



The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion

Sir James George Frazer (1854 - 1941)

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The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion is a wide-ranging study of mythology and religion spanning most of recorded history and most of the known world at the time. Throughout the focus is on the similarities and shared elements that exist in different cultures in fertility rites, human and animal sacrifices, rituals of dying and reviving gods and kings, the significance of trees, plants and animals. The book had its origin in an examination of *The Golden Bough*, a painting by J. M. W. Turner illustrating an incident in *The Aeneid* where the Sibyl presents a golden bough from a tree in a sacred grove to the gatekeeper of Hades to gain admission. It grew into an encyclopedic

study first published in two volumes in 1890, expanding to twelve volumes in the third edition published between 1906-15. Intended for educated members of the general public already familiar with *The Age of Fable* and *Stories of Gods and Heroes* by Thomas Bulfinch, the book created something of a scandal by including the Christian story of Jesus and the Resurrection in the study. The scope of the material combined with rigorous scholarship and keen insight made the book an important influence on the emerging discipline of anthropology. It is now seen as a foundational work in the history of ideas and is often cited as an inspiration to much of Modernist literature, influencing major writers from T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Sigmund Freud and D.H. Lawrence to Joseph Campbell, Mary Renault and Camille Paglia, to name just a few.

Sir James George Frazer (January 1, 1854 – May 7, 1941) was a Scottish social anthropologist who made major contributions to the study of mythology and comparative religion, most notably *The Golden Bough*. He was born in Glasgow the son of a chemist. He attended Springfield Academy and Larchfield Academy, then University of Glasgow and Trinity College, Cambridge, where he graduated with honors in Classics and remained a Classical Fellow for the rest of his life. His source material was gleaned primarily ancient histories and questionnaires mailed to missionaries and imperial officials posted all over the world, from which he assembles an encyclopedia of magical and religious beliefs. He was the first scholar to show similarities in rituals and beliefs from different cultures and to examine the relationships between myths and rituals. He was a proponent of the Darwinian notion of human understanding of the world progressing through three stages, rising from magic through religion and culminating in science, but also divined the importance of an eternal and symbolic cycle of life underlying much mythology and religion. As such, he is often considered one of the founders of modern anthropology. His work was a major influence on 20th century poets and artists, most notably T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*. He was knighted in 1914.