

INTRODUCTION



A few claims about Lord Raglan could hardly be controversial: his books are beautifully written, crisp and clear, terse and pungent, and controversial to the marrow. He was not a professor and did not write the way most professors write.

He was born in 1885, educated at Eton and Sandhurst, joined the Grenadier Guards in 1905, and later served with the Egyptian army and as district commissioner in the Mongalla Province. In 1918 he joined the army in Palestine and spent more than two years among the Arabs in Transjordan. In 1921 he succeeded his father as Lord Raglan and retired.

In 1933 he published *Jocasta's Crime*, a study of incest, and was elected president of the Anthropological Section of the British Association. *The Hero* followed in 1936, and his ideas are developed further in *How Came Civilization* (1939) and *The Origin of Religion* (1949). He was president of the Folk-Lore Society from 1945-47 and also wrote articles on the Lotuko tribe in the Sudan and the Arabs of Transjordan.

He died September 14, 1964, and the following day *The New York Times* said in its long obituary: "In his time, he thwarted the slave traders of Sudan and settled blood feuds in Jordan . . . While in the Sudan, he also . . . completed the first Lotuko-English dictionary. . . ."

He was neither an amateur nor a professional scholar but, like Francis Bacon and Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and George Berkeley, David Hume and Edward Gibbon, John Stuart Mill and Bertrand Russell, a highly intelligent man who wrote on matters in which he had a consuming interest, dispensing with academic claptrap. What is more,

he had something to say and said it clearly and powerfully, leaving us in no doubt at all about where he stood. He thought that most of the received views of the subjects he wrote about were wrong and could be shown to be based on little or no evidence, and he proposed views of his own and tried to show that they were obviously right.

Since *The Hero* first appeared, writing of this kind has become almost extinct. Most scholars take ever greater pains to establish their expertise by publishing microscopic studies that are of no great interest to readers who are not specialists, while books that have wider appeal and are more entertaining tend to be either unscholarly or inconclusive, or both. The most popular book on the subject of *The Hero* is a case in point. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) agrees with Raglan, without ever mentioning him, that the same motifs are to be found all over the earth, but while the author, Joseph Campbell, is good at retelling stories, he has no central thesis of his own. He follows Raglan in being a diffusionist, who believes that all culture spread from one central area, the so-called Fertile Crescent; but at the same time Campbell, unlike Raglan, is also influenced by C. G. Jung and invokes archetypes in the human soul that are held to account for the fact that the same motifs are found in so many different places. The whole presentation is so long on the raconteur's art and so short on rigor that neither the author nor most of his readers seem to notice the central inconsistency. If diffusionism is right—and as recently as his *The Mythic Image* (1975) Campbell has insisted on that—then we need not invoke archetypes or Jung.

Raglan states his case so well that there is no need to paraphrase or summarize it. But if we want to reflect on it critically, we need to bear in mind some of the major steps in his argument. This is doubly important because in passing he makes many statements that specialists might question and we must ask to what extent his case depends on these assertions.

The Hero makes three central claims. First, tales about heroes all over the globe agree in containing a large num-

ber of the twenty-two motifs that are enumerated at the beginning of Chapter XVI. Oedipus scores a full twenty-two, Theseus twenty, Romulus eighteen, and so forth. Second, there is no good evidence to support the claim that these tales reflect historical events or that myths and folklore are based on history. Finally, there is good evidence for believing that myth and folklore are based on ritual dramas that originated in the Fertile Crescent.

Clearly, the first of these three claims is crucial. If it could be proved, the second and third claims would seem highly plausible. If, on the other hand, Raglan failed to come anywhere near establishing it, then his whole case would crumble. It is to the author's credit that he presents his case so clearly. Simply noting similarities between tales here and there is neither here nor there, and does not get us anywhere. It is admirable when Raglan selects close to two dozen motifs and then examines the stories of close to two dozen heroes to see how many motifs recur in each case. Methodologically, this is exemplary. It makes it easy for those who want to reflect critically on his theory to see how much evidence there is for it. To be sure, it might be still better if references had been given for every motif in each of the twenty-one cases, though this would have encumbered Chapter XVI with hundreds of footnotes. But this fault can be remedied by any scholar who has the patience to examine the evidence for himself. The eleven Greek heroes can be checked easily in any number of reference works on classical mythology, the three Biblical ones should be familiar to anyone who knows the Old Testament, and Romulus, Siegfried, King Arthur, and Robin Hood are not excessively esoteric either. Only three of the twenty-one examples are not so easily accessible, which is fair enough, and the reader can easily add cases of his own.

Raglan leans over backward not to include or even mention Jesus, confident, I suppose, that every discerning reader will think of Jesus and compute his score for himself. Here is Raglan's list of twenty-two motifs:

- (1) The hero's mother is a royal virgin;

- (2) His father is a king, and
- (3) Often a near relative of his mother, but
- (4) The circumstances of his conception are unusual, and
- (5) He is also reputed to be the son of a god.
- (6) At birth an attempt is made, usually by his father or his maternal grandfather, to kill him, but
- (7) He is spirited away, and
- (8) Reared by foster parents in a far country.
- (9) We are told nothing of his childhood, but
- (10) On reaching manhood he returns or goes to his future kingdom.
- (11) After a victory over the king and/or a giant, dragon, or wild beast,
- (12) He marries a princess, often the daughter of his predecessor, and
- (13) Becomes king.
- (14) For a time he reigns uneventfully, and
- (15) Prescribes laws, but
- (16) Later he loses favor with the gods and/or his subjects, and
- (17) Is driven from the throne and city, after which
- (18) He meets with a mysterious death,
- (19) Often at the top of a hill.
- (20) His children, if any, do not succeed him.
- (21) His body is not buried, but nevertheless
- (22) He has one or more holy sepulchers.

The story of Jesus in the Gospels contains all but five, namely 1-3, 12, and 14, and Raglan might well wish to include 1. The implication is clear and, no doubt, intended: it would be foolish to suppose that this story is based on historical facts. One might grant that Jesus lived, taught, and was crucified, but the story we have was made to conform to a traditional pattern, if Raglan is right.

Is Raglan right? Let us next consider the three examples he gives from the Hebrew Bible: Joseph, Moses, and Elijah. Joseph scores twelve points, according to Raglan, and we might well add motif 20 ("his children do not succeed

him"), but we must question some of the other points: 1 (Rachel comes nowhere near being "a royal virgin"), and 8, 11, 12, 13 can be made to apply only by departing rather far from the original wording of these motifs. If we add one point to Raglan's twelve but subtract five, we are left with eight, suggesting that a historical tale might have been enriched with some mythical motifs.

Moses is given twenty points by Raglan, but one might question eleven of these: motifs 1, 2, 5, 10, 11, 12, 13, 16, 17, 21 and 22. In some of these cases Raglan stretches the meaning of the words quite implausibly (for example, 1 and 2), in other cases he goes against the biblical text (5 and 21), and when he comes to 22 ("he has a holy sepulcher near Jerusalem") he refers to a Muslim site. The Bible states expressly that "no man knows his grave to this day" (Deuteronomy 34.6), and the Jews have always accepted this statement.

Elijah is given nine points, including "a holy sepulcher," though this is again a much later Muslim structure, and the Jews have always accepted the Biblical story that he has no grave. Of the remaining eight points, one might well deny 13 and 19 after seeing how these motifs were defined originally, and while it is true that "his children do not succeed him," this motif is hardly applicable to a prophet, since there is no presumption whatever that a prophet has children who inherit his calling. That leaves 11, 16, 17 (Beersheba instead of Mount Sinai is a slip), 18 and 21, which is not an impressive example at all: a score of five. As we shall see soon, many definitely historical figures score more points than that.

Clearly, Raglan is not at his best in the Old Testament. His claim in Chapter XVII "that sometimes at least the candidate for the throne had to pass in a rainmaking test" is supported solely by the cases of Joseph, Moses, and Elijah, none of whom was a candidate for any throne; and his claim three pages earlier, in the same chapter, that "Joseph wore a special garment which was soaked in goat's blood" will not sit well with anyone familiar with the text of Genesis 37.31: Having sold Joseph into slavery,

his brothers "killed a kid of the goats, and dipped his coat in the blood and brought it to their father" to make him believe that Joseph had been killed by a wild beast.

Almost all of Raglan's references to the Old Testament can be faulted. It is odd that he himself did not realize when he said, still in Chapter XVII, "that the hero of tradition never wins a battle," rarely has companions, "and when he has he never trains or leads them," that Moses was not a traditional hero of this sort. The same goes for his remark, three pages later, that the hero's "story, from the time of his accession to the time of his fall, is as a rule a complete blank." Still odder is the claim in Chapter XVIII that Moses and Elijah "are represented as committing suicide." Near the end of Chapter XXIII, the footnote reference to 2 Kings i, should be to 2 Kings ix; the claims in the text are again not quite right; and the last two paragraphs of Chapter X are also open to criticism. It would be pointless to go on in this vein.

What Raglan, like almost everybody else, has failed to note is a crucial difference between the ancient Hebrews and the ancient Greeks. On the Greeks he is, on the whole, very good. The similarities between the tales about different Greek heroes are indeed striking. Among the eleven Raglan examines we find nine scores of fifteen or better. One might well contest a few points, but then one might also credit Romulus—whom one could assimilate to this group as a hero of classical antiquity—with motifs 9 and 13, increasing his score from eighteen to twenty. But these scores do not show sufficiently well how plausible Raglan's theses are when we consider this group of heroes. So much of what he says is so well taken and perceptive that it would be pointless to enumerate his insights. He himself states them so well that it makes more sense to call attention to some of his relatively few slips, as I have done. But to point up the contrast between the Greeks and Hebrews, consider Chapter XXII "Age and Time."

What is said here is essentially right—and important—about the Greeks, and obviously does not apply to the Old Testament. That goes for Rules 1 and 2, which are stated

at the outset, as well as the striking quotations from Gilbert Murray and Peake and Fleure a page or two later: After the destruction of Troy, "no more. . . . What happened to Mycenae after the death of Aegisthus? No one seems to know, there seems to be no Mycenae anymore. What happened in Sparta after Menelaus and Helen had taken their departure to the islands of the blest? There is no record, no memory." And as Murray noted, "It is the same wherever we turn our eyes in the vast field of Greek legend." Here we are indeed in an essentially unhistorical world, the realm of myth, and Raglan illuminates it brilliantly. In effect, he gives us a more plausible version of "The Birth of Tragedy" than Nietzsche did.

In the Old Testament, on the other hand, we are not at all at a loss to answer the questions: What happened after the death of Jacob, or of Moses, or of David, or Solomon, or Ahab, or Elijah, or after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, or after Cyrus conquered Babylon? Here we are in an essentially historical world, even if one or another detail may have crept in here or there from the realm of myth. (For a detailed contrast of the different attitudes of the Greeks and Hebrews toward "Age and Time" and history, see the first half of my *Time Is an Artist*, which also deals with ancient India.*)

It is often said that the Greeks discovered history. In fact, their lack of any pronounced interest in history is doubly striking when one considers their immense intellectual curiosity. They knew next to nothing about their own past before, say, 600 B.C., and little indeed of the sixth century, which is even more remarkable since they lived close to nations that did keep records of their past. The historical consciousness was born in ancient Israel, but in failing to see this Raglan does not stand alone. We only need to add that in the story of Jesus in the Gospels, which were written in Greek, a historical kernel is smothered by myth.

* The book has been published separately and also as part two of *Man's Lot: A Trilogy. Photographs and Text*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1978.

Far more serious is another flaw in *The Hero*. At the end of Chapter XVI Raglan says: "I have not found an undoubtedly historical hero to whom more than six points can be awarded, or perhaps seven in the case of Alexander the Great." As a matter of fact, Hitler rates eleven points (3, 8-11, 13, 15, 16, 18, 20, and 21), and so does Napoleon (9-13 and 15-20). Kaiser Wilhelm II and the last tsar get ten points each (1, 2, 9, 12-17, and 20), and Frederick the Great nine points (1, 2, 6, 9, 11-13, 15 and 20), Edward VIII gets eight points (1, 2, 9, 13, 14, 16, 17, and 20), Lincoln seven points (8, 9, 11, 13, 15, 18, and 20), and Franklin Delano Roosevelt at least six (9, 11, 13, 15, 18, and 20). One could increase these scores by stretching the meanings of some words as Raglan does in some cases, giving F.D.R., for example, additional points for 1, 2, 6, and 12. Moreover, many, if not most, of the Pharaohs of Egypt score at least ten points: 1, 2, 3, 5, 9, 12, 13, 14, 15, and 22. In other words, the mere fact that we encounter approximately half of Raglan's twenty-two motifs in a tale about a hero does not create any strong presumption that the tale is mythical rather than historical.

At this point it may seem as if Raglan's theses had been demolished. In fact, the book is so good that it survives all such faults. On reading the opening paragraph of Chapter XIX, "Myth and the Historic Hero," it appears that Raglan himself did not heed his own good advice sufficiently. Clearly, not all of the twenty-two points are of equal weight, some apply to many kings while others are more essentially mythical.

What remains highly plausible in this fascinating book is the description of the ritual drama on which much of Greek mythology is based, the analysis of myth as quite different from history, and the suggestion, developed further in some of Raglan's other books, that much of the mythology and folklore in other parts of the world was derived directly or indirectly from the Greeks or from earlier common sources in Egypt and Mesopotamia.

In the end, Raglan does not prove his theses, but his theses are of extraordinary interest and stated and argued

for clearly enough to invite critical discussion and further research. Before undertaking that, one should also read his *Jocasta's Crime*, *The Origins of Religion*, and *How Came Civilization*, and it is to be hoped that they, too, will be reprinted soon. Few subjects are more intriguing and important than the question whether civilization developed in one place and spread from there, and few writers have written books that open up this subject as forcefully as Raglan's.

For a long time, diffusionism has been neglected while anthropologists have concentrated on smaller issues. It is high time to consider its merits and to give sustained attention to books that are relevant; for example, Campbell's *The Mythic Image*, especially Chapter II, and Alexander von Wuthenau's utterly fascinating and beautifully illustrated *Unexpected Faces in Ancient America 1500 B.C.–A.D. 1500: The Historical Testimony of Pre-Columbian Artists* (New York, 1975). Above all, Raglan's work should be studied carefully, and anyone who turns to his books is sure to find it is a joy to read them.

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