

July 16, 2019
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"Rivers of Wisdom"
Acts 17:22-28



For "In God we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we too are God's offspring."

We are getting older all the time. That might seem pretty obvious as each sunrise and spin around the sun inches us farther from our date of birth, and as each glance in the morning mirror confirms the aging process. But here I am speaking using the royal "We" in reference to all of humankind. Scientist once thought homo sapiens were about 200,000 years old. A new fossil find has pushed that date back to at least 300,000 maybe 400,000 years of humankind walking on this earth we call home. ¹

So here are a few questions for you to ponder given humanity's age.

If you believe in a God of all Creation and our species has been around let's say 300,000 years or so, give or take a few hundred thousand years, was God of the Universe -who was is and always will be -present to our ancestors all those many years ago?

If God of the Universe, who was and is and always will be ,was present to our ancient ancestors, did they attain any wisdom, any spiritual connections or experiences with that Presence who strew stars in the heavens above their heads too?

If you believe in a God of all Creation, who was and is and always will be, created all that is from every flower petal, to every creature of the sea and air, and who made "made all nations to inhabit the whole earth" - every human from Mesopotamians to Mayans to Aboriginal Australians, does God of All time and place have favorites?

Is wisdom and experience of God of Cosmic proportions limited to the last 4,000 years to a narrow slice of all human history to a particular people who lived in the Fertile Crescent?

I guess, those questions beg a general question, How big is your God? Can other people, in other times and places other than descendants from a nomadic tribe of Hebrews 4,000 or so years ago, have anything to share about their encounters with the Cosmic God?

Our faith ancestors in the Judeo-Christian tradition say yes. There is wisdom for us to learn from those who came before us. There was wisdom to learn from those who came before them and around them. We find many of the Hebrew parables are parallel to stories of other cultures and older times. Other peoples older than the Hebrews told stories of a Great Flood, stories of a man swallowed by a giant fish, stories of a man who lost everything and challenged the order of the universe (he would be called, Job in our telling). Other people had stories of clay tablets authored by their deity with commandments for living a good life which are pretty much what we have as our Big 10 Commandments. To know our place in the universe, and honor the God of all, to honor neighbor, neighbor's life, relationships and property. The Hebrew texts of the Torah are filled with inspirations and wisdoms shared from other cultures. These stores from Mesopotamian and Babylonian and Egyptian peoples revealed universal truth. For the Hebrew authors adopted and adapted them and wove them into their teachings about the God of All and the Creation of the world and how they would live with one another in community.

Gleaning wisdom from various spiritual traditions and incorporating it into our faith tradition did not stop with the Old Testament authors. We also find strong parallels that Jesus did the same in his teachings. For example Jesus said, "Do to others as you would have them do to you." (Luke 6:31) That is wisdom teaching, but it was not original to Jesus. We call it the Golden Rule in Christianity. It is shared wisdom from many spiritual traditions, many much older than first-century

¹ <https://www.quora.com/How-old-is-the-human-race-1>

Christianity or ancient Judaism. In fact, many of Jesus' teachings have strong parallels with teaching of other faiths, most notably Buddhism.

Some believe Jesus traveled to India sometime between his 14th year to his 29th year when the Christian scriptures are silent about his whereabouts. Some believe Jesus learned from those magi, or wise wanderers who may have made more than one trip seeking an audience with the holy child. The trade route was well established and the Roman Empire made roadways. Pilgrims and tradesmen carried more than goods to new lands; they brought their culture, beliefs and religions as well. It would have been easy for Jesus to have learned wise sayings from his own Jewish faith as well as wise sayings from others. He appears not to have closed his heart, mind or door to the sages that shared a common message of compassion and suffering and unity woven from God's Cosmic teachings in other spiritual traditions.

Jesus also saw fingers pointing to God in the lilies of the field, the sparrows of the air, the harvest, the sea, the vastness of the grains of sand and wheat. He gathered wisdom from all Creation and found God's self revelation woven in all.

When Jesus spoke to a Samaritan woman, as recorded in John's Gospel, he opened the door wide for inclusivity in worship.

19 "Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. 20 Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."

21 "Woman," Jesus replied, "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship God neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 23 Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship God in the Spirit and in truth,. 24 God is spirit, and God's worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth."

Jesus transcends Samaritan worship location and Jewish worship locations and points to a worship of God in Spirit and in Truth larger than either of their traditions practiced. I believe that Spirit and Truth which transcends particular cultures and religions is Love and Compassion, Mindfulness and Union with the Holy.

You are hearing me propose that the teachings of Jesus we hold dear and true are. The teachings of Jesus provide one of many ways people can experience the Sacredness and Oneness of life, and that we can draw from diverse sources of wisdom in our spiritual journey just as our ancestors have passed along to us. We can learn from others on different spiritual paths, maintaining our path and honoring and learning from others as well.

Of course, I suspect that someone might be thinking, but what about ... what about John 14:6- where Jesus appears to offer exclusivity by saying, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to God except through me." You can approach this text in several ways - as we can any single verse. Let me offer a few. I AM is the name used for God in the Hebrew scriptures. If we consider it that way, it reads: God is the way, the truth, and the life; no one connects to God except through the way Jesus learned. Jesus has announced union with God and offering that path of union with God through love. Early followers in the Jesus Movement were called people of The Way. Jesus points the way to union with God. The way is the way of non-violence, compassion, and love. Doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God. Not sitting oneself or ones religion above all others. Jesus clearly dismissed the idea that all must worship in the same manner.

This verse can also be read as a statement of devotion. It was written by Jesus followers to Jesus followers, Jesus is the only way, the only way WE can come to know God. It is the language of gratitude and love. It was not spoken in arrogance to discredit other worship of God. This verse is spoken in devotion to those in a particular relationship. Like we speak to our beloved and say "you are the most beautiful person in the world" Literally? in the world? have you checked? or is your beloved the most beautiful person who has captured your heart and touched your soul. Marcus Borg

calls this “poetry of devotion and the hyperbole of the heart. Poetry can express the truth of the heart, but it is not doctrine.”²

Our Hebrew faith ancestors recognized, learned from and incorporated wisdom teachings from diverse sources along their spiritual journey. Jesus recognized, learned from and incorporated wisdom teachings from diverse sources along his spiritual journey. And the Apostle Paul did likewise.

When Paul enters Athens, he sees that the city is full of idols. The most important city in ancient Greece would be expected to have a great pantheon of Greek god/goddess idols. The text says, “Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new” So Paul steps up in the colonnade and shared. He’s got something new to tell them. Hey, I see how religious you are. I’ve studied all your objects of worship. You have a lot of them! and I found one that says, “to an unknown god.” So the Athenians have built statues and temples to Zeus the god of the sky and Hera the goddess of families, and Poseidon the god of the sea, and Demeter the Goddess of Agriculture. and Ares the God of War and on and on and on.. But just in case they missed one, they dedicate one for the Unknown God. The anonymous God. Paul says, I don’t know these other gods you name, but I can tell you about this one you can’t name. This God - is the God - who made the world and everything in it. This is God of heaven AND earth. This God I know brings life and breath to all things. From one ancestor, the God made all of us in all the earth. His brother, we are related. This God is what you’ve been searching for in all these other gods. We all look for God, and indeed God is not far from each one of us. For in this God, we all live and move and have our being. Just like your poets have said, “for we too are God’s offspring.” You see what Paul did. He honored their devotion and He told them about the Cosmic God of all and he did so by quoting their own poetry. He quotes Epimenides a 6th century BCE Greek poet, then he adds Aratus and 3rd century- Stoic philosopher to proclaim God in whom all live, and move and have being.

This God of us All, of ancient and modern humankind, is the very ground of our being in which we live and move. Those of us who experience through Jesus Christ the example of love, grace, compassion need not fear others who through their teachers also see lessons of love, grace, compassion. We need not fear those who worship God of All in Truth and Spirit. We can draw deep from diverse rivers of wisdom in our spiritual journey; just like our ancestors did, just like Jesus our teacher did, as we follow the path Jesus shows in sacred living with God.

May your God be big enough to hold all the world in one embrace. May your God be near enough to be the ground of your being. Amen.

Resources for further exploration:

Epic of Gilgamesh

Egyptian Book of the Dead, and Instruction of Amenemope

Jesus and Buddha, The Parallel Sayings, Marcus Borg. Ulysses Press.

One Heart: Wisdom from the World’s Scriptures. Bonnie Louise Kuchler, ed.

² Marcus Borg. *The Heart of Christianity*.