

HYMN 129
from the
RIG VEDA
about 1500–1200 B.C.

The Vedas consist of four collections of the sacred verses of ancient Indian belief. The Rig Veda, the oldest and most important of these collections, contains over 1,000 hymns of praise to various deities. Many hymns in the Rig Veda explain the workings of the universe. The poem below describes the beginning of the universe.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Comparing and Contrasting

Compare and contrast Hymn 129's description of creation to another story of the beginning of the universe, such as Genesis in the Bible.

- 1 Then was not non-existent nor existent: there was no realm of air, no sky beyond it.
What covered in, and where? and what gave shelter? Was water there, unfathomed depth of water?
- 2 Death was not then, nor was there aught immortal: no sign was there, the day's and night's divider.
That One Thing,¹ breathless, breathed by its own nature: apart from it was nothing whatsoever.
- 3 Darkness there was: at first concealed in darkness this All was indiscriminated chaos.
All that existed then was void and formless: by the great power of Warmth was born that Unit.²
- 4 Thereafter rose Desire in the beginning, Desire, the primal seed and germ of Spirit.
Sages who searched with their heart's thought discovered the existent's kinship in the non-existent.
- 5 Transversely was their severing line extended³: what was above it then, and what below it?
There were begetters, there were mighty forces, free action here and energy up yonder.
- 6 Who verily knows and who can here declare it, whence it was born and whence comes this creation?
The gods are later than this world's production. Who knows then whence it first came into being?

1. **One Thing:** an abstract divine power, neither male nor female

2. **Unit:** same as One Thing, the divine power out of which the universe developed

3. **Transversely was their severing line extended:** a line was drawn between the upper and the lower worlds

- 7 He, the first origin of this creation, whether he formed it all or did not form it,
Whose eye controls this world in highest heaven, he verily knows it, or per-
haps he knows not.

Source: Hymn 129 from *The Hymns of the Rigveda*, edited and translated by R.T.H. Griffith (Benares: E. G. Lazarus, 1892).