

‘Abodah Zarah is the common term in Rabbinical literature for idolatry. The Rabbis denounced idol-worship as a cardinal sin. The prohibition of idolatry is equal in weight to all the other commandments of the Torah [Horayoth 8a], they taught; and conversely, So grave is the sin of idolatry, that whoever rejects it is as though he acknowledges the whole Torah [Hul. 5a]. Whereas a Jew was permitted to violate the ordinances of the Torah under threat of death, an exception was made of idolatry, immorality and bloodshed [Sanh. 74a], idolatry ranking first in importance. In addition to teaching this abstract doctrine, the Rabbis had to formulate practical rules which would have the effect of diminishing the likelihood of a Jew becoming contaminated by heathenism. When engaged upon this task, they kept before them the principle that prevention was better than cure, which they expressed in the aphorism, Keep off, we say to a Nazirite; go round the vineyard and come not near to it [fol. 58b]. The chief deterrents they elaborated are: [i] An idolatrous object is *asur be-hanaah*, by which was meant that a Jew may not make use of it himself and he may also not derive any benefit from it. He could not dispose of it in any way which would in the slightest degree cause profit to accrue to him. [ii] They allowed a Jew to take possession and utilize such an object after it had been annulled, i.e., mutilated by a heathen, because its very appearance would then suggest the idea of its helplessness — It could not save itself, so how can it save me! [fol. 41b]. And they added this important proviso: once the object had been in the possession of a Jew, even by his just picking it up, it could never be annulled. [iii] Appreciating the fact that eating and drinking together with heathens must lead to close social intercourse, resulting in mixed marriages and eventually the possible abandonment of Judaism, the Rabbis instituted various regulations for the disqualification of food prepared or handled by them with the purpose of preventing such intimate association. It is important to understand that the vehement opposition to idolatry which distinguishes the legislation of the Bible and later of the Talmud was not merely the antagonism of one theological system to another. Fundamentally it was a conflict of ethical standards. Heathen peoples practiced abominations against which the Scriptures earnestly warned Israel. Idolatry was identified with immoral conduct, an identification which was too often verified by experience [see fol. 22a et seq.]. The denial of God, therefore, which was implied in polytheism, entailed for the Rabbis an inevitable denial of the morality of the Torah. They maintained that whoever acknowledges idolatry denies the Ten Commandments as well as the precepts given to Moses, to the prophets and the patriarchs [Sifre, Numbers § III]. Consequently in their aim to save their people from the ravages of paganism, the Rabbis were convinced that they were fighting for ethical purity as well as religious truth. In a world of debased standards of conduct they waged a resolute contest for the preservation of the higher and nobler concepts of human behavior which reflected the will of the God of Israel; and in so doing they rendered a conspicuous service to their own community and also to the advancement of civilization. [Adapted from the Introduction.]

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