

I

Introduction

Mythological monsters and deities, though not always in their full mythic garb, haunt the pages of the Hebrew Bible. For instance, it is said that God “crushed the heads of Leviathan” in a time long ago (Ps 74:14 NRSV);¹ that the mighty waters continue to “lift up their roaring” in defiance against God the king (Ps 93:3 NRSV); and that, one day, God “will kill the dragon that is in the sea” (Isa 27:1 NRSV). Interestingly, a great many of the myth fragments found in the Hebrew Bible, like the ones mentioned, reference sea deities and sea monsters and God’s conflict with them. These references and allusions to the sea myth – which recount the story of divine conflict with and ultimate triumph over aquatic forces of evil and disorder – have understandably fueled curiosity and concern about the relationship between the Hebrew Bible and myth in general and between the sea myth and biblical literature in particular, giving rise to an uninterrupted stream of scholarly production since before Hermann Gunkel’s *Schöpfung und Chaos* in 1895 into the present.²

¹ Translations of the Hebrew are my own, unless otherwise noted.

² Herman Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit: Eine religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung über Gen 1 und Ap Job 12*. mit Beiträgen von Heinrich Zimmern (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1895). English translation of the 1921 2nd ed., *Creation and Chaos in the Primeval Era and the Eschaton: A Religio-Historical Study of Genesis 1 and Revelation 12* (trans. K. William Whitney Jr.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006). Questions remain whether Gunkel derived the main idea of his seminal work from T. K. Cheyne or George A. Barton. On this, see W. G. Lambert, “A New Look at the Babylonian Background of Genesis,” in “I Studied Inscriptions from before the Flood”: *Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1–11* (ed. Richard S. Hess and David Toshio Tsumura; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 96–113. In any case, George A. Barton (“Tiamat,” *JAOS* 15 [1893]: 1–27) conducted the first

2 *Myth, History, and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible*

Over the past century or so, scholars have put forth diverse interpretations to explain the significance of the sea myth to biblical literature and thought. Today, the bias of an older generation of scholars against myth is generally regarded as incommensurate with the importance of myth internal to the Hebrew Bible. Most scholars – though there are significant contrarian voices – have come to agree that it is no longer acceptable to dismiss myth as irrelevant or ornamental to the Hebrew Bible on the ground that myth does not conform to one’s conception of biblical literature as historical or its theology as monotheistic. Rather, more typical now is a less etic and more emic hermeneutic that respects the self-presentation of the text. And the careful work in recent decades concerning myth in the Hebrew Bible has done much to return into our hands a literature that is more ancient and Israelite and less modern and Western.

Despite these developments, however, we have yet to fathom the true depths at which the sea myth courses through the biblical tradition; we have yet to discover that the sea myth may be found at the literary and conceptual foundation of the Hebrew Bible. The enduring legacy of the conceptual bias against myth and the fragmentary nature of references to myth in biblical literature have made it difficult to plumb the reach of the sea myth in the Bible. As noted, it is generally acknowledged that we find shattered fragments of myth in the Hebrew Bible; however, the statement that the Hebrew Bible contains no continuous narrative of the combat myth comparable to the Ugaritic *Baal Cycle* or the Mesopotamian *Enuma Elish* follows quickly and with unexamined certainty. Consider, for example, the recent statement by Debra Scoggins Ballentine: “In our extant literature from Mari and Judah, we do not have lengthy stories about a battle between the warrior deity and sea deity or dragon. Rather, we have references to such a battle in abbreviated form, epitomes or summaries of the conflict and allusions to it, that is, the ‘conflict

comparative study linking biblical sea and sea monsters with those found in *Enuma Elish*. For a brief biography of Gunkel, see Rudolf Smend, “Hermann Gunkel,” in his *From Astruc to Zimmerli: Old Testament Scholarship in Three Centuries* (trans. Margaret Kohl; Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 118–31. Recent publications on the topic include JoAnn Scurlock and Richard H. Beal, eds., *Creation and Chaos: A Reconsideration of Hermann Gunkel’s Chaokampf Hypothesis* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013); Dexter Callender, ed., *Myth and Scripture: Contemporary Perspectives on Religion, Language, and Imagination* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014); and Debra Scoggins Ballentine, *The Conflict Myth and the Biblical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

motif.”³ The result has been a de facto circumscription of the study of myth in the Hebrew Bible to motifs and themes, a limitation present already in Gunkel’s then-pioneering work. This methodological limitation has hampered the study of the structural and narrative imprint of myth on biblical literature. It is time to question the assumption that the Hebrew Bible contains mythic fragments (in the form of themes and motifs) but is not mythic at a deeper structural level.

In this book, I address the interpretative challenge posed by the fragmentary nature of mythic presence in the Bible to the study of the structural impact of myth by proposing, in conversation with a tensive theory of metaphor, a new method for analyzing the influence of myth and its hermeneutical significance. I argue that specific imagery, entire sentences, and crucially also the narrative plot of an entire work can function as a metaphor and, based on this hermeneutical insight, argue that the sea myth is source not only of imagistic – in essential agreement with past scholarship – but also structural metaphors for biblical literature and thought. More specifically, I argue that biblical writers represented creation (Genesis 1), the intervening history of Israel’s exodus (Exodus 14–15) and her experience of exile and return (Deutero-Isaiah), and the eschaton (Isaiah 24–27, Daniel 7) each as unfolding according to the plot, the *muthos*, of sea myths. The hermeneutical implications of this novel and bold thesis are immense: It demonstrates that, far from hostile to myth, biblical literature and thought are more deeply indebted to myth than previously recognized. At the same time, it would be a mistake to conclude that the Hebrew Bible is mythological in the same way that the *Baal Cycle* or *Enuma Elish* are. For, as I explain later in the book, the semiotics of metaphor mediates the relationship of biblical literature and thought to myth. The relationship between the Hebrew Bible and sea myths is metaphorical, which is not to say that it is merely ornamental – but neither is the relationship one of literal equivalence or figural similitude.

THE BIBLE AND MYTH

“Myth,” in popular parlance, is regarded as synonymous with falsehood: “Myth” is not only a fictional story but also a lie whose aim is to deceive.

³ Ballentine, *Conflict Myth*, 14. In light of this observation, Ballentine (*ibid.*, 74) limits the study of myth in the biblical tradition to the “conflict motif,” that is, “epitomes, allusions, references, and imagery pertaining to the victory of a divine warrior over the sea or dragons.”

4 *Myth, History, and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible*

No wonder, then, that Jewish and Christian preachers tend instinctively to distance the Bible from myth and the negative moral judgment that label implies. Just as telling is the charge against Judaism and Christianity, not uncommonly made, that the Scriptures they hold sacred are full of mere myths – naïve and superstitious beliefs of a time long past. These pejorative views of myth are not limited to popular parlance and religious discourse but staunchly persist among biblical scholars as well. Although the prejudicial understanding of myth is no longer predominant in academic circles and is generally recognized to be an inadequate characterization of the role myth plays in the Bible, the wide haze of prejudice continues to distort the perception of biblical scholars to varying degrees. A minority of scholars still labor painstakingly to read out of the Bible myths that ancient authors lovingly wrote in.⁴ Just as pernicious and consequential is the effect prejudice has on an entire population. Most scholars still broach the subject of myth and Bible in town squares, in synagogues and churches, and even in scholarly books from a defensive posture, which bends the discussion imperceptibly but surely toward apology. The old dichotomy that pitted Bible against myth endures.

An older generation of biblical scholars argued that the Hebrew Bible is not innocent to a polemical attitude toward myth and in fact supplies arsenal with which to wage war against myth, namely monotheism and the historical nature of biblical literature.⁵ These scholars offered for consideration, for example, the rhetoric inspired by the monotheistic impulse of ancient Israelite religion against foreign gods and the stories about them. The gifted poet from the exilic period, the mysterious and singular prophet of Deutero-Isaiah, perhaps expressed the core doctrines of the polemic best:

Thus says YHWH, the King of Israel
 And his Redeemer, YHWH of Hosts:
 I am the First, and I am the Last;
 There is no god but me.

(Isa 44:6)

⁴ Perhaps the representative work in this regard in recent years is Rebecca S. Watson's *Chaos Uncreated: A Reassessment of the Theme of "Chaos" in the Hebrew Bible* (BZAW 341; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005). See also the more careful and nuanced work of David Toshio Tsumura, *Creation and Destruction: A Reappraisal of the Chaokampf Theory in the Old Testament* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005).

⁵ For a helpful outline of the history of biblical scholarship on myth up to the time of its publication, see Robert A. Oden, *Bible without Theology: The Theological Tradition and Alternatives to It* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 40–91. More recently, see Ballentine, *Conflict Myth*, 8–13.

Introduction

5

Deutero-Isaiah's battle cry against foreign gods and the accompanying attack on idol worship (44:9–20) – incited, no doubt, by actual idol worship – it may be argued, negate the very possibility of mythological stories. If myth is defined as involving the interaction of multiple deities, as it once was, how could there be myths about YHWH when YHWH stands alone?⁶

Another oft-made argument concerns the biblical insistence on the importance of history to Israelite identity and theology. It has been noted that biblical writers, in contradistinction to other peoples of the ancient Near East, claim that Israel's origin lies in history and, tellingly, not at the center among kings but at the margins among slaves. Coupled with this view, and adding steel to the conviction, is the belief that history is the proper arena for God's redemptive activity. God saves his people Israel in the realm of history, first from Egypt, then from Assyria and Babylon, and still later from the Greeks. Biblical writers, in an ingenious act of inversion, came to understand Israel's origin at the margins of history as the ground for divine chosenness: Marginality became a central tenet of Israelite self-identity, and history of Israel's understanding of God.⁷ Consider, for example, how these themes intermingle in the basic narrative of Exodus–Joshua and the theological summary found in Deuteronomy:

It was not because you are the most numerous of all the people that YHWH set his heart on you and chose you – for you are the smallest of all the people. Rather, it was because YHWH loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors that YHWH brought you out with a strong hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh, the King of Egypt. (Deut 7:7–8)

The Israelites were the smallest of all the people in number and in might; they were oppressed slaves in the land of Egypt. But they were also chosen and beloved of God, Deuteronomy claims, despite or precisely because they were the smallest. And this story of divine promise and human

⁶ The Grimm brothers infamously defined myth as a story about the gods. For a discussion of this issue, see Oden, *Bible without Theology*, 46–50, 53. Michael Fishbane, in his highly erudite work, *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), questions the assumption that monotheism and myth are incompatible (*ibid.*, 3–13). On the complex issue of monotheism and Isaiah, see Nathan MacDonald, “Monotheism and Isaiah,” in *Interpreting Isaiah: Issues and Approaches* (eds. David G. Firth and H. G. M. Williamson; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 43–61.

⁷ On this issue of inversion, see the nuanced discussion by Peter Machinist, “The Question of Distinctiveness in Ancient Israel: An Essay,” in *Ah Assyria . . . : Studies in Assyrian History and Ancient Near Eastern Historiography Presented to Hayim Tadmor* (ed. Mordecai Coogan and Israel Eph'al; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1991), 196–212, esp. 210–12.

6 *Myth, History, and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible*

faithfulness, it is important to remember, is presented as taking place not in the realm of myth but in the mundane world of history. It is there that God keeps promises he made to human beings and defeats historical foes to safeguard a people he chose to love for reasons beyond reason.⁸ That God acts in history and that the story of God and his people Israel unfolds within historical, linear time were understood as an implicit rejection of myth and its cyclical conception of time.⁹ If God acts in history, what need is there for myth?

The widespread prejudice against myth as false, the theologically motivated apologetic bias of scholars against myth, and the reasoned conviction that the Hebrew Bible was by definition free of myth – because the Bible is monotheistic and historical whereas myth is polytheistic and nonhistorical – led to what Robert A. Oden calls “the exile of myth from the Bible” until the 1960s.¹⁰ Since then, thanks to the work of a number of scholars, fewer and fewer scholars today try to reduce the rich complexity of the Hebrew Bible on the question of myth to a simplistic negative position: Myth is peripheral to the biblical tradition, never having penetrated into the historical and theological core of the Hebrew Bible.¹¹ Rather, the majority of scholars now argue that, while history and monotheism are important categories in the Hebrew Bible, the biblical relationship to myth requires a far more nuanced account that is attentive to the long and complex history of composition and to the fact that the Hebrew Bible stems from a culture alien to the modern West. Scholars have come to see that, if the Hebrew Bible is monotheistic, it is not strictly so, or unproblematically historical. Consider, again, our spokesperson for biblical monotheism, Deutero-Isaiah:

Awake, awake, put on strength, Arm of YHWH.
 Awake as in days of old, generations long ago.
 Is it not you, the Hewer of Rahab, the Piercer of Dragon?
 (Isa 51:9)

⁸ See the discussion of God’s irrational and mysterious love for Israel by Jon D. Levenson, “The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism,” in *Ethnicity and the Bible* (ed. Mark G. Brett; Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 1996), 143–69, here 156.

⁹ On this issue, see G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (Studies in Theology, First Series 8; London: SCM, 1952).

¹⁰ Oden, *Bible without Theology*, 45. See the discussion in *ibid.*, 42–52.

¹¹ Oden (*ibid.*, 50–52) identifies two seminal works: Brevard S. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament* (SBT 27; London: SCM, 1962); and Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth, Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973).

Deutero-Isaiah's understanding of God and the world allowed him one moment to declare, "There is no God but YHWH," and in the next to call on YHWH who battles sea dragons. Consider also the widely accepted view that the account of Israel's exodus from Egypt, in particular of Israel's redemption at the Sea (Exodus 14–15), reflects an ancient myth of creation.¹² It is clear that monotheism does not adequately describe the theologies of the Hebrew Bible, or history its richly varied literature.¹³ What more? More recent work has shown that myth contributes positively to a theological representation of reality as the biblical writers saw it.

One example readily demonstrates the inadequacy of the dismissive stance toward myth and the correctness of an emic hermeneutic toward myth. Ugarit was a West Semitic kingdom, located strategically on the Mediterranean coast near modern-day Ras Shamra. This thriving port city was destroyed by the Sea Peoples, a mighty invading force of uncertain, possibly Aegean origin, toward the end of the Bronze Age, at a time that would have paralleled the tribal period in ancient Israel. (The biblical Philistines were among the Sea Peoples.)¹⁴ This misfortune left for students of the ancient Near East a rich record of a vibrant Canaanite culture, rediscovered in 1929. Recovered among the Ugaritic treasure troves is a remarkable myth, commonly known as the *Baal Cycle*, that relates three interrelated stories about the storm deity, Baal, and his struggle against various forces that oppose his kingship, including Yamm, the god of the sea, and Mot, the god of death. The passage of immediate interest comes in the third narrative cycle of the myth where Mot says to Baal:

¹² Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 112–44; Bernard F. Batto, *Slaying the Dragon: Mythmaking in the Biblical Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 102–27.

¹³ On the question of monotheism, see Peter Machinist, "Once More: Monotheism in Biblical Israel," *Journal of the Interdisciplinary Study of Monotheistic Religions* 1 Special Issue (2005): 25–39; Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002). The notion that gods act in history is hardly unique to Israel, as Bertil Albrektson (*History and the Gods: An Essay on the Idea of Historical Events as Divine Manifestations in the Ancient Near East and in Israel* [Lund, Sweden: Gleerup, 1967]) and H. W. F. Saggs (*The Encounter with the Divine in Mesopotamia and Israel* [London: Athlone, 1978]) have forcefully argued. Cross (*Canaanite Myth*), Batto (*Slaying the Dragon*), and others have demonstrated that myth plays an important role in the supposed historical narratives of the Hebrew Bible.

¹⁴ For a brief overview of the history of the Philistines, see Peter Machinist, "Biblical Traditions: The Philistines and Israelite History," in *The Sea Peoples and Their World: A Reassessment* (ed. Eliezer D. Oren; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 53–69; and Lawrence E. Stager, "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World* (ed. Michael D. Coogan; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 90–131, esp. 113–29.

8 *Myth, History, and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible*

When you struck down Litan, the Fleeing Serpent,
 Annihilated the Twisty Serpent,
 The Potentate with Seven Heads,
 The heavens grew hot, they withered.
 (KTU 1.5 I 1-3)¹⁵

The god of death, here at the beginning of his conflict with Baal, refers to a previous battle in which Baal struck down Litan, a sea dragon and the personification of Yamm, the sea god. Directly comparable to this Ugaritic text is a passage from the biblical book of Isaiah:

On that day YHWH will punish,
 With his cruel and great and strong sword,
 Leviathan the fleeing serpent,
 Leviathan the twisting serpent;
 He will kill the dragon that is in the sea.
 (Isa 27:1; see also Ps 74:13-14)

The reference to mythic tropes could not be clearer. The Isaianic writer describes Leviathan, the Hebrew equivalent of Litan, using the same expressions as those used to describe Litan in the *Baal Cycle*. Both Leviathan and the Ugaritic Litan are serpentine foes of the deity of life and order, YHWH or Baal, that twist and turn as they flee from the divine warrior. At the same time, by the subtle introduction of the phrase, “on that day,” and by changing the verbal tense from the past to the future, the biblical writer has changed the tenor of the mythic allusion from one of cosmic recollection to one of eschatological hope. Students of myth are fond of stating that, within the mythic worldview, what happens *in illo tempore* is determinative of reality for all time and especially for the eschaton. So the degree of the Isaianic innovation may be slight, but it is nevertheless deeply significant. Isaiah 27:1 demonstrates the creative and, importantly, the altogether sincere way in which biblical writers could and did use myth to describe the world in which they believed they lived or hoped to live – a world in which YHWH slays sea dragons.

In addition to Isaiah 27:1, scholars have identified numerous other myth fragments in the Hebrew Bible, many that reference or allude to sea monsters and deities. As we will see in the following discussion, these fragments tend to cluster around particular topics (e.g., temple and kingship) and periods (e.g., creation, exodus, exile, and eschaton). And the

¹⁵ Citations from KTU 1.5-6 are from Mark S. Smith, “The Baal Cycle,” in *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry* (ed. Simon B. Parker; SBLWAW 9; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 81-180.

emic and learned studies on these texts and the comparative materials from the past half century have added depth and clarity to our understanding of what and how the biblical writers conceived of those topics and periods.

However, as skillfully and carefully as scholars have read the Hebrew Bible in the light of its mythic heritage, none have yet to fathom the structural depths at which the sea myth lies in the Hebrew Bible and to take stock of the conceptual implications of the presence of myth at that level of biblical literature. The problem has been that of definition and method rising from the legacy of the prejudice against myth. Because myth was rejected as unfit for the Bible largely on conceptual grounds – it is not monotheistic, not historical, not true! – scholarly effort to recover and demonstrate its validity and, indeed, vitality within biblical tradition have tended to focus on its content and function.¹⁶ What are myths about? And what do they do, or what do people do with them? These were and remain the controlling questions. Contributing to this bias toward content and function is the fragmented nature of biblical references to myth, which has made the study of the total form of myth difficult.

The present study aims to address these challenges and difficulties by proposing both an analytical methodology that is more attentive to the structure and form of myth and a flexible hermeneutic that is sensitive to myth's multiple levels of signification to the end of rediscovering the mythic foundation of the Hebrew Bible, which has been long buried under layers of tradition. It will be argued that the Hebrew Bible not only contains mythic fragments but also shorter and longer compositions, from brief psalms to much lengthier compositions, whose very narrative structure is mythic. The Hebrew Bible does not contain sea myths, as has been repeatedly observed, but it contains compositions studded with sea imagery and, what more, structured by the plot of sea myths. That is to say, the sea myth is present in the Hebrew Bible not only as metaphor but also as plot, that is, as *muthos*.

OUTLINE OF THE ARGUMENT

I will first define myth and then propose a method and a hermeneutic commensurate with the definition (Chapter 2). The method will underline

¹⁶ Ballentine (*Conflict Myth*, 2–3) states that the focus on the content and function of myth in the Hebrew Bible reflects a like focus in myth theory more generally.

the narrative quality of myth, an aspect of myth virtually all scholars agree upon, and devise a means of analyzing the influence of myth on the Hebrew Bible at multiple levels of narrative, including at the level of plot. Then, I will introduce a flexible hermeneutic deeply informed by metaphorology as a lens through which to interpret the various ways myth contributes to the semantics of the Hebrew Bible. Next, I will analyze two relatively complete sea myths, the Mesopotamian *Enuma Elish* and the Ugaritic *Baal Cycle*, as an introduction to the language, characters, themes, and plot of the sea myth we find in fragments in the Hebrew Bible (Chapter 3). In the main body of the book, I will focus on the analysis of biblical texts concerning key events within biblical time: creation (Genesis 1), exodus (Exodus 14–15), exile (Isaiah 40–55), and eschaton (Isaiah 24–27, Daniel 7) (Chapters 4–7). The discussion will focus on unveiling the formal and structural influence of the sea myth on the biblical conceptualization and presentation of these periods and on the hermeneutical implications of that influence. I will demonstrate that the rediscovery of the profound structural impact of the sea myth on biblical literature and thought allows us to see heretofore hidden conceptual implications: The sea myth did not only color biblical historiography and theology but also gave shape to its theological and historical imagination as its structuring principle. Finally, I will argue that the sea myth shapes the worldview of the Hebrew Bible (Chapter 8). Biblical writers mapped all biblical time, from the creation to the eschaton, in one way or another, onto the plot of the sea myth. To put it in hermeneutical terms, biblical writers, together and individually, saw the world through the metaphorical lens of the sea myth. They seem to say, together or apart: Today, sea dragons rage in defiance against the God of order and of life; come tomorrow, God will slay the dragons and reign again, as he did in days long ago, over his creation from his stately house. Far from incompatible with salvation history and monotheism, as once thought, we will see that the sea myth is the ocean that bears the islands of biblical literature and thought.

Let us embark.