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## DOES THE OLD TESTAMENT TEACH THE DEVOLUTION OF RELIGION, AND DOES PAUL CONFIRM IT IN ROMANS CHAPTER 1?

by Dan Story

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Little more than a decade after Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was published in 1859, intellectuals in the mid-nineteenth century, seduced by the theory of biological evolution, were convinced that religion was a product of evolution and arose fairly late in human development. Primitive animism was thought to be the earliest evolutionary stage and monotheism the most sophisticated and advanced. This theory was posited most vividly by English anthropologist Sir Edward Burnett Tylor in his two-volume book *Primitive Culture* (1871). Austrian anthropologist Wilhelm Schmidt summarized Tylor's lengthy treatise in his book *The Origin and Growth of Religion*, which I condense below:<sup>1</sup>

- Primitive man first forms the idea of the existence of human souls.
- Because primitive man measured all things in his world by analogy with himself, the idea developed that plants and animals were also indwelt with souls, evolving into the idea that spirits animated the natural world.
- The worship of spirits in natural entities such as trees, water, rocks, and totems resulted in the development of polytheism as spirits came to be identified as gods.

- Eventually there evolved the concept of helpful or harmful forces, or a dualism of good and bad gods. [Somewhere along the way, pantheism also evolved from primitive animism, but on a separate branch of evolution's religion tree.]
- The end result of this evolution of religion was monotheism. Concludes Tylor: "Animism has its distinct and consistent outcome, and Polytheism its distinct and consistent completion, in the doctrine of a Supreme Deity."<sup>2</sup>

Although Tylor's theory had great influence and was accepted by most students of religion in the late nineteenth century — almost without alteration — it was later attacked by many of his successors. Nevertheless, an evolutionary understanding of the origin and development of religion persists in many quarters of academia to this day — as to be expected in a secular culture increasingly entrenched in philosophical materialism. But can this theory be substantiated by modern studies in comparative religion and ethnology? More important, is there any indication in Scripture to support such a claim? In both cases, the answer is no, and there are three lines of evidence that refute the evolutionary theory of religion.

### **WHAT DO ETHNOLOGY AND COMPARATIVE RELIGION ACTUALLY REVEAL?**

If religion is a product of evolution, there should be a time in history when religion was absent from human culture. But no prereligious culture ever has been found. Moreover, if monotheism has evolutionary roots in animism, primitive societies should be void of any inklings of monotheism. But this is not the case. Ethnological studies reveal that traces of monotheism are a near-universal ingredient in the oldest cultures on Earth: aboriginal Australians, pre-European Native Americans, Mongolians, Polynesians, Zulus, Bushmen and other African tribal people. All of these cultures recognized a primal Father or "High God," even if he was not the primary focus of religious activities. The same is true for Eastern religions.

#### **"Lord of Heaven"**

Missionary and author Don Richardson, well known for his anthropological and linguistic work among primitive peoples, writes that the earliest reference to religion in China is a Supreme God called "*Shang Ti* — the Lord of Heaven," which "predates

Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism by an unknown number of centuries.”<sup>3</sup> This is corroborated by the *Encyclopedia of Religions and Ethics*: “The Chinese language possesses two terms which, as far as etymology goes, [Shang Ti] seems adequate to stand for God....The earliest reference to Shang Ti, or indeed to any religion whatever, in the ancient history of China” refers to this ancient term.<sup>4</sup>

Nor has ethnology revealed any evidence that polytheism evolved into monotheism. Reformed Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck explains:

*We have no historical testimony to the development of polytheism into pure monotheism; when polytheism comes no longer to satisfy the intellectual circles, it is remodeled into pantheism, which has in common with polytheism the “nature-character” of the godhead, and dissolves the multitude of nature-gods into one nature-godhead. On the other hand, we have many historical examples of monotheism not developing, indeed, but gradually degenerating into polytheism and polydemonism.*<sup>5</sup>

Old Testament scholar, the late Ronald Youngblood, agrees:

*It cannot be shown that there is a universal tendency on the part of polytheistic religions to gradually reduce the number of deities until finally arriving at one deity [monotheism]. In some instances, in fact, such a religion may even add more deities as its adherents become aware of more and more natural phenomena to deify! At any rate, the Old Testament teaches that monotheism, far from having evolved through the centuries of Israel’s history, is one of the inspired insights revealed to the covenant people by the one true God Himself.*<sup>6</sup>

Youngblood’s statement that the Old Testament teaches monotheism brings us to our next evidence refuting the evolutionary theory of religion. In the biblical narrative, monotheism actually *devolved* into polytheism and idolatry.

## WHAT THE OLD TESTAMENT SAYS

Genesis chapter 1 opens with the phrase “In the beginning God....” Nowhere throughout the remaining sixty-five books of the Old and New Testaments is the transcendent, eternal, creator God of Genesis portrayed in any way other than the one true living God — monotheism. (Christians recognize the Trinitarian attribute of God, but this does not detract from essential monotheism.) When God revealed Himself to

Adam in Genesis chapter 2, there is no question that Adam knew Him as a single personal deity, and this understanding continued on through the first eleven chapters of Genesis. For example, we are told in Genesis 4:26 that the descendants of Seth “began to call upon the name of the LORD” (Yahweh — singular). Several generations later, we read that Enoch “walked with God” (5:24).

When we come to Genesis chapter 6, the entire human race — with the exception of Noah and his family — had turned from God and brought on themselves the judgment of the worldwide flood. Yet *even then*, the biblical narrative gives no indication that the rebellious human race worshipped false gods or practiced idolatry. The Bible only relates that “the LORD saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time” (6:5). People knew of the one true God even though they rebelled against Him.

By Genesis 11, despite mankind’s fresh start as descendants of godly Noah, people were once again rebelling against God, prompting Him to separate the human race into various language groups and to scatter them to other parts of the world. But *even then* the Bible does not relate that the inhabitants of Babel practiced pagan religious beliefs or idolatry — although building a “tower that reaches to the heavens” (v. 4) may have been the beginning stages of idolatry.

### **The Judgment of Babel**

Sometime after Babel and the proliferation of nations, cultures, and languages — along with Scripture’s shift of focus to the future nation of Israel — the Bible begins to speak increasingly about pagan practices, in particular polytheism and idolatry. From the time of Abram (Abraham), God stopped dealing with the family of man corporately, and the human race continued to turn from God and spiral downward into ever more decadent moral behavior (e.g., Gen. 15:16; cf. Deut. 9:4–5).

But *even then* there were exceptions. Although God was not dealing with the family of man corporately, individuals throughout biblical history, such as Job and Melchizedek — who lived in the interim between Babel and Abraham — knew and worshipped the God revealed in Scripture. We can be certain these men were not alone in this knowledge. The book of Job mentions other people who knew and worshiped the one true God.

All this is to say that in the furthest reaches of biblical history, God has always revealed Himself as a single personal deity — monotheism. Pre-Babel humanity knew God as one, even as they rebelled against Him. According to the biblical narrative, it was *after* the judgment of Babel that we read about the rise of false religions. Except for Israel, the nations of the world turned away from the one true and living God and

began to worship idols and practice polytheism. Israel, alone among the world's nations, continued to worship God as one (Deut. 6:4). (This is not to say that the Israelites were always faithful to God. Their history is replete with cycles of rebellion and apostasy.)

Two facts are apparent in light of this. First, God's revelation to the human race has always been in harmony with His essential monotheistic nature. Second, animism, polytheism, pantheism, idolatry, neopaganism (nature worship), and all the other deviant views of God *devolved from* mankind's original knowledge of God as one Being. Again, theologian Bavinck put it well:

*For although Abraham left Babylonia and was sent to dwell apart in a strange land, the God who manifested himself to him, and later to Moses and to Israel, is no new, strange God, but the God of old, the creator of heaven and earth, the Lord of all things, who had been originally known to all men, and had still preserved the knowledge and worship of himself in many, in more or less pure form. The segregation and the election of Israel served the sole purpose of maintaining, unmixed and unadulterated, continuing and perfecting, the original revelation, which more and more threatened to be lost, so that it might again in the fullness of time [i.e. the incarnation of Jesus Christ] be made the property of the whole of mankind.<sup>7</sup>*

Critics who hold to an evolutionary view of religion will argue that the Hebrew God YHWH evolved from a pre-Israelite tribal deity. Scripture does imply that the emerging Hebrew nation perceived the gods of surrounding pagan cultures as actual gods (e.g. Ex. 12:12; 32:8; Deut. 5:7), but it is a causal fallacy to assume that YHWH evolved from these deities, regardless of how the Hebrews may have perceived them during their formative years. The Hebrews in the Pentateuchal era did not have a fully developed theology of God as He is — even though God revealed Himself to them as “one” (Deut. 6:4). As Bavinck explained, God's self-revelation to the emerging nation of Israel was a progressive revelation, a “continuing and perfecting [of] the original revelation.”

### **WHAT THE APOSTLE PAUL SAYS**

The devolution of monotheism into polytheism and idolatry is corroborated by Paul in Romans 1:18–20:

*The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of [people] who suppress the truth by their wickedness. Since 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 qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. (NIV)*

This passage refers to what theologians call *general revelation*. It reveals that God exists (He created) and certain of His fundamental attributes — His sovereign power, divine nature, and righteous judgment. All this, Paul says, is self-evident in creation (v. 19), and it provides enough information about God so that people are held accountable for how they respond to it. Why? Because, Paul explains, the people who rejected this general revelation actually knew God (v. 21) but willfully chose to “suppress” that knowledge (v. 18). Hence, God considered them “without excuse” (v. 20). Paul goes on to explain in verse 21 through the rest of chapter that the people who “did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God” (v. 28), revealed through His handiwork in nature, turned to false gods of their own imagination — and sunk into increasing moral degeneration, deserving eternal separation from God (v. 32).

### **An Unchanging God**

Two things stand out in this passage. First, it confirms monotheism. When Paul writes that “since the creation of the world” certain of God’s attributes are revealed in nature, he is referring back to original creation in Genesis 1. In other words, the God who created the Earth, and whom people rejected in favor of false gods, is the same God revealed to the human race from the beginning of their creation.

Second, the Romans 1 passage also confirms the devolution of religion. The historical consequence of rejecting the true God in favor of false gods has been the proliferation of a multitude of counterfeit religions, which have spread across the Earth since the events in Genesis 11. Paul illustrates this (intentionally or not) by sorting his abridged list of idolatrous deities in such a way that, ironically, it resembles the broader devolution of all religion. The people “who suppress the truth” of God (v. 18) chose to worship “images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles” — a reversal of the evolutionary model of biological development. Instead of deities represented by images of lower life forms evolving into images of humanlike deities, Paul envisioned the opposite. Deities in pagan religions *devolved* from humanlike idols to mammals and birds and finally to lowly reptiles. When the one true and living God revealed in Scripture is rejected in favor of counterfeit gods, spiritual depravity knows no bounds.

**Dan Story** has a master's degree in Christian apologetics and is the author of many books, booklets, and articles.

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## NOTES

- 1 Wilhelm Schmidt, *The Origin and Growth of Religion, Facts and Theories*, trans. H. J. Rose (Proctorville, OH: Wythe-North Publishing, 2014), 74–77.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 77.
- 3 Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts*, rev. ed. (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1984), 62–63.
- 4 *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 6, ed. James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons), 272.
- 5 Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation, Edited for the 21st Century* (ALEV Books [publishing through Amazon's Createspace], 2011), 106–7.
- 6 Ronald Youngblood, *The Heart of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 9.
- 7 Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 110.