

Is Jewelry Pagan?

by Rod Reynolds

Upon his return to Canaan, Jacob buried the idols and earrings of his household and all who were with him (Genesis 35:1-4). Does this make jewelry pagan? As we will see, it depends on the circumstances.

Why did Jacob's household have idols in the first place? Accompanying Jacob were male and female servants, along with his family (Genesis 32:5, 11). The family of Jacob's uncle Laban, father of his wives, had fallen into idolatry (Genesis 31:19, 30). Jacob did not know when he left Padan-aram (in western Mesopotamia) that his wife Rachel had stolen Laban's gods (*teraphim*, Genesis 31:32). Some scholars have thought that possession of these gods gave title to the household estate, but most scholars reject that idea as lacking sufficient proof. Upon returning to Canaan Jacob admonished his entire household to get rid of their idols (Genesis 35:2). It was in this context that those traveling with him gave up their idols and earrings.

Isaiah wrote in a prophecy of judgment on the "daughters of Zion" that God would take away, among other things, their "earrings," as it is in the King James Version, or "amulets," as the Hebrew word *lachashim* is translated in the English Standard Version and some other translations (Isaiah 3:20). The use of amulets is based on a belief in their magical power to ward off "bad luck" or evil spirits, or on the flip side, to produce "good luck," or some desirable effect. Such superstitions are a form of idolatry.

Amulets were widely used in the ancient world (as today), including Mesopotamia, where they were incorporated into the worship of various idols. Mesopotamian peoples regarded "the gods as givers of magical powers to men" (*Encyclopedia Americana*, vol. 1, 1949, "Amulet," p. 594). Belief in magic and the use of amulets was a part of the "mystery of their religion" (*ibid.*). Often amulets were in the form of a symbolic figure, or had magical inscriptions or figures carved into them. Amulets were "worn either suspended from the neck or in the ears of females" (*Easton's Bible Dictionary*, "Earrings"). Thus we see why Jacob took away the earrings with the other idol objects. Worn as amulets, in effect they were themselves idols.

Jewish leaders as well as some of the early "Christian fathers" condemned the use of amulets. Even so, for millennia, "...the cross has been regarded as the greatest of all amulets" (*Encyclopedia Americana*, vol. 1, 1949, "Amulet," p. 595). Use of the cross or any other image as an amulet violates God's laws against idolatry. Thus jewelry worn in such a way is contrary to the true Christian faith.

However, when Israel went out of Egypt, God allowed them to plunder jewelry from the Egyptians (Exodus 3:22; 11:2; 12:35). It was not the Israelites having jewelry that God objected to, but their using it to make an idol (Exodus 32:2-4; Ezekiel 16:17). Later the Israelites gave some of their jewelry for use in making the Tabernacle (Exodus 35:22). The Jews at the time of Jehoshaphat, when God delivered them, stripped the jewels off their enemies and kept them (2 Chronicles 20:25-30). In speaking of Israel metaphorically as his bride God adorns her with jewelry (Ezekiel 16:10-14). It's not the wearing of jewelry that is wrong of itself, but the wrong use of it, such as wearing an item of jewelry as an amulet, "good luck charm," or in some other way fashioning it into an idol (Ezekiel 16:17-20; 1 Peter 3:3-4).

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