

## **Exploring Idolatry in the Contemporary Era: Addressing Issues in Parenting and Worship**

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### **Introduction**

In Exodus 32, there was a blasphemous event among the Israelites, who were nearly demolished by the wrath of God. Idolatry is worshipping anything other than God. From the academic lens, idolatry holds its own historical and philosophical significance and complexity. In the modern era, idolatry has become dramatically complicated and has developed many forms. This article examines idolatry from various perspectives and provides insight into correctly acknowledging the worship of God. This article addresses specific concerns, especially for God-fearing mothers, like Jenny and Shuney, who are concerned about the “celebrity worship” of their children. Celebrity worship indicates that one is sightlessly obsessed with the star or celebrity.

### **Definition of Idolatry**

Idolatry is the act of worshipping anything that is not God and can be seen as stealing glory from God.<sup>1</sup> In Judaism and Christianity, idolatry lifts a person up or something else as God, which is forbidden in the Decalogue. Idolatry is clearly warned against in the Ten Commandments, particularly in the command, “You shall have no other gods before me.”<sup>2</sup> If people are greedy or lustful and value money or sex over God or what God provides

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin L. Gladd, “Sin as Idolatry,” The Gospel Coalition, Last modified July 11, 2024, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/sin-as-idolatry/>.

<sup>2</sup> The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, “Idolatry,” Encyclopedia Britannica, Last modified May 2, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/idolatry>.

for them, they are acting in an idolatrous manner.<sup>3</sup>

The essence of sin is idolatry, which is worshipping something instead of God. As creatures, human beings should not worship anything in creation, such as images, the self, or other things. The primal sin caused “cosmic tragedy,” leading humans into an unlimited temptation to get lost from the faith.<sup>4</sup> According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, idolatry involves divinizing other things into God’s position, including false gods, demons, power, pleasure, race, ancestors, or money.<sup>5</sup>

### Occurrences of Idol Worship

The first mention of idol worship in the Bible can be found in Genesis 31:19, which gives an example from Laban, Jacob’s father-in-law, involving his household gods. These household gods were idols from the indigenous religions in that ancient culture.<sup>6</sup> The first example of the entire nation of Israel engaging in idolatry is illustrated by their gathering to worship the golden calf while Moses was on Mount Sinai (Exod 32:1-6).<sup>7</sup>

As Oren Hayon, from Hebrew Union College, noted, finding a Hebrew term for “idolatry” is difficult. The difficulty arises from the fact that there is no original Hebrew word for “idolatry,” which is derived from Ancient Greek. The Hebrew Bible does not contain a specific word for idolatry, but

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<sup>3</sup> Daniela English, “Idolatry Definition, Examples & Bible,” Study.Com, Last modified 2022, <https://study.com/academy/lesson/idolatry-forms-examples.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin L. Gladd, “Sin as Idolatry,” The Gospel Coalition, Last modified July 11, 2024, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/sin-as-idolatry/>.

<sup>5</sup> Catholic Church, Catechism of the Catholic Church, accessed March 9, 2025, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_\\_\\_P7E.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P7E.HTM).

<sup>6</sup> Christian Pure Team, “Why Is Idolatry a Sin?,” Christian Pure, Last modified September 26, 2024, <https://www.christianpure.com/learn/idolatry-frequency-bible>.

<sup>7</sup> Olive Tree, “What Does the Bible Say about Idolatry?,” Olive Tree Blog, Last modified May 12, 2021, <https://www.olivetree.com/blog/what-does-the-bible-say-about-idolatry/>.

it does include concepts like *chata'ei giluleichen*, “Your idol sins,” which parallels the modern translation for idolatry. Furthermore, other Hebrew terms include *pesel*, *temunah*, *teraph*, *elil*, and *asherah*. However, it is difficult to define the exact word “idolatry” because of the nature of these Hebrew words.

When the Talmud began to be accepted and used by Jews, rabbis used the word *zarah*, which translates to “foreign worship,” to describe idolatry.<sup>8</sup> The term *avodah zarah* first appeared in the Mishna and was used throughout the book to denote idolatry. Jews have continued to use this word until today.

In a typical rabbinic perspective, Rabbi Reuven Firestone explained idolatry by starting with examining the perspective of a person who had an inexplicable religious experience. From stories of Elijah, Firestone also found identical descriptions of religious experiences that were often filled with anthropomorphic expressions. Also, God in the Tanakh was often portrayed as angry, loving, regretful, and sad.<sup>9</sup>

The description of the second commandment underscores the relationships of human beings by utilizing highly human-related language. From this perspective, idolatry indicates disloyalty, betrayal, and infidelity. However, one might ask this question: how does the small community of Israel have the right to proclaim that their own God is the true God? Why are neighbors like Milkom from the Ammonites, Kemosh from the Moabites, and Dagon from the Philistines not recognized as the true God, but the Israelites’ God is? The answer to these questions lies in the belief that the Israelites’ God is a universal creator who knows everything and is all-powerful, but other gods are not.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Haviva Pedaya, “The Dynamism of Idolatry,” essay, in *Idolatry: A Contemporary Jewish Conversation* Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2023, 213–31, 214.

<sup>9</sup> Reuven Firestone, “Prohibition of Idolatry” CCAR Press, Last modified January 1, 2020, [https://www.academia.edu/99481244/Prohibition\\_of\\_Idolatry](https://www.academia.edu/99481244/Prohibition_of_Idolatry), 30.

<sup>10</sup> Reuven Firestone, “Prohibition of Idolatry” CCAR Press, Last modified

Firestone recognized that making images or icons is a common practice in various religions and is a type of idolatry. Popular Greek philosophers challenged Jewish leaders to think about God with more reason. Wrong theology evolved into idolatry for the Jews, Muslims, and Christians. Today, the idea of idolatry — traditionally tied to making or worshiping images — is evolving into a more abstract, rational concept of God. Some interpret this shift as aligning with modern atheists who deny God's existence. Yet Jeremiah shows a different problem: people can create their own gods. There are no gods at all. Firestone suggests focusing on the small, humble faith rather than the arrogant, powerless propaganda.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Historical and Philosophical Jewish Perspective**

Naomi Janowitz explores what good Jews did not do, especially through the lens of idolatry's historical and philosophical framework. Janowitz elaborates on biblical injunctions and the Greco-Roman context of iconoclastic claims. Although the Bible is against making images, there are anthropomorphic representations of Yahweh. Also, sacrifices were made using ivory, terra-cotta, faience, and seals. An example in Scripture is the *teraphim*, small household idols, and the way Hosea demolished the cultic poles and pillars (Hosea 3:4, 10:1-2). Another example is a serpent-like image of Nehushtan, created by Moses and destroyed by Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:4). Janowitz argues that during the Second Temple era, the editors of Deuteronomy strongly denied image worship and foreign cult practices since they deemed that wax and wane dominance was the main reason for the destruction of the kingdom.<sup>12</sup>

In the Greco-Roman era, arguments about whether images could be used in worship developed. Pre-Socratic philosophers were frequently

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January 1, 2020, [https://www.academia.edu/99481244/Prohibition\\_of\\_Idolatry](https://www.academia.edu/99481244/Prohibition_of_Idolatry), 30.

<sup>11</sup> Firestone, "Prohibition of Idolatry," 31.

<sup>12</sup> Naomi Janowitz, "Good Jews Don't: Historical and Philosophical Constructions of Idolatry," *History of Religions* 47, no. 2/3 (November 2007): 239–52, doi:10.1086/524212, 243.

criticized for their traditional worship styles. Xenophanes mocked those who used images, claiming that God is immortal and does not need a physical form. Heraclitus also rejected the efficacy of worship through physical images. Later philosophers, like Clement, claimed that the understanding of God could not be represented in an image. Also, Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, mentioned that the temple was unnecessary since artisans built it. Judaism agreed with some of the premises of these philosophers in disagreeing with image-based worship. Jewish rabbis criticized the worship process of the native Greco-Roman practices, proclaiming that Judaism embodied a superior and purer philosophy over the worshippers who used statues. However, early Greek religions had their way of image worship, like using small statues in family rituals or big statues in public cults. Some other early Greek religions even worshipped the uncarved stone rather than the images of their gods.<sup>13</sup>

Janowitz abstracted the concepts of idolatry by utilizing psychoanalysis to explore its implications. The concept indicates a rejection of the world of the body and replaces it with the world of the mind, allowing no space for compromise. However, the interpretations of icons and idols change with different cultures, backgrounds, and images. Therefore, interpreting whether something is idolatrous can be highly relative.<sup>14</sup>

Oren Hayon explained why idolatry cannot be removed from history. He categorized idolatry into three areas: theological opinion as a pagan religion, economics as wealth, and social intercourse. The reason why Jews cannot abandon idolatry is that it contains an innovative nuance that appeals to their instinct about social groupishness. He describes it as a phantasm constructed for the social and evolutionary benefit of Jews. Idolatry remains in history because it can genuinely provide innovation in a way that fulfills social groupishness. To explain this opinion, consider the analogy of people refusing to drink a glass of water contaminated by cockroaches, even though the glass has been fully disinfected. This

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<sup>13</sup> Naomi Janowitz, "Good Jews Don't: Historical and Philosophical Constructions of Idolatry," *History of Religions* 47, no. 2/3 (November 2007): 239–52, doi:10.1086/524212, 245.

<sup>14</sup> Janowitz, "Good Jews Don't," 247.

highlights that nothing is completely pure, just as ancient belief systems are no longer seen as entirely pure today.<sup>15</sup>

### **Idolatry in the New Testament**

The authors of the New Testament discussed idolatry. According to Joel Marcus, idolatry in the New Testament is recognized as the continuous prohibition from the Decalogue of the Old Testament and Jewish traditions (Exod 20:2-5). In the Jewish tradition of the Old Testament, idolatry was worshipping a false God because Israel recognized no other God except the God of Israel. Idolatry was already a taboo in the Old Testament era and remained in the New Testament period. It has been difficult for Christians to make a clean and thorough break from idolatry, even to this day.<sup>16</sup>

Marcus notes that one serious issue is that idol worshippers often have no restrictions on sexual matters. This behavior was a serious problem for both Jews and Christians, especially the pregnancy and marriage with a Gentile, which could potentially turn the community into idolatry. This type of idol worshipper, featured in licentiousness, often causes moral transgressions based on the idolatrous foundation of fornication (Wisd 14:12-31). That is why fornication is another form of idolatry in the New Testament.<sup>17</sup>

Second, idol worship can also be tied to money by making it the source of peace and happiness. In the context of the New Testament, mammon was not translated as it is nowadays, since there was already confusion between worshipping money and worshipping the Emperor. The Emperor governs the state and mints the currency, just like the golden eagle on Jerusalem's temple roof. However, Jesus replied in Mark 12:16-17, saying that one should give Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God. Jesus' answer gives a sense of ambiguity, as if he created another world of worshipping Caesar. However, these two forms of worship

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<sup>15</sup> Oren J Hayon, "Rethinking Idolatry" thesis, 2004, 63.

<sup>16</sup> Joel Marcus, *Idolatry In The New Testament*, 2006, 152-64, 152.

<sup>17</sup> Marcus, *Idolatry In The New Testament*, 155.

are different since one must obey God rather than human beings (Acts 5:29). Early Christians acknowledged this problem based on this verse. However, this idol worship issue is still unresolved nowadays.<sup>18</sup>

The third concept is the consumption of food for idols. In 1 Corinthians 8 and 10, there is a contradiction, as Paul gives substantial restrictions on avoiding idol worship. However, the author deems that Paul's focus is primarily on the faith of the weak brother, which could easily be affected. Food sacrificed to idols in chapter 8 is a neutral moral issue, but in chapter 10, it becomes harmful to the Christian faith. In 1 Corinthians 8:4, Paul recognizes that the food of idols is nothing, although it can become a hindrance to love.<sup>19</sup>

Brittany E. Wilson discusses the concept of idolatry in Luke and Acts, specifically the concept of visibility. Wilson recognizes that Luke thinks God is invisible, as he illustrated in Acts 7:2 and Luke 2:9. The research included a discussion of Stephen's preaching, Paul's statement at the Areopagus, and the accusation by the silversmith Demetrius against Paul regarding idols in Acts 19. Wilson found that Luke's description of the divine images mainly works to distinguish those who worship foreign gods from God's people. In Act 7, Luke used the word "idol" to indicate the rejection of Moses and the people's desire to return to Egypt. Stephan's preaching describes theophanies as God's appearance to Abraham (7:2) and a vision of God during Stephen's preaching (7:55-56). Therefore, Wilson claims that the image in chapter 17 indicates not visibility but tactility in idol-making. It is not harmful when Luke describes visibility from Wilson's perspective, since Stephen saw heaven open and the glory of the Son of God.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, the hand of God is the indication for the creation of the heavens and earth (Isa 66:1-2). It is an anthropomorphic metaphor,

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<sup>18</sup> Marcus, *Idolatry In The New Testament*, 155.

<sup>19</sup> Marcus, *Idolatry In The New Testament*, 160.

<sup>20</sup> Brittany E. Wilson, "Imaging the Divine: Idolatry and God's Body in The Book of Acts," *New Testament Studies* 65, no. 3 (May 2, 2019): 353-70, doi:10.1017/s0028688519000109, 364.

indicating that God's body should be higher than the place where human beings were created or beyond human perception. Therefore, God's paternity and body illustrate that he does not reside in human-made houses and images. It means from Luke's description in Acts that God is depicted as a being beyond human visibility, but it does not imply that God is entirely invisible. It suggests that early Christians may not have acknowledged God's divinity in intangible ways, indicating that visibility could be a barrier to understanding it.<sup>21</sup>

### **Why is the Lord against Idolatry?**

The answer to why God is against idolatry leads us to ask who God is. God is Holy. In Exodus 3, God revealed himself to Moses through the burning bush on Mount Horeb, the “mountain of God.” God instructed Moses to take off his sandals because the place he was standing was holy. What made the ground holy? Mount Sinai has no special character that makes it holy. It is because of the presence of God that the mountain was made holy. As soon as Moses heard God proclaim, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob,” he hid his face because he was afraid to look at God. The cause of Moses’ fear was not because of the burning bush but from the revelation of God’s presence. The very presence of God is holy.

In Exodus 24:9-10, the elders, Moses, and Aaron went up to the mountain and had a vision of the God of Israel. It was mentioned that under the feet of God was a pavement made of lapis lazuli. They can only describe the pavement made of a blue gemstone, as bright blue as the sky! Lapis lazuli continues to be used in jewelry today and was highly prized for thousands of years because of its bright blue color.<sup>22</sup> If the pavement where

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<sup>21</sup> Wilson, “Imaging the Divine: Idolatry and God’s Body in The Book of Acts,” 370

<sup>22</sup> Joel E. Arem, “Lapis Lazuli Value, Price, and Jewelry Information,” International Gem Society, Last modified October 7, 2024, <https://www.gemsociety.org/article/lapis-lazuli-jewelry-and-gemstone-information/>.

the form of God was standing was described in such excellent terms, how much more would God's image be? The description gives us a thoughtful idea in visualizing the Holy God we worship if we see him face to face. However, because God is holy, he is beyond comparison and is indescribable. There is no one like him.

### *Careful Instruction about Idolatry*

In Exodus 19, God instructed Moses to descend from Mount Sinai to go to the people and consecrate them in preparation for meeting with God on the mountain (v. 10). Several rituals were to be done as part of the process of consecration (vv. 10-15). The process of consecration is essential for the Israelites, for it describes how they are to be holy: “devoted solely to the service and worship of God.”<sup>23</sup> The Lord requires his chosen people to be sanctified, or purified, as they approach him for worship and before receiving the law.

When God handed the tablet of the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai, two of the laws related to idolatry were: 1) to have no other gods before the Lord, and 2) not to make an image in the form of anything and bow down or worship them (Exodus 20:3-4). In Deuteronomy 4, Moses again reminded the Israelites to follow the decrees and laws the Lord gave them so they might live (v. 1). He encouraged them to carefully observe so that other nations could see the wisdom God bestowed to his chosen nation (v. 6). Moses also taught them to avoid being corrupted, which could cause them to make idols and images (v. 16). And he emphasized the significance of teaching the next generation about God’s laws and decrees so that they might not forget who the Lord is as they took possession of the promised land (v. 25). God required his chosen people to walk in obedience and reverence to him.

In addition, the Lord instructed the Israelites in Deuteronomy 7:3-4 not to intermarry with the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. The reason behind this command was that these tribes served and worshipped idols, and intermarriage would lead the

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<sup>23</sup> Anna Phuong, “Exodus,” Academia.Edu, Last modified February 14, 2017, <https://www.academia.edu/31422870/Exodus>, 407.

Israelite's' children to internalize false beliefs. Failure to obey the Lord's command would result in punishment, including destruction from God's wrath.

### *Punishment for Committing Idolatry*

Deuteronomy 4:25-26 mentions that if the Israelites act corruptly and violate the first two commandments, the punishment would be destruction and they would be scattered. In Deuteronomy 13, even a prophet or a dreamer who convinced the Israelites to worship other gods should be put to death. God spared no one, including even a family member who enticed his siblings or parents to worship other gods. They would be demolished by being stoned to death (Deut. 13:6). A city filled with people convincing the Israelites to worship other gods must be investigated, and if it was found out they were leading the people to idolatry, they should be put to death by a sword, their livestock be destroyed, and the place burned down, ruined, and never to be rebuilt (Deut. 13:12-16).

Death was the ultimate consequence or punishment for idolatry mentioned in Deuteronomy (Deut. 4:26, 7:4, 8:20). While God did not solely focus on punishment, disobedience had consequences. Punishment came after failure to obey the commands given to the Israelites. Although the punishment could last up to the third and fourth generation, God's favor is extended to thousands of generations who love and worship him (Exo. 20:5-6; Deut. 5:9-10). God is just, yet he is also loving and merciful (Deut. 4:31).

## **Idolatry in the Contemporary World**

Modern forms of idolatry are rampant all over the world today. Many people are obsessed with material possessions like properties, houses, cars, money, investments, business, and careers. The current generation cannot live without a mobile phone, as if it has become their lifeline. Mobile phones often become the first thing we touch when we wake up and the last thing we see before sleep. Younger generations are hooked up with K-pop idols, K-dramas, artists, and music bands, feeling the need to stay updated all the time on the lives of their idols. Some blindly follow mentors or leaders

despite their crooked actions or behavior.

Additionally, some people tend to idolize their relationships, with their spouse or family members becoming the center and ultimate reason for their existence. This kind of idolatry is how the taglines “I cannot live without you” and “my life revolves around you” were created. Self-centeredness is also a form of idolatry wherein a person seeks entitlement to satisfy one's ego. Unfortunately, some Christians have fallen into the trap of these kinds of idolatry as well. Christians have allowed themselves to be enticed by the world's pleasures, frequently prioritizing other things rather than worshipping God and living a Christlike life.

### *Distinction between Celebrity Worship and Idol Worship*

Chau-kiu Cheung and Xiao Dong Yue conducted research about the Idolatry between Absorption-Addiction Idolatry (AAI) and Identification-Emulation Idolatry (IEI). Their study was based on a sample of one thousand three hundred and ten secondary school and university students. There are three factors in AAI: entertainment or socializing, personalizing, and obsession with the idol; and five factors in IEI: identification, attachment, romanticization, idealization, and consumption.<sup>24</sup>

The study concluded that female youth are more likely than male youth to engage in celebrity worship. Furthermore, the result indicates that idol worship reached its highest level. The explanation of the identification is a model of internalization for learning and personal growth.<sup>25</sup> However, celebrity worship is not about identification but rather a lucrative form of worship constructed by the entertainment industry.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Chau-kiu Cheung and Xiao Dong Yue, “Idols as Sunshine or Road Signs: Comparing Absorption-Addiction Idolatry with Identification-Emulation Idolatry,” *Psychological Reports* 122, no. 2 (February 22, 2018): 411–32, doi:10.1177/0033294118758903, 413-14.

<sup>25</sup> Cheung and Yue, “Idols as Sunshine or Road Signs: Comparing Absorption-Addiction Idolatry with Identification-Emulation Idolatry,” 415

<sup>26</sup> Cheung and Yue, “Idols as Sunshine or Road Signs: Comparing Absorption-Addiction Idolatry with Identification-Emulation Idolatry,” 426

*Idol Worship as Celebrity Worship*

Kun Li conducted a qualitative study on the significance of celebrity worship among college students. The researcher intended to acknowledge the dynamics behind fifteen Chinese college students in three aspects: the way of celebrity worship, the role model of celebrities, and the significance of celebrity worship. The results clarified that the students were seeking self-development and personal characteristics from celebrities. Furthermore, celebrity worship impacted the students in various ways, such as emotions, spiritual support, personality, and relationships. The students did not feel they experienced negative influences while following celebrities. For the researcher, celebrities play essential roles in inspiring younger generations.<sup>27</sup>

In the research, Kun Li explained why college students worship celebrities professionally, physiologically, and publicly. For them, celebrities always have excellent personalities and professional abilities that are enough to influence society. Their appearance and pleasant voice provide sensory enjoyment to the watchers. Some celebrities benefit their fans and supporters by transforming the public image of these fans. These are the main reasons why college students have a propensity for celebrity worship.<sup>28</sup>

Fan communities have educational roles, such as engaging in social public welfare and charity work, as encouraged by their celebrities. Celebrity worship encourages fan members to take on responsibility and develop skills in areas like event planning, poster designing, copywriting, video editing, etc.

Even though celebrity worship might have certain positive effects for teenagers, negative consequences are far more serious.<sup>29</sup> From a behavioral

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<sup>27</sup> Kun Li, "A Qualitative Study on the Significance of Idol Worship of College Students," *Cultural Communication and Socialization Journal* 3, no. 1 (2022): 01–07, doi:10.26480/ccsj.01.2022.01.07, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Li, "A Qualitative Study on the Significance of Idol Worship of College Students," 5.

<sup>29</sup> Siqin Xie, "The Relationship between Peer Influence and Teenagers'

perspective, teenagers may waste money and experience poor academic performance or anxiety about school. They might thoughtlessly imitate lavish lifestyles and contradictory virtues like the attitude toward love and marriage. In some cases, they might copy the behavior of their celebrity, leading to irreversible results. Furthermore, celebrity worship can stimulate feelings of anxiety, depression, and social phobia, especially when the celebrity is belittled and mocked. Furthermore, celebrity worshippers often show endless forgiveness to their celebrities, even if the behavior of these celebrities is immoral and illicit.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, building self-assurance and self-awareness is significant for teenagers. Providing clear guidance for their participation in society meets the desire for autonomy and involvement. Pastors can nurture teenagers to develop positive morals and ethics. Parents should understand teenagers' emotional needs and observe their inner world to address them adequately. Society, too, can create a positive atmosphere that empowers the growth of teenagers.<sup>31</sup>

### *Resolution on Celebrity Worship for Parents*

Qi Liu conducted quantitative research to provide guidance for the parents about how to nurture their children's star-chasing behavior. Liu recognized that entertainment companies intentionally target young audiences. This manipulation can make youth struggle with self-control and act irrationally in pursuit of celebrities. Therefore, effective parenting is important since a negative parenting style can stress youth and lead to unfavorable results.<sup>32</sup>

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Celebrity Worship Phenomenon,” *Frontiers in Educational Research* 4, no. 12 (2021), doi:10.25236/fer.2021.041219, 88.

<sup>30</sup> Xie, “The Relationship between Peer Influence and Teenagers’ Celebrity Worship Phenomenon,” 92

<sup>31</sup> Xie, “The Relationship between Peer Influence and Teenagers’ Celebrity Worship Phenomenon,” 93

<sup>32</sup> Qi Liu, “The Relationship between Parenting and Students’ Star-Chasing Behaviours,” *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences* 12 (April 19, 2023): 53–59, doi:10.54097/ehss.v12i.7598, 53.

Each of the four parenting styles, authoritarian, authoritative, doting, and neglected, has an attitude determined by the level of control. Authoritarian parenting is strict. The authority is controlled in a reasonable and democratic manner. Doting is less restrained and involves less control, with freedom for children to talk freely about their feelings. Neglectful parenting is inactive parenting. Quantitative research involving 515 parent and teacher participants showed that authoritarian parenting produces more fanatical students, resulting in a strong inclination towards star-chasing behaviors. The neglectful parenting style resulted in a lack of love and attention, contributing to increased star-chasing behavior. In contrast, the doting parenting style has less impact since the youth has skills of discernment when engaging in star-chasing behavior. The least impact for star-chasing behaviors is the authoritative parenting style since parents maintain reasonable and democratic control.<sup>33</sup>

Qiu li's suggestion about star worship for parents is to guide their children in nurturing a foundation of infinite love for their pursuits. Stars can become role models for the youth, inspiring them to learn and develop their skills through the motivation of their stars. However, toxic celebrity worship should be avoided to foster self-confidence and self-esteem. The primary task for parents is to support their children's psychological and social maturity.<sup>34</sup>

### **Categories of Idol Worship in the Contemporary Era**

#### *Idolatry—Greed*

Brian S. Rosner has developed an idea about idolatry that focuses on the issue of greed. Initially, he provided two models of idolatry in relation to greed from the Bible based on the relationship between God and people. The first model uses anthropomorphic metaphors to illustrate this relationship, focusing on two types: marital and political. From the

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<sup>33</sup> Liu, "The Relationship between Parenting and Students' Star-Chasing Behaviours," 54

<sup>34</sup> Liu, "The Relationship between Parenting and Students' Star-Chasing Behaviours," 56

perspective of the marital relationship, sin can be seen as betrayal, particularly in the circumstances in Exodus and the Prophets, especially Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. The second model is the relationship between the king and his people. The sinful political relationship between God and people is depicted as distrust and infidelity.

An example is Samuel's disappointment when the people demanded that he install a king. Also, numerous descriptions in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel indicate human kingship as another kind of idolatry. In Revelation, God is described on the throne, representing power in religious terms and indicating his ultimate sovereignty instead of human rulers.<sup>35</sup>

Rosner introduces an additional model of idolatry as greed. The story of a wealthy young man can provide proof of this perspective. In Colossians 3:5, greed is equated with idolatry. In Ephesians 5:5, the greedy person is indicated as an idolater. In Matthew 6:24 and Luke 16:14, the concept of mammon can be a form of idolatry. In 1 Timothy 6:17, the rich do not trust God. Hebrews 13:5-6 reminds the readers not to love money. Greed can also manifest itself in oppressive power that ignores social justice.<sup>36</sup> Thus, greed is a form of idolatry because it interrupts God's exclusive rights to human love, trust, and obedience.

### *Idolatry—Possession*

Regina Schwartz recognized that idolatry can lead to violence. Idolatry focuses on the desire for possession, which can cause doubt among believers, particularly when reflecting on the story of Cain and Abel. One might wonder why God did not bless both Cain and Abel. The question can also be asked of the story of Esau and Jacob. These stories might lead the believer to doubt monotheism, as they can be seen as promoting exclusion and intolerance. However, Schwartz claims that believers might wrongly explain monotheism, encouraging justification for violence and exile. Schwartz holds that the origin of this wrong belief lies in the sinful instinct

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<sup>35</sup> Brian S. Rosner, "The Concept of Idolatry," *Themelios*, May 1999, 21–30, 25.

<sup>36</sup> Rosner, "The Concept of Idolatry," 28

of possession.<sup>37</sup> This temptation is identical to the temptation of Adam and Eve: wanting to claim ownership. Eve sinned because she longed to possess the world through the forbidden fruit what she wanted to possess originated from God, who is our provider. An incorrect understanding of the narratives could lead to violence, which is another form of idolatry. Idolatry in these stories was more than a visual representation of an object, statue, or painting; it was the incorrect understanding of the world as God's possession.

### *Idolatry—Local Tradition*

Luke Ijezie, a Catholic scholar, tried to acknowledge the idolatrous practices in the contemporary context of Africa, particularly among the Igbo people. Traditionally, Igbo people have a polytheistic nature from their tradition, worshipping demigods and powerful deities. However, with the arrival of Christian evangelization, the Igbo people started to believe in Jesus Christ and the role of the priest. However, the impact of the indigenous idols has remained strong. For example, a priest believed that Arusi, a god of misbehavior, encouraged people to misbehave. Another chief priest of the Ulu deity stubbornly refused to change the calendar to the contemporary one.<sup>38</sup> Ijezie recognized that awareness, fostering dialogue at all community levels, and total commitment to care are the key steps in overcoming this idolatrous worshipping tradition.<sup>39</sup>

From his personal experience, Professor Jin invited a guest speaker to class, who is an Indonesian Christian. Her father-in-law was a Hazrat, and her mother-in-law was a Catholic believer. They have four sons growing up in both contexts. Before meals, her father-in-law would go to the front gate near a tiny dome and pray, while her mother-in-law would pray at the back

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<sup>37</sup> Regina Schwartz, "The Violence of Idolatry," *The Bible and Critical Theory* 4, no. 1 (February 2008), doi:10.2104/bc080002, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Luke Emehiele Ijezie, "The Catholic Priest in a New Vicious-Idolatrous Culture and Society," *Biblical and Intercultural Research and Development* 7 (2023): 41–65, 46.

<sup>39</sup> Ijezie, "The Catholic Priest in a New Vicious-Idolatrous Culture and Society," 59.

gate near a small statue of Maria. After their prayers, they would eat together. They decided to let their eldest son and second son be Catholics, and their third and fourth son be raised as Muslims. The fourth son was the guest speaker's husband. After their marriage, the husband converted to Christianity. The guest speaker was a professor at a Bible school in Indonesia. She has concerns about the way her husband prays. Although her husband learned how to pray in a Christian way, his prayers contain the stance of an Islamic prayer since they include a prayer for their ancestors to go to heaven after their death, which is contradictory to the Christian prayer. Furthermore, Indonesian culture generally forbids women from teaching men within their family. To deal with this, she has created a space to nurture the Christian faith with her husband's pastor and has kept praying for her husband.

### *Idolatry—Approval-Driven Identity*

Nowadays, with the development of technology, behavior like idolatry is a reality and present in social media. Steven Lee delivered a new perspective on identity concerning idolatry. In the era of post-modernity, Christianity needs clarity because living without God is “a failure of imagination” or a “disenchantment” formed by a transactional, pragmatic, and utilitarian mindset. Various things, idols, and egocentric ideas replace God. One of the famous identities in the modern era is the Approval-Driven identity. The people who create social media realities create and maintain this identity, causing insecurities and deep desires in individuals. Therefore, people seeking approval from social media prioritize appearance and enjoyment over helping others or being honest. Another risk of approval-driven identity is the ambiguity sensor in distinguishing reality from social media. In other words, Approval-driven identity encourages an egocentric lifestyle.<sup>40</sup>

In the Bible, God's truth is eternal and different from the shifting values of the world. The world is constantly changing, and Christians believe in

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<sup>40</sup> Steven Lee, “Embodied Idolatry: Idolatry as Approval Seeking in The Social Media Age,” *Research Gate* thesis, 2021, 24. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/353350333\\_EMBODIED\\_IDOLATRY\\_IDOLATRY\\_AS\\_APPROVAL\\_SEEKING\\_IN\\_THE\\_SOCIAL\\_MEDIA\\_AGE](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/353350333_EMBODIED_IDOLATRY_IDOLATRY_AS_APPROVAL_SEEKING_IN_THE_SOCIAL_MEDIA_AGE), 32.

an unchanging truth. The way of the world can never align with the ways of God. Christians are called to love their neighbors as themselves. Approval-Driven identity becomes much more selfish and self-centered, resembling a form of addiction. Faithless behavior can nurture selfish and self-centered characters, resulting in a worthless life. Love for Christians should focus on experiencing an abundant life for eternity. The life of a Christian should bring glory to God and be accompanied by Christ. Without God's authority, power, and purpose, an Approval-seeking identity is impossible to overcome death, experience true glory, and undergo transformation.<sup>41</sup>

### *Idolatry—Consuming Love*

Hippolyto Tshimanga mentioned that churches are not paying attention to three main contemporary images of idolatry. Tshimanga reflected on God's self-introduction to Moses, underscoring that God is the reason we should live. Also, God's comment in Exodus. 20:1-5 illustrates the definition of idolatry. Tshimanga thinks that idolatry has many forms and hides reality, involving movements like occult sciences, financial capitalism, a system like investors sitting on stockpiles instead of creating jobs, and unhealthy family dynamics as a distorted and consuming model of love. Consuming models of love means "If I can not have her, nobody can." This leads to "passionate killing."<sup>42</sup> Tshimanga assured that the church must identify these damaging relational patterns that lead to destruction, but also embrace a divine task to achieve human well-being (Eph 3:10). He advocates for an economic system that serves humanity rather than causing destruction. The church should behave like a fully human value and work to transform unjust social orders.<sup>43</sup>

### *Idolatry—Forgetting God*

Richard Ehusani discussed idolatry as the act of forgetting God. The

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<sup>41</sup> Lee, "Embodied Idolatry: Idolatry as Approval Seeking in The Social Media Age," 37.

<sup>42</sup> Hippolyto Tshimanga, "Contemporary Images of Idolatry," *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology*, 2011, 34-42, 37.

<sup>43</sup> Tshimanga, "Contemporary Images of Idolatry," 41.

essence of Deuteronomy stresses the significance of remembering what God has done for Israel (7:18,8:2,8:11,9:7). The act of remembrance in Deuteronomy is tied to the act of worshiping God. It takes effort to counteract the natural tendency of the human mind to forget, so that the “Second law” given to the Israelites before they go into the Promised Land was to remind them not to forget the One who brought them out from Egypt and reinforce the existence of the covenant between the Israelites and God.<sup>44</sup>

Ehusani emphasizes that idolatry is the act of worshiping another god other than the true God. It involves focusing on matters that eventually lead to resistance against God. Therefore, the idea of remembering God became significant for Moses. The instruction when faced with the act of idolatry is elimination (7:1-5,12:2-4). In order for Israel to avoid forgetting, four models are warned against in Deuteronomy: disobedience, arrogance, materialism, and idol worship. These attitudes lead to apostasy, forgetting the history of God, losing dependency on God, and developing ungodly behavior. Therefore, remembering God is the first lesson for believers, guiding them away from the temptation of pride, self-centeredness, greed, and gluttony.<sup>45</sup>

### *Idolatry—Postmodernism*

Tim Keller stressed two forms of idolatry from a postmodern perspective. Keller started by defining sin as establishing life from anything except God, which is the primary form of idolatry. The issue with postmodernism is its self-righteousness, since postmodernists believe they have the power to define their own beliefs. The standard for justification changes from God to individuals or collective perspectives, just as the Pharisees forced Jesus Christ on the Cross. The second is relativism, which

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<sup>44</sup> Richard Ehusani, *Remembering and Forgetting God: Towards an Expanded Definition of Idolatry in Deuteronomy*, 2025, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/388375661\\_Remembering\\_and\\_Forget ting\\_God\\_Towards\\_an\\_Expanded\\_Definition\\_of\\_Idolatry\\_in\\_Deuteronomy](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/388375661_Remembering_and_Forget ting_God_Towards_an_Expanded_Definition_of_Idolatry_in_Deuteronomy), 2.

<sup>45</sup> Ehusani, *Remembering and Forgetting God: Towards an Expanded Definition of Idolatry in Deuteronomy*, 3

prioritizes self-worth and happiness instead of God. These types of idolatries can lead to negative results like addictions, anxiety, and jealousy.<sup>46</sup>

### *Idolatry—Pride*

R. R. Reno explored idolatry from the perspective of primal sin as developed by Augustine. The focus is on the desire. Whether or not it is the desire to steal or murder, there is always a motivation behind the sin. Reno recognized Augustine's examples as the desire to serve the self.<sup>47</sup> Pride is defined as self-love that leads people to destruction (Prov 16:18). The Bible is not talking about self-love, centered on self-sufficiency, worshiping false gods, and following our hearts as the divine principles. The priority of a believer should be God instead of self-love, as stated by the second commandment (Exod 20:4-5). The structure of idolatry can be seen as the failure of the finite good and the prideful meditation and imagination about God.

Reno also listed some philosophers who emphasized the significance of the self. Reno conceded the enlightenment as a way of pride. From Kant's perspective, reasonableness can produce a well-structured moral system that can replace the traditional religious system. Voltaire recognized injustice and criticized the inhumanity of the religious system, which needs to be managed based on reason. Also, Bertrand Russell and Jean-Jacques Rousseau highlighted the special vocation of individuals to live their path. However, finding peace from a restless heart is impossible, particularly in a world that utilizes rational capacity.<sup>48</sup> From Augustine's perspective, the futility of reason or self-love leads to a state of slavery to objective desires. Inflexible rationalism and authenticity from different goals can result in a

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<sup>46</sup> Tim Keller, "Talking about Idolatry in a Postmodern Age," Monergism.com Blog, Last modified 2007, <https://www.monergism.com/talking-about-idolatry-postmodern-age>.

<sup>47</sup> R. R. Reno, "Pride and Idolatry," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 60, no. 2 (April 2006): 167–80, doi:10.1177/002096430606000204, 169.

<sup>48</sup> Reno, "Pride and Idolatry," 178

rationalism originating from self-love.

Pride from self-love focused on happiness originates from objective desire and self-love, which can be acknowledged as the graven image of idolatry, violating the Decalogue.

### **What is Proper Worship?**

#### *Worship in the Pentateuch*

The word "worship" was first mentioned in Genesis when Abraham was about to go to the mountain to sacrifice Isaac. He wanted his servants to wait until he finished the sacrifice (Gen 22:5). Worship is also found in Exodus, which tells how Moses brought the people out of Egypt and worshiped God on the mountain. Moreover, the list goes on. The term has been used multiple times in the Bible, but what does it mean for us?

The most common Hebrew word translated as worship is *shachah*, which means "to lie prostrate with face touching the ground" or "to bow down." In the Bible, we can observe the Jews' elaborate methods of worship. One is that there was only a specific place where people could worship and offer sacrifices. During the time of Moses, the Israelites worshiped at the tabernacle, a portable tent that would travel with them until the Temple of Solomon was built. Until Jesus' time, the center of Jewish worship was primarily in Jerusalem, as mentioned in John 4:20. Second, no one is to come to the Lord's presence with their uncleanness. They must offer sacrifices to atone for their sins, which, as Leviticus describes, was to be done through animal killing. Lastly, only the priest is allowed to enter the holy of holies. Given all these things, it may seem like worship is a set of monotonous duties or tasks, but in reality, it is far more than a ritual.

#### *Worship in Spirit and in Truth*

The Samaritan woman's encounter with Jesus by the well in John 4 gives a deeper understanding of the importance and meaning of worship. In this chapter, Jesus described worship in Spirit to the woman, that we can worship God anywhere (John 4:21). God is omnipresent and cannot be confined to a location. Moreover, because of Christ, all believers can now

worship God, Jews or Gentiles. All God's children gain equal access to the Father. Jesus then continues in verse 23, saying that true worship means to worship God the Father in the Spirit. So the question is, how do we worship the Lord in Spirit and truth?

To worship God is to love him completely. In Deuteronomy 6:4, Moses taught the Israelites how to love their God: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and with all your might." The word "might" in Hebrew indicates totality, meaning we should love God with everything we have; no reservations. Worshiping in Spirit and truth involves engaging the heart, but it must be properly informed. Worship centered on emotion leads to shallow and instinct-based worship. As the emotion cools down, the worship will follow the state of the emotion. Therefore, it is necessary to have the correct knowledge to worship God instead of a wrong view of God. Both knowledge and emotion are important for God-honoring worship. The more we know about God, the more we appreciate and love him.

### *Worship as a Lifestyle*

Jenny shared her testimony in the group presentation like this:

I grew up Catholic and was an active church attendee. I went to church every Sunday and attended processions and other church-related events as I saw necessary. All I knew about God back then was that he should be worshipped because he is God. I did not have a personal relationship with him. He was no more than a God I can pray to and a God I can run to when times get tough. Fast forward, and I was born again. I didn't know that there was so much more to Christianity as a religion. I met Jesus, and I've never been happier. But it was also more than an emotion. As I got to know him, I realized how sinful and unworthy I am. Little by little, I surrendered the things that were not pleasing to him. I am being transformed from the inside out, from grace to grace. Worship changed and continuously changed me. It was more than attending church. It was a relationship that brought out the best in me, as God intended.

True worship involves getting to know the God you worship, submitting to his Lordship over your life, and falling more in love with him in the process.

### **We Become What We Worship**

G. K. Beale delivers a foundational biblical way to deal with idolatry: to acknowledge the creator of this world.<sup>49</sup> From Beale's perspective, idol worship is an anesthetic process where believers become numb to the truth. This process can be found in the false teachings about market-driven, self-fulfillment, and ego-centric life. However, the focus should be on God instead of our perception. It is important to understand that God is the creator and the one who restores and redeems us. Healing and restoration are from God instead of pursuing a distorted identity shaped by social groups or peers. God has the power to make us new. He will reform, transform, and remake the image of God for believers. Eventually, history will culminate in the resurrection of all Christians, who reflect God's image in Christ (1 Cor 15:45-54; Phil 3:20-21).<sup>50</sup> Finally, this means we will become like what we worship.

### **Conclusion**

To the modern person, idolatry feels like a quaint idea that has shifted down through literature from ancient times. Its distinctly religious implications often make people uncomfortable, and so they dismiss it as no longer relevant to their lives. Even Christians tend to view idolatry as something that does not impact their daily lives unless they live in a culture where the dominant religion incorporates the use of images and statues in its worship. Part of what makes idolatry easy to dismiss is the faulty assumption that idolatry has a simple explanation and is easily understood.

As stated earlier, "Idolatry is the act of worshipping anything that is not God," and "Idolatry uplifts a person or something else instead of God." This seems simple to state, but a closer look at Scripture and the works of theologians, scholars, and philosophers reveals that the existence of idolatry

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<sup>49</sup> Anna Phuong, "Exodus," Academia.Edu, Last modified February 14, 2017, <https://www.academia.edu/31422870/Exodus>, 283.

<sup>50</sup> Phuong, "Exodus," 321.

is complicated and pernicious. The presence of idolatry in people's lives is shaped by their culture and presents itself as normal and harmless. Idolatry gets called by other names like fandom, greed, jealousy, and even love. As a result, people miss that these things have come between them and God; sometimes these things have actually replaced God in their lives. As Christians, we need to ask ourselves, "Am I worshipping something other than God? Am I lifting up something instead of God? Has anything come between God and me?" As we allow the Holy Spirit to work in our hearts, these things will shrink in importance, and we will be a people who have no other gods in our lives.

### **About the Authors**

Jin has been privileged to be an instructor in the Bachelor of Arts in Theology program of APNTS from 2023 to 2025. ABTH is a Ministry Preparation Program and a bachelor's program at the seminary. One of his classes was on the Pentateuch. A group of students delivered a brilliant presentation on idolatry. This fabulous experience presented a good opportunity for him to contribute academically to the ABTH by sharing this group project. Jenny and Shuney contributed their original group presentation work to this article, which discusses the definition of idolatry and proper worship. Jin added content on its application and treatment, while Sarah wrote the conclusion and proofread the entire project.

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