

The Speaking God: Nothing from Nothing

*I am Yahweh, your Holy One,
the Creator of Israel, your king.¹*

2 Kings 1

¹⁵ They rejected his decrees and the covenant he had made with their fathers and the warnings he had given them. They followed worthless idols and themselves became worthless. They imitated the nations around them although the LORD had ordered them, "Do not do as they do," and they did the things the LORD had forbidden them to do.

¹⁶ They forsook all the commands of the LORD their God and made themselves two idols cast in the shape of calves, and an Asherah pole. They bowed down to all the starry hosts, and they worshiped Baal. ¹⁷ They sacrificed their sons and daughters in the fire. They practiced divination and sorcery and sold themselves to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, provoking him to anger.

Habakkuk 2

¹⁸ "Of what value is an idol, since a man has carved it?
Or an image that teaches lies?
For he who makes it trusts in his own creation;
he makes idols that cannot speak.

¹⁹ Woe to him who says to wood, 'Come to life!'
Or to lifeless stone, 'Wake up!'
Can it give guidance?
It is covered with gold and silver;
there is no breath in it.

²⁰ But the LORD is in his holy temple;
let all the earth be silent before him."

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Psalm 36:1-4 says that the "wicked" have no fear of God at all in their hearts, and that is just the beginning. With that as the starter, vss. 2-4 of Psalm 36 is a tightly packed analysis of a wicked person, a person who loves evil, thinks only of evil, and plans only evil. By contrast, vss...5-9, the psalmist thinks of the greatness of God, of God's

¹ Isaiah 43:15, The New Jerusalem Bible.

unfailing mercy, His character as the “fountain of life,” and in whose presence is fullness of joy.... As it says in my favorite line:

*⁸For with you, O Lord, is the fountain of life,
and in your light we see light.*

With vss. 10-12, we have the first use of the language of prayer in Psalm 36. By that I mean the psalmist asks for continued mercy for the people of God, that the wicked would be overcome, and for steadfastness in his own heart. This is one of my favorite Psalms for meditation and prayer.

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Three of the world’s great religions trace their early history to the same person: Abraham, formerly Abram of Ur of the Chaldeans. These faiths are Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. But this is not the only thing these religions have in common; they are all monotheistic; that is, they worship one God. Judaism and Christianity are the oldest of the three; Islam dating its beginning to the sixth century AD. We are not surprised then to note that the deity of Islam differs in some important respects from God as understood by Jews and Christians. But this is another matter. What is important for us now is that apart from these three, other religions are polytheistic (worshipping many gods and goddesses), with idols as representatives of their deities or the actual deities themselves.

This was the world of our ancestors, of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and later Jesus the Redeemer and Paul; a world shaped by belief in idols, idols by the hundreds, sometimes by the thousands. There were idols of all shapes and sizes, often mixtures of humans and animals or reptiles, idols largely unconcerned about humans, busy with their own loving, hating, fighting, and dying. Idolatry was the single greatest threat to Judaism in its formative years. It was the main concern of Yahweh, God of the Jews, and the great prophets. This was serious business. As Israel found out, they could not mix Yahweh and idols. God would not tolerate that. Idolatry was clearly the wrong road.

*No! You idols are less than nothing and can
do nothing at all.
Those who choose you pollute themselves.²*

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A terrible drought was the background for the dramatic clash between the mighty prophet, Elijah, and 450 prophets of the Canaanite god, Baal.³ At issue was the power of God. An altar to each deity would be erected and the god who answered prayers by “fire” and consumed the sacrifice on the altar would indeed be God! History records that Elijah called down fire from God that burned up sacrifice, altar, and trenches filled with

² Isaiah 41:24. New Living Translation, 2004 edition, p. 549.

³ See 1 Kings 17:1ff.

water, which surrounded the altar. The 450 prophets of Baal were silent. The event left everyone wide-eyed and the idolatrous priests fearful for their lives.

This amazing victory was only temporary in its effect however, and time after time the people of God slipped into the pagan ways of their neighbors. At issue was always the reality of God. The testimony of Israel was that God is a speaking God, a God of steadfast love who interacts with His people. Thus, Israel's word to Egypt, Babylonia, Assyria, and others was simply this: You cannot get something from nothing... and these various pantheons of gods and goddesses all around were simply nothing.

The longest passage of Scripture dealing with idols in the Old Testament is found in Isaiah 44:9-20.⁴ In a word, the text in Isaiah is concerned with the futility of idols in comparison with the grandeur of Yahweh. The section below mocks a god made from the same wood that warms a person, cooks his biscuits, and prepares her steak.

^{9a} All who make idols are nothing,
and the things they treasure are worthless....
¹⁵ 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.
¹⁶ 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."
¹⁷ 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."

Anyone that will worship a block of wood, Isaiah says, knows nothing, sees nothing, and understands nothing (vss. 18-19). We look back at the ancients and think, What fools! Yet we are not too far from them when we look around at our society. We are often quick to substitute something else for the God of the Bible.

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The Lord Jesus gave us a huge insight into the work of God in His beatitudes (Matthew 5-7). Those who believe in God and live out the implications of their faith, He says, will have a "blessed" *or* "happy" life. Such a life will be capped off with eternal life in the kingdom of God. A happy life is the goal of the Gospel for us; not a surface happiness but deep, abiding joy that makes life worth living, even at its roughest times.

⁴ If you are interested, check our Psalm 115:4-8 and Jeremiah 10:1-16.

By happiness the Gospel means what we often think of as deep delight in God, a sense of satisfaction, even peace. We look as eagerly for such a life as the Babylonians and Assyrians did. They hoped their wooden idols would do the job but, alas, their lives were full of unhappiness, violence, and general turmoil.

Today we leave wooden and stone idols to museums, but we have the same desires the Hittites and Romans had. If only we could be content with life...if only we could be safe and satisfied. Where are you, happiness? Many people today throw out God and Christ with the ancient gods Dagon and Zeus. Oddly enough, if we dismiss the divine in our quest for meaning, we are left with the same thing that troubled Isaiah: the work of human hands as the source of meaning. So we look for Coke or Pepsi to make the world smile or to Nike shoes for speed (just like Nike the goddess of victory in Greek mythology) and joy. I heard a prominent sports figure say that his love of the game was greater than anything else in life, including family and God. Yes, he did say that!

Some people are not that brave, to say sports is more fulfilling than God, but a lot of us live like it. For example, the person who curses with Jesus' name or who blasphemes the living God by taking His name in vain is acting much like an ancient polytheist. Add these moderns to the list of those you know who have a lot of this world's goods but are miserable nonetheless. They all eat from the same bowl. They worship an idol, ever bit as much as the Greeks of the fifth century BC, though not one with a human body and the head of a hawk, whittled out of wood.

Christians are those people who once piled sin on sin as they looked for meaning in a car, a marriage, a house, a career, or the winning lottery ticket. By divine grace we have turned to the living God, whom we hoped was there but hardly believed it. Now we believe it out of a sense of gratitude and joy. "Save me, you are my God" is what we say to the Lord, not to a block of wood. And we discover gentleness coming at us, forgiveness covering us, and acceptance giving us peace...and we say, "Thank you, Jesus."

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the Creator of Israel, your king.*

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*The Christian Church has typically interpreted
Isaiah 52:13-53:12 as prophecy about our
Lord Jesus. Read that text and see why the
Church would come to that conclusion.*

The next installment of our series is entitled
The Speaking God: Give Ear and Come to Me!
In preparation for that installment please read
Isaiah 45, noting questions you may have.

--Jerry Mercer
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