

**Of Fates and Fortunes:  
An Almost Brief Examination of Fate  
Through the Eyes of Ancient Literature**

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In ancient literature from the Epic of Gilgamesh and further on into the evolution of the simplistic notion of the Moiræ in Homer's works to more complex characteristics in later Greek myths, fate (or the Fates) finds itself perpetually misunderstood as *merely* divine providence in action. Over time and the influence of neoplatonism on late Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the identification of fate as a personal force to which man must passively surrender and through which was provided the paradox of free will and predetermination (as found in many of the biblical legends of various patriarchs and heroes) grew out of the impersonal conceptions of fate as a blind destiny to which man strove to achieve by the strength of will and the risk of circumstance. This is reflected as much in literature as it is in the hermeneutic process by which literature is interpreted thousands of years later. It is posited here that the underlying concepts of fate in the ancient world from greater Mesopotamia to the Far East are based on an impersonal view of *wyrd* and exemplified through works as the Epic of Gilgamesh and the writings of Tao Ch'ien. These are contrasted in the biblical stories of Joseph and Jonah which offer the helpless state of predetermination as the embodiment of *kismet*.

For the purposes of this examination, fate has been divided into two distinct characterizations that follow Joseph Campbell's lead from Creative Mythology. Before crossing over into examples of the role of fate in literature, understanding the differences in how fate is defined and how each is similar in composition is vital in the exegetic role of the reader. Depending on how the reader approaches the concept of fate will determine how any particular

text is interpreted as a whole. On the differences between *wyrd* and *kismet*, Campbell writes that "when [fate is] viewed from outside . . . the world's events can be recognized as governed to such a degree by the laws of cause and effect as to be inexorably determined [i.e., *kismet*]; whereas, when [fate is] experienced from within, from the standpoint of an acting subject, living yields an experience of choice [i.e., *wyrd*]" (139). There is no moral association added to this broad categorization as it works just as well in a clockwork universe a'la the Enlightenment as it does in a chaotic universe of random patterns (cf. Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science*).

The Germanic word *wyrd* means "fate, lot, destiny" (Hoed 537). It is interesting to note that the original etymology of the word provides a meaning derived from "become" or "to become" (ibid). This is important here to point out that it is this concept of *becoming* that explicitly distinguishes *wyrd* from *kismet*. It is a pursuit of one's destiny; that is to say, the *act of becoming*. Without denying the point of external forces made previously, *wyrd* holds close the idea that a man is capable of living up to his destiny and overcoming all odds—taking those risks and facing chance in the universe—to capture all he is meant *to become*. In short, *wyrd* expresses an active form of fate that lies in the hands of a mortal rather than solely in the whims of external forces. It is also a fate, to the linear mindset, that is pursued rather than merely accepted as a given or with which one was born.

According to The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions, *kismet* is a word that comes to us from the Turkish language—*quisma*, 'share, portion'—and is generally portrayed as "the acceptance that God determines all things" (Bowker). While generally an Islamic word, there is no difference in this specific term and the general concept of divine providence in any of the other Abrahamic religions. Overall this approach to fate is a "claim that the most important

forces which create, shape, guide, reward, and afflict human life are out of human control" (Johnston par. 5). Kismet, specifically, is a fate that is accepted as inevitable and preordained since birth (usually with grains of original sin built-in), given by the figurative or literal "hand of god," and *from which* there is no escape or change. It is ultimately fatalistic in nature even if it is assumed that mortals have a free will to direct the more insignificant aspects of their lives.

## WHERE THE WYRD THINGS ARE

*Destiny is not a matter of chance, it is a matter of choice; it is not a thing to be waited for, it is a thing to be achieved.*

— *William Jennings Bryan*

Something that seems to be one of the staples of both ancient literature and modern fairy tales is the amnesiac prince who runs into a charming young milkmaid, falls in love, runs away to live "happily ever after" only to smack his head on a low hanging branch, wake up remembering he is a long lost prince and *then* runs off to actually live happily ever after since he is in the position to make his new paramour a princess. In so many different stories, the theme comes back to the same premise: that is, the protagonist as running *away* from his fate—whether he realizes it or not—rather than running to embrace it only to run headlong into it later and accept their lot in life (i.e., their *wyrd*). Gilgamesh, for instance, is an ideal character as representing this aspect of the hero running from his fate.

Gilgamesh is given a destiny. It states in Gilgamesh that he is "given the kingship, such was [his] destiny" (40). This selection of the story starts out with the people disturbed and muttering that a "king should be a shepherd to his people" (13). Gilgamesh is aimless even in the

face of his own destiny. He wanders around starting fights and takes the city's best young men with him. He takes lovers, willing or not, from his own soldiers and the nobles of his court. Gilgamesh does not at all seem like one who has been given a great responsibility or even understands his own fate.

For Gilgamesh, however, this kingship is his *wyrd*, his destiny, his *destination*, if you will. This is the fate to which he *should* be aiming to attain. However, he is unwise and squanders his abilities to the point that the gods were supplicated to figure something out. It is here that we can see first that the gods have not set out a specific path for Gilgamesh's destiny. He must pursue this destiny on his own. However, in the story, the people are so afflicted by Gilgamesh that the gods put Enkidu into the mix. Note that this is no chance encounter. This is a very deliberate and calculated move by the gods. It does not affect the specific fate of Gilgamesh *per se*, but it does provide a new focus for Gilgamesh to look beyond his superficial circumstances and see his destiny.

On a visceral level, the loss of Enkidu is the turning point between Gilgamesh the wild warrior and Gilgamesh the great king. It is certainly the external event, but up to this point the struggle between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, the hunt for Humbaba, and the events with the Bull of Heaven leading up to the death of Enkidu are all events that provided the internal attachment necessary for Gilgamesh to alter his view of himself and his circumstances. After the death of Enkidu, Gilgamesh not only realizes his mortality but that there is something more to his life than sex and war. It is then that he begins to *pursue* his destiny.

From here, Gilgamesh can be seen in the light of his destiny. This *wyrd*, as it were, is what is given to Gilgamesh. However, it is no mere target or goal. This *wyrd* "is not a

predetermined future that, if not achieved, leads to ruin. Rather, given the . . . the defined possibilities of one's fate, there exists a fullness of becoming for the human person" (Rodriguez 83). This fate, this *wyrd*, this destiny of Gilgamesh is the fullness of his own self. And, at the end of the epic, Gilgamesh does indeed capture all that he is *to become*.

For Tao Ch'ien it is not so much the pursuit of his destiny but the acceptance of it. But this is not a passive acceptance such as comes with *kismet*. He is very cognizant of this destiny. In his "Elegy," Tao Ch'ien says, "Content with Heaven and accepting my lot, I lived out the years of my life" (1369). Ch'ien sees death as the crowning aspect of his destiny—or anyone's—"of which one cannot be ignorant" (*ibid*). But he claims that "men fear to waste their days, concerned that they may fail to succeed" (*ibid*). There is no such claim about himself. For Ch'ien, then, life has been exactly as it was supposed to be. He says, in fact, that he find "no regret in this present transformation" (*ibid*).

What is most interesting about Ch'ien's destiny is that he acknowledges it, he understands it, he accepts it, but it is still passive almost as if leaning toward fate as *kismet* but not quite all the way into that realm of blind acquiescence to the forces of chance. This seems to be at least part of an Eastern mindset that views life *itself* as destiny. Rather than having a specific *wyrd* in the sense of Gilgamesh's kingship, for Ch'ien, it is the acceptance that his life has been lived (or, as in some of his work, *being* lived) fully— as we come back to this sense of the "fullness of becoming for the human person" (Rodriguez 83)—and it has been lived without regret. However, and more importantly, what is missing is the sense of his destiny being defined for him by external forces. He has been the master of his own life, for better or for worse, and he has lived as his destiny allowed.

**KISMET! GOD BLESS YOU!**

*Fate is like a strange, unpopular restaurant, filled with odd waiters who bring you things you never asked for and don't always like.*

—*Lemony Snicket*

One of the more interesting aspects of fate is the ability of protagonists throughout many different types of literature to challenge fate or to "beat" fate as it were. Rarely is it ever successful, of course, since the fate found in these stories is that of *kismet*; that is, a fate ordained to mortals by something outside their own control. The biblical stories of Joseph and Jonah are perfect examples of both sides of kismet: the passive acceptance and the futile challenge, respectively.

Examining "The Story of Joseph" there is a view of the passive acceptance of kismet including the happy ending justification for any number of cruel acts. Joseph is sold to the Midianites by his brothers who then set out to deceive their father after they had "killed a kid of the goats, and dipped [Joseph's] coat in the blood" (67). He is then accused of rape by his master's wife after he refuses her and thrown into prison (68). Through all of his ordeals, there is a phrase that repeats throughout the story that "the Lord was with Joseph" (68, 69).

It is important to note that at no point in the story is Joseph actually acting of his own accord: that is to say, Joseph is *not* the master of his own fate. While it is not insignificant to the creation of a cultural hero that his duty and morality stood firm in the face of temptation, ultimately it is not relevant except as a plot device to provide a background to the kismet of the protagonist that, according to Joseph himself, was all preordained by god. It is at the end of "The

Story of Joseph" that we see that he provides an explanation for his journey and trials—ultimately denying that he or even his own brothers had any real choice in the events or their actions—as he justifies the whole series of events through the anthropomorphization of his fate: "God did send me before you to preserve life" (76) and "to preserve [his family] a posterity in the earth, and to save [his family] by a great deliverance" (ibid).

On the other end of the spectrum—though no less an example of kismet—is Jonah. While there is certainly some complex psychological issues involved here, at the most base level "Jonah" is the story about a man who attempts to challenge and escape his inevitable fate. When set in contrast to "The Story of Joseph," this story has a smaller timescale involved. Rather than being a dozen years or so, we are looking at a story that takes place over a month or two at most. But time is not a very consistent factor when examining fate from this perspective. Fate, as kismet, is about the paradox of free will and predetermination.

In a quick review of "Jonah," we see that god told the prophet, "Arise, go to Nineveh . . . and cry against it" (101). Jonah immediately turns and runs in the opposite direction. But his fate is in the hands of a predetermined end that *will* happen regardless of his intent to flee that fate. No matter what Jonah does on his own, his fate—his kismet—is to end up in Nineveh. This view of existence is fatalistic in the sense that all activity is idle and fruitless since all conclusions are inevitable and only superficially appear to be taken through an application of free will. The difference, in fact, between the "running away" of Jonah and Gilgamesh is in this sense of predetermination. Jonah *will* end up at Nineveh regardless of his attempts to avoid it. Gilgamesh *may or may not become* the great king of his destiny depending on his own choices and actions. Jonah is at the mercy of god. Gilgamesh is at the mercy of his own ego and pride.

In both of these biblical stories, fate is a predetermined aspect of an individual's life. There is an illusion of choice involved, of course, but it makes no difference to the outcome of events. What is found in both of these stories is the acknowledgement of external forces in control of the life of a mortal. In Joseph's case, it is a passive acceptance of one's lot in life, that conclusion that is inevitable for his life. For Jonah, even though there is an active attempt to challenge that fate, there is still an acknowledgement of the inevitability of his circumstances.

## SHADES OF FATE

*My fate cannot be mastered; it can only be collaborated with and thereby, to some extent, directed. Nor am I the captain of my soul; I am only its noisiest passenger.*

—*Aldous Huxley*

The examination of fate is a complicated study with twists and turns, shades of grey, and large smudges where the line that divides *wyrd* and *kismet* is blurred and they seem to cross one on top of the other and back again. Religion, traditionally speaking, tends to lean toward the side of *kismet*. At least it does seem that way here in the West. Many of the Eastern philosophies—religious or not—may seem to look at fate as a semipassive player in the cosmic drama of men but they are just as divided over whether men pursue their fate or merely accept it. Sometimes it would appear that doing both is the right answer.

Fate generally works in literature as both a plot device and a brutal exploration of the human condition. There is, without a doubt, a great exposition of the *wyrd* that comes to the reading chair by way of the earliest literature known to man. It continues forward from the Epic of Gilgamesh into the European epics of Beowulf, the Nibelungenlied, and others. Much of our

own literature brought to or created in the New World was influenced by such poetic and philosophic trends. The idea that a man pursues his destiny is very much ingrained with the imagination and dreams of our youth—as it should be—just as it was with our country's founding fathers.

It is no small coincidence that the United States Declaration of Independence reads, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" (par. 2). It is this right of every man—and, to our country's designers, an "unalienable right"—that he be able to pursue his own destiny that sets apart the American dream, born in the revolutions of the Enlightenment, from the preordained fate imposed from the cradle to the grave by the Medieval Church. It is little wonder, then, the folklore of the United States mirrors the myths and stories of Gilgamesh and other epics more than those of biblical legend.

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