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Traditions and Legends of the Polynesians

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Abstract: This article describes Hawaiian myths that resemble biblical myths. The writer asserts that they have myths of the Old Testament and not the New Testament because “Hagoth and his company, from whom we believe the Polynesian islanders originate, sailed from the Northern part of South America.” Polynesians have a legend of a visit from one of the gods who promised he would return. The islanders mistook Captain Cook for the god Lono.

Traditions and Legends of the Polynesians

By *Wm. M. Waddoups, Secretary of the Hawaiian Mission.*

Judge Fornander, Messrs. Alexander, Dibble, Ellis, and others, who have spent much time in collecting Hawaiian tradition and folk lore, have brought together much that is interesting and of vast importance in establishing the paternity and origin of the Polynesian family, located upon widely separated islands in the Pacific Ocean. While widely separated and scattered, yet they are so homogeneous in physical characteristics, language, tradition, and customs as to leave no doubt in the mind of the investigator that they are one people, with a common origin, and yet that origin has not been satisfactorily established. Upon this matter Judge Fornander has this to say in the opening paragraph of the first volume of his excellent work, *The Polynesian Race*: "North and South America, Malays, Papuans, Chinese and Japanese, and even the lost tribes of Israel, have all at different times and by different writers, been charged with the paternity of this family, and made responsible for its origin and appearance in the Pacific Ocean."

The purpose of this brief article is to point out the wonderful and astonishing similarity between the traditions, customs, religious practice and ceremonies of the Polynesian race, and the teachings of the Hebrew scripture known as the Bible. The reader may draw a conclusion as to where and to what people these traditions, customs and practices rightfully belong.

Much of the tradition and folk-lore of the Hawaiian people may be found, with slight variations, among the New Zealanders (Maoris), Samoans, Tahitians, Marquesans, Tongans and Paumotu islanders.

These traditions were had among the Hawaiians many generations before these islands were discovered, and long before the Bible was introduced among them by Christian missionaries. It is now difficult to find a Hawaiian, of the present generation, who knows the folk lore and traditions of the Hawaiians before the days of King Kamehameha.

The Hawaiians recognized three supreme gods, Kane, Ku and Lono. These three form a triad known as Ku-Kaua-Kahi, a fundamental supreme governing unity. These gods existed in number. Next they created the sun, moon, and stars; then

expressed it, "*Mai ka po mai.*" They created the heavens, three in number. Next they created the sun, moon, and stars; then a hosts of angels or spirits were formed. Last they created man in the image and likeness of Kane. The body of the first man was made of red earth, *lepo ula*, and spittle from the mouth of Kane. The head was made from white clay collected by Lono from the four quarters of the earth. After the man was formed the three gods breathed into his nostrils and commanded him to arise, and he became a living man. After the man was created a woman was formed from one of the ribs of the man. This first man and woman are known by different names in different chants and traditions, but the most commonly known and accepted are for the man, Kumuhonua, and for the woman, Kealokuhonua.

This primordial couple were placed in a home of which the Hawaiians speak in glowing terms. It was called by various names, such as Kaluna-i-hau-ola (Kalana with the life-giving dew); or Aina-wai-akua-a-Kane (The land of the divine water of Kane). It was known as a sacred place, and a man must be righteous in order to dwell therein. Among the adornments of the Polynesian paradise, were two trees, the Ulu kapu a Kane, the forbidden breadfruit of Kane, and the Ohia hemolele, the sacred apple. It was said among the ancient Kahuna or priests of Hawaii, that the eating of the forbidden breadfruit of Kane, brought sorrow, trouble and death to Kumuhonua and Kealokuhonua, the first man and woman. The tradition further says that the gods made spirits from the spittle of their mouths, to be their ministering servants. A number of these spirits rebelled because they were not allowed to drink awa. (Awa was used in sacrificial worship in olden times. It is a plant from the roots of which a drink is made which intoxicates if taken very freely.) The god Kane, however, was victor in the struggle which followed this rebellion, and these rebellious spirits were cast down into darkness (*ilalo loa i ka po*). The chief spirit or leader of these seditious spirits is called variously, Milu, Kanaloa, Po, Kupu ino, etc.

Another tradition says that after the gods Kane, Ku and Lono had created man and breathed into him the spirit of life, that Kanaloa also made a man, but when his clay model was completed and he commanded him to live, he failed to arise and live. This angered Kanaloa and he swore to cause the death of the man whom the gods had created. The ancient Hawaiians looked upon Kanaloa as the prince of evil, the origin of death, a disobedient spirit, and that he was severely punished by the supreme god Kane. The tradition further says that the first man and woman had two sons, the first Laka and the second Ahu, that Laka was a bad man and killed his brother Ahu.

There are three Hawaiian genealogies from the first man Kumuhoenua to Nuu or Kahinalii. The first counts thirteen generations, the second gives fourteen generations, and the third counts only twelve. (The line of Seth from Adam counts ten generations to Noah.) It is said in this tradition that it was in the days of Nuu that a great flood (known as *Ke kai a ka hina-*lii**) came upon the earth, and that Nuu, his wife Lilinoe and his three sons, with their wives, were saved in a large vessel called in their chant, *He waa halau alli o ka Moku*. After the flood subsided they found themselves upon the top of Mauna Kea (the thirteen thousand foot peak on the island of Hawaii). It is said that after Nuu went out from the ship he took a pig, coconuts and awa and offered sacrifice to the god Kane. As he looked into the sky he saw the moon, and thinking it to be Kane he worshiped it. Kane is then said to have descended on the rainbow and reproved him, but owing to the mistake he had made he was forgiven, and Kane left the rainbow in the heavens as a token of his forgiveness.

Ten generations from Nuu, according to this genealogy, there arose another great Kahuna or priest, called among other names, Kane-hoa-lani. It is said that he introduced circumcision among his people. He is said to have left the land of his nativity and traveled to a land far to the south. This Lua-Nuu had two wives. To him and his slave wife was born a son, Ahu; and to his wife Mee-hewa was born Kalani-menehune. His grandson, Kini-lau-a-mano, was the traditional father of twelve sons from whom sprang the Menehune people, who are said in this tradition to be the progenitors of the Polynesian family.

We also find in Hawaiian folk lore a tradition closely resembling the story of Joseph who was sold into Egypt. It runs thus: Waiku had ten sons and one daughter. Waikelenuiaiku one of the sons, was much beloved by Waiku, but hated by his brethren. Owing to their hatred they cast him into a pit belonging to Holonaeole. His oldest brother gave strict charge to Holonaeole to take good care of Waikelenuiaiku. He is said to have escaped from the pit and fled to a country under the rule of King Kamohoalii. He was thrown into a pit underground where were confined other prisoners. Four of these fellow prisoners dreamed dreams, one dreamed that he saw a ripe ohia (native apple), and his spirit ate it; the second dreamed that he saw and ate a ripe banana; while the third dreamed that he saw a pig, killed, dressed and ate it, and the fourth dreamer pressed awa juice from the awa plant and drank it. The interpretation given to the first, second and third dreamers were that they should die. The awa dreamer, however, was told that he should be released from the pit and restored to service in the house of the king. As was predicted, the

three dreamers who saw the ohia, the banana, and the pig, were killed, but the fourth was liberated. He subsequently told the king of the wonderful powers of Waikeleuiaiku, and he was released from prison and placed in the service of the king. He afterwards became one of the principal chiefs in the kingdom.

Another tradition closely resembling the story of the deliverance of Israel through Moses, is found in the legend of Kealii-waha-nui. He was the king of the land called Honua-ilalo. He oppressed the Menehune people, the traditional forefathers of the Polynesian family. The god Kane sent Kane-apua and Kanaloa, his older brother, to deliver them from the land of oppression. They were led to the land called Ka aina momona a Kane (The rich land of Kane). They were here instructed to observe four kapu days, or holy days, in remembrance of their miraculous deliverance. They then gave to Kane goats and swine.

Another legend is told of one Hiiaka, who went to the island of Kauai (a principal island of the Hawaiian group) to recover and restore to life the body of Lohiau, who was said to be the lover of her sister Pele, the goddess of the volcano. The body had been concealed in a cave on the summit of Kalalau Mountain. Upon arriving at the foot of the mountain she discovered that night was close approaching. She prayed to Kane to keep the sun stationary until she had accomplished her mission. She ascended to the cave, vanquished the guards, and recovered the body. A similar story of lengthening the day until a certain work was accomplished is also told concerning Maui-a-kalana, an ancient chief of great power.

A legend is also found concerning an Oahu prophet called Na-ula-a-Maihea, who left Oahu on an important mission to Kauai. His canoe was upset, he was swallowed by a whale, and afterwards thrown up on the beach near Wailua, Kauai.

You will note that in none of these traditions do we have anything seeming to point to important events in the Christian era. So far as I can learn there is nothing in Polynesian mythology and traditional folk lore that in any way points to the important events recorded in the New Testament. I have learned that there was a common belief among some of the Polynesians that one of the governing gods visited them and left a promise that he would visit them again, and that they should be watchful and prepared for his second coming. The Hawaiians speak of this god as Lono. When Captain Cook discovered these islands, in 1778, the natives at once deified him and gave him the name Lono, saying that their god Lono had returned again as he had promised.

If, as Judge Fornander maintains, the Polynesian peoples have received their traditional knowledge of Biblical characters

and events as follows, "That during the time of the Spanish galleon trade, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, between the Spanish main and Manila, some shipwrecked people, Spanish and Portuguese, had obtained sufficient influence to introduce these scraps of Bible history into the legendary lore of this people," it is strange at least that not a single mention is made in the legends of the people of the all-important and crowning event of the New Testament, the birth and crucifixion of our Savior Jesus Christ.

If, however, the theory of the origin of the Polynesians, as believed by the Latter-day Saints, be accepted, then the total absence of legendary knowledge among them, concerning the chief characters and events of the New Testament is easily explained. Hagoth and his company, from whom we believe the Polynesian islanders originate, sailed from the northern part of South America some fifty-four years before the birth of Jesus Christ. They would, therefore, of course, bring nothing with them concerning the ministry of Christ, and the travels and labors of his disciples. They were, however, fully conversant with the chief events and characters of much of the Old Testament, perhaps all that which precedes the year 600 B. C., or the time when Lehi left Jerusalem under divine command.

Honolulu, T. H.

I Know Not

I know not who I am, nor when
My life began to be;
But this I know,
Where'er I go
I am and shall be free.

I know not who I am, nor how
My eyes were made to see;
But this I know,
Where'er I go
I'll live eternally.

I know not how the universe
And Father came to be;
But this I know,
Where'er I go
My God will go with me.

I know not when nor how nor where
That I shall have to die;
But this I know,
When I shall go
My Savior will be nigh.

Provo, Utah.

Alfred Osmond.