

# Yahweh and the Gods: A Theology of World Religions

*It was Israel who saw the uniqueness of Yahweh acting in her history (Ex 8:6; 9:14). It was Israel who experienced the difference between Yahweh and the gods (Ex 15:11). It was out of the richness of these experiences that Israel truly knew Yahweh... The polemic throughout the Pentateuch (and the Old Testament prophets) is persuasive evidence for an exclusivistic understanding of Yahweh in a pluralistic environment. Yahweh, instead of the pagan gods, is the sovereign Creator who controls nature, brings fertility, and subdues nations.*

by Ed Mathews

**P**luralism is a major challenge confronting contemporary religions. The challenge is a serious one. For in the past, when various religions encountered each other, new insights and expressions of faith developed.<sup>1</sup> These developments resulted in either different religious formulations or fresh spiritual growth.

Christians are reexamining the foundations of their faith, especially their understanding of God, and who He is. Did the Israelites borrow their understanding of God from their pagan neighbors? How should a Christian respond to the claims of religious pluralism? These questions are the focus of the ensuing examination of the Pentateuch.

## **Yahweh in the Pentateuch**

God revealed himself in the history and culture of ancient Israel. This disclosure occurred among societies that believed in a pantheon of gods. The similarities between Yahweh and the gods are interesting; the differences are convicting. What the Lord did in Israel “simply never happened elsewhere” (Noth 1958:2,3). The central elements of biblical faith are unique in that they could not have emerged by any natural evolutionary process from the pagan world in which they originated (Wright 1968:7; cf. Richardson 1961:71,72). The Hebrews realized their religion was different from other religions because their God was different from other gods!

### **“There is No One Like the Lord”**

Yahweh was without equal. None of

the pagan gods was like Him. He was incomparable (Durham 1987:128). In the Old Testament, several phrases expressed this uniqueness: “there is none, there is nothing, there is no one ... as, like, compared to, on a level with, equal to...” For instance, in comparing Himself to other gods, Yahweh said, “There is no one like me in all the earth” (Ex 9:14). While blessing Israel just before his death, Moses said, “There is no one like the God of Jeshurun, who rides on the heavens to help you...(Dt 33:26). As expressions of uniqueness, one-of-a-kindness, or singularity, these comparative phrases also described the plagues of hail and locust (Ex 9:18,24;10:14); the despairing cry of the Egyptians (Ex 11:6); and the leadership of Moses (Dt 34:10). It is obvious that, as a particular linguistic form, these comparisons were part of everyday conversation. They had their origin in the idiom of the people (Labuschagne 1966:15). Only later did Israel apply them to the incomparability of Yahweh.

### **“Who Among the Gods is Like You?”**

Besides comparative statements, the Israelites employed rhetorical questions to express uniqueness and singularity. For example, Moses asked, “What god is there in heaven or on earth who can do the deeds and mighty works you do?” (Dt 3:24). Again, Moses inquired, “Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testing, by miraculous signs and wonders, by war, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the

Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?” (Dt 4:34). Yahweh was beyond comparison among all divine beings. “There is simply none like Him, none even approaching an equality with Him” (Durham 1987:207). He was magnificent in holiness, awesome in splendor, and extraordinary in accomplishment! Moses also used rhetorical questions to describe the uniqueness of Israel, i.e., without equal among the nations (because Israel’s God was without equal among the gods. (Dt 4:7; 5:26; 33:29). It seems clear, then, that a rhetorical question was a communication device for expressing a deep conviction (Kessler 1982:8). The anticipated answer to these “who is like” questions was always “none.” When they referred to the Lord, the expected reply was “none but Yahweh” or “Yahweh alone.”

### **“The Lord is One”**

The escape from Egypt and subsequent passage through the wilderness shaped the identity of Israel, an identity clarified by the demand to “love Yahweh with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Dt 6:5). The force of this demand rested on the profound realization and repeated mention in the Pentateuch that “Yahweh is your God.” The Shema goes a step further in affirming that “Yahweh is one” or “Yahweh alone” is the God of Israel. Though the Hebrew text is ambiguous at this point, “monotheism is implicit” in both versions of that grand

creedal statement (Christensen 1991:145). If the ambiguity is irresolvable, as some argue (Miller 1990:99), then the task of interpretation calls for grappling with the sense of both translations.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Undivided Loyalty of Israel*

The translation “Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone” anticipates the command to love God with undivided devotion. It describes the appropriate commitment of Israel. Its concern is her loyalty to the God of the covenant, a refusal to permit her to direct only part of her love to God (Wyschogrod 1984:25). Therefore the Shema, according to this rendering, is a radical confession that the loyalty of Israel is one, a loyalty to worship “no other gods” except Yahweh—to have “no other gods” except Him (Ex 20:3).

#### *Undivided Nature of God*

The alternative translation “Yahweh our God, Yahweh is one” speaks of the integrity and the unity of His purpose, thus emphasizing His oneness (Moberly 1990:211-215). The Lord was known as “the one who brought Israel out of the land of Egypt” (Dt 5:6). When His people made a golden calf, God was ready to destroy them (Dt 9:12-14). This threatened destruction made Him appear fickle and inconsistent (Dt 9:28,29). In the end, the integrity of God prevailed because He kept His covenant with Israel (Dt 7:8,9).<sup>3</sup> The Shema demanded the same integrity (or undivided commitment) of Israel toward God (Janzen 1987:291-295). To confess that “Yahweh is one” was to claim that He was faithful and consistent in purpose and being—undivided in heart and mind and will.

#### **Yahweh and the Gods**

Yahweh was unique and incomparable, whole and undivided, a covenant God of impeccable integrity. Where did these ascriptions originate? Did Israel borrow them from local pagan religions and apply them to their God? The evidence does not warrant that con-

clusion. Instead, Yahweh was both greater than and distinct from the gods of Babylon, Egypt, and Canaan.

#### *Distinct from the Gods*

The Israelites lived in a world shaped by polytheism, by a supposed cosmic struggle between gods and goddesses (Glasser 1989:37). The faith of Israel resulted from “the direct activity of God” (Wright 1968:15), not from a religious developmentalism that evolved out of polytheism into henotheism or out of henotheism into monotheism (Rowley 1950:333-338). Though the Pentateuch reflects some borrowing from local sources, the elements in paganism are so radically reconceptualized that the faith of Israel stood in sharp contrast to the polytheistic environment in which it resided.

#### *The God El*

The father and omnipotent ruler of the Canaanite gods was El.<sup>4</sup> He was older than the sub-deities. Thus, in age and power, he surpassed them all. After leaving behind the gods of Ur (Jos 24:14) and entering Canaan, Abraham worshipped El, who was also the God of Melchizedek and Abimelech (Ge 14:18-20; 20:1-17; 21:22-24). Likewise, Jacob built an altar and called it “El, the God of Israel” (Ge 33:19, 20).<sup>5</sup> About the time Abraham moved to Canaan, the Ugaritic texts were written. They told the myth of Ba’al driving El from the kingship over the Canaanite gods, a myth that began in the north and swept steadily south through Palestine (Kapelrud 1963:40-42). This religious revolution was the result of the coming of the Amorites who brought their god Ba’al with them (cf. Ge 15:16 and Am 2:9,10; Oldenburg 1969:151-163). The myth reflected in religion what took place in politics—the Amorite conquest of Canaan.) Ba’al, as an agricultural fertility god, did not penetrate the desert regions of Midian in the far south, where Abraham migrated at the beginning of the Amorite occupation and where Moses, six centuries later, wor-

shipped El (Ex 2:15-31). While in Midian, Moses came face to face with El, “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” at the burning bush (Ex 3:6). There the Lord, who was similar to El, revealed himself as distinct from El.<sup>6</sup> He said his name was Yahweh: “I am who I am” (Ex 3:14).<sup>7</sup> Moses, who had worshipped El, was given a new understanding—an insight into the distinctiveness of Yahweh—to prepare him for confrontations with Ba’al.

#### *The worship of Ba’al.*

When Israel crossed the Jordan and moved into Canaan, defeating the people and taking over the land, the Hebrews became bitter enemies of the Canaanites, and Yahweh became the fierce adversary of Ba’al. In spite of dire warnings (Dt 4:5-20; 7:1-6; 8:19,20; 17:1-3; 18:9-13; 30:17,18), some Israelites abandoned Yahweh (Jdg 2:10; 6:7-10; 10:6,7a). Leaders in ancient Israel adopted Ba’al cult practices (cf. 2Ki 23:4-9 and Jer 32:30-35; Greenfield 1987:546). Deliverers drove out the enemy, abolished the cults, and brought the people back to Yahweh. The rivalry between Yahweh and Ba’al persisted through out the course of Israel’s and Judah’s history. The Israelites misunderstood the distinctiveness of Yahweh, the only God who asked His people to love Him as He had already loved them (Ex 34:10-14; Christensen 1991:15).

#### **Greater than the Gods**

Whenever the Pentateuch mentioned other gods, it assumed the gods were real to the pagans. Yet, when comparing Yahweh with the gods, it portrayed Yahweh not only as distinct from the gods but also greater than the gods. The prohibitions against idolatry and the expressions of exaltation reflect this greatness.

#### *Prohibition against idolatry*

Idols were not to be made or worshipped by the Israelites (Ex 20:4,5; 34:17; Lev 19:4; 20:1; Dt 29:16-18).

They were merely man made pieces of detestable, useless, ineffective, dead wood and stone (Dt 27:15; 29:17; 32:21). Images could not see, hear, eat or smell (Dt 4:28). They disappointed and embarrassed those who trusted in them. Why, then, did Yahweh prohibit idolatry? The Pentateuch does not give a precise answer.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to the gods of Canaan—that were known through idols—Yahweh made Himself known entirely apart from images (Dt 4:12-18). The prohibition against idolatry, therefore, set Israel apart from her pagan neighbors (Curtis 1985:285). It distinguished Israel from her contemporaries and Yahweh from their gods. As the sovereign Lord, He had the authority to impose the ban against idols, (Deut. 4:1,2). He was the God of gods, the God not formed or controlled by human hands.<sup>9</sup>

#### *Expressions of Exaltation*

Some scholars suggest that Israel adopted her forms of exaltation of Yahweh from her pagan neighbors (Wright 1951:4). Since Babylon, Egypt, and Israel employed similar statements of uniqueness for their deities, the question of borrowing must be taken seriously. Considering the evidence, however, “it cannot be proved on sufficient grounds that Israel borrowed the concept” (Labuschagne 1966:129). It seems more plausible to believe that the Israelites formed expressions of exaltation independently from the rich resources of her language. Although the Hebrews probably knew the local idioms of incomparability, the idea developed in the experience of Israel with Yahweh as a distinct, unique God, remarkably different from pagan deities.

It was Israel who experienced Yahweh as a God of integrity, a holy God, a God of justice, a God of mercy toward the helpless, who gave command-

ments, who spoke to his people in passionate language, and who demanded complete commitment and undivided loyalty. It was Israel who saw the uniqueness of Yahweh in the plagues, the exodus, and the wilderness journey (Ex 8:6; 9:14). It was Israel who experienced the difference between Yahweh

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## **Israel linked the uniqueness of Yahweh as a creedal confession, that Yahweh was one, an entirely different God beyond comparison or imitation. There was none greater!**

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and the gods (Ex 15:11). It was out of the richness of these experiences that Israel knew Yahweh. There was no need for her to imitate, adopt, or borrow from her pagan neighbors. The polemic throughout the Pentateuch (and the Old Testament prophets) is persuasive evidence for an exclusivistic understanding of Yahweh in a pluralistic environment, i.e., Yahweh, instead of the pagan gods, is the sovereign Creator who controls nature, brings fertility, and subdues nations. The author is aware that some religions are nontheistic. In such cases, the question should be reworded: What is the relationship between Yahweh and their “ultimate concern” (Tillich 1957:106), Yahweh and “the holy” (Otto 1958:12-19), or the “Real”? Each religion—whether theistic or nontheistic—is an attempt to seek and respond to that which is considered the One.

From the very beginning, Israel linked the uniqueness of Yahweh with her salvation from Egypt (Ex 20:2). The concept was not borrowed from pagan minds but began as a creedal confession—based on the activities of God—that Yahweh was one, an entirely different God beyond comparison or imitation. There was none greater! There was none other (Dt 4:39).

#### **Yahweh and Religious Pluralism**

The contrast between Yahweh and the gods contributes to an understanding and appreciation of the Lord. It demonstrates the qualitative difference between God and the gods, draws attention to his singular uniqueness, sets the parameters for religious pluralism,

and provides a basis for responding to the contemporary voices of religious tolerance. In view of the various world religions with their divergent beliefs and practices, what relationship does Yahweh have with their gods? Three possibilities<sup>10</sup> will be dis-

cussed: “One reflected in the many, One reached by the many, and One instead of the many.”

#### **One Reflected in the Many**

This position assumes that there is a reality at the center of all religions. The different perceptions of that reality in the various religions are true to the people holding them but, as the pluralists argue, they cannot be imposed upon those of other religions (Hick 1977; Smith 1981). Therefore, Yahweh cannot be normative (and no god or ideology can be the standard for all religions). Instead, pluralists say, all talk of Yahweh is “mythological speech about the Real” (Hick 1989:248). This severs any connection between human language and divine reality (D’Costa 1991:67). Pluralism provides no way for people to speak about God and, should they attempt to do so, no way of knowing if they are speaking about the same God (McGrath 1994:463). Therefore, in accommodating all religions, pluralism accommodates none. Truth is relativized. The “One reflected in the many” approach creates an impossible dilemma.

#### **One Reached by the Many**

This understanding advocates a utilitarian function for every religion. It

assumes all religions are ladders to help their devotees reach the One. The various religions are “traditions of instrumentality” (Coward 1985:96), all supposedly leading to the same God or, at least, to the same destiny. Some inclusivists believe that the faithful adherent of a non-Christian religion is an “anonymous Christian” (Rahner 1974:73), that God will ultimately sum up all things in the Messiah, and that, therefore, by whatever way people come to God, they will be saved (Knitter 1985:143). This is problematic. People would receive salvation who do not desire it. They would acquire grace from a God they do not know, acknowledge, or worship.

### One Instead of the Many

The exclusivist view says there is only one God and only one way to be reconciled to Him. Though people of other religions may live sincere and faithful lives, they cannot be saved by their religions that, at best, are human attempts to reach God—attempts, perverted by rebellion, to find Him (Kraemer 1938). The claims of exclusivism are logically possible but present a painful question: Can a merciful God deny salvation to those who have never heard of Him (Klootwijk 1993:458)? The answer to that question depends on understanding the God of the Pentateuch.<sup>11</sup>

Yahweh was greater than the gods. He was incomparable, singularly unique. There was no other god like him (Ex 9:14; 15:11; Dt 3:24; 33:26). These ascriptions were not philosophical deductions or cultural adaptations. *Israel developed them out of her experience with Yahweh.* He intervened in her history with redemptive power (Ex 20:2; Dt 4:34; 33:29a). His mighty deliverance was His way of showing the pagans that He was Yahweh (Ex 7:5,17; 8:10), of telling Israel that it was Yahweh who rescued her (Ex 6:7; 10:2; 16:6,12).<sup>12</sup> These are not self-evident truths or humanly devised myths. They are clues to the concern and compassion of God, to his nature and mis-

sion in the world.

The *covenant love* of Yahweh also clarifies his incomparability (Dt 7:9; cf Ex 34:6,7). His nearness to Israel manifested that love (Dt 4:7), a love no one could question, a nearness no god could equal. Yahweh heard the cry of His people, He saw their misery, He agonized over their suffering (Ex 3:7,9). He promised to be with them (Ex 3:12), to be their Immanuel. And He was!

Because of the experiences of Israel, Moses declared, in speaking of Yahweh, that there was no god besides him (Dt 32:39). He was not like a pagan god, namely, a false “rock,” a god who disappeared in times of crisis, a “no-god” image, a worthless idol (Dt 32:21, 31,37). There simply was no other God (Dt 4:35,39). If Israel took the reality of her monotheism seriously, she had an authentic witness within pagan polytheism. If she kept at bay the voices of religious tolerance, the temptations of religious pluralism, she had an incredible purpose, a marvelous privilege—for, like Pharaoh, she was the means of proclaiming His name “in all the earth” (cf Ex 9:16 and I Ki 8:56-60). Is that not also our calling, our purpose, our privilege as God’s people today?

### End Notes

- 1 The world religions emerged in and were shaped in reaction to pluralistic environments. In every case, the existing religions were made to question their beliefs and practices (Coward 1985:94,95. See also D’Costa 1986 and Martinson 1987).
- 2 Canonical support for the legitimacy of both translations of the Shema is found in Mark 12:32: “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him.” This statement points to both the undivided nature of Yahweh and the undivided loyalty of Israel.
- 3 A similar scenario is recorded in Numbers 14:11-16.
- 4 Some will argue that “El is rarely if ever used in the Bible as the proper name of a non-Israelite Canaanite deity (Cross 1974:44). Though that may be true, the Ugaritic texts are the exception to that rule. El is depicted not as a generic name but a specific deity. “El is a word common to all Semitic languages. It occurs as a common noun (the god, god) and also as the proper name for a particular god. This is clearly demonstrated in the texts from Ugaritic in North Syria (fourteenth century B.C.)” (Schneider 1986:67, see also Manley 1962:478).
- 5 Genesis depicts no antagonism between the religious practices of the patriarchs and the inhabitants of Canaan, an antagonism strongly evident elsewhere in the Pentateuch (Ex 23:23-25a; Dt 11:8-17; Moberly 1992:91). Many misread this lack of antagonism as an original polytheism which later gave way to monotheism. Cf. Rowley 1967:14, 15, and Smith 1987.
- 6 El and Yahweh were both called “the creator,” “the God of mercy,” and “the Holy One.” They were both authors of social order, teachers of righteousness, and champions of widows and orphans. Among the Canaanite gods, none were like El and Yahweh. Nevertheless, unlike El, the Lord did not rule over a pantheon of gods. He allowed Israel to worship no other god except (or besides) Him (Ex 20:3; Clifford 1973:15. See also Weasels 1989:49-51).
- 7 The meaning of the divine name is unclear. Many possibilities are suggested (Gianotti 1985:40-46). “I am who I am” may mean “I am the God who is active in whatever situation you are called to face” (cf. Dt 29:1-6; Davidson 1964:27. See also Kim 1989:108-117).
- 8 Several possibilities have been suggested: (a) An image of Yahweh would not be Yahweh; consequently, any worship of such an image would (by definition) be idolatry (Kaufmann 1960:18). (b) An image of Yahweh would make the assimilation of Canaanite fertility cult practices easier (Childs 1974:485,486. See also Milgran 1985:48-55; Ratner and Zuckermann 1986:15-60). And (c) an image allowed humans to control their god; thus prohibiting the use of idols meant Yahweh did not submit to the whims of human control (Albright 1968:171, 172; Miller and Roberts 1977:9-17).

- 9 Textual and archaeological evidence support the conclusion that from the beginning of the occupation of Canaan the prohibition against idolatry was for the most part kept by Israel. "Figurines of the mother goddess, to be sure, are regularly found in Israelite towns... but... excavations have thus far brought to light not a single image of Yahweh" (Bright 1981:60). Hebrew polytheism was not existent to a significant degree in Israel until the early monarchy. The exile came as a direct result of such disregard for Yahweh (Tigay 1986:37-41. Cf. Taylor 1988:557-566).
- 10 These three possibilities are frequently employed as a framework for discussing a theology of world religions, i.e., pluralism, inclusivism, and exclusivism respectively (cf. Race 1982; D'Costa 1986; McGrath 1994).
- 11 What ultimately will happen to those who do not know Yahweh can be left in the hands of a just, compassionate, forgiving, holy God. Their destiny, like the rescue of Israel, will be grounded in His concern for everyone (Thomsen 1990). Our concern should not be THEIR judgment but OUR faithfulness to His mission call.
- 12 The Red Sea event had the same two purposes (Ex 14:4, 18,31).

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