

# Gods, Principalities and Powers in the Bible: Implications for Christian Theology of the Religions

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The Bible has a lot to say about other religions—and more than most Bible readers have imagined. We have missed much of the Bible’s perspective on the religions, either because we have not looked for it, or because the answers were coded in terms we did not recognize. For example, few modern Christians have recognized that for many Old Testament authors, Yahweh is not “alone” in the heavens, as it were. There are other divine beings “up there,” some allied with him and working to carry out his designs, and others opposed to him and actively working to frustrate his purposes. (This has recently become a commonplace among scholars, even conservatives such as N.T. Wright,<sup>1</sup> but it has not yet filtered its way down to ordinary Christian consciousness.)

By divine beings I don’t just mean angels. The text makes a remarkable number of references to other “gods.” Many readers dismiss this language as referring to empty idols, preferring to interpret “gods” as later chapters in Isaiah interpret them: “Besides me there is no god” (44.6c).<sup>2</sup> Yet most books of the Old Testament speak of “the gods” as existing realities—real spiritual beings with minds of their own.

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<sup>1</sup> Wright’s term for this is “creational monotheism,” which means that Yahweh rules over a cosmos inhabited by other supernatural beings as well as human, angelic and animal creatures. As he puts it, in the ancient world “we have very few examples of ‘pure’ monotheism anywhere, including in the Hebrew Bible.” N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 258.

<sup>2</sup> The problem with letting such a statement from Isaiah represent mainstream Old Testament belief—as either its inner or culminating meaning—is that the book of Isaiah itself contains counter-evidence. In chapter six Yahweh is presented as having a council with which he consults (vv. 2-8). And the same “second”<sup>2</sup> Isaiah who seems to teach the unreality of the gods suggests the same for nations, princes and armies: they are as nothing (40.17, 23; 41.12) before Yahweh. For example, “All the nations are as nothing before him; they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness” (40.17). Perhaps such

The Psalms fairly explode with evidence. “There is none like you among the gods, O Lord” (86.8); “For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; he is to be revered above all gods” (96.4); “Our Lord is above all gods” (135.5); “Ascribe to Yahweh, [you] gods, ascribe to Yahweh glory and strength” (29.1, my trans.); “He is exalted above all gods” (97.7); “For Yahweh is a great god, and a great king above all gods” (95.3). And so on.

But it’s not just the Psalms. In Exodus Yahweh predicts that he will execute judgments “on all the gods of Egypt” (12.12). The author of Numbers then declares that that is indeed what happened: “Yahweh executed judgments against their gods” (33.4). There is no hint that Yahweh is the only God. Instead it is clearly implied that Egypt has her own gods, and Yahweh will defeat them. When Yahweh gives his people the Ten Commandments, the first commandment implies the existence of other gods: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20.3; see also Deut. 5.7). In Exodus 23.32-33 Israel is told not to covenant with or worship other gods; there is no suggestion that the gods of Israel’s neighbors do not exist.

Deuteronomy goes even further. It suggests that Yahweh had assigned other gods to the nations. When Moses warns the Israelites that they will be punished if they worship other gods, he predicts that “all the nations” will wonder why Yahweh’s people “abandoned the covenant of the Lord, the God of their ancestors . . . and served other gods, worshiping them, gods whom they had not known *and whom he had not allotted to*

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language, both for other rulers and the gods, is literary hyperbole with a point: the nations and the gods, compared to Yahweh, are nothing.

them” (29.25-26, emphasis added). This allotment of gods to different peoples is cited just a few chapters later:

When the Most High apportioned the nations, when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of *the gods*; Yahweh’s own portion was his people, Jacob his allotted share. (32.8-9; emphasis added)

The implication is that Yahweh delegated supervision of other nations to other (in the context “subordinate”) gods, while he exercised direct supervision of Israel.

Joshua and Judges continue to speak of Israel’s departure from the god of their ancestors to the gods of their neighbors (Josh. 24.15; Jdg 2.12, 6.10, 10.6) without a hint of the notion that the ancestors’ gods are fictitious. Indeed, quite the opposite. In Judges 11 the Jewish leader Jephthah sends a message to the king of the Ammonites, who had made war on the Jews in order to get back territory which the Jews had previously won in battle. Jephthah insists that Yahweh had won the disputed territory for his people. But he also assumes that the territory which the Ammonites currently possessed was won for them by their god Chemosh.

So now Yahweh, the God of Israel, has conquered the Amorites [a general term for the entire aboriginal population of Canaan and therefore including the Ammonites] for the benefit of his people Israel. Do you intend to take their place? Should you not possess *what your god Chemosh gives you to possess*? And should we not be the ones to possess everything that Yahweh our God has conquered for our benefit? (11.23-24; emph. added)

The most remarkable thing about this intriguing series of questions is not simply Jephthah’s clear belief that Chemosh is real,<sup>3</sup> but his assumption (and presumably the assumption of the author/editor of Judges) that lands are won first and foremost by gods,

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<sup>3</sup> Many readers today think this was just Jephthah's way of making his case more compelling to the Ammonite king. But it is a scholarly consensus that Jephthah was assuming the reality of Chemosh. See, for example, Robert Goldenberg, *The Nations That Know Thee Not: Ancient Jewish Attitudes Toward Other Religions* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 14.

and only secondarily by human forces. Furthermore, the text also assumes that each people or land has a different god assigned to it—which is what we saw in Deuteronomy.

Similar allusions to the reality of other gods can be found in most of the other historical books. In 1 Kings Solomon opens his prayer of dedication of his magnificent temple with the declaration, “Yahweh, God of Israel, there is no god like you in heaven above or earth beneath” (8.23). That Solomon believed in the other gods is clear, for the author chastises him for worshiping “Astarte the goddess of the Sidonians, Chemosh the god of Moab, and Milcom the god of the Ammonites” (11.33).

But even the author (or editor) of Kings seem to believe that these other gods existed. Ahab’s son Ahaziah injured himself by falling, and sent messengers to ask of the Philistine god, Baal-zebub, whether he would recover. An angel of Yahweh told the prophet Elijah to meet the king’s couriers with the message, “Is it because there is no god in Israel that you are going to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron?” Elijah’s message was not that there are no other gods, but that the Jewish king ought to be seeking the god of the Jews, not the god of some other people.

This last story is not the strongest evidence because it is an argument from silence: Elijah does not assert the reality of Baaal-zebub but simply fails to deny it. But there is stronger evidence in this same book of 2 Kings. It’s the story of Israel’s war with Moab, a people on the east shore of the Dead Sea. The kings of both Israel and Judah, along with the king of Edom, had attacked Moab with great success. All the Moabite cities but one had been overturned, and that last city was surrounded (2 Ki 3. 21-25). But then, with his back against the wall, the king of Moab pulled out his ace in the hole, a card that only horrifies modern readers: he

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took his firstborn son who was to succeed him, and offered him as a burnt offering on the wall. And great wrath came upon Israel, so they withdrew from him and returned to their own land. (3.27)

Once we get over our revulsion for this king's barbarism, we must recognize the other remarkable feature of this story: the author clearly seems to believe that Moab's god was real, was pleased with this grisly sacrifice, and as a result did something that actually prevented Israel from completing its victory. The text does not tell us exactly what happened at this point, but it nevertheless makes plain that Chemosh (the god of Moab) liked the smell of the poor boy's flesh and rewarded his father's unfeeling ruthlessness by obstructing the Israelite army. In short, the gods are real and have genuine power to affect what happens on earth.<sup>4</sup>

What we find, then, when we read the Old Testament with our eyes open to the possibility of other beings in the cosmos besides humans and Yahweh, are some remarkable things. "The Old Testament speaks freely, without any hesitation or embarrassment, about the existence of gods other than the God of Israel. . . . To be sure, the supremacy of Israel's God over all other gods is everywhere asserted. But the assertion always drives home the dominion of Yahweh over other gods, not the denial of their existence."<sup>5</sup> This has been noted by a wide range of scholars, not only those

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<sup>4</sup> There are also numerous references in Tanach to the "divine council." For the purposes of this paper, in the interest of time, I have chosen not to discuss this. But the upshot is the same: most biblical authors believe in the reality of other divine beings besides Yahweh.

<sup>5</sup> Ulrich Mauser, "One God Alone: A Pillar of Biblical Theology," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* n.s. 12, no. 3 (1991), 259.

primarily dedicated to university debate but also “conservative” scholars committed to orthodox and evangelical traditions.<sup>6</sup>

We also find a variety of approaches in the Hebrew Bible’s treatment of the gods. First, there is what one scholar has called “neighborly pluralism.”<sup>7</sup> This is the attitude that other peoples have their own gods which Yahweh has assigned to them. The other gods are subordinated to Yahweh, and probably created by him. As long as they leave us Jews alone to worship Yahweh, we can leave them alone. Jephtah assumes the Ammonites can get along with their god Chemosh and their land as long as Israel is permitted to keep its religion and land. This attitude lies behind the Daniel 10 passage where the “prince” of Persia is resisting Yahweh, and it inspires Micah 4.5: “Each of the nations walks in the name of its own god, but we shall walk in the name of Yahweh our God forever.” It probably also animates the author of Jonah, who in the first chapter has each of the sailors call on the name of his own god to protect the ship. Jonah told them

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<sup>6</sup> For a sampling of scholarship that has treated this phenomenon, see Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and The Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990); Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel’s Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Goldenberg, *The Nations That Know Thee Not*; E. Theodore Mullen, Jr., *The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980); John Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 2000); G Ernest Wright, *The Old Testament Against Its Environment* (London: SCM Press, 1957); David Penchansky, *Twilight of the Gods: Polytheism in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005); Penchansky, *What Rough Beast Images of God in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999); Bernhard Lang, “Wisdom,” *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. Karel van der Toorn (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1999), 900-05; Peggy Lynn Day, *Satan in the Hebrew Bible* (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1986).

For scholars who have identified themselves as committed to orthodox and/or evangelical traditions and have also noted this pattern, see N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 258; Larry Hurtado, “First Century Jewish Monotheism,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 71 (1999): 3-26; Gregory Boyd, *God At War, passim*; Tremper Longman and Daniel G. Reid, *God Is A Warrior* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 42, 64-65, 74-78, 81-82, 102, 142-53.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Goldenberg, *The Nations That Know Thee Not: Ancient Jewish Attitudes Toward Other Religions* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 10. See also David Penchansky, *Twilight of the Gods: Polytheism in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

that Yahweh made the sea (and so is greater than their gods who seem more localized), but there is no hint of hostility toward their gods and religions (1.7-14).

Then there is “competitive pluralism.”<sup>8</sup> This means there may be other deities, but there is absolutely no room for honor or worship to be given to them—even if they were originally created as part of a divine council. Moses, for example, denied there was any like Yahweh among the gods, and his father-in-law Jethro, a pagan, says the same (Ex. 15.11; 18.11). This is the attitude we see in Psalm 82, which is an angry dismissal of foreign deities as once divine but now demoted.

We also see this in Elijah’s triumphant declaration after “defeating” the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel: “Yahweh is the gods! Yahweh is the gods!” (1 Ki 18.39) In other words, no other god has Yahweh’s power.

A third approach is “vehement missionary exclusivism.”<sup>9</sup> This is the explicit denial of the reality of other gods. It is the attitude that there is indeed only one god, and his name is Yahweh. All other gods are figments of the imagination of non-Jews. Yahweh alone is in the heavens, as it were. No other supernatural powers exist, except perhaps for Yahweh’s angels.

But there is still another view, not necessarily in complete distinction from all of the preceding, but different in emphasis. This is the “cosmic war” view. It rejects the “Yahweh alone” view that denies the existence of any other gods. It might refuse to call them “gods,” but when it does that it is only quibbling with words. For it believes the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

cosmos is full of supernatural powers, and that they are fully engaged with Yahweh and his plans.

There are traces here of the Canaanite and Mesopotamian religious myths of Tiamat, Yamm, and Leviathan—stories about rival gods that are embodied in nature and fight for control of the cosmos. The Old Testament makes clear that the cosmic forces which these deities represented were defeated by Yahweh, but at the same time the Bible suggests the war is ongoing. For example, Yahweh defeated the sea (which represented the power of Yamm for the Canaanites) in Ps 104.7; Job 38.6-11; and Ps 29.3-4 and 10. But the Psalmist still prays for deliverance from the deep (Ps 69.14-15). By the same token, Yahweh has crushed Leviathan (another Canaanite monster representing primal cosmic power) in Ps 74.14, and yet Yahweh will continue to defeat him (Is. 27.1).

The point of these allusions, scattered throughout the Old Testament, seems to be that while the pagan stories of these powers are largely false, they are also partly true. The pagan stories are wrong when they suggest a high god that is still struggling for mastery with monsters and other gods. But they are right when they depict a cosmos that is still at war, and divine beings other than Yahweh. The major difference, however, is that Yahweh has defeated these hostile powers. The present situation is like D-Day, the sixtieth anniversary of which we celebrated in 2004. That gigantic battle broke the back of the Wehrmacht, and so for the most part won World War II. But there was still to be almost another year of war in Europe, with many more bloody battles and much loss of life. Like D-Day, Yahweh's primal victories over these hostile powers (we read allusions in the OT, and proclamations in the NT, of victories over rebellious angels) were

decisive, but there are still continuing battles to reinforce and reaffirm those first, decisive conquests.

The New Testament also affirms the existence of other cosmic powers, especially in the epistles. In fact, “principalities and powers” are fundamental to Paul’s view of the world. “The idea of sinister world powers and their subjugation by Christ is built into the very fabric of Paul’s thought, and some mention of them is found in every epistle except Philemon.”<sup>10</sup> Paul’s belief that the powers are the invisible agents behind what really happens in the world is especially seen in Ephesians 6.12:

We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. (NRSV)

Therefore behind all human opposition to God’s work in the world are invisible spiritual powers. We miss the real enemy, Paul proposes, when we direct our attacks against human beings.

Paul’s conviction of Christ’s lordship over all the powers is the only way to make good sense of a number of tricky passages in Paul’s letters. It helps explain what Paul meant by “those not being by nature gods” (Gal. 4.8) whom the Galatians nevertheless had “served” before they became Christians (Gal. 4.3, 8)), and “what are called gods” in his letter to Corinth (1 Cor. 8.5). Paul calls these same beings the “weak and beggarly *stoicheia*” (Gal. 4.9; c.f. the same word in Col. 2.8, 18, 20).

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<sup>10</sup> George Bradford Caird, *Principalities and Powers: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), vii.

In other words, Paul was telling his churches that the star deities which the Greeks worshipped were in reality the same national angels whom Daniel identified as malevolent powers now hostile to God's people but to be defeated in the last days (Dan. 10.13, 20). They were created by the pre-existent Christ (Col. 1.16), led in triumphal procession as defeated enemies at the cross (Col. 1.16), subjected invisibly but decisively at that point to the triumphant and ruling Christ (Eph. 1.21; Col. 2.10), will one day acknowledge to the cosmos that they are indeed subservient to Christ (Phil. 2.10), and will be defeated finally at the end of this world (1 Cor. 15.24).

Werner Foerster explains that these angelic beings are cosmic powers, not demons. Paul refers to these angelic powers as *archontes* and *exousiai* (principalities and powers), not *daimones* or *daimonia*, which are the words used commonly by the New Testament for demons or local spirits that afflict individuals. *Daimones* and *daimonia* are restricted to the "air," the lowest region of the earth and sky which humans inhabit, while *exousiai* and *archontes* are given authority over entire nations. Foerster adds that *thronoi* and *kuriotetes* (two other words Paul uses for spiritual powers, usually translated as "thrones" and "dominions") may stand immediately in the presence of God, in the highest heavens. (We know that Paul believed in ascending levels of heavens because of his autobiographical description of a "man in Christ . . . caught up to the *third* heaven" [2 Cor. 12.9].)<sup>11</sup>

It seems clear, then, that Paul believed in spiritual powers that had a limited potency in the world, and that these were not the demons so frequently mentioned in the

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<sup>11</sup> Werner Foerster, in "ἐξουσία," Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* [TDNT](Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 2:573.

gospels. We see more of Paul's understanding of these powers in an intriguing passage in 1 Corinthians 2. Here Paul uses a form of the word *archontes* (at this point, "rulers").

Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the *rulers* of this age, who are doomed to perish. But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the *rulers* of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. (1 Cor. 2.6-8)

Some interpreters have insisted that Paul's "rulers" here are merely the human authorities who killed Jesus. But then why would Paul say they "are doomed to perish"? No one ever doubted the mortality of human rulers. But they did doubt the mortality of the *spiritual* rulers and principalities. Besides, the same Greek word is used in the fifteenth chapter of this same letter, where the "rulers" are clearly spiritual. They are "enemies," and one of them is "death" itself (1 Cor. 15.24-26). It appears, then, that these rulers were spiritual powers whom Paul believes were responsible for killing Jesus of Nazareth.

The more interesting question which this passage raises, however, is not the existence of spiritual powers but why they would have been so stupid! Notice that Paul says that "none of the rulers of this age" understood God's plan and therefore proceeded to crucify the "lord of glory." If they were cosmic spiritual powers, wouldn't they have realized that Jesus was the Son of God, and that killing Him would mean trouble for them?

Not if they had misunderstood their roles, and therefore God's plan. The powers apparently believed that with God's separation from humanity after the Fall because of human sin (Rom. 1.24-28), they would become unconditional world rulers (*kosmokratores*). Sin had established a "wall of partition" between God and humans,

leaving the powers free from God's interference to govern human beings according to the harsh regime of divine law.<sup>12</sup>

George Caird has explained that, for Paul, the powers ruled by their manipulation of God's legal system.<sup>13</sup> They used 1) human obligation to obey the law, and 2) God's just demand to punish the law's violations, to hold human beings in bondage. That's why Paul said that "the power of sin is the law" and "sin, seizing the opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness" (1 Cor. 15.56; Rom. 7.8). The powers used God's holy law to keep humans "enslaved" not only to sin but also to the powers' false religion (Gal. 4.8, 10), which in turn diverted human beings from true religion. As long as the powers could convince human beings that law is God's final word, they could continue to masquerade as absolute gods rather than merely angelic delegates. And the powers themselves could continue to believe that their dominion over humanity would last forever. Human beings continued to believe there was no way out of a system of law that brought only condemnation for their sins.

But at Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, the powers' deception was unmasked—to their horror and Paul's delight. Now it became clear that God's punitive legal system was going to be superceded by grace. That when law is isolated and exalted into an independent system of religion, it becomes demonic. But that a new regime of grace would be inaugurated precisely by an enactment of the legal regime: death was administered as punishment for sin (which the powers rightly believed was necessary), but through the death of the Son of God. His resurrection vindicated the plan, showing "to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places . . . God's wisdom" and "eternal purpose"

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<sup>12</sup> Gerhard Delling, "ἀρχή," in TDNT, 1: 483.

(Eph. 3.10-11). That is, now the powers saw that “the record that stood against us with its legal demands” was “erased” (Col. 2.14). Christ “set this aside, nailing it to the cross” by fulfilling in His own body what it required (ibid.). The powers now realized that they would lose their hold over those human subjects who identified with a new organic unity (the body of the risen Christ) over which evil has no power.

Hence by his crucifixion and resurrection Christ “disarmed the rulers and authorities, and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it” (Col. 2.15). The powers now saw their cosmic error in conspiring to execute Jesus. They had imagined they would eliminate the greatest threat to their rule by killing the divine interloper. Instead they opened the door to their destroyer. By fulfilling God’s law, Christ showed the powers that law was not God’s last word. This disarmed the powers, because they kept their human subjects in bondage by the deception that law and its condemnation was the entirety of religion. They also kept their subjects captive by the power of sin, which used law to make its hold even more tenacious. But Christ’s complete obedience, performed vicariously for human subjects, broke the powers’ hold. Because Christ was not only divine but also a man, sharing human nature, his *human* obedience could set aside “the record that stood against us with its legal demands” (Col. 2.14). For now the legal demands had been fulfilled. His human obedience became our human obedience because he shared our humanity.

Now, therefore, all the cosmos was beginning to see that grace not law is God’s ultimate word. All the angelic and human creatures were coming to learn that law was only meant to lead them to the Christ’s rule of grace (Gal. 3.24). God had permitted men to die through the law--even through the delegation of legal power to corrupted beings!--

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<sup>13</sup> Caird, *Principalities and Powers*.

so that He could make them alive by grace through justification (God's acceptance of humans because of what Christ did). He did that by accepting one Man's obedience as counting for the obedience of all—thereby setting all free from having to serve the system that regarded law as the only word.

And last but not least, this new understanding of God's ways with man also exposed the powers as the corrupted "weak and beggarly spirits" that they were, not the absolute gods which they claimed to be (Gal. 4.9). The powers were thus shown to be "usurpers of the divine majesty and imposters in the claims they made upon man's allegiance."<sup>14</sup>

On the whole, Paul takes a hard line against other religions. He seems to have believed they were creations of the powers' deception and malice, and that Christians must steer clear from their worship and rituals.

Yet Paul's sermon at the Areopagus in Athens (Ac 17.16-34) contains hints of a certain recognition of truth in the religions. Two points are noteworthy. First, Paul suggests that the Athenian pagans, while mired in religious ignorance, were nevertheless groping for the same God whom Paul knew to be the Father of Jesus Christ. He tells them, "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you." In other words, while their ideas about God were nearly all wrong, nevertheless the object of their misguided worship was still the same God Who had revealed Himself to Paul as the true and living God.

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<sup>14</sup> Caird, 85.

Second, Paul acknowledges that some Greek poets, presumably devotees of false Greek religion, spoke religious truth.

For “in him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring.”

Paul was probably quoting Epimenides (6<sup>th</sup> cent. B.C.E.) and Aratus (4th cent. B.C.E.). The astonishing thing here is that Paul, who apparently believed that Greek religion was abysmally ignorant of the true God, nevertheless conceded—in a sermon highlighting Greek religious ignorance!—that the religions had *some* access to *some* true notions of the living God.

These two gleanings from Mars Hill (a translation of “Areopagus”), when connected to what Paul believed about the powers, suggest a few promising threads to help stitch together a Pauline approach to the meaning of the religions.

Like many other first-century Jewish readers of Torah, Paul believed the powers behind the religions were originally angelic forces that fell from grace. He seemed to think they used God’s law in a cynical way to enforce fidelity to their own worship, and in the process distorted the meaning of divine law. Like other intermediary powers that are fallen, they took what is good and holy, and used it for unholy ends.

Yet in the process, some truth emerged. Human beings under their thrall still learned something of God’s truth and law—that they are not autonomous but created subjects who are accountable and will face judgment. Like the powers behind national states, the powers behind the religions perhaps restrain other forms of evil that would otherwise reduce civilization to violent anarchy. Some of them teach the truths that God

is supreme over the cosmos and stands for justice and goodness—though of course they define those terms in ways that often conflict with Christian notions.

If this is true--that both Old and New Testament authors affirm the reality of other supernatural powers—what does this mean for Christian understandings of other religions?

In my first answer I will hear the hat of a historian of religions. This recent scholarly understanding of other gods and powers in the Bible shows how Jews and Christians thousands of years ago dealt with a disorderly and sometimes chaotic world of religious difference. They took an approach familiar to us in the guild—henotheism—by saying that there are indeed other live powers out there, but our god is the most powerful. This enabled them to acknowledge what seemed patently obvious—that there are other spiritual realities in other religions—while at the same time retaining their conviction that their god was the “true-est” and ultimately in control of the others. Perhaps today, when even the West is beset not by atheism but a circus of spiritualities, this approach will become more attractive for Christians and Jews.<sup>15</sup>

In my other answers I will put on my Christian-believer hat. (To do otherwise would be disingenuous.) I think a second way in which this approach can be helpful to Christian theology of the religions is to show Christians that other religions can tutor us. In the first three centuries of Christianity God used Greek philosophical religion to help the church develop its doctrine of the Trinity. This pattern of Christians “despoiling the Egyptians” continued through church history. Augustine, for example, was aided by

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<sup>15</sup> The popularity of books by fundamentalist Frank Perretti and liberal scholar Walter Wink, both sets of books on “the powers,” demonstrates that this approach is already growing.

Plotinus and his Neoplatonic ontology to understand evil as lacking in substance, to break from Manichaeism by seeing the biblical emphasis on God's sovereignty and holiness, and to battle Donatism by seeing that the church on earth will never be a company of the perfected.

It wasn't only Augustine. Thanks to (pagan) Aristotle's embrace of nature, Thomas Aquinas gained confidence to articulate a biblical doctrine of the resurrection of the body in an age that demeaned corporality. Aristotle also helped Thomas develop his concept of analogy, which ever since has helped Christians understand how they can talk about an infinite God using broken, finite language.

Even John Calvin was helped to better understand biblical revelation by pagan thinking. Renaissance humanism's celebration of rhetoric helped Calvin see the importance of preaching; its confidence in self-reformation through human effort may have stimulated Calvin's notable formulation of what we call sanctification; and its conception of oratory as deliberately attuned to the ears of an audience helped shape Calvin's classic portrayal of how God accommodates His message to "mean" human capacities."<sup>16</sup>

Third, this approach means that Christians have a lot in common with believers of other religions. We agree with them that final reality is spiritual not material.<sup>17</sup> We agree with many of them--Muslims, for example--that God is moral and that he has given us divine law. In fact, this understanding of the powers, as we have seen above, reinforces the idea that we must submit to moral law. It is for this reason that Catholics could work

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<sup>16</sup> For a fuller argument on how Augustine, Aquinas and Calvin learned from other religious sources., see McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religion? Jesus, Revelation, and religious Traditions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), chap. 5.

side-by-side with Muslims at the 1995 United Nations Conference on Population and Development in Cairo to prevent abortion-on-demand from being enshrined as a universal human right. It is why Christians and Buddhists can work together today to fight to preserve the environment. They, along with believers from other religious traditions, agree with Christians that there is a transcendent rationale for stewardship of the resources of this world, and that our future destiny hinges in part on how we handle that stewardship. Monotheists agree that God is just and good; most other religionists believe there is cosmic support for efforts to protect life and nature. Christians believe that these religious convictions help restrain sin and evil in us all, so that the world is a happier place than it would be without these religions.

Fourth, this will help Christians relate to their non-Christian friends with more respect and sensitivity. Christians who acknowledge this pattern in the Bible should understand that other religious traditions contain religious truth, and therefore that other religious pilgrimages are of value.

Fifth, this new approach may also change the way Christians think about Christ. If they see that God has often used other religions to help believers better understand Christ and the gospel, they may also see that some religions portray aspects of the divine mystery that the Bible does not equally emphasize--for example, the Qur'an's sense of the divine majesty and transcendence, and the human being's submission to the holiness of God's eternal decrees. Hindu traditions can help remind Christians of God's immanence in an era in which deistic tendencies have obscured it. Theravadin Buddhists may be able to show us dimensions of the fallen ego that will shed greater light on what Paul meant

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<sup>17</sup> But final reality involves heavenly matter, as it were, for we look forward not to a purely spiritual heaven in the clouds but to "the new heavens and the new earth" (Rev. chaps 21-22).

by "the old man." Philosophical Daoists may have insights into nonaction that can help Christians better understand "waiting on God." Confucius' portrayal of virtue may open new understandings of radical discipleship, and the Qur'an's attention to the physical world's "signs" of God's reality can enrich our belief that the cosmos is the theater of God's glory.

Sixth, Christians can believe that the Spirit uses other religions to judge and purify the church. God can use devotees of other faiths to show us Christians--if we are open to it--the poverty of our own commitment. We may also see or hear God in the encounter. Some missionaries report there is frequently a moment in missions when the missionary realizes that the evangelized may already implicitly or explicitly know God (as the early Fathers would put it, they have already heard the voice of the *Logos*, even if they do not possess the fullness of the *Logos*), and that from this person the Christian may hear God's word--even as Peter learned from Cornelius' religious experience and heard God's word through him.

Finally, this approach can enlarge the Christian imagination of God. As the Fathers argued, God has always been at work in every human culture, but always by the Word, the *Logos*. This makes sense to the Christian believer who reads in the sacred text that God "desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2.4). Other religions may be inspired in part by other powers, but God has not abandoned whole cultures to perdition and untruth. God is still at work, using other perceptions of truth to clarify Christian perceptions. And the Spirit is still actively leading individuals within the religions to draw closer to the divine reality.

