

MYTH AND SCRIPTURE



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MYTH AND SCRIPTURE

CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES ON RELIGION,
LANGUAGE, AND IMAGINATION

Edited by

Dexter E. Callender Jr.



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ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by D. N. Freedman. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
AJP	<i>American Journal of Philology</i>
AnBib	Analecta biblica
ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> . Edited by J. B. Pritchard. 3rd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969.
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
ATD	Das Alte Testament Deutsch
BA	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
BDAG	W. Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
BRev	<i>Bible Review</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CANE	<i>Civilizations of the Ancient Near East</i> . Edited by J. Sasson. 4 vols. New York: Scribner, 1995.
CBET	Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CBQMS	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series
CC	Continental Commentaries
COS	<i>The Context of Scripture</i> . Edited by W. W. Hallo. 3 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1997– 2002.
CP	<i>Classical Philology</i>

DK	Hermann Diels and Walther Krantz, eds. and trans. <i>Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker: Griechisch und Deutsch</i> . 7th ed. 3 vols. Berlin: Weidmann, 1954.
ER	<i>Encyclopedia of Religion</i> . Edited by Mircea Eliade. 16 vols. New York: Macmillan, 1987.
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
FGrHist	<i>Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker</i> . Edited by Felix Jacoby. Leiden: Brill, 1954–1964.
FOTL	Forms of the Old Testament Literature
HALOT	L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm, <i>Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Translated and edited by M. E. J. Richardson. 5 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1994–2000.
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
ICC	International Critical Commentary
Int	<i>Interpretation</i>
IOS	<i>Israel Oriental Studies</i>
JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
JQR	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
JR	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
JSPSup	Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha Supplement Series
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
KTU	<i>Die keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit</i> . Edited by M. Dietrich, O. Loretz, and J. Sanmartín. AOAT 24/1. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1976.
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LHBOTS	Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
MARI	<i>Mari: Annales de recherches interdisciplinaires</i>
NCBC	New Century Bible Commentary

NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
OTL	Old Testament Library
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue biblique</i>
RIH	Ras Ibn Hani (excavation number)
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBLDS	SBL Dissertation Series
SBLWAW	SBL Writings from the Ancient World
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
SHCANE	Studies in the History and Culture of the Ancient Near East
SJLA	Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity
<i>SJOT</i>	<i>Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Vetus Testamentum Supplements
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZPE	<i>Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik</i>



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INTRODUCTION:
SCHOLARSHIP BETWEEN MYTH AND SCRIPTURE

Dexter E. Callender Jr. and William Scott Green

INTRODUCTION

This is a book about how scholars make sense of what we study.¹ As a field of research whose primary focus is a fixed and finite set of data, biblical studies innovates less by discovering new objects of study than by finding fresh ways—or refining old ways—to examine its basic subject matter. Scholars investigate by designing categories of analysis and interpretation to achieve understanding. Regular assessment of the value of these categories—however recondite it may appear to a field’s outsiders—provokes scholarly self-consciousness and thereby strengthens the quality of research and advances knowledge.

“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. For the purposes of this volume, *scripture* is a generic native category that biblically based religions use to depict themselves, though some scholars apply it to other religions as well.²

Religions typically claim that there is an order to existence—usually the work of deities or other superhuman beings—that humans did not make and in principle cannot change. For instance, the creation accounts

1. This volume was completed with generous research assistance from North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa.

2. For a concise comprehensive overview of the category, see Graham 1987; for Judaism and Christianity, see esp. pp. 135–36.

of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament do not suggest that humans played any role in shaping the structure of reality, creating light and darkness, time and space, day and night, or in making the “Word” become flesh. For its adherents, a religion’s cosmic order establishes the givens of existence and constitutes the prerequisites of human experience.

In religion, the cosmic structure is objective, factual, true, and—most important—normative. Religion assumes that humans on their own are, can be, or will be out of sync with the normative cosmic order and the superhuman beings who generated it. Religion further claims to know how to correct and prevent this inconsonance. Full and proper knowledge and understanding of this dynamic is highly specific, if not exclusive, to a religion itself. Religions aver that only by adhering to their own specific and distinctive teachings, which entail proper interactions with its deities or other superhuman beings, can humans either prevent or repair a breach with the created order. Religions teach their adherents why and how the world should work as it does, what humans should do to live in accord with that normative structure, and what will happen to them if they do or do not do so. The validity of a religion’s specialized claims about the cosmos comes from the experience of living them.

Each religion has its own particular sources of authority—texts, canons of scripture, revelations, sages, enlightened ones, prophets, chains of tradition, and so on—that reveal, transmit, and certify its privileged knowledge of the cosmic order.³ In the biblically based religions, the writings generically designated as “scripture” (Torah, Tanak, Testament, Gospel, Word of God, the Bible, etc.) constitute one—perhaps the pre-eminent—source of authority.⁴ “Scripture” thus constitutes the religious community’s charter account of the cosmic order and provides guidance on how to conform to it.

It is a scholarly commonplace that a “scripture” has authority because a community grants it. There are no inherent or required literary traits or genres that define or constitute “scripture.” Biblical texts include narrative, law, poetry, oracles, genealogies, letters, among other forms. Religions mark the distinctiveness of “scripture” both in their claims about and in their use of such texts. In biblically based religions, for instance,

3. This and the preceding two paragraphs are drawn from Green 2010.

4. As Dexter Callender points out, at Sinai, the deity—the God of Israel—transforms divine speech into writing, and the writing becomes both the emblem and repository of the deity’s power and wisdom.

“scripture” is not only a source of instruction and inspiration but also a routine component of prayer and liturgy. It can serve as a sacred artifact that evokes special behavior. In Judaism, the Torah Scroll is an object of veneration. Roman Catholic priests remove their skullcaps in the presence of the Gospel, and Lutherans rise when the Gospel is read during worship. Secular legal or political documents elicit no comparable response or action because they are both devised and alterable by human beings alone. “The Word of God” makes a broader claim to legitimacy than does “the consent of the governed.” The President of the United States swears loyalty to the Constitution on the Bible. Our society would regard the reverse as ludicrous.

If “scripture” is a relatively settled native category of religion, “myth”—as the essays gathered here suggest—is somewhat less stable.⁵ Although it ordinarily and historically is associated with narratives about deities and other superhuman beings, “myth” has markedly divergent connotations. It denotes both a narrative that is unsusceptible of proof—which connotes fiction, if not falsehood—and a narrative that expresses a religious community’s deepest convictions and assumptions—which connotes gravitas and value, if not a kind of truth. Both understandings are evident in contemporary biblical studies. For example, a section in chapter 1 of Christine Hayes’s *Introduction to the Bible*, entitled “Myths and Facts about the Bible,” clearly uses the term in the sense of error or falsehood (2012, 5–9). Douglas Knight and Amy-Jill Levine, on the other hand, adhere to the second understanding when they write:

“Myth” ... means 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; it explains how life as we know it came to be; it expresses our hopes and fears. It is true, in the same way that a parable is true. (Knight and Levine 2011, 66–67)

These disparate connotations yield contrary utilities for “myth” in the study of biblical literature.⁶ On the one side, understood as falsehood, “myth” has little analytical payoff when applied to “scripture.” It hardly

5. For a useful and insightful survey of the varied definitions of myth in the context of biblical studies and the Greco-Roman world, see Oden 1992a and 1992b and Graf 1992. See, more recently, Callender 2013.

6. To be sure, these different connotations are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

can explain a phenomenon it dismisses. This conception of “myth” can lead to the position that “scripture” is devoid of “myth” and that the category “myth” is misapplied in the study of biblical writings. On the other side, understood as the expression of a religion’s fundamental convictions, “myth” can create fresh contexts for understanding biblical texts.

DESCRIPTION

“Myth” and “scripture” intrude on one another most intensely and are particularly—perhaps only—pertinent to one another when scholars study biblical texts as religious writing. The present volume brings together specialists in the Hebrew Bible and ancient Near East, the New Testament and the Greco-Roman world, along with theorists of religion and myth, illustrating a range of ways each category can affect the other.

Part 1 of the volume addresses myth in the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East. John Rogerson, whose *Myth in Old Testament Interpretation* (1974) remains a standard in the field, revisits the topic of myth in the Old Testament, specifically taking on the matter of definitions and their consequences. Rogerson begins by distinguishing “myths” as particularly literary phenomena and “mythological elements” as the themes, motifs, or personalities within myths from “myth” proper. Rogerson’s conception of myth is grounded in the idea of a common possession held by ancient and modern humans alike—a conception he works out through a consideration of charter myths, the mythicizing of history, the origin of myth itself, and the truth of myth. What emerges stems from the impulse to give account of the hows and whys of the world as we experience it. Myth frames our empirical encounter with the “facts” of the world. It takes shape in traditional accounts drawn from a broader cultural repository and, in the case of the Bible, often features images that point ambiguously to life and death. Although assessments of its “truth” are governed by the particular epistemological commitments of the interpreter, literary context provides clues to the nature of the truth conveyed by the biblical tradents.

Dexter Callender considers the terms *myth* and *scripture*, specifically as emotionally charged categories tied to institutional structures. He gives

A religious community’s charter account of cosmic structure can reflect a cultural worldview that is erroneous or false.

attention to the role conceptions of speech and writing play in the exploration of experience (particularly religious experience) and reflects upon how these come together in the notion of Torah, which itself is presented in a manner that betrays serious concern with how language embodies and relates to experience.

Robert Kawashima, analyzing the narrative traditions of the Hebrew Bible through the lens of Foucault's "archaeology of knowledge," argues that myth and history constitute two distinct discourse configurations or epistemes. If mythic thought conceives of the cosmos as an eternal and necessary structure, historical thought conceives of the world as a realm governed rather by contingency and time. Consider, for example, the concept of the human condition. According to various myths, humans and gods are joined in an unalterable "natural unity" established in the time of creation. According to biblical prose narrative, however, humankind and God are alienated from each other. Yahweh solves the problem of alienation by placing his "call" upon Israel in an historical encounter that Althusser referred to as "interpellation." The "human unity" established in this contingent encounter is the covenant.

Mark S. Smith pursues an inductive approach to myth, inquiring into the nature of Gen 1 in light of features present in ancient Near Eastern texts generally taken as myth. For Smith, features within these texts and the ways scribes presented the texts (as narrative songs whose performance invokes gods and their world) indicate conscious interest in ritual access to the divine world. Observing how scribes combined mythic narratives with a wide variety of other literary forms (including older mythic narratives) and following Jonathan Z. Smith's insight likening traditional narrative structures to the objects manipulated by the diviner, he demonstrates how the nature of myth's identity is contingent on the particular situation of its use. The identity of myth is thus contextual and complex. The truth of Gen 1 as myth is nuanced by both its literary contextualization among variant creation traditions and its incorporation into the canonical expression of the Bible by which it becomes scripture. Smith's response to the question of whether Gen 1 is myth points to fundamental issues common to antiquity and modernity regarding the religious and epistemological aims and sensibilities of the interpreter.

Susan Ackerman applies the idea of the tragic hero to uncover the problems of Moses' death in Transjordan and in the process takes up consideration of the hagiographic accounts of religious heroes. This move reflects a conscious turn from older models of reconstructing Israel's

history. Ackerman grounds her approach in the rites-of-passage pattern observed by Arnold van Gennep, which later scholars extended beyond the sphere of life-cycle rituals to include heroic narratives (and all phenomena that mark journeys from the profane to the sacred). Continuing a line of investigation begun by biblical scholars who find in these insights a potentially fruitful approach not only to the narratives of individual biblical heroic figures but also to those of collective Israel, Ackerman reflects upon Moses' identity as intermediary to explain his death within the structure of the exodus narrative.

Hugh Rowland Page pursues a folkloric approach, offering a reading of "archaic poetry" as an assemblage whose data can shed light on "human" and "divine" as categories, clarify conceptions of personhood, and reveal strategies of engendering implicit and explicit spiritualities. The questions Page puts to the texts are similar to those posed by Mark Smith (and Amy Merrill Willis) regarding scribal attitudes toward the materials, their effect, and their relation to present reality. Page considers the process of scripturalization and cross-cultural social scientific research into the behavior of gathering and preserving and exchange, known in some quarters as the "anthropology of collecting." Building on the work of Susan Pearce, who linked collecting to social praxis involving the construction of identity and establishing of social roles, Page suggests the same for the scholarly collection of literary artifacts and discerns other areas of social control at work.

The approach taken by Marvin Sweeney considers mythological motifs from around the ancient Near East as more than mere evidence of Ezekiel's literacy. These, in conjunction with similar oracles concerning Sidon and the restoration of Israel in Ezek 28, function within the structure of the book to prefigure the rebuilding of the temple at the center of creation. Sweeney understands Ezekiel's creation-oriented mythopoeic imagery as part of his Zadokite priestly heritage, and sees its objective as making sense of the prophet's own earthly circumstances in terms of divine involvement both in accomplished events and in events set in a future that provides the framework for hope.

Amy Merrill Willis takes a decidedly Ricoeurian approach to address the myth and history dichotomy in the context of apocalyptic literature. Drawing attention to the narrative property that connects the two, she argues that their relationship is symbiotic through the shared property of narrative. Building upon John Collins's recognition in Dan 8 of the same mythic pattern seen in Isa 14, Merrill Willis argues that this "rebellious

subordinate” pattern is appropriated historiographically within the four-kingdoms narrative and constitutes an example of a Ricoeurian configuration of events—a *refiguration* that establishes a temporal unity, thereby producing meaning. Historical details are taken up into mythic narrative patterns, contextualizing them within the ultimate cosmic whole, providing a means of attaining cognitive coherence (cf. Festinger 1962 and Carroll 1979).

Part 2 of the volume includes papers that focus on writings from the Greco-Roman world and the New Testament. Steve Kraftchick addresses how the ways scholars construct myth, its definitions and valuations, affect our analyses of it. He offers a comparison of the work of four theorists whose work engages myth and biblical studies, particularly in view of notions of truth and meaning. These four, Rudolf Bultmann, Thomas Altizer, Craig Evans, and Gerd Theissen, he characterizes as recasting, refashioning, rejecting, and reclaiming myth, respectively. Kraftchick’s survey points to four areas of concern that he raises as important in moving forward: the opposition of myth to categories such as history, logos, and truth variously across disciplines; attention to antiquity and modernity; the usefulness of considering nonrational truth, entertainment, and imagination; and the ethical implications of studying myth with respect to the Bible.

Luke Timothy Johnson considers the difficult language of 2 Corinthians to discuss myth as language tied to the experience of reversing human alienation. A mythic use of language, Johnson asserts, is evident in Paul’s interweaving of statements concerning himself and his readers with statements concerning God and Christ. Myth, by Johnson’s definition, lies in first-order statements that feature human and divine persons in situations of mutual agency. These statements invoke the empirical yet remain beyond the limits of empirical investigation. Still, as Johnson argues, mythic language is essential to the communication of religious experience and hence its truth claims are subject to verification on the basis of experience itself and the symbolic world within which such statements make sense. The logic of mythic language lies in shared convictions regarding the empirical world.

James E. Miller takes a traditional approach to what myth is in his consideration of demythologizing in Greek literature to caution against confusing the ancient polemic with the concerns of the modern interpreter, and in the process examines standards of rationality, truth, and belief. Miller observes differences in demythologizing associated with a variety of different contexts and aims (e.g., ancient classical, Homeric criti-

cism; criticism of the Hebrew Bible; criticism of the New Testament) and tied, in part, to different understandings of myth.

John T. Fitzgerald's examination of the Derveni papyrus considers traditional views of the gods inspired by Homer and Hesiod and those of the pre-Socratics that lead to what is now commonly referred to as pagan monotheism. A central concern for Fitzgerald's inquiry is the practice of allegory, which he asserts reconciled "human uncertainty about the divine." In the papyrus, a treatise on an Orphic mythological poem that declares the poem's true meaning as allegorical and consonant with empirical reality, Fitzgerald discerns a perspective in which allegory itself emerges as religious practice—not only rescuing Orphic theological language, but creating the conditions for the experience of a *hieros logos*.

Part three of the volume is devoted to an essay by Robert A. Segal, in which he considers patterns in myth and the category of the hero myth as part of a broader inquiry into the place of theories of myth in biblical studies. Segal's treatment goes beyond the mere recognition of a pattern to pursue theoretical questions regarding origin, function, and subject matter. To this end, he applies the psychoanalytic theorizing of Otto Rank and the theorizing of folklorist Lord Raglan to the life of King Saul. Segal's essay is an abridged version of a longer paper delivered at the 2007 Society of Biblical Literature annual meeting in San Diego, California, in a special joint session of the SBL's Bible, Myth, and Myth Theory consultation and the Religion and Social Sciences section of the American Academy of Religion under the theme "The Place of Theories of Myth in Biblical Studies." Responses presented in that session by New Testament scholar Adela Yarbro Collins, Jungian analyst David Miller, and social scientific theorist of religion Ivan Strenski follow Segal's paper in this volume, along with Segal's reply to each.

PRELIMINARY REFLECTIONS

The papers gathered here suggest that the interaction of "myth" and "scripture" can enrich our understanding of biblical writings. Even the most elementary understanding of "myth" as a story about gods or heroes creates a framework within which to set biblical writings in both cultural and literary comparative contexts. In the realm of culture, the category has enabled biblical scholars to read biblical accounts alongside religious charter narratives from other ancient Near Eastern cultures and better understand what is commonplace and shared among them. From these studies, new

knowledge of ancient Near Eastern multiculturalism or “interculturalism” has emerged. In the area of literature, the category of “myth” has helped biblical scholars identify broad literary traits—motifs and plot lines, for instance—that transcend discrete cultures and demarcate narratives about gods and heroes.⁷ In different ways, this use of “myth” has widened and enriched our understanding of the nature and character of biblical texts.⁸

By the same token, that contextualization provides fresh, empirical evidence for how biblical writings, distinctively, became “scripture.” Mark Smith astutely observes that the diverse texts contained in the Hebrew Bible ultimately became part of a collection that was read and understood as a unity. In this respect, biblical creation texts, at least, differed from those of surrounding ancient Near Eastern nations, and, it might be added, of Greece and Rome as well. He explains that in ancient Israel:

texts regarded as holy or inspired were coming to be read and interpreted together; . . . words or complexes of terms shared by different religious texts not only could be read in tandem but should be read together across the boundaries of their original contexts, beyond the limits of any individual passage or document. It is this process of scriptural reading, linking passages across their former textual boundaries, that eventually distinguishes works that belong to the Bible.⁹

Critical scholarship has persistently shown that the books and fragments of books collected in the canons of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament have distinctive and even divergent perspectives and positions. That is what a secular analytical reading should demonstrate. But insofar as religious communities regard these collections as providing a divinely sanctioned charter account, as expressing an authoritative—and thus necessarily unified—depiction of the nature of the cosmos and humanity’s place in it, they constitute “scripture.” In establishing its writings as “scripture,” *how* a community reads may be as important as *what* it reads.

Finally, it is possible to understand “scripture” itself as “myth.” For example, Robert Kawashima elegantly defines “myth” by distinguishing it from “history.” He suggests that “mythical thought conceives of the

7. Susan Ackerman’s contribution to this volume provides lucid illustration of this point.

8. See, e.g., the contribution by Marvin Sweeney.

9. Mark Smith, 96 below.

cosmos as a static system, composed of various elements and relations that are eternal, necessary, and essential.” By contrast, “Historical thought . . . apprehends the world as a realm of accident, contingency, and time. This properly empirical reality is thinkable as such only in opposition to some strictly utopian ideal beyond the empirical.” These two categories create an “epistemic rupture” across the Israelite biblical tradition and yield “two versions of the human condition.” The version of myth holds that Israel and God have a natural, essential connection and unity. By contrast, the version of history avers that “were it not for key human decisions”—largely “formalized” in the institution of covenant—Israel could have been other than it came to be.

This is a cogent and defensible analytical distinction. An “unscriptural” reading of these “two modes of narrative” about the human condition treats them as discrete and yields the “epistemic rupture” that Kawashima identifies. Alternatively, reading both modes of narrative as “scripture”—as authoritative and, in Mark Smith’s words, “across the boundaries of their original contexts”—gives the historical mode of narrative a mythic character. Read as “scripture,” the “human decisions” that connect Israel to God become paradigmatic and normative and set the conditions for all future covenantal “human decisions.” This approach adds a mythic dimension to scripture. From the perspective of “scripture” as “myth,” human beings may well be free to make their own decisions (perhaps because they are themselves created in the mythical “image of God”?), but the results of those decisions are clear and immutable. A text such as, “I offer you the choice of life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life, and you and your descendants will live; love the LORD your God, obey him and hold fast to him: that is life for you and length of days, on the soil which the LORD swore to give to your forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Deut 30:19–20), precludes death as a consequence of choosing to love God. Thus “scripture” transforms the “contingency” of history into the “necessity” of myth.

If this volume prompts fresh assessment of some basic categories for the analysis and understanding of biblical writings, the collective work represented here will have served a constructive purpose.

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