

Monotheism and Western Civilization

Commentary for April 1, 2011 — Pagans Were Monotheists Too, in a Sense

One major point that Dr. Ernest Martin makes in this month's article "The Origin and Goal of Western Civilization, Part 2" is that a general trend of a belief in monotheism began in Babylon with King Nebuchadnezzar. This monotheistic belief was initiated by God and it continues to our day as part of the general theology of Western Civilization. This may seem strange but it is true nonetheless. For introductory information read the [April 2011 Newsletter](#).

It is well and good to believe in one God but this is insufficient to satisfy Him: **"You believe that there is one God; you do well: the devils also believe, and tremble"** (James 2:19). James goes on to say that your actions in life must be in line with your beliefs. The devils believe in God. Indeed, they believe in the one and true God but they do not act correctly. They do not "live" what they believe. They do not worship God as God even though they "tremble" at His power and authority over themselves.

The major requirement for Israel in their covenant with YHWH was that they were to exclusively worship YHWH, the Creator, and Him alone (Matthew 4:10 and Luke 4:8). Israelites and Gentiles alike all knew and understood the fact that other "gods" existed: **"For YHWH is a great El, and a great King above all Elohim"** (Psalm 95:3). Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, said this to the people of Israel:

"Now I know that YHWH is greater than all Elohim: for in the thing wherein they [Elohim] dealt proudly [he was] above them."

• **Exodus 18:11**

Indeed, scholars recognize the proper usage of "Elohim" and how that term was used in the Holy Scriptures, by the early *ekklesia*, and even later. Let me give two examples:

"Jewish Scripture freely uses the plural form of 'god', and that the Christian Fathers have no difficulty in understanding and accepting this use quite literally, since in one form or another they do believe in the deification of Man."

• **Athanassiadi and Frede, *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, p. 3**¹

"By our measure, all ancient monotheists were polytheists. Ancient Jewish monotheists, like their pagan and (eventually) Christian counterparts, knew that gods other than their own existed, too: other peoples and cultures were obvious evidence of their existence."

• **Fredrickson, *"Just Like Everyone Else ..."*, p. 126**²

There was a difference. For Israel, YHWH was to be the only Elohim they could worship:

¹ P. Athanassiadi and M. Frede, ed., *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 1999), p. 3.

² Paula Fredriksen, "Part One: Just Like Everyone Else, Only More So," a review of David Baile, ed., *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, in *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 95, No. 1 (Winter 2005) 119–130.

“You shall fear YHWH your Elohim, and serve him, and shall swear by his name. You shall not go after other elohim, of the elohim of the people which are round about you; (For YHWH your Elohim is a jealous El among you).”

• ***Deuteronomy 6:13–15***

Before Israel desired a king, Samuel, the last Judge, instructed the people of Israel on how to stop the oppression of the Philistines:

“And Samuel spoke unto all the house of Israel, saying, ‘If you do return unto YHWH with all your hearts, then put away the strange elohim and Ashtaroth from among you, and prepare your hearts unto YHWH, and serve him only: and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines. Then the children of Israel did put away Baalim and Ashtaroth, and served YHWH only.’”

• ***1 Samuel 7:3–4***

Dr. Martin documents the beginning of understanding by pagans (Gentiles) that there was one supreme God above others. This began with Nebuchadnezzar. YHWH revealed it to him and to other kings and emperors. Understand this important fact: full knowledge about God can only be gained through God’s self-revelation to you and all mankind.

You cannot learn much about God through your experience, senses, observing creation, or by reason. You can learn that God exists and about His power and godhead,³ but you cannot learn what He is like and how and why He acts (Romans 1:19–20). Without God’s revelation, man quickly reverts to worshipping the creation instead of the creator (Romans 1:21–25). Jesus Christ came to reveal God the Father (Matthew 11:27; Luke 10:22). Such details about the Father can only come through the Word of God. Today we have access to those details through the written Word of God which is contained in the Holy Scriptures.

In a long process God is revealing Himself to the world, slowly over thousands of years so mankind will accept the concept of one God. God is educating mankind about Himself, so that when God’s plan of salvation for mankind is completed (1 Corinthians 15:28), all will acknowledge that God constantly had a witness about Himself available to the world.

Israel is one conduit for some of that information. He uses the *ekklesia* to convey more information. He also uses Gentile rulers to proclaim His existence, power, and glory through the decrees and proclamations of those rulers. All these accounts of God telling mankind about Himself are presented in the Bible for you to read.

The wise men of the world did not know what you know (1 Corinthians 1:20–21; 1 Corinthians 2:6–7). They could not know what you know because God hid that information from them. In fact, you and I can know things that angels could not know in the past, details about God’s plan revealed through the apostle Paul and others (Romans 16:26; Ephesians 3:5). God has blessed us with a marvelous resource. Use it wisely and often.

David Sielaff
david@askelm.com

³ For example, we can know what God’s appearance is like. We are told explicitly that we are created in His image and likeness (Genesis 1:26).