

A BIBLICAL HISTORY OF IDOLATRY

In the Old Testament

Idolatry—the worship of false gods in the bible—is found throughout Israel’s history. It is first found in Gen 35:1 – 4. The first recorded instance of national idolatry was when Israel was at Mt. Sinai waiting for Moses’ return. (Exo 32) The Israelites’ 400-year exposure to the Egyptians and their myriad gods probably influenced them to a high degree. Even though God performed great miracles to evacuate them from Egypt, they were what God called “a stiff-necked people.” (Exo 33:5)

God laid down His law concerning idolatry in the first two commandments. However, the Israelites were so fond of Egypt that an entire generation had to pass away before He would allow them into the Promised Land. (Deut 1:35)

Later, God told Israel to destroy the false gods worshiped by the nations when they entered Canaan. (Exo 23:24; 34:13; Deut 7:4-5; 12:2-3)

After Moses and Joshua died, during the time of the judges, God’s people frequently turned to idols. A repeated phrase found in Judges is, “each man did what was right in his own heart.”

During Samuel’s reign as judge, there were vestiges of idolatry still in existence. (1 Sam 7:3-6) During the reigns of Saul and David, the practice seems to have stopped.

When Israel demanded a king to “be like the other nations,” Samuel rebuked them severely, and they became afraid. He said to the people, “Do not fear. You have committed all this evil, yet do not turn aside from following the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart. And you must not turn aside, for then you would go after futile things which can not profit or deliver because they are futile.” (1 Sam 12:20-21)

He essentially told them, “You’ve got a king just like you wanted. Though you’ve done wrong, however, don’t turn aside to worship idols (useless things).”

In Israel’s later years, Solomon set in motion a consistent pattern of idolatry in Israel, thanks to his devotion to many foreign wives and their false religions. (1 Kgs 11:1-11) When Israel split into two kingdoms, all of the kings of the Northern Kingdom were idolaters, as were many in the southern kingdom of Judah.

Idolatry was attractive to Israel for a couple of apparent reasons. They had been surrounded by pagan nations and were thus exposed to the various beliefs. Conventional pagan notions concluded that the worship of many gods provided better security than the worship of just one. This idea was still popular during Rome’s hey-day. For another thing, no real obedience was required. Idolatry was attractive to the flesh. Pagan rites included sexual immorality with temple prostitutes as part of their religious rituals. God, on the other hand, required obedience to high moral standards as defined in His Law to maintain a saving relationship with Him. These moral

standards grated against man's sinful nature. When you add the bloody animal sacrifices, it may be that the Jews found it more enjoyable to worship idols rather than the One True God.

The demonic character of idols *at times* produced genuine and demonstrable results. Fertility gods promised children. The weather gods (the sun, moon, stars, etc.) promised abundant crops. Warrior gods promised victory. If the rain came, credit went to an idol, not the True God. During the exile, the people complained that worshiping the Queen of Heaven brought good luck. But what they attributed to an idol was God's doing. (Jer 44:15-25)

Idolatry was the main reason God punished Israel. He warned them over and over again through the prophets.

Has a nation changed gods, when they were not gods? But My people have changed their glory for that which does not profit. (Jer 2:11)

Can man make gods for himself? Yet they are not gods! (Jer 16:20)

The OT provides some humorous depictions of these false gods:

Their idols are silver and gold, the work of man's hands. They have mouths, but they cannot speak; they have eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but they cannot hear; they have noses, but they cannot smell; they have hands, but they cannot feel; they have feet, but they cannot walk; they cannot make a sound with their throat. Those who make them will become like them, everyone who trusts in them. (Psa 115:4-8)

See also Isa 44:9-20 and Jer 10:1-15

Behind all idols were demons:

They sacrificed to demons who were not God, to gods whom they have not known, new gods who came lately, whom your fathers did not dread. (Deut 32:17)

They mingled with the nations, and learned their practices, served their idols, which became a snare to them. They even sacrificed their sons and their daughters to the demons. (Psa 106:36-37)

Paul said, "The things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons, and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons." (1 Cor 10:20)

Satan is named "the god of the age," (2 Cor 4:4) able to produce counterfeit miracles, signs, & wonders (2 Thess 2:9).

The Lord put up with the Northern Kingdom's idolatry for 200 years, warning them through the prophets. His patience finally ran out, and He sent the Assyrians to destroy Samaria and to scatter the ten tribes. (2 Kgs 17:6-18) The southern kingdom of Judah did have some God-fearing kings such as Hezekiah and Josiah, but because of wicked kings such as Manasseh,

idolatry became entrenched in Judah. (2 Kgs 21:1-9) As a result, God promised that Jerusalem too would be destroyed. (2 Kgs 21:10-16)

In spite of these warnings, and the example of the northern kingdom's captivity, idolatry continued in Judah. (Isa 48:4-5; Jer 2:4-30; 16:18-21; Ezek 8) God finally fulfilled His promise through King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, who captured Jerusalem, burned the temple, and sacked the city. (2 Kgs 25)

At the end of the Babylonian captivity, the Jews had learned their lesson. They have remained a monotheistic people to this day.

Christians who engage in any form of idolatry will not inherit Christ's kingdom (1 Cor 6:9-10; Gal 5:20-21; Rev 22:15) The idea today that we can just believe in a "higher power" smacks in the face of the Second Commandment: "You shall have NO OTHER gods before Me." (Exo 20:3)

In the New Testament

What had threatened the Jews in the Old Testament became a problem for the New Testament church when Gentiles began entering the Christian church. When Paul came to Athens, Greece, "his spirit was provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols." (Acts 17:16)

The problem of idolatry and Gentile influence is apparent in 1 Corinthians, where Paul addresses the issue at length. In chapter 8, he says that since idols are not even real, don't worry about eating meat sacrificed to them. Don't ask questions about the food, but instead, give thanks to God for it.

In chapter 10, however, the apostle nails down the real danger of getting too "up close and personal" with idols:

The things which the *Gentiles* sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. (1 Cor 10:20, 21)

John's farewell in his 1st epistle is, "Little children, guard yourselves from idols." (1 John 5:21)

In Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, he describes how the veneration of images and statues crept into the early church. Briefly, after the apostles died and Christianity became accepted, certain church elders who had influence came up with an idea: *Let's attract pagans into the church by installing statues of famous Christian figures*, since this was what pagans were used to seeing in their temples. As a result, statues and paintings of the Virgin Mary, John, Peter, and Jesus Himself began showing up in Christian places of worship.

Paul emphasized this issue, "Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer." (2 Cor 5:16) NKJV Yet just as the Ephesian artisans made their living manufacturing idols, so too do many peddle crucifixes and statuettes of the Virgin Mary

and Christ. In Jerusalem today, streets are lined with vendors, hawking cheap images of Christ, Mary, and other religious figures.

Hezekiah destroyed the bronze serpent Moses had made 400 years before because the Israelites were burning incense to it. (2 Kgs 18:4) It seems that humans just can't fathom the unseen spiritual world. They have to have something they can see and touch to make their faith real.

Rosary beads, crucifixes, "holy" water, statues, portraits, and buildings all cater to the flesh. They have no power to save or heal, nor does scripture support their use anywhere. Just like the idols of ancient times, they are made by the hands of men.

Faith must rest in God and Him only.

Terry DeLaney
Updated August 2017