Image Rights and Iconoclasm: A Study on the Relationship between Christology and Idolatry

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INTRODUCTION

'Little children, keep yourselves from idols' (1 John 5:21).

What is idolatry? This article is, in part, borne out of Greenspahn's concern that in wider theological discourse, the term *idolatry* is regularly applied with little clarity of definition. However, it differs with Greenspahn's own willingness to admit the inherent ambiguity of the term.[1] The relevance of idolatry to the various loci of theology necessitates a clear definition of the term.

Following on from this initial question, one then asks, why is idolatry a sin?

This article attempts to answer these questions by examining idolatry in relation to Christ as the image of God. In that sense this is a work on Christology in relation to idolatry, with its focus on the relationship between these two concepts. The basic thesis put forward is that the answers to these questions are ultimately Christological. In essence, this study aims to prove that understanding Christ as the image of the unseen God (Col. 1:15) is essential in comprehending all aspects of idolatry.

With this in mind, this work takes a two-pronged approach. First, idolatry is explored in an Old Testament context. This probes how one can take a Christological approach to idolatry in the pre-Incarnation Scriptures. Second, idolatry in the New Testament is examined. Here, the Old Testament findings are expanded through the Christology of Paul. The consequences of a Christological approach to idolatry are then investigated.

It ought to be made clear from its outset that this work focuses on the primary concern of all Christology; the person of Christ himself. Its accent is on the theological relationship between the reality of the second person of the Trinity and the sin of idolatry. The secondary question of

[1] F. Greenspahn 'Syncretism and Idolatry in the Bible', *Vetus Testamentum*, LIV 4 (2004), pp. 480-94.

the legitimacy of pictorial representations of the Christ is not taken up at this time.

THE OLD TESTAMENT, IDOLATRY AND CHRISTOLOGY

Hypothesising that the answers to all questions of idolatry are ultimately Christological, this article works on the principle that Jesus Christ being the *eikon tou theou tou aoratou* (Col. 1:15) is central to Scripture's theological concept and ethical condemnation of idolatry. However, if idolatry is most fully understood via Christology, the immediate question is; how does this relate to the Old Testament? The aforementioned hypothesis seems unusual given that the bulk of Scripture's references to idolatry come before the incarnation.

Clearly, idolatry is a major focus in the Old Testament. From the creation account onwards its flavour is consistently anti-idols and pro-Yahwhistic monotheism. Indeed, Genesis 1 has an almost overwhelmingly polemic drive against Canaanite idolatry. According to Kline the creation account is the total demythologising of pagan cosmological mythology and idolatry.[2] The law is also often taken up with idolatry; it is the subject of both the second commandment (Exod. 20:4-6) and much other instruction (Deut. 29:17). In the same vein the prophets regularly railed against Israel's idolatrous habits (Isa. 10:11; Jer. 8:19).

It should be noted that Jesus' own Old Testament hermeneutic had a basic Christ-ward trajectory: 'And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself' (Luke 24:27). Likewise the concern of this section is to understand the Old Testament's handling of idolatry in a way which prepares the reader for the New Testament's clearer Christological understanding. With that in mind, two areas of Old Testament theology will be dealt with: first, the salvation context of its teaching on idolatry; and secondly, the ethical nature of its teaching on idolatry.

The Salvation Context

The Old Testament is a story of salvation. God creates humanity, humanity falls into sin, God initiates his redemptive plan in the history of Israel. Within this great redemption metanarrative the first port of call in an overall Old Testament approach to idolatry is the decalogue; in particular, its preamble and first two commandments.

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2 M. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Overland Park: Two Age Press, 2000), p. 28.

As it is a theological concept, *idolatry* must be defined within a theological context. This is found at Mount Sinai. The decalogue represents the covenant terms laid down by Yahweh as suzerain for his vassal people.[3] Its context is one where Sinai follows the exodus. Through Moses Yahweh gave these laws to a people who had already received his salvation. The New Testament makes much use of this exodus deliverance as a motif for the greater salvation that comes through Jesus Christ. At the transfiguration it is evident that Christ's work in leading his people out of bondage to sin has superseded that of Moses' work in the exodus. Here the divine voice, 'added that [Jesus], the promised prophet like Moses (Deut. 18:15; Acts 3:22), is the only voice they are to listen to'.[4] Paul, writing post-Incarnation, expresses this exodus redemption in unambiguous, New Testament, salvific terminology: 'For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ' (1 Cor. 10:4). Interestingly, the Apostle identifies them as idolaters ('Do not be idolaters as some of them were', 10:7) and describes their idolatry as Christological ('We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did', 10:9) before again exhorting the Corinthians, 'Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry' (10:14).

The fuller New Testament significance of this exodus salvation picture will be explored in the following section. However, what is made clear at this point is that in Exodus one finds a gospel story. In the immediate context the Israelites were saved from their slavery in Egypt having been supernaturally delivered from an oppressive pagan regime. Such deliverance was intended to facilitate God-centred worship. This salvation context is immediately apparent in Exodus 20: 'I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.'

An Old Testament theology of idolatry, while not Christological in name, is perhaps not far from Christological in nature. The pre-incarnation context in which idolatry is most clearly illuminated is a context in which Yahweh's gracious provision of salvation is pre-eminent. Indeed, 'The Lawgiver and his gracious act of redemption provide the context and the backdrop against which the "ten words" are given.'[5] It is evident that the decalogue defines idolatry against the backdrop of Old Testament

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3 J. Mackay, *Exodus* (Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2001), p. 340; M. Kline, 'The Ten Commandments', *The New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. Douglas (London: IVP, 1962), pp. 1251-2.

4 D. Macleod, *The Person of Christ* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1998), p. 103.

5 W. Kaiser, *Towards Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), p. 84.

gospel. Idolatry is also defined in relation to Yahweh as the Ultimate Reality.

While the Lutheran joining of Exodus 20:3-6 into a single commandment is not followed in this work, Luther's *Doctrine Concerning Good Works* has nonetheless shed light on this issue. Luther interprets the commandments in their salvation context, seeing, 'You shall have no other gods before me', as intrinsically related to justification by faith alone. He then restates Exodus 20:3 in positive terms: 'Since I alone am God, thou shalt place all thy confidence, trust and faith on Me alone, and on no one else.'[6] What is required by the first commandment is faith in nothing but Yahweh alone; there is no other source of justification or salvation. Only Yahweh took Israel from Egypt, and thus only Yahweh can be trusted in as Saviour. In this light, it seems impossible simultaneously to keep the second commandment whilst breaking the first. To flee idolatry, one must first believe the gospel.

Calvin held a similar view of the interconnected nature of commandment keeping: 'Surely the first foundation of righteousness is the worship of God. When this is overthrown, all the remaining parts of righteousness, like pieces of a shattered and fallen building, are mangled and scattered.'[7] In the decalogue's chain of theological events rejection of Yahweh (and his salvation) is the birthplace of idolatry. Thus, one can say with assurance that idolatry is the product of unbelief in the one true God and his gospel.

The investigation then moves on to its second major question: why is idolatry a sin? Due to its nature as progressive Messianic revelation, Scripture provides a two-part answer to this question. The Old Testament makes plain the prohibition against man-made icons. The New Testament then spells out fully how God has revealed his image.

Dealing, then, with why the Old Testament prohibits idols two points stand out. First, the second commandment primarily prohibits not the worship of pagan idols, but the worship of Yahweh through man-made images (as was the case with the calf worship at Bethel and Dan). This is argued from the decalogue's context; the first commandment has already ruled that foreign gods must not take Yahweh's place. Within these covenant terms between Yahweh and Israel, commandments three and four deal with Yahweh's *name* and Yahweh's *Sabbath*. The second commandment is, in modern terms, concerned with Yahweh's *image rights*. In the decalogue, this is an area where Yahweh reserves total control; he can be

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6 M. Luther 'Doctrine Concerning Good Works' (http://www.ststephen-stow.com/pages/50_HistoricalWorks/Luther_GoodWorks.htm)

7 J. Calvin, *Institutes* II.VIII.11

nothing but self-defining. By way of exploring the LORD's use of these image rights he has already 'created man in his own image' (Gen. 1:27). For an Israelite to be reminded of the reality and presence of God, he should need to look only at his fellow human beings.[8] After all Yahweh has made them in his image. Humanity, however, has rebelled against him and this image has been defaced. Idolatry is thus exposed as cruelly misleading. It leads humanity to look instead to golden calves rather than Yahweh himself.

The notion that Yahweh alone can define himself leads into a second point; the decalogue's condemnation of Yahwhistic icons is a battle in an epistemological war. Calvin writes that Scripture contrasts God with idols 'to expose the world's folly, nay, madness, in searching for God when all the while each one clings to his own speculations'.[9] The point here is that a biblical epistemology places divine revelation as both its highest source of knowledge and indeed the only source of knowledge of God. This is what Van Til referred to as 'revelational epistemology'.[10] All true epistemology begins with Yahweh's sovereign self-revelation. Such a message is clear in Deuteronomy 4:15-16: 'Therefore watch yourselves very carefully. Since you saw no form on the day that the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves.' This point leads naturally into the second major concern of this section.

The Ethical Context

In Deuteronomy 4:16 it is explicitly recorded that making one's own icon of Yahweh is 'corrupt' (*shachat*). It follows that an answer to the question 'why is idolatry a sin?' must consider this issue in terms of ethics. Why does Scripture portray the idolater as morally corrupt?

The starting point of discussion on the ethical aspect of idolatry is the honour and glory of Yahweh. Indeed, this is the beginning of all Old Testament ethical studies wherein one finds God's character expressed.[11] Calvin, writing on Deut. 4:16, claims that 'Every figurative representation of God contradicts his being.'[12] This is the foundation on which the Bible's ethical condemnation of idolatry stands. As it is impossible accurately to depict Yahweh through unaided human reasoning or imagining,

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8 cf. J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* I.I.1

9 J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* I.XI.2

10 C. Van Til, *Survey of Christian Epistemology (In Defence of Biblical Christianity)* (Pittsburgh: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1980).

11 W. Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1979), p. 172.

12 J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* I.XI.2.

any attempt to do so will necessarily misrepresent him in some way. This in turn highlights truth as the reason idolatry is ethically *shachat*. God is honoured by truth (John 4:24) and dishonoured by falsehood. Defamation and misrepresentation of character is ethically wrong. This is particularly the case where the subject being misrepresented is Yahweh himself. Indeed, it marks out idolatry as a particularly gross sin. Thus, the reason Scripture portrays the Yahwhistic idolater as morally corrupt becomes clear. At best he misrepresents Yahweh. At worst, he blatantly lies about him. Either way the author of truth is denied a truthful representation. Such an inherent denial of truth is, by its very nature, unethical. Again, epistemological issues are closely related. Trying figuratively to represent the LORD involves a serious epistemological crime. Calvin notes that Yahwhistic idolatry follows directly from a rejection of revelational epistemology.[13] It involves idolatrous human reasoning overruling the divine injunction not to imagine of Yahweh what he has not chosen to reveal of himself. This is unethical as it breaks the decalogue's divine image rights and attempts to depose God and assert humanity as judge of truth.

In the Old Testament idolatry is a sin primarily because truth matters. Jesus highlighted the truthfulness of God in naming Satan as the 'father of all lies' (John 8:44). If Yahweh reserves the right to reveal himself, inaccurate and misleading depictions of his character cannot begin with the Father of all truth. The Yahwhistic idolater is corrupt because he lies about Yahweh. At an even more rudimentary level than this he is corrupt because he is a covenant breaker. The terms of Yahweh's covenant stipulate that the divine image rights belong to the LORD; any attempt to subvert this is to act in breach of contract. Of interest in this regard is that both Calvin and Luther regarded justification by faith alone as the source of all true moral life and ethical conduct.[14] It is imperative, therefore, that one keeps the first commandment (by attributing salvation and deliverance to Yahweh alone) so that one might not break the second commandment through idolatry.

Summary

The Old Testament's total aversion to the use of images in worship has thus been noted. At the beginning of this section, the validity of an Old Testament Christological approach to idolatry was questioned. The following comments stand in summary.

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[13] J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* I.V.11.

[14] D. Sinnema, 'The Discipline of Ethics in Early Reformed Theology', *Calvin Theological Journal* 28 (1993), pp. 10-44.

First, the nature of divine revelation is progressive. God's self-revelation is as One in the Old Testament and Triune in the New Testament. This reality is significant in how one relates a Christological understanding of idolatry to Old Testament references to idol worship. Second, nothing in the Old Testament's handling of idolatry contradicts a New Testament Christological understanding of the topic. In fact the opposite is evident. The Old Testament defines idolatry within the context of the good news of God's deliverance. This leads naturally into a New Testament approach centred on Christology. In addition to this as Yahweh has already laid an exclusive claim on his image rights in both the decalogue and Deut. 4, he is firmly within those rights in revealing himself most fully 'in a Son' (Heb. 1:2) who is 'the image of the unseen God' (Col. 1:15).

On the basis of Old Testament evidence alone what is idolatry and why is it a sin? As this work has a Christological conclusion definitively answering these questions at this point is impossible. However, substantial observations can be made. Idolatry is fuelled by unbelief in the God who reveals himself and who saves. The decalogue deals primarily with idolatry as icon worship which Scripture condemns as ethically corrupt. This verdict is reached via the covenantal nature of the decalogue; Yahweh alone has the right to reveal himself and his image. No human imagining of him ever faithfully represents him or does justice to his glory.

THE NEW TESTAMENT, IDOLATRY AND CHRISTOLOGY

Examining idolatry in relation to Christology in the New Testament will principally involve the examination of two Pauline texts: 1 Cor. 10:1-14 and Col. 1:12-14. In the former Paul uses overtly Christological concepts to relate the idolatry of the Israelites to the New Testament Corinthians. In the latter the same author uses exodus concepts prior to embarking on a *tour de force* of the highest Christology. In this context he describes Christ as 'the image of the unseen God'.

In the Incarnation of Jesus Christ one finds a virtual paradigm shift in the progressive self-revelation of God. The Gospel of Mark immediately introduces Jesus Christ as *huiou theou*. Matthew and Luke begin with accounts of his supernatural conception. John's Gospel describes him as *ho logos*. Not only was this Logos *pros ton theon* but the Logos was God (*kai theos en ho logos*). The New Testament immediately makes clear that with Jesus' enfleshment something utterly unprecedented has happened: God has become man (Matt. 1:23). The experience of knowing this Jesus of Nazareth prompts staunchly monotheistic Jews to proclaim without reservation or embarrassment, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God' (Matt. 16:16), and 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the

King of Israel' (John 1:49). This phenomenon thus has a profound effect on all theology from this point onwards. With respect to the incarnation Barthelemy perhaps goes some way to shedding light on its relationship to iconology:

> YHWH would not tolerate any idol made by man's hand because he would not tolerate man's reversing the relationship of moulder to the moulded. He would never give man any image distinct from himself, for fear that the image, instead of playing the part of transparent sign, should become a veil which masks him. Only one possibility remained: that he should raise up among men an image that would not be distinct from himself, that would not be other than himself. That would be the incarnation.[15]

In this section we will propose that the Incarnation was the ultimate divine act of iconoclasm. In the person of Jesus Christ God has most fully revealed himself, and that entirely on his own terms. Yahweh's covenantal image rights are exercised most fully in the one who has said, 'Whoever who has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9). It will be concluded that the revelation of Christ as the *eikon* of God will ultimately mean the end of all idolatry.

Christology and idolatry in Corinth

Beginning in 1 Corinthians one finds Paul from 8:1 (*peri de ton eidolothuton*) to 11:1 dealing with idolatry in a New Testament context. Ancient Corinth, circa 600 BC to AD 350, was the site of the Temple of Demeter. The apostle's topic is how New Testament believers should conduct themselves in a culture where pagan iconolatry formed an important part of social and political life.[16] Within this extended discourse (8:11-11:1) scholarship seems settled on 1 Corinthians 10:1-22 as a separate section.[17] Here Paul condemns pagan sacrificial meals as idolatrous and exhorts Christians not to partake in them (1 Cor. 10:7, 14). It should be noted that considerable debate has been generated over from which perspective Paul

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[15] D. Barthelemy, *God and His Image* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966), p. 84.

[16] J. Smit, '1 Corinthians 8:1-6: A Rhetorical *Partitio*: A Contribution to the Coherence of 1 Cor. 8:1-11:1' in *The Corinthian Correspondence*, ed. Reimund Beiringer (BETL, 125; Leuven: Peeters-University Press, 1996), pp. 557-91.

[17] P. Naylor, *A Commentary on 1 Corinthians* (Durham: Evangelical Press, 1996), p. 184.

approaches this issue. The majority of commentators view Paul as dealing primarily with idolatry on a theological level.[18]

Viewing 1 Corinthians 10:1-14 as a passage where Paul deals theologically with the ongoing problem of idolatry in the New Testament church one finds him highlighting an Old Testament example: the idolatry of the Israelites in the wilderness. Paul freely describes this Old Testament experience in the language of New Testament Christology. In 10:1 Paul makes mention of 'our fathers' (*hoi pateres hemon*). That he is speaking of the Israelites in their wilderness experience is evident from the context. These were the fathers who had been delivered through Moses in the Exodus (10:2); their experience was of grand divine salvation. These were the fathers with whom Yahweh had declared his covenant terms in the Decalogue and who had subsequently broken those terms; 'some of them were idolaters' (10:7). The interest of this study is in Paul's Christological emphases in verses 4c and 9.

What is apparent thus far is that Paul is using the example of the Israelites, and particularly their idolatry, as a comparator through which his hearers may more clearly comprehend their own situation; 'these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did' (10:6). It seems, however, that the fathers provide more than a mere analogy. Paul describes the experience of Corinthian and Israelite as substantially the same. This point will be argued by Paul's application of New Testament Christ-terminology to their Old Testament experience. In what sense was Christ the Israelites' rock? This verse has caused much divergence of opinion. By way of a wider context the sacraments are on Paul's mind in 1 Cor. 10. He refers to the Israelites as having been 'baptised into Moses' and later goes on to apply his iconographic principles to the eucharist (10:16-22). Having thus already mentioned baptism is it legitimate to say that Paul understands the Israelites' spiritual eating (manna, Exod. 16:4-36) and drinking (from the rock at Kadesh, Num. 20:2-13) as typologically prefiguring the two eucharistic elements? Undeniably, Paul refers to these things as tupoi. Whether he is conveying a definite sense of theological typology as opposed to the *tupoi* merely serving as examples is less clear. Baird claims that 'here Paul does not

[18] For example, G. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 469; J. Smit, '"Do Not Be Idolaters" Paul's Rhetoric in 1 Corinthians 10.1-12', *Novum Testamentum* 39.1 (Jan. 2007), pp. 40-53. For contrasting opinions, see W. Willis, *Idol Meat in Corinth: The Pauline Argument in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10* (SBLDS 68; Chico: Scholars Press, 1985), pp. 196-219; M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians*, HUT, 28 (Tubingen: Mohr, 1991), pp. 138-42, 250-6.

depict types to be fulfilled but moral lessons to be learned from negative examples.'[19] This, however, does not do justice to the text's Christological nuances. Certainly, Paul does not explicitly make out that the Israelite and Corinthian experience is consubstantial. That said his description of their actions as 'drinking from Christ' and 'putting Christ to the test' does point to their experiences as substantially very similar.

Much can be said in favour of a typological approach to this passage. Calvin understood 1 Corinthians 10 in this way. He translates 10:6 as 'Now these things were types to us', and adds that 'it is not without consideration that I have given a different rendering from that of the old translation, and of Erasmus'.[20] Indeed, such an approach leads Calvin to describe the manna and water as 'emblems of Christ':

> It follows, that Christ was connected with them, not locally, nor by a natural or substantial union, but sacramentally. On this principle the Apostle says, that *the rock was Christ*, for nothing is more common than metonymy in speaking of sacraments.[21]

Paul, it is claimed, is using metonymy rather than metaphor. In what sense, then, was Christ their rock? The incarnation was still some way off. The triunity of God (particularly in relation to the second person) was still unknown and shrouded in mystery. Nonetheless, Jesus Christ was with the Israelites as the undisclosed author of all their blessings. The substantial reality of this unbeknown presence has an immediate practical consequence for the Corinthians: 'Christ lived in the midst of the ancient people, and the people perished! How can you think yourselves, you Christians, secure from the same lot!'[22] The fathers fell into idolatry when the reality of Christ's presence with them was shrouded; the stakes, therefore, are considerably higher for those born on the other side of Bethlehem. With most of the Israelites 'God was not well pleased'. In becoming idolaters, they broke the suzerain's covenantal stipulations. At this point it is important to note the technical distinction between idolatry and apostasy. The Israelites did not formally renounce Yahweh as the true God (à la Ahab and Jezebel, 1 Kings 16:29-33); instead they made

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[19] W. Baird, '1 Corinthians 10.1-13', *Interpretation* 44.3 (July 1990), pp. 286-90.

[20] J. Calvin, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, tr. John Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), pp. 322-3.

[21] Ibid., p. 319.

[22] F. Godet, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark), cit. in Geoffrey Wilson, *1 Corinthians* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1971), p. 144.

and worshipped Yahweh-icons (Ex. 32:4; cf. 1 Kings 12:26-33). However, this difference aside, the sin remains serious.

Paul then describes the circumstances in which their idolatry presented itself. First, *ekathisen ho laos pagein kai perin kai avestesan paizein.* Meeks[23] sees this as a midrashic technique whereby Paul is reduplicating his words; God provided them with food and drink which they consumed and then 'rose to play'. However, this analysis perhaps overlooks an important point. Having already set out their privilege in the provision of spiritual food and drink through Christ (10.3-4), Paul recounts their descent into idolatry by quoting Exodus 32:6. Such a choice of reference is highly significant. Paul is referring to the incident of the golden calf; the epitome of Israel's idolatry. There the people responded to Moses' extended time on Mount Sinai by abandoning their divinely mandated revelational epistemology and demanding of Aaron 'Make us gods who shall go before us'. It is within this context that Paul refers to their 'sitting to eat and drink, and rising to play'. Thus viewed it is clear that this eating and drinking is part of the overall paganism into which the Israelites' true religion was degenerating. Such an interpretation reads cogently in the Hebrew text which resonates consistency between the three actions (*w'yeshebh ha'am le'ekol w'shato wayaqmu l'tsaheq*).

'The word means "to play" anyhow; more especially to dance to the sound of music. Here it means to *dance religiously* round an idol; the idol in this case being the golden calf.'[24] The Israelites' shame is evident. Christ was spiritually in their midst. He had provided them with sacramental types. While in the position to eat and drink Christ's provision they instead chose to participate in the pagan cult; eating and drinking what Paul refers to as 'the cup and table of demons' (1 Cor. 10:21). On the basis of this, Paul states why the Corinthians must abstain from idolatrous pagan cultic rituals. His reason is Christological; the Christian cultic meal is centred on body and blood of Christ. 'You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons' (10:21). For the Corinthians the answer to their theological dilemma on idolatry is Christological; Christians belong to Christ, not idols. In this sense Paul sees Christ as the Corinthians' deliverance from their idolatrous origins. Calvin notes the probable reason that Paul emphasises pagan feasts rather than the act of idol worship. Corinthian Christians were unlikely to have participated in direct acts of

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[23] W. Meeks, '"And Rose Up to Play": Midrash and Paraenesis in 1 Cor. 10.1-22', *Journal for The Study of The New Testament* 16 (1982), pp. 64-78.

[24] D. Brown, *1 Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark) cit. in Geoffrey Wilson, *1 Corinthians* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1971), p. 145.

idolatry. They were, however, under social pressure to attend feasts held in honour of these pagan deities; 'base ceremonies, which were tokens of idolatry'.[25]

Second, the Israelites 'put Christ to the test' (*mede ekpeirazomen ton christon, kathos tines auton eteirasan*). The relationship between their idolatry and their 'testing Christ' must be explored. Paul's reference is to Numbers 21:5. Here the Israelites in the wilderness are recorded as denouncing Yahweh's act of deliverance from Egypt and decrying manna as *q'loqel* (worthless). Yahweh's response was to send serpents which killed many of the Israelites. Indeed, Paul's graphic use of the imperfect *apollunto* (literally 'lay perishing', a past-continuous form) emphasises the calamity of their situation. In response the Israelites repented and implored Moses to ask Yahweh that the serpents be removed. The divine reply was, 'Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live' (Num. 21:8). In this context Paul focuses on their rejection of Yahweh as *deliverer* (Num. 21:5a, b) and as *provider* (Num. 21:5a, c). He isolates this rejection and describes it as 'tempting Christ'. The question which thus arises concerns Paul's use of Christological terminology; how could they tempt Christ in the pre-incarnation period?

Although it handles a new set of facts, this is essentially the same question as has already been asked of 1 Corinthians 10:4c: how could Christ be their rock before the incarnation? It is therefore possible (and necessary for consistency) to answer using the same hermeneutical principles. In what sense was Christ present to be tempted by the Israelites? It is noteworthy in the passing that Jesus applies this incident to himself in John 3:14-15: 'And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.' According to Calvin Christ was present in the wilderness through the Angel of the LORD. Whether he would place the Angel in the category of theophany or Christophany is unclear. 'Let us then regard it as a settled point, that the angel was the Son of God.'[26] The reformer holds that the term *Christ* 'from having a signification that corresponds with his human nature...was not as yet applicable to the Son of God, but it was assigned to him by the communion of properties'.[27] For Calvin Jesus' presence was as the Son of God rather than the Christ, and this through the Angel of Yahweh. Such an approach is consistent with the earlier handling of Christ as their rock.

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[25] J. Calvin, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 323.

[26] Ibid., p. 326.

[27] Ibid.

Having detailed the Israelites' drinking from and testing Christ Paul summarises both in a single command (10:14): *dioper* (literally, 'for this very reason') *pheugete apo tes eidololatrias*. What is fascinating here is how readily Paul relates Christology to iconology. His logic works as follows: Christ was previously found only in shadows and types, but now he is now openly known by the Corinthians; therefore, they should flee from idolatry. It is in this sense that Christ is the great divine iconoclast. He is the *eikon* through which the believer has seen the Father; hence, Paul's abhorrence at Christians participating at any level in idolatry. This theme will now be developed through an examination of Pauline Christology in Colossians 1:12-15.

Helyer interestingly relates 1 Corinthians 10 to Colossians 1:15 through the topic of cosmic Christology. He writes that Paul 'does appear to ascribe to Christ an historical presence in those events' and refuses to 'reduce this passage to allegorical language representing the spiritual realities currently being experienced by the Corinthian believers'.[28] Paul makes clear that when the Israelites were falling into idolatry, Jesus was Lord of all. This is intimately connected with the awesome cosmic Christology of Colossians 1.

Christ as the image of God: Christology in Colosse

This study began in Exodus. There the salvation context of the decalogue was highlighted as the primary Old Testament context in which idolatry is to be understood. After this Paul's Christological teaching on idolatry in 1 Corinthians 10 again reverted to the time of the exodus. What will be demonstrated in this section is that another exodus picture provides the backdrop for the ultimate divine act of iconoclasm; the revelation of Jesus as *eikon tou theou tou aoratou.*

The chapter in question, and in particular verses 15-20, contains some of the most important Christological truths in the New Testament. Some scholars have argued that the verses are the quotation of a hymn.[29] Schweizer[30] claims that this hymn was 'probably known and sung often' by the Colossians. Such an assumption is doubted by Behr[31] and openly

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[28] L. Helyer, 'Cosmic Christology and Col. 1.15-20', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37/2 (June 1994), pp. 235-46.

[29] R. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon* (New Century Bible, Oliphants, 1974), pp. 61-4; R. Roth, 'Christ and the Powers of Darkness: Lessons from Colossians', *Word and World* 6.3 (Summer 1986), pp. 336-44.

[30] E. Schweizer, 'Colossians 1.15-20', *Review and Expositor* 87 (Winter 1990), pp. 97-104.

[31] J. Behr, 'Colossians 1.13-20: A Chiastic Reading', *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 40.4 (Issue 4, 1996), pp. 247-64.

disputed by Wright.[32] Of greater likelihood is that the verses form a piece of Greek poetry.[33] Such poetry is outstanding in form but much more so in terms of its Christological content.

In Colossians 1:12-14 Paul reminds the Colossians of their new covenant privileges. God has 'qualified' them 'to share in the inheritance of the saints in light' (1:12). In the following verse Paul writes, *hos errusato hemas ek tes exousias tou skotous kai metestesen eis ten basileian tou huiou tes agapes autou.* What is particularly striking here is that echoes of the exodus are found in Paul's language. 'Of prime importance in the interpretation of this passage is the fact that, in both vocabulary and imagery, it is based on the Old Testament.'[34] The verb *errusato* (from *ruomai*, 'deliver') is used in the Septuagint translation of Psalm 78:9 in reference to God as Israel's deliverer in the exodus. Its aorist middle tense describes an already realised eschatology. That the Colossians have already been taken from their Egypt is beyond doubt. In Colossians 1:12-13 Paul refers to both light (*en to photi*) and darkness (*tou skotous*). Such a progression is not intended to parallel Gnostic dualism, but rather works to emphasise the dramatic nature of the Colossians' deliverance.[35] In 1:13 Paul then similarly juxtaposes the domain of darkness and the kingdom of his beloved Son. The grammar of this verse is carefully constructed:

1:13a	delivered	from	the authority	of darkness
1:13b	transferred	into	the kingdom	of his beloved son

That God is the sole subject of such a substantial predicate (*hos*) resonates with the Old Testament exodus salvation paradigm. Two other Old Testament echoes can be detected in these verses. First, the verb behind 'redemption' in 1:14 (*lutroo*) has clearly recognisable overtones from the Israelites' time in Egypt (Exod. 13:13). It is used in the divine promise of deliverance (Exod. 6:6, LXX) and in Deuteronomy is used almost exclusively of the exodus itself. Second, God is referred to as the exodus redeemer in Psalm 78:35. Paul sums up the Colossians' exodus experience in 1:14b; it is 'the forgiveness of sins'. Wright recognises the '"exodus" ideas of 1.12-14' as belonging 'exactly where they are in relation to the

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[32] N.T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon* (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1986), p. 64.

[33] For a thorough overview of different approaches to the structure of this passage see, J. Lamp, 'Wisdom in Col. 1.15-20: Contribution and significance', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41 (March 1998), pp. 45-53.

[34] J. Behr, p. 249.

[35] T. Abbott, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians*, eds. S. Driver, A. Plummer and C. Briggs (T & T Clark: Edinburgh, 1985), p. 207.

poem'.[36] At this point the Old Testament decalogue (in its preamble and first two commandments) and Paul's Christ-poem (in its introduction and opening statement) are operating out of highly similar paradigms:

Exodus 20:1-6

I am the LORD your God, your deliverer

You shall have no other gods before me

You shall not attempt to reproduce the image of God

Colossians 1:12-15

The Father has delivered us from the domain of darkness

His beloved Son is our sole king

Christ is the image of the invisible God

The primary difference between these two paradigms is that the former is stated negatively, whereas the latter is expressed positively. 'The Decalogue could have been stated positively throughout as well as negatively, for moral law is always doublesided. Every moral act is at the same time also a refraining from a contrary mode of action that could have been taken.'[37] Is it legitimate to see Colossians 1:12-15a as a suitable positive restatement of Exodus 20:1-6? An answer to this question must first ask what Paul means when he describes Christ as the image of God. Several options are presented.

First is the understanding that this refers to the incarnation. Lucas is a proponent of such an interpretation which 'must be governed by the fact that the glory of the *invisible* God has actually been manifested to people through Christ. This must therefore refer to the incarnation'.[38] Such an approach finds support in John 1:14-18 and is also the position of Calvin. Second, Markus Barth[39] renders *aoratou* in a factual, pragmatic way. He argues that humankind is incapable of perceiving God as ruler of the cosmos, and because of this, *image* should be understood primarily in reference to Genesis 1:26-28. Barth's understanding of the *imago Dei* is one of dominion over the earth and contains little thought of divine self-revelation in the image. This, perhaps, is the weakness in such an interpretation of Christ as simply the divine ruler. God's highest act of self-revelation in Genesis 1 was the creation of the human being. In God's

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36 N.T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon* (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1986), p. 70.

37 Kaiser, p. 83.

38 D. Lucas, *The Message of Colossians and Philemon* (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1980), p. 50.

39 M. Barth, *Colossians* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), pp. 249-50.

eyes it elevates the 'good' to become 'very good'. Third, some commentators take all of Colossians 1:1-15 as 'descriptive of the Word before the Incarnation'.[40] However, Paul's chosen verb tense (*estin*) clearly shows that Christ currently is the image of the invisible God.

In trying to discern the meaning of 1:15a it is prudent to consider Paul's use of *eikon* in Colossians. In this epistle the word is used twice (1:15; 3.10). Paul's context must also be recognised. Although Colossians never directly quotes from the Old Testament it alludes to several Jewish disputes which presuppose an awareness of the Old Testament (2:16-17). In addition to this it contains allusions to biblical texts and concepts. These also point to the epistle being written against the backdrop of Old Testament religion (1:6, 10, 14; 2:11, 13-14). For Paul twice to use the concept of 'image of God' in such a context the most obvious connection the reader will make is with Genesis 1:24-30.[41] What is important at this point is that Scripture, in both Testaments, refers to humankind as the 'image of God' (Gen. 1:24-30; 1 Cor. 11:7). Does Paul hold Christ to be the 'image of the unseen God' in any unique way?

The two references to the *imago Dei* in Colossians make clear that Paul does regard Christ's divine image bearing as distinctive. In 1:15 Christ's status as the *eikon tou theou* is unqualified. Paul's dramatic contrast between the emphatic *aoratou* and *eikon* highlights how fully one can see the invisible God in Christ.[42] In 3:10 the Christian's image bearing is in view. Ruined by sin but undergoing repair by grace this believer has 'put on the new man' which is being 'renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator'. Much sanctification is required before God can be clearly seen in the believer. The God-Man, however, needs no such improvement. Whoever has seen him has seen the Father (cf. John 14:9).

Summary

At this point, one might ask what Paul's theology of the *imago Dei* in Colossians has to do with idolatry. The following should be noted:

First, Yahweh has reserved complete control over his image rights. These rights have been exercised twice: initially with the creation of humankind in his image, and then in the revelation of the Second Person of the Trinity. Second, although fallen humankind continues to bear the

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40 T. Abbott, p. 209.

41 A thorough investigation of the *imago Dei* in Gen. is outwith the scope of this article. For a succinct summary of various viewpoints (Classical Reformed, Roman Catholic, Lutheran etc.) see J. Murray, 'Man in the Image of God', *Collected Writings of John Murray 2: Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), pp. 34-46.

42 T. Abbott, p. 210.

imago Dei its image bearing has been grossly distorted by the fall and now requires renewal (Col. 3:10). In contrast Christ needs no renewal as the *eikon tou theou*. Third, Colossians 3 provides a context in which both humankind's idolatry (3:5) and fallen image bearing are dealt with (3:10). Johnson provides sage guidance in this regard:

> But what does it mean to be renewed according to the image of God? Does this point to a renewed function of exercising dominion over the world (as Christ does) by the new humanity? This seems to be a logical direction; but it is one in which Colossians does not go. Instead, Colossians points to the supremacy of Christ. He is everything...So to be renewed in the image of God refers to the process of becoming like Christ. He is already the image of God; he has dominion.[43]

What is thus apparent is that it is only in Christ that man finds freedom from idolatry. One flees from idolatry (1 Cor. 10:14) by pursuing Christ, the invisible made visible.

CONCLUSION

In the introduction two questions were posed: what is idolatry, and why is it a sin? The hypothesis was put forward that the answers to these questions are ultimately Christological. Having thus followed a path through the Old and New Testaments it remains to be asked, can these questions be answered? If so, in what sense are those answers ultimately Christological? The title of this article, 'Image Rights and Iconoclasm', holds the key to these answers.

In order to understand what idolatry is one must grasp the covenantal context of the decalogue, particularly in its preamble and first two commandments. Within the covenant terms Yahweh reserves for himself an absolute right of self-disclosure. Idolatry occurs when humankind acts in breach of this term and sets out predicating Yahweh without divine revelation. It is undergirded by a fundamental attitude of unbelief towards God and his salvation. Its nature as an act of covenant betrayal explains its sinfulness. However, if this can be said from the Old Testament alone, why pursue the aforementioned Christological hypothesis? Quite simply the divine concern in Scripture is not only to identify and define sin, but also to isolate and then defeat it. This is as true of idolatry as it is of any other sin. That God has set about the destruction of idolatry through the incarnation of his Son requires such a Christological line of thought. As

[43] D. Johnson, 'The Image of God in Colossians', *Didaskalia* 3.2 (April 1992), pp. 9-15.

has been demonstrated from Corinthians and Colossians Jesus' status as the unimpaired image of God necessarily spells the eventual demise of all idolatry. Idolatry was mortally wounded when the Son of God became incarnate. It is in this light that Jesus himself stands out as the ultimate iconoclast. He is a jealous God who will share his glory with no other.

By most fully disclosing his image while enfleshing his Son God has set about redeeming his people from every sin, including the sin of idolatry. The idol factory of the human heart finds its only cure in the *eikon tou theou tou aoratou*. Human beings restlessly worship lesser icons until they worship the true divine icon, the person of Christ. In putting on the new man fleeing idolatry and being renewed in the image of one's creator all roads ultimately lead to Christ. He is the authentic divine self-revelation in whom the believer has seen the Father. Furthermore, he is the great reason that Christians, whatever else they may be, should never be idolaters. Jesus Christ is thus both the divine icon and the divine agent of iconoclasm; those who follow him should see the wrongness and redundancy of all other icon worship. In closing, Calvin's wisdom seems appropriate:

> [God] is revealed to us in Christ alone. For in Christ he shews [*sic*] us his entire righteousness, goodness, wisdom, power, in short, his entire self. We must, therefore, beware of seeking him elsewhere, for everything that would set itself off as a representation of God, apart from Christ, will be an idol.[44]

[44] J. Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Colossians*, tr. W. Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 150.