

5. OLD TESTAMENT POLYTHEISM

The claim of having a more superior god

In Psalm 82, the author describes God as a supreme judge who is interrogating His subordinate judges. He reprimands them for not fulfilling their duties and showing partiality to the bullies instead. Thus, they have betrayed His justice. He demands that they correct their wrongdoings and care for the weak and oppressed, especially the orphans and widows who have no one to depend on. The psalmist used his lively imagination to visualize God holding a grand assembly and presiding over the meeting Himself. Before Him are the minor gods who share His authority. In the stanza, “I” refers to God while “you” refers to the “gods”. The latter are supposed to defend justice in the world, uphold the truth, and help the weak. Sadly, they have failed in their duties.

God’s judgment is first to reveal the judges’ faults and then to reprimand them (v. 2). Next, He instructs them on what to do, which contrasts with what they have not done (v. 3-4). Their abuse of authority has led to the degeneration of moral values, shaking the foundations of the world (v. 5). For the psalmist, natural calamities such as an earthquake was said to be brought about by moral failures. Changes in nature, such as climate changes were expressions of God’s actions and often signs of His wrath. Natural disasters were also associated with decadent moral behaviors such as unjust exploitation and corruption of the leaders, and the disasters were interpreted as God’s punishment.

Some scholars interpreted the “gods” as referring to worldly judges. However, if that is so, verse 7 cannot be

explained. Therefore, as man will age and die anyway; a punishment of mortality for them would be pointless. If it refers to “minor gods” unlike humans, then it makes sense that they would be punished and die as humans do when they are negligent in their duties. The final verse shows the intentions of the psalmist: in view of the corrupted and unreliable judges of heavenly gods and earthly judges, he turns to the almighty God, pleading with Him to come to uphold His righteousness, for He is the true judge of heaven and earth.

This Psalm reflects the polytheistic view of ancient Israelites. They believed that there were many gods in heaven although their authority and power were subordinated to the almighty one. Many other chapters in the Book of Psalms convey the same idea. For example, in Psalm 95:3, “For the Lord is the great God, the great King above all gods.” Or in Psalm 96:4, “For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods.” Psalm 97:7 also states that, “All who worship images are put to shame, those who boast in idols – worship him, all you gods!” The mentality is also seen in Psalm 135:5 with “I know that the Lord is great, that our Lord is greater than all gods.”

Other than the Psalms, the Old Testament expresses the same polytheistic view in many other Books. It is described in Exodus, “I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the Lord” (Ex 12:12, see also Nm 33:4). In addition, stipulated in their Books of Laws is, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex 20:3 and Dt 5:7). We can rightly conclude that ancient Israelites believed that other than the God they adored, there were other gods whom they should not worship. Their view was not different from other ancient tribes who had a “multi-gods”

ideology. In fact, they believed that every tribe and social group had their own god, just that they must ensure they worshipped the one who could protect and provide for them well. Ancient Israelites believed they had made the right choice – the God of Israel was the greatest among all other gods, the one who could help them best.

Today, there are some Christians who have such a theological misconception, no different from the people of the Old Testament. In their minds, there are many “gods”, and the God of Christianity is the greatest of all. Since He is the greatest of all gods, people should choose to worship Him and reject other gods. When met with unanswered prayers in the Christian church, people with such a mentality will suspect that the God they believe in is not effective, and hence would consider a switch to another church or even to temples of other religions to pray. Alternatively, they may blame themselves for not being good enough to be worthy of God’s favour, or they may have done something wrong that offended God, resulting in his prayers not being answered favourably!

Such mentality and behavior of “comparing gods” and assessing “which god is greatest among them” are inappropriate. If there is God, there should only be one God; He is the God of all, the creator of the universe. However, people may know this same God differently and worship Him in different ways – giving rise to different religions with different names for God and diverse ways of worshipping. In fact, no matter how people worship or address God, there can only be one God. He is the one and only.

It is misleading to think of God as “yours” or “mine” and that “each group is worshipping its own god”. Instead of comparing and competing among people of different

faiths, we should help one another to cultivate a purer heart and more sincere devotion towards the one and only God.