

Penal Substitution: Modern Baal Worship

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | May 12, 2020



More than 2,500 years ago, the pagan worship of Baal had infected Israel to become the dominant belief system and worship practice amongst the people whom God had called His own. In order to combat this distorted belief system, God raised up the prophet Elijah, who boldly confronted the false system of worship.

Despite Elijah's singular victory over Baal at Mt. Carmel, Baalism has persisted through history as various cultures adopted its god, always changing his name to suit their time and place in history. For instance, Baal became Zeus to the Greeks, Jupiter to the Romans, and Thor to the Germanic and Norse peoples.

Then, with the supposed conversion of Constantine, Baalism insidiously infected Christianity. God, through the prophet Malachi, foretold that before Christ returns, God's people would see the prophet Elijah, again, calling them back to the worship of the true God.

"Before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes, I will send you the prophet Elijah. He will bring fathers and children together again" (Malachi 4:5, 6).

Malachi's prophecy is a warning that prior to the coming of Christ, the world will face a similar crisis – when religious and political leaders would lead the masses into the worship of a false god.

In order for us to understand Malachi's prophetic application for today, we need to understand what made Baal worship false. What was the problem with Baalism? Was it simply a matter of using the word "Baal" when worshipping God? Was it because they were not saying *Yhwh* (Yahweh)? Or did the problem lay elsewhere?

"The Hebrew noun *ba'al* means 'master', 'possessor' or 'husband'. Used with suffixes, e.g. Baal-peor or Baal-berith, the word may have retained something of its original sense; but in general Baal is a proper name in the OT, and refers to a specific deity, Hadad, the W Semitic storm-god, the most important deity in the Canaanite pantheon.

"Yahweh was 'master' and 'husband' to Israel, and therefore they called him 'Baal', in all innocence; but naturally this practice led to confusion of the worship of Yahweh with the Baal rituals, and it became essential to call him by some different title; Hosea (2:16) proposed 'îš, another word meaning 'husband.'"

Obviously, the problem noted here was not the mere syllables being used by the Hebrew people, as *ba'al* was one name they used for the true God. Therefore, the problem must have been something else. There must have been a distortion presented in the character of Baal that is not in the character of God. So, what was Baal like?

A Hostile Deity

Ancient, non-biblical sources give varying degrees of information regarding Baal and the pagan pantheon, but there are some key elements common among them.

Baal was the son of El (i.e., El-ohim or El-Shaddai). He was the god of weather and was often called "Almighty" and "Lord of the Earth." Baal was the god who brought rain, thunder, lightning, who fertilized the earth, controlled the sun, and brought the harvest. Baal fought the great serpent leviathan, as well as battled against Mot, the god of death. And most amazing of all, it was taught that Baal died in his battle with Mot and was resurrected to bring life to earth.

So what was the problem with worshipping a god who was the "husband and protector of Israel," the son of El, who controlled the weather, who brought rain, sunshine, and fertility, who blessed with a full harvest, who warred against the great serpent and death, who died and was resurrected to bring life to the earth? What was wrong with this god? What was Elijah opposing? What made Baal worship false?

Here is what one Christian writer identifies as the central distortion in Baal worship:

"Determined to keep the people in deception, the priests of Baal continue to offer sacrifices to their gods and to call upon them night and day to refresh the earth. **With costly offerings the priests attempt to appease the anger of their gods ...**" [\[ii\]](#)

The Bible confirms this:

“So the prophets prayed louder and cut themselves with knives and daggers, according to their custom, until blood flowed” (1 Kings 18:28).[\[1\]](#)

Could it be that Baal represented Satan’s version of God – that is, Satan’s lies about His character – the idea that as God, He must have bloody sacrifices in order to be appeased, to have his wrath assuaged, or have his anger propitiated?

And, perhaps most vital to our church in these last days, is God waiting for His people on earth to complete the Reformation by eliminating this pagan god concept and restoring the true picture of God, as revealed in Jesus, in the hearts of humanity?

Two Kinds of Laws

God is the Creator, who built all reality, and His laws are the laws upon which reality operates. When one breaks God’s laws, one takes themselves out of harmony with God, with life itself, and the sure, natural result is ruin and death. As the Bible teaches, “The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction” (Galatians 6:8 NIV84).

But false gods, like Baal, do not create; they impose. Their laws are imperial, rules designed to control others. Breaking the imposed rules that created beings make up doesn’t cause damage to the breaker of the rules; it results in the ruling authority inflicting punishment. This is the root of all false systems of worship, a false law construct, which leads to a false god construct in which the deity is the enforcer of punishment, one that requires appeasement and payment.

At the 1897 General Conference Session of Seventh-day Adventists, Pastor George E. Fifiield, secretary of the New England Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, gave a powerful sermon on this subject. Here is an excerpt:

“In Christ Jesus we ...[are] the household of God; and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner-stone. ... This is as near to the Lord as we can get. This is the at-one-ment. ... Notwithstanding this, we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted [Isa 53:4]. That was what we thought about it. **We said, God is doing all this; God is killing him, punishing him, to satisfy his wrath, in order to let us off. That is the pagan conception of sacrifice.** The Christian idea of sacrifice is this. Let us note the contrast. ‘God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.’ That is the Christian idea. Yes, sir. Indifference keeps, hatred keeps, selfishness keeps. ... But love, and love only, sacrifices, gives freely, gives itself, gives without counting the cost; gives because it is love. That is sacrifice, whether it is the sacrifice of bulls and goats, or of him who is the Lamb of God. It is the sacrifice that is revealed throughout the entire Bible. **But the pagan idea of sacrifice is just the opposite. It is that some god is always offended, always angry, and his wrath must be propitiated in some way.**

“If it is an ordinary case, the blood of bulls and goats will suffice; but if it is an extraordinary case, the blood of some innocent virgin or child must flow; and when the god smells the blood, his wrath is appeased. We talk of pagan immortality, pagan Sunday, pagan idolatry, etc.; **but it seems to me that the lowest thought is that men have brought this**

pagan idea of sacrifice right into the Bible, and applied it to the sacrifice of the cross. So the Methodist Discipline uses these words: ‘Christ died to reconcile the Father unto us,’ that is, to propitiate God so that we could be forgiven - paganism straight out. Why, brethren and sisters, it is the application of the pagan conception of sacrifice to the sacrifice upon the cross, so that that wonderful manifestation of divine love, which God intended should cause all men, all beings in the universe, to wonder and adore, has been turned around and made a manifestation of wrath to be propitiated in order to save man. I am glad that we are losing sight of this manner of viewing the subject, where we do not say that Christ died to reconcile the Father unto us. **Brethren, there is sometimes such a thing as to give up the expression of a thing, and think we have thus gotten rid of it, when a good deal of it still lingers and clouds our consciousness of the love of God, and the beauty of his truth, so that we cannot present a clear gospel.**”[\[iii\]](#)

Nineteenth-century Congregationalist theologian George MacDonald also noted:

“The Lord never came to deliver men from the consequences of their sins while those sins yet remained. ... Yet, feeling nothing of the dread hatefulness of their sin, men have constantly taken this word that the Lord came to deliver us from our sins to mean that he came to save them from the punishment of their sins.

“This idea has terribly corrupted the preaching of the Gospel. The message of the Good News has not been truly communicated. Unable to believe in the forgiveness of the Father in heaven, **imagining him not at liberty to forgive, or incapable of forgiving forthright;** not really believing him God who is fully our Savior, but a God bound – either in his own nature or by a law above him and compulsory upon him – **to exact some recompense or satisfaction for sin,** a multitude of religious teachers have taught their fellow men that **Jesus came to bear our punishment** and save us from hell. But in that they have misrepresented his true mission.”[\[iv\]](#)

A contemporary of Fifiield and MacDonald, E.G. White described Satan’s strategy has been, from the beginning, to cause the Jewish ceremonial system to be misunderstood to reveal a God who required propitiation of His wrath:

“While **God has desired to teach men that from His own love comes the Gift which reconciles them to Himself, the archenemy of mankind has endeavored to represent God as one who delights in their destruction.** Thus the sacrifices and the ordinances **designed of Heaven to reveal divine love have been perverted to serve as means whereby sinners have vainly hoped to propitiate, with gifts and good works, the wrath of an offended God.**”[\[v\]](#)

Are Fifiield, MacDonald, and White right? Has the pagan idea of sacrifice infected Christianity? Has the time come for Malachi’s prophecy to be fulfilled? Is it time for a people to stand up and, like Elijah, say, **“No! God is not like this!** Consider the evidence for yourself.”

Yet a statement from an article called "A Call to Evangelical Unity," from *Christianity Today*, June 14, 1999, teaches:

"We affirm that the atonement of Christ by which, in his obedience, he offered a perfect sacrifice, **propitiating the Father by paying for our sins** and satisfying divine justice on our behalf according to God's eternal plan, is an essential element of the Gospel."

And this is from *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology*:

"The word 'propitiation' properly signifies the **turning away of wrath by a sacrifice**. Thus it signifies **appeasement**. ... According to Leon Morris: 'The consistent Bible view is that the sin of man has incurred the wrath of God. That wrath is averted only by Christ's atoning offering. From this standpoint his **saving work is properly called propitiation**.'" [\[vi\]](#)

In the book *The Cross of Christ*, we read:

"Paul always speaks of people being reconciled to God (2Cor 5:19; Rom 5:10; Col. 1:20). He never refers to God being reconciled to us. **In spite of that fact**, [my comment: he just affirmed that the Bible nowhere refers to God being reconciled to man, yet now he denies this fact and argues that "in spite of what the Bible says," God did have to be reconciled to man] however, we should recognize that sin affected both sides. Humanity's rebellion and sense of guilt alienated it from God, **while God was separated from humankind by His necessary hatred of and judgment on sin (His wrath). Christ's sacrificial death (propitiation) removed the barrier to reconciliation from God's side.**" [\[vii\]](#)

"Leon Morris writes that *if God's 'wrath is regarded as a very real factor so that the sinner is exposed to its severity, then **the removal of the wrath will be an important part of our understanding of salvation.***' Of course, 'if we diminish the part played by divine wrath we shall not find it necessary to think seriously of propitiation.' Thus Morris comments in another connection, 'if people are to be forgiven, then the fact of that wrath must be taken into consideration. It does not fade away by being given some other name or regarded as an impersonal process.' **In other words, Gods' wrath must be propitiated or turned away from the sinner. That was one aim of Christ's self-sacrifice on the cross.**" [\[viii\]](#)

Here are two quotations from *Seventh-day Adventist 27 Fundamental Beliefs*:

"Christ's self-sacrifice is pleasing to God because this sacrificial offering **took away the barrier between God and sinful man in that Christ fully bore God's wrath on man's sin**. Through Christ, God's wrath is not turned into love but is turned away from man and borne by Himself." [\[ix\]](#)

"For a loving God to maintain His justice and righteousness, the atoning death of Jesus

Christ became 'a moral and legal necessity.' God's 'justice requires that sin be carried to judgment. God must therefore execute judgment on sin and thus on the sinner. **In this execution the Son of God took our place, the sinner's place, according to God's will.**" [\[x\]](#)

And this has led to theologians writing things like this:

"Why did **God the Father choose** a cross to be the instrument of death? Why did He not choose to have Christ instantly beheaded or quickly run through with a spear or sword? **Was God unjust in executing judgment on Christ with a cross** when He could have done it by beheading, a noose, a sword, a gas chamber, a bolt of lightning, or a lethal injection?" [\[xi\]](#)

In the December 2007 issue of *Adventist Review World*:

"One of the fundamental problems of the Moral Influence Theory is that it rejects the substitutionary nature of Christ's death. The idea that **God had to kill the innocent** instead of the guilty in order to save us is considered a violation of justice" (emphasis mine). [\[xii\]](#)

But was God really the one who executed His Son on the Cross?

Did fire come down from heaven and consume Christ? Or was Christ murdered at the instigation of Satan and unholy men? Is God the source of killing, execution, and death, or does death arise from sin? The idea that God requires sacrifice to assuage, appease, or propitiate His wrath is pagan – it is modern-day Baalism – and Isaiah prophesied that we would misunderstand what Christ did in just that way:

"Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, **yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted**" (Isaiah 53:4).

From Jesus' own mouth, we are told what His Father did to Him: "My God, My God why have you **forsaken** me?" Notice that He didn't say, "My God, My God, why are you **killing** me? – or "Why are you raining fire down upon me?" Rather, in love, God surrendered His Son to be our Savior! It is Baal who must be appeased; it is Baal who destroys!

E.G. White, one of the founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, puts the killing of Christ squarely on Satan:

"Satan saw that his disguise was torn away. His administration was laid open before the unfallen angels and before the heavenly universe. **He had revealed himself as a murderer. By shedding the blood of the Son of God, he had uprooted himself from**

the sympathies of the heavenly beings.”[\[xiii\]](#)

Could we, like ancient Israel, be in a spiritual war over two warring god concepts – with false god beliefs strongly entrenched into mainstream religions, including Christianity? Could we be deceived into worshipping what we only think is God, but in actuality we’re worshipping that ancient counterfeit – Baal?

“For though we live in the world we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. **We demolish every argument and pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God**, and take captive every thought to Jesus Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

Yes – the battle is over the “knowledge of God” – what God is really like! E.G. White also recognized the insidious infection of false god concepts in Christianity:

“Thousands have a false conception of God and His attributes. They are as verily serving a false god as were the servants of Baal. Are we worshipping the true God as He is revealed in His Word, in Christ, in nature, or are we adoring some philosophical idol enshrined in His place? God is a God of truth. Justice and mercy are the attributes of His throne. He is a God of love, of pity and tender compassion. Thus He is represented in His Son, our Saviour. He is a God of patience and long-suffering. If such is the being whom we adore and to whose character we are seeking to assimilate, we are worshipping the true God.”[\[xiv\]](#)

Are we worshipping the true God as revealed in Jesus? A being of love and tenderness – a being who “so loved the world that He sent His only Son” to save us? Or do we worship Baal, a god who has to be appeased by a human blood sacrifice? Are we failing in our ability to finish the work of preparing the world for the coming Messiah because we don’t take the true picture of God to the world?

So – what is the final message the world needs to hear?

“It is the darkness of misapprehension of God that is enshrouding the world. Men are losing their knowledge of His character. It has been misunderstood and misinterpreted. **At this time** a message from God is to be proclaimed, a message illuminating in its influence and saving in its power. **His character is to be made known.** Into the darkness of the world is to be shed **the light of His glory, the light of His goodness, mercy and truth.** ... **The last rays of merciful light, the last message of mercy to be given to the world, is the revelation of His character of love.**”[\[xv\]](#)

It is time for the truth about God to go forward. It is time for the people of Planet Earth to prepare to meet Christ! It is time for us to throw off the false god concept of Baal and embrace the truth as Jesus revealed it.

To the people of God in all denominations, I call upon you to rise up and promote the truth about God just as Elijah did! Elijah's challenge - "If the Lord is God, serve him. If Baal is God, serve him" - rings out today.

I issue the same challenge: If God is like Jesus revealed Him to be, then serve Him; however, if God is a wrathful being who, like Baal, must be propitiated, then serve him.

The question is: Whom will *you* serve?[2]

[1] Some may argue that what made Baal worship false was its gross and hedonistic practices. I assert that all such degradation is the outgrowth of worshiping a god who must be appeased, assuaged, or propitiated. In the Dark Ages, the ugly practices of worshiping such a god were evidenced in the Inquisition and burning people at the stake. The gross forms of their worship were the fruit of the real problem, which was accepting a god who had to be paid by sacrifice to grant blessings, a god who would inflict punishment if sacrifices were not brought. And Revelation tells us that those who hold to this view of God will again torture and kill in the name of their god.

[2] Do not conclude that because I assert that Jesus' death was not needed to appease/assuage/propitiate the Father that I am saying mankind could be saved without the death of Christ, or that Christ's death was unnecessary for our salvation. Absolutely not! We could not be saved without the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Christ. His death was a non-negotiable requirement for the salvation of mankind; it just wasn't needed to do anything to the Father or the law, for nothing was wrong with the Father or the law. His death was required for other reasons, all of which are consistent with God's character of love.

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[ii] White, E.G., Prophets and Kings, p. 124

[iii] 1897 General Conference Daily Bulletin Sermon Series number 1

[iv] George MacDonald, Discovering the Character of God (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1989), p. 39

[v] White, E.G., Prophets and Kings, p. 685

[vi] Duffield, G. P., & Van Cleave, N. M. (1983), Foundations of Pentecostal theology (188), Los Angeles, Calif.: L.I.F.E. Bible College

[vii] Knight, George, The Cross of Christ, p. 74

[viii] *ibid.*, p 64

[ix] Seventh-day Adventist Believe 27, p. 111

[x] *ibid.*, p. 111

[xi] Whidden, W., Ministry Magazine, February 2007 <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2007/February/sinners-in-the-hands-of-god.html>.

[xii] Rodriguez, A., Adventist World Review, December 2007; p. 40

[xiii] White, E.G., Desire of Ages, p. 761

[xiv] White, E.G., Faith I Live By, p. 59

[xv] White, E.G., Christ's Object Lessons, p.415
