

SYNCRETISM

A Blending of Paganism & Truth

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Syncretism is defined as "the combination of different forms of belief or practice" (Webster's). The word *syncretism* does not appear in the KJ V, but the subject of syncretism is certainly addressed (and condemned) in the Scriptures. From a Biblical perspective, syncretism is the blending together of Yahweh worship with pagan worship.

A perfect example of syncretism is the worship of the Samaritans. When the Samaritan woman asked Yeshua a question about the difference between the worship of the Jews and Samaritans, He responded with this: "Ye worship ye know not what. We know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews" (Jn. 4:22).

This forthright statement probably sounds arrogant and ethnocentric in today's politically correct world, especially given the fact that the Samaritans believed in the same God the Jews worshipped. What was wrong with the worship of the Samaritans? To answer this question, we have to go to 2 Kings 17 and read about the origin of the Samaritans.

King David and King Solomon both ruled over a united, twelve-tribe monarchy. After the death of Solomon, the ten northern tribes seceded from the southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin, and made Samaria their capital. The ten northern tribes sinned greatly against the Lord. Their punishment was exile: Then the king of Assyria came up throughout all the land, and went up to Samaria, and besieged it three years. In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria took Samaria, and carried Israel [the ten tribes] away into Assyria, and placed them in Halah and in Habor by the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes... So was Israel carried away out of their own land to Assyria unto this day" (2Ki. 17:5f, 23).

After the Israelites were carried away, the king of Assyria populated Israel's land with pagans from other territories: "And the king of Assyria brought men from Babylon, and from Cuthah, and from Ava, and from

Hamath, and from Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the children of Israel: and they possessed Samaria, and dwelt in the cities thereof (2 Ki. 17:24).

These were the people who later became known as the Samaritans. The rest of the chapter describes the development of the Samaritans' syncretistic worship. Soon after these people first settled in Israel's land, Yahweh sent lions among them "because they feared not Yahweh" (vs. 25). The Samaritans told the king of Assyria that they did not know how the God of this land wanted to be worshipped. So the king sent an Israelite priest to teach them the manner of the God of the land," and this priest "taught them how they should fear Yahweh" (vs. 27f). The Samaritans then began to worship Yahweh. However, they mixed their worship of Yahweh with the worship of their old pagan gods: "They feared Yahweh, and served their own gods, after the manner of the nations whom they carried away from thence... So these nations feared Yahweh, and served their graven images, both their children, and their children's children: as did their fathers, so do they unto this day" (vs. 33 & 41).

Yahweh had made it clear in Deuteronomy chapter 12 that He does not want worship which is patterned after the worship of pagan gods. Rather, He said, "What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it" (Deut. 12:32). The unnamed priest who instructed the Samaritans apparently neglected to tell the Samaritans that Yahweh rejects syncretistic worship. Or, if the priest did tell them, they chose to ignore those instructions. In either case, the Samaritans ended up with a flawed system of syncretistic worship. They erroneously believed that their system of worship was every bit as legitimate as that of the Jews. When the Jews returned from Babylon to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple, the Samaritans came to them and said, "Let us build with you: for we seek your God,

as ye do; and we do sacrifice unto Him since the days of Esar-haddon king of Assur, which brought us up hither" (Ezra 4:2).

The Jewish leaders rightly refused this ecumenical proposal, because they knew that the Samaritans' syncretistic worship would end up polluting their own worship. The Samaritans resented being shunned this way, and so opposed and harassed the Jews in their efforts to rebuild Jerusalem. About 500 years later, at the time of the Messiah, the Jews and the Samaritans were still not getting along with each other -which explains why the Samaritan woman was surprised when Yeshua asked her for a drink. "How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria? For the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans" (Jn. 4:9).

It was to this Samaritan woman that Yeshua spoke about the need for true worshippers to worship "in spirit and in truth." The Father seeketh such to worship Him," Yeshua said, "and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth" (Jn. 4:23f). True worship is a blend of spirit and truth. Syncretistic worship is a blend of paganism and truth.

The subtle danger of syncretistic worship lies in its claim to be worshipping the true God, Yahweh. When the Israelites brought idols and idolatrous practices into the Temple, they did not think of their actions as an abandonment of Yahweh. They thought of it as just supplementing their worship with customs borrowed from heathen idol worship. Even the golden calf at Mount Sinai was not regarded as a substitute god to replace Yahweh; rather, it was regarded as a symbolic representation of Yahweh. This can be seen in Aaron's reference to the golden calf as the God "which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt" and his proclamation that the worship of the golden calf would be "a feast unto Yahweh" - not a feast to some Egyptian god (Ex. 32:4f).

Syncretism made its way into the Messianic faith quite early. Certain

statements in the Epistles show that it was starting even before the Apostles died. Paul scolded the Galatians for turning back to the weak and beggarly elements which put them in bondage to the observance of times. (And it is clear from the context that Paul was *not* referring to Yahweh's appointed times, which Paul himself observed. Rather, this observing of times concerned the Galatians' reverting back to their former pagan superstitions about times, much like some Christians today who put stock in their horoscopes.) Syncretism was also occurring among the saints at Colosse. This is obvious from Colossians chapter 2. (Here too it is clear from the context that Paul was *not* referring to the commandments of God written in the Torah; rather, he was talking about unhealthy bondage to man-made traditions, commandments, and philosophies.)

We know from history that the Apostles' warnings against syncretism went unheeded by the majority of Church leaders. Pagan customs were adapted and modified for use in Christian worship. Much that exists in Christianity today is nothing more than white-washed, baptized paganism. This is especially obvious in the Roman Catholic Church, which freely admits that many of its extra-Biblical traditions were borrowed from pagan idol worship. Anyone who doubts this can read *Catholic Customs and Traditions: A Popular Guide* by Greg Dues (Twenty-Third Publications, 2000). This book, written by a Catholic and primarily for Catholics, is a brief but comprehensive overview of the customs of Roman Catholicism. Throughout the book, the author freely admits that many Catholic customs were borrowed from paganism. Some examples:

- Sunday worship "is an example of how culture and pagan traditions influenced Christian religious traditions. This title [Sun-day] comes from pre-Christian worship of the sun" (pg. 22).

- The choice of December 25 as the date to celebrate Jesus' birth was an adaptation of the pagans' December 25 celebration of the birthday of their sun god. After Constantine "became the benefactor and protector of Christian-

ity," the writer states, "pagan cultural features of sun-symbolism were no longer threatening. They could be freely absorbed by the church. The church, with its Nativity date of December 25 already in place, did precisely this" (pg. 51 f).

- "Most Christmas traditions associated with evergreens and trees are related somehow to pre-Christian practices... Teutonic and Scandinavian peoples worshipped trees and decorated houses and barns with evergreens at the new year to scare away demons" (pg. 56).

- Concerning Santa Claus: "The origin of this tradition is a fascinating and deliberate mixture of a bishop-saint, Father Christmas, Christmas Man, and the Norse mythological god Thor." Thor is described as "elderly, jolly (though a god of war), with white hair and beard, friend of the common people, living in the north land, traveling in the sky in a chariot pulled by goats, and as god of fire, partial to chimneys and fireplaces" (pg. 60-62).

- Mardi Gras, the Catholic pre-Lenten party-time, came from "pre-Christian revelry and masquerading associated with ancient pagan observance of spring and New Year festivals celebrated at the spring or vernal equinox" (pg. 73).

- Concerning the Catholic custom of giving milk and honey to those newly baptized: "This practice, marking an important moment in life, was borrowed from pagan mystery cults" (pg. 90).

- Concerning the origin of Easter eggs and Easter bunnies: "In ancient Egypt and Persia friends exchanged decorated eggs at the spring equinox... These eggs were a symbol of fertility... Rabbits are part of pre-Christian fertility symbolism because of their reputation to reproduce rapidly" (pg. 98f).

- Valentine's Day is connected to "a pagan Roman festival, Lupercalia... This festival came under the patronage of Juno, the goddess of marriage... St. Valentine replaced the pagan goddess Juno as a patron of love" (pg. 139f).



The Havdalah Candle

An Example of Syncretism?

Though the Bible does not prescribe any ritual to end the Sabbath, the rabbis prescribe a ritual called *havdalah* ("separation"). The climax of this short ceremony is at the conclusion, when a flaming torch (made of a braided candle) is plunged into wine and extinguished. We used to do *havdalah* every Saturday night at our house, but eventually got out of the habit. I'm glad now that we did. After reading about one particular custom practiced by pagan fertility cults, I would no longer feel comfortable doing *havdalah*. Greg Dues writes: "During the pagan ritual a flaming torch was plunged into water" (pg. 96). Dues explains that the fiery torch was a male symbol, and the liquid was a female symbol. The sexual connotations of an erect, hardened torch having its fire quenched by being plunged into a wet substance should be obvious, especially when this climactic act is preceded by romantic candle light and sweet-smelling spices, as in the *havdalah* ritual.

I do not know if the rabbis who first established the *havdalah* ritual borrowed it from the pagan fertility cults or not. Perhaps they did not; perhaps the striking similarity is a mere coincidence. If it is, I'm sorry if I've ruined *havdalah* for those who enjoy it I will not condemn those who still want to do it, but I prefer to not do it.

Samaritanism and Roman Catholicism are not the only systems of worship guilty of syncretism. Syncretism exists in Protestantism, too. It can even be found in Judaism. "But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship Him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth" (Jn. 4:23f). Let's worship in spirit and in truth, not in a blend of paganism and truth.