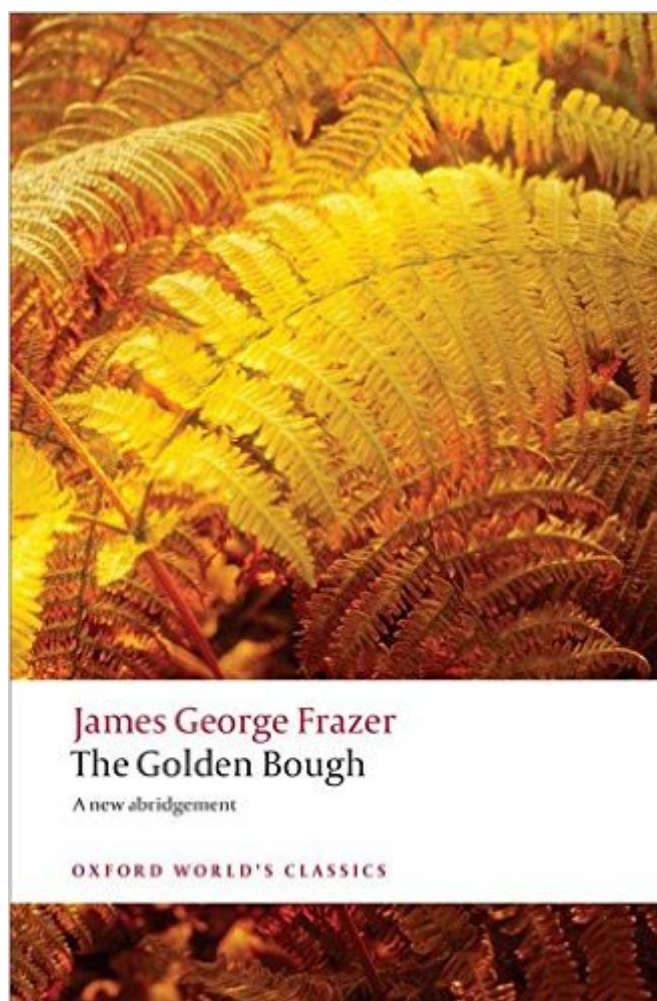


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# The Golden Bough: A Study In Magic And Religion: A New Abridgement From The Second And Third Editions (Oxford World's Classics)



## Synopsis

A classic study of the beliefs and institutions of mankind, and the progress through magic and religion to scientific thought, *The Golden Bough* has a unique status in modern anthropology and literature. First published in 1890, *The Golden Bough* was eventually issued in a twelve-volume edition (1906-15) which was abridged in 1922 by the author and his wife. That abridgement has never been reconsidered for a modern audience. In it some of the more controversial passages were dropped, including Frazer's daring speculations on the Crucifixion of Christ. For the first time this one-volume edition restores Frazer's bolder theories and sets them within the framework of a valuable introduction and notes. With new, modern packaging this new edition is a valuable classic to add to your bookshelf. About the Series: For over 100 years Oxford World's Classics has made available the broadest spectrum of literature from around the globe. Each affordable volume reflects Oxford's commitment to scholarship, providing the most accurate text plus a wealth of other valuable features, including expert introductions by leading authorities, voluminous notes to clarify the text, up-to-date bibliographies for further study, and much more.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Frazer's classic "*The Golden Bough*" may justifiably be called the foundation that modern anthropology is based on. While it has been discredited in some areas since its 1st publication, it has stood the test of time remarkably well. It's still the best book I know of to explain the origins of

magical & religious thought to a new student of comparative religions. I would especially suggest it to anyone interested in mythology, supernatural magic or religion, especially any of the modern neo-pagan religions. More than one critic has said that it should be required reading for everyone. Originally, Frazer sought to explain the strange custom at an Italian sacred grove near the city of Aricia. He wanted to know why it was custom there for a priest of Diana to continually guard a sacred tree with his life. Why was it required that this pagan priest murder anyone who dares to break a branch from the tree & why were so many willing to risk their lives to do so? What power did this broken branch have that made it a symbol of the priest's own coming death? Why could the priest only be relieved of his position by being ritually murdered & who in their right mind would strive to take his place? What Frazer discovered in his search for answers went well beyond what he expected to find. He very quickly found himself surrounded by ancient pagan beliefs & magic rituals that were as old as mankind & just as widespread. He slowly reveals to us, by way of hundreds of examples, that ancient or primitive man was bound up in a never ending web of taboos & restrictions that regulated his existence here on earth. Every move, spoken word or even thought could swing the powers of the divine for or against pagan man. Every action was bound by religious code & any mistake could invoke supernatural retribution. The entire world, it seemed, was a reflection of the mystic other world that pagan man worshipped & everything here was symbolic of something there. While studying this idea Frazer covers many other perplexing questions about culture & belief that have affected our lives. For example, he explains the origins of many of our holidays. He reveals the original symbolism & meaning of the Christmas tree & mistletoe & tells us what they represent. He explains the pagan origins of Halloween & why it's necessary to placate the spirits who visit your home that night. He solves the question of why Easter isn't a fixed holiday but is instead linked to the Spring Equinox & just what colored eggs have to do with anything. In short he covers just about every known superstition or tradition & relates it back to its pagan beliefs. What emerges from this collection of superstition & folktales isn't a chaotic mess of mumbo-jumbo but is instead a fully expounded religious system. Frazer shows again & again that these traditional customs & continuations of ancient rites are the basis for a religious system pre-dating any of our own. We find that in this system man can not stand apart from nature or the world. Nor can he commit any action without its usual equal but opposite reaction. Eventually, we learn of the powerful but frightening association between a king's fertility & his lands well-being. Lastly, we learn that it's not always "good to be king" & just what sort of horrible price one must pay to be "king for a day". But more than all of this Frazer is commenting on our own times & our own beliefs. "The Golden Bough" isn't simply about ancient pagan religious ideas for their own sake. The book

provides & explains these ideas so we can see how they are still in operation even today. Primitive pagan beliefs & symbolism are with us daily, besides the obvious Christmas tree & Easter eggs. Behind his exhaustive examples & explanations of mystic or secret magic rituals Frazer is actually commenting on our own Judeo-Christian religions. A careful reading between the lines reveals what Frazer was afraid to state bluntly in 1890. That idea is that all religions, even our own, are based on the same basic pagan ideas of "sympathetic" & "contagious" magic. Despite advancements in science & knowledge & even despite spiritual advancements in religion & philosophy, we're still trying to comprehend the divine with the same tools our ancestors used thousands of years ago.

This is Frazer's own abridgement of a mere 750 pages. The original work is 12 volumes. I've started in my lunch hour writing a few reviews here on of things which either really struck me deeply, or which I feel are underrated or overrated... or which I happen to have read recently and therefore are fresh in my mind. This one is of the deep-striking, perspective-altering kind. The book feels to me somehow to be the most central work on mythology, ritual or anthropology that I have read. The reason for this, I think, is that Frazer had a clear vision of some central Fact which he needed to convey. The book is therefore very well organized, doesn't lose its focus amid the masses of data -- and I mean masses of data -- which he brings to bear. And this Fact which he conveys is not really about something external to man -- even something external which man has created; it is about something internal and fundamental to man. Its fundamental point concerns a changeless Fact about the nature of things, more than any myriad of facts -- however amazing -- which have resulted from historical circumstance. After 100 or so pages, I was thinking, "All right already, I get the point about sympathetic magic and a dead guy in a tree. When's the next topic?" But he just kept going on, and about 300 pages into the book, I felt a sort of chill in the base of my spine... maybe I hadn't gotten it about the dead guy in the tree... and then Frazer just keeps going on and on and on for another 450 pages. The sheer volume of data, and the effectiveness with which it is organized somehow sunk through. Had I read a yet more abridged volume, I might not have been left with this stunned sense of the unbelievable pervasiveness and power of this one central Myth which runs through all humanity. There's a lot more one could write about that Myth and the evolution of religions and consequently societies, but I suppose I'll leave that to Frazer. However, for those who have been struck by the Myth or the Dream, I would say that this is the place to start... more than Freud, Jung or Campbell... all of which should be read at some point. I feel like what Frazer presents is fact more than a perspective or theory, which is why I wish I had read it prior to Freud or Jung. I read Joseph Campbell over and over more than Frazer, but his scholarly works are not as

easy to penetrate or as unified as are Frazer's.

I'll skip reviewing the content and speak to book's edition. This is the one that was abridged by the author from a multi-volume, earlier edition. In later years, the tome was watered down and censored due to authorial speculation on the nature of Jesus. All the controversial ideas are present in this particular edition, so it is safe to purchase it and not feel cheated.

In *The Golden Bough*, James George Frazer, an expert social anthropologist, explains the ancient origins of the world's myths, rituals, and religions. He shows the similarities between many cultures' strange superstitions, such as animal and human sacrifice, fertility ritual, community cleansing rituals, and others. He begins with the question of why, at Nemi in prehistoric Greek times, a warrior priest known as the King of the Wood kept his position by fighting for his life, which could be threatened at any time by his successor and murderer. By attempting to explain this ancient tradition, Frazer examines similarities between religious beliefs and shows how the belief in magic and the worship of nature was gradually transformed into the worship of religious kings and gods. Controversially, many elements of Christianity are included, such as Christ's crucifixion and the fact that many Christian holidays coincide with the dates of prehistoric pagan rituals. For the diligent skeptic of Frazer's ideas, I would advise reading the full, multi-volume edition, which includes the archeological evidence for the theories. This book is ESSENTIAL for the studies of mythology, religion, or anthropology.

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