

Gods You Carry & the God Who Carries You

Thomas Robinson, *God of Life & Light for the World*, 3. October 7, 2018

Isaiah 46:1-13

¹ Bel bows down; Nebo is stooping;
their idols/images are on beasts and livestock;
these things you carry are borne
as burdens on weary beasts.

² They stoop; they bow down together;
they cannot save the burden,
but themselves go into captivity.

³ "Listen to me, O house of Jacob,
all the remnant of the house of Israel,
who have been borne by me from before your birth,
carried from the womb;

⁴ even to your old age I myself am he,
and to gray hairs I myself bear the load.
I myself have made, and I myself will carry;
I myself will bear the load and will deliver.

⁵ "To whom will you liken me and make me equal,
and compare me, that we may be alike?

⁶ Those who lavish gold from the purse,
and weigh out silver in the scales,
hire a goldsmith, and he makes it into a god;
then they fall down and worship!

⁷ They lift it to their shoulders, they carry it,

they set it in its place, and it stands there;
it cannot move from its place.

If one cries to it, it does not answer
or save him from his trouble.

⁸ "Remember this and stand firm,
recall it to mind, you transgressors,
⁹ remember the former things of old;

for I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is none like me,

¹⁰ declaring the end from the beginning
and from ancient times things not yet done,
saying, 'My counsel shall stand,
and I will accomplish all my purpose,'

¹¹ calling a bird of prey from the east [=Cyrus],
the man of my counsel from a far country.

I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass;
I have purposed, and I will do it.

¹² "Listen to me, you stubborn of heart,
you who are far from righteousness:

¹³ I bring near my faithful righteousness; it is not far off,
and my salvation will not delay;
I will put salvation in Zion, for Israel my glory."

Isaiah 40:18-20

¹⁸ To whom then will you liken God, | or what likeness compare with him? | ¹⁹ An idol? – A craftsman casts it, | and a goldsmith overlays it with gold, | and casts for it silver chains. | ²⁰ Whoever makes an offering | chooses wood that will not rot; | he seeks out a skilled artisan | to set up an image shaped by humans that will not topple.

Exodus 20:1-4 The First of the 10 Commandments

¹ And God spoke all these words, saying, ² "I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ³ You shall have no other gods before me. ⁴ You shall not make for yourself a molded image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth."

Exodus 32:3-4 Israel at Mt. Sinai

³ So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"

Matthew 6:24

²⁴ "No one is able to be a servant to two Lords. For a servant will either hate the one and love the other, or will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Mammon (money)."

Colossians 3:5

⁵ Deaden therefore the parts that are limited only to the earth, sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed for more (pleonexia), which is idolatry.

1 Thessalonians 1:9

⁹ For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God

Romans 1:20-23

²⁰ For God's invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, since the creation of the world, being perceived in the things that have been made, so that they may be without excuse. ²¹ Because, although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became foolish: ²³ They exchanged the glory of the immortal God for a likeness of an image of a mortal human – and of birds and animals and creeping things!

Mighty Gods on Weary Beasts

Isaiah speaks to Israel in exile. Conquered, destroyed by the might of Babylon and its gods: Bel (= Marduk, Baal, cf. Belshazzar) and Nebo (cf. Nebuchadnezzar). Gods of power, wealth, fertility, control. Now Persia is coming, Cyrus and his gods, a “bird of prey.” How do you tell which god is real. The one who wins, conquers, delivers. Israel is defeated, exiled. Where is Yahweh?

Isaiah repeatedly focuses on idolatry. Irony and sarcasm! Unfair? Bel is not just a statue. But Bel, Nebo, the gods of almost all religions are part of the natural world, powers within creation. Not transcendent, beyond nature. They're bigger than us – us magnified. Humans at our greatest power, pleasure, control – we make a god in that image. We know them. They're us!

Isaiah sees them stooping. They have to be carried to try to escape the coming of new gods like themselves, who in their turn will have to be carried. Can you see? Blindness and deafness plague humans in seeing the pitiful character of our human-made gods, so natural to us.

The God of the Servant, Able to Carry

Idolatry is the fundamental brokenness of humanity. 1st of the 10 commandments. Israel's betrayal at Sinai. Idolatry is almost built into us humans. The world centers around us and our well-being. We exchange the glory of the creator for the image of created things. Power within our power.

The Transcendent God is separated from us and every created thing by an incomprehensible gap between creator and created. From the side of the created, the gap is unbridgeable. The gods we make are on our created side of the great divide – something shaped by humans in some human-like form, an image of us, an idol. Our religion wants to turn God into a human-made god.

For God, it is the very human being that is the inadequate and broken image of God. The human is still usable by God for self-revelation within his creation. God can use our elaborate language of greatness and power, but he shows himself in ways that disdain the power and greatness of human empires, wealth, beauty, fertility and pleasure. He chooses slaves. He comes as a nobody.

46:4: “I myself” bear the burden: create, sustain, save. From birth to grey hairs, we are infants.

Idolatry Old and New

Sometimes we imagine that because we avoid images we are without idols. Jesus breaks that delusion. Idols are all the forms of Mammon: all that we depend on to define and secure our lives. The list is as various in detail as humans are diverse. But also very simple: power, wealth, pleasure, control, identity, success, etc. played out on the large and small scales of Life.

Good things that we imagine will carry us, sustain us, secure us. But when they become gods, they eat us alive. (DFW quote) We have to create them, carry them. They never save. God comes in weakness on a cross, with self-giving love. He picks up our broken lives and carries us into his life.