

Habakkuk 2:19

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Woe unto him that saith to the wood, Awake; to the dumb stone, Arise, it shall teach! Behold, it is laid over with gold and silver, and there is no breath at all in the midst of it.

Analysis

Woe unto him that saith to the wood, Awake; to the dumb stone, Arise, it shall teach! Behold, it is laid over with gold and silver, and there is no breath at all in the midst of it. The fifth woe mocks idolatry, exposing its absurdity. Commanding wood to "Awake" (עַזְבֵּה/haqitz) and stone to "Arise" (עֲרוּאִי/uri) reveals the foolishness of expecting lifeless materials to respond. "It shall teach" (הָוֵא יֹרֶה/hu yoreh)—can it instruct? The rhetorical question expects: No!

"Behold, it is laid over with gold and silver" (הִנֵּה-הֵוָה תִּפְשֹׁשׁ זָהָב וְכַסְף/hinneh-hu tafus zahav vakesef)—external beauty conceals internal emptiness. Overlaying precious metals creates impressive appearance but doesn't impart life. "There is no breath at all in the midst of it" (וְכֹל-רוּחַ אֵין בְּקִרְבּוֹ/vekhol-ruach eyn beqirbo)—no רֹעֵן (ruach, spirit/breath), the animating principle of life.

This contrasts absolutely with verse 20: "the LORD is in his holy temple"—God is alive, present, active. Idols are dead matter; YHWH is living God. The passage warns against trusting anything created—whether literal idols or modern equivalents (wealth, technology, power)—rather than the living Creator who alone possesses breath, life, and power to save.

Historical Context

Babylonian religion involved elaborate idol worship. Massive statues overlaid with gold represented gods like Marduk and Nebo. During annual festivals, these idols were paraded through streets—dead wood and stone carried by men, yet worshiped as divine. The absurdity wasn't lost on exiled Jews: their captors worshiped creations of their own hands.

When Cyrus conquered Babylon, he mockingly described how Babylonian gods couldn't defend their city—proving their impotence. Isaiah 44:9-20 and Jeremiah 10:1-16 similarly ridicule idol-making: cutting down a tree, burning half for cooking, carving the other half into a god. The critique remains relevant: modern people trust created things (money, status, pleasure) rather than Creator, committing functional idolatry though denying literal idol worship.

Related Passages

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Study Questions

1. What modern 'idols'—things overlaid with impressive appearance but containing no life—do people trust instead of the living God?
2. How does the absence of 'breath' in idols contrast with God as the source of all life and the giver of the Spirit?
3. What is the difference between appropriately using created things and idolatrously trusting them for what only God can provide?

Interlinear Text

דַּם	מִ	לֹא	בַּן	עַ	וּרְיִ	בָּקָר	יִצְחָה	לְעֵץ	רָאֵם	לְעֵץ	רָאֵם	לְעֵץ	רָאֵם
Woe	unto him that saith	to the wood	Awake	Arise	stone	to the dumb							
H1945	H559	H6086	H6974	H5782	H68	H1748							
יְמִינָה	יְמִינָה	יְמִינָה	תְּפַזֵּשׁ	בְּגִימָעָה	בְּגִימָעָה	בְּגִימָעָה	בְּגִימָעָה	בְּגִימָעָה	בְּגִימָעָה	בְּגִימָעָה	בְּגִימָעָה	בְּגִימָעָה	
and	it shall teach	the he	Behold it is laid	over with gold	and silver								
H1931	H3384	H2009	H1931	H8610	H2091	H3701							
בְּלֹא	רְאֵם	אֵין	בְּלֹא										
and there is no breath			at all in the midst										
H3605	H7307	H369	H7130										

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 135:17 (Parallel theme): They have ears, but they hear not; neither is there any breath in their mouths.

Jeremiah 10:4 (Parallel theme): They deck it with silver and with gold; they fasten it with nails and with hammers, that it move not.

Jeremiah 10:9 (Parallel theme): Silver spread into plates is brought from Tarshish, and gold from Uphaz, the work of the workman, and of the hands of the founder: blue and purple is their clothing: they are all the work of cunning men.

Revelation 17:4 (Parallel theme): And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication:

Isaiah 46:6 (Parallel theme): They lavish gold out of the bag, and weigh silver in the balance, and hire a goldsmith; and he maketh it a god: they fall down, yea, they worship.

Isaiah 44:17 (Parallel theme): And the residue thereof he maketh a god, even his graven image: he falleth down unto it, and worshippeth it, and prayeth unto it, and saith, Deliver me; for thou art my god.

Isaiah 40:19 (Parallel theme): The workman melteth a graven image, and the goldsmith spreadeth it over with gold, and casteth silver chains.

Acts 17:29 (Parallel theme): Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device.

Psalms 97:7 (Parallel theme): Confounded be all they that serve graven images, that boast themselves of idols: worship him, all ye gods.

Jeremiah 10:14 (Parallel theme): Every man is brutish in his knowledge: every founder is confounded by the graven image: for his molten image is falsehood, and there is no breath in them.

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