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Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is from the New International Version of the Bible.

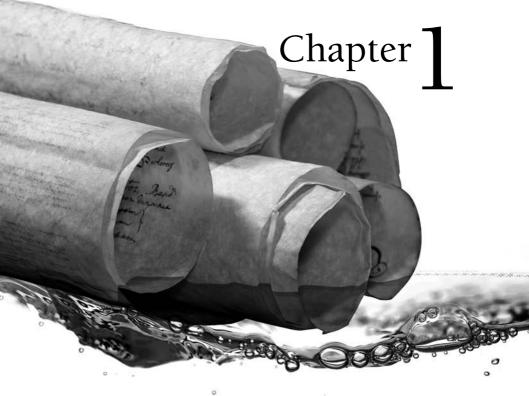**Printed in the United States of America**

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# MYTH: HISTORY OR LEGEND?

*Bid me discourse, I will enchant thine ear.*[1]
— William Shakespeare

*Mythology*. The very word conjures up different images for different people. Some picture the gods and goddesses of ancient Rome: Jupiter, Mercury, and the bloodthirsty war-god, Mars. Some picture the Minotaur of Greek mythology, hiding deep in his labyrinth lair, waiting to devour his next victim. Others may picture the slightly more obscure animal spirits of Native American legends, or the tree-spirits of Celtic lore. Regardless of what we may picture, nearly everyone, in some way, is drawn to mythology.

With the popularity of movies such as *Jason and the Argonauts*, *Ben-Hur*, *Troy*, *King Arthur*, *Alexander*, *300*, even

*Finding Neverland*, film companies and moviegoers have long attempted to discern the difference between reality and fiction. We all seem to have the desire to find — are perhaps even obsessed with finding — the fine line that often exists between history and legend. What is it that draws us to mythology? What makes ancient folklore so irrevocably attractive to us? Do we simply love a good yarn? Are we drawn to it for the entertainment, or do we sometimes feel the tug of a memory — a feeling that our history is, somehow, embedded in the stories?

In the past, mythologists have approached ancient literature with a certain amount of skepticism: myths, they felt, were nothing more than fanciful literature — imaginative inventions of creative minds — and therefore could not, and *should* not, be taken as literal history. But is this true? Is a myth nothing more than a child's bedtime story, a fable to be outgrown? Not every mythologist feels that way, however. The last century has seen a shift in how we regard mythology. Since the late 1800s, mythologists have come to see myth as not *wholly* fictional, but instead as *embellishments* of truth. In other words, a "complex" myth may, in fact, have a perfectly "reasonable" footing in "reality."

There are two basic basic approaches to interpreting myths. The first approach is one of utter disregard for the tales, legends, and recorded history of a group of people. The second approach is an attempt to "symbolize" the stories by discounting the telling of them as distorted and exaggerated versions of the truth. What mythologists who take this approach believe is that the mythical event happened, but not necessarily as it was told. The events, they argue, may have been "real," but the interpretation — the version passed down — has been exaggerated and distorted well beyond the "true" event. A perfect example of a myth that suffers from both of these interpretive styles, and one we

will be looking at in more detail later, is that of the global Flood.

The story of the Flood permeates nearly every culture of the world in some way, shape, or form. While some of the details vary between the different cultural versions, the same basic plotline occurs in all of them: a god becomes angry and destroys the earth with a flood but preserves the human race by selecting a certain number of people to survive the catastrophe. These people are saved from the flood by a vessel, which carries them throughout the duration of the event. In the stories, it is this same group of people that is then responsible for repopulating the earth.

Despite these striking similarities, some mythologists have looked at the *differences* in the various versions and declared: "This never happened!" The differences, they often claim, are too great, and the premise is too far-fetched. They may look at the fact that Noah builds an ark, while a group of aborigines in Australia build a raft and claim that the differences make the story impossible.

On the other hand, many claim that a flood did indeed occur, but that it was a "local" flood and its occurrence was merely misunderstood and overstated. "Noah's flood" and the "Aborigine flood" were not so much global catastrophes as they were local disasters. I feel both of these interpretive styles stem from an unfortunate mindset: the belief that we know better than the people who came before us.

We believe we live in an age of "progressive" thinking. Personally, I prefer to call it "contradictory" thinking. We contradict ourselves in that, while we wish to be open-minded and rational, we stop using our minds if stories seem too "illogical"; we dismiss them outright as fairy tales. In other words, we close our minds just when we should be opening them more, and in the process disregard what may, in fact, be truth. This is not to say that ancient cultures were more

technologically advanced than we are today — after all, they did not have computers, cars, or electricity — but it is not fair to say that they were less *intelligent*. Does owning a car translate into having a better grasp on "reality"? Does having a computer mean that we understand events of the past better than the people who may have experienced them? Two extremely cogent examples of this thinking spring immediately to mind. The first involves the myth of Troy and a blind bard's tale of war and betrayal. The second example involves the myth of the Kraken.

### *Of Wars and Cephalopods*

Prior to 1870, most scholars regarded Homer's *Iliad* as pure fiction. However, in the early 1870s two archaeologists, Heinrich Schliemann and Frank Calvert, excavated several artifacts in the Turkish desert, including a city that had been burned to the ground just as Homer had reported. Even more importantly, however, they uncovered within the ruins a coin engraved "Ilium," the ancient Latin name for Troy (and the source for the title of Homer's *Iliad*). Sadly, while historians did *eventually* begin to take a more serious look at Homer's work, it took until the late 19th century for the battle of the *Iliad* to even be acknowledged as *possible*. In essence then, Troy had been destroyed twice prior to the excavations — first in battle, and then in the minds of the educated. Today, we still do likewise. We believe that if a story or historical account does not mesh with practical sensibilities, we cannot accept it, and we want everything to be proven before we will believe it. I've found, however, that lack of *proof* does not necessarily mean lack of *truth*. Another example of this idea, made popular in recent movies, is the myth of the Kraken.

The Kraken appears most notably in Norse and Icelandic mythology, but its stories were also popular with American whalers, who brought many of the legends with them from

the Old World. This is not to say, however, that the whalers were responsible for *every* tale of the Kraken on this side of the Atlantic, because similar tales already existed here. In Peru, for example, Native American fishermen would tell tales of a water demon that closely resembled the Kraken of Norse mythology.[2]

The beast was said to be a form of cephalopod, like the common octopus or squid. Descriptions of its size varied, but it was reported to have tentacles long enough to drag a ship under the waves. In the middle of the 1700s, Bishop Pontoppidan, a well-known but often criticized biologist (or "naturalist," as they were then called), described, at length, the Scandinavian Kraken. He wrote that it "looks at first like a number of small islands, surrounded with something that floats and fluctuates like sea weeds." He then described that, as one nears it, the "sea weeds" look more like "horns [i.e., arms] . . . which grow thicker and thicker the higher they rise above the surface of the water." He finishes by asserting that the "horns," when jutting straight up out of the ocean, "stand as high and large as the masts of middle-siz'd vessels."[3] Pliny the Elder discusses the Kraken at length in his *Naturalis Historia*, written sometime in the first century A.D. Pliny actually calls the creature a "polyp," but his description matches that given of the Kraken in other literature. He describes it as a fierce beast with a jelly-like body, long tentacles, and a sharp, parrot-like beak.

Despite the numerous tales, though, naturalists for several centuries dismissed the Kraken as an imaginary creature. A sighting, they seemed to argue, had never been "confirmed," and therefore the beast could not possibly be real. Elsewhere in the world, tales of other giant cephalopods were told, but these were dismissed, as well. Even in 1861, when a French crew on the *Allecton* actually *harpooned* a giant squid, or *Architeuthis*, managing to save the tail section, tales of the Kraken were still soundly ignored by naturalists.[4] It was not until a

full specimen of a giant squid washed up on the shore of New-foundland 12 years later that giant cephalopods were finally taken seriously by the scientific community.

From that point on, specimens of the giant squid — always dead and badly decomposing when they washed ashore — were studied intently. It became the general belief that they could achieve lengths of up to 60 feet. The first living giant squid to be photographed was in 2004, when a team of Japanese researchers at the Ogasawara Whale Watching Association managed to catch sight of one in the waters off the coast of Japan. In 2006, that same group was able to videotape, for the first time, a living giant squid.[5] Incidentally, the squid was "only" 24 feet long, and considered a juvenile. Whether or not the giant squid is the precise creature that the Norwegian fishermen had in mind when they told each other tales of the Kraken is of little relevance. The point is that giant cephalopods — and therefore the Kraken — *do* exist. However, despite the earlier tales, the Kraken as an actual living creature was blatantly disregarded by scientists until the latter part of the 19th century.

Once more, this is the first approach to mythology: utter disbelief. The mantra seems to be, "If we don't believe it, then it *can't* be true." I wonder, though, how much of our history — and *natural* history — is being disregarded each time we take this stance. What insights into ancient Greece might we have gained by now if we had taken Homer's poem seriously? Would biological research into giant cephalopods be further along if we had begun it, say, in 1773, instead of 1873? Some mythologists, realizing this, have taken a different approach to their study. This approach is to accept some myths as not *simply* fact, but as *embellished* fact. In other words, the myths are partially true, but not entirely accurate.

We see this, once again, in the story of the Deluge. Because so many cultures speak of a flood, it is argued, they

each must have experienced some form of flooding. The prevailing theory is that, because cultures settle near water, each would have experienced the destructive force of a "local flood" at some point. In my own town, on the banks of the James River, we experience severe flash flooding whenever a hurricane comes through the area; local floods are a necessary evil when living near water. A relatively new book, published in 1998, even suggests that the Genesis account was based on the flooding of the Black Sea, sometime at the end of the last Ice Age.[6]

This interpretation — that the myths are based on localized flooding — is exceptionally convenient, because it accounts for all of the differences that we find between Native American, Greek, Hebrew, Indian, and other versions of the myth.[7] After all, if each culture developed the story based on local events, then we would *expect* variation between the different cultural versions. However, what it fails to account for are the striking *similarities* among the different versions, several of which we will address in later chapters. If separate cultures invented separate stories, of course they would differ. But if separate cultures developed separate stories, why would they be identical in some aspects? The "independent evolution" stance cannot account for that.

Not only does the "independent evolution" theory fail to account for the similarities among the stories, it also severely undermines the intelligence of these cultures. Surely cultures intelligent enough to build ocean-going vessels know the difference between river valley floods and a global flood. Few would question the intelligence of the advanced Hindu culture that produced the *Mahābhārata* and *Ramayana*, and yet many scholars attribute its flood story (*Mahābhārata*, Book III) to the cyclic flooding of the Ganges River. On the same token, do we believe that the Greeks, whose governmental, philosophical, and artistic ideas still influence us

today, truly mistook a local flood for a global deluge, as is reported in their story of Deucalion and Pyrrah? Does it really seem sensible that such intelligent cultures would make such simple oversights? It does not seem likely at all.

There is, therefore, one other alternative, and that is to accept that the different versions all refer to the *same event*. In other words, what if we accept that there was a group of people that survived a global deluge, and that the story of the event was passed on from generation to generation through various developing cultures? What would that look like? We would expect to see two things. First, we would expect to see similar, if not identical, plots spread throughout the various versions. At the same time, we would expect to see diverging details — perhaps even *contradictory* details — as the story spread. I call this process — the process of one story being told many different ways as it progresses through time — telephone mythology.

### *Telephone*

Most of us have played the game. A dozen people sit in a circle, and one person whispers a phrase to the person next to him or her. That person then whispers the phrase to a third person, who, in turn, whispers to the next, and so on. When the very last person has "received" the message, he or she speaks it aloud, only to discover — usually to the delight of everyone — that it has been changed and distorted. History is really no different.

Anthropology more or less *requires* one of two views when analyzing the development of cultures. The first view requires the separate major cultures found throughout the world to have evolved in their homelands, independent of each other, in an amoeba-to-man process. Each culture, as it developed, would create its own set of mythologies for such things as the elements, sickness, and so forth. One such myth

that each culture would have developed would have been a story of a deluge, sent by an angry deity to wipe out life on earth. Those who survive do so because of a miraculous intervention in their lives by a creator god who provides them with either the instructions for building a vessel, or the vessel itself. What we often find is that this deluge story is followed by a story of a diaspora, or a spreading of cultures from a central point. According to some, the flood portion of the tale is inspired by something like the annual flooding of a local river. The diaspora portion, then, would be nothing more than an attempt on the part of the storytellers to describe the origins of other existing cultures with which they may have come into contact from time to time. This view is commonly held among mythologists, anthropologists, and the scientific and literary community as "accurate."

The second — and less common view — requires an *actual* deluge, followed by an *actual* diaspora, which *results* in separately evolving cultures, each of which carries a part of the story with it. When the vessel of the deluge lands and the families begin to disperse and develop their own cultures, they each hold onto the details that pertain to their own evolving belief systems. As time passes and those cultures begin to fragment into other cultures, we would expect to see other changes in the story; this is only natural. In fact, we would expect that the further from the source (both temporal and physical) the story moves, the more it would change. However, even more curiously, when we then add thousands of years, countless people, and a scattering of these people, we find that, despite changes, there are *still common threads*. The first view — the "local flood" or "independent evolution" view — can reasonably explain the differences in the versions. It cannot, however, explain all of the similarities. Indeed, how can we account for these common threads, unless we admit that the stories all originate from the same source?

The telephone mythology view is the only view that explains both the similarities and the differences.

This is in no way an attempt to undermine the other mythological disciplines, for they each have their place. While we need not believe that Apollo sails across the sky in his chariot, is it distasteful to believe in someone with the characteristics of Hercules? Should we fictionalize Samson? This is simply presenting *another* way to look at myth. So what are we to do? Are we to blindly accept every story we hear as children? Should we believe that a pernicious little rabbit hopped about in a blue coat, stealing vegetables from a certain farmer's garden? Should we rewrite history books to include, as fact, every novel published? Do we admit that H.G. Wells' *Time Machine* really happened?

No, of course not! Yet to immediately dismiss mythology outright, or to oversimplify mythology in an attempt to make it more palatable to our modern way of thinking, is intellectually irresponsible because it *potentially dismisses our very own history*. We once disregarded the *Iliad* simply because we *chose* to disregard it. We once dismissed tales of the Kraken simply because we *chose* to dismiss them. Just because we *regard* certain things as fictional does not give us the right to immediately *dismiss* them as fictional.

Yet if we are to discuss whether or not to dismiss mythology, we have to decide whether or not a myth is reasonable. After all, we cannot — in a very practical sense — examine *every* myth for historical accuracy, for there are far too many, and several of them contradict each other. Where, then, do we start in this process? What criteria do we use to determine the "reasonability" of a myth? How do we know if a myth is historical, without actually having been there to witness the events?

Furthermore, how do we even *define* myth? Is "myth" one broad category in literature or is there more than one kind

of "myth"? Is myth always fictional, or *can* it be historical, as well? The next chapter looks at some of these questions.

**Endnotes**
1. William Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*. Line 145.
2. Michael Bright, *There Are Giants in the Sea* (London: Robson Books Ltd., 1989), p. 156 .
3. E. Pontoppidan, *The Natural History of Norway*, 1775. Quoted by Richard Ellis, *Monsters of the Sea* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), p. 125.
4. Ibid, p. 121.
5. "Japanese Researchers Capture Giant Squid," Fox News, December 22, 2006.
6. William Ryan and Walter Pitman, *Noah's Flood: The New Scientific Discoveries About the Event That Changed History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).
7. See appendix B for several versions of the Flood story.