

NAME _____

ABOUT MERCURY ☿



In Roman mythology, Mercury is the god of commerce, travel and thievery, the Roman counterpart of the Greek god Hermes, the messenger of the Gods. The planet probably received this name because it moves so quickly across the sky. The planet's existence has been known since to at least the first millennium BC.

Mercury is the first and smallest planet of our solar system. Mercury revolves around the sun every 88 days and rotates every 58 days. Mercury is very similar to the Earth's moon – dry and dead. Something that is interesting is that the surface of Mercury that is facing Sun is 700°F. On the other hand, the planet's surface that is not facing the Sun (its dark-side) is -300°F. Between night and day, that's a temperature change of 1000°! So, you're either on fire or you're a block of ice. The reason for this is because Mercury has no atmosphere. The Sun's heat is not trapped in an atmosphere like other planets, so the temperature is not stable. Here on Earth, we have an atmosphere... During the day, it can be 75°F and then at night, it can be 40°F... that's only a change of 35°. For life to exist, a stable atmosphere is a big deal!

Mercury has been now been visited by two space probes, Mariner 10 and MESSENGER. Mariner 10 flew by three times in 1974 and 1975. Only 45% of the surface was mapped. MESSENGER was launched by NASA in 2004 and will orbit Mercury starting in 2011 after several flybys. Its first flyby in Jan 2008 provided new high quality images of some of the terrain not seen by Mariner 10. Unfortunately, Mercury is too close to the Sun to be safely viewed by the Hubble Space Telescope to take easy images... It'd be like taking binoculars and looking right at the Sun!

Questions about Mercury

1. What was Mercury named after?

2. What are some reasons why we would not be able to live on the planet?

3. What space probe is the one most recently to visit the planet and take pictures?

4. Why can't the Hubble Space Telescope just take pictures of the planet?

