

How Religious were Neanderthals?

by LSI Blog writer Warren Krug. Posted Dec 12, 2016.

There is still a lot of mystery surrounding these ancient humans, but they likely had some kind of religious faith.

A certain Spanish cave which once was inhabited by Neanderthals has piqued the interest of some archaeologists. Inside the cave is the grave of a toddler, and the grave is surrounded by 30 horns of animals such as bison and red deer. A hearth likely once provided heat with its fires. Archaeologist Enrique Baquedano has opined that these are the probable markings of a funeral ritual, but while the bones are real, the idea that a funeral ritual was once conducted in this cave is merely informed speculation.

Nevertheless, the Neanderthal funeral scenario has raised questions in the mind of anthropology professor emerita Barbara J. King. Did Neanderthals practice religion and how could we find out if they did, she wonders in a commentary published by NPR (National Public Radio). King says that “it is clear” these ancient people were our cousins, not our ancestors or members of our species *Homo sapiens*. Still, she admits they lived in Europe and Asia at times alongside our human ancestors. In fact, they likely interbred with humans. Some humans today carry Neanderthal genes.

As all informed people today will acknowledge, Neanderthals were not the dumb, brutish cave people they once were considered to be. We know they built complex structures, used feathers to ornament themselves, and hunted mammoths and other mega fauna with tools. There are other Neanderthal sites around the world with suggestions of ceremonial burials. But were these beings religious?

Some skeptics believe these hints of ceremonial burials all have natural explanations. Yet, when considering all the evidence, King believes some Neanderthals did indeed bury their dead with planning and care. But is there proof these people engaged with the supernatural or the sacred? We can't say today for certain why the Neanderthals buried their dead as they did.

As intelligent beings, Neanderthals probably considered life's mysteries such as the weather or the end of their lives. And anthropologist John Hawks of the U. of Wisconsin offered his opinion on the possibility Neanderthals were religious. He says that “there is really very little in most religious traditions that is different from what Neanderthals do. So I don't think it is at all improbable that the Neanderthals had a humanlike religious capacity.” If religion is considered practice and not just belief, King writes, then the Neanderthals can be said to have had a religion.

Commentary:

First, it is most certainly not “clear” that Neanderthals were merely our “cousins” and not us. Isn’t the fact they mated with humans and passed down their genes to modern humans proof that they must have been members of our human species as well? The ability to interbreed is usually considered the main characteristic of a species. So, even looking at these ancient people from a secular viewpoint, they should be considered fully human.

Secondly, consider all the other evidence that points to the intelligence and sophistication of Neanderthals, evidence which King did not mention. Some reconstructions of Neanderthals from fossils have made them look much more human than they are often pictured. They reportedly wore make-up, cooked their food, invented tools, were expert mariners, and had language skills. The Bible, of course, has no room for semi-humans, non-human human ancestors, or even our “cousins.” Since they weren’t animals, they must have been humans.

However, where to place them in human history can be a challenge. Creationists admittedly are divided in their opinions. The most popular idea though seems to be that they were one of the nomadic tribes which left Babel after God confused the language of those disobedient people.

Were they religious? Almost certainly they were, in my opinion, although what kind of faith they had we probably will never know. Considering how easily the account of Noah’s Flood was passed down from generation to generation, these descendants of Noah likely would have retained knowledge of that great event and the reasons for it. In addition, modern science has discovered that humans are born with a penchant for faith in God and that atheists must reprogram their minds in order to separate themselves from religious faith.

The bottom line is that these ancient humans were either believers in the promised Messiah or they weren’t. If they truly believed, then they can look forward to eternal life with us in heaven because they were part of the world, as in “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Reference: Barbara J. King, “Were Neanderthals Religious? - a Commentary,” NPR, December 7, 2016.¹

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¹ <http://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2016/12/07/504650215/were-neanderthals-religious>