

Conveying profound truths through metaphor, symbolism, and history, creation myths provide elaborate accounts of how the world began and how people came to inhabit it. Nearly all known religious texts offer perspectives on how humanity's primeval entity has evolved. Some people, however, have accepted these metaphors as fact, denying scientific evidence of evolution and replacing it with stories manipulated by man. Since most creation myths develop in oral tradition and are passed down from one generation to the next, these stories have arisen through man's desire to understand his origins from the unrecorded beginnings of history.

In the analysis of these creation myths, it becomes quite clear that the tales and interpretations have undeniable parallels to one another; many patterns exist in the myths, indicating a similar root that can be traced throughout humanity. Perhaps the connections exist because of man's conflict with his position in the world: he does not want to be dictated by history. Because man is constantly searching to assume a role he cannot seem to obtain, he creates his identity. Moreover, man creates an identity for all life that inhabits planet Earth and a symbolic portrayal of how the human race has developed. Creation myths serve to show man's rejection of scientific evidence, for without these stories, he would be unable to explain how life began. Because the emergence of humans dates back 4.4 million years ago to the time of the *Ardipithecus ramidus* and has no documentation, it can be deduced that any story may possess truth. Man, in a quest to answer his questions on the origin of the human race, has often sought creation myths as a way to compensate for the scarcity of factual evidence on how the world was formed (Gardner, "Human Evolution").

Creation myths exist in many forms, one of which is called "Creation from Chaos." In this form of mythology, the creator uses material found within a shapeless void to form Earth. "Creation from Chaos" myths are primarily male oriented, and are spontaneous in nature. The ambiguity of these myths can be found in most forms of creation stories, and has the capacity of transcending all levels of scientific reasoning and "rational thinking." Two examples of "Creation from Chaos" myths are Genesis 1-2:3, from the Old Testament, and "Making the World and Man," a Swahili creation story. Both creation myths portray God (or, in the case of the Swahili creation myth, Allah) ordering the universe. According to both myths, life on earth exists as a result of the creator's commands. Having fashioned everything he desired, the creator then proceeds to separate opposite elements and cause them to bring creatures into being.

An example of two opposite elements depicted in both myths is light and darkness. In the Old Testament, God first created light for the planet Earth, a prevalent symbol of enlightenment and benevolence in many stories and traditions throughout human history. Light is referenced in the following lines: "And God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day" (Sproul, 123). In the Old Testament, God created light and thus brought daytime into being. Daytime represents idealism and innocence, when all is visible and unconcealed. Hence, nighttime represents all that is real, implying that man should seek light in order to remain innocent and protected by God's enlightenment. The stark—and quite often dangerous—reality that exists beyond the fantastical depictions of life in the Old Testament represents the world without God's gift of light. Making connections to pervasively influential metaphors throughout literature, it can be deduced that God's declaration that there shall be light plays out in the way humans differentiate between good and bad. Man uses the metaphor of light on earth to signify the innocence and idealism with which he wishes to be portrayed.

The Swahili creation story, “Making the World and Man,” describes God ordering the universe and commanding his archangels in order to create a dynamic world. Similar to Genesis, “Making the World and Man” provides an explanation of how God separated light and darkness:

“... God said: ‘Let there be light!’ And there was light. God took a fistful of this light and shone it in His hand. Then He said; ‘I am pleased with you, my light, I will make out of you the prophet Mohammed (May God pray for him and give him peace), He loved it so much that He decided to create mankind so that He might send Mohammed to it as His messenger to bring His word to Earth. His word would teach the peoples of the earth the distinction between Good and Evil, and in the end God would judge all the souls and reward those who had chosen to follow the Good Messenger, and reject the others.’” (Knappert, 14-24)

The separation of light and dark in this myth is a symbolic portrayal of the distinction between what is perceived to be good and what is perceived to be bad, although not deliberately conveyed. It can be deduced, however, that because God used light to create the prophet Mohammed, light remains an important symbol for knowledge and benevolence in this creation myth. The message many religions share from these lines is for God to send light to shine down on His people, metaphorically representing God lending His compassion and kindness to Earth. “Making the World and Man” and Genesis 1-2:3, two creation stories subject to manipulation by man, use light as a source of knowledge and goodness. The metaphor of the heavens shining light upon Earth also suggests man’s desire to elevate his status and to earn the entitlement to the land he inhabits. The symbol of light many religions have woven into their creation myths proves man’s desire to find spiritual significance in his life by seeking God’s enlightenment. Thus, God’s gift of light manifests itself in the actions of earth’s inhabitants.

Both Genesis 2:4-23 and “Making the World and Man” depict a heavenly oasis suited for humans (as opposed to deities). These places might have been written about in an attempt to fulfill the god-like role humans desire to assume. Genesis describes the Garden of Eden, which God planted at the head of the Persian Gulf, an area well known for its fertile, silt-enriched soil:

“... the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the Lord God made to grow the very tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil... The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.’” (Sproul, 126)

In this excerpt, the Garden of Eden seems to serve as a barrier between reality and God’s idealism. Perhaps the tree of the knowledge of good and evil represents reality, a realm to which no god desires his people to travel. God wanted Adam, the first human he created to live in the Garden of Eden, to remain innocent, thereby allowing God to justify his actions. God seems to be acting as a puppet master in this creation myth, toying around with his human subjects and predetermining their fates. Humans might have sought to describe this manipulation as a way to create a sense of order within civilization. In the construction of a metaphorical kingdom of

heaven and earth, humans have sought creation myths. Thus, man finds significance in civilization by providing it with a reason to function.

“Making the World and Man” provides another example of an oasis humans have sought. God creates the Garden of Delights for “good souls” in this myth, giving humans a higher level of existence to attain, even if it actually cannot be reached. The imagery and possibility of its being is a reason for humans to seek significance in their lives. Additionally, the Garden of Delights could serve as a source to prevent man from carrying out bad deeds:

“The sixth thing which God created was the Garden of Delights which was designed for the good souls. There they would sojourn for ever and ever, forgetting the sufferings of their lives on earth. In it there are streams of limpid water, rivers of milk and honey, fragrant flowers and trees whose branches bend down heavy with fruits. The fruits are soft and sweet and juicy and as soon as one falls off, a new one grows on the same branch in no time. Who would not give everything he possessed to be there?” (Knappert, 18)

Similar to the Garden of Eden, the Garden of Delights serves as a heavenly oasis that can be reached after life for individuals who have done good deeds during their existence on earth. Full of the finest fruits, the Garden of Delights is described to be one of the greatest paradises to be visited by humans, equaling any land a god might inhabit. In order to view God as a largely anthropomorphized figure, humans have sought ways to reach heaven from earth. Since the Garden of Delights bans the souls of sinners, man must do good deeds and prove his benevolence in order to obtain the divine right to live in the Garden of Delights after life. Humans have thus expressed their desire to find significance in their existences by trying to transcend the mundane, common lives they lead.

Characters in the Sumerian-Babylonian “Epic of Gilgamesh” also try to accomplish good deeds in order to rise above human life. The Epic of Gilgamesh depicts the emergence of humanity by a series of heroic deeds accomplished in order to preserve life and declare a new beginning for humanity. Predating the Bible, The Epic of Gilgamesh provides a more detailed account of how the world began, from which the tale of Noah’s ark was borrowed. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, the great gods had planned to end humanity with a flood. The god of wisdom, Ea, fled the conference between the great gods and warned an unsuspecting human, Utnapishtim, of their arrangement. Attempting to help, Ea taught him how to build a boat in which Utnapishtim’s family and animals could escape. After the flood transpired, the gods regretted their decision and granted Utnapishtim immortality in order to compensate for their actions. Narrating his story, Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh about his encounter with the gods, “He touched our foreheads and, standing between us, he blessed us: ‘Previously Utnapishtim was a human being. But now let Utnapishtim and his wife become like us, the gods!’ ” (Rassam, Tablet XI). Gilgamesh, the tragic hero of the epic, is immediately intrigued and begs Utnapishtim to allow him to live forever, too. Utnapishtim then determines whether Gilgamesh deserves eternal life using one test in which Gilgamesh has to stay awake for one week. However, Gilgamesh fails, and Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh to return to his city of Uruk, where he is king. As Gilgamesh begins his journey home, he is interrupted by Utnapishtim’s wife, who tells him about the plant of eternal life and where to find it. After searching for a few hours, Gilgamesh obtains the plant of eternal life. Celebrating, Gilgamesh decides to bathe in a nearby body of water, setting the plant down with his animal skins. When he emerges from the water, Gilgamesh notices that a scorpion had eaten

the plant, its skin shed, a significant symbol of rebirth. As the story unfolds, it becomes quite evident that Gilgamesh's character brings about both good and bad (George, "The Epic of Gilgamesh").

Gilgamesh remains an important symbol for man in his quest to seek significance in his life, having to conquer his greed and tragic flaws in order to fulfill his desire to understand his existence. Coupled with Gilgamesh's search for meaning, Utnapishtim has an equally profound experience when the god of wisdom, Ea, told him about the flood the gods were planning to destroy all humans. Building the boat to protect himself, his wife, and his animals becomes a way in which he becomes closer to the gods, since Utnapishtim's boat withstands the violent storms and flood intended to end humanity. Hence, man sought meaning in his existence by creating tales in which he is subjected to many treacherous upheavals that he must overcome in order to prove he is worthy of inhabiting earth.

Emergence creation myths attempt to explain how people first inhabited Earth by claiming that humanity came into existence from another world (commonly the "womb of the earth mother"), into the one in which they currently reside. In this kind of myth, people and supernatural beings develop through a series of subterranean worlds until they finally arrive to the present (or rather, current place). "Emergence" is a male oriented myth, commonly found in Native American traditions, in which the most common link is a hole leading to the underworld.

A leading example of an Emergence myth is the Hopi story of how the earth was formed and how people first came into being. In this story, the first world of empty space existed in the mind of the creator and supreme god, Taiowa. "Then he, the infinite, covered the finite" (Waters, 3). A force ignited within Taiowa and he thus created his nephew, Sotuknang as his first power and instrument as a person. Sotuknang would be used to carry out all Taiowa's plans for life in endless space, which involved arranging the nine-tiered world. Then Sotuknang formed Spider Woman who, with a mixture of earth, raw material, and creative wisdom, made twin gods to animate the earth with vibration and sound, to harden it, and to guard it at the two poles. After having created plants and animals in the same manner, Spider Woman created people in three stages. Only Sotuknang, however, could make people creative in and of themselves, and did this by providing them with speech and intelligence. From this, people developed independently: "With the pristine wisdom granted them, they understood that the earth was a living entity like themselves. She was their mother, they were made from her flesh... In their wisdom they also knew their father in two aspects. He was the Sun, the solar god of their universe" (Waters, 7). "Pristine wisdom," granted to humans by the gods, remains the foundation to cultures, languages, religions, and societies. Believing that the parents of humanity are universal entities, humans use these characters as instruments through which their power was made manifest, emphasizing their development and intelligence. Hence, man has found significance in humanity by using his "pristine wisdom" in order to conjure a symbolic portrayal of how the human race has emerged (Waters, "The Book of the Hopi").

Creation myths are often the essences of what their cultures perceive reality to be. By organizing the way in which humans perceive their role in the world, these myths proclaim attitudes toward reality. In these myths, individuals set forth their understanding of man and the world, denying scientific evidence of evolution (which, according to some people, renounces man's idealism and thus could never be true). People have the ability to oversee systems of beliefs and preside over the order in which the natural world and society functions. Some people consider it a divine right to be able to place themselves at utmost importance in the sequence of life on earth. Authoritarian individuals have affirmed man's "proper" role as set above all the

physical world by his intelligence and all the spiritual world by his ability to govern it. Even the individuals who contend that creation myths are mere fairy tales have been influenced by these stories because of their dominance in cultures around the world.

We, as a people, have dictated beliefs since the emergence of humanity. However, problems arise when myths are not interpreted as metaphors, and instead considered factual accounts that accurately reflect the way in which the world was formed and how humans came to inhabit it. Joseph Campbell, in his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, insightfully notes the contradiction of human intention and what actually occurs:

“... furthermore, we have not even to risk the adventure alone; for the heroes of all time have one before us, the labyrinth is fully known; we have only to follow the thread of the hero-path. And where we had thought to find abomination, we shall find a god, where we had thought to slay one another, we shall slay ourselves, where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come to the center of our own existence; where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world.” (Campbell, 20)

Campbell states a very interesting point: the “labyrinth” of life has been revealed to humanity, and we “follow the thread of the hero-path” in an attempt to glorify the image we create for ourselves. Creation myths guide the way in which humans perceive their role in the world. In some cultures, creation myths are inextricably connected to reality. Fundamentalists (the creationists) believe these myths must be interpreted literally, instead of as metaphors or allegories. Although humans have distorted scientific evidence of evolution by writing accounts on the origin of humanity, time and the occurrence of actual events remain two elements that humans cannot alter.

Perhaps we seek meaning in our lives in order to compensate for our limited understanding of the role humanity is to serve. Man’s conflict with the image he created for himself has led him to continue pondering the origin of life. Because explaining how humans have arrived on Earth is a complicated task which requires information that is unrecorded, man poses innumerable questions about why he exists on Earth. If man realizes that there is no absolutely authoritative and perspicuous story that does not distort the evidence of evolution, he must dismiss all interpretations. One question remains, however: can we as humans transcend the identity we have created for ourselves?

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