

Unit 5: The Origin of Light

(a) Ancient Egyptian myth

At first there was only Nun, the primal ocean of chaos that contained the beginnings of everything to come. From these waters came Ra, the Sun god. Ra himself gave birth to Shu, the god of air, and Tefnut, the goddess of moisture. They gave birth to Geb and Nut, the Earth god and the sky goddess. And so the physical universe was created.

Men were created from Ra's tears. They proved to be ungrateful, so Ra and the council of gods decided to destroy humans. Hathor was dispatched to do the job. She was very efficient and had slaughtered all but a few when Ra changed his mind and stopped her. Thus the present world was created.

Geb and Nut got married against Ra's orders. Ra was angry and ordered Shu to separate them, which he did. Nut was already pregnant, but she was unable to give birth because Ra had decreed she could not give birth in any month of any year. Thoth, the god of learning, decided to help her. He played with the Moon for extra light, and managed to add five extra days to the 360-day calendar. On those five days Nut gave birth to Osiris, Horus the Elder, Set, Isis, and Nephthys. Osiris became the symbol of good, while Set became the symbol of evil. And thus the two poles of morality were fixed once and for all.

(b) Akkadian story from Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq and Kuwait)

A mountain rose out of the sea, and Enlil, the air god, separated it into heaven, An, and Earth, Ki. Enlil raped Ninlil, the air goddess, who gave birth to Nanna, the Moon god. Nanna and Ningal gave birth to Shamash, the Sun. Thus the Moon was born out of darkness and gave birth to the Sun.

Shamash was the god of justice of both gods and men. He sat on a throne, from which he could see everything that happened on Earth. He gave King Hammurabi of Babylonia the code of laws. At night, Shamash became judge of the underworld.

Shamash was the conqueror of night and death. He swept across the heavens on horseback, bestowing light and life.

(c) Inuit story from Alaska

In the beginning of time, there was only darkness. There was no light at all. At the edge of the sea lived a woman and her father. Once she went out to get some water. She was scraping aside the snow when she saw a feather float toward her. She opened her mouth and the feather floated in. She swallowed it and she was immediately with child.

When the baby was born, it had a raven's bill for a mouth. The woman tried to find toys for her child, but it wasn't easy. Her father had a bladder hanging on the wall. The baby Raven saw it and cried for it. The woman did not want to give it to him, but he cried for it continuously. Finally, she agreed to give it to him for a toy. But he broke it. When it broke, it let light into the world. Now there were both light and darkness. When there was light, Raven had disappeared.

(d) Fon story from West Africa

Liza and Mawu were twins. Liza was the Sun god and lived in the East. His sister Mawu was the Moon god and lived in the West. When there is an eclipse, it is because Liza and Mawu are making love.

They had a son, Gu, who had the shape of an iron sword. They used him to form the world. Gu taught the people the art of ironworking, so they could make their own tools and shelter. Unfortunately, Gu did not know humans would also use this knowledge to make weapons. The cosmic serpent, Da, helped man bring this evil into the world.

(e) Story from the Chou dynasty of China

There were 10 suns. Each day the suns traveled with their mother, Xi He, in a chariot drawn by six horse dragons. They went to the Valley of the Light in the East, where Xi He would wash her children in the lake and put them into the branches of a giant mulberry tree. Each day, one sun would set out from the tree to make a journey across the sky to the mountain Yen-Tzui in the West. (China recognized a 10-day week during the Chou dynasty.)

After many years, the 10 suns decided that they wanted to make this journey together. Life on Earth became unbearable from the resulting heat. So the father of the 10 suns, Di Jun, tried to persuade them to return to the old way. When they refused to listen, Di Jun sent Yi, an archer armed with a magic bow and 10 arrows. Yi was only supposed to frighten the suns, but instead he shot nine of them. Di Jun managed to save the last sun by having someone steal the tenth arrow. This Sun shines over Earth to this very day.

(f) Amaterasu (Shinto) myth from Japan

Amaterasu was born from the left eye of her father. He gave her a necklace of jewels. Then he sent her brother, Susanoo the storm god, to rule the sea. Susanoo began to misbehave and cause destruction. When he threw a dead horse into Amaterasu's weaving hall, she hid in a cave in protest. Darkness fell over the world.

The other gods came up with a plan to draw Amaterasu out of the cave. They gathered up some cocks and hung mirrors and jewels on a tree in front of the cave. One of the goddesses began to dance, and all the other gods laughed loudly with joy. Amaterasu was very curious why the gods were joyful when the world was plunged in darkness. They told her that there was a new goddess, brighter than Amaterasu herself. She peeked out, saw her reflection in the mirror, and heard the cocks crow. She came out of the cave to see more. They quickly blocked the cave entrance to prevent her from going back into hiding.

(g) Norse myth from Scandinavia

Once there was no heaven above nor earth below, but only a bottomless deep and a world of mist in which flowed a fountain. Twelve rivers flowed from this fountain. They froze into ice, gradually filling up the bottomless deep.

South of the world of mist was the world of light. A warm wind flowed from this world and melted the ice. The vapors rose up and formed clouds, from which sprang Ymir, the Frost giant. He had a giant cow, Audhumbla. One day Audhumbla was licking the salt from the ice when the hair of a man appeared. The next day a whole head appeared. On the third day, an entire body appeared. This new being was a god, who together with his wife gave birth to three sons: Odin, Vili, and Ve. The sons slew Ymir and out of his body the Earth was formed. His blood became the seas, his bones the mountains, his hair the trees, his skull the heavens, and his brain the clouds.

Odin then placed the Sun and the Moon into the heavens to regulate the periods of day and night and the seasons.