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978-0-521-27492-0 - Structuralist Interpretations of Biblical Myth

Edmund Leach and D. Alan Aycock

Excerpt

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1 Introduction

EDMUND LEACH

None of the essays in this volume could have been written if they had not been preceded by Lévi-Strauss' two seminal essays, 'The Structural Study of Myth'¹ and 'The Story of Asdiwal',² but the discrepancies between the methodology developed here and that employed by Lévi-Strauss are numerous and fundamental.

Most of these differences stem from the fact that Lévi-Strauss follows the conventions of American cultural anthropology in supposing that human culture can be broken up into discrete entities. In his language, 'cultures', especially those of primitive peoples, exist in the plural. In almost all his myth analyses other than the 'The Story of Asdiwal' he is concerned with problems of cross-cultural comparison. In Lévi-Strauss' view, structuralist method provides illumination because it is able to reveal the existence of common patterned structures in the cultural products of contrasted 'cultures'.

As an indirect consequence of this emphasis on the plurality of cultures, Lévi-Strauss has been led to argue that his method can only appropriately be applied to data from what he calls 'cold' societies (i.e. 'primitive' pre-literate social systems) and not to data from 'hot' societies (i.e. literate, historically fluid social systems) in which the notion of cultural boundaries becomes wholly arbitrary.

As a functionalist British social anthropologist I reject this way of handling anthropological materials. For me, 'culture' is a concept which exists only in the singular. The permutations and transformations of patterned structure which I find interesting are not those which appear when we compare radically different social systems but those which are found within a single social system, both synchronically at one particular phase of its history and diachronically during the course of its historical development.

I emphasise this point right at the start because some commentators on my earlier, related essays³ seem to have supposed that I fail to follow the precepts of Lévi-Straussian orthodoxy only because I fail to understand the essentials of the method. This is not the case. The essays in this book

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employ variations of a structuralist methodology; it is a methodology which owes much to Lévi-Strauss; it is not a Lévi-Straussian methodology.

My first contribution to the general field covered by the essays in this book was published as long ago as 1961.⁴ At that time Lévi-Strauss' *Mythologiques*⁵ was not yet in existence and his earlier, mostly very brief, experiments in the structural analysis of myth were little known outside France.

Since then 'structuralism', 'post-structuralism' and the rest have gone through several cycles of death and rebirth in a variety of different fields – anthropology, literary studies, classical studies and biblical studies in particular. The term 'structuralism' itself, which arouses the awed admiration of some and the uncomprehending abuse of many, has by now acquired such a diffuse set of significations as to be almost meaningless. Was the psychoanalyst Lacan a structuralist? Are Althusser and Foucault to be reckoned structuralists? Was the structuralism of Roland Barthes derived from the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss or are they quite independent phenomena? Where does the Nietzschean 'Deconstruction' of Jacques Derrida fit in? Creeds and heresies and doctrinal deviations abound on all sides. It is hardly surprising that those who have not been caught up in this sectarian debate are inclined to brush the whole business aside as an ephemeral Parisian aberration.

That I think would be a pity. The basic argument that lies at the back of all the essays in this collection is that sacred texts contain a religious message which is other than that which can be immediately inferred from the manifest sense of the narrative. Religious texts contain a mystery; the mystery is somehow encoded in the text; it is decodable.

The code, as in all forms of communication, depends upon the permutation of patterned structures. The method of decoding is to show what persists throughout in a sequence of transformations.

When structuralist method is described in language of this sort it can sound very alarming but the principles involved are quite familiar, especially in theological studies. Christian dogma presupposes that the stories of the Old Testament 'prefigure' those of the New and that the deepest mysteries of Christianity are revealed in contemplation of the 'messages' in the text which survive this process of transformation.

Prior to the Reformation all Christians took this for granted. Not only was the whole of the Bible true but it was all true in the same way. It could be read as a synchronous story in which the different parts were internally cross-referenced.

It is only during the last 150 years that a quite different attitude has come to dominate biblical scholarship. Truth is now equated with 'historical truth' and since it has become apparent that large parts of the Bible

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could not possibly be 'true as history' in a strict sense the task of the scholar has been seen as that of sifting the true from the false. If only we could know what really happened in history then we should understand the truth, including religious truth.

This type of biblical scholarship, which I have referred to as 'unscrambling the omelette', is not universal but it is very common. It seems to me to be a self-defeating exercise. Not only is the search for historical truth vain in itself, but the method of search serves to generate a fog which hides the religious truth that was formerly understood.

A methodology in which the Bible is treated piecemeal as a composite set of documents of varied date and differing authenticity is common to all the forms of scholarship which have their roots in the Higher Criticism of the nineteenth Century. By its very nature it serves to obscure, or even to deny, the existence of 'patterns' which persist as transformational structures between one document and another.

Structuralist analyses of the sort presented here reverse this procedure. They seek to make explicit coded patterns of the sort that the early Christian Fathers took for granted but which many latter-day Bible-readers seem to be unable to recognise.

Many not all. There will certainly be some readers of these essays who will react by saying: 'But of course, we know that, but it is trivial.' To such readers I have nothing further to say. But I think that there may be others who will react in a different way: 'But yes, I had not noticed that; it certainly seems curious; perhaps it is significant; let me think about it.' It is to open-minded Bible-readers of this latter sort that this book is primarily addressed.

It is also addressed to professional anthropological colleagues, but what they may or may not get out of it I cannot predict.

The circumstances through which these essays have all come to be published between one set of covers and under the sponsorship of the Royal Anthropological Institute need to be explained. The central point is that the RAI has a kind of moral obligation to publish Chapter 3 which was the Huxley Lecture for 1980 but which is substantially longer than most of the papers which appear in the RAI journal, *Man*.

The joint authors have never met. Dr Aycock's contributions are here because he sent me an earlier draft of 'The fate of Lot's wife' (Chapter 6), which might perhaps have been called 'Asdiwal in Jericho', at about the time that I had started to work on 'Why did Moses have a sister?' (Chapter 3), and I thought that the two pieces together might well go into an RAI Occasional Paper. Our book, as now published, is a much more ambitious exercise, but I would recommend any reader who is puzzled as

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to just what we mean by structuralist analysis to get the feel of things by reading Chapter 6 first; it is very short.

On such a first encounter the method is unlikely to appear either particularly illuminating or altogether persuasive, but Aycock here invokes many of the pattern-searching devices which appear in the longer essays: the assumption that all symbols are 'polysemic' – they have several different levels of meaning; the assumption that the structured patterns which convey other than superficial meaning are built up from contraries in binary pairs; the crucial value attached to the ambiguous 'middle term', in this case Lot's Wife herself; and so on.

In the Asdiwal story on which Aycock had modelled his interpretation, Asdiwal, who has one home under the sea and another in the sky and still another in the land of mortals, loses his magic powers and ends up turned to stone, betwixt and between, half-way up a mountain side. Because of this Asdiwal connection, the argument in this Aycock essay will appear more straightforward to the anthropologist reader than to the non-anthropologist. But if, when tackling the longer pieces, the reader keeps in mind the list of ambiguities on which Aycock lays stress in the last few paragraphs of his essay, it will become apparent that the two authors have independently made use of a very similar set of parametric variables.

I am rather less happy about Dr Aycock's second essay (Chapter 7), not so much because I disagree with it as because I think he has left out too much. An elaboration of that comment may help the non-anthropologist to understand just what we are up to.

The transformational scheme of binary oppositions which Aycock displays could be summarised as in Figure 1. But in claiming that, if we add in the details which Aycock mentions, Jesus and Cain are revealed as hero-figures which are 'precise structural analogues of one another' Aycock leaves out a crucial step in the argument. The stories of Jesus and of Cain may be analogues but, at least at the first level of transformation, they are inverse.

Cain founds a city of mortal men; Jesus founds a Church of immortal men. Sinful Cain becomes tied to God (is redeemed) through the sacrifice of Abel. Jesus is tied to God from the start; he redeems sinful mankind by submitting to sacrifice by the sinners who are redeemed.

In the patterning of these two stories Jesus is the equivalent of Abel rather than of Cain.

It may seem hardly polite to start off by criticising my colleague's contribution in this way. But I do so because my comment enlarges Aycock's thesis without destroying it. This is an important point. Structuralist analyses do not yield solutions which are 'right' or 'wrong'; they

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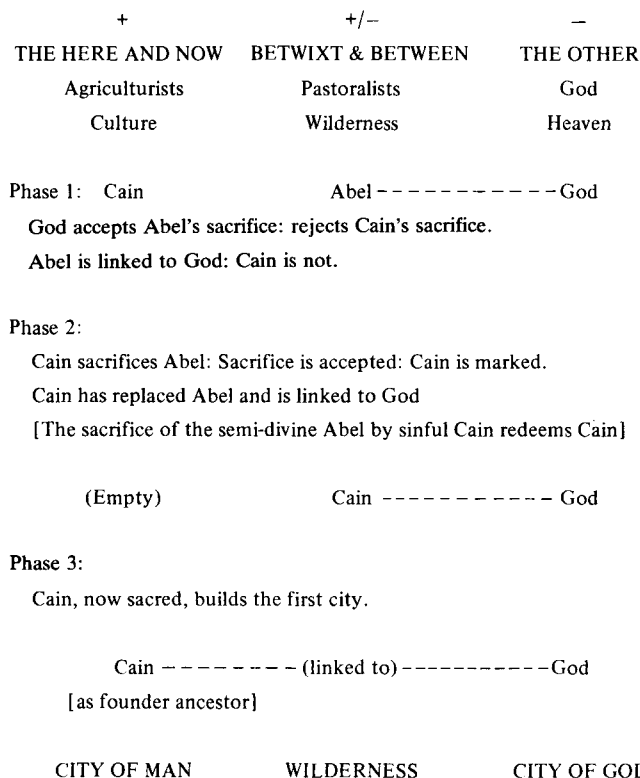
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Figure 1. The structure of the Cain and Abel story.

demonstrate the existence of partial patterns. This provokes us to ask: is this significant or is it trivial? Further analysis will then reveal a more elaborate or perhaps a rather different pattern and we are faced with the same question as before: does this give us 'insight' or does it not?

There is no end point at which the analyst can say: 'there, I understand it all'. At best he can simply feel that he understands rather more than when he started out. The whole process is dialectical; a provisional enquiry which then provokes further enquiry. What is revealed is not the truth but the basis for looking at familiar materials in a new way.

Of an earlier paper of mine the distinguished Judaic scholar Jacob Neusner wrote: 'Leach will show us in stories we have read many times, meanings and dimensions we did not know were there. When we follow his analysis, we realize that we have been blind. For he shows us what it means to see.'⁶ My hope is that some readers at least will feel the same way about the essays in the present collection, though I should add that

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the earlier part of Chapter 2, because of the circumstances of its original presentation, is not concerned with structuralist analysis at all.

Chapter 4 has also appeared before. The justification for reprinting it is that the 'Proceedings of the Royal Anthropological Institute', in which it originally appeared, only ran for a few years and is now extinct. Various would-be readers have complained that it is hard to obtain.

In the collection as a whole there is inevitably some instability of style and also a certain amount of repetition. My two RAI addresses (Chapters 4 and 3) and Dr Aycock's two papers presuppose an audience of anthropologists; Chapter 2 was prepared for a gathering of Bible scholars; Chapter 3 was a contribution to a joint seminar of literary critics and theologians; only in the last case did I prepare my text with an eye on the fact that the various pieces now assembled would all be printed in one place.

Despite this diversity of origin I have endeavoured throughout to keep the interests of the general reader in mind. We are not addressing ourselves to specialists though I hope that I have included enough scholarly apparatus in the footnotes to show my non-anthropological professional colleagues that I am not wholly ignorant of the fields in which they work.

Throughout the book quotations from the Bible are ordinarily given in the language, chapter and verse of the 1611 'King James Version'. I have however consulted a variety of other versions. In a few cases I make reference to translations employed in the New English Bible of 1970.

Notes

- 1 Lévi-Strauss, C. 1955 'The Structural Study of Myth' in *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 68. No. 270
- 2 Lévi-Strauss, C. 1958 'La Geste d'Asdiwal' in *Annuaire 1958–59 École pratique des hautes études. Section des sciences religieuses*. Paris. pp. 3–43. Latest English version in C. Lévi-Strauss *Structural Anthropology: Volume II* (London: Allen Lane) pp. 146–197
- 3 Leach, Edmund 1969 *Genesis as Myth and Other Essays* (London: Cape)
- 4 Leach, Edmund 1961 'Lévi-Strauss in the Garden of Eden: an examination of some recent developments in the analysis of myth' *Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences Series 2*. Vol. xxiii No. 4. pp. 386–96
- 5 Lévi-Strauss, C. 1964–71 *Mythologiques*: 4 Volumes. (Paris: Plon)
- 6 Neusner, J. 1979 *The Talmud as Anthropology*, Annual Samuel Friedland Lecture, The Jewish Theological Seminary of America

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2 *Anthropological approaches to the study of the Bible during the twentieth century**

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Old Testament stories were retained and rewritten because a small group of Jews ... believed themselves to be the sole survivors of the Hebrew people whose glorious traditions ran back into the dim past. They re-used the old stories, adapted them in up-to-date preaching to the needs of their own age ... There is a human reason why each story and saying was written and retained when so much was discarded and lost, and it is much more important in biblical study to try to discover why a story was told or a saying recorded than to question its date, origin or historicity.

J. N. Schofield, *Introducing Old Testament Theology*
(London: SCM Press Ltd [1964] pp. 9–10).

I had better say right away that my whole contribution will be an exercise in self-justification and that it will be very restricted in scope.

I am going to talk about anthropologists who have had the temerity to write about the Bible and *not*, to any significant extent, about biblical scholars who have, in one way or another, made use of the writings of anthropologists. Furthermore I am going to talk almost exclusively about British anthropologists rather than about American or French or Dutch anthropologists, or whatever. And finally I am going to take a very narrow view of what constitutes anthropology.

I am adopting this restricted position simply because there is too much ground to cover. I am fully aware that thereby I shall leave out much that some members of my audience may feel is both relevant and important. For example, I shall not be referring to the semiotic studies of biblical texts which have been inspired by Claude Chabrol and Louis Marin,¹ though in fact some of their work comes much closer to my own than does that of any of the British authors whom I shall mention. I shall also be ignoring the American counterpart of these French studies, most of which has appeared in the periodical *Semeia*.² My justification is simply

*Lecture given as a 'Centennial Address' to the meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature meeting in Dallas, Texas, 6 November 1980 (I am indebted to the organisers of the meeting for permission to reprint the text of the address. E.R.L.) It is printed in Tucker, G. M. and Douglas A. Knight (ed.) 1982 *Humanizing America's Iconic Book*, Chico, Calif., Scholars Press.

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that the authors concerned are specialists in semiotics rather than anthropology.

Those who wish to explore some of the facets of my theme which I myself have neglected may find it useful to take a look at Rogerson (1978). Rogerson is not himself an anthropologist and his understanding of contemporary anthropological argument is, in places, decidedly mixed up. But he has read quite widely in parts of the relevant anthropological literature which I shall be ignoring in this lecture. Moreover, he makes a serious, if not wholly satisfactory, attempt to pin down the areas where anthropologists and biblical scholars get into a mutual tangle by using a similar terminology to denote quite different ideas.

I must confess however that I myself found Rogerson's book somewhat depressing, for whereas he ends by saying that 'some sort of new dialogue between Old-Testament experts and anthropologists is opening up,'³ his book makes it all too clear that, so far, there has been absolutely no mutual communication between the two sides. And here Rogerson himself is just as much at sea as are those of his theological colleagues whom he is seeking to inform.

My own professional competence is that of a social anthropologist trained in the British functionalist tradition established by Malinowski in the 1920s. As part of that tradition I use the word *myth* to mean 'a sacred tale about past events which is used to justify social action in the present'.⁴ By this definition a myth is *true* for those who believe in it; whether it is also true in a matter-of-fact, empirical, sense is irrelevant and would, in any case, usually be very difficult to demonstrate.

Many people, including fellow anthropologists, use the word myth in quite a different sense. They assume that the essence of myth is that it is 'mythical', that is to say that it is *untrue* in any rational matter-of-fact sense. They therefore restrict the category to stories which contain palpably supernatural happenings: animals who talk, men who fly like birds, supernatural births and so on. Claude Lévi-Strauss, who has written more about myth than any other living anthropologist, appears to use the word in this way, though I am not aware that he has ever actually said so.

For my present purpose the distinction between the use of myth to mean 'a sacred tale' on the one hand and 'a fabulous impossible tale' on the other is very important. In the 'sacred tale' version, which is my own usage, the whole of the Bible is myth for Christians and the whole of the Old Testament is myth for Jews. In the 'fabulous impossible tale' version the scope of Biblical myth is not only much more restricted but also open to dispute. Even devout Christians would now

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presumably agree that the Genesis Garden of Eden story is a myth in this latter, 'fabulous-impossible', sense, but there could be wide disagreement, even among the faithful, as to how to classify the New-Testament stories of Christ's Nativity.

When I declare that 'the whole of the Bible is myth' *in the sacred tale sense* I am merely stating the obvious, but I am also drawing attention to the nature of the canon. The Bible, as we have it today, is an edited compendium of a great variety of documents of differing origin and differing date. The sacredness of the corpus derives from the fact that it is these documents and these documents alone that the faithful are required to accept. In the process of editorial selection many other similar documents, some of which are known to us, were rejected. In other words, the canon is what it is because the final editors of the period 200 B.C. to A.D. 200 felt that these particular documents hang together in some special way.

This hanging together is crucial. It is what the books of the Old Testament say as a collectivity which makes it a sacred tale for the Orthodox Jew; it is what both the Old and the New Testament say when taken together as a single collectivity which makes the whole Bible a sacred tale for the believing Christian.

Now what these two canons say as collectivities is something very different from what the individual documents contained in the two canons say if they are read piecemeal. As an anthropologist concerned with myth in the 'sacred tale' sense, my interest is with the totalities rather than with the component parts of which the totalities are made up. Since a great deal of traditional-style biblical scholarship has precisely the opposite objective of taking the present-day collectivity apart in order to demonstrate what were its original component elements, communication between anthropologists of my sort and biblical scholars proper is often very difficult.

The difficulties are of many different kinds but one of them relates to the problems of how we should distinguish between *myth*, in the sense that I have defined, and *history*.

A countless number of events have occurred in the historical past. It should be obvious that even in the most favourable circumstances we can only know a tiny fraction of such past events. It should also be obvious that, for the most part, what we thus know is a matter of fortuitous accident rather than human planning. But though we may not know much about the past we can invent a great deal.

Down to about 1930 most anthropologists considered that this was their main task; they were pre-historians. Their role was to concoct plausible guesses about how grand-scale history had worked itself out.

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Some anthropologists still operate within this convention. I myself do not. It seems to me that it is just as difficult to reconstruct the past as it is to predict the future.

Furthermore, since I totally reject all those forms of historicism which assume that the future must necessarily follow the same kind of trajectory that has been patterned by the past, I regard the invention of conjectural history as a total waste of time. The latter part of this personal credo has only an indirect bearing upon what I am going to say but you need to keep it in mind.

Now if we consider the Bible as a totality, as I urge you to do, it is quite clearly a sacred tale and not a history book. But, if you take the totality to pieces after the fashion of orthodox biblical scholarship, it is equally clear that substantial parts of it are written 'as if' they were history, and the majority of biblical scholars seem to have persuaded themselves that these are, in fact, records of 'true' history.

There is disagreement about just where legend ends and history begins but mostly it seems to be assumed that Moses (probably), and Saul and David (certainly), were real people who actually existed in the period 1250 to 1000 B.C., that is to say 500 years before the age of Herodotus and Thucydides.⁵

Personally I find this most implausible. There is no archaeological evidence for the existence of these heroes or for the occurrence of any of the events with which they are associated. If it were not for the sacredness of these stories their historicity would certainly be rejected. Classical scholars do not now believe that the Trojan War was an historical event or that the kind of society depicted in the Iliad and the Odyssey ever actually existed; still less do they imagine that Achilles and Hector and Agamemnon and the rest were real people of flesh and blood. But Saul and David were reputedly their contemporaries.

In this regard my own position is one of extreme scepticism. If we ignore the rather small number of named biblical characters whose existence is fully vouched for by independent evidence, and by that I mean archaeology rather than Josephus, I regard all the personalities of biblical narrative, both in the Old Testament and in the New, as wholly fictional. They are there because they fill a particular role in the totality of the sacred tale and not because they actually existed in history. And even if a few of them did have some kind of real-life existence this fact is quite irrelevant.

If a named individual 'X' 'really existed' so also did thousands of other individuals whose names we do not know. What interests us about 'X' is the role he is made to play in the sacred tale; this interest is not affected by the question of historicity. In Tolstoy's novel *War and Peace* quite a