

Jeremiah 16:20

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Shall a man make gods unto himself, and they are no gods?

Analysis

This rhetorical question highlights the absurdity of idolatry: 'Shall a man make gods unto himself, and they are no gods?' The Hebrew verb 'make' (asah, עָשָׂה) emphasizes human manufacture—these 'gods' are human artifacts, not divine beings. The phrase 'unto himself' (lo, לֹא) underscores the self-serving nature of idolatry—people create deities that conform to their desires rather than submitting to the true God who created them. The concluding phrase 'they are no gods' (lo elohim hemah, לֹא אֱלֹהִים هֵם) is emphatic—literally 'not gods they.' This exposes idolatry's fundamental contradiction: the creature cannot create the Creator; humanity cannot manufacture deity. The verse echoes Isaiah 44:9-20, which mocks idol-makers who use wood for both fire and gods. This principle applies beyond carved images to any human construct—ideology, philosophy, political system, or even religious tradition—that we elevate to ultimate authority in place of God's revealed truth. Paul later develops this in Romans 1:22-25, showing how humanity exchanges God's truth for self-made lies, worshiping creation rather than Creator.

Historical Context

This verse occurs in Jeremiah's prophecy of exile and eventual restoration (chapter 16). The immediate context addresses God's judgment on Judah's idolatry—the very sin this verse exposes. Despite centuries of prophetic warning, Judah persisted in syncretism, blending Yahweh worship with Canaanite Baal worship and other pagan practices. Archaeological excavations in Judah have uncovered numerous figurines and cultic objects from this period, confirming widespread idolatry even among those who formally worshiped at Jerusalem's temple. The

irony is profound: Israel had witnessed Egypt's impotent gods at the Exodus, seen Canaanite deities fail to protect their worshipers, observed Assyria's gods unable to save Samaria—yet still manufactured their own false gods. The exile to Babylon would finally cure Israel of this particular sin; post-exilic Judaism never returned to idol worship. Early Christians faced similar temptations in the Roman Empire, where civic religion demanded honoring the emperor and various deities. The apologists used arguments like Jeremiah's—ridiculing the notion that manufactured objects could possess divinity.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. In what ways do modern people manufacture "gods unto themselves"—ideologies, success, comfort, political movements—that function as ultimate authorities in place of the true God?
2. How does recognizing that we cannot create God (but only respond to His self-revelation) protect us from making Christianity into a religion of our own preferences?
3. What practical tests can help us discern whether we are worshiping the God of Scripture or a god of our own imagining?

Interlinear Text

make	H0	Shall a man	gods	H1992	gods
	H6213		H430		H430

Additional Cross-References

Isaiah 37:19 (References God): And have cast their gods into the fire: for they were no gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone: therefore they have destroyed them.

Galatians 4:8 (References God): Howbeit then, when ye knew not God, ye did service unto them which by nature are no gods.

Jeremiah 2:11 (References God): Hath a nation changed their gods, which are yet no gods? but my people have changed their glory for that which doth not profit.

From KJV Study • kjvstudy.org