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Introduction

Humans are part of a universe that is older and larger than we can begin to imagine. How did this universe come into being? What led to our earth's existence? How and when did our ancestors evolve? What is our place in the universe?

This Big Era sets the stage for human history. It is about the very beginnings of our environment, of the world we live in, its landscapes, its plants and animals. It is also about the evolutionary steps that led to the existence of our species, *Homo sapiens*. Understanding this era is vital if we are to grasp how human history fits into the larger history of our earth and the universe as a whole. Our ideas about the universe, the earth, and our own existence as a species affect how we think about ourselves and our history; they help us understand our place in the larger universe of which we are a part. This fascinating quest to discover the very roots of humanity has tantalized us for millennia. Since the earliest times, creation myths—stories attempting to explain the origins of our world—have existed in all human societies.

Creation Myths



WHY STUDY CREATION MYTHS?

We all have a need to understand beginnings. People from different ethno-racial backgrounds and religions have rooted themselves in particular understandings of beginnings. One cannot understand the history of the world without understanding different ways in which individuals and groups have perceived the origins of the world. This chapter engages students in a consideration of why an understanding of beginnings is so important to people. In it students will investigate, compare, and contrast different creation myths. Students will consider some of the modern scientific processes and procedures used to judge the validity of different creation myths, including the theory of evolution. Finally, based on their consideration of myths and scientific theories, students will examine what it means to “know” something and the role of theories in understanding the world around them. The content considered in this chapter serves as a foundation for the entire world history course that follows.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completing this chapter, students will be able to:

1. Explain why people possess an intrinsic need to understand the origins of both themselves and the world
2. Compare and contrast features of different creation myths, and analyze how these myths have satisfied the needs of people with different backgrounds to understand the origins of the world
3. Describe the order in which different components of the universe came into existence, according to the Big Bang Theory

4. Analyze the idea that people often understand the world through theories rather than absolute knowledge and that theories are based on the best knowledge available to people at a particular time

TIME AND MATERIALS

- 3 class periods (40 minutes each)
- Markers and/or crayons
- Unlined paper

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Modern science theorizes that the universe appeared quite suddenly about 13 billion years ago. Since humans did not emerge on the scene for another 12,999,750,000 years, there is no first hand account of the world's origins. These origins remain a mystery. This time period, however, set the stage for human existence. Within these nearly 13 billion years the Earth developed, as we know it today, into a planet on which the human race could develop and grow. Modern scientists have extensively investigated the processes that enabled the development of our planet. For our purposes, the actual processes that formed our Earth are not as important as the ways in which these processes have been perceived by humans.

Though people may never “know” with absolute certainty how our world came to be, they will never stop contemplating this question. Beginnings are fundamentally important, and a desire to understand beginnings is fundamentally human. People not only want to know about the beginnings of the world. They also want to know about their own beginnings, that is, their infancy and early childhood. Indeed, historians maintain that it is important to know where we started in order to understand how we have arrived at our present circumstances. Though people cannot know how the world began, this has not stopped them from developing explanations of it.

Throughout the very brief history of human existence, people have developed creation myths in an attempt to understand the world's beginnings. Though individual myths have similarities and differences with one another, all creation myths seek to explain how the world started. Individuals and communities often accept myths as valid explanations of something that has occurred. They accept creation myths because they believe that the myth contains a valid explanation for the ways in which the world came into being. While some myths lose their credibility over time, others continue to maintain adherents who accept them as valid. For example, the historian David Christian calls the theory of evolution the creation myth of the present time. The tenets of this myth, or scientific model, demand that thoughtful individuals apply certain “scientifically acceptable” processes and procedures to an investigation of the world's beginnings. In calling the theory of evolution a modern-day creation myth, Christian does not mean that the theory of evolution is fallacious. Rather, he argues that evolution is the theory that modern people commonly accept as explaining how the world as we know it today was formed.

Modern historians consider the ways in which people representing different societies have perceived the origins of the world. They recognize that throughout their existence human beings have developed myths to explain their origins. While these myths may not accurately explain the world's origins, they do reveal significant information about the ways of life of the people, societies, and civilizations that conceived these myths.

Creation myths typically place individuals, specifically their authors, at the center of creation. Simply put, the central motif of these myths often posits that the universe's creation specifically led to a time and place in which the authors and more generally the societies in which they lived came to exist. These myths typically do not consider the idea that most of the history of the universe has unfolded without any human beings existing in it.

Many world history courses taught in American high schools begin more than twelve billion years after this course begins. Rather than starting with the origins of the universe, these courses typically begin with the paleolithic era, the period of history in which people survived as hunter/gatherers. As such, most history courses lend credence to the perception that people fill *the central role* in the universe. This course, on the other hand, begins with the origins of the universe, since this represents the beginning of time, as we know it. This starting point supports the idea that one cannot truly understand the human role in the universe without understanding the short period of time in which humans have inhabited the earth and the tiny amount of space that the earth occupies in the realm of the universe.



Center of the Orion Nebula

THREE ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Humans and the Environment

Formulate a fundamental question about origins or processes in the natural or physical environment, and construct a non-scientific myth to answer that question. Explain your myth. (For example, develop a myth to explain why earthquakes occur or why certain kinds of trees have leaves in the summer but lose them in the winter.) What factors might make your myth convincing or believable?

Humans and Other Humans

Discuss why creation stories are usually concerned with relationships between humans and supernatural beings. What attitudes and actions may characterize those relationships? (For example, what sort of relationship develops between God on the one hand and Adam and Eve on the other in Chapter 2 of the Book of Genesis in the Bible?)

Humans and Ideas

Construct a poster, graphic illustration, or brief PowerPoint presentation that explains Darwin's theory of natural selection. Try to communicate this idea with few words or none at all.

KEY THEMES

This chapter emphasizes the following historical themes:

Key Theme 5: Expressing Identity

Key Theme 6: Science, Technology, and the Environment

Key Theme 7: Spiritual Life and Moral Codes

INSTRUCTIONAL RESOURCES

Barrow, John D. *The Origin of the Universe*. New York: Basic Books, 1994. This book considers numerous speculative theories and myths relating to the origins of time, space, and matter.

Brockway, Robert W. *Myth from the Ice Age to Mickey Mouse*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993.

Christian, David. "Creation Myths." *Berkshire Encyclopedia of World History*. Great Barrington, MA: Berkshire Publishing Group, 2005.

Christian, David. "World History in Context." *Journal of World History* 14 (December 2003): 437–458. This text presents world history on an unprecedented scale, stretching from the beginnings of time to present day. The author relies on knowledge gleaned from numerous disciplines to explain historical events.

Dorson, Richard M., ed. *African Folklore*. Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1972.

Encyclopedia Mythica. www.pantheon.org.

Hawking, Stephen. *A Brief History of Time: The Updated and Expanded Tenth Anniversary Edition*. New York: Bantam, 1996. The author of this text, which considers the fundamental questions of science in laymen's terms, is considered one of the world's greatest theoretical physicists.

Sproul, Barbara. *Primal Myths: Creation Myths around the World*. New York: Harper Collins, 1991. An anthology of creation myths.

LESSON 1

Creation Myths

1. In groups of two or more, asks students to use available dictionaries to define the words “myth,” “fable,” and “scientific.” After students have completed defining these terms, reconvene the class. Lead a discussion in which students consider the meanings of these three words. Help students understand that while both fables and myths teach important ideas, fables are typically accepted as fallacies. Myths, on the other hand, are typically accepted as factual depictions of something by some group of people at some point in time, even though people outside that group may regard them as fables. For example, even though some people consider the first two chapters of Genesis as a fable, others accept it as a scientific account of origins. Urge students to consider the difference between a myth and something that is scientific. In order to help students understand the difference between “myth” and “scientific,” explain that while “scientific” requires observations through the senses, myths are ideas that people accept primarily because of belief rather than hard evidence. Ask students what they think the term “scientific story” means. Stories that are based on empirical observations might be called “scientific stories.” As a challenge, ask students if they think that scientific knowledge can ever become myth.
2. Ask students to form groups of two or three and read the worksheet titled “A Creation Myth from the Yoruba People of West Africa.” In their groups, students should answer the questions that follow the summary of this traditional creation myth. After students have answered these questions, reconvene the class. Tell students that approximately twenty-eight million Yoruba-speaking people live in Nigeria in West Africa. Today most Yoruba people are Christian and Muslim, but this myth stems from their ancient history. Invite students to share their answers aloud.
3. Now ask students to return to their groups and read the worksheet entitled “A Babylonian Creation Myth.” Students should answer the questions that follow this excerpt. Then, reconvene the class, and invite students to share their answers. Ask students if they think the traditional Babylonian myth accurately describes creation processes. Students will likely agree that these myths do not contain accurate depictions. Ask students why they think that people might have accepted these stories as accurate depictions of the world’s creation at one point in time. Encourage them to support their opinions. During this discussion, point out that while the Yoruba creation myth explains the way in which the entire Earth became populated, the Babylonian creation myth limits its explanation to Babylonia.
4. Now ask students to return to their groups and read the worksheet titled “A Story of Creation as Depicted in Genesis.” Students should answer the questions that follow this excerpt. Reconvene the class, and invite students to share their answers.

Ask students if they can prove that the ideas in this text are true. Ask if they can prove that the ideas in this text are false. Urge students to support their opinions.

5. Pose the following statement to students. “Only simple-minded people would develop a myth about creation.” It would be best to write the statement on the board. Tell students who agree with this statement to go to one side of the room. Students who disagree with the statement should go to the other side of the room. Once students have gone to their chosen side of the room, inform them that the class is going to hold a debate. Ask each group to develop an argument, sharing their perspective. After students have developed these arguments, reconvene the class. Invite each group to present their argument to the class. Once both groups have presented their arguments, encourage students to challenge one another by asking probing questions. During this debate, students will hopefully examine the idea that ancient people developed creation myths using the knowledge that they possessed at the time. Both the time and place in which they lived constrained their knowledge. If students do not raise these ideas on their own, lead them to these ideas by facilitating the debate. (Note: If either group is too large to develop one argument, ask the group to break into two groups. Each group should then develop its own argument. If no students go to one side of the room, challenge a few of your students with good critical-thinking skills to develop an argument for that side of the room, even if they do not agree with it.)
6. Ask students if they think that the authors of these creation myths necessarily believed in their historical truth. Encourage students to consider the fact that the authors might have intended these myths to be interpreted symbolically. Ask students to contemplate the reasons that creation myths typically attributed the beginning of the world to one or more gods. Ancient people realized that they could not have created the world. Therefore, they decided that a power superior to themselves must have created it. At the same time, people saw themselves as the center of creation, perhaps because they knew the world from their own perspective. They formed a theory based upon their own knowledge and reasoning skills. In other words, these authors might have recognized that they could not know how the universe came to exist. However, they desperately wanted to explain it. Therefore, they developed these myths.
7. Urge students to reflect on the lessons that might be learned from these myths, even if the myths lack historical accuracy. Point out that just as poetry often uses symbolic language, so do creation myths. For example, the last line of the Babylonian creation myth in Student Handout 3.1.2 states, “Marduk established Babylon as his own residence.” Ask students if they think that ancient Babylonians truly believed that Marduk was one of their neighbors. Encourage them to consider what this sentence might mean, if it does not mean that Marduk actually lived in Babylon. Students should recognize that the authors believed in the central position that people held in the universe. Ask students why they think that myth writers might have written ideas that they did not intend to be construed literally. Help them understand that these

writers might have used the language that they were most familiar with to explain very difficult ideas. For example, even if the authors did not believe that gods had human form, they did not know how to describe the gods without attributing human form to them. Consequently, they attributed human form to the gods in a symbolic manner. Students should understand that some people actually accepted the historical accuracy of creation myths. These people did not recognize symbolic messages of creation myths; they thought that the ideas contained in the myths should be accepted literally.

8. Now, ask students if they can think of any questions that they would ask the authors of any of these creation myths if they could speak to them. (For example: “Do you *really* believe this stuff?”) Perhaps one or more students will ask about the origins of the gods discussed in these different myths. If no students raise this question, raise it for them. While these creation myths explain how the world came into being, they do not explain how gods came into being. Help students understand that people who accept religious myths might believe that one or multiple gods have always existed; therefore, they do not have to consider the origins of gods. However, non-religious people sometimes raise this origins question as problematic and perhaps believe that no good answer exists.



Planet Earth