

BOOK REVIEW

God versus Gods: Judaism in the Age of Idolatry, by Reuven Chaim Klein, Mosaica Press (2018), 398 pp. Reviewed by Jeff Bienenfeld

The subtitle of Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein's remarkable study says a great deal about the immense task he assumed in researching his fascinating book, *GOD versus gods*. The subtitle, "Judaism in the Age of Idolatry" sets an enormous challenge for anyone attempting to chronicle the role idolatry played in the religious culture and history of the Jewish People from biblical times until the destruction of the First Temple, at which time, according to the Sages, the worship of idols as an ancient cultic practice for all intents and purposes ceased. Over this lengthy time period, from mankind's earliest days until some three and a half millennia later, Rabbi Klein offers an exhaustive and substantive account of how the Jewish People variously succumbed to and resisted, promoted and fought to eradicate this most pernicious of transgressions. Because there are few sins whose prohibitions are as many in the Torah as idolatry, and because this sin is the central focus of the prophets' rebuke and chastisement in the Prophets, the topic deserves careful and studious attention. This work does just that.

One's first impression of the book is its reader-friendly format. The historical chronology is diagrammed on the front and back in-folds making for easy reference. In Unit I, the time flow is divided into five epochs, each receiving in-depth treatment. In the "Genesis of Idolatry and the Guardians of Monotheism," we read how our forefathers confronted the sin and sought to resurrect the Judaic monotheistic belief system against overwhelming odds. The sin of the Golden Calf and the Egyptian cultic worship is thoroughly analyzed followed by the "Slippery Slope to Paganism" in the idolatry of the Kingdom of Israel resulting in its exile. The penultimate chapter deals with the "Royal Blunders and Betrayal" in the idolatry of the Kingdom of Judah which was one of the major causes for the destruction of the First Temple and subsequent Babylonian exile.

Unit II contains an invaluable encyclopedia of all the major deities mentioned in the Bible, each one discussed in detail marshalling the relevant in-

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formation necessary to enable the reader to mark the differences between the ancient gods. The bibliography gives an indication of the extent to which the author researched not only the classic commentaries, both biblical, Talmudic and post-Talmudic, but many important academic and secular sources to draw a complete and fuller picture of how scholars investigated the theological phenomenon of idolatry.

When one begins the book, it is refreshing to see how the author effectively weaves together the biblical narrative with an analysis of how ubiquitous the lure toward idolatry was in the national and private lives of the people. Secular sources are introduced and compared with traditional commentaries to create a nuanced and erudite analysis of a complex subject. The text is extensively footnoted with references from both Torah and academic sources.

I was particularly impressed with Unit I's final chapter, "The End of an Age: Idolatry as Obsolete Superstition." Although TB *Yoma* 69b relates that the evil inclination which had seduced people toward idolatry was banished in the wake of the destruction of the First Temple, there were still some residual pockets where idolatry held sway. The author discusses how and why this phenomenon occurred and how even after the destruction of the Temple, idolatry assumed different and more rarified forms. The confluence between the end of idolatry and the end of prophecy is also discussed with its implications for our generation. What I found most intriguing was that apart from exploring the theological commonalities between idolatry and prophecy and their radical divergences, the author introduces us to what historians and archeologists have called the "Axial Age," a period in the religious history of man which saw a pivotal shift in which "a pagan set of superstitions" was replaced by "more sophisticated theosophies to justify pagan behavior." The author traces how ancient idolatry morphed into more modern expressions of the idolatrous impulse (pp. 263-73). The chapter ends with a fascinating discussion depicting idolatry's final obliteration in the Messianic Era.

This concluding discussion is a prelude to Volume II in which the author plans to delve more deeply into the conceptual, theological and psychological underpinnings of idolatry, why it was once the most tempting and enticing of all Biblical sins, and how the Torah sought to wean mankind off these insidious ideologies. The author hopes to discuss how and why modern man is still afflicted with this ancient temptation and how Judaism provides the "the an-

tidote (*tavlin*),” to deal with this pervasive evil inclination. Other subjects such as astrology, witchcraft and demonology will also be investigated in this forthcoming book.

All in all, Rabbi Klein, in this excellent study, has provided something for everyone. Well written and organized, both the Torah scholar and layman alike will find the collected information both fascinating and instructive. The book will not disappoint.



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