

# Barbara Kay on Northrop Frye: The power of myths in shaping history

Wednesday August 8th, 2012



David Colyn/ Walters Art Museum

Rembrandt's representation of Joseph, one of the biblical patriarch Jacob's twelve sons, being thrown into a pit by his brothers, who resented their father's favoritism towards him.

Apart from fundamentalists and secularists — the former with uncritical reverence, the latter with contempt — who now takes the Bible seriously as a key to our culture's worldview?

Literary visionary Northrop Frye, for one. In October, his centenary will be celebrated with a three- day symposium at the University of Toronto, Frye's academic home from 1939 until his death 20 years ago. (July 14 would have been his 100th birthday — but summer vacation is a bad time for conferences.)

As a student in English Language and Literature at the U of T in the 1960s, I was of course well aware of Frye's leonine academic stature. But our paths didn't cross: His bailiwick was Victoria College and mine was University College.

I dipped into his critical essays here and there at that time, but I didn't fully appreciate the grandeur of his intellect until many years later.

I was in my late thirties, and recovering, so to speak, from a transformative aesthetic experience. I had just finished reading Thomas Mann's luxuriantly fleshed- out literary saga, *Joseph and His Brothers*, which gripped me as few other literary adventures ever have, before or since.

From there, I was drawn to the illuminating pages of Frye's *The Great Code: the Bible and Literature*.

All cultures begin in an age of myth, Frye teaches us in *The Great Code*. To the modern ear, the word "myth" connotes ignorance and irrationality. But its original meaning, rooted in the Greek *mythos*, is "plot." In the formation of culture, whether a story is factually true or not is irrelevant. "Myths," Frye says, "are the [sacred] stories that tell a society what it is important for [us] to know."

A unified mythology can be a powerful instrument of social authority. What Frye calls a civilization's canon of "concerned knowledge," transmitting a heritage of shared allusion, creates a cultural history. The sacred stories that recur again and again are "charged with special seriousness and importance."

Take, for example, the Bible's central myth of the exodus from Egypt that Jews celebrate every Passover. There is no historical record of such a great emigration of people in Egyptian sources, but this "historical reminiscence" and the annual repetition of the story, hammering away at our central cultural motif of liberation from slavery, is nevertheless of supreme importance to the Jews' sense of collective identity.

As Frye puts it: "The real interest of a myth is to draw a circumference around a human community and look inward toward that community, not to inquire into the operations of nature." Thus, the Bible is a series of "mythical accretions" that are as powerful in their influence as historical events. And so in seeking to understand the significance of the myth of Noah's ark, for example, one should not compare it to real historical floods; rather one should compare it to other cultures' flood myths.

The most persistent Western myth, of course, concerns the idea of salvation. Christians see Joseph as a precursor to Jesus. Joseph was betrayed by his brothers and cast into a pit. They told their father he was dead, but he was "resurrected" from the pit, taken to Egypt, betrayed again, once more thrown into the depths and again "resurrected." On the strength of his prophetic power, he rose to great material and political heights. He literally saved his family from starvation. The Jesus myth is a spiritual palimpsest on Joseph's political and material success.

From Mann, I gathered that fascination with the mystery of death and resurrection of a beloved protagonist is not just a biblical motif, and that the Joseph story is itself linked to a precursor. In one popular variation of a supremely influential Egyptian myth, Osiris, a primeval king of Egypt, is murdered and dismembered by his brother Set and cast into the Nile. He emerges whole and restores dynastic order, an Egyptian fetish, through Horus, his miraculously conceived son.

The wheel of history turns, but on mythic axles. Egypt is still preoccupied with dynastic order, Israel with material and political survival, and Christians with salvation for their (no longer spiritual, but imperial, racial and environmental) sins. Everything old is new again.

National Post

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