

Jewish Teachings of Mankind and God in the Book of Genesis 1-3

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Religion has always been an important part of human history and culture. Throughout history there have been many different traditions and belief systems practiced by many different groups of people. Learning about these traditions and beliefs allows contemporary humans to better understand how ancient people thought and what they believed, and how these thoughts and beliefs of theirs impacted their everyday lives, such as what rituals they practiced, what deities they worshipped and how these deities influenced their views on life, among other things. One of the most important of these religions is Judaism, which is the traditional religion of the ethnic Jews, and really the starting point of a group of religions known as the Abrahamic religions, which essentially diverged from Judaism and include other important, influential sets of religious traditions, such as Christianity and Islam. There are a few main, universal topics of belief that each religion has, the most quintessential of these topics being some form of creation story that usually mentions the god involved with creating everything and the characteristics of this god, and a moral description of mankind as a whole; a few characteristics that each and every person shares, either good or bad, and have shared ever since the first humans appeared. What will be discussed are these stories and how they appear in the Book of Genesis in the Jewish Bible, specifically chapters 1-3. These chapters of the Book of Genesis describe how God created the universe and everything within it, and also what God made the human race endure once they were created in order to show their worth. This tale will reveal what kind of deity the Jewish God is, and ultimately what he finds out about the mankind that he had created.

It will also tell in what ways mankind as a whole is related to the God that had created them in the first place.

Indubitably, the Bible story most known among the chapters of the Jewish Bible is the story of creation in the first couple of chapters of the Book of Genesis. This story, appearing from Genesis 1:1 to Genesis 2:4, outlines the emergence of the cosmos, and everything that they contain, as composed by God within a span of seven days¹. Within this section of the story, he dedicated the first three days of his creation process to developing the “generalities or domains,”² which he used as areas in which he would place the occupants. These domains were heaven and the universe, in which everything else would be created and also included the concept of day and night (Genesis 1:1-5), the sky using the top part of all the waters that were collected (Genesis 1:6-8), under which the dry land of earth would be placed, which would ultimately grow vegetation and which would have the collection of the bottom part of the waters resting on it that God called “the seas” (Genesis 1:9-10). During the next three days, God created “the specifics or the inhabitants of the domain,”³ which would be placed in their appropriate domain. The first of this span was dedicated to creating “the greater light to dominate the day and the lesser light to dominate the night” (Genesis 1:16) that would translate to the sun and the moon, respectively, and would be located within the universe itself. The second day of this span was comprised of God bringing forth all the sea creatures to occupy all parts of the seas, and also the winged creatures that would essentially be fed by the sea creatures, helping them multiply (Genesis 1:20-23). On the third day of this span of creation, God brought about all the living creatures

¹ The *Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation* will be used throughout this paper.

² Adele Berlin et al., *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 12.

³ *Ibid.*

that would roam the surface (Genesis 1:24-28). Among the living creatures that he placed on land, God had “created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:27). The point of distinguishing between two different genders is attributed to God’s command to mankind to “be fertile and multiply,” (Genesis 1:28) which would then lead to mankind as a whole virtually ruling over all the other living creatures that dwell upon the earth. As a source of food, God let mankind and every other land creature consume the seeds of plants and trees (Genesis 1:29-30). Because of this, God could be considered to a certain extent as being omnibenevolent, meaning that he is an all powerful being who only wants good in the universe and can in some sense control the distribution of the good and bad, and consuming other living things as they are living their lives would not be considered a morally good thing to do. To him it may be better to eat the the seeds before they could grow and live their lives, so that they would not have to die prematurely at the hands of another one of his creations. It was on the seventh day that God stopped working on his creations, during which he consecrated that specific day “because on it God ceased from all the work of creation that He had done” (Genesis 2:3). From these seven days of creation, one can conclude that God, in terms of Judaism, acted alone in the creation of the cosmos, which he had created with knowledge of what he wanted to and what he was doing, and how he wanted to do it. He is a non-physical being, one that does not make up any sort of matter, yet is present within the universe and everything that he created. It is because of his presence in all that he created that he is able to maintain relationships with everything. This notion would thus result in God being completely incomprehensible; he is too great of a being to be understood by anyone, in the sense that one can say what he is not, but cannot say what he is. God is also an eternal being, since he is

present in the natural world, yet he is beyond the physical world. Lastly, God created man not like he created everything else, rather he created man as the greatest of his creations. In a way he created the cosmos (or at least the earth) as something that was for man and to be ruled by man in every way possible. He instilled within man the power to control all life on the very surface with which man shares. Unlike other living creatures that God created, mankind has their own nature attributed to them, a nature with which God had only equipped man to give them this edge over everything else that he had created.

Creationism has been a very controversial topic of discussion, especially the past couple hundred years. The story of creation is great to read and analyze to see what was truly meant by the author or authors as they were writing it. At the point in time during which the story was first conceived it was certainly a concept that was capable of being believed, since science and even philosophical thought were not at the advanced stage needed in order for people to effectively be critical and perhaps envision a better, more persuasive story on how the cosmos as we know and don't know it could have come to be. One point that is rather confusing and difficult to wrap one's head around is how God can be eternal. This infers that God has always been present, even before he supposedly created the cosmos, therefore he himself was not created, rather he was at one point existent within a void; he was inside of something that was not actually a thing; he existed as a being within an empty, inconceivable nothingness. Coming from a different point of view, there are such theories as the Big Bang Theory that could explain from a scientific viewpoint the origin and creation of the cosmos. But even this modern theory of creation that has been agreed upon by a vast majority of major scientists cannot conclusively and resoundingly explain the reasoning behind the determination of events, and also how this

seemingly instantaneous creation of the cosmos aligns with the sudden creation of the same cosmos as explained in the Bible. Even with everyday advances in science and technology, there may never be a day where a theory is proposed that can perfectly explain the state of the existence of God in this universe while also explaining the occurrences that have happened and will eventually happen, and whether or not we had a say in how our past prevailed and if our futures have already been predetermined for everyone and everything.

From the point in time that mankind was created by God, it showcased as a whole its own nature; a nature distinguishable from the natures of other animals and creatures that God had created. At the time that God had created the earth and heaven, “the LORD God formed man from the dust of the earth” (Genesis 2:7). Although it was not at this point stated, it could be relevant to know that the name of this man was given the name Adam, which is derivatively the Hebrew word for “man”⁴. Upon creating the first man, “The LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom he had formed” (Genesis 2:8). God placing the first man into the garden of Eden that he had created is significant, since “Adam is conceived as a farmer, and work - albeit in an exceedingly easy form, given the miraculous fertility of Eden - is part of the divine plan.”⁵ In order to give Adam something on which to work in the garden, God made the ground cultivate any beautiful-looking plant and all the good food, “with the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and bad” (Genesis 2:9). God had placed him in the garden of Eden “to till it and tend it” (Genesis 2:15). Adam’s role was as so relevant to his being because he had been created from it, and thus he would inversely have some skill on how to take care of it. With this, God made sure to warn the man about not

⁴ Berlin, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 15.

⁵ Ibid.

eating from the tree of knowledge by stating, “Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat, but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die” (Genesis 2:16-17). God made this restriction for this man because this tree “offers an experience that is both pleasant and painful; it awakens those who partake of it to the higher knowledge and to the pain that both come with moral choice.”⁶ God did not want man (in this case, all of mankind) to have to experience any evil, or even have the knowledge of such a horrible thing. It is also worthy to point out that God made this restriction in the form of a test that would examine just how much mankind really trusts God. The idea was proposed by God that man needed a fitting helper because it was not right that he was alone, so then God created all the living creatures, every creature of which could be thought, but none of them really proved to be a fitting helper (Genesis 2:18-20). This conclusion led to God forcing the man to go into a deep sleep, so that he could take one of his ribs, with which he utilized to create a woman (Genesis 2:22-23), who was later named Eve by Adam “because she was the mother of all the living” (Genesis 3:20) which assumes that the name “Eve” originates from possibly a Hebrew word that means something along the lines of “source of life,” or maybe simply just “life.”

There was then a proclamation that a man “leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, so that they become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24), This means that a man is supposed to stay with his woman, and only that woman, and become one with each other. Because of this, “promiscuity is thus a degradation of God’s intention in creating human beings male and female.”⁷ The belief in soul mates applies to this concept; once a man finds his “fitting helper,” then he should no longer keep looking. After the creation of the woman, “The two of them were naked, the man and his

⁶ Ibid, 16.

⁷ Ibid.

wife, yet they felt no shame” (Genesis 2:25). Them being nude signifies their ignorance of what is good and bad, which is seen as a good thing since they were not able to experience the evils of the world. Then in Genesis 3:1-4, a serpent, who is the most clever of the creatures created by God, appears to tempt Adam and Eve into eating from the tree of knowledge by stating that God was just lying to them and keeping them from something that would bring them bliss, and that they are not going to die if they do eat from the tree of knowledge, “but God knows that as soon as you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like divine beings who know good and bad” (Genesis 3:5). As soon as she heard what would come of her eating from the tree of knowledge, Eve took fruit from the tree and ate it, while also giving some of the fruit to Adam so that he could enjoy it, as well. Both Adam and Eve soon realized the consequences of doing this. When they ate the fruit, their eyes had opened “and they perceived that they were naked; and they sewed together fig leaves and made themselves loincloths” (Genesis 3:7). This symbolizes their loss of ignorance and a gaining of advanced knowledge, which is of the same level of a divine being, or in this case, God. It is a horrible thing now that they have this knowledge because they know what it is like to feel embarrassed and be exposed to the evil among the world. The emphasis is on how Adam and Eve reached this realization. The knowledge came about not by getting direction from God, but rather through their own experience. Adam and Eve then hid from God, with Adam telling God that the reason was because he was scared since he was nude, this knowledge coming from them eating from the tree (Genesis 3:8-10). When asked why he had eaten from the tree, he blamed the woman for supplying him the fruit from the tree, after which the woman blamed the serpent for enticing her into eating from the tree (Genesis 3:11-13). God had to punish them for going against his orders, so upon punishing the

serpent by removing his legs, forcing him to slither, and forever being subject to the animosity of mankind (Genesis 3:14-15), he ordered that the woman “will suffer pain in childbirth, experience sexual desire for her husband, yet be subordinate to him,”⁸ (Genesis 3:16) and then ordered that the man, “for having obeyed her rather than God, will toil over unproductive soil all the days of his life, until the ground from which he was taken reabsorbs him”⁹ (Genesis 3:17-19). It is important to note that Adam had done as Eve had done, rather than obeying what God told him not to do. Aside from this, “the man lamely attempts to pass the buck to his wife, and thus, also to the God who put her at his side,”¹⁰ which means that Adam had betrayed God in a more harmful manner than Eve had. The fitting helper of his that God had given him is that one on whom he turned, which simply is not as bad as Eve turning on a creation of God that was naturally menacing. After punishing them, God then clothed both Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:21) which shows that one can find “in this unmerited kindness a paradigm for human behavior.”¹¹ From this one is taught forgiveness among people who do wrong, which is something that all of mankind should do. God finally banishes Adam from the garden of Eden, because if he were to stay he would have the potential of continually eating from the tree of knowledge, thus gaining a much greater knowledge than what he had already achieved, and God does not want man to know all right away, rather he wants man to gain knowledge through his guidance, little by little. One claim that can be made from this story is that Adam and Eve are the ancestors to every human who has existed and will ever exist. These humans are made as beings who will prosper as a whole, but individually are mortal. They are together imperfect, as they have the capability

⁸ Ibid, 17.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid, 18.

of doing evil things and turning their backs on God, occasionally for personal gain. Mankind may both be imperfect, but the relationship that mankind and God are able to share with each other is fundamental to Jewish tradition, both traditional and modern.

The story of Adam and Eve is a great story, and one of the most traditional stories among the Jewish Bible. But just because of the accolade of it being a great story, that does not mean that it has to be believed. Even without the multiple, almost universally accepted theories about the origin of man by analyzing human history through the utilization of both anthropological and scientific practices, it would still be difficult to accept that the names and exact whereabouts of both of these alleged first humans could be documented and “remembered” for all of this time, and that we humans have not changed one bit ever since these first humans were created. Another point that is mentioned a lot is how this extremely powerful being was not able to create everything exactly how he wanted to in the first place. His intention all along may have been for mankind to have indeed gone against his word, but for the mankind that he had created to succumb to an evil manipulator is very troubling if you consider that this is an omnibenevolent being wanting his creations to go against him and commit evil acts. Even with its flaws, this story is still one that holds some truth to it, and does in some ways accurately show the nature of mankind as it always has been.

The importance of the stories of creation and thus Adam and Eve are important to Judaism, in that they metaphorically explain the relationship between mankind and God. This relationship between the two signifies how they work together in order to fulfill God’s will, and also how they are related in a spiritual sense. After God had created everything else, from the sky and the sea and the land creatures, he went on to make man “in our image, after our likeness.

They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth” (Genesis 1:26). The creation of man in God’s image and likeness “carries with it a commission to rule over the animal kingdom.”¹² God’s intention all along was to create man after he had created all the other creatures, symbolizing that God had bestowed upon man the position of ruling everything made before them, showing that God had in fact created man with some sort of divine qualities. In Genesis 2, it depicted the concoction of man by God as a formation from the dust of the earth, where God “blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being” (Genesis 2:7). Compared to how man was created in Genesis 1, this illustrates a much more intimate relationship between man and his Creator, in which God had taken what he had already created and made a being out of it, a being with a few capabilities that God himself had. The man “is not an amalgam of perishable body and immortal soul, but a psychological unity who depends on God for life itself.”¹³ A main teaching within Judaism is that God brought us here; without him we would not be here, and we should look up to God for guidance. If we look up to and trust in God, he will reward us with his divine help. Prior to Adam and Eve eating from the tree of knowledge, they realized that they were nude, but they also were not ashamed (Genesis 2:25). This feeling of pride that they had “attests to their innocence,”¹⁴ in the sense that they were letting God direct them and letting him wait to show them experiences that will be needed. When Adam and Eve managed to experience by themselves, it gave them this new knowledge of shame and nudity “that they had lacked in their childlike innocence, a symbol of a much more encompassing sense of guilt and an ominous

¹² Ibid, 14.

¹³ Ibid, 15.

¹⁴ Ibid, 16.

estrangement between God and the primal couple.”¹⁵ Adam and Eve, upon being banished from the garden of Eden, had left “the magical garden of their childhood and their innocence and entered into the harsh world of adulthood and its painful realities.”¹⁶ Their relationship ceased to be innocent, now that Adam and Eve had some sort of a divine knowledge. God realized that man was able to live on their own, without any strict rules, although he would still give them some guidance during their lives. Man had become, according to God, “like one of us, knowing good and bad” (Genesis 3:22), which states that God had realized that man is now a very real, God-like being, and at this point he “resolves to deny him the opportunity to make himself immortal and banishes him from the garden in which the tree of life was found.”¹⁷ Although man now had this new, divine-like status, God interrupted him getting any closer to being as divine as he is by making him leave the garden of Eden. The relationship that man and God share is one that is of utmost importance among the Jewish community. From the Jewish Bible we are able to see that human beings are not supposed to, rather they are not able to whatsoever, be as divine as God is, and that God determines what we do by guiding us through life, while letting us have the free will to do what we ever so choose to do. We all depend on God, and thus in a sense, God depends on us.

The relationship that God shares with mankind is an endearing one, and a crucial element of Jewish beliefs. Every person who is a follower of this religion will note this relationship, and how God will protect man in any situation and when it all ends, God will reward those that confess their faith and trust in him. This would make sense in a way, since those who do not believe or trust in him would thus not get rewarded, but what is not clear (at least from Genesis)

¹⁵ Ibid, 17.

¹⁶ Ibid, 17-18.

¹⁷ Ibid, 18.

is the relationship that God has with these people. If there is some form of relationship between God and all of mankind, which would mean every person that he created, then even the non-believers would have some form of relationship with God. Even if everyone did actually have a relationship with some sort of God, there would be no way to know this for sure. It is also difficult to assume, even if God did exist and his intention were to make us the prime authority of the animal kingdom, that we in fact are. It would have been better if the writers of the Bible expanded on this claim, maybe state in what ways we are the rulers of every animal. We are obviously much more intelligent than other animals, but in no way are all other animals inferior to us in every other way. It could be assumed that if the Jewish God were real, and the reason why we all are here is because of him, then in a sense we would be made in his image, but everything about this God and mankind relationship discussion, plus everything else concerning God, depends on whether or not God really exists.

Religion, as a whole, teaches some great moral values by which anyone could learn to live. The stories told in the scriptures of most religions portray these values, and the creation story including Adam and Eve is just one example of this. Not only is this story just a part of Genesis, but it explains some of the most fundamental beliefs of the Jewish tradition, about the nature of God, the nature of mankind, and the powerful relationship that the two of them share with each other. Judaism has been a very influential tradition, possibly in fact the most influential of them all. It impossible to imagine what the world would be like if Judaism had never arisen, and if this creation story was never written. We can all be thankful, however, that these traditions are here, and that hopefully they will not ever go away.