

# 119

## MINISTRIES

*“The following is a direct script of a teaching that is intended to be presented via video, incorporating relevant text, slides, media, and graphics to assist in illustration, thus facilitating the presentation of the material. In some places, this may cause the written material to not flow or sound rather awkward in some places. In addition, there may be grammatical errors that are often not acceptable in literary work. We encourage the viewing of the video teachings to complement the written teaching you see below.”*

### What is Pagan?

Many have an understanding that something that is pagan is inherently bad, or that it has to do with the occult. In fact, it is not uncommon to hear everything called pagan if it has to do with false god idol worship and practices. During the times of year that Easter and Christmas are celebrated, you will hear the word “pagan” thrown out all over the place. Also, it is always in a negative connotation. However, is it appropriate to consider all things that have been associated with paganism as being bad?

Can you imagine being condemned for wearing a wedding? It happens, a lot, we’ve seen it. We have seen people condemned by fellow “believers” because their wedding rings are supposedly “pagan.” We’ve seen people condemned for celebrating their birthday, for more on that, please see our video [Is It Wrong to Celebrate Birthdays?](#) The accusation of being a pagan is very common and is thrown about for all sorts of things like the days of the week, the months of the year, “Lady Justice”, crossing your fingers, knocking on wood, and the list goes on. People apply the label of pagan to nearly anything they can and then accuse others of worshiping false gods because they use the word Thursday or Saturday or claim to be born in the month of January.

Is this what YHWH intended when He told us not to worship Him the way the pagans worship their gods (Deuteronomy 12:4, Leviticus 18:3)? Is everything that’s pagan false god worship? Should we be condemning others because they wear wedding rings, celebrate holidays like Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, their birthday, or use the common names for the days of the week?

What if we were to tell you that you are involved with pagan things all of the time. The computer or device you are currently watching or reading this teaching on? Pagan. The car you drive? Pagan. The food you eat...well it’s likely that that’s pagan too. We need to take the time to see what words mean before we simply throw them out and put a negative connotation on them.

First remember, something’s connotation is not the same as its denotation. As an easy way to remember the difference here is that something’s **de**-notation is its **dictionary definition**. Something’s connotation is a meaning placed on it by society or in common use; it’s not necessarily its true definition. Essentially, connotation is slang. After enough time and widespread use, what was once slang sometimes gets added to the dictionary and becomes “denotation.”

Now that we've got that out of the way let's look at what something being "pagan" actually means. We like to start with defining Scripture, with Scripture. In other words, when words are used in Scripture we like to see them defined by other Scripture, or at least understand what those words meant in the time and culture in which they were written.

Depending upon the translation of Scripture that you're using, you may see the words "pagan," "gentile," or "heathen" used. They can all mean the same thing in the Greek or Hebrew when they were written.

In Hebrew, the word "gowy" or "goyim" is used (H1471 in Strong's). It may simply mean a nation or people. It can mean both those who are and those who are not descendants of Abraham. Using the KJV, in Genesis this word is translated as both "Gentiles" and as "nation" or "nations." Sometimes it is referring to the "nation" of Israel (descendants of Abraham), and other times it refers to other nations. In Genesis 18:18 the word "gowy" is used to refer both to the seed of Abraham and to the rest of the nations of the world.

### **Genesis 18:18 (KJV)**

Seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation [gowy], and all the nations [goyim] of the earth shall be blessed in him?

It is also translated as "heathen" or "people" in other places throughout the Old Testament, or the TANAKH.

If we jump to the Greek, the word "ethnos" (G1484), or a form of it, is often used and simply means: "a body of persons united by kinship, culture, and common traditions." It often denotes "people groups foreign to a specific people group." (BDAG 4th ed., "ἔθνος," 245). It is translated as Gentiles, nation, heathen, and people. The same is true if using the Greek Septuagint for the Old Testament as well.

For Scripture in general, we see that the words heathen, pagan, and Gentile tend to simply refer to a group of people, or nations, that are not Hebrew (or Israel, descendants of Abraham). However, as we pointed out, there are some times that they do refer to Israel, it just isn't as common. The words can be used interchangeably depending upon the translation you read. For example, in the ESV using the word "pagan" is common:

### **1 Corinthians 5:1**

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife.

While the KJV uses the word Gentile in the same place.

### **1 Corinthians 5:1 (KJV)**

It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife.

In fact, the KJV never uses the word "pagan" at all, just like the ESV does not use the word "heathen"; they are synonymous based upon the translation being used. Both of them use the word "Gentiles" as a meaning of the same word. Another interesting thing to note is that the word "pagan" is not used in the Old Testament at all in the ESV. Instead, the less culturally loaded word "nations" is used. So why does this matter?

It matters because we need to make certain we are not inserting any of our own modern vocabulary definitions into Scripture and our understanding of it. This is why we like to simply let Scripture define Scripture whenever possible.

If something isn't specifically defined in Scripture, then we need to look at the historical and cultural context of the word. From there we can then need to look at the context surrounding the word or phrase in order to determine what it means at that time in that sentence.

This becomes especially important with words like "pagan," "heathen," or "Gentile." The words used in Scripture (in the Hebrew and the Greek) mean one thing at one time, but today through the evolution of language and translations, the word can mean or imply something more.

Keep that in mind as we take this a step further and look at the history of the English words pagan, heathen, and Gentile.

### **Pagan**

Using dictionary.com, we find these definitions of the word "pagan" when used as a noun:

1. (no longer in technical use) one of a people or community observing a polytheistic religion, as the ancient Romans and Greeks.
2. a member of a religious, spiritual, or cultural community based on the worship of nature or the earth; a neopagan.
3. Disparaging and Offensive.  
(in historical contexts) a person who is not a Christian, Jew, or Muslim; a heathen.  
an irreligious or hedonistic person.  
an uncivilized or unenlightened person.

In modern times, we combine all three of those definitions into one implied definition when we hear or call someone or something "pagan." Look at definition 1 again, do you see the note there? It says it's no longer the definition in technical use. Yet from some context in Scripture, this is very likely a definition of the word, but only if the context puts that definition there such as in Deuteronomy 12:30. Remember how we said that the word "pagan" isn't used in the ESV until the New Testament? Here is an example, we see the word "nations" used instead, but further context reveals that these particular nations worship other gods.

### **Deuteronomy 12:30**

take care that you be not ensnared to follow them, after they have been destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire about their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods?—that I also may do the same.'

However, other times it is more generic and simply referring to the people not of Israel like in Deuteronomy 4:27. Notice that we still have the same word "nations" translated here, but without any indication that they are idol worshipers. While they may be, the meaning here is closer to that of definition 3 from earlier, meaning that they are simply not of Israel.

### **Deuteronomy 4:27**

And the LORD [YHWH] will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the Lord will drive you.

It's interesting to note that Definition 1, which is not in technical use today, is the definition we often think of when we speak about the 'pagan origins' of some Christmas and Easter traditions. When reading Scripture, it often defines itself through context; sometimes the same word used as heathen in one context carries a vastly different meaning than in another verse.

It may also be worth noting, that the word "pagan" derives from a word simply meaning a civilian, or one living in a rural area. These areas were among the last to be "Christianized" and thus held to their false god worship longer than the larger metropolitan areas like Rome or Athens. This is likely why the modern implied meaning carries with it an idea of one who worships other gods or idols.

We have covered the word "pagan" in depth, but because the words Heathen and Gentile are similar in nature, we will only briefly cover their modern definitions.

### **Heathen**

When used as an adjective, the word "heathen" refers to people or nations that are not Christian, Jewish, or Islamic, in other words, pagan. The word has sometimes been used to mean strange, uncivilized, nonreligious, or an uncultured person.

*("Heathen." Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/heathen>. Accessed 9 May. 2023.)*

We see here that these definitions are very similar to those found in the word "pagan." Historically they refer to people who are non-Hebrews, just as often described in Scripture. However, they can also mean an uncivilized person or potentially one who worships other or even no gods.

### **Gentile**

When used as a noun it can refer to someone who is either not Jewish in faith or heritage. This can mean a Christian or even a heathen. To those in the Mormon Church, it can mean a non-Mormon.

*"Gentile." Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gentile>. Accessed 9 May. 2023.*

Do you note the similarity in all of these words and their definitions? Do you see how in the definition for "Gentile" one of the definitions was actually listed as "a heathen or pagan"? All of them show a connection of a person not being part of Israel (here they used Jewish but we are going further back before Judaism was created as a religion).

So what does this mean for us today? You should be able to see that the word pagan can mean something relating to false gods and idol worship, but it does not necessarily have to mean that. This is why at the beginning of this teaching we mentioned that your mobile device, your vehicle, or the food you eat is likely pagan. Chances are, none of them are of Hebrew origin.

Calling something pagan doesn't necessarily mean it is bad and used in a false idol worship practice; it can simply mean it is not of Hebrew origin. This also means that not everything used in paganism (as in false god worship) is necessarily bad in and of itself.

Many pagan, or neopagan fertility rites involve sex, dancing, or fire. These things in and of themselves are not evil, thus they are not against the Torah. The problem occurs only when these same practices are done in a specific way. For instance, when temple prostitution is done in the name of YHWH, or

dancing as worship to a false god, or using fire to sacrifice to false gods, etc.

We should not be practicing temple prostitution and claim we are worshipping and honoring our Creator with it; such practices are against the Torah. We should not be performing ritual dances of other religions in worship of YHWH. And we should not be worshipping fire as a god or performing the same sacrifices and sacrificial rites of false gods and say we are worshipping YHWH.

We can have sexual relations with our spouses (we are commanded to be fruitful and multiply; sexual relations are a part of the marriage covenant where a man and woman become one flesh). We can dance and sing in worship of our Creator; we see Israel do the same when they were freed from Egypt, King David also did it. We can use fire to cook with, for warmth, or when we have the Levitical Priesthood and Temple in place to offer burnt offerings to YHWH as He commands at the time He commands them. In these cases, we are doing things His way to honor Him.

To simply list something as “pagan” is not enough to justify correcting a person in the faith. We need to make sure we say Bible things in Bible ways.

Our Creator told us to **not worship Him in the way the nations (or pagans) worshipped their gods.** That is what is important.

It becomes false god worship when we literally begin worshipping the creation instead of the Creator.

#### **Romans 1:24-25**

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

The bottom line is that we need to do more than find out if something “sounds pagan” or “could be pagan.”

Biblically, something being “pagan” is not the problem; it may just be something that is not specifically Hebrew such as a dance, or a cooking pot.

The problem is when we take the traditions of the “pagans” that were used to worship creation or other false gods, instead of the Creator, and then offer those traditions up to YHWH as if He would be pleased with them.

Hopefully by now you can see the importance of defining biblical terms in biblical ways and not projecting our own modern definitions and words into ancient vocabulary. When we do so we can misconstrue the intent of the message trying to be relayed by the authors of the Bible.

We need to understand that none of us, nor the translators of the modern Scriptures, were alive at the time they were written. They have all had to do their best to interpret in their modern language what was being communicated in ancient times. Over time the meaning of words can change or have additional meanings added to them. Doubtlessly this has led to many of the misunderstandings of Scripture throughout history and why we at 119 strive to understand Scripture in its original culture, language, and intent.

Before you assume that everything that is called pagan in modern times is bad or evil, we hope that

you'll take a moment to first consider if it really is pagan as in having to do with ancient false god worship. Or could it really just be something that was not descended from Abraham but can still be used today without breaking the Torah, such as dancing with joy before your Creator.

*We hope that this teaching has blessed you.*

*Remember, continue to test everything.*

*Shalom!*

*For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at [www.testeverything.net](http://www.testeverything.net)*

**Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.**

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