2. *Myth & History*

F.F. Bruce

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Since the publication of the first edition of David Friedrich Strauss's *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*,[1] if not earlier, the question whether there is an element of myth in the New Testament presentation of the Gospel story (and if so, to what extent) has been a recurring subject of study and debate. This is no mere question of the use of originally mythical forms as a pictorial means of relating essentially historical facts, such as we find in Old Testament poetry;[2] it is a question of the mythical or mythological character of the central affirmation of the New Testament—that 'in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself' 2 Cor. 5:19).[3]

1. MYTH AND RITUAL

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. It comprises the *legomena* (the things spoken) which accompany and interpret the *drōmena* (the things done) or the *deiknymena* (the things shown). So the mysteries enacted at Eleusis were ex-

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plained by the *hieros logos* (sacred story) recounted in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*.[4]

This is the sense of 'myth' which lies behind the use of the word by the 'myth and ritual' school.[5] 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. It is pointless to ask which came first—the myth or the ritual, the plot or the drama—for they were involved in each other from time out of mind.

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[1] *Das Leben Jesu kritisch untersucht* (1835-6); Eng. trans. of fourth German edition (1840), *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1846), reissued with an introduction by P.C. Hodgson (SCM Press, 1973). Since Strauss found it impossible to believe in a transcendent God intervening in the life of the world, he was unable to accept the Gospel witness to Christ, and replaced it by a careful reconstruction based on a thorough-going typology of miracle and myth.

[2] *Cf.* A.S. Peake, *Faded Myths* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1908).

[3] W. Pannenberg's essay, 'The Later Dimensions of Myth in Biblical and Christian Tradition', in *Basic Questions in Theology*, III (SCM Press, 1973), pp. 1-79, is now indispensable reading for all who are concerned about this subject.

[4] *Cf.* G.E. Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962).

[5] *Cf.* S.H. Hooke (ed.), *Myth and Ritual* (Oxford University Press, 1933); *The Labyrinth* (SPCK, 1935); *Myth, Ritual and Kingship* (Oxford University Press, 1958).

Much of the ancient poetry of western Asia has been interpreted along these lines; for example, T.H. Gaster has explained 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.[6] 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 constitute the *mythos* or *hieros 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 memorable night 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, 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—not only the record of its institution by Jesus 'on the night when he was betrayed', as Paul repeats it in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25, but the relating of the passion narrative itself. 'For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup,' Paul goes on, 'you 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

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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 that the details of the story set forth in the mysteries of Attis never happened and yet were eternally true;[7] but of the events set forth in the Christian eucharist, as of those set forth in the Jewish passover, it must be said, 'These things happened once for all, and therefore they are eternally true.'

But how was the story told?

There are several ways in which the death of Jesus and its attendant circumstances might be related. One could, for example, imagine a dispassionate historian, after some reference to the activity of John the Baptist, continuing his account somewhat as follows:

> Scarcely had John been imprisoned in Machaerus, when Galilee, the more important of the two regions of Antipas's tetrarchy, witnessed the emergence of another preacher. He was a former associate of John and proclaimed the advent of the kingdom of God, Daniel's fifth monarchy which was to supersede Gentile world power. His preaching, attended by an impressive healing ministry, caused great excitement throughout the region; and many

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[6] *Thespis* (Schuman, New York, 1950).
[7] Julian, *Hymn to the Mother of the Gods*, 169d-170c (perhaps with an implied criticism of the 'Galilaeans', who believed that their *hieroi logoi* really had happened); cf. *To Herachus the Cynic*, 216c. See also Sallustius, *Concerning the Gods*, iv, 9.

thought that he was the man to lead a successful attack not only on the Herodian dynasty but on the Roman dominion, whose creatures the Herods were. He made it plain, however, that submission and conciliation, not violence and revolt, were the marks of the new kingdom as he envisaged it, and the majority of his original adherents lost interest in him.

Shortly before the passover of (probably) AD 30 he went to Jerusalem to confront the capital with his message, and entered the city in a manner reminiscent of a messianic oracle (Zc. 9:9), acclaimed by a crowd of enthusiastic pilgrims. He alienated many of the common people there by his unsatisfactory answer to a test question about the payment of tribute to the Roman emperor, and incurred the hostility of the temple authorities

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by a demonstration against various commercial practices inseparable from the sacrificial order. In their alarm lest his actions and words might excite a riot which would bring down the heavy hand of Roman ascendancy, they took steps to arrest him. One of his own close followers aided them in achieving this aim. They then handed him over to the Roman prefect of Judea, Pontius Pilate, who sentenced him to death on a charge of sedition: the death sentence was carried out by crucifixion.

That this was not the end of the matter was due to the conviction of his Galilaean disciples that he had risen from the dead and had appeared to them alive again, charging them to carry on his programme.

Few Christians would disagree with any of the statements made in this imaginary extract from a history of Palestine under the Romans, but most Christians would regard it as a very inadequate representation of the Gospel story and as a quite unsuitable recital to be incorporated in a liturgical service. If we look for an acceptable recital in a liturgical context, we shall find one in the second division of the Nicene Creed:

...one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, Begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God, Begotten, not made, Being of one substance with the Father, By whom all things were made: Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, And was made man, And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried, And the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, And ascended into heaven, And sitteth on the right hand of the Father. And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead: Whose kingdom shall have no end.

Or we might go back beyond Nicaea to the Pauline Letters and quote passages in them which have sometimes been identified as pre-Pauline hymns or confessions. Here is one:

Though he existed in the form of God,
He did not exploit equality with God for his own advantage,
But emptied himself and took a servile form,

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Appearing in the likeness of men.

And thus appearing in human shape,
He humbled himself and became obedient―

> Obedient up to the hour of death,
> Even death on a cross.
>
> Therefore God exalted him on high,
> And gave him the name above all names,
> That in Jesus' name each knee should bend,
> In heaven and earth and underworld;
>
> And each tongue confess Jesus Christ as Lord,
> To the glory of God the Father.[8] (Phil. 2:6-11)

And here is another:

> [He is] the very image of the God whom none can see;
> He is the Firstborn, prior to all creation,
> Because it was through him that the universe was created.
> Yes, all things in heaven and on earth, visible
>   things and things invisible—
> Thrones, dominions, principalities or powers—
> They have all been created through him and for him.
> He himself exists before them all;
> It is through him that everything holds together.
> He is, moreover, the head of his body, the church;
> He is the beginning, the Firstborn from the dead:
> Thus over old and new creation his pre-eminence is universal.
> It is God's good pleasure, in short, that the
>   totality of divine fullness should reside in him
> And that through him the universe should be reconciled to God,
> Through the shedding of his blood on the cross.[9] (Col.1:15-20)

Coming forward many centuries, we find a presentation in a different idiom in Isaac Watts' poem which begins with the stanzas:

> Nature with open volume stands
>   To spread her Maker's praise abroad,

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> And every labour of his hands
>   Shows something worthy of a God.
>
> But in the grace that rescued man
>   His brightest form of glory shines;
> Here on the cross 'tis fairest drawn

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[8] *Cf.* R.P. Martin, *Carmen Christi* (Cambridge University Press, 1967); C.F.D. Moule, 'Further Reflexions on Philippians 2:5-11', in W.W. Gasque and R.P. Martin (eds.), *Apostolic History and the Gospel* (Paternoster Press, 1970), pp. 264 ff. [http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/philippians_moule.pdf]

[9] *Cf.* E. Norden, *Agnostos Theos* (Teubner, Leipzig, 1913), pp. 250 ff.; E. Kasemann, 'A Primitive Christian Baptismal Liturgy', in *Essays on New Testament Themes* (SCM Press, 1964), pp. 149 ff.; J.M. Robinson, 'A Formal Analysis of Colossians 1: 15-20', *JBL* 76, 1957, pp. 270 ff.; R.P. Martin, 'An Early Christian Hymn', *EQ* 36, 1964, pp. 195 ff. [http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/eq/early-christian-hymn_martin.pdf]; idem, *Colossians: The Church's Lord and the Christian's Liberty* (Paternoster Press, 1972), pp. 40 ff.

> In precious blood, and crimson lines.[10]

And so we might go on. But sufficient examples have been adduced to show that, in whatever form the Christian story is told, the cross is a constant feature. In the cross the creeds are 'earthed'.

2. HISTORICAL EVENT AND THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

But how are we to describe the four quotations which follow our bald 'historical' summary of Christian beginnings? They would be described by many as a 'mythologization' of history—which at least is a less unsatisfactory procedure than to call the Christian story the historicization of myth.[11] It would be better, however, to say that they convey a theological interpretation of historical events—an interpretation which, as Christians believe, brings out their true meaning.

But is the interpretation part of the history? If we are to operate with that form of the historical-critical method which stems from the Enlightenment and cannot accommodate salvation-history;[12] if the 'historical Jesus' means 'what can be known of Jesus of Nazareth by means of the scientific methods of the historian',[13] then God, whose gracious initiative is emphasized in our four interpretative quotations, can have no place in the 'history'. To a Christian, let it be said plainly, this conclusion is the *reductio ad absurdum* of the premises on which it is based.

How, for example, should a historian who wishes to establish the course of events *wie es eigentlich gewesen*[14] (as it actually was) deal with the resurrection of Jesus? He will recognize the resurrection faith, but what of the resurrection fact, apart from which, as Paul affirms, the resurrection 'faith is in vain' (1 Cor. 15: 14)? He may say (1) 'Jesus was believed to have risen from the dead', but if he wishes to penetrate behind that belief he may go so far as to say (2) 'Jesus

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"rose" from the dead, whatever may be meant by that statement'. But can the historian go farther, and say (3) 'God raised him from the dead'? It depends partly on his *Weltanschauung* and partly on our definition of 'historian'.[15] But for the Christian nothing less will adequately express the event 'as it actually was'.

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[10] Described by Erik Routley as 'the greatest of all hymns on the atonement written since the reformation' (*Hymns Today and Tomorrow*, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966, p. 68).

[11] *Cf.* G.A. Wells, *The Jesus of the Early Christians* (Pemberton, 1971), where arguments are presented for the possibility that the story of Jesus results from the historicization of a mythical or mystery figure. For the commoner mythologizing of a historical figure we have present-day evidence in the Che Guevara cult.

[12] G.E. Ladd, 'The Search for Perspective', *Interpretation* 25, 1971, p. 49.

[13] J. M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus* (SCM Press, 1959), p. 26. He adds that this 'historical Jesus' need not be identical with 'Jesus of Nazareth as he actually was' (pp. 28 f.). Cf. the report on *The Nature and Extent of Biblical Authority* presented to the Christian Reformed Church (Christian Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, 1971), pp. 478 ff.

[14] L. von Ranke, *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker*, 1494-1535 (Reimer, Berlin, 1824), preface. A translation of the preface is given in F. Stern (ed.), *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present* (Macmillan, 1970), pp. 55-8. Cf. also C. Brown's essay, p. 177.

[15] Cf. C. Brown's discussion on p. 177 ff.

The application .of 'myth' to the contents of the New Testament, which involves a different sense of the word from that of the 'myth and ritual' pattern noticed above, has come prominently to the fore during the past thirty years 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, reinterpreted and the gospel restated, the restatement turns out to resemble a Christianized version of Heidegger's existential analysis:[16] the moment of revelation is not in the person or work of Jesus but in the existence of the man of today.

Whatever be thought of the validity or success of this restatement, it is clear that Bultmann's motive is different from that of the typical nineteenth-century rewriters 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 proponents of the Christ-myth theory. Bultmann's motive is evangelistic; it is to prevent the essential *skandalon* of the gospel 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.[17] In the traditional formulation of the Gospel story, Christ came down from heaven to

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earth, descended farther from earth to Hades, and 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 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. Bishop John Robinson agrees that for thinking people the conception of God as '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'.[18] Such phrases are but spatial metaphors for God's transcendence, just as the Bishop's pre erred conception of him as 'in the depths of being' is an equally spatial metaphor for his immanence. 'To all

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[16] Bultmann's reply to this representation is: 'Some critics have objected that I am borrowing Heidegger's categories and forcing them upon the New Testament. I am afraid this only shows that they are blinding their eyes to the real problem, which is that philosophers are saying the same thing as the New Testament and saying it quite independently' ('New Testament and Mythology', in H.-W. Bartsch (ed.), *Kerygma and Myth,* I (SPCK, 1953; combined edn. with vol. II, 1972), p. 25).

[17] *Cf.* R. Bultmann, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

[18] J.A.T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (SCM Press, 1963), pp. 11 ff.

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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, the 'decisive, eschatological event'.[19]

We need not trouble ourselves, then, about the necessity to demythologize that form of thought and speech in which 'divine transcendence is expressed as spatial distance';[20] 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.

3. THE DEMYTHOLOGIZING PROGRAMME

There is another sense in which Bultmann uses 'myth'. Myth, in this sense, 'is the account of an event or happening in which super-

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natural 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.'[21] 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 fullness of time, his rising from the dead as a 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.[22]

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[19] *Kerygma and Myth*, I, p. 43.

[20] *Ibid*., p. 10, n. 2; cf. Bultmann's *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (SCM Press, 1960), p. 20.

[21] Zur Frage der Entmythologisierung,' in H.-W. Bartsch (ed.), *Kerygma und Mythos*, II (Herbert Reich, Evangelischer Verlag, Hamburg-Volksdorf, 1952), pp. 180 ff.

[22] *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, p. 84.

There is much truth is 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—*i.e.* in the historical event called the resurrection rather than in the risen Christ who is knowable by faith alone. Similarly, it is not so much because certain

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other affirmations of the historic faith are really incompatible with the scientific world-view that he insists on their rejection, but because they may come between the believer and the one who should be the sole resting-place for his faith. We would not gather from Bultmann's writings that he has ever heard of the principle of complementarity; probably indeed lie 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 possibility of a new life which is opened up by faith'.[23] 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 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. (It must be added, in fairness to a great man, that such an outline of Bultmann's demythologizing programme may do him an injustice and give a distorted impression of his thought unless it is set in the context of his theology as a whole.)[24]

4. DEMYTHOLOGIZING IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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;[25] but already in the Old Testament, psalmists and prophets had 'demythologized' Leviathan to make him serve as a picture of the powers opposed to God and overcome by him at the exodus.[26]

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 a New Testament passage such as 2 Thessalonians 2: 7-12. But in 1 John 2:18; 4: 3 and 2 John 7 'false teachers

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[23] *Kerygma and Myth*, I, p. 22.
[24] See G. Miegge, *Gospel and Myth in the Thought of Rudolf Bultmann* (Lutterworth, 1960).
[25] *Cf.* C.H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* (Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome, 1965), 67: 1: 1-3.
[26] *Cf.* Is. 27: 1; Ps. 74: 14.

play the role of this mythological figure. Mythology has been transposed into history. These examples show, it seems to me, that demythologizing has its beginning in the New Testament itself, and therefore our task of demythologizing today is justified.'[27] 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 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.[28]

This is reminiscent of H.H. Rowley's striking treatment of the apocalyptic figure of 'Beliar'.[29] 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? They might indeed continue to have a potent existence in the minds of those who believed in them and were enslaved by them, but for those who shared the fruits of Christ's conquest of them they were demoted to the status, at best, of 'weak and beggarly elemental spirits' (Gal. 4:9).

5. 'MYTH' IN FORM CRITICISM

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[30]—stories which Bultrnann 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

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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 "pothegm" or "Pronouncement Story" or "Paradigm" '[31]—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.

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[27] *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, p. 34.
[28] *Ibid*., p. 21.
[29] H. H. Rowley, *The Relevance of Apocalyptic*[3] (Lutterworth,1963), pp. 177 ff.
[30] M. Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel* (Nicholson & Watson, 1934), pp. 266 ff.
[31] T.W. Manson, *Studies in the Gospels and Epistles* (Manchester University Press, 1962), p. 5.

6. THE GNOSTIC MYTH

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 *magnum opus* on the 'Iranian redemption mystery' was published over fifty years ago.[32] In its Iranian form the myth relates to Gayōmart, the first man (whose name means 'mortal life').[33] In the Avesta, Gayōmart appears occasionally as the ancestor of the Aryan peoples and the first believer in the teaching of Ahura Mazda.[34] In the *Bundahišn* and other Zoroastrian texts of the seventh century AD and later, however, Gayōmart appears as an important figure in the cosmic drama: he is a heavenly being, the primal man, son of Ohrmazd (Avestan *Ahura-Manda*); he battled with Ahriman (Avestan *Angra-Mainyu*), the evil power, for a cycle of 3,000 years, at the end of which he was overcome and killed by Ahriman. From him, after his death, the human race sprang up; and when, at the end of time, Saošyant ('the Saviour') appears to raise the dead, Gayōmart will rise first and be exalted to archangelic rank. This myth certainly had a long career in oral tradition before it received literary form, but it can scarcely be dated earlier than the Sassanian era (AD 226). Quite apart from its relatively late date,

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there is little enough in the Gayōmart myth that could give rise to the New Testament concepts of the Son of man or the man from heaven.[35] 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[36] and Manichaean[37] texts.

The general pattern of the Gnostic myth (if 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 thraldom of matter and reascends 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

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[32] R. Reitzenstein, *Das iranische Erlösungsmysterium* (Marcus & Weber, Bonn, 1921).
[33] Avestan *Gaya-maretan*.
[34] In the Avesta the primal man is *Yima* (*cf*. Vedic *Yama*).
[35] Cf. J. M. Creed, 'The Heavenly Man', *JTS* 26, 1924-25, pp. 113 ff.
[36] *Cf*. E.S. Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran*[2] (Brill, Leiden, 1962); K. Rudolph, *Die Mandäer* (Mohr, Tübingen, 1966); E. Yamauchi, 'The Present State of Mandaean Studies', *JNES* 26, 1966, pp. 88 ff.; idem, *Gnostic Ethics and Mandaean Origins* (Harvard University Press, 1970).
[37] *Cf*. F.C. Burkitt, *The Religion of the Manichees* (Cambridge University Press, 1925).

over the demonic powers is re-enacted in Mandaean baptism, which is further—and later—associated with the baptism of John.[38]

The form in which the Mandaean myth appears is not earlier than the seventh or eighth century AD; its detailed indebtedness both to Manichaeism and to the Peshitta has been established.[39] There is no evidence to support the view that here we have in essence the Gnostic myth on which a number of New Testament writers draw.[40] A Palestinian origin for the Mandaeans is quite probable; they may have migrated to Mesopotamia in the first century AD.[41] 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; the model was then used for the interpretation of

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the *Acts of Thomas* and other Gnostic writings.[42] 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.

It is indeed extremely difficult to find convincing evidence of the typical Gnostic myth in a pre-Christian form. It is suspected by certain students of Gnosticism that some of the documents in the Nag Hammadi collection, Christian though they are in their present form, may in fact be christianized recensions of pre-Christian Gnostic documents; but the arguments for regarding them as such are precarious.[43] Perhaps when the whole collection is published we shall be in a better position to speak confidently on this point. As it is, one of the documents thus far published which shows unusually little Christian colouring, the *Apocalypse of Adam*,[44] speaks of the 'incorruptible *phosteres* which have come forth from the holy seed, Jesseus, Mazaraeus, Jessedekeus'. It is difficult to avoid seeing in 'Jesseus, Mazareus' a corruption of 'Jesus the Nazarene' (Gk. *Iesous Nazōraios*), while 'Jessedekeus'

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[38] In its literary presentation Mandaean baptism presupposes the baptismal ritual of Syriac Christianity, and the figure of John belongs to the latest stratum of Mandaean tradition; *cf.* H. Lietzmann, 'Ein Beitrag zur Mandäerfrage', *Sitzungsberichte der preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, phil.-hist Kl. (1930), pp. 596 ff. (TU 76, 1958, pp. 124 ff.).

[39] *Cf.* S.A. Pallis, *Mandaean Studies* (Oxford University Press, 1926), pp. 115 ff.; F.C. Burkitt, 'The Mandaeans', *JTS* 29, 1927-8, pp. 225 ff.; idem, *Church and Gnosis* (Cambridge University Press, 1932), pp. 100 ff.

[40] *Cf.* e.g., R. Bultmann, 'Die Bedeutung der neuerschlossenen mandäischen und manichäischen Quellen für das Verständnis des Johannesevangeliums', *ZNW* 24, 1925, pp. 100 ff.

[41] *Cf.* R. Macuch, 'Alter and Heimat des Mandaismus nach neuerschlossenen Quellen', *TLZ* 82, 1957, cols. 401 ff., where he infers this from a passage in the *Haran Gawaitha* which mentions a migration of 60,000 *Naṣôrayya* from Palestine to the Median highlands under King Artabanus—identified by him with Artabanus III of Parthia (AD 12-38). See also idem,'Zur Frühgeschichte der Mandäer', *TLZ* 90, 1961, cols. 650 ff.; E.S. Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran*, pp. 5 ff.

[42] *Cf.* G. Bornkamm, *Mythus and Legende in den apokryphen Thomasahten* (Vandenhoek & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1933).

[43] *Cf.* E.M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1973).

[44] *Cf.* A. Böhlig, 'Die Adamsapokalypse aus Codex V von Nag Hammadi als Zeugnis jüdisch-iranischer Gnosis', *Oriens Christianus* 48, 1964, pp. 44 ff., for the view that this work provides evidence of pre-Christian Gnosticism.

could be a still more corrupt form combining the name 'Jesus' with Hebrew *saddiq* ('righteous') or even bearing some relation to 'Melchizedek'.[45]

7. COSMIC VICTORY

In the hymn which (as has been mentioned above) 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 1:15 ff. Jesus is presented as Lord of the old creation and of 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 pre-

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vent 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 (Col. 2:13-3:4).

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.[46] That this latter concept underlies the expression in Ephesians is supported by the consideration that other 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

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[45] *Cf.* R. McL. Wilson, *Gnosis and the New Testament* (Blackwell, 1968), pp. 135 ff.

[46] H. Schlier, *Christus and die Kirche im Epheserbrief* (Mohr, Tübingen, 1930), pp. 18 ff.; *idem*, *Der Brief an die Epheser* (Patmos Verlag, Düsseldorf, 1965), pp. 126 ff. With the *mesotoichon tou phragmou cf. Acts of Thaddaeus*, quoted in Eusebius, *EH* i, 13, 20: 'He divided asunder the partition (*ton phragmon*) which had not been divided from eternity' (this partition being that which separated earth from Hades; *cf. Acts of Thomas*, 156).

temple in Jerusalem,[47] 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 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,

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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.

8. INCARNATE WISDOM

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 was sent by 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 eternal life with him in fellowship with God. If the language in which the Christian message itself is sometimes told presents features which suggest mythological affinity, these features are derived most probably from the terms in which Divine Wisdom is personified in Jewish literature of the immediate pre-Christian period.[48] Divine Wisdom both fills a cosmic role and dwells with men on earth. That such portrayals of Wisdom underlie the Johannine Prologue[49] and such a passage as Colossians 1: 15 ff.[50] has long been recognized. Further speculative elaborations of this Wisdom figure are familiar in Gnostic literature from the *Odes of Solomon* onwards—not least in those documents which feature *Sophia* in their titles.[51]

But when the Christian story was gnosticized, the varieties of Gnostic myth into which it was transmuted tended to embody the Gnostic antipathy to matter (so that the real incarnation of the Son of God was denied) and to replace the gospel emphasis on *agapē* by the Gnostic emphasis on *gnōsis*. I would hazard the guess that one of the earliest attempts at transmuting

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[47] *Cf.* J.A. Robinson, *St Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians* (Macmillan, 1904), pp. 18 ff. (The temple barrier is described by Josephus, *War* v. 193 f.; *Ant.* xv. 417.)

[48] *Cf.* J.T. Sanders, *The New Testament Christological Hymns* (Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 29 ff. *et passim*.

[49] Cf. J.R. Harris, *The Origin of the Prologue to St John's Gospel* (Cambridge University Press, 1917); for a 'Gnostic' interpretation, cf. R. Bultmann, 'Der religionsgeschichtliche Hintergrund des Prologs zum Johannes-Evangelium', *Eucharisterion, Festschrift für H. Gunkel* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1923), pp. 1 ff.; *idem, The Gospel of John* (Blackwell, 1971), pp. 13 ff.

[50] *Cf.* C.F. Burney, 'Christ as the *APXH* of Creation', *JTS* 27, 1925-6, pp. 160 ff.; for a 'Gnostic' interpretation cf. E. Kasemann, 'A Primitive Christian Baptismal Liturgy' (see n. 9 above).

[51] Such as *Pistis Sophia* and in the Nag Hammadi collection, *Sophia Jesu Christi*. In one as yet unpublished 'Wisdom' myth in the Jung Codex the being that fell is called not Sophia but Logos.

the gospel message into a Gnostic type of myth can be detected in the heresy to which Paul replies in

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the Epistle to the Colossians.[52] When Paul replies to it, he does so in some degree by taking some of the concepts of the Colossian heresy and using them in what has been called a 'disinfected' sense[53] to set forth the gospel truth which that heresy had subverted. But this is a far different matter from re-presenting 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.

Let us repeat: it is the person and work of Christ that are at issue. How much mythology has entered into the traditional concept of the combining of the divine and human natures in his person? None, we may say, in the sense that the long-accepted formulations are cast in metaphysical and not mythical language. But if the term 'mythical' or 'mythological' is used with a wider range of meaning, it can properly be applied to any statement about Christ which gives the impression, however faintly, that there was something vaguely 'unreal' about his manhood—that his temptations, his sufferings and his death were not as 'real' as ours are. Since God created man in his image, humanity provided a congenial medium for the revelation of God to this world. The 'human face of God'[54] is a real face, not a mask assumed for a dramatic purpose. It is in the manhood of Jesus, not merely *through* it, that the divine glory shines for those who have eyes to see it. It was in 'the form of a servant' that the 'form of God' was most adequately displayed on earth (Phil. 2:6 f.). John the Evangelist knows what he is doing when he speaks of Jesus' being 'lifted up' on the cross as the means of his being 'lifted up' in glory: the royalty of the God whom we adore is fully seen in the crucified one. To the same effect Mark the evangelist associates the moment of Jesus' death with the rending of the temple veil and the centurion's confession: 'Truly this man was the Son of God' (Mk. 15:38 f.). It is not on the dying and rising god of a ritual drama but on the once-for-all event of the passion and triumph of Jesus of Nazareth that the gospel of our salvation is firmly based.

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[52] The Simon Magus myth, in a more primitive form than that described by church fathers, might be even earlier: it was perhaps 'an assimilation of imperfectly understood Christian doctrines to a fundamentally pagan scheme' (R.McL. Wilson, *The Gnostic Problem*, Mowbray, 1958, p. 100). *Cf.* K. Beyschlag, 'Zur Simon-Magus Frage', *ZThK*, 68, 1971, pp. 395 ff.

[53] *Cf.* H. Chadwick, 'All Things to All Men', *NTS* 1, 1954-5, p. 272.

[54] *Cf.* the title of J.A.T. Robinson's Hulsean Lectures on Christology, *The Human Face of God* (SCM Press, 1973). This work contains several observations on the 'mythological' duality of certain kinds of language about the person and work of Christ (pp. 20 ff., 116 ff., *et passim*).