THE MEANING OF „MYTHOLOGY“ IN RELATION TO THE OLD TESTAMENT *)

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This paper is intended to contribute towards the clarification of a term which is to-day enjoying frequent use in reference to Bible, religion and theology. The continuing need for such clarification may be indicated by the following two points:

1. We are becoming increasingly aware that the study of the facts or phenomena cannot be separated from the terminology which we apply to them. When we work with detail on a small scale this problem of terms is less serious and the danger of error more remote. But when we attempt to relate facts and their significance over a wider area we may by inappropriate use of terms lay our study open to misconstruction, and much more serious, lead ourselves into actual errors of interpretation. We may take as an example the difficulties into which we may have been led by terms like “monolatry” and “Monotheism”, and still more by “animism” or “polydaemonism”—each of which has no doubt been used with good intention to express something in some of our texts, but which has carried other connotations going beyond the Old Testament texts and has thus become a mould forcibly applied to a reluctant material.

2. The recent discussion of „mythology” has been to a great extent dominated by New Testament studies and general philosophy and theology. It seems to me however that the basic problem of faith and mythology is one hammered out in the Old Testament, and that discussions which evade this fact miss a great deal of the point. This has not been unrecognised, e.g. by ALAN RICHARDSON in his paper “Gnosis and Revelation in the Bible and in Contemporary Thought” (Scottish Journal of Theology, vol. 9, no. 1, 1956). It is very largely ignored however by the essays translated from German in the volume Kerygma and Myth, by HENDERSON in his Myth in the New Testament, and by MACQUARRIE in his An Existentialist Theology—three

of the most influential expositions of the problem in English. In the discussion it has too often been imagined that mythology could be identified for some purposes at least with the First-Century view of the universe. It will be part of the thesis of this paper that this First-Century cosmology is only a part of an approach to myth which is a theme of the whole Bible, and which is indeed more consciously a central concern of ancient Israel than it is of the New Testament Church. For this reason I suggest that Old Testament scholarship has a special contribution to make to this study.

We may begin by admitting that in a sense we are discussing a problem of definition. What do we mean by "mythology"? We have here the same difficulty that appears in other terms like "eschatology", "animism", etc., namely that we are abandoning actual Biblical language and seeking to find other terms to express Biblical thought. So far we might say that the terms can be used in any sense we wish, provided always that we define them clearly in advance. This would appear to avoid one of the commonest causes of confusion.

But we cannot be satisfied with this as a solution. In fact it is impossible for language to carry any sense by an arbitrary act of definition. Words carry a certain connotation of content; definition must be appropriate, in a sphere of this kind, to the entities studied; the division between words must, if error is to be avoided, be made to correspond as closely as possible with the division between relevant actualities. If this is true, the following appears to be true also:

1. A definition of myth for the purposes of Old Testament study would not be built upon universal theoretical considerations, or even upon the universal phenomenology of religion at all times and in all places. Definition would begin from example. Thus we could say, "By myth we mean, in this context, the sort of thing we find in Ugarit, or in the Enuma Elish, or in other expressions of culture which in fact impinged upon Israel with some directness." We would thus leave for the moment undecided whether in fact such myth universally existed, or whether other types existed elsewhere which would also within their own sphere of relevance require to be designated as "myth".

2. The most serious fault in much recent discussion has been that the sense of the word "myth" has been tacitly or deliberately fixed not in reference to myth as it actually existed in cultures in
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contact with Israel but by its position in more or less modern philosophic usage. BULTMANN’S original essay defines myth as follows: “Mythology is the use of imagery to express the otherworldly in terms of this world and the divine in terms of human life, the other side in terms of this side.” This is perhaps not an impossible definition in itself, though open to criticism in many ways. But in its context in BULTMANN’S thought it is clear that the content attached to myth is drawn from the opposition of myth to modern science rather than from the study of a mythology in its actuality.

3. It is not my concern here to deny that the word “myth” may be properly used in a general philosophical sense as opposed to, or even as a part of, natural science or epistemology. But it does seem true that such usage when applied to the Biblical and extra-Biblical cultural data introduces considerations completely foreign to the subject.

On this basis we can go on to say the following:

1. Myth has to be seen as a totality within the relevant cultural group. It is true that within a single civilisation we have myths of different strata and of different degrees of importance, and myths which appear to bear little relevance to one another. Historical and phenomenological study may for certain purposes have to isolate these elements and see them separately. None the less the effect of myth upon the consciousness of a people is seen only when we realise that it was the mythology as a totality which both shaped and expressed its mind.

It is a totality first of all because mythological thinking is a striving for a total world-view, for an interpretation or meaning of all that is significant. Mythology is not a peripheral manifestation, not a luxury, but a serious attempt at integration of reality and experience, considerably more serious than what we loosely call to-day one’s “philosophy of life.” Its goal is a totality of what is significant to man’s needs, material, intellectual and religious. It has then its aspects which correspond to science, to logic, and to faith, and and it would be wrong to see myth as a distorted substitute for only one of these. Egyptian mythology, for example, has its insights into the configuration of the land of Egypt, the nature of truth, and the dealings of the gods with one another and with men. Myth is then a total worldoutlook; not an outlook brought to expression only on certain solemn occasions, rather one which informs and inspires with meaning the daily business of living. Where new interests and
needs emerge, myth will expand to comprehend the new and greater totality of what is now relevant. This is not to say that mythology was always or ever fully successful in comprehending the totality for which it strove; hard facts can be awkward for myth as they can for any world-outlook; yet to claim the comprehension of such a totality was its nature.

On the other hand man influences and is influenced by the totality of myth as he knows, believes and enacts it. Elements in mythology may come and pass away; but at any point of time and place there is a totality of myth as it is then and there known, which in one way moulds and controls the minds of men and in another way equally is expressing them or being moulded by them. One mythological form or pattern may infiltrate into another and finally replace the other; but man does not see himself in this as surveying two alternatives and choosing between them; rather throughout the process of infiltration, from the beginning to the end of the change, he is moved by the totality as it then exists.

This does not mean that myth is a totality in the sense of a logical system. On the contrary, the attempt to make myth intelligible by a logical systematisation usually distorts it. On the other hand myth may have a logical background; rationalisation does not necessarily abolish myth, but alters it. In late times we have such a phenomenon as post-rational myth, such as the Gnostic mythology, with the rationality of Greek philosophy lying behind it. But in general the totality of myth consists not in its logical organisation but in its grasp of what is significant and its recognition as such by man.

Being such a totality, myth is not a substitute for or a distortion of merely one of our forms of knowledge, scientific, philosophical or religious. It is not merely a pre-scientific attempt to understand the world of nature, sun and moon, plant and animal. Nor is it simply the philosopher’s quest for a Logos or ultimate reality, a quest which lacking the instrument of rational logic has fallen into inextricable symbolic confusion. Nor is it merely a kind of religion which, unable to know God in his spiritual reality, has cultivated the creator under the guise of the creature. And it is not just the projection of the human subconscious, important as the psychological aspect must be for understanding the hold which myth has upon the minds of men.

2. Secondly, myth is not really a symbolic knowledge. In fact it is only within limits and with some reserve that we can look upon
myth as symbolic at all. MALINOWSKI (speaking however of "primitive" culture) can say, "Studied alive, myth, as we shall see, is not symbolic, but a direct expression of its subject matter; it is not an explanation in satisfaction of a scientific interest, but a narrative resurrection of a primitive reality, told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, moral cravings, social submissions, assertions, even practical requirements" 1).

This would seem to apply equally well to the mythological culture of the Near East contemporary with the Old Testament. This myth was not the symbolism to which we may turn when we reach the rationally incomprehensible, when our logical concepts fail to take us farther; nor was it the symbolism which uses pictures for the sake of the impression they give, for the extra tones of their colouring. In ancient times myth was not a picture language. We cannot translate it element by element into another type of language, as if we could say, "This stands for this and that represents that." When we consider myth functionally, in its actual working within a society of mythological culture, we cannot understand it as essentially symbolic in nature.

If this is true, one or two consequences must be drawn. In particular, and this should surely be obvious, it is entirely confusing to treat myth and metaphor as things of the same kind. All language is symbolic in one sense, but this does not make it myth. Some language is metaphorical, but even then it is not myth. It is not myth to say that somebody is a worm. It has sometimes been argued against BULTMANN'S plans to get rid of mythology that mythology is indispensable to human discourse, since all language, especially when it goes beyond the description of familiar tangible things, is symbolic. This argument is entirely misleading and unsuccessful. Even if the position I have just been maintaining were denied, and it was held that myth was a kind of symbolism, even so it would not mean that all symbol was myth.

3. Thirdly, the centre of mythology, or at any rate its characteristic which is specially significant in relation to the Biblical material, is its doctrine of correspondences. Myth always maintains a secret correspondence or hidden harmony of some kind between gods and

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man, gods and nature, man and nature, the normative primeval and
the actual present. The correspondence is, as we have said, not merely
figurative but ontological. Tammuz dying and the vegetation dying
are not merely like one another but are one another. The corres-
pondence is not only believed but enacted. Not only does myth teach
the existence of the harmony, but ritual ensures that the harmony
will in fact exist. In Enuma Elish there is a correspondence between
gods and man because both had their origin ultimately from the same
monsters of chaos; and there is a correspondence between the sal-
vation of the universe from chaos and the prosperity and fruitfulness
of the existing state. The recital and re-enactment of the story at the
festival not only relates these correspondences but brings them
into renewed being. We believe then that this correspondence
doctrine is fundamental to myth as we find it in the ancient
Near East.

This is not to say that in every sentence or element of myth we
can trace a direct correspondence to something in the present world.
It is rather in the totality of myth, and not in each component part,
that we find the necessary connecting link somewhere, which makes
the whole relevant to life in this world, and it is in the form of a
correspondence that the link exists.

The place of ritual makes clearer to us the unitary type of ap-
pearance which lies behind the correspondences. The King of
Egypt succeeding his dead father is Horus succeeding the dead
Osiris, and myth and ritual celebrate not one of these two things but
both, for both are one. Zeus is the rain. Mythology does not per-
cieve Zeus and then symbolise him as rain, nor see rain and then
personify it as Zeus, but it sees Zeus-rain, as it can also see Zeus-
thunder, or Zeus-meteorite (Zeus Kappotas). The perception is
essentially unitary. We might ask what is characteristic of Zeus as
separate or abstracted from these unitary relations, but mythology
proper sees no meaning in such a question.

The importance of the correspondences is above all functional.
They express the fact that myth is not a mere story or fiction but an
integral and essential instrument for the maintenance of actual human
life in the world. When it is related that the world of the gods was
defended successfully against the attack of chaos this is significant
because this world of the gods has a connection of origin or other
correspondence with the world of men, and its successful defence
guarantees corresponding prosperity for the farmer or shepherd or
merchant. The provision of this guarantee is the function of myth and ritual in society. Without the correspondences myth could not provide anything of value.

We are now in a position to approach Israel's special position among the mythological cultures which surrounded it.

1. In Israel we have a very radical departure from the characteristic mythical thought in terms of harmony or correspondence. The thinking out of this change may well have been slow and gradual; perhaps its clearest example is the creation story in Gen. i, where the old creation story is very thoroughly demythologised. The very sharp distinction between God and his creation here carried out seems to be characteristic of the central currents of Hebrew thought from early times also. It is not too much to say that the main battle of the Hebrew faith is fought against the confusion of human and divine, of God and Nature. The historical Sitz im Leben of this movement in thought may well be the problem of Canaanite Baalism, in which the confusion of God and nature was a basic principle. Against this background, so well illustrated in an earlier form from Ugarit, we can see the significance of another Israelite affirmation—namely that Yahweh alone is God, and that (in pure forms of Israelite faith) he has no female goddess with him—in its full contrast with the Canaanite interest in the divine sexuality and the sexual aspects of human worship which are here part of the correspondence theme. The 'Ascherah was more offensive to reformers than the massebah, of which many innocent traditions remain.

The main thesis of this paper is, then, that in Israel the correspondence pattern of mythology was broken.

2. We must return however to our point about totality. Israelite thought is a totality with its own centre, and its various peripheral manifestations have their place in relation to that centre. It is clear that many fragments of traditional near-Eastern mythology survive in Israel. In a sense they remain mythology. But whether they are so called or not, they now have to be understood in their relation to a totality which is shaped largely by its repudiation of the characteristic mythological pattern of correspondence. Fragments of mythology are no longer mythology in the full sense. This, we may remark in passing, seems to be one of Bultmann's errors here; he exemplifies what he calls mythology from the concept of the "three-decker universe", which is not really living mythology in any full
sense, but rather a residual and sterilised fragment, on the cosmological side, of what was once myth

3. It will probably be agreed that the importance of history in the Israelite mind was the greatest factor in enforcing the differences from the mythological environment. It is thus perhaps possible to say that the central position in Israelite thought is occupied by history rather than myth, and that such survivals of myth as exist are controlled by the historical sense. It is perhaps too much to say, as has sometimes been said, that myth by its own nature is in principle unhistorical and uninterested in history. But it is certainly true that for the most part myth has in fact tended to an interest in the cyclic or the permanent rather than in the moving stage of history. If we ask how this Israelite interest in the historical arose, we are probably forced back on Israel’s own confession to the centrality of the Exodus and the events surrounding it. This is independent of any question of the exact accuracy of the Exodus narratives as we have them.

4. Perhaps the most difficult problem at this point lies in the understanding of the Israelite cult in its double aspect of action and word, as we see it in the Psalms for example, or in the kingship as a focus of that cultic life. Is this not “ritual and mythology” in the sense of the surrounding cultures? Does this not include certain themes of divine-earthly correspondence, as in the Messianic attributes of the king, or elements of that functional purpose of ritual and myth, to keep the world going on and society prosperous? It is important here not to see the cultic elements in isolation from the historical; on the one hand the historical basis of the Israelite consciousness going back to the Exodus; on the other hand the historical realities of the Israelite kingship from David on. From early times a tendency to pure culticism, to cultic myth in the Canaanite sense, was balanced and restricted by the old traditions of the people. The functional idea of the cult, where the cult stabilised society by reproducing the primaeval divine event, was checked in Israel by the understanding of the transcendence of God, evidenced in the Exodus and contradicting a simple harmony picture of God and the world. Under this influence the central position of the king, which seems to me now to have been well established, and the ideas related to his person of the renewal of creation and the establishment of justice,

take on a new colour as gracious acts of God. In so far as they refer to the great acts of the past (and this past is a real past, not the un-historical primeval time of mythology), celebrate and re-enact them in the present, and bear also a future reference, they carry a certain sense of movement in time which we might designate as eschatological.

This leads us on to the question of myth and eschatology; and in this we may make special reference to the paper of S. B. Frost read before this society some years ago 1). He says there, following Mowinckel, that “fundamentally, myth is opposed to eschatology by its very nature”. This is a statement which the writer would also be prepared to make, but which seems to have rather different ramifications in his thinking from what it has in Frost’s. For Frost agrees with Mowinckel that “while the cult maintained its hold upon men’s thinking, eschatological thought could not arise; only in the mythological mother’s death could the eschatological child come to life” 2). We have just argued, however, in effect that while mythology in the usual sense of the near East is opposed to eschatology, cult as such is not. There is no reason to think that the Israelite cult from David’s time was dominated by these static and therefore anti-eschatological features; more likely, indeed, it was the cult, and not only the breakdown of the cult, which under the influence of the history of God’s acts in time, transmitted to later generations the impulses towards eschatology. It seems impossible that the Israelite eschatology arose from disillusionment under the pressure of political deterioration and disaster, which broke the mythological idealisation of the status quo and forced men’s interest into the future. Mesopotamia and Egypt also had their times of disaster but produced no eschatology; their mythology remained relatively stable through it all.

This is important in its consequences; for I am unable to agree with Frost that at the time of the Exile there was a re-mythologising of Israelite eschatology, and that Apocalyptic represents the completion of this process of mythologisation. He writes as follows: “It was this fusion of myth and eschatology which produced what we call apocalyptic. In fact, we may define apocalyptic as the mythologizing of eschatology” 3). What I take it Frost is pointing out here

2) Ibid., p. 72.
is the extensive use in later prophecy and in apocalyptic of themes like the conquest of the dragon or the return of the Golden Age, in other words the use of themes with a mythological origin. He is not saying that the philosophy of the status quo, the rationale of mythology, is now being revived and integrated with eschatology. But he does not make it quite clear that he is not saying this. The following points in particular should be made:

1. It is somewhat artificial to argue that the early stages of eschatology were not expressed in mythological terms, while later stages were 1). Can we really draw so sharp a distinction in nature between the fire which ate up tehom rabbah in Amos and the prophecies of the Golden Age?

2. It seems unlikely that the situation of the Exile was a sufficient cause for the alleged upsurge of mythology among the Jews. Is it not an attempt at learned explanation, rather than a credible account of reality, with a basis in evidence, to suggest that in Babylon Jews suddenly came to hear of the Dragon, the Flood or the Golden Age, and at once began to use these new terms as their natural idiom?

3. Why then did late prophecy and apocalyptic enter so much more deeply into symbolic and difficult language? This is not, I think, either a revival of mythological ideals, or a new injection of mythological language. It comes rather from the basic fact that these later writers had a greater sweep of history before their consciousness. The earlier prophets made no great effort to clarify the sequence or the arrangements of the things which were “coming”. But when the prophetic tradition becomes temporally longer its interpretation of God’s activity requires something closer to a philosophy of history, a discerning of the divine purpose through the ages. But such a total view is necessarily a view δι’ ἐσόμαι ἐν αἰνήματι, a discerning of a veiled purpose. Hence Daniel has as principle that “there is a God in heaven who unveils secrets” 2). It is the natural outgrowth of classical prophecy in the fullness of time.

2) Dan. ii 28.