

Engaging Gospel Doctrine (Episode 115.2)

LESSON 38 (STUDY NOTES)

“Beside Me There Is No Saviour”

Hook	Throughout human history, belief in God has been near universal. At the same time, that belief has varied significantly by time and place. What do we make of this diversity compared to our individual experiences?
Goal	
Overview	
Conclusion	

Manual Goal: To help class members understand that Jesus Christ is incomparable in his devotion to his people and that he has a great work for them to do.

EGD Goal: To appreciate that people experience God in different ways, and understand the power of devotion to God and the role it plays in our lives.

I. Sunday School

- a. Just what do we mean when we say “God”, anyway? (In part two will talk about types of belief in God across the world and history)
- b. Different ways people experience God
- c. Review of the reading: Lots of reading, so it is helpful to look for themes, repetition, and specifics such as what we learn about God: (God as master of history/predictor of the future; God as the one who cares, carries his people, God as caretaker, nurturer, mother! God as one who saves for the sake of his reputation; God as the only, only God ever)
- d. God in our personal lives/devotion to and worship of God
- e. Conclusion I

II. Scholarship

- a. Historical and literary commentary on the reading
- b. The authorship of Isaiah
- c. Servant songs (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12)
- d. A survey of belief in God in Israelite religion

A summary from my Hebrew Bible online class:

Preexilic Religion: Summary and Exceptions

According to archaeological evidence and a critical reading of the biblical texts, it seems that a majority of preexilic Israelites were polytheistic, worshiping Yahweh as the national god alongside other Canaanite deities, all influenced by other cultures such as Egypt and Assyria. The Deuteronomistic editors often lambast the royalty for worshipping other gods; it would

make sense that the royalty and upper class would be influenced the most by other cultures and that this would trickle down to popular religion. Zion theology was also linked to the king—Jerusalem was the holy city, the temple Yahweh’s house, and the king his chosen servant. There were other popular features of Israelite religion as well, such as worshipping in local house shrines and ancestor worship.

At the same time, there was a vocal minority that urged worship of Yahweh alone. These “Yahweh-only” movements included the prophets such as Amos, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and perhaps Priestly groups. The Deuteronomists eventually became the most influential of these Yahweh-only groups, and they have granted us our picture of early Israelite history. They also selected and edited the prophets who championed exclusive Yahweh worship. At this point we likely can only talk about monolatry and perhaps henotheism with Josiah’s reforms, not full monotheism; that was a development of the exile. Josiah’s reform brought in henotheism, as he established Yahweh as the supreme deity and localized worship in Jerusalem.

The Exile

The Babylonian exile influenced Israelite religion to the point that it can be called the birth of Judaism (at least the beginning of that birth, with postexilic developments completing the transition). When the Judeans were displaced from Israel, so too was Yahweh, the God of Israel. As noted above, in the preexilic period Yahweh was *literally* the national god. He was the special God of Israel, even though Israelites worshipped other gods along with him. But when prayer and service to Yahweh disengaged from Israel, Yahweh became universal. This universalism was heightened by conflict and polemic with Babylonian religion, and thus we have the strident poetry of Deutero-Isaiah, where monotheism is first expressed unequivocally (for example, see Isaiah 43–44). Thus the interests of the Deuteronomists and priests, who were both invested in centralized worship of Yahweh, converged and these groups were key in rewriting the history of Israel. In doing so, they emphasized the messages of those whose prophecies were fulfilled—the Yahweh-only prophets were copied and updated, while Zion theology faded into the background (to be revived somewhat during the Second Temple period). Thus began the theological reversal—Yahweh worship and monotheism became the majority position (as far as we can tell from our sources), and polytheism became the exception.

Postexilic Period

The Deuteronomists continued to be influential in the postexilic period and beyond. Canonically, it is their view of history that won the day. Zion theology and Priestly thought became even more dominant with the construction of the Second Temple. The priests viewed the temple as the center of the universe, and claimed only here could Yahweh be revered (in reality, there were other temples to Yahweh in locations such as Lachish, Elephantine, and Gezirim). Postexilic Judah was a theocracy, and adherence to the Torah and a faithful cult for those at Jerusalem became the measure of Jewishness. The books of Chronicles portray this view. Prophecy was marginalized after the exile, as oral prophecy shifted to written prophecy—the interpretation and reworking of prophetic texts and writing texts in the names of older figures (apocalypses). Beginning in the fourth century and reaching a peak in the second century BCE and beyond, apocalypticism became an important world view.

- e. Agnosticism vs. Atheism (we could throw in other terms like antitheism or apatheism) “functional atheism” is a good term.
- f. Thoughts on belief in God around the world/in history
 - i. Animism (nature spirits, human spirits, oldest perhaps is belief in evil spirits!)
 - ii. Polytheism
 - iii. Monolatry and Henotheism
 - iv. Dualism
 - v. Monism (God or divine reality pervades all things; all is unity, Hindu concept of Brahman for example)
 - vi. Monotheism (but sometimes ideas are at tension with devil, angels, Trinity, etc)
 - vii. Deism (God created the world but does not interact with it)
 - viii. God as an impersonal force (Pantheism posits that God pervades everything)
 - ix. Panentheism: God both penetrates every part of the universe and transcends it

(Note that the LDS conception of God is interesting in multiple ways. We call ourselves monotheistic, but believe the Celestial Kingdom is made up of Gods and Goddesses. We believe God has a God, extending forever? We believe God has a body, but also transcends that body. God has a gender, but also transcends that gender. More important than all these details of course is the core idea that God is loving and cares for us, has expectations for us and will help us meet those expectations)

III. Study Notes

- a. Deutero-Isaiah and the Book of Mormon
- b. Israelite views of God in theological perspective
- c. What do we make of the diverse beliefs relating to God?
- d. Agnosticism and atheism
- e. God down the rabbit hole (What is necessary for someone to be called “god”? Could your neighbor be a god? Could you? Why not? If you had to write up a wanted ad for God, what would you include? what are the options for conceptions of God? What does the evidence allow for, and what are the pros and cons of different conceptions?) (My number one trait: God is one who saves, who makes life more abundant)
- f. What can atheists and theists learn from each other?
- g. God and meaning
- h. Conclusion II

http://www.religionfacts.com/big_religion_chart.htm