

SENIOR ESSAY
A COMPARISON OF THE AFRICAN AND
HEBRAIC CONCEPT OF MAN

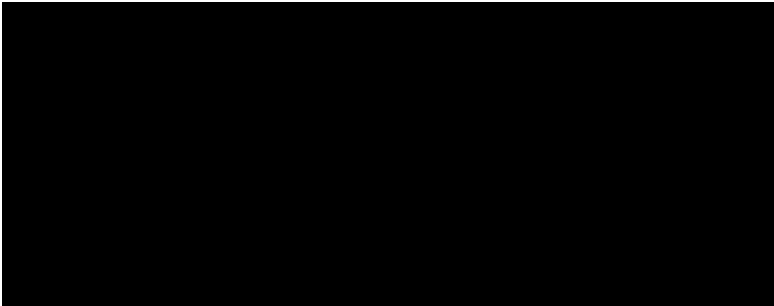
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INTRODUCTION

One hundred years ago or less, different nations, races, tribes or clans thought that they were different, so much so that they could not live together as human beings, regardless of color, nation, tribe or culture. The majority of the people in the world did not know how to read or write. Also, transportation and communication was poor.

But today things have changed because new lands and people have been discovered. Advanced means of transportation and communication make it possible now for any American to know about African culture through reading books concerning it.

My study of the Bible, Hebrew history, and the theology of the Old and New Testaments has enabled me to find out that the Hebrews have many things in common with the Africans. It is the purpose of this essay to show these similarities and differences.

I have relied on many books in regards to the Hebraic concept of man. In regard to the African concept of man, especially the Bantus, I represent the source of information. In addition, I have used two books which are available. In relation to other tribes of Africa other than the Bantus, I have relied on Mbiti. I shall discuss the African concept of man, the Hebraic concept of man

and finally, compare and contrast these concepts.

CHAPTER ONE

THE AFRICAN CONCEPT OF MAN

The African concept of man differs in the various tribes with regard to their culture, religion, and the creation of man. The difference is caused by the fact that if one tribe divides into two tribes and lives in isolation from each other, the same story goes through changes as it is told to each generation. After a century or more, these variations can be noted; even within the tribe these variations are there, as the following discussion will indicate.

The Origin of Man

Concerning the origin of man, Africans have given varying accounts or myths with respect to man's origin. According to Mbiti, who cites H. Baumann's book entitled "Schöpfung und Urzeit des Menschen im Mythos der Afrikanischen Völker" (1936), God is the explanation of man's origin and sustenance; it is as if God exists for the sake of man.

The Abaluyia hold that God created man so that the sun would have someone for whom to shine. The Lozi hold that God was still on earth when he created man after creating all things. He is said to have created different peoples, "each with their own customs, languages, and manners. The Lugbara

say that God in heaven created the first man, husband and wife, long, long ago."¹ The people of the upper Nile valley believe that man and woman were both created by God elsewhere and then lowered down to this world.

The Zulus have two accounts of the creation of man and woman. The first account maintains that woman was created first. The second one holds that man was created first. According to some grey heads of man Zulus, women demanded their rights but, owing to the fact that they are weaker than men by nature, men did not give in to their demands. The belief that the woman was created first ceased only when the white missionaries showed by the Bible that man was created first.

Concerning the stuff used in creating man, the majority of Africans have a vivid myth that man was created from clay. They recount that God made the body of the first man by kneading and then covered him with a skin and poured blood into his lifeless body. Then, the first man breathed

¹John S. Mbiti, African Religion and Philosophy (New York: Praeger, pp. 92-93).

and lived, and God whispered softly in his ear: "You will beget children who will live in the forest." The idea of man's creation from clay is widespread in Africa.

Many African tribes maintain that after God had created man, He first placed him in a state of happiness and childlike ignorance and provided him with ability to rise again after dying.

He is said to have provided him with the necessities of life, either directly or through equipping him to develop them. The Bantus hold that man, in his original state, was not supposed to die. Their legends attribute man's immortality, and his knowledge of it, to a message from God. After God had made man, according to the tradition that is told with many variations by the grey heads of the tribes:

"He sent one of his slower creatures, some say a chameleon, to tell man that he was not going to die, or as others have it, that dying he was to arise again. Later he sent another messenger with a confirmatory message. The second runner, with nimble feet and slacker brain, or, as other versions suggest, a lover of trickery, arrived first with a garbled message: God says you are to die,

and dying leave the world for good.
When the correct message came, it was
too late, for death had already set in."²

The Zulus hold that God ordered men to farm from the very beginning: "Let there be men and let them cultivate food and eat."³ They maintain that God taught them other skills, such as cooking, hunting, forging metals, domesticating animals, and making fire.

Alienation of Man From God

According to the Ashanti, God originally lived in the sky but close to men. The mother of these men constantly went on knocking against Him with her pestle while pounding the traditional food, fufu. To get out from this knocking, God moved up higher. The woman instructed her sons to gather all the mortars, pile them upon each other and follow God. This they did, but before they could reach Him, they ran short of construction material. As there was a gap of only one mortar, she advised her children to take the bottom mortar in order to fill up the gap. Obediently, they did this, only to cause the whole tower to tumble down and kill

²W.C. Willoughby, The Souls of the Bantus,
(Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1928), p. 3.

³Ibid., p. 3.

many of them. The survivors gave up the idea of attempting to follow God.

There are many traditions about the alienation between God and Man. The Bambuti, Bonyarwand, Barotse, Bushmen, Chango, Pare, Elgeyo, and others hold that God gave each family or clan its law and culture which constituted its religion. As long as man observed and kept these laws or commandments, his relationship with God remained sound and healthy. Alienation took place only when he broke them.

Another story from the upper white Nile region maintains that originally the sky, or heaven, and earth were united by a rope or bridge, and that at times God lived among men on earth. It claims that this rope was broken accidentally by the hyaena so that the direct link or relationship between God and men was severed.

Man In The Tribe

Individualism is unknown in the African tradition. A married man is more closely bound to his family which consists of his grandfather, his father, his brothers, sisters than to his wife. This idea refers to an extended family which characterizes Africa even today, especially in the rural areas where family need is more dominant than individual need. Before a man marries his fiancée must be approved by his parents because she is married to the family also. She

becomes a part of the family. In matriarchial families, a man leaves his family to join his wife's family. His children become a part of her family, not his, as is the case with patriarchial families. By the same token, what the parents of the wife say is law for the wife of the man and for the children. There are few tribes in Africa who practice this system.

Before a man marries, he must pay what Africans call lobola, that is, an expression of gratitude to the in-laws. This simply means, in a patriarchial system, that the woman belongs to that family. If her husband dies, it is the duty of that family to get her a husband, usually the young brother or cousin of the deceased person. The children, although it is known that they belong to their mother and father, also belong to the Kraal or family. When a child is asked: "Where do you come from?", he will say, mentioning his grandfather's name, "Kumalo's Kraal." Then he says, my father is Dumisa." Should his father die, he will get the same treatment his father could have given him.

Heart, Spirit, Brain

According to the Zulus, the offshoot of the Bantus:

"Man consists of the body, umzimba, and the spirit or soul, idlozi. Besides these are the inhliziy, heart, feelings or mind, the ingondo, brain, intellect, understanding, memory or mind, as well as a hazily defined something called isithunzi, shadow or personality."

The Zulus use the term umoya for wind or air and the spirit of man which means life. In short, umoya is the spirit of the living person. The spirit of the dead person is called idlozi. Idlozi is the name given to the ancestor who is always addressed as he. The spirit or soul is the principle of life which animals possess, too.

When an African says, "my spirit (umoya)" he means I, myself, my soul or spirit; yet he does not think of the soul as the seat of life and as visible as the heart, the source of life. The brain which is closed in the skull is thought to be the intellect or intelligence. Africans use soul and heart interchangeably without changing the meaning because they think the soul or spirit is housed in the heart.

⁴ Eileen J. Krige, The Social System of the Zulus (South Africa: Petermaritzburg Shuter and Shooter, 1950), p. 280.

As already indicated, the isitunzi (shadow), or personality, which man does not share with animals does not die at death. Isitunzi becomes idlozi (the spirit of the dead) or ghost, which comes back and enters some people's hearts, making them act abnormally. When a man acts abnormally, Africans think that idlozi, which acts for good and bad, has entered his heart. This is the reason why they think of the heart as the seat of good and evil also. Later we shall deal with the concept of this soul, which does not die, and is sometimes described as the second soul which becomes idlozi.

The idlozi is a minor diety who mediates between the living and God. He is the only means by which man can be saved from sickness, misfortune, unnecessary death or anything that is detrimental to him. Man as an individual asks for favor from his ancestors who, in turn, talk to Unkulunkulu (God) for him.

When there is a common need, for instance, rain, the people in a region pray directly to God who is thought to reside in a special mountain, or at times in heaven or the sky which hangs low, according to the African concept. The idlozi survives after death for an indefinite period of time.

"The amadlozi (ancestors) live underground and occupy the same relative position there as they did while alive. An unimportant man has little or no power after death; the head of the family, on the other hand, is the spirit that is invoked for help and provides for his descendants, while the spirit of the chief has the welfare of the whole tribe at heart and is of far greater importance than any other spirit."⁵

According to Gordon Quaye of the Isa tribe in Ghana, "man was created by God Nyomo, owner of heaven and earth, and consists of dust and soul, su and susuma. The soul does not die but lives in the ghost world as a spirit."⁶ Quaye like the majority of the Africans, holds that the dead person does not cross the "river" to the land of the spirits before the funeral rite is performed.

This religious ceremony after death is performed for two reasons: if the funeral rite is not performed, the dead person cannot cross the river and may come back to the living in the form of a ghost, snake. All these animals are supposed to cause disease and misfortune to the living. Also, the dead person is in a position to be invoked only

⁵Krige, The Social System of the Zulus p. 284.

⁶Gordon Quaye, C.M.E. Dormitory, Private Interview on African Concept of Man, February 14, 1970.

after crossing the river. He can be called upon for aid, for protection, and is worshipped so that in turn he can intercede or can become a connecting link between the living and God.

CHAPTER TWO

THE HEBRAIC CONCEPT OF MAN

Job describes man as born of a woman and full of troubles. "He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down: he fleeth also as shadow, and continueth not (Job 14:1-2; Ps. 90:5, 6; 103:15)." "As for man his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth: let wind pass over it, and it is gone, and the place thereof knoweth it no more" (Psalm 103:15-16). "The first affirmation of the Old Testament about man underlies all the rest in that he is a creature and as such shares in the feebleness and limitations of all creatures; his existence is ephemeral and ends inexorably with death."⁷

Origin of Man

According to the Hebraic concept God first created Heaven and earth and everything that was to be created before creating man. "And God made beast of the earth after his kind, and cattle after their kind, and everything that creepeth upon the earth after his kind: and God saw that it was good."

⁷Rheinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947), p. 7.

(Gen. 1:25). After creating everything (Gen. 1:26), God created man in his own image (Gen. 1:27). "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (Gen. 2:7).

Although the first account does not refer to the stuff out of which man was created, it assumes that God created him in his own image. Man and woman are said to have been created at the same time (Gen. 1:27).

In the Hebrew perspective, man was created by God and is fundamentally different from his creator. According to Genesis 2:7, the creation is described as being formed by God out of the dust of the earth and animated by the breath of life that comes from Him. The account that maintains that man was created first was dominant among Hebrews (Gen. 2:7).

The Alienation of Man From God

The Hebrew story of man's alienation from God is presented in the account of the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:8-15). After God had created man, He is said to have placed him in the Garden of Eden.

"And the Lord planted a Garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed." (Gen. 2:8).

According to verse 9, God provided every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food. In the same Garden, there was the tree of life and the tree of knowledge. Man had everything he needed in that Garden. The story is as follows: While Adam was away, the serpent came to the woman and said, "Yea, hath God said, 'Ye shall not eat of every tree of the Garden'" (Gen. 3:1). The woman told the serpent that they could eat of the fruit of the trees of the Garden: but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the Garden, God hath said, 'Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die' (Gen. 3:3). The serpent, tempting the woman, said "Ye shall not surely die." For God knows that the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and he shall be as gods, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:4-5). "When the woman, looked at the tree, she found that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat." When God came down to the Garden, He cursed both of them, and man was cast out of His presence" (Gen. 3:1-24).

Man in the Tribe

Mould maintains that

"the will of the tribe was the law and custom was sole authority. In the tribal group there were separate families, but the whole family signified a much larger group than it does today. The head of the tribe was variously called patriarch, elder, or sheikh. He was chosen by his fellow tribesmen because of personal prowess, or the size of his family, or his wealth."⁸

The family was the basic Hebrew social institution because it included the individual household, the clan or tribe, and all who traced their descent to a common ancestor. Strangers were admitted into the tribe or family by taking part in a blood-ritual or by adoption. None was homeless, even if he did not have parents. The father was the head of his family which included his wives, his concubines, his children, his daughters-in-law, relatives, slaves, and friends within thy gates (Gen. 15:2).

⁸ Elmer K. Mould, Essentials of Bible History (New York: Ronald Press, 1939), p. 85.

"Man's destiny is only fully realized within the unity of the married couple. Marriage is always regarded as the normal state and celibacy is only considered as an exceptional vocation, necessary for the fulfillment of a mission, as in the case of Jeremiah."⁹

According to the teaching of the Old Testament, the woman is subordinate to the man because man was created first. (Gen. 2:7).

The Hebrew concept of man views him as a unitary being; the woman who is given to him adds nothing to his nature and owes all her existence to him. "This is now flesh of my flesh" (Gen. 2:23). The Old Testament assigns the woman an inferior role in the religious domain as well as in social life. However, this does not prevent her fulfilling on occasion the function of military leadership or prophetess; but generally the place of the woman is in the home because she was taken out of man (Gen. 2:23).

⁹Edmond Jacob, Theology of the Old Testament (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1958), p. 172.

Soul, Spirit, Heart

According to the Bible, man and only man is the recipient of the spirit of God (Gen. 2:7). "The spirit upon man or in him can be a transitory experience, a condition lasting sometime or the disposition of a life-time. It is a transitory thing when the spirit of God comes upon soul so that his anger is kindled and he liberates Jabesh."¹⁰

According to Robinson, the word "soul" (nephesh) is to be translated simply as "life." "When the prophet Elijah prayed for the restoration of the life of the child of the widow of Zarephath, the child's nephesh returned upon his inward parts and he lived."¹¹ We can sum this up by a quotation from Dummelow:

"To become a living soul means no more than to possess the principle of life possessed by animals; (Gen. 2:19), where the Hebrew, for living creature is the same as for living soul here. But it is not said of the animals that God breathed into their nostrils the breath of life, this implies that man stands in a special relation to God, and may be taken as referring to the gift"

¹⁰Ludwig Kohler, Old Testament Theology(Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953),p. 140.

¹¹H.W. Robinson, The Religious Ideas of the Old Testament(New York: Charles Scribner's Sons,1915), p. 80

of those spiritual faculties by which he holds communion with God and possesses a likeness to Him."¹²

In spite of the fact that soul and spirit are in some instances used interchangeably, soul refers to the principle of life in man and animals. Burrows sums up the whole debate on "soul" as follows: "Closely related to the meanings 'life and person' is the meaning of 'self'. Thus 'my soul' often means I, me, myself, etc."¹³

Robinson holds that the original meaning of spirit throughout Hebrew literature is "wind." From that usage, it came to denote the mysterious wind-like influences, the demonic forces, which were supposed to account for what is abnormal and strange in human conduct.

Otto J. Baab understands ruach as follows: "Ruach is that element in human nature which is most closely connected with the nature of God. It is the endowment of man with the energy and capacity for religious activity."¹⁴

Another significant psychological term in Hebrew

¹²J.R. Dummelow, The One Volume Commentary (New York: Macmillan Company Publishers, 1968), p. 7.

¹³Millar Burrows, An Outline of Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1946), p. 136.

¹⁴Otto J. Baab, The Theology of the Old Testament (New York: Abingdon Press, 1931), p. 64.

is lev or levav, translated "heart." The heart is the "source of life." The Hebrews regarded the heart as "the seat of the will and of good and evil intentions and attitudes, of conscience and thought, intelligence or mind. It is also frequently mentioned as the seat of such emotions as joy and sorrow, as in modern Occidental usage."¹⁵ Jacob understands the heart as: "the quintessence of the man, that we may be tempted to assimilate it to nepshesh and say: man is heart."¹⁶

In the story of Solomon, heart is used in the same sense as mind. "Behold, I have done according to thy word: lo, I have given thee a wise and understanding heart so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee." (I Kings 3:12). Baab makes this clear by saying "the Hebrews, along with other peoples, thought of the psyche as residing, not in the brain, but in the heart, kidneys, liver, or bones."¹⁷

¹⁵Burrows, An Outline of Biblical Theology, p. 139.

¹⁶Baab, Theology of the Old Testament, p.166.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 166.

CHAPTER THREE

COMPARISON OF THE AFRICAN AND HEBRAIC CONCEPTS

Having treated the African and Hebraic concepts of man, let us discuss their similarities and differences.

The Origin Of Man

In essence, the Hebraic and African concepts of man's origin are similar. Both concepts hold that man was created by God from the dust of the ground, who breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul (Gen. 2:7). According to African understanding, God, and only God, is responsible for man's creation. As already mentioned, Africans hold that God used clay to make man, the way the potter does with his pots.

The people of the upper Nile valley believe that man and woman were both created by God elsewhere and then lowered down to this world. This account is similar to Genesis 1:27. The method of creating man is not the same, but the Creator, the stuff used, and the concept of man's creation are similar.

In short, both concepts maintain that everything in the world was created by God.

Alienation of Man From God

The alienation of man from God is similar in the Hebrew and African traditions. The Hebraic concept is easier to follow because it mentions the place as the Garden of Eden and the people who were involved. However, in both accounts alienation of man from God took place when man broke the commandments that God had commanded him to observe.

The concepts of the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:8-15) and the Babel story in Genesis 11: 1-9 concerning man's alienation from God are presented in the African concept of man's separation from God. Africans hold that man was originally placed in a state of paradise, that is, happiness, peace, blessedness and child-like ignorance. The story of Ashanti(woman), who, when God had moved up higher, instructed her sons to gather all the mortars, pile them up and follow God, has the same intention as the Babel story. In both traditions, it is said that God created man as a mortal being but that he provided means for man to become immortal.

Man in the Tribe

The Hebraic and African concepts of man in the tribe are very similar. The will of the tribe was the law and custom was sole authority in both traditions. Individualism was unknown. None was homeless, even if he did not have parents. Parents played a very important role in both traditions. Honor

thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee (Exodus 20:12).

African children expect blessings from parents just as Esau expected blessings from Issac (Gen. 27:1-4). Man in both traditions is bound up with the entire life of the community

Heart, Soul or Spirit, Brain

Africans and Hebrews think of the heart as "life itself" or "source of life," often used interchangeably with soul or spirit. They both regard the heart as feeling, will, seat of evil and good intentions. To the Hebrews, the heart is more than what has been said; it is also intellect, intelligence, or mind and memory. At this point they differ with the Africans because to them, intellect, intelligence and memory belong to the "brain." Sometimes an African will say to a friend, "Your head does not work," referring to ingondo (brain) because it is in the head.

The second difference is that the heart is visible and its location is known. The Hebrews do not know where the heart is located. (I Sam. 25:37; Jer. 23:9; Psalm 64:7).

The Africans think of the soul or spirit as the Hebrews think of them with slight variations. To both of them, man has something that he does not share with animals. Spirit is understood as a special something that God breathed into his nostrils that gives him spiritual faculties by which

he communes with God. In both traditions, this special faculty goes to the underworld after death.

Thus, it appears that Hebraic and African concepts of man have a great deal in common. The differences are largely concerned with the functionary elements of man's existence rather than with his essential nature.

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