The Broken Token

How the Greeks Understood Their Idols

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November 2026

Abstract

Idolatry has been described for two and a half thousand years by its enemies. The prophets of Israel, the apostle Paul, the Church Fathers and, later, the Qur'an all said the same thing: the nations bow to wood and stone, the work of their own hands. The worshippers themselves said something else. I write as a Hellene, and I want to give them back their voice. Hellenic image-worship was never about the statue. It was a symbolic language, built over centuries, by which the Greeks conceived of incorporeal powers: the earth and the sky, the sea and the storm, desire, victory, justice and shame. The human form was the alphabet of that language. The Greeks called such an image a *symbolon*: half of a broken token, which does not describe the god but fits him. Philosophers from Xenophanes to Sallustius knew it, priests and orators defended it, and the Neoplatonists gave it a full theory. The Church, which condemned it, later defended its own icons in the same words. Like Shinto and Daoism, the Greeks found the divine in nature and named its powers many; polytheism and pantheism, I argue, are one thing seen from two sides.

The State of the Question

Much of the ground here has been surveyed, and the paper owes its debts. Classicists have long argued that the Greeks did not confuse the statue with the god: Jean-Pierre Vernant on the image as a making-present of the invisible, Richard Gordon on the social life of statues, Deborah Steiner and Verity Platt on images and epiphany. Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit showed that "idolatry" is a concept defined by its opponents. Graeme Miles and Dmitry Kurdybaylo have read Porphyry's *On Statues* as a theory of symbols. Emma Stafford has shown that personified powers such as Aidōs, Nemesis and Eirēnē received real cult. Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede, and after them Stephen Mitchell and Peter Van Nuffelen, have explored the belief in one god behind the many. Milette Gaifman has questioned the old story that Greek worship moved simply from stones to statues. Gerhart Ladner, Ernst Kitzinger and Moshe Barasch traced the debt of the Byzantine defenders of icons to pagan image theory. And from another direction, James Hillman, David Miller and Jean Shinoda Bolen read the gods as archetypes of the psyche.

I add three things. First, I gather these separate findings into one argument, told from the worshippers' side, from Herodotus to the Second Council of Nicaea: that Hellenic image-

worship was a symbolic language for conceiving powers that have no body. Second, I speak as a practitioner, not a psychologist. The archetypal readers move the gods inside the mind. I hold them to be what the Greeks held them to be: real, incorporeal powers, outside the mind and not made by it. I keep them there, and read their interplay, as the Greeks did, as a guide for life. Third, I read the myths as maps, turning the structure that Vernant described into the practical ethic of Delphi: give each power its due and nothing in excess. Along the way I show why the worshippers' case has been so little heard. Their answers were burned, and the work of reconstructing them is still to be done.

The Charge

The charge begins at Sinai. The second commandment forbids it outright: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God" (Exodus 20:4–5; Deuteronomy 5:8–9). Deuteronomy gives the reason. At Horeb Israel heard a voice and "saw no manner of similitude" (4:12, 15–19). God showed no form, so no form may stand for him.

The first breach followed at once. While Moses was on the mountain, the people gave Aaron their gold, and he made a calf. They cried, "These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt," and Aaron proclaimed a feast "to the LORD" (Exodus 32:1–6). God told Moses to stand aside so that he might consume them; Moses pleaded, and God relented (32:9–14). Then Moses came down, saw the calf and the dancing, and broke the tablets at the foot of the mountain. He burned the calf, ground it to powder, strewed it on the water and made the people drink it. The Levites took the sword, and about three thousand men fell that day (32:19–28).

By the text's own words, the calf was no foreign god. Aaron's feast was "to the LORD," and the calf was hailed as the god who brought Israel out of Egypt. Many scholars read it as an image of, or a throne for, the God of Israel himself, as Jeroboam's calves at Bethel and Dan later were (1 Kings 12:28). Even an image meant to honour the true God was condemned. The objection was to the image itself.

The prophets kept the charge alive. In Isaiah a craftsman cuts down a cedar. With half of it he warms himself and bakes his bread; of the other half he makes a god, falls down to it and prays, "Deliver me, for thou art my god" (Isaiah 44:14–17). The Psalm says of the idols of the nations that they have mouths and speak not, eyes and see not, and that those who make them are like them (Psalm 115:4–8). The Wisdom of Solomon, written by a Jew of Alexandria who knew Greek religion at first hand, adds a history: idolatry began with a grieving father who made an image of his dead son, and with subjects who honoured the statue of a distant king (Wisdom 14:15–17).

Paul carried the charge into the Greek world. Those who knew God, he wrote, “changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man” (Romans 1:23). At Athens he found the city “wholly given to idols” and told the Areopagus that the godhead is not like gold or silver or stone, graven by art and man’s device (Acts 17:16, 29). The Greek word he used, *eidōlolatreia*, the service of images, was new. No Greek had ever used it of himself (Galatians 5:20; 1 Corinthians 10:14).

The Fathers made it a system. Clement of Alexandria, who knew the Greek poets better than most Greeks, mocked the statues one by one: wood, stone, ivory, gold, made by men who could be named and paid (*Protrepticus* 4). Arnobius and Lactantius said the same in Latin. Augustine went further and made the gods themselves demons, drawn into the statues by the rites (*City of God* 8.23–24); Origen had already said they fed on the smoke of sacrifice (*Against Celsus* 7.5). From there the charge passed into law. The decrees of Theodosius in 391 and 392 forbade the worship of images under penalty.

Islam took up the charge with full force. The sin has a name, *shirk*, associating partners with God, and it is the one sin the Qur’an says God will not forgive (4:48, 4:116). The Qur’an retells the golden calf, made at the urging of al-Sāmirī (20:83–98). It tells of the young Abraham, who asked his father’s people, “What are these images to which you are so devoted?” He broke them all but the largest and told them to ask it who had done it. They threw him into a fire, and God said, “O fire, be coolness and safety for Abraham” (21:51–70). The rabbis tell the same tale of Abraham in his father Terah’s idol shop (*Genesis Rabbah* 38:13). When Muhammad entered Mecca in 630 he cleared the idols from around the Kaaba, reciting, “Truth has come and falsehood has vanished” (17:81; al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ* 4287). Many schools of Islamic law forbid images of living things altogether. Neither tradition speaks with one voice. The rabbis debated whether Gentiles who honoured the one God together with others were idolaters at all, and Muslim jurists have long disagreed over which images the prohibition reaches. I give the charge here in its strongest form.

Why is it held to be so grave? The three faiths answer in different words with one meaning. God is one and has no partner; to give worship elsewhere is betrayal. The prophets called it adultery, Israel the unfaithful wife running after other lovers (Hosea 2; Jeremiah 3; Ezekiel 16); hence the jealous God of the commandment. God has no form, so any image misrepresents him. And the image is made by hands; to bow to it is to serve “the creature more than the Creator” (Romans 1:25). The rabbis set idolatry among the three sins a Jew must die rather than commit, with murder and forbidden unions (Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 74a), and Maimonides wrote that whoever admits idolatry denies the whole Torah (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Idolatry 2.4). Paul counts idolaters among those who will not inherit the kingdom (1 Corinthians 6:9–10), and Revelation gives them their part in the lake of fire (21:8). Halbertal and Margalit reduce the charge to two counts: betrayal of the one God, and error about what God is. Both assume the same thing: that the worshipper takes the image for the god, or gives it the god’s due.

The charge assumes the worshipper cannot tell the image from the god, and it was always made from outside. To know what the Greeks did when they stood before an image, we have to ask them.

Silenced, Not Answered

The charge looks unanswered. The Greeks answered it in full. Their answers were destroyed, and what survives, survives mostly in the books written to refute them.

Celsus wrote *The True Word* against the Christians about AD 178. It is lost. We know it only because Origen, seventy years later, quoted it line by line in order to answer it (*Against Celsus*). Porphyry wrote fifteen books *Against the Christians*, the most learned attack of antiquity. Constantine ordered them burned; in 448 Theodosius II and Valentinian III ordered every copy destroyed again (*Codex Justinianus* 1.1.3). Only fragments quoted by his opponents remain. Julian's *Against the Galileans* survives only in the passages Cyril of Alexandria copied out to refute it. Porphyry's *On Images*, the heart of the Greek theory of the image, survives only because Eusebius quoted it in order to attack it.

The destruction was not only of books. About 386 the orator Libanius begged Theodosius to stop the men in black, the monks, who went through the countryside wrecking shrines and temples, "eating more than elephants" and calling it piety (Oration 30, *For the Temples*, 8–9). The historian Eunapius, a pagan of the same age, says that when Alaric came through Thermopylae in 395, the gate of Greece was opened to him by "the impiety of the men in black," his name for the monks, and that Eleusis fell (*Lives of the Philosophers* 476).

Recent historians rightly warn that the destruction of temples was uneven, worse in some provinces and decades than in others, and that many shrines simply fell out of use (Cameron 2011; Dijkstra and Raschle 2020). The burning of the books is not in doubt. The critics' case stood for fifteen centuries because the answers were burned and the voices that might have spoken were silenced. I have reassembled them here from the fragments their enemies preserved.

The Words

The Greeks had no word for idolatry because they had no such practice in their own eyes. Their words for an image tell what they thought it was.

Eidōlon (εἴδωλον) meant a phantom, a reflection, an appearance without substance: the shade of the dead in Homer, the ghost of Helen that went to Troy while the real Helen sat in Egypt (Stesichorus, fr. 192 *PMG*, quoted in Plato, *Phaedrus* 243a; Euripides, *Helen*). Greeks seldom called the cult statue of a god an *eidōlon*. It was the Jewish translators of the Septuagint who gave the word to the gods of the nations, and the choice was itself an argument: your gods are phantoms.

Agalma (ἄγαλμα) was the word the Greeks used. It comes from *agallomai*, to delight, to glory in. An *agalma* is a thing that gives delight: a gift, an ornament, an honour. Before it meant a statue it meant any offering pleasing to a god; in Homer a fine-wrought cup or a bull with gilded horns is an *agalma* (Odyssey 3.438). A statue was a gift set up in the god's honour, made as beautiful as men could make it.

Hedos (ἕδος), a seat, was the cult image in its temple: the place where the god could sit among men. **Xoanon** (ξόανον), a carved thing, was the old wooden image, often small, often said to have fallen from heaven. **Bretas** (βρέτας) was a poet's word for the same.

The philosophers added three words for what the image does.

Symbolon (σύμβολον) was first a tally: a token broken in two, each party keeping a half, so that the halves could be matched when the parties met again. Plato's Aristophanes says that each of us is a *symbolon* of a human being, cut in two and seeking the other half (*Symposium* 191d). The image is such a half. It does not describe the god; it fits him, and the one who brings it is recognised.

Synthēma (σύνθημα) was a password, a sign agreed between two parties. The Chaldean Oracles say that the mind of the Father "has sown symbols throughout the cosmos" (fr. 108), and Iamblichus calls these signs *synthēmata*: tokens the gods themselves planted in stones, plants and images, which they recognise when the theurgist offers them back (*On the Mysteries* 2.11). The image is a password the god gave first.

Hieroglyph. Plotinus praised the sages of Egypt because they did not teach in letters and sentences. They carved images, and each image was a whole knowledge, grasped at once and not reasoned out step by step (*Enneads* 5.8.6). The image is knowledge without words.

None of these words says "god." A delight, a seat, a carved thing, a token, a password, a sign: the vocabulary itself keeps the image and the god apart. The image was an offering to the god and a place for the god, not the god.

Before the Image

The Greeks began with powers that had no name and no face. They came to the human form slowly, as a language is built. The process was not a simple ladder from stone to statue: Gaifman has shown that the unworked stone and the carved image lived side by side for centuries, and that the neat evolutionary story is partly a modern one (*Aniconism in Greek Antiquity*, 2012). But the two modes, the bare mark and the articulate face, tell us what each was for.

Herodotus heard the story at Dodona, the oldest oracle in Greece. The Pelasgians, the people before the Greeks, sacrificed and prayed to the gods but gave them no names and no titles, for

they had never heard any. They called them simply *theoi*, he says, because the gods had set all things in order (2.52). Only later, he adds, did Homer and Hesiod give the gods their families, their honours, their arts and their shapes, four hundred years before his own time (2.53). Whatever the truth of the etymology, the order is right: first the power, then the name, then the face.

The oldest places of worship bear him out. At Dodona the god spoke through an oak. At Thespiai the most ancient image of Eros was “an unworked stone” (Pausanias 9.27.1). At Orchomenos the Charites were stones said to have fallen from the sky (9.38.1). At Hyettos Herakles was honoured in a rough stone “after the ancient fashion” (9.24.3). At Gytheion, in Laconia, a stone stood for Zeus Kappotas, Zeus who brings rest (3.22.1). Hera of Samos was once a plank of wood (Callimachus, fr. 100). Apollo of the roads, Agyieus, was a plain pointed pillar set before the doors of Greek houses. In the market of Pharai in Achaia Pausanias counted some thirty square stones, each called by the name of a god, and he drew the conclusion himself: “in more ancient times all the Greeks honoured unwrought stones instead of images” (7.22.4).

Beside the stones came the shaped forms. The herm: a pillar with a head and nothing else. The *xoanon*: a wooden figure, stiff, half shaped, often hidden and dressed. The archaic statue, then the classical, until Pheidias could make Zeus at Olympia so that men said he must have seen the god himself.

That is why the image was invented, as a device of the mind. A stone can mark where a power is met. It cannot say what the power is. A face can. Desire, victory, the sky, the sea and the hearth are hard to think about as stones; they are easy to think about as persons, with tempers, histories and gifts. The human form was a step up from an unworked stone to an articulate symbol. The Greeks made statues into a way of thinking about gods.

Personification as a Language

Hesiod shows the method. Gaia is the earth under the plough and a mother who plots against her husband. Ouranos is the sky and a father who hides his children. Nyx is the night and bears Sleep, Death and the Dreams. Strife bears Toil, Famine, Battles and Lies (*Theogony* 116–232). In the same list stand a mountain range, a feeling and a goddess. Hesiod draws no line between them because, for him, there is none. Each is a power at work in the world, and each is given a name, a parentage and a face.

The Greeks did this with everything that moved them. They built altars to Aidōs, shame or reverence, and to Eleos, pity, in the Athenian agora (Pausanias 1.17.1). On the Acropolis they honoured Nikē, victory, as Athena Nikē, and later Greeks explained her wingless image as a victory that could never fly away. After the peace of 375 BC Athens commissioned Kephisodotos to carve Eirēnē, peace, holding the child Ploutos, wealth, in her arms: an

argument in marble that peace nurses prosperity. Tychē, fortune, wore the walls of her city as a crown. By the fourth century Athens even sacrificed to Dēmokratia. Walter Burkert calls them all powers.

The human form was the grammar of this language. A power with no body cannot be addressed, prayed to, thanked or blamed. Give it a face and it can. The face is a tool for thought, a way to hold in the mind something that has no shape: the reach of the sky, the pull of desire, the turn of fortune. It is what we would now call a thought experiment, carried out in stone, in song and in ritual.

The Greeks knew they were doing it. Herodotus says it was Homer and Hesiod who gave the gods their names, their honours and their shapes (2.53). Xenophanes saw that each people draws its gods after its own likeness: the Ethiopians make them black and snub-nosed, the Thracians blue-eyed and red-haired, and if horses could draw, they would draw gods like horses (frr. 15–16 DK). Yet he concluded that there is one greatest god, “in no way like mortals in body or in thought” (fr. 23). Prodicus of Keos held that men first gave divine honours to the things that sustained them: the sun, the rivers, bread and wine. Theagenes of Rhegium (DK 8), in the sixth century BC, was already reading Homer’s battles of the gods as the strife of the elements. The Stoics made a system of it: Zeus as the fiery reason that runs through all things, Hera as the air (Cornutus, *Compendium*).

If personification is only a tool, a critic may say the gods are inventions. The Greeks never drew that conclusion, and neither do I. The form is ours. The power the form lets us think of is not. A map is drawn by men; the country is real.

The Interplay as a Map

A single god cannot be in tension with himself. Many gods can, and the Greeks read those tensions as the shape of a human life.

Aphrodite and Artemis pull against each other: desire and chastity, the bed and the wild. Euripides built a tragedy on it. Hippolytos honours Artemis alone and scorns Aphrodite, and in the prologue the goddess says plainly that she will destroy him for it (*Hippolytos* 1–57). His crime is refusing a god, not loving the wrong one. Pentheus in the *Bacchae* makes the same mistake with Dionysos and is torn apart by his own mother.

Apollo and Dionysos share Delphi. Plutarch, priest there, says the god of order rules the sanctuary for nine months of the year and the god of the vine for the three months of winter, when the paean falls silent and the dithyramb is sung (*On the E at Delphi* 9). Measure and ecstasy are not enemies to be chosen between. Each has its season. Athena and Ares are both gods of war, and Homer sets them against each other: when they meet on the field Athena strikes Ares down with a boundary stone (*Iliad* 21.400–414). Strategy masters fury.

Many images teach what one cannot. A life goes wrong when it serves one power and ignores the rest. The judgment of Paris, who had to choose one goddess and so offended two, is the Greek parable of it. To know the gods is to know the forces that act in you and around you, and to give each its due: the Delphic *mēden agan*, nothing in excess, applied to the whole of life. The polytheist's many images are a map of the soul's weather. They help a man find his way through it.

Two Myths Read as Maps

Two stories test the claim: a choice that went wrong and a loss that was resolved. Each is told by the Greeks themselves, and each, read as the interplay of powers, gives a pattern a person can steer by.

The judgment of Paris

All the gods were invited to the wedding of Peleus and Thetis except one. Eris, Strife, was left out. She came anyway and threw a golden apple among the guests, inscribed "for the fairest." Hera, Athena and Aphrodite each claimed it. Zeus would not judge between them; he sent them with Hermes to a young shepherd on Mount Ida, Paris, son of the king of Troy. Each goddess offered him a gift. Hera offered rule over Asia. Athena offered wisdom and victory in war. Aphrodite offered the most beautiful woman in the world. Paris gave her the apple, took Helen from Sparta, and Troy burned (*Cypria*, in Proclus; Homer alludes to it at *Iliad* 24.25–30).

Read as a map, it shows four patterns.

The power left out comes back uninvited. Strife was not asked to the wedding. She came, and she brought the apple that began the war. Conflict ignored does not go away; it returns at the worst moment, in the worst form. The wise host makes room for it.

Some choices are not ours to make. Zeus, the wisest of the gods, would not rank three powers that are all divine. Sovereignty, wisdom and love are not rivals to be placed first, second and third. Each is good in its place. The man who must choose one and only one has already been led into error.

To exalt one power is to offend the others. Paris chose desire over rule and wisdom. He did not sin by honouring Aphrodite; he sinned by honouring her alone. Hera and Athena became the enemies of Troy for ten years. A life built on one good, however real, makes enemies of all the goods it neglects.

The young are most at risk. The judge was a shepherd boy, not a king. The Greeks knew that the young are offered these choices first, and in their crudest form: power, success, pleasure, each as if it were the whole of life. The myth is a warning given in advance.

Demeter and Persephone

Hades seized Persephone as she gathered flowers, and carried her below the earth with Zeus's consent. Her mother Demeter searched the world for nine days with torches, then withdrew in grief and anger. She sat in her temple at Eleusis and let nothing grow. The earth gave no grain; men starved, and the gods went without their sacrifices. Zeus sent god after god to plead with her. She would not yield until her daughter was returned. Persephone came back, but she had eaten pomegranate seeds below, and so for a third of every year she must return to Hades. Demeter made the fields bear again and gave the Eleusinians her mysteries (*Homeric Hymn to Demeter*).

The patterns here are different.

Grief is a power, and it has rights. Demeter's sorrow stops the whole world, and the gods themselves must bargain with it. A loss that is not honoured will starve everything around it.

But grief cannot rule alone. Demeter could not have her daughter back entirely. Hades, the power of death, had his share, and the seeds already eaten could not be uneaten. The resolution is a division: two parts of the year above, one below. Neither power wins outright. Each is given its measure.

What is resolved becomes a rhythm. The story ends in the seasons, in sowing and harvest, in a loss that returns every year and a return that follows every loss. The pattern teaches a mourner what the Greeks knew: that the dead are not given back, but that grief, honoured and measured, can turn into a cycle a life can live within. Eleusis promised its initiates more than this, a better lot after death; but the first lesson was the year itself.

What the maps share

In both stories no single god is the villain and none is the answer. The trouble comes from a power excluded or a power absolutized; the healing comes when each is given its due. That is the polytheist's guide to the waters of life, and it is the Delphic *mēden agan*, nothing in excess, written as story. A worshipper who has learned these myths does not need to be told that ambition, love and wisdom must be balanced, or that grief must be both honoured and bounded. He has watched the gods do it.

The map in a living hand

The Greeks steered by these stories. Alexander is the clearest case. Plutarch says he took the *Iliad* as a provision for the road of military virtue, and kept a copy corrected by his teacher Aristotle, the "casket copy," under his pillow with his dagger (*Alexander* 8.2, 26.1–2). When he crossed into Asia he went first to Troy, anointed the grave of Achilles and ran naked round it with his companions, as the heroes did, while Hephaistion honoured the grave of Patroklos

(Arrian, *Anabasis* 1.12.1; Plutarch, *Alexander* 15.4). He had found in Homer a pattern for courage, friendship and glory, and he lived it across the known world.

He also shows that the map must be read whole. Alexander took Achilles' wrath along with his courage. He killed his friend Kleitos in a drunken rage, and when Hephaistion died he mourned him as Achilles mourned Patroklos, past all measure (Arrian 7.14). The Iliad itself warns against both: it opens with the wrath that destroyed the Achaeans and ends with Achilles learning pity. A reader who takes one power from the poem and leaves the others repeats Paris's error. Alexander is the proof that the old stories work as a guide to action, and the warning that they must be read with Delphi's measure.

What the Worshippers Said

The critics put a question to the Greeks: do you think the statue is the god? The Greeks answered it, often and in the same way.

Heraclitus, about 500 BC, already mocked those who pray to statues "as if one were to talk to houses, not knowing what gods and heroes are" (fr. 5 DK). He meant that the worshipper must know what stands behind the image.

Dio of Prusa gave the fullest answer. Standing at Olympia beside Pheidias's Zeus, about AD 97, he asked whether the sculptor had done right to give the god a human body. His answer: men have a strong desire to honour the divine from close at hand, to approach it, to touch it, to bring it gifts, as small children reach out for an absent father in their dreams. Mind and reason cannot be carved. So the sculptor took the human body, the vessel of mind, as the best image of what cannot be seen (*Olympic Oration*, Or. 12.59–61, 77–83). The image was the bridge between the longing and the god.

Maximus of Tyre, a century later, wrote a whole oration on the question "Should images be set up to the gods?" God, he said, the father and maker of all things, older than the sun and the heavens, has no name the tongue can say and no form the eye can see. Unable to grasp his being, we lean on sounds and names, on animals and shapes of gold, ivory and silver, as lovers treasure a lyre, a cloak or a place that recalls the beloved. Greeks honour the gods in the human form, Egyptians in animals, others in rivers or fire. If a Greek is stirred to remember god by the art of Pheidias, an Egyptian by honouring animals, another by a river, another by fire, he does not resent the difference. Let them only know, let them love, let them remember (Oration 2.10, in substance).

Plutarch, priest of Apollo at Delphi, warned against the opposite error. Those who call bronze, painted and carved figures gods, he wrote, are like men who call the sails and the rigging the ship, or the voice and the ink the writing (*On Isis and Osiris* 71). The image is a sign; the god is what the sign means.

Even Celsus, the philosopher who wrote the first great attack on Christianity, answered the charge in passing: only a child, he said, would take the statues for gods and not for offerings to the gods and images of them (Origen, *Against Celsus* 7.62). The charge was answered before it was fully made.

The Image in Practice

What the Greeks did with their images shows what they thought of them better than any treatise.

They washed them. Every year at the Plynteria the women of Athens stripped the old olive-wood image of Athena Polias and washed it and its robes, most likely in the sea at Phaleron; the city kept the day as unlucky, because its goddess was away. They dressed them. Every four years at the Great Panathenaia a new robe, the *peplos*, woven by Athenian girls with the battle of gods and Giants, was carried up the Acropolis and given to the same image. At Nauplia, Pausanias says, the Argives bathed Hera's image in the spring of Kanathos each year, and she became a maiden again (2.38.2–3). They carried them in procession, crowned them, set food before them, and at the Theoxenia laid couches for the gods to dine.

The critic sees only a woman washing a doll. The worshipper is doing something else. The bath, the robe and the feast are honours. They are offered through the image to the power it stands for, as a family keeps a grave clean, sets flowers before a portrait, or folds a flag with care. No one thinks the flag is the country or the stone is the grandmother. The care given to the sign is the measure of love for what it signifies.

The practice also proves the point from the other side. A god who could be bathed and dressed was a god near at hand. The image brought a power that has no body close enough to touch, to thank and to serve. That nearness was the whole purpose of the device.

The Theory of the Image

The Neoplatonists of late antiquity turned these answers into a doctrine. They had to: by their time the charge was no longer a philosopher's jibe but a church's program.

Porphyry wrote a treatise *On Images* (*Peri agalmatōn*), of which Eusebius preserved long passages in order to refute them (*Preparation for the Gospel* 3.7, 3.11). Its opening states the whole theory. The ancients, Porphyry says, showed god and the powers of god through images akin to sense, making visible the invisible. Those who have learned to read find in a statue what the unlettered cannot: just as a man who knows his letters sees in an inscribed stone not stone but words, so the wise see in the god's image not wood or marble but the thing signified. The human form was chosen because god is rational; the statue is made of white marble or gold because the divine is light; the god is seated because his power is steadfast. Every feature is a word in a language. The image is a book for those who can read it.

Iamblichus went further, and his answer belongs to theurgy. For him a consecrated image is not only a sign but a receptacle: by the right materials, symbols and rites, a statue can be made fit to receive a share of divine presence, as a lamp prepared receives the flame. But even here the god is not the statue and is not compelled into it. The gods give themselves, freely, to what has been made ready for them (*On the Mysteries* 1.12, 5.23). This is the limit case, where the language of images comes nearest to what the critics alleged, and it is fair to say so. But the line holds: the statue is prepared, not worshipped, and the god it receives remains free. The art the Platonists called *telestikē*, the consecration of images, is the same art the Hermetic *Asclepius* describes when it says men learned to make gods (23–24, 37–38).

Julian, emperor and philosopher, answered the Christians directly in a letter to a priest. Our fathers, he writes, set up statues and altars as symbols of the gods' presence, not so that we should think them gods, but so that through them we might worship the gods. As men who love the emperor look gladly on his portrait, and men who love their father on his image, so whoever loves the gods looks gladly on their images, and feels reverence for the gods who look on him unseen. He adds the decisive point: an image made by men can be broken by men, and the god is not harmed (*Letter* 89b, 293–294).

Sallustius, Julian's friend, wrote the little catechism of the old religion, *On the Gods and the World*. Myths, he says, are things that never happened but always are (4). The gods need nothing from us; worship is for our sake, so that we may be joined to them. Temples imitate heaven, altars the earth, images life, prayers the intellect, and the signs carved on them the ineffable powers above (15). The whole of worship is a language of likeness. Its purpose is not to feed the gods, or to house them, but to make us like them.

The Many Faces of the One

The charge of idolatry had a second half. You worship stones, said the critics; and you worship many. Polytheism, on this account, divides the divine into quarrelling pieces, where the one God is whole.

The Greeks did not see it so. Xenophanes, the first to mock the gods in human shape, also spoke of "one god, greatest among gods and men" (fr. 23 DK). An Orphic hymn, quoted in the Derveni papyrus of the fourth century BC, sings that "Zeus is the head, Zeus the middle, from Zeus all things are made" (col. XVII). Maximus of Tyre, in the age of the Antonines, put the common belief of the whole world in a sentence: amid all the quarrels of men about everything else, one law and one account agree in every land, that there is one god, king and father of all, and many gods, children of god, ruling with him (Oration 11.5). Celsus told the Christians it made no difference whether one called the highest god Zeus or by any other name (Origen, *Against Celsus* 5.41).

The philosophers gave the belief its structure. Plotinus taught that to show the greatness of the divine is not to shrink it into one but to show it in all the many gods that come from it (*Enneads* 2.9.9). Proclus made it a system: each god is a *henad*, a unity, and every henad is rooted in the One, as rays are rooted in the sun (*Elements of Theology* 113–165). The many gods are the One as it unfolds into the world, each a distinct way in which the single source acts.

Here the many images find their place. One image could only ever show one face. Many images show the One as it is met in the world: as order and as ecstasy, as war and as wisdom, as the sea, the hearth and the harvest. Greek religion held unity and multiplicity together. Its many gods are the divine articulated: one light, seen in many colours.

All things full of gods

There is a second way to read the many and the one, and it begins with nature. Thales, the first of the philosophers, is said to have held that "all things are full of gods" (Aristotle, *On the Soul* 411a7). Heraclitus wrote that god is day and night, winter and summer, war and peace, plenty and hunger, and changes as fire does when mixed with spices, named after the scent of each (fr. 67 DK). On this reading the gods are the powers of nature, and nature is divine.

The Stoics made it a doctrine. God, they taught, is the fiery reason that runs through the world. He is one, and is called by many names after his powers: Zeus as the cause of life, Athena as he reaches into the upper air, Hera into the air, Hephaistos into the craftsman's fire, Poseidon into the sea, Demeter into the earth (Diogenes Laertius 7.147). Cleanthes' *Hymn to Zeus* addresses the one god who steers all things by law. The many gods are one nature seen from many sides. Modern writers call this pantheism, a word coined only in the eighteenth century.

Plato and his heirs drew the line one step higher. For them the cosmos is a living god, "a visible god, the image of the intelligible" (*Timaeus* 92c), and Plato's word for it is the word for a cult statue: the maker rejoiced to see the world move and live, "an *agalma* of the everlasting gods" (37c). Plotinus defended the beauty of that image against those who despised the world (*Enneads* 2.9.16–17), and Julian praised the sun as the visible image of the god beyond it (*Hymn to King Helios*, Oration 4). Nature is divine, but it is not the whole of the divine. The source stands beyond it, and nature is its first and greatest image. Scholars call this panentheism. The Greeks had no need of the word.

Both readings lead to the same place. The sea, the sun, the grain and the hearth were already the gods made visible. A statue of Poseidon was an image of an image: a human face given to a power the worshipper had already met in the waves. Not every god is a power of nature; Aidōs, Dikē and Nikē belong to the life of men. But the oldest gods, the ones Hesiod names

first, are the earth, the sky, the night and the sea. Before any sculptor worked, the Greeks lived inside the first *agalma*.

The Greeks were not alone in this. In Japan the *kami* of Shinto are the powers of the land: a mountain, a waterfall, an old tree, the sun goddess Amaterasu, the spirits of ancestors. Motoori Norinaga, the great eighteenth-century scholar of the *Kojiki*, defined a *kami* as anything out of the ordinary that possesses superior power and inspires awe. Tradition speaks of eight hundred myriads of them, *yaoyorozu no kami*. Shinto keeps no single creed on what lies behind them, yet the worshipper bows at a shrine whose holiest object is often a mirror, a stone or the mountain itself. The power is met in nature, honoured in a sign, and named in the many.

In China the *Daodejing* opens with the source that cannot be named: “The Dao that can be told is not the eternal Dao” (1). The Dao gives birth to the one, the one to two, two to three, and three to the ten thousand things (42). Asked where the Dao is, Zhuangzi answered: in the ant, in the weeds, in the roof tiles, even in dung (*Zhuangzi* 22). Yet the Daoist religion that grew from these books filled its temples with gods, the Three Pure Ones at their head, each a face of the Dao turned toward men. One source beyond naming, present in all things, honoured through many images: it is the Greek pattern in another tongue.

What follows is my own synthesis, not a doctrine every Greek held; Plotinus kept the One above the world. But set side by side, the three traditions show that the line between pantheism and polytheism means less than the textbooks suggest. They are two ways of looking at one thing. Look at nature as a whole and you see one divine life; look at it in its parts, the sea, the sun, desire, grief, and you see many gods. The Stoic who calls it all Zeus and the farmer who prays to Demeter at harvest stand in the same field. One speaks of the field; the other speaks to the grain. Only a theology that sets God wholly outside the world needs the distinction to be sharp. For those who find the divine within it, many and one are a matter of where one stands.

The One without an image

The Greeks gave human form to the powers, never to the One.

Xenophanes’ greatest god is “in no way like mortals in body or in thought” (fr. 23 DK). Plato’s maker and father of the universe is “hard to find, and having found him, impossible to declare to all” (*Timaeus* 28c). The One of Plotinus is beyond being, beyond thought and beyond every form; the soul reaches it only by letting go of every image, “the flight of the alone to the alone” (*Enneads* 6.9.11). Proclus calls it ineffable, prior even to the gods. Maximus, defending images, begins by admitting that the father and maker of all has no name the tongue can say and no form the eye can see. No temple held a statue of the One. No sculptor tried.

Popular worship drew the line less sharply. Zeus was “father of gods and men,” and Pheidias carved him enthroned at Olympia. But even there the philosophers read Zeus as the highest of the powers that govern the world, not as the first principle beyond it; and Dio, standing before that very statue, said that mind and reason cannot be carved, only the body that is their vessel. The image showed the governor of the cosmos. It did not claim to show the source.

So the second commandment’s fear, a graven image of the one God, does not touch the Greeks where it aims. They agreed that the highest cannot be pictured, and they did not picture it. What they pictured were its powers at work in the world: the sky, the sea, the hearth, wisdom, desire. The charge of making an image of God strikes a practice the Greeks never had.

The Argument Returns

The Church won. The temples were closed, the statues broken or carried to Constantinople as ornaments. Then, within three centuries, the Church found itself defending images of its own, and it defended them in the words of the people it had condemned.

The icons of Christ, the Virgin and the saints filled the churches of the East. In 726 the emperor Leo III began a campaign against them, and the iconoclasts used the old charge: to bow before painted wood is idolatry. The defenders answered as Porphyry and Julian had answered. Basil of Caesarea had already given them their axiom four centuries earlier: “the honour paid to the image passes to the prototype” (*On the Holy Spirit* 18.45), and Basil drew it, by his own account, from the honour paid to the emperor’s portrait, Julian’s very example. John of Damascus wrote three treatises in defence of the icons. An image, he said, is a likeness that shows its original while differing from it; we do not worship the wood but what it shows (*On the Divine Images* 1.16, 3.16). The Second Council of Nicaea in 787 made it law. Images receive *proskynēsis*, veneration; only God receives *latreia*, worship; and the honour given to the image passes to the one it represents.

Side by side, the texts show the borrowing, as Ladner, Kitzinger and Barasch showed long ago. Porphyry: the image shows the invisible through the visible, and the wise read it as letters. John of Damascus: the image shows the invisible through the visible, and is a book for the unlettered. Julian: men who love the emperor honour his portrait. Basil: the honour paid to the emperor’s image passes to the emperor. The defenders of the icons argued from Scripture and from the Incarnation, as they had to. But their account of what an image is, and of where the honour paid to it goes, came from the Hellenic tradition they had spent four centuries calling idolatry.

The borrowing went beyond the theory of the image. Christianity kept a world of mediating powers between God and men, each sought for its own needs, and it imaged them as the Greeks had imaged theirs. Cities had their patron saints as they had had their gods: Demetrios

guarded Thessaloniki as Athena had guarded Athens. Sailors prayed to Nicholas where they had prayed to Poseidon and the Dioskouroi. At the shrine of Saints Cosmas and Damian in Constantinople the sick slept in the church and waited for the saints to heal them in a dream, as the sick had slept in the precincts of Asklepios. The nine ranks of angels in Pseudo-Dionysius' *Celestial Hierarchy* were built, as scholars have recognised since 1895, on the system of the Neoplatonist Proclus. The saints and angels are the successors of the gods in function, and their icons work exactly as the Greek images did: a face for a power, the honour passing through it.

On one point Christianity went where the Greeks never went. The Greeks never pictured the highest. The Christians did, and they defended it by the Incarnation. "In former times," John of Damascus wrote, "God, who is without form or body, could never be depicted. But now that God has been seen in the flesh and has lived among men, I make an image of the God whom I see" (*On the Divine Images* 1.16). Christ is not, in Christian teaching, a lesser power beneath the Father; the Council of Nicaea declared him of one substance with the Father, and condemned the view that he was a subordinate divinity. So the icon of Christ is, by the Church's own account, an image of God. Whether that is lawful turns on the Incarnation. If God has truly shown a form in the flesh, the Christian is consistent, and the prophets' charge no longer reaches him. If not, he stands where the prophets placed the Greeks, and nearer their charge than the Greeks ever stood, for the Greeks refused to make a likeness of the One. Either way, the charge never fell on the Greeks.

I say this to settle the question, not to wound. When the Church had to explain what a believer does before a holy image, it could find no better account than the one the Greeks had given all along. The image is not the god. It is the way to the god.

The Long Eclipse

The silencing was the last of several conquests, and each one bore on the images.

Rome. When Rome took Greece in the second century BC, it took the gods with it. Their statues were carried to Rome by the shipload; Mummius stripped Corinth in 146 BC, and the generals who followed filled their villas with Greek bronzes. The gods were given Latin names, Zeus as Jupiter, Athena as Minerva, Hermes as Mercury, and the names stuck for two thousand years. Virgil's *Aeneid* gave Rome a pedigree that ran not from Greece but from Troy, Greece's old enemy; the Greeks of the poem are the men of the wooden horse, and "I fear the Greeks even bearing gifts" (2.49). Rome kept the Greek images and the Greek myths, and wrote its own name over them.

Judaea. A generation earlier the Greek kings of Syria had met the oldest enemy of images. In 167 BC Antiochus IV forbade the practice of Judaism and set up an altar to Zeus Olympios in the Temple at Jerusalem, the "abomination of desolation" (1 Maccabees 1:41–64; Daniel

11:31). The Maccabees rose, took back the Temple in 164 BC, cleansed it and rededicated it; the festival of Hanukkah remembers that rededication to this day (1 Maccabees 4:36–59). It was a war over religion begun by a Greek king's persecution, and the Jewish victory, won in the name of the second commandment, was soon swallowed by Rome. It was the first time the clash between the image and the imageless God was fought with swords.

Christian Rome. Then the empire became Christian, and the conquest turned inward. The temples were closed, the festivals given to saints, the Parthenon made a church of the Theotokos. The Greeks became Romans, *Rhōmaioi*, and the word *Hellēn* came to mean simply a pagan.

The last pagans. The old worship did not end everywhere at once. In Mani, the mountains south of Sparta, it lasted into the ninth century and perhaps longer. Constantine VII, writing about 950, says the Maniots were still called Hellenes because in former times they had worshipped images after the fashion of the ancient Hellenes, and that they were baptized only under his grandfather Basil I (*De Administrando Imperio* 50). By then the name of the Greeks had become the name for image-worshippers. Laconia kept both the images and the name longest.

The Ottomans. In 1453 Constantinople fell, and in 1460 Mystras, the last home of Plethon, followed. For nearly four centuries the Greeks lived under Ottoman rule, their Church their only public institution and their faith the mark of their nation. The old gods had no place in that world either.

Now. The modern Greek state was founded in 1830 on the name of Hellas. For most of its life it has been an Orthodox state, and the old religion was a matter for scholars. That has begun to change. In 2017 the Greek state recognised the Hellenic Ethnic Religion as a "known religion," able to hold its rites and keep its places of worship. After two thousand years we who worship the old gods may again speak for ourselves, in our own country and in our own words. I write for that hour, so that when we speak, we can say what our ancestors meant, and what they never meant, when they stood before the image of a god.

Conclusion: The God, the Image and the Worshipper

Three things stand in every act of Hellenic worship: the god, the image and the worshipper. The critics saw only two. They saw a man and a statue, and concluded that the man worshipped the statue. The Greeks saw all three, and they knew the image stood between the other two as a word stands between a speaker and the thing he names.

The Greeks built a language of such words. They gave the earth a mother's face, the sky a father's, desire a winged boy, victory a woman landing on a ship's prow. The earth and the sky were divine before they had faces; the faces let men speak to them. They knew, as Xenophanes said, that the faces were their own. They knew, as Herodotus said, that their

poets had shaped them. They kept them anyway, because a power that cannot be pictured cannot be approached, and a power that cannot be approached cannot be loved. The image was the means; the god was the end. As Porphyry put it, those who can read see in the stone not stone but meaning.

It was never about the statues. It was about a symbolic language that let men and women conceive of what has no body and still turn toward it: in prayer, in gratitude, in fear and in hope. Personification is the tool. The power it lets us think of is alive.

That is the practice the Temple keeps. An image of Athena on our altar is not Athena. It is a word in the oldest religious language of the West, spoken so that we may remember her, honour her, and become a little more like what she is.

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