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The Myth of the Dragon and Old Testament Faith

by John N. Oswalt

Four and a half years ago we published a paper by Dr. Oswalt, Professor of Old Testament in Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, Kentucky, on "The Golden Calves and the Egyptian Concept of Deity". We are glad to publish a further paper from him on another aspect of Israel's relation to the religious ideas of her neighbours. It was read in 1974 to the Southern Section of the Institute for Biblical Research. (Biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.)

THE question to which this paper addresses itself is: whence Biblical allusions to myth? What does the alleged presence of mythical elements in the Biblical text say about the origins and development of Biblical faith? In the first part of the study the data and the alternatives are reviewed. In the second part, one particular piece of evidence is focused upon in an attempt to evaluate its significance and, by extension, to raise questions about the use of other such evidence. For two reasons consideration is limited to the creation myth: in order to keep the paper within manageable limits, but, more importantly, because it is to this myth that the vast majority of the supposed allusions are made.

Ever since the first fragments of the Babylonian Creation Epic began to come to light it has been customary to see the Biblical creation accounts as being in some sense derived from that story. At first, it was fashionable to see the Biblical accounts as direct derivations. The implication was that Israel only has a creation account because of direct dependence upon the Mesopotamian myth. The passing of time has shown this to be, at best, a vast over-simplification. It can now be demonstrated that such a myth, in one form or another, was spread all over the Ancient Near East, including India and Greece. The Mesopotamian version was not the original, nor does it appear to have had any undue influence on the other versions. Thus, as has been shown by Alexander Heidel, the idea of direct connection between the two traditions is extremely tenuous.¹ Nonetheless, a significant number of modern commentators, including E. A. Speiser,² continue to state or imply that the *Enuma Elish* is the direct prototype for the Biblical accounts.

¹ Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, Second edition (Chicago, 1951), pp. 138 f.

² E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, New York, 1964), pp. 8 ff.

Of those commentators who do not see a direct connection, most would still hold that Hebrew thought arose out of myth. Arguing on the basis of passages in Job, the Psalms, Isaiah and Ezekiel, they hold that Israel must have at some time had its own version of the myth of the dragon. It is held that this was probably similar to the Ugaritic myths of Yam and Lotan, although not much is known about the content of these myths as yet.³ This is essentially B. S. Childs' position in his well-known *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament* (SCM, 1962). A more recent treatment of the problem, Mary K. Wakeman's *God's Battle with the Monster* (Brill, 1973), also seems to move in this direction.

Before going further it is incumbent upon us to examine some representative passages where specific allusion to myth is alleged. First, Isaiah 51: 9, 10:

Awake, awake, put on strength,
 O arm of the LORD;
 Awake, as in days of old,
 The generations of long ago.
 Was it not thou that didst cut Rahab in pieces,
 That didst pierce the dragon?
 Was it not thou that didst dry up the sea,
 the waters of the great deep;
 That didst make the depths of the sea a way
 for the redeemed to pass over?

In this passage it is quite clear that the drying up of the sea is described in more than naturalistic terms. The parallelism between Rahab and Dragon on the one hand and Yam and *Tehôm Rabbâ* on the other make it quite clear that the author is suggesting either poetically or literally that Yahweh's parting of the Red Sea was analogous to the defeat of the chaos monster.

This latter point is of great significance. The author does not use the myth in its original setting of primordial creation. Such a use would be pointless since Yahweh has created once and for all in time and space. Rather the author seems to say, "Mythmakers, if you want to see where disorder and evil were really conquered, you are going to have to look within time to the redemption of His people." He thus demonstrates that evil and disorder are not inherent in the cosmic stuff, they are rather a result of wrong choices by God's creatures. This situation is not rectified by creation, but rather redemption.⁴

Second, Job 40: 25-30 (Eng. 41: 1-6):

Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook,
 or press down his tongue with a cord?
 Can you put a rope in his nose,
 or pierce his jaw with a hook?

³ Most of what is presently known comes indirectly through the Baal and Anat cycle. Cf. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, pp. 129-142.

Will he make many supplications to you?
 Will he speak to you soft words?
 Will he make a covenant with you
 to take him for your servant for ever?
 Will you play with him as with a bird,
 or will you put him on leash for your maidens?
 Will traders bargain over him?
 Will they divide him up among the merchants?

It is evident that Leviathan here is not primarily a cosmic monster. In fact, it may reasonably be asked whether there is any mythic allusion at all. Is the author not merely speaking of some large and fearsome water animal such as a hippopotamus or a crocodile? This certainly may be so. However, the fact that Job 26: 12, 13 contain clear references to smiting Rahab and piercing the slippery serpent, a term used of Lotan in the Ugaritic literature, suggests that the author was quite aware of the mythic overtones of the term he was using.

There seems, then, to be a *double entendre* in the writer's mind. He wants to make use of all the emotional connotations of the name Leviathan. He specifically uses it in order to convey on a feeling level all the overtones of God's superiority over nature. At the same time, however, he wants to make it very plain that this sovereignty was not won as a result of some "do or die" cosmic battle. Rather, given God's nature and the nature of the world, such dominion is entirely normal, indeed a commonplace.

Third, Psalm 74: 12-17:

Yet God my king is from of old,
 working salvation in the midst of the earth.
 Thou didst divide the sea by thy might;
 thou didst break the heads of the dragons on the waters.
 Thou didst crush the heads of Leviathan,
 thou didst give him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.
 Thou didst cleave open springs and brooks;
 thou didst dry up ever-flowing streams.
 Thine is the day, thine also the night;
 thou hast established the luminaries and the sun.
 Thou hast fixed all the bounds of the earth;
 thou hast made summer and winter.

Once again, in a way very similar to that of Isaiah 51, allusion to the myth is coupled with historical circumstance.⁵ The Psalmist is

- ⁴ This is even more emphatically illustrated in such passages as Isa. 27: 1 and Ezek. 32: 2 ff., where the destruction of the dragon is seen as yet to be accomplished. This will take place when God delivers His people from the Exile. Rev. 12: 13-17 seems to be dependent upon such passages for its concept of the destruction of the dragon.
- ⁵ Wakeman (p. 62), following Dahood, *Psalms* II, p. 204, reads "Destroy (12) O God, the kings from the East. . . ." This may be correct in the light of the difficulty with *kh* at the end of v. 11, but the traditional reading of v. 12 makes excellent sense.

in need of deliverance, the enemies having destroyed even the sanctuary. Yet the Psalmist knows that God is able to redeem and deliver. He expresses this confidence in an allusion to the myth. The point here is the same as that in Isaiah 51: the real conquest of disorder and evil takes place in the lives and hearts of humankind as God redeems them.

It appears rather definitely then that these and a number of other passages which they represent contain clear references to the dragon myth.⁶ How shall we explain these? As indicated above, Childs and Ms. Wakeman seem to argue that a slowly developing consciousness of Yahweh's transcendence and of His use of history for self-revelation had, toward the end of the kingdom period, burst the bonds of the original Hebrew myth.

On the other hand, perhaps there was no original myth, but rather what we see in these passages is a self-conscious and aggressive Yahwism confidently appropriating the language of myth to demonstrate Yahweh's superiority over the pantheon.⁷

But it may be argued, is this distinction not merely academic hairsplitting? All parties grant that Scripture uses the terms in resolutely non-mythical ways. Does it then really matter how it comes that Scripture uses the terms? It matters rather significantly. Childs' explanation (and the one for which Ms. Wakeman appears to opt) calls into question the veracity of Scripture concerning the development of Yahwism and thus in the final analysis must cast doubt upon the validity of the Biblical revelation.

What is meant by a statement? If Childs (and perhaps Ms. Wakeman) are correct in thinking that early Yahwism, well into the monarchy, was primarily mythical—that is, it saw God as being essentially continuous with creation and saw him as acting in primarily supra-historical ways—only becoming historicized as the result of a long chain of theological speculation, we must surely admit that the Biblical traditions have been thoroughly and tendentially altered. If this is so, it must be asked whether the Bible's use of history is really *sui generis* or only appears to be so. If Babylon and Egypt, speculating upon the meaning of their existence, create a theology rooted in nature, and Israel, following the same course, creates one based on history, can the latter theology really claim any

⁶ Cf. also Job 3: 8, 9; 7: 12; 9: 13; Ps. 87: 4; 89: 10, 11; 104: 25, 26; Isa. 30: 7; Ezek. 29: 3-6.

⁷ The date of Job is difficult. Traditionally it has been dated in Patriarchal times. More recent scholars have tended to date it much later. A recent study by D. A. Robertson, *Linguistic Evidence in Dating Early Hebrew Poetry* (SBL, 1973), suggests that the linguistic evidence would put Job among the oldest literature of the Bible. If this is so, then the process of attacking myth began at a very early date.

superiority over the former? Surely a great part of the Biblical claim to be a valid word from God is that it is not speculative in nature, but rather rests on direct perception mediated through a series of events whose meanings were either immediately obvious or were made immediately obvious through divine verbal communication. If we deny this claim it becomes very difficult to understand the Old Testament as anything fundamentally different from its environment.

At the opposite extreme from Childs is Yehezkel Kaufmann in his *Religion of Israel*.⁸ He maintains that the Hebrews were so far from being myth-makers in any period of their history that they did not even understand the nature of myth. Here he rests heavily on such statements as Isaiah 44: 9-20 where the foolishness of praying to a stone or a log is so eloquently flayed. Kaufmann argued that in order for a person to have made such a statement, he must have failed to understand that the pagan never thought of the deity as simply coterminous with the idol. The idol was only a manifestation of the larger divine reality. To be sure, it partook of the deity, but the deity was not solely contained in the idol.

In answer to this it may be said that while Kaufmann's explanation of the theory of myth is surely correct, Isaiah and others have their fingers precisely on the Achilles heel of the mythical world-view in that they show how it confuses creature and creator, thus producing deities which are incapable of free activity on behalf of the creation. That they choose to use all of their verbal arsenal upon this one point may merely demonstrate their capacity as polemicists: find the weak point and concentrate there.

However, more to the point in the context of this paper, those passages cited above and the others like them would lose most of their force if the hearers were not conscious of the mythic background of the figures. How could God's superiority over the pantheon be portrayed through allusions to myth if the listeners knew nothing of myth?⁹ Thus it would appear that for all of Kaufmann's excellent contribution on the anti-mythical nature of Hebrew religion in its very inception, his maintaining that the Hebrews were ignorant of the nature of myth must be seen as an unwarranted extreme.

It would appear then that a middle road between Childs and Kaufmann, if it can be supported, would be most true to the plain statements of Scripture. This would be the second explanation offered above: that certainly after the Exodus (and perhaps even before)

⁸ Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, tr. and abridged M. Greenberg (Chicago, 1960).

⁹ Kaufmann admits the mythic allusions but maintains that Rahab, etc. are seen only as rebellious creatures, nothing more (pp. 11, 17, 62, 71, 118). My objection stands.

myth formed no part of normative Hebrew religion.¹⁰ The existence of this fundamental tension is seen in the near-total absence of mythic allusions in the Pentateuch and especially in Genesis 1-3. Even those who see a direct connection with the *Enuma Elish* in Genesis 1 must admit that there has been a careful effort to expunge any appearance of such allusion.¹¹ Only much later in that self-confident maturity which was attained in the Prophetic Age, did Yahwism feel free openly to utilize the language of myth. The non-mythical character of Yahwism was by that time so clearly established that the mythical world-view posed no threat to the faith. Now it was possible to go over to the offensive and carry the attack into the enemies' own camp.

However, is there support for such a view? To begin to answer this, we must return to a consideration of Ms. Wakeman's work. While, as stated previously, she makes no direct statement in favour of an early Yahweh myth having been broken, her very enthusiasm for discovering mythic allusions in the Scripture must tend in that direction. Having discovered references to the sea-monster Yam, she suspects every usage of *yām* ("sea") to have mythic overtones. All references to serpents, including Moses' rod, are potential candidates. Those verbs which are associated with the myth, such as *hll*, "to pierce," *pr*, "to break," *dk*, "to smash," etc. are all seen as freighted with mythic connotations.¹² This is not meant to be a blanket attack on all of Ms. Wakeman's work. There is much that is stimulating and valuable. However, it is clear that if these assumptions are correct the Hebrews were not only familiar with myth; their entire culture was suffused with this way of thinking.

Is this position correct? Or rather, apart from a fairly limited number of specific allusions, does Hebrew exhibit a remarkable freedom from such quasi-mythical usages? Space does not permit any

¹⁰ One cannot be dogmatic about Abraham's conception of God on the basis of Scripture. The common use of E1 as a proper name suggests a commonality with Ugaritic thinking at this time (E1 being the titular head of the Ugaritic pantheon). Cf. Gen. 14: 18; 16: 13; 17: 1; 33: 20, etc. Along with this is the worship of other gods when in a foreign land (Gen. 35: 2). Taken together, these suggest monolatry. At the same time one must allow for the possibility that the accounts of Gen. 1-11 were transmitted in much their present form through a family line which maintained an essentially correct understanding of God.

¹¹ Even were one to grant that such features as *tehôm*, the firmament, the (much-debated) pre-existent matter of Gen. 1, the tree of life and the serpent of Gen. 2 and 3 are derivatives from mythical contexts, it must be plain, by comparison to the passages examined above, that there is a different attitude prevailing here. Here the mythical background, if actually there, is not going to be admitted, whereas in Isa. 51, etc., the background is freely admitted.

¹² p. 104, n. 3.

kind of lengthy examination of Ms. Wakeman's examples. However, investigation of one complex may at least highlight the issues.

Before becoming familiar with *God's Battle with the Monster*, I had become interested in the word *bāqa'*, "to split, cleave, tear open," because of its use in Genesis 7: 11 where it is said that the fountains of the great deep (*tehôm rabbā*) were split up. The association of *tehôm*, which has often been connected with Tiamat of the Babylonian myth, and the splitting action, also reminiscent of the myth, was highly suggestive.

In the course of further study on *bāqa'*, I encountered Ms. Wakeman's book and discovered that she definitely sees the verb as having mythic roots.¹³ As a result, she takes the basic meaning as to split open a body.

Before examining Hebrew usage to verify or contest this definition however, it would be well to raise a question about the relation of the splitting action to the myth and of *bāqa'* to the myth. First of all, splitting the body of the monster is not a prominent feature in most versions of the myth. Much more common are such actions as smashing, piercing or smiting. In the *Enuma Elish* mention of this splitting occurs in two lines only, tablet IV: 136, 7.¹⁴ The verbs used are *zāzu*, whose dominant usage is a legal one, "to divide an inheritance into equal shares," and *hepu*, whose chief usages are "to smash, destroy, break (a tablet), etc.," with the idea of cleaving occurring only a few times. The verb *bq'* does not occur in Akkadian.

In Ugaritic, *bāqa'* appears most importantly in two places: Anat's cleaving of Mot in a reenactment of harvest,¹⁵ and Dn'l's splitting open the bodies of the eagles hoping to find the remains of his son Aqht.¹⁶ Neither of these can be related to the splitting of the Monster although Wakeman attempts to do so in the first instance.¹⁷ But Mot is not split open so that Baal and order can emerge. Rather, the act represents merely the cutting down of the dead grain as the first step in the harvest, from which total process Baal is eventually reborn. In the tales of Yam's defeat there is no reference to splitting.

Since *bāqa'* nowhere occurs with reference to splitting the chaos monster and since the actual splitting is not a major focus of the story, it seems unwise to derive so much of the root's meaning from its supposed mythic connections.

¹³ pp. 123-127.

¹⁴ James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, second edition (Princeton, 1955), p. 67.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 140.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 154.

¹⁷ p. 38.

When one examines the use of *bāqa'* in the Scripture, one is further led to question whether the earliest connotations of the word are derived from its connection with the myth. Ms. Wakeman suggests that the most frequent usage is the ripping open of a body or a city (which is a kind of body).¹⁸ This statement immediately makes one think of Marduk ripping open Tiamat's body and thus leads one to the desired conclusion. However, investigation shows that this statement is misleading at best. The verb means in all cases to break into something, break out of something, break something open. It occurs 51 times. In these cases the subject or object of the breaking is a human body eight times, a city three times, a state twice, and a military camp twice. At least seven other subject/objects are used, including eggs, logs, the earth, rocks and wineskins. Two special categories are references to the dividing of the sea at the Exodus (five times) and some kind of splitting action (usually of the earth) to produce water (ten times).

On the basis of the above findings it seems out of the question that the basic connotation of *bāqa'* is to be derived from its original connection with the myth. However, may it not be argued that the 15 (out of a total of 51) references which refer to the Reed Sea and the production of water are a significant enough group to point to some sort of early Hebrew myth which had to do with splitting the water monster? In other words, can such a large body of material come solely from allusions to someone else's myth?

Let us consider first of all the references to the division of the Reed Sea. These are Ex. 14: 16, 21; Neh. 9: 11; Psa. 78: 13 and Isa. 63: 12. First of all, it must be pointed out that none of these passages shows any overt mythical allusions. Secondly, in those passages where God's victory over the monster is celebrated there is no mention of Yam's being cleft.¹⁹ Special attention must be drawn to Isa. 51: 9, 10 where such a statement would surely be expected if it is to be found anywhere. Ms. Wakeman does suggest that drying up was the result of splitting and that therefore *bāqa'* is in view whenever drying up the sea is spoken of,²⁰ but this is surely circular reasoning: assuming that the only way the drying up of the sea would have been understood was in terms of the myth and that therefore all mentions of drying up the sea involve *bāqa'*. As a matter of fact, as Ms. Wakeman herself points out, it is not at all clear in the Enuma Elish how the splitting relates to the dry land.²¹

¹⁸ p. 123.

¹⁹ The Revised Standard Version of Psa. 74: 14 to the contrary. The word translated "divide" there is actually *pr*, "to break, make ineffectual."

²⁰ p. 126 f.

²¹ p. 19.

In view of these findings, I would conclude that there are no mythical overtones in these passages.²²

The remaining references, as mentioned previously, generally have God splitting something to produce water, e.g., Judg. 15: 19, where God splits open a hollow place and gives Samson water. One of the key references is Prov. 3: 20, for it clearly associates the splitting of *tehôm* with creation. With v. 19 it reads:

The LORD by wisdom founded the earth;
by understanding he established the heavens;
by his knowledge the deeps were split
and the clouds drop down dew.

Interestingly enough, Ms. Wakeman makes only a passing reference to this statement.²³ The passage is clearly poetic, but it is difficult to ascertain whether conscious allusion to myth is involved. The writer may have in mind the upper and lower waters of Gen. 1: 6, 7. The reference to clouds seems to support this view.

Gen. 7: 11, where the great deeps are split open, may be, like Isa. 51, a conscious historicizing of a myth. However, the theme is the opposite of the *Enuma Elish* which has the deity bringing chaotic waters under control by, among other things, splitting up the monster's body. Here chaos is released by breaking open the *tehôm*. If any allusion at all is intended, it is probably only utilized to point up God's sovereign control of the waters: He can release or control them at will.

Precisely this theme seems to be expressed in Psa. 74: 15 (see above), for although the production of water is placed in a clearly mythically oriented passage, it is important to note that it is not the monster who is divided here, but rather, because the monster has been defeated, the waters belong to God to dispense as He will. Similar statements of God's sovereignty without allusion to myth are found in Isa. 35: 6 and 50: 2 where, on the one hand, God is shown to be able to turn deserts into lakes and, on the other, dry up seas at will.

A companion passage to Psa. 74: 15 is Hab. 3: 9:

Was thy wrath against the rivers, O LORD?
Was thy anger against the rivers,
or thy indignation against the sea,
When thou didst ride upon thy horses,
upon thy chariot of victory?
Thou didst strip the sheath from thy bow,
and put the arrows to the string. [Selah]
Thou didst cleave the earth with rivers.

²² The repeating of dry land in both the Reed Sea and the Jordan passages may well have Gen. 1: 9 in view, in keeping with the general understanding that the Exodus is a complement to creation.

²³ p. 123, n. 7.

The mountains saw thee, and writhed;
 The raging waters swept on;
 The deep gave forth its voice,
 It lifted its hands on high.
 The sun and moon stood still in their habitation
 at the light of thine arrows as they sped,
 at the flash of thy glittering spear (3:8 -11).

Although the literary strands in this passage are very difficult to unravel, the references to rivers (*nāhār*) and sea (*yām*), especially since Nhr is one of Yam's names in the Ugaritic myth, make it appear that the creation myth is at least one of the strands. Note here that once again it is the earth which is split. Ms. Wakeman argues for an earth monster as well as a sea monster in the Ancient Near Eastern repertoire and she explains this statement and a few others in the light of this view.²⁴ Without mounting a direct challenge to this somewhat questionable point of view, it is enough to say that here God's mastery over Nhr is depicted as being so complete that in God's hands he becomes a tool directed against a rebellious creation.

The remaining references, Psa. 78: 15 and Isa. 48:21, are to be understood in the light of the preceding. The one who first cleaved open brooks and springs was able to do it again in the wilderness of Sinai. Here again appears to be this resolute historicizing which sees redemption as an indivisible aspect of creation. Moreover, it says that if these mythical accounts have any validity at all, it is with respect only to God's historical self-revelation.²⁵

If I have correctly analyzed the data then, *bāqa'* does not support the idea of an original Hebrew Yahweh myth. The root meaning is not necessarily derived from the monster myth and indeed the entire splitting concept finds little consistent expression in either the Ancient Near East or the Bible. In only about a half-dozen places where the word is used can clear allusions to myth be demonstrated. These, I would argue, are examples of conscious appropriation of literary figures not native to Israel.²⁶

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²⁴ pp. 120, 126.

²⁵ I am indebted to Dr. John Stahl of Western Kentucky University for reminding me that C. S. Lewis took the same point of view when he spoke of the revelation as myth become fact. Cf. *Miracles* (Collins, 1960), pp. 137, 8 n. I would differ with Lewis on the point of what constitutes myth, however.

²⁶ Since this paper was prepared and presented, an article by G. F. Hasel entitled "The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology" has appeared in THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY XLVI: 2 Apr.-June 1974, 81-102. I heartily concur with Professor Hasel's point of view.