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## Confronting Idolatry in Zephaniah 1:4-6 and in the Twenty-First Century

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The book of Zephaniah is Christian Scripture written “for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom 15:4). Preaching during the days of King Josiah’s spiritual reforms, the prophet Zephaniah opened his oracle strongly confronting idolatry, stressing how Yahweh would soon overturn “the stumbling blocks with the wicked” (Zeph 1:3)<sup>2</sup> and eradicate from Judah “the remnant of the Baal” (1:4). An idol is “an illegitimate object of worship,” and idolatry is a false or improper form of worship “involving reverential human acts of submission and homage before beings or objects in the place of the one true God.”<sup>3</sup> Yahweh had stressed: “There should never be to you other gods beside me. You should never make for yourself a graven image, any likeness that is in the heavens above or that is at the earth beneath or that is in the waters

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<sup>1</sup> [www.jasonderouchie.com](http://www.jasonderouchie.com).

<sup>2</sup> The “stumbling blocks” (ESV = “rubble”) likely refers to idols (cf. Ezek 7:19–20; 14:3–4), which God promises to collect along with the “wicked” who worship them (cf. Matt 13:41).

<sup>3</sup> Daniel I. Block, *For the Glory of God: Recovering a Biblical Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 29; cf. G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 17.

under the earth. You should never worship them or serve them” (Deut 5:7–9). Yet as Moses foresaw (4:25–26; 31:16–17), Israel secured their own punishment (8:19–20) by going after foreign gods in the land and following the customs of the nations (Judg 2:12; 2 Kgs 17:7–8). As Zephaniah stressed, the fate of the wicked in Judah would resemble the fate of the nations, because “against Yahweh they have sinned” (Zeph 1:17). This study seeks to carefully evaluate Zephaniah’s confrontation of Judah’s idolatry in 1:4–6 and then consider some lasting implications for Christians today. Before exegeting these verses, I will overview the literary context, structure, and form of all 1:2–6.

<sup>2</sup> I will surely gather everything from on the face of the ground—the utterance of Yahweh. <sup>3</sup> I will gather human and beast; I will gather the bird of the heavens and the fish of the sea and the stumbling blocks with the wicked. And I will cut off humanity from on the face of the ground—the utterance of Yahweh. <sup>4</sup> So, I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And I will cut off from this place the remnant of the Baal—the name of the illegitimate priests with the priests, <sup>5</sup> and those who bow down on the roofs to the host of the heavens, and those who bow down, who swear to Yahweh but swear by their king, <sup>6</sup> and those who turn away from Yahweh and who have neither sought Yahweh nor inquired of him. (Zeph 1:2–6, author’s translation)

### **The Literary Context, Structure, and Form of Zephaniah 1:2–6**

The prophet Zephaniah opens his oracle stressing that Yahweh commits to gather and punish the idolatrous peoples of the wider world in general (1:2–3) and of Judah and Jerusalem in particular (1:4–6). The unit in 1:2–6 provides the context for God’s call to revere him in view of his coming day of wrath (1:7–18). The Hebrew interjection חָשׁוּ (“Hush!”; 1:7a) marks this call. Together, 1:2–18 establishes the setting for the book’s main exhortations (2:1–3:20), which urge the remnant in Judah and other lands to pursue Yahweh in hope—seeking him together to avoid punishment and waiting for him to enjoy salvation.

The opening unit (1:2–6) announces Yahweh’s intent to punish the wicked based on a list of indictments.<sup>4</sup> The unit has two parts, distinguished by content and form. Concerning content, the discourse begins broadly with Yahweh announcing global punishment against the world’s rebels (1:2–3). The text’s focus then narrows, addressing the local punishment of Judah and Jerusalem’s rebels (1:4–6).<sup>5</sup> The repetition of the phrase “to cut off” (כרת) in 1:3c and 1:4b also signals an AB-A’B’ topical pattern within the unit, with both parts displaying a progression of two parallel divine actions:

Part 1: “Gathering” (1:2–3ab) → “cutting” (1:3c)

Part 2: “Stretching out” (1:4a) → “cutting” (1:4b)

Concerning form, the unit’s lack of syntactic connection with what precedes (i.e., the asyndeton at the head of 1:2) sets it apart from the introductory superscription in 1:1. Additionally, the exclamation “Hush!” (הִס) at the beginning of 1:7a sets off 1:2–6 from what follows. Furthermore, the oracular formula “the utterance of Yahweh” (נְאֻם־יְהוָה)<sup>6</sup> at the end of 1:2 reinforces the unit’s opening, and its repetition at the end of 1:3c climaxes and closes the first of the two parallel parts.<sup>7</sup>

Six first-person verbs all point to Yahweh as the main speaker in the unit. The initial three are *yiqtol*s (1:2–3ab), and the next three are *weqatal*s (1:3c–4b). Though God addresses himself in third-person in 1:5–6, he remains the primary speaker, for the prophet’s voice is shown primary only where third-person references to Yahweh occur in the

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<sup>4</sup> See Marvin A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39 with an Introduction to Prophetic Literature*, FOTL 16 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 529–31.

<sup>5</sup> The same shift from a global perspective to a focus on God’s people is seen in at least Amos 1:2–2:16 and Mic 1:2–16.

<sup>6</sup> Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 546.

<sup>7</sup> Ernst R. Wendland and David J. Clark, “Zephaniah: Anatomy and Physiology of a Dramatic Prophetic Text,” *JOTT* 16 (2003): 6. Floyd rightly notes that the oracular formulas in 1:2–3 do not distinguish oracular from non-oracular speech. Michael H. Floyd, *Minor Prophets, Part 2*, FOTL 22 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 191.

subject position (e.g., 1:7b; 2:11; 3:5, 15, 17).<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the oracular formula “the utterance of Yahweh” in 1:2, 3c reminds the reader that the entire message comes through Zephaniah,<sup>9</sup> who operates as the covenant ambassador heralding the message of the great King (1:1; cf. 1:15). Thus, the divine and human voices speak as one.<sup>10</sup>

The common *yiqtol* plus *weqatal* pattern in Zeph 1:2–6 marks the discourse as anticipatory.<sup>11</sup> Part one (1:2–3) marks the predictive context by an indicative *yiqtol* in non-first position (1:2) that announces Yahweh’s intent to gather everything for judicial assessment, adding emphasis at the end using the oracular formula. But before proclaiming the divine punishment in 1:3c, two asyndetic *yiqtol* clauses (1:3ab) explicate Yahweh’s gathering in 1:2. He gathers human and beast (1:3a) and then bird and fish and idols (1:3b). The *weqatal* in 1:3c then announces the consequence of the worldwide ingathering, building on the initial action stated in 1:2 and concluding part one with another use of the oracular formula.<sup>12</sup> After stating this global perspective, part two continues with two *weqatal* clauses detailing how God’s punishment against the world will also reach Jerusalem. In the first clause, God declares that he will extend his strong hand even against Judah (1:4a). In the second, he notes what this means: he will destroy every hint of Baal worship in the land (1:4b–6).

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<sup>8</sup> Wendland and Clark, “Zephaniah,” 6; contra Marvin A. Sweeney, *Zephaniah: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 56.

<sup>9</sup> So too Sweeney, *Zephaniah*, 56, 58.

<sup>10</sup> Thus, the prophet’s personality is implicitly acknowledged even when he speaks words as if from the very mouth of God.

<sup>11</sup> Duane A. Garrett and Jason S. DeRouchie, *A Modern Grammar for Biblical Hebrew* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2009), 312–14; Jason S. DeRouchie, *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017), 112.; cf. Robert E. Longacre, *Joseph—A Story of Divine Providence: A Text Theoretical and Textlinguistic Analysis of Genesis 37 and 39-48*, 2nd ed. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 105–10.

<sup>12</sup> Sweeney skews this unit’s structure by failing to see that (1) the asyndeton (i.e., lack of connection) at 1:3ab can signal explication, and (2) the *ṯ* (*waw*) of the *weqatal* in 1:3c connects to 1:2 rather than 1:3b. Sweeney, *Zephaniah*, 62.

This targeting of a holdout of Baal followers is the first in a complex collection of direct objects in 1:4–6. The definite direct object marker  $\text{־תָּא}$  fronts each object, but some object markers lack the Hebrew connector  $\text{וְ}$  (gloss “and”). When two or more adjacent noun phrases are linked by  $\text{וְ}$ , the phrases bear equal syntactic value and function (e.g., a compound subject or direct object). In contrast, the lack of connection (i.e., asyndeton) marks the second in apposition to the first.<sup>13</sup>

The above translation of 1:4–6 indicates that there is one primary direct object that Yahweh promises to “cut off”—“the remnant of the Baal,” which is signaled by the definite direct object marker ( $\text{־תָּא}$ ) in 1:4b. In the series of four more object markers that follow, the first is asyndetic, and then this is conjoined to the following three by the repeated connector “and” ( $\text{וְ}$ ). The resulting pattern is:

$\text{־תָּא} \text{וְ} \dots \text{־תָּא} \text{וְ} \dots \text{־תָּא} \text{וְ} \dots \text{־תָּא} \dots \text{־תָּא}$

The residue of Baal worship still in the land is defined by four different, though at times overlapping, groups: (1) various priests *and* (2) star worshipers *and* (3) syncretistic oath takers *and* (4) apostate rebels, including those who fail to pursue Yahweh in any way. Most translations skew this pattern by *adding* connection where it is not present and/or by *removing* connection where it is present, thus altering the prophet’s meaning. Of the translations consulted, Young’s Literal Translation (1898) alone represents the MT precisely, following this pattern:  $\emptyset \rightarrow \emptyset \rightarrow \text{and} \rightarrow \text{and} \rightarrow \text{and}$ . Every other version alters the meaning in one of five ways:

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<sup>13</sup> For an overview of the role of *waw* and asyndeton in the OT, see DeRouchie, *How to Understand*, 103–9.

MT	$\emptyset \rightarrow \emptyset \rightarrow waw \rightarrow waw \rightarrow waw$	A single direct object with four-part compound appositive (MT; cf. YLT [1898])
	<b>Pattern</b>	<b>Meaning (Versions)</b>
1.	$\emptyset \rightarrow \text{and} \rightarrow \text{and} \rightarrow \text{and} \rightarrow \text{and}$	A five-part compound direct object (LXX, Geneva Bible [1599], Douay-Rheims [1610], KJV [1611], Webster Bible [1833], RV [1885], ASV [1901], Bible in Basic English [1965], NASB [1995])
2.	$\emptyset \rightarrow \text{and} \rightarrow \emptyset \rightarrow \emptyset \rightarrow \emptyset$	A two-part compound direct object with three-part appositive in unlinked series (NRSV [1989], ESV [2001], CEB [2011])
3.	$\emptyset \rightarrow \emptyset : \rightarrow \emptyset \rightarrow \emptyset \rightarrow \emptyset$	A single direct object with a single appositive, which itself is clarified by a three-part appositive in unlinked series (NKJV [1982], WEB [1997], NIV [2011])
4.	$\emptyset \rightarrow \emptyset : \rightarrow \emptyset \rightarrow \emptyset \rightarrow \text{and}$	Same as #3 but with last member of three-part appositive conjoined (NETB [1996])
5.	$\emptyset \rightarrow \emptyset \rightarrow \emptyset \rightarrow \emptyset \rightarrow \text{and}$	Unclear, but potentially a single direct object with a four-part appositive with only the last member conjoined (CSB [2016])

Table 1. Translational Patterns in Zephaniah 1:4–6

Interpreters most commonly treat “the remnant of the Baal” and “the names of the illegitimate priests along with priests” as two *different* groups (e.g., LXX, KJV, NASB; NRSV, ESV, CEB). The prophet, however, views the latter as a subset of the former, one of three other clusters that shape the overarching residue of Baal-influence in Jerusalem. Others

rightly recognize that the various priests describe the Baal-followers, but then they view the star worshipers, syncretistic oath takers, and rebels as descriptive of the religious leaders (NKJV, NIV; NETB). Yet Baal's influence was far more pervasive than the priests, and Yahweh's indictment was against not only the cultic heads but also everyone who worships creation, lives hypocritically, or fails to depend wholly on Yahweh.

### **An Exposition of Zephaniah 1:4–6:**

#### **Local Punishment of the Rebels of Judah and Jerusalem**

Having declared how Yahweh was bringing punishment on the world's wicked populous at large, Zephaniah now stresses that God's special covenant people will not escape this global reprimand of Yahweh. Just as his worldwide "ingathering" will give rise to a global excision (Zeph 1:2–3), two conjoined *weqatal* clauses in 1:4ab tell us that the "stretching out" of his disciplining hand against Judah will equally result in his "cutting off" the idolaters from among his people. Yahweh's execution of wrath against Jerusalem in 1:4, 12 contrasts with his restoring and favoring her in 3:14, 16.

#### **Yahweh's Extension of His Hand against Judah and Jerusalem (1:4a)**

Yahweh will "stretch out" (הִטָּוֶה) his hand against his enemies from among his own people. Bailey notes that God's extended hand "symbolized omnipotent power (Jer 32:17) and God's sovereign direction of history (Isa 14:26–27; Jer 27:5)."<sup>14</sup> This imagery frequently occurs in contexts of divine retribution (Isa 5:25; Ezek 14:13),<sup>15</sup> and here God pledges to work against Judah in the same manner that he will work against the foreign nations (Zeph 2:13). At the exodus, God's outstretched hand was originally a gesture of destruction for Egypt and a "gesture of salvation" for Israel (Exod 3:20; 7:5; 9:15; cf. 15:6, 12), but

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<sup>14</sup> Waylon Bailey, "Zephaniah," in *Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, by Kenneth L. Barker and Waylon Bailey, NAC 20 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 417.

<sup>15</sup> See also Isa 23:11; Jer 51:25; Ezek 14:9; 16:27; 25:7, 13, 16; 35:3.



in this text it “is now one of judgment” for Judah.<sup>16</sup> “Judah” was all that remained under Israelite control after the Assyrians ransacked and exiled the northern kingdom in 723 BC. Nevertheless, in the century that followed leading up to Zephaniah’s ministry, Judah failed to learn from her sister’s fate and even grew worse. Thus, “the soul of backslider Israel is more righteous than traitor Judah” (Jer 3:11). The disposition of many of those associated with the capital city “Jerusalem” remained no different than their evil neighbors.

### **Yahweh’s Punishment of Remaining Paganism in Judah and Jerusalem (1:4b–6)**

#### ***The Declaration and Object of Punishment (1:4b)***

Thus, God promised to “cut off from this place the remnant of the Baal” (1:4b), reemploying the covenant excision language (כרת) used in 1:3c.<sup>17</sup> The term “place” (מקום) can designate a broad space (e.g., Jer 16:2–3, 9; 22:11–12). However, its regular association with the central sanctuary (Deut 12:5; 1 Kgs 8:29; Jer 27:22) suggests that part of what is at stake in bringing punishment on “Jerusalem” may be cultic purification.<sup>18</sup> Yahweh is holy, and Jerusalem was to stand as a beacon of his holiness to the world with both the center of Davidic kingdom and God’s temple in its midst (1 Kgs 11:13, 36; Jer 17:25). Yet, the sinful inhabitants increasingly contaminated the city. Such wickedness necessitated the death of the guilty (Lev 15:31) or the sacrifice of a substitute (17:11).<sup>19</sup> Prohibited, unaddressed uncleanness would result in God completely removing the people from the land (Lev 18:26–30; 20:22–24).

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<sup>16</sup> J. Alec Motyer, “Zephaniah,” in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 912.

<sup>17</sup> Ezekiel 14:13 and 25:13 use the language of the “outstretched hand” and “cutting off” to target humans and animals. Ehud Ben Zvi, *A Historical-Critical Study of the Book of Zephaniah*, BZAW 198 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991), 61.

<sup>18</sup> Sweeney, *Zephaniah*, 58, 66. Cf. Deut 12:3, 11, 21, 26; 1 Kgs 8:30, 35; 2 Chr 6:20, 21, 26; Ezek 42:13.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Heb 9:22.

Within Jerusalem, the object of God's wrath was "the remnant of the Baal" (שָׁאֵר הַבַּעַל). Because in Scripture, the terms for "remnant" never denote a deity, Zephaniah here likely refers to a subset and perhaps even a majority in Jerusalem's populace illegitimately worshipping this false god. This wicked "remnant," which Zephaniah describes with the masculine noun (שָׁאֵר), contrasts with the remnant of the faithful and humble that Zephaniah will refer to with the feminine noun (שְׁאֵרִית) and that Yahweh will preserve in his impending ordeal (Zeph 2:7, 9; 3:13).

"Baal" (בַּעַל) in Hebrew bears a common meaning of "lord, owner" and as such frequently developed into a title and then a proper name for gods.<sup>20</sup> It is associated even with Yahweh (2 Sam 5:20), but its common connection with "Baal"-Hadad, the false Canaanite/Aramean deity of storm and fertility, pushed Hosea to prohibit any association of the term "Baal" with Yahweh (Hos 2:16–17[18–19]; cf. 1 Kgs 18:21) for it too often led to insidious syncretism.<sup>21</sup> The storm god, Baal, provided the most enduring threat to exclusive Yahweh worship in Israel, especially because the Levant was so dependent on rain (see 1 Kgs 17–18).<sup>22</sup> The Bible consistently adds the definite article before "Baal" (e.g., הַבַּעַל), but extra-biblical discoveries from Ras Shamra and elsewhere clearly use Baal as a proper name, so most scholars today affirm that "*ba'al* with the article belongs to the category of common nouns and adjectives which can be regarded as proper names when referring to a specific individual."<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, it is also possible that the definite article points to a specific physical idol of Baal (i.e., *the* Baal-idol) in Jerusalem that the Judeans worshiped.

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<sup>20</sup> J. C. de Moor and M. J. Mulder, "בַּעַל *ba'al*," *TDOT* 2:184; cf. 186.

<sup>21</sup> J. J. M. Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 172.

<sup>22</sup> The text may also suggest Mesopotamian influence on the Jerusalem cult, because Assyria was the major superpower of the day (see Zeph 2:12–15) and also had a deity named *bēl* (= Baal) (Baker, *Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah*, 93). For more on this topic, see Johannes Vlaardingerbroek, *Zephaniah*, Historical Commentary on the Old Testament (Leuven: Peeters, 1999), 70–72.

<sup>23</sup> de Moor and Mulder, "בַּעַל (*ba'al*)," *TDOT* 2:192.

The statement “the remnant of the Baal” in Zeph 1:4 means not a part of Baal proper but rather a holdout of the cult of Baal as a group. Trusting counterfeit gods like Baal for help was always evil in Yahweh’s sight (see Deut 5:7; Judg 3:7). Such folly brought destruction to the northern kingdom (2 Kgs 17:16–18), and the same activity during the reigns of Manasseh and Amon (22:3, 21) rendered Judah’s destruction imminent (21:11–15; cf. 23:26–27; 24:3–4). That a hold-out of such paganism and apostasy continued in Zephaniah’s day was deeply concerning, especially because it reached all the way up to the religious and political leadership (Zeph 1:4; 3:3–4; cf. Jer 11:13). God would act, eradicating Baalism not only from Israel but from the entire world (cf. 2 Kgs 10:28).

### ***The Composition of the Object of Punishment (1:4b–6)***

English translations differ in their view of the number of groups that receive judgment. My earlier discussion of the structure argued that “the remnant of the Baal” included four groups:

1. Legitimate and illegitimate clergy practicing idolatry (1:4)
2. Those revering the stars as gods (i.e., star-worshippers, 1:5)
3. Those paying lip-service to Yahweh but retaining in practice other higher authorities (i.e., syncretistic hypocrites, 1:5)
4. Those going their own way and failing to pray for guidance and help (i.e., the self-ruled and self-dependent, 1:6).

Among “the remnant of the Baal,” the *first* group Zephaniah lists as God’s target is “the name of the illegitimate priests along with the priests” (Zeph 1:4). Israelite “priests” (כֹּהֲנִים) of Yahweh were supposed to be Levites who taught God’s Torah, guarded knowledge, and preserved what was holy (Lev 10:10–11), but some in Zephaniah’s day were corrupt, having “treated Torah violently” (Zeph 3:4; cf. Ezek 22:26; Mal 2:7–9). They were also serving in Jerusalem alongside the כֹּהֲנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (rendered “illegitimate priests”), a term occurring only twice elsewhere in the OT (2 Kgs 23:5; Hos 10:5) but which appears to connote the non-Levitical clerics that Jeroboam I and later kings ordained to serve at the unlawful

high places throughout the land (1 Kgs 12:31–32 and 13:33–34 with 2 Kgs 23:5).<sup>24</sup>

כֹּהֵן is a loanword in biblical Hebrew and served as the most common term for “priest” outside Israel.<sup>25</sup> The biblical authors do not hesitate to apply the term כֹּהֵן to priests of other regions like Egypt (Gen 47:22), Midian (Exod 2:16), and Philistia (1 Sam 6:2) and to priests of foreign gods like Dagon (1 Sam 5:5), Baal (2 Kgs 11:18), Chemosh (Jer 48:7), and Milcom (Jer 49:3). Therefore, Zephaniah’s use of כֹּהֲמִים is probably a rhetorical jab aimed at illegitimate Israelite priests and not a description of foreigners serving as priests or Judean priests engaged in illegitimate worship.<sup>26</sup> This is strengthened by the explicit inner-biblical link in Kings

<sup>24</sup> Cf. 2 Kgs 17:32; 2 Chr 10:13–15; 13:9. So too C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 10 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), s.v. “2 Kgs 23:5.”; cf. Ben Zvi, *The Book of Zephaniah*, 68.

<sup>25</sup> See HALOT, s.v. “כֹּהֵן”; P. Jenson, “כֹּהֵן (*kōmer*),” *NIDOTTE* 2:654–55. The root meaning of כֹּהֵן is associated either (1) with rising heat (כָּמַר in the Niphal, of emotions: Gen 43:40; 1 Kgs 3:26; Hos 4:8; or of skin, Lam 5:10) that can result in darkness (cf. כֹּהֵן in Job 3:5; also Sir 11:4) or (2) with a trap/snare (cf. כֹּהֵן in Ps 141:10; Isa 51:20; מִכְּמָרָת in Isa 19:8; Hab 1:16; cf. 1QHod 3:26; 5:8). Both images aptly fit spiritual deceivers.

<sup>26</sup> Sweeney posits that the כֹּהֲמִים in Zeph 1:4b were Judean priests of Yahweh engaged in illegitimate Yahwistic worship, His view, however, does not distinguish this group from the כֹּהֲנִים “with” (עִם) whom the כֹּהֲמִים are associated and who are clearly legitimate (though idolatrous) priests equally included in “the remnant of the Baal.” Sweeney, *Zephaniah*, 68. Cogan and Tadmor, following fifth-century BC Aramaic Jewish Elephantine papyri, prefer the idea that the כֹּהֲמִים in Scripture were actually non-native priests designated to certain pagan deities, whereas the כֹּהֲנִים were Israelite priests. Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 11 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 285; cf. Jenson, “כֹּהֵן [*kōmer*],” *NIDOTTE* 2:654–55. In contrast, the explicit inner-biblical link in Kings between Jeroboam’s appointment of illegitimate priests (1 Kgs 12:31–32; 13:33–34) and the unnamed seer’s prophecy that a king named Josiah would burn the bones of those Jeroboam ordained (13:2 with 2 Kgs 23:15–16, 20) suggests that the כֹּהֲמִים were indeed not foreigners but non-Levitical Israelites serving as priests. Furthermore, the sly nature of oath taking (see the discussion

between Jeroboam's appointment of illegitimate priests (1 Kgs 12:31–32; 13:33–34) and the unnamed seer's prophecy that a king named Josiah would burn the bones of those Jeroboam ordained (13:2 with 2 Kgs 23:15–16, 20).

While not fully eradicated at the time of Zephaniah's oracle, King Josiah's ongoing religious reforms would cleanse the land of all the idolatrous priests, whether illegitimate or legitimate in biological heritage (2 Kgs 23:5, 8–9, 20).<sup>27</sup> The fact that their "name" is "cut off" not only points to complete annihilation but also suggests that a core problem among the cult leaders was concern for their own renown rather than for God's (see Gen 11:4 vs. 4:26). In the future, God would grant his restored remnant a great and everlasting name that would ultimately point to his great renown and glory (Zeph 3:19–20; cf. Isa 56:4–5).

*Second*, alongside the religious leadership in the remnant of the Baal (1:4) are the star-worshippers (1:5). The phrase "the host of the heavens" (צְבָא הַשָּׁמַיִם) can refer to the spiritual armies of Yahweh (e.g., 1 Kgs 22:19; cf. 1 Sam 17:45; Isa 13:4), but more commonly, as here, it denotes the stars, perceived as divine beings (cf. Amos 5:26; Acts 7:42–43).<sup>28</sup> The Hishtaphel of 2-חֹהֶה means "to prostrate, bow down" and always expresses an action or attitude directed toward a superior, be it human or divine.<sup>29</sup> Normally the word expresses an external gesture of greeting, respect, submission, or worship aligned with an inner attitude, though hypocrisy was possible; other times, it simply expresses one's disposition (e.g., a posture of prayer with hands outstretched) and does not require

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at Zeph 1:5) suggests that idolatry in Jerusalem during the days of Josiah was likely *not* so forthright as to have actual foreign priests of Milcom from Bene-Ammon or Baal from Canaan serving at the Jerusalem temple.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. 2 Chr 34:5; Jer 48:7; 49:3.

<sup>28</sup> "The queen of the heavens" (מַלְכֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם) cult is probably associated with this same problem (Jer 7:18; 44:15–25; cf. 8:2; 19:13; Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 172). In the days of Assyrian supremacy this type of Israelite idolatry appears most prevalent, both in the north (e.g., Amos 5:26) and in the south—especially during the reigns of Manasseh and Amon (2 Kgs 21:3, 5, 21) and into the time of Josiah (23:5, 12). Israel's practices directly violated Moses's instruction (Deut 4:19; 17:3).

<sup>29</sup> HALOT, s.v. "חֹהֶה-2."

prostration.<sup>30</sup> In Israel, only Yahweh was to receive such worship (Deut 4:19; 5:9; 26:10), and the penalty for worship of other gods was death (8:19; 11:16).

Like the ancients of Babel, who built a high temple to gain easier access to the gods (Gen 11:4), some in Zephaniah's audience were climbing to their roofs to worship the astral bodies (cf. Jer 19:13; 32:29).<sup>31</sup> The Canaanite god Baal was regularly associated with "the heavens," so worshiping luminaries was natural.<sup>32</sup> The plural "roofs" (תּוֹרֹת) suggests private worship,<sup>33</sup> and because the homage was to the stars, the acts were done at night in secrecy. And since many ancients believed that the most powerful gods slept in the evening, these would also be times of desperation.<sup>34</sup> Yahweh never sleeps (Ps 121:4), and he apportioned the sun, moon, and stars "to all the peoples under all the heavens" not as legitimate objects of worship (Deut 4:19; cf. 17:3; Jer 44:25–27) but as providential signs (Gen 1:14) and to point to the certainty of his kingdom promises (Gen 15:5; Jer 33:22) and power (Neh 9:6; Ps 8:3–4[4–5]; Isa 40:25–26).<sup>35</sup> Punishment had already fallen on the

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<sup>30</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, "תּוֹרֹת (*hāwâ* II)," *NIDOTTE* 2:43.

<sup>31</sup> Holladay believes Jer 19:13 is directly dependent on Zeph 1:5. See William L. Holladay, "Reading Zephaniah with a Concordance: Suggestions for a Redaction History," *JBL* 120 (2001): 673.

<sup>32</sup> Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 7–8; cf. Richard D. Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah: An Exegetical Commentary*, *Minor Prophets Exegetical Commentary* (Dallas: Biblical Studies Press, 2003), 273.

<sup>33</sup> Vlaardingerbroek, *Zephaniah*, 75.

<sup>34</sup> The Old Babylonian "Prayer to the Gods of the Night" portrays a petitioner calling upon the constellations to witness his act of homage and guarantee his petitions. He believes the stars are lesser gods, but he is also convinced that the great gods who ordinarily control world affairs sleep in the evening. Though the text is dated to around a thousand years before Zephaniah, it represents a typical worldview among the ancients. See *ANET*, 390–91.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. 1 Kgs 22:19; Job 38:31; 147:4; Isa 45:12; Amos 5:8. Daniel I. Block, *Deuteronomy*, *NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 130. This view of God's purpose for the luminaries runs counter to how

northern kingdom for venerating the creation as if it were divine (2 Kgs 17:16), and now Yahweh declares comparable punishment on the south due to their sustained idolatry (cf. 2 Kgs 21:3, 5–6, 21; Jer 19:13). And when this chastisement came, the Judean rebels would not be gathered or buried but would be spread out like dung under the very luminaries they once revered (Jer 8:2).<sup>36</sup> King Josiah's reforms included the destruction of at least one roof-altar designated for astral worship, along with others that Manasseh had set up in the temple-courts (2 Kgs 23:12; cf. 21:5).

The *third* subset of Baal followers are the syncretistic hypocrites—"those who bow down, who swear to Yahweh but swear by their king" (Zeph 1:5).<sup>37</sup> The prophet clearly asserts that Jerusalem's Baal worship included a form of syncretism that combined devotion to Yahweh with that of another. While the MT renders the second party מְלִכָּם, "their king," some find it more satisfying contextually to revocalize the MT as מִלְכָּם ("Milcom"),<sup>38</sup> and others leave the MT form as מְלִכָּם but see it either

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astrologers seek to discern the future or a god's will in the present. Yahweh mocks such acts (see Isa 47:13; Jer 10:1–3; cf. Dan 2:27; 5:7–12) and condemns all forms of divination or omens (Lev 19:26; Deut 18:10; cf. *B.Sanh.* 65b–66a).

<sup>36</sup>King Josiah sought to eradicate star-worship (2 Kgs 23:5, 12), but it apparently returned quickly in subsequent generations (cf. Jer 7:18; 8:2; 19:13; 44:17–25; Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 172).

<sup>37</sup> Some scholars question the originality of the repeated substantival participle הַמִּשְׁתַּחֲוִים ("those who bow down") due to an alleged syntactic awkwardness with the asyndetic substantival participle that follows and due to the fact that the LXX does not include the phrase. E.g., Knud Jeppesen, "Zephaniah I 5B," *VT* 31.1 (1981): 372–73; Sweeney, *Zephaniah*, 70. The repetition could simply be dittographic (accidental scribal repetition of the same word due to the similar beginnings of the two phrases with אֶת-הַמִּשְׁתַּחֲוִים). Nevertheless, the MT is readable, and such a structure is known elsewhere in biblical Hebrew—even in Zephaniah (Zeph 1:12c; cf. Jer 23:2; Song 3:3; 5:7). GKC, §§120g–h; 154a n.1. See also 1 Kgs 14:17//2 Chr 12:10 and Ball Jr., *A Rhetorical Study of Zephaniah*, 26–30. The lack of the phrase in the Greek text may only arise from carelessness or deliberate abbreviation.

<sup>38</sup> The national god of Bene-Ammon (1 Kgs 11:5, 33; 2 Kgs 23:13). See Douay-Rheims, NASB, NRSV, NKJV, ESV, CEB, CSB. Bene-Ammon is the full proper

as a variant spelling or at least a reference to “Milcom” (Jer 39:1, 3)<sup>39</sup> or “the Molech-god” (מֹלֶךְ; see Lev 18:21; 2 Kgs 23:10; Jer 32:35).<sup>40</sup> Israel’s historians and Jeremiah appear to apply the title “king” to Milcom (2 Sam 12:30//1 Chr 2:20; Jer 49:1, 3), and Josiah’s reformation did explicitly confront “Milcom” worship (2 Kgs 23:13). However, because the king’s reforms also targeted Ashteroth of the Sidonians and Chemosh of the Moabites (23:13), it is difficult to know why Zephaniah would have narrowed his focus here on Milcom. Furthermore, the text addresses the remnant of the *Baal*, not Milcom (Zeph 1:4), therefore it is best to read the second party as מֶלֶךְם, “their king,”

In view of the parallel with “Yahweh” in the clause of Zeph 1:5, “their king” was probably an epithet for a divine rather than human being (i.e., “Baal” of 1:4).<sup>41</sup> At least five lines of evidence support this conclusion. (1) Berlin rightly notes that swearing *by* a human “king” or any other human personage is otherwise unknown in Scripture (though it does occur in

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name of Israel’s “cousins” to the east, who are commonly called the Ammonites. For more, see Daniel I. Block, “*bny ’mwn*: The Sons of Ammon,” *AUSS* 22.2 (1984): 197–212.

<sup>39</sup> See Geneva, Bishop’s, KJV, Darby, Young’s Literal, Webster, RV, ASV, WEB.

<sup>40</sup> See NLT, NIV. “The Molech-god” is a Canaanite deity some have questionably proposed is only a local manifestation of Milcom (1 Kgs 11:5, 7). Significantly, the title “Molech” usually includes the definite article in the OT (= מֹלֶךְ הַ, “the Molech-god”), and the spelling is likely a derogatory form of מֶלֶךְ (“king”), using the vowels of “shame” (בִּשְׁתָּ). See *HALOT*, s.v. “מֶלֶךְ”; Judith M. Hadley, “מֹלֶךְ (*mōlek*),” *NIDOTTE* 2:956. Molech was likely “a netherworld deity to whom children were offered by fire for some divinatory purpose.” Heider, “Molech,” *DDD* 585.

<sup>41</sup> So too C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, “Zephaniah,” in *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, vol. 10 of *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 128; Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 275; contrast Nicholas R. Werse, “Of Gods and Kings: The Case for Reading ‘Milcom’ in Zephaniah 1:5bβ,” *VT* 68.3 (2018): 505–13. The Targum on the Prophets renders the phrase וַיִּמְנוּ בְּשֵׁמוֹת פְּתוּכֵיהוֹן (“and those who swear by the name of their idols”). For similar applications of the title “king” to foreign deities, see Job 18:14; Hos 10:7; Amos 5:26.



extra-biblical texts and perhaps is anticipated in some biblical texts).<sup>42</sup> (2) Unlike his two royal predecessors, Josiah, as leader of the reform movement, “turned to Yahweh with all his heart and with all his being and with all his substance” (2 Kgs 23:25). He would not have affirmed or received such veneration. (3) The ancients outside the Bible regularly applied the title “king” to deities,<sup>43</sup> God uses the term to refer to Leviathan (Job 41:34[26]), both Amos and Isaiah may refer to a foreign god with it (Isa 57:9; Amos 5:26), and Jeremiah applies it to Milcom (Jer 49:1, 3).<sup>44</sup> (4) Scripture frequently designates Yahweh as “king,” and Zephaniah does so with the title “Israel’s King” (מֶלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל) in Zeph 3:15 (cf. Isa 44:6). Yahweh is “the great King above all gods” (Ps 95:3), but for the logic in Zeph 1:5 to work, the “king” must be some figure other than Yahweh. (5) When Zephaniah later stresses that Yahweh and no other is Israel’s sovereign, saving, and satisfying “King” (Zeph 3:15), he is most likely intentionally confronting the common use of the title מְלִכָם (“their king”) from 1:5 as applied to Baal or any host of other competing deities over which he bore authority.<sup>45</sup> From the perspective of the prophet, the *gods* of the nations were the source of the problem, and destroying them would result in the undoing of every earthly rebellion (2:11).

Significantly, the remnant of the Baal made oaths “to” (לְ) Yahweh but did so “by” (בְּ = under the highest authority of) “their king.”<sup>46</sup> The former action involves a vow or promise to a given party, whereas the latter action invokes the power of a higher authority to witness the vow and to

<sup>42</sup> See Exod 22:27; 1 Sam 17:55; 1 Kgs 21:10; Isa 8:21. Berlin, *Zephaniah*, 76.

<sup>43</sup> Philip J. Nel, “מֶלֶךְ (*mālak* I),” *NIDOTTE* 2:951.

<sup>44</sup> The reference to the Ammonite king in 2 Sam 12:30 // 1 Chr 20:2 may refer to the same if the LXX is followed.

<sup>45</sup> Ben Zvi helpfully compares the use of “their king” (מְלִכָם) in Zeph 1:5 to the use of “your God” (אֱלֹהֵיךָ) in Jer 2:28. Ben Zvi, *The Book of Zephaniah*, 77).

<sup>46</sup> The LXX misses the change in preposition, and the Targums, Peshitta, and Vulgate do something similar. Some English versions express the distinction (e.g., the RV, Darby, Young’s Literal, ASV, NRSV, NASB, ESV). Vlaardingerbroek proposes that the prophet is intentionally confronting a certain form of oath-taking that allowed the inhabitants of Jerusalem to invoke inconspicuously the authority of other gods under the title “king” while still sounding like they were remaining faithful to Yahweh. Vlaardingerbroek, *Zephaniah*, 40–41, 70.

hold one accountable, thus guaranteeing the promise.<sup>47</sup> When humans invoke a deity as witness to an oath, they treat the deity as a chief authority and place themselves under the potential judgment of that god (see 1 Sam 28:10; 1 Kgs 1:29–30 where the whole oath formula is present).<sup>48</sup> Those who swear “by Yahweh” in an honorable way can rejoice (Ps 63:11[12]), but those who swear “by Yahweh” and then pursue ungodliness profane God’s name (Lev 19:12) and place themselves under covenant curse. Moses directed Israel to swear only *by* Yahweh (Deut 6:13; 10:20), and Joshua charged them never to swear *by* the false gods of the nations (Josh 23:7; cf. Deut 32:21). Nevertheless, the people of Judah were underhandedly doing just this, outwardly affirming Yahweh as Israel’s national god while inwardly expressing higher allegiance to the Baal and the numerous other deities over which he exercised authority (see also Jer 5:7). Zephaniah’s preaching and Josiah’s reform sought to end it (e.g., 2 Kgs 23:6, 10, 12–15, 24; cf. Zeph 2:11 with 1:18 and 3:8).<sup>49</sup> The fourth group aligned with the remnant of the Baal are the self-ruled, self-dependent, who outrightly reject Yahweh (Zeph 1:6). To “turn back” (Niphal of 1-סוג) from Yahweh always depicts covenant disloyalty (e.g., Pss 44:18[19]; 78:56–57; Isa 59:12–13). The nature of this apostasy is then defined negatively by the subsequent *waw* plus relative clause (וְאִשֶּׁר). Specifically, the rebellion was manifest through failure to “seek” (Piel בקש) and “inquire” (דרש). These verbs often act as synonyms and denote reliance on God through prayerful repentance, request for help, or worship (e.g., Deut 4:29; Ps 105:3–4; Jer 29:13).<sup>50</sup> The terms can also refer to the dependent pursuit of knowing God’s will or word (1 Kgs 22:5; Amos 8:12). While the two verbs have overlapping semantic ranges,

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. similar preposition shifts in Josh 2:12; 9:18; 1 Sam 24:21; 28:10; 1 Kgs 1:17, 30; 2:8.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Matt 23:16–22.

<sup>49</sup> For more on Yahweh’s exclusivity, see Exod 34:14; Deut 4:35, 39; 5:7; 6:4; 1 Sam 2:2; 2 Sam 22:32; Isa 45:5, 18, 22; 46:9.

<sup>50</sup> Chhetri suggests that, “when used together, *bqš* denotes seeking in a general sense while *drš* denotes inquiring of God with a view to repentance. Chitra Chhetri, “בְּקֶשׁ [bāqāš],” *NIDOTTE* 1:725. For a comparable synonymous use of בקש and דרש, see 1QS 5:11.

Vlaardingerbroek notes that, when Yahweh is the object, **בַּקֵּשׁ** more commonly means “to pray,” whereas **דַּרַשׁ** usually means “to inquire” via an oracle or recognized Scripture.<sup>51</sup> The rebels, therefore, would be those who reject prayer and God’s word in their daily approach to life, and turning from Baal would require acceptance of both. In Zeph 2:3, a quest for “righteousness” and “humility” before God explicate the call for all the faithful remnant to “seek [בַּקֵּשׁוּ] Yahweh.” Only pursuing God in this way will allow one to avoid divine punishment and to experience lasting joy. Practical atheism, in which God is irrelevant for daily living, can only result in destruction.

### **Confronting the Attractions of Idolatry Then and Now**

While not recognized by many, the idolatry that Zephaniah confronted remains pervasive in our world today. Certainly it is present in the fashioned idols of Hinduism, but it also appears in the more sophisticated practical atheism, materialism, and superstar veneration of the West. Paul charged those in Corinth professing allegiance to Christ, “Do not be idolaters” (1 Cor 10:7), and he warned them not to think “idolaters ... will inherit the kingdom of God” (6:9–10).

What made and makes idolatry so attractive?<sup>52</sup> At least seven features clarify why this false and dangerous worldview entices so many.

1. *Guaranteed*. Do you ever pray and feel that God is not there? Are you ever tempted to hope in more tangible things like people (Pss 118:9; 146:3) or money (49:5–6; 1 Tim 6:17)? An idol was a visible, physical representation that was considered to transmit the presence of a deity. Yet the one true God declared that idols are controlled by demons and that such gods are worthless nothings, being made of mere wood and holding no ultimate power (Deut 32:17).<sup>53</sup> Accordingly, God made the luminaries not for objects of worship but

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<sup>51</sup> Vlaardingerbroek, *Zephaniah*, 77.

<sup>52</sup> Stuart originally listed nine attractions, which I have here adapted and developed. See Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, NAC 2 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 450–54.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Isa 41:24, 29; 44:14–20; Jer 10:14–15; 1 Cor 8:4; 10:19–20.

as pointers to his providence (4:19; cf. Gen 1:14). Yahweh is spirit and is incomparable to anything he has made (Deut 4:12, 15–19; Isa 40:18–26; John 4:24). He created and creates all things and therefore knows all, guides all, and is present and active in all (Gen 1:1; Isa 45:7; Dan 2:21; Heb 1:3; Acts 17:24–28).<sup>54</sup> He alone can save and will work for those who wait for him (Isa 40:30–31; 43:11; 45:21; 64:4; cf. Rom 8:31–32).

2. *Works-oriented and covetous.* Are you ever prone toward self-righteousness or tempted with materialism? By offering food sacrifices to an idol, people believed they obligated the god to multiply their crops, fertility, cattle, etc. Paul called covetousness idolatry (Eph 5:5; Col 3:5), and this is because idolatrous “worship” is at its core a pursuit of prosperity or health as an earned wage for works done (Hos 2:12; 9:1; Mic 1:7; Rom 4:4). In contrast, true worship excludes self-exalting boasts (Jer 9:23–24; Rom 3:27; 1 Cor 4:7)<sup>55</sup> and considers God to be the supreme treasure of reality who alone is worthy of worship (Matt 13:44–46; Rev 4:11). Idolatry is of no true profit (Jer 2:11–13; Isa 44:9; Rom 1:22–23), for false gods (Jer 10:11) and all earthly goods (Matt 6:19–20) will pass away. Furthermore, true life is found in God alone by faith in Christ (John 6:35; Eph 2:8–9), who calls us to renounce things of this world (Phil 3:7–8; Heb 12:1–2) and to pursue godliness with contentment (1 Tim 6:6).

3. *Easy.* Do you ever find it easier to please men rather than God or to love yourself over others? Idolatry called for frequent and generous outward sacrifices yet did not demand a true love for God or neighbor. It was not tied to covenantal obligations, as is clear in the way many in Judah remained prayerless, oppressed the weak, failed to heed God’s word, and lived in self-reliance (Zeph 1:6; 3:1–2). It was the easy way, but it led to destruction (Matt 7:13–14). Zephaniah would call his listeners to seek Yahweh in righteousness and humility and to wait

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<sup>54</sup> Cf. Exod 4:11; Deut 32:39; 1 Sam 2:6–8; Jer 10:11–13; Isa 42:5; 44:24; 46:9–10; 48:12–13; Rom 11:36; Eph 1:11; 4:6; Col 1:16; Heb 1:3.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Rom 4:2; Eph 2:9; Jas 4:16.

upon the only true God to act (Zeph 2:3; 3:8). Christ modeled a life of service and sacrifice to others (Matt 20:28; Phil 2:8) and urged radical love for God and neighbor (Matt 22:37–40) that requires self-denial and service (16:24; 20:26–27) and persevering surrender to God and his ways (Josh 24:15; 1 Kgs 18:21; 1 Cor 10:31). Jesus’s followers must “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matt 6:33). This kind of lifestyle is not just hard; it is impossible (Rom 8:7; 1 Cor 2:14), apart from the gracious work of God through Christ by his Spirit (Matt 19:26; Phil 2:12–13).<sup>56</sup>

4. *Convenient*. Do you ever find that following God gets in the way of your own agenda? While frequent and generous offerings were expected, such “worship” of idols could be performed whenever and wherever one so chose—“on every hill and under every green tree” (1 Kgs 14:23; 2 Kgs 17:10). But true worship of Yahweh demanded that Israel value Yahweh over self, regardless of the cost. They were to destroy pagan shrines and gather three times annually for community worship at his central sanctuary (Deut 12:2–14; cf. 16:16). They were to aid rather than ignore a neighbor suffering loss or an accident (22:1–4), and they needed to ensure that they abided by the other detailed prescriptions of the sacred calendar and covenant instructions. They were not their own; they had been bought with a price (cf. 1 Cor 6:20; 7:23). Today, holy, pleasing, and acceptable worship is found when we continually present ourselves spiritually as living sacrifices, proclaiming God’s excellencies, abstaining from fleshly passions, living honorably, doing good, and sharing what we have (Rom 12:1; Heb 13:15–16; 1 Pet 2:5, 9, 11–12). At times, this requires great cost through toil and hardship for the good others (Luke 14:26–28; 2 Cor 12:10), and this God-dependent and God-exalting lifestyle is not always convenient. Nevertheless, it is right, good, and necessary and the only path to life (Matt 16:24–25).

5. *Normal*. Are you ever prone to follow the crowd and give in to peer pressure, even when you know the majority is wrong? Idolatry was *the*

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<sup>56</sup> Cf. Ezek 36:26–27; 1 Cor 15:10; Col 1:28–29.

normal way of life in the ancient world and stood in direct contrast to the counter-cultural biblical view there was a single God over all, who redeemed a people for relationship (Deut 4:32–40). Three features characterized most ancient idolatry: (1) *polytheism* (many gods) (2 Kgs 17:16; Zeph 1:4); (2) *syncretism* (blending worldviews) (2 Kgs 17:33; Zeph 1:5); (3) *pantheism* (God and the universe are one) (Jer 8:2; Zeph 1:5). Yet what the culture declares as normal is often not right, for “many walk as enemies of the cross of Christ” (Phil 3:18; cf. Matt 7:13–14) and most people are spiritually dead, following the devil and unable to accept God’s ways (Rom 8:7; 1 Cor 2:14; Eph 2:1–3). Contrary to *polytheism*, Christians must affirm in word and deed “‘that an idol is nothing in the world,’ and that ‘there is no God but one’”—indeed, “one God, the Father, ... and one Lord, Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 8:4, 6; cf. Deut 32:39; Isa 45:21–22). Against *syncretism*, “no one can serve two masters” (Matt 6:24). One is either free from condemnation and empowered by God’s Spirit to obey as a child of God or he is condemned and living according to the flesh as a child of the devil (John 3:18; Rom 8:13; 1 John 3:10). Finally, in contrast to *pantheism*, Yahweh God is eternally and wholly distinct from his creation yet sovereign over it (Gen 1:1; Isa 45:7; Heb 1:3; Acts 17:24–28), and humans uniquely bear the capacity and calling to display God’s glory as those made in his image (Gen 1:26–28; Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18; Col 3:10).

6. *Logical*. When you are sick, would you rather see a specialist or a general practitioner? Ancient peoples believed that most gods of the nations specialized in aspects of the world or nature.<sup>57</sup> For example,

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<sup>57</sup> They also distinguished personal, family, and national gods, the latter of whom bore limited geographical sovereignty (see 1 Kgs 20:23, 28; 2 Kgs 5:15, 17; Jon 1:3). While all Israelites would have affirmed Yahweh as their national god (because he created the nation and redeemed them from Egypt), many did not hesitate to pay homage to other deities in family or personal worship. Zephaniah, thus, pointed to those who “swear to Yahweh but by their king [e.g., Baal]” (Zeph 1:5). On the three categories of gods, see H. A. Frankfort, John A. Wilson, and Thorkild Jacobsen, *Before Philosophy: The Intellectual Adventure of*

Baal of Canaan was the young weather god (Judg 2:11, 13); Ashtoreth his consort, the mother goddess of love and fertility (2:13); Chemosh of Moab, the god of war (11:24); and Dagon of Philistia, the god of grain (16:23). Other gods controlled life, death, light, evil, water, etc. Such specialization made it logical for people to seek “expert” help rather than go to Yahweh, who had to manage all spheres of life. In our day, you may find it easier to act without prayer, to look to “the experts” over God’s Word, or to follow the culture’s priorities and scheduling patterns instead of God’s values and instructions. Yet Yahweh alone sits on the throne of the universe (Deut 4:35, 39; 32:39), and he called his people to let this truth inform all their lives (5:7; 6:4–5). From him, through him, and to him are *all* things (Rom 11:36; cf. Eph 1:11). While knowing God’s eternal power and divine nature, humans quickly suppress the truth, dishonoring God, not giving him thanks, and even approving of others who turn from him (Rom 1:18–21, 32). Exchanging the glory of God for idols (1:23), they are darkened (Eph 4:17–18) and “stupid,” becoming “worthless” like what they worship (Jer 10:14–15; cf. 2 Kgs 17:15; Jer 2:5; Ps 115:8). “This world’s wisdom is folly with God” (1 Cor 3:19), promoting “confusion and every base practice,” whereas God’s wisdom “is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, sincere” (Jas 3:16–17).

7. *Sensuous*. How often are you ever tempted to turn away from God to satisfy ungodly desires? Sexual immorality and impurity of all sorts abounds all around us, and to embrace such practices in any way is to engage in idolatry. Focused on what is earthly, idolatry gratifies the physical senses and fleshly desires. In Scripture, it included bowing down and kissing idols (1 Kgs 19:18), visual (often pornographic)

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*Ancient Man: An Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East*, Pelican Books A198 (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1951), 22, 87, 107, 123, 128–29, 218–33; Karel van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria, and Israel: Continuity and Change in the Forms of Religious Life*, SHCANE 7 (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

images and smells (Ezek 8:10–12),<sup>58</sup> cutting the body, loud cries, and weeping (1 Kgs 18:28; Ezek 8:14), heavy feasting and drunkenness (Amos 2:8; Acts 15:20–21; 21:25; 1 Cor 8:4–13); and immoral sex (see the close association in Acts 15:20; Eph 5:5; Col 3:5). Some even thought engaging in temple prostitution would obligate the gods to generate fertility on earth (e.g., Amos 2:7–8; Mic 1:7). Yet in Zephaniah’s day, King Josiah destroyed the houses of “the male cult prostitutes who were in Yahweh’s house [i.e., the temple]” (2 Kgs 23:7).<sup>59</sup> Such was the proper response, since Moses forbade cult prostitution (Deut 23:17) and Yahweh declares such idolatrous acts “abominations” against which he “will act in wrath” (Ezek 8:17–18). Similarly, Paul stressed that those who live “in the passions of the flesh” are “by nature children of wrath” (Eph 2:3; cf. 1 John 3:16).

However, God’s saving grace trains believers so that, “having denied ungodliness and worldly passions, we may live sensibly and righteously and godly in the present age” (Tit 2:12). We must, therefore, “make no provision for the flesh” (Rom 13:14), while still celebrating God’s good gifts in their proper context and measure (1 Tim 4:4–5). Ever remember that “neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men practicing homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor abusers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor 6:9–10). Then revel in the fact that, though “such were some of you,” “you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (6:11).

### **Conclusion: Flee Idolatry!**

John urged his fellow believers, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21), and he also warned that idolaters will end up “in the

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<sup>58</sup> The sexually explicit nature of ancient depictions of gods and their emblems (whether in idols or reliefs) is well attested throughout the ancient Near East. For some graphic examples of images of which viewers should use caution, see James B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 160–91.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. 1 Kgs 14:24; Job 36:14; Jer 5:7; Ezek 23.



lake burning with fire and sulfur, which is the second death” (Rev 21:8). Idolatry will result in ruin. Zephaniah opens his oracle warning against such evil by urging his listeners to embrace Yahweh’s supremacy over all things and to seek and inquire of him (Zeph 1:4–6), knowing that he will ultimately put an end to “all the gods of the earth” (2:11). May we be among the remnant who heeds his voice.