When They Severed Earth from Sky: How the Human Mind Shapes Myth.


MOUNT MAZAMA violently erupted over 7,600 years ago creating beautiful Crater Lake, which slowly filled the caldera formed by the mountain’s collapse. A Klamath Indian legend tells of a Chief of the Below World who, spurned by a lovely maiden, caused the mountain to shake and red hot rocks and burning ash to fall like rain. The eruption only ceased when tribal medicine men sacrificed themselves to appease the angry chief.

The Barbers (one studies Old World archeology and linguistics; the other, comparative literature and folklore) make a strong case that many myths have evolved out of similar events. Their point is that before the invention of writing, myths served as way to transmit important information, i.e. actual events, across generations. The authors, starting with a few myths whose historical origins are independently known, noted many specific principles uniting myth language and cognition. They collapsed these into “mytho-linguistic” principles; silence, analogy, compression, and restructuring. To briefly define these principles: silence is what everyone is expected to know and is not explained in so many words; analogy, if any entities or phenomena bear some resemblance in any aspect, they must be related; compression, when two things originally viewed as related come to be viewed as one (compression of information); restructuring, whenever there is a significant cultural change, some patterns will be restructured and eventually render the form of the pattern un-understandable to its users. The authors have many sub-principles under each main category, all for the purpose of analyzing the “events” behind many myths.

The book offers many cross-cultural examples of myths that have been passed down through the ages and distorted by the peculiarities of our cognition until nothing remains of the original story. Several examples stand out of how myths become distorted over time. The Old Testament relates how the Egyptians held the Children of Israel in cruel captivity. An Egyptian account, probably of the same event, tells how the Hyksos, a Semitic people, from Levant invaded and ruled for several centuries until they were driven out.

The Barbers point out that the restructuring of myths continues. Jung used the Greek gods Apollo, Dionysus, Epimetheus, and Prometheus to represent his classifications of temperaments. Freud completely reinterpreted the myth of Oedipus to suit his theory that men desire their mothers. (Oedipus actually ran away to avoid marrying his mother Jocasta upon hearing the prophecy.) The book has a long and difficult chapter on how ancient man used the sky and stars to measure time and the seasons as agriculture grew in importance.

Myths are often seen as fables that convey “truths” about human nature or the universals of the human condition, but are clearly not based on facts. The Barbers, through linguistic and cognitive analysis, say some myths may have their roots in reality, and were told to record and preserve prehistoric events. It does change the way one views myths. Looking at the myth of Prometheus as an interpretative report of the eruption of the volcano, Elbrus, instead of the legend of a delinquent god punished for stealing Zeus's is less romantic - but it may be closer to what actually happened.