

## PRIMITIVE MONOTHEISM by Norman L. Geisler, Ph.D.

### THE PROBLEM OF EARLY MONOTHEISM

The Bible teaches that monotheism was the earliest conception of God. The very first verse of Genesis is monotheistic: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). All the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, reflect an early monotheism (Gen. 12-50). This reveals one God who created the world and who, therefore, is prior to, more than, and different from the world. These are the essential elements of theism or monotheism.

Likewise, long before Moses, Joseph clearly believed in a moral monotheism. His refusal to commit adultery was because it would be a sin against God. While resisting the temptation of Potiphar's wife he declared: "How can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (Gen. 39:9).

The other book in the Bible that reflects an ancient pre-Mosaic period, Job, clearly has a monotheistic view of God. There is good evidence that the book of Job was set in pre-Mosaic patriarchal times (see below). It speaks of an "almighty" (see 5:17; 6:14; 8:3, etc.) personal God (cf. 1:7-8) who created the world (38:4) who is sovereign over it (42:1-2).

What is more, Romans 1 affirms that monotheism preceded animism and polytheism, affirming that "what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities -- his eternal power and divine nature -- have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator -- who is for ever praised" (Rom. 1:19-25).

### FRAZER'S THESIS OF A LATE MONOTHEISM

The early monotheism thesis was championed by W. Schmidt in his **High Gods in North America** (1933).<sup>1</sup> However, James Frazer's **The Golden Bough** (1912)<sup>2</sup> has dominated the

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<sup>1</sup> See W. Schmidt, *High Gods in North America* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), *The Origin and Growth of Religion: Facts and Theories* (London, Methuen, 1931), *Primitive Revelation* (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder, 1939).

<sup>2</sup> James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (London: Macmillan, 1890).

history of religion for the past few generations. His hypothesis is that religions evolved from animism through polytheism to henotheism and finally monotheism. In spite of its selective and anecdotal use of sources that are outdated by subsequent research, the ideas from the book are still widely believed. Frazer's contention that a monotheistic conception of God evolved late is without foundation for many reasons.

### **ARGUMENTS FOR AN EARLY MONOTHEISM**

There are many arguments in favor of primitive monotheism. Many come from the records and traditions we have of early civilization. These include Genesis, Job, the Ebla Tablets, and the study of preliterate tribes.

#### **The Historicity of Genesis**

There is no doubt that the book of Genesis represents a monotheistic God. Likewise, it is clear that the book of Genesis purports to be a record of the history of the human race back to the first human beings. Hence, what argues for the historicity of the first chapters of Genesis also argues in favor of an early monotheism. Noted archaeologist, William F. Albright, has demonstrated that the Genesis record of the patriarchs (12-50) is historical. He wrote, "Thanks to modern research we now recognize its [the Bible's] substantial historicity. The narratives of the patriarchs, of Moses and the exodus, of the conquest of Canaan, of the judges, the monarchy, exile and restoration, have all been confirmed and illustrated to an extent that I should have thought impossible forty years ago."<sup>3</sup> He added, "Aside from a few die-hards among older scholars, there is scarcely a single biblical historian who has not been impressed by the rapid accumulation of data supporting the substantial historicity of patriarchal tradition."<sup>4</sup> However, Genesis is a literary and genealogical unity, being tied together by a listing of family descendants (Gen. 5, 10) and the literary phrase "this is the history of" (Gen. 2:4 NKJV) or the "account of" (NIV). The phrase is used throughout the book of Genesis (2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1, 9; 37:2). What is more, events from everyone of the disputed first 11 chapters of Genesis are referred to by Jesus and New Testament writers as historical, including Adam and Eve (Matt. 19:4-5); their temptation (1 Tim. 2:14); their fall (Rom. 5:12); the sacrifice of Cain and Abel (Heb. 11:4); the murder of Abel by Cain (1 Jn. 3:12); the birth of Seth (Luke 3:38); the translating of Enoch (Heb. 11:5); marriage before the flood (Lk 17:27); the flood and destruction of man (Mt. 24:39); preservation of Noah and his family (2 Peter 2:5); the genealogy of Shem (Lk. 3:35-36), and the birth of Abraham (Luke 3:34). So, if one were to question the historicity of Genesis, then he would also have to question the authority of Christ and many other Scriptures which refer to Genesis.

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<sup>3</sup> William F. Albright, *From Stone Age to Christianity* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957), 1329.

<sup>4</sup> William F. Albright, *The Biblical Period* (New York: Harper, 1955), 1.

There is strong evidence for the historicity of the Genesis record about Adam and Eve in particular. Yet this record reveals that the very first parents of the race were monotheists (see Gen. 1:1, 27; 2:16-17; 4:26; 5:1, 2). 1) Genesis 1-2 presents them as actual persons and even narrates the important events in their lives (=history). 2) They gave birth to literal children who did the same (Gen. 4:1, 25; 5:1f.). 3) The same phrase ("this is the history of"), used to record later history in Genesis (6:9; 9:12; 10:1, 32; 11:10, 27; 17:7, 9), is used of the creation account (2:4) and of Adam and Eve and their descendants (Gen. 5:1). 4) Later Old Testament chronologies place Adam at the top of the list (1 Chron. 1:1). 5) The New Testament places Adam at the beginning of Jesus' literal ancestors (Luke 3:38). 6) Jesus referred to Adam and Eve as the first literal "male and female," making their physical union the basis of marriage (Matt. 19:4). 7) The book of Romans declares that literal death was brought into the world by a literal "Adam" (Rom. 5:14). 8) The comparison of Adam (the "first Adam") with Christ (the "last Adam") in 1 Corinthians 15:45 manifests that Adam was understood as a literal, historical person. 9) Paul's declaration that "Adam was first formed, then Eve" (1 Tim. 2:13-14) reveals that he speaks of a real person. 10) Logically there had to be a first real set of human beings, male and female, or else the race would have had no way to get going. The Bible calls this literal couple "Adam and Eve," and there is no reason to doubt their real existence. And what argues for their historicity also supports an early monotheism.

### **The Evidence from the Book of Job**

Other than Genesis, Job is possibly the oldest book in the Old Testament. At the least the story is set in pre-Mosaic patriarchal times. Yet it too reveals a monotheistic view of God. God is the personal (see Job 1:6, 21), moral (1:1; 8:3-4) yet sovereign (42:1-2), and Almighty (5:17; 6:14; 8:3; 13:3, etc.) Creator (4:17; 9:8-9; 26:7; 38:6-7). The early setting of Job is evidenced by: 1) the pre-Mosaic family clan organization; 2) the lack of any reference to the Mosaic Law; 3) the use of the characteristic patriarchal name for God, "the Almighty" (Job 5:17; 6:4; 8:3 cf. Gen. 17:1; 28:3, etc.) 4) the comparative rarity of the name "LORD" (Yahweh) (cf. Ex. 6:3); 5) the offering of sacrifices by the head of a family rather than by a levitical priest; 6) the mention of early coinage (Job 42:11 cf. Gen. 33:19); 7) use of the phrase "sons of God" (Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7) found elsewhere only in Genesis 6:2-4); and 8) the longevity of Job who lived 140 years after his family was grown (42:16) fits a patriarchal period. But Job speaks of One God who created the world (Job 38:4) and is sovereign over all things in it (cf. 42:2), including Satan (see Job. 1:1, 6, 21 etc.). But all of these are characteristics of a monotheistic God. Thus, the early time of Job reveals that monotheism was not a late development.

### **Evidence from the Ebla Tablets**

Outside the Bible, the oldest records come from Ebla in Syria. And they reveal a clear monotheism declaring: "Lord of heaven and earth: the earth was not, you created it, the light of

day was not, you created it, the morning light you had not [yet] made exist."<sup>5</sup> This lucid statement of monotheism from such early tablets is an evident sign of early monotheism. It alone should lay to rest the idea of an evolved and late monotheism.

### **Primitive Religions are Monotheistic**

Contrary to popular belief, the primitive religions of Africa unanimously reveal an explicit monotheism. The noted authority on African religions, John S. Mbiti wrote of the 300 traditional religions, "In all these societies, without a single exception, people have a notion of God as the Supreme Being."<sup>6</sup> This is true of other primitive religions as well, many of which have a High God or Sky God which reflects a basic monotheism.

### **The Influence of Evolution**

The idea that monotheism evolved is itself late, gaining popularity in the wake of Charles Darwin's theory of biological evolution (**On The Origin of Species**, 1859) and even stated by Darwin later in his **Descent of Man** (1896). He wrote: "Belief in God -- Religion. -- There is no evidence that man was aboriginally endowed with the ennobling belief in the existence of an Omnipotent God." On the contrary, Darwin believed that human "mental faculties . . . led man to believe in unseen spiritual agencies, then to fetishism, polytheism, and ultimately monotheism . . ."<sup>7</sup>

Frazer's evolutionary idea in religion is based on several unproven assumptions. One, it assumes biological evolution is true when in fact it seriously lacks support. But this has been seriously challenged by noted scientists.<sup>8</sup> Second, even if biological evolution were true on a biological level, there is no reason to believe evolution is true in the religious realm. It is a methodological category mistake to assume that what is true in one discipline is also true in another. Social Darwinism is another case in point. Few Darwinians would agree with Hitler in **Mein Kampf** that we should weed out the inferior races since evolution has been doing this for centuries! He wrote: "If nature does not wish that weaker individuals should mate with the stronger, she wishes even less that a superior race should intermingle with an inferior one; because in such a case all her efforts, throughout hundreds of thousands of years, to establish an

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<sup>5</sup> Cited by Eugene Merrill, "Ebla and Biblical Historical Inerrancy," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (Oct.-Dec., 1983).

<sup>6</sup> See John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1969); *Concepts of God in Africa* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970).

<sup>7</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (New York: Appleton and Company, 1896), 302, 303.

<sup>8</sup> See Michael Denton, *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis* (Bethesda, MD: Adler and Adler, 1985) and Michael Behe, *Darwin's Black Box* (New York: The Free Press, 1996).

evolutionary higher stage of being, may thus be rendered futile."<sup>9</sup> But if evolution should not be applied to human social development, then there is no reason to apply it to religion either.

### **Anecdotal Evidence**

Frazer's evolution of monotheism thesis is based on fragmentary and anecdotal evidence, not a serious historical and chronological search for the origins of monotheism. Like the so-called evolution of the horse once used by evolutionists, alleged examples of the hypothesis are taken out of order and without due regard for their proper ancestors. In short, Frazer's evolution of monotheism assumes an evolutionary thesis and then finds bits and pieces of evidence to fit it.

### **A BETTER EXPLANATION**

The origins of polytheism can be explained as well, if not better, as a degeneration from original monotheism just as Rom. 1:19f. declare. That is, paganism is a falling away from the primitive monotheism. This is evident in the fact that most pre-literate religions have a latent monotheism in their view of the Sky God or High God (see Mbiti). William F. Albright likewise acknowledges that the "high gods may be all-powerful and they may be credited with creation of the world; they are generally cosmic deities who often, perhaps usually, reside in heaven."<sup>10</sup> This clearly runs counter to the animistic and polytheistic conceptions of deity.

### **CONCLUSION**

There is no real reason to deny the biblical account of an early monotheism. On the contrary, there is every evidence to believe that monotheism was the first religion from which others devolved just as Romans 1:19f. declare. Indeed, this fits better with the strong evidence for the existence of a monotheistic<sup>11</sup> God and the proven tendency of human beings to distort the truth God reveals to them (cf. Rom. 1:18f). In short, man's view of God has devolved, not evolved, over the centuries. God made man in His image, but man has returned the compliment.

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<sup>9</sup> Adolph Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (London: Gurst and Blackett Ltds, Publishers, 1939), 239-242.

<sup>10</sup> Albright, *From Stone Age to Christianity*, 170.

<sup>11</sup> See William Lane Craig, *The Kalam Cosmological Argument* (London: The MacMillan Press, 1979); Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1976), chapter 13; Fred Heeren, *Show Me God: What the Message from Space Is Telling Us About God* (Wheeling, IL: Searchlight Publications, 1995); Hugh Ross, *The Creator and the Cosmos: How the Greatest Scientific Discoveries of the Century Reveal God*. Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1993.