

THE BIBLE, NORTHROP FRYE & CLASSICAL CHRISTIAN EDUCATION II

by Louis Markos, Houston Baptist University

In my previous essay, I considered a sevenfold narrative paradigm employed by Canadian literary critic and ordained minister Northrop Frye in *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (HBJ, 1982) to help readers unpack the unique language, mythic patterns, and metanarrative of the Bible. I would like to turn now to the sequel of that book, *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature* (HBJ, 1990), to explore a second, fourfold paradigm that take us to the heart of the Scriptures. As before, my goal in explicating and opening up Frye's critical apparatus will be to guide classical Christian educators toward a deeper understanding of the Bible that respects both its eternal truth claims and its complex literary structures.

Before turning to that paradigm, however, it would be valuable to take a step backward and consider the true founder of Frye's archetypal criticism: not Karl Jung or William Blake, not Dante or Vico, not Aquinas or Augustine, but the Apostle Paul. Again and again in his epistles, St. Paul joins Old Testament to New through the medium of typology. To read the Bible typologically is to recognize that many, if not most, of the people, events, and symbols of the Old Testament not only carry historical significance in themselves but function as types (or figures) of things to be revealed later.

Viewed typologically, the key figures and events of

Jewish history do not achieve their complete meaning until they are viewed in the fuller light of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ and the new covenant (or testament) that God makes with the Church. Thus, Elijah is a historical prophet who lived in the wilderness and challenged the corrupt leaders of his day (Ahab and his scheming wife Jezebel), but he is also a type (or prefiguring) of John the Baptist, who also lived in the wilderness and challenged the corrupt leaders of *his* day (Herod Antipas and his scheming wife Herodias). Just so, Joshua (Yeshua in Hebrew), who led the children of Israel over the River Jordan and into the Promised Land is a type of Jesus (the Greek equivalent of Yeshua) who leads the Church through the River of Death into the New Jerusalem.

The near-sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham is a type of the Crucifixion, but with a salvific twist. Whereas a ram in the thicket is provided to Abraham to take the place of Isaac, God the Father allows his own Son to *be* that ram in the thicket, his bloody crown of thorns recalling the thorns that prevented the ram from escaping Abraham's sacrificial knife. In a similar way, the brazen serpent that Moses raised up in the wilderness, which brought healing to any serpent-poisoned Jew who looked up to it with faith, foreshadows Christ on the Cross, who brings salvation to any sinner who will

Louis Markos (www.Loumarkos.com), professor in English and scholar in residence at Houston Baptist University, holds the Robert H. Ray Chair in Humanities.

put his faith in the One who became sin on our behalf (see John 3:14-15).

When Jesus reworks and redefines the meaning of Passover at the Last Supper, he engages in what may be the supreme act of typology. In the historical story recorded in Exodus, the people living in Egypt—Jew and Gentile alike—must face the merciless angel of death, who will move through the land killing the firstborn of all living things. Though none can escape his destructive sword, God offers the Jews—and presumably any faithful, God-fearing Egyptians—a way of escape. If they take a spotless lamb, kill it, and spread its blood on their doorpost, when the angel of death arrives, he will see the blood and pass over the house.

Such is the historical, Old Testament meaning of Passover, a meaning which, while sufficient in itself, does not reach its consummation until the sacrifice of Christ. Viewed typologically, in terms of its New Testament meaning, Passover is the story of how all people, on account of original sin, will one day have to stand before the dread judgment seat of God. If any of us were to face that judge, we would be condemned to (spiritual) death. But, as he did in ancient Egypt, God provides a way of escape to those who will trust his divine provision. If we will but take the innocent blood of Christ, the sinless Lamb of God, and, metaphorically, spread it across our foreheads, when we stand before God the judge, he will see his Son's blood, and we will, literally, pass out of judgment. Paul sums it all up in a beautiful seven-word phrase that cuts to the very heart of biblical typology: "Christ our passover is sacrificed for us" (1 Corinthians 5:7).

As an archetypal critic of the Bible, Frye identifies and investigates just such Pauline types as a way of revealing the deeper, organic unity that knits the Bible together. In his search, he uncovers not only individual connections between Old Testament types and their New Testament antitypes, but a complex, interlocking pattern of types and antitypes that gives both shape

and tension to the Scriptures. In Part Two of *Words with Power*, Frye focuses on four distinct archetypal clusters that weave their way in and out of the biblical metanarrative: the mountain (or ladder), the garden, the cave, and the furnace.

#

In my previous essay, I discussed Frye's compelling argument, in *The Great Code*, that the Bible posits a two-level view of nature: the good divine creation recorded in Genesis 1-2; the fallen order of nature that ensues after the primal sin of Adam and Eve. In *Words with Power*, Frye expands that two-level paradigm to a four-level one. On the top, he places heaven, "the place of the presence of God"; beneath that is the "earthly paradise, the natural and original home of man . . . which has disappeared as a place but is to a degree recoverable as a state of mind"; third is the "fallen world of alienation" into which we are born; and below that is the "demonic world of death and hell and sin" (169).

In Norse mythology, these levels are united by Yggdrasil, the great ash tree that connects all the worlds. Although the beginning, middle, and end of the Bible's sacred narrative pivot around the two trees in the Garden of Eden, the tree on which Jesus was crucified, and the restored, more fruitful tree of life in the New Jerusalem, the most important scriptural image of commerce between the upper and lower realms is Jacob's ladder, a ladder, or staircase, upon which the angels of God ascend and descend.

Jacob's dream, Frye reminds us, is of "a ladder *from* heaven rather than *to* it; it was not a human construction but an image of the divine will to reach man" (152). Frye does well to make this distinction, for it highlights an aspect of biblical typology that is often overlooked. Though it is true that each Old Testament type points ahead prophetically to its New Testament antitype, it is equally true "that every image of revelation in the Bible carries with it a demonic parody or counterpart" (154). Frye identifies the demonic parody of Jacob's ladder

with the Tower of Babel, a product of man's prideful desire to ascend to heaven by his own power. Frye then intensifies the link between God's ladder of divine mercy and man's tower of human arrogance by explaining that the word Babel, in addition to its linguistic link to the babbling of languages provoked by that arrogance, "actually means what Jacob called the place of his vision, the gate of God" (154).

But what exactly does this link mean, and how can it draw us more deeply into the Bible? On the simplest level, the contrast between ladder and tower is a political one. "The demonic tower signifies the aspect of history known as imperialism, the human effort to unite human resources by force that organizes larger and larger social units, and eventually exalts some king into a worldly ruler, a parody representative of God" (163). Over against this vision, the Bible exalts God as the true king. Indeed, much of Scripture tells the story of a small tribal people, often nomadic, who are continually threatened by ungodly, tyrant-led empires: first by Egypt, Assyria, and the various Canaanite groups; then by the four mighty kingdoms symbolized in Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the giant (Daniel 2)—Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome.

But there is an even deeper level of meaning concealed behind the ladder and its evil counterpart. Whereas Jacob's ladder "is based on the primacy of the word," explains Frye, the Tower of Babel is based "on the primacy of the act" (163). To understand this distinction, we must catch the subtle connection that the incarnate Christ makes between himself and Jacob's ladder. He makes the connection in the closing verse of John 1, when he speaks these words to the awe-struck Nathaniel: "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

More than a mere antitype to Jacob's ladder, Jesus is that ladder, the divinely-constructed bridge between God and man. But he is also, as the first verse of John

1 tells us, the logos or Word of God, the one who fully reveals and explains the Father to us. When we fallen mortals attempt to ascend to God, we do it by means of action, by attempting to build a human edifice that will lift us up to godlike status. When God descends to us, first by the creation that he spoke into being and then in and through his Son, the Word, he does so by means of divine speech. "With the Incarnation, or descent of the Word in flesh," concludes Frye, "the symbolic apparatus of ladders and the like become entirely verbal. Ladders, temples, mountains, world-trees, are now all images of a verbal revelation in which descent is the only projected metaphor" (165).

Whereas the secular academy has raised up its fist against God's revelation and the authoritative word of divinely-inspired tradition, classical Christian schools strive to be conduits of that revelation and that tradition. Rather than build a man-made Ivory Tower, such schools seek to receive what has already come down to us through God's direct ladder (the special revelation of the Bible) and indirect ladder (the general revelation that shines truly, if dimly through the Great Books of the Western intellectual tradition).

#

Frye's reading of the Scriptures is as much influenced by biblical critics as by the poetry of Blake and Milton. In discussing the cluster of images that gather around the archetype of the garden, Frye resorts often to the strong theological and aesthetic link that Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, forges between Eden and Eve. Eve's beauty and fruitfulness reflect that of Eden; in fact, Eve is, in a sense, both Adam's wife and his garden.

This "garden-body metaphor," explains Frye is established in Genesis and then "strongly reinforced by the Song of Songs," where the body of the beloved "is identified with the gardens and running waters of a paradise" (196). This link to the Song of Songs is vital, for, by means of its at once erotic and spiritual imagery, the marriage of Adam and Eve in the second chapter

of Genesis becomes linked itself to the Great Marriage of Christ (the Bridegroom) and his Church (the Bride) that is prophesied and celebrated in the last two chapters of Revelation.

Though Frye, in his discussion of the garden archetype, gets caught up in and blindsided by feminism (patriarchy is, of course, a bad thing), the documentary hypothesis (there are two different creation accounts in Genesis 1–2 that naturally contradict one another), and the sexual revolution (everyone knows the Church promotes an unhealthy form of sexual repression), he nevertheless illuminates powerfully the nature of this hierogamy (“sacred marriage”) that begins with Adam and Eve becoming one flesh in Eden and ends with the Great Marriage in a paradise (the New Jerusalem) that unites city and garden.

At the center point of these two hierogamies, midway between Eve and the Bride of Christ, lies the Virgin Mary, “who is metaphorically a replica, in the form of an individual human body, of the original unfallen garden” (202). Mary is the walled garden (*hortus conclusus* in Latin), an image that appears often in paintings of the Annunciation, and that itself comes from the Song of Songs (4:12). Mary, who maintains her innocence while saying “yes” to God, is the second Eve, just as Christ, who said “yes” to God’s will in the Garden of Gethsemane, is the second Adam.

In terms of its archetypal imagery and its narrative pattern, the Bible is not a tragedy but a comedy. That is to say, it ends not with a death but a marriage. The garden, with its rivers and its tree of life, will be restored and perfected, and we will be joined with God in an intimate, but not personality-destroying union that is foreshadowed and proclaimed each time a husband and wife lie with each other and become one flesh (Ephesians 5:31–32). In a cynical age hell-bent on corrupting innocence, collapsing masculinity and femininity, and reducing sexuality to a purely physical act, it behooves classical Christian educators to provide their students

with a counter vision. Despite what the media and the academy say, young people are hungry to know that Edenic innocence is stronger than fallen skepticism, that the sexes were made to complement one another, and that biblical sexuality is a sacred act that unites rather than divides, edifies rather than degrades.

#

Just as Frye’s analysis of the garden image is, to my mind at least, marred by feminism, the documentary hypothesis, and the sexual revolution, so his analysis of the image of the cave—that is, of death, the grave, and the cycles of nature—is marred by the modern dismissal of the biblical doctrine of hell: “The post-mortem hell of eternal torments developed by Christianity, eternal meaning endless in time, has largely disappeared from our metaphorical cosmos by now, though some desperate rationalizers insist that it is still there even if no one is in it” (230). Nevertheless, Frye’s journey through the nether regions of man’s spiritual subconscious, though it offers little help in explicating the Bible per se, offers deep insight into the way the mythos of the Bible has subtly changed since the Romantic age.

As Frye explains it, the four-storey paradigm described above, with heaven on the top, followed by the lost Garden of Eden, our current fallen world, and the hellish region of Satan, sin, and death is replaced by “a four-level cosmos that is very like the older one upside down” (248). When modern man looks upward, he no longer sees the biblical heavens but a cold, mechanistic outer space. Beneath that empty sky from which man is alienated does not lie the earthly paradise, but “human civilization, with its built-in injustices and absurdities along with its positive achievements” (248). What lies beneath that is what lies beneath our conscious minds, things which the injustices of civilization have forced us to neglect or to repress but which are “dangerous to ignore” (248). Finally, at the bottom of the cosmos is not hell, but the dark underbelly of human imagination.

The modern mind has moved away from the orthodox telling of the tale, in which the Second Person of the Trinity leaves heaven to become incarnate in our fallen world and dies, but, through his death, harrows the demonic depths of hell to release the righteous people of the Old Testament and take them back up with him to heaven and, eventually, to the restored earthly paradise of the New Jerusalem. And yet, in moving away from the biblical myth, those who live on this side of the French Revolution found that they could not simply make up a new one from whole cloth.

“There being no new species of myth,” explains Frye, “the Romanic myth re-emphasized the myth that its own existence dramatized, the myth of death, disappearance and return familiar from pre-Biblical cultures” (252). These vegetation myths of dying-and-rising gods (Osiris, Adonis, Bacchus, Tammuz, Mithras, Balder) were famously documented and arranged by Sir James Frazer in *The Golden Bough* under the archetype of the Corn King. Common to all versions of the Corn King myth is a violent revolution against authoritarian rule followed by defeat, death, rebirth, and . . . a replaying of the same eternal cycle. Though Frye appears to prefer the hopeful, once-and-for-all, apocalyptic myth of Christ’s incarnation, death, harrowing of hell, and resurrection to the pessimistic, unending cyclical nature of the Corn King and its post-1789 embodiments, he falls short of providing a Christian way out of this mythical-political-spiritual impasse.

Had he read C. S. Lewis, one of the key mentors of those committed to classical Christian education, Frye might have found that way out, that “ex-odus” from “Nietzsche’s ‘eternal recurrence’” (255). Before his famous night walk with J. R. R. Tolkien, Lewis firmly believed that Frazer was right and that Christ was nothing more than the Hebrew version of the Corn King. And then Tolkien suggested that the reason Christ sounded like one of those myths was that he was the

myth that came true. Although Frye’s notion that all the biblical types have demonic parodies—as we saw above with Jacob’s ladder and the Tower of Babel—is a helpful one, it is, I believe, incomplete. For Tolkien and Lewis, Osiris and Adonis are not so much demonic parodies as they are pagan foreshadowings, albeit violent ones, of the true dying-and-rising god who would descend into the actual, time-and-place world of history and experience death and resurrection on our behalf.

This notion, that Frye does not consider, lies at the root of classical Christian education, with its faith that students who study the pagan classics can find in them seeds of truth that point forward to the fuller revelation of Christ and the New Testament.

#

And that leads us to Frye’s final archetypal cluster, the furnace. Although Frye does not consider the possibility that the mythic Corn Kings that became so attractive after the French Revolution might have been used by the God of the Bible to prepare the pagan world for the coming of the historical Corn King, he does realize that the reworking of the biblical mythos by such Romantic poets as Blake and Shelley marked a departure from the Bible that led to much of the cruelty and bloodshed of the twentieth century.

Frye’s furnace imagery revolves around the rebellion of Satan whose devilish community not only represents a demonic parody of the angelic community but stands behind “the almost superhuman grandeur of the heathen empires” (273).

Israel, and later the Church, passed again and again through the demonic furnaces of such heathen empires as Egypt, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome, always achieving, after much suffering, a climax that was comic rather than tragic. What Frye has to say about this dramatic distinction between pagan tragedy and biblical comedy is profound and holds much relevance for teachers wishing to build bridges between pre-Christian, Christian, and post-Christian literature,

history, philosophy, and art.

In pagan myth, Frye explains, tragedy tends to spring from a mingling of the divine and the human, as it does in Genesis, when the sons of God mate with the daughter's of men to produce the Nephilim, a race of giants which the Bible links to the "mighty men which were of old, men of renown" (Genesis 6:4). Significantly, after this brief, enigmatic episode, the Bible does not speak again of a phenomenon that underlies the Greek epic-heroic-tragic spirit. At least not until the gospels, when, in sharp contrast to pagan myth, "the mixed parentage of Christ points to, at least, a reconciliation of the divine and human, and is therefore comic" (275).

The Bible, Frye concludes, "is not very friendly to the heroic or the tragic, much less to the titanic, and the Bible's ascendancy in our culture is the main reason for the tradition of identifying the titanic with the demonic" (276). That is why we are presented with "a series of potentially tragic figures in the Old Testament, Cain, Ishmael, Esau, Saul, who seem to be first in line for a divinely ordained inheritance, but are passed over for younger successors, often for mysterious or inscrutable reasons. We find a renewed sympathy for such figures in Romantic literature" (282). That is to say, the Romantics resuscitate the Titans—the Greek equivalent of the demons and the Nephilim—as the true heroes of history and myth, heroes who wield, like Prometheus, the revolutionary energy of liberation and the technological weapons of freedom.

The kind of traditional education that undergirds classical Christian schools knows that the Romantics were wrong to heroize Satan and the Titans, even if it cannot help but admire the stubborn tenacity of such heroes. Frye, I think, knows it too—as when he concedes that "Antichrist can descend to hell, even harrow it, but what he brings up is only a hell to earth" (293)—but he cannot develop it apart from Lewis's understanding that the New Testament fulfills both the prophetic types of the Old Testament and the mythic types, bloody though

they be, of the great pagan poets and philosophers.

Frye, like the pagan myths he so loves, points the way toward a fuller appreciation of and engagement with the Bible, but it is finally those who can hold Athens and Jerusalem, the classical and the Christian in the proper balance who are best poised to break the code of the Bible and channel the power of its words for a generation desperately in need of what Tolkien and Lewis, along with G. K. Chesterton, called true myths.