

THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDOLS AND IDENTITY:

AN EXEGESIS OF ISAIAH 41: 5-10

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**CURTIS CHANG
50 SAWYER AVE. - TUFTS UNIVERSITY
MEDFORD, MA 02155
CCHANG@EMERALD.TUFTS.EDU**

curtis\acad\is41pap.sam

A PARAPHRASE OF ISAIAH 41: 5-10

(5) The pagan nations have seen and fear,
the people from the ends of the earth quake.

(6) Each one helps the other,
Saying to themselves, "Fortify yourself!"

(7) The artisan fortifies the goldsmith,
the smoother with hammer encourages the striker of anvil.
They certify their finished creation, "It is good."
Together they fasten it with nails so it will not topple.

(8) But you, Israel, my servant,
Jacob, whom I have chosen,
offspring of Abraham, my friend,

(9) You whom I fastened from the ends of the earth
and called from its farthest corner,
certifying you, "You are my servant."

I have chosen you, not cast you away.

(10) Do not fear, for I am with you.
Do not look about bewildered, for I am your God.
I will establish you, I will help you;
I will hold you up with my righteous right hand.

INTRODUCTION

While the Old Testament frequently refers to idol worship, the book of Isaiah refers to the actual construction of idols more than any other book in Scripture. With the possible exception of the Jeremiah 10, Isaiah 40-55 as a literary unit offers unparalleled access to the details of idol making.¹ Such a concentration raises obvious questions: why does the book insert accounts of idol construction at specific points and why those details in particular?

Modern critical scholarship has tended to avoid those questions by essentially denying the importance of idol making for understanding Isaiah. Commentators like the form critical scholar J. Begrich have repeatedly dismissed the idol making sections as extraneous and/or non-Isaianic inserts. The scholarly treatment of Isaiah 41:5-10, with its description of an idol making factory in vv. 6-7, has characterized this dismissal. Bernhard Duhm, in his influential commentary on

¹ My own count of verses that refer to idol construction shows Isaiah with 27 verses, Jeremiah with 20 verses (most of them in Jeremiah 10), Exodus with 8 verses (all in the golden calf episode), Deuteronomy with 6 verses. The Psalms, Hosea, and Habakkuk have fewer than 5 relevant verses.

Isaiah published in 1892, removed the idol factory verses from the chapter altogether, arguing that they bore no literary relation to the rest of the passage.² The Revised English Bible and the New American Bible translations follow this consensus by transposing 41: 6-7 to after verse 20 in chapter 40. In his Anchor Bible translation of Isaiah 40-55, John McKenzie comments that "verses 6-7 [of chapter 41] appear to be another fragment of polemic against crass idolatry i.e. the worship of material image, which has wandered from its original place, and cannot be restored."³ Detailed studies of vv. 6-7 tend to treat the verses as simply a technical account of idol manufacture, devoid of any meaningful relationship to the chapter. One such article insists that "vv. 6-7 stick out like a sore thumb in chapter 41... I have no explanation for the displacement of 41:6-7 other than a copyist's carelessness."⁴

This paper will attempt to show that the idol making description in Isaiah 41: 5-10 actually fits hand in glove with the meaning of the passage. By examining the historical background to the text -- and in particular the role of idol construction -- and offering a close reading of the passage, I hope to show that vv. 6-7 stand as an intrinsic part of the literary unit. In fact, the particular details of idol construction lend crucial support to Isaiah's larger concern with how human beings construct their own identity.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Exile

The overwhelming consensus of scholars place 41:5-10 as part of the unit called "Deutero-Isaiah" (chapters 40-55), a composition written within and for the exile community in Babylon in the 6th century. A few conservative scholars, like J. Motyer, still advocate that the 8th

² See Richard J. Clifford, "The Function of Idol Passages in Second Isaiah" in *CBQ* 42 (1980), 450

³ Revised English Bible, New American Bible, in *Parallel Translations XX*. The Anchor Bible: Second Isaiah (NY: Doubleday, 1968), 28

⁴ Aloysius Fitzgerald, "The technology of Isaiah 40: 19-20 + 41:6-7" in *CBQ* 51 (1989), 431

century Isaiah of chapters 1-39 composed the entire work. A review of the issues involved in dating are beyond the scope of this paper, but the exilic dating seems to me most persuasive and will be assumed for the rest of the paper.⁵ The view taken for granted is that Isaiah 41:5-10 is part of a body of work faithful to (and probably containing much of) the original message of the 8th century Isaiah, but composed probably by Isaiah's disciples to speak to the exiles late in their Babylonian captivity. That date (mid to late 6th century) and setting is in fact suggested by Isaiah 40: 1-2: "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid."

The exilic community's need for comfort was undeniable. They had been deprived of all the most visible aspects of their national identity: land, temple, and king. The period was certainly one of collective angst, shaped by the fundamental questions of "Who are we? Where are we headed?" The old answers that had been given for centuries -- that they were God's chosen people designated for a special purpose -- seemed devoid of any supporting evidence. As J. Bright has noted, "Even the best of the people, those who had received the prophetic word, were plunged into despair, fearing that mortal sin had been committed, and that Yahweh had cut off Israel off in his wrath and canceled her destiny as his people."⁶ Severed from their roots and placed as a tiny minority in the bowels of a true world power, the community must have been tempted to adopt aspects of the surrounding Babylonian culture, a culture which proclaimed its customs and worldview as dominant.

But as the audience of Isaiah 41:5-10 looked out at Babylon in the mid to late 6th century, they would have witnessed a nation suddenly feeling its own foundations shaking. Babylon and

⁵ J. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1993), 28-34. See W. Lasor, D. Hubbard, F. Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1982), 365-378 for a discussion of the issue from the perspective of evangelical scholars. Their conclusion, shared by me, is that "one cannot dispute that the viewpoint of ch. 40-66, in general, does not anticipate the Exile, but rather stands within the Exile." (pg. 374).

⁶ J. Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 348

the surrounding pagan nations themselves faced a most disturbing threat to national security. In the prelude to vv. 5-10, Isaiah describes a rising "victor from the East" who "tramples kings under foot [and] makes them like dust with his sword" (41:2-2). The conquest is so swift that the victor is described as "scarcely touching the path with his feet" (41:3). The description fits Cyrus the Persian, an equation which Isaiah 45 makes more explicit. Starting from about 550, Cyrus suddenly emerged onto the world stage from east of Babylon, swept westward to take over the Median empire, and in a series of lightning-quick invasions, conquered nation after nation in Asia Minor. In a span of only several years, Babylon's century-old hegemony over the region evaporated. It stood isolated and vulnerable to the Persian onslaught.⁷

The Role of Idols and Idol Construction

In the ancient Near Eastern worldview, a people's amorphous sense of itself as a nation found concrete expression in its idols. The idols, of course, represented national gods, like Babylon's Marduk and Nebo. But an idol was much more than simply a religious symbol. In the Mesopotamian mind, the distinction between a symbol and the spiritual reality behind that symbol did not exist as clearly as it does in the modern Western mind. Nor was the national god held as an entity clearly distinct from the nation itself. For instance, as part of his coronation ceremony, Sargon II probably physically grasped the stone hand of the statue of Marduk.⁸ Even Babylonian socio-economic practices derived legitimacy from the actual placement of the idols vis a vis one another.⁹ As William Holladay notes, "Not only was the image understood to sum up the reality of the god, but the god, in turn, was understood to sum up the whole national enterprise and its ideology."¹⁰

⁷ Bright, 354-360.

⁸ J. Finegan, *Myth and Mystery: An Introduction to the Pagan Religions of the Biblical World*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989), 29

⁹ J. Watts, "Babylonian Idolatry in the Prophets As a False Socio-Economic System" in *Israel's Apostasy and Restoration*, (Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 1988),

¹⁰ *Isaiah: Scroll of a Prophetic Heritage*, (NY: Pilgrim Press, 1978), 142-143. See also M. Halbertal and A. Margalit, *Idolatry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 40-41 for an excellent discussion of the Mesopotamian equation between image and reality,

The physical idol stood so completely as the embodiment of a nation's identity that the definitive sign of a nation's collapse was the capture or toppling of its idols. The Babylonians themselves had amassed quite a collection of such foreign idols in their conquests.¹¹ Since the physical state of an idol was so crucial to the people's security, Cyrus's menacing advance toward Babylon provoked a flurry of activity around the idols. Herodotus reports that Croesus, king of Lydia (which was tied with Babylon in a defensive alliance against Cyrus) prepared for Cyrus's imminent invasion by busily attending to the sites of the gods Delphi and Amphiaraus.¹² Repair of the idols probably took place throughout the region as part of the royal effort to curry favor from the deities and steady the local populace.

As Cyrus finally advanced on Babylon itself, the manufacture and installation of idols in the immediate vicinity also increased. Along with concentrating his military forces within the city, King Nabodinus erected increasing numbers of idols, even removing the statues belonging to outlying cities and ensconcing them in the capital. That the removal of idols had the reported effect of demoralizing the outlying cities points to the pressing demand for a greater supply of idols in a time of crisis.¹³ It is not hard to suppose, then, that the historical crisis surrounding Isaiah 41:5-10 was marked by feverish idol construction throughout the region.

In summary, the historical context of Isaiah 41:5-10 is one of widespread anxiety about national identity. The exiles of Israel had lost all the visible signs of their nationhood and faced an insecure future. This insecurity could only have intensified as they heard the pagan nations themselves fearing their own disintegration. And the note of fear was struck by the hammers and tongs of workmen busily constructing more idols to bolster the anxious populace.

which the authors term as much more a "metonymic" relation rather than a symbolic one.

¹¹ La Sor, *et. al.*, 386. Holladay, 141

¹² Cited by J. Muilenburg, *Interpreters Bible*, vol. V. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), 451

¹³ Bright, 360

EXEGESIS OF ISAIAH 41: 5-10

Literary Context

The literary context of the passage is a string of questions God submits for judgment. The author employs the motif of the court scene found throughout Isaiah and the Old Testament, a court where God acts both as judge and prosecutor.¹⁴ The series of questions in chapter 40 are all variants of "Who created the natural order?" (40:12,13,18,25). These and other cross examinations (40:27 "Why do you say, O Jacob...") are aimed directly at Israel. Interestingly, another account of idol construction similar to vv. 6-7 is inserted in the middle of these questions (40:19-20).

Chapter 41 opens with God summoning the "coastlands" (*'iyyim*) for yet another court case. This does not mean the passage is literally meant to address specific coastland nations. The term is a generic term to refer to all pagan nations, as evidenced by the ABC/A'C' parallel construction of 40:5: "The coastlands (*'iyyim*) have seen and are afraid / the ends of the earth (*qatash 'erets*) tremble."¹⁵ The court summons to the *'iyyim* is a literary device that continues the world-wide scope of the cosmic court case begun in chapter 40. The real audience, as v. 8 makes clear, remains Israel.

However, the judgment moves from the issue of who is behind the natural order to who is behind the political order (vv. 2-3). Who is the ultimate force behind Cyrus's disturbing rampage? The answer is the same: "Who has performed and done this, calling the generations from the beginning? I, the Lord, am first, and will be with the last" (v. 4). Yahweh, the creator and controller of nature in chapter 40, also creates and controls human history.

¹⁴ Y. Kaufmann, *The Babylonian Captivity and Deutero-Isaiah*, (New York: UAHC, 1970), 108-110

¹⁵ See also Motyer, 126

The Structure of the Passage

In vv. 5-7, then, the passage begins with a description of the pagan response to the verdict of history Yahweh himself has passed. Verse 8, "But you, Israel...", reveals the true purpose for depicting the courtroom drama and its aftermath: a direct message from God that will define just how unique His people is vis a vis the pagan nations, Vv. 9-10 then completes the contrasting definition.

The comparative nature of the passage -- and the integral part the idol factory scene plays -- can be best observed in its chiasmic structure.

A (vv. 5-6a) - The Universal Insecurity

B (vv. 6b-7) - The Pagan Response: The Idol Factory Creates and Certifies

C (v. 8) - Israel's Identity Declared

B' (v. 9) - Divine Response: God Creates and Certifies

A' (v. 10) - God's Assurance

The chiasmic links are drawn most tightly by the parallel diction:

A
The people "look" (*ra'ah*)
"fear" (*y'are*)

They "tremble" (*charad*)

They [must] "help the other" (*'azar*)

B
The workers "fasten" (*chazaq*) the idol

He "certifies" (*'amar*) the idol

A'
Do not "look about bewildered" (*sha'ah*)
"fear" (*y'are*)

I will "fortify" (*amats*); I will "uphold" you
(*tamask*)

I will "help" (*'azar*)

B'
I "fastened" (*chazaq*) you

I "certify" (*'amar*) that "You are my servant"

The Pagan Construction Project

As the structure reveals, the passage takes the basic form of a comparison between two creation accounts. The author underlines this comparison for the Jewish audience by contrasting how the workers from the ends of the earth (*qatash 'erets*) in vv. 5-7 can only create a statue of metal, while God has already created in Israel a nation of flesh and blood from *qatash 'erets* (v. 9). This evocation of Israel's identity via the patriarchs' pilgrimage from distant lands will reach its height in the middle of the chiasm, when the writer refers to the patriarchs.

As the product is completed, each side also declares or issues (*'amar*) a "certificate of manufacture" testifying to the product's true identity. The pagan certification is phrased with the highly suggestive declaration in v. 7, "It is good (*towb*)," appropriating the same phrase issued by God on the birth certificate of the world in Genesis 1. The connection seems to be deliberately drawn. In his purely technological analysis of the construction procedures described in v. 7, Fitzgerald argues persuasively that the craftsman is certifying that the completed statue stands soundly enough in the base for final installation.¹⁶ However, if the author merely wanted to communicate the sense of "standing soundly," a more appropriate term would seem (at least to this Hebrew illiterate poring through a concordance and dictionary!) to be *kuwn*, which Strong's Dictionary defines as "to be erect... made ready, right, set, be stable."¹⁷ The author seems to have gone out of his way to intimate that the idol makers seek to arrogate the divine role of ultimate creator and identifier. The factory scene reinforces that accusation by deliberately listing several types of skilled artisans like *charash* (a mason or metal fabricator), *tsaraph* (refiner), or *pttiysh* (goldsmith). This listing directly echoes -- albeit with a ridiculously hollow tone -- the

¹⁶ Fitzgerald, 436, 443-444. It should be noted that the NKJV, REB, and the NJB all miss what I perceive to be the intended reference to Gen. 1. Those versions translate the line as variously, "It is ready for the soldering" or "he declares the soldering to be sound." The NRSV and the NIV both translate the line, "It is good."

¹⁷ Strong's Dictionary word number 3559 (from Quickverse 3.0). *Kuwn* would certainly have been in the author's repertoire, appearing in the Isaianic corpus in 30:33.

descriptions of God in the preceding chapter as the master artisan of the universe. The men who measure out stone blocks or weigh gold ingots dare to usurp the one who "measures oceans in the hollow of his hand" and weighs mountains and nations "on the scales" (40:12,15).

And the object that the idolmaking impulse invariably turns toward is one's self. Creating a stable idol is equated with creating a stable sense of self. The passage conveys this dynamic by taking advantage of the semantic range of the word *chazaq*. *Chazaq* can be used to mean both emotionally strengthening a person and physically fortifying a structure. Thus, in v. 6, the author uses the word to describe how the pagan nations turn inward and say to themselves: "Fortify yourself (*chazaq*)!" And in the very next verse, the idol workers fasten (*chazaq*) the idol while they simultaneously fortify (*chazaq*) themselves. In contrast, of course, the divine creator in verse 9 fastens (*chazaq* again) Israel with their special identity out of the undifferentiated "ends of the earth."¹⁸ The real construction site, then, is located not within the temple, but within the people themselves.

The pagan construction project, however, is doomed to fail. The usurpers can never fasten an identity with any stable foundation. After all, if an idolater's need for a sturdier identity stems from weakness within that person's very self, how can he hope to create stability by his own efforts? How can an unsteady hand steady itself? The author points to this problem by making another verbal link between the idol makers' internal condition and their building project. The workers come from the "ends of the earth" so weak that they are trembling and quaking (*charad*). Yet, these quaking workers somehow still seek to fasten this idol that will not shake or fall (*mowt*)! Any autonomous creation of self will fall because chronic instability is built into the project.

¹⁸ The author's intention to load extra meaning on the word is demonstrated especially by his choice to describe God as "fastening" Israel from the ends of the earth. The verb more commonly used to describe the divine election is *bachar* (to choose) which is used, for instance, throughout Deuteronomy (i.e. 7:6-7, 14:2).

The author seems to imply that identity can only be secured by a source truly external to one's self. The deception of idolatry, of course, is that it provides such an external foundation; this is why the tangible presence of an idol statue is so important to pagans. But by focusing on idol making, Isaiah explodes that deception. The true existential source of idols is simply the shaky self.

The only true foundation can be built by Another, one who stands fully stable Himself and has already laid the foundation of the very universe (40:26). The passage again uses particular verbs that emphasize the contrasting sturdiness of God's construction project. In verse 10, God promises to "harden or establish" (*amats*) Israel. Like *chazaq*, *amats* is used to describe both physical construction (see Isaiah 44:10 and 2 Chronicles 24:13) and emotional support. God's action is also phrased as *tamask*, "holding you fast so can stay up." Even God's election of Israel is phrased to connote divine construction: *bachar* in 41:8 echoes the parallel idol making passage in 40:18-20, where the idol maker chooses (*bachar*) proper material so his idol "will not topple" (*mowt*: same in 41:7).

In summary, by depicting an idol making factory in contrast to God's creation, the author offers a critique of the pagan response to insecurity. If Israel is at all tempted to adopt the Babylonian worldview, the passage exposes that option as a failure. In the process, the author actually contributes an important insight into the phenomenon of idolatry. Idolatry is more commonly condemned in Scripture as false worship: placing one's trust or allegiance in something other than God. But focusing on the practice of idol making highlights an even deeper level of sin: the human attempt to supplant God as ultimate creator and definer of self.

Identity of Israel

The idol making scene also sets up a powerful description of how God creates Israel's identity. The enduring attraction of idol making is the offer of control. One can enjoy the illusion of being the one choosing, creating, and defining rather than being the one chosen, created, and defined. The absence of control over one's own identity is conversely the enduring trait of how God identifies His people. From the middle of the chiasm in verse 8, God suddenly appropriates all the active verbs. The only action assigned to the people is negative: "Do not fear, do not look around bewildered" (v. 10).

In v. 8, God -- not the autonomous self -- points to three pillars of Israel's identity He has built. Each would have restored the fragile exilic community back to its historical foundations. The first appellation, "Israel, my servant" (*ebed*) reaffirms not only their name as a nation, but also their national destiny. *Ebed* connects the present community to God's mandate from the Mosaic era that Israel be his *ebed* nation (i.e. Exodus 32:13, Deut. 9:27). The designation also hints at chapters 49-53, which will expand on the title of "servant of God" in unprecedented ways.

The second name, "Jacob, whom I have chosen," also addresses the exiles' sense of rootlessness. The title, "Jacob," was used as a shorthand for the whole patriarchal tradition.¹⁹ This tradition, which emphasized God's promise to multiply the patriarchs' descendants, would have reassured the tiny minority. God has already shown his ability to craft a great nation out of meager material. Moreover, Israel need not fear that they have been rejected (*ma'ac*) by God. They still bear the mark of the chosen.

The final identity that God affixes to Israel, "offspring of Abraham, my friend," is especially meaningful. At the most immediate level, the title completes the tracing of Israel's

¹⁹ E. Conrad, "Isaiah and the Abraham Connection" in *AJT*, (vol. 2:2 1988), 387

foundations back to Father Abraham himself. But the identification with Abraham would have encouraged the exiles in a more subtle way. For according to Scripture, Abraham himself had dwelt as an exile in roughly the same region. As an exile, he had trusted God to bring him to a home in the promised land. Certainly some listeners would have heard an intimation that Abraham's "offspring" would eventually follow in his footsteps to return to that land.

The particular phrase, "friend (*ahab*) of God" is very unique; as a phrase, it appears only one other time in the Old Testament, also in reference to Abraham, and interestingly, also in a book dated to the Exile (2 Chronicles 20:7). The common usage of *ahab* tends to refer to the type of friendship experienced between humans. The word connotes a special sense of "belovedness, affection, and intimacy" that seems deeper than the more widely used word for friend, *rea'*. Designating Israel as the offspring of one who could relate to God this intimately would have been a powerful affirmation of Israel's special standing.

The list of three titles in fact seems to follow a pattern of increasing intimacy with God. It moves from "servant" to "chosen" to "friend", or alternatively as one commentator has noted, from a political entity to a patriarchal tradition to an individual.²⁰ The pattern appears important enough for the author to repeat again, with an exchanged phrase that further elucidates the special *ahab* friendship:

v. 8	"...Israel, my servant"	vv. 9-10 "certify you, 'You are my servant.'"
	"...Jacob, whom I have chosen"	"I have chosen you"
	"...Abraham, my friend"	"I will hold you up with my righteous right hand"

This pattern of deepening intimacy emphasizes the deepening levels that undergird Israel's identity. At the absolute base of the foundation, Israel is a friend, personally held by God Himself.

Israel's nationhood and tradition -- as important as they are -- ultimately point to a direct, close,

²⁰ J. Walsh, "Summons To Judgment: A Close Reading of Isaiah XLI 1-20" in *VT* (vol XLIII, 3, 1993), 363

and immediate relationship with God. The exiles may have lost their political status, their land, and their temple, but they still "are" because they are loved by God.

Indeed, each of the titles in the pattern is significant only in the context of relationship. "Servant," "chosen," and "friend" have meaning only as servant, chosen, and friend of Another. Thus, Isaiah continues his treatment of human ontology begun in the idolmaking section. While people can never define themselves, they can know their true selves in relationship. We only know who we are, the passage concludes, in friendship with the One.

And since God is the creator of all that is natural, any attempt to craft a self outside of relationship with our creator will invariably seem artificial. It will feel false, a fabrication. In other words, personhood apart from a personal relationship with God will ultimately be impersonal. The last line of the passage (v. 10) depicts natural personhood in vivid contrast to artificial im-personhood. While the "friend of God" is held up by the very "right hand of God," the product of artifice is held up by iron nails.

RELEVANCE OF ISAIAH 41: 5-10 FOR MINISTRY TODAY

Several authors have recently commented on how our current era resembles the Exile.²¹ Our national identity as the people of the "American Dream" feels shaken as the promise of unlimited progress and prosperity seems indeed like a distant land that only our ancestors knew. Debt, AIDS, and environmental disasters loom on the horizon, threatening to disintegrate existence as we have known it. And those of a rigorous Christian faith can feel like a besieged minority; we look about and see an increasingly pagan society that has shaken loose from the

²¹ J. Middleton and B. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1995), chapter 6. See also Andy Crouch, "Forgive Us Our Debts, As We Forgive Our Debtors: the Gospel and My Generation," (unpublished, 1995), 7-10

centuries-old pretense of cultural Christianity. On a worldwide scale, post-modernism is deconstructing all the foundations of objective truth and morality.

The average college student experiences these epochal changes most profoundly in her sense of self. Middleton and Walsh aptly summarize the current experience of Exile:

With the loss of our secure modern self-image, we are submerged in a postmodern crisis of immense proportions. These days more and more people are asking themselves [the] question, 'Am I crazy?' And though the answer may not come back a resounding YES! many of us are honest enough to admit, 'I'm just not feeling myself anymore'... [The] postmodern self finds itself asking again, 'Who am I?' The question will not go away.²²

The most popular answer to this crisis has been, "You are who you choose to be!" The ethos of "You are your own rock" and "Express Yourself" rules the thought of the day and the commercial airwaves at night. The bookshelves are lined with titles like "Uncovering The Sacred Self," "Make The Most of Who You Are," and other explicit manuals for the construction of self.

But the actual experience of autonomous creation proves its own falseness. As Robert Bellah has documented, the one who conceives of his own identity as merely a product of his choice invariably is the one most needy of pre-fabricated identities.²³ As Middleton and Walsh explain: "A constantly reconstructible self with no stable core requires a world of fleeting images to provide material for its reconstruction. Having no substance in itself, the saturated self must be constantly fed with images that it can take up, mimic, be entertained by and then discard. Television, of course, is custom-built for this task."²⁴ The electronic media thus acts as today's idol factory, busily crafting identities and nailing them on our screens.

But these pre-fabricated images prove as unstable today as idols were in Isaiah's day. They ultimately feel artificial and contrived. It is no surprise that this generation, which possesses unprecedented autonomy to define the self, also hungers insatiably for a sense of genuineness and

²² Middleton and Walsh, pp. 51-52

²³ *Habits of The Heart*, (Berkeley: Univ. of Ca. Press, 1985)

²⁴ Middleton and Walsh, 54

naturalness. Tired of the cool surface of electronic metal and nail, we long for the warm hand of a friend.

My intention is not to repaint the postmodern landscape. I merely wish to point out that our era presents nothing truly new, and our ministry does not need to be original. The prophets of the exile already stand as models of faithful witness to an era of decentered identities. And in particular, I believe Isaiah's distinctive focus on idol making -- and not merely idol worship -- helpfully guides our eyes as we analyze our ministries.

My own experience these past six years has demonstrated (to me, at least) the importance of Isaiah's subtle but helpful distinction between idol making and idol worship. As an undergraduate at Harvard, I was the beneficiary of a ministry philosophy that emphasized repentance from idol worship. Scripture study and teaching exposed ways we falsely believed in the rewards of worshiping money, power, academic achievement, sex, or any other idol of the Harvard pantheon. Instead, we were called to believe that following Jesus, the true God, would provide ultimate satisfaction for our deepest hopes. Indeed, the hallmark of the ministry philosophy was enlightened self-interest as the explicit motivation for obedience of Jesus. In its classic Doctor analogy, we were motivated to obey Jesus' "prescriptions" in order to obtain true health. Moreover, along the lines of that analogy, repentance meant faithfully obeying the regimen over an extended period of time (ultimately our whole life).

This ministry and philosophy changed the trajectory of my life and the lives of many of my peers. It contained -- and still does -- much of the Gospel's truth, and I still follow much of it in my current ministry. However, this ministry philosophy assumes throughout a relatively strong sense of self. Enlightened self-interest only works if there is a "self" in place. The power of the ministry's call away from false idols to obeying the true God rested on harnessing well defined

ambitions, desires, and hopes -- all central components of identity. Even the Doctor analogy perhaps unintentionally conveys this sense: the patient-doctor relationship, after all, is one of our society's most strongly bounded exchanges, with clearly defined roles. And it is generally assumed that the patient arrives at the doctor's office with enough agency and will to follow the prescriptions over time.

This assumption of a strong self carried over into ministry strategy. For instance, my staffworker believed strongly that the team setting itself served as a key discipleship tool. His metaphor was a tumbler: solid selves rubbing against each other to produce a more polished disciple. It is no surprise that our ministry enjoyed the most success with students like myself: individuals who entered as motivated, relatively strong personalities, and could withstand and benefit from bumping against others like themselves.

To put it in grammatical terms, a ministry focused on combatting idol worship tends to assume that the main problem -- and choice -- lies in the object (idol or Jesus) and the verb (to practice idolatry or discipleship), not the subject. But weakly constructed subjects seem the norm as I have moved to a campus more representative of the wider student population. With such weak subjects, appeals to their "enlightened self-interest" dissipate into the confusion of "Who is my self? What *do* I really desire?" Prescriptions for discipleship that I outline are received by students as means to gain my approval, in the hopes that I will tell them who they are. And sustained action in any direction -- let alone the obedience of difficult commands -- is frequently drowned by emotional turmoil. And simply putting these individuals into a team setting can produce just more bruises and breaks. In short, if my ministry is to successfully direct students away from idols to Jesus, my ministry must also facilitate the formation of their basic sense of self.

While I am still trying to flesh out exactly what this means for my ministry practice, Isaiah 41: 5-10 points me in an important direction. First, my friendship with my students will be the most powerful vehicle for any of my efforts. If idols are so attractive because they provide a tangible incarnation of the self-constructed identity, then the Body of Christ (and its sacraments) provides the equivalent for the God-constructed identity. People only come to know who they are in relationship. Thus, as a leader within that Body, I need to offer them the type of identity-forming friendship that God offers. As their friend, I need to affirm, remind, and call out their true created selves.

But lest I allow myself to be made into the students' idol, I must constantly bring them to the cross of Christ. Scripture makes clear that the divine construction of human identity finds final completion only in our union with Christ, joining in his death and resurrection (Romans 6:5-11). As I befriend, pray with, counsel, and teach students, I must repeatedly bring them into the real presence of our crucified Lord. Only as they take their place with Jesus -- bringing to the cross the pain, sin, and false selves from their past -- will they become the servant, the chosen, and the friend of God. In the end, His nails are the only ones that hold any of us up.

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