

The Folly Of Idolatry

"Thou shalt have no other gods before me. 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, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me ..." (Exodus 20:3-5). Almost from the very moment the Israelites were given these commandments from Moses, the children of Israel pursued idolatry. Furthermore, their failure to eradicate the idolatrous Canaanites from the land of promise allowed idolatry to become deeply ingrained in the religion of the Israelites.

As most Bible students know, the effects of the Israelite's idolatrous practices were disastrous. Second Kings 17 describes how the nation of Israel was taken away into Assyrian captivity and 2 Kings 24-25 describes the taking of Judah into Babylonian captivity. Both of these judgments were the result of their idolatry. After the nation of Judah returned from Babylonian captivity, they abandoned idolatry. However, in New Testament times, idolatry was a common practice among Gentiles (cf. Acts 17:16). Nevertheless, Gentiles learned that they must put away idolatry in order to obey the gospel of Christ (1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 10:14; Galatians 5:19-20; Revelation 21:8). It is astonishing that both Jews and Gentiles desired to worship anthropomorphic images of wood and stone, silver and gold, resembling the "inhabitants" of the heavens, earth and waters in light of God's disdain and prohibition of such acts. The Scriptures, in no uncertain terms, condemn idolatry as an abomination before God. Samuel declared, *"For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry"* (1 Samuel 15:23).

But beyond the fact that idolatry is an abomination before God is the fact of its utter folly. The Scriptures also portray idolatry as mere foolishness when compared to the true worship of God. For instance, the Psalmist writes, *"Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they speak not: eyes have they, but they see not: They have ears, but they hear not: noses have they, but they smell not: They have hands, but they handle not: feet have they, but they walk not: neither speak they through their throat. They that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them"* (Psalm 115:4-8). Isaiah adds, *"Behold, they are all vanity; their works are nothing: their molten images are wind and confusion"* (Isaiah 41:29). Isaiah further adds, *"They that make a graven image are all of them vanity; and their delectable things shall not profit; and they are their own witnesses; they see not, nor know; that they*

may be ashamed. Who hath formed a god, or molten a graven image that is profitable for nothing?" (Isaiah 44:9-10). The Lord, through Isaiah, was stating how ludicrous it was to think that the same piece of wood used to make a fire could also make an idol to which men would bow down and worship. To *"worship the stock of a tree"* is to *"feed on ashes"* (Isaiah 44:19-20). As Isaiah points out, the folly of idolatry is that the one who worships an idol has *"a deceived heart"* and *"cannot deliver his soul"* (44:20).

The folly of idolatry is perhaps no better proven than in a comparison of the evidence between the Bible and idolatry. Idolatry is based upon myth. A myth is much different from legends and sagas or fables and fairy tales which were invented to amuse. Mythology is the body of traditional stories concerning gods and goddesses, supernatural beings and the heroes of a given culture, with whom humans may have relationships. It is often intended to explain the workings of the universe, nature or human history. Myths combine religious purposes with explanatory purposes and have been widely used in literature. There are many examples of mythological gods from various ancient cultures, and as one might imagine, mythology varied from culture to culture, and from nation to nation.

Egyptian gods and goddesses were depicted as men and women with animal heads and often having human weaknesses and imperfections. In Egyptian mythology, animals were sacred to certain deities and viewed as incarnations of them. In ancient Egypt, cats were worshipped and revered (domestic cats were mummified at death). They associated it with the Moon and it was sacred to the goddesses. This dedication to mythology caused an Egyptian household to shave their eyebrows when a cat died and to shave their entire bodies when a dog died. On the other hand, the religion of the Canaanites focused on fertility and therefore included gross immorality. Its myths were structured around the agricultural cycle. Their gods and goddesses were brutal and highly sexed and religious rites employed fornication between the unmarried to stimulate the gods and goddesses. This sexual employment was believed to have granted fertility to the land and livestock.

The chief Canaanite god was Baal. He was the principal Canaanite sky, weather and fertility god. His name was originally applied to various local gods (i.e., Baal-peor). Baal is depicted in the form of a bull or a man. He is known as Prince; Lord of the Earth; Lord of Rain and Dew; and god of springs, sky and fertility. Baal was one of the many gods of the Canaanite pantheon and their chief god until exile. Myth portrays Baal as god of the sky and rain struggling with Mot (drought and death god). Baal was of primary importance in Palestinian agriculture. He is portrayed as bloodthirsty

and highly sexed. The erotic element in his worship was said to stimulate him to mate with Asherah, his consort, thus bringing rain and fertility to the land. The Hebrews were strongly attracted to Baal worship. Ahab and Jezebel in Israel actively promoted a form of Baal worship that was imported from Phoenicia. Athaliah (the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel) married into a royal family, usurped Judah's throne, and promoted Baal worship in Judah until her death.

Asherah appears as a goddess by the side of Baal, whose consort she evidently became, at least among the Canaanites of the south. She was the goddess of fertility and love and her full name is Lady Asherah of the Sea. She is one of the Ugaritic mother goddesses. She is known, in the Bible, as Ashtaroah or Ashtoreth and linked with other fertility goddesses such as Venus, Aphrodite, Ishtar, and Inanna. Asherah's worship involved sexual excesses intended to stimulate rain and quicken the ability of animals and people to reproduce. She was invoked in childbirth and planting time. Her figures were made of wood and she was associated with sacred trees or groves of trees. She was symbolized by a pole or tree found beside the altar in a Canaanite high place of idolatry and depicted as an unshaped piece of wood or a naked, curly-haired goddess riding a lion and holding lilies and serpents.

The equipment for idolatrous worship, probably Phoenician in origin, was the "high place." It was crowned by the altar, the standing pillars and the images of the Asherah. The worship, interwoven with the concept of the fertility of the land, became a fertility cult. The chosen symbol of the cult was the trunk of a tree. This explains the prohibition against the planting of trees by the altar of the Lord (Deuteronomy 16:21; Judges 6:25, 28, 31). The goddess of the cult was Asherah, who also appears as the mistress of the sea. The prophets of Israel roundly condemned the worship of Asherah and commended those kings who destroyed her shrines (1 Kings 15:13-14; 2 Kings 17:10; 21:3; 23:4).

From earliest times people have tended to choose high places for their worship, whether of the true God or of the false gods that man has invented. The worshipers chose an exposed site where the "god" was likely to see what they were doing and to perform there some act comparable to what they wished their god to do for them. In Canaan the high places had become the scenes of orgies and human sacrifice connected with the idolatrous worship of these imaginary gods; and so when Israel entered Canaan they were told to destroy all high places (Numbers 33:52). Israel's failure to destroy them resulted in idolatry.

Before Solomon built the temple, there was a mixed condition of worship. The tabernacle with most of its furniture was at the high place at Gibeon

though David had brought the ark to Jerusalem. Solomon offered sacrifices there and God heard his prayer, granting him great wisdom (2 Chronicles 1:1-13). Later some godly kings, including Hezekiah (31:1), destroyed the high places, but others, including Manasseh, relapsed and rebuilt them (33:3). Through the godliness of Josiah, especially after he had heard the Law read (2 Kings 22:8-20), the judgment was delayed until after his death. God's attitude toward the godly kings depended largely on their attitude toward the high places. In the next article, we will examine idolatry in the New Testament and consider the validity of the Scriptures.

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