

What *The Great Code* Is and Does

by

Alvin Lee

(April 20, 2005)

The Great Code is a powerfully structured and intricately detailed prose poem about the possibility of human love and freedom through a new kind of understanding of the Bible. By a process of imaginative literalism, the author invites the reader to confront the major challenges of the Bible--its sheer length, its complexity, most of its 80 books, its having been composed during more than a millenium, its being read in translation by most readers, its unifying but also its fragmenting characteristics, its traditional claim as the Word of God told through human agents, all this and more--in the hope that the old writings will breathe new life and so enable genuine individuals to be born, imaginatively and spiritually. The intention is to free the hoary ancestral text from centuries of doctrinal accretions and of having been misread as history when it is not, except in vestigial ways, so that it can work again for thinking men and women (not necessarily religious ones) as the great visionary document of Western culture.

Throughout his life Frye became increasingly aware of the enormous shaping influence of the Bible, not only on individual poets and writers but also, more generally, as what he called the mythological framework of the culture. He came to see as well that the Bible was in danger of becoming extinct for most educated people, as growing numbers moved away from religious traditions, and as other cultures clamoured for attention. He became convinced that the assumption of "a contrast or opposition between the religious and the secular, the sacred and the profane, does not work any more, if it ever did. Everything in religion," he says, "has its secular aspect, and everything in secular life has religious implications, however ignored or undefined they may be(1). After long pondering, then, he set about defining some of these implications and accepted the pressures, external and internal, actually to write what was already being talked of as his "big book on the Bible." He recognized as he did so that he was not in any conventional sense a Biblical scholar. *The Great Code* is presented as his "own personal encounter with the Bible" (Introduction, 1). It is also the response to the Biblical text, I add, of one of the twentieth century's most erudite and creative minds and imaginations. Long ago, Carlos Baker, reviewing the manuscript of *Fearful Symmetry* for Princeton University Press, had written: "he knows the Bible as few scholars do" (Ayre, 192). Baker's comment points to at least two things: Frye's thorough reading knowledge of the Bible and his extraordinary way of knowing it. In his Blake book Frye had said, "Even the Bible must be shaken upside-down before it will yield all its secrets" (FS, 120).

Frye's immersion in the Bible began early in his life and his insights into it expanded steadily, both before *The Great Code* appeared (1982) and in the following eight years, culminating in his last big book, *Words with Power, Being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature* (1990). In the next half hour, I try to provide you with a synoptic account of how Frye saw the Bible and how he hoped readers would approach it. I shall concentrate on the shape and meaning of only the first half of *The Great Code*. If you have questions or comments about the rest or about the later book, *Words with Power*, we can talk about those in a few minutes.

Centripetally, that is, in its inner patterns of coherence, *The Great Code* is chiasmic: each of its two halves, entitled Part One, "The Order of Words," and Part Two, "The Order of Types," has four chapters, a total of eight. The chapters have individual titles and, in the case of Part Two, subtitles as well. In his Introduction Frye says "that the book fell accidentally" into this "double mirror" pattern, by analogy with what *The Great Code* says about the patterned relationship between the two Testaments of the Christian Bible. Readers of the notebooks, aware of the dozens of skirmishes Frye had with himself about the subject matter, order, and number of the book's chapters, will recognize that, accidental as the final arrangement may be, it came after a struggle that was prolonged and fierce. At no point in the notes, however, does the final form of the book--two parts with eight chapters, each half reflecting and revealing part of the meaning of the other--emerge. In the event, the formal design of *The Great Code* is simple and elegant, and proves itself capable, as do the Old and New Testaments, of forgoing a splendid symmetry and an ongoing dialectical unity out of a huge mass of diverse and often contradictory material.

Those readers who have complained that Frye's book is more symmetrical than the Bible and that it purports to describe a degree of typological and imaginative unity in the Bible that is at least as much imposed on it as

found in it have three things to contend with. It is, after all, in large part the author's choice how much symmetry his own book is to have. Secondly, and massively important in understanding what has been done historically by others with the Bible, the main lines and countless details in Frye's account of the interconnections between the Testaments were drawn hundreds of years ago, beginning in both the Old and New Testaments themselves and continuing through the apostolic, patristic, medieval, and more modern periods of Biblical art and exegesis. This fundamental cultural fact is abundantly clear for anyone pouring through rabbinical commentaries or texts of the Greek and Latin Fathers or reading, for example, the eighth-century story of the first poet in the English language, Caedmon, by the Venerable Bede, as he describes in typological and Biblical terms the beginnings of English poetry(2). Non-literary, visual images of typological thinking about the Bible are found in abundance in Romanesque and Gothic churches and in illuminated manuscripts. And, thirdly, because of the massive presence of Biblical typology in the culture, and as Frye more than once commented, many students find they cannot understand Milton or Blake's poetry, or that of a host of other writers, because they do not know the Bible, typologically or any other way. Frye uncovers the power of the Biblical narrative and imagery in the light of some of the most advanced intellectual understandings of symbolism in the modern world but the Bible-based imaginative tradition--once deeply embedded but now needing to be uncoded--is still full of promise.

Chapter I of *The Great Code* is about the language in which the Bible has been discussed at different times in history, Chapters Two and Three are concerned with its literal (which is to say, its literary) meaning, and Chapter Four is an account of the traditional typological way of reading it. Part Two, as in a reflection in a mirror, appears in reverse order, with left becoming right and right left. Chapter Five is "Typology II," Frye's revivification of an old tradition, followed by "Metaphor II" and "Myth II," closer applications to the imagery and narrative of the Bible of the critical principles set down in Part One. Finally in "Language II" there is a searching examination of the rhetoric of religion, specifically of the Bible, and suggestions for a multileveled approach to meaning in the Bible. Frye's statements in his Introduction about the book's design and overall argument are accurate, as far as they go. They are, though, ironic and disarming in their references to tradition and familiar terms like imagery, narrative, language, and even typology. Readers quickly notice that the treatment of these subjects, though based on considerable knowledge of what traditionally has been thought and said about each, goes well beyond tradition or convention and often turns things on their heads.

Each chapter is carefully patterned to provide a new perspective on the book's subject, the Bible and literature. Frye is insistent on the subtitle being what it is, even though most of his enormous reading of literature and many of the literary references in *The Great Code* notebooks have by now receded into the background. The book is centrally about the Bible and literature, in two senses. The main concern is to show how it has many literary characteristics but is, nonetheless, what Frye calls "literature plus." Secondly, partly by implication, the Bible is being treated as a code for deciphering a large body of literature on which it has exerted shaping and informing influence over the centuries. Unlike *Anatomy of Criticism* with its huge array of literary works, *The Great Code* goes on to apply the literary critical principles set out in *Anatomy*, to the Bible. As he did in *Anatomy*, so here in the first chapter, he takes and adapts from the 18th-century thinker Giovanni Vico a concept that will provide a broad historical perspective, specifically in this book the idea of three ages of language that have emerged from ancient Near Eastern times until the present (in *Anatomy* it is the historical modes of fiction in Frye's Essay One that owe a debt to Vico)(3). The Bible long antedates mimetic writing and art. It cannot be seen in an adequate perspective without the help of a philosophy of history that gives a place to the long-held pre-Romantic view that the Bible is in a language purporting to tell the mind of God and also, as *The Great Code* decodes the ancient language for a post-Romantic world, a language that reproduces directly the voice of creative processes and powers of the human mind below normal consciousness.

The three ages or phases of language are: the metaphorical, dominant in a stage in culture in which the gods were thought to be immanent in natural forces; the allegorical, characterized by monotheism and a sense that there is a divine force transcending nature, so that words get their meaning allegorically by reference to ideas in the divine mind; and the descriptive phase, in which the general cultural assumption is that the gods have been displaced and language has reached a stage capable of objectivity. All three phases of language are present in all historical periods but each of them, one at a time in turn, gains cultural ascendancy. The argument here is wide-ranging and has many ramifications. In summary it can sound like the grossest of simplifications but, as Frye works it through in Chapter One (and as a powerful undertow in the other chapters), a new perspective emerges within which to recognize that, although the origins of the Bible are in the first or metaphorical (poetic, mythical) phase of language, and much of it is contemporary with the second or allegorical phase (metonymic, dialectical), it does not fit comfortably into either. That it is not thought or

composed in the descriptive phase is clear, though, even so, many throughout the Bible's history and even now have tried or try to think the opposite. The main arguments against the assumption that it is descriptively composed are dealt with in Chapters Two and Three on myth and metaphor.

Since the Bible's use of poetic language does not confine it to being simply literature, and since it does not function in the allegorical language of concepts and abstraction, Frye outlines at the end of Chapter One two other conceptions, oratorical rhetoric and *kerygma*, which are crucial to an understanding not only of *The Great Code* but also *Words with Power*(4), and the Bible itself, if Frye's two books are right. Oratorical rhetoric is a combination of metaphorical or poetic language with "existential" idioms; it uses all the figures of speech but within a context of concern and direct address that is not present in poetry as such. As Frye begins to demonstrate in this Chapter (the culmination of the argument is in Chapter Eight, "Rhetoric"), the essential idiom of the Bible is oratorical. Traditionally this aspect of the Bible has been thought to be the rhetoric of God accommodated to human intelligence, but coming "from a time out of time"(29). Oratory on the highest level--oracle, exhortation, divine command, proclamation--is *kerygma*, a term used conventionally by modern Biblical scholars about the New Testament. For reasons that become clearer as the book proceeds, Frye extends the term *kerygma* to the language of the whole Bible, thus turning inside out the conventional scholarly meaning. *Kerygma*, then, is the linguistic vehicle of what traditionally has been called revelation. Frye recognizes that this kind of language is a special mode of rhetoric and that it is both metaphorical and existential, but that unlike most rhetoric it does not disguise any argument by means of figuration. God and Jesus use metaphors in their expressions of concern. They do not engage in argument.

In Chapter Two, Frye takes as established among scholars the realization that the Bible cannot be treated as a history. Instead of searching behind the text, as many do, for a history thought to be more important than the Bible itself, he takes the mass of "mythical accretions," the materials that scholarship tries to clear away, as the main linguistic vehicle of the Bible, and the source of whatever revelatory power it has. He uses as a general critical principle the hypothesis "that if anything historically true is in the Bible, it is there not because it is historically true but for different reasons." (40) As the Book of Job demonstrates--no one thinks this part of the Bible is history--"historical truth has no correlation with spiritual profundity." (40) Frye delineates several definitions of "myth," beginning with its root Greek meaning of plot or narrative, or simply the sequential ordering of words, and shows what narrative is in each of the three ages or phases of language. In each phase, myth or narrative is a form of imaginative and creative thinking which may draw into itself elements of history or the actual world, in varying degrees, depending on which phase is in the ascendant and on what the purposes of the particular story are. But as a constructed narrative the sequence of words will never be a full and factually reliable description of anything that has ever actually existed or happened. In the case of the Bible, "a violently partisan book" (40), the individual narratives, like the overall one, are made to fit into the ongoing account (the mythology) about divine action, human rebellion, and divine response. These happenings "are as distantly related to historical events as an abstract painting is to realistic representation, and related in a similar way. The priority is given to the mythical structure or outline of the story, not to the historical content." (41) Still, the Bible cannot be reduced completely to the hypothetical basis of poetry or imaginative expression. In addition to its aspect as myth and story, it has a "social function as concerned knowledge" (47). From this distinction between myth and concern, Frye moves into an important discussion of *Weltgeschichte*, what we normally call history, the account of events in time, and *Heilsgeschichte*, the mythical story of God's actions in the world and the human responses to them. These two kinds of writing, one an attempted record of what is and the other a story of what might or should be, cannot be simply opposed to each other. All human societies imagine myths and mythologies to express their main concerns and, by doing so, open up possibilities not otherwise present in the actual world. Here, at the end of Chapter Two, Frye is laying an important part of the groundwork for the ideas later in the book about the differences between causal history and typology.

Chapter Two presents a literary theory of myth by examining what happens, in different periods of Western culture, to the telling of narratives or words in sequence, that is, to the spreading out of words in time. Chapter Three on "Metaphor," in a symmetrical paralleling action, follows a similar kind of argument but is focused on words in stasis, words sitting in spatial relationships with each other. What does a text, including the Bible, look like when it is "frozen," when it is seen "statically, as a single and simultaneous metaphor cluster?" (76) This question leads into one of Frye's classic accounts of metaphorical language in terms of implicit and explicit metaphor. The Bible may not be primarily literary in intention, but it is filled with figures of speech, many of which are explicit metaphors: "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock (*petra*) I will build my church"; "Issachar is a strong ass"; "I am the bread of life." This kind of illogical or counter-logical statement occurs so frequently in the Bible that it is clear that metaphor is "not an incidental ornament of Biblical language, but one of its controlling

modes of thought" (54). In a memorable use of one of Ezra Pound's ideas, Frye pushes even further the recognition of metaphorical language, in the Bible and elsewhere. In explicit metaphor there is a predicate, often in the form of the verb "is," as in "Joseph is a fruitful bough." But, says Pound, such predication is a concession to a prose mind. Remove the predicate and you still have metaphor, but now it is implicit, created through the juxtaposition of images, through association. Frye brings forward here from the Second Essay of *Anatomy of Criticism* a critical principle essential for dealing with the fact that the Bible is saturated with metaphorical figures of speech and, also, with the larger fact that "all language is permeated by metaphor simply because words are juxtaposed" (59). Once consideration of implicit metaphor begins, it is necessary to consider how, in all reading, our attention moves in two directions at once, inward as we follow the ordering of words in the text itself and outward to whatever the dictionary meanings of the words point to or signify. The first of these mental actions provides centripetal meaning, a sense of a meaningful whole; the second indicates centrifugal meaning, and is a recognition of the text's reference to externals.

When the Bible is thought about centripetally, "it is a unity of narrative and imagery and what we have called implicit metaphor" (62), a critical principle with huge implications for the rest of *The Great Code*, and for other reading and writing. What is being pointed to ultimately is the fictive quality of all verbal expression, including writings about the world of the imagination and of revelation. Without such a world of imagined possibilities the animality of human beings and their alienation in nature would combine to destroy them. On the level of the centrifugal and the actualities it points to, what science and history try to describe, the feeling is that death is inevitable. In contrast, the feeling that new life is inevitable comes from myth, from the centripetal and imaginative uses of words, from refusal to accept the centrifugal as the last word. Uncoding the centripetal power of the Bible's images and stories generates hope for a transformation of consciousness and the possibility of enlightenment. In the preceding chapter, Frye has shown how the Bible is more myth than history; because it primarily turns inward towards divine-human concerns and away from accurate or convincing description of external events and circumstances. In this Chapter he does something similar with the Bible and nature. Because the Bible subordinates its referential meanings to its more primary ones, it is not scientific. Its imagery, like its narrative, does not have as its main purpose representation of things in an actual world. Both are engaged in time and space but they express something quite other than history or the world of nature: literally and literarily, the presence of God.

Part I, "The Order of Words," is a weighty theoretical prolegomenon to the Bible, an establishing of fresh perspectives for reading it and for being read by it. The documentation is relatively sparse, whether the subject is phases of language, myth, or metaphor, or their interpenetrating relationships. In comparison, in Part II, "The Order of Types," the applications of the literary critical principles are more extended and the recognition of the Bible as literature-plus is delineated. Before the applied or practical criticism can do its creative work, however, something more is necessary in the argument. Chapter Four introduces one of the book's most powerful conceptions, the idea of creative time, or typology. For twenty-first century readers looking back on the twentieth century's almost endless slaughters of human beings by other human beings, and the humanly wrought devastation of much of the physical environment, the tough, shrewd optimism articulated in Frye's Chapter Four may sound like "a still small voice." But it is there, and it provides a carefully articulated contrast between the conventional causal way of thinking about history and the typological one, even as it draws the reader forward to Part Two and its rich uncoding of how typology, metaphor, myth, and language in the Bible can still do their re-creative work, in a world sorely in need of them once they have been made useful again through previously unopened perspectives.

In Chapter Four, Frye sets out two ways of thinking about human experience in time. The usual one is summed up in the word "causality." Causal history has four characteristics. It proceeds inductively, collecting large amounts of data which are used to explain particular events and circumstances. Secondly, it looks mainly or even exclusively to the past (82). Thirdly, when it is searching and honest about what it discovers, it tends towards disillusionment, not to a hope that anything better will emerge. Finally, it stays in the same dimension of time, proceeding in a linear or horizontal cause-effect way of thinking. In contrast, the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament introduced to the world a different way of thinking about history, one with a pronounced vertical direction. In the Biblical story of Israel, the people chosen by Jahweh are shown as being miraculously delivered in the Exodus from tyranny in Egypt and then as undergoing 40 years of instruction and testing in the wilderness. Jahweh fashions what they initially were, a rabble of released slaves, into a people ready to enter the Promised Land. This epochal, perhaps entirely imagined, event is presented and interpreted by writers of other parts of the story of Israel, and by a host of Biblical compilers and editors, as the type or foreshadowing of each subsequent climactic event. Again and again Israel and its leaders sink to a nadir of experience--

disobedience to Jahweh's commands, going awhoring after other gods, being captured or besieged by enemies--at which point they are reminded of the Exodus: "But the Lord hath taken you, and brought you forth out of the iron furnace, even out of Egypt, to be unto him a people of inheritance, as ye are this day" (Deuteronomy 4:20). This formula about their revolutionary deliverance varies somewhat in wording in the various Old Testament stories but it is used countless times to recall the typical defining event of Israel's Biblical story. All other important happenings are adumbrations or antitypes of the originary one.

This way of thinking about human experience in time and space is radically discontinuous. It tells of the possibility of the creating imagination effecting escape from the furnace of fire. Something from beyond what normally is thought of as history, the linear or chronological succession of events, enters into it from outside: Jahweh locates the young shepherd Moses and tells him what to do, and does not take no for an answer. The sense of the possibility of external or miraculous intervention in human affairs, of divinity working through a human agent who has been seized by words of divine instruction (*kerygma*), is revolutionary. It is continued by the Christian writers of the New Testament, as they fashion their version of the life of Jesus and the early church in terms of the antitype Jesus, the new Adam "who to the battle came," and of the church as the new Israel. It is important to realize, in reading Chapter Four, that Frye is thinking here not only about two kinds of history but also about a renewal of what he sees as the original revolutionary impulse in Biblical religion. By the end of the chapter, he has shown how this impulse might express itself in words. This is not a matter of a recommended political or social revolution but, at least initially, something individual, in which the inner meaning of Scripture can break in on the individual at any time; from this social consequences can follow. Explicit and implicit metaphor combine as the Chapter develops and then spiral upward into what Frye calls "the royal metaphor" and the conception of the Messiah. This in turn leads into a penetrating examination of democracy and tyranny. Finally, the royal metaphor turns inside out, giving the possibility of a resurrected human being awakening from the single vision of causal history's nightmares.

Footnotes:

(1) "To Come to Light," originally a Thanksgiving address on 5 October, 1986 at the 150th anniversary of the founding of Victoria College, in *Northrop Frye on Religion*, ed. Alvin A. Lee & Jean O'Grady, *Collected Works of Northrop Frye*, 4 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 363.

(2) Bede: *A History of the English Church and People*, trans. Leo Sherley-Price (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1955), 245-48.

(3) Giambattista Vico (1688-1744), a historical philosopher, attempted in his *Scienza Nuova* (1725) a synthesis of the study of literature, history, and philosophy into a single human science, in a cyclical theory of the growth and decline of societies. See *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin & Max Frisch (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968).

(4) The three phases of language, plus two other concepts, set out here are developed much more fully in *WP* as five modes of language, esp. in Chapter One, "Sequence and Mode."