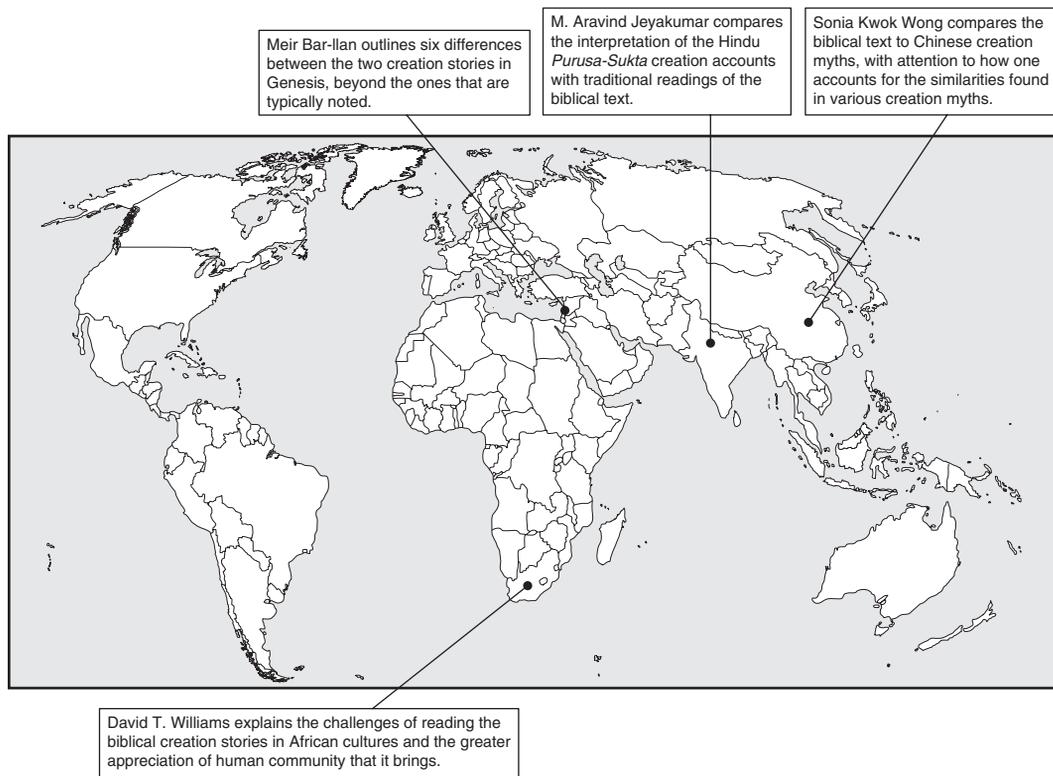


CHAPTER 1

GENESIS 1–3 (PART I)



READINGS

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A COMPARISON OF CHINESE CREATION MYTHS AND BIBLICAL TEXTS

Sonia Kwok Wong (China)

Creation is a common theme in mythologies worldwide. In China alone, there are six separate creation myths. In spite of geographical distance and cultural divergence of the countries in which they are attested, creation myths display striking resemblances. As a Chinese biblical scholar, I am intrigued by the similarities that I find between the biblical and the Chinese creation myths. In this essay, I will compare one of the earliest versions of the Nüwa creation myth of China with the biblical one (Gen. 1–3), demonstrating that the methodological lens in reading Chinese myths could be applied to the biblical creation story.

The earliest versions of the Nüwa myth are found scattered fragmentarily in the Chinese literature of the Warring States era (c. fourth century B.C.E.), although the myth is dated to a much earlier time. Nüwa is often depicted as a goddess with a human face and serpent body in ancient texts and grave paintings. She has been esteemed and worshipped as the creator of the universe, the great progenitor of humankind, the supreme matchmaker, and the patron of marriage by many people in China.

The Nüwa myth is nonstatic and malleable. It has undergone a complex process of oral and textual transmission. Consequently, numerous versions of the myth have been engendered. To quote (my translation) an early Han-dynasty version in *Fengsu tongyi* (*Penetrating Customs*), as cited in *Taiping yulan* (*The Imperial Readings of Taiping Era*):

It is said that when heaven and earth were separated, there was no humankind. Nüwa created human beings by kneading yellow earth. The task was so arduous that she was too exhausted to complete it. So she flicked the sludge with her cord and lifted it to form humankind. The ones kneaded with yellow earth became the rich aristocrats and those made by flicking the sludge the poor commoners.

In contrast to Genesis 1–3, the Nüwa myth does not mention any divine reason for the creation of humankind, and, of course, the gender of the creator is different. It is not difficult, however, to notice the striking similarities, such as the motifs of the separation of heaven and earth and molding humankind from earth. These motifs are by no means limited to Chinese and biblical creation myths. In fact, they also appear, for instance, in the folk literature of Ireland, Greece, Babylonia, Siberia, Indonesia, Australia, and India.

If I expand my comparison to other Chinese creation myths, more parallels to Genesis 1–3 emerge. For instance, it is said that the mythological figure Pangu created the universe out of chaos (cf. Gen. 1:2) and that Yilou enlivens humans by blowing air into them (cf. Gen. 2:7). How do we account for the similarities found in the creation myths of cultures that are so different and so far apart geographically?

One way to account for them is by conjecturing a common ancestry. In the mid-nineteenth century, some scholars, such as Max Müller, who believed in the common ancestry of Indo-European languages, postulated a protomythology of Indo-European folktales. The monogenetic theory has now been dismissed and regarded as a “myth” itself, because it fails to explain the similar and even identical motifs found in folktales of non-Indo-European languages. It is possible that similar myths found in geographical proximity might have developed from a “proto-myth”; however, it is extremely hard to prove genealogical link of those found in remote places with independent language systems.

Another possible explanation is to attribute the similarities to the parallel development of cultures. Anthropologists once had assumed that all human cultures undergo the identical process of cultural evolution. Cultures in the same developmental stage, irrespective of their geographical distance, would produce folklores that converge in thematic elements because of the commonality in the way that the “primitive” people perceive the world and express themselves. Myths, in this sense, are polygenetic and regarded as remnants of the “primitive” culture in the contemporary world. This view presupposes that all human societies progress in the same sequence and number of stages, and thus it fails to acknowledge that cultures evolve and develop differently based on contextual constraints.

Societies need not follow the same developmental path. Similarities in myths could be attributed to similar concerns, customs, beliefs, values, and circumstances shared by cultures, even if they do not follow a programmed path of development. Similar, or even identical, ideas could be genealogically related or have originated separately (each case must be assessed independently). Also, independent myths could subsequently exert influence on each other through the process of dissemination. In the case of the similarities in the Chinese and the biblical creation myths, it would be far-fetched to postulate a common ancestry because of the geographical distance and cultural divergence between ancient China and Palestine.

The construction of many myths reflects an urge to find explanations on how the world came to be in its present form (an etiology). While the urge might be a spiritual concern, its ideological dimension cannot be overlooked. The Nüwa myth quoted above is conspicuously a product of a stratified society. The last line, likely a later addition to the original version, is an etiology of social stratification. The distinction between the rich and the poor is said to have been preestablished by the goddess Nüwa in primeval time. The implication is that social stratification is a divine mandate, predestinated and unalterable. The myth serves to perpetuate social inequality through the rhetoric of divine legitimation. Ancient myths were often produced or reappropriated by ruling elite for their own interest and agenda, be it for the purpose of maintaining social status quo, inducing social transformation, or forging a sense of group identity.

This methodological lens can also be applied to the stories in Genesis 1–3. What are the ideologies embedded in the biblical creation story? Who benefits from these ideologies? Is it a rewritten version of an earlier myth for ideological purposes? Has it been reappropriated subsequently as a means to legitimate certain social structures? By reading the biblical text as an ideologically charged myth, new insights will be gleaned.

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THE HINDU *PURUSA-SUKTA* COMPARED TO BIBLICAL TEXTS

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Every culture of the world has creation stories which attempt to trace the origin of the universe and its components with special reference to human beings. These stories are conditioned by the religious, cultural, social, and political context from which they originate. The same is true of the interpretations of these narratives: they derive from a particular location. As such,

creation stories may be used to explain and justify certain political, religious, and social realities that are oppressive and discriminatory. Such is the case with the Genesis creation narratives and the Hindu *Purusa-Sukta* creation accounts. Here I will first explain the traditional reading of each text which has fostered inequity and repression through the centuries. Then I will explore an egalitarian rereading of both accounts.

There is not one Hindu creation story. Numerous cosmogonies can be found in almost all of the important Hindu scriptures and there are many interpretations for those creation myths. They are all representations of the main principle of Brahman, which is described as being “everywhere and nowhere, everything and nothing.” Creation came from Brahman’s thought, or the actions of the god Brahma, who is the representation of Brahman as a man.

According to the *Purusa-Sukta* creation hymn (*Rig-Veda* Book: X. Hymn: 90), creation is the result of the sacrifice of *Purusha* (Man), the primeval being, who is all that exists, including “whatever has been and whatever is to be.” When *Purusha*, who had “a thousand heads, a thousand eyes, and a thousand feet,” was sacrificed, the clarified butter that resulted was made into the beasts which inhabit the earth. From the dismemberment came also the animals, plants, rituals, sacred words, and the Vedas. This same sacrifice produced the gods, *Indra* (the menacing king of gods), *Agni* (Fire), *Vayu* (Wind), as well as the Sun and Moon. From *Purusha*’s navel the atmosphere was born; his head produced the heaven, his feet produced the earth, his ear the sky, his mind the moon, his eye the sun, his breath the wind, his feet the earth, and his belly button the atmosphere. The four *varnas* were also born from *Purusha*: the mouth was the Brahman (priest), the arms the *Kshatriya* (warrior), the thigh the *Vaishya* (general populace), and the feet the *Sudra* (servant). For centuries the *sudras* and the outcastes (Dalits) have been treated as lesser humans by the so-called upper dominant castes. This creation hymn is understood in all later Hindu scriptures to sanction the caste system as divine ordination. Thus India follows a social caste structure based on this ancient narrative.

Traditional interpretations of the Genesis narratives have also been used to support hierarchical social structures. Here God is seen as the ruler over the whole creation; God alone commands and controls. God is over the whole creation and the creatures have to submit to the creator. Man is created first and then woman is formed from the rib of the man; therefore woman is subordinate to man. This interpretation, then, establishes God as superior to human beings, and man as superior to woman. It has been used to oppress women folk and to propagate man’s superiority over woman.

But different, egalitarian readings of both Genesis and *Purusa-Sukta* can be offered. A liberating reading of the Genesis creation account presents the following insights: God is the source of all creation. God is creator, but at the same time God’s re-active and re-creative aspects in the process of creation are emphasized. While the image of the deity as transcendent in Genesis 1 detaches God from humanity and nature, the anthropomorphic picture of God in Genesis 2–3 emphasizes God’s activity in the creative process and humankind’s active role along with God. Creatures participate with God in creation by separating, ruling, developing, and reproducing; this emphasizes their involvement as cocreators along with God. God does not place Himself above all else but rather works alongside the rest of creation. This reading dismantles the traditional and colonial idea of God as king or ruler and establishes a smooth nexus between God, humans, and the natural world.

Moreover, both male and female are created in the image and likeness of God. Here, both man and woman have the freedom to think and express themselves without fear; both have self-dignity and self-respect. The creation of woman after man from his rib does not imply hierarchy, but rather it brings completion and wholeness. Their physical oneness, commonality of concern,

and loyalty and responsibility to one another are emphasized. The spirit of God breathed into human beings highlights that both man and woman share divine life and breath.

An egalitarian rereading of *Purusa-Sukta* focuses on the fact that every human being is from the cosmic person, Brahma, the Supreme Being, so there should not be any inequality among human beings in the name of caste. Brahma is the source of all creation. Everything originates from Him and into Him all is absorbed. Since all the four groups of people originated from the same flesh, there are no hierarchical differences. All groups originated from parts of the body that are divine and thus there is no issue of pure and impure or purity and pollution in the name of caste. The diversity of all creatures—humans, plants, and animals—originated from the same substance, indicating their ultimate unity within the diversity of God’s creation.

The heterogeneous creation concept highlights differences in creatures created by Brahma, but rejects hierarchical social structures in which one group dominates and oppresses another. Different people with different skills are necessary for the smooth functioning of society. But superiority or inferiority is not the purpose here; every human being must be given equal respect irrespective of his or her occupation. Occupational skills should not be designated in terms of caste. The idea is that all *varnas* are contained in every individual instead of every individual being comprised within one of the four *varnas*; no one should be humiliated at any cost because everyone is created from the same Brahma (same substance).

Furthermore, the anthropomorphic account of *Purusa-Sukta* exposes God in human form and God sacrificing His own body to create the human and natural world. It is thus a creation story of love and peace. Through the sacrificial love of Brahma, the whole world and humanity was formed. This narration proclaims a message of peace between diverse creatures and human-kind created from the “same substance” of Brahman.

In sum, our rereading the Genesis and *Purusa-Sukta* creation stories has undermined the traditional understanding of them as sanctioning hierarchical structures. Creation means differences, plurality in creatures, and diversity in skills or tasks assigned to the creatures. But no one is inferior or superior to another because all are created by God and from God. Even God is not superior since he is cocreator (Gen. 2–3) and sacrificially offers his own body (*Purusa-Sukta*). The created order demands the plurality of creatures with interdependence; it requires participation without dominance or hierarchical structures for peaceful coexistence. Thus discrimination in the name of gender, caste, class, or any such form is against the created order.

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THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN COMMUNITY IN AFRICAN CREATION STORIES

David T. Williams (South Africa)

Europe and its offspring in other parts of the world have had a tradition of treating Genesis 1–3 as literally true, an historical account of primal events which set the scene for the development of all human history. Although this view has begun to change somewhat in recent years—for

example, the belief that God created the world in six 24 hour days has waned—the tradition still persists among many Christians around the world.

African Christians, however, are much less likely than those in the United States and other places to accept a literal explanation of Genesis. There are a number of reasons. First, Africa has a far shorter history of writing, and therefore much less respect for the authority of the written word. While a written signed document is treated as authoritative among Europeans, this is not the case in Africa. Second, whereas European religious and literary history did have a variety of stories to explain the origin of the world, these have long since generally been forgotten, partly because they were regarded as just stories. In contrast, while the old stories of origins in Africa, explaining such things as why palms of black people are not pigmented, may not be believed, they are still widely known. The natural reaction for African Christians, then, is to treat the Genesis accounts in the same way, namely, as “white” myths. Indeed, the Bible itself is still commonly regarded as a “white” book, so not really a part of Africa; therefore it can readily be rejected, which it is in many cases.

Africa is pervaded by spirituality. Indeed, Africa tends to be much more religious than the modern West. But this spirituality is not in relation to God, which is yet another reason that it is difficult to identify with the creation stories in Genesis. It is common in Africa to stress the separation of God from the world rather than a connection between the two. This is so strong that many early missionaries did not see any belief in God at all. The belief was always there, but it was in a God who is clearly transcendent—a God who made the world, but has minimal involvement with it thereafter (much like European deism and the “absent watchmaker” God). In Africa, people do not relate to God directly, leading to what is perhaps the most characteristic religious belief in Africa, namely, that people can interact with the dead and with their ancestors, and that only through their mediation is any approach to God possible. It is in this belief that African spirituality resides. The absence of this crucial element from the Genesis stories contributes to its lack of relevance for many Africans.

Interaction with ancestors is part of a view of humanity which complements the belief in the absence of God. Without a direct individual relationship with God, interpersonal human relationships are more important. In contrast to the excessive individualism in the West is what we might call “communitarianism” in Africa. This, again, makes the Genesis stories—at least as they have been presented to Africans—not particularly meaningful. For example in the story of the Fall, the human couple are portrayed as individually responsible and individually guilty. But in a culture where the emphasis is on the community, there is little sense of personal guilt. This means that there is little felt need for individual salvation—certainly not salvation in the afterlife. Indeed, the African view is that people will naturally survive after death as ancestors. The whole notion of the separation of righteous people from wicked people is difficult to accept where the unity of the community is paramount.

There are, however, a couple of ways in which an African context does connect nicely with Genesis 1–3. First, the phrase “these are the generations” in 2:4 does put individuals firmly into the context of the group. More important, though, is that the story of the Fall indicates the effect of sin not just on individuals but on the group as well. Paul develops this in Romans 5, where he explains his notion of “original sin,” which applies to all of humanity, the human community we might say. Here the unity of humanity is significant in an Africa that has felt the brunt of racism, where people have sometimes been treated as subhuman. For Paul and Christian theology, all humans are affected by events in the Garden. Furthermore, the African emphasis on community finds a point of contact with Genesis in that humans are created in the image of God (1:26–27). Although exactly what it means to be created in the image of God has been much

debated, it seems clear enough that all people—regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, or any other factor—have a special significance which separates them from the animals and bonds together all of humanity.

Notably, however, an African reading of the text does not resonate with the fact that the passage describes the creation of a single couple—one man and one woman. That is, in the biblical story the richness of community does not extend beyond the model of a monogamous, nuclear family—husband, wife, and children. In African culture, the extended family is much more important, not to mention the practice of polygamy—neither of which are in the purview of Genesis 1–3.

Here we might argue that if the God-given monogamy of the Genesis account were practiced more diligently in Africa, our continent might not have the highest prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the world—a problem which is not disconnected from a celebration of community. Indeed, Genesis flows quickly from the description of the creation of humanity to its perversion. The story of the Fall is a reminder that the ideal for human behavior is not humanity, but God’s norms. Indeed, the essence of the serpent’s primal temptation is the elevation of humanity as a norm. Where this is done, disaster follows. The one thing that comes over so strongly in the story of the Fall is that there are norms set by God, and disobedience to them has serious consequences.

An African reading of Genesis 1–3—and of Scripture in general—brings greater appreciation of human community, an emphasis that has tended to be overshadowed elsewhere. It also makes a valuable contribution to the key questions concerning the nature of humanity and how humans should behave toward each other. This fits beautifully with the uniquely African philosophical concept of *ubuntu*. Literally translated as “humanity,” Archbishop Desmond Tutu explained *ubuntu* this way in his book *No Future Without Forgiveness*: “A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.” There is no doubt that the world stands in great need of this ethic, as long as it is seen in the context in which Genesis puts it: as something given through God and in relationship to him.

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SIX DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TWO CREATION STORIES IN GENESIS

Meir Bar-Ilan (Israel)

It has been well known for centuries that Genesis 1–3 contains two different stories: one in 1:1–2:3 and a second in 2:4–3:24. Originally scholars stressed the fact that in the first story the deity is named Elohim (God), while in the second story he is called Yahweh-Elohim (Lord God). While there is no need to underestimate this difference, it should be noted that the change of the divine name is not essential, but rather technical (just like the difference in the number of

Hebrew words: 469 in the first story and 640 in the second). The aim of this paper, therefore, is to analyze the essential differences between the two stories. There are six such differences:

THE AIM OF THE STORIES In the first account there is only one protagonist: God. Given that His deeds are so tremendous, with no precedent, it is clear that the aim of the first story is to glorify God (as creator). However, in the second story there are several protagonists, each of them is doing or saying something in his or her turn. The bottom line of this second story is that man has to toil hard for his living, woman has to suffer, and wild animals will threaten man's existence. That is, it is an etiological story, explaining the destiny of human beings, why the world is the way that it is. The differences between the stories become evident by looking at statistics of words and their dispersion. In the first story, man appears after 317 words (63 percent of the text), and he is mentioned in 102 words, that is 20 percent only. However, in the second story, man is mentioned after 29 words (4 percent of the text) and he takes up more than 80 percent of the text. In short, one story is God oriented while the other is man oriented.

TIME VERSUS SPACE Time governs the first story (day one, day two, and so forth). Moreover, the luminaries were created to enable man to reckon times (not for warming or ripening fruits, for example). There are different types of times: linear (1:1–7), cyclical (evening, morning), and secular time of the working days and the holy time (day seven), a “quality-time” according to religious perspective, not a social one. Other than God himself, time governs the world, and there is no specific space. The second story is by contrast space oriented. The narrator depicts the Garden of Eden, the venue of the story, by giving it geographical dimension aided by four rivers (and lands). Moreover, the importance of the location is augmented by the fact that man is expelled from his congenital territory, marking the importance of realm in one's life. While holy times mark the life of religious persons, territory marks the more mundane man (who ignore God's ruling).

THE POWER OF THE WORD In the first story, the word of God is His tool to create the world. The power of speech is evident. Speech is a divine tool that preexisted the world. Names that were given by God to His deeds, such as “day” or “sky,” marked the end of their creation. With this power of the word, God blessed His creatures—fish, fowl, man, and the seventh day—showing that the existence of the world is word dependent. And only God speaks. Unlike the first story, in the second God does not use His speech ability as a tool of creation; rather man uses it to impose his own supremacy. The word has no divine merit and God brings forward the animals to man waiting for man to name them. In other words, the first story implies that language is divine, denoting it is part of the creation, while in the second story language is a man-created phenomenon.

ORDER AND LAW The first story is marked by the order of numbers (one, two, three) and comes to its culmination in the seventh day. Order is also implied in the creation of the luminaries and stars, as in the “rules of Heaven” (cf. Jeremiah 33:25; Job 38:33), and in the “laws” necessary for creation (cf. Proverbs 8:27–29). So although the terms “law” and “order” do not appear in the first story, it is clear they were there from the very beginning. Stars have laws and order, and God, their Creator, is not only the Lord of time but also the Lord of order. However, in the second story there is no order (even not implied) and there is no law. As a matter of fact, God decreed a law (not to eat from the Tree) but after a short while this law is transgressed and chaos seems to dominate the world. In brief, God goes together with time and order, while man goes together with space and disorder.

THE ROLE OF NUMBERS In the first story, numbers are the spine of the story and their appearance at the end of each passage denotes the tempo, or dynamics, of the story. In the first story there are 469 words and among them there are 10 number-words, in this order: *one, two, three, two, four, five, six, seven, seven, and seven*. The percentage of number-words is 2.016. In the second story, there are 640 words and only six are number-words (*four, one, two, three, four, one*), which means a percentage of 0.937. This difference in the use of numbers, part of what is called “stylometry,” reflects attitude toward science (and order). While God did not create numbers, He did something to them: He bestowed quality on quantity. The number seven is related to God as well as to blessing and nonactivity, which exemplifies holiness. Thus the number seven was transferred from being quantity only to become a symbol of quality. The number seven accompanies God from primordial till the end of times; seven means divine.

SERMON VERSUS STORY The structure of the two stories is very different. The first story is full of formulas. Each and every passage begins and ends with a formula (and God said, let there be, and God saw that it was good, etc.). As a matter of fact, roughly 20 percent of the text is formulaic. Thus it has a clear, special, and “tight” structure. The second story, by contrast, is “loose”—it has no specific structure (but like any story there is an exposition, a change, and an end). Therefore, it is assumed that the first story originally began as a sermon, probably to mark a new year, while the second story was nothing but a story. The second story is the craft of a narrator, but the first one is a speech made by a speaker, a preacher (a priest and a prophet).

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QUESTIONS

1. What if, for the sake of discussion, it could be proven that the biblical tradition was in fact influenced by the Chinese stories or vice-versa? How, if at all, would that influence your understanding and interpretation of the texts?
2. Jeyakumar notes how both Genesis 1–3 and the *Purusa-Sukta* have been used to sanction hierarchical social structures. Are such interpretations distortions of the text? Or does the text lend itself to such interpretations?
3. In addition to the ways that African “communitarianism” resonates with Genesis 1–3, identify several additional aspects of the text that might also lend themselves to a “group-oriented” perspective.
4. In addition to the ones that Bar-Ilan mentions, identify some reasons for viewing Genesis 1–3 as two separate stories.