Don Nardo

Classic Stories in World Mythology

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CHAPTER ONE

Stories of Creation

One of the four main creation myths held sacred by the ancient Egyptians was one championed by the priests at Thebes. That city was Egypt's capital during what modern experts have dubbed the New Kingdom (lasting from 1550 to 1069 BCE). According to the priests, two primeval and powerful gods were responsible for creating the world, plants, animals, and human beings.

One of those creator deities was Amun, who the priests said had a sort of dual personality. First he was a member of the Ogdoad, a group of eight very ancient gods who floated in a vast, dark sea that long ago made up the whole universe. In addition to his role as one of those eight floating deities, however, Amun was secretly something much greater. Namely, he was the almighty Amun-Ra, supreme god of all that exists. Thanks to his limitless powers, he was able to absorb the other seven members of the Ogdoad. Thereafter, he felt compelled to indulge in a huge, vigorous burst of creation, in the process making dry land, mountains, lakes, plants, and the thousands of species of animals that inhabit nature.

For reasons still unknown, one important job that Amun-Ra did not undertake was the creation of humanity. That crucial task he left to his highly industrious and talented fellow deity Khnum. Depicted by Egyptian artists as having a ram's head atop a man's muscular body, Khnum oversaw the Nile River's annual floods. But in the eyes of posterity, his most memorable achievement was fashioning people from the special clay found only along the Nile's banks. Khnum was said to have sat quietly at a big potter's wheel and methodically molded each human body one at a time. Then he added hearts, lungs, and other organs to them and breathed into their mouths, an action that made them come to life.

Little Known Fact

The special clay that the Egyptian god Khnum found on the Nile's banks and used to model human beings was later employed by the locals to make a kind of pottery called Nile silt ware.

In some parts of Egypt, people passed along a very ancient myth about Khnum that pictured him as a sort of universal creator much like Amun-Ra, as well as the controller of the enormous flow of the Nile's waters. Because those waters made agriculture possible in Egypt's otherwise dry environment, Khnum could either *cause* a drought or *alleviate* one. A surviving inscription tells how, during a widespread drought-driven famine, Khnum came to the reigning Egyptian king in a dream and said, "I am Khnum, your creator. . . . I am master of creation [and] I will make the Nile swell for you . . . so the plants will flourish. . . . The land of Egypt is beginning to stir again, the shores are shining wonderfully, and wealth and well-being dwell with them, as it had been before."[6]

A Fascination for Beginnings

That the ancient Egyptians recognized multiple creation stories and creator gods clearly demonstrates their powerful preoccupation with the origins of the world and everything contained within it, including people. Moreover, they were far from alone in this fascination for understanding the beginnings of things. Indeed, anthropologist Robert L. Carneiro points out, the origins of the universe and humanity are "among the most basic questions raised by human beings." All around the world, he goes on, early societies wondered, "How did the human species arise? How was the Earth created? What about the sun? the moon? the stars?" For ancient cultures everywhere, it seemed only logical that "people and the world exist because they were brought into being by a series of creative acts. Moreover, this creation is usually regarded as the work of supernatural beings or forces."[7]

Although most of the cultures that believed in the existence of such creator deities vanished long ago, a good many of the tales of those supernatural beings have survived. Unquestionably, one

This picture shows Khnum—depicted with a ram's head and wavy horns—molding mankind on a potter's wheel. Thoth, the god of wisdom and learning, is pictured on the right recording the event..

of the more intriguing aspects of those surviving creation myths is that, despite emerging from places thousands of miles apart, most share certain basic ideas, plots, and themes. Common, for instance, is the notion that in the beginning there was only a vast, dark, swirling sea or a dark, spinning mixture of chaotic elements. And out of that fluid, murky mass, one or more primordial, supernatural beings emerged.

From Darkness and Chaos to Light and Order

In fact, that is exactly how the early Greeks, very much like the ancient Egyptians, pictured the creation. The Greeks called the universe—consisting of everything that exists—the cosmos. The sixth-century-BCE Greek epic poet Hesiod wrote that at first the cosmos was composed of a dark, spinning, disorganized assemblage of unidentified substances. He and other Greek thinkers called it Chaos. According to the late classical scholar W.H.D. Rouse, within that scrambled concoction drifted "the seeds or

beginnings of all things [all] mixed up together in a shapeless mass, all moving about in all directions."[8]

Seemingly countless centuries elapsed, during which nothing changed. But then, in an unforeseen turn of events, two shapeless living beings leaped into existence. Those two lumps of consciousness—Night and Erebus—became aware of their surroundings and each other, and they mated almost immediately. The result was an egg that grew within Erebus's formless body.

More time passed, and when the egg finally burst open, out flew a truly miraculous being whom the Greeks came to call Eros, meaning "love." Sometimes they referred to him as "God." Whatever he was called, he produced an immense torrent of pure light that suddenly flooded outward, erasing the darkness and turning disorder into order. In the words of the Roman storyteller Ovid, "God unlocked all elemental things." The lighter elements floated upward and became the sky, while the heavier ones sank downward, forming the land. And, said Ovid, "at God's touch lakes, springs, dancing waterfalls streamed downhill into valleys, waters glancing through rocks, grass, and wild-flowered meadows."[9]

Indeed, across Earth's surface, plants and animals sprang into being. The Greeks did not envision Eros himself creating these things, as if by magic. Instead, they viewed him as a great organizer. The general belief was that the seeds of rocks, trees, mountains, flowers, and animals had already existed within Chaos and that Eros was somehow able to release them in an ordered way.

Little Known Fact

The Roman poet Ovid compiled some 250 ancient Greek and Roman myths in his hefty work, the *Metamorphoses*, meaning "the transformations."

A Being with an Amazing Work Ethic

The fact that multiple supernatural beings were involved in various aspects of both the Egyptian and Greek visions of the creation is no coincidence. Similar situations appear in the creation myths

The Greeks' Grandmother

The chief ancient Greek creation myth suggests that no single god created the universe and other conscious beings. Rather, the cosmos had already long existed in a state of chaos, perhaps for an infinite amount of time. At some point in the dim past, several divine beings, including Eros, appeared from out of that chaotic state. Not long after he hatched from an egg and brought light to the darkness, two of the most important of all the Greek divinities arose. One was Gaia, or Mother Earth, a gigantic consciousness embodying the planet itself. The other vast being was Uranus, or Father Heaven, personifying the sky. According to the surviving myths, those two beings mated several times, in each case creating a new brood of offspring. At first they produced only misshapen monsters, including several one-eyed giants (the Cyclopes). Later, however, Gaia and Uranus gave birth to the first race of gods, the large, physically perfect, and very powerful Titans. Partly because the kindly Titan Prometheus fashioned humans from river mud or clay, the Greeks thought of Gaia as, in a sense, the grandmother of their own race, and people commonly prayed to her for guidance or luck.

of many past peoples around the globe. In ancient China, for example, two gods equivalent in several ways to Egypt's Amun and Khnum were thought to be responsible for fashioning the world and humanity. The first of the two Chinese creator deities was Pangu. Like Egypt's Amun and Greece's Eros, he came into being within a seemingly limitless expanse of darkness and swirling forces.

Also, as Eros supposedly did, Pangu emerged from a long period of gestation inside a big egg. No one has ever known where Pangu's egg originated. More certain, at least according to the third-century-CE Chinese writer Xu Zheng, was that Pangu remained inside that object, fast asleep, for eighteen thousand years. When the creator finally woke up, he was unhappy to find himself enveloped in darkness. So he wished for an ax to appear in his right hand, and the object magically materialized. Pangu used that tool to chop at the surrounding layers of shell, and in the words of the myth teller for the Chinese ballet company Shen Yun, "the egg split into two with a thunderous crack."[10]

The liberated Pangu was blessed with what might be called an amazingly strong and effective work ethic. Wasting no time,

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