

**MYTHS OF
THE ORIGIN OF FIRE**

AN ESSAY

SIR JAMES GEORGE FRAZER
O.M., F.R.S., F.B.A.



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FELLOW OF TRINITY COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE
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PREFACE

MYTHOLOGY may perhaps be defined as the philosophy of primitive man. It is his first attempt to answer those general questions concerning the world which have doubtless obtruded themselves on the human mind from the earliest times and will continue to occupy it to the last. Thus the task which it sets the inquirer is identical with that which at a later stage is taken up by philosophy and at a still later stage by science. Surrounded by mysteries on every hand, we are impelled by an invincible instinct to lift the veil that seems to hide them, in the hope that, once uprolled, it may disclose the grand secret which generation after generation of seekers has sought in vain to discover. It is an endless quest, an endless succession of systems, mythical, philosophical, scientific, confidently propounded, strenuously defended like fortresses built for eternity, glistening in rainbow radiance for a time; then bursting and vanishing like gossamer threads in the sunbeams or bubbles on a river. So it has been and so it will be; it is not for the philosopher or the naturalist to cast stones at the glass-houses of his predecessor the myth-maker. Indeed, one of the greatest of philosophers, Plato himself, was fain to span not a few chasms in his system with bridges built of myth, which, light and airy as they seem, may in the end outlast the structure they were designed to consolidate. To this supreme builder of mythical bridges—this *Pontifex Maximus*—we owe the flights of angel fancy in the *Phaedrus* and the sublime simile of the cave in the *Republic*.

Thus, to be complete, a history of philosophy and even of science should begin with an account of mythology. The

importance of myths as documents of human thought in the embryo is now generally recognized, and they are collected and compared, no longer for the sake of idle entertainment, but for the light they throw on the intellectual evolution of our species. In that work of collection and comparison much remains to be done before all the myths of the world can be classified and arranged in a *Corpus Mythorum*, in which, as in a museum, these fossils of the mind can be exhibited to illustrate an early stage in the progress of thought from its lowly beginnings to heights as yet unknown. With my other writings I offer this essay as a contribution to that great palaeontology of the human mind which remains to be written.

J. G. FRAZER.

8th December 1929.

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