

What Isaiah Knew: The LORD Is God and There Is No Other

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Despite being God's covenant people, ancient Israel was deeply entrenched in idolatry for most of its pre-exilic history. In response, the prophets spoke sharply, often using startling imagery, sarcasm, and creative rhetorical strategies in an effort to seize Israel's attention. Isaiah's idol parodies, specifically Isa 40:18–20 and Isa 44:9–20, showcase his use of emphatic syntax, sarcasm, literary devices, foreign vocabulary, and interaction with idol-making rituals, perhaps the Mesopotamian Washing and Opening of the Mouth, by which gods were thought to become manifest in their statues. The result was not only an effective rhetorical strategy but one that highlights in a creative and convincing way Isaiah's emphasis that Yahweh alone is God and there is no other.

Key Words: aniconism, idol making, idol parodies, idolatry, image, Isaiah, Monotheism, Washing and Opening of the Mouth, mis pî pî pî

Isaiah's emphasis on "God alone" is a hallmark of the book that bears his name. To be sure, this is a biblical theme, but it is particularly prominent among the prophets who call Israel back to their exclusive covenant with Yahweh. The covenant demanded Israel's full allegiance: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod 20:3). It also required Israel to abstain from fashioning idols: "You shall not make for yourself a carved image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" (Exod 20:4). Fidelity proved difficult for Israel to maintain. At Sinai, they created and then worshipped a golden calf (Exod 32), and later, at Shittim, they sacrificed to the Moabite god, Baal of Peor (Num 25:1–3; Deut 4:3). After settling in the promised land, they adopted Phoenician, Ammonite, Moabite, and Canaanite gods as their own, creating carved images of Baal and Asherah and worshipping them in shrines and temples they built in Samaria, Bethel, and Jerusalem (1 Kgs 11:15, 33; 2 Kgs 21; 23:13). In the Solomonic temple courts, Israel worshipped the hosts of heaven. During the reign of Manasseh, they sacrificed their children to foreign deities (2 Kgs 21:6, 9, 11). Judean women wove garments for the goddess Asherah (2 Kgs 23:7), and as families, they offered sacrifices to the Queen of Heaven (Jer 7:18;

44:17–19, 25). Despite Yahweh's strict requirements for exclusivity, Deuteronomy's repeated warnings against creating and worshipping images, and the LORD's longsuffering with his rebellious people, Israel's history was replete with syncretism.

The prophets' primary task was to remind Israel of her covenant obligations—to expose her rebellion, to pronounce judgment, to speak of God's mercy and a great future hope, and to call Israel back to the LORD. However, their "God alone" message was not exclusively about Israel's covenant faithfulness. *It was a proclamation of monotheism.* Israel was to worship Yahweh not only because he was their God, but because he *is* God and *there is no other* (Isa 37:20; 43:10–13; 44:6–8; 45:5–6, 14, 18, 21–22; 46:9).

Monotheism and aniconism were difficult for Israel to accept. Hence, the prophets mixed stinging words, sharp attacks, impassioned pleas, and grand visions of hope with extreme prophetic acts to jolt Israel out of her idolatrous stupor. The prophets' startling and, at times, blunt and sarcastic communicative style is perhaps best exemplified in a series of prophetic messages known collectively as the idol parodies,¹ in which the prophets expose the pure folly behind Israel's belief that humans could create a god. The detail with which the prophets describe the idol-making process suggests that they were quite familiar with it. In particular, Isaiah uses language and imagery in Isa 40:18–20 and Isa 44:9–20 that indicates his awareness of how gods were "born." He may even have been familiar with the ancient ritual by which the gods supposedly became manifest in their cult statues—the "Washing and Opening of the Mouth" (*mis pî pî pî*). Whatever his sources, Isaiah demonstrates familiarity with the methods and materials preserved in *mis pî pî pî* and the theological assumptions behind them.² He then cleverly refutes them to make a startling point: those who fashion and worship idols become ignorant, gullible, deluded, and enslaved because they worship an object they themselves have created (Isa 44:20).

In what follows, I will introduce the "Washing and Opening of the Mouth" ritual and mention a few recent studies that have explored possible interactions by biblical authors with the *mis pî pî pî*. I will then examine specific features of Isa 40:18–20 and Isa 44:9–20. Whether Isaiah was interacting directly with the *mis pî pî pî* or some other related body of knowledge on cult statue manufacture, his parodies reflect explicit

¹ Isa 40:18–20; 41:5–7; 42:8, 17; 44:9–22; 45:16–17, 20–21; 46:1–7; 48:5; Jer 10:3–15, Pss 115; 135.

² Christopher Walker and Michael Dick, *The Induction of a Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian Mis Pî Pî Pî Ritual* (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2001), 25.

knowledge about idol-making, which he uses in surprising ways to refute their claims.

A Brief Introduction to the Washing and Opening of the Mouth (*mīs pī pīt pī*) Ritual

The ritual instructions and the accompanying incantations from Mesopotamia, which describe the physical manufacture and ritual birth of a cult statue, are known collectively by the Babylonian title *mīs pī* (“washing of the mouth”) and *pīt pī* (“opening of the mouth”). The tablets were discovered at nine different sites,³ including Nineveh and Babylon, and date to the 8th–5th centuries B.C.E.⁴ However, that these texts may have been part of a long-standing tradition is suggested by the additional, albeit few, historical references to the washing and/or opening of the mouth found as early as the Ur III period, where priests performed the rite on statues of Gudea, the deified king of Lagash,⁵ and on statues and other objects in the Old Babylonian period (2000–1600),⁶ the Middle Babylonian period (14th–13th century),⁷ and the Neo-Assyrian period.⁸ The purpose of the *mīs pī* was to purify the recipient in preparation for cultic activity.⁹ Priests performed it on the king and his royal insignia, various animals and sacred objects, individual humans, priests, royal statues, and on statues of the gods.¹⁰ By contrast, the mouth-opening rite (*pīt pī*) was reserved for inanimate objects.¹¹ Its purpose was to consecrate, activate, and/or enliven the object in preparation for cultic use. When applied to a divine statue, the Opening of the Mouth was thought to animate the statue’s sensory

³ In addition to Nineveh and Babylon the *mīs pī* texts were found at Assur, Huzirina (Sultantepe), Hama (Syria), Sippar, Nippur, Kalḫu (Nimrud) and Uruk.

⁴ See Walker and Dick, *Induction*, 27–29 and footnote 96 where they cite possible 3rd and 2nd millennia sources.

⁵ Walker and Dick, *Induction*, 18–20 and Irene J. Winter, “‘Idols of the King’: Royal Images as Recipients of Ritual Action in Ancient Mesopotamia,” *JRS* 6 (1992): 13–42.

⁶ Walker and Dick, *Induction*, 21.

⁷ Walker and Dick, *Induction*, 21–22.

⁸ Walker and Dick, *Induction*, 22–24.

⁹ Walker and Dick, *Induction*, 10–13, 16; A. Berlejung, *Die Theologie der Bilder: Herstellung und Einweihung von Kultbildern in Mesopotamien und die alttestamentliche Bilderpolemik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1998), 187.

¹⁰ Walker and Dick, *Induction*, 10–11.

¹¹ Walker and Dick *Induction*, 13–14; A. Berlejung, “Washing the Mouth: The Consecration of Divine Images in Mesopotamia,” in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Karen van der Toorn (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 44–72, esp. p. 45.

organs and limbs, enabling it to consume offerings, smell incense, and move about freely.¹² Once the mouth washing and opening were complete, the statue was considered a fully functioning, living manifestation of the divine.¹³

The *mīs pī pīt pī* and the Old Testament

Several texts in the Old Testament indicate the authors’ awareness that manipulating the sensory organs activated the individual. In Isa 6:6–7, a seraph removes Isaiah’s guilt by touching his lips with a burning coal, readying him for prophetic service. Yahweh himself touches Jeremiah’s mouth, enabling the prophet to proclaim the LORD’s message (Jer 1:9–10). The sensory organs can also be deactivated to render someone unfit for their mission. Due to Israel’s unfaithfulness, Yahweh vows to make their rebellious hearts dull so they cannot understand, their ears heavy so they cannot hear, and their eyes blind so they cannot see (Isa 6:9–10). Similarly, the psalmists warn that anyone who trusts in idols will conform to them. Like the anthropomorphic statues of the gods, worshippers will have eyes that cannot see, ears that cannot hear, a mouth that cannot speak, and a nose that cannot breathe nor smell (Pss 115:1–8; 135:15–18).

Genesis 1:26–27 and Gen 2:5–3:24 interact with the *mīs pī pīt pī*, or at least the ideas they contain, to redefine an “image of God.”¹⁴ Humans, not man-made statues, are God’s living representatives. J. Kutsko compares the animation of divine statues in the “Washing and Opening of the Mouth” to the reconstitution of Israel by the breath (*ruḫ*) of God in Ezek 37:9–10. He comments, “Ezekiel is intentionally contrasting creating humans with imagery involving divine statues.”¹⁵ N. Levtow proposes that

¹² As indicated in Incantation Tablet 3, “[...]This statue cannot smell incense without the ‘Opening of the Mouth’ ceremony. It cannot eat food nor drink water,” in Walker and Dick, *Induction*, 140–41, 151 (lines 70–71).

¹³ See Winter, “‘Idols of the King,’” 14; T. Jacobsen, “The Graven Image,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, ed. Patrick D. Miller, Paul D. Hanson, and S. Dean McBride (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 15–32; Berlejung, “Washing the Mouth,” 46; and Walker and Dick *Induction*, 6–7.

¹⁴ Catherine L. McDowell, *The Image of God in the Garden of Eden; The Creation of Humankind in Genesis 2:5–3:24 in Light of the mīs pī pīt pī Rituals of Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015).

¹⁵ J. Kutsko comments, “Ezekiel is intentionally contrasting creating humans with imagery involving divine statues” (*Between Heaven and Earth: Divine Presence and Absence in the Book of Ezekiel* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000], 197).

the idol parodies in Isa 44:9–20 and Jer 10:1–16 borrow terminology specifically from the Babylonian cult,¹⁶ and M. Dick cites evidence from Isa 40:18–20 and Isa 44:9–20 to demonstrate the prophet’s firsthand knowledge of Babylonian idol-making practices.¹⁷

In addition to what Levtow and Dick have noticed, there is further evidence in Isa 40:18–20 and Isa 44:9–20, which indicates that the prophet had personal knowledge of idol construction and consecration. Through an analysis of select vocabulary, syntax, and imagery in Isa 40:18–20 and Isa 44:9–20, by consulting the translation history of these passages in the ancient witnesses and select modern English Bibles, and by considering a relevant comparative text, I will attempt to bolster the case that Levtow and Dick have made. I will also suggest that Isaiah used his knowledge of idol-making practices, and perhaps even the *mis pi pit pi* itself, to create a compelling prophetic message against the creation and worship of idols.

Isaiah 40:18–20: מִסְכָּן, *musukkānu* and *mēsu*

וְאֵל־מִי תִדְמֶינּוּ אֵל וּמַה־דְּמוּת תַּעֲרֹכּוּ לוֹ: 40:19 הַפֶּסֶל נֹסֵף חָרַשׁ וְצֹרֵף
בְּדֹהֵב יִרְקָעֵנּוּ וְרִתְקוֹת פֶּסֶף צוֹרֵף: 40:20 הַמִּסְכָּן תְּרוּמָה עֵץ לֹא־יִרְקַב
יִבְחָר חָרַשׁ חָכֵם יִבְקָשׁ־לוֹ לְהִכִּין פֶּסֶל לֹא יִמוּט:

To whom will you liken God, or what likeness will you compare to him? As for the idol, a craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith with gold gilds it, and silver chains he casts. מִסְכָּן wood¹⁹ (for) an offering,²⁰ wood that will not rot he chooses. A skillful craftsman he seeks for himself to set up an idol that will not move.

The Hebrew term מִסְכָּן occurs only here in the MT. The LXX and Peshitta of Isa 40:20 offer no equivalent for this term, but the Vulgate renders it as *orte lignum*, “strong wood” and the Targums reads אורן, “laurel tree.” HAL (606) suggests that מִסְכָּן is a pual participle of the Middle Hebrew סכן, “to become poor,” a view that is, unfortunately, followed by most English translations: “a person too poor” (NIV), “he who is too

¹⁶ Nathaniel Levtow, *Images of Others: Iconic Politics in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 64.

¹⁷ Michael B. Dick, “Worshipping Idols: What Isaiah Didn’t Know,” *Bible Review* 18 (2002): 30–37.

¹⁸ 1QIsa^a reads ירבק vs MT ירקב. The DSS reading is likely the result of metathesis.

¹⁹ The type of wood is unknown. See *CAD* 10.2:237–39.

²⁰ The addition of “for” follows Robert Alter’s suggestion in his *Prophets*, vol. 2 of *The Hebrew Bible* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2019), 751. There is no equivalent for תְּרוּמָה in the Peshitta, Targums, and the Vulgate.

impoverished” (ESV), “he that is so impoverished” (KJV). The Vulgate and Targums, however, find support in the cognate Akkadian term *musukkānu*. This noun denotes an unidentified species of tree (or its wood) imported into Mesopotamia from Gandara and Karmana (in modern-day Pakistan) in the Ur III and Old Babylonian periods, but which was locally available in Assyria and Babylonia in the 1st millennium.²¹ The Sumerian equivalent, *mes* or *mēsu*, is identified in “Erra” and “Eshum,” an 8th century BC Mesopotamian myth contemporary with Isaiah, as “the flesh of the gods,”²² meaning that the basic form or wooden core of the statue was made from *mēsu/musukkānu* wood. Because Isaiah used the Hebrew cognate of Akkadian *musukkānu* in his parody, M. Dick concludes that the prophet must have had “personal knowledge of Babylonian cult images and their dedication ceremonies.”²³ At the very least, Isaiah’s choice of מִסְכָּן rather than the generic Hebrew term for “wood” (עֵץ), indicates he had particular rather than general knowledge of idol-making.

Isaiah 44:11: הָן and מְאָדָּם

הֵן כָּל־חַבְרָיו יִבְשׁוּ וְחַרְשֵׁים הֵמָּה מְאָדָּם יִתְקַבְּצוּ כָּלֵם יַעֲמְדוּ יִפְתָּדוּ
יִבְשׁוּ יַחַד:

Behold, all of its worshippers will be put to shame, for the craftsmen are merely human! Let them assemble, all of them, let them stand up. They will be terrified. They will be put to shame together.

Given the הָן + noun combination in וְחַרְשֵׁים the הָן probably represents a disjunctive, “For the craftsmen,”²⁵ contra the ESV, which renders it as a conjunction, “and the craftsmen.” The disjunctive accent *zāqep qātôn* above יִבְשׁוּ separates it from the following וְחַרְשֵׁים and further indicates there is a break at this point.²⁶ Although they interpret the pause differently, the NIV and NASB recognize the disjunction, translating it with a combination of punctuation and an pronoun (NIV) or a preposition (NASB), as follows:

²¹ P. R. S. Moorey, *Ancient Mesopotamian Materials and Industries: The Archaeological Evidence* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 352.

²² “Erra and Eshum,” trans. Stephanie Dalley (COS 1.407:150).

²³ See M. Dick, “Worshipping Idols,” 36.

²⁴ 1QIsa^a 37:16 differs only in two insignificant ways: הנה for הן and the plene spelling כול for MT כָּל.

²⁵ See B. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 129, 650.

²⁶ Paul Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 2006), 58.

People who do that will be put to shame; such craftsmen.... (NIV)

Behold, all his companions will be put to shame, for the craftsmen.... (NASB)

Why this is significant is related to the preposition מן on מַאֲדָם.²⁷ The LXX of Isa 44:11a has a different reading,²⁸ and the DSS is inconclusive.²⁹ The Vulgate and the Targums are somewhat ambiguous:

Vulgate:

fabri enim sunt ex hominibus

the carpenters, in fact, are from/out of (but?) men

Targums:

וְאִוְמְנֵי עֲבָדֵינוּ מִבְּנֵי אָנָשָׁא

the craftsmen, from men,³⁰ made them

However, the ESV, NIV, NASB, NRSV, and NKJV translate the מן on מַאֲדָם as follows:

and the craftsmen are only human (ESV)

such craftsmen are only human beings (NIV)

for the craftsmen themselves are mere men (NASB)

the artisans too are merely human (NRSV)

And the workmen, they are mere men (NKJV)

Given the probability that the וְ is disjunctive, that the Vulgate and Targums of Isa 44:11a only make sense if they used *ex* and מן in the sense of “but,” “merely,” or “only,” that in the Masoretic tradition there is a break after בְּיָשׁוּ, and the collective opinion of scholars on the translation committees of several major English translations, it is reasonable to conclude that Isaiah uses a disjunctive וְ + מן intentionally to create a more emphatic statement than merely using the disjunctive וְ or the מן alone. How ludicrous, says Isaiah, for Israel to think that *mere humans* can create a god!

²⁷ This may be a *min* of material. See Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 130.

²⁸ *καὶ πάντες ὅθεν ἐγένοντο ἐξηράνθησαν, καὶ κωφοὶ ἀπὸ ἀνθρώπων.*

²⁹ The DSS is identical to the MT: יִם הַמָּה מֵאָדָם.

³⁰ The בְּנֵי in בְּנֵי אָנָשָׁא may designate a group, class, or guild, as it does in Hebrew in 1 Sam 10:5, Amos 7:14, 1 Kgs 20:35, Isa 19:11, Eccl (Qoh) 10:17, Neh 3:8, and 2 Chr 24:7 and HAL 137. Alternatively, it may simply mean “human,” as it does in Dan 2:28 and 5:21. Whatever the case, to translate בְּנֵי אָנָשָׁא as “merely human” takes the מן into account.

Isaiah’s emphasis is all the more understandable if he is responding to the *mis pl̄ pl̄ pl̄* texts, or at least the image-making rituals they preserve. At one point in the “Washing and Opening of the Mouth,” the artisans symbolically cut off their hands and repeatedly swear that they were not involved in the statue’s creation:³¹ “I did not make him (the statue), Ninagal (who is) Ea (god) of the smith made him.”³² “Esarhaddon’s Renewal of the Gods” expresses a similar view.³³ After his father, Sennacherib, had sacked Babylon, destroyed its temples, and captured its gods (their statues), Esarhaddon restored the statues before attempting to return them to Babylon. He claims:

Whose right is it, O great gods, to create gods and goddesses in a place where man dare not trespass? This task of refurbishing (the statues) which you have constantly been allotting to me (by oracle) is difficult! Is it the right of deaf and blind human beings who are ignorant of themselves and remain in ignorance throughout their lives? The making of (images of) the gods and goddesses is your right; it is in your hands; so I beseech you, create (the gods), and in your exalted holy of holies, may what you yourselves have in your heart be brought about in accordance with your unalterable word. Endow the skilled craftsmen whom you ordered to complete this task with as high an understanding as Ea, their creator. Teach them skills by your exalted word; make all their handiwork succeed through the craft of Ninshiku.³⁴

Esarhaddon acknowledges that creating cult statues is exclusively a divine task. His prayer, however, is that the gods would endow the human craftsmen with supernatural ability. This may be the idea to which Isaiah responds. Despite the *mis pl̄ pl̄ pl̄*’s repudiation of human involvement, its repeated proclamations that a team of divine craftsmen created the statue, and Esarhaddon’s prayer to fill the human craftsmen with divine wisdom, Isaiah replies emphatically מַאֲדָם הֵמָּה וְהָרְשִׁים, “As for the craftsmen, they are merely human!” Their creation is nothing but a block of wood, a shameful lie in their right hand (Isa 44:19–20).

Isaiah 44:14: אֲרָן and *erēnu*

Isaiah may further demonstrate his familiarity with idol-making rituals by using another *hapax legomena* in Isa 44:14. He lists four types of wood

³¹ Walker and Dick, *Induction*, 65 (lines 173–175 and 179–86), 76, 80 (lines 51–52).

³² Walker and Dick, *Induction*, 76, 80 (lines 51–52).

³³ Walker and Dick, *Induction*, 25–26.

³⁴ Walker and Dick, *Induction*, 25.

used in the process of idol-making: אֲרָזִים (cedar), תְּרִזָּה (cypress?),³⁵ אֵלֹן (oak), and אֲרָן. Two Hebrew manuscripts suggest אֲרִזָּה (cedar) as a *ketib* for אֲרָן,³⁶ but this has no support among the ancient witnesses.³⁷ The LXX and Peshitta of Isa 44:14 lack an equivalent term. However, the Vulgate translates it as *pinum* (pine, fir), and the Targum renders it as אֲוֵרָן (laurel).³⁸ H. R. Cohen, followed by M. Dick, has identified Hebrew אֲרָן as the Akkadian loanword *erēnu*, “cedar.”³⁹ Cedarwood and its oil were used in various rituals, including the “Washing and Opening of the Mouth.”⁴⁰ If Isaiah was familiar with the rituals for making a cult statue, it is not surprising that he would mention it in the context of an idol parody.

Isaiah 44:14 and the Growing and Felling of Trees

הָלַף לְקַרְתִּילּוֹ אֲרָזִים וַיִּקַּח תְּרִזָּה וְאֵלֹן וַיִּצְמַחְלּוּ בְעֵצֵי־יָעַר נָטַע אֲרָן וּגְשָׁם יַגְדֵּל:

He cuts down cedars for himself. He takes a cypress tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. (Isa 44:14)

Isaiah’s description of the craftsman felling trees, of strengthening the tree, and of rain as the agent which causes the tree to grow may reveal his familiarity with one of the incantations⁴² from the *mis pī pī pī* entitled, “As you come out/grow in greatness from the forest.”⁴³ In the incantation, the god Enki waters the tree, causing it to drink the pure water of the

³⁵ This, too, is a *bapax legomenon*. The species to which it refers is unknown.

³⁶ See M. Dick, “Prophetic Parodies of Making the Cult Image,” in *Born in Heaven Made on Earth: The Making of the Cult Image in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Michael B. Dick (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 29 note y.

³⁷ The LXX and the Peshitta of Isa 44:14 offer no equivalent for Hebrew אֲרָן.

³⁸ It is also preserved in 1QIsa^a (with plene spelling) as אֲוֵרָן.

³⁹ H. R. Cohen, *Biblical Hapax Legomena in the Light of Akkadian and Ugaritic* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978), 44–45.

⁴⁰ Walker and Dick, *Induction*, 54 (line 13), 55 (lines 26, 37), 56 (line 45), 62 (line 132), 78 (lines 17, 20), and 80 (line 41).

⁴¹ The MT reads לְקַרְתִּילּוֹ without הָלַף but cf. the LXX (*ekopsen*, “he cut”) and the Vulgate (*succidit*, “he cut”). This emendation is suggested by D. Winton Thomas, “Isaiah XLIV. 9–20: A Translation and Commentary,” *Hommages à André Dupont-Sommer*, ed. A. Caquot and M. Philonenko (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1971), 326. It is adopted by Richard J. Clifford, “The Function of Idol Passages in Isaiah,” *CBQ* 42 (1980): 450–64 (see especially p. 461n28), and Dick, “Prophetic Parodies,” 1–53 (see especially p. 28 note v).

⁴² Incantation Tablet 1/2 (ST 199) in Walker and Dick, *Induction*, 114–22.

⁴³ Walker and Dick, *Induction*, 114–21 esp. lines 13–40.

Apsû,⁴⁴ and the god Ninildu “touches” (chops down) the tree with his great ax, his fine chisel, and his pure saw.⁴⁵ By identifying the rain, which elsewhere Isaiah attributes to Yahweh (Isa 55:10), as the agent which waters the tree, and the human craftsman as the one who cuts it down, Isaiah may be subtly denying the involvement of, and probably, in light of Isa 44:6–8, the existence of, the other gods supposedly involved in making the idol. This is especially so given the preceding emphatic וַיִּ + מָן combination in וְהָרָשִׁים הֵמָּה מְאָדָּם (“As for the craftsmen, they are merely human) in vs. 14, discussed above.

Isaiah 44:15, 17: אֵל and פְּסָל

אֶרְיִפְעֵל־אֵל וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ

also he makes a god and bows down,

עָשָׂהוּ פְּסָל וַיִּסְגַּד־לְמוֹ

He creates⁴⁶ it, an idol, and falls down before it. (Isa 44:15)

לְאֵל עָשָׂה לְפִסְלוֹ

Into a god he makes his idol

וַיִּסְגַּד־לּוֹ וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ

his idol, and he falls down to it and worships. (Isa 44:17)

Twice in Isa 44:15, 17 Isaiah mockingly defines אֵל, a god, as a פְּסָל, a derogatory term used consistently throughout the Old Testament as a term for an abominable image made of stone, wood, or metal.⁴⁷ The syntactic parallelism in v. 15 underscores his sarcasm:

verb (עָשָׂהוּ, יִפְעֵל) + object (אֵל, פְּסָל) + waw consecutive (וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ, וַיִּסְגַּד)

Isaiah also departs from the standard Hebrew word order in v. 17. Instead of leading with verb-subject Isaiah highlights the objects אֵל by placing it at the front of the clause.⁴⁸

Isaiah’s pairing of אֵל with פְּסָל may be another indication of his familiarity with idol-making practices. The terms *ilu* (god) and *šalmu* (image)

⁴⁴ Walker and Dick, *Induction*, 116, 120 (line 31).

⁴⁵ Walker and Dick, *Induction*, 116, 120 (lines 33–35).

⁴⁶ For עָשָׂה as “to create” see HAL עָשָׂה I qal 4.

⁴⁷ See Exod 20:4; Deut 4:16; 2 Kgs 21:7; Jer 10:14; 51:17; Hab 2:18; and Ps 97:7.

⁴⁸ See Christo H. J. van der Merwe, Jackie A. Naudé, and Jan H. Kroeze, *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 346–47.

are used interchangeably throughout the *mīs pīl pīl pīl*, both before and after the image was purified and animated. In other words, the image was simultaneously a statue and a god both before and after its ritual birth. The materiality of a divine being created no dissonance for ancient worshippers, but this is precisely the issue Isaiah addresses—God cannot and does not exist in a manmade statue. It was necessary, thus, in order for Isaiah to make his point, that he emphasize the idol's material nature.

Although *šelem* was one of many Hebrew terms for “idol,” Isaiah never uses it, perhaps because its Akkadian cognate *šalmu* was equated with a divine being and because its range of meaning in Hebrew was not exclusively materialistic—a point Isaiah consistently emphasized. Perhaps Isaiah may have chosen פָּסֵל⁴⁹ because it refers specifically to a *manufactured* image, whether carved from wood, sculpted in stone, cast in metal, or plaited with gold and silver.⁵⁰

There is yet an even more significant reason for Isaiah's choice. פָּסֵל is the term God himself uses in Exod 20:4, and Deut 5:8, לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה לְךָ פָּסֵל, “You shall not make for yourself a carved image ...”. Isaiah may intend for פָּסֵל to remind Israel of the specific commandment prohibiting idol-making and the covenant as a whole.

Isaiah 44:18 and Malfunctioning Sensory Organs

Finally, the reference to the blind and ignorant craftsmen in Isa 44:18 suggests that Isaiah had firsthand knowledge specifically of the *pīl pīl* portion of the ritual. Concerning the human craftsmen he states:

לֹא יָדְעוּ וְלֹא יִבְיִנוּ כִּי טַח מְרֵאוֹת עֵינֵיהֶם מִהַשְׁפִּיל לַבְּתָם

They do not know, nor do they discern, because he (Yahweh) has smeared over their eyes so they cannot see (and) their hearts so they cannot understand.

To enable the god/statue to see, hear, smell, speak, breathe, and move about as a living being, the priest performed activation rituals. The Babylonian version even explicitly mentions the opening of the eyes.⁵¹ That the priest places the image facing the sunrise in the Nineveh version suggests a similar emphasis on the eyes' animation.⁵² By claiming that Yahweh has smeared over the craftsmen's eyes to blind them and hardened

⁴⁹ From the verb פָּסַל, “to carve out, to hew.” See *HAL*, 949.

⁵⁰ *HAL* 949, *BDB* 820, and Hadley, Judith M. פָּסַל *NIDOTTE* 3:641.

⁵¹ Walker and Dick, *Induction*, 76 (line 53), 80 (line 53). See also Berlejung, “Washing the Mouth,” 66–67.

⁵² Walker and Dick, *Induction*, 59n82; Berlejung, “Washing the Mouth,” 56 and 56n49; Berlejung, *Die Theologie der Bilder*, 221.

their minds so they cannot discern nor understand, Isaiah reveals that idol worship *deactivates* the senses. The idols are not the only ones who are inanimate. Those who worship them become like them, having eyes that cannot see and minds that cannot know nor discern (cf. Pss 115:8 and 135:18).

Conclusion

The creation and worship of cult images was widespread throughout Israel's history, from the manufacture of the golden calf at Sinai to the worship of the Queen of Heaven in the last days of Jerusalem (Jer 7:18; 44:18–19, 25). Idolatry was so entrenched in the hearts and minds of God's people that the prophets were forced to speak sharply, often using startling imagery, sarcasm, and creative rhetorical strategies to seize Israel's attention. Isaiah was no exception. He masterfully weaves various literary genres and devices, unusual syntax, captivating imagery, and clever taunts to create a long series of powerful, prophetic messages. His idol parodies in Isa 40:18–20 and Isa 44:9–20, in particular, showcase his use of emphatic syntax, sarcasm, literary devices, foreign vocabulary, and effective engagement with prominent cultural ideas about the gods. Whether through the *mīs pīl pīl pīl* or other means, Isaiah was well acquainted with contemporary idol-making practices and the theology behind them. He was thus able to create an effective rhetorical strategy that creatively and convincingly highlighted the unique message of the Old Testament prophets:

For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it empty, he formed it to be inhabited!):

I am the LORD, and there is no other.

I did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness;

I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, “Seek me in vain.”

I the LORD speak the truth; I declare what is right.

Assemble yourselves and come; draw near together, you survivors of the nations!

They have no knowledge who carry about their wooden idols, and keep on praying to a god that cannot save.

Declare and present your case; let them take counsel together!

Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old?

Was it not I, the LORD? And there is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none besides me.

Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth!

For I am God, and there is no other. (Isa 45:18–22 ESV)