

MYTHS AND THE SCRIPTUR



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by Hugh Nibley

A student confronted for the first time by classical and Oriental myths that read like reruns of well-known Bible stories—such as the Garden of Eden episode and the Flood—often goes into a sort of shock, emerging from which he announces to family and friends that he has just discovered a fact of life: the Bible is just a lot of mythology.

Such a conclusion may be the result of a faulty approach to the Bible as well as to the myths. The first thing to do in such a case is to apply cold packs and calm the student down, pointing out to him that such deeply religious writers as Dante and Milton not only were aware of many parallels between Christian and pagan lore and imagery, but also freely mingled the two together in constructing their faith-promoting epics.

Some of the earliest religious writers were edified by the Egyptian phoenix, and the later Fathers of the traditional church diligently catalogued those heathen myths and doctrines that most closely resembled their own beliefs as proof that the gentiles had always pirated the true teachings of the prophets and patriarchs.

The idea was that the Egyptians had picked up a lot of stuff from the Israelites during the latter's sojourn in Egypt, and of course the Egyptians got it all mixed up. Also, since Adam, Enoch, Noah, and Abraham had all left writings behind long before Moses, it was only to be expected that in times of apostasy their teachings, in contaminated form, should fall into profane hands.

There is a good deal to be said for this theory, for the myths and rites of all the ancient world, if traced backward in time, do show a marked tendency to conform more and more to a few basic themes and to converge on a limited geographical area as their apparent

place of origin. But whatever the real explanation, there is a very real relationship between the biblical and the worldwide pagan traditions. There has been no question of proving that such a relationship existed; however, there has always been the neglected task of showing just what that relationship is.

This sensible and promising line of approach to the problem of mythology and Bible has been vigorously rejected by the modern clergy, by professional scholars, and by the literate. Three points bear elaboration here:

1. The clergy, Christian and Jewish alike, have insisted before all else on the absolute originality and uniqueness of the teachings of Christ and Moses respectively, laboring under the strange illusion that if anything coming from any other source shows a close resemblance to those teachings, the claims of the founders to originality and hence to divinity are in serious jeopardy.

A close resemblance between biblical and non-biblical teachings and practices is necessarily a "suspicious resemblance." Theologians have worked out their own theory of communication between God and man, which they have strictly limited as to time and place, allowing no latitude whatever for the possibility of anything occurring that is not accounted for in the Bible.

Indeed, the Fathers of the fourth century insist that we may safely assume that whatever is *not* explicitly mentioned in the Bible could not possibly have occurred—ever or anywhere.

The present-day insistence, especially by the Catholics (though vigorously challenged by the brilliant Jesuit Hugo Rahner), on the absolute originality of Jesus is the result of total rejection of the idea of dispensations. If we know, however, that the gospel has been on the earth from time to time ever since the days of Adam, then it is easily understandable that recognizable fragments of it should be seen floating around in sundry times and places.

But "dispensationism" has long been anathema to the clergy. Hence their hostility to the Apocrypha, their marked coolness to the Dead Sea Scrolls, and their hot denunciation of Joseph Smith for giving the world ancient writings that not only resemble the Bible, but also lay claim to the same inspiration while widening the horizon of God's covenant people to include times

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Original facsimile No. 1, somewhat torn.

and places heretofore undreamed of.

2. Professional scholars, who as a matter of course reject the whole idea of inspired writings, have been as reluctant as the clergy to recognize resemblances between the myths and legends of various parts of the world as being anything but the purest coincidence. The reason for this is departmental pride. For example, a Celtic or Semitic scholar may very well know more about Greek than I do; but if Greek is my one and only field, I may still turn up my nose with a great show of scientific skepticism and technical superiority, and categorically refuse to consider even the possibility of a relationship between documents that I can read and documents that I cannot read.

A dazzling demonstration of this type of precious myopia was the century-long refusal of Egyptologists to acknowledge any connection whatever between Israel and Egypt (they used it as an argument against Joseph Smith) though links and ties confronted them at every turn. When Erman finally showed beyond a doubt that an important piece of Egyptian wisdom literature also turned up in the body of Hebrew wisdom literature, he was almost ashamed of his discovery and never followed it up.

Secular scholars, on the other hand, have been quick to take any resemblance between heathen traditions and the Bible as absolute proof that the scriptures are simply ordinary stuff. The classic example of this was the Babylonian flood story, discovered by Layard in the mid-nineteenth century. It resembled the biblical account closely enough to show without doubt that they were connected, but before any search for the source of either version was undertaken, it was joyfully announced that the biblical account was derived from the Babylonian and was, therefore, a

fraud. The experts were wrong on both points—the Assurbanipal version is really a late redaction, and the duplication of the flood story, instead of weakening it, actually confirms it. Indeed, if there really were a universal flood, it would be very strange if memories of it did not turn up in many places, as in fact they do.

3. Most students learn about ancient myths from teachers and textbooks of literature by way of the late classic poets to whom the myths were little more than literary playthings. A student cannot understand *A Midsummer Night's Dream* without knowing something about the many myths that cluster about the figure of Theseus; but the teacher's only concern is to put the student in the literary picture, and for that a trip to the handbook suffices.

For the student of literature, the myths are but handy aids to the writer, useful devices for achieving decorative or erudite effects, as they were once the paint and gilt of decadent poetry. Since the day of Augustus, the *literati* have had neither the desire nor the equipment to look beneath the surface.

Hardly worth mentioning at this date is the nineteenth century *wissenschaft*, which inevitably explained everything as "nature myth"—primitive man's reaction to his natural environment. The ancient Sophists played around with that idea, naively assuming, as did the scholars and scientists of a hundred years ago, that any reasonable explanation for a phenomenon that they could come up with would necessarily be the true and correct answer—how could it be otherwise if it was a strictly rational conclusion free of all superstition and religion? It was an impressive exhibition of scientific gullibility, but it is not taken seriously today, now that we know a lot more about ancient myths than we did.



A Cretan sacrificial procession.

In recent years the early myths have acquired a new status and dignity. A steady accumulation of comparative studies tying this to that and these to those now crams the stacks of our libraries. Spread out before the mind's eye, their myriad pages interweave into a grandiose texture a vast shadowy tapestry in which we begin to discern the common backdrop of all history and religion.

But the books are still sedulously segregated and widely distributed among the floors and alcoves of the library, and to bring them all together into the one organic whole from which they were taken is a task that will yet tax the capacity of the computer. Meanwhile, we must imagine the pieces of this huge jigsaw puzzle as heaped in separate piles, each representing a special field of study or cultural area, from Iceland to Polynesia. To date no one has taken the trouble to integrate the materials in even one of these hundred-odd piles; and as to taking up the whole lot and relating every pile to every other, so far only a few bold suggestions have come from men of genius like G. Santillana, Cyrus Gordon, or Robert Graves, whose proposals get chilly reception from specialized scholars who can only be alarmed by such boldness and appalled by the work entailed in painting the whole picture.

But such study as has been done shows us that the old myths are by no means pure fiction, any more than they are all history. As the Muses told Hesiod, "We know both how to fib and how to tell the truth," and, as Joseph Smith learned of the Apocrypha, "there are many things contained therein that are true, and there are many things contained therein that are not true" (see D&C 91)—all of which means that we must be very careful in accepting and condemning.

Today formidable task forces of first-rate scholars and scientists are working on the Atlantis problem, whereas a very few years ago anyone careless enough

to express interest in that question was announcing his candidacy for the asylum. The world that "deebrowed Homer" was supposed to have conjured up out of his own head has in our own day taken on flesh and blood, and today we read the novels of Marie Renault or Robert Graves with a feeling that Theseus or Heracles were probably real persons who did at least something like the deeds attributed to them.

If we attempt to untangle the probably historical from the fanciful, we soon discover the common ground on which they meet and fuse: it is *ritual*. Myths arise as attempts to explain ritual doings, the meaning of which has been forgotten—"What mean these stones?" After much discussion back and forth, the consensus now emerges that it is the rites and ordinances that come first. This should have been clear from the outset, since myths and legends are innumerable while the rites and ordinances found throughout the world are surprisingly few and uniform, making it quite apparent that it is the stories that are invented—the rites are always there.

Such indeed has always been the Latter-day Saint position. Adam first performed an ordinance and when asked to give an explanation of it replied that he knew of none "save that the Lord hath commanded me." Then it was that the true explanation came forth, from the mouth of a heavenly instructor.

But if in later times members of some distant tribe having inherited the rites, were asked to explain them, they would have to come up with some invented stories of their own—and that would be myth. It is in their contact with ritual that history and fantasy share a common ground and mingle with each other.

Take the model heroes Theseus and Heracles, for example. We know that they are ritual figures because they repeatedly get themselves involved in well-known ritual situations. Thus each in his wanderings is not once but often the guest of a king who tries to put him to death, forcing the hero to turn the tables and slay the host or his officiating high priest in the manner intended for himself. The nature of this business is now well understood, thanks to hundreds of similar examples collected from all over the world and from every century, making it clear that we have to do with an established routine practice of inviting a noble visiting stranger to be the substitute for the king—on the throne, in the favor of the queen, and finally and all too quickly on the sacrificial altar—thus sparing the king himself the discomfort and inconvenience of being ritually put to death at the end of a sacred cycle of years. This exotic little drama was more than a fiction; it was an actual practice, surviving in some parts of the world down to modern times, but flourishing with particular vigor in the Near East around 1400 B.C., the period to which most of the Greek myths belong.

Since, as we have said, myths are invented or adjusted to explain ritual, the two are naturally identified, and hence any event reported in a myth is customarily dismissed as purely mythical. But that won't do any more, because such strange ceremonial events actually did take place, regularly and repeatedly.



Abraham belongs in the old Procrustes tradition, noting that the wicked Cities of the Plain where Abraham was given a bad time all had in their central market-places ritual beds on which they would sacrifice strangers by stretching them out if they were too short and whacking them off if they were too tall to match the exact length of the bed. This, of course, is the celebrated Procrustes technique, and Beer duly notes that Procrustes' other name, Damastes, has exactly the same meaning as Sodom—the "Forcer" or "Violator." Furthermore, Beer reports early traditions telling how Eleazer, when he went to represent Abraham in those cities, appeared there in the exact form and stature of Abraham and narrowly escaped being put to death on such a bed. So we have Abraham on the altar as another Theseus or Heracles, surprisingly sharing the fate of the great patriarch of the Athenians!

Busiris, an Egyptian king, killing a foreigner on the altar of Zeus.

Ancient civilization was "hierocentric"—centered around the temple. The everyday activities of farming, trade, and war were all ritually bound to the cycle of the year and the cosmos. The great periodic rites were of a dramatic nature, but they were none the less real: a coronation is the purest ceremony, yet for all that it is still real recorded history; a war or migration, though only too real to its victims, would be carried out with strict ritual propriety, according to the religious rules of the game. It is hard for us to understand this ritualizing of history, but once it was a very real thing, and one can still find it miraculously surviving among the Hopi.

So when the ancient myths from all over the world show us the same situations and the same adventures and monsters recurring again and again, we may look upon this endless repetition not as discrediting the historicity of those events and situations but as confirming it. These myths tell about such things happening because that was the type of thing that did happen, and the ritual nature of the event guaranteed that it should happen not once but over and over again.

Nothing illustrates this principle better than the long-despised (by scholars and clergy) and neglected Book of Abraham. Since we have chosen Theseus and Heracles as our archetypes, we may well consider the most spectacular and celebrated stories of how each escaped from his inhospitable host. The last and worst actor that Theseus had to deal with was Procrustes, whose notorious murder bed has become proverbial. Was there such a bed? A century ago the Egyptologist Lefebure noted that there are quite a number of old traditions around the eastern Mediterranean about kings who built cruelly ingenious altars, sometimes mechanically operated, usually of metal, and shaped like beds, on which they would put to death their noble guests.

In 1859, B. Beer pointed out for the first time that



Painting shows Trojans being sacrificed on a funeral pyre.

But Lefebure also notices that Theseus and the bed of Procrustes have a close counterpart in the story of Heracles' most famous and sensational escape. This took place not in Greece nor in Asia, but in Egypt at the court of Pharaoh. The Greeks regarded this as the first and oldest example of the oft-repeated royal sacrifice of an honored visitor, the archetype of them all, and they always located it in Busiris, which actually was, from prehistoric times on down, the most celebrated and venerated center of human sacrifice in Egypt.

Egyptologists do not doubt the reality of a periodic sacrifice of the King of Egypt in early times, or the practice of drafting a substitute (preferably a noble redheaded stranger) to take his place, first on the throne to establish his identity with the king, and then on the altar. So we have a three-way tie-up, and a very firm one, in which Theseus is related to Heracles as an intended victim on the famous "cruel altar" of a desperate and designing king. The same Theseus is also related to Abraham in a like situation by the peculiar name and nature of his evil host Procrustes.

And Abraham in turn is tied to Heracles as the intended but miraculously delivered victim on the altar of a pharaoh of Egypt.

What are we to make of these three heroes? Do their stereotyped adventures cancel each other out? On the contrary, they confirm each other as long as we recognize that the reality that lies behind them is a ritual reality. The Book of Abraham is particularly strong on this point, making much of the awesome ceremonial nature of the doings in which the Patriarch as a young man got himself dangerously involved. We are dealing with well-established routines of which nothing was known a few years ago.

Recently someone has noted that mention of the attempted sacrifice of Abraham is to be found in the once widely read Bayle's *Dictionary* as early as 1732, and suggested that that is where Joseph Smith got the story. But all Bayle says on the subject is that there is a rabbinical tradition "that he was cast by the Chaldeans into a fire, from which he emerged unscathed," with the usual stereotyped observation that the story arose from a misreading of his escape from "Ur," Ur meaning both Ur (the city) and fire.

And that is the whole story—no mention of any altar, let alone a description of deliverance by the angel accompanied by the disastrous earthquake, and other details that any reader of the Book of Abraham knows about. Bayle mentions the rabbis but gives us no references whatever. All this is preserved in early Jewish tradition but was not published to the world before 1859, and the really significant documents did not first see the light until within the past twenty years or so. Actually Joseph Smith's account of Abraham is a highly unoriginal story, one that can be documented from a hundred parallel sources. But nobody in Joseph Smith's day knew anything at all about that story or dreamed of putting Abraham in the mythical picture where he fits so nicely. The story is in every detail an authentic myth, describing an authentic ritual, and as such is to be considered seriously as authentic history.

The bull, ram, and fowl are all sacrificial victims in this Roman sculpture found in Algeria.



Twenty-sixth century B.C. limestone painting found in an Egyptian tomb depicts sacrifice of a goat.



Another example. To the Babylonian flood story and the Greek myth of Deucalion (the Greeks made much of their forefather Iapetus—Japheth), Joseph Smith added yet another tale of the deluge, which he boldly attributed to the Egyptians. It was the story of a great lady who came to Egypt just after the flood, found the land still under water, and "settled her sons in it," establishing the monarch by matriarchal right.

It was not until the second decade of the present century that H. Junker gathered together the widely scattered Egyptian documents that told the same story, preserved by the Egyptians since the beginning of their history by being ritually dramatized every year in a great national water festival. This episode from the Book of Abraham is, like the story of Abraham on the altar, a perfect little vignette, placed with unerring accuracy in its proper ancient setting.

In conclusion, like those rare elements in deserted mines and dumps that miners and prospectors have hitherto ignored but that now promise great riches, the riches of mythology, so poorly worked in the past, still await the serious exploitation made possible by new skills and techniques.

There is no telling what wonders may be brought to light simply by bringing together new combinations and associations of documents already in our possession. But from the few hesitating steps that have been made so far, it already appears that the ancient myths, wherever they turn up, have a tendency to fit together into the same picture, supporting and confirming each other due to the solid ground on which they stand—the reality of ritual, by which history becomes a religious phenomenon—as is markedly the case in the annals of the Pharaohs. This leads us to conclude that there is a serious historical reality behind the myths as a whole, in spite of the adjusting and romancing that sometimes effaces them almost beyond recognition.

The myths thus provide us with a new and powerful tool for searching into hitherto inaccessible recesses of the past. Though the use of this tool has barely begun, it has already given us a useful means of checking up on the revelations of Joseph Smith, showing us that what were thought by some of his critics to be his wildest stories, the purest figments of his imagination, turn out to be mythological commonplaces, overlooked by generations of scholars and clergymen. ■