

The Most High God
by Rev. Eric Elnes, Ph.D.
Niantic Community Church
April 30, 2023

Scripture: Deuteronomy 32:7-12

I. How sure are you?

This morning we're going to start off with a little game I like to call, "How sure are you?" This is the way it works:

Count the number of "f"s in the following statement, then re-count the "f"s as many times as you wish until you are absolutely sure you know the number:

In the final analysis, all interpretations of Scripture are subject to the "Rule of Love." This rule finds its origin in the commandments Jesus identified as being first and foremost: (1) To love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength; and (2) to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Do you have your number? Now, I invite you to count the number of "f"s one last time to be certain. I assure you that you are not being tricked. I just want you to be absolutely sure. So sure that you'd bet money you're right.

Now, turn to the bottom of the last page of this sermon and you will find the correct answer. Don't read on until you've done this.

.....

Isn't it interesting how we can be so sure we know something – believing it to be perfectly correct – "black and white" even – and still be mistaken?

Sometimes our mistaken "certainties" don't really matter – like missing an "f" or two in the game we just played. Other times, our false certainties cause us, and others, a great deal of harm.

Consider how many Christians were certain that God approves of slavery? Or that women have no role in voting or leading churches. Or, how many people have been harmed by Christians who are certain that homosexuality is a sin, or that one race is superior to all others?

Consider, too, how much harm has been created through the "certainty" that Jesus's statement in John 14:6 (that "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me") means that Christianity is the only legitimate faith on the planet, and that people of all other faiths are lost, at best, or going to be tortured in hell for all of eternity at worst.

This belief served as ready justification for subjugating the indigenous peoples of our country in the name of "Christianizing the heathen," then taking over their lands.

This belief was also used to justify the capture of indigenous Africans and bringing them to serve as slaves in America, on the understanding that it was better for these Africans to become Christianized as slaves than to remain in their native land worshipping what were thought to be demons.

More recently, the assumption that Christianity is the only legitimate religion has made it easier for certain groups to paint all Muslims as being terrorists, and terrorist wannabes, and to turn Muslims into political fodder. Frankly, this “certainty” has also made it easier to drop bombs on a Muslim country than on Christian ones – unless, of course, it’s a Christian country that is trying to wipe all the Jews off the face of the planet as some sort of “final solution” to the Jews not converting to the “one true faith.”

No, if you believe that John 14:6 means that it’s either “Jesus’s way, or the hell way,” the burden is on you to show that there is no other plausible interpretation of this statement. For if there are other plausible interpretations, then a lot of the hell we’ve created in this world for others who are not Christian can come to an end.

Last week, we found that there is another plausible interpretation. We found that it is more likely that Jesus was not talking about a specific religion that connects people to God, or even a specific person, but a specific *Way of Life* that connects us – a way of life that Jesus taught and embodied, but that is also practiced by people of other faiths. If you missed last week’s reflection, I invite you to pick up a copy in the Narthex or find it on our website or YouTube channel.

This week, I’m going to offer another plausible interpretation of John 14:6. It’s not that the one I’m about to offer is correct, and the one I offered last week is incorrect. Rather, both interpretations may be true. They’re not mutually exclusive.

.....

Before offering this interpretation, I have another little game to play with you, which could be called “Discerning the Difference.” This game comes straight out of my Ph.D. dissertation. My dissertation was a study of how the ancient Hebrews conceived of their own distinctiveness as a people, and how they considered their God, Yahweh, to be distinct from other gods. What I found was that the ancient Jews wrestled with surprisingly similar issues with respect to Jewish identity as we do with Christian identity. This shouldn’t be terribly surprising, of course, given the close relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Many people forget that Jesus was Jewish himself.

Here’s the game:

In the following series, identify which symbol (i.e., letter or number) you find to be the most distinctive:

3 3 3 M 3

If you guessed “M”, then you, too, could have a Ph.D.! That’s what I chose in my dissertation.

Since you did so well with this series, let's try making it slightly harder. This time, don't jump too quickly to a conclusion. Think it over. Which element or set is most distinct in the following series:

a ab abc abcd abcde

If you picked "a", this is probably because you are used to thinking of uniqueness or distinctiveness as signifying that something is the "only one." Yet, it could also be argued that "a" is the *least* distinctive element in this series. Why? Because it occurs in every single set.

The most distinctive element or set is "abcde". Why? Because this set contains more of the available possibilities than any other set does.

What this little game illustrates is the difference between how an identity can be formed through exclusivity or inclusivity. In the first series, "M" was identified as most distinct through exclusivity. It is the only "M" in the series. It's the only one of its kind. Yet in the second series, "abcde" was identified as most distinct for the exact opposite reason – through inclusivity, not exclusivity. Its distinctiveness was formed in and through what it shared in common with others. In fact, if this set were missing any of the letters, it would be less distinct.

II. A Wild Side

What does this little game have to do with John 14:6? Oh, just about *everything!* It has to do not only with how we, as Christians, relate with God, but how our Jewish siblings relate with God as well.

I want to acknowledge that what follows is going to be kind of a wild ride for some of us. I'm going to make some observations about ancient Judaism that very few people are aware of unless they have studied the Hebrew Scriptures at the graduate level. The reason why this knowledge tends to remain in an academic setting rather than being disseminated to churches or synagogues is that it tends to overturn certain assumptions people have made about the history of their faith. What I can promise, though, is that my goal is not to make you uncomfortable, but rather to provide you a great deal of comfort if you have been worried about what happens to people who do not convert to Christian faith.

Ready? Here we go.

Most people assume that the ancient Jewish religion was monotheistic in nature; that the Jews believed in the existence of only one God – their God, Yahweh. According to this assumption, Yahweh would then be like the "M" amidst the "3"s in our game. Totally unique.

Yet, throughout most, if not all, of biblical history, the Jewish people did not, in fact, believe that Yahweh was the only God. Rather, they believed that Yahweh as the *highest* God.

If you have doubts, just look at our passage from this morning. Deuteronomy 32 identifies Yahweh as the "Most High" God. You can't be the "Most High" God unless other Gods exist!

Deuteronomy 32 not only identifies Yahweh as being the “Most High” God, but goes on to say that, in the beginning, when Yahweh, the “Most High” God, apportioned the nations, Yahweh “fixed the boundaries of the people according to the *number of the gods*.”

This isn’t the only passage in the Old Testament that reflects a belief in other gods. Take, for instance, the very first chapter of Genesis, where God says, “Let *us* create humankind in *our* image, after our likeness ...” (Gen 1:26). Who is the “us” and “we” here?

Most modern scholars who are not fundamentalist Christians believe the “we” here is an artifact from a day when Yahweh was believed to be the High God of a Divine Council of gods. The “us” and “we” refer to the gods of the Divine Council.

Psalms 82 makes this understanding even more overt. It literally says, “God has taken his place in the Divine Council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment.”

If this notion of belief in other gods stresses you out, let me ease the stress a bit. Israel was never purely polytheistic in their beliefs. Scholars call ancient Israelite belief *monolatrous*.

What’s the difference?

Polytheists believe in many gods that each have some measure of autonomy. Even though most polytheists believe in a Highest God, like Zeus among the Greeks, polytheists believe it is possible for other gods to subvert the will of this Highest God to thwart his or her intentions. Where do you think all those Greek comedies and tragedies came from? One god trying to outwit another! On the other hand, while a monolatrist also believes in the existence of many gods, only one God is believed to have any true power. ¹

If you a clear example of what a monolatrous faith looks like, just read C.S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia*. In the seventh and final book there is a scene where a character named Emeth – a follower of the false god Tash – encounters Aslan after his death. Aslan explains to Emeth that

¹ We do find passages like Isaiah 45:5, where the word of the Lord delivered by the prophet is, “*I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God.*” Likewise, in Deuteronomy 4:35, Moses says to the Israelites, “*You were shown these things so that you might know that Yahweh is God; besides him, there is no other.*” While these statements seem monotheistic to us today, if you were an ancient Israelite, they wouldn’t seem as monotheistic as they appear. Consider the following three prayers from Israel’s neighbors in Mesopotamia. Prayers from a clearly polytheistic culture:

#1: “O Shamash, great light of the heaven and the earth, beside you there is no other.”¹

#2: “O Enlil, Lord of the winds, father of the gods, beside you there is no other.”¹

#3: “O Inanna, radiant queen of heaven and earth, beside you there is no other.”¹

Why would someone who clearly believes in the existence of many gods pray to a certain deity as if this deity were the only one in existence? If you have ever been in love with someone, you surely know the answer. Haven’t you ever said something to the effect of, “Darling, you are the *only one*. You are my all, my everything. Beside you, there is no other”? When you said such things did your beloved answer, “You’re wrong! I’m not the only person who exists in this world!” Or, did your beloved respond to you with a kiss? What these polytheists meant when they prayed is similar to what you meant when you spoke to your beloved. What they meant was, “You are the only god *for me*. I count you as being so high above all other gods that none can compare. There is truly none beside you.” When the ancient Israelite prophets said “there is no one beside Yahweh,” they meant something similar. They meant, there is no one beside Yahweh *for Israel*.”

all good deeds done in the name of Tash were actually in service of Aslan himself. Here is the passage:

Then I fell at his feet and thought, Surely this is the hour of death, for the Lion (who is worthy of all honor) will know that I have served Tash all my days and not him. Nevertheless, it is better to see the Lion and die than to be Tisroc of the world and live and not to have seen him.

But the Glorious One bent down his golden head and touched my forehead with his tongue and said, "Son, thou art welcome." But I said, "Alas Lord, I am no son of thine but the servant of Tash". He answered, "Child, all the service thou hast done to Tash, I account as service done to me."

Then by reasons of my great desire for wisdom and understanding, I overcame my fear and questioned the Glorious One and said, "Lord, is it then true, as the Ape said, that thou and Tash are one?" The Lion growled so that the earth shook (but his wrath was not against me) and said, "It is false. Not because he and I are one, but because we are opposites, I take to me the services which thou hast done to him. For I and he are of such different kinds that no service which is vile can be done to me, and none which is not vile can be done to him. Therefore if any man swear by Tash and keep his oath for the oath's sake, it is by me that he has truly sworn, though he know it not, and it is I who reward him. And if any man do a cruelty in my name, then, though he says the name Aslan, it is Tash whom he serves and by Tash his deed is accepted. Dost thou understand, Child?"

I said, Lord, thou knowest how much I understand. But I said also (for the truth constrained me), "Yet I have been seeking Tash all my days."

"Beloved," said the Glorious One, 'unless thy desire had been for me thou wouldst not have sought so long and so truly. For all find what they truly seek."

Aslan serves as a fitting metaphor for the God of Israel, as Israel itself understood Yahweh. The false god, Tash, however is not a perfect metaphor. Tash stands for Satan. If we were to make the metaphor more reflective of Israelite belief, there would not only be Tash, but a whole host of other gods – only gods that were in alignment with Aslan's will. You could think of these other gods like powerful angels.

In fact, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint, seems to reflect this exact understanding in Deuteronomy 32. Where the original Hebrew has Most High God apportioning the nations "according to the number of gods," the Septuagint reads "according to the number of *angels*."

Angels may be lower than God, but they are also servants of God. To use our "abcde" analogy, the gods of other nations may have been seen to be "abcd" kind of gods, whereas the Israelite God was not just an "abcd" God, but the God of the whole alphabet. A God capable of containing all the letters of all the gods.

III. The Faith of Jesus

What does all this have to do with Jesus and John 14:6?

First off, we should be reading John 14:6 in light of John 10:16, where Jesus says, “I have other sheep, that do not belong to this fold.” Such a statement is fully in alignment with the God of the Hebrew Scriptures, who lovingly tends to God’s people, Israel, yet is also the Shepherd of other peoples through their gods.

Secondly, we must recognize that then when Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me,” he was not talking to Buddhists, Taoists, or Hindus. He was talking to his own disciples. He was saying, “If you are my followers, then I am your way, your truth, and your life. There is no other.” This is just like what the ancient Israelite prophets were saying to Israel, “For you, Yahweh alone is God, there is no other” even as the prophets would acknowledge this same statement was not *for others*.

You may wonder, is it better to be a follower of Jesus than a follower of, say, the Hindu god Shiva? I’ve never been a follower of Shiva, so how would I know? How would any of us know, unless we’ve lived their lives? What I do believe is that, followers of Shiva, the Buddha, Lao Tzu, and others seem to practice and live out the very way of life that Jesus says connects us to God: through practicing the Three **G**reat Loves (loving God, neighbor, and self), and through giving and receiving **G**race - the “**4G**” way of life we talked about last week.

Does one path live the “4G” way of life better than another? That’s not for me to judge. All I can say is that Jesus’s path may not be the only path but, for me, it is the best path. I make this as a statement of personal experience only, not universal dogma.

I can also say that, as followers of Jesus, I do not find that we are either morally or spiritually expected to convert a sincere follower of another faith to Christianity. Nor are we morally or spiritually expected to make America a more Christian nation. God has other sheep who are not of the Christian fold.

What Christians are both morally and spiritually expected to do are make themselves more fully followers of Jesus. And rather than making America more fully Christian, we are expected to make Christ’s Church more fully Christian.

Answer to the “Are you sure?” exercise: 7

In the final analysis, all interpretations of Scripture are subject to the “Rule of Love.” This rule finds its origin in the commandments Jesus identified as being first and foremost: (1) To love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength; and (2) to love our neighbor as ourselves.

If you guessed less than 7, chances are your brain did not register an “f” when you read the word “of” above, which occurs twice.
