

# The Loom: Teaching Mythology—Why and How?

## TEACHING MYTHOLOGY: WHY DO IT, AND HOW?

Some Christians object to teaching small children about the mythologies of other cultures, fearing that they will be confused and begin thinking that Bible stories are myths, or that pagan myths carry the same spiritual weight as Bible stories. We feel that if you present mythology in the context of pre-Christian cultures, your child will understand,<sup>1</sup> but this is up to your discretion as a parent, of course. In weeks where mythology is featured prominently, we have tried to also include enough alternate material that parents who are convinced that studying mythology is not God's will for their children should have plenty to do in a given week. We suggest that if you are attracted to both the assignments that include mythology and those that don't in a given week, that you simply take two weeks to cover the plan. Another idea is to make a note to come back to alternate assignments during an upcoming vacation or maybe during your summer vacation.

### Here are our reasons for including directions for the study of mythology for all students.

It is a popular secular theory that mythology represents a segment of man's religious progression. The general theory goes something like this:

1. First, man was a caveman on the earth. Because he did not understand the world scientifically and was fearful, he invented and prayed to "gods of nature." Thus, the sun, the earth, the wind, etc. were all gods. (This is not totally without grounding, of course. As we will see, many early pantheons are comprised of "nature gods.")
2. Later, people developed higher, more consistent forms of religion, which we call mythologies, with nature gods fixed into stories that explained the world and gave people a sense of meaning. Mythologies also defined people's abilities to affect their own life through piety, sacrifice, and other rituals. Sumerian, Egyptian, and Greek myths and their associated rituals would be in this category.
3. Man developed further, and monotheistic religions were born: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.
4. Later still, as man understood more and more science, and as the established religions were clearly corrupted or scientifically disproved, religion ceased to be important to man. Man rose above his need for religion by means of secular knowledge, which explained his world and removed his need for "gods." This is the basic position of many in our secularized society today.
5. The (largely) unspoken direction of this evolutionary theory of religion is that the only reality is man himself. Man will perfect himself through science and reason to become master of all: his physical body (immortality through medicine), his world (control of environment through buildings, roads, and proper management of natural resources), and eventually, his universe (through space travel and colonization). Indeed, some major heresies preach this view openly: Mormons and New Age groups believe that men are destined to be gods.

Romans 1 teaches an entirely different, true understanding for the place of mythology in the history of man, and you will need to set mythology in this context over and over as you teach it.

### Romans 1:18-32

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, [19] since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. [20] For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

[21] For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. [22] Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and [23] exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

[24] Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. [25] They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

[26] Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. [27] In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

[28] Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. [29] They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed

<sup>1</sup> The Unit 1 introduction goes into this subject in greater detail than space will permit here.

and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, [30] slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; [31] they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. [32] Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

Biblical revelation teaches that man is not "progressing" in an "evolution of religion;" rather, he knows what is right because God has revealed His attributes in Creation. Yet man refuses to honor God and thank Him. Therefore, his foolish heart is darkened and his cultures fall into idolatry and sin. Honoring and thanking God, and worshipping His Son Jesus for His death on the cross, are the only true religion. And, someday, every knee shall bow at the name of Jesus and every tongue confess that He is Lord, to the glory of God.

Isaiah lived and wrote more than 800 years before the birth of Christ. The Ancients were aware of the battle between pagan idolatry and the existence of a Living God. Recorded in Isaiah 45:18-25 is the conscious choices men have long made to turn away from the Living God. Here, we read:

For this is what the Lord says—  
he who created the heavens,  
he is God;  
he who fashioned and made the earth,  
he founded it;  
he did not create it to be empty,  
but formed it to be inhabited—  
he says:  
"I am the Lord,  
and there is no other.  
[19] I have not spoken in secret,  
from somewhere in a land of darkness;  
I have not said to Jacob's descendants,  
'Seek me in vain.'  
I, the Lord, speak the truth;  
I declare what is right.

[20] "Gather together and come;  
assemble, you fugitives from the nations.  
Ignorant are those who carry about idols of wood,  
who pray to gods that cannot save.  
[21] Declare what is to be, present it—  
let them take counsel together.  
Who foretold this long ago,  
who declared it from the distant past?  
Was it not I, the Lord?  
And there is no God apart from me,  
a righteous God and a Savior;  
there is none but me.

[22] "Turn to me and be saved,  
all you ends of the earth;  
for I am God, and there is no other.  
[23] By myself I have sworn,  
my mouth has uttered in all integrity  
a word that will not be revoked:  
Before me every knee will bow;  
by me every tongue will swear.  
[24] They will say of me, 'In the Lord alone  
are righteousness and strength.'"  
All who have raged against him  
will come to him and be put to shame.  
[25] But in the Lord all the descendants of Israel  
will be found righteous and will exult.

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It is important to set all studies of mythology in this context: man did not “make up mythology because he was ignorant.” Rather, man has consistently chosen to ignore the evidences of his senses and his conscience, and has sought to apprehend good and avoid evil apart from God. All mythologies seem to share the following characteristics:

- ❑ They are man-centered: the gods may be immortal or supernatural, but they have limitations of character that make them more like humans than like our God. Mythological stories center on beings who get angry, who steal, who cheat, who are foolish, who are jealous, and who are driven by sexual passions. No mythological gods are all-knowing, all-powerful, or all-loving. None seem to display the compassion and sacrificial love of our God. Perhaps this is because mankind knows, in its heart, that it lacks such qualities, and so, when inventing its own gods, it seeks to lower them to its level.
- ❑ Heathen gods seek no personal relationships with their devotees (unless it is sexual union for their lustful pleasure). In fact, pagan deities seem unconcerned with the welfare of men and women. Rather, people seem to be their playthings, or serve as bargaining chips in situations of deistic strife.
- ❑ In many cases, people exist merely to placate angry gods who are looking for an opportunity to harm them. Thus, sacrifices, rituals, and other situations are required.
- ❑ In no way is there a sense of an overarching plan for creation or history. Rather, each story seems to attempt to explain the inexplicable things of life on Earth (as the secular theory above indicates).

Repeatedly noting these and other differences between mythological characters and God usually helps your children to remain free from confusion between these gods and our Heavenly Father.

Very young children can and do see these distinctions, and we have seen them benefit from constant reinforcement of this biblical framework. But we encourage you to listen to the Holy Spirit on this issue, and if you are unconvinced by the above discussion and wish to save the study of mythology for later years, we seek to provide alternatives for you.

Note, too, that some stories contain a ring of familiarity or truth. Opponents of our faith claim that Bible truths were culled from earlier mythologies; the reverse is more likely. Remember, both conscience and Creation speak to people’s hearts about their loving Creator. It is not surprising that in the days of oral tradition, bits and pieces of revealed truth would become interwoven with human fabrications.

We feel that older children need to have a Biblical perspective of the myths they will encounter as they eventually enter the secular world, but of course, this is your choice. The mythology we’ll study this year (with the possible exception of Egyptian mythology) is the basis for many literary allusions. Their stories and characters are often either referenced or modified in newer literary forms. Knowing mythology, especially Greek and Roman systems, helps students as they study literature and history of much later periods.

## For further reading...

We offer companion documents to this one in other places within the *Tapestry* curriculum. These are listed below, and we hope they will aid you in coming to your own conviction about teaching pagan mythology to your students.

- ❑ [“Introduction to Literary Study”](#) discusses more of our educational philosophy, relating to our choices of secular literature for study by Christian students. It is available for public viewing on the Loom.
- ❑ [“Of Myths and Men”](#) by author Marcia Somerville’s daughter, Marjorie Somerville, then age 12, is included here to give you a look at a real child’s reaction to our approach to teaching mythology in her own words. Marcia’s family attends a very strong church that has a high degree of theological literacy. She has taught numerous families from this community. Some have chosen to adopt her philosophy as articulated above, and some have not. Marcia’s daughter chose to write her major term paper during her study of Year 1 on the topic of mythology. Being the youngest of a precocious group of siblings, she wrote this paper at age 12, with a lot of supervision for structure. The thoughts were her own. If you don’t have time to read the whole thing, pages 1 and 12 are worth the price of admission. Enjoy!