

1 Samuel 12:21

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And turn ye not aside: for then should ye go after vain things, which cannot profit nor deliver; for they are vain.

Analysis

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Samuel warns against turning to 'vain things' (tohu) - the same Hebrew word used for the formless void before creation (Genesis 1:2). These empty, chaotic alternatives 'cannot profit nor deliver, for they are vain.' The inability to 'profit' (ya'al) or 'deliver' (natsal) - the very things Israel sought from a king - exposes the futility of trusting anything other than Yahweh. This applies not only to idols but to any false source of security, including the monarchy itself if not subordinated to God.

Historical Context

The Hebrew tohu connects to prophetic polemic against idolatry (Isaiah 41:29; 44:9). The term emphasizes not merely the moral wrong of idolatry but its practical futility - idols cannot deliver because they are nothing. Samuel applies this logic to any alternative to covenant faithfulness.

Related Passages

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. What 'vain things' promise profit and deliverance but cannot deliver?
2. How does recognizing alternatives to God as empty 'chaos' reframe our choices?

Interlinear Text

וְלֹא	תָּס וְרוּ	כִּי	אַחֲרַי	תִּהְיוּ
H3808	And turn ye not aside	H3588	for then should ye go after	for they are vain
	H5493		H310	H8414
אֲשֶׁר	לֹא	יוֹעַ	וְלֹא	יִצִּי
H834	H3808	things which cannot profit	H3808	nor deliver
		H3276		H5337
	תִּהְיוּ	הֶמָּה:		
	for they are vain	H1992		
	H8414			

Additional Cross-References

Habakkuk 2:18 (Parallel theme): What profiteth the graven image that the maker thereof hath graven it; the molten image, and a teacher of lies, that the maker of his work trusteth therein, to make dumb idols?

Jeremiah 16:19 (Parallel theme): O LORD, my strength, and my fortress, and my refuge in the day of affliction, the Gentiles shall come unto thee from the ends of the earth, and shall say, Surely our fathers have inherited lies, vanity, and things wherein there is no profit.

Jeremiah 10:15 (Parallel theme): They are vanity, and the work of errors: in the time of their visitation they shall perish.

Jeremiah 14:22 (Parallel theme): Are there any among the vanities of the Gentiles that can cause rain? or can the heavens give showers? art not thou he, O LORD our God? therefore we will wait upon thee: for thou hast made all these things.

Deuteronomy 11:16 (Parallel theme): Take heed to yourselves, that your heart be not deceived, and ye turn aside, and serve other gods, and worship them;

Isaiah 45:20 (Parallel theme): Assemble yourselves and come; draw near together, ye that are escaped of the nations: they have no knowledge that set up the wood of their graven image, and pray unto a god that cannot save.

Isaiah 46:7 (Parallel theme): They bear him upon the shoulder, they carry him, and set him in his place, and he standeth; from his place shall he not remove: yea, one shall cry unto him, yet can he not answer, nor save him out of his trouble.

Jeremiah 2:13 (Parallel theme): For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.

1 Corinthians 8:4 (Parallel theme): As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one.

Jonah 2:8 (Parallel theme): They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy.