

# MASTERS OR SLAVES?

## INTRO

This study looks at the dangers that virtual and augmented reality systems might pose to our ability to mirror God's image, both in entertainment and professional use. We consider the bible's teaching on idolatry and consider when it might apply to these and other AI applications we have explored in this series.

## A TALE OF POKEMON GO

- Shortly after its launch in 2016, a Japanese driver was so distracted playing the game whilst driving that he ran into and killed someone, injuring another.
- In 1991 David Gelertner predicted that one day we would look into our computer screens and see reality.
- Today we call it Augmenting Reality (AR) where a virtual world is overlaid with the real world – just like the Pokemon Go game.
- Virtual Reality (VR) worlds are computer simulations, usually experienced through special glasses and combine motion effects.
- VR games are big business and the goal is to create the seamless experience often portrayed in sci-fi films.
- There are many seemingly benign and useful applications such as visualising the internals of a jet engine during repair or

training firemen to fight fires without a real fire.

- In the future you will be able to visualise pieces of furniture in your home without leaving the comfort of your couch.

## LOSING REALITY

- Whilst VR and AR technology have huge attractions at first sight, there is a danger that some will become addicted and lose consciousness of the real world around them.
- Who will own the data from a myriad of sensors in our homes and streets used to create mirror worlds – will our privacy be more compromised?
- The CEO of Electronic Arts thinks that people play computer games for community but can we substitute virtual communities for real communities where we walk and talk and share a meal?
- People are 11x more likely to buy when experiencing an AR service at home.

## A SLIPPERY SLOPE

- There are dangers for children with the immersive experience that VR & AR offers – would it be better for them to play a real game of football and get some exercise?
- What seems fun at first can become addictive without self-discipline.
- Will we be able to distinguish the real world from the virtual as it becomes more and more life-like and with simulated people.
- Will we treat it like the real world?

- Things like AR shopping platforms leave us open to manipulation just like social media.
- These virtual worlds can become our real world, the place where we find meaning.

## NEW IDOLS

- When we substitute the real world made by God, for a virtual world and become immersed in it, it dethrones God and diminishes our humanity, leading to addiction and ultimately idolatry.
- This can apply to other AI applications too when we become dependent on them, extol them and grant them a potency that belongs to God.
- We are not to create images of God or anything else in creation, because he has already made us in HIS likeness to be his mirrors – to reflect his image.

## A NEW TOWER

- The hype surrounding AI is in danger of giving rise to a generation that thinks the technology progress of humanity is unstoppable.
- AI is the product of our God-given creativity but so are bricks and mortar and we should be cautioned by the arrogance of millennia ago, when humans tried to build a tower to the heavens to make a name for themselves (Genesis 11).
- We know what God thought about that!

Next Study – Soul Purpose

Now do the bible study for unit 8.

**Read Exodus 20:3-6, Isaiah 2:8, 44:17, Jeremiah 2:17-19**

How do these passages define idolatry?

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What were the Israel depending on in Jeremiah 2:17-19?

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**Read Genesis 11:1-9, 2 Chron. 26:14-15, Daniel 4:28-37**

What are the consequences of technological prowess?

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What was Uzziah proud of?

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What was Nebuchadnezzar's downfall?

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What restored Nebuchadnezzar?

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**Read Psalm 115:4-8**

What happens when we idolise something that we have made?

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What the passage say that others do, who also end up idolising this artefact?

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**Reflection**

What are idols?

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How does idolatry distort the image of God in us?

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In what ways can digital technology - AI and robots become idols?

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What application examples of AI and Robots from the previous studies do you think could become idols and why?

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How might we end up serving technology rather than it serving us?

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The aim of this study is to look at the bibles teaching on idolatry and consider how it applies to VR, AR and other AI applications we have explored in this series.

### **Read Exodus 20:3-6, Isaiah 2:8, 44:17, Jeremiah 2:17-19**

How do these passages define idolatry?

- Putting something (a god) before God.
- Worshiping man-made entities (artefacts), bowing down or serving them.
- To worship something or put it before God is to revere something more than God. Seen in this light it's not too difficult to see how we could fall into the trap of putting 'things' before God, allowing them to take our eye off of depending on and serving God.

What were the Israel depending on in Jeremiah 2:17-19

- They were depending on other nations to deliver them instead of God.

### **Read Genesis 11:1-9, 2 Chron. 26:14-15, Daniel 4:28-37**

What are the consequences of technological prowess?

- Arrogance and pride, reliance on our own developments and abilities.

What was Uzziah proud of?

- His achievements.

What was Nebuchadnezzar's downfall?

- He became proud of his achievements, seeing them as due to his power and aimed at his own glory – he deified himself which is in fact idolatry!
- Chris Wright suggests that when we breach the Creator-creature distinction, 'Therein lies the root of all other forms of idolatry: we deify our own capacities and thereby make gods of ourselves and our choices and all their implications'<sup>i</sup>.

What restored Nebuchadnezzar?

- He repented of his pride (v37) and praised God for who he is, acknowledging, in contrast, that 'the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing' (v35) – (the Creator-creature distinction).

### **Read Psalm 115:4-8**

What happens when we idolise something that we have made?

- We become like it.

What does the passage say that others do, who also end up idolising this artefact?

- They trust them, note the parallel with us trusting in what we have made rather than God.

### **Reflection**

Leave time for some of these questions at the end of the bible study or introduce one or two as you feel appropriate during the study. The answers given here are for guidance, allow people to express their thoughts freely but try to encourage the participants to use bible truth to defend their point of view. Focus on VR, AR and other AI applications from previous units.

What are idols?

- An optional summarising question to pick up what the group have learnt in the study about idolatry generally.

How does idolatry distort the image of God in us?

- Humans are God's image bearers and when we revere other things, we diminish God's image in us and our ability to mirror that image.

In what ways can digital technology - AI and robots become idols?

- One way is when we see technology as our saviour – curing our illnesses, extending our lives, seeking immortality. You could use the Covid 19 pandemic as an example – e.g. vaccines being our saviour.

What application examples of AI and Robots, from the previous studies, do you think could become idols and why?

- All of them could be if we didn't set boundaries. In the next study we will look at how to do that and where there might be hard boundaries.

How might we end up serving technology rather than it serving us?

- When we allow it to control us and distract us – for example from prayer, bible study, forming real relationships.

Isn't AI just an example of human creativity, what we were created to do – invent things for human flourishing?

- Explore this question in the light of what the group learnt about Uzziah and Nebuchadnezzar. Key ideas are balancing creativity with dependence on God, responsibility and wise stewardship.
- You could discuss 'creativity' in the context of manipulative algorithms in social media – e.g. is tech. neutral, should there be ethical boundaries?

<sup>i</sup> C. J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), p. 164.