

**THE PLAUSIBILITY OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE
BEING THE BASIS OF GRECO-ROMAN
MYTHOLOGY**

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Gods and Goddesses

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The mythological tales of many of our Western cultures seem to ring with an overwhelming similarity to the stories contained within the Hebrew Scriptures¹. The influence of the Jewish people and their stories is a play well rehearsed throughout every nation under heaven, this influence can be seen in every field of expertise from medicine to farming and most importantly, to faith. The purpose of this paper was to explore the plausibility of the Jewish people being the basis of much of Greco-Roman mythology.

A People of Influence

The influence the Jewish people had upon the world around them is predicated upon the fact that they were actively mingling with goyim² for the purposes of trade and commerce. As business affairs took the Jewish people throughout the known world of the day, not only did they sell their wares but they also shared their faith with those whom they came in contact with. It is this communication of faith that led to the rise of many Western mythological tales of the ancient world. Philo³, writes of the Jewish influence upon the world of his day by saying, "There is not a single people to which the custom of the Sabbath observance has not spread" (Bacchiocchi, 1985, p.34) .

¹ Hebrew scripture is a term used to describe, what is better known as the Old Testament.

² Goyim is the Hebrew word for "nations" or "gentiles".

³ Philo (20 B.C.E. – 50 C.E.) was a Jewish historian from Alexandria Egypt.

Philo suggests that the known world had been impacted by the Jewish faith with regards to the Sabbath. The spreading of this faith was in the form of stories and songs that accompanied the believer wherever they travelled. Whether the traveller was in exile⁴, such as in Babylon, Egypt, Assyria or merely on a business trip, and as one culture encountered another, stories were exchanged and repertoires expanded.

In antiquity information was carried by word of mouth, this is beautifully illustrated among the Greeks by way of their merry minstrels. “The legends of the Greek gods were passed from island to island by the minstrel who wandered through the land with a harp across his back and the stories in his hand. Since there were no books to read in that day little public activity, the minstrels sang for their supper and became the city-wide entertainment. He became the teacher of the young and old alike, and was welcome as the honoured guest in both the palace and the individual home. The stories of the minstrels helped establish the mythology of the gods, and formed a major part of the teaching of history, geography, and the honourable behaviour expected of a Greek” (Moseley, Gods and Goddesses, 1999).

Within modern Jewry it is well known that the activity of spreading the word about the faith and making converts is a private matter. However within Biblical Judaism⁵ the concept of going about and spreading the faith was not only common place but encouraged. Jesus mentions of his detractors that they were willing to traverse land and sea to make one convert (Mtt.23:15).

⁴ Exile is a divine punishment that drove Israel through many nations of the world.

⁵ Term used to describe Jewish faith and practice prior to the establishment of Rabbinic tradition.

Tertullian⁶ echo's the words spoken by Philo when he reproaches the heathen for having adopted Jewish customs such as the Sabbath (ibid). It appears that many of the historians of ancient times were well aware of the influence of the Jewish people and their willingness to affect the people around them with aspects of their faith. In like manner Augustine of Hippo⁷ quoting the Roman Seneca⁸ in his complaint about the strength of Jewish influence during the reign of Nero that "Jewish customs have gained such influence, they are now received throughout the world. The vanquished have given laws to the victors" (Messianic Jewish Musings 2007).

Exactly what Augustine of Hippo meant by saying "throughout the world" can only be a matter of subjection. However, the evidence seems to suggest that the idea of "world" would have meant the Roman world-view which would have been to the outer reaching of the empire. This gives us a better understanding of what the Jewish people did while they were resident outside the land of promise. They would, it seems speak of Sabbath, of Torah⁹, the customs given in scripture. Although there were people who were Separated from the land of promise and the second temple were not going to fade into the recesses of the earth without making a deposit of Jewish faith and practice into all those they came in contact with. It is these Hebrew deposits that would become the basis for the evolving mythological religion of the West.

⁶ Christian writer from Carthage who lived circa 160 – 220 C.E.

⁷ A Platonic Latin church father 354-430.

⁸ Known as "Seneca the younger" lived 4B.C.E. – 65 C.E.

⁹ Hebrew word meaning "law" or the first five books of the Bible.

An Infectious People

The historian's compositions of the period seem to suggest that this so called vanquished down people had begun to cause huge changes in thought and expression, and that these changes had reached Rome the very heart of the empire itself. In 139 B.C.E., the Roman Gnaeus Cornelius Scipio attempted to silence the Hebrews from "infecting the Roman customs with the cult of Jupiter Sabazius" [Roman way to say Adonai Tzebaot]. (Valerius Maximus, Epitome of Julius Paris).

This "infection" as it was called was to make its way throughout the Empire and even found itself resting in the nation of Greece which had fallen to the Romans in the year 30 B.C.E.. Near the end of the first century, the Stoic philosopher, Epictetus, began to raise questions about why some of the citizens were choosing to be halfway between a Jew and a Roman. He goes on to say that if they went ahead and got baptized [for Jewish conversion] then they would be a Jew and be called a Jew. (Arrian, Dissertations)

Some have postulated that Poppaea Sabina¹⁰ may have been a God-fearer because of her defence of the Jews against Herod Agrippa¹¹. It has been suggested by Josephus¹² that Poppaea very well could have been believer, once again testifying to the power and influence of this dispersed people. It is even recorded in the Jewish Midrash¹³ and Talmud¹⁴ that the Yirei Shamayim¹⁵ were among the Romans (Deut. Rabbah, 2.24; Megillah 74a).

¹⁰ The wife of Nero

¹¹ King of Judea 10 B.C.E. – 44 C.E.

¹² 1st century Jewish historian in the employment of the Romans

¹³ Compilation of teachings and commentaries on the Hebrew Scriptures

¹⁴ Collection of Rabbinic discussions on the Scriptures

The classic example of Jewish influence upon a nation could possibly be Babylon. We understand that while the Jews were in Babylon they learned the art of merchandizing and became quite wealthy and only about 42,000 returned to Eretz¹⁶ Israel from exile leaving the vast majority of Jews in Babylon. It is this massive population that produced the most widely used Talmud of the day, namely the Babylonian Talmud. Two of the greatest universities were established there and it is from Babylon that we see the creation of the synagogue. It was the great company of Jews that drew Peter, the Apostle to the Jews. It is recorded that Peter even wrote a letter from the church that was at Babylon (1Peter 5:13).

Seafaring Jews

We are told that Solomon created a navy with many ships and that the port was located at the Red Sea (I Kings 9:26). These men were skilled with knowledge of the sea and went about hunting gold. This could very well be the method of contact that introduced the Queen of Sheba to the reputation of Solomon as his ships are mention in I Kings the ninth chapter and she is mentioned a mere two verse later “And when the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the Lord, she came to prove him with hard questions” (I Kings 10:1).

It should be noted here that although the men were out to do business, that being to look for gold, the queen was impressed by the “name of the Lord”. It appears that while they were travelling they also shared of their faith

¹⁵ Hebrew for Fearers of Heaven

¹⁶ Hebrew word meaning “land” meaning specifically the land of Israel

to the point of converting a monarch.

The seafaring occupation of the Jewish people is further verified by the existence of a brass astrolabe¹⁷ inscribed in Hebrew. The existence of such instruments attest to their use by Judaic navigators. Instruments such as the quadrant, used in conjunction with astronomical tables, in addition to maps showing the earth as globular were largely the product of Judaic savants (Kurinsky 2000). The Biblical record speaks of three of the tribes of Israel as having to do with the sea and ships namely Zebulun, Dan and Asher (Genesis 49:13; Judges 5:17). The fact that the world was a globe was spoken of in the Jerusalem Talmud (Aboda Zara, 42c). The Zohar¹⁸ is even more emphatic declaring that the earth rotates on its axis like a ball and even Maimonides¹⁹ subscribed to this concept.

With the understanding well within the fabric of Jewish thought from the earliest of times, they plotted routes around the world by land and by sea that allowed them to increase in wealth and educate the heathen.

Land Lovers

The Jewish seafaring expositions can only be rivalled by their many land routes they produced from the Silk Route, created by the Persian Jews in the fifth century B.C.E. to the Kings Highway. These connected Israel to the rest of the world. Israel became an intersection of the world with everything from the Via Maris to the Incense Route and the ancient Levantine trade routes. The exports that moved the Hebrews throughout the world were many faceted and included glassware and linen. Rabbi Chiyya bar Abba, is mentioned in the Mishnah as being involved with trade in the Near East.

¹⁷ Astronomical instrument used for sailing.

¹⁸ Most famous work of Jewish mysticism

¹⁹ Also known as Rambam, he is credited with codifying Jewish Oral Law 1135 C.E. – 1204 C.E.

Among his wares were: glassware, flax and linen. It is recorded in the Jerusalem Talmud that “the fine linen vestments which come from Beth Shean (Qiddushin ii, 5062c).”

Confirmation comes via the fourth century Latin work *Descriptus Orbis* declaring that Beth Shean is described as a city which supplies textiles to the whole world. Two Roman Emperors Diocletian (296 C.E.) and Hadrian (132 C.E) describe the Jews as being skilled glassmakers in both Judah and Alexandria (Dan Barag 1985).

In 1902 a man named M. A. Stein discovered that uniquely Judaic glassmaking was practiced by itinerant artisans along the Silk Route. Included with the glassmaking relics found at one site was a fragment of a business letter written in Hebrew script and a Hebrew prayer written on paper. Paper was then as yet unknown in the West; Its presence indicates that the traveller was travelling from East to West (M.A.Stein 1902).

Original Replacement Theology

With plenty of quality goods to sell and established routes on both land and sea the Jews launched out into a polytheistic world to reaping the riches of the Gentiles and to sowing into them faith in Ha Shem. When culture met culture and Biblical stories relayed, it appears that many who heard them replaced the ethnically Jewish heroes with people of their own nationality. The stories are too similar to have been by chance and, given the mobility of the Jews, not only is it a plausible proposition, but a probable one.

The Stories they Shared

The parallels between Samson and Hercules are many faceted: Hercules is called by God to perform tasks of great strength as was Samson.

Hercules must escape a woman called "Pleasure" compared with Samson and the harlots of Canaan or even Delilah. In addition, Hercules first task is to kill a lion both of which echo the life of Samson. There is some speculation that lions did not even exist in Greece at the time of Homers writing.

Hercules went out and captured wild animals even as Samson caught wild animals. It is interesting to note that the word for traders or merchants is the Hebrew word "Heraclim" (Brooks 2000). If indeed, the Jews landed upon the coast of Argos and introduced themselves as "Heraclim" it is plausible then that the people who created the Greek name of their hero would use the name of the people who brought them the story.

The story of Noah is so close to the myth of Deucalion that one can not overlook the obvious source of the story. Deucalion and Pyrrha for example built a wooden chest to save them from the flood. The flood of Deucalion was to destroy mortals for their evil deeds. The chest finally runs aground on a mountain top and the survivors upon exiting the chest offer up a sacrifice all of which mirror the epic of Noah found in Genesis chapters six through nine.

The very concept of Achilles who would die through an injury to his heel shouts of Genesis three where it is stated that Messiah would die due to an injury to His heel (Genesis 3:15). Similarities abound between G-d in the Exodus and Zeus. G-d is seen to be living on Mt. Sinai, Zeus lives on Mt. Olympus. Sinai is surrounded by clouds, lightning and thunder, and Zeus sends lightning and thunders from Olympus. G-d is the one only true King and Zeus is supposedly the king of all gods.

The story of the fall within Greek mythology speaks of the first human couple being banished from paradise. They lived like the gods being free from

disease, sorrow and even work. The fall of mankind just as in the Genesis account came through the disobedience of the woman.

Dr. Moseley mentions that “the religious background of the early Greeks evolved from their view of the world as a frightening place with every storm and eclipse of the sun directly the anger of the gods”. (Moseley, Gods and Goddesses 1999).

Although I do agree with Dr. Moseley in principle, and it does appear to some extent that nature was responsible for the mythology of many in the Greco-Roman world. However, one cannot overlook the impact of a migratory, vocal and faith filled people, the Hebrews, as a plausible source of much of Western mythological faith and practise.

Conclusion

- 1.) The Jews were people of influence regardless of their state whether it be in exile or in freedom.
- 2.) They were not silent about their faith but shared it with those whom
- 3.) They were sailors and great navigators of the sea having three tribes dedicated to the ships of Israel.
- 4.) They also pioneered land routes and had use of all routing that crisscrossed the land of Israel.
- 5.) Their stories of the heroes of the Bible, the Sabbath, the Law and their customs made their way into the pagan world.
- 6.) The native peoples among the various nations to whom the Jews were sent took the stories, the history and the characters and Hellenised them, the by-product being the creation of many myths held within the ancient world.

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