

Should Christians Worship God with the Same Practices used by Pagan Religion?¹

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Chapter Seven

Before the Israelites went into the promised land God gave them this command.

"When the Lord your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you DO NOT inquire after their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise' You SHALL NOT worship the Lord your God in that way; for every abomination to the Lord which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it." (Deuteronomy 12:29-32)

Let's think about this passage for a moment. Why do you think God would say such a thing? Is it simply because God says He is a jealous God? (Exodus 34:14, Deuteronomy 4:24, 5:9 and 6:15) On the surface this may seem the case unless we read this verse carefully and realize that this commandment is different from the one prohibiting the Israelites from having other gods or the one which prohibits idols. In this passage God tells them to not look after how other people worship their gods and then apply their methods of worship to Him.

If asked if Christians should use the times, practices and symbols of Pagan religions to worship the God of the Bible I'm sure most Christians would answer no. But sadly most Christians don't even know they are doing just that. Confused? Do you realize that each year when Christians celebrate the monumental events of the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ by observing Christmas and Easter they are doing so on pagan days, with pagan practices and pagan symbols .

Does this statement surprise you? Well hold tight because in the pages that follow we are going to look at the true origins of Christmas and Easter exposing their pagan origins as well as exploring more of what the Bible has to say about whether or not it is "ok" for Christians to adopt the times, practices and symbols of Pagan idol worship to use in the worship of the true God.

THE FIRST ROYAL FAMILY

Unknown to most people, the Bible contains not only the details of the true religion of the only true God, but it also gives us a hint of where the false religions of the world sprang. To begin our study of the origins of pagan religious mythology we are going to first turn to our Bibles to get an introduction to the pivotal character from whom much of pagan religion originates. His name? Nimrod. In Genesis 10:8-10 we read, "Cush begot Nimrod; he began to be a mighty hunter before the Lord. And the beginning of his kingdom was Babel, Erech, Accad and Calneh, in the land of Shinar." This man Nimrod is the first king mentioned in the Bible and his kingdoms the first given names. However Since the Bible doesn't give us much information about Nimrod we will have to turn to other sources to learn about his unique figure from human history.

The Jewish Encyclopedia tells us that Nimrod was, "He who made all people rebellious against God." In fact his name, which comes from the word "marad", means "He rebelled" The expression we read from the Bible which said that he was, "a mighty hunter before the Lord" can carry a hostile or adversarial meaning or in other words Nimrod was a mighty hunter against the Lord, or if you will, a hostile adversary.

The noted historian of the Jews, Josephus, wrote: "Now it was Nimrod who excited all of them to such and affront and contempt of God . . . the multitudes were very ready to follow the determination of Nimrod . . . and they built a tower. The place where in they built the tower is now called Babylon." According to legend after his death, which was greatly mourned by the people of Babylon, his wife Semiramis claimed he was now the sun-god. Later when she gave birth to a son, who was named Tammuz, she claimed he was supernaturally conceived and was the son of the sun-god.

While sun-worship was the primary focus of the religious system which grew out of these legends the worship of mother and child also had an important part to play in the religious practices we will explore. Much of the Babylonian worship centering around this royal family was carried on through mysterious symbols. The golden calf, for example was a symbol of Tammuz, son of the sun-god. Since Nimrod was believed to be the sun-god (later to be known as Baal) fire was considered to be his earthly representation thus ritual candles and fires were lighted in his honor. In other forms Nimrod was symbolized by sun images, fish, trees, pillars and animals. Hence at a very early time idolatry was born as described by the Apostle Paul in Romans 1:18-25.

HOW THIS FALSE RELIGION SPREAD

To understand more regarding this subject turn back with me now to a time shortly after the flood were in the land of Shinar the mystery begins to unfold. "The whole earth had one language and one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar and they dwelt there." (Gen 11:1-2) Keep in mind that from what we read in the tenth chapter of Genesis we know that the leader of these people was Nimrod. The story continues. "And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar, and they dwelt there. Then they said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly.' They had brick for stone, and they had asphalt for mortar. And they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth'

"But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. And the Lord said, 'Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to

¹ C:\My Documents\SCHOOLofLocalChurch\Lessons\33PaganHolidays\Articles\Saturnalia15a.doc

do will be withheld from them. Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.' So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city. Therefore its name is called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth." (Genesis 11:2-9)

I would like to point about a few things from this passage you may never have noticed before. There is no mention of how much time had passed between the beginning of the building of this city and the time God intervened. This is important because building a city is a far different undertaking than building a house. When one builds a house there comes a time when it is finished however in many regards a city is never really finished. As such for all we know Nimrod and his family could have been long since dead and gone and religion which grew out of their lives could have become common in the culture of the city by the time God intervened. The next point to notice is that God's destruction of the Tower of Babel was not to put an end to false religious, but rather slowing down the destructive nature of the human mind.

If you pay close attention to what God had to say about the situation. He did not scatter the people because of any false religion or rebellion against God, even the Apostle Paul tells us God. "Gave them up to their uncleanness" and "vile passion" (Romans 1:24, 26) God rather took action because of what they had accomplished and He knew that if He did not slow down the growth of the combined intellect and the destructive nature of man we would have brought the evils and destructive powers that exist in our world today upon mankind many thousands of years ago which was not in keeping with the time table of God's plan. In fact if the purpose of scattering the people was to put down some rebellion this was not the way to do it because it would not have done anything to stop the worship of false gods. What do I mean by this?

Scholars tell us that sun worship developed in many lands independent of one another as people came to associate the sun with the growing season and warmth. The truth of the matter is that when God confused the speech at the Tower of Babel and scattered the people around the world they brought with them the religion of Babylon. Just because their language and geographic location had changed nothing in the Bible says that their religious beliefs or practices changed. They simply practiced the same religion in a different language and in a different place. With this in mind let's begin our examination of these beliefs and practices.

IMPORTANCE & DEVELOPEMENT OF SUN WORHSIP

No religious belief was more extant in the ancient world than sun worship. The worship of the sun can be found entrenched in the cultures of the American Indians of the south western and western United States as well as Central and South America with groups such as the Aztec, Inca and Mayan. The people of Japan worshiped their emperor as a descendent of Amaterasu-o-mi-Kami, the sun-god. The Teutonic ancestors of the ancient Romans even named the first day of the week after the sun. Sunday. Although gods in Egypt tended to be grouped in threes one of the most popular gods of Egypt was Ra, the sun-god. However it is the triads which are of more interest to our subject here.

These triads usually consisted of a father, mother and son. Chief among these triads was that of Osiris, Isis and Horus who are of particular interest to us because the stories of these three bear a strong resemblance to the story of Nimrod, Semiramis and Tammuz. As any student of the Bible knows the Israelites must have found these gods of Egypt pretty tantalizing because they were constantly returning to them in their religious life. (Read Ezekiel 20:7-8, 30) In fact why is it that no one ever asks why the Israelites chose to build a golden calf to worship God as recorded in Exodus 32? The answer is simple. It was what they knew from Egypt. It was the worship of the son of the sun-god, Tammuz, or as he was known in Egypt Horus, symbolized by the golden calf. By the time the Israelites entered into the promised land the sun-god of this area was known as Ball'ham'on, which was later shortened to Baal.

Among the various manifestations of sun worship is the mystery cult of Mithra or Mithras which arose in Persia. Mithraism reached into the second century B.C. and became popular in the Roman army, the commercial class and among slaves and eventually was adopted by the Roman emperors because it supported the divine right of kings.

THE CONNECTION OF SUN WORSHIP WITH CHRISTMAS

Mithraism is important to our examination of Christmas because it was the largest group which fostered the celebration of December 25th as a holiday. This winter festival has a few names, but it was commonly referred to as "the Nativity of the Unconquered Sun." The winter festival was very popular in ancient times. In the Roman and Greek, and ancient Egyptian civilizations the period of the winter solstice was a period of rejoicing and festivity.

The Saturnalia, as it became known in Rome, was a time of great joy and celebration. A time of gift giving and general feeling of geniality. This festive spirit was because for those who worshiped the sun the sign of the days getting longer after the winter solstice gave them great comfort in that their sun-god had not left them. If one wanted to one could reason that this would be a great time to commemorate the birth of Jesus Christ as a human being (See Chapter 8 for a look at the real time setting of Jesus' birth.) but the question that should be asked by Christians is does God give us that option. Does God want to be worshiped using the same symbols used by ancient pagans to worship their gods. The same people who, "knew God", but, "did not glorify Him as God" people who, "exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (Romans 1:18-25)

SYMBOLS OF THE SATURNALIA

One of the most popular, and ancient symbols in the celebration of the Saturnalia was a tree of some form. Among the druids, of Europe, the oak was sacred. Among the Egyptians it was the palm. In Rome it was the fir, which was decorated with red berries during the Saturnalia. In Scandinavian myth, Odin was believed to bestow special gifts at Yuletide to those who approached his sacred fir tree. The decorating of these trees of worship usually consisted of gilded nuts and balls which were symbols of the sun. Of some interesting note is that there are at least ten Biblical references to a green tree are associated with idolatry and false worship (Example: Jeremiah 2:20; 3:6, 13) Since all

trees are green at least part of the year, the special mention of green probably refers to trees that are ever green. One of the more interesting Biblical reference to trees is found in Jeremiah 10:2-5.

"Thus says the Lord; Do not learn the way of the Gentiles; Do not be dismayed at the signs of heaven, For the Gentiles are dismayed at them. For the customs of the people are futile; For one cuts a tree from the forest, The work of the hands of the workman, with an ax. They decorate it with silver and gold; They fasten it with nails and hammers so that it will not topple, They are upright, like a palm tree And they cannot speak; They must be carried, Because they cannot go by themselves. Do not be afraid of them, For they cannot do evil. Nor can they do any good."

One thing to note from this passage from Jeremiah is that God tells His people to, "not be dismayed by the signs of heaven" why would He say this? What could it mean? Quite simply the Gentiles around them were troubled by the shortening of days and were actually afraid that their sun-god might not come back and they would die. What God is doing is comforting His people that they do not need to be worried by such things.

WORSHIPING THE SUN AT SUNRISE

On Easter Sunday it is not uncommon for Christians to attend sunrise services. It is assumed that such services honor Jesus Christ because He rose from the dead on Easter Sunday morning just as the sun was appearing over the horizon. But according to the Biblical accounts (examined in detail in chapter 9) the resurrection did not actually occur at sunrise. On the other hand, there was a type of sunrise worship that is recorded in the Bible.

In the book of Ezekiel we read, "And He brought me (Ezekiel) into the inner court of the Lord's house and behold at the door of the temple of the Lord, between the porch and the alter, were about five and twenty men, with their backs toward the Temple of the Lord and their faces toward the east; and they worshiped the sun toward the east." (Ezekiel 8:16) The fact that they worshiped the sun toward the east shows pretty clearly that it was a sunrise or at least an early morning service since this is when the sun is in the east. What is important about this passage is God's reaction to it. He tells Ezekiel, "Son of man do you see what they are doing, the great ABOMINATION that the house of Israel commits here to make Me go far away from My sanctuary." (Ezekiel 8:6)

These people had driven God out of His temple by what they practiced there. Didn't God say, "I do not change."? (Malachi 3:6) Why then do we think it is ok for God's people to learn the ways of the Gentiles now? It would appear Solomon was right when he wrote, "That which has been is what will be, That which has been done is what will be done, there is nothing new under the sun." (Ecclesiastes 1:9) I guess God's people just think it is more fun to worship God how they prefer instead of how He wishes.

IMPORATANCE OF MOTHER AND CHILD WORSHIP TO OUR QUESTION

As mentioned earlier the worship of the mother goddess began with Semiramis and her child Tammuz. When God confused the languages and scattered the people around the world they took with them the worship of mother and child.

The Chinese had a mother goddess called Shingmoo or the Holy Mother. The ancient Germans worshiped the virgin Hetha. The Scandinavians called her Disa. The Etruscans called her Nutia and among the Druids the Virgo-Patitura was worshiped as Mother of God. In India, she was known as Indrani, who, like all the rest mentioned here, was represented with child in arms. The mother goddess was known as Aphrodite or Ceres to the Greeks, Nana to the Sumerians and as Venus or Fortuna in Rome. No matter her name or culture she was the wife of the sun-god and as the mother goddesses were also associated with fertility. The goddess of sexual fertility among the Romans was Venus. Venus who was also connected with Friday which was regarded as her sacred day because she was said to rule the first hour of Friday. The fish, as a symbol of the goddess of fertility was also associated with Ashtoreth, also called the Queen of Heaven, both of which were names she was known of by the ancient Israelites, who worshiped her, usually in connection with Baal. (Judges 2:13; 10:6; 1 Samuel 7:3-4; 12:10; and 31:10)

Other names by which the goddess is known are Eostre, Ostera, Astarte or Ishtar which in its modern form is pronounced EASTER! I'll bet you didn't know that the holiday commemorating Jesus' death and resurrection was named after a pagan fertility goddess. Did you ever wonder why we call the day commemorating such an important event as the death and resurrection of our savior Easter? At least with Christmas we can see that it means Christ-mas or the mass of Christ, but Easter? What's the connection?

SYMBOLS OF THE WORSHIP OF THE MOTHER

Many other symbols and methods of worship are connected with this goddess Easter. The egg for example was a sacred symbol among the Babylonians who believed an old fable about an egg of wondrous size which fell from heaven into the Euphrates River. From this marvelous egg the goddess Astarte (Ishstar or Easter) was hatched. The egg therefore came to symbolize the goddess Easter.

The ancient Druids bore an egg as the sacred emblem of their idolatrous order. The procession of Ceres in Rome was preceded by an egg. Chinese also used dyed or colored eggs in sacred festivals. In northern Europe eggs were colored and used as symbols of the goddess of spring. Among the Egyptians the egg was associated with the sun, the "golden egg". The Encyclopedia Britannica says, "The egg as a symbol of fertility and of the renewed life goes back to the ancient Egyptians and Persians, who had also the custom of coloring and eating eggs during their spring festival."

If you were to take the time and go to your local library and investigate this more (which I encourage you to do) you could find volumes of information which would show that both the Easter egg as well as the beloved Easter bunny were symbols of sexual significance as well as symbols of fertility. Just the sort of things, I'm sure, Jesus Christ wants connected to his monumental work of redemption.

WEEPING FOR TAMMUZ

Connected with the spring season were also rituals concerning Tammuz. According to legend after Tammuz was slain by a wild boar, he descended into the underworld, but through the weeping of his mother Semiramis (Easter), he was mystically revived in spring. The resurrection of Tammuz through Semiramis' grief was dramatically represented

annually in order to insure the success of the crops and the fertility of the people. Each year men and women had to grieve with Semiramis over the death of Tammuz and celebrate the god's return in order to win her favor and her benefits. When the new vegetation began to come forth, those ancient people believed their "savior" had returned from the underworld, had ended winter and caused spring to begin.

Even the Israelites adopted the doctrines and rites of the annual pagan spring festivals, for before God showed Ezekiel the practices of men worshiping the sun Ezekiel said he was, "Brought to the door of the north gate of the Lord's house; and to my dismay, women were sitting there weeping for Tammuz." (Ezekiel 8:14)

The weeping for Tammuz was quite the event. According to legend when Tammuz was killed he was forty years old. It is said that forty days, a day for each year of his life, were set aside to "weep for Tammuz". In ancient times these forty days were observed with weeping, fasting and self denial to gain anew his favor so he would come forth from the underworld and cause spring to begin. This observation was seen as an indispensable preliminary to the great annual festival in commemoration of the resurrection of Tammuz. Anyone out there ever heard of Lent? Sound familiar? A time of self-denial connected with the resurrection of a savior.

To the ancients this time of weeping for Tammuz was necessary to bring Tammuz back from the mystical underworld each year. Why would Christians do this in regards to the resurrection of Jesus? Jesus died and was resurrected once and is alive yet to this day sitting on the right hand of God the Father in heaven. (Romans 8:34)

While it is easy to see some apparent parallels between the reality of Jesus Christ and the myths of Tammuz why mix truth with myth? To do so is to cheapen and confuse the truth. No wonder non-believers say that the story of Jesus is nothing new, claiming that it is only reshaped paganism. To many these rituals may seem trivial in their modern incarnations, but of their triviality God tells Ezekiel, "Is it is a trivial thing to the House of Judah to commit the abominations which they commit here ? For they have filled the land with violence; then they have returned to provoke Me to anger. Indeed they put the branch to their nose. Therefore I also will act in fury. My eye will not spare nor will I have pity; and though they cry in My ears with a loud voice, I will not hear them." (Ezekiel 8:17-18)

Some may not think it matters but it sure seems like it matters to God. At the beginning of this chapter I asked you to speculate as to why God would command His people not to use the practices of pagan religions in the worship of Him. I would like you to consider this as an answer. If it is true that God's law is a revelatory device and we can learn about Him and His plan for humanity from His prescribed method of worship the opposite would also be true. Meaning we are limited in coming to a greater understanding of God by worshiping Him with practices that did not come from Him and are not given for our learning.

Think about it what is there for one to learn about God from Easter bunnies, colored eggs, and all the trappings of Easter? What is there to be learned about God by decorating Christmas trees and talk of Santa and flying reindeer? Then consider what can be learned from observing the Passover and reliving the story of the exodus and considering how as the Israelites were freed from their slavery by the death of the first born we have been rescued from the slavery of sin by the death of the firstborn son of God, our Passover, Jesus Christ.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO ABOUT IT?

For those of you who are not trying to serve God as He has revealed Himself through the Bible I hope that you might see that the story of the Bible is unique and not simply a rehash of paganism.

To those of you who are committed to the service of God, and His Son Jesus Christ, I hope you will seriously ask yourselves whether or not you should continue to worship the true God by the methods used by people who rejected the true God and worshiped the creature rather than the Creator.

I encourage you to study this matter further. Go to your local library and read some books on the religions of Egypt, Persia, Europe and so on. As you study consider what Jesus said to a group of religious people of His time, "These people draw close to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in VAIN they worship Me Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." (Matthew 15:8-9)

Please consider it. As you do remember that the place in which Nimrod built his tower was called Babylon and in the book of Revelation Christians are told, regarding Babylon, to "Come out of her My people, lest you share in her sins and lest you receive her plagues." (Revelation 18:4) Serious words any Christian should take to heart.

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