

The Consequences of Idolatry for the Jew and Gentile

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When an Evangelical Christian friend of ours passed away from COVID, I pondered what would become of his soul. Without realizing he was propagating idolatry, our now deceased friend had actively evangelized to others doing his best to get people to believe in and accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior. By all accounts, he was a “godly” guy. Subsequently, curiosity led me to research what the Hebrew Bible had to say about idolatry and potential consequences for both the apostate Jew and misinformed Gentile that perceives and worship Jesus as God.

What Is Idolatry?

According to the Bible, idolatry is defined as worshiping others, or other deities, or objects as if they are God (Exodus 20:2-4, 34:17). It's interesting that God or other Biblical authors acknowledge there are other deities, or other concepts believed to be deity (Exodus 15:11, 20:3-4; Psalm 96:5, 97:7, 135:5). In other words, the text acknowledges the fact that mankind struggles to focus on an invisible, infinite God and instead tends to fashion finite, visual being(s) and deem them God. Remember the golden calf incident?

Additionally, idolatry is likened to adultery and considered both an abomination and even identified as hating God (Exodus 34:15-16, Ezekiel 16:15-22; Psalm 81:9-16).

These passages, however, are directed towards ancient Israelites, which now are known as Jews.

Are Only Jews Prohibited from Worshiping Anything as God or All Humanity?

Just as God instructed Jews to not worship other gods early on in the Book of Exodus, God also gave the Egyptians in the same story the opportunity to repent from worshiping their plethora of false gods and to worship the One and Only True God instead. At one point, Pharaoh repented and the LORD relented in the plague (Exodus 10:16-17). Unfortunately, Pharaoh repeated old patterns and refused to let the Israelite people go to worship God. Through it all, however, God's motive was to reveal Himself as the One True God to not just the Israelites, but the Egyptians as well. Consequently, many realized the gods they worshiped were false ones and chose to enjoin themselves with the Israelites and fled alongside them (Exodus 12:38). In other words, God's mission and subsequent use of the plagues weren't just to relieve and rescue the Israelites from oppression but was to also make His name and authority known to thousands so that they could intimately know God and how He defines covenant relationship with Him. Essentially, God removed them from bondage to a polytheistic culture so they could know the bond of Oneness. In light of this revelation, ponder the concept that Jesus' statements of being one with the Father didn't mean he is proclaiming himself as God or part of a godhead, rather Jesus conveyed the bond of covenant relationship with God- oneness. Hence, praying to God that others could also be one with God (John 17). If Jesus were saying he was God, then his prayer would mean he was praying others could also be God.

Another similar opportunity of oneness with God was presented to the Ninevites, who were Gentiles, in other words, not Jewish for Ninevah was a populous capital city in the Assyrian Empire. Commissioned by God to deliver this important message, Jonah reluctantly arrived to warn the aggressive Ninevites to repent from their many sins, presumably including idolatry or there would be dire consequences (Book of Jonah). Unlike Pharaoh, the Ninevites repented and God's grace was given. He delighted in forgiving these Gentiles (non-Jews) just as God would have the Egyptians. While dwelling on God's grace towards the Ninevites, notice no human needed to die for their sins, no blood needed to be shed, and yet, God forgave them. Tragically, the Ninevites must have reverted to their pagan tendencies because later the prophet Nahum warned of God's judgment specifically for their idolatry (Nahum 1:1,14).

Interestingly, passages foretelling the future reveal idolatry, or worshiping anything but the One and Only God, will be forever banished from all the Earth, meaning for both Jew and Gentile (Zechariah 13:2, 14:9,16-21). It should be noted in Zechariah 14:16-21, in the future, the nations that choose not to worship God in the way He instructed, specifically by coming to the temple for the Feast of Trumpets/Sukkot, will suffer consequences. It's interesting because that is one of the three holy holidays God taught the Israelites they must celebrate by coming to the temple. He did not command that to everybody, just Jews, and yet, in the future, *everybody* must participate regardless if they are a Jew or of the nations (Exodus 23:14-17, 34:18-23; Deuteronomy 16:1, 9-10, 13, 16-17). All of which validates the Israelites, or Jews, are chosen to lead the nations to God's teachings found in Torah, which is referred to as "light" (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6; Psalm 119:105; Proverbs 6:23).

How Are Jews to Handle Idolatry?

- Not to intermarry with those of another faith (Deuteronomy 7:3, 20:16-18; 1 Kings 11:1-2; Ezra 9)
- To divorce those of another faith (those who worship other gods) (Ezra 10)
- To tear down, destroy, toss out, remove all evidence of idols in one's territory (Exodus 34:13; Isaiah 27:9)
- To continue to lead in love as they guide other Jews and non-Jews to Torah's teachings, which is God's teachings of what He loves and hates; moreover, the faithful Jew uses God's Torah, which means "teaching", to teach others what love is and isn't.

What Are the Consequences of Idolatry, If Any, for Jews & Gentiles?

Below is a list of the specific consequences for Jews, but to rephrase in a modern-day reality, Jews that worship Jesus (or any other god):

- Cursed (Jeremiah 17:5)
- Makes Jews/Israel vulnerable to physical attacks such as war and disease (sent by God as a means to discipline the Jews – Judges 8; Psalm 81:9-17; historical and Biblical siege of the Northern Kingdom by Assyria for their idolatry as well as siege

of Southern Kingdom by the Babylonian Empire for doing the same. Both events were warned by the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah)

For the Gentile, the Hebrew Bible details similar consequences:

- Early death or destruction (Nahum 1:13)
- Will become like the idols they worship – mute, blind, deaf, lifeless, no breath, dead (Psalm 135:15-18)

Moreover, for both the Jew or Gentile, or in broader terms, all of humanity, it does the following:

- Idols of one's heart cannot be hidden from God (Psalm 44:21-22; Ezekiel 14:1-11)
- Vexes God prompting rebuke (Deuteronomy 32:19-24)
- Makes God jealous (Exodus 34:15; Isaiah 42:8; 48:11)
- Makes God angry (Psalm 106:34-46)
- Activates TRUE prophets to advise otherwise/warn (Judges 8:7-10; Hence, prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Jonah, and Nahum warning Jews and Gentiles of such destructive choices)
- Cursed (Jeremiah 17:5)
- Activates severe consequences such as fire, plagues, war, aggressive beasts (Ezekiel 14:12-23- Notice the language in verse 13 "if a land", not specifically, the land of Israel so any land that worships another god, similar to what the future prophecy Zechariah 14:16-21 conveyed)

In conclusion, while digging through these passages, it became grossly evident to me that idolatry causes God pain, severs any hope of oneness with God, and produces significant consequences as God enforces His boundaries of love. It is too late for our deceased Christian friend, but perhaps the most recent plague of COVID and its many variants along with these compelling Scriptures could invoke repentant hearts as we cast down our idols and indeed make our hands clean.

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