

Hosea 13:1-3

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/hos/hos-13/hosea-131-3/>

The LORD states that Ephraim's devotion to the pagan fertility god Baal, and resulting violation of His covenant with Him, will cause the nation to disappear quickly like smoke pouring out a chimney.

The LORD began this chapter with a historical review in which He contrasted Ephraim's glorious past to his present condition marked by spiritual idolatry. In the past, *when Ephraim spoke, there was trembling* (vs 1). As the most prominent tribe of the northern kingdom, *Ephraim*, which means "doubly fruitful," was highly respected (Genesis 41:52). When he *spoke* people listened. There was great respect, or fear, applied to *Ephraim*, which is described by *there was trembling*.

In fact, the book of 1 Kings says that Jeroboam I, the first king of the divided kingdom in the north, was from the tribe of *Ephraim* (1 Kings. 11:26, 12:25). In those days, *Ephraim* exercised authority in Israel and became the leading tribe. As a result, he was filled with arrogance. He *exalted himself in Israel*. But *through Baal he did wrong and died* (vs 1).

This statement that *he did wrong and died* could refer to Jeroboam I, who set up pagan idol worship in Israel (1 Kings 12: 28-33). Because of Jeroboam's wickedness, God sent to his house a prophecy that his dynasty would end brutally as a result of his wanton disregard for God's commands (1 Kings 15:29-30). Jeroboam served *Baal*. He did not follow Israel's covenant God, who promised to bless Him greatly if He followed in His ways (1 Kings 11:38). However, Jeroboam *did wrong* and his dynasty *died*. Jeroboam would be a symbol of Ephraim as a whole. The entire nation is about to experience the same sort of brutal end.

Since *Baal* was supposedly the god of fertility and life, *Ephraim* turned to him. However, instead of achieving life, *Ephraim* got death. The irony of the situation is that *Ephraim*, the once doubly fruitful, ceased to be productive because of his unwise decision to abandon the true God in favor of *Baal*. Instead of learning the object lesson from the experience of Jeroboam, Israel persisted in their sin and disobedience to the covenant by which they had agreed to live (Exodus 19:8).

Soon after turning to *Baal*, *Ephraim's* situation deteriorated drastically, *And now they sin more and more, and make for themselves molten images, idols skillfully made from silver* (vs 2). The phrase *now they sin more and more* could refer to the kings like Omri, who was elevated to be king of Israel over the house of Jeroboam. Jeroboam's lineage was removed due to worship of *images* and *idols* and the sensual self-seeking and exploitation that attends such worship. God's prophet Jehu pronounced God's judgment on the house of Jeroboam for disobedience. Although Jeroboam's descendants saw God's judgement when Omri ascended to the throne of Israel, Omri sinned *more and more*, doing more wickedness even than before (1 Kings 16:25)

These *idols* that the Israelites worshipped were *molten* pieces of art, *skillfully made*. This ought to demonstrate to the Israelites two opposing realities: 1) it is a man-made thing, so therefore

can't really be divine and 2) they are devoting time, attention, and treasure to something that is false.

Why would Israel devote such resources and attention to idols? Pagan idol worship appealed to sensual senses, even including sexually immoral practices. It also appealed to the human desire to live out an illusion of control; the basic proposition of idolatry is that if the idol is appeased, the petitioner can have what they desire. It should be obvious this is not true, since the idol is hand-made (Isaiah 44:16-18). However, the desire for the illusion of control often overtakes reason.

The Ten Commandments forbade the making of images (Exodus 20:4, Deuteronomy 5:8). The people of God were commanded not to

“make a graven image for yourselves in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the sky, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water below the earth.”
(Deuteronomy 4:16–18)

To manufacture and worship such idols would violate the greatest command of God's covenant with Israel (Deuteronomy 6:5).

The worship of an image was the gateway to rationalizing pagan practices of addictive sensuality and exploitation. The violation of the first and greatest commandment would naturally lead to a violation of the second greatest command, to love one's neighbor as oneself (Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 22:37-39). The self-rationalization and self-focused sensuality that would result from pagan idol worship would naturally preclude the development of an external focus of love and service toward others.

In spite of this prohibition to worship idols, *Ephraim's* lawlessness and idolatrous devotion to the pagan fertility god *Baal* caused the people to fashion *idols*: And *all of them were the work of craftsmen* (vs 2). In spite of Israel's attention to craftsmanship, it was still a reality that the statues were powerless, motionless, and mute (Psalm 115:4–7). The fact that Israel employed an intentional acquisition and application of the skills necessary to manufacture these images shows *Ephraim's* deliberate choice to corrupt his worship with paganism.

Such an evil intent led *Ephraim* to say of these idols, '*Let the men who sacrifice kiss the calves!*' Apparently, to *kiss the calves* was believed to provide a blessing to the worshipper. Hence, the belief was that the calf would do the bidding of the worshipper. That Israel worshipped *calves* likely harkens back to King Jeroboam I, the first of the northern kingdom's kings. He instructed his newly formed kingdom to worship calves rather than go to Jerusalem for festivals (as commanded by God in their covenant) lest his subjects restore their devotion to the House of David, and rejoin Judah to again form a united kingdom (1 Kings 12:26-30).

In ancient Israel, the kissing of an idol (*kiss the calves*) was an act of adoration, submission, and allegiance (1 Kings. 19:18). So, as *Ephraim* fashioned the calves, he invited the people to pay

homage to them and submit to them during cult sacrifices. Therefore, the LORD announced judgment on *Ephraim* and described the fleeting nature of its life as a nation using four powerful comparisons.

The phrase *Let the men who sacrifice kiss the calves* can also be translated as “Those who sacrifice man may kiss the calves.” Jewish tradition understands this verse to refer to the pagan worship of Molech, which involved human sacrifice. Apparently the priests of Molech would say “Whoever sacrifices his son to the idol is worthy of kissing the calf” for he has offered him a precious gift. The end result is the same, Israel had fallen into worshipping a man-made creation in order to live an illusion that they controlled spiritual powers that would give them power to gain what they desired.

In the first two comparisons, God said, *They will be like the morning cloud and like dew which soon disappears* (vs 3). Both *cloud* and *dew* (moisture condensed upon a cool surface) are images of brevity because they evaporate quickly. This makes them a symbol for something that is transient and ephemeral. Thus, the Suzerain (Ruler) God asserts that *Ephraim*’s life as a nation would disappear as quickly as *morning cloud* (fog) or *dew* before sunlight. Their nationhood would soon end, as Assyria would overrun and exile them (2 Kings 17:20-23).

The last two comparisons added more emphasis to the ephemeral nature of *Ephraim*’s life. Here, the Suzerain God described *Ephraim* as *chaff which is blown away from the threshing floor* and as *smoke from a chimney* (vs 3). The term *chaff* illustrates something that is trivial and worthless (Job 41:28). The *threshing floor* was a hard, level surface on which farmers would bring their grain to be crushed under the feet of the oxen or by a threshing sledge. The worthless residue on the *floor* would move quickly as the winds blew it away (*chaff*).

Like *chaff*, *smoke from a chimney* is also ephemeral. God’s point here is that just as the residue from threshing (*chaff*) is driven away by the wind blowing across *the threshing floor* (Psalm 1:4) or as *smoke* escapes through a window, *Ephraim* would disappear suddenly and quickly from the scene. *Ephraim*’s life and fertility would be reduced to nothing because he worshiped idols that are worthless.

Biblical Text

¹When Ephraim spoke, there was trembling.

He exalted himself in Israel,

But through Baal he did wrong and died.

²And now they sin more and more,

And make for themselves molten images,

Idols skillfully made from their silver,

All of them the work of craftsmen.

They say of them, “Let the men who sacrifice kiss the calves!”

³Therefore they will be like the morning cloud

And like dew which soon disappears,

Like chaff which is blown away from the threshing floor

And like smoke from a chimney.