

## Is Basketbaal a Pagan Sport?

Recently on the radio, a talk show host interviewed a famous atheist. The stated purpose of the interview was to show the total nonsense of any claim that Creationism was in any way a science. The guest began by explaining the “god myth” as a primeval creation in the mind of primitive man, then continued with his assault on anyone of faith.

Why should one take time to listen to such a program? We need a better understanding of how people like this spread their hatred against God and anyone who believes in Him. Usually, a radio program like this is inundated with non-scientific thinkers who are totally offended by the rhetoric and zealously call in to defend their faith. This of course does not result in a convincing defense, rather it sounds like the tirades of the ignorant and uninformed. This feeds the purpose of the atheist. I would not doubt that some are really set up calls where the caller has been coached on a stereotypical, but bad defense of God. On this show, someone called in who seemed to change his mind after the discussion with the guest. When the caller made some accolades of surrender to the higher intellect of the guest, this famous atheist said, “*hallelujah!*” Wow, was that a slip? Did he really believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Has he now shown his conversion to the previously held position of the caller?

One gains no merit from God by merely making the proper statements or saying the proper words. God knows the heart and without regard to the words of this atheist, God knew there had not been a heart change. We are unable to make such a judgment since we cannot see into the heart, but we can observe the actions of the individual. If his actions still support his previous paradigm, we can be very suspicious of his use of “*hallelujah.*”

Many aspects of the Hebrew Roots movement emphasize that it is action not profession which proves submission to God. James states, “But someone will say, ‘You have faith, and I have works.’ Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.” (James 2:18 NKJV) We know that the Apostolic Writings, teach that one must show fruit of repentance. There is a life change, as well as a heart change. Each of us is attempting to grow in our service to God through embracing the Torah and carefully distinguishing truth from long-held erroneous beliefs. In the process of separating out the wheat from the chaff, it is inevitable that we will adopt some new beliefs that more closely resemble the chaff than the wheat. Often our overzealous desire to discover truth and to reject long-standing errors leaves us with the propensity to embrace a new thought too quickly and the result is that we develop a new error in the process.

In recent years a superstition has developed in the Hebrew Roots community concerning the use of certain words. Some words are venerated while others are demonized. To correctly pronounce YHWH is claimed to make God do as you command, while names used to describe the pagan gods are to be removed from our speech. Hence, *baal* and the English words connected to it must never be spoken. To compound the problem, certain English words are associated with the hea-

then usage of Hebrew words making them also forbidden to use. It is said that the word *lord* should **not** be used because it is a translation of the word *baal*. Then to make it more complicated, add in some words from a third unrelated language and more associations with paganism develop. Considering this, we are **not** to use *lord* because it is a translation of *Adonai* which is etymologically related to the Greek god *Adonus*. Even the term God has been forbidden because of an obscure verse about calling on a false deity named God.<sup>1</sup> There are many such words that are on the list of forbidden terms because of the superstitious nature of those making the list. They are there for a variety of reasons, but all are based on the notion that a word has an innate nature. The objective of this paper is to remove the false notion that any word has an innate nature that requires one to treat it as special. Language is no more than a means of communication. It does not possess any magical qualities that require careful or special treatment.

Frequently, time causes words to reverse in meaning or to slowly migrate in meaning until the original meaning is lost or totally obscured. One that has reversed in meaning in our day is the word “bad.” While its old meaning has not disappeared and may yet prevail, presently something that is considered “great” by the speaker can be referred to as “bad.” A word that has migrated in meaning is the word *gay*. When I was a child, it meant happy, but when I was a teenager it came to mean a homosexual, and today it seems to have taken on new meaning. Considering how quickly these words have evolved in our present language, one must be aware that there are like migrations throughout history.

In the late 1800s, all study in semantics was based on a historical progression of the word studied. Ferdinand de Saussure revolutionized linguistics by showing how this historical approach could be inadequate and misleading in the scientific analysis of languages. Saussure developed two terms that better explained the systematic analysis of language. These terms are *synchrony* and *diachrony*.

Diachrony denotes the historical progression of a term and synchrony designates the way in which the term was used during a particular period. An example in English of a diachronic study can be presented using the word *prevent*. The Old English definition for *prevent* meant, “to go before, or precede.” The term’s meaning shifted slightly in Middle English because of the common usage in that day. If some plans had been made, yet an enemy discovered those plans and went before their initiation to stop them, then he prevented the plans. This usage takes on a negative connotation of attempting to thwart the plans; thus, the Middle English definition included the concept “to interpose a hindrance.” This usage became so popular, that today the original meaning has been removed from our understanding. In present times, no one considers the history of the “prevent” when using it in common speech.

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<sup>1</sup> (Isaiah 65:11 NKJV) "But you are those who forsake the LORD, Who forget My holy mountain, Who prepare a table for Gad, And who furnish a drink offering for Meni." The Hebrew pronunciation of the word *Gad* is the same as we pronounce the English word *god*. So because of similar pronunciation we are accused of worshipping Baal Gad, referred to in other passages. Joshua 11:17, 12:7, and 13:5

The diachronic evaluation of a word helps us understand its change over centuries and will expose why a word has various meanings throughout history, but it is not valuable in determining a social understanding of the text during a particular time period. It will only keep you from improperly assigning the wrong definition to a particular era. To impose the historical progression on each word we currently use is an improper use of word analysis. No word can contain centuries of historical baggage and still be a tool of communication in the modern world. This would render an argument on every sentence spoken, attempting to define the varied use of each individual word. Language would become so ambiguous it would be incapable of communication.

This is **not** a proposal that there should be a total disregard for diachronic analysis. Such a disregard would bring linguistics down to a level of association by similar sounds rather than a solid progression of speech. When one begins to analyze linguistics by associating similar sounds in diverse languages rather than historical connections, the following error could occur. A shortened form of the name of God in Hebrew is *Yah*. The German word for yes is *ja*, pronounced yah. While the pronunciation is identical, the latter did not evolve from the former. There is no relationship whatsoever between these two words; consequently, the Germans are not calling on or referring to God every time they give an affirmative answer.

If words are magical rather than merely being signs referring to an object or action, and the association of words is based on similar sounds rather than diachronic progression, then the Germans would be the most powerful people in the world. They call upon God every time they say yes (*ja*). It is ridiculous to assume that God is incapable of distinguishing between a German's affirmative answer and his crying out to Him. The two similar sounding words do not confuse Him in the least. When a Christian German says "mein Gott," our Heavenly Father recognizes that the German is calling on Him in the German tongue even though the man is using a general term. The general term must be sufficient since *elohim*, a general term often used for the many gods<sup>2</sup> is used by the Almighty when referring to Himself.<sup>3</sup> When God refers to Himself with a general term, it is sufficient evidence that He is not offended by the general usage, the specific word or the title. This illustrates that the mere vocalization of certain consonants and vowels placed in a specific order is not alone capable of determining intent. The heart reveals the intent and only God can read the heart. We can also conclude that similar vocalization of consonants and vowels are insufficient in determining common origin. The *Yah* in the Hebrew Scriptures is not the same as yes (*ja*) in German.

Please examine the following passages from Scripture and see how the aforementioned knowledge can help in understanding the text.

<sup>NASV</sup> **Deuteronomy 12:30** "beware that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, 'How do these nations

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus 18:11 and other places

<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 23:14 and other places

serve their gods, that I also may do likewise?' 31 "You shall not behave thus toward the LORD your God, for every abominable act which the LORD hates they have done for their gods; for they even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods."

Moses is reiterating God's commandments to the children of Israel. He contrasts the ceremonies for worship of the pagan gods with the overall law that God had given the children of Israel. After warning them not to worship the God of Israel in the same manner as the pagans worship their gods, he warns them to follow the commandments as YHWH has given them. They shall neither add to, nor take away from them. This contrast of God's law and pagan ceremony reveals that proper heart and action are important to God. The worship of these gods was not merely calling out their name. Participating in their temple cult to receive the blessings that they were supposed to give is the true meaning of calling upon their name. A study of the word שֵׁם (*shem*) as used in Scripture, reveals it is more often speaking of the character, practice and authority which is called to mind when the proper name is spoken, than the actual verbalization of the proper name.<sup>4</sup> Hence, Moses does not warn the people about not calling out the pagan gods' proper name; rather, he challenges them to act according to the ways of the one true God, instead of the ways of the pagan gods.

We recognize that God desires for us to memorize Scripture. Most of us would agree that it is proper to read Scripture out loud. The Hebrew word for read, קָרָא (*qarah*), literally means to call out. Furthermore, we consider Scripture to be holy, hence we should not tamper with its contents. These three tenants further indicate that God is concerned with our actions rather than with the words used to designate a pagan deity. God tells us that He will remove the names of the *Baalim* from our mouths. However, in Scripture we read about *Baal-zebub*, *Baal-peor*, *Baal-berith*. Many idols are listed by their general terms as *baalim* (baals in English) which could be translated as lords or husbands. If God expects us to meditate on His word, He must not be asking us to remove these words from our lips, since within His word He lists these false gods. It makes sense that we are not to repeat what it takes to worship these gods. We should not educate people in what practices must be done to fulfill their temple cult, nor should we talk about what the worship of them could do for us. **This** would be proclaiming their name. Instead, we should forget their practices and only teach and uphold the commandments of the one true God and the proper procedures to partake in His worship.

The word *baal* in Scripture is really used in a variety of ways. Hebrew is based on a series of roots with prefixes, suffixes and infixes denoting the pronouns, prepositions, and possessive nouns etc. A wife might refer to her husband as *baali*, a possessive form meaning my lord or my

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<sup>4</sup> 08034 שֵׁם {shem} **Meaning:** 1) name 1a) name 1b) reputation, fame, glory 1c) the Name (as designation of God) 1d) memorial, monument **Origin:** a primitive word [perhaps rather from 07760 through the idea of definite and conspicuous position; TWOT - 2405; n m **Usage:** AV - name 832, renown 7, fame 4, famous 3, named 3, named + 07121 2, famous + 07121 1, infamous + 02931 1, report 1, misc 10; 864

husband. God referred to himself as *baalti*, a verb in perfect tense, first person, meaning I am married or maybe, I am your *baal*. There are several non-Israelite kings that took the name of *baal* as a title. *Baal* is used to designate ownership of property. *Baal* is also used in the general sense as men. There are other uses of *Baal*, so this word should be considered a common term in the Hebrew language with varied meaning much like our English word sir. If Hindus moved to the US and took the title of sir applying it to their many gods, should we abandon the term due to their renegade usage? This would be taking a general term in common use among a people group and specifying it for use in a worship system not associated with the original group. This is exactly the way the word *baal* was used. Someone started referring to their idols as lords, masters or husbands. In no way should this demonize the word or ban it from common usage. It merely reflects their idolatrous practice, not ours.

In like manner, other perfectly good Hebrew words are used to distinguish false gods as well as the one true God. *Elohim* is used as a general term for angelic beings, men, judges and false gods.<sup>5</sup> Then it is used in the same plural form to designate the one true God. The plural form in Hebrew can be used to denote the greatest, therefore it is used for God since He is the greatest God or the God of gods. *Adon*, more commonly recognized by its proper form *Adonai* is another general term used for lord, husband, master, etc. However, it is also used for our Lord and Master, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. *El* in like manner can be used for the general term god, or can be used to distinguish the one true God as in *El Shaddai* or other variations. Since the original Hebrew text did not have vowel markings placed under the consonants, God even refers to Himself with the same letters that designate בעל *baal* and מולך *moleck*, however, when designating YHWH, the translators use the term husband and king. The original Hebrew had no such qualifiers. God does not seem to be confused by this, why should we? We must not allow the pagan to usurp the usage of perfectly good Hebrew words that have been used in common speech for millennium.

As emphasized earlier with the story about the atheist, the use of a word is merely an attempt at communication. It has no mystical powers either positive or negative. We cannot manipulate YHWH by calling upon His name with an exact proper pronunciation. That would be witchcraft. Neither can we drive Him away by sincerely calling upon Him with an improper pronunciation or by using a general term. He knows the heart, He is not confused.

Well-meaning people sometimes suggest that we are mixing pagan and true biblical worship when we use words that sound like those used in idol worship. They also insinuate such if we use the common terms sometimes used for the pagan gods to refer to or describe our Heavenly Father. In doing so, they limit their ability to communicate with the general public. They even stifle their ability to communicate with church-going believers who may otherwise be sympathetic to learning more about their Hebraic roots. When we make unfavorable comparison of words

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<sup>5</sup> Elohim is translated as angels in, Psalm 8:5; as judges in Exodus 21:6, 22:8 & 9; and gods/god Exodus 22:20, Judges 6:31, 11:24 just to name a few. It also calls men gods in Psalm 82:6, & Exodus 7:1 among other places.

based merely on their sound, yet have no diachronic relationship, the connections are confusing, questionable and often totally wrong. The illustration of *ja* and *Yah*, indicating that God has no ability to distinguish between the two is attributing the feeble-mindedness of man to the nature of God. Even if there were some diachronic relationship between an ancient Hebrew term and a modern English one, it is irrelevant to our modern synchronic usage, and to forbid its use on this premise impedes clear, Godly communication.

It is impossible to carry on a conversation with a person in your local church and present your view in a clear and concise manner, while eliminating all the words that some believe to be pagan, including (perhaps especially) the name 'Jesus.' This hypersensitivity limits our ability of persuasion and obscures our message. Since the Apostolic Writings are greatly illuminated by understanding their Hebraic foundation, it is best to use clear and familiar terms.

Asserting that certain words are innately evil is superstitious at best. Could it be possible that this latter-day controversy is actually a deception from the enemy, attempting to make obscure or irrelevant the message of the Hebrew Roots movement? When we realize that paganism is a condition of the heart and not a mere recital of words, we are free to lead our Christian brothers and sisters into a greater understanding of their Jewish Messiah. This realization should liberate us from the fear of making a 'fatal' mistake that would bring down judgment from a wrathful deity. In truth, although He is an all-consuming fire, He is also gracious, compassionate, and abounding in lovingkindness. The Word of God discerns the thoughts and intents of the heart. Just as there is no magic in pronouncing the Sacred Name, there is no fireball to consume the innocent who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.

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