

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF GENESIS CREATION STORY AND YORUBA MYTH OF CREATION

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Abstract

The field of comparative studies in the attempt to appreciate the beauty of God's creation has persisted in theological research for common denominator in the myths that surrounds creation story. For several centuries, many people, especially critical scholars have called attention to the obvious discrepancies between the creation accounts found in different theories. True enough, but the narratives are fundamentally very different and still talking about the same event. The aim of this paper is to articulate the relevance of Yoruba myth in comparison to Genesis Creation Story. To this extent, the comparative and theological research methods are employed while relying on secondary sources factual analysis. The research findings revealed that creation theories were theories indicating that the Supreme Being is the originator of all creations. God was the first worker Who created, designed, fashioned, engineered, molded, and constructed the entire universe, therefore He is the base of all theories about the creation of the heaven and the earth propounded by different scholars in the past, present and future world.

Keywords: Comparative study, Creation, Supreme Being, Myth, and Yoruba

Introduction

Creation is a phenomenon that can be understood in different dimensions according to the angle where it been viewed by individual scholars or group of scholars. The book of Genesis in the Bible introduces us to the creator, and creation account is theocentric, not creature centered, involved God, human and nature. Furthermore, Genesis 1-2 accounts for the creation of the world in two perspectives: the Priestly account and the Jewish account, in both God is seen as the Ruler, of all creation, God alone commands and controls. This is also applicable in Yoruba myth of creation where *Olodumare* is described as the creator of the universe.

In respect to this research in particular, creation is from the Supreme Being which is God. The evidences are seen through the different theories by different scholars in their proof of how the world came into existences. With this, theories of creation will be analyses in this paper from the view point of Genesis creation account and Yoruba myth of creation for the understanding of how the world came into existing. Therefore, the main aim of this paper is to compare both theories of creation accounts and provide evidence for the

relevance of the Yoruba myth in the Genesis account. With his, how can we relate the source of the similarities between the two accounts of creation from different geographical location?

In lieu of this, historical and comparative research method was used in the paper to achieve a factual, conclusive and successful research work. Historical method is a techniques and guide line used in primary sources, its serves as evidence of research work and study of historical facts in this research. And comparative method was used to identify and explain the similarities and differences between the accounts. Conclusively, it was deduced that the Genesis account of creation and Yoruba myth of creation acknowledged God as the Supreme Being who is the Originator of the world and every things that are in the world in respects of the geographical differences in the universe of the world. More so, both accounts will be analyzed starting from Genesis account of creation.

Genesis Account of Creation

The Biblical creation has to do with purpose in life and in the universe. The creation as assert by this research brings life, purpose and hope, darkness becomes light and night become day. Furthermore, the principal thing that must be understood in comprehending the account of creation is the fact that God is endeavouring to provide mankind with the knowledge of all the essential factors that were involved in the creation processes. God was leaving out nothing that was necessary for humanity to know in regard to these matters. This is why, some scholars, like Westermann, says there are two accounts of creation called the priestly and Jewish accbunts, they are quite diverse from one another. The first narrative Priestly is recorded from Genesis 1:1 to 2:4a and the second Jewish is given from Genesis 2:4 to the conclusion of the chapter. A close comparison of the two historical accounts reveals that they are incompatible to one another in their sequence of creative events and in the time periods separating those events, though the two narratives are complementary to one another.¹

In actual fact, the two accounts are revealing to mankind a marvellous revelation about the two stages of God's creative actions in bringing into existence the heavens and the earth. When we really understand what the Bible is relating to us, we discover that it is providing a most logical scenario of God's theory of creation. The real Story of Creation is sensible indeed.²

The Stages of Creation in the Bible

The fact that there are profound differences between the two accounts is an important factor in realizing what God is telling mankind concerning the methods and theory by which He brought into being the things within the environment. God is showing two stages in the creation process. When He brought into existence the galaxy, the solar system of which we are part, the earth on which we live, and finally the development of

His crowning achievement (the creation of humankind), He performed those physical actions in two creative stages.³

Though God can create things in an instant, the creative processes that He has revealed to us in Genesis indicate that He often takes different periods of time to accomplish His purpose. The Bible shows that God creates things separately and distinctly from one another and also show that God uses various stages to bring into existence the things of His choosing. God allots periods of time for His creative plans to be brought to fruition.⁴ With this; God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh day.

It can be deduced in the Bible that the creative processes of God are normally accomplished in stages one step at a time, and it can be affirm in the narratives of creation in Genesis. In actual fact, the creative acts of God are still in operation at this very moment and it will continue to be in evidence for long periods of time in the future which He has mapped out for the accomplishment of His plan.⁵ According to Dr. Martin's presentation *The Creation of Life in Contemporary Times* where the Psalms talk about other creations of God that are continuing and are ongoing at the present time. God does not stop creating.⁶ This article also denotes an additional account of God's creative process from Psalms 103–106.

Narration of the Two Different Accounts of Creation in the Book of Genesis

It behoves us to note that account of creation in the book of Genesis 1-2 is divided into two by some biblical scholars like Westernmann, Ringgren and others who shared the submission into Priestly account (P) and Jewish account (J). The Priestly account is in Genesis 1-2:4a and Jewish account is in Genesis 2b-3. This is not to say that there are no scholars of the contrary opinion of two creation accounts in Genesis creation story. H.H Hobs agreed in line with most theological interpreters, he states that, contrary to the arguments of documentary hypothesis, that there are not two creation stories in Genesis, the narrative is continuous. Genesis 2 is not a separate account of creation, but a further development of Chapter One. Genesis 2:1-5 gives a resume of chapter one up to the point of the creation of man. Hobbs, like most theological interpreters, asserts that Moses was the author of the Pentateuch, and so, of the creation account, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and he does not doubt the historicity of the accounts.⁷

This research, however, makes use of the opinion of Westernmann and Ringgren by using two accounts of creation in Genesis. With this analyse, the two accounts will be examined separately for a proper understanding of the creation account in Genesis.

Priestly Account of Creation in Genesis 1-2a

Priestly account examines the origin of the universe in order of creation; this implies that this creation account was made orderly by the creators. The eight acts of creation was made in six days, heaven and earth first, followed by plants inanimate creatures and then

animals were created before man was created lastly. Ringgren agrees that the narrative in Genesis 1-3 was not homogenous but consist of two narratives. Genesis 1-2, 4a is ascribed to the priestly writer (p), this account narrate creation orderly.⁸ The following narrative are the affirmative word of Ringgren that creation was in order.

In Genesis 1:3-31, God says let there be light and there was light, with this light God was able to separate it from darkness and created the first day. The firmament was created on the second day which means the heaven, and God created the earth and separated it from the heaven, and there was heaven and the earth called the third day. With this, the lights to rule the day and night – the sun, stars and the moon – were created on the fourth day. On the fifth day, God created the animals that live in water, on land and on the air. Finally, on the sixth day God created man in his image and gave man dominion over all the things he had created. This analysis has proven to us that creation narrative is in order.

Westermann observes that in the first account a ponderous rhythm approaching a kind of literary which has the character of a tremendous monotone comprising five elements which are Announcement: and God said, Command: let there be, Report: and it was so, Evaluation: and God saw that it was good, Temporal Frame work: and there was evening and there was morning, called the day.⁹ This narrative explain and indicate how the priestly explained the Genesis creation.

In lieu of this, the same structure and fulfilment with minor variation is observable in the large legal complex stretching from Exodus 2:5, through the Leviticus to Numbers chapters 10. This large complex of law belongs according to him, as does Genesis 1, to priestly source.¹⁰ The Priestly story of revelation of the creation of the universe at the centre of the Law or Pentateuch about the beginning of the universe. We now understand that everything that happened is seen as been from God's commands, the fulfilment and God's authentication of the universe of the whole matter of creation.

Therefore, there are two structures that are combined in Genesis chapter 1 and one superimposed on the other. One is that by acts, God made, he separated and others. The second structure that is merged in the two accounts can be seen in the account of the creation of the firmament. This is the point where an act is introduced to describe how a creature was created God made the firmament whereas no act is used in the creation of the light in verse three. Instead, there was light is used. With this, the structure that the priestly circle recast an old tradition from the point of view of that circle, but was not able to entirely assimilate what that tradition had inherited from an age long past.¹¹

It is pertinent to note that, priestly account indicates that creative act took place in six days and God rested on the seventh day. The eight acts of creation are distributed over six days and it shows that creation was in order in the priestly account of creation, there given observance of the Sabbath day, to rest as the day of the Lord.

Jewish Account of Creation in Genesis 2b-3

The second account of creation made no references with the origin of the heaven and the earth but present a complete account of creation and its focal point is the creation of man. The Jewish account narrate how God created man by forming man from the dust of the ground and breath into his nostrils the breath of life, this made man to become a living being. Creation of man and how God put man in the garden to oversee every other creature and gave him dominion over everything He created are the priority in the Jewish account. However, before the creation of man in Jewish account, there had been the desert land where plants grew, from this creature gradually came into being in order of plants, animals, man and woman. This indicates that the story originated in a region where drought appears as enemy of man probably in Palestine or somewhere on the edge of the desert.¹² This second account focuses mainly on the creation of man and how God place man in a convenient place of abode.

The Difference in the two Accounts of Creation

In the creation narrative starting with Genesis 1:1 says God created on the first day the heavens and the earth. The Bible also stated in this creation that the earth was empty and water covered the whole surface of the globe without form, and void and darkness was upon the face of the deep, Genesis 1:2, and verse 7. But the second account shows that "in the day" God created the heavens and the earth the land masses were already in evidence and a mist or a stream or spring from the earth watered the surface of the ground Genesis 2:4-6, These are the generations of the heavens and of the earth when they were created, verse 2:4a. In the day that Elohim made verse 2:4b

1. The earth and the heavens,
2. And every plant of the field before it was in the earth, and
3. Every herb of the field before it grew.¹³

For Elohim had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was not a man to till the ground. But there went up a mist from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground. Genesis 2:4-6. This is different from the first account because in it the dry ground did not emerge from the water that covered the globe until the third day Genesis 1:9-13. This is the first difference we encounter. There is even more profound variances.¹⁴

In the second account, the next thing that follows the creation of the heavens and the earth was the formation of Adam a male human being Genesis 2:7. We are told that Adam was created before there were any plants and herbs of the field verse 5. The fact that plants were brought into existence after Adam is stated in the two verses following the account of Adam's creation verses 8 and 9. But in the earlier narrative, the plants were created on the third day Genesis 1:11-13 a full three days before the creation of Adam.¹⁵

The second narrative also shows every beast of the field and every bird of the air as being created after Adam verses 18–20, but in 'Genesis 1 the living creatures (beasts, cattle, creeping things) were created on the sixth day and before Adam was made alive. And while the first chapter of Genesis shows that both Adam and Eve were created in the latter part of the sixth day Genesis 1:26–31, in the second narrative Eve was created from Adam's rib after the plants and the animals were brought into existence Genesis 2:21–25.

In spite of these differences, it is absurd to think that Moses was unaware; he knew that there were major variances in the accounts. These differences did not deter him from placing them together, one after another, in the first two chapters of Genesis. The recording of these different accounts was Moses' way of showing to mankind the two stages of creative theory and development that God used to bring into existence are the heavens and earth. The second account was similar with the Yoruba myth of creation and this is explained below.

Yoruba Creation Myth

Myth is a story which is believed to be true and has its origin in the far distant past history of a people. Alagoa says that they are historical information transmitted orally by processes peculiar to each community.¹⁶ Myths are manmade stories that play explanatory functions in the African understanding of reality. The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines myth as; a story handed down in oral form from our forefathers who explain reality, concepts and beliefs and further serves as explanations of nature event such as creations, origin of things, and history of a race or a people.¹⁷ This shows that myth is not just product of human imagination but a direct expression of reality. Anyanwu says that man cannot live without myths.¹⁸ The reason is quite obvious: man is a being that cannot bear to live with certain questions unanswered that is why he sits down to formulate myths to make those questions answerable. Thus, man is a myth making animal as Anyanwu opines. Some thinkers have rightly observed that myths are pre-philosophic in nature; that philosophy started where myths stopped, which presupposes that philosophy has its roots in myths.¹⁹ There are different narrative of Yoruba myth by different scholars, this may be as a result of how they understand the myth or each narrative may come from different Yoruba ethnic group and background. Therefore, some of the narrative by different scholars will be analyse.

However, the Yoruba tribe of West Africa has a myth about how they were created. According to Bolaji Idowu, the earth was once a watery, marshy waste. Above was the sky and heaven which was the abode of *Olodumare* and the divinities, with some other beings. The watery waste constituted, in a way, sporting place for those dwellers above. On it they used to descend by strands of spider's web which also formed bridges by which they walked over it, some of them came down from time to time for the purpose of hunting. However, *Olodumare* conceived the idea and at once carried it into effect, He summoned *Orisa-nla*, the arch divinity, to His presence and charged him with the duty

and He gave him the materials needed, a leaf packet of loose earth in a snail's shell and for tools a five-toed hen and a pigeon.²⁰

Orisa-nla threw the loose earth on a suitable spot on the watery waste, he let loose the hen and the pigeon; and these immediately begin the work of scattering and spreading the loose earth until a great portion of the waste was covered. *Orisa-nla* went back and reported to *Oloдумаре* that the work had been accomplished, he dispatched the chameleon to go down and inspect what had been done.²¹ The chameleon was chosen due to his extraordinary carefulness and delicacy with which it moves and acts in any situation. In his first visit, he took back the report that the earth was wide enough but was not yet sufficiently dry for any further operation. From his second report, it was both wide enough and sufficiently dry. Wherefore, the place where the work began was named *Ife*, means to be wide according to Yoruba land. The prefix *Ile* was added which signifies that it was the original home of all and to distinguish it from other town called *Ife*.²²

Fauna explains further that in the beginning, there was only the sky above, water and marshland below. The chief God *Olorun* ruled the sky, and the goddess *Olokun* ruled what was below. *Obatala*, another god, reflected upon this situation, then went to *Olorun* for permission to create dry land for all kinds of living creatures to inhabit. He was given permission, so he sought advice from *Orunmila*, oldest son of *Olorun* and the god of prophecy. He was told he would need a gold chain long enough to reach below, a snail's shell filled with sand, a white hen, a black cat, and a palm nut, all of which he was to carry in a bag. All the gods contributed what gold they had, and *Orunmila* supplied the articles for the bag.²³

When all was ready, *Obatala* hung the chain from the corner of the sky, placed the bag over his shoulder, and started the downward climb. When he reached the end of the chain he saw that he still had some distance to go. From above, he heard *Orunmila* instruct him to pour the sand from the snail's shell, and also immediately release the white hen. He did as he was told, whereupon the hen landing on the sand began scratching and scattering it about. Wherever the sand landed it formed dry land, the bigger piles becoming hills and the smaller piles valleys. *Obatala* jumped to a hill and named the place *Ife*. The dry land now extended as far as he could see.²⁴

He dug a hole, planted the palm nut, and saw it grow to maturity in a flash. The mature palm tree dropped more palm nuts on the ground, each of which grew immediately to maturity and repeated the process. *Obatala* settled down with the cat for company. Many months passed, and he grew bored with his routine. He decided to create beings like himself to keep him company. He dug into the sand and soon found clay with which to mould figures like himself and started on his task, but he soon grew tired and decided to take a break. He made wine from a nearby palm tree, and drank bowl. Not realizing he was drunk, *Obatala* returned to his task of fashioning the new beings; because of his

condition he fashioned many imperfect figures. Without realizing this, he called out to *Olorun* to breathe life into his creatures.²⁵

The next day he realizes what he had done, and soon Ife prospered and became a city. All the other gods were happy with what *Obatala* had done, and visited the land often, except for *Olokun*, the ruler of all below the sky. She had not been consulted by *Obatala*, and grew angry that he had usurped so much of her kingdom. When *Obatala* returned to his home in the sky for a visit, *Olokun* summoned the great waves of her vast oceans and sent them surging across the land. Wave after wave she unleashed, until much of the land was underwater and many of the people were drowned. Those that had fled to the highest land beseeched the god *Esu* who had been visiting, to return to the sky and report what was happening to them. *Esu* demanded sacrifice be made to *Obatala* and himself before he would deliver the message. The people sacrificed some goats, and *Esu* returned to the sky. When Orunmila heard the news he climbed down the golden chain to earth, and cast many spells which caused the flood waters to retreat and the dry African land reappear.²⁶

Yoruba myths gives a deep understanding on how the universe, heaven and the earth was made by *Olodumare* who is also called *Olorun*, the owner of heaven through his divinities whom he assigned to do it by given him *Obatala* all the necessary material according to the two version of narrative we analyse above. This will lead us to the next creation theory by the science.

Comparative Study of Genesis Creation Account and Yoruba Myth

Areas of Similarities

The whole scenarios of creation started from “In the beginning”, which is the same English translation of the word *Bereshit* in Hebrew and the word Genesis. Genesis 1:1 begins with *ex nihilo* creation, as does the Yoruba creation myth. Out of the nothingness, God creates the heavens and the earth. In Genesis 1:3, God begins to create and separated things to create the natural order: night and day, sun and moon, seas and land, vegetation and animals.²⁷ This is similar to the Yoruba account of creation of celestial entities and animals. These again are both creation accounts that work in stages, rather than in one single creative event.

Genesis then moves on to tell of the creation of humans. There are two biblical accounts of human creation in Genesis: Genesis 1:26 and Genesis 2:7. Genesis 1:26 has humans appear *ex nihilo*, with God creating man in God’s image, male and female in the same event. Genesis 2:7 can be compared to the Yoruba account of *Obatala* creating humans out of clay, as God does forming man out of dust from the ground, and woman from one of man’s ribs. Genesis also has the placement of humans in the order of the world. God gives the first humans dominion over all of the creatures, but prohibits them from eating from certain trees. In comparison to some Africans creation myths, the Bushongo myth has a Bantu saying “Behold these wonders, they belong to you” to the first humans. Also.

the Zambian myth has *Kamonu* punished for defiant behaviour. These leads us to some silent themes in both creations that will be examine below.²⁸

Also, both account agreed with the theological interpretation of the creation account. The concept of God as the creator was conceptualised by both account. For example, the Yoruba people express the attribute of God as the creator in their sayings, prayers, and song according to Awolalu and Dopamu.²⁹ In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth and everything within orderly either by himself or through the divinities.

Furthermore, creation was seen to be made by God and by some heavenly bodies. When God says in Genesis 1:26 let us make man in our image, indicating that God was not alone when he was creating the heaven and the earth. While in Yoruba myth it was clearly stated that *Olodumare* worked with divinities and assigned *Obatala* the second in command to him to go and create the earth. With this, it shows that both Genesis account and Yoruba myths agreed God and some heavenly body.

Points of Differences

However, it must be pointed out that we cannot expect two creation stories from two different people from different locality to be alike in details. As a result of this, there are striking differences whereby few in both accounts will be analyse in this research. In the first place, there is the Yoruba account of man's origin which is different from Genesis account. For example, the Yoruba account explain how the divinity *Obatala* engage in moulding human structure from the dust, in the process he got drunk and mould some in a deformed way before *Olodumare* now breath on the figures while the Genesis account simply says that God made man out of dust of the ground and breath into his nostrils the breath of life. Genesis 2:7

In Genesis account of creation, creation was made by God through the word of command. In Genesis 1:3 "And God said let there be light, and there was light". The priestly account narrates the creation story that God commands and through it the universe was made and thereafter God rested. While in Yoruba creation myth *Olodumare* assigned the creative work to the highest ranking divinity called *Obatala*. According to chapter four where Yoruba creation myth was analysed by Bolaji Idowu who says *Obatala* was given the materials needed for the creation of the earth and he came downward through spider's web.³⁰

The days of creation in both accounts are of different days. The priestly account analyses the creation days to be six days. Genesis 1:31, 2:1-3. And God rested on the seventh day of creation, sanctified it and made it a special day of rest. In Yoruba myth of creation, some scholars like Bolaji Idowu and others did not specify the number of days of creation³¹ while scholar like Ademiluka says Yoruba creation was made in four days and *Olodumare* rested on fifth day which was quite different from the priestly account of creation.³²

In conclusion, there is no divergent view against the obvious similarities between the Genesis creation story and Yoruba myth. According to our findings, it can be clearly seen that Yoruba myth finds relevance in Genesis creation story. With the outcome of the two methods used, however, it can be concluded that Yoruba myth was extracted from the Genesis creation story as seen in the sources of how Yoruba people from Africa was able to come in contact with the Palestine through the sojourn of the Israelite in Egypt and commercial transaction that existed between the two nations.

Endnotes

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- ²⁷ Alexander T and Baker D (Ed.). Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship, 2003), 161
- ²⁸ *ibid*, 160
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