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Has a Nation Ever Changed its Gods?

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Has a Nation Ever Changed its Gods?

Abstract

"Israel rebelled against its God from the beginning precisely because He is the real God. He made demands of them that they didn't like."

Posting about discerning the ways of God from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/has-a-nation-ever-changed-its-gods/>

Keywords

In All Things, lectionary, gods, worship, Old Testament

Disciplines

Christianity

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

Has a Nation Ever Changed its Gods?

 [inallthings.org /has-a-nation-ever-changed-its-gods/](https://inallthings.org/has-a-nation-ever-changed-its-gods/)

Donald Roth

Daily Scripture Texts

[Psalm 81](#)

[Jeremiah 2:4-13](#)

[John 7:14-31, 37-39](#)

The prophets are often described as God's prosecutors in His divine lawsuit against Israel for its compulsive covenant-breaking. If we use that metaphor, then Jeremiah represents the closing arguments of that case, and he is a star prosecutor. In Jeremiah 2:11, he poses a rhetorical question that stops the reader dead in their tracks: "Has a nation ever changed its gods?" Because the implied "no" is obvious, most of us say the answer in our heads and just plow on through the text, but perhaps we should stop and really ponder this question.

Think back to the ancient civilizations. Sure, many were syncretistic,¹ but a nation's gods were deeply ingrained parts of their cultural heritage. Many of us still learn about the Greek and Roman pantheons in school, and gods like Baal, Molech, and Asherah were similarly tied to Canaanite cultures. Abandoning these gods would be tantamount to Philistines starting to call themselves Phoenecian. Yet this is almost exactly what the Israelites did from the beginning.

As Psalm 81 notes, ever since God set Israel apart by delivering them from Egypt, they preferred to follow after their own ways. God brought His people into a land flowing with milk and honey, yet they would never take fully-peaceful possession of that land because of their pathological inability to follow His instructions. After suffering this rebellion for hundreds of years, God finally sent Israel away into captivity (as Jeremiah 3:8 says, He "[sent her away with a decree of divorce](#)"), and now Jeremiah warns Judah that the same fate awaits her if she cannot finally repent and turn to the Lord who has repeatedly delivered her. Sadly, as we know, Judah would continue to stray from the Lord of Life and seek life in empty gods of her own making, preferring broken cisterns to living water.

Of course, it's easy for us to see Israel's folly, but how often do we do the same thing? Israel rebelled against its God from the beginning precisely because He is the real God. He made demands of them that they didn't like. He sent prophets who spoke of more than health and wealth. He couldn't be manipulated by the blood of bulls and goats but instead demanded that they "circumcise their hearts" and follow Him ([Deut. 10:12-16](#)).

What do false gods demand? For the price of a sacrificial animal, they claim to bring good luck and plenty. They authorize us to do what we always wanted to do (look how many of the ancient religions were closely bound to temple prostitution), and they make no demands on our hearts. What does Zeus care if you love him so long as you give him what he wants? False gods are easy gods.

Yet how often do we still make our God an easy god? We can manipulate the theology of calling and vocation to make it a rubber stamp on our ambitions. We can cheapen grace until the very concept of sin seems old-fashioned. We can channel more Ayn Rand than sacred Scripture to justify failing to give to the poor. In short, we can convince ourselves that we're making very real sacrifices while clinging to a level of comfort and luxury unheard of in ages past.

If this sounds radical, it's because it is. From the Garden on, mankind has been inclined to the worship of self-over-savior, and resisting that impulse is something truly radical. It's not impossible to worship God well in the modern age, but we should be suspicious if it seems too easy. Scripture shines a light that makes the foolishness of the Israelites clear, but that light falls on us as well. Where do you see these temptations creeping in in your life?

Let us all pray for the wisdom to discern the way of God and the grace of the Holy Spirit to follow that path, for we are dependent on His grace. Let us not be overconfident in our ability to take up our own cross, lest we find we've fashioned it from balsa wood.

Footnotes

1. the blending of two or more religious belief systems into a new system ↩