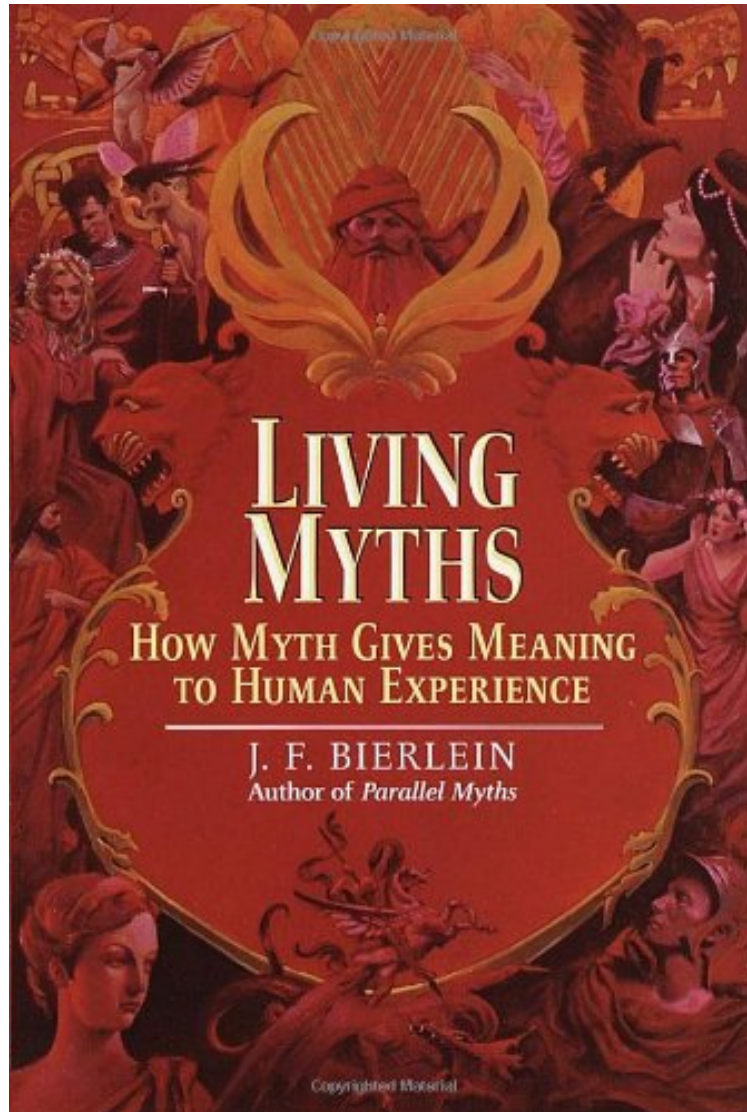


(Download) Living Myths: How Myth Gives Meaning to Human Experience

Living Myths: How Myth Gives Meaning to Human Experience

J.F. Bierlein

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connects the myth with one or more of the six elements of human existence. At the end of each chapter there is one or more paragraphs summing up what we have learned from the myths in it. There is a concluding chapter fleshing out his premise from the introduction, and what he teased out of each myth in the preceding chapters. The book had a wealth of information without being boring or over your head. It was tight and concise and a fascinating and easy read. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars By Rhonda Tretsvon Wonderful book can't wait to read the next one 0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Good book By C. Pierce I needed this book for a class I was taking. It is really easy reading and I was actually surprised as to how interesting it was.

An intriguing exploration of the enduring significance of the world's great myths--from the dawn of time to the present day As ancient as speech, as essential as law, myths are the stories we tell to find our identity in the cosmos. It is through mythology that we attempt to unravel not only the meaning of our actions and impulses but the significance of human existence itself. Now in *Living Myths*, classical scholar J. F. Bierlein explores the enduring patterns and messages of myths from every culture. Myths, writes Bierlein, are "the eternal mirror in which we see ourselves." *Living Myths* delves behind the mirror and brings to light the imperishable and transcendent forces common to the myths of the world. Juxtaposing myths of fathers and sons--the Greek myth of Athamas and Phrixus, the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, the Algonquin tale of Grandfather, Father, and Son--Bierlein uncovers essential lessons about human nature and divine will. In the Indian story of Nala and Damayanti, the Greek legends of Aphrodite, and the haunting Irish tale of Etain, Bierlein examines the transforming mystery of romantic love. Here too are tales of the world's great heroes--the Greek Theseus, the Irish Cuchulainn, and the Mexican Quetzalcoatl--and their common desire to break through the masks of appearances. Steeped in wisdom, brimming with insights into human nature and behavior, *Living Myths* is a luminous exploration of the meaning of mythology through the ages and today in each of our lives.

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About the Author The author of *Parallel Myths* and *The Book of Ages*, J. F. Bierlein teaches in the Washington Semester and World Capitals Program at American University in Washington, and also works for a social sciences consulting firm. Multilingual, he is deeply interested in theology, existentialism, art, opera, and the study of classical Greek, Sanskrit, and Hebrew, as well as other languages. Professor Bierlein and his wife, Heather Diehl, live in northern Virginia.

Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. "Faith can mean nothing else but the conviction that life as such, with all its mysteries, all its horrors, and all its marvels, has a meaning."--Arthur Schnitzler, Austrian playwright (1862-1931) "The world in which we are born is brutal and cruel, and at the same time a thing of divine beauty. Which element we think outweighs the other, whether meaninglessness or meaning, is a matter of temperament. If meaninglessness were absolutely preponderant, the meaningfulness of life would vanish to an increasing degree with each step in our development. Probably, as in all metaphysical questions, both are true. Life is--or has--meaning and meaninglessness. I cherish the anxious hope that meaning will preponderate and win the battle."--Carl G. Jung, Swiss psychoanalyst (1875-1961)

Does life have meaning? This book is about not only the meaning of the myths, but the more important matter of how myth gives meaning to human existence. Meaning. There are days when life appears to be merely a crazy quilt, a random collection of episodes, punctuated by inevitable failures, victories great and small, moments of joy, grief, and loss, and simple absurdity. Yet, when life is viewed as a totality, a continuous process of growth, each event has meaning as part of something greater than itself. In the myths, we see attempts to comprehend the cosmos, and the roles, however small, we as humans play. We see ourselves as part of the totality of the cosmos. We see patterns of growth and recovery in the face of life's starker realities. Myth shows the way others have worked at reconciling the opposing forces at work in human experience. Collectively, as nations, we seek meaning and create sacred civic histories. Being an American, a Canadian, or a Swiss is more than being born on a given side of a river. Nationality and nationhood are complex matrices of beliefs, symbols, "magic" words, that provide us individually and collectively with identity, the meaning of our nation, and the mythic dimensions of its past

that direct our future. Nationality is based on civic myths that we live in daily, consciously or not. The great problem of human life always has been and still is that of finding a meaning or purpose, an aim toward which one may direct one's efforts. In the disciplines of theology, philosophy, psychiatry, and literature, the meaning of life has always been the central question. The sharpness and urgency of this question seem to have increased throughout the twentieth century and still follow us into the new century. The challenges to human existence, both as individuals and as societies, seem greater than ever. My own generation, the eighty million Americans and nearly ten million Canadians born in the 1950s and 1960s, are now at a point in their lives where the question of meaning seems urgent and elusive in an environment of social polarization, gratuitous violence, and a quest for perceived lost "family values." Religion was and is a compass through that existence, and our myths have been the road map of meaning. We may doubt the existence of higher realities, but we ache to see them at work in our world. That breakthrough of something beyond objective reality into our objective world is the numinous--from the Latin word *numen*, or supernatural being. A sacred history, common to all mythic systems, is a record of the numinous in the human past that is both a pattern for the present, and in the words of German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), the "eternal now" that is always there, but only truly real as we encounter it. A useful way to understand how myth speaks to us is to keep in mind the six critical elements of the human condition as set out by contemporary French existentialist philosopher Paul Ricoeur (born 1913): Ricoeur proposed that, in order for humans to be at peace with their lives, they need to address these six issues in their lives: (1) our finitude; (2) our estrangement from God and/or the numinous; (3) our process of becoming and transcendence, in that in each human life, the truth is never whole and complete; (4) the paradox of the freedom and burden of human choice; (5) our existence with, in, and through others, for our sense of meaning is relational; and ultimately, (6) our identity and participation in the cosmos. By finitude, we mean the realization that there are limits to our "sight" (our understanding and our reasoning), and that life, too, is limited. We can never apprehend the numinous in a complete form, and the process of "revelation" and the language of mythology are efforts to understand the reality of God, or the numinous, acting in human history and experience in terms accessible to and understood by human beings. We are also finite in that we know the inevitability of our own death and the anxiety that this causes. As the German writer Hermann Hesse (1877-1962) bluntly put it: "Das Leben ist doch so beschissen Weil wir alle sterben mssen. Life is certainly shitty since everybody must die." The issue of human finitude gives an urgency to the sense of meaning. Not only do the myths speak to the possibilities, meaning, and realities of a worthwhile life, they also concern themselves with what happens when we die. The issue of estrangement permeates the myths. Invariably, many myths tell of a "time before time" wherein God (or the gods) and humans lived in a companionable fellowship that was broken through sin or perhaps an action on the part of the Creator to absent himself or herself from the creation; this belief is common to virtually all cultures. Estrangement pervades two modes of our thinking: our subjective selves and our faculty of feeling, which yearn for something beyond ourselves and ache to see God or the numinous active in the world, and our objective reasoning, which seems to rule out the possibility of the supernatural acting directly in human history, and in our personal histories as well. The process of reconciliation and renewed fellowship is a key theme throughout the myths. What can transcend this estrangement? This is a central question in the myths of the past and our own today. "Man is part of nature, subject to her physical laws and unable to change them, yet he transcends the rest of nature. He is set apart while being a part; he is homeless yet chained to the home he shares with all creatures. Cast into this world at an accidental place and time, he is forced out of it, again, accidentally. Being aware of himself, he realizes his powerlessness and the limitations of his existence."--Erich Fromm, German American psychoanalyst (1900-1980) "Limited in his nature, infinite in his desires, man is a fallen god who remembers the heavens."--Alphonse de Lamartine, French poet (1790-1869) The process of becoming and transcendence is yet another consistent theme in the myths and is a source of hope for us all. The hero might be born to his quest, but although born to be a hero, he also has to become a hero. The hero goes through trials and is never entirely invincible; he must transcend defeats. Here is an entry point, for like any of us, the hero loses sometimes. And yet, the hero becomes a hero through the realization of his quest; in the same manner, we all become ourselves through the realization of work and the search for truth. As American mythologist Joseph Campbell (1904-1987) wrote, "The hero is every man." In the trials and transcendence offered in the myths of the heroes, we see ourselves and we see meaning. And so it is in every life: we are always in the process of becoming whom we are. Each new life situation demands something new of us that causes us to change in ways both small and great. Thus the hero of the myths is always faced with the paradox of the freedom and burden of critical choices, both in the context of ethical ambiguity and in terms of the risks inherent in every choice. In the Christian and Jewish traditions, it was through the exercise of free will--choice--that sin, and thus estrangement, took place. In Greek mythology, estrangement from the gods took place when Prometheus stole fire from heaven and Pandora opened the box whence the ills of the world sprang; these were acts of human choice. For us, it means asking the question, Do I make my choices or do my choices make me? Here is truth as paradox, for both are true. In our own lives and the lives of the heroes, there is always the certainty of tragedy and the anguished hope of transcendence that gives meaning to human experience. The myths provide models of transcendence that help us find a means to transcend difficulties and sorrows and invest life with meaning. "Life is an operation which is done in a forward direction. One lives toward the future, because to live consists inexorably in doing, in each individual life

making itself."--Jos Ortega y Gasset, Spanish philosopher (1883-1955)The myths remind us as well that our existence, and its meaning, are with, in, and through others. Our process of becoming cannot take place in isolation. Children receive an identity from their parents, yet strive to establish their own individuality. The myths speak to the power of love to transform both the lover and the beloved; this love gives meaning to life. The hero cannot become a hero alone, and the heroic myths include mentors, friends, lovers, allies, and, above all, enemies who define the hero. Each of these relationships is necessary for the hero to take up his quest. Myths can act to invest our lives--our existence--with meaning. They give us our identity in the cosmos, a perspective of our place in the entirety of things. Our identities as citizens, children, lovers, workers, and the minor-league heroes we are in our own houses are reflected in the myths of many cultures and times. Inasmuch as we seek to find how myths have given meaning to people throughout history, we should also consider the myths as meditations on events that touch every life and affirm the value of life in the face of its realities. One day when I was home sick with the flu, I noticed how, viewed close up, there appeared to be no order to the quilt that my mother had made; for years I had appreciated its neat pattern from the perspective of the whole. The little patches in the quilt had their value only as part of the overall pattern. Thus, as the myths teach us, meaning is derived from taking the parts and seeing a whole. Seeing that one has a role in the cosmos automatically conveys a sense of purpose and place; this is what is affirmed in the myths. The American playwright Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953) once wrote to his children that the secret of life was contained in a simple phrase: "Man is born broken; he lives by mending; and the grace of God is the glue." It is only by viewing life as a process, a collection of meanings bound together by a thread, that life can offer the joy that is found in a sense of meaning. The myths are threads for the process of mending. The threads may fray and break, but we know that there is a pattern being sewn. In the life of every individual human being, the process of finding a meaning, embracing that sense of meaning totally, and living a worthwhile life often appears to be a hit-or-miss proposition. The realities of growing older, of parenthood, losing our loved ones, economic displacement, and the sense of brevity of our own lives often make us question the meaning of our existence, and certainly that of happiness. Few topics have received such agonized attention as the search for meaning, especially in the first half of the twentieth century. The decline of a religious worldview and the shattering of old civic myths--following the destruction of the stable order people had known before World War I--created anxiety and urgency. The two fruits of this inquisitive process were both existential philosophy and a renewed interest in the value of myth. Religion, myth, and any book with the word soul in the title have become hot commodities today. Why? For roughly the past 150 years, it has been widely believed that science and technology alone might eventually solve all human problems, that progress is inevitable, and that history moves in a linear direction toward a technological utopia. (If you doubt this, go back and look at films of Disney's Tomorrowland from the early sixties or watch old newsreels of the 1939 and 1964 New York World Fairs. The record of technological and scientific progress is stunning, and this progress has been extraordinary in extending, improving, and safeguarding human life. The world in which my grandmother was born was a world of horses and buggies, the telephone, and Victrolas--with an average human life expectancy of under fifty years. The world in which she died was the world of cloning, cyberlinkage, "designer" genetics in agriculture, and MTV--with an average human life expectancy of seventy-eight years.) The stage for the twentieth-century problem of meaning was set in the nineteenth. Throughout the past 150 years, a philosophical system called positivism held sway and precluded the possibility of accidents, the numinous, miracles, or randomness. Positivism held that the scientific method of investigation could be applied to the study of anything. As positivism grew in influence, the realms of feeling and intuition, the "unseen" worlds of God, and our subjective human impressions were diminished in influence or value and at times categorically negated. Science and myth were set against each other as enemies. Yet the scientific mode of thinking, in itself, has not been able to provide human beings with a sense of meaning. In fact, rational scientific thinking perceived the traditional sources of meaning--namely myth, religion, and philosophical speculation--as outmoded. Given this increase in objectivity, there has been a diminishing sense of that most subjective thing--meaning--in human life. Not only has science not been able to answer the question of meaning, it has raised new questions of meaning! Many of us support capital punishment but fight such practices as euthanasia and abortion. We are able to prolong the quantity of life through medical advances, but this provokes anguished debates over the quality of life. We would do well to remember that science and religion can answer two very different questions. Science tells us how things happen, by identifying the causes of things as can be observed, identified, and described by our five senses (empirically) or quantitatively through precise measurements, mathematical, or statistical analyses. Science is objective and studies objects. Religion and myth answer why things happen--not in terms of causes, but in terms of purpose and meaning, a subjective understanding. The difference between causative "how" thinking (scientific) and purposive "why" thinking (religious) can be illustrated using the analogy of a wristwatch. You may take a wristwatch apart--tiny spring by tiny spring--and if you are attentive, you will see "how" the watch works, by identifying what gear causes which hand to move. However, as useful as this information might be, it tells you nothing of the purpose of the watch, let alone why we need to tell time. It does not explain the anxiety we feel about keeping appointments. And it offers no consolation when the boss chides us for not being on time. In our inquiry as to the difference between these two modes of thinking, it is important to think in terms of phenomenon and noumenon. A phenomenon is something that can be perceived empirically. The noumenon, in

contrast, is something that can be known only through intellectual intuition, experience, or feeling; it is something felt, apprehended, or grasped. The word phenomenon comes from the Greek verbs *phainesthai* (to appear) and *phanein* (to show). Noumenon, on the other hand, comes from a very different source. It comes from *nous*, the word used by both Plato and Aristotle to signify mind. It is also a first cousin to *gnosis*, or knowledge. Think about the distinction between knowing a person and knowing a fact. Knowing a person has a qualitative, subjective quality: I know my friend is kind, intelligent, funny, a bit self-indulgent, but warmhearted. But knowing that two and two make four is a very different kind of knowledge. Interestingly, the greatest assault on the objectivity of science came from a scientist. German physicist Werner Heisenberg (1901-1976) was a rare man, winning the 1932 Nobel Prize for his work in quantum mechanics and devoting himself to philosophical speculations in his later life. Heisenberg wrote a paper in 1927 that established the Heisenberg indeterminacy principle. What Heisenberg said was that scientific inquiry is never and cannot be entirely objective. All observations are colored by the subjectivity of the investigator. Even in strictly quantitative endeavors, the observer undertakes a qualitative allocation of value to what is seen. On that basis, the causative and purposive blur together. And in our reading of the myths, the causative and the purposive are thoroughly blended together. The myth of Kore, for instance, tells us about the origins of spring--nature--on one level and discusses the question of life after death--human nature--on another. The story of Isis and Osiris tells us why the Nile rises when it does, and also discusses life after death. The question of meaning has always been answered in terms of knowing whom we are and why we are here. It is the numinous--the appearance in objective reality of something beyond that reality--that gives us a sense of meaning and always has. Moses doesn't lead his people out of the desert simply because Egypt is unpleasant. Rather, the numinous appearance of the burning bush, the plagues against Egypt, and the parting of the Red Sea all give a numinous and living meaning to the Exodus. Passover is a retelling and reliving of that sacred history in the present. Our sacred history is a record of meanings that give meaning to human experience in the present, not merely a linear list of dates; the same can be said of civic myths. And so, meaning starts with the apprehension of a Great Mystery in which we take part. And investing life with meaning is where myth begins to function. Thus, our inquiry in *Living Myths* is to see how myths are a road map of the human experience common to us all, and that they speak clearly to who we are as finite creatures, estranged from the numinous, living out a process of becoming and transcendence, making choices, living in societies and families, and finding our identity and place in the cosmos. This road map and our sense of our place in the cosmos begins with our most elemental human experiences: as parents and children.

1. Fathers and Sons

There is no more basic human experience than that of parent and child. The myths that follow concern perennial issues between fathers and sons. In doing so, they convey lessons about behavior and human nature. In later chapters, we will see mothers and daughters, mothers and sons, and fathers and daughters interacting in the myths. Here, too, the interactions are eternal; only the specifics are different. In some of the myths that follow, we see a father contemplating killing his own son to please the gods, showing that there are limits to the transactions that can be conducted between gods and men. Clearly, in these myths it is the gods who have the upper hand--yet the gods ultimately affirm the value of human life. In the latter myths in this chapter, we see moral parables contrasting the braggadocio of youth with the mellowness and wisdom of age. In all three tales a youth talks himself into a difficult situation. Clearly these myths expose both the results of swaggering machismo and the certain competitive element that always exists between fathers and sons. And the myth of Phathon is a powerful story of love versus indulgence in a parental relationship. The father, who loves his son, promises him anything within his power; the son asks the one thing the father will not grant. Beyond the apparent morals offered in these myths, the myths also offer insights into specific cultures. One can see how the Greeks and Romans, the people of Israel, the Norse, and the Algonquins saw themselves both in society and in the parent-child relationship. What Thor brags about and how Odin responds tell us about the male values in Norse culture; the lesson of the Algonquin story of Grandfather, Father, and Son speaks to the issue of the individual versus the community. Ultimately, all of these stories offer culturally specific and universal insights. The roles of women in these myths, or the paucity thereof, have something important to say as well. In the patriarchal societies that predominate in this chapter, men are the focus not only of intergenerational conflict, but of the struggle between fathers and sons for identity, power, and legitimacy. The paucity of women in these stories may, as we will see, be a record of a "history of prehistory," reflecting the distant memory of the battle between a patriarchy and an earlier matriarchal society. In returning to the six elements of human existence, age readily accepts the finitude of our lives--a lesson that youth can only learn painfully. In the first two stories, sacrifices are offered to bridge the sense of estrangement from the gods, only for the gods to impose limits. The stories of Athamas and Phrixus, Abraham and Isaac, and the Algonquin story of Grandfather, Father, and Son all point to transcending truths learned at a cost. The stories of fathers and sons are stories also of becoming fathers and sons in a dynamic relationship that constantly redefines itself through interaction. All of these stories illustrate the freedom and burden of human choice, for which a price must be paid. And, much as myths define our identity in the cosmos, we both receive an identity from our fathers and rebel against them to establish individual identities.

ATHAMAS AND PHRIXUS (Greece)

This story is a prologue to the well-known adventure of Jason and the Argonauts. It is notable in its similarity to the story of Abraham and Isaac and is believed to share the same original source--probably the Semitic people of Mesopotamia, or perhaps it was spread by the trading Phoenician neighbors of

Israel. The tale of the youth wrongly accused, as given here, of adultery is a common ancient theme, found in the Bible story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, and the Egyptian tale of the Two Brothers. Athamas had a son named Phrixus. As the boy grew, he became very handsome, so much so that his aunt (by marriage) fell hopelessly in love with him. When Phrixus rejected her advances, telling her that it was wrong to sleep with his uncle's wife, she spread the rumor that it was Phrixus who had tried to seduce her. The word spread throughout the world until it reached the god Apollo, who was outraged at such immorality. Apollo decreed that Phrixus must die, and because a form of incest was involved (although Phrixus's aunt was not a blood relative), Athamas must carry out the execution of his own son. Athamas wept as he took Phrixus to the mountaintop; his hands shook as he took the knife to slit his son's throat. Just as Athamas was ready to strike the fatal blow, the hero Heracles (Roman: Hercules) appeared and bellowed, "My father Zeus is revolted by human sacrifice!" Zeus (Roman: Jupiter), who knew that Phrixus was innocent, sent at that moment a golden ram to the mountaintop. Phrixus climbed on its back and off they flew to safety. Zeus's wife Hera (Roman: Juno), enraged that Athamas would believe his sister-in-law's lies, struck Athamas absolutely mad to the point that he lived like an animal, eating grass. As for the golden ram, its fleece became the Golden Fleece that was later sought by Jason and the Argonauts.

ConnectionsThe myth of Athamas and Phrixus speaks to the existential element of estrangement from the gods, and Greek gods who strongly resemble humans. In this story, humans are so alienated from the gods that a wrongful judgment is rendered by the god Apollo, who readily accepts the false witness of Phrixus's aunt and sentences the lad to death without bothering to consider Phrixus's account. One condition of youth has always been their elders' unwillingness to accept their credibility. The Greek gods, in this myth and others, are mirrors of ourselves. They disagree and act rashly, even unfairly. Apollo, too, is finite in his sight. Yet the story of Athamas and Phrixus affirms the principle of divine justice, as Zeus intervenes, not only to stop an unjust execution, but also to assert the value of human life through abhorrence of human sacrifice. With respect to the relationship between fathers and sons, it is important to remember that Zeus had to intervene because Athamas readily believed the false charges against his son and was prepared to carry out the sentence of death pronounced by Apollo. Athamas did not believe Phrixus's side of the story and did little to help. Athamas's pleas and anguish were based on love of his son--not on faith that his own son was telling the truth. Fathers, in cases both great and small, may love their sons, but often make judgments about them whether fair or not. One also has to wonder whether Athamas experienced some element of jealousy over his son's handsomeness and youth. But ultimately, the story is an assertion that divine justice is superior to filial piety, and the gods demand that even a father must pay for misjudging his own son. A father may be master in his own house, but even that father must answer to a master. The fact that the golden ram is sent by Zeus at just the right moment and that its fleece later becomes the hard-won prize sought by Jason and the Argonauts speaks to the issue of human estrangement. The Golden Fleece is a token of the numinous, evidence that Zeus (and thus divine justice) intervened in human history. Much as the medieval heroes sought the Holy Grail (the chalice used by Christ in the Last Supper Seder) and invested it with great supernatural power, so did the Argonauts risk their lives to find the Golden Fleece as they invested it with power. Human beings inherently quest for "proofs" of the numinous, and hunger to overcome their estrangement from it.

ABRAHAM AND ISAAC(The Bible and Talmud)This story, which appears in Genesis 21 and 22, has long been both an admonition to faith, a statement on Israel's covenant with God, and a paradox that bears an important existential truth. One interesting note: in the Islamic version of the story, it is Ismail, ancestor of the Arabs, and not Isaac, who is brought to the sacrifice. The patriarch Abram had two sons by two different mothers. The elder son, Ishmael (or Ismail, in Arabic), was the son of Abram by his Egyptian handmaiden, Hagar. The younger son was the result of a miracle. The old patriarch Abram had reached his nineties and his beloved wife, Sarai, the age of eighty-nine. For decades the couple had accepted her barrenness. So Sarai had agreed for Abram to have a child by Hagar, his Egyptian handmaiden, as she knew that he must have an heir. Thus, Ishmael was born. Ishmael was the ancestor of the Arabs (and Muslims count him as a direct ancestor of the prophet Muhammad). But God had other plans. When Abram turned ninety-nine years old, God changed his name from Abram to Abraham, meaning father of many nations, and renamed Sarai, Sarah, meaning princess. Abraham at first took this as a cruel joke and asked God how he and Sarah could have a child at such an advanced age. God replied that it was His will that Abraham be the father of many nations and announced that the ninety-year-old Sarah would conceive and bear a child within the year. Not long after, three strangers appeared at Abraham's tent. While Abraham was out selecting a calf to feed them, one of the strangers pointed at a tent and said, "Next year, Sarah will give birth to a child in that tent." Sarah overheard them and burst into laughter. The strangers confronted Sarah about her laughter, which she then denied. Some months later Sarah delivered a boy, named him Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day in token of God's covenant with Abraham. And as his half brother, Ishmael, was ancestor of the Arabs, Isaac was the ancestor of the Jews and Philistines. One day God spoke to Abraham at Beersheba and commanded the old patriarch to take his son and climb to Mount Moriah. Abraham responded that he had two sons; whom was he to bring? God then said, "Take the son you love best." Abraham responded that he loved both of his sons. God knew that Abraham preferred Isaac, and so said once more, "Take the son you love best." Considering that Isaac was a miracle and the son of old age, Abraham did indeed love Isaac best and tended to ignore Ishmael. So he determined to take Isaac. Mount Moriah was the mountain of sacrifice, so Abraham knew what God appeared to be asking, but kept it to himself.

Abraham gathered some wood to build a sacrificial fire and brought out a donkey to carry the load. Then Abraham, Isaac, and two servants set out northward for Mount Moriah. Abraham then bade the servants to remain behind as he, Isaac, and the donkey proceeded up the mountain. The Talmud tells us that as Abraham and Isaac were scaling the mountain, the fallen angel Samael, in the guise of an old man, whispered into Abraham's ear, "Do you really think that a loving, compassionate God would have you kill the son for whom you've waited a lifetime?" But Abraham ignored the tempter. Undaunted, Samael appeared to Isaac and said, "That crazy father of yours wants to kill you!" Isaac also ignored the tempter. Abraham and Isaac reached the summit, built an altar of stones, and placed the wood on the sacrificial altar. Then Isaac asked, "Father, where is the lamb for the sacrifice?" Abraham responded, "The Lord will provide one." The situation, though, became clear when Abraham began to tie Isaac with rope as one does to a lamb before the sacrifice. Nevertheless Isaac willingly cooperated and was placed on the altar. Just as Abraham took a knife in hand and prepared to deliver the fatal blow, God called out, "Abraham! Don't touch that boy! Since you were willing to sacrifice your own son, I know your heart is pure." At that moment, God supplied a lamb that was caught in the brambles, and the father and son sacrificed it to God.

The familiar story of Abraham and Isaac is a problematic one. While it is traditionally construed to demonstrate how great Abraham's trust in God is, it makes God appear to be capricious, even cruel in imposing such a test. Isaac, the long-awaited son of Abraham and Sarah's old age, is also the son through whom God promised to bless the nations; certainly Abraham must have thought that Isaac would either be spared or replaced. Still, the story must be considered in the context of the ancient Semitic peoples. The sacrifice of the firstborn son was relatively common among Abraham's neighbors and is referred to at many points throughout the Bible (2 Kings 23:10, 2 Chronicles 28:3 and 33:6). Apostates in Israel fell into the practice, particularly in devotion to Chemosh (2 Kings 3:27) and Moloch, which means king (2 Kings 23:10). Among the Semitic peoples, the sacrifice of a firstborn son was considered the ultimate expiation of sin (Micah 6:7). Remember as well in the Exodus narrative that the slaying of the firstborn sons of Egypt was the ultimate plague that moved Pharaoh to "let my people [Israel] go." Both the story of Abraham and Isaac and that of Athamas and Phrixus tell us that there are limits to the transactions between gods and humans. Moreover, these stories tell us of a different view of humankind: The gods of Greece and Israel abhor human sacrifice, and as people are in the image of the gods, so they have a peculiar value among all things in creation. This expression of humanism colors our worldview today. It gives a sense of what the covenant of Israel meant; the God of Israel was different from the gods of their neighbors, and Israel was a people apart. This can be contrasted with ancient Mexico, where humankind was made by mixing blood with cornmeal. Therefore, the appropriate sacrifices back to the gods were human blood and cornmeal. In Babylonia and ancient Mexico, human beings were created to serve the gods; in Israel and Greece, they were created to provide the gods with fellowship. Christians have often read the story of Abraham and Isaac as a prophetic prefiguration of God the Father sacrificing His son, Jesus Christ, on the wooden cross; medieval artists even drew upon the parallel between the wood to be used for the sacrifice of Isaac and the wood of the cross of Christ. Truth and meaning are so often conveyed in the form of a paradox, especially in the realm of myth and religion, and this is true of the story of Abraham and Isaac. On the surface, it would appear that God is demanding the sacrifice of Isaac. But, more significantly, God is demanding that Abraham give himself, to the point of killing the one whom Abraham loves most: the long-awaited son Isaac. It is Abraham's complete giving of himself that makes the sacrifice of Isaac unnecessary. The story also speaks powerfully to the existential elements of finitude, estrangement, and identity. Abraham recognizes his finitude, and as he believes that God sees beyond the limits of man's sight, so he is prepared to act by faith. The story also speaks to the human sense of estrangement. Not only in ancient Israel, but throughout the myths of many cultures, death enters the world as humankind is estranged from God or the gods (in the Judeo-Christian and classical traditions, through sin). Thus, estrangement is perceived to be overcome only through death--whether our own (think of the Catholic term beatific vision, wherein the righteous see God "face-to-face" after death) or the sacrificial death of another, be it Isaac or Jesus. Abraham seeks to overcome estrangement by giving himself through the death of Isaac. The Abraham and Isaac narrative speaks to the issue of identity as well, for Abraham and his descendants. Traditionally the Arabs and Jews count themselves as the descendants of Abraham. In the Islamic version, it is Ismail, not Isaac, who is taken for the sacrifice. As noted in the introduction, the prophet Muhammad is counted as a direct descendant of Ismail, and some Muslim scholars consider this event an important point in Allah's revelation. To an Arab Muslim, this is his or her own sacred history. The covenant relationship with God was the very definition of ancient Israel, and the definition still stands among Orthodox Jews. Jews are those who keep the covenant with God; this is both their sacred history and their identity. And, unlike their neighbors' gods, the God of Israel rejects the transaction of human sacrifice, instead asking for Israel's people to give themselves in obedience to the covenant, as codified in the Torah. Abraham, as we have said, is asked by God not so much for the sacrifice of his own son as to give himself. This needs to be restated, as herein lies the father-son dynamic of the story. Abraham is defined by his son and is still spoken of as Father Abraham even today. Abraham's identity is so dependent upon having an heir that even his name is changed to mean father of nations. The son is a crucial element in who Abraham is, and the relationship with the son is the reflection of the relationship with God. Abraham waits ninety years for the birth of Isaac, a test of faith in God. As much as all fathers give a family identity to their sons, so, too, the father-son

relationship is a "spiritual barometer" for the father, as what is most demanded of any father in the father-son relationship is the father's own self. The paradoxes in this story bothered Danish philosopher Sren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) so much that he used it as the framework for a major philosophical investigation. The result was a classic of Christian existentialism: *Fear and Trembling*. For Kierkegaard, the story of Abraham and Isaac is a perfect place to begin an investigation of the limits of ethics, of the relationship between God and man, of the costs of faith, and ultimately of the meaning of our existence. Through the story of Abraham, Kierkegaard addresses the problem of "the teleological suspension of the ethical." In other words, is the duty to God so great that one would act unethically in order to fulfill his will? Kierkegaard asks the question of whether it was ethical for Abraham to follow God's command and take Isaac to the place of sacrifice, without even telling Isaac's mother, Sarah, or the priest Eleazar. For Kierkegaard, using the example of Abraham, faith in God presented a paradox; it was not merely objective belief, but a subjective passion. Kierkegaard, and certainly modern people, would be appalled were their neighbor to take his or her son for sacrifice, claiming that God had commanded it so. Even if one reckons in the factor that sacrifice of the firstborn was a relatively common religious practice among Abraham's neighbors, it appears to be at once an act of supreme faith in God and an abomination. For Kierkegaard, faith in God has a price, and the passion cannot be understood unless experienced, "felt."