# Social Orders and Creation Stories: Crash Course World Mythology #5

Crash Course: World Mythology
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Hi, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Mythology, and today - rather than focus on how the Earth and what's around it was created - we're going to look specifically at what's on it. More specifically, people, and even more specifically, men and women people. Also the occasional animal. No, not you, Thoth. You're a god with an animal head. It's different.

Anyway, we're going to see how myths explain our origins and our relationships with each other, or at least how they try to explain them. It's couple's therapy, myth style.

[Opening music]

Myths don't usually incorporate contemporary ideas of gender fluidity, although sometimes they do. Tiresias, ancient seer, looking at you. As we've seen from the Chinese and Zoroastrian creation stories, myths often tend to focus on dualities or binaries, and one of the key ones that we find is a distinction between men and women, and this binary opposition frequently sets women as subordinate to men – at least on Earth. In the heavens, it's a little bit more complicated, as it tends to be.

Let's start with a story that is probably well-known to many of our viewers: the creation of man and woman from the Bible. Close readers of the book of Genesis will know that there are two or even three creation stories within it which, according to Biblical scholars, reflect different writing traditions. We're going to focus on the second one, found in Genesis 2.

As we join our story, God has already created the Earth and the heavens and man to till the Earth, because as we established last time, gods don't like weeding. Unlike the first version of creation in Genesis, man is created near the very beginning, which suggests that he's actually pretty important in the grand scheme of things.

But apparently one man wasn't enough for all of that Edenic gardening. Genesis 2:21 begins, "So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept, took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib the Lord God had taken from the man, he made into a woman, and brought her to the man. Then the man said, 'This is the bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She should be called 'woman' because she was taken out of man.' Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh."

Here we see an early justification for men being superior to women, and it's kind of based on bad wordplay. In the rest of the Genesis story, one of the things that marks man's dominion over other creatures is that he's given the power to name them, just as he is permitted to name 'woman' here. The wordplay here also works in the original Hebrew, where the word for man is *ish* and the word for woman is *isha*. So, get it? She was taken out of man, and so even her name was taken out of man. Yup, it's hilarious. Just ask Gelos, Greek god of laughter. Yeah, this is a tough crowd.

This passage also explains marriage, although only between a man and a woman, and describes a social order in which men leave their parents' household when they marry to have their own homes. Whether this describes a family structure that already existed or it was written in order to encourage such a family structure, we can't say for certain, but it's likely that this was an after-the-fact description. Providing a rationalization for what people encounter in their daily lives is an important function of myths.

The Bible goes on to refine the "natural" relationship between men and women, and not in an especially fun or feminist way. After they eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, God is miffed and he punishes them. To the woman, he said, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing. In pain you should bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you."

And to Adam he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and you have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you. In toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you, and you shall eat the plants of the field. In the sweat of your face, you shall eat bread 'til you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken. You are dust, and to dust you shall return."

There is just a lot going on here. One way to interpret this is that it provides justification for man's dominance over women as punishment for what one woman did in disobeying God. The first punishments directly affect the experiences of women, causing the pain of childbirth and the desire for a husband that shall "rule over" her, establishing a patriarchal order that just really caught on.

Men are punished too, by having to work hard in order to eat, toiling, bringing food out of the ground. More gardening. And what's the reward for all this hard work? Death and returning to the ground. Not even dental benefits. Worse yet, as far as solidifying male dominance goes, all of this is because a man listened to the voice of his wife, so that sets up a pretty nasty precedent.

Greek mythology creates a similar rationale for misogyny with the story of Pandora. Even before she opened the jar bringing sorrows to all of the world, Zeus made her as a punishment for Prometheus who stole fire and gave it to the humans. This is in addition to having his liver eaten by an eagle for all of eternity. According to Hesiod, she would be another gift to men, an evil thing for their delight. Hermes endowed Pandora with "lies and persuasive words and cunning ways."

And probably also like the absolute perfect shade of lipstick. But before we agree to this image of women as conniving and untrustworthy, let's pause to remember that it's Hermes, a male god and one of the great misogynists of the ancient world who bestows these qualities on Pandora. So this is a dude's hateful vision of women.

Anyway, Zeus gave Pandora as a gift to Prometheus's brother, Epimetheus, who accepted her, even though Prometheus had told him to never accept a gift from Zeus. Maybe Zeus gifted lots of socks. According to Hesiod, here's what happened.

"Before this time, men lived upon the Earth apart from sorrow and from painful work, free from disease which brings the death-gods in. But now the woman opened up the cask, and scattered pains and evils among men. Inside the cask's hard walls remained one thing, hope, only, which did not fly through the door. The lid stopped her, but all the others flew, thousands of troubles wandering the earth."

Unfortunately, this concept that a social order of male dominance and female subordination resulting from women acting out of turn is not unique to the Biblical or Greek tradition. We find a similar story in Japan, just without an evil serpent or an all-powerful death chest.

Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

One Japanese creation myth starts with a young, not fully formed Earth that looked something like a jellyfish. Three invisible gods came into existence in *Takamagahara*, the high planes of heaven. These three gods, called *kami*, were led by the Lord of the Center of Heaven, Amanominakanushi-no-kami. After them were seven more generations, followed finally by the primal couple Izanagi and his wife Izanami, who was also his sister.

Izanagi and Izanami were commanded by the gods to solidify the

drifting land, so they went to the floating bridge of heaven and stirred the soupy liquid below with a spear. Drops congealed on the tip of the spear and formed the island of Onogoro, the first dry land. The primal couple went down to Onogoro and built a heavenly pillar. Then they decided to procreate.

Izanagi asked his sister how her body was formed, and she told him that there was an unfinished part between her legs. He replied that between his legs was an excess, and perhaps the two should join there. They devised a marriage ritual whereby each would walk around the pillar and when they met, they would exchange compliments and have intercourse.

A child was born, but it was a deformed leech child called Hiruko. His parents put Hiruko on a boat and set it out to sea. The gods determined that the reason the first child was born deformed was that Isanami had spoken first. Izanagi and Izanami returned to the heavenly pillar in Onogoro and repeated the ritual, only this time Izanagi spoke first. In due time, Izanami gave birth to an abundant number of children, islands, gods, and goddesses.

Thank you, Thought Bubble.

This rationale established male precedence and female subservience in Japan. Not only does this myth explain Japanese gender inequality, it may also explain an ancient Japanese ritual in which the birth of a first child was celebrated by putting a clay figurine into a reed boat and floating it away.  There's often a strong connection between myths and rituals.

Many creation stories begin with the idea that human beings are immortal until something or someone intrudes. Biblical humans were immortal until Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge, for example. It was human error that brought death into the world. So, sorry about that everyone.

So we see another theme emerging here. The Biblical, Japanese, and Greek explanations place the blame for human toil, pain, and disease on women. It's a pernicious idea and one that has had profound consequences for gender relations. Perhaps what we're seeing is a justification for a system in which men feel it is their right to rule over women, and find stories to tell to support it. After all, there's no logical reason why women should be blamed. Men make mistakes, too.

We're going to get to Phaethon and the time that he almost burned down the entire Earth eventually, but until then, thanks for watching. We'll see you next week.

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Thanks for watching, and don't forget to be mythological.