Comparison Of Judaism And Islam Essay, Research Paper

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Because of the history of political and religious warfare that has separated them, the underlying unity of Judaism, and Islam is seldom recognized except by scholars. Yet these two great world religions have the same origins, the same central belief in monotheism, and to a large extent the same genealogical and scriptural authorities. It is in a greater sense a tale of two sons or two brothes. It is not surprising that these religions should share a common belief of creation and patriarchy, since the roots of these two are to be found in the basin of Mesopotamia, in the “Fertile Crescent” of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. There, in the ancient civilization of Sumeria, the descent of the Patriarchs of the Bible can be traced to an historical basis:

“Abraham was probably born in the Sumerian City of Ur four thousand years ago a scholar invented a label for the descendents of Shem; he called them Semites.” (Chaim Potok, p.23)

The story of Abraham and Sarah is the basis of the real distinction between the religions of the Semitic peoples; from their two sons are descended the patriarchy of the Hebrew and Arab peoples. The question of descent and the patriarchy is basic to any understanding of the origins of Judaism and Islam. God promised Abraham that he would have a son. In their old age Abraham and Sarah had yet to conceive this promise. According to ancient Mesopotamian law, a man could have many wives, and if a legitimate wife could not bear him children, he could take a servant as a wife. Sarah was barren, so according to custom and law she gave her Egyptian servant Hagar to Abraham to bear his children; and a son was born. However, this went against the promise of God to Abraham. As promised Sarah miraculously gives birth to a son as well, and a rift develops between these two brothers for what would be their birthright. Sarah orders Hagar and her son Ishmael cast out:

“But God appears to Hagar as she sits a distance from the child, in despair, unable to endure watching him die. God promises to make Ishmael father of a great nation. The boy is saved. Arab nations claim descent from Ishmael.” (Chaim Potok, p.32)

Similarly, God intervenes to save Sarah’s son Isaac from the sacrificial knife of Abraham in the famous test of his faith. The Hebrew people claim descent from Isaac. In this paper, I will examine the beliefs and practices of Judaism, and Islam, with the view that these two “brothers” common origins and ideas are more significant than their obvious differences.

Starting with Judaism we see Abraham is regarded by his people as the first Jew, however a better case can be made for regarding Moses as the founder of Judaism. Born in roughly the 14th century B.C.E., Moses was raised in anonymity in the court of the Egyptian pharaoh Seti I, having been saved from a decree ordering the death of all new-born Hebrew males. Moses thus had an Egyptian upbringing, and the basic belief in a universal God that some say may have been related to the experimental monotheism of an earlier pharaoh, Akhenaton:

“About a century before Moses, the pharaoh of an Egypt swollen with the spoils of empire envisioned a single god, one natural force at work upon the suffocating multiplicity of gods and men… His name was cursed; his god was obliterated. There can be no connection between that pharaoh and the man tending the flock in the wilderness – other than that both are of the same species, both reached for a unity beyond the wearying kaleidoscope we wake to each morning.”

(Encyclopedia Britannica, p.165)

Perhaps there is no connection, but it should be remembered that currents of monotheism were running in the ancient world outside Mesopotamia and Judea. Moses’ claim as the founder of Judaism is based on his role as a prophet of God, as receiver of the tablets of law, which form the basis of the Jewish covenant or pact with God. The Mosaic Law is the ethical basis of Judaism, and its belief in a single, universal God is based on the revelations of the supernatural God with the human prophet Moses. A definition of Judaism in the Encyclopedia Britannica observes the following:

“By emphasizing the difference between the human and divine natures…. Judaism differs from other creeds which also stress the Unity of God, e.g., Unitarianism and Islam, for these faiths assign to Jesus and Mohammed respectively a higher grade than that which Judaism concedes to Moses. On the other hand, Judaism differs from theoretical systems of ethics by reason of its historical, ceremonial and racial elements.” (Encyclopedia Britannica, p.166)

Specifically, Moses is regarded not simply as a prophet of God to whom the Law was revealed, but also as a liberator of the Hebrew peoples; as such, he is an historical figure and not a superhuman one.

The covenant with God that Moses reveals to the Hebrew peoples, after having spoken face to face with God declares them to be the “chosen people of God.” This belief remains the center of the Jewish religion today. The Mosaic covenant has had to be periodically renewed, as it was during the more than one thousand years between the time of Moses and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. This means not only the continuing adherence to the Law, (which was based on the earlier Noachian Law ordering abstinence from adultery, murder, robbery, and other sins), but a renewal of the very special relationship between God and the “Chosen People”. The sacred book of Judaism, the Torah, comprises the Old Testament of the Bible as well as other prophetic texts regarded as divine by Islamic faith. Although the Jewish people are distinct as a race, they do accept converts from other races and religions, and regard their religious teachings as representing universal truths which will ultimately be accepted by all mankind.

The essential teachings of Judaism are simpler than the wide range of biblical and ritual law might seem to suggest they be. They have summed up as follows:

“Man can, therefore, unaided, achieve his own redemption by penitence. Prayer having replaced the sacrifices of the Temple, no extra substitute for them is needed… The world is not regarded as inherently bad and Judaism consequently repudiates those Gospel sayings and teachings which, inspired by the conviction that the end of the world was at hand, maintained that the pious should abandon the ordinary conditions of settled social life and concentrate on the approaching change in the order of things.” (Encyclopedia Britannica, p.166)

Rabbis, for example, can marry and have children, and Judaism in general accepts the world as it is. This is because the end of the world and the coming of the Messiah to reveal the Kingdom of God to man is looked forward to; in other words, Judaism

“… places the Messianic age in the future, some authorities holding that this consummation will be non-catastrophic, but the outcome of the gradual development of the human race, Judaism believing essentially in progressive evolution, while others hold that a personal messiah, sent by God, will bring the Golden Age to pass” (Encyclopedia Britannica, p.166)

More than Judaism, the Islamic religion is the product of the genius of one man, Mohammed, regarded by the Islamic peoples as the true prophet God. Mohammed was born approximately 570 years after the birth of Jesus, at Mecca on the Arabian Peninsula. With the general collapse of the Roman Empire, paganism had overtaken much of the Middle East, and the peoples of Arabia were largely dissatisfied with the teachings of Judaism and Christianity. The inclination to monotheism was well founded in the region, and the people of Mecca already recognized Allah as the one God. It was in this atmosphere that we are told Mohammed received direct inspiration from God:

“He was almost forty years old when he received his call. We are told that a voice called to him, “Recite!” The frightened man could not respond and felt himself being strangled. He mustered the strength to ask what it was that he should recite. The commanding voice, that of the angel Gabriel, answered, “Recite!” three times, and then said, “Recite in the name of your Lord who created all things, who created man from clots of blood….”. It was night in the month of Ramadan in the year 610 of our era. That night was later named the Night of power.” (Chaim Potok, p.251)

The modern Islamic era, however, dates from 622 A.D., the date of the beginning of Mohammed’s “hejira” or pilgrimage from Mecca. The teachings of Islam are primarily the teachings of the Holy Koran, which is the record of Mohammed’s oral teachings during the latter part of his life. The Koran is based on the acceptance of certain scriptural authority from the patriarchs, but it is by and large the original work of Mohammed:

“On the question of originality there can hardly be two opinions now that the Koran has been thoroughly compared with the Christian and Jewish traditions of the time; and it is, besides some original Arabian legends, to those only that the book stands in any close relationship. The matter is for the most part borrowed, but the manner is all the prophet’s own….” (The Koran, viii)

There are direct references to the patriarchs in The Koran, as when Mohammed says of the infidel,

“Hath he not been told of what is in the pages of Moses? And of Abraham faithful to his pledge? That no burdened soul shall bear the burdens of another, and that nothing shall be reckoned to a man but that for which he hath made efforts…” (The Koran, p.71)

Thus Islam accepts as truthful the basic origin of man as described by Jews, but holds Mohammed’s teachings to be later and authoritative.

The monotheism of Islam is absolute, as expressed in the teaching, “There is but one God, Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet.” The ethical teachings of Islam have remained strongly intact, and resemble in many ways the Judaic teachings of the Old Testament, but with some differences. The sins of alcohol, prostitution, adultery, idolatry and theft are still strongly proscribed, and there is a greater degree authority granted to the man and the mullah than to the rabbi in Judaism.

The Islamic faith emphasized man’s moral behavior in this world, accepts the conversion of infidels to the faith, and recognizes the divine inspiration of other prophets of God, including Moses and Jesus. There is even a paraphrase of Moses that is spoken by Mohammed in Sura II, (The Cow):

“Verily, they who believe (Muslims), and they who follow the Jewish religion, and the Christians, and the Sabeites—whoever of these believeth in God and the last day, and doeth that which is right, shall have their reward with their Lord: fear shall not come upon them, neither shall they be grieved.” (The Koran, p.344)

Ultimately, however, Muslims must accept the authority of Mohammed as supreme, and his teachings in the Holy Koran as the final expression of God’s law for all mankind.

Because of the history of political and religious warfare that has separated them, the underlying unity of Judaism, and Islam is seldom recognized except by scholars. Yet these two great world religions have the same origins, the same central belief in one God, and to a large extent the same genealogical and scriptural authorities. It is in a greater sense a tale of two sons or two brothers. In he beginning of Judaism and Islam you find two sons that share their birthplace, yet fight for their birthright. It is hard to imagine the unity of these two very similar religions in light of this ancient sibling rift. Two brothers who can not get along.

References

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The Koran, Intro. By G.Margoliouth, viii.

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