### **An Introduction to Origin Stories**

*By Cynthia Stokes Brown, adapted by Newsela*

Everywhere around the world people tell stories about how the world began. Different cultures tell different stories about how the Universe started and where humans came from. Scholars call these tales “creation myths” or “origin stories.”

Some origin stories are based on real people and events. Others, however, use a bit more imagination. Origin stories can contain powerful, emotional symbols. They can feature heroes and gods with great powers. They may tell deep truths about how humans relate to nature. But, they are not always based on facts. They help explain where that culture came from and how it fits into the Universe.

When people in a culture learn to read, they write down their origin stories. But the stories frequently go back way before written records. Before a group of people could write they told stories to each other. Then they handed them down verbally to others. This is called an “oral tradition.” Multiple versions of each story often exist. As people retell them they may change them slightly. From group to group, and generation to generation, stories change. The stories here come from a wide number of places and eras. Feel free to tell them aloud to each other.

**1. Big Bang: The Modern Scientific Origin Story**

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The Big History is told as a modern origin story. This one is based on scientific evidence, not oral tradition. It comes from knowledge gathered by humans on Earth. It summarizes a great collection of historical and scientific information.

In the beginning, there was nothing. There was just darkness. Suddenly, from a single point, all the energy in the Universe burst forth. That moment was 13.8 billion years ago. Since then, the Universe has been expanding. And as it gets bigger it cools down.

Gradually energy cooled enough to become matter. One electron could stay in orbit around one proton to become an atom of hydrogen. Great clouds of hydrogen atoms swirled around space. Then gravity pulled some atoms so close together that they began to burn as stars. Stars swirled together in giant clusters called galaxies. Today, the number of galaxies is in the billions.

After each star burned up all its matter, it died in a huge explosion. The explosion was so hot, some of the atoms got stuck together. As they joined, they got more and more complex. That allowed them to form many different elements, including gold and silver.

One giant star, our mother star, exploded. The explosion scattered clouds of gas containing all the elements needed to form living beings. About 5 billion years ago, gravity pulled these atoms into a new star that became the Sun. The leftover pieces of matter stuck to each other and formed eight planets. These planets revolve around the Sun and make up our solar system.

#### ***Perfect size, perfect distance***

The third planet out from the Sun, Earth, became our home. It was the perfect size — not too big, not too small. And it was the perfect distance from the Sun. If it had been too far away it would be too cold. Too close, and our planet would be too warm.

A thin crust formed over Earth’s hot interior. The temperature on the surface was just right for water to form. Gradually the chemicals in the water formed inside of little sacks called membranes, which protected them from the water. Inside the membranes, one-celled living things appeared. Those organisms were able to survive and reproduce.

For 3 billion years these one-celled creatures reproduced almost exactly, but not quite. They gradually changed in response to their environment.

But they also changed their environment. They learned to burn energy from the sun. And they released oxygen into the atmosphere. The oxygen formed an ozone layer around Earth that protected life from the Sun’s rays.

Eventually, cells stuck together to form creatures with many cells. Plants and animals came out of the sea and onto land. They became more and more complex and aware. Then about 100,000 years ago human beings came onto the scene. We evolved from a shared ancestor with the species of apes.

Humans could talk in symbols and sing, dance, draw, and cooperate more than the other animals could. Humans learned to write. Importantly, we began to collect our learning together so that it kept expanding. Humans increased in skills and in numbers. In some places, there were too many people and too few big animals.

Then humans learned to grow their own food and herd their own animals. Some animals learned to cooperate with humans. This gave humans new sources of food and animals helped them do work. This led to people living in larger and larger groups. These groups expanded into cities and empires. As humankind grew it used more and more of the resources of Earth. Humans collaborated and learned collectively in more complex ways; they traveled, traded, and exchanged inventions. They created vast civilizations of astonishing beauty and complexity.

Humans were always looking for more energy to use. About 200 years ago, we learned to use the energy from coal. We found this hard rock buried underground. Coal actually came from trees that grew more than 300,000 years ago. Over time the trees became fossils. Now we burn coal for heat and electricity.

Humans also learned to burn oil to create energy. Like coal, oil helped create heat and electricity. It also powered cars and planes. Like coal, we have to dig it up. Oil comes from the remains of tiny animals like algae and plankton buried long ago under the sea and fossilized. As we burned these fossil fuels, the gases they released drifted up into the atmosphere. The human need for more and more energy began to change the climate quickly.

Now humans are in a difficult situation. Fossil fuels are running out. Yet, our population is growing quickly. We are pushing many plants and other animals into extinction. As a result of all this, we are changing the climate. What are we humans going to do next?

**2. An Aboriginal origin story: The Rainbow Serpent**

Here is a recount of an Aboriginal origin story involving the Rainbow Serpent:

In the Dreamtime, all earth lay sleeping. Nothing moved. Nothing grew. One day the Rainbow Serpent awoke from her slumber and came out from under the ground.

She travelled far and wide and eventually grew tired and curled up and slept. She left marks of her sleeping body and her winding tracks. Then she returned to the place where she had first appeared, and called to the frogs, “Come out!”

The frogs came out slow because their bellies were heavy with water, which they had stored in their sleep. The Rainbow serpent tickled their stomachs and when the frogs laughed, water ran all over the earth to fill the tracks of the Rainbow serpents’ wanderings. This is how lakes and rivers were formed.

With water, grass and trees sprang up. Also all animals awoke and followed the rainbow serpent across the land. They were happy on earth and each lived and gathered food with his own tribe. Some animals live in rocks, others on the plains and others in trees and in the air.

The Rainbow Serpent made laws that they all were to obey, but some became quarrelsome and made trouble. The Rainbow Serpent said,” Those who keep my laws will be rewarded; I shall give them human form. Those who break my laws will be punished and turned to stone, never to walk the earth again.

The lawbreakers became stone and turned to mountains and hills, but those who kept the laws were turned into human form. The Rainbow Serpent gave each of them their own totem of the animal, bird or reptile from whence they came. The tribes knew themselves by their totems. Kangaroo, emu, carpet snake, and many, many more. So no one would starve, the Rainbow Serpent ruled that no man should eat of his totem, but only of other totems. This way there was food for everyone.

The tribes lived together on the land given to them by the Rainbow Serpent or Mother of Life and knew the land would always be theirs, and no one should ever take it from them.

## **3. Genesis: The Judeo-Christian Origin Story**

*By Big History Project, adapted by Newsela*

This biblical story comes from Genesis, the first book of the Old Testament, which is the sacred source book for both Jews and Christians. In Genesis, this story is followed immediately by a second creation story in Chapter 2. In the second, God creates man from dust and places him in the Garden of Eden.

These stories were written down thousands of years ago. They evolved into the form in which we know them around 450 BCE, about 2,460 years ago.

**Genesis: Chapter 1**

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the Earth, the Earth was a shapeless hole of nothing. Darkness was everywhere. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning. This marked the first day.

And God said, “Let there be a dome between the waters to separate water from water.” So God made the dome and separated the water under the dome from the water above it. And it was so. God called the dome “sky.” And there was evening, and there was morning. This marked the second day.

And God said, “Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.” And it was so. God called the dry ground “land,” and the gathered waters he called “seas.” And God saw that it was good. Then God said, “Let the land produce vegetation.” And it was so. The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed of every kind and trees bearing fruit with seed in it of every kind. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning. This marked the third day.

And God said, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night.” And it was so. God made two great lights — the Sun to govern the day and the Moon to govern the night. He also made the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light on the Earth, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning. This marked the fourth day.

And God said, “Let the water teem with living creatures.” So God created the great creatures of the sea and winged birds. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the Earth.” And there was evening, and there was morning. This marked the fifth day.

And God said, “Let the land produce living creatures of every kind” And it was so. God made all the creatures that move along the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, in our likeness."

So God created humankind in his own image; male and female. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number." He put humans in charge of the Earth: "Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole Earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the Earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground — everything that has the breath of life in it — I give every green plant for food.” And it was so. God saw all that he had made. It was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning. This marked the sixth day.

Thus the heaven and the Earth were finished. And on the seventh day God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. God blessed the seventh day. He made it a holy day because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.