

ENGL1102M

Student: Ellen Davis

Instructor: Ms. Liz Vasconcelos

James Weldon Johnson's "The Creation" and the Biblical Creation: A Comparison

James Weldon Johnson's poem "The Creation" is a thoughtful recreation of the creation story found in Genesis of the Biblical Old Testament. First published in 1929 in the book *God's Trombones: Some Negro Sermons in Verse*, it was inspired by (and undoubtedly furthered) the themes of the Harlem Renaissance, including the black folk tradition and the candid revelation and acceptance of black culture. In following with the larger purpose of the movement, "The Creation" explores and depicts the black folk tradition from Johnson's black point of view. More specifically, "The Creation" is the first literary reflection on the old-time African American preacher of the South, a well known prototype who is very culturally relevant in the exploration of what it means to be black. Slightly more direct in nature, the purpose of the creation story in Genesis is both to reveal the universal and timeless story of creation and to introduce the regal, infallible, and utterly inhuman God of the Bible. Johnson's poem and the prose of Genesis stand in contrast to one another by way of different speakers, different characterizations of God, and different imagery of the Earth. The two works feature the old-time preacher versus the unseen informant; the anthropomorphic, relatable God versus the infallible, omnipotent God; and the human sense of creation versus the majestic creation.

Johnson, like other writers during the Harlem Renaissance, sought to explore, define, and praise what it meant to be African American on every level. He set great store in the accurate literary representation of black culture. For this reason, he saw merit in the old-time African American preacher, a character who is "an important figure, and at bottom a vital factor" in the cultural definitiveness of black America (*Trombones* 12). In his preface to *God's Trombones*, Johnson notes that "a good deal has been written on the folk creations of the American Negro; his music, sacred and secular; his plantation tales, and his dance; but that there are folk sermons, as well, is a fact that has passed unnoticed" (11). Johnson publicly acknowledges the power of the old-time preacher in the development of cultural African Americanism by calling him "the greatest single influence among the coloured people of the United States" (*Trombones* 12). The old-time preacher is a man to whom African Americans owe much, including the provision of the first independent churches "in which race leadership might develop and function," and in which learning and literacy took roots for the slave (*Trombones* 13). In the realm of cultural specificity, the old-time preacher is most highly praised for his skills as an orator, and this is the context in which Johnson presents him in "The Creation."

Johnson infuses specific cultural significance into the Biblically-based creation story by authoring his poem, "The Creation," through the voice of the old-time preacher. To read through the poem, the reader must first understand that Johnson intends for the poem (functionally a sermon) to be "heard" most accurately by the reader, to be full of intonations and a "progression of rhythmic words" (*Trombones* 14). Johnson intends for the reader to hear the strong, varied voice of the preacher when he writes,

And God stepped out on space,
And he looked around and said,
“I’m lonely –
I’ll make a world.”¹

Johnson pairs “the crowding in of many syllables or the lengthening out of a few” to indicate the syncopation of the preacher’s speech (*Trombones* 20). In lines one and two, the reader is introduced to the loud, unwavering voice of the preacher. In line two, the tempo speeds up, only to slow to an attention-grabbing halt in line three, when God says “‘I’m lonely’ –” (Johnson “Creation”). In the preface to *God’s Trombones*, Johnson explains that the “certain sort of pause that is marked by a quick in-taking and an audible expulsion of the breath [he has] indicated by dashes,” like the dashes at the end of line three. Where a line ends without punctuation, the reader hears the preacher “at a high pitch of fervency,” as in lines 18-20. Johnson writes, “And the light that was left from making the sun / God gathered it up in a shining ball / And flung it against the darkness” (“Creation” lines 18-20). In such lines, the reader can feel the excitement of the speaker through the tempo of the lines, and Johnson intends for the reader to picture “congregations moved to ecstasy by the rhythmic intoning” of the preacher (*Trombones* 14). Indeed, the reader cannot fully hear the speaker through a reading alone, but through the careful placement of punctuation and line breaks, Johnson attempts to portray the “voice that was a marvelous instrument, a voice he [the old-time preacher] could modulate from a sepulchral whisper to a crashing thunder-clap” (*Trombones* 14). The characterization of the preacher in “The Creation” is ongoing throughout the poem and is one of the essential elements that sets the poem apart from the creation story in Genesis. This emphasis on the speaker rather than on the story is the dominant difference between Johnson’s text and the text of Genesis.

The speaker of Genesis, the unseen and all-knowing informant, stands in stark contrast to the prototype of the old-time preacher. Unlike the colorful, loud speaker of Johnson’s “The Creation,” the unknown speaker of Genesis has no characterization. What little background is known about the speaker—that he was “a member of the Priestly school . . . in the sixth century BCE,”—is not readily evident in the text (Armstrong 9). In *The Book of Genesis*, Clare Amos classifies the speaker as “a voice which, so often in a cathedral, you cannot see, declaiming solemnly, chanting creation into being” (2). During the course of the creation story, from verses 1:1 to 2:3, no trace of the speaker ever surfaces, so that the reader defines the speaker by the language in which the speaker writes. Using the repetition of the phrases “And God said,” “And it was so,” “And God saw that it was good,” the speaker “employs stately rhythm and repetition [to] make us feel that events are following a serenely ordained pattern” (*New International Version Bible*, Gen. 1.9, 10; Armstrong 9), and this straightforward and lofty manner of writing “emphasizes the purposefulness of God’s creativity” (Armstrong 9). Because Johnson’s speaker is so prototypical and the speaker of Genesis is so indefinable, comparing the two is difficult. Underlying the difference in characterization, or lack thereof, of the two speakers is a difference in literary purpose—while the speaker of Johnson’s text exists to characterize himself directly, the speaker of Genesis exists to reveal information entirely outside of himself, or more specifically, to reveal the creation story of which he is not even indirectly a part.

¹ Although I realize the standard MLA format indicates that block quoting should be used for quotations that exceed four lines in length, I felt that the tempo and pauses in speech would not be adequately understood when taken out of the original format.

Differing characterizations of God further define the distinct purposes of Johnson's poem and the prose of Genesis. While the preacher in "The Creation" depicts God as anthropomorphic, the speaker in Genesis portrays God as regal, omnipotent, and infallible—essentially superhuman. The difference in the characterization of God is first evident in the introductory stanza of the poem and in verse one of Genesis. Although both versions establish that God exists alone in time and space, the Biblical text does not indicate that God is lonely, which is a specifically human emotion. Conversely, Johnson's text quotes God saying "I'm lonely – / I'll make a world" ("Creation" 3, 4). God's loneliness, coupled with the personified acts of God stepping "out on space," looking, and speaking, give human characteristics to a God who is in no way humanized in the first verse of Genesis, which omnipotently says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (*New International Version Bible*, Gen. 1.1). Unlike the God of "The Creation," the God of Genesis does not contemplate aloud what he wants to do. Rather, he simply acts, and through this simplicity of creation, the God of Genesis brings superhuman order and premeditation to the text.

In the lines and verses that follow line one and stanza one, Johnson's text is filled with indications of spontaneous creation, while Genesis is filled with evidence of a predetermined creation. In the creation story of Genesis, each phase of creation is methodical. Repeatedly, God speaks matter-of-factly, and His spoken word is fulfilled: "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light"; "God said, 'Let the land produce vegetation' . . . The land produced vegetation"; "God said, 'Let us make man in our image' . . . So God created man in his own image" (*New International Version Bible*, Gen. 1.3, 1.11-12, 1.26-27). Karen Armstrong describes the God of Genesis as a "single God in center stage, the sole source of power and life, totally in control of his creation. God is isolated and unique, entirely distinct from the natural world, which is wholly subordinate to him. God has simply to speak and his words articulate the formless waste of chaos, giving it grammar, shape, and form" (9). Johnson's God clearly does not display the attributes that Armstrong describes here. Where the Biblical God is "totally in control of his creation," Johnson's God "flung [the sun] against the darkness," and "hurled the world," phrases that, at worst indicate a carelessness for the ongoing creation, or, at best, indicate disorganization and spontaneity (Armstrong 9; Johnson "Creation" 20, 24). Where the God of Genesis is "isolated and unique, entirely distinct from the natural world," Johnson's God is entirely humanistic (Armstrong 9). In "The Creation," God has eyes, hands, and feet, and he actively smiles, spits, bats his eyes, and claps his hands (Johnson "Creation" 4, 14, 26, 9, 37, 38, 39). Additionally, this characterized God takes on an active role in creation that the God of Genesis does not. Rather than speaking and subsequently watching his creation come into being, Johnson's God takes "the light in His hands," and "set[s] the sun a-blazing in the heavens" (Johnson "Creation" 14, 17).

With the completion of each phase of creation in the Biblical text, whether it is the creation of the sky, vegetation, or sun and moon, the text reads, "And God saw that it was good" (*New International Version Bible*, Gen. 1.10). In the poem "The Creation" the preacher completes each phase of creation with the line, "And God said, 'That's good!'" (Johnson "Creation" 13). These two sentences, though only slightly different, carry two vastly different implications. After arguably spontaneous lines, such as "He hurled the world," the phrase "That's good!" connotes surprise rather than conviction that the creation has turned out well

(Johnson 24, 13). In contrast, “there seem to be no surprises” in the Genesis creation story, proving that “this deity does not, in Einstein’s famous phrase, play dice” (Armstrong 10, 9). Moreover, the Biblical phrase “And God saw that it was good” “emphasizes the purposefulness of God’s creativity” (New International Version Bible, Gen. 1.10; Armstrong 9). Overall, the unseen speaker of Genesis is a majestic, awe-inspiring God who is perfectly complete in and of himself, while the prototypical preacher of “The Creation” depicts a sometimes fallible, sometimes spontaneous, but wholly relatable, humanistic God. Inherent in this difference is that the old-time preacher teaches an emotional brand of spirituality and is, therefore, particularly interested in his audience feeling a connection with their God.

The distinct purposes of the two works are also defined by way of the imagery describing the created earth. In Genesis, the creation is defined through regal, majestic imagery, whereas in the poem “The Creation,” the earth is depicted in familiar, natural imagery. There is magnificence in the magnanimity of God’s Biblical creation. Phrases such as “so God created the great creatures of the sea and every living and moving thing with which the water teems” induce feelings of reverence for this regal, all-encompassing imagery. Clare Amos writes that the majestic feel of Genesis 1.1-2.3 is something akin to standing in a “vast cathedral” where “soaring above us are the heavens and their luminaries. Around us the walls are coloured with pictures of the varieties of plant and animal creation. There is an ethereal choir humming wordlessly” (Amos 2). The vastness of the imagery in Genesis is so great that it is inconceivable to the reader. The magnificence of the imagery in Genesis furthers the purpose of the work by augmenting the omnipotence of God and establishing a universal sense of reverence toward God and his creation.

Unlike the magnanimous imagery of the Old Testament creation, Johnson’s preacher portrays creation using predominantly Southern imagery familiar to the African American congregation to which his sermon is directed. Where the Bible reads “darkness was over the surface of the deep,” the preacher in “The Creation” intones “Darkness covered everything, / Blacker than a hundred midnights / Down in a cypress swamp” (*New International Version Bible*, Gen. 1.2; Johnson “Creation” 6-8). Where the Bible talks of “seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it,” the old-time preacher depicts more specific images such as “green grass,” “little flowers,” “the pine tree,” and “the oak,” all common images of Southern nature (*New International Version Bible*, Gen. 1.12; Johnson “Creation” 42, 43, 44, 45). By making the earthen imagery more accessible to the reader, Johnson highlights the old-time preacher’s fundamental desire to establish an emotional connection between his audience and their God.

Through contrast with the original account of creation in Genesis—contrast of purpose, speaker, God, and imagery, the cultural specificity of the old-time preacher’s sermon in “The Creation” is defined against the Old Testament revelation of the creation and the God of the Bible. Through the speech of the old-time African American preacher, the anthropomorphic, relatable characterization of God, and the familiar Southern imagery depicted in “The Creation,” Johnson explores, defines, and praises the role of the old-time African American preacher. Highlighting the cultural significance of the old-time preacher, Johnson writes, “He preached a personal and anthropomorphic God, a sure-enough heaven and a red-hot hell. His imagination was bold and unfettered. He had the power to sweep his hearers before him; and so himself, was

often swept away. At such times his language was not prose but poetry” (*Trombones* 14, 15). Johnson recognizes that these preachers have been consciously shaping a distinctly African American art in the form of oratory for a number of years. By revealing their characterization, the God they preach, and the imagery they use, Johnson gives accurate literary credit to a previously overlooked aspect of black culture.

Works Cited

- Amos, Clare. *The Book of Genesis*. Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2004.
- Armstrong, Karen. *In the Beginning: A New Interpretation of Genesis*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1996.
- Johnson, James Weldon. *God's Trombones*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1944.
- . “The Creation.” *African American Literature: A Brief Introduction and Anthology*. Ed. Al Young. New York: HarperCollins College Publishers, 1996. 369-72.