

Bite Size Bible Study

Pagan Religions #107

By Pastor Lee

Growing up in a Christian home and going to Sunday school, I had always thought those who followed pagan religions were foolish and wanted the easy out for their religious activities. After reading “Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament” by John H. Walton, I find that my perception is far from the truth.

There were many similarities between ancient Hebrew religion and the pagan religions. The big difference was that the Hebrews had only one god while most of the pagan religions had a large pantheon of gods. They had a god of the field, a god of fertility, a god of this and a god of that. It was their duty to keep all of these gods happy, or at least not angry with them. Sometimes it was the duty of the city to provide for a god, but most families had personal family gods whom they were responsible for.

One responsibility was to provide a comfortable place for the god to live (in an idol) and to provide food and drink. For this they felt that they could petition the god to provide them with something. It may be a good crop for the year, or it may be for a large healthy family, or even wealth – and the list goes on.

The problem came when one did something to anger a god. It may be something that they did intentionally or maybe something unintentional like forgetting to feed or wash the idol where the god resided. It was believed that an angered god would either leave, which meant that what ever that god was providing would be lost, or it would bring havoc and destruction to them. Angered gods were to be pacified as soon as possible,

The problem was that one never knew what would pacify the particular god. There was no code of conduct to remedy the anger of a god. As such they would try this or that and keep trying until, in some religions, they would sacrifice their own children to regain the favors of the god. Not knowing what they did, made it even more difficult to know what to do for the god.

Far from the god being a comfort to the family or city, there was a constant stress of not doing the right thing to keep the god from his/her anger and vindictive actions. Anything like a failed crop, or the lack of rain, or death in the family; could possibly be a sign that one or another god was displeased with their actions.

It must have been a hard life to live, but they had no other understanding of the way the cosmos worked. Over the millenniums from Adam to them they had lost sight of the true God. They had been ejected from the garden and lost contact with the true God. The records in the Bible document how far they had strayed.

God saw how lost they were and began rescuing one extended family to set them up as an example of how to live with the true God of the Cosmos. Through a man called Moses, He rescued Israel and gave them a set of instructions (we call the Law) on how to live with God.

These instructions gave them an understanding of how to relate to God. There would be no more guessing about whether ones actions were pleasing to God or not. The instructions were quite clear. And if one did do something that would displease God then there was a proper way to reconcile oneself back to God.

No more guessing, no more sacrificing children, no more wondering if their actions were pleasing to God. For those who understood and practiced it, it must have been a great relief. But not everyone got it. Generations of acting and believing one set of rules is not easily set aside.

Even on the journey to a promised land there were those who felt that the God of Creation was not enough; they needed an idol. They needed a god that they could see and touch, so they built an idol of God in the image of a bullock – a symbol, to them at least, of great power.

He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf (Bullock), fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, “These are your gods {This is your Elohim}, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.”
Exodus 32:4 NIV

They had not left God for other gods, but were trying to honor Him in the way they honored other gods. They didn’t yet know better.

How many times in our naiveté do we try to honor God from our own understanding, not letting His teaching and instructions lead our behavior? Maybe we have things to learn (or unlearn) just as our pagan neighbors did.

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