

## *Myth and the New Testament*

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### I

In any discussion of the term 'myth' it is necessary to begin with a definition; there are few words which can mean so many things. In popular parlance a myth is a sheer invention, a piece of falsehood lacking any foundation in fact. In theological parlance the word is used with a closer reference to its origin. The Greek *mythos* is originally an utterance or a story, which may be true or false. In the earliest literature it is a synonym of *logos*; some later writers contrast the two words, *mythos* being a fictional narrative whereas *logos* is the prosaic fact. But in a religious context a *mythos* is a story about one or more of the gods—especially a story which was enacted in a sacred ritual. This is the sense which lies behind the use of the word by the 'myth and ritual' school. In Greece an important development of early 'myth and ritual' is seen in tragedy and comedy, where *drama* (or 'action') is accompanied by *mythos* (or plot). The *mythos* tells the story which is enacted in the *drama*.

Much of the ancient poetry of Western Asia has been interpreted along these lines; for example, in *Thespis* (1950) T. H. Gaster explains the religious texts from Ugarit and elsewhere as the *mythoi* or *hieroi logoi* of seasonal rites of emptying 'and filling' which he endeavours to reconstruct. It is against this background that much discussion of myth in the Old Testament is carried on; and if we use the terms in these technical senses it would be proper to say, for example, that the first fifteen chapters of Exodus constitutes the *mythos* or *hieroi logos* of the annually repeated Passover ritual in Israel. To this day, as the ancient drama is enacted at the paschal table, the head of the household is given the cue to repeat the story of that night much to be remembered' when the God of Israel came down to redeem His people from bondage in Egypt. But—and herein lies the whole *differentia* of Israel's faith as contrasted with the surrounding religions of Old Testament days—the *mythos* in this instance is not the casting of a recurring fertility pattern in the form of a story thrown back to primeval times, but the recital of something that really happened in history, interpreted as the mighty and self-revealing act of Israel's God.

So in the New Testament the sacramental action of the Eucharist was accompanied by words in which its meaning was made plain: 'as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup', says Paul to the Corinthian Christians, 'you

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proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' (1 Cor. 11:26). This probably means, not that the partaking of the bread and cup is in itself a visible proclamation of the Lord's death (although that is certainly true), but that it was accompanied by a recital of the saving events which were symbolized in the sacramental action. Again, to use the terms in their technical sense, the *drama* was accompanied by the *mythos* or *hieros logos*; again, as in the case of the Passover, the *mythos* was the recital of something that really happened in history—the Lord's death—interpreted as God's saving act on behalf of mankind. The Emperor Julian might say of the details of the story set forth in the mysteries of Attis, 'These things never happened, and yet they are eternally true'; but of the events set forth in the Christian Eucharist, as of those set

forth in the Jewish Passover, it must he said, 'These things happened once for all, and therefore they are eternally true.'

## II

However, while 'myth' is frequently used in this sense in Old Testament discussion, it is something different from this that is commonly meant when the subject of myth in the New Testament is considered. The subject has come to the fore more particularly during the past quarter of a century as a result of Professor Rudolf Bultmann's demythologizing programme. Bultmann's thesis, in brief, is that if the gospel is to make its impact on men and women today, it must be freed from its 'mythological' formulation and presented in such terms as will expose the hearers immediately to its challenge and its 'offence'. It is no part of his programme to remove the 'offence of the cross'; rather he believes that that 'offence' is obscured by the mythological language in which it has been traditionally wrapped up. When that language has been jettisoned and the gospel restated, the restatement turns out to be an attempt at a Christianized version of Heidegger's existential analysis.

Whatever be thought of the validity or success of this attempt. it is clear that Bultmann's motive is different from that of the typical nineteenth-Century re-writer of the Life of Jesus, who hoped by stripping away the miraculous incrustation from the story to recover the picture of the inoffensive teacher of the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man; and more different still from that of the proponent of the Christ-myth theory (a theory now almost entirely defunct apart from its survival as part of the official Communist mythology). Bultmann's motive is to prevent the essential *skandalon* of Christianity from being so entangled with the dispensable *skandala* of its 'mythological' concomitants that people who cannot accept the latter reject the former along with them.

When we ask what these mythological concomitants are, we are given more than one answer. One of them is the conception of the three-decker universe: earth is the floor on which we live, heaven is the floor above, hades is the basement beneath. In the traditional formulation of the gospel story, Christ came down from heaven to earth, descended farther from earth to hades, came up again from hades to this earth, from which He 'ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come [back to earth] to judge the quick and the dead'. But this is not really mythological; it is a pictorial framework, going back, admittedly, to pre-Copernican and even pre-Ptolemaic times. A Christian astronomer, when he recites the Creed, is no more bothered by language of this kind than he is in ordinary conversation when he speaks of the sun rising and setting. The Bishop of Woolwich agrees that for thinking people the conception of God 'up there' has long since been given up as having any 'geographical' precision (if it was ever thought to have any)—although we may question whether they have replaced it in any comparable sense by the conception of God as 'out there'. Such phrases are but spatial metaphors for God's transcendence, just as the Bishop's preferred conception of Him as 'in the depths of being' is an equally spatial metaphor for His immanence. 'To all life Thou givest' is as true as the companion confession, 'In all life Thou livest'. From beyond our own existence and resources God comes into our human life to impart grace in time of need; the language of personal relationship (even though it too would be regarded as mythological by some) best expresses the gospel witness about God and man, and if that witness is sometimes conveyed in spatial metaphors, they are metaphors for 'the divine-human encounter embodied in the Person and work of Christ, for what Bultmann himself calls the act of God in Christ, His decisive eschatological

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act' (*Kerygma und Mythos* I, p. 48).

We need not trouble ourselves, then, about the necessity to demythologize that form of thought and speech in which 'God's transcendence is conceived of as spatial remoteness' (*Kerygma und Mythos* I, p. 22); that is a natural use of language, and if 'demythologization' is the right word for the translation of metaphorical into non-metaphorical terms (I am sure it is not), we can do our own demythologizing in this respect as we go along.

### III

But there is another sense in which Bultmann uses 'myth'. Myth, in this sense, 'is the account of an event or happening in which supernatural and superhuman powers are operative.... Mythical thinking regards the world and world-events as "open"—open to invasion by transcendent powers, and so not watertight from the point of view of scientific thought' (*Kerygma und Mythos*, II, pp. 180f.). Getting rid of myth in this sense means the rigorous exclusion from the gospel of everything that savours of miracle, but—more drastic still—it means the exclusion from the gospel even of that account of the coming of God's grace which might be given when the metaphorical terminology of the 'three-decker universe' has been replaced by non-metaphorical language. The transcendence of God, the pre-existence of Christ, His being sent by His Father in the fulness of time, His rising from the dead as an historic event, the personal activity of the Holy Spirit—in fact, many (perhaps most) of the central affirmations of Christian doctrine—are given up. Bultmann is no doubt anxious that Christians should not rest their faith on history or natural science, but one may question whether the best way to teach them where they ought to rest their faith is to assure them that much of what they have been accustomed to accept as divine revelation is to be rejected as either unscientific or unhistorical or both. 'God withholds Himself from view and observation. We can believe in God only in spite of experience, just as we can accept justification only in spite of conscience. Indeed, demythologizing is a task parallel to that performed by Paul and Luther in their doctrine of justification by faith alone without the works of law. More precisely, de-mythologizing is the radical application of the doctrine of justification by faith to the sphere of knowledge and thought. Like the doctrine of justification, de-mythologizing destroys every longing for security. There is no difference between security based on good works and security built on objectifying knowledge' (*Jesus Christ and Mythology*, p. 84). There is much truth in all this, but Bultmann overdoes it. One gets the idea that he thinks it better that the resurrection of Christ should be demythologized than that its claims to be regarded as a historical event should be objectively examined, because in the latter case we are in danger of placing our faith in history rather than in the risen Christ who is knowable by faith alone. Similarly, it is not so much because certain other affirmations of the historic faith are really incompatible with the scientific world-view that he insists on their rejection, but that they may come between the believer and the One who should be the sole resting-place for his faith. We should not gather from Bultmann's writings that he has heard of the principle of complementarity; probably indeed he has heard of it, but clearly he has no use for it. It is not the scientific world-view that compels him to abandon belief in the Holy Spirit, save as 'the factual possibility of a new life realized in faith' (*Kerygma und Mythos* I, p. 31). What is it then? Bultmann's aim is certainly not to make Christianity palatable to modern man or to reduce it to as much as Jones will swallow; but repeatedly it appears that (without his being conscious of it) the features of historic

Christianity which are dismissed as 'mythological' are those which are unacceptable in the climate of contemporary opinion, apart from the irreducible existential challenge.

#### IV

One area in the New Testament where mythological elements might indeed be recognized is the Book of the Revelation and other apocalyptic sections. But Bultmann does not insist so much on these, probably because the symbolical character of apocalyptic imagery has been generally recognized. Whatever be the origin of the drama of the dragon, the woman and the child in Revelation 12, that origin had been thoroughly 'demythologized' long before John's time. The dragon is recognizably the dragon of chaos, the seven-headed Leviathan; but already in the Old Testament psalmists and prophets had 'demythologized' Leviathan to make

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him serve as a picture of the powers opposed to God and overcome by Him at the Exodus.

Such demythologizing of apocalyptic figures Bultmann finds in one specific instance—in the figure of Antichrist. In Jewish eschatological expectation, he points out, Antichrist is 'a thoroughly mythological figure', as also in such a New Testament passage as 2 Thessalonians 2: 7-12. But in 1 John 2: 18; 4: 3 and 2 John 7 'false teachers play the role of this mythological figure. Mythology has been transposed into history. These examples show, it seems to me, that de-mythologizing has its beginning in the New Testament itself, and therefore our task of de-mythologizing today is justified' (*Jesus Christ and Mythology*, p. 34). One might ask, however, whether John's view was not that the emergence of these 'many antichrists' prefigured the early appearance of the last Antichrist.

Or, if we think of the principalities and powers of the Pauline Epistles, we may ask whether in Paul's own mind these may not have been 'demythologized' to stand for all the forces in the universe opposed to Christ and His people. Bultmann points out that 'in our day and generation, although we no longer think mythologically, we often speak of demonic powers which rule history, corrupting political and social life. Such language', he continues, 'is metaphorical, a figure of speech, but in it is expressed the knowledge, the insight, that the evil for which every man is responsible individually has nevertheless become a power which mysteriously enslaves every member of the human race' (*Jesus Christ and Mythology*, p. 21). This is reminiscent of H. H. Rowley's striking treatment of the apocalyptic figure of 'Belial' in *The Relevance of Apocalyptic* (1963), pp. 177f. But may not Paul have had a very similar understanding of the principalities and powers which, he affirmed, for all their malignity were unable to separate believers from the love of Christ?

#### V

Thus far we have concentrated on Bultmann, because he more than anyone else has compelled attention to these subjects, but he is not alone in seeing myth of one kind and another in the New Testament. Martin Dibelius used the term 'myths' for such stories about Jesus as the baptism, the transfiguration and the resurrection—stories which Bultmann in his form-critical analysis prefers to call 'legends'. Dibelius called them myths because in his judgment they belonged to the category of stories usually so designated—stories explaining the origin of religious rites or of cosmic phenomena. In so far as the use of this designation is a purely form-critical judgment, no objection need be taken—in T. W. Manson's words, 'a paragraph

of Mark is not a penny the better or the worse as historical evidence for being labelled "Apothegm" or "Pronouncement Story" or "Paradigm" (*Studies in the Gospels and Epistles*, p. 5), nor yet, we may add, for being labelled 'myth' or 'legend' in the technical form-critical sense. But too often there is an unobtrusive passage from a form-critical judgment to a historical judgment, a passage which is all the easier because in ordinary usage the historicity of a narrative is doubted or denied when it is called a myth or a legend.

## VI

The designation of elements in the New Testament, or in the traditional formulations of Christian doctrine as 'mythological', has been related by some scholars to a mythical pattern which they believe to have been current in the Near East around the time when Christianity first appeared. Unlike the dying-and-rising god pattern of earlier times, this was a redeemer-myth, originating in Iranian religion and passing thence to Gnosticism. An outstanding proponent of this theory was R. Reitzenstein, whose *Das iranische Erlösungsmysterium* was published in 1921. In its Iranian form the myth relates to Gayomart, the first man (whose name means 'mortal life'). In the Avesta Gayomart appears occasionally as the ancestor of the Aryan peoples and the first believer in the teaching of Ahura Mazda. In later Iranian literature, however, of the seventh and later centuries AD, Gayomart appears as an important figure in a Cosmic drama: he is a heavenly being, primal man, the son of Ahura Mazda, who battled with the power of evil for a cycle of 3,000 years, at the end of which he was overcome and killed by that power. But from him, after his death, the human race sprang up; and when, at the end of time, the Saoshyant ('Saviour') appears to raise the dead, Gayomart will rise first and be exalted to archangelic rank. Quite apart from the post-Christian date of

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this myth, there is little, enough in it that could give rise to the New Testament concepts of the Son of Man or the Man from Heaven. It is possible, however, that it is related to some of the Gnostic myths—more particularly, that its 'influence may be traced in the Mandaean and Manichaean texts.

The general pattern of the Gnostic myth (it is not too bold to speak of a 'general pattern' amid such a bewildering proliferation of mythology) portrays a heavenly essence which falls from the upper world of light into the lower world of material darkness and is imprisoned in a multitude of earthly bodies. To liberate this pure essence from its imprisonment a saviour comes from the world of light to impart the true knowledge: he is at once revealer and redeemer. By acceptance of the revealed knowledge the pure essence attains release from the thralldom of matter and re-ascends to its true abode.

In Mandaean literature it is Manda d'Hayye ('Knowledge of Life'), or his son Hibil Ziwa ('Abel the radiant'), who comes to instruct and redeem the soul of man, imprisoned in material darkness; in passing through the successive spheres lying between the upper world of light and this world he has conquered their demonic warders, so that they can present no barrier to the liberated soul on its way back to the world above. The victory of the redeemer over the demonic powers is re-enacted in Mandaean baptism, which is further associated with the baptism of John.

The form in which the Mandaean myth appears is not earlier than the seventh or eighth century BC; its detailed indebtedness both to Manichaeism and to the Peshitta has been

established. There is no evidence to support the view of Lidzbarski, Reitzenstein and Bultmann that here we have in essence the Gnostic myth on which a number of New Testament writers draw. A Palestinian origin for the Mandaeans is most probable; they apparently migrated to Mesopotamia in the first century AD. A careful comparative study might indicate an affinity between them and one or more of the baptist sects operating in the Jordan valley at the beginning of the Christian era. But it is illegitimate to date the Mandaean myth so early as that. The model of Bultmann's Gnostic myth was constructed by him on the basis of the later Mandaean literature; his disciples then read it into the *Acts of Thomas* and other Gnostic writings and this reading of it into these writings was taken as further proof of the soundness of the theory. But in fact, there is much more reason to think that certain aspects of the Mandaean myth are due to the New Testament than to trace the influence the other way round. It can even be claimed that primal man and the redeemer-revealer are nowhere brought together in Gnosticism except under the influence of the gospel.

## VII

In the hymn which Paul incorporates into Philippians 2: 6-11, 'Christ Jesus' is the one who, pre-existing in the form of God, refuses to exploit His equality with God for self-aggrandizement, but humbles Himself to man's estate and submits obediently to death; in consequence, He is exalted by God to the place of supremacy and endowed with the Ineffable Name so that all intelligent beings in the universe may render Him homage and glorify God by doing so. In Colossians Jesus is presented as Lord of the old creation and the new, the one in whom the present universe has its being and in whom, by His rising from the dead, His people enjoy new and endless life as members of the body of which He is head. The principalities and powers of the old creation, unwilling to have their captives released from their custody, tried to prevent Him from accomplishing his redeeming work and thought they had succeeded when they found Him, as they imagined, at their mercy on the cross. There they flung themselves on Him with hostile intent, but He grappled with them, disarmed them, liberated their captives, and transformed the cross into His triumphal car before which the hostile powers were driven in mute acknowledgment of His supremacy. He then ascended to the throne of God—a place to which He was antecedently entitled as 'the image of the invisible God'—but thanks to His victory and liberation of His people He has now established their title to join Him there.

To this it could be added that, according to Ephesians 2: 14, part of the victorious accomplishment of Christ is His breaking down of the 'middle wall of partition'—a concept which H. Schlier has explained in terms of the wall which, in one form of Gnostic mythology, separates the heavenly realm from the world below. That this latter concept underlies the expression in Ephesians is supported by the consideration that other

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elements from the same conceptual complex are found in the context—the ascension of the redeemer, the heavenly man, the Church as the body of Christ, the body of Christ as a heavenly building, and the heavenly marriage. The identification of some of these elements as of Gnostic origin should be contested, but one point calls for attention here. The wall which Christ demolishes in Ephesians 2: 14 is not a horizontal wall, dividing the world above from the world below, but a vertical wall, which has hitherto divided two communities on earth, the Jews and the Gentiles. The resemblance between this wall and the Gnostic wall is purely superficial. Yet Schlier's account has profoundly influenced many exegetes, especially among

his fellow-countrymen. It has been pointed out that while British commentators tend to illustrate the 'middle wall of partition' by the barrier which excluded Gentiles from the inner courts of the temple in Jerusalem, German commentators tend to reproduce Schlier's illustration. There is no doubt which of the two is more apt to the argument in Ephesians 2.

Again, in St John's Gospel, the Logos who was with God in the beginning, and through whom all things came into being, the Logos of God who is at the same time the Son of the Father, came down from heaven to earth to become flesh and give His life for man's salvation, so that all who receive Him by faith may have eternal life in Him and be enrolled as children of God. Having accomplished the work which the Father gave Him to do, He returns to the Father to resume the glory which He had with the Father before the world existed, but now He has won for His people the privilege of being with Him where He is.

## VIII

When the historic mission of Jesus is described in language of this kind, there is naturally a tendency to think that it is couched in terms of a current myth of a heavenly being who humbles himself for the sake of men on earth, and thus succeeds in his task of bringing them with him back to the heavenly realm. The trouble about this is that no such myth is ascertainable at this period. When the myth does appear, it is much more probable that it is based on the Christian message of one who did come from God for man's salvation, and as man on earth endured humiliation, suffering and death—who did, moreover, as a matter of widespread experience, procure salvation for those who received him by faith, and assure them of an eternal home with him in the presence of God. This message was transformed into the many varieties of Gnostic myth, embodying the Gnostic antipathy to matter (so that the real incarnation of the Son of God was denied) and replacing the gospel emphasis on agape by the Gnostic emphasis on *gnōsis*. I would hazard the guess that one of the earliest attempts at transforming the gospel message into such a Gnostic myth can be detected in the heresy to which Paul replies in the Epistle to the Colossians. When Paul replies to it, he does so in some degree by taking some of the concepts of the Colossian heresy and using them, both in Colossians and in Ephesians, in what has been called a 'disinfected' sense to set forth the gospel truth which that heresy had subverted. But this is a far different matter from representing the gospel in terms of Gnostic myth. Any demythologizing which is called for had been done by Paul before he pressed those terms into the service of the truth as it is in Jesus.

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