

Where It All Began

An Inductive Study of Genesis

A FEW WORDS ABOUT CREATION MYTHS

As you may recall from class, a **myth** is properly understood not as a 'mere fiction,' a fairy tale, or a false scientific theory, but rather as a symbolic and metaphorical way of conceptualizing the most important aspects of life and of our place in the universe. To call an account a 'myth' is not to call it untrue, but rather to flag the fact that the kind of truth it contains may be of a deeper sort than it might, at first, appear. Myth is an artistic, symbolic, and poetic way of conveying some truth about human experience. A myth involves a **worldview** – an understanding of what is real and what existence is all about, conveyed symbolically in terms that are familiar, simple, and easily accessible to human beings. The images of myth, while often supernatural, are 'homey' images, so to speak; they are the images and concepts, emotions and items of the familiar, lived-in world 'transplanted' into the realm of the divine. In a myth, a culture's conception of the nature of Reality itself and of the sacred is expressed and given life through concrete *images* -- images which are usually (though not always) conveyed in **story**.

All good mythologies start with a **creation story** or some similar sort of account of the origin of the universe we inhabit. It is in the creation narrative that the clearest and most elemental imagery about the nature of the universe, as it is conceived by a people in its collective **experience**, is given. A culture's way of understanding the 'big' issues of human life {God, the world, the soul} is symbolically communicated in its creation account. How does a people conceive of God? What is the purpose of human life? What happens to us after we die? Do we possess free will? These and other fundamental questions (the 'biggies,' you might say) are the stuff of the creation myths. The creation myth addresses matters of what Protestant theologian Paul Tillich calls 'Ultimate Concern' – each creation myth we encounter testifies to a particular way of experiencing the Divine

(the Reality that we, as Christians, know as God).

Why spend our time dealing in myths, you might ask? Would we not do better simply to say what we mean, and mean what we say? Well, perhaps. But consider this: the form of language that we use can drastically influence the way we interpret the message we are trying to convey. We tend to take very literally the things we express in simple prose or 'plain talk.' The power of reason and of language can often seem unlimited. When the subject matter is that of God, the Absolute Source and Origin of the universe, using plain talk without the aid of myth can trick us into thinking we have 'gotten the whole story,' (or at least, 'gotten the story wholly'). We can easily be fooled into thinking that by our ideas we 'understand' more about God than is humanly possible, forgetting that God is **BEYOND** all human concepts and that we only "see through a glass darkly" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

So, what can the likes of Thor and Apollo, Vesta and Aten, Marduk and Izanami no Mikoto do for our lives, you ask? I answer that they can give us several things. Joseph Campbell, the well-known professor of Comparative Mythology and author, emphasizes that myths provide valuable lessons about the **human condition**, about our psychology, our universal human spiritual quest, and our human experience as the finite sons and daughters of the Infinite God. In story, these universal constants of human life are brought to life for us in a very experiential way and we learn about *ourselves*.

Secondly, I suggest that like the moral of a story, the **principles** underlying the images of myth (the **worldview** brought to life within the myth) can be illuminating for us today. By studying the **ontology** (i.e. the **principles**) of the myth, we come to see the universal elements of reality (God/the Divine, the world, the human being) reflected in the slightly different light of the various narrative 'mirrors.' Like a profusion of so many windows on

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reality, we can see **beneath** the stories and the characters they contain a level of truth in which we **can** believe. The principles underlying mythological stories afford us the enriched perspective of a multiplicity of lenses through which we might catch a glimpse of God ...

Lastly, our understanding of our own foundational narrative – the Bible – can only be **deepened** by familiarity with the similarities and differences that our story has with the stories of other people, other times, and other places. Holy Scripture is opened up in a truly amazing way when we see that many (and I mean *many!*) of its most important themes, images, symbols and lessons appear across cultures and across time within the corpus of pre-Christian, pagan, and non-Christian mythology. (To cite just a few good examples of this: resurrection/rebirth into new life, baptism, meals of Holy Communion in which the god is taken into one's being, virgin birth, various forms of incarnation, battles of the Last Days, monotheism, etc., etc.)

When we are dealing in story, in narrative, we are keenly aware that we are not simply engaged in 'plain talk.' When we examine the foundational myths of other cultures and ancient peoples, we are less inclined to believe the stories literally, we are more apt to seek and to find the truths and experiences which these stories symbolically embody. We are thus more prepared to recognize the layers of symbolism and metaphor (the **universal**

Questions

1. The Shinto creation story (in its several variations) gives an account of the origin of the world beginning with the birth of the gods. By what act is this process begun? Do you see a **principle** that the Shinto account of creation has in common with the Genesis account?
2. In the Shinto creation myth, the Creator gods are one male and one female, whereas the God of the Bible is said to be *beyond* male and female (though often referred to as 'He.')

principles) at work in our Holy Scriptures. For most Christians, **our story**, the Bible, is **the** story, the best or fullest story, the very Word of God. For many it is literally and historically true. But how AWESOME then is our God Who has **built the world** and inspired Holy Scripture **so as to contain** the very symbols of His Majesty which appear in the myths of so many non-Christian cultures!

When we look at a myth **philosophically**, we need to pay attention to the way the images presented in the creed or story express **principles** which describe reality in particular way. For example, we might look at a creation myth and ask whether God/the Absolute/Being Itself is depicted being Many or One? If God is One, whence comes the multiplicity of things that comprise the universe (including you and me)? Does the myth show the Divine as incarnated in any way in a particular being or beings? Is God/the Divine depicted as Unchanging or as subject to change? What is the origin of evil in the world and how is it related to God?

Throughout our study of Genesis, we will explore some of the difference and similarities between "our story" and the creation stories of other ancient and modern cultures. It is our hope that through this comparison and contrasting, you will come to see more of the **comprehensiveness** of the Genesis account (I would indeed go so far as to say that there is not a perspective present in mythology which is not somehow present in the Book of Genesis). Truly, our God is an Awesome God!