The Quest for the Roots of the Judaic Monotheism in African Perspective

By

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Research Article

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ABSTRACT

History has made us to understand that the beginning of Judaism can be traced to the Israelites’ Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who lived up to 1900BCE. After Jacob went to Egypt, an African country, with his twelve sons who later became symbolic representation of Israel’s twelve tribes genealogical arrangements and with his seventy grand children, the Jews experienced a great multiplication which is as a result of the fulfillment of promises made to Abraham, their progenitor during his initial call (Gen. 12:1-7, Gen. 15:1-3, Gen. 17:1-9). However, the actual beginning of Judaism as a religion has been opened to rigorous academic debates over the years. Ideas like Judaism as a religion started with Abraham during his call or with Moses at Mount Sinai at the great revelation in about 1400BCE or when God gave the Ten Commandments to the Israelites are prevailing issues. These have been carefully examined within the context of Israelites’ historical development, the biblical narratives and archaeological discoveries from the Middle Ancient Near East studies. This has helped to find out that Judaic monotheism evolved as an off shoot of contacts with religious traditions from Egypt in Africa by Moses, the Law giver and an “Egyptian Prince” under the influence of the religious reform led by Pharaoh Akhenaten.

Keywords: Judaism, Isrealites, Egypt, Religion, Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Most Jewish people, whether observant or not, know the clarion call; Shema Yisreal, Adonai Elohenu; Adonai Echad “ that is:” hear Oh Israel, the Lord our God the Lord is One” (Deut.6 verse 4.)KJV).Whatever else may be in question, we agree that in the Jewish religion, there is only one God especially as suggested by African Scholars like Abe (2005,p34) and some biblical narratives apart from the popular verse quoted above. Yet there are many debates as to tracing the roots or origin; the starting point, concept and the historical progression of the evolution of this monotheistic belief and tendency strongly prevalent in Judaic faith.

The main hypothesis of this research could be summed up like this: the monotheism of the ancient Israelites; which in this paper is called, the Pre-Judaic period; how did it evolve? Was it invented by Abraham or Moses as suggested by some Scholars? Did it evolve from the several contacts with Mesopotamia or Palestinian religio- cultural affinities by the Ancient Isrealites? If yes, how and when? Or was it revealed as claimed in Deuteronmy Chapter Six verse Four?

This paper, therefore, examines the ascendency or the dominant influence or control of African religious development in the formation of the Israelites’ monotheistic belief and ideology.

Pre-Judaic Religious Tradition

Many approaches have been adopted to the understanding of the ancient Israelite and the Canaanite religious traditions. These give rise to the adoption of several theories of which the most popular and interesting is the evolutionary psychology which sees religion as a Pan- human Phenomenon (Steinberg, 2011p.234 ).

However, narrowing the consideration to what is known of the Canaanite and early Israelite religion; Steinberg observed that religion as a phenomenon was unknown and was initially incomprehensible to the Canaanites and the Israelites at the very early time of their formative periods (2011p.237). This, according to Fohrer (1972p. 72 ) and Marks(2001p.6 ) is because in the Pre-Hellenistic times there was no concept of an order of nature governed by immutable natural laws. Hence, biblical Hebrew has no word for “religion”

In our attempt to understand the ancient Israelite religion, it is useful to bear in mind that the Palestinian area where Israel had the origin of its social and religious civilization and frequent interactions throughout the Middle and Late Bronze Ages and beyond was always open to immigration from all angles (Dever,2005 pp.12-15). In the Bronze Age; Palestine had no unified government or army but was largely areas of hill country. This made its settlers on this largely unoccupied hill country side of Palestine unchallenged. Due to the unchallenged
immigrations of peoples and animals from all sides into Palestinian country; it became open to Lebanon, Syria, Mesopotamia and Anatolia. Infiltration by nomads and military invasion by nomads from the Syrian Desert and Arabia was a common experience (Steinberg, 2011p.315).

As reported by Dever (2005p.18) and Steinberg (2011p.316) the Palestinian country suffered frequent invasions from the Egyptians, Syrian, and Lebanon armies during the Middle and Late Bronze Ages. According to Williams (1957p.51) through the Biblical tradition, we are able to know that before Israelites’ occupation of the land of Canaan, there were already many ethnic groups on the land such as; the Amorites, Hittites, Hitites, Horites, Kenites and Perizites. Even, though some of these tribes appear to be non-Semitic people who seem to have become assimilated into the Canaanite culture and bearing Semitic names (Steinberg, 2011p.234). He further noted that the strong Egyptian cultural influences along the coast and strong Mesopotamia influence in the northern Syria was a clear prevailing circumstance that must be noted in discussing the ancient Israelite religion. This is because the Egyptian cultural influence which was boosted by Egyptian rule in the centuries preceding the emergence of Ancient Israel may also have had great influence on the belief system of the people of Israel for a long period of time before the Solomon reign when the idea of monotheistic God became very prominent (MacDonald, 2004 p. 55).

However, Albright (1969p. 39), opined that from the geographical standpoint of view one could see that there was a homogeneous civilization which shared a common material culture through the entire period that influenced language, literature, arts and even religion of the entire peoples in Palestinian and Mesopotamian world. These were substantially the same in the Bronze Age. Steinberg (2011 p.239) supports this assertion by saying that since Israel had its background and emerged from the same Northwest-Semitic settings as the Phoenicians and other Canaanite groups one would expect to find extremely close relationship in both material and higher culture which includes faith and belief system. This belief system was polytheistic and it embraced the worship of idols which served as the focus on the presence of cosmic or nature gods. It was tied to nature and seasons because the peoples were predominantly agrarians and nomads. This influenced the belief in the gods or goddesses of renewal of life and fertility.

The Origin of Judaic Religious Tradition

In our quest for the origin of Judaism, one needs to first make a clarification between how old is Judaism. That is when did the Jews begin as a people and nation or when did Judaism start as a religion. This paper is aimed at finding out the origin of the Judaic monotheism with an African eye view. The utmost interest therefore, is not in the quest for the beginning of Jews as a people or as a nation. However, since the people’s life are said to be majorly influenced by their cultural settings and belief systems; it is possible that this approach may engage in interpolation with the origin of a people called Hebrews or Jews.

As noted earlier, the origin of Judaism as a religion, lies in the Bronze Age polytheistic Ancient Semitic religions, specifically Canaanite religions which were syncretized with elements of Zoroastrianism and Yahwism as reflected in the oracles of the early and the exilic prophetic books in the Hebrew Bible.

Biblical tradition says that Abraham was the first in his line to worship Yahweh and this would place the starting date of Yahwism at around 2000BCE (Abe 2004p7). A non-binding Jewish tradition (Midrash) says that Abraham realized that the idols of the gods of his father had no power and sought the real God; Yahweh; who later became God of Israel (Albright,1969,p 41). Nearly 4,000 years ago, Abraham emigrated from the thrilling metropolis of Ur of the Chaldeans in Sumeria to the land of Canaan of which God stated: “To your offspring I will give this land “ (Gen.12:7,NIV). From him the Jewish people draw a line of descent that started with his son, Isaac and his grandson, Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel (Gen.32:27&28). Israel (Jacob) had twelve Sons, who became the founders of twelve tribes of Israel. One of them was Judah, from which name the word Jew was eventually derived (2.Kgs.16:6). Later, the word Jews was applied to all Israelites, not just to a descendant of Judah (Esther 3.9:20). Because of the destruction of the Jewish genealogical records in 70BCE when the Romans razed Jerusalem, no Jew today can accurately determine his tribe of descent (Albright,1969p.42).

Judaism is also sometimes regarded as starting with Moses because God gave him the ten commandments (Exo.20:1ff); and because he is often credited with writing the first 5 books of the Hebrew Bible- the Pentateuch or Torah – which largely defined Judaism. However, Liberal scholars tell us that these books could not have been written by him, but were composed from input from several sources, usually known as J, E, D and P.

This assertion is supported with the fact that it was through Moses to the people that God revealed this divine name and then gave the law at Sinai. Moses served as the chief human agent.

In view of the above evidences as they are glaringly and clearly supported by the Hebrew bible; it could be said therefore that Moses is the central founding figure of Judaism as the religion of Israel while Abraham is the genetic father of Judaism as a people or nation. This is because throughout the Hebrew Bible, there is not a single reference which we know that refers to Moses as being Polytheistic in either teaching or practice. The God, who revealed himself toMoses (Exodus chapter 3), was the one God that Moses worshipped and the one and only God of Israel. This serves as the first idea of monotheistic tendencies in the faith or belief systems of the Jewish people. But if we dwell on the above; the question is where did Moses get his idea of monotheism from?
The Judaic Monotheism in African Perspective

Jimmy Dunn reported a fairly recent education documentary on the Discovery Channel in Egypt in which an argument was made for Akhenaten, Egypt's 18th Dynasty King with Moses of biblical fame. It clearly stated that Manetho of Sebennytos (C.300BC) an author and an Egyptian Priest who wrote an orderly account of the history of the Egyptian Pharaoh in Greek language, claims that the founder of monotheism, whom he called Osarsiph, assumed the name Moses and led his followers out of Egypt during Akhenaton's reign.

Other ancient writers of Mesopotamia and Egyptian antiquities, cultures and history, such as Lysimachus, Tacitus and Strabo also alluded to this association between Akhenaton and Moses. Even in the modern era, Sigmund Freud, an active collector of Egyptian artifacts, also proposed study of Moses and the origin of monotheism (Jimmy, 2011 p.1). Akhenaten is frequently referred to as the Religion, at least for a brief period, creating a belief system that was as close as ancient Egyptian monotheism with his worship of the Sun Disk called the Aten (Jimmy, 2011 p.1).

Biblical narratives have made us to know that strict monotheism was first demanded of the Israelites by Yahweh, God of Israel in connection with Moses and the Israelite Exodus from Egypt. Thereafter, writers from all fields; may it be history, culture, geography, science, technology and even, archaeology have aligned themselves with the facts that emerged throughout ages between Akhenaton and Moses.

However, the Old Testament offers no evidence of a relationship between Moses and Akhenaten. This does not rule it out completely that he was not the Pharaoh of Exodus fame and there is not much reason to believe that he was, either. The challenge here is that in the quest for Biblical accounts of ancient Egypt; Jimmy, (2011 p.2) reports that investigators essentially have no evidence to clearly support the existence of Joseph, or Moses or even, the Israelites’ Exodus and this made the investigators to only examine what was possible and what fits into an Egyptian context. This means that it is possible that such events or people could have existed from what we know of ancient Egypt. Even, Egypt’s own founder, Meres, though because of historical records, is as difficult to identify as Moses, for while later tradition firmly places him at the roots of historical Egypt, contemporary proof is lacking (Jimmy, 2011 p.2).

Assessing the modern perception of Freud (1939) in his last book, “Moses and Monotheism” postulated that Moses was an Egyptian nobleman who adhered to the monotheism of Akhenaten. Moses grew up as the grandson of Pharaoh, who was then the most powerful human being on earth, being the ruler of the mightiest nation on earth. He was an Egyptian Prince. Moses could easily have grown up to be a totally assimilated, totally spoilt Egyptian kid. There he enjoyed absolute freedom and he was accorded a royal dignity, respect and recognition. The religious reform led by Akhenaten took place and it is probably correct to assert that he (Moses) was not ignorant of that reform and that his later idea of Yahweh, the only holy God and god of Israel might have been influenced by his experience at the Pharaoh religious reforms. This is why many scholars like Sigmund Freud (1939 p.27) argued in favour of this assertion when he opined that Egypt in Africa is the birth place or the starting point of monotheism.

The entire belief system of one God alone in the Jewish creed in Deuteronomy Six verse Four found its roots in African monotheistic tendency invented by Akhenaten by instituting or legislating that Aten; the solar god is the supreme deity above other pantheons. By this, Aten became more personal conception of the divine because Akhenaten had demanded that no images of gods be made save for those of the sun disk and further ordered total destruction of idols dedicated to other gods. Conceivably, the impetus for such action was the belief that no other god was tantamount to their preferred deity.

Scholar, like Freud (1939) seems to believe that the Zoroastrian and Egyptian conception of singular divinity may have found its way into the Abrahamic traditions by way of these shared mythologies. This could be interpreted to mean that Judaism received undeniable influences from various pre-biblical religious traditions of Egypt, an African country. The word Moses is an Egyptian name. He was raised in the palace of king Pharaoh and may have been greatly influenced by the African zealously already seen and participated. Also in a process parallel with the Egyptians, ancient Israelite culture seems to have moved from henotheism to monotheism (Jimmy, 2011 p.1). Akhenaten is frequently referred to as the Religion, at least for a brief period, creating a belief system that was as close as ancient Egyptian monotheism with his worship of the Sum Disk called the Aten (Jimmy, 2011 p.1).

With this school of thought, the idea that the Israelites were introduced to Yahweh as the only God, which is the idea of monotheistic faith is profound and popular. This opinion is strengthened when we consider the active participation of Yahweh in the progressive history of Israelites in Egypt and through to the wilderness experience coupled with his personalised and unprecedented presence and involvements in all the battles the people engaged in before the final and complete occupation of Canaan from the time of Moses to that of Joshua. This, according to Abe (2004 p. 7-11); made Yahweh to become their national and personal God in concrete historical experience throughout the wilderness to the evolutions of a unique Israelite monotheism. This is because in the pre-Israelite period the idea of monotheism was not a concept. The prevalent religious idea was purely polytheistic and idolatry, even, till the time of Abraham, the progenitor of Israel as a nation.
Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that in tracing the origin of the Israelite religion, a consideration and attention should be given to the religious affinities of the people of Palestine, and practically Egypt in Africa, who greatly influenced the general worldviews of the elected people of God due to unavoidable interactions in terms of civilization and trade. We must remember that the Israelites spent more than 400 years in Egypt, first as royal guests of pharaoh during the time Joseph was the first minister and later as slaves and masters after the "King that knew Joseph had died ". The implication of this prolong stay in Yoruba parlance is that "Bi ewe ba pe lara ose, 0un naa a di ose " that is; if a leaf spends too much period with soap; it would turn also to soap".

Adamo (2005 p.46-51) opines that the Hapiru or the Hebrews are Africans. This is because the prolonged stay of the Hebrews in Egypt must have changed their entire thought and the way they perceive issues of life would have been very similar to the Egyptians’ way of doing things. He assessed the acculturating processes that would have taken place between which was aided by trade and inter-marriages between their children. This according to Adamo (2005 p 50) has made it easier and convenient to assert the strong influences of Africa and Africans on the thought, historical and religious developments of the Hebrews. In his findings; the interactions between the Hebrews and people of African descent either from Egypt or Ethiopia, was a long standing phenomenon. This is evident in the fact that Abraham married an African woman so also Moses did.

The issue is that looking at the progressive quest for the roots of Israelite monotheism; one could probably opine that Africa and Africans had been a source of great civilization in philosophy, science, trade education, culture and religion to the rest of the world. In considering what is known today as the Israelite monotheism, actually it is a result of experience or idea about the supreme deity as ordered by Akhenaten that influenced Moses, the progenitor of Israelite monotheistic religion.

CONCLUSION

From the Biblical narratives, it appears that real Judaic monotheism did not appear until the days of the Prophets in the eight century BCE. This is because the Bible records that the Northern Israel was at all times polytheistic from inception until the destruction of the Kingdom by the Assyrians. The biblical references to the Kings of the northern kingdom Israel show that every one of them was polytheistic in their belief systems. Our findings, therefore, could lead us to assert that Judaic monotheism could really have begun in the southern Hebrew State of Judah.

Though, the biblical narratives make us to know that Judah was polytheistic as well until the reign of Hezekiah, who made a failed attempt to impose monotheism in the 7th century BCE but only a small group was constantly at odds with the powerful king of Judah. This is responsible for why Manaseh, Hezekiah’s son allowed polytheism to flourish once again which is an evidence that though it has started but monotheism had not taken root among the ordinary people. This is the reason why scholars like Abe (2004 p.23) believes that Yahwism or Judaic monotheism went through gradual evolvement of primitive phases of religious progression in much the same way as the African religious belief system. That is to say, the Judaic monotheism, as we have found out, evolved through a biological phases of organic growth and development. Just like the African belief system; it evolves, first, through animism which is defined as the attribution of conscious life to nature or natural objects which characterized the early Palestinian, Mesopotamian, Egyptian and Assyrian beliefs systems from where the pre-Israelite people got its background and religious influences.

After animism, came polytheism which the father of Abraham practiced with the members of his household. Totemism, perhaps followed polytheism which is characterized with the ancestral worship and this may develop into belief in a local tribal deity. Totemism graduated to henotheism and or monolatry as established in our discourse.

From all the stages mentioned above, the real idea of monotheism which Moses intended came to national scene in Israelites religious history as evident in the biblical narratives. This got to the highest peak of its manifestation during the period between 8th-7th Centuries BCE when the prophets rose to the challenges of frequently condemning any act of apostasy. Though Scholars like Kenneth (1966 p.7), an Egyptologist at the University of Liver Pool in England, believes that the scenario of Jewish religious evolutionary development is absolutely unsubstantiated. But scholars like Steinberg (2011) and Abe (2004) who argued for the evolutionary theory of Jewish faith system believe that the Judaic monotheism under the leadership of Moses, the law giver, and the proclamation in Deuteronomy 6 verse 4 was highly influenced by the African religious tendencies on him during his Childhood religious contacts in the palace of Pharaoh of Egypt. This is so because of the profound monotheistic antecedent prevalent during the religious reform led by King Akhenaten of Egypt when Moses himself was still a member of the royal family.

Therefore, this paper concludes by saying that the ancient Israel’s history is grossly inadequate without looking critically at her religious history and the development of the Judaic monotheistic faith with an African eye view. The reason for this much needed exercise is to see clearly how Africa and the Africans, otherwise derogatively referred to as black continent by Euro-American scholars had influenced both the historical and religious developments of the Jewish people. The African religious tendencies in, Moses, the progenitor of the Jewish monotheism, were either not adequately attended to or grossly denied by the Scholars of non-African origin.
REFERENCES