



## What is a Myth?

When you look up at the sky, you see the sun, moon, clouds, meteors, comets, planets, and stars. You may recognize certain star patterns (called *constellations*) such as the Big Dipper and the Little Dipper (also called the Big Bear and the Little Bear). You might know the names of the nine planets: Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto. Did you know that many of the names of these heavenly bodies come from myths?

What are myths?

Myths are stories of a special kind. They are created to give values to persons, places, and things. Myths respond to our need for some kind of reassurance and meaning in the universe.

Myths are traditional tales of a particular people—Indians, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and others—and are especially connected with religious beliefs and rituals performed at public festivals. These rites were believed to invoke a type of magic that would aid the growth of crops and promote stability in the land. Out of these rituals came songs, poems, and stories which explained how people acquired basic things like simple speech, fire, grain, wine, oil, honey, agriculture, metal work, and other skills and arts.

A myth is an attempt to explain other things, as well, such as a certain custom or practice of a human society (like a religious rite), or a natural process, like the apparent daily motion of the sun across the skies. In their imaginations the Greeks of ancient times saw a man driving across the heavens in a chariot drawn by fiery horses. When evening came, he dipped into the western ocean, and while he slept he was carried back eastward along the earth's northern rim in a golden boat shaped like a bowl. Even today children might hear their parents say at sunset: "Now he's going down—now his feet, now his body, and now the top of his head." Sometimes it's fun—even for modern people—to give human characteristics to non-human objects.



Myths were passed down by storytellers from generation to generation.