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Mayan Cosmology in Relation to Hebrew Cosmology

There are three noteworthy categories within Mayan religion and cosmology to both the Mayans themselves and to the scholars that study them: the creation of the cosmos, the destruction of the cosmos, and the gods worshiped. These are the building blocks to the religion and the beliefs displayed in the Mayan book the *Popul Vuh*, which dates back to around 1550 (Weor). When comparing the Mayan culture with western cultures, these topics allow understanding of how each relates to and opposes the other. With the similarities that are present in each creation and destruction story, as well as the characteristics of the gods, it is clear that there must be a universal cosmology in every culture and religion naturally throughout the world.

This paper will focus on the Quiche Maya, who inhabited the highlands and currently reside in present-day Guatemala and parts of El Salvador and Mexico (Penprase 123). The Quiche culture is completely reliant on the creation myth and structure depicted in the *Popul Vuh*, which is their sacred text. In this sacred book, there are four sections to explain the cosmos. The first part consists of a narration of the failure of the gods to create earthly beings who will adore, obey, and sustain them and the story of the “Hero Twins” (Hunahpu and Xbalanque) who destroy a celestial being, Vucub-Caquix, and his two sons, Zipacna and Cabracan, because they refused to adore, obey, and sustain their creators (Christenson 59-62). In deeper detail, there is the creation of mankind explained through four different races. The Plumed Serpent (also known as Gucumatz or Quetzalcoatl) arises along the “bearers” and “begetters” of the sea. He said

“earth” and it arose, allowing him to create gods and demons to inhabit the earth and underworld (Penprase 117). The Serpent also created the twins who rose to be the Sun and the Moon on the first day of the universe. Along with the other gods, the serpent created the first race as various animals, but they were not capable of speaking the human language, meaning they could not worship the gods. This state of affairs was not acceptable to the Serpent so he sent them into the wild to be hunted by demons. The second race was created out of clay from the earth, but they would disperse in water. The third race was made of wood, but these men were incapable of understanding and lacked souls, so a flood and demons killed them. Finally the Serpent created a race out of yellow and white Maize and this race was able to worship and count days (Christenson 64-72). This is the most well-known and prominent section of the *Popul Vuh* in Mayan culture and religion due to the cycle of creation and destruction.

The Plumed Serpent is one of the main and most worshipped gods in the Maya's complex pantheon of deities because he is the creator of the universe. He taught the Maya the arts of civilization including law, medicine, agriculture, and fishing, making him a cultural hero as well as god (Goets 82). He is also a paradigm, because he acts in cycles, he came from the sea and returned to it, also he represents the forces of good and evil and will return to Earth during the End Times. He is also the god of the four elements that are fire, air, water, and earth. In order to properly worship the Plumed Serpent, Mayas offered human and nonhuman sacrifices as well as bloodletting (89). Out of respect for the great god, kings and priests would often take on Quetzalcoatl as their name when they rose to power; therefore, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish myths that are discovered from historical accounts of the lives of rulers (Mayan Gods and Goddesses). As a major god and creator of the universe, the Plumed Serpent is similar to gods in different cultures and cosmologies, including the Hebrew God, Yahweh, who is also

creator who spoke the universe into existence. Both gods are worshipped through ritual and sacrifice because of their respective roles as creators. Unlike the Plumed Serpent, Yahweh only demanded animal sacrifices rather than that of humans for his worship. Yahweh also did not emerge out of water or of anything else; he has always been in existence. Quetzalcoatl is sometimes compared to Jesus Christ from the Christianity tradition because both are believed to come again at the end of the world to reign over the people (Thompson 23).

Mayan cosmology is dominated by numbers and describes the universe as organized layers with a flat Earth surrounded by multiple “heavens” and “underworlds” that are ruled by different gods and demons. The Earth’s four corners are aligned with the four cardinal directions, which are represented by colors; north by white, south by yellow, east by red, and west by black. The colors of each cardinal direction correspond with the different colored trees of abundance that grow in each corner respectively. Different gods, known as *Bacabs*, support each corner of the Earth and four different species of trees support the sky. Connecting the nine layers of the underworld, the thirteen layers of heaven, the Earth, and the various gods, is the “world tree” that rises through the middle of the universe. The *Oxlahuntiku*, or Thirteen Gods of the Upper world, rule the layers of heaven. The *Bolonitku*, or Underworld gods, rule over *Xibalba*, the nine layers of the underworld. *Oxlahuntiku* and *Bolonitku* are comparable to heaven and hell of Hebrew cosmology because souls of the departed find homes in one of the twenty-two layers of the Upper world or Underworld. If a person experienced a violent death, their soul was sent to one of the upper levels, but those who suffered a peaceful death were sent to one of the lower levels (Penprase 123). Furthermore, the World Tree is “the conduit of communication between the supernatural world and the human world,” connecting the people to the gods that they worship. Trees are prominent in the cosmology of the Mayan people probably because they were also

prominent in their day-to-day lives providing food, shelter and medicines (“Maya Cosmology”). Mayas represented their cosmology in their pyramids, whose steps reflected the layers of the universe.

Both Mayan religion and cosmology and that of the Hebrew culture have had an important impact on universal cosmology and can be compared to each other and other cultures’ cosmologies. In beginning of the *Torah*, the first five books of the Hebrew bible, God creates the heavens and the earth through a series of seven days. He created the sky, land, sea, plants, day, night, and mankind during the first six days of the universe. This creation story relates to that in the *Popul Vuh* and the four races of man, both signifying a type of sequence used to build the world. According to Hebrew cosmology, Yahweh is merciful, eternal, all-powerful, and the creator of everything, just as the Serpent is in Mayan culture. On the sixth day, God created Adam, who represented the first existence of mankind, out of dust from the ground, this is similar to the second race of man in the *Popul Vuh*. Both the humans in the Maya story and in the Hebrew story are created to maintain the Earth and worship their god/s. A serpent is also present in the Hebrew creation story. However, it is not a positive creature in the Hebrew tradition like it is in the Mayan tradition because it causes suffering and turmoil for humans.

The *Torah* continues with a very prominent form of destruction in cosmological myths: the flood. The Great Flood occurs as a result of God’s perception of the wickedness of mankind. God is ashamed of what he has created and decides to send a flood throughout the earth in order to erase mankind. He decides that Noah is an example of a man who is loyal to him and ultimately righteous, so he allows him to build an ark with two of every species. After the flood is over, Noah and the people and animals that are on his ark are saved. After the flood, God makes a covenant with Noah and promises that “never again shall all flesh be cut off by the

waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth” (Gen.9: 11). The covenant contains the Noahide laws that allow man to live in a peaceful and civilized society. Judaism teaches that anyone who follows these laws will have guaranteed salvation with god.

In both the Mayan creation myth and Hebrew scripture, destruction and dissatisfaction with God is a recurring concept. In Genesis, God is unhappy that mankind became sinful and wicked. In Mayan cosmology, the Gods are unsatisfied with mankind so there are floods that kill all humans. They are dissimilar, however, in that mankind is given a second chance through Noah and his ark. Mayan Gods have no mercy and instead create mankind again so they can never achieve the greatness of the Gods. The concept of destruction and renewal is a concept that causes mankind to be recreated in order to achieve ultimate good in people. There are also slight similarities in the story of Adam and Eve and the characteristics of God. Even though the Maya were polytheistic, they believe that a serpent created the Earth. Despite the fact that the serpent does not show many characteristics similar to Yahweh, the serpent still represents an all-creator. In the beginning of Genesis, however, the serpent represents evil and the consequences of desire. Even though the serpent is mostly related to sin, it also represents fertility and wisdom. The tree of knowledge is also in Genesis and represents knowledge of everything, moral capacity, and sexual knowledge; it represents the concept of evil and good being mixed together. The Mayans use the World Tree as the center of their cosmology, it rises through the middle of the universe and trees are on the ends of all four of the cardinal directions. The importance of destruction, trees and floods are obvious in these two cultures’ cosmologies and reaffirm the similarities between the two cultures.

It can be seen through deep analysis of each creation story and the cosmological beliefs of each culture that there are undeniable similarities and prominent oppositions. The largest

similarities between the two cultures are the creators and the destruction of mankind. The Plumed Serpent and God are both all-powerful creators of the universe and everything in it. Each are eternal and to be worshiped by man. The destruction stories in each myth are amazingly similar. In both, a god or gods are angry and dissatisfied with the race of mankind they created and create a flood to wipe them out. There are also major differences; for instance in the Hebrew scripture, there is only one major flood and one human race, which survive to rebuild. Very differently, in the *Popul Vuh*, there are multiple forms of water (a flood and rain) that destroy two separate races and in all destruction of the races there are not survivors except some monkeys. In addition to the gods and destruction of mankind, there are similarities in the two sacred texts in that there are sacred trees (the World Tree and the Tree of Knowledge) that are primary aspects to the upholding of each culture and religion. With these two cultures, it can be seen that there are universal ideas to the creation and destruction of life, as well as ideas for what a creator should be like, thus proving that there is a somewhat universal cosmology that is naturally placed in cultures and beliefs around the world.

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