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978-1-107-40557-8 - Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship

Kevin J. Vanhoozer

Excerpt

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Introduction: What is remythologizing?

At the heart of Christian theology, as an intellectual activity, there lies the continual interpenetration of dramatic and ontological.¹

The apostle Peter distinguishes the gospel from “cleverly devised myths” by rooting the former in eyewitness testimony (2 Pet. 1:16). He bases his case for the majesty of Jesus on the “voice borne from heaven” that accompanied Jesus’ transfiguration: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (2 Pet. 1:17). *Ear-witness* testimony thus figures prominently too: “we heard this voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have the prophetic word made more sure” (2 Pet. 1:18–19).²

In combining the prophecies of Isaiah 42:1 and Psalm 2:7, the voice from heaven identifies Jesus by referring to his ordination as Suffering Servant and coronation as Son of God. Peter explains this remarkable piece of theologizing that links suffering to sovereignty by noting that “no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (2 Pet. 1:21). The passage thus alludes, in a pericope-sized nutshell, to the work of Father, Son, and Spirit in the history of redemption from Israel to Jesus Christ. Yet what stands out is the voice from heaven.³

1. MacKinnon, *Themes in Theology*, p. 234.

2. See also R. H. Gundry’s suggestion that the Word christology of the Fourth Gospel is a variation on the Synoptic accounts of the transfiguration. The glory associated with Jesus’ face in those accounts is reworked into Jesus as the “heard Word” (“How the Word in John’s Prologue Pervades the Rest of the Fourth Gospel. Addendum I: The Transfiguration of Jesus According to John: Jesus as the Heard Word,” in *The Old Is Better: New Testament Essays in Support of Traditional Interpretations* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005], p. 360).

3. The critical dispute over the place of 2 Peter in the canon does not affect my argument, as the accounts of the voice from heaven occur in Matthew 17:1–8, Mark 9:2–8, and Luke 9:28–36 as well.

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Is there a speaking subject up there? If those to whom electrical switches and elective surgery are a matter of course find it hard to believe in miracles, how much more difficult is it for those who have explored space and mapped the human genome to believe in a voice from heaven? Hans Urs von Balthasar identifies the key question: “whether God *can* enter a drama that takes place in the world, and play a part in it, without becoming mythological.”⁴ In the light of the prevailing twenty-first-century Western plausibility structures, many may be tempted to view the story of Jesus as a *poorly* designed myth.

Human beings are inveterate producers and consumers of myths. Inasmuch as stories help order and provide meaning to human life, myths – and other forms of the imagination, including narratives and metaphors – are the currency we live by.⁵ Some myths die hard. John Robinson would no doubt view biblical language about a voice from heaven as contributing to the (for him) idolatrous notion that God is “up there” or “out there.” Is theism necessarily mythological?

Paul Tillich contrasted God as a supreme being with the notion of God as Being-itself. To think of God as one being, albeit the highest, among many is to espouse a mythological, supernatural picture of the God-world relation. Both Robinson and Tillich consider the idea that God is a supreme being – like us, only much, much bigger and better – a bogey to scare young theologians. James Morrow’s novel, *Towing Jehovah*,⁶ illustrates what they fear is the consequence of taking biblical language too literally. The story begins with the angel Gabriel (feathers and all) appearing to a sea captain in 1992, announcing the death of God and the subsequent fall of his two-mile-long corpse into the ocean. The captain receives an angelic commission to tow God to the Arctic, where the frozen body will float at rest inside a hollowed-out iceberg. The captain’s ship, an Ultra Large Crude Carrier chartered by the Vatican, is an apt and ironic choice: it takes a supertanker to tow the supreme being.

The various characters in the book respond differently to the news of God’s demise. Father Ockham, a Jesuit delegated to represent the

4. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. III: *Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), p. 505.

5. See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

6. (New York/London: Harvest Book, 1994).

Vatican in the flotilla, initially ponders the cosmological implications: “Was He truly gone, or had His spirit merely vacated some gratuitous husk? ... Did heaven still exist? ... What of the Son and the Ghost?”⁷ Later he forms a theory as to why God died: “In my gut I feel it was an empathic death. He died from a bad case of the twentieth century.”⁸ Towards the end of the book, however, he formulates a different hypothesis, arguing that God willed himself out of existence out of love for humanity: “He realized our continued belief in Him was constraining us, holding us back” – a theory to which a Cardinal sneeringly responds, “Oh, *that* old argument.”⁹

A perennial problem: myth, *mythos*, and metaphysics

To speak well of God one must first let God present himself. To move from faith to understanding, however, one must think through the implications of God’s self-presentation. What must God be like in order to do what the Bible depicts him as doing with words: creating, commanding, promising, consoling?

Myth

The term “myth” typically inspires no more confidence today than it did in New Testament times, not least because it is notoriously difficult to define.¹⁰ The term oscillates uneasily between “foolish delusion” and “vehicle of higher truth.” It often carries pejorative connotations, especially among those who are looking for some form of scientific rationality or historical truth. The *Concise OED*, for example, lists as its first definition “a traditional narrative usu. involving supernatural or imaginary persons and embodying popular ideas on natural or social phenomena.” George Caird notes that

7. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 362. By “that old argument,” the Cardinal is referring to positions similar to that of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who claims that God “allows himself to be edged out of the world” in order to teach us “that we must live as men who can get along very well without him” (cited in Robinson, *Honest to God*, p. 39).

10. Raymond Williams traces two twentieth-century streams of usage, positive and negative, and concludes that the term “is now both a very significant and a very difficult word” (*Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. edn. [New York: Oxford University Press, 1983], p. 212).

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the sense of myth as sheer fiction always lurks in the background of the discussion, and that this is “the only sense the word has in the New Testament.”¹¹

Myths are “sacred stories” or “stories of the gods” that characteristically take place in sacred space-time (i.e., apart from the realm of ordinary history) and typically involve superhuman speech and acts.¹² Early modern anthropologists saw myth as “primitive” – “a prescientific attempt to explain natural phenomena.”¹³ Yet ancient myths, such as Plato’s famous myth of the cave, also serve as vehicles of universal truth. From yet another perspective, Carl Jung argues that myths articulate archetypal patterns that have a social function, expressing the collective unconscious. Myths may therefore have an explanatory function (as stand-in for science), an illustrative function (as stand-in for philosophy), or a communal function (as foundation narrative that shapes a group’s identity).

Rudolf Bultmann distinguishes between three senses of myth in the New Testament’s message concerning the event of Jesus Christ: (1) a cosmological sense that attempts to explain the cosmos in terms of a triple-decker picture, with the heavens “above” and hell “below”; (2) an existential sense that communicates universal truths concerning human being; and (3) a kerygmatic sense that announces an act of God: “Bultmann speaks in turn as a man of science, an existential philosopher, and a hearer of the word.”¹⁴

Bultmann believed that men and women who accept modern science *cannot* also accept the biblical accounts of God’s acts. The biblical reports of divine action cannot literally mean what they say if the scientific account of nature is true. While some theologians and scientists are currently busy trying to demonstrate the compatibility of science and religion, others agree with Bultmann and sharply

11. G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), p. 219.

12. C. S. Lewis, however, defines myth as stories that *might have happened* and that have value independent of their embodiment in any literary work (*An Experiment in Criticism* [Cambridge University Press, 1961], ch. 5).

13. E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (1871), as referenced by Caird in *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, p. 220.

14. Paul Ricoeur, “Preface to Bultmann,” in Don Ihde (ed.), *The Conflict of Interpretations*, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), p. 393. Roger Johnson describes these three senses as the Enlightenment, existentialist formulations and *Religionsgeschichtliche* respectively, (*The Origins of Demythologizing* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974], p. 30). Johnson argues that the first and third senses dominate Bultmann’s work after 1934 (p. 35).

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distinguish between scientific and mythic (religious) thought.¹⁵ Neither option, however, does justice to biblical descriptions of divine action or to the idea that God is not merely a cause but a purposive agent. The kerygma is good news about what God has done, not a poetic way of expressing existential self-understanding. Between the theoretical rationality of science and the existential understanding of myth, then, lies the practical reason of personal agents.¹⁶ The latter is the special province of *mythos*.

Mythos

It is important to distinguish what Aristotle calls *mythos* from the aforementioned modern senses of “myth.” Remythologizing pertains first and foremost to *mythos*, not myth. *Mythos* is Aristotle’s term for dramatic plot: a unified course of action that includes a beginning, middle, and end. Drama “is essentially an imitation not of persons but of actions and life, of happiness and misery. All human happiness or misery takes the form of action; the end for which we live is a certain activity, not a quality.”¹⁷ *Mythos* concerns what people do and what happens to them; it is a story that concerns doers (agents) and the done-to (sufferers).

Myth and *mythos* diverge in at least two important respects, with regard to both content and form. First, as to content, *mythos* pertains to this-worldly rather than other-worldly events, to ordinary as well as heroic stories and histories. Second, the meaning and truth of *mythos* are linked to the way the action is rendered. Unlike myths that hide kerygmatic kernels under disposable literary husks, the

15. As an example of the latter tendency, see Donald Wiebe, *The Irony of Theology and the Nature of Religious Thought* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991). William Schweiker rightly criticizes Wiebe’s dichotomy thesis (borrowed from Lévy-Bruhl) for failing to provide a place for practical reason and its distinctive truth claims: “Practical reasoning, it seems, is reducible for him to a subset of mythic thinking, or it must be identified with scientific rationality as he understands it” (Review of Wiebe in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 60 [1992], p. 763).

16. Practical reason (Aristotle’s *phronesis*) pertains to deliberating well about what to do in particular situations. Practical reason concerns right (i.e., fitting) action. I shall argue below that remythologizing is precisely a matter of thinking according to the manifold forms of biblical discourse (i.e., *communicative* action), forms that cannot always be easily translated into one kind of discourse or one kind of rationality (i.e., scientific).

17. Aristotle, *Poetics*, in Richard McKeon (ed.), *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), p. 1461.

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form and content of *mythos* are integrally linked.¹⁸ It is precisely for this reason that Ricoeur seizes upon *mythos* as the unique means for depicting or “configuring” personal identity, for who we are as persons (content) is inseparable from what we say and do – from how we realize our potential for communicative agency (form). The following account of *mythos* builds on several of Ricoeur’s seminal insights that modify Aristotle’s traditional understanding.

In the first place, Ricoeur calls attention to the way in which *mythos* and *mimesis* work together in Aristotle to make sense of what persons do in time. In Plato, *mimesis* (imitation) had a more meta-physical sense whereby things imitate Ideas as works of art imitate things. In Aristotle’s *Poetics*, however, what gets imitated is a matter not of being but of *doing*: action. *Mythos* is a mode of discourse that configures human action so as to create a form of wholeness (i.e., a unified action) out of a multiplicity of incidents. “Poetics” refers to how authors create meaningful wholes (viz., stories) that allow one to make sense of what would otherwise be a chaotic jumble of unrelated events. A dramatic plot or *mythos* thus “configures” a totality of time out of a succession of events. Indeed, Ricoeur suggests that the *mythos* of drama is to time what the icon of painting is to space.¹⁹ Whereas Ricoeur focuses on the way in which *mythos* configures human action, however, the present work deploys the notion in order to understand divine action.²⁰

Second, Ricoeur treats *mythos* primarily as an operation – emplotment – rather than as a literary genre or structure.²¹ Specifically, he calls attention to *mythos* as a cognitive instrument. Emplotment is a unique and indispensable means of making sense of a phenomenon – a course of human action; human freedom – before which scientific explanation can only shrug its shoulders. As such, *mythos* offers an “intelligibility appropriate to the field of *praxis*, not

18. This is similar to the point that Hans Frei makes about the irreducibility of the narrative form. See his *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

19. Ricoeur, “Pour une théorie du discours narratif,” in D. Tiffeneau (ed.), *La Narrativité* (Paris: Centre National de Recherche Scientifique, 1980), p. 54.

20. I suggested in an earlier work that the Gospel narratives of Jesus’ life are schemas not only of time but of eternity. See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), ch. 8.

21. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. I, tr. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 31.

that of *theoria*.”²² The present work develops Ricoeur’s suggestion in a communicative direction: the *mythos* of Jesus Christ renders intelligible the field of triune communicative praxis.

Third, and perhaps most controversially, whereas Ricoeur tends to associate *mythos* with the narrative form only, I shall use the term more broadly to refer to *all the ways in which diverse forms of biblical literature represent, and render, the divine drama*. Here I take up Martha Nussbaum’s point that the forms – the *how* of poetic discourse – contribute to the content or *what* of discourse. What Nussbaum says of novels and philosophy applies to the Bible and theology as well: “The very qualities that make the novels so unlike dogmatic abstract treatises are, for us, the source of their *philosophical* interest.”²³ *Mythos* in its broadest sense therefore stands for all those forms of discourse that may be employed in the course of a story or drama to render an agent or patient, a unified action or a unified passion.

Mythos is thus a form of what Nicholas Wolterstorff calls, in the context of aesthetics, a means of “world-projection.”²⁴ In the hands of an author or artist, *mythos* serves as a cognitive tool to project a sense of the world as an ordered whole. While Ricoeur’s focus is on narrative and Wolterstorff’s on the work of art, the focus of the present work is on the various ways in which the biblical *mythos* renders human and divine reality by depicting persons in act and at rest, speaking and silent. To speak of the biblical *mythos* is to indicate that complex dramatic whole that renders not only the action but also reality of God. As such, *mythos* has theo-ontological significance. God, like being, may be said in many ways.²⁵

The biblical *mythos* is both one and many. There is one overall plot, namely, the story of God’s self-presentation in the history of Israel and Jesus Christ. Yet God’s unified self-presentation is rendered by many voices speaking in diverse (literary) registers. The many literary forms of the Bible are theologically significant both for what they say (content) and how they say it (discourse). To anticipate: the various voices that make up the canon constitute a dialogue that

22. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

23. Martha Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 29.

24. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), pp. 122–55.

25. As we shall see in ch. 4, this is even more the case when “being” is conceived in terms not of static substance but of dynamic activity.

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is itself a key ingredient in the triune economy of communicative action. Stated differently: the biblical *mythos* is the written form of God's self-presentation. As such, the Bible is the plumb line for right Christian speech about God.

Metaphysics

Can one by doing metaphysics find out God? Not if by metaphysics one means speculation that begins "from below," with human experience, and seeks through a process of incremental and inferential reasoning to arrive at conclusions about what God "above" must be like. The problem with "totalizing" metaphysics is the underlying assumption that there is one set of categories, accessible to unaided human reason, which applies both to the world and to God, created and uncreated reality. This invariably leads to ontotheology, a unified system of thought that employs concepts such as Supreme Being or Unmoved Mover as conceptual stopgaps to prevent infinite metaphysical regress.²⁶ Call it "bad" metaphysics: bad, because it imposes a system of categories on God without attending to God's own self-communication.²⁷

Metaphysics, understood as the study of reality beyond mere appearances, has in modern times more the fragrance of *logos* than of *mythos* about it; its privileged forms are conceptual, not dramatic. To be sure, some thinkers have breached the "dividing wall of hostility" that for centuries has separated poets (and dramatists) from philosophers.²⁸ Philosophers of science have acknowledged the reality-depicting capacity of metaphors.²⁹ And the recent rediscovery of narrative is one of the signal contributions of late twentieth-century theology. Still, in some quarters (e.g., analytic theism), proper (i.e., metaphysically robust) God-talk remains a metaphor-free zone,

26. See Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), chs. 1 and 13.

27. The present work employs a "good" metaphysics: good, because it derives its system of categories from the train of God's own communicative action (i.e., theodrama). A "good" metaphysics is thus a descriptive metaphysics – descriptive of the biblical *mythos*, together with its presuppositions and implications.

28. See especially, Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, ch. 1, and, from a different angle, the works of the later Heidegger and Jacques Derrida.

29. See, for example, Mary Hesse, *Models and Analogies in Science* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1966).

while other neighborhoods, especially those influenced by postmodern Continental philosophy, routinely prohibit metaphysics. By and large, *mythos* and *logos* remain segregated.

Matthew Levering's *Scripture and Metaphysics* sets out to overturn the opposition "between scriptural and metaphysical modes of articulating truth,"³⁰ not least because metaphysics is often required if faith is to attain understanding of the implications of biblical texts, particularly when these concern the reality of God. Unfortunately, the opposition between *mythos* and *logos* has been exacerbated by recent Trinitarian theologians who see more discontinuity than continuity between the metaphysical attempt to lay bare the ontological and causal joints of reality and the scriptural account of God in dramatic and narrative form.³¹ Some among these theologians have repudiated Greek metaphysics; some have espoused modern forms of metaphysics (e.g., relationality); others have rejected metaphysics altogether; and still others try to reform metaphysics along biblical lines, as does the theodramatic version set forth in these pages.

An interesting case in point of the first tendency is Jack Miles's Pulitzer prize-winning book, *God: A Biography*.³² Miles sets out to write the life of God the protagonist – the *protos agonistes* or "first actor" – of the Hebrew Bible. The result is a "theography."³³ Miles attends to the development of the *mythos*, a dramatic plot that includes narrative, speech spoken by God, speeches addressed to and about God, and silence. Though he distinguishes (literary) criticism from (historical) scholarship and proposes to focus on the first, he ends up suggesting that "God" is in fact an amalgam of several divine personas: "The equation is creator (*Yahweh/’elohim*) + cosmic destroyer (*Tiamat*) + personal god (*god of ...*) + warrior (*Baal*) = GOD, the composite protagonist

30. Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 1.

31. For an earlier statement of a similar problem, see Brian Wicker, *The Story-Shaped World. Fiction and Metaphysics: Some Variations on a Theme* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1975). Wicker undermines the strict dichotomy between story (*mythos*) and religious belief by suggesting that there is a metaphysics of *mythos* as well as a rhetoric of belief (p. 214). Thomas Aquinas and other theists "had a highly developed sense of the *analogical*, but a corresponding underdeveloped sense of the *metaphorical* uses of words" (p. 8). Levering similarly believes that a healthy Trinitarian theology requires "that theologians reject the alleged opposition between scriptural and metaphysical modes of reflection, without conflating the two modes" (*Scripture and Metaphysics*, p. 2).

32. (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

33. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

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of the Tanakh.”³⁴ According to Miles, then, the protagonist of the Hebrew Bible is a God with multiple personalities.

Theology must go further than geography: theology must explore the *logos* of the *graphe* or *mythos* of God. Miles’s biography of God illustrates the *formal* (i.e., hermeneutical) problem posed by the apparently mythical elements in the biblical narrative (e.g., the divine voice coming from heaven): how to move from the setting forth in speech to the ordering of reason, from the literary rendering to the reality rendered, from “myth” to metaphysics. At its best, the practice of metaphysical questioning is a work of faith seeking understanding and “constitutes a spiritual exercise that purifies from idolatry those who would contemplate the self-revealing God.”³⁵ Be that as it may, given the complex relations between myth, *mythos*, and metaphysics, the question still stands: how may we think and speak well of God?

Whether we are analyzing the concept of *ens perfectissimum* or narrating the story of Jesus, we must rely on what MacKinnon calls a “system of projection” in order to speak of what transcends space-time human experience.³⁶ Theologians have employed numerous conceptual schemes to speak of God (e.g., Platonism, existentialism); the nagging worry is that such schemes simply foist our categories and interests onto the subject matter, thus revealing more about the cultural-historical conditioning of humanity than about divinity.

MacKinnon wonders whether Christian theology may be “much more than it realizes the victim of the victory won in the person of Plato by the philosophers over the poets, and in particular the tragedians.”³⁷ Yet Christianity is less about philosophies and systems of moralities than it is about how God’s particular words and acts in the history of Israel converged climactically in the history of Jesus Christ. This book conducts a MacKinnon-inspired thought experiment, adopting as its system of projection the biblical *mythos*, together with the concrete forms of discourse that comprise it, as well as the categories implicit in the theodramatic action to which

34. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

35. Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics*, pp. 9–10.

36. MacKinnon, “The problem of the ‘system of projection’ appropriate to Christian theological statements,” *Explorations in Theology* 5 (London: SCM Press, 1979), pp. 70–89.

37. MacKinnon, *Borderlands of Theology and Other Essays* (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1968), p. 100.