Elder Brother and the Sealed Jar

The Akimel O'odham (Pima) · the Gila River, Arizona

Where It Comes From

The Akimel O'odham, "River People", also called the Pima, have farmed along the Gila River in southern Arizona for centuries. Their long creation story was written down by the anthropologist Frank Russell and published in *The Pima Indians* (1908). Russell heard it from an elder named Thin Leather, a well-known storyteller, with the help of Pima interpreters. The flood is one chapter in a much longer account, woven with songs.

What Happens

Earth Doctor makes the world and the first people. They grow so many that food runs short and they turn on one another, so he ends that world by pulling the sky down on it, and makes a new one.

In this new world Elder Brother, a powerful being, is born, and he decides to destroy Earth Doctor's people too. A strange chain of events follows, through a handsome young man and the tricks of a medicine man called South Doctor. At its end a baby is born, and its screaming and its tears grow into a flood.

Earth Doctor escapes inside a hollow reed. Elder Brother seals himself inside a clay jar, an *olla*, and floats on the water. Coyote rides a log. Some people slip through a hole to the other side of the earth.

Others climb Crooked Mountain behind South Doctor, who sings it higher four times as the water rises. When his power gives out, the water covers them, and they are turned to stone. Stone figures there are pointed to still.

What Stands Out

Why the flood came. Part of Elder Brother's plan: the second time a world of people is ended, after the first ended in hunger and violence.

Who was saved, and how. The two great beings in a reed and a jar, Coyote on a log, a few birds, and the people who went through the hole.

The boat or the refuge. A sealed clay jar, a hollow reed, a log, and a mountain that grows.

What came after. Elder Brother comes out and the world is set in order again; the drowned remain as stone.

The flood here grows out of a whole web of earlier events, with songs at every turn. Russell was an outsider, and the O'odham are a living people today, so his record is one telling from one time, not the last word.

THINK IT THROUGH

Different survivors escape in different ways: a jar, a reed, a log, a hole in the earth. Why might a story give so many ways to survive?

Sources

Frank Russell, *The Pima Indians*, 26th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology (1908), the creation story told by Thin Leather.

Everything here is a summary in our own words. Where a story has many tellings, we follow the source named above and say so.