

On Teaching the Bible as Literature: A Mythical Bias

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Introduction

Talking about the Bible in general is like talking about Shakespeare's plays in general: the topic is just so huge that it is difficult to know where to begin and just as difficult to know where to stop. I will therefore give a brief outline of my goals to start with, which chiefly involve curriculum and pedagogy. First, I will make the argument that the Bible should be made a requirement for Japanese students studying English literature and, more broadly, Japanese students studying most aspects of Western culture in general. Second, I will be arguing for teaching the Bible as literature. And third, I will be arguing for using a mytho-archetypal approach as the basis for reading the Bible as literature. Ancillary to this approach, we must also keep an eye on ideological biases of the Bible, because mythology itself is communal, articulating the values of a society. Thus, any given mythology is ideological, or ideology forms a very important constitutive basis of any given mythology. I should add that this approach can and should probably include many other valuable critical approaches--such as feminism and formalism--which can and should be used to expand our critical understanding of the Bible. With this in mind, let me begin.

Curriculum

The Bible as Literature should be required study at the university level in Japan for students of English literature and students of Western culture and art. That, simply, is the first part of my thesis. The reasons are simple and obvious: the Bible is the book that has most influenced, and is still most influential on, Western culture; you cannot go anywhere in your literary travels without bumping into it; all the Western cultures are founded on, or at least greatly conditioned by, its ideas and beliefs. Studying Western literature without studying the Bible is like studying Japanese literature without studying anything about Buddhism or Shintoism. Fundamental concepts such as faith, guilt, and conscience are simply different in the two cultures, and thus must be dealt with in classes in both Japanese and Western culture. For Western culture this means the Bible must be taught.

Although I am stating the obvious here, it is equally obvious that, in Japan at least, the Bible is not being taught. Stories as simple and basic as Adam and Eve in the Garden are simply not known by the majority of Japanese students studying English literature (I am making the presumption that this is true also for the more general category of Japanese students of Western culture). When I am teaching Shakespeare, or Hawthorne, or T. S. Eliot, or Blake, I often find myself asking if students understand concepts or allusions which to English-speaking students would be cultural or literary givens, and finding that the Japanese students simply do not understand the concepts or Biblical allusions.

This is the reason that I chose to offer a class on the Bible as literature this year, and also why I think the class should continue to be offered every two to three years and be required for Japanese university students during their sophomore or junior year. (I am referring specifically to English-literature students here, and when I refer to “students” below, I refer to these students in particular; for other majors centered on Western culture, however, the principle of studying the Bible because it is the cornerstone of Western thought seems to hold firm as well.)

Let me clarify my own religious position and background. I was “raised” as a Christian (Episcopalian) and attended a Jesuit (Catholic) high school. I have been baptized and even been to communion a few times. But, I have always been a bit skeptical in matters religious. For many years I have regarded myself, with Yeats, as a religious man without a religion. I feel similarly about politics and see little if any essential difference between religious and political fanatics. There is no “fundamental” difference between killing people in the name of God, Christ, Allah, Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, Asahara, or Satan. Arguments for religious, racial, or national purity amount to the same thing: intolerance of the other, whether this manifests itself as indifference, fear, ostricization, inequality, persecution, or murder. The history of Christianity is largely a history of intolerance. It is certainly one of those great ironies that Christianity didn’t follow its own Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Pedagogy

Having said all this, let me turn to the Bible more specifically, and to approaches to teaching the Bible. As my title indicates, I am arguing for focusing on the archetypal and mythic approach. I envision the class as an introductory one, and assume that the students have little or no first-hand knowledge of the Bible. Because of this, the primary goal of the class is simply to get the students to read, to learn, to get extremely familiar with the most

important stories. They should be able to reiterate these stories. They should know the plots, the characters, the most important details. On the next level, as in all literary studies, they should be able to articulate themes and analyze symbolism. They need to be made aware of and to learn the major themes, patterns, and motifs. Moreover, they should be able to analyze these stories on different levels or in different ways. Further, they need to be made aware of the mythic nature of these stories, that these stories *are* myths that taken together form a mythology. Therefore they need an introduction into the nature of myth itself: this means that a secondary goal of the class is to give an introduction to archetypal and mythic criticism. In addition, they should become aware of the ideological nature of the myths, that these myths articulate the most important values of the society, and that these myths, as a recasting of myths from other traditions and religions, are responding to, or resisting, or fighting against these different cultures and religions. As students move beyond this class and continue their reading of Western literature, they should become more and more aware of how the Western authors throughout history have used, commented upon, interpreted, resisted, criticized, and themselves reworked these myths. Western writers write from deep within this Judeo-Christian tradition, and Western people are deeply conditioned by it.

The Bible that should be taught is the Christian (as opposed to the Hebrew) Bible. As Northrop Frye has observed, it is Christianity that has most shaped the Western world and experience (*Great Code* xiii). The text should probably be the Authorized King James version, the best known and most influential (particularly on writers) of the various translations, the one echoed most by Western writers. I wish to emphasize that this class cannot be taught as a class inculcating religious beliefs. This is not a class to make converts—that is what missionaries are for.

In any event, the ideal approach to choosing which books of the Bible (from now on, when I refer to the Bible I mean the Christian Bible) to teach would certainly be an all-inclusive one: have the students read the Bible from beginning to end. But, as we all know, this is certainly impractical, particularly given the structure of the Japanese university course system, not to mention that we are teaching this to students of English as a foreign language. The amount of reading is simply too great (unless one were to adopt this as a two-year course; then virtually all of the Bible could be covered). Therefore, the books of the Bible that should be taught are the major or best-known ones, and selections from books that contain the most important and well-known stories. Just as an example, the whole of Genesis and Exodus should be taught because they form the basis for the rest of the Bible, establishing the major themes, patterns, and motifs. To be a little more specific, when reading Genesis the students

should learn both versions of the creation of humanity, the temptation, the Fall, the expulsion from the Garden, the curse on man and woman, the story of their children Cain and Abel, Noah and the flood, the curse on Canaan, the story of Abraham and his family, the stories of Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph—in other words, all of the major stories in Genesis. The books I have chosen for my students to read during the first semester of a year-long course are: all of Genesis and Exodus, much of Deuteronomy, and all of Joshua and Judges. During the second semester I will cover Job, Matthew, Luke, John, Acts, and Revelation. Obviously, much is left out.

Myth and Archetype

Let me first outline a few points about myth, ritual, archetypes, and typology before turning more specifically to the early books of the Bible to illustrate the points I have made above. The major aspects of myth can be regarded as the following:

- 1) Myths are stories, or narratives.
- 2) Most of the stories are about gods, and/or the society's relationship with or to its gods.
- 3) The stories are about what is most important to the society (religion, history, class structure, laws, etc.).
- 4) The stories help to unify the community (psychologically, spiritually, culturally).
- 5) These stories are themselves symbolically repeated in the rituals of the society.¹

In terms of the importance to the study of literature, we may focus on the ideas that myths “link with one another to form a *mythology*,” and that myth “defines a cultural area and gives it a shared legacy of allusion” (Frye, *Harper Handbook*). Allusion means a reference, direct or implied, to an image or a story. When I mention a tree with fruit on it, or a land of milk and honey, my reader should think of those references and stories from the Bible.

Moreover, many of these stories and images resonate within the Bible as a sort of closed system, a set of internal repetitions, mirrors, and echoes. Some of these images and stories are so strongly connected that they clearly are part of a narrative strategy of which the reader must be aware. When we read about Abraham sacrificing his son Isaac, we are supposed to think of God the Father sacrificing Christ. The former is a type of the latter. When we think of the sacrifice of Christ, we are supposed to recall Abraham and Isaac. Hence, it seems essential that the student develop a clear understanding of the concept of the type and how typology works in the Bible. On the importance and centrality of typology to a coherent reading of the Bible, Frye remarks:

The general principle of interpretation is traditionally given as “In the Old Testament the New Testament is concealed; in the New Testament the Old Testament is revealed.” Everything that happens in the Old Testament is a “type” or adumbration of something that happens in the New Testament, and the whole subject is thus called typology, though it is typology in a special sense. . . .

This typological way of reading the Bible is indicated too often and explicitly in the New Testament itself for us to be in any doubt that this is the “right” way of reading it—“right” in the only sense that criticism can recognize, as the way that conforms to the intentionality of the book itself and to the conventions it assumes and requires. The typological organization of the Bible does present the difficulty, to a secular literary critic, of being unique: no other book in the world, to my knowledge, has a structure even remotely like that of the Christian Bible. (*Great Code* 79-80)

Beyond reading typologically, or in such an intratextual way, we also need to be sensitive to the fact that certain Biblical stories and images are archetypal, such as the story of Creation and images like the tree and snake. These archetypal stories and images are adopted by the Judeo-Christian tradition and, retaining much of their archetypal character, are co-opted by the Biblical mythology and so acquire their own peculiar ideological flavor. That is, the Bible uses archetypes in the creation of its own unique mythology, and mythology is informed by ideology: in terms of how myth legitimizes class structures, gender constructs, and the like, myth becomes ideological, that is, it justifies and reinforces the legitimacy and values of the power structure. Robert Graves and Raphael Patai make a nice distinction between the character of Greek myths and how they differ from the Hebrew myths that helps show the ideological nature of myth: “Greek myths are charters for certain clans . . . to rule certain territories so long as they placated the local gods with sacrifices, dances and processions. Annual performances of such rites enhanced their authority. [On the other hand] Hebrew myths are mainly national charters: the myth of Abraham for the possession of Canaan, and for patrilineal marriage; the myth of Jacob for Israel’s status as a chosen people; the myth of Ham for the owning of Canaanite slaves” (*Hebrew Myths* 17).

There is a very strong interconnection between myth and ritual. Rituals repeat the myths or stories, and reenact what are seen as actions that were originally performed by gods or legendary heroes. “Every ritual has a divine model, an archetype,” says Mircea Eliade. He cites from Indian religious texts two very nice examples of how clear this idea is: “We must do what the gods did in the beginning,” and “Thus the gods did; thus men do” (21).

Marriage rites, for example, simply repeat or reenact the original sacred marriage; they “reproduce the hierogamy, more especially the union of heaven and earth” (23). As another example, Eliade talks about consecrating a building or construction: “Through the paradox of rite, every consecrated space coincides with the center of the world, just as the time of any ritual coincides with the mythic time of the ‘beginning.’ Through repetition of the cosmogonic act, concrete time, in which the construction takes place, is projected into mythic time, *in illo tempore* [‘in those days,’ in the beginning] when the foundation of the world occurred” (20). That is, there is a sacred time and place, just as there is a historical time and place. Ritual nullifies the historical and allows us to participate in the sacred, and it is only the sacred that is truly “real”: “reality is conferred through participation in the ‘symbolism of the Center’: cities, temples, houses become real by the fact of being assimilated to the ‘center of the world . . .’” (6). All Churches, temples, mosques, and shrines are thus the center of the world. It is at the center of the world that we come in contact with God, eternity, and infinity. The point about repetition is also very important: “In the particulars of his conscious behavior, the ‘primitive man,’ the archaic man, acknowledges no act which has not been previously posited and lived by someone else, some other being who was not a man. What he does has been done before. His life is the ceaseless repetition of gestures initiated by others” (5).

When we look closely at Exodus, for example, we can see that the people and readers are being instructed to learn and repeat the rituals. It is a major theme of the book: the people are to incorporate these rituals into their lives, to make them a fundamental part of their existence and behavior. The need for repeating, in ritual, God’s original actions is itself repeatedly emphasized, indicating how important it is for the people to follow the rituals in order to internalize the codes, the lessons and meaning, of this national religion. The rituals and the laws serve as important ways of unifying the community. Take a look, for example, at the representation of the sabbath, which is clearly and emphatically referred to as a repetition of the celestial archetype, that is, of God resting on the seventh day after he created the universe:

And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying,

Speak thou also unto the Children of Israel, saying, Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations; that ye may know that I am the Lord that doth sanctify you. . . .

Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations, for a perpetual covenant.

It is a sign between me and the children of Israel: for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed. (31:12-13, 16-17)

The sabbath repeats the act of rest originally enjoyed by God, just as the building of the ark and tabernacle, both designed by God, repeat the original act of creation. The ark and the tabernacle enact the symbolism of the center: the Testament (ten commandments) is inside the ark, which is inside the tabernacle, which is inside the tent, God appearing to Moses in the center, the holy of holies, the center of the world.

Let us look at some of the various levels and types of repetition in the Bible. Repetition on the semantic and syntactic levels serves in one sense as a ritual invocation of the divine presence. The repetition is ritual or ritualistic, and the divine presence is thus evoked by enacting discourse as ritual (the discourse or rhetoric of ritual). The rituals and ritualistic discourse encourage the internalization of the mythological or religious beliefs or codes.

In the description of the Passover (Exodus 12-13), the rhetoric of ritual is extended to the mythic and typological levels: the Passover ritual is an imitation of the celestial archetype, of God passing over the Egyptians (killing them) and Israel (saving or redeeming them). The lamb sacrificed at the Passover ritual is called the passover (12:21), and the sacrificial lamb which redeems the Israelites' firstborn is a type of Jesus Christ, who redeems everyone with his sacrifice.

The repetition thus is working on at least four levels: semantic, syntactic, mythic, and typological. Moreover, when we look at Deuteronomy, for example, much of the thematic thrust is toward remembering and passing on the stories and lessons to the children: reading, remembering, and teaching (as Moses repeats what the Lord tells him to say, teaching the Israelites). The repetition of the stories is itself part of the ideology. And interestingly, the symbolism of the center seems to inform the narrative strategy at the level of discourse. As Robert Polzin observes, the anonymous narrator of Deuteronomy

is a privileged observer and reporter of God's words, just as he describes Moses describing himself to be in chapter 5.

These temporal and psychological details are sometimes complicated by a more complex layering of quotations within quotations. In 2:4-7 and 32:26, 40-42, for example, the narrator quotes Moses quoting YHWH quoting himself; thus there is an utterance within an utterance within an utterance within an utterance, all in direct discourse. (93)

Quoting himself, God occupies the center of these discursive Chinese boxes.

Critical Approaches

As I said in the Introduction, students need to be reading and analyzing on a variety of levels or in a variety of ways. I turn now to look at a few of the stories and patterns to try to show an integration of a variety of critical approaches. Let us begin at the beginning.

The beginning story of Creation is a relatively simple one: God creates the universe and all living things out of chaos or the void, establishing order out of chaos. In the two stories about the creation of humanity in his image, the first gives us man and woman created at the same time and both in the likeness of God him/herself. The second story, the most culturally predominant one, has God creating Adam out of the earth and then forming Eve from one of Adam's ribs: she is created second, as a helpmeet for Adam, and is thus subordinated to him. Eve is tempted by the serpent, eats the infamous forbidden fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and then gives it to Adam, who eats. They are ashamed of their nakedness, get caught by God, are cursed and expelled from the Garden. On a literal and traditional level, we can read this to say that, well, it just goes to show you, you can't trust women. God is a father figure, he created the universe and us, we ate that fruit, and we have to work for our bread, women suffering also from the pains of childbirth. The Fall is the prototype of any fall from grace (unless we count the prior fall of Lucifer), and the Fall and attempted return to the Paradise of God's grace probably provides the dominant archetypal pattern in the Bible.

Since teaching literature is largely a matter of teaching students how to read, analyze, and interpret, let us look more closely at this story by putting into play the medieval system of Biblical hermeneutics. The medieval Church discriminated between four levels of how to read or interpret the Bible: literal, moral, allegorical, anagogic.

On the literal level, the story is literally true. Adam and Eve ate the fruit from a tree called the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and got kicked out of the Garden.

On the moral level, the story is interpreted in terms of the individual, and the focus is on the individual's actions, what s/he does. Adam and Eve don't really eat from a tree—they disobey God and feel guilty and are punished. They commit the sin of disobedience. If we do something wrong, we will feel guilty and suffer. From a psychological perspective, this also means that we grow up, or develop from children to adults, with all the accompanying knowledge and worries about sex and conscience: we become self conscious; we learn about the difference between good and evil.

On the allegorical level, the story is interpreted from a social perspective, or in terms of

how it relates to people in general, and the focus is on their beliefs. The story of Adam and Eve is the story of every man and woman. If we disobey God, we will feel guilty and suffer punishment. Eating the fruit means committing any sin. We must follow God's dictates which are given to us by the Bible and the Church. Disobedience to the Church is like disobedience to God; being expelled from the Garden is like being excommunicated. If we sin, we are exiled from the community and the company of our friends.

On the anagogic level, the story is interpreted from a mystical or universal perspective. The story of Adam and Eve is the story of the Fall from God's grace and the attempt to return to God's grace. The Bible is about the Fall, atonement, redemption, judgment. The Fall is the fall of the human soul from the paradise of God's grace to the hell of being distanced from God. If we sin, then we must atone for our sin. We can then be redeemed, and at the Last Judgment enter the kingdom of heaven.

Let us extend the criticism to involve a more contemporary approach, feminism. In the second story of the creation of Adam and Eve, Eve is created second, from Adam's rib. She is essentially made for him because he is rather lonely, being the only one of his kind. Eve is the one to first taste of the forbidden fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and then give it to Adam. She is responsible for the Fall. Hence, we have the ideological justification for the subordination of woman and for sexism in general.

The Bible also suppresses competing mythologies or stories that were unsuitable for the ideological agenda of the Bible's authors. The example of Lilith shows that God, like Victor Frankenstein after him, had trouble making a woman. According to one tradition, Lilith was the first female, Adam's first companion, who turned out to be a bit of a devil. She deserted Adam, leaving Paradise before the Fall, settled by the Red Sea where she gave birth to more than one hundred little demons per day, God making one hundred of them die every day (Graves and Patai 65-69). The story gives us clear indications of the mixture of Biblical myth with pagan myths or myths of other traditions. We are not as "pure" as the Bible would have us think.

The symbolism of the serpent also shows us similar problems. As a symbol of the earth goddess or goddess-centered religion, the serpent is a positive symbol of fertility, wisdom, and rebirth, but as the serpent reappears in the Bible, rearing its ugly little head as it were, the serpent becomes a symbol of evil. And, as the serpent is associated with the phallus and with male sexuality, or sexuality in general, sexuality becomes suspect, as it were, and sexual license, as in orgiastic fertility rites, is curbed and roundly condemned. By co-opting the snake from earlier goddess-centered religions and metamorphosing it into an image of evil,

we can see an important ideological move by the authors of Genesis.

I would like to end my discussion by turning briefly to one of the central themes and archetypal patterns in the Bible—deliverance. Frye remarks that the central theme of the Bible is the myth of deliverance (*Great Code* 50), and he graphs a repetitive narrative pattern “that is roughly U-shaped, the apostasy being followed by a descent into disaster and bondage, which in turn is followed by repentance, then by a rise through deliverance to a point more or less on the level from which the descent began” (169). He argues further that “as the Exodus is the definitive deliverance and the type of all the rest, we may say that mythically the Exodus is the only thing that really happens in the Old Testament. On the same principle the resurrection of Christ, around which the New Testament revolves, must be, from the New Testament’s point of view, the antitype of the Exodus” (171–72). We might, however, note that the earlier story of Abraham and Isaac provides the type for Exodus, the former being a story of individual, the later of collective, deliverance. Christ would thus unite the two: by sacrificing himself he delivers not only each individual “believing” soul but also redeems from the original sin the collective human race.

In that early story of deliverance, Abraham has been ordered by God, in Bob Dylan’s words, to “kill me a son,” and goes up to a mountain to sacrifice his son Isaac. Miraculously, the Lord saves Isaac by sending an Angel to stop the sacrifice, providing a ram in the place of Isaac. This story shows the testing of Abraham’s faith and the redemption of Isaac (the redeeming of the firstborn is also a major motif in the early books of the Bible). The story is also a type for the offering of Christ by his father God, and is often read as showing us anthropologically the movement away from human sacrifice (appeasing the gods and ensuring the cycle of fertility and growth in nature), to animal sacrifice, which will eventually become symbolic sacrifice with the rite of transubstantiation performed during communion: turning bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. But, the story of Abraham also includes God’s covenant with Abraham, and God’s promise of the promised land, the land of deliverance. What I wish to emphasize here is that within the first twenty-five chapters of Genesis (or more clearly and emphatically, within the first two books of the Bible, Genesis and Exodus), we have very clearly established the narrative pattern for the entire Bible, a pattern to be repeated many times and culminating in the resurrection of Christ, which foreshadows our own redemption from sin, and our own deliverance from this imperfect world into the promised paradise of heaven.

Let us turn to examine what seem to be intensely ideologically-based books, Joshua and Judges. David M. Gunn says that, simply put, the story in “Joshua is an account of the

For example, we read:

And we took all of his [Sihon's] cities at that time, and utterly destroyed the men, and the women, and the little ones, of every city, we left none to remain. . . . (Deut. 2:34)

When they enter the Promised Land, they are to do the same thing to all of the cities. Even an act of mercy to a helpful spy living there is not to be rewarded: all must die. The reason for this is to prevent the Israelites from backsliding and worshipping other gods, the gods of the people living there. Genocide is thus more than “mere” genocide and also signifies obedience to God. What we begin to focus on when we keep the Deuteronomic passages in mind is that there is a radical thematic opposition between the fulfillment and the unfulfillment of the covenant, between “the rhetoric of fulfillment and the rhetoric of incompleteness” (Gunn 108–09).

By focusing on the Israelites' failure to completely fulfill the covenant and on the formal elements of the two books, Gunn offers a reading that reveals a great deal of continuity within Judges and between Judges and Joshua. He shows that Judges is much more than it “has often been described as,” that is, as “a rather randomly assembled anthology of tales, at best an illustration of a cyclical pattern of sin, oppression, repentance, and salvation, expressive of an editor-compiler's rigidly deterministic theology of reward and punishment” (103–4).

Joshua and Judges repeats the fall-deliverance pattern discussed above. In Judges particularly, this pattern, repeatedly reiterated, may be said to be the dominant motif. Focusing on this pattern, one might argue that Judges is like a narrative vortex, a center within which this narrative pattern—apostasy, disaster and bondage, repentance, and deliverance—is intensified to the point where distinctive stories simply blur into one another by virtue of the fact that there are so many similar stories so quickly related. Neither the Israelites nor the readers get a chance to catch their breath before being rushed into the next cycle. It is almost as if the narrative pattern itself gains predominance over the individual stories: the cyclical pattern is simply so strong that its repetition seems inevitable. When we move past Judges into Kings and Chronicles, the pace slows down and we are allowed to focus on the individual characters and reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon—but the pattern has been inexorably established.

Conclusion

As Frye remarks, when we read the Bible we must read centripetally not centrifugally:

the Bible does not primarily refer outwardly to this world and to history, but inwardly to itself (*Great Code*, see particularly 53-77). What is offered up as ostensible history, as in Joshua and Judges, is a literary structure that is incorporated into the larger Biblical mythology. Crucial historical moments are marked by the appearance of God or reveal God's wrath or grace, history being transfigured and made sacred, inviting us into the archetypal story of the fall and deliverance over and over again. History is the fall away from God and the deliverance by God. To use Eliade's phrase, this is "history regarded as theophany" (see particularly 102-12).

The Bible is the very stuff of myth and ritual. In reading and teaching the Bible, we need to spend a lot of time focusing on the mythic elements, the relation of myth to ritual, on the isolation and analysis of archetypes, archetypal patterns, and on the concept of typology in general. To read the Christian Bible (and the Hebrew Bible, I believe), means that we must be reading archetypally and typologically, the way that it was written and structured.

Notes

¹ Let me expand briefly on the five points, which come from a variety of sources. Alan Watts says that myth is "A complex of images or a story, whether factual or fanciful, taken to represent the deepest truths of life, or simply regarded as specially significant for no clearly realized reason" (63). Myth is also clearly related to the society or community and is found in all societies and times. "And just as dreams reflect the unconscious desires and anxieties of the individual, so myths are the symbolic projections of a people's hopes, values, fears, and aspirations. . . . Myths are by nature collective and communal; they bind a tribe or nation together in common psychological and spiritual activities. . . . Moreover, like Melville's famous white whale (itself an archetypal image), myth is ubiquitous in time as well as place. It is a dynamic factor everywhere in human society; it transcends time, uniting the past (traditional modes of belief) with the present (current values) and reaching toward the future (spiritual and cultural aspirations)" (Guerin 148-49). "From Greek *mythos*, 'plot' or 'narrative.' The verbal culture of most if not all human societies began with stories, and certain stories have achieved a distinctive importance as being connected with what the society feels it most needs to know: stories illustrating the society's religion, history, class structure, or the origin of peculiar features of the natural environment. A distinction arises between 'serious' stories and stories told for amusement, and this distinction develops into the literary distinction between myth and folk tale. The difference between myth and folk tale is thus one of social function rather than structure. . . . But the specific social function of myth gives it two characteristics all its own. First, it defines a cultural area and gives it a shared legacy of allusion. . . . Second, they link with one another to form a *mythology*, an interconnected body of stories that verbalizes a society's major concerns in religion and history particularly. . . . For many reasons the great bulk of myths are stories about gods or

other beings beyond the orbit of ordinary experience (dragons, human heroes of supernatural powers, etc.). . . . The social function of myth divides into two aspects. First, it is a structure of concern, telling a particular society what the society most wants to know: the names and relationships of its gods, its laws, and the origins of its class structure, its legends and historical reminiscences, and the like. Second, it is a means of symbolizing the ideals and aims of an established spiritual and temporal hierarchy. Thus medieval romance embodies the ideals of a chivalric aristocracy, or, in the Grail stories, of a religious intellectual elite, along with being distantly related to universal mythical themes" (Frye, *Harper Handbook* 300-01). Robert Graves and Raphael Patai also emphasize the social (and ideological) function of myth, while also stressing the importance of ritual (symbolic repetition of an act originally performed by the gods or heroes): "Myths are dramatic stories that form a sacred charter either authorizing the continuance of ancient institutions, customs, rites and beliefs in the area where they are current, or approving alterations" (*Hebrew Myths* 11). In *The Greek Myths*, Graves more clearly defines myth in terms of ritual: "True myth may be defined as the reduction to narrative shorthand of ritual mime performed on public festivals, and in many cases recorded on temple walls, vases, seals, bowls, mirrors, chests, shields, tapestries, and the like" (12).

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