

The Hebrew Corner

Idol worship was an ever-present evil described within the pages of the Tanach. There were many forms of idolatry. Objects were often cast into the likeness of animals and worshipped, for example, the golden calf that Aaron made for the Israelites in the wilderness during the time that Moses was receiving the Ten Commandments from God. Baal (בעל, bah-AHL) worship is described in many passages in the Tanach. Baal in English means owner, master, or husband, and was the male deity of the Phoenicians and the Canaanites, whose female counterpart was the goddess Astaroth. We see this worship spreading into Israel, as depicted in the following passage, Hosea 13:1-2:

“When Ephraim spake trembling, he exalted himself in Israel, but when he offended in Baal, he died. And now they sin more and more, and have made them molten images of their silver, and idols according to their own understanding, all of it the work of the craftsmen: they say of them, Let the men that sacrifice kiss the calves.”

Another idol that we see corrupting the people of the area was the god Dagon (דגון, dah-GOHN), worshipped by the Philistines. An encounter between God and Dagon is recorded in 1 Samuel 5:2-4:

“When the Philistines took the ark of God, they brought it into the house of Dagon, and set it by Dagon. And when

they of Ashdod arose early on the morrow, behold, Dagon was fallen upon his face to the earth before the ark of the Lord. And they took Dagon, and set him in his place again. And when they arose early on the morrow morning, behold, Dagon was fallen upon his face to the ground before the ark of the Lord; and the head of Dagon and both the palms of his hands were cut off upon the threshold, only *the stump* of Dagon was left to him.”

In this passage, the words “the stump” were added for clarity in the King James Version. Here it is pertinent to know that the Hebrew word dag (דג, DAHG) means fish in English. Brown Driver Briggs, a standard Hebrew lexicon, suggests that there may have been a transcription error in this passage, and that instead of the last occurrence of the word Dagon, the word dago (דגו, dah-GOH), meaning “his fish” was originally intended, so the passage should read instead “only his fish was left to him,” indicating that Dagon may have been part fish in his images and statues.

Isaiah the prophet exposed the foolishness of idol worship, in passages such as the following (Isaiah 44:14-19):

“He heweth him down cedars, and taketh the cypress and the oak, which he strengthens for himself among the trees of the forest; he planteth an ash, and the rain doth nourish it. Then it shall be for a man to burn: for he will take thereof, and warm himself, yea, he kindleth it and baketh bread; yea, he maketh a god, and worshippeth it; he

maketh it a graven image, and falleth down thereto. He burneth part thereof in the fire; with part thereof he eateth flesh; he roasteth roast, and is satisfied; yea, he warmeth himself, and saith, Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire: And the residue thereof he maketh a god, even his graven image; he falleth down unto it, and worshippeth it, and prayeth unto it, and saith, Deliver me, for thou art my god. They have not known or understood: for he hath shut their eyes, that they cannot see; and their hearts, that they cannot understand. And none considereth in his heart, neither is there knowledge nor understanding to say, I have burned part of it in the fire; yea, also I have baked bread upon the coals thereof; I have roasted flesh, and eaten it: and shall I make the residue thereof an abomination? Shall I fall down to the stock of a tree?"

Here the prophet shows in graphic terms the folly of burning one portion of wood as fuel for a fire, and taking what is left over to carve an idol, and then bow down to it as a god. This represents worship of a work by the individual who made it, clearly a form of self-worship. Many of us want to make God in our own image, attributing to God the characteristics that we think he should have. This is the broader context of the passage, which we often see in our own lives and the lives of others.

May we all humble ourselves in worship of the God that made us in his image, and may his blessings always be with you.