

What's So Bad about Worshipping Other Gods?

Tyron Goldschmidt
University of Lucerne

ABSTRACT: Many religious traditions teach that we should worship God, and philosophers have explored the requirement to worship God, and what might make God worthy of worship. These religious traditions also prohibit worshipping other gods. This essay explores, from a Jewish perspective, what it might mean to worship other gods, what the rationale behind the prohibition might be, and why the prohibition might be so grave.

1. Introduction

God commands Israel not to worship other gods: “You must not bow down to them and you must not serve them” (Exodus 20: 5)¹. The word *worship* might sometimes mean something different from, but related to, the *avodah* (literally service) referred to in this verse. Sometimes I refer to worshipping other gods below as *foreign worship*, as per the Hebrew term *avodah zarah* (or foreign service). This essay tries to get clear on the basic meaning and rationale of the command from a Jewish perspective, though some of the points might be acceptable from Christian, Muslim and other perspectives.

There is already some philosophical treatment of worship, for example, on the questions of what makes God worthy of worship, of whether worshipping God is obligatory (e.g., Swinburne 2016, chapter 15) and of whether God can command worship (e.g., Brown & Nagasawa 2005). But this essay is about the more neglected and negative question of what makes worshipping *other* gods *wrong*. The questions are related, since other gods must *lack* what makes God worthy of worship. But there is more to it than this. Since the prohibition forbids worship that falls far short of the kind of worship God is worthy of, and there is also the question of why the command is so severe, as we will see.

2. The Importance of the Command

But first something about the importance of the command. One of our questions is about why the command is so important. The command not to worship other gods is the most important command:

The command against foreign worship is equivalent to all the commands, as it is written, “if you err and you do not perform all these commands that God spoke to Moses—anything that God commanded you through Moses—from the day,

¹ Translations from Jewish scripture and classical sources are my own and/or based on the standard translations.

etc.” [Numbers 15:22-3], and from the oral tradition [Horayot 8a] we learnt that this is written about foreign worship. Thus, you learn that anyone who acknowledges foreign worship denies all the Torah, and all the prophets, and all that the prophets commanded from Adam until the end of the world, as it is written, “from the day God commanded and onwards, throughout your generations” [Numbers 15: 23]. And anyone who denies foreign worship acknowledges all of the Torah, and it is the principle of all the commands. (Mishneh Torah, Avodah Zarah 2:4)

The importance of the command is highlighted by three other things:

- *first, the extent of related commands*: God commands Israel not to worship other gods. But he also frequently commands against other things that are (at least) related to worshipping other gods. Some of the commands (e.g., not to make an idol, to destroy it, etc.) are explicitly about other gods. Some (e.g., not to shave the corners of the head, not to tattoo, etc.) are not explicitly about other gods, but are related to foreign worship.
- *second, the severity of the punishments*: As for punishments by the courts, violations related to foreign worship (e.g., tattooing) are often punished by the court with lashes. But violations of the command not to worship other gods (e.g., sacrificing to an idol) are punished by the courts with execution. As for divine punishments, violations result in national catastrophe and exile.
- *third, the preference of martyrdom*: While various violations of the Torah are punishable by death when not under duress, only *three* kinds require martyrdom even under duress, including worshipping other gods: “[Regarding] all the commandments in the Torah, if they say to a person, ‘Transgress and you won’t be killed!’, he may transgress and not be killed, except for foreign worship, sexual immorality and bloodshed” (Sanhedrin 74a).

The commands related to foreign worship are spread throughout the Torah, and the threats of punishments are spread throughout the Torah and prophets. Subsequent rabbinic tradition details the commands in various places, but especially in the Talmud in tractate Avodah Zarah and around the middle of tractate Sanhedrin, and in Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah, in Hilchot Avodah Zarah.

3. Questions and Constraints

Two sets of questions are raised by the command:

- *the meaning questions*: What counts as other gods? What counts as worship?
- *the rationale questions*: Why is there such a command? And why such a severe command?

The questions are related, since we cannot understand the rationale for the command *as such* unless we have some understanding of what the command is. Compare: we cannot understand the rationale for heart surgery *as such* unless we have some understanding of what hearts are and what surgery is. Further, we might understand:

- the rationale for the command in light of its meaning; or
- the meaning of the command in light of its rationale,

as we will see.

Acceptable answers—acceptable from a Jewish perspective—must be consistent with Jewish tradition, biblical and rabbinic. There are then at least three constraints that answers must satisfy:

- *the over-prohibiting constraint*: not prohibiting what the tradition permits or requires
- *the under-prohibiting constraint*: not permitting or requiring what it forbids, whether

specific to the command not to worship other gods or more generally. And acceptable answers must also be reasonable so far as God is concerned by, for example:

- *the rationality constraint*: not making God out to be capricious or overtaken by emotion.

The problem is in finding answers that satisfy all three constraints.

4. The First Meaning Question

There are two questions about the meaning of the commandment not to worship other gods. The first question: What counts as another god? This question divides: What counts as a *god*? What counts as *another* god?

What makes something a *god* at all? A simple answer: having enough of a combination of attributes, like

- omnipotence, or at least extreme power (especially in the scope of its basic actions);
- omniscience, or at least extreme knowledge;
- omnibenevolence, or at least extreme goodness; or
- fundamentality (e.g., creator, sustainer), or at least being close enough to fundamental.

Then *other* gods are distinct from the God of the Jews—the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who created the world and redeemed Israel from Egypt, etc. Jewish tradition takes only God to have enough of the attributes. Jewish tradition takes there to be no other gods. There are—at most—only the things taken to be other gods. For example, astronomical bodies and human rulers have been taken to be other gods: “Lest you lift up your eyes towards heaven and you see the sun and the moon and the stars—all the hosts of heaven—and you are lured and bow down to them and serve them” (Deuteronomy 4:20).

Baal, Anubis, Mercury, etc., have also been taken to be other gods. They were often taken to be the powers behind the astronomical bodies, so that what was worshipped was not so much a planet but the supposed power behind a planet. Whatever they are, if they are at all, they are not the God of Israel. Whatever they are thought to be, none is God.

The notion of *god* is vague: What is it to have *enough* of a *combination* of *extreme* power, etc.? God certainly has enough: he is all powerful, etc. A mouse—as we take it to be—certainly does not have enough. The gods of ancient Canaan, Egypt and Greece—non-existent as they are, but as they were taken to be—would pass the threshold².

5. The Second Meaning Question

The second question is about the meaning of the command not to worship other gods: What counts as worship? There is:

- worship in *action*: bowing, sacrificing, offering a libation or burning incense to a god; or worshipping an idol in its own way (e.g., throwing stones at an idol of Mercury, defecating intentionally before an idol of Peor).

Worship in action requires *an intention directed towards* the god *as such*; if done by accident, or for some other purpose, or not towards the god as such, there is no worship in action, and the action is not subject to the command. Abaye illustrates the *as such* qualification:

What is the case of this unwitting act of foreign worship? If he thought that [the idolatrous temple] was a synagogue and bowed to it, behold his heart was [directed] towards heaven. Rather, it's when he saw the idol and bowed to it. If he accepted it upon himself as a god, he is an intentional sinner. If he did not accept it upon himself as a god, it's nothing. (Sanhedrin 62a)

Closely connected to worship in action then is:

- worship in *thought*: having a certain attitude.

The attitude is behind the intention in worship in action. We can frame it so that worship in thought is a necessary condition for, and conceptually prior to, worship in action; worship in action is worship in thought (psychological attitude) plus some other ingredient (bowing,

² A reviewer requests "a fuller discussion of what is the difference between worshipping one God and worshipping a different God" and notes that it "would be relevant to contemporary issues to consider whether worshipping the Christian God (who is a Trinity) or the Islamic God ('Allah') is worshipping the same God as the Hebrew God." I'm afraid I don't have anything very informative or original to say.

As to the first point, the question depends in part on how reference works, and here I endorse the treatment of Gellman 1997, 20-34. As to the second point, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Sikhs and others worship the same God. This is unproblematic in the case of Jews and Muslims on any plausible theory of reference. This is more problematic in the case of Jews and Muslims, on the one hand, and Christians, on the other, because of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Jews, Christians and Muslims all worship what Christians take to be the *Father*, and in that sense worship the same God. But Christians (especially Social Trinitarians) might worship other gods in the *Son* and *Holy Spirit*. However, what complicates things is that they take the *Son* and *Holy Spirit* to be the same God as the *Father*. Maimonides does take Christianity to be polytheistic and has a negative view of Christianity, but other classical Jewish sources are ecumenical and have more positive views—and, needless to say, there is no, stoning Christians for idolatry.

sacrificing, etc.). On this way of framing it, an “unwitting act of foreign worship” is not really an act of foreign worship at all.

Alternatively, we could frame it so that there can be worship in action without worship in thought. But then the point would be that worship in action is the subject of the command only when there is worship in thought. On this way of framing it, an unwitting act of foreign worship is an act of foreign worship, albeit unwitting and less serious. There is no need to decide on how to frame it.

Rava's view is that there is worship in action only when there is worship in thought, or that worship in action is the subject of the command only when there is also worship in thought: “Anyone who performs foreign worship from love or from fear—Abaye says he is liable [for execution]; Rava says he is exempt. Abaye says he is liable because he worshipped it. Rava says he is exempt: if he accepted it upon himself as a god—yes [he is liable]; but if not—no” (Sanhedrin 61b). Maimonides adopts Rava's view, and explains what he means:

Anyone who serves another god [*avodah zarah*] from love—for example, he desired some image since its design was very beautiful—or serves it from his [superstitious] fear of it, lest it harm him—as the idolators think that it benefits or harms: If he accepts it upon himself as a god, he is liable to stoning, but if he serves it, whether in its own way or in one of the four [standard ways: bowing, sacrifice, incense, or libation], from love or fear, he is exempt. (Mishneh Torah, Avodah Zarah 3:6)

The Mishnah might seem to be at odds with this:

One worshipping another god [includes]: one serving [it in its typical way], and one sacrificing, and one burning incense, and one pouring libation, and one bowing, and one accepting it upon himself as a god, and one saying, “You are my god”. But [one] embracing, and kissing, and cleaning, and spraying, and washing, and rubbing [it with oil], and dressing [it], and putting shoes on [it]—he transgresses a prohibition [but is not liable for execution; see Rashi *ad loc*]. One vowing in its name, and affirming an oath in its name, transgresses a prohibition [see Exodus 23:13]. One defecating to Baal Peor—that is its [typical way of] service. One throwing a stone at Mercury—that is its [typical way of] service. (Sanhedrin 60b)

The separate addition of “accepting it upon himself as a god” might seem to mean that in the other cases someone counts as worshipping another god even if they do not accept it as a god. But the commentaries explain that in these cases he is presumed to have accepted it as a god too. As generally as plausibly, an act of sacrificing, etc., is assumed to include worship in thought, unless there is evidence to the contrary. Thus even Rav Menashe was liable for throwing a stone at Mercury:

Rav Menashe was going to Bei Torta. They said to him: There is foreign worship here. He picked up a stone and threw it [at the idol]. They said to him: It is Mercury [which is worshipped by throwing stones]. He said to them: We learned one who throws a stone at Mercury [to worship it is liable, but I throw stones to demean it]. He asked the [sages] in the study hall. They said to him: We learned that one who throws a stone is liable even though he intends to demean it. (Sanhedrin 64a)

By *worship in thought* I do not mean what the rabbis (Ta'anit 2a) called *avodah shebalev* (worship or service of the heart), which means prayer.

The second meaning question turns on the question: What counts as worship in thought? Three possible answers are salient. The simplest and best answer is that worship in thought is:

- *positive attitude*: some positive attitude we often enough take to non-divine beings (e.g., honor, reverence, commitment, submission).

For worship in thought, the attitude must be taken towards something taken to be a divine being by the subject. In the case of worshipping other gods, the positive attitude is taken to another god *as such*.

But there are alternative answers. In English *worship* can mean something like an intense positive attitude. The Jewish tradition also requires an intense positive attitude to God. For example: “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:5). We might then take worship in thought to be an:

- *intense attitude*: a certain degree of the positive attitude (e.g., intense honor, intense reverence, etc.).

But this is not the meaning of the Hebrew word (*avodah*) here: The answer permits honoring Anubis or revering Baal just a little. But these are not permitted. So the answer fails the *under-prohibiting constraint*.

In English *worship* can also mean an exclusive devotion. We might then take worship in thought to be an:

- *unconditional attitude*: taking the attitudes toward something to the exclusion of others (e.g., exclusive devotion, unconditional commitment, reverence above all else).

But this is not the meaning of the Hebrew word. Worship does not mean exclusive devotion; for example, honoring and revering *God* does not rule out honoring parents and revering sages. Since honoring parents and revering sages is permitted, even obligatory, the answer fails the *over-prohibiting constraint*.

The command not to worship other gods is not just about committing to God unconditionally, or revering God above all other gods. For then the command would permit conditional commitment to Anubis or revering Baal, so long as God is revered more. But, so long as they are taken to be gods, honoring Anubis or revering Baal is not permitted. Foreign worship was notoriously syncretist. So the command would fail the *under-prohibiting constraint*.

So I stick with the *positive attitude* answer. But this answer faces two objections. The first objection is that the answer violates the *under-prohibiting constraint*: it permits believing in other gods so long as one has a neutral or negative attitude towards them, whereas believing in other gods is forbidden. Since the other answers face the same problem, this objection does not favor them over *positive attitude*.

Has someone who believes in—but *hates*—other gods then not violated the command? They have not. They have violated another command: a separate command not to believe in other gods. “Anyone who thinks that there is another god, transgresses a prohibition, as stated, ‘You must not have any other gods before me’ [Exodus 20:3], and denies a principle [of faith], in that this is the greatest principle which everything depends on” (Mishneh Torah, Yesodei HaTorah 1: 6). You might think that there is a problem with commandments about what to

believe. There are a couple well-known problems, set out by Ḥasdai Crescas, about the (alleged) command to believe in God (Exodus 20:2). The first is from the combination of:

- doxastic involuntarism—the view that we cannot directly choose what to believe; along with the view that
- commands must be for things that we can choose to do.

A simple answer is that, even *if* we cannot directly choose what to believe, we can undertake certain actions that will influence our beliefs. This is not unproblematic and there is much to be said about this, but this essay is not about these other commands or belief *per se*³.

The second problem is more complicated (see Goldschmidt 2015). But can be briefly captured by the questions: What sense is there in a command to believe in God if:

- we already believe in God? In which case the command is otiose.
- we do not already believe in God? In which case we cannot comply with the command.

In any case, the objection does not face a command not to believe in other gods. As before, if we:

- already believe in other gods, then we can undertake actions to remove those beliefs.
- do not already believe in other gods, then we can undertake actions not to fall for such beliefs.

For example:

The Holy One Blessed be He commanded us not to read [any idolatrous book] at all, and we must not muse over it, and not over anything about it. And even looking at the image of an idol is forbidden, as is said, “Do not turn to the gods” [Leviticus 19: 4]. In this regard, it is said: “[Guard yourself...] lest you inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How did they worship them?’” (Mishneh Torah, Avodah Zarah 2: 2)

And not only did He forbid turning to foreign worship in thought, but we are warned against every thought that causes a person to uproot a principle of the Torah—not to give it attention, and not to turn our minds to it... And the Torah warned against this, and stated about it, “Do not wander after your hearts and after your eyes, that you go astray after” [Numbers 15: 39]... Thus the sages [Berakhot 12b] said: “‘after your own hearts’—this is heresy”; “‘and after your own eyes’—this is promiscuity”. (Mishneh Torah, Avodah Zarah 2: 4)

The second objection against *positive attitude* is about the *rationale* for the command: Why is

³ A reviewer objects against the point about doxastic voluntarism: "it does seem morally wrong to try to persuade yourself to hold a belief which you now believe to be false in order to do some action which you now believe to be wrong". But skeptics might not be persuading themselves of something they take to be false (they might merely be agnostic) in order to do actions they take to be wrong (they might think the actions neutral or obligatory). For more on doxastic voluntarism generally, see, for example, Hieronymi (2006) and Jackson (forthcoming).

- the positive attitude towards non-divine beings (e.g., parents, sages) permissible or even obligatory; whereas
- the same attitude towards other gods is forbidden?

The objection also faces *intense attitude*, since an intense attitude towards non-divine beings (e.g., parents, sages) is permissible or even obligatory, but the same attitude to other gods is not. The objection is avoided by *unconditional attitude* since we cannot take an unconditional attitude to multiple beings. So the objection would favor *unconditional attitude* over the other two answers. But the objection will be answered in the next section.

6. The First Rationale Question

The meaning question can be answered simply. I take worshipping other gods to be:

- having a positive attitude towards a being that the subject takes to have enough divine attributes

or for the command against foreign worship to apply only when there is such an attitude. There might be other senses of *worship* and other senses of other *gods*, as important as related.

This raises the question of why a positive attitude to beings taken to be divine is forbidden while taking a positive attitude to other beings is permitted and sometimes obligatory. There are two bigger questions about the rationale of the command. The little question can be answered via the big questions. The first rationale question is: why is there a command not to worship other gods?

There is a debate about how far the rationale for commands extends. There might be:

- a general reason behind commands (whether about diet, dress, sex, etc.) without a particular reason for each command. For example, God might command us in order to discipline us or to bring a spiritual awareness, but there is no reason why he commanded us this way (not to eat pork) rather than that way (not to eat apples); or
- a reason for some details but not others; or
- a reason for every detail.

There is plausibly a reason for the command not to worship other gods, given the importance of the command, and given that reasons are not so hard to find.

There are at least six answers to the first rationale question. These are not mutually exclusive and I see no reason for thinking them exhaustive either. In each case the idea is that God commands us not to worship other gods because foreign worship is wrong (and God knows that, and warns us).

The first answer is that foreign worship is wrong because:

1. *jealousy*: it upsets God a lot.

The Torah and prophets often describe God as *jealous* about our worship. For example: “You must not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God”

(Exodus 20: 5). Just as a jealous spouse feels intensely angry and sad about unfaithfulness, God feels intensely upset about foreign worship.

An objection is that the answer portrays God as having emotions, whereas God cannot have emotions. If God cannot have emotions, then the tradition and the answer might be interpreted metaphorically. But I do not go into the debate over divine impassibility here, and do not try to interpret the answer metaphorically.

Another objection is that, left at that, the answer violates *the rationality constraint*: it makes God out to be overly overtaken by emotion. A reply provides a reason why God is jealous. Then the first answer might come down to that reason:

- alone; or
- combined with God's being upset.

God's being upset might or might not be an extra ingredient making foreign worship wrong.

Why would Sam's kissing Aaron be wrong? Answering that it would make Gaby feel jealous might portray Gaby as overly emotional. But her jealousy is not overly emotional if we add that she is Sam's wife. A more complete answer now is that the kissing would be wrong because:

- Sam is married to Gaby, and just because of that; or
- Sam is married to Gaby and also because the kissing upsets Gaby.

The wrongness of kissing and of foreign worship might or might not be similar in respect of the correspondence of ingredients.

What is the reason God is jealous? Jealousy makes sense in the context of marriage, and the prophets often describe foreign worship as a kind of adultery. For example: "rebellious Israel committed adultery, and I gave a writ of divorce to her, but faithless Judah her sister was not afraid, and she too went whoring ... she committed adultery with the stone and with the wood" (Jeremiah 3: 8-9). So why is adultery wrong? An answer is because there is a *contract* between the married party, and adultery violates the contract. Similarly, our second answer is that foreign worship is wrong because:

2. *contract*: it violates a contract between people and God.

The second answer might be independent or might be a part of the first answer, as we have seen.

Israel entered into a contract—a covenant—when accepting the Torah: "You stand this day—all of you—before the Lord your God... to enter you into the covenant of the Lord your God and into his oath that the Lord your God established with you this day" (Deuteronomy 29: 9-11). Foreign worship is forbidden in the Torah and so violates the contract.

There are two objections to this answer. The first objection is that, left at that, the answer violates the *rationality constraint*: it makes God out to be capricious. Why does God include in the contract a command against worshipping other gods? Why not a command *to* worship other gods? Or to worship some others but not other others? Without answers to these questions, *contract* is arbitrary.

A reply provides a reason why God includes the command in the contract. Then the answer to why foreign worship is wrong might come down to that reason:

- alone; or
- combined with there being a contract.

In other words, the problem is that *contract* puts the cart before the horse. Spelled out more fully, the answer tells us that God commanded us not to worship other gods because foreign worship is wrong, and that foreign worship is wrong because God contracted us not to worship other gods. But the relevant part of the contract is just the command not to worship other gods. So the answer tells us that God commanded us not to worship other gods because God commanded us not to worship other gods. There must be another reason why God commanded us not to worship other gods.

To be sure, there being a command might be an extra ingredient making foreign worship wrong. The command might make the action wrong because of our relationship to God. Compare: a child should not eat too much candy because it will damage their teeth *and* because they have to respect the wishes of their parents generally (because of their relationship to their parents). Perhaps this is the meaning behind Rabbi Ḥanina's teaching: "Greater is he who is commanded and performs than he who is not commanded and performs." (Avodah Zarah 3a)

The second objection against *contract* is that, according to Jewish tradition, non-Jews are prohibited from worshipping other gods: "The Children of Noah were commanded with seven commandments: [to establish courts of] judgments, [against cursing] the name [of God], [against] foreign worship, [against forbidden] promiscuity, and [against] spilling blood, and [against] stealing, and [eating the] limb from a living creature (Sanhedrin 56a)." While *contract* would answer why foreign worship is wrong for Jews, it would not answer why foreign worship is wrong for non-Jews unless they too contracted not to do so. There would then be some other reason why foreign worship is wrong for non-Jews. For the sake of parsimony, we should rely on that reason in the case of Jews too—either independently of *contract* or as providing the reason behind the contract.

An answer would be that

- even though non-Jews are not contracted by the Torah, they too are required not to worship other gods by some other contract; or
- the reason foreign worship is wrong for non-Jews (as well as Jews) is one of our other answers.

There is dispute among the rabbis about whether the command for Jews has the same content as the command for non-Jews. But that would help answer the second objection only if the content differed relevantly, not forbidding a positive attitude towards other gods.

The third answer is that foreign worship is wrong because:

3. *slippery slope*: it results in other wrongs.

Worship of other gods was connected to other sins—and not just sins prohibited on the basis of their connection to foreign worship. Most gravely, foreign worship was connected to child sacrifice. For example:

Any man from the Children of Israel or from the foreigner residing in Israel who gives from his seed to the Molekh must certainly be killed, the people of the land must stone him with stones. (Leviticus 20:3)

They built the high places of Tofet, that are in the valley of Ben Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in fire, which I did not command. (Jeremiah 7:31)

An objection against *slippery slope* is that foreign worship is forbidden even if there are no other wrongs involved. But the objection does not show that *slippery slope* is not the rationale behind the command not to worship other gods. For:

- first, something can be wrong if there is enough *risk* of other wrongs, even if it does not result in other wrongs in every case; and
- second, *slippery slope* can still apply in those cases where foreign worship does result in other wrongs.

The fourth answer is that foreign worship is wrong because:

4. *distraction*: it distracts us from good or obligatory things, especially the worship of God.

As noted above, God wants our deep commitment, and God is our only salvation: “Turn to me and be saved, all ends of earth, for I am God, and there is none else” (Isaiah 45: 22).

An objection against *distraction* is that

- other things distract us from good or obligatory things; and, more particularly,
- other things distract us from worship of God, such as caring for our children and parents,

but these other things are permissible, and in the latter cases even obligatory.

The objection does not show that *distraction* is not the rationale behind the command against foreign worship. As for things that distract us from good or obligatory things, they might be wrong. As for things that distract us from worshipping God, such as caring for our children, these might be permitted or obligatory because they are intrinsically good or a part of the good of worshipping God (raising one’s children to be pious, etc.), whereas foreign worship is not intrinsically good or a part of worshipping God.

Further, worshipping other gods might be *more* distracting than other distractions.

The fifth answer is that foreign worship is wrong because:

5. *falsehood*: it involves a (deeply) false belief.

There are no other gods. This is a very fundamental fact about reality. “I am the first, and I am the last, and there is no god besides me” (Isaiah 44: 6). Believing in other gods is believing something false, and something deeply false. And believing something false, or something so deeply false, is wrong.

An objection is that false beliefs, even about fundamental things, are not generally wrong (in the moral sense of *wrong*). The belief that the earth is the center of the universe is a false belief about something fundamental. But the ancients were not *morally* wrong in having it.

A reply is that some false beliefs are also morally wrong. The belief that the Holocaust never happened is morally wrong. The belief that women are sub-human is morally wrong. Or perhaps the beliefs *per se* are not morally wrong, but what the agent

- did to come to the beliefs; or
- will do in light of the beliefs

is morally wrong. Similarly, we could say that foreign worship is wrong because what the worshipper did to come to the beliefs or will do in light of the beliefs is morally wrong. Then the fifth answer comes down to one of the others.

The sixth answer is that foreign worship is wrong because:

6. *injustice*: it gives credit where credit is not due.

Giving credit where credit is not due can wrong those to whom it is due. For example—courtesy of Dustin Crummett—the president awarding the Medal of Honor to his kids would wrong those who have properly earned the Medal of Honor. Similarly, reverencing a being who does not deserve reverence wrongs God who does deserve reverence. Perhaps a more similar example would be awarding the Medal of Honor to enemy fighters, since false gods (non-beings) are the antithesis of God (the most real being). “I am the Lord, that is my name, and I will not give my glory to another, and my renown to idols” (Isaiah 42: 8).

The question at the end of the last section was: Why is a positive attitude towards other gods forbidden whereas the same attitude towards parents and sages is not permitted or even obligatory? An answer is that the ingredients that make the positive attitude towards other gods forbidden are not present (or not present to the same degree) in the positive attitude towards parents and sages—while some other ingredients make the latter obligatory.

7. The Second Rationale Question

The second rationale question is: Why is the command not to worship other gods so important? Why are the punishments so severe?

There are at least three answers to the question. These are not mutually exclusive and I see no reason for thinking them exhaustive either. In the first two answers the idea is that the command not to worship other gods is so important because foreign worship is *very* wrong (and God knows that, and warns us).

The first answer is that foreign worship is very wrong because:

1. *more-of-the-same*: it involves more of a *slippery slope*, *distraction*, etc., than do other wrongs.

The answer can be spelled out differently depending on whether we prefer to focus on *slippery slope* or on *distraction*, etc. This answer is derivative of our answer to the first rationale question above. So any problems with our answer to the first rationale question will also be problems for *more-of-the-same*.

The second answer is that foreign worship is very wrong because:

2. *fragility*: our moral relationship with God is very fragile.

While we depend on God through and through, our moral relationship with God is not so multifaceted. There are few ways we can benefit God or wrong God directly. We cannot really help or harm God, psychologically or physically. But we can wrong God directly (or at least more directly) by neglecting him or giving others his credit. Foreign worship does so, as per *distraction* and *injustice*.

In contrast, there are many ways to benefit or wrong people directly. We can:

- benefit them by helping them, psychologically or physically, and even by saving their lives;
- harm them, psychologically or physically, and even by killing them.

There are as many ways to wrong God *indirectly* as there are to wrong his creation, if harming the creation wrongs the creator.

But since our direct moral relationship with God is a thin thread, damage to it will be serious. Thus foreign worship damages our moral relationship with God seriously. Severe punishments help protect the relationship by deterring violations.

Suppose Sam meets Gaby once every year, because he is an astronaut and in space the rest of the year. They can only exchange grainy videos. Their annual meeting is then very important to their relationship. Gaby's forgetting their meeting or Sam's going golfing instead would do serious damage to their relationship—much more than if they were as connected as other spouses. Another analogy: A piece of music with a few notes would be damaged much more by an off note than a piece of music with many notes.

The third answer is that the command against foreign worship is so important, not because (or not only because) foreign worship is very wrong, but because (or also because) it is wrong and:

3. *temptation*: it is especially tempting.

If there is more temptation to foreign worship, then a more important command, with more severe punishments, might be needed for effective deterrence. Mixing wool and linen (Leviticus 19:19, Deuteronomy 22:11) is not especially tempting, and (perhaps therefore) the prohibition against it is not emphasized, and the punishment is not as severe. In contrast, sexual sins are especially tempting, and (perhaps therefore) there are numerous prohibitions with severe punishments.

Foreign worship might be (or might have been) especially tempting because we are (or were) strongly:

- attracted to idolatry naturally; or
- pressured into idolatry externally by surrounding cultures.

As for natural attraction, the rabbis teach that there was an overwhelming natural attraction towards foreign worship. For example:

Rav Ashi ended [his lecture before reaching the topic of] the three kings. He said [to the students]: Tomorrow we will open with these [three] friends. Menashe appeared to him in a dream. He said, “You called us your friends and the friends of your fathers [as if we are your equals. Whereas we are far more brilliant than you]!” [Rav Ashi] said: “Since you are so wise, what is the reason you engaged in foreign worship?” [Menashe] said to him: “If you had been there, you would have taken the hem of your cloak and raced after me [to idolatry]”. The next day [Rav Ashi] said to [his students]: “We will open with our masters”. (Sanhedrin 102b)

Why did Rav Ashi not feel the overwhelming attraction towards foreign worship? Because the prophets prayed for the attraction to be removed:

And they cried in a loud voice to the Lord their God” [Nehemiah 9:4]. What did they say? Rav Yehuda says, and some say Rav Yonathan: “Woe, woe, this [attraction to foreign worship] is what destroyed the Temple, and burned the Sanctuary, and massacred the righteous, and exiled the Jewish people from their land—and it still dances among us! Did You not give it to us only for receiving reward [in overcoming it]? We do not want it, and we do not want its reward... They fasted for three days [and] begged for mercy. A note fell from heaven, on which was written: “Truth”... The figure of a fiery lion cub came out of the chamber of the Holy of Holies. A prophet said to Israel: “This is the attraction to foreign worship!” Upon their catching it, one of its hairs fell out and [its shriek] was heard for four hundred parasangs. They said: “What should we do? Perhaps heaven will have mercy on it [if it shrieks any more].” The prophet said to them: “Throw it into a container of lead, and cover it with lead, since it absorbs sound, as it is written [Zechariah 5:8]: ‘He said, “This is the evil, and he cast it down into the midst of the measure, and he cast the lead stone over its opening.”’” (Sanhedrin 64a)

As for external pressures, the social pressure from idolators and idolatrous nations towards idolatry might have been greater than the social pressure towards, for example, eating pork.

8. Conclusion

A simple understanding is that the command not to worship other gods means that we should not revere, honor, etc., beings we take to be divine other than God. There could be a few reasons for such a command. There are also other related commands not addressed by this

essay. For example, there is a command not to make an idol of God, let alone of another god. Why is there such a command?⁴

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⁴ The author thanks the John Templeton Foundation for a grant, which was administered through the "Worship: A Jewish Philosophical Investigation" project, and which facilitated the research for and writing of this paper.