
PAGAN SAINTS !

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Some evangelicals are arguing for the view that at least some unevangelised people will be saved without faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. In this article we examine one aspect of that case, perhaps the most important of all, namely the biblical evidence claimed for it.

General Approach

Clark Pinnock has made a significant contribution to the study of the relationship between Christianity and World Religions. Having outlined some thoughts in article form, he has recently presented a fully worked out position on this pressing subject. His book is entitled *A WIDENESS IN GOD'S MERCY* but its sub-title is *The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions*. It is his conviction that the time has come for evangelical theologians to re-appraise their position on this matter and to adopt a more positive approach towards those of other faiths. He claims that the Bible presents such an outlook.

Pinnock's general approach and basic principles are in accord with those of Peter Cotterell in his book *MISSION AND MEANINGLESSNESS*. Negatively, he rejects the thinking of radicals like the late Bishop J A T Robinson, of pluralists like John Hick and inclusivists like the Roman Catholics Karl Rahner and Hans Kung. Positively, he adopts the view which regards General Revelation and the illumination of the Logos (Jn 1:9) as pointing strongly towards salvation by their means.

He uses a number of texts in support of this positive outlook. In addition to the well known passages in Acts 14 & 17, he refers to Deuteronomy 4:19 (see p 101). This verse explicitly prohibits Israel from worshipping the sun, moon and stars, describing them as "things which the LORD your God has apportioned to all the nations under heaven". Pinnock regards this prohibition as applying *only* to Israel but he also deduces from the latter part of the verse that: "*With liberality* Yahweh permitted the nations to worship *him* in ways not proper for Israel to do" (italics ours).

The Deuteronomy text does not require the inclusion of the italicised words to exegete it. There is no suggestion in it that the nations were either worshipping God or that their worship met with divine approval. Pinnock reads that out of the verb "apportioned" which simply records the fact that in the divine administration of mankind the nations were left to practise idolatry. The same can be said about Pinnock's comment regarding Naaman (2 Kings 5:18). His interpretation goes beyond what Scripture actually says. He writes: "*God allowed* Naaman ... to worship in Rimmon's temple because of the delicate circumstances he was in" (italics ours). In point of fact there is no mention of God doing anything. Elisha's words "Go in peace" do not amount to a divine permission and Naaman himself knew he was doing wrong in what he proposed.

Two verses from Acts are referred to next, namely 14:16 and 17:30. They say much the same thing in different words, describing a divine sufferance of the thoughts and ways of the nations and not a saving pursuit of them on the part of God. Pinnock writes: "God overlooks the times of human ignorance (Acts 17:30) and passes over former sins (Romans 3:25). Is it possible that we have made God out to appear stingy? Should we

not rather be thankful for the wideness of his mercy?"

He seems to be understanding these verses, certainly the Romans reference, as being tantamount to divine forgiveness, whereas all they declare is that God did not intervene in judgment during the period stated and for the reason given. Postponement of judgment is not the same as pardon for sin.

Pagan Saints

Our main objective is to focus attention on one subject area of Pinnock's book. Though it is subsidiary to his main concern, it is not unimportant to his case. Because of its sustained use of Scriptural data it is, arguably, the corner stone of his whole argument. The title of this article "*Pagan Saints!*" indicates what that subject area is.

Without the exclamation mark, the title is actually taken from Pinnock's book. A "pagan saint" is someone who has faith but who is neither a member of Israel nor of the Church. He or she is not to be thought of as the equivalent of the "noble savage" in the romantic and liberal tradition of the nineteenth century in the western world. By this striking juxtaposition of adjective and noun Pinnock is drawing attention to something *in the Bible* which, he is convinced, has not generally been recognised. He calls it "the much neglected biblical theme" of "the holy pagan tradition".

In discussing this tradition, Pinnock does not dismiss the fact that a deceptive and corrupting influence is exerted in and by many religions, thinking of religions in the objective sense as sets of beliefs and related practices. This he traces in an unambiguous manner to Satan's activity. He does not mince his words on this subject despite the fact that, in the process, he criticises a christian religiosity as well (see pp 86-92). But though he rejects the idea that somehow all religions are valid ways to God, he does say that in the cases of Melchizedek and Jethro, both "pagan priests", that "their religions seem to have been vehicles of salvation for them", adding immediately "But it is not safe to overgeneralise from these cases" (p 107). We will consider these later.

It is in relation to "religion" in its subjective sense that he conceives of this holy pagan tradition. He finds it to consist of "faith, which is neither Jewish nor Christian, which is nonetheless noble, uplifting and sound". He gives these examples of it in Scripture: "believers like Abel, Noah, Job, Daniel, Melchizedek, Lot, Abimelech, Jethro, Rahab, Ruth, Naaman, the Queen of Sheba, the Roman soldier, Cornelius and others" (p 92). Of these Pinnock declares: "(They) were believing men and women who enjoyed a right relationship with God and lived saintly lives, under the terms of the wider covenant God made with Noah".

It is our view that the above statement needs to be examined. We will do so by looking first at what Pinnock says about covenants, before giving attention to what is actually said about them in the Bible. We might find that some of them really were saints, and not pagans; perhaps others really were pagans who became saints. We do not think that any of them were "pagan saints" in the way in which Pinnock defines the expression.

PAGAN SAINTS AND COVENANTS

A foundational passage for Pinnock's entire theological outlook on this matter is found in the following words:

"According to the Bible, persons can relate to God in three ways and covenants: through the cosmic covenant established with Noah, through the old covenant made with Abraham and through the new covenant ratified by Jesus. One may even speak

of salvation in the broad sense in all three of the covenants. Of course, there is a more complete saving knowledge of God in the new covenant than in the old, and more in the old than in the cosmic covenant, but a relationship with God is possible in the context of all three covenants. In all three, God justifies Jews and Gentiles on the ground of faith, the condition of salvation in all dispensations” (Rom.3:30) (p 102). We judge it to be a sound biblical principle that people can only relate to God in terms of a covenant which he makes with them. But this covenantal connection needs to be treated in a more discriminating way than Pinnock does and so we will draw attention first of all to what he says about the Abrahamic covenant and the Noahic covenant. We also want to consider a covenant which he does not mention. Having done that we think that we will be in a better position to come to some sort of conclusion about what he says concerning individual pagan saints.

The Abrahamic Covenant

It can be seen from the major quotation just included that Pinnock describes the Abrahamic covenant as “old”. The New Testament, however, nowhere uses that adjective to describe it. Instead it denominates the Sinaitic covenant in that way (Heb 8:6-13). The New covenant is the fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant and not its abrogation. By setting them in contradistinction from each other Pinnock makes it appear that they exhibit different ways of salvation, which they do not (see Rom 3 and Gal 3). They are one and the same in essence, in spite of their differences, because they focus on the same promised seed. Consequently, the saints under the Abrahamic and the New covenants are one people, not two.

The Noahic Covenant

As can be readily seen from the above quotation, Pinnock places great emphasis on the Noahic covenant in what he has to say about “pagan saints”. He relates to it all the Old Testament figures whom he names. We have two points to make here. The first concerns the **character** of that covenant and the second, relates to the **time of its disclosure**.

We have not rejected Pinnock’s claim that the Abrahamic covenant sets out the same way of faith as the New covenant does, though we did highlight the matter of the promised seed as the specific object of that faith, but we want to challenge what he says about the Noahic. In doing this we know we are falling foul of Pinnock’s stricture that:

“It is common to interpret the Noahic covenant in a minimalist way and to see it as a covenant only of physical preservation and not of redemption. But surely this is a divine commitment and promise that transcends merely preserving the race from another flood. The promise to Noah prepares the way for the blessing of all nations through Abram a few chapters later. The call of Abram implements the promise made to Noah. Both covenants were universal in scope. For a reader not to see this suggests a hermeneutical presupposition blocking truth out” (p 21).

Pinnock only names Karl Barth in support of his view and it is, at least, arguable that Barth’s thinking on this score is coloured by his vigorous opposition to any idea of general revelation or common grace - a vital matter in the present subject. But in the quotation Pinnock admits that many take the view of the Noahic covenant which he himself rejects. It is that view which is being advocated in this article.

To call this view ‘minimalist’ is to use a tendentious term. In fact all that Pinnock has to say by way of counter to it is that a connection exists between the Noahic and

Abrahamic covenants. But we reply that those who see the Noahic covenant as being limited to “physical” matters - that is to the earth, its seasons, and a fresh beginning for mankind would not dispute the existence of such a link. Indeed, they would argue that a close relationship exists between those covenants which can be set out as follows.

The Noahic covenant, guarantees a stable universe, free from any threat of a global cataclysmic judgement such as the Flood was, even though sin continues to be practised in it. In such a world, the gracious purposes of the Abrahamic/New covenants and the promises made earlier in Genesis 1-5 are worked out throughout time and among all the nations. The view therefore which Pinnock rejects finds no difficulty in recognising and acknowledging a continuity between the Noahic and the Abrahamic covenants which is not merely a continuity of chronological subsequence but also of theological coherence. We think that Pinnock fails to see the important *distinction* between the Abrahamic and the Noahic covenants and that might equally be said to be the result of “a hermeneutical presupposition, blocking truth out”, to use his own words.

The fact of the matter is that no way of salvation for all flesh was made known via the Noahic covenant and no promise of a seed to come was made known to Noah as there would be to Abraham. Pinnock is therefore not correct when he says that “God announces *in this covenant* that his saving purposes are going to be working, not just among a single chosen nation but among all peoples sharing a common ancestry in Noah” (italics ours, p 21).

It is difficult to see how Genesis 8:15-9:17, the text regarding the Noahic covenant, can be understood in this way. The whole passage is reminiscent of the Creation narrative in Genesis 1. Abounding sin threatened all that had been made. The Flood was God’s way of beginning a new universe and a new humanity, though within the context of the Fall. Genesis 9:25-27 does have something to do with the outworking of God’s saving purposes among humanity but *that* is not the Noahic covenant.

The only knowledge about God which could be gained from that covenant was that God was a preserver of and provider for the life of all kinds of creatures in spite of his being a most awesome judge of the sin of human beings. The fact that the deliverance of eight people from the Flood is referred to later in Scripture (Isaiah 54:9-10 and 1 Peter 3:20-22) as a type of messianic salvation is beside the point. The matter at issue is what people might have come to know as they reflected on the event of the deluge and its immediate aftermath and not what could be learned from subsequent revelation about it. It is therefore our view that Pinnock makes two general mistakes. The first is that he does not correctly inter-relate the three covenants which he specifies. The second is that he regards his “pagan saints” as having learned more from the Noahic covenant than was actually possible. We will take up the question of where they could have obtained their knowledge when we mention a covenant which Pinnock overlooks.

But Pinnock makes a major blunder when he says that all the pagan saints “lived saintly lives under the terms of the wider covenant made with Noah”. That could only be true if the Genesis record were itself untrue because it records that some of them lived *before* the Flood, for example Abel and Enoch. They could not have lived under the terms of the Noahic covenant. This might also be true of Job and the Daniel who is mentioned in Ezekiel 14 and 18. In addition, Noah himself had a relationship with God before he began to build the ark. The biblical chronology requires that some differentiation be made between the knowledge of those whom Pinnock groups in the category of “pagan saints”. And a question arises as to where those in the group who lived before the Flood obtained

their believing knowledge from. Plainly, it could not have come from the Noahic covenant. From whence then could it have come?

A COVENANT OVERLOOKED

Pinnock's view, as we have seen, is that three covenants have to be considered in relation to God's dealings with human beings. These are the Noahic, the old (Abrahamic) and the new. Though we have agreed with him that a knowledge of God is only possible as a result of a covenant arrangement through which God discloses himself, we do not agree that there are only three covenants to be reckoned with in this regard. We have just seen that some "pagan saints" antedated the time of Noah and we must therefore go back further in biblical history in order to evaluate their knowledge. This means not only that the first eleven chapters of Genesis have to be considered, which Pinnock describes as having been so neglected but, more narrowly, the first six of those chapters which are so distrusted.

We note that Pinnock speaks of a "covenant of creation" or "a cosmic covenant" by virtue of which "the whole world and its peoples belong to God". In addition he refers once to a covenant made with Adam. But he declares that it was also made with Noah. We quote the sentence in which he does that because perhaps the singular noun at the end should have been printed in the plural. "The covenant made with Abram has to be interpreted in the context of the covenant made with Noah and with Adam" (p 24).

If we read "covenants" it would be possible to say that Pinnock recognises that a distinct covenant was made with Adam but as the sentence stands that is not possible. Though Pinnock does refer to Adam as the representative head of all humanity, he does not recognise that a distinct covenant was made with him as such. He does not have anything at all to say about the content of God's self-revelation to Adam and Eve.

Pinnock does not examine the first three chapters of Genesis and that is surely a serious omission. They have relevance to all biblical subjects and particularly to the "covenant" or binding arrangement made with Adam, the representative head of the entire human race. We will review what we believe to be the relevant data. In 1:28 & 2:15-17 we have the record of mankind's duty to God, together with the threatened penalty for disobedience to a specific precept. Chapter 3 records the transgression of Adam and Eve and the effects of that. This awareness of living in God's world as his subjects and of being exposed to death on account of sinful rebellion is the background for the Noahic covenant and for those passages in both Testaments which deal with General Revelation. A point of reference is thus provided, as we shall see, for part of the knowledge of some of these "pagan saints".

But we want to argue that there is a verse in Genesis 3 which is the background to the Abrahamic covenant and to all the subsequent saving self-disclosures of God. It is, of course, verse 15, which promises a male descendant of Eve who would crush the serpent's (Satan's) head though at the cost of having his own humanity (heel) crushed in the process. This has been regarded as the *protevangeliium*, the first proclamation of the gospel.

That promise of a coming seed is something which Adam and Eve believed. Adam confessed his faith by renaming his wife. He had given her the name "woman" to indicate her oneness with him as human. It is a name which speaks of creation. Calling her Eve, (3:20) from the Hebrew for "to live" is expressive of God's promise to deal with the death which has been introduced through sin. In turn, Eve did something similar by her naming of their sons. Cain (4:1) which means "obtained" is linked with "the LORD"

and expresses Eve's belief that the promised seed has already come. Seth (4:25) which means "appointed" is a replacement for Abel and his birth is a testimony to God's faithfulness to his promise over against the malignity of the seed of the serpent. We can assume it is that knowledge of God which informed the faith of Abel, Enoch and Lamech, the father of Noah (see 5: 28-29) They were all of the line of Adam-Seth and not Cain-Lamech and were looking for the one who would undo what sin had done.

Given this information, those individuals should not therefore be classified as "pagan saints" at all, but as belonging to the line which was the precursor of Israel and the church. They were saints, not pagans, because saving revelation had been made known to them. To call them "pagan" saints is to deny that they had received any such saving revelation. They should therefore be removed from Pinnock's list.

Genesis 4:26b ought also to be given due weight even though one would like to have more information about what it refers to. Literally it means "Then began to call on the name of the LORD". An impersonal subject noun needs to be supplied in order to complete the sense e.g. "people". Taking this statement at its face value it describes that public and corporate confession of faith in Jehovah /Yahweh in the context of the worship which occurred in the days of Enosh, Seth's son. It stands in marked contrast to the arrogant self-exaltation of Lamech which is expressed in the previous verses. Did some of his descendants or contemporaries, revolted by his bloodlust, also begin to worship the LORD? We are not told. If they did, they were pagans who became saints at that time.

But should Genesis 4:26b be regarded in this way? Certainly the Divine Name is found in the Hebrew text of this verse. But what weight can be put on that? We have taken it at face value as stating that the people referred to not only knew of the existence of the Name and actually used it in their confession of faith. Not only would the majority of non-evangelical Old Testament scholars disagree with this but even some evangelical ones as well, though not on the same terms. They would all refuse to affirm that the patriarchs knew Elohim as Jehovah, pointing to Exodus 6 verses 2 & 3 as proof.

Exodus 6:2-3

It might appear at first sight that the exegesis of this verse belongs simply to the field of Old Testament scholarship and that it has no bearing whatsoever on our subject. Such thinking could not be further from the truth. A case could be made out for saying that one's view on this matter determines one's view on the question of the salvation of the unevangelised. To show that it is relevant requires a discussion which could be technical. We will try to simplify it because it is so relevant.

In the heyday of the Higher Criticism of the Pentateuch it was axiomatic to regard the statement in Exodus 6:2-3 as meaning that the Name was only made known at the time of Moses and in the Exodus. Consequently, all the references to Yahweh in Genesis were not authentic for the people and the periods referred to. This was the corner stone of the old Documentary Hypothesis and of the evolutionary view of the development of the religion of Israel. Just as Genesis - Deuteronomy was the result of the combination of different sources over a period of time, so Old Testament religion was regarded as a compound of differing religious views and practices - some from the surrounding nations. Obviously this opens the door to a partial recognition of other gods and religions as being valid.

Alec Motyer responded to this in his monograph entitled *The Revelation of the Divine*

Name. Though published over thirty years ago, it was, along with the work of W J Martin, a landmark in evangelical study of the Pentateuch in the United Kingdom. They dealt with the Documentary Hypothesis and defended the Mosaic authorship of the first five books of the Bible and their work is by no means outdated.

After making due allowance for the fact that the biblical writer made references to Jehovah, Motyer showed that in at least 45 out of 116 occurrences, between Genesis 12:1 and Exodus 6:2-3, the term Yahweh (Jehovah) was either used by the patriarchs of God, or by God himself. He then argued that the Hebrew terms in Exodus 6:2-3 did not mean that the Name was completely unknown but that its significance had not been previously disclosed. He presented and argued for the following translation of the verse: "And God spoke to Moses, and said to him: I am Yahweh. And I showed myself to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob in the character of El Shaddai, but in the character expressed by my name Yahweh I did not make myself known to them". He argued that these verses did: "not deny to the patriarchs the knowledge of the name Yahweh, but only (the) knowledge of the significance of the Name.....These words tell us plainly that what Moses was sent to Egypt to declare was not a Name but a nature".

Certainly Motyer's line of exegesis is much better than the old liberal view which many Old Testament scholars are seeking to move from, without actually declaring it to be wrong. To regard the Name as being previously known certainly precludes the possibility of other gods and religions being approved of in the Old Testament record. But two questions remain unanswered. The first is, what about the pre-Abrahamic period that is Genesis 1-11? Did Noah, Enosh and Adam and Eve for example also know of the Name? Secondly, is it *entirely* satisfactory to say that though the Name was known, the nature which corresponded to it was not? We will return to these questions.

Contemporary evangelical Old Testament scholars, e.g. Gordon Wenham and Chris Wright take a different line with reference to Exodus 6 and the previous uses of the Name. They do not pass over these uses in silence as Pinnock does. What they do is to refer to the distinction between the final editor of the text and the time reference in the text. In the words of Wenham:

"Is this identification of the patriarchs' God with that of Moses a theological assertion by the writer of Genesis, who was sure the same God had spoken to Abraham as spoke to Moses? Or do the statements in Genesis implying that Yahweh revealed himself to the patriarchs correspond to the patriarchs' own conception of the God they worshipped?"

This distinction needs to be clarified in order to be understood. Taking Genesis 15:6 where we read "Abram believed the LORD and he credited it to him as righteousness" and working with the view that this statement is the author's (editor's) report means that Abram was, in terms of his knowledge, believing in El or El Shaddai but not Yahweh. The editor knew that El was Yahweh and so what he wrote was true as a fact, but it was not true as a description of what had gone on in Abram's mind.

When one calls to mind that El was the chief god of the Canaanite pantheon, however, it can be appreciated that such a distinction as Wenham and Wright accept and employ opens the door to an endorsement of syncretism in the biblical narrative. Wright is aware of that possibility and therefore poses the following question: "Are we then to regard the faith of Israel as syncretistic in its origins and early development, and if so, does this constitute biblical support for a syncretistic stance by the Christian vis-a-vis contemporary world faiths?"

He answers this question by defining syncretism and differentiating it from “accommodation or assimilation”.

“Syncretism is a conscious or unconscious attempt to combine divergent religious elements (beliefs, rites, vocabulary) in such a way that a new religious mixture evolves which goes beyond the contributing elements. It presupposes that none of the contributing elements can be regarded as final or sufficient in itself. . . It must be distinguished from the modes by which God has communicated his self-revelation using existing concepts and religious forms, but then transcending and transforming them with a new theology. The latter process is usually called accommodation or assimilation. It is quite different from syncretism inasmuch as it recognizes the reality of unique divine revelation in history, whereas syncretism excludes such a category a priori”.

We would be happy to leave the matter there if that were the only “danger” inherent in Wenham and Wright’s position. This is because we also see in the Bible that God does condescend to make himself known in an alien context only to break that mould by subsequent disclosures. A wedge of grace creates a divide which opens into a chasm with every further divine disclosure. But another question can be raised on the basis of the editor/patriarch distinction. Wright sees this and expresses the question as follows: “Can we infer from the Genesis story that men may worship and relate personally to the true, living God but under the name or names of some “local” deity and without knowledge of God’s saving name and action in Christ?”

In answer to that question Wright points out that God’s self-disclosure to Abraham “in terms of divine names” which he would have already known “in no way implies that all Abraham’s contemporaries who worshipped El in his various manifestations, and with the seamier side of his mythology, thereby knew and worshipped the living God”. Wright sees God’s relationship with Abraham as being based on an act of divine grace and not on a disclosure of divine names.

So far, so good, we may think. The caveats which Wright introduces should prevent anyone from deducing that what is being claimed is that all gods are (ultimately) one and the same and that all religions are ways of salvation. He also denies that all will be saved. But there are two loopholes or possibilities which are left open by the denial that the divine Name was known prior to the Exodus.

Wenham points out the first which is that the pre- Mosaic era was much freer and more benign than the Sinaitic in terms of its view of other gods and religions:

“This distinction between the El revelation of Genesis and the Yahweh revelation of later times is more than a verbal contrast. The exclusiveness, holiness, and strictures of the God of Exodus is absent from Genesis. Though the patriarchs are faithful followers of their God, they enjoy good relations with men of other faiths. There is an air of ecumenical bonhomie about the patriarchal religion which contrasts with the sectarian exclusiveness of the Mosaic age and later prophetic demands”.

Something is being felt for in this statement for which there is no evidence in Genesis. There is not a hint of patriarchal involvement with Canaanite religion in that book.

Secondly, if the patriarchs did not know the name Yahweh then it becomes possible to argue that just as they knew (the true) God savingly, without knowing the name Yahweh, so may others be saved today, without knowing of the name of Jesus Christ. Wright concedes this possibility and includes in it those like Noah and Enosh, Adam and Eve, that is those who lived before Abraham. Here is the beginning of the contemporary divide

among evangelicals between those who adopt only a christocentric view of the way of salvation and those who also take an epistemological view. The former see salvation as being only in Christ, but the latter also see faith as necessary.

But we are not prepared to accept this understanding of Exodus 6:2-3 and of the faith of the men and women who lived before Moses, including those who antedated the patriarchs. We do not think that Joshua 24:14 with its reference to the other gods which were served by the fathers of Israel before the era of bondage means that they served El not Yahweh. The statement can quite acceptably refer to the gods which were served prior to Abram's call. We submit these two reasons for this conclusion.

- 1 It seems to us that Motyer has demonstrated that the Hebrew of Exodus 6:2-3 does not *demand* the view that the Name was unknown before Moses.
- 2 The uses of the Divine Name in Genesis 12-50 and in 1-11 (though Motyer does not mention those chapters) can be taken at their face value, because being so few, they do not provide evidence that they were the result of reading back subsequently given revelation. Had the writer been so motivated the likelihood is that he would have used it more often.

The view we therefore propose is as follows. We begin with Motyer's position that Exodus 6:2-3 refers to the disclosure of the *meaning* of the name rather than of the name itself. The name Jehovah was not unknown prior to Moses. Was his mother's name not Jochebed, which is a compound of an abbreviation of the name Jehovah?

Even so it was primarily as El or El Shaddai that the patriarchs knew God. That name came to the fore in their times because Jehovah wished to stress his ability to transform his people (the three patriarchs were named or re-named by El Shaddai) and to perform his promises alone. El Shaddai means "God Almighty" and points to divine omnipotence. It provides a rich background for the disclosure of what was implicit in the name Jehovah, the use of which consequently declined in that period.

However, we wonder whether Motyer overstates the contrast by using the name/nature distinction. Was it the case that prior to Moses and the Exodus *nothing* of God's nature was known which corresponded to the name Jehovah? Have we not seen that Adam, Eve, Enosh, Lamech, Noah and even Abraham knew something of that nature? Does not that evidence point to there being *some* connection in the minds of people between the Name and the promise of a coming deliverer? In turn, does this not indicate *some* knowledge of a "saving God" existing and surviving to *some* degree within that line of descent marked by the names Adam, Abel, Seth, Enosh, Noah, Shem and Abraham?

In one place in his monograph Motyer admits that something of the nature which corresponded to the Name was known to Abraham. In a remarkably powerful and spiritually perceptive piece of writing, he says:

"But, as so often in the Bible, the light which will shine in fullness only at some future date is too strong wholly to be restrained from earlier ages, and here and there breaks through in hints and suggestions which are only appreciated when at last the moment of unveiling comes. Once in Genesis such a beam of light fell. When Abraham, on the mountain, found that God had indeed provided a sacrifice, and when he offered the ram in manifest substitution for his son, then, for a brief second he caught and expressed the truth, 'Yahweh sees, Yahweh provides'. Here only is the divine name elaborated in pre-Mosaic religion, and Yahweh is declared to be the God who meets his people in their extremity, when the chosen seed is at the point of extinction, and Himself provides the redemption price".

But then Motyer goes further and this is what we have been arguing for in claiming that Genesis 3:15 and the name provided in embryonic form all that would be subsequently unfolded in Scripture about salvation. Motyer writes movingly as well as brilliantly:

“The mountain top scene could hardly be expounded even in this detail except that the full light was later unveiled, and God showed His nature. The exodus is, on a large scale, what Mount Moriah is in miniature. The same God who provided the ram provided also the Passover Lamb. There is no further truth about God ever to be revealed; even we, who have been permitted to see the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, see only the truth of the exodus - ‘his exodus which he would accomplish in Jerusalem’ - and when, in God’s mercy, we meet the Lord in the air, it will be to discover that once again God has done that which his name declares: He has gone down to Egypt to redeem His people: for this is His name for ever, and this is His memorial unto all generations”.

This background therefore accounts for the knowledge of the “pagan” saints before and up to Noah and makes it impossible for them to be regarded as “pagan” on Pinnock’s original definition of that word which was “an outsider”. They were insiders in terms of the circle to whom revelation was vouchsafed. They were indeed saints.

All this is certainly relevant as the informing context for the knowledge of so-called “pagan saints” in the pre-diluvian period. But it is also to be remembered with reference to what followed after the Flood. Noah and Shem knew of it and Japheth too. It did not die out with the Flood. It would therefore have been transmitted to posterity, diminishing in some families as time passed because of the increasing effects of sin, but being augmented in others by the onward unfolding of special revelation. In those years up to the pre-Sinai era, to be outside the covenant line was not *ipso facto* to be destitute of all knowledge of the El who was Jehovah.

Works referred to:

C H Pinnock, A WIDENESS IN GOD’S MERCY, Zondervan

P Cotterell, MISSION AND MEANINGLESS, SPCK

G J Wenham, ESSAYS ON THE PATRIARCHAL NARRATIVES, IVP

C J H Wright, The Christian and Other Religions, THEMELIOS, Jan 93

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The Christian idea of the responsibility of knowledge is rooted in the notion that God is there and that he speaks. He is therefore the one with both the first decisive word on life - in creation - and the last decisive word - in judgement. Thus human life is essentially responsible, answerable and accountable. Such responsibility of knowledge is the silent assumption in many basic doctrines. Sin, for example, is a deliberate violation of the responsibility of knowledge - human beings become responsible where they should not be (playing God) and refuse to be responsible where they should be (denying guilt). This responsibility of knowledge is also embedded in the root meaning of many biblical words. For example, the Hebrew word ‘to know’ includes the meaning ‘to care for’. The idea is that ‘knowledge of’ something is ‘power over’ it, ‘responsibility to’ it, and ‘care for’ it.

Os Guinness, FIT BODIES, FAT MINDS, p 148
