



Discipleship Training

Mythology or Religion?

Thinking further about our discussion regarding the identity and name of the biblical God we worship, it seems to me that there are several points that might shed light on our dilemma. First, let's consider the difference between mythology and religion:

Mythology can be defined as a collection of myths, especially one belonging to a particular religious or cultural tradition. The myths are traditional tales or legends of heroes, gods or events without a provable, factual basis or natural explanation.

A notable example is the belief system of Norse mythology, which has been translated into the Scandinavian folklore of the modern period. It contains 'tales of various deities, beings and heroes [in their interactions with each other, their enemies and humanity] derived from numerous sources, before and after the pagan period, including mediaeval manuscripts, archaeological representations and folk traditions', Wikipedia. The mythological cosmos of the old Germanic and Norse gods and goddesses consisted of nine worlds that flanked a central tree; various forms of creation myths included how the world was created from the flesh of the primordial being Ymir. The first two humans were Ask and Embla, and they will repopulate a reborn world in the future after an immense battle between the gods and their enemies. (Sound familiar?)

By contrast, *religion may be defined* as a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature and purpose of the universe, that involves devotional and ritual observances in worship of a superhuman, creative or controlling power, especially a personal God or gods.

I think this emphasises the nature of our intimate relationship, compared with the abstract pantheons of ancient mythologies and pagan cults, which attempted through those systems to understand and explain the world they inhabited.

We have examined something of the Mesopotamian pantheons through our study of the Enuma Elish and Epic of Gilgamesh, comparing them to our own Genesis accounts of Creation and Noah's Flood. And it is obvious that many contemporary cultures had numerous gods and goddesses, each attributed to a specific sphere of human life.

The Sumerian, Akkadian, Assyrian, Babylonian empires successively worshipped Hadad, the storm god; Enlil (Ashur) the god of the air, and head of the Assyrian pantheon; others included Marduk, the patron deity and chief Babylonian god, and Tiamat the goddess of the deep, from whose body he created the cosmos.

The numerous ancient Egyptian gods and goddesses included Amun, creator god and patron of Thebes; Aten, sun disc deity and monolatrous god of pharaoh Akenhaten; Horus, falcon headed god of sky, sun, kingship and son of Osiris and Isis; Osiris, god of death and resurrection, ruler of the underworld; and Ra the sun god.

Ancient Greece and Rome had dozens of gods and goddesses, many of whom corresponded to the other's system. Roman gods included Apollo, god of light; Aurora, goddess of the dawn; Bacchus,

god of agriculture and wine; Cupid, god of love; Cybele, goddess of the earth, nature and fertility; Diana, goddess of wild animals and the hunt. The Greek pantheon included Aphrodite, goddess of love, sex and beauty; Athena, goddess of reason, wisdom and war; Artemis, fleet-footed goddess of the hunt; Hermes, messenger god of music, fertility, luck and deception; Poseidon, god of the sea, horses and earthquakes; and Zeus, the chief deity, controlled the weather but was chronically unfaithful!

As we have learned, the nations surrounding Israel, as the children of God sought to establish themselves in Canaan, had numerous gods. Chemosh was the chief god of the Moabites, and the Canaanites 'who were in the land', *Genesis 12:6*, worshipped Ba'al, the storm god; Anat, the warrior goddess; Ashtoreth/ Ashtar, the goddess of love and fertility; El and his consort Asherah. 'The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, forgetting the LORD their God, and worshipping the Ba'als and the Asherahs', *Judges 3:7*.

There is considerable evidence in the Hebrew Bible that people continued to pray to their old 'household gods' and make sacrifices at local shrines, or 'high places', despite or contemporaneous with their covenanted worship of God. These were repeatedly criticised and banned, even vilified, but 'the old ways' held on for several generations. When he was afraid of being defeated in battle even King Saul sought the professed knowledge of the witch of Endor!

³ 'Now Samuel had died, and all Israel had mourned for him and buried him in Ramah, his own city. Saul had expelled the mediums and the wizards from the land... ⁵ When Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly. ⁶ When Saul inquired of the LORD, the LORD did not answer him, not by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets... Then Saul said to his servants, 'Seek out for me a woman who is a medium, so that I may go to her and inquire of her.' His servants said to him, 'There is a medium at Endor', ' 1 Samuel 28.

We might perhaps compare this reluctance with the change from universal Catholicism to Protestant beliefs and practices in this country, alongside continuing 'underground' Roman Catholic worship. (And on a light-hearted topic, my own experience with metric weights and measures falls into this category of unwillingness to change: I still think in miles, pints and pounds, rather than kilometres, litres and kilos!)

Bible Passages:

Genesis 31:19, 34, as Jacob and his entourage left Haran (in a hurry) Rachel stole her father's household gods and packed them in the camel's saddle! She sat on them when Laban caught up with them.

Genesis 35:2-4, when they reached Shechem, Jacob said to his household and others, 'put away the foreign gods... purify yourselves... and let us go to Bethel where I will make an altar to God who answered me in the day of my distress...' (and the rings in their ears!)

Exodus 20:4-6, 'you shall not make for yourself an idol or any likeness... to worship or serve them, for I am a jealous God' // *Deuteronomy 5:8-10*, and *7:25-26*;

Deuteronomy 29:17, 'you have seen their detestable things, their idols made of wood, of stone, of silver and gold...' (See additional references)¹

¹ *1 Samuel 19:13-16*, Michal helped David to escape from Saul through a window, by putting a *teraphim* in her bed as if David were asleep there;

2 Kings 23:24, 'Joshua removed the mediums, spiritists, *teraphim*, idols and abominations ...'

Second, What's in a Name?

What name(s) should we attribute to our God, as we try to give him/her human characteristics that help us to make sense of our faith? Belief in one God does not necessarily require him/her to have a personal Name, but a pantheon of gods by its very nature demands that gods and goddesses are named for identification purposes.

You may remember that when St Paul visited Athens he asked about the altar inscribed 'to an unknown god', in case of offence; he was able to tell them that he was proclaiming Jesus Christ to fill that place, *Acts 17:23*.

We have already seen the adam naming animals over which he was given power, *Genesis 2:19-20*, and God renamed the early patriarchs to show the altered import of their future relationships. Thus Abram became Abraham, Sarai became Sarah, Jacob became Israel, and in later years Jesus gave Simon the name Kephas, the Rock, (Petros, Peter) and Saul changed his Hebrew name to the Gentile Paul.

Abram means exalted ancestor, and Abraham means ancestor of a multitude:

⁵ 'No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations', *Genesis 17:5*.

Sarai means princely, and Sarah means queen of princes or mother of princes:

¹⁵ 'God said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶ I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her', *Genesis 17:15*.

Jacob means cheater, deceiver, and Israel means the one who strives with God: ²⁸ 'Then the man said, 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed', *Genesis 32:28*.

We have learned that Wellhausen's theory of documentary sources identified J and E respectively by their use of Jahwe, LORD, for the personal God Yahweh who created and relates to humanity, and Elohim to refer to the almighty, but remote creator God, and that the Priestly and Deuteronomic sources are referred to as P and D. (The pronunciation of Yahweh as Jahveh became the incorrect Jehovah!)

But there are various other names attributed to God in the Hebrew Bible, several of which show adaptation from the surrounding cultures. Thus, El Shaddai, God Almighty, *Job 31:2*; Elyon, Most High God, see below; YHWH, the divine tetragrammaton that is too holy to say aloud and is vocalised

Isaiah 44:9-11, 'those who fashion a graven image are all of them futile... who has fashioned a god or cast an idol... will be put to shame for the craftsmen are mere men';

Isaiah 45:20, 'assemble and draw near... they have no knowledge, they who carry about their wooden idols, and keep praying to a god who cannot save', cf *Revelation 9:20*;

Ezekiel 18:5-6, 'But if a man is righteous, and practises justice and righteousness, and does not eat at the mountain shrines or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel...';

Ezekiel 21:21, 'for the king of Babylon stands at the parting of the ways to use divination - he shakes the arrows, consults the household gods, looks at the river';

Zechariah 10:2, 'for the *teraphim* utter nonsense, and the diviners see lies ... therefore the people wander like sheep, they suffer for lack of a shepherd'.

as Adonai, my LORD; ha-shem is Hebrew for 'the name', see below, *Deuteronomy 28:58*; Tzevaot, the LORD God of hosts in *Psalms 89:6-8*; Melekh ha-Olam, the sovereign ruler of the universe, contrasted with Molech, the Ammonite god-king whose worshippers were accused of child sacrifices.

(Incidentally, *Allah*, as the name for God, was used by Arabic people of differing religions before Islam; it probably derived from *al-ilah*, the god, and is related to El and Elah, the Hebrew and Aramaic words for God.)

Bible Passages:

Genesis 14:18-20, 'And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine;

... he was priest of *God Most High, (El Elyon)* ¹⁹ He blessed him and said,

'Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth;

²⁰ and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!

And Abram gave him one-tenth of everything'.

Genesis 49:22-26, Jacob blessed his son Joseph, using several names for God;

²² 'Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a spring; his branches run over the wall.

²³ The archers fiercely attacked him; they shot at him and pressed him hard.

²⁴ Yet his bow remained taut, and his arms were made agile

by the hands of *the Mighty One of Jacob*,

by the name of *the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel*,

²⁵ *by the God of your father, who will help you,*

by the Almighty (Shaddai) who will bless you with blessings of heaven above,

blessings of the deep that lies beneath, blessings of the breasts and of the womb.

²⁶ The blessings of your father are stronger than the blessings of the eternal mountains, the bounties of the everlasting hills;

may they be on the head of Joseph, on the brow of him who was set apart from his brothers'.

Deuteronomy 1:10-11, '*The LORD your God* has multiplied you, so that today you are as numerous as the stars of heaven. ¹¹ *May the LORD, the God of your ancestors*, increase you a thousand times more and bless you, as he has promised you!'

Deuteronomy 5:11, 'You shall not make wrongful use of the name of *the LORD your God*, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name'.

Deuteronomy 28:58-59, 'If you do not diligently observe all the words of this law that are written in this book, fearing *this glorious and awesome name, the LORD your God*, ⁵⁹ then the LORD will overwhelm both you and your offspring with severe and lasting afflictions and grievous and lasting maladies'.

Deuteronomy 32:3-9,

³ 'For I will proclaim *the name of the LORD*; ascribe greatness to our God!

⁴ *The Rock*, his work is perfect, and all his ways are just.

A faithful God, without deceit, just and upright is he;

⁵ yet his degenerate children have dealt falsely with him, a perverse and crooked generation.

⁶ Do you thus repay *the LORD*, O foolish and senseless people?

Is not he your father, who created you, who made you and established you?

⁷ Remember the days of old, consider the years long past;

ask your father, and he will inform you; your elders, and they will tell you.

⁸ When *the Most High* (Elyon) apportioned the nations,
when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the peoples
according to the number of the gods;

⁹ *the LORD's* own portion was his people, Jacob his allotted share'.

Numbers 9:89, 'When Moses went into the Tent of Meeting to speak with the LORD, he would hear the Voice speaking to him from above the mercy-seat (cover) that was on the ark of the covenant (or treaty, *eduth*) from between the two cherubim; thus He spoke to him'.

And third, the synthesis of our belief in one God with the early biblical record of the acceptance of their new relationship with the Divine by the ancient Israelites. We briefly touched on the historicity of the Bible, and whilst it does not claim or set out to record 'history' as we understand it, there is an historical passage of time of some 1,000 years from the Patriarchs to King David and another 1,000 to the time of Jesus.

'The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob' is used repeatedly in Genesis and Exodus, and is quoted in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 22:32, Mark 12:26, Luke 13:28, Luke 20:37) and in the Book of Acts, (3:13, 7:32) to reinforce our heritage. And the fact that we worship Abraham's God is enshrined in our hymns and Liturgy:

'The God of Abraham praise,*
Who reigns enthroned above,
Ancient of everlasting days,
And God of love.

Jehovah, great I AM,
By earth and heav'n confessed,
We bow and bless the sacred Name
For ever blest.'

*Thomas Olivers, 1725-1799, based on the Hebrew 'Yigdal Elohim Chai'**

Jesus taught his followers to think of God, his heavenly Father, as *Abba*, but his teaching was rejected by the religious authorities who felt threatened by his radical ideas. Was that so different from the response to God's original attempts to persuade humans in the ancient world that the God we worship and try to obey has our best interests at heart, and that He lovingly created us for his own enjoyment? God sent his Son to live on earth to save us from ourselves as a last resort, but the cycle of rebellious disobedience, punishment, repentance and restoration is still evident in society today. The promise He left for us, and the Holy Spirit who strengthens us in those endeavours, is eternal life with our Lord and Saviour.

¹¹ 'Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. ¹² His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and *he has a Name inscribed that no one knows but himself*. ¹³ He is clothed in a robe dipped in (or sprinkled with) blood, and his Name is called The Word of God. ¹⁴ And the armies of heaven, wearing fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. ¹⁵ From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty', *Revelation 19*.

Some scholars now believe that the personal Name worn by the risen Christ is the Name revealed to Moses at the burning bush, '*ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh*, and that its translation should become 'I call into

being what will be', or 'I create', ² instead of 'God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I AM has sent me to you",' *Exodus 3:14*.

The writer of the Fourth Gospel described Jesus as the Bread of Life, the Good Shepherd, and so on using the epithet I AM. 'I AM the vine and you are the branches' in *John 15* seems to refer to the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden, *Genesis 2:9* and *Revelation 22:1-2*, that is the central branch of the Jewish Menorah, *Exodus 25:31-32*, and of the Lampstand in Zechariah 4:1-3, and Revelation, chapter 1.

¹² 'Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and *in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man*, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. ¹⁴ His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵ his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. ¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force', *Revelation 1:12-16*.

Is it any wonder that that the early liturgical hymn in Philipppians insists:

⁵ 'Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death
even death on a cross.

⁹ *Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the Name
that is above every name,
¹⁰ so that at the Name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father'.*

When you next have time to sit and ponder all these things, try praying the following sacramental hymn as an aid to your meditation:

'This is my body, broken for you, bringing you wholeness, making you free;
Take it and eat it, and when you do, do it in love for me.

This is my blood, poured out for you, bringing forgiveness, making you free;
Take it and drink it, and when you do, do it in love for me.

Love one another; I have loved you, and I have shown you how to be free;

Serve one another, and when you do, do it in love for me.' Amen

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Kay Duckett, January 2020