Teacher's notes and answer key

Papa Legba and Janus – Guardians of the Threshold

Subjects: English · Religious Studies · History · Latin | recommended from age 13 (B1) | Video: 9:09 min

Answers B

1. Legba speaks every language. His older siblings each rule a realm (sky, earth, sea) with its own tongue; only Legba understands them all. Anyone who wanted to speak to the gods had to go through him. He was also a trickster who could stir up quarrels if people tried to skip him.

2. Janus has two faces, one looking forward and one looking back. His name is related to the Latin word for door (ianua); January is named after him. Ovid describes him with a staff in his right hand and a key in his left.

3. The young, cheeky trickster became an old man: an elder with a cane, a straw hat and a pipe, who walks slowly and yet can open any door.

4. It does not begin with the most powerful spirit but with Legba. The drums start and a priestess (manbo) traces a vèvè on the ground with cornmeal; Legba's vèvè usually centres on a cross, the crossroads. The first song almost always says: “Papa Legba, ouvri baryè a pou mwen” – Papa Legba, open the gate for me.

5. Open doors meant war, closed doors meant peace. Because Rome was almost always at war somewhere, they stood open nearly all the time (closed e.g. under King Numa, after the First Punic War, and three times under Augustus).

Answer C

Correct numbers from top to bottom: 4 – 7 – 1 – 6 – 2 – 8 – 3 – 5

Notes on C, D and E

C (order) follows the order of the video. Note: Janus is historically older than Legba in Haiti; the video switches between the two cultures – a good starting point to talk about story order versus historical order.

D1: The lwa live in the distant realm of Ginen, the memory of a lost Africa; only Legba can open the barrier. For uprooted people he becomes the road back to their ancestors and homeland; the old, patient elder fits people who had to wait and endure. D2: At birth, marriage, death, the new year or when entering a stranger's house, you have left one state and not yet reached the next. In this in-between (van Gennep's middle stage, later called 'liminal', from Latin limen = threshold) people need protection, so many cultures place a guardian there.

E: Origin – Legba: Fon (Benin, West Africa), later Haiti from the 17th/18th century; Janus: Rome, many centuries earlier. Appearance – Legba in Haiti an old man with cane, straw hat, pipe; Janus two faces, staff and key. Gate – Legba: barrier between the world of the living and Ginen, the crossroads; Janus: doors, city gates, beginnings, temple doors in the Forum. Called on – both first: Legba at the start of every ceremony, Janus before Jupiter in sacrifices and prayers. Meaning – Legba: a personal lifeline of an uprooted community to its ancestors; Janus: a matter of state, a sign of war or peace. Bridge: in Haiti Legba was identified with Saint Lazarus and Saint Peter (keys of heaven); there is no direct link to Janus.

Content note and age

Recommended from age 13. The video mentions the forced transport and enslavement of people from West Africa, deaths during the crossing and a long, bloody uprising, without graphic scenes. Please put this in context in class and avoid detailed questions about it. Vodou is a living religion practised by millions of people in Haiti and the diaspora; the video explicitly separates it from Hollywood clichés (pin-stuck dolls) – please treat it with respect.

Background: Fon tradition from Benin, Ovid (Fasti, book 1), Augustus' account of his deeds (Res Gestae), Arnold van Gennep, 'Les rites de passage' (1909). The channel also has a separate episode about Janus.

The narrator's voice and the illustrations in the video are AI-generated; the script follows the established tradition. You are welcome to copy and share this worksheet for classroom use.

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