



# SAINTS PERSPECTIVES

*Things MetaPhysical*

## Mythology

by Joshua J. Mark

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Myths are a part of every culture in the world and are used to explain natural phenomena, where a people came from and how their civilization developed, and why things happen as they do. At their most basic level, myths comfort by giving a sense of order and meaning to what can sometimes seem a chaotic world.

Mythology (from the Greek mythos for story-of-the-people, and logos for word or speech, so the spoken story of a people) is the study and interpretation of often sacred tales or fables of a culture known as myths or the collection of such stories which deal with various aspects of the human condition: good and evil; the meaning of suffering; human origins; the origin of place-names, animals, cultural values, and traditions; the meaning of life and death; the afterlife; and celestial stories of the gods or a god. Myths express the beliefs and values about these subjects held by a certain culture.

Myths tell the stories of ancestors and the origin of humans and the world, the gods, supernatural beings (satyrs, nymphs, mermaids) and heroes with super-human, usually god-given, powers (as in the case of the Greek myth of Heracles or Perseus). Myths also describe origins or nuances of long-held customs or explain natural events such as the sunrise and sunset, the cycle of the moon and the seasons, or thunder and lightning storms. Scholars Maria Leach and Jerome Fried define mythology along these lines:

"[A myth is] a story, presented as having actually occurred in a previous age, explaining the cosmological and supernatural traditions of a people, their gods, heroes, cultural traits, religious beliefs, etc. The purpose of myth is to explain, and, as Sir G.L. Gomme said, myths explain matters in "the science of a pre-scientific age." Thus myths tell of the creation of man, of animals, of landmarks; they tell why a certain animal has its characteristics (e.g. why the bat is blind or flies only at night), why or how certain natural phenomena came to be (e.g. why the rainbow appears or how the constellation Orion got into the sky), how and why rituals and ceremonies began and why they continue."

Mythology has played an integral part in every civilization throughout the world. Pre-historic cave paintings, etchings in stone, tombs, and monuments all suggest that, long before human beings set down their myths in words, they had already



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developed a belief structure corresponding to the definition of 'myth' provided by Leach and Fried. According to twentieth century psychiatrist Carl Jung, myth is a necessary aspect of the human psyche which needs to find meaning and order in a world which often presents itself as chaotic and meaningless. Jung writes:

"The psyche, as a reflection of the world and man, is a thing of such infinite complexity that it can be observed and studied from a great many sides. It faces us with the same problem that the world does: because a systematic study of the world is beyond our powers, we have to content ourselves with mere rules of thumb and with aspects that particularly interest us. Everyone makes for himself his own segment of world and constructs his own private system, often with air-tight compartments, so that after a time it seems to him that he has grasped the meaning and structure of the whole. But the finite will never be able to grasp the infinite."

The infinite Jung references is the numinous quality of the mysterious, holy, and powerful which provides the underlying allure of mythological tales and themes because it gives a final meaning to human existence. The concept of something greater and more powerful than one's self gives one the hope of direction and protection in an uncertain world. According to Leach and Fried, the mysterious, holy, and powerful is "a concept of the human mind from earliest times: the basic psychological reaction to the universe and environment which underlies all religion"

What one calls "mythology" in the present day, it should be remembered, was the religion of the ancient past. The stories which make up the corpus of ancient mythology served the same purpose for the people of the time as the stories from accepted scripture do for people today: they explained, comforted, and directed an audience and, further, provided a sense of unity, cohesion, and protection to a community of like-minded believers.

### **Types of Myth**

Scholar Joseph Campbell, who famously advocated for the study of myths, notes how mythology is the underlying form of every civilization and the underpinning of each individual's consciousness. In his seminal work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, he discusses what he calls the "monomyth", the similarities in theme, characters, purpose, and narrative progression of myths from different cultures, at different times, around the world and throughout history. Campbell writes:

"What is the secret of the timeless vision? From what profundity of the mind does it derive? Why is mythology everywhere the same, beneath its varieties of costume? And what does it teach?"



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Campbell's answer, ultimately, is that myths teach meaning. Mythology explains, empowers, stabilizes, and elevates the life of a believer from a mundane existence to one imbued with eternal meaning. On the most basic level, a myth explains a phenomenon, tradition, place-name, or geological formation but it can also elevate a past event to epic and even supernatural significance and, most importantly, provide a role model for one's individual journey through life.

## **About the Author**

Joshua J. Mark is World History Encyclopedia's co-founder and Content Director. He was previously a professor at Marist College (NY) where he taught history, philosophy, literature, and writing. He has traveled extensively and lived in Greece and Germany..

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