**SUMERIAN INFLUENCE ON MONOTHEISTIC FAITHS**

The world, and particularly the west, would be a vastly different place if it were not for its three main religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Often times in history, and even still today, these religions have found themselves at war with each other while shaping the course of history. Easy to forget, with all the friction between them, is that they share common books they consider holy.

Each of these three religions teaches that the Torah (the five books of Moses) was given by God, to Moses. Archeological clues, however, hint that the Torah, at least in part, has far older influences by a more ancient civilization: the Sumerians.

The Sumerians may have come from northern Mesopotamia, leaving traces of farming and irrigation on their way south to Sumer (modern day Iraq), where they settled in the 5th millennium BC (Cantor & Werthman, 1972). Their advanced agricultural techniques allowed their population to grow and allowed them to pursue other interest beyond basic survival. Soon, supported by strong agricultural practices, they went on to develop the first known civilization where they flourished until approximately 2000 BC. It wasn’t long until these Sumerians were lost to the minds of humanity for thousands of years, however, not before they left their mark, and influence, that continues in religion today.

Although the Sumerians flourished, their success wasn’t without problems. The land in which they settled, although very fertile, was known for frequent floods.  From day to day they faced unexpected dangers and it was likely not uncommon for individuals to lose everything, including loved ones (Rosenberg, 1999). It makes since then that the gods, in the minds of the Sumerian, were often selfish beings not concerned about them at all who only wanted humans as slaves (Rosenberg, 1999).

The Sumerian ideas about the gods are evident in their flood story. The similarities between the Genesis flood and the Sumerian flood myth that evolved down through the millennia are hard to ignore and is one hint at Sumerian influence on the Torah. The first known recorded Sumerian version of the flood myth is dated to the 18th century B.C. and is called the Eridu Genesis and was named for its discovery location. Many pieces of the Eridu Genesis tablets are missing, but we have enough to know it’s primarily the same version as in later Babylonian versions. In both the Genesis account, and Sumerian account, we have a god who warns his servant (Atrahasis in the Sumerian version, Noah in the Genesis account) of an impending flood and instructs them on how to build an ark (or boat) to survive.

Additional similarities between the two accounts of the flood myths exist. In both accounts animals board the ship for safety, they both send out a bird, and finding no resting place, the bird returns, and they both made sacrifices when it was all over to their god. Differenced exist in names and timeframes and one of the biggest differences is in scope. In the Sumerian flood myth, the flood was localized to a single river, but in the Genesis account, the flood was worldwide (Lambert, Millard, & Civil, 1999). As the story of Atrahasis evolves, however, certain details begin to change. Its next evolution shows itself in the well-known Epic of Gilgamesh. Again the names and timeframes have changed, but now, the flood story changes to become a worldwide event. So similar is the flood account of the Epic of Gilgamesh to Atrahasis and the Eridu Genesis that many scholars believe it was copied word for word with only minor changes (Tigay, 1982).

Other hints from Sumerian Mythology exist as well, and give more credibility to the notion that the Sumerians had an influence on the Torah. The Sumerian god Ninti was born for the purpose of healing the rib area. The “ti” in the word Ninti is Sumerian for the word “rib” or “life” depending on its usage. Ninti was called “the lady of life”, as well as “the lady of the rib” (Meagher, 202). This correlates with the Genesis story of Eve, who Genesis calls “the mother of all living” and was created from the rib of Adam (Lerner, 1994). Although this is by no means conclusive proof of a connection, it’s certainly easy to consider the possibilities. Perhaps as the Babylonians changed some of the Atrahasis myth of the Sumerians to fit in their Epic of Gilgamesh, the Jews borrowed elements of their surrounding culture to fit into their myths.

The dates of all these Myths lead further credence to the prospect of a Sumerian influence on the Torah. As mentioned previously, a conservative traditional view holds that Moses wrote the Torah and if this is the case would have been near the 12th century B.C. The Eridu Genesis, however, is dated to around the 17th to 18th century B.C (Davila, 1995). This was followed by the Gilgamesh version in which tablet XI, containing the flood myth, was created around the 13th century (Dalley, 1991). The point here is that the Sumerian/Babylonian creation and flood myths predate the traditional Biblical view that Moses wrote the Torah.

Most scholars do not agree with the traditional orthodox view but instead believe the Torah didn’t arrive in its final form until around 450 B.C. (Seters, 1975). Just less than 100 years prior, the Jews had faced hundreds of years of turmoil beginning in 722 B.C when Assyrians conquered the northernmost kingdom of the Jews. Less than 200 years later, the southern kingdom fell to the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar beginning in 586 B.C. in what is known as the Babylonian exile (Kagan, Ozment, & Turner, 2010). This exile lasted until 583 B.C. when the Persians conquered Babylonia and allowed the Jews to return.

Pope Benedict XVI (Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger) summarizes the mindset of the Jews during the exile saying “There were times when Israel was so preoccupied with the sufferings or the hopes of its own history, so fastened upon the here and now, that there was hardly any use in its looking back at creation; indeed, it hardly could. The moment when creation became a dominant theme occurred during the Babylonian Exile.” (p. 10). At this time, in exile, the Jews were scattered everywhere and were exposed to all kinds of cultures and belief systems. Without a center, they almost certainly had to adapt, if even unknowingly, to the influences surrounding them. Babylonian mythology, built atop the now forgotten Sumerian culture, finds its way to leave its mark on the Torah.

Given the evidence that the Torah was likely not completely compiled until the 5th century B.C., and that just a hundred years before the Jews were in exile, it seems completely plausible that some of the surrounding culture crept into Jewish ideas. Even if we chose to take a more traditional view of Biblical origins, we still find a very similar flood story predating Moses by at least 500 years. The dates make it seem much more likely that if there was mythological borrowing, it was likely the Jews that borrowed from the surrounding Babylonian culture who embraced much of the Sumerian culture that came before. Also the nature of both the Jewish and the Sumerian religion are sacrificial as noted in the flood myths. Finally, etymological studies of words employed in genesis such as “rib”, and the phrase “mother of all life” in relation to Eve suggest an obvious link with the Sumerian word “ti”, which means both rib, and life. Separately none of these facts conclusively prove a relationship between the two cultures. All these facts combined, however, make a compelling case for Sumerian influence on western religion.

USING THE INFORMATIN ABOVE REPSOND TO THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

In what ways did the Sumerians influence Jewish mythology or beliefs?

In what ways did the Sumerians influence Jewish Religious texts and writings?