

Question of the Week

17 November 1997

by Ted Wise (twise@mediacity.com)

QUESTION:

"In one of articles on your site you call witchcraft a pagan belief. You don't know what the word pagan means. The actual definition of pagan is derived from a word meaning "country dweller"..."

ANSWER:

Zina,

I'm curious about how you happened to be reading Ray Steadman's writings, what with you being Wiccan and all. I'm also curious about anyone who would jump right into things with an understanding of how important it is to know what the original writer meant when he or she wrote the words we translate, "pagan" or "heathen",. That gets my attention every time. In part, you wrote, "...The actual definition of pagan is derived from a word meaning "country dweller"..." So, like you, I just have to check it out.

While I'm at it, maybe I can improve my reputation as a Christian with you. I imagine that you have at your disposal information about the Wiccan religion that most other people don't have. Well, the same is true of some Christians, I say some, because as you have pointed out, there are folks who call themselves Christians who don't seem very Christ like. In fact they sometimes sound as if they believed that God is being recreated in their image as they speak. There really is no excuse for that kind of ignorance when one is handling the Word of God. Like you, they have access to the study tools of their faith. Unlike you, they don't bother to learn much about the very Word or words they claim to believe.

I knew before I read your letter, that in the New Testament, a Greek word that has the same root as "ethnic" (in the country folk sense) was being translated in some versions as "pagan". But I must confess that I have not studied the use of the word "heathen". However, because I have the study tools, let's see if I can remedy our misunderstandings and who knows, perhaps bring you under my spell, so to speak?

The first thing I always need is a hermeneutical strategy, as with any text. So I use the good old basic big three: What does it say? What does it mean? and So what? I'm not sure Zina, what sort of a method you use in your studies to establish the meaning of a word in its historical context rather than in its present use. Judging from your comments, you seem to understand that words from long ago and far away aren't necessarily so today.

Zina, I don't want to sound as if I'm making excuses for "attitude" in regard to those Christians who judge you to be a satanist by association through Bible word tricks. It never seemed to me that Jesus played the role of religious policeman much at all. More like a life guard, I'd say. Anyway, one must take into account that the writers of the Old Testament were all Israelites and not western in their thoughts at all. The same goes for the New Testament, all former Jews. This is a very important consideration namely because of exactly what you wrote about, the translation of the original Greek word, "ethnoi".

Western thought is so centered on individuality that it is impossible for us to appreciate what it would be like to regard one's nation as a family, the off spring of one man, Abraham. Even the name Israel is a particular man's name. We think in terms of national borders. They thought in terms of a portable nation, A group of

tribes descended from 12 brothers.

Most Israelites could recite their genealogy. As a result they saw Israel as God's kingdom, a people, a nation, a race, and a family. In the nation itself, only those who were obedient to Moses' law were in the Kingdom of God and truly Jews. This, of course leads to a very different view of "country people" than we have. To be an Israelite was an "us" and "them" proposition. Modern Jews often use the words gentile and Christian interchangeably. It comes from their view that Jews are born Jews so therefore Christians must be born Christians.

Let me quote from one of my hermeneutical tools, The Holman Bible Dictionary. (Not that I think Holman is the last word or anything like that. I just happen to have the book loaded on my computer).

Holman sez:

PAGANS: Those who worship a god or gods other than the living God to whom the Bible witnesses. Some versions use pagans as the translation of the Greek *ethnoi* (1 Cor. 5:1; 10:20), which is generally translated Gentiles. In English, Gentile relates to ethnic background while pagan refers to religious affiliation. See Gentiles; Gods, Pagan.

GENTILES: (ghehn' tiles) People who are not part of God's chosen family at birth and thus can be considered "pagans." Though not synonymous in English "Gentiles," "nations," "pagans," "heathens" are variants chosen by translators to render *goyim* in Hebrew and *ethnoi* in Greek. "Gentile" and "nation" suggest race or territory, while "pagans" and "heathen" suggest religion. "Heathen" is used in the KJV for the idolatrous people of Israel (Jer. 49:15; Ps. 135:15), but is in the NIV only at 1 Thessalonians 4:5. "Pagan" is not in the KJV but is in the RSV at 1 Corinthians 5:1; 10:20 for *ethnoi*, and is used numerous times in the NIV for both *goy* and *ethnos*. An invariable distinction between *am* ("people") and *goy* ("nation") is impossible. Both apply to Israel in the same context (Ex. 33:13; Deut. 4:6).

Zina, I'm sure you can see how your differences are with the Bible more than with the misguided attempts of some of us Christians to "inform" you of the truth. No matter how mean spirited some of us might seem, it is the Bible, The Word of God, that your quarrel is with. If I were you, I'd think twice, maybe more, about judging its contents. According to that very book when one judges God's word, one judges God Himself.

Please don't stop reading it. You sound like a good student. Rather, develop your own hermeneutic and have a go at the rest of its commonly misused and badly dated language. (KJV)

I have suffered the un-Christ like judgment at the hands of my fellow Christians just as you have. The irony is that the Bible actually IS about judgment, from the first murder (Cain vs Abel) to the last judgment of the whole of mankind in The Revelation. Fortunately, it is also about how to escape that judgment. Pretty strange when one pauses to think about it. An ancient book about how God can save you from God.

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