



BIG HISTORY PROJECT

1050L

ORIGIN STORIES

INTRODUCTION

By Cynthia Stokes Brown

All humans yearn to know
where we came from
and how our world began.
We may have different
stories, but they all serve
a similar purpose.



Everywhere around the world people tell stories about how the Universe began and how humans came into being. Scholars, namely anthropologists and ethnologists, call these tales “creation myths” or “origin stories.” In comic-book lingo there is a specialized meaning for “origin stories.” They are accounts that relate how superheroes got their superpowers.

Some origin stories are based on real people and events, while others are based on more imaginative accounts. Origin stories can contain powerful, emotional symbols that convey profound truths, but not necessarily in a literal sense. In the United States, many people tell stories about Santa Claus. But everyone, except young children, knows that he is a symbol of love and generosity, not a person who actually exists. Many cultures tell stories that seem strange to outsiders but have deep meaning to group members.

When people in a culture become literate, they write down their origin stories. But the stories frequently go back way before written records, to when people told them aloud. This is called an “oral tradition.” Multiple versions of each story often exist, since people — from group to group and generation to generation — may change them slightly as they retell them. I have chosen to summarize, in writing, five origin stories from a wide number of places and eras — feel free to tell them aloud to each other.

Origin stories comparison chart

Use this chart to highlight the differences — and any similarities — between the origin stories you read:

	Chinese	Greek	Iroquois	Judeo-Christian	Mayan	Modern Scientific
Source of the world						
Originator of the world						
How Earth formed						
Age of Earth						
First life forms						
How humans formed						
Relationship between humans & animals/plants						

Image credits

An illustration of Zeus crowned by Victory

© Bettmann/CORBIS

An illustration of the Iroquois prayer of Thanksgiving

© National Geographic Society/CORBIS

Detail of God from *Creation of Adam* by Michelangelo Buonarroti

© Alinari Archives/CORBIS

Planetary nebula NGC6210, in Hercules constellation

© ESA/Hubble and NASA

An illustration of Pan Gu from the *Sancai Tuhui*,
public domain

Creation by Diego Rivera

© Christie's Images/CORBIS

Telling stories by the fire

© Gideon Mendel/CORBIS

NEWSELA

Articles leveled by Newsela have been adjusted along several dimensions of text complexity including sentence structure, vocabulary and organization. The number followed by L indicates the Lexile measure of the article. For more information on Lexile measures and how they correspond to grade levels: <http://www.lexile.com/about-lexile/lexile-overview/>

To learn more about Newsela, visit www.newsela.com/about.



The Lexile® Framework for Reading

The Lexile® Framework for Reading evaluates reading ability and text complexity on the same developmental scale. Unlike other measurement systems, the Lexile Framework determines reading ability based on actual assessments, rather than generalized age or grade levels. Recognized as the standard for matching readers with texts, tens of millions of students worldwide receive a Lexile measure that helps them find targeted readings from the more than 100 million articles, books and websites that have been measured. Lexile measures connect learners of all ages with resources at the right level of challenge and monitors their progress toward state and national proficiency standards. More information about the Lexile® Framework can be found at www.Lexile.com.