

## **A Little Symposium on The Great Code**

Here are three commentaries on Northrop Frye's *The Great Code*, which has had the awesome distinction of being a difficult, highly intellectual and ingenious book and a Canadian best-seller. In the summer of 1983 in Vancouver, the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies sponsored a symposium on this book under my chairmanship and the following three papers have arisen from that discussion. They represent a spectrum from hostile to admiring and capture, I think, many of the major issues raised by Frye's work. It all depends on how the reader wants to see and use the Bible and whether one believes in history or not.

*Joseph Gold*

### 1. *Peter Richardson*

#### **Cracking the Great Code, or History is Bunk**

*The Great Code* is a towering work of imagination. It has a grand conception of the Bible, is written in a style (and with a structural consistency) that is extremely attractive, and it shows a wide knowledge of a number of fields and sub-specialties.<sup>1</sup>

As a work of imagination it has the advantages and faults of that genre. Many who do not know intimately the Bible, Biblical history, and Biblical criticism may be attracted by the very neat ways in which Northrop Frye provides an entrée into what he considers the main structures of the Biblical narrative. Those with a good knowledge of the Bible, who value its understanding of history, and who are aware of the need to approach it critically may well be distressed by *The Great Code*.

Professor Frye anticipates this negative reaction: "As a teacher I know how emotionally explosive the material I am dealing with is, and how constantly it is the anxieties of the reader that make the primary response to whatever is being said" (p. xx). The book is explosive, but not always in the ways that Frye expects, as I hope to show. While he anticipates some of the intemperate reactions of the Biblical critic such as me, those reactions—a few of which I shall describe briefly—may still be important, even fundamental, criticisms of his imaginative reconstruction. Some criticisms that he does not anticipate may put his work into the category of a curious byway so far as informed study of the Bible is concerned.

It is easy enough to construct a list of things one does not like about the book. What is remarkable is the way Frye gives advance warning of these issues in the Introduction. He anticipates the difficulties he has created. Or perhaps I should say, since introductions are written last, that he too was aware of the criticisms after he had finished writing the book. But whichever way, he disarmed the critic of his lance too regularly for it to be accidental. There is here, it must be said, a quality of writing that one rarely encounters. This quality involves such an

acute understanding of the subject and scope that the author hears the objections as they are being formulated by the reader, he understands the anxieties, and he makes every effort to meet them and persuade of the truth of his view.

Let me illustrate. A marginal note to myself reads: "Frye's view of Jung's view of Blake's view of Milton's view of the Bible." But when I reread the introduction I saw that he had already told me most of that; I simply had not heard it. Likewise I became worried that he had a curious view of the causality of the Bible's origin, about which more later, only to realize that he had told me he was interested in the "why?" and had claimed that "the Bible does not, for all its miscellaneous content, present the appearance of having come into existence through an improbable series of accidents" (p. xvii).

What follows fastens on a few substantial items of deep concern, leaving to one side those issues that I am less competent to remark upon such as the main argument of the book. That main point has to do with "the impact of the Bible on the creative imagination," or to put it the other way around, as Frye does, "how ... the Bible had set up an imaginative framework - a mythological universe ..." (p. xi). Of the three main elements in Professor Frye's book—the content and character of the Bible, the sweep of subsequent Western literature, and a literary theory to do justice to both—I will of necessity limit myself to his remarks on the Bible.

It is important to begin with a few brief comments on the state of Biblical criticism, for Frye's basic views, despite his vast reading, seem to have remained curiously fixed at the point in the thirties when he took his own theological education. Nevertheless there are some illuminating similarities between the influences on Frye and on Biblical critics. Works on hermeneutical theory similar to those used by Frye have not only been read and appropriated by a generation of young Biblical scholars, the field has also been significantly advanced by Biblical critics.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it is probably true to say that no body of literature has been as intensively considered by hermeneuts as the Bible. Likewise, the interest in the social sciences—in Frye's case especially comparative mythology, in German and American Biblical criticism especially sociology and anthropology—draws Frye and Biblical critics together. Again, the Biblical field in the past generation has shown a greater ability than most other literary disciplines to incorporate legitimate social science insights into the warp and woof of constructive readings of the materials.

Many Biblical scholars are as impatient as Frye is with *Formgeschichte*, that approach that deals mainly with small units of oral tradition, and the centre of the stage has come to be occupied by

*Redaktionsgeschichte*, an approach that looks at writings as a whole against the background of their composition processes. Frye might well still be impatient with Redaction critics, since they deal only with single books. But he gives little evidence of knowing of this development. In the last few years, indeed, a new school of criticism has arisen, associated with the name of Brevard Childs,<sup>3</sup> called "canon criticism," in which the concern is to take the Bible as a finished whole—as a fixed canon—and to deal with it as the Church's book. In this development Frye and Biblical criticism are moving onto the same plane, and no doubt are responding to much the same pressures for a holistic view.

In brief, Frye and modern Biblical criticism are shaped by many of the same influences; the concerns, too, are somewhat the same. As a result, I find his characterization of criticism as a "disintegrating" of the text (p. xvii), and his impatience with questions of authorship, historicity and so on, to be disturbing. As the investigations of those working with recent hermeneutical theory, with social scientific methods, with redaction criticism and canon criticism have shown, the historical particularity of the Biblical materials can be taken seriously while still using techniques that encourage more relevant interpretations of the Bible than previous critical procedures. The text is not always disintegrated by modern scholars.

In fact it would seem that Frye is merely chiding Biblical scholars for not treating the Biblical material in the same way that he does. It must be candidly admitted that there is a major difference between Frye and the mainstream of Biblical criticism. Most of us, while accepting the importance, indeed the uniqueness, of the canon as it has been passed down to us, wish to insist on the historical particularity of each part of the Bible. We are not, generally speaking, willing to pay the high price required if this historical bedrock is dissolved.

This brings me to my second comment: there is an anti-historical bias in *The Great Code*. To an unashamed historian this is a very high price to pay for a literary theory. Questions of authorship, of time and place and culture and religion—even of fact—matter very much. It matters that Blake did not write "Much Ado About Nothing" and that John Milton was the writer of "Paradise Lost." It matters how and when Mark wrote his gospel, and whether the John of the Letters is also the John of the Apocalypse. Paul's indebtedness to Judaism is important, just as Luke's apologia to Rome is. If one overlooks the particularity of the parts of the Bible, all manner of illegitimate deductions will be drawn from the Bible. This can be seen in the Pope's recent attempt to argue from Paul's statements about women to questions today about women ministers and sexual relationships. The Pope was

correct when he said that Paul held some conservative views, but he was silent about Paul's more radical views. And he was quite wrong in failing to recognize that Paul's time and place had much to do with his views and our time and place have a great deal to do with our views on handling the Bible.

Frye knows all this. He grants that "no one denies that the Bible is passionately interested in historical issues," and he is correct in pointing out that "the Bible's answer ... is a curiously quizzical one ..." (p. 39). But he is not correct to conclude, as he does in his chapter on "Myth I," and "we cannot get an inch further without new archeological evidence." This suggests an unbelievably limited view of the shape of history, as if it were concerned only for objectified data that can be dug up. Again, Frye is reflecting the simplistic views of the first quarter of the twentieth century.

Most of the interesting historical work on the Bible is being done by scholars preoccupied with the history of religion, cultural developments, points of conflict in the development of early Christianity, with subtle analyses of literary forms, and with the social factors underlying the spread of Judaism and Christianity. Few would say that the "Bible will only confuse and exasperate a historian who tries to treat it as history" (p. 42), and even fewer would imagine that archeological evidence is the route to salvation for those who would understand the Bible sensitively and relevantly.

One aspect of what I refer to as anti-historical is more a lack of interest in history and the Bible. There is a second aspect to this, reached in the mirror chapter on "Myth II," where he collapses various historical events into *mythoi* of one and the same thing (p. 171). This makes good literary theory, perhaps, but it leaves me very uncomfortable, for reasons I shall mention later. It leads Frye to insist, for example, on making room in one of his diagrams for Christ's descent into Hell and the Harrowing of Hell, though as he acknowledges there is no evidence for the latter and only very weak evidence for the former. It soon becomes apparent that the literary theory, or perhaps I should say the demands created by later literary patterns, have imposed themselves upon the Bible.

In a brilliant phrase Frye refers to "the relentless smashing of individuality" of the writers' personalities in the Bible as a result of editorial processes over a lengthy period of time. Certainly there is a sense in which parts of the Bible have been pulverized by the editors. This can be seen at numerous points; in the Gospels one can certainly find a crushing of the oral tradition in the service of later purposes. Yet it must be seen that it is for other purposes and not for the homogenizing of the text. Matthew and Mark and Luke still have very strong

individual peculiarities that can be described in literary terms: composition, redactional techniques, theology, attitudes to social groupings and the like. So let us rather talk about the stamp each of the editors has given the pieces of material, and not conclude that some nameless and simple-minded editor has taken all the individuality out of the Bible and made it all of one piece.

In the Gospels or in Kings and Chronicles where the process that Frye describes can indeed be seen, however, the editors are not simple editors but writers with theological motives—even passions. In other parts of the Bible his claim is not remotely true. One must not speak of the “smashing of individuality” in Hosea or Amos or Ezekiel, or Paul or James or John. While it is true that they do not parade their personalities before us deliberately, and while we do not know them as personalities as well as we might like, their personalities have in no sense been destroyed. Just barely below the surface of the text the reader discovers a Paul, alternately petulant and forgiving, or an Amos filled with righteous indignation, or a James deeply concerned for the integration of belief and behaviour.

Frye’s theory requires a kind of homogenization that obscures the personal idiosyncrasies and even the theological differences of the immediate authors. The reason for this is not entirely apparent. Presupposed by his theory is, however, an important view of the canon.

This canonical question is the third issue I wish to deal with. The Bible is viewed by Frye as a unified literary creation. As I have already pointed out he is uninterested in specific questions of authorship and in general issues of development. But as he proceeds he gradually begins to speak as if the Bible had taken on a life of its own. This feature crops up hesitantly in “Metaphor I,” for example, when he speaks of the verbal structure “freezing” and “turning into a unity” (p. 62).

These “causal” notions of the Bible’s origin become a particular problem at the beginning of “Language II,” where he says:

Some aspects of this unity are clear enough, such as the care taken to indicate a beginning and an end. It would hardly be possible to start off a sacred book more logically than the opening words of Genesis do. The book of Revelation ... was deliberately composed as a coda or finale to the whole canon. (p. 199)

Such views presuppose, despite the later disclaimers (pp. 203, 206), a causality lying behind the Bible as a collection. This may be true. Certainly many of us who take the Bible seriously would like it to be true. But if it is true it should be historically investigated. Regrettably

historical investigation does not sustain the kind of statement I have just quoted.

By using passive sentences to suggest this unity Frye hints at a mysterious process of compilation, different from what most of us really believed happened. For example, it is highly unlikely that the Gospel of John "was intended to stand first in the New Testament canon" and that "by a historical accident ... it was the last Gospel to be admitted ..." (p. 207). Both parts of the claim obscure the complicated process of composition and the real motives of the book. To begin with, the idea of a canon was not in view when the Gospel of John was written. We cannot know that it was written to stand first, though we can know that it was among the last to be considered canonical. But to claim that this was historical accident is nonsense. There were very real hesitations about the inclusion of John. Frye's claim here is just another part of his denigrating of history and his elevation of literary need over historical fact.

Frye takes away some of the force of my objection in what follows, beginning in the very next paragraph, by noting that the Bible is also careless about its unity. Yet he continues to speak rhetorically of the Bible as if it had a self-generated origin that belies the mixed character of the whole book. Thus one finds a little later that one feature of the Bible is "its capacity for self-re-creation," it has a "highly self-conscious view" of history, it creates an "awareness of itself;" we cannot "trace the Bible back to a time when it was not doing this" (p. 225).

This kind of language is extremely confusing, especially when it is applied uniformly to all parts of the Bible. What I should want to say is that some of the authors might be conscious of some of those things. But not all. And it is unlikely that many of the Biblical authors were conscious of writing scripture. Nevertheless, as scripture the whole Bible has had the kind of effect Frye suggests upon later writers; but those effects are in the minds of the later authors. They reflect the Church's view of the Bible and are not, as a "cause," to be attributed to some self-generated quality of the Bible itself.

My fourth concern with *The Great Code* has to do with Frye's extension of this notion of causality to include a pattern of seven "phases." There is an interpretation of the Bible called "dispensationalism," characteristic of some 19th and early 20th century forms of Protestantism and today associated only with some extremely conservative groups, usually outside the mainstream. This system too imposes a pattern of seven dispensations, sometimes linked with successive covenants upon the Biblical material. The result of such a system of interpretation as classically formulated, for example, in the

Scofield Bible is to distort rather seriously the basic message of the Bible.<sup>4</sup> The system takes precedence over the individual elements, especially as it seeks to find typological equivalents between dispensations and hidden meanings that will illuminate troublesome texts.

Where this dispensational scheme has been present in the Church's history there has been a strong tendency to elevate the Bible's authority and divine origin, on the one hand, while being able to discount the historical particularity of the Bible on the other. Frye's schematization has much the same effect, even though he starts from a radically different point of view. The main difference, of course, is that the basis of his system is a mythological understanding of the Bible as a whole, a notion that would make dispensationalists rise up in righteous indignation. The basic outline, the typological concerns, and the diminishing of the period of law in particular, have much in common however with this earlier attempt to deal with the Bible as a whole. Frye's view (especially in chapters 5 to 7) took me aback. It may be that he owes something to Blake or Milton on these fronts; but the consequent similarity to dispensationalism remains to a degree that is surprising.

Earlier I suggested that Frye's criticism of Biblical scholarship smacked much more of scholarship as he knew it in the thirties than of recent scholarship. This curious similarity to dispensationalism on Frye's part also seems to be a hold-over from the same period. Dispensationalism was very vigorous in the twenties and into the thirties, and exercised great (and subtle) influence on many. Is it too fanciful to suggest that in this one respect Frye's system of literary theory in fact is an unconscious carry-over from his early days in the Maritimes where dispensationalism was common? Or would it be more cautious to say that early exposure to dispensationalism created fertile ground for a reading of Blake and Milton? Whichever, the consequence of cutting and snipping the Bible so that it fits into a neat seven-phase typological pattern is to remove it from reality and turn much of it into an abstraction.

Finally a brief word on two other features. I worry that Frye does not take the text seriously. I do not mean he is not serious about the Bible, but rather that he does not take the ordinary meaning of the individual texts as seriously as he should. *The Great Code* substitutes a reading of the text in general—as a mythological universe—for a reading of its constituent parts and their contingencies. I should not want to impose *my* way of reading the text upon him. But can one, in a work like the Bible, read the whole correctly without first taking the parts in their individuality and obliqueness?

My final criticism of *The Great Code* was going to be that it had a strong apologetic force, that Frye said some of the things he says in



order simply to win a hearing for the Bible. This may be not a criticism but a virtue. Frye's towering position in the world of letters, his creative imagination as a literary critic, his forceful reading of the world's greatest book, and his deep commitment to his Christian roots may combine to make *The Great Code* an apologetic of great significance for the 1980's.

If this apologetic motive is present, if *The Great Code* is a deliberate attempt to turn people unfamiliar with the Bible towards Christianity, that intention could be applauded. But I am not confident that this reading is correct. The book itself sounds as if Frye believes he has actually grasped the essential character of the Bible, not as if he is trying to make it appealing to outsiders. In the end, the intention of the author is important. This makes reading of the volume a sad experience for I suspect that Frye achieved something he did not set out to achieve, and that he failed to achieve what he thought he had.

#### NOTES

1. The following paper originated in a Victoria University Symposium held on October 1, 1982 to honour Northrop Frye. I am indebted to the College for inviting me to participate on that occasion, and to Professor Frye for his graciousness in accepting criticism of his life-long love affair with the Bible. The paper as delivered has been substantially revised. Page numbers in the text refer to Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (Toronto: Academic Press, 1982). The title refers to Henry Ford's statement when in the witness box during a suit against the *Chicago Tribune* in July, 1919.
2. See, for example, the surveys in C.E. Braaten, *History and Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968); Paul J. Achtemeier, *An Introduction to the New Hermeneutic* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969); Ernst Fuchs, *Marburger Hermeneutik* (1968); Rudolph Hermann, *Bibel und Hermeneutik* (1971); James M. Robinson, *The New Hermeneutic* (1964).
3. Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979). See also James A. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).
4. For a positive restatement see C.C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965). For a critique, see C.B. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism: Its Historical Genesis and Ecclesiastical Implications* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmens, 1960); and see also James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (London: SCM, 1977), 190-207.