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One Creation: Examining Creation Myths Across Time and Culture

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Introduction

The question has been asked: is there any truth to the myths our ancestors told? No matter which historical route you take, there seem to be moments in history that the world wraps itself around. Moments that set the tone and the stage for millennia to come, including moments before there was any written word. There was the ancient worldwide Flood as seen in Mesopotamian, Biblical, Asian, and several other ancient texts and artifacts around the world. The World Tree was heavily featured in the Americas as well as the Northern parts of Europe and Asia. People dispersed, languages grew and the vast legends of men began adding characters like the primordial sacrifice, the dueling brothers, and the Messiah who comes for mankind's redemption.

The tales that we hear and tell connect us to all kinds of people throughout time and space. One of the best ways to tell a good story from a bad one is by considering whether or not people can relate to it across cultures, language, and time, regardless of the details. For several millennia–likely many more than we know–myths and legends have served as a means of explaining the unexplainable. Perhaps nomads told stories of the stars to distract them on long, cold nights. Perhaps parents explained the world to their children in anthropomorphic terms and these subtleties made the foundations of organized religions, gods to worship, and ways to live. Since those vague, unwritten, and therefore untraceable days of the tongue, the scientific model has taken center stage, particularly in the last few hundred years this has played a significant role in how people view the world. Nevertheless, stories and legends continue to have a unique ability to put life into perspective, give people a goal to achieve, and a purpose for which to live.

When first looking at long abandoned mythologies, we need to get into an open mindset that allows for pre-scientific thought. People didn't simply settle for myths before modern-day

science came around. What we call “myths” were the stories that parents used to explain the universe to their children and provided the history for the adults and the wise men in particular. From these tales were assembled moral values, government designs, and religious rites. They were a comprehensive guide to the cosmos formed by principles learned over countless generations that we ultimately have no track of. Out of these myths arose beliefs and religions (being faith-based practices serving a social function), many of which are still studied and practiced to this day. Storytelling is an inextricable aspect of being human. Life itself is presented in the form of a narrative and every individual tells his or her own story from his or her own point of view. We listen to stories because they have a unique way of conveying the truth without stating it explicitly. They give us a glimpse into any one of the lives we may choose to live.

Long before communities settled, governments organized, and certainly long before languages were under any consistent understanding, stories were shaping the lives of literally everyone who heard or repeated them. As they were carried through different lands to be heard by peoples with different tongues and different worldviews, names were misremembered, characters and plot lines were likely forgotten, and general chaos no doubt ensued. Only in this giant game of telephone, the originator wasn’t in the room and there was no Google through which to verify. But like the languages they are recorded in, by tracing the roots of these tales back to the source, we see that some trace elements of the story remain the same. In this paper I make no assertions about the validity of one belief system or another; I also do not claim that one culture stole or even adopted ideas from another. Simply stated, my goal is to note the similarities and consider why these particular stories have stuck around for so long.

The Regions and Their Texts

The only way we can trace myths is through their available ancient texts. All else–and even much of what we do have–is speculation. The advent of writing changed everything. Languages began to stabilize, laws were written, grocery lists were kept, and people began to claim official statuses. The cosmological tales that I will be looking at will all derive from somewhere near the Fertile Crescent, near where language seems to have first comfortably settled. For the sake of simplicity and efficiency, the majority of research in this paper will look at five major creation myths and we will also dip into some of the neighboring stories. The *Enuma Elish* is the name given to the cosmological myths from the Mesopotamian region written in Sumero-Akkadian cuneiform. The belief systems described in the *Enuma Elish* were common around 1750 B.C. when the tablets were presumed to have been written. Around this same time, Hammurabi, king of Babylon laid out what might be the oldest set of written rules and laws that we know of. (Dalley, xii-xvi) Then we will also look at several moments regarded as canon in the texts of Christianity whose texts originated in three languages across 1,500 years including both the Old Testament and the New Testament. The name for the canonized text of Judaism is the *Tanakh* and it includes much of the Old Testament including the story of creation.

The final three of the creation myths we will look at all come from three major branches of the Indo-European languages. These “parents" of the Indo-European languages, cultures, and beliefs will be divided into three major branches: Indo-Iranian, the Roman, and the Germanic. The purpose of keeping our focus so narrow is to allow us to zero in on one particular fork in the great metaphorical tree of human history. The Proto-Indo European language (or its early successors) likely would have mingled with other major languages and their beliefs like those of the Hebrews, the Egyptians, or the Mesopotamians at a critical point in human history, creating a

new divide of before and after written language. The effects of this could be more than any historian could trace, but the more we learn about each of the Indo-European cultures and histories, the more of those pieces begin to come together and create a stable foundation.

The Indo-European languages make up just one out of 142 different language families still spoken around the world today. However, it by far has the most speakers at nearly 3.5 billion people speaking at least one of its languages as their primary language. (Eberhard) The reason for focusing on these myths and the languages from which they came is because of their influence over the most widely spread beliefs in the world today. They have served as the template for countless other mythologies and belief systems including the Greek, Chinese, Russian, Celtic, Japanese, and Australian creation myths (Lincoln, 123). Everything from ritualistic practices, idioms, and old wives tales frequently come from many of these long-forgotten myths and understanding them is a part of understanding who we are today. The vast reach of these are the reason we must limit them to so few.

The oldest of the Indo-European written pieces that we will look at are the Vedas, which were originally written in Sanskrit in the area of modern day India around 1750 B.C. Sanskrit is often thought to be the oldest of the written languages, and it is just one of the many descendants of the unwritten Proto-Indo-European language. The Vedas serve as the backbone for the Indo-Iranian branches of mythology and the canonized text of the Hindi religion. These systems of belief are likely ancestors to several others like Hinduism and Zoroastrianism. Hinduism dominates as the most popular religion in India to this day. There are four major sections of the Vedas and each one contains hundreds of hymns that praise the gods, heroes, and cosmic beings. These hymns describe and praise the history of all the great beings have done and all of what they will do.

The second Indo-European people group we will look at is the Ancient Romans. For the original creation myth of Rome, I will be looking at the writings of Livy, who lived roughly from 64 BC-AD 17 leaving him unaffected by any influence of Christianity but perceptive enough to be aware of what was Greek influence and what was Roman-made.

The final branch of the Indo-European tree that we will look at is the myths of the Nordic peoples. What is referred to as "Norse mythology" includes the myths coming from the regions of Scandinavia and the Northern Germanic peoples. These "Germanic" stories are best depicted in the *Poetic Edda* and the *Prose Edda* which were originally written in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, respectively. The *Poetic Edda* has no known author while the *Prose Edda* is credited to the Icelandic historian, Snorri Sturluson. In comparison to the other texts looked at in this paper, these writings are fairly recent which does allow for more room to fall victim to unrelated trends and beliefs (e.g. Christianity) but they are the oldest and most solid examples available. Snorri's recordings are thought to have been written in an attempt to clear any confusion of the Norse myths getting mixed up with other mythologies or systems of belief. There is no known author for the *Poetic Edda* which creates the air of mystery that so charmingly surrounds most mythologies. Interestingly enough, historians, archeologists, and linguists have been putting the pieces together and discovering a potential intermingling with sailors from the Semitic languages (Haase, 53). While this alone would not necessarily prove anything, it certainly would not hurt the theory that the Germanic peoples might have been influenced by belief systems of the Middle East long before the influence of Christianity.

While walking through examples I will shift from region to region to depict the same great myths being told through different sets of eyes and across different eras. Details and interpretations between the myths will vary across cultures, often based on the examples at hand

or the general worldview of the people, but the thematic material, symbols, characters, and structures remain the same. Just as individual churches of the world today vary in details, canonicity, and goals, so did these branches of mythology. Though I intend to touch on each myth in each of the upcoming sections I will usually focus on one story and its names and, unless otherwise stated, the version will apply generally to the other mythologies, as we will see.

The Great Nothing

"In the beginning God created the Heavens and the Earth" (English Standard Version, 2013, Genesis 1:1). This is depicted very clearly and plainly in the book of Genesis which is both the first book of the Hebrew Bible and the first book of the Christian Old Testament. But what happened before that? The consensus seems to be clear: nothing. Before there was something, there was by definition nothing–not even time. Sometimes this is described as infinite chaos, but this really just means that all was formless and so there really was no thing in particular. At one point–or rather every point–or rather no points–there wasn't anything or even anyone. There was nothing. Nothing is not a topic one can go into much depth on as the more one talks of it, the more of a "something" it becomes. But much like Descartes noted in himself, there was a thought–somewhere, or rather by someone–which quickly gave way to an "am;" an "I am," or the beginning of all consciousness (Sjödin, 47). Whoever this was is considered to be the first autonomous, free-willed agent in existence.

The *Enuma Elish,* the ancient Babylonian depiction of the creation and fall of the universe, does not say much else but that there was nothing, and then there was something:

"When skies above were not yet named

Nor earth below pronounced by name,

Apsu, the first one, their begetter

And maker, Tiamat, who bore them all,

Had mixed their waters together,

But had not formed pastures, nor discovered reed-beds…"

(Dalley, 233)

To most readers in the world today, this likely sounds similar to the Biblical version of creation. And the truth is that it is common to see one or two beings appear at the start of all things like this. In the case of Mesopotamia, Apsu is described as the first being, but creation without Tiamat also does not seem possible. Apsu was like the father being, and Tiamat was the chaos in the universe that mothered creation. Before humanity and the rest of the earth, other gods had to first come into play, but this does not in any serious way hurt the ability to see similarities across cultures.

The Bible immediately starts with Creation. A logical choice since, as we noticed, there was nothing before that. And as for God, all that is known is he was there before anyone else and he created all things. For the Creator, Yahweh, there were no other gods or beings to interfere or fight with over his position of power. No other being was or is presented as his equal.

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters…

"And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness…

> *"And God said, Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters. And God… separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse."*
>
> (English Standard Version, 2013, Genesis 1:1-2, 4, 6-7)

The first reflexive verb from God is found in verse 26 "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.'" This is the only indication in the Bible of anyone else being present at the point of creation, but it suggests an obvious willingness and intent behind the actions of God. And the implication behind all of these names and pronouns, it has been assumed and asserted, is that this is referring to God in the three forms: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The Vedic text, the first of the Indo-European myths and the oldest to which we have access, describes all of existence before creation very explicitly. The image sounds familiar. The first being is different, as we shall see, but at a first glance even the Vedic story of creation:

> *"Then was not non-existent nor existent: there was no realm of air, no sky beyond it.*
>
> *What covered in, and where? and what gave shelter? Was water there, unfathomed depth of water?*
>
> *Death was not then, nor was there aught immortal: no sign was there, the day's and night's divider.*
>
> *That One Thing, breathless, breathed by its own nature: apart from it was nothing whatsoever.*
>
> *Darkness there was: at first concealed in darkness this All was indiscriminate chaos.*
>
> *All that existed then was void and form less…"*
>
> (Griffiths, 186)

Like the *Enuma Elish* and the book of Genesis, even for the Nordic peoples the world before creation was not much to describe. They finally got around to writing down their version of what the world was like before they were there to see it in the fourteenth century. This means that the stories of the Norse spent centuries–if not a millennium or more–being altered by the various religions and languages from all over the quickly expanding world.

The *Poetic Edda* describes the state before the settlement of the cosmos:

> "*Early in time Ymir made his settlement,*
> *there was no sand nor sea nor cool waves;*
> *earth was nowhere nor the sky above,*
> *a void of yawning chaos, grass was there nowhere.*"
> (Larrington, 4)

From this point, something had to be done. Something had to be created. Matter had to be given purpose, not just shape and form, but meaning. Time itself had to be crafted before the narratives of individuals could be introduced and put to use. Once history started being made, events and inanimate aspects of the universe were given names and faces, deeper meaning, and souls of their own. It is our tendency as human beings to give all things names just like it is our tendency to see faces even where they are not. It is most certainly easier to work with something once it has a title, and eventually, a name. Naming something gives it a purpose, a goal, and a story. Naming something in the Semitic languages was seen as a sign of identification and even parenthood. Like the power of creation, they set things into motion, allowing prophecies and great legends to be played out. However, with the act of creation, there does come a price. In order to become something, someone–that is some being–had to be willing to sacrifice all they

had. In other words, his newfound titles also imposed newfound limits in regards to his placement in time and space. Limitation, including the limit to life, is the price of being.

Creation by the Regions

The story of creation in the *Enuma Elish* is rather complicated, but only a few characters are necessary to summarize the major moments. The first two major beings are the father of order, Apsu, and the mother of chaos, Tiamat. They were both described as being present in the Great Nothing, and from these two the other gods are born and begin to intermingle. Eventually Apsu tires of his children and decides to kill them so that he may have peace and quiet. Tiamat, not wanting her children to die, warns her descendants. When her great-grandson, Ea, hears of this, he puts Apsu to sleep and kills him. From Apsu's body, Ea makes his home. This is why he has also been known as "the Great Shepherd" and often referred to as "the Lord." And though Tiamat wanted to save her children, the murder of her husband was also unacceptable and not what she had planned. Tiamat then prepares for battle against her descendants. It is eventually Ea's son, Marduk, who defeats Tiamat, and out of her corpse and Apsu's, he creates the heavens and the earth and appoints roles to gods and men. (Dalley, 235-255) If nothing else this story goes to show that tropes like these do certainly exist, but the question as to why still remains.

As we have seen, the story of creation for the Christian and Jewish faiths are found in Genesis chapters 1 and 2 in the *Tanakh* and the Bible. They depict God's creation of the universe from nothing and God's creation of man and woman in his own image. The details are few and there is still much debate regarding the time spent, but compared to most other mythologies that we have and will look at, the process seems to have been fairly simple and pain free. Of course, this is just the creation aspect. Chaos is inevitable as soon as other autonomous beings enter the

picture. As to what this says about mankind, each individual culture is left to speculate for themselves as we see by the cultures they produce.

Most of the Hindi details of creation are depicted in the first of the four Vedas, the Rigveda. This is where the most famous of the creation hymn in all Vedas is found and it depicts the story of Purusha's sacrifice found in Rigveda 10:90:

> *"A thousand heads hath Purusha, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet.*
> *On every side pervading earth he fills a space ten fingers wide.*
> *This Purusha is all that yet hath been and all that is to be;*
> *The Lord of Immortality which waxes greater still by food.*
> *So mighty is his greatness; yeah, greater than this is Purusha.*
> *All creatures are one-fourth of him, three-fourths eternal life in heaven…"*
> (Griffiths, 178)

This Vedic tale, like all mythologies, has many facets which could be explored but first and foremost, it is the story of the primordial being's sacrifice which allowed all other gods and beings and things to come into existence (Brown 82). Rare is it that any theory of creation sits well with our modern scientific view of things. After all the process is often bloody, incest is frequently involved and versions vary on scope or even lessons learned, but once again we must return to that idea of an open mind devoid of modern conceptions. When we do, the structure starts to come together, and most often it seems to resemble a family tree.

From this point, the story of creation unfolds like any genealogy. In the Greek myths, Gaea, who was essentially Mother Earth, and Ouranus, who became Father and all the Heavens, join together in an embrace that creates a new world and a new order. From Gaea and Ouranus' embrace, monsters and the other first beings are born and begin to walk the face of the earth.

Some of these beings are said to have a hundred hands and fifty heads (similar to Purusha as depicted in Veda 10:90). Ouranus hated these children, considering them monstrous, and locked them up deep beneath the earth. Ouranus and Gaea, Father and Mother, then created the Cyclops and the Titans. But still Gaea still despaired over the fate of her first children. So when her next child, the Titan Cronus was born, she hid him away. The children of Ouranus and Gaea eventually overthrew their father, Ouranus, and claimed the heavens and earth for themselves with Cronus leading the charge like Ea and Marduk before him. But Cronus feared that someday like his father, his children would also plot to kill and overthrow him. In an attempt to hold on to his power, Cronus devoured his own children one after the other as soon as they were born. And like Gaea before her, and Tiamat before Gaea, Cronus's wife, Rhea, protected her youngest son who would eventually grow up to slay his own wicked father. (Hamilton, 78-93)

This cycle of violence is destined to be never-ending in many mythologies, and the Greek myths even prophesied that mankind would eventually overthrow Zeus. Until then, however, men are called to offer up sacrifices in tribute to the gods in an endless display of life and rebirth like the generations in between Tiamat and Marduk, or the Norse beings whose deaths had long been set in stone. Of course, the Greek myths were not one of the original versions we planned to examine, but their cultural importance and influence on storytelling to this day and easy access should not go ignored. Most Greek myths around this time are thought to be based on those that would have come out of India, likely even before the Vedas were written and preserved. Such stories were thought to have been passed through the Persian Courts where they would have been taken back to Greece and received a culturally approved makeover before also being written down as Greek legend.

The most sparse information of the three Indo-Iranian branches in regards to cosmology is the Roman legend. Luckily, the stories themselves are well depicted in the works of the Roman historian Livy as well as other sources that confirm no validity in regards to the truthfulness of the story, but they do show consistency. The story of Rome is not a typical creation story, and unlike the other myths examined, the Roman formation as depicted by Livy does not claim to explain the beginning of the cosmos. Instead, he describes the story of two brothers born of an innocent priestess. The king at the time took no pity on the woman and had her imprisoned and her infants sent to the river to die. Some versions say the twins were fathered by Mars, the god of war or even the legendary hero Hercules. Some say that the young priestess was raped and merely claimed the deity to be the father, but the innocence of the woman is always present. However, the story is far from over. In fact, that was all pre-creation, or more accurately pre-foundation. The twins, named Romulus and Remus, manage to survive the currents of the river and are rescued and nursed by a she-wolf. As young boys, they are taken in by a shepherd. Eventually, in a duel with robbers, Remus is kidnapped and brought to the king for punishment. The brothers and their supporters then plot to kill and overthrow the king. From there they begin to build their empire until Romulus kills Remus. (Livy, 8-11) The reason that we can still refer to this as a creation myth is because it can be traced to the original Proto-Indo-European mythology through its ties in names and specific plot points that we will continue to uncover throughout this paper.

What is sacrifice?

Ancient sacrificial practices are not often viewed in a positive or even productive light. In entertainment today ancient sacrifices are usually seen as foolish and archaic at best and

completely barbaric at worst. Still, they show up time and time again as the major crux not only in countless stories, but as the centerpiece of major religions systems of belief. Lives depend on this sacrifice, and the vicious circle of life, destruction, recreation, and sacrifice into infinity was the inevitable conclusion of all societies and the ultimate unsolvable puzzle. The rituals practiced by the ancient peoples and those who practice such beliefs today involving sacrifices often require great precision and careful, extensive practice. The purpose of such rituals was for the performers and viewers to understand beyond the literal, into the cosmological and the spiritual. Hidden in these tedious traditions is the belief that our own individual actions bear significant weight; our choices have practical consequences that we must answer for. The main reason for focusing on the sacrificial stories is because that is where so many myths begin, end, and begin again. It is one of the uniting themes in all of these ancient cultures and faiths. The symbols of these beliefs make their way into the day-to-day lives of the people who hear and tell them as we see through their artifacts, writings, and religious and communal practices.

In the oldest of the Indo-European myths we know, the Vedic, the sacrificed being is willing and chooses its own fate for the sake of others. It is still a bloody affair, but Purusha participates willingly. The very foundational assumption of sacrifice is dependent upon a higher power over which man has no control; he must seek either approval or appeasement from this higher power. It is for this reason that he must offer up a sacrifice. The performance is intended to detach any participant from his or herself. With the idea of transcending the day-to-day aspects and reminding each individual of his or her own role in the grander scheme of the universe. (Cavallin, 34) “Participants and objects in the ritual stand for, embody, and indeed actually *become* participants and objects in the larger sphere of human life and in the cosmos,”

(Sjödin, 52). These sacrificial rites, we see, stood as pillars for each faith itself. Legends or not, the stakes were real and each rite served a purpose symbolic or otherwise.

It has also been suggested, particularly for the Indo-European myths, that every sacrifice in history is simply a reenactment of the very first sacrifice. Each individual man or woman is a microcosm of the universe and the universe is a macrocosm of the individual (Lincoln, 122). By looking specifically at the sacrificial tales we will dive into the complexity that is growing, dying, changing, and advancing–or at the very least, adapting and understanding. It is the foundation of life itself. The end of widespread ancient sacrificial practices is frequently correlated with the death of Jesus Christ and the subsequent rise of Christianity (Larson, 63). To leave the subject out would be to write an intentional plot hole, ignoring one of the most pivotal moments in recorded human history. Most major and still active religions gave up regular sacrificial practices for one reason or another, and so they have since fallen out of the norm in today's age, but traces of them still remain. By returning to this root of sacrifice itself and how that theme intermingled with its neighbors, we can better understand our own beliefs, why they came about the way they did, and how they have played a role in shaping a society. The Mediterranean was a hotbed of clashing cultures at the time of Jesus Christ after Julius Caesar and Alexander with influences from Egypt, Mesopotamia, India, and whoever might have been wandering the steppes of Russia. And outward from the eye of that storm of civilization is a hurricane difficult to untangle.

With creation came the discovery of limitations, and thus, death. "In the Vedic worldview the sacrifice is the realm that mediates between the cosmic and the personal and mundane" (Jamison, 19). In the Vedic texts, it is the first being, Purusha, who serves as the universal sacrifice who is the first to die. Most Hindi scholars would agree that another version of him

arose in the Hindi god of death, Yama (coming from the word “yemo” meaning “twin”) but that the two were later differentiated (Lincoln, 138). In the book of Genesis, death is promised to Adam and Eve as a result of eating from the forbidden tree. However, the first to die is their son, the innocent Abel who was murdered by his brother Cain. This is considered an even worse crime as Abel was known as faithful to God and good at bringing the best sacrifices. Cain killed Abel out of his anger with God for approving of Abel’s sacrifice and not Cain’s. The theme of sacrifice is presented with very different but important details of the stories.

Violent acts like fratricide, patricide, matricide, regicide, and all the killings always seem to find their way into ancient stories. Perhaps the dramatic story itself has been strong enough to keep it alive, or perhaps such violence is inevitable, but I think there is something even more than that. As an example, violence plays a prominent role in Norse mythology. If one wanted to obtain eternal holy life, he was required to die valiantly in battle (Larrington, 49; DuBois, 82). Much of Nordic mythology focuses on Ragnarok, or the final battle between the gods of the universe. But what is interesting about both of these end-of-the-world stories is that they are just that: stories of the world ending. From that point, it seems the whole reason for religion is to celebrate what is to come after this world or life ends. They gave birth to something new, again and again: an eternal sacrifice.

The Original Sacrifice

At times, the primordial being depicted in a mythology is androgynous and capable of asexual reproduction such as in the case of the Nordic Ymir, or arguably even the God of Bible once both the Old and New Testaments have been taken into account. From it all things are divided and formed in and of the universe. Oftentimes this explicitly refers to material and non-

material things. Pronouns appear to be up to the storyteller, or more likely, are dependent upon cultural and gender norms as they vary across time and text. The Germanic tale, for example, appears to be satisfied with an androgynous first being, whereas the Indian tales tend to take a more masculine perspective–a trait not uncommon for the culture which undeniably valued the role of masculinity over that of femininity. This is further played out and exaggerated in the mythologies that root from each of the Indo-European branches.

Much like language, it does not take a long look at comparative mythologies (or singular mythologies, for that matter) before things start to get fuzzy. Tales get twisted, names get mixed up, and scribes make mistakes. Like comic books written by multiple authors across multiple decades, it gets more and more difficult for people to agree on who the "real Thor" is. But once enough information is available we can weed through the details and determine at the very least the general structure and meaning of the thing. There is no obvious holy sacrifice in the *Enuma Elish*. But it is still from the defeated body parts of deities (namely from the chaos goddess, Tiamat) that the heavens and the earth are eventually formed by the hero, Marduk. (Dalley, 237) Perhaps it is a stretch to refer to this as a "sacrifice" on the part of Marduk and his contemporary gods, but the actions and consequences are still the same as in other mythologies including the Vedic and Nordic Indo-European mythologies.

In the Vedas, the creation of all the universe is described in the sacrificial hymn of the primordial being Purusha. The name Purusha is literally translated to "man" (which may also explain the name change from "twin" as depicted in the Proto-Indo-European version of the myth) and over and over throughout the Vedas, "man" is called upon to practice his sacrificial rites. In hymn 10:90 of the Rigveda, the story is told of how all other gods gathered together to prepare and offer up Purusha is told. "From that great general sacrifice," it is said, "the dripping

fat was gathered up. He formed the creatures of the air, and animals both wild and tame" and from it, all things were born (Griffiths, 178). Faiths like Hinduism conclude that if we all come from the same materials, we must all be connected to one another; we must be one. It is undoubtedly more comfortable to imagine life as an unending, un-beginning circle.

The Norse story of creation is similar to that of the *Enuma Elish* except that it is considered an outright sacrifice:

> *"From Ymir's flesh the earth was shaped,*
> *And the mountains from his bones;*
> *The sky from the skull of the frost-cold giant,*
> *And the sea from his blood."*
> (Larrington, 40)

The necessity of this act is depicted in other verses from the *Poetic Edda* such as the prophetic poem "Voluspa" or "The Seeress' Prophecy" where a priestess recounts the very beginning of all things, long before even the gods. And it is further repeated in other poems like "Grimnismal" and "Hyndluliod" which both provide for much of the known mythological facts of the Norse peoples.

Some other cultures, however, took the idea of sacrifice down a different road. As we have seen, the Roman origin story is more one of foundation than creation, and the role of the sacrificed became greatly downplayed, but the important details remain. These changes likely came about as a result of centuries worth of Romanization and of oral tradition altering details such as the replacing of a bovine with a wolf and the names of some of the leading figures. As an example, the name Remus–who was killed by his brother Romulus–has been recognized as having very direct ties to the Proto-Indo- European "Yemo" or "twin" figure who was to be

sacrificed by his own brother (Lincoln, 138). Conflict arose between the brothers when the time came to name their city. In an argument, Remus is said to have jumped over the new walls dividing his side from his brother's, at which point Romulus became so angered he struck Remus dead. (Livy, 9-11)

The purpose for such a death is not always clear. Especially in a case like that of Romulus and Remus. Perhaps it was simply the determining of the name. Perhaps one needed a blank canvas with which to work. Some cultures, like the Indo-Iranians and Egyptians who wrote the Vedas, depict the first being to die as becoming the god of the Afterlife. Interestingly enough, the Egyptian tale depicts the god of death and resurrection, Osiris, as being killed and dismembered by his brother, Set. (McDowell, 384) The Egyptian myths have not been used in this paper because they come from an entirely different time period altogether and they span so many centuries. It is even more uncertain to make assumptions about any beliefs of Egyptians in the Old Kingdom. Other later cultures, however, like the Nordic and the Mesopotamian, simply use the parts and carry on.

It is not enough in these stories for different points of view to come together. In fact, they cannot and will not function as a worldwide jigsaw puzzle whose final image will solve all problems. Instead, these are pieces broken apart that countless cultures have attempted to reassemble through new forms of mythology or meaning. Jagged explanations get shoved into square holes and chaos inevitably ensues.

Allow us to return to the Bible and that image of Abel being murdered by his brother. They were the original children born and raised in lives cursed by sin. Cain, the first being to truly be born according to Genesis, and Abel, the first being to die, are accidentally pitted against one another because of the sacrifices they have offered up. The text seems to be clear that the

value of the sacrifices was a matter of quality from the sacrificers, going against what Eve had named them for and anticipated for them. The name Abel means a type of "emptiness," "frail breath," or "vapor." (English Standard Version, 2013). Essentially it is without substance because it came after its brother. The extra, the spare, the "twin." The sacrifice in this story does not play a role in creation, but it does appear to be a religious practice by all definitions that we have seen and it plays a major role at the start of the world and the creation of different people groups as Cain eventually flees and develops his own race of people.

The Original Sacrificer

Every sacrifice needs a sacrificer to perform the ritual and to receive the blessings. This leads us to the other side of the coin and blessing. We know who has died, but who performed the action is usually a different matter entirely with a whole new world of consequences. The violence depicted in each story is often quite telling of the values possessed by the people who originally told them. And as we shall see, some motives for killing are more or less noble than others.

There is no singular Sacrificer in the *Enuma Elish*. If anyone were to be given credit it would likely be Marduk who was famous in the Babylonian empire for having conquered the great mother of chaos, Tiamat, and creating the heavens and the earth from her remains (Dalley, 237). This was, of course, after the first formations we looked at but before the creation or presence of mankind.

> *"[Marduk] divided the monstrous shape and created marvels*
>
> *He sliced her in half like a fish for drying:*
>
> *Half of her he put up to roof the sky…*

Her waters he arranged so that they could not escape…

He opened the Euphrates and the Tigris from her eyes…"

(Dalley, 255-257)

In the *Enuma Elish* mankind is not created except as an afterthought as justice is brought out after the war with Tiamat. Ea, "the Lord", is then said to have formed men from the blood of another sacrifice. From there he doled out responsibilities to men and gods alike. (Dalley, 261-262)

Returning to the book of Genesis, with Cain and Abel the audience gets an example of both a man who was good and holy, contrasted with another man who was not, as seen by the quality of his sacrifice. The name of Eve's first son, Cain, is "to acquire" or "to create" in the sense of building a city (English Standard Version, 2013). Compare this to her second son, the "emptiness" or "vapor" that Eve named her second son after. In addition, it has been suggested that the one occurrence and the word "conceived" and the two occurrences of the phrase "bore" in Genesis 4 suggests that Cain and Abel were possibly twins. A detail not imperative to the story, but interesting to note the appearance of twins yet again so early in the story of history. Of course, the story of Cain and Abel is obviously one of walls and wars like Romulus and Remus, but it does end in the death of one and the great empire of another.

As we have seen in the Vedas, Purusha is described as being the first being, from which all things–including the Hindi gods–were created. The other gods are described as the beings who sacrifice Purusha, and maybe this is true when we consider they all became separate autonomous beings. The image may not be as pretty as the Indian version. In sacrificing itself, Purusha gave birth to all other beings.

> *"The sacrifice drawn out with threads on every side, stretched by a hundred sacred ministers and one, –*
>
> *This do these Fathers weave who hitherward are come: they sit beside the warp and cry, Weave forth, weave back.*
>
> *The Man extends it and the Man unbines it..."*
>
> (Griffiths, 187)

This translation of "the Man" may indicate the involvement of one other first being at creation besides Purusha. Perhaps it is the brotherly figure that is so often depicted in other tales. Perhaps it is a necessary counter to balance out all things that appear in the form of chaos and order, light and dark, good and bad.

For the Romans, Livy depicted the story as a historical event with Romulus killing his twin brother, Remus. His name, Romulus, has not been shown to have any direct ties to "Manu," but the figure essentially plays the same role. From that point, Romulus was free to build the city under his own name.

The *Poetic Edda* describes Odin leading his brothers Vili and Ve in the violent, warlike act of destroying their great-grand-being, using its body to form all of the Nine Realms in the World (or Universal) Tree, Yggdrasil. From what they formed of Ymir's body they created and ruled. This is what makes Odin the "Allfather" as he created all things and he became the ideal candidate for the translation of "Yahweh" into "God." The Nordic gods themselves lived above, as if in the branches of the tree in the realm called Asgard. Humans lived as if in the trunk, right at the heart, called Midgard. (Larrington, 4)

From His Body

Returning to the theme of creation and the dismemberment of one for the foundation of all and what came from the body of that time and time again, even when it is not explicitly for that purpose, deities die and are used for parts. It's no wonder that many cultures have come to some understanding of a "circle of life" that endlessly nourishes and renourishes life through death. Furthermore, this is why we still ask "Is there life after death?" even though that is literally a contradictory sentence, and yet it is the hope that all sacrificial acts put their faith into.

It is common amongst Christians to hear the phrase "the body of Christ" and to refer to different people serving different roles as different parts of the body. Paul, in his letters to the Corinthians, compares parts of the body to roles in the church and in society and church. But this is only after the idea and practice of Communion has been established by the sacrifice himself. Phrases have been changed and ideas altered but the underlying act remains. "This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me" and "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood…" Christ tells his disciples (English Standard Version, 2013, Luke 22:19-20). The practice of Communion includes several factors that tie it back to an ancient understanding of religious practices. The practice as a whole is to do in honor of Christ who died upon the cross. This story is repeated and practiced, like other religious rites, in the place of a sacrifice.

Parts of the body have been long associated with religious practices and roles within a belief system. I hesitate to call them "religions" because they were not so much matters of beliefs, but simply the way things were within that culture. (Ptacek, 78) Within the Vedas describing creation the pieces of Purusha are handed out to specific groups of people such as the Sidhyas, the Rishas, the Brahman, and the Vaisya (Griffiths, 178). Similar to the body of Ymir

whose pieces are spread about throughout the cosmos. Though the *Poetic Edda* depiction of Ymir did not hand out roles like the body of Christ described the people of the church as serving different functions.

This does not apply to all stories. Obviously, Romulus could not make entire galaxies from the body of his brother, Remus, but the consequences are essentially the same and it does segway us into the final image seen throughout mythology that we will examine in this paper. Furthermore, had Romulus and Remus taken a more global perspective, perhaps they too would have been deified as the founders of their empire. What, after all, does the sacrifice itself (or his or herself) have to gain from the sacrifice? It's a question commonly asked of deities and humans alike.

Cursed is He Who is Hanged From the Tree

The final theme that we have not discussed but certainly should cover given the subject matter is the issue of willingness on the part of the sacrifice. It does not seem that anyone in the *Enuma Elish* willingly passed on and gave up their power. World-renowned mythologist, Joseph Campbell has taken note of this Willing Victim who is offered to be "slain, dismembered, and buried" and from whom all future things are born and grow (Campbell, 43). Death by hanging was a very specific kind of execution reserved for kings and other men placed in high positions (English Standard Version, 2013, Joshua 8:29, 10:26) This is why in the book of Deuteronomy it is said that "his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God" (English Standard Version, 2013, 21:23).

As we have seen, there are different types of sacrifices in different mythologies. There are the sacrifices which are created by destruction and conquering, there are the manmade

depictions and acts of service and faith, and there are the final sacrifices which create order from chaos, ultimately by facing consequences and having to pay their price. In most cases there is an evil, or at the very least an unknown that is seemingly insurmountable. Only the hero can restore the balance that has been lost. When it comes to mythology, the farthest back we can really trace back to is the Old Kingdom of Egypt which reigned from roughly 2686-2181 B.C. In these myths, much like Odin, the young hero Horus, was said to have journeyed to the Underworld and defeated the great and evil Set. In the process he, too, lost an eye, but it was restored and became a symbol of wisdom and redemption. (McDowell, 385)

Most mythologies, it seems, are not satisfied with just one sacrifice. In fact one of the major themes appears to be the idea of continually sacrificing oneself in the hopes of creating a better future through the circle of life, and all. A new question then must be asked: Is there an end to this cycle of violence and rebirth? Perhaps, but it seems only when all is lost. And even then, violence, sin, injustice, all of these things seem to rear their ugly heads and it all begins again. These are reminiscent of Purusha's willingness to be sacrificed for the sake of the universe and for the sake of anything and everything. It would make sense for Odin, who is thought to have gained popularity throughout the development of the Nordic regions over time, though he was most likely originally overshadowed by the god of war, Tyr (Larrington, xiv). Odin, the Allfather earned his place in prominence, sacrificed himself to himself.

From the poem Hávamál, or "Sayings of the High One", stanza 138:

"I know that I hung on a windswept tree

nine long nights,

wounded with a spear, dedicated to Odin,

myself to myself

on that tree of which no man knows

from where its roots run."

(Larrington, 32)

Odin did this upon the great World tree, Yggdrasil. We've seen this tree and others like it before. Some associate it with one of the trees described in the Garden of Eden book of Genesis, and some tie it to the cross or the "tree" on which Jesus was crucified. Contrast this with Judas, who is thought to have been left to hang for so long that his body eventually fell from the tree and burst open (Matt. 27:5; Acts 1:18). Though Odin's sacrifice was not for forgiveness or propitiation, it was greatly beneficial for him and all his subjects. For his journey and his suffering, Odin is rewarded with wisdom and ancient knowledge (Larrington, 32).

It would seem that many different creation stories and sacrifices find this tree. It serves as a perpetual source of life, even portraying the seasons as they go. There was the "Tree of Humanity" in the Vedas and later myths of Iran which is thought to have "stirred the seas of the Milky Way" (Taheri, 2013) Many have suggested that this tree is one of the trees Adam and Eve came across in the Garden of Eden. At the tree, they sacrificed their relationship with God for knowledge of the world. This is not seen as much of a positive thing as most of the other sacrifices we have seen. They are closed off from that tree and the garden in which it grows, where they had direct contact with God. In the same way, the ordinary people of Earth or Midgard or whatever the religion of the day is calling it, do not have direct access to any other higher being. Mankind is left to speculate and forever depend on that being whom he may never fully know.

Conclusion

Joseph Campbell spent his life studying myths and legends from around the world, and the more he wrote the more he found. Campbell wrote in his book *Myths to Live By* that "[f]acts of the mind manifest in a fiction of matter" (12). Though not a believer in the supernatural in any way, Campbell dedicated his life to studying these very types of patterns across histories and in particular, their mythologies. My intention is not to present a lesser form of study than his, but to show that the search is far from over.

I am fascinated by examining myths across cultures. The stories people tell are reflective not just of the individual telling the story, but of the society that is shaping that individual and everyone else involved. A good story combines narrative with a higher truth. There is a lesson to be learned from it. It would be all too easy to push it aside as escapist nonsense, but stories dominating societies during moments of great cultural shifts are more telling than we give them credit for in our extremely logical day and age. Life for the individual is too short to watch the cosmos change and too long to do nothing about it. So what is a man left to do about it? All he can do is make a legacy. And even if it is not he who lives eternally through the story, he has at least existed for something greater, and something worth believing in and dying for.

The psychoanalyst Carl Jung spoke extensively of archetypes and there seems to be a great divide amongst scholars regarding the legitimacy of such claims, and though the significance of Jung's studies specifically are not of necessary importance, they do once again beg that question: is there any truth to the myths our ancestors told? Along each historical route we've taken, there seem to be some moments in history that the world wraps itself around, including moments before the written words were at hand. And then some more when the written word was around. As to metaphor, description, explanation, or misinterpretation, who is to say

what these various versions are accurate. But when we take a step back, an outline begins to appear. Like constellations in the sky once seen they cannot be unseen, and our entire worldviews may begin to develop around these figures and schemas that we've had played out to us in the form of a story. Be it the parental figures of Adam and Eve (the Sky and the Earth), or the brothers turned rivals like Romulus and Remus, or even the great cosmic being who gave everything to create the universe.

The purpose of studying ancient myths is not easy to explain on a pragmatic level. And especially, the deeper one digs into such myths, the more anyone would realize that our stories never really change. But just because the tale is from long ago and just because it sounds familiar doesn't mean it does not feature daily nuisances and delights. It doesn't matter if you wander the sacred temples of India or the bars of Nashville, you'll find the town drunk. Along the way, you might also find a wise old traveler or a kind woman with faith strong enough to move mountains. The reason for returning to these old, old stories is not simply to know our roots but to see where we're going–or rather where we should be going. At the dawn of all creations, there were standards set. Implicitly or explicitly, the standards were put into place and are now there. Epic tales often begin when men (or gods) do not live up to those standards. The more we look at old stories, the more unoriginal we realize we are. But looking at old stories–be they from our fathers or our neighbors we begin to see ourselves in endlessly different lights. And through this, we may become masters of our own fates, and thus, the world's or even that of beyond.

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