



# Introduction

A myth is a sacred narrative explaining how the world and man came to be in their present form. This definition has provided the guideline for the selection of essays included in this volume devoted to the serious study of myth. The critical adjective *sacred* distinguishes myth from other forms of narrative such as folktales, which are ordinarily secular and fictional. One can test the distinction between folktale and myth easily enough in Western cultures by placing one of the opening folktale formulas, for example, "Once upon a time," before one of the myths of the Old Testament, such as the creation of man, or the flood. Religious individuals would presumably be offended by the implication that such narratives were classified by the raconteur as folktales, that is, as secular, fictional narratives, rather than as sacred narratives. That myths are sacred means that all forms of religion incorporate myths of some kind. And there is nothing pejorative about the term *myth*. The term *mythos* means word or story. It is only the modern usage of the word *myth* as "error" that has led to the notion of myth as something negative (although it is true that Plato opposed myths because he felt they led men astray).

In common parlance the term *myth* is often used as a mere synonym for error or fallacy. "That's just a myth!" one may exclaim to label a statement or assertion as untrue. (The terms *folklore* and *superstition* may serve the same function.) But untrue statements are not myths in the formal sense found in this book—nor are myths necessarily untrue statements. For myth may constitute the highest form of truth, albeit in metaphorical guise. If one keeps in mind that a myth must refer minimally to a narrative, then one can easily eliminate most if not all of the books and articles employing *myth* in their titles. (One need only look under *myth* in the subject card index of the nearest large library to discover just how many book titles make use of the word *myth* and how few refer to myth in the sense of a sacred narrative.)

The study of myth is an international and an interdisciplinary venture. Scholars from around the world have contributed to the analysis of myth, and these scholars include students of anthropology, classics, comparative religion, folklore, psychology, and theology, to mention

several of the most prominent disciplines. This remarkable variety of approaches is represented by the essays in this volume. The initial essays, which are concerned with the definition of myth, include American anthropological folklorist William Bascom, Dutch folklorist Jan de Vries, Finnish folklorist Lauri Honko, British classicist G. S. Kirk, and theologian J. W. Rogerson. Another British classicist, James G. Frazer, applies the comparative method to a central myth in Genesis. Then follow theoretical considerations by an Italian scholar in the history of religion, Raffaele Pettazzoni; an American expert in the ancient Near East, Theodor H. Gaster; an American (but originally Romanian) scholar of comparative religion, Mircea Eliade; and a Swedish authority on American Indian religion, Åke Hultrantz. These discussions take up the intriguing question of the relationship between myth and ritual. Swedish folklorist Anna Birgitta Rooth offers a typology of American Indian creation myths, and Japanese scholar K. Numazawa presents a unique interpretation of the world-parent myth (Sky-father and Earth-mother).

The functionalist approach is discussed by the champion of this method, social anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, who was born in Poland, as well as by anthropologist Raymond Firth (from New Zealand). A Dutch scholar in the history of religion, Th. P. van Baaren, extends Firth's notion of the adaptability of myth, while French scholar Eric Dardel gives a sensitive overview of missionary-ethnologist Maurice Leenhardt's extraordinary lifetime study of the meaning of myth.

Psychological considerations of myth are represented by Switzerland's C. G. Jung's delineation of the notions of collective unconscious and archetype in his essay on the child archetype; by an incisive critique of Joseph Campbell's approach to myth by Robert A. Segal, an American specialist in myth theory; and by my folkloristic application of Freudian theory to the widespread earth-diver creation myth. French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss demonstrates the structuralist technique of analysis, and Hungarian folklorist Sándor Erdész, in a truly remarkable essay, shows how concepts of worldview are related to the content of traditional folk narratives. The final essay in the volume, by American classicist Dorothea Wender, reviews several of the principal theoretical approaches to myth by applying them in parody style to the legend of George Washington. A short bibliography of suggested further readings in myth theory brings the volume to a close.

From this sampling of theoretical writings on myth, the student will learn that there are disagreements about what myth is and how it should be analyzed. There has been a dramatic shift in theoretical ori-

entation from the nineteenth century to the twentieth. In the nineteenth century, myth theorists were primarily interested in questions of origins. It was assumed by some authorities that myths prevailed in an early, usually the earliest, stage in an evolutionary scheme, or that myths were the result of primitive mythopoeic man's attempt to explain such natural phenomena as the rising and setting of the sun. Even the comparative method, which involved assembling different versions of the same myth, had as its goal the historical reconstruction of the original form of the myth.

After the diachronic theories of the nineteenth century came synchronic theories in the twentieth. Instead of speculating about possible origins, scholars turned to considerations of the structure and function of myth. Investigations of the formal attributes of myth and the purposes it served resulted from the empirical examination of myths in their actual cultural contexts. While nineteenth-century thinkers were content to muse about myths from the safety and comfort of their library armchairs, twentieth-century scholars often made a point of going into the field to experience firsthand the recitations of myth and their impact on living peoples. The substantial increase in the number of myths recorded from all over the world sparked new interest in studying the nature of myth.

Mythologists will surely continue to number specialists in their ranks. Scholars in classics are primarily interested in elucidating ancient Greek and Middle Eastern myths; Bible scholars are concerned with the presence of myth in the Old Testament; anthropologists study the ways myths encapsulate cultural patterns such as social organization; experts in the history of religion explore the role of myth in religious systems and rituals; folklorists are fascinated by the distribution of various myth types in different geographical and cultural areas; psychologists seek to understand myths as fantastic projections of basic human dilemmas or impulses. But no matter what the reason for studying myth, it is essential that one become familiar with the rich variety of theoretical approaches to the subject. "In the beginning" is how many myths start their story. We begin now our study of myth by turning to attempts to define the genre.