

Clandestine Religion  
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Hab 1:16

(BHS)

על-כֵּן יִזְבֵּחַ לְהַרְמוֹ  
וַיִּקְטֹר לְמִכְמֵרָתוֹ  
כִּי בַהֲמָה שָׁמֵן חֶלְקוֹ  
וּמְאֻכְלוֹ בְּרָאָה:

(CEB)

Therefore, he **sacrifices** to his net;  
he burns incense to his fishing nets,  
because due to **them** his **portion** grows **fat**  
and his **food** becomes luxurious.

The color coding should help with vocabulary. You may note that the verb “sacrificing” is the same root as “altar.” Just like “food” is a substantive form of the verb for “eating.”

The first thing to note here is that the religious actions of making sacrifice and burning incense are ordinarily done before a deity. You would expect the prophet to say, “He sacrifices to Marduk and burns incense to Ishtar.” But surprisingly, what is being worshipped in our verse is not any god they profess, but rather ordinary tools of the trade: fishing nets. I read this as a symbol for their actual work, which was war. I take it to mean that they worship their weapons of war: their swords and siege ramps and so on. Because it is from these that they stay prosperous.

This rhetorical device of describing non-religious things using religious language can be found throughout Scripture. Here are some examples:

- Paul said of the circumcision party, “Their god is their belly.” I focus on his odd comment in [this](#) essay. I wrote, “gratification of the body functioned as their hidden master—and they probably didn’t even know it.” If we are ruled by our pleasures, then they function as gods in our hearts.

- Paul wrote that covetousness is idolatry. Read about it [here](#). Anything you may covet—be it your neighbor’s house, or his stuff, or his wife, or anything that is your neighbor’s—can be conceptualized as a principle in your heart that competes with the true and living God. We *confess* Jesus, but we live like he isn’t sufficient.
- Paul wrote about how pleasing people is the opposite of pleasing God. People can take the place of God, and we can speak of them as little gods in our lives. [Here](#) is an essay about that. We *say* that we are righteous in Christ alone, but if someone criticizes us, we are rattled and defensive. Something is competing with our professed faith in our hearts—an unacknowledged theology.
- In 2 Chronicles, good king Jehoshaphat trusted in his healers *rather* than in God. Putting our trust in medical science is idolatry. Even during a pandemic. [Here](#) is where I preach on it.
- We trust money rather than God (Matt 6:24). Where do you really get your sense of security? The Dow? The 401K? It might do you spiritual good if God were to do crash these so that you trust him alone. After all, he is a jealous God. We need to see beyond the secondary means to our true Provider.
- And in our verse, the Chaldeans trusted in their competency, their ability to win for themselves prosperity. We sing, “Jehovah Jireh,” but we don’t really believe it. We really believe in ourselves.

These are examples of “idols of the heart” that Scripture talks about. Together they form a system of unbelief that competes with the gospel in our hearts. When I think of the “sinful nature,” this is what I mostly have in mind.

One way of understanding sanctification is to see it as the process of becoming conscious of how you trust this or that false idea or idol, and then choosing to turn from it to embrace some neglected promise of God.

The good news is that Jesus has broken the power of these false gods. When your heart idol lets you down (I would say, when you are under its covenant curse), you are alerted to a spiritual problem. This is what daily devotions are all about—to root out your clandestine religion, and to turn from these things to Christ alone.

This is not easy to do. It takes a lifetime. But God's Spirit works in you through his Word to help you. I know a man who couldn't take Greek with his friends, and on campus saw them together in a study group, and went home and cried tears of loneliness. Then he asked himself, "Where have I misplaced my identity?" The answer of course was, in that group. Once he realized this, the power of that idol was broken. He could turn from it to Jesus, and in so doing, the bad feelings fell away. This is the dynamic we all need to practice with every counterfeit gospel and every false god.

Something to think about.