The Fisherman and the Sea God

The Mā'ohi (Tahitians) · Raiatea and Tahiti, the Society Islands

Where It Comes From

The people of the Society Islands, Tahiti and Raiatea among them, told of a flood that came not as rain from the sky but as the sea rising over the land. The missionary William Ellis wrote down two versions in his *Polynesian Researches* (1829).

What Happens

On Raiatea, a fisherman went out to a part of the sea that was sacred. He let down his hooks, and they caught in something heavy: the hair of the sea god, Ruahatu, who was sleeping on the ocean floor.

The god rose up, angry at being woken. But the fisherman begged for mercy, and Ruahatu spared him. He told the man to take his wife and child to a small island called Toamarama, out in the lagoon, and to stay there.

Then the sea rose and covered Raiatea, and everyone else on the island was drowned. When the water went back, the fisherman and his family came ashore and the island was peopled from them.

In the Tahitian telling, a man and his wife escaped the rising sea on a high mountain, Pitohito, and survived.

What Stands Out

Why the flood came. A sacred place was disturbed, and the god was woken in anger.

Who was saved, and how. The fisherman who woke the god, with his family, because he asked for mercy.

The boat or the refuge. A small island in the lagoon, or a mountaintop.

What came after. The island was peopled again from that one family.

The odd thing here is that the man who caused the trouble is the one saved. He did the wrong thing, then asked for mercy, and was given it.

THINK IT THROUGH

The person who caused the flood is the person who is spared. What do you make of that?

Sources

William Ellis, *Polynesian Researches* (1829), vol. 1, as given in James George Frazer, *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (London: Macmillan, 1918), pp. 242–245.

Roland B. Dixon, *Oceanic Mythology* (The Mythology of All Races, vol. 9, 1916), p. 39.

Everything here is a summary in our own words. Where a story has many tellings, we follow the source named above and say so.