Sequencing allegiances
Idolatry and the one God

James E. Brenneman

Is it blasphemous to worship a sandwich? That question confronted me on a tabletop ad for Jimmy John's #9 Italian Night Club sandwich, filled with Genoa salami, Italian capicola, smoked ham, and provolone, topped with lettuce, tomato, onion, and mayo, with homemade Italian vinaigrette. This playful invitation to a divine encounter in a sandwich has marketing appeal, precisely because we "get it": we understand that the rhetorical question elicits our yes, and precisely for that reason we want to try the sandwich. If "becoming what we worship" is one definition of idolatry,[1] and if "we are what we eat," then Jimmy John's ad masterfully zeros in on an Eden-like temptation to "become like god" by eating the forbidden fruit. In this case, the forbidden sandwich.

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On the other hand, the ad works because we also know in a primal way that we are created in God's "image and likeness" (Gen. 1:26–27). We sense that in some high and holy way, we are nearly god-like even in our humanity. But whatever else the word *image* might mean, an early Hebraic meaning is "icon"—a material, contingent representation of a divine king. The semantic slippage between *image*, *icon*, and *idol* suggests just how easily we humans fall prey to the age-old temptation to idolatry, worshiping our own likeness and image (or the things we make, like sandwiches), in place of the One of whom we are, like moons to the sun, mere reflections. But it is this fine distinction between holy image and iconic worship that we must explore.

Between holy image and iconic worship, a continuum

When we trace the move from a polytheistic, cosmotheistic, nature-oriented mythological world of prehuman and early human cultures, into what Jan Assmann calls the "Mosaic distinction" of exclusivist monotheism, we realize that our beliefs often lie on a continuum, and we can never settle in to stay in the one spot that's exactly right.[2] No matter how much we claim to worship one God and one God only, we seldom, if ever, get it just right.

Indeed, I believe the standard of pure monotheism is so high, so unwavering, so total, that ever adhering unequivocally to its exclusive demands is humanly impossible. Because unwavering obedience to the one God is impossible, we need to construct gradations of obedience, if not a whole set of nuanced qualifications about the nature and object of divine worship. Besides the semantic minefield surrounding what it means to be created in God's image and likeness as it relates to defining idolatry, several factors testify to the harshness of pure monotheism and its nearly impossible requirements.

First, when the entire canon of Holy Scripture decries idolatry in all its permutations, yet remains remarkably elastic in its divine-human interactions, we see how difficult it is for biblical people, people of God—indeed, any people—to live life in worship of one God and one God only. The Bible provides ample evidence of the fluidity of terms, gradations of belief, theophanic expressions, and modes of divine conveyance, en route from a polytheistic worldview to that of a more or less exclusive monotheism. God appears in a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, in a burning bush, in a still small voice, in the bread and cup of communion and other mediated ways—including ultimately in human form in Christ—all of which only heightens the layers of ambiguity between sacramental iconography and pure iconoclasm. This evolutionary progression has sometimes been described as a series of "monotheistic moments" along a historical trajectory climaxing in the radical exclusive monotheism of the late exilic period and beyond.[3]

Second, the attempt by scholars and others to create a taxonomy of monotheisms (exclusive monotheism, inclusive monotheism, henotheism, summodeism, cosmotheism, one-godism, Trinitarianism, "Jesus-only"-ism) argues for the near impossibility

of absolutizing any monotheistic claims or claiming that one's own monotheism is the absolute and only one. Such confessional claims may be true but are terribly difficult to prove beyond a reasonable doubt, because they are seldom lived out in practice. We all fall short.

Third, in everyday parlance and in confessional terms, we almost always acknowledge our inevitable fallibility by defining idolatry in terms that allow for some slippage in our practice. For example, G. K. Beale expands Martin Luther's definition of idolatry by adding one word. Idolatry, says Beale, is "whatever the heart clings to or relies on for [*ultimate*] security."[4] In other words, under the monotheistic burden or blessing we almost always acknowledge the need and the reasoned ability to sequence our set of allegiances, as long as they are topped off by the one and only God. Thus, if we are honest, our arguments are often about a whole set of allegiances, ranked with respect either to their prioritization in relationship or to their true or false witness to the one and only God we worship.

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If "we become what we worship," then Beale is acknowledging, perhaps without meaning to, the near-blasphemous claim the title of his book would be, if we *could* become gods or divinities by worshiping the one and only God. In effect, in a truly exclusive Mosaic monotheism, we cannot really become what we worship and still adhere to the first commandment.

Idolatry has sometimes been defined as making absolute the radical contingency of all that is not God, including humanity, nature, ideas, and all other possible categories of distinction.[5] In effect, then, pure monotheism is as much a theoretical construct as a lived reality. In a sense, the best we, who wish to be identified as biblical monotheists, can claim for ourselves is that like our ancient ancestors, we too are always en route to keeping the first commandment.

Allegiance in the book of Deuteronomy

No other book in the entire scripture comes closer to affirming the "Mosaic distinction" of exclusive monotheism and condemna-

tion of idolatry than the book of Deuteronomy. Some twenty-five explicit references in one form or another condemn the worship of other gods, including idols of those gods and images of the one God, Yahweh.[6]

The structure of the book of Deuteronomy roughly coincides with much older covenant treaties made in the world of international diplomacy of their times.[7] In a sense, the book of Deuteronomy is poised as a covenant treaty rivaling other such treaties between rival sovereigns, including rival gods. Immediately following the opening prologue (chaps. 1–4), a summary set of laws providing historical background are proclaimed; these include a revised set of the Ten Commandments (chap. 5), followed by commentary on the most important of those commandments, the first commandment, which warns against idolatry (chaps. 6–11).

The first commandment is sobering and negative: "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me" (5:7–9). However, in commenting on this commandment, Moses offers a more positive spin in what has become known as the great *Shema* in Jewish ritual (6:4–5), "Hear, O Israel: The LORD, our God, the LORD *alone*," or equally possible in translation, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD, our God, the LORD is *one*." Followed by the affirming directive, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

The ambiguities of the translations, whether in the first commandment itself in chapter 5, or in the commentary that follows in chapter 6, seem to allow for the possible existence of other gods, but to place the emphasis on the people's loyalty to Yahweh (Israel's God) alone among the alternative temptations (compare 32:8–9).[8] In almost all periods of Israel's history, the worship of more than one god, whether as an idol or not, was a temptation. Up until at least this second sermon of Moses in Deuteronomy, various names or titles of God or the gods were used, including God of your fathers, God of various locales, *El Roi*, *El Shaddai* and

so on.[9] Later, in Canaan, gods who were rivals to Israel's God came with names like El, Dagan, Baal, and Asherath.

It is tempting to want to identify by name the possible rival gods Deuteronomy worries will be a threat to Israel's allegiance to Yahweh. It is tempting to focus on the above-named rivals, including gods related to cults of the dead, and also Assyrian, Babylonian, and Egyptian deities. All the more remarkable then, that the book of Deuteronomy does not identify these competing gods by name, not in the sense of specifically named deities that ancient Israel might have been tempted to worship. Instead, as Dennis Olson points out, Deuteronomy focuses on three more insidious and less culture-specific gods or idols that remain formidable rivals for our *ultimate* allegiance.[10]

For Olson, the three gods that Deuteronomy warns against and that demand allegiance in every generation are the gods of militarism, materialism, and moralism, each with their various forms of worship: power, wealth, and self-righteousness. In chapter 7, to worship the god of power politics backed by military might, or to trust in nations mightier and more numerous than emergent Israel, is to polytheize (7:17). This chapter stresses the singular power of Yahweh, who alone is warrior and defender of the little David, Israel, among the Canaanite Goliaths round about them. Chapter 8 warns against making material possessions objects of devotion and allegiance. One must not elevate even good and necessary things such as water and food too high in the pantheon of belief, since "one does not live by bread alone" (8:3). Indeed, while the people wandered in the desert some forty years, didn't God provide sandals that did not wear out, food to eat, water when needed, and clothes for their backs? If some day the people are to become wealthy in the promised land of plenty, they must not imagine that their prosperity is a result of their business savvy and acquisitive power (8:17). Theirs must be worship of the Giver not the gift. Chapters 9 and 10 warn against communal self-righteousness, against defining one's own cultural identity, particularity, image of God–ness, as morally superior to

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others'. Indeed, to imagine that their own moral decency, inherent goodness, or doctrinal purity was the reason they had received a homeland from God would be idolatry of the worst kind (9:3). For fifty-two verses, Moses engages in a harangue intended to take the pride out of his people, lest they imagine themselves to be gods worthy of self-worship. Like a capstone, chapter 11 repeats the language of the *Shema*, underscoring the positive call to love the LORD with all one's heart, soul, and might.

Sequencing our allegiances

If the book of Deuteronomy serves as our guide for determining criteria for idolatrous temptations, inclinations, and practices, few if any of us emerge with a clean slate. If we with confidence stand assured that we do not bow down to military might, are we equally free of idolatrous commitments to material gain? If we proclaim our nonallegiance to military power and also manage to restrain our desire for wealth, have we done so without a hint of self-righteous moralism? Life under Mosaic monotheism can be burdensome indeed. We are more polytheist in practice than we care to admit. We create gods and idols of our own, though we seldom call them that. Perspective matters.

A Jewish or Muslim monotheist might wonder about the apparently idolatrous nature of the Christian faith. He might see Christian claims of monotheism—using Trinitarian doctrine and singing hymns to Jesus Christ—to be like so many pre-Copernican machinations for describing an earth-centered universe. A poor Latina immigrant, who works two jobs and has prayed to God for patience to stand in line for fifteen years in order to become a citizen of the United States, might wonder how a wealthy, educated, US-born citizen could possibly interpret her pledge of allegiance to her new country as idolatry. A pacifist Christian in his attempt to follow Jesus in refusing to kill another human being—even to save the life of an innocent victim—might wonder why a just-war Christian would question such ideological commitment as idolatrous. And so the throwing of stones begins.

A singular, unified view of reality over which the one and only God rules can invite a totalizing, totalitarian temptation to defend one's god (belief), violently, or for that matter, nonviolently but arrogantly. The arguments about idolatry are often disguises about

claims to truth over against accusations of falsehood. History is replete with examples of such ruthless defense writ large. My God versus your god. On the other hand, if God is the one and only, then to claim God exclusively as one's very own is the height of self-regard and clearly under condemnation according to Deuteronomy's criteria of idolatry. The beauty of a monotheistic worldview is that reality is imbued with a coherence, an integrity, a wholeness, a purpose—and at the same time it is also relativized by the one and only God, so that any projection of one's own narrow, parochial, denomi(national) god onto the universe comes perilously close to disobeying the first commandment.

We who call ourselves Christian, a people of the Book, stand under the burden and blessing of Mosaic monotheism. As we have seen, for a lot of reasons, some not of our own making, it is nearly impossible to obey the first commandment with absolute consistency. And perhaps that is why God gave it to us. Evidence within and outside scripture shows how people then and now are ceaselessly tempted to devote our lives to myriad aims, things, ideas, beliefs, and transcendent projections, as if they had ultimate claim on our lives. Ironically, it took the inclusion in scripture of the book of Job to relativize the retributive justice of the book of Deuteronomy that had all but assumed its own divine status above the one and only God it so wonderfully proclaimed and nearly displaced. In dethroning the Deuteronomic ideology, the book of Job warns us never to confuse even the most sacred and holy and biblical faith claim with the one and only Claimant deserving our worship. For Mennonite Christians, Job may caution against placing the peace of Christ above a relationship with Christ, or reifying pacifism above Christ, our Peace. In the end, sequence matters.

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Earlier I suggested that idolatry is "whatever the heart clings to or relies on for *ultimate* security."[11] This definition of the nature of idolatry allows us to negotiate in the spirit of humility a sequence of allegiances, bearing in mind our ultimate commitment to the one God over and above and in us all. It is perilous indeed to

suggest that other believers are somehow idolatrous when they differ from us on this or that sequence of allegiances, under the same sovereign domain of the one and only God.

If the *Shema* invites us to defend God's unique status as God, to work out a sequence of allegiances befitting such a God, it equally invites us to defend the only or ultimate feeling worthy of God, the feeling of love (Deut. 6:5): "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." Indeed, describing our relationship with the one and only God as one of love is a defining contribution of the book of Deuteronomy. When approached by scribes arguing over what the greatest commandment in scripture might be, Jesus simply quoted the *Shema*, in effect arguing that to love God is the greatest commandment of all (Mark 12:28–34). In the end, it is a comfort to know that God's love ultimately overshadows God's anger against idolatry by a factor of five hundred to one (Deut. 5:9–10). Such audacious love is the antidote to the work of fine-tuning and the inevitable falling-short of living up to whatever sequence of allegiances we create.

Notes

[1] See G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

[2] Even if one sets aside this evolutionary sequence for that of an originating monotheism that succumbs to a fallen polytheism or paganism recovered by an Abrahamic then Mosaic exclusive monotheism, the difficulties of defining idolatry and the practice of a recovered monotheism are in no way diminished.

[3] Jan Assmann coined the phrase the "Mosaic distinction" to describe an early version of monotheism borrowed from Egypt that continued to influence subsequent iterations of monotheism in Israel (Jan Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism*, trans. Robert Savage [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010]). In *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 10, Mark S. Smith says such a "Mosaic distinction" could only ever be fully claimed during the late biblical and postbiblical canonical formation period.

[4] Beale adds the word *ultimate* to Luther's definition. See Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, 17.

[5] Adapted by Brian S. Rosner from Reinhold Niebuhr's definition, in "The Concept of Idolatry," *Themelios* 24, no. 3 (May 1999): 24.

[6] Deut. 4:15–35; 5:6–10; 6:4, 14–15; 7:2–5, 16, 25–26; 9:12–21; 11:16, 28; 12:2–3, 30–31; 13:1–15; 16:21–22; 17:2–3; 18:9–14; 20:17–18; 27:15; 28:36; 29:17–18, 25; 30:17; 31:16–20, 29; 32:16–21.

[7] For what follows, see James E. Brenneman, *On Jordan's Stormy Banks: Lessons from the Book of Deuteronomy* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press: 2004), 17–18.

[8] See Dennis T. Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses: A Theological Reading*,

Overtures to Biblical Theology (Minneapolis: Augsburg/Fortress, 1994), 50–51, esp. n3. I am not persuaded by Tracy J. McKenzie's argument in *Idolatry in the Pentateuch: An Intertextual Strategy* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2010), 115–17, that the Pentateuch as a whole, and Deuteronomy in particular, portrays the rival gods of the nations as nondeities, mere images and false idols. Mark S. Smith, *God in Translation*, 146–47, argues otherwise.

[9] Mark S. Smith, *God in Translation*, 157–65. See also Irving Zeitlin, *Ancient Judaism: Biblical Criticism from Max Weber to the Present* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1984), 58–59.

[10] For much of what follows, see Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses*, 52–61.

[11] See n4 above.

About the author

James E. Brenneman is president of Goshen College. He previously served as lead pastor of Pasadena Mennonite Church and taught Hebrew Bible at the Episcopal Theological School at Claremont. He lives in Goshen, Indiana, with his wife, Terri Plank Brenneman, and their son, Quinn.