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Judaeo-Christian Cosmology vs. Chumash Cosmology

Growing up in America, one would presume that we would be more exposed to the cosmologies and creation stories of the people that lived here before the influence of Europe took hold of the land. Americans today are almost all educated under the ideas of Judaeo-Christian traditions, and learn little about the cultures that existed here before the Americas were colonized. Research reveals some striking similarities and some noteworthy differences between the way that the origin of the universe was explained by indigenous tribes and the way that it is explained by Judaeo-Christians. The fact that the Western thinkers and the indigenous tribes of America had no knowledge of each other's creation stories and cosmologies makes one wonder how certain aspects of their stories can be almost identical, such as the world being wiped out by floods to leave a clean slate for new creation. Specifically with the Chumash tribe of Southern California, there are some peculiar congruities with Judaeo-Christian beliefs, but also some evident incongruities.

First off, if one simply looks at the structure of the Chumash cosmography in comparison to Judaeo-Christian beliefs, there are some clear similarities. According to Figure 1, which is a picture of the three layered cosmos that the Chumash believed existed, at first glance it looks very similar to the beliefs of Christianity. There are three clear "worlds," one in the clouds, on the back of an eagle, one in the middle, which is centered around an island, and another

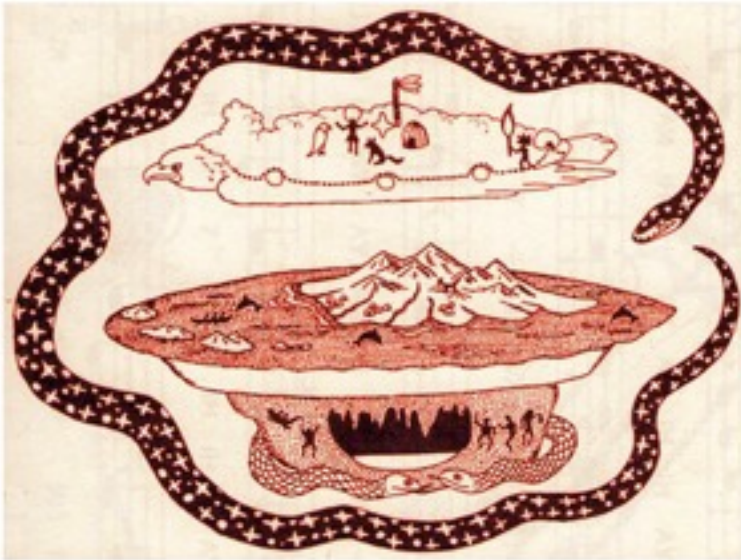


Figure 1, The three worlds of Chumash Cosmology

underground, which is dark and encircled by a snake. It is impossible to look at this and not see what Christians would call heaven, hell, and the world that we live in. Heaven is often referred to as a city in the clouds, as it is portrayed here.

Furthermore, in the Adam and

Eve story, the devil takes the form of a snake when he tempts the humans with the apple, and in the figure it can be seen that a snake also lives in the underworld of the Chumash cosmography.

There are many similarities between the Chumash creation story and the creation story in the bible. In Genesis 1, God creates Earth, and then for six straight days he creates something new, be it land, water, animals, or humans. On the seventh day, he rests. This cosmological idea of how the Earth was created is part of the religion of Christianity. It is a story that is widely accepted in Western culture and many put their faith in this higher power. Although there was only one higher power in the Genesis 1 creation, God, and there are many at work in the Chumash story, (the sun, moon, and stars, and others) this does not make it impossible to see similarities between the Chumash story and Genesis I. In Genesis 1, we are told that God created heaven and Earth, then darkness and light, better known as light and day. In the Chumash Creation, the Sun God and the Moon represent night and day, and the Great Eagle represents Heaven. Each God has its own duty, but they come together in order to design new creatures that would soon inhabit the Earth. In both stories you are able to see the importance that Heaven,

day, and night, play in these creation stories, and they are the first things created if not the leaders of the creation.

The Chumash, like the Hebrews, tell us of how animals were the first creatures made, and the humans were next. The Sun God, Morning Star, the Moon, and the Great Eagle initially come together to create the new creatures, such as the lizard and the coyote. They give humans similar characteristics to the animals, such as hands like the lizards. In Genesis 1, God creates inhabitants of the water and Earth. These animals were whales, and cattle, and God was able to see that it was good. He then made man in his image, to reproduce and be fruitful, and then blessed them. Both stories include water creatures, such as the swordfish in the Chumash story, which were made to protect the people. We are able to see the importance animals have within the creation stories, and that they were made before humans. A difference though, is that the Gods in the Chumash story did not create humans in their image, but rather combine aspects of each animal to form a new creature. This shows the respect the Gods had for the creatures they initially created, and accounts for the respect that the Chumash had for their animal gods, much like the respect Judaeo-Christians have for God.

In Judaeo-Christian cosmology, there is a widespread belief that the first civilization of humans and animals were wiped out by a massive flood: “God saw how great wickedness had become and decided to wipe mankind from the face of the earth” (Fairchild). God’s purpose was to eliminate sin and wrongfulness, not to destroy all humans. A select group of humans and animals were chosen by God to survive the impending flood. God chose Noah and his family to build an ark that would save him, his family, and two of each animal. Noah was told of the

massive flood and was instructed on how to build the ark. These survivors were saved to repopulate the earth once the flood had wiped out all evil life on earth.

Similarly, the Chumash believed in a great flood that wiped earth of all life. “The Chumash myth tells of a great deluge which engulfed the earth, taking with it all living things



Figure 2, The Great Eagle

save for the Spotted Woodpecker (Figure 3), the nephew of Kaqunupenawa, the Sun God” (Chumash Indians Creation Myth). While in Judaeo-Christian cosmology the flood wiped out humans and animals, in the Chumash cosmology the flood wiped out many early spirits. Those spirits were then transformed into different present-day animals after the flood. The Sun God, Morning Star, the Moon, and the Great Eagle

Slo’w (Figure 2)all created the new creatures to live on the earth, while in the Judaeo-Christian cosmology they believed all the previous animal species were saved so they could repopulate the world with the same animals. The Chumash believed that this all occurred on the Southern California island of Santa Cruz. This is unlike the Judaeo-Christian cosmological belief that there was no specific place that the creation of animals occurred.

Both the Chumash creation story and the Genesis I creation story believe that there is one God that initially creates the earth and

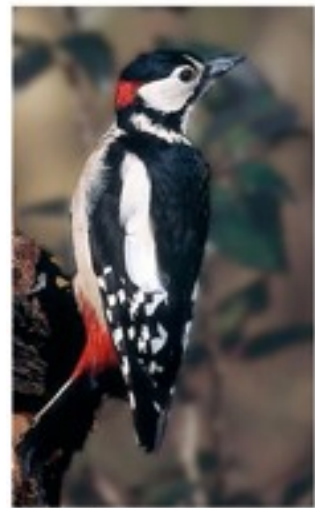


Figure 3, The Great Spotted Woodpecker

the first inhabitants that live on it. An aspect that is slightly different is the gender of these creators. The Chumash people believed that the creator Hutash was a female goddess. The Judaeo-Christian cosmology, while never explicitly determining the gender of their God as either male or female, often referred to God as "Father." They also believe that it was the same God that helped restore the world after the great flood, compared to the Chumash who believed a different group of gods rebuilt and created completely new life on earth. This is also a major difference in beliefs because the most Western beliefs are centered around only one god. The Chumash believe in many different Gods that all have different purposes in creating the world that exists today. Their gods were based on the sun, the moon, the stars, and other animals that were indigenous to their land. The fact that the Gods in Chumash culture were based on the sun, moon, and stars is worth noting, because these were the means by which the Chumash kept time. They used "light and shadow schemes involving wall markers...to keep track of the sun's course," much like the Pueblo tribes that were relatively nearby (Aveni 171).

One of the most interesting points about the Chumash creation story is that it claims that human beings were created in the image of animals. This could be viewed as both a stark contrast or a similarity to the Judeo-Christian creation stories. One could view it as a similarity because the Chumash Gods were animals, so like the ideas of Catholicism, the Chumash believed that they were created in the image of God; however, they did not see their God as anything that looked like a human being. This is where the difference between Chumash cosmology and Judaeo-Christian Cosmology comes into play. While Judaeo-Christian philosophies think that humans are created as exact replicas of the likeness of God, the Chumash believe that human beings are created by putting bits and pieces of the Gods together, creating

one entity, the entity of a human being. In fact, a lot of the Chumash cosmological theories tend to blur the line between what is human and what is animal, as exemplified in their name for the stars of the constellation “Cygnus,” which they refer to as “Scorpion Woman,” and their name for the Big Dipper, which is “Boys who turn to Geese.” Polaris, the North Star, is referred to as “Sky Coyote,” and the list goes on and on (Penprase 65-66). Even in other Chumash stories, the motif of combining animal and human traits is still very prevalent. In one Chumash myth, “The Dog-Girl,” the protagonist is “introduced as a dog, but this serves only to explain her poverty, her low class, and her tragic flaw” (Applegate 191). This indicates that perhaps, due to their creation story, the Chumash tribe would always put humans in terms of animals that would accurately describe them, because they thought of themselves as humans made in the image of animals. Applegate even goes on to say that “A Chumash audience (hearing this story) would have ascribed both human and animal traits to *all* of the figures in the text, even if the (story did not) explicitly identify them with particular animal characters” (Applegate 191). Applegate further explains how animals were used as terms to describe people in the tribe and their roles in the tribe. For example, the chief of a tribe would be seen as an eagle. Clearly, a large part of Chumash culture is based around the idea that humans can be described in terms of the animal world. One of the aspects of the Chumash creation story that could be held accountable for this is the point in the story where, as Penprase puts it, “Lizard beat Coyote in casting his handprint on the sacred White Rock which is why human hands are shaped something like Lizard’s” (Penprase 96). Since the root of all human creation in Chumash culture can be traced back to the handprint of the lizard, it is only natural to see that they put everything in terms of animals. It is evident that the Chumash cosmology, in comparison the the Judaeo-Christian

cosmology, reflects how much more in tune with nature the Chumash were. Everything is based around animals and the natural world, while Judaeo-Christian traditions are based around humans and a human-like God.

The Chumash's appreciation for the animals and stars makes it evident how important celestial beings were in their cosmology. They are very much aware of things in the sky that are natural and visible to the naked eye. Things in the sky, such as the "Cygnus Rift, a dark area of the milky way" (Penrprase 67), served a purpose in the Chumash story of the journey to the afterlife. The rift is believed to be a body of water over which the dead had to cross on a narrow bridge "where huge monsters would taunt the souls and attempt to get them to fall off" (Penrprase 67). If they made it over the bridge, then they would end up in the Land of the Dead, "Shimilaqsha." This is similar in nature to the idea of judgement in Judaeo-Christian beliefs, where all dead souls must earn their way into heaven by the trial of judgement.

Clearly, the rift between the creation stories and cosmologies of Western Culture and the Chumash tribe may be evident, but it is not as large as one might think. The very beginning of the Chumash story and the Judaeo-Christian stories are identical: a large flood wipes out the world to leave a blank slate for better things. Even though the details in the stories differ from this point on, both the Chumash and most Judaeo-Christian stories agree that humans are made in the images of the Gods, or the image of God, even if the God/Gods after which we are modeled are very different. It is incredible how stories from worlds apart, while different, can share so many similarities .

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