

*Parallel Myths* by J.F. Bierlein

In his 1994 book, *Parallel Myths*,<sup>1</sup> Bierlein opens with a short discussion on myth, which he equates to “an eternal mirror in which we see ourselves,” and states that exposure to only European literature “does not allow the reader to see the fascinating parallels that exist among the myths of widely separated cultures.” He further articulates his comprehension of myth as the “earliest form of science: speculation on how the world came into being” and that they being to work “where our own five senses end.” He understands myth as a bridge between images of the unconscious and the conscious mind.

Bierlein explains that missionaries translated any general term for a nonpersonified greater power as “God,” and states that “the sun was not merely the heavenly body but was personified as a god with a definite humanlike life history.” In many mythologies, all life is produced by the marriage between “Father” sky and “Mother” earth. He explains how myths guided the names of the months and the days of the week around the world, and marks a clear distinction between a linear view of history and a cyclical one that includes the cycles of ages called yugas in the Hindu tradition.

Among the great many parallels offered, the clearest are those that equate the Greek gods with the later Roman interpretations of them. These include Zeus/Jupiter, Hera/Juno, Aphrodite/Venus, Hermes/Mercury, Artemis/Diana, Ares/Mars, Hestia/Vesta, Poseidon/Neptune, Hades/Pluto, Athena/Minerva, Hephaestus/Vulcan, Demeter/Ceres, and Dionysus/Bacchus. Other parallels are drawn between these and some Hindu deities, including Jupiter with the Priest of the gods, Brihaspati, and the Uranus as the “Father of Heaven” with Varuna as a pantheon

chief. Further parallels are drawn between the Egyptian Ennead, a pantheon of nine, with various gods and powers of other regions.

Bierlein compares the creation myths of Mesopotamia, India, the Eastern Mediterranean, Greece, Rome, the Nordic countries, the American Indian tribes, the Yoruba of West Africa, Madagascar, Finland, China, Japan, Polynesia, New Zealand. He discusses common motifs, including the important roles played by primordial water, floods, the serpent, the tree, love, the fall of man, and the end of the world.

Academic scholarship on the subject is divided between the theories of *diffusion* and *psychological view*. The former viewpoint asserts that myths were produced in a few areas, such as India or the Levant, and then “passed through contact between cultures.” The psychological view holds that the “core elements of myth are products of the human psyche” and are universal to all human beings. Bierlein closes his book with a discussion of the mythological viewpoints held by luminaries in the field, such as Robert Graves, Adolf Bastian, Leo Frobenius, Emile Durkheim, Bronislaw Malinowski, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and several others.

1. Bierlein, J.F. *Parallel Myths*. Ballantine Books, 1994.

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