



The Great Code: The Bible and Literature

Northrop Frye

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An examination of the influence of the Bible on Western art and literature and on the Western creative imagination in general. Frye persuasively presents the Bible as a unique text distinct from all other epics and sacred writings. “No one has set forth so clearly, so subtly, or with such cogent energy as Frye the literary aspect of our biblical heritage” (New York Times Book Review). Indices.

The Great Code: The Bible and Literature Details

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Jared says

Our final two weeks in Dr. Watson's "Reading the Bible as Literature" course were devoted to The Great Code by Northrop Frye, the famous literary critic. His book is devoted to an examination of the biblical material from a literary perspective. The title comes from William Blake: "The Bible is the great code of art and literature."

I absolutely loved the book, but almost no one else did. Gallagher was my only fellow Frye fan. The response of others in the class ranged from "I haven't read it" to "I don't understand it" to "This guy is an idiot." The first two were almost forgivable . . . the book was not short, nor was it an easy read, but . . . Northrop Frye is a genius. I was surprised by Frye's ability, writing as a secular figure, to achieve such balance and sensitivity to the material in his discussion of the Bible. Here is my explanation of the book (as produced for my final exam in the class):

In The Great Code, Northrop Frye begins by outlining his general purpose in the introduction. He will discuss in his book the idea that the Bible is a literary unity and is the most important book in Western history and culture. He will do this by describing general factors under the headings of Language, Myth, Metaphor, and Typology in Part I. In Part II he will apply these factors more specifically within the Bible, returning backwards through them and giving the book a chiasmic structure.

In Language I, Frye notes that Christianity, unlike either Judaism or Islam, has relied primarily on translations for its religious texts since the very beginning of its history. First there was the Greek Septuagint of the early church, followed by the Latin Vulgate in the Middle Ages. Around the time of the Protestant Reformation, translations in English and Germany gained prominence. And today there is a concerted movement to see the entire Bible translated into every language known to mankind.

In examining, in particular, the language of the Bible, Frye describes the three phases of history posited by Giambattista Vico: the Age of Gods, the Age of Kings, and the Age of Men. He also discusses the difference between langue (or different languages like French, English, and German) and langage (or the common experience of living on earth which gives all languages equivalent terms and the ability to be translated into each other). Frye notes that there is a history of langage which moves through three distinct phases. Vico calls them poetic, heroic (or noble), and vulgar. Frye describes them as hieroglyphic, hieratic, and demotic. However, for most of the chapter, he refers to them as metaphor, metonymy, and descriptive.

In the metaphorical phase of language, words carry a great deal of power with them, for they invoke their objects when they are used. A word is the object which it refers to, and all concepts (even those we might consider abstract today) are concrete and real. Thus we see in the Bible how God speaks and Creation begins, how Jephthah's vow must be kept, how the Hebrew people never say or write out the name of God, etc. At the center of the metaphorical phase is the concept of the "god" of nature and the world. A sentient personality is given to virtually everything, and from this we have a sun-god, rain-god, war-god, and so on.

In the metonymic phase of language, words shift from a state of "this is that" to a state of "this is put for that." The language becomes capable of sustaining abstract concepts, and the idea of a transcendent "God" (who is outside of and over all things) moves to the center of the language. In metonymy, what was once literal is now much more poetic in nature.

In the descriptive phase of language, words arise out of the need to describe that which we see before us. In this phase, “God” no longer has any linguistic function because the concept cannot be sensed physically or in any way tested or measured empirically. Therefore, in the third phase of language God is said to be dead. However, Frye points out that God “may not be so much dead as entombed in a dead language.”

Once he has described these three phases, Frye states that the Bible does not fall squarely into any of them. The Bible contains metaphorical language, metonymic concepts, and descriptive writing, but it is actually something else altogether. The Bible makes use of a kind of rhetorical oratory which claims to bring revelation from a time outside of time. The Bible, then, is what Frye calls *kerygma*, or proclaiming rhetoric. *Kerygma*, he says, is the vehicle of the Bible’s revelation. In turn, the linguistic vehicle of *kerygma* is myth.

Myth, Frye says (in *Myth I*), serves to “draw a circumference around a human community.” Myth is communicated in story form, and it delineates the things which a society needs to know about itself. Myth is differentiated from other forms of story in two ways. First, it is part of a larger canon, or a *Mythology*. Second, it serves to set a particular society or culture apart from all others by forming the basis of a cultural history.

There are two types of history: *Weltgeschichte* and *Heilsgeschichte*. *Weltgeschichte* is authentic, accurate history which recounts events as they actually happened. *Heilsgeschichte* explains the importance of and meaning behind those historical events. The Bible, Frye asserts, is the latter type of history, and accurate history is usually secondary (and even irrelevant) to the biblical message. The myth of the Bible serves to redeem history by explaining its purpose and meaning.

In *Metaphor I*, Frye explains that the Bible, in accomplishing the construction of a mythology, uses a great deal of poetic imagery, despite the absence of a literary purpose as such. The reason for that is because of the value a verbal structure has in constructing a corresponding material structure. Frye notes that, when any verbal structure of words is created, it artificially links disparate material elements into a material structure. These material elements are only a minute part of all material reality, and may be totally unrelated without the presence of the linking verbal structure.

The purpose of this sort of structuralization in the Bible is to draw together the various events of the past in the construction of a unified, purposeful history. The Bible at its core consists of a universalized structure which remains open to a variety of theological interpretations. The history of the Bible presents a natural cycle of events which recurs over time, moving us towards a final denouement, or judgment, in which all creatures are divided between paradise and hell. Although Frye states that the Bible cannot be reduced to a single “metaphor cluster,” the guiding purpose throughout this historical movement is embodied in the word of God. The word of God can refer to both the Bible itself and to Jesus Christ.

In *Typology I*, Frye reveals that the Bible is able to carry its purpose (to account for the forces guiding all of human history) because it possesses a typology. A typology is essentially a theory of historical process which holds that there is a meaning and a purpose behind all events which transpire. Every event which occurs is a type, pointing to some event in the future which will remain clouded and unknowable until it actually takes place, thus revealing both itself and the manner in which it was concealed in the preceding event. This future event is the antitype of the type that came before.

Frye shows that the Bible consists of Old Testament and New Testament, which are type and antitype of each other, forming a “double mirror” in which each reflects the other but not the world outside. However, not only are the Old and New Testaments type and antitype, but every event in the Bible is in some way the type of what is to come and the antitype of what has already been. In this way, Frye believes, the Bible

moves inexorably from beginning to end, carrying a single purpose forward throughout.

In Typology II, Frye discusses the seven specific “Phases of Revelation” which make up the totality of the Bible: five in the Old Testament, two in the New Testament. These phases in order are: Creation, Revolution (the Exodus), Law, Wisdom, Prophecy, Gospel, and Apocalypse. Each of the seven is, as previously discussed, the type of the phase after it and the antitype of the phase before it. Frye carries the reader through each of these phases, describing them and their links with each other. These descriptions serve largely as review material for anyone who possesses previous familiarity with the text.

In Metaphor II, Frye discusses the unity of biblical images. Imagery in the Bible is of two kinds: either Apocalyptic (good), or Demonic (evil). Each of these kinds is further divided, Apocalyptic into Group and Individual, and Demonic into Manifest and Parody. Parody only exists within the Demonic type because everything within Parody is a perversion of something good. Good does not pervert evil, so there is no Apocalyptic Parody. Parody itself is further divided into Group and Individual.

Once the images have been placed beneath one of the above headings, they are further divided into one of seven categories: Divine, Angelic (or Spiritual), Paradisal, Human, Animal, Vegetable, and Mineral. All biblical imagery fits somehow into this scheme, presenting the reader with a unified picture of the world where everything is part of the positive picture or the negative picture, all the way from the divine down to inanimate objects on earth.

In Myth II, Frye discusses the unity of the biblical narrative. He describes the entirety of the Bible as a rising and falling cycle of high points and low points tracing their way throughout history towards a final, ultimate high point. The narrative goes something like this: Garden of Eden, Sin/Wilderness/Cain’s City/Ur, Promised Land I (Pastoral), Sea/Wilderness/Pharaoh, Promised Land II (Agrarian), Philistines, etc., Jerusalem/Zion, Captivity/Babylon/Nebuchadnezzar, Rebuilt Temple, Antiochus Epiphanes, Purified Temple (Maccabees), Rome/Nero, Jesus’ Spiritual Kingdom.

Within this narrative, Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, Antiochus, and Nero are all spiritually the same oppressor, and Egypt, Babylon, and Rome are the same place. Furthermore, the Garden of Eden, the Promised Land, Zion, and Jesus’ Spiritual Kingdom are all metaphors for the same place, and Moses, David, Joshua, etc. are all pointing towards the coming Messiah.

In Language II, Frye first addresses the question of the biblical canon which has formed this unity of imagery and narrative that he has just discussed. He believes that it has been formed around the book of Deuteronomy. The other books in the Pentateuch were re-written to conform to it. Earlier prophecy was interpreted according to it. Histories were written in light of it. And, finally, the New Testament books were selected according to their conformity with, and illustration of, Deuteronomy 6:5.

While some might see the question of authorship as integral to the selection of the canon, Frye states that this is not the case. In fact, authorship and the question of inspiration are fairly irrelevant. If inspiration is to be believed, then we must also believe in the inspiration of editors, translators, compilers, and so forth.

As for authorship, Frye states that the Bible was largely composed during a transitional phase between oral tradition (wherein the author is anonymous) and writing tradition (as in modern times, where the author is named). In this transitional phase we have a great deal of pseudonymous writing, in which the actual authors will attach the name of some famous or important person in order to show the legitimacy of their writings. Frye supplies us with the example of II Peter.

Frye further describes the unity of the Bible as being largely built out of innumerable smaller units, or kernels. Examples of these include the proverbs or aphorisms of Wisdom literature, the oracles of Prophecy, the commandments of the Torah, and the pericope of the Gospels.

Proceeding forward, he discusses the importance of the Bible as a piece of objective (rather than subjective) art. Objective art by Frye's reckoning consists of works which form an integral part of a society's cultural history. In our case, this might mean such things as the writing of Shakespeare, Dickens, and, of course, the Bible.

Objective art, he states, has achieved "resonance" with its audience. In other words, particular phrases have achieved their own power and significance within a culture, even when separated entirely from their context within the original text. The example he gives is the phrase "Grapes of Wrath" from Isaiah 63, which has become a famous line in a culturally significant song as well as the title of an important piece of literature.

Next he describes Dante's ideas of finding multiple meanings within a single passage. Dante classifies these meanings as: Literal, Allegorical, Moral, and Anagogical. Literal is the obvious meaning of the actual words. Allegorical is how the words form a picture or symbol of our salvation from a fallen state. Moral is how the words form a picture or symbol of our movement from a sinful to a virtuous life. And Anagogical is how the words form a picture or symbol of our glorification from base, human, earth-bound existence to an existence in the divine presence of God. Frye is careful to note that these varying meanings do not conflict with each other, but rather operate on various levels and are all, in some sense, true.

There are two cautionary notes which Frye provides to the application of Dante's theory of polysemous meaning, however. First, it assumes the validity of a single worldview through which we interpret (in Dante's case, Medieval Catholic Christianity). Second, it assumes that the words themselves are not important, but rather some higher meaning which exists behind the words.

However, Frye states that what Dante is trying to accomplish in the search for polysemous (but unified) meaning in a religious or spiritual sense is very near to what Frye is advocating in the application of polysemous (but unified) interpretation in a literary sense. He states that this approach is the most useful in any consideration of the Bible as literature. It must be considered as a unity of narrative and imagery, a product of composition which sought to account for a purpose behind history, and a self-contained work of proclaimed revelation in order to allow for the most useful study of its text in literary terms.

I found that Frye had a great deal of value to communicate in *The Great Code*. His approach to the Bible was both profound and meaningful. At times his writing could be quite difficult to follow and understand, yet this was not a failing of that writing, for once I understood what it was communicating I could think of no better way to explain whatever he was trying to say. In other words, I found the reading of the book to be a very rewarding and stretching experience. Frye challenged my beliefs without belittling, demeaning, or dismissing them, and I think I came away from the book ultimately strengthened in those beliefs.

Nevertheless, it is a marvel to me that a man with Frye's obviously intimidating intelligence should be capable of conducting so thorough and knowledgeable a study of the meaning and value of the biblical text without himself believing in the truths espoused within that text. There were times in *The Great Code* where I felt that he was very close to believing just that, times when he seemed puzzled because something did not quite add up between his own assumptions and the actual situation he found, yet somehow he does not seem to have been capable of making that last leap to faith.

Even towards the end of the book when he is describing the nature of faith so well, there does not seem to be

the least spark of any such knowledge or sentiments on his part. This both astounds and saddens me. However, Frye's lack of faith in the Bible does not in any way affect the importance of what he has to say about it in his book. The Great Code was of considerable value to me in giving me perspective on what exactly the Bible is that I had never before heard or considered on my own.

Adam says

Frye's second-most-famous book of criticism explores the ways the Bible is literature and has influenced literature. There are so many things Frye does skillfully, not least of which is providing incisive critical analysis into a text that carries such cultural and spiritual weight without impinging on the religious role of the Bible. This is not a spiritual book by any measure; it's a literary one, but Frye shows great respect for the spiritual impact of the Bible. Perhaps people who believe in the 100% literal truth of every line of the Bible will be distressed when Frye points out that many of the events of the Bible contradict each other and could not literally be true, but I suspect these readers won't be looking for critical takes such as this one.

He lays out systems of understanding the Bible through Language, Myth, and Typology, then applies these systems in reverse order (Typology II, Myth II, Language II.) The structuring looked a little cheesy to me, but in fact it is masterfully arranged.

I can only use superlatives to describe the effect this text had on my appreciation for and understanding of the Bible. I took a course on the Bible as literature in college. Then, this past summer, I undertook to read the entire Bible, and I read this guide shortly afterwards, while the language was still fresh in my mind, and now my brain hums with types and antitypes, mythic cycles and echoes of repeated history.

A bit of warning-- this is an academic text, and probably not for the casual Bible-skimmer. I have an advanced degree in English and I navigated this text slowly, deliberately, and with a pencil to summarize, underline, and annotate as I read. It was like a little grad-school rehash, which I enjoyed. Frye's prose is clear and accessible, for an academic, but readers may labor a little as he unleashes "demotic" and "dialectic" and "metonymic."

All in all, this book is hugely valuable for anyone who wants to study the Bible in a scholarly way, and even for readers who read the Bible for spiritual nourishment, Frye's treatment is earnest and respectful.

Al says

This is in many ways a brilliant book but more difficult than I am accustomed to reading at this point in my life. Academic in nature, by a respected literary scholar, an analytical look at the Bible as literature amongst the world's literature. Literary criticism often leaves me feeling like the dissection of the frog was well done but I really liked the frog better before it was cut up. I think though, that my approach to the Bible is forever altered by the questions he raises and answers and the understanding of how this unique book fits in amongst the literary history of humanity was enriching.

Somayeh says

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Chris says

This book changed my life. I'm not just saying that. It really did. I learned how to read, watch, and consume literature in a whole new way. It's like, before I read this book I was gulping down literature as if it were water, somewhat bland at times but necessary for life, and now after I've read the book I've realized that it's more like a fine wine that deserves to be savored and that there's different, subtle notes to it to that deserve to be discovered. The Great Code brings to life not only Scripture but all of Literature by bringing to light the very nature of language, metaphor, typology, and mythology that is rooted in the biblical narrative but that has seeped into the life-blood of all literature. Definitely a difficult read, but one that is so worth it to struggle through and to seek understanding of.

Kirk Lowery says

This book is Frye's take on the Bible and its meaning. As a literary critic, he's clearly out of his element tackling the Bible: he makes egregious mistakes, is dependent upon biblical scholars for essential ideas, and presents his own without a context. And this lack of context shows. His views on typology are arbitrary and uncontrolled by any hermeneutical principle that I could detect. And since linguistic meaning is created by juxtaposition, his association of type and anti-type produced ludicrous results. On the other hand, his

discussion of metaphor in general and in the Bible specifically was generally helpful and at times insightful. Frye is caught between how the Bible is and has been understood by people and cultures down through the ages and how the Bible was intended to be understood by the original authors to the original recipients. He should have stuck with the "reader response" side of how the Bible has been used in Western civilization, for that is his expertise. His attempts to confuse that approach with actually interpreting the message and meaning of the Bible are unconvincing at best.

Czarny Pies says

Northrop Frye liked to tell his undergraduate classes that the Bible was edited more than it was written. As a result, this work which was composed over a 1500 year period in three different languages and which has been under revision for over 3000 years now possesses a wonderful unity of language and thought which has allowed Professor Frye to analyze it as an integrated whole much as Bullfinch allows us to view Greco-Roman mythology as a single corpus.

Northrop Frye identifies four types of language found in the Bible: (1) factual, (2) logical, (3)rhetorical and (4) mythic.

Frye then takes Vico's cyclical typology of history in which a divine era (dominated by mythic language) is followed first by a heroic age (dominated by metaphorical language) and then by a human era (dominated by factual and logical language) which will bring the wheel back to a new divine era. Today we live in the human era which is why we have trouble interpreting the Bible which is written in metaphorical language.

Frye finds that the Bible has the plot of a comedy. It begins with Genesis, advances through the passion to a triumphant resurrection and then concludes with the Apocalypse (the vision of heaven). Humanity which has begun in God's earthly kingdom is now in God's heavenly kingdom.

This is a great model that I wish I could be convinced of. Professor Frye was a good Protestant who loved the Bible as only a Protestant could. Being a Catholic I have been trained to think that I should be following Christ the person not a book (albeit divinely inspired). The Catholic Church for most of its history felt the Bible should be available only in Latin and actively discouraged anyone but priests from reading it even in Latin. Only with Vatican II were lay people formally allowed to read the Bible in the translation of their choice.

The translators of the Bible are always struck by how varied the original sources are in nature, philosophy and level of language. The translation always creates a unity of terms and styles that did not exist in the original documents. To agree with Frye one has to accept the idea that the apparent unity of the modern Bible is due to God's plan not an accident of history.

Nonetheless this book is a great read. Frye is correct of course that modern man instinctively perceives the Bible to be a unified whole and his interpretation of this unified whole is of great value to understanding the impact that the Bible has had upon us since Gutenberg's time.

Martha Anne Davidson says

The distinguished Canadian scholar Northrop Frye published *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* in 1981, but the study still speaks to this reader all these years later. Frye declares his subject and purpose clearly at the beginning: "This book attempts a study of the Bible from the point of view of a literary critic." The description of the Bible as "The Great Code" comes from William Blake, Frye's subject in his 1947 study entitled *Fearful Symmetry*, and many of the ideas in *The Great Code* relate to those in Frye's monumental literary study of 1957 entitled *Anatomy of Criticism*, which is probably the most important work of literary criticism I have read. In *The Great Code*, Frye focuses on the Christian Bible, Old and New Testaments. He insists that the Bible is more than a work of literature, but finds it significant that the Christian Bible, as we have it, has had so much influence on the literary imagination over so many years. He explains that "the present book has grown directly out of my teaching interests rather than out of scholarly ones, concerned more with establishing perspectives than with adding specifically to knowledge" and that he was aiming at "a kind of handbook or introductory study" for "introducing the general reader to a knowledge of the Bible and to some of the applications he can make of such knowledge in the rest of his reading." The book defines and discusses the literary concepts of language, myth, metaphor, and typology, and then applies those to the Bible. I have already started to use Frye's book as a reference book or handbook. The Index of Passages lists scores of references from the various Bible books, and the index helps me find my way back to the commentary Frye makes about a specific verse. The book is more than just a textbook or reference book, though: the book is an illuminating and inspiring study of literature. It has also helped me to appreciate the Bible more. I fear it sounds a little dramatic, but I can almost feel sparks flying with the many ideas and connections that Frye shares. From Abraham and Aesop to Yeats and Zechariah, the study abounds with impressions and insights. For this reader, definitely a "good read."

Scriptor Ignotus says

Northrop Frye takes a neo-Viconian approach to what many would call the foundational text of western civilization. Vico identified three general stages of culture, each with its own unique way of using language. In the hieroglyphic stage, there is no distinction to be made between the word-concept and what you might call external reality. Reality, as the culture understands it, is derived from the words of hieroglyphic texts, and those texts are always heavily symbolic; they never attempt to write "scientifically" or "descriptively" in any modern sense. In the second stage, which Vico called the hieratic stage, language generally takes the form of metaphor. Words and things are not directly identified with one another, but they are juxtaposed for literarily significant purposes. The third stage, called the demotic, is purely descriptive in nature, and it is the mode of language that is most natural and familiar to the modern age. In this stage, words are used to describe an exterior world that is almost entirely detached from language itself.

Frye believes that the Bible is mostly the product of second-stage, hieratic literature. It is highly metaphorical; but even though it displays nearly every characteristic of what we would consider to be a work of literature, Frye maintains that the Bible is *not* a work of literature in the sense in which that term is commonly understood. The Bible is describing something its authors believe to be real; but the horizon of what is "real" for second-stage thinkers is not the same as what is "real" for the demotic sensibility. To paraphrase one of Frye's great lines, God is not dead, but he is entombed in a dead language.

Mohammad Ranjbari says

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John David says

“The Great Code” really re-configured the way that I conceive of the Bible as a literary document. After two centuries of historical criticism (or narrative criticism as it’s called when applied to the Bible), it is refreshing to see a whole new interpretive methodology which looks inward at the Bible, instead of trying to test its significance by how well it correlates to something outside of itself. And that is the central thesis to Frye’s argument – that the Bible is a unified mythology, replete with its own literary devices, that hardly needs confirmation from history or archaeology to successfully tell the story (mythos) that it tells. Because of this, the book has been the target of a number of appropriate historicist critiques, all claiming that one can’t cut wholly separate the work of literature from its social and cultural context. Although these criticisms aren’t all fair themselves, as Frye even considers the structure of certain metaphors (like the ubiquitous flood myth) modulate themselves repeatedly via literary transmission into new texts.

The first part of the book consists of a highly condensed theory of language which Frye employs in the second half. I found this part just as useful, yet often elided in critical reviews. According to Frye, his own ideas are highly influenced by Vico’s “Scienza Nuova” which posits the idea of a cyclical theory of language wherein each human epoch uses language in a unique, irreducible way. In his tripartite interpretation, there is the hieroglyphic stage in which words have the pure energy of potential magic, the hieratic stage in which words begin to reflect an objective reality of a transcendent order, and the demotic stage, where prose continues its subordination to “the inductive and fact-gathering process,” and seems to be the stage we remain in today. If this evolution has taken us full circle from feel the pure immediacy of metaphor, how are we supposed to read the Bible (whose language is, of course, one of pure metaphorical immediacy)? Nietzsche said that God had lost his function, but Vico (and Frye in turn) might have replied that the Bible is simply entombed in a lost part of the cycle, inaccessible and unable to be interpreted by the demotic. His neo-Viconian theory of language goes some way in offering a theory for the vulgarism that so often takes the name of Biblical interpretation: “With the general acceptance of demotic and descriptive criteria in language, such literalism becomes a feature of anti-intellectual Christian populism” (45).

The second part begins the literary criticism as one would more formally recognize it. According to Frye, the Bible can operate independently precisely because it functions and maintains its own body of rhetorical devices, including metaphor, and type, antitype, and archetype. “We clearly have to consider the possibility that metaphor is not an incidental ornament, but one of its controlling modes of thought” (54). Metaphor and trope become the sole measure of the Bible’s inner verbal consistency. The “type” and “antitype” are essentially import; he construes the entire Bible as a series of musical call-and-response gestures between the Old and New Testaments: the Resurrection is the response to the Old Testament Promised Land, the baptism in the River Jordan is the New Testament’s answer to the Old Testament’s Red Sea. He also integrates a number of other complex typologies, including the Creation-Incarnation-Death-Descent to Hell-Harrowing of Hell-Resurrection-Ascension-Heaven motif and a nomenclature of types, including the “demonic,” “analogical,” and “apocalyptic.” This universe – multiverse, even – of complex metaphor, meaning, and type are the ones that we continue to recognize, read, and struggle with today, which accounts for the fact that

myth goes a long way in exploring who we are and what we do as a community. Notice how Frye deftly bypasses any theological or strictly philosophical concerns. As Frank Kermode would comment almost a decade after the book was published, "Just as he exiled questions of value from the Anatomy [of Criticism], he exiles from his Biblical criticism questions of belief."

I was considering giving this book four stars, because of my occasional disagreements with it (including the arguments from historicism mentioned above). But I can't in good conscience do that. Just for the interpretive vistas that it opens up, I feel that anything less than five would convey an impression that I was less than impressed, which certainly is not the case.

H Wesselius says

The subtitle should have set the Bible and literary theory. Lots of theory not enough literature and, thus, disappointing. I prefer more historical approach to the Bible and literature. Karen Armstrong is better for that.

Feliks says

Joke: "*What is an epistle?*"

Punchline: "*The wife of an Apostle!*"

I chose well, when I selected this work of scholarly criticism; my purpose was to gain some more firmer traction under-my-feet when it comes to Biblical references, metaphors, and allusions. (*Not for the least of which reason: because doing so, helps one better understand authors like Faulkner and Hemingway and Steinbeck--writers who toss Biblical similes around like pizza dough*).

But as you know, the Christian Bible is one of the worst books to attempt to assimilate casually. You can easily wind up slinking away with nothing. As for tackling it 'head on'? Trying to plumbs its depths without a reliable Virgil to serve as guide? Impossible. Its sheer size has overpowered ranks of better-learned and cleaner-breasted men across the centuries.

So--where to turn? I didn't want a '*Cliff's Notes*' to help me gain more familiarity with the thing--nor did I really want some uber-serious or weighty analysis of Christianity itself. (Churches are usually struck by lightning when I enter them).

I only wanted someone who could draw, quarter, dress, and render the animal down, plucking out for me only the juiciest, choicest, tidbits. Serve me up only the tender pith and the marrow because that's all I have time to absorb.

And, Northrop Frye--yes, he is surely that very man! None better. The Canuck Critic! Famed for incisiveness and breadth of acumen. A man among men. A man to be trusted with any mission of letters.

And so it proved. Frye is an easy read; he always speaks calmly and confidently and always using lay-language. He patiently and carefully pursues his task here and the result is wonderful, economical, and

lasting.

Last year I had already scarfed down his legendary '*Four Essays*' in which he manhandles the Greeks and the Britons. Here in this fine little study, he takes on the Jews and the Pharisees and the Philistines; Maccabees and Pharaohs; saints and emperors galore; the disciples and everybody-who-was-anybody from the Fertile Crescent and the Holy City. He takes away the overwhelmingness of it all and makes it cozy, comfortable, and familiar.

Frye doesn't say whether a particular invasion really occurred or not; he doesn't decide whether any belief is valid; he merely aims to clarify all the metaphors and target what they have meant as transposed into Western literature.

He sets aside the first and last chapters for a 'basic primer' on literary criticism concepts and terms; but the sweet succulent middle of the book is all about flood symbols, fire symbols, virgins, swords, what the Rock-of-Ages actually was, who-wrote-what, who-begat-who, who-smote-who, and why *Paradise Lost* 8-2 in extra innings.

I'm being facetious (above) only to emphasize that this is a book with a lot of lore but which is also fun; it is refreshing and pleasant to have so much complexity boiled down into forms we understand. Literary forms. That's what we know best, in this day and age.

Conclusion: if you feel an awkward gap in your cultural knowledge (*if you don't know your Saul from your Sarah or your Enoch from your Elijah, your Jonah from your Joshua*) if cryptic fire-and-brimstone names in novels and motion-pictures always leaves you scratching your head, then this is the book for you. And if you're a writer --or any kind of artist at all --it is a must-read.

Kids, send for your Bible Heroes Decoder Ring today! Amaze your friends and confound your enemies with the help of Old Testament Prophets! Surprise your co-workers with Scripture and proverbs, ready at your fingertips! Be the raconteur and toastmaster of any professional gathering with psalms ready to fall from your lips! No stigmata involved and no actual Bible will be shipped to you!

'Seriously, in these troubled times, the Bible is something we could all do *a lot more of with*'. --Nichols and May

Tom says

'If we insist that the Bible is "more" than a work of literature, we ought at least to stick to the word "more," and try to see what it means.

'What I think it means is that we have to turn again to the traditional but still neglected theory of "polysemous" meaning. One of the commonest experiences of reading is the sense of further discoveries to be made within the same structure of words. The feeling is approximately "there is more to be got out of this," or we may say, of something we particularly admire, that every time we read it we get something new out of it. This "something new" is not necessarily something we have overlooked before, but may come rather from a new context in our experience. The implication is that when we start to read, some kind of dialectical process begins to unfold, so that any given understanding of what we read is one of a series of

phases or stages of comprehension.'

B. Hawk says

This review may reveal how traditional I am in my literary theoretical approaches, but I love Frye's book. It is often cited as one of the most provocative literary discussions of the Bible, and with good reason: in his estimation, the Bible rests at the heart of the "rhetoric of religion" and is the fundamental "imaginative influence" that pervades Western literature and thought (xxi). The structure of the book itself also lends a helpful approach, as Frye offers discussion of the Bible in terms of "Language," "Myth," "Metaphor," and "Typology" in two parts. In this organization we see the blending of both traditional forms of biblical interpretation and the incorporation of modern scholarship on language and literature--a fusion at the core of Frye's analyses, and one that gives the book so much of its impact. This blending, in fact, is what makes this book so relevant for studying the Bible in culture, as it forms much of the Western tradition, even predating reactions against it. The relevance of this type of discussion is apparent for a medievalist, who must negotiate tradition with modern critical approaches to it. In all of this, Frye provides a secular approach to the Bible as literature, but he does so with an admiration for it as a work of art, rather than a purely skeptical perspective.

The essential starting point for Frye's discussion is that "the Bible is more like a small library than a real book" (xii), but it contains "a unified structure of narrative and imagery" (xiii). It thus creates a coherent "mythological universe" (xviii) that has shaped Western culture and its "human imaginative response" through literature (231). Within this overall unity, Frye sees the metaphor of typology (a deeply medieval concept--and thus relevant for medievalists approaching the Bible as/in literature), which he describes as follows: "The two testaments form a double mirror, each reflecting the other but neither the world outside" (78)--"The New Testament, in short, claims to be, among other things, the key to the Old Testament, the explanation of what the Old Testament really means" (79). Furthermore, he describes the overall scheme of the Bible as "a sequence of seven main phases: creation, revolution or exodus (Israel in Egypt), law, wisdom, prophecy, gospel, and apocalypse" which "is another aspect of Biblical typology, each phase being a type of the one following it and an antitype of the one preceding it" (106). Setting these general structures within a larger umbrella of unity, Frye also describes the imagery of the Bible as consisting of "apocalyptic," or the ideal, and "demonic," or the corruption of the ideal, along with the "analogical" that stands between these as the "types" of the Old Testament awaiting fulfillment in the New (139-40). The details of the analysis constructed are too many to rehearse, but they are worthy of a full reading.

Underlying much of Frye's discussion, of course, is an implicit polemical (and political) argument against the problems of literalism and legalism that has held hostage various Christian interpretations of the Bible for centuries. This is especially apparent in the conclusion to the last chapter of this book, when Frye calls for a new means of thinking about "the body of human imaginative response" to the Bible: "[P]erhaps it is only through the study of works of human imagination that we can make any real contact with the level of vision beyond faith" (232). Not much needs to be said about this argument, but it is yet another admirable trait, as he seeks to explain that the Bible may be understood for its literary metaphorical value, not just as a religious justification. Part of this implicit argument is also tied up with what seem the oddity of references to Marx--whom Frye sees as another of the deep roots of modern Western culture (and becoming part of the global culture, as seen in references to Marxism in China, xix-xx), and "the direct heir of the revolutionary and socially organized forms of religion derived from the Bible" (xx; cf. 16, 80, 114). This very acknowledgement and the parallels drawn are evidence of such roots, and of the strong presence of Marxism in the academy generally and literary studies in particular.

With these oddities notwithstanding, *The Great Code* is a substantial contribution to examinations of the Bible, and this is evident in its influence on subsequent literary approaches. Frye's work, then, provides a key study for students of the Bible, literature, and even Western culture generally.
