

from nothing to something ~ readings

chinese tradition



'Let it be told of a time when there was nothing but chaos, and that chaos was like a mist and full of emptiness. Suddenly, into the midst of this mist came a great colorful light and from this light all things came to be. The mist shook and separated, things that were lighter rose up to form heaven and things that were heavy sank, became solid and formed the earth.

Now from heaven and earth came forth strong forces and these two forces combined to produce yin and yang. Picture this yang like a dragon - hot, fiery, male, full of energy. Imagine this yin as a cloud - moist, cool, female, drifting slowly. Each of these forces is full of great power. If left alone, either force would destroy the world with their might and chaos would return. Together they balance each other and keep the world in harmony. This then is yin and yang and from them came forth everything. The sun is of yang and the moon, yin. The four seasons - winter, spring, summer and autumn - and the five elements - water, earth, metal, fire and wood - sprang from them, So did all kinds of living creatures.

So there was the earth, floating like a jellyfish on water. But the earth was just a ball without features. Then the forces of yin and yang created the giant figure P'an Ku, the Ancient One. P'an Ku set to work to put the earth in order. He dug the river valleys and piled up the mountains. Over many thousands of years he shaped and created the features of earth.

But such work took its toll. Even mighty P'an Ku could not escape death and, worn out by his struggle, he collapsed and died. His body was so large that when he fell to the ground his body became the five sacred mountains, his hair became the plants and his blood the rivers. From his sweat came the rain and from the parasites living on his body came forth human beings.

The people at first lived in caves but soon Heavenly Emperors came to teach them how to make tools and houses. The people also learnt how to build boats, to fish, to plough and plant, and to prepare food. This is how it all began.'

christianity and judaism

In the beginning, Elohim* created the universe. At first the earth was shapeless and covered in darkness, and Elohim's spirit hovered over the waters. Elohim said, "Let there be light". And there was light. Elohim divided the light from the darkness, naming them ' day' and 'night'. This was the first day and Elohim saw that it was good. On the second day Elohim made the sky to separate the water on the earth. On the third day he raised the dry land up from the waters and

commanded the earth to bring forth all plants. Elohim saw that it was good.

Elohim then made the greater light for the day and the lesser light for the night, and he saw that it was good. This was the fourth day. On the fifth day Elohim commanded the waters to fill with living creatures and the air to fill with birds. And he was pleased with what he saw. On the sixth day Elohim commanded the earth to bring forth all kinds of living creatures and he saw that it was good. Elohim then said "Let us make man in our own image." So Elohim created man and woman in his own likeness and gave them authority over all living things. Elohim looked at everything he had made and was very pleased. On the seventh day, Elohim rested.'

In the original Hebrew, the name "Elohim" was used in Genesis 1. English Bibles translate "Elohim" as "God."



Before this time began, there was no heaven, no earth and no space between. A vast dark ocean washed upon the shores of nothingness and licked the edges of the night.

A giant cobra floated on the waters. Asleep within its endless coils lay the Lord Vishnu. Everything was so peaceful and silent that Vishnu slept, undisturbed. From the depths a humming sound began. It grew and spread, filling the emptiness light and pulsing energy.

The night had ended, Vishnu awoke. As the dawn began to break, from Vishnu's navel grew a magnificent lotus flower. In the middle of the blossom sat Vishnu's servant, the god Brahma. He awaited Vishnu's command.

Vishnu spoke to his servant: 'It is time to begin.' Brahma bowed. Vishnu commanded: 'Create the World.' As a wind began to sweep up the waters, Vishnu and the serpent vanished.

Brahma remained in the lotus flower, floating and tossing on the sea. He lifted up his arms and calmed the wind and the ocean. Then Brahma split the lotus flower into three. He stretched one part into the heavens. He made another part into the earth. With the third part of the flower he created the skies.

The earth was bare. Brahma set to work. He created grass, flowers, trees and plants of all kinds. To these he gave feeling. Next he created the animals and the insects to live on the land. He made birds and many fish. To all these creatures, he gave the senses of touch and smell. He gave them power to see, hear and move. The world was soon bristling with life and the air was filled with the sounds of Brahma's creation. Once Brahma was finished, Vishnu turned himself into a great spirit and entered everything that Brahma had made.



In the time before time, Allah was. And when Allah wanted to create something, all he needs to say is "Be", and it was created. So it was that Allah created the world and the heavens. He made all the creatures, which walk, swim, crawl and fly on the face of the earth. He made the angels, and the sun, moon and the stars to dwell in the universe. Allah poured down the rain and broke up the soil to bring forth the corn, the grapes and other vegetation; the olive and the palm, the fruit trees and the grass.

Then it was that Allah ordered the angels to go to the earth, and to bring seven handfuls of soil, all of different colors', from which he could model man. Allah took the seven kinds of earth and molded them into a model of a man. He breathed life

and power into it, and it immediately sprang to life. And this first man was called Adam. Allah took Adam to live in Paradise. In Paradise, Allah created Eve, the first woman, from out of Adam's side. God taught Adam the names of all the creatures, and then commanded the angel to bow down before Adam. But Iblis, one amongst the angels, refused to do this, and thus began to disobey God's will.

In the original Arabic, the name "Allah" was used. English Bibles translate "Allah" as "God."

Source: Big History Project

scientific



In the beginning, as far as we know, there was nothing. Suddenly, from a single point, all the energy in the Universe burst forth. Since that moment 13.8 billion years ago, the Universe has been expanding — and cooling down as it gets bigger.

Gradually energy cooled enough to become matter. One electron could stay in orbit around one proton to become an atom of hydrogen. Great clouds of hydrogen swirled around space until gravity pulled some atoms so close together that they began to burn as stars. Stars swirled together in giant clusters called galaxies; now there are galaxies numbering in the billions.

After each star burned up all its matter, it died in a huge explosion. The explosion generated so much heat that some atoms fused and got more and more complex, forming many different elements, including gold and silver.

One giant star, our mother star, exploded and scattered clouds of gas containing all the elements needed to form living beings. About 5 billion years ago gravity pulled these atoms into a new star, creating the Sun. The leftover pieces of matter stuck to each other and formed eight planets, which revolve around the sun.

The third planet out, Earth, became our home. It was the perfect size — not too big, not too small — and the perfect distance from the Sun, not too far or too close. A thin crust formed over Earth's hot interior, and the temperature was just right for water to form on parts of the surface. Gradually the chemicals in the water formed inside of membranes and got more complex until single-cell living organisms appeared, able to maintain themselves and reproduce.

For 3 billion years these one-celled creatures reproduced almost exactly, but not quite. They gradually changed in response to their environment.

But they also changed their environment. They learned to burn energy from the Sun, and they released oxygen into the atmosphere. The oxygen formed an ozone layer around Earth that protected life from the Sun's rays.

Eventually cells stuck together to form creatures with many cells. Plants and animals came out of the sea onto land and became ever more complex and aware, until about 100,000 years human beings evolved from a shared ancestor with the species of apes.

Humans could talk in symbols and sing, dance, draw, and cooperate more than the other animals could. Humans learned to write and to accumulate their learning so that it kept expanding. Humans increased in skills and in numbers until there were too many people and too few big animals in some places.



shinto (japan)

Of old, Heaven and Earth were not yet separated, and the In and Yo (Ying and Yang) were not yet divided. They formed a chaotic mass like an egg which was of obscurely defined limits and contained germs. The purer and clearer part was thinly drawn out, and easily formed Heaven. The heavier and grosser element settled down and became Earth. This was done with great difficulty. Heaven was therefore formed first, and Earth was established second.

After the creation of Heaven and earth, Divine Beings were produced between them as the land was floating among the waters. At this time a certain being came to life between Heaven and Earth. It was like a reed-shoot. Now this being was transformed into a god, and was called Kuni-toko-tachi no Mikoto, who would shape the world and its creatures.

iroquois (american first nation)

The first people lived beyond the sky because there was no Earth beneath. The chief's daughter became ill, and no cure could be found. A wise old man told them to dig up a tree and lay the girl beside the hole. People began to dig, but as they did the tree fell right through the hole, dragging the girl with it.

Below lay an endless sheet of water where two swans floated. As the swans looked up, they saw the sky break and a strange tree fall down into the water. Then they saw the girl fall after it. They swam to her and supported her, because she was too beautiful to allow her to drown. Then they swam to the Great Turtle, master of all the animals, who at once called a council.

When all the animals had arrived, the Great Turtle told them that the appearance of a woman from the sky was a sign of good fortune. Since the tree had Earth on its roots, he asked them to find where it had sunk and bring up some of the earth to put on his back, to make an island for the woman to live on.

The swans led the animals to the place where the tree had fallen. First otter, then muskrat, and then beaver dived. As each one came up from the great depths, he rolled over exhausted and died. Many other animals tried, but they experienced the same fate.

At last the old lady toad volunteered. She was under so long that the others thought she had been lost. But at last she came to the surface and before dying managed to spit out a mouthful of dirt on the back of the Great Turtle.

It was magical earth and had the power of growth. As soon as it was as big as an island, the woman was set down on it. The two white swans circled it, while it continued to grow until, at last, it became the world island as it is today, supported in the great waters on the back of the Great Turtle.



Source: Big History Project

mayan (meso-american first nation)

Now it still ripples, now it still murmurs, still sighs, and is empty under the sky. There is not yet one person, not one animal, bird, fish, or tree. There is only the sky alone; the face of Earth is not clear, only the sea alone is pooled under all the sky. Whatever might be is simply not there.

There were makers in the sea, together called the Plumed Serpent. There were makers in the sky, together called the Heart of Sky. Together these makers planned the dawn of life.

The Earth arose because of them. It was simply their word that brought it forth. It arose suddenly, like a cloud unfolding. Then the mountains were separated from the water. All at once great mountains came forth. The sky was set apart, and the Earth was set apart in the midst of the waters.



Then the makers in the sky planned the animals of the mountains — the deer, pumas, jaguars, rattlesnakes, and guardians of the bushes. Then they established the nests of the birds, great and small. “You precious birds; your nests are in the trees and bushes.” Then the deer and birds were told to talk to praise their makers, to pray to them. But the birds and animals did not talk; they just squawked and howled. So they had to accept that their flesh would be eaten by others.

The makers tried again to form a giver of respect, a creature who would nurture and provide. They made a body from mud, but it didn’t look good. It talked at first but then crumbled and disintegrated into the water. Then the Heart of Sky called on the wise ones, the diviners, the Grandfather Xpiyacoc and the Grandmother Xmucane, to help decide how to form a person. The Grandparents said it is well to make wooden carvings, human in looks and speech. So wooden humans came into being; they talked and multiplied, but there was nothing in their minds and hearts, no memory of their builder, no memory of Heart of Sky.

Then there came a great destruction. The wooden carvings were killed when the Heart of Sky devised a flood for them. It rained all day and all night. The animals came into the homes of the wooden carvings and ate them. The people were overthrown. The monkeys in the forest are a sign of this. They look like the previous people — mere wooden carvings.

The story continues with the final people being made from corn, an important crop that enabled the Mayan people to move from being a hunting-and-gathering society to a more complex civilization.

story lines

After reading the “From Nothing to Something” readings, create brief/simple “timelines” or plot lines for each story, outlining the major events/turning points.

example

