

THE BIBLE, NORTHROP FRYE & CLASSICAL CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

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Somewhere between the work of Joseph Campbell and Leland Ryken lies the literary criticism of Northrop Frye. Campbell, working in the tradition of Sir James Frazer's *Golden Bough*, laid side-by-side for his readers the various myths, legends, and sacred rituals of people groups across the globe, ultimately treating Christianity as one myth among many, albeit a more sophisticated one. Leland Ryken, to my mind the foremost evangelical scholar of the Bible as literature, shares Campbell's focus on mythic and literary structures, but treats the historical stories recorded in the Bible as reliable, if imaginatively presented history.

While remaining skeptical as to the literal, historical accuracy of the New, and especially the Old, Testament, Frye (1912–1991), a Canadian educator and literary theorist who was also an ordained minister, locates in the Bible transcendent, interlocking truths of permanent value. As an evangelical, I naturally gravitate toward Ryken; however, there is much that a creedal, Bible-believing Christian can learn from Frye. In *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (HBJ, 1982) and *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature* (HBJ, 1990), Frye offers readers willing to wrestle with his dense but accessible analysis stunning insights into the mythic architecture of the Bible. Although his insights will reward all careful students

of the Bible, they have special significance for classical Christian educators who seek to unite the best of our Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian heritages.

Frye achieved critical fame in 1947 with his path-breaking and code-breaking analysis of the arcane, esoteric, Bible-inspired prophetic poems of William Blake, *Fearful Symmetry*. A full decade later, he published *An Anatomy of Criticism*, the foundational text in the school of archetypal criticism. Archetypes are words or images or rituals that carry universal, cross-cultural significance. Nearly all civilizations, whatever their religion, recognize the archetypes of the sun or of water, of the quest or the cycle of the harvest, of the wise old man or the blue-blooded orphan. An archetypal critic identifies and analyzes such archetypes, not only in themselves, but as part of a complex series of symbols and allusions that link one poem to another and point back to a higher center of meaning.

Frye helped edge criticism, at least for a time, away from what he called centrifugal theories, ones that take us outside the literary work to the author's biography or the sociopolitical milieu in which he wrote or any of a number of race, sex, or gender-based ideologies. Instead, Frye advocated centripetal theories that take us into the work itself, treating it as both a self-contained literary artifact and an organic part of a greater system

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of aesthetic forces and patterns. With the boldness and apocalyptic energy of a biblical prophet, Frye the critic helped open the eyes of two generations of teachers and students to the deeper, eternal truths that lie hidden at the core of the Great Books of the Western Intellectual Tradition. And he did so in a way that championed the existence of a final center or nodal point from which all meaning radiates.

As Frye was arguably the last major systematic theorist to posit a transcendent meaning for poetry, it is vital that Christians of a literary bent who believe that absolute standards of Goodness, Truth, and Beauty exist should have some working knowledge of Frye's contribution to the study of literature in general and the Bible in particular. In the remainder of this essay, I will consider a helpful paradigm for understanding the unique language, mythic patterns, and metanarrative of the Bible that Frye develops in *The Great Code*. In a sequel essay, I will consider a second paradigm that Frye develops in his own sequel, *Words with Power*.

Frye is a master at laying out threefold or fourfold or sevenfold systems for organizing the interlocking archetypes that meet us again and again in literature. In *The Great Code*, he helpfully identifies and analyzes a seven-phase sequence of events that gives thematic structure and narrative direction to the diverse, sixty-six books that make up the Bible. He labels those phases creation, revolution, law, wisdom, prophecy, gospel, and apocalypse.

1) "Genesis," writes Frye, "presents the Creation as a sudden coming into being of a world through articulate speech . . . Something like this metaphor of awakening may be the real reason for the emphasis on 'days'" (108). Although evangelicals like myself will be far less prone to write off the creation week as merely metaphorical, Frye's point helps to clarify the centrality of waking to the overall story of the Bible. From God creating the world out of nothing, to Adam waking to find Eve, to Abraham being shocked awake by the angel who stops

him from sacrificing Isaac, to Jacob realizing that the man he has been wrestling with all night is God, to Moses awakening to his call to rescue his people, to the children of Israel waking over and over again to their stiff-necked rebelliousness, the Bible introduces us to a God who is ever shaking us out of our slumber.

Two things that God's role as Creator particularly shakes us out of is the twin temptation to either worship nature, as did the pagans, or to reject it, along with the Gnostics, as the bastard offspring of an evil demiurge. The first three chapters of Genesis help steer the reader away from both extremes by setting up what Frye calls a two-level view of nature, one that persists from Genesis to Revelation. "The upper level," Frye explains, "was the 'good' divine creation of Genesis; the lower level was the 'fallen' order that Adam entered after his sin. Man is born now on the lower level, and his essential duty in life is to try to raise himself to the higher one. Morality, law, virtue, the sacraments of the Church, all help to raise him, as does everything genuinely educational" (113).

We who live on the lower level must seek ever to repair the ruins of the fall, a project in which classical educators can play almost as important a role as the clergy. To teach children about Goodness, Truth, and Beauty, to attune their ears and eyes to hear the music of the spheres and to see the reflection in our world of the Form of the Good is to lead them along the path toward what Plato and the church fathers called the beatific vision. It is also to open up the Scriptures for them so that they can perceive the hand of the Creator who will one day bring both levels together in the New Jerusalem.

2) As we move from Genesis to Exodus, we encounter a revolutionary aspect of God. He may be the Creator of all the earth and of all the peoples on the earth, but he is also a God who works through particular events, who enters "history in a highly partisan role, taking sides with the oppressed Hebrews against the Egyptian establishment" (114). Whereas most modern critics of the Bible shy away from this aspect of the God of the

Bible, preferring to cling to an emasculated version of Jesus the meek and mild inclusivist, Frye stays true to this essential dimension of God's biblical self-revelation. Though he labels it the "least amiable characteristic" of the Israelites, Frye is honest enough to admit that it was not the Jewish "belief that their God was the true God but their belief that all other gods were false that proved decisive" (114).

The God who, in the Old Testament, takes sides with Isaac over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau, with Joshua at Jericho and Elijah on Mount Carmel, with Samson and David among the Philistines and Daniel and Esther among the Persians, is the same God who, in the New, thunders against the Pharisees and Sadducees, chases the money changers out of the Temple courts, strikes Herod Agrippa dead for refusing to give glory to God, and will one day defeat the godless nations who have oppressed his Bride. From Genesis to Revelation, the same God who creates nature involves himself in the kingdoms of men, now judging and now forgiving, now tearing down and now rebuilding.

It has been a good fifty years since the public school system abandoned history and replaced it with social studies. A renewed meditation on the Scriptures might help restore history to its proper place in the educational curriculum. Even though Frye often registers skepticism as to the historical accuracy of the biblical narrative, he does at least help us to see that the controlling mythic structure of the Bible is concerned with a providential history in which things do not happen randomly but in accordance with a greater plan.

3) God may be a revolutionary, but he is not an anarchist. No sooner does Israel secure her freedom from bondage than God binds her to the Mosaic Law. Drawing an incisive, historically relevant comparison between 1776 and the Sinai covenant, Frye helps us see the centrality of the biblical movement from revolution to law: "A country founded on a revolution acquires a deductive way of thinking which is often encoded in

constitutional law, and the American reverence for its Constitution, an inspired document to be amended and reinterpreted but never discarded, affords something of a parallel to the Old Testament sense of Israel as a people created by its law" (118).

Justice and purity are not peripheral concerns in the Bible, but touch on the very nature of God and his relationship to his chosen people. Frye highlights the stories of Achan in the Old Testament (Joshua 7) and Ananias and Sapphira in the New (Acts 5) as clear, if disturbing examples of God's absolute commitment to justice and purity. When the Bible used to stand at the center of American education, virtue was stressed as strongly as knowledge—not "values clarification," which encourages children to come up with their own morality, but true virtue that manifests itself in the inculcation of the specific and absolute virtues of courage, temperance, wisdom, and justice.

4) Phases four and five of Frye's sevenfold schema help remind readers of the Bible that history, though vital to the overall biblical narrative, does not exhaust the focus of God's revelation. A considerable portion of the Scriptures are devoted to wisdom literature and to the "thus saith the Lord" pronouncements of the prophets. In Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and many of the Psalms, the Law given to Moses takes on, as it were, flesh and blood. "Law is general," explains Frye, "wisdom begins in interpreting and commenting on law, and applying it to specific and variable situations" (121). The Bible, that is to say, not only provides a grand, sweeping narrative of God's work in human history, but meets each person where he is at. Its message is timeless, but its application is always *now*.

Never a book to mince words or to coddle dunces, the Bible unapologetically makes a division between the wise man and the fool: "the wise man is the one who follows in the accepted way, in what experience and tradition have shown to be the right way. The fool is the man with the new idea that always turns out to

be an old fallacy” (121). In our own day, “progressivist” thinkers both inside and outside the church never tire of recycling all the old heresies, from Arianism to Gnosticism, Marcionism to nominalism. It should come as no surprise that the Bible so often links wisdom—that is, discernment—to the old; the old are the ones who have learned through experience that there is nothing new under the sun.

Although Frye balks a bit at the pain that has been caused by the biblical warning that those who spare the rod will spoil the child, he admits that such verses are not motivated by cruelty or tyranny. “Education is the attaining of the right forms of behavior and the persistence in them; hence, like a horse, one has to be broken into them” (121). If we try to spare our student’s “feelings,” if we refuse to do anything that will hurt their self-esteem, then we will only succeed in producing eternal sophomores (a Greek word that means “wise fools”) who will continue the recycling of old fallacies with a passion born out of an unshakeable sense of entitled ignorance.

Those who pride themselves on coming up with ever-more “progressive” readings of the Scriptures have cut themselves off, not only from sound teaching and doctrine, but from the very biblical tradition of wisdom literature. Though evangelicals may be a bit too self-assured about the Bible being a self-interpreting book, the Bible, rightly understood, *does* equip and empower those who read it carefully and prayerfully to see through the mist and fog of worldly lust and pride, through what Solomon calls the vanity of vanities.

5) Biblical discernment grounds us in the wisdom of the past, but what of the future? Does the revolution end with the exodus and the giving of the law, or does it persist? For Frye, it persists via the fifth stage of the biblical journey: “prophecy is the individualizing of the revolutionary impulse, as wisdom is the individualizing of the law, and is geared to the future as wisdom is to the past” (125). Though the Bible refers to scores of

prophets who followed the status quo and told the king what he wanted to hear, the Old Testament champions those prophets who proclaimed the word of God in the face of corrupt leaders: Elijah, Enoch, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Joel, etc.

Furthermore, Frye rightly points out, those prophets of whom God approved rarely gave the sorts of messages that we expect: “The popular notion of a prophet is that of a man who can foretell the future, but the Biblical prophets as a rule take fairly short views, except when prophesying the future restoration of Israel” (127). Biblical prophecy has little to do with fortune telling and divination; in fact, the Old Testament forbids just such practices. When Isaiah, Jeremiah, and company are not looking ahead to the first or second coming of the Messiah, they generally speak words of judgment against an apostate Israel who has forgotten that God is the creator and provider of all things who rescued them from bondage in Israel and who expects them to follow the law and show forth godly discernment in their choices and actions.

Frye distinguishes thus between the voices of wisdom and of prophecy: “The wise man thinks of the human situation as a kind of horizontal line, formed by precedent and tradition and extended by prudence: the prophet sees man in a state of alienation caused by his own distractions” (128). We need to hear both voices if we are to understand the full revelation of the Bible and live the moral-ethical-spiritual lives to which it calls us. All is well, yet all is not well. The Kingdom of God is here, now, among us; but it is also still to come. An education that is truly classical and Christian will teach students the time-worn, biblical strategies for living a good and fruitful life, while clearly warning them against the estranged, fragmented nature of our fallen world and the deep depravity that lurks in each of our hearts.

6) As we move from the Old Testament to the New, prophecy gives way to gospel—and that gospel is heralded by the last and greatest of the Hebrew prophets:

John the Baptist. John calls on his followers to repent of their sins, but, Frye suggests, the sins John cries out against are not the kind that result “in criminal or antisocial acts.” Rather, they are the kind that “block the activity of God” (130). All of the prophecies of the Old Testament lead up to Christ, who preaches his good news in an eternal-infinite now that breaks down time and space. We can participate in that now or stand against it.

The gospel brings us face-to-face with God, not that we might be enlightened but that we might be transformed and united with him. In Christ’s atonement, “a channel of communication between the divine and the human is now open, and hence the whole metaphorical picture of the relation of man and God has to be reversed. Man does not stand in front of an invisible but objective power making conciliatory gestures of ritual and moral obligation to him: such gestures express nothing except his own hopelessness” (134). The gospel thus fulfills the Old Testament while simultaneously rendering obsolete and unnecessary its elaborate systems of sacrifice and ritual purification. Christ beckons us at every moment to ascend into the upper level, into the Kingdom that is both a restored Eden and a foreshadowing—or, better, in-breaking—of the coming New Jerusalem.

7) And that leads us to the climactic seventh phase, revelation, a Latin word that, like the Greek word it translates (apocalypse), means an “unveiling” or “uncovering.” Frye’s unique reading of this final stage in the biblical journey is searingly insightful, even if it relies a bit too much on Blake’s semi-Gnostic proclamation, in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, that “[i]f the doors of perception were cleansed, every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite.”

According to Frye, Revelation does not so much foretell events to come as reveal to us “the inner form of everything that is happening now” (136). Why is this necessary? Because “[m]an creates what he calls history

as a screen to conceal the workings of the apocalypse from himself” (136). We need to have our man-made vision of history torn aside so that we can see what is really taking place all around us. What Revelation opens our eyes to is not “the destruction of the order of nature [but] the destruction of the way of seeing that order that keeps man confined to the world of time and history as we know them. This destruction is what the Scripture is intended to achieve” (136).

Frye uses the word Scripture rather than Revelation in the previous sentence because he interprets the final book of the Bible as offering the key to understanding the other sixty-five books. The journey from Genesis to Revelation is a historical journey, but it ever points beyond itself to an eternal, invisible God who dwells outside of time and space. That is why the Bible abounds with literary-poetic language. Apart from its metaphors and metonymies, its allegories and symbols, its parables and proverbs, it could not forge the kinds of connections between time and eternity, man and God, creature and creator, object and subject that it needs to make to fulfill its purpose of uncovering hidden truths.

A true classical Christian education is committed to far more than the impartation of knowledge. Things must not merely be memorized; they must be understood. Eyes and ears must not merely be pointed in the right direction; they must be opened and purified. Faith means much more than belief or even trust; it means achieving a radically new way of seeing God, ourselves, and creation.

We must do more than read the Bible in order to understand it; we must allow the Bible to teach us how to read and understand everything else.