfects Terah from the stain of genuine devotion to the idols. He also places into Terah's mouth in Jubilees 12:29–31 a long (and,

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<sup>71</sup> Vermes similarly notes in his study of Abraham in post-biblical exegesis that "the author of Jubilees, conscious of the part played by fear in the apostasy of the Jews during the time of the Hellenistic crisis, imputes this emotion to Terah. Admonished by his son to abandon idolatry, which is vain and useless, he [Terah] declares: 'I also know it my son, but what shall I do with a people who have made me to serve before them?'" See Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition*, 84, and cf. the discussion of Vermes' account in Chapter 3 above. Like Werman, then, Vermes places Terah's response within the context of Jewish responses to the pressures of Hellenism. Vermes presumably means to suggest, like Werman, that Terah is intended here as a negative example for Jews reluctantly submitting to icon-worship, but he does not make this claim explicitly.

indeed, theologically normative) farewell blessing to his chosen son and successor in the model of Isaac and Jacob, praying “May the eternal God make your way straight; May the Lord be with you and protect you from every evil; And may no person have power over you to harm you. Go in peace” (*Jub.* 12:29).<sup>72</sup> Terah’s further request in this farewell speech to be brought by his son to the land of Caanan—if it turns out to be “a land that, in your view, is a pleasant one in which to live” (*Jub.* 12:30)—is similarly reminiscent of Jacob and Joseph’s deathbed requests.<sup>73</sup> Werman herself notes furthermore that “the blessing of Terah to Abram hints to the Priestly Blessing” in Numbers 6:23–27.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, the author’s inclusion in Jubilees 12:1 of the fixed call-and-response “Abram said to his father Terah, ‘My father.’ He said, ‘Yes, my son?’” further serves to solidify the identification between Jubilees’ Terah and the Biblical patriarchs.<sup>75</sup> Werman’s read of Terah as a negative example against trends of accommodating monotheism in Hellenistic Judaism, then, seems unpersuasive.

If Terah’s rejection of the idols, then, militates against the uniqueness of Abraham as emphasized by VanderKam and Van Ruiten, but is not sufficiently explained by Kugel’s familial proclivity to virtue or Werman’s polemic against accommodating monotheism, why has the author of Jubilees gone to such lengths to emphasize it?

The answer, we would suggest, is to be found in the Bad Faith Argument. As in the movement from the priests of Baal to the priests of Bel, here too we see a shift in rhetoric concerning the sincerity of transgressive worship. The passion assumed throughout the Hebrew Bible to characterize the worship of other gods and their images has here moved toward a denial

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<sup>72</sup> See Gen 27:28–29 and 48:19–22 for Isaac and Jacob’s parallel blessings to their children.

<sup>73</sup> See Gen 47:29–31 and 50:24–25, though these requests concern posthumously moving the speakers’ bodies to the Land of Caanan, rather than bringing the speaker there himself.

<sup>74</sup> Werman, *Book of Jubilees*, 278. My translation.

<sup>75</sup> See Gen 22:1,7, 27:1,18, and 37:13, as well as Ex 3:4 for a similar example with Moses.

of the idol-worshiper's subjective devotion. This shift, it is true, is certainly not systematic; minor characters like Abraham's brothers and great-grandfather are still portrayed as devoted worshipers of the idols. Yet, as soon as the narrative begins to engage seriously with the subjectivity, the inner devotion, of Terah, the author immediately moves to portray him as secretly devoted to the true God, and to reject the sincerity of his worship of the idols. It is as though, upon stopping to consider the inner life of an idol-worshiper, the author cannot but reject the possibility of the sincerity of their devotion. The author of Jubilees, though accepting the scriptural datum of Terah's idolatry in Joshua 24, undermines the plain sense of that text by creating a division between Terah's public performance of idol-worship and an inner subjectivity in which these practices are, in fact abhorred. Just as in Philo's portrayal of the reluctant worshipers of the Golden Calf, terrified into compliance by the violent madness of the mob, Terah is motivated not by a sincere commitment to the reverence of the icons, but rather by *the fear of persecution*, our second subtype of Bad Faith. Indeed, for the author of Jubilees, this attempt to reject the sincerity of Terah's devotion to icons took precedence not only over the plain sense of Joshua 24, but also over an opportunity to elevate the uniqueness of Abraham as a religious pioneer. Jubilees 12 has taken the Biblical idolater Terah and hollowed out in him an inner space of disbelief. Terah has become a paradigm of Bad Faith.

### **III. The Idol-Maker (Isaiah 44) and the Idol-Breaker (Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael)**

#### **Isaiah 44:12–20**

In Chapter Two, we discussed the in-depth polemic of Isaiah 44 against the crafting and worship of idols. The prophet, attempting to argue for the unique and reliable power of the Israelite God, discredits his feeble opponents, the idols, and those who trust in them:

<sup>12</sup> The craftsman in iron, with his tools,

Works it over charcoal  
 And fashions it by hammering,  
 Working with the strength of his arm.  
 Should he go hungry, his strength would ebb;  
 Should he drink no water, he would grow faint.  
<sup>13</sup> The craftsman in wood measures with a line  
 And marks out a shape with a stylus;  
 He forms it with scraping tools,  
 Marking it out with a compass.  
 He gives it a human form,  
 The beauty of a man, to dwell in a shrine.  
<sup>14</sup> For his use he cuts down cedars;  
 He chooses plane trees and oaks.  
 He sets aside trees of the forest;  
 Or plants firs, and the rain makes them grow.  
<sup>15</sup> All this serves man for fuel:  
 He takes some to warm himself,  
 And he builds a fire and bakes bread.  
 He also makes a god of it and worships it,  
 Fashions an idol and bows down to it!  
<sup>16</sup> Part of it he burns in a fire:  
 On that part he roasts meat,  
 He eats the roast and is sated;  
 He also warms himself and cries, “Ah,  
 I am warm! I can feel the heat!”  
<sup>17</sup> Of the rest he makes a god—his own carving!  
 He bows down to it, worships it;  
 He prays to it and cries,  
 “Save me, for you are my god!”  
<sup>18</sup> They have no wit or judgment:  
 Their eyes are besmeared, and they see not;  
 Their minds, and they cannot think.  
<sup>19</sup> They do not give thought,  
 They lack the wit and judgment to say:  
 “Part of it I burned in a fire;  
 I also baked bread on the coals,  
 I roasted meat and ate it—  
 Should I make the rest an abhorrence?  
 Should I bow to a block of wood?”  
<sup>20</sup> He pursues ashes!  
 A deluded mind has led him astray,  
 And he cannot save himself;  
 He never says to himself,  
 “The thing in my hand is a fraud!”  
 (Isa 44:12–20)



In our analysis in Chapter Two, we discussed this pericope in the context of our broader assessment of biblical passages dealing with the worship of other gods and the reverence of their icons. We contended that in Isaiah 44, just as in the other biblical pericopes we considered, the author makes no attempt to explain the appeal of the transgressive worship being portrayed, but simply *assumes its attractiveness to the imagined idol-worshiper* and, correspondingly, the worshiper's sincerity. Indeed, as we pointed out, the very substance of Second Isaiah's attack here revolves around the ludicrous *earnestness* of the worship. To reiterate Holter's assessment: "This is the ridiculousness of idol-fabrication, as Habakkuk and Second Isaiah sees it. *Human beings trust in what they have managed to make themselves.*"<sup>76</sup> If Isaiah 44 is a deliberate caricature of more sophisticated pagan rites, it is a caricature which in no way questions the worshipers' sincerity.

### **Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael on Exodus 20:2–3**

In the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, we find a narrative of idol-crafting which seems strikingly parallel to that found in Isaiah 44. Yet, more than anything, the correspondences between the two stories serve to highlight the vast conceptual gap between the view of non-Israelite worship presented in Second Isaiah and that of the Rabbis here in the Mekhilta.

Commenting on Exodus 20:2–3 "I the LORD am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage: You shall have no other gods besides Me," the Mekhilta asks, "But are they gods? Has it not been said: 'And have cast their gods into the fire; for they were no gods [but man's handwork of wood and stone]'" (Isa. 37:19)? What then does Scripture mean when it says: 'Other gods'?"<sup>77</sup> In this initial section of the Decalogue, the Mekhilta thus notes, God

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<sup>76</sup> Holter, *Second Isaiah's Idol-Fabrication Passages*, 140. Emphasis added.

<sup>77</sup> Lauterbach, *Mekilta De-Rabbi Ishmael*, 2:319.

seems not only to describe rivals, but in fact to describe them as *other gods*. The rabbinic authors of the Mekhilta, however, take it for granted that there are no other gods, and bring a proof to this effect from Isaiah 37, “for they were no gods but man’s handwork of wood and stone.”<sup>78</sup> If the “other gods” of whom God speaks, then, are not really gods, why does the verse “You shall have no other *gods* besides Me” use such provocatively misleading language?

R. Eliezer proposes one of a number of explanations offered for this seemingly problematic word-choice:

R. Eliezer says: *Other Gods*—For every day they [idolaters] make for themselves new gods. How so? If one [an idolater] has an idol of gold and then needs the gold, he makes the idol of silver. If he has one of silver and then needs the silver, he makes the idol of copper [היה לו של זהב וצריך לו היה לו של כסף וצריך לו של כסף וצריך לו עשאו של נחשת]. If he has an idol of copper and needs the copper, he makes it of iron. And so also with one of tin and so also with one of lead, as it is said “New gods that came newly up.” (Deut. 32.17)<sup>79</sup>

The idol-maker constructs the statue out of gold, but when he has need of the gold, he melts it down for his own purposes and re-crafts it out of whatever lesser substance may be on hand—silver, copper, or even mere lead.

R. Eliezer’s narrative revolves around interpreting the theologically difficult verse “you shall have no *other gods* besides me” through the lens of a verse found elsewhere in the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy 32:17:

They [the Israelites] sacrificed to demons, no-gods,  
Gods they had never known,

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<sup>78</sup> See also the discussion of this section of the Mekhilta in Noam Zohar, “Idolatry, Idols, and their Annulment,” *Sidra: A Journal for the Study of Rabbinic Literature* (2001–2002), 66. Note that the interpretation of Ex 20:2 through the lens of Isa 37:19 seems to assume without argumentation that the “other gods” to whom God refers in Ex 20:2 are physical idols, “man’s handwork of wood and stone.”

<sup>79</sup> Lauterbach, *Mekilta De-Rabbi Ishmael*, 2: 320. Note that, as in the Mekhilta’s juxtaposition of Ex 20:2 and Isa 37:19, R. Eliezer’s interpretation of Deut 32:17 assumes that the “other gods” under discussion are idols. Compare the parallel discussion in Sifre Deuteronomy sub vers. Deut 11:16.

New ones, who came but lately,  
Who stirred not your fathers' fears.

Like our verse in Exodus 20, Deuteronomy 32:17, which we analyzed in Chapter 3 above in the context of its interpretation in the Sifre Deuteronomy, appears to describe entities apart from the Israelite God as “gods.” Unlike the verse in Exodus 20, however, which seems to leave open the irking possibility that these “other gods besides me” may actually exist, this verse in Deuteronomy 32 makes it painfully clear that these gods are “no-gods.” R. Eliezer, perhaps noting the apparent redundancy between “new” and “came but lately” (חדשים מקרוב באו) chooses to interpret the word “lately” (מקרוב) in the physical—rather than temporal—sense of “from close by.” The gods who are “no-gods” here in Deuteronomy 32 are interpreted as idols, the fact that they are “new” (חדשים) is interpreted as meaning that they are constantly being remade anew by their worshipers, and that they “come from close by” (מקרוב באו) is read to mean that they are thrown together from the bits, lying around, of the old idol which has just been scrapped for parts. Thus the rather enigmatic statement that these “no-gods” are “new” and “came from close by” comes to indicate the above narrative in which an idol-maker constantly creates *new* idols on the basis of materials that are *already close by*, thus resolving the apparent pleonasm between “new” and “but lately” (חדשים מקרוב).<sup>80</sup> The Mekhilta, taking R. Eliezer’s interpretation of the “gods” in

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<sup>80</sup> Considered closely, R. Eliezer’s interpretation on its own seems to make no attempt to explain the apparently problematic description of “other gods.” In fact, only with great difficulty can one discern any connection between R. Eliezer’s *midrash* and the verse to which the Mekhilta attaches it. Rather than explaining the word “other” in the phrase “other gods,” it would seem that R. Eliezer’s brief vignette is directed entirely toward explaining a word “new” found nowhere in the verse in question. Perhaps, we might suggest, R. Eliezer’s midrash was intended originally as an interpretation of Judg 5:8, “When they *chose new gods* [אלוהים חדשים], Was there a fighter then in the gates? No shield or spear was seen Among forty thousand in Israel!” Explaining this “choosing” of “new gods,” R. Eliezer suggests that idolaters ‘every day... make [מחדשים] for themselves new gods’ because, constantly re-appropriating the materials from which their idols are made, they are forced to recraft their idols each day from other supplies. R. Eliezer then connects this with Deut 32:17, “They sacrificed to demons, no-gods, Gods they had never known,

Deuteronomy 32:17, *reapplies* it to the mention of “other gods” in Exodus 20:2 to conclude that there, as well, the “other gods” about whom the verse speaks are mere pieces of wood and not, of course, true divine beings.

As in our pericope from Isaiah, we find here a polemical, narrative account of the idol-maker and his craft. Yet note, despite clear thematic similarities, how the argumentative aims of the Mekhilta and our text from Second Isaiah differ. While the prophet in Isaiah 44 is concerned to evangelize on behalf of the unique power of the LORD, our discussion from the Mekhilta does not appear to expend any effort toward this end. Quite to the contrary, it dismisses the possibility of the existence of other gods with one quick verse from Isaiah 37, “for they are not gods, but man’s handwork of wood and stone,” and then moves on as though the falsehood of rival gods and their worship has been fully and satisfactorily demonstrated. Unlike Isaiah 44, the goal of the Mekhilta here is not to stigmatize the worship of other gods, but rather to reconcile the apparently problematic *scriptural* phrasing “other gods” in Exodus 20 with the established and secure fact that no other gods exist. Isaiah 44 seeks to justify God; the Mekhilta seeks to justify the text.

More important for our purposes than the argumentative aims of the two texts, however, are their implicit understandings of the subjectivity of the idol worshiper. In chapter one, we sought to demonstrate how secondary literature which deals with Jewish attitudes toward gentile religion in antiquity trends overwhelmingly toward a focus on the normative and evaluative, and suggested that such a focus obscured the descriptive material, in many cases more revealing of Jewish

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*New ones, who came but lately, Who stirred not your fathers’ fears.”* He thus paints a picture of the idol maker’s lackluster commitment to these Johnny-come-lately gods. If this analysis is correct, then it is only through the Mekhilta’s redeployment of R. Eliezer’s midrash as a comment on the Decalogue that the interpretation takes on the function of sanitizing the phrasing of Exodus 20:2. On the redeployment of a midrash initially crafted for a different context, see James Kugel, “Two Introductions to Midrash,” *Prooftexts* 3:2 (1983), 150–51 and cf. Kugel, *In Potiphar’s House*, 255–56.

attitudes and frankly more interesting, which is also often to be found in ancient Jewish discussions of pagan religion. Saul Lieberman's discussion of our midrash—or, rather, of a parallel version of our midrash in the *amoraic* Deuteronomy Rabbah—in his seminal *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* presents a clear example of this obfuscating concentration on the normative. Lieberman comments:

The Rabbis occasionally dramatize the abuse of the idols [by the idolaters] *available in the Prophets*, relatively in the *same spirit* which is predominant in the *Epistle of Jeremy*. A typical example of it is contained in *Debarim Rabbah*. The rabbis portray a poor man ordering a wooden idol from the artisan... The *Midrash* goes on further to depict the plight of a poor man who replaces his gold idol with one of silver, of copper, of wood until the final *denouement*. 'The man had nothing to eat; he had to [bake] a fourth of a *kab* of flour...he took the axe, cleft the idol, built a fire with one half of it and worshipped the other half, as it is said (Is. 44:16–17): 'He burneth the half thereof in the fire...And the residue thereof he maketh a god.'<sup>81</sup>

In Lieberman's assessment, then, the polemics focusing on "the abuse of the idols" by the idolaters, whether found in rabbinic literature, the biblical prophets, or the Epistle of Jeremiah, all fundamentally proceed "in the same spirit." Lieberman proceeds to observe that "Clement of Alexandria made fun of the idols in a similar way." Yet whereas the Church Fathers relied heavily on Greco-Roman literature, mythology, and Homeric epic in their ridicule, "*the rabbinic satire is only a literary elaboration of the Bible*," and as such "the Rabbis failed to utilize the latter [Homer's mythology] in their scoffs at idolatry."<sup>82</sup> So slavishly did they cling to the precedents of

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<sup>81</sup> Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine*, 116–17. Some emphasis added. In the section of Deuteronomy Rabbah quoted by Lieberman, the portion most relevant to us states "ואם צריך אותו והעני אומי מה זה של זהב עושה אותו של כסף ושל כסף עושה אותו של נחשת. אלא הריני מוכרו ומתפרנס בחציו. שוב העני אומי מה זה של נחשת עושה אותו של עץ. אלא הריני מוכרו ואתפרנס ממנו ועושה תחתיו של עץ וכי" See Saul Lieberman ed. *Midrash Devarim Rabah* (Jerusalem : Sifre Vahrman, 1974), 56.

<sup>82</sup> Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine*, 117–18. Emphasis added. According to Lieberman, the Rabbis did not utilize Homeric mythology in their polemics "because they probably knew that their gentile neighbors themselves treated them as mere fairy tales." See Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine*, 118. On the complicated question of ancient "belief" in Greco-Roman mythology, see Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths: An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination*, trans. Paula Wissing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). Veyne's important question about the epistemological status of *myth* in the ancient world, however, should not be confused with the distinct issue of devotion to the traditional Olympian *gods*. On the latter question, see the discussion of Urbach and Lane Fox in Chapter Three above.

biblical polemic, that is, that they passed up even the golden opportunity to ridicule the gods which their debaucherous portrayal in Homer presented.

Note the effect of Lieberman's normative focus on the conclusion which he draws. The material under consideration is, like Clement, an attempt to make "fun of the idols," it is a "satire," and a set of "scoffs at idolatry." In its function as mockery, as denigration, it indeed stands in total continuity with the polemics "available in the Prophets" of the Hebrew Bible, and is just a mere "literary elaboration" of them. The biblical prophets, the Epistle of Jeremiah, and Deuteronomy Rabba, insofar as they are all attempts to *ridicule* idolatry, are all fundamentally of a piece.

When, however, we attempt to break free of this normative myopia, and instead shift our mode of inquiry to the descriptive understanding of the Other which these passages imply, we see that, for all its resemblance to the prophets, the substance of the polemic here in the Mekhilta—or in its parallel in Deuteronomy Rabba—is the exact *opposite* of that which we find in Isaiah 44. In Isaiah, the idol-maker is ridiculous precisely because of the *sincerity* of his belief in the idol. Even though he himself cut down the tree to harvest the wood, even though he himself hurled half of that very wood into the fire and from the leftovers his own hands fashioned the figure, he still forgets, fails to comprehend, the materiality of the statue which he has crafted. The exclusive worship of the Israelite God is the only real option, contends the prophet, because the alternative is so extreme and deluded, so distant from the realm of rationality *in its genuine belief in the power of a mere statue*, that it merits no consideration.

In the Mekhilta, however, it is precisely the *insincerity* of the idol-maker which forms the substance of the critique. The idol-maker has no genuine respect for his god—he is entirely aware of its dumb materiality, to such an extent that, in a moment of need, he will sacrifice the idol itself in order to reclaim its physical substance, and simply innovate for himself a cheaper substitute.

Could we say of R. Eliezer's idol-maker what the prophet said of his, that "they lack the wit and judgment to say: 'Part of it I burned in a fire... Should I make the rest a god? Should I bow to a block of wood?'"<sup>83</sup> Surely not. The idol-maker in the Mekhilta understands, just as R. Eliezer does, that the idol is a mere hunk of metal, and the staccato tone of the narrative, more literally translated as "he had [one] of gold and needs it, he made it of silver, he had [one] of silver and needs it, he made it of copper," serves to emphasize literarily the dismissive attitude of the idol-maker to the statue.<sup>84</sup>

In his discussion of the pericope of the idol-maker in Isaiah 44, Claus Westermann notes that the anonymous prophetic author "does not express any surprise he may feel that 'it does not occur' to the manufacturer of idols that he terribly misunderstands the majesty and holiness of the god."<sup>85</sup> In other words, suggests Westermann, because the worship of the idol-maker is, as portrayed in Isaiah 44, so self-evidently erroneous, we might have expected Second Isaiah to register some surprise at it, or to provide some attempt at explaining it. Note however, despite the thematic similarity between Isaiah 44 and our selection from the Mekhilta, how little such a concern could apply to the latter. Though a tone of surprise is similarly absent in the Mekhilta, absent as well is the "misunderstand[ing]" which should have prompted surprise or comment in the first place. The idolater's subjectivity, his understanding, has in essence *been brought into consonance with that of the Jewish author*, and thus is not bizarre or incongruous enough to demand explanation. The idolater here is perfectly aware that the idol is, fundamentally, a chunk of material. Indeed, he is so aware of this fact that he is willing to scrap his icon for parts whenever

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<sup>83</sup> Lit. "an abhorrence."

<sup>84</sup> Cf. also Gen 25:34 for a similar literary intimation of indifference through the staccato repetition of verbs.

<sup>85</sup> Westermann, *Isaiah*, 151.

the need should arise, and does so cavalierly, and with regularity. Just as in the Epistle of Jeremiah in our taxonomy, then, in which the Babylonian priests steal the clothes off their own gods' backs, we have here an example of "carelessness and disesteem," our third subtype of the Bad Faith Argument. By demonstrating the idolater's flippant and degrading behavior toward his own purported sancta, the midrash undermines the sincerity of his worship. At the same time, this text from the Mekhilta seems to partake of the fourth subtype of Bad Faith, "tenuous commitment," as well. The idolater is sufficiently invested in his icon to recreate it, but his commitment only holds as long as he has no need of its metals; the moment that his own welfare is at stake, he unceremoniously sacrifices his idol. Like Isaiah 44, the Mekhilta's portrayal here is polemical and satirical, and perhaps deliberately mischaracterizes the worship it depicts. Yet, caricature or not, the substance of this polemic is precisely the opposite of that in Isaiah 44. In total discontinuity with the biblical portrayal, the worship of the idolater here is utterly unserious.

### **Conclusion**

In Chapter 2 above, we laid out a pattern which, we argued, consistently characterized Biblical portrayals of the worship of other gods and the reverence of their statues; without exception, we suggested, such worship was assumed to be sincere—or at least its sincerity was never questioned—and no attempt was made to explain its appeal. In Chapter 3, we noted that, while this consistent biblical view continued into the subsequent Jewish literature of the Second Temple and tannaitic periods, a new perspective emerged and began to compete alongside it, one which impugned the sincerity of such worship. In this chapter, we have attempted to put such a schema to the test. By directly comparing three biblical scenes with thematically similar pericopes from mid-Second Temple and tannaitic literature, we have shown how biblical assumptions of what we might call "genuine idolatry" morphed in many cases into an portrayal of Bad Faith. The



passionate dervishes of Baal in 1 Kings 18, eagerly awaiting the salvation of their god, stand in total discontinuity with the devious clergy in Bel and the Dragon, manipulating the naïve king for the sake of financial gain. The Terah of Joshua 24, to whom the worship of other gods is simply ascribed without psychological elaboration, is transformed in Jubilees into a paradigm of Bad Faith, innerly aware of the futility of the icons, but coerced into their public worship by his fear of persecution. And the idol-maker of Isaiah 44, ludicrous precisely for his sincere devotion to the work of his hands, becomes the recycler of the Mekhilta, melting down his own god for spare parts and replicating him out of cheaper material; surely the worshiper of Isaiah 44 would be scandalized at his successor in the Mekhilta.

## Chapter 5—Mishnah ‘*Abodah Zarah* 3:4 and the Bad Faith Argument

In *m. ‘Abodah Zarah* 3:4, we encounter a complex dialogue between the leading Jewish sage Rabban Gamliel and a gentile Greek, resident in the Land of Israel, named Proclus:

Proclus the son of Philosophos asked a question of Rabban Gamliel in Acre when he was bathing in the bathhouse of Aphrodite. He said to him, “It is written in your Torah: *Let nothing of the idolatry stick to your hand* [Deut 13:18]. Why [then] are you bathing in the bathhouse of Aphrodite?”

He responded to him, “One may not respond in a bathhouse.”

And when he exited, he said to him, “I did not come into her domain, she came into my domain.” “One does not say ‘Let us make the bathhouse for Aphrodite as an adornment,’ but rather one says ‘Aphrodite herself is made as an adornment for the bathhouse.’”

Another interpretation: If they were to give to you much money, you would not enter into [the house of] your idol naked and after a seminal emission and urinate in front of it, but this one stands next to the canal and all the people urinate in front of it. It says only [in the instructions to destroy items and places associated with prohibited worship in Deut 7:25 and 12:2–3] ‘their gods’—that toward which one behaves in a manner befitting a god is prohibited; that toward which one does not behave in a manner befitting a god is allowed.

(*m. ‘Abodah Zarah* 3:4)<sup>1</sup>

In line with a frequent rabbinic trope, our mishnah here ascribes to a gentile—in this case, Proclus the son of Philosophos—an intimate familiarity with Jewish scripture and perhaps even elements of its rabbinic interpretation.<sup>2</sup> On the basis of this knowledge, the gentile Proclus issues

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<sup>1</sup> My translation on the basis of Chanoch Albeck, *Shishah Sidre Mishnah* vol. 4 (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1959), 333. Line-breaks and punctuation altered. Though mss. Kaufmann, Cambridge, and Parma read “if they were to give you much money, you *would* enter into the house of your idol [אתה נכנס]” contextually it seems clear that this is intended as a negation (perhaps in the form of a rhetorical question) rather than an affirmation. Albeck, as well as the mishnah as it appears in *b. ‘Abodah Zarah* 44b in the Vilna, Venice, Pizarro and Munich 95, has “you would *not* enter [אי אתה נכנס].” On the identification of the questioner’s father as “פלוספוס” rather than “פלסלוס” or “פלוסלוס,” see Abraham Wasserstein, “Rabban Gamliel and Proclus the Philosopher,” *Zion* 45:4 (1980), 257 (though Wasserstein, 258 proposes correcting “Philosophos” to a description of Proclus himself rather than the name of his father). Albeck reads the mishnah to state that the bathhouse was *na’ăšâ* but I have translated it instead as the object of *na’ăšê*, though in context this is perhaps a distinction without a difference. On the meaning of חרם (translated here as “idolatry”) in the Bible, see *BDB*, 356. For its use in Second Temple and rabbinic literature, see Moshe Benovitz, *Kol Nidre: Studies in the Development of Rabbinic Votive Institutions* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 69–109.

<sup>2</sup> On Proclus as a gentile, see Albeck, *Shishah Sidre Mishnah* vol. 4, 333.



is, is in some sense prior to that of Aphrodite, and the prohibiting verse does not require him to discontinue that pre-existing affiliation when the idolatrous object is introduced.<sup>5</sup>

Second, he adds, “One does not say ‘Let us make the bathhouse for Aphrodite as an adornment,’ but rather one says ‘Aphrodite herself is made as an adornment for the bathhouse.’” Aphrodite’s presence, on this view, is not only secondary to Rabban Gamliel’s own presence, but also secondary *to the bathhouse itself*.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, whereas in his first answer Rabban Gamliel only addressed the issue of chronological priority (i.e. “she came into my domain”) here Rabban Gamliel adds also the element of *intent*. Aphrodite’s presence is not only subsequent to his own, but now also subservient or instrumental *in the intent of the builders* of the bath. Aphrodite’s very affiliation with the bathhouse is, from the perspective of the gentiles who introduced her presence, merely a decorative means toward the glorification of the bathhouse itself. She is an afterthought.

Lastly, the Mishnah adds “another interpretation,” declaring that:

Another interpretation: If they were to give to you much money, you would not enter into [the house of] your idol naked and after a seminal emission and urinate in front of it, but this one stands next to the canal and all the people urinate in front of it. It says only [in the instructions to destroy items and places associated with prohibited worship in Deut 7:25 and 12:2–3] ‘their gods’—that toward which one behaves in a manner befitting a god is prohibited; that toward which one does not behave in a manner befitting a god is allowed.

This third argument abandons altogether the issue of priority and posteriority which were at work in the first two arguments and instead focuses in entirety on the criterion of subjective intent which Rabban Gamliel introduced in the second argument. In that argument, the Aphrodite of the bathhouse was excluded from the category of prohibited idolatry because the *initial* intent

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<sup>5</sup> On the interpretive difficulties surrounding R. Gamliel’s first and second statements—in particular concerning their connection to the rest of the mishnah and their sufficiency as a response to Proclus—see Azzan Yadin, “Rabban Gamliel, Aphrodite’s Bath, and the Question of Pagan Monotheism,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 96:2 (2006), 162–65.

<sup>6</sup> Albeck explains the argument as claiming that the statue of Aphrodite was a “תכשיט למרחץ, נמצא”  
המרחץ עיקר ופסל אפרודיטי טפל.” See Albeck, *Shishah Sidre Mishnah*, 333.

in introducing her was merely instrumental toward the beautification of the establishment. Here, the Mishnah takes the argument of intent a step further: genuinely prohibited idolatry must be characterized by an *ongoing attitude* of reverence. Here, however, the dismissive—and even disgusting—behavior of the gentiles toward the statue of Aphrodite demonstrates that their intent toward the icon is too frivolous to warrant prohibition. “This one [statue of Aphrodite] stands next to the canal and all the people urinate in front of it.”

This mishnah, with its exceptional portrait of Jewish-Gentile confrontation, has brought on a flood of academic interpretations. As early as 1959 Ephraim Urbach relied on the principle articulated in the mishnah at issue (among other rabbinic texts) that “that toward which one behaves in a manner befitting a god is prohibited; that toward which one does not behave in a manner befitting a god is allowed” to argue that the Rabbis recognized an emic Greco-Roman distinction between ornamental statuary and idolatrous statuary.<sup>7</sup> “There were gentiles,” Urbach states, “who made idolatrous objects, but did not worship them and did not intend them to worship any god.”<sup>8</sup> It was upon this internal pagan theological distinction between devotional and non-devotional statuary, according to Urbach, that the Rabbis ultimately based the concept of “*biṭṭul*” or “desecration” of gentile statuary; because gentiles themselves recognized a category of merely

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<sup>7</sup> Urbach, “The Rabbinical Laws,” (1959), 230. Urbach cites this principle from its parallel appearance in *t. ‘Abod. Zar. 6:2* (not connected there to the narrative of R. Gamliel in the Bathhouse) rather than from our mishnah directly.

<sup>8</sup> Urbach, “The Rabbinical Laws,” (1959), 230. Cf. also Sacha Stern’s survey of rabbinic discussions of pagan images—among them our mishnah—in which he points out that “the distinction between worshiped figures and decorative figures was not simply halachic and theoretical,” but rather that “this distinction existed in practice in the ancient pagan world.” See Sacha Stern, “Figurative Art and Halakha in the Mishnaic-Talmudic Period,” *Zion* 61:4 (1996), 403. My translation. So too Ishay Rosen-Zvi states that such distinctions “are not a creation ex nihilo of the Jewish study hall” as “the distinction between worshiped and non-worshiped images in the mishnah was accepted in Roman culture” itself. See Ishay Rosen-Zvi, “Thou Shalt Surely Destroy All the Places,” *Reishit* 1 (2009), 111. My translation.

decorative statuary, they could symbolically spurn a pagan religious icon in such a way as to transfer it from the category of the idolatrous to the category of the ornamental.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the “possibility of an idol’s being desecrated by a Gentile offered ample scope for easing the restrictions on Jewish economic life and particularly on business relations with the gentiles” by facilitating Jewish trade in statues and similar materials now understood to be merely decorative. “This was presumably the fundamental purpose of the lenient rabbinical ruling” toward gentile statuary.<sup>10</sup>

Yaron Eliyav, meanwhile, as part of a broader study of the Jewish relationship to the classical bathhouse, analyzes ancient Greco-Roman conceptions of baths and puts Jewish responses—including our mishnah—within this historical context. Eliyav points out, for example, that the Romans did in fact distinguish between consecrated and non-consecrated sites;<sup>11</sup> that from the Roman perspective “the bathhouse was, in the eyes of all... a non-consecrated institution;”<sup>12</sup> and that “there were no ritual practices in connection with the baths’ statues, sacrifices were not offered, and religious ceremonies were not conducted there.”<sup>13</sup> At the same time, Eliyav concedes that “the many inscriptions unearthed in bath-houses... demonstrate the abundant spirituality that

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<sup>9</sup> Urbach, “The Rabbinical Laws,” (1959), 230.

<sup>10</sup> Urbach, “The Rabbinical Laws,” (1959), 233. Perhaps “de-sacralization” would capture the sense of the rabbinic “ביטול” better than Urbach’s “desecration.” For a criticism of Urbach’s economic argument, see Christine Hayes, *Between the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds: Accounting for Halakhic Difference in Selected Sugyot from Tractate Avodah Zarah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 61–62, and cf. Hayes, 166–69.

<sup>11</sup> Yaron Eliyav, “Two Comments on Idolatry in the Roman Bath House,” *Cathedra: For the History of Eretz Israel and Its Yishuv* 110 (2003), 175. My translation.

<sup>12</sup> Eliyav, “Two Comments on Idolatry,” 176.

<sup>13</sup> Yaron Eliyav, “The Roman Bath as a Jewish Institution,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period* 31:4 (2000), 431.

was intrinsic to the baths,” and that therefore the “religious status” of the statues there is not “clear-cut.”<sup>14</sup>

Azzan Yadin, juxtaposing this mishnah with a similar encounter in the Mekhilta, argues that Rabban Gamliel is in direct dialogue with the Neoplatonic philosophy of Plotinus (204/5–270 C.E.). On Yadin’s interpretation, Plotinus disparaged Greek civil religion, sacrifices to pagan gods, and idolatry, and even flirted with “practical atheism”—that is, “the refusal to participate in popular cults.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, when asked to accompany one of his disciples to a sacrificial festival for the pagan gods, Plotinus purportedly responded that “it is they who should come to me, not I to them.”<sup>16</sup> Yadin sees in this statement a direct source for Rabban Gamliel’s claim in the Mishnah that “I did not come into her [Aphrodite’s] domain, [but rather] she came into my domain.” According to Yadin, Rabban Gamliel takes Proclus’ criticism, based on the Jews’ Torah, about fraternizing with idols and turns it back on Proclus by quoting to him *Plotinus’* low opinion of idols—Plotinus, who is one of the great luminaries of the Greek philosophy of the era. Key sages from within Proclus’ own Greek philosophical thought-world, that is to say, discourage engagement with idols just as much as does Rabban Gamliel’s Torah. “By alluding to Plotinus’s statement,” contends Yadin, “Rabban Gamliel places the ball back in the philosopher’s court.”<sup>17</sup> Yadin, thus interpreting *m. ‘Abodah Zarah* 3:4 through the lens of Plotinus, avers that “it is true

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<sup>14</sup> Eliyav, “The Roman Bath,” 432. Emmanuel Friedheim, by contrast, argues that the Roman bathhouse and its statues could often function as a religious space, and that “against the background of the devotional aspect of the Roman bathhouse... we may cast doubt on whether the words of Rabban Gamliel to Proclus in fact match the prevailing socio-religious reality in the bathhouse in Acre and the surrounding pagan world.” See Emmanuel Friedheim, “Rabban Gamliel and the Bathhouse of Aphrodite in Akko: A Study of Eretz-Israel Realia in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Centuries CE,” *Kathedra* 105 (2002), 26. My translation.

<sup>15</sup> Yadin, “Rabban Gamliel,” 171, quoting Mark Edwards.

<sup>16</sup> Yadin, “Rabban Gamliel,” 170.

<sup>17</sup> Yadin, “Rabban Gamliel,” 170.

that Deuteronomy can be interpreted in a way that prohibits a sage's presence in Aphrodite's bathhouse. But the philosopher is hardly in a better position, since his own philosophical tradition is critical of statues and sacrifice—the key elements of popular pagan religion.”<sup>18</sup>

Yair Furstenberg, meanwhile, analyzes our mishnah through the lens of the rabbinic concept of *biṭṭul*, the gentiles' nullification of their own idols. Seeking an aetiology for this rabbinic concept in the pagan world itself, he locates the origin of *biṭṭul* in the Roman custom of *damnatio memoriae*, in which a “symbolic infliction of damage on the statue” of a hated emperor serves to “nullify... [his] memory” after his death.<sup>19</sup> On the basis of this Roman ritual vandalism, Furstenberg argues that “when the rabbis at the end of the Tannaitic period presented the possibility of nullifying idolatry by means of defacement, they were not creating a new halakhic norm that would now be applied to gentiles but, rather, were referencing a practice, common in their milieu, that was used to ‘erase’ the memory of rulers through the defacement of their statues and images.”<sup>20</sup> For Furstenberg, then, *biṭṭul*, the rabbinic concept of gentile nullification of idols, is essentially the Roman idea of *damnatio memoriae* in Jewish clothing.

Furstenberg then seeks to apply this new understanding of the concept of nullification of idols to the mishnah under consideration. He first notes that Proclus' interrogation of Rabban Gamliel's presence in the bathhouse “assumes that Aphrodite is indeed considered (by him) [i.e. by Proclus] as having idolatrous standing.”<sup>21</sup> As such, “at first glance it seems that Rabban

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<sup>18</sup> Yadin, “Rabban Gamliel,” 170–71. On the literary structures and possible philosophical connections of this narrative and parallel pericopes in Tannaitic literature, see also Luitpold Wallach, “A Palestinian Polemic Against Idolatry: A Study in Rabbinic Literary Forms,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 19 (1945–46), 389–97.

<sup>19</sup> Yair Furstenberg, “The Rabbinic View of Idolatry and the Roman Political Conception of Divinity,” *The Journal of Religion* 90:3 (2010), 345.

<sup>20</sup> Furstenberg, “The Rabbinic View of Idolatry,” 347.

<sup>21</sup> Furstenberg, “The Rabbinic View of Idolatry,” 358.



Gamliel's response is paradoxical."<sup>22</sup> Proclus has himself, by his very inquiry to Rabban Gamliel, demonstrated that he sees the bathhouse as somehow religious in nature. "How then," Furstenberg asks, "can Rabban Gamliel argue that 'you yourself do not consider this to be an idol, as can be seen from your behavior?'"<sup>23</sup> Indeed, he inquires, "can the Mishna really ignore the explicitly stated perspective of the non-Jew and define on his behalf what is considered in his eyes to be real idolatry?"<sup>24</sup>

Furstenberg attempts to resolve this seeming tension by rearticulating Rabban Gamliel's response as a critique of paganism *from within a pagan framework*. On Furstenberg's understanding, our mishnah "is actually based on a familiarity with the same pagan outlook that lies behind the law of nullification of idolatry"—namely, the Roman practice of *damnatio memoriae*.<sup>25</sup> Rabban Gamliel deploys this pagan notion of *damnatio memoriae*, simply rephrased in rabbinic literature as *biṭṭul*, to point out an internal inconsistency in the behavior of Proclus and his fellow pagans, one which unfolds from within the pagans' own theological thought-world: the pagans' purported devotion to the statue seems precisely undermined by an almost *damnatio*-esque treatment of the Aphrodite statue. "Thus," Furstenberg concludes, "the answer given to Proclus" in this mishnah, "like the law regarding the nullification of idolatry... indeed correlate to the way in which paganism was understood among its adherents."<sup>26</sup> For Furstenberg, the rabbinic concept of *biṭṭul*, of desecration, reproduces an internal Roman concept of *damnatio memoriae*, and it is this authentic Roman concept which Rabban Gamliel deploys in his response to Proclus. "Rabban

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<sup>22</sup> Furstenberg, "The Rabbinic View of Idolatry," 358.

<sup>23</sup> Furstenberg, "The Rabbinic View of Idolatry," 358.

<sup>24</sup> Furstenberg, "The Rabbinic View of Idolatry," 358.

<sup>25</sup> Furstenberg, "The Rabbinic View of Idolatry," 359.

<sup>26</sup> Furstenberg, "The Rabbinic View of Idolatry," 359.

Gamliel bases his permitting of bathing” on the “point of view...of the gentile,”<sup>27</sup> on the very “same feature of paganism of his time that is expressed in the defacement of sculptures of the emperor.”<sup>28</sup>

Despite their differences, we can see that this wide range of scholarly explanations all proceed from one common assumption: that our mishnah—and the character of Rabban Gamliel which it presents—draws upon real concepts, practices, and ideas from within Greco-Roman culture. Be it the distinction between ornamental and sacral for Urbach, the historical religious status of the Greco-Roman bathhouse itself for Eliyav, the citation and engagement with Greek philosophical texts for Yadin, or the Roman practice of *damnatio memoriae* for Furstenberg, scholars have consistently assumed that our mishnah presents a perspective which is genuinely to be found in the pagan world which it confronts—that it in some way accepts the pagan understanding of the sacred and then *reflects* that understanding back.<sup>29</sup>

In the context of our broader discussion of Bad Faith, we would suggest that a key element of this mishnah’s stance toward pagan culture has been overlooked by these approaches: the element not of *reflection* but rather of *projection*. Though the mishnah concedes from the outset that this bathhouse is considered—evidently by the pagans themselves—to be in some sense “of Aphrodite,” and though Proclus—a pagan himself—considers the institution sufficiently

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<sup>27</sup> Furstenberg, “The Rabbinic View of Idolatry,” 357.

<sup>28</sup> Furstenberg, “The Rabbinic View of Idolatry,” 359.

<sup>29</sup> Arguably, even Seth Schwartz’s determination that the Mishnah engages in “misprision” or “misinterpretation” (whether intentional or otherwise) of the pagan understanding of religion still assumes that the actual internal perspective of the historical pagan is the issue of primary importance against which to measure and compare rabbinic portrayals of the other. See Seth Schwartz, “The Rabbi in Aphrodite’s bath: Palestinian society and Jewish identity in the High Roman Empire,” in Simon Goldhill ed. *Being Greek Under Rome: Cultural Identity, the Second Sophistic and the Development of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 346, 356–57.

connected with the goddess that it ought to present a problem for a Jewish attendee, Rabban Gamliel—and our mishnah along with him—*rejects the relevance of the testimony of the pagans themselves* in determining whether the bathhouse fits the category of “idolatry [חרם].”<sup>30</sup> The mishnah, that is, assumes internal Jewish understandings of devotion and worship and then *projects* these on to the pagans in order to determine whether the statue must be considered idolatrous. It is on this internal Jewish basis that Rabban Gamliel *rejects*, at least in regard to the Bathhouse of Aphrodite, the sincerity of the pagans’ own religious devotion.

Furstenberg asks, “Can the Mishna really ignore the explicitly stated perspective of the non-Jew and define on his behalf what is considered in his eyes to be real idolatry?”<sup>31</sup> In fact, we would suggest, this is *exactly* what the mishnah seeks to do. Ultimately, our mishnah does not care what the “correct” opinion of the gentiles entails. Our mishnah is not interested in investigating them, in interviewing native informants and elucidating their own emic categories like an anthropologist; frankly, it would be quite surprising if it were. Furstenberg’s attempt to desecrate within the narrative a reference to the internal Roman category of *damnatio memoriae*, while intriguing, cannot save us from this conclusion. Not only, as Furstenberg himself notes, does our mishnah lack any explicit reference to *biṭṭul* (and thus, for Furstenberg, to the internal pagan category of *damnatio memoriae*) but, what is more, the characteristic examples of *biṭṭul* are laid out clearly in the very next chapter of *m. ‘Abodah Zarah* itself, and none of them are to be found in our pericope:<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Friedheim too points out that “Proclus the gentile, who almost certainly knew all too well how to evaluate the degree of religiousness of the statue of Aphrodite which stood in the bathhouse, was surprised to see Rabban Gamliel bathing in the bathhouse of Aphrodite.” See Friedheim, “Rabban Gamliel,” 26. My translation.

<sup>31</sup> Furstenberg, “The Rabbinic View of Idolatry,” 358.

<sup>32</sup> See Furstenberg, “The Rabbinic View of Idolatry,” 355.

How does one perform *biṭṭul* on it [an icon]? If he cut off the tip of its ear, or the tip of its nose, or the tip of its finger, or flattened it, even if he did not remove material from it, it is considered *biṭṭul*. (m. 'Abodah Zarah 4:5)<sup>33</sup>

And, indeed, that same mishnah goes on to declare explicitly that:

If he spit in its face, *or urinated in front of it*, or dragged it, or threw feces on it, *it is not considered desecrated* [הרי זו אינה בטילה]. (m. 'Abodah Zarah 4:5)<sup>34</sup>

Urination in front of the icon, the very action in our mishnah which would seem to be the clearest candidate for *biṭṭul* (and thus, on Furstenberg's read, *damnatio memoriae*) is explicitly rejected as a form of *biṭṭul* in the selfsame tractate of the Mishnah. *Biṭṭul* must thus be considered an implausible lens for understanding our mishnah, and it would seem at least unwieldy to posit, as Furstenberg seems to propose in places, that multiple and incompatible instantiations of *damnatio memoriae* circulate simultaneously in tannaitic literature, some of which are reflected in the notion of *biṭṭul* and other, contradictory ones in our mishnah and elsewhere.<sup>35</sup>

Rather than attempting to reflect any internal pagan notion back against a gentile interlocutor, then, our mishnah is engaged simply in *projecting* its own conceptions onto a literarily constructed pagan. Thus, if we include Rabban Gamliel's initial dismissal or delay of the question, we see that as many as three of the four arguments put forward in our mishnah evidently reject outright the pagans' own stated devotional relationship to the bathhouse and its Aphrodite: they deploy, that is, the Bad Faith Argument. First, Rabban Gamliel's preliminary answer, "one may not respond [about words of Torah] in the bathhouse"—apparently rather bathetic in the midst of

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<sup>33</sup> My translation.

<sup>34</sup> My translation. Emphasis added.

<sup>35</sup> *Damnatio memoriae* "served, on one hand, as the basis for the rabbinic law regarding the nullification of idolatry. At the same time, it also served as a point of departure for a more general reflection on paganism incorporated in the Mishna in the form of dialogues." See Furstenberg, "The Rabbinic View of Idolatry," 364.

a serious interreligious dispute—seems already to flirt with the Bad Faith Argument by presupposing, contrary to the apparent assumption of his pagan questioner, that the bathhouse is by nature profane rather than sacred. Furthermore, Rabban Gamliel declares, “One does not say ‘Let us make the bathhouse for Aphrodite as an adornment,’ but rather one says ‘Aphrodite herself is made as an adornment for the bathhouse.’” That is, the builders’ intent toward Aphrodite, according to Rabban Gamliel but evidently not according to Proclus, is merely instrumental and aesthetic, and not *genuinely* devotional. And lastly, the mishnah states that:

Another interpretation: If they were to give to you much money, you would not enter into [the house of] your idol naked and after a seminal emission and urinate in front of it, but this one stands next to the canal and all the people urinate in front of it. It says only [in the instructions to destroy items and places associated with prohibited worship in Deut 7:25 and 12:2–3] ‘their gods’—that toward which one behaves in a manner befitting a god is prohibited; that toward which one does not behave in a manner befitting a god is allowed.

Of course, our mishnah assumes, gentiles in general are devoted to their gods; were they to encounter a genuine idol, they would never disesteem it—even for vast wealth. Yet in this particular instance, the Mishnah insists, we can *infer* that the gentiles do not actually consider the statue of Aphrodite a religious object in any way. Their demeaning treatment of the statue proves, *against their own testimony*, that they have no true religious conception of it. Even the mishnah’s criteria for evaluating gentile reverence toward an idol adopt the internal Jewish halakhic language of בעל קרי, the bearer of seminal impurity.<sup>36</sup> It is the Rabbis’ estimation of what constitutes “a manner befitting a god”—and not any gentile’s own report—which is ultimately dispositive, and based on that estimation the Mishnah dismisses the possibility that the statue of Aphrodite—or her

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<sup>36</sup> It is worth noting, however, that Greco-Roman conceptions of purity did in fact contain a similar notion of ritual pollution through seminal emission. See Robert Parker, *Miasma* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 74–77. For the biblical basis of the halakhic term בעל קרי, see the instruction in Deuteronomy 23:11. Leviticus 15:16 issues a similar direction, though the specific terminology of “קרי” is not used.

bathroom—could possibly constitute objects of idolatry. Even in the face of direct pagan testimony from Proclus, Rabban Gamliel and our mishnah *reject that the pagans could possibly see this bathroom as a religious site.*

We can summarize thus: Proclus, a native informant from within Greco-Roman culture, testifies that *this statue of Aphrodite* has some religious significance, but Rabban Gamliel, rejecting this informant testimony, *denies the possibility* that this statue of Aphrodite could have any religious significance for anyone. This accusation of Bad Faith against Proclus' religious understanding of this specific statue of Aphrodite (and of the bathroom associated with it) is then generalized into an interpretation of the nature of idolatry itself as banned in Deuteronomy 7:25 and 12:2–3 (and, by extension in context, in Deuteronomy 13:18 as well). Through this interpretation, Rabban Gamliel's argument against the statue of Aphrodite is expanded into a halakhically productive framework for potential future applications of Bad Faith against pagan religious practices to render them non-idolatrous: "That toward which one behaves in a manner befitting a god is prohibited; that toward which one does not behave in a manner befitting a god is allowed."

This new understanding of our mishnah as a deployment of the Bad Faith Argument may have significant implications for the most far-reaching analysis of Rabban Gamliel in the bathroom, that of Moshe Halbertal. Expanding upon Urbach's proposal of a rabbinic attempt to facilitate Jewish financial life in Roman Palestine through leniency toward statues, Halbertal suggests that the "main concern" of the Mishnaic tractate *'Abodah Zarah* was "to constitute between Jews and pagans and to delineate the limits of a neutral space—a space that will enable

Jews to coexist with what they perceive to be their ideological and religious enemy.”<sup>37</sup> For Halbertal, the scene presented in our mishnah provides a perfect example of the attempt to carve out such an a-religious arena. Rabban Gamliel’s arguments to Proclus, Halbertal contends, “attempt to redescribe the bath as a neutral space in spite of the presence of a pagan symbol in its midst.”<sup>38</sup> As in Urbach’s analysis, for Halbertal the fundamental intellectual move in Rabban Gamliel’s argument is a rabbinically sanctioned “distinction between the cultic and the aesthetic”<sup>39</sup> within pagan statuary in order to facilitate halakhically at least some limited range of interactions between Jews and their pagan neighbors and overlords. Whereas for Urbach, however, this distinction (particularly in its manifestation as *bittul*) served to ease the financial burden on Jews in Roman Palestine, for Halbertal it served to help create a broader “neutral” civic space, defined by neither Judaism nor Greco-Roman religion.<sup>40</sup>

Yet if, as Halbertal persuasively suggests, our mishnah is part of an attempt to carve out a ‘neutral’ public and civic space beyond confessional commitments, it achieves this distinction only through the Bad Faith Argument—that is, by ascribing to the pagans an entirely dismissive attitude toward the statue of the goddess in question, even against the pagans’ own testimony. Indeed, Rabban Gamliel’s argument here falls squarely into the third subtype of the Bad Faith Argument, that of “carelessness and disesteem,” which we saw above in Chapter 3. Just as in the Epistle of

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<sup>37</sup> Moshe Halbertal, “Coexisting with the enemy: Jews and Pagans in the Mishnah,” in *Tolerance and Intolerance in Early Judaism and Christianity*, eds. Graham N. Stanton and Guy G. Stroumsa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 163.

<sup>38</sup> Halbertal, “Coexisting with the enemy,” 166.

<sup>39</sup> Halbertal, “Coexisting with the enemy,” 167.

<sup>40</sup> Seth Schwartz, though reluctant to accept Urbach’s notion (seemingly shared by Halbertal) that the Rabbis *intentionally* promoted leniencies toward idols in order to ease the lot of Jews in pagan society, nonetheless concedes that “whether or not the rabbis were aware that their legislation was accommodative...what seems clear is that it *functioned* as accommodation.” See Schwartz, “The Rabbi in Aphrodite’s Bath,” 359.

Jeremiah the priests of the idols “take off their [i.e. the idols’] garments and clothe their wives and children in them” (Ep Jer 33) while even “the menstruant and the post-parturient woman touch their [i.e. the idols’] sacrifices” (Ep Jer 29), and in the Mekhilta the idol-maker melts down his own god without a second thought in order to harvest its materials, here too Rabban Gamliel in the Mishnah ascribes to the gentile bathers an entirely contemptuous approach to their own icon and thus undermines the possibility that their devotion to the goddess is sincere. The gentiles described in our mishnah do not merely have a genteel, ornamental, or aesthetic perspective on this statue of Aphrodite; they are not presented as lining public porticos with beautiful marble Aphrodites, or decorating their grand manor homes with them for the sake of luxury. Rather, the gentiles, impure after seminal emission, set the statue of their goddess next to the water-duct and urinate in front of it. So far from worshiping the statue of Aphrodite, their treatment of the god’s image is outright abuse.

Halbertal is surely right that the mishnah under discussion participates in creating a distinction between ornamental and religious pagan statues and in carving out a neutral space between Jew and gentile. Yet the creation of this neutral civic space is not achieved through an emphasis on tolerance, pluralism, or mutual respect. Rather, the mishnah neutralizes the space of the bathhouse by utterly rejecting the gentiles’ own testimony to its religious significance, by projecting onto them an attitude of disdain toward the statues of their own gods.<sup>41</sup> The “neutral space” in Greco-Roman society is carved out through the Bad Faith Argument.

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<sup>41</sup> See also Barbu’s treatment of Artapanus for a distinct but related version of what we might call “toleration through condescension,” Barbu, *Naissance*, 277.



## Chapter 6—Conclusion

In the course of this dissertation, we have attempted to demonstrate that a change took place in Israelite/Jewish portrayals of the worship of other gods and the reverence of their icons. The biblical sources, we argued, consistently depicted such worship as genuine. At some point in the mid-late Second Temple period, however, a new mode of portrayal arose which saw in the reverence of gods and statues pure disingenuousness. This latter view competed with its biblical predecessor throughout the mid-late Second Temple and tannaitic eras, though never replacing it.

In Chapters 3, 4, and 5, we noted and analyzed such a portrayal, which we termed “the Bad Faith Argument,” in a wide variety of texts. Beginning with a paradigmatic example in the Sifre Deuteronomy, in which “even though they [the ancestors of the Israelites] would sacrifice to them [other gods] and offer incense to them, they did not fear from them,” we proceeded to lay out a taxonomy of this Bad Faith argument. In its various subtypes, we saw how an ulterior motive for profit was ascribed to the idol-maker of Wisdom 15, how Philo viewed fear of persecution as the true motive for many of the participants in the episode of the Golden Calf, how carelessness and disesteem characterized the service of the Babylonians’ images in the Epistle of Jeremiah, and how the gentiles in the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael were at best tenuously committed to their own gods.<sup>1</sup> From here, we proceeded to juxtapose biblical narratives with thematically similar scenes from mid-late Second Temple and tannaitic literature, demonstrating the stark shift in the portrayal of transgressive worship which separates the two eras. While the priests of Baal in 1 Kings 18, Terah in Joshua 24, and the idol-maker in Isaiah 44 were devoted worshipers of their gods and icons—

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<sup>1</sup> We also cited three additional examples in the footnotes to Chapter 3, namely the ulterior motives of Demetrius the Silversmith in Acts 19, the fear of persecution marking the Golden Calf episode in Pseudo-Philo, and the carelessness and disesteem which the iconolaters in Wis 14 demonstrate by violating their oaths to their own gods, knowing these gods to be incapable of exacting retribution.

or at the very least their sincerity was never questioned—the priests of Bel in Daniel 14, Terah in Jubilees 12, and the idol-maker of the Mekhilta are either utterly insincere in their worship or downright degrading to their own purported sancta. Lastly, we considered the narrative of Rabban Gamliel in the Bathhouse of Aphrodite in *m. 'Abodah Zarah* 3:4, and observed that, if this mishnah attempts to create a neutral civic space between Jews and pagans, it does so through the deployment of the Bad Faith Argument, specifically in its subtype of “carelessness and disesteem.” In many of the cases we considered, texts from the mid-late Second Temple and tannaitic eras went so far as to militate against the plain sense of biblical texts in order to arrive at a Bad Faith portrayal.

A mid-Second Temple shift in the portrayal of the devotees of other gods and their icons—of what we might describe more boldly as the portrayal of ‘other religions’—is, in and of itself, a sufficient contribution, and if we have persuaded the reader of such a shift we shall consider the project successful. But perhaps it is possible to take the argument a step further by inquiring into the *reasons* behind such a shift. Why did the Bad Faith Argument, absent in biblical portrayals of the worship of other gods and the reverence of their icons, spring up in the depictions of the mid-late Second Temple period and continue on into rabbinic literature?

This shift in rhetoric cannot be explained as simply one more weapon in the arsenal of anti-idolatry polemic, as merely the introduction of a new strategy of attack which was formerly unavailable or unrequired. After all, as we have seen, the biblical authors were perfectly capable of deploying the Bad Faith Argument, and did so on numerous occasions against forms of Yahwism which they saw as transgressive. Furthermore, they were eager to militate against the worship of other gods and their icons. As such, both the means for a Bad Faith depiction of pagan

religion and the desire for attack were fully present in the Biblical period. Yet biblical authors never used the Bad Faith Argument to this end.

Nor can the aim of the Bad Faith Argument have been primarily apologetic, designed to cleanse the ancestors of the nation from the charge of idolatry by denying the sincerity of their transgressive worship. Such apologetic ends, even if they do play a role in some subset of the sources, can hardly explain the numerous deployments of the Bad Faith Argument which deny the authenticity of *gentile* worship of other gods and *gentile* reverence of icons; surely the Jewish authors of the Second Temple and rabbinic periods were not interested in defending their inner religious rectitude.

With this in mind, let us return for a moment to the arguments of Yehezkel Kaufmann with which we began Chapter 2 above. We suggested there that Kaufmann's central argument in his *Religion of Israel* could be distilled into three main points:

1. The biblical portrayals of pagan religion are empirically *inaccurate* etc.
2. This misrepresentation by the biblical authors stems from a failure properly to understand pagan religion.
3. We can infer from their failure to understand pagan religion that the biblical authors themselves had radically different religious conceptions than those of the pagans.

We also noted that, following logically from these three points, Kaufmann deduces that the Babylonian exile could not, as is often posited, have entailed a movement away from "paganism" toward "monotheism" because, in Kaufmann's account, the Israelites were already radically distanced from "paganism" in their theological outlook. Whatever shift occurred among the Israelites during the exile, then, must have been a shift only in practice, not affecting the Israelites'

fundamental religious or theological conceptions; there was “not a change in its religious world outlook.”<sup>2</sup>

Though our methodology, focusing as it has on construction of the Other rather than the historical accuracy of their depiction, differs fundamentally from Kaufmann’s, perhaps we may nonetheless be able to raise a challenge of sorts to Kaufmann on the basis of our conclusions. For Kaufmann, the Israelites of the biblical period were so conceptually divorced from paganism that they mistakenly believed their neighbors worshiped sticks and stones as their gods with no further metaphysical or mythological superstructure. If Kaufmann is right, and the biblical authors truly did not understand the worship of the pagans at all, believing them to bow down to and implore mere sticks and stones as gods, why do they nowhere, not once, question the sincerity of such evidently stupid practices? Would we not expect them, if only in one or two verses out of the perhaps hundreds in which they discuss the reverence of other gods, to wonder whether the idolaters can possibly believe that such rocks and figures are in themselves fully divine powers, able to harm and save? We see a Bad Faith portrayal of Jeroboam’s Yahwistic calves; why never of the *Bealim* or the *Ashtarot* or Chemosh or Rimmon or Nevo or the Queen of Heaven or the gods of the Canaanites or the unspecific icons of the nations?

Furthermore, beyond the absence of any Bad Faith portrayal of the worship of other gods in the biblical corpus, the very *shift* in rhetoric should itself present a difficulty for Kaufmann’s schema. After all, for Kaufmann the Babylonian Exile was responsible for changes in Israel’s practices but “not a change in its religious world outlook.”<sup>3</sup> How then could he explain the shift between the biblical and post-biblical periods which we have sketched?

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<sup>2</sup> Kaufmann, *The Babylonian Captivity*, 29.

<sup>3</sup> Kaufmann, *The Babylonian Captivity*, 29.

Quite to the contrary, if the shift in rhetoric which we have outlined can be explained neither as a previously unavailable avenue of polemic, nor as an attempt at apology, it must reflect instead a change in the *religious conceptions* of at least some Jews and the texts that they produced. Forms of worship which, though much maligned, were still *emotionally intelligible* to the authors of the biblical texts, began to seem to the Jews of the mid-Second Temple period somehow bizarre and *in need of explanation*. Over and over again in the Epistle of Jeremiah, our earliest example of the Bad Faith Argument against the worship of other gods, we see the question phrased explicitly, serving almost as the leitmotif of the text itself:

For how can they be called gods? (Ep Jer 30)

Why then must anyone think that they are gods, or call them gods? (Ep Jer 40)

Why then must anyone think that they are gods, or call them gods? (Ep Jer 44)

How then can the things that are made by them be gods? (Ep Jer 47)

How then can one fail to see that these are not gods? (Ep Jer 49)

Who then can fail to know that they are not gods? (Ep Jer 52)

Why then must anyone admit or think that they are gods? (Ep Jer 56)

Time and time again, the Epistle of Jeremiah demands an *explanation* for the religious behavior of the Other, and the explanation that it ultimately provides is, as we saw in Chapter 3 above, one of Bad Faith: the degrading treatment of the icons by their purported devotees proves that they know the futility and absurdity of their worship just as well as the author himself. So too, we would suggest, all of the deployments of the Bad Faith Argument which we have surveyed serve, at least in some capacity, to resolve the challenge of the Other by nullifying it—to explain by explaining away. The problem of difference, the challenge posed by the ostensibly irrational (from the in-group’s perspective) behavior of the Other, is resolved by denying the existence of difference at all, at least on an intellectual level. Their behavior and explicit testimony notwithstanding, those who appear to disagree with me must, on some level, know that I am right.

In Chapter 3 above, we noted Ephraim Urbach's proposal that Jewish skepticism toward the sincerity of Greco-Roman religion simply reflected the decreasing religious commitment of Greco-Roman pagans themselves. Yet, before arriving at this conclusion, Urbach, as we saw, offered another explanation, one which dropped out of his discussion quite as soon as it was uttered:

The repudiation of idolatry became the common heritage of the Jewish people in the days of the Hasmoneans, and with the limitation of proselytization the feeling prevailed that idolatry presented no danger, since it had no substance; and this view was so deeply rooted that it even posited that actually even the Gentiles cannot believe in the reality of idolatry.<sup>4</sup>

This, we would suggest, is the true heart of the issue. Contra Kaufmann, the authors of the biblical period *did understand* the religions of their pagan neighbors—if not intellectually, than at least *emotionally*. They did not find these worship practices strange or unappealing enough to question their sincerity. It was only at some point in the mid-Second Temple period, prior to the composition of the Epistle of Jeremiah (and thus, incidentally, earlier than the Hasmonean period to which Urbach assigns it) that a *new distance in religious conceptions* took hold on some Jewish authors. Now, for the first time, the worship of other gods and the reverence of their icons became unappealing enough, perplexing enough, to demand a psychological explanation of the worshipers' behavior. This new skepticism toward the earnestness of competing forms of worship, though never eliminating the biblical assumption of sincerity, would persevere through the late-Second Temple period and through tannaitic literature, and, though beyond the scope of our project, make crucial appearances in amoraic literature, in Patristic religious polemic, and in medieval Jewish thought.

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<sup>4</sup> Urbach, *The Sages*, 23.

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