

CHAPTER ONE:

THE MEANING AND PURPOSE OF MYTH: TOWARDS A DEFINITION©

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The Problem of Myth

If you were to go to a search engine like Yahoo or Google and type in the word “myth,” more than likely a majority of the first hits would read, “10 Myths About Weight Loss,” “10 Myths About the Terrible Twos,” “Myths About Buying a Used Car,” or “Myths About Paying Taxes.” The popular television show *Myth Busters* tests certain “modern myths” such as whether or not eating pop rocks and drinking soda will cause one’s stomach to explode. Even in our everyday language, we may respond to a far-fetched claim or story with the conclusion, “Oh, that’s just a myth.” All of these examples show the unfortunate trend of associating myth with deceit or untruthfulness. The problem with the study of myth is the very word itself.

In recent mythology studies, many scholars have attempted to rename myth with such labels as “significant narratives,” “sacred narratives,” “symbolic literature,” or “imaginative texts.” However, no matter how you say it, myth is what it is. For many, myth refers only to the stories of the ancient Greeks. Yet, all cultures, both familiar and not-so-familiar, ancient and modern, have myths that express a universe of experience with symbols. Part of the misunderstanding of myth is the misunderstanding of the

symbols themselves and their purpose. This study, then, embraces the word *myth* and in doing so, I hope to put the light back on its original meaning.

In this first chapter, I want to re-present myth in its own context as a symbolic language, explore its purpose, and define it as it should be defined. This chapter establishes a methodology of critical thinking and reading that will help you, the reader, not only make sense of these myths, but also join in an ancient game of giving them meaning. Hopefully, by the end of this book, you will see that myth is not just a story.

The Phenomenology of Myth

Human life is full of significant moments: birth, marriage, graduation from school, the death of someone close. These moments are highly emotional experiences and individuals react in different ways. Yet, almost all will, eventually, choose to deal with these events through the use of words and actions. For example, a birth is not just significant for the person being born but also for the parents of that child. To celebrate this event, there will be, most likely, cake, candles, and presents. Also, the parents may delight (much to the adult child's chagrin) in retelling the story (words) of the day their child was born. The event of "The Birthday," through celebrating and narrating the event, is an attempt to recapture the power of the original past event. In essence, this action and narration is myth in everyday life.

On a much deeper level, there are those "essential experiences" that go to the very core of human existence. Essential experiences are those moments in life that awaken in us those fundamental, ontological questions. Pregnancy or the birth of a child may illicit the question, "Where do I come from?" The death of someone close to us may beg the

question, “Where am I going?” In some cases, the revelation of a truth that contradicts all we previously thought we knew may cause us to contemplate, “How do I know?” Finally, a sudden change in vocation or life circumstances may force us to wonder, “What is my purpose?” These questions are the themes of myths. The answers an essential experience may provide, however, are subjective since they are, after all, individual experiences. Yet, the individual who has had this experience seeks to share it with others through words and actions in hopes of recreating the essential experience for other people.

In his 1938 study *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, G. Van Der Leeuw describes the process by which these essential experiences are transmitted to others. First, the experience must be mediated between the essential or absolute power and the observer and, second, between the observer and other human beings. What Van Der Leeuw suggests is that all such writing should be considered using phenomenological aesthetics. Rather than spend a lengthy amount of time exploring what a phenomenological aesthetics is, it would be far more useful to see how it works.

According to phenomenology, meaning is made by the interaction of three elements. The first element is the object or phenomenon. Phenomena are “out there” in information or, as I have discussed, experiences. While these “objective phenomena” exist in the world, it requires observers to give them meaning.

The second element, then, is the subject or observer. This observer is active, reflective and conscious. Past experiences have given this observer contexts that he or she will use to make a conscious judgement on the meaning of the phenomenon experienced. These “contexts” are part of the observer. Each individual carries with him

or her set of experiences that help create his or her own unique frame of reference. This frame of reference acts as a filter that determines what new information comes in and what goes out. It is within this place that knowledge and meaning are made. Knowledge and meaning are created when a whole objective experience is processed and the subject makes use of these screens to decide what elements of that experience get used and how they are to be used.

The final product of this process is an expression, a narration that explains not just what the experience was but what it meant. This expression, however, is more than mere repeating—it does not seek to only tell “what.” Instead, what separates repeating from the verbal manifestation of an essential experience (to use Van Der Leeuw’s terminology) is that this expression seeks to recreate, for another person, the power and meaning of the original experience.

This process begins to illustrate the tension that exists between logic and myth. Logic demands facts while myth asks for imagination and meaning. So, while science and logic seek an explanation of reality, myth seeks to adequately express experience.

A good example of this process can be found in the story of Moses and the burning bush. In this text, Moses’ essential experience begins with his seeing a bush that is on fire yet, paradoxically, is not consumed by the flames. The subject, Moses, seeks to make sense of this event and says, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burnt up” (Exodus 3:3). This dialogue illustrates two of Moses’ contexts: (1) The factual: as an experienced shepherd, Moses knows that it is not “normal” for a bush to burn yet not burn. He wants to see “why” this is happening. (2) As an individual trained in Egyptian wisdom (according to the Talmud and Acts), Moses

also seeks the meaning or significance of this event. Ultimately, however, Moses does not discover how or why the bush burns yet is not consumed; rather, he realizes the phenomenon's meaning.

While the meaning may have been clear to Moses on an intuitive level, the text expresses the emotion and feeling of the event rather than concrete "facts." Consider what the text says about the bush itself. Exodus 3:2 says that "the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the bush." Then, as Moses moves closer, it is God who calls to him from "out of the bush" (3:4). The reader, like Moses, is left wondering who exactly speaks from the bush. Moses does ask for clarification in 3:13. The response causes more questions than answers: "God said to Moses, 'I am who I am'" (*ehyeh asher ehyeh*). He says further, "This you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am (*ehyeh*) has sent me to you.'" God also tells Moses, "This you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord (Yahweh) the God of your ancestors . . . has sent me'" (Exodus 3:14-15). Moses' request for clarification is answered with a three-part riddle. Here, the reader is meant to feel the confusion that Moses must surely have felt.

Myth, therefore, does not seek to report or present fact. Instead, it seeks to recreate the emotions of the subject in the reader, thus drawing the reader into the process of subjective meaning making. This passage expresses the confusion of Moses. The text is not merely a reporting of an event; rather, the reader is to feel the confusion, fear, and mysteriousness of the essential experience. The reader, then, is left with the same questions Moses surely had: "What just happened?" and "What does this mean?"

A mythological text attempts to express the chaos of the essential experience. As the analysis above shows, a historical or actual event becomes an experience that, rather

than be judged on its facts, is considered, instead, from its desire to clarify human experience and emotions. Again, this is not to say that myth disregards truth. Myth is not as concerned about objective truth as it is in the expression of the essential truth rooted in experience. Here, we have made our first important characterization of myth. Myth is always an expression and, therefore, it is a carefully crafted text. A myth will always be transmitted in narrative form. Now that we know this, let's examine how that narrative text is constructed.

Myth and Symbol

Because myth is more concerned with showing rather than telling, a myth text relies on the depth of language found in symbol and metaphor. To fully understand how this works, we must first examine the context, methodology, and goals of philosophy and mythology.

Although often placed in conflict with each other, philosophy and mythology actually share a common goal (understanding of phenomena) and context (to be examined shortly). In fact, Plato often shows Socrates teaching with myth and metaphor to make a complicated point (consider "The Allegory of the Cave" or even Atlantis). Philosophy and mythology differ only in their methodology. Whereas philosophy makes use of logic to examine and explain phenomena, mythology makes use of speculation and empathy. Even these distinctions, however, can be somewhat problematic and arbitrary considering, as mentioned above, philosophers may often rely on a creative narrative to express an essential truth. However, before we can begin to examine the use of metaphor, we must first be familiar with the context that gives these metaphors meaning.

The Universal Mind: Experience and Expressions of the Absolute Reality

Let's begin by revisiting Plato and his "Allegory of the Cave." In *The Republic*, Plato has Socrates explain the difference between the authentic knowledge of reality and the illusion of appearance in a parable about a cave. In this cave, people are restrained so that they can only see a blank wall in front of them. Onto this wall, shadows of real objects are projected. Because these people know only the shadows, they believe them to be the actual "thing" they represent. Further, some clever prisoners manage to memorize the sequence in which these shadows are projected and are considered wise.

Occasionally, a person may slip from the restraints and stumble out of the dark cave into the blinding light of the "real world." Here, the person sees, firsthand, that the "things" he/she has mistaken for real are only shadowy reflections. This Platonic cosmology held that this world was a reflection of a celestial prototype. This view held that the visible world was actually a copy based on a higher cosmic double; however, the world of everyday shadows that the inquirer had direct and immediate access to was not seen as false or deceptive. Rather, these parading shadows were a testament to the presence and authority of the transcendent idea that informed these shadows. In other words, the reality within the cave was real only in so far as it reflected the reality on which it is based. So, to know the shadow reality of the cave is one thing; it is also important to seek the transcendent reality that informs the easily knowable world of shadows. The goal of the inquirer, then, was to recollect the transcendent idea. For Plato,

illumination was a reawakening to and a remembrance of forgotten knowledge. To make sense of the process, we must reexamine the connection between experience, thinking, and speaking.

In the Greek philosophical context, the primary context for knowing was *nous* or the mind. This, however, was not the forgetful mind of the human being but rather the transcendent soul of the cosmic order. The *nous* represented the absolute reality or imminent mind that influenced the world through pure intellect. This mind is manifested as *logos*. It is from *logos* that we get our word *logic*, which is one meaning of the Greek term; however, *logos* has proven itself to be a complicated concept to adequately translate. In its original sense, *logos* probably meant word, speech, or thought. On a cosmic level, it was a concept that suggested the rational principle that governed the cosmos. Recently, David Hoffman has suggested that a more correct definition would be gathering or composing using words or language. In any case, for the Greeks, *logos* was seen as being manifest in the human power of reason.

The divine mind (*nous*) communicates with the universe with its reasoned speech (*logos*). For Plato, the goal of true understanding was to use *logos* to find one's way back to *nous* thus arriving at *Kosmos* (a combination of order, structural perfection and beauty). Plato believed that to discover *Kosmos* in this world was to reveal the structured beauty (*Kosmos*) of one's soul. Keep in mind, Plato's conviction was that our consciousness was ordered like the universe—human intellect was the *nous* in miniature. Therefore, like recognizes like in that humans, through logic, find beauty inside by seeing how they are perfectly beautiful like the outside.

How does this relate to mythology? Mythologist Mircea Eliade believed that some myths expressed a theme very much like this philosophical idea. Eliade said this desire for a wholeness that existed before a separation from the absolute reality was expressed as a “nostalgia for paradise.” In this theme, myth texts become a metaphor for the investigation and expression of the *logos*. The purpose of myth is to provide a sign that allows a seeker to find the *nous* that creates understanding found in the *Kosmos* of existence.

What are the implications of this perspective? The Plato/Eliade model of myth illustrates that human beings are either blinded by the light or lost in the darkness. There can be no real knowledge of the absolute since it transcends the only human method of knowing it—the senses. The best a seeker of truth can do is realize that he/she doesn’t know and ask questions. Human beings gather and relate what has been gathered through narrative. The narrative illustrates what is being sought and why and how it was found and where. In other words, by seeking how the myth expresses the *logos* of the *nous*, the *Kosmos* (wholeness, absolute, paradise) is revealed in metaphor.

Again, we can see this idea expressed in the Moses narrative. In Exodus 3, Moses asks for a name—a specific term that can identify and make knowable a transcendent entity. This is not what he gets. Instead, the voice uses the word *Yahweh*, a term that is not a noun but a verb meaning to “create or to be.” Moses is seeking a knowable object but is handed, instead, an action or a concept that suggests fertility and growth. What is most interesting is that *Yahweh*, as a term, harkens back to Genesis and the creative process itself. Moses is not given a name to identify an entity but a metaphor for the *Kosmic* process.

The Gathering of Symbolic Representation

In his book *God and the Creative Imagination*, Paul Avis writes that divine revelation “can be given only in the medium of the imagination and can only be appropriated in the same way” (6). His point is the same as the one just investigated. We communicate with each other through “myth.” We gather experience and express that gathering with symbol, metaphor, and narrative. Yet, the process we have just described appears to be so subjective as to be beyond study. If each subject has an individual experience and then subjectively chooses symbols to express that experience, how do we successfully communicate with each other and comprehend what is being presented?

The answer is that meaning is made when constructed in and presented to “shared contexts.” These shared contexts are elementary ideas or, what Carl Jung called, *archetypal images*. According to Jung, all humans share a “foundation of images” that give our dreams meaning. He believed that these contexts and themes were instinctual, that nature had made space for them in our brains. Joseph Conrad, in his mythopoeic novella *Heart of Darkness*, writes that “We live as we dream, alone.” This may be the case; however, Jung reminds us that the symbols in our dreams are shared and recognizable to others. Who hasn’t dreamed of swimming, being chased, falling, being naked in public, or being unprepared for a big event? Individually, these symbols may have separate meanings; nevertheless, they are recognizable as meaningful to other human beings.

Biology and psychology are not the only contexts that give meaning to myth and symbol. Mythologist Joseph Campbell observed that myths are public dreams and

dreams, personal myths. There are also external contexts that allow cultures to communicate with each other through history. The most readily available context is nature. When a culture wished to express an understanding of an essential experience, it looked to nature to supply the symbol that would capture the essence of the event and be able to communicate that meaning to another.

More importantly, the symbol often reflected the local topography; therefore, not only was a transcendent idea being expressed, but the symbol was also localized. An example of this can be seen in the Adena and Hopewell burial mounds of Southern Ohio. William F. Romain observed that the conical-shaped Adena mounds and the loaf-shaped Hopewell mounds reflect the conical and loaf-shaped mountains indicative of Southern Ohio. Similar in theme are the Egyptian pyramids. Also considered “burial mounds” of sort, it has been suggested that the pyramid shape was chosen because it reflected either the naturally formed yardangs (wind-carved rocky outcrops that take on pyramid shape) or the triangular look of sunbeams as they shine through the clouds. This similarity is apparent in Amarna period art, which features the life-giving sunbeams of the Aten in pyramid shape.

In both cases, the cosmic mountain may be represented differently, based on local observation, but the symbol and context are the same. Symbolic mountains were chosen as burial places because the mountain (or sunlight) represented the touching point of heaven and earth. The mountain-shaped tomb, then, becomes a vehicle for the deceased to travel from this world to the next.

A culture may also seek to express itself by going back into its archaic past in order to bring forward symbols to connect its present state to a golden past age. In the

case of Coptic Christianity, this is done not only to connect itself to the Pharaonic past but also to show that the new idea (Christianity) is rooted in the past (Egyptian religion). A common image found in many Coptic churches is a painting of Mary, the mother of Jesus, holding the child Jesus. Much has been written about the similarities of this icon with the ancient Egyptian image of Isis, the mother, holding Horus, the child king. However, a closer look at the Coptic image reveals another layer to the symbol. Looking closely at Mary's robe, one can see that it is covered with a star pattern. In ancient Egyptian thought, the sky goddess Nut represented the heavens. In Egyptian art, she is always depicted as being covered with stars--representing either the night sky or the Milky Way. She was also considered to be the mother of all the celestial bodies. Important for this study, the sun was believed to pass through her body every night, being "born" every morning. In Coptic art, Mary is depicted in this role of mother to the "sun." The child Jesus is sitting on her "eastern side" showing that he is just born and in the land of the living. Egyptian Christians, therefore, have chosen a context from their past not only to give meaning to a new idea, but also to present the new idea in a way that the culture will understand.

This looking back doesn't just happen in ancient times. A trip to Washington, D. C. is an adventure in cultural symbolism as well. Few people take the time to notice that the Washington Monument is an Egyptian obelisk or that the original plan of the capital building included placing George Washington's remains in an underground crypt in the center of the building—thus making him a vegetation god filling every particle of the city with his power of order and renewal. However, the primary cultural symbol is clearly Hellenistic. From the Supreme Court building to the Lincoln Memorial, these

structures have been designed to look like Greek temples. Greek temples were more than just places to pay respects to a deity. The temples were designed to elicit an essential experience in the worshipper. Generally, the temple was dark except for the sunlight that came through the east-facing doors, illuminating the statue of the deity. These colossal statues were hollow, much like the statue of liberty, and as the sun heated the metal, the statue would begin to “breathe.” The rising heat caused the mice living inside to scurry around. Imagine standing in a dimly-lit building where only the statue of the god was illuminated and that statue seemed to be very much alive as it creaked, squeaked and sighed.

On my last visit to Washington, D.C., I got a sense of what this Greek essential experience must have felt like. After climbing the tall, steep staircase (another cosmic mountain?) to the Lincoln Monument, I left the heat and sun of outside and entered the cool, dark space of inside. Turning a corner, I was confronted with the colossal statue of a seated Abraham Lincoln, solemn faced, chin tucked to his chest, looking down at me. The design of the statue, the seated figure rising up, his face looking down, added to the feeling of elevation but also a connectedness to the below. Whether or not one is affected visually or spiritually by the monument, its structure evokes a powerful physical response as one is moved from outside to inside, lightness to darkness and lines are drawn that guide the eyes upward and downward. Either spiritually or physically, the sightseer becomes the vessel filled by a designed essential experience.

Symbols are the main tool in communicating the abstract meaning of an absolute experience. As I have discussed, symbols and metaphors are used to create a sense of meaning in an individual rather than concretely define an objective term or event.

Because symbols can be so subjective, contexts are needed to situate the meaning within an individual or culture. Therefore, as we study the myths themselves, we must be aware of where, culturally or naturally, these symbols are placed. By asking why this context was chosen and what meaning the symbol has in that place, we will be better able to enter into a deeper level of mythological meaning.

Myth and Language

Even though culture and nature may be used to supply contexts for symbols, the primary mode of meaning transmission in myth is through language. Yet, language itself is a system of symbols with often slippery contexts and connotations. I don't want to dwell too long on the problems of linguistics and meaning; however, because we are so familiar with language, we often overestimate what language can do and underestimate its capacity for ambiguity.

Considering the nuances of language may seem like a great deal of philosophical hair splitting. Yet, in order to understand myth, we must first understand language. Way too often, language is viewed as a simple, utilitarian naming system where a list of words directly and literally corresponds to a "thing" that the word names. What is often overlooked is that any language is necessarily a collection of analogies. De Saussure stated simply that language, as meaning maker, consisted of two parts: the signifier, which would be the word, and the signified, the concept that is being referred to. In other words, "cat" as a word refers not to any particular cat but rather a generalized conceptual cat. From here, we make this even messier by saying that signified is not only conceptual but can also exist as a physical, knowable object. Consider these two sentences:

1. I hate cats.
2. My cats, Fluffy and Daisy, are calicos.

The same signifier (cats) does not refer to the same “thing.” In sentence one, no particular cat is referenced. Rather, a whole concept of furry, four-legged mousers is the referent. However, sentence two references two physical felines who are actually real, physical entities (should I confuse this more by admitting that I don’t have any cats?). More simply, I can say, “My brother is a horse,” and no one would believe that he was an equine. It would be automatically inferred that my brother is large (and possibly smells badly).

The point I hope to make here is this. In normal, everyday conversation, our minds make the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical automatically. Yet, when reading myth, we desire to make the myths literal and become disgusted when they are obviously speaking in hyperbole. In dealing with myth, it is safe to say that myth always refers to the conceptual and never to an object exclusively. Myth is concerned with using language to express emotional meaning and ideas rather than facts. Like poetry, myth makes use of analogy to go beyond words. So, while myth will have a literal meaning found in the narrative, the message of myth is found in the metaphor.

When analyzing myth, it is important to look beyond the literal (what does it say?) and look more to the metaphorical (what does it mean?). Later in this book, we will discuss the “Epic of Gilgamesh.” Literally, the story is about a tyrannical king who loses a friend, fears his own death and becomes a better person. On a more objective level, we can also say that Gilgamesh was a real person who came to be a highly regarded king. The more literal minded could dismiss the whole epic as a lie based on the improbability

of a real person befriending a Bigfoot-esque individual and seeking knowledge in the Garden of the Gods. This is the breakdown not only of language but also of reading. The power of the story is seeing each character and event (even historically accurate characters and events) not as objects but as concepts. When Gilgamesh is seen not as a historical figure or a literal hero, we can analyze him more deeply as a symbol for kingship and what that responsibility implies. To take any mythical narrative at face value is to miss the deeper meaning and purpose the myth seeks to express.

Defining Myth

This chapter began with a discussion of what myth isn't. From there, we have looked at how myth creates meaning and, through use of symbol, language and context, how myth expresses that meaning. I have purposefully avoided defining myth until this point in order to build a solid base not just for the definition of myth to be used in this book, but also to make us aware of the basic misconceptions that surround the concept of myth. However, before we can investigate our definition of myth, we must see how others have attempted to define myth.

Because myth reaches into such wide and varied methodologies such as history or religion, myth is often paired with, and then deemed unworthy of, the discipline it has stumbled into. Despite the often contentious relationship between science and religion, it isn't uncommon to hear both the historian and the theologian declare that something, "is only myth." As we have seen, ideas and things take on meaning within their contexts. Before we can declare myth an unworthy epistemology (a way of knowing) we must examine each individual methodology in terms of method of inquiry and goals.

Science, for example, is primarily concerned with the establishment of fact. To establish these facts, science makes use of experiments that can produce observable results. As you may remember from high school chemistry, these results must be capable of duplication by others—that is, be observable by others in order to be taken as fact. This is done to avoid individual subjectivity. In other words, multiple observations of the same result can be taken as objective fact.

In philosophy, the goal is to discover truth. In order to accomplish this goal, philosophy makes use of reason or logic. Like science, truth must be objective—not individual. Consequently, what can be considered “truth” is examined through a dialogue with others. Socrates is depicted in Plato’s writings as making use of the “Socratic method” to question others about what they know in order to examine multiple perspectives. Like science, philosophy begins with an observation and is then investigated using theories and syllogisms to reasonably discover the truth in an objective context.

Theology and religion are concerned with arriving at faith. Faith is sought through belief. Of the three methodologies we have considered, theology/religion is the most abstract. The religion seeker must believe in something that has not and cannot be objectively observed. To do this, one cannot rely on experiments or logic but rather on faith. The Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard writes that faith is the belief in the absurd. A belief is absurd when it has no objective basis and cannot be duplicated.

Purposefully, I have broadly defined these methodologies in order to highlight their differences. However, their goals are basically the same—to understand the meaning of existence. This is why, despite differences in goals and methodologies, you

may hear of a philosopher of religion or the philosophical sciences. Yet, while they may mingle with each other, they also agree that myth must not be trusted.

Mythology, as we have discussed, is primarily concerned with the meaning of individual or collective experiences. This meaning making is accomplished through speculation. Often, a myth text is an artifact without a context. The text is often the product of a society that has long since vanished; therefore, it is often difficult to understand the social significance, the historical significance, or the personal significance the text may have held for the writer. In many cases, even the language used to transmit the text may be of no use. Consider ancient Egyptian literature. Here, our understanding of hieroglyphs continues to grow and, consequently, we begin to have a better understanding of the literature and culture. Making sense of a text outside its own context can be very difficult. As a result, in order to make sense of the meaning of the text, mythologists can't rely on facts or reason. Instead, they must delve deeply into the whole of human experience, that subjective chaos of personal experience and meaning, and let that become the context that sheds light on the purpose and meaning of the text.

Several summers ago, I participated in an archaeological dig in Southern Ohio. The goal of the project was to locate and map Hopewell structures in the Ross County area. I have always been drawn to the "Mound Builder Myth" because of its relation to the "lost civilization myth." Further, as a young child, I was fascinated by these ancient people who lived in the same river valley as I did. We shared a place, a context—but so much else was lost. Like the archaeologists and historians, I also wanted to know why these people built such intricately arranged mounds and structures and answer the old mythological question, "What does it mean?"

While laying out a survey grid in a hot, humid July day in Chillicothe, I took a look around me. I was surrounded by mounds and trenches as old as Rome. Then, I looked up. In the distance, across the Scioto River, blurred slightly by the heavy air, were the Sugar Loaf Mountains. I had a sense that I was standing in a model of these mountains. Could it have been that these people had created a model of the universe that they saw as being the works of the gods or nature? If so, were they paying homage to these powerful forces or attempting to elevate themselves to the creative level of the Absolute?

Over lunch, I shared my speculations with some of the archaeologists. They nodded politely and one said, “Nobody really knows.” But, I felt like I knew and felt compelled to express this purely subjective understanding. This is what fuels the mythological speculation: focused creativity and empathy for the human experience. This is Joseph Campbell’s simple, yet profound, definition of myth: myth is the search for meaning—the search for the experience of being alive.

If we pay attention to the symbols used in myth, they can relate to us and awaken in us that very experience. In Plato’s dialogue “Phaedrus,” Socrates expresses the very idea that myths are meant to awaken in us knowledge of ourselves. In the dialogue, Phaedrus asks Socrates if he believes the myth of “Boreas and Oreithyia” to be true. Socrates responds:

If I believed, as the wise men do, I should not be extraordinary; then I might give a rational explanation, that a blast of Boreas, the north wind, pushed her off the neighboring rocks as she was playing with Pharmacea, and that when she had died in this manner she was said to have been

carried off by Boreas. But I, Phaedrus, think such explanations are very pretty in general, but are the inventions of a very clever and laborious and not altogether enviable man, for no other reason than because after this he must explain the forms of the Cenitar and then that of Chimaera, and there presses in upon him a whole crowd of such creatures. . . . If anyone disbelieves in these, and with a rustic sort of wisdom, undertakes to explain each in accordance with probability, he will need a great deal of leisure. But I have no leisure for them at all; and the reason my friend, is this: I am not yet able, as the Delphia inscription has it, to know myself; so it seems to me ridiculous, when I do not yet know that, to investigate irrelevant things. And so I dismiss these matters and accepting the customary belief about them, as I was saying just now, I investigate not these things, but myself, to know whether I am a monster more complicated and more furious than Typhon or a gentler and simpler creature, to whom a divine and quiet lot is given by nature.

Socrates' answer is complicated and needs to be unpacked. First, he supplies Phaedrus with the typical objective explanation of myth: myth as a primitive and superstitious means of explaining natural phenomena (in this case, the north wind). He next responds that if one sets down this road, all mythical symbols must be considered as being objectively based in the external world. This, he says, would take a great deal of time and effort. In what follows, he seems to dismiss myth as "irrelevant" since the purpose of inquiry is not to know things but to "know thyself." In actuality, it is the objective explanation of myth that Socrates dismisses. He states that the meaning of myth is not

found in a symbol's reflection of the external world but, rather, in that symbol's reflection of our "selves." To know himself, Socrates looks at Typhon, a mythical creature representing chaos, to see and understand himself. Myth, according to Socrates, is a means of investigating the self and the nature of others.

In the "Phaedrus," Plato anticipates more modern theories of mythology that see myth as a means of rectifying the tension between the external world and ourselves. In other words, external objects (symbols) are necessary to focus the mind in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of ourselves. Sigmund Freud was one of the most well known of these modern theorists. He emphasized the symbols of dreams noting that a sleeper's mind works by different rules than the mind of the same person who is awake. Like Plato's cave, however, the symbols in dreams had direct or symbolic correlation with things in the waking world.

Freud further argued that dreams and their symbols were a psychological attempt to ease the tension found in waking life. The primary tension resulted from our internal animal impulses conflicting with the rules and laws of society, an unconscious battle between our instinct and our reason. This conflict, Freud argues, is fought in our sleep. Freud connected myth and dreams by pointing out that certain myths reflected these tensions. His most famous example is the Oedipus Complex. Here, he takes the Greek story of Oedipus and sees it as a retelling of the fantasy of the son to replace his father.

While many find the whole Oedipus Complex creepy, Freud made a good point about the internal human conflict between the animal and the social. Our earliest ancestors had to come to terms with the fact that their survival necessarily meant the destruction of another life form. As a result, stories began to arise that attempted to ease

the guilt that arose from the paradox of killing to live. Joseph Campbell referred to this motif as “The Willing Victim.” This motif was especially apparent in hunting societies. Usually, a community’s existence depended on a particular animal—the buffalo, elk, bear. The individual stories of these communities usually depicted the animal in the role of savior who willingly sacrificed itself physically in order for a greater spiritual good. In killing an animal, it was believed that humans, while helping themselves to exist, had also allowed the animal to achieve a higher level of existence. Rather than committing murder, the hunter had freed the spirit trapped in the animal body.

This motif can also be found in early agrarian societies. The Mikasuki people of the Seminole tribe tell the story of a grandmother who sacrifices herself to become corn in order to feed her grandchildren. This tale contains many of the familiar themes: a willingness to sacrifice self for the good of the “children” and the requisite instruction on how to properly conduct rituals to insure a good harvest. The guilt resulting from killing is not as apparent in the agricultural stories. Instead, they seem to be more concerned with garnering a sense of awareness and appreciation within the culture for the commodity that sustains them.

Freud’s student, Carl Jung, took this idea further by arguing that both myths and dreams reveal a complex symbolism that reveals and conceals the workings of the unconscious mind. Jung called this complex system of symbols “archetypal images.” He saw these timeless images as recurrent and the basis for our emotional world and our myths. Myths, Jung argued, like dreams express these timeless themes and images. Think of the many stories that make use of the wise old man, the earth mother, the evil uncle, the Divine Child, the hero. These images serve as sign posts in a grammar for how

we approach and understand our lives. This is why Joseph Campbell, who was heavily influenced by Jung, states that myths and dreams are instructive in the meaning of the very experience of life.

My favorite Jungian archetype is the disk in the sky. In the 1950s, Jung wrote a lengthy essay that addressed the UFO craze that had gripped America. Jung linked this fascination to UFOs to the idea of the sun disk that was a fixture of many world mythologies. In his article, Jung argued that the UFO was really a re-invention of the sun god motif. Jung made a good point. In mythology, the sun is the creator, the illuminator, the bringer of life and wisdom. UFO “contactees” expressed a similar belief about our “space brothers.” According to this narrative, advanced “space brothers” crossed their DNA with that of primates to create human beings. While wacky, within this idea we still see reflected the idea that human beings are the product of earth (primates) and sky (space men).

Jung even saw the new flying disc as a logical evolution of this symbol. In very early cultures, the sun was considered an actual being who lived in and traversed the sky. Later, in Egypt, where the sky was considered a vast sea, the sun was still a being but one who traveled in a boat. Finally, in Greece, the sun had become an object in the sky that was pulled behind Apollo’s chariot. Jung made the point that in every case, the symbol of the sun changed to reflect a society’s technology. This is why, he believed, the sun disk had become, in the twentieth century, a machine. However, while the metaphors have changed, the meaning is remarkably untouched.

Jung, despite his interpretation of this changing symbol, was primarily concerned with the consistent meaning behind the symbol. Those who make use of the structural

theory, on the other hand, believe that the meaning is found in the changing of the image or the retelling of the narrative. Claude Levi-Strauss believed that the meaning of a myth could be found not in the content of a narrative but in the structure of the story itself. Structuralism holds that a culture will revise and re-submit a symbol based on its own culture and environmental contexts. The focus, then, is not so much on what the story says but, rather, on how the story is put together.

Levi-Strauss takes this idea further by stating that even interpretations of a myth should be considered part of the larger structure of the myth because these interpretations are, in his view, added variants. For example, Jung's analysis of the UFO phenomena, despite being an interpretation of the theme and not a narrative, is, nevertheless, a new version of the sun disk myth. Only now, the myth has been retold using psychology and science instead of religion and superstition. The result, Levi-Strauss would say, is a new version that represents modern concerns while still holding onto the essential themes of separation and return. This structural approach is important to myth analysis for two reasons. First, these added interpretations become a link in the chain of meaning that can be followed back to the very origin of the myth. It becomes possible, then, with close analysis, to see the workings of our human capacity for thought as the structure of the myth changes through time. This method is almost like cognitive archaeology. Second, structuralism shows the myth narrative to be an open, not closed, text. Therefore, students of myth have the freedom and authority to analyze and interpret based on their own critical and creative speculation. Rather than "change" the meaning of a narrative through close reading, students of mythology are adding to the overall meaning of the text. In a sense, we become part of that myth's history by our interaction with it.

In this chapter, I have attempted to redefine myth by looking at the history of the word itself and how others have viewed myth's function. So far, we have seen myth defined as everything from a lie, to psychology, to the very interpretation of a text. It is time now to discuss how we, in this study, will define myth. In very simple terms, mythology is the study of myth. What is myth? Our word *myth* comes from the Greek *muthos* which means language, to talk, to speak words, to tell something. In other words, mythology is the story of a particular kind of language. From this point on, myth/mythology will be defined in this book as follows:

Mythology is the study of the language used to express experiences with and understandings of the “absolute reality.” The mythographer recognizes the fallibility of language and, therefore, seeks the collective meaning of individual expressions of encounters with the absolute.

Mythology does not and cannot make statements relating to the validity or truthfulness of the text itself. Rather, the emphasis is placed on the “meaning” of the text.

Before we move on, let's examine this definition further and relate it back to where we have been. Myth begins with an essential experience (“absolute reality”) that is highly emotional or intuitive. Therefore, it transcends the ability of language to adequately express it. Remember, when Moses had his essential experience, it's name is “existence”—a label that is vague but infinitely meaningful. Consequently, the language of myth can't be taken literally. Our definition of myth, instead, looks to the purposeful choice of terms and seeks to examine the meaning behind these choices.

So, while myth can discuss the significance (meaning) a narrative, myth can't

address whether the events happened or not. For example, to examine the resurrection of Jesus as “myth” is not to suggest that it is a lie, fable, or falsehood. Rather, the examination is to look at the words and texts of the resurrection narrative in order to understand what meaning the event had for those individuals 2000 years ago and what meaning it holds for believers today. Issues of fact, truth, or historiography are not the interest of mythology.

What this definition reflects is the rhetorical nature of myth. Rhetorical in that a myth is constructed in a particular manner in order to obtain a desired result using language. The rhetoric of myth suggests that not only does a myth text reflect a purposeful and meaningful point of view, but also that the text provides the framework by which we, as hearers/readers can understand the function of that text.

The rhetorician Wayne Booth describes this methodology as a “rhetorology.” He defines this concept as probing the position of each side of an argument to see where they overlap. Rather than seek difference, one should look to where the positions overlap and, then, examine that shared ground. The idea of rhetorology seeks to bridge the gap between the opposites mythology reflects. Not just between writer and reader, but also mind and matter, the one and the many, the I and the thou. The end focus of rhetorology is not the positions in conflict, but rather the undifferentiated wholeness of meaning.

To help with the process of rhetorology, Booth provides the rhetorological paths. These are a set of questions the reader can ask a text and then, using the text, speculate about the answers. These paths are useful tools in opening a text to the reader. The rhetorological paths are as summarized as follows:

- (1) What are the goals of the opposite rhetoric (the text)? This question seeks to examine what the purpose of the text is. What is the text trying to tell the reader? What is the text trying to persuade the reader to do, believe, or accept?
- (2) What are the methods of the opposite rhetoric (the text)? How is the text trying to persuade the reader? Is it through fear? Humor? Reason? Why would the storyteller choose this method to make a point?
- (3) What are the definitions of the subject? As we have discussed, all characters and objects in myth represent concepts. Based on the text, what do the characters, actions, events represent? How are they presented? What do these purposeful choices of terms tell us about the writer(s) of the narrative? How do they define themselves?
- (4) What are the principles and belief structures of speaker and audience? Based on the text, what do the writers of the narrative believe in? What do they value? What do they fear? Here, the mythographer must also turn the path around. What do you, as a reader, value? Fear? What are your beliefs? Where are they the same or different than those in the text? Here you learn about yourself as well as the ancient voices in the text.

- (5) Where are the scenes? These are the contexts we discussed earlier. Is the story situated in a cultural context? A natural context? Where are the symbols situated? Why? What does this reveal about what the cultures value?

As we explore myths rhetorically, we must consider these paths and approaches to myth. As these paths fold seemingly opposite positions together, we will begin to see the wholeness of meaning that the concept of Kosmos suggests.

The Four Functions of Myth

In an earlier section, I outlined how mythology was different from religion, philosophy, and science. This somewhat arbitrary distinction creates a problem in myth analysis. At its most early stage, myth functioned as all three disciplines; therefore, found within every myth narrative is an apparent contradiction of function. To help isolate these functions and get at the core meaning of the text, Joseph Campbell suggested that every myth needed to be considered in terms of its four basic functions.

Campbell's first function is the mystical. According to Campbell, this function serves to awaken and maintain in individuals a sense of wonder and participation in a mysterious universe. This function is a reflection of the old, holistic idea of the cosmos. Rather than an impersonal mechanism, this function maintains that the universe (which includes all things in that universe) is connected to and part of the intimate relationship of existence. This function holds that the worship of the universe and the act of worship by individuals are mutually dependent for the proper function of the other. By performing

rites, human beings regulate their lives and in doing so, regulate the universe. Because the universe and humanity are one, their action must be in balance for there to be order. So, rather than the relationship being one of animosity, the universe and individual are actually partners in being.

The second function is the cosmological. Campbell defines this function as the action of filling the local cosmological image with its measure of the mystical importance of the first function. Every feature of the local order of nature is converted into an icon or figure that reveals the “absolute reality.” In other words, the mystical, undifferentiated cosmos is categorized and named. In this way, humans can more easily interact with the concept because it has been made accessible symbolically. The ancient Egyptians offer the best example of these first two functions. For the Egyptians, the primary cosmological principle was ma’at which is often translated as order, justice, or truth. Yet, ma’at represented more than an impersonal cosmic order. Ma’at was the force that governed the regulation of natural phenomena (the rising and setting of the sun), social justice, and the existential truth of each individual. Although differentiated, it was the same Ma’at that made an individual a good farmer as well as caused the annual flooding of the Nile. This connection between human nature and external nature is more than philosophical. By regulating human life according to universal truth, both society and the universe will function in an orderly manner. In this way, humanity becomes an active participant in the universe.

Further, the concept of ma’at was personified and depicted in the form of the Goddess Ma’at. She was depicted as a fully anthropomorphic figure and the symbol of ma’at, the feather, was part of her crown. To the king, Ma’at was the source of his

authority and was considered to be his “sister.” The point to be made here is that a complex, mystical and abstract concept like cosmic order is turned into a cosmic person with a personality, a genealogy, and a role to play in the local, knowable universe. It is through this personification of ma’at, an abstract idea, that the individual, through stories and rituals, can participate personally in an otherwise impersonal universe.

The sociological function is the third of Campbell’s functions. Here, the sociological further represents the local moral order by validating and maintaining the particular moral system and customs of the culture telling the stories. One example of this function can be seen in the hero stories of a culture. The hero, as a representation of that social order, serves as an example of what is to be considered the proper behavior for that culture. The Blackfeet hero, Blood Clot Boy serves a sociological function for this tribe. In this tale, the hero, Kutoyis (Blood Clot Boy), destroys a series of monsters, each reflecting a social taboo--ranging from filial neglect to cannibalism. As we shall see in a later chapter, the hero represents the ideal self in a culture. So, the sociological function tells us that as the hero does, we should do also.

The final function of myth is the pedagogical. According to Campbell, this function serves to instruct in the conducting of individual life from the stages of dependency in childhood, to the responsibility of maturity and on to old age and the ultimate passage to death. This function teaches the listener how to live and, in many cases, how to die. Further, this function answers the question, “So what?” as the moral of the story. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is a rich myth that teaches the listener/reader not just how to be a good king, but also how to be a good human being. The epic begins with Gilgamesh as a spoiled, over-privileged young man who takes advantage of his position

of power. He abuses his authority as king and his people suffer. After his friend Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh embarks on an adventure that, like Oedipus, paradoxically takes him away from his fate while at the same time leading him to it. By the end of the tale, Gilgamesh's adventures and experiences have taught him and what it means to be human, what it means to be Gilgamesh. Wiser and humbled, he accepts his destiny. This hero, a symbol for us, teaches us how to conduct ourselves as we adventure towards maturity.

It is important to recognize that while there are four functions of myth, these do not operate on an "either/or" basis. One myth is likely to contain all four of these functions. While it can be very useful to consider how all four functions work together and are expressed in the text, it can also be a challenge to speculate about which function was originally intended. When beginning to analyze a myth, it is often helpful to ask the first rhetoricological question: "What are the goals of this text?" Based on your expectations and reading, the answer will be one of these functions. Now that myth has been defined and methods for analysis presented, let's see how all this comes together in the process of analysis.

"Enuma Elish": A Rhetoricological Analysis

The purpose of this chapter has been to define mythology as it functions within the narratives themselves. In this final section, I want to illustrate how all these concepts come together as tools for analysis. Joseph Campbell believed that the primary goal in myth study should be to become "myth literate." While part of this is learning the symbols and the significance of recurring themes, these important elements are worthless without gaining access to the narratives themselves. This chapter ends with an analysis

of the Babylonian creation epic “Enuma Elish” using the four functions of myth to open a dialogue with the text. Subsequent chapters will make use of these functions and rhetorical paths as well as specific themes and symbols unique to the type of myth being examined. After reading each chapter, students should make use of the same methodology to arrive at their own sense of meaning in the myths.

The Multiple Functions of the “Enuma Elish”

The “Enuma Elish” is the Babylonian creation story written, probably, in the twelfth century B.C.E. The main narrative concern of the poem is the tracing of creation from the establishment of the universe to the gods’ building Babylon as their home on Earth. There was also a performance aspect to the poem. It was recited on the fourth day of the Babylonian new year celebration as a means to “renew” history and also, presumably, to remind the king of his obligations to Heaven and Earth. As myth, however, the “Enuma Elish” makes use of a complex system of symbols and metaphors that must be explicated for its full meaning to be appreciated.

The Mystical Function

As mentioned earlier, the mystical function concerns itself with making the seemingly unknowable and immanent knowable. Through observation of natural processes and then creative speculation, the individual comes to have an intimate relationship with that process. The “Enuma Elish” begins with the creation of the universe. According to the poem, the primary building blocks of the universe are “sweet water” (fresh, river water), “bitter water” (salty, sea water) and language (words or

sounds). When sweet and bitter water come together, silt is formed. Once the silt solidifies, a scene for creation is established, and the universe, as we know it, begins to unfold.

In this case, the Babylonians observed that after the annual river floods, silt deposits were left—new land. As was mentioned in a previous section, the ancient Near East held that events on earth mimicked cosmic events on a lesser scale. If terrestrial land is created through the flooding and depositing of silt, the universe must have been created in a similar, although more mystical fashion.

Through observation and speculation, human beings participate in the meaning-making process. The universe is still mysterious and awesome, yet it is familiar and knowable through the focused empathy and creativity of the observer.

The Cosmological Function

The cosmological function takes these mystical aspects and makes them further knowable through naming. Here, the impersonal cosmic forces are personified as knowable personalities. In doing so, the mysterious and cosmological become local and psychological. In the case of the “Enuma Elish,” the three primary elements of creation are presented as three distinct personalities that not only reflect the cosmological but also the local geography. In the mystical function, the river water is personified as a male personality, Apsu, the “first begetter.” Likewise, Tiamat, the salty, ocean water, is depicted as feminine and “the mother of them all.” Using Booth’s third rhetorological path, we can ask, “what are the definitions of the subjects?” By examining the myth using the fourth, we might examine “What are the belief structures?” First, the subjects,

elements of creation, are depicted as male and female and as fresh water and salt water, respectively. We can see from these choices that the Babylonians looked to their own landscape at how their own reality was formed and made that the microcosm context for a macrocosmic function.

As always, it not just the question “What is it?” but also, “What does it do?” that can yield the most meaning. What do these choices of metaphors tell us, the reader, about the ontological beliefs of the Babylonians? We should notice that the condition of creation is set up as a series of opposites: male and female; sweet and bitter water. On the one hand, this establishes a cosmic conflict that is not uncommon. Order, in cosmogonic myth, is often depicted as a battle between opposites. But, that doesn’t appear to be the case here. The opposites of Apsu and Tiamat do not battle; rather, they “mingle together” and in these waters “gods were created.” At least in the beginning, creation is not the result of conflict and defeat but mingling and synthesis.

The personality of Mummu is an interesting element to consider as well. In the text, Mummu is the counselor who advises both Tiamat and Apsu in their decision to destroy the young gods. Mummu represents the ancient Near Eastern idea of the cosmic word that either creates or has a hand in the creation of the universe; however, the Babylonian “word” is not the divine command of order found in Genesis One or the reasoned speech of the Egyptian “Memphite Theology.” According to Joseph Shipley, Mummu’s name may be related to the Indo-European root *mom/mum* which means “imitative of indistinct speech or *momo* for baby talk. In either case, Mummu seems to represent ineffective speech, which casts doubt on his reliability as a counselor. The text bears this out by referring to Mummu as “that servant who clouds [Apsu’s] judgment.”

While this text reflects the idea of the cosmic language principle, it appears that the Babylonians perceived language as creating chaos rather than order.

The Sociological Function

The sociological function seeks to explain and justify the customs and particular order of a given society. In the case of the “Enuma Elish,” the primary concern is political in nature. Even as the events leading up to the creation of the universe are narrated, the “Enuma Elish” also seeks to validate the political structure of Babylon and the authority of the king. Having created the younger generation of gods, Apsu and Tiamat retire to rest. Yet, the constant action and noise of the younger gods disturbs their sleep. Through the bad advice Mummu, Apsu and Tiamat decide to kill their own children. Ea, the champion of the young gods, destroys Apsu and enslaves Mummu. This first course of action seems to suggest a primitive time of tribal warfare. Ea, as champion, defeats his father and gains the right to rule. It is worth noting here that Ea uses his father’s body as the raw material to build his palace. The symbolism is obvious; each new kingdom is built on the body of the old.

The next scene depicts a society in both transition and chaos. Ea’s new society is governed by a divine counsel which appears to be a form of democracy or at least parliamentary rule. This works until Tiamat forms an army of demons to avenge her husband’s death. Once again, Ea is called upon to save the young gods, but he finds himself too old to meet the challenge. Marduk, the son of Ea, steps forward to defend the society—with one condition. Marduk agrees to do battle with Tiamat’s forces if he is made supreme ruler. Out of fear, the counsel agrees.

This movement from tribal warfare to democratic rule to authoritarian rule offers some interesting glimpses into Babylonian political philosophy. Because Marduk is the concept of the ideal ruler the “Enuma Elish” is progressing towards, the Babylonians seemed to have recognized the idea of social evolution—a very similar idea to that expressed by Plato. According to this perspective, society will progress from tribal chaos to democracy to totalitarianism. For the Babylonians, it appears, totalitarianism was the ideal state of government.

The idea of preferred totalitarianism is paradoxical to our ears. Yet, the Babylonians suggest the ideal ruler is one who is chosen by destiny and acts according to his own will. In the narrative, those who rely on the counsel or authority of others do not fare well. Tiamat and Apsu are both misled by Mummu. The unfortunate Kingu is handed the Tablets of Destiny by Tiamat as a symbol of his authority. Notice, they are handed to him. Unlike Marduk, Kingu is not born to this position but chosen for it. Real power, the text suggests, comes from birth and is manifested in action not found in marriage, symbols or ceremonies.

Finally, the text also illustrates how power is to be transferred. When Tiamat, Apsu, and Mummu become too old and inactive to be effective leaders, they make a decision to kill the younger gods—their rivals for power. Ea, however, recognizing that he is no longer capable of facing Tiamat and her army, takes Marduk aside and offers him “advice.” Although Marduk is the hero, Ea also is depicted as an ideal ruler, powerful but mindful of his own limitations. Rather than fear his more powerful son, he retires at the appropriate time and serves as an advisor to his son.

This process depicts how the transfer of power is supposed to happen. Kingu on the other hand, illustrates what should never happen. The text describes Kingu as a “clumsy laborer” who is promoted to the level of war and assembly leader merely because he has become the husband of Tiamat. His authority comes not just from marrying well, but also as a result of having the Tablets of Destiny attached to his chest. Kingu’s power and authority is more symbolic than actual. The young gods also have a problem with the transfer of power. After Ea recognizes he is no longer up to the challenge, the task does not immediately fall to Marduk. Rather, the first choice is Anu, the son of Anshar, the president of the Annunaki. Here, like Kingu, Anu is offered a position of power based solely on his family connections. Yet, unlike Kingu, Anu realizes he is not fit for this position of power and returns to the Annunaki.

Marduk, however, was born for greatness. He is conceived in the hall of fate that predetermines his greatness. The text says that Marduk was a “leader from the first.” This element of the text wants to define what true social power is and the text is clear. True power and greatness is not a result of family ties or empty symbols; rather, people are fated for greatness. Kings, then, should be chosen based on their ability and merit not on familial power or power symbols.

The Pedagogical

The pedagogical function pulls the previous three functions together to ask, “So what?” In doing so, the pedagogical function reveals how the society telling the myth viewed the proper conditions for life. To extend this meaning, it is necessary to make use of the rhetorological path that asks, “What are the definitions of the subjects?” Within

this text, it is clear that the main conflict is between the “bad” gods of the first generation and the “good” gods of the younger generation. But, this distinction is not complete.

What makes these gods bad? The text shows that conflict arises primarily because Tiamat, Apsu, and Mummu are inert and want to sleep. The younger gods, however, are active and “dance.” The one action the older gods do take, the act of creation itself, is a passive “mingling” as opposed to the structured and meaningful approach taken by Marduk.

The opposite, then, is exactly what makes the young gods good. They act. Marduk, especially, is personified action. He is described as having long arms and legs, four eyes and four ears. The point here is that not only is he all-seeing and hearing (consequently all-being) but is also capable of all-doing. This is illustrated in the text after Marduk slays the older gods, including Tiamat and Kingu. Marduk does not rest but creates the heavens and earth and begins to administrate. He establishes a holy precinct for the gods (Babylon) and creates humanity to serve them. Compare this to Ea who after Apsu is dispatched, returns to rest.

Ontologically speaking (that is the study of being), the theme here is that action is preferred to inaction. Marduk is elevated because he acts and acts wisely. Further, he acts according to his nature. Following the fated path is what separates even Ea and Anu from Kingu. Ea and Anu realize that the final battle and power that it would bring are not their path. Kingu, however, accepts symbols and flattery as authority and pays for it with his life. The message of this element of the myth appears to be that acting according to your nature will result in order while going against your nature leads to the destruction of the self.

There is also a decidedly political theme at work in this narrative. Marduk, as the symbol of an ideal king, is meant to instruct rulers in the proper execution of their position. First and foremost, the king must be an individual suited for the job. The text shows that great kings are fated from the beginning with a destiny. Advisors, gifts and even family ties cannot undo the inborn greatness of the chosen.

Further, the fitness of the king will be judged by the standard established by Marduk. Like this great god, the king is expected to provide safety and administrative competence, remain active and create and maintain an orderly state. If the king fails to provide these attributes of a cosmos, he is an agent of disorder, not order. Consequently, that king has two choices: retire and transfer power to a younger more capable individual like Ea or die like Apsu.

All along, the “Enuma Elish” functions as a political manual, a philosophical treatise and a religious text. Further, by looking at the metaphors and language specifically chosen to narrate these cosmic events, we, as readers, begin to see the geographical, political, and existential reality of a people long gone. To find these meanings, however, we must ask the rhetorological questions and then listen with our minds to what the text wants to say.

Conclusion

A myth is much more than an entertaining story or a fantastic tale. As we have seen in this chapter, a myth is, in its essence, a way for a culture to express its reality through the use of speculative, creative thought and metaphorical language. But, myths don't just belong to others. Levi-Strauss reminds us that as we read and make sense of

myth, the stories become ours as well. One joy of the myth is watching its meaning unfold, surprising us as we see familiar themes in unfamiliar stories. Another joy is to realize that we share a common desire for meaning with a people separated from us by time, language, and place. Joseph Campbell expressed it best when he said that myth was the story of the soul's high adventure.

In the chapters that follow, I will present definitions and a methodology that will open a window into the myths you will explore. Each of you, the mythographer, should make use of these perspectives and methods to crack open each narrative in a way that reflects your understanding of yourself in the world.

