



Words with Power: Being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature

Northrop Frye

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Frye continues his exploration, begun in *The Great Code*, of the influence of Biblical themes and forms of expression on Western literature, with discussions of authors ranging from Chaucer and Shakespeare to Yeats and Eliot. Frye identifies four key elements found in the Bible—the mountain, the garden, the cave, and the furnace—and describes how they recur in later secular writings. Indices.

Words with Power: Being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature Details

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Charity says

So far, so good from this scholar-sceptic. A book for lit critics--but not a barnburner (which is why I did not give it a higher rating)

David says

I didn't read the first study, "The Great Code", that Frye did before this study. I was expecting a close reading of the Bible, instead it was an overview of the myths contained within the scriptures. Frye doesn't equate myth with fable, rather as a powerful story telling particular spiritual truths. Frye compares stories like Jacob's Ladder, Jesus's harrowing of Hell, with other myths. I was particularly impressed with his drawing on the idea of axis mundi, or the human attempt to reach Heaven such as Dante's Divine Comedy, the building of towers on the Middle East. I kept thinking of James Kugel's saying, the Bible may not be true but it is true what it says about God.

David Riemer says

Along with its companion volume, the Great Code, this book should be required reading for anyone who wants to talk about religion in the West, atheism, or the Bible. I have always said that the Bible required a guide book; well, this is it. Strictly speaking, these two works are literary criticism. They are this and so much more: cultural geography, history of Western civilization, philosophy, linguistics, you-name-it.

The books are easy to read and comprehend if you pay attention. Northrop Frye's lucid mind is reflected in his highly organized writing and his penchant for tables and diagrams enhances readability.

These works' most significant contribution, I believe, is to dig deeply into the Bible as a literary enterprise, and in so doing to dismiss simplistic fundamentalism (not to mention deliberate fundamentalist misreading such as the bulk of "analysis" of the Bible generated by the "New" Atheists.)

Frye's approach is heavily drawn from the radical reevaluation of the Bible undertaken by two of his literary luminaries, John Milton and William Blake. Because of this the Christ who appears fleetingly in both works is an unsettling force, who by virtue of his earthly, corporeal existence is focused on the things of this world as well as his father's business. (God's, not Joseph's.)

In Words of Power, Frye applies the scholarly methodology, developed in his first book, Fearful Symmetry--a groundbreaking study of Blake's poetry--to the Bible in what would be his last book. In so doing, he liberates the Bible from the misapprehension of literalists and the cynical misconstruing of people who should know and do better, such as Christopher Hitchens.

Immanent in this work, and peeking through or penetrating this world's dimensions, is a radical

reconfiguration of what it means to be human and why so many brilliant, thoughtful people believe in Jesus and his revolutionary teachings and ethos.

This book is provocative without trying to be and fascinating without attitude. Just watching Professor Frye laying out his argument, developing the logical connections that fuse the Bible into unity is a lesson in language, reasoning and intellectual discipline. These are all in short supply.

Anne Hamilton says

One of the books that it's impossible to digest in one reading. It needs rumination.

Notes:

xii - Vico presents the understanding that all major verbal structures have descended historically from poetic and mythological ones.

xxiv - the Greek word for *truth*, aletheia, means *unforgetting*

13-14 - justice as a decision of law-makers, as influenced by sophistry and rhetorical ability; and justice as the opposite of injustice to be reached by dialectic

43 - a reader of romance might be pardoned for sometimes thinking that romance has no subject except sexual frustration, even when that frustration is resolved on the last page or so

70 - after the initiates of the Mysteries of Eleusis were shown a reaped ear of corn as the climax of their initiation, they were known as 'epoptae', *seers*. Zen Buddhism also has similar eucharistic emblems whose purpose is to enjoin "seeing".

80 - Yeats opens his poem, *The Statues* on the erotic nature of Greek statuary of the influence of Pythagoras.

82 - The discoverer of the principle that all verbal structures descend from mythological origins is Vico. His axiom was *verum factum*: what is true for us is what we have made.

91 - sunflower is a symbol of repressed or frustrated desire (regarding issues of life)

91 - 'derek' is Hebrew for the *way*; its Greek cognate is 'hodos'

147 - in Milton's *Paradise Regained*, Jesus is tempted to be a Greek philosopher

153 - one early name for Osiris is 'the god at the top of the staircase'; 'klimax' is the Greek word for ladder

164 - in early medieval times, the concept of the cycle of empires became consolidated as the wheel of fortune

197 - 'beulah' is *the married land*

205-206 - mystics such as John of the Cross used Song of Songs as an important element of their imagery.

Henry Vaughan's *Regeneration* is a significant example of this.

244 - Blake's developed mythology includes Urizen (horizon), Orc (Orcus or hell) and Luvah (spirit of rebellion, identical with Orc but stressing the sacrificial aspect)

268 - a divided state of life is depicted by a head separated from a body. In such literary works as Poe's, *A Predicament*, and Yeats' *King of the Great Clock Tower*, which both feature a clock tower and a severed head. As does Mallarme's *Cantique de Saint-Jean*.

281 - Iago responds with silence.

Carol says

I should have read the Great Code first but this book stands by itself for an excellent understanding of scripture.
