

Notes for the Ekklesia Meeting

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The Uniqueness of Israel's Religion

by Dan Trygg

“Indeed, ask now concerning the former days which were before you, since the day that God created people on the earth, and inquire from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything been done like this great thing, or has anything been heard like it? ³³ Has any people heard the voice of God speaking from the midst of the fire, as you have heard it, and survived? ³⁴ Or has a god tried to go to take for himself a nation from within another nation by trials, by signs and wonders and by war and by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm and by great terrors, as Yahweh your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? ³⁵ To you it was shown that you might know that Yahweh, He is God; there is no other besides Him.” Deuteronomy 4:32-35

These notes were inspired by an article in the [Apologetics Study Bible](#), entitled *The Uniqueness of Israel's Religion*, by E. Ray Clendenen. His glimpse into the polytheistic world of the patriarchs, and the radical nature of Biblical faith was very thought provoking.

According to the Bible, **Adam and Eve, and their immediate descendants, knew the one Creator-God**, and they worshipped Him alone. **Eventually, however, people wandered from those foundational beliefs** and began to be enamored with other things. Because they did not honor God, or keep Him before their minds and hearts, **they fell into deception and sensuality, and eventually served gods of their own imaginations, or were driven to placate demonic beings** who wished to exalt themselves over men and hold them captive (Rom. 1:18-32; Deut. 32:17,18; I Cor. 10:20).

God began to initiate His plan for the redemption of humankind by communicating with a polytheistic, pagan man, Abram, from a city of Chaldea (modern-day Iraq). Abram's family, like many other people, worshipped many gods (Josh. 24:2). **In response to the personal call of Yahweh, however, Abram left Ur and traveled to Canaan, and devoted himself exclusively to Yahweh**, whom he called God Most High, the Creator of heaven and earth (Gen. 14:22). **God not only promised to give him a vast multitude of descendants, but made a covenant with him to give the land of Canaan to his offspring.** In the details of this exchange, **God revealed that He is the judge of nations, and the owner of the land, and He gives it to whom He will** (Gen. 15). **He knows the future, and can exercise His will in other countries**, not just some localized territory. He also has great power to deliver His people, and to grant them dominion over a large area of land.

It is important to see how radical this understanding of God was, especially in a world where polytheism (belief in many gods) **and henotheism** (belief in localized gods) **had grown to be commonly accepted.** Abram was trusting in a God who would not be limited by other gods, by worldly political powers, or by any natural limitations. **He was trusting in a God who he truly thought of as all powerful**, El Shaddai (Gen. 17:1). In spite of the weaknesses of his faith, God was showing Sarah and him that nothing was too difficult for Him (Gen. 18:10-14). In His dealing with Sodom and Gomorrah, Abram, now Abraham, **learned that God was “the judge of all the earth”** (Gen. 18:25). **Evildoers would be answerable to Him. Furthermore, God listens to the cries of the oppressed, and will intervene to deliver them** (Gen. 18:20; cf. Ex. 6:5).

God established a relationship with Abraham so that he would direct his descendants to keep His way, so that the Lord could fulfill His promises through Abraham's family (Gen. 18:19). The outworking of this long-term plan became evident through the Lord's providential oversight of Joseph, so that Israel was preserved and even blessed through the time of famine that came upon that region (Gen. 37-50). While others were impoverished, or even perished, the children of Israel prospered and multiplied in Egypt. **The Egyptians saw the Israelites as a threat, and enslaved them.** Then, at the end of the 400 year period God had spoken of (Gen. 15:13), **Yahweh brought them out of their bondage by a mighty hand**, through a series of plagues which were directed against the gods of Egypt (Ex. 12:12). **Yahweh made a name for Himself by defeating all these so-called gods and compelling pharaoh to let His people go.** After leading them through the Red Sea, and drowning the Egyptian charioteers in the water, **God led His redeemed people to Mount Sinai, and established a covenant with them** (Ex. 1-20). **This covenant formed not only the basis of the Israelite faith, but also established their laws and many of their customs.**

As a result of this history, powerful deliverance and teachings of the covenant, the Old Testament faith had a number of distinctives that set Israel's beliefs apart from their pagan neighbors:

First and foremost, Israel's faith was monotheistic and exclusivistic. There was *only one God*, and Israel was to be *committed to only Him*. **In Exodus, God clearly made the point that there were no other gods like Him** (Ex. 8:10; 9:14; 15:11). **God also demanded their sole allegiance.** They were to have no other gods *before* Him, nor were they to make any images that represented Him or any other object of worship (Ex. 20:2-5). **By the time the 40 years in the wilderness had passed, the implications of this had finally settled in: He alone was the one true God!**

The other so-called “gods” were not like Him at all. Whatever may be claimed *by them, or for them* by their followers, *they were not real gods, at all*, at least nothing like Yahweh. Thus in Deuteronomy 4, Moses refers to the “gods of wood and stone” as “the work of men’s hands, . . . which neither see nor hear nor eat nor smell” (vs. 28). **The dramatic, powerful acts of Yahweh in delivering Israel from Egypt have no parallel in history. These things were done so that they would know that “Yahweh, He is God; there is no other besides Him”** (vss. 35,39). By contrast, Clendenen writes, “Cities in the ancient Near East were often filled with temples to various gods (e.g., Acts 17:22,23). Each of Babylon’s nine city gates was dedicated to a different god. Practitioners of other religions often expended great effort in either *identifying their gods with those of other nations, or demonstrating the subordination of other gods to their patron deity*. But **Israel’s God demanded not just a special place in a pantheon of other gods, but exclusive allegiance**. In the context of ancient Near Eastern polytheism, the call of Deuteronomy 6:4 to the worship of Yahweh as the *one* true God would have been *revolutionary!*”

Another distinctive was that the God of Israel was transcendent (*more than and outside of creation*) **and self-sufficient**. “*He was not the personification of nature, nor did He have a sovereignty limited to the earth, the heavens, or the underworld. He did not need to be tended or fed in His temple, like a Babylonian or Egyptian god. Nor did He need other divine or human assistance through religious rites to maintain cosmic and political order and agricultural productivity*. Egyptian temple rituals were the means by which the people contributed to holding the forces of chaos at bay, and Canaanite fertility rites ensured continuing agricultural and human productivity.” **Instead, Yahweh is the transcendent One who created the universe out of nothing, and who continually maintains and controls it for His glory**. “The profoundest insight of Hebrew religion,” John Oswalt declares, “may be that ‘Whatever God is, He is *not* the world around us.’” This means that magic has no part in Biblical worship.

Thirdly, loyalty to one God radically affected the nature of worship itself, when contrasted with those who believed in many gods. “By definition, **polytheism precluded wholehearted devotion and loyalty to any one god**. If divine power existed in *many* gods, *none* could possess *unlimited* wisdom or power, . . . and the activities of one god could often be counteracted by the activities of another. In polytheism, the will of the gods was fragmented, so that *a person could never be safe from divine displeasure and punishment*, since the will of one god could very well conflict with that of another.” (If you have ever read the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* of Homer, or saw the movie, “*Troy*”, you become aware of the never-ending conflict among the Greek gods, and how people were like pawns at the mercy of their whims.) In a polytheistic world view, a person would have to continue to offer appeasements to *numerous* gods to avoid disaster. “...But **if there is only one God, we can be wholehearted in our devotion to Him**, as Deuteronomy 6:5 demands.”

A fourth distinctive is that although God is transcendent, He has not kept His character or His will hidden, as did the gods of other peoples. He is not capricious, unpredictable or disinterested. By contrast, T. Jacobsen describes the Babylonian god Enlil in this way: “Man can never be fully at ease with Enlil, can never know what he has in mind. . . . In his wild moods of destructiveness he is unreachable, deaf to all appeals.” Where the other peoples *had to search continually for the divine will* through divination, and *try to awaken divine interest* through bodily mutilation or multiplied sacrifices or prayers (I Kg. 18:26-29), and *avoid misfortune through incantations and the wearing of amulets and charms*, Yahweh has plainly revealed His heart and His will in His written Word (Deut. 4:6-8).

The fifth distinctive was the nature of the relationship between God and His people. Israel’s relationship with Yahweh was based on God’s choice by which He established in history a covenant with His people. **No other ancient people in that part of the world had a covenantal relationship with their god**. The Bible presents humankind as the “crown of creation”, and the natural world as created *for us* to oversee and enjoy. But the foreign gods were primarily *feudal gods of the land*, which they had created *for themselves*. *People were little more than serfs, a necessary nuisance* seldom receiving more than a brief expression of pity or remorse for their grievous situation. **By contrast, the Lord had formed a people for Himself, bound them to each other and to Himself by covenant, and pledged to shepherd them faithfully forever by His grace and to guard jealously their relationship to Him**.

Finally, while Yahweh ordained the use of ritual in worship, He abhorred ritual aimed at manipulation. *Pagan worship was essentially selfish*, focused almost exclusively about either appeasement of wrath or manipulation of favor. A “magical view” of worship was common, where rituals were employed to cover sin, allay punishment or secure blessings, regardless of the actual devotion of the heart. By contrast, **Biblical religion gives at the same time both a higher view of humanity and a higher view of God** – *Yahweh is omnipotent, undivided, purposeful, merciful, uniformly righteous, and deserving of our undivided love*. **We worship God because He is good, and worthy of all our praise**. The only actions that please Him are those that honestly arise from the heart (Hos. 6:4-6). **True worship is to be accompanied by joy in the Lord, followed by integrity in one’s actions** (Deut. 12:12,18; Isa. 1:11-17; cf. Jn. 4:22-24). Israel was to be a kingdom of priests, singing to the Lord from the heart, declaring His glory to the nations day after day (I Chron. 16:23), and showing the positive results of faith through lives of righteousness and consistency (Isa. 60:1-3; Mic. 6:6-8; Matt. 5:15,16).