Homer, Comparison And Contrast Of The Gods In Homer’s Epics With The God Of The Hebrews Essay, Research Paper

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Comparison and Contrast of the gods in Homer?s epics with the God of the Hebrews

There are many similarities and differences between the Greek gods and the Hebrew God. These similarities and differences are revealed in the character and functionality of the gods. The revelation of similarities and differences can also be seen in man?s relationship to his god or gods. Homer was instrumental in documenting the oral traditions of the Greek gods in his poetry. Moses, the Hebrew leader, is attributed with documenting what he witnessed from God in the Torah. The Greek and Hebrew belief systems were established for the purposes of explaining the world we live in, the phenomenon in nature, and the existence and purpose of man. The Greeks were polytheistic and had more gods than they could probably keep up with. In contrast the Hebrews had only one God. Regardless, the Greeks and Hebrews shared the same desire and that was to find answers to questions about existence and the purpose of life.

The character and functionality of the Greek gods vary from god to god. Zeus was the chief of the Greek gods and considered the most powerful. This may be a bit misleading because even though he held the highest rank, the lesser gods did not always submit to his authority. The lesser gods did things at times that they knew would go against the wishes of Zeus. It is apparent that all the gods did things for their own pleasure and men were the pawns in the games they played. This can be seen in Homer?s The Iliad. Zeus loved Sarpedon and wanted to intervene to save him from injury or death. Queen Hera advised Zeus that it would be unwise to intervene because the other gods would see it as favoritism. Petroclus killed Sarpedon. The god Apollo avenges the death of Sarpedon by stripping away Petroclus? armor rendering him

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defenseless, and thus he is killed by Hector. It is apparent that the Greeks felt that the gods ordered their destiny. According to Alexander Murray, ??man himself, and everything around him, was upheld by Devine power; that his career was marked out for him by a rigid fate which even the gods could not alter, should they wish it on occasion. He was indeed free to act, but the consequences of all his actions were settled beforehand? (2). In the case of Petroclus, it was his destiny to die in that particular battle and thus the gods ensured that it happened according to fate. The Greek gods were not always considered fair in their dealings with man. There arose doubts to the absolute justice of the gods, and even the sanctity of their lives. There seemed to be two sets of standards, one for the gods and one for man. The deities were not eternal in their existence. There are stories about their birth. They were the offspring from other gods. The gods were immortal; however, there is a story of the death of Zeus that came from the Isle of Crete. The gods maintained and preserved the existing order and system of things according to their divine wisdom. The Greeks never arrived at the idea of one absolute eternal God. This is a distinction the Hebrews held fast to.

The Hebrew god is most commonly referred to as God; however, he has been also called Elohim, and Yahweh. In the English rendering he is called Jehovah. There appears to be no documentation that states that the Hebrews were ever polytheistic and evolved into worshipping one supreme god. The Pentateuch or Torah is composed of the first five books of the bible. These books reveal the character and function of the Hebrew god. Genesis, the first book of the bible states: ?In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.? (1.1). This beginning is the creation of the universe, man, and all living creatures. It is not the beginning of God. We have no oral account or written history as to God?s beginning. We are only told that he has existed for eternity. A definition found in the Westminster Shorter Catechism declares: ?God is a

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Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.? (316). The Greek gods had claims to wisdom and power; however, they were not usually referred to as being holy, just, or good. They were holy, just, and good when they chose to be. Murray emphasizes that the gods ??were conceived to possess the form of human beings, and to be, like men, subject to love and pain, but always characterized by the highest qualities and grandest form that could be imagined.? (4). These characteristics did not make the Greek gods infallible but rather fallible due to the element of human emotion.

The Hebrew God is a spirit and could not be seen by man lest he die. The Hebrews were forbidden to craft statues of God.? Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.? (Ex 20:4). Based on this it is hard to say how they envisioned the appearance of God. Interestingly God states that he created man in his image in Genesis 1:26. It is obvious that the Greeks never actually saw their gods but they did create them in works of art and as a result adopted in their minds the created image as being an actual likeness. The Hebrews had no frame of reference to consider nor were they allowed to consider such. The Hebrew God had no other gods to contend with. It is documented in the bible that there are angels, but angels are not on the same level as God. Angels are the servants to God and man and do not have any power equivalent to God?s power. Satan, who was a fallen angel represents evil and is anti-God. Some of the Greek gods may have acted evil on occasion but there were none that purposed evil continually against Zeus. God and the Greek gods were considered omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. Only a god could possess these characteristics. The greatest contrast between The Greek gods and the Hebrew God is the relationship between god and man.

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The Greeks did not have a close intimate relationship with their gods, as did the Hebrews. One might contend that the reason the Hebrews were more intimate with God is because they were persecuted and looked to God for comfort. The story of their captivity, slavery, and final exodus reveals some very trying times for the Hebrews. During the time of Homer, which was around the eight century B.C., the Greeks were living somewhat prosperously. There began a rise of aristocracies throughout Greece and it was during this period that the Olympiads began. This is not to imply that the Greeks did not need a god to rely on throughout their daily lives. It only shows that they were living in an era of economic prosperity and they were not slaves as were the Hebrews. History reveals that people in general turn to god whenever they are experiencing difficulty in life. The death of a loved one, severe illness, persecution, slavery, and poverty seem to make people a bit more religious to their god. Thus people living in prosperity may not need God for comfort like those who are under some sort of trial in life. The Hebrews witnessed the miracles from God that convinced the Egyptians to free them from slavery. They also wandered forty years in the wilderness prior to entering the Promised Land. During the Exodus they witnessed many more miracles such as the parting of the Red Sea, Manna from heaven, and water from a rock. These experiences would make one a believer in the power and person of God. Moses apparently saw these things happen and recorded them first hand. Homer records what he has heard from the oral traditions. Oral traditions can be very powerful and very believable. The development of the oral traditions on the other hand can over time evolve into something more realistic even though they may have originated from imagination. The Greeks eventually abandoned their gods and adopted beliefs in gods from other cultures. As to the origin of these oral traditions, Murray, has this to say: ??the youth of a nation, like that of an

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individual, is the period at which the activity of imagination and fancy is greatest in proportion as knowledge is least?when they seek to fathom or measure the cause of the phenomena of nature they have no standard to employ at hand, except themselves.? (77). The Hebrews use God as a standard to employ since Moses and his followers witnessed the events firsthand. This may be why the Hebrews believe in their God to this day and the Greeks abandoned theirs. The Greeks eventually realized that their traditions were created by the imaginations of man. This did not occur suddenly. The Romans conquered the Greeks and adopted much of the Greek mythology adding their own embellishments to the traditions. History reveals that the Romans also abandoned these adopted traditions for Christianity. Christianity takes the Hebrew tradition and adds a second chapter so to speak. The Hebrews do not accept this Christian theology but both share the same original traditions. The Hebrew God passed down to man standards for righteous living. The Ten Commandments found in Exodus 20 are the first written standards of living righteous passed from God to man. The remainder of the book of Exodus reveals numerous other standards that God required from man. The Hebrews called these standards The Law. The Hebrews learned that God was infallible, totally pure, totally just, and completely unchangeable in his ways. The Greeks could not say the same about their gods. Their gods acted capriciously and the issue of justice was one that meant one thing for the gods and another for man. Morality was not something that the gods passed on to the Greeks but rather ideals that the Greeks adopted for themselves. Edith Hamilton, comments: ?Zeus, trying to hide his love affairs from his wife and invariably shown up, was a capital figure of fun.? (9). The Greeks did not necessarily see the gods as being moral. Michael Gibson explains this relationship. ?Another way in which the Greeks tried to make the all-powerful gods seem less austere was to give them human weaknesses. ? (12). It is interesting to note that God played an active part in Hebrew

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morality whereas the Greeks where influenced by the gods immorality. God punished the Hebrews for their sins. It is not really clear that the Greeks were punished for their sins; however, they probably saw common misfortunes as a possible punishment from the gods for sin. The Hebrews passed the Law to their children and continued this tradition throughout generations. We see the opposite in the Greeks. Murray finds: ?It is remarkable and surprising that, with all the piety and religious ceremonies of the ancients, there existed among them no established means of instruction for the mass of the people, as to the character and function of the gods whom they worshipped.? (16). The belief system of the Greek and Hebrew warrants comment.

After the establishment of the Law, God also gave instruction concerning offerings, worship, and sacraments. It is not clear how the Greeks established the rules concerning such things. They did develop such a system because throughout The Illiad and The Odyssey the characters did make obeisance to the gods in the form of oblations. An example from The Illiad is the following quote. ? ?Here, quickly-pour a libation out to Father Zeus! Pray for a safe return from all our mortal enemies, seeing you?re dead set on going down to the ships-?? (196). The Greeks practiced two types of offerings or sacrifices. The first was the fruits, cakes, and wine offering. The second was animal sacrifices. In both cases the offering was to be of the best quality, and in the case of animals, they were to be of the healthiest stock and without blemish. Gibson offers an explanation of how the idea of offerings to gods came about for the Greeks. ??the Greeks probably adapted stories brought by invaders, or heard in other lands, to fit their own ritual practices, the true meanings of which had been forgotten.? (12). The Hebrews on the other hand had very similar practices. They had oil, flour and animal offerings. These offerings had to meet the same criteria of being of the best quality. God meticulously described in the book

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of Leviticus the process of making sacrifices. His instructions were very clear and concise. The Greek and Hebrew cultures maintained priesthoods. In the Greek culture, the priesthood was to

be pure but there appears to have been no consequence for impurity in the priest. In the Hebrew culture, a priest had to be pure otherwise God would strike him dead. The Hebrews had a practice of tying a rope around a priest?s ankle with bells attached. The priest would enter the holiest of holies and perform sacrifices to God. If the priests were impure, God would kill them. In order to retrieve the body of a slain priest, they had to pull him via the rope from the holy place. Only priests were allowed in this most holy place. There does not appear to be any tales of such consequences from the Greek gods. We do see that the Greek gods became angered if they were not recognized through some shrine or oblation. It was commonly thought that prosperity and health were results of pleasing the gods. In the Hebrew culture, the main concern was more on the issue of an afterlife.

There appears to be some differences between the Greeks and Hebrews concerning thoughts of life after death. The Greeks were more concerned about the physical life rather than the life after death. There are some indications that they believed in a life in the realm of the gods but it is not clear that they really prepared for such an event. The Hebrews on the other hand were taught that they must live a pure life in order to go to heaven. Heaven is the abode of God. Faithful servants would be entitled to enter heaven after death. The unfaithful or disobedient were directed to a much less desirable place. This destination called Hades or Hell was a place of eternal torment. It can be clearly understood that such a thought would cause fear in a person. Therefore, the Hebrews saw a mortal life of devotion to God as just a stepping-stone into an eternal afterlife. Sin was enmity against God and since man was not perfect he was apt to sin. God made a provision for sin and that was animal sacrifice. The blood of the slain animal would

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atone for the sins committed by man. The Greeks did not have such a belief and they did not envision an eternal place called hell.

There is one final point to be made concerning the Hebrews and their god. The Hebrews felt that God was a god exclusive to the Hebrews. All other people were considered heathen and the heathen had their own false gods. The Greeks did not have the same philosophy. A foreign person was permitted to learn about and worship the Greeks gods. This was not thought to be abnormal. The Hebrews were tempted to worship the false gods of the heathen. Throughout the Old Testament, which is comprised of 66 books, there are many stories of the Hebrews trying to adapt to pagan ritual and custom. In nearly every incident, God punishes the Hebrews for their disobedience. It is possible that some of these rituals finally became a part of the Hebrew belief system. Like the Hebrews, the Greeks did borrow from other cultures. It is improbable that the Hebrews did not do the same even though their God did not wish it.

Both cultures were equal in their quest to understand the origin of human existence. The Greeks developed science as an explanation. The Hebrews followed their faith in God as an answer to all. We can see parallels in some of the stories that show the attempts by man to explain phenomena that occur in nature. It is likely that the Greeks and Hebrews felt that the gods were responsible for fierce storms, thunder, and lightning. We realize that today these are natural weather phenomenon but to these early cultures they were very frightful experiences that could only be explained through their own imaginations.

In summary, the Greeks and Hebrews shared the common belief that gods or God had the final say so as to the fate of man. The gods were all knowing, all powerful, and could be

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anywhere at all times. Gods were immortal and man was mortal. There are some contrasts but these contrasts only show the differences in Man?s relationship to his god. The Greeks and Hebrews borrowed from other cultures at least in part. The Greeks were conquerors and the Hebrews were normally the conquered. This probably explains the difference in man?s relationship to a god. Eventually we see that the contrasts are not that different and the comparisons are very much alike.

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