

Deuteronomy 4:28

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And there ye shall serve gods, the work of men's hands, wood and stone, which neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell.

Analysis

And there ye shall serve gods, the work of men's hands, wood and stone, which neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell.

Devastating irony pervades this judgment: Israel, who wanted to worship images like the nations, will be forced to do so in exile among the nations. The punishment fits the crime. The Hebrew *ma'aseh yedei adam* (מְעַשָּׂה יָדֵי אָדָם) 'work of men's hands') exposes idolatry's absurdity—humans worshiping what humans have made, the creature serving its own creation.

Moses catalogs what these gods cannot do: *lo yir'un* (לוֹרַאַן, 'neither see'), *velo yishme'un* (וְלֹא יִשְׁמַעַן, 'nor hear'), *velo yo'kelun* (וְלֹא יִכְלַעַן, 'nor eat'), *velo yerichun* (וְלֹא יִרְחַעַן, 'nor smell'). These negations mock the very activities worshipers performed before idols—presenting food offerings, burning incense, seeking prophetic guidance. The gods receive worship but respond with nothing. Isaiah 44:9-20 and Psalm 115:4-8 develop this polemic further.

The contrast with Yahweh is implicit but powerful: the God who spoke from fire, who smelled Noah's sacrifice (Genesis 8:21), who sees the affliction of His people (Exodus 3:7), who hears their cries—this living God Israel exchanged for deaf, blind, inert matter. Exile forces Israel to experience the futility of what they chose over the living God.

Historical Context

Moses describes the irony of exile: in foreign lands, Israel would serve man-made idols of wood and stone. This contrasted sharply with their experience at Horeb where they heard God's voice from fire but saw no physical form, establishing that the true God cannot be represented by human craftsmanship.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 – God is love

1 Corinthians 13:4 – Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. What 'works of human hands' do people today trust in that ultimately cannot see, hear, or respond to their needs?
2. How does the contrast between dead idols and the living God who sees, hears, and acts shape your confidence in prayer?

Interlinear Text

Additional Cross-References

Deuteronomy 28:64 (References God): And the LORD shall scatter thee among all people, from the one end of the earth even unto the other; and there thou shalt serve other gods, which neither thou nor thy fathers have known, even wood and stone.

Jeremiah 16:13 (References God): Therefore will I cast you out of this land into a land that ye know not, neither ye nor your fathers; and there shall ye serve other gods day and night; where I will not shew you favour.

Deuteronomy 28:36 (References God): The LORD shall bring thee, and thy king which thou shalt set over thee, unto a nation which neither thou nor thy fathers have known; and there shalt thou serve other gods, wood and stone.

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.

Isaiah 44:9 (Parallel theme): They that make a graven image are all of them vanity; and their delectable things shall not profit; and they are their own witnesses; they see not, nor know; that they may be ashamed.

Isaiah 45:20 (References God): 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.

Ezekiel 20:39 (References God): As for you, O house of Israel, thus saith the Lord GOD; Go ye, serve ye every one his idols, and hereafter also, if ye will not hearken unto me: but pollute ye my holy name no more with your gifts, and with your idols.

1 Samuel 26:19 (References God): Now therefore, I pray thee, let my lord the king hear the words of his servant. If the LORD have stirred thee up against me, let him accept an offering: but if they be the children of men, cursed be they before the LORD; for they have driven me out this day from abiding in the inheritance of the LORD, saying, Go, serve other gods.