

CREATION MYTHS AND CREATOR GODS: PARALLELS BETWEEN AFRICAN AND HEBREW NARRATIVES

MITOS DE CRIAÇÃO E DEUSES CRIADORES: PARALELOS
ENTRE NARRATIVAS AFRICANAS E HEBRAICAS

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In *Afro-Brazilian Religions* (Porcher, 2025, sec. 2.2), José Eduardo Porcher presents an argument against equating Olorum (also known as Olodumare), the supreme being of Candomblé, with the God of the Abrahamic religions. He outlines three competing perspectives on the theistic status of Olorum-Olodumare and then contends that this entity, as conceived within African Traditional Religions (ATR), does not possess the attributes typically ascribed to the Abrahamic God by both scholars and adherents of Judaism and Christianity.

Porcher argues that the most theologically significant narratives concerning Olorum-Olodumare's nature—those that reveal the attributes ascribed to this entity—are the creation myths of the earthly world (*aiê*). Broadly speaking, these myths take the form of cosmogenic narratives, recounting the creation of the universe and the role played by Olorum-Olodumare in it. Porcher's approach, therefore, consists of comparing these narratives with the traditional theological conception of the Abrahamic God as the creator of the universe, a view upheld by certain theological traditions. Since the depiction of Olorum-Olodumare in the *aiê* myths does not appear to align with this conception, Porcher concludes that the two entities must be distinct.

While the question of whether Olorum-Olodumare corresponds to the Abrahamic God is certainly worth considering, and while turning to the *aiê* creation myths is a reasonable starting point, it is not evident that comparing myths with a systematic theological conception of the Abrahamic God is the most appropriate method. In my view, addressing this question in a way that remains faithful to the nature of ATR sources—which, as Porcher (2025, p. 2) himself acknowledges, are ritual-focused, orally transmitted, non-textual, and lack systematic theological frameworks—requires a comparison between myth and myth, rather than between myth on the one hand, and systematic theology on the other.

This paper advances a fairly narrow claim, but one with important consequences to Porcher's argument. When the *aiê* creation myths, as they're discussed by Porcher, are placed alongside the creation myths of the Abrahamic religions, Porcher's conclusions no longer seem to follow. At the very least, they are not as straightforward as they may initially seem.

One of the pillars of Porcher's argument for the non-identity between Olorum-Olodumare and the Abrahamic God is the fact that Yoruba mythology depicts the world as having been fashioned by Olorum-Olodumare using pre-existing materials, materials that might even have always existed (Oladipo, 2004). According to this view, the creator of the universe must have certain limitations – this deity didn't, for instance, create *everything* there is. In this respect, it is quite different from the Abrahamic god, who is the creator of the world in the Judaeo-Christian traditions, but who is said to have created all that there is.

The problem with this argument is that it does not fit very well with Jewish mythology. If we turn to the Jewish myth of the creation and we aim to interpret it in the most literal and theologically transparent way possible, we see that it is simply not true that the creator has created the world from scratch.

The single most important source one must turn to if one aims to understand creation according to Judaism is Genesis 1:1, which, in most of the translations, read "In the beginning, God created the heavens and earth". This is how it reads in the Revised Standard Version of the Hebrew Bible, that first came out in the 1950's and has been the translation of choice within the academic world:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.¹

In other traditional versions, such as the King James version (1611) and the American Standard (1901), Gen 1:1-3 reads almost identical to the Revised Standard Version, with only minor variations that are of no particular semantic significance.

Now, the above quoted excerpt, in spite of being the standard translation of Gen 1:1, is a mistranslation. Not only that – it is a mistranslation that rests on a misunderstanding. That's because, for many readers, particularly those without access to the original Hebrew, this translation suggests that in the beginning, only God existed, and subsequently, God created everything that exists, expressed in this verse by the phrase "heaven and earth". It is entirely reasonable for a layperson, upon reading any standard English edition of the Bible in which Genesis 1:1 is rendered in this way, to conclude that at the outset, there was only God, and from that point, God brought the entirety of creation into being.

The notion that, in the beginning, there existed only God, and that God subsequently created all that exists, is both a theological and an ontological assertion. However, this assertion appears to be entirely absent from the original Hebrew text of Genesis 1. As has been noted by some scholars (e.g., Fox & Schwebel 1997; Tabor 2020), Genesis is a book about the

¹ *New Revised Standard Version Updated Bible: With Deuterocanonical and Apocryphal Books of the Old Testament*. National Council of Churches USA; Society of Biblical Literature. Friendship Press, 2021. See also *The Holy Bible: new revised standard version containing the Old and New Testaments with the Apocryphal and the Deuterocanonical books*. Hendrickson Publishers, 1993.

origin of the people of Israel and how the beginning of this people is linked to the beginning of *this* world (not the universe as a whole). Genesis 1:1-3 is not concerned with the creation of something from nothing, nor does it suggest that only God existed in the beginning, prior to the existence of all else. The verse is not about the quintessential metaphysical and, to some extent, physical question of why there is something rather than nothing, or how something can emerge from nothing. These inquiries have long been central to both philosophical and scientific debates, particularly in Western intellectual circles (in fact, it was one of the major topics within philosophy during the Middle Ages). Nevertheless, these issues are not what Gen 1 is about.

This first became clear to the English-speaking world in 1985, when the Jewish Publication Society put out a new version of their Hebrew Holy Scriptures,² reflecting a discussion that was long-standing in Jewish circles, about the hypothesis that the first verse should be translated as a temporal phrase. This is how their translation of Gen 1:1-3 reads:

When God began to create heaven and earth – the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep, and a wind from God sweeping over the water – God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.

Verses 1-3 are supposed to be a single sentence, and the idea they express is: this is the state of affairs when God began to create, or fashion, or order, or engineer this particular planet. So, the focus is on this particular planet, not on the universe as a whole; and it is not about the beginning of the planet, but the beginning of the design, when God begins to give shape to the heavens and the earth as we know them. He started with something unformed, or amorphous, and He gave it its particular properties. Thus, this planet was like that: unformed and empty, and dark, and covered with water, and wind was sweeping over it. And then God said, “Let there be light”, and light broke into it. Then the waters (that were already there when He began) were separated, the dry land appeared, and then life in its various forms was created, and then, finally, human beings. That’s verses 1-3.

This is another translation of Gen 1:1-3 to English, by James Tabor:

[*Bere’sheet*] At the first of ELOHIM creating the skies and the land — and the land was desolation and emptiness; and darkness was over the face of the deep, and the spirit of ELOHIM was hovering over the face of the waters — ELOHIM said, “Let there be light”; and it was light.
(Tabor, 2020, p. 28)

As Tabor remarks (Tabor, 2020, p. 82), the books of the Hebrew Bible are named after their opening words, in this case, *Bere’sheet*, meaning “At the first of...” or, more literally, “At the head of...”. This construction, “At the head of”, is a temporal phrase, meaning “When at first...”. The same construction occurs in Jeremiah 26:1, with the same meaning.

² *Tanakh, the holy scriptures: the new JPS translation according to the traditional Hebrew text*. Jewish Publication Society of America, 1st ed., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1985.

Another point concerns the original term to refer to God in the Book of Genesis, ELOHIM. As Tabor observes (Tabor, 2020, p. 24), God is referred to by many names throughout the Bible, for instance, the Tetragrammaton YHWH (*Yahweh*, or *Yehovah*); SHADDAI (meaning “protector/destroyer”), ADONAI (which is the plural of *adon*, which means “master”, or “lord”), and ELOHIM (which is the plural of *el*, or *eloah*, which means “power”, or “mighty one”). In the Hebrew scriptures, as well as in many Jewish sources, those terms are normally written in capitals as a sign of reverence, and to respect traditional prohibitions against pronouncing the name of God.

Now, some of those terms are plural, as mentioned, and it seems to be of special significance for this discussion that the term for God that is used in Gen 1, ELOHIM, is one of them, since we have seen, from Porcher’s presentation, that some versions of ATR’s cosmogenic myths portray creation being undertaken by more than one entity. Porcher remarks that, according to the interpretation he calls view #3, Olorum-Olodumare would be the “first among equals”, rather than an unambiguously supreme being. He would have the same rank as other entities that have authority and power over the world, as well as over creation (Porcher, 2025, p. 14). In the Jewish creation myth, that which creates things, ELOHIM is a plural noun, that often functions grammatically as a collective singular, since it takes a singular verb. As Tabor further observes (Tabor, 2020, p. 82), ELOHIM can refer to judges and leaders, heavenly beings, the gods of the nations, or the one God of Israel.

It is important to clarify that this does not imply, in any way, that the Hebrew God is a polytheistic entity, nor that the term serves as a codename for a pantheon of deities, a notion that would contradict the foundational tenets of Judaism. However, the use of the term ELOHIM in Gen 1, as well as the fact that ELOHIM is a plural noun brings with it an intriguing implication: it suggests that the divine figure responsible for creation, organization, and the design of the universe, according to Jewish tradition, may not have acted alone, or might not have been the sole creating power that ever was (especially given that at least some of the materials for the creation of this world already existed prior to the commencement of His creating activity, as discussed above). Consequently, what emerges is not a stark distinction between African Traditional Religions (ATR) and Jewish mythology, but rather an intriguing convergence.

Finally, I’ll leave it open, as a possibility following this discussion, that the myth-to-myth comparative approach will open the door to an argument in favour of perennialism, the view according to which there is a common core in all the world’s religions. Such a common core encompasses the idea that physical reality, the terrestrial plane, is contained within and controlled by an intermediate plane (subtle, animic, or psychic), which is in turn contained and controlled by the higher, celestial plane. The latter is the Supreme Being, that each religion calls by a different name.

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