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A stairway to heaven : Daoist self-cultivation in early modern China
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Conclusion

Wu Shouyang

The “immortals” and the authors of the inner alchemy texts are often portrayed in hagiographies as semi-divine figures with extraordinary features and mysterious powers. The occasional “auto-hagiography,” such as that of Wu Shouyang, also participates in this process of mystification by describing the subject as someone indisputably destined for holiness. But what the biographical materials of Wu Shouyang also show us is the picture of a remarkable yet ordinary man, with a family life, a career as a teacher and author, and a man with everyday worries about things such as health and income. The inner alchemy texts are highly intertextual writings that assume a great deal of erudition on the side of the writer as well as the reader. The practice of inner alchemy was also a costly affair that required considerable funds in order to compensate for the loss of income and be able to devote long periods of time to continuous religious practice. It is to be expected then, as is the case with Wu Shouyang and other masters, that inner alchemy was primarily a pursuit for the literate elite that had the education to make sense of its theories and the wealth to afford its practice.

There was of course a communal way to organize the conditions for cultivation practice and that was the monastic system. We have come to associate the names of Quanzhen and Longmen primarily with a monastic order which practices inner alchemy as part of its broader activities. But as this monastic system developed from the small community of disciples around Wang Chongyang, the Quanzhen-type of inner alchemy also continued to be practiced in non-monastic, small-scale fellowships built upon the relationships between masters and disciples and patrons and clients, similar to the original fellowship of Wang Chongyang. Wu Shouyang is representative of this non-monastic form of Quanzhen. These cultivators financed their activities with their own wealth, with the help of patrons, or by pooling resources with likeminded cultivators.

Most of them were married with children. Leading the life of a “normal” householder, such religious practitioners are usually referred to as “laypersons” but that only makes sense if we insist on seeing them from a perspective which takes monasticism as the norm. They did not refer to themselves as laypersons and many of them were much more seriously engaged in their religious practice than this term suggests. The secondary literature never refers, I think, to Wu Shouyang as a layperson. Very similar figures, such as Zhao Bichen or Chen Yingning, are referred to with this term.⁶⁷⁴ The reasons behind such terminological choices are not always clear but presumably based on a set of assumptions about marital status and connections with large-scale institutions and their institutionalized mechanisms of ordination, as well as probably simple adherence to what appears to be the academic consensus. On the basis of his Quanzhen label, Wu Shouyang is even sometimes referred to as a monk. If we simply choose to distinguish between “monastics” and the “laity,” in the sense of non-monastics, we should assign Wu Shouyang to the second category. Alternatively, we might consider reserving the term “laity” for those that explicitly identify themselves as such and, indeed, do so relative to a monastic institution. In the Buddhist tradition, the “laity” would then refer to the *upāsakas* and *upāsikās*, who define themselves vis-à-vis monastic Buddhism. Practitioners such as Wu Shouyang, who had no relationship at all with a monastic institution, could then be defined as “self-cultivator” (besides being an “author” and “teacher”).

They saw themselves as “immortalists” (*xianjia* 仙家), or simply as “cultivators” (*xiuxingzhe* 修行者 or *xiushi* 修士), and they saw each other as fellows (*banliu* 伴侶) or comrades sharing the same aspirations (*tongzhi* 同志). Their basic social structure, modelled after the structure of a family, was the lineage that was built around master-disciple relationships. These were esoteric fellowships, predicated on the idea that the masters possessed, or perhaps embodied, a secret knowledge that they would only transmit to deserving disciples, after the appropriate rituals of initiation, and only gradually, in discrete transmissions. Initiated

⁶⁷⁴ For an example, see Xun Liu, *Daoist Modern*, esp. 36, who explicitly refers to Wu Shouyang as part of the monastic system and to figures such as Lu Xixing, Fu Jinqian, Li Xiyue, Zhao Bichen, and, of course, Chen Yingning as “lay practitioners.”

students were ordained in private ceremonies, receiving religious names indicating their place in the lineage and talismans as symbols of the orthodoxy of the transmission.

Wu's story is in several ways the typical story of a Daoist master from the literati type. Growing up in a family of some wealth and education, his expected course towards the examinations and civil service was disrupted by tragic events. First, his father died, which also meant that the household had to start eating into its reserves. Later, the area was hit by three consecutive years of severe floods and famine. These were part of the wave of natural disasters in the late Ming that contributed to the fall of that dynasty. The events must have made a huge impact on the young Wu. Simultaneously, he had been exposed to religious ideas by reading books that were available in the family library. When he finally encountered a local inner alchemy master, he took the step to abandon his study of the classics and start his discipleship.

None of Wu's known predecessors in this lineage seems to have had any connections with the monastic Quanzhen institute. The stories about Zhang Jingxu, the first identified master in this lineage, were third-hand stories and the details do not add up. His story links the lineage to the legacy of Qiu Chuji, simply by claiming this link. The next masters, Li Xu'an and Cao Hanyang, each had increasingly more students. Wu Shouyang would take the lineage from rural Jiangxi to the heart of urban literati life in Nanjing.

More important for his long-term legacy, Wu would also be the first in this lineage to write and publish his views on inner alchemy. These views were grounded in the teachings of his lineage and his extensive reading in Daoist and Buddhist texts. His writings arose in large part from the dialogues with his students, part of these dialogues being reworked into essays. He would leave one work intended for a general audience; the *Straightforward Essays*. This work was reprinted many times and we can follow its printing history in considerable detail. He also left manuscripts intended for circulation among initiated disciples only. These first appeared in printing in the early nineteenth century. They contain further essays, dialogues, verses, jottings, and an autobiography. But the printed editions each represent a different selection and arrangement of these texts, suggesting that several manuscripts circulated between Wu's death and the first printing. We can identify at least four such editions.

Wu's works were recognized as accessible surveys of inner alchemy. His account of this tradition was a synthesis of elements from the various lineages, combined with elements from Buddhism and Confucianism. Wu Shouyang's writings have been frequently published since 1622 until now. First, during the late imperial period, for a market of elite inner alchemy enthusiasts in major cities including Nanchang, Nanjing, Suzhou, Beijing, Wuchang, and Chongqing. In the Republican era, Wu's works became one of the best-sellers for the modern publishing houses in Shanghai. In the 1960s and 70s, modern facsimile reproductions were published by the active publishing houses of Taiwan that were closely associated with local religious communities. During the 1980s and 90s, Wu's works were important titles in the various series published in the PRC in the wave of popularity of *qigong*. In the last few decennia, we have seen a variety of modern editions in the PRC and on Taiwan.

In the early nineteenth century, Wu's writings were included in Fu Jinqian's collected works. Before that, the Chan monk-turned-Daoist Liu Huayang used Wu's works as the inspiration for his own writings on inner alchemy. An anthology of Wu and Liu's works was the edition of Wu's writings that became the best-seller mentioned above. Wu's works were also included in the collectanea of Jiangxi and, as a result, in many republications of such collectanea. Wu's works were included in every major collection of Daoist texts produced since their first publication. Most importantly, they were included in the Qing period *Daozang jiyao*, often seen as the most important collection after the *Zhengtong daoze*. They were also included in Ding Fubao's *Daozang jinghua lu*, Xiao Tianshi's *Daozang jinghua*, and in the *Zangwai daoshu*. As mentioned above, they were included in many of the reprint series produced during the *qigong* boom of the 1980s and 90s. Last but not least, they were the only inner alchemy texts from after the Ming canon that were included as supplements in a reprint of the *Zhengtong daoze* by Taiwanese publisher Xinwenfeng.

Inner Alchemy

Most scholars characterize Wu Shouyang's writings as representative of a mature stage in the development of inner alchemy. His description of inner alchemy is characterized by: (1) the completeness of topics; (2) the level of detail; (3) the systematic outline of the process of cultivation; (4) an eclectic and syncretic nature, evidenced by the fact that it combines aspects of the various preceding lineages, along with concepts from Confucian morality, Neo-Confucian cosmology, and Buddhist soteriology; (5) an emphasis on the idea of practical verification with a periodization scheme and signs associated with each stage; and (6) the use of (relatively) accessible language. Wu Shouyang himself also claimed of course to be the first to completely

disclose the oral teachings and this claim is echoed by some scholars.⁶⁷⁵ All of these factors have undoubtedly contributed to Wu's inner alchemy writings being relatively easy to understand and hence being suitable as primers on inner alchemy. Later inner alchemists such as Chen Yingning recommended them as such. These factors also go a long way in explaining their popularity and continuous reprinting. Several scholars have described Wu Shouyang's account of inner alchemy as representative of the standard account of inner alchemy as it developed in the late imperial period.

Wu Shouyang's writings have also introduced a number of specific concepts into inner alchemy theory. Ding Chanchun has identified the "appearance of yang radiance," the "work of gathering the great medicine," the "signs of the generation of the great medicine," the method of the "five dragons bearing aloft the saint," and the fusion of the lower and middle elixir field.⁶⁷⁶ We can add to this the detailed description of the preconditions for cultivation, the systematic association of the "three changes" of the "path of humans" with the "three passes" of cultivation, Wu's dictum that there can be no inversion when there is no natural process, the, what I have termed, "five periods," and the systematic association of Daoist and Buddhist terminology.⁶⁷⁷

Many later works on inner alchemy show the impact of Wu's ideas through the use of quotes, the adoption of terminology, or through paraphrase. Writer's and texts influenced by Wu's works include Liu Yiming 劉一明 (1734–1821)⁶⁷⁸, Liu Huayang 柳華陽 (1735–99), Fu Jinquan 傅金銓 (1765–1844)⁶⁷⁹, Li Xiyue 李西月 (1806–56)⁶⁸⁰, Wang Qihuo 王啟濩 (1838–1917)⁶⁸¹, Liu Mingrui 劉名瑞 (1839–1931)⁶⁸², Huang Shang 黃裳 (fl. 1840s)⁶⁸³, Zhao Bichen 趙避塵 (1860–1942), Liu Shouyuan 柳守元⁶⁸⁴, Zhu Wenbin

⁶⁷⁵ Without access to this oral tradition, this claim is difficult to verify. We can nevertheless say a few things. An oral tradition can of course never be completely rendered in textualized form without losing a large part of its content. Further, the claim to disclose secret teachings must also be seen as part of the type of rhetoric that is used by esoteric traditions. Having said that, we do seem to observe that later texts become gradually more explicit than earlier texts, hence, the claim that Wu disclosed more previously secret teachings to a general audience than his predecessors is likely to be true.

⁶⁷⁶ Ding Changchun, *Wu Shouyang neidan sixiang yanjiu*, 250.

⁶⁷⁷ I also thank Xiao Jinming for sharing his thoughts on the influence of Wu Shouyang on inner alchemy.

⁶⁷⁸ Liu Yiming 劉一明 (1734–1821) hailed from Quwo 曲沃 (Shanxi) and was an eleventh-generation Longmen master. His writings were collected in the *Daoshu shi'er zhong* 道書十二種 (1819). See Pregadio, "Superior Virtue, Inferior Virtue: A Doctrinal Theme in the Works of the Daoist Master Liu Yiming (1734–1821)."

⁶⁷⁹ Fu Jinquan 傅金銓 (1765–1844) hailed from a village called Shancheng 珊城, located in Jinxi 金谿 county not far from Wu's hometown in Nanchang county. In his early youth he is known to have read widely in Daoist and Buddhist texts, after which he traveled through several provinces looking for instructors and collecting further texts, to finally settle in Chongqing in 1817 where he stayed until the end. The region where Fu lived was an important printing and publishing center and immigrants from this region revived the Sichuan printing industry during the mid to late Qing. One of these was Fu Jinduo 傅金鐸, an older relative of Fu Jinquan, who founded the Shancheng tang in Chongqing in 1750/51. This publishing house also printed Fu Jinquan's own works. Fu's collected works were published around 1842 as the *Jiyi zhi zhengdao mishu shiqi zhong* 濟一子證道秘書十七種. This collection itself is available in several editions, among which a facsimile reprint in the *Zangwai daoshu*. It consists of Fu's own writings, commentaries, and reprints of other works. See Valussi, "Printing and Religion in the Life of Qing dynasty Alchemical Author Fu Jinquan."

⁶⁸⁰ Li Xiyue 李西月 (1806–56; *hao* Hanxu zi 涵虛子) hailed from Leshan 樂山 (Sichuan) and is known as the founder of the Western Lineage of inner alchemy (also known as the Yinxian pai 隱仙派 or Youlong pai 猶龍派). Li wrote the *Daoqiong tan* 道窮談, *Sanche bizhi* 三車祕旨, *Jiuceng lianxin fa* 九層鍊心法, *Taishang shisan jing zhuji* 太上十三經注解, and the *Haishan qiyu* 海山奇遇. He also edited the *Zhang Sanfeng quanji* 張三丰全集 (1844) with works attributed to the immortal Zhang Sanfeng, on which see Wong Shiu Hon, *Investigations into the Authenticity of the Chang San-Feng Ch'uan-Chi: The Complete Works of Chang San-Feng*.

⁶⁸¹ Wang Qihuo 汪啟濩 (1839–1917; *hao* Tizhen shanren 體真山人, *zi* Dongting 東亭) hailed from Xiuning 休寧 (Anhui). He studied with a certain master Wu Tianzhi 吳天秩, a disciple of Li Xiyue (Hanxu), thus making Wang a third-generation disciple of the Western Lineage. His own writings include the *Xingming yaozhi* 性命要旨, *Jiaowai biechuan* 教外別傳, *Tizhen xinyi* 體真心易, *Sanjiao yiguan* 三教一貫, *Jindan xuanyao* 金丹玄要, and *Dongting jiyao* 東亭輯要. Further, he compiled the *Daotong dacheng* 道統大成 (1899), a collection of ten inner alchemy scriptures, which is reprinted in the *Zangwai daoshu*. On Wang Dongting, see Hu Fuchen, *Zhonghua daojiao da cidian*, 208; Hudson, "Spreading the Dao," 592.

⁶⁸² Liu Mingrui 劉名瑞 (1839–1931) hailed from Wanping 宛平 county (now Beijing) and was a Quanzhen cleric of the Nanmo 南無 lineage. He was one of Zhao Bichen's teachers. He wrote the *Daoyuan jingwei ge* 道源精微歌 (1888), *Qiaojiao dongzhang* 敲口洞章 (1892), *Yikao jiequan* 易考解詮, and *Nanmo daopai zongpu* 南無道派宗譜. See Goosaert, "Daoists in the Modern Chinese Self-Cultivation Market: The Case of Beijing, 1850–1949."

⁶⁸³ Huang Shang 黃裳 (fl. 1840s; *hao* Yuanji 元吉) was an inner alchemist who hailed from Fengcheng 豐城 (Jiangxi) and was active in the latter half of the nineteenth century in Fushun 富順 (Sichuan), where he established his Leyu tang 樂育堂. He wrote the *Leyu tang yulu* 樂育堂語錄. His writings clearly show influence of Wu's writings. Not to be confused with the Yuan dynasty Jingming master Huang Yuanji.

⁶⁸⁴ Liu Shouyuan 柳守元 wrote the *Tianxian jindan xinfa* 天仙金丹心法 (1813–1815).

朱文彬⁶⁸⁵, and the *Dacheng jieyao* 大成捷要⁶⁸⁶.

One thing we can conclude from Wu's writings is that the inner alchemy masters and their students were not primarily interested in intellectual speculation for its own sake but were very much interested in the technical details of the practice. We can see that in Wu's explanations, but especially also in the questions the students ask, which in large part consist of requests for detailed explanations of how to put the instructions into practice. Inner alchemy texts include the notion of sudden awakening, suggesting that if students succeed in immediately returning to emptiness, they can skip further practice. But inner alchemy is in its core a program of step-based gradual cultivation. It describes a path, a Dao, that leads the adept along a series of intermediate attainments to ultimate salvation. Hence, if we want to understand the inner alchemy teachings of a specific lineage, we need to start by identifying its distinctive formulation of this path.⁶⁸⁷

As I have shown in chapter three, we can find a whole range of different delineations of these stages. But not all of these delineations play the same role or are equally important. The idea of the integrated cultivation of inner nature and lifespan is ultimately based on the binary pair of yin and yang, inner nature and lifespan, and clarifies the whole process as a project in which the adept first secures his physical lifespan (*ming*) so as to assure enough time to cultivate his yang spirit (*xing*) that can ultimately leave the body as an immortal spirit. The three passes divide the process in three stages based on the distinction between the three treasures of essence, *qi*, and spirit. The three accomplishments and the five ranks of immortality signify the different degrees of intermediate attainment. The five periods express each stage as a time period. The fire phases connect each stage with alchemical metaphors. And so on. The oral instructions are the most concrete expression of the stages of cultivation; they are the actual content of the transmission and they describe the actual events that divide the process into steps. They describe the workflow, as it were, the sequence of actions the adept should take and the experiences the adept should have and act upon.

In Wu's lineage, there were twelve of these oral instructions and through them we can follow the inner alchemy cultivation process. After a period of "refining the self," in which the adept maintains sexual abstinence and disciplines his thoughts and behavior, he awaits the (1) "inner sign of the generation of the medicine." This means that the *qi* is activated and therefore now referred to as essence. When this essence starts to move towards the genital area, the adept spontaneously "knows" it and experiences a penile erection. These are the signs of the generation of the medicine and they signify that the adept should take action by beginning the (2) "true work of gathering the medicine." Carefully determining the right moment to intervene, the adept commences meditation as he concentrates his attention in the "cavity of *qi*" in his abdomen. Because spirit and *qi* follow each other, the *qi* will return to the cavity of *qi*. Then, the adept commences the (3) "work of operating the fire." This is a very complex operation which involves the coordinated control of respiration, attention, and the movement of *qi*. The objective is to replenish the original supply of *qi* in the body. This is done by retransforming the essence into *qi* each time when the *qi* transforms into essence. In other words, and in more explicit terms than those used by Wu, each time the adept starts to get aroused, he commences his meditation by focusing on the abdomen and practicing his regulated breathing patterns. After approximately one hundred days, the adept should experience the (4) "sign to stop the fire." The adept will experience a flash of light between his eyebrows and around the same time he will stop having erections.

The adept stops the fire and begins the (5) "work of gathering the great medicine." He enters a state of samadhi, constantly focusing his attention on the middle elixir field. In a span of approximately seven days, he should experience the (6) "sign of obtaining the great medicine." These signs include such things as an intense feeling of warmth in the abdomen and urogenital system, a visual experience of light and an auditory experience of noise, and what seems to be a general pulsating feeling throughout the body. Having obtained the "great medicine," described as a ball of yang *qi* in the abdomen, the adept can prepare for the (7) "work of the three barriers," immediately followed by the (8) "work of ingesting." After closing of his anus with a

⁶⁸⁵ Zhu Wenbin 朱文彬 wrote the *Daoxiangji* 道鄉集.

⁶⁸⁶ The undated and anonymous *Dacheng jieyao* 大成捷要 (before 1929) is a late text of unclear origin. It is sometimes attributed to Liu Huayang, but probably dates from the Republican period (Hudson, "Spreading the Dao," 595).

⁶⁸⁷ Isabelle Robinet argued, in her defense against a critical review of her book by Douglas Wile, that the variety of the actual practices that distinguished specific lineages made it impossible to identify a univocal account of inner alchemy: "Moreover, these physiological aspects assume many varieties, according to diverse schools, sometimes with large discrepancies and sometimes with small ones, so that it is necessary on the physiological level to stick to a single school or interpretation if we want them to make sense. That is why, in writing this particular book, I 'totally eradicated the material base', as indeed many of the *neidan* authors I have studied explicitly do." Robinet, "Response to Douglas Wile's Review," 146. Similarly, though with a different conclusion, I am arguing that, in order to reintroduce the material base, we indeed need to stick to singular interpretations of inner alchemy if we want to make sense of its variety.

cotton-padded wooden seat and closing his nose with a wooden peg, the adept carefully guides the *qi* through a route in the body, leading from the cavity of *qi* downwards, along the spine upwards, through the head, and back to the abdomen. Rather than intentionally guiding the *qi*, the adept should await its spontaneous movement and gently help it along with the force of his spirit. The first objective is to clear this route by letting the *qi* remove the obstructions in the spine and in the head. When the route has been opened up, after the *qi* has travelled through this route for the first time, the adept commences what is called the (9) “principle of maintaining the center.” This means that, during a period of approximately ten months, the adept enters samadhi and lets the *qi* continuously move of its own accord through the route from cavity of *qi* to the heart. Presumably, during these ten months, the adept stays in an ever longer state of samadhi until he can almost continuously stay in this state. As he does this, the yang *qi* transforms the yin spirit in the heart into a yang spirit. This is again accompanied by a series of signs of confirmation. The adept gradually requires less and less food, sleep, and even less breath. The pulses slow down, feelings of drowsiness disappear, and the spirit becomes increasingly clearer. Eventually, the adept acquires the six powers of the spirit, providing him with a range of extraordinary skills.

At a certain moment, when the spirit is completely yang, the adept experiences the (10) “sign to let the spirit exit.” This is again a visual experience, described as a spectacle of snowflakes or flowers falling from the sky. The adept should now commence the (11) “method to let the spirit exit and to collect the spirit.” In the course of approximately three years, the adept trains his spirit to leave the body and roam through space for ever longer durations and over ever longer distances. Eventually, the spirit should be able to travel to the farthest regions of space without the fear of getting lost. When this is accomplished, the adept can choose a suitable moment to finish his grand project by commencing the (12) “principle of refining the spirit and returning it to emptiness.” This signifies that the adept enters in a constant state of samadhi, letting the spirit leave the body for good as it returns to emptiness.

Throughout this process, the adept experiences a series of intermediate attainments. These are described in chapter four. Contrary to the longstanding discussion among scholars over immortality of the body versus immortality of the spirit, the notion of *xian*-hood covers a range of types of immortality, including physical immortality as well as immortality of the spirit. Following the Zhong-Lü texts, Wu distinguishes five basic types of immortals. If the adept should let his spirit exit without having transformed it into a yang spirit, he will become a “ghost immortal.” If he replenishes his supply of *qi*, thereby securing his physical lifespan (*ming*), he becomes a “human immortal.” Only when his sexual function is completely eradicated and an involuntary emission of essence is precluded, he becomes a “terrestrial immortal.” When he has created the yang spirit, he becomes a “spirit immortal.” When he finally leaves his physical body to ascend into space, he becomes a “celestial immortal.”

If an adept is unsuccessful in completing this process in the course of one lifetime, his life ending before having assured immortality, he will experience rebirth. In between death and rebirth, there is a period when the adept dwells in an intermediate state. For the unfortunate adept, there is still a window of opportunity here to make sure that his spirit, or rather he himself as a spirit, ends up in a favorable position for further cultivation. Wu describes the techniques to find another body for the spirit to occupy. The adept of inner alchemy considers salvation, as in Buddhism, something that can be attained in the course of one lifetime or over several lifetimes.

The main natural cause of death was understood to be the exhaustion of *qi*. The main cause for the gradual depletion of *qi* was understood to be the “leakage” of essence. For this reason, replenishment and conservation of *qi* through sexual abstinence was critical to the success of the cultivator. In chapter five, we saw that inner alchemy is based on the same principles as the bedchamber arts and only differs from these in its application of these principles. Even though the objective of the first stage is to transform all essence into *qi*, a beginning cultivator must be in possession of his optimal sexual potency. Virgins can therefore skip stage one and immediately continue with stage two. Those elderly who suffer from sexual dysfunction should take measures in order to restore normal function. Those in between these extremes should first replenish their lost *qi* by observing abstinence and devoted practicing; according to the standard formula, in one year one should be able to compensate the losses of ten years. What the examination in chapter five shows is that, even for so-called “pure” cultivators, sexuality played a crucial role in cultivation and, even though the objective was abstention, in cases of severe sexual dysfunction it could even be advisable to practice sexual stimulation in order to activate the *qi*.

The ultimate objective of inner alchemy is examined in chapter six. It is described in two ways which seem to peacefully coexist in the texts without ever coming into contact. The sequence of intermediate attainments, that is, the model of five types of immortals, suggests that the adept becomes a celestial

immortal that ascends to the heavens and takes up position in the celestial bureaucracy as a celestial official. There is no indication that this image was only used as a strategy to lure the naïve populace with fancy stories in order to slowly prepare them for more sophisticated teachings. Instead, the attainment of celestial immortality was presented as something as real as other phenomena that were never really seen but everybody knew existed, such as the emperor in Beijing or the Jade Emperor in the heavens. The sequence of the three passes and the twelve oral instructions, on the other hand, suggested that the cultivator let his spirit “return to emptiness.” As explored in detail, this “emptiness” was simultaneously cosmological and psychological in nature. Again, these two different ways of describing the final fate of the cultivator coexist without contact and it is not made clear in the texts if and how these stories should be reconciled.