

An Extended Discussion of *On the Three Metamorphoses*: Nuance, Rejection, and Juxtaposition

Friedrich Nietzsche begins part one of the book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* with a speech-parable entitled *On the Three Metamorphoses*. Together, the book's prologue and this introductory speech serve as the biblical Genesis analog for the eventual professions and ideals of the book's character, Zarathustra. It is in a tangential fashion that Nietzsche's character mirrors common Christian symbols and behaviors as he decries Christian practice altogether — more broadly, a rejection of God; thus, this book's introduction is Zarathustra's genesis and a thematic juxtaposition to Christianity. And more specifically, it is with nuance in this introductory speech that Nietzsche formulates a replacement to the ubiquitous (at its time) Christian doctrine by offering an idea that is no doctrine at all but targets individuals in society who are energized to be more and take hold of their life. Zarathustra famously speaks of the overman.

What is the parable?

On the Three Metamorphoses is a parable that speaks of a character that undergoes 3 transitions: becoming the camel, or beast of burden; becoming the lion who defies; and becoming a child who creates (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* [TSZ], Prologue, 1). This pathway begins when one chooses to undertake what is difficult. It is a decision made by an individual, or as Zarathustra says, "the spirit," and not the starting place for all people. It is important to recall the context provided by the prologue just before the beginning of this speech. In it, Zarathustra

had just identified his mission: he desires to “join the creators, the harvesters, the celebrants. (He) shall show them the rainbow and all the steps to the over man” (*TSZ*, Prologue, 9).

Zarathustra is quick to mention that the companions he seeks are “not corpses, not herds and believers.” He wishes *not* to speak to ordinary people, as he likens it to speaking to the dead.

Who then are these celebrants, harvesters, and creators? They are those in society “ripe for the harvest.” They “lack a hundred sickles: so (they) pluck ears and are annoyed” (*TSZ*, Prologue, 9).

They are strong, reverent spirits that are willing to concern themselves with more, primarily difficulty, for the sake of creating.

The camel asks what it can take upon itself so that in the process of overcoming it can lay witness to its own strengths and follies while taking the opportunity to humble oneself. It is considering that which they’ve earned, after they’ve earned it, to be a needless charity that has been *given* to them and they should deprive themselves of it because this deprivation is further exultation of their strength. When one masters being this “beast of burden” — the one who takes difficulty upon themselves by orders from themselves and from whatever higher thing to which they subscribe — they “speed into the desert” and the first morphosis begins. Here, the spirit becomes the lion and a second character is introduced: the great dragon of “thou shalt.”

It isn’t the difficult tasks of “offering a hand to the ghost that would frighten us” and “parting from our cause (once) it triumphs” that are most difficult (*TSZ*, *On the Three Metamorphoses*). The most difficult things are choices to *not* do what is easiest. The great dragon of “thou shalt,” who is the ‘voice of virtue,’ commands in the name of society’s accepted principles and important virtues throughout all history. When the master, “thou shalt,” gives

commands to him or her who has faith and belief in society's virtues, it is very easy for him or her to comply. However, it is very *difficult* to reject "thou shalt." It is so hard that it requires a new aptitude, one that the camel does not have; therefore, the metamorphosis in the desert is the becoming of the lion, the spiritual form that is capable of such a task. The defiance of the lion symbolizes the rejection of God. Further, as Zarathustra mentions, "the creation of freedom for oneself for new creation — that is in the power of the lion" (*TSZ, On the Three Metamorphoses*). As Zarathustra exclaims, the lion's sole purpose is to *become the master* of his or her own insistence by explicit defiance of its last master! This is the nuance in Zarathustra's lesson. The lion does not defy its master, "thou shalt," because it disagrees with its master. The lion practices only defiance because defiance introduces the freedom to make its own choices about what are right and wrong actions. As a 'matured' spirit (an eventual child) the lion will have then shown its ability to defy the commands of its prior master when it does not agree with the prior master, when it decides that the traditional values of people and people past do not represent the values that the spirit wishes to legislate on its own.

It is the child, then, that the lion becomes when it no longer rejects to reject, but when it rejects because it does not believe in the order given — it is no longer the lion. More, it is the child who can give "a sacred 'Yes'" when it had the capability to say no — it is not the camel. As Zarathustra continues, "the spirit now wills his own will, and he who had been lost to the world now conquers his own world" (*TSZ, On the Three Metamorphoses*). The child has morphed into a form of the spirit that can undertake difficult challenges, that can defy its old master, and be the master of its own world. This master of its own world is to become what is later known as the overman.

What is juxtaposed?

To Nietzsche, God has become not a being but a contrivance. A tool designed to bear our weight when our load is heavy. Is it not a greater success to summit a mountain when we've carried our *own* weight for our *own* journey? This is a question that Nietzsche would ask. And it is with this assumption, among the many other uses of God throughout *TSZ*, that this author believes favorably in the connection between the Old Testament's Book of Genesis and the early parts of *TSZ* including the prologue and *On the Three Metamorphoses*. I believe the use of Zarathustra as a renouncer of God is a response to an erroneous *use* of a belief system and not necessarily a belief system itself.

The Lawbreaker and Writer

An early allusion to the Book of Genesis occurs midway through the prologue, section 9 of *TSZ*. In the story of Moses and the Israelites, Moses is called by God for a meeting on Mount Sinai to deliver to his people the Ten Commandments. The commandments, written on stone tablets, represent the most fundamental commands of God, and strong faith in God is a requisite for fear of these commands. When delivering the tablets, Moses finds that his people have misbehaved, and out of anger, breaks the coveted tablets of the Ten Commandments. Due to his outrage, Moses is told by God to write on new tablets the *same commandments* as before. This is an important story in the creation of Abrahamic religions. In the prologue of *TSZ*, about the people whom Zarathustra identifies as herd-like shepherds, he says "Shepherds, I say; but they call themselves the good and the just. Shepherds, I say; but they call themselves believers in the true faith" (*TSZ*, Prologue, 9). He continues by saying that the person whom

those shepherds hate most is the person who “breaks their table of values.” Notwithstanding, Zarathustra’s “creators” are “those who write new values on new tablets” (TSZ, Prologue, 9).

It is evident here, then, that Nietzsche uses the serial ‘abiders’ of this religious force as the opposers to his coveted ‘creators.’ Zarathustra uses this biblical passage as the basis of opportunity for the creators he envisions; whereby, those who’s spirits underwent the three metamorphoses will enact new tablets with new values for the spirit’s new world which it now owns! The turning point in the juxtaposition that Nietzsche creates with this biblical story and his Zarathustra was the sin of Moses breaking the commandments out of rage. In Zarathustra’s logic, this was an opportunity for Moses to defy God and write on the tablets his *own* values; however, Moses chose to succumb to God and let God bear the weight of his summit!

Alone in the Desert

I believe there is also significance of the lonely desert that Zarathustra speaks of in *On the Three Metamorphoses* with the desert described in the story of Hagar and Ishmael, seeing that the connections between this portion of TSZ and the Book of Genesis continue. It is in “the loneliest desert (where) the second metamorphosis occurs” (TSZ, *On the Three Metamorphoses*). Similarly, in the story of Hagar and Ishmael, the mother Hagar is commanded to take her child away, through the desert of Beer-Sheba, with very little food or water (Genesis 22:2–8). Hagar complies, but in their journey, no water is left for the child. Hagar places Ishmael by the shade of a bush and looks away as she cannot bear witness to the suffering and parching of her child. Miraculously, an angel of God speaks to her and saves the child by letting appear there a well of water.

Zarathustra may have a laugh at this story. The most difficult task of the mother in the desert was to watch her child die, not the act of bringing him there knowing that the danger was so high. It was also in this desert where God intervened, where only at God's hand was the boy saved. Not only does this profess reliance on God, but it teaches submission to God's command. Submit to God's will because, with God's acclaimed omnipotence and omnibenevolence, God will ensure that what is right will happen to you when you obey. In Zarathustra's metamorphoses, the desert represents the origin of a being that *rejects* God. Where the mother wearily waits aside for the boy's saving after bringing her boy to parch because she is told to, the camel makes the transition to the lion by the refusal to act on that so simple yet faithful order and instead would never take the boy *because* God said it ought to. Remember, it was the camel that entered the desert, but it is the lion who "wants to fight his master" (*TSZ, On the Three Metamorphoses*).

If this juxtaposition with the story of Hagar and Ishmael continues, it may be that Zarathustra posits that when you control your own values and your own compliance, you would never choose to bring your child into the desert with no food or no water.

- *serpent and pride at the end of the prologue???!!!!*

A last example of the parallels between the Book of Genesis and the beginning of TSZ can be found in the analysis of the serpent. This connection may also extend further into Book I, in *The Adders Bite*. In the book of Genesis' story of the Garden of Eden, it is told how the mortality of human beings is granted by God (albeit in punishment) for Adam and Eve's disobedience (Genesis 2). Specifically, after Adam is told they shall not eat the fruit from "the

tree of knowledge of good and evil” — also known as the tree of wisdom — both he and Eve do anyway (Genesis 2:9). But this action was not self-inspired, rather it was the garden’s serpent who guided them. As mentioned, retribution from God was mortality. Further, God proclaims: “for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” and he says Adam is limited to the food from the fields of the Earth (Genesis 3:19).

How, then, does this story find its relation to the story of Zarathustra? It is without any keen eye that one will recognize the role played by the serpent of *TSZ* is no malevolent one. The serpent appears multiple times. First: “For ten years you have climbed to my cave: you would have tired of your light and of the journey had it not been for me and my eagle and my serpent” (*TSZ*, Prologue, 1). This is where Zarathustra speaks to the sun thanking it for its longtime devotion to he and his animals with whom he happily resides. Next, after Zarathustra identifies those celebrants with whom he wishes to associate, the Eagle and Serpent return, “And behold! An eagle soared through the sky in wide circles, and on him there hung a serpent, not like prey but like a friend” (*TSZ*, Prologue, 10). He then refers to his serpent as “the wisest animal under the sun,” and hopes “that (he) might be wise through and through like (his) serpent!” (*TSZ*, Prologue, 10). These examples show fondness toward the animal. Whereas the role the serpent plays in the Bible is one that causes scorn from God on human beings, Zarathustra embraces the serpent with awe. What is this embracement for? It serves to represent that what we might have thought was the token of evil, might rather be the opposite. For one, it is the serpent teaching human beings how to reject God in its earliest example. Further, it is the serpent who instigates an initial endeavor into what is noted as the tree of “good and evil” or “wisdom,” both very important concepts to Nietzsche and, thus, throughout the story of *TSZ*. Moreover, it

is due to the serpent that the 'gifts' (as this author puts it in the assumed eyes of Nietzsche) of mortality and earthly symbiosis are granted. Each of these gifts allows humanity to separate itself from reliance on God. Mortality allows humanity to *appreciate* its life, to live for something, and have something to waste so that he does, in fact, have something to work for. It is also clear that Zarathustra strongly embraces the Earth: "To sin against the earth is now the most dreadful thing" (*TSZ*, Prologue, 3)

The juxtaposition between the Bible and *TSZ* on this account is the realization that the serpent was not a harm to humanity, but rather a wise guide. Because of the serpent, humanity can create its own values, man can bear its own weight. Lastly, it was because of the serpent that the *most* innocent rejection of God's command on humanity's behalf was made. In this light, rather than the attribution of humanity's original sin to the serpent, it should be humanity's original *child* that is attributed to the serpent.