

Confronting a Devastating Doctrine: Are Children's Toys Graven Images? Of Course Not.

I guess it was just a matter of time, but I had two sets of parents ask me about this in one week – sending me supporting websites proclaiming this. It's the natural consequence of the internet community's preoccupation with potential paganism and probably the most devastating manifestation of it that I have seen thus far. A person with a blog, website, you-tube or vimeo account yet with no academic credentials whatsoever can put out a very convincing and passionate argument, on the surface, as to why this or that is pagan and people will assume that they are experts. Fear does that, and the internet preachers excel in injecting fear into an audience that is increasingly terrified of its own shadow – unable to live in the modern world or even to open their eyes for fear of contamination (Messiah and the Jerusalem Talmud [Sota 22b](#) describes such people as “blind” (blind guides in Messiah's case Matt 23:16.24) – those men who were so concerned with their righteousness that they would injure themselves by walking into a wall with their eyes closed rather than risk seeing a beautiful woman).

As I have been, since August, increasingly transforming my ministry into equipping children and their families (so they can better teach their children and grandchildren whether in the home or in a classroom setting) into an understanding of scriptural context and character, this is something that I need to address before any more young lives are needlessly hurt.

If you want to know the counterfeit bill when you see one, you familiarize yourself with real money. In the same way, if you want to know what isn't pagan, you familiarize yourself with

what is actually pagan. I have been intensely studying ancient near eastern and first century religion for quite a while now. I wanted to understand all the references in the Bible to it, I wanted to know what was pagan (the worshiping of graven images) versus what was just cultural (i. e. anointing feet with perfumed oil), or decorative (i. e. palm trees, or [ankhs](#)), or organisational (i. e. dividing groups of priest's workload into set times during the year), or legal (for example, a good law is a good law even when pagans have the same law). I also did this because I saw people who started out searching out pagan references in culture then getting upset over elements of the worship of YHVH because they were also used in pagan rites (i.e. sacrifice, incense, etc). Familiarizing myself with what the other cultures did and why they did it made it increasingly easy for me to spot the false forms of worship, and I was also able to rule out a lot of things that do not fall into that category. People obsessed with 'paganism' are walking away from the worship of the one true God because they do not understand what constitutes idolatry and they overreact and see the Temple service as simply another aspect of what was going on in the ancient world. However, an in depth study of what actually was going on, instead of a surface understanding, shows that there is absolutely nothing whatsoever 'pagan' about the worship of YHVH. I will prove the same about children's toys, that they are in no way pagan.

For example, what if someone equated nuns with young girls because of their virginity and called all young girls nuns? Context tells us that this is a ridiculous train of thought. In the same way, we cannot equate wives with prostitutes simply because neither are virgins – we need the context of the nature of the sexual relationship in order to discern the difference between the good and the bad. If someone looks at me and my sister in law and says, "Oh look, they gave birth to twins," because we both have sets of twins, they would also be incorrect. In context, my husband and I adopted our sons

whereas my sister in law gave birth to her daughters. When I talk about my "Twin" you would imagine someone who looks just like me and grew up with the same experiences, not an African American RN from Chicago who I have never actually met in real life. Surface knowledge alone will give rise to our active imaginations, but rarely to an accurate assessment of the situation.

Think of a first semester med school student, diagnosing themselves to death. They have a certain amount of surface knowledge and to a certain extent they are limited to appearances – but they lack the overall context that enables them to rule out certain possibilities, and to filter out unimportant data. In a few years, they will no longer have that problem and because they have context, we go to them when we are ill. We see the same thing in computer or automobile repair. If I have limited experience and I hear a sound or get a fatal exception error then I figure it's broken because I lack the context to know what is really going on.

People who want to shout the alarm are not always legitimate watchmen, usually they aren't – they are people who got excited about something, felt like they had to warn everyone, mistook that excitement for the leading of the Spirit and stirred up fear. They are generally not experts, and generally they haven't even checked their facts because they assumed that the people from whom they got the information did the hard verification work themselves and checked *their* facts using legitimate sources

So what are the facts on toys vs graven images? After being approached by a parent who was terrified that they were being commanded to bonfire their children's toys (even their Legos, from the website they sent me), I knew that this had to be addressed. Are toys idols? What does the word idol even mean because Christianity has seriously redefined it so that it can be practically anything. If someone likes something too much, we don't call it an obsession or a dangerous distraction or an

addiction – nope, it's an idol. We have watered down something with an actual meaning into an over-spiritualization – like the Pharisees did with Sabbath-breaking – it came to mean too much, and was not uniformly enforced, making a mockery out of the day. Sabbath breaking had the potential to become whatever a person wanted it to be – if they had an audience and had been given the authority. These days you don't even need the authority, and social media provides everyone with an audience.

What is a toy – a toy is a natural function of childhood, modified through form. A child without a ball will kick a rock or a can, one without a sword or toy gun will use a stick or their finger, a child without a doll will fuss over a rolled up blanket, or a family or neighborhood baby, one without a swimming pool will go to the river or lake to play. The toy is a functional item that serves a purpose, shaped by the culture a child was raised in – sword vs gun is a perfect example of that. Function, and not form, is what separates a toy from a graven image. Function, and not form, is also what separated idolatry from cultural expressions of respect, decorative motifs, organisational strategies, and laws. Function is what, for example, separated the Tabernacle in the wilderness and later, Solomon's Temple, from the [Parthenon](#) – a temple is not bad because the form is used elsewhere – it is the actual function that determines whether or not it qualifies as 'pagan.'

The same exact form can serve different functions and so we must be crystal clear on what the intended function is.

Graven images cannot simply be defined on the surface as an image that is engraved – as though the English language description conveys intention and function. The Commandments were engraved in stone – including the one telling people not to make graven images.

A graven image was, specifically, an object carved or molded

out of clay, stone, metal or wood *for the purpose of* being embodied by the essence of a god, through a magical ceremony conducted by professional priests. The purpose for the embodiment with the god's spirit was so that the god could be worshiped – which in pagan religions specifically meant to be cared for through washing, dressing, anointing, feeding it real food and drink, setting it into its throne, where it can be petitioned, adored, fed again, undressed and put to bed so that the god would not starve to death and their function in the universe would not fall into chaos. Modern day idol worshipers can tell you this – someone who was Hare Krishna just gave me an education on some things a few weeks back.



The above is an idol, an actual idol. Mishnah Tractate Sanhedrin Chapter 7 Mishnah 7 (some versions list it as Mishnah 6), which was written when people still did this all over the world, is a reflection of this. It will tell you exactly what constituted idolatry (I recommend the Kehati commentary otherwise it is confusing). They knew because they lived in an idolatrous world, they had the context. Legos don't qualify as graven images, nor did the cherubim in the Temple, or the Menorah, or the bulls holding up the Molten Sea, or baby dolls, or any children's toys. No one played with idols, they were set up in shrines and treated like the gods that they represented, but they themselves were not the gods, everyone knew that. They didn't get set aside, ever. They were cared for not for fun, but by professional priests who were charged with keeping the god alive and healthy and hopefully, doing their job and mostly leaving the people alone (a bored

god was a dangerous thing).

Toys serve a specific function that is completely at odds with idolatry. But more than this, I want you to think about the spiritual danger of taking that which is beloved and destroying it simply because someone on the internet tells you to and instills you with fear. We aren't being careful enough about who we believe and listen to – we are assuming that people wouldn't have a website unless they had legitimacy – but these days anyone can have a website. You need time and sometimes money, that's it. A \$30 little webcam will get you free access to the people on you-tube. Social media also gives you unfettered access to people – but you don't need to have any expertise, you only need to sound convincing. The article I read on toys was full of manipulative fear tactics, but not full of any real information. The authors defined what a graven image, an idol, was, and then expanded their own definition so that it could include and exclude things at their own convenience. Idols, however, are real life constructs serving real life purposes, worshiped with real life intentions and we can't just ignore that real life context and manipulate the words to suit our own agendas. I honestly pity the people who have put this stumbling block in front of children, who are knowingly subjecting them to the horror of watching their toys burned in the yard – and blaming God for it. It's just cruelty under the illusion of zeal, but it is rooted in a lack of knowledge of the actual situation, and the resulting overreaction.

But frankly, it was inevitable, because we have created an online culture where everyone has a pulpit and people try to undermine the experts for this or that reason if the experts present facts that are in disagreement with agendas based on, in this case, theories. I ignore a lot of stuff on social media because it is outside the scope of my ministry, but this is where I draw the line and I am speaking up because my studies have given me a certain measure of expertise – at

least compared to the people who came up with this devastating doctrine. This is hurting children, needlessly, but it is the logical consequence of listening to whoever is speaking the most persuasively and inducing the most fear and presuming that they must know what they are talking about.

Edit: 2/13/16 My brother Ryan White posted this [blog](#) explaining this same concept this morning.