

CHAPTER
16

Section 2

PRIMARY SOURCE *from the Popol Vuh*

The Popol Vuh, or “Book of the People,” records the history and beliefs of the Quiché, a Maya people who lived in the highlands of Guatemala. Part of the Popol Vuh recounts the Highland Maya version of the story of creation. In this excerpt, the gods who live in the sea—Maker, Modeler, Bearers, Begetters, and Sovereign Plumed Serpent—talk with Heart of Sky, Newborn Thunderbolt, Raw Thunderbolt, and Hurricane, gods who come down from the sky. How does this creation story compare with others you are familiar with?

Here follow the first words, the first eloquence: There is not yet one person, one animal, bird, fish, crab, tree, rock, hollow, canyon, meadow, forest. Only the sky alone is there; the face of the earth is not clear. Only the sea alone is pooled under all the sky; there is nothing whatever gathered together. It is at rest; not a single thing stirs. It is held back, kept at rest under the sky.

Whatever there is that might be is simply not there: only the pooled water, only the calm sea, only it alone is pooled.

Whatever might be is simply not there: only murmurs, ripples, in the dark, in the night. Only the Maker, Modeler alone, Sovereign Plumed Serpent, the Bearers, Begetters are in the water, a glittering light. They are there, they are enclosed in quetzal feathers, in blue-green.

Thus the name, “Plumed Serpent.” They are great knowers, great thinkers in their very being.

And of course there is the sky, and there is also the Heart of Sky. This is the name of the god, as it is spoken.

And then came his word, he came here to the Sovereign Plumed Serpent, here in the blackness, in the early dawn. He spoke with the Sovereign Plumed Serpent, and they talked, then they thought, then they worried. They agreed with each other, they joined their words, their thoughts. Then it was clear, then they reached accord in the light, and then humanity was clear, when they conceived the growth, the generation of trees, of bushes, and the growth of life, of humankind, in the blackness, in the early dawn, all because of the Heart of Sky, named Hurricane. Thunderbolt Hurricane comes first, the second is Newborn Thunderbolt, and the third is Raw Thunderbolt.

So there were three of them, as Heart of Sky, who came to the Sovereign Plumed Serpent, when the dawn of life was conceived:

“How should it be sown, how should it dawn? Who is to be the provider, nurturer?”

“Let it be this way, think about it: this water should be removed, emptied out for the formation of the earth’s own plate and platform, then comes the sowing, the dawning of the sky-earth. But there will be no high days and no bright praise for our work, our design, until the rise of the human work, the human design,” they said.

And then the earth arose because of them, it was simply their word that brought it forth. For the forming of the earth they said “Earth.” It arose suddenly, just like a cloud, like a mist, now forming, unfolding. Then the mountains were separated from the water, all at once the great mountains came forth. By their genius alone, by their cutting edge alone they carried out the conception of the mountain-plain, whose face grew instant groves of cypress and pine.

And the Plumed Serpent was pleased with this:

“It was good that you came, Heart of Sky, Hurricane, and Newborn Thunderbolt, Raw Thunderbolt. Our work, our design will turn out well,” they said.

from Dennis Tedlock, trans., Popol Vuh: The Definitive Edition of the Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), 72–75.

Discussion Questions

Determining Main Ideas

1. What two things existed before earth and life on earth according to the *Popol Vuh*?
2. How did the earth come into being?
3. **Making Inferences** By the time Spanish conquerors came to Mexico and Central America in the 1500s, Maya civilization had faded. How does a book like the *Popol Vuh* help historians find out what Maya civilization was like?

Excerpt from *Popol Vuh: The Definitive Edition of the Mayan Book of The Dawn of Life and The Glories of Gods and Kings*, translated by Dennis Tedlock. Copyright © 1985 by Dennis Tedlock, 1995 (revised and additional material) by Dennis Tedlock. Used with the permission of Simon & Schuster, Inc.