

# A Study on the Belief System of the Dangun Myth and its Reflection on Korean Christian Faith

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## I. Introduction

Myths have been important not only in primitive society, but also in modern society due to humans having used myths to describe or explain facts and things they could not have comprehended otherwise. Myths have served as the basis for rituals by which the ways of humanity and those of nature could be religiously reconciled. Therefore, without at least a basic understanding of myths, it is impossible to fully understand the culture which has come from them because myths express belief of a society, its people, and ultimately justifies its institutions, customs and

value. Thus, R. Bellah, who emphasizes the method of what he calls “symbolic realism”, explains myths as seeking to transfigure reality so that it provides moral and spiritual meaning to individuals or societies.<sup>1)</sup> Furthermore, Inoue the Japanese mythologist urges to conceive the myth of the founding nation as a source in relation to both characteristics and the aim of the society that makes the story.<sup>2)</sup> Korean people have long transmitted the Dangun myth as a story on the origin of Gochosun (ancient Korea). The Dangun myth as a story on the founding of Korea not only contains the cultural phenomena in the Korean peninsula, but also conveys plenty of symbols and discernible belief structures.

The purpose of this essay is to examine the religious ingredients from the Dangun myth, which has long been the heritage of ancient Koreans to regard it as an origin of religious identity.<sup>3)</sup> In particular, I intend to analyze the texts of the Dangun myth to better understand the process of forming ancient culture and society, find out the religious ingredients, and clarify the analogy between the Dangun myth and Christianity in the concept and belief of deity. To achieve the aim of this study, it is useful to take a philological and historical method of religious study in order to seek the core of religious elements and realize its means and characteristics of the belief systems in the Dangun myth. Through this study, I seek to elucidate the mystery concerning the Korean church as such: how Korean Christianity understands the concept of God, or how Korean Christianity has influence on such a rapid growth of churches in recent years.

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1) Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant*, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 3.

2) Inoue, Hideo, *The Cultural Correspondent in Ancient East Asia*, (Hiroshima: Keisuisha, 1993), 39.

3) Paik called Christian Salvation in Korean churches “to be embodied within our own cultural heritage.” Paik, Young Min, “Korean-Americans in Transition,” *Theology and Praxis* 40(2014), 368.

## II. The texts and analysis of the Dangun myth

### 1. The texts of the Dangun myth

While sources of the Dangun myth come from many classic literatures, the original copies have almost disappeared due to their rejection by Confucian scholars, who looked down upon them as an absurd book of prediction. Now, the remaining written documents are generally recognized as a source of history in spite of various contents. Even though some banned books during Japanese colonial times are found out only recently, their authenticity cannot be recognized due to certain anonymous books at the end of the Chosun dynasty. The books as a source of history are *Samguk-yusa*(三國遺事), *Ungjesi-ju*(應製詩註), *Jewang-ungi* (帝王韻紀), and *Sejong-silrok*(世宗實錄), while the books without authenticity are *Kyuwon-sawha*(揆園史話) and *Dangun-gosa*(檀君古史). When I want to take on religious study, I can even use the books without authenticity in philological documents on occasion. Thus, all of the books can be used as materials to study the Dangun myth with a religious perspective.

First of all, I will focus our attention on the basic ingredients of the Dangun myth. The Dangun myth is included in *Samguk-yusa*, which was written in 1279 by a Buddhist monk named Il-yon(一然; 1106-1289) and revised by his student Moo-keuk (無極). He had tried to collect various myths and legends handed down from the earliest times in oral tradition. The contents of *Samguk-yusa* begin with a chronological table and is followed by a long section entitled Records of Marbles; it is here that the Dangun myth can be found. Furthermore, five other stories can be found in the section, including Jumong(朱蒙), myth of Koguryo(高句

麗), and Hyegese (赫居世).<sup>4)</sup>

The story of the Dangun myth is as follows;<sup>5)</sup>

“The book of Wei”(魏書) says that Dangun Wangkum,([壇君王儉] in popular, using Dan[檀]) who lived two thousand years ago, built the capital city in Asadal [阿斯達] to open a nation in the name of Chosun. Even if it was called in the name of Mt. Muye[無葉] or Mt. Baekak[白岳] in the sacred Book, it was Baekju [白州]. It was also called to be located at the east of Gaesung[開城], which is currently Baekakgung[白岳宮]. It was said the time was the same period as King Yao(高;堯).<sup>6)</sup>

In various ancient writings(Kogi;古記), it is said that there was Whan-ung (桓雄), son of a concubine of Whan-in(桓因, Hananim, which is Jeseok(帝釋)), who desired to descend upon the human world beneath with interest in the valleys and mountains. Knowing his son's intention, the Father who felt the need of public welfare for the people upon the three high mountains around Mt. Taebaek (which is one of them) allowed him to descend and govern the people on earth, providing him with the three Heavenly-warrants. Wahn-ung descended upon Mt. Taebaek (now Mt. Myohyang[妙香]) with three thousand spirits and founded his divine city under the sacred tree(神壇樹). This is the one who was called Whan-ung, the heavenly king. Accompanied by the "Wind General," the "Rain Governor," and the "Cloud Manager", he governed and cultivated people on earth. Thus, Whan-ung taught the

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4) "Samguk-yusa" is a private book which is selected by Il Yon, the Buddhist monk. In the other side, "Samguk-Saki" is a public book which is deducted with the order of the King by Kim Busik, the confusion scholar.

5) Il, Yon, *Full Translation Wanyok-Samkuk-yusa*, tr. Kim Sa-yub, (Tokyo: Bungosyuppan, 1980), 54-55.

6) Hulbert said that "It was in the twenty-fifth year of Emperor Yao of China, which corresponds to 2332 B.C., Clarence N. Weems ed., *Hulbert's History of Korea Vol. I*, (New York: Hillary House Publishers LTD, 1962), 1.

people principles concerning agriculture, destiny, diseases, criminal law, virtue, and evil along with the three hundred and sixty six ethical principles to be needed in the human world.

At one time, a bear and a tiger were living in the same cave. They approached the god Ung(Whan-ung) and eagerly wanted to be changed into humans. Thus, the god Ung gave each of them a stalk of Artemisia and twenty pieces of garlic telling them to eat these, and to hide from the light of the sun in a dark cave for a hundred days. Only the bear was able to follow this program through, with the tiger not having the patience to remain hidden for very long. Eventually after only twenty-one days, the bear was changed into a woman. Then, the bear-woman prayed for a baby under the divine tree because she had no husband. At a time, Whan-ung incarnated (into a man) for a moment and married her. Eventually, she bore a son, who was named Dangun-Wang-kum(壇君王儉).

(Wang-kum) founded his kingdom Chosun(朝鮮, old name of Korea), fixing Pyungyang(now Seokjung) as its capital city, and then moved to Mt. Asadal - probably at Mt. Beakak - in the fiftieth year of the reign Yao(高), the emperor of Dang(唐;ancient China). Asadal was called Mt. Gungmull(弓勿 or 方勿 in other writing) or Kumidal(今彌達). He reigned over the kingdom for one thousand and five hundred years.

In the story of the Dangun myth, *Samkuk-yusa* is almost the same as *Ungjesi-ju*. Moreover, *Jewang-ungi* is almost the same as *Sejong-silrok* in the contents. However, if I examine the contents in these documents, I can find the fact that there are many discrepancies in detail as well.<sup>7)</sup> The Chinese names of Whan-ung are not the same by different documents. For example, *Samkuk-yusa* and *Ungjesi-ju* has

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7) Cho, Jai Kook, *The People's Religions and Christianity in Korea*, (Tokyo: Shinkyosyuppan, 1998), 33.

used “Whan-ung(桓雄)” and *Jewang-ungi*, and *Sejong-silrok* has used “Dan-ung(檀雄)” instead of “Whan-ung (桓雄). In particular, the foot note of *Ungjesi-ju* adds “to say Whan or Dan” so that *Kogi*(古記) and *Bongi*(本紀), which were the original source books, may use two other ways of wording as well. Besides, there is a discrepancy in writings on the Dangun birth. According to *Samkuk-yusa* and *Ungjesi-ju*, the mother of Dangun is changed originally from a bear into a human, while in *Jewang-ungi* and *Sejong-silrok*, she becomes not only the granddaughter of Whan-in, but is also changed into a human by drinking a certain medicine.<sup>8)</sup> Consequently, it seems that the mythical parts in the original *Samkuk-yusa* are revised or adapted later.

## 2. Analysis of the Dangun myth

Traditions of myth have been transmitted through remembrance of the people. The people do not remember delicate expressions in detail, but do remember a main structure of the story in general. Also, the Dangun myth has been handed down by the Korean people's remembrance and narratives, so that it has influenced the thoughts and the religious beliefs of them in history. Thus, as I analyze the Dangun myth, I can seek the structural characters and religious means for the ancient Korean people, which they have long desired in order to achieve their ideal vision.

At first, Kim Taegon found the following four items as basic elements of the story of the Dangun myth.<sup>9)</sup> (1)The descent of the heavenly god

8) “令孫(態) 女飲藥成人身, [帝王韻記下券 東国君王開国年代 并序], Research Center for Religions of Seoul National University, ed. *The Dangun- its documents and understanding*, (Seoul: Seoul National Univ. Press, 1995), 403-404.

9) Kim, Taegon, “The Dangun myth from Shamanism,” Lee Eunbong ed., *A Study on Dangun Myth*, (Seoul: Onnuri,1986), 145.

that Whan-ung, the son of Whan-in, descended upon Mt. Taebaek in order to live in the world of humans (2)the soteriology that Whan-ung, the descended god, saves the humans and the world by teaching the 360 ethical principles and regulations (3)totemism that a female bear marries with Whan-ung to bear a son (4)deification of a human, that Dangun returns to a mountain god after being retired. In brief, the Dangun myth contains four religious imaginations: the descent of a heavenly god, soteriology, totemism, and deification of a human. These elements play not only an important role to form the traditional peoples' religions, but also gives a big impact on a view of the religions in Korea. Moreover, Kim Taegon says that the totemistic element on Dangun' birth is appended to the original story later. He provides evidence for the fact that "Whan-ung who descended from the heaven, makes the granddaughter(bear) become human by drinking a medicine and makes her marry with Dansoo (mountain) god to bear Dangun" according to a footnote of *Jewang-ungi*, so this story might be different from the totemistic imagination of a bear in *Samkuk-yusa*. Thus, he urges that the story of the Dangun myth has some parts to be appended and to be combined with other stories at the process of transmission.

For the reasoning mentioned above, the story of the Dangun myth has related with other oral traditions as folklore and Shamanism in its formation and development. Mr. Jung Jinhong tries to point out several typical elements of mythology from the Dangun myth.<sup>10)</sup> He says that the story of the Dangun myth can be divided into three stories as follows: a story of a descending heavenly god and saving humans, a story of becoming a human from a bear or a tiger as totemism, and a story of a bear woman marrying with Whan-ung and bearing Dangun. He says to find out the structure of confrontational equilibrium as the

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10) Jung, Jinhong, "Analysis on the Myth," Lee Eunbong ed., *op. cit.*, 129.

typical elements of a myth also from the Dangun myth. In the story of the descent of a heavenly god - through the medium of the three Heavenly-warrants - it combines the heaven with the earth. In the story of changing a bear into human - through the medium of the Artemisia and garlic - it combines an animal with a human. In the story of the birth of Dangun - through the male and female - it combines man with woman. In this article, I am not concerned with the understanding of symbolic meanings of myths to analyze elements of the Dangun myth, but instead with the examining of the general structure of the Dangun myth story as shown above.

### III. The formation of a society and a nation in ancient Korea

#### 1. The formation of ancient society in the Dangun myth

Even though the Dangun story as a myth cannot be regarded as a historical document due to their magical writings, it certainly contains traces of history to understand the founding of the ancient Korean society and nation. Thus, I need to examine the Dangun story as the myth concerning the foundation of a society and a nation. Mr. Lee Jongwook tries to find out the process of the establishment of Gochosun. According to his study, Gochosun at first was a small tribal society which peacefully communicated with one other.<sup>11)</sup> In the period of bronze culture when the Dangun myth was formed, there were more than 100 small tribes in the Korean peninsula and Manchuria. As a small tribe, the Gochosun might hand down the Dangun myth as its founding story

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11) Lee, Jongwook, *A study on the history of Gochosun*, (Seoul: Iljogak, 1993), 37.

by oral or ritual traditions. The Gochosun had been enlarged from a tribe state to a big state and, as a consequence, the Dangun story had been changed into the myth of the founding of a nation.<sup>12)</sup>

In the early period of ancient society, the people began to form tribes and later small tribal states and then big states by kingdom. For the people who formed the Dangun myth, Mr. Chun Kwanwoo says that the tribe to be called as the son of a heavenly king conquers and assimilates the two native tribes to be symbolized as a bear and a tiger, and has a primitive society before the state with a territory. He insists that at first, Dangun might be an ancestral god of the dominant tribe near the Daedongang River in Pyongyang city, and also an ancestral god of most tribes in Korean peninsula and Manchuria by enlarging the territory of the state in the latter.<sup>13)</sup> To sum up, the matter begins when Whan-ung moved into the earth in the Dangun myth, in the same way of appearance in most myths of the founding nation. While Dongmyung(東明), the founder of Buyo(扶餘) moved from Kolikook(古離國), Joomong, the founder of Kokuryo(高句麗) moved from Buyo and also Onjo(溫祚), the founder of Baeje(百濟) moved from Kokuryo. Mr. Lee Jongwook says “it seems to divide into three groups from people’s power in the Dangun myth as the power group to be committed in establishment of ancient Korean society, that is, a group to be related with Whan-in and Whan-ung, a group to be symbolized as a bear and a tiger, and a group to be represented by Dangun.<sup>14)</sup> It seems that the Whan-ung group as an immigrant has better civilizations than natives through his bringing the three Heavenly-warrants, three thousand spirits and the three

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12) *Ibid.*, 38.

13) Chun, Kwanwoo, *The history of ancient Korea by Perspective of Person*, tr. Lee, Euntaek, (Tokyo: Gakuseisha, 1985), 18-22.

14) Lee, Jongwook, *op. cit.*, 43.

hundred and sixty six ethical principles and regulations. The Whan-ung group has allied with the bear group as a native because a small state cannot be founded by itself.

According to Mr. Lee Jongwook, the Whan-ung group, which has immigrated from Eun(殷) of ancient China, has allied with the native bear group to defeat the tiger group and then two allied groups have been changed into Dangun group to found the Gochosun. By his hypothesis, the time to establish the Gochosun must be after 12c century B.C. when Eun was destroyed. In addition, because the top limit of the period of bronze culture may be estimated to 1,000 year of B.C., it seems that the time of establishing Gochosun is estimated to be around 12 century B.C.

In the writings of the Dangun story, the capital city has been changed from Pyongyang to Asadal, from Asadal to Jangdankyung, and from Jangdankyung to Asadal in return. It is a reflection on the historical facts on the basis of the growth of the Gochosun as a big nation. As thinking through the development stages of a nation in order to go from small nation, federation of small nations, union of small nations, and a centralized kingdom at last, I can say that the Gochosun had developed a small nation about 12th century B.C., at 8th century B.C. had developed a federation of small nations due to trade with ancient China, and at last 4th century B.C. the kingdom of Gochosun had been established through a union of small nations.<sup>15)</sup> Furthermore, Mr. Kim Doojin explains the society and the culture of the Gochosun era to form the Dangun myth as follows: the society to form *Dangun-goki*(檀君古記) was the stage of the early bronze culture when the Gochosun as a territory nation was founded.<sup>16)</sup> Because the mental culture did not yet

15) Lee, Gibaek, *A Study on History of Ancient Korea*,(Seoul: Iljogak,1976), 26.

16) Kim, Doojin, "The way of understanding an ancient writings of Dangun,"

spread in the early Gochosun society, the agriculture to use mental tools was not established, but the Neolithic culture remained still at large. The early Gochosun had the unity of religion and state as a political system. As mentioned above, the Dangun myth revealed the social situation at the time of the founding of the Gochosun. The traditional belief as the cultural elements were also systemized with Dangun as an ancestral god.

## 2. The formation of a nation in ancient Korea

The people in the time of Gochosun took the important role in the founding of a nation, and created the traditional culture to be located in Korean peninsula at large. I have to find out how to establish and how to develop the Korean folks with the Dangun myth. The Dangun myth says that the group to found the Gochosun was to be those who have carried on their life with belief of totemism. It has been assumed that the Gochosun people have belonged to a Tungustic branch of the Ural-Altaic family who had lived in East Asia. According to Mr. Shin Chaehyo, a well-known scholar on the history of ancient Korea, the original Korean people had long traveled from the Pamir plateau or the Mongolian desert toward the east in order to seek the original place of the sun, where they had eventually arrived at Mt. Bulham (Baekdoo in present), which is a gate of the sun and the moon. As they thought that the god of the Brighten dwelled there, they called Mt. Bulham(不咸) “Chosun(朝鮮)”, meaning “the Brighten” in Idoo(ancient Korean language).<sup>17)</sup> “Hae”(解) as the name of a king or “Bulguan”(弗炬内) as the nickname of a king, and “Bulham” or “Chosun” as the name of a

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Lee Eunbong ed, *op. cit.*, 267.

17) Shin, Chaehyo, *History of early ancient Korea*, tr. Yabe Atsuko, (Tokyo: Ryokuinsyobou, 1983), 57-58.

nation are to mean the Brighten. It confirms their intention toward the Brighten. Further, the common belief of Dangun is spread to people at that time. Dangun also means the Hanunim of Sodo(蘇塗神) so that the people perform a worship to the god of the brighten at altar to be called “Sodo”. On every May and October, they selected a master of rituals who sat down at midst of the Sodo altar and performed a religious ritual to call “Hanunim”.

Furthermore, Dangun has the meaning of the lord of Sodo. On the one hand, Dangun is a master of ritual who performs the worship. On the other hand, Wangkum is a king who takes on politics. By Mr. Shin Chaehyo, “Wangkum” is translated from “Imgeum(임금)” for a king by Ido. Therefore, I can say that the ancient Korean people used the original language “Idoo” and developed the Sodo religion to perform for the sun god. From five thousand years ago to six thousand years ago, the people of the Neolithic period had lived in Korean peninsula and were called “the people of striped earthenware”. Around 15 century B.C., the people of pattern-less earthenware with agriculture moved into the Korean peninsula to become a dominant power group. Later, they laid the base of Korean culture by the development of bronze and metal culture.<sup>18)</sup>

In particular, the people of the patternless earthenware were likely originated from the Siberians because bear worship was strong there. They also had the thoughts of the heavenly god, the worship of sun god and shamanism, etc. as religious elements of the northern region. Further, the dolmen of ancient Korean origin and the wall painting regarding the Dangun story from the Sandong(山東) peninsula in China indicates that the Dangun myth influenced the people called “Dong-yi”

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18) Shin, Chaehyo, *History of early ancient Korea*, Comment, Lee Manyeul, (Seoul: Momorial Foundation, 1990), 99-102.

by the books of ancient China as follows: Sandong, Yodong(遼東), and Chosun(朝鮮). Consequently, it seems that the Whan-in group taught agriculture to the group with bear totemism and striped earthenware, and the two groups united in founding a nation called Chosun with the Dangun myth.<sup>19)</sup> As mentioned above, the people of ancient Korea as a holder of the Dangun myth have strongly kept his cultural identity and enlarged his subjectivity through a narrative of the Dangun myth. Above all, the political leaders have used the Dangun myth to promote the common consciousness as the same people after a unification of three kingdoms by Silla, and the Dangun myth was systemized by the revision in order to raise it as the birth myth of the nation in the Koryo period.<sup>20)</sup>

#### IV. The belief system in the Dangun myth

##### 1. Religious ingredients of the Dangun myth

Recently, it is no exaggeration to say that the research on the Dangun myth has been held by using a methodology of religion study because the Dangun myth has comprised sources regarding traditional religious beliefs more than on the Gochosun milieu. Further, the Dangun myth as the myth of the founding of a nation has not only functioned as a religious matrix for the formation of cultural identity and unification of thought to the Korean people, but also profoundly influenced the religious life and folk beliefs of the Korean people. Therefore, it is meaningful to examine the religious ingredients and to understand the means and influences to the present time in the Dangun myth.

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19) *Ibid.*, 201.

20) Kim, Junghak, "Dangun Myth and Totemism," Lee, Eunbong ed., *op. cit.*, 83-84.

Mr. Choi Namsun insists that according to the examination of religious ingredients from the Dangun myth, the character of Korean culture is “Bulham culture(不咸文化)” based on faith to the Brighten.<sup>21)</sup> He thinks that the Dangun myth is to reflect faith to the descent of the heavenly gods in a solar myth. Mr. Kim Junghak also asserts that the Dangun myth has the idea of the heavenly son belonging to a solar myth, as pointing out that Whan-in as the heavenly god has a solar deity and Whan-ung as his son descends, with Dangun as his son governs a nation. The story of the bear-woman’s bearing Dangun by marriage with Whan-ung reflects totemism. The system of beliefs in the Dangun myth comes from the synchronization of the belief of sun worship and the totemism of the bear worship as so to indicate that a tribe of a sun worship takes over a tribe of a bear worship. Above all, Mr. Ryu Dognsik urges that as finding out the soil of ancient Korean culture from Shamanism, the Dangun myth as an original vestige of Shamanism comprises religious ingredients as follows.<sup>22)</sup>

First, there is the god and the belief of his descent. In brief, the point of the Dangun myth is that Dangun, the son of god, founded and governed Gochosun and then he came the god of mountain after he retired. Moreover, in the Dangun myth, the venue of Whan-ung’s descent is under the sacred tree upon the three high mountains of Taebaek. This is the express of belief in the sacred mountain to mediate between the heaven and the earth. Secondly, there is belief in fertility and the religious initiations.<sup>23)</sup> The Dangun myth says “a bear eats

21) Choi, Namsun, *The Complete Works of Choi Namsun II*, (Seoul: Hyunamsha, 1973), 43-76.

22) Ryu, Dognsik, *Shamanism in Chosun*, (Tokyo: Gakuseisha, 1976), 22-26.

23) The most important initiation is a baptism which is recognized as the best way to commit the christian faith. Han, Chaedong “ Restoring the Matter of Baptism as Participating in the Salvific Reality,” *Theology and Praxis* 41(2014), 36-37.

Artemisia and garlic, and has the patience to remain hidden in a dark cave, and then after twenty-one days eventually the bear was changed into a woman”. The bear-woman can look at the sun again from the cave without light of the sun. This is to express the mystery of the grain god to be recreated and reborn by going in the womb before creation with death. Moreover, the transformation into a woman is to symbolize not only the religious experience to cause the change in quality into a new being, but also to express the religious initiations.

Finally, there is the harmony of the heaven and the earth, along with the creation belief. Dangun-wangkum(壇君王儉) is the founder of the Gochosun as a new system and order in cultures, as he is born by marriage of Whan-ung as the heavenly god and the bear-woman as a god of fertility. This means to create cosmos from chaos shows that the myth of the founding nation is a creation belief. The unification of god and human makes a new life by Dangun’s birth and the new world is created by him. The structure of the creation myth is accomplished by the unification of the heaven and the earth, or god and human. Therefore, the structural characteristics in the Dangun myth are that the unification of god and human can be achieved by the descent of god and the sanctification of a human.

## 2. Shamanistic ingredients of the Dangun myth

Shamanism has long been transmitted in the lives of people as a cultural matrix in Korean society. It is essentially an indigenous primitive religion, and other foreign religions have been grafted. From a historical perspective, Shamanism

has been the source of many religious movements in Korea. Not only the various foreign religions, but most of the folk and sect religions

sprang through the soil of shamanism.<sup>24)</sup> Among its rituals calling for “Gut(굿)”, there are many that serve the aim of securing tangible benefits such as fertility, growth, prosperity, protection from danger, healing from disease, etc.

Mr. Choi Namsun, on the origin of shamanism, insists that Dangun is a shaman and the system of thoughts in ancient Korea has been deeply associated with shamanism.<sup>25)</sup> Mr. Kim Taegon also urges that guardian gods of the traditional Korean household have connected closely with the Dangun myth by examination of the Songju song of shamanism to be used at the time of giving worship to the god of Songju as one of guardian gods for the household. He says that the Songju song was originated from the praise song to the heavenly god in shamanistic rituals, which is used in the festival for him to be based on the belief to him in ancient Korea as a song which tribal people sang to praise the heavenly god. Thus, though the song was originally a song to praise the heavenly god, it was changed into the ritual song for the god of Songju as a guardian god of the household afterwards.<sup>26)</sup>

The story of the Dangun myth has been transformed by other elements in the process of its transmission, as the story has been revised by elimination, addition and a garbled explanation of certain terms from early Korean history and legends. In an original trace of the Dangun, the song of the god of Songju with an epic poem comprises three stages as follows: (1) the personification of a Shamanistic god and birth in this world, (2) the redemption of humans, (3) the establishment as a shamanistic god. These elements are the same as that of the

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24) Ha, Changsoon, “A Study on counseling according to Emotional Characteristics of the Korean,” *Theology and Praxis* 42(2014), 390-391.

25) Choi, Namsun, *op. cit.*, 366.

26) Kim, Taegon, “Dangun Myth by Perspective of Shamanism,” Lee, Eunbong ed., *op. cit.*, 254-259.

Dangun myth except an element of the bear totemism, which may have been added later.

Furthermore, in the book of *Jewang-ung*(帝王韻紀), the birth of Dangun is achieved by the arranged marriage between the granddaughter of Whan-ung and the god of the sacred tree(檀樹神) so as to express the thoughts of tree worship from totemism. At present day, I can seek a kind of tree worship from Kolmegi worship as a belief of the god house in the Kyungsangbukdo province in Korea. The sacred tree to be located at Kumho Dong of Kanggu-myen, Yongduk-gun, had been enshrined as gods.<sup>27)</sup> They say that the gods divided into the Tojung god (which means the god of the land) of the Lim family and the Komegi god (which means the guardian god of the village) of the Lee family because Lim's family came to the village to be established at first, with Lee's family being removed from the village. The people in the village decided an old tree as the sacred area and to take the village festivals on 3-4 times every year, calling "Kolmegi" around the old tree. It seems that the shamanistic trace to be related with the sacred tree and the sacred city appearing in the Dangun myth may be the Kut of Seonang(城隍) as a ritual of shamanism. The people in many of these villages have long held the village festival to call "the Kut of Seonang" or to call "the Kut of Byulsin(別神)". The Kut festival is held around the sacred area calling for the Seonang altar in order to pray for fertility, growth, and protection from danger by all of the villagers every three years.

As seeking the origin of the Kut of Seonang from "Palwhanhei(八關會)" in Koryo and "Soosin(水神; the water god) Kut" in Koguryo, Mr. Kim Yeolgyu seeks its origin from the god of the sacred tree under which Whan-ung descended to found the divine city in the same time.<sup>28)</sup>

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27) *Ibid*, 162-163.

On the one hand, “Palwhanhei” and “Soosin Kut” are the mass rituals as a festival to be held for peace of the people and prosperity of the nation. But on the other hand, “Seonang Kut” is a festival to be held for a village. It seems that while the divine city which Whan-ung founded means the place where gods gather, it is the sacred area where a village ritual is held now known as the Seonang Kut. These results lead us to the conclusion that while the Dangun myth originates in the praise to the heavenly god, the Dangun myth is the story of a shaman who was filled with the divine spirit and conducted the Seonang Kut to symbolize the divine city at the Seonang altar to symbolize the sacred tree upon Mt. Taebaek.

Finally, even though the myth in ancient Korea has been explained as a story of the divine right of kings, the structure and elements of the myth are very similar to today’s shamanism. Thus, it is possible that the myth in shamanism is revised and expanded as a myth of the divine right of kings by the dominant group of political power later on. Particularly, if shamanism in ancient Korea would come from Siberian religions, the original image of shaman in Siberia is similar to the image of the Dangun myth. According to Siberian shamanism, the first shaman is personified after descending on the tree of the ground to hide in the egg of an eagle. Though Whan-ung is not born from the egg, his descent under the tree on mountains is very similar to the image of a Siberian shaman. This image and structure of the Dangun myth has supplied not only the spiritual energy, but also the arch type of religious belief to Korea people by settlement in the history of religions in Korea.

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28) Kim, Yeolgyu, “Korean Myth and Shamanism,” *Depth of Korean thoughts*, Cho, Myunggi ed., (Seoul: U-suk. 1994), 53.

## V. The analogy between the Dangun myth and Christian faith

### 1. Triangle idea of gods and trinity of Christian God

The study on traditional culture and religions of old Korea has various difficulties due to relying on sources or documents not to be proven positively. Thus, I have to interpret them by hermeneutics.<sup>29)</sup> The first scholar to pay attention to the interpretation was Mr. Yoon Sungbum.<sup>30)</sup> He sought the similarity of the concept of god between the Dangun myth and Christianity by analysis of the components of the Dangun myth. He found out that the Dangun myth had the deity of three types of gods; Whan-in, Whan-ung, and Whan-gum(Dangun). Each of the three gods could compare with God the father, the Holy Spirit, and the Son in Christianity.

Daejongkyo(大倂敎) is one of the new religions, which believes Dangun as a god and the book "Samilsingo"(thoughts of three-one god) as sutra. According to the book, Whan-in relates with creation as a lord of making and Whan-ung indicates the truth as a lord of preaching, Whan-gum makes the norm to establish a nation as a lord of governing.<sup>31)</sup> Each role of three gods in the book can confront with the works of

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29) Kwon, Hyeok Nam, "A Study of the Role and Responsibility of Preacher -Based on the prospect of Hermeneutics-," *Theology and Praxis* 40(2014), 118. Mr. Kwon said "The Bible is not the text for a specific target in a certain era but has been representing and enlightening on the current status of the lives of audiences depending on the historical and situational horizons."

30) Yoon, Sungbum, *Christianity and Korean Thoughts*, (Seoul: The Christian Literature Society of Korea, 1964), 61.

31) Lee, Eulho, "Samilsingo(thoughts on three gods)," Lee, Byungdo ed., *The Thoughts of Folks and Religions in Korea*, (Seoul: Samsung Publishing Co., 1991), 393.

the triune God in Christianity as follows: work of creation as God the Father, work of support as God the Holy Spirit, and work of redemption as God the Son. Mr. Hulbert, the early missionary in Korea translated Whan-ung of the Dangun myth into the Spirit King as saying as follows: “The first wish of her heart was maternity, and she cried, “Give me a son.” Whan-ung, the Spirit King passing on the wind, beheld upon her sitting there beside the stream. He circled round her, breathed upon her, and her cry was answered”.<sup>32)</sup>

Furthermore, the book *Sinlidaejon*(神理大典;the book of theory of god),<sup>33)</sup> which comments “Samilsingo”(三一神誥), says “the gods are Whan-in, Whan-ung, and Whan-gum(Dangun). . . .In the heaven, there is nothing but god and of all of things, there is nothing to be existed earlier than god, of all of humans, there is nothing superior than god. Three if divide and one if combine. The deity is from one of three”.<sup>34)</sup>

It seems that the concept of deity on the Dangun myth is polytheistic or pantheistic due to the “Wind General”, the “Rain Governor”, and the “Cloud Manager” with whom Whan-ung descends to the earth. However, Christianity is not monotheistic in number, but monotheistic in the triune God. Further, “Hananim” as the name of god in Dangun myth, has the tautological meaning to combine one with lord while it means not only “love”, “light” and “joy”, but also God to be called as “you(Du)” in the New Testament. In particular, the concept of “Hananim” is not “Ri(理) or “Dao”(道) as “the Heaven is idea”(天即理) in Chinese philosophy, but is personal as calling “Hananim” as a real object of belief.

Moreover, Mr. Yoon Sungbum asserted the ability for Korean folk

32) Clarence N. Weems ed., *Hulbert's History of Korea Vol. I*, (New York: Hillary House Publishers LTD, 1962), 2.

33) *The the book of theory of god of Daejongkyo*(大宗教) written in 1917 by the founder Na Chul.

34) 神者,桓因,桓雄,桓俊也.在天無上,在物無始,在民無先.分即三也,合即一也,三一而神位定.

religion to accept the concept of god from the Orthodoxy church.<sup>35)</sup> In confession of the Orthodoxy church as that “the Holy Spirit is from God the Father”, there is the structural component of three persons such as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit while there are the same elements as Whan-in, Whan-ung, and Whan-gum in the Dangun myth. Furthermore, when the Nestorian church introduced to China in the 6-7th Century as the name of “Kyungkyo”(景教), Salmankyo as a Shamanistic folk religion accepted the concept of trinity deity in Christianity.

Therefore, he says to be inferable of that the story of the Dangun myth may be a saga which is formed under the influence of Christianity from the 4th Century to the 8th Century.<sup>36)</sup> As mentioning that it is a hypotheses, he asserts that the Dangun myth is vestigium trinitatis(debris of trinity) for folk religions in ancient Korea to accept. In addition, he points out that Whan-in is similar to the Father because In (因) in Whan-in means “origin”, “source”, “reliance” or “intimacy”, Whan-ung is in appearance of the Holy Spirit because Ung(雄) in Whan-ung means “strong”, “full”, “powerful” or “authority”, and Whan-gum is alike to the Son because Gum(儉) in Whan-gum means “temperance”, “humility”, or “mediation”. His opinion is just an inference that needs more discussion, but then it is the fact that the concept of deity in traditional folk religions from ancient Korea is very similar to the concept of deity in Christianity. This point is important to analyze the understanding of God in Korean Christians.

## 2. The creation of life and the creation faith

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35) Yoon, Sungbum, *op. cit.*, 65-68.

36) Yoon, Sungbum, “Cosmopolitan Character of Thoughts of god,” *Sasanggye*, (The world of thoughts, 1963. 9), 233.

In the creation faith of the Dangun myth, the three Heavenly-warrants and the bear-woman as a god of the earth are related with creation and birth. The bear-woman is changed into a human after the patience to remain hidden for twenty-one days in a dark cave as a symbol of the mother's womb, while the three Heavenly-warrants contain the seed of grains. Also, the founding of the old Chosun in the Dangun myth means not only the founding of a nation, but also the creation of the cosmos from chaos. According to "Samilsingo", Whan-in has a role of in creation as a lord of making. The achievement of creation in the Dangun myth comes from a unification of heaven with earth and god with a human as far as the descent of god mingles with sanctification of a human in the Dangun myth. God the Father in Christianity achieves the Creation of heaven and earth.

Further, God the Son is incarnated by borrowing a body from Mary and then achieves the mission of redemption to create a new order. As the bear-woman is changed into a human by great obedience to bore Whan-kum(Dangun), Mary is obedient to God when she hears the message about her pregnancy of the Son of God by the Holy Spirit from an angel. The birth of Dangun indicated in the Dangun myth is not only the story of bearing a baby, but also the story of the Savior as saying in Christianity as well as a mediator between god and humans.

Mr. Chung Jinhong urges that the Dangun myth has some matters of soteriology in Christianity by analysis as methodology of Claude Levi Strauss.<sup>37)</sup> All of them have an element of chaos which is changed into the cosmos by intervention of the mediator. A corrupted human is changed into a redeemed human by intervention of Jesus who is born from Mary. The three dimensions of Christian soteriology appears in the

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37) Chung, Jinhong, *op. cit.*, 131-139.

Dangun myth. The first dimension is that the human world in chaos is changed into the new world in cosmos, which Whan-ung governs after his descent with the three Heavenly-warrants. The second dimension is that a bear is changed into the bear-woman which then changes into a new human being after the patience for twenty-one days. The third dimension is that the new creation of life is accomplished after the birth of Dangun as a son by intervention of the bear-woman with Whan-ung. Though the above matters, I can recognize the Dangun myth contains religious soteriology and has deep religious significances in the substance of human life even though it is known as a myth of the founding of a nation.

In addition, Mr. Ryu Dongsik urges that the Dangun myth has the creation faith of soteriology in Christianity.<sup>38)</sup> He finds out images of death and resurrection of Jesus on the cross in the faith on birth of life and fusion of the heaven and earth of the Dangun myth. The works of birth and life in the Dangun myth has some analogy to the works of redemption of Jesus; after the bear has the patience to remain hidden in the cave for twenty-one days, she accomplishes the birth of life by changing into a human, and after Jesus has the experience of dying on the cross, He accomplishes the work of redemption by resurrection. Above all, the thought of the three gods and the creation of life in the Dangun myth is to be popularized widely among people even today, and to be a base of faith and religion to Koreans. Thus, it is sure to function as a cultural matrix for the acceptance and assimilation of foreign religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, etc.

## VI. Conclusion

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38) Ryu, Dongsik, *Christianity in Korea*, (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1987), 2-19.

The people of ancient Korea as a holder of the Dangun myth have strongly kept their cultural identity and enlarged their subjectivity through a narrative of the Dangun myth. The image and structure of the Dangun myth has supplied not only the spiritual energy, but also the arch type of religious belief to the Korean people by settlement in the history of religions in Korea.<sup>39)</sup> I can find that the Dangun myth contains four religious imaginations: the descent of a heavenly god, soteriology, totemism, and deification of a human. Moreover, those elements play not only an important role to form the traditional peoples' religions, but also give a big impact on a view of the religions in Korea. Also, in the structural characteristics of the Dangun myth, I see that the unification of god and human can be achieved by the descent of god and the sanctification of a human.

In particular, Korean theologians assert that the concept of deity in traditional folk religions from ancient Korea is very similar to the concept of deity in Christianity. While the Dangun myth had the deity of three types of gods: Whan-in, Whan-ung, and Whan-gum(Dangun), each of the three gods could compare with God the father, the Holy Spirit, and the Son in Christianity. It is difficult for those who live in non-christian societies are difficult to fully understand the concept of the Trinity in Christianity. However, Koreans can easily understand and accept it due to the traditional concept of three gods in the Dangun Myth. Besides, God the Son in Christianity is incarnated by borrowing a body from Mary and then achieves the mission of redemption to create a new order. As the bear-woman of the Dangun Myth is changed into a human by great obedience to bear Dangun, Mary is obedient to God

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39) Paik, Young Min, "Korean-Americans in Transition," *Theology and Praxis* 40(2014), 368. Paik called the Korean cultural heritage for sacrificial love and salvific compassion and forgiveness.

when she hears the message about her pregnancy of the Son of God by the Holy Spirit from an angel. Moreover, the Bear-woman beared her son Dangun by Whan-ung, the Spirit King. The birth of Dangun is not only the story of bearing a baby, but also the story of the Savior as saying in Christianity as well as a mediator between god and humans. The spirituality of Koreans came from the traditional peoples' religions and was brought over to Korean Christians. Therefore, Korean churches have emphasized the Holy Spirit.

When I want to examine what the cause of the rapid growth of Christian churches is in Korea, I have to mention the necessity to study more on a relation of the faith in Christianity with the faith in traditional peoples' religions, which remains alive and meaningful in the lives of the Korean people.

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■ Abstract ■

**A Study on the Belief System of the Dangun Myth and  
its Reflection on Korean Christian Faith**

**Cho, Jai Kook**

This essay aims to examine the religious ingredients from the Dangun myth, which has long been the heritage of ancient Koreans to regard it. In particular, I intend to analyze the texts of the Dangun myth to understand the process of forming ancient culture and society, find out the religious ingredients, and clarify the analogy between the Dangun myth and Christian church in the meaning of deity. Through this study, I tried to elucidate the mystery concerning the Korean churches as follows: how the Korean Christian church understands the concept of God, or how the Korean Christian church has influence on such a rapid

growth of churches in recent years.

To achieve this aim, I worked for the following tasks. At first, I analyzed the editorial resources in the texts of the Dangun myth and their meanings in perspective of religions. The Dangun myth has been handed down by the Korean people's remembrance and narratives so that it has influenced the religious beliefs of them in history. Thus, as I analyze the Dangun myth, I could seek the structural characters and religious meanings for the Gochosun people who have long desired in order to achieve their ideal vision. At second, I tried to examine the Dangun story as the myth concerning the foundation of a nation. I could urge that the bear group who founded Gochosun had developed its original culture and civilization. The Gochosun people had strongly kept his cultural identity and enlarged his subjectivity through a narrative of the Dangun myth. At third, I examined the religious ingredients and their meanings of today in the Dangun myth. I could find the three religious elements: the god and the belief of his descent, belief in fertility, the religious initiations and the harmony of heaven and earth.

At fourth, I interpreted the belief system in the Dangun myth to compare with the Christian faith by hermeneutics. While the Dangun myth had the deity of three types of gods(Whan-in, Whan-ung, and Whan-gum), each of the three gods could compare with God the father, the Holy Spirit, and the Son in Christianity. Moreover, as the bear-woman of the Dangun Myth is changed into a human by great obedience to bore Dangun, Mary is obedient to God when she hears the message about her pregnancy by the Holy Spirit from an angel.

This essay is to examine the cause of the rapid growth of Korean Christian churches in the perspective of religious ingredients of Gochosun. I can mention the potentiality and capacity to accept Christian faith by the similarity of belief systems between Korean peoples'

religions and Western Christianity.

**Key Words**

Dangun myth, Gochosun, soteriology, Shamanistic ingredient, people's religion

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