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Solomon's Idols

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Idolatry was strictly forbidden among God's ancient people (Exodus 20:4-5). King Solomon fell into idolatry in his later years. This slide into sin, according to 1 Kings 11:3-4, came about through complicity with his foreign wives. His downfall serves as a warning to God's people today to guard against spiritual compromise. Solomon rendered devotion to three named deities as well as countless other idols as described in 1 Kings 11:5-8. An overview of Solomon's idols can serve as a warning to God's people today.

Ashtoreth

First Kings 11:5 describes Ashtoreth as the goddess of the people of Sidon (compare 1 Kings 11:33). Ashtoreth was a common Canaanite fertility goddess. "Particularly numerous in Canaanite sites, both in private houses and in cult places, are female figurines of clay or metal. Many of these are believed to be representatives of the mother goddess, associated with fertility, love, and war, known to the Israelites through the Canaanites and called Ashtoreth (plural, Ashtaroth—Judg. 2:13; 1 Kings 11:5; Astarte in Greek)."¹

Ashtoreth proved to be a seductive goddess throughout Israel's history. After Israel's release from bondage in Egypt and

settlement in the Promised Land, many of the Israelites fell into idolatry by worshipping Ashtoreth (Judges 2:13; 10:6). Under Samuel's spiritual leadership the Israelites abandoned their worship of Ashtoreth (1 Samuel 7:3-4; 12:10). Ashtoreth worship returned during Solomon's reign (1 Kings 11:5-8). Later, King Josiah destroyed Solomon's sacred places where he had instituted the worship of Ashtoreth, Chemosh, and Molech (2 Kings 23:13-14).

Ashtoreth is known by other similar names in ancient cultures, including Astarte, Ashtartu, and Ishtar.² In fact, the Hebrew Ashtoreth seems to be an intentionally corrupted form. "Ashtoreth" (v. 5) is a deliberate distortion of Ashtart, the Canaanite fertility goddess. The revocalization is based on the word for 'shame' (boset)."³

Molech

According to 1 Kings 11:5, Molech was "the detestable god of the Ammonites." The Hebrew text reads "Milcom" (compare 1 Kings 11:33 and 2 Kings 23:13), though "Molech" is common in the Old Testament. The name is composed of the same Hebrew letters as the word "king," and therefore may indicate that Molech was a deity with broad authority over life.

Molech worship included the heinous crime of child sacrifice and was therefore strictly forbidden among God's people (Leviticus 18:21; 20:2-5; 2 Kings 23:10; Jeremiah 32:35). Although there's no biblical evidence that Solomon went so far in his worship of Molech as offering human sacrifices, two other kings did engage in this terrible practice—Ahaz (2 Kings 16:3) and Manasseh (2 Kings 21:6). Jeremiah 32:35 draws a connection between Molech and Baal worship in relation to child sacrifice.

The place of Molech worship, located in the valley east of Jerusalem, was called Tophet. The prophets denounced worship at Tophet as extremely abominable in God's sight (Jeremiah 7:30-31) and warned that it would become a place of slaughter and judgment

(Isaiah 30:33; Jeremiah 7:32-34; 19:6; 19:10-15). King Josiah desecrated this site during the reforms under his reign (2 Kings 23:10). “Where formerly fires had burned on the *topheth* or altar-hearth of Molech, now fires of another kind were to burn, for the place became the common refuse dump and incinerator of Jerusalem. The constant fires which burned there led to the name Valley of Hinnom (Heb. *Ge-Hinnom*) later being used as the name of the place (*Gehenna*, in its Greek form) where the wicked are to be punished in the world to come”⁴

Chemosh

The third idol that trapped King Solomon was Chemosh, “the detestable god of Moab” according to 1 Kings 11:7 (compare 1 Kings 11:33). Israel celebrated its victory over Moab and the Moabite god, Chemosh, as the tribes made their way to the Promised Land (Numbers 21:29). During the period of the Judges, Jephthah warned the Moabites to be content with what Chemosh had given them (Judges 11:24). In his reform movement King Josiah included the destruction of the places of Chemosh worship that Solomon had established (2 Kings 23:13). Jeremiah prophesied the defeat of Moab and its god, Chemosh, at the hands of the true and living God (Jeremiah 48: 7, 13, 46). Chemosh may have been “the Moabite equivalent of the Ammonite Molech or Milcom.”⁵

The discovery of the Moabite Stone in 1868 shed new light on Chemosh and the relationship between Israel and Moab. Israel’s King Omri had subjugated Moab and required tribute. Moab’s king, Mesha, paid that tribute until the death of King Ahab, Omri’s son, at which point Mesha rebelled against Israel (2 Kings 1:1; 3:4-5). Mesha enjoyed a measure of success, and eventually slew his own son as a sacrifice to Chemosh to help seal his resistance to Israel (2 Kings 3:27). The Moabite Stone records Mesha’s evaluation of these events:

I (am) Mesha, son of Chemosh—[. . .], king of Moab, the Dibonite—my father (had) reigned over Moab thirty years, and I reigned after my father,--(who) made this high place for Chemosh in Qarhoh [. . .] because he saved me from all the kings and caused me to triumph over all my adversaries. As for Omri, king of Israel, he humbled Moab many years (lit., days), for Chemosh was angry at his land. And his son followed him and he also said, “I will humble Moab.” In my time he spoke (thus), but I have triumphed over him and over his house, while Israel hath perished for ever!⁶

Chemosh, therefore, was viewed as a vengeful deity with power to overturn nations.

Why would King Solomon turn to such deities as Ashtoreth, Molech, and Chemosh? We might likewise ask why our society has so readily turned to the idolization of sex (Ashtoreth was a fertility goddess), abortion (Molech was worshipped by child sacrifice), and political power (Chemosh could overturn national interests). When we devalue the true and living God, other gods necessarily take His place.

¹ Finegan, Jack. *Myth & Mystery*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989, pp. 126-127.

² White, William, Jr. “Ishtar, Descent of” in *Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology*. E. M. Blaiklock and R. K. Harrison, Editors. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983, p. 253.

³ Patterson, R. D. and Hermann, J. Austel. “1, 2 Kings” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 4. Frank E. Gaebelein, Editor. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988, p. 107.

⁴ Bruce, F. F. *Israel and the Nations*. Revised. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997, p. 70.

⁵ Patterson and Hermann, p. 107.

⁶ Albright, W. F. Translator. *The Ancient Near East*, Volume I. James B. Pritchard, Editor. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958, p. 209.