

Monotheism and Idolatry in the Book of Judges

Have you ever read about idol worship in the Bible and wondered why anyone would prefer an idol over the God of creation? How could a monotheistic people whose creed was: “Hear, O Israel, Yahweh our God is one,” ever stoop to worship other gods, and venerate their images?

I mean the idols (images) did represent real gods to the people who were worshipping them, but the whole thing seems rather foolish from our sophisticated, 21st century, western perspective, doesn't it? But is there something that we can learn from the gods and idols that were such a stumbling block to Yahweh's people?

We read in Judges 10:6—

The sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of Yahweh, served the Baals and the Ashtaroth, the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the sons of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines; thus they forsook Yahweh and did not serve Him.

So, in order to understand the practice of idol worship during the time of the judges and what its connection might be to us today, we need to go back in history to the very beginning.

When God created Adam and Eve, the first humans, he already had a supernatural family. Here God speaks to Job about what his spirit family — the sons of God — were doing when he created the world. God asks Job:

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding, who set its measurements? Since you know. Or who stretched the line on it? On what were its bases sunk? Or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy? (Job 38:4-7)

In the third chapter of Genesis, we meet one of those sons of God; the book of Revelation calls him “the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan.”¹ We see him also in the first two chapters of Job, where we read:

“Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them.” (Job 1:6)

So, we see the “sons of God” are God's spiritual family, just as humans are God's physical family. We see them mentioned by this name in the sixth chapter of Genesis, where we read:

Now it came about, when men began to multiply on the face of the land, and daughters were born to them, that the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves, whomever they

¹ 20:2

chose. The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men, and they bore children to them. Those were the mighty men who were of old, men of renown. (Genesis 6:1-2,4)

Peter and Jude both mentioned these actions of the sons of God and what their penalty was and will be:

God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into Tartarus and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment. (2 Peter 2:4)
Angels who did not keep their own domain, but abandoned their proper abode, he has kept in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day. (Jude 6)

So, it appears that the sons of God (called “angels” by Peter & Jude) took on the physical form of men, and then lusted after the daughters of men, and procreated a race of giants. Concerning these few verses in the sixth chapter of Genesis, there is much Hebrew tradition recorded in a book entitled 1 Enoch, that clearly Peter and Jude were familiar with, given what we just read that they wrote.

There is much more that can be said about this chapter in the early history of humankind, but fact is, the only reasonable interpretation of the actions of these sons of God before the flood, is that they did just as I’ve indicated. So God destroyed their offspring along with all humans in the flood.

Then God gave to Noah and his sons that same commission he had given to Adam & Eve: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.”² But, again, the people did not obey the Lord’s commission. They decided to not separate from each other, but build a tower to reach to God. Well, God didn’t destroy his disobedient children, but he did force them to separate from each other by giving them each new languages. And here’s where the story gets very interesting...and informs us about the small “g” gods.

In chapter ten we have the genealogy of Noah for the next 100 or so years, and it totals up to 70 families. (It seems interesting that the human race 2.0 multiplied from 70 families, and the nation of Israel multiplied from 70 individuals.)

These are the families of the sons of Noah, according to their genealogies, by their nations; and out of these the nations were separated on the earth after the flood. (Genesis 10:32)

From here we jump to Deuteronomy 32.

² Genesis 9:1

When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God. But the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage.³

Here are the same two verses in the Good News Translation (ABS):

The Most High assigned nations their lands; he determined where peoples should live. He assigned to each nation a heavenly being, but Jacob's descendants he chose for himself.

So, from these verses, it seems clear that God assigned one of his sons to each of these seventy nations. Now if this seems a little strange or a new thought to you, let's look at a couple of verses in Daniel that affirm this very concept. The speaker is an divine personage who has appeared in human form, and he says:

Do you understand why I came to you? But I shall now return to fight against the prince of Persia; so I am going forth, and behold, the prince of Greece is about to come. However, I will tell you what is inscribed in the writing of truth. Yet there is no one who stands firmly with me against these forces except Michael your prince. (Daniel 10:20-21)

Now at that time Michael, the great prince who stands guard over the sons of your people, will arise. (Daniel 12:1)

Another name for the sons of God is also found in the book of Daniel. Here Daniel is interpreting Nebuchadnezzar's dream, and he says:

This sentence is by the decree of the angelic watchers and the decision is a command of the holy ones, in order that the living may know that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind. (Daniel 4:17)

In this same context these sons of God are also called the heavenly host,

All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth. (Daniel 4:35)

Of course we are all familiar with this same expression connected with the birth of Jesus:

And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host. Luke 2:13)

Let's look at just one more designation for these divine sons of God; it's found in Psalm 82.

God (elohim) has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods (elohim) he holds judgment. (Psalm 82:1)

³ Verses 8-9 (ESV).

In this psalm God refers to his divine sons as *elohim*. This is not a strange use of this Hebrew word, which simply means “spirit beings,” or “spirits.” Even though it is a plural noun, it is mostly used for God (capital “G”). Hebrew grammarians call this use “the plural of majesty.” In fact, in this very verse, *elohim* is used of God, the creator of all things, and gods the divine sons of God.

In Deuteronomy 10:17 God, affirming the existence of other gods (*elohim*) who are less than him, declares:

Yahweh your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God.

Now we might be confused when we read where Isaiah quotes God, saying:

I am Yahweh, and there is no other; besides me there is no God. (Isaiah 45:5)

This, however, is just a way of saying that Yahweh is incomparable to any other created god. To illustrate this use of comparison we only need to look at what Isaiah says just two chapters later about Babylon, the city. Babylon is quoted as saying:

I am, and there is no one besides me. (Isaiah 47:8)

Clearly, the people of Babylon knew there were other cities, but in its estimation, its greatness was so incomparable it was as though no other cities existed. This same kind of comparison is used of God: he is so incomparable, it is as though no other *elohim* exists.

Additionally, those who might claim that no other gods really exist, have a difficult time explaining scriptures that extol Yahweh’s superiority above all other gods, if indeed they are non-entities.

For You are Yahweh Most High over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods. (Psalm 97:9)

We could continue this exercise by looking at other places in the Bible where these sons of God are mentioned, but we need to keep moving in this study.

Let’s return to what can be called a Deuteronomy 32 worldview. This is the place where we read that God assigned one of his sons to have administrative responsibility over each of the 70 nations into which he had separated the people of the world at Babel. But at the same time, he chose one man to be his own inheritance, and the one through who he promised to reveal himself and to bless the the entire world.

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father’s house, to the land which I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” (Genesis 12:1-3)

God repeated this when he told Moses to say to the Israelites:

I will take you for My people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. (Exodus 6:7)

He repeated this yet again through the prophet Jeremiah:

You shall be My people, and I will be your God. (Jeremiah 30:22)

And we could quote several other biblical texts that confirm Israel as God's inheritance; his chosen people through whom he has revealed himself and brought his blessing to the world.

So, Yahweh, since before the creation of the world, has had a family of spirit beings, that in the scriptures we've looked at today, have been called:

- sons of God
- gods (*elohim*)
- princes
- watchers
- holy ones
- heavenly host
- divine council
- angels

So, when we read about gods and idols in the book of Judges, we need to understand that the gods are real spirit beings, and that they are rebellious sons of Yahweh that were entrusted with the nations of the world but who, like the sons of God spoken of in Genesis 6, have sinned against God, and have allowed themselves to be worshiped, even though they know that only Yahweh is deserving of worship. Like Satan, and likely operating under his usurped authority, they are seeking to frustrate and sabotage the plans of God.

Ancient texts from the other idol-worshipping people groups that were living in the Near East, tell about how the idols were associated with the gods. After they had crafted an idol of wood, metal or stone, they would perform a ceremony in which they called upon their god to inhabit the image they had created. So, while we think it foolish to pray to or worship something clearly inanimate, these peoples were praying to and worshipping the spirit whom they believed dwelt within the idol.

The apostle Paul confirms this reality in 1 Corinthians 10. As he was talking to them about having nothing to do with the idols which were part of their culture and past way of life, he spoke of the *real* power behind the images:

What do I mean then? That a thing sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons. (1 Corinthians 10:19-20)

So, I started by saying this would be a study of monotheism in the book of Judges. The name of Yahweh is found 174 times in the book of Judges. There is no doubt that Yahweh was still Israel's God. and Israel was God's possession. The people of God were simply in violation of the first two commandments. They added other gods from the pantheon that surrounded them. They intermarried with the people who worshiped other gods. They participated in the practices of the idol-worshiping people that were near them. But, if you were to ask them, "Who is Israel's God?" they would doubtless reply, "Yahweh." On the doorposts of their houses would surely be the words of the *shema* of Israel: "Hear O Israel, Yahweh our God is one!"

You see, they were not much different from us. Jesus gave us the very same commandment that Yahweh gave the people of Israel: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul, and all your mind." But both them and us have loved other gods. The apostle John urges us to not love the gods of this world:

Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever. (1 John 2:15-17)

I'm not going to presume to name the idols in your life. I'm just going to ask you to consider the things of this world that you may be loving either more than God, or alongside of God. To love something is to place a high value upon it. Probably time and money are the most valuable things we have. Time is the only thing we cannot get more of. And money comes hard and goes easy. Regarding time, the apostle Paul warns us:

Be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil. (Ephesians 5:15-16)

The Bible has a great deal to say about both the wise and foolish use of money.

Honor the LORD from your wealth and from the first of all your produce; so your barns will be filled with plenty and your vats will overflow with new wine. (Proverbs 3:9-10)

Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. (1 Timothy 6:9-10)

So, just taking these two valuable possessions — time and money — that God has given to you, how much of each are you giving to the pursuit of:

- The lust of the flesh — Desiring to see, hear, feel, taste, and smell things that delight your sensual pleasures.

- The lust of the eyes — Desiring to have and possess the most, best, newest, fastest, biggest, shiniest, etc. of anything the world has to offer.
- The boastful pride of life — Striving for the acclaim of others, acceptance by your peers, the highest position, the first place in line, the joke or story that bests all others, etc., so that you might be recognized as a very important person.
- Love for God — Sitting at the feet of Jesus daily to learn from his word, talking with him throughout the day about absolutely everything, yielding up to him your so-called rights, always being thankful for all things, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, losing your life for Jesus' sake, etc.
- Loving others — Regarding others as more important than yourself, seeking to serve rather than be served, giving to those who can't reciprocate, taking the lowest place, listening to others rather than always talking, prefer others in giving honor, etc.

In case you're wondering how loving others connects with love for God, consider these words of the "apostle of love":

If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also. (1 John 4:20-21)

Yes, the idols of this world have real gods (powerful spiritual persons) possessing and promoting them. We typically identify them as demons. In our culture we don't really see people making and worshiping idols. But I suggest to you that the idols of our culture are the pleasures, possessions, and popularity that this world affords. These are the things that followers of Jesus are tempted to freely give their most valuable resources — time & money — to obtain and to keep. The apostle Paul said about the idols of his time that they were nothing. But if our enemies — the gods of this world system — can get us to love the world and things in the world, are we really any different from the Israelites in the book of Judges who were lured away from God to the idols of their time?

God told his people to not make any images of God nor to worship them. But God gave us an image of himself that we can worship. It was not an image of stone, metal, or wood, but rather of flesh and blood. Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God; the exact representation of his nature. Jesus said, "If you've seen me, you've seen the Father.

Make Jesus the goal of your life; love him, worship him, and pursue him with everything you've got!

God bless you.