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***Primitive Mythology (The Masks of God, Volume 1)* by Joseph Campbell**

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PRIMITIVE MYTHOLOGY (THE MASKS OF GOD, VOLUME 1). Joseph Campbell. Revised edition. Novato, CA: New World Library. 2021. 509 p. 978-1608687251. \$25.49.

THIS IS ANOTHER VOLUME rereleased by the Joseph Campbell Foundation (JCF) in the Collected Works of Joseph Campbell series (2021). *Primitive Mythology* is the first volume in *The Masks of God* series, consisting of four volumes, including the titles *Primitive Mythology*, *Oriental Mythology*, *Occidental Mythology*, and *Creative Mythology*. Each volume includes many black-and-white illustrations and greyscale reproductions of art and anthropologists' photographs. *Primitive Mythology* was originally released in 1959. To keep the text relevant, the JCF commissioned anthropologists Sydney Yeager and Andrew Gurevich to correct outdated passages with sidebars on the pages containing correct data and "current scientific consensus" (xii) and, very occasionally, to extract unsalvageable passages where needed (xii). The result is an authoritative, up-to-date version of *The Masks of God* series that can introduce new readers to the influential thoughts of Joseph Campbell and provide an updated new edition for old fans, with the assurance that outdated information and opinions will not be perpetuated. In the book, Campbell uses the anthropology, psychology, literary criticism, and literature of his day to show the development of mythology, storytelling, and artistic spiritual expression from neolithic times to his present. I agree with the JCF Collected Works editor, David Kudler, that *The Masks of God* "stands alongside *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*" (xi) in its significance. *The Masks of God* is a natural progression from Campbell's description in *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (originally 1949) of how stories across time share archetypal elements. In *The Masks of God*, he moves

forward onto the larger canvas of his self-described “Natural History of the Gods and Heroes” (3). Following is the scope of Campbell’s study in his own words:

I attempt in the following pages the first sketch of a natural history of the gods and heroes, such as in its final form should include in its purview all divine beings—as zoology includes all animals and botany all plants—not regarding any as sacrosanct or beyond its scientific domain. For, as in the visible world all of the vegetable and animal kingdoms, so also in the visionary world of the gods: there has been a history, an evolution, a series of mutations, governed by laws; and to show forth such laws is the proper aim of science. (4-5)

Primitive Mythology, like the other volumes in the series, provides an overarching theoretical thread arguing that while “humanity’s myths spring from universal sources, (that) it was essential to look at the ways in which mythologies and cultures varied over time and across continents” (xi).

Campbell does a masterful job of producing in *Primitive Mythology* a picture of the gestation of mythology for all humankind. The book provides a comprehensive treatment of its subject, worthy of its model, a natural history for the life sciences. The book uses the science of his day to present evidence of the origins of mythology as seen in Neolithic cave art, in the discoveries of anthropologists studying tribal rituals, and in psychology’s description of the objects of children’s imaginations. Campbell presents all three as evidence that mythology is a universal product of the way humans have always been programmed to experience life and the world around us. The book begins with Part One: The Psychology of Myth (21-125), in which he explores the psychological mechanism of symbolism and how the mythological expression of the supernatural functions at different stages in the life of individuals, tribes, and cultures. Part Two: The Mythology of the Primitive Planters (125-199) provides an outline of the evidence of spirituality in the four phases of development of society from 12,500–2,500 B.C. Included are chapters on stories about the immolation of kings and of rituals of love and death. Part Three: The Mythology of the Primitive Hunters (211-319) enthusiastically discusses Shamanism, the spiritual relationship of humankind to the animals they hunted, and Paleolithic cave art. Part Four: The Archaeology of Myth (327-384), examines anthropological evidence of early stages of humanity from the Australopithecus 3.3–2.1 million years ago and up to the Caspian-Microlithic Style Man 30,000–4,000 B.C. (vii). Campbell continues in his narrative to describe the significance of the symbol of the Great Serpent to Early Planter societies, the birth of Civilization in the Near East, and finally the Diffusion of humankind. The Conclusion (427-434) ties up the book’s themes with a summary of his

earlier discussion of how mythology and myths are meaningful to all humankind and remain spiritually freeing and relevant even as they evolve while humanity diffuses across time and continents.

As mentioned in the beginning of this review, *Primitive Mythology* is the first volume in Campbell's comprehensive study of mythology, using a natural history of living things as a model for his series. Despite the series' scope and size the reader should not expect its layout to be that of an encyclopedia or dictionary of mythology. Instead, the book is structured similar to its predecessor, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, which includes extended descriptions of various stories told as examples of the overall point at hand in the text. Such stories include the "Spontaneous Animism in Childhood" (74-76), "The Legend of the Destruction of Kash" (139-148), "A Night of Shehrzad" (148-151), "The Monster Eel" (175-182), and "The Legend of the Buffalo" (260-262). Campbell was a gifted storyteller. It is a pleasure to read both his overarching thesis and his telling of the various tales.

Because I began this review with a description of the series *The Masks of God*, I will end by mentioning a story he tells that I think encapsulates his works and is fundamental to the values of the members of the Mythopoeic Society. In the second volume, *Oriental Mythology*, Campbell relates, from a 1958 Congress for the History of Religions in Tokyo, that a Western sociologist is reported to have said to his friend, a Shintō priest: "I don't get the ideology. I don't get your theology." To which the Shintō priest responded "We do not have theology. We dance" (600). Our society's founder, Glen GoodKnight, wrote in a 1972 *Mythprint* article that "The (Mythsoc) Motto 'Laeta in Chorea Magna' in Latin translates: Joy in the Great Dance" (3) It interests me that this beautiful way of viewing life would be fundamental to both Joseph Campbell's work and to be the motto of the Mythopoeic Society. Due to this commonality of outlook, I would expect his work to resonate with a number of our members.

In conclusion, I highly recommend *Primitive Mythology* (*The Masks of God, Volume 1*) to readers, such as myself, who have been fans of Joseph Campbell's works for decades. I especially recommend it to fans who desire to move beyond *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* or *The Power of Myth* with Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers. Reading *Primitive Mythology* is to take a step into the larger world of his series *The Masks of God* has to offer. I recommend the book to new readers of Joseph Campbell who are interested in mythology presented on a large canvas that covers both his description of its structural underpinnings and its value to the psychological and spiritual wellbeing of humanity. This book is appropriate for most public, college, and university libraries. More than anything it is a pleasure to read and a joy to dance with a fine writer.

—Phillip Fitzsimmons

SOURCES

Campbell, Joseph. *Oriental Mythology (The Masks of God, Volume 2)*. Revised edition. New World Library, 2021.

GoodKnight, Glen. "The Coat of Arms of The Mythopoeic Society." *Mythprint*, vol. 5, no. 4, Apr. 1972. p. 3. <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythprint/vol5/iss4/1/>

