

# THE DOCTRINE AND LEGEND OF CREATION: COMPARING RELIGIOUS NARRATIVES TO THE PALAU CREATION STORY

Leneah Olsingch

Major: Exercise Sport Science with a Biomedical Emphasis

Minors: TESOL, Cultural Anthropology, Nutritional Science and Biology

*Brigham Young University–Hawai‘i*

Across the globe, there are unique histories, cultures, and beliefs that often will exist harmoniously with religious beliefs. The influence of religion can be seen in all aspects of life, whether in personal beliefs, morals, political status, and even cultural stories. Understanding the impact of religious ideologies can help navigate and identify connections among seemingly unrelated topics. Christianity is the source of influence over Palau’s religious beliefs, and the Palauan culture blends both cultural and religious beliefs together in daily activities. Christian scriptures and religious texts are oftentimes the blueprint for the functionality of active religious organizations or lifestyles. Muslims, Jews, and Christians are known to share similar beliefs and scriptures. This paper examines the complementary ideologies of the creation stories recorded in the Holy Qur’an, the Torah, the Old Testament, and the legends of the Creation told in the Palauan culture.

## Introduction

Palau is located in the subregion of Micronesia with an estimated population of 20,000 people. There are nearly 30,000 islands, encompassing hundreds of languages, dialects, and many political jurisdictions in the Pacific. Foreign naval captains stumbled across the Pacific waters and renamed the subregions of the Pacific: Melanesia (east), Micronesia (north), and Polynesia (west). Palau, a Micronesian

country, has a folk history based upon creation legends that establish connections to the past, present, and future. Palau's creation legends are orally passed down through families and communities; this is how I became aware of the creation of the universe from the belief system of Palau. The story of the creation of earth and life may be a common belief, but it is interpreted very differently from religious and secular standpoints. Many accounts of the creation can be found in religious texts or teachings with differing sets of beliefs or practices. Common beliefs are what unite people, especially those of religious background. In these groups of people, bonds are formed based on similarities. In regional culture, beliefs are set apart by etiquette and interpretation of the history or belief system of the area. The different interpretations of the cosmogonic stories that exist in different cultures and beliefs may often be seen as something that sets groups apart from one another, but more so, it can bring people together. Although interpreted differently, there are underlying elements in different religious narratives of the creation story that may have similarities to other creation ideologies. In studying three religious diverse creation stories in comparison to the Palauan creation story, are there influences of cosmogonic belief systems upon the Palauan culture?

### **Cosmogonic Stories**

There are three monotheistic religions that share similar views and beliefs within the sacred texts used in denominational practice, more specifically, the origin of humans and their standing with God (Inati and Kavanaugh 2004). Islam, Judaism, and Christianity have multiple religious organizations, and each adheres to its own ideology that is traditionally found in and structured upon religious texts. In this analysis, the religious texts studied were the Muslim Holy Qur'an, the Jewish Torah, and the Christian Holy Bible. Both human and Earth's creation were studied, as it marks the viewpoint of the beginning of man's relationship with a higher power.

### **Creation Addressed in the Holy Qur'an**

The Holy Qur'an is a book of scriptures that "lays down for them [Muslims] the law and commandments, codes for their social and moral behavior, and contains a comprehensive religious philosophy" (Ahlul Bayt Digital Islamic Library Project). A description from Al Islam, the official website of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, states this scripture is a record of the teachings of the prophet Muhammad; it contains 114 chapters (Arabic: Surahs) and has not been changed in the last 1,500 years.

The English-translated Qur'an provided reference to the creation of the Earth in 7:54, as the timeline of the creation (Al-A'raf:54-55):

Surely, your Lord is Allah Who created the heavens and the earth in six periods; then He settled Himself on the Throne. He makes the night cover the day, which pursues it swiftly. And *He created* the sun and the moon and the stars, *all* made subservient by His command. Verily, His is the creation and the command. Blessed is Allah, the Lord of the worlds.

Allah, otherwise known as the God of Islam, is considered to be the higher deity or almighty being in this monotheistic religious system who is responsible for the creation of the Earth and man in a six-day period.

### **Creation Addressed in the Torah**

Maryanne Saunders, professor of Religious Studies at King's College London, explains that Hebrew teachings or law, "constitutes the first five books of the Hebrew Bible" (Saunders 2019). The books included in the Torah were originally titled Bereshit, Shemot, Vayikra, Bemidbar, and Devarim, translated to English being Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These books are also contained in the Holy Bible.

The Baltimore Jewish Times explains there are two versions of the creation story within the Torah. The first is found at the end of chapter one in Genesis, where God creates male and female in his image. Neither is over the other, and they are both responsible for the creatures created alongside them. The second is found in the second chapter of Genesis. In this translation, God creates one male along with the other creatures on Earth. God then decides the man should not be alone, so He takes a rib from Adam and creates a woman to complement him (Abusch-Magder 2021:15–17).

In these versions, we see that male and female were created in God's image, and it is suggested that the Earth was created in stages, as humans were created and given responsibility over everything God had previously created. In an article highlighting the creation, it states, "The Torah tells us that the first human was created on the sixth day of creation: And the Lord God formed man (ha'adam) of dust from the ground (adama), and He breathed into his nostrils the soul of life, and man became a living soul" (Gen. 2:7; Rabinowitz 2021).

### **The Creation Addressed in the Holy Bible**

The creation story in the Old Testament is divided into seven days or what is termed dispensations: (one) light and darkness; (two) waters and heavens; (three) oceans and earth; (four) sun, moon and seasons; (five) living creatures; (six) Adam and Eve; and (seven) rest and observance (Gen. 1–2:2). Amid the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve walked with God, there were two trees.

One was the tree of life and the other was the tree of knowledge of good and evil. These two components play a pivotal role in the transition from the Creation to the Fall of man. Eve partook of fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, which changed both herself and Adam into mortal beings with agency and the ability to discern. To right her wrongdoing, Eve could have tried to partake of fruit from the tree of life, which would grant them eternal life. God placed a cherubim over the tree to guard it. If Adam and Eve had partaken of that fruit, they would have lived an eternal life in sin, with no redeemer to save them (Gen. 2:15–3:24). They were cast out of the Garden to “multiply and replenish the earth” (Gen. 1:28). They had many children, but the most referenced are Cain, Abel, and Seth. Cain killed his brother Abel out of jealousy, and their family grew to populate the earth (Gen. 4).

### **The Story of Miigel Latmikaik**

When I was growing up, my dad would tell his children the story of the creation in Palau; he told us that in one village, there was a giant. The giant demanded food from the people, and soon he grew too big. They burned him, and when he fell, his body became the scattered islands. The people that lived on his head were smart, those living on the legs were fast, and in the abdominopelvic region, it rained a lot. This was his interpretation of it that I grew up hearing, but the more commonly told story has several different parts. The stories of Palau depict polytheistic beliefs; many different gods with different objectives are mentioned in legends. The most commonly told version of the creation is titled “The Story of Miigel Latmikaik” (Aoyama 1996:113–25). The world began as only darkness until the chief god, Ucheleanged, decided it was time for land and life to be created. The other gods agreed, so the ocean and land were created. The mother clam named Miigel Latmikaik rested on top of a mountain and continually grew, but her jaws never opened. The gods heard the worried whispers of the spirits that life would not exist because of the clam and not even the massive waves of the sea could pry her open. Ucheleanged grew frustrated and created a sea serpent of water that coiled and flew up the mountain to strike the mother clam. Latmikaik shuddered, and her jaws opened, bringing forth all forms of life. The final three forms that emerged from the mother clam’s mouth were three demigods: Chuab, Uchererak, and Tellebuu. In continued stories, Chuab has a large appetite, and the people of the village work day and night to meet his needs. They decided to burn Chuab to free themselves from the labor, and when he was burnt, his body fell and scattered across the ocean as the islands of Palau. Those living near his mouth tend to talk too much, those on his legs are very fast, and

those near his stomach eat seven times a day. In some narratives, one sibling dwelled on earth, and the other was taken to heaven.

### Analysis of the Four Accounts

There are two prominent similarities between the three religious texts and the Palauan legends. The first similarity in all four of the texts was the order of the creation. The second, also present in each text, was the first inhabitants of the earth. The similarities of the order and first people on the earth suggest a similar perception of the beginnings of man and earth. The narratives are interpreted differently in time and elements, such as the first humans or the first creations, but they relay the same message and belief. These multiple connections advocate for the idea of cosmogonic influence on the Palauan creation legend.

#### *Order of the Creation*

It is written in the Holy Bible, the Torah, and the Qur'an that the world was created over the span of six days or dispensations. Culturally, the stories pertaining to the creation of Palau are told in three eras (see Table 1); the first era is the era of darkness (*mikoik*) in which only gods existed, the second is the era of gods and humans (*chelid* and *chad*), and the third is the present era in which humans dominate (Aoyama 1996:113–25). Upon comparing the dispensations and the eras, Palau's creation story also showcases similarities in eras.

In the Holy Bible, the six-day creation period is referenced in Genesis 1:5–31. In Genesis 2:2, it is written, “And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had <sup>a</sup>made; and he <sup>b</sup>rested on the seventh day from all his <sup>c</sup>work which he had made” (Gen. 2:2). In the Torah, the creation period is found in Genesis,

**TABLE 1. Division of Dispensations into the Eras of the Creation Story from Palau.**

Era	Day
1: Era of darkness	1: Heavens, darkness, light
	2: Water
	3: Earth, seas, plants
2: Era of gods and humans	4: Seasons, moon, sun
	5: Creatures and fowls
	6: Beast, man, woman
3: Present era	7: Rest, observance

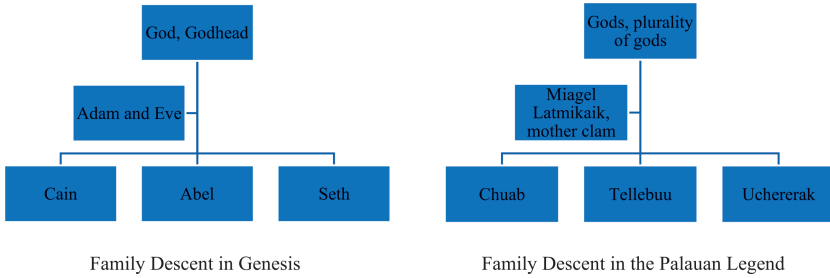
or the Book of Bereishit, in the same place as the Holy Bible (Genesis 1–2:2), as this section of scriptures is the first several books from the Holy Bible. It is not located in the same place in the Qur’an, but the timeline is the same; it is mentioned in Surah Al-‘Araf, meaning the seventh chapter of the Holy Qur’an. Verse 54 testifies that the Lord “created the heavens and the earth in six days” (Al-‘Araf:54-55).

In the second era, humans and gods both existed; this initiates the necessity to create both man and woman whose posterity would number the earth. The first humans created were Adam and Eve. It is during this period of time in the religious accounts and the legend that the earth became inhabited by beasts and humans. The biblical account of Adam’s creation is found in Genesis 2:7, where “God “formed <sup>h</sup>man of the ‘dust of the ground” (Gen. 2:7). Eve’s creation is found in verses 18–23, “And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a “woman, and brought her unto the man” (Gen. 2:18–23). Both Adam and Eve’s creation in the Torah is found in the Book of Bereishit 1:27, stating God created the two in His image (Gen. 1:27). Adam is addressed in the Qur’an in As-Sajdah, or Surah 32, verse 7, where it is set forth that God created humankind from clay. I feel it is important to mention the footnote found with the word “clay” which makes a reference to Adam (As-Sajdah:54–55).

This final era is called the present era, which can be related to mortality. A defining characteristic of this period of time in Palauan legend is that humans dominate and the gods no longer reside on earth. The seventh day is when the Lord rested. Chapter 2 verse 2 of both the Book of Genesis (Gen. 2:2, 4) and the Book of Bereshit (Gen. 2:2) both state that God rested on the seventh day. The Qur’an does not specifically state that God or Allah rested, rather it explains that God “established Himself on the Throne” in Surah 7, verse 54. God established the idea of rest to be redirecting His divine attention to other holy matters (Al-‘Araf:54–55). Sequential order is one pattern that is observed in many stories and doctrines across religious texts.

### *The First Families*

In Genesis, after being cast out of the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve followed the Lord’s command to multiply and replenish the earth. They had multiple children, but the three that are most often referred to are Cain, Abel, and Seth. The Book of Bereishit 4:1–2 contains the scripture of Cain and Abel, the two sons of Adam and Eve. Cain is rejected by God and walks in darkness (Gen. 4:1–2). In Al’Ma’idah, or Surah 5, Cain and Abel are introduced in verse 27; furthermore, in verse 30, Cain kills Abel and becomes “regretful” expressing guilt for his action. It specifies that he did



**FIGURE 1. Descendancy of Earth's First Inhabitants from Genesis in the Bible and Miagel Latmikaik.**

not feel guilty for murdering Abel, but rather for failing to bury the corpse (Al-Ma'idah:27, 30). Cain's offering was rejected, while his brother, Abel, was praised for his. He killed Abel out of jealousy and walked in unrighteousness (Gen. 4).

In the creation story from Palau, the mother clam creates three offspring: Chuab, Uchererak, and Tellebuu (see Fig. 1). The story of Chuab tells that the people burned him (Aoyama 1996:113–125). All four accounts mention the first sons of earth, but the Holy Bible and the Palauan legend make reference to three sons rather than two.

Both Chuab and Cain were rejected and cast off from the presence of God because of their selfish endeavors. Seth is known in the Holy Bible as a prophetic and faithful leader. It is not clearly stated, but one of the other offspring of the mother clam was highly regarded on earth and taken to heaven to live with the gods. There is a relation between each account, but the Holy Bible and the Palauan legend are more congruent than the other two in relation to familial descendancy.

### Finding Connections

These scrutinized comparisons present similarities, shared beliefs between people, cultures, and origins that support the convergence of lineage to a single family or way of life. There are cultural connections beyond the establishment of written records because oral traditions create a united sense of connection to one's personal and ancestral beliefs. Could there exist foreign religious influence in the Palau creation story given the existence of similarities? To research the possible connections linguistically, there could be language genealogical ancestry. Each language tree depicted very different origins. Early versions of the Bible were written in the Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic languages. Most versions

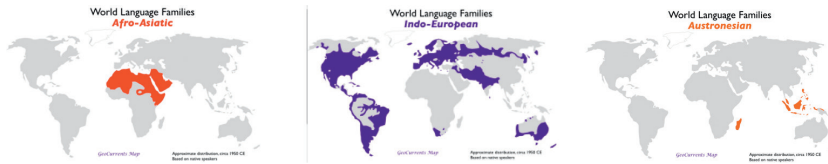


FIGURE 2. Language maps of the Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Palauan. (Martin W. Lewis, *GeoCurrents*, [https://www.geocurrents.info/gc-maps/geocurrents-maps-by-topic/geocurrents-maps-of-languages-language-families/.](https://www.geocurrents.info/gc-maps/geocurrents-maps-by-topic/geocurrents-maps-of-languages-language-families/))

used now are English translations. The Torah was originally written in Hebrew. Greek is an Indo-European language, and both Aramaic and Hebrew are Afro-Asiatic languages. Palauan is an Austronesian language. Although some of the areas of the different languages may be in the same general region, none overlap or coincide, but both have similar stories with very similar elements (see Fig. 2).

While looking into other possible connections of the language, two other stories told in Palauan history have strong similarities to narrations in the Holy Bible and the Torah. The first is a short story called “The Bird that Exhibited Everlasting Life,” which takes place prior to the creation. The gods were discussing what attributes humans should have, and the god Obechad suggested they have eternal life (Aoyama 1996:113–25). The bird god Terriid opposed the notion and upset Obechad. He, in turn, threw a stick at Terriid and injured him, casting him out. He was disgusted by the bird god’s opposition to the gift of immortality.

The second story is called “Ngibtal” or the story of the breadfruit tree. A demigod living on earth named Dirrachedebsungel was gifted a magical breadfruit tree for teaching the Palauan people to plant taro (Aoyama 1996:113–25). The tree would produce large amounts of fish, but one day, a jealous villager chopped down the tree, causing a giant flood to engulf the island as punishment. As recorded in Genesis 2:9, while in the Garden of Eden, there was the tree of life, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The three trees from these accounts were gifts from celestial beings that were established with rules and consequences for violation of those agreements (Gen. 2:9). When the tree given to Dirrachedebsungel was chopped down, the island flooded, and the people on the island were punished for their ignorance and jealousy. When Eve partook of the fruit, she knew good from evil and could no longer reside in the garden or with God; this resulted in the Fall. Literally speaking, both stories embody a descension; Adam and Eve descended to earth and the island of Ngibtal descended below the sea. These stories suggest the idea of the second hypothesis that foreign influence over traditional cultural



ideologies may cause differences in interpretation and the recitation of indigenous ancestral traditions and beliefs.

### **Conclusions and Continued Research**

It was captivating to research the stories of Palau, my ancestral homeland, and further investigate the religious stories and scriptures that are taught internationally. Viewing history holistically, it is interesting to think of missing or misinterpreted accounts of culture, people, and beliefs. Many religious teachings are supported by sermons, scholars, and prophetic revelation throughout centuries. Creation is essential to identity and existence before and after the human existence. There are unfamiliar shared beliefs or ideas across all people, cultures, and origins that support the convergence of lineage to a single family or way of life. Religious teachings can have great effects on culture and beliefs, which can, in turn, make it difficult to identify the original story in communities that practice oral traditions.

Anthropologist Tevita Ka'ili's theories of *tā* and *vā* in continued research of the connections of Pacific stories and religious accounts encourages out-of-the-box thinking by observing the beliefs of Palauans through an emic, or insider perspective, rather than etic or outside views (Ka'ili 2018). In his anthropological work, Ka'ili discusses the different perceptions of time and space in Tongan and Western realities. This theory can help express and further investigate the similar ideas in differing cultures, despite limited historical connections by idealizing the observance of a universal history that has been interpreted uniquely by every culture, region, and people, specifically between Tongan and Western culture. If this theory can be applied more in general study, observation connections are able to be realized that connect cultures, peoples, and belief systems.

The similarities between creation stories of the order of the creation and the first families allude to the influence of religious cosmogenic narratives on the interpretation of the Palauan creation legend. In analyzing the three religious texts alongside the Palauan creation, it was clear to see that there were strong similarities between all four narratives, but they are interpreted differently due to regional beliefs, culture, or interpretations suggested by religious leadership. The Palauan creation story has existed for generations and is orally passed down. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that over time, there was a cosmogenic religious influence on Palauan stories. These religious elements were taken and intertwined in Palauan culture and legends and are continued to be passed on to the upcoming generations.

## REFERENCES

- Abusch-Magder, Ruth  
2021 Simchat Torah renews our ability to tell Genesis' 2 creation stories. *Baltimore Jewish Times*, 15–17.
- Ahlul Bayt Digital Islamic Library Project  
2022 What Is the Holy Quran? And what does it contain? November 27, 2022. <https://www.alislam.org/question/what-is-holy-quran-contain/>.
- Al-Azmeh, Aziz  
2014 Preface. In *The emergence of Islam in late antiquity: Allah and his people*, xii. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.
- Aoyama, Toru  
1996 Annotated inventory of a collection of Palauan legends in the Belau National Museum. Kagoshima Univ. Research Center for the South Pacific, Occasional Papers 30, 113–25.
- Inati, Shams, and Dorothy Kavanaugh  
2004 Shared ancestors. In *Islam, Christianity, and Judaism*. Broomall, PA: Mason Crest Publishers.
- Ka'ili, Tēvita O.  
2018 *Marking indigeneity: The Tongan art of sociospatial relations*. Tucson: Univ. of Arizona Press.
- Rabinowitz, Shmuel  
2021 Parashat Bereishit: Man and earth: This Torah portion tells the story of God creating the world and the events that occurred in the beginning of days. *The Jerusalem Post* (online).
- Saunders, Maryanne  
2019 "The Torah." *British Library*. September 23, 2019. <https://www.bl.uk/sacred-texts/articles/the-torah>