

Judaism and the Isms

#1 - Judaism and Paganism

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pagan (n.)

mid-14c., "person of non-Christian or non-Jewish faith," from Late Latin *paganus* "pagan," in classical Latin "villager, rustic; civilian, non-combatant" noun use of adjective meaning "of the country, of a village," from *pagus* "country people; province, rural district...."

The religious sense is often said to derive from conservative rural adherence to the old gods after the Christianization of Roman towns and cities....Applied to modern pantheists and nature-worshippers from 1908.

Pagan and *heathen* are primarily the same in meaning; but *pagan* is sometimes distinctively applied to those nations that, although worshipping false gods, are more cultivated, as the Greeks and Romans, and *heathen* to uncivilized idolaters, as the tribes of Africa. A Mohammedan is not counted a *pagan* much less a *heathen*. [Century Dictionary, 1897]

The Torah as a Polemic Against Paganism

Yeshayahu Leibowitz, Yahadut, Am Yehudi, u-Medinat Yisrael, p. 321

It is impossible to attribute to the first verse in the Torah any meaning other than a grand proclamation regarding the state of the world before God... We, perforce, must understand "In the beginning, God created..." as a great call directed at man to recognize the insignificance of the heaven and the earth – "For fear of the Lord, and for the glory of His majesty" (Yeshaya 2:10): the world ("the heaven and the earth") is not God! This is a great negation of the essence of idolatry, pantheism, and atheism.

Julius Guttmann, Dat u-Medina, p. 265

God's relationship to the world: He is the Creator, He says and does, He stands above the world. Surely there are other religious attitudes: the god of pantheism is in the world. He is supreme unity, the powers of which fill the world. This unity of life force also includes man, who is one drop in that great stream that flows through the world. Judaism's God of ethics has a different relationship to the world. He is perforce separate from the world, He gives direction, He provides the world with an objective, but He is not part of the world. This is the secret of the greatness of Genesis 1. There is no divine life force in nature itself; nature is created; in and of itself, it is dead, and God stands outside of it, the world on this side and God on the other.

Yechezkel Kaufmann, History of the Religion of Israel, II, p. 227

The Israelite religion overcame the doctrine of the corporeality of God in a fundamental and decisive manner: it imagined God as being totally unconnected to the matter of the world. God has no matter; He is above and beyond the nature of matter. God is "spirit and not flesh," He is not a "body." And furthermore, it imagined Him above and beyond any connection to the laws of the universe, to nature, to fate. This is the point that distinguishes it from idolatry; it is from here that it rose to its own unique sphere. Its God is super-mythological and supernatural – this is its fundamental idea.

בראשית רבה סח

ויפגע במקום (בראשית כח, יא), רב הונא בשם רבי אמי אמר מפני מה מכנין שמו של הקדוש ברוך הוא וקוראין אותו מקום, שהוא מקומו של עולם ואין עולמו מקומו

מלכים א פרק ח

(כו) ועתה אלהי ישראל יאמן נא דברך אשר דברת לעבדך דוד אבי:
(כז) כי האמנם ישב אלהים על הארץ הנה השמים ושמי השמים לא יכללוך אף כי הבית הזה אשר בניתי:

Chief Rabbi Dr. J.H. Hertz – "The Deluge and Its Babylonian Parallels"

"Flood stories are very numerous, and are found in every part of the world. But these are of little or no interest to the bible student or to the modern reader. The Babylonian parallel to the biblical account of the Deluge, however, stands in a class by itself. Both the resemblances and the differences are of great importance....

...the resemblances...lie on the surface...the whole human race is doomed to destruction; one man with his dependants and animals is saved in a ship; the episode of the dove and raven; and after leaving the ship, the man offers sacrifices and receives divine blessings.

Of far greater significance, however, are the differences between the two accounts. The Babylonian story is unethical and polytheistic, devoid of any uniform or exalted purpose, and lacking in reverence and restraint. Not so the terse, direct, and simple Hebrew narrative. Instead of the quarrelsome, deceitful, vindictive pack of the Babylonian deities, false to one another

and false to men, we have in the Hebrew account, the One and Supreme G-d – holy and righteous in his dealings with man. Unlike its Babylonian counterpart, the Hebrew Deluge is a proclamation of the eternal truth that the basis of human society is justice, and that any society that is devoid of justice deserves to perish, and will inevitably perish. Noah is saved, not through celestial caprice of favouritism, not because he was “superlatively clever” but because he was righteous and blameless in a in a perverse generation. . . .an impassable gulf separates the biblical and the Babylonian deluge stories. The infinite and ethical difference between them is recognized even by those who are otherwise hostile to the Bible. . . .”

Maimonides, Introduction to Hilchos Avodat Kochavim

They contain 51 mitzvot: two positive commandments and 49 negative commandments.

During the times of Enosh, mankind made a great mistake, and the wise men of that generation gave thoughtless counsel. Enosh himself was one of those who erred.

Their mistake was as follows: They said God created stars and spheres with which to control the world. He placed them on high and treated them with honor, making them servants who minister before Him. Accordingly, it is fitting to praise and glorify them and to treat them with honor. [They perceived] this to be the will of God, blessed be He, that they magnify and honor those whom He magnified and honored, just as a king desires that the servants who stand before him be honored. Indeed, doing so is an expression of honor to the king.

After conceiving of this notion, they began to construct temples to the stars and offer sacrifices to them. They would praise and glorify them with words, and prostrate themselves before them, because by doing so, they would - according to their false conception - be fulfilling the will of God. This was the essence of the worship of false gods, and this was the rationale of those who worshiped them. They would not say that there is no other god except for this star.

This message was conveyed by Jeremiah, who declared (10:7-8): "Who will not fear You, King of the nations, for to You it is fitting. Among all the wise men of the nations and in all their kingdoms, there is none like You. They have one foolish and senseless [notion. They conceive of their] empty teachings as wood;" i.e., all know that You alone are God. Their foolish error consists of conceiving of this emptiness as Your will.

After many years passed, there arose people - false prophets - who told [their nations] that God had commanded them to say: Serve this star - or all the stars - sacrifice to it, offer libations to it, build a temple for it and make an image of it..

He would inform them of a form that he had conceived, and tell them that this is the image of the particular star, claiming that this was revealed to him in a prophetic vision. In this manner, the people began to make images in temples, under trees, and on the tops of mountains and hills.

People would gather together and bow down to them and the [false prophets] would say: This image is the source of benefit or harm. It is appropriate to serve it and fear it. Their priests would tell them: This service will enable you to multiply and be successful. Do this and this, or do not do this or this. . . . Thus, these practices spread throughout the world. People would serve images with strange practices - one more distorted than the other - offer sacrifices to them, and bow down to them. As the years passed, [God's] glorious and awesome name was forgotten by the entire population. [It was no longer part of] their speech or thought, and they no longer knew Him. Thus, all the common people, the women, and the children would know only the image of wood or stone and the temples of stone to which they were trained from their childhood to bow down and serve, and in whose name they swore.

The wise men among them would think that there is no God other than the stars and spheres for whose sake, and in resemblance of which, they had made these images. The Eternal Rock was not recognized or known by anyone in the world, with the exception of a [few] individuals: for example, Chanoch, Metushelach, Noah, Shem, and Ever. The world continued in this fashion until the pillar of the world - the Patriarch Abraham - was born

After this mighty man was weaned, he began to explore and think. Though he was a child, he began to think [incessantly] throughout the day and night, wondering: How is it possible for the sphere to continue to revolve without having anyone controlling it? Who is causing it to revolve? Surely, it does not cause itself to revolve.

He had no teacher, nor was there anyone to inform him. Rather, he was mired in Ur Kasdim among the foolish idolaters. His father, mother, and all the people [around him] were idol worshipers, and he would worship with them. [However,] his heart was exploring and [gaining] understanding.

Ultimately, he appreciated the way of truth and understood the path of righteousness through his accurate comprehension. He realized that there was one God who controlled the sphere, that He created everything, and that there is no other God among all the other entities. He knew that the entire world was making a mistake. What caused them to err was their service of the stars and images, which made them lose awareness of the truth. Abraham was forty years old when he became aware of his Creator. When he recognized and knew Him, he began to formulate replies to the inhabitants of Ur Kasdim and debate with them, telling them that they were not following a proper path. He broke their idols and began to teach the people that it is fitting to serve only the God of the world. To Him [alone] is it fitting to bow down, sacrifice, and offer libations, so that the people of future [generations] would recognize Him. [Conversely,] it is fitting to destroy and break all the images, lest all the people err concerning them, like those people who thought that there are no other gods besides these [images].

שד"ל על התורה, בראשית פרק כ"ב

והואיל ושאר העמים עובדי אלילים גם את בניהם ואת בנותיהם היו שורפים באש לאלהיהם, והואיל ומעשים כאלה תועבה הם לפניו ית' ולא היה בדעתו לצוות לעמו שיעשו כאלה, אבל נהפך ציוה לבלתי עשות אחת מהנה, הנה ראה ה' כי העדר הקרבנות ההם יהיה נחשב לגנות ומום גדול לתורתו ולמחזיקים בה, כי יאמרו הגוים לישראל: איה אהבתכם לאלהיכם? וגם ישראל עצמם אולי תהיה דתם נמבזה בעיניהם מפני החסרון הזה.

לפיכך הקדים וניסה את אברהם (אשר כבר ידע את לבבו וידע שיעמוד בנסיון), למען יכירו וידעו גם ישראל וגם האומות כי עבדי ה' הנאמנים לו לא יכבד עליהם לעשות גם זה וגם יותר מזה (כאשר הוא זביחת בן יחיד הנולד לזקוני אביו ואמו) אם היה ה' שואל מעמם לעשותו, אלא שאלהי אמת לא יחפוץ בקרבנות כאלה ותעב יתעבם. והנסיון הזה אשר הוא כבוד האמונה ותפארת המאמינים בחר ה' לעשותו באברהם אב המאמינים, כדי שלא תישאר אמונת האמת בחזקת פחיתות ובחסרון הודה והדרה אפילו דור אחד. ונמצא לאחד הקדמונים, סנכוניאנטון, זכרון למעשה זה, אמנם מעורב בשיבושים הרבה.

ספר מורה הנבוכים חלק ג פרק מח

וטעם גיד הנשה כתוב, ואמנם טעם אבר מן החי הוא היותו מקנה ומלמד אכזריות, ועוד שכן היו עושים אז מלכי הגוים, וגם לעבודה זרה היו עושים כן. ר"ל שהיו חותכין מן בהמה אבר ידוע ואוכלים אותו, ואמנם איסור **בשר בחלב** עם היותו מזון עב מאד בלא ספק ומוליד מלוי רב, אין רחוק אצלי שיש בו ריח עבודה זרה

What is Idolatry?

- #1 – Biblical - Idolatry as Rebellion/Adultery
- #2 – Maimonides – Idolatry as False/mistaken notion of God
- #3 – Nachmanides – Idolatry as worshipping an Intermediary instead of the Supreme God
- #4 – Rav Yehuda Halevi – Idolatry as alien worship vs the right worship

Sources in Tanakh – Exodus 34:15-16, Jeremiah 2:2, 3:19-22, Hosea 1:2, 2:9-11, 14-15, Ezekiel 16:15-26

The Guide to the Perplexed, 1:26

You, no doubt, know the Talmudical saying, which includes in itself all the various kinds of interpretation connected with our subject. It runs thus: "The Torah speaks according to the language of man," that is to say, expressions, which can easily be comprehended and understood by all, are applied to the Creator. Hence the description of God by attributes implying corporeality, in order to express His existence: because the multitude of people do not easily conceive existence unless in connection with a body, and that which is not a body nor connected with a body has for them no existence. Whatever we regard as a state of perfection, is likewise attributed to God, as expressing that He is perfect in every respect, and that no imperfection or deficiency whatever is found in Him. But there is not attributed to God anything which the multitude consider a defect or want; thus He is never represented as eating, drinking, sleeping, being ill, using violence, and the like. Whatever, on the other hand, is commonly regarded as a state of perfection is attributed to Him, although it is only a state of perfection in relation to ourselves; for in relation to God, what we consider to be a state of perfection, is in truth the highest degree of imperfection. If, however, men were to think that those human perfections were absent in God, they would consider Him as imperfect.

The Guide to the Perplexed 1:59

This chapter is even more recondite than the preceding. Know that the negative attributes of God are the true attributes: they do not include any incorrect notions or any deficiency whatever in reference to God, while positive attributes imply polytheism, and are inadequate, as we have already shown. It is now necessary to explain how negative expressions can in a certain sense be employed as attributes, and how they are distinguished from positive attributes. Then I shall show that we cannot describe the Creator by any means except by negative attributes. An attribute does not exclusively belong to the one object to which it is related; while qualifying one thing, it can also be employed to qualify other things, and is in that case not peculiar to that one thing. E.g., if you see an object from a distance, and on enquiring what it is, are told that it is a living being, you have certainly learnt an attribute of the object seen, and although that attribute does not exclusively belong to the object perceived, it expresses that the object is not a plant or a mineral. Again, if a man is in a certain house, and you know that something is in the house, but not exactly what, you ask what is in that house, and you are told, not a plant nor a mineral. You have thereby obtained some special knowledge of the thing; you have learnt that it is a living being, although you do not yet know what kind of a living being it is. The negative attributes have this in common with the positive, that they necessarily circumscribe the object to some extent, although such circumscription consists only in the exclusion of what otherwise would not be excluded. In the following point, however, the negative attributes are distinguished from the positive. The positive attributes, although not peculiar to one thing, describe a portion of what we desire to know, either some part of its essence or some of its accidents: the negative attributes, on the other hand, do not, as regards the essence of the thing which we desire to know, in any way tell us what it is, except it be indirectly, as has been shown in the instance given by us.

The Guide to the Perplexed 1:36

How great, then, must be the offence of him who has a wrong opinion of God Himself, and believes Him to be different from what He truly is, i.e., assumes that He does not exist, that He consists of two elements, that He is corporeal, that He is subject to external influence, or ascribes to Him any defect whatever. Such a person is undoubtedly worse than he who worships idols in the belief that they, as agents, can do good or evil.

רמב"ן דברים פרק יח פסוק יג

יג וטעם תמים תהיה עם ה' אלהיך - שנייחד לבבנו אליו לבדו, ונאמין שהוא לבדו עושה כל והוא היודע אמתת כל עתיד, וממנו לבדו נדרוש העתידות, מנביאיו או מאנשי חסידיו רצוני לומר אורים ותומים. ולא נדרוש מהוברי שמים ולא מזולתם, ולא נבטח שיבואו דבריהם על כל פנים, אבל אם נשמע דבר מהם נאמר הכל בידי שמים, כי הוא אלהי האלהים עליון על הכל היכול בכל משנה מערכות הכוכבים והמזלות כרצונו מפר אותות בדים וקוסמים יהולל. ונאמין שכל הבאות תהינה כפי התקרב האדם לעבודתו. ולפיכך אחר אזהרת שאלת העתידות מקוסם ודורש בעד החיים אל המתים אמר שתהיה תמים עם השם בכל אלה, ולא תירא ממגיד עתיד אבל מנביאו תדרוש ואילו תשמע. וזה דעת אונקלוס, שלים תהא בדחלתא דה' אלהך, שלא תהיה חסר ביראתו, כי "תמים" הוא השלם בדבר, כמו שה תמים (שמות יב ה) שאין בו מום ושום חסרון. וזו מצות עשה, וכבר הזכרתי זה בפסוק והיה תמים (בראשית יז א):

ורבים יתחסדו בנחשים לומר שאין בהם אמת כלל, כי מי יגיד לעורב ולעגור מה יהיה. ואנחנו לא נוכל להכחיש דברים יתפרסמו לעיני רואים. ורבותינו גם כן יודו בהם, כמו שאמרו בואלה שמות רבה (ויק"ר לב ב, קהלת רבה י כג), כי עוף השמים יוליך את הקול (קהלת י כ), זה העורב וחכמת הטיאריין. העופות בלשון ערב טא"ר, וחכמי העופות יקראו טיאריין. ועוד מוזכר מזה הענין בגמרא (גיטין מה א): אבל יש לענין הזה סוד, וכבר הודענו (ויקרא יח כה) כי יש למזלות שרים ינהיגו אותם והם נפשות לכדורי הגלגלים, ושירי זנב וטלה הקרובים לארץ והם הנקראים נגידי התלי יודיעו העתידות, ומהם נעשים סימנים בעופות שבהם יודיעו עתידות. ולא לזמן גדול ולא עתידות רחוקות יגידו רק בעתידות הקרובות לבא יודיעו, מהם בקול העוף בקראו בקול מר על מת ומהם בפרישות כנפיו, והוא שאמר יוליך את הקול, למגידיים בקולם, ובעל כנפים, לרומזים בכנפיהם. וכל זה איננו תועבה בעמים אבל חכמה תחשב להם,

רמב"ן ויקרא פרק טז פסוק ח - שעיר המשתלח

וזה סוד הענין, כי היו עובדים לאלהים אחרים, הם המלאכים, עושים להם קרבנות והם להם לריח ניחוח כענין שנאמר (יחזקאל טז יח יט) ושמני וקטרתי נתת לפניהם, ולחמי אשר נתתי לך סולת ושמן ודבש האכלתיך ונתתיהו לפניהם לריח ניחוח והיה נאם ה' אלהים. ואתה צריך להתבונן בכתוב במקרא ובמסורת:

והנה התורה אסרה לגמרי קבלת אלהותם וכל עבודה להם, אבל צוה הקדוש ברוך הוא ביום הכפורים שנשלח שעיר במדבר לשר המושל במקומות החרבן, והוא הראוי לו מפני שהוא בעליו ומאצילות כחו יבא חורבן ושממון כי הוא העילה לכוכבי החרב והדמים והמלחמות והמריבות והפצעים והמכות והפירוד והחרבן, והכלל נפש לגלגל מאדים, וחלקו מן האומות הוא עשו שהוא עם היורש החרב והמלחמות, ומן הבהמות השעירים והעזים, ובחלקו עוד השדים הנקראים מזיקין בלשון רבותינו, ובלשון הכתוב (להלן יז ז) שעירים, כי כן יקרא הוא ואומתו שעיר. ואין הכונה בשעיר המשתלח שיהיה קרבן מאתנו אליו חלילה, אבל שתהיה כוננתו לעשות רצון בוראנו שצונו כך:

The Kuzari, 1:198

Their sin I consisted in the manufacture of an image of a forbidden thing, and in attributing divine power to a creation of their own, something chosen by themselves without the guidance of God. Some excuse may be found for them in the dissension which had broken out among them, and in the fact that out of six hundred thousand souls the number of those who worshipped the calf was below three thousand. For those of higher station who assisted in making it an excuse might be found in the fact that they wished to clearly separate the disobedient from the pious, in order to slay those who would worship the calf. On the other hand, they sinned in causing what was only a sin of intention to become a sin in deed. This sin was not on a par with an entire lapse from all obedience to Him who had led them out of Egypt, as only one of His commands was violated by them. God had forbidden images, and in spite of this they made one. They should have waited and not have assumed power, have arranged a place of worship, an altar, and sacrifices. This had been done by the advice of the astrologers and magicians among them, who were of opinion that their actions based on their ideas would be more correct than the true ones. They resembled the fool of whom we spoke, who entered the surgery of a physician and dealt out death instead of healing to those who came there. At the same time the people did not intend to give up their allegiance to God. On the contrary, they were, in theory, more zealous in their devotion.