

What do origin stories say about the role of women?

In this inquiry students will read creation stories and examine how these stories outline gender roles. At the end students will compare creation stories from various cultures. This activity would work well as a think, pair, and share.

Document A: The Origin of Japan and her People

This story is from the Kojiki, the Japanese "Record of Ancient Things". This story was among many that were recorded between 500-700CE to preserve the ancient traditions. The following story is the closest to a creation story there is in this text.

When heaven and earth began, three deities came into being, The Spirit Master of the Center of Heaven, The August Wondrously Producing Spirit, and the Divine Wondrously Producing Ancestor. These three were invisible. The earth was young then, and land floated like oil, and from it reed shoots sprouted. From these reeds came two more deities. After them, five or six pairs of deities came into being, and the last of these were Izanagi and Izanami, whose names mean "The Male Who Invites" and "The Female who Invites".

The first five deities commanded Izanagi and Izanami to make and solidify the land of Japan, and they gave the young pair a jeweled spear. Standing on the Floating Bridge of Heaven, they dipped it in the ocean brine and stirred. They pulled out the spear, and the brine that dripped of it formed an island to which they descended. On this island they built a palace for their wedding and a great column to the heavens.

Izanami examined her body and found that one place had not grown, and she told this to Izanagi, who replied that his body was well-formed but that one place had grown to excess. He proposed that he place his excess in her place that was not complete and that in doing so they would make new land. They agreed to walk around the pillar and meet behind it to do this. When they arrive behind the pillar, she greeted him by saying "What a fine young man", and he responded by greeting her with "What a fine young woman". They procreated and gave birth to a leech-child, which they put in a basket and let float away. Then they gave birth to a floating island, which likewise they did not recognize as one of their children.

Disappointed by their failures in procreation, they returned to Heaven and consulted the deities there. The deities explained that the cause of their difficulties was that the female had spoken first when they met to procreate. Izanagi and Izanami returned to their island and again met behind the heavenly pillar. When they met, he said, "What a fine young woman," and she said "What a fine young man". They mated and gave birth to the eight main islands of Japan and six minor islands. Then they gave birth to a variety of deities to inhabit those islands, including the sea deity, the deity of the sea-straits, and the deities of the rivers, winds, trees, and mountains. Last, Izanami gave birth to the fire deity, and her genitals were so burned that she died.



Donald L. Philippi, trans., 1969, Kojiki: Princeton, Princeton University Press, 655, and Joseph M. Campbell, 1962, The Masks of God: Oriental Mythology: New York, Viking Press, 561.

1. Is there one god, goddess, or many? Name the characters.
2. Who is responsible for creating humans?
3. Is anyone asked to be silent in this story? Who?
4. What happens to the female characters?



Document B: Genesis

The following is from the Hebrew Bible, also known as the Old Testament. It is a collection of stories that are the pillar of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in addition to other texts. In Genesis, meaning the beginning, there are two creation stories written by two different authors sometime between 600-900CE. Scholars know that there are two authors because the language shifts from one story to the next. In the English translations this is shown by the shift between the use of the words Lord and God. In the first story, God creates earth in seven days. In the second, ideas about gender play a big role. The author of this story is known as Yahweh, or J. The characters in this story are Adam and Eve. Adam literally means man, and Eve literally means life.

On the day that Yahweh made the heavens and the earth, the land was dry and barren until a mist came up from the earth and wetted the land. Then Yahweh took dust from the earth and shaped it into the form of a man, and he breathed life into that form, and it came to life.

Yahweh created a garden in a place called Eden. In this garden Yahweh placed all the trees that bear fruit, including the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. A river flowed out of Eden and watered the garden, and there it divided to become four rivers that flow to the four corners of the world. Yahweh put the man there and instructed him to cultivate the garden and to eat of whatever fruit he liked, except for fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Then Yahweh decided that the man should not be alone, and that he should have a helper. Thus Yahweh made the beasts of the field and the birds of the air, and the man gave a name to each of them. However, none were fit to be his helper, so Yahweh made the man fall into a deep sleep and took one of the man's ribs, and he made it into a woman. This man was Adam, and the woman's name was Eve.

In the garden was a snake, and the snake persuaded the woman that she could eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil without dying, and that eating the fruit would give her Yahweh's knowledge of good and evil. She ate the fruit, and she gave some to the man too. For the first time they were ashamed of being naked, and so they made aprons for themselves.

When the man and woman heard Yahweh in the garden, they hid from him, but Yahweh called them out and asked why they had hidden. The man explained that they hid because of their scanty clothing. Yahweh asked the man how they knew to be ashamed of nudity, and if they had eaten the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The man explained that the woman had eaten of the fruit and given him some too. When Yahweh asked the woman, she explained that the snake had beguiled her into eating the fruit.

Yahweh said to the snake, "Because of what you have done, you are cursed more than any other animal, and you will have to crawl on your belly in the dust, and you will be beaten by the offspring of this woman". To the woman Yahweh



said, "You will be cursed with great pain in giving birth to children, yet you will have the desire to reproduce, and your husband will rule you." Finally, to the man Yahweh said, "Because of what you have done, the ground is cursed and you will never eat of this fruit again. You will grow plants and fields and eat bread until you die, until you become the dust from which you were made."

Herbert G. May, editor, The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New York, Oxford University Press, 1564.

1. Is there one god, goddess, or many? Name the characters.
2. Who is responsible for creating humans?
3. Is anyone asked to be silent in this story? Who?
4. What happens to the female characters?



Document C: The Enuma Elish and the Astrahasis

This creation story is Babylonian from the Enuma Elish and the Astrahasis, written between 1900-1500 BCE, around the time of King Hammurabi. As with many ancient records, they were written on stone tablets, which are today only partially intact. Scholars compiled this story by combining ideas contained in several newer tablets that seem to be consistent with the older ones. This story has a lot of characters. It might be helpful to keep a family tree.

In the beginning, neither heaven nor earth had names. Apsu, the god of fresh waters, and Tiamat, the goddess of the salt oceans, and Mummu, the god of the mist that rises from both of them, were still mingled as one. There were no mountains, there was no pasture land, and not even a reed-marsh could be found to break the surface of the waters.

It was then that Apsu and Tiamat parented two gods, and then two more who outgrew the first pair. These further parented gods, until Ea, who was the god of rivers and was Tiamat and Apsu's great-grandson, was born. Ea was the cleverest of the gods, and with his magic Ea became the most powerful of the gods, ruling even his forebears.

Apsu and Tiamat's descendants became an unruly crowd. Eventually Apsu, in his frustration and inability to sleep with the clamor, went to Tiamat, and he proposed to her that he slay their noisy offspring. Tiamat was furious at his suggestion to kill their clan, but after leaving her Apsu resolved to proceed with his murderous plan. When the young gods heard of his plot against them, they were silent and fearful, but soon Ea was hatching a scheme. He cast a spell on Apsu, pulled Apsu's crown from his head, and slew him. Ea then built his palace on Apsu's waters, and it was there that, with the goddess Damkina, he fathered Marduk, the four-eared, four-eyed giant who was god of the rains and storms.

The other gods, however, went to Tiamat and complained of how Ea had slain her husband. Aroused, she collected an army of dragons and monsters, and at its head she placed the god Kingu, whom she gave magical powers as well. Even Ea was at a loss how to combat such a host, until he finally called on his son Marduk. Marduk gladly agreed to take on his father's battle, on the condition that he, Marduk, would rule the gods after achieving this victory. The other gods agreed, and at a banquet they gave him his royal robes and scepter.

Marduk armed himself with a bow and arrows, a club, and lightning, and he went in search of Tiamat's monstrous army. Rolling his thunder and storms in front him, he attacked, and Kingu's battle plan soon disintegrated. Tiamat was left alone to fight Marduk, and she howled as they closed for battle. They struggled as Marduk caught her in his nets. When she opened her mouth to devour him, he filled it with the evil wind that served him. She could not close her mouth with his gale blasting in it, and he shot an arrow down her throat. It split her heart, and she was slain.



Alexander Heidel, 1952, The Babylonian Genesis (2nd edn.): Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 153 p.(BS1236.H4 1963).

Tikva Fryer-Kensky, (trans), Astrahasis, in O'Brien, Joan, and Major, Wilfred, 1982, In the Beginning: Creation Myths from Ancient Mesopotamia, Israel, and Greece: Chico, CA, Scholars Press, 211 p. (BL226.O27 1982).

1. Is there one god, goddess, or many? Name the characters.
2. Who is responsible for creating humans?
3. Is anyone asked to be silent in this story? Who?
4. What happens to the female characters?



Document D: Upanishad

This creation story comes from the second and fourth Brahmanas of the Brhad-arayaka Upanishad, recorded in India in the 700-600BCE. Praja-pati, is the Lord of Creation, referred to as "he" in this story. In this creation story, the female goddess is trying to evade the male and in each case he rapes her. This is canonized rape.

In the beginning there was absolutely nothing, and what existed was covered by death and hunger. He thought, "Let me have a self", and he created the mind. As he moved about in worship, water was generated. Froth formed on the water, and the froth eventually solidified to become earth. He rested on the earth, and from his luminence came fire. After resting, he divided himself in three parts, and one is fire, one is the sun, and one is the air.

Thus in the beginning the world was only his self, his being or essence, which then took the shape of a person. At first he was afraid, but realizing that he was alone and had nothing of which to be afraid, his fear ceased. However, he had no happiness because he was alone, and he longed for another. He grew as large as two persons embracing, and he caused his self to split into two matching parts, like two halves of a split pea, and from them arose husband and wife.

They mated, and from their union arose the human beings of the earth. The female reflected on having mated with someone of whom she was once a part, and she resolved that she should hide so that it would not happen again. She changed to a cow to disguise herself, but he changed to a bull and mated with her, and from their union cows arose. She changed to the form of a mare, but he changed to that of a stallion and mated with her, and from that union came horses. She changed to the form of a donkey, but he did likewise, and from them arose the single-hoofed animals. She became a ewe, but he became a ram, and from their union came the sheep and goats. It continued thus, with her changing form to elude him but he finding her and mating with her, until they had created all the animals that live in pairs, from humans and horses to ants.

After all this work, he reflected that he was indeed Creation personified, for he had created all this. Rubbing back and forth, he made Fire, the god of fire, from his hands, and from his semen he made Soma, the god of the moon. This was his highest creation because, although mortal himself, he had created immortal gods.

S. Radhakrishnan, (editor and translator), 1953, The Principal Upanisads: New York, Harper and Brothers Publishers, 958 p. (BL1120.E5 R2)

1. Is there one god, goddess, or many? Name the characters.
2. Who is responsible for creating humans?



3. Is anyone asked to be silent in this story? Who?

4. What happens to the female characters?



Document E: Theogony and Metamorphoses

*This portion of a creation story was written by Hesiod in *The Theogony* around 700 BCE. *The Theogony* considers the origin of the Greek gods and goes on to describe their relationships. The latter portion of this passage is from Book I of *Metamorphoses* of Ovid. Gaia is the goddess of earth. Interestingly, her name, also spelt Ge, is the root of the word geology, or the study of the earth.*

In the beginning, there was Chaos, the abyss. Out of it first emerged Gaia, the earth, which is the foundation of all. Next came Tartaros, the depth in the Earth where condemned dead souls go to their punishment, and Eros, the love that overwhelms bodies and minds, and Erebus, the darkness, and Nyx, the night. Erebus and Nyx made love and from their union came Aether, the air, and Hemera, the day.

Gaia, the divine personification of the earth, gave birth to three offspring without any sexual concourse. Gaia's first such child was Uranus, the starry heavens that fit around her perfectly and that provide a home for the immortals... Then Gaia lay with Uranus, the heavens, and she gave birth... Thus in three generations, from Chaos in the first, to Gaia, Tartaros, Eros, Erebus, and Nyx in the second, and to Aether, Hemera, Uranus, Pontos, and Okeanos in the third, the entire world as we know it came to be.

Gaia and Uranus went on to have twelve children, known as the Titans, and Gaia gave rise to many others as well. Uranus, loathing all these children, would push them back into Gaia, who suffered horribly with the pressure. Gaia created flint, and from it she made a sickle, and she urged her sons to use the sickle on their father. The youngest of the twelve Titans, Kronos, took the sickle and, when Uranus came to lie down with Gaia, Kronos cut off his father's genitals and threw them in the sea. From the resulting sea foam came Aphrodite, the goddess of love and the only Olympian god not descended from a Titan.

...Kronos, who had emasculated his father Uranus, became the ruler and mated with his sister Rhea. Because Gaia and Uranus had prophesied that Kronos would be unseated by one of his children, Kronos swallowed the children that Rhea bore, who were Poseidon, Hades, Hestia, Demeter, and Hera. To foil Kronos, Rhea give birth to her next child, Zeus, in secret and kept him hidden. She bound up a stone in a cloth and gave it to Kronos, who swallowed the stone thinking it was the next of the children that he sought to contain. When Zeus was grown, he and Gaia conspired to make Kronos vomit up the five elder siblings of Zeus.

Zeus, son of Kronos, went on to lead his siblings in a great struggle against the Titans, in a war that lasted ten years, until finally the twelve Titans were defeated and confined to Tartaros. Zeus and his siblings and their offspring went on to be the Olympian gods who rule the world today from Mount Olympus...



Prometheus, one of the Titans, made the first humans from clay, and he brought them fire from Mt. Olympus. However, Zeus, as king of the gods and no friend of Prometheus, became disgusted with the behavior of humans. He and his brother, Poseidon, caused rains to fall and rivers to flood, so that all of the humans would be drowned. However, Zeus finally saw one blameless couple huddled in a boat, trying to ride out the flood, and eventually he decided that they could survive.

These two survivors were Deucalion... and Pyrrha... Themis told them, "Go forth from my temple, cover your heads, and throw your mother's bones over your shoulders." Pyrrha was horrified at the idea of committing this sacrilege to the spirit of her mother. Deucalion, similarly horrified and perplexed, pondered the words of the oracle and finally said, "Perhaps the oracle means our mother Gaia, the Earth, and the bones of which she speaks are the stones of the Earth". Neither Deucalion nor Pyrrha was sure that this was right, but they pulled their robes over their heads, picked up stones, and threw them over their shoulders. After a bit, the stones slowly softened, and they began to change shape, and eventually they took the form of humans and became human. Those transformed stones are the ancestors of the humans of today, and that is why we have the hardness and endurance that we possess, having come from the stones of our Mother Earth.

Hesiod, Works and Days and Theogony and The Shield of Herakles, translated by Richmond Lattimore. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1959.

Hesiod, Works and Days and Theogony, translated by Stanley Lombardo with introduction, notes, and glossary by Robert Lamberton. Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1993.

Ovid, Metamorphoses, translated by Rolfe Humphries. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1955.

Smith, W., Smaller Classical Dictionary. New York, E.P. Dutton, 1958.

Zimmerman, J.E., Dictionary of Classical Mythology. New York, Bantaam Books, 1964.

1. Is there one god, goddess, or many? Name the characters.
2. Who is responsible for creating humans?
3. What is significant about Gaia giving birth "without sexual intercourse" and later giving birth to children after "laying" with her son, Uranus?
4. How is Gaia treated in this story?



Document F: Mossi Oral History

This creation story comes from the Mossi people in the Mogho kingdom, in west Africa. Frederic Guirma was taught this story by his ancestors as part of an oral tradition. He recorded the story in 1971, much later than other creation stories, and after colonialism. This is one of the only stories to mention race.

In the beginning there was no earth, no day or night, and not even time itself. All that existed was the Kingdom of Everlasting Truth, which was ruled by the Naba Zid-Wendé (the higher being). The Naba Zid-Wendé made the earth, and then they made the day and the night. To make the day a time to be busy, they made the sun, and to make the night a time of rest, they made the moon. In doing so, they made time itself.

At first the earth was covered with fire, but the Naba Zid-Wendé blew on the earth to cool the fire. They ordered the fire to live inside the earth, so that the surface would be safe for the humans they were going to make. Only very resentfully did the fire go into the earth.

First the Naba Zid-Wendé made... animals... The crust was strong enough to hold up even them, and so the crust was solid and cool.

Finally the Naba Zid-Wendé were ready to create humans. They made them very black, because black is a strong color, and to make them different from the sun, which is red, and from the moon, which is white. The Naba Zid-Wendé used their breath to blow a soul into the humans that they had made.

The smile of the Naba Zid-Wendé at their human creations became the sky, and they hung the sky so low that humans could reach it and eat it for their food. They made stars out beyond the sky, and they made many other wonderful things for their humans. The humans nonetheless became arrogant and suspicious, and the humans began to claim that the Naba Zid-Wendé had hidden something valuable from them under the mountains. The humans dug under the mountains, but they only found a leper living there, and they let the leper go free from his subterranean prison.

This leper, however, was really the fire, and he soon burst into flames. Still angry at the Naba Zid-Wendé and jealous of the humans, the fire was evil, and it burned the sky. The sky withdrew in pain, and withdrew all the way beyond the stars, back to the Kingdom of Everlasting Truth.

No longer could the humans get their food from the sky, their arrogance had ended that. The Naba Zid-Wendé nonetheless made clouds and rivers and streams to keep the earth wet, and they made plants for humans to have food and trees that produce fruit for them. They made flowers to make the earth beautiful, and made the scents of the flowers to provide the smell of life.

The humans, however, multiplied and became more and more arrogant. To wash away the arrogance, the Naba Zid-Wendé made a big blue lake in which the humans should bathe. The humans were too busy to come to the lake, however, and that gave the evil fire time to throw hatred and envy in the lake.



Only when the Naba Zid-Wendé sent the sun to dry up the lake did the humans finally go there to bathe. The first group that went in bathed in the waters of hatred and division, and they came out white from head to toe. The second group that went in come out yellow from head to toe. The same happened to third group that went in, except that they came out copper-red. By the time the last group went in, only a little water was left from the sun's efforts to dry up the lake, and the last group could only wash their hands and feet. They came out with soles and palms of white, yellow, or red, but the rest of their bodies were still black.

The Naba Zid-Wendé came to earth later to see what they had created... but the human races were too busy dividing up the land and enslaving each other to notice. The Naba Zid-Wendé were so sad to see what the humans were doing.

Frederic Guirma, 1971, Tales of Mogho: New York, Macmillan, 113 p.

1. Is there one god, goddess, or many? Name the characters.
2. Who is responsible for creating humans?
3. How is this story different than other creation stories?
4. Why do you think race is an important part of this story?



