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Worship the LORD, Not Idols

44: 6-20

Worship the LORD, not idols DIG: What are the ways that God claims to be unique? What titles and descriptions does the LORD use of Himself? What does each mean? In what ways is He different from the idols in 44:12-20? For what reason is idolatry mocked in these verses? In what ways do those who worship idols end up like the idols themselves?

REFLECT: What idols have people in our culture created for themselves? Why are people attracted to these false gods? With which ones do you struggle? How have you seen these false gods end up oppressing those who make them? Karl Marx said that “religion is the opiate of the people” to drug them into ignoring reality. How might the prophet agree with him? How do the modern forms of idolatry do that? How might worshiping God end up being an idol itself? How is true worship of the LORD different? How is the irony of 44:15-17 reflected in the modern forms of idolatry? In what way have you experienced that following these modern idols merely ends in futility?



Even though the world does its best to deny it, **ADONAI** controls human history. **He** is **the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the**

End (Revelation 22:13). And because **He** controls history, what has happened to **Isra'el** was neither a surprise to **Him** nor against **His** will. **The Israelites** would eventually go into captivity during **Jeremiah** and **Ezekiel's** lifetime for one reason alone: their broken Covenant with **God**. By the same token, **His** uniqueness meant that **the god** of **Israel's** enemies could do nothing to prevent **Him** from delivering **His** people at the moment **He** chose to do so. In fact, **their far eschatological deliverance** had already been foretold (**44:3-5**). To all of this, **Isra'el** had been a witness, not only to what had already happened, but what would happen. **Her** entire existence, past, present and future could only be explained by the uniqueness of **the LORD**. This section is the high point of that entire argument.

The section begins with a brief, pointed summary of **ADONAI's** absolute claims. The message that **Israel's King and Go'ali, or Redeemer, the LORD of heaven's** angelic **armies (CJB)** wants to convey is that there is no one who can even be compared to **Him**. **I Am the first and the last; apart from Me there is no God (44:6)**. It is not that **He** is merely the greatest of all **the gods**, but that in comparison to **Him**, there are no other **gods**. To make **His** point, in descending order from the most universal to the most specific prophecy, **He** declares **Himself** to be **the God of eternity, history, and prophecy**.

First, **He is the God of eternity**. **I am the first**, or the beginning of human history, and **I am the last**, or the end of human history. Three times in **Isaiah**, **ADONAI** calls **Himself the first and the last (41:4; 44:6 and 48:12)**. When we get to **Chapters 49 to 57**, the key personality in those chapters is **the Messiah, the Servant of the LORD**, especially **the Suffering Messiah**. However, in **Revelation**, **Jesus Christ** is no longer suffering; **He** is **the glorified Son of Man**. And three times in the book of the **Revelation He** reiterates: **I am the first and the last**. The context of all three **Revelation** statements (**Revelation 1:17; 2:8 and 22:13**) are the same as the **I am the first and the last** in **Isaiah**.

Secondly, **He is the God of history**. **Who then is like Me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and lay out before Me what has happened since I established My ancient people, and what is yet to come - yes, let him foretell what will come (44:7)**. **God** had previously said that **Isra'el** was a witness to the truth of **His** claims about **what** would happen in the future (**43:12**), and **He** is about to say it again in the next verse. Therefore, **He** alone has **established** them as a **people** and nation. **He** alone has declared **what is yet to come** and no **idol** can match **Him**.

Thirdly, **He is the God of prophecy**. **God** had predicted all of the major events that took place in **the Israelites** own history. As a result, **they** should **not tremble** or **be afraid**. **Their** faith will not be misguided, **God** will not abandon **them**, Babylon will not devour **them**, and the ancient promises will not fall to the ground. **Isaiah's** own ministry was all to that end. When all the guarantees of the exile had come horrifyingly true, alongside stood these detailed assurances, equally old, that the exile would not be the end; **Did I not proclaim this and foretell it long ago? You are My witnesses. Is there any God besides Me (44:8a)?** The word **God**, here, is the singular *eloah*, the only time it is used in the book. The intention must be to stress the singleness of this one and only **God**.

To all the world **Isra'el** will be a living witness to the fact that **God** had predicted all of this far in advance, and that **He** held the power to make **His** promises come true. **No, there is no other Rock; I know not one (44:8b)**. Just as **He** had predicted their exile, at the same time **He** was predicting their unheard-of return. One hundred and fifty years *after Isaiah's* death the people would be able to testify, "Yes, **God** told us all of it, curse and blessing, long before any of it happened. **He** alone is **God**. There is no other."¹⁶⁷

The Achilles' heal of all paganism is **idol** making. And the line of reasoning used by the inspired prophet to expose it is detailed and devastating. Those who make **idols** are witnesses to the senseless character of their supposed **gods**. In **40:18-20** and **41:5-7**, **idols** were exposed by contrasting **them** to the holiness of **ADONAI**. But here that argument is reversed, **the glory of God** is seen in contrast to the absurdity and uselessness of **idols**. Instead of logical refutation of **idol** worship, **Isaiah** appeals to our imagination to drive home the final nail of persuasion. Thus, when **he** finished **his** sarcastic illustration, it is simply unthinkable to compare those chunks of **wood** and **stone** to **the Holy One of Isra'el (43:3)**.

Then **ADONAI** turned to **the idols** themselves as witnesses. What kind of evidence could *they* produce that *they* are supreme? The remaining verses in this section answer that question. In painful detail **Isaiah** describes how **the idol** worshipers built their **idols**. How can something made with human hands ever save anyone? More than that, those who bow down to the work of their own hands reduce themselves to nothing. They only worship themselves.

Without any fanfare **the prophet** bluntly states **his** theme. **All who make idols are nothing**. The word **nothing**, or *tohu*, in **Genesis 1:2** is translated *formless chaos*. Pagan mythology asserted that the function of the gods was to maintain

order against the constant onslaught of *chaos*. But **Isaiah** asserts that far from finding order, **the gods** create *chaos*. **And the things they treasure are worthless. They** cannot help anyone. **Those who would speak up for them are blind; they are ignorant, to their own shame (44:9)**. The witnesses of **the idols** become nothing through **their** alliance with **the gods** who *are* nothing. **They** have created a lie and are part of that lie.

Once again we find **Isaiah** simply mocking the **idols** by using Jewish humor. **Who shapes a god and casts an idol, which can profit him nothing (44:10)?** It's as if **Isaiah** asked the question, "Why do you spend all **your** time making false **gods**? **You** are a fool. **You** don't make a **god**; **God** made you!" Rabbi Saul would agree: **We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one (First Corinthians 8:4b)**. There is **nothing** behind the visible **idol** because there is only one **God**. But, on the other hand, **the idol** holds the idolater in an iron grip from which **he cannot save himself (44:20b)**. To this, Paul would also agree: **indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords" (First Corinthians 8:5)**, and, at the deepest, horrible level, that **the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God (First Corinthians 10:20a)**. The meaningless and dead **idol** has a grim power to make its devotee like itself. **Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them (Psalm 115:8)**. **The craftsmen will be put to shame** because they **are nothing but men**. If only **they** would **take their stand**, or stop and take an honest look at what **they** were doing, **they** would **be** terrified **(44:11)**.

The Holy Spirit makes the point there that the **idols** made of wood and metal are the creation of mere **man**. **Isaiah** illustrates how mundane the process is. There is a lot of humor here if you can understand what is behind the scenes. **Isaiah** picks out three different occupations that made **idols**. **He** takes us step-by-step from the end of the process to the beginning, showing in each stage how ridiculous it is for humans to make **gods**. First, **the blacksmith takes a tool and works with it in the coals; he shapes an idol with hammers, he forges it with the might of his arm**. But if **he gets hungry and loses his strength; he drinks no water and grows faint (44:12)**. The emphasis here is on the weakness of **man**. If **he** does not eat or drink, **man** is weak. Yet as weak as **man** is, depending on sources outside of himself (like food and drink), here **he** is making little **gods** for **himself**. Can a weak **man** make a strong **god**? No. A weak **man** will make an even weaker **god**.

Secondly, **the carpenter measures with a line and makes an outline with a**

marker; he roughs it out with chisels and marks it with compasses. He shapes it in the form of man, of man in all his glory, that it may dwell in a shrine, literally *dwells in a house* (**44:13**). What kind of a **god** is it? The kind that needs a house in which to live, a roof over its head to keep out the rain, and four walls to keep the thief out. The emphasis here is on subjectivity because **the carpenter** fashions the **idol** to look nice or beautiful. But beauty is in the eye of the beholder. So **the carpenter** makes an **idol** that is beautiful to *him*. But not matter what their intent; the result of human effort cannot rise about the human. Unfortunately, we have not progressed beyond this today. The religion of humanism is only an abstract form of this age-old effort. Whether implicitly or explicitly, the world today says, “We will be **God** and **God** will be us.” Some spend their lives and their money trying to discover “the **God** within,” and that effort ends up being just as futile as **the blacksmith’s, the carpenter’s**.

Thirdly, the emphasis is on the one who cuts down **the trees** in order to make an **idol. He cut down cedars, or perhaps took a cypress or oak. He let it grow among the trees of the forest, or planted a pine, and the rain made it grow** (**44:14**). The opening infinitive seems to serve **Isaiah’s** retrospective thinking. It states the purpose of the planting. Just as sheep were raised specifically for sacrifice, **trees** were planted specifically for idolatry. The devotee went out to chop **the tree** down. Out of it **he** made his **idol**, yet **the tree** needed to be sustained by rain or it would die. How could it be a **god** if it had no control over its existence?

With relentless repetition **Isaiah** now hones in on the final irony. How can a log, part of which was burned for human need, become a **god** that demands human obedience? **The prophet’s** reaction to **the gods** is much the same as Paul’s some seven hundred years later. They are **nothing. Idols** lack the power to bless or to defile: **Since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone - an image made by man’s design and skill** (see my commentary on **Acts, to see link click [Cb](#) - An Unknown God in Athens**).

It is man’s fuel for burning; some of it he takes and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread. But he also fashions a god and worships it; he makes an idol and bows down to it (**44:15**). **Isaiah** is saying that those stupid **idols** are made up of the same materials used in the most trivial domestic tasks. What an origin for a **god**! **Half of the wood he burns in the fire; over it he prepares his meal, he roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms**

himself and says, “Ah! I am warm; I see the fire” (44:16). So this guy goes out and cuts down for himself a big **tree**. Part of **the tree** he uses as a fire to warm himself with. Another part of the tree he uses for smaller **wood** to cook and bake on.

From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships; He prays to it and says, “Save me; you are my god” (44:17). The repetitive nature of the verbs here; **bows down, worships, prays,** points us to the apparently endless rituals of the pagans (**Matthew 6:7-8**). He cuts up the rest of **the tree** and makes a **god** out of it. So, **the god** is made out of the same wood he just used to warm himself with, and to cook with. What a stupid thing to worship. What a dumb thing to make **gods** out of. That is the irony here. They make **gods** out of the same things they use in the most trivial domestic tasks. It could not warm them, it could not cook their food, and it could not help them or save them. In reality, it could do anything for them. **ADONAI** was calling **Israel’s** attention to how absurd idolatry really is.

*Many of us give ourselves to those things that take us away from **God**. These things do not help us, they don’t lift us up. They don’t bring us joy, and it is a fact that they can never save us. **John** warns us: **Dear children, keep yourselves from idols (First John 5:21)**. Whatever captures the human heart and mind as an alternative to **Jesus Christ**, whatever it is, is an idolater.*

Isaiah has argued at length that the reason **ADONAI** can deliver **His** people is that **He** was created by them, is not an extension of them, and does not exist to serve them. In short, **He** is not one of **the** many **gods** made by human hands. As a result, **He** is the only **One** who can deliver them. **Isaiah** says that the maker of these **idols** does not see the obvious contradiction. **They know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over with mud so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand (44:18).** **The intellectual level of the idolater is so low that he is quite incapable of applying the most rudimentary principles of logic to his absurd conduct.**

Those who resist **the LORD** are steadfast in their belief system. It is useless to argue with them because they merely become more entrenched in darkness. It is only by the **Spirit of God** and **the Word of God** that they can see **the light of the Gospel**. Without realizing it, their eternal destiny is at stake. Like a rock climber without a safety rope reaching for a piece of rotten granite, a wrong choice is not merely a mistake when one’s whole life depends on it. According to **Isaiah**, those

are the stakes depending on our decision about the nature of **God**. As much as the world doesn't want to see or hear it, there is only one solution to the riddle of the universe and its meaning. There is only one **God**, and you are not **Him**. It is foolishness to rest your eternal destiny on a piece of **wood**! Eternity is a long time.

No one stops to think, no one has the knowledge or understanding to say, "Half of it I used for fuel; I even bakes bread over its coals, I roasted meat and I ate shall I make a detestable thing from what is left: Shall I bow down to a block of wood" (44:19)? This is a devastating analysis of the fallen mind. You cannot use a piece **of wood** to burn and then call that same piece **of wood god**. Then ask it: **Save me, you are my god (44:17b)**. The fallen mind cannot understand: **The man without the indwelling Holy Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned (First Corinthians 2:14).**

The idolater **feeds on ashes (44:20a)**. Here **Isaiah** uses one of **his** favorite metaphors, but in a much different way than usual. Everywhere else in the book, the world **feeds** is used to suggest the peacefulness and plenty that we associate with the picture of a flock of sheep quietly feeding on grass. It may also refer figuratively to **the Holy ones** in the far eschatological future (**Deuteronomy 33:2-3; Job 5:1; Psalm 16:3 and 34:9; Zechariah 14:5**). But here **he** intentionally uses it as a contrast. Instead of the rich green grass of the pasture, or the plenty of the Messianic Kingdom, the idolaters are seen trying to scavenge for food in a field that has been burned to **ashes**. Such is the reality of the worship of **the world (John 2:15-17)**.

A deluded heart misleads him (44:20b). Just common logic should have told this **idolater** that something was wrong. Instead, **he** suffers from total self-deception. The result of this self-deception is not deliverance, but **sin**. The very opposite of what was hoped for when **the idol** was made. The Hebrew, **misleads him**, can also be translated *makes him sin* because the verb used has the basic sense of *missing a target*, which lies behind the idea of **sin**. The idolater misses the target because **he** refuses to admit to **himself** that **he** is spiritually helpless and cannot make the first move toward **God**. **He cannot save himself, or say, "Is not this thing in my right hand a lie" (44:20c)?** **He** is holding onto it, but just as assuredly, it is holding onto **him**. **He** is hooked on idolatry and does not understand its futility. **The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of**

Christ, who is the image of Christ (Second Corinthians 4:4).

But because the natural man and woman is spiritually dead and without any hope (**First Corinthians 2:14**), **ADONAI** made the first move toward us. **So when the appointed time arrived, God sent forth His Son. He was born from a woman, born into a culture in which legalistic perversion of the Torah as the norm, so that He might redeem those in subjection to this legalism and thus enable us to be made God's sons. Now because you are sons, god has sent forth into our hearts the Spirit of His Son, the Spirit who cries out, "Abba" (that is, Dear Father)! So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if you are a son you are also an heir (Galatians 4:4-7 CJB).**