



## Myth as Revelation

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[See table of contents](#)

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### Article abstract

This essay explores how myth functions as a means of revelation in Scripture. It first clarifies a definition of myth, and then discusses the appearance of myth in the Old Testament. Not only is myth found in the Bible, but its presence is of great importance. Considering the various functions of myths in general, it becomes indispensable that myth form a part of the inspired canon. Revelatory myth is essential, especially today. Finally, this essay considers how one might recapture an appreciative reception of biblical myths.

# MYTH AS REVELATION

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*RÉSUMÉ : Cette contribution examine la fonction du mythe biblique. L'auteur y défend que le mythe est utilisé comme un instrument de révélation dans l'Écriture. Dans la première partie de cet article, l'auteur définit ce qu'est le mythe en général et comment il est employé dans l'Ancien Testament. Le mythe est non seulement présent dans la Bible, conclut-il, mais il y est d'une grande importance. En considérant les diverses fonctions du mythe, on ne peut que conclure que le mythe fait partie intégrante du canon inspiré. Aujourd'hui, le mythe révélateur est essentiel et, pour cette raison, la dernière partie de cet article examine comment on pourrait faire naître une réception élogieuse du mythe biblique.*

*ABSTRACT : This essay explores how myth functions as a means of revelation in Scripture. It first clarifies a definition of myth, and then discusses the appearance of myth in the Old Testament. Not only is myth found in the Bible, but its presence is of great importance. Considering the various functions of myths in general, it becomes indispensable that myth form a part of the inspired canon. Revelatory myth is essential, especially today. Finally, this essay considers how one might recapture an appreciative reception of biblical myths.*

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The goal of this essay is to see how the genre (if it is a genre) of myth functions in the Word of God. First, we need to be clear about what “myth” is, and so work through some definitions. Then I will discuss whether there is myth in the Bible. My focus here is the Old Testament (and not all of it). My argument is not only that there is myth in the Bible, but also that it is profoundly valuable that there is. When we look at what myth “does,” we will see that it is unthinkable that God would reveal without myth. Especially today, we need revelatory myth ; we need to hear the voice of God speaking through myth. Finally, we will consider what that hearing entails, how the Christian can receive the biblical myths.

## I. DEFINING MYTH

The mythographer, Bruce Lincoln opines, “It would be nice to begin with a clear and concise definition of ‘myth,’ but unfortunately that can’t be done. Indeed, it

would be nice to begin with *any* definition.”<sup>1</sup> Biblical scholars have voiced similar laments : “It is a pity that a word such as ‘myth’, which has been so useful in the discussion of religious literature, should act as a barrier between scholars rather than a means of enriching mutual understanding.”<sup>2</sup> One source of the problem “derives from a simple fact of its usage in everyday language : so long as a myth is generally understood to be a story about something that is not real, not true, we may safely predict that no single academic definition will ever prevail.”<sup>3</sup> For a long time, I avoided using the term, especially in teaching, given its modern overtones.<sup>4</sup> What altered my position was John Paul II applying the term “myth” to Genesis 1-2.<sup>5</sup> John Paul II’s definition of myth I also found a useful starting point : “An archaic way of expressing a deeper content [...] expresses in terms of the world [...] what is beyond the world.”<sup>6</sup>

Of the countless definitions of myth, I have adopted that of Alphonso Groenewald as the one that most precisely defines the category : a myth is a story (not, e.g., a painting),<sup>7</sup> of content that has been passed down by tradition by a community over time (i.e., one cannot compose a new story that immediately qualifies as myth).<sup>8</sup> Some of the characters must be “more than merely human” (thus, the story of Oedipus does not qualify) and the events of the story should be “from remote antiquity.”<sup>9</sup> The only thing that one might add is that myth does address some deeper content. Groenewald acknowledges this, too, but there is considerable debate about *how* myth

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1. Bruce LINCOLN, *Theorizing Myth*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999, p. IX. So, also, John H. MCDOWELL, “From Expressive Language to Mythemes,” in Gregory SCHREMPF, William HANSEN, ed., *Myth : A New Symposium*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2002, p. 29.
  2. Nicolas WYATT, “The Mythic Mind Revisited,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*, 22 (2008), p. 161-175 ; repr. in Nicolas WYATT, *The Archaeology of Myth*, London, Equinox, 2010, XII-111 p. ; Mark S. SMITH, *The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1*, Minneapolis, Fortress, 2009, p. 142.
  3. MCDOWELL, “From Expressive Language,” p. 241.
  4. It is similarly rejected by Peter ENNS, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, Grand Rapids, Baker, 2005, p. 49 ; and Richard SWINBURNE, *Revelation*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 64.
  5. JOHN PAUL II, *Theology of the Body*, Boston, Pauline Books and Media, 1997, p. 43.
  6. *Ibid.*, p. 91, n. 4.
  7. “Story” is broader than “narrative,” and allows the story to appear in semi-narrative material like prayers or psalms. Note that “myth” itself is thus not a *literary* genre (WYATT, “Mythic Mind Revisited,” p. 137).
  8. I would not insist that such transmission be oral, as does Hans-Peter MÜLLER, “Mythos und Metapher,” in *Wege zur Hebräischen Bibel*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht (coll. “Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments,” 228), p. 73-74. This allows Müller to distinguish between myth and mythical, the latter being what remains at a time when myth was no longer being composed.
  9. Alphonso GROENEWALD, “Mythology, Poetry and Theology,” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies*, 62 (2006), p. 912. Avery Dulles’s definition is almost the same : Avery DULLES, “Symbol, Myth, and the Biblical Revelation,” *Theological Studies*, 27 (1976), p. 8-9. Similar, also, is that of Wim VAN BINSBERGEN, “Rupture and Fusion in the Approach to Myth,” *Religion Compass*, 3 (2009), p. 314. For other, similar definitions, see P. SWIGGERS, “Babel and the Confusion of Tongues,” in *Mythos im Alten Testament und seiner Umwelt*, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter (coll. “Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft,” 278), 1999, p. 188-189 ; Alan DUNDE, “Madness in Method, plus a Plea for Projective Inversion in Myth,” in Laurie L. PATTON, Wendy DONIGER, ed., *Myth and Method*, Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1996, p. 148. The final aspect, a setting in the past, is open to debate if one considers apocalyptic material like Daniel 7-12 mythic (SMITH, *Priestly Vision*, p. 144).

does that and what kind of deeper content it expresses (see below). Nevertheless, this definition and John Paul II's easily merge.

Some biblical scholars are averse to constructing such an "etic" definition, and instead seek an *emic* definition from the ancient texts themselves. That is, they line up all of the ancient Near Eastern stories that are generally considered myths and then note what characteristics these have in common.<sup>10</sup> This method has little control, in that it is up to the interpreter to set both the geographic and chronological boundaries. Does Egypt belong? Probably, yes. India, probably not. What about Persia? How late of "myths" does one include, once the Hellenistic Age is involved? What about Pre-Islamic Arabia? Moreover, it is philosophically problematic to consider that using "myth" in a general, linguistic or philosophical sense "when applied to the Biblical and extra-Biblical cultural data introduces considerations completely foreign to the subject."<sup>11</sup> The same could be said of importing the modern term "verb" and applying it to ancient languages that knew no such term, or of any number of categorical terms ("gender," "poetry," "infinitive," etc.), without which we could not study ancient material. When studying literature, we use universal literary terms, and define those as precisely as possible based on the current scholarship on the issue in question: here, myth.

## II. MYTH IN THE BIBLE

So by this definition, is there myth in the Old Testament — are there archaic stories set in hoary antiquity, containing material that has been passed down by tradition in community over time, involving divine and supernatural characters, expressing in terms of the world what is beyond the world? Clearly, the answer is, "yes," but we should first note a strong opposition among certain theologians to saying there is myth in the Bible.

Some theologians have used the pedestrian sense of the word, "myth" = false story, and accordingly rejected it as present in the Bible. Thus, Benedict XVI's address to the XII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops "The Word of God in the Life and Mission in the Church": "The history of salvation is not a myth, but a true story."

Nevertheless, this fear of applying the term seems more of a conservative evangelical condition.<sup>12</sup> Benedict is referring to parts of the Old Testament other than

10. James BARR, "The Meaning of 'Mythology' in Relation to the Old Testament," *Vetus Testamentum*, 9 (1959), p. 2; SMITH, *Priestly Vision*, p. 145-148.

11. BARR, "Meaning," p. 3. The difficulty of this position and the chimerical nature of the term "myth" leads SMITH to assess that "Genesis 1 surely shows these hallmarks of ancient Near Eastern myths" (*Priestly Vision*, p. 153), but "Genesis 1 is not a myth, nor did its editors design it to be read or to be understood as the kind of narrative that we would call a myth" (p. 156), and finally, "The question of Genesis 1 as myth depends on what we mean by the word myth and what we think myths are really about" (p. 159).

12. ENNS, *Inspiration*, p. 40; Frank MATERA, "Biblical Authority and the Scandal of the Incarnation," in William P. BROWN, ed., *Engaging Biblical Authority*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2007, p. 104-105. Nevertheless, the obstacles are not insurmountable in the Evangelical tradition, as illustrated by Kenton L. SPARKS, *God's Word in Human Words*, Grand Rapids, Baker, 2008.

Genesis 1-11, where he would surely concur with the tradition expressed by Augustine, “That God formed man by means of earth with corporeal hands is altogether too childish an idea. Even if the Holy Spirit tells us this, we must suppose that the author is using a metaphor” (*On Genesis*, chap. 6; cf. *Book Two on Genesis against the Manichaeans* 12.17) — and Aquinas, “Moses was speaking to ignorant people and out of condescension to their simpleness presented to them only those things immediately obvious to the senses” (*Summa theologiae* 1a. 68. 3).<sup>13</sup> As Benedict himself wrote, “The story of the dust of the earth and the breath of God does not in fact explain how human persons come to be but rather what they are.”<sup>14</sup> Catholics are accustomed to reading for genre, and attention to it in interpretation is mandated (*Dei Verbum* 12).<sup>15</sup> The “slippery-slope” argument — “if the historicity of Noah is doubted, that of Jesus will be next” — holds no weight in a non-*sola scriptura* faith and with a collection of sacred texts where differences in genre are fairly clear.<sup>16</sup>

However, Guardini argued that, “From the very first verses of the Bible, the myth is done away with.”<sup>17</sup> Myth, he maintained, was a product of the Fall, of human sin;<sup>18</sup> it “bears witness to the separation of man from God, his creator, and his alliance with the world.”<sup>19</sup> Now, as we shall see, this is in part due to a faulty definition of myth. But Guardini is not rejecting the term in its meaning of “false story”; he uses the term “myth” according to scholarly definitions (in this case, Lévy-Bruhl plus Jung).<sup>20</sup> But he does not think it is possible for the Scriptures to contain such material. He weds this definition to a particular understanding of Original Sin to come to the same conclusion Peter Enns describes: “We seem to think of myth as something ancient people thought up because they didn’t want to listen to what God said.”<sup>21</sup>

Rudolf Bultmann used similar (faulty) definition of myth but identified it *in* the Bible. From this came his program of demythologization, of extricating the existential meaning of the Bible’s myths so that the Scriptures would become palatable for modern sensibilities. Bultmann’s program is beyond the scope of this essay, but as mythographer Robert Segal writes, “Demythologized, God still exists, but Satan does not.”<sup>22</sup> The revelation is sanitized, according to the theologian’s preference. When

13. Also CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *Stromateis*, 6.15; ORIGEN, *On First Principles*, 3.1.

14. BENEDICT XVI, *In the Beginning*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1995, p. 50.

15. DULLES, “Symbol,” p. 1.

16. Nicholas WOLTERSTORFF, *Divine Discourse*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 217; SWINBURNE, *Revelation*, p. 243. Augustine BEA was one of the first theologians to allow that God could have taught by the genre “myth”: *De Scripturae Sacrae Inspiratione*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Rome, Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1935, p. 89.

17. Romano GUARDINI, “Myth, and the Truth of Revelation,” *Cross Currents*, 1 (1951), p. 9-10.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 3-4.

21. ENNS, *Inspiration*, p. 50.

22. Robert A. SEGAL, “Does Myth Have a Future?,” in Laurie L. PATTON, Wendy DONIGER, ed., *Myth and Method*, Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1996, p. 91. There are many discussions of Bultmann; recently, see Jean-Daniel CAUSSE, “Quelle fonction attribuer aux mythes?,” in Élian CUVILLIER, Jean-Daniel CAUSSE, ed., *Mythes grecs, Mythes bibliques*, Paris, Cerf, 2007, p. 15-20. For mythographers’ assessments, see William G. DOTY, *Mythography*, Birmingham, Ala., University of Alabama Press, 1986,

myth is “decoded,” a great deal is lost, as we shall see at the close of this essay. Charles Taylor comments on such moves : “We see ourselves as having climbed out of ‘myth’ (let this for the moment stand duty for all the not-yet-rational forms) into science or reason. In the course of this, something was supposedly gained, some clarity, self-conscious control of thinking, greater capacity to grasp truth, or something of this sort.”<sup>23</sup>

Louis Bouyer vigorously opposed such demythologizing.<sup>24</sup> The Word “takes its rise from” myth, he writes.<sup>25</sup> “What language could the Word of God have used in speaking to man except that in which man spontaneously expresses himself ?”<sup>26</sup> Austin Farrer maintained that, “Christian orthodoxy not only *admits* that the story of redemption is mythical ; it *claims* that it is, and makes a special point of the claim.”<sup>27</sup> It is a matter of faith that the story set two thousand years ago and passed down in tradition by the community actually involved a character who was both truly God and truly man, and that what appeared to be happening in the world at his execution was expressing what is beyond the world. It is even more fit that the Old Testament includes myth. Since the “stuff of revelation,” writes Avery Dulles, is not mere “eternal and necessary truths” or “common historical facts,” “but revelation has to do with the hidden God and the ways in which he calls man into union with Himself. [...] Unlike historical or abstract truth, mystery cannot be described or positively defined. It can only be evoked.”<sup>28</sup>

Yet biblical scholars themselves contributed to the impression that there was no myth in the Old Testament. They drew a dichotomy between Israel and its ancient neighbors in this regard, in two ways.<sup>29</sup> Israel, it was said, thought historically, not mythically. The Babylonians, Egyptians, etc., thought mythically. For them, time was cyclical ; for Israel, it was linear.

Israel’s perception of history, however, was far from unique in the ancient Near East. Israel’s historical perception and view of history’s importance is close to that of

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p. 63. Bernard LONERGAN, too, made many minimizing statements about myth, see *Method in Theology*, New York, Herder and Herder, 1972, p. 8, 28, 92-93, 98, 213, 306. Rahner opposed this move : “Observations on the Concept of Revelation,” in Karl RAHNER, Joseph RATZINGER [BENEDICT XVI], *Revelation and Tradition*, New York, Herder and Herder, 1966, p. 20.

23. Charles TAYLOR, “Comparison, History, Truth,” in Frank REYNOLDS, David TRACY, ed., *Myth and Philosophy*, Binghamton, State University of New York Press, 1990, p. 46. See the similar assessment in VAN BINSBERGEN, “Rupture and Fusion,” p. 317.

24. Louis BOUYER, *Christian Mystery*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1990, p. 81-82, 84.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

27. Austin FARRER, “Can Myth be Fact ?” (1945), repr. in *Interpretation and Belief*, London, SPCK, 1976, p. 167 ; so, too, Pierre BÜHLER, “Mythos und Wissenschaft,” *Hermeneutische Blätter*, 1 (2002), p. 51.

28. DULLES, “Symbol,” p. 1. Benedict ASHLEY has the exact opposite premise of what the “stuff” of revelation entails (“The Bible Gap,” *Ignatius Insight* [Feb. 2006], online essay at [http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2006/bashley\\_biblegap\\_feb06.asp](http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2006/bashley_biblegap_feb06.asp), p. 6). Thus, for him, “Theology cannot be content simply to accept it [a biblical narrative] as a meaningful myth” (*ibid.*, p. 8).

29. Fritz STOLZ, “Einführung,” in *Funktionen und Leistungen des Mythos*, Freiburg, Universitätsverlag (coll. “Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis,” 48), 1982, p. 9, who critiques this view.

the ancient Hittites.<sup>30</sup> The Mesha Stele from ancient Moab articulates a view of history identical to that of Israel expressed in the books of Samuel and Kings. When a people sins against their god, they are delivered into the hands of their enemy ; the outcome of history is a basic moral indicator. On the other hand, Israel clothes much historical recollection in mythic terms (Psalms 74, 89).<sup>31</sup>

That the Old Testament contains myths like the literature of its neighbours has, also, become well accepted among biblical scholars.<sup>32</sup> The Old Testament contains many archaic stories set in hoary antiquity, containing material that has been passed down by tradition in community over time, involving divine and supernatural characters, expressing in terms of the world what is beyond the world. But even beyond this, the Old Testament contains a great deal of ancient Near Eastern mythic material, particularly various forms of a myth about the slaying of a dragon who represents both the sea and chaos, a combat myth that is also a creation story, a cosmogony — what Benedict XVI called, “The pagan creation accounts on which the biblical story is in part based.”<sup>33</sup> Israel was aware of both the Canaanite and Babylonian versions of this story.<sup>34</sup> “The Combat myth — whether in its Babylonian or Canaanite form — underlies to some extent virtually every aspect of Israel’s historically based faith.”<sup>35</sup>

Israel uses this myth complex in several different ways, in Isaiah 27 ; 44 ; 51 ; Psalms 74 ; 89 ; 104 ; Job 26 (and probably also in Genesis 1 ; Exodus 15 ;<sup>36</sup> Isaiah 25 ; Psalms 24 ; 29 ; 65 ; 68 ; 77 ; 91 ; 93 ; 106 ; Job 9 ; 38).<sup>37</sup> Some have argued that in all passages the biblical context demythologizes the combat myth.<sup>38</sup> It is true that, at times, the Bible is refuting the myths (Genesis 1).<sup>39</sup> At other times, the myth serves only as a metaphor (Isaiah 25 ; Psalm 89). In these passages, the biblical material using the mythology is not itself “myth.” But in Isaiah 51, Job 26, and

30. Hubert CANCIK, *Mythische und historische Wahrheit*, Stuttgart, Katholisches Bibelwerk (coll. “Stuttgarter Bibelstudien,” 48), 1970, p. 129-130.

31. Of course, there are differences in theology. The fundamental theology of Israel and its neighbors was in many ways worlds apart (Giorgio BUCCELLATI, “On Christic Polytheism and Christian Monotheism,” *Communio*, 22 [1995], p. 114-126), but myth-vs.-history is not one of those ways.

32. Luis Alonso SCHÖCKEL, *Il dinamismo della tradizione*, Brescia, Paideia (coll. “Biblioteca di Cultura Religiosa,” 19), 1970, p. 153.

33. Joseph RATZINGER [BENEDICT XVI], *New Song for the Lord*, New York, Crossroads, 1996, p. 86.

34. FISHBANE, *Biblical Myth*, p. 33.

35. GROENEWALD, “Mythology,” p. 910 ; FISHBANE, *Biblical Myth*, p. 61.

36. Balthasar found it in Exodus 15 : Hans Urs von BALTHASAR, *Glory of the Lord*, San Francisco, Ignatius, 1986, vol. 6, p. 77.

37. For discussion, see Nicolas WYATT, *The Mythic Mind*, London, Equinox (coll. “BibleWorld,” 8), 2005, p. 98-99, 204-209.

38. BARR, “Meaning,” p. 7.

39. SWINBURNE, *Revelation*, p. 245. John Paul II identified “cosmologies of the ancient Near East purified and assimilated into the first chapters of Genesis” (JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to Rev. George Coyne SJ, Director of the Vatican Observatory*, 1 June 1988).



Psalm 74 the combat myth appears as myth in the Bible.<sup>40</sup> Dulles writes, “What have we here if not a mythical representation?”<sup>41</sup>

The Old Testament incorporates a few other ancient Near Eastern myths — the flood is the most obvious, but Ezekiel 28 is another example.<sup>42</sup> The Old Testament also has its own myths, such as Genesis 6:1-4 and the Tower of Babel.<sup>43</sup> The story of Adam and Eve fits perfectly the definition of an archaic stories set in hoary antiquity, containing material that has been passed down by tradition in community over time, involving divine and supernatural characters, expressing in terms of the world what is beyond the world.<sup>44</sup> Here, writes André LaCocque, “J [the Yahwist] uses this device for the sake of dramatizing and archaeologizing evil”; “Adam and Eve’s story is paradigmatic. In it, all humans are invited to recognize themselves.”<sup>45</sup>

### III. THE VALUE OF MYTH

There is, then, myth in the Old Testament. Let us approach the question of “why?” and its accompanying question of “so what?” It is true that “why” is that this was a form of literature in use at the time of the ancient human authors. Inspiration in the Bible employs authentic human literary forms of all sorts (*Dei Verbum*,

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40. The mythic complex itself predates both the Canaanites and Babylonians, and in later times evolves in Daniel and Revelation (Rev 13:1; 17:3); Nicolas WYATT, “What has Ugarit to do with Jerusalem?”, *Studies in World Christianity*, 8 (2002), p. 146. The trajectory of this myth from its earliest prebiblical form through both Testaments is of great importance theologically. I have touched on this somewhat in “Gentiles in the Zion Hymns: Canaanite Myth and Christian Mission,” *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies*, 26 (2009), p. 232-246. BARR (“Meaning,” p. 10) argues that the apocalyptic material is mere symbolism and bereft of even the slightest mythic baggage. I have shown that content from the earliest forms of the myth resurfaces even in the latest texts. See, also, John Paul HEIL, *Jesus Walking on the Sea*, Rome, Biblical Institute Press (coll “Analecta Biblica,” 87), 1981, p. 72-73, 118, on Matthew 14 and pars. That the Church is well aware of this is evident from the pairing of Mark 4:35-41 in the lectionary with Job 38:1,8-11. On such trajectories in general, see Klaus NÜRNBERGER, *Theology of the Biblical Witness*, Münster, LIT Verlag, 2002. The argument in the present essay that revelation takes place through biblical myth does not explore whether the prebiblical myths are “pre-revelation,” the term of SMITH, *Priestly Vision*, p. 114; see also MATERA, “Biblical Authority,” p. 100; GRESCH, “Further Reflections,” p. 83.
41. DULLES, “Symbol,” p. 16; FISHBANE, *Biblical Myth*, p. 58, 60, 86.
42. Ezekiel 28 reflects the myth of the Ugaritic text KTU 1.6.i.43-65. Ezek 28:3 directly refers to Dan’el of the extra-biblical *Aqhat* myth, evidence that the biblical authors themselves knew they were drawing on other people’s myths. On mythic material in the Psalms, see Bernd WILLMES, “Das Königtum Gottes in den Psalmen auf dem Hintergrund kanaänischer Mythologie,” in Hubert IRSIGLER, ed., *Mythisches in biblischer Bildsprache*, Freiburg, Herder (coll. “Quaestiones Disputatae,” 209), 2004, p. 114, 121-122.
43. On Genesis 6, among recent literature see Paul BARIÉ, “Die sogenannten ‘Engelgehen’. Ein mythisches Relikt in der Bibel (Genesis 6,1-4),” *Symbolon*, n.s., 14 (1999), p. 169-183; Christopher A. ROLLSTON, “The Rise of Monotheism in Ancient Israel,” *Stone-Campbell Journal*, 6 (2003), p. 102-105. On Babel, see André LACOCQUE, “Whatever Happened in the Valley of Shinar?”, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 128 (2009), p. 29-41; Francis GUIBAL, “Babel, malédiction ou bénédiction?”, *Études*, 406 (2007), p. 51-61. On other myths in the Old Testament, see Peter B. MACHINIST, “Once More: Monotheism in Biblical Israel,” *Interdisciplinary Study of Monotheistic Religions: JISMOR*, 1 (2005), p. 25-39.
44. Andrés Ibáñez ARANA, “Los mitos de los orígenes en la Biblia,” in *Revelación y Pensar Mítico*, Madrid, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1970, p. 189, 192, 195. Much in this story, too, may be drawing on ancient Near Eastern myth’s like *Atrahasis* (Nicolas WYATT, *Space and Time in the Religious Life of the Near East*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 2001, p. 75).
45. *The Trial of Innocence: Adam, Eve, and the Yahwist*, Eugene, Cascade Books, 2006, p. 254.



12); it is fully “incarnational” in that sense.<sup>46</sup> But this is only a partial answer. I will argue that there is a value in myth, that myth functions better than would another literary form in these places. For this argument, we must look at what myth in general “does.”

Farrer wrote, “Men may construct a myth expressive of divine truths as they conceive them, and the stuff of the myth will be words. God has constructed a myth expressive of the divine truths he intends to convey, and the stuff of the myth is facts.”<sup>47</sup> Very well. But how does this work? The Scriptures have both a human author and a divine author (*Dei Verbum*, 11), so the contrast of what man constructs and what God constructs cannot be pressed too hard — although I am happy to stay with the “authorial-discourse” image of inspiration.<sup>48</sup> This is the Church’s consistent view: Verbal Inspiration, as dictation, is denied, and, as Irenaeus said, both the inspired man and the Spirit’s inspiration are involved. Inspiration is an operation of the Holy Spirit acting through men, according to the laws of their constitution, which his influence does not neutralize (*Dei Verbum*, 13).

Here is where my title must be fudged somewhat. Most theologians would say that Revelation is a communication from God.<sup>49</sup> Revelation’s content is ultimately not the Bible but the person of God, as *Dei Verbum* 2 states.<sup>50</sup> All that is written within revelation derives meaning and value from its relationship to the fundamental act of revelation in which God offers himself.<sup>51</sup> “Scripture,” writes Balthasar, “is the Word of God witnessing to the Word of God.”<sup>52</sup> So it is not precise to say, “The Bible *is* Revelation”; revelation, writes Benedict XVI, “is not itself simply identical with Scripture.”<sup>53</sup> Rather, the Bible is a unique witness to God’s self-revelation that is anterior to it (*Dei Verbum*, 18).<sup>54</sup> This seems to be the point of John 5:39, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life, but it is they merely testify on my behalf.”<sup>55</sup> The Old Testament, too, recognizes the words

46. Étienne NODÉ, “Sens littéral ou icônes?,” in Olivier-Thomas Venard, ed., *Le sens littéral des Écritures*, Paris, Cerf, 2009, p. 103; François MARTIN, “La lecture aux prises avec la lettre, la figure et la Chose,” in Christian BERNER, Jean-Jacques WUNENBURGER, ed., *Mythe et philosophie*, Paris, PUF, 2002, p. 71-72.

47. FARRER, “Can Myth be Fact?,” p. 167.

48. WOLTERSTORFF, *Divine Discourse*, p. 184.

49. Avery DULLES, *Models of Revelation*, rev. ed., Maryknoll, Orbis, 1992.

50. That this is the Old Testament’s own view was illustrated by Sigmund MOWINCKEL, *The Old Testament as Word of God*, Nashville, Abingdon, 1959, p. 45.

51. GORMLEY, *Commentary*, p. 8.

52. Hans Urs von BALTHASAR, “Scripture as the Word of God,” *Downside Review*, 68 (1950), p. 1.

53. Joseph RATZINGER [BENEDICT XVI], “Revelation and Tradition,” in Karl RAHNER, Joseph RATZINGER, *Revelation and Tradition*, New York, Herder and Herder, 1966, p. 35; also RATZINGER, “On the Schema *On the Sources of Revelation*: Address to the German-speaking Bishops, October 10, 1962,” in “Six Texts by Prof. Joseph Ratzinger as *Peritus* Before and During Vatican Council II,” ed. by J. WICKS, *Gregorianum*, 89 (2008), p. 270.

54. MATERA, “Biblical Authority,” p. 99-100; SWINBURNE, *Revelation*, p. 137. I will not enter into discussion of BENEDICT’s statement that, “There can be scripture without revelation” (“Revelation and Tradition,” p. 36), because only in a very precise sense can this be affirmed.

55. This is the translation, with commentary, of Randall HESKETT, “Deuteronomy 29-34 and the Formation of the Torah,” in Randall HESKETT, Brian IRWIN, ed., *The Bible as a Human Way to Divine Revelation*, New York, T&T Clark (coll. “Library of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies,” 469), 2010. Heskett draws

“of Moses” as testifying to a revelation beyond them and yet which cannot be accessed but through them (Deut 29:29 ; 31:26 ; 32:46).<sup>56</sup> This is a basic tenet of Catholic doctrine, affirmed also by Sigmund Mowinckel, and James Barr also insisted that revelation precedes Scripture.<sup>57</sup> The Word, after all, “was God” (John 1:1),<sup>58</sup> and the Bible “points to a theological source or reality that lies *outside* the Bible.”<sup>59</sup>

#### IV. THE FAILURE OF HISTORY

The mid-twentieth century saw the flourishing of the so-called “Biblical Theology” movement. Associated especially with the Protestant biblical scholar G. Ernest Wright, this movement held that the way to bring theological insight from academic study of the Scriptures was to focus on *Heilsgeschichte* or Salvation History. God had acted in Israel’s history, and those “mighty acts” were the locus of revelation. That is, the history described in the text, penned by the inspired community, *is* the revelation — revelation was not the “story of faith” but the actual events themselves.<sup>60</sup> For this movement, the problem of previous theological readings of the Bible was that they imposed anachronistic theological categories on the Bible. What was needed, instead, was a “theology of recital,”<sup>61</sup> which worked progressively in stages.<sup>62</sup> History has a meaning,<sup>63</sup> while, as G. Ernest Wright wrote, “the Bible is thus not primarily the Word of God, but the record of the Acts of God.”<sup>64</sup>

Although Protestant biblical scholars were in the forefront of the Biblical Theology Movement, Catholic exegetes and theologians were numerous in this school of thought, too. Pierre Benoit and John McKenzie would wax eloquently of the *Heilsgeschichte*<sup>65</sup> and Jean Daniélou state that “the Bible exists simply for the purpose of describing the *Magnalia Dei* : from Genesis to Revelation, it is nothing but a chronicle of these privileged events.”<sup>66</sup>

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the analogy of a sign on a highway from Toronto that reads “Niagara Falls.” To stop and have a picnic around the sign would be little enjoyment. I am interested in signs that are more iconic than textual.

56. HESKETT, “Deuteronomy 29-34” ; James BARR, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 196. And yet, it is not contacted *only* by them ; both Catholicism and Barr allow for — in fact, require — natural theology (BARR, *Biblical Faith*, p. 197 and *passim*). Catholicism, of course, includes more than natural theology in its *Extra Scriptura* revelation (Leo SCHEFFCZYK, “Biblische und Dogmatische Theologie,” *Trierer Theologische Zeitschrift*, 67 [1958], p. 199).
57. RATZINGER, “On the Schema,” p. 271 ; MOWINCKEL, *Old Testament*, p. 41, 84 ; BARR, *Biblical Faith*, p. 196.
58. MOWINCKEL, *Old Testament*, p. 43.
59. James BARR, *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, Minneapolis, Fortress, 1999, p. 494, italics original.
60. Krister STENDAHL, *Meanings*, Philadelphia, Fortress, 1984, p. 25.
61. W.J. PHYTHIAN-ADAMS, “Shadow and Substance,” *Interpretation*, 1 (1947), p. 420.
62. *Ibid.*, p. 434.
63. G. Ernest WRIGHT, Reginald H. FULLER, *The Book of the Acts of God*, Garden City, Doubleday, 1960, p. 17.
64. G. Ernest WRIGHT, *God Who Acts*, London, SCM (coll. “Studies in Biblical Theology,” 8), 1952, p. 107.
65. Pierre BENOIT, *Aspects of Biblical Inspiration*, Chicago, Priory, 1965, p. 73 ; John L. MCKENZIE, *Myths and Realities*, Milwaukee, Bruce Publishing Company, 1963, p. 62.
66. Jean DANIELOU, *The Lord of History*, Cleveland, World, 1968, p. 149 ; cf. p. 157, 159, 165-167.

There was much of value in this model. Instead of treating the final and terminal editor as the only inspired author or “distributing the charism, so to speak, among the various men who contributed to the book,” it made all the sources and redactors heirs of a faith and a tradition that preceded them all.<sup>67</sup> It allowed for a unity of the Old and New Testaments based on “one divine action running through one history.”<sup>68</sup> This model became very influential in the Second Vatican Council.<sup>69</sup> *Dei Verbum* adopted the idea that revelation consists especially in the acts of God, relegating the words to “proclaiming the works” (*Dei Verbum*, 2).<sup>70</sup> Articles 3-4 and 14 each contained overviews of the stages of Salvation History. “Never before in a Church document had events (deeds, works) been considered alongside words as an integral part of revelation.”<sup>71</sup>

The Biblical Theology Movement died dramatically in the 1960s and 1970s. James Barr and Brevard Childs have been credited with its demise, but a host of biblical scholars shared their insights.<sup>72</sup> It was important to the Movement that the *Magnalia Dei*, God’s acts in history, really happened.<sup>73</sup> What if historical evidence is contrary to the historicity of the events? The landslide of sites and artifacts found in the ancient Near East in the last half of the twentieth century quickly eroded confidence in finding and recovering historical confirmation of Israel’s narratives. It became what Leo Perdue called “the collapse of history.”<sup>74</sup>

Two books published in 1974-1975 by Thomas Thompson and John Van Seters considered all the evidence for the historicity of Abraham and the Genesis patriarchs and pointed out that none of the archaeological evidence cited by scholars was usable.<sup>75</sup> “Not only has archaeology not proven a single event of the patriarchal tradi-

67. MCKENZIE, *Myths*, p. 62-63.

68. Floyd FILSON, *The New Testament against Its Environment*, London, SCM (coll. “Studies in Biblical Theology,” 3), 1950, p. 64.

69. John T. FORD, “Theology of Revelation,” *American Ecclesiastical Review*, 159 (1968), p. 166. Dumitru STANILOAE, “Revelation through Acts, Words, and Images,” (1968) repr. in *Theology and the Church*, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1980, p. 112.

70. Thomas NORRIS, “On Revisiting Dei Verbum,” *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 66 (2001), p. 317-319.

71. Joan F. GORMLEY, *Commentary on Dei Verbum*, Paeonian Springs, Va., Catholic Home Study Institute, 1994, p. 9; FORD saw this shift as part of a movement “from a deistic-historicist background to a Biblicist-personalist framework” (“Theology of Revelation,” p. 168).

72. James BARR, “Revelation Through History in the Old Testament and in Modern Theology,” *Interpretation*, 17 (1963), p. 193-205; *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, London, Oxford University Press, 1961; Brevard S. CHILDS, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, Philadelphia, Westminster, 1970, p. 13-96; also influential in the demise were Langdon GILKEY, “Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language,” *Journal of Religion*, 41 (1961), p. 194-205; and B. ALBREKTSON, *History and the Gods*, Lund, Gleerup (coll. “Horae Soderblomianae,” 5), 1967.

73. Wolfhart PANNENBERG, *Basic Questions in Theology*, Philadelphia, Fortress, 1970, esp. p. 15, 19; Oscar CULLMANN, *The Christology of the New Testament*, rev. ed., Philadelphia, Westminster, 1963; WRIGHT, *God Who Acts*, p. 117, 123-124.

74. Leo G. PERDUE, *The Collapse of History*, Minneapolis, Fortress, 1994; Prosper GRESCH, “Further Reflections on Biblical Inspiration and Truth,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 42 (2012), p. 88.

75. Thomas L. THOMPSON, *Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter (coll. “Beiträge zur Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft,” 133), 1974; John VAN SETERS, *Abraham in History and Tradition*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1975.

tions to be historical, it has not shown any of the traditions to be likely.”<sup>76</sup> Since the appearance of these two works, the entire concept of a historical patriarchal period has been abandoned. The most conservative assessment would be that it is not possible to establish an historical framework that is so exclusive that the patriarchs must necessarily belong within it.<sup>77</sup>

The Exodus and Conquest have fared little better. Although many had raised problems earlier, by the 1980s most Egyptologists and many biblical archaeologists recognized the Exodus account was not only fraught with historical inaccuracies but that it was difficult to point to more than a handful of “accuracies.”<sup>78</sup> As for the biblical Conquest, William Dever, one of the most renowned American biblical archaeologists alive today — and himself now the champion of biblical historicity against the so-called “Minimalists” (see below)<sup>79</sup> — put it bluntly: “There isn’t a single reputable professional archaeologist in the world who espouses the conquest model in Israel, Europe or America. We don’t need to say any more about the conquest model. That’s that”;<sup>80</sup> “It simply did not happen; the archaeological evidence is indisputable.”<sup>81</sup> The current locus of debate over historicity is the united monarchy of David and Solomon. The archaeology of 1000-800 B.C. is daily news in the biblical blogosphere, with archaeologists and biblical scholars alike arrayed between “Minimalists” and “Maximalists” over the history of these narratives.<sup>82</sup>

I present this “news from the biblical field” not because I conclude the biblical narratives in question are fictitious or bear no connection to actual history. I do not hold either of those views and have written so extensively.<sup>83</sup> I present this to highlight the danger of basing the theological importance of the Old Testament solely on its history, on its status as a record of God’s saving acts.<sup>84</sup>

But there were other problems with the Salvation History Biblical Theology Movement. Most immediately, the Salvation History model fails to deal with non-

76. THOMPSON, *Historicity*, p. 328.

77. Joseph BLENKINSOPP, *The Pentateuch*, New York, Doubleday, 1992, p. 129-130.

78. Donald REDFORD, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel*, Princeton University Press, 1992, esp. chap. 10, 14; Ernest FRERICHS, Leonard H. LESKO, ed., *Exodus*, Winona Lake, Eisenbrauns, 1997.

79. William G. DEVER, *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2006, p. IX, 227; ID., *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2001, p. 258.

80. ID., “How to Tell a Canaanite from an Israelite,” in Hershel SHANKS, ed., *The Rise of Ancient Israel*, Washington, D.C., Biblical Archaeology Society, 1992, p. 29.

81. DEVER, *Who Were the Early Israelites*, p. 227-228.

82. Hershel SHANKS, “In This Corner: William Dever and Israel Finkelstein Debate the Early History of Israel,” *Biblical Archaeology Review*, 30, 6 (2004), p. 42-45; Israel FINKELSTEIN, Amihai MAZAR, Brian B. SCHMIDT, *The Quest for the Historical Israel*, Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature (coll. “Society of Biblical Literature Archaeology and Biblical Studies,” 17), 2007.

83. Robert D. MILLER II, “Yahweh and His Clío: Critical Theory and the Historical Criticism of the Hebrew Bible,” *Currents in Biblical Research*, 4 (2005), p. 145-165; “How Post-Modernism (and W. F. Albright) Can Save Us from Malarkey,” *Bible and Interpretation* (online journal at [www.bibleinterp.com](http://www.bibleinterp.com)), November 2003.

84. Ferdinand DEIST, “The Problem of History in Old Testament Theology,” *Ou-Testamentiese Werkgemeenskap in Suider-Afrika*, 24 (1981), p. 23.

historical material like the Old Testament Wisdom Literature.<sup>85</sup> “The Bible does not proclaim history as the only or even the main factor of revelation.”<sup>86</sup> Since “Concrete history is never revelation history pure and simple,” someone must interpret the history.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, as Morton Smith wrote, “Clearly the defense of biblical history as a revelation of the ways and nature of God cannot well be pursued except by the many who are ignorant of the Bible and the few who know what it says but have been so thoroughly brainwashed that they read and revere it without thinking of what it means.”<sup>88</sup> Prosper Gresch notes how *Heilsgeschichte* fails to observe the fundamental rule that the Christian read in the light of the whole canon, in that it ignores the reinterpretation of, say the Deuteronomistic History in the apocalyptic literature of the Old and New Testaments, treating it solely as a linear history of *Magnalia Dei*.<sup>89</sup> Barr pointed to three weaknesses of this theology: “a strong personalism and existentialism”; a “tendency to ignore philosophy, to regard it as an enemy of theology”; and a conviction that scholars could educe “a way of thought, a mental pattern [...] from the Bible” and then apply this thought pattern in reading the Bible “with the assurance that the result would be the right interpretation of the Bible.”<sup>90</sup>

There are many alternatives to the *Heilsgeschichte* model of biblical theology, and it is not my intention to discuss them here.<sup>91</sup> Let me instead suggest that a return of *Heilsgeschichte* in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century Church owes much to the fact that “History has been and is the dominant (not exclusive) mode of perceiving experience, searching for the ‘real,’ and structuring the self in the West.”<sup>92</sup> I agree with the call thirty years ago of W. Taylor Stevenson, “that we cease to reifying history as a self-explanatory and self-evidently true and supremely privileged form of knowledge.”<sup>93</sup>

But before proceeding, let me be clear of two things I am not arguing. I am not arguing that the Bible *is* myth, that there is no history in it. Nor am I arguing that history is irrelevant as a category for the Bible’s theological interpretation. We need history. John Paul II in his Preface to *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* said (II.7), “The Church of Christ takes the realism of the incarnation seriously, and this is why she attaches great importance to the ‘historical-critical’ study of the Bible.”

85. Gary DORRIEN, *The Word as True Myth*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1997, p. 151; Avery DULLES, *Models of Revelation*, rev. ed., Maryknoll, Orbis, 1992, p. 63.

86. Mark S. SMITH, *Memoirs of God*, Philadelphia, Fortress, 2004, p. 165.

87. Karl RAHNER, “Concept of Revelation,” p. 17; Austin FARRER, *Glass of Vision*, Westminster, Dacre, 1948, p. 38, saw this problem long before Barr and Childs.

88. Morton SMITH, “William Robertson Smith,” in William M. CALDER III, ed., *The Cambridge Ritualists Reconsidered*, Atlanta, Scholars Press (coll. “Illinois Classical Studies Supplement,” 2, “Illinois Studies in the History of Classical Scholarship,” 1), 1991, p. 257.

89. GRESCH, “Further Reflections,” p. 88. For examples, see Scott W. HAHN, *Father who Keeps His Promises*, Ann Arbor, Servant Publications, 1998, p. 31-35; and ID., *Understanding the Scriptures*, Woodridge, Ill., Midwest Theological Forum, 2005, p. 15.

90. BARR, “Revelation,” p. 147.

91. A useful survey is in Christine HELMER, “Biblical Theology: Bridge Over Many Waters,” *Currents in Biblical Research*, 3 (2005), p. 177 and *passim*.

92. W. Taylor STEVENSON, “Myth and the Crisis of Historical Consciousness,” in L.W. GIBBS, W.T. STEVENSON, ed., *Myth and the Crisis of Historical Consciousness*, Missoula, Scholars, 1975, p. 2.

93. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Christianity is a historical faith. The Nicene Creed is a historical narrative.<sup>94</sup> I do not advocate a synchronic approach, focusing on a text detached from historical context, giving literary criticisms precedence over historical ones. "Literature does not exist without a context. Furthermore, literature without a context would lose its content and meaning."<sup>95</sup> "If the text is taken out of its historical context, the only historical context within which it can be interpreted is that of the interpreter, which is then uncritically read into the text."<sup>96</sup> If we are interested in linking the biblical literature and the life of faith, we will necessarily posit a context in which the literature functioned as part of the ancient community's life.<sup>97</sup> Marie-Joseph Lagrange criticized the Modernists a century ago for synchronic digging in the text for ideas but ignoring the "historical facts."<sup>98</sup> "Biblical Criticism is inevitably a historical discipline,"<sup>99</sup> and I remain deeply committed to history. What I do echo is Stevenson's plea was that, "Myth understood or believed *as myth* can [...] be taken in all seriousness, be recognized as an important source of truth, and even be accepted as articulating for an individual or community an ultimate worldview or faith stance."<sup>100</sup> To understand why it is essential that the Bible contain "revelatory myth," we must next look at what myth actually *does*.

## V. THE FUNCTIONS OF MYTH

Over the past two centuries, scholars have proposed several "models" for how myth functions. Most of these models also explained the presence of myth itself, and most of the adherents of these theories held them to be mutually exclusive. They need not be. Groenewald, building on others, lists the following seven models.<sup>101</sup>

Some held myth to be the ancient counterpart of science. That is, for Taylor and Frazer, myth was how ancient man explained the workings of the universe. Myths, like science, provided etiologies for scientific and technical phenomena.

94. Of course, "We do not believe in a creed : we believe through a creed" (Gerald VANN, *Myth, Symbol, and Revelation*, Washington, The Thomist, 1962, p. 5).

95. Mark J.H. FRETZ, *Lamentations and Literary Ethics : A New Perspective on Biblical Interpretation*, diss., University of Michigan (1993), p. 332.

96. DEIST, "Problem of History," p. 25.

97. Ugo VANNI, Chapter 13 of R. LATOURELLE, ed., *Vatican II : Assessment and Perspectives*, New York, Paulist, 1988, vol. 1, p. 358 ; SMITH, *Memoirs*, p. 166.

98. Marie-Joseph LAGRANGE, *Historical Criticism and the Old Testament*, London, Catholic Truth Society, 1905, p. 226.

99. John BARTON, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2007, p. 102, also p. 80-81.

100. STEVENSON, "Myth," p. 13 ; italics original. He defines "taken as myth" as "as linguistic event, as cosmogenic or world-shaping, as exploratory, etc." (*ibid.*). "Every literary genre has its own way of being true," writes Prosper GRESCH, "Further Reflections," p. 87.

101. GROENEWALD, "Mythology," p. 914-916. Full bibliographic details for each school are not provided here. Groenewald probably omits a few models, such as the Marxist view expressed in MARX's "Grundrissen der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie" ; Klaus FREYBERG, "Die Dialektik des Mythos," *Sic et Non. Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Kultur im Netz* (2005), online essay at [archiv.sicetnon.org/artikel/wesen/mythos.htm](http://archiv.sicetnon.org/artikel/wesen/mythos.htm). Freyberg provides his own list of models.



A second model, somewhat related, saw producing myth as the activity of the “mythopoeic” mind.<sup>102</sup> Ancient man engaged in literally a different kind of thinking. Implicit in this view, associated with Andrew Lang, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Ernst Cassirer, and Karl Mannheim, is that humanity has evolved out of this form of thinking.

The third model, the so-called “myth and ritual school,” held that myths were the spoken counterparts of rituals. Rituals, in turn, functioned to act out the myths. Pioneered by William Robertson Smith and Jane Harrison, biblical scholars like Mowinckel and Gaster flocked to this theory and assigned the biblical myths to ancient Israelite holidays.<sup>103</sup> As an explanation, this one is circular, since it leaves open the question of the mythic ritual’s function (or the liturgical myth’s).

A fourth model, associated with Durkheim and Malinowski, is sociological. Myths function to cement social bonds and provide group identity. The myths are a pragmatic charter for a community. They can also serve to provide legitimation for power structures.

The Jungian understanding of myth and the unconscious has been widely misunderstood. Jordan Peterson explains it as follows.<sup>104</sup> Jung’s theory is that myths function to fulfil individual, psychological needs (Freud argued this, too). But because these needs are really *neurological*, all Homo sapiens share them. The commonality of myths across cultures and time illustrates this. Thus, we can speak of a “collective unconscious.” There are many anticipations of Jung’s model in Friedrich Schelling’s psychological identification of elements of one myth with those of another.<sup>105</sup> And there are echoes of Jung in Paul Ricœur’s understanding of the role of the non-verbal, pictorial aspect of myth in the imagination.<sup>106</sup> For Ricœur, semantics and psychology, or imagination and emotion, allow myth a claim to realize true insight about reality.<sup>107</sup>

The understanding of myth of Lévi-Strauss and Saussure was structural. Myths only produce meaning by the structure of their relationship with one another. Myths in such contexts communicate, like a language. But removed from their structural network, they are unreadable.

Finally, although Eliade’s thought on myth is broad and multifaceted, his phenomenological approach saw myths as exemplary models for human behaviour. Myth is thus pedagogic. The ubiquity of certain specific myths is owing to the universal impulse for religion and ethics in humanity.

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102. VAN BINSBERGEN lumps these first two models together (“Rupture and Fusion,” p. 306).

103. The Myth-and-Ritual School was significantly more important in biblical studies than these other models, although its heyday passed a half-century ago.

104. JORDAN B. PETERSON, *Maps of Meaning*, New York, Routledge, 1999, p. 92.

105. EDWARD A. BEACH, *The Potencies of God(s)*, Binghamton, Statue University of New York Press, 1994, p. 201.

106. PAUL RICOEUR, “The Status of ‘Vorstellung’ in Hegel’s Philosophy of Religion,” in L.S. ROUNER, ed., *Meaning, Truth, and God*, South Bend, Notre Dame University Press, 1982, p. 85.

107. PAUL RICOEUR, *The Rule of Metaphor*, New York, Routledge, 2004, p. 374-379 ; ID., *Freud and Philosophy*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 2008, p. 6-7.



There are shortcomings to all of these models, and individual myths exist that refute each. Myths are not proto-science, because trueness of myth is always a religious phenomenon for its community.<sup>108</sup> To limit myth to the etiological function ignores what human communities themselves say about their myths : that they address the emotional, aesthetic, and moral aspects of life, too.<sup>109</sup> The first model and definitely the second embrace the Western hegemonic view of progress from myth to science that shored up the superiority of European colonizers in the past two centuries.<sup>110</sup> The Myth-and-Ritual model survived in biblical scholarship long after it had died in classics, only to now reappear in classics in the work of Walter Burkett. The difficulty with the theory is the many instances in the ancient world where myths and ritual do not overlap.<sup>111</sup> The Jungian model remains so variously understood that its application has been limited. Mythographer Alan Dundes writes, "It would take too long to demonstrate all the logical (not to say psychological) flaws in the Jungian archetype," and notes it has never been applied well to actual texts.<sup>112</sup> The structuralist approach identified elegant logical structures in myth, but as with structuralism in general, one began to wonder what structures were actually in the mind of the modern interpreter and not in the myth. Moreover, Lévi-Strauss's myths were still a defining product of the savage's mind ; he merely inverted the hierarchy so that the mythic mind became in many ways superior to the rational, Western mind.<sup>113</sup> The fourth and seventh models, while no doubt true, are reductionist ; they confuse function with purpose and often limit a myth to a single function. At their worst, all these models became mere "meta-narratives explaining away important mythical materials."<sup>114</sup> They demythologize, they commit the error of "explanation" that we shall return to below.

On the other hand, the models are not incompatible, and each has an element of accuracy to it. Almost all myths have both a theoretical, explanatory function and a much more important practical significance.<sup>115</sup>

The specific links between myth and ritual are case-specific. Usually, if they are related, the myth generates the ritual, but there are reverse cases. Myth's relationship to ritual is complex : myths may provide the origin of ritual, but more often, a myth explains a ritual's general orientation. Myths may be narrated for ritually constitutive

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108. Mariano Herranz MARCO, "Características diferentes de la expresión mítica," in *Revelación y Pensar Mítico*, p. 59.

109. DOTY, *Mythography*, p. 61 ; FARRER, "Can Myth be Fact ?", p. 165.

110. LINCOLN, *Theorizing Myth*, p. 210.

111. The literature on the refutation of Myth-and-Ritual is immense, going back as early as Clyde KLUCKHOHN, "Myths and Rituals," *Harvard Theological Review*, 35 (1942), p. 45-79, an essay reprinted repeatedly over the following three decades.

112. DUNDES, "Madness," p. 150-151.

113. LINCOLN, *Theorizing Myth*, p. 210.

114. VAN BINSBERGEN, "Rupture and Fusion," p. 317.

115. T.P. VAN BAAREN, "The Flexibility of Myth," in *Ex Orbe Religionem*, Leiden, Brill (coll. "Studies in the History of Religions," 22), 1972, p. 204-205.

purposes, purporting to enhance a certain layer of the tradition, which crystallizes in a certain ritual.<sup>116</sup>

At the same time, myth is man's social experience objectified. Myths do *function* in society ; they address sociopolitical, psychological, and moral-pedagogical ends.<sup>117</sup> And they perform these functions not merely in their original contexts ; the myths continue to have power, even when far removed from their original contexts.<sup>118</sup> Finally, with Ricœur, it is precisely the iconic element of myth, rather than the narrative, that seems to give myths this power.

Yet none of these explanations can replace the myths themselves. The Baconian (and it was Bacon's, too !) reduction of myths to specimens is as old as the Greek philosophers, for whom myth was not only to be explained but also denigrated. As early as Theogonus of Rhegium (6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.) and Pindar (5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.), *muthoi* were falsehoods, contrasted with what was true (*alēthēs*).<sup>119</sup> Euripides sneered at mythic fantasy, as did Xenophanes and Varro,<sup>120</sup> although it is worth noting how often writers like Herodotus and Thucydides treated as historical what is clearly legendary (e.g., the eponymous ancestor Hellen in Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War* 1.3.2).<sup>121</sup>

Plato held that myths, which were falsehood, could contain some pedagogical truth (*Republic*, 2.376c-377d). Much mythic material was to be condemned outright (*Republic*, 2.379), although some could be permitted as a vehicle for the truth it allegorized (*Republic*, 3.389b ; *Timaeus*, 22c-22d).<sup>122</sup> Aristotle held the same view (*Metaphysics*, 1074b.1). Boethius's commentaries on Aristotle preserved this Platonic view through the Middle Ages.<sup>123</sup> When Francis Bacon treated myths as irrational discourse that perhaps held truth allegorically at its origin, he was merely echoing Plato.<sup>124</sup>

116. At Ugarit, KTU 1.40, 1.43, and 1.119 all combine ritual with epic-style liturgies for dramatization of myth.

117. David BROWN, *Tradition and Imagination*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 180 ; Armindo dos SANTOS VAZ, "Genèse 2-3," in BERNER, WUNENBURGER, ed., *Mythe et philosophie*, p. 182-183. The Babylonian creation story of *Enuma Elish* serves to legitimate the city of Babylon and the Babylonian king as the emperor of the world (*Enuma Elish*, 6.161-162). At the same time, it can be read structurally in a Jungian fashion, as does PETERSON, *Maps*, although admittedly, Peterson vastly overestimates the age of the story and misunderstands its ritual performance (p. 100, 108, 125).

118. BROWN, *Tradition*, p. 178.

119. PINDAR, *Olympian*, 1.27-29. Catherine SALLES, "Les Grecs ont-ils cru à leurs mythes ?," in Élian CUVILLIER, Jean-Daniel CAUSSE, ed., *Mythes grecs, mythes bibliques*, Paris, Cerf, 2007, p. 39.

120. Discussion in FARRER, "Can Myth be Fact ?," p. 166 ; Ioana I. SION, "Mythical Self and Infernal Labyrinth," *Lingua Romana*, 5, 1 (2006), online essay at <http://linguaromana.byu.edu>.

121. BROWN, *Tradition*, p. 181.

122. This is not the same as Euhemerism, for Plato will not reduce the myths entirely to their supposed real, veiled meanings. See *Republic*, 2.229c-229e ; Carlo GINZBURG, "Myth," (1996) ; repr. in *Wooden Eyes*, New York, Verso, 2002, p. 27-29.

123. GINZBURG, "Myth," p. 31-32, 35.

124. LINCOLN, *Theorizing Myth*, p. 209. For late Medieval reading of myth in this line, see M.-D. CHENU, "Involucrum : Le mythe selon les théologiens médiévaux," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge*, 22 (1955), p. 78.

A renewed respect for myth only came with Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), who defined myth as *vera narratio* (true story) in opposition to an intellectual climate that, like our own, saw “belief is a weakness and poetry is a baroque irrelevance.”<sup>125</sup> The Truth of Myth consists not in its representation of reality, said Vico, but rather in its modes of narration of it. Moreover, myth was a witness to the mental range and linguistic potentialities of its authors’ day, what Vico called the *sensus communis*.<sup>126</sup> Vico’s sentiments were echoed by several thinkers of subsequent centuries (although few actually drew on Vico because of his “writing style that his contemporaries and ours have called incoherent”<sup>127</sup>), but of these only Vico sought to integrate his understanding of myth with Christian theology.<sup>128</sup>

Explicitly drawing on the later Schelling’s fascination with extra-biblical fore-shadowings of biblical stories,<sup>129</sup> the 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher Karl Jaspers affirmed the value of myths as loci in which one can “encounter the essentially real.”<sup>130</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, also drawing on Schelling, saw myth as “the truth itself reduced to its elements.”<sup>131</sup> But Rosenzweig, unlike Jaspers, Schelling, and Vico, identified myth in the Bible itself that functioned as the most direct revelation of the really real.<sup>132</sup> Rosenzweig writes, “The spirit of myth founds the realm of the Beautiful.”<sup>133</sup>

So, then, the question is not “Can myth be revelation ?” but Dulles’ question : “Can it be admitted that myth has a function in revelation ?”<sup>134</sup> or “How does myth function in revelation ?” And here we return to what we have already seen about how myth functions in general.<sup>135</sup> The primary function of myth in the Old Testament is

125. Mark WILLIAMS, “Ancient Language and Myth as New Science,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 35 (2002), p. 304. There are suggestions, in the paintings of Velázquez, for example, that the recovery had begun earlier in the 17<sup>th</sup> century ; GINZBURG, “Myth,” p. 40-41.

126. Giambattista VICO, *First New Science*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 384 ; ID., *Autobiography*, Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 1944, p. 153.

127. WILLIAMS, “Ancient Language,” p. 302 ; LINCOLN, *Theorizing Myth*, p. 50.

128. Karl JASPERS had an Arian theology that disparaged Judaism and Christianity (*Truth and Symbol*, New York, Twayne [1947], 1959, p. 75-76).

129. BEACH, *Potencies*, p. 201, 242. See F.W.J. SCHELLING, *Historical-critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Myth*, Binghamton, State University of New York Press [1852], 2007, p. 62, 125.

130. JASPERS, *Truth*, p. 56.

131. Rivka HORWITZ, “From Hegelianism to a Revolutionary Understanding of Judaism,” *Modern Judaism*, 26 (2006), p. 31, 40.

132. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

133. Franz ROSENZWEIG, *The Star of Redemption*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press (coll. “Modern Jewish Philosophy and Religion,” 5) [1919], 2005, p. 46. The philosopher, Oskar Goldberg and his disciple Erich Unger likewise drew on Schelling and saw myth in the Bible as profoundly pedagogical ; Oskar GOLDBERG, *Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2005 (orig. rev. ed. 1925), p. 16 ; Erich UNGER, *Das Problem der Mythischen Realität*, Berlin, Verlag David, 1926, p. 5-7. Yet Unger in particular wanted to “translate” the myths into rational, discursive language, ultimately demythologizing : see Erich UNGER, *The Story of the Garden of Eden*, trans. E.J. Ehrman, online edition at [www.erich-unger.org/eden/index.php](http://www.erich-unger.org/eden/index.php), 2010, p. 6-7, 11.

134. DULLES, “Symbol,” p. 7.

135. BROWN, *Tradition*, p. 179, writes, “It will not do to treat biblical mythology as profound, while continuing to be dismissive of myth in all other contexts.” Fuller treatment of this issue is beyond the scope of this essay.

evocation.<sup>136</sup> Myth, as we have said, expresses in terms of the world what is beyond the world. Concepts bearing upon metaphysical or religious reality have to work with a sensible image even when they themselves are remote from direct experience. The sensible image is not the original phenomenal form of that reality ; it is arrived at from elsewhere. But the image is a dramatic representation — a mythical representation (or can be developed into one). In this case, mythical discourse would always be essentially involved in genuine and permanently valid knowledge of truth.<sup>137</sup> As a dramatic representation, the mythic image creates an “existential arena” wherein we encounter truth.<sup>138</sup> The mythic revelatory material, then, does not serve mainly to communicate information but to engage us ; it does not so much communicate elements of faith as it embodies the faith.<sup>139</sup> We do not have to become nebulous and mawkish or claim that mythic language speaks to our emotions.<sup>140</sup> Myths, as we have seen, embody morality, psychology, social unity, and communal anthropology.<sup>141</sup>

Distinguishing myth in the Old Testament is not directly about the authors’ intent. It is commonplace to address contradictions between, say, Genesis 1 and modern astronomy and biology, by opining that Genesis 1 does not intend to teach such things.<sup>142</sup> There is truth to this, and it holds within it the best answer to such contradictions. But we must be careful about whose “intent” we are speaking of. With regard to the divine author’s intent, which is “for the sake of our salvation” (*Dei Verbum*, 11 ; drawing on Augustine, *Literal Interpretation of Genesis* 2, 9, 20), the statement is true.<sup>143</sup> For the “text’s intent,” it is probably also true, although such a phrase would require some unpacking. For the “human author’s intent,” the view is problematic. By identifying “myth” as a category in the Old Testament, I am not arguing that the ancient authors intended a text to be myth. This much is true for any ancient text : the author’s intent may or may not correspond to the genre that the reader correctly identifies. We thus avoid the “intentionalist fallacy.” Although certainly writing in an act of faith, the authors of Genesis 1 may well, by a certain defi-

136. Juan Guillén TORRALBA, “Revelación y Mito en el Antiguo Testamento,” in *Revelación y Pensar Mítico*, p. 169.

137. Karl RAHNER, Herbert VORGRIMLER, *Theological Dictionary*, New York, Herder and Herder, 1965, s.v. “Myth.”

138. Jerry GILL, *Faith in Dialogue*, Waco, Jarrell, 1985, p. 126 ; Christian BERNER, “Mythe et philosophie : de l’exégèse biblique à l’herméneutique philosophique,” in BERNER, WUNENBURGER, ed., *Mythe et philosophie*, p. 264.

139. GILL, *Faith*, p. 124-126, drawing on the later Wittgenstein ; VAZ, “Genèse 2-3,” p. 183.

140. As do STANILOAE, “Revelation,” p. 130 ; and WILDER, *Theopoetic*, p. 75 ; but also ALEXANDER OF HALES, *Summa Theologica Tractatus Introductorius* q.1, cap. 4, a.3.

141. On the necessity of revelation addressing the archetypal psyche, see James ARRAJ, *Jungian or Catholic ? The Promises and Problems of the Jungian-Christian Dialogue*, Midland, Ore., Inner Growth Books, 1991, esp. chap. 8.

142. Joan F. GORMLEY, “Creation in the Bible,” in Robert BRUNGS, ed., *Creation and Evolution*, St. Louis, Institute for the Theological Encounter with Science and Technology Faith/Science Press, 1998, p. 49, 51, 61, 64-65.

143. ASHLEY, “Bible Gap,” p. 6. For a recent revisionist interpretation of this clause from *Dei Verbum*, a reading of it that sees unrestricted inerrancy, see Brian W. HARRISON, “Does Vatican Council II Allow for Errors in Sacred Scripture ?,” *Divinitas*, n.s., 52 (2009), p. 279-304 ; along with most of the essays in *For the Sake of Our Salvation : The Truth and Humility of God’s Word = Letter and Spirit*, 6 (2010).

nition, have intended “science” ; they draw on the best science they knew, Neo-Babylonian, and present a rational, scientific counterpart to Genesis 2.<sup>144</sup> It is certain that they did not consciously think out every interconnection of their mythic imagery. The categories of “myth” and “history” may have meant little to the ancient Israelites.<sup>145</sup>

From a theological perspective, our reading of the Old Testament as inspired Scripture begins from a perspective external to the text ; it begins with Christ. Therefore, “it is not necessary,” writes Benedict XVI, to establish exactly the “old covenant’s own conception of its own nature” in every place.<sup>146</sup> While I acknowledge a need for some estimation of authorial intent (*Dei Verbum*, 12), we can never really get to the author’s intention, and Augustine said it was a sin of pride to suggest one’s own interpretation was the original intent of the author (*Confessions*, 12.25). The locus of divine inspiration need not be the human author’s intentions, but more accurately their imaginations.<sup>147</sup> Our interest as interpreters is ultimately on what the authors did say, not what they intended.<sup>148</sup>

Modern biblical criticism, too, is not a quest for the author’s intent. Biblical criticism is concerned with the “plain sense” of the text, and presenting that sense “is a semantic or linguistic and a literary operation first and foremost, only indirectly concerned with the original, the intended, the historical, or the literal meaning.”<sup>149</sup> “That biblical critics have often been intentionalists does not seem to me in doubt,” writes John Barton, but intentionalism is only frequent, not inherent.<sup>150</sup>

At one time scholars held that to understand a myth one had to enter the minds of the myth’s authors.<sup>151</sup> But as Jaspers argued, myths were not altogether more “readable” at the time of their writing ; their “meanings” were not immediately unpackable in such a marked contrast to to-day.<sup>152</sup> Here is where Pannenberg’s critique of Austinian speech-act theory is crucial.<sup>153</sup> Speakers do not always intend as the goal of their discourse to establish the content to which they refer. Representation is the dominant function of myth, and a focus on authorial intent emphasizes performance so much that representation is not adequately considered.<sup>154</sup> In any extended conversation, participants traverse all manner of topics seemingly unrelated to each other outside of

144. ENNS, *Inspiration*, p. 55 ; VAZ, “Genèse 2-3,” p. 182.

145. WYATT, “Mythic Mind Revisited,” p. 140 ; FARRER, “Can Myth be Fact ?,” p. 166 ; SWINBURNE, *Revelation*, p. 250.

146. RATZINGER, “Revelation and Tradition,” p. 39 ; MOWINCKEL, *Old Testament*, p. 70.

147. Ingolf DALFERT, “The Stuff of Revelation,” in Ann LOADES, Michael MCLAIN, ed., *Hermeneutics, the Bible, and Literary Criticism*, New York, St. Martin’s, 1992, p. 72-73.

148. WOLTERSTORFF, *Divine Discourse*, p. 199 ; RATZINGER, “On the Schema,” p. 280 : “The inerrancy of Scripture has to be limited to its *vere enuntiata* [what is really affirmed].”

149. BARTON, *Nature*, p. 101 ; SWINBURNE, *Revelation*, p. 243, 261.

150. BARTON, *Nature*, p. 73. Barton proves this on p. 7, 73-74, 79.

151. Erich UNGER, “Mythos und Wirklichkeit,” *Der Morgen*, 3 (1928-1929), p. 297.

152. JASPERS, *Truth*, p. 50.

153. E.g., Wolfhart PANNENBERG, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, Philadelphia, Westminster, 1985, p. 370.

154. Wesley S. BIDDY, “Review of Wolfhart Pannenberg on Human Linguisticity and the Word of God,” *Ars Disputandi*, 5 (2005), p. 16.

the context of the conversation. The object of the conversation becomes increasingly concrete as the exchange proceeds.<sup>155</sup> David Schindler shows how this insight was already Claudel's.<sup>156</sup> So, too, the object of a myth "represents and expresses the totality of life into which it is integrated, so that what we could legitimately call the 'spirit of life' [Vico's *sensus communis* (see above)] is present in the community established between the conversing persons."<sup>157</sup> This will be of key importance to the question of how to recapture myth today.

And I would argue that we must recapture it. Secular assumptions shared commonly in the culture of Western liberal democracy fill the roles once played by myth. "History" is a dominant mode of defining the "real."<sup>158</sup> "Science" has usurped myth's function.<sup>159</sup> When we look at particular myths, even if some aspect of meaning were to correspond to empirical truth, true to Plato we would merely consider this a kernel of truth in a greater untruth.<sup>160</sup> Those who cling to the Scriptures as inspired assent to the Enlightenment definition of truth and of the kinds of discourse worthy of acceptance and therefore retreat into literal readings of the Bible's myths.<sup>161</sup> Most theology rests at the discursive, the rational, and the prosaic.<sup>162</sup> But as Paul Claudel predicted, the contemporary loss of images and imagination leads to faith itself losing its substance.<sup>163</sup>

Yet, in the Post-Modern world, we return to myth. "Myth brings us face to face with that deep suspicion of the human heart that we are not 'alone' and that we are

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155. PANNENBERG, *Anthropology*, p. 375-376.

156. D.C. SCHINDLER, "Why We Need Paul Claudel," *Communio*, 34 (2007), p. 136.

157. BIDDY, "Review," p. 16. Pannenberg thought that salvation history supplied this conversation context (Wolfhart PANNENBERG, "Analogy and Doxology," in *Basic Questions in Theology*, London, SCM, 1970, 1.212 ; ID., *Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1991, 1.256). As we have seen, this not a fruitful place to look and, as Biddy argues, Pannenberg's move was an unjustifiable, radical break with his previous thought (BIDDY, "Review," p. 39).

158. STEVENSON, "Myth," p. 2. And the problem is not only the changing locus of truth but also an alienation from the natural world that is another post-Romantic legacy of modernity, as C.S. Lewis observed (C.S. LEWIS, *The Abolition of Man* [1944], San Francisco, HarperCollins, 2001, p. 54-55, 67-68, 71). Post-60s returns to nature lack the robustness of Genesis or Job (WILDER, *Theopoetic*, p. 20).

159. SEGAL, "Does Myth Have a Future?," p. 82. Charles Taylor argues that "rationalism" and "empiricism" are "our myths" only by broad analogy (TAYLOR, "Comparison," p. 47). Nevertheless, science depends as much upon imagination as upon the intellect (Madeleine L'ENGLE, "Childlike Wonder and the Truths of Science Fiction," *Annual of the Modern Language Association Division on Children's Literature and the Children's Literature Association*, 10 [1982], p. 103).

160. Gregory NAGY, "Can Myth be Saved?," in Gregory SCHREMPF, William HANSEN, ed., *Myth : A New Symposium*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2002, p. 241 ; STANILOAE engages in this procedure in "Revelation," p. 116.

161. GORMLEY, "Creation," p. 51 ; Madeleine L'ENGLE, *The Rock that is Higher*, Wheaton, Shaw, 1993, p. 89.

162. WILDER, *Theopoetic*, p. 1-2. Wilder observes that much of what passes for the poetic in theology is actually nostalgic religious sentimentality (*ibid.*, p. 3).

163. SCHINDLER, "Why We Need Paul Claudel," p. 148. I am aware of Claudel's sometimes vitriolic antipathy for biblical criticism, yet he also expressed admiration for the "beneficial and inestimable" work of Marie-Joseph Lagrange and his students. For citations and discussion, see Dominique MILLET-GÉRARD, "Le sens littéral dans l'exégèse claudélienne," in Olivier-Thomas VENARD, ed., *Le sens littéral des Écritures*, Paris, Cerf, 2009, p. 265-266.



addressed by Being in a most personal way.”<sup>164</sup> Myths “are fundamental in helping us remember our humanity.”<sup>165</sup> We see the ubiquity of what Jaspers saw as degradations of myth in the popularity of mythology, superstition, mythological art, and cinematic and literary fantasies that take up the grand primal narratives.<sup>166</sup>

At a minimum, recapturing myth is necessary in order to appropriate the portions of the Bible that must be designated myth. This essay has shown considerable other reasons to do so. Now, we could recapture myth by unpacking the myths ; this has been the mainstay of mythography since Plato and Euhemerus. Peterson’s Jungian unpacking of the cosmogonies of the ancient Near East, including Israel’s, is a recent example.<sup>167</sup> Bruce Lincoln proposes the most elaborate and cogent strategy for correctly unpacking myths.<sup>168</sup> For the theologian, one merely has to “attribute the main point to God, and discard the [...] particular way of making the point as of purely human significance.”<sup>169</sup>

Genesis 1-2 is easy to unpack in this way.<sup>170</sup> The world has a beginning. God exists already outside of and independent of creation. The only continuum from God to creation is his word. God is the creator of everything : all things are contingent. There is a rational wisdom to creation, a coherence and a goodness. Without any resistance to his power, God creates. Nothing in creation is necessary. Man is not by nature evil, nor is he a god, nor is he a product of nature. The sexes are equal and both are required to image God, while idols do not image him and kings do so no more than other humans do. Genesis 3 could be similarly unpacked : at the dawn of human history, our ancestors misused their faculties and lost their innocence before civilization began. But the biting criticism of Farrer rings true :

Such a statement as this sounds very reasonable and harmless, far better than the tale about the apple. It is indeed a safe sort of statement, but like most safe statements, it is an almost completely meaningless one. Whatever really happened between primitive man, his conscience, and his God, it certainly was nothing like a text-book generalization, it was the individual drama of someone’s existence. [...] And if you won’t have the myth of Adam you have got to make up a novel for yourself to replace it. Try, by all means, but I wonder if you are likely to do better.<sup>171</sup>

Balthasar, too, was extremely critical of rendering down the text’s meaning into statements that supposedly more clearly articulated the true meaning. To do so fails

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164. LARRY S. CHAPP, *The God Who Speaks*, San Francisco, International Scholars Publications, 1996, p. 48.

165. SION, “Mythical Self.”

166. JASPERS, *Truth*, p. 58 ; JAMES HANVEY, “Waiting for Aslan,” *Thinking Faith : The Online Journal of the British Jesuits* [<http://www.thinkingfaith.org>], 26 (June 2008), p. 2. They are degradations because they are safe, nonthreatening substitutes for the imagination (HANVEY, “Waiting for Aslan,” p. 2, 4).

167. PETERSON, *Maps*, p. 112, 386.

168. LINCOLN, *Theorizing Myth*, p. 150-151.

169. WOLTERSTORFF, *Divine Discourse*, p. 210. Wolterstorff justifies this move since the human writer has spoken literally while God has spoken tropically in the same text (*ibid.*, p. 211).

170. This rendition is drawn largely from GORMLEY, “Creation,” p. 66-69.

171. FARRER, “Can Myth be Fact ?,” p. 171.



to appreciate the Bible's surplus of meaning.<sup>172</sup> It proposes a Hegelian dualism between sign and referent where the sign is disposable once the signified is affirmed.<sup>173</sup>

The myth cannot be "evaporated into general statements without losing its force."<sup>174</sup> Of course, theology is necessary; doctrines that elaborate what is in Scripture and much else form the meat of Christianity. But they do not replace the image patterns of the biblical myths,<sup>175</sup> and they never shed the imagery, without which "something less — dangerously less — than the Christian truth is being transmitted."<sup>176</sup> Catholic theology, especially, embodies its faith in this poetry.<sup>177</sup> That is because the biblical myths, unlike their explanations, employ the central and elementary symbols that human life affords, universal symbols that are the common heritage of humanity.<sup>178</sup> They enable us to venture further towards the inexpressible and the apophatic than can the language of theology or doctrinal formulas.

But to hold that the Church can use no images not positively authorized by the Bible would be archaism.<sup>179</sup> We do not want a "retreat into non-translatability of divinity."<sup>180</sup> Moreover, we cannot undo the Enlightenment nor should we wish to. "Myth is for us *broken* myth, and it will always remain so. Short of the total collapse of our culture, there is no possibility of returning to the state of original participation (Barfield) or a first naïveté (Ricœur)."<sup>181</sup> I return to a quotation used earlier in this essay: "Myth understood or believed *as* myth can [...] be taken in all seriousness, be recognized as an important source of truth, and even be accepted as articulating for an individual or community an ultimate worldview or faith stance."<sup>182</sup> To "take as myth" means to enter the conversation, to use Pannenberg's analogy.<sup>183</sup> The essential desideratum for engaging the myth is Vico's *sensus communis*: faith. Pannenberg refers to this engagement as attention, as focussing, a movement of total disposition.<sup>184</sup> Here the hermeneutical models of Stanley Hauerwas and others that emphasize reading-in-community or "reading from within the narrative" seem promising, although that

172. W.T. DICKENS, "Balthasar's Biblical Hermeneutics," in Edwart T. OAKES, David MOSS, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 183.

173. *Ibid.*, p. 175; DALFERT, "Stuff," p. 93.

174. FARRER, "Can Myth be Fact?," p. 170.

175. DALFERT, "Stuff," p. 94; Christian BERNER, "Mythe et philosophie," p. 260-261.

176. SCHINDLER, "Why We Need Paul Claudel," p. 149. In this sense, Smith's call for "translation," "translatability of divinity" cannot be entirely embraced (Mark S. SMITH, *God in Translation*, Wiesbaden, Mohr Siebeck [coll. "Forschungen zum Alten Testament," 57], 2008, p. 339-340).

177. Hellmut ROSENFELD, *Legende*, Stuttgart, J.B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1964, p. 3.

178. FARRER, "Can Myth be Fact?," p. 171. The specific elements of the myths Israel shares with the rest of the ancient Near East are also shared with so wide a geographic range and historical depth that van Binsbergen ventures to call them "species-specific"; VAN BINSBERGEN, "Rupture and Fusion," p. 315; Owen BARFIELD, "The Concept of Revelation," *Anglican Theological Review*, 63 (1981), p. 236.

179. DULLES, "Symbol," p. 24.

180. SMITH, *God*, p. 337.

181. STEVENSON, "Myth," p. 9.

182. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

183. BIDDY, "Review," p. 16-18.

184. PANNENBERG, *Anthropology*, p. 380-381.

avenue and its attendant shortcomings are beyond the scope of this essay.<sup>185</sup> We need not dwell on a search for hermeneutical method as if selecting the proper fishing lure before casting into the text. Pannenberg equates receiving the word with receiving grace,<sup>186</sup> and as Claudel noted, “The ray of grace attacks us, following the latent disposition of need, of desire and fruit, which it alone discerns, by that fundamental formative part of us which precedes our faculties.”<sup>187</sup> Perhaps all that is necessary is to begin to read.<sup>188</sup>

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185. See Stanley HAUERWAS, “The Moral Authority of Scripture,” in C.E. CURRAN, R.A. MCCORMICK, ed., *The Use of Scripture in Moral Theology*, New York, Paulist (coll. “Readings in Moral Theology,” 4), 1984, p. 243, 245, 255, 259; *Unleashing the Scripture*, Nashville, Abingdon, 1993, p. 21-23. The theory is also associated with Stephen Fowl and George Lindbeck. For important critiques of this approach and its failure to follow through on its own Nonfoundationalism (in a MacIntyre sense), see COLLINS, *Bible*, p. 135-142.

186. BIDDY, “Review,” p. 18.

187. Paul CLAUDEL, *A Poet before the Cross*, Leesburg, Alethes, 2007, p. 19-20, n. 12; see. Thomas AQUINAS, *Summa contra Gentiles*, 3.154.

188. L’ENGLE, *Rock*, p. 217. Or “to listen,” in that liturgical hearing of the word, integrated into the calendar of the Church, further mediates the mythic images through more images (WILDER, *Theopoetic*, p. 92, 100). Marianne Schleicher agrees that this is the most powerful way to recapture, and fears it for just this reason (SCHLEICHER, “General Reflections Addressed by Scripture,” in Kirsten NIELSEN, ed., *Receptions and Transformations of the Bible*, Aarhus, Aarhus University Press [coll. “Religion and Normativity,” 2], 2009, p. 136-137).