

# The Bible and English Literature

NORTHROP FRYE (edited by DAVID LAWTON)\*

NF: I thought it might interest you to hear some of the things I have been struggling with.

The successor to *The Great Code* has taken a long time to write, largely because I was thinking in terms of a sequel and of course no book of mine has ever been a sequel to anything. Every book you write has to be numbered 'zero' and not 'number one'; but I had been thinking about the literary patterns of the Bible and it struck me that in literature you have two processes in reading. You first read something which moves in time; you hear a poem being recited or a play being acted on the stage, or you're turning the pages from the upper left-hand corner of page one to the lower right hand corner of page whatever it is, and in this movement in time, you're gathering in your impressions of what you're reading. And then after you're through, you make an effort to understand what you've been reading, and we describe this in terms of visual metaphors. You hear a joke and then you see the joke (if all goes well, that is); and you get an impression of the general shape of what you've been reading. Sometimes, with a long and complicated work like a novel, the novelist will give a title, like *The Golden Bowl* or *The Rainbow* or *To the Lighthouse*, which describes an image which somehow represents by synecdoche that whole simultaneous understanding.

The Bible is a narrative which starts where time starts and ends where time ends. It is long of reading, as you turn the pages from Genesis straight through to the end, but you notice that the last book of the Bible, a book which is explicitly called Revelations, is a book which presents you with the simultaneous understanding of the entire pattern of the Bible up to that point, in the form of an identity of all possible metaphors and images in the natural world with the body of the Messiah. If you take the analogy of the novelist again, like Henry James writing a long work of fiction; it may have taken rise from some anecdote he heard when he was at a dinner party, and that was a kind of seed, the unfolded form, of what the book unfolds. And in the structure of the Bible, you have that in the Creation myth, and the Creation myth, in a sense, gives you the enfolded structure of the entire Bible, just as the Book of Revelations gives you the unfolded structure.

Now, as you know, there are two Creation myths in the Bible, and the one that comes first is chronologically the later one, the one that we call the 'P', or Priestly.

\* *The distinguished scholar Northrop Frye was in Australia for two months in 1986 as a visiting professor at the University of Sydney. Professor Frye led an English Department Honours seminar on 14 July (his 74th birthday). He spoke of his work for a book to follow The Great Code: the Bible and Literature, published in 1982. This article is a lightly edited transcript from a tape recording. David Lawton is Reader in Early English Literature and Language in the University of Sydney.*

narrative, which takes in the first chapter of Genesis and the first three verses of the second chapter. The Bible divides the creative act into seven stages: the stage of light, the firmament, then the separation of land and sea, and the creation of trees, then the heavenly bodies – sun, moon and stars, which are simply referred to as ‘lights’ – then the creatures of water and air, then the land animals, including human beings, and then the seventh – the archetypal Sabbath – which is not an act but the rest of God.

Now one thing that is interesting about this account is the amount of discrimination and marking off of boundaries that you get. You have first the light, marking off the boundary between the cosmos of light and the chaos of darkness. Then you have the firmament separating the waters above (those very mysterious waters that only come through in the Flood) and the waters below. And then the land and sea are separated, demarcated, in the same way. And the creatures of water and air precede the land mammals and the link between human beings and the land mammals is very clearly recognised.

Now, if you take the other one, the ‘J’ (for Jahwist) narrative, beginning Genesis II.iv, the consists of seven stages too, but they are not numbered, so nobody notices there are seven. First of all, you start with something which is called a ‘mist’, which is sent up from a dry, parched earth, and that is followed by the creation of the adam: I say ‘the adam’ with a small ‘a’, because he’s not Adam with a capital ‘A’ yet.

Then there follows the creation of the Garden of Eden – the planting of the Garden with its trees, and the setting up of the four rivers of Eden. You notice that the fourth day concludes the theme of fertilising moisture which begins with the mist of the first day, just as in this account the sun, moon and stars are the lights which confirm the primordial light of the first day. And then there comes the creation of all living things, apart from human beings. And then, there comes the creation of woman – of Eve – as the climactic act in this creation, and the creation of Eve, of course, is what turns the adam into a male being, Adam; up to that time there has been the same confusion between man and the male which has disturbed a lot of people ever since.

And then the seventh, again, is not a creative act; it is simply a statement about the world after it has been completed. That is the ‘state of innocence’. They were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed. That bald statement, that they were naked and not ashamed, of course was too much for the later commentary stuffers; if you look at a book in one of the pseudepigrapha called *The History of the Rechabites*, you’ll find there a story of a man who journeys to the earthly paradise and is cautiously informed that Adam and Eve before the Fall were clothed in a spiritual garment and that everything was really quite decent.

Now, the differences between these two accounts are quite obvious. For in ‘P’ you have a sense of a cosmos emerging from chaos. And there is also a very strong sense

of a relationship to human needs; that is, on the fourth day, what are created are the lights in the firmament of heaven, which are there primarily for the purpose of keeping a calendar, and this is the creation of fundamentally an objective world; and with the act of rest on the seventh day, where God surveys what He has done, the world becomes objective to God Himself and consequently to human beings. Now in 'J', of course, everything is fertilising images – the garden, rivers, and the creation of humanity is very sharply distinguished from the rest of creation, whereas in 'P' it is assimilated to it. Philosophers have always discriminated two aspects of nature: nature as a structure or system, *natura naturata*, and nature as a fertilising force of life, *natura naturans*; and those are the two aspects of nature which you have in the two Creation myths.

Now, to the earlier 'J' account there is appended a story of a Fall, for the simple reason that the world that God created must have been a perfect world, so you have to have the alienation myth of the Fall to explain the difference between the world God made and the world that we're in now. The Fall turned on two things; the discovery of sex, because they knew that they were naked as soon as they had eaten of the fruit; and the sense of morality, of good and evil; and so you get from them all the systems of morality which have as their driving force the repression or sublimation of sex. No Fall story is really attached to the first account except insofar as the fall of Adam and Eve is attached to it, but later on in the Bible, you begin to get references to titanic or demonic forces, that is forces of chaos over against the shaping of the cosmos, and that comes to a culmination in the Book of Enoch which tells about the story of the fall of the rebel angels. Enoch never made the Bible, but it was very influential in the New Testament and elsewhere, and that whole demonology of titanic beings and the dragon of chaos who was concealed under this creation account, and so forth, belong to a kind of suppressed Fall, which is a fall of the angelic into the demonic, rather than the fall of the original human into the later human.

The one thing that seems clear is that neither of these accounts is, and in my opinion was never intended to be, a pre-scientific account of how the order of nature came into being. I think that if it had ever been intended to be that, it would have been a little bit cleverer, and would not have had the trees created before the sun was. I think that you will find that, as a general principle, a myth is not a proto of science; it is not talking about the objective world and the order of nature at all. It is talking about human wishes and anxieties and concerns and aggressions; and the 'J' myth is there to try to account for the origin of such things as the repression or sublimation of sex and its relation to morality, and the 'P' narrative is there to indicate rather the sense of something coming into being which is intelligible, that is, ideally, a conscious mind exists before the Creation and the Creation is really the sense of an intelligible order which is possible only to consciousness. And it's ascribed to God, partly to make it something more than simply the human mind gazing in the mirror of its own construction, and so you have a Creator outside the human order, in order to

guarantee, so to speak, that the implications of creation are inexhaustible and that man is not simply finding order in the world because he put it there.

*Q:* You connect Adam and Eve – the myth of Adam and Eve – with sublimation . . . . Could you also connect the sublimation with art, so that the Fall is the beginning of art?

*NF:* Well, perhaps so. I think that it is really the Fall story, of course, that brings in the self-conscious aspect of sex; they knew that they were naked, or what D.H. Lawrence calls 'sex in the head', and in a sense that does connect with the artistic or creative impulse of man himself. I mean, you could look at these two Creation accounts and say that a Creation myth is simply a projection of the fact that man is creative and that he creates order in the scheme of things, and that that is why we assume that God must have done the original creating. The notion of a Divine Creation, of course, has had a rather unfortunate effect on the history of the arts, because it means that there are two strikes on man already as an artist; no matter what he tries to do as an artist, he's been outsmarted by God, who has created the supreme work of art, and that is one reason why Sir Thomas Browne says that if the world had stopped at the sixth day, without the day of rest, it would still be a chaos, because there would still not be the sense of an order constructed which is separate from its Creator. Notice in this account here, that all the living beings are brought to Adam to be named (brought to the adam to be named), and in *Paradise Lost* Milton realised that there was something of a difficulty here, and so he has God saying to the adam rather apologetically, 'understand the same of fishes'.

But the verse in Genesis (and I think its pretty accurately translated, because the translation's the same in whatever version I've consulted), 'brought all the animals to the adam to be named, to see what he would call them' – suggests to me that God was rather bored with all the attributes of omniscience that have been wished on Him by theologians, and preferred to take the position of somebody who has created an unpredictable being with some kind of free will, and has the human, if not Divine, impulse of curiosity to see what will become of his own creation.

I say that Adam, that the adam, only turns into Adam *after* the creation of the female body, because a male body makes no sense without a complementary female, so what the shape of the adam was before the creation of Eve, nobody knows, and consequently the libraries have been filled with speculation on the point.

*Q:* Why two accounts? Was 'J' insufficient in some way?

*NF:* Yes. I think that 'J' is certainly the older Creation story. The Priestly myth is the one which emphasises the sense of nature as an order. It is quite closely related to the very ancient Samaritan and Mesopotamian myths about the creation as the killing of the dragon; in the Babylonian creation. Gilgamesh kills a dragon and splits her in

two, and makes half of her heaven and half of her earth. This Priestly account is perhaps more superficially philosophical than the other one, but what it does is to round out the two aspects of nature; nature as physical and nature as biological.

*Q:* Why let 'J' stand after you have drafted 'P'? Is it simply respect for tradition?

*NF:* Well, then you would not have the sense of nature as a pullulating force, also you'll not have the peculiarly human account of the fall into the lower aspect of nature. What you have here is a Creation myth with a Fall myth suppressed, which later comes into the Bible as the revolt of the demonic from the angelic order, and that is again not a complete creation story. To get a complete creation story with the kind of God you have in the Bible, you must have the 'fall' story. There need to be other things in the order of nature that are thought of as well as human beings. Of course later on, the demonic forces, the rebel angels, Satan and the like, become incarnate in the heathen king so that the demonic world does enter the human world; and what interests me in the study of English Literature is the way in which, from Romanticism on, this demonic fall of the rebel angels begins to become annexed to the human order. If you're thinking of the Greek equivalents for them, you would call this the Creation and Fall of Prometheus, and this the Creation and Fall of Eros.

*Q:* You mentioned before something concerning the translation of the Bible. What kind of latitude did some of the translators allow themselves?

*NF:* Well, there's a good deal of latitude in translations of the Creation account . . . But those variations, so far as I can see, don't affect the general meaning. There is a pun on the word 'adam' which is a profoundly suggestive one. God, we're told, formed the adam from the dust of the ground, which is 'adama', a feminine noun, and there is obviously a pun there, and a very far reaching pun; so that in the 'Introduction' to Blake's *Songs of Experience*, for example, what falls, the 'lapsed soul', is neither Adam nor Eve, but a female being which is called 'earth' and which represents the original unity of humanity with the nature around it. The fact that Eve takes the initiative in the Fall is, of course, something which has been a source of comfort and consolation to patriarchal theologians; and in fact the Biblical account itself tells us that as a result of woman's initiative in the Fall, human quality is going to become patriarchal. The only thing is that if man falls as woman, that is to say, if man falls as sexual being, then man has to be redeemed as woman, and that is why in the later symbolism of the Bible the souls of all redeemed human beings, whether they are men or women, are symbolically all female. That redemptive process is carried on by the second Adam, the title that Paul gave to Christ, and the second Eve, the title that theology has always given to the Virgin Mary.

*Q:* What about Lilith?

*NF:* Well, Lilith is one of the attempts to make sense out of the two very different creation myths as it affects human beings. In the Priestly account, which is the one that students of the Bible would have read first, we are told that God formed animals from the ground and that he also created males and females, so that the story of Lilith comes as part of the attempt to flesh out and make more plausible, the story of the revolt of the demonic from the angelic; that is, the original Lilith was supposed to have been the first sexual partner of Adam and the progenitor of all the demons; and that would bring the 'P' narrative into line more sharply with the 'J' narrative. But Lilith has always had a somewhat marginal existence. Her name comes from Isaiah, where she is a dragon of the night, but although she comes into some Jewish legends, she doesn't really get her literary innings until the time of the Romantics, when she comes into Goethe's *Faust*, and to George Macdonald's nineteenth century very remarkable story of Lilith.

As I say, she's a somewhat marginal figure, and in *Paradise Lost*, which doesn't have Lilith of course, you have the story of how Adam fell because he would rather die with Eve than live without her. And if he had done the theologically right thing, he would have immediately repudiated Eve at that point, and gone crawling back to his Maker saying, 'Look what that awful woman did; you've got to get rid of her'. But dramatically and poetically, our sympathies are entirely with Adam, because in his place, we would have done the same thing that he did, and that's the main point of Milton's poem. But with Lilith, if we can look into so very hypothetical a case, apparently that would have been what Adam did; he would have repudiated her and saved himself at that point, even if he didn't later.

*Q:* Does knowledge of literature corrupt our reading of the Bible?

*NF:* Well, I don't know. I think one as a student of English Literature dealing with a Creation myth of Genesis is bound to be reminded of *Paradise Lost* because it's such a powerfully integrated poem, which relates the whole story of the fall of man to the whole sequence of human history, up to the theatre of the Civil War in the English seventeenth century. I don't know that that necessarily corrupts one's view of the Bible, if the critic is watching what he's doing. Bernard Shaw has the devil in Hell, and man as Superman is saying to this day every Englishman believes that the whole of Milton's silly story is in the Bible and of course, it isn't, and anybody who's dealing with the Biblical text has to be aware of the extent to which it is not. There is nothing about the invention of gunpowder by the devils in the Bible, for example.

*Q:* Just comparing the Biblical creation story with some of the other literature, there seem to be some *major* differences; for example, God is largely offstage, and man and nature are centre stage; do you think this may have had some particular influence on the character of the literature of Christian culture in the West?

*NF:* Well, it's very difficult to say, because the documentary evidence you can muster is so scrappy and so hypothetical; the prose *Edda* for example has creation myth themes, which are also in creation myths older than the Bible, such as the creation of the world out of the body of a giant, who is dismembered; and that is a kind of aspect of a creation myth that would certainly attract any poet who came across it in English literature. So far as I know, nobody did come across it before the eighteenth century and there is always the question in a document like that, how far it has been influenced by Christianity in the first place, and it's just that the amount of evidence you can produce is very seldom clear; it dissolves into hypothesis. The most one can say is that all creation myths everywhere show certain family likenesses, and I think that those family likenesses are the result of similarities in design. Man is distinguished from the rest of the animals by his command of the word, by his mastery of language, and that being an idea that would be naturally in the forefront of almost anybody's mind who was thinking about original creation, you have the same principle, 'in the beginning was the Word'.

*Q:* We think we now know why there are two accounts of Creation in Genesis; we've got the documentary explanation for it. What about the influence on early Christian exegesis of not knowing why there are two – I'm actually thinking of Origen, looking at the two stories, asking himself, 'why should there be two – why should God have given us two creation stories which look inconsistent but can't be, because they are, after all, Divinely inspired. And his answer, very interestingly, because he too is actually thinking of St. John's Gospel, 'in the beginning was the Word' is that the Word incarnate in the 'J' account is ordinary, human, if you like Saussurean, language, and that God gives us not an alternative creation story but the creation of Platonic form before actual form. So that He gets the Platonic form, the idea of mankind, the idea of trees created in Genesis I, and the actual earthly or if you like the sort of translation of what you might call Divine word into human language in chapter II, as it were in defiance of Saussurean linguistics. I wondered if you'd like to comment on that whole issue of language and Platonic form, which is clearly crucial to your view of the Bible?

*NF:* I think that you start out of course with the 'P' narrative where there is a very heavy emphasis on the commanding word. There is 'And God said that there would be light and there was light'. In other words the real thing is created by the power of the saying of the word, and the characteristic of this creation myth is that whatever is created by the power of the word is fixed, is stabilised, whereas in 'J' the word is rather that shifting power of intercommunication in which God says 'now you can eat off all the trees except one', so Adam goes straight to that one and eats it. That's the way verbal messages operate in human society. And the one is a *natura naturata* type of world, the word becomes kind of archetype, the creation being the result of the intelligibility of God's mind. In the other the creation is of a biological, a liquid flowing world of trees and water and a world in which the word passes down in the form of certain commands and is accepted or repudiated as the case may be. I think

that this distinction that I've been drawing between the *naturata* and the *naturans* doesn't become fully formulated I suppose until the time of Spinoza but its certainly linked in the Platonic and Neo-Platonic speculations which came through the word.

*Q:* I'd like to raise a question about the Bible generally and not the Creation myth. Obviously the Bible has been a great powerhouse of our literature and culture generally in the past and we have to know a lot about the Bible to be able to understand a lot about our literary heritage. How do you think it stands – what kind of powerhouse is it today?

*NF:* Well I think that the Bible is potentially as much of a powerhouse as it ever was, and the current may not be turned on as strongly as it was a century ago. I'm interested in the way that the Bible has infiltrated English literature. I think the poets if they repudiate the Bible or don't, or simply are not interested in it or are trying to work outside it, are going to come up with exactly the same forms as the poets who are steeped in it. I noticed for example in reading the fourth Canto of Ezra Pound, where he is talking about the creation of Zigaraths in ancient Persia where there are seven turns of the spiral of the tower and on the top the bride is laid awaiting the descent of the God form the sky; this he sees as reflected in a Greek myth of Danae who was wooed by Zeus in the form of a shower of gold. Well in Pound you simply have the reference to Danae followed instantly by a reference to a picture of the Virgin Mary carried in the procession in medieval Italy, so its quite clear in Pound's mind the identification of the Virgin Mary with the legend of Danae. And when I first read that my mind went back to the poem 'Asumpta Maria' by the catholic poet Francis Thompson in which he gives the Virgin Mary a great number of names, one of them being Danae in the shower of gold. So it really doesn't matter what the poet thinks, it's what takes over the poet's mind and expresses itself that matters.

*Q:* May I take the opportunity to ask you, Professor Frye, whether the same would apply to you as a critic?

*NF:* I imagine so. I feel that I have been very lucky in having some idea of what actually has been chewing away at the top of my spine. I was brought up myself in a rather strict evangelical background and was all set to go all through the revolting patterns that would have been normal to one in one's adolescence from that kind of background. I came across Blake, and Blake made an imaginative sense of that background that I never dreamed possible and so when I tackled Blake I had certain advantages, a certain technical knowledge of the Bible. I'd had three years of theology by then and my work has been spiralling around Blake and Milton ever since and I think that its been one of the major factors in my critical career that I've always been rushing up to my readers handing them a key and insisting that this is the key, at least it's the most central one I can think of in the whole western tradition.

narrative, which takes in the first chapter of Genesis and the first three verses of the second chapter. The Bible divides the creative act into seven stages: the stage of light, the firmament, then the separation of land and sea, and the creation of trees, then the heavenly bodies – sun, moon and stars, which are simply referred to as ‘lights’ – then the creatures of water and air, then the land animals, including human beings, and then the seventh – the archetypal Sabbath – which is not an act but the rest of God.

Now one thing that is interesting about this account is the amount of discrimination and marking off of boundaries that you get. You have first the light, marking off the boundary between the cosmos of light and the chaos of darkness. Then you have the firmament separating the waters above (those very mysterious waters that only come through in the Flood) and the waters below. And then the land and sea are separated, demarcated, in the same way. And the creatures of water and air precede the land mammals and the link between human beings and the land mammals is very clearly recognised.

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Then there follows the creation of the Garden of Eden – the planting of the Garden with its trees, and the setting up of the four rivers of Eden. You notice that the fourth day concludes the theme of fertilising moisture which begins with the mist of the first day, just as in this account the sun, moon and stars are the lights which confirm the primordial light of the first day. And then there comes the creation of all living things, apart from human beings. And then, there comes the creation of woman – of Eve – as the climactic act in this creation, and the creation of Eve, of course, is what turns the adam into a male being, Adam; up to that time there has been the same confusion between man and the male which has disturbed a lot of people ever since.

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*Q:* What did the word knowledge mean in Biblical terms, when Adam was forbidden to eat from the tree of knowledge? It seems such a strange thing to be forbidden, when the whole directive is to gain knowledge.

*NF:* I usually answer that question by referring to Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. Claudio is betrothed to Juliet and has completed legal marriage except that he hasn't published the banns, therefore he is technically an adulterer and that is a capital offence in this extraordinary world that the Duke has walked out of. Angelo on the other hand has been engaged to marry Mariana but calls the marriage off because the financial arrangements fall through. Well that in terms of the knowledge of good and evil, the knowledge of the law, makes Claudio a condemned criminal and it makes Angelo a pillar of the establishment. The thing is that no audience that ever listened to *Measure for Measure* is going to believe that and what that implies to me is that the knowledge of good and evil is forbidden to man because it is not a genuine knowledge of anything, certainly not a knowledge of what good and evil are. The knowledge of good and evil is something that results in a morality founded on sexual repression, but it is not a real knowledge.

*DL:* That's a marvellous note to end on. I would like to thank Professor Frye on your behalf for his customary generosity, his erudition, his intellectual passion and above all for spending an hour of his 74th birthday with us today. Thank you.