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Does Jeremiah 10:1-5 Speak against Having a Christmas Tree?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about whether Jeremiah 10:1-5 speaks against having a Christmas tree, whether celebrating Christmas is extra-biblical and we should be celebrating Israelite feasts and festivals instead, and why Zechariah was disciplined for questioning the message he received from an angel but Mary wasn't.

- * Does Jeremiah 10:1-5 speak against having a Christmas tree?
- * Is celebrating Christmas and Easter extra-biblical? Are Christians grafted into Israel and should therefore be celebrating the Israelite feasts and festivals?
- * Why was Zechariah disciplined and made mute for questioning the angel's message about his wife conceiving due to her age, but Mary wasn't disciplined for questioning her pregnancy due to her virginity?

Transcript

This is Amy Hall. Welcome to the hashtag SDR-esque podcast from Stand to Reason, where I ask Greg Coco questions that come from you, and then he answers, and then I respond, and then we go into the next question. That's how it works.

Alright, so Greg, since we are in, in December now, I have a couple questions about Christmas. Alright, so let's take this first one from Millie. Is it okay to have a Christmas tree, even though in Jeremiah 10, 1 through 5, it speaks against it? I've always had Christmas trees at home as a non-believer.

As a follower of Christ, now an adulthood, I love the idea of having a Christmas tree, but I feel convicted that I need to first study on this. So, a question just occurs to me, and it's not unusual to have this question during this time, but the question that occurs to me is, have you ever gone to a, excuse me, an art museum? Well, an art museum, you have all kinds of statues. Venus de Milo, famously, for example.

And it, I don't, I have actually never heard anybody object to statuary as a form of art, okay? When images were, graven images were prohibited in the Mosaic Law, they were images that were, that prohibited regarding the Jews, because images in that time were objects of worship, and the cultures around them did this, and they were told not to make any of these kind of images that couldn't do the thing that only God could do, all right? And so, nowadays, we are not involved in an idolatrous culture like that, okay? And so, this is why no one thinks pretty much that Venus de Milo is an example, is a violation of the Ten Commandments, having a sculpture of a woman in this particular case, all right? So, with that in mind, let's read this passage, and here the word of the Lord, which the Lord speaks to you, O house of Israel, Jeremiah chapter 10, and the first few verses, thus says the Lord God, do not learn the way of the nations, and do not be terrified by the signs of the heavens, although the nations are terrified by them, okay? Because, I'm sorry, for the customs of the people are delusion, because it is wood cut from the forest, the work of the hands of a craftsman with a cutting tool. I just want to make an observation here. In the first couple verses, he says, don't learn the way of the nations who are terrified about the heavens.

So, whatever they're doing with this craftsman, they are trying to control what's going on in the heavens. And maybe this is astrology, and they are going to make an appeal using this thing, the fashion with their hands, to protect them in some way, from the thing that isn't going to help anybody, whatever they're doing, that's not going to help them, because the wood, why not? Because it's wood cut from the forest, the work of the hands of a craftsman with a cutting tool. They decorate it with silver and with gold, they fasten it with nails and with hammers so that it will not totter.

Now, that phrase sounds kind of like Christmas trees when taking an isolation, but you can't take this in isolation because the whole context here that makes it clear what they're talking about. Verse 5, like a scarecrow in a cucumber field, are they? And they cannot speak. They must be carried because they cannot walk, do not fear them, for they can do no harm, nor can they do any good.

Now, this first five makes it really clear that the people are hoping to accomplish something with this thing they made with their hands and decorate with their hands, but God says, don't worry about it. They got to carry the thing around. I can't walk, I can't speak, can't think, can't do anything.

Another passage is it'll say, and those who make them are like them. In fact, I remember reading that in Jeremiah just recently, Isaiah has a similar kind of comment. They aren't gods is what the Lord is saying.

They aren't gods. They can't do for you anything. They can't protect you.

They can't provide for you. They're just wood. You're fashionable.

You're saying your hand. You take the stuff that you clean off it and then you burn it in the fire. Other passages say this kind of thing.

This is crazy to do this kind of thing. There is no, in my mind, there is no application of this passage to Christmas trees, because nothing about this passage is similar to the practice of having a Christmas tree except for cutting the wood and decorating it and fastening it so it doesn't fall over. The context there makes it really clear that people are using these trees that they're decorating and fastening so it doesn't fall over as a kind of fetish that is something that is going to protect them from the other gods that they're afraid of, or maybe the stars that they're afraid of, and now they're doing this so they'll have this protective thing that they fashion with their own hands.

It's almost comical the way God refers to these kinds of idols. Like another passage says, they have eyes they can't see. They have ears they can't hear.

They have mouths they can't speak. They're dumb basically. Those who make them are like them.

There's a judge coming there, an assessment from the prophet in that passage. We have a very condemnation of having a Christmas tree. If it were, then anything that you decorate, any bushes you decorate, your bushes outside of your house, a lot of people do that.

What about Venus de Milo? There's any image that's being made. It's being made in a totally different, for a totally different purpose, in an environment where no one is tempted to bow down to them. Now, I do think there are religious traditions that violate this principle, not with a Christmas tree though.

They make images that are the focus of de facto worship and even affection of people. They knelt on in front of these images and they pray to these images. And I think that's saying, well, it's not the image we're praying to, but the person the image represents.

This doesn't help. It's interesting that a lot of times there are people who will take the same image, then a real small thing, put it on a lanyard and hang it from their mirror. Why are you doing that? Well, that protects them.

So they think. So it's clear that they're looking to the physical thing to represent a kind of care and protection that the writer here, Jeremiah, God speaking through him, makes clear is not going to do anything for them. I think you're exactly right, Greg.

I think verse five makes this clear because the point is they think that they can speak or do harm or do things. Nobody thinks the Christmas tree is doing anything. Nobody's worshipping the Christmas tree.

What this passage is against is idols, not decorations, as you pointed out. That's a good way to put it. And, you know, I would say also, if this were about Christmas trees, then what would you say about somebody who made a wooden doll? They fashioned a doll out of wood, they make clothes for it, they decorate it, but it's not an idol.

And so this doesn't apply to that either. It's not an idol and there's no object of veneration. So all the Christmas tree is, is a decoration.

And unless you're going to say that no decorations are allowed in your house, there's no reason to think that Christmas trees aren't allowed because nobody is worshipping Christmas trees. That's right. And on the, I mean, the opposite is true that these Christmas trees are pointing to Christ.

They're celebrations of the incarnation. And they're there to help us to bring beauty into our house and to, you know, to help us to celebrate it's all pointing to Christ. It's not pointing away from him and we're not worshipping it.

So yeah, that's where people view Christmas in a theologically robust way. That's the case. A lot of people just put them up because it's that time of year.

But in neither case is an example of idolatry. And by the way, if we're going to read it that way, what do we make of scarecrows? It says right there. Verse five, like a scarecrow in a cucumber field, are they? So why not condemn scarecrows for the same reasons? It's mentioned in this passage disparagingly, you know, because the scarecrow can't speak or, or it must be carried.

It cannot walk. Don't fear them. It says they're, they're in consequential for spiritual as a spiritual of in any for spiritual value.

And therefore, don't worry about them. Don't fear them. And that's, but that's for those who are looking at it in a spiritual way, looking to get some spiritual benefit out of it.

And incidentally, Greg, I you mentioned that other religions have idols. If you go look at the, if anyone's ever been to a Hare Krishna temple, there's one actually, I think it's in Venice or Culver City here. And they actually sell idols.

They sell gods. I think they sell them on their website or they, but they at least have them and they do decorate them and they do dress them up. And you can purchase them.

And they call them their gods. So it really, it's still happening out there. It's just not what Christmas trees are.

Okay, here's another question from Natasha. Is celebrating Christmas and Easter extra biblical? Are Christians grafted into Israel and should therefore be celebrating the

Israelite feasts and festivals? My friend is considering this, but I disagree. But I'd like to know more about how to respond.

Well, was the, was the question about whether it's extra biblical? Yes. Well, the answer to that is yes. Anything that's not spoken of in the Bible is extra biblical.

Okay. And I make a distinction between things being unbiblical and non-biblical. Okay.

So now I've got to try to remember which ones which unbiblical would be against the Bible, right? Extra biblical is just not in the Bible. Yeah, I would say unbiblical means it's not in the Bible and non-biblical means it's against the Bible, something like that. I think it's the way I've used it.

But in any of that, there is a distinction and one can figure out which word to use here between things that are contrary to Scripture and things that are not spoken of in Scripture. Okay. And things not spoken of in Scripture are harmless.

It's the things that are contrary to Scripture in a definable way. And so when there's all kinds of things that we do, even in our worship liturgy that have no justification in Scripture, it doesn't mean that what we're doing is wrong. But if we're doing, if we work into our liturgy, kneeling before an object for spiritual purposes, that looks like idolatry to me.

And this does happen in certain religious traditions. And I don't know how they can get past that. So there is a distinction.

Extra-biblical itself doesn't mean there's a problem. But if the extra-biblical thing is contrary to Scripture, then that is a problem. I'd also say what they're celebrating is not extra-biblical.

Christmas and Easter are celebrating biblical things. They're celebrating the incarnation and the resurrection. So it's not as if we've added some random celebration into the Christian life that has nothing to do with something that's biblical.

This is actually just a way to celebrate these things. And I don't see anything wrong with that. As to the question of whether Christians are grafted into Israel and should be celebrating the Israelites, this is where we come to the whole question of how to understand the law.

And of course, you've written about this and I've written about this on our website, str.org. So I recommend you take a look there. But one thing you need to note is that we are not grafted into the law. In fact, if you look at Romans 7, it's very clear about the fact that we have died to the law through the body of Christ.

We've been released from the law. We have died with Christ and we're raised with Him.

We're joined to Him.

And through that, we're grafted into the promise given to Abraham. But the law is separate from that. The law was not... Paul talks about this in Galatians.

I can't remember which chapter, probably four, but I don't know. It's all throughout there. But the idea that the law came in, maybe it was three, but the law came in to reveal their sin and to point them to Christ and the righteousness which would be in Christ.

As a tutor to drive him to the Christ. Right. But we're no longer under the law.

And Hebrew says, again, it's obsolete now because we're in a new covenant. So there's no... We're not under any obligation to celebrate the Israelite feast and festivals. But I don't see any problem with celebrating if you want to.

Exactly. I'm with you there. Interestingly, Jeremiah 31-31 is where the first reference of the new covenant comes in Scripture.

Ezekiel speaks about it too. But Jeremiah in chapter 31 and following says, I'm going to make a new covenant with you, not like the other covenant that I gave to you when you came out of Egypt, the covenant which you broke. Okay.

So that's obviously the Mosaic covenant. They have broken that covenant. Now God's going to give a new covenant.

And it's the new covenant, as you are pointing out, that God has grafted us into. It's still a Jewish covenant. But the old covenant wasn't a salvation covenant in the sense or the same way that the new covenant is.

Actually, I think ultimately everybody was saved under the old covenant. We're saved in virtue of the new covenant which was to come. I'd like to give the illustration of using a credit card to get what you want now and then you pay for it later.

And Jesus was that payment, not the blood of bulls and goats. That was just a temporary means by which that's the credit card, so to speak. The blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sin.

That's Hebrews. And that's why another one had to come. Behold, in the scroll of the book, it has written to me, I have come to do your will because a body you have given me.

Okay. So that's all sort of Hebrews 10. So we have a very clear characterization of the end of an old, system and the beginning of a new one.

This is why we have an old testament and a new testament because these reflect the old covenant and the new covenant. And it might be even more precise to say the mosaic

covenant because the covenant with Abraham, this all goes back to him because he's the father of everyone who has righteousness through faith and is by grace and it's all God's doing. And again, like Paul makes the point that the mosaic covenant was separate from that.

And the reason why we are all saved through faith is because God wanted it to be guaranteed and to be by promise. And we would never have made it if we had to follow law in order to gain the righteousness by law. So I just recommend Galatians and Romans.

They go into this in such detail, especially Romans seven, which is really clear, but also Galatians is really clear. And again, I just want to say, if you want to celebrate their feast, there's nothing wrong with that. I think we see people doing that in the in the New Testament.

You see Paul taking part in certain of the rituals of the law while saying at the same time, those were not necessary for salvation. And they were not the people in the new covenant who were coming into it as gentiles and weren't required to do those things. But you can still do them if you want to, if it's part of your culture, whatever it is.

So do you have anything to add to that? Or you know, I think you're right about that. Okay, one more question about Christmas here. Maybe I'm reaching a little bit, but I still about Christmas.

Katie from Montana, why was Zechariah disciplined and made mute for questioning the angel's message about his wife conceiving due to her age? But Mary wasn't disciplined for questioning her pregnancy due to her virginity? Well, I think that the other there does seem to be a parallel between the two. I think there's a difference in the response where Zechariah was expressing unbelief. Mary was expressing confusion.

Okay, notice how she ends, by the way, once it's clarified and she knows what's going to take place that how can this thing be, since I am a virgin, she's confused. And then the angel describes what's going to take place. And she says, Behold the handmaiden of the Lord, be it done to me according to thy will.

So there's a submissive attitude throughout there. But she's just confused about this thing, this characterization. And where Zechariah seems to be expressing serious doubt, this can't be the case.

Yeah, he says, how will I know this for certain? Yeah, how will I know this for certain, right? I told you. Yeah, how about this? I know you're an angelic being here right in the holy of holies, but that's not good enough. I need something more than that.

Yeah, it's a very different tone that we see or point of view or sense that we see with Zechariah than with Mary. Yeah, I think that's a good way to put it, Greg, that Zechariah

was expressing doubt about it happening. And Mary was just questioning how it could happen.

How can this be? How will you do this? But not saying, I don't believe you. That's crazy. Yeah.

So yeah, I think that's dangerous too, which is what happened. Okay, you won't be able to speak. Now here's how you'll know, you won't be able to speak for the next nine months or actually six months or three months.

Yeah, I got certainly gave them a sign. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, that's it for Christmas questions.

This time. And so thank you for sending those in, Millie and Natasha and Katie. We're grateful that you sent those in.

If you have a question, go ahead and send those in on Twitter with the hashtag STRask or you can go to our website. Just go to str.org and look for the hashtag STRask podcast page. And when you get there, you'll see a link.

And the important thing to remember is just keep it short. Keep it the length of a tweet, just about two sentences. And I mean, normal sentences, not, not super long sentences, just short.

Not cocoa sounds. Amy Hall sounds this. Oh, I don't know.

I can get pretty long too. But anyway, anyway, that's how you can do it. We'd love to hear from you.

We always love to get lots of questions. I try to group them together in topics. And so we love to get a variety of topics.

We hope to hear from you. This is Amy Hall and great cocoa for a stand to reason.