

UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPTS OF GOD, MAN AND SALVATION IN SEMITIC RELIGIONS

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Abstract

Semitic religions have a common origin in middle east Asia. The followers of these religions commonly believe that they are the descendants of patriarch Abraham and therefore, Semitic religions are otherwise known as Abrahamic religions. Judaism, Christianity and Islam are the major Abrahamic religions which constitute the major part of the world religions. Many of their fundamental beliefs, doctrines and dogmas have similarities. They are monotheistic religions believing in only One and Supreme God. This God is the creator and sustainer of the entire universe. He has created the human beings in his own image and likeness with the purpose of obeying His commands and do good. Finally, on the day of Last Judgement, human beings will be rewarded and punished by him according to their deeds on this earth. This paper aims at discussing the similarities and dissimilarities in their conception of God, Man and Salvation.

Key words: Semitic, Abrahamic, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Monotheistic, Last Judgement etc.

Introduction

Semitic religions are otherwise known as the Abrahamic religions. Judaism, Christianity and Islam are the major Abrahamic religions. They all believe that they are the descendants of the patriarch – Abraham. Due to their common origin most of their beliefs are similar. They all worship the God of ancient Israel, the God of Abraham. These religions are monotheistic religions as they believe in the existence of only One Supreme God. Concept of man in Semitic religion is something different from other religion. Man, according to these religions, is created by the Supreme God in His own image and likeness and is endowed with an immortal soul. At the bodily death of a human being, the body dies but soul does not. Souls, on the last day of judgement, will be judged by the Almighty according to their deeds on this earth. Whereas the

souls with good deeds will be rewarded with heavenly bliss, the souls with bad deeds will be condemned to eternal damnation. In Semitic religion man is totally dependent on One God. Because He is the controller of his or her life. This paper discusses the concept of God, the concept of the origin of man, the cause for human suffering, final judgment or reward to immortal souls and the ways for human salvation according to these Semitic religions. The paper is divided into three parts, each discussing these three major Semitic religions separately.

A. Jewish/ Judaic Understanding

Judaism is one of the oldest religions of the world. Among the contemporary Semitic religions, it is the oldest one. Most of the fundamental beliefs of Christianity and Islam have been directly derived from Judaism. Therefore, it becomes necessary to understand the basic tenets, dogmas and beliefs of Judaism in order to understand the other two Semitic religions well.

Concept of God

Jewish religion is a monotheistic religion. They believe in one God. The very opening word of the Jewish confession of faith, *shema*, declares, "Here, O Israel, the Lord, our God, the Lord is one."¹ This is the fundamental belief of Jewish people. God is personal but it does not mean that he has got personality like ordinary human being. He has pure consciousness and will and everything in the world is done according to his will. He speaks to men and responds to their prayer. Since God is essentially ethical and He appears with ethical attributes such as justice, mercy, righteousness etc.; the whole human beings are expected to deal with Him and fellow human beings ethically. God is considered as the ruler and creator of this universe. "God is infinite and has no form or likeness, God is far beyond the grasp of human, finite minds. This is the reason there are no pictures or statues of any kind in Jewish place of worship."² But we can know him by the attributes such as omnipotence, omniscient, omnipresent, eternal, transcendent, immanent etc. According to Jews, God is holy and so radiant that no one can set his eyes on him and if anyone does so, he will die. The reason for this is that man is unclean from within and without.

The Origin of Man

The Jews believe that God created man. The book of Genesis teaches us that after creating all things in the world finally God decided to create human kind.

God said "Let us make human kind in our image, according to our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth. So, God created

humankind in his own image, in this image of God he created them: male and female he created them. (Gen 1: 26-27).

This passage clearly tells us that God is the cause for the creation of man because he had the desire to create humankind like him in his image and likeness. After creating all things in the world God created humankind in this way, "God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being." (Gen 2: 8). But God understood that it is not good that the man is alone so he gave a helper as his partner. "So, the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the ribs that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman." (Gen 2: 21-22) They were called as Adam and Eve and they are regarded as the first parents of all humankind. They were like God and they were with the divine presences. But when they committed sin they went way from divine presence and were sent out from the paradise which they were given to live. So, from here the separation started between God and men. When Adam and Eve disobeyed the commandments of God, God punished them by sending them out of the paradise. The same pattern we can find in the life history of Jewish people. Whenever they disobeyed the commandments of God they were sent for exile. The book of Exodus is the example of this. "The whole purpose of creation is to establish a divine order and establishment of the kingdom of God on earth."³ This is possible for human kind only by obeying God's commandments which are given by His servants like Moses etc.

Human Suffering as Consequence of God's Wrath

The Judaic concept of human suffering is a punishment from God or Yahweh. When the first parents - Adam and Eve, committed sin in the garden of Eden, God punished them by sending them out of the paradise. However, God did not curse them but blessed them and sent them to the world to live with suffering and happiness. God understood that after committing sin human being is able to choose what is good and bad. The limitations and imperfection of human being became the cause for committing sin. "God has granted free will to the human beings the latter themselves are responsible for the various sins they commit."⁴ It means that God gave moral laws to the human beings (which are given to Mosses) but they have the freedom to obey or disobey those laws. In other words, man is himself responsible for his actions and not God. If we disobey the commands of God, we will be punished. This can be seen throughout the history of Israel or the Jewish people. "God is transcendent, so he can meet his people through the revelation He makes. This revelation has been progressively made through the ages by His

prophets.”⁵ The prophetic writings include moral laws and commandments from God which are revealed by God to those prophets. All these prophets lead the people to prepare for receiving the Messiah and they are still waiting for the coming of the Messiah. The history of the Jewish people begins with sorrow because Adam and Eve sinned. The first son of Adam killed his brother Abel, they enjoyed the promised land of Canaan for a very short spell of time, the kings after kings disobeyed Yahweh and thus, there were famines, pestilence and were defeated by the neighboring countries. Twice their temple was destroyed and they were taken to exile: first in Egypt and second in Babylon. Finally, and most recently, many Jews were killed by Hitler in the Nazi camps. All these events took place when they disobeyed the Yahweh God. So, they believe that “man has been endowed with free will and its misuse in disobeying God is the cause of his suffering.”⁶ Nevertheless, if the innocent people suffer, they believe that it is a test from God as Job suffered. Job was a righteous man in front of *Yahweh* but the suffering of Job was unimaginable. God had taken everything from him including his property, sons, daughters and all that belongs to him. His wife and friends blamed him for believing in God but he had unwavering faith in God, he didn't doubt God. Eventually, everything was given back and restored to him by God as he stood firm in his faith.

Life-after Death and the Human Destiny

Judaism believes that the life in this earth is not ending with the physical death. They believe in the resurrection that there will be a world which is for the resurrected souls. There the souls will be rewarded for the good deeds, which he or she had done in this world: “According to Judaism to which it seems that the advantage of resurrection and after –life is only to the righteous and the wicked are to perish forever along with their physical death”.⁷ It means that the righteous will be rewarded and he is having a life in the world to come. “In this view, the world to come in a life-after-death, is a world only meant for the good and the righteous in which they will be allowed to live eternally in nearness to God and his angels with all pleasure and happiness”.⁸ The punishment of wicked is that they will be cut off and perish like any animal. In the early Judaism there was no belief in heaven and hell but later they started to believe in these conceptions of final judgment, resurrection of the dead and in the heaven or the hell according to their good and bad deeds. There is another belief about life-after-death, that is, after bringing all dead to life on the Day of Judgment, God "heals" them all except those few 'who brought injury to everyone'. The meaning of the healing is not clear but it may be curing the defects, diseases etc. Thus, it is difficult to point out the elements of Judaic eschatology in exact unambiguous terms.

The ultimate human destiny is to attain the membership of heaven where he will live eternally in perfect pleasantness with God and his angels. In this world there is no body or bodily function, that human being will attain pure spiritual form in perfect peace and calm. Our soul which is eternal always searches for God and it is restless in search of God. The human destiny is to take this soul to heaven and for this he has to be righteous in the world or he has to obey the commandments given by God. There is another belief in Judaism that the hell is temporary because they believe in an ultimate happy life is granted to all because, a messiah will come on to the earth to redeem everybody. "Thus, it seems that according to the Jewish belief a time will come when the world will be reduced to one in which there will be only righteousness and happiness."⁹ So, that the ultimate destiny of human being is to be with God.

B. The Christian Understanding

As Christianity is the offshoot of the Judaism, its concept of God, man and salvation is almost similar to that of Judaism. They both believe that the Supreme Being, God, created man in his own likeness and image. The human spirit or souls which God gave when he formed human being from dust is inclined towards union with God. On the final Day of Judgment, God will reward these souls according to their deeds in the world.

The Concept of God

God is self-existent and man is created by God. God is, the creator and man is the creature. Christianity begins with Jesus Christ. It is a monotheistic religion believing in one God. "God is of the nature of a person although not in the ordinary sense of the term 'personality'. He has consciousness and will and is of the nature of pure spirit."¹⁰ God has got three forms but God is one; they are 'God the Father and God the Son and God the Spirit.' God has many metaphysical and ethical attributes but most of all is his nature as loving father. Finally, through the incarnation, God became a human person and he became a savior of the world who was the last person in order to establish the idea of the revelation of God. Man is sent in this world in order to do righteous work or good deeds on this earth, but due to the traps of Satan and its evil influences human beings disobeyed the Word of God. God himself incarnated in the world as a human being and he established the righteousness in the world. Incarnation means that God becomes a human being. "Through the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, God become a human being, one of god's own creatures."¹¹ God sent many prophets in to the world to teach the right lesson in the world or to establish a righteous world. They promised a Savior in to the world and in the fullness of time God sent his son Jesus as the Savior of the

world. Through Him, God wanted to teach the way to God and the way to lead a good and moral life in this world. “The incarnation is what makes Christianity something new. For Jesus is not a prophet who speaks in the name of God, but is God Himself speaking and saving: he is God who comes in person to speak of himself to man and to show him the way by which to reach him.”¹²

By his death, he became the Savior of the world. So human beings are invited to imitate him and follow his teachings. In the Last Supper he established Eucharist by giving his blood and body to humanity for the spiritual nourishment. It was a means to fulfill what Jesus promised that “I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Mt 28: 20) According to Christian belief, Jesus is present in every human being by receiving his body and blood. Through this body and blood Jesus is coming in to us. In the Old Testament, we see God gave Ten Commandments to Moses but Jesus, the Son of God, reduced it into two. They are love your God and love one another as yourself. Jesus said, “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” (Jn 13: 34) Jesus Christ gave a helper to human being. He promised that “I will ask the father and he will give you another advocate, to be with you forever. This is the spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.” (Jn 14: 15-17) Finally, all the human beings on the earth participate in Jesus Christ's redemptive mystery by receiving seven sacraments.

The Christians consider God, as the Supreme Being because He is the cause or reason for all the creation in the world. He is the Savior of the world. “God is the sustainer and destroyer of the world; he has created the world out of nothing and may destroy at any time according to his sweet will.”¹³ It means that He is the ruler of the world because he created the world and at any time can destroy the world. Therefore, he is the Supreme Being or ruler of the world. He will offer a life after death in the last judgment in accordance with our good and bad actions, which we do in this world.

Christianity is a monotheistic religion. But the nature of God is in three forms; they are Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This three in one nature of God is known as the Holy Trinity. Holy Spirit will enable the people to teach about God and Jesus. He is active in the world because “Jesus before his death promised that he would send the Holy Spirit who will teach them, what else has to be known and talked about Jesus and God. Thus, there are three things, namely God the Father, God the son, God the Holy ghost or Spirit.”¹⁴ Son of God is Savior of the world and God the father is the creator of the world.

Concept of Man and Soul

According to Christian belief human person is created by Supreme God. It is similar to the Judaic understanding of Human person. Human person is endowed with a soul and therefore a combination of body and soul. Human soul is immortal. Death is not the end of man, because when God formed human being out of dust, it was only a physical body or material body. Then God breathed into his nostrils the breath of his life and man became a living being. The death of our physical body is not the end of our life, because there is a life to come. In the mission of Jesus Christ, he preached the kingdom of God is near. So, we can believe that there is a world to come or life after death which is known as the kingdom of God. There, in that kingdom, we will not have any shape or body. We will be like spirit which is considered as the human soul. The fundamental basis for belief in the life after death is that “Christ has been raised from death as the guarantee that those who sleep in death will also be raised.” (1Cor 15:20) Human being will be rewarded on the last Day of Judgment according to their good or bad actions committed on the earth. Jesus says, “do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul: rather be afraid of God, who can destroy both body and soul in hell.” (Mt 10:28) God can destroy this human soul but human being cannot kill the soul; he can kill only the physical body. So “Jesus himself tells us that the soul can be destroyed by God if men persist in their evil ways.”¹⁵

The Human Suffering and Salvation

In Christianity human suffering is a way to God. In human beings', sufferings may occur when the evil powers dominate over human beings. Evil powers are the cause of human suffering. This evil power dominates over us when we disobey the commandments of God. When Adam and Eve, committed sin all human beings fell into original sin. “The Christian’s view that man suffers due to his original sin.”¹⁶ It means that human being always has a tendency to do evil things and we are born with the original. The original sin is forgiven when we receive the sacrament of baptism because Jesus Christ died for us and became a savior of the world. It is clear that the human suffering on the earth is because of the disobedience of the commandments of God. There is also an alternative understanding regarding suffering that “God the father uses strict suffering to discipline his sons (human kind).”¹⁷ It means that through their sufferings, people may turn towards God and may be completely obedient to the will and plan of God. But the innocent people’s suffering is considered as the glorification of God the Father. Because for the glorification of God, Jesus Christ suffered on the cross. So, the innocent people’s suffering is a will and plan of God, and also to test the sincerity and depth of their faith in God

When Adam and Eve committed sin, God closed the door of the paradise forever and God sent them out of the paradise and there was a big gap between God and man. Human beings disobeyed the commandments of God and they were possessed by the evil powers. Therefore, God, in his mercy, promised a Savior for the human beings. In the fullness of time God himself incarnated in the world as a human being and by his passion, crucifixion, death and resurrection he offered salvation to the human kind. “The death of Jesus is such that by its very nature it is subsumed into the resurrection. It is a death into the resurrection. And resurrection does not mean the beginning of a new period in the life of Jesus, a further extension of time filled with new and different things.”¹⁸ It means through his resurrection he promised our resurrection also because the resurrection of Jesus did not bring a new period. It was an extension of his life with God the Father. By our resurrection we also will be unified with God the father. “In this resurrection soul of all men are reunited with their bodies and men again come in the fullness of their nature.”¹⁹ That is spirit. The Son of God reopened the door of the paradise which was closed for ever through Adam and Eve’s sin. “Jesus does not act on his own but accord with God’s plan and intention.”²⁰ It means that when God created man, he gave free will to him or her to choose what is right and wrong. The incarnated Jesus Christ also had this free will but he was completely obedient to the will of God. In the like manner, we are expected to do righteous deeds in the world as the Son of God did in the world and as he fully obeyed the commandments of God. Human being because of their imperfection may turn towards the worldly pleasure and commit sin again. Jesus the son of God sacrificed his life on Mount Calvary, and offered salvation to all human kind in the world.

C. The Islamic Understanding

In Islam everything in the world is created by God. They believe that man is created by God. They believe that “God created two apparently parallel species of creature's human's and Jinn, the one form clay and the other from fire.”²¹ According to this God created two species: humans and Jinn. Jinn are the cause for the evils which is established with itself in reason and responsibility. It is with human beings and Quran describes itself as guides for the human race. The story of the fall of Adam is accepted in Islam too, “but the Quran states that God forgave Adam for his act of disobedience, which is not viewed in the Quran as original sin.”²² Islam believes that humans are the noblest creatures of all creation. All other creations in the world are to serve human beings. All creation in the world has a certain purpose to do in the world and people have been created for the service of God and obedience to God’s will. The nature of human being is weak and faltering. Everything in the universe has a limited nature and they

have to recognize their limitations and insufficiency. Human beings are viewed as rebellious and full of pride, arrogating to themselves the attributes of self-sufficiency. Pride is considered as cardinal sin of human kind. Because without recognizing its own creaturely limitation, “Human kind becomes guilty of ascribing to itself partnership with God and of violating the unity of God.”²³ True faith will lead to the unity of God and human being is for total submission to the Divine will. According to Quran, human faith must include in these three elements; “they are belief in God, belief in his messages addressed to humanity, belief in the Day of Judgment.”²⁴ Through his messages and prophets God was calling people back to him. But very few accepted the calling. Others become disbelievers but it is possible for a sinner to repent and to achieve redemption by a genuine conversion to the Truth. Genuine repentance can remove all sins and bring back the people to sinless life which was at beginning of their life. Human beings have the choice to obey or disobey. In Islam marriage is necessary. Celibacy is only something exceptional. Monasticism is not a way of life.

Allah the Supreme Being

Islam considers God as Allah. It is the name given to the Supreme Being. Name *Rabb* also is given to God. Islam is a monotheistic religion believing in one God and all the creations in the world is originated from him. “The Quran identifies Allah as the creator, sustainer and sovereign of the heavens and the earth.”²⁵ Including this there are many attributes given to God in the Quran. Islam believes that Allah the Supreme Being revealed his messages through prophets. They were elected by God. Some of the main prophets are Abraham, Noah, Moses and Jesus. Muhammad is the last prophet of Islamic religion. He revealed the Quran to the world. The summary of basic Islamic teaching regarding God is as follows:

Allah! There is no God but he, the living, the Everlasting. Neither slumber nor sleep seizes him. His are all things in the heavens and the earth. Who is there who can intercede with him except by his leave? He knows what is before them and what is behind them, while they comprehend nothing of his knowledge except as he wills. His throne extends over the heavens and the earth. Sustaining them does not burden him, for he is the most high, the supreme.²⁶

Five Pillars of Islam

The five pillars of Islam are known as obligations. These are fundamental practices in Islam. One must observe them. Observation of these practices lead a person to be righteous. These five pillars help a person to live with the plan and purpose of God. These are the practices one must practice in social and community life. Let us see these five pillars in a quick-glance. The first pillar is the profession of faith. It is Repetition of Faith in the Absolute Oneness of Allah

or *Shahada*. The profession is that “there is no God but Allah and the Muhammad is his prophet.”²⁷ By professing this, one is entering in the Muslim community and one becomes member of Islamic community. Apart from this fundamental belief, one has to believe in the Angels (the revelation of angel Gabriel to Muhammad), in the revealed book Quran, in prophets and the last Day of judgement. The second pillar of Muslim spiritual life is Daily Prayer or *Salat*. “A Muslim is required to pray at least five times a day; at dawn, after mid-day, in the late afternoon, after sun-set and in the last evening.”²⁸ It is also known as five daily prayers or *Salat*. The noon prayer on Fridays is the cardinal congregational prayer. Other times they can pray anywhere. It is not necessary that they have to come Mosque. The third pillar is the obligatory tax called *zakat* or Almsgiving. This is the only permanent tax levied by the Quran and is payable annually on food grains, cattle, and cash after one year's possession. It is collected by states and used for the poor people. Quran mentions other purposes also: they are ransoming Muslim war captives, redeeming chronic debts etc. It is believed that by giving alms as prescribed, the rest of one's wealth is religiously and legally purified. The fourth pillar is Fasting or *Sawm*. Muslims are required to fast once a year during the Muslims' month of *Ramadan*. Fasting begins at daybreak and ends at sunset and during the day eating, drinking and smoking are forbidden. The reason for fasting is that it helps them to remember the plight of the poor and needy; Commemorates the revelation of the Quran to the prophet Muhammad and it helps one to grow stronger in spirituality.²⁹ At the end of the fasting Muslims celebrate the feast of *Eid-ul-Fitr*. The Fifth one is Pilgrimage or *Hajj*. It is a participation in the annual pilgrimage to *Macca* at least once in their life time. It is a Holy city where Mohammad was born and received his revelations. It is a cultural and social gathering in *Macca* and standing before the *Kaba* praising Allah together. In the *Hajj* all are truly equal. The *Hajjis* are allowed to use only simple and white clothes called *Ihram*.

Human Suffering and Life-after Death

The Islamic concept of suffering is that God is the controller of the world. So, suffering must be a part of this plan or purpose. In Islam they believe that “man's sole duty towards God is unconditional, absolute submission and no doubts are to be raised against his plan of work.”³⁰ Those who are acting against God's plan and purpose will suffer in the world. According to Quran, suffering is firstly a punishment for sin and secondly, suffering is trial or test for faithfulness to God.

With regard to the day of last judgement, Islam believes that, “on the Last Day, the world will come to an end, the dead will be resurrected and a judgment will be pronounced on every

person in accordance with his deeds.”³¹ They believe that man's life does not come to a final end with his physical death. His physical body will be consumed by the earth in the grave and his soul rests in place called *Al-Berzahk*. The unexpected time God will come for the judgment and He will give heaven or hell to human beings according to the good and bad deeds in the world. “Those who are condemned will burn in the hell with fire and those who are saved will enjoy the abiding pleasures of paradise.”³² It means that those who did good in the world will be rewarded and the bad people will be punished. Islam believes that on the day of judgment, trumpet will be sounded by the angel *Israfil* and the dead will rise from their grave to stand before the judgment throne of God. It is also believed that in the day of judgment Moses, Jesus and prophet Muhammad would advocate for mercy for their followers but God will hear the petition of Muhammad.

Conclusion

Semitic religions accept the concept of one God and they believe that one God is the cause for this universe and He is the sustainer and the controller. They believe that He is the cause for human beings' existence. He has created the human beings, endowing human body with an immortal soul. The immortal soul comes from God and this immortal soul is incarnated in the world to do righteous deeds. But when this immortal soul becomes possessed by evil power or goes behind the worldly pleasures, God punishes them. This is the cause for human suffering. They also have an alternative belief concerning suffering that sometimes it may be a test from God to know how strong one's faith in God is. The Final Judgment for us is dependent upon our good and bad actions on the earth. Regarding this Jews believe that a Messiah will come for the redemption; Christians believe that Jesus Christ became the savior of the world and Muslims believe that Prophet Mohammad will advocate for Allah's mercy on them. Finally, obedience to God's commandments is the way to God and salvation. The believers of Semitic religions have the view that from birth to death God has a prominent role in human life.

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