



UNION

Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

The Creation of Earth and the Art of Storytelling: An Analysis of Ancient World Stories, Beliefs, and Practices

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Unit Title: Beliefs in the Ancient World

Lesson Title: Creation Stories in the Ancient World

Abstract:

This is a lesson that combines small-group work, independent writing, and whole-class discussion. You may extend it through as many days as you see fit. The primary focus of this specific lesson is on the art of storytelling using historical narratives. The lesson is going to be an introduction to religion, using mythology as a window, with an emphasis on the three ancient civilizations we will focus on this year: Mesopotamia, Mesoamerica (Aztec and Maya) and Ancient Africa (Egyptians). This lesson is designed to be done independently in the Social Studies/History classroom, or collaboratively along with Technology, Art and English. The lesson is also designed to have a choose-your-own-ending. The teacher may choose to end the lesson with a group project or an independent project.

Curricular and School Context:

This lesson is written for a 6th grade Social Studies class (75 minutes) on a block rotation schedule at a private independent school. Social Studies in 5th and 6th grade is the foundational stepping stone for further historical learning in later years. It is designed to provide the foundation of world geographic knowledge necessary for our students to understand the concept of “place,” and develop an appreciation for the planet, and the interconnections therein. Students explore in 5th grade the physical components of geography. This will include the study of different types of maps, land-forms, bodies of water, capitals and political boundaries. 6th grade is an expansion of geography to include human systems and the nuts and bolts of “civilizations.” We will also discuss transcontinental exchanges and processes following the G.R.A.P.E.S acronym (Geography, Religion, Art/Architecture/Political structure, Economics, Social structures) to establish, what makes a civilization? What makes a civilization thrive? What makes a civilization fall? The primary focus will be ancient civilizations, but we will also explore several modern indigenous communities throughout the world.

Teaching Goals/Reflections of Lesson:

- Connecting the year's focus: *ancient civilizations* with the concept of religion.
- Mythology is a great window into religious views for younger students.
- Students will uncover themes and ideas from three different texts and through small-group discussions, and citing textual evidence, they will compare and contrast these themes. The lasting questions I want the students to leave the lesson with are: Why do groups of humans create stories such as these? What are they trying to explain? How do storytelling and mythology play a crucial role in the history and culture of a people? Students will begin recognizing themes that are presented through religious and cultural stories portraying how humans interpret often empirically unanswerable questions (depending on time frame), and how these stories relate to a broader sense of culture and identity for these ancient peoples.

Assessment/Learning Outcome:

- Group project: retelling a myth through active storytelling.
- OR
- Independent research assignment creating a story book of a creation myth.

Skills:

- Public speaking
- Source evaluation
- Collaboration
- Shared dialogue and active listening.
- Independent Investigation Skills/Research
- Writing/Note-taking

Prior lesson/knowledge:

- What is the word God/s referring to in ancient mythology?
- What do monotheism, polytheism and henotheism mean?
- What ancient civilizations will we be covering this year?
- What is a myth?

Lesson 1-3 Days/Classes:

Lesson Objective(s):

Immediate Goals:

Students will evaluate three creation stories from three ancient civilizations, identify themes, and discuss reactions and meaning in small groups. Each group will rotate together to three tables to observe three different creation stories. Students will be expected to record their reactions on a worksheet below, and complete either an independent project or group project to follow.

Big-picture Goals:

This lesson is introduced before our World Religion unit. Students will begin recognizing themes that are presented through religious stories about the human interpretation of often empirically unanswerable questions (depending on time frame), and how these stories relate to a broader sense of culture and identity for these ancient peoples.

Guiding Questions:

- What themes do you see across each story?
- What pieces of each story are unique?
- What images do they create in your head?
- What mood/feelings do they instill?
- Why do groups of people have stories like these? What are they trying to explain?

Lesson Set-up:

3 table groups arranged in room.

(1 - Sumerians - Mesopotamia 2 - Maya from Mesoamerica 3 - Egyptians - Ancient Egypt, Africa)

On each table:

- 4 (depending on student number) laminated pages per table describing the creation story for each (coffee stain it, add some creative flare, maybe some hieroglyphs or cuneiform.) *Laminating allows the students to annotate using Expo pens and they can erase them before rotating with whiteboard cleaner and cloth.*
- Several images of interpretations of these practices.

Links, Worksheets, Websites:

Readings 1, 2, 3 (located below lesson plans)

Independent Worksheet: Worksheet for Recording Themes (located below lesson plans)

Websites/literature:

Located in Works Cited below.

- 3 additional artifacts or items to add to the experience.
- 1 map of the ancient geographic area and 1 map of the modern day area.

Launching the Lesson:

Opening:

The teacher should begin by reading an example of a creation story in an animated and elaborate way using props, Google slide images and physical actions. (Bonus ambient addition: I've found the use of dim lights, electric candles, and the "Fireplace video without music" on Netflix really adds a special touch for story reading.)

Chosen Creation Story:

"A Dictionary of Creation Myths." Google Books,
books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=vetARxZS-bMC&oi=fnd&pg=PA1&dq=info%3AhcvfEVRhX4MJ%3Ascholar.google.com%2F&ots=ehC80Ca8FJ&sig=8RCpMB2W-UF87xK0wTO2XtZjr24#v=onepage&q&f=false

Pre-lesson Discussion Points:

- **What is a Myth?** - The word "myth" can be often controversial when describing stories that many people believe to be true. *You can use call on students to help define this.*
- **Who is Telling Whose Story?** -Historical recitings may change or be modified, or interpreted differently depending on who writes and interprets it.
- **Ancient Civilization/s** - this term is often used to describe a grouping of many separately established communities who shared a similar geographic region, but often were very different in a lot of ways.

Instructions/Directions: (~5-7 minutes)

- Teacher pre-arranges groups into 4's
Each group has 2 readers who rotate and 2 note-takers.
- Groups should discuss after reading their stories the themes from the story and further reactions to it.
- All should record their findings on their own worksheet.
- Rotate groups every 7-10 minutes to each table.

Activity One (~30 minutes): Table Rotations - Reading Creation Stories and Writing down Themes.

The teacher should float and listen to the group discussion, taking notes on each student's interactions and thoughts.

Activity Two/Closing (~15 minutes): Whole Group Discussion of Themes

The class comes back together as a whole to discuss their findings and various themes. The teacher can fill out a larger version of the same form using a document reader.

Teacher uses Guiding Questions to continue discussion and records on the board.

Guiding Questions:

- What themes do you see across each story?
- What pieces of each story are unique?
- What images do they create in your head?
- What mood/feelings do they instill?
- Why do groups of people have stories like these? What are they trying to explain?

Additional Closing Teacher Discussion Points:

- Most belief systems about life contain a body of traditionally sacred written, orally told or sung stories that are believed to express profound truth and answers to questions.
- Storytelling preserves culture, heritage and family traditions.
- Myths help answer hard-to-answer questions before scientific discoveries and technology.
- There are a lot of unknowns that still exist today.
- Storytelling was also a form of entertainment.

Next Lesson/s:

Group Project:

Each group will now be assigned their creation story (from below or choose new ones) that they must expand and present to the class.

The teacher will offer students a menu of options on how to present their stories (with an emphasis on active storytelling):

1. Google Slides
2. *Skit/Play. *depends on the content
3. iMovie/documentary with narration
4. Live news report or podcast (with sound effects).
5. Let students decide a new idea!

Independent Project:

Each student will be given a set of (pre-reviewed) creation stories ranging all over the world, and will recreate their own storybook to retell this myth. This would be a good way to practice storytelling and paraphrasing.

Extension 1: Students could develop their own myth about how something came to be, by examining Aesop's Fables or various other sources selected by the teacher. This is a good opportunity to practice MLA Format and writing skills.

Extension 2: Students could translate their story into a picture book with images/ pictographs.

Extension 3: Students could use non-firing molding clay and develop their own "tablets" with pictographs and/or small English sentences depicting their stories.

Extension 4: Survey the history of pigment and paint (this could be a cross-collaborative effort with the Art teacher) and demonstrate how spices, herbs, burnt wood, etc. were used to create the first stories on cave walls. Recommended to Amazon order natural-toned oil pastels as well, to have students retell their myth on construction paper as though it were prehistoric cave art.

Project Material Ideas: Construction paper, oil pastels, tumeric and paprika powder with water, burnt wood/charcoal pencils, coffee-stain paper to design an ancient scroll, any creative result the students want to explore.

Vocabulary:

Students may want to keep a **word bank** of new words they encounter

- Myths and mythology (*potential discussion: is this an appropriate*

Differentiation:

When designing your groups, make sure to balance out reading levels, along with students who are outspoken with those who are more quiet.

Assigning roles/jobs for each group member insures they are all

<p><i>word to use for “discontinued” religious practices and beliefs?)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>God/s - the answer is going to be difficult to maneuver, it is important to evaluate this deeply and explain to students that the answer is fluid, and is dependent on the belief system in question. I aim to present the concept of a “God” as a force/forces throughout everything that exists in the universe which may or may not have human characteristics and may or may not exchange or interact through different channels with humans, wildlife, and animals. The concept of God can be translated through multiple Gods, one God, or spirits and prophets who act on behalf of the God/s, depending on the belief system. Words associated with God/s: Powerful. All-knowing. Omniscient. Universal. All.</i> • Any words in footnotes of readings below. 	<p>participating. Lastly, make a Self/Peer Evaluation on a Google Form for students to complete so they evaluate themselves and what it was like working with their partners.</p>
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Works Cited

“A Dictionary of Creation Myths (Oxford Paperback Reference S).” Amazon, Amazon, 25 Jan. 1996, www.amazon.com/Dictionary-Creation-Oxford-Paperback-Reference/dp/0195102754.

Ancient History Encyclopedia, Ancient History Encyclopedia, www.ancient.edu.

Dalley, Stephanie. *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others*. W. Ross MacDonald School Resource Services Library, 2009.

“What Is A Myth?” *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, www.pbs.org/mythsandheroes/myths_what.html.

Mesopotamian Creation Story

According to the Mesopotamian creation myth, the *Enuma Elish*, (meaning, 'When on High') life began after an epic struggle between the elder gods and the younger. In the beginning there was only water swirling in chaos and undifferentiated¹ between fresh and bitter. These waters separated into two distinct principles: the male principle, Apsu, which was fresh water and the female principle, Tiamat, salt water. From the union of these two principles all the other gods came into being.

These younger gods were so loud in their daily concourse² with each other that they came to annoy the elders, especially Apsu, and, on the advice of his Vizier, he decided to kill them. Tiamat, however, was shocked at Apsu's plot and warned one of her sons, Ea, the god of wisdom and intelligence. With the help of his brothers and sisters, Ea put Apsu to sleep and then killed him. Out of the corpse of Apsu, Ea created the earth and built his home (though, in later myths, 'the Apsu' came to mean the watery home of the gods or the realm of the gods).

Tiamat, upset now over Apsu's death, raised the forces of chaos to destroy her children herself. Ea and his siblings fought against Tiamat and her allies, her champion, Quingu, the forces of chaos and Tiamat's creatures, without success until, from among them, rose the great storm god Marduk. Marduk swore he would defeat Tiamat if the gods would proclaim him their king. This agreed to, he entered into battle with Tiamat, killed her and, from her body, created the sky. He then continued on with the act of creation to make human beings from the remains of Quingu as help-mates to the gods.

¹ Undifferentiated - not different.

² Concourse - a crowd or assembly of people.

Mayan Creation Story

Before explaining the Maya creation myths, it is important to understand the difference between the two sources from which the Maya creation stories have been found. These sources include the *Popol Vuh* and the Books of *Chilam Balam*. The *Popol Vuh* is associated with the highland Maya of what is today Guatemala. It contains text about human creation, prophecies, and traditional myths and histories. The Books of *Chilam Balam* are normally associated with the lowland Maya of the Yucatán area of Mexico.

For the Maya the creation of the earth is said to have been a deed of Huracán, the wind and sky god. The sky and earth connected, which left no space for any beings or vegetation to grow. In order to make space, a Ceiba tree was planted. The tree grew roots in all the levels of the underworld and its branches grew into the upper world. The tree trunk grew to leave space on earth for animals, plants, and humans. According to Maya belief, animals and plants were extant³ before humans. The gods were not satisfied with only the animals because they could not speak to honor them. From there, humans were made in order to honor the gods.

The Many Epochs of the Maya

According to Maya texts, thus far, there have been three creations. Two of these creations have ended, or in other words, the creatures have been destroyed. There are many variations of the three creations. Some have been influenced by Christianity; however, the basic events of the creations are detailed in the following explanation from the *Popol Vuh* of the highland Maya.

Built from Mud - The first creation saw the people who were made of mud. The mud people were not the most productive as many were not able to think in the capacity that modern-day humans do, and according to Maya sacred texts, these humans “spoke but had no mind.” They could not move because they were made of mud and they also were not technically mortal. The gods were not happy with their first creation, so they destroyed the mud people with water.

Built from Wood - For the second creation, the deities made men from wood and women from reeds. These people could function as humans do, but had no souls and did not honor the gods. They were also immortal. When they died, they only remained dead for three days and would rise from the dead. The destruction of the tree men and reed women was caused by an inundation⁴ of boiling hot water. The few who may have survived this apocalypse are thought to have become the monkeys that exist today.

Built from Maize -The third creation saw the birth of modern-day humans. These humans are made of white and yellow maize⁵ dough and the blood of the gods. The first humans were four men

³ Extant - still in existence; surviving.

⁴ Inundation - flooding.

⁵ Maize - known as corn, is a cereal grain first domesticated by indigenous peoples in southern Mexico about 10,000 years ago.

and four women. These men and women were deemed too wise by the gods. The Maya deities believed these intelligent humans were a threat to their authority and almost destroyed them as well. However, Heart of Heaven (also known as Huracán, but in the creation story he is the Heart of Heaven, Heart of Earth, or Heart of Sky) clouded their minds and eyes so that they would become less wise.

The most important concept to understand about Maya religious belief is that time and other creation of humans are thought to be cyclical.

The different Maya groups believe in a variety of creation myths. The most important concept to understand about Maya religious belief is that time and the creation of humans are thought to be cyclical. This means that some Maya believe that contemporary⁶ humans will be destroyed and another creation is imminent. However, this does not necessarily equate to the popularized notions that the Maya believed in an “end of the world” event. Belief in the end of humanity isn’t the end of the world, it is the end of an era and, perhaps, the beginning of a new epoch of the gods. The gods destroyed the different versions of “humans” because they either could not or would not worship their creators. This is a crucial consideration for the gods. They could not afford to have creations which were unworthy and incapable of providing sustenance to the gods.

⁶ Contemporary - living or occurring at the same time.

Ancient Egyptian Creation Story

The gods of ancient Egypt were seen as the lords of creation and custodians of order but also as familiar friends who were interested in helping and guiding the people of the land. The gods had created order out of chaos and given the people the most beautiful land on earth. Egyptians were so deeply attached to their homeland that they shunned prolonged military campaigns beyond their borders for fear they would die on foreign soil and would not be given the proper rites for their continued journey after life. Egyptian monarchs⁷ refused to give their daughters in marriage to foreign rulers for the same reason. The gods of Egypt had blessed the land with their special favor, and the people were expected to honor them as great and kind benefactors⁸.

Long ago, they believed, there had been nothing but the dark swirling waters of chaos stretching into eternity. Out of this chaos (*Nu*) rose the primordial⁹ hill, known as the Ben-Ben, upon which stood the great god Atum (some versions say the god was Ptah) in the presence of Heka. Atum looked upon the nothingness and recognized his aloneness, and so he mated with his own shadow to give birth to two children, Shu (god of air, whom Atum spat out) and Tefnut (goddess of moisture, whom Atum [regurgitated¹⁰] out). Shu gave to the early world the principles of life while Tefnut contributed the principles of order. Leaving their father on the Ben-Ben, they set out to establish the world.

In time, Atum became concerned because his children were gone so long, and so he removed his eye and sent it in search of them. While his eye was gone, Atum sat alone on the hill in the midst of chaos and contemplated eternity. Shu and Tefnut returned with the eye of Atum (later associated with the Udjat eye, the Eye of Ra, or the All-Seeing Eye) and their father, grateful for their safe return, shed tears of joy. These tears, dropping onto the dark, fertile earth of the Ben-Ben, gave birth to men and women.

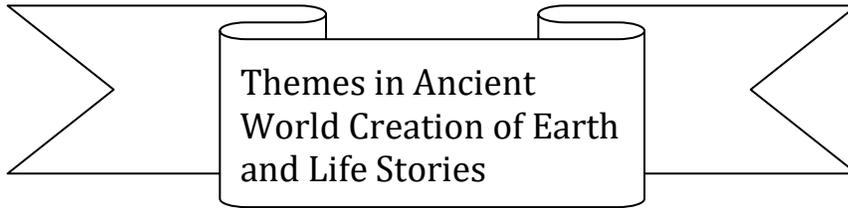
These humans had nowhere to live, however, and so Shu and Tefnut gave birth to Geb (the earth) and Nut (the sky). Geb and Nut, though brother and sister, fell deeply in love and were inseparable. Atum found their behaviour unacceptable and pushed Nut away from Geb, high up into the heavens. The two were forever able to see each other but were no longer able to [connect]. Nut, however, eventually gave birth to Osiris, Isis, Set, Nephthys, and Horus – the five Egyptian gods most often recognized as the earliest (although Hathor is now considered to be older than Isis). These gods then gave birth to all the other gods in one form or another.

⁷ Monarchs - a sovereign head of state, especially a king, queen, or emperor.

⁸ Benefactors - a person who gives money or other help to a person or cause.

⁹ Primordial - existing at or from the beginning of time

¹⁰ Regurgitate - bring (swallowed food) up again to the mouth.



Themes in Ancient
World Creation of Earth
and Life Stories

Name:

Class:

Date due:

Directions: Take turns reading the creation story at your table. Discuss your reactions as a group but complete your own answers on your worksheet based on your own interpretation. Use evidence from the text to answer the following questions in your own words. Write in complete sentences.

Creation Story #1: _____

- How was the earth created?
- How were humans created?
- How were animals and nature created?
- What was the relationship between the God/s and nature?
- What was the relationship between God/s and human beings?

Creation Story #2: _____

- How was the earth created?
- How were humans created?
- How were animals and nature created?
- What was the relationship between the God/s and nature?
- What was the relationship between God/s and human beings?

Creation Story #3: _____

- How was the earth created?
- How were humans created?
- How were animals and nature created?
- What was the relationship between the God/s and nature?
- What was the relationship between God/s and human beings?

Name:

Class:

Date:

Table of Themes

Themes	Mesopotamian	Mayan	Ancient Egyptian
Natural Elements			
God/s and Spirits			
Challenges and Conflict			
Other Themes			
Other Themes			