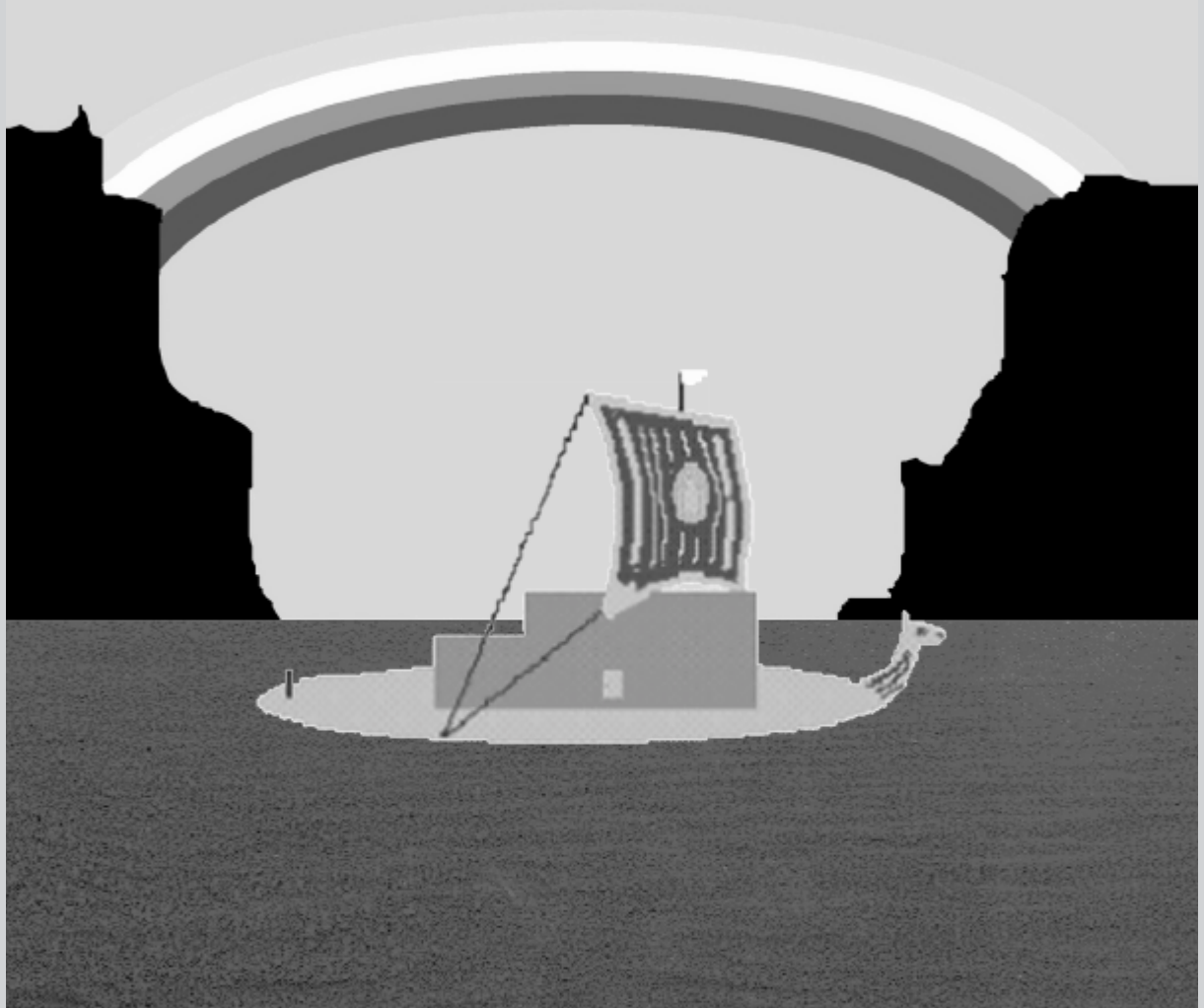


What About Noah?



Cora E. Cypser

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by
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Chapter I

Drawing History out of Myth

In the beginning was the Word. Gospel of John 1:1

Why are we here, and where did we come from? The theories are many. People very seldom concur on politics, religion, or history, but I think we can agree that we are created in a marvelous diversity for some mysterious purpose. There are many opinions about what this purpose is. People are ready to kill each other using war and weaponry to decide which nation or religion has the best solution to making the world a peaceful place. Yet we are endowed with a valuable gift from the past, called *myth*, that we still find relevant today. Using this gift, we can find common ideas in past cultures, and we can tie together threads from our present cultures to make a harmonious whole. This gift of myth has been buried under changes in language, been hidden beneath misinterpretations, been destroyed in book and library burnings, been down played as senseless ramblings, been dismissed as black magic, and been railed against by religious zealots, yet it is still able to speak in our souls.

I like to think that I am a mediator. The job of a mediator is to listen to opposing viewpoints and to help the arguing parties to come to a mutually satisfactory agreement. In other words, the job is to help people to be tolerant, or even to enjoy the variety of opinions that life presents. We are given a choice: we can enjoy each other, or we can destroy each other.

I have two friends: Phelicia is an anthropology expert; she is interested in world history from the moment of creation onward; then there is Jake who is an expert in interpreting the Bible and in formulating laws. He genuinely believes the *Beloved Community* is possible. They are my friends even though their religious beliefs and ethical values are quite dissimilar. That is where I come into the picture. Perhaps I can guide them into a unity of their world views. Perhaps they will decide that their friendship is more important than their differences; that love is stronger than argument and affliction; that past events do not have to influence present decisions. Or will they throw up their hands and decide not to speak to each other any more? Can people live their everyday together successfully when their beliefs about time and eternity are far apart?

When your everyday life is seriously affected by your religious beliefs, it is necessary to check out root causes of differences and to find areas of agreement. What does our present day culture lead us to believe? Are our environmental excesses destroying our earth? Is abortion a crime against humanity, or is male abuse and misuse of the female, the greater crime? Was the land of Israel promised to the Jewish people, or was the whole earth promised to all people if we showed ourselves willing to share its bounty wisely? Is the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and Responsibilities the accepted way to treat others, or are there better laws made by other forms of government? United Nations Resolution #242 prohibits the acquisition of territory by force. Israel does not have the right to continue or enforce its occupation. Israel's admission to the United Nations in 1948 was conditioned upon its willingness to comply with General Assembly Resolution #194 calling for the Palestinian Right to Return. The International Court of Justice ruled in 2004 that the wall in Palestine is illegal. Are the inner urges to kindness and compassion written in our hearts, making governments and laws unnecessary? What should be the guiding principle of our lives? Can we ever really find out the truth of these matters? Finally, in our everyday dealings, does it really matter if we agree perfectly with one another?

The best place to start our discussion is at the beginning of humanity's present way of being, with the entry of the modern human on the scene. Presumably, there were no problems when the world was peopled with unthinking microbes, rocks, and animals. If dinosaurs devoured each other, they did not commit a sin. Those gigantic creatures had no knowledge of right or wrong, but had an inner need to keep their bellies full. Humanity may have crossed the line in its consideration of others when we recognize our similarities to Yeti and Big Foot. Our present difficulties and differences are due to the fact that we have the ability to think. Perhaps Yeti and Big Foot could think also. Even the raging dinosaurs and the gentle deer thought about the safety of their young ones, and we reflect this evolutionary thrust in our desire to make war against another tribe, in order to protect our own. We love our young ones and we greedily grab land, resources, and money, in a non-thinking way, to make ourselves and our particular descendants secure. This urge to do another person or tribe violence does not seem to work. We must include the whole earth in our agenda in order to preserve ourselves and maintain a workable society. This ideal of inclusivity requires a review

and an understanding of how the earth came to be, how the human being evolved, and how tribes learned to get along with each other. Presumably we can learn something about these topics by consulting the myths and holy books of previous generations.

Our evolutionary beginnings relate to our religious notion of the nature of sin. As we evolved, we acquired certain characteristics. Those who murdered others got to live and reproduce themselves. Those who killed and reproduced, influenced the genetic structure of those who came after them. Those who were non-resistant, and died, often had no offspring.

Tribes of primates may have had one important male who mated with the females in the tribe. The other males had to hang out off in the outer areas, and get along with each other. There was no shame in that social situation at being a homosexual. It was the natural life style of many members of the group. These excess males would also be useful as protection against other marauding groups. We still have similar social situations today. Our armies are made up of younger males who obey the orders of older power-wielding patriarchs. Our church structures employ younger males usefully as monks who pray for the good of their societies, even as they stand apart from them.

When we look at our young males today, we can see that they have resemblances that have survived down many millenia. Fathers who rape their daughters have been around a long time, too. The tales of the Goddess Demeter arrived in Sicily from Crete. She hid her daughter (by Zeus) Persephone in a cave. Zeus turned into a serpent, raped Persephone, and she became the mother of Dionysos. Some demons tore this child into 7 parts. One piece, the heart, escaped, rescued by Athena. She gave it to Zeus who resurrected it by swallowing it, and rebirthing his son.

What are some recurring themes in myths down through the ages? Two of the primary topics that are the subject of myths are the problem of the time of the Creation of the world and the event of the Creation of the human being. People think differently about these topics. Jake is on the fundamentalist side. He believes that the Bible is God's word and truth for all time. The Bible might be interpreted as saying that the creation of the human being and the creation of the universe took place simultaneously. Phelicia sees tribes sharing their myths and religious beliefs with one another with the hope of finding out more about the unknowable God. She believes that the creation of the universe is far distant from the creation of the human, which gives time for many legends and languages to develop. Story tellers from ancient tribes would absorb the more exciting bits from the tales told by other tribes. Of course, there would have to be name changes of the people and places involved in order to make a tale relate to a new audience. Sometimes tribes would unite or absorb each other and amalgamate their stories. Sometimes they would destroy each other, even as they do today, and one tribe's culture heroes might be turned into another tribe's demons. Some people see no need for a discussion of God's existence, but both Phelicia and Jake accept that a worthy universal God created the earth and the universe. When things on earth were ready, this Force created human beings. Jake believes that God snapped his fingers and at that instant the first human being appeared. Phelicia has a longer story to tell. She objects to assuming that God is male or has fingers to snap. Besides consulting the Bible, she is ready and willing to check out the Holy Books and writings of other tribes and nations.

The evolutionary story of the human being is like a woven tapestry; every now and then a thread will attract our attention, and we will note its place and background. Previous peoples did keep records of events that seemed important to them. Often the buildings they constructed, the wars they fought, and the ways they traveled can seem very unimportant to us, but like a giant picture puzzle, every piece has its place. If we can understand our past, we will be better able to construct our future. With the help of the Creator Spirit, we are still working on the masterpiece that is our world.

Human beings are really quite remarkable. For creatures that have come from nothingness, we act like we believe we are something. We are not an ordinary lifeless something; we are minds that can think and plan the future. We can make living replicas of ourselves for a future generation by having children. We educate and guide our offspring, and hope they will do "better" than we did. We try to improve our descendants through the building of health care centers, educational programs, and the use of progressive communities. We experiment with mind-boggling inventions, mind blowing drugs, and expeditions into outer space. Looking ahead to future generations, some of us produced half a million test tube babies before 2002. (de Duve, p. 246). Our viable creation allows decay and death, in order to promote new growth. Not having an immediate solution to suffering and death, we design in our minds a future non-earthly existence in a place called heaven, where all will be bliss and comfort. Some believe so firmly in heaven that they do not mind suffering. If there were no "promise of heavenly delights, there would be fewer suicide bombers." (de Duve pp.305-306). We produce both good and evil actions according as to what we think will be the ultimate good for us. We construct and believe in a Spiritual Being to guide us through the morass of daily

life. For this process, we need (not necessarily authoritative priests) but spiritual facilitators or guiding mentors; we need moral rules, derived collectively and consensually, rather than harsh and punishing laws. Unfortunately, we are often deceived by our leadership, as they, themselves, become deceived.

Early pharaohs thought they were the sons of God, and that their actions reflected God's will. If everyone bows down to you, you begin to suspect that you are special. The human mind can be variously deceived. Soldiers can believe they are serving their country by killing soldiers from another country. Such fighters become wounded in their minds as well as in their bodies. Phelicia believes that those who contract Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), such as Tim McVey who was awarded the Purple Heart for killing Iraqis, and then executed for bombing Americans, should be given treatment for their trauma. She says they are no more at fault than their leaders who were likewise ignorant and advised them incorrectly. As good subordinates, they were following the instructions they were given. Jake is against the death penalty, but feels there must be appropriate punishment when folks step out of line. Jake's opinion is that if you forgive, the offender will just go out and do it all over again. It would be nice if we could forgive all such immature actions, as we ourselves have all fallen short of the ideal. Consequently, we must be careful who we appoint to, or who we accept in leadership positions. When we look around the world, we wonder who is responsible for allowing and upholding negative leadership. Are "we the people" responsible or are we merely helpless pawns in formidable circumstances? We must follow the advice of Job 34:30, "Let not the hypocrite reign, lest the people be ensnared." The next question is, "How do you prevent a charismatic individual from taking over?"

How could the Pharaoh think he was such a special privileged happening? There must have been some element inside him driven by the evolutionary process. However, that element must be inside every part of God's creation. Perhaps we are all sons and daughters of God or of the Generous Creative Force. We all have an urge to greatness, to be more than we are. "All nature abhors a vacuum," and the Creative Force seeks the fulfillment of the universe.

Phelicia admits the Bible is a very important compilation of many of the myths of the Near and Middle East, but she believes facts can be uncovered in other interesting works from the Americas, such as the *Wallum Olum* (or *Painted Calendar* or *Red Record*) of the Lenni Lenape. This spans one hundred generations of Native Americans who lived along the Delaware River when it was called the Lenape River, and called themselves the *original people* although their legends say they came from far away in the west. Other revealing stories are found in the *Popol Vul* of the Mayas who seem to be related to very early people; the *Lahun Chaan* of the Chumayel, a village on the Yucatan Peninsula off Mexico, <<http://home.planet.nl/~roeli049/chilam.pdf>>; the *Book of Chilum Balam* of the Yucatec who also come from the Yucatan; and myths about Quetzalcoatl or Kukulcan who seems to have been a very early culture hero who keeps reappearing.

When reading about myths, please keep in mind that we are all expected to interpret them in various ways. Some will take them literally. Some will think they are wild imaginings. Quoting from Karen Armstrong in *A Short History of Myth*, "When we read of Jesus ascending to heaven, we are not meant to imagine him whirling through the atmosphere. When the Prophet Muhammad flies from Mecca to Jerusalem and then climbs up a ladder to the Divine Throne, we are to understand that he has broken through to a new level of spiritual attainment. When the Prophet Elijah ascends to heaven in a fiery chariot, he has left the frailty of the human condition behind, and passed away into the sacred realm that lies beyond our earthly experience." It is OK for each of us to consider the myth from our own viewpoint. There is no need to raise a voice in objection to another's idea.

The author of Genesis (Chapter 2:3) proclaims, "God blessed the Seventh Day and made it holy, because on that day he had rested after all his work of creating." Are we going to help in building the earth through living compassionately and creating a peaceful world? We are given a choice. We can create the earth or we can cremate the earth. Modern weaponry combined with greed for oil, can make refugees of millions of people in Iraq and the Sudan. Modern weaponry combined with greed for land can fill the Palestinian refugee camps and the coast land of Gaza with terror. When we come to our Seventh Day, will we be able to say like God, "We have made a good earth"?

When reading this information, please skip over the long genealogical lists unless you are particularly interested in comparing names of tribes or heroes, or are a specialist in Greek or Sanskrit translations. Early language branched off into strange variations, by adding additional letters to the beginnings and endings of words, by changing nouns into verbs, or adding articles for emphasis. Occasionally, when I think there are possible similarities or word derivations or meanings, I may write something like, "*Noah* means *comfort*, but it can also be *No* (= *knowledge* or *wisdom*) plus *ah* (= a godlike ending as in *Yahweh* or *Alleluiah*)." All of our words come from somewhere, as our myths come from somewhere, and we will never be able to track back and clearly see all the origins. If you find these insertions

wearisome, you could skip over them quickly. You could omit them all together if you weren't interested, and the story about myth will be basically the same.

Perhaps when we look back at our past we will see new ways to correct the problems of our present, and new paths to a viable future. For instance in the Amnesty International picture below, we may think about the needs of this child and how marvelous it is that he is a product of creation. We might question in our minds as to how we could build him a worthy future, which might lead us into further thought on how to restructure the world.

Phelicia, Jake, and myself believe that a world built on Freedom, Equality, Justice, and Dignity is possible. We believe that good people such as the heroes of our myths, will rise to help the earth when it goes into a decline. We know that our world is an imperfect place and that we human beings are often cruel and thoughtless in our dealings with others, but we also know that human beings have a capacity for kindness, and shoulder responsibility when the going gets rough.



Photo from: American Near East Refuge Aid
Aftermath of Gaza Strip Bombing