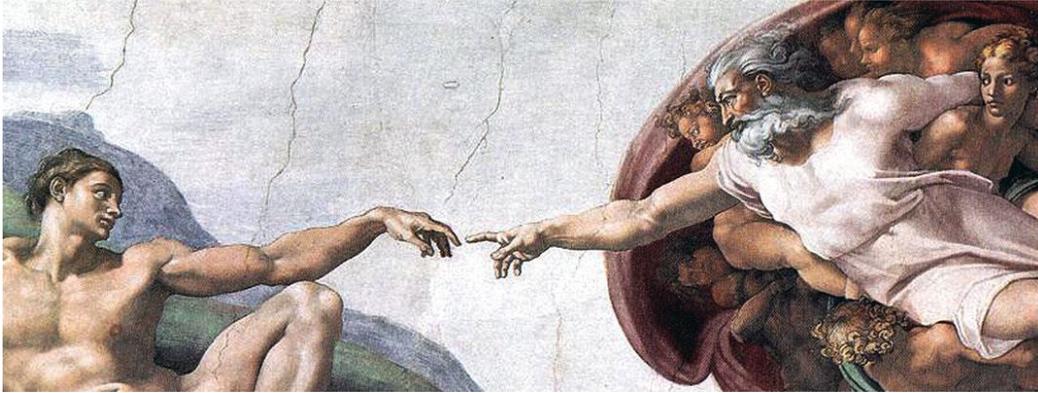


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Detroit Bible Students Ecclesia
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THE UNKNOWN GOD

*“Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars’ hill, and said, ‘Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. For as I passed by and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, **TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.** Whom, therefore, ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.’”*
Acts 17:22,23

The title “The Unknown God” comes from an experience of the Apostle Paul’s in the city of Athens. It is recorded in the book of Acts, chapter 17. Paul had been hounded out of the city of Thessalonica by Jews who objected to his preaching the resurrection of Jesus. He was sent to Berea by the brethren, but the Jews, learning that he was there, stirred up trouble and forced him to leave there as well. The brethren took Paul to Athens where he waited for Timothy and Silas to come to him

As he waited he observed that Athens was wholly given to idolatry. The ancient Greeks had no scarcity of gods. Every element of nature had a god connected to it. The gods warred among themselves or with humans. They had husbands or wives and bore children. Some were hostile to man and others were perceived as protectors. Some were very beautiful and some hideous. Some were heroic, and some vengeful. The gods mirrored human society in every way. Learning the myths surrounding the adventures of the Greek gods or of their Roman counter-parts forms part of the content of world literature classes in every school today.

The Greeks and Romans were not the only societies with multiple gods. The Germanic tribes of northern Europe had their own pantheon of gods which differed from the Greek

and Roman in little but their names. Ancient Egypt’s gods are seen on the murals in the burial tombs of the great. Hinduism recognizes and worships many gods to this day. In fact, all ancient societies had a multiplicity of gods except one—the Hebrews. For them “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!” (Deuteronomy 6:4, *New American Standard Version*) was the rule of life in ancient times, and still is.

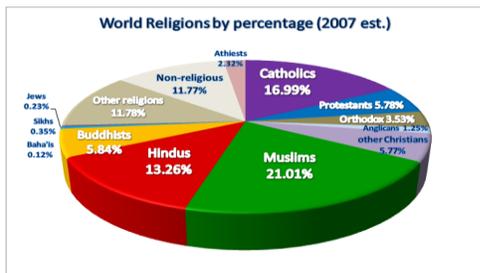
Paul spent his waiting time preaching in the marketplaces where he was heard by certain Stoics and Epicureans. These had an intellectual curiosity about what Paul was saying so they took him to the Areopagus to hear his full testimony. The Areopagus was a large rock out-cropping near the Acropolis on which court was held in some criminal cases as well as matters relating to religion.



Passing through the area around the Parthenon, Paul observed tributes to many gods, as well as one altar dedicated to The Unknown God. Paul saw his opportunity to tell the Athenians about the Living God, Jehovah, who created the world and all things in it. Paul’s words were

engaging to the philosophers until he talked of the resurrection of Jesus. At this point the court split up as some mocked Paul for his doctrine while others wanted to hear more.

The gods of ancient Greece and Rome have faded into the mists of time. What of the God of the Hebrews—the God of the Hebrew Scriptures? His revealed Word continues to be an influence in the world although, sadly, the God of the Bible is still a complete stranger to most of the human race.



Even among those professing Christianity there is confusion about the nature and character of God. There are also in Christian societies some who find the idea that there is a God as repugnant to their “enlightened intelligence” as the concept of the resurrection was to the philosophers of Greece in Paul’s day. (Acts 17:32)

Many visualize our Heavenly Father as a bearded old man, austere and vengeful. They point to God’s instruction to Israel to kill their enemies, man, woman, and child. They say the God of the Old Testament is brutal and remorseless. Others see God as wishing to save all mankind, but powerless to do so. Does God really have such a split personality? What is God truly like?

So much about the God of the Hebrews whom the Apostle Paul served was unlike anything conceived by man. He told the Athenians, “we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.” (Acts 17:29, *English Standard Version*)

The fact that their God, Jehovah, was invisible to the human eye was a difficult thing for the Israelites of old to deal with. They felt awkward amongst the surrounding people who had images of their gods. This desire to see God is still evident in the world’s religions today.

God understood the weakness of man in this area, therefore Israel was strictly forbidden to make any sort of image or likeness of anything that lives in the air, on the earth, or in the sea. (Ex.20:4; Deut. 4:23; 5:8; Lev. 26:1)

Even the altars that they made were to be made of uncarved stones. (Exodus 20:25)

For this reason, also, God instructed the Israelites to totally rid the land of Canaan of the idolatrous people they would find there. Was this because God was a monster and a racist? The Apostle Paul said, God “made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place.” (Acts 17:26) So why favor Israel?

God told Israel, “Do not say in your heart, ... ‘It is because of my righteousness that the LORD has brought me in to possess this land,’ whereas it is **because of the wickedness** of these nations that the LORD is driving them out before you. Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is driving them out from before you, and that he may confirm the word that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.” (Deuteronomy 9:4,5)

God wanted to keep the nation of Israel separate from the gross wickedness of the pagan religions because in the course of time he would use them to bless all nations. Paul said the gospel was first preached to Abraham, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” (Galatians 3:8, 16, 29)

The practices of these heathen religions were terrible, even including the burning of babies alive in the arms of Moloch.



Every one of the heathen religions had some form of child sacrifice. Satan’s evil wiles are indeed strong. One wonders why anyone would want to worship a god that made such terrible demands rather than a God that required only fidelity and the following of a generous Law.

In Deut. 12: 29-31(ESV) God told Israel, “ When the LORD your God cuts off before you the nations whom you go in to dispossess, and you dispossess them and dwell in their land, take care that you be not ensnared to follow them, after they have been destroyed before you and that you do not inquire about their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods?—that I also may do the same.’ You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way, **for every abominable thing that the LORD hates they have done for their gods, for they even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods.**”

Yes, Israel's God called burning children as a form of worship an abomination. Nothing like it was ever asked of the people of Israel. Instead, their devotion was shown by animal sacrifices and by adherence to the laws given them by God through Moses. But because Israel didn't drive out all the people of the land, the temptation to worship visible gods was a constant snare and Israel's history was one of succumbing to idolatry, repenting and reforming and again turning to heathen idols.

Some think that because God told Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, God wanted such human sacrifices. But it was only a test. It was God's way to test Abraham's absolute trust and faith. It was never intended that Abraham go through with killing Isaac. That is why the angel was sent and the ram was there in the thicket. (Gen. 22:11-13)

God's code of laws fully demonstrated his character as it was expressed in Exodus 34:6: "The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty." Jeremiah extolled God's love, "It is of the LORD'S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness." (Lamentations 3:23,24)

Not only did God's law keep them healthy and legislate just treatment for all people, but many laws were specifically for compassionate treatment for the poor and unfortunate, the stranger, and even for animals. Deuteronomy 24 and 25 detail some laws for protecting special interests, for example, a newly married man could not be sent out with the army for a year. Farmers were to leave something behind from their harvests for the poor to take. A donkey was not to be yoked with an ox because of the disparity of strength between them. (Deuteronomy 22:10)

The Apostle Paul told the Athenians that "The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything." (Acts 17:24,25)

Do we have any proof that God is the Creator? Science has conjured up a perception of a mindless, accidental origin for nature and man. God has been totally removed from their equation and to even hint at the apparent mark of a Designer in the natural world is strictly forbidden in "educated" circles. But the evidence of design in even the

simplest cell is incontrovertible. Scientists are just now beginning to unlock the secrets of the order and design found in every part of nature, but the essence of life, that animating spark, continues to be elusive. Life cannot be defined. It can only be described by what it looks like and what it does. Only God can create life.

God's wisdom and power are demonstrated by his creative works. The God that made the heavens and the earth and all things in it, is beyond the scope of man to comprehend fully. However, God put clues within his Word to show that he is in fact the Great Designer of life. These are found scattered throughout the Scriptures and reveal a knowledge of the universe and of the earth that man can only recently take pride in knowing. (Send for the free book offered at the end of this newsletter)

Is the New Testament God different from the God of the Old? No. Does God wish to have everyone saved and can he do it? Yes, absolutely. Does the Creator who gave all men life have the power to restore life? Of course! Paul said that God "will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth." (1 Timothy 2:4) The first part of this scripture has already been accomplished. Jesus died to take away "the sin of the world." (John 1:29) The next part is not far off. "All who are in their graves will hear his voice and come forth" (John 5:28,29) and be given the "knowledge of the truth." The vast majority of the world's people have never heard the truth. When "the earth is full of the knowledge of the LORD" (Isaiah 11:9) all who hear and obey will live forever. "Your dead will live; ... You who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy..." (Isaiah 26:19 NASB)

*May you have a thankful Thanksgiving
and a joyful Christmas praising God for his
great gift of Salvation, Jesus.*

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