

Zephaniah 1:5

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And them that worship the host of heaven upon the housetops; and them that worship and that swear by the LORD, and that swear by Malcham;

Analysis

Them that worship the host of heaven upon the housetops—Tzeva ha-shamayim (תְּזֵבָה הַשָּׁמַיִם), "the host of heaven," refers to astral deities: sun, moon, stars, and planets worshiped throughout the Ancient Near East. Deuteronomy 4:19 and 17:3 explicitly forbid this practice, yet it flourished in Judah. Flat-roofed houses provided perfect platforms for star worship—high places where devotees bowed to celestial bodies, offered incense, and sought divination (2 Kings 21:5, 23:5; Jeremiah 19:13). Astral religion appealed to human desire to discern fate through astronomy/astrology, bypassing dependence on God's revealed will.

Them that worship and that swear by the LORD, and that swear by Malcham—This describes religious syncretism, the deadly mixing of true and false worship. These people swear allegiance to Yahweh while simultaneously swearing by Malkam (מַלְקָם), likely Milcom/Molech, the Ammonite god associated with child sacrifice (1 Kings 11:5, 33; 2 Kings 23:10). The verb **swear** (shaba, עָשָׂה) means taking oaths, binding oneself in covenant loyalty. To swear by both Yahweh and Molech represents theological schizophrenia—attempting divided loyalty that God utterly rejects.

Jesus echoed this principle: "No man can serve two masters" (Matthew 6:24). James condemns double-mindedness (James 1:8, 4:8). Elijah confronted Israel: "How long halt ye between two opinions? If the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Kings 18:21). Syncretistic religion—maintaining outward

Yahweh worship while incorporating pagan practices—constitutes covenant adultery. God demands exclusive loyalty, undivided affection, single-hearted devotion. Anything less invites His jealous judgment upon those who claim His name while serving other gods.

Historical Context

Astral worship intensified during Assyrian domination (eighth-seventh centuries BC). Assyrian religion heavily emphasized celestial deities, and vassal states like Judah adopted these practices under political-cultural pressure. Manasseh "worshiped all the host of heaven, and served them" and "built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the LORD" (2 Kings 21:3-5)—bringing star worship into God's temple itself. Archaeological evidence confirms widespread astral cult practices in Iron Age Judah.

Rooftop worship appears repeatedly in Jeremiah's contemporary prophecies. Jeremiah 19:13 condemns houses whose roofs were used for burning incense to celestial bodies. Jeremiah 32:29 describes houses where people "have burned incense upon the roofs unto Baal, and poured out drink offerings unto other gods." These weren't secret, hidden practices but public, normalized religious activities integrated into daily life. The syncretism was so complete that worshipers saw no contradiction between temple sacrifices and rooftop astral rites.

Molech/Milcom worship involved horrific child sacrifice in the Valley of Hinnom (called Topheth) just outside Jerusalem's walls. Parents would "pass their children through the fire to Molech" (2 Kings 23:10; Jeremiah 32:35)—burning infants alive as offerings to ensure prosperity and fertility. That people could maintain Yahweh worship while practicing such abominations demonstrates sin's capacity to blind conscience and harden hearts. Josiah defiled Topheth to prevent further child sacrifice (2 Kings 23:10), but the spiritual corruption persisted, warranting the total judgment Zephaniah announces.

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Study Questions

1. What modern forms of syncretism tempt believers to mix authentic Christian faith with incompatible worldviews or practices?
2. How does swearing allegiance to multiple "lords" (career, comfort, security, reputation) alongside Christ constitute the divided loyalty God condemns?
3. In what ways can outward religious observance coexist with heart-level idolatry, creating the double-mindedness James warns against?

Interlinear Text

בָּשָׁמָן מִן לְצַבָּא אֱלֹהִים
H853 And them that worship H7812 H5921 upon the housetops H1406 H6635 the host H8064 of heaven

וְאֵת בָּשָׁמָן מִן וְבָשְׁבָע יְמִינֵה הַלְּהָבָד וְבָשְׁבָע יְמִינֵה
H853 And them that worship H7812 H7650 H3068 H7650 and that swear by the LORD and that swear

בְּמִלְּכָם:
H4445

Additional Cross-References

Jeremiah 19:13 (Parallel theme): And the houses of Jerusalem, and the houses of the kings of Judah, shall be defiled as the place of Tophet, because of all the houses upon whose roofs they have burned incense unto all the host of heaven, and have poured out drink offerings unto other gods.

1 Kings 11:33 (Worship): Because that they have forsaken me, and have worshipped Ashtoreth the goddess of the Zidonians, Chemosh the god of the Moabites, and Milcom the god of the children of Ammon, and have not walked in my ways, to do that which is right in mine eyes, and to keep my statutes and my judgments, as did David his father.

2 Kings 17:33 (References Lord): They feared the LORD, and served their own gods, after the manner of the nations whom they carried away from thence.

Amos 5:26 (Parallel theme): But ye have borne the tabernacle of your Moloch and Chiun your images, the star of your god, which ye made to yourselves.

1 Kings 18:21 (References Lord): And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? if the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered him not a word.

2 Kings 17:41 (References Lord): So these nations feared the LORD, and served their graven images, both their children, and their children's children: as did their fathers, so do they unto this day.

2 Kings 23:12 (References Lord): And the altars that were on the top of the upper chamber of Ahaz, which the kings of Judah had made, and the altars which Manasseh had made in the two courts of the house of the LORD, did the king beat down, and brake them down from thence, and cast the dust of them into the brook Kidron.

Isaiah 44:5 (References Lord): One shall say, I am the LORD'S; and another shall call himself by the name of Jacob; and another shall subscribe with his hand unto the LORD, and surname himself by the name of Israel.

Isaiah 45:23 (Parallel theme): I have sworn by myself, the word is gone out of my mouth in righteousness, and shall not return, That unto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.

Isaiah 48:1 (References Lord): Hear ye this, O house of Jacob, which are called by the name of Israel, and are come forth out of the waters of Judah, which swear by the name of the LORD, and make mention of the God of Israel, but not in truth, nor in righteousness.