# 2

# The Shape of the Bible

The narrative sequences in the Bible that I was speaking of are of a type that make it very difficult to answer the question, Are they histories or fictions? In fact, it might be said that what is distinctive, almost unique, about the Bible is the fact that that question cannot be directly answered at all.

Every sequence in words, just by virtue of the fact that it is a sequence, is a verbal structure in which the words have their own patterns and their own forms. It is impossible to describe anything with definitive accuracy in the outside world by means of words, because words are always forming their own self-contained patterns of subject and predicate and object. They are continually shaping reality into what are essentially grammatical fictions.

It doesn't matter whether a sequence of words is called a history or a story: that is, whether it is intended to follow a sequence of actual events or not. As far as its verbal shape is concerned, it will be equally mythical in either case. But we notice that any emphasis on shape or structure or pattern or form always throws a verbal narrative in the direction we call mythical rather than historical. To give you an example, the Book of Judges is a sequence of stories about leaders who were originally tribal leaders, but the stories have been edited to present the appearance of a united Israel going through a series of disasters and restorations. The actual heroes are different each time—Gideon, Jephthah, Samson, Samuel—and the stories told about them naturally differ in content. But they're all set inside a similar framework: Israel deserts its God, and the result is disaster; an enemy moves in, conquers the country or invades it; the Israelites think better of their infidelity, turn back to their God again; a deliverer or a judge is sent, who brings them back to a position roughly where they were before.

Now that gives us a narrative shape or pattern that we would get either in a history or in a work of literature: roughly a U-shape. And that U-shaped pattern is the typical shape of the structure we know as comedy. If we look at comedy, we find that a situation is presented which gradually becomes more ominous and threatening and foreboding of disaster to the characters with which we are sympathetic. Then there's a kind of gimmick or sudden shift in the plot, and eventually it moves towards a happy ending where everybody gets married, and the hero and heroine's real life is assumed to begin after the play is over. That is why the heroes and heroines of so many comedies are in fact rather dull people. The main character interest is thrown onto the blocking characters, the parents who've forbidden them to marry, for instance.

That curve is also the containing narrative shape of the Bible, because the mythical shape of the Bible, if we read it from beginning to end, is a comic one. It's a story in which man is placed in a state of nature from which he falls—the word "fall" is something which this diagram indicates visually.[7] At the end of the story, he is restored to the things that he had at the beginning. Judaism focuses upon the story of Israel, which in the Old Testament is to be restored at the end of history, according to the way the prophets see that history. The Christian Bible is focused more on the story of Adam, who represents mankind as falling from a state of integration with nature into a state where he is alienated from nature.

In symbolic terms, what Adam loses is the tree and the water of life. Those are images that we'll look at in more detail later. On practically the first page of the Bible we are told that Adam loses the tree and the water of life in the garden of Eden. On practically the last page of the Bible, in the last chapter of the Book of Revelation, the prophet has a vision of the tree and the water of life restored to man. That affinity between the structure of the Bible and the structure of comedy has been recognized for many centuries and is the reason why Dante called his vision of hell and purgatory and heaven a *commedia*.

We owe our great tragedies very largely to the Greek tradition, which has a different outlook. The Bible is not very close to tragedy: when it deals with disaster, its point of view is ironic rather than tragic. While there are many reasons for this, the main one is that in a typical tragedy there is a hero who embodies certain qualities which suggest the superhuman, and the Bible recognizes no such hero except for Jesus himself. The Crucifixion would be the one genuine tragic form in the Bible, but that of course is an episode in a containing comedy.

And this U-shaped pattern of loss and return and deliverance is found all the way through the Bible. It's not only the overall containing form, but appears in many parts of the Bible that have nothing to do with history. It is, for example, the containing form of the story of Job, who is in a state of prosperity, loses everything he has, and at the end of the story is restored to what he had before. It is also the containing shape of Jesus' parable of the prodigal son [Luke 15:11–32]. It's perhaps interesting to notice that of these loss-and-return stories, the prodigal son is the only version we have in the Bible where the decision to return is a voluntary act of the chief character himself. All the others depend on a human confession of helplessness and a divine intervention.

A fact which links onto that is that the central nation of the Bible story is Israel, and the most important historical fact about Israel is that the Israelites were never lucky at the game of empire: the land of Israel was simply a highway between Egypt and the Mesopotamian kingdoms. In the entire historical record, there are only two very brief periods of relative prosperity and independence: the period of David and Solomon and the period just following the Maccabean rebellion, about a century before the time of Christ. The reason was the same in both cases: one world empire had declined, and its successor had not yet arisen. The period of David and Solomon came between the decline of Egypt and the rise of Assyria, and the period of the Maccabees and their successors came between the decline of Syria and the rise of Rome.

So we find that history is always in itself a problem for the Biblical narrators. They are surrounded by kingdoms that are prosperous and powerful and, although awfully wicked, that seem to get away with it. Most of the Biblical writers are writing within an Israel which desperately longs to have this kind of power and influence and prosperity, and would certainly regard it as a mark of signal divine favour if it ever did have it. But throughout the Biblical story, mostly it doesn't.

We can look at the story of Israel, mythically, as a sequence of falls and rises. Sometimes the rise is only to a change of masters, but still, that U-shaped pattern is the way in which the story of Israel is told throughout the Bible. Now, to mention all of these falls and rises at once would be confusing, so I'll select six, in honour of the days of Creation. We start of course with Adam, who is thrown out of Eden and told to go and till the ground, which is cursed in order to make it more difficult. And so, from the garden, we are turned out into a wilderness. To that symbol of the wilderness, two other images are added. One is the image of the sea, which turns up in the story of Noah's flood. The other

is the symbol of the heathen city. The first person born outside the garden of Eden is Cain, the eldest son of Adam and the murderer of Abel. He is then sent into a far country, and there he founds a city. That city has always been a puzzle to readers of Genesis, who are reading a narrative which seems to imply that there were only three people alive in the world at that time. But what is interesting is the assumption that cities are the earliest form of human settlement, rather than villages or hamlets or isolated farms.

Cain goes out to what is called the land of Nod. We don't know where that is, but it looks as though it were somewhere in Mesopotamia. We'll pass over the story of the flood for the moment, but the first conspicuous upward movement is the one associated with Abraham, who lives in a heathen city called Ur in Sumeria and is drawn out of there by God and promised a land in the west. And from this the patriarchs succeed: Abraham's son is Isaac; Isaac's son is Jacob, whose later name is Israel. This period seems to be very largely a pastoral one associated with flocks and herds, essentially a ranching economy. But then Jacob (Israel), as a result of a complicated story about his son Joseph, goes down into Egypt.

Now this is the great archetypal event, so to speak: it's the one from which all the others take their form and model. The Israelites did nothing wrong in entering Egypt; in fact, they were welcomed there. But after a century or two, there arose a pharaoh who determined to exterminate them by genocide, and the result was the Exodus. The Exodus, under the leadership first of Moses and then of Joshua, takes them back to the Promised Land. But this time the economy is more of an agricultural one. They are promised a land flowing with milk and honey [3:8], and neither of those is a vegetable product: but the symbol of the Promised Land, when they get there, is a big bunch of grapes [Numbers 13:23–4]. We are told that, with some reluctance, they settled down to an agricultural life, dependent on the crops and on the harvest and vintage.

The crucial event of the Exodus was the crossing of the Red Sea. The Israelites got across it safely, but the Egyptian army pursuing them was drowned in it [Exodus 14]. So the demonic image of the sea recurs in the story of the Exodus, and that is followed of course by forty years' wandering in the wilderness.

There follows the period of the judges, and eventually the Israelites find themselves in bondage to many of the surrounding kingdoms, of which the most powerful and important were the Philistines. The Phi-

listines were probably a Greek-speaking people from Cyprus, and they gave their name, somewhat ironically, to Palestine. By this time, we are getting towards the period of the Trojan War, which is a legendary reconstruction of a period of history in which the Egyptian Empire was declining and was constantly being attacked by sea pirates, most of whom were allied to the Greeks. The armour of the Philistine giant Goliath, which is described in the Book of Samuel [1 Samuel 17:5–7], is rather like the armour of the Homeric warrior. So we're speaking of the period around 1200 to 1100 B.C.

This is followed by a renewed prosperity, where the great leaders are David and David's son Solomon. Here the imagery shifts to urban imagery. David's great feat, from the Biblical point of view, was to capture the city of Jerusalem and to make it the capital of his kingdom. Thus, Jerusalem becomes the central image of this phase of Israelite history, along with the temple on Mount Zion built by his successor Solomon.

Solomon is a curious example of the way in which legend and history are interwoven in the Bible. The historical Solomon was not a wise man, but a weak and foolish and extravagant man who spent seven years building a temple, thirteen years building his own palace, and who then, at the suggestion of some of his seven hundred wives, amiably built two or three more temples to other gods. Well, that's fair enough: historically, Solomon was probably not a monotheist at all. But the memory of his taxation for all these buildings was very bitter, and not long after his death, when his son proposed to continue his policies, he instantly lost ten-twelfths of his kingdom, which split into a Northern Israel and a Southern Kingdom of Judah. After that, it was only a matter of time until another captivity. The great Assyrian war machine rumbled across western Asia and destroyed the Northern Kingdom around 722 B.C. The Southern Kingdom, Judah, had a respite for a little while, but eventually King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came and sacked Jerusalem, and the Israelites, now the Jews, were carried away into captivity in Babylon.

The Babylonian captivity lasted about seventy years, until Babylon itself was destroyed by the power of Persia. The first great king of Persia, Cyrus, one of the few authentically great men of the ancient world and a tremendous legendary figure both in Greek literature and in the Bible, permitted—in fact, according to the Bible, encouraged—the Jews to return and rebuild their temple [2 Chronicles 36:22–3; Ezra 1:1–3] . There are two returns prominently featured in the Bible, one of

them towards the end of the sixth century, around 516 B.C., and a later one about a century later under Ezra [7–10] and Nehemiah [2:5 ff.]. There were probably others, but symbolically we need only one return, which focuses on the image of the rebuilt temple.

There follows something of a blank. Consecutive Old Testament history stops with the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., and we have only fragmentary glimpses of the Persian period. You remember that the Persian Empire was destroyed by Alexander the Great, who gets very little attention in the Bible, although the great Biblical historian Josephus has him welcomed into Jerusalem by the high priest with many expressions of mutual esteem.[8] But Alexander's empire of course fell apart instantly after his death. Judah was eventually attached to the largest chunk of it, the Seleucian Empire, with its headquarters in Syria. Finally, around 165 B.C., there arose the persecution of the non-Hellenized Jews by the king of Syria, whose name was Antiochus and who gave himself the name of Epiphanes, which means "the Glorious." But when he wasn't listening, his courtiers altered it to Epimanes, "the Lunatic." Antiochus seems to have regarded the Jewish religion as a personal insult, and his persecution was so ferocious that it provoked the rebellion of a man of the priestly tribe of Levi, whose five sons, all of whom were also very actively engaged in the rebellion, are known as the Maccabees.

Eventually the Maccabees gained a certain degree of independence for the country, perhaps the most important event symbolically being not so much the rebuilding of the temple as the purification of it. What Antiochus had done that was particularly outrageous to Jewish feelings was to put a statue of the god Apollo in the Holy of Holies,[9] the most sacred part of the temple. Therefore, on the anniversary of this sacrilege, the temple was purified by Judas Maccabeus [2 Maccabees 10:1–9]. The independence won by the Maccabees lasted until the legions of Rome, headed by Pompey, again came rolling over from Asia Minor and entered Jerusalem in 62 B.C.. That is the historical situation which we meet at the beginning of the New Testament.

In A.D. 70, Jerusalem was sacked and looted by the Emperor Titus. In A.D. 135, the Emperor Hadrian expelled all the Jews from their homeland and changed the name of Jerusalem to a Latin name—Aelia Capitolina—and simply eradicated all geographical traces of the Jewish people. At this point, Jewish and Christian versions of this U-shaped narrative diverge. The Christian interpretation is that Jesus came to achieve all these symbols of peace and prosperity in a spiritual form. In

the Jewish belief, that has still to happen, and there has to be also a literal return of the Jewish people to their homeland.

I wouldn't say that this pattern was cyclical. The Bible doesn't like cyclical views of history. The reason it doesn't is that a cycle is a machine, and a cyclical view of history means a machine turning, something impersonal. Such a view would be part of that perverse tendency on the part of mankind to enslave himself to his own inventions and his own conceptions. Man invented the wheel, and so in no time at all he's talking about wheels of fate and wheels of fortune as something that are stronger than he is. That's the Frankenstein element in the human mind, an element which is part of original sin.

The Bible, while its approach to history is a very oblique one, nevertheless has a very strong, even passionate interest in historical sense. And in history, as we know, nothing ever exactly repeats. Every situation is a little different, but what happens is a kind of growing consolidation of these images. So that the image of the final restoration of mankind that we get in the Book of Revelation is not a simple return to a simple garden of Eden, but incorporates the imagery of cities and of harvests and vintages as well. I think that at every phase we get a new aspect, symbolically, of the ideal human life, which is first thought of as a garden where man lives entirely on tree fruits. Then, as history goes on, it incorporates these elements of human work, these elements by which man transforms his environment into something with a human shape and a human meaning. And with the conception of the rebuilt temple, you have the element of time added. It becomes something that takes place in time as well as in conceptual space.

Well now, if we look at this manic-depressive chart,[10] we notice that symbolically there is a certain affinity among all the categories on the top. They are all symbols for the home of the soul, for the ideal situation of human life. Similarly, all the categories at the bottom are recurring symbols of the bondage and tyranny of human history. We've been dealing with the principle of myth at some length, but the next thing we have to do is to invoke another principle, which is the principle of metaphor.

Metaphor is the grammatical figure which says "this is that." If you look at the forty-ninth chapter of Genesis, which is Jacob's prophecy of the twelve tribes of Israel, you'll find a number of metaphors of that kind: Joseph is a fruitful bough; Naphtali is a hind let loose; Issachar is a strong ass; Dan shall be a serpent in the way [vv. 22, 21, 14, 17]. Now that is the grammatical form of the metaphor, in which there are two

categories, A and B. They are said to be the same thing, although they remain two different things. Therefore, the metaphor is illogical; or, more accurately, it is insane. That is, nobody can take metaphor seriously except the people mentioned in the speech of Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the lunatic, the lover, and the poet [5.1.7–8]. The Bible is so full of metaphors because it is so intensely poetic.

We'll find later how many of the images of the Bible, and even how many of the central doctrines of the Bible, or the central doctrines of Christianity which evolved from the Bible, can be grammatically expressed only in the form of metaphor. In the doctrine of the Trinity, for example, one equals three. Or, one is three and three are one. The doctrine of the real presence is that the body and blood are the bread and the wine. Jesus, in Christian doctrine, is man and God. All of these are metaphorical in grammatical expression, and they are all statements that completely transcend, or whatever they do, the world of logic. In logic, A can only be A. It can never be B.

We are told in the New Testament by Paul and others that the Bible has to be understood spiritually—*pneumatikos*—and the word "spiritually" means a good many things in the New Testament. But one thing it always means, and always has to mean, is "metaphorically." In Revelation 11:8 we are told of a martyrdom of two witnesses in the last days, as one of the prophecies of what is going to happen at the end of time. And the verse reads: "And their dead bodies shall lie in the street of the great city, which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified." That is, spiritually, metaphorically, Sodom, Egypt, and the earthly Jerusalem are all the same city. And similarly, in the symbolism of the Bible, Egypt, Babylon, and Rome are all symbolically the same tyranny. And the Pharaoh of the Exodus, the Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and the persecuting Caesars of Rome, of whom Nero is particularly the type, are metaphorically or spiritually the same person.

But, of course, they are the same person in a way which does not commit you at all to any literal belief in reincarnation or "there's that man again." That is, Antiochus and Nero and Nebuchadnezzar and the Pharaoh of the Exodus are all spiritually the same person. And similarly, the garden of Eden, the Promised Land, Jerusalem, and the temple on Mount Zion are all interchangeable spiritually, the same image of the soul's ideal and the soul's home. The reason this conception is so centrally important in the Christian Bible is that Jesus continually talks about his spiritual kingdom, which he makes quite clear has nothing to

do with overturning the Roman Empire. And that is why the word "spiritual" is so much stressed in the New Testament.

I don't mean individual or subjective. The word "spiritual" is something which normally we approach in a rather individual and subjective way, but there's a very strong social interest in the Bible which is part of its historical interest. In the New Testament, Paul, for example, speaks of a moment of private illumination that he had. At the end of the second Letter to the Corinthians, he's extremely apologetic about it, and talks about boasting, which is something he dislikes doing [12:1–12]. He also talks about it very vaguely. He's not sure whether it happened to him or to somebody else. And what he's thinking of, I think, is that a religion which is aimed purely at individual illumination is something of a cop-out. What he is trying to proclaim is a social and a revolutionary thing as well. He wants the world, not individuals here or there, to wake up.

# Biblical and Classical Myths

## The Mythological Framework of Western Culture

*Northrop Frye*
*and*
*Jay Macpherson*

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PRESS
Toronto Buffalo London

*Symbolism in the Bible*


*Four Ages: The Classical Myths*
First published by Macmillan of Canada 1962

Toronto Buffalo London

ISBN 0-8020-3927-8 (cloth)
ISBN 0-8020-8695-0 (paper)

Printed on acid-free paper

Frye Studies

---

**National Library of Canada Cataloguing in Publication**

Frye, Northrop, 1912–1991.
Biblical and classical myths : the mythological framework of western culture / Northrop Frye and Jay Macpherson.

Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-8020-3927-8 (bound). ISBN 0-8020-8695-0 (pbk.)

1. Myth in the Bible. 2. Mythology, Classical. I. Macpherson, Jay, 1931– II. Title.

BL312.F79 2004 201'.3 C2004-902028-5

---

This volume has been published with the assistance of a grant from the DeGroote Trust for the Collected Works of Northrop Frye at McMaster University.

University of Toronto Press acknowledges the financial assistance to its publishing program of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council.

University of Toronto Press acknowledges the financial support for its publishing activities of the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP).