

MYTHOLOGY AND THE BOOK OF JOB

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Mythological elements in the book of Job have long been recognized by critics who now use the newer literary materials from the Biblical world to confirm their opinion. Our purpose in this investigation is to examine certain key passages to determine where there are unmistakable mythological allusions and to explain how this fits with an evangelical view of the origin of the book and its interpretation.

There is a rather limited number of categories or subjects where mythological terminology is employed. The most frequent usage is when the speaker deals with the forces of nature, the storm, fire, the sea, etc. A second category has to do with creatures cosmic or otherwise. A third with cosmography and a fourth with heathen cultic practices. Only one passage has the latter, which may be dealt with summarily. Job 3:8:

“Let those who curse a day curse it¹
or even those skilled to stir Leviathan.”

Job calls for the enchanters to curse his day. Usually taken as the rousing of the sea monster who, according to primitive notions, was supposed to swallow the sun or moon and bring about an eclipse. This would fit the context for Job has wished the day of his birth were indeed blotted out or made dark. Verse 5b seems to be a reference to the eclipse. This presents no special problem since Job's whole mood here is erroneous: he is using a common forceful expression as he yields to his anguish of soul even though he undoubtedly knew that use of enchanters was forbidden by the Lord. His real sin, for which he can scarcely be excused, was in damning the day of his birth, questioning the sovereign purpose of God.

A superficial acquaintance with the dialogues of the Book of Job will convince anyone that Job and his friends were theologically somewhat confused especially in the matter of theodicy. In some places, therefore, they could be mouthing contemporaneous notions. However, we would not expect this in the words of God as, for example, in the theophany of chapters 38-41, and may well ask, “Are there clear-cut mythological assumptions here?”

The tendency of the naturalistic critic to see mythology everywhere results in more misinterpretation than the well-meant but misdirected attempt to rule out all mythological expression. Reading primitive mean-

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ing into a piece of monotheistic literature where the idiom can be viewed as a result of simple observation or the use of quaint expressions is poor methodology. On the other hand, we must be cautioned against the rejection of all mythological usage in a strained attempt to remove the writers of scripture from such contamination.

There are those references where the language of mythology appears as borrowed metaphors, use of names, etc. This is like the New Testament use of the heathen deity name Baalzebub for Satan. As the writer stated in an earlier paper, "this marks a time of religious vigor and verbal fluency...in artful poetic idiom without necessarily a thought given to polytheistic usage." ("Ugaritic and the Theology of the Psalms" ETS 20th Anniversary Volume, forthcoming). The Canaanite linguistic substratum was a readily available vehicle through which the prophets and poets could communicate the truth.

Job 26 is said to present a primitive cosmography. Verses 9 and 10 read:

9. He encloses the face of his throne
And spreads his cloud upon it.

10. He marked (described) a circle on the surface of the waters
As far as the fartherest (the very end of) limit of light and
darkness.

How can it be affirmed that this represents a primitive cosmography when verse 7 says "he hanged the earth on nothing"? Verse 10 may mean that when one is on the water out of the sight of land everywhere he turns one sees only horizon. Verse 9 is said to picture God seated on a throne above a solid firmament conceived of as a dome sitting on the pillars of heaven (v. 11). The R.S.V. saw correctly that *ksh* is not throne but *keseh* meaning "the full moon" as in Psalm 81:4 and Proverbs 7:20. So that 26:9 reads:

"He closes in the face of the full moon
And spreads his cloud over it."

It may be quaint but is highly poetic to speak of the mountains as pillars (26:11) which support the low clouds.

No one has ever satisfactorily explained how verse 7 fits into any primitive cosmography.

"He stretches out the north over the void
And hangs the earth on nothing."

Buttenweiser's famous comment on 26:7 is summarily dismissed in the *Anchor Bible 15* which makes no attempt to explain mythologically or otherwise what it means. Buttenweiser translates:

"He that suspended the earth over the vacuum"

and he comments: "Our author, though naturally ignorant of the law of gravitation, had outgrown the naive view of his age about the universe, and conceived of the earth as a heavenly body floating in space, like the sun, moon, and stars. It is not surprising to meet with such a view in the Book of Job when one considers the advance astronomy in Babylonia, Egypt, and Greece. As early as 540-510 B.C. Pythagoras of Samos, on his travels in Egypt and the East, acquired the knowledge of the obliquity of the ecliptic and of the earth's being a sphere freely poised in space. . . . Job 38:6 bears out rather than contradicts the conclusion that the writer of Job had attained a more advanced view of the universe, since the question, 'Whereon were its foundations set?' shows that he no longer shared the primitive notion that the earth was resting on pillars erected in the sea." (Buttenweiser, *The Book of Job*, in loco.)

The figure in chapter 38:4-6 is a description of the building of the earth as if it were a house. Buttenweiser's interpretation is weakened if we view the passage as God's questioning Job on whether the earth was built like this.

Buttenweiser also contends the north (26:7) is the celestial pole formed by the seven stars of Ursa Minor from which the movement of the universe was believed to proceed.

But we cannot ignore what Ugaritic tells about Mount Zaphon as being the Canaanite Olympus (actually *Mons Casius*, *Jebel el 'Aqra*) where Baal built his marvelous dwelling. This explains why the Hebrew word *Sāphōn* means north. It is to be understood in Job as the celestial place where God dwells using the available Canaanite expression just as Isaiah does in Isaiah 14:13, 14:

"You said in your heart,
I will ascend to heaven;
above the stars of God
I will set my throne on high;
I will sit on the mount of assembly
in the far north
I will ascend above the heights of
the clouds
I will make myself like the Most High."

Furthermore the verb *nth* is often used for the stretching out or bending or arching of the heavens (Psalm 104:2), and this concept parallels antithetically the other side of the bicolon "The earth he hangs on nothing" and "He stretches out the north (heaven) over the void."

Psalm 48:2 and 3 (Hebrew) reads:

"Beautiful of height,
Joy of all the earth,

Is Mount Zion on the sides of the North, (or, Is Mount Zion in the heart of Zaphon)

The City of (the) great king”

Biblical terminology here identifies *Sāphōn* with Mount Zion as the place where God dwells, which reminds us of Isaiah 2:2-4 where the Mount of the Lord's house is established at the head of the mountains with all the nations flowing to it. This Mount Zion is most assuredly echatological Jerusalem where the Lord is enthroned and rules over a world of universal peace.

In Job 26:12-14 the terms used are again mythological but the meaning is of God's powerful control over the raging force of the sea. We translate

“By his strength he stills the Sea, (Note article=improper noun)

And by his understanding he smites Rahab

By his wind he puts Sea in a bag, (Tur-sinai, The Book of Job, in loco.)

His hand pierced the fleeing serpent.”

The two bicola are parallel. “The Sea is stilled” parallels “Sea is put in a bag.” And “Rahab is smitten” parallels “the fleeing serpent is pierced.”

Job goes on to say that such dominion over the sea is only a bit of his dominion, only a whisper, Who can understand the real thunder of his mighty acts?

Similarly in Job 9:13 the cohorts of Rahab are described as those who grovel beneath the Almighty who shakes the earth and removes mountains; who stretched out the heavens alone and made the constellations and who treads on the back of Yam (the Sea). *Bmh* is never used for waves but the Ugaritic cognate of *bhm* is always the back of a creature which yields a well-known Near Eastern symbol of overcoming one's foes (Isaiah 63:6). The metaphor pictures God's complete control of the sea. Likewise in 7:12 Job complains of imagined harassment by God when he says “Am I Sea (*Yam*) or *Tanin* (Sea Monster) that you set a guard over me?” In Hebrew monotheism God created and controls the *Taninim* in contrast to northwestern Semitic mythology where the uncreated monsters of chaos are slain by hero gods who then proceed to create the land and sea from pieces of the slain monster.

We see none of this where we might expect to see it in Job 38 where the sea is personified and its birth is pictured (8-11). Shutting the sea within doors (8) is indeed like Marduk did after slaying Tiamat

and creating the seas from her, but here it merely refers to the limitations of the seas boundaries. There is similar use of swaddling bands in Job 38:9 and in the birth of the Ugaritic bovine monsters called Eaters and Devourers, but both are borrowed from events of human birth and the Biblical account is tied closely to natural phenomena.

In Job 38:12b Morning and Dawn are personified just as Dawn and Dusk were a divine pair in Ugaritic, and in verse 13 Earth is personified with coming of day likened to the snatching off of her skirts and shaking the wicked out of it. But apart from personification no other mythological distinctive is employed in these verses.

Just as *Sāphōn* was a word originally meaning the abode of the gods, but in Hebrew was used for the habitation of the only true God, so the terms *Yam* and *Rahab* derived from the Canaanite Sea-God and his monstrous cohort, and it can be demonstrated that in a strong monotheistic context like the Book of Job these personifications were simply rich linguistic expressions of the powers of nature. Even when viewed as Canaanite gods, part of their function was to describe and explain natural phenomena. If Job and his friends did know the mythology, this in itself would not prove they believed the myth any more than my reference to Greek deities proves I believe them. This view is strengthened by Job 31,26, 27 where the patriarch by oath with sanctions denies ever being tempted to participate in heathen worship of the sun or moon.

We turn to Job 5:7 where the KJV and RSV read:

“But man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward.”

M. Pope in *Anchor Bible* 15 translates:

“And Resheph’s sons wing high.”

This is another clear case where the name of a northwest Semitic deity is used to refer to forces in nature with which the particular deity was identified in the mythology. In the Ugaritic pantheon Resheph is equated with Nergal, the Mesopotamian god of pestilence and the netherworld. In the Old Testament the word is used of pestilence in Deuteronomy 32:25 and Habakkak 3:5, and the plural is used of lightning in Psalm 78:48. In Psalm 76:4, however, the reshephs (arrows) of the bow are in apposition to the shield, the sword and the battle. In Ugaritic Resheph is called “Lord of the arrow,” probably referring to his skillful use of lightning. Just as Death had a first-born in Job 18:13 who devours wicked men’s bodies, so here the sons of Resheph may be various forms of trouble or pestilence or flames which soar aloft. It is curious that in Song of Solomon 8:6 the Reshephs are associated with earthly love, but only in the sense that such love is like flashes of fire. It seems unnecessary to carry the thought to the ambivalent nature of Resheph sometimes mentioned in extra-Biblical texts.

“...Love is as strong as death...and her reshephs are reshephs (flashes) of fire, a most vehement flame.”

What of Behemoth and Leviathan in Job 40 and 41? There is something to be said for simply taking them as a great bovine creature (or hippopotamus) and crocodile respectively. Both are used in other Old Testament contexts without a hint of mythological or symbolic implication. (Pss. 8:8; 50:10ff; 78:22; 104:26; Joel 1:20; 2:22; Habakkak 2:17). The word *Behemoth* seems to be an intensive plural of *Behemah* (beast); hence the beast par excellence. *Behemoth* is called in 40:19a "the first of the ways of God." Pope translates this "a primordial production of God," but Dahood renders "He is the finest manifestation of God's power" (*drkt* = dominion in Ugaritic). In Ugaritic the goddess Anat conquered the seven-headed Leviathan along with a bovine creature called 'gl il 'tk "the ferocious bullock."

Old Testament passages speak of great evil powers whether cosmic or political in terms of monstrous creatures. Such as Isaiah 27:1 where in the day the Lord punishes the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity he also will slay Leviathan, the swift, crooked serpent. In Isaiah 51:9, 10 Rahab is Egypt and in Psalm 74:12, 13 the many-headed Leviathan is Egypt, and in Job 40 and 41 the description of Leviathan becomes highly symbolic. One must assume a considerable amount of hyperbole to make of this simply a crocodile. Could it be possible that after a description of the crocodile an unannounced transition occurs because God also intends to remind Job of those cosmic forces which Leviathan symbolizes and against which no human strength can prevail. For some reason the Hebrew text begins a new chapter in the middle of this description (41:9 = 41:1 Hebrew). We translate from this chapter verses 9-12 (1-4):

"Behold any hope is false
 (For) the angels are hurled down at his appearance
 (And) he is fierce when one arouses him.
 (But) who can stand before me,
 Who can confront me and survive,
 For everything under the heavens is mine.
 Will not I silence his boastings
 His proud (high) talk and his fair array of words."

And verses 18-21:

"His sneezings flash forth light,
 His eyes are like the glow (eyelids) of dawn.
 Out his mouth go burning torches
 And sparks of fire leap forth.
 From his nostrils go smoke
 As out of a seething pot and burning brushwood.
 His breath kindles coals
 And a flame goes pours out of his mouth."

And verse 25:

"At his terror the angels (mighty ones) are afraid
 By reason of despair they are cast down."

The swords, javelins, arrows, clubs, slingstones are no good against him 26-29). And according to verses 33 and 34:

“Upon earth there is not his like
One made without fear.

He looks on all that is lofty
He is king over all proud beings.”

My studied conclusion is that this is not a mere crocodile but is to be understood in light of Isaiah 27:1 etc. (cf. the dragon symbol of Rev. 12).

The prologue of Job pictures the heavenly council before God. Eliphaz in 5:1 says

“Call now; is there any who will answer you,
And to which of the Holy Ones will you turn?”

Eliphaz is taunting Job that it is hopeless for him to appeal to the *qedōšim* (holy ones). Critics take them to be the lesser divine beings, who, according to Mesopotamian concept, were available as personal intercessors in the divine assembly. It should be noted that whether here or in the prologue or in Psalm 89:5 “the assembly of the holy ones” is most assuredly made up of created beings. Even in Mesopotamian concepts the lesser divine beings were created, whether in the progress of revelation Eliphaz had made the clear-cut monotheistic distinction we cannot tell, but we can be certain that neither the Book of Job nor the Psalms attribute to these “holy ones” any of the pagan concepts of deity. In Job 15:8 Eliphaz condemning Job for self-exaltation questions his ability to sit in and eavesdrop on the divine council. In 33:23, 24 Elihu speaks of mediation by an angel. The Mesopotamian belief in a personal god who looked after the interest of his mortal client in the divine assembly may be a related concept but it is not a proven stage in the development of Hebrew religion. These “holy ones,” among whom a man might find a defender, should be tied to Job’s appeal for an arbiter (*mōkiah*, 9:33) or witness (*ēd*, 16:19-21) or vindicator (*gō’ēl*, 19:25-27). In a most prophetic way Job is touching on the mystery of godliness in seeing that one who can stand between God and man must share in the nature of each, as Job says in 9:33 “that might lay his hand upon the two of us.” This concept finds further expression in the Old Testament teaching regarding the suffering vicarious expiator.

Some scholars feel that Job 38:31a provides an example of how the KJV was influenced by the earlier Jewish interpretation taken over by Christian exegetes. Nachmanides et al. understood the verse in an astrological sense, the “sweet influences” of Pleiades being the astrological forces which produce pleasure, flowers, and fruits in the spring. It is likely the key word should be rendered “fettters” parallel with “bands” of Orion following I Samuel 15:32 where Agag stands before Samuel, not delicately, but in fetters (ICC). Nor should verse 33 be taken astrologically “Knowest thou the ordinances of heaven? Canst thou set the

dominion thereof in the earth?" Some take these words to be pre-Newtonian allusions to the forces of gravity. The words are *huqqōt statutes* parallel with *mištār* (Akk. *maštāru*, a writing). The stars in Akkadian are called *šitir šamē* "heavenly writing." I believe Tur-Sinai has come closest to understanding the verse by connecting it with Psalm 19 (*Archiv Orientalni* 17, II, 1949).

An example of a forced attempt to read mythology into the text is demonstrated by Dhorme followed by Pope who render 38:36:

"Who put wisdom in Thoth (*ṭuhōt*)
Who gave Sekwi understanding" (*šekwi*)

The R.S.V. takes these difficult words as "clouds" and "mist" with some philological support. Since the verses before and after are dealing with the clouds, the rain and lightning, Thoth and Sekwi as gods are out of context

On this general subject Albright has said some cogent things in his *History, Archaeology and Christian Humanism*. Remarking how the Old Testament is a "masterpiece of empirical logic not expressed in formal categories," Albright claims the Old Testament has demythologized not the literature but the language of Canaan. "Old words are kept but with new meanings divested of all clear mythological connotations." Albright notes how the Puritan John Milton drew heavily on Greek mythology to enrich his poetic imagery even in his picture of creation.

For example, the use of plural *'elōhîm* and *'adōnāy* may have come from polytheistic usage but in Hebrew came to mean the totality of all the manifestations and attributes of deity which polytheism broke down into single elements. Even in some documents a single high god is referred to with the plural ending, the so-called plural of majesty (Amarna and Ugaritic). Nothing sounds more polytheistic to some ears than the words used by the Chronicler "for great is our God above all gods" (I Chron. 2:5).

Albright observes "much of the onslaught on early Israelite monotheism comes from scholars who represent certain theological points of view with reference to monotheism, i.e., who deny that orthodox trinitarian Christianity... or orthodox Judaism or orthodox Islam are monotheistic. I do not need to stress the fact that neither of the last two religions can be called monotheistic by a theologian who insists that this term applies only to Unitarian Christianity or liberal Judaism. But no dictionary definition of monotheism was ever intended to exclude orthodox Christianity." *History, Archaeology and Christian Humanism*, p. 155.

In conclusion let me say that the distinguishing mark of a mythology is not references to gods or the use of anthropomorphism and various descriptive metaphors which describe deity in concrete terminology but rather the narration of the actions of numerous gods who have the same limitations and sins common to man, including especially sexual relations. Neither the Book of Job nor any of the Old Testament has the slightest hint of belief in any such mythology.