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"They Are Not Gods!" Jewish and Christian Idol Polemic and Greco-Roman Use of Cult Statues

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I. Jewish Idol Polemic: Is It Reflective of Pagan¹ Beliefs?

One set of trademark convictions of early Judaism and Christianity includes their aniconic tradition, monotheistic commitment, and polemic against idols. In the late second or early third century C.E., for example, Christian apologist Minucius Felix mocked pagan idol worship with these words: "When does the god come into being? The image is cast, hammered, or sculpted; it is not yet a god. It is soldered, put together, and erected; it is still not a god. It is adorned, consecrated, prayed to—and now, finally, it is a god once man has willed it so and dedicated it" (see *Oct.* 22.5). The Christian haranguing of idolatry goes back to the Jewish Scriptures,

¹ There is some concern among biblical and religion scholars that the word "pagan" is pejorative and unfairly judgmental. In this article, I use this term only to refer to non-Christian and non-Jewish Greeks and Romans. It should be noted, also, that the term "pagan" is still widely used by historians for non-Christian religions of classical antiquity. See, e.g., *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Philosophy* (ed. David Sedley; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); *One God: Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire* (ed. Stephen Mitchell and Peter van Nuffelen; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); *A Companion to Greek Mythology* (ed. Ken Dowden and Niall Livingstone; Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011). For a helpful discussion of terminological options, and the necessary (albeit imperfect) use of the words "pagan" and "paganism," see Hans-Josef Klauck, *Magic and Paganism in Early Christianity: The World of the Acts of the Apostles* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000) 1.

most notably Jeremiah, Isaiah, and the Psalms.² Similar polemical statements can be found in Habakkuk (2:18-20). This tradition is expanded in early Jewish texts such as *Bel and the Dragon*, *Wisdom of Solomon*, *Apocalypse of Abraham*, the tractates of Philo, and, most extensively, the Epistle of Jeremiah.³ We find idol polemic in the NT in places such as Acts 19:26 and Rev 9:20.⁴ The wider idea that stands behind almost all Jewish and Christian idol-polemic texts is this: *Do not worship statues, because they are not gods!* (So Jer 16:20: "Can people make for themselves gods? Yes, but they are not gods!"; cf. Isa 37:19; Josephus *A.J.* 10.4.1 §50; Epistle of Jeremiah passim). According to this logic, idols should not be worshiped because they are handmade works; they are creations, not creators. As far as the early Jews and Christians were concerned, pagans worshiped blocks of metal, stone, and wood, and this was improper because such materials could never amount to a real "god."

But is this a fair criticism of pagans? Did they really worship statues as gods? For many modern biblical scholars it is a foregone conclusion that this Jewish idol polemic is hyperbolic and a rhetorical caricature. According to these scholars, this is vituperative satire that does not reflect how the pagan neighbors of Jews and Christians actually thought and worshiped. They did not worship statues, so some argue, but saw these statues as symbolic or representative of their deity's presence.

² See Horst Dietrich Preuss, *Verspottung fremder Religionen im Alten Testament* (BWANT 92; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1971); José Faur, "The Biblical Idea of Idolatry," *JQR* 69 (1978) 1-15; William W. Hallo, "Cult Statue and Divine Image: A Preliminary Study," in *Scripture in Context II: More Essays on the Comparative Method* (ed. William W. Hallo et al.; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983) 1-17; Heinrich Schützinger, "Bild und Wesen der Gottheit im alten Mesopotamien," in *Götterbild in Kunst und Schrift* (ed. Hans-Joachim Klimkeit; Studium Universale 2; Bonn: Bouvier, 1984) 61-80; Walter Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise: Doxology against Idolatry and Ideology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); John Day, "Ezekiel and the Heart of Idolatry," *BSac* 164 (2007) 21-33; Stuart Weeks, "Man-Made Gods? Idolatry in the Old Testament," in *Idolatry: False Worship in the Bible, Early Judaism, and Christianity* (ed. Stephen C. Barton; T&T Clark Theology; New York: T&T Clark, 2007) 7-21; Nathan MacDonald, "Monotheism and Isaiah," in *Interpreting Isaiah: Issues and Approaches* (ed. David G. Firth and H. G. M. Williamson; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009) 43-61.

³ See Karl-Gustav Sandelin, "The Danger of Idolatry according to Philo of Alexandria," *Temenos* 27 (1991) 109-50; Lawrence H. Schiffman, "Laws concerning Idolatry in the Temple Scroll," in *Uncovering Ancient Stones: Essays in Memory of H. Neil Richardson* (ed. Lewis M. Hopfe; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994) 159-75; Claudia Bergmann, "Idol Worship in Bel and the Dragon and Other Jewish Literature from the Second Temple Period," in *Septuagint Research: Issues and Challenges in the Study of the Greek Jewish Scriptures* (ed. Wolfgang Kraus and R. Glenn Wooden; SBLSCS 53; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006) 207-23; John M. G. Barclay, "Snarling Sweetly: Josephus on Images and Idols," in *Idolatry* (ed. Barton), 73-87; Andrei A. Orlov, "'The Gods of My Father Terah': Abraham the Iconoclast and the Polemics with the Divine Body Traditions in the Apocalypse of Abraham," *JSP* 18 (2008) 33-53.

⁴ See Paul J. Achtemeier, "Gods Made with Hands: The New Testament and the Problem of Idolatry," *Ex Auditu* 15 (1999) 43-61; Joel Marcus, "Idolatry in the New Testament," *Int* 60 (2006) 152-64.

This presumption is matter-of-factly stated, for example, by biblical commentator Jerry L. Sumney: "Polytheists did not identify the god with the statue standing in the temple."⁵ Similarly, Philip R. Davies states, "Worshippers of deities that are represented in the form of idols do not make the mistake of thinking that these images are the gods."⁶ And Ronald Williamson chastises Philo of Alexandria, for example, for sustaining an argument that the Egyptians worshiped statues, an argument that (Williamson argues) does not reflect their real religious perspective such that this rhetorical ploy appears to be little more than propaganda.⁷ Does this supposed modern scholarly consensus reflect pagan religious thought?

Clearly, Christian and Jewish writers *were* mocking idol worship, but did they mistakenly (or purposely) argue that pagans directly worshiped the cult statue *as* their god? Did pagans see the statue as merely a statue? In this article, I seek to explore precisely this matter. To make this study more narrowly focused, I will look exclusively at Greco-Roman religion, as the early Jewish and Christian examples of idol polemic, in particular, appear in this context. There are some philosophical conversations about this subject that support the above-mentioned scholarly impressions that pagans "knew" that their cult statues were *not* actual gods. For example, Heraclitus of Ephesus (ca. 535–ca. 475 B.C.E.) famously warned that too many worshipers of the gods paid homage to mere statues, "as if chattering with houses, not recognizing what gods or even heroes are like."⁸ Similarly, Plato wrote, "We erect images of the gods as statues, and we honour these even though they have no souls, but we believe that because of this those gods who do have souls have goodwill and *charis*" (*Leg.* 11.931a1–4).⁹

⁵ Jerry L. Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008) 191; other examples include John Barton, "'The Work of Human Hands' (Psalm 115:4): Idolatry in the Old Testament," in *The Ten Commandments: The Reciprocity of Faithfulness* (ed. William P. Brown; Library of Theological Ethics; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004) 199–200; Walther Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1978) 123; John J. Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 418; Joan E. Cook, *Hear, O Heavens, and Listen, O Earth: An Introduction to the Prophets* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006) 230.

⁶ Philip R. Davies, "God of Cyrus, God of Israel: Some Religio-Historical Reflections on Isaiah 40–55," in *Words Remembered, Texts Renewed: Essays in Honour of John F. A. Sawyer* (ed. Jon Davies, Graham Harvey, and Wilfred G. E. Watson; JSOTSup 195; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 222.

⁷ According to Ronald Williamson, "It has been suggested that Philo should have known—and did in fact know—that intelligent pagans did not worship the cult object before which they made their devotions, but that Jewish propaganda misrepresented it. Philo almost certainly knew that Egyptians did not bow down *to* the animals *before* which they bowed down, but only to the gods they represented, but to have admitted that in his writings would have served only to weaken his *apologia* on behalf of Judaism" (see *Jews in the Hellenistic World: Philo* [Cambridge Commentaries on Writings of the Jewish and Christian World, 200 B.C. to A.D. 200 1.2; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989] 31; emphasis original).

⁸ Celsus apparently agreed with Heraclitus on this matter; see Origen *Cels.* 7.62, 65.

⁹ In the fourth century B.C.E., Dionysius the Younger, ruler of Syracuse, "stripped the statue

This was a topic of some interest among Greek and Roman philosophers, but their sharp comments reveal that they were challenging popular or folk beliefs and habits of the people. Thus, the philosophers do not represent a majority or common perspective. So classicist Deborah Steiner concludes:

[F]or all his critical tone, the philosopher has succinctly expressed the way in which Greeks of his and other ages commonly imagined the relationship between the god (or hero) and his visual representation, and has acknowledged the concept underpinning the efficacy ascribed to images venerated in cult: the statue acts as a vessel, a potential or actual container for the numinous power that could take up residence inside.¹⁰

II. Theorizing Greco-Roman Cultic Worship with and through Statues

In order to make sense of how Greeks and Romans worshiped and how and why they used statues, it is helpful to examine closely how statues were understood in general in antiquity. Derek Collins, in his book *Magic in the Ancient Greek World*, directs attention to Greek habits and attitudes regarding the function of statues and offers a number of fascinating case studies. He argues that, for Greeks, statues regularly functioned as proxies. For example, Pausanias (*Descr.* 6.11.2-9) tells us the story of famed athlete Theagenes of whom a bronze statue was produced after his death. An enemy of Theagenes, wanting to punish his nemesis, flogged the bronze statue. According to Pausanias's account, the statue fought back and killed the opponent. The sons of the murdered man proceeded to prosecute the statue. The court tried the statue and found it guilty, which resulted in a sentence of exile.¹¹ Based on this example (and many others), Collins attempts to process how such a tale reveals a particular folk perspective of statue ontology and agency. He concludes, "In anthropological terms, the statue of Theagenes is a *social*

of Zeus in Sicily of its golden cloak and ordered it to be clothed in a woolen one, with the witty remark that this was better than the golden one being both lighter in summer and warmer in winter" (see Clement of Alexandria *Protrept.* 4.46). According to Diogenes Laertius, the Greek philosopher Stilpo cleverly engaged a challenger with this dialogue: "'Athena is the daughter of Zeus, is she not?' 'Yes,' 'But this Athena (pointing to the image) was not produced by Zeus but by Phidias.' His opponent agrees. 'Then,' Stilpo concludes, 'Athena is not a goddess'" (*Lives* 2.2.116). Not much later in history, Horace wrote this in his *Satires* about an idol recognizing its own origins: "Once I was a fig-tree, good-for-nothing wood, when the craftsman, after hesitating a while whether to make me a stool or a Priapus, decided for a god" (1.8.1). See Stijn Bussels, *The Animated Image: Roman Theory on Naturalism, Vividness, and Divine Power* (Kunst und Wirkmacht: Studien aus dem Warburg-Haus 11; Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2012) 152-54.

¹⁰ Deborah Steiner, *Images in Mind: Statues in Archaic and Classical Greek Literature and Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) 79.

¹¹ See also Stephen G. Miller, *Arete: Greek Sports from Ancient Sources* (3rd expanded ed.; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) 113-14.

agent—it is effectively a human being and is therefore, from the functional viewpoint of the relevant community, treated like one.”¹²

Comparatively, archaeologists have noted a trend in ancient Hellenistic burial customs where statues were found in unearthened graves instead of corpses—presumably as a substitute when it was not possible for the actual human body to be buried.¹³ Statues were clearly more than tributary objects; they somehow could “live” or exist on behalf of the absent or unseen.

Archaeologist Nigel Spivey argues that “classical Greece remains the very *locus classicus* for stories of [statue] animation.”¹⁴ According to popular belief, statues were far more than artistic or commemorative objects. Indeed, “cult statues were regarded as properly vicarious. That is, the statues contained powers of response: statues embodied will, personality, spirit.”¹⁵ Spivey argues that, for members of ancient Greek society, the barrier between “animate” and “inanimate” was sometimes unclear—something that modern critics should understand in view of our own obsession with “virtual reality.”¹⁶ Spivey, quite appropriately, points to Ovid’s classic rendition of Pygmalion as a story indicative of this blurred line between statue and living being.¹⁷

Steiner explains the dynamics behind Greek cultic statue ontology using the imagery of two worlds: the mortal world and an invisible world of gods and ghosts. A cult statue, in particular, could be understood as a “stepping stone pointing to the original that gives the viewer access to a hidden or absent reality.”¹⁸ For all intents and purposes, the statue becomes a portal to another realm, such as the world of the gods.

The figures, together with the uncanny powers ascribed to them, supply visualizations and expressions of the gap between mortals and divinities, and a means of contrasting two entirely distinct modes of being.¹⁹

She goes on to explain:

Theophanies . . . are so hard to tell apart not only because the Greek literary and epigraphic sources regularly use the term *theos* for the god and his representation both,

¹² Derek Collins, *Magic in the Ancient Greek World* (Blackwell Ancient Religions; Oxford: Blackwell, 2008) 95.

¹³ See Donna C. Kurtz and John Boardman, *Greek Burial Customs* (Aspects of Greek and Roman Life; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971) 247-59.

¹⁴ See Nigel Spivey, “Bionic Statues,” in *The Greek World* (ed. Anton Powell; London: Routledge, 1995) 442-62.

¹⁵ Ibid., 452. See also Jörg Rüpke, *Religion of the Romans* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007) 74.

¹⁶ Spivey, “Bionic Statues,” 455.

¹⁷ Ibid., 443. Rüpke, similarly, refers to Roman views that place statues into an “indeterminate zone, where one could move at will between the two opposing poles, animate and inanimate” (*Religion of the Romans*, 73).

¹⁸ Steiner, *Images in Mind*, 5.

¹⁹ Ibid., 183.

but also because the behavior of the Olympians seems so frequently to “spill over” into that exhibited by their images: the very modes in which the gods of myth, anecdote, and literary account declare their presence and demonstrate their prerogatives determine, and are matched by, the activities ascribed to their images.²⁰

So, for Greeks, Steiner explains, a statue is “not so much a representation of the absent god, but . . . an object that has assumed his predicates, too.”²¹

If we recall the assumption of some biblical scholars that the Jewish idol polemic is a caricature and that the Greeks and Romans did not *actually* believe their cult statues were *real* gods, it would seem that the matter is much more complex and ambiguous when the evidence from Greco-Roman sources is closely examined. Certainly there was a concern among the Greek philosophers that “images” should not be equated with the gods themselves, but because the philosophers’ rhetoric is so strong, it only seems to prove the point that common worshipers did in fact make these kinds of assumptions. It would seem, then, that when the Jewish writers urged readers not to worship statues, this was a genuine prohibition, not merely a mockery. The common perception among most worshipers in the Greco-Roman world was that there was something unique about these objects—inexplicably, they transferred the god into the mortal realm for access and efficacy.

How might we describe this view of cult statues, then? The most plausible theory should make some sense of this tension in Greco-Roman thought that views the statue as an object that stands at the boundary between the world of the human and the visible, and the world of the invisible—a world of gods, ghosts, and the dead. Using this two-world framework, we can suggest a key feature attributed to statues by Greeks and Romans: *amphicosmic ontology, an existence that places the statue on the boundary between two dimensions.*

Sarah Iles Johnston discusses how Greeks used statues to deal with spiritual attacks from the dead, such as unwanted “visitants” terrorizing a householder. According to a *lex sacra* from Selinous, the victimized householder was instructed to make wooden or clay figures, both male and female, and offer them food.²² The householder then would transfer the figurine(s) to a remote area (such as an unin-

²⁰ Ibid., 135.

²¹ Ibid., 157. Jean-Pierre Vernant expresses this notion aptly: “the idea is to establish real contact with the world beyond, to actualize it, to make it present, and thereby to participate intimately in the divine.” Nevertheless, Vernant insists that there is danger in this endeavor and the lines, though blurred, cannot be erased: “it [the world beyond] must also emphasize what is inaccessible and mysterious in divinity, its alien quality, its otherness” (Vernant, “From the ‘Presentification’ of the Invisible to the Imitation of Appearance,” in idem, *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays* [ed. Froma I. Zeitlin; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991] 143–74, here 153). See also Julia Kindt, *Rethinking Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 50.

²² Sarah Iles Johnston, *Restless Dead: Encounters between the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) 59. She comments that figures are made

habited forest). The logic appears to be that the ghost is “transferred into the statue.” Mortals could ostensibly control “restless ghosts” using such a technique. For example, the Spartans fashioned a statue of traitor Pausanias to control his ghost.²³

Johnston mentions a different example regarding the command of the oracle of Delphi to the Orchomenians regarding the trouble-making ghost of Theban hero Actaeon. The oracle instructed the Orchomenians to bury Actaeon’s body and bind a statue of him to a rock. Another kind of relevant practice among Greeks that Johnston discusses pertains to what she calls “magical dolls,” similar to what we think of as voodoo dolls: “by affecting the doll, one affected the individual whom the doll represented.”²⁴ Obviously the idea is that the object is more than representational; it vicariously aids the artificer and/or the owner in controlling the “person.”²⁵

Again, all of these stories point to a conceptualization of statues that goes far beyond merely monument and art. It is even too simple to reduce pagan belief to the idea that the numinous power of the god rested within the statue, as water rests in a jug. When the common worshiper approached the statue, he or she did so believing the god to be truly present, and often hoping for a genuine response. In the way that Herodotus describes the erection and use of honorary statues of “dead-and-missing” heroes, Steiner explains, he attributes to them a “quasi-sacred status, suggestive of its capacity to actualize the individual’s power at the site and make it continuously accessible to those who have erected the monument.”²⁶

An interesting case study is discussed by Spivey, one that sheds light on the amphi-cosmic ontology attributed to cultic statues by Greeks and Romans. Spivey points to the discovery of a vase from Apulia (fourth century B.C.E.). Depicted on the vase is a temple of Apollo. Inside the temple one can see the figure of Apollo holding bow and patera. Just outside the temple there is another picture of Apollo, but this one is seated and plucking a lyre. Spivey asks, “Will the real Apollo please announce himself?”²⁷ By that he means: What did the artist have in mind in his double-presentation of Apollo? Spivey entertains three options. First, it could be that the figure inside of the temple, being slightly more rigid and austere, is meant

both male and female if the householder does *not* know the visitant. If the visitant is known, however, the householder would make only the appropriately gendered figurine.

²³ See Thucydides *Hist.* 1.134.4-135.1; Pausanias *Descr.* 3.17.7-9; Diodorus Siculus 11.45; Themistocles *Ep.* 5.15; Aristodemus (*Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker* [ed. Felix Jacoby; Leiden: Brill, 1954-64] 104 F 8).

²⁴ Johnston, *Restless Dead*, 60. See also Christopher A. Faraone, “Binding and Burying the Forces of Evil: The Defensive Use of ‘Voodoo Dolls’ in Ancient Greece,” *Classical Antiquity* 10 (1991) 165-205.

²⁵ Johnston, *Restless Dead*, 62.

²⁶ Steiner, *Images in Mind*, 8-9.

²⁷ Spivey, “Bionic Statues,” 451.

to reflect the temple statue of Apollo, and the person outside is the god himself. This option would align more or less with how the biblical scholars mentioned above tend to view the matter. A second option would be that the artist is representing the unique divinity of the god by showing that he can be in more than one place at one time. Spivey, however, considers a third choice, which has the potential to marry the other two views. Could it be that the in-temple figure is the statue, and the out-of-temple figure is the heavenly god, but they are both Apollo and both are direct and legitimate recipients of worship? If this perspective is realistic, a statue is not just a statue but is considered bionic: "Greek statues are 'bionic' because they are amazing, superhuman, and surprising."²⁸

III. The Nature and Activity of Cult Statues in Light of Jewish Idol Polemic

I began this essay by noting that Jewish writers could be quite hostile toward the worshippers of idols. Their line of reasoning was often based on five ideas: (1) the idol is a human creation; (2) the idol is not alive; (3) the idol does not have natural senses (seeing, hearing, speaking); (4) the idol cannot move; and (5) the idol is inefficacious (i.e., useless). Four of these accusations appear together in Psalm 135:

The idols of the nations are silver and gold,
the work of human hands.
They have mouths, but they do not speak;
they have eyes, but they do not see;
they have ears, but they do not hear,
and there is no breath in their mouths.
Those who make them
and all who trust them
shall become like them. (135:15-17)²⁹

The fifth, that the idol is immobile, is articulated clearly in the Epistle of Jeremiah:

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. If anyone sets it upright, it cannot move itself; and if it is tipped over, it cannot straighten itself. Gifts are placed before them just as before the dead. (26-27)

Many biblical scholars find these criticisms an unfair caricature of pagan religion. I have shown above, though, that it is not so much that Greeks and Romans were

²⁸ Ibid., 445.

²⁹ All English quotations from biblical and LXX apocryphal texts are from the *NRSV* unless otherwise noted.

simpleminded and naively equated their cult statues with deities such as Zeus or Hera. Rather, we may more properly reason that their perception of the statue–deity association is complex and ambiguous, which is more fitting in view of a variety of experiences, myths, personal accounts, and philosophical speculations that make up their worldview and religious imagination. Indeed, it is in appeal to the many stories about cult statues from Greek and Roman antiquity that we see how realistic and direct Jewish concerns actually were. Their mockery was “legitimate” insofar as everyday people in the Hellenistic and Roman world tended to think that the statues of their gods were living and active. To underscore this point, then, I will take each major Jewish idol-polemic accusation and show that Greeks and Romans did, indeed, seem to hold these views.

A. *The Origin of the Cult Statue*

A very common line of reasoning in Jewish literature for the spurning of idol worship is the concern over the origins of the cult statue. Isaiah 44:13-20 narrates the irrationality of such obeisance in view of the base production of the object of worship:³⁰

The carpenter stretches a line, marks it out with a stylus, fashions it with planes, and marks it with a compass; he makes it in human form, with human beauty, to be set up in a shrine. He cuts down cedars or chooses a holm tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. Then it can be used as fuel. Part of it he takes and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Then he makes a god and worships it, makes a carved image and bows down before it. (Isa 44:13-17)

Jews ridiculed the idea that something divine could come from the same substance as wood for a fire. We see this same incredulity stated matter-of-factly in the *Letter of Aristeas*:

For it would be utterly foolish to suppose that any one became a god in virtue of his inventions. For the inventors simply took certain objects already created and by combining them together, showed that they possessed a fresh utility: they did not themselves create the substance of the thing, and so it is a vain and foolish thing for people to make gods of men like themselves. (136)

Philo takes what he assumes to be the foolish logic of pagans one step further by urging that it would make more sense to pray and sacrifice to the artisans of the statues and the materials of composition and production (anvils, hammers, engraving tools, measuring devices) than to the final products (*Dec.* 72).

³⁰ See Michael B. Dick, “Prophetic Parodies of Making the Cult Image,” in *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth: The Making of the Cult Image in the Ancient Near East* (ed. Michael B. Dick; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999) 1-53.

Obviously Plato, Horace, and certainly other pagan thinkers recognized the challenge posed by the humble origins of the cult statues of their religious heritage. Perhaps many everyday worshipers did not know the origins of their cult statues or simply did not care to know. For the more reflective, there was one way to approach this conundrum, namely, to regard the skilled artificer as holy. Spivey points to what we might call the “Daedalus effect”—attribution to a professional sculptor of nearly godlike abilities. He explains,

The artist displayed skill, *techne*, by his representation of the divine; he also demonstrated a mysterious semi-divine status—since to be able to *represent* the gods he must have “seen” them, if only in his mind’s eye. So Daedalus stands at the head of a tradition that imputes numinous insight to the artist, eventually pervading the Renaissance hagiographies of Giotto, Michelangelo *et al.*—the artist as a vehicle for divine communication, therefore a “divine maker” (*deus artifex*).³¹

Thus, Greeks and Romans could find ways to make sense of how a temple statue, hewn from earthly materials, could actualize the presence of the divine. Mere knowledge of this pagan idea of the *deus artifex* would surely not have silenced Jewish skepticism, but it does allow us to see that Jews were attacking an actual basis of belief for their pagan neighbors.

B. The Life of the Cult Statue

In Jewish tradition, the God of Israel is the only living and true God who breathed life into all creatures.³² In a number of OT texts, reference is made to an idol being devoid of “breath” or “spirit” (LXX: πνεῦμα; Jer 10:14; 51:17; Hab 2:19; Ps 135:17). The Wisdom of Solomon mentions that the statues of false gods do not even have nostrils, so they cannot breathe air (Wis 15:15). In the tale of *Joseph and Aseneth*, twice the gods of Aseneth are referred to as “dead and mute idols” (8.5; 12.6). Similarly, the *Didache* refers to idols as “dead gods” (6.3).

Did pagans think that their statues were alive? George L. Hersey addresses

³¹ Nigel Spivey, *Greek Sculpture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 61. Elsewhere, Spivey (“Bionic Statues,” 458) explains that the Greeks had a tradition whereby they attributed to certain artists *enthousiasmos* (“inspiration,” “enthusiasm”). Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz explain that, in the time of the Greek city-states, artists were not recognized or well respected, partly because of their work in manual labor, and partly based on the Platonic notion that a representation inevitably pales in comparison to the original (see *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: An Historical Experiment* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979] 38–60). Kris and Kurz argue that it was only beginning in the fourth century B.C.E. that this began to change and an appreciation for artists developed (detected, for example, in the works of Xenocrates and Duris).

³² See Richard Bauckham, “The ‘Most High’ God and the Nature of Early Jewish Monotheism,” in *Israel’s God and Rebecca’s Children: Christology and Community in Early Judaism and Christianity. Essays in Honor of Larry W. Hurtado and Alan F. Segal* (ed. David B. Capes et al.; Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007) 39–53, esp. 40–41.

this matter by giving attention to inscriptions found on statue pedestals. Such texts are often found in first person singular form, as if the statue were speaking directly to the passerby.³³ Much evidence will be provided below to show that many pagans thought that statues could move, talk, and give aid, but I will offer two important anecdotes here as “proof of life,” as it were, in the Greek and Roman minds. G. W. Bowersock offers a memorable account from Dio Cassius, who reported that the statue of Minerva (near Mutina) apparently could discharge both blood and milk (46.33.4).³⁴ Strabo reported that, when the statue of Trojan Athena (at Heracleia) witnessed worshipers being dragged away by hostile Ionians, she closed her eyes: “even today, the wooden image can be seen to close its eyes,” Strabo added (*Geogr.* 6.1.14).³⁵

C. *The Sensory Functions and Mobility of Cult Statues*

The Jewish legend called Bel and the Dragon narrates a series of interactions between Daniel and Cyrus the Persian, who worshiped the Babylonian god Bel. The narrator explains that the Babylonians fed the statue of Bel about one hundred gallons of flour, forty sheep, and sixty gallons of wine every day. When the king inquired as to why Daniel did not worship Bel, Daniel replied, “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” (5). The king addresses the suggestion that Bel is *not* living by pointing out his god’s voracious appetite. Daniel knows that the statue is nothing more than clay and bronze. The king puts a bet on it that will expose the liar as either Daniel or the priests of Bel.

Despite the fact that the priests of Bel use a special hidden door to enter the shrine at night and clandestinely consume all the choice food and drink, Daniel outsmarts them by secretly dusting the ground to reveal their footprints. With the ruse exposed and the king outraged at the deceit, Daniel is given permission to destroy the statue of Bel as well as its temple.

If this Daniel mocks the statue that cannot eat, so also the Epistle of Jeremiah ridicules the immobile idols: “Having no feet, they are carried on the shoulders of others, revealing to humankind their worthlessness (26a; see above). Also, the Wisdom of Solomon underscores the full scale of the idol’s worthlessness: “these have neither the use of their eyes to see with, nor their 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” (15.15).

³³ George L. Hersey, *Falling in Love with Statues: Artificial Humans from Pygmalion to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) 14.

³⁴ See G. W. Bowersock, “The Mechanics of Subversion in the Roman Provinces,” in *Opposition et résistances à l’empire d’Auguste à Trajan* (ed. Kurt Raaflaub et al.; Geneva: Fondation Hardt, 1987) 291-320.

³⁵ See Hersey, *Falling in Love with Statues*, 14.

While this comprehensive denunciation of idols might seem shocking to their pagan neighbors, it should be kept in mind that it was not the common experience for everyday Greek and Roman worshipers to converse with their cult statues and see them move. In fact, as Steiner puts it, "A host of semi-proverbial [Greek] expressions declares the nullity of the image: it frequently carries the epithets *akinētos* ('unmoving'), *apathēs* ('unfeeling'), *aphōnos* ('voiceless'); to be silent is to be like *tois chalkois andriasi* ('bronze images'); to lack feeling is to be a *bretas anaisthētos* ('unperceiving statue')." ³⁶

This is one area, then, where we might say that pagans did, in fact, know better than to believe statues are simply speaking, seeing, and moving all of the time. Greeks and Romans had a wider mythic understanding of petrification, where mortals and other living creatures are transformed into stone, demonstrating the tension between "fleet-footedness and fixity peculiar to the fashioned stone." ³⁷ Yet the matter is not so simple. One can find case after case where statues behave like living beings. Dionysius of Halicarnassus offers a report of a statue of Fortune who spoke to her supplicants "in Latin in a voice both distinct and loud," saying, "You have conformed to the holy law of the city, matrons, in dedicating me" (*Ant. rom.* 8.56.2-3). ³⁸ And, if statues can speak, it is presumed that they can hear, though we also have a story regarding a custom in Rome whereby the names of people entering the Capitoline temple were announced to Jupiter's statue, with mention also made of the time of day. ³⁹

In terms of movement, Dio Cassius reports that when Gaius Vibius Pansa departed from Pharsalus (Thessaly, 48 B.C.E.), the statue of the Mother of the Gods on the Palatine Hill turned its face from east to west and spat blood (46.43). In 38 B.C.E., during a Roman tax revolt, the statue of Virtus fell on its face as a sign of disappointment. Afterwards, it had to be purified in the sea on account of the sins of the people (*ibid.*). Perhaps no tale of a mobile statue is more peculiar and interesting than that of Apollo in Lucian's record. Lucian claims to be an eyewitness in a temple of Apollo. When the god desired to pronounce an oracle, the statue would walk over to a throne. If the priests did not immediately hoist the pedestal onto their shoulders, the statue would then sweat and begin to pace (*De Syria Dea* 36-37).

How is it possible that Greeks and Romans had this kind of contradictory perspective of cult statues—understanding them, on the one hand, as motionless and frozen and, on the other hand, as active and animate? Steiner offers a helpful theory. She argues that the statue *does* actualize the presence of a deity in the Greek

³⁶ Steiner, *Images in Mind*, 136. See, for follow-up references, Aeschines fr. 37 Dittmar; cf. Xenophon *Lac.* 3.5; Anaxandrides fr. 11KA; *Paroem. Gr.* 1.347.

³⁷ Steiner, *Images in Mind*, 138.

³⁸ See Bussels, *Animated Image*, 141.

³⁹ Rüpke, *Religion of the Romans*, 102-3. In addition, the historian Herodotus twice recounts how particular supplicants stood before an image of a goddess and prayed for someone else (1.31.6; 6.61.3).

world, but the stillness and silence of the statue are a reminder that a necessary gap still separates the world of the gods from the world of mortals. That the statue is typically unresponsive is a reminder that the god reveals himself or herself at will and not at the beck and call of suppliants.⁴⁰ It is as if the statue becomes a meeting place for devotee and deity, and the deity will choose to show up, sometimes with words and actions.

D. *The Efficacy of Idols*

The *Apocalypse of Abraham* portrays the young Abraham serving the gods of his father, Terah. The opening scene of the apocalypse borders on satirical:

Having entered their temple for the service, I found a god named Marumath, carved from stone, fallen at the feet of the iron god Nakhin. And it came to pass, that when I saw it my heart was perplexed and I thought in my mind that I, Abraham, could not put it back in its place alone, because it was heavy, (being made) of a big stone. But I went and told my father, and he came in with me. And when we both lifted it to put it in its place, its head fell off, even while I was holding it by its head. (1.3-4)

Later on, Abraham is sent to sell some cult statues. On his way, his donkey is frightened and, while running off, tosses the “gods” in tow. Three statues are crushed (2.4). Abraham, despondent and confused by the fragility of his objects of worship, reflects on the folly of his occupation and religion.

“What is this inequality of activity which my father is doing? Is it not he rather who is god for his gods, because they come into being from his sculpting, his planing, and his skill? They [the purchasers of the statues] ought to honor my father because they are his work. What is this food of my father in his works? Behold, Marumath fell and could not stand up in his sanctuary, nor could I myself lift him until my father came and we raised him up. And even so we were not able (to do it) and his head fell off of him. And he put it on another stone of another god, which he had made without a head. And . . . the other five gods which got smashed (in falling) from the ass, who could not save themselves and injure the ass because it smashed them, nor did their shards come up out of the river.” And I said to my heart, “If it is so, how then can my father’s god Marumath, which has the head of another stone and which is made from another stone, save a man, or hear a man’s prayer, or give him any gift?” (3.2-8)

This self-dialogue of the pensive Abraham reflects the common accusation made by Jews against pagans, that their statues are impotent—they cannot *save* themselves, so they cannot be expected to *save* anyone else (see 3:7 in particular).

The Epistle of Jeremiah is more overt in its mockery: they cannot “save” (διασῶζω) themselves from rust and corrosion and cannot even wipe dust off their faces (12-13). It goes on, “One of them holds a scepter, like a district judge, but is

⁴⁰ See Steiner, *Images in Mind*, 135-84.

unable to destroy anyone who offends it. Another has a dagger in its right hand, and an ax, but cannot defend itself from war and robbers" (14-15). Again, they cannot "save" (σῶζω) themselves from war or disaster (49). They neither choose leaders nor send rain (53). They cannot acquit the falsely charged (54). Without help, a temple fire will consume them (55). Perhaps the most derisive, but also the most incisive, comment made in the Epistle of Jeremiah regards a comparison of utility: "So it is better to be a king who shows courage, or a household utensil that serves its owner's need, than to be these false gods; better even the door of a house that protects its contents, than these false gods; better also a wooden pillar in a palace, than these false gods" (59).

This stinging denunciation is quite relevant for Greek and Roman religion, as a common philosophy of worship involves what Luke Timothy Johnson calls "participation in divine benefits." He explains this type of religiosity in this way:

The divine *dynamis* is conceived as available to humans in the empirical world: revealing through prophecy, healing through revelation, providing security and status through Mysteries, enabling and providing for the daily successes of individuals, households, cities, and empires.⁴¹

The expectation that a cult statue carries a central role of ensuring "security and success"⁴² is underscored by an oft-repeated story about a statue of Apollo. Apparently this deity threatened to abandon the city of Tyre on the eve of Alexander's attack. In reaction, the people attempted to prevent his flight by tying down his statue using cords of gold.⁴³ Statues of Athena or Zeus were often located on the acropolis in various cities as a protector who would watch from the hilltop.⁴⁴

Jaś Elsner refers to the "apotropaic" affects of cult statues, which could "bind wandering spirits and prevent them from troubling the land."⁴⁵ Elsner shares a tale regarding the image of Apollo (near Magnesia). According to Pausanias, the statue could give "strength equal to any task. The men sacred to the god leap down from sheer precipices and high rocks, and uprooting trees of exceeding height walk with their burdens down the narrowest of paths" (*Descr.* 10.32.6). Elsner includes

⁴¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Among the Gentiles: Greco-Roman Religion and Christianity* (AYBRL; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010) 46.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 50. See, similarly, Steiner, *Images in Mind*, 105: "they aim to make divinity emerge and act on behalf of those performing the rite."

⁴³ See Diodorus Siculus 17.41.7-8; Plutarch *Alex.* 24.5-8; Quintus Curtius Rufus 4.3.21-22. More examples of this sort of behavior are legion; see Pseudo-Lucian *Lucius* 41; Cicero *Scaur.* 23.46; Livy 38.43.4-5.

⁴⁴ Susan Guettel Cole, "Civic Cult and Civic Identity," in *Sources for the Ancient Greek City-State: Symposium, August 24-27, 1994. Acts of the Copenhagen Polis Centre 2* (ed. Mogens Herman Hansen; Historisk-filosofiske Meddelelser 72; Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1995) 292-325.

⁴⁵ Jaś Elsner, *Roman Eyes: Visuality and Subjectivity in Art and Text* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007) 31: "Numinous images may have miraculous effects on their beholders—not only healing . . . but also instilling remarkable qualities."

visions and prophetic and curative dreams as gifts of the gods as well which could be mediated through statues.⁴⁶

That is not to say that deities served at the bidding of the citizens. They could instill much fear as well. For example, Plutarch recounts the rituals associated with Artemis Soteria at Pellene. The local residents attest that the image "usually stands untouched, and when a priestess happens at any time to remove it and carry it out from the temple, nobody looks at it, but all turn their faces from it; for not only is the sight terrible and harmful to mankind, but it even makes the trees past which it has been carried become barren and cast their fruit" (Plutarch *Arat.* 32.2; cf. Pausanias *Descr.* 7.27.3). Hersey shares an interesting tale regarding a cult statue of Samos. This image of Hera was stolen from its temple by pirates. Once on board their ship, the statue prevented the boat from moving until it was removed. The residents of Samos who found it on the beach supposed that it had run away and proceeded to tie it to a willow tree.⁴⁷

This anecdotal evidence should be proof enough that Jews could make a relevant (albeit often sardonic) accusation against pagan idols that they cannot protect or bless because they are not real gods. This is, again, the most significant concern for Jews because, first, they believed that their God alone could save, and, second, pagans visited, fed, worshiped, prayed to, and even gave offerings of money in hopes of security and reward. The mantra of the Epistle of Jeremiah (e.g., 6:23, 29) is, therefore, memorable in this regard: *these are not gods, do not worship them*. They cannot hear, see, speak, or move because they are lifeless. If they are dead, they cannot save.

IV. Conclusion

What can we say, then, about Jewish and Christian idol polemic and Greco-Roman cult statue ontology? When the prophet or apostle says, "Do not worship these statues, they are not true deities," how would a Greek or Roman have understood this? It would seem that many biblical scholars have assumed that the pagan neighbors of the Jews would have simply agreed, explaining that the statue was merely a symbol or reminder of the invisible presence of the god. Now, perhaps we can say that the purpose, it would seem, of attributing to Greeks and Romans this differentiating viewpoint is borne out of an attempt to make these ancient worshipers seem less primitive and more sophisticated. There is nothing wrong with attempting to take an emic perspective and to think about the inner rationality

⁴⁶ Ibid., 42.

⁴⁷ See Hersey, *Falling in Love with Statues*, 17. Cf. Menodotus Samius (*Die Fragmente griechischen Historiker*, 541 F 1); a variant tradition is cited by Pausanias *Descr.* 7.4.4; see also Karl Meuli, "Die gefesselten Götter," in *Gesammelte Schriften* (ed. Thomas Gelzer; 2 vols.; Basel: Schwabe, 1975) 2:1060-61.

of a religious viewpoint. Yet, when we look at archaeological and Greco-Roman literary materials closely, as I have tried to do here, the matter is not as simple as some would make it seem.

We can say with good confidence that Greeks and Romans did *not* think that a deity exclusively and eternally existed as a statue in a temple. The preponderance of evidence, however, from a wide variety of authors, regions, and time periods, shows that the cult statue was treated with a unique ontology, as if a bridge between two worlds. It was considered, at least sometimes, to be alive and could be addressed as the god himself. Statues were regularly groomed and fed. They were often treated as living beings, whether being escorted to the toilet or taken away on a retreat. If early Jews and Christians can be faulted for unkind mockery and cruel exaggeration and hyperbole, that does not amount to a wholesale dismissal of their central concern: objects should never be worshiped because they are created works and not the Creator. While Greeks and Romans would have undoubtedly disagreed with this concern, by and large, I do not believe they would have found it a gross error for Jews to think that homage was paid by pagans to their god directly through a living and efficacious cult statue, an effigy they considered to have ampicosmic ontology.