



# An Introduction to Mythology

*Lewis Spence*

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In the preface to his "Introduction to Mythology" Mr. Spence remarks: "Thirty years ago, if a student of myth had been asked who Janus was, he would probably have replied: 'A Roman god of origins.' To-day he might see in him a development of the 'kern-baby!'" It is thus that relativity is becoming the keyword in the sciences; and in this instance mythology ceases to be the recording of specific myths for their informative or documentary value, and becomes the comparison of myths to determine their common denominators.

It is a short step, however, from the grouping of myths by parallelisms or recurrences to the explanation of these parallelisms by the formulation of some underlying principle; for these comparisons show "a regularity of development not to be accounted for by motiveless fancy, but by laws of formation." One finds, for instance, the continual recurrence of the Deluge in the myths of peoples scattered over the entire earth; and if the Hebrew myth is explained as a borrowing from the Babylonian, how is the prevalence of the same subject accounted for in the American Indian? Is this due to some purely physical relationship? Or does it testify to a certain broad similarity in all human brains?

On this phase of the subject Mr. Spence is at great pains to maintain no thesis at all; although he does summarize what has been done in the way of establishing monistic principles, while he himself holds to the opinion that such efforts have been more invigorating than true, and that the interrelations of mythology should be formulated on a less wholesale basis. In his 'chapter dealing with the bearing of myth on folklore, he gives some interesting material relating to the metamorphosis of the former into the latter. The belief in the power of iron, for instance, to ward off evil fairies may be connected with the times of the pre-historic bronze-users, whose weapons were shivered to pieces by the users of iron; iron thus coming to be looked upon as a magic power. If the writer of this note could be permitted to add his mite to knowledge, may not this old iron-spirit be traced in a modest form even to present-day America? In the children's game of "iron-tag," the person who stands on iron can not be tagged by the person who is "it."

—*The Freeman*, Vol. 4 [1921]

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