

# We Become What We Worship

A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF IDOLATRY

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## Preface

THIS BOOK HAD ITS BIRTH IN 1983, when I did some research on Isaiah 6. This later became the basis for a sermon that I preached on Isaiah 6 in 1987 at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary's chapel. In 1991, I decided to work in more depth on Isaiah 6, and this resulted in a publication: "Isaiah 6:9-13: A Retributive Taunt Against Idolatry," *Vetus Testamentum* 41 (1991): 257-78. The article focused on the idea that Isaiah 6:9-13 was about idolatry, particularly a judgment on Israelite idol worshipers in contrast to Isaiah's faithfulness. The idea that I formulated for Isaiah 6 was this: *what you revere you resemble, either for ruin or for restoration*. I have made reference to this article in some of my subsequent publications that have discussed the use of Isaiah 6 in the New Testament, especially in Revelation. Others likewise have made positive reference to the article (which I note in chapter 2).

Then about two years ago, Joel Scandrett approached me and asked whether or not I had any book projects that I might be interested in proposing to him. I told him if I ever had the time I would like to write a book on a biblical theology of idolatry, which would take the ideas that I had found in Isaiah 6 and would try to trace how they occurred elsewhere in the Old and New Testaments. I told him then that I did not think I had the time to do this. But while working on another project, the idea again arose as important, and so I decided to put the other project on hold and go on and try to write this book on a biblical theology of idolatry.

A word about the title of the book is needed. The title *We Become What We Worship* is a metaphor, which is an implied simile, omitting the word *like* between *We Become* and *What We Worship*. The thesis of the book is *not* that people become the idols they worship or become the God they worship, but they become *like* the idols or *like* God. The point of figuratively omitting the word *like* is to emphasize that the worshiper reflects some of the important qualities or attributes of the object of worship.

I want to make one recommendation that I believe will result in the readers' better comprehension of the book: because some chapters contain in-depth analysis of some Old Testament texts (especially chapters 2 and 3, which are foundational for the rest of the book), I recommend that the reader read through the body of each of these chapters first to get the overall flow of the argument before extensive consultation of the footnotes.

It is my hope that the biblical-theological perspective of this book will provide greater fuel to fire the church's motivation not to become conformed to the idols that surround it in order better to fulfill its mission to the world, which is to proclaim that people need to be conformed to Christ's image for the greater glory of God.

I am indebted beyond words to my wife, Dorinda, who has discussed the theology of idolatry with me for the past couple of years and who remains as excited as I am about the subject. She has been one of the main instruments through which I have been able to understand this topic in more depth.

I am likewise grateful to several churches that have invited me to come and give a series of sermons on this topic of idolatry. Attempting to distill the material for the church community has been essential in helping me to understand it even better. In addition, being able to teach the subject at Wheaton College Graduate School has been an enormous benefit, especially with respect to student questions that have sharpened my perspectives.

I also want to offer appreciation to my students Ben Gladd and Stefanos Mihailios, who helped do research in connection with this book. I am above all indebted to my teaching assistants, Mitch Kim and Mike Daling, who read and reread, double-checked, and helped to edit the manuscript of this book, as well as composing some of the indexes. They were tireless in their work and were always willing to help. Thank you, Mitch and Mike—you contribution to this book was invaluable.

Above all, I am thankful to God for enabling me to conceive the idea for this book and for giving me the energy and discipline to write it. It is my prayer that God's glory will more greatly be manifested as a result of the reading of this book.

A few comments about some stylistic aspects of the book are in order. English translations follow the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise indicated or, when different, it represents my own translation. With respect to all translations of ancient works, when the translation differs from the standard editions usually referred to, then it is my translation or someone else's (in the latter case I indicate whom).

References to the Greek New Testament are from the NA<sup>27</sup>. In making references to the Septuagint, I refer to the Greek text of *The Septuagint Version of the Old Testament and Apocrypha with an English Translation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), which is dependent on Codex B, published by special arrangement with Samuel Bagster and Sons, London. This will enable those not knowing Greek to be able to follow the Septuagint in a readily available English edition.

My references to the Dead Sea Scrolls come primarily from the new edition of F. G. Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated* (Leiden/Boston/Köln: Brill, 1994), and sometimes reference is made to *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition*, ed. F. Garcia Martinez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, 2 vols (Leiden/Boston/Köln: Brill, 2000). In addition, other translations of DSS were consulted and, sometimes, preferred in quotations, though at other times variations from Martinez are due to the author's own translation.

The primary sources of various Jewish works were ordinarily referred to, and sometimes quoted, in the following English editions: *The Babylonian Talmud*, ed. I. Epstein (London: Soncino, 1948); *The Talmud of the Land of Israel: A Preliminary Translation and Explanation* (the Jerusalem Talmud), vols. 1-35, ed. J. Neusner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982-); *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, vols. 1-3, trans. and ed. J. Z. Lauterbach (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1976); *The Midrash on Proverbs*, trans. Burton L. Visotzky, Yale Judaica Series 27 (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992); *The Midrash on Psalms*, trans. and ed. W. G. Braude, Yale Judaica Series 13:1-2 (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1976); *Midrash Rabbah*, vols. I-X, ed. H. Freedman and M. Simon (London: Soncino, 1961); *Midrash Sifre on Numbers*, in *Translations of Early Documents*,

Series III, Rabbinic Texts, trans. and ed. P. P. Levertoff (London: Golub, 1926); *Midrash Tanhuma* vols. 1-2, trans and ed. J. T. Townsend (Hoboken, N.J.: KTAV, 1989); *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu. An English Translation of Genesis and Exodus from the Printed Version of Tanhuma-Yelammedenu with an Introduction, Notes, and Indexes*, trans. Samuel A. Berman (Hoboken, N.J.: KTAV, 1996); *The Minor Tractates of the Talmud*, vols. 1-2, ed. A. Cohen (London: Soncino, 1965); *The Mishnah*, trans. and ed. H. Danby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vols. 1-2, ed. J. H. Charlesworth (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983) (though sometimes reference was made to the *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 [Pseudepigrapha], ed. R. H. Charles [Oxford: Clarendon, 1977]); *The Pesikta de-rab Kahana*, trans. and ed. W. G. Braude and I. J. Kapstein (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1975); *Pesikta Rabbati*, trans. and ed. W. G. Braude, Yale Judaica Series 18:1-2 (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1968); *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, trans. and ed. G. Friedlander (New York: Hermon, 1916); *Sifre: A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy*, trans. and ed. R. Hammer, Yale Judaica Series 24 (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986); *Tanna debe Eliyyahu*, trans. and ed. W. G. Braude and I. J. Kapstein (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981); *The Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan Ben Uzziel on the Pentateuch, with the Fragments of the Jerusalem Targum from the Chaldee, on Genesis and Exodus*, trans. and ed. J. W. Etheridge (New York: KTAV, 1968); the available volumes published in *The Aramaic Bible: The Targums*, ed. M. McNamara (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1987).

References to ancient Greek works, especially those of Philo and Josephus (including English translations), are from the Loeb Classical Library. References and some English translations of the apostolic fathers come from *The Apostolic Fathers*, translated by J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, and edited by M. W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).

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