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978-0-521-76820-7 - Homer's *Odyssey* and the Near East

Bruce Loudon

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Introduction

Why a new study of the *Odyssey*? Lowe, in his analysis of classical plot types in Western literature, revises Northrop Frye's (1976) claim for the Bible's pre-eminence as most influential text, replacing it with the *Odyssey* (2000: 129):

A generation ago, it hardly seemed controversial to declare that "western literature has been more influenced by the Bible than by any other book". Yet already this is looking less true, and perhaps it never was. In the forms and media of popular fiction, at least, the pagan influence of the *Odyssey* has always been incomparably more alive. Now, as the traditional borders between high and low culture seem to be opening permanently to traffic, that persistent influence is more visible than ever.

Lowe argues for its pre-eminence not only as a paradigm for later narrative, but for its command of an unprecedented variety of narrative types (128):

[T]he *Odyssey* is the most encyclopaedic *compendium* of technical plot devices in the whole of ancient storytelling, and one of the most dazzling displays of narrative fireworks anywhere in literature.

I will also look at the *Odyssey* as a "compendium of plot devices," if from another perspective: how it combines distinct narrative types, or different genres of myth.

Lowe divides Western literature into two subdivisions, a major key, first present in the *Odyssey*, and a minor key, first present in the *Iliad* (2000: 128), a neat correction of the usual bias that assigns greater importance to tragedy. In his major, Odyssean, key, the protagonist has greater control, makes decisions consistent with those forces that govern the protagonist's world, whereas in his minor, Iliadic, key, those forces are beyond the protagonist's control. Agreeing with Lowe's claims for the *Odyssey* as paradigmatic for Western culture, I will slightly problematize its Western-ness by considering its relationship with his and Frye's other paradigmatic text, the Bible.

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GENRES OF MYTH

What does it mean to say that the *Odyssey* is an epic? What is an epic? Myths employ traditional components, verbal formulas, motifs, and type-scenes, such as divine councils, or a host receiving a guest. Traditional types of characters, such as heroes, gods, prophets, and patriarchs, are also constituent elements of myth. Specific genres of myth are also recurring elements of a mythology. By a genre of myth I mean that myths can be seen as falling into, or existing, in specific categories, each usually consisting of a few interconnected type-scenes. Audiences, performers, and cultures, in a certain sense, acquire an understanding of a “template” of the respective genre of myth, to which some individual modifications, local details, accrue, to make a given instance of the genre fit into a specific context. A few such genres are well known: *creation myth*, depicting the creation of mortals, gods, or the earth, as in the *Enuma Elish*, the Sumerian *Enki and Ninmah*, the Babylonian *Adapa*, Genesis 1–6: 4, Hesiod's *Works and Days* (47–174), Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1.5–88), Milton's *Paradise Lost* (5–6), and the like. *Theoxeny*, when a host receives a stranger who is really a god in disguise, ending favorably, with Nestor (*Odyssey* 3) and Abraham (Genesis 18; cf. Ovid, *Fasti* 5.493–544), or ending with the destruction of those who violate hospitality (*Odyssey* 1, 17–22, Genesis 19, *Metamorphoses* 8. 611–724), has been explored by Reece (1993: 10, 47–57, 181–7).

This study argues that the *Odyssey*'s larger plot combines several distinct genres of myth (eighteen, by my count), including *theoxeny* (explored in Chapter 2), *romance* (Chapter 3), *creation myth* (Chapter 5), *combat myth* (Chapter 8), and *catabasis* (Chapter 9). For those genres that lack established names, I have put forth simple descriptive titles, *Sea-monsters and the fantastic voyage* (Chapter 7), *The king returns, unrecognized and abused in his kingdom* (Chapter 12). I will establish and analyze these and the other genres of myth that together make up the *Odyssey* by demonstrating that the same genres are also extant in Near Eastern mythic traditions.

Three studies, exploring common ground between the Old Testament and various Near Eastern cultures, use similar approaches to those I employ here. Sparks' *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible: A Guide to the Background Literature* (2005) is a study of genre, a comparative, cross-cultural exploration of the different forms of narrative the OT employs, much as I will do for the *Odyssey*. In one chapter Sparks compares hymns, prayers, and laments in Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Hittite, and Ugaritic texts, while in another he notes parallels between apocalyptic myths from Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Persian, and Greek sources. He offers a nuanced

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discussion of genre theory (1–18), including a typology of different perspectives on what constitutes genre (generic matrix, intrinsic genre, and analytical genre), a dichotomy of how new genres are formed (generic assimilation and generic extension), and a typology of cultural diffusion, forms of intercultural transmission of genres.

Carr's *Reading the Fractures of Genesis: Historical and Literary Approaches* (1996: 16) explores the transmission history of Genesis. Briefly noting how the composer of the Old Babylonian *Gilgamesh* epic linked together previously separate narratives depicting Gilgamesh doing this and that to form the complete tale that the epic presents, Carr invokes this model to consider the formation of Genesis. First noting how the Deuteronomist source “itself refers repeatedly to independent source documents upon which it depends” (1996: 17), he finds evidence for the sources behind the other two principal strands previously identified by biblical commentators, the Yahwist and Priestly (P) layers, particularly the latter. He demonstrates how Israelite culture joined together originally separate accounts, Mesopotamian creation and apocalyptic flood myths, independent story cycles about Jacob, on the one hand, and Joseph on the other, by linking them all together under the larger rubric of promise-covenant narratives (1996: 48, 79, 81–5, 154–5, 204–8, 210, 222, 226–34). The Abraham narratives, later than those of Jacob and Joseph, provide the model for the larger “promise” framework. The editors/redactors make occasional insertions and changes in the earlier Jacob and Joseph traditions so they conform to the pattern the Abraham narratives establish (1996: 203):

In summary, I will be arguing for a model of an originally separate, but not independent P source, a source written in constant relation to non-P material (=dependent), but designed to stand separate from and over against it (=originally separate). If this model is accurate, then the final form of Genesis is the product of a remarkable intertextual move. It is the compositional interweaving of an originally separate P source with the non-P material it was originally designed to replace.

There is much here relevant to my consideration of the *Odyssey*'s structure. I will argue that Genesis shares more genres of myth in common with the *Odyssey* than does any other ancient narrative. Carr's theory on its formation, *mutatis mutandis*, can serve as a hermeneutic for understanding how the *Odyssey* may have come together.

The essays John J. Collins collects in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism; Volume 1: The Origins of Apocalypticism in Judaism and Christianity* (2000) explore a variety of apocalyptic myths in considerable detail, breaking them

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down into different subtypes (see especially VanderKam [2000]), showing the different components that together make up this well-known mythic type (Clifford [2000]). A fourth book, N. J. Lowe's *The Classical Plot and the Invention of Western Narrative* (2000), though it does not engage Near Eastern mythic traditions, offers germane observations about the *Odyssey* and Homeric epic, and has much to say about genre, and the comparative neglect of Books 1–4 and 13–24, relevant to Chapters 2–3, and 11–13 of this study.

My work has techniques and objectives in common with these studies, though I developed my method independent from them (nor should these authors be held accountable for possible shortcomings in this work).¹ As in Sparks (2005), much of my discussion is comparative, and those mythic traditions offering the closest parallels to the *Odyssey*, employing the same genres of myth, are the same as his *comparanda* for OT myth: Mesopotamian (whether Sumerian, Akkadian, or Babylonian), Egyptian, Ugaritic, and occasional other Near Eastern cultures. Like Carr does for Genesis, I consider how the *Odyssey* joins together separate, smaller types of narrative, and how it may have imposed changes upon them, to form its larger plot. As some of the essays in Collins, I analyze the smaller components that together constitute a specific genre of myth, such as apocalyptic myth. Like that of Lowe, this study considers the entire *Odyssey*, not just Books 5–12 (or 9–12). In terms of labels, my work, like these four, applies comparative typological and structuralist perspectives.

Consideration of other examples of the mythic genres the *Odyssey* employs is significant for several reasons. A non-Homeric instance of one of the *Odyssey*'s genres helps demonstrate the genre's existence, and helps us interpret how the genre functions within the *Odyssey*. Each separate instance of a genre elucidates the others. Lowe (2000: 55) notes how awareness of a narrative's genre increases an audience's understanding:

One of the distinctive qualities of *genre* is that it allows a common rule-system to be assumed across a whole corpus of texts. A reader familiar with a system of genre conventions will not need to have the rulebook spelled out within any particular text, any more than Italian-speakers need to consult a grammar every time they engage in conversation . . . There is no such thing as a narrative innocent of genre.

The parallels, and divergences, between different instances of a given genre of myth reveal what is most traditional or most expected for that mythic type, how a given instance conforms or innovates.

¹ See Loudon (2006: 149–285; 1999: 70–2, 95–9) for earlier instances of the approach used in the present work.

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Sparks, in his study of parallels between Near Eastern and OT myth, quotes Ricoeur (2005: 8) on how awareness of genre helps an audience interpret a narrative:

In the words of P. Ricoeur [*sic*], genre functions “to mediate between speaker and hearer by establishing a common dynamics capable of ruling both the production of discourse as a work of a certain kind and its interpretation according to rules provided by the genre.”

The process I follow through much of this work, noting parallel instances of the *Odyssey's* genres of myth, using them to better understand it, and the other narratives, is what Sparks calls *analytical genre* (2005: 10):

[W]e must deliberately compare problem texts with others in the hope that this will help us understand what is unclear. This grouping of similar texts creates an *analytical genre*, a class of texts that serve our comparative purposes by helping us adjust our generic expectations, which may either be broadened or narrowed, depending on the situation.

Sparks compares the result of using analytical genre to Chomsky's notion of literary competence (2005: 12), gaining “a familiarity with the ancient context,” that in Sparks' case approximates that of those who compiled/composed/edited the Old Testament. Sparks concludes (2005: 18), “In sum, good interpretation must consider the modal traits of a composition.”

My study demonstrates that the genres of myth that comprise the *Odyssey* are also extant in Near Eastern cultures, often in *Gilgamesh*, but most frequently in OT myth. Why do commentators usually omit consideration of the substantial parallels between Homeric and OT myth?² Modern audiences may, even without realizing, project their beliefs onto how they read ancient texts. Given the long dominance of Christianity and Judaism in the West, a majority of modern Western audiences, whether consciously or unconsciously, may, on the basis of their faith, regard biblical and Homeric narratives as opposites, seeing the former as “true” or “real,” but the latter as “false,” “unreal,” or “fictional.” Intentionally or unintentionally, faith has erected a wall between the study of the two narrative traditions. I ask readers, therefore, to consider the parallels I adduce, and the arguments proposed concerning them, as objectively as possible.

The Near Eastern parallels also serve as a challenge to the theory that Homeric epic descends from an Indo-European prototype, or largely

² Taylor (2007: 1–36) is a recent exception.

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reflects or conforms to an Indo-European inheritance. Though Greek is certainly an Indo-European language, and Homeric epic may very well retain *some* motifs from an Indo-European inheritance, the unproven assumption that it is largely or primarily Indo-European has, in my view, hindered study of arguably deeper and more numerous parallels Homeric epic exhibits with Near Eastern myth and epic. My study challenges the Indo-European paradigm and would replace it, at least in part, with another. As I hope to demonstrate, the genres of myth, the narrative vehicles the *Odyssey* employs to depict Odysseus' arc from Troy to his recognition scene with Laertes, are closer to those in several Near Eastern traditions, and suggest extensive interaction with non-Indo-European Near Eastern cultures.

West's recent survey, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (2007), offers a good test for my thesis. Having read this study after my own was largely finished, I remain firmly convinced that, though Indo-European and Near Eastern myth employ many of the same motifs, the specific *combinations* of motifs that comprise the genres of myth in the *Odyssey* have more in common with Near Eastern myth than with Indo-European. I posit five areas as offering the most fruitful overlap between Near Eastern and Indo-European myth. One is the structure of hymns. West's analysis of *Rig Veda* 2.15.1–9, a hymn to Indra (2007: 314), has several elements in common with some of the Psalms, and I suspect this could be a productive area for research. Near Eastern and Indo-European myth both make central use of divine councils (on Indo-European use see West, p. 151). In a future study I will consider whether the specific subtypes analyzed and explored here common to Homeric epic and Near Eastern myth are also extant, say, in Sanskrit epic. West reviews the evidence that in Indo-European pantheons the sky father figure and the god of thunder were originally two separate gods, though Greek myth combines the two in Zeus (2007: 238–9). The same is also true in Ugaritic myth where El, the sky father, and Baal the storm god, are separate figures. Classical Indian myth, especially dramas such as Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*, employs a form of romance close to that considered here in the *Odyssey* and the myth of Joseph (Gen. 37, 39–47). The hero's interactions with the gods are again quite close in Near Eastern and Indo-European myth.

My study would also challenge another dominant paradigm, the assumption that the *Iliad* provides the best context for understanding the *Odyssey*. The majority of Homeric criticism and commentary, I suggest, employs an *Iliad*-centered paradigm, either explicitly or implicitly, for interpreting the *Odyssey*. According to this rarely questioned model, the *Odyssey* was composed with the *Iliad* as its main backdrop; an episode in the *Odyssey*

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functions more as an inter-textual comment on an episode in the *Iliad* rather than serving its own integral function within the *Odyssey* itself. In my analysis the two Homeric epics are composed of almost entirely different genres of myth. While the *Iliad* employs such mythical genres as *siege myth*, *the king who quarrels with his prophet*, *god sends the king a deceiving spirit*, *aristeiai*, and *theomachy*,³ perhaps only in Book 22, and part of 21, does the *Odyssey* employ subgenres of myth also found in the *Iliad*. Only here does Odysseus engage in the kinds of acts one might expect from an *Iliad*-based perspective. Though both epics feature divine councils, they employ different subtypes (excepting *Il.* 7.445–64, where the *Iliad* uses the *Odyssey*'s main type).⁴ The presence of the same genres in various Near Eastern traditions, many of which predate Homeric epic, suggests that not only does Near Eastern narrative offer a more germane context for interpreting the *Odyssey*, in many respects, but that the *Odyssey* may just as well be responding to Near Eastern mythic traditions as to the *Iliad*.⁵

MYTH AND EPIC

I define myth as, *a sacred, traditional, narrative, that depicts the interrelations of mortals and gods, is especially concerned with defining what is moral or ethical behavior for a given culture, and passes on key information about that culture's traditions and institutions*.⁶ My definition should be thought of as applying best to ancient Near Eastern texts including *Gilgamesh*, the *Enuma Elish*, and other Mesopotamian narratives, the Ugaritic *Kirta*, and *The Aqhat*, the Bible, especially the OT, European epics including the *Odyssey*, *Iliad*, *Argonautica*, and *Aeneid*, Hesiod, Greek tragedy, the *Mahabhârata* and the *Ramâyana*, and some later epics, such as *Beowulf* and *Paradise Lost*. This list should not be taken as a value judgment privileging or validating one myth over another, but a natural grouping of texts that bear close relations to each other, texts that can provide contexts for each other, and may have genetic relations with each other.⁷

Lowe, much as I define myth as illustrating “what is moral or ethical behavior for a given culture,” stresses the *Odyssey*'s central moral concerns (2000: 140–1):

³ For fuller analysis of the principal genres of myth that make up the *Iliad*'s plot, see Loudon (2006: Chapters 5 and 6).

⁴ Discussion below in Chapters 1 and 13.

⁵ The *Iliad*-centered bias reflects the prejudice that tragedy is more important or instantiates a greater seriousness than romance.

⁶ Cf. Loudon (2006: 9), and Kirk (1974: 27).

⁷ For a very different, more inclusive definition of epic, see Martin (2005).

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[T]he three great Odyssean principles that will become virtual constants of the rule-system of classical narrative: that crime brings inevitable punishment, brain is intrinsically stronger than brawn, and trespass on another's property is an invariably fatal violation . . . any mortal contempt for divine status or authority – invariably brings retribution, whether on the ogre Polyphemus, the beggar, Irus, or even (in his blasphemous final outburst to the blinded giant) Odysseus himself . . . To a great extent, the narrative roles of the human players themselves are straightforwardly defined in terms of these moral laws.

I define epic not as a *type* of myth, such as “heroic myth,” but as a *framework that can contain within it any other kind of myth, but which features a heroic protagonist and heroic modality, depicts that hero's close interaction with the gods, and through his dilemmas, explores some of the meanings of mortality, what it means to have to die.*⁸

Let us partly apply this definition to *Gilgamesh*, which, as is commonly understood (e.g., Carr 1996: 16), combines a number of originally separate narratives, distinct genres of myth. To insert the character Enkidu into its narrative, and to account for his character's unique qualities, the *Gilgamesh* epic employs a version of *creation myth*. It depicts the gods creating Enkidu in the same way creation myths depict the creation of the first mortal: fashioned from clay or earth, formed not as an infant, but as an adult male, living away from human culture in a pastoral environment, and so forth, very much as Genesis 2:4–3:24. Like *Gilgamesh*, the *Odyssey* also incorporates creation myth, or at least some key facets of it, though for a very different purpose: to depict Odysseus' circumstances on Ogygia with Kalypso (explored in Chapter 5).

Though Mesopotamian and Egyptian myths afford parallels with the genres of myth the *Odyssey* employs, OT myth is the Near Eastern tradition with the greatest number of relevant parallels (as I argue is also true of the *Iliad*; Loudon 2006: Chapters 5 and 6). OT myth not only has affinities with epic (Yadin), but draws on it as a source, as Sparks notes (2005: 302; cf. Niditch 2005):

[E]pic and legend appear to have been prominent among the sources used by Israelite historians . . . the Hebrew Bible may allude to such sources when it refers to the “Book of Jashar” (Josh. 10:13; 2 Sam. 1:8) and to “the Book of the Wars of the Lord” (Num. 21:14), and scholars have long suspected that remnants of the Hebrew epic tradition are preserved in poems such as the Blessing of Jacob (Gen. 49), the Song of Miriam (Exod. 15), the Oracles of Balaam (Num. 24), the Blessing of Moses (Deut. 33), the Song of Deborah (Judg. 5), and the lament over Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam. 1). There can be no doubt that poetic narrative sources existed

⁸ As also given in Loudon (2006: 6).

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in ancient Israel; that these were substantial epic works in the Homeric sense is only an educated guess.

This study will more frequently adduce parallels from OT myth than from other Near Eastern traditions. Though some readers may not be used to thinking of OT, let alone New Testament, narratives as *myth*, the examples adduced from those two collections do conform to my definition (*sacred, traditional, narrative, that depicts the interrelations of mortals and gods, is especially concerned with defining what is moral or ethical behavior for a given culture*).

OT myth's relevance is evident in the close parallels three well-known myths offer to the *Odyssey*. Joseph, separated from his brothers and father for virtually the same length of time Odysseus is away from Ithaka, meets with them unrecognized, submits them to various painful tests, before revealing his identity to them. The recognition scenes serve as the climax to his narrative, as do Odysseus' recognition scenes with Penelope and Laertes. The parallels suggest a highly developed form of *romance*, with intricate recognition scenes, is a mythical genre common to both Greek and Israelite culture, as explored in Chapter 3. Odysseus' crew, confined on Thrinakia for a month, in revolt, sacrificing Helios' cattle in a perverse ritual, offers extensive parallels to the Israelites' revolt against Moses, and perverse worship of the gilded calf in Exodus 32. The myths of Jonah and Odysseus suggest that Greek and Israelite culture both have a genre of myth we might think of as the *fantastic voyage*.

As these examples indicate, very different types of myths are used to depict the various stages of Odysseus' larger narrative trajectory from Troy to Ithaka. Gaining an understanding of how these smaller units function helps reveal how the *Odyssey* as a whole functions, how it ties together distinct mythic types into a large, smoothly functioning composite. Many of the genres of myth in the *Odyssey*, such as *theoxeny*, challenge usual assumptions of what constitutes an epic. For the greater part of nine books (14–22) Odysseus, to all outward appearances, is a beggar, associating with lowly slaves, abused, unrecognized in his own kingdom – unexpected behavior for an epic hero. The *Odyssey* establishes its central concern with non-heroic genres of myth in the *Telemachy* (Books 1–4), which especially explores hospitality myth. Here the focus is first on Telemachos' observance of the sanctity of hospitality, and the suitors' thematic violation of the same (Book 1). Later the patriarch Nestor offers exemplary hospitality to Telemachos, now a guest, and to the disguised Athena (Book 3), furthering the *Odyssey's* use of non-heroic genres of myth. In these ways and others

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the *Odyssey* has more in common with Genesis and parts of the gospels (see Chapters 9, and 11–12 of this study) than with most heroic myth, or the *Iliad*.

WHY THE ODYSSEY EXHIBITS EXTENSIVE PARALLELS WITH NEAR EASTERN MYTH

As I will argue, the parallels are far too frequent and close (differences in tone and narrative agendas notwithstanding) for coincidence. The similarities between Greek and Near Eastern myth suggest some form of diffusion. I assume that each tradition, Homeric or Near Eastern, learned or acquired a “template” of the respective genre of myth, to which each culture then made some modifications, added more local details, to make it fit into the specific context in which that culture now employed it. The *Odyssey*, for instance, uses theoxeny as episodes in the lives of warriors, Odysseus, Nestor, and Telemachos, whereas OT myth employs theoxeny as episodes in the lives of patriarchs, Abraham and Lot. Because of the different type of characters featured, the respective instances have different modalities. The warrior Odysseus himself carries out the destruction of the suitors, as demanded by Athena, whereas in Genesis 19 destruction rains down from the sky. My analyses do not depend on verbal echoes between the different forms of the same myth. Rather, the genre of myth exhibits parallels at a morphological level, different instantiations using the same themes and type-scenes, if differing in some details.

The likeliest scenario for cultural diffusion is Greek contact with Phoenician culture, whether in ancient Syria, on Cyprus, or in the Greek world.⁹ Ongoing archeological research affirms how close ties were at times between Greeks and various Near Eastern peoples, the Phoenicians in particular. Since the Greeks obtained their alphabet from the Phoenicians (see Teodorsson: 2006: 169–72, and Powell 2002: 99–108, for recent discussions), and Greek myth assigns key roles to Phoenicians (Cadmus, most importantly), it is likely that the two cultures also engaged in *exchanges of narratives*, or specific genres of myth, as well.¹⁰

Sparks (2005: 4) delineates four types of dispersion:

⁹ Note the prominence of Sidonia, a Phoenician city, at *Iliad* 6.289–91; cf. Proclus' account in the *Cypria*, and Apollodorus, *Epitome* 3.4. See also the background information on Agamemnon's corselet as a gift from a Cyprian king, *Iliad* 11.19–28. I make a few additional comments in the Conclusion.

¹⁰ The *Odyssey* makes many references to Phoenicians or Phoenician culture: 4.83–4, 618; 13.272, 285; 14.291; 15.118, 415, 419, 425, 473; cf. *Iliad* 6.290–1; 23.743–4.