

THE INFLUENCE OF MYTHS ON THE OLD TESTAMENT

By H. L. ELLISON, B.A., B.D., Wallington

IT WOULD SEEM that there is no such thing as a specific vocabulary of revelation, i.e. the Holy Spirit does not seem to have moved the prophets and other human media of revelation to invent new words to express new truths. At all points He seems to have used an already extant vocabulary, leaving it to God's revelation in history to show how these traditional terms should be interpreted. That is why the etymological study of the key terms of the Bible is more likely to underline the differences between biblical religion and that of the pagans than to offer a positive interpretation of biblical truth.

The same seems to be true of general thought forms. It is repeatedly possible to discover major concepts of ancient Near-Eastern thought in the outlook of Israel, but in every case they have to a greater or less extent been transformed by the people's experience of God in history. This is particularly true of myth.

As H. and H. A. Frankfort have shown so clearly in the introduction to *Before Philosophy*,¹ myth was the form that thought about the outside world took in the ancient Near-East (and indeed probably everywhere else) until the rise of scientific and philosophic thought. This means that Israel not only emerged from a background in which myth reigned, but also lived in the midst of a setting in which it was vital and real. It is therefore to be expected that Near-Eastern myths will have left their mark on the Old Testament; indeed it would be most surprising if they had not. The question that really concerns us is to what extent and in what manner these myths have been transformed by the experiences of the Exodus and Sinai, and all that followed.

It is perhaps unfortunate that we are made familiar in childhood with mythology in its most individualized and personified form as presented in its later Greek expression, or in the fanciful re-writing of other mythologies.² Thus we failed to realize that the gods and other supernatural beings of the myths are merely the forces of nature — the term personification is misleading, for everything in nature was regarded as essentially alive. They exist because nature exists, and if nature ceased to exist, so would they. Though in the course of time the gods in the myths seem to become more individual, they seldom, if ever, gain true personality and remain as a-moral and incalculable as are the forces of nature. This aspect of mythology is particularly obvious in the myths of the Canaanites.³

It is disappointing that the Ugaritic discoveries up to date have not contained a cosmogony. There are no grounds, however, for thinking that the creation myths of the Canaanites will have differed essentially from those of the rest of the Fertile Crescent. The outstanding feature of these cosmogonies is that they do not concern themselves with creation in the strict sense at all. They describe mythically the evolution of the cosmos that now is from the chaos that once was. The 'creator' gods somehow emerge from chaos, conquer it and re-mould it into something ordered. In other words they are all essentially monistic in outlook.⁴

The only importance of Egyptian cosmogonic myths to us here is that fundamentally they conform to the same basic concepts as those of Mesopotamia. They are, however, so distinctively Egyptian, that they will hardly have exercised influence outside that land. It is otherwise with the Mesopotamian. Not only is there evidence for the wide spread of the *Enuma elish*, but Israel traced its origins back to Mesopotamia. Further, though we do not possess a Canaanite cosmogony Baal's destruction of Yam (the sea) and Lotan (the seven-headed sea-monster, the Leviathan of the Bible) is obviously in the same category as Marduk's killing of Tiamat, the goddess of chaos.⁵

In spite of frequent statements to the contrary, there are no real parallels between *Enuma elish* and the Genesis story. Indeed the superficial student is often in danger of being led astray by a *non sequitur*. His attention is drawn to the obvious similarities between the biblical story of the Flood and the story of Utnapishtim in the eleventh section of the Gilgamesh Epic, and he is left to infer that the resemblances in the creation story are of the same nature.⁶ But the story of Utnapishtim, however many mythological

traits it may contain, is essentially a legendary treatment of historical fact. The Genesis parallels are all in the factual narrative and not in the realm of myth.

It has often been suggested that the essential difference between *Enuma elish* and Genesis 1 is that in the latter the story has been stripped of its original polytheism;⁷ the real difference is, if we may use a term that has become popular in another setting, that it has been completely 'demythologized'. This is to be seen even in its form. *Enuma elish* is a poem, because 'myth is a form of poetry which transcends poetry in that it proclaims a truth';⁸ Genesis 1 is prose, albeit noble and rhythmic, because it is a simple statement of facts. Once we have grasped this, we are likely to look at the alleged similarities between the two cosmogonies rather more critically. They are set out in Ryle: *Genesis* (pp. 42f.) and are far from impressive. Pinches' statement is fully justified: 'The comparison of the two accounts of the Creation . . . will probably have brought prominently before him the fact, that the Babylonian account, notwithstanding all that has been said to the contrary, differs so much from the Biblical account, that they are, to all intents and purposes, two distinct narratives.'⁹

When we pass on to the other narratives in Genesis 2-11 (omitting the flood narrative, which, as we have already noted, contains no mythological elements in its Hebrew form) we find that scholars are puzzled to suggest their origin. The extant myths of Mesopotamia suggest only the most superficial parallels, and there is nothing in the Ugaritic discoveries to suggest a Canaanite origin.

It used to be popular to describe the stories of Genesis 2: 4 - 3: 24 and Genesis 4 as myths because of their 'desire to explain the origin of existing facts of human nature, existing customs and institutions . . . the custom of wearing clothing, the gait and habits of the serpent . . .'.¹⁰ But it has now been recognized that these are not the subjects of myth, which are the vital facts of existence, and its main purpose is that man may throw himself on the side of the gods to guarantee that chaos will not emerge again. That is why Alan Richardson prefers to use the term 'parable' for these stories¹¹ — their scientific truth and historicity are not the subject of this article.

How are we to explain not merely the 'demythologizing' of this early material in Genesis, but the virtual vanishing from it of all that would remind us of myth? The polytheism of developed mythology is merely the expression of the conviction that the gods are in nature and are its vital forces. 'The mainspring of the acts, thoughts and feelings of early man was the conviction that the divine was immanent in nature, and nature intimately connected with society.'¹² Even the so-called monotheism of Akhenaten is merely the selection of the sun's disk as the premier power within nature.¹³ Hence human action was as purposeful or purposeless as that of nature, and had as its only goal the maintenance of cosmos as against chaos. With the Exodus, the giving of the moral law (the apodeictic law is unique!) and the conquest of Canaan Yahweh had shown His power to break into nature, to create something new, to initiate a process leading to a goal; in other words to face man with history and not merely the mere cyclic changes of nature. This could only mean that Yahweh was outside nature and its uncontrolled Controller. The categories of myth were meaningless when applied to Him. He was sexless, imageless, and describable only in terms which involve action (Ex. 34: 6, 7). His glory can fill nature (Is. 6: 3), as the flame filled the thorn bush (Ex. 3: 2), but it neither consumes it nor becomes part of it.

If I have linked this realization with the revelation of the Exodus, it is not that I doubt the patriarchs' knowledge of it, but because we really know so little of their 'theology'. Equally it is not being suggested that this knowledge was common to all Israel. It was precisely the question of Yahweh's transcendence that lay behind the long prophetic struggle against the popular religion that would bring Him into and subordinate Him to nature as a whole.

That does not mean that the language of myth is not found in the Old Testament; it is in fact frequent, especially in some of the psalms and prophets. The extent to which it has been 'demythologized', however, may be sensed by the fact that much of it was not recognized as such until Near-Eastern literature became better known with growing archaeolo-

gical discoveries. In other words, much of it is dead verbal imagery, its origins virtually forgotten.

There are, however, other passages where it is deliberately used as a refutation of the very beliefs which had given rise to mythological language. One of the more striking examples is in Psalm 74: 12-15, where by the use of terms from the myths the creation and the exodus are linked together as equally acts of Yahweh's sovereignty. But that is not to reduce the exodus to myth, but to 'demythologize' the creation and make it the beginning of history. In Isaiah 51: 9-11 we again have terms from the creation myth applied to both the exodus from Egypt and the coming exodus from Babylon. Similarly in Psalm 89 we have the creation linked with the choice of David as king and the historic process that this set in motion. Myth and a true concept of history cannot co-exist. So the prophetic proclaimers of Yahweh as Lord of history could use terms from the myths without fear of being misunderstood. Such a use was a tribute to Yahweh as the One who had triumphed over the gods of the heathen.

Another way in which the concepts of the myths are used is in a deliberate transformation. In all Near-Eastern myths the sea, or the waters, express chaos. In Utnapishtim's story of the flood the gods are terrified:

The gods were frightened by the deluge.

And shrinking back, they ascended to the heaven of Anu.

The gods cowered like dogs¹⁴

But of Yahweh we are told:

Yahweh sat as king at the Flood;

Yea, Yahweh sitteth as king for ever (Ps. 29: 10, 11).

Indeed the waters are subject to the mere command of God (Ps. 104: 6-9 — probably both creation and flood are here envisaged) and can be used as the instrument of protection for God's people (Ex. 14: 22, 29). To us the crossing of the Sea of Reeds is merely a kind of appendix to the exodus; for Israel it was the supreme proof of Yahweh's control of nature in every form.

The same transformation is seen in certain references to Leviathan. Instead of being Yahweh's foe he is rather His servant (e.g. Ps. 104: 26; Am. 9: 3). This passage in Amos is particularly important because of its relatively early date. There is a tendency in some circles to think that the process of 'demythologizing' is to be linked with the exile. While there is considerable mythological material in Amos 7-9, it should be obvious that it had no living significance for the prophet from Tekoa. For Jonah the deeper meaning of the storm at sea and the great fish was that though they figured chaos and Leviathan to the believer in myths, for him they were the tokens of Yahweh's control of all that is.

Notes:

1 *Before Philosophy* by H. & H. A. Frankfort, J. A. Wilson and T. Jacobsen (Pelican Books).

2 A reference to the two volumes of Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, will show to what extent our childhood versions were adapted.

3 Cf. especially the short account in ch. III of Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*.

4 For the chief Egyptian texts see Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, pp. 2-10; for the Akkadian, Pritchard, pp. 60-72, Winton Thomas, *Documents from Old Testament Times*, pp. 3-16; for the Ugaritic, Pritchard, pp. 129-149, Winton Thomas, pp. 128-133. There is a valuable discussion of the Egyptian myths in *Before Philosophy* by J. A. Wilson (pp. 59-70) and of the Mesopotamian by T. Jacobsen (pp. 182-195).

5 See Pritchard, pp. 131, 137, Winton Thomas, p. 129f.

6 e.g. Driver, *Genesis*, p. 30.

7 Driver, *Genesis*, p. 30.

8 *Before Philosophy*, p. 16.

9 *The Old Testament in the Light of the Historical Records of Assyria and Babylonia*.

10 Driver, *Genesis*, p. 36.

11 *Genesis I-XI* (Torch Commentaries), p. 27 seq.

12 *Before Philosophy*, p. 237.

13 See his long hymn to Aten — Pritchard, p. 369, Winton Thomas, p. 143.

14 Pritchard, p. 94.