

Biblical Concepts in Ancient China

Temple of Heaven and Ancient Chinese Writings

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It is generally believed that Christianity spread from the West to the East, and many Christian historians dated the arrival of the Nestorian (景教) monks of the Assyrian Church to China during the Tang dynasty (唐朝) in 635 AD as the beginning of Christianity in China. But there are evidences that many Biblical concepts may be found in ancient Chinese history. This paper examines the ancient ceremony called *Border Sacrifice* (效祀) performed every year by emperors, as early as 2250 BC in the Shang (商) dynasty, and also the written characters of ancient China. It explores the conceptual similarities between these two ancient civilizations, Hebrew and Chinese, and the likelihood that these similarities are the results a shared common heritage that dates back to the patriarch of Genesis.

The best way to begin is at the *Temple of Heaven* (天壇) in Beijing. The present-day “horseshoe shape” Temple of Heaven Park covers some 2.73 km², three times larger than the Forbidden City. The 3-storey iconic building on the right is called the *Hall of Prayer for Good Harvest* (祈年殿). There are 3 important structures in Temple of Heaven, shown in the map below. Opposite the Hall of Prayer is the *Circular Mound Altar* (圓丘壇) in the south, and the *Imperial Vault of Heaven* (皇穹宇) in between them. The Vault is surrounded by a circular *Echo Wall* (回声牆).



The Temple of Heaven was built in 1420 and had undergone many modifications. Below is a scene from a re-enactment of the Border Sacrifice ceremony at the 3-tier Circular Mound Altar using either a calf or a lamb. The Hall of Prayer can be seen at a distant north.



Here is a view looking south from the Hall of Prayer, with the Circular Mound Altar at a distance south.



Picture below shows the emperor ascending to the Hall to pray for good harvest.



Though complete description of the Border Sacrifice was not formalized until 1366 AD in the *Collected Statutes of the Ming Dynasty* (大明会典), there are ample ancient Chinese references to emperors performing the Border Sacrifice. The earliest account was in *Shu Jing* (书经) compiled by Confucius himself. It was recorded that Emperor Shun (舜帝 2255 BC) “offered sacrifice to ShangDi” (上帝, Ruler Above) at Mount Tai (泰山) in Shandong Province (山东). Thus it is generally accepted that Border Sacrifices were performed well before the birth of Moses (1500 BC). Confucius considered the sacrifice so important that he said, “He who understands the ceremonies of the sacrifices to Heaven and Earth...would find the government of a kingdom as easy as look into his palm”. The Border Sacrifice was moved from Mount Tai to Beijing in 15th Century AD. The ceremony was officially terminated in 1911 when the Nationalist Chinese Republic overthrew the Qing imperial government. But tourists may still enjoy re-enactment ceremony, each January/February around the time of Chinese New Year.

On the right is part of the actual text in Chinese of the ceremonial prayer in the Border Sacrifice, taken from the *Collected Statutes of The Ming Dynasty*. This image is reproduced with permission from a book by Nelson, Broadbery & Zhou (2012). The writings on the right of the tableau is the original text in classical wenyen (文言), while the writings on the left is the transliteration into today’s Chinese writing style known as pihui (白话), which is easily understood by most people.

A close examination of the actual text of the prayer offered during the Border Sacrifice with Biblical accounts, particularly in the Book of Genesis, shows remarkable similarities.

The Table below shows side by side, the English translation of the prayer and related Biblical texts. It is hard not to notice the similarity between them.

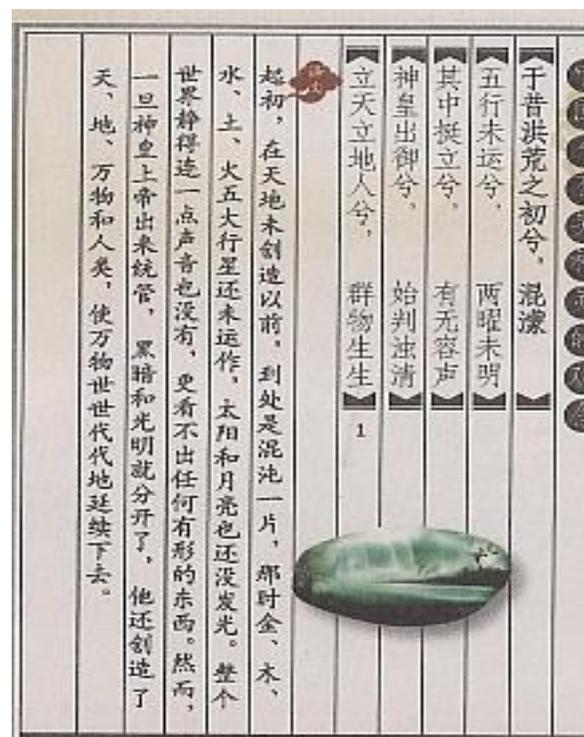
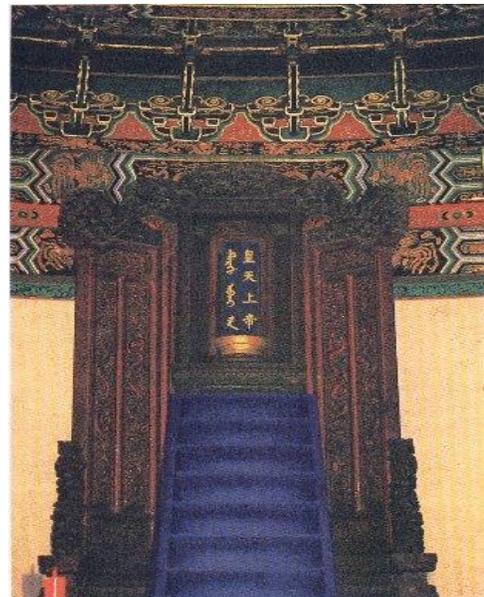


Table 1: Comparing Text of the Border Sacrifice Prayer and the Bible

Prayer offered during Chinese Border Sacrifice	Hebrew Bible Texts
<p>“Of old in the beginning, there was great chaos, without form and dark. The five elements (planets) had not begun to revolve, nor the sun or moon to shine. In the midst (of the chaos) there existed neither form nor sound. You, O spiritual Sovereign, came out in your presidency, and first did divide the grosser parts from the purer.”</p>	<p>“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” –Genesis 1:1-2, NKJV.</p>
<p>“You made heaven. You made the earth. You made man. All things with their reproducing power got their being (from you).”</p>	<p>“The God said, ‘Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters...’ And God called the firmament Heaven....and the dry land Earth” Genesis 1: 6-10. “So God created man in His own image;... God blessed them and said, ‘Be fruitful and multiply...’” Genesis 1:26-28. “It is I who made the earth and created mankind upon it. My own hands stretched out the heavens; I marshaled their starry hosts.” Isaiah 45:12</p>
<p>“Like a potter, you have made all things</p>	<p>“Yet, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.” Isaiah 64:8</p>

How could this be? Two very different ancient civilizations, Hebrews and Chinese, share such similar notions of ShangDi or God, noting that the Border Sacrifice existed well before the time of Moses (that is the Book of Genesis). If these two civilizations evolved independently, such similarity will be highly unlikely. Would it be possible that these two civilizations indeed share a common heritage because they are both descendents of the Biblical Noah? After all, stories of floods are common during the ancient China’s “Legendary Period”.

Another interesting observation relates to the inside of the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvest and of the Imperial Vault. Surprisingly there are no idols or images of the “gods” inside as one would expect in Buddhist or Taoist temples. The central display is an inscription containing the words *Heavenly Sovereign ShangDi* (皇天上帝). The photo on the right shows two columns: the right column is the Chinese writing, while the left column is the Manchurian writing, because this is a photo of the Hall of Prayer in Qing dynasty. Thus this “God” that the ancient Chinese worshiped seems to be monotheistic and is not represented by any images, an idea that is not unfamiliar to the Hebrews. The second command of the Decalogue explicitly forbids the worship of images. Is this another pointer to the shared common origin of the Chinese and Hebrew theistic concepts?



“Heavenly Sovereign ShangDi.” Inscription in the Imperial Vault (Temple of Heaven), and in the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests.

Let us now turn to Chinese writings. Chinese characters may be classified into two general categories: Wen (文), simple or primitive pictures, and Zi (字), compound characters. Wen are essentially pictograms (象形), that is, they are pictures or icons of objects in nature. Zi are compound or indicative symbols (指事), used to represent or associate with more complex concepts, events, or stories. For example, one way to form new character is to combine “primitive” characters in juxtaposition.

In this paper, we only have time to look at three examples. The first is the word 婪, to covet or to desire. This character consists of three parts: a tree 木, a second tree 木, and a woman 女. The juxtaposition of these three parts seem to depict a woman facing one tree, perhaps looking longingly, with her back to the second tree. This is reminiscent of Genesis 3:6, “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate...”. While it is impossible to scientifically prove beyond doubt that this was indeed the origin of the word 婪, the coincidence with the Genesis story is difficult to be totally ignored. The first tree is probably the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, while the second tree, to which the woman turned her back is probably the Tree of Life.

The second example is the word lamb, 羔, which consists of two primitive parts. The character on the top is the word sheep, 羊, while that at the bottom, represented by the four dots, is the word fire, 火. This description of the word lamb, indicates that it is a sacrificial animal, to be offered as a burnt offering on a fire. The question is, where would the ancient Chinese get this concept of a lamb?

The third example is even more remarkable. This is the word righteousness, 義, pronounced “Yi”. This word 義 is composed of two parts: the upper part, 羊 which is the word “lamb” or “sheep”, and the lower part 我 which is the word “me” or “I”. The new word is formed by putting 羊 on top of 我 - in other words “to cover me with the Lamb”. The new word thus form is “Righteousness” or 義. Now, where did the ancient Chinese get this theological notion of covering one with the lamb to form this word 義 or righteousness? But since western Christianity (Nestorianism) did not reach China until 7th century, how could this Biblical concept got passed to China? Would it be possible that the Chinese learned their stories of Biblical redemption from their Noachian patriarch?

While the exact circumstances and the origins of these (and other) Chinese characters cannot be fully ascertained, the coincidence and association with these concepts appears to be something that cannot be totally ignored. Those interested in a more in-depth study of Biblical concepts in ancient Chinese Wenzhi (文字) are referred the article by Voo & Hovee (1999), the book by Chan & Fu (2009), and the book by Nelson, Broadberry, & Zhou (2010) listed in the Reference section of this paper.

In this article, we attempted to show that many Biblical concepts, particularly those found in Genesis, may also be found among two ancient Chinese institutions: the Border Sacrifice at Temple of Heaven, and Chinese writing, Wenzhi. The association and similarities are easily recognizable.

Postscript: The Temple of Heaven was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1998. It was described as "a masterpiece of architecture and landscape design which simply and graphically illustrates a cosmogony of great importance for the evolution of one of the world's great civilizations... "

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