

Are Christmas Trees Forbidden by Jeremiah?

By Pastor Tony Jasper

Jeremiah 10:2-4

Thus says the Lord: "Do not learn the way of the Gentiles; do not be dismayed at the signs of heaven, for the Gentiles are dismayed at them. For the customs of the peoples are futile; for one cuts a tree from the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the ax. They decorate it with silver and gold; they fasten it with nails and hammers so that it will not topple.

Recently an interpretation was given to this passage in Jeremiah 10 claiming it was speaking against the practice of decorating a home (or church) with Christmas trees. Using this passage, it was asserted, rather forcefully, that Christmas trees, because they are cut down, propped up, and decorated with gold and silver, are a form of idolatry and are therefore not acceptable for the Christian. The information seems to fit. Christmas trees are cut from the forest, propped up, decorated with shiny metals, etc. But just because the information fits one's private interpretation, does not necessarily mean one has "rightly divided" the passage (2 Timothy 2:15).

For example, the same information also fits the work of a carpenter, who cuts down trees, fashions furniture and homes in such a way so they will not topple, and decorates them with metallic fixtures—nails, decorations, braces lighting fixtures, etc. It also fits the work of wooden ship builders, complete with metal tackle and fittings, and keels so as not to topple, etc. Why aren't these interpretations equally correct? Why isn't anyone sounding the alarm against carpenters or ship builders doing their work since their very actions are condemned right here in the Bible? Why is it a Christmas tree and not a night stand, or a Tudor home, or a yacht that is being condemned?

One of the things that is missing from those who are quick to add their own interpretations to this passage, or any passage for that matter, is that they fail to ask a very important question. They tend to ask too soon, "What does this mean to us?", when they must first answer the question, "What did it mean to them? In our passage what was Jeremiah addressing? What was happening in his day that required him to write these words?" Or maybe more fundamentally, "Was Jeremiah's message given for a future generation addressing a situation that did not yet exist? Or was he addressing something happening in his day?" We have no right to produce our own interpretations of Scripture (2 Peter 1:20). Doing so will not lead to enlightenment, but to our own destruction (2 Peter 3:16; Revelation 22:18-19)? Our interpretations are to be found *in the Bible* (Isiah 8:20). We do not have to form our conclusions based on what is in our own minds, when we can read the passage in its biblical and historical context and come to better conclusions.

For us to rightly understand and interpret a passage of the Bible, there are several things we will need to do. One is to read the passage in its biblical context. Another is to compare scripture with scripture. A third is to seek confirmation from other inspired writers and outside scholarly authors. And above all, we are going to have to pray for the Holy Spirit to give us a teachable spirit, for it is He who is commissioned to lead us into all truth. And the hope is we will arrive at truth when we are teachable and humble enough to follow His lead.

There is a major obstacle in the way however. An interpretation has already been given that will not stand up to the scrutiny of this process of discovery. And if we cling to this interpretation, rather than follow the Spirit's lead through comparative Bible study, we will find that we have made an idol, not out of wood or gold or silver, but out of our own ideas. May God help us to learn and follow. Holy Spirit, please help us to learn and follow.

The Immediate Context

The immediate context of Jeremiah 10:2-4 must include verses 1 and 5 at least, which suggest that Israel is being addressed (not America), and that it is not a decorative tree used in a home at the time of a holiday at issue, but in fact an idol fashioned after, and used in the worship of, a pagan god.

Hear the word which the Lord speaks to you, **O house of Israel** (Jeremiah 10:1, emphasis mine).

They (the carved and decorated trees) are upright, like a palm tree, and **they cannot speak; they must be carried**, because **they cannot go by themselves**. Do not be afraid of them, for **they cannot do evil, nor can they do any good** (v. 5, emphasis mine).

So it is clear Jeremiah was addressing Israel of his day, and that his address has something to do with things that were made which cannot speak, must be carried about, cannot get around on their own, and can do neither good or evil no matter how much people hope or fear they can. Jeremiah himself tells us he is speaking of false gods (v. 11), and molten images (v. 14). The themes of not being able to speak, not being able to move about on their own, having to be carried around, and not being able to do anything (good or evil), is repeatedly addressed in the prophets when they confronted the practice of idolatry.

The Broader Context of the book of Jeremiah suggests that idolatry was a major problem in the kingdom at the time (8:19; 22:28; 43:13; 50:2, 38; 51:47, 52). The idolatry of Israel had gone on for generations, and if it continued Jeremiah's warning was it would lead them into exile. These idols were made of wood, propped up so they would not topple over, fashioned in some instances with gold and silver fittings, some decorated with gold and silver, and still others when fashioned for the rich were made of solid gold or silver.

The Historical Context

Isaiah addresses this same practice several times at least a century before Jeremiah, using the exact same language to describe the practice of idolatry. Isaiah 40:18-20 serves as one example.

To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare to Him? The workman molds an image, the goldsmith overspreads it with gold, and the silversmith casts silver chains. Whoever is too impoverished for such a contribution chooses a tree that will not rot; he seeks for himself a skillful workman to prepare a carved image that will not totter.

It is not difficult to see that Jeremiah borrowed his language from Isaiah to address the same idolatrous situation. In Isaiah's day the poor had carved wooden images. Those who could afford them decorated these wooden idols with gold and silver. And the truly rich had molded solid gold images with silver chains. Artisans were hired to fashion these in a manner that they would

not topple over. They had to be propped up. God, through Isaiah, rightly questioned why they practiced idolatry? Why should not His people believe in the One who fashioned them, who bears them on His shoulders, and who props them up? And since God alone is God, then why did they not serve Him?

Isaiah 41:7-10

So the craftsman encouraged the goldsmith; he who smooths with the hammer inspired him who strikes the anvil, saying, "It is ready for the soldering"; then he fastened it with pegs, that it might not totter. But you, Israel, are My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the descendants of Abraham My friend. You whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest regions, and said to you, "You are My servant, I have chosen you and have not cast you away: fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand."

Again the language used here is the same as in Jeremiah: craftsmen, hammer, fastened with pegs, not totter, etc. and in Isaiah it is a clear reference against idol making and idol worship. The prophet is asking his people why it is they uphold their gods with fastened pegs, when it is God who strengthens, helps, and upholds them with His righteous right hand! The passage in Isaiah 46:1-10 is of this same character.

Bel bows down, Nebo stoops; their idols were on the beasts and on the cattle. Your carriages were heavily loaded, a burden to the weary beast. They stoop, they bow down together; they could not deliver the burden, but have themselves gone into captivity. Listen to Me, O house of Jacob, and all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been upheld by Me from birth, who have been carried from the womb: even to your old age, I am He, and even to gray hairs I will carry you! I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you. To whom will you liken Me, and make Me equal and compare Me, that we should be alike? They lavish gold out of the bag, and weigh silver on the scales; they hire a goldsmith, and he makes it a god; they prostrate themselves, yes, they worship. They bear it on the shoulder, they carry it and set it in its place, and it stands; from its place it shall not move. Though one cries out to it, yet it cannot answer nor save him out of his trouble. Remember this, and show yourselves men; recall to mind, O you transgressors. Remember the former things of old, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure.'

There is no comparison to be made between the real God who made man, and the man made gods, who...well...have never done anything. It was incongruent to believe in gods which must be carried about, when one may believe in the God who carries them. Idols cannot answer our prayers, or deliver us from trouble. Only God can. This was Isaiah's and Jeremiah's point. Isaiah wrote to persuade Israel to abandon their idols, and embrace the true God. Jeremiah follows the ministry of Isaiah with the same message, adding the element of impending judgment if they would not heed the call to immediately abandon their idols and return to the true God.

Application

To suggest Jeremiah's passage is addressing the use of Christmas trees would be imposing on the scriptures an idea that it was not addressing. First of all in the time of Jeremiah, Christmas trees

did not yet exist. Nor is there any evidence they were ever prevalent in the area of Israel. To suggest Christmas trees were in view in Jeremiah 10:2-4 is to ignore the immediate context of Jeremiah 10:1-16, the broader context of the book of Jeremiah, and the historical context of the day. Idolatry had been practiced for hundreds of years, but had been running rampant since the days of Isaiah. Left unchecked, the warning of Jeremiah was the nation would be forced into exile. Since they had abandoned the true God for false gods, God would give them up to the consequences of their own choosing. Jeremiah was addressing an urgent situation in his day (idols) in his land (Israel), not addressing a future practice (Christmas trees) in a distant foreign land (America) when neither even existed yet. He was concerned about idol worship not home decorations.

To suggest to a Christian that Christmas trees are objects of worship, providing in the Christian home a god which they bow down to, worship, depend on for help, pray to, ask favors of, or any other such baseless accusation, is reprehensible. The attempt to make Christmas trees out to be some kind of modern day idols, is without Biblical support. (By the way, building structures and ships, such as ones carpenters and ship builders make, *is* condemned in the Bible as a form of idolatry. See Isaiah 2:16, 17; and 4:8. Ironic, isn't it?)

We would not want to make the case that the Christmas holiday as traditionally practiced in America is not without examples of excess and idolatry. This would be equally baseless. But let us not fight where the battle isn't (Christmas trees) and jeopardize our opportunity to address the battle where it really exists: the tendency of the human heart to depend on things, or money, or pleasure, or self—which are real examples of idolatry—rather than on God.

Additional Authoritative Affirmation

This harmonizes with trustworthy Bible commentaries.

The IVP Bible Background Commentary of the Old Testament entitles this section of Jeremiah 10:1-25 "Contrast between the Lord and the Idols". Its commentary on verses 3-4 simply reads "see comments on Isaiah 40:19; 41:7; 44:10-14." Looking at the comments in Isaiah makes it crystal clear that idolatry was in view, not decorative trees in the home. These idols were fashioned to represent deities, and used as objects of worship, recipients of prayers, etc.

The Pulpit Commentary (vol. 11, pp. 268-274) makes similar links between our passage in Jeremiah 10 to Isaiah 40:19, 20; 41:7; 46:7; 41:23. Under the heading "The Folly of Paganism" (p. 271) the commentary says, "The Jews were tempted to fear astrological portents (ver. 2) and idol-powers (ver. 5). Yet a little reflection was enough to show that these things were impotent for harm." And on page 274 we read yet another heading commenting on verse 5, "The helplessness of heathen gods a conclusive argument against them." The material rendered under this heading speaks of the futility of worshipping "idols", because they are just wood and gold and silver, and their "divine attributes" are nothing more than "the tendency to transfer subjective ideas to objects."

The SDA Bible Commentary agrees with the witness of these commentaries, adding: "**Cutteth a tree.** The worthlessness of the idols is forcefully demonstrated by calling attention to the origin of these idols (see Isa. 40:20; 45:20). **Workman.** An 'artificer' or a 'craftsman', from a verb meaning to 'plow' or 'devise'. In the hands of such a craftsman the forest tree becomes a work of

art. **They deck it.** The carved figure is next adorned with precious metals (see Isa. 40:19). **Fasten it.** The idol is nailed to some wall or pillar to make it stand upright and to keep it from falling (see Isa. 41:7)."

The implications from these commentaries are clear. Idols, figures, images, objects of worship are in view in Jeremiah 10. It is not just a cut tree, but an artisan-crafted work of wooden art, decorated by a smith with hammered gold and silver for the purpose of idol worship. This artisan or workman is missing from the Christmas Tree interpretation. Isaiah is referenced throughout this segment in the commentaries, because it forms an obvious backdrop for Jeremiah's appeal to the Israelites to abandon their idols, or exhaust the forbearance of God and suffer the consequences.

Similar interpretations are provided by a myriad of conservative Bible commentaries (*Word Biblical Commentary*, *Matthew Henry Commentary*, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*), and even liberal commentaries (like the *One Volume Bible Commentary*) and all say the same thing about the passage in Jeremiah 10: "idols", "Isaiah 40-44", "false gods".

It is also abundantly clear that Ellen White viewed the issue addressed in Jeremiah 10 as idol worship. In *Prophets and Kings* she speaks of the connection between Jeremiah 10 and "idolatrous practices" and "worshippers of idols" (*Prophets and Kings*, pp. 96-97).

To apply this passage to Christmas trees because it "seems to fit" the evidence is like trying to study the artistic techniques used to create the Mona Lisa when one is nearly blind. Rather than flying blindly by interpreting the passage a certain way because one wants it to mean that so much, it would be better to abandon the preconceived idea altogether, and read, and study, and interpret the passage biblically, wiping the interpretive slate clean, prayerfully paying attention to the details provided in the passage, drawing conclusions based on the emerging evidence, and then making one's application.

Let's add one thing more to this discussion before we close...in the Bible the trees—evergreens and deciduous—are tools to worship God. Psalm 96:9-12 says,

Oh, worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness! Tremble before Him, all the earth. Say among the nations, "The Lord reigns; The world also is firmly established, It shall not be moved; He shall judge the peoples righteously." Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad; Let the sea roar, and all its fullness; Let the field be joyful, and all that is in it. Then all the trees of the woods will rejoice before the Lord.

In this passage there is no inconsistency between worshipping the Lord in the beauty of holiness and the trees and woods adding to our rejoicing before the Lord.

In Psalm 104:16, 17 the cedars of Lebanon and the fir trees are called "trees of the Lord". This is at a time when the Canaanites used these very trees to construct their ashtoreths (wooden idols likened to the ones condemned in the time of Isaiah and Jeremiah).

And then you have Psalm 148:7-13.

Praise the Lord from the earth, you great sea creatures and all the depths; Fire and hail, snow and clouds; stormy wind, fulfilling His word; mountains and all hills; fruitful trees and all cedars; Beasts and all cattle; Creeping things and flying fowl; Kings of the earth and all peoples; Princes and all judges of the earth; Both young men and maidens; Old men and children. Let them praise the name of the Lord, For His name alone is exalted; His glory is above the earth and heaven.

I do not know if you are reading this passage like I am, but each of these things mentioned in these verses, the hail, the stormy winds, the mountains, the trees, the animals were all *objects* of worship in the days of the Psalmist. But according to the Psalter everything that has ever been made, including "the fruitful trees and cedars" (v. 9), it says in verse 13 is to be a tool to praise the name of the Lord.

Do you know what this tells me? It doesn't matter if these elements of nature have pagan roots. If the pagans are using these things to worship their false gods they do so wrongfully. Everything God has made is to be used in the worship of God. Never are we to worship the created, or the creature. The second commandment forbids the use of any idol in our worship of God, or to worship idols at all. Only the Creator is worthy of our worship, and all things He made are an aid to our worship of Him. They are to direct our attention to Him. The evergreen tree tells us something about the true God. It bears His creative stamp. And we are to see that quality of God He put in that tree, and worship not it, but God. Pagans erred in their worship because they took a *tool* in the worship of the true God, and fashioned it into an *object* of worship of a false god. The same cannot be said of a Christmas tree because it is not fashioned after a form of anything, it is not an object of worship, it is not prayed to, or relied upon, nor indeed has it ever been.