

Responding to the New Atheists' attacks on the God of the Old Testament-9: "God is Jealous"(part 3, idolatry and harlotry)

In the last essay I included the entire chapters of Ezekiel 16 and 23. As you may have noticed: it is not exactly G-rated material. God entered into a covenant with Israel so that she "became Mine." God provided lavishly for Israel, but she prostituted herself with other nations and gods, trusting in their military might and foreign idols rather than in God. "But you trusted in your beauty and played the harlot because of your fame"; "you spread your legs to every passer-by to multiply your harlotry" (Ezek. 16:15, 25). This very graphical language expresses the deep betrayal of Israel's spiritual adultery and prostitution.

We shouldn't be surprised that God wanted to wipe out Israel after the golden calf betrayal: Exodus 32:10, "Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them, and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you [Moses] a great nation." This took place just after Israel had made "vows" of faithfulness to attach herself to Yahweh at Mt. Sinai: Exodus 24:7, "Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!" Israel's idolatry was like a husband finding his wife in bed with another man—*on their honeymoon!* If we use the imagery in Ezekiel, it would be like him finding her with her legs open to any man who happened to walk by her. This is the context in which we must understand God's jealousy (zealous love). The reason God is jealous is because He binds himself to His people in kind of spousal intimacy. So worshipping idols and other gods is a rejection of who He is, just as adultery is a rejection of one's spouse in marriage.

When the word *jealous* describes God in Scripture, it's in the context of idolatry and false worship. This is true of Israel as well as the church age believer. When believers choose this-worldly pursuits, kosmos-diabolicus, over relationship with God, they engage in spiritual adultery (James 4:4; 2 Cor. 11:2, Col. 3:5), which provokes God's righteous jealousy/zeal. The truths portrayed by the graphic imagery in the Old Testament of God's brides quickly becoming whores and sluts is even more profound and indefensible for the church age believer, the bride of Christ. Idolatry is as real today as it was in Moses's or Ezekiel's day. We are just more sophisticated about it. We do not have little Teraphims on our mantles and bookcases, our idols are far more sophisticated—living and worshipping self (e.g., pre-occupation with self), looks, possessions, human approbation, and even family. Anything that is more important than Jesus Christ and His Word is an idol. An idol is always something a person wants more than anything else, more than Christ. An idol is the thing a person feels he would be the most miserable if she did not have. Christ (and Bible doctrine which provides the mediation to knowing and living for Him) must always be the most important Person in our lives. When He is in first-place, then we can enjoy all of those blessings and creature comforts that He provides. It never works the other way around: 1 John 2:15, "Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love for the Father is not in him. 16 For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh

and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.”

Idolatry is depicted in sexual language because it is—and always has been—a very seductive enterprise that can get the best of any of us. Idolatry in the ancient Near East involved manipulating reality (“the gods”) through certain rituals and sacrifices to get more kids, crops, and cattle. Chanting to an idol (not unlike chanting and babbling activity in “worship” services in many Christian churches today) would get people into immediate contact with a god’s very essence. Reversionistic Jews of the Old Testament did not want to go through the trouble of travelling to Yahweh’s Jerusalem three times a year when they could conveniently go to the shrine of a person or family god (like Dagon or Baal) at a nearby grove or high hill (Deut. 12:2; 1 Kings 14:22-24)? Idolatry in the ancient Near East also appealed to the sensual and the indulgent side. Rather than the self-restraint in Yahweh worship, one could get drunk at idol feasts as well as engage in ritual sex, gluttony, and adultery, all in the name of “religion.” Furthermore, idolatry in the ancient Near East didn’t commit one to improved ethical behavior, e.g., living out God’s truths. As long as you kept your idol “fed,” you didn’t have to change your lifestyle. Although I am tempted to expatiate on the striking parallels to modern apostate Christianity (e.g., believers who forsake the local assembly where the Word of God is taught faithfully—it is a sin to forsake the local church (cf., Heb. 10:25); sit at home and participate in the sorcery of “Christian” TV programming like the Word of Faith wizardry; and get involved in sexual immortality, which is only a flip away on the TV remote or a link away on the computer. Times have not changed, only the means have. The reversionistic believer of the Old Testament may have been more obvious and flagrant, but the sin is the same. In fact, it is much easier now. One thing that has not changed is our Lord’s passionate love, His zeal, for His own. This will never change).

What Dawkins does not get when He slams God for being jealous is God’s intimate and incredible zealous love for His people. We could perhaps ask Dawkins, “How strong should a spouse’s commitment to marriage be? How seriously should one treat adultery in marriage?” Dawkins has openly expressed his love for his wife. How would Dawkins or the other New Atheists feel if their wives pretended to love them all the while regularly going to bed with other men? They would be outraged, and rightly so! The New Atheists would understand each other’s outrage—but, of course, not God’s! Do you think they would have the capacity to love their wives unconditionally and die for their wives’ unfaithfulness and gross sinfulness that they personally witnessed, or would we see more of the anger and rage that they regularly display against Christians who believe in the one and only all-loving and all-forgiving God?

In His Matchless Grace,

Pastor Don

Titus 3:5 He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, 6 whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 that being justified by His grace we might be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.