

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”

Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian Students

Presented by the
President of

Central Baptist
Theological Seminary
of Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

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Radical Monotheism

Part Two

One True God

Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God is one LORD.

—Deuteronomy 6:4

The Bible teaches only one true religion, but that religion has passed through various stages. With the progress of revelation, patriarchal religion became the religion of the tabernacle and temple, which in turn gave way to the Christianity of the New Testament. These are not different faiths, but stages in the development of the one, true, biblical faith.

This biblical religion includes required actions, affections, and affirmations. All of these are important, but they are not all *equally* important. Some are necessary to the well-being or maturity of biblical religion. Others are essential to its bare existence. The latter are fundamental to its being at all.

The most fundamental affirmation of all biblical religion is the *shema*, recorded in Deuteronomy 6:4—“Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God is one LORD.” This verse asserts the existence of exactly one true and living God. Furthermore, it identifies Yahweh as that God. “Hear, O Israel: Yahweh is our God—Yahweh alone.”

To call Yahweh *our* God implies the existence (real or imagined) of other gods who are not ours. This affirmation posits a category or class of beings (*gods*) of which Yahweh is a member. As it happens, we know that Yahweh is the only member of that class who exists in the real world. People have imagined other beings, however, to whom the property of “god-ness” applies. The *shema* attempts to help us glimpse who Yahweh is by leading us to see Him as a member of the category or class of gods.

Therefore, if we want to understand what the *shema* means when it says that “Yahweh is our God,” we must begin by understanding what a god is. We need a definition. This definition must be more than a personal description of Yahweh. The definition must pertain to the whole class or category of gods, whether those gods are real or imagined. It must be capable of including, not only Yahweh, but also entities such as Molech, Ashera, Marduk, Zeus, Neptune, Thor, and other putative deities.

Asking “What is a god?” is not the same as asking “Who is the true and living God?” The fourth question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, “What is God?” The catechism answers, “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.” This is an excellent, brief description of Yahweh. By listing His attributes it points the finger at the God of the Bible and says “There—*that* is the true God!” Identifying the one true God, however, is not the same thing as offering a definition of a god.

Muslims and Zoroastrians do not acknowledge the Yahweh of the Bible, but they do worship gods. Of course, their deities have no real existence, but the imaginary objects of their reverence do bear the name of *god*. So do the deities of all non-biblical religions. The question we are asking is not, “Who is the true God?” but, “What is a god?” What properties distinguish the class of beings (real or imagined) called *gods* from other things? How should we define the term *god*?

Two experiences point toward an answer. The first happened to a missionary of my acquaintance. Walking down an African road, he met a man with a bent stick hooked around his neck. “What’s that?” asked my friend.

The man replied, “That is my god.”

My friend was incredulous. “Your god?”

“Yes,” said the man, “I worship it.”

A similar thing also happened to me. I had taken a computer into a shop for repairs and I was chatting with the owner in his office. He was a man who had come to the United States from another part of the world. As we talked, I spotted a golden elephant on his book shelf. “That’s very interesting,” I said. “What is it?”

His reply: “That’s my god.” Seeing the astonishment on my face, he continued, “In my country we worship that.”

Both of these experiences are suggestive. Nothing intrinsic to a stick or even a little golden elephant suggests deity. Both of these objects, however, were called *gods*. The thing that qualified them as gods was not any property that they themselves possessed, but rather lay in the way they were treated. Because they were worshipped, they became gods to their worshippers.

These two experiences suggest at least a functional definition: A *god* is what is worshipped. Whatever a person chooses to worship becomes a god to that person. If people worship sticks or stones or images, then those things become their gods.

The worship of such things is called *idolatry*. It has always evoked scorn from the people of God. Elijah heaped scatological mockery upon worshippers of Baal (1 Kgs 18:27). Isaiah reserved some of his most biting satire (Isa 44) for those who worship idols. He wrote about a man who plants a tree, and when it has grown up he cuts it down. He uses part of the tree to build a fire with which he can warm himself and cook his meal. From the scraps he fashions an image, falls in worship before it, and begs, "Deliver me, for you are my god."

This biblical scorn helps us to understand the significance of the *shema*. Absolutely anything can be worshipped. One temple in India is even devoted to the worship of rats. While anything *can* be worshipped, however, not everything *deserves* to be worshipped. Only what deserves to be worshipped is truly God (with a capital G) instead of an idol or a god.

The *shema* insists that God is one. There is one and only one true and living God. In other words, only one being in the entire universe genuinely deserves to be worshipped. The one true God is Yahweh, the God of the Bible.

Radical monotheism is not a philosophy or an abstract system. It is about worship. It begins by recognizing that all human beings are worshippers (more on this later). It insists that only one being is worthy of worship. Radical monotheists restrict their worship to the one true and living God. Their God is Yahweh, and they worship no other. If they rightly understand what that means, it will change the way they see everything. ✕

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of Central Seminary's professors, students, or alumni necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

SINNE. (I)
George Herbert (1593- 1633)

LORD, with what care hast thou begirt us round !
Parents first season us : then schoolmasters
Deliver us to laws ; They send us bound
To rules of reason, holy messengers,

Pulpits and sundayes, sorrow dogging sinne,
Afflictions sorted, anguish of all sizes,
Fine nets and stratagemes to catch us in,

Bibles laid open, millions of surprises,

Blessings beforehand, tyes of gratefulness,
The sound of glorie ringing in our eares ;
Without, our shame ; within, our consciences ;
Angels and grace, eternall hopes and fears.

Yet all these fences and their whole aray
One cunning bosome-sinne blows quite away. ✠

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