

Commentary & Application of Ezekiel 8

Idolatry in the Temple of God's people in the Old Testament

Idolatry in the Church of Christ today!

Introduction

Ezekiel the prophet of God has gone into exile with the Jews during the time of Nebuchadnezzar. Jechoachin was the Jewish ruler during this period.

Ezekiel was contemporary with Daniel although serving God in different spheres. Daniel was in the social and political sphere in the palace and Ezekiel in the priestly and prophetic role amongst the exiled people of Judah.

Ezekiel had a brief from God in going into captivity with the people. God was going to rescue them. But Ezekiel's ministry was to show the people why they were in captivity. They had not paid heed to the prophet Jeremiah. Ezekiel was to expose their sins and ensure that were purified and ready to possess the land again which God had prepared for them.

In Chapter 8 of Ezekiel's prophecy we have a particular problem! The leaders of the people. He was sitting as it says in verse 1 with the elders of Judah when the Lord came on him and gave him a vision.

There is similarity in the vision of the 'man' with Daniel's visions but not so detailed. The drama of the event is very clear. Ezekiel felt lifted up by the hair of his head to a place between heaven and earth. Then visions were given.

The place where the problem is revealed is at the temple in Jerusalem. This was where the root of the problems had been. What was happening in the temple.... in the church. Remember that as Christians we have been grafted into the people of God, their privileges and responsibilities. The problems which the people of God had then are very similar to the church today.

Ezekiel saw a vision. He was taken to Jerusalem where he knew that an idol 'which provokes to jealousy stood'. What is it? Not sure. Some have suggested it was sexual symbol which had no place in the Temple. What Ezekiel knew about he now sees for himself, and the comment of the Lord God is 'do you see what they are doing'. The collective group of the 'House of Israel', a cover term for the covenant people, were participating in the idol worship. The participation was driving God away from meeting his people in the appointed place and manner. The reason that the people of Israel had got into so much trouble was because they had tolerated the practises of the people they were meant to conquer and convert. They accepted their ideas and the corrupt practises followed.

This is happening in our society at the moment with the church beginning to interpret its beliefs in the words of those who oppose it. The anarchist movement has long had an agenda, in revolutionary terms, which wanted to alter the way we thought about language, gender, sexual activity, family etc. Our society is on course to fully adopting these ideas and the church is following meekly. We seem to have got hooked on the mentality that if someone is successful and 'nice' then how they live their lives and what they recommend is okay, even if it at odds with the teaching of Jesus in the Old and New Testaments. The idol which provokes to jealousy in the scriptural context here may have been a sexual symbol which had been erected in the temple. What that may

represent in our culture is not quite certain yet but when it does appear it will certainly mark a significant point in the time of the end.

Greater Idolatry

But Ezekiel in verse 6 was told he was going to see worse.

God then took him to the entrance to the court. This was the place from which the rulers, priests and Levites operated. There he saw a hole in the wall. Ezekiel was instructed to dig in order to reveal what was happening. Sometimes we operate with the idea of the three wise monkeys; hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil. Make sure you keep yourself clean but don't get involved. This was not an option for Ezekiel as the prophet of God, nor for a member of Christ's body as Christ lives in us to be a light to the world. The evil had to be uncovered in order to root it out and give the people an opportunity for salvation.

When Ezekiel was obedient and dug then he saw an entrance. We can sometimes feel when we catch a glimpse of evil that there is no way to really get to the bottom of it and sort it out. Not true! As Ezekiel dug he found a way because God will make a way as we are obedient.

He found an entrance.

Going in as God asked him to do he found seventy elders of Judah.. God's people... burning incense surrounded by images that are termed hideous and repulsive. The reason they were doing these things was because they thought that God had deserted and abandoned them. Offering incense was the means of honouring the power and significance of that 'god' (*spirit worshipped as having power over nature or human fortunes*). Whoever does such a thing?

Is this relevant to us today remembering that these are visions using symbols which represent a reality of thought and practise?

Yes. There was a man some 150 years ago who reckoned God had abandoned him in the death of his youngest and much loved daughter. As a result he wrote in his personal diary that he hated God. What did he do when he came to this determination. In the words of the old ditty, "*nobody loves me, everybody hates me, I think I'll go and eat worms*", was what he did. I have been to his garden and seen the place where he lived, ate and slept worms. I have seen his study where the walls are lined with many kinds of crawling insects and creatures. What did he do with this activity and study. He produced a system which sought to remove the activity of the Creator God of Christianity from the appearance of life on earth. His hatred was deep.

We know this as the theory of Evolution. Charles Darwin. He learned, followed and allowed his thinking to be changed, away from the Word of God, by worms and crawling creatures.

This theory has been used to understand how we behave, how others will react to our behaviour, to manipulate people and situations and whether people should live or die. Our social and financial habits are framed by this theory. This is a 'god'

It is taught to our children with our agreement and money in schools and universities as the accepted means by which life appeared on earth. It's method of operation is accepted by all the major Christian denominations as the means by which Christ has brought life on earth and is used as a corner stone of interpretation of the Christian Scriptures. This means it is truth. We worship it since we learn from it in every aspect of our life and in the lives of our children:

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds,” Romans 12v1,2

How grievous to the Lord Jesus Christ!

Jesus inspired these words to be written by the same writer in the context of God’s creation, *“Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man— and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.”* Romans 1v22,23.

Even Greater Idolatry!

Ezekiel was taken to the north gate of the God’s house and saw women mourning for Tammuz. It’s really strange! The first picture Ezekiel saw gave the impression of many detestable things which were going on by most of the people. They were all shocking.

But what is shocking about this one verse that justifies the term even more detestable?

Here it is important to recognise that God looks on the heart and knows the culpability of people and the things which lead to the acts which deeply offend and cause trouble. God sees the root of the problem. In this vision of the weeping for Tammuz we have a core problem that affects everything else. In itself it does not seem to be too bad. But its root is thoroughly evil and leads to a dreadful misrepresentation of God. This kind of idolatry is a foundational source for the ones listed above. What is it? Who is Tammuz?

At the time of writing his prophecy Ezekiel would have known that Tammuz was worshipped as a fertility god. Tammuz was linked strongly with the seasons and his death (winter) was mourned and his resurrection (spring) celebrated. It was a fertility cult which was centred on the earth and its processes. Nature. The most vital of these processes was the continuance of the ability of the earth to produce harvest, animals and thus provide for human life. Anything which interrupted this natural process was a serious business and these people were very well aware of the vagaries of existence. There was no knowledge of the Creator God of Israel and his holiness. The earth had produced life and they had to learn how to be in sympathy with it. Their understanding was the processes had continued the same from the beginning and they needed to ensure that it continued. The sought to please the ‘god’ who controlled nature ... the fertility god.

This Idolatry in our church

How does this apply to us today? Have you noticed the insistence by taught science of the self organisation of the universe and the earth. The Big Bang and evolution over billions of years eventually producing the earth and life. The end result of all of these beliefs is that we now have an understanding of ourselves which is a mixture of ‘science’ and ‘religion’

“As the fundamental basis of modern science, Naturalism is a very powerful paradigm...Naturalism has been a philosophical movement as well as an axiom underlying the scientific method. But could there also be a naturalistic religion or naturalistic spirituality - focused entirely on the natural world, without belief in any supernatural beings, realms or forces? A religion of science, a religion of reason, fully compatible with science, evidence and logic?”

<http://www.pantheism.net/natural.htm>

The millions and billions of years which we are all taught and assaulted with constantly in education and media is based on the premise of naturalism. Science as taught in our schools and universities excludes *a priori* the possibility of a supernatural Creator having anything to do with the process and allows only processes observable today to be used to work out what happened in the past. This is what we allow our children to be taught in school: the doctrines and fruits of naturalism. This is also pervasive in the Christian Church and taught in all its theological colleges in Britain. Even at Keswick. This teaching makes the history in the Bible a ‘lie’. The

'fact' of the fruits of naturalism; the millions of years, is used as a touchstone to interpret the scriptures. This is particularly true in Genesis.

As a group and typical of this approach of pantheism they reject the personal God of Christianity but attach all the qualities of such to the impersonal forces of nature and ourselves. Fulfilling the lie in the garden of Eden, modern scientific man sees himself as a 'god'.... "we believe that humans are the source of human ethical codes." As Genesis chapter 3 indicates 'knowing good and evil'. The church now knows better than to trust in the unfailing Word of God for true history!

Modern Version

The modern version of 'Tammuz' the fertility god and the sacrifices to him are made in 'natural terms'. Eco living. Rejecting the use of fossil fuels, striving to fulfil the requirements of a naturalistic fertility religion which preserves the environment. The cost of this offering is enormous. Implementing the Kyoto treaty effectively would cost something in the region of \$1trillion. The people who suffer worst in such a scenario and are the offerings to such a naturalistic 'god' are the poor. Such a sum would allow clean drinking water to be made available to every person on the earth. See this link for a good analysis of the present debate on global warming <http://www.cornwallalliance.org/docs/an-examination-of-the-scientific-ethical-and-theological-implications-of-climate-change-policy.pdf>

More specifically this statement made in the World Pantheism answers section shows the religious connection between the modern science of Big Bang, billions of years and evolutionary theory, "Richard Dawkins, in his book *The God Delusion*, has described Pantheism as "sexed-up atheism." That may seem flippant, but it is accurate. Of all religious or spiritual traditions, Pantheism - the approach of Einstein, Hawking and many other scientists - is the only one that passes the muster of the world's most militant atheist."

It is this area that women are mentioned particularly. Perhaps because in general women have a greater empathy with nature and this can be turned easily by false teaching.

The Worst Idolatry!

But in Ezekiel's vision God said there was an even worse idolatry. There was a core attitude which was the fount of all the other idolatries of wrong thinking and practise. This had taken hold of the people at a deep level and brought the people of God into a place of judgement.

What was it?

In the vision there were a group of important men 'about' twenty five in number. This number is significant as Ellicot's commentary points out:

Between the porch and the altar.—Ezekiel now returns to the court of the priests, and there sees—not *about*, but *as it were* (referring to the nature of the vision)—"twenty-five men." These are probably the high priest and the heads of the twenty-four courses, representing the whole body of the priests, as the elders represented the whole body of the people. They were standing between the altar and the Temple, therefore in the most sacred part of the court, and there, turning their backs upon the Temple of the Lord, worshipped the sun. The adoration of the sun, probably the earliest form of false religion, was the especial worship of Persia, but had been long since practised by the kings and people of Judah ([2Kings 23:5](#); [2Kings 23:11](#)). Thus all classes of the nation are seen to be involved in common sin; and the priests particularly, the especial guardians of true religion, are found practising this sin under circumstances of peculiar insult to God. That the "chief priests" did pollute the sanctuary at this time is expressly asserted in the history at [2Chronicles 36:14](#).

Now we have the real core of the problem of idolatry in the people of God. The first group (elders) represented the people generally, social and political leaders. The second group seemed to be aligned particularly with the women in Judah. But in this last group it is the religious leaders who are given over to sun worship.

How can this be so in our present evangelical church?

One would think in our present day church that we would be far distanced from such practises. That would be to underestimate the capacity for our spiritual enemy to lie and deceive.

Always the test of what we believe is what we allow our children to be taught. It would be fair to say in the Church in general that no one teaches that the Lord God placed the earth at a privileged place in the Universe and arranged everything else around it. Specifically that when Joshua declares that the sun and moon stopped in the sky we consider that he was talking observationally and not stating actual facts. That is what we allow our children to be taught. The earth is the third rock from the sun spinning on its axis and orbiting the sun once a year. We have accommodated the beliefs of pagans just as the people of Judah now in exile had done!

But the Psalmist said that the earth is established and cannot be moved. This is interpreted as the world system even though the Psalmist aligns it with the stability of God's throne and his statutes and does not make sense unless we are talking about an earth which is not moving:

Psa 93:1 The LORD reigns, he is robed in majesty; the LORD is robed in majesty and armed with strength; indeed, the earth is established, firm and secure.

Psa 93:2 Your throne was established long ago; you are from all eternity.

and

Psa 96:9 Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth.

Psa 96:10 Say among the nations, "The LORD reigns." The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity.

But what does it matter if we say the earth moves or not. Does that effect our salvation? Let's consider what our children get taught.

- 1) We have come from the stars. It was the death of stars that made the necessary 'dust' from which we have evolved.
- 2) We owe our existence to the sun. The search for exo planets (similar to the earth which might bear life) is premised on the proximity etc of a planet to a similarly sized and type of sun as ours.
- 3) The possibility of a Designer is always excluded (naturalism) and events attributed to natural causes.

Now our children are being taught colloquially that the apparent design in the Universe, our special place where everything is just right for life, is actually due to the fact that there are an infinite number of universes (multiverses) of which this one just happens to have the right conditions for life to appear.

'The multiverse can be viewed as the continuation , or perhaps the climax, of a series of great shifts that dislodged the Earth, then the sun, and then our own galaxy from a special position at the centre of physical reality. Now even our visible universe - once hailed as being simply and inexplicably there, to paraphrase Bertrand Russell- is coming to be viewed as but one arbitrary patch of space-time within a manifold of infinite volume.

Support for this scenario stems from the "unnaturalness" of the fine tuning that we observe in our surroundings' Joseph Silk 'Cosmic conundrums' p26 New Scientist 8th March 2014

Now in this statement they are worshipping, not just the sun but an infinite number of suns, as Creator because of the 'unnaturalness' of what actually confirms the Biblical Creator who spoke things into being over six twenty four hour days.

God revealed to Ezekiel that the wrong thinking about the sun ie learning from it and other suns (now) about how we came about without the need for God is the CORE OF IDOLATRY.

Historically this attitude to the Creator, the scepticism of unbelief to the revelation of God, began with Copernicus and Galileo. The exalting and learning from the created thing. This led to the Enlightenment with the move to establish long ages of the earth with its uniformity or naturalism of slow processes and the subsequent development of evolutionary theory for the origin of biological life. We now allow our children to accept this as true. Some of us might quibble with the evolution and possibly even the long ages, though very few. But almost no one has challenged the absolute core of secularism... the cosmology which displaced the earth from its observed place and made it move.

See <http://www.bposh.org> for the details.

All of the vile practises which God found detestable in verses 3 and 4 which led to the image which provoked jealousy were based on layers of idolatry on biological things first (crawling things) the geology (fertility of the earth) and lastly, but the worst of all, cosmology (the sun and moon and stars).

God gave his Revelation in the Scriptures to guide us in our thinking and how to interpret the things we discovered. When we explain away the scriptures and let the created thing teach us how to understand ourselves and how we came about we WORSHIP THAT THING.

Conclusion

These Idolatries which Ezekiel was shown have three main cores. Each was worse than the other. In our society and evangelical church today they go under the modern headings of historical biology, historical geology and cosmology.

The Church is full of idolatry. We are all guilty of this. We are at the cusp of persecution and judgement. We must repent, reject those who claim wisdom and authority in these areas, no matter how eloquent, and teach ourselves and our children the WORD OF GOD as truth where it touches these three topics.