Earth Mothers and Rebellious Sons - Creation Part 3: Crash Course World Mythology #4

Crash Course: World Mythology
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Hey there, I'm Mike. This is Crash Course Mythology, and today, we're gonna pick up where we left off last week, talking about sex. Mythological sex. Legendary sex. Sex that results in the creation of the world. There's also gonna be more castration, and also dwarfs. Stop hiding, Thoth! You can handle it.

This time, we'll focus, not only on sex itself, but on a common side effect: children. Mostly adorable mythological babies, but there are also those who are self-begotten. Like our own Thoth, and also like Athena, Greek goddess of wisdom, who sprang fully-grown from the foreheads of their fathers. Long before epidurals were invented too. Yeowch.

[Opening Theme]

Last week, we started with spitting, vomiting fathers, some of whom managed to pull of creation without any female counterpart. In general, though, the world's creation myths include some kind of duality. Whether it's that separation of male and female, light and dark, good and evil, or day and night.

The idea of "Mother Earth" is a pretty common one in the West, and it's been remarkably persistent. In fact, in the 1970s, British scientist James Lovelock updated the myth in a scientific hypothesis, defining "Mother Earth," under her Greek name, Gaia, as: "a complex entity involving the Earth's biosphere, atmosphere, oceans, and soul; the totality constituting a feedback or cybernetic system which seeks an optimal physical and chemical environment for life on the planet."

So, let's begin with the mother of them all: Gaia. According to Hesiod: "First came the chasm; and then the broad-breasted Earth, secure seat for ever of all the immortals who occupy the peak of snowy Olympus; Earth bore first of all one equal to herself, starry Heaven, so that he should cover her all about, to be a secure seat for ever for the blessed gods, But then, bedded with heaven, she bore up deep-swirling Oceanus."

And a bunch of other supernatural beings, including Coeus, Crius, Theia, Rhea, Memory, Phoebe, Tethys, and most important for us in this episode, Cronus, God of Time, and future castrator. These beings are called the Titans.

Gaia also bore the one-eyed Cyclopes, and the Hecatoncheires, who were giants with a hundred arms, and fifty heads that were so scary, that Heaven hid them away in a cavern, inside of Earth, called Tartarus, which made Earth angry. But really, can you blame Heaven? Those are fifty faces only a mother could love.

Before we get into all the incest and castration that follows, let's pause and think about why people might want to characterize Earth as a mother, rather than a father.

One obvious answer is that, traditionally, mothers are the ones who give birth, unless we're talking about seahorses. So it's not a huge stretch to think of creation as coming from mothers. And mothers are nurturing, in the biological sense, that they provide physical food for infants. By the same token, in agricultural societies, and probably hunter-gatherer and herding cultures too, the Earth provides the food that people and animals need to live, so the metaphor of "Mother Earth" makes a lot of sense.

The mothers of myths aren't always the most doting, and they're often pretty powerful. In many myths, they love their children a lot more than their husbands, who, to be fair, can be apocalyptically horrible. Let's go back to the Greeks.

We saw in a previous episode what happened when Earth, or Gaia, was ticked off that Sky, aka Ouranos, had locked up her fifty-headed children. She gave a sickle to her son Cronus, who castrated his dad, and as a result, Aphrodite was born.

Surprisingly, Ouranos didn't harbor too many hard feelings, maybe because he and Gaia knew that it would soon be curtains for Cronus, at the hands of his own children no less. We're gonna see this prophesy about a son overthrowing, or possibly even killing, his father a lot. And your parents were worried about your goth phase! Ugh.

Cronus, knowing what he had done to his own father, was understandably nervous about his children, born to his sister Rhea. Again, incest, pretty common in cosmologies and pantheons. Actually, maybe we can just have some kind of Incest Alert, instead of me mentioning it every time it comes up? Yeah. That's perfect. That's great.

So, as each of his children were born, Cronus took them up, and swallowed them. As Hesiod tells us: "His purpose was that none but he of the lordly celestials should have the royal station among the immortals."

In the same way that Gaia was upset about Ouranos imprisoning the Hecatoncheires, Rhea was not thrilled about Cronus eating all of her children. So with the help of her parents, she came up with a plan. When her son Zeus was about to be born, Rhea snuck off to Crete to give birth, and handed baby Zeus off to his grandma, Gaia.

Rhea then wrapped a stone in a onesie, showed it to Cronus, who - no big surprise - grabbed the stone, and ate it. Apparently he had very strong teeth, and also was somehow unfamiliar with the density of your standard baby, but hey, okay.

Zeus grew up, and he set to work overthrowing his dad, and fulfilling the prophecy, 'cause that's how prophecies work. Knowing that he needed help to unseat his father and the other Titans, and also to set his siblings free from daddy's tummy, Zeus released those fifty-headed Hecatoncheires, and together, they went to war. He also freed Rhea's other children, and together, they defeated the Titans, and Zeus and his fam became the Gods of the Greeks.

Like I said, this idea of the son rising up to supplant the father, causing a war in Heaven, is pretty common in a number of creation stories. For example, in the Norse creation myth from the *Prose Edda*, an old Norse text, we find the evil frost giant Ymir Who not only created man and woman from his sweaty left armpit, which explains a lot when you think about it, but also created a family of frost giants.

And also also, somehow, another man named Búri, who has a son named Borr, who in turn married Bestla, the daughter of the frost giant Boelthor. Because, I guess alliteration was in the style at the time. Bestla gave birth to three sons: Vili, Vé, and Odin. So here's where the story gets really interesting.

Thought Bubble?

The three brothers, Vili, Vé, and Odin, hated Ymir and the other frost giants, even though they created them. Notice the emerging theme here? So then they battled and defeated them, killing Ymir, then the three gods used Ymir's body to create the world.

His flesh became Earth. His bones became mountains and stones. His blood served well to make the lakes that dotted the world, and the seas that surrounded it, and his skull was used for the sky. And, yes! This does sound a lot like the Chinese creation myth of P'an Ku, with a skull, instead of a cosmic egg. But I guess god blood always turns into water. Anyway.

A dwarf stood at each of the four corners of the sky. The dwarfs were named East, West, North, and South. The gods made the sun and moon from the sparks of Múspell. To the giants, they assigned a place called Jotunheim. The brothers then created a fertile land called Midgard from Ymir's eyebrows, and they created a man from a fallen ash tree, and a woman from a fallen elm.

Odin gave them life, Vili gave them intelligence and emotions, and Vé gave them senses. Ask was the man, and Embla was the woman. These were the parents of the human race.

And because the Norse gods were very into up-cycling, out of the maggots that had come from Ymir's rotting flesh, the gods made dwarfs. More dwarfs! As for the sons of Borr, they formed a family of gods and goddesses called the Æsir, led by the father god, Odin. They built a wondrous home over Midgard, and called it Asgard. The two zones were linked by the rainbow bridge, Bifröst.

Thanks, Thought Bubble!

We'll be hearing more about these gods of Asgard later, but right now, I want to use this myth as a rainbow bridge, my favorite kind of bridge, to a similar creation story.

Fans of Crash Course World History know that we love the Epic of Gilgamesh, but there's another sacred text from that part of the world: The Enuma Elish, from Babylonia, that gives us one of the worlds oldest creation stories. And hey, surprise, it features a war between younger gods and their parents. As a bonus, it also has: primordial waters, an angry mother goddess, and a big bad creator dad.

Oh! Stan, could you just make a note to trademark "Angry Mother Goddess" and "Big Bad Creator Dad?" Band name, game series, sandwich menu items; the possibilities are endless.

In the beginning of the Enuma Elish, the primordial freshwater, Apsû, and the primordial saltwater, Tiamat, "get together," if you catch my drift, and produce the land, in the form of silt deposits Lahmu and Lahamu. The land then got together, and created the first family of gods: Anshar, Kishar, and their son, Anu, who then created a second set of deities, lead by Ea, not to be confused with the Greek Eos, which means dawn.

Ea and his brothers were a wild bunch of crazy kids who disturbed their grandparents, Apsû and Tiamat. Before Apsû could carry out his plan to force Ea and his brothers to "turn down their music and go to their rooms!" Ea and Koh killed Apsû. Which does seem a little extreme.

Unsurprisingly, Tiamat was... none too happy, so she created a bunch of snakes, dragons, fishmen, bullmen, and other horrors to teach those boys a lesson. Ea, Anshar, and Anu went to war against the monsters, but were unable to defeat them without the help of Ea's son, Marduk. Now, Marduk, whom Ea called the Great Sun (with a U), was no dummy, and he saw his father's weakness as a chance to take over.

So he made a deal with Ea. Marduk would help defeat Tiamat if he could be named King of the Gods and also the Universe, nbd. Ea agreed to Marduk's deal, and he went off to fight Tiamat, who, as sometimes happens, had transformed herself into a sea monster. We made it! We made it to sea monsters.

Anyway, you probably know where this is going. Marduk defeated Tiamat, and became the king of the gods. But, hey, surprise ending: Marduk took Tiamat and divided her like a shellfish, to create the world.

"Out of her head Marduk made a mountain. Her eyes became the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, her breasts hills, her nostrils reservoirs. Marduk then established Babylon as his temple city and the unified home of the gods. Out of the blood of Tiamat's son, Qingu, Marduk had Ea create humans, who would do the work that the gods preferred not to do."

Like weeding. And estate planning. Gods hate that stuff!

So, once again we see that a parent is divided up to create the physical world. Often, this division is described as a sacrifice, and used to explain sacrifice rituals we find in many religions.

Now, are these myths just a way of justifying existing religious rituals, or is there something else going on here? Maybe these myths have a psychological dimension too. They illustrate the willingness parents may have to sacrifice anything for their children.

But also, some of the messy, complicated, angry feelings that parents can feel towards their kids, and that kids can feel towards their parents. Though, thankfully, that usually doesn't result in castration.

These myths show us that these feelings are as old as, and are even maybe the source of, creation itself.

Thanks for watching! We'll see you next week.

Crash Course Mythology is filmed in the Chad & Stacey Emigholz Studio in Indianapolis, Indiana and is produced with the help of all of these very nice people Our animation team is Thought Cafe.

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Thanks for watching! And just 'cause I like to say it: Hecatoncheiries! People say they're ugly, but they sure sound great.