

A.14.1. Did God Not Anticipate Israel's Sacrificing of Children?

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In Jer 7:31 we read, “And they have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, *nor did it come into my mind.*” Open theists, dualists, and Arminians use this and the similar statements in 19:5 and 32:35 to show that God’s sovereignty does not mean he knows all or controls all things. How would you respond, taking the wording of the text seriously?

The clause in Jer 7:31, 19:5, and 32:35 literally reads, “It was not lifted up on my heart/mind.” Standing alongside the statement that God did not command child sacrifice, the clause seems to imply that the people of Israel had thought such actions were okay. In contrast, God declares he never commanded them and never considered affirming such things. Here I am reading “It was not lifted up on my heart” to mean that there was never even a hint that God would desire such heinous actions.

The structure of the clause at hand finds three close parallels in Jeremiah itself, all three of which help us understand better the clause’s meaning. In every case the statement parallels the verb “to remember.”

1. In Jer. 3:16, we are told that a day is coming when the ark of the covenant “shall not come to mind (lit. arise on the heart) or be remembered or missed, and it shall not be made again.” Because “remembered” suggests thought, it seems “arising on the heart” is similar to this but distinct, likely speaking of interest in or desire for the ark. The day is coming when no desire for the ark will arise. Comparably, God never had this kind of desire arise toward child sacrifice.
2. In Jer. 51:50, Israel is called to “remember Yahweh from far away, and let Jerusalem come into your mind (lit. arise on your heart).” Certainly the point is not simply cognitive awareness of Jerusalem, but a type of recollection that awakens new loyalties or hungers. To let Jerusalem arise on the heart is to see birthed fresh desire for the place of God’s name. God never had this kind of desire birthed toward child sacrifice.
3. The previous two have addressed mankind’s “heart,” but Jer. 44:21 focuses on God’s heart and is therefore closely parallel to the passages above that state child sacrifice never arose on God’s heart/mind. Here the prophet asks, “As for the offerings that you offered in the cities of Judah..., did not Yahweh remember them? Did it not come into his mind (lit. arise on his heart)?” Here the prophet is speaking rhetorically, for the next lines declare: “Yahweh could no longer bear your evil deeds and the abominations that you committed. Therefore your land has become a desolation” (44:22). We should thus read v. 21 to mean God did *not* remember or desire them (i.e., they never arose in his heart), for the idolatries of Israel made their offerings appalling, arousing God’s zeal against sin and for his holiness that gave rise to his judging the nation. Israel’s action awakened passion in God, but it was not in favor of his people.

In none of these parallels does “arise on the heart” ever mean thinking or mental activity by itself. Rather it means an awakening of interest or attention. Furthermore, in all three verses, the statement in question immediately follows the statement “which I did not command,” suggesting that what “was not lifted on God’s heart” was *to command* the Israelites to do child sacrifice.

These facts suggest that Yahweh's statement that child sacrifice never "arose in his heart" means not that he didn't foresee their actions or even consider that Israel could get so bad but that he never considered approving of such sin. Never were his interests or attention aroused toward or in favor of child sacrifice, yet that is exactly what Israel engaged in. Yahweh neither commanded this abominable activity, nor did he ever have a disposition toward such things.

Final confirmation of this view is found in the only two other occurrences of this phrase in the Bible: 2 Kgs. 12:5 and Isa. 65:17. The phrase occurs without the "not" in 2 Kgs. 12:5, referring to money which "is lifted up on a man's heart" to give to the temple-repair fund, so a meaning of "desire" is clearly indicated. Isaiah 65:17 isn't so helpful for deciding between the two possibilities, since either "thought" or "desire" works there. Thus in every case, the meaning "to desire" fits, and in all but one case, "to desire" fits the context far better than "to think about the existence of such a thing."