PARALLELS IN THE NARRATIVES OF FAITHS

ZOROASTRIAN · HINDU · BUDDHIST
JEWISH · CHRISTIAN · ISLAMIC TRADITIONS

A Book of Shared Reflection on the Stories of Asia and the Middle East



MOHAMMED MUNAWAR

Parallels in the Narratives of Faiths
Zoroastrian, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian and Islamic Traditions

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Quran	Sahih International (1997)
Bible	New King James Version (1982)
Bhagavad Gita	S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgita* (1948)
Upanishads	Patrick Olivelle, *The Early Upanishads* (1998)
Gathas	Stanley Insler, *The Gathas of Zarathustra* (1975)

Full details are given in the sources at the end of each chapter.

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The views and interpretations expressed in this book are those of the author. Religious narratives are presented for comparative study and reflection, with an effort to distinguish historical evidence from religious belief and tradition.

This book is intended to encourage understanding and respectful dialogue among readers of different faiths. It does not seek to diminish, replace, or disparage any religious tradition.

Correspondence: mohd.munawar@outlook.com
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How each chapter reads: 1. History, 2. Each religion in its own words (Zoroastrian, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, and Islam last), a box of *Parallels readers have noted*, 3. A comparison table of all religions, then Key takeaways and Sources.

PART I

The One God and the Unseen World

CHAPTER 1

Allah

Allah in the Quran, and how God is spoken of in Iran, in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, in the Torah and in the Bible

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LONG AGO, PEOPLE in many lands looked at the sky and asked the same question: who made all this?

In Iran, Zoroaster asked who set the sun and stars on their path and who holds up the earth and the sky, and answered: Ahura Mazda (Yasna 44.3–5).

In India, a seer of the Rig Veda sang that truth is one, though the wise call it by many names (1.164.46).

Moses taught Israel the words that Jews still say each day: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one!' (Deuteronomy 6:4).

And the Quran answers in four short verses: He is One, the Eternal Refuge, who neither begets nor is begotten, and none is equal to Him (112).

Many voices, one question. This chapter listens to how each tradition names the One, and where their answers part.

AT A GLANCE

Names	Ahura Mazda (Iran); Brahman, Ishvara, Paramatman, Bhagavan, and the Trimurti of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva (Hindu); no creator God, the Unconditioned (Buddhist); YHWH and Elohim (Jewish); God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Christian); Allah and Ar-Rahman (Muslim)
Date in this book	No date. God is the Ever-Living. Written accounts of one God are documented from about 1350 BCE.
Main texts	Yasna 44; Rig Veda 1.164.46 and 10.129; Chandogya Upanishad 6.2.1; Bhagavad Gita 13.22, 15.17; Udana 8.3; Deuteronomy 6:4; Exodus 3:14, 34:6; Matthew 28:19; Quran 1, 2:163, 2:255, 4:36, 4:171, 21:22, 42:11, 112
The question	Who is Allah, how do other religions speak of God, and what does Islam teach as final?

1. HISTORY : WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS

Scholars trace belief in one supreme God to several places. The Egyptian king Akhenaten, about 1350 BCE, made the sun disc Aten the only god of the state, but the change ended soon after his death. The Hebrew Bible shows Israel worshipping one God, and some scholars think a stage of worshipping one god without denying others came first.

In Iran the teacher Zoroaster taught the worship of Ahura Mazda, the 'Wise Lord'. His hymns, the Gathas, are close in language to the Rig Veda. Scholars often date them between about 1500 and 1000 BCE, though some place him later. In India the Rig Veda, composed about 1500 to 1200 BCE, praises many gods, yet also says the sages call one truth by many names (1.164.46). The Upanishads, from about 800 BCE, speak of one reality, Brahman. Appendix B sets the dates of all these scriptures on one timeline.

The Buddha, about the 5th century BCE, taught a path to liberation that does not depend on a creator God. In Arabia, inscriptions show that Allah was known as a high god before Muhammad, and Arab Jews and Christians also use the name. Most scholars derive it from al-ilah, 'the God'.

The names tell a story of their own. Rahman, 'the Merciful', comes from the Semitic root r-h-m, which also gives the Hebrew rahum, 'compassionate' (Exodus 34:6). Ahura, 'lord', is the Iranian form of the Sanskrit asura. Brahman comes from a Sanskrit root brh, 'to grow' or 'to expand', and is not related to the Semitic words.

Documented	Written accounts of one God in Egypt, Israel, Iran, India and Arabia; the related Hebrew and Arabic words for mercy; the shared Iranian and Vedic word for lord.
Not documented	That the earliest humans worshipped one God; that the Hindu teaching of one reality came from Abraham. History cannot decide which view of God is true.

2. THE CONCEPT OF GOD IN EACH RELIGION

Each religion is described here as its own followers understand it: Zoroastrian, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian and Islam.

Zoroastrian. Zoroastrians worship Ahura Mazda, the Wise Lord, who is uncreated, wholly good and the maker of all good things. In the Gathas, Zoroaster asks who set the sun and stars on their path and who holds up the earth and sky, and answers that it is Ahura Mazda (Yasna 44.3–5). Ahura Mazda works through the Amesha Spentas, the Holy Immortals, such as Good Mind and Truth. Against him stands Angra Mainyu, the Destructive Spirit, who will be defeated at the end of time. Zoroastrians pray facing fire as a sign of God's light and purity, and do not worship the fire itself.

Hindu. Hindus speak of one supreme Reality called Brahman, 'one only, without a second' (Chandogya Upanishad 6.2.1). When this Reality is known as a personal Lord, it is called Ishvara or Bhagavan. When it dwells in the heart as witness and ruler, it is Paramatman, the Supreme Self (Bhagavad Gita 13.22; 15.17). The Bhagavata Purana says the one Reality is called Brahman, Paramatman and Bhagavan (1.2.11). The sacred syllable Om stands for this Reality (Mandukya Upanishad 1).

Hindu schools understand God in different ways. Shankara's Advaita teaches that Brahman is without attributes, and that the self is in truth one

with it. Ramanuja and Madhva teach a personal God, usually Vishnu, who is distinct from souls and whom souls serve forever.

The Trimurti. Many Hindus see the one divine work in three forms, the Trimurti: Brahma who creates, Vishnu who preserves, and Shiva who dissolves the world at the end of each age (Maitri Upanishad 5.2). Brahma has few temples; the best known is at Pushkar. Vishnu, the Preserver, comes down to the world as avatars such as Rama and Krishna (Bhagavad Gita 4.7–8). Shiva dwells on Mount Kailasa with Parvati, who in the far south is worshipped as Meenakshi at the great temple of Madurai. Vaishnavas hold Vishnu to be the Supreme, Shaivas hold Shiva, and Shaktas worship the Goddess. For how these traditions grew over the centuries, see Appendix C.

Buddhist. The Buddha did not teach a creator God, and the goal of his path is nirvana, freedom from suffering and rebirth. In the early texts the god Brahma appears, but he is a being within the world who mistakenly thinks he created it (Digha Nikaya 1, the Brahmajala Sutta). The Buddha also spoke of something beyond all change: 'There is, monks, an unborn, unbecome, unmade, unfabricated' (Udana 8.3). Buddhists understand this as nirvana, not as a God, though some readers of other faiths see in it a longing for the Eternal.

Jewish. The centre of Jewish faith is the Shema: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one!' (Deuteronomy 6:4). God reveals His name to Moses at the burning bush, 'I am who I am' (Exodus 3:14), and describes Himself as 'merciful and gracious' (Exodus 34:6). Judaism forbids any image of God (Exodus 20:4). Maimonides' Thirteen Principles teach that God is one, has no body, and alone is to be worshipped.

Christian. Christians also confess one God, the Creator of heaven and earth. They believe this one God exists as three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19), as set out in the Nicene Creed of 325 CE. They teach that God is love (1 John 4:8) and that God is made known in Jesus Christ. Arab Christians call God Allah in their prayers and Bibles.

Islam. Muslims worship Allah, the proper name of God in Arabic, related to the Hebrew Eloah and the Aramaic Alaha. He is One, the Eternal Refuge, who neither begets nor is begotten, and none is equal to Him (112); nothing

is like Him (42:11), and to Him belong the most beautiful names (17:110). The Quran says Allah sent a messenger to every nation with the same call to worship Him alone (16:36). It holds itself to be the final revelation, confirming and correcting what came before (5:48). 'And your god is one God. There is no deity [worthy of worship] except Him' (2:163). 'And do not say, ‘Three ’; desist – it is better for you. Indeed, Allah is but one God' (4:171). 'Worship Allah and associate nothing with Him' (4:36), for associating others with Him is a great wrong (31:13). 'Had there been within the heavens and earth gods besides Allah, they both would have been ruined' (21:22). Creating, preserving and ending are not shared among three: Allah alone creates, provides, causes death and gives life (30:40). He has no son, no partner, no image, and does not come down in the form of any creature.

Allah is near to every person by His knowledge and care, 'closer to him than [his] jugular vein' (50:16), but He is not in everything: the world is His creation and sign, not Himself. At death the soul returns to Allah as its Lord and Judge (2:156), not to merge into Him, and each soul answers for its own deeds (6:164).

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3. COMPARISON OF ALL RELIGIONS

Religion	Name for the highest reality	How God is understood
Zoroastrian	Ahura Mazda	One, wholly good, creator; opposed by an evil spirit
Hindu	Brahman, Ishvara, Paramatman; the Trimurti of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva	One reality; worshipped as creator, preserver and dissolver, or as beyond attributes, by school
Buddhist	Nirvana, the Unconditioned	No creator taught; liberation beyond the world
Jewish	YHWH, Elohim	One, without image, merciful and just
Christian	God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit	One God in three persons, made known in Christ
Islam	Allah, with Ar-Rahman and the most beautiful names	One, without son, partner, image or equal; creates, preserves and ends alone; near by His knowledge, not in everything

Key takeaways

- Belief in one supreme God is documented in Egypt, Israel, Iran, India and Arabia. Scholars debate how it developed.
- Other religions speak of the highest reality as Ahura Mazda, Brahman, the Unconditioned, YHWH, or the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- Islam teaches that Allah is One, without son, partner, image or equal; that He sent the message of oneness to every nation; and that He is near by His knowledge but is not in everything, and the soul returns to Him without merging into Him.

Sources and further reading

- The Quran, 1, 2:156, 2:163, 2:255, 2:256, 3:64, 4:36, 4:48, 4:171, 5:48, 5:73, 6:1, 6:108, 6:164, 7:54, 9:31, 16:36, 16:51, 16:125, 17:110, 19:88–92, 21:22, 23:100, 29:46, 30:40, 31:13, 35:24, 39:42, 42:11, 50:16, 52:35, 112.

- The Torah: Exodus 3:14, 20:4, 34:6; Deuteronomy 6:4. The New Testament: Matthew 28:19; 1 John 4:8.
- The Avesta: Yasna 44 (the Gathas).
- Rig Veda 1.164.46 and 10.129; Chandogya Upanishad 6.2.1; Mundaka Upanishad 2.2.10; Mandukya Upanishad; Maitri Upanishad 5.2; Bhagavad Gita 4.7–8, 13.22, 15.17; Bhagavata Purana 1.2.11; the Vishnu Sahasranama.
- Digha Nikaya 1 (Brahmajala Sutta); Udana 8.3, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu.
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- Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, Oxford University Press, 1998.

CHAPTER 2

The Heavens and the Earth

Samawat wal-Ardh in the Quran, and how creation is told in Iran, in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, in the Torah and in the Bible

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BEFORE THERE WAS anything, what was there?

A seer of the Rig Veda asked it plainly. In the beginning, he sang, there was neither being nor non-being, only darkness and water. Then he asked: who truly knows how the world began (10.129)?

Genesis answers in a single line: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' (1:1).

The Quran says that the heavens and the earth were once joined and Allah parted them, and made every living thing from water (21:30). When He wills a thing, He says 'Be', and it is (36:82).

Today science looks back 13.8 billion years to a hot, dense beginning. This chapter sets the ancient answers side by side, and beside what science can and cannot say.

AT A GLANCE

Names	Samawat wal-Ardh (Quran); the seven creations (Zoroastrian); the Lokas, the worlds (Hindu); world-systems (Buddhist); the heavens and the earth (Torah and Bible)
Date in this book	Billions of years ago. Science dates the universe at about 13.8 billion years and the Earth at about 4.5 billion years.
Main texts	Bundahishn 1; Rig Veda 10.129 and 10.121; Manusmriti 1.8; Bhagavata Purana 3.11; Digha Nikaya 27; Genesis 1; John 1:1–3; Quran 7:54, 21:30, 41:9–12, 51:47, 36:82
The question	How did the heavens and the earth come to be, how do other religions tell it, and what does Islam teach as final?

1. HISTORY : WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS

Science dates the beginning of the universe to about 13.8 billion years ago, from a hot, dense state called the Big Bang, and the universe is still expanding. The Earth formed about 4.5 billion years ago, and life began in water. Science describes how the universe developed. It does not say why, or whether it has a Maker.

Ancient peoples told their own stories of the beginning. In the Babylonian Enuma Elish, written down in the 2nd millennium BCE, the god Marduk splits the sea goddess Tiamat to make the sky and the earth. The Rig Veda, about 1500 to 1200 BCE, holds several hymns of creation, among them the Nasadiya Sukta (10.129). Genesis 1 was written down about 1000 to 500 BCE. The Zoroastrian Bundahishn, 'Primal Creation', was compiled in the 9th century CE from much older Zoroastrian teaching. See Appendix B for these texts on one timeline.

Many of these accounts begin with water or darkness, and many count creation in stages. Scholars do not treat ancient religious texts as scientific works.

The stories of this book span the lands from Egypt to India

Places named in the chapters, on today's coastlines



2. CREATION IN EACH RELIGION

Each religion is described here as its own followers understand it: Zoroastrian, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian and Islam.

Zoroastrian. Zoroastrians teach that Ahura Mazda made the world good, in seven creations: the sky, water, earth, plants, the first animal, the first man, and fire (Bundahishn 1). He first made them in a spiritual state, and then gave them material form. The Destructive Spirit, Angra Mainyu, attacked this good creation, bringing death and decay. History is the struggle between them, and at the end of time evil will be defeated and the world made new.

Hindu. The Rig Veda gives several accounts. The Nasadiya Sukta says that in the beginning there was neither being nor non-being, only darkness and water, and asks who truly knows how the world began (10.129). Another hymn speaks of a golden embryo, Hiranyagarbha, from which the world arose (10.121). In the Manusmriti, the Self-existent casts a seed into the

waters, which becomes a golden egg, and from it Brahma is born to make the worlds (1.8–9).

The Puranas describe fourteen worlds, the Lokas: seven above, from Bhur, the earth, to Satya, the highest, and seven below. Time moves in vast cycles. A day of Brahma, a kalpa, lasts about 4.32 billion years, and at its end the worlds dissolve and are made again (Bhagavata Purana 3.11). Brahma creates, Vishnu preserves and Shiva dissolves.

Buddhist. The Buddha did not teach a first creation. He said the beginning of the round of rebirth cannot be found, and counted speculation about the world's origin among the matters that cannot be resolved by thought (Anguttara Nikaya 4.77). The texts describe countless world-systems that arise and pass away over immense ages. In the Agganna Sutta, when a world forms again, beings come down from a world of radiance and slowly become bound to the earth (Digha Nikaya 27).

Jewish. Genesis 1 opens: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth'. The earth was without form, and the spirit of God moved over the waters (1:2). God creates by His word in six days, light first and humankind last, and sees that it is good. On the seventh day He rests, and the Sabbath is kept in memory of it (Gen esis 2:2–3; Exodus 20:11). Jewish teaching holds that God created from nothing, by His will alone.

Christian. Christians receive the account of Genesis and add that all things were made through the Word: ‘In the beginning was the Word … all things were made through Him' (John 1:1–3). They identify the Word with Christ. Christian creeds confess God as 'maker of heaven and earth', who created from nothing.

Islam. The Quran teaches that Allah alone created the heavens and the earth: when He wills a thing, He says 'Be', and it is (36:82). The heavens and the earth were joined and He parted them, and He made every living thing from water (21:30). He created them in six periods (7:54; 41:9–12), and no weariness touched Him (50:38), so there is no day of rest. He made seven heavens, and earths like them (65:12), and the sun and moon are His signs, not gods (41:37).

Creation has a purpose and was not made in play (21:16). It is one creation with a fixed term, not an endless cycle: on the Day the heavens will be rolled up like a scroll (21:104), followed by the Resurrection and the Judgement. No second power shares in the work, for Allah created death and life to test who is best in deeds (67:2).

3. COMPARISON OF ALL RELIGIONS

Religion	How creation began	Stages	Cycles or one creation
Zoroastrian	Ahura Mazda makes a good world	Seven creations	One history, then renewal
Hindu	Waters, a golden egg, Brahma	Fourteen worlds	Endless cycles
Buddhist	No first beginning taught	World-systems	Endless arising and passing
Jewish	God creates by His word	Six days and a rest	One creation
Christian	God creates through the Word	Six days and a rest	One creation
Islam	Allah says 'Be'; the heavens and earth were joined, then parted (36:82; 21:30)	Six periods, no weariness; seven heavens	One creation, one end, the Resurrection

Key takeaways

- Science dates the universe at about 13.8 billion years and the Earth at about 4.5 billion. The ancient accounts speak in the language of their own time.
- Other religions tell of seven creations (Iran), fourteen worlds in endless cycles (Hindu), world-systems with no first beginning (Buddhist), and six days with a day of rest (Torah and Bible).
- Islam teaches that Allah alone created the heavens and the earth in six periods, without weariness and with purpose, and that there is one creation, one end, and one return to Him.

Sources and further reading

- The Quran, 2:117, 2:255, 3:190–191, 5:48, 7:54, 10:3, 13:16, 14:48, 17:44, 21:16, 21:30, 21:104, 22:47, 30:40, 32:4, 36:82, 41:9–12, 41:37, 44:38, 46:3, 50:38, 51:47, 52:35, 65:12, 67:2– 5, 70:4.
- The Torah: Genesis 1–2; Exodus 20:11. The New Testament: John 1:1–3.
- The Bundahishn, chapter 1.
- Rig Veda 10.121 and 10.129; Manusmriti 1.8–9; Bhagavata Purana 3.11; the Vishnu Purana, book 2.
- Digha Nikaya 27 (Agganna Sutta); Anguttara Nikaya 4.77.
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