Creation from the Void: Crash Course World Mythology #2

Crash Course: World Mythology
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Hi, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Mythology. And today we're gonna talk about a small, easy topic - the creation of the universe.

This is the first of several episodes on creation stories and this one will center on myths that imagine a universe created out of nothing...or possibly something. Sometimes out of water, probably water, but it's magical water, it's primordial water.

Hey Thoth, do Egyptian gods drink water?

[Opening music]

Myths that describe creation as coming out of nothing are some of the hardest to get our heads around. In Latin, the phrase *ex nihilo* is used to describe this type of creation, and it can cause a bit of existential dread for people who are uncomfortable with the idea of absolute nothing - no time, no space, just an infinite void. Like when the wifi suddenly goes down, just much, much worse. Just ask Hephaestus, Greek god of technology, that guy knows about unstable router architecture. And hammers.

The *ex nihilo* creation story that's probably the best in the West comes from the book of Genesis. In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form and void. And darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

So, in this story, the main character is God. And hey, let's take just a quick minute to remember that this is mythology, not religious studies, so we're going to be referring to the Judeo-Christian god as a character. So take a second to just get comfortable with that. And now let's move on.

So this character exists before anything we would call the world. Where does God exist? It's unclear. There's a void, there's water, which are handy if God needs storage space or is thirsty but that's about it.

Ex nihilo creation stories are common in the ancient Near East. The Mediterranean world where the Abrahamic religions - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - originated.

Egpyt was part of an interconnected Mediterreanean system and one of it's creation myths also posits a universe coming from nothing. As we can see in this fragment:

"*I am the eternal spirit*
I am the sun that rose from
The primeval waters.
My soul is god, I am the creator of the word.
Evil is my abomination, I see it not.
I am the creator of the order
Wherein I live,
I am the word, which will
Never be annihilated
In this my name of 'soul.'"

Take away the first person pronoun and the bold claims and you can see the similarities to the Genesis story. There is an eternal god who creates the world and then there are waters out of which rise. Well, in this case it's the sun, which is nice. Just ask Ra, Egpytian sun god, cause eventually humans would realize, some of us look better with a tan, me especially.

I don't know about you, but I have a hard time conceiving of nothingness. I'm a lot more accustomed to thing-ness. I mean isn't nothingness a thing, in and of itself? And hey, more importantly, can we really even call it nothingness with all this water around?

Fortunately, for people like me, there's a word to describe the condition before creation, chaos. Which mythology David Leeming defines as "the primal void or state of uniform non-differentiation that precedes the creation of the world in most creation myths."

Chaos is something of a background in many of these myths, as it is in the Greek version of creation found in the *Theogony* by Hesiod, a poet and sheep farmer, who probably lived in the 8th century BCE. According to this version, "verily at the first Chaos came to be, but next wide-bosomed Earth."

Not much to go on there, but as we can see, Chaos is what we have before a deity or deities roll up and provide order. And also the earth apparently has breasts. Mother Earth, I guess? Makes sense?

In many creation myths, an integral way to put things into order is to bring light out of darkness. In one creation myth from the Kono people of Guniea, the darkness before creation is inhabited by Death, his wife, and his daughter. In the beginning, there was darkness and in it lived Death, called Sa, with his wife and daughter. The three of them were all that was.

There was no where for them to live comfortably, so Sa started it. He used his magic power and he made an endless mud sea. In this mud place, Sa built is house. After that the god Alatangana came to visit Sa. He found Sa's house dirty and dark. Alatangana though Sa should do better than that, and he said so. Nothing can live in such a place, the god told Sa. This house needs fixing up. Everything is too dark. So Alatangana thought he better take things in hand. He made the mud solid, we now know it as Earth.

"The Earth feels sad," God said. "I will make plants and animals to live on it." So he did. And that is how we got home renovation. Just kidding.

I love this myth. I love that god thinks the earth is sad and so he gets the earth a puppy to cheer it up. A puppy and some plants. You know, spruce up the joint. But notice there are a lot of similarities between this myth and the Egyptian myth. In that both describe a vast sea, one of mud, one of water, and that there is a god who exists previous to and outside of the void and the darkness. Though the Kono myth differs in that it implies that death is the one constant in the universe. Oh no, and now I'm worried about the puppy.

But why are this talk about water? Well, we don't know exactly, but if you're living in an ancient society and you try to think through something as big as the creation of the universe, you probably turned your thoughts to the vastest things you were around of - the sky and the sea. Even if you only experience the ocean from the relative safety of the shore, there is something unknowable and eternal about it that makes it possible to imagine the sea existing for all time and even before time itself.

And according to the theories of evolution, the idea that all life came from the sea is fairly accurate. But let's not get into evolution here. We'll leave that to Hank and the scientists over at Crash Course Biology.

Hey, fun facts though, the Western hemisphere has water too. And we have some *ex nihilo* creation stories of our own. One of the most difficult and fascinating comes from the Mayans of Guatemala and is recorded in the *Popul Vuh*, or *The Book of the Community*. (It's not as catchy in translation.)

In this complex story, creation occurs four times, but begins, like the Gospel of John in the New Testament, with the word. And just because I think it's going to be fun to watch Thought Bubble

animate nothing, let's see this myth there. Hey, Thoth, pass me the popcorn.

The word began long ago, in a place called Quiché, where the Quiché people lived. There was no one, there was not one animal yet and no birds fish, or tree. There was no rock, or forest, no canyon, no meadow. There was sky, separated from all things, the face of the earth was invisible, there was nothing that could make a sound. There was the sea, so calm and all alone. There was dark and night and sea murmurings, ripplings.

Yet within the dark and night and sea, there was the Maker and there was the Feathered Serpent. And they brought their words together, joined them with their thoughts, planned creation. Their words and thoughts were so clear that whatever they said came to be.

And the Serpent and the Maker thought about the nature of the world: what would be light and dark, who would bring food, and what everything should look like. And then by speaking their thoughts, they brought the world into existence, starting with earth and then moving onto its features, like mountains and trees, followed by wild animals. But, there was a problem. The wild animals were unable to speak the names of the Maker and the Feathered Serpent, as well as the other gods who helped bring about creation, and they were unable to praise the gods, thus the first creation was a failure.

The Maker had to start over again. But not before explaining to all wild animals there lot was to be brought low, which considering that the Maker and the Feather Serpent organized things this way, seems at least a little unfair.

"You - bird, deer, you will stay where you are, where you sleep and eat, in the forest and canyons, among the tree and bush. You will be eaten. You will kill and be killed. You will stay low and serve, since you cannot talk and praise your god."

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

This particular myth is fascinating for a number of reasons. First of all, it reminds me of the story in Genesis, of Adam giving names to all the animals and establishing humanity's dominion over all non speaking creatures, providing a single reason why humans should be considered special among all animals. We have power of speech and by extension, the power to invent and tell creation stories of our own. Just ask Anansi, African spider god of stories. Thoth, don't eat him! This is not Australia.

Even though this myth doesn't focus on Chaos or the void or nothingness, it does have the idea that before creation, there was nothing, except god or the word. And like the creation myths we looked at earlier, it includes an endless sea, a physical manifestation of things unknown. But also, of the source of life, since nothing we can see exists without water. Especially people, but *especially* fish. We'll spend a little more time in the cosmic ocean next time when we look at eggs, seeds, and earth divers.

But this creation story is elaborate. Since creation 1.0 doesn't go so well, the Maker and the Feathered Serpent get back to work and they have to get all the way to creation 4.0 before they resolved all of the major glitches. And even then there are probably still some software updates, like ancient, ancient software, like service packs, but for existence.

Before we leave the realm of ex nihilo creation, I want to give one more example. The Big Bang. And a lot of you now staring at your screens in confusion and horror and saying this isn't a myth at all. But remember, we're talking about significant stories with staying power, which the Big Bang certainly is.

So let's try it out. Hank and Phil Plait, in detail, over at Crash Course Astronomy and we've talked about it on Big History. Here, we're gonna use a version related by Brian Swimme in his book, *The Universe is a Green Dragon:*

"Imagine that furnace out of which everything came forth. This was a fire that filled the universe - that was the universe. There was no place in the universe free from it. Every point of the cosmos was a point of this explosion of light. And all the particles of the universe churned in extremes of heat and pressure, all that we see about us all that now exists was there at the beginning, in the great burning explosion of light."

Hey, that sounds a lot like some of the most ancient myths, doesn't it? Like all *ex nihilo* creation stories, the Big Bang starts in a time before time and gives us an origin event, one that seems to conjure light from darkness, heat from cold. And okay, unlike earlier myths, it doesn't supply a god or water, but you can still appreciate the structural similarities. And what's so great about fish anyways. Oh, sorry Thoth.

So, yes, *ex nihilo* creation myths are unsettling. They ask us to imagine void, absence, chaos. But then we see how each tradition brings some order to that. Order and light. And sometimes mud.

Thanks for watching, see you next week.

We'll see you next week. Crash Course Mythology is filmed in the Chad & Stacey Emigholz studio in Indianapolis, Indiana and is produced with the help of all these nice people. Our animation team is Thought Cafe.

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Thanks for watching, and if you can help it, try not to eat any spiders. Especially Anansi.