

Myth in the Bible

For biblical scholars, myth refers to a traditional story, usually associated with the time of origins (e.g., creation or some important institution) that has paradigmatic significance for the society in which the story is operative. "Myth" refers to a story, usually set in the distant past when the normal rules of physics do not apply (i.e., that world is not our world), that offers a summary of a cultural worldview, explaining how life as we know it came to be and addressing our hopes and fears. Myths are true, in the same way that a parable is true. Myth is characteristic of every traditional society; some would argue that myth continues to be operative even in modern, scientific society, camouflaged under other terms, including science itself (e.g., the big bang theory).

"Myth" and "scripture" are two established categories used to describe and analyze the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Each has figured prominently as a way of rendering the meaning or "truth" of human experience. Myth is an established category in the academic humanities and social sciences, particularly in classics, literature, anthropology, and religion. Scripture is a generic native category that biblically based religions use to depict themselves, though some scholars apply it to other religions as well.

Recent research into the mythology of Ancient Near Eastern religions (Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Canaanite) has shown that myths develop around a people's religious rituals and demonstrate a fairly consistent pattern. Beginning with a particular conflict (the hero, for example, does battle with a monster who represents chaos), the mythical story recounts the defeat or destruction of the protagonist, then passes to a description of the people's lamentation (mourning the hero). In the final stage, the hero is "reborn," rising from death and defeat to new and exalted life. This pattern of conflict, death, mourning, and vindication seems to have originated in agricultural societies, where ritual performances reenacted, and hence promoted, the rebirth of vegetation in the spring of the new year. This pattern unquestionably influenced the development of certain Old and New Testament traditions, just as it did various Hellenistic mystery cults.

One can find such themes, in several of the stories included in the first eleven chapters of Genesis (especially the creation story, the Noah story and the account of Job), and even in the life of Jesus (conflict with religious and political authorities, judgment and crucifixion, lamentation on the part of the disciples and faithful women, followed by resurrection). The Old Testament, and to a limited extent the New Testament (particularly the Book of Revelation), do reflect certain universal mythical themes. It is important to stress, however, that the Bible is essentially free of myth per se, since these underlying influences have been transformed by the essentially historical interest of its various authors.

Which is to say the Bible employs mythical language and traditions to tell its particular story of the Hebrew God, His people and of his son Jesus. The Bible is not myth per se as much as it is a library of literature that incorporates dominant mythical themes of the times in which it emerged.